

5-25-2017

South African identity, as exhibited through domestic animation

Steven J. Johnson

Loyola Marymount University, stevenjohnson1997@gmail.com

Recommended Citation

Johnson, Steven J., "South African identity, as exhibited through domestic animation" (2017). *Grants & Fellowships*. 23. <http://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/honors-grants-and-fellowships/23>

This Honors Summer Research Fellowship is brought to you for free and open access by the Honors Program at Digital Commons @ Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in Grants & Fellowships by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@lmu.edu.

South African identity, as exhibited through domestic animation

Steven Johnson

Loyola Marymount University

I am requesting funding to conduct an investigation about how animation produced in South Africa is reflective of the cultural identity of its citizens. The basis for my investigation is the prominence of the country's animation industry and its growing global reputation for quality, as well as the current post-apartheid identity crisis. Two notable points for research are Triggerfish Animation Studios (dubbed the "Pixar of South Africa") and Mike Scott (an animator that was a part of the studio's story development program). I plan on flying to South Africa and interviewing animators as well as studio execs and other industry members about identity, their work, and the industry as a whole.

When animation is mentioned, the company Pixar and others of American origin are often the most notable ones that come to mind. Less attention is given to animation from other countries, although some are producing projects that are of high enough quality to compete on a global scale. One such country is South Africa. The nation reflects a continent-wide trend of animated narratives being produced and distributed successfully on the international market (Vourlias).

Home to what a late 2015 article in *The Hollywood Reporter* is calling the “Pixar of South Africa”, Cape Town seems to be the center of the developing industry (Szalai). Triggerfish Animation Studios, which has won a number of awards and has been featured in numerous international publications (such as BBC and Forbes), hosted a Story Lab in which African writers and directors received the opportunity to be mentored with their work and the platform to distribute it on a wide scale. Adding to the animation atmosphere of the city is the fifth annual Cape Town International Animation Festival, also created to highlight some of the work coming out of South Africa (Makings).

One particularly interesting animator from the Triggerfish Story Lab is Mike Scott. He has been featured on both Nickelodeon and Disney XD, with his work consistently centering around quirky characters, human or animal (Mworira). *Bru and Bougie*, one of his more personal creations, features two Black “dudes” with their hands in their underwear, having simplistic conversations and doing interesting things. In an interview with Julia Louw of Animation South Africa, Scott refers to the two characters as his “spirit animals” and, when faced with opposition from Disney concerning the underwear, states that “the whole point of Bru and Boegie is that they wear underpants; they don’t change for anybody and that’s their spiel.”

It is this kind of creative freedom that Scott credits to Africa as inspiration for his work (Mworia). An article from the Animation World Network supports this ideal of diversity in their animation media as a positive quality of South Africa's industry, but also mentions that the perception of the industry is lower than it should be. It seems as though South Africa is very adamant about not being placed in a box of what their identity should be by other people, and animation is growing as a means through which this desire may be fulfilled.

The concern with self-identity can be related most recently to the dissolution of the apartheid regime, which noticeably altered both black and white self-identity in the nation. Afrikaners (descendants of Dutch colonial settlers) had an identity strongly connected to the principles supporting the apartheid regime and, after its end, struggled to reconstruct that identity (Verwey and Quayle 573). Black South Africans, on the other hand, gained a stronger identity after the regime's end, credited by Thom and Coetzee to the emergence of a democratic society that places a value on black culture and the appreciation of activist figures who were formally considered criminals (191). There is still, however, a need to adjust identity to the new democratic state; Black citizens just seem to have had an easier time adjusting.

Race plays a significant role in how South Africans self-identify, as do others' perceptions of them. This scramble for reclassification began relatively recently, and the fact the national government is actively attempting to sanction identity formation and the film industry is a likely indicator that society's efforts are likely to manifest themselves in animation, with Mike Scott's work serving as a prime example. For this reason, I plan to investigate how does the growing animation industry in South Africa currently express the identity of its citizens, and how will it continue to do so as it expands.

The investigation that led me to this topic began with desire to learn more about the entertainment industries outside of the United States. I searched for information about the largest film industries outside of Hollywood and several inquiries led me to Nigeria's Nollywood. Last semester, I was enrolled in Transmedia Storytelling, and wanted to somehow incorporate the material from the class into my research. As a result, my inquiries began to expand from "Nollywood" to "Nollywood transmedia" (and other related phrases).

Very few pertinent sources were found as a result of my search. However, one source in particular redirected my research to a different market. A research paper by Helena Barnard and Krista Tuomi informed me on the difference between Nollywood and the film industry of South Africa. The higher quality products produced by South Africa don't have a place in markets like Nigeria, where consumers are accustomed to lower quality products because of limited access to others, but thrive in markets in which the consumers demand high quality that can't be fulfilled by local providers (Barnard and Tuomi). This led me to look further into South Africa, and possibilities that it could provide for topics.

The next set of inquiries were intersections of "South Africa" and other entertainment related topics, first beginning with "transmedia". I found one academic article that mentioned how the portrayal of Black identities are something that has been prevalent (and will be prevalent) in South African cinema for a long time, but other than that there was not much success (Maingard). A meeting with Charles Swanson, my mentor, pushed me in the direction of looking beyond simply film. Professor Swanson reminded me that the future of entertainment is likely in a different medium, like television or digital.

I returned to my search with a different perspective and eventually found two articles in *Variety* and *The Hollywood Reporter* about the "toon boom" sweeping the continent of Africa

and the “Pixar of South Africa”, respectively. I looked further into the details mentioned in the articles and it was then that I realized that the animation industry, with consideration to identity, could prove to be an interesting and fulfilling topic to research. I found no academic work on the topic of how identity and the animation relate to each other, so any work I do will create a foundation for further study.

To best engross myself in the national and animation cultures of South Africa, I will fly there and conduct my research with the use of primary sources, consisting mostly of interviews and animation works by domestic animators. The subjects of my interviews would include Mike Scott and individuals working for Triggerfish Animation studios, in addition to other local animators and studios based on availability. Before it would be appropriate for me to interview an artist, it is required that I study their work so that I have an idea of what questions would be relevant to ask. I would watch an array of animations from different artists to establish a foundation of primary texts.

It would be helpful to conduct interviews with other industry members and the National Film and Video Foundation for another perspective on the future of the industry. I also plan on visiting the National Library of South Africa, to find resources concerning the intersection of South African sociology and media. After conducting my research, I will produce a paper detailing my findings. In support of my analysis of animation works, I will also include stills from the works referenced. My paper will acknowledge that this is an unexplored topic and that it will act as the basis for further investigation.

An important part of my interviewing process to consider is that snowball sampling will be an essential part of the success of my investigation. South Africa’s animation studio system follows a small studio model; studio websites often feature the bios and contact information for

individual animators. It is very likely that individuals I interview will lead me to other industry members that could provide valuable insight for my research. For this reason, I am creating a general schedule to prevent my investigation from being stifled by restricting it to a rigid time table.

Schedule:

Sunday May 7th, 2017 – Fly from Los Angeles to Cape Town, South Africa

Cape Town (Sunday May 7th, 2017 to Friday May 19th, 2017)

Animation Studio Visits:

- Triggerfish Animation Studios
- Sea Monster Entertainment
- Lung Animation
- Sunrise Productions

Industry Member and Organizations Visits:

- Interview with Mike Scott
- Animation South Africa (Cape Town branch) – Visiting this non-profit will give me market information about the industry as well as information concerning government policy efforts. This will provide insight into goals that are being worked toward for the future.

Saturday May 20th, 2017 – Train to Johannesburg

Johannesburg (Sunday May 21st, 2017 to Friday May 26th, 2017)

Animation Studio Visits:

- Bugbox Animation Studios
- Luma Animation

Industry Organization Visits:

- National Film and Video Foundation
- Animation South Africa (Johannesburg branch)

Saturday May 27th, 2017 – Fly from Cape Town to Los Angeles

Additionally, I will visit the both branches of the National Library of South Africa in order to obtain more resources concerning the history and development of the South African cultural identity.

Budget

Airfare, roundtrip - \$1,200

Lodging - \$910 (DoubleTree by Hilton Hotel Cape Town – Upper Eastside, around \$70/night); \$749 (Crowne Plaza Johannesburg - The Rosebank, around \$107/night)

Food - \$630 (LMU per diem of \$30 a day)

Train ticket from Cape Town to Johannesburg – \$52

Car rental – \$513, 13 day Avis rental in Cape Town (5/7 – 5/20); \$230, 6 day Avis rental in Johannesburg (5/21 – 5/27)

The car rental is a cost effective way to ensure that I can arrive punctually for my scheduled interviews/visits. Public transportation is unreliable and taxis/Uber can be very costly.

Transcription software - \$120 (Trint, 10 hours of transcription)

The use of this software will allow me to process the data I collect more quickly and accurately.

Total: \$4,404

References

- Barnard, Helena, and Krista Tuomi. "How Demand Sophistication (De-)limits Economic Upgrading: Comparing the Film Industries of South Africa and Nigeria (Nollywood)." *Industry and Innovation* 15.6 (2008): 647-68. Web. 10 Oct. 2016.
- Maingard, Jacqueline. "South African Cinema: Histories and Futures." *Screen* 48.4 (2007): 511-15. *EBSCOhost*. Web. 15 Sept. 2016.
- Makings, Dianne. "The Fifth Annual Cape Town International Animation Festival Kicks off This Weekend." Interview by Africa Malane. Audio blog post. *Soundcloud.com*. Primedia Broadcasting, 19 Feb. 2016. Web. 9 Oct. 2016. <<https://soundcloud.com/primediabroadcasting/the-fifth-annual-cape-town-international-animation-festival-kicks-off-this-weekend#t=0:00>>.
- Mworia, Tim. "Interview: Animator Mike Scott Talks Disney And Africa." *KenyaBuzz*. KenyaBuzz, 14 July 2016. Web. 29 Oct. 2016. <<https://www.kenyabuzz.com/lifestyle/mike-scott-a-dogshow-with-cat-interview>>.
- Scott, Mike. "Animation SA: Mike Scott on the Importance of Underpants." Interview by Julia Louw. Audio blog post. *Soundcloud*. Animation SA, 3 Oct. 2016. Web. 30 Oct. 2016. <<https://soundcloud.com/user-856117447/animation-sa-mike-scott-on-the-importance-of-underpants>>.
- Szalai, Georg. "'Pixar of South Africa' Unveils Film, TV Projects." *Hollywood Reporter* 13 Dec. 2015: 19. *Film and Television Literature Index with Full Text [EBSCO]*. Web. 10 Oct. 2016.
- Thom, Dorothea P., and Cas H. Coetzee. "Identity development of South African adolescents in a democratic society." *Society in Transition* 35.1 (2004): 183-93. Web. 6 Feb. 2017.
- Verwey, C., and M. Quayle. "Whiteness, racism, and Afrikaner identity in post-apartheid South Africa." *African Affairs* 111.445 (2012): 551-75. *Taylor & Francis Online*. Web. 1 Dec. 2016.
- Vourlias, Christopher. "South Africa Leads Continent's Toon Boom." *Variety* 4 June 2013: 103. *Film & Television Literature Index with Full Text*. Web. 10 Oct. 2016.