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A “Poor Man’s Pleasure”: The Cinema House and Its Publics in Twentieth Century South Africa

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ABSTRACT

What do cinema houses have to tell us about the experience of collective leisure in early twentieth-century South Africa? This article considers how the cinema house points to unprecedented social conditions that allowed the emergence of new publics. Drawing on scholarship on the development of cinema in South Africa, the article considers how the historical transformations through which the cinema has passed since the 1910s suggest attempts to domesticate the space of projection of the cinema as well as the formation of new cinema audiences. Diverging from readings of the cinema in South Africa that focus on film, the article considers how the cinema house is inscribed in this scholarship as an evocative cipher of incipient publics and as a metaphor for the containment of a new public sphere during the periods of segregation and Apartheid. While today the cinema house no longer occupies the place it once did, the paper concludes with a reflection on recent recreations of the space of the cinema in two South African art installations. The restaging of these cinemas offers a way into the making of a collective space and the kinds of distinct publics they forged.

KEYWORDS

Cinema house; publics; leisure; segregation; South Africa

Introduction

Early cinema houses in South Africa in the first decades of the twentieth century attracted large and often unwieldy crowds. Cape Town hosted most of the cinema houses in the country and initiated a political process of containing the publics cinema drew and curtailing its unprecedented popularity. Official correspondence surrounding cinema houses like the Wolfram Bioscope – which by 1910 had become a reputed venue in the city’s central district – reveals early attempts to contain, classify, and even segregate cinema attendance by age and race (Cape Provincial Administration Secretariat 1917). Cinema houses attracted businessmen, distant travellers, soldiers, war nurses, and young recruits. It also increasingly became the favourite pastime of children and youth, whose attendance drew relentless criticism and concern in the press. Early cinema publics swarmed into bioscope spaces and sat shoulder to shoulder in small theatres, mobile units, city halls, or makeshift pavilions, as well as at the old waterfront. Attracting audiences oblivious to the metropolitan mores and cultural etiquette of the established theatre, cinema was – as described in the press – the “poor man’s pleasure”: a medium of entertainment

for the masses associated with childish amusement and vulgarity far from a respectable art form.

By approaching historical and sociological works on the development of cinema as collective pastime, this article suggests how the cinema's historically specific social and technological arrangements offered conditions for the establishment of the cinema house as a public, shared space. The social conditions that enabled the institution of cinema in the country reveal the importance of other entertainments associated with working-class patronage which were also considered of "low order" and offers material for an analysis of cinema as a space that inaugurates a new public sphere. However, as early as 1916, the Cape's first provincial cinema ordinances set in motion the policing and regulation of places of projection, legitimising the restriction of early audiences, and limiting the commercial expansion of cinemas as a collective leisure space. The public perception and subsequent regulation of cinema houses in the Cape marked the cinema as both a signifier of metropolitan modernity and as well as of its subsequent curtailment.

This article suggests that these early cinematic experiences constituted a new way of being in public but also promoted new ways of regulating such publicness. The cinema house signalled the public potential of this new form of leisure and its cultural relevance for incipient Black audiences. Thus, the article begins with a reading of how cinema-going culture speaks of the political possibility of expanding a mass audience and marks the cinema as central to discussions about incipient Black modernity and cultural movements. The second part deals with the ever-increasing restriction of this audience, starting with the initial classification of films according to age and gender, followed by segregation along racial lines in the 1930s, and the geographic and spatial rationalisation of racial segregation during Apartheid. The third and final section considers how the cinema house appears as both a threat to and facilitator of projects for forming distinct racial groups and advancing a political project of cinema founded on ethnic nationalist ideas before Apartheid. Conceptually the article suggests that the cinema house helped to envision the possibility of a distinct public sphere that, while increasingly contained and policed, drew together a metropolitan elite and those on its margins through a new visual medium. It thus offers a lens onto the historical conditions of cinema publics in South Africa and onto its curtailment into racially distinct audiences. The article concludes with a reflection on two artistic installations reconstructing the cinema house, reminding us of the kind of public leisure experience it provided.

The formation of cinema as a public space

In cinema's mythology of "arrival", Carl Hertz shipped one of his cinematographs from London to South Africa and started his exhibition tour in Johannesburg and Cape Town just before the turn of the twentieth century. The complexity of the electric apparatus mirrored the turmoil that unfolded around it: the Transvaal Republic had just survived a failed political raid that attempted to overthrow its president and forced Cecil Rhodes to resign as the prime minister of the Cape Colony. Social unrest characterised the outside world while another world was conjured up in the illusions generated by machines brought in by metropolitan dispatch: these moving images screened in populated halls charged with political expectation and anticipation of scientific and aesthetic novelty. This period marked not only the beginning of the era of "bioscopes" – as cinemas

were called for most of the twentieth century, after the name of the screening technology – but also the beginning of film appreciation as a shared and public endeavour.

However, the great appeal of early cinema lay less in its relationship with the theatre as much as in the kinship with its less high-brow counterparts, such as the moving opera and other itinerant attractions (Gutsche 1946, 26). The discovery of diamonds in Kimberly and gold on the Witwatersrand brought with it the demand for spaces of amusement for the new “salaried masses”. While transport remained a difficulty in this period, theatre companies and musicians took their stages and instruments to the road in ox-wagons. The theatre seemed to follow a shift from coast to the interior, from sea-port towns – especially Cape Town and Port Elizabeth – to rapidly growing settlements around mineral discoveries, offering fertile grounds for professional entertainment. Cape Town, which by the 1920s hosted most film halls in the country – 44 licensed spaces seating roughly 160,000 people – was a port for emerging cinema publics as well as imported reels (Cape Provincial Administration Secretariat 1917). Initially an urban phenomenon, cinema spread quickly throughout the South African countryside. An important dimension of cinema in the first half of the twentieth century was the way it drew rural and urban audiences together at cinema palaces, local neighbourhood bioscopes, and in mobile cinema units that were set up in local halls or makeshift areas. Thelma Gutsche’s 1946 doctoral thesis traces the first four decades of cinema, showing how cinema developed into a popular art form, and eventually into a form that warranted its own exclusive spaces, or “theatres”.

If by the late 1890s Frank Filly’s Circus had captivated a loyal audience wherever it travelled and had surpassed the popularity of vaudeville and drama (Gutsche 1946, 5), this didn’t last. The decline in circus popularity in the first decade of the twentieth century was associated with the advent of electricity, which transformed how audiences regarded and witnessed public entertainment. Phonograph and gramophone parlours, as well as the appearance of dictaphones, created a desire for aesthetic novelty and accelerated the tempo of daily life. At the same time, as settlements in the interior grew into cities, some of the itinerant forms of entertainment slowly gave way to arcades, fairs, and permanent exhibitions, combining the latest attractions with the latest technologies. They enticed the public with amusement shows of all kinds and did so by highlighting the aesthetic potential of technological inventions. Across cities, a public formed around these spaces, creating a demand for regular popular amusement, enabled by new technological media forms.

Gutsche reads public opinion expressed through the press and the emergence of an inaugural “scene” of the arrival of moving images in Johannesburg in 1895: a kinoscope offered animated images which the viewer could look at through an aperture at the top of a cabinet, starting the motion simply by inserting a penny (Gutsche 1946, 13). While the kinoscope was fit for arcade entertainment, it was Hertz’s invention, the cinematograph, that took films outside the cabinet and individual viewing, and projected them onto a large sheet on a stage to the appreciation of many. Although the flickers, scratches, and blurs did not exactly make for a great viewing experience, this new way of seeing moving images transformed how the medium was publicly perceived. This signalled the advent of the “bioscope era” in South Africa, altering, for good, the tempo of attractions by instituting an industrial, mechanical, and electrical acceleration of leisure.

This fast tempo was what the contemplation and thought ascribed to theatre purportedly inspired against. However popular these moving image places would become, they

were not to be seen as a space for the high arts. The bioscopes were often the milieu of speculators of leisure, who, still unsure about the fate of movies, gambled on presenting a mechanical gimmick to perceived unsophisticated masses and the longevity of this apparatus' professional career. It is in the early cinema spaces that a new kind of public would be formed, and the battle to define and shape how this public would be composed, and what social and political potential it held, would intersect with political developments over the next forty years.

An artwork of effects

Small cinemas in the Cape were a symbol of many social maladies and immoralities. They drew the attention of child welfare advocates, social reformers, religious leaders, and women's associations and were the target of continuous public grievances in the press. These grievances were mostly associated with the cinema's technical shortcomings, the danger of crowds and fires, and were centred on the cinema house as a place of physical disrepair and moral disrepute. In this period, cinemas attracted everyone from businessmen to travellers, from soldiers and recruits to war nurses, and were also widely patronised by young women with babies and by children, much to the media's chagrin. Early cinema spaces came to metonymically stand for the urban influx of workers to the cities, a period Gutsche (1946) describes as marked by increased demand for amusements of a "low order". Cinema was part of a myriad of "illegitimate" forms of entertainment along with the first roller skate rinks, acrobat shows, fireworks display, and fencing tournaments. Cinema's capacity to gather a mass public of indistinct class, gender, and racial character shaped public opinion on the perceived dangers of the bioscope.

Public suspicions of the effects of cinema-going, particularly among the medical sciences, were heightened during the outbreak of the Spanish Flu pandemic in 1918, motivating the shutdown of these venues in Cape Town, and re-emerging later as public concern around "flu orphans" (Phillips 1984, 10). Added to the supposed sanitary concerns, a moral panic emerged in the early 1920s and became infamous as the *swart gevaar* ("black peril"), suggesting that Black men posed a sexual threat to (especially young) White women: "mixing" in cinemas was held to be especially dangerous (Burns 2013, 83). These concerns around cinemas resulted in the rigid curtailment of children and the creation of matinees on the one hand, and the increasingly bureaucratic censorship and policing of Black audiences on the other (Cape Provincial Administration Secretariat 1922).

It is not surprising that by the end of that decade the challenge for cinema impresarios and government authorities was to show that the distribution circuits of the cinema house remained profitable even after the long pandemic shutdown, while portraying the cinema house as a respectable amusement venue. Drawing on the bygone era of theatrical palaces would serve the need for establishing reputable venues for cinema's mass aspirations. Here, the distinction made by Kracauer (1963) between picture palaces and small cinema houses in Berlin in 1926 offers an interesting parallel. Kracauer regards these large cinema theatres as palaces of distraction or optical fairylands as opposed to the small Kinos or neighbourhood cinema houses. One, if not the sole reason for creating these palaces, Kracauer suggests, was the attempt to move cinema

out of ordinary life into the glamour of ornate venues. These “mass theatres” were “shrines to the cultivation of pleasure”, a “total artwork of effects” (1963, 323–324).

For Kracauer, film palaces in the late 1920s sought “to raise distraction to the level of culture” through a complete assault of the senses: cinemas were mass objects par excellence, and they were aimed at the masses. And yet, because film palaces remained largely bourgeois, their effect on the working classes was limited. It was as if “the growth of this human reservoir meant nothing, and thus [they could] maintain the illusory claim that they are still the guardians of culture and education” (Kracauer 1963, 93). In Cape Town, too, a battle emerged between the cinema palace as the site of refinement, and the popular neighbourhood bioscope, whose positions in cultural, class, and race terms was far more ambiguous. The mass aspirations of early cinema entertainment were both forged and curtailed in the Cape Province. Cinema’s political potential was recognised by authorities by both establishing censorship boards to monitor the content of film and by policing cinema attendance itself. Early discussions of the Wolfram Bioscope, an institution in the city’s central district, show that as early as 1911 there were attempts to contain, classify, and even segregate cinema attendance by race, but this was mostly done without legal backing.

It was from its entry seaport in the Cape that a decisive decade for cinema was launched between 1917 and 1927. The combination of municipal laws and provincial cinema ordinances during this period initially designated the police as the responsible public body for issuing cinema licenses and, subsequently, imposed local control of venues and reels through a publicly funded board of inspectors. These ordinances enabled the formation of the Cape Province Bioscope Inspection Board, whose focus on the cinema house was twofold: Firstly, to prohibit films considered inappropriate for children, women, and so-called mixed-race audiences; and, secondly to control the space of the cinema house itself, its attendance and layout, along with its capacity for drawing crowds, to prevent stampedes and threats of fire, forbid racial and sexual mixing, and ward off all kinds of perceived moral threats and social indecencies.

Early cinema impresarios worked to grant cinema public legitimacy by building large film “palaces” in major South African cities. Indeed, in its association with theatre, cinema sought to dispel the perceived cheapness and low-grade amusement of its early beginnings in South Africa, which meant sacrificing some of the public’s darlings, the early exhibition halls. The formation of the early cinema or “bioscope” was tied up with producing social respectability along with a kind of spatial stability with theatre-like spaces of projection, a process that took several decades to achieve. The very notion of what the cinema was, and the decision around who could attend it and where, was at stake in this crucial decade of class, racial, gender, and age regulation of leisure. These early moments of cinema helped to create a distinctly South African leisure public sphere that drew together a settler colonial elite and those on its margins through a new visual medium. Such cinematic experiences constituted a new way of being in public and a distinct form of domesticating such publicness.

A divided cinema public

Paying attention to mass publics, I draw inspiration from Walter Benjamin’s “Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” ([1935] 1968). A key argument of this seminal work

is that as a form of art, cinema inaugurates a new kind of audience and critic: the working class. Unlike prior epochs, when the artist was either subsumed into the artwork or into the individual genius of the artist-defined art, cinema's rapid growth in the early twentieth century not only engaged a mass audience in a new way, but the medium also produced that audience as a political agent. That meant that cinema as art had the capacity for political influence and became a stage on which a battle between fascism and communism could be fought. In South Africa, early cinema publics were formed by child audiences and adults enticed by the appeal of the spectacle, a diverse public expecting innovations and the most up-to-date technological machines. The bioscope was first designed as a "cinema of attraction", to use the influential term coined by Tom Gunning (1986), referring to the allure of animated images and the early cinema experience of collective viewership oriented towards the spectacle of effects rather than the narrative power of films. While permanent cinema houses were established in the middle of the 1910s, the early bioscope was considered popular, childish, and vulgar. This set the conditions for the formation of mass cinema publics in South Africa, albeit divided ones.

Suryakantie Chetty notes how the Second World War animated the use of the cinema to tailor messages of propaganda to mass audiences. This audience could be an absorbed, passive one: Chetty quotes the Director of Military Intelligence and educator E.G. Malherbe, who justified the use of cinema for controlling war information by positing that a distinct quality of films is that in cinema one "cannot answer back" (cited in Chetty 2012, 107). Malherbe's enthusiasm for cinema turned into support for cinema research – including for Gutsche's thesis (1946, 10) – and encouraged the use of cinema for pedagogical aims, envisioning cinema as performing a public role in national education, war propaganda, and nation-building processes.

The scramble for film and the struggle over national cinematic imagination has been extensively analysed by Jacqueline Maingard, and Keyan Tomaselli, among others. Especially in the 1930s, Maingard shows the appropriation of the medium for fostering national imagination, drawing attention to the appropriation of the nation in films through the production of historical epics and fostering of nationalist images.¹ Tomaselli (2008) analyses Afrikaans amateur filmmaking through Hans Rompel's 1942 *Bou van 'n Nasie*, contrasting Rompel with Gutsche, arguing that this exemplifies a paradigm of "Conservative Cultural Theory" in South African cinema research.²

While these analyses largely focused on film, it was often the cinema house as a form of mass viewership that promised collective space of viewership and posed a threat for Cape English-speaking liberals and their Nationalist counterparts. For Rompel, criticism of film also extended to what was called *bioskoopbeskawing*, "bioscope culture". In 1946, Rompel's public lecture at the *Volkskongres* of the Federation of Afrikaans Cultural Associations warned about the foreign influence of films and urged Afrikaners to boycott cinema and cinema-going altogether. I read this as a rejection of both the cinema palaces built across the British Empire in the late 1920s as well as the neighbourhood bioscopes in areas like District Six which gained reputation for being "sordid", mixed-race,

¹Scholars have shown that film as medium was of importance to nascent Afrikaans nationalism in the 1930s and 1940s, from the continued showings of the 1916 *De Voortrekkers* film to the 1931 *Sarie Marie* and *Moedertjie* and the 1938 *Bou van 'n Nasie* films (Maingard 2007; Steyn 2016, 74–76).

²Rompel's admiration for the realistic input was in fact for its metaphorical grasp – reflected in the "art of expressing ideas as visual and acoustical arranged motion into photographs" (Tomaselli and Eckardt 2011, 232).

working-class leisure venues where audiences could not be entirely controlled. The triumph of Afrikaner nationalism and the beginning of Apartheid in 1948, turned the cinema as a potential locus of cultural indoctrination and nationalist sentiment, rejecting both the metropolitan connections promised by the palaces and the popular, racially “mixed” and uncontrolled audiences of the neighbourhood bioscopes.³

Despite such racially mixed audiences attending several of Cape Town’s permanent bioscopes, for most Black South Africans, access to the cinema theatre was through itinerant venues, mobile film units that travelled to places of work and living, the edges of the city, and the countryside. Despite the widespread enthusiasm for film, it is precisely at the cinema that one encounters the barriers preventing the promise of African modernity to be realised. H.I.E. Dhlomo describes how one could arrive at the cinema theatre

[W]ith your lady friend all spick and span or accompanied by visitors whom you are entertaining only to find that “No Natives” are allowed to see the picture that night. Your group might include graduates and wealthy African businessmen, but that will not help. As you stand helpless and humiliated, the disdainful glances and even sarcastic smiles of non-African patrons will drive you mad. (Cited in Masilela 2003, 23)

Such barriers did not prevent Solomon Plaatje in the early 1920s from attempting to mobilise cinema politically, creating an itinerant bioscope of his own and travelling around the countryside, showing moving images of Black life in places like the US South and the Caribbean. Plaatje’s bioscope has been read as a counter to the national and racist hold on the medium (Willan 2013), a symbol of Black modernity (Maingard, 2018; Masilela 2003; Saks 2004), and a mode of mobility and political research (Remington 2013).

This distinctly racial segmentation of leisure venues, including the cinema theatre and the films they show, represents a more rigidly divided public sphere that placed cinema and its modernity entirely under the guise of national government. However, the legacy of Plaatje and the New African Movement, in Ntongela Masilela’s (2003, 28) analysis, is apparent in the 1950s Sophiatown Renaissance and the return of the symbols of early Black modernity, for which the cinema is central. Following Masilela, the cinema shifts the discourses of tradition versus modernity, pointing to alternative modernity or the seizing of modernity as an act of survival. The potential – or critical public potential, to use Litheko Modisane’s term – of films remained despite the strict regulation of the cinema house.

The cinema house and its public lives

Modisane’s (2012) reading of the public life of “black-centred films” suggests a distinct quality of film culture and film, which for him are quintessentially modern. Cinema indexes modernity by mediating reality with technology, images that are historically specific, and through the very act of cinema-going itself. Cinema is thus a historically distinct form of public life. Importantly, for Modisane, even historical renditions in the cinema

³This happened in three ways. First, the Apartheid government sought to sever the cinema from its seaport connections and Anglo-American ties (Pinto de Almeida 2021). Second, Apartheid sought to impose strict classification of films according to age and race – a legacy of colonial regulation in the first two decades of that century – and, thirdly, and importantly for this paper, to classify cinema theatres according to the “needs” of racial groups by areas, to match their division of neighbourhoods, land ownership, and jurisdiction of leisure establishments by designated racial groups, businesses, and patrons.

appear only through the mediation of a particularly located lens: the technology is what makes even prior historical periods visible through modern forms of mediation. It is the possibility of a historical constitution, dialectically formed through the engagements of historical subjects and the latter's technical mediations. Cinema publicness points to the latter's capacity to circulate even among those who have not seen films, an argument that adds complexity to the notion of "reception" in film studies.

However, the reference to the seated audience still marks a conventional mode of considering viewing "the" public through the act of public viewing or, following Michael Warner's suggestive definition, the "crowd witnessing itself in a visible space such as a theatre audience" (cited in Modisane 2012, 16). The "publicness" of a crowd witnessing itself visibly may be mediated precisely by this new technology of seeing. More specifically, however, expanding the discourse range of films as text, the cinema continues to shift from a discursive space to a metaphor of public visibility. The critical potential of films lies in the resonance between a public object and the contexts in which it circulates, with circulation itself the condition for its public character. The film extends the publicness of the "seated audiences", as it circulates beyond the cinema space and its capacity to bring a public into being.

Although the publics to which Modisane refers were constituted despite the regulation of cinema, knowing more about this regulation helps give shape to how cinema publics, divided as they were, existed. Returning to Cape Town's cinema houses in the 1920s and 1930s which transitioned to "talkies" or sound film and turned into sound theatres from 1929, regulators were now concerned with the effect of defective reels and projectors and the question of hygiene and security. At the same time, there was increasing public debate and policing of the cinema house's darkness. This feature of the cinema, the darkness inside, was accompanied by public hysteria around the demand for government regulation to prevent perceived indecencies and objectionable contact between young patrons and between racialised patrons. This rigid control of the behaviour inside cinemas has also been documented for cinema houses designed exclusively "Non-European" or "Coloured". The excesses associated with early cinema appear in novels such as Richard Rive's (1987, 15) *Buckingham Palace*, in which he describes the cinema house as a space of both control and excess, through the imagery of an usher who rides a bicycle down the cinema's aisle. The physicality that cinema elicits is present in Rive's narrative, in which cinema takes a corporeal, sensual quality, with "[a]n usher opening the door. Adjusting the outside gate. Preparing for the crowds to pour out. To vomit and spill out".

Bill Nasson's essay on cinema-going as popular culture in District Six between the 1920s and 1950s notes that the rumpus that happened before the screening of the film and the anticipation of darkness was also part of the experiential universe of the cinema house: "[t]hey loved it, being there, waiting for it to go black" (Nasson 2016, 173). Nasson points to connections between excessive forms of regulation of cinema and the control of patrons' behaviour in prescribed modes of cinema viewership. Yet, such regulation does not mean the foreclosure of the film's potential to offer viewers an experience beyond the immediate restrictions that segregationist and Apartheid authorities sought to impose. Indeed, Nasson suggests that cinema takes shape around discussions of the city's "still lingering cosmopolitanism" (2016, 165). He approaches the regulation of mass audiences by asking whether forms of restrictions and increasingly

anonymised experience of the cinema house could curtail cultural and class-based forms of autonomy of working-class publics. If once cinema publics reflected ever wider class and wealth orientation the class stratification of/in the cinema house translated these into claims of “respectability”.

A further dimension of this publicness lay in the fact that the cinema became a prism through which to review popular leisure and its regulation. In that, the cinema was taken as educational, a form of social, public pedagogy. Dhomo suggests that, during the 1930s, along with the theatre, cinema was an “educating agency” as significant as schools (cited in Masilela 2003, 23). This position resonates with Premesh Lalu’s (2017) writing about cinema in its relation to “petty Apartheid”, such as the “desire for schooling” which is conveyed by the bioscope’s contrasting or opposing forms of disciplining thought provoked by everyday forms of segregation. The bioscope screen becomes “a surface that conveyed an expansive globality” (Lalu 2017). Lalu considers the practice of cinema houses in Athlone, Cape Town, where the bioscope shared with the school a different conception of “interval”: one that promised a non-sectarian future in place of the difference marked out by Apartheid. For Lalu, the bioscope promoted a reorganisation of the visual field and the various segmentations forged by segregation and spaces that became uninhabitable.

Particularly when viewed in the light of its critical potential, foregrounding the cinema house and its publics reconsiders cinema’s gesture toward a shared future which appears poignant during political transitions. Indeed, concretely, there were “battles over the bioscope” (cf. Gordon 2005) at different moments in the twentieth century, battles over the potential of cinema publics to transcend oppressive social conditions. Both the films in the cinema house and the cinema house itself were marked by struggles over censorship and the location and style of bioscopes. As already suggested, the first half of the twentieth century saw the establishment of the cinema house, the creation of respectable “White” venues in city centres, and itinerant Black cinema. While not a focus here, the second half of the twentieth century saw the development of drive-ins and township cinemas, the consolidation of White cinema theatres into monopolies, and their eventual movement into malls (Shepperson and Tomaselli 2000; Pinto de Almeida 2022). After the democratic transition, the promise of creating a proper public viewership was curtailed, not politically, but by the capitalist-driven development of technologies that would separate the watching of film from collective sites of viewership. This turned film viewership into a matter of individual consumption increasingly accessible outside the collective experience of cinema publics.

Vestiges of the cinema house after the cinema’s passing

Recently, at a moment of its seeming obsolescence, the cinema house has become the subject of artworks as well as scholarly research that examines the cinema from the standpoint of museums and art exhibitions (Mandelli 2019; Hanich 2017; Roberts and Hallam 2014; Rhodes and Gorfinkel 2011; Bruno 2007). In the visual arts, Hiroshi Sugimoto’s “Theaters” offers an extensive photographic series of cinema interiors, spanning four decades from 1978 to the 2010s, using the film screen as a source of photographic light to reproduce the aura of empty pavilions and seats and Franck Bohbot’s “The last show, 2020” assembled images of old cinema houses threatened with closure in Los

Angeles, in the liminal affective space lodged between Hollywood decay and nostalgia. In South Africa, where cinemas have once signalled the allure of metropolitan modernity alongside emerging working-class publics, the cinema house is at the centre of two contemporary museum-based art installations by Penny Siopis and Jan van der Merwe. Their work recreated cinema interiors in ways that depict the latter into a public space of embodied practice and encounter.

Capetonian artist Penny Siopis' art installation of the film *My Lovely Day* (1997), featured an exhibition of private reels collected from personal archives and flea-markets in a recreated cinema interior, with its characteristic red, dim lights, tip-up seats, and velvet curtains. What appears in Siopis' cinema interior is also the story of her grandfather as a cinema owner, a story told alongside and through the recreated space of a cinema interior where the viewer can appreciate her collection of reels. We are offered a montage of personal and foraged films, sutured together with Siopis' subtitles. These films determine the way cinema appears "so oblique", as Siopis herself deems it, to expand the space's metaphorical power. These cinematic palimpsests, we are told, are not merely traces of history but they come to uncover history's mechanics or, as Siopis (cited in Olivier 2014) prefers, the "obscure mnemonics of disappearing worlds".

Siopis' cinema is an experimental space of memory-making in the 1980s and 1990s in South Africa, the decades of the height of the anti-Apartheid struggle and its eventual demise. Her critique of memory outside its purely mimetic or representational character has been said to work as a de-mythologising strategy of both the regime's narrative accounts and, later, post-Apartheid attempts to reveal the regime's truth after its end with truth-telling setting forms of democratic repair leveraged by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. The premise of Siopis' film pieces, as well as the premise of Siopis' memorabilia, presupposes cinema as more than space to gather forensic evidence, also shaping how historical evidence is conceived and deployed by different memory plots. The cinema is thus both a space marked by history and a historical symbol – expressed in Siopis' provocation of what it feels like "to be marooned in a place, [to] cut ties [to live] charmed lives" (1997). This marooned space can be read as the cinema interior itself, that of Siopis' grandfather's cinema house in Mthatha, a space to move and of being moved, of forging dreams of freedom from historical markers of visibility designed by Apartheid. The cinema is at once formed within the expansive temporality of moving images and the located, contained space of the cinema house.

In the interior of Siopis' grandfather's Metro Cinema in Mthatha in the Eastern Cape sits a child "marooned" who, much like the cinema-goer in Siopis' art, has escaped catastrophe, massacre, and disaster, to be presented with memory images as a film-fantasy. But there is also an amount of sensorial excess involved in the piece. This is not merely to say that cinema is always mediated. Emulating the workings of memory, the cinema interior offers a mnemonic framing: Siopis conjures up an interior of the cinema house housing reels as past fragments to be projected in motion, and thus imagines a viewer caught in its motion. Siopis' cinema house reveals historical writing in which textualisation is free from context but struggles to break free from the historical form of the cinema house itself.

In Jan Van der Merwe's cinema installation *The End/Die Einde* (2006), the installation doubles as a cinema interior, with seats arranged in rows, their metal surface rusted in patina. We are presented with the effects of cinema's afterlife, with personal objects scattered on seats as if left in a hurry but resting for a long period following their owners'

departure. The cinema-goer enters the dark space of the exhibition and inhabits the momentary fantasy that preceded a film exhibition (Figure 1).

The installation allows spectators to move along the rows and to discover objects on the seats: children's war toys and paper planes, pieces of clothes, and a notebook, all covered in layers of tin rust. Van der Merwe arguably dedicated the notebook to the memory of Barrie Hough, famed South African theatre critic, but whatever personal and specific allusions he hints towards, he evokes a sense of universality in memory of cinema-going. As a critique of the aesthetic effects of time, the rusted tin is a trace of van der Merwe's artistic interventions. Art critic Koos Van der Watt (2005, 30) calls the latter the "patina of time", with the coating of the surface enabling the artistic activation of a "time metaphor" that conflates notions of personal memory and public history to allow the release of objects' and spaces' "metaphorical significance in the present". The installation allows for cinema to evoke memories of childhood, of war, to act as mnemonic device as well as for seats to resemble a "graveyard with designated sections" (Van der Watt 2005) which the visitor both observes and activates by navigating it.

Such literal connections – both in Siopis' and Van der Merwe's cinema interiors – are not readily available to visitors. Their relevance is to be evoked precisely in the liminal space of interpretation, both from the artist and the public. The recreation of the space expresses Siopis' concern with "the relationship between history and memory in the movement of objects; the processes of physical decay and aging that lead to the "completed" work itself being subject to constant change" (Olivier 2014). In *The End*, the experience of discovering the seats' objects and memories, turns the cinema into a maze and pilgrimage, with the objects and the seats acting as remnants or evidence of cinema's past lives. The cinema house points to discrete units of time – "like frozen film" (Van der Watt 2005, 30) – in which each frame unfolds personal and public narratives alike. Cinema can be both charted by personal and collective experiences, while its disconnected context turns it into a terra incognita of larger historical developments.



Figure 1. *The End / Die Einde*. Reservoir of the Oliewenhuis Art Museum in Bloemfontein during the exhibition "Time and Space" in 2013 (Lewis and van der Merwe 2020, 5). Reproduced with permission.

Conclusion

This article examined historical accounts and artistic renderings of the cinema house as well as how the cinema became a metaphor for the experience of mass leisure it enabled. The artworks discussed draw on the cinema house's aesthetic appeal by recalling its fraught nature and political potential. This leads me to propose that the cinema house produced a form of publicness in the twentieth century that is separable from the films it screened. By evoking "publics" instead of audiences, I emphasise the notion of "publicness" that cinemas once enabled: the collective experience of watching a film in a shared space that both transported an audience to another place and allowed them to relate to one another as a group who shared that experience. For Benjamin ([1935] 1968), cinema signalled a shift in the social position of art: a medium that could be the site of collective consciousness and possible progressive politics by forging a mass audience and a new kind of public aesthetic experience.

I discussed how, in Cape Town, cinema's emergent possibilities from the 1910s were met with attempts to distinguish and stratify audiences, both by censoring and classifying films by race, gender, and age, and by regulating attendance. It is to the public promise of cinema, I suggest, that Penny Siopis' and Jan Van der Merwe's artworks point. The restaging of these cinemas offers a way into the making of a collective space and the kinds of distinct publics they forged. By considering the materiality of cinemas, the article was attentive to how they reorient the space of collective viewership precisely through the historical associations that connect cinema with a distinct public sphere. I approach this formation of cinema publics amid conditions of regulation, showing how such publics were constituted through cinema, albeit in attenuated forms. On the one hand, these works draw from cinema's potential to convey a universal experience as a shared, open, public space of leisure and art appreciation. On the other, they negotiate the cinema as a space to be bordered, to select, to control, and to separate or modulate its public. It is precisely the tension between this supposedly universal art form and its markedly fragmented publics that helped forge cinema's representation. The early experimental modes that cinema inaugurates reveal how we can make sense of cinema's past in terms of these categories.

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