

## **The cultural politics of adaptation: *Fools* and the politics of gender**

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### **Abstract**

The shifts in the priorities of literary and cultural theory and criticism were already underway in the South African academy by the end of the 1980s, with the gathering momentum of the mass political movement reaching its apotheosis with the release of Nelson Mandela from prison in 1990. Whereas creative literary and cultural expression has often lagged behind advances in theory, there was nevertheless a steady acknowledgement of the necessity for a corresponding shift in the discursive character of the creative arts, even if the material conditions on the ground remained largely unchanged. Ramadan Suleman's film *Fools*, which appeared in 1997 as an adaptation of Njabulo Ndebele's 1983 novella by the same title, entered the fray with its argument for a new or, as it were, broader consciousness of the deeper, more complex legacy of 'sexual violence'. This legacy included the weak 'place of women in the everyday life of the township' (Suleman 1995: 1), and indeed in the very idea of 'the everyday' that some in literary and cultural circles sought to inscribe.<sup>1</sup> This article provides an assessment of the nature and extent of the film's intervention in the context of the systematic breakdown of the old certainties of race, identity and nation post-apartheid, together with the literary-critical cultures and apparatuses that presided over their coherences and raptures. I take as my starting point Robert Stam and Louise Spence's (1983: 3) assertion that '[a]though [...] those questions bearing on the cinematic industry, its processes of production, distribution and exhibition' – in short, questions bearing on 'the *contextual*' – are of 'crucial importance', they need to be tempered with those bearing on the '*textual* and *intertextual*' (emphasis in original). *Fools* is a film that enters the textual and contextual terrain of Ndebele's novella, but in doing so contests its textuality by shifting its narrative ground and voice.

**Keywords**

gender

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space

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translation

**Introduction**

The 1997 appearance of Ramadan Suleman's film *Fools* marked a highly contested period in South African history: a period of assessing the violent legacy of apartheid, its resistance and its silences; that is, some of the glaring absences in the symbolic culture of resistance. In particular, I have in mind the absence of any sustained and coherent critical-theoretical discourse on black African men and women at the very moment that the iconography of resistance valorised the heterosexual black African male body as the site of emotional investment,<sup>2</sup> and virtually occluded the presence of the female body (or, alternatively, eroticized (sexualized) its suffering).<sup>3</sup>

In this article, I posit that *Fools* attempts to address this critical-theoretical absence (albeit with some contradictions) by working the political issues of male and female gender and sexual embodiment and subjectivities into a densely textured filmic code. In this sense, even though *Fools* appeared in 1997, two years before [the first season of](#) the much talked-about drama series *Yizo Yizo I* (1999–),<sup>4</sup> it nevertheless provided a crucial perspective on some of the issues that were to become central to the latter, but which in *Yizo Yizo I* remained somewhat obscured (or at best limited) by its largely documentary style. By endeavouring to probe the politics of gender, *Fools* actively provides grounds for its own evaluation. Nevertheless, my aim is to assess the extent to which the film's treatment of gender and

sexuality offers up new insights into these concepts as they manifest themselves in relations between men and men, women and men and women and women.

***Fools as an adaptation: Old and new audiences***

Roland Barthes' (1979) evaluation of interdisciplinary activity can be said to hold true of intertextual activity, albeit with a careful substitution of intertextual activity for interdisciplinary activity, and texts for disciplines/branches of knowledge. Barthes cautions that:

Interdisciplinary activity [...] cannot be accomplished by simple confrontations between various specialized branches of knowledge. Interdisciplinary work is not a peaceful operation: it begins effectively when the solidarity of the old disciplines breaks down [. . .] to the benefit of a new object and a new language, neither of which is the domain of those branches of knowledge that one calmly sought to confront.  
(Barthes 1979: 79)

I would add that this is the case if this 'new object and [...] new language' do not simply remake themselves in the image of the solidarity of the old ones that interdisciplinary or, in my case, intertextual activity sought to break down. If, as an adaptation of Njabulo Ndebele's novella, Suleman's film is such a new object and a new language – and in interviews Suleman indeed set great store by the film's difference in both character and purpose – then a great level of care is necessary in assessing its pedigree. The aspect of Suleman's film as an adaptation became the subject of interest for some of the film's critics, in large part because of the place of Ndebele's novella in debates during the 1980s and 1990s about the place and role of literature, culture and representation in a changing South African society (cf. Dovey 2005; Renders 2007).

Whereas the idea of adaptation found in some of the critics' comments is a conventional one – in which the film's success or failure is judged by its closeness to or

distance from the ‘original’ or source text – my approach is that adaptation is an instance of a specific type of symbolic spatial and ideological translation (as it were, a cultural politics). Lindiwe Dovey and Luc Renders, for instance, argued that as an adaptation of Ndebele’s novella, which was told through the interior monologue of its protagonist, Zamani, the film presented some conceptual difficulties over and above its insights into post-apartheid social and political concerns. With regards to the conceptual difficulties, they argued a similar case to what they saw as a weakness in the adaptation. Renders (2007: 248) argued that the film was a ‘failed adaptation’ because:

[w]hile in the novella the psychology of the characters is of paramount importance, in the movie the characters lack psychological depth and credibility. Zamani is portrayed as a pathetic, bumbling loser who is afraid of his own shadow. In contrast, Zani is an arrogant, young firebrand but without charisma. He also seems to be completely out of touch with the power relations in the township. And whereas in the novel [sic] the women are the pillars of strength in the black community, in Suleman’s movie version they lose their dignity, resilience and earthly wisdom. (Renders 2007: 249)

For her part, Dovey (2005: 107) felt that the film could have opted for a ‘voice-over narrative’ in order not to lose the psychological depth and irony that signify the two important elements of Ndebele’s presentation of Zamani in the story. However, she also noted a deliberate shift in the film’s emphasis, whereby ‘the filmmakers have not chosen to replicate Zamani’s consciousness by means of a voice-over narrative’, but instead introduced a new political discourse through their adaptation – the politics of gender’ (2005: 107). Nevertheless, what Dovey and Renders note about the film’s lack of psychological depth in its structure of address is fundamental to a consideration of its difference.

To return to my point about adaptation as cultural politics, I argue that, as a species of translation, a film adaptation stakes its claim by setting up another viewing space/position, by

constituting an audience and by instituting a different relation of the audience to the text it adapts. The idea of translation as a cultural politics comes from the work of Lawrence Venuti, particularly his seminal work, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* (1994), and marks a significant departure from the somewhat binary and largely de-historicized (but sufficiently suggestive) idea of translation found in the 1813 essay by Friedrich Schleiermacher, 'On the different methods of translating', in the realm of which Dovey and Renders's conception of adaptation can in part be located. For Schleiermacher (2004: 49), 'there are only two possibilities' in translation: either the translator 'leaves the author in peace as much as possible and moves the reader toward him [or] leaves the reader in peace as much as possible and moves the writer toward him'. In 'Translation as cultural politics: Regimes of domestication in English', Venuti (1993: 208) posits what in my view is a more trenchant idea of translation as a regime of domestication of one text by another, the latter text being in this relation a metalanguage, 'a second-order discourse that takes a prior signifying system as its object'. Citing Barthes, Venuti reasserts the status of 'a metalanguage [as] always terrorist' (Barthes quoted in Venuti 1993: 208). This sense of translation places emphasis on the difference – linguistic, cultural, ethnic, spatial and suchlike – between the texts that are brought together by the act of translation. Yet the idea that the translator can 'leave the author in peace' may, in the end, not be his/her choice. In any event, Suleman declares the intentions of his film upfront: it is a film that actively contests some of the fundamental assumptions of Ndebele's 'Fools', particularly its mode of address.

If Suleman's film is seen in this light as a metalanguage that openly contests the grounds of contest laid down by Ndebele's 'Fools' by shifting the angle of vision and area of emphasis, then it makes sense to revise conventional notions of adaptation – such as the notion of the fidelity of the translation to the text it translates – while also assessing the film's own claims as a new object and a new language. In the 1995 interview, Suleman set the agenda for the film in the following terms:

*Fools* will provoke a debate in the heart of the Black South African community on the state of consciousness, education, the brutal imposition of the Afrikaaner [sic] culture, sexual violence, and *the place of women in the everyday life of the townships*. These issues are particularly pertinent at this moment, as the country is undergoing profound democratic transformations. (Suleman 1995: 1; my emphasis)

Evidently, not only would it be missing the point of the film to call its attention to Ndebele's novella, particularly its mode of address, but perhaps more crucially it would also be missing the grounds of its own claims as well. Whereas Ndebele's 'Fools' sought to call attention to a certain formalism – a 'progressive formalism' in Ndebele's (1991: 74) own words – by working political questions into formal ones (that is, into an idea of storytelling), Suleman's *Fools* is explicitly polemical, defining 'the everyday' not so much as a formal question, but as one of voice and position. Thus, seen in the light of this orientation of the film, the interior monologue of Ndebele's story would prove in adaptation not only politically inert but also spatially circumscribed, setting its vast material on a singular psychological platform. By contrast, in the above Suleman claims for his film a frankness of speech and a democracy for the image. Yet, as I intend to argue, in order to do this the film must contend with the conceptual background of Ndebele's novella; for whatever the film's claim to a new pertinence/relevance, Ndebele's broader project with stories such as 'Fools' was to redefine the very idea of what was pertinent or relevant<sup>5</sup> – indeed of what constituted the everyday – and how literature and culture negotiated the formal demands pertaining to representation. In this sense, whether one is delving into the psychology of a villain (as Ndebele does with Zamani, who examines his physical and psychological deterioration after his rape of his pupil), or wresting narrative authority from Zamani (as the film does), the encounter between the story and the film is not a simple one about ethics, but rather one that raises the question of the very possibility of ethics in representation.<sup>6</sup> Seen against this background, *Fools* cannot escape the conceptual quandaries that marked the emergence of Ndebele's 'Fools', as laid out in Ndebele's essays, as well as elsewhere in the longstanding debates about the 'proper'

language of aesthetics, ethics and politics in South African literature and culture. Put differently, the question, as I frame it in this discussion, is not whether one or the other approach is intrinsically better, or that one is ethical and the other lacking in this respect, but rather how each approach deploys its representational apparatus and to what ends. I begin by briefly setting out the conceptual context in which Ndebele's 'Fools' appeared.

The conceptual history of the film is, by implication, tied to the fictional and critical project of Ndebele in the 1970s, through the 1980s to the early 1990s. This project culminated in Ndebele's 1983 collection of short stories and critical essays under the title *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture* (1991). The essays themselves spanned some seven years prior to their collection in *Rediscovery of the Ordinary*, and addressed the problem of the relation of art by black South African writers to politics; or, more specifically, to the social and cultural lives of ordinary black Africans. *Fools and Other Stories* has been seen by critics as Ndebele's fictional expression of his longstanding critical project and its intermittent creative impetus. Ndebele's theme of making 'the ordinary' or 'everyday' a serious preoccupation of fiction dates back to the 1970s, and could already be discerned in the poem 'The Revolution of the Aged', which poses questions similar to those that he poses in his later fiction. In the story 'The Prophetess', for instance, Ndebele writes not so much about the prophetess, a well-known figure in urban and rural black African communities, as about the shifting cultural and epistemological attitudes towards her: at once revered, feared and held in perpetual credibility and doubt. In the story, as in others in *Fools and Other Stories*, can thus be distilled part of Ndebele's critical-theoretical project, i.e. his endeavour to reveal the complex patterns of survival and inventiveness in the racially spatialized milieu, where 'class, social, and language differences do not easily find separate spaces where wealthy families are able to isolate themselves from the poor, the criminals or the gangs [...] as occurs in normal free market-driven economic spaces' (Tomaselli 1991: 47).

One could say that Ndebele's thematic choices reflect his sense of literature's artistic capacity to step back from its subject, the better to return to it with a keener (which is to say

artistic) sense of its inner workings. Suleman's own project with his film underscores his artistic concerns. He states as the primary motivation for creating the film his intention 'to say to the politicians, "Let's not invent images or formulas for the people; let's not slip false words into the language; let's allow daily life to create its own vocabulary"' (Suleman 1995: 3). On the surface at least, there is a shared view between Ndebele and Suleman about the need to revise the priorities of art. For Ndebele (1991: 23), this involves a critical 'aware[ness] of the demands of the artistic medium chosen', even as the literary work 'display[s] a high level of explicit political pre-occupation'; for Suleman, the revision begins with rejecting the 'formulas' of political language. Where they differ, it seems to me, is in their practice as artists, and the film adaptation is thus an important occasion on which to ponder questions of the ideology of form. In this regard, one could say that, while both Ndebele and Suleman make social realism the framework (or conception) of their art, Ndebele's realism in 'Fools' is the lyrical type, whereas Suleman's is associated with neorealism or *cinéma-vérité*. The former is the kind that tells and the latter one that shows (mimetic); or, in Suleman's (1995: 3) words, that 'allow[s] daily life to create its own vocabulary'. However, as I note above, neither of them is intrinsically better or efficient. To restate my earlier point, rather than answer the question about how well or accurately the film captures the novella, my discussion of the film takes the film's own claims as the starting point.

### **Shifting the narrative terrain and voice: Masculinities at a crossroads**

In 'African film adaptation of literature: Mimesis and the critique of violence' (2005), Lindiwe Dovey writes:

The film was inevitably to lose Zamani's interior voice in the transformation [...] from book to film, and the filmmakers have not chosen to replicate Zamani's consciousness by means of a voice-over narrative. Irony – which is vital to Ndebele's critique of the violence made possible by certain modes of thinking or



knowing – is also inevitably lost. In losing this critique, the filmmakers have, in some ways, depoliticized the discourse in the novella that relates to the epistemologies of white domination. On the other hand [...] they have introduced a new political discourse through their adaptation – the politics of gender. (Dovey 2005: 107)

Dovey (2005: 107) also recalls Suleman as saying that, while he ‘liked the book, [he] tried to go a step further in the film to try to make South Africans reflect, especially at this democratic period, on the relationships with women’. I should point out that, on the point of the film’s ‘depoliticiz[ation] [of] the discourse in the novella that relates to the epistemologies of white domination’ (2005: 107), my view is that the film does not so much do this as broaden the epistemological terrain to include other forms of domination, particularly textual, sexual and gender domination. Thus, in shifting the narrative terrain and voice of Ndebele’s ‘Fools’, the film sets up multiple positions from which it dramatizes Ndebele’s novella, and consequently prompts multiple viewing positions. One of the immediate implications of this is that the film throws deeper historical and philosophical questions about narrative authority, black masculinities and even femininities into sharp relief. No longer filtered through the overarching narrative of Zamani, the film accentuates the performative dimensions of literature and identity; that is, their being-in-the-world. In place of Zamani’s subsuming personal narrative of loss (of respectability) and redemption, the film dramatizes what Biodun Jeyifo (1985) calls a ‘contest of wills, a confrontation between contending principles’; a conflict he maintains is constitutive of the dramatic situation and, I would add, of what Mikhail Bakhtin calls literature’s inherent dialogic character. After all, in neorealism or *cinéma-vérité*, the camera maintains an intense interest in the world not so much by interpreting the world as by letting it speak with its many *and* contending voices.

What then is the nature of ‘the relationships with women’ at the centre of Suleman’s adaptation of Ndebele’s novella? The film answers this question through a complex set of contests – i.e. between men and men, and between women and men – and through an equally complex set of relationships – i.e. between women and women, men and men, and men and

women. The political background of apartheid – the compromises with it and the challenges to it – is never far away. Indeed, the political background is the subtext on which these contests and relationships are partly built.

While it could be argued that the film retains the core of Ndebele's story, it nevertheless introduces crucial changes to it. The most crucial of these changes is that Mimi, the schoolgirl (and Zani's sister) that Zamani rapes, aborts the baby, whereas in Ndebele's story she gives birth to it. Aside from the implications that this has for the film's revision of the power relations between men and women in the novella, it also has far-reaching symbolic implications for the textual-sexual-gender overlay of Ndebele's story. In the film, it is not only that Mimi literally aborts the baby, but also that the film in turn symbolically aborts the self-authorizing 'text'/act whereby Zamani not only inscribes but also describes his masculine violence on Mimi's body. Indeed, even the lyricism of the novella's rendering of the rape scenario, which suits the style and tenor of its narrative, is replaced in the film by *mise-en-scène* – what Jacques Rancière (2014: 2) calls 'the mercantile aestheticization of images from life' – as opposed to the 'modernist paradigm' or 'the concentration of each art on its own medium'.<sup>7</sup> The issue of the different aesthetic choices means that the shift in both the visual and symbolic character and meaning of the rape marks an important event in the encounter between the novella and the film. However, let me proceed systematically along the track of the film's restaging of the novella's gender aspect, which involves contesting the novella's investment of this aspect in one man, i.e. Zamani, and in the metaphysics of personal redemption.

Earlier, I quoted Luc Renders (2007: 249) as saying that in the film 'Zamani is portrayed as a pathetic, bumbling loser who is afraid of his own shadow', and that '[i]n contrast, Zani is an arrogant, young firebrand but without charisma [who] also seems to be completely out of touch with the power relations in the township'. Renders argues that the film does this against the backdrop of the 'psychological depth and credibility' of the novella's characters, a quality he considers 'of paramount importance' for Ndebele. However, it should be evident by now that my inquiry is not into Zamani's lucidity/coherence (or his

lack thereof) as the storyteller in the novella or as a character among others in the film; rather, my concern is with the ways in which the film constitutes the masculinities of Zamani, Zani and an array of men in the film's conceptual setting of 1990s Charterston (as opposed to the town in 1966, when the novella is set). In any event, Zamani's lucidity in speech and thought sits awkwardly alongside his drunkenness, debauchery and loss of face, which he readily admits to in the novella itself. In this light, it makes sense for the film to open its filmic apparatus up to a more elaborate inquiry into modes of becoming, and indeed of being a man in his milieu. As I noted earlier, it does this by setting its story on a broader canvas than the more circumscribed one on which the somewhat subsuming dramatic monologue of Ndebele's 'Fools' is set.

The chance meeting between Zamani and Zani in the waiting room of Springs train station to the east of Johannesburg, where both will catch a train to Charterston, sets in motion a chain of 'meetings' between the men, the nature and significance of which requires careful analytical attention. In the film's thesis, these 'meetings' establish the basis for a consideration of not only black masculinities, but black femininities as well, both within the context of an apartheid regime presided over by white men. The conversation between Zamani and Zani in the station's waiting room takes place against the backdrop of anti-apartheid political slogans scrawled across the waiting room's walls (something not mentioned in the novella), thereby enabling the scene to form the rich text/texture of the film's *mise-en-scène*. This is what David Thorburn (2012), in his discussion of Italian neorealism, calls 'moments of multiplicity', whereby the camera 'acknowledges the complexity of the world' by investing its primary images with the 'texture' and 'density' not immediately graspable in the images' obvious references. Against this background, Zani's charge that Zamani 'and [his] generation [are] the masters of avoidance', and that "[i]nstead of confronting the system, you smoke and drink and direct your anger at the weakest around you', speaks to a number of issues, not all of which are present in the statement itself but which are nevertheless implied. They are implied in the political slogans, for instance, which speak of a political struggle once active, but to all accounts crushed and replaced by tactics of

survival by inwardly directed male violence. As my discussion will show, there are many such ‘moments of multiplicity’ in the film, in which the texture of a single scene throws into focus the multiplicity of its references and thus its complexity.

What then is the nature and significance of Zani’s charge, as a young man who would later mount a lone ‘assault’ at ‘the system’? What are the multiple implications of this charge in the context of the ‘generation’ of men at whose apathy he takes umbrage? His initial attempts at constituting a new (i.e. young) generation of thinkers for his ‘DINGANE’S DAY: STAY AT HOME AND THINK! THINK! THINK!’ campaign – including addressing Zamani’s primary school pupils on the political meaning of Dingaan’s Day, followed by taking his campaign to the streets of Charterston and to the picnic where the Dingaan’s Day celebrations take place – may seem the delusions of a ‘young firebrand [...] without charisma [who] also seems to be completely out of touch with the power relations in the township’ (Renders 2007: 249), but this is beside the point. Rather, seen in the context of the film’s politics of gender, these attempts shift the area of conflict from the interiority of Zamani’s personal narrative of ‘recover[y] [of] his dignity and self-respect’ (2007: 251) – of ‘the schoolteacher arriving at an understanding of the nature of the “terrible crime” that he has committed three years previously’ (Dovey 2005: 104) – to the exteriority of the sociopolitical environment of Charterston, where the generational contest is played out in the open. To address the question of Zani’s charge, one needs to look at the nature of the contest it sets up. Indeed, as the film’s scriptwriters, Suleman and Bhekizizwe Peterson, pointed out:

[We] had a problem in adapting this part of the book [in which Zamani talks about his moral degeneration after the rape] because the issue of rape is very important and needed to be addressed fully. [...] And how can the rapist be the moralist? (quoted in Dovey 2005: 104)

As I noted earlier, the larger questions of the coming-into-being of black men (indeed of being a black man) in the sociopolitical environment in which Charterston is but a microcosm

loom large, so that addressing the issue of the rape necessarily involves addressing these questions as well. As such, whereas in the novella the irony of Zamani's sexual violence resides in his consciousness, the film relocates it to the camera, and it is in the ways in which the camera deploys it that it is made most telling. It is not, as Dovey (2005: 107) claims, 'inevitably lost' in the adaptation/translation from novella to film. The Zamani of the film is always too drunk to recognize (or, perhaps more to the point, acknowledge) the irony of his daily life in the public places where some of it is literally and symbolically on display. To cite a few instances, one would note the fact of Zamani's drunkenness against the backdrop of the political climate of the country, figured in the slogans on the walls of the waiting room; his rape of Mimi; and his drunken charades at his house, about 'who is wearing pants in this house', which neither Nosipho nor the viewers take seriously. Therefore the question is: Are these instances to be understood only in political terms as products of political irony? Surely it would be overstating the point of politics and the 'epistemologies of white domination' when the case before the viewers of the film is older and more complex than what seems to me to be a narrow political explanation? Does the film not bring the politics of gender into prominence precisely by shifting to the background the general politics of 'men's issues with their apartheid adversaries'?

There is no doubt that on a psychosocial level the political nature of the spatial organization of the township has telling effects on the conduct of the film's characters. Having said this, it is also doubtless that the film eschews political and psychological determinism, and instead homes in on the issue of individual action and accountability. Thus Zamani and his drinking friends' behaviour<sup>8</sup> has its roots also in the unchecked class entitlements that the educated (and, in the case of Mazambane,<sup>9</sup> moneyed) male members of the community feel they have. With the film's focus on individuals also comes its emphasis on intimate spaces as sites for its gender politics. In fact, even some of the public spaces assume a more intimate, if at least domestic, character: viewers follow Zamani from the railway station's waiting room where he sleeps to the home he shares with his wife and where he rapes Mimi; and from the backstreet of a high-rise apartment building where he has sex

with a prostitute to the living room of his teacher friend, Khehla, where he discusses young girls with his friends over beer.

The enduring message of the film is that the spaces of male aggression are also sites of the loss of male power, so that in the film's reckoning male violence becomes literally and symbolically compensatory. As a husband, teacher and, as he says of himself, 'respectable [community] man', Zamani is a spent force, and his once virile body has been worn down by excessive drinking, reckless sexual conduct and inactivity. In short, he is a parody of the 'respectable man' that he thinks he is. His formal appearance stands in comical contrast to his almost permanent state of drunkenness. To buttress this point, the film shows him on one occasion taking a swing at Zani, whom he finds in his living room talking to Nosipho, missing his target and passing out on the floor. It is also at this point that Nosipho, after stepping over him, proceeds to pack her clothes in a suitcase in preparation to leave him.

Mazambane, the thug, also functions as a cipher for the film's irony of male bravado. During a wedding he accosts a young woman in the street for whom he has a sexual interest, but his attempt to reach out to her is brutal: when she walks away, he can only reach her with his (unprovoked) blows, so that the act itself becomes an absurd inversion of courtship. However, Mazambane's violence, like that of Zamani, conceals a bitter sense of his masculine impotence. Besides his abuse of the young woman, later on the same day he stabs Zani because he has told him that he has 'the mind of a chicken'. When the police arrive soon after the stabbing incident, he runs with the mob, comically limping down the street. This shot of him running with such a limp is poignantly imbued with multiple meanings, each arising from similar circumstances as those that viewers come to associate with Zamani – namely, male political and social withdrawal – for which Mazambane compensates by being spectacularly violent and self-possessed. Mazambane recruits his 'gang' from impressionable pre-pubescent schoolboys, as though, like a metaphorical prosthetic limb, they can carry for him the promise of youth, extension and sexual potency. However, his violent command of the township streets ends when the police arrive to reclaim it for the regime that has limited his action to the narrow township precinct.

The principal of Charterston High School is another male character who has been domesticated by the apartheid regime's hierarchy, and whose threats of violence to those (learners) who disregard his authority hides masculinity that has been reduced to mere form. At the morning assembly, where viewers first encounter him, he speaks under the supervision of Meneer Coetzee, the Afrikaner schools' inspector to whom he constantly defers thereafter. His frail body contrasts sharply with that of Coetzee, which projects an authoritative and self-assured patriarchal demeanour. Added to this is the line of photographs of past apartheid heads of state on his wall, which bear down on him like a constant reminder of his borrowed and mediated space and authority. The Afrikaner motorist who whips him at the end of the film seals this chain of references to the irony of a space and body that are externally governed.

If public spaces coincide with their political domestication for the black African male characters, domestic spaces force them into retreat. There is a scene at the train station that is fairly unremarkable, and which has gone unremarked in reviews and critical essays relating to the film. It occurs within the scene where the Apostolic Faith congregants sing while waiting for the train, and involves a woman chasing her husband with a stick. From what the husband says as he runs – that is, '*Ngek' ung'thole*'/'You will never catch me' – it is evident that the chase originates from their home, and may be an instance of retributive justice. I argue that the scene itself serves as a stark metaphor for the reorganization of the domestic space in the Charterston township environment. Contrary to the dominant but inaccurate image of the black African township as a place where men rule over docile and fearful women, this scene brings home what many in the townships already know: that men do not have monopoly on violent domestic acts.

If, however, the example of masculinity in retreat above seems unremarkable – after all, it lacks a story that would explain it and its significance – it nevertheless forces the viewers' attention to those aspects of the film most remarked upon, which also involve the failure of the men to assert their patriarchal authority over women in intimate relations. One of these aspects is Zamani's presumption about Nosipho's status in their house: he reminds

her that he is the one ‘who wears pants in this house’ and accuses her of being ‘barren’. Leaving aside the fact that Zamani’s assessment of his status has no bearing on the evidence presented to the viewers, let alone their sense of what constitutes masculinity in the performative sense, his presumption about Nosipho’s barrenness is a red herring, as it conceals his loss of possession of the female body that his power in the township once guaranteed.

When I speak of masculinity in retreat, it is in more subtle ways than the case of the man running along the platform of the railway station: it is in the way in which Zamani’s drinking friends retreat from the reality of their world into the fantastical one of American jazz; and, by extension, of male sexual abandon where the female body is the ‘edible’ target – the stake – ‘fresh with no preservatives’, as one of Zamani’s friends intones.<sup>10</sup> But the question is: Whose body is it that they discuss in such terms during one of their drinking sessions? For Rosi Braidotti (1990: 36), it is not the body of a real-life woman, but rather the rhetoric of femininity (‘the feminine’) in male discourse, essentially ‘nothing more than a very elaborate metaphor, or symptom, of the profound discontent that lies at the heart of phallo-logocentric culture’ (1990: 36). Moreover:

It is a male disease, expressing the crisis of self-legitimation. [...] This ‘feminine’ bears no immediate or even direct relationship to real-life women [...] a rather ancient mental habit which consists in using the ‘feminine’ as the sign, the metaphor or the symptom. [...] It is a typically masculine attitude, which turns male disorders into feminine values. (Braidotti 1990: 36)

The male possession of the female body, whether symbolic or violently literal (as in the teacher’s photograph of the schoolgirl and the rape of Mimi), is thus in reality a form of male self-possession, yet also an act of male ‘self-legitimation’ (Braidotti 1990: 36)

But what of Zani’s sense of the pertinence/relevance of his political message? What does the film make of his return to Charterston from Swaziland, and his political intervention



in the context of what he considers the betrayal of the Struggle by Zamani and his generation? As I noted above, rather than focus on the credibility of Zani as a character, or the credibility of his politics, I contend that the film addresses something much more profound through his performance; namely that despite the text of Zani's address to Zamani's pupils, which culminates in his lone protest in the street and at the gate of the venue where the Dingaans' Day picnic is about to take place, the implied or subtext is in fact *De Voortrekkers/Winning a Continent* (Shaw, 1916). Made by African Film Productions (AFB), whose films were 'funded by the State Information Service' (Tomaselli 1989: 55), *De Voortrekkers* is a film which documents the historical migration of the Afrikaners from the Cape into the hinterland of the country where they met, fought and (in 1838) defeated the Zulu king, Dingane. In *De Voortrekkers*, Afrikaner male narcissism is depicted with flourish and hyperbole. The performance that Zani gives in the few minutes that he has with Zamani's pupils before he is chased off the school premises by the principal is spirited and narcissistic. It obviously lacks the triumphal tone that marks *De Voortrekkers* as a highly seductive text of Afrikaner male endurance and triumph, in which women are offered conventional roles as mothers and stoical sufferers, but its tone and motivation are heraldic of the coming into their own of the new black African men. Thus, if one considers that the film's project is to displace male discourse, then the questions that it poses through Zani's performance are: What is at the centre of his performance? Who is he addressing, i.e. who is his implied audience? I propose that, in the structure of Zani's address, the Dingaans (sic) episode functions as a metaphor in his elaborate ensemble of literal and figurative references to his ideal male leadership and historical subjectivity that must emerge from the morass of debauchery to reclaim its place in a present that does not seem to me to include women as historical actors.

What I have attempted to highlight in my discussion of *Fools* is its place in a community in transition from political imperatives to the new questions about gender, sexual violence and sexism. Both the political questions and those that the film addresses bear directly on the film's visual world and rhetoric. But it is also clear that the film seeks to engender new viewsites without unduly forgetting the political past that looms large over the

male characters' conceptions of their diminished spatial and corporeal prevalence over women, who now emerge from the obscurity of the original story's partial narrative space. However, as it is wont to happen in male discourse about such a highly contested field as gender, stereotypes slip through the net that is put out to catch them. It is with this in mind that I move to consider some of the lapses in the film's constitution of the identities of some of its female subjects.

### **Looking relations and the precession of the male gaze: The female body-object**

The constitution of viewing/looking relations in film intersects with what Laura Mulvey (1985: 803) calls 'visual pleasure', by which she means the constitution of spectatorship as an effect of the cinematic framework and experience. In this sense, the viewer can in fact be outside the film narrative frame insofar as s/he is inside the cinematic frame, which is 'reinforced by pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work within the individual subject and the social formations that have moulded him' (1985: 803). Of course, as Mulvey intimates, this is not an inevitable position. Nevertheless, 'film reflects, reveals and even plays on the straight, socially established interpretation of sexual difference which controls images, erotic ways of looking and spectacle' (1985: 803).

I invoke Mulvey here in order to reflect on some of the scenes in which the body of woman is used in sexual scenes, consummated or interrupted, and which thereby invite a certain structure of viewing relations. The first scene involves love-making between Zani and Ntozakhe on the train from Swaziland. Ntozakhe's role in the film is limited so that this scene, in which her naked upper body is portrayed, is one of the rare ones in which she holds the viewers' attention in a high stakes drama that threatens at once to be an occasion for both voyeurism and aesthetics. The other scene in which this occurs is when Zamani has interrupted sex with a prostitute, even though in this instance the film appears to invite neither voyeurism nor aesthetics. Nevertheless, both scenes offer a rare instance in which a broad political reading is momentarily suspended and a sexual one is foregrounded, although in the second case a politics of sexuality is embedded in the sexual act more overtly than in the first.

But what do these two instances signify, and what assumptions about male and female sexualities do they represent? Whereas the scene on the train opens with both lovers' bodies visible to the viewers, it closes with Zani's mostly hidden from view (with the exception of his head). For no reason that the film can explain – or makes the effort to explain – Ntozakhe has not covered her breasts when the camera again returns to them after a brief interruption. In this sense, she becomes both aestheticized and made the object of the scene's voyeuristic residue. And, because Zani is not posed in this manner to be looked *at*, the film keeps the convention of the nude female pin-up, and its associations with the consuming and fetishizing masculine gaze, in place. Could it be that the construction of this scene is informed by the male body having been conventionally featured in culture as a hard surface unavailable to gazes that might also install a homosexual looking relation (Easthope 1990)?

It seems plausible to me that the idea of the female body as the object of male desire played a significant part when constructing the sex scene. Ntozakhe's naked torso certainly invites male spectatorship, and it is not a coincidence that her breasts are lingered on within the framed visual space. By contrast, Zani rehearses an old convention of male sexual representation: he fixes Ntozakhe with his gaze, thereby directing the spectators to the object of desire already posed by the camera (which is not him). Richard Dyer describes this process thusly:

[T]he artist or photographer constructs the image to be looked at; and, on the other hand, the image that the viewer looks at is not summoned up by his or her act of looking but in collaboration with those who have put the image there. (Dyer 1992: 269)

The prostitute engenders another conventional set of assumptions about looking at 'deviant female sexuality' that are nonetheless surreptitiously smuggled into a scene that at once reveals and conceals these assumptions. Given that she is inserted into a charged but ultimately disarming gender political text whose objective is to portray Zamani's sexual-

political sterility, she is made to play a conventional role as ‘the prostitute’. She also becomes an instrument/device that guarantees the film and the viewers the gender political message that is made primary. In ‘Eighteenth-century prostitution: Feminist debates and the writing of histories’, Vivien Jones (2000: 127) writes: ‘In the triad, virgin/mother/whore, which defines femininity within modernity, “whore” is the category which, through difference, guarantees the respectability of the other two’. In some sense, the prostitute features in the film to guarantee Nosipho’s respectability and Zamani’s loss thereof. Indeed, it is Nosipho that Zamani calls out to when, after his interrupted sex with the prostitute, he escapes the police raid through the station’s subway.

The scenes of Zamani’s rape of Mimi and his inability to achieve intimacy with Nosipho are held in place by the presence of the prostitute as the causal link; it is immaterial that Mimi’s rape occurs prior to the scene of the prostitute, because the time-space relation is compressed in one fleeting flashback that plays out in Zamani’s head. Mimi functions in the film as the violated virgin and her role is framed in inverse terms as an innocent girl. There is an indication that she has an identity and agency outside this framework, but it remains merely an indication in a letter that she *wrote* to Zamani while he was in Swaziland, which is ‘re-read’ through her voice and ‘re-played’ in Zamani’s memory, as well as in the comment that she makes about being structured out of her own experience. As such, not only do viewers ‘see’ her body in the possession of her rapist or hidden in a toilet where she aborts/miscarries, she is also symbolically erased from the very scenes in which she features.

These representations do not diminish the credibility of the film’s critique of male self-legitimation, which is simultaneously ‘won’ and lost over the bodies of three women: Mimi, Nosipho and the prostitute. Indeed, despite her critique of some of the aspects of the film’s approach, Dovey acknowledges its subtle critique of the novella when she states:

Looking at different facets of the same thing in the film leads to a shift away from Zamani’s consciousness and to the development of an array of characters. If Ndebele provides a critique of the rape through a weighing of competing epistemologies, the

film provides its critique by visualizing the gender politics operative in the township. The film thus simultaneously engages in a form of criticism of the novella. In bringing the action closer in time to South Africa's political transition, the filmmakers shift more responsibility onto Zamani, whom the audience is less likely to see as a victim of structural violence that he cannot control. (Dovey 2005: 110)

### **Conclusion**

In many respects, Dovey (2005: 100) says *Fools* may be said to occupy 'a unique place in history: its creators' 'decision to adapt a novella written in 1983 and set in 1966, about the rape of a schoolgirl by her teacher, seems remarkable'. She also remarks that:

While Ndebele's set of female characters could be said to be somewhat schematic – the innocent and childlike victim of rape (Mimi), her sister Busi who 'exudes a whorish sensuousness' (Ndebele 1983: 187) the intellectual girl (Ntozakhe), the idealized wife (Nosipho), the traditional mother (Ma Buthelezi) – the film gives shape and voice to an array of strong women. (Dovey 2005: 111)

What I have tried to highlight in my analysis of the film's adaptation of the novella is that, whereas the action of the film takes place against the backdrop of unresolved political tensions resulting from a betrayed Struggle, it is not altogether structured by them. Rather, the general political text speaks to the legacy of apartheid's sociopolitical engineering; that is, the creation of a docile and self-abusing black African body politic. The regimented school milieu; the principal who leads the singing of the apartheid regime's national anthem under the watchful eye of an Afrikaner schools' inspector; the deafening sound of army helicopters overhead; the row of framed photographs of past apartheid heads of state on the wall of the principal's office; the Dingaan's Day celebrations tickets that the teachers must sell; and the appearance of the Afrikaner motorist at the end of the film, who scatters learners and staff at the Dingaan's Day picnic with a whip – all these situate the school within the apartheid

political framework. However, there is a notable shift in the critical paradigm of the film *Fools*: unlike in most of the films that appeared before and after it, *Fools* compels its viewers to observe its male subjects as male firstly and as black subjects secondly. As men, their fantasies of masculine self-possession and self-legitimation are rendered patent, so that whatever acts they commit to assert their authority over women fail largely because the women are not consenting or hapless victims. Zamani's redemption in the film is not guaranteed: at one point he runs through symbolic fire flames after Busi, Mimi's sister, expels him from her home. The homeless and somewhat deranged Forgive Me, who reads Bible passages that speak of things that will be revealed ('Verily, verily, I say unto you...') while this happens, further places the instruments of redress out of Zamani's reach. Furthermore, for most of the film Zamani is pitted against Zani, Mimi, Nosipho and a whole array of antagonists, among whom viewers are also positioned as antagonists. In this sense, the passage towards Zamani's redemption is negotiated through a polyphonic visual device through which the authority of his interior monologue in Ndebele's story is displaced. Within the film's conceptual framework, Zamani is the instigator of the conflicts but not the terminus thereof. The beating that he endures at the hands of the Afrikaner motorist towards the end of the film may seem to redeem him, but it is also enough to raise the viewers' suspicion that maybe even this may not be enough. For me, this reinforces Suleman's point about the film's status as the instrument of provocation.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Ndebele's argument in *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture* (1991) was for such recognition of the everyday lives of ordinary people in black South African literature and culture. As such, his stories sought to inscribe this sense of the everyday.

<sup>2</sup> Consider, for instance, Mtutuzeli Matshoba's anthology of short stories, *Call Me Not a Man* (1979), in which black African male assertion gains heightened emotional currency by being filtered through the deeply felt bonds of apartheid's racial-capitalism and emasculation.

<sup>3</sup> Sipho Sepamla's representation of the police torture of Bongi in *A Ride on the Whirlwind* (Heinemann, 1984) may be seen in this light.

<sup>4</sup> A drama series about youth gender and sexual violence in black township schools, *Yizo Yizo 1* became a talking point in and outside the academy, and brought into sharp focus issues of masculinity, violence and race in South Africa post-1994, as well as how these imbricate with mass consumer culture, in particular the ascendance of the acquisitive culture among black youth.

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<sup>5</sup> He dealt with this question in his essay 'Redefining relevance', which later appeared in his collection of essays, *Rediscovery of the Ordinary: Essays on South African Literature and Culture* (1991).

<sup>6</sup> Suleman's problem with Zamani as the focalizer in Ndebele's 'Fools' – and thus his choice to shift the angle of focalization to the women characters instead – arose from his sense of the ethical problem of having the rapist appropriate the authority to speak, and by implication to speak for Mimi, whom he rapes.

<sup>7</sup> In the novella, one gets virtually no sense of a rape being described.

<sup>8</sup> The novella does not introduce any of Zamani's drinking friends, except when he mentions that he is often away for days on end drinking.

<sup>9</sup> Mazambane is the thug who stabs Zani in the novella, after Zani says he has the mind of a chicken. He is not named in the novella, but in the film he appears on a few other occasions after the stabbing scene.

<sup>10</sup> One of Zamani's drinking friends shows them a photo of a schoolgirl with whom he is apparently sleeping.

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