



---

## The Effect of South African Geopolitical Position in the Development of Cinema in South Africa

---

Hassan Eskandari<sup>1</sup>, Amirbahram Arabahmadi<sup>2\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Regional Studies, Southern Africa Studies, Faculty of World Studies, Tehran University, Tehran, Iran

<sup>2</sup>Faculty of World Studies, Tehran University and Fellow Research at International Institute for Asian Studies, Leiden University, Leiden, Netherlands

---

Received: 5 Nov 2018 ; Accepted: 20 June 2019

---

### Abstract:

This paper will discuss about the role of the geopolitical location of South Africa in the development of movie and the cinema industry in this country. Despite of bringing cinema to South Africa by white Europeans, but the development of this phenomenon is mostly due to the geopolitical position of this country. It is interesting to know that cinema reached Africa in much the same time as it spread across Europe and the United States. Moreover, the South African film industry is one of the oldest in the world, with the first feature film, *The Kimberly Diamond Robbery*; being shot in 1910. South African cinema is one of the best and well-developed cinemas in the African continent. Regarding to the advantages of geopolitics factors in South Africa there are a large number of the US and European active film companies in this country. These factors are included: Variety of culture, language, religion, climate, wildlife, lower cost of living, and working compare with European and American countries. And also, as South Africa is a country of strikingly beautiful and varied landscape, with a wide variety of climatic zones that range from the Kalahari Desert in the northwest to the dramatic mountain range in the southeast, and from the Mediterranean coastal ridges in the south-central region to the rolling prairie Savanna grassland of the central plateau and the north.

**Keywords:** Geopolitical location, Variety of culture, Language, Religion, Climate, Wildlife, Lower cost of living and working, Development

### Introduction

This article will explain the effects of geopolitical location of South Africa in the development of cinema as a whole and the cinema

industry. The Republic of South Africa occupies the southernmost part of the African continent. Covering a land area of over

---

\*Corresponding Author's Email: Arabahmadi@ut.ac.ir

470,000 square miles, one-seventh the area of the United States, South Africa is one of the largest and certainly the most industrialized states in Africa (Afolayan, 2004: 1)

South Africa is a unique country in the African continent “with a heterogeneous population of approximately 55 million people and bounded on the southwest by the Atlantic Ocean and in the southeast by the Indian Ocean, these country shares boundaries with Namibia in the northwest, with Botswana and Zimbabwe in the north, and with Swaziland and Mozambique in the northeast”. (Middleton, 2002 : Volume 4:46)

This land was very important for Europeans. So, regarding this, the directors of the Dutch East India Company in 1652, sent Jan van Riebeeck and his party of 90 men to establish a small, fortified station at Table Bay that would perform the specific and limited functions of supplying passing ships with fruit, vegetables, grain, and fresh water; providing temporary housing where sick sailors could recuperate. (Farley, 2008: 47)

It was the first time that white European thinks about permanent settlement in South Africa, so they made a close relationship with indigenous people and maintaining good relations with the Khoikhoi, who were the main source of meat for the company fleets later on they found this region is a strategic location and fertile land, So, they gradually started to annex the fertile land to their territory and send the native owner of those lands towered the north of the cape. Then, later British came to this land to make another territory, in sum bloodshed wars happened between two occupiers. They killed lots of each other's and also innocent black people during these wars. Then, eventually in 1910 two sides made reconciliation and made new policy which was completely in interesting of the minority of white in return to the majority

of black people which call the Union of South Africa.

A decade before this time “South Africa was one of the first countries in the world to see and hear sound motion pictures. The Kinetoscope (invented by Thomas Edison) was a box in which people could see a moving image. The first Kinetoscopes in South Africa were opened to the public on April 19, 1895 in Johannesburg. It completely belonged to the white people”. (Arabahmadi, 2013: 32)

This technology was completely in service of whites and “white government used by this technology just in the news as a short film and just white people were engaged in producing these films and also, only could see these films. It is interesting to know that cinema reached Africa in much the same time as it spread across Europe and the United States. And “the South African Film Industry is one of the oldest in the world, with the first feature film, *The Kimberley Diamond Robbery*, being shot in 1910. It is also one of the most fragmented industries, since the national audience is severely divided and the black majority has very limited access to cinema”. (Treffry-Goatley, 2010: 38)

Despite European claim that they brought cinema and developed it in South Africa, there is another factor for cinema development in this country the geopolitical conditions of South Africa which has been led to attract the Western countries, and the pioneers of the cinema industry to South Africa. It was one of the reasons for the flourished cinema and film industry of this country. Regarding the geopolitical position of South Africa there are a large number of the US and Europe film companies in this country, so it is important for any film director and producer to know and to use these capabilities of well-developed country especially in the field

of film and cinema industry. These factors are included: Variety of culture, language, religion, climate, wildlife, lower cost of living, and working compare with European and American countries. And also, as “South Africa is a country of strikingly beautiful and varied landscape, with a wide variety of climatic zones that range from the Kalahari Desert in the northwest to the dramatic mountain range in the southeast, and from the Mediterranean coastal ridges in the south-central region to the rolling prairie Savanna grassland of the central plateau and the north”. (Scholvin, 2014: 67)

South African cinema is one of the best and well-developed one in the African continent, this phenomenon came to South Africa by white Europeans. So, this will be important to know, how the geographical position of South Africa can help to improve cinema and film industry in this country.

### Methodology

This paper is based on document analysis and the research methodology is qualitative, which means data extracted from books and journal, which had been written in this case. The main reasons to choose this method compare to other methods, is the lack of enough time to do interview with experts about the role of geopolitical position of South Africa in the development of cinema in this country, and it is common for writers on social and political research to use this method to cover the wide variety of objects on whom or from whom data will be collected. In social research, we are rarely in a position in which we can interview, observe, or send questionnaires to all possible individuals who are appropriate to our research. Time and cost issues will always constrain the number of cases we can include in.

### Literature Review

This research is set out on the effect of South African geopolitical position in the development of the cinema in South Africa and the first book is *Culture and Customs of South Africa*, which wrote by Funso Afolayan and published in 2004. It contains ten chapters and in chapter Land and People, I found the general information such as location, population, and industrial position of South Africa.

The second book is *The Geopolitics of Regional Power*, which wrote by Sören Scholvin and published in 2014. This book contains seven chapters. I used chapter three for geographical data and the variety of climate in South Africa.

The third book is *South Africa in World History* which wrote by Iris Berger and published in 2009. This book contains eight chapters and I found in chapter two, The History of Penetrating of Dutch in South Africa.

The fourth book *Africa: an Encyclopedia for Students Volume 1* wrote by John Middleton and published in 2002. This book is an encyclopedia of Africa, it is a main source for paper and I found in this book about the effect of climate, wildlife, mixed culture, variety of languages, and strategic position of South Africa in developing film industry.

The fifth book is *The Position of Film Making and Cinema in the African Economy of Great South Sahara* which wrote by Amir Bahram Arab Ahmadi and published in 2012. I found it very useful book for the history of African cinema and especially in South Africa and also the effect of cinema in the economy. I used some others articles which all of them were published by Roadlede.

### Argument

There are two different views about the cinema development in South Africa, the first one is modernity and the second one is the role of geopolitical features of this country, that based on the first view “people in Africa have been watching, acting in, and making movies since the early 1900s. Until the 1950s, films were generally controlled by European colonial powers. The colonial governments oversaw production and decided which movies could be shown to the public. In the years since African nations gained independence, Africans have developed their own cinema with their own directors and actors. Many of their films have gained worldwide attention for their passionate portrayal of social and political issues such as apartheid”. (Middleton, 2002: 136)

The South African Film Industry is one of the oldest in the world, with the first feature film, *The Kimberley Diamond Robbery*, being shot in 1910. “It is also one of the most fragmented industries, since the national audience is severely divided and the black majority has very limited access to cinema. Another distinctive feature of the industry is the monopolization of exhibition and distribution structures, with the United States (US) playing a dominant role since 1913 and from 1931 to 1994; the industry was subjected to state censorship. (Botha, 2007: 65)

It is fact that from 1910 the engine of cinema was turned on in South Africa and many good films were made in this country and in this relate “between 1910 and the beginning of the 1990s South African cinema was fairly active, producing films ranging from the seminal *De Voortrekkers/Building a Nation* of 1916 to Jamie Uys's internationally popular series of *The Gods Must Be Crazy* films of the 1980s. In general, however, the quality and reception of most South African

cinema were inconsistent. More to the point, the industry rapidly fragmented along racial and linguistic lines as the implementation of the National Party's Apartheid strategy went ahead after 1948”. (Tomaselli, 2011: 64)

This time was the beginning of the entering of foreign filming companies in South Africa. In addition, “By 1913 the South African Cinema Industry was controlled by I.W. Schlesinger's monopoly. This covered production African Film Productions, distribution African Consolidated Films and Exhibition African Consolidated Theatres. Originally, American interests had contracted to distribute their wares through African Consolidated Films (AFP) for exhibition in African Consolidated Theatres (ACT) venues. However, the major producers like MGM and 20th Century Fox soon established their own theatres and distribution network, with large cinema palaces in the major centers and several distribution agreements with independent exhibitors to get the product to a wider (all white) audience”.(Tomaselli, 2011: 65)

### 1-Modernity

South African whites, claim that the idea of “Cinematic Cities” led to the development of the cinema and the cinema industry in this country, but this paper will also discuss about the geopolitical position as a main reason of cinema development in this country. Let first study on modernity posses in South Africa:

#### 1-1-Cinematic Cities

This idea was created by European in South Africa and they urged to show the modernized face of cities, to convince foreign film making companies for coming into this country. Moreover, through this way improved the indigenous film industry of South Africa. “From the mid-1920s to the beginning of the 1950s, depictions of South African cities on

film were overwhelmingly positive, and could be summarized as projecting images of 'Desirable Cities in the Sun'. This was possible in part, no doubt, because white urban elites could believe that the greater urban order had been achieved by the mid-1920s. The threat of imminent working-class insurrection had greatly receded after the crushing of the Rand Revolt. Racial segregation offered the seemingly realistic hope of the continuation of white supremacy in the countryside and town. The mass of Africans was still resident in rural areas under a 'Native Administration' apparatus; African men were subject to pass laws aimed at controlling access to cities and favoring their employment as fixed contract migrant laborers; those African men and women working for longer periods could seemingly be accommodated without enormous difficulty in 'locations', in terms of the Urban Areas Act of 1923; and black political opposition was (ideologically and geographically) disunited, sporadic, and seldom bridged class divides". (Bickford-Smith, 2013: 689)

Many depictions of South African cities subsequently made by (American immigrant) I.W. Schlesinger's African Film Productions Company (established in Johannesburg in 1913) or the likes of foreign companies, such as Britain's Gaumont Graphic and Gaumont British newsreels, also suggested social and cultural similarities with other cities of the British Empire. (Bickford-Smith, 2013: 689)

### **1-2-(SARH)-South African Railways and Harbors**

The SARH feature was the influential feature to promoting the tourism industry in South Africa, which subsequently created many travelogues about South Africa, and it was interesting for filmmakers come to South Africa. And this was another reason for pro-

moting the country's cinema. "A further ingredient in positive city place-selling was the contribution of the Railway and Harbors Department of the South African government (hereafter the SARH), which was responsible from 1910 onwards for promoting tourism across the country. Many films overtly intended as Schlesinger's African Film Productions Company made travelogues for the SARH; indeed, the latter's patronage helped to sustain South Africa's often-faltering film industry before the introduction of a state subsidy system in the 1950s. Yet, even after this development, the State Information Office continued to help finance numerous travelogues". (Bickford-Smith, 2013: 689)

### **1-3-Township Space**

The government decision to make a separation between spaces of black and white in South Africa led to create another type of cinema in this country and that was a good reason to bring many filmmakers from the western countries and USA in this country. "The Group Areas Act, 1950 was legislated which enacted the strict separation of the South African population into separate residential areas based on skin color and to control the purchase and occupation of land. 'Othering' of black identity was at the core of the apartheid ideologies. Afrikaner Nationalism recognized the ideological importance of space and set out on a campaign which clearly demarcated". (Bickford-Smith, 2013: 690)

"Cinematic representations of the city space have been theorized extensively as a space of modernity and for theorists of modernity the city is the place par excellence for the realization of the individual. In South African cinema, the 'township space' has been employed as a central location to represent the black identity and culture. Whereas filmmakers construct 'place-

images' to represent the city as modern and the 'place par excellence' for the individual, 'place-images' of the 'township space' are constructed as pre-modern and on the threshold of civilization". (Bickford-Smith, 2013: 690)

Finally, this act not only was not a reason for the improvement of South African cinema, but also increases tough censorship and limitation on cinema, and led to produce weak and commercial films.

## 2- Geopolitical Features

South Africa geopolitical features are playing a pivotal role in developing film and cinema industry in this country. Over 1300 feature films had been produced in South Africa since 1910, since 1910 till 1949 white and later apartheid government had claimed that they improve South African cinema through the modernization of cities, flourishing economy and industry as we discussed in the first part, but from 1970 gradually South Africa was introduced to the world and many film companies found this country very suitable for film making and documentaries. The geopolitical position of this country was interesting for them because of a variety of cultures, religious, language, climate, wildlife, lower cost of living, and working compare with European and American countries. "There are some archaeological sites in South Africa, such as Border Cave in Swaziland and Klasies River Mouth on the coast of South Africa, contain skeletons of Homo sapiens along with evidence of "modern" behavior and different traditional fate such as the development of family groups, food sharing, and the planned use of resources, which are good subject for a documentary and film. These sites may be more than 100,000 years old". (Middleton, 2002: 51)

## 2-1-Environment and Building Materials

This feature also is a good subject for filming. "The environments in Africa range from harsh deserts to tropical rain forests to temperate savannas. The architecture of each region is directly related to its environment and the building materials available". (Middleton, 2002: 51)

## 2-2-Early Foreign Influence

South Africa is a country with varieties of the nation. So, it could be a good feature to attract filmmakers to travel to this country. "Travelers from Europe and Asia have long influenced South Africa's architecture and lifestyle, so you can find different type of nation with their own culture and lifestyle in South Africa like European and Indian people who are living now in this country and as Haseenah Ebrahim's article showcases her pioneering work on the consumption and production of Bollywood in South Africa. The paper examines the post-1994 mainstreaming of the Bollywood on the national broadcaster in the Bollywood Film Festival and suburban multiplexes; and via DVDs in video stores. The article also provides a history of cinema consumption in the South African Indian community and discusses how this shaped and was shaped by the spread of Bollywood". (Hofmeyr & Govinden, 2009: 13)

"Regarding the production, Ebrahim outlines Growing patterns of South African-Indian film industry co-operation and the use of South Africa as a location for shooting Bollywood. The co-operation has been somewhat erratic. A flurry of MOU'S has been signed; a number of delegations have traveled both ways; South Africa has been featured in the Indian International Film Convention. Like other international filmmakers, Bollywood production companies have been taking advantage of South Africa



as a relatively cheap shooting location. However, as Ebrahim points out, these locations are seldom acknowledged as being in South Africa, something that irritates South African authorities, not least the Minister of Defense, who had agreed to allow the South African Air Force (SAAF) to do a fly-past for filming purposes". (Hofmeyr & Govinden, 2009: 13)

### 2-3-Art and culture

The other feature of this country is a variety of art and culture, which existed in South Africa. "Each of the hundreds of different cultures in Africa as a whole and many of them in South Africa has its own artistic traditions and its own ideas of what is beautiful or important variations in the style and form of artworks, as well as in the materials used to produce them, reflect such factors as a region's geography and climate, its social customs, and the available technology. Of course, the skill and tastes of individual artists—and the purpose for which the work is created—also play a role in shaping the final product". (Middleton, 2002: 60) Thus, this is very important for filmmakers to have such a place with a combination of art and culture as a location for shooting.

### 2-3-Desert and National Park

Most of the films and documentaries about wildlife, nature, are made in these two places and filmmaker from all over the world come to these places for their films. "Kalahari Desert, large basin-like plain of the interior plateau of Southern Africa. It occupies almost all of Botswana, the eastern third of Namibia, and the northernmost part of Northern Cape Province in South Africa. In the southwest, it merges with the Namib, the coastal desert of Namibia. The Kalahari's longest north-south extent is roughly 1,000 miles (1,600 kilometers), and its greatest east-west

distance is about 600 miles; its area has been estimated at some 360,000 square miles (930,000 square kilometers)". (britannica.com)

"The northern Kalahari supports a considerable population of giraffes, zebras, elephants, buffalo, and antelopes (roan, sable, tsessebe, and impala); predators such as lions, cheetahs, leopards, wild hunting dogs, and foxes; other large and medium-sized mammals, such as jackals, hyenas, warthogs, baboons, badgers, anteaters, ant bears, hare, and porcupines; and numerous small rodents, several types of snakes and lizards, and a wealth of birdlife". (britannica.com)

"Krugers National Park, the largest national park in South Africa. It is located in Limpopo and Mpumalanga provinces, west of the Lebombo Mountains on the Mozambique border. The park, with an area of 7,523 square miles (19,485 square km) Vegetation varies from open veld to dense bush that includes mopane, acacia, morula, and baobab trees. Wildlife includes elephants, lions, leopards, cheetahs, buffalo, rhinoceroses, zebras, wildebeests, impalas, and numerous birds. Although six perennial rivers cross the park, droughts often make artificial watering necessary". (britannica.com)

### 2-4-Diseases

One of the best places for documentary film about diseases is South Africa because of its geography and climate. "A number of diseases that exist within and outside of Africa occur in somewhat different forms or circumstances in South Africa. These differences can be traced mostly to factors such as climate, geography, and the behavior and customs of people likely to be affected by the disease". (Middleton, 2002: 216) So, it is a good subject for filmmakers and documentaries to come South Africa and make a movie or documentary film.

“Africa has some infectious diseases that appear nowhere else in the world and appears to be the source of numerous diseases found on other continents. Over the centuries, these diseases were spread through trade and travel. In most cases, it takes a number of years for HIV to develop into AIDS. As it progresses, AIDS destroys the human immune system, which normally protects the body against infectious disease”. (Middleton, 2002: 213)

### Conclusion

There is no doubt that European colonizers brought cinema to South Africa at much the same time as it spread across Europe and the United States. We have to know cinema plays an essential role because it is a means of education, information, awareness and at the same time an incentive to creativity. Since that time until now cinema developed in South Africa as much as Europe and United States.

Many depictions of South African cities subsequently made by an American immigrant I.W. Schlesinger’s African Film Productions Company established in Johannesburg in 1913 or the likes of foreign companies, such as Britain’s Gaumont Graphic Gaumont British newsreels, also suggested social and cultural similarities with other cities of the British Empire.

Colonial government through the ‘cinematic theory’ tried to show the development of the country as a whole and the cinema in South Africa is because of modernized and industrialized of this country which done by European, but there is a fact that they neglected the South African geopolitical influence in this project. Although colonial governments brought roads, railroads, ports, new technology, and other benefits to Africa. However, their policies also damaged traditional economies and dramatically changed

patterns of land ownership and labor. Though the colonial system provided opportunities—such as education, jobs, and new markets for goods—for some Africans, it left many people poor and landless. Regarding this, British and American filmmakers begin to offer an alternative, realist-in-style ‘Dystopian City’ visions in the course of the 1950s. The first of these was an extraordinary polemic that included a section on urban conditions in South Africa, produced by Johannesburg clergyman Michael Scott called *Civilization on Trial in South Africa*, a film that was shown to at least some delegates at the United Nations and had screenings in Britain. The second was *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1951), starring Sidney Poitier and Canada Lee, a Zoltan Korda film adaptation of Alan Paton’s eponymous novel that had sold 15 million copies by the time of the author’s death. Both films were the products of an internal South African debate that took off in the 1940s on the effect on cities of rapidly increased numbers of African migrants. War-time import substitution had fuelled a rapid increase in South African industrialization, accompanied by African urbanization (also the product of rural ‘push’ factors) and a housing crisis in African residential areas. The number of Africans in towns rising from under 600,000 in 1921 to close to two million in 1946, much of this increase occurring in the war years and in the form of migration to the three main cities, Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town.

However, they tried to show their work on cinema in a way that have had a positive effect on the possess of development of this phenomenon, but the obvious message here is that the corollary of African urban misery is violent crime and mutual suffering in the city and make Outcast Cities and Black Urbanity and also there is evidence for showing their



racial discrimination thought in this field. Such as a two-part documentary called *African Conflict* (1954), made for the CBS channel in the United States. Near the beginning of the first program, there are distinct overtones of Paton. Commentary tells the viewer that Africans have been 'sucked' into the big city of Johannesburg, from the 'jungles of many centuries go into concrete jungles', as shots are displayed of labour recruitment in rural areas. Likewise, there is much footage of poor housing for Africans in the cities themselves. However, the film does include an interview with Trevor Huddleston, the Anglican priest who had worked in Sophiatown, in which he argues that the inhabitants should not be removed as at least they had houses and many were respectable.

With all the efforts made by Europeans to demonstrate the impact of their work on the advancement of the cinema industry in South Africa, there is evidence that showed influences of geopolitical position in the advancement of the cinema industry. As we witness that beginning in the 1920s, feature-length documentaries about African people, animals, and geography became popular with foreign audiences.

In 1928 Americans Martin and Osa Johnson made *Simba: The King of Beasts*, a film about lions; in 1959 Henri Storck, a Belgian director, filmed *Les seigneurs de la forêt (Masters of the Congo Jungle)*. Documentaries about animals were often broadcast on American television. Many American and British filmmakers came to Africa to film, stories of adventure and colonial conquest. These were often enormous productions, with crews and leading actors brought from overseas, which showed the role of geopolitical position of South Africa in the development of cinema industry.

## References

- Afolayan Funso (2004), "*Culture and Customs of South Africa*" published by Greenwood Press, London
- Arabahmadi, Amir Bahram, (2013), *Position of filmmaking and cinema in the African economy of Great South Sahara* published by I.R.I Cinema Organization
- Berger, Iris, (2009), *South Africa in World History* published by Oxford University Press
- Bickford Vivian –Smith, (2013), *Cinematic Cities: A 'Film and History' Overview for South Africa's Major Metropolises from the 1890s to the 1950s*, *Journal of Southern African Studies* published by Routledge
- Coetzee, Carli, (2013), *All Tickets Please, or How Cinema Histories of South Africa Can Stop Re-Enacting the Radicalized Past*, *Journal of Southern African Studies* published by Routledge
- Hofmeyr Isabel & Devarakshanam Betty Govinden, (2008), *Africa/India: Culture and circulation in the Indian Ocean*, *Scrutiny2* Published by Routledge
- Middleton, John, (2002), *Africa an Encyclopedia for Students* Volume 1 published by Karen Day
- Russell, Sharon, (1998), *Guide to African cinema* published by Greenwood Press, London
- Scholvin Sören (2014), *The Geopolitics of Regional Power* published by Ashgate
- Shepperson Arnold & Keyan G. Tomaselli, (2002), *restructuring the industry: South African cinema beyond Apartheid*, *South African Theatre Journal* published by Routledge