

Introduction

Media Cities: Mapping Urbanity and Audiovisual Configurations

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The prime research question of this special issue of the *Journal of African Cinemas* focusses on the urban configuration of cities as media hubs. Placed within the broad research agenda of developing “systematic analyses of trends [...] in South African ‘media cities’” (Tomaselli 2013), the issue offers case studies of selected Southern African cities as both home to media production, distribution and exhibition as well as the subject of media imaginations. In line with this, the overall focus of the study is on mapping urbanity in an African context by analysing media environments and audiovisual configurations of cities from both textual and contextual perspectives. This case study research design constructs the respective media cities examined as single units while remaining attentive to how these developments relate to similar cities outside the case studies under investigation.

Interest in cities as media hubs is a quite recent area of research. Given that audiovisual media are highly capitalized and labour-intensive products (cf. Fitzmaurice 2001), it is not surprising that film and television firms are centralised in big cities—urbanity is the central hub of industrialization and capitalism (see Parker 2016). Two responses to the centrality of the city as a media hub are significant for our purposes here. Firstly there is an attention to the city as a site of production and consumption with particular attention being paid to production and, to a lesser extent, consumption clustering within the central city. This spatial

turn can be characterised as a political economy of services in that it is generally marked by its emphasis on the variety of intermediate inputs, organizational arrangements, facilities, and expertise associated with the processes involved in the development of media projects (cf. Goldsmith and O'Regan 2005). However this approach tends to have given less consideration to the crucial position of the distribution-exhibition couplet within the production value chain and more attention to the screen production value chain. In this research and related policy development context scholars, industry and policy makers seem to have forgotten that without audiences films remain inactive texts, unseen, and financially unviable (see Mboti and Tomaselli 2015). In contrast to this work there has been some initial work dealing with South African media cities that modifies this services perspective by suggesting that a developmental focus foregrounding economic sustainability might include not only skills and production facilities development, film friendliness and job creation but also might include distribution and exhibition as prerequisite elements for industry development and assistance (cf. Mboti 2011, Naidoo 2011, Tomaselli 2011, Tomaselli 2013). This political economy approach theoretically relies on a service approach but shifts that services emphasis to a focus on sustainability, creativity and skills development potential of each value chain's input into the production and circulation of the respective media products. Crucially, these South African studies have linked exhibition and audience development in currently unserved urban areas to the production-consumption value chain (Mboti 2012; Mboti and Tomaselli 2015). In this circumstance the provision of mini-cinemas serving black township audiences – as was offered by initiatives such as the now stalled ReaGile project – may be key to the unlocking of value within South Africa cinema. This trajectory, deriving from political economy, is not easily conceptually linked to the study of cities via media texts and audiovisual configurations. We are of course aware of this paradigmatic disjuncture but we have deliberately counterpoised the two usually separate approaches in this number as a way of

flagging the outer parameters of the topic: the imaginary production of cities by media on the one hand and how cities configure and service production on the other.

Second, media hub research in the field of media anthropology has focused on how audiovisual configurations provide people with cognitive maps for assigning themselves a specific position within their environment (cf. Ritzer 2015). Regarded in this way, audiovisual media occupy a central place in everyday constructions of knowledge, the latter increasingly being shaped through the medium of images (and sounds). To be understood as part of a general “pictorial turn” (Mitchell 1992) in the humanities, this mediating agency of configurations in audiovisual media is placed at a nexus of social as well as scientific discourses, also influencing understandings and contributing to new forms of urban geography.

According to this research, the construction of knowledge in geography, whether in the form of classic maps, graphics, diagrammes, photographs, films or digital animation provides a means to engage with the enormous importance of the audiovisual in the construction of both lived-in worlds and scientific reasoning alike. Consequently, the new field of media geography now being developed around the work of cultural studies scholars such as Goldsmith et al (2010), Aitken & Zonn (1994), Driver (2003), Thornes (2004) and Schlottmann & Miggelbrink (2009) is significant in that it shows mediated geographies are never pure representations that could be equated with physical reality but have to be regarded as media structures equipping life with meanings, discourses and ideologies. Here audiovisual media interact with social, cultural, political and also academic worlds, substantially determining how people engage with their surrounding environments.

These different imagined geographies call for an operation of decoding that cultural theorist Fredric Jameson has related to historical facts external to media texts themselves, yet “inscribed within the internal intrinsic experience [...] of decoding or aesthetic reception [...] which cannot in the very nature of things be 'rendered' directly“ (Jameson 2013: 73). As allegories of their own conditions of production, audiovisual configurations call for a sophisticated analysis sensible to their specific modes of reflexivity. In other words, what is needed besides a media industry perspective is an approach based in allegorical readings and centering on the recognition of media patterns addressing people’s imaginative capacities. Understanding media as cognitive maps, in this way theory as well as analysis can move beyond the traditional critique of ideology and focus instead on a more “productive, meaningful encounter between an individual and the representation of her/his social world” (Ritzer 2015: 457-8).

Audiovisual configurations enhance human perception and therefore form an important part of both discursive patterns and material practices at work in a given context. The task of this special issue of the *Journal of African Cinemas* is therefore to develop theoretical approaches to the deconstruction of imaginations of urban geography in media in order to be able to systematically analyse the corresponding perceptions arising from these very audiovisual agencies and state policy makers. Thus, the focus lies on interactions between media and lived-in worlds, i.e., the audiovisual transmitting and staging of space through drawing up imaginary geographies and what those geographies lack in terms of filling out the value chain (in the form of exhibition especially). This has been already done with regard to the potential lost from the ReaGile initiative, due to the exhibition industry’s over-reliance on previous apartheid-derived path dependences and lack of imagination on how to re-configure leisure spaces for a new urbanity based in townships and other looser African urban structures than

that provided by a city's commercial, business and entertainment precincts. Here was a now forfeited chance for the state to not only have provided the support services needed for the distribution and exhibition of films, not to mention local ownership also, in black urban townships underserved by cinemas and leisure facilities, but of also stimulating low budget production within them. Many townships do sport amateur and aspirant video making groups. These amateurs come up with their own imagined geographies of urban life, yet far removed from the often more artistically motivated aesthetic production that presupposes access to capital.

The ReaGilé concept, for example, imagined a totally new value chain conferred black township mini-cinema ownership upon local co-operatives. Such an approach, may have enabled the low budget township film production to be viable. However, it threatened prevailing political interests and priorities centred on capital formation, traditional cinema exhibition and distribution models, and a limited role for not-for-profit commercial and part commercial initiatives managed by co-operatives. One question therefore is related to the examination of the lessons learned from the single complex that operated for 18 months at Katlehong. How did this unit's co-operative members imagine the potential for both exposure of previously non-cinema going audiences to both South African and imported titles, while at the same time contributing to systematic poverty alleviation? Another question considers specific generic allegorizations of struggling (black) life, such as the gangster myth narrative in productions like *Jerusalema* (Johannesburg), *31 Million Reasons* (Durban), or *Cold Harbour* (Cape Town). Thereby, the concept of allegory is meant to provide a heuristic means of intertwining the textual and the contextual, considering both industry economics, social politics, as well as aesthetic creativity.

Combining a media service and value chain approach with a focus on textual analysis and allegorical reading, this special issue concentrates on the three key issues: Firstly, what sort of media industry including local networks of financing and creativity exist in Southern Africa's major urban areas such as Johannesburg, Durban, Cape Town, and Pretoria and how can they be productively aligned in policy and media development interventions? Secondly, how is these cities' urbanity geographically as well as discursively imagined in media productions and audiovisual configurations of film and television and how can these geographies of the imagination be harnessed towards productive ends? And thirdly, in what ways can value chains and a textual allegories approach be mapped onto each other both theoretically as well as analytically and in policy terms, providing media studies with an innovative methodological and policy impulse? What we are proposing is a holistic approach where the industry, creators of content, and transmission of same are included into a single value chain for study purposes, while this study also takes into consideration issues of aesthetic production. Finally then, the value chain's material output may itself be read allegorically as a text providing insight into the political economy just as well as audiovisual configuration of urbanity.

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