*Prof. Ylva Rodny-Gumede*

*Department of Journalism, Film and Television, School of Communication, University of Johannesburg (yrodny-gumede@uj.ac.za)*

# UBUNTU AND THE CINEMATIC DRAMATURGY OF *ELELWANI*

## ABSTRACT

*In this article the author shows how the dramaturgy of Elelwani (wa-Luruli 2012) challenges theories around narration and audience interaction as articulated in the analysis of North American and European films, instead presenting a cinematic dramaturgy uniquely African. This is done by drawing upon two distinct, and often juxtaposed, modes of narration – the classical linear cause and effect narration as exemplified by many Hollywood productions, and art-cinema narration based on symbolism and artistic expression (Bordwell 1985; 2005). In particular, the article draws on Israel's (1991) philosophical distinctions between the Anglo-Saxon narrative with links to a Cartesian dualism between body and mind, and the epic-lyrical narrative linked to Hegel. It is argued that the dramaturgy of Elelwani not only overcomes the Cartesian dualism by giving the individual an active role in the knowledge creating process in the Hegelian tradition, but also draws on, as well as moves away from, a multi-layered epic-lyricism steeped in a European worldview of the self, and instead presents a novel, and uniquely African, dramaturgy steeped in a relational ethic and conceptualisation of self, linked to the Southern African philosophy of ubuntu.*

**Keywords:** *Elelwani*; classical narration; Anglo-Saxon narration; art-cinema narration; epic-lyrical dramaturgy; Descartes; Hegel; *geist*; ubuntu; film communication

## INTRODUCTION

Based on a novel by Titus Maumela, *Elelwani* (wa-Luruli 2012), directed by Ntshavheni wa Luruli and produced by Florian Schattaue, starring Florence Masebe, Vusi Kunene and Ashifashaba Muleya, is the first South African Tshivenda movie. The movie explores the Tshivenda culture in detail and tells the story of a young university educated woman, Elelwani, who returns to the rural village where she grew up. While Elelwani returns to introduce her new boyfriend to her parents, and to tell her parents about an opportunity for continuing her studies abroad, her father has a different plan for her return. Elelwani's father wants her to marry the local Venda King and as such take on the role of Queen of the Venda.

This article shows how the dramaturgy of *Elelwani* challenges theories around narration and audience interaction, as articulated through the analysis of North American and European films, and instead presents a cinematic dramaturgy steeped in a relational ethic and conceptualisation of self, linked to the Southern African philosophy of ubuntu. This is done by drawing on two distinct, and often juxtaposed, modes of narration, classical narration and art-cinema narration as set out by Bordwell (1985; 2005). The article also draws on Israel's (1991) philosophical distinctions between the Anglo-Saxon narrative with links to a Cartesian dualism between body and mind, and the epic-lyrical dramaturgy linked to Hegel.

The article demonstrates how *Elelwani* challenges both of these modes of narration. This is done by overcoming the Cartesian dualism perpetuated through the Hollywood/Anglo-Saxon model of narration, and instead giving the individual an active role in the knowledge creating process in the Hegelian tradition. However, the narration of *Elelwani* also moves away from art-cinema and the Hegelian multi-layered epic-lyrical dramaturgy steeped in a European worldview and an artistic expression of the self, to instead present a novel cinematic dramaturgy, uniquely African.

Bordwell's (1985) distinction between four modes of narration, namely classical narration, art-cinema narration, historical materialist narration and parametric narration, has informed much of the understanding of cinematic narration and audience engagement with film. In this article, the author draws on two of these modes. First, the classical narration often linked to Hollywood mass circulation movies – a style of filmmaking involving a coherent and linear cause and effect narrative structure based on "cinematic realism", characterised by coherence of time and space and a principal agent with clear-cut goals and problems (Villarejo 2007: 153; Bordwell 1985; 2005). Second, art-cinema narration as exemplified through many European movies, based less on cause and effect narration and realism, and instead grounded in symbolism and artistic expression (Bordwell 1985; 2005).

The article first sets out some of the main ideas of, and juxtapositions between, these two forms of narration and the way in which they relate to, and have been expanded on in Israel's (1991) philosophical distinctions between two separate filmic processes. These processes are the Anglo-Saxon (Hollywood) narrative, with links to a Cartesian worldview, and the epic-lyrical narrative, with its links to Hegel, exemplified through art-cinema narration (Hedling 1992; Israel 1991).

Some of the ideas of Hegel's aesthetics will also be expanded upon, i.e. the idea of art as an expression of spirit (*geist*) as they relate to Israel's (1991) conceptualisation of epic-lyrical dramaturgy. The article then proceeds to show how the idea of spirit and time in *Elelwani* both relates to, as well as moves away from, Hegelian ideas of spirit, premised on multi-layered experiences and realities. Instead, it shows how reality and spirit are established through an African conceptualisation of self, informed by the moral philosophy and relational ethic of ubuntu.

## THE HOLLYWOOD MODEL VS THE ART CINEMA MODEL

Whereas "narrative" is commonly understood as the art of story-telling and the representation of an event or story reliant on cause and effect (Bordwell & Thompson 2013: 73), "dramaturgy", a word emanating from stage performance, is the art or technique of dramatic composition and theatrical representation, "a comprehensive exploration of the context in which a play resides" (McCabe 2008: 64). While cinematic dramaturgy is less researched than dramaturgy within the performing arts (Koivumäki 2016), there are many different types of dramaturgy practiced in film that draw on dramaturgy as conceptualised through the performance arts (Potter 2015: 362). Dramaturgy is not "filmed theatre" (Bazin 2005: 76); instead, dramaturgy is a film's dramatic structure and direction, in the words of Bazin (2005: 77), the "embodiment of art and drama". Koivumäki (2016) further defines cinematic dramaturgy as all choices made by the author/director in order to build a cinematic performance for the viewer to experience.

The analysis of film through its inherent dramaturgy, rather than narrative, is essentially a phenomenological approach that seeks to understand the essence of what is experienced – an ontological and existential phenomenological attempt at understanding the being of ourselves. The approach emanated from Hegel's writings on the phenomenology of spirit and was further expanded on by Husserl and Heidegger (Casebier 2009; Inwood 2002; Moran 2000). The analysis of cinematic dramaturgy also leads us away from understanding film as solely narration or the "showing" of things, characters or actions, towards an understanding of film as a thought and thinking process, a film-phenomenology with its own way of "attending to its world" (Frampton 2006: 91).

Even though scholarly engagement with the philosophy of film is still in its infancy, film philosophy or philosophy of film is a growing scholarly field through the examination of the nature of film, film narration, emotional engagement, authorship and its societal role (Wartenberg 2014; Casebier 2009; Colman 2009; Wartenberg & Curran 2005; Freeland & Wartenberg 1995; Jarvie 1987). The philosophical study of phenomenology has influenced much of the theorisation of film through the writings of philosophers such as Jean-Luc Nancy and Merleau-Ponty (Colebrook 2009; Fielding 2009), a philosophical study of the structures of experience and consciousness that stands in contrast to the Cartesian dualistic worldview of objects acting and reacting upon one another (Sobchack 1991; Merleau-Ponty 1989). Merleau-Ponty's (1989) existential and semiotic phenomenology also challenges many of the basic assumptions of current film theory that reduces film to an object of vision and the spectator to a victim of a deterministic cinematic apparatus. Instead, it explores the possibility of human choice and expressive freedom within the bounds of history and culture (Sobchack 1991).

The use of the term "cinematic dramaturgy" in the analysis of *Elelwani* is apt as the director, Ntshavheni wa-Luruli, can be said to draw upon a theatrical dramaturgy rather than narration in many of the scenes. This is particularly prominent in the way in which Elelwani, rather than narrating her story through a clear storyline, instead lets the spectator partake in a thought process that is her own journey to herself, and

the development of spirit through community with others. No more evident is this than through how Elelwani comes to accept the role of Queen of the Venda in the interest of the community. This, through a journey of self-discovery in which she takes on her new role, not as a sacrifice or in resignation, but as a conscious choice.

Israel (1991) outlines Descartes' presentation of the dualism between body and mind and the Cartesian claim that the dualism between subject and object is disconnected. Descartes ignores the individual's interaction with the surrounding world and believes that his or her "truth" is determined in advance by the structure of the world of objects (Israel 1991). Conversely, Hegel tries to overcome this dualism by giving the individual an active role in the knowledge creating process (Israel 1991). By using conflict, climax and resolution, Israel (1991) argues that the classic Hollywood narrative, the Anglo-Saxon dramaturgy, follows the credo of Descartes by moving the spectator forward as a passive element to whom things happen. The truth is given in advance and there is only one interpretation. As such, the spectator remains a passive onlooker merely slotted into the power structure of the film/television programme (Israel 1991). The Anglo-Saxon narration is premised on a linear, and often singular, narrative set out in a chronological order of conflict, climax and resolution and where the linearity of time is used to enforce a realist impression of the plot and film itself (Bordwell & Thompson 2013: 73; Villarejo 2007: 153; Israel 1991).

By contrast, in art-cinema as conceptualised by Israel (1991) through the Hegelian epic-lyrical dramaturgy, the spectator is in dialogue with the narrative of the film through its many parallel lines of action, shifting time chronologies, rich nuances and ambiguities of interpretation. As such there are possibilities of interpretation ruled out in the linear Anglo-Saxon model (Israel 1991). No more is this exemplified than through Hollywood remakes of movies originally thought of as art cinema movies. While, for example, Luc Besson's *Nikita* (Besson 1990) and the original Swedish movie *Män som hatar kvinnor* (transl. 'Men who hate women') (Oplev 2009) are both aligned more with art-cinema narration, the Hollywood remakes *Point of no return* (Badham 1993) and *The girl with the dragon tattoo* (Fincher 2011) employ a distinctly Anglo-Saxon linear cause and effect narration.

Film theorists have long debated narrative models and how they correspond with audience engagement, interpretation and cognitive processes (McCabe 2008; Bordwell 1985; 2005; Chatman 2005; Heath 2005). Some scholars such as Bordwell (1985; 2005) argue that all forms of narration are premised on reception and cognitive processes on behalf of the audience, and hence there is no difference between the Anglo-Saxon narrative and the art-cinema narrative in terms of the cognitive processes, demanded by, and triggered in the audience. Other scholars, while recognising that reception and interpretation of all art forms depend on cognitive processes, argue that they do so in different ways, and to different degrees (Westphal 2011; Žižek 2001). Thus, they argue against a neo-formalism that understates the role of culture and ideology in shaping the film text, and the contexts in which films are produced in any one society (Žižek 2001).

Israel (1991) cites the work of Deleuze (1985) and the different cinematic adaptations of image of movement (*L'image mouvements*), time and image of time (*L'image temps*) and argues that the Anglo-Saxon model follows a mechanical image-by-image succession dependent on a near realistic linear-time narration that demands little in terms of audience engagement and cognition. On the contrary, narration in art-cinema often breaks with the linearity of time and as such demands of the audience to engage with the narrative in ways that rely on imagination and a dialectic relationship with the narrative (Israel 1991).

This distinction also comes through in the ways in which characters in the Anglo-Saxon model are moved along with the plot with no agency of their own, and no articulation of self. In contrast, the epic-lyrical dramaturgy provides for characters to exercise agency and the development of self through multi-layered personas shaped by a Hegelian understanding of history as dynamic, and the present containing within it traces of the past. This is further emphasized through Bakhtin's concepts of dialogism and polyphony (Flanagan 2009). Bakhtin's analysis of the works of Dostoyevsky, for example, provides an understanding of the development of self as an "unfinalisability" and determined through interactions with others (Flanagan 2009). The idea of imagination and development of cognition has also been highlighted in later years with regards to non-Western movies, exemplified through Bollywood productions that have become more accessible to Western audiences (Colm-Hogan 2009) and that moves beyond dichotomies of mass production and art-cinema classifications. This can also be seen through the rise of an African film industry in which narratives and narrative structures contextualised from within local politics, cultures and locales increasingly apply a decidedly non-Western gaze.

## FILM DRAMATURGY AND THE EPIC LYRICAL

Israel's (1991) conceptualisation of an epic-lyrical dramaturgy emanates from Hegel's aesthetics, in which Hegel provides an outline of what art teaches us about human nature and ourselves (Houlgate 2014). To understand this, and to put art in context of human nature, Hegel drew upon his philosophy of nature in which he shows that life is more explicitly rational than mere physical matter and thus more explicitly self-determining (*ibid*.). This occurs, in Hegel's view, with the emergence of *human* existence. Human beings, for Hegel, are not just accidents of nature; instead, they are reason itself that has come to life and consciousness of itself (*ibid*.).

Thus, for Hegel, life itself becomes more explicitly rational and self-determining when it becomes conscious and self-conscious – that is, life that can imagine, use language, think and exercise freedom (*ibid*.). Such self-conscious life Hegel calls "spirit" (*geist*) (Houlgate 2005: 78), as further developed in the phenomenology of Husserl's life-world (Moran 2000: 60). For Hegel the unity of the world and the mind is spirit discovering itself (Solomon & Higgins 2010: 133) and "humanity connected through an all embracing spirit" (Solomon & Higgins 2010: 62), neither separate nor different from us (Solomon & Higgins 2010: 78).

Art, seen as objects created by human beings, gives expression to the spirit's understanding of itself and renders the freedom of spirit visible or audible to an audience (Houlgate 2014). As such, the art of movies makes human spirit (self-consciousness and freedom of expression) visible. Art's purpose is therefore to enable us to bring to mind the truth about ourselves, and so to become aware of who we truly are. In an African context, such opportunities have been rare, particularly through cinematic expressions that are truly and uniquely African, and that talk to Africans' truths about their own existence.

With regards to how art brings to mind truths about ourselves and our freedom, Hegel analyses poetry and poetic expression. Hegel identifies three basic forms of poetry: epic, lyric and dramatic poetry (Houlgate 2014). In Hegel's view, all poetry is an attempt to give expression to the complex, yet crucial relationship between humanness and the divine forces of the universe (Law 2000: 116). One of the central issues of poetry for Hegel is the problem of ascertaining our position in the cosmos: What are we? Why are we here? And to what extent if any are we free? (*ibid*.). For Hegel, spirit moves towards self-understanding through human history (Solomon & Higgins 2010: 135-136) and as our consciousness evolves we find answers to the questions of what we are, why we are here, and to what extent, if any, we are free (Law 2000: 116).

For Hegel dramatic poetry presents the most concrete form of art in which individuals are acting in pursuit of their *own* will and interest, and thereby coming into conflict with other individuals (Houlgate 2014). However, dramatic poetry does not depict the richness of the epic world or explore the inner world of lyric feeling; instead, epic poetry presents spiritual freedom—that is, free human beings—in the context of a world of circumstances and events. "In the epic," Hegel (*ibid*.) states, "individuals act and feel; but their actions are not independent, events [also] have their right". What is described in such poetry, therefore, is "a play between actions and events" (*ibid*.). Epic individuals are situated individuals, caught up in a larger enterprise, as for example in the Trojan War in Homer's *Iliad* (*ibid*.). What they do is thus determined as much by the situation in which they find themselves, as by their own will, and the consequences of their actions are to a large degree at the mercy of circumstances. As such, epic poetry shows us the "worldly" character and attendant limitations of human freedom. In contrast to the epic hero, the subject of lyric poetry does not undertake tasks, journeys or adventures in the world, but simply gives expression to the self's ideas and inner feelings through hymns, odes or songs (*ibid*.).

Hence, poetry for Hegel shows us ourselves, our freedoms and the limits thereof. This stands in contrast to the Cartesian dualistic worldview of cause and effect, mind and matter, subject and object, and human beings as disconnected from the world around them. Hegel's analysis of art as an expression of spirit can tell us something about how art provides the spirit with an understanding of the self. Hegel's account also provides us with a framework for analysing the dissolve of time, or circularity and infinity of time, as well as conceptual notions of reality.

As much as juxtapositions between cause and effect and/or linear narrative models and art-cinema models can be challenged on grounds of interpretation and amalgamations

of narrative forms, as well as challenges to ideas of audience interaction and spectator cognition as lesser in one than the other (Casebier 2009; Bordwell 1985), what is important for the analysis that follows is that Hegel's aesthetics and the conceptualisation of the epic-lyrical puts the emphasis on creating a communicative relationship with the spectator (Israel 1991). The interpretation and imagination that is left to the spectator is empowering, non-determinist and open, unlike its oft thought counterpart, the Anglo-Saxon linear model, which offers the spectator limited interpretation, imagination and closed readings (*ibid*.). Further to this, the reading of art-cinema narration through the Hegelian epic-lyrical shows us the genre's emphasis on the development and cognition of multi-layered personas that defy the linearity and determination of time, and whose past, present and future lies in the dissolve, circularity and infinity of time.

Israel (1991) highlights Russian filmmakers such as Tarkovsky as epitomising the epic-lyrical dramaturgy through movies such as *Ivan's Childhood* (Tarkovsky 1962), *Andrei Rublev* (Tarkovsky 1966), *Solaris* (Tarkovsky 1972), *The Mirror* (Tarkovsky 1975), *Stalker* (Tarkovsky 1979), *Nostalgia* (Tarkovsky 1983) and *Sacrifice* (Tarkovsky 1986). Kona (2010) argues that Tarkovsky's films invent a language of the spirit through the poetry of the cinematic image in which art, the individual, and the life of the spirit are interconnected. His films are about the "interior terrains where a person is one with oneself … on the borders of invisible realms" that "…can be felt rather than logically deciphered". *Solaris* (Tarkovsky 1972), for example, addresses the anxieties that knowledge produces when you have to face your real self, and in movies such as *Stalker* (Tarkovsky 1979) and *Nostalgia* (Tarkovsky 1983), Tarkovsky explores his characters' quest for redemption (Kona 2010). Not only does Tarkovsky emphasise the inner feelings and life-worlds of his characters, he also explores the phenomenon of spatio-temporal lapses and alternative time frames that disrupt the linear progression of events and instead creates narrative discontinuity (Skakov 2012).

However, little has these juxtapositions between narrative forms and explorations of time and self factored in all the nuances in between, particularly with regards to cultural expressions outside of Northern Europe and the Euro-Russian Slavic sphere. Hegel decidedly ignored Africa in his explorations of art and self (wa Thiong'o 2014: 36) and saw Africa as still enveloped "…in the dark mantle of the night" (wa Thiong'o 2012: 42). However, as a response to this in non-Western traditions, stands narrative structures of magic realism, often quoted in the context of, and linked to, African narrative expressions (Grzeda 2013; Cooper 1998). Magic realism has been used to explain how the spirit understands time and the dissolve of time and reality through bringing in elements perceived as magical and that deviates from reality (Bowers 2004). Casebier (2009), however, questions these juxtapositions and argues that film theorisation has been set back by debates of nominalism and idealism. Instead, he argues for an understanding of film narration based on Husserl's phenomenology and develops a theory that stands counter to existing theories about the nature of cinematic representation. He argues for a theory that is realist with respect to both epistemology and ontological issues and that goes against a view of human identity wherein the human subject is constructed by, and in, a cultural context rather than being transcendent to it, as in

Hussel's phenomenological account (Casebier 2009: 112). As such, Casebier (*ibid*.) argues that all narration is realist in its own right.

Taking Casebier's (*ibid*.) argument further, the problem of understanding the dissolve of time and reality in the context of African film lies in the idea of the perception and interpretation of the magical itself. The magical is neither magical nor part of reality, instead history and those who have come before us are ever present, not myth nor magical elements of the present. Instead, what is perceived, often by Western audiences, as magical or myth in the tradition of Latin American magic realism, is part of the real and non-magical reality of everyday life in African culture. Thus, when, in African tradition, the drink is poured on the floor, often interpreted in a Western context as paying homage to the ancestors or the dead, this act is in fact honouring the present and the living – the presence of the ancestor in the room. As such, the transference of magical realism to African film does not accurately capture a relational understanding of the self as neither dissolved in time nor informed by time past and neither does it capture the perceived magical as something lived and experienced in the present rather than unexpected and separate from the here and now or as a fusion of the real and the fantastic (Flores 1995).

Instead, the dramaturgy of *Elelwani* and the protagonist Elelwani herself can better be understood through the sub-Saharan relational ethic and moral philosophy of ubuntu.

## UBUNTU AND THE CONCEPTUALISATION OF SELF

The African philosophy of ubuntu has been likened to European ideas of communitarianism. Both hold the community as "ontologically prior to person … and serves as an antidote to mainstream libertarianism" (Christians 2004: 235). However, Metz and Gaie (2010: 275) argue that ubuntu stands apart from Western morality of self-realisation in that sub-Saharan morality is relational in a way that other Western approaches usually are not. Ubuntu is often interpreted as "a person becomes a person through other persons", which means that one cannot realise one's true self in opposition to others or even in isolation from them (Metz & Gaie 2010: 275). Metz (2007) argues that ubuntu is grounded in moral conceptions of human dignity where human beings have dignity by virtue of their capacity for constructing community through identifying with, and exhibiting, solidarity with others.

Further to this, a person's humanness is developed through relating to others in positive ways (Metz & Gaie 2010: 275). Emeritus Archbishop Desmond Tutu (1999: 31) articulates this as:

> a person with ubuntu is open to others, and does not feel threatened that others are able and good, for he or she has a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that he or she belongs in a greater whole and is diminished when others are humiliated or diminished, when others are tortured or oppressed.

Building on this Metz (2007: 337) argues that ubuntu entails goodwill and solidarity amongst people to enable them to achieve viable communities based on caring for one another and to build meaningful identities for themselves in ways that produce

shared identity. They do so with the goal to produce harmonious relationships rather than discordant ones (Metz 2007: 341). In order to achieve this, a certain sacrifice of self for the sake of others is needed (Metz 2007: 337). Thus, a sense of self and personhood is defined in relation to the community and a sense of mutuality of needs where self-hood and being is constructed through participation (Mkhize 2008: 39-40).

The construction of self through ubuntu is therefore done in community with others in ways that construct community in positive ways. Choices made, and cause and effect, are intrinsically linked to a relational ethic of belonging and solidarity rather than one character's subjective journey towards self-realisation. However, this does not mean an erasure of individuality or self; on the contrary, and here Chasi (2014) makes an important impasse, in that he argues that through ubuntu individuals are also grown towards the best that they can be. In this sense ubuntu as an ethic can also be interpreted as epitomising the best of individualistic self-realisation.

Notwithstanding Hegel's ideas of Africa and culture only emerging in Africa as result of European colonialism (wa Thiong'o 2014: 36), the Hegelian ideas of epic-lyrical poetry will not only help us understand the dramaturgical narrative of *Elelwani,* but also how the film ultimately presents a novel, and uniquely African dramaturgy, beyond the causal and/or linear and the symbolic epic-lyrical; a dramaturgy in which the idea of spirit is constructed through community with others, as much as through the uniquely individual journey of the spirit towards itself.

## THE DRAMATURGY OF *ELELWANI*

In the first scene, we meet Elelwani. She is yet to be presented to us as the future Queen of the Venda; however, when we first meet her in her bedroom in the royal village, a location not yet know to us, we guess at her importance to the narrative yet to unfold. As spectators, we are also given a clue to the overall narrative structure of the movie. Through the simplicity of the room, we have the sense of attending a stage production, and we grasp at a storyline that is different from the linear, a storyline more aligned to the narration of the art-cinema. We are drawn in by Elelwani's words, "I am Elelwani, my journey has brought me to myself", words through which she presents herself to the spectator, as much as to herself.

However, this is quickly dispersed as we enter the second scene, in which we leave the stage production and instead enter into the realm of the perceivably "real" and "tangible". Elelwani returns from the city to the village of her birth with her boyfriend Vele. We are introduced to the main characters and the plot step by step, following a linear Anglo-Saxon model, and are thus given a sense of an impending conflict between Elelwani and her parents, on the one hand, and Elelwani and Vele, on the other; a conflict easily read as modernity versus tradition. Elelwani no longer talks to the spectator; instead, her spirit is obscured and temporarily subordinate to the drama unfolding.

In subsequent scenes, we see the conflict escalating through Elelwani negotiating her life path with her parents as well as with Vele. As spectators we are moved along the path of the linear, we know the conflict, we guess at a climax and reach the point of no return in the form of Elelwani's decision to follow tradition and to marry the Venda

King and thereby save her younger sister who has been chosen to take her place due to Elelwani's initial refusal to marry.

The causal linear narrative is however broken and re-imagined as we at times find ourselves back in the stage production and the realm of the art-cinema. This is exemplified through the way in which the community elders enter the scene in impasses that break the linear with visuals and references to a culture that defies the causal linear narration. The stage production is also emphasised in Elelwani's interactions with her parents and in her pleas for self-determination.

However, we are still in the realm of the linear, real and tangible. This is reinforced as we are visually led down a village path as Elelwani undertakes the journey from her parents homestead to the village of Prince Thovele and the Venda. Prince Thovele as a character is still unknown to the spectator, but we guess at his role as someone who might take the plot to its climax, and maybe even resolution. However, as Elelwani reaches the village of her future husband, the causal linear narrative is yet again dissolved and we find the dramaturgy suspended between the linear and the lyrical.

We now enter the realm of the spirit. Elelwani, who has thus far been presented to us as a character in conflict and as a character facing a dilemma, now transitions into a multi-layered character who is no longer locked into a narrative model dependent on conflict, climax and resolution. Instead, Elelwani drives the dramaturgy in directions that give the spectator the power to imagine spirit in ways that go beyond the linear and where time is no longer conformant to the linear. Instead, time is dissolved and premised on Elelwani's understanding of present as part of a circularity of time in which past, present and future are dissolved.

This is emphasised through the relationship that Elelwani forms with Prince Thovele. Thovele, who has remained an almost mythical character, is, when we first meet him, presented to us as a tragic character disguised by a golden mask. He seemingly epitomises the Hegelian epic character, a character at the mercy of the circumstances and the situation he finds himself in. As such, he shows the attendant limitations of human freedom (Houlgate 2014). Thovele is imprisoned on the outskirts of the village and prevented to take on the role as King of the Venda through a succession feud devised by his sister, who, by keeping Thovele locked away from the rest of the community, eagerly awaits the opportunity to seize the crown. Thovele is not only physically imprisoned; he is denied his humanity, his ubuntu through community with others. As will become clear as the narrative unfolds, he is a character yet to be released through the humanity and ubuntu of Elelwani.

What unfolds is a drama contingent on Elelwani's journey towards an understanding of herself in relation to the community she belongs to. In her interactions with Thovele, Elelwani shows us that she has ubuntu. This, to paraphrase Tutu (1999: 31), through being open to others, not feeling threatened that others are able and good, and by gaining self-assurance from knowing that she belongs in a greater whole and that her spirit is diminished when others are humiliated or oppressed.

This is further developed with the return of Vele. Vele, who we have known in the realm of the real and a causal linear narrative, now returns as a comedic character. He is

in disguise and initially unrecognisable to the spectator. Whilst Vele returns hoping for reconciliation, Elelwani has made her choice, she has realised her role is that of Queen of the Venda. Her destiny is grounded in a realisation of herself as part of the community she is shaped by, and importantly is to shape, past, present and future. We no longer see the conflicted young woman trapped between her own wishes and those of others, driven forward by a causal linear narrative; instead, she rises to herself within the realm of the epic-lyrical, but also through her understanding of self-realisation in, and through, community with others.

As a film *Elelwani*, and the character Elelwani, represents spirit in the Hegelian sense, as spirit discovering itself as a basis for the unity of the world and the mind (Solomon & Higgins 2010: 133), through "humanity connected through an all embracing spirit" (Solomon & Higgins 2010: 62), not separate or different from us (Solomon & Higgins 2010: 78). However, the unique ways in which her journey to self-realisation is narrated is also uniquely narrated and enmeshed in an understanding of ubuntu as the fundamental ethos underlining the realisation as self-premised on community with others, past, present and future. This is further emphasised through the recurrent appearance of a white lion, a symbol that in Venda culture represents the spirits of the ancestors present in the surrounding landscape.

In the last scene, we find ourselves back in Elelwani's bedroom in the royal village. She is now the Queen of the Venda. Dramaturgically and visually, time is circular and infinite and yet suspended in the present as Elelwani yet again speaks, "My journey has brought me to myself … I am Elelwani. And I am free."

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Hegel's analysis of art tells us how art provides the spirit with an understanding of the spirit, and provides us with a framework for analysing the dissolve of time, or rather circularity and infinity of time, as well as conceptual notions of reality. Hegel's aesthetics show us how the beauty of the non-linear dramaturgy lies in the relationship it creates with the spectator (Israel 1991). Here, the interpretation and imagination that is left to the spectator is empowering, non-determinist and open (*ibid*.).

However, while the Hegelian idea of drama, contingent on both the poetic and the lyrical, gives a framework for the analysis of both creative expression on behalf of the filmmaker as well as the spectator's role in knowledge creation, it does not account for geographically and historically situated experiences. The dramaturgy of *Elelwani* is neither causal linear or epic-lyrical, neither is it magical or symbolic. Instead, the dramaturgy of *Elelwani* is better described as transcendent and realist in its own right (Casebier 2009), with the lived and the real explored through the human spirit grounded in ubuntu.

Thus, the dramaturgy is premised on, and formed by, Elelwani's journey to herself as she transitions and transcends both the linear and causal as well as the epic-lyrical. Her journey represents not only a transition from modernity to tradition but also a journey that bridges the two. No one says this better than director Ntshavheni wa-Luruli himself:

> Culture can only survive if it can adapt – if not, it's doomed to die. This young woman is the present South Africa, who is trying to forge a bridge between what it was [her past], and what it is [her present] … It integrates the old and modern culture and Elelwani learns that there is no contradiction or conflict between African tradition and modernity, as both traditions can live side by side with the understanding that neither of the two is better than the other (wa-Luruli, in Kumalo-Valentine 2010).

As such, *Elelwani* embodies the African spirit in its dramaturgy and through the character of Elelwani herself. At the same time, the dramaturgy of the film acknowledges the spirit of the spectator as a co-creator of meaning, and the articulation of spirit premised on ubuntu – a spirit that is free to express itself precisely because it is premised on community, solidarity and belonging past, present and future. As such, Elelwani's journey to herself is a journey to humanity through ubuntu, and premised on a uniquely African philosophical understanding of spirit. Such an understanding also moves the theorisation of *Elelwani* away from an understanding of cinematic expression as narration solely, towards an understanding of the film as a film-phenomenology with its own way of "attending to its world" (Frampton 2006: 91), and in this instance through the articulation of the uniquely African ethic of ubuntu.[1]

## ENDNOTES

[1] The author wishes to thank the anonymous reviewers of *Communitas* for their insightful and critical comments, which have greatly added to the strength of the overall argument and narrative of the article.

## LIST OF REFERENCES

Bakhtin, M.M. 1984. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics.* (trans. C. Emerson). Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Bazin, A. 2005. *What is cinema?* Berkley: University of California Press.

Bordwell, D. 1985. *Narration in the fiction film*. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press.

Bordwell, D. 2005. Principles of film narration. In: Wartenberg, T. & Curran, A. (eds). *The philosophy of film: Introductory text and readings.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Bordwell, D. & Thompson, K. 2013. *Film art: An introduction*. (Tenth edition). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Bowers, M.A. 2004. *Magic(al) realism: The new critical idiom*. New York: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203625002

Casebier, A. 2009. *Film and phenomenology: Towards a realist theory of cinematic representation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chasi, C. 2014. Ubuntu and freedom of expression. *Ethics & Behavior* 24(6): 495-509. https://doi.org/10.1080/10508422.2014.894913

Chatman, S. 2005. The cinematic narrator. In: Wartenberg, T. & Curran, A. (eds). *The philosophy of film: Introductory text and readings.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Christians, C. 2004. Ubuntu and communitarianism in media ethics. *Ecquid Novi* 25(2): 235-256. https://doi.org/10.1080/02560054.2004.9653296

Colebrook, C. 2009. Jean-Luc Nancy. In: Coleman, F. (ed.). *Film, theory and philosophy: The key thinkers.* Durham: Acumen.

Colman, F. (ed.). 2009. *Film, theory and philosophy: The key thinkers*. Durham: Acumen.

Colm-Hogan, P. 2009. *Understanding Indian movies: Culture, cognition, and cinematic imagination*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Cooper, B. 1998. *Magical realism in West African fiction: Seeing with a third eye*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203451397

Fielding, H.A. 2009. Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In: Coleman, F. (ed.). *Film, theory and philosophy: The key thinkers.* Durham: Acumen.

Flanagan, M. 2009. *Bakhtin and the movies: New ways of understanding Hollywood film*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230252042

Flores, A. 1995. Magical realism in Spanish fiction. In: Zamora, L.P. & Faris, W.B. (eds). *Magical realism: Theory, history, community*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Frampton, D. 2006. *Filmosophy*. London: Wallflower Press.

Freeland, C. & Wartenberg, T. 1995. *Philosophy and film*. London: Routledge.

Grzeda, P. 2013. Magical realism: A narrative of celebration or disillusionment? South African literature in the transition period. *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature* 44(1). [Online]. Available at: http://www.ariel.ucalgary.ca/ariel/index.php/ariel/article/view/4472 [Accessed on 02 March 2017].

Heath, S. 2005. Against authorship. In: Wartenberg, T. & Curran, A. (eds). *The philosophy of film: Introductory text and readings.* Oxford: Blackwell.

Hedling, E. 1992. Filmdramaturgi och vardagstänkande: En kunskapssociologisk studie by Lena Israel. *Sociologisk Forskning* 29(2): 85-89.

Hegel, G.W.F. 1975. *Aesthetics: Lectures on fine art*. Volume 2. (transl. T.M. Knox). Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Houlgate, S. 2005. *An introduction to Hegel: Freedom, truth and history*. London: Blackwell.

Houlgate, S. 2014. Hegel's aesthetics. Stanford Encyclopaedia of philosophy. [Online]. Available at: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hegel-aesthetics/ [Accessed on 02 March 2017].

Inwood, M. 2002. *Heidegger: A very short introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780192854100.001.0001

Israel, L. 1991. *Filmdramaturgi-en kunskapssociologisk studie*. Stockholm: Daidalos.

Jarvie, I. 1987. *Philosophy of the film: Epistemology, ontology and aesthetics*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203221952

Koivumäki, M-R. 2016. *Dramaturgical approach in cinema: Elements of poetic dramaturgy in A. Tarkovsky's films*. Doctoral thesis. Helsinki: Aalto University publication series.

Kona, P. 2010. The spiritual cinema of Andrei Tarkovsky. *Off Screen* 14(12). [Online]. Available at: http://offscreen.com/view/spiritual_cinema_tarkovsky [Accessed on 02 March 2017].

Kumalo-Valentine, Z. 2014. 'Elelwani' in the race for an Oscar. *Mail & Guardian*, 8 October.

Law, S.C. 2000. Hegel and the spirit of comedy. In: Maker, W. (ed.). *Hegel and aesthetics.* Albany: State University of New York. https://doi.org/10.5840/hsaproceedings2000149

McCabe, T. 2008. *Mis-Directing the play: An argument against contemporary theatre.* Chicago: Ivan R Dee.

Merleau-Ponty, M. 1989. *The phenomenology of perception*. London: Routledge.

Metz, T. 2007. Towards an African theory. *The Journal of Political Philosophy* 15(3): 321-341. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9760.2007.00280.x

Metz, T. & Gaie, J. 2010. The African ethics of Ubuntu/Botho: Implications for research on morality. *Journal of Moral Education* 39(3): 273-290. https://doi.org/10.1080/03057240.2010.497609

Mkhize, N. 2008. Ubuntu and harmony: An African approach to morality and ethics. In: Nicolson, R. (ed.). *Persons in community: African ethics in a global culture.* Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press.

Moran, D. 2000. *Introduction to phenomenology*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203196632

Potter, G. 2015. Dramaturgy and film. In: Romansk, M. (ed.). *The Routledge companion to dramaturgy*. New York: Routledge.

Skakov, N. 2012. *The cinema of Tarkovsky: Labyrinths of space and time*. New York: I.B Tauris.

Sobchack, V. 1991. *The address of the eye: A phenomenology of film experience.* Princeton, HJ: Princeton University Press.

Solomon, R.C. & Higgins, K.M. 2010. *The big questions: A short introduction to philosophy*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, Cengage Learning.

Tutu, D. 1999. *No future without forgiveness*. New York: Random House.

Villarejo, A. 2007. *Film studies: The basics*. New York: Routledge.

Wartenberg, T. 2014. Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy: Philosophy of Film. [Online]. Available at: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/film/ [Accessed on 02 March 2017].

Wartenberg, T. & Curran, A. (eds). 2005. *The philosophy of film: Introductory text and readings*. Oxford: Blackwell.

wa Thiong'o, N. 2012. The language of scholarship in Africa. *Leeds African Studies Bulletin* 74: 42-47.

wa Thiong'o, N. 2014. *Globalectics: Theory and the politics of knowing*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Westphal, K.R. 2011. Self-consciousness, anti-Cartesianism, and cognitive semantics. In: Houlgate, S. & Baur, M. (eds). *A companion to Hegel*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.

Žižek, S. 2001. *The fright of real tears: Krzysztof Kieslowski between theory and post-theory*. London: British Film Institute.

## FILMS

*Andrei Rublev* (1966) Andrei Tarkovsky

*Elelwani* (2012) Ntshavheni Wa-Luruli

*Ivan's Childhood* (1962) Andrei Tarkovsky

*Män som hatar kvinnor* (transl. 'Men who hate women') (2009) Niels Arden Oplev

*Nikita* (1990) Luc Besson

*Nostalgia* (1983) Andrei Tarkovsky

*Point of No Return* (1993) John Badham

*Sacrifice* (1986) Andrei Tarkovsky

*Solaris* (1972) Andrei Tarkovsky

*Stalker* (1979) Andrei Tarkovsky

*The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011) David Fincher

*The Mirror* (1975) Andrei Tarkovsky