Film series

STRETCHING THE ARCHIVES

TOWARD A GLOBAL WOMEN'S FILM HERITAGE

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Archive Books

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Into the Archives: Critiquing White Feminism Through the Work of Katinka Heyns

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ABSTRACT:
In chapter 10 Lizelle Bisschoff looks at South African filmmaker Katinka Heyns (b. 1947) and uses it as a vehicle to both describe the history of Afrikaans women filmmakers but also to critique the roles of White women in the country's film industry. A focus on the role of women reveals the silences and absences left by the apartheid system that ravaged the country for the best part of the last century: the voices of Black South Africans are rare, and those of Black women virtually absent. With a study of *Die Storie van Klara Viljee* (*The Story of Klara Viljee*, 1991), the author here inscribes South Africa's complex and contentious socio-political history with gendered and racial consideration. Heyns' oeuvre, considered from a feminist perspective, prompts us to recognise White feminism, and the place of race in gender politics and debates.

Delving into the South African film archives with a focus on the role of women reveals the silences and absences left by the apartheid system that ravaged the country for decades. As with film industries everywhere, women's voices are few and far between, but specific to the system of racial segregation that controlled the country for the best part of the last century, the voices of Black South Africans are even rarer, those of Black women virtually absent. It is thus striking, if not surprising, to find that it is White South African women who emerge as the pioneers of female filmmaking in South Africa. It has been documented (Botha, 2015: 1) that Truida Pohl, an Afrikaans actress, journalist and director for stage, radio and film, was the first South African woman to direct a fiction feature film in 1962, *Man in die Donker* (*Man in the Dark*). And not until two decades later did three further White female feature directors emerged: English-speaking Elaine Proctor, Helena Noguiera, who is of Portuguese heritage, and Afrikaans director Katinka Heyns.

In this chapter, I want to explore the work and legacy of Afrikaans director Katinka Heyns in more depth, focusing in particular on what is arguably her most feminist film, *Die Storie van Klara Viljee* (*The Story of Klara Viljee*, 1991). Inevitably, discussing the work of a White Afrikaans director in the context of South Africa's complex and contentious socio-political history, necessitates a consideration of not only gender but also of race, which I will attempt to incorporate from an intersectional vantage point. Katinka Heyns' oeuvre, especially when considered from a feminist perspective, prompts us to also consider White feminism, and its place in South African gender politics and debates. I have a particular interest in this positionality because

it aligns with my own, as I am also writing from the perspective of a White, Afrikaans scholar of African cinema, a position that I have increasingly considered and scrutinized in recent years. I grew up watching Afrikaans cinema, and I remember watching Heyns' films as a teenager and then young woman in the 1990s, just as I was coming of age and the country transitioned to a new, post-apartheid era. Considering Heyns' work from my contemporary perspective enables me to re-think the Afrikaans films of my childhood, and to consider questions of gender and race in particular, which I might not have considered as critically in my youth. Thinking through the role and position of White Afrikaans women in South African culture and society reveals their complex positionality of an identity category that straddles both victim and perpetrator – as White women were and still are privileged in the South African context because of their race, but have historically also been oppressed within a conservative, Calvinist patriarchal Afrikaans culture. Thus, vis-à-vis my own positionality, I attempt here to consider Heyns' work within the context of White feminism in South Africa, and also the value of her legacy, grappling with questions such as whether White-directed films from the archives still have significance. Are they worth retrieving from the archives, and what is their contemporary value? I attempt a diachronic view on this aspect of South African film history, to discover how the past illuminates our understandings of the present.

Harriet Gavshon (1992: 251) stated that of the approximately 605 feature films made in the country between 1985 and 1989, only two, *Quest for Love* (Helena Noguiera, 1988) and *Fiela se Kind* (*Fiela's Child*, Katinka Heyns, 1988) were directed

by women. It took almost another 10 years for Black women to enter the industry as directors, with Palesa Nkosi being credited as the first Black woman to direct a short drama, *Mamlambo*, in 1997 (Pillay, 2001: 64). The first feature film by a Black South African woman, Maganthrie Pillay, who is of Indian heritage, was released only in 2005 (Bisschoff and Van de Peer 2020: 40). Her film, *34 South*, deals with issues of rural-urban migration, race and identity. Pillay stated around the time of the release of the film: "With a hundred years history, we only have three other women, all of whom are white, who have made feature films. What does that say about South Africa? What does that say about our industry? To be the first black woman simply highlights the fact that there are thousands of other stories that need to be made" (quoted in Bisschoff 2009: 66–67). As South Africa has been grappling with the opportunities and challenges of a young postcolonial and newly democratic state over the past three decades, this depressing absence of women in the film industry is slowly being redressed, as more and more female directors, Black and White, are emerging. However, the continuing underrepresentation of Black female directors helming fiction feature productions is a troubling legacy of the structural inequalities left by the apartheid era that continues to this day (Bisschoff and Van de Peer 2020: 41). At the 2018 Durban International Film Festival, filmmaker Zamo Mkhwanazi, speaking on behalf of Black women in the film industry, powerfully proclaimed: "There isn't a single space where I feel that we've been treated fairly, we've been represented, whether it's because of our gender or because of our race. We are black and we are women all the time" (Vourlias 2018).

Zoe Ramushu, a South Africa-based Zimbabwean writer, director and producer, also claims that the plight of Black women in the industry is "an intersectional issue that needs to be dealt with as such [...] Although we are fighting for the same thing as women, we have to understand that women are not starting from the same starting point. There are different struggles for women" (ibid.).

In the context of this chapter, these statements intersect with the complexity of White feminism I alluded to earlier: the position of White South African women as both victims of patriarchy and perpetrators of a system predicated on White privilege and supremacy. This complex and problematic positionality also brings to the fore the contentious relationship that Africa has had with (White) feminism, exemplified by Black women's suspicion of feminism as a colonialist, Western construct, and a resistance against simplistic and misplaced notions of a "shared sisterhood." The development of feminism in South Africa has faced the same barriers the adoption of feminism in other parts of the Global South has encountered, viewed with caution and skepticism by women of colour. By the end of apartheid in the mid-90s, the movement was criticised for the dominance of White women's voices in South African feminist discussions (De la Rey 1997: 6). Feminism has been a problematic position for Black women in South Africa to adopt, where it was seen as a colonial importation, White and middle-class. Desiree Lewis, South African professor of Gender and Women's Studies, stated in 1993 that "local feminist scholarship is largely insensitive to the interaction of race, class, and gender" (535), and, "[b]ecause these paradigms emerged mainly in first-world

and middleclass contexts, they tended to dictate standards to "othered" (black, third-world, and working-class) women, presenting context-bound perspectives under the guise of universalistic notions of sisterhood".

Writing in 1997, shortly after the official end of apartheid, South African gender and race theorist Cheryl de la Rey referred to the growing awareness of complex interconnected identities as the "difference debate", which ruptured ideal notions such as non-racialism and the ideal of a shared universal sisterhood. Feminism in South Africa, dominated by White women initially, had to embrace the understanding that gender is not the only or even the primary social category of analysis. The difference debate introduced other categories of social relations, such as class, sexual orientation, ethnicity and so on, a multifaceted view of identity construction that Kimberlé Crenshaw dubbed *intersectionality (*1991). De la Rey (1997: 7) states that "[t]hese debates tested the notion of triple oppression which basically postulated an additive or accumulative model of oppression – race plus class plus gender." She further argues that the triple oppression model increasingly came to be seen as limited; a positivist view of human experience that objectifies dimensions of social experience through creating unintegrated and isolated categories of identity, devoid from a holistic view of human experience. De la Rey also critiqued White South African men and women who believe, having been active in the anti-apartheid movement, that they are absolved from racism, ignoring the reality that racism is systemic and in-built. The development of feminism in South Africa was further hampered by the fact that anti-apartheid causes and protests

regularly took precedence over gender equality issues. Since the abolition of apartheid in 1991 and the transition to a democracy in 1994, more attention has been devoted to women's rights, and Black South African feminists became more prominent, forging their own feminist pathways based on their specific, particular struggles and aims.

It is important, then, that we situate Katinka Heyns' work – which regularly centralises the experiences of White women, and displays a strong feminine (if not overtly feminist) sensibility in her filmic narratives – within a White feminist framework, and that we understand her career progression to a director within the context of a privileged, educated, middle-class woman during South Africa's politically turbulent transitional years from the 1980s onwards. In a documentary about Heyns, simply entitled *Katinka*, directed by her son Simon Barnard (2018), Heyns declares her love for storytelling, inspired by her father's stories of mermaids and magic. Storytelling also provided an escape during her youth in Afrikaans Meisies Hoër (Afrikaans Girls High), a well-known Afrikaans language high school in South Africa with a hundred-year illustrious history, where bullying was rife. Heyns started her creative career on stage and cites pioneering director Truida Pohl as an early mentor. She was encouraged by actor Kobus Rossouw to do an audition for Jans Rautenbach, the well-known Afrikaans filmmaking pioneer. Heyns' work with Rautenbach established her as one of the most beloved and well-known South African actresses during the 1960s and 1970s for her roles in films such as *Katrina* (1969) and *Jannie Totsiens* (1970), as well as in television series from the late 1970s onwards. South African film journalist

Leon van Nierop ascribes Heyns' prominence and reputation as an accomplished and talented actress to her sensitive acting style and challenging roles (for example that of a young woman struggling with poor mental health and delusions in *Jannie Totsiens*) which contrasted with the majority of female characters in 1970s Afrikaans escapist cinema – "beauty queens"; peripheral and one-dimensional characterisations of women (Barnard, 2018).

Heyns met her first husband, the cinematographer Koos Roets, on the set of *Jannie Totsiens*, and credits him for her becoming a director. While Heyns' collaboration with Rautenbach was extensive, productive and well-documented, and he undoubtedly had a crucial formative influence on her transition to a screen director, it was also Rautenbach's style of directing – at times disorganised and tough, and often haphazard, working with incomplete scripts and improvisation – that encouraged Heyns to found her own production company, Sonneblom Films (Sunflower Films) in 1974. The company produced dramas, documentaries and television series, and also did dubbing for international productions in a small sound studio. Heyns started making feature films after being handed *Fiela se Kind* (*Fiela's Child*) by famous Afrikaans writer Dalene Matthee (1985), the novel her first feature was based on. Heyns' second husband was the well-known Afrikaans writer Chris Barnard, and both these creative partnerships, with Roets and Barnard, continued throughout most of her filmmaking career: Roets creating the cinematography for most of her films, and Barnard writing the screenplays for all of her feature films. In fact, collaborations remained important throughout her career, a creative process

that South African film historian Martin Botha calls Heyns' "collaborative authorship" (2015: 2). While Heyns undoubtedly developed a distinct filmmaking style, and highlighted narrative themes that often represented a complex (White) female psyche and interrogated Afrikaans culture and specifically female identity, this collaborative process denotes a creative process that aligns with a feminist work ethic. Heyns sees filmmaking as a collective process, as opposed to the "auteurist" approach to filmmaking, often critiqued for being White and male. The gendered aspect of Heyns' career is also revealed in the documentary about her life (Barnard, 2018), when she acknowledges that one of her biggest regrets is not spending enough time with her son, a negotiation between motherhood and a film career that many women deal with, and a primary site of feminist struggle. What we can deduce then from interviews and testimonials from people who have worked with her, is that Heyns managed to create a sensitive, caring, feminist working environment for her cast and crew.

Heyns' first feature film, *Fiela se Kind* (*Fiela's Child*, 1988), tells the story of a small White child lost in the Knysna forest in southern South Africa. He is found and cared for by a poor, coloured (mixed-race) family, who come to regard and love him as their own. The mother, Fiela, is a formidable woman, who takes on the authorities and bureaucracy to get her son back when he is taken away because being White it is inconceivable that he could be raised by a coloured family. The boy, Benjamin, spends his teenage years with a poor White family, mistakenly identified by the authorities as his biological family, who live from selling wood and poaching elephants in the Knysna forest. The two

families are harshly contrasted in the novel and the film, offering a penetrating take on racial issues in South Africa at the time: Fiela's family is deeply religious, has dignity and integrity, and makes a living from hard, honest work, while the White "bos" (bush) family have an illiterate, abusive and racist father, live in abject poverty and do not respect the forest environment. Benjamin is finally reunited with Fiela as an adult, and she offers him his rightful inheritance and ownership of the farm on which the family lives. Although the character of Fiela offers an example of a strong woman prepared to take on the apartheid authorities for what she believes is just, the ending of the film is problematic and endorses an apartheid worldview. By reinstating Benjamin, the white male, as the rightful owner of Fiela's farm, the film is reinforcing the social and economic hierarchies of apartheid ideologies.

Heyns' third feature, *Paljas* (1998, the term refers to something magical, for example a charm or a spell) is set in the post-apartheid transitional period and is about an Afrikaans family in the semi-desert of the South African Karoo region, isolated and dysfunctional in their interpersonal relationships, whose lives are irrevocably transformed when a travelling circus visits their town and leaves behind a clown. *Paljas* is thematically linked to a genre of Afrikaans magical realism, which has been explored in particular by female novelists and playwrights, for example Fransie Philips and Reza de Wet, as well as by the acclaimed South African novelist André P. Brink. Heyns' last feature *Die Wonderwerker* (*The Miracle Worker*, 2012) is loosely based on a period in the life of well-known Afrikaans author Eugene Marais, during which he sought refuge on an Afrikaner

farm while recovering from addiction. His presence creates turmoil in the lives of the family members, serving as a catalyst for hidden resentments and finally reconciliation. Of all four of her features, *Fiela se Kind* is the film that most overtly deals with racial issues specific to the South African context, if in a limited way, and despite the fact that Heyns has stated that she did not consider the story in terms of race, an oversight Botha describes as ironic (2015: 5). From her other films, with their primarily and overtly White, Afrikaans cultural milieus, we can establish that Heyns did not deal with the political and racial situation in South Africa in any depth, if at all. Indeed, in spite of her wish to create a feminist working environment for her cast and crew, Heyns' treatment of characters of colour is problematic in most of her films and as such, her feminism is problematic and non-intersectional.

If Heyns neglected to consider South African racial politics in her work, an oversight which should be critiqued from a contemporary point of view, what is more clearly discernible, is her preoccupation with the societal and domestic roles and pressures of women, a critique of White patriarchy. This thematic trope is the clearest in *Die Storie van Klara Viljee*, of which Botha (2015: 5) has stated that "[i]t was considered by many critics to be a profound feminist statement". The film tells the story of Klara, a seamstress who lives independently, much to the incomprehension of the villagers with their conservative small-town mentality. She falls in love with a local fisherman, Pietman, a womaniser, who deserts her and has a child with Engela, still in high school. Pietman fakes his own death by pretending that he has drowned and leaves the town. The paternity of Engela's

child is actively speculated on by the whole village because extra-marital sexual relations are heavily frowned upon in this conservative Calvinist Afrikaner community. Klara, not knowing that Pietman has deceived her, vents her anger and grief at the tragedy that has befallen her onto the sea, deciding that the sea will never see her again and building a house behind a dune. When she eventually finds out about Pietman's deception, she decides that she can face the sea again, and embarks on flattening the dune all by herself, by making use only of a stubborn donkey pulling a ramshackle plough. For her, carrying out this punishing labour on her own is a process of purification and emotional healing, as she states: "Every load that I carry away is a load off my shoulders."

Klara continuously rejects the meddling of various men in the village who express concern about her living on her own and attempt to "rescue" her, she "emerges as a woman who determines her own destiny in a completely uncompromising fashion" (Marx 1992: 337). She even sets in motion the emancipation of other White women in the village, who, inspired by her example, reject the yoke of patriarchy in various ways and join Klara in her quest to flatten the dune. A powerful and caring community of women takes shape, and as unproductive and oppressive gender roles are questioned and transformed, even the men in the village appear happier. What is striking about the character of Klara, is the athleticism and physicality of the role, superbly acted by beloved South African actress Anna-Mart Van der Merwe, a resilient and irrepressible female presence that was a rare sight on South African screens at the time. The film certainly carries a clear feminist theme in its

depiction of female emancipation, although the ending, which sees Klara falling in love with the village teacher, Dawid, is rather more problematic. The final shot contains a slow aerial zoom-out of Klara and Dawid, dancing on the sand dunes during a birthday party hosted for Klara by the villagers, a scene that serves to re-establish and restore heteronormativity and Whiteness. Lesley Marx (1992: 340) argues that all Heyns' films end with the regeneration of family and community, albeit in a conservative, White, Afrikaans mould.

Significantly, *Die Storie van Klara Viljee* was released in 1991, the year Nelson Mandela was released from a 27-year imprisonment, and thus a pivotal transitional time in South Africa's history. If one were unaware of this socio-political context, the film's narrative gives very little away of this turbulent period in South Africa's past. Characters of colour are peripheral and have minimal speaking roles; one of the only hints towards the racial politics of the time, is when the builder, a coloured man, refuses to sit down in the teacher's office, stating: "In this town we do not sit down when talking a white man, Sir." While Klara succeeds in freeing not only herself from the burden of patriarchy, but also inspires other women in the village to oppose and break out of their prescribed oppressive gender roles, these emancipatory acts are limited to the White women in the village only. Indeed, in the South Africa of the early 1990s, Black women breaking out of White oppression and Black patriarchy would be almost inconceivable and one could assume that Heyns would not have considered extending the narrative of female emancipation to Black women. Such a narrative turn would also most likely have led to

the film being banned or censored. Throughout the film we encounter people of colour as extras in the background, filling out the societal context of the time, which consisted of multiracial if segregated communities, even in a small, Afrikaans village. At the end of the film, when most of the community members gather on the beach around Klara's house to celebrate her birthday, characters of colour again hover in the background, but are entirely excluded from the narrative. When bringing this film out of the archives and shining a contemporary light on it, we can appreciate it for its accomplished production values, solid acting and evocative cinematography, and herald it for its White feminist message, but from a racial point of view it remains limited and problematic. As an influential, well-resourced and networked woman filmmaker at the time, a pioneer of female filmmaking in South Africa, it is unfortunate that Heyns did not consider using her creative influence and reach to even subtly critique apartheid and Afrikaners' complicity in it.

Today Heyns' films form a significant part of the history of South African cinema, even if they are not widely seen or available any longer. The rights to all her feature films were previously held by the South African pay television channel, M-Net, within their now defunct African Film Library. Today some of her films can be viewed on Showmax, a South African video-on-demand platform, alongside the work of other (White) South African film pioneers, including Jans Rautenbach's films. Thus, there have been some attempts to archive these works, in order to retain their place within South African film history and create access to these films for contemporary audiences, archivists and researchers. They remain an important part of the

country's film history, even if they are problematic from a contemporary point of view. Lesley Marx (Blignaut & Botha 1992) has suggested that the films of the three female pioneers of South African cinema – Proctor, Nogueira and Heyns – should and could have created the vanguard of feminist filmmaking in South African cinema. Although female themes and a questioning of patriarchal norms are central to their films, the notion of a South African feminist film aesthetic in the absence of any Black female voices is inconceivable today. Heyns' films portray the personal perspectives of the lives and experiences of White women, often to the exclusion and marginalisation of Black stories and characters. Recovering these works from the archives enables us to see the gaps that they leave, omissions that are now slowly being redressed.

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