5 Documentary film as political communication in post-apartheid South Africa

Miners Shot Down

Pier Paolo Frassinelli

Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the role of documentary film as political communication in post-1994 South Africa. In particular, I want to look at how this genre has been used to reframe narratives of current political events and social issues. The internationally best-known example is Rehad Desai's *Miners Shot Down* (2014), which won several international and national awards – including the International Emmy Award (2015), the *Festival panafricain du cinéma et de la télévision de Ouagadougou* (FESPACO) (2015) and the South African Film and Television Award (2015) for best documentary film – and decisively contributed to change South African public discourse on the Marikana massacre, where 34 striking mineworkers were shot dead by police on 16 August 2012. *Miners Shot Down* has been described in the South African press as the ‘film every South African should see, and never forget’ (Thamm 2014). It became part of a forensic case that indicted ‘the police, the government and the Lonmin mining company [the employer of the striking miners] for their respective roles in the most deadly display of violence witnessed in post-apartheid South Africa’ (Thamm quoted in do-cimpactaward 2016, 12).

But there are other documentaries that have subverted dominant and state-sanctioned narratives of post-1994 events and realities. For some time, South Africa has had one of the highest numbers of community and other forms of protest of any nation (see, among others, Alexander 2010; Duncan 2016). Most of these protests have been waged by poor communities affected by the transition from apartheid to a version of neoliberalism only partially attenuated by state support for the poor in form of social grants, which has made South Africa one of the most unequal countries in the world. Documentary film has been one of the representational forms that have been used to speak to the contradictions and struggles engendered by this “elite transition” (Bond 2014).

Examples of documentary films where the filmmaker presents a conflict or dissonance between, on the one hand, official and mainstream discourses, and, on the other hand, voices, events and actions that challenge

or subvert them include Dara Kell and Christopher Nizza's *Dear Mandela* (2012), on the struggles of shack dwellers in Durban; Rehad Desai's *The Giant Is Falling* (2016) and *Everything Must Fall* (2018), which together with *Miners Shot Down* constitute a trilogy that tackles enduring inequality in South Africa; Lebogang Rasethaba's *The People Versus the Rainbow Nation* (2016), which reframes post-apartheid South African history in the wake of the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements as the failure of the ideal of the rainbow nation; Aliko Saragas's *Strike a Rock* (2017), on the lives of the women and community of Marikana after the massacre; and Kurt Orderson's *Not in My Neighbourhood* (2018), where Cape Town is singled out, together with Sao Paulo and New York, as an example of a city where gentrification is producing new forms of spatial apartheid. Each of these documentaries provides an oppositional and alternative counter-framing of contemporary social and political realities, thereby producing a decolonial counterpoint to official discourse by exposing the pitfalls of post-1994 national consciousness. They are all significant examples of how documentary film can be used to destabilise and challenge the narratives that legitimise the power of postcolonial elites and their transnational economic and political networks.¹ This use of documentary film thus challenges a narrowing of mediated political communication that often privileges the views of "political and social elites", while "the experiences and concerns of the majority of the country's citizens" are 'ignored, marginalised or used as a tool to score political points' (Wasserman 2015, 278).

Miners Shot Down responded to this narrow model political communication, which, as we will see, was reproduced in the mainstream media coverage of the Marikana massacre, through a counter-narrative that exposes the role of the state and capital in the massacre, and through its involvement in a campaign in support of the miners, their communities and their quest for justice and the truth. As I am going to discuss, Desai's film is not only a hard-hitting documentary. It has also been part of a collective effort involving the Marikana miners and their families and communities, as well as grassroots organisations and social justice activists to contest and replace the narrative of the massacre that was hastily cobbled together by the South African government and its political supporters and mainstreamed by South African media in the weeks immediately following the massacre to blame its victims on it.

The Marikana massacre

Miners Shot Down documents an event that represents a turning point in South African history. The name of the small town where the massacre of 34 striking miners by the South African police took place on 16 August 2012 has become a periodisation marker that places South Africa in what we may call the post-Marikana period, the aftermath of the lowest point in post-1994 history.

On 10 August 2012, miners in the platinum industry downed tools to demand a living wage of 12,500 rands (about 800 euros/950 US dollars at the time) per month. The epicentre of the strike was the informal settlement of Wonderkop, near Marikana in the North West Province, where the miners congregated on a *koppie* (small hill). The massacre was the culmination of a concerted effort by the transnational mining corporation Lonmin and the South African government to break this “unprotected” strike – in that formal pre-strike procedures had not been implemented – during which the miners had taken on both their employer and the National Union of Mine-workers (NUM) (see Alexander et al. 2012).

Official discourse about the massacre was first shaped by government statements, which were initially aimed at erasing state culpability and presenting the massacre as an accident, or indeed as the result of the strikers’ actions. Early comments and statements by state representatives often appealed to the notion of national unity, thereby implying that the events of the previous week had disrupted it and forced the hand of the police. In clips included near the beginning of *Miners Shot Down*, immediately after the first images that show the police using live ammunition to mow down the strikers, we see President Jacob Zuma stating in an address the day after the massacre, ‘this is not a day to apportion blame. It is a day for us to mourn together as a nation. It is also a day to start rebuilding and healing’. This is followed by a cut to another speech by National Police Commissioner Riah Phiyega, who insists,

the SAPS [South African Police Service] did all in its power to avert a situation such as this ... and the police members had to employ force to protect themselves from the charging group. This is no time for blaming. This is no time for finger pointing. It is a time for us to mourn a sad and dark moment we experience as a country.

In the days and weeks after the massacre, the striking miners were presented ‘as an unruly and dangerous mob who needed to be controlled and contained’ (Sinwell, Lekgowa, Mmope and Xezwi 2012, 3). Their voices were silenced. As Jane Duncan shows in her study of the early press coverage of the massacre, out of 153 articles she examined:

only one miner was quoted on what actually happened during the massacre, and he said the police shot first. Most miners were interviewed in relation to the stories alleging that the miners had used *muti* [traditional African medicine] to defend themselves against the police’s bullets, as well as the miners’ working and living conditions. So in other words, of all 153 articles, only one showed any attempt by a journalist to obtain an account from a worker about his versions of events.

(Duncan 2015, 182)

While acknowledging the excessive use of force by the police, and in particular the dangers with the use of live ammunition – which would have been exceedingly difficult to deny – the various versions of this narrative still managed to blame what NUM general secretary Frans Baleni described as the ‘dark forces who can mislead our members, make them to believe that they’ve got extra power to make their life to be different overnight’ (Baleni 2012, n.p.). The striking miners were consistently portrayed as backward traditionalist men misled by opportunists and reactionary forces. South African Communist Party (SACP) General Secretary Blade Nzimande wrote that ‘attempts by the opposition to liken police reaction in Marikana to that of the apartheid regime is outrageous [sic], no matter how unacceptable death is’. He condemned ‘cheap politicking [...] in trying to lay the blame at the door of government and narrowly the police’, and called for an investigation into the:

essentially backward beliefs and practices amongst sections of the working class. [...] Just how does a sangoma [traditional healer] is [sic] today still able to convince sections of the working class that bullets turn into water if you have used “intelezi” [traditional plant medicine], is something that we should no longer be talking about in a hush hush manner but should openly engage, albeit sensitively.

(Nzimande 2012, n.p.)

In the same vein, a police spokesperson claimed in an interview: ‘we were dealing with people who looked possessed, or believed the bullets would not work on them’ (quoted in Duncan 2015, 191).

This discursive strategy rationalised the massacre by othering the miners and presenting them as naïve and credulous men who had been misled by “*sangomas*” and ‘turned into automatons by the *muti*, lulled by their own superstition into believing that they were invulnerable to police bullets’ (ibid., 191). In addition, early reporting attributed the conflict to inter-union rivalry between the NUM and the Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU). In line with this interpretation, journalists ‘seemed to assume that including union voices was sufficient to “cover” the workers’ voices’ (ibid., 187). Media reports covered workers’ actions as if they could be explained by reference to the role played ‘by a rogue union, or by agitators, or by political troublemakers’ (Brown 2015, 12).

This same erasure is replicated in the report on the massacre compiled by the Marikana Commission of Inquiry presided by Judge I. G. Farlam (Farlam Report), which was released to the President of South Africa on 31 March 2015 and to the public on 25 June 2015. The report’s findings are based on the notion of “common intent”, whereby the miners are construed as a homogeneous, monolithic entity. As Socio-Economic Rights Institute of South Africa (SERI) Director Stuart Wilson underscored immediately

after the release of the report, nobody is held responsible for ordering the massacre: ‘After 300 days of hearings (page 16) the Commission merely recommends “further investigations” (pages 545 and 546)’. Wilson notes:

the report tends to treat both the living and the dead – especially the miners – in a highly generalised way. Intentions and motives are assigned to groups of people, not individuals. [...] What Judge Farlam offers is an unsatisfactory narrative of faceless crowds and poorly-judged decisions, where responsibility, if it is apportioned at all, is doled out in the abstract.

(Wilson 2015, n.p.)

The usefulness of the report in explaining what happened in Marikana is, by its own admission, limited. Its findings and the evidence on which it is based were circumscribed by the Commission’s terms of reference, which precluded it from addressing matters such as the migrant labour system, the labour relations system on the mines, and the role and performance of the Department of Mineral Resources. Also excluded from the scope of the investigation was the role of ‘other departments or agencies pertaining to the tragic incidents’ (Marikana Commission of Inquiry 2015, 14). In other words, the Marikana Commission of Inquiry was prevented from investigating the political responsibility for the massacre. What we have as a result ‘can’t be anything approaching the whole story’ (Wilson 2015, n.p.).

But what is “the whole story” of the Marikana massacre? *Miners Shot Down* attempts to answer this question by framing the narrative within two temporal axes that respectively zoom in on the immediate events that led to the massacre and take a longer view of the historical sequence that frames it in the South African transition to democracy.

Miners Shot Down

Set in the cold, arid winter of the *koppies* of Marikana, in the platinum belt situated a couple of hours drive from Johannesburg, the film juxtaposes the director’s footage and interviews with workers, their legal representatives and politicians with media coverage and police and security videos. It also includes plenty of aerial shots that ‘contrast the massive scale of the mine with the small town where the workers live adjoining it and the barrenness of the terrain beyond it’ (Moyer-Duncan 2019, 60). Desai’s documentary shows us a group of workers who break with the union bureaucracy to try to directly address the company they work for, Lonmin, and demand better wages for their labour. Led by rock drill operators, the workers go on strike and assemble by the mountain near the informal settlement where many of them live, determined to hold fast to the demand for 12,500 rands per month and force the employer to negotiate with them.

But the story told in *Miners Shot Down* goes beyond the events narrated in the film to speak to overlapping temporalities and geographies:

beside being a precious record of history in the making, the film is an unique exploration of the tension governing South Africa in the current phase, and a complex interweaving of local and global interests that bear on the country's contemporary politics.

(Oboe 2014, 4–5)

As said, *Miners Shot Down* is chronologically framed by two narratives. The first is that of the six days before the massacre of the striking workers – which saw the death of at least four miners, two police officers, and two security guards – underscored by the sequence of titles that bring us closer and closer to the event and slice the film, which opens with white characters on a black screen: “Wednesday 10 August 2012 – 6 days before the massacre”. This is the narrative that ‘provides forensic proof that the police attack was planned, that the mineworkers were on their way home when attacked and that 17 mineworkers were executed at short range’ (Thamm quoted in docimpactaward 2016, n.p.).

Interspersed with this exposé of state, police and Lonmin's culpability for the Marikana massacre, we have flashbacks that insert it into the unfolding history of South Africa's long transition to a democratic dispensation that, to fulfil its mandate, should rid itself of the legacy of colonialism and apartheid. *Miners Shot Down* thus points to two distinct but interconnected historical contexts. One is the growing securitisation and militarisation of the police force and more generally the state (Duncan 2015), which is today both a South African story and a global story (Giroux 2015). Related to this, there is the centrality of the extractive industry and the mining sector in the South African and continental economy, whose role in the neoliberal world order remains that of a supplier of raw materials, especially minerals and oil (Ferguson 2006: 194–210). Juxtaposed to this frame, there is a more extended national narrative which, as the voiceover in the opening scene tells us, takes us back to the history of apartheid and the liberation struggle, whose high points were punctuated by the mass killings in Sharpeville (1960) and Soweto (1976), as well as by the popular rebellion that led to the demise of white minority rule.

These are the two convergent temporal frames that in *Miners Shot Down* construct the Marikana event as a story of betrayal of the “people” by the liberation struggle's political elite, who had seized power in the people's name and is now colluding with international capital to undermine its historical mission. The documentary makes abundant use of voiceover in the first person singular, which occasionally becomes a plural we, by Rehad Desai, who bears witness to this betrayal together with “fellow South Africans”. This historical frame is introduced right at the beginning of the film, in the title sequence, where the footage of police firing at the miners is

followed by the filmmaker's account, which brings us back to the brutalities of the apartheid regime, the liberation struggle and the transition to democracy (for a discussion of the title sequence, see Strauss 2016, 64–68):

It's the 16th of August, 2012. Outside the Lonmin Platinum mine Marikana, South Africa, a hundred and twelve striking miners are shot down by police. Thirty-four die. Like many South Africans, the shooting shook me to the core. Events like these took me back to the massacres of apartheid: Sharpeville, 1960; Soweto, 1976. Killings like these led South Africans to support Nelson Mandela and his struggle for freedom. But today, these miners are being shot at by our new government to ensure that it's business as usual. We could see that lives were now being sacrificed for money, and that the young democracy we had so much hope for was under threat.

Key among the references to the betrayal of the liberation struggle in *Miners Shot Down* are the images of South African president Cyril Ramaphosa, the former president of the NUM and a prominent figure in the liberation struggle turned hugely wealthy politician and businessman, who at the time of the massacre was the executive chairman of Shanduka Group, 'the majority shareholder of the Lonmin black empowerment subsidiary, which gave him 9 per cent ownership in Lonmin and a seat on the board' (Saul and Bond 2014, 228).

The voiceover tells the viewer that "The story of the Marikana massacre would be incomplete without a close look at the involvement of Cyril Ramaphosa", who is first seen through the footage of an earlier version of himself as the leader of the NUM interspersed with images of rallies and marches. The voiceover continues,

I had watched him with admiration as he built the largest trade union the country had ever seen: the National Union of Mineworkers. Under Cyril's leadership, NUM saw the miners join the fight against apartheid. And I took my place marching side by side behind their banner.

From there, the film cuts to a press conference where we hear a young and radical Ramaphosa declaring, 'It must be remembered that it was the mining industry, and specifically the Chambers of Mines, which pioneered the most oppressive features of apartheid South Africa'. Then, after another clip of militant miners' struggles during which the voiceover underscores how his leadership of the NUM made him a key figure in the birth of the new South Africa, we have Ramaphosa stating, 'There is no such thing as a liberal bourgeois. They are all the same. They use fascist methods to destroy workers' lives'. At all the screenings that I have attended, this statement unflinching prompted laughter from the audience, which clearly thought of Ramaphosa's present position as a prominent member of the very same class

he associates with fascism. The statement is followed by footage of Ramaphosa first introducing Nelson Rolihlahla Mandela during a rally and then cutting a MacDonald's cake – in 2011, Ramaphosa acquired the ownership of all McDonald's assets in South Africa, including property (Peyper 2016). The voiceover goes on:

He soon became a leading member of the African National Congress, and from this position joined the black economic elite. Ramaphosa, who once saw South Africa's working class as a force to bring about change, now found himself on the other side of the table. At the time of the massacre, he was a board member of Lonmin.

Ramaphosa continues to provide a counterpoint to the narrative throughout the documentary. As the day of the massacre approaches, the story is interjected with more clips of the current president of the Republic of South Africa first as a union leader, then next to Nelson Mandela in 1990, as a businessman and ANC leader, and in a reticent interview with the director.

This narrative counterpoint culminates with the exposure of Ramaphosa's involvement in the massacre. The film shows transcripts of emails he sent to lobby government ministers to increase police presence and press for action to be taken against the miners. The most disturbing message was sent the day before the massacre. It states that the actions of the miners 'are plainly dastardly criminal and must be characterised as such. In line with this characterization there needs to be concomitant action to address the situation'.

Early in the film, the voiceover had asked: "who sanctioned the order to use live ammunition against the strikers?" Ramaphosa's involvement and the suggestion that orders came or had at least been sanctioned right from the top of the South African state are the documentary's answer to this question.

In this narrative, the Marikana massacre comes straight out of pages on "the pitfalls of national consciousness" in Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), where the postcolonial elite, acting as intermediary for transnational capital and unable to "rationalize popular action", brings about such a high level of "exploitation and such contempt for the state" that it 'inevitably gives rise to discontent among the mass of the people. It is in these conditions that the regime becomes harsher' (Fanon 1961 [1965], 149 and 174). This historical narrative is framed by the threat that the collusion between the post-apartheid government and capital represents for "the young democracy we had so much hoped for". The African National Congress's 1994 "Reconstruction and Development Programme" described this political dispensation as capable of combining elements of "representative, participatory and direct democracy" (RDP 1994, 119). The strike, during which the miners had taken on both their employer and their union, went against the institutionalised model of participation defined by

the corporatist system regulating labour relations that has at its centre union representation, recognition agreements and the collective bargaining system that are supposed to ensure workers' participation in matters concerning salaries and working conditions. The Farlam report underscores that Lonmin refused to talk to the strikers outside organised bargaining structures. It is against this institutionalised system and organised structures that had failed them for so long that Lonmin miners went on strike. As Stuart Wilson argues:

To the striking miners of Marikana, to participate in the existing structures of collective bargaining and labour dispute resolution was to acquiesce in a system in which they had lost faith. The rejection of "participation" took them beyond the mechanisms through which their political agency could be assimilated and dispersed, which is why Lonmin and the state were so threatened by it.

(Wilson 2014, n.p.)

Miners Shot Down is an indictment of South African democracy, underscored by footage of leading state figures Cyril Ramaphosa, Jacob Zuma and Riah Phyegea, none of whom is prepared to take responsibility or apologise for what happened in Marikana on 16 August 2012. In the words of former Minister of Intelligence Ronnie Kasrils, who is no longer a member of the ANC:

It is the time to point finger. In the first place, to point finger at those whose fingers pulled the trigger. But foot soldiers... what about those who pulled the strings, who gave the orders. And who are they? Tell me. Who are they? Minister of police? President? He's got to answer.

In trying to answer some of these questions, *Miners Shot Down* directly challenged the narrative provided by South African media immediately after the event. This narrative was shaped by government's spin, which came in different shades and tones, some more cynical and brazen than others, but with a refrain: the silencing of the dead. The film mounted this challenge not only through its retelling of the story of the event but also by participating in a campaign involving the miners and their families, as well as grassroots organisations and social justice, independent media and other activists to contest the dominant narrative of the Marikana massacre – which has come to be known by this name largely because of this campaign – and seek justice for its victims.

The social and political life of *Miners Shot Down*

Among the film's achievements, there is the 2016 Doc Impact Award, which celebrates 'the documentary films that have made the greatest impact on

society' (docuimpactaward 2016, 5–6). This award was a recognition for the role of the documentary in revealing the truth about the Marikana massacre and in the Marikana Support Campaign. An analysis of this film – of the way it frames and narrates the history of the Marikana massacre – would therefore be incomplete without a discussion of its social and political life.

The filming of the documentary started simultaneously with the multimedia campaign that accompanied and followed its production and release. As Desai recalls, in 2012 he was working on a film project in an area near Marikana when he started filming the miners' strike. Then the massacre happened: 'I was very angered and moved to do something, so we started filming immediately and set up a Facebook group on the same night. It was called "Justice Now for the Marikana Strikers"' (Frassinelli 2016, 423). The documentary was completed and first screened at the beginning of 2014. Even before it officially opened in South African cinemas, it was shown up and down the country in auditoriums, universities, township halls, clubs and homes. People were encouraged to get a copy, organise a screening and invite their friends and neighbours.

Before the film was released, the multimedia campaign was in full swing. The producer, Anita Khanna, recalls:

we continuously made small clips. We put them out on the Internet and they went viral [...] we were constantly being like some sort of conduit channelling all this information through different vehicles and platforms to put it out to different groups of people.

(Quoted in Frassinelli 2016, 24)

This campaign involved multiple levels, both online and offline, and one of its highlights was the screening of a rough cut of the film, in December 2013, a few months before the official release, for 1,200 members of the National Union of Metalworkers (NUMSA) at the Special National Congress that would lead with its break with the Confederation of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) and the ANC (docuimpact 2017, 34). Other events included a tour of South Africa that began in April 2014:

Using a mobile cinema kit, the campaign brought the film to schools, universities, churches, independent movie clubs, and people's living rooms – and when possible, included a lawyer from the Commission and/or a mineworker from the film. Screenings were also held outside platinum mines using large exterior spaces. In one screening alone, 4,000 miners stood in silence watching the film. The filmmakers re-versioned the film into local languages to increase accessibility on the tour.

(Ibid., 19)

The campaign coincided with the more traditional routes of film distribution, including sales, and theatrical and festival release. *Miners Shot Down*

was released in South African cinemas in May 2014 at the high-end art cinema Cinema Nouveau, which is part of the Ster Kinekor chain, where, thanks to good audience turnout, it ‘ran for three weeks, two weeks longer than the initial week committed to’ (ibid., 28).

In addition, DVDs were produced and sold by community members of the campaign for a small profit, with over 7,000 DVDs sold in South Africa in the first 18 months (ibid., 28), including ‘1,400 directly to mineworkers at the Marikana Commemoration in 2014’ (ibid., 20). Still in August 2014, there were 11,000 views on YouTube over the course of three days (ibid., 35). On the occasion of the same commemoration, the campaign enlisted the support of the widows of the miners to present a memorandum to the two South African free-to-air broadcasters, eTV and the SABC, demanding that the film be shown to the South African public – it would only be broadcast, as a result of a prolonged campaign and of the film’s national and international acclaim, on eTV on 13 and 20 January 2016 and on SABC on 9 August 2019. The two broadcasts on eTV trended on Twitter, with more than 25,000 tweets after the first broadcast, as people took to social media to say ‘that they hadn’t known what had happened at Marikana until seeing the film’ (ibid., 42).

The film’s budget was 551,475 US dollars and that of its impact campaign 244,701 US dollars (ibid., 53). Up to 2016, it had 133 official international screenings in 23 countries, and 289 cinema and festival screenings and 150 community screenings in South Africa. It scooped a total of 15 awards at various national and international film festivals (ibid., 27–28). The Marikana miners and their communities participated in many of the community screenings. Anita Khanna recalls:

In the process of doing all these things we all changed as people, our roles changed. You get things like the mineworker not just being there to speak but also dealing with the equipment. You get the person dealing with the equipment getting out and speaking and translating. You get Rehad putting out the chairs. It became a very democratic, collective type of approach to the way we were doing things.

(Quoted in Frassinelli 2016, 432)

So, what does all of this tell us about *Miners Shot Down* and documentary film as political communication?

Conclusion

Miners Shot Down and the multimedia Marikana Support Campaign point to the possibilities for mobilising film, media and cultural resources in struggles for social justice, which in this instance were premised on revealing the truth about what Advocate Dali Mpofu, who represented arrested and injured miners, described at one of the hearings of the Marikana Commission of Inquiry as “a collusion between the state and capital”. The question to

which we must return then is, what is the “truth” about Marikana? How can a documentary film tell the “whole story” of the massacre?

Certainly, the story told by *Miners Show Down* is a partial one. It focuses on the miners and their struggle for a fairer wage. But it has little to say about the role in this struggle of their communities and especially of women, who are the backbone of these communities but whose voices are absent in the film. It has also been criticised by filmmaker, activist and author Gillian Schutte for choosing to focus on the role of Cyril Ramaphosa and of Lonmin black spokesperson, Barnard Mokwena, while ignoring Lonmin white chief executive, Ian Farmer, and opting instead for ‘Casual references to the “capitalists”, “the Lonmin mine owners”, “the management”’, thereby letting white business and transnational capital off the hook (Schutte 2014).

Indeed, the Marikana massacre is not just a South African story. Lonmin plc, the mining company that employed the workers killed by South African police, is a multinational corporation headquartered in London and listed on the London stock exchange whose presence in southern Africa goes back to when it was incorporated in the United Kingdom on 13 May 1909 as the London and Rhodesian Mining and Land Company Limited. Its involvement in the massacre is outlined in the documentary by Marikana families’ lawyer James Nichol, who notes:

we now know that this was a joint operation between Lonmin and the police: that Lonmin was completely integrated into the police strategy and assisted the police strategy. It provided a senior executive to be part of the police team; they briefed the police offices and senior generals at least once every day; they provided helicopters and went out on surveillance expeditions with the police; they provided detention facilities; and at the very end of the day, after all the killings were done, they provided the Lonmin game farm for the debriefing.

South Africa is home to 80% of the world’s known platinum reserves. The small town of Marikana is part of its platinum belt, which stretches from the North West, Gauteng and Mpumalanga provinces all the way up to Limpopo (Saul and Bond 2014, 215). This geographical location is thus both “local” and “global”: it is inserted in the transnational circuits of capital that delineate the global geopolitical economy of mineral-resource extraction and continue to bring western-based and, increasingly, eastern-based multinationals to the rich mineral enclaves and natural resources of sub-Saharan Africa.

Schutte’s critique points to real issues with the film. All representations are partial. They are a specific take on reality. As Stuart Hall reminds us, ‘Meaning “floats”. It cannot be finally fixed. However attempting to fix it is the work of representational practice’ (Hall 2013, 228). One is also reminded of what African American novelist Toni Morrison calls the “distinction between facts and truth”, whereby ‘facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot’ (Morrison 1995, 93). Morrison refers to the embodied, lived

truth of historical events and their affective, as well as historical and political dimensions. This is, for instance, the truth of the widows of the slain Marikana miners who had to fight to tell their version of the story to a disinterested Commission of Inquiry. This is truth of Betty Gadlela, one of the widows interviewed in another documentary produced by SERI and directed by Dara Kell, who says, ‘Nobody knows the dreams our families had’ (2016).

It is also the truth, repeated by many, including Rehad Desai in the voice-over right at the beginning of *Miners Shot Down*, of how what happened in Marikana painfully revived images of apartheid era state massacres. In the words of South African poet and sculptor Pitika Ntuli, whose art installation ‘From Marikana Hill to Constitution Hill’ (2013–2015) brought the Marikana massacre to the site that perhaps more than any other represents the aspirations that accompanied the transition from apartheid to democracy: ‘I think that what hit us most as a society is that we thought the era of mass killings was over with apartheid. To have our democratic government allowing this to happen is shocking’ (quoted in Frassinelli 2019, 126). As theologian Tinyiko Sam Maluleke added at the launch of the installation, ‘If the democratic dispensation has not cured us from our rites of blood, what will?’ (quoted in *ibid.*).

Moving from facts to truth is not just a matter of digging up evidence and providing a detailed forensic account of the events that took place – much as this was needed. Facts do not speak for themselves: they need interpretation – encoding and decoding – to be narratable and representable and make sense to an audience. Still today, the question we are still trying to answer is not just *what happened* in Marikana on 16 August 2012, but *how could it happen*.

In an interview I conducted with the film’s director and producer, when I asked why *Miners Shot Down* has had such a powerful impact on audiences worldwide, Khanna replied:

The short answer is that they were massacred, that’s why. Because of state violence, because it was shocking, and because it’s a democracy. Because it was the ANC, the party that all over the world people have been looking up to; the party about which they were saying, “Wow, what an amazing achievement, they fought apartheid and the country didn’t break down afterwards, they still have a democratic state, social democracy”.

(Frassinelli 2016, 429)

In other words, a big chunk of “truth” about this event is the historical significance of the time and place where it happened: a nation-state still seen by many as a model postcolonial dispensation and a successful multiracial democracy built on the ruins of the apartheid system.

Its shortcomings and omissions notwithstanding, *Miners Shot Down* remains a fundamental documentary because of how it makes us reassess a recent historical event by shedding light on the culpability and responsibilities of the South African state and its repressive apparatus. Its disclosure of how

Black African workers were massacred by the post-apartheid state forces us to reassess the legacy of the apartheid system in post-1994 South Africa. Lastly, this is an important documentary because it shows how documentary film can become an agent of change and mobilising tool in struggles for social justice.

Note

- 1 Cara Moyer-Duncan uses the definitions “new resistance films” and “resistance documentaries” to describe some of these works and compare them to anti-apartheid resistance films and documentaries (Moyer-Duncan 2019).

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