



## OUR PETRIFIED GARDENS

Constructions of identity on South African TV

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By examining TV's role in rationalizing and validating apartheid, and how such role has changed over time, this article analyses the function that storytelling has played (and plays) in the formulation of the South African identity and in perceptions of what is real.

### INTRODUCTION

Based on personal reflection, my aim in this article is to briefly analyse the function that storytelling has played (and continues to play) in the formulation of the South African identity and in our perception of what is real by examining the role television has played in rationalizing and validating apartheid, and how this role has changed over time. Given this country's political past and the unreliability of official historical text, stories and fiction have played an extremely important role in recording alternative versions of reality. During the apartheid years, one had to turn to other sources of information if one wanted the 'truth' of this country's past and present. While the function of the written word has been the focus of much research and attention, my belief is that South African television has played an equally significant role in South Africa's 'imagining of self', with the medium's reflections of the world-out-there contributing significantly to our understanding of our context and ourselves.

During South Africa's apartheid years, television was a very effective means used by the government to legitimate and justify segregationist politics. While news broadcasts were skewed to show black people as criminals and terrorists, and stringent censorship laws prevented newspapers from printing honest reportage, TV's depiction of a happy, white South Africa played an equally insidious role in justifying that country's overtly racist politics. By presenting a whites-only South Africa as normal and desirable, TV series during apartheid played a surreptitious role in depicting the apartheid order as 'natural', thereby facilitating the continuation of this system of governance long after it should have ended.

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In the same manner in which TV furthered the aims of the Nationalists<sup>1</sup>, the power of this form of media was utilised during the transition years to facilitate peace in the country during a time of political turbulence. Later, it was through the South African Broadcasting Corporation's (SABC) new TV series that South Africa's 'new', racially mixed order was presented to the country, and viewers watched, many for the first time, black and white people interacting on the same social level. Finally, at present, South African TV is a powerful source of information and education, both formally through its 'learning' shows, and by means of its flourishing Entertainment Education programmes.

Thus, my hypothesis is that South African television, from its inception until the present day, has been and continues to be a powerful mediator of reality. Both reflecting and creating what 'is', this far-reaching media vehicle has contributed, in significant ways, to this country's collective sense of self – during apartheid, when it normalised segregation, and in the present day where it is a very strong purveyor of HIV, health and social welfare information. By mirroring back the world-out-there, TV's dual function to reflect and create reality has played an important historical role in the articulation of the South African identity, and has the ability to play a big role in the country's future development.

## THE CHANGING FACE OF SOUTH AFRICAN TELEVISION

While South Africa was, by far, the most economically advanced country in Africa, its population waited a long time for the privilege of television. In fact, it was one of the last countries in the world to have television broadcast, and the reason for this was simple: maintaining the illusion of separate-but-equal, the slogan of apartheid, required the tightest control over what the South African public were allowed to see, read and hear. In the 1970s, the South African Minister for Posts and Telegraphs, Albert Hertzog, argued vehemently against its inception, calling it "the devil's own box, for disseminating communism and immorality." In an interview with the Cape Times newspaper in 1969, Hertzog stated, "If, at the present time you introduce television, you will pay for it with the end of the white man."

Despite the government's unwillingness, public pressure around the issue of television mounted, amplified by the embarrassing fact that South Africa was one of the few countries unable to watch Neil Armstrong land on the moon. In the end, the government had no choice but to capitulate. In 1971, the South African Broadcasting Corporation was finally allowed to introduce a television service. Experimental broadcasts on only one

channel began in 1975, with nationwide service commencing in 1976. This channel divided its broadcasting equally between English and Afrikaans, while five years later, in 1981, a second channel was introduced which broadcast in Zulu, Xhosa, Sotho and Tswana.

Written works of fiction have the potential to challenge and change the 'national imaginary' (Hemer, 2008). Fiction is a powerful mediator of reality. In what follows, I will examine the role of television in contributing to the South African imagining-of-self, reasoning that this medium, with its wider reach and broader audience, has untold potential to influence reality. While literary works have the capacity to denote the complexity and multi-dimensionality of human experience, at the same time their inescapable limitation lies in the fact that reading books remains an elitist pursuit. In developing countries such as South Africa, illiteracy, lack of resources, and a paucity of leisure time for the majority of the population dramatically reduce the 'reach' of works of fiction, limiting their consumption -and therefore impact- to the middle classes.

Television, on the other hand, is a medium that does not require literacy to be watched and understood. It does not have to be purchased by each individual -television sets can be shared by families, friends and communities, and it does not rely on the existence of spare time to the same extent as books -it can be watched (or at least, heard) while other tasks such as cooking, cleaning and ironing are performed. In addition, a very common form of employment for black South African women is as child-minders and domestic workers, situations where television is often on and heard in the background. Thus, while books do not commonly feature in the life of working-class South Africans, TV on the other hand has a pervasive presence, and plays an important role in the South African 'imagining of self.'

Even a casual glance at present-day South African television, when compared to its inception thirty years ago, reveals a striking difference in the articulation of the South African identity, an articulation which both reflects and refutes the 'world-out- there.' As Tufte (2000) explains, in order to maintain audience appeal, this world must be recognisable, based on reality, and familiar enough for its audience to relate to its characters, thereby entering into that zone of 'believing the unbelievable'. Thus, television cultivates a fundamental duality in the sense that what it offers is both a concrete, or 'fixed', idea of how the world works by reflecting back 'reality', while at the same time presenting opportunities for escaping the status quo by offering alternatives to reality.

In order to illustrate some of these points, it is necessary to take a closer look at television in South Africa. In 1976 SABC aired its first-ever locally produced TV series, *The Villagers*, which soon became the most watched

show on South African television. Set on a gold mine, this series documented the lives and dramas of a handful of individuals and families who lived and worked on the mind compound, Village Reef. When viewed now, compared to the sophistication and quick pace of contemporary South African TV, *The Villagers* is painfully slow, while the 'gaps' which link the various dramas and which give the audience a chance to assimilate the flow of the narrative (Tufte, 2000) are so lengthy that maintaining interest is something of a challenge. Nonetheless, to its neophyte 1976 audience, *The Villagers* was fresh and engaging, successfully utilising the mechanisms used by soap operas to retain the interest of their viewers.

Another principal reason why *The Villagers* was such a success in South Africa was its loyal representation of the lives and concerns of its audience; its characters spoke real 'South African English', rolling their 'r's, flattening their vowels, and peppering their speech with Afrikaans-derived words. The folk on Village Reef were ordinary, recognizable and loveable to their audience, and their predictable dramas and tribulations provided a welcome means of escape from the combustible political milieu of South Africa in the late seventies. In the same year that *The Villagers* aired, the Soweto riots of 1976 were one of many events leading to the declaration of a State of Emergency in South Africa whereby the police force was instructed to re-install political stability 'at any cost'. With free reign to quash anything that might be conceived as a threat to the state, 'order' was again restored to South Africa. However, it was becoming increasingly apparent that things were going to change for this small, white tribe that had located themselves on the southernmost tip of Africa.

Given the unruly political climate in South Africa at the time, tight controls on media coupled with arcane and unreasonable censorship laws ensured that a firm control was kept on what information the public was allowed to access. Foreign news, particularly pertaining to the co-ordination of sanctions against South Africa, was edited in a way that made the government appear victimised. The 'story' that was told on national TV made no mention of the disparity in funding allocated to black versus white schools; the inferior level of education that was offered, nor the means (torture, imprisonment, exile) which the state used to quell the growing wave of resistance amongst a segment of the black population.

Given this context, no doubt the producers of *The Villagers* had clearly defined margins within which they had to work. As mouthpiece of the national party, the SABC was obliged to produce a TV show which reflected the interests and concerns of the government; hence the development of a series which, to all intents and purposes, was a manifestation of the fantasy of an Africa-without-Africans. In the few instances that they feature, *The Villagers'* black characters (who remain

unnamed) are depicted as lacking intelligence and in need of guidance and supervision. In contrast to this, of course, is the way *The Villager's* white characters are presented –intelligent, ambitious, industrious and creative, expertly managing the mine and its work-force, and resourceful in solving any problems that arise. While its few black characters are nameless and mute, the white folk are colourful, engaging and sophisticated, and the implicit message of white-over-black superiority is clear. Since there were literally no alternatives, this was the show virtually everyone who had a television set watched; thus, the government had total monopoly on the image South Africa received of itself.

As Tufte (2000) explains in relation to the role of telenovelas in Brazilian society, a duality exists in the way TV correlates with reality: in one sense, the realism of certain shows reflect back the 'world-out-there' as it is, in recognizable, digestible terms. The familiarity of the audience's association with this world comprises one of the reasons certain TV shows command such large audiences. In other words, this (seemingly) unmitigated representation of reality concretises the audience's perception of the 'world-out-there by signifying it in static designations; in this 'real' world, there are some things that cannot be changed; limits as to what can be accomplished. Yet, by the same token, the fact that this 'television world' is a fictional one means that there is a 'space' in which movement *can* occur; in which uncommon things *can* happen. And it is this 'space' for fantasy, for the fulfilment of dreams, which (as Tufte argues) captures the imagination of the audience and keeps them watching the same show night after night. It is within this 'space' that TV has the potential to fulfil a didactic purpose -by offering a somewhat malleable, modified version of reality, audiences' assumptions and prejudices can be challenged, or at least, acknowledged. As certain things become possible/doable within this 'space', there is room for movement, and even improvement, in the lives of the audience.

In 1998, twenty-two years after the first series of *The Villagers* aired, and four years after apartheid was officially abolished, South African audiences were introduced to a new SABC production by the name of *Isidingo*. As a loose 'follow-on' from the original (long since ended) *Villagers* series, *Isidingo* provides an excellent example of the transformation of the 'national imaginary' in South Africa from the seventies to the late nineties. While *The Villagers* shies away from anything even vaguely political, *Isidingo* tackles these topics head-on, and there is a bracing candidness and transparency in its treatment of South African society. In contrast to the 'white' South African English spoken on *The Villagers*, the language spoken by both black and white miners in *Isidingo* is a hybrid of English, Xhosa and Afrikaans, and this language, with its deeply South African roots, crops up frequently as a metaphor for the fusion of cultures and customs which comprise this society. While audiences connect with the familiar sounds of this modified English, the hybridisation of the language

also refutes notions of purity, illuminating the essential mixed-ness of the people of South Africa.

The 'face' of South Africa which *Isidingo* showed was not a pretty one, but it was real, gritty and unafraid, and for this reason, very compelling. It did not feed its audience the lie of the 'rainbow nation' – the fantasy of the races of South Africa existing harmoniously side-by-side. On the contrary, in *Isidingo* (as in South Africa then and now) there is tension and fear, mistrust for this 'new' world and its sentimental platitudes; abuse and exploitation, violence and crime, all of which its audience could relate to, and all of which, of course, make for very good TV. If *The Villagers'* characters could very well have been living in Europe, there is no mistaking *Isidingo's* situation and time, and the stereotyping and racism which constitute much of South African society are exposed, rendered and discussed.

It can be argued that, at the same time as reflecting back a transformed, if shaky, social reality, *Isidingo* fulfilled an important didactic function for a society desperately in need of guidance. When *Isidingo* was first aired, most of its white viewers would never have had social contact with black people; due to laws which strictly enforced the separation of the races, there were (and remain) deeply entrenched prejudices and ignorance by whites about the lives of black South Africans. For the first time, audiences went into their homes, places of work, shebeens (bars) and saw that they were just regular people leading regular lives, and that the fears, superstitions and anxieties harboured by white South Africans against blacks were unfounded and ridiculous. While racism was very much on the agenda and part of each episode's story-line, at the same time South African audiences were being shown a time post-apocalypse, in a sense: a space where South Africans of all races could and did live peaceably side-by-side. A space where similarities and shared human experience took precedence over difference, and history, in that space, was defeated.

While *The Villagers* portrayed a static, unyielding social structure in South Africa with the unstated but obvious aim of preventing its audience from imagining an alternative to apartheid, there is a sense of openness, a malleability to *Isidingo* which embodies the faculty of television to create, and be created by, its social reality. There is a vibrancy in its articulation which hints at possibility and the power of change, and this very clearly reflects the climate during which the series was created. In the early days of South Africa's democracy, a sense of hope and excitement for the future reigned; nothing was impossible in the 'new South Africa.' The early episodes of *Isidingo* reflect this stance – a casting out of the old, oppressive regime, and the rebirth of a new, better world. Now, ten years since *Isidingo* first aired, this attitude has again changed, hope and optimism having been tempered somewhat by South Africa's

ongoing and worsening social problems. Since that time, there has been a sobering realisation that the way the nation was constructed by the old regime remains a big obstacle to reformation in that country, and changing legislation was just the first step. History had cast its tentacles way into the future, and it was going to be a long time before South Africa was free of its stranglehold.

## SOUL CITY, TSHA TSHA AND THE LEGACY OF POVERTY

The most remarkable aspect that emerges from analysing South African television over the past thirty years is that, in the sense of a permanent, homogenous entity, 'South Africa' existed less in reality than it did in the imagination of its storytellers. The contrasts from 1976 to the present time are so dramatic and fantastical; our historical consciousness so severed, that the images of South Africa then and now remain strikingly disparate; barely connectable in any way. Studying these representations, one is aware of an overwhelming sense of severance; an amputation of the 'then' from the 'now', which defies the continuity of national consciousness which might render meaningful our so-called lessons of the past. According to the SABC producers of 1976, South Africa 'was' white men drinking whiskey in comfortable living rooms. 2005's South Africa, by contrast, is black and poor and standing over an open grave where yet another young woman has fallen victim to a preventable disease.

The present 'state of emergency' in South Africa is no longer about keeping political power in the hands of the white minority, but about empowering the poor in South Africa through the dissemination of information. *Soul City* and *Tsha Tsha*, currently the most widely watched shows on South African television, are Education Entertainment (EE) tools constructed with the aim of providing a far-reaching source of health education to information-poor segments of the population. Long used as a means of addressing health-related issues, EE's application as a tool in the fight against HIV has more recent origins. Tufte (2005) offers a broad definition of EE as follows: "Entertainment education is the use of entertainment as a communicative practice crafted to strategically communicate about development issues in a manner and with a purpose that can range from the more narrowly defined social marketing of individual behaviours to the liberating and citizen-driven articulation of social change agendas".

While HIV is not new to South Africa, the attention it is receiving is. Overlooked by the apartheid government as a 'black' disease, the seriousness of this illness continued to be neglected during the optimism and headiness of South Africa's transition period which overshadowed the country's social problems in the early post-apartheid years. Both *Soul City*

and *Tsha Tsha* can be seen as urgent attempts to address South Africa's AIDS pandemic. And while it is understood that EE is not a straightforward solution to altering behaviour, what these shows successfully achieve is a re-articulation of the South African context; a re-imagining of this country on its own terms, in a sense.

*Soul City* is the brain-child of two medical doctors, Shereen Usdin and Garth Japhet, whose work amongst the poor in both rural and urban areas of South Africa led them to the understanding that in order to improve health conditions in the region, they needed to reach a much wider audience. The media were the obvious means to achieve this aim, and a TV show was devised with the aim of transmitting important health information to its viewers. The basic premise of Entertainment-Education (or 'edutainment, as it's commonly abbreviated) is that if one can capture the imagination of one's audience through the use of drama, thereby making the didactic message interesting and relevant, one can change the thinking and behaviour of the individuals watching the show. In this way, the audience itself becomes the vehicle of change (Tufte, 2005). Thus, the television series *Soul City* was developed and subsequently expanded to become a multi-media project including radio and printed materials, and a spin-off show, *Soul Buddyz*, was included to educate and inform youngsters. As well as delivering practical health information to its audience on immunisation, disease prevention and nutrition, *Soul City* touches on some of the major issues and problems of development projects, while utilising audience feedback to deliver its message and extend its reach to the more remote areas of Southern Africa.

The series *Tsha Tsha*, developed along the same lines, was commissioned by the SABC as an emergency project to address the rampant spread of the HIV-virus amongst South African people. Produced by the Centre for AIDS Development, Research and Evaluation (CADRE), *Tsha Tsha* tackles HIV head-on, grappling directly with this frightening disease and the trail it leaves of shame, stigmatization, bereavement and ever-worsening poverty. While *Soul City*'s milieu is contemporary and urban, *Tsha Tsha* takes its audience away, deep into the countryside, to complex, hybrid spaces where the modern is blended with the traditional. While *Soul City*'s primary concern is the communication of health information to its audience, what *Tsha Tsha* does is take a step back, as it were, to investigate the broader context and the socio-cultural factors which make HIV such a difficult disease to control.

It is clear that *Soul City* and *Tsha Tsha* are much more than simply television series - they are meticulously articulated information vehicles designed to address the most pressing issues on the contemporary South African agenda, that of poverty and HIV. While their didactic message is obvious, what they also do is re-tell the South African 'story' from a

different perspective. For the first time in the history of South African television, it can be argued that the image reflected back on the screen is one that represents the population. Whether or not, of course, this re-articulation of the 'national imaginary' penetrates the structures of this riven society remains a pertinent question: a new tale is being told, but are we actually listening? The following and final section attempts to answer this complex question by contemplating the power and the limitations of television broadcasts.

## IMAGINING SOUTH AFRICA

An interesting but perhaps unsurprising phenomenon emerged when embarking on preliminary research for my Master in Communication for Development thesis project. Curious to hear opinions on the new SABC and its flourishing two series, *Soul City* and *Tsha Tsha*, I asked a cross-section of South Africans what they thought of the shows. While overall the black South Africans I spoke to liked and watched the series, the response I got from white South Africans most often was that they had never heard of either show, let alone viewed them. In any other context, this ignorance of the two most watched shows on national television would be bewildering; in South Africa, less so. Fourteen years after the official abolishment of apartheid, it is understandable that one encounters a society still deeply riven by its recent historical past, and the attitudes and prejudices which fed the ideology of separation are still deeply embedded in the minds of many South African people: these are 'black' shows; why would white people watch them?

While there is undoubtedly a travesty in this opportunity to learn something about the lives and experiences of black South Africans missed by white South Africans, it would be naïve to expect the generations of people who grew up during apartheid to not feel a distance from these shows. On the other hand, as I explicate in earlier chapters, television has played a fundamental role in 'mapping' South Africa history, and it has a vitally important role to play in the future. During apartheid, television 'normalised' a whites-only South Africa, presenting a skewed version of reality which supported segregationist politics. Later, it was TV which guided the nation through the turbulent and volatile period of its transition to a democracy. And finally, it was TV which 'taught' South Africans how to live in their changed circumstances by providing a 'blueprint' for what a racially integrated South Africa looked like.

With the hype of the transition period over and the myth of the rainbow-nation long exposed, contemporary television has a similar responsibility to put a human face on poverty and HIV, constructs which are all too real, yet retain an abstractness in much of South Africa. While there is an

awareness of poverty and the public is bombarded with HIV-messages, there remains a sense of these things happening 'out there', in the townships, to people who are 'different.' Televised drama is uniquely suited to challenge these misconceptions; to illustrate, for example, that everybody is vulnerable to the HIV virus, and that poverty is usually a circumstance of factors beyond an individual's control and something which can be addressed and reduced.

South Africa's recent historical past, including the remarkable calm of its transition to democracy, illustrates how pivotal a role media plays on reality, and Edutainment on South African TV has made vitally important strides into addressing this country's social and health issues. Being the first show of its kind, *Soul City* represents an admirably resourceful attempt to address the most urgent of South Africa's problems, while painting an alternative 'picture' of South Africa; one which negates the popular image of South Africa as a place of beautiful, bountiful nature, and articulates this country in much more realistic terms. By identifying and addressing the vital elements from which behaviours and choices are derived, these projects epitomise effective communication methods with their focus on putting power into the hands of their audience, themselves. At the same time, as is widely understood, HIV does not occur in a vacuum, but in an order where the poor are marginalized and their needs are overlooked. What addressing the real issue of poverty requires (on a global scale as in South Africa) is a reformulation of the way in which we view humanity; a re-articulation of 'them', the 'other', not at the opposite end of the dichotomy from ourselves, but one involving the acceptance of our essential sameness.

While much has changed in South Africa, too much remains the same – power rests in the hands of a small elite, and for the most part, the poor have not experienced the benefits of South Africa's economic growth. What *Soul City* and *Tsha Tsha* (and, latterly, *Isidingo*) succeed in doing is telling a new story about South Africa - one which has always been relevant, but long been ignored. At present, South Africa has embarked on a new era of leadership, and with this comes the tentative hope of ushering in an epoch which will stand apart from the others as a time of advancement and change. As it did before in the history of this country, television has the power and the capacity to influence public opinion to a significant extent. If the success of these two series and their representations of South African life can set a trend for future media interpretations of this country we can begin to alter our imaginings of what South Africa is, thereby changing the reality of what it will become.

1. The National Party (also known as Nationalists or Nats) was the governing party of South Africa from 1948 to 1994. Its policies included apartheid, the establishment of a republic and

the promotion of Afrikaans language and culture.

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