Constructing African realities: Genre-crossing and the city in representations of Africa on screen

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Introduction

> [T]he image is implicitly the place where battles are fought and strategies of resistance negotiated.[1]

The three films to be explored in this essay represent a battle over the image of 'Africa'. *Africa Addio (*1966), the English language version of which was entitled *Africa Blood and Guts*, is a 'shockumentary' filmed by the controversial Italian directors Prosperi and Jacopetti, who depict 'Africa' as a continent descending into anarchic violence following the departure of the civilising European powers. *Petit à Petit* (1968), by ciné-ethnographer Jean Rouch, is an exercise in reverse anthropology, where a business entrepreneur from Niger flies to Paris to investigate the size, shape and customs of its native population, subverting colonial and anthropological discourse on 'Africa' and Africans. Finally, *Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon* (2006), is a journey into the lives of refugees in Johannesburg, by Khalo Matabane, a director coming to terms with the city he grew up in, and the claims of other Africans to be a part of it.[2]

These films together can be seen as representing the ideological battles that have been fought over the continent and signifier 'Africa'. However, these films have been chosen is for two specific reasons. Firstly, they all have the striking similarity of existing between genres, being both documentary and fictional, providing critical insight into how images of African 'realities' have been constructed. Secondly, the films all engage in a struggle over the meaning of 'Africa' through the vehicle of the 'city', which has served as a symbol for civilisation, modernity, and post-modernity, contested themes in the imagining of Africa.

This paper begins with a brief summary of the films. The way in which 'Africa' has been and is still imagined in public discourse, such as *Africa Addio*, is then interrogated. From here, I analyse the contrasting ways in which the films employ documentary and fictional methods in their depiction of African realities. Finally, the conceptual site of 'the city,' in these debates and in these films, is explored.

The films
Africa Addio (1966)
As we watch the British flag being lowered and replaced by that of the newly independent state of Kenya, the narration begins with:

> The Africa of the great explorers, the huge land of hunting and adventure adored by entire generations of children, has disappeared for ever…The purpose of this film is to bid farewell to the old Africa that is dying and to entrust to history the documentation of its agony.

Italian filmmakers Gualtiero Jacopetti and Franco Prosperi travelled for three years across Africa during the early 1960s, and this is their 'testament' to the process of decolonisation, or, as they argue, the descent of the Dark Continent into an inevitable orgy of violence. Scenes of pristine, civilised conduct by whites are contrasted with loud and uncontrollable displays of violence and brutality by Africans. We see the last fox hunts in the colonial estates of the Kenyan highlands (accompanied by harps and violins), followed by footage of the bodies of white farmers and families killed by Mau Mau rebels. We see the slaughter of hundreds of elephants, buffaloes, hippopotamuses and antelope, as the newly independent nation does nothing to protect the game reserves. This is followed by footage of the massacre of the Arabs in Zanzibar, war in Angola, genocide in Rwanda, and mercenary executions in Congo. The audience sees hundreds of dead, mutilated and burnt bodies.

These scenes are contrasted with footage from Cape Town, which is portrayed as a haven of European civilisation and beauty. The film ends with footage of penguins being washed off the rocks at Boulders Beach on the Cape Peninsula, a metaphor for the European way of life which is clinging to the tip of the continent. The following narration ends the film:

> At the end of the Ice Age, a warm current broke this little colony of penguins off of the glaciers of the south and carried them here on huge rafts of ice that melted in the sun. Isolated and without the possibility of returning to their original homeland, they have for centuries been strangers in a strange land that is becoming more and more heated and hostile toward them surrounded by a sea that grows higher and more and more filled with rage. Perhaps a little peace will descend upon these waters sooner or later, before a wave stronger than the others tears them away forever from this last rock that forms the geographic end of the Dark Continent.

The film was very successful in Italy, earning over two million dollars at the box office.

Petit à Petit (1968)
A fiction film beginning with a fictional company; 'Petit a Petit Import Export', under the direction of the business partners Damouré and Lam. Upon hearing that there will soon be a skyscraper in the Niamey, the capital of Niger, the board of directors decides to send Damouré to Paris, to find out more about these buildings, and the habits of their inhabitants. Damouré sets about investigating the shape and habits of the Parisian tribe, stopping to measure the skulls, chest size and teeth of people on the streets, and asking them questions about their traditions. On the whole, the residents of Paris (genuine passers-by) are quite accommodating, yet Damouré, whilst impressed with the city, finds them ugly, uncivilised and oversexed, with disgusting eating habits. Lam is sent by the company to retrieve Damouré, and the two return to Niger with Safi, a Senegalese fashion model, her French friend Ariane, and a tramp they meet on the street. The skyscraper is built, but life inside is not as idyllic as the two men originally planned, with conflict for their attention and technical hiccups resulting in the departure of their new friends. Pondering events on the banks of the Niger river, the two resolve to build a "modern, new civilisation", one not modelled on the grotesque example they found in Paris.

Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon (2006)
In *Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon* we watch the fictional character of Keniloe, a young writer, become fascinated by the story of a Somali woman (Fatima), whom he meets in a park in Johannesburg. Fatima's father and brother were murdered in front of her in Somalia, and she is in South Africa as a refugee, desperately awaiting news of her mother's whereabouts. The film is split into two parts; a mainly fictional section, where Keniloe befriends Fatima over four Sunday afternoons, and a mainly documentary section, where Fatima disappears and Keniloe searches for her, and in doing so meets refugees and immigrants from across Africa and the world. We meet a whole cast of 'characters', from Ethiopia, Kenya, Uganda, Serbia, Korea, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Palestine, Sudan, China, Malawi and Zimbabwe, all of whom simply tell their stories. He searches the Lindela deportation centre, where illegal immigrants make pleas to Keniloe, the camera, and the world, saying that they are not criminals, they are fellow Africans like those who are detaining them, and they demand the right to search for greener pastures. Eventually, Keniloe does find Fatima, however she does not wish to speak to him.

Images of Africa
Following the release of Africa Addio (1966), the representatives of five African states approached the United Nations requesting it be banned. It continued to be screened in Italy, but was banned in the United States. The reason for this controversy? There are many, but principally, the film confirms every stereotype of Africa as 'the Dark Continent'. These can be summed up in Binyavanga Wainana's words, in her article 'How to write about Africa' (or film it):

> Always use the word 'Africa' or 'Darkness' or 'Safari'…'Zanzibar', 'Masai', 'Zulu', 'Zambezi', 'Congo', 'Nile', 'Big', 'Sky', 'Shadow', 'Drum', 'Sun' or 'Bygone'…treat Africa as if it were one country. It is hot and dusty with rolling grasslands and huge herds of animals and tall, thin people who are starving. Or it is hot and steamy with very short people who eat primates. Don't get bogged down with precise descriptions. Africa is big: fifty-four countries, 900 million people who are too busy starving and dying and warring and emigrating to read your book…so keep your descriptions romantic and evocative and unparticular…Describe, in detail, naked breasts (young, old, conservative, recently raped, big, small) or mutilated genitals, or enhanced genitals. Or any kind of genitals. And dead bodies. Or, better, naked dead bodies. And especially rotting naked dead bodies…and always take the side of the elephant.[3]

Each and every one of these stereotypes is evoked in the film. Africa is spoken of as one place, peopled by one people: the African/the Black. We are presented with a mass of black bodies throughout the film, alive and dead, often naked or clothed in animal skins. The only time we hear an African speak is when pleading guilty to the murder of white farmers. There are many shots of the sunset, of vast landscapes with roaming herds, and of "Noah's terrestrial paradise," to use the words of the film's narrator. A major theme in the film is the end of the era of the great game reserves, as the new African governments fail to administer the parks effectively, and there is a ten minute sequence in which we watch the death ballet of several families of elephants, to orchestral music.

The structure of the film parallels that of travel literature generated by explorers in the late nineteenth century: a land in regression, populated by primitive savages, whom the authors have survived and returned to tell the tale, with the writings/footage as proof. However, what if the 'proof' comes in the form of live film footage that does indeed document massacres? It is the presentation of this footage that offers the tools for its deconstruction. Whilst the Italian duo undoubtedly did capture, as they claim, some of the only footage of the massacre of the Arabs in Zanzibar, they incorporate this, and other 'real' footage, with entirely fabricated sequences. The filmmakers were taken to court, accused of staging some of the executions in Congo, though the charges were dropped due to insufficient evidence. Other scenes which are clearly constructed are those such as the scene where we see a river covered in floating balloons that all say 'attention crocodile', as a 'document' of the work of conservationists, and a scene towards the end of the film, where a group of 'Zulus' joyously dress themselves in European clothes, swing to jazz music and drive off in convertible Chevrolets.

Footage of 'Africans' is shot up close, handheld, focusing on mouths, teeth and bodies in motion, in frenetic, usually aggressive activity. Footage of 'white' people is framed in steady shots, on a tripod, in such a way as to accentuate the orderliness of their conduct, with military formations framed to reflect neat lines of soldiers, and tea parties and fox hunts filmed in soft focus to reflect their delicate, European sensibilities. The same musical refrain is played throughout the film, with different instruments depending on who is on screen: delicate then soaring harps and violins for 'white' scenes, and out of tune, circus-like trumpets and bassoons when Africans are on screen (or drumming). The film is visually a masterpiece, with saturated colours, camera angles, cuts and music that work together with breath-taking beauty. However, this ingenious mixing of real and constructed footage, and the choreographed cinematic and musical style, works to tell a polemical story that is presented as fact.

This film was made in the late 1960s, however is still very much in circulation. It has become an alternative, 'cult' film. It is also very popular amongst white supremacist groups, who repeatedly use it as 'proof' of their beliefs, as shown in the quote below taken from a 'white power' website:

> To whites who have grown up in largely segregated suburbs, *Africa Addio* gives them the shocking truth about the basic nature of the negro and the threat the negro poses…Whites who grow up in "white flight" suburbs and watch TV think that negros are just like them, except that negros are better athletes. After half a century with thousands of films and TV shows with blacks acting like calm, wise, sexually disinterested Europeans, *Africa Addio* is a powerful antidote. In a little over two hours, *Africa Addio* destroys the propaganda investment of the last fifty years.[4]

However, the point is that the film does not represent an image of Africa that is the sole preserve of racists and 'cult' film viewers; it serves as a more explicit version of the implicit image of Africa that circulates in political rhetoric, the media, and private homes.

Dunn illustrates how Robert Kaplan, who receives considerable media and political attention in the United States, uses the same rhetoric as early colonial writers in his mixture of travel writing and political analysis.[5] In an article entitled 'The Coming Anarchy', published in the February 1994 edition of *Atlantic Monthly*, Kaplan argues that the Third World, and particularly Africa, poses a threat to the United States and Europe:

> Whatever the laws, refugees find a way to crash official borders, bringing their passions with them, meaning that Europe and the United States will be weakened by cultural disputes.[6]

The Clinton White House faxed a copy of this particular article to every US embassy around the world. Dunn shows how the Western gaze requires a fixing of the 'African' spatially (in the village) and temporally (in 'tradition'), and Africans on the move represent a threat to the Western image of Africa's rolling savannahs, teeming with wildlife, that must be protected; "temporal movement images of a modern, 'developed' Africa are cast as threatening to an endangered, 'natural' Africa."[7] This parallels the major concern of Jacopetti and Prosperi, who repeatedly show the slaughter of the animals of the great African plains by 'natives' with spears (tribal barbarity) and rich tourists with guns (African government incompetence at stopping them). In the film, the animals are saved by 'Anglo-Saxon private money'.

Similarly, the image of 'Africa' in Western media continues to be stereotypical and naturalised. In her discourse analysis of articles from both the Guardian and the Telegraph, British newspapers on opposite ends of the political divide, Brookes writes of how Africa is portrayed as a homogenous whole, with the metaphor of darkness and the theme of civil war dominating the articles. In Africa, civil war

> involves fierce, tribally based fighting, excessive, uncontrollable and indiscriminate violence, terrible atrocities and other human rights abuses, large numbers of deaths, large scale destruction and anarchy.[8]

Westerners are portrayed as frequently remaining behind in conflict zones, bravely 'holding the fort' in acts of self-sacrifice. African persons and sources are discredited, and African leaders and their people cannot be trusted, especially with aid. Western participants are the agents, with the 'African' as the 'done to' victims, unless they are direct agents of violence.

Chow writes of how the image, and the act of watching it, is essentially pornographic and violent, with the passive victim on display being pierced by the aggressive sight of the viewer. This is very much the case with the images of Africa described so far, however where does a film like *Petit à Petit* (1968) fit in? The main characters are business-owning Africans (agents), who find the habits of the Parisians they encounter "dégoûtant!" ("disgusting!"), and highly uncivilised. The film represents a turning of the colonial gaze back onto the coloniser, the anthropologist's gaze back on the metropole. The film balances a tightrope, as the key characters appear at times rather incompetent, yet ultimately they posses great acumen, and construct a critical distance from the trappings of a European modernity. This is in the face of the complete incompatibility of Western constructs to the landscape, social and

agricultural context of Niger. Produced at the same time as *Africa Addio*, *Petit à Petit* still offers a piercing critique of the dominant image of Africa.

Both Chow and Mbembe ask the question of whether we can simply *ignore* the "false" image of the 'native', by either replacing it with a "correct"/authentic one, or giving the native "voice"/subjectivity, or changing "the defiled image, the stripped image, the image-reduced-to-nakedness, by showing the truth behind/beneath/around it."[9] Chow argues that this is simply attempting to turn history upside down, and will keep us in the "deadlock" between native and coloniser.[10] Mbembe similarly states that if we maintain these boundaries between the native and the non-native Other, then we are marking out the space for the authentic and inauthentic 'African', in a process of re-racialisation.[11] I would argue that whilst there are many 'African' films that would seek to do this, *Petit à Petit* is not one of them, as it does not fit into the "cult of victimisation,"[12] but instead is an active reversal of the gaze; it does not locate African agency in an authentic African essence, but simply highlights *agency* in and of itself. It is not of the 'African fable' quality of which Mbembe is so critical. Cinematically, this would be in the vein of West African directors such as Ousmane Sembène (the 'father' of African cinema), Souleymane Cissé and more recently Dani Kouyaté, who incorporate the figure of the traditional figure of the 'griot' into the cinematic narrative. *Petit à Petit* allows for the free agency of *all* its characters, those from France and from Niger, with none of them representing the 'essence' of their 'people'.

Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon is similarly reacting against the dominant image of Africa, however this time one constructed from within. Danso and McDonald, and Harris show how the South African media constructs an image of the rest of Africa as war-torn, diseased (HIV virus and other diseases), desperately poor, and uncivilised, with darker peoples massing at the borders to gain entry into the civilised paradise of South Africa.[13] In his press release, Khalo Matabane stated that his film is a direct challenge to these myths. *Conversations* does so through similar devices to *Petit à Petit*. It is in the tools of improvisation and the interaction of actors with members of the public that no 'essences' can be claimed, for people speak for themselves, *as themselves*, in diverse, contradictory, and complex ways. How this is done will be explored in the next section.

Constructing reality: Shockumentary / Cinéma-verité / Docu-fiction
All three films blur the line between documentary and fiction, between real and acted events and people. Looking at the specific way in which this is done in each film uncovers the directors' ideological relationships to 'Africa'. As discussed, whilst presenting itself as a documentary account of Africa's descent into chaos, *Africa Addio* is in actual fact made up of many constructed scenes and sequences, sometimes quite obviously, other times not so. In contrast, *Petit à Petit* and *Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon* both set themselves up as 'stories', and through the interaction of actors with members of the public we get glimpses of 'reality'.

In a documentary charting the infamous career of Jacopetti and Prosperi, we hear Jacopetti describe his change from written to film journalism, as he realised film was the "perfect medium to tell the facts of life."[14] However, in the footage that follows, we clearly see Jacopetti *directing* people in their movements, organising where they stand, and carefully framing shots in an environment that looks exactly like a film set.

Contradicting the statements at the beginning of their films, in which they state that they are merely chronicling the world and all its 'truth', he stated the following in the interview:

> Can a reporter be objective, be it in film or in print? I say no…even if you're intimately objective, the very moment you choose the framing of a shot, automatically, your personal point of view comes out.[15]

In *Africa Addio*, there are many scenes that have clearly been more than framed, and actively *constructed* through the interventions of the directors, yet they are presented as factual documentation of historical processes.

In contrast, "*Cinéma-verité*", the style of filmmaking that Jean Rouch began, holds that there can be no objectivity in filmmaking, and celebrates this. Its origins lie in the cinematic realism of the documentary filmmakers Flaherty and Vertov, who experimented with mixing 'cinema' and 'real life.'[16] To follow *cinéma-verité*, the films must be unstaged, with non-actors either doing what they would do in natural, spontaneous settings or using interactive techniques with the world around them. This involves one take of each shot, no additional sound or lighting equipment, and filming with handheld cameras.[17] The term, for Rouch, was:

> an ambiguous or self-contradictory expression since, fundamentally, film truncates, accelerates, and slows down actions, thus distorting the truth…it designates not 'pure truth' but the particular truth of the recorded images and sounds- a filmic truth, *cinéma-verité*.[18]

As with the ethnographer, the filmmaker distorts reality through his presence and his consequent representations, but also generates a potential, through these interventions, for people to reveal themselves, and for meanings to emerge in the process. *Cinéma-verité* was not attempting to be "fly-on-the-wall" filming, for it recognised that objective "recording" of reality was impossible, and instead capitalised on the fundamental intervention of camera: "Rouch was always clear in his conviction that direct cinema must confront the epistemology of intersubjectivity."[19] *Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon* speaks the language of *cinéma-verité*, and in the film it is clear how having a camera, or a tape recorder, gives the filmmaker an *excuse* to go up to strangers and ask them questions, much like an anthropologist's research question. This can reveal the hidden meanings that exist in the world.

Petit à Petit and *Conversations* are filmed in the style of *cinéma-verité* on the streets of Paris and Johannesburg. We see the principle protagonists wander the cities' streets enacting a fictional story and interact with members of the public spontaneously, as they find them. In both films they are given a reason to approach people; in Petit a Petit to ask them questions about being Parisian, in *Conversations* to first ask them if they know Fatima, and then later to tell their story. Through the use of constructed questions, that are seeking an answer for the fictional element of the film, the stories of real peoples' lives emerge, and all the more strikingly, as a consequence of the juxtaposition of a real story in a fictive one. In *Conversations*, we have the additional layer of the negative fiction of Africa that circulates in public and political discourse. Hearing the real struggles of many different African immigrants against the backdrop of a fictional story has the effect of amplifying their voices, and this works powerfully

to counteract the myth of the homogenous, ominous tide of 'Africans' invading South Africa.

Petit à Petit works in a rather different way to deconstruct the myth of 'Africa', and 'Africans'. Take one of the earliest scenes, in which Damouré [D], sitting at his desk by the river, is approached by a man [M] with a request. The dialogue is as follows:

D: How's the fishing? They want fish everywhere. Everywhere! In Norway, Switzerland…It takes lots of fishing to catch lots of fish…
[M mumbles]
D: What?
M: Hippos
D: Hippopotamuses! What about them?
[M mumbles some more about hippos and catching them and things not working, at which point D turns to another man, T, asking him to translate]
T: [stunned that he has to explain] They're amphibians…er…quadropeds…they damage the rice fields, and eat lots of grass and rice.
D: They should be caught and locked up!
T: It'd be easier to kill them
D: Bon, allors, I'll authorise you to kill two. I'll notify the authorities. Voila!
[Signs some paper, orders T to help the man]

If this was read as a script, it could come across as framing Africans as naïve and ignorant. However, the way in which the scene is improvised, and the way in which the audience sees the actors (non-actor actors) playfully choosing their words and smiling at the farce of it all, means that the scene works to *subvert* the image of the simple African farmer and his landowner. They are all 'knowing' subjects, clearly enjoying playing up to and around the stereotypes of 'Africans.' As the actors crack the façade and smile at the conversation in which they are performers, this scene both lays bare the mechanics of fictional filmmaking and the objectification of Africans in other films. Instead of simply watching them, the audience sees them *seeing*, and thus occupying a subjectivity that is denied to them in many films in and on Africa, such as *Africa Addio*.

Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon similarly disturbs the process of *watching* for the audience. Throughout nearly all the interviews with the refugees and immigrants, Keniloe's hands and arms enter the shot at the bottom, top or from one of the sides, holding the tape recorder. This has two effects. Firstly, as above, we see Keniloe *seeing,* and are thus invited into his subjectivity, and his 'process' in coming to terms with what he sees. Secondly, as mentioned previously, making it obvious, in the context of a fictional narrative, that we are hearing real stories serves to amplify their effect. In a conventional documentary, the viewer can often forget that the action is real, as it is happening at a distance from them. Having a section of Keniloe's face, or his hands, in shot throughout the interviews has the effect of making the audience feel like they have their eye to the camera's viewfinder. They are thus much more implicated in the process of the film, and feel more connected to what they are seeing and hearing on screen. These devices serve to close the distance between the viewers of the film and the people interviewed, allowing them to get a sense of the textures and challenges lived by strangers in the street.

Cities

> Each urban encounter is a theatre of promise in play of power.[20]

> Africa…can be better understood in terms of its extracanonical leakages, its lines of flight, its borderlands and interfaces.[21]

Directly after the second bout of animal slaughter in *Africa Addio*, where we see herds of elephants being shot to accompanying symphonic music, we arrive in Cape Town, and the narration is as follows, over slow-motion footage of young, athletic white men surfing in the Atlantic:

> We just left behind an Africa that's disappearing and immediately we enter an Africa that's already disappeared…On one side, confusion and indiscriminate death. On this side, order and discriminating life. This is Cape Town…To the universal cry that proclaims "Africa for Africans" the South Africans respond "This is not Africa!". And this, at least, is true… Cape Town is a miracle that, despite its physical reality [on the tip of Africa], transcends the limits of time and space, wrapping men and objects in a soft blanket of bliss in a delicate balance between the transient and the eternal.

What follows is a long slow motion sequence to harp music in which we see a group of young white women and girls running across the beach, stripping down to bikinis and running into the sea, swinging on swings, or jumping on trampolines, all very beautiful, and very white. There is a direct cut from this to a shot from below and behind of a group of African women in tribal attire, beating drums, whom the narrator says are 'Zulus' (though the Cape is mainly Xhosa speaking). The camera then zooms out and we see that it is a film set, as Cape Town is the place where the next White-man-in-Africa blockbuster is being made. The 'Zulu young maidens' have a tea break, and gleefully dress up in European panties, gloves and jewellery, and proceed to have a fine old time dancing to swing music, with the filmmakers delighting in the (constructed) juxtaposition between the tribal and the civilised. Cape Town is the safe haven of European values and customs on the continent, though the film ends with the penguins (pale foreigners) being swept off the edge of the Cape by the rage of black Africa.

Today, there continues to be a symbolic struggle over the image of Cape Town, through arguments over whether it is or is not an African city. Some of its residents enjoy its reputation as 'the last colonial outpost in Africa,' and others affirm the slave roots of the city and its Creole culture. In a recent collection of writings on the city, *A city imagined*, we see this struggle played out in literary terms, where competing voices lay claim to the city, choosing to see or not see, refer to or not refer to, the many streams of life that flow through the city.[22] The most political article is that of Jeremy Cronin, who argues the political and professional elite of post-apartheid South Africa do not like Cape Town because its mixed-ness, its Creole culture, represents a challenge to the "implicit notion of race purity" that continues to dominate political discourse in the country. For Cronin, in walking around Cape Town "you can still hear and see the undisappeared-disappeared, the multiphonic wrested from schizophrenia. Cape Town's subconscious has long guessed what contemporary

science is now confirming: we are all bearers of the same mixed-up genetic bredie. Humanity is Coloured."[23]

For Pratt, Cape Town is a "contact zone," which is a concept she uses to "invoke the spatial and temporal co-presence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect."[24] Whilst Cape Town may be the site of critical colonial encounters, I would like to extent Pratt's notion of the contact zone as applying to all cities today, in a postcolonial world, where movement of people, goods and information has put many subjects previously separated in close contact. This is apparent in the three films of this study. *Africa Addio* is clearly framed within the colonial paradigm, and in it Johannesburg is the city where the rapidly multiplying black population risks overthrowing the whites, and Cape Town is the 'miracle' city, bringing white civilisation to Africa. In *Petit à Petit*, skyscrapers, and the large city, are symbolic of phallic Western aspirations, and the streets of Paris are used as the site for reversing the colonial relation. In *Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon*, we are taken on a tour through the streets of Johannesburg where you will hear French and Swahili being spoken alongside English and Zulu. We see that in all these films the *image* of the city, as a consequence of its being a contact zone, is the site for a struggle over the meaning of 'Africa', 'Africans', and what it is to be 'civilised', 'modern' or 'cosmopolitan.'

Both *Petit à Petit* and *Conversations* provide images of the city as the site for the overlapping of many bodies in transition, with the figure of a walking body central to both films; Damouré walking the streets of Paris and Keniloe wandering through inner-city Johannesburg. We see the main characters engaging with the people they meet, with unforeseen and unintended consequences. Amin and Thrift write of how "each urban moment can spark performative improvisations which are unforseen and unforseeable,"[25] and in the two films this performativity and spontaneity is enhanced through the presence of actors and a camera. Damouré and Keniloe are the postcolonial version of the figure of Benjamin's *flâneur*, the "reflexive walker," who wanders the streets with "lyrical expectancy and openness," reading and mapping the city from the level of the street, who does "not romanticise, but portrays the multiple uses of the street, the unexpected subversions of the stereotype."[26] The figures of Damouré, the African *flâneur* in Paris, and the South African Keniloe, in a seemingly foreign Johannesburg, allow us to grasp that sense of intersecting trajectories in postcolonial worlds: bodies on the move, mobile witnesses to a world on the move.

In addition to the *flâneur*, the films highlight Amin and Thrift's concept of "footprints," shedding light on the transitivity of the new urbanism of the postcolonial world: "the spatial and temporal porosity of the city also opens it to footprints from the past and contemporary links elsewhere. Cities are always exposed."[27] In *Petit à Petit*, when we first meet Safi, the Senegalese courtesan in Paris, when asked where she is from there is a dramatic cut to a dream sequence in which we see her, back in Senegal singing a nostalgic melody over a crashing coastline below. Similarly, the refugees and immigrants in *Conversations* come from all over the world, and have intimate relationships with distant home countries, whether they want to or not. Memories of other places line the streets of the city; some have nostalgic visions of home, with a strong desire to return, like Safi, whereas others are haunted by violent memories. Footprints of other countries live and breathe in the city, and force

nationalist conceptions of the city to be stretched spatially and conceptually. Mbembe and Nuttall argue that Johannesburg is:

> an "unfinished city" thrust by the force of circumstances into a conversation between the past and the future, between Africa and the world. Rather than explore these configurations in detail, all films made about the city to date have confined themselves to rendering its supposed apocalyptic proportions, as if ordinary lives simply did not exist in this metropolitan culture.[28]

Khalo Matabane's film *Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon* speaks directly to both the conversation between past and future, Africa and the world, and that between Africa and itself, as well as providing a space for the stories of ordinary lives of the metropolis to be told. Cities function as entry and exit points, and there is a need for filmmakers and writers to locate these sites in their narratives, thus serving to "defamiliarise commonsense readings of Africa."[29]

In *Conversations* Keniloe strides past rows and rows of street stalls and small shops selling cheap plastic goods from China, mobile phone covers, rows of multi-coloured, multi-textured belts, and hair extensions. However, transnational urbanism not only involves commodity-exchange, but also exists in electronic space and on the streets of the toughest neighbourhoods. In one scene, beneath a dilapidated building where a young family watches the world go by, Keniloe waits on a street corner beside a shop selling airtime, talktime, email and internet connection, and offering cheap call rates to all over the world; the Democratic Republic of Congo and China, the United States and Senegal. Amin and Thrift argue that we cannot continue to see cities as existing in ordered lines of mobility, within geographical limits, but need to see the many trails and flows of the city. Only then will we appreciate that cities do not have "territorial integrity," but are stretched across space, "points of translation and transmission," situated in networks of trade, communications, and personal lives, memories and imaginaries.[30]

This interconnection does not exclude the presence of segregated spaces, nor deny the bio-politics of city life. People are ordered into politicised and racialised hierarchies of citizens and non-citizens. What occurs is a continual tension between the two, and this is also made apparent in the scenes with the police and in the final scenes of *Conversations*, where we see immigrants awaiting deportation, captured by the state, yet resisting, through singing "It's useless, it's useless…we'll be back." The film allows the refugees, immigrants and migrants to speak in their many different voices and consequently Matabane (the director) complicates the image of the immigrant threat' that dominates the South African media. The interventions of power will affect each of their lives differently, depending on whether they are a well-educated foreign national, a former Congolese Presidential Guard (who is treated exceptionally well), a refugee from the DRC or an immigrant from Malawi seeking greener pastures.

Pollock, Bhabha, Breckenridge and Chakrabarty argue that:

> Cosmopolitans today are often the victims of modernity, failed by capitalism's upward mobility, and bereft of those comforts and customs of national belonging. Refugees, peoples of diaspora, and migrants and exiles represent the spirit of cosmopolitical community.[31]

As Mbembe and Nuttall argue about the migrant worker, I would argue that the profiles of the immigrants we see in *Conversations* offers us the "paradoxical cultural figure of African modernity – the one who is both beneath the city and outside of its orders of visibility,"[32] those who have to remain hidden in the face of racism and xenophobia. However, framing these individuals as victims is problematic, and *Converstions* provides a space for their complex social positionings to be articulated. Whilst undoubtedly marginalised, these refugees and immigrants are surviving and thriving. Peberdy and Rogerson document the wide spread of immigrant and migrant economic activity in the inner city areas in which *Conversations* is filmed. Their study shows the diversity of small, medium and micro-enterprises that different communities are involved in, and the transnational dimensions of the various trade networks.[33]

Nuttall puts forward another concept that updates the concept of the *flâneur*, incorporating the transnational origins of the contemporary inhabitants of Johannesburg, and capturing the high-speed negotiations of space and power that are continually lived:

> We could add the figure of the *sâpeur* – the figure of spatial transition, operating in the interstices of large cultures, participating in a cult of appearance…a mobile individual who creates ramifying networks extending through time, space and multiple cultures as he circulates between countries, pulling off *coups* in otherwise invisible spaces in and between cities.[34]

This fits with the images from the film, as well as with other research into transnational communities, such as the Senegalese brotherhood of the Murid, whose "Islamic modernity" has initiated circuits of accumulation and trade which have taken them as urban migrants across Africa, Europe, Asia and the Americas.[35] Diouf argues that they are the new actors of globalisation, "bearing a new memory that differs from that of Western modernity', building their own economic realities and enacting a 'vernacular cosmopolitanism."[36]

Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon brings this concept to life; we are shown the overlapping paths of ordinary individuals of diverse geographical, social and cultural origins, who are embedded in complex networks of relationships with people, communities and nations, and who are transforming their own lives and circumstances, in the site of the city. *Conversations* provides us with insight into the lives of this vernacular cosmopolitanism, a new reality that we are seeing being enacted in Johannesburg and Cape Town, in Shanghai and Mumbai, in Chicago and Paris, in cities across the globe, not only as an African modernity, but as a set of alternative modernities that arise out of the lives of displaced, dispossessed, and/or searching individuals.

I want to end this section mentioning an article published in the spring 2006 edition of Art South Africa, entitled Dakar-Kinshasa-Cape Town. The artworks in this piece are images of African cities that reflect the ways in which the contested and contradictory meanings of 'Africa' are being performed in these cities, in these 'spaces of becoming'. We are seeing new strategies of belonging to distant 'home' communities, of surviving economically, of living new citizenship, and of belonging to 'Africa' and

to the world. This is the new image of Africa that is emerging, as art imitates life, and the lives of these everyday people are finally being reflected in images of Africa.

A question of images
The three films discussed represent key moments in the representation of Africa through images on the screen. *Africa Addio* is a film drawing on all negative stereotypes of Africa as a singular entity, eternally condemned to darkness by virtue of an evolutionary backwardness. As shown, many contemporary images of Africa that circulate in the media and political discourse continue to draw on similar themes, if more subtly, reinforcing colonial discourses of 'Africa'. *Petit à Petit* is the response, and still has great power to subvert these images. However, film distribution is a political project, and out of over one hundred films that Jean Rouch directed, only five are available in the United States.[37] Very few films on the international blockbuster circuit contain images of Africa that *don't* portray the continent as war torn, disease/starvation ridden and in political crisis (for example, the two recent commercial successes of *Hotel Rwanda* (2004) and *The Constant Gardner* (2005)). Quayson argues that whilst "we Africans will have to attend to the material details of our nightmare," the way in which Africa is represented has to be changed, for the images of Africa that circulate in the contemporary world have *material effects*.[38] Quayson points to the "genre chains" that link blackness, and Africaness, to subordinated positions in relation to knowledge, economy and power:

> At no point in our history have Africans actually been in a position to trigger and control the direction and rate of transformation of the genre chains that shape the structures within which we are denominated. We have always been consigned to responding from a place where we ought not to have been standing.[39]

As a consequence, these chains of signifiers have also had the affect of shaping Africa's self-conception. What is required, within and outside Africa, is a complete, "total negation of what *Africa* means."[40] We must break the chains of association between 'Africa' and the plethora of images and signifiers that follow from the word.

Mbembe argues that writing back is not self-writing, and that attempts to define an 'African identity' within a geographical space (of the continent), and time (and its history), results in a logic of victimisation and the dangerous quest to find an authentic essence in 690 million people, which denies the "thickness of which the African present is made."[41] It is *Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon* that I believe begins to open up this space, by presenting multiple 'African' subjectivities, yet by also interrogating the notion of subjectivities as being *essentially* tied to the geographical place of a continent, or for that matter, the shifting concepts of 'race' and 'custom'. An authentic image of African identity cannot be retrieved from the past, either from 'tradition' or in history. Instead, African subjectivities in the contemporary world must be framed by an "exploratory attitude…to get out of the dead end of an invented self,"[42] and cannot simply be an attempt to reverse alienation, race and dispossession. Instead,

> Mbembe's challenge to the partisans and practitioners of Africanity speaks for itself: to reformulate Africanity as an open question – for the sake of creativity.[43]

Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon presents the image of Africa as an open question. By framing the shots and narrative as he does, Matabane allows a breadth of 'African' subjectivities to speak for themselves, revealing their *dis*-unity, and all the contradictions inherent in the identification 'African'.

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[1] R. Chow, *Writing diaspora: Tactics of intervention in contemporary cultural studies* (Indiana University Press: Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1993), p. 2.
[2] *Africa Addio* (1966). Directed by Gualtiero Jacopetti and Franco Prosperi. 128 mins. *Petit à Petit* (1968). Directed by Jean Rouch. 90 mins. *Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon* (2005). Directed by Khalo Matabane. 80 mins. *The Godfathers of Mondo.* (2003). Directed by David Gregory. 90 mins.
[3] B. Wainana, 'How to write about Africa,' in *Granta 92* (Winter) 2005, p. 92.
[4] See www.stormfront.org.
[5] K. C. Dunn, 'Fear of the black planet: anarchy anxieties and postcolonial travel to Africa,' in *Third World Quarterly* 25(3) 2004: 483-499.
[6] Quoted in Dunn, 'Fear of the black planet', p. 495.
[7] Dunn, 'Fear of the black planet,' p. 490.
[8] H. J. Brookes, ''Suit, tie and a touch of juju': the ideological construction of Africa,' in *Discourse and society* (6)4 1995, p. 466.
[9] A. Mbembe & S. Nuttall, 'Writing the world from an African metropolis,' in *Public Culture* 16(3) 2004: 347-372; and Chow, *Writing diaspora*, p. 29.
[10] Chow, *Writing diaspora*, p. 29.
[11] Mbembe and Nuttall, 'Writing the World,' p. 245.
[12] Mbembe, 'African Modes', p. 243.
[13] R. Danso and D. A. McDonald, *Writing xenophobia: immigration and the press in post-apartheid South Africa* (South African Migration Project Cape Town, 2000); and Harris, 'Xenophobia: a new pathology for a New South Africa?' in D. Hooks & G. Eagle, *Psychopathology and social prejudice* (University of Cape Town Press: Cape Town, 2002).
[14] Quoted from *The Godfathers of Mondo*.
[15] *Ibid.*
[16] See S. Feld, *CinÀ©-Ethnography: Jean Rouch* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 2003).
[17] *Ibid.*
[18] Quoted in Feld, *CinÀ©*, p. 13.
[19] Feld, *CinÀ©-Ethnography*, p. 17.
[20] A. Amin, & N. Thrift, *Cities: Reimagining the urban* (Blackwell: Cambridge, 2002).
[21] Mbembe & Nuttall, 'Writing the world', p. 354.
[22] S. Watson, ed., *A city imagined* edited (The Penguin Group: Cape Town, 2005).
[23] J. Cronin, 'Creole Cape Town,' in Watson, *A city imagined*, p. 50.
[24] M. L. Pratt, *Imperial eyes: travel writing and transculturation* (Routledge: London, 1992), p. 5.
[25] Amin & Thrift, *Cities*, p. 4.
[26] *Ibid.*, p. 11.
[27] Amin & Thrift, *Cities*, p. 22.
[28] Mbembe & Nuttall, 'Writing the world,' p. 366.
[29] *Ibid.*, p. 352.

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[30] Amin & Thrift, *Cities*, p. 22-27.

[31] S. Pollock, H. Bhabha, C. Breckenridge and D. Chakrabarty, 'Cosmopolitanisms,' in *Public Culture* 12 (3) 2000, p. 582.

[32] Mbembe & Nuttall, 'Writing the world,' p. 364.

[33] S. Peberdy and C. Rogerson, 'Transnationalism and non-South African entrepreneurs in South Africa's small, medium and micro-enterprise (SMME) economy,' in *Canadian Journal of African Studies,* 34 (1) 2000*,* pp. 20-40.

[34] S. Nuttall, 'City forms and writing the `now' in South Africa,' in *Journal of Southern African Studies* 30 (4) 2004, p. 742.

[35] M, Diouf, 'The Senegalese Murid diaspora and the making of a vernacular cosmopolitanism,' in *Public* culture, 12 (3) 2000*,* pp. 679-702.

[36] *Ibid.*, p. 684.

[37] Feld, *CinÀ©-Ethnography*, p. 12.

[38] A. Quayson, 'Obverse denominations: Africa?' in *Public Culture* 14(3) 2002: 585-588.

[39] *Ibid.*, p. 587.

[40] *Ibid.*

[41] Mbembe, 'African Modes of Self-Writing,' in *Public Culture* 14(3) 2002, p. 273; and S. B. Diagne, 'Keeping Africanity open,' in *Public Culture,* 14(3) 2002: 621-623. 2002).

[42] Diagne, 'Keeping Africanity open,' p. 622.

[43] *Ibid.*, p. 621-2.