

GENDERING CRUELTY: AN INVESTIGATION OF THE DEPICTION OF THE CRUEL MALE IN GODWIN MAWURU'S NERIA (1993)

Phebbie Sakarombe

ABSTRACT

*The Zimbabwean Film Industry originated in a colonial context, with content developed based on often negative racial stereotypes. Although efforts to decolonise film after independence in 1980 bore notable fruit, due to funding constraints, most films started to depend on donor funding linked to Non-Governmental Organizations. In Zimbabwe, the most active NGO was Media for Development Trust. Producers of NGO films used films ostensibly to “educate” and, in the process, broke down and recreated archetypes. Drawing on film theory inflected through gender politics, this paper examines a specific form of character ‘typage’ found within *Neria*, a well celebrated Zimbabwean film, made with the help of NGO finance. *Neria* is about the disinheritance of a grieving widow by a cruel male relative. The film was a major hit at the box office and remains arguably the high point of Zimbabwean filmmaking. I revisit *Neria* in the context of renewed debates about decolonisation and gender. It is my contention that in *Neria* there is to be observed a type of male character who is represented as if he were naturally cruel and exploitative, and as if cruelty was an inborn male trait. In other words, cruelty and exploitativeness are given a male gender. Or, at least, cruelty and exploitativeness are limited to the DNA of certain males. This cruel male type does not change; moreover, he is unable to change, unlike the women or the ‘compassionate male’ types. Considering the complexity of social relations in Zimbabwe, this portrayal is both limiting and limited. This article argues that the depiction of certain men in *Neria* is meant to collectively diminish and tarnish, as much as possible, complex African gender norms in favor of a simplistic and untenable vision of social change sponsored by the Media for Development International (MFDI). This vision is one which gives men an untenable choice between being “genderless” and being a “cruel male”. This choice, I conclude, is male-annihilating.*

Keywords: Zimbabwean film; *Neria*; gender; gender politics; #MenAreTrash; MeToo; masculinity; patriarchy

Introduction

This article revisits one of the most celebrated films in Zimbabwe's history, *Neria* (Mawuru, 1992), and re-reads it in the context of renewed debates about decolonisation and epistemic independence/dependence, on the one hand, and gender issues, as foregrounded in such hashtag movements as #MenAreTrash¹ and #MeToo,² on the other hand. Decolonisation has become a seminal topic in the wake of protests at South African universities in 2015 and 2016 (Jansen 2018). Calls have been made to revisit the unfinished business of independence and decolonisation, in order to awaken new generations to a new, necessary, radical vision of being human and being African. It is in the spirit of revisiting unfinished epistemic business that I write this article about decolonising the gaze of African film, in light of new questions and perspectives. For instance, the #MenAreTrash and the #MeToo movements that arose in the wake of the Karabo Mokoena femicide in South Africa and the Harvey Weinstein scandal in Hollywood have helped draw renewed attention to male abuse of women. At the same time, these movements have opened the debate about the nature of gender abuse and the so-called gender of the abuse. Is there a type of man out there whose nature it is to abuse women? Is being male somehow a crime? *Neria* appears to say yes to these questions. It is this "yes" in *Neria* that I examine in the context of the problem of *recognising* abusive males and telling them apart from the non-abusive males.

In this paper, I investigate a specific form of character 'typage' found in *Neria*, which was made with the help of Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) finance. It is my contention that in *Neria* there is to be observed a type of male character who is represented as if he were naturally cruel and exploitative, and as if cruelty was an inborn male trait. In other words, cruelty and exploitativeness are given a male gender. Or, at least, cruelty and exploitativeness are limited to certain males. The cruel male type does not change; moreover, he is *unable* to change, unlike the women or the 'compassionate male' types. What sort of man is that who is unable to change? What must happen to unchanging men? Can gender abuse be corrected by stereotyping certain men into fixed abuser roles? Considering the complexity of social relations in Zimbabwe, the portrayal of Phineas (a character in *Neria*) is considered both limiting and limited and is here re-examined in order to underscore the need to decolonise frames of seeing what Judith Butler calls "gender trouble" (Butler, 1990).

This paper argues that the depiction of certain men in *Neria* is meant to collectively diminish and tarnish, as much as possible, the male gender in the African context in favour of a vision of social change sponsored by the Media for Development International (MFDI). This vision, I argue, annihilates African males. The article critiques the representation of the male character in *Neria* and argues for more nuance. In such a call for nuance, I will compare and contrast the cruel, 'backward' male with the supposedly compassionate, 'modern' male. It will be shown that the pattern of characterising certain males as cruel-by-nature in this film raises questions about the ideology of this film, as well as broader, troubling questions about the current turn in gender politics exemplified to some extent by hashtag movements such as #MenAreTrash and #MeToo. In sum, this article is about the gender politics of *Neria* with the

¹ #MenAreTrash was a hashtag movement that started in 2017—following the highly publicized femicide of Karabo Mokoena, a young South African woman from Johannesburg who was murdered, mutilated and burnt by her boyfriend. Activists defined #MenAreTrash as a movement for those who want to stop an epidemic of violence against women. The purpose of the hashtag was to challenge South Africans to speak against the epidemic of women murdered at the hands of their male counterparts.

² #MeToo is a movement against sexual harassment and sexual assault of women by men and it was propounded by the activist Tarana Burke in 2006 and later went viral in 2017 when Alyssa Milano used it to support her friend's allegations of sexual harassment. The #MeToo movement has empowered women to reveal the global extent of gender-based violence and harassment.

focus on the depiction of males or male traits. It is my contention that the depiction of males in this film has a bearing on the understanding and perception of *being male* in Zimbabwean society, on gender relations and perceptions in general and on the types of ideological frames we can expect from Zimbabwean films.

The paper will use the historical understanding of Zimbabwean film to question the ideological evolution of ideas about social change, particularly in relation to gender issues. The colonial objectives of Rhodesian film, which were merely to teach Africans to '*behave*', have evolved into a "media for development" trope that arbitrarily separates African men from African women, and, more importantly, separates some African men from other African men.

A Brief Background

The history of film in Zimbabwe starts when the country was still Rhodesia (Hungwe 1991, 1992, 2001; Mboti 2014; Burns 2002, 2003; Ureke 2018). The British government established the Colonial Film Unit in 1939 just as the First World War was beginning (Burns 2002, 2003). The idea was to use film as a propaganda tool to get the settlers in the colonies to support the war on the side of the Allies. After the war ended, the film began to be used for propaganda of 'development' of the colonies:

The use of film was part of the new developmental initiative in the colonies and was funded by the Colonial Development and Welfare Act (1940) as well as subsequent acts. The initiative stressed adult education. The experiences gained during the war were to be harnessed to develop and use film as an educational medium in the colonies. The British Colonial Film Unit set up four production units that it directly controlled in East and West Africa. The Central African Unit (CAFU) covered Southern and Northern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe and Zambia respectively) and Nyasaland (now Malawi). Forty percent of its funds came from the British government and the rest from the contributions from the territorial governments that made up the federation. The activities of CAFU spanned the period 1948-63, coming to an end with the dissolution of the federation³

Colonial "development" film, therefore, was patently racist, as it sought to use film to "maintain white standards" as well as civilize blacks and teach blacks how to know "their place". Ultimately, the colonial film was driven by assumptions of white superiority over Africans. The racist assumptions of the colonial Rhodesian film were typified by a radio broadcast in 1950 by Alan Izod, CAFU's first executive producer. Izod stated that "the goal was to make educational films that were presented in an entertaining way, with strong moral messages. Adult Africans were to be protected from unwholesome messages, in other words, the production of films 'affording healthy entertaining'.⁴ CAFU's mission to develop and civilize Africans through film did not succeed as blacks began to call for self-rule after 1965 (Burns 2002, 2003). The Rhodesian front stepped up the propaganda machine as the liberation war started, producing films such as *War on Terror* to 'educate' Africans (through threats) not to support the 'terrorists'.

Post-independence, Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) funding, which maintained the ideological structure of the previous regime, stepped in to fill the gap left by Colonial development film. *Neria*, which is two hours long, was, to a large extent, financed by NGO funding; a fact which is crucial in the context of evaluating the ideology of the film. As Fisher (2010) suggests in his study of NGO films in Zimbabwe, "he who pays the piper calls the tune". NGOs moved in rapidly to fill the vacuum that was left open when

³ The first executive producer of CAFU films, Alan Izod, who was recruited from London, had previously produced some British propaganda war films during the Second World War. His team was entirely made up of expatriates. Izod described the challenge as difficult: "We had of course set ourselves a very difficult task, perhaps more difficult than we realized. I personally was without previous first-hand knowledge of African life and customs and so were two of the leading technicians" <http://www.filmbirth.com/zimbabwe.html>.

⁴ <http://www.filmbirth.com/zimbabwe.html>.

the Zimbabwean government lost much of its interest in the local film industry (Hungwe 1991, 1992, 2001; Mboti 2014), particularly after its financial loss in the making of *Cry Freedom*.⁵ The ideological assumptions at the heart of this film are of interest in this discussion, with ideology is seen to be referring to the representation of social, cultural or political beliefs as fixed and natural or taken-for-granted (rather than historical and open to contestation). I argue that the representation of male traits is ideologically motivated. In focussing on specific themes in *Neria* in relation to elements of the story or *mise-en-scene*, the paper will tease out some of the salient ways in which the issue of being-an-African-man has been framed by an NGO-funded film. The term *mise-en-scene* refers to the directors' control over what appears in the film frame.⁶ In terms of methodology, I treated the film as a text and subjected it to close reading or analysis. I applied a semiotic reading, through which I regarded the film text as a complex sign system that creates social meanings. I began by watching the film closely on DVD, pausing at critical moments in the narrative to make notes on the content of the *mise-en-scene* as related to the representation of social types.

Setting the Scene

NGOs such as the MFDI made films for purposes of “education, information, entertainment and edutainment” (Locksley 2009). On the surface, producers of edutainment-oriented media seek to create stories that promote inclusion and positive relationships among different people exposed to their messages (cf. Kidd 2016). In reality, there is more than meets the eye. NGOs films have a larger, ideological aim: behaviour change. Behaviour change theories are attempts to explain why behaviours change and they cite different factors such as personal and behavioural characteristics as major behavioural determination (Glanz et al. 2008). Since my interest in this article is on the *typage*, *typing* or *typifying* (Wojcik 2004; Schweinitz 2011) of male characters in *Neria*, I am going to argue that the need to cause behaviour change is the motive behind setting up this male type. Usually associated with the Soviet Montage school (Goodwin 1993), *typage* is related to the use of stereotype in communicating the essential qualities of a character (Schweinitz 2011), or what Wojcik (2004: 176) calls “recognisability and repetition”. Although some scholars tend to regard stereotypes to be distinct from social types, Dyer (1999) regards the difference to essentially be one of degree. Goodwin (1993) argues that *typage* occurs in-between *typecasting* and stereotype. Klapp (1962) defines social types as representations of those kinds of people that one expects and is led to expect, to find in a given society. A “social type” is, in this case, recognised through external clues and cultural codes. Bingham (n.d.) says that *typage* is “the depiction of sailors, officers, or factory workers in summary images that evoke every sailor or worker.”⁷

⁵ During the first decade of independence, the state, through the Ministry of Information, launched an aggressive initiation to promote Zimbabwe as a film-making centre for Hollywood studios. The country was described as a ‘perfect film-making venue’ with an excellent climate, a good and varied terrain, excellent infrastructure, and adequate technical support base. The reasons for promoting the country were both cultural and economic. It was expected that Hollywood studios would inject more money into the economy and provide training for the local film-makers, who would, in turn form a local film industry.

In pursuing the objective of a local film industry, the state was keen to invest directly in the film industry. A partnership was struck with Universal Pictures that led to the production of the anti-apartheid film *Cry Freedom*. The film was not as successful as anticipated, and the government did not realize a return on its US\$5.5 million investment in the film. Stung by this loss, the government has stayed away from the production of feature films. It continues to sponsor a limited programme of film through the Ministry of Information's Production Services. These are mostly short documentaries of a cultural and educational nature. The production unit has faced severe budgetary constraints and has not made a significant impact locally. <http://www.filmbirth.com/zimbabwe.html>

⁶ In short, *mise-en-scene* covers four areas, namely, setting and props, lighting, costumes and make up, and, finally, behaviour of figures (acting and other movement). Diegetic sound (that is, sound that emanates from the scene and is not outside it, such as the music that is not being played within the scene or a voice-over) is analysed under *mise-en-scene*. For example, Oliver Mtukudzi's singing of the song 'Neria' to his sister after the death of her husband. These elements of *mise-en-scene* will be investigated where they occur in *Neria* along with cinematography and editing.

⁷ Bingham, D. (n.d.) “Casting: Alternative Approaches to Casting”, <http://www.filmreference.com/encyclopedia/Academy-Awards-Crime-Films/Casting-ALTERNATIVE-APPROACHES-TO-CASTING.html> Accessed 13 March 2017.

In *Neria*, as in most films, it appears that the easiest way to establish characters, plot, conflict and resolution in two hours was to stereotype the characters and direct the actors to mimic societal archetypes like the 'cruel male'.

Faber and Mayer (2009) contend that modern archetypes represent and reproduce psychological and mental replicas like self- and other-schema and prototypes as well as eliciting intense emotional responses. This strategy would be said to have worked when the audience effortlessly recognises characters by their general traits. Schweinitz (2011: 57) has called this "identificatory or distant participation", which is part of a set of effects sought by the film audience. Stereotypes are in one sense substitutes used by directors in place of creating original, complex characters. Kidd (2016) states that stereotypes are regarded as culture-specific and in most cultures, certain groups of people are seen as possessing specific, often negative characteristics, and these people are treated as these adverse stereotypes are true, which is rarely the case. The notion of stereotypes was propounded by Lippman (1922) to elucidate how individuals are influenced by and make sense of mediated messages. Kidd (2016:27) argues that stereotyping "is a neutral system of classification. However, the modern definition focuses on the problems inherent in portraying a co-culture using trite, limited characteristics". The stereotype is a device that is as functionally important as it is problematic to a film's narrative. The analysis of the stereotypes as a way of drawing attention to a formula, cliché, conventional imagery, and recurring narrative patterns of reduced complexity in cinema, is thus an important aspect of the current discussion.

There is a scarcity of literature that questions the negative imaging of males in African film. However, there is much to talk about in terms of the 'gendered gaze', film and ideology, gender identities and patriarchy among other themes. According to Eagleton (1979; 1976), film is not a neutral artistic medium. Rather, it is a potent tool for carrying and transmitting ideas, values, thoughts and feelings that can either support or challenge the social status quo. As a human art, it springs from an ideological conception of the world and fulfils aesthetic and ideological functions in general. In Eagleton's (1979) view, film directors come from particular races, classes and sex in society, and these identities more or less determine what they will eventually put in the *mise-en-scene* as truth or as values to be questioned. Films like *Neria* thus may be said to play a role in the distortion, restoration or construction of people's self-image. Audiences, of course, are not limited to the readings imposed by the producer of the text. Instead, as Stuart Hall argues, texts are polysemic and readings can be negotiated or even oppositional (Hall 1997).

However, there is a tendency for films to make the messages they carry appear to be natural. Eagleton (1979) argues that film is ideological as it reflects certain modes of thinking which can either prop up cruel regimes or support the establishment of broad-based democratic society. What modes of thinking does *Neria* reflect? Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School of the 1960s argue that film falls under the realm of culture industry as it is concerned with the reproduction of particular values and ideologies in societies. In a way, film can fulfil or prevent the transformation of human social systems. Vambe (2001) points out that though film is a product of technical inventions and uses technology extensively, it should not be forgotten that it is a human art that is concerned with society and the human condition.

Theoretically, the paper draws partly and loosely on gendered approaches to cinematic analysis as well as from semiotic film theories. The study of gendered representation in cinema began in the early 1970s with Molly Haskell's *From Reverence to Rape: The Treatment of Women in the Movies* (1974). Haskell looks at images of women in movies made from the 1920s to the 1970s, mainly in Hollywood. The study and images of women were crucial to the development of feminist film culture in the early 1970s. Drawing on post-structuralism, semiotics and psychoanalysis, Claire Johnston developed a theory of cinematic representation based on an understanding of film narrative as a mythic system that naturalizes conventional gender relations. Within this system, the figure of the woman functions not as a

representation of female subjectivity but as the objective of male desire. Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975) looks at gendered divisions of labour in cinema that identify the male hero with the movement of the narrative and the female figure with its spectacle. The cinematic apparatus thus aligns the gaze of the spectator with that of the camera, and editing conventions subsume the look of the camera into that of the protagonists. This system of looks assumes narcissistic identification with the male protagonist of the narrative and voyeuristic enjoyment of the female object of the gaze. This enjoyment is, however, ambivalent, because of the castration anxiety engendered by the sight of the woman.

Neria

Neria was directed by Godwin Mawuru and produced by John and Louise Riber of the Media for Development Trust (MFDT). MFDT is an NGO established in 1989 as a project of Media for Development International (MFDI), the copyright holder of *Neria*. MFDI completed its first full year of real activity in 1992, garnering about a quarter of a million United States Dollars in support from about 15 different donors.⁸ The MFDT project is registered in Zimbabwe as a non-profit Social Welfare Organisation and is listed in the Zimbabwe Aids network (ZAN) directory as providing 'Advocacy, Training and Information Exchange' services. Its 'Thematic Areas' are listed as 'Prevention and Mitigation'. The concept of 'media for development' itself is cited in a World Bank 'Working Paper' as encompassing "education, information, entertainment and edutainment" (Locksley 2009). The MFDT thus fits within the broader NGO agenda of bringing in so-called development from outside so as to influence 'progress'. The MFDI's Annual report for 1991 records that the organisation received the support of USD\$5,500 from Rockefeller's National Video Resources to cover 'social message film/video' projects for Africa.⁹ *Neria* is one such so-called 'social message' or 'message-oriented' film.

Neria depicts a process of inheritance, disinheritance and re-inheritance. It is a story about the protagonist, Neria, a 35-year-old woman living in the Harare suburb of Warren Park. When the movie begins, she is happily married to Patrick and has two children, Mavis, aged 13 and Shingirayi aged 7. Both children are in school and seem to be happily provided for by their parents. The family has just bought (or finished building a new home) and owns a modest car. Neria works at a women's crocheting co-operative where, in a good month, she earns as much as her husband. Neria and Patrick are painting their new home, a project which Neria contributes to both financially and physically. Patrick and Neria have been living in the city since their marriage, though they go to the village to visit their relatives on occasion. The bottom line is that Neria's family is portrayed as modern, happy and secure. Much of the happiness seems to come from the fact that Neria and her husband understand each other so well. While Neria has a shared understanding with her husband Patrick, she has some differences with her mother-in-law, Ambuya. The bone of contention seems to be that Neria is a modern woman and Ambuya a traditional woman. Ambuya does not understand their urban lifestyle and wonders why Neria insists on working instead of staying home like 'a good wife'. Ambuya resents Patrick's closeness to his wife, which she thinks is too much. Neria respects Ambuya's ideas and does her best to please her. The happiness and security in Neria's life are however painfully destroyed by fate. As Patrick is returning home one evening, he is hit by a car and killed. Neria is devastated. Her brother-in-law, Phineas, steps in to help. Neria and her children go to her husband's rural home for the funeral. After a month in the village, she realises that she must go back to the city. Not only have the children missed school, but she has missed work. She needs to go back to the city to continue their life. In the meantime, Phineas is helping himself to Neria and Patrick's things. He takes possession of cash and their Post Office Savings Bank joint

⁸ Media for Development International 1991 Annual Report, http://www.mfdi.org/content.php?pgn_id=42

⁹ Media for Development International 1991 Annual Report, http://www.mfdi.org/content.php?pgn_id=42

account bank book, the car, virtually all their furniture and eventually takes over her home. It is not clear why Patrick is doing this except out of greed and sheer insensitivity to a widow and her orphans.

Because of widowhood and Phineas' property-grabbing, Neria struggles to make ends meet. She pleads with Phineas for money from their savings to help her family but is ignored every time. In time, it is obvious that Phineas is misusing his traditional role as the protector of his brother's family. Neria's best friend, Connie, advises her to consult a lawyer. But Neria is reluctant as she does not want to offend her husband's family. One day Neria comes home from work to find the locks on her house changed and her children gone. She knows that Phineas has taken them and chases after them. She arrives in the village to find her daughter very ill and in need of hospital care. Ambuya is away at her sisters' village and only Phineas is around to help her. She pleads with him to take them in her late husband's car to the hospital, but he is not willing. In desperation, Neria carries Mavis to the bus stop and manages to get her to the hospital on time. Neria decides that things have reached a point where she must fight back. She decides to take Connie's advice and seek legal help. After learning the background to the conflict, the lawyer advises Neria of the steps she must follow. With the help of her brother Jethro (Oliver Mtukudzi), Neria goes through the necessary legal channels at community court level and her eldest child is appointed their heir. Phineas is ordered to return the property. Phineas is outraged by the turn of events as he feels he is naturally entitled to his brothers' property. He takes the matter to the High Court, claiming that Neria is not fit to maintain the children and that in such circumstances it is best to follow customary law. After an involved court hearing which brings to light Phineas' exploitative, greedy and insensitive nature, the judgement is that Neria will remain the guardian of the heir. Through this process, Ambuya realises that Phineas has all along been twisting tradition to suit himself. Ambuya comes to understand, through witnessing Neria's victory over patriarchal exploitation, that at times tradition must give way to changing times.

Discussion

Neria begins with an omniscient voice that, thundering alongside a musical score of drums and rattles, describes the hardworking nature of both Patrick and Neria. The camera casts an image of a man riding a bicycle with a lunch box behind and some children playing street soccer. The background is dark whilst the people themselves are in the mid-ground and beaming sunburn light cast out. The fact that the background is dark draws attention to the mid-ground. It looks as though the children are laughing. This is an establishing shot as it sets the atmosphere and mood whilst creating the setting. The filmmaker exploits the long shot which gives us visions of the object without much detail. Phineas is shown in full screen and the soundtrack changes to create a tense atmosphere, even the volume sounds lower (repeated in the scene when Phineas carries off Patrick and Neria's wealth). Some tapping sounds quicken the pace of the film as though it's a little anti-climax, creating the mood for danger or action. The 'good' life that Neria and her family lead early in the movie is depicted in such a way that it should not last. It is too good to be true. As such, the filmmaker seems to cause Patrick's death so that the role of cruel villains such as Phineas could start to be seen. Though Phineas is not to blame for Patrick's death, his behaviour toward Neria and the children afterwards elicits responses that transfer the blame to him. Yet, the family is suffering primarily because Patrick is no longer there to take care of them, not because of Phineas. Patrick died from an accident, not from Phineas' greed. However, the filmmaker conveniently creates a *one-sided*, villainous Phineas so that the audience finds someone to hate. Everything bad becomes synonymous with Phineas. Even Neria, who was always gentle to people, starts to treat Phineas as a type of social evil.

Because Phineas secretly took all the money in cash that belonged to Neria, their POSB joint bank account, their car and among other valuables, the camera zooms in on Neria and her facial expressions show that she is miserable: all because of Phineas. In a conversation with colleagues at the 'Crocheting co-operative' Neria reveals that her children Shinigami and Mavis have been suspended from school

because their fees have not been paid. This is due to Phineas' cruelty—he holds the bank book in the village when the book is supposed to help Neria and the children in the city. She is given advice by her friends to take her case to the community court and sue Phineas, even though he is her in-law. The advice to appeal to the courts shows that in MFDI's vision, tradition has failed Neria and African women in general. The only protection left to women is to redress at the law courts. Yet, often, Africans solve issues by approaching elders, aunts, uncles and other family members and friends. There are also traditional *matare* (courts) at the village that can serve the same purpose. For instance, the issue of who is to inherit Neria as a wife after Patrick's death goes through a traditional process. We are made to believe that no such process exists for settling disputes such as the one between Neria and Phineas. At the Crocheting club, women have to come together for protection or go to court. Interestingly, the High Court judge is a (white) man.



Neria testifying in Court before a white male judge

Neria explains how Phineas went to the village and never communicated with her. She says, 'Patrick sacrificed everything they had to make Phineas and the extended family happy ... and when Patrick dies, Phineas took everything that belonged to the family' Neria's tone is that of bitterness and pain as she recounts Patrick's sacrifice which is matched by her in-law's indifference in the scene when Neria leaves the village after Patrick's funeral. In *Neria*, Phineas symbolises mindless and parasitic male violence meted on powerless women. Such violence seems childish, crude, irrational irresponsible. This is noted, for instance, through Oliver Mtukudzi's song 'Dzikamawo wakura' (grow up) in the scene when Phineas and Patrick go to a pub during the time they are in the village. Indeed, Phineas is known for three things: buying beer for prostitutes, his devilishly acquisitive behaviour, and his cruel insensitivity, especially to his village wife.

When Patrick dies, Phineas transfers his devilish cunning and insensitivity to dealing with Patrick's widow Neria. The tables turn, however, and Phineas turns from being the most popular man in the village and pubs to become the most disliked and detested person. The filmmaker shows how the community's approving attitude changes when they hear about Phineas' intentions of making Neria's life miserable based on 'tradition'. After the high court judgement, everyone including Ambuya who once supported Phineas' acts begins to notice a cruel heartless man with evil intentions—a result of his masculine ego and intolerable machismo. While Phineas' domination of others is partly blamed on his distortion of tradition, it is also African tradition that is being blamed for creating such men who oppress widows and orphans.

Male cruelty is a result of social situations that encourage male domination over women. Pierre Bourdieu (1976) states that male domination and cruelty is rooted in our collective unconscious that we no longer

even see it. Though we see the extent to which it affects the widow and the orphaned children after the death of the husband as highlighted in *Neria*, male cruelty is so in tune with our expectations that it becomes hard to challenge it. Phineas' domination is viewed in a gruesome way as he takes away Neria and Patrick's P.O.S.B joint account, property, car and the cash that was in the wardrobe on Patrick's death. The cunning brother justifies his acts as a way of helping the family. As he is talking to his wife whilst taking a dry bath in the village, Phineas says 'it is the responsibility of the elder brother to take care of the family of the smaller brother according to tradition, and as you can see Mukoma Joel is not always around, so I take up the responsibility'. We are shown a Phineas that is cruel, but it is not made clear why some men should be better than him. If we accept that male dominance is part of the collective unconscious, then surely even 'compassionate' males such as Patrick, Jethro and the High Court Judge are also part of the same system that oppresses women? Why separate men into compartments?

In *Neria* male irresponsibility is depicted as a form of violence. This violence is imposed on Neria and her two children, Shingirayi and Mavis as Phineas fails to pay school fees or the rentals (electricity is cut off and the children are sent out of school). However, Phineas' actions do not make sense and do not seem to be motivated by rationality. He just seems to intend to ruin the children, as if that was his avowed mission on earth: to oppress orphans. Such characterisation of Phineas as a naturally cruel man betrays the ideology of the film.

Virginia Woolf attempts to analyse what she refers to as the hypnotic power of domination. She uses ethnological analogy and relates women and children's segregation back to the rituals of the ancient societies. Woolf contends that:

people look upon societies as conspiracies that sink the private brother whom many of us have reason to respect and inflate in his stead monstrous male, loud of voice, hard of fist, childishly intent upon scoring the floor of the earth with chalk marks, within whose mystic boundaries, human beings are penned rigidly, separated artificially, where, daubed red and gold, decorated like a savage with feathers he goes through mystic rites and enjoys his dubious pleasures of power and domination while we, his women are looked down upon¹⁰

The issue of power and domination is dominant in Mawuru's *Neria* as shown through Phineas who is depicted as a static character who cannot change from being cruel to adopting a better role or attitude. For instance, Phineas sits in the shop in the village reading a letter from Neria, without a care in the world. One can note that Phineas enjoys his dubious pleasures of power and domination over Neria's family. Phineas fails to return the bank book as requested by Neria in the letter to him. He is not bothered at all with the suffering of his dead brother's family.

In the melodramatic plot of *Neria*, Phineas is depicted as the sort of a man who takes unbridled pleasure in tormenting people as he reduces Neria to servitude and tries to bribe Neria's children so that they can turn against her. This is clearly highlighted when Phineas and his wife come to Warren Park to find only the children at home. Phineas tries his tricks by paying money so that the electricity is reconnected. After that, he goes to buy new clothes for Shingirayi and Mavis while his wife gets Mavis a new hairstyle which Neria strongly disapproves. The film shows that Phineas does all these things as a way of making the children turn against their mother, which is one way of fulfilling his cruel wishes. In other words, he is not content with robbing the widow of her money and assets. He also has the cruel intention of stealing her children as well! However, this blindly avaricious and acquisitive view of Phineas seems exaggerated to make sentimental audiences hate Phineas *even* more. Mawuru's characterisation relies on excess or heaping negativity and villainy on Phineas. Even society's problems such as child labour (Mavis ends up

¹⁰ Woolf, Virginia, in Bourdieu's 'On Male Domination' (1976).

selling tomatoes and green vegetables at the market while Shingirayi washes cars instead of being in school) are blamed on male types such as Phineas instead of relations of the capitalist system.

Phineas is depicted as taking advantage of patriarchal privilege in order to oppress Neria and the children. He is characterised as believing that he has the upper hand and has the final decision *because he is a man*. After all, he does not consider that women can make decisions for themselves or the entire family as he constantly blames Patrick for *always listening* to Neria. Phineas argues that a man has the upper hand and authority and must not listen to whatever women say *because he paid the bride price*. He says to Patrick, 'Remember I paid the bride price for her and you must not consult her in any sort because you are the man!' The words put in Phineas' mouth about bride price take us back to misguided colonial views about lobola being a form of buying of wives. These views are calculated to make Phineas look hopelessly backward and foolish. His character is created in such a way that his kind is shown as having *no place* in the modern world. It is this *no-placeness* that I shall argue is linked to male annihilation. Interestingly, the characterisation contains a contradiction: it is not clear how a foolish and backward character can at the same time be cunning enough to manipulate tradition. After the sudden death of Patrick, Phineas tries to trick Neria to accept the idea of inheritance so that he would get hold of her property and wealth. When he finds Neria sitting on a rock where she used to sit with her husband, he says 'Amainini I think it's time that we two work out something whilst there is time so that the children will not feel that they have lost a father'. The film, in its search for a villain, contradictorily sets up Phineas as being at the same time a cunning trickster and a backward, foolish African man. These contradictions show that the filmmakers may be trying to force Phineas character to fit a contradiction.

Radical feminists appear to support the view of the backward and cruel male in African society. They argue that patriarchal culture imprisons women and gives room for men to act selfishly. As far as this may be true, it may be noted in *Neria*: through Phineas, who exercises his power upon Neria and the family in the name of culture and tradition. Phineas keeps reminding his brother that men have an upper hand upon their women because they paid the so-called bride price for them. The radical feminist's further state that this social system has managed to survive for so long because its chief psychological weapon is its universality as well as its longevity (Charvert, 1982). However, if we are also to believe that the African community is, after Kaphagawami (2000: 77), 'a collaborative life-world', then the views of the radical feminists cannot be objective. If Africans collaborate to make their societies, then even the like of Phineas is part of that complex collaboration. Certainly, the building of African values cannot be selectively limited to 'good' men such as Patrick, as this would mean that African values are one-sided and simplistic.

The cruelty of men in *Neria* is not only depicted through the protagonist Phineas but also through the male character in the folktale 'Jari Mukaranga'. As Patrick and Ambuya narrate the folk tale to the audience they both depict the idea that Jari's husband is a cruel man as he takes away his wife's money which she sweated for whilst the husband was not around. Jari's husband's cruelty is much seen when he takes the wife's money and marries another wife and shuns the first who is the breadwinner of the family. It is through this story that Ambuya and Patrick are teaching people that *indeed men are cruel* as they prove to be insensitive to the plight of women. In the courtroom, Phineas is even made to boast that he did what he did to Neria and the children because he was aware that Neria cannot withstand the pressures of being alone and what she needs is a man who can take care of the family. Chirimuuta (2006) argues that the "patriarchal nature" of the Shona society has shaped and perpetuated gender inequality and male cruelty to the extent of allowing male domination hence paving the way to female subordination. Scholars like Chirimuuta make it seem as if Shona society is patriarchal by nature. They overlook that society is a result of *socialisation* and *can* change. By forcing Shona culture to be seen as a part of nature, these thinkers are also condemning it unfairly as unchanging and incapable of changing. The same thing

happens with Phineas. He is characterised as cruel by nature, and therefore incapable of changing. Such characterisation is flawed and says more about the filmmakers' intentions than about Phineas himself.

In *Neria*, Phineas fails to change from being a cruel and arrogant person so that he can adopt a flexible character. One wonders why Phineas is trapped in the mould of a static cruel "type", compared to other male characters such as Jethro, Joel, Patrick and even the lawyer who are compassionate towards the plight of women. These men, unlike Phineas the arch-antagonist, respect women and give them women their rightful place in society. These men tend to show feelings of sympathy to Neria and her children, despite all the challenges she faces as a result of Phineas' apparent jealousy and cruelty. But the question is: is Patrick incapable of cruelty as well? Why is he shown as an angel? Is such characterisation believable or is it an exaggeration of positive qualities to manipulate audiences into sympathising with the character of Patrick? In the real world, believable characters do both good and bad things. Yet Patrick is scripted by the filmmakers to portray a one-sided, good man. Basically, he is a *foil* to Phineas. That is, Patrick is suitable for driving their agenda of portraying 'modern' new men who fit the MFDI vision of the world.

Uncle Jethro, Neria's brother shows the emotional capacity of empathy and sympathy to Neria's misfortunes. He is always there for Neria and the children. Neria goes to Jethro for help and he assists her with money to pay school fees for Mavis and Shingirayi. Jethro, like Patrick, does not support the idea of "patriarchy" and tradition taking advantage over women.¹¹ According to him, men and women are just the same despite the difference in gender roles. He is against Phineas' idea of treating women as objects and property. Jethro thus helps his sister by bringing back Shingirayi from the village. Uncle Jethro appears to understand the issue of gender equality, encouraging his sister to go to the community court as well as to the high court to allow the law to settle the differences between her and her in-laws. Thus, men like Patrick and Jethro are framed as modern and enlightened, while the likes of Phineas are *in darkness* and belong to the uncivilized African past. Jethro, in all his goodness, is still a paper-cut figure. That is, his character is one-dimensional and unrealistic. Where can you find a man who is all sympathetic and all good and all understanding? A more rounded African man shows complexity: he has good moments and bad in equal measure. In *Neria*, the compassionate and modernised men are 'captured' by the frame and used to diminish African values as backward without the option of dialogue with the likes of Phineas. There is thus in *Neria* a type of a male character, Jethro and Patrick, who is depicted as no longer gendered, but merely modernised. Jethro and Patrick are "good" not because they are men but because they are modern. That is, the good men are, in fact, genderless. Or, at least, their gender is called modern. They are modern men, with the emphasis on modern and man merely being a placeholder.

In the end, there is in *Neria* a type of a male character who is no longer male but is genderless (Patrick and Jethro), and another who is gendered and by being gendered is depicted as naturally-born cruel (Phineas). Is cruelty in-born? Does it have a gender? *Neria* demands that the "new" and desirable African male be "genderless". This is the same "genderlessness" at the heart of the message of #MenAreTrash. In order not to be trash, one has to be a man who is not a man – or be a man but not be a man. I call such a vision male-annihilation. Although male-annihilation has become fashionable with such hashtag's as #MenAreTrash and #MeToo, it is visible in films such as *Neria* too. The gender of cruelty is specifically

¹¹ Linda Goffigan (1977) contends that gender roles are evolving, and men are becoming more compassionate. In *Neria* this may be highlighted by Joel who tends to moderate the cruelty of male characters such as Phineas who are insensitive towards widows and orphaned children. At one point in time Joel slows his cunning brother down when he is in a hurry for the inheritance ceremony to take place in a span of two weeks after Patrick's death. Joel realises that property and wealth belongs to Neria and the children and he even supports the idea that Neria should be given time to decide for herself, and that her decision should be respected.

and deliberately limited to males such as Phineas, in a way that makes “good” men ashamed to be men. No man would want to identify with Phineas after watching *Neria*, just as no man would want to be a man if he also supports #MenAreTrash. These tropes force men to choose not to be (like other) men. But like which other men? The main antagonist of the film is typified as traditional and backward for a reason. Phineas is unable to change unlike the women or the so-called compassionate males. His lack of evolution is the nail in his coffin: he has no place in modernity. The cruelty of males in Africa is thus set up as a direct result of a *failure to modernise*. Phineas and those who think like him are dead to modernity – they cannot emerge as modern people.

Conclusion

Neria makes valid points about the need for society to respect women in general, and widows and orphans in particular. The film attempts to be a bridge between customary law and common law and to make men conscientious and appreciative of widows’ position in society. For this, *Neria* must be commended. However, the film is weakest in its attempt to normatively characterise society’s problems as being caused by people like Phineas. The film deflects attention from larger, systemic forces that destroy family cohesion and social fabric such as capitalist pressures and exploitative economic relations. There is no attempt to link the view of the backward cruel male to colonial stereotypes, and no attempt to question the rationale behind behaviour change interventions. Such interventions by “media for development” NGOs need be traced to colonial attempts to “civilize” the native – largely to turn the colonised into cheap labour for the white man’s factories, farms and mines. Mawuru’s film ends up, through showing Phineas as *incapable* of changing, not only as mere African male bashing but as an attack on certain perceived African male genetic traits. Like the message of #MenAreTrash, the message of *Neria* seems to be that the “good” men like Patrick are no longer men in a normative sense – otherwise they would also be trash like the rest. In order not to be “trash” like Phineas, Patrick conveniently dies (or is killed off) early in the film. The message of #MeToo also subtly excludes men. Rather, “me too” means “me too, I have been a victim of men”.

Neria, in this paper’s view, loses a rich opportunity for dialogue between genders in society as it divides people into the backward ones who cannot be helped (Phineas) and the good ones who are already modernised and converted (Patrick, Jethro). The likes of Phineas are labelled as the embodiment of all that is seemingly wrong with African gender relations (patriarchal masculinity and machismo), and the likes of Patrick as the (dead) solution. The issue is reduced to those simple binaries. There can be no dialogue between the good (because they are good and conveniently dead) and the bad (because they are bad, alive (uselessly so), and genetically defective). In the end, we have a movie of absent African men: Patrick is physically dead, and Phineas is dead to the audience. The African male, whether good or bad, is *annihilated through Phineas*. These are the losses of *Neria*, a strong movie that reproduces a myopic view of what is assumed to be wrong with African men. The *male-annihilating* vision of *Neria*, in this sense, is hard to swallow.

REFERENCES

Ansell, N. ‘Using films in teaching about Africa’ *Journal of Geography in Higher Education* 26 (3), 2002, 355-368.

Bingham, D. (n.d.) “Casting: Alternative Approaches to Casting”, <http://www.filmreference.com/encyclopedia/Academy-Awards-Crime-Films/Casting-ALTERNATIVE-APPROACHES-TO-CASTING.html>, Accessed 13 March 2017.

- Bourdieu, P. (1976). 'On Male Domination', (1976), <http://mondediplo.com/1998/10/10bourdieu> Accessed 2 April 2009.
- Burns, J.M. (2002). *Flickering shadows: Cinema and identity in colonial Zimbabwe*. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Burns, J.M. (2003). A source of innocent merriment: Cinema and society in colonial Zimbabwe, *South African Historical Journal*, 48 (1), 130-137.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity*. Chicago.
- Culture Fund (2009). *Baseline study on the culture sector in Zimbabwe*, Harare: SIDA.
- Dyer, R. (1999). "The Role of Stereotypes", In: Paul Marris and Sue Thornham (eds.), *Media Studies: A Reader*, 2nd Edition, Edinburgh University Press.
- Faber, M.A., and Mayer, J.D. (2009). Resonance to archetypes in media: there's some accounting for taste. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 43, 307–322.
- Film Birth (n.d.) "History of cinema in Zimbabwe from 1896-2000", <http://www.filmbirth.com/zimbabwe.html> Accessed 3 April 2009.
- Fisher, Alexander. 'Funding, Ideology and The Aesthetics Of The Development Film In Postcolonial Zimbabwe'. *Journal of African Cinemas*, Volume 2 Number 2, 2010, pp. 111-120.
- Glanz K, Rimer BK, Viswanath K, eds. 2008. *Health Behavior and Health Education: Theory, Research, and Practice* (4th ed). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Goodwin, J. (1993). *Eisenstein, Cinema, and History*, University of Illinois Press.
- Hall, S. (1997). *Representation: cultural representations and signifying practices*. London: Sage.
- Hungwe, K. N. (2005), 'Narrative and ideology: 50 years of film-making in Zimbabwe', *Media, Culture & Society*, 27: 1, pp. 83–99.
- Hungwe, K. (1991). Southern Rhodesia propaganda and education films for peasant farmers, 1948–1955, *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 11(3), 229–241.
- Hungwe, K. (1992). Film in post-colonial Zimbabwe, *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 19(4), 165–171.
- Jansen, J.D. (2018). Decolonising the curriculum and the Monday morning problem. Foreword to Chaunda, L. Scott and Eunice N. Ivala (Eds), *The status of transformation in higher education institutions in post-apartheid South Africa*. London: Routledge.
- Kaphagawami, D. (2000) 'Some African conceptions of person: A critique', In: *African Philosophy as Cultural Inquiry*, eds I. Karp & D. Masolo, Bloomington, IN, Indiana University Press.
- Klapp, O.E. (1962). *Heroes, Villains and Fools*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.

- Kidd, A.K. (2016). Archetypes, stereotypes and media representation in a multi-cultural society. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 236 (2016) 25 – 28.
- Locksley, G. (2009). 'The Media and Development: What's the Story?' *World Bank Working Paper No. 158*. Washington, D.C.: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank.
- Mboti, N. (2014). The Zimbabwean film industry, *African Communication Research* 7(2), 145-172.
- Media for Development International (MFDT), 1992\1991 Annual Report, <http://www.mfdi.org/content> Accessed 3 April 2009.
- Mulvey, L. (1975). Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, *Screen* 16(3), 6-18.
- Schweinitz, J. (2011). *Film and Stereotype: A Challenge for Cinema and Theory*, Columbia University Press.
- Ureke, O. (2016), 'Cinematic fact and the film services industry: Production contexts and contexts of production in Zimbabwe', PhD thesis, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban.
- Ureke, O. (2018). Introducing the 'drasofi': A genre of convenience and context in Zimbabwean film production, *Journal of African Cinemas*, 10(1-2), 147-164.
- Wojcik, P.R. (2004). "Character and Type" In: Wojcik, P.R. (ed), *Movie Acting, the Film Reader*, Psychology Press, 165-190.
- Woolf, V. (1998) *Three Guineas*, In: *A Room of One's Own*, Oxford World Classics, Oxford 1998, quoted in Pierre Bourdieu's 'On Male Domination', <http://mondediplo.com/1998/10/10bourdieu> Accessed 2 April 2009.

FILMOGRAPHY

Mawuru, Godwin (1992), *Neria*, Media for Development Trust International, 103 mins. DVD