

Documentary film politics and the politics of documentary film: *Miners Shot Down* (2014)

ABSTRACT

This paper sets out to consider the production of political documentary films in post-apartheid South Africa at a time when massification of the media and state capture of the South African Broadcasting Corporation, the country's public broadcaster, silenced oppositional voices. Rehad Desai's award-winning film, *Miners Shot Down* (2014) serves as the main case study for the research.

The film deals with the days leading up to the final and tragic outcome of strike action by miners at a time when the print media predicated the state and the mine owners' points of view. The filmmaker, a self-acclaimed political activist, set out to recount the events by recreating a voice for the mine workers by offering his personal reaction to the deaths of the 34 black men by interviews and archival material¹.

Miners Shot Down was received well locally and internationally, but as an overt political narrative presented in a subjective reconstruction, some of the omissions may impact on a fuller understanding of the tragic event. This finding prompted recommendations for entrepreneurs, policymakers and scholarship.

Keywords: Rehad Desai, Marikana massacre, political activism, National Union of Mineworkers (NUM), Association of Mineworkers and Construction Union (AMCU).

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¹ Although the film does make reference to the other ten deaths which occurred during the period, these are not focal to Desai's film.

It is not surprising that documentary-makers have usually worked in a spirit of advocacy. They are people sufficiently committed to a point of view to go to the trouble of obtaining expensive equipment, carting it into the field, shooting miles of film, often under unpleasant or dangerous conditions, and spending months or years splicing the results into a coherent movie. It's easier to write an editorial. It's easier to write a book [...] They make movies because they are passionate about their subjects and they want to arouse passion in others.

Louis Menand, quoted by Chanan (2012: 23)

This paper deals with South African filmmaker, Rehad Desai's award-winning documentary film *Miners Shot Down* (2014). My research focuses on Desai's approach to the film, the documentary techniques he employs to create the unfolding narrative and the way in which he contextualised the news footage he uses in the construction. I draw on documentary theory to support my analysis. To initiate my discussion, I present a brief introduction to the film and its distribution.

INTRODUCTION: THE FILM, ITS DISTRIBUTION AND RECEPTION

Desai introduces the film on the company website, Uhuru Productions, as follows:

In August 2012, mineworkers in one of South Africa's biggest platinum mines began a wildcat strike for better wages. Six days later, the police used live ammunition to brutally suppress the strike, killing 34 and injuring many more (<http://www.uhuruproductions.co.za>).

He continues by stating that the film presents the point of view of the miners and that it represents the battle between the "lowly paid mineworkers" and the Lonmin mining company, "the ANC government and their allies in the National Union of Mineworkers" (<http://www.uhuruproductions.co.za>).

Released in February, 2014, the film has been screened at film festivals and by broadcasters locally and internationally and has garnered numerous awards, including the 2015 International Emmy for best documentary film (<http://www.uhuruproductions.co.za>). Although the film was broadcast on a number of pay channel stations in South Africa, it was only after winning the Emmy Award that the documentary was screened on etv, a local free to air television station. The South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC), our local public broadcaster, waited until 2018 before screening the film and as a result the material was inaccessible for many South Africans who have no access to digital pay channels. To counter these hurdles, the production company has facilitated screenings in community halls, at universities and other venues across the country.

Challenges to making the film more accessible are indicative of Duncan's (2013) analysis of early

journalistic reporting on the strike and the massacre. She argues that not allowing for a workers' point of view in the media, the reporting became "system maintaining, by failing to take workers' voices seriously". Duncan posits that the one-sided reporting contributes to "the disempowerment of the one social force capable of disrupting exploitation in one of the most strategic industries of the economy" (2013:13).

A much earlier but somewhat similar endeavour entails screenings of educational documentary films in the early part of the twentieth century. The government authorities at the time regarded the screenings as "corrupting the African". One of the founder members of the African National Congress, Sol T. Plaatje, screened documentary films across South Africa after his return from three overseas trips. According to Masilela (2003:15), the newspaper *Umteteli wa Bantu* recognised Plaatje as the first African intellectual to seriously engage with film culture. According to Balseiro and Masilela (2003:18) Plaatje hosted public screenings of documentaries that focused on the accomplishments of the so-called "New Negroes" in America. He argued that there were profound affinities between the process through which the New Negro intervened in the construction of US modernity and the means by which the New African should participate in the newly emergent South African modernity (Balseiro & Masilela, 2003:18). Negative sentiments from government and missionaries put an end to the Plaatje screenings, but not before his work served as an important inspiration to fellow black activists, which included individuals such as H.I.E. Dhlomo and Bloke Modisane (Treffry-Goatley, 2010:18).

In an article entitled "Resistance documentaries in post-apartheid South Africa: *Dear Mandela* (Kell & Nizza, 2012) and *Miners Shot Down* (Desai, 2014)", Moyer-Duncan (2019), drawing on Tomaselli (1987), Steenveld (1992), Unwin and Belton (1992) and Maingard (1995), points at a comparison between the anti-apartheid films "protesting against conditions and being subjected to violence by the apartheid regime" (48) and the two films she selected for her study, both made approximately two decades after the transition to a democratic country. She expands on the films, contrasting those that were hastily-produced, often under clandestine conditions, such as *Come Back Africa* (1959), *Let My People Go* (1961) and *Last Grave at Dimbaza* (1974), with later films such as *Mayfair* (1984), *Compelling Vision* (1987) and *Fruits of Defiance* (1994), before mentioning the conditions under which contemporary resistance films are made. Moyer-Duncan (2019) states that such films are no longer made in secret, and that the makers have more money available to produce the films.

She points to another important shift, in that the earlier narratives were mostly produced from a white liberal perspective, using stereotypical apartheid imagery and a narration delivered by a strong white English voice which also, according to Maingard (1995), enforced the representation of "all black South Africans as victims and all white South Africans as oppressors¹". The later

¹ According to Maingard (1995), the voice of the earlier anti-apartheid films was "a strong narrational presence in the form of an omnipotent off-screen male voice speaking in what is perceived to be a 'white English accent; a representation of South Africans in stark categories – all blacks are victims, all whites are oppressors; and they rely on crude statistics and stereotypical images of apartheid (1995:658).

apartheid-era films, she argues, were made mostly by university-trained filmmakers who worked with marginalised communities to produce their films (2019). In contrast, the two resistance films she analyses were both produced without undue political interference despite the police efforts to keep journalists away from the scene of the massacre.

As is the tradition of resistance films, many of which were well-received especially overseas, *Miners Shot Down* was received with much praise from reviewers, activists and social scientists, researchers, journalists and others (Cara Moyer-Duncan, 2019, Kylie Thomas, 2018, Khuselwa Dyantyi and Thato Masiangoako, 2020, Greg Nicholson, 2014, and others).

However, despite the numerous awards and the acclaim, the film has also been negatively received. Blade Nzimande, the then Minister of Higher Education and Training, argues that the approach by Desai and others present a “more insidious” narrative from “the supposed left who seek to portray the strikers as courageous proletarians taking on the combined might of the State, Lonmin and the National Union of Mineworkers” (<http://www.rdm.co.za/politics/2015/07/08/how-biased-pseudo-left-filmmaker-rehad-desai-got-marikana-wrong>).

Schutte (2014) points to two major criticisms leveled at the film in academic circles and by non-governmental organisations. Firstly she mentions the lack of female representation, both of female mineworkers and in the narration, and secondly, the exclusion of white business’s complicity in the outcome of the strike by focusing solely on the involvement of South Africa’s Deputy President Cyril Ramaphosa. For Schutte, the film presents a one-dimensional narrative and, from a feminist perspective, excludes women’s voices².

She also argues that *Miners Shot Down* presents “a reworking of the black-on-black violence discourse from the 1980s ... as if white economic imperialism had nothing to do with this heinous event”. She further states that the film was made as a commercially viable documentary and she supports her point of view by referring to an “intimation” by the consulting producer, Bheki Peterson, that *Miners Shot Down* “was an intentional styling of the film so that it “entertained”. It is “styled” into a high-end television/cinema “whodunnit” criminal investigation framework with “kind-of BBC overtones” (Schutte, 2014. <http://mg.co.za/article/2014-08-22-miners-shot-down-where-have-all-the-women-gone>).

It is therefore of interest to analyse the construction of the film as a politically inspired yet commercially viable documentary, and contextualise the narrative within a spectrum which could be labelled as documentary film politics, and the politics of role and the approach of the filmmaker.

² In the film, the only females from the mining community included in the visual material are a few women in the squatter camps and the bereaved families at the Farlam Commission of Enquiry. None of the women are given an opportunity to present their experiences and their concerns. Desai addressed these concerns at the time by co-producing the film, *Strike a Rock* (2017), a film that focuses on the friendship between two women from Marikana. This film offers points of view that should be addressed in further research (<http://strikearock.co.za>).

1. THE FILMMAKER

In an interview, Desai (2015) described himself as “a political documentary filmmaker” and regards his films as “often creat[ing] a fine line between being polemical and journalistic”. He argues that “some films can shift things” and “have impact”, and that “some films are calls to action”. For Desai, *Miners Shot Down* was definitely a call to action. He recounts how he reacted to a funding offer to produce a new film and how he was inspired by the November/December 2011 UN Climate Change Conference in Durban where the impact of mining on the environment was one of the topics under discussion. Desai’s research took him to many different locations across Southern Africa before he decided to focus on the Bafokeng³ nation from North West Province and the platinum mining activities there.

I was reminded of the tremendous amount of social power that the mining houses exercise in South Africa and life and the political economy, and how the modern South African state is formed around these mining companies, and how intricately they are involved in governmental negotiations.

The Marikana strike at the mine broke out while Desai and his crew were doing research and were filming in the area. The team followed the strike action for a number of days until, “about seven days later ... the guns came out ... and we decided, well, that is the story”. According to Desai (2015) the dominant narrative regarding the events soon became clear, with the official version as represented in the media:

Times Media, the mining houses, companies and the police represented the miners as suicidal, tribalistic, uneducated, criminals, and this was in complete counterdistinction to what I was hearing from the mine workers in the days following the massacre. And I was very much on the case. I was like a crazy man for a few weeks, if not a couple of months, just trying to make some sense of this story ... and I felt obligated as a socialist to side, and as an artist, to side with the powerless against state authority where a complete travesty of justice was taking place (Desai, interview, 2015).

2. CONSTRUCTING THE FILM

According to Desai (2015), the film was well funded “from the beginning” and this placed him in “quite a comfortable position”. He started the construction process by searching for and collecting all the archival material. In many cases, he had to campaign and fight to get access to the material. At first Desai managed to obtain only edited clips from the various role players, which necessitated an additional search for the source footage. The filmmaker soon realised that “there was a complete

³ The Bafokeng are a group of Setswana-speaking South Africans Available from: <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/prehistory-rustenburg-area>

fabrication of evidence”. In his interview (2015), he adds that “the police were caught out quite early, fabricating evidence” and that he “realised that the archive had a story to tell in a number of ways”. He supports his position by listing aspects such as the distance at which the media was kept from the shooting, the position of the workers, and an intuitive sense of “smelling fear” from the police’s point of view. Desai also argues that the police realised how damning their footage was, and decided that handing the material over would incriminate them.

The helicopter footage, I don’t believe they handed over half of it. I mean, it was all useless, completely useless. The fact that they had sent their own police cameramen back to their joint operation command centre an hour before the massacre took place on the pretext that the cameramen were no longer safe – I mean, why did they send them back there? They are supposed to, by protocol, film all these things, major public disturbances. So yeah, it was clear that they were hiding stuff, but at the same time what they did give over was also very revealing (Desai, interview, 2015).

At the end of August, 2012, then President Zuma had appointed a commission of enquiry, led by retired judge Ian Farlam, to investigate the events at Marikana and during the hearings video footage was used as evidence. As the recordings were now in the public domain, Desai managed to access more material from ITN, Reuters, Al Jazeera and the SABC. According to Desai (2015) the police, as “they had to provide something”, only submitted cell-phone clips. They maintained that none of the four cameras on the police water canon wagons were working. Desai (2015) mentions that one of the lawyers at the hearings obtained a police laptop after threatening to prosecute the policeman for withholding evidence. It became evident from the indexed clips that some of the material was missing. He adds, “and that is when they went to the police computers that this stuff had been transferred to and started discovering other missing documents” (2015).

Once Desai had amassed the archival material, the challenge was to sort through the “complexities” to create a narrative that “is simple enough, but not missing out the key context” for “a major international audience of millions of people”. He also realised that by using as much of the archival footage as possible, he could “characterise these workers, humanise them in the process” and “put forward an alternative point of view which was primarily their point of view” (2015).

Desai decided to construct an outline of the events by using the archival material before he embarked on conducting the “major” interviews to contextualise the clips and to build the film into a narrative. He interviewed twenty-five “serious leading figures in South African society [who were, in one way or another] connected to this story” (Desai, 2015). The participants included Cyril Ramaphosa, Deputy President of South Africa and a non-executive board member of the Lonmin mine at the time, Dumisa Ntsebeza a lawyer for the families, journalist Greg Marinovich, Lonmin spokesperson Barnard Mokwena, strike leaders Mzoxolo Magidiwana and Tholakele Dlunga, Joseph Mathunjwa, leader of the breakaway union of mineworkers AMCRU (Association of Mineworkers

and Construction Union), and others.

What should be noted here is how the framing of interviews impacts on how audiences react to the social actors on screen. In this instance, I do not refer to body language and shot size, but rather to how the selected backgrounds and lighting impact on the gravity of the testimonies and the stature of the interviewees. It can be argued that using in situ location backgrounds offers more information regarding the characters, yet I have noticed how, in my own work as well as in this and other documentary films such as *A Common Purpose* (2012), a stylised interview set-up, not only enables a well-focused reading of the content, but also creates, even if only at a subconscious level, a different reading regarding the social standing of the participants. This is also the case in *Miners Shot Down*, as the interviews with the miners are recorded in informal rural locations, whereas the others are highly formal, constructed settings.

Sound from testimonies and cross-examinations from footage recorded at the Farlam Commission as well as from the archival material collected by Desai are included in the construction of the narrative. Although Desai does not include any visual representation of himself, he acts as the narrator and in this way, he reinforces his point of view and cements the style and the mood of the film; he frames the documentary as his subjective interpretation of what happened at the time by relying on the archival material to support his argument. He contextualises the events leading up to the massacre around his understanding of the Sharpeville massacre in 1960 in apartheid South Africa⁴ as well as the role of Cyril Ramaphosa, and his contribution as a union activist in the 1980s and a board member⁵ of the Lonmin mine at Marikana until 2013. Ramaphosa resigned from the board after he was elected as Deputy President of South Africa⁶.

Rabiger (2004) argues that documentary films are either monological and authoritarian or dialogical, when the filmmaker invokes the complexities of language, thought and purpose by relying on multiple viewpoints to create a richly textured and nuanced representation of the socio, political or economic issues addressed in the presentation. Desai presents the film from a subjective, personal interpretative framework, and even with the testimonies presented by the participants, the film could be labelled as monological as it does not offer the audience the option of exposure to other points of view as the basis for a dialogical experience of the film.

3. DOCUMENTARY FILM

In this section I draw on a selection of scholarly approaches to defining and understanding the

4 On March 21, 1960, the police opened fire on a group of anti-apartheid protesters killing 69 people and injuring 180 more. Available at <https://www.sahistory.org.za/topic/sharpeville-massacre-21-march-1960>

5 Ramaphosa was a non-executive board member of Lonmin at the time. This is not addressed as such in the film.

6 In an interview with Christiane Amanpour, Ramaphosa stated that "They had died in what I still see as a 'criminal' way ... I was appealing to the authorities to take action to prevent further deaths," added Ramaphosa, who was the first general secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers and chaired the Constitutional Assembly in 1994. - Reuters. <https://mg.co.za/article/2013-01-23-ramaphosa-quits-mondli-and-lonmin-boards/>

documentary film genre, including the construction process and the impact of directorial choices on the unfolding narrative as a frame for my reading of *Miners Shot Down* (2014) as a political documentary and the politics of documentary embedded in the narrative.

Defining the documentary film or representations of real life has had a long and often contested history ever since the Lumière brothers produced their film clips which became known as *documentaire* or *actualité*. Other filmmakers labelled their films as educational, travel, interest films or documentaries, but the term was only widely accepted after Grierson defined the genre as 'documentary film' in reference to Flaherty's production *Manoa* (1926). Grierson's other famous tag-line describing a documentary film where the "original actor" and the "original scene" are presented as "the creative treatment of actuality" is somewhat misleading when one looks at the phrase in the context of the author's full sentence:

Documentary, or the creative treatment of actuality, is a new art with no such background in the story and the stage, as the studio product so glibly possesses (Grierson, 1933:8)⁷.

Many filmmakers started to differ from the Griersonian approach and at a meeting in June 1948 they defined the genre as "all methods of recording on celluloid any aspect of reality interpreted either by factual shooting or by sincere and justifiable reconstruction" (Jansen, quoted by Winston, 2013:7).

More recently the documentary film has been defined as a representation of the historical world (Nichols, 2001) or as "a discursive screen onto which a society's fears and hopes are projected" (Smaill, 2015:139). Nichols argues that the documentary film shapes photographic records of aspects of the world "*from a distinctive perspective or point of view. And as such they become one voice among the many voices in the arena of social debate and contestation*" [his italics] (2001:43). Drawing on Nichols (1991), Smaill (2015:3-4) proposes that a documentary is more than a "discourse of sobriety", and motivates her position by suggesting an interrogation of the "emotionality inherent in sobriety" (3). She sees the emotional content of a film as not only the way in which "the poetics – music, rhetoric, narrative – affect the audience, but how emotion confers cultural meaning onto others" (3). She argues that emotions are private, but that "they also circulate in the public sphere where they are fashioned across histories of signification, different media forms, and other technologies of social life" (Smaill, 2015:3).

Nichols (1991, 1994, 2001) has over the years developed a system of modalities for classifying different approaches to constructing documentary films. His latest list has six modes or categories and as Desai drives the narrative of his film, the performative mode seems most appropriate as a tool to analyse aspects of the documentary. In his chronological, and often much criticised approach to these modes (Bruzzi 2006), he defines "performative" as a style that "stresses subjective

⁷ Here I draw on the article by Kerrigan and McIntyre (2010) "The 'creative treatment of actuality': Rationalizing and reconceptualizing the notion of creativity for documentary practice".

aspects of a classically objective discourse". He argues that the shift from the expository, the observational, the participatory and the reflexive modalities to that of the performative "further blurs, yet more dramatically, the already imperfect boundary between documentary and fiction" (1994:95) by making the viewer rather than the historical world, the focus of the film, or, as he writes, in the emphasis of from the referential as the dominant feature. Thus, for Nichols (2001) "the performative documentary underscores of complexity of our knowledge of the world by emphasizing its subjective and affective dimensions"(2001:131) or a compassionate approach which has a greater impact than the antecedents from the historical world (2001).

According to Nichols (2013), evidence, narrative and ethics are the three elements for the successful construction of a documentary film as the filmmaker seeks to externalise evidence. He continues by arguing that facts, objects and situations can only become evidence in a discursive or interpretive framework as these factors do not speak for themselves; i.e. within the interpretative frame of the externalised expression.

Another approach, documentary as an asserted veridical approach, as expressed by Carl Plantinga (2005) is also helpful in devising a strategy to unpack the film selected for this discussion. He defines the genre as an interpretation and reworking of a subject using moving images and sound tracks, newly recorded and or from the archive as a "narrative, [or in] a rhetorical, categorical or associative form, in which the film's maker openly signals their intention to the audience." Plantinga adds that this requires the filmmaker to firstly take a position with regards to argument presented in the film (i.e. her or his point of view); to secondly, be able to rely on the imagery, the sound and combinations there-of as "reliable sources" to support the film's proposition; and to thirdly, to accept the iconography and the sound track and the combination of these as "phenomenological approximations" of the events that happened and were recorded, known as the 'pro-filmic event' (Plantinga, 2005:61).

Smaill (2010) poses a number of questions in an attempt to uncover the way in which emotions are produced in documentary film construction and how the production process impacts on the emotions of audiences. She also questions how "new trends in documentary reference particular modes of selfhood" (Smaill, 2010:4). These questions are designed to offer insights into the implications of emotionality in the public sphere and how these emotions shape our understanding of subjectivity in "a defined social context" (2010:3-4). To accommodate the role of emotions and subjectivity, she argues that the Habermas' definition of the public sphere should be expanded to include the tensions between the individual and the collective and between governance and the collective to allow for emotional investments in the status of the individual and the well-being of the collective.

Since Desai voices his own film, the intricate aspect of "the voice of the documentary" has to be addressed before expressing some of my questions while watching the film and when reading some of the material that has been written, or when watching other documentary films on the Marikana

massacre. Nichols (2001) posits that the voice of the documentary “conveys a sense of what the filmmaker’s social point of view is, and how this point of view becomes manifest in the act of making the film” (2001:45). He also says that the documentary voice reveals the filmmaker’s approach to the world, “in a way that he might not have fully recognized” (2001:44). For Rabiger (2004), a documentary is “a story whose ‘voice’ and impact emerge on their own”, dependent on whether the director has a “clear purpose” for making the film, and relates emotionally to “the story and each of its characters”. He or she should also know what the impact on the audience should be at every point of the film (2004:65). Pringle (2015), writing about Joshua Oppenheimer’s film *The Act of Killing*, refers to the main character Anwar Congo, a member of an Indonesian death squad, who expresses his sentiments as wanting the audience to understand who the participants are, and for the film to assist in them being remembered in future. Pringle interprets these sentiments as a variation of a recurring theme in many documentary films, as the need for “participants to tell their version of the truth” (2015:24).

4. Miners Shot Down (2014)

Despite the deep-seated cultural attachment to the evidential quality of the photographic image, the authenticity of documentary witnessing, whether by film-makers or through the agency of informants, is problematic. What if the witness is giving a “performance”? “Inauthenticity is inevitable if the documentary subject is thought to be ‘acting’”. And what if the film-makers reveal themselves? What is the impact on “documentary value” of their “role”? Bruzzi (2013:48).

Desai’s film offers an opportunity to look at how “facts, objects and situations” related to the Marikana massacre have been contextualised in the discursive framework set up by the filmmaker’s point of view. In this film the point of view is constructed not only by the choice of archival or evidential footage, but also by the insertion of the filmmaker’s voice, recorded not in the traditional “voice of god” expository style (Nichols, 2001), but as a personalised and subjective presentation of Desai’s response to the lead-up and violent outcome of the strike at the Lonmin mine.

Desai (2015) mentions that although he had a strong film with no commentary, he realised that he had no way of closing the film without a voice, as using text would require too much reading. He adds that using his own voice, and writing the narration from his own point of view also enabled him to add his own experiences as he had been “involved in the [union] movement and was severely disappointed by what happened”.

There is no question that the police should not have used live ammunition when launching the last total onslaught and there was no need to attack the column of miners who were in the process of evacuating the hillock where they had amassed as a part of their protest action. With Desai’s background, his standing as a filmmaker, and his passion as a political activist, he was the perfect

fit for this project. The documentary is both aesthetically and technically excellent.

I draw from Ghosh (2010), who argues that the “material frames” created by the formal production and structuration of documentary film are definitive elements of how the filmmakers want and expect the audiences to understand and react “intellectually and affectively” to their films. She suggests that these “cognitive frameworks” bring about the necessary critical responses, and to unravel a frame that has been created by a filmmaker there are two crucial questions which should be asked. These are, “What kind of frameworks do we find in these documentaries? And how do they encourage us to read testimony in specific ways?” (Ghosh, 2010:64-65).

5. THE UNIONS

Thomas (2018:402), in an article entitled “‘Remember Marikana’: Violence and visual activism in post-apartheid South Africa”, writes how while she was doing research in early 2012 on “vigilantism and police violence in South Africa during and after apartheid, she became aware of violent attacks at mines outside Rustenburg in North West Province in February of that year. Thomas refers to an image in a newspaper of a man with his head split open, and adds:

The killing was in response to a strike at the mine and of a conflict between two opposing trade unions. Warning signs of the ongoing crisis of systemic inequality and structural violence had filtered through to the public, but the strike did not receive much too much attention (2018:402).

I would argue that the above points to the very long lead-up to the August massacre and to very hard questions that should be answered by both the unions and the Lonmin mine management⁸, both in terms of the duration of these strikes and the final outcome of what happened at Marikana. The causes of the massacre was further exacerbated by two other instances. Firstly, Alexander (2013) mentions the unhappiness the miners had with NUM, as they experienced the organisation as corrupt and in cahoots with the mine management as well as paying scabs to break up the strike action on 10 August, 2012, days before the massacre⁹. Secondly he writes that Frank Baleni, the NUM general secretary at the time, “called for ‘the deployment of the Special Task Force or the South African Defence Force’” (Alexander et al., 2012:178). “Three days later it was this task force that carried out the massacre” (2013:3).

Although Desai confirms the complicity of NUM as allies of the ANC (<http://www.uhuruproductions.co.za>), the impact of the union’s role in the lead-up to the disaster and the period covered in *Miners Shot Down* is not clear in the film.

⁸ Here I draw on Kerrigan and McIntyre from their article The ‘creative treatment of actuality’: Rationalising and reconceptualising the notion of creativity for documentary practice (2010)

⁹ According to Alexander (2012, 2013), the strike was unprotected, i.e. the tools-down was not in line with South African Labour Laws. The strike was led by an independent committee that included representatives from the two unions). Alexander also mentions that the unions “rightly denied causing the stoppage”.

6. THE POLICE

In June 2012, then President Jacob Zuma had appointed Riah Phiyega as the National Police Commissioner of South Africa. This was a controversial appointment at the time and demanded of a leader with two months of experience, in a position she should never have accepted, to make “the biggest decision in post-apartheid South Africa” (Moya, 2017). This aspect of the possible causes of the tragedy has never been addressed, especially as, to quote Moya (2017), “the Phiyega inquiry is another case of selective accountability. A National Police Commissioner doesn’t appoint herself”.

7. VOICE OF THE MINERS

Desai sets out to tell his “version of the truth” not only through the construction of the film using cinematic conventions as discussed, but also by fronting the intention to present the miners’ point of view, something which was visibly absent from the various media representations of the events (Duncan, 2013).

Despite taking the miners’ point of view, the film includes many expert opinions on what had happened, but it offers nearly no opportunity for the voices of the mineworkers to be heard. Peter Alexander (2013) lists a range of issues raised by the miners, such as their wages, debt-traps, micro-lenders and lawyers, the hazardous working conditions and the resultant high incidence of sicknesses such as TB, rude treatment by mostly white managers, complicated support systems brought about by the migrant working conditions, and abysmal housing conditions. Two of the 78 injured miners (including the strike leader Tholakele Dlunga) do offer some testimony in the film of what had happened and what their realities are in the aftermath of the events at Marikana, and at the start of the film there is the disembodied voice of a man claiming, “We did not follow the instruction ... but hey, it was impossible to” (*Miners Shot Down*, 2014). Although this was a wild-cat strike with two union representatives on the strike committee, union leaders did address the miners urging them to leave the mountain and to return to their homes. On August 16, 2012 the AMCU leader Joseph Mathunjwa addressed the group one last time before they start the move to return home. The section included in *Miners Shot Down* shows him saying to the miners:

Comrade, the life of a black person in Africa is so cheap, they will kill us, they will finish us and they will replace us and continue to pay salaries that cannot change black people’s lives. That would mean that we were defeated, but capitalists will be the ones who win. But we have a way that you have showed us, that this is the way to go. We are requesting that you brothers, sisters, men. I am kneeling down, coming to you as nothing. I say, let us stop this blood that NUM has allowed this employer to let flow. We do not want bloodshed, we want your problems solved, so you get your salaries, comrades (*Miners Shot Down*, 2014).

In an interview following the archival material transcribed in the above paragraph, Mathunjwa recounts how he afterwards told an ENCA reporter that “all this is now in God’s hands”. An ENCA produced film, *The Marikana Massacre: Through the Lens: The Morning of August 16th (Part One)*, includes Mathunjwa warning the strikers “You have raised your voices, spoken out about what you want. Government has now declared this area a security zone, which means this area is now under police control”. It would be conjecture on my part to even guess when the police took control after the request from Baleni, but I would argue that it was an oversight not to have conveyed this information to the strike committee at an earlier stage, should this have been possible.

8. THE MUSIC

According to Rabiger (2004), the use of music in documentary films can often be experienced as manipulative; he argues that the content should carry the message and the voice of the film without having to rely on music to provide insight into what the documentary filmmaker is saying or trying to say. The beautiful, haunting and very emotive music for *Miners Shot Down* was composed by Phillip Miller, but it may have been more prudent to use a less intrusive and more minimalist score, to minimise the inevitable blurring of the boundaries between fiction and documentary.^{10,11}

Having mentioned some of the aspects of the film that raise questions even after multiple viewings, and acknowledging that no documentary film, especially not a subjectively voiced political construct, could present a completely omniscient point of view and include all variables, facts and figures, I propose that there still exists a responsibility to offer a reliable text that frames the topic of the film in a holistic and inclusive way. American filmmaker Michael Moore relies on a very personal and as such a very subjective mode of production. When taken to task for reordering the historical chronology of events that he presented in his film *Roger and Me* (1989), Moore responded by saying that he was telling a story, condensing hours of footage to present Flint’s tragic recent history, and that his story about Flint was largely accurate (Kellner, 2013). Kellner sees Moore as “an exemplar of a partisan documentary tradition which rejects what it sees as a ‘myth of objectivity’” (2013:59). For filmmakers such as Moore, de Antonio and others, films are constructed, and the many production processes such as editing are ultimately subjective. The filmmakers also argue that there are many other criteria by which documentary films could and should be evaluated (Kellner, 2013:61).

Despite these arguments, I concur with Schutte (2014), who argues that although Desai’s film does reveal aspects of the unfolding events that had not been illuminated by the Farlam Commission or others, she feels that it represents but one aspect of the Marikana realities at the time and that as such lacks the “nuance and complexity” required by investigative journalism. This is especially important when covering an event that Alexander (2013:1) describes as “a turning point in South

¹⁰ Phillip Miller is an accomplished South African composer and sound artist. For more information visit: <https://www.philipmiller.co.za>

¹¹ An example would be *The Thin Blue Line* (1989), a groundbreaking documentary film by Errol Morris. Philip Glass composed the music (Rabiger, 2004).

African history”.

9. CONCLUSION

I have offered my interpretation of how Desai, an internationally and locally acclaimed documentary filmmaker, created the frames for *Miners Shot Down*, and argued how these elements combine to create the emotional experience for the viewer. Subsequent to *Miners Shot Down*, Desai has completed three more documentaries, *The Giant Is Falling* (2016), *Everything Must Fall* (2019) and *How to Steal a Country* (2020) – films that were constructed using somewhat similar material frames. As a political activist who expresses his reliance on the documentary genre, he draws on contemporary issues to create discourse in the public sphere. He visualises his films by using text, interviews, newly recorded events, historical archival material as well as more recent news footage. As an activist, he approaches the topics from a very personal point of view and even when he allows for other voices, the testimonies are framed within a subjective frame that does not really allow for the unfolding of oppositional or other points of view. According to Christensen and Haas (2005), films “participate” in specific political times, not always as was intended, but as they are seen and how they are interpreted by those who see them. We do not yet know what impact the Desai films will have, but what we do know is that “South Africa will never be the same again”.¹²

¹² Tagline for *Miners Shot Down* (2014) (<http://www.uhuruproductions.co.za>).

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