Socially Constructing Contexts and Imaginations through Filmic Simulacra

The Case of *Invictus*

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Abstract

Geographies and histories are important to acknowledge when viewing filmic productions to understand renditions of places and social groups. Contemporary issues relevant to geography and history are often communicated through a host of visual images – widely and readily accessible. In this regard, films contribute to knowledge of places by creating geographical imaginations, and thus require an interpretation of their content and context. The following commentary assesses the film Invictus, critically examining the role of rugby alongside with racial divisions in South Africa. Geopolitical struggles over nationalism are incorporated to indicate the role of sport pertinent to contexts and representations of international events, domestic politics, and race in South Africa following the period of apartheid.

Keywords: film geographies, context, imagination, Invictus

I. Study Framework

Jeff Hopkins (1994) wrote, "the power of the film spectator must lie…in the ability to experience film critically" (p. 60). Supplemental to this thought, when "watching films we are drawn into the worlds that they seem to reveal" (Freeland & Wartenberg, 1995, p. 3). Films are social constructions and have the power to simulate (i.e. make virtual) images that construct geographical imaginations and knowledges of distant places and associated histories (Doel, 2008). Geographies and histories are important to acknowledge when viewing filmic productions to understand renditions of places and social groups. Contemporary issues relevant to geography and history are often communicated through a host of visual images – widely and readily

accessible. David Harvey (1997) refers to images as "postmodern cultural artifacts," later adding that images allow for "perhaps the most robust capacity to handle intertwining themes of space and time in instructive ways" (p. 61). Moreover, visual images play a defining role in establishing imaginations, or "a simulacrum of the real" (Lukinbeal & Zimmermann, 2008, p. 19) for consumption purposes in Western societies. Grounding the perspective that films are simulated social constructions, Jason Dittmer (2010) notes, "films are types of popular culture that establish representations or claim[s] about a place's characteristics, nature, etc" (p. 40).

Gillian Rose (2003) has contributed much to the geographical base of literature aimed at understanding visual images by stating a crucial proposition: "how, exactly, is geography 'visual'" (p. 212). She also notes that as Westerns, we "now interact with the world mainly through how we see it" (Rose, 2001, pp. 6-7). Therefore, as a visual form of communication, a film discourse constructs knowledge places through the narration of images in the form of an extended simulation. In this nascent era of globalization, films have become a part of the current postmodernist paradigm in western society. Knowledge is constructed and later consumed vis-à-vis images, reinforcing Rose's statement above. Just as films have the power to engineer knowledge of places and past events, a film's broader narrative and associated context is assembled and presented by the film's producer. Moreover, the notion of cultural imperialism, or the forging of cultural identities (see Said, 1993), is carried out through the production and portrayal of foreign places to simulate some context of a place by western producers and actors. Furthermore, films function "as an apparatus that could both manipulate and manufacture space and time…bound to the real, to become a simulacral medium, free to fabricate a reality-affect" (Doel, 2008, p. 96). In this regard, the filmic narration becomes the geographic imaginary, and thus requires an interpretation of context(s) (Dittmer, 2010).

When assessing films, it is also important to address Mikko Lehtonen's analysis of texts. Texts are not limited to textual prints, such as popular newspapers or magazines, but also encompass a host of visual discourses, including films (Lehtonen, 2000). For the purpose of this study, context refers to the deeper meanings that the creator of the discourse (i.e. the film's producer) is attempting to simulate. In acknowledging further conceptual depth, Rose clarifies Jean Baudrillard's notion that images are simulacra (Baudrillard, 2004). "Baudrillard argued that in postmodernity it was no longer possible to make a distinction between the real and the unreal; images had become detached from any certain relation to a real world" (Rose, 2001, p. 8). In relation to how westerners come to understand the world through images, the term 'ocularcentrism,' as discussed by Martin Jay, has become more apparent in this postmodern period (Jay, 1993) as a result of the plethora of images widely accessible for immediate consumption (Harvey, 1997). This has led geographers to "assert that the ocularcentrism of geography is a primary *modus operandi* of geographical knowledge (Lukinbeal & Zimmermann, 2008, p. 15).

Additionally, context is part of the active broader narrative, "which always exist[s] *together* with the texts" (Lehtonen, 2000, p. 111). From a geographical perspective, film simulacra require an interpretation of contexts embedded in their narrative, based upon how realities are socially constructed, and then conveyed. When assessing such texts, Doel and Clarke (2007) suggest that viewers must acknowledge that "vision is not simply composed … It is articulated and entrained" (p. 983). From this statement, other geographers have brought representation into discussions of film. Just as "a text constructs a viewing subject" (Aitken & Zonn, 1994, p. 13), viewers need to be aware of histories and broader narratives representing the reality of places. Therefore, Aitken and Zonn (1994) note, "we must also consider…who makes decisions about what is and what is

not represented, how it is represented … and the contexts of its reception" (p. 13). Furthermore, Freeland and Wartenberg (1995) mention that "what makes films suitable for critical reflection is precisely their ability to create … worlds" (pp. 3-4). The question therein lies in the form of interpretation. Although each person will comprehend a film differently, this commentary attempts to assess socially constructed contexts by interpreting critical geographical themes simulated in *Invictus*.

The creator of *Invictus* presents the storyline of racial divisions in South Africa by interweaving broader contexts and representations. Geopolitical struggles over nationalism are incorporated to show the role of sports in allocating racial divides in the country. Therefore, the broader narrative presented in *Invictus* involves contested sporting nationalisms, politics, and race in South Africa immediately following the period of apartheid. With the film creator's ability to socially construct past knowledges and imaginations of places and social groups, this challenges researchers to evaluate contextual meanings being simulated. The following commentary offers a socio-geographical interpretation of *Invictus* by assessing contexts simulated in the film's broader narrative, dialogues, and images.

II. *Invictus*: Contested Sporting Nationalisms, Politics, and Race

From the opening scene of *Invictus*, the audience is immediately presented with racial divisions and the social make-up of sport in segregated (apartheid) South Africa. In one properly fenced-in, well-groomed pitch are a group of young white men engaged in an organized rugby practice. As the camera pans out and positions its focus across the street, beyond a rugged fence on a poorly maintained dirt field is a group of black youths playing soccer. These images begin to simulate South Africa during the period of apartheid by contrasting the predominantly white upper-class game of rugby to its more popular counterpart soccer. Similarly, two female aid

workers, one black and one white, hand out clothing to underprivileged black children. The white woman presents a black child with a green and gold Springbok jersey. When the boy refuses to accept the article of clothing, the white woman believes this gesture is in light of the team's poor performance. The black woman informs her that "for them, the Springbok still represents apartheid" (27:44). *Invictus* uses sport as both popular and political mediums to address contexts of not only class and racial divisions but also assemblages of contested politics, power, control, and later national unification.

Sports are often cited as being more than a game because they are inherently associated with cultural identity and, in many other cases, as "a political tool used to intensify nationalism" (Vinokur, 1988, p. 17). The film presents two figures of power. The first, Nelson Mandela, the leader of South Africa, is played by Morgan Freeman, and the second, François Pienaar, captain of the Springboks, is played my Matt Damon. The producer of the film attempts to position Mandela's character in accordance to his egalitarian views on politics, while the sport of rugby and the Springboks – through reference to their color and brand name – throughout the greater part of the film represent apartheid. In addition, the film makes virtual black uprisings after Mandela's inauguration period and then subsequent debates over the Springboks and their brand. Black officials seeking revenge for past oppressions vote to eliminate rugby, arguing that the game is a symbol of imperialism and Anglo identity. Numerous scenes discuss the past and the future of South Africa, putting much emphasis on dialogue focusing on the future. Throughout the film, viewers are presented with the multiplicity of perspectives over efforts to maintain and restore the Springboks and their color. Insight into forgiveness relates to Edward Said's conceptualization that there is a "new urgency about understanding … the past, and this urgency is carried over into perceptions of the present and future" (Said, 1993, p. 7). Viewers become

aware of Mandela's attempts to keep rugby and the Springbok brand name intact as a strategic offering despite the colonial legacy.

The characters and events in *Invictus* make virtual actual events in South Africa's past as a way of informing the audience how rugby's continuation intended to minimize racial tensions. Moreover, strategically, although inherently political, rugby came to symbolize unification and the future. However, the film's geographical imaginary continued to personify ongoing racial divisions. Three obvious examples include those playing the parts of the security team, spectators at the first rugby match against England, and Mandela's family criticizing him for supporting the symbol of oppression. Of these examples, racial tensions are represented during the first rugby match of the feature, informing viewers of fandom relationships. The black crowds supported England, and the white crowds cheered on South Africa, wearing and displaying their green and gold colors.

Building upon further contexts of division, sport often becomes a popular political dialogue for situating ethnic/racial tensions, social identity, and for generating greater semblances of nationalism. In South Africa, while the Springboks successes in the 1995 Rugby World Cup did generate a strong sense of nationalism, in *Invictus*, the discourse of sport becomes an intermediary for unification. Therefore, the sport of rugby, as simulated in the film, fits the context of Nelson Mandela's vision to unite South Africa and elapse previously constructed imaginations of the country as a segregated and hostile place. Through the 1995 Rugby World Cup, the world was brought to South Africa. For many countries, hosting mega-sporting events represents an opportunity to create positive publicity internationally. In South Africa's case, the objective was to re-construct imaginations of the country abroad. Furthermore, at the national scale, rugby was used to promote domestic change throughout South Africa such as when the

Springboks travelled the country to teach and capture support for the game in black communities nationwide. By displaying clear representations of segregation at the start of the film, as the films narrative developed, viewers are made aware of movements towards unification and change. This happens when the Springboks share a soccer field with black children to promote the game of rugby, thus over-layering identities in the landscape. This scene was further contextualized as children in this black community, upon the team's arrival, chant "Chester! Chester! Chester! …" (57:50), who was the Springboks lone black player in 1995. Towards the end of the same scene, when the Springboks bus departs, a sign symbolizing unification becomes bounded within the limits of the frame, stating a popular motto leading up to the 1995 South African Rugby World Cup: "one team, one country" (1:00:15).

Likewise, with an emphasis on the 1995 Springboks squad, Crawford (1999) notes that the South African national team became "fully aware of the important opportunity to draw a nation together" (p. 131). Such context was incorporated to show Mandela's direct and indirect contacts with the team. The following filmic examples reflect actual events. An indirect encounter with Mandela came after an early morning workout when the Springboks visited Robin Island. This historical background was incorporated to heighten the importance of uniting the nation, bringing more of South Africa's history into perspective. Two additional scenes simulated examples of the team's immediate contact with Mandela occurring on the practice field and in Ellis Park. First, as Mandela's helicopter descends to the training grounds, in the background the song *colorblind* (by the band *Overtone*) heightens the scene (1:07:46). This scene continues with Mandela's visit to the Springboks training grounds to showcase his gratitude towards the team. Later, and arguably, one of the most significant scenes comes towards the end of the film just prior to the final match when Mandela enters Ellis Park wearing François' number six green and

gold Springbok jersey. This symbolism, though conflicting, conveys past and present, black and white, and becomes a discourse simulating how sports nationalistic prowess encouraged racial integration.

Moreover, as mentioned in the *Economis,* "June 24 1995 will stand in South Africa history as a day on which a yearning for national unity helped make their whole country Number One in the world" (as cited in Crawford, 1999, p. 129). As the opening scene shows segregation and interplays of racial identity associated with sport, closing credits reflect the opposite, showing a group of black South Africans engaged in a game of rugby. This signifies what Mandela's character (Morgan Freeman) states earlier, "Chester is far too easy to identify, but, this will *change*; *it must*" (1:05:13, *emphasis added*).

III. Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, *Invictus* represents how imaginations of racial segregation, contested identities, and later movements towards national unification in South Africa during the mid-1990s were constructed through filmic simulations. Dialogues and visuals position how the usage of images socially constructs knowledge for the purpose of consumption and interpretation. *Invictus* presents how sports influence the politics of race, social exclusion, and movements towards national unification. The above evaluation of *Invictus* attempts to present critical interpretations of socio-geographical contexts as simulated through filmic representations of sport, identity, and South Africa. Further research intends to build on interpretation strategies, assessing audience awareness of social and political contexts presented in similar cases to better understand how filmic social constructions generate imaginations of places.

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