Gaze Regimes

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Gaze Regimes: Film and feminisms in Africa.
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 Nested in the most north-eastern part of South Africa, close to the border of Zimbabwe, lies the rich cultural landscape of the Venda people. It is a community informed by a long tradition of royal lineage and a vibrant history woven with incredible legends of sacred forests and lakes. It is the smallest ethnic group in South Africa and its language, Tshivenda, is spoken almost exclusively by those of the community. Tshivenda has not been widely adopted like isiZulu or isiXhosa in an urban environment. The language is described as melodic and lyrical in its use of innuendo, which draws strongly from the oral histories and customs of the community. It was this location and the language that was the inspiration for director Nshavheni Wa Luruli’s film *Elelwani* (2012), which is based on the first Tshivenda novel (of the same name) by Dr Titus Maumela.

The experiences of being a co-producer on *Elelwani* gave me immediate access to the community and a privileged perspective of how the community had viewed the novel historically, and how they interacted with the material in a contemporary context through the production process.
It is my intention here to connect aspects of the production process with the narrative content of the film and its interpretation, both from a close textual reading (as is the convention of textual analysis), and with the interpretation of the story and characters as experienced during the production process by the community (particularly by the women) it claimed to be representing. The aim of this approach is to offer some reflection on what the expectations of filmmaking were in a community that is economically impoverished. In this sense, the idea of film is not simply a didactic tool but an instrument (through the production and location filming) to empower people economically in the region. This relationship between filmmaking as an instrument to empower a community so that they might gain economically from the ‘industry’ component of filmmaking is distinct from considering the film (the end product) that serves to empower women through its representation. Finally, I will turn my attention to how content might reflect some of the inherent gender contradictions in this community, bringing to the fore questions of gender empowerment and, perhaps, how it belies expectations when interpreted from a Western-normative paradigm.

Wa Luruli had the idea to adapt Maumela’s 1954 novel to a contemporary context because, as Venda himself, he wanted to represent Venda people and their cultural history in a way that he felt was only possible for an insider. The original novel was a handwritten manuscript and it told the story of a young girl bequeathed to the king. She challenges this idea of marriage because she would rather complete her schooling. In an interview that Maumela gave (Elelwani the documentary, 2007) he explained that, as a schoolteacher, he was frustrated that the only text he could teach in Tshivenda was the Bible, which did not capture anything that his students could relate to culturally. As a way of bringing Tshivenda to a written language, he wrote the novel to expose scholars to what he felt was relevant to their lives. The handwritten manuscript was ‘lost’ but Maumela was not deterred. He rewrote the manuscript and submitted it for publication so that it would be possible to teach Tshivenda as a written language. Maumela went on to write and publish a significant number of titles in TshiVenda thereafter.

This back story is significant because it goes a long way towards explaining some of the emotional ‘buy-in’ when the decision was being
made to adapt the novel for the screen. The director had read this novel as one of his setworks at school.

Wa Luruli as the writer/director was very clear that he wanted to find a way to make the film contemporary and relevant to an audience almost 50 years later and in the context of a changed political system.

What relevance would such a story have in a democratic South Africa and how would a young girl or woman expressing her wish for freedom be shown differently (if differently at all) than in the 1950s under apartheid? My interest in this project stemmed from the way in which the director spoke very convincingly about the multiple layers informing the treatment of women in Venda, and the different social spheres that women had to navigate between life in a village, the privileges of the royal family and the role of legends and myths that inform the plight of women in that community.

The character of Elelwani in the film version is not a schoolgirl, but a university educated woman who returns after her graduation to inform her parents of her academic success and the opportunity to continue her studies abroad on a scholarship. On her return to her parents in the village, she is confronted with the reality that she is not the architect of her future as her education allows her to believe. Unbeknown to her, she is indebted to the king who has been paying for her university studies and now expects a wife whom he has been sponsoring.

By offering the narrative from the position of an older and more educated character, the director seeks not only to give his protagonist more agency in her own personal choice, but to create the space for more complex discussion on the political agency of women generally in this community.

While Elelwani is subject to the traditional laws and expectations that are deemed culturally specific in terms of Venda customs and expectations of women who must comply with parents and community – as a character Elelwani is able to challenge these expectations by illustrating to her parents that she sees herself as a woman with options, who can make choices as an individual, but also on account of her political awareness.

The turning point of the story is when her parents finally concede that they cannot force her into a marriage with the king. Instead, the parents offer to the royal family Elelwani’s young sister Rendane, who is seven or eight years old, as a substitute. The narrative at this point is also a matter of foregrounding the unspoken sacrifices that women are complicit in,
either in the name of tradition or in the face of choices that challenge their instinct and moral duty. Elelwani recognises the importance of education, of protecting her sister’s childhood and innocence, and, rather than have her sister robbed of these things, she offers herself up against her own will. In this gesture she sacrifices her own romantic love and her opportunity for a life outside of the village, and concedes to the custom of women’s duty.
In a compelling scene between Elelwani and her mother, Elelwani questions her ‘worth’ as a woman in this society, and that of women in general. She complains to her mother that women have simply been viewed as property, as providers of heirs and as possessions. Her mother listens and finally, in responding to Elelwani’s introspection, her maternal response is simply: ‘That is how it’s always been.’ There are no other words.

Later in the film when Elelwani accepts her parents’ request (demand) to honour her family’s duty to the royal family, the instruction from her mother reiterates this idea that women must comply: ‘Don’t ask questions, and obey.’

Director Wa Luruli accomplishes a cinematic tour de force in this sequence as the mother disrobes her daughter of her city (modern) clothing and, with incredible pride, grooms her in a beautiful traditional MuVenda. The double entendre is not lost: there is the pride of a mother (as any mother) seeing her daughter as the potential bride, but the sacrifice and Elelwani’s reluctance are palpable, as though she were being sent to a slaughterhouse.

The film content itself, the contemporary re-contextualisation, creates a narrative possibility for exploring both the representation of women’s experience in what is perceived as traditional roles and, contrastingly, modern (emancipated) aspirations and values as reflected in a democratic state. The balancing act in the narrative comes from reflecting on how traditional values come to be assimilated with modern aspirations. The democratic state in South Africa does not have the same meaning or experience for all its citizens. This inequality is based not on differentiation, but rather on the latticing of two distinct and discrete experiences of governmentality (Foucault 1991); of simultaneously being a citizen in a liberal state, while also being subject to sovereignty in a Venda kingdom. Michel Foucault’s seminal work on governmentality is useful in this context for reflecting on how these varying political organising structures across history in society produce different subjects through varied ‘policing’ systems of the self (as in the case of the latter) or regulating subjects through systems of governance outside of a liberal political logic (as in the case of the former in the Venda kingdom):
The theory of sovereignty is something which refers to the displacement and appropriation on the part of power, not of time and labour, but of goods and wealth. It allows discontinuous obligations distributed over time to be given legal expression but it does not allow for the codification of a continuous surveillance. It enables power to be founded in the physical existence of the sovereign, but not in continuous and permanent systems of surveillance. The theory of sovereignty permits the foundation of an absolute power in the absolute expenditure of power. [The] new type of power has been a fundamental instrument in the constitution of industrial capitalism and of the type of society that is its accompaniment (Foucault 1972:104–105).

This political tension has been subject to continuous debate in South Africa, and while traditional leaders are constitutionally recognised, their powers have been limited in the democratic South Africa. In a controversial proposition in 2012 by South African president Jacob Zuma, the draft of the Traditional Courts Bill proposed granting traditional leaders greater authority within their territories. This would not only have had devastating consequences for women and children, but would have also seriously influenced issues of land inheritance and property ownership, with further consequences for land rights as well.

In the context of the film narrative, land rights and property feature strongly as one of the motivations for why Elelwani must commit to being part of the royal family, and her leadership is sought to protect the land and the heritage of the Venda people. Through a complex series of narrative twists, Elelwani realises that she is part of a much broader royal conspiracy. Her role is to prevent the sale of Venda land to property developers and big businesses that intend to deforest indigenous forests for development of luxurious resorts, thus destroying sacred plants used in herb practices.

The political complexity of traditional rights as it relates to empowerment of women is a strong motif in the film. As the ‘opening night’ film at the Durban International Film Festival (DIFF) 2012, the film was evocative on these numerous levels, with no uncertainty. The film Elelwani does not offer a platform to solve these issues, but instead reflects on the complexities and the straddling of multiple conflicting forces that come into play in the discussion of women’s
rights relative to traditional expectations and the protection granted by the new South African Constitution. The film further implies these relations as it pertains to land, inheritance and heritage. Moreover, it points to the recurring conflict between the discourse of responsibility to the community (Ubuntu, if one is aligned to this philosophy) and individual aspirations (the idea of personal will). At DIFF 2012, one of the recurring observations was the film’s representation of Venda culture. The film offers a depiction that is about affording and reclaiming a cultural dignity and reverence but without shying away from offering critique. This balance of observation and pointed cultural commentary is the space that allowed for debate and discussion. Rather than assuming the responsibility to pose any possible solutions that align cultural practices with the aspirations of a modern society, with its recognition of the rights and contribution of women to civil society, the film reflects on the constant tension and negotiation between these two forms of governance.

Unencumbered by any will to social or political didacticism, the director sees himself first and foremost as a filmmaker whose function is to offer acute observation of this culture (his culture) as an insider; and then with the ability to step away by balancing the narrative with interpretation and critical commentary through the choices his characters make.

Elelwani is neither a documentary nor an ethnographic film in the tradition of capturing the nuances of ritual or cultural practices to explain their significance to a broad audience. As stated earlier, in adapting the novel for the screen the relevance of the narrative to a contemporary context was paramount to the director. In this sense, the representation of the cultural aspects is a stylisation and (director’s) interpretation of the Venda culture that serves to heighten the narrative from the point of view of the young woman Elelwani. This is further a creative strategy, allowing the director to move against the normative expectations of an African film. Such an artistic strategy allows the film a two-fold accessibility: firstly, it subverts the prevailing misconceptions of the Venda culture in South Africa for a local audience, and secondly, it marks a radical shift away from the broader expectation of African films as ethnographically representative. This has been one of the hugely debilitating problems (with stories set in rural communities) with regard
to expectations and reception of films made in Africa when they travel to a broader international audience.

At this point, I would like to deviate briefly to explore this idea of expectations or perceptions of ‘what constitutes an African film’ before returning to the details of the film itself.

Broadly speaking, there are two audience-distribution frameworks when the issue of films made in Africa is addressed. There is the immediacy of African video films which have become hugely popular across the continent and which are made with a focus on an immediate local or regional market. This is what is commonly understood as the ‘Nollywood model’. This business model of film production allows for films to be read easily as ‘consumables’, commodities, from the producer’s perspective: a product that can be created over a shorter period of time, with a faster turnaround from conception to final film and with a straight-to-DVD distribution. There is a lesser expectation of technical competency and the narratives serve the immediacy of the local and regional expectations of the audiences. The success of these straight-to-DVD distribution platforms has been important in ensuring the market success of African video films, since there is no competition with other distribution platforms like theatrical releases or licensing to broadcasters. Instead, the value chain is significantly compressed, allowing the producers to recoup their investment immediately from DVD sales; this cycle creates the capital to start the next film, with less time between each production.

Of course, this model particularly was subject to much criticism in its first ten years owing to technical proficiency (or lack thereof), low production value, the issue of representation that seemed not to offer interrogative space but instead reproduced gender or ethnic prejudices, and storylines that were highly specific to the immediate concerns of the local or regional experiences of its audiences and which did not necessarily translate to broader audiences (excluding the diaspora audiences). The issue of copyright infringement and piracy has also been a recurrent aspect in the discussion of straight-to-DVD distribution. This cultural specificity or local appeal is also what made the study of local African video films so popular initially for anthropologists, before its much later – or reluctant – uptake by scholars in the disciplines of film/cinema studies. In this sense, video films made in Africa were being used and read as ethnographic traces of the communities in which they were produced, and little, if any,
consideration was given to the film as a form of creative expression. In some ways this further reproduced the assumptions that African films were first and foremost ethnographic representations or inclined to didacticism over any form of creative expression or artistic imperative.

However, the climate for African video films has most certainly shifted in recent years, and with the economic success of the Nollywood model and its emulation in other local African markets (including South Africa), some of this filmmaking has maturated out of its infancy. The African Movie Academy Awards (AMAA) has become an important initiative to promote the technical and conceptual aspects of this business model. It also serves to bridge the divide between the various African filmmaking approaches on the continent. These are recent and invaluable developments for African filmmakers to recognise and promote their own industry from within, and this platform attempts to bridge the divide between the business and the creative imperatives of filmmaking. This is in stark contrast to the legacy and initiatives of FESPACO, the biennale film festival in Ouagadougou, Burkino Faso, that has historically been strongly informed by a ‘politics’ of representation and filmmaking practice, and has been less concerned about the ‘business’ (industry) of making films. I am taking some time to talk about the idea of markets and audience in the context of Elelwani because this is important since ‘the market for the film’ informs some of the creative decisions for story, the development of the woman’s character in Elelwani, and the artistic choices made in representing the Venda culture.

For the director, and for the producer Florian Schattauer, this was not a straight-to-DVD film made for a singular local Venda or South African audience, although these audiences would be important in ensuring its local box-office success and in affirming the authenticity of the narrative world. The idea was to create an art house film that would offer a window into Venda culture to a broader international audience as well. The artistic merits of the film were also an important vehicle for the director to showcase the culture and language so as not to reproduce any stereotypes of either an African film or the misperceptions of Venda culture to a local South African audience. As stated earlier, as the smallest ethnic group located in the poorest part of the country, the Venda community has had many prejudices directed towards it, and the idea of reworking a historically ground-breaking novel in a contemporary setting would
allow for a representation of this community that would challenge the prevailing preconceptions of the Venda culture in South Africa.

In a series of interviews he gave at Berlinale 2013, the director Nshavheni Wa Luruli made a point of stressing that he felt that, as a minority ethnic group in South Africa, the Venda people and their culture were severely misunderstood in a broader South African context. In that sense, the film was a desire to not only subvert the dominant and prevailing ideas of what constituted the dominant ethnic representations in South Africa from a foreign perspective (his reference was to the fact that Zulus and Xhosas were the most well known), but that he also wanted to challenge myths about the Venda culture.

Limpopo province, which is home to the Venda people, while lush and fertile in its climate and farming activities, remains one of the most economically disenfranchised regions in South Africa. It has been plagued by continuous cycles of political corruption, and while the landscape is visually stunning, few film crews have chosen this province as a location on account of minimal support from local authorities and an absence of infrastructure to support production crews. Given the absence of the infrastructure necessary to take even a modest crew into the region, film production has been an almost non-existent form of income for Limpopo. In this sense, Elelwani was a first: the first feature film shot entirely on location in this region with the support of the local community, both in terms of performance and infrastructure. As producers we required not only the support of the local municipality but also the royal family, who generously gave us access to their royal village for filming.

In South Africa, almost every business sector, including film, requires that some part of the project has a development component. With the high rates of unemployment and the lack of skills and training, it was necessary that the production complied with development and the skills transfer required. In this sense, the decision to film entirely on location and involve the community directly would also enable Elelwani as a production to fulfil its business and community development responsibility, but in a way that also directly addressed the experiences of the community through their connection with the language and the culture. In setting up the production, a cultural representative from the community was appointed who also would be the liaison person with the royal family. This point person was able not only successfully to offer
support in terms of logistics, but also explain to the community what the production was about, to relate the vision of the director, and to create an awareness of what was required for making the production possible over the four-week shoot period.

All the cultural events and crowd scenes, and the wedding march depicted in the film, are locals from the community who participated in its making: this was the production participation in front of the camera. Many more participants were involved behind the camera. The production ensured that for each department in the production, at least two interns were appointed to give locals exposure and access to the experience of working as film crew. The impact of this was two-fold: it meant that the crew were exposed to the community in a more immediate way than just having the experience of entering and leaving without having a ‘lived experience’ of the community they were representing. And for the community involved it also meant exposure to the challenges of what it means to represent the community they live in and have no critical distance from. The narrative and the role of women raised a number of talking points for the people involved, and while it might sound far-fetched, by the time the production was in its second week, the entire local community was aware of the film’s production and the presence of the film crew that was ‘shooting the film of Dr Maumela’s book’.

For me as a co-producer, this interface was an important reflection of how the interpretation offered by the director would be read. It was a way to also gauge how the community viewed its own gender politics and whether Elelwani’s ambition and emancipation as a character were aspects that resonated with the local population, and the women in particular. This is where the conversations were interesting. While most of the women thought that Elelwani was brave – courageous, in fact – to want to pursue her education and defy her parents, there was an incredibly engaged conversation about not recognising why marrying the king was such a bad idea. After all, he is the king and life would be not be as demanding if one were to marry the king. In fact, there would be no need for an education at all because life in royalty would also offer extraordinary benefits.

The significance of economic security as a form of emancipation seemed to be viewed exclusively from the point of view of having the ability to be emancipated through political agency offered through
education and economic self-empowerment. Elelwani’s choice to leave with her romantic love to pursue a further academic path would appear pointless if the end goal of economic security with a king is immediate, as opposed to the long-term efforts of continuing with one’s education. The pursuit of further education is related directly to economic security, which was rationalised as insecure and uncertain anyway (given the high levels of unemployment in the country) when compared to the security assured by marriage to a king.

Returning then to Foucault’s idea of governmentality and the differences between how the self is constructed (or ‘self-esteem’ as Foucault also suggests) and how it is perceived, the idea of this tension between the citizen and the subject becomes all the more pronounced in South Africa. For women in rural communities who are often subjected to the immediacy of local traditional laws, the idea of a democratic state that protects your rights and interests as a woman seems to be a far-reaching idea, not just in terms of its practice, but by virtue of its geography. Town and city magistrate offices in a democratic state are distant places that require economic means and time to access. Let me exemplify.

It became clear during the principle photography of this film that the Royal emissaries and Venda maidens lead Elelwani out of her father’s house.

Film still from Elelwani (2012).
community represented were at a distance from the character portrayed precisely because Elelwani is educated and seems to be making choices outside of the gamut of their immediate realities as women living in this rural community. She is not really representative of the realities in which they live, and even though she might have been a Venda girl from a rural village some time ago, her education and access distinguish her from other women in this community. Of course, this seems obvious given that the character returns to her family after successfully completing her tertiary education; her life is informed by different ambitions and with clear self-determinism. But the film narrative is also representative of the community and reveals the plight of women and their understanding of their situation as being without agency. Some of these tensions are explored at various junctions in the film when Elelwani is confronted with obstacles and choices that foreground the differing experiences of what it means to be emancipated, as well as what the reach of self-determinism and ambition might constitute.

In the final act in Elelwani, a significant narrative shift occurs, which bridges the tension and divide in the two registers of the women’s experiences: that of the local rural women and that of Elelwani, the educated woman who eventually becomes the sovereign. Once at the royal palace, Elelwani is confronted with a series of palace intrigues and,
unbeknown to her, she is a conduit to fulfilling a promise/prophecy. This promise not only pertains to her sovereignty, but also alludes to an educated woman who must now shepherd an institutional change that will lead to the emancipation of other women in her community.

In her seminal essay ‘Can the subaltern speak?’ (1994), Gayatri Spivak addresses the question of the agency (and the lack thereof) of the subaltern. One of the defining factors is that these women (women in this underclass) might be seen to be without social mobility. Agency for these women, therefore, would be about building a relationship with the state. In her articulation, Spivak is clear that this relationship with the state is not one that is whole; instead, the building of the infrastructure is one part of the constituting structure in the state which would recognise these women as part of its labour system. The potential embodied in the character of Elelwani is thus a bifurcated relationship which must at once recognise that these women (the rural women in Limpopo) have not been a part of a productive labour system, and also that in order for Elelwani (as the new sovereign) to be the agent of change, she will have to be responsible for reconstituting the system of governance. Elelwani is therefore the agent for building the infrastructure but she is also a heterogeneous subject – produced from a post-colonial condition – who will be required in some way to enable a relationship (for the local rural women) to the state as a metonym/synecdoche and create new possibility, as is suggested at the end of the film narrative:

In seeking to learn to speak to (rather than listen to or speak for) the historically muted subject of the subaltern woman, the postcolonial intellectual systemically ‘unlearns’ female privilege. This systemic unlearning involves learning to critique postcolonial discourse (Spivak 1994:91).

Elelwani is a strong but open-ended narrative that invites the character of Elelwani as an intellectual to unlearn some of her privileges as a subject; to in part unlearn the alternative governance structure she represents. At the same time, she is now the conduit that speaks for and on behalf of the underclass of women who are now her subjects. Spivak concludes in her influential paper: ‘The subaltern cannot speak’ but is quick to add the
significance of the intellectual: ‘Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with flourish’ (Spivak 1994:104) In this film, Elelwani owns her responsibility, and in the final sequence, in a voice-over, declares: ‘I am free.’ Elelwani means ‘promise’ in Tshivenda, and this is the promise she brings for the rural Venda women of Limpopo. Her freedom represents the promise of freedom that may be possible, even if only metonymically, for this underclass of women in contemporary South Africa.

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