

Speaking with Earth and Sky:
Oral Storytelling in the cinema of Craig and Damon Foster

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Resumo

O foco deste artigo está nos documentários dos irmãos Foster, especialmente em seus arrojados experimentos com a forma. Um breve relato da trajetória do cinema documentário sul-africano, do final dos anos 1970 ao séc. XXI, contextualiza algumas das importantes questões temáticas na obra de Craig e Damon Foster, como por exemplo personagens marginais, povos que sofreram deslocamentos forçados e a destruição de culturais tradicionais. Os Foster estão entre os raros cineastas sul-africanos que usam, em seus filmes, a tradição oral dos narradores africanos. Seus documentários combinam, de muitas formas, as preocupações sociais dos filmes politicamente progressistas dos anos 1980 com a estética oral de outras cinematografias africanas.

Palavras-chave: narrativas orais; *griots*; cinema africano; documentário.

Abstract

The focus of this article is the documentaries of the Foster Brothers and in particular their bold experimentation with form. A brief historical overview of developments in South African documentary filmmaking from the late 1970s till the 21st century contextualises some of the important thematic concerns in the work of Craig and Damon Foster, namely marginal characters, the forced removal of people from their land, as well as the destruction of indigenous cultures. The directors are among very few South African film-makers, who use the African tradition of oral storytelling in their documentaries. In many ways the documentaries combine the social concerns of the progressive political documentaries of the 1980s with the oral aesthetics of film cultures elsewhere on this continent.

Keywords: oral storytelling; *griots*; African cinema; documentary.

Historical contextualisation

My first exposure to the African cinema theories and critical courses occurred at the South African Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) during the 1980s. Apartheid led to an isolation of South African film-makers and academics from their colleagues elsewhere on the African continent.

Since the 1920s in Egypt, and especially after independence in sub-Saharan Africa, several hundreds of full-length films were made by African film directors (Armes 2008; Botha 1994; Convents 2003). The advent of sub-Saharan African cinemas coincided with the independence of many African countries after years of colonial subordination. The African film practitioners were deeply concerned with the issue of culture and national identity (Bakari & Cham 1996; Botha 1994). In both documents of the 1975, *The Algiers Charter on African Cinema* and the *Niamey Manifesto* of 1982, the need was stressed to express the cultural legacy of the African peoples through films as well as the need to use films in the development of African nations.

Since then independence feature and short films have been produced in Africa with a voice, content and aesthetic, which are rich, historical and creatively responsive to African social reality. The films also have used oral storytelling traditions, and where the films reached their audiences, they were immensely popular (Botha 1994). Since the 1960s certain African countries have produced world-famous film directors: Ousmane Sembène and Djibril Diop Mambety from Senegal, Youssef Chahine from Egypt, Med Hondo from Mauritania, Idrissa Ouedraogo and Gaston Kaboré from Burkina Faso and Souleymane Cissé from Mali.

Already in 1973, African films were prominent at the Cannes Film Festival when the Senegalese film of Djibril Diop Mambety, *Touki Bouki*, was screened in the *Quinzaine des Réalisateurs* section. In 1975, *Chronicle of the Burning Years*, a 3-hour epic directed by the Algerian film director Mohammed Lakhdar-Hamina, won the much sought after Golden Palm Award at the Cannes Film Festival. In 1986, the Tunisian film *Man of Ashes* was screened in the official selection round for the

Cannes Film Festival. With the upsurge of film art especially in western Africa, Cissé's *Yeelen* won the Jury Prize at Cannes in 1987.

Thereafter Ouedraogo had two consecutive successes at Cannes: in 1989, the FIPRESCI Prize was awarded to *Yaaba*, and in 1990 the second highest Cannes award, the Grand Prix du Jury, went to *Tilai*. In 1992, Sembène's *Guelwaar* and Djibril Diop Mambety's *Hyenas* entered the main competition at Cannes, which further underscored the prominence of countries such as Senegal and Burkina Faso at this film festival. Burkina Faso is a relatively poor African country but is one of the undisputed leaders in African film art, not being South Africa (Botha 1994).

Since the Senegalese director Ousmane Sembène produced his first film, *Borom Sarret*, in 1964, a series of films followed (such as *Xala* and *Camp de Thiaroye*) which were very well received across the world. Since 1960, countries such as Tunisia, Egypt, Ghana, Burkina Faso, Zaire, Zimbabwe, Senegal, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, Ethiopia and Mali have produced films that caught attention worldwide. Apart from awards at Cannes, film auteurs such as Cissé, Hondo and Sembène won awards for their work at film festivals in Paris, Rome and Moscow. Nigeria is currently one of the largest video industries in the world with an annual video production of more than 800 titles.

As a result of apartheid and the international cultural boycott during the 1980s, South African academics and film-makers were excluded from the major African film festivals and congresses, such as the Pan African Film and Television Festival (*Festival Panafricain du Cinema et de la Television de Ouagadougou*, i.e. FESPACO) and the Carthage Film Festival (*Journées Cinématographiques de Carthage*) (Botha 1994). The Pan African Film and Television Festival is held in Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso, and in 1993 nearly a million people participated in the programme which comprised 120 films shown at 13 venues. The Carthage Film Festival is held in Tunisia and is regarded as the display window of African cinemas.

As a result of international isolation during the 1980s, South Africans were seldom exposed to these films as well as the debates on film aesthetics, distribution and other important issues on the African continent.

Academics such as Botha (1986) and Van Zyl (1985) argued during the mid-1980s for a closer link between the South African film industry and film industries elsewhere on the continent. In 1988, a watershed was experienced in South Africa when the Film and Allied Workers' Organisation (FAWO) was founded. It was initiated by the Culture in Another South Africa (CASA) congress and festival, which were held in Amsterdam the previous year. At the congress, the role of film-makers in the cultural struggle in South Africa has been debated. Definite similarities were pointed out between South African initiatives and initiatives in other developing countries, particularly in Africa, with regard to the establishment of an 'indigenous' film culture.

A further development led to contact between local and other African film-makers. In July 1990, the Zabalaza Film Workshop and Film Festival were held in London. South African directors, such as Elaine Proctor, and veteran African film-makers, such as Med Hondo and Gaston Kabore, were panel members during the panel discussion. For the first time, South African cinema was discussed and debated within the historical context of African films. A book on the link between South African and African cinema, titled *Images of South Africa: The Rise of the Alternative Film* by Botha and Van Aswegen was completed and published in 1992. The theories by Teshome Gabriel (1989) were used to make sense of South African cinema during the 1980s.

FAWO have also started important initiatives: the training of potential young black film-makers in a so-called Community Video School (which evolved into the Newtown Film school); the distribution of films, including African films, in the townships by means of the Video Suitcase Project (which became the Film Resource Unit); and research on new structures for the local film industry which lacked a central statutory body responsible for securing continued government support for the industry. Voluntary researchers such as Danie Pieterse, Johan Blignaut, Martin Botha, Clive Metz and others studied the structure of various foreign film industries with a view of possible application of their findings in the South African context (Botha 1991; 1997b; Metz 1991; Moni 1991). Eventually the French structures, amongst others the *Centre National de la Cinematographie*

(CNC), which was also successfully implemented in Burkina Faso, emerged as a viable model for South Africa (Pieterse 1991).

At the congress of the ANC's Department for Arts and Culture in April 1993, the French structures and their success in establishing a true national film industry in France and Burkina Faso were illustrated and discussed.

Since the unbanning of the African National Congress, Pan African Congress and South African Communist Party, and the concomitant political changes in South Africa, individuals in the local film and television industries worked closer together with their colleagues in Africa. At the 1993 Pan African Film and Television Festival in Burkina Faso three South African films, namely *Sarafina!* (1992), Jean Delbeke's *The Schoolmaster* (about racism in a small South African town) and Jürgen Schadeberg's *Have You Seen Drum recently?*, a documentary on Sophiatown culture that was wiped out by apartheid in the 1950s, were included in the festival programme for the first time. In the sphere of television, Africa's United Radio and Television Network Association (Urtna), in collaboration with the pay channel M-Net, broadcast the award ceremony, which was held in Nairobi, Kenya, as a television programme live across Africa. In order to stimulate the production of local films, M-Net also invited other southern African countries, such as Botswana, Lesotho, Zimbabwe and Namibia, to enter their work for M-Net's annual film competition. The competition was open to the whole African continent. In 1992, Gaston Kabore of Burkina Faso visited South Africa as guest of the Weekly Mail, and three of his films were screened at the newspaper's annual film festival, the Weekly Mail Film Festival (Botha 1994).

Since 1994 there has been progressively closer contact and co-operation between the film and television industries of South Africa and other African countries. Martin Botha incorporated African cinemas as part of the film studies modules at the University of South Africa in 1996 and between 2000 and 2005, at the CityVarsity School of Media and Creative Arts. During 2007 Botha started a third-year course in African Cinemas in the Centre for Film and Media Studies at the University of Cape Town that introduced students to the work of directors such as Djibril Diop Mambety, Youssef Chahine, Gaston Kaboré, Ousmane Sembène and Gillo Pontecorvo. The course also examines contemporary issues on African

cinemas, including cinema in South Africa during and after apartheid. During 2008, an African Cinema Unit was established by Botha at the same university.

The Department of Arts and Culture (DAC) and the NFVF of South Africa, in association with the Pan African Federation of Film-Makers (FEPACI), hosted the first African Film Summit as well as the General Congress of the Pan Federation of African Film-Makers in Johannesburg from 3rd to 6th of April 2006. Over 150 delegates, including some of the most prolific film practitioners from the continent and the Diaspora, representatives of national and regional film associations, guilds and unions, continental and national government institutions and other key stakeholders, converged in Johannesburg to engage with each other and continue the dialogue towards the streamlining of policies, strategies and activities aimed at developing the African audiovisual industry. Discussions towards the hosting of the summit initiated at the 2003 edition of FESPACO between the DAC, NFVF and FEPACI were on the basis of the recommendations of the African Union Commission's appeal for the participation of the African Union, the RECs (Regional Economic Communities), African governments, the private sector and the civil society to take appropriate steps, in conjunction with FEPACI, Urtna, FESPACO and all stakeholders, to hold consultations and conduct preliminary studies with a view to establish an African Commission on the Audiovisual and Cinema Industries as well as a fund to promote the cinema industry and television programmes in Africa (Decisions of the Assembly of the AU, Second Ordinary Session, 10–12th of July 2003, Maputo, Mozambique). South Africa was requested by FEPACI to host the first African Film Summit.

Through the various initiatives of FEPACI, which include the film festivals in Ouagadougou and Tunisia as well as inter-African co-operation in respect of co-production and interdependent distribution networks, South Africans have been progressively exposed to film debates and films that are released elsewhere in Africa and to which we have been denied access for many years. This contact was an enriching influence on South African film culture, especially with regard to the use of oral storytelling by a new generation of post-apartheid film-makers.

Developments in South African documentaries from the 1970s till the 21st century

It was not until the late 1970s that several key events came together to create the conditions for an independent documentary film industry to develop. The introduction of television in 1976 necessitated a lifting of the ban on video technology, thereby making more affordable small-format video cameras available to South African film-makers and broadening the national skills base. While news programming on the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC1) was tightly controlled, producers of drama series and other programmes were afforded a surprising bit of leeway with regard to making social statements that challenged the state (e.g. the work by Manie Van Rensburg, which is discussed in Botha 2012).

In 1982, the introduction of SABC2 and SABC3, two new networks aimed at black audiences, further opened the door. In some cases the national broadcaster even unwittingly provided tools and training that would be used to produce anti-apartheid films (Pichaske 2009).

Around the same time, a few South African universities began teaching film and video studies, which facilitated the emergence of a new generation of critical viewers and liberal film-makers. Less restricted than their professional counterparts, South African university students began to explore documentary topics that were critical of the state and/or exposed some of the hardships endured by black South Africans at the time (Steenveld 1992).

Since the late 1970s and early 1980s a group of film and video producers and directors who were not affiliated to the established film companies in the mainstream film industry made films and videos about the socio-political realities of the majority of South Africans (Botha 1996).

Some of these films were shown at local film festivals such as the Durban and Cape Town International Film Festivals and, from 1987 to 1994, the Weekly Mail Film Festival. Other venues included universities, church halls, trade union offices and the private homes of interested parties. Most of the films experienced

ensorship problems during the state of emergency during the 1980s, and many were banned (Botha 1996; Botha & Van Aswegen 1992).

The films had small budgets and were financed by the producers themselves; by progressive organisations such as the International Defence and Aid Fund for South Africa (IDAF) which strived for a united, democratic, non-racial South Africa, the National Union of South African Students (as in the case of *Wits Protest* [1970–74]), the South African Council of Churches; private investors such as the Maggie Magaba Trust; as well as European and British television stations (Botha 1996; Botha & Van Aswegen 1992). These films were chiefly the product of two groups that emerged jointly: a group of white university students opposed to apartheid and black workers who yearned for a film or video form using indigenous imagery that would portray their reality in South Africa and would give them a voice and space in local films (Botha 1996). Together with numerous documentaries, community videos and full-length films such as *Mapantsula* (1988), as well as short films, these productions marked the beginning of a new, critical South African cinema.

The IDAF was founded in the early 1950s by the chairman of Christian Action, Canon John Collins of St Paul's Cathedral, Britain, when money was collected to support the families of those charged and imprisoned in South Africa for their opposition to apartheid and to provide legal defence for those accused in political trials (Botha 1996). The fund ran a comprehensive information service on affairs in South Africa over the past decades, which included visual documentation. It also produced films on all aspects of repression and resistance against apartheid in South Africa. The best-known films included those by director Barry Feinberg, for example, a film about the life and work of Archbishop Trevor Huddleston and his continuing commitment to the destruction of apartheid. The film

Makhalipile – The Dauntless One (1989) includes interviews with Oliver Tambo, Desmond Tutu and Helen Joseph. The suffering of children under apartheid was examined in Feinberg's *Any Child Is My Child* (1988). *Song of the Spear* (1986) portrayed the role of culture in the struggle for national liberation. By intercutting performances of the Amandla Cultural Ensemble while on tour in Britain, with mass singing of resistance songs on the streets of South Africa, this 16mm film dramatically depicted the emerging culture of liberation, which respects the

humanity of all people without regard to race while reflecting the diversity of the South African population (Botha 1996).

Isitwalandwe: The Story of the South African Freedom Charter was made by Feinberg in 1980 on video and 16mm and made it clear that as a people's blueprint for democracy the Freedom Charter remained relevant for political change in South Africa (Botha 1996).

The major audiences for IDAF productions, however, were the international antiapartheid movements. The work was intended to play a campaigning role for the liberation movement in South Africa and unfortunately offered an uncritical account of its policies. IDAF productions keep to *cinéma vérité* techniques by avoiding voice-over commentary and by using live sound and letting political spokespersons speak for themselves. These productions unambiguously presented an ANC viewpoint (Botha 1996).

IDAF was instrumental in establishing an alternative news distribution office in London, namely Afravision, by providing financial and logistical assistance. Barry Feinberg's concern for the preservation of South Africa's anti-apartheid films resulted in the largest single collection of material at IDAF. With the changing political dispensation IDAF has placed this film archive at the University of the Western Cape (Botha 1996).

Many South African documentaries were made with an international audience in mind in order to get support for the anti-apartheid movement and to educate an international audience on the horrors of apartheid (Botha 2006b). Notable earlier work included Anthony Thomas's *The South African Experience* (1977), Peter Davis's *White Laager* (1977) and Chris Austin's *Rhythms of Resistance* (1979).

In 1980 two major productions on the history of the South African liberation struggle against apartheid were released internationally: Peter Davis's *Generations of Resistance* (1979) and Barry Feinberg's *Isitwalandwe* for IDAF. The latter was the first in a long line of films and videos in the 1980s to keep the conscience of the world alive to the issues at stake in South Africa under apartheid. IDAF was instrumental in establishing an alternative news distribution office in London by providing financial and logistical assistance to anti-apartheid documentary filmmakers. Some of the most seminal political documentaries of the 1980s came from

Video News Services (VNS), which included film-makers such as Brian Tilley, Laurence Dworkin, Nyana Molete, Seipati Bulane Hopa and Tony Bensusan (Botha 2006b). Collective film work by Tilley, Dworkin, Molete, Bensusan and Elaine Proctor led to the 25-minute anti-apartheid film *Forward to a People's Republic* (1991), which was completed with assistance from IDAF. This film portrayed the dynamics of the conflict in the country in the early 1980s by juxtaposing the people's militancy with white militarisation. In April 1985, VNS was formed with the assistance of the liberation movement and overseas financial support. VNS became the trade union COSATU's unofficial film unit. The film-makers saw themselves first and foremost as political activists. For VNS to achieve this aim, and avoid being shut down under the state of emergency, Afravision was established in London to interface with international anti-apartheid movements, and locally VNS crews made themselves indistinguishable from the foreign news media operating in South Africa (Botha 1996). At first VNS made television documentaries for international television companies but later started to make the so-called video pamphlets to distribute news about a wide range of issues from township to township. These videos were a type of news network and were aimed at South Africans.

Most of the videos were 15- to 30-minute productions and ranged from vigilante killings to the white election process in 1988. The VNS Collective made various compelling short documentaries: *Tribute to David Webster* (1989), about the human rights activist, and *Fruits of Defiance* (1990), which portrayed resistance to apartheid in September 1989 in Cape Town.

Apart from VNS, other documentary film-makers have also made important work on political issues during the apartheid regime, including the following themes (Botha 2006b; Pichaske 2009; Steenveld 1992):

- The forced removal of people from urban and rural communities under the Group Areas Acts and the Homelands policy: *Crossroads* (1976), *Mayfair* (1984), *Last Supper at Horstley Street* (1983) and *Katriner: End of Hope* (1984)
- Labour problems and organisation: *Passing the Message* (1981) and *Freedom Square and Back of the Moon* (1987)

- Different forms of community struggle, such as the development of literacy and health projects in rural and urban communities: *Ithuseng: Out of Despair* (1987) and *Robben Island: Our University* (1988)
- The role of women in the anti-apartheid struggle: *You Have Struck a Rock* (1981) and *The Ribbon* (1986)
- General political situation: *No Middle Road to Freedom* (1984), *The Struggle from Within* (1984), *Witness to Apartheid* (1986) and *The Two Rivers* (1985)
- The role of the church in the anti-apartheid struggle: *The Cry of Reason* (1987)
- The destruction of indigenous cultures: *The People of the Great Sandface* (1985) and *Have You Seen Drum Recently?* (1988)

With the unbanning of political organisation such as the ANC and the release of political prisoners in 1990, the immediate direct goal of anti-apartheid films had begun to be achieved (Botha 2006b). Political film-makers, however, continued to focus on the process of transition itself, to which a large number of films on CODESA (the negotiation process leading up to the 1994 democratic elections) and on the TRC attest. One significant film from the time is Liz Fish's *The Long Journey of Clement Zulu* (1992), which follows three political activists after their release from imprisonment on Robben Island and subsequent attempts to rebuild their lives as free men. The film is plot driven and foregrounds its characters' individual perspectives. The film vividly provides a truly intimate portrayal of the characters over the course of nearly a year (Pichaske 2009). The extended length of the narrative and the intimacy of content enabled the audience to gain a true affinity for each character, empathy for Clement Zulu's views, and a desire to know what will happen in his life. The means by which Fish – an outsider with regard to race, class and personal experience – was able to create such an intimate and personal portrait are worthy of further examination. Of utmost importance, her racial outsider status was tempered by her status as a political insider. A long-time struggle activist and director of the Community Video Education Trust (CVET), she had close ties to black communities and had done considerable work with other Robben Island prisoners. She knew the cultures of her characters, and she knew their issues. In addition, Fish developed a personal relationship with her subjects that far exceeded

the standards of apartheid-era film-making (Pichaske 2009), an aspect that is also important in the discussion of the work by Craig and Damon Foster in this article.

This personal relationship served not only to deepen understanding between film-maker and subject but also paved the way towards a more collaborative approach to filmmaking. *The Long Journey of Clement Zulu* lets its subjects speak for themselves. Each of the three characters interrogates 'the struggle' on his own terms and through his own experience of being released back into a democratic South Africa only to wonder what has been gained. The message is subtle; the answers open ended and the views subjective and varied (Pichaske 2009).

Unprecedented freedom of access also allowed new forms of purely observational filmmaking: Harriet Gavshon and Cliff Bestall's series *Ordinary People* (1993), a ground-breaking product in terms of South African television at the time, followed ordinary South Africans as they dealt with newfound freedom and in the process documents the transitions in South African society. The *Ordinary People* series was shot in a *vérité style* and was entirely character and plot driven – creative choices that were entirely new for the SABC. By examining events from a variety of perspectives, the series actively challenged the very notion of fixed truths, encouraging the viewer to understand and respect multiple perspectives on the same issue (Pichaske 2009). This was a perfect message for a newly democratic South Africa and a positive sign of the new SABC fulfilling its social service mandate. For the field of documentary, it represented a critical first step away from the old conventions of presenting fixed, unified (pro- or anti-apartheid) arguments and binary (black/white, good/evil) representations, in favour of open-ended narratives, multiple viewpoints and hybrid identities.

Film-makers were also now finally allowed to probe and reveal what actually happened under apartheid, with the result that many films were now concerned with the past. Various films about the TRC process were made, including Lindy Wilson's *The Gugulethu Seven* (2000), which depicts the uncovering by TRC investigators of security police duplicity in the murder of seven Cape Town activists. Many of the older generation of political film-makers have felt the weight of responsibility for making sense of a hitherto-concealed and painful past. Documentary film-making during the 1980s was based on audio-visual material that reflected the realities of

the black majority of South Africa in their aspirations and struggle for a democratic society, but since the beginning of the 1990s other marginalised voices were added to these documentaries and short films, for example, those of women, gays and lesbians, and even the homeless. The work by Craig and Damon Foster about the San in their visual poem *The Great Dance* (2000) forms an important aspect of the post-apartheid cinema's concerns with characters or subjects at the margin of society.

Most of the South African documentaries between the 1980s and early 21st century can be described as progressive film texts in the sense that the majority of them are consciously critical of racism, sexism or oppression (Botha 1996; 2006b). They dealt with the lives and struggle of the people in a developing country and were mostly allied with the liberation movements for a non-racial, non-sexist South Africa. Some of these documentaries also dealt with events, which were conveniently left out in official South African history books or in a contemporary context in actuality programmes on national television under control of the Nationalist regime (Botha 1996; 2006b).

Therefore, they became guardians of popular memory within the socio-political process in South Africa. Examples are *Between Joyce and Remembrance* (2003), *The Gugulethu Seven* (2000), *The Life and Times of Sara Baartman* (1998), *Ulibambe Lingashoni: Hold Up the Sun* (1993), *What Happened to Mbuyisa?* (1998) and *The Cradock Four* (2010).

The documentaries of Craig and Damon Foster

The focus of this article is the work of the Foster Brothers and in particular their bold experimentation with form. Brothers Craig and Damon Foster grew up in a wooden bungalow on the Atlantic Ocean, near the tip of Africa. They have travelled extensively, living and working in remote villages and wilderness areas in 10 African countries. They have more than 20 years of filming experience in Africa. Their primary intent lies in telling stories with the voice of Africa herself and in creating film experiences that enable the viewer to gain an intense and deep insight into the

natural and cultural dynamics of this ancient continent (Foster et al. 2005). They are among very few South African film-makers, which use the African tradition of oral storytelling in their documentaries.

They explore the timeless and universal themes of the relationship between man and animal, and the relationship between them and the environments that they share. The result is a portrayal of a reality that is rarely represented. Together they have over 40 international awards for film-making in the areas of photography, editing, writing, directing and human/animal interaction.

Manthia Diawara (1996) underlines the fundamental difference between oral literature and cinema. The language of the film (for example camera movement, shots and shot/reverse shots) is not the same as those used by the *griot*, the storyteller in African context.² The *griot* depends on spoken language as well as music to actualise the story. The film director uses the means of mechanical reproduction to give shape to the story. Diawara argues that whereas oral literature speaks of life, films reproduce an impression of life. Theories about oral storytelling in African cinema have been discussed in detail elsewhere (Bakari & Cham 1996; Botha 2012; Botha & Van Aswegen 1992; Chirol 1999; Gabriel 1989; Tomaselli & Prinsloo 1992).

The Great Dance: A Hunter's Story (2000) is characterised by stunning visuals, which act as some form of equivalent to the aesthetics of oral storytelling. The film is the winner of more than 35 international awards. The production took three years and is based on substantial research. It is a visual poem on the San hunters, who sustain a small band of nomads in the Kalahari Desert. Strictly speaking not a conventional documentary the film-makers have intercut documentary footage with highly original and semi-abstract material so the hard core of fact is surrounded with lyrical evocations of San legends, creating an intriguing visual texture. Black and white footage has been combined with richly coloured images, giving the film a poetic dimension rarely seen in documentaries (Van Vuuren 2007). In their book *Africa: Speaking with Earth and Sky* (2005) the Foster Brothers rejoice about the

² For an excellent discussion on griots see Hopkins, Nicholas S. "Memories of Griots." *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 17 (1997): 43-72.

vast expanses of earth and sky in remote rural African regions. They applaud the incredible generosity and spirit of its people, as well as their knowledge and wisdom, but feel that yet very little of this is written down. Instead it travels like water on the tongues of the elders. In particular, the indigenous healers appeal to them due to their ability to mediate between the world of nature and spirit in a manner that allows for the co-evolution of all life forms.



The Great Dance. Courtesy of Craig and Damon Foster.

As an example of oral storytelling the screenwriter Jeremy Evans constructed the narrative out of the words of one of the main characters in the film !Nqate Xqamxebe. The narrative structure is based on the original field recordings of !Nqate. The story is about three hunters and their personalities, their love for and belief in their traditional hunting practises, their passion for the land they live on, their extraordinarily sophisticated knowledge of the environment and ecology of the Kalahari, their cultural mythologies and ritual practices, their trouble with government and the prohibitions on their hunting, their sadness at the disappearance of their cultural practises in the face of sweeping change brought on by modernity, and their religious beliefs. All of these elements of the three hunters' stories are related back to the central thread of narrative that brings the film together – that of the hunt, particularly the hunt-by-running (Van Vuuren 2007). /XAA is the word for dance in the !Xo language of the Kalahari. It also means revere or to show oneness. This holistic approach to the close connection of the San with their natural world, and the celebration of it, is the core of the film. In a poetic way one of the protagonists describes tracking as dancing – like dancing with God. In the opening sequence the directors already establish the connection of the characters with nature, with animals and insects, and the earth and sky. It is a brilliant montage inspired by the early artists, the rock painters. Landscapes are captured in wide shots and their vastness by means of pans. The time-lapse shots highlight the beauty of the landscapes. The tracking ability of the hunters is also accentuated.

Closely shadowing each sequence of hunting and tracking in the film is the telling of stories by means of the oral tradition. The three hunters read the signs left around the carcass of a pregnant steenbok, which has been killed by a leopard. They retell the story for the camera, often acting out the actions of the animals. Their stories are illustrated by a variety of stylised sequences created by the film-makers, usually in black and white that identify the images as 'flashbacks'. Here the Foster brothers' technical innovations with digital cameras produce unique camera angles, shooting from the bodies of animals, so that the viewer has a strong idea of the movement of the animals. Dramatic sequences are created that reconstruct the

movement of animals as they hunt, the eating of their prey or the fevered chaos of vultures gobbling the remains of a carcass (Van Vuuren 2007).

The hunters also narrate to the camera, sitting around a fire. During these sequences they discuss their god, and their religious beliefs as well as their holistic, tradition-bound approach to hunting. Their words are not fed through the narration of !Nqate but are translated on screen in subtitles. These fireside oral narrations are important because they provide an opportunity for the other two hunters, Karoha and Xlhoase, to speak. They also allow for an intimate, 'real-time' connectedness with the hunters (Van Vuuren 2007). Their perspective on the world in a totally holistic way is being celebrated, although the film-makers admit that the knowledge of the San is too nuanced to be presented on film. *The Great Dance* is just some attempt, almost a mere introduction (Foster et al. 2005). The San *griots* have been represented as master storytellers in the oral tradition.

By sharing rough cuts of the film to the main characters the Foster Brothers created a participatory filmmaking process and as a result the three hunters disclosed more in-depth accounts about the lives and worldview with the directors (Foster et al. 2005). The directors also consulted with the main characters what should be in the film and what not.

At the end of the film, !Nqate asks what will become of their traditions, now that everything is changing. Close-ups of his children's faces illustrate the point. They are filmed ghost like in the flickering light of the fire. The film closes with a mosaic of stylised images: slow-motion dancing, lightening in the sky, a man framed against a vast horizon, clouds and fire, and finally a single ember from the fire that is picked up and flung out into the night. The glowing coal lands on the ground and is filmed in close-up as its heat slowly fades away (Van Vuuren 2007). *The Great Dance* seems to be an attempt to show value in a culture at a time when that value is being rapidly eroded by poverty and dispossession. It is not intended to represent the entire San community, only three characters and their families.

Ten years after the moving closing sequence in *The Great Dance* the Foster Brothers premiered their documentary *My Hunter's Heart* (2010). The film, shot over 3.5 years, explores the world's most ancient shamanic culture and how it is now on the brink of extinction. It tracks the Khomani San of the Central Kalahari, the oldest

living indigenous tribe in the world and who are genetically linked to every human being on planet earth. In modern times, their traditional nomadic way of life has changed, and westernisation has severed their link to the land and the animals. The film follows younger members of the clan as they embark on an epic journey to try to recapture some of the knowledge and skills of their ancestors. The children feel there is no future and the elders are faced with haunting reminders of their past. Again the stories of the three main characters Sanna Witbooi, Abijol Kuiper and Anna Swarts form the core of the narrative. Although the plot includes a hunt to celebrate the past of the subjects, the film is almost a requiem for this community. They have been forced off their ancestral land due to the construction of national wildlife reserves. In fact they live on the margin of these parks in houses, which they described as cages, while the animals are running free in the parks. The film is a sad portrait of marginal characters, somewhere stuck between memories of a rich past and modernisation.

Again the Foster Brothers create visual equivalents to the stories by the main protagonists, but the film turns into a painful reflection on dispossession and poverty. Alcoholism as an escape from daily hardship is a reality. The journey of the three characters involves a visit to a museum, which has an exhibition of the genocide of San. It also turns the protagonists into almost tourists of heritage sites such as rock paintings, a past reminder of a rich culture, now reduced to artefacts on stones. Again the time-lapse cinematography creates a wonderful sense of landscape, earth and sky, a reminder of the reference at the beginning of *The Great Dance* to notions of revere or to show oneness – the awesome interconnectedness of man and nature. The music is composed by multi-award winner Trevor Jones.

Oral aesthetics are also at the core of the narrative structure of *Cosmic Africa* (2003), based on the personal odyssey of African astronomer Thebe Medupe. Based on his words the film chronicles his journey into the African continent's astronomical past and in the process unveiling the deep connection Africans have with the cosmos. Thebe is an astrophysicist and during his journey he gathers the earlier cosmologies of our ancestors (Foster et al. 2005). The film is not only about Medupe's journey of exploration from boyhood to adulthood, but also about the journey to remote rural areas in Africa. Shot on High Definition this visual

masterpiece explores and sheds light on traditional African astronomy and the stories by several *griots*. Using these oral storytelling aesthetics the film vividly captures the remarkable personal journey of Medupe through the ancestral land of Namibia's hunter-gatherers, the Dogon country of Mali and the landscapes of the Egyptian Sahara Desert (Botha 2006b). Grant McLachlan's powerful musical score enhances the poetry of the film.



Cosmic Africa. Courtesy of Craig and Damon Foster.



Cosmic Africa. Courtesy of Craig and Damon Foster



Cosmic Africa. Courtesy of Craig and Damon Foster.

The Foster Brothers' other explorations include further celebrations of landscapes, nature in all its glory and African knowledge systems. *Iceman: The Lewis Gordon Pugh Story* (2008) serves as a visual experience of Lewis Gordon Pugh's attempts to draw attention to the oceans and raise awareness about climate change. The film documents the extraordinary physiological and psychological journey of Lewis's long-distance swims in the freezing waters of both the South and the North Pole. Lewis Pugh has 10 seconds before he plunges into the freezing Arctic Ocean, where he swims a kilometre across Antarctica, wearing nothing but a Speedo and a swim cap, a feat never thought possible. 'Ordinary' humans would probably die within minutes in this icy water. The film raises questions such as how can his naked body cope with these conditions for so long and why on earth would anyone want to do such a thing. With the support of cutting-edge science and an incredible ability to believe in himself he hopes to unify the potential of mind and body. Pugh has gone where no one has gone before and achieved a new understanding of the human body.

The Nature of Life (2009) is an epic documentary feature film that tries to provide solutions to humanity's greatest challenge yet – Global Climate Change. So far all we have heard is that climate change is the biggest ever environmental crisis and that it has been caused by our unsustainable approach to living. *The Nature of Life*, however, sets out as a great inspired clarion call to humanity, telling us that there is hope and that there are ways to adapt to and overcome this crisis. The documentary encapsulates a vision of hope that stems from the heart of Africa and expands globally, highlighting ground-breaking examples of sustainable development all over the world, inspired by the examples of Africa and the natural world. The microcosm of the 'cradle of civilization', Africa, will spill into the entire world, introducing the audience to a group of extraordinary humans and companies who are challenging past models of sustainability and creating a new legacy of elegant design, technology and rediscovered indigenous wisdom.

Conclusion

The outstanding aspect of the Foster Brothers' documentaries is their celebrations of the oral tradition in African storytelling. The directors are, however, mindful of the marginal status of the San people and the factors, which threaten their heritage, lifestyle and future. In many ways the documentaries combine the social concerns of the progressive political documentaries of the 1980s with the oral aesthetics of film cultures elsewhere on this continent.

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