
Dirty cuts: Violence, trauma and narrative in a post-apartheid South African film

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Abstract

This paper considers narrative disruption in Teboho Mahlatsi's 1999 film, *Portrait of a Young Man Drowning*, particularly as it relates to memory, trauma and violence. The disruption that marks this eleven-minute film indicates a violent and impoverished past intruding into the present, in terms of both the broader political context of apartheid South Africa and the more recent social instability caused by crime. The film communicates an underlying trauma through the disruption; the narrative intrusions can be read as symptomatic, but they are weighted down with memory. Post-apartheid South African film has been haunted by the past, particularly through the compulsion to rehearse reconciliation, even if not explicitly political, through film narratives. While the trend in recent South African fiction film has been towards seamless editing and the contained structure of the three act narrative, Mahlatsi's film begins to address concerns which mainstream narratives find difficult to articulate. The underlying violence of the film is communicated textually, through its almost aggressive editing. Discontinuous editing becomes a way of representing interior experience. Narrative disruption creates a disturbed text and this is symptomatic of subterranean social trauma caused by a troubled past and violent present.

Key words: Teboho Mahlatsi, trauma, violence, film, discontinuity editing, narrative, Truth and Reconciliation Commission

Introduction

At the centre of Teboho Mahlatsi's 1999 film *Portrait of a Young Man Drowning* is an image of the protagonist, Shadow, as he watches himself hoisted upon the shoulders of a funeral procession making its mournful way through a township. This is an impossible image and interrupts Mahlatsi's stark representation of the township as a space of violence and vigilantism. It is not the only interruption in this short film. Throughout the eleven minutes, Mahlatsi makes what I call 'dirty cuts' – rough incisions that deviate from the norms of continuity editing and result in a disrupted narrative.

Continuity editing privileges seamless transitions. There are techniques that smooth transitions from shot to shot, maintaining the spatial and temporal coherence of the film. For example, match cutting ensures that the movement, position and direction of objects and actions are coherent; there are rules such as the 30-degree rule for avoiding jump cuts and ensuring that the spatial continuity of the film is not compromised. Consequently, the viewer experiences a film that does not draw attention to itself as technique becomes invisible. However, in *Portrait of a Young Man Drowning*, the narrative is disrupted by red-tinted images that suggest an alternative temporal order, and communicate Shadow's psychological and physical dis-ease. These dirty cuts resemble wounds; they are a formal manifestation of the stab wound that catalyses

Shadow's journey across the township. The film realises the protagonist's interior experience in its structure by creating an infected text to mirror his infected body. This article considers the function of narrative disruption, caused by the infected text in this short film within the context of post-apartheid cinema. The discontinuity in editing highlights the relationship between trauma and film language: how the codes and conventions of film may be refigured, thereby reducing the totalising effects of seamlessness in order to represent a deep-seated violence or dis-ease.

Portrait of a Young Man Drowning is an award-winning¹ short film by Teboho Mahlatsi, a South African filmmaker who is best known for his direction of the first two seasons of the controversial television series, *Yizo Yizo*.² Like *Yizo Yizo*, *Portrait of a Young Man Drowning* raises questions of realism as it explores township violence. It tells the story of Shadow, a community executioner who is caught between his role in vigilante killings and a search for redemption. At the beginning of the film, Shadow is injured and sets out looking for water to wash himself. As he walks through the township, he encounters various people: a friend, a man in a wheelchair, women and the funeral procession of someone that he has killed. Shadow is despised and distanced by the community – no-one will give him water – yet they seek him out when they capture a rapist. He makes his way to Tata Phiri, a community leader who tries to dissuade him from killing the rapist. The film climaxes as Shadow and the rapist face each other in a ruined building, his inner turmoil made evident through his hesitation. He limps away after weakly stabbing the rapist while children laugh and throw stones at him. At the end, he immerses his face in the water set outside, according to custom, for the funeral-goers to wash their hands.

Mahlatsi's *Portrait of a Young Man Drowning* offers an oblique engagement with the ideas and values of what can be called the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) films – these are films, usually feature length, that attempt to work through and communicate social cohesion by addressing South Africa's traumatic past, using the Commission as a platform. The film explores external social reality by engaging the subjective reality of the protagonist. Using discontinuous editing techniques, Mahlatsi averts the restraint and erasure that may occur through the seamlessness of continuity editing and negotiates the divide between the individual and the collective. The discontinuous editing results in a disrupted narrative that begins to address an underlying trauma.

Representing trauma in post-apartheid film

There is a trend in post-apartheid films made between 1999 and 2005, roughly the latter period of the first decade of democracy, to depict a confrontation with South Africa's past, usually through recognition of the corrupt nature of apartheid and a gesture towards some kind of reconciliation. For example, *Red Dust* (Hooper 2004), *Forgiveness* (Gabriel 2004), and *In My Country* (Boorman 2005)³ explicitly explore issues around reconciliation using the TRC as a vehicle for social relationships. In these three films, the personal is explored in the context of apartheid politics unearthed during the transition years of the TRC; they draw upon the TRC to communicate South Africa's transition at an individual level.⁴ Films that do not pursue this as an explicit theme weave elements of reconciliation or restoration in their subtexts: Twist's rightful urban, middle-class legacy is restored to him after being forced to the streets when abandoned at birth (*Boy Called Twist*, Green 2004); Yesterday is wronged by

her husband and community, but remains patiently forgiving as she is ravaged by disease (Roodt 2005). *The Wooden Camera* (Wa Luruli 2003) explores multiculturalism through Madiba and Estelle's friendship, but it is the father's acknowledgement of his mixed heritage that allows for a deeper reconciliation. More loosely, *Stander* (Hughes 2003) abandons lawful white society after the scene depicting the June 16 uprising: we are encouraged to read his bank robbery as a defiance of the apartheid state; the gap between black and white marked by the violence of the Soweto uprising underpins the division between law and disorder that the film explores. Gavin Hood's protagonist in *Tsotsi* (2005) finds peace through reconciling the stolen infant and its parents; through his encounter with the baby he resolves his own traumatic past. All of these films allude to the rift in South African society brought on by the divisive nature of apartheid: the past destabilises the present until it is confronted and laid to rest; the reconciliation explored at an individual level serves as an analogy for a more encompassing idea of reconciliation and atonement. This rehearses reconciliation through narrative and aligns it with the TRC's attempt to use narrative to address the traumas of apartheid and ascribe agency for these traumas.⁵

South African feature film in the post-apartheid era tends to model itself on the dominant modes of storytelling as developed by Hollywood.⁶ These films use neat three-act narratives, continuity editing and conventional soundscapes associated with the classical Hollywood narrative form, which remains the dominant mode of narrative construction in mainstream film today. They are presented with resolution and closure, thereby effectively suppressing any trauma or more complex experience that cannot be contained by or communicated through linearity and glossy production values. Apartheid forms the backdrop in many of these films, but is engaged in ways that avoid anything

dangerous or threatening. *Red Dust*, for example, explicitly takes on the issue of traumatic apartheid experience by incorporating torture and betrayal as narrative tools in the construction of a thriller.⁷

There are ideological assumptions underpinning the aesthetics of the new South African film industry. Ideas around 'production quality' specify a distinct texture and polish to films – a totalising, contained seamlessness – and this is what commercial cinema necessarily privileges. Production quality is ideologically loaded: creating films with a Hollywood finish entails implicit choices, and rejecting that aesthetic potentially opens up a different register in film, one which allows alternative options for communicating. Lucia Saks (2010:7) refers to the 'double articulation of cinema as industry and cinema as art' where the demands of industry rub up against the desire for exploring the range of the medium. This can translate to a tension between an emphasis on conforming to industry led aesthetic ideals and a more arthouse cinema that attempts to grapple with complex experience, while exploring cinematic expression and social issues. The two are not necessarily mutually exclusive, and *Portrait of a Young Man Drowning* attempts to negotiate this tension.⁸

Although there are thematic similarities between *Portrait of a Young Man Drowning* and the feature-length films mentioned above, feature-length and short films have significant differences. Not constrained by the same commercial demands as features, short films have more freedom to explore and deviate from technical and narrative conventions. The shorter length allows for a greater degree of flexibility,⁹ which is evident through the long history of experimental film using the short format. This is evident, for example in Gavin Hood's *The Storekeeper*, where the muted use of sound, particularly dialogue, underscores the

potency of the image, especially during its terrible climax. In South Africa, the short film has also provided a platform for the exploration of marginalised experience (Botha 2009).

One of the core tensions in Mahlatsi's short film is the simultaneous desire to tap into the spectacular, even fashionable, elements of contemporary popular film and the clear attempt to communicate something specific about South African experience through a disrupted narrative. Mahlatsi's use of the form of the short film does not eschew the influence of dominant modes of storytelling as the film draws on the MTV style of editing, with its particular brand of self-conscious camera and editing that was fashionable at the time.¹⁰ The trend towards incorporating disjuncture in mainstream film, particularly through editing, can be a source of aesthetic pleasure.¹¹ However, this pleasure occurs because disjuncture is a momentary breakdown in an otherwise largely coherent narrative. In Mahlatsi's short film, the disruption becomes more relentless. The aesthetic of the film hesitates between a more uncomfortable viewing experience that emerges from its questions about violence and trauma in a South African township, while engaging elements of a mainstream aesthetic.¹² This tension underscores the trauma narrative that the film attempts to communicate.

The idea of trauma as unrepresentable informs much of the literature on the subject. For some critics, like Jacqueline Rose, it is language that is inadequate to communicate traumatic experience. She writes in the context of the TRC:

To read the Report of the Commission is to be confronted on almost every page with how difficult it is to speak of atrocity, whether as victim or perpetrator of the act, although the difficulty is radically different for each. It has been at the centre of the Commission and the

source of its greatest difficulty that language ... does not easily "bed" the truth (Rose 2003:220).

Rose's observation echoes Cathy Caruth (1996:5), who writes that trauma is spoken in a language that somehow 'defies, even as it claims, our understanding'. Trauma is thus understood to be an elusive experience. It is difficult to comprehend, even as it occurs (Caruth 1995). Anne Whitehead (2004:5) refers to this formulation of trauma as the 'collapse of understanding' where trauma 'registers as non-experience' because 'its happening exceeded the individual's capacity for registration or understanding' (Rossington & Whitehead 2007:188).

The translation from verbal to visual language does not make reference to experiences which resist language any easier. If anything, the apparently deceptive nature of the visual image, because of its capacity to look like reality, serves to complicate the visual telling of trauma.¹³ Furthermore, the dominant expression of film language, with its particular conventions of lighting, camera work and sound as well as the complex syntax of film editing, has almost codified the communication of experiences of pain and trauma: it is difficult to really comprehend experiences of pain and trauma through their media representation. The representation of violence in Hollywood film, as a particular variation of pain and trauma, has standardised images of suffering to a large extent.

In addition, there is an extent to which violence is constituted by spectacle. Žižek's (2002:11) analysis of the relationship between the representations of violence and the experience of it through his analysis of the images of 9/11, highlights the spectacular nature of violence:

For the great majority of the public, the WTC explosions were events on the TV screen, and

when we watched the oft-repeated shots of frightened people running towards the camera ahead of the giant cloud of dust from the collapsing tower, was not the framing of the shot itself reminiscent of spectacular shots in catastrophe movies, a special effect which outdid all others, since – as Jeremy Bentham knew – reality is the best appearance of itself?

Žižek suggests that the crash of the plane and collapse of the towers is indicative of fantasy intruding into the real and that the now iconic image of the World Trade Center collapsing had happened many times before, in the movies. Power and Crampton (2005) discuss how survivors and eyewitnesses of the 9/11 attacks used film imagery to communicate and refer to their experience of the attacks. Similarly, in my interview with Teboho Mahlatsi (2004), he refers to Shadow's desire to extract himself and find redemption by saying 'Clint Eastwood wants to walk away but the people in the village won't let him', thereby articulating township violence and its effects through images of the American western.

For large-scale and ongoing violence, films become a frame of reference that is never neutral; the experiences that are communicated become contaminated by their articulation through these ready-made images. More than a reference point, violent images in the media inform the comprehension of acts of violence.

Violence in the media then does not only anaesthetise – but rather, the experience of violence is constituted to a large extent through exposure to media images.¹⁴ Experiences of violence and trauma are recast using images from films to articulate and understand them.¹⁵ This is not a causal relationship where life imitates art, but a more nuanced relationship between the spectacular and experience, particularly in relation to pain and trauma.¹⁶ Interestingly, Mahlatsi's other

success, *Yizo Yizo*, revealed a related conundrum: how can violence be articulated without the images elaborating on and constituting further violence?¹⁷ While the series appeared to be representing a truth about township life, the images depicted were harnessed to become part of the language of the problem; as a new weapon. This is the problem of pain, violence and trauma finding representation: the representations are not simply neutral reflections; they continue to hold dialogue with experience.

Identity and community in *Portrait of Young Man Drowning*

Portrait of a Young Man Drowning explores township crime and violence, which stem from strategic deprivation during the apartheid years, and their effects on the community. The film attempts to communicate the ways in which communities cohere when they have been fragmented by trauma. There are two levels of trauma at work in the film; one refers to the broader issue of the social effects of apartheid – this is the historical trauma that LaCapra (2001) writes about. The second is the related, but more specific issue of violence and crime within a small community, corresponding to LaCapra's idea of structural trauma, and it is depicted against the landscape of the township. For LaCapra, one of the key differences between the two is that the distinctions between victim, perpetrator and bystanders generally do not blur in historical trauma. Therefore, Mahlatsi's film should be read with the understanding that in the context of the broader social ills of apartheid, there is an absent perpetrator in the film; that to some extent, the community is a society of victims whose experience of poverty, violence and crime are all connected to the encompassing historical trauma. The film depicts

a hostile community where human interactions are characterised by suspicion and detachment and the lines between victim, bystander and perpetrator have been dissolved. There is a tentative kindness which characters appear to be unable to enact fully, marking the film with a sense of hesitation. The need for self-preservation appears to override the sense of connectedness in the community.

The red-tinted shot of Shadow watching himself hoisted on the pallbearers' shoulders is an image of Shadow integrated into the community. It is also the only inserted image that appears twice – the second time is a closer shot (Figure 1). This shot strikingly shows Shadow's apparently dead body replacing the coffin. This image of Shadow split in two and watching himself dead alludes to one of the primary concerns of the film: the search for identity. LaCapra (2004:5) observes that trauma results in a 'rupture in memory that breaks continuity with the past, thereby placing identity in question to the point of shattering it'. Shadow's split self indicates a fragmented identity which is related to the film's attempt to communicate an underlying trauma.

By seeing himself in the place of the dead man in these two shots, Shadow identifies with the victim (who is also a perpetrator since Shadow is a vigilante killer): the man he had slain. It contrasts with an earlier flash where he sees himself as one of the pallbearers holding up the coffin alongside the community. Shadow's fragmented identity positions him conflictingly as both victim and perpetrator, key member of the community and yet outsider, treading the fine line between saviour/hero and outcast, and this ambivalent identity drives the narrative. His sense of self is dissociated – even the name suggests this as 'shadow' always entails something else. However, here the relationship between shadow and self is inverted as the shadow

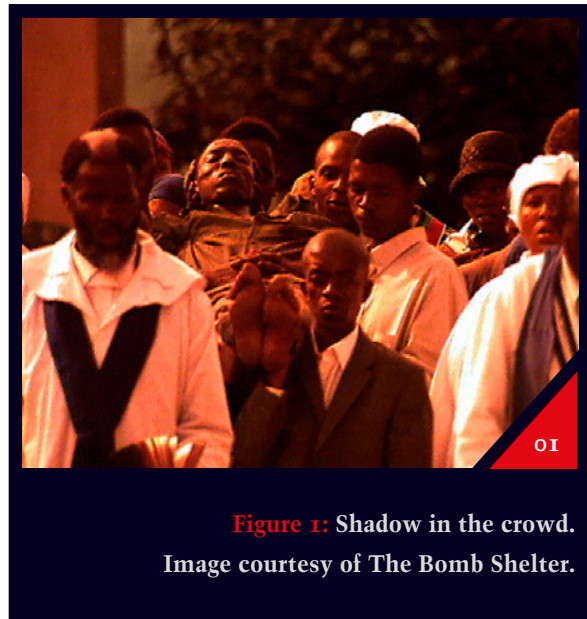


Figure 1: Shadow in the crowd.
Image courtesy of The Bomb Shelter.

exists in the here and now and it is the self that is elusive. The viewer is allowed glimpses of the self through images such as Shadow observing himself as if dead and mourned; through the figures of his slain who appear to refract a sense of his self. The lost sense of self is bound up in the relationship between Shadow and the community as it follows Shadow's attempt to find his identity, and assert himself within the community rather than haunting its margins. But this cannot happen because the community needs to see him as a killer, as their shadow who takes on the work they cannot face themselves.

Shadow's dissociation is structurally embedded into the film through the arrangement of point-of-view in the editing. The opening evokes a strong, but detached point-of-view as it winds through a montage of dissolves through a ruined house. The *mise-en-scène* shows distinct signs of abandon: the flames licking the edge of the frame, the burnt out interior of the ruined house. There is a sharp contrast between the ordered regularity of the image – clear lines, neat squares and rectangles – and the sense of disorder and abandon created by the searching camera before it enters Shadow's shack. The point-of-view does not appear

to belong to any character, but mimics Shadow's inner journey and resonates with the sense of searching that the film communicates. This includes search for identity, a search to recover a lost self, which culminates in the moment of confrontation at the end.

The underlying conflict between Shadow and the community builds up to the confrontation between Shadow and the rapist in the ruin. The film begins and climaxes in a ruined house. The searching camera in the beginning, the weaving of the funeral procession, the return to ruin in the end all suggest a kind of entrapment, a circularity of space which closes in around Shadow. The spatial snare corresponds to Shadow's search for identity – the search motif is established spatially from the very start and the film replicates this at a structural level.

When facing the rapist in the ruined building, Shadow struggles to 'finish him off' as the community urge him. He catches a glimpse of his face in the shards of a broken mirror and cries, unable to continue. He rejects his social identity, and immediately his community rejects him. He then flouts tradition by interrupting the procession and washing his wound and bloody hands in the funeral-goers' water. The final image is a red-tinted shot of him emerging from water, suggesting that he has attained redemption. But this is attained by stepping outside of the bounds of tradition and his role in the community (Figure 2).

The depiction of the funeral procession shows a point of connection for the community. An important trope in the film – reflecting this connectedness and coherence – is mourning, which is one way that communities attempt to come to terms with trauma. The ritual of mourning links Shadow, his victim, and the community, as the funeral procession's slow wail pervades the film. Rose (2004:5) identifies mourning as key to the

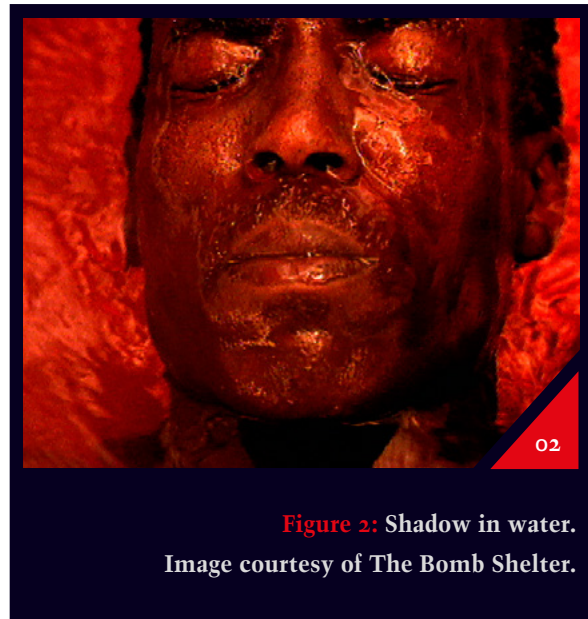


Figure 2: Shadow in water.
Image courtesy of The Bomb Shelter.

'emotive binding of social groups', suggesting sacrifice in order for a group to cohere around loss. And Shadow, as community-appointed executioner, signifies that loss. Each time that Shadow kills, he loses himself through the act; this is suggested by his eroded sense of self and through his reluctance to stab the rapist towards the end. Mourning, as the TRC reminds us, can bring release; but as the TRC testimonies reveal, it struggles in the absence of a body.¹⁸ Mourning therefore formalises around an object and in *Portrait of a Young Man Drowning*, Shadow becomes the scapegoat, the stand-in corpse that signifies a collective mourning for an unarticulated loss (Figure 3).

It is through mourning that the community is able to work against fragmentation. Therefore, Shadow's dissolution is crucial for the ongoing coherence of a community splintered by crime, violence and the effects of apartheid. By killing others and losing his own identity, which he has sacrificed to the perceived good of the community, Shadow fulfils this.

The mourning of the slain becomes a new ritual that binds the community together because it is premised on guilt. Shadow's marginality and the community's

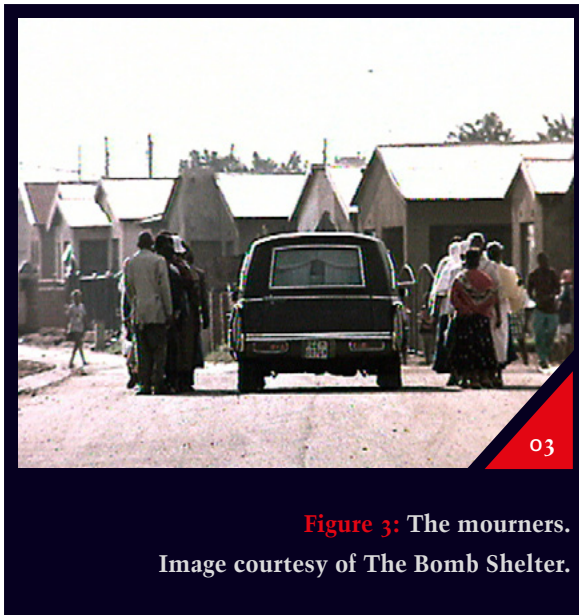


Figure 3: The mourners.
Image courtesy of The Bomb Shelter.

ambiguity towards him emerge from the conflicting desire for the vigilante murders, and simultaneously the revulsion of taking life. Caruth (1996) argues that the crisis at the core of trauma narratives is the unsettling question of whether the trauma arises from an encounter with death or from having survived. The community's position is double-sided: on the one hand they mourn the dead, but on the other they willed the death in order to preserve themselves. Mourning is therefore not the lamenting of the loss of life, but a way of ritualising the exchange between these two opposing positions. In the middle, is Shadow, whose conflicting identity as both perpetrator and victim, is linked to the symptomology of trauma and conveyed through the form of the film.

The infected text: communicating trauma

The film edit simultaneously figures as a cut, or wound, as well as the suturing of that cut. It is implicitly violent, exploited most effectively by Hitchcock in his famous shower sequence in *Psycho* (1960) where the violence is directed at the viewer as well as towards the victim.

But stitching together is potentially more dangerous. Suturing alerts us to what has been bound up in the seam; of what may be festering beneath. In *Portrait of a Young Man Drowning* there are two cuts or wounds to the characters' bodies that resonate with the cuts to the film text itself. There is the wound that Shadow, the reluctant community executioner, weakly inflicts on the rapist towards the end of the film, when he confronts his own identity as a killer. But, more pervasive, is Shadow's wound that marks his body as diseased and him as an outsider. It also begins to explain his disturbed psychology which is conveyed through the inserted images and disrupted editing: the viewer could read them as the hallucinations of a delirious man (Figure 4).

The disrupted editing and disturbed psychology ensures a distance between the viewer and film. Seamlessness in continuity editing allows for insertion of the viewer into the fictional world: the viewer is unaware of the mechanics of the different shots being joined because of the established norms. Mahlatsi deviates from these norms, leaving the viewer in a more uncertain position. The detached viewing experience combined with the moral ambiguity of Shadow and the community, makes for a complicated audience response. The community, the protagonist and by extension the audience, are implicated to some degree as victims of the violence, but more strikingly, as perpetrators. Mahlatsi does not allow the viewer any easy identification with either Shadow or other people in the community. Identification in film occurs through the arrangement of shots of the character, especially close-ups, and how these are combined with point-of-view shots. Shadow is depicted as jagged and wounded as he limps through the township with his stiff jerky gait which contrasts with the stillness of the people he encounters. He is often on the edge of the frame, but this closed off framing is tempered with

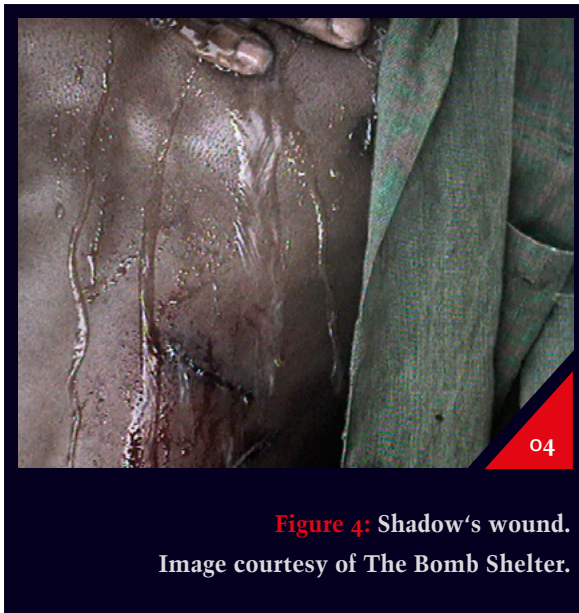


Figure 4: Shadow's wound.
Image courtesy of The Bomb Shelter.

close-ups which encourage some empathy towards him. This is augmented by his reluctance to kill the rapist, the repeated refusal of his request for water and the awareness that his intentions are ultimately to protect the community; it could be perceived as the worthier wrong. The viewer is, however, aligned with Shadow; the viewer follows his character and has access to his screen space.¹⁹ Shadow's point-of-view is shared mainly in the inserted shots, the interior moments, and his point-of-view is rarely accessed in 'normal' reality. The film prioritises communicating a disturbed psychology above an audience identification with the protagonist. Shadow's character is therefore communicated at two levels: the 'killer dog' with whom the viewer struggles to identify, and the tortured mind which the viewer can access all too immediately.

Writing in the context of intercultural cinema, Laura Marks (2000:xii) discusses film as 'contagious' because of the potential to work towards a change in the viewer. Mahlatsi's film forces questions about violence and complicity; it closes the distance between the passive observers in the township and a wider audience who affect a similar ignorance. In this way, the film could be understood to be contagious: the ambivalent

positioning of the audience where the options are the vigilante killer, the rapist or the detached community who to an extent, puppeteer Shadow's actions. By communicating the diseased bodies and mind through a similarly diseased film text, the film works to act upon its viewers, to get under their skin.

Portrait of a Young Man Drowning communicates trauma through Shadow's diseased body and mind, but primarily by infecting the text with dirty cuts. It assaults viewers with images that do not appear to belong and then forces them to draw on their subjective resources in order to create sense and to complete the image. The narrative disruption makes the inaccessible explicit, where interior processes may become externalised. The film indicates different ways of materialising trauma: the cut on Shadow's body that vexes him and drives his search for water, functions as a cipher for an internal wound; it is the mark on the material. The cuts that disrupt the film become markers of violence in the same way as the cuts on Shadow's body and the stab that Shadow inflicts on the rapist. The integration of continuity editing and discontinuity works in a way that indicates an eruption, as well as disruption: the inserted images indicate the moments that will not be contained.

Shadow's wound also acts as a constant reminder of the violence that plagues him and the community. This violence is drawn into the representation of the township, and is evident throughout the film: the dead dog Shadow passes as he limps along; the disconcerting encounter with the laughing man in the wheelchair; the stabbing of the rapist in the ruined building. In our interview, Mahlatsi (2004) explains how the image of the man in the wheelchair carries the weight of cultural memory:

It seems like every township has a man on a wheelchair, the result of our violent past and present. I just took it a step further by making him fall off the wheelchair and have him struggle to climb back on.

Mahlatsi therefore draws on the iconography of the township as he understands it by including the image of the wounded man in the wheelchair, which he further distresses in his depiction of Shadow's disturbed psychology. The depiction of the township with its ruined houses imprints the memory of violence into the landscape:

... those houses are real. I shot in the neighbourhood (Thokoza, East Rand, Johannesburg) that experienced this kind of violence: the political violence of the early nineties between ANC supporters and Inkatha supporters from the hostels. Houses were burnt down, people slaughtered and this house was burnt down during those days and many years later I found it still abandoned (Mahlatsi 2004).²⁰

The film weights contemporary violence with the burden of the past. However, the relationship with the past is complicated by the breakdown of a linear progression of time brought on by the disrupted narrative. Mirroring the symptomology of trauma at a textual level allows the film access to obscured memory.

Editing and memory

As well as indicating an infected text where the inserted images could be the hallucinations of a delirious man, these images could also be read as resurfacing memories. There are two elements that signal the importance of memory in this film: the first includes the red-tinted images that disrupt the continuity of the film; the second is a small moment near the

beginning where Shadow hides a picture beneath his mattress. In this scene, which is the first after the prologue, Mahlatsi's composition graphically links the shots of the ceiling with the corn-rows on Shadow's head. Graphic relations in and between shots can serve to underscore conventional linear editing, or as in the case of experimental film, they can present an alternative narrative logic as they privilege an image based linking of shots.²¹ These matching lines not only create a sense of texture and draw the shots together, but function as vectors which guide the viewer's attention to the mattress, beneath which Shadow has hidden a photograph of a woman carrying a child. The picture looks dated, so the film encourages us to believe that this is an image from the past, presumably his mother. The secrecy and the brevity of the moment, suggests that it is someone with whom he no longer has contact but who continues to haunt him. The picture is placed beside his knife, thereby juxtaposing the picture of someone loved with an indicator of his traumatised, lost self. The hidden picture potentially offers an explanation for Shadow's elusive identity and the overwhelming sense of loss which drives the film. By repressing this image, other images disrupt the narrative and spill out of its seams. Through this image, Mahlatsi offers an object around which the disruptions may cohere. Shadow's missing mother is not an important narrative element in the film. Rather, the picture stands in for another kind of loss, in the same way that the image of the mourners indicates bereavement as metaphor for social processes.

In the absence of a clear, linear narrative around loss and trauma, the film presents alternative ways of communicating these. It is possible that traumatic experiences may begin to be released when representation breaks down. *Portrait of a Young Man Drowning* suggests at least two alternative ways through which trauma makes itself manifest: how trauma speaks

through incoherence and disruption, and how trauma can cohere around a material presence, such as the hidden photograph.

In writing about the elusive referentiality of traumatic experiences, Caruth (1996) suggests another way that trauma becomes available: through forgetting. The elusiveness of language, both verbal and visual, with regard to trauma means it can be inaccessible even to the one who experiences it. The failure of memory becomes a way of accessing what may be otherwise inaccessible: by detaching these experiences, they may be inhabited. Caruth argues that the experience of trauma is filtered through the fictions of traumatic repression which then allow the event to become indirectly available. Post-traumatic stress, in particular, is accompanied by disruption and dissociation of memory. The images are evidence of a psychic trauma, a manifestation of repressed, dissociated memories making their way to the surface; this idea of surfacing is indicated visually in the final image of the film where Shadow emerges from the bloodied funeral water (Figure 5).

Throughout the film, the inserted images indicate an alternative perception of the world, created by Shadow's disturbed psychology and dissociated memories. Their most salient features include their fragmentation and their possibility within the fictional world. They show the world of the township and its inhabitants, but with some distortion. They depict things that are plausible within the established world: Shadow looks down and instead of seeing his hands as they are, they are covered in blood; he looks at the man in the wheelchair and then sees him having fallen out and struggling to get back on the chair. There is a misconnection between the mind and the world around it where the mind misperceives the ordinary and reinterprets it with a darker, more violent



Figure 5: Shadow's scream.
Image courtesy of The Bomb Shelter.

vision; the surfacing memories taint the present with violence. This is perhaps a sense of premonition: while these images may not exist in the past or present, there is a sense of foreboding, brought on by the trauma that allows the viewer to infer the future. Temporality is disrupted by trauma and reinterprets the ordinary through the lens of the traumatic past and alienated present.

The film therefore refigures narrative time in order to communicate trauma. LaCapra (2004:19) writes about the 'dual sense of being' where the 'past is uncontrollably relieved' through instances of traumatic memory such as the 'nightmare or the flashback'; this collapses the 'distance between here and there, then and now'. By establishing an alternative temporality, the film is able to draw the past into the present. It is also another way of drawing together Shadow's fragmented identity, where the self who remembers and the self who experienced the traumatic events momentarily blur.

Conclusion

Portrait of a Young Man Drowning begins to communicate an underlying social trauma by drawing together a troubled past and a violent present. Trauma can be understood as elusive and resistant to language. The visual representation of violence further complicates the communication of traumatic experience.

As it attempts to reconcile the past and present, *Portrait of a Young Man Drowning* engages with concerns that have been explored in feature length films: the recurring themes of reconciliation and restoration. However, the form of the short film allows more flexibility to deviate from the dominant modes of storytelling in film. Mahlatsi employs elements of mainstream film in the service of his disrupted narrative and this adds a creative tension.

The subterranean trauma of the film, as well as a more immediate trauma bound up in issues of violence in the township, work to fragment the community and destabilise identity. In its exploration of the fragmented community, the film attempts to find a point of coherence through the image of mourning, depicted by the funeral procession that is repeated throughout. It is also through engaging with the community's mourning that Shadow can begin to recover his own fragmented identity. Mahlatsi therefore explores issues of identity and community, using the landscape of the township which still bears the effects of apartheid and the continuing social problems.

Discontinuity editing in *Portrait of a Young Man Drowning* combines images in ways that emphasise a fractured reality and a disturbed psychology. The film narrative is disrupted by images that could be read either as delirious hallucinations, brought on by infection, or else as fragmented and distorted

memories that resurface and contaminate the present; the form of the film bears the symptomology of trauma. In addition, the film acts as a means of contagion by placing the viewer in an ambivalent position: it blurs the lines between victim and perpetrator; it aligns the viewer with Shadow, the reluctant executioner. The disrupted narrative refigures narrative time as a means of drawing together the historical and recent trauma and thereby beginning to represent elusive experience.

Notes

- 1 Silver Lion, Best Short Film, Venice Film Festival, 1999.
- 2 Teboho Mahlatsi directed the first two seasons of *Yizo Yizo*. It was aired on SABC 1 between 1999 and 2004 and caused controversy for its depiction of violence and social disorder in township schools.
3. These are films that directly engage with South African content even though they cannot all be considered entirely South African in production. There are varying degrees of international influence, usually because of co-production, ranging from minimal in *Forgiveness* to extensive in *In My Country*
4. Martha Evans (2007) discusses these three films in the context of the TRC.
- 5 See LaCapra (2001) for a description of how the TRC attempted to provide a forum where loss could be articulated, culpable activity acknowledged and a collective ritual of mourning could be enacted.
- 6 Many films, including those commercially classified as 'World Cinema', explore aesthetic models and narrative techniques that veer away from

- the established modes. In other African countries, there are many examples of films that do not share the aesthetics and narrative construction of Hollywood cinema and so it is interesting that post-apartheid South African cinema has been tentative in deviating from these norms, embracing instead a Hollywood aesthetic with high production values where it can. *Zulu Love Letter* (Suleman 2004) is an interesting example of a feature film that begins to explore alternatives.
- 7 Lucia Saks (2010:101) discusses *Red Dust* as a genre film following the Hollywood narrative mode yet remaining close to 'the moment of truth'.
 - 8 See Lucia Saks (2010) for a detailed discussion of the factors that influence and shape the South African film industry. In particular, she acknowledges how South Africa has previously 'sought validation from the only world that mattered – the Western world' but how the 'bonds of commonality' have since been redrawn (Saks 2010:79). She identifies how an international influence on African film is a positive development which is 'a way of claiming autonomy for the filmmakers of Africa outside of state regulations' (Saks 2010:82).
 - 9 See Richard Raskin (2002) for a discussion on the greater flexibilities of the short film. In particular, he suggests that they are not bound to the same sequential constructs of features, and works to develop a model for reading shorts.
 - 10 See Dancyger (2002) for a discussion of the influence of MTV on cinema trends. See also Carol Vernallis (2001:22), who writes about how MTV editing may underscore non-narrative visual structures and how MTV editing maintains the video's momentum, keeping it in the present: 'A striking edit can allow one to move past a number of strange and disturbing images while neither worrying about them or forgetting them completely.'
 - 11 In his discussion of intensified continuity in contemporary Hollywood film, Bordwell (2002:24) acknowledges the incorporation of disjuncture in the mainstream aesthetic, but indicates that these are marginal, deviations from 'a still powerful cluster of norms'.
 - 12 This is a tension that Mahlatsi (2004) acknowledges in our interview: 'I grew up watching kung-fu movies, westerns, action movies and in many ways I'm a product of that and at the same time I also reject that cinema because it's not part of my reality. So there's constant embracing and rejecting going on all the time'. This is also evident in his 2006 film *Sekalli le Meokgo*.
 - 13 See Lesley Marx (2007). Marx writes about how the glamour of cinema further complicates the representation of atrocity, while engaging with the relationship between the film image and reality in her discussion of South African film and trauma.
 - 14 Žižek (2009) explores this further when he discusses how certain images of violence have more media worth than others.
 - 15 This is neatly demonstrated in Oliver Schmitz's *Hijack Stories* (2000) where the gangsters practice their hijacking techniques using behaviour borrowed from the movies.
 - 16 Žižek (2002) comments that after 9/11 the Pentagon sought help from Hollywood specialists in catastrophe movies in order to imagine scenarios of terrorist attacks and how to fight them.

17 Images of violence, particularly Papa Action flushing a child's head in the toilet, were reported to be influencing schoolchildren who appeared to mimic his behaviour. See Modisane's (2010) discussion of *Yizo Yizo*.

18 This idea is repeated in the testimonies of various people, most noticeably by Joyce Mtimkulu. Her experiences following the loss of her son, Siphiwo, particularly with regard to the TRC and Gideon Niewoudt, is documented in Mark Kaplan's *Between Joyce and Remembrance* (2003). Joyce Mtimkulu stresses her need to find out what happened to him and to his body; she specifically appeals for his bones. Interestingly, Niewoudt's strategy was to delay the TRC hearings, thereby inhibiting Joyce Mtimkulu from speaking; there is a correlation between needing to speak and finding the bones, most vividly depicted by her holding up the remains of Siphwo's scalp when she finally did get to testify. Although Joyce Mtimkulu did not find his bones, the film ends with the symbolic burial of the scalp in a small box. The search for a body in order to find closure is also a premise of *Red Dust* (2004) and *Zulu Love Letter* (2004).

19 See Murray Smith (1995).

20 Mahlatsi (2004) further draws together the recent violence, related to crime, with apartheid-era violence when he says in our interview: 'One of the people I gave the camera to was a young man who was a former Self Defence Unit member in the East Rand, Johannesburg, who after the political wars of the nineties, filmed himself going around his neighbourhood looking for a place to take a bath. But people did not allow him to enter their houses. Even though he had committed acts of violence to protect them against Inkatha attacks,

they had still not forgiven him for his violence. That became an inspiration to write *Portrait*.'

21 Carol Vernallis discusses the effects of graphic relations, specifically graphic matches, in the context of MTV editing.

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