The Role of Film Genre in Transformative Politics: An Ideological Documentary Analysis of *Nelson Mandela: The Living Legend (1918-2013)*

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Abstract

This article is a critical analysis of the biographical-political documentary entitled *Nelson Mandela: The Living Legend (1918-2013),* published by the British Broadcasting Corporation as part of its multi-dimensional global media projects. The two-part series narratively outlines an illustrious, albeit significant historic, political and transformative period spanning about 67 years embodied in Mandela's *persona* as a symbol of the dialectic of resistance and transformation in South Africa. The article employs qualitative content analysis to highlight the producers' use of specific filmic excerpts that frame Mandela as the symbolic figure and transformative leader who reconfigured South Africa's political stalemate to democracy. This is augmented by an ideological analysis of the socio-economic and political milieu premised within the institutional context represented in the documentary. Despite the functional agenda setting role that the film packaging process espouses, the producers' application of Western constructive ideological framing as the epicentre upon which the legendary qualities of Mandela are pivoted is evident. This eventually yields into the focalisation of Mandela's transformative model to highlight as well as demonstrate the benefits of reconciliatory-inclusive politics in facilitating change as opposed to the antics of violence and confrontational conquest often associated with individualist paradigms and politics of patronage. Thus, beyond purveying the protagonist as a symbol of both political influence and moral integrity, particularly during the transition period, the documentary is a vivid *mise-en scene* that showcases Mandela's charismatic leadership as the prototype befitting the qualities of iconic international statesmanship.

1.   Introduction

In all societies globally, the media form a critical part of the institutions that facilitate political, economic and socio-cultural discourses, albeit in novel forms. In some instances, they have been optimally harnessed to create an informed citizenry with subsequent benefits including encouraging meaningful participation and

involvement of ordinary people in transforming government systems (Coronel 2003). Often, this function has mainly been performed through use of mainstream media such as the radio, television and newspapers with limited reference to film and its functional utilities as a specific genre. However, film has proven to be one of the popular media platforms through which people become informed about the contemporary developments in the world through its multiple genres (Snyman 2007). While the modest application of film to addressing societal problems may be partially restricted by some of its genres' expressionist aesthetics, particularly fiction-based formats, this cannot be said about the realist genres such as the documentary. As an important part of film and television, the documentary is distinguished for its ability to record and portray reality often in a kind of warning or advice about important issues in society (O'Shaughnessy and Stadler 2005). Hence, the analysis of its utility as a powerful means through which salient messages may be conveyed to target audiences makes it an important subject of inquiry.

Despite its numerous sub-genres, the purpose of the documentary is to serve as a commentary on the changing nature of society as mirrored through the political, economic and socio-cultural activities of its citizens. This is achievable by analysing the production context and consumption dynamics of the documentary itself rather than its technical or filmic expressions that usually focus on its semiotic composition (Pollak 2008). *Nelson Mandela: The Living Legend* (1918-2013) is a two-part series political-biographical documentary produced by the British Broadcasting Corporation's worldwide productions that outlines the illustrious and significant historic, political and transformative period that characterises Mandela's life. It portrays South Africa's former President from his formative years through to his elegant eventful times as Head of State (1994-1999) and his subsequent role as international statesman. The initial years reveal how his life in the former Transkei was socialised into upholding the customs and moral values of his African people (Berg 2014). It was these personal experiences with some of the cultural rites that forced him to escape to Johannesburg where his political consciousness was eventually realised.

The film under analysis portrays Mandela's hassles with law enforcement agents and his brave outlook towards his conviction to principles of democracy and peaceful co-existence. His interactions with ordinary people, passion for sport and other artistic expressions such as boxing and dancing were some of the social elements that exposed him to the political injustices of colonial bigotry and its untenable effects on the future of the black population in South Africa. The white government's lack of responsiveness and use of police brutality and racial prejudice drove Mandela and his compatriots including his mentor, Walter Sisulu, to adopt violent means to wage the struggle for freedom. This treasonous decision earned him and

his compatriots a life-time incarceration that only saw his momentous release from jail at the height of South Africa's most precarious moments in 1990 (BBC World-wide 2013). As president, the film portrays how Mandela kept balance between his busy schedule involving hosting high profile guests such as the former President of the United States (US) and friend Mr Bill Clinton and other compelling outdoor contexts such as packaging televised campaigns for the African National Congress – ANC (BBC Worldwide 2013).

2.   Documentary genre and its utilities

A genre is a group of films that has recognisably similar plots, character types, settings, filmic techniques and themes (Watson and Hill 2015). Each genre carries with it certain characteristics in terms of narrative style, setting, events and roles. Some of the popular examples of documentary include sport, wildlife and tourism, health, historical and biographical. Nonetheless, this section focuses on the documentary and its utilities in relation to its conventional aspects relevant to film analysis. Specific allusion is made to the political documentary *Nelson Mandela the Living Legend (1918-2013)*, as the pre-occupation of the article.

2.1   The documentary genre

Despite the difficulty in defining genres, Lacey (2005) views them as potent con-cepts in as far as audiences, institutions and producers use them to define texts, and to articulate meaning. In the case of the documentary, the images are often selected for their use in illustrating and substantiating an argument through the use of specific materials including film libraries, archives, museums, and other collections (Pollak 2003). Hence, the term documentary is applicable where film is perceived as a kind of 'document' on which reality has been recorded (O'Shaughnessy and Stadler 2005: 273). Documentaries can differ in aesthetics, in their reference to either the past or present and in the way they observe the world, or interact with it. However, they can distinguish themselves from other film genres through a quite definite claim to truth and factuality (Snyman 2007). Essentially, documentaries present actual incidents and statements which can be tested against reality (Nicholas and Price 1998). For instance, they make use of characters from real life and their scripts usually contain messages of educational, social and political im-portance. Thus, for analytical purposes, analysts need to observe the differentiated elements between documentaries and other film genres. This is significant for avoid-ance of technical or content orientation on filmic representation rather than the context of production and ideological motives intended by film production teams.

2.2 Utilities of the political documentary

Regardless of their factual truth or application of research techniques to enhance their appeal, the fundamental purpose of documentary is to entertain, inform and engage the audiences (Snyman 2007). Like the historical documentary, the political documentary is basically made to convey messages about the realties experienced by a particular people where the messages control the portrayal of the reality in question (Rabiger 2009). For example, watching a political documentary about a certain country or place in the world can afford those viewers who have not had the privilege to travel to that area with an educational excursion in the comfort of their homes. They can learn and enjoy the many benefits of being exposed to realities occurring in other parts of the world by merely watching the documentary. Therefore, people's attitude regardless of their factual truth or application of research techniques to enhance their appeal, the fundamental purpose of documentary is to entertain, inform and engage the audiences (Snyman 2007). Subsequently, many people are likely to change their mind-set due to being positively influenced by specific perspectives presented in the documentary.

Political documentaries have the potential to encourage critical thinking about the world view since seeing facts and the display of actualities may help moderate myths and superstitions about particular issues. Hybrid documentaries in particular can also unfold historic political events in an interesting manner where lived experiences and facts are tailored to generate interest in a subject that the population may have forgotten about (O'Shaughnessy and Stadler 2005). Students of history and political studies for example, can learn easily and more effectively about world conflicts and how they were resolved through watching documentaries. This is owed to the fact that a visually recorded fact is invincible evidence and therefore has a greater influence to move minds more than the written or the spoken word. Furthermore, documentaries can educate and inspire people into taking certain steps which would not have been possible otherwise, by bringing marginal and invisible social identities to the fore front (Pollak 2003). This has the subsequent effect of changing lives as viewers may derive inspirational courage and determination to change the course of history by supporting a national cause. More significantly, this description gives the political documentary an ideological edge over other film genres due to its unique ability to represent reality and how the reality is presented to target audiences (Nicholas and Price 1998).

3. On method and lens: Framing the analysis

In spite of the generic purpose of the documentary genre, each sub-genre raises different questions with respect to its societal significance, technical construction

and ideological underpinning, hence the need for different tools of analysis. The article employs qualitative content analysis to examine the documentary's use of specific filmic excerpts used to frame Mandela's transformative model of democratic and symbolic leadership responsible for reconfiguring South Africa's political stalemate to democracy. The choice of the film genre and sub-genre are both purposive owing to the attendant presence of the transformation-oriented themes encapsulated in the bio-political documentary. This is augmented by an ideological analysis of the socio-economic and political milieu as represented in the film narrative. This entails inference to the application of basic packaging techniques in the form of subtitles, allusion to time and place, and reference to institutional records such as legal proceedings and political rhetoric. These techniques are critical in the contextualisation and explication of how the film narrative portrays Mandela's significance in transforming South Africa's political landscape. Furthermore, thematic analysis, which entails coding, searching for emerging issues and conceptualisation of data is imperative in the generation of discursive frames.

3.1 Ideological film criticism theory

An ideology refers to systems that help to justify the action of those in power by distorting and misrepresenting the reality experienced by those in subordinate positions (Devereux 2014). In the context of this article, this also refers to the ideas that are adopted by those who control the media to legitimise the power of the dominant social group. Ideological analyses of media content entails the quest to untangle discourses not only related to hegemonic tendencies, but also those about class relations and the struggle for freedom from various forms of oppression (Devereux 2014). For instance, in South Africa film production was for decades dominated by the apartheid system wherein its racist prejudices served as underlying themes to sustain the white minority government (Saks 2010). According to Lemon (1991), film was used as a social and political construction against the background of a cultural minority whose experiences and interests were the preoccupation of both the communicator and the sponsor of the films. This tendency placed the film packaging process within the realm of dominant ideology and colonial subjugation as the culture and experiences of those portrayed in the films mirrored the critical imbalances evident in the entire country (Saks 2010). Such analysis is not only applicable to apartheid, but also to other political systems elsewhere in the world due to the nature of societal challenges that underlie the people's view of life realities and humanity in general. As such, ideological criticism of film content cannot be separated from the existential and political beliefs or orientations of those involved in the class struggles worldwide.

Kress (2012) noted that ideological analysis focuses on the ways in which mean-

ing serves to establish and sustain relations of domination. In this view, each film regardless of its genre, can be viewed as an ideological construct (O'Shaughnessy 2005), because its producers or creators are not ideologically neutral. In South Africa, some scholars have shown how apartheid influenced film production where the apartheid ideology influenced the content and form of the films produced at that time (Saks 2010). Thus, ideological analysis of film sets to examine the relationship between a given film, its society and the ideology of that society to determine the specific ways in which the particular film either supports or attacks the dominant ideology of the society that produced it (Stromgren and Norden 1984). Nonetheless, in certain instances, the main criticism against ideological film criticism is that the approach tends to be biased and subjective by highlighting, overstating or evening undermining specific contexts that characterise different societies. While the very nature of ideological film criticism to downplay or ignore the artistic and technical aspects of the film may contribute to its limitations (Pollak 2008), it is these very features that make the approach to be more relevant to the analysis of realist genres such as the documentary.

3.2 Framing

Although framing is commonly used in communication literature, it is rarely structurally defined as an approach to the effects of the media. It describes the influence of news angles on the public as applied by media practitioners resulting from the dictates of their editorial processes. This implies the interpretative and ideological framework within which journalists report particular issues as well as the contextualisation of those reports in relation to public thinking. Essentially, the process generally supports the idea that the media deal with certain issues in different frames and perspectives (Kamalipour 2010), to produce a desired effect on the way audiences ultimately interpret issues. A typical example of this scenario is the Western nations' film makers who use their financial strength to export ideologies that promote their own interests in the developing countries (Herman and McChesney 2006). Through this, filmmakers use ideology to maintain Western domination in weaker nations without the need to use power to subordinate or coerce less powerful people.

   Framing is important because media portrayals are constructed to guide the audience's interpretation and to influence the formation of new opinions. The selection and omission of particular sources contribute to the framing of any particular issue. In some instances, official sources such as politicians and government figures often dominate the content whereas alternative voices tend to be marginalised (McCombs 2004). Thus, the 'frame' surrounding an issue can change the audiences' perceptions without having to alter the actual facts. In the context of politics or mass-

media communication, a frame defines the packaging of an element of rhetoric in such a way that it encourages certain interpretations and discourages others (Devereux 2014). For political purposes, framing often presents facts in such a way that presents a problem that needs an urgent solution. Hence, politicians usually attempt to frame issues in a manner that makes the solution to favour their own political ideology as the most appropriate course of action for the situation at hand (Kamalipour 2010).

4.   Mandela's transformative model: Towards reconciliatory-inclusive politics

This section is discussed in relation to the significant role played by Mandela's transformative leadership in managing the transition from apartheid to democracy in South Africa. It demonstrates how he not only devoted his life to the struggle for freedom, but also how he endeavoured to sustain it during and after his tenure in office as South Africa's first black president. Thematic analysis, with which discursive frames are hereby generated is based on four tenets that characterise Mandela's transformative model namely, conflict resolution, democratic aspirations, political symbolism, and demonstration of statesmanship in leadership. Essentially, this implies the archetypal approach with which Mandela's personal narrative imbued within his inclusive-reconciliatory politics succeeded in dissuading diverse audiences from a warring path to share his vision for humanity.

4.1 Conflict resolution

One of the flagship milestones of Nelson Mandela's legacy as both a freedom fighter and nation builder presented in the documentary is the embodiment in his rejection of violence and application of confrontational conquest in politics. Despite the unbearable conditions of life in apartheid prisons including espionage, deprivation and loneliness intended to break his volition to advance the struggle, his release was not seen as an opportunity for revenge (BBC Worldwide 2013). Instead, the documentary carefully highlights how he strived to attain a peaceful termination of the apartheid regime through collective engagement and embracing his former incarcerators. These included the Rivonia treason trial prosecutor, Mr Percy Yutar and apartheid architect's wife, Mrs Verwoerd, whom he visited as part of the reconciliatory gesture which inspired and further lent credibility to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) at a later stage. His approach brought together enemies across rigid ideological enclaves into a unified force through his unique ability to listen to all sides of the political spectrum. This style earned him the maxim of 'Madiba magic' owed to his impressive reconciliatory gesture

through which South Africa averted a potential bloody civil conflict that has been "seen by many commentators as intractable" (Limb 2008: 1-2).

Although he was widely accepted as one of the most strategic nationalist leaders of his time, Mandela used numerous political and social platforms including the famous speech during Chris Hani's funeral to illustrate that South Africa's success could only be a product of collective effort by all its citizens across the colour bar. Furthermore, an examination of some of his personal writings such as *Long walk to freedom*, *The struggle is my life*, *Conversations with myself*, and their accompanying critiques does confirm these archetypal leadership qualities. Hence, due to his deliberate consciousness of the other person' fears and interests during the negotiations, Mandela's charismatic leadership qualities became the unifier of the different constituencies who eventually rallied behind him to deliver the rainbow nation. As such, it is this legendary narrative that arguably bestowed on him the cradle on transformative politics and "accolade of revolutionary resistance and hope" for the South African people (Pollard 1994: 79).

4.2   Thrust towards democratic aspirations

Another of the critical elements showcased in the film about Mandela's achievements was his appreciation and encapsulation of democratic aspirations. This is illustrated in the documentary's portrayal of his most popular Rivonia trial speech where he alluded to an exemplary model of democratic practice characterised by harmony and respect for human rights, unfettered freedoms as well as equal opportunities for all citizens across racial lines (BBC Worldwide 2013; Brink 1998). It is these legal proceedings and accompanying experiences during his imprisonment that vividly highlight how Mandela sacrificed so much to the struggle for freedom at the expense of his own liberty and personal life. Despite Mandela's own admission that the South African liberation story was a product of a shared vision, the documentary's 'one-man storyline' confirms Hallengren's (1999) view that Mandela's narrative is largely presented as one man's remarkable life history that eventually blossomed into a national vision resulting in the abolishment of the apartheid system. This ideological flaw is premised within the dominant Western paradigm that justifies and credits Mandela with masterminding the achievements of political rights, electoral reform and accompanying freedoms in South Africa. Regardless, the producers have arguably succeeded in purveying him as a visionary whose goals were inspired by African freedom, political stability and development trajectories for a democratic South Africa.

4.3 Symbolic political and moral integrity

Mandela's ability to identify with the struggles of the common men made him to become the potent symbol of resistance against apartheid and its colonial in-justices. This is evident where, despite facing stern resistance and criticism from both within and outside his political party (Glad and Blanton 1997), Mandela's political courage, integrity and symbolic vision sustained his focus for the establish-ment of democracy in South Africa. As the living symbol of African resistance against apartheid, he was willing to take political risks by rising above the con-straints of virulent racist tendencies of the apartheid regime and the intense bitter-ness of his people (Limb 2008). This personal virtue earned him the role of political and moral leader of both the ANC as well as other competing political constituencies of the time (BBC Worldwide 2013). This symbolism presented him as both an alternative moral and political leader beyond his immediate constituency. Among these were liberals whose ideology lay in seductive politics to woe the white minorities who feared to lose their cultural identity, political and economic power (Gevisser 2009: 193).

   Furthermore, it is this inclusive approach that inherently characterised the 'talks' during the transition period which led to the conversion and pacification of the militant groups within the Congress of Democratic South Africa (CODESA). This is exampled by Mandela's gravitas speech after Chris Hani's assassination when the country was at a crossroads. In this instance and other related cases such as the massacres at Boipatong and Bisho, he successfully swerved the militants within his fold away from vengeance towards peace in a bid to establish a lasting peaceful solution and cessation of violence. Other cases involved how Mr Louis Luyt clashed with the ANC over a racist stance on his choice to play only the Afrikaans section of the National Anthem at a Rugby match and Mr Mandela's meeting with Percy Yutar and Mrs Verwoerd as a reconciliatory gesture.

4.4 Charismatic leadership and statesmanship

In Limb's (2008) viewpoint, both the national and global forces of Mandela's time are important to gain a comprehensive appraisal of his life's work. Accordingly, this is derived from the rich and inspirational context evident in his native heritage, history and personal experiences which enabled him to build on earlier African political structures to achieve impressive gains (Limb 2008). This won him a highly esteemed global stature in a period when most political leaders had disenchanted many of their people, particularly in Africa where numerous countries have been caught up in domestic conflicts. Indeed, numerous post-colonial states have been embroiled in civil war with an estimated 500 000 people left dead since 1989, yield-

ing more than three million refugees (Klare 2001). This has seen a sharp decline in living standards, untenable unemployment rates and an increasingly repressive character of most African leaders. For example, countries such as Somalia and the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) have suffered from long standing oppression and violence at the hands of their fellow kith and kin.

Therefore, the documentary script on *Nelson Mandela: The Living Legend (1918-2013)*, has been carefully tailored to brand Mandela as the appealing grassroots mobiliser, "African king, father of the nation capable of realising momentous social change" (Limb 2008), in a saintly fashion that engenders trust from his distractors. Beyond his formal duties, Mandela remained remarkably active as an elderly statesman in his eighties advancing human rights and socio-political challenges in African states including initiating the peace talks in Burundi in 1999. This illustrates the extent to which the legend envisioned the ideals of a better humanity for the entire world (Choi 2007), a gesture inspired by his successes in the domestic front where he established a democratic constitutional and political framework seen by many as one of the most progressive in the world (Limb 2008; BBC Worldwide 2013).

Despite the suitability of the above themes in presenting Mandela as a 'God send' whose protagonist role redeemed his countrymen from colonial bigotry, it is important to acknowledge that this monolithic approach has limiting effects in understanding the South African struggle. This is in view of the fact that an individualist paradigm to the explication of the struggle narrative should be understood within a multi-dimensional and collectivist framework. Hence, human as he was, Mandela could only succeed in conflict resolution, democratisation, and statesmanship as part of a collective rather than a singular icon.

5.   Conclusion

The documentary illustrates how the Mandela narrative represents a significant historic, political and transformative period where the legend rose above the racial, ethnic and political divide to deliver the envious constitutional democracy that South Africa came to be in 1994. Complementary to its aesthetic *mise-en-scene*, the biographical uses Mandela's own political narrative infused with his actions, fears, victories, and hopes to persuade its audiences to share his vision for humanity (Limb 2008; BBC Worldwide 2013). This agenda setting anchorage successfully presents Mandela as one of the legendary leaders and statesman in world history, from whom other leaders could take a cue. Despite the evident Western ideological footprint, the scripter encapsulates how this remarkable 'dream' occurred in the implied context of numerous African countries embroiled in civil conflicts with lethal socio-economic and political ramifications. For instance, Angola had an es-

timated 500 000 people dead by 1989, leading to at least three million people living as refugees whereas Somalia's over two-decade civil war subjected the homogeneous nation to one of the most unbearable living conditions experienced in the world (Brittain 1998). Thus, the film projects Africa's miracle rainbow nation within a juxta-positioned context with other African countries that have seen a sharp decline in living standards characterised by high unemployment, poor health conditions due to somewhat unresponsive repressive political systems. Notably, these conflicts and their consequent aftermaths are a result of a multi-faceted array of causal factors that negatively affect Africa's potential as a developing continent. Thus, while the South African political context may have been unique due to the apartheid system, the documentary demonstrates that there are numerous lessons and approaches which other countries could adopt towards conflict resolution and transformation in their respective settings.

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