Intimacy, identity and home: 40 years of south african television

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INTIMACY, IDENTITY AND HOME: 40 YEARS OF SOUTH AFRICAN TELEVISION

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The year 2016 marks the fortieth anniversary of South Africa’s first nationwide television broadcast in 1976. Due to the apartheid government’s long resistance to television, the first broadcast of the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) occurred about 20 years after most developed countries started broadcasting (Evans 2014, 27). While South Africa’s television history is a relatively short one, it has been tumultuous, marked by complexity and political change. After years of an oppressive apartheid regime, South Africa began to move toward democracy in the 1980s and held the first democratic elections in 1994. The close of this anniversary year offers an opportunity to reflect on the role of television in narrating and imagining identity in the emerging nation.

Underpinning the story of South African television is a dialectic of separateness (associated with apartheid broadcasting policy and the country’s isolation from global media) and connectedness (linked to the transformation of post-apartheid broadcasting and the concept of the ‘rainbow nation’). These same binaries have dominated discourses on South Africa as a nation. Nuttall and Michael (2000, 1) identify separateness as one of the defining ways in which South African national
culture has been understood. The long absence of television in South Africa is one of the ways in which separateness defined its television culture. Evans (2014, 28–37) has explored how South Africa was historically excluded from global events, due initially to the absence of television and later as a result of its pariah status in the global community. The first television broadcast in 1976 was a step toward connecting South Africans to the rest of the world but separateness still defined South African life and its broadcasting culture for many years. This is evidenced both in the country’s exclusion from major sporting events (Evans 2014, 37) and the separateness of South Africa’s racialised broadcasting policies (Barnett 1999, 279). While 1994 marked a tremendous shift toward inclusion (both in terms of South Africa’s relationship with the world and a national sense of togetherness) in the post-apartheid context, television viewing remains subject to the factures and complexities of apartheid’s legacy.

While noting the separateness that has defined South Africa’s national identity, Nuttall and Michael (2000, 1–2) also argue for the importance both of understanding the modes of creolisation and togetherness that have existed for a long time in South Africa and, importantly, for imagining ways of thinking togetherness in the post-apartheid nation; they call for ‘new forms of imagining’ South Africa’s future. I argue that television, as a medium of intimacy, mass communication and national culture, is one of the key sites for this form of imagining. Nuttall and Michael (2000, 5) write: ‘Alongside the closure of South African imaginations there exist intimacies and connectivities, other ways of seeing’. The special, themed issue of *Communicatio* draws together research which explores post-apartheid television’s role in narrating these new ways of seeing and imaging while at the same time exploring the distances, losses and gaps in a vision of South African togetherness.

The issue emerged from the work presented at a conference on television and intimacy held at the University of Cape Town in 2015. This conference took television’s association with intimacy as its theme, and used the complexity of the South African context as an opportunity to question the association between television and warm, cosy effects such as comfort and intimacy. While television is quite literally a medium of connection, it is also on television where people may need to negotiate with distance, dissonance and dislocation. In a nation still experiencing the fracturing legacy of the apartheid regime, representations of local intimacies are shot through with trauma and loss along with negotiations of identity and power. Love, the central facilitator of intimacy, is always also charged with both the hope associated with a new nation and the sense of those things that are lost.

Due to its home viewing context, theorists have long aligned television with ideas of ‘intimacy and togetherness’ (Ang 1996; Jacobs 2000; Morley 2003, 2005; Spigel 1988; Spigel and Mann 1992). However, the association between television and a warm inclusive domesticity has seldom been tested outside of Western viewing
contexts. Such ideas often rely on an imagining of a nation bound together in shared intimacy by a unified public broadcaster but such work seldom focusses on the exclusions involved in creating national togetherness on television. Creeber (2004, 28) addresses this blind spot in television theory in the United Kingdom (UK) and notes that, in the satellite age, nostalgia for a bygone era of broadcasting is based on a vision of ‘a time when the whole nation was seemingly bound together by a limited number of choices – bathed in the warm glow of what Williams (1971) once referred to as a “common culture”’. While apartheid media may have worked toward creating a sense of unity for its white, Afrikaans-speaking television viewers, South Africa at large, has arguably never basked in such a seemingly uncomplicated sense of a ‘common culture’. Indeed, while initially defined by the exclusion of black viewers, with the introduction of second and third channels for South Africa’s black population, South African broadcasting was defined by separated audiences. Up to the present date, television viewing in South Africa has arguably always been characterised by a fractured and unstable understanding of the way in which television broadcasts relate to ideas of home, identity and community. Furthermore, the concept of home as the stable locus of identity cannot be guaranteed in a country with a history of forced removal and migrant labour as well as a present marked by both continued poverty and quite dramatic social mobility for small segments of the population. Commercial and technological changes in recent years have further fractured the South African viewing audience as the national broadcasting culture represented by free-to-air broadcast television competes for audiences with commercial platforms, such as DSTV, Showmax, Netflix and other online practices of viewing.

As a critical object, television has been studied through a dizzying range of disciplinary approaches, for example: media and communications, cultural studies, sociology, media effects research, social geography, consumption studies, gender, anthropology, psychology, and so on. In the UK, Australia, New Zealand and, to a certain extent, the United States, ‘television studies’ has developed into a relatively rich disciplinary formation. This has been a fraught process as critical suspicions of this relatively new and popular form have long obstructed ‘serious’ engagement with the medium. The UK has perhaps the oldest history of television studies, starting with the work undertaken in Screen, an academic journal of film and television studies, in the 1970s. Several universities in the UK have established television studies programmes and departments. The current issue is a gesture toward building a more sustained and collective focus on South African television as a critical object.

While the existing work on television in South Africa is still relatively small and has emerged from disparate fields, an exciting body of critical thought has been growing over the past 20 years, in particular in relation to South African soap operas, drama, edu-soaps and sitcoms. It would be impossible to provide a suitably thorough overview of this work within the scope of this introduction, and given the diffuse and interdisciplinary work on South African television, it is difficult to track the shape of this emerging discipline. Instead, I will highlight three key themes that have emerged
in post-apartheid television theory which are central to the work presented in the issue and I will indicate how these concerns can be understood through the theme of ‘intimacy, identity and home’. Firstly, the issue of ‘togetherness’ is a central concern of work on South African television. This is most obviously embodied in the ‘rainbow nation’ discourse that has characterised post-apartheid television. Secondly, writing on South African television, including the work within the issue, has considered an increasing shift toward the celebration of consumption and neoliberalism on South African television. Finally, works on television have circulated around themes of ‘old’ and ‘new’, that is, they deal with the contestation between the legacy of the apartheid past and the imagining of new futures. I will briefly trace these themes and introduce the articles in the issue in relation to their engagement with each of ideas.

Theorists, such as Ruth Teer-Tomaselli and Keyan Tomaselli (1996, 2001), Jaqueline Maingard (1997), Clive Barnett (1999), Dorothy Roome (1997), Ian Barnard (2006), and viola milton (2008), amongst many others, have explored the SABC’s process of transformation toward multiculturalism and a ‘rainbow nation’ ethos. Post-apartheid media discourses have foregrounded concepts of togetherness and imagining ways and means of being together in South Africa. As I have suggested in the introductory discussion, television’s role as a medium of intimacy and family means that television potentially plays an important role in exploring, testing and narrativising ‘togetherness’ in South Africa. Television bridges public space and domestic environments, offering models on which to imagine living together. The big issues of South Africa’s political transformation may, on television, be played out in the small details of people’s home lives and in the delicate intimacies of human relationships. Television also offers the opportunity of domesticating political discourse so that concepts, such as the ‘rainbow nation’, ‘truth and reconciliation’, non-racialism, and so on, are effectively brought home and ritualised as part of people’s daily lives.

Most commentators have welcomed the changes to a public broadcaster that once operated as the mouthpiece of the apartheid state. Barnard (2006, 40), for example, explores the shift to multilingual programming and multiculturalism in South African television drama, arguing that emerging multilingual South African sitcoms and soaps have the capacity to ‘critique and contest its apartheid past and imply an innovative model of multi-culturalism for the future’. The enthusiasm shown by theorists for the changes to television content is matched by a lament for the lasting effects of apartheid on the accessibility, ownership and modes of engagement attending television. Barnett (1999, 274) observes that the progress of reform also indicates the extent to which inherited economic, institutional and cultural conditions continue to impose limitations on the practical implementation of a progressive conceptualisation of the mass media as a vehicle for nation-building and democratic communication.
And indeed the ownership base of South African media and the distribution of wealth in South Africa has meant that the transformation of broadcasting has been compromised by market tendencies and an embracing of consumer values. Due to the enduring attractiveness of wealthy, white audiences, a certain amount of South African television content continues to frame national togetherness in a way that caters to and centralises whiteness. The discourse of ‘togetherness’ in the rainbow nation context relies upon a particular way of engaging with race. As more recent political and critical shifts in South African thought, not least of all the recent student movement, have pointed out, the optimistic rainbow nation image embraced in the post-apartheid years relies upon a blindness to the enduring structural and economic inequalities of apartheid’s legacy. Many television shows in the post-apartheid era present idealised representations of co-existence with whiteness at the centre.

Francis Jonker’s article, ‘Negotiating difference, imagining intimacy: The role of “intermediate” racial masculinity in Egoli: Place of Gold’, addresses exactly this centering of whiteness. Jonker explores the way in which a soap opera aired during South Africa’s early transition years found ways to help the primarily white audiences at whom the show was marketed, to engage with and negotiate with the shifts in power and inclusivity taking place in the country. Jonker discusses how coloured identity is mobilised in this show to introduce elements of change while still assuaging white anxiety. In particular, he considers the coloured character, Andrew Willemse, as an ‘intermediary’ facilitating a voice of change and idealism that was palatable for a white audience during South Africa’s transition to democracy.

Hannelie Marx Knoetze’s article, ‘Ignorance-making in 7de Laan: A Critical Whiteness Studies perspective’, also addresses the way in which whiteness is still the normative frame through which multi-racial and inclusive Afrikaans culture is imagined. Her study of the popular Afrikaans soap opera 7de Laan explores the show from the perspective of CWS. Knoetze examines the role of wilful ignorance that seems to drive the utopian sensibilities of this Afrikaans soap opera. For her, the pleasant sense of harmonious community generated on the show is made possible by the characters’ shared ignorance of South Africa’s past. In the example of 7de Laan, for a sense of belonging and common culture to be expressed, the difficult aspects of the past must be elided. Knoetze argues that, while the show makes gestures toward representing an inclusive and multicultural South Africa, it still primarily serves the anxieties of whiteness.

While these fictional television series have been invested in testing and imagining utopian ideas of multi-cultural intimacies, talk shows and reality formats have arguably presented a greater focus on questions of loss and forgiveness. In this sense they echo the discourses of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings in espousing mediated reconciliation (see Ndlovu (2013) and Smit (2016) on mediated forgiveness programmes).
Nyasha Mboti’s article, ‘The empty space of fragmented intimacies on Khumbul’ekhaya’, examines the way in which South Africans use television in conjunction with online communities in order to ‘fill in’ and repair the damage to families and intimate relationships that is apartheid’s legacy in the country. Mboti uses the concept of ‘empty space’ as theorised by Ngugi wa Thiong’o to discuss the way in which South African audiences utilise the show’s Facebook page to create a communal meeting place marked by shared intimacy. Here, reconciliation and togetherness are the goal of the show’s discourse but to reach this point the participants must deal with disconnection, fracturing and hurt.

The legacy of past inequality is at the heart of Mvuzo Ponono’s article, ‘It’s 50/50 … the township home as a context of viewing’, which is a reception study of the drama series, Intersexions. Due to the legacy of apartheid, which destabilised family structures and limited educational options for black families, Ponono argues for the importance of considering the complexity of home environments in which these texts are viewed. The show serves a public service role, addressing issues around sex and HIV/AIDS through a drama format. Ponono considers the township home as a viewing context for Intersexions, a drama series which explores intimate and somewhat risqué subject matter in the family space of the home. He explores the important influence of Xhosa cultural practices and family dynamics when it comes to watching programming about sex in the township home. Where family structures have been compromised, Ponono sees television as an important site for learning and understanding around sex. He recognises that most reception studies in South Africa are undertaken in relation to the individual responses of discrete viewers. These studies do not give enough space the important role of contextual factors, such as the home and the family, in conditioning responses to television texts.

Like Jonker and Knoetze, Adam de Beer’s article, ‘Animating a South African identity? The case of URBO: The Adventures of Pax Afrika (SABC 2006–2009)’, highlights the way in which white, middle-class normalcy enduringly provides the reference point for imagining the future of togetherness in South Africa. De Beer’s study proceeds from the idea that the medium of animation has a distinct capacity to imagine and transform reality. URBO: The Adventures of Pax Afrika takes advantage of this capacity and presents a futuristic vision of South Africa in which the racial inequalities of the past have been transcended and new forms of togetherness are imagined. However, De Beer notes how white, middle-class normalcy comes to define the vision of racial togetherness in the future, while African-ness is associated with the mystical and a distant traditional past. De Beer’s article, for example, points out how the racial problems of the past are replaced by the newer problem of rampant consumerism. While the programme represents dreams of the future, it also speaks to new fears. The programme’s solution to consumerism and waste relies once again on a temporal relationship, and the key character must call upon ancient African wisdom to fight the forces of consumerism.
Consumption, neoliberalism and conspicuous displays of wealth emerge as key areas of focus in post-apartheid television. Watching television is itself an act of consumption as well as a platform for advertising consumer behaviour. As the above discussions about the centrality of whiteness suggest, commercial interests play a crucial role in how South African togetherness can be imagined. Theorists, such as Clive Barnett (1999), Sarah Ives (2007), Loren Kruger (2010) and Innocentia J. Mhlambi (2007), have all written about the contradictions between public service values and the neoliberal impulses on SABC programming. Because the SABC has had to rely on both state and commercial sources for its funding, the messages offered on the public broadcaster, and even more so on commercial stations, have demonstrated an embrace of market capitalist values and have foregrounded utopian fantasies of wealth, aspiration and black business success. Kruger (2010, 78) has explored the extent to which certain SABC dramas, while advancing an ostensibly neoliberal message, offer a Brechtian ‘critique by stealth’ of post-apartheid television’s embrace of consumption and the otherwise unspoken exclusions that structure aspirational narratives on South African television. Something that has perhaps not been addressed, but accounts for decrying the consumer-driven narratives of post-apartheid television, is the extent to which consumption and discourses of togetherness are imbricated in national fictions. That is to say, aspiration and consumer spending are figured as ways of either being together or ways of keeping people apart.

Consumption is a key term in my own (Alexia Smit) contribution to the issue, ‘Reading South African bridal television: Consumption, fantasy and judgement’, on the DSTV programme Our Perfect Wedding. Unlike the other articles in the issue, the article examines a show offered on DSTV, South Africa’s pay satellite television network. The article considers how Our Perfect Wedding foregrounds consumption and luxury purchasing as a way of staking a claim or being part of a vision of the ‘freedom’ of new South Africa. In the article, Smit examines ways in which consumer freedom is aligned both with the freedom of the new South African and the freedom associated with postfeminist discourses of choice and self-stylisation. At the same time, spending is articulated not just as an empty materialistic practice, but rather wedding spending is undertaken in the service of meaningful long-term relationships and operates as a way of confirming a hard won social mobility. Thus, the article shares with other articles in the issue, a concern with the staging of intimacy, literally exploring the relationship between people’s financial means and their capacity to celebrate and confirm love. The article also explores the fragility of the newly aspirational middle-class identities staged on the show. By inviting viewers to cast judgement on failures in wedding perfection, missed payments and mishaps, Our Perfect Wedding indicates just how much the consumer freedoms of the future are constantly at risk of slipping back into the insecurities conditioned by past inequality.
A conversation between past and present runs through the figuring of togetherness and inclusion in all of the articles in the issue. The intimacy of television stands in a particular relationship to temporality. South African television has lived alongside South Africans and narrated South Africa’s transitions and social changes on a daily basis, in time with the lives of everyday South Africans and, indeed, television has lived in their homes over the past 40 years. Local television’s aspirational and utopian discourses signal toward imaginings of the future. Andersson (2003, 152) describes how South African television might be seen as presenting ‘future memory’, and she explores the enfolding of past, present and future in television time on South African screens. South African television programmes represent not only the now but reflections on where South Africans have been along with fantasies of where they are going. Representations of present and future intimacies are shot through with the difficulties and disconnections of a national past defined by forced separation and inequality. Each of the articles in the issue manages the dialectic between past and future differently. In each case, the hopes for future togetherness are matched by the complexities of apartheid’s enduring legacy.

The special, themed issue, and the conference from which it emerged, represents an attempt to draw television theorists together and work toward a sustained theoretical focus on television. While valuable research on South African television is being produced in different fields, this is a call to bring this work together in a community of theorists committed to taking television seriously as a critical object, art form and cultural practice. In particular my aim is to advocate for the close analysis of discrete programme texts, the reasons for consideration are at once pedagogical, practical and scholarly:

By championing the serious critical consideration of South African television, theorists have an opportunity to enrich the way they teach future practitioners in universities about the industry in which many of them aspire to work and the network of meanings into which their work is going to enter. Furthermore, it is hoped that by creating a critical discourse around television, theorists can aid and inform industrial practice and policy for television. Finally, South Africa popular television is an important site for creativity, storytelling and meaning-making. It is also widely attended, discussed and taken up by South Africans. Accordingly, television deserves critical attention as much as (if not more than) ‘elite’ forms like art, literature and film. The exploration of the diversity of programming available to South African viewers in a burgeoning multi-platform age has barely begun. The articles presented here represent a modest attempt at gathering these fragments together. It is hoped that they demonstrate the richness and complexity of a popular form that is so often dismissed and that the current issue will play a small part in building television studies in South Africa. There is much more work to be done.
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