Penny Siopis's Film Fables
— TJ Demos

Penny Siopis's *Osbear White Messenger* (2000) tells the story of Dimitrius Tserfendai, the man who assassinated South African Prime Minister JF Verwoerd in 1966. The film combines samples of found home-movie footage, a mixed soundtrack, and text that runs over the images like subtitles, relaying the story. From this text, we learn that the architect of apartheid was stabbed to death in Parliament by Tserfendai, who had been employed there as an official messenger. It turns out that Tserfendai was an illegal alien, a stateless wanderer who had passed through the otherwise well-guarded gates of access to the highest levels of government by some mysterious bureaucratic error. Tserfendai was of mixed race: his Greek father lived in Lourenço Marques (today's Maputo) where Dimitrius was born, and his Mozambican mother worked in his father's household as a domestic labourer. The video presents footage of these diverse places while the soundtrack plays traditional Turkish music, the two together translating the sights and sounds of the subject's life into aesthetic heterogeneity.

In her film, Siopis examines this remarkable encounter between an exemplary exponent of the National Party's politics of racial separation and an obscure figure of stateless hybridity.

Developing an experimental cinematic structure of montage, she finds an innovative way to speak about the traumatic apartheid past in a modernity of dislocation and crisis. Her approach reinvents the conditions of documentary practice, moving beyond the stale oppositions of fact and fiction in order to propose a new way to tell stories of subjective and geopolitical resonance. Moreover, *Osbear White Messenger* proposes the cinematic means to transcend the violence of political and epistemological oppositions – between truth and falsehood, purity and hybridity, nationality and statelessness – in a post-apartheid present when xenophobia, anti-immigration policies and nationalism are resurgent and exist in paradoxical relation to the international flows of commodities, migrant labourers and information that define globalization.

*Osbear White Messenger* exemplifies Siopis's thematic concerns and filmic style, which she has established gradually over several interrelated works since 1997.
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Tsafendas taught Turks English

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My Lovely Day (1997) explores the travels of the artist's maternal grandmother to Greece, England and South Africa in the early twentieth century, comparing and contrasting her experiences with a coming era of mobility under contemporary global reality. 

Communion (2011) tells the story of an Irish nun, Sister Aidan Quinlan, who was tragically caught up in an anti-apartheid protest in the town of Empangeni during the Defiance Campaign of 1952 and was brutally killed by a crowd of angry demonstrators, including some to whom she had dedicated her service. And The Master & Dancing (2012) investigates the attempted examination of Verwoerd in 1960 by David Beresford Pratt, a liberal white businessman and farmer, on the eve of the inauguration of the apartheid Republic of South Africa. The Prime Minister was shot twice in the face, yet miraculously survived.

The film presents news footage from the time, mixed with home movies, showing the annual Rand Easter Show in Johannesburg, where the shooting took place.

What these various projects share is Sipio's signature mode of filmic construction, in which assembled clips of found footage are coupled with narratives derived from historical documents relating to the circumstances of the film's subject. My Lovely Day presents the narrative 'voice' of Sipio's grandmother, which speaks of her literal and emotional journeys during that 'sad time' when people displaced by war and crisis travelled out of necessity, a situation she contrasts to today's leisurely tourism: 'You don't know what it feels like to be marooned in a place, uproar, or cut ties,' she claims. For the artist, the film develops 'a much larger allegory of the felt effects of the what we might now call globalization.'

Similarly, Obscure White Messenger builds its narrative from various historical documents, employing a question-and-answer format based on a psychiatrist's interview with Tsafendas immediately after the assassination, and also supplemented by medical reports, legal documents and quotes from Henk van Woerden's biography of Tsafendas, A Mournful of Glass. Meanwhile, Communion crafts its story from court records and newspaper reports of the case, reconstructing Sister Aidan's voice in the form of subtitles, which certify the nun's story in the first person and the present tense. And The Master & Dancing derives its text from various historical sources, including transcripts of Pratt's trial and newspapers of the time. In these documents, Pratt, who had a history of mental instability and epilepsy, describes his intention to 'murk' Verwoerd and grant him the contemplative time of convalescence in which to reassess his sin for misguided apartheid policies.

In other words, Sipio's stories generally focus on the experiences and conflicts of the diverse white population living in apartheid South Africa, and how migration, dispossession and the creation of a diaspora complicated and intervened in the racist system as a nationalist mythology. However, these are 'like their protagonists' identities, are not presented in transparent fashion. In all his works, Sipio stresses the materiality of place and the complex meditations of coatings. For instance, she emphasizes the spotty marks, dust spots, scratches and signs of damage in her films, and highlights the processes of filmng by including the effects of amateurish camera work, incorrectly exposed shots and light flares. These aspects recall self-reflexive lessons of structuralist film 1960s and 70s, which underscored the material conditions of the medium. Sipio transfers 8mm and 16mm found footage to 35mm, defining a further space of material hybridity in her moving images, which also resonates with her practice as a painter concerned with formalism and materiality.

As Sipio notes, 'the physicality of the film has a history that is often as compelling as the events pictured in the film, or story of the film. That history of filmic physicality leaves its mark with the ghostly trace of a past severed from meaning and context, marooned in time place, which indicates a reality beyond what representation can capture, a realm that is not and other to the meaning and significance of language. This visual indeterminacy at the heart of Sipio's stories and reinforces the uncertain relation between their text and images, images that often have no direct relation to the film's subject, but bear on the associative connection, Obscure White Messenger, for example, features shots of an octopus swirling its tentacles slowly around a tank of water, and these images appear metaphorically connected to the tapestry that Tsafendas imagined to be living in his stomach, a delusion that tormentled him much of his adult life. Sipio frequently uses this kind of serendipitously corresponding...
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Her films thus approximate a contemporary formation of 'documentary fiction' within contemporary art, or what Jacques Rancière terms 'film fables', meaning a type of cinematic construction that links the camera's objective capturing of the visual field and the artist's subjective vision, making for a cinematic form of the 'heterogeneous sensible' capable of remaking the conditions of history. According to Rancière's model, fiction doesn't oppose fact, and it doesn't define an escapist tendency, relativist logic or make-believe fantasy. Rather, fiction – derived from the Latin fiant, meaning 'to forged' – connects to language's constructivist and performative functions. Fiction, in other words, identifies the material and sensible components used to construct reality and history – which is exactly what Siposi's films do.

More specifically, Siposi's archival explorations, built around centres of indeterminacy and uncanny resonance,
respond to the difficult circumstances of telling history after the psychosocial trauma that was apartheid. As Annie Coombes observes:

*My Lovely Day* is also an exploration of the effects of traumatic displacement. It may not be in the same register as the trauma recounted at the TRC [Truth and Reconciliation Commission] hearings, but it is part of the complex of difficult loyalties, nostalgic longings, misplaced desires, and internalized prejudices that make up any society that has a long history of immigrant settlement.°

Siopis’s films, that is to say, underscore the subjective effects and emotional qualities of political and social order, and yield results different from the judicial and forensic functions of the TRC. In this sense, Coombes is right to point out how Siopis’s work nonetheless enables us to share in the film’s own regime of truth if we accept that [by working] across these different generational registers simultaneously and through the deployment of fragments it is possible to reproduce a closer approximation of the contradictions and conflicts, the fleeting desires and frustrations, of lived experience.°

Pointing to a ‘regime of truth’ is key, as it makes clear that the subjective and psychosocial elements of lived history are nonetheless one form of truth. In fact, the TRC defined four types: factual or forensic truth (the kind used to determine innocence or guilt in a legal trial); personal or narrative truth (where subjective storytelling contributes to the psychological working-through of a traumatic past); social or dialogue-based truth (where discussion allows for social negotiation of the past and for public forms of social justice); and healing or restorative truth (where expression can lead to the restoration of the survivors’ dignity).°

While Siopis’s films negotiate these various levels, and perhaps come closest to the truth of storytelling, they also run contrary to the way the TRC directed truth-telling toward social reconciliation and national unification. In fact, Siopis’s version of subjective storytelling reveals the ‘truth of film’ as fundamentally a matter of uncertain meanings, fragmentary conditions and indeterminate relations between
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Clearly, then, these indeterminate elements challenge the notion of an incontestable, definitive history, and overturn those versions of 'truth' associated with official accounts—for instance, those that reigned until the end of apartheid, where truth was monopolized, guarded and determined by the ruling government and its censored media apparatus. (The resulting official mythology of apartheid is invoked in Siopis's video *Fever Dream* 1986 (1999), which shows him speculating about the 'golden era' of South Africa that
The conditions are there, the raw materials are there.

We can give happiness and prosperity to all our races.

Then our future in the international arena would be dark.

I don't want to elaborate on this tonight.
ions are there, terrestrial are there

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and that we will be spared international pressure and attack

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What will we do with this Golden era?
promised to bring 'happiness and prosperity for all races'. In this regard, her work is part of an emergent experimental mnemonic culture following the demise of apartheid in the early 1990s. But more than merely deconstructing official history, the productive force of her films prompts new or under-represented historical insights that complicate our understanding of the past. For instance, Siopis brings a Tsafendas's political anti-apartheid motivations behind the assassination ('I was so disgusted with the racist policies'), motivations that were generally expressed by the media at the time in favour of reports stressing his ostensible insanity and tape worn fantasy as explanations for his violent act. Her films abandon the deceit and epistemological violence of official truthful accounts that allow no contestation and admit no contingency. She proposes instead the truth of the subjective relation to matters of world-historical significance – as in the way madness, the experience of statelessness, and conditions of displacement and racist exclusion intervened in the proceedings of the apartheid regime in the mid-1960s – a matter that has found little place in the post-apartheid historical process with its focus on victim hearings.

In a way, having no place is the truth of Siopis’s films, which not only investigate exile and geopolitical displacement, but do so, as we’ve seen, via a formal structure of dislocation and fragmentation. Her use of found footage, collected in flea markets and charity shops in South Africa and during travels abroad, endows her film fragments with the sense of being stranded in time, which in turn resonates with the fragmentary nature of memory. Siopis connects to important precedents in joining the aesthetics of exile and the aesthetics of geopolitical dislocation. One might think of the diasporic Afro-Caribbean film practices in London during the 1980s (such as those of the Black Audio Film Collective and Isaac Julien); or the exile aesthetics theorized by Edward Said in relation to the literature of a deracinating modernity, or models of contemporary art that investigate the geopolitical displacement, refugee conditions and borderland worlds of globalization via migrant images (as in the work of Emily Jacir, Yto Barrada and Hito Steyerl). Connecting to these diverse models, Siopis advances her own aesthetics of exile through her own filmic specificity and phenomenology of storytelling, which is also singularly connected to the South African post-apartheid context.

What is singular about her work is the particular filmic relation she establishes between the autobiographical and the geopolitical, which highlights historical moments of crisis when the subjectivity of difference and diaspora meets political upheaval and violence during apartheid. That relation between geopolitical event and subjective perspective is mediated in her films through the experience of reading texts, where the viewers are invited to internalize the language (often relayed in the first person), listen to the music and watch the historical footage. These texts and sounds draw us into an affective space that constructs a relationship between our own inner narratives as viewers and those presented by the film. We read her films, with the effects of light and age disturbing their surfaces, as dreamlike sequences of apparently disconnected parts, "their surfaces connect us to the materiality of the past."
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