Long Night’s Journey Into Day: Mapping the Rehabilitation of South Africa’s Fractured Society

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The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Mandate and Structure

Shortly after the first democratic elections in South Africa in 1994, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was set up to, among other tasks, examine the nature, causes and extent of gross human rights violations committed during the apartheid regime, specifically during the thirty-four year period between 1 March 1960 and 10 May 1994 (the date of Nelson Mandela’s inauguration as President). The TRC effected its mandate through three committees: the Human Rights Violations Committee, the Reparation and Rehabilitation Committee and the Amnesty Committee.

The Human Rights Violations Committee undertook to bring perpetrators and victims of human rights violations face-to-face in non-judicial public hearings across the country between 21 April 1996 and 29 March 1998. According to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report, Volume 6 (1998), during its two year operational period, the Human Rights Violations Committee collected a total of 21,519 victim statements, containing more than 30,384 gross violations of human rights. Approximately ten percent of the victims were heard in public hearings. Victims were given the opportunity to tell their stories and, ultimately, to confront their perpetrators before an audience; perpetrators were given the same opportunity to disclose publicly unknown information about crimes committed during the apartheid regime.

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1 The Promotion of National Unity and Reconciliation Act 34 of 1995, which established the terms and conditions of the TRC, defines gross human rights violations as “the killing, abduction, torture, or severe ill-treatment of any person; or any attempt, conspiracy, incitement, instigation, command or procurement to commit” any of the aforementioned acts (3).
The Centrality of Forgiveness in the Reconciliation Process

It has been widely recognised in literature that Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu played a crucial role in defining the guiding principles shaping the TRC’s work. Desmond Tutu, the TRC’s Chairperson, in particular, has been linked to the centrality of forgiveness in the radical proposal for interpersonal reconciliation that framed the TRC’s endeavour to promote restorative, rather than retributive justice (Amstutz 2005; Graybill 2002). As Desmond Tutu (9) explains in the Foreword to the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report*, Volume One, “We believe … that there is another kind of justice — a restorative justice which is concerned not so much with punishment as with correcting imbalances, restoring broken relationships — with healing, harmony and reconciliation”. Central to the restorative justice model is the restoration of the equilibrium in relationships, thereby enabling the offender’s reintegration into the community.

However, the intermeshing, during the Human Rights Violation Committee proceedings, of the concepts of reconciliation and forgiveness caused unease and raised, from the start, several fundamental questions: Is reconciliation a transaction between perpetrators and victims, whereby the former offer contrition and confession in exchange for the latter’s forgiveness? Does reconciliation simply aim at peaceful coexistence between previously estranged people? Does forgiveness necessarily lead to reconciliation?

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2 According to Gibson (2002) the TRC process was underpinned by four theories of justice, notably, distributive justice, which provides compensation to victims; restorative justice, which emphasises restoring dignity to victims by means of symbolic reparation (an apology); procedural justice, which ensures victims and their families are given a “voice” as they get to tell their stories publicly and, hence, receive recognition that they were wronged; and retributive justice, which is premised on the punishment of offenders.

3 The African philosophy of *ubuntu* was pivotal to this process. As Desmond Tutu (1999) discusses in *No Future Without Forgiveness*, the values nurtured by the ancestral communitarian model of *ubuntu* — generally translated as “humaneness” or “the essence of being human” — advocate that each person, rather than an abstract being, is a living force in a constellation of relationships. Accordingly, *ubuntu* promotes exercise of the responsibility of the self for the other as both the precept of social existence and the recognition of a shared humanity.
Volume One of the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of South Africa Report* clarifies that forgiveness does not mean reconciliation. The latter is a process of re-establishing relationship and settling differences so that cooperation and a sense of harmony are achieved. On the other hand, it establishes that forgiveness is important in the process of coming to terms with a traumatic past, since “It is about seeking to forego bitterness, renouncing resentment, moving past old hurt, and becoming a survivor rather than a passive victim” (119).

With this in mind, I wish to take a closer look at what the process of forgiveness entails. In the emerging field of study of psychology of forgiveness, Wade et al. (634) define forgiveness as:

an intra-personal process, in which those who have been hurt release negative thoughts and feelings for the offending person and gain some measure of acceptance for the events … However … forgiveness does not necessarily have to include reconciliation … forgiveness is not condoning a hurtful action, forgetting the wrong, or ignoring the natural consequences of the offence. Finally, forgiveness is not simply reducing the negative thoughts or emotions associated with unforgiveness.

Wade et al. stress that true forgiveness “requires the ability to see others in realistic terms (both the good and the bad) and to hold them accountable to natural consequences, yet still to feel compassion, empathy, or some degree of positive feelings for them” (634). Pumla Godobo-Madikizela⁴ (2002) considers the factors and circumstances leading to forgiveness and claims that key among them is the expression of remorse. In this respect, Godobo-Madikizela highlights the opportunity provided by the TRC hearings for perpetrators to express remorse for their deeds, enabling “what is termed the *paradox of remorse*”⁵ (21). The author contends that

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⁵ According to Godobo-Madikizela (“Remorse” 21), the “paradox of remorse” stems from the perpetrator’s feeling of regret, self-reflective thoughts and emotions that “produce the paradoxical experience of the perpetrator as a wounded self”.

“[G]enuine remorse humanizes perpetrators and transforms their evil from the unforgivable into something that can be forgiven” (8).

In practice, few perpetrators offered apologies and showed regret for their deeds. Quite often, when this happened, there was doubt as to whether expressions of remorse by perpetrators or forgiveness by victims/victims’ family members were sincere and voluntary, or a direct result of the TRC’s moral discourse and the repeated appeal to tolerance, compassion, forgiveness and reconciliation. As Amstutz (202) points out, “[T]he TRC made room for, if not directly encouraged, individual and collective forgiveness through its emphasis on the restoration of relationships through confession, empathy and amnesty”.

Forgiveness and reconciliation seldom took place during the TRC process, but what ought to be appreciated is that, for the first time in the history of South Africa, conditions were created that both favoured forgiveness and reconciliation and promoted the reconstruction of a deeply divided society. It was often found, however, that following a perpetrator’s confession and expression of remorse, for the victims/family members of victims, feelings of empathy and compassion were neither immediate nor easy to negotiate. When it took place, forgiveness stemmed from deep internal struggle, grief, anguish and pain (Godobo-Madikizela 2003; Graybill 2002; Tutu 1999).

Long Night’s Journey into Day: A Cinematographic Treatment of Forgiveness

This process is masterfully explored in the segment dedicated to the mothers of the Guguletu Seven in the documentary film Long Night’s Journey into Day, directed by Frances Reid (2000).6 Shot over a period of two and a half years, the film chronicles the stories of victims and perpetrators in four cases brought to the TRC: the murders of Amy Biehl and the Craddock

6 Other documentary films have focused on the TRC, most notably Mark Kaplan’s If Truth Be Told (1996), Where Truth Lies (1998) and Between Joyce and Remembrance (2004); Gail Pellett’s Facing the Truth with Bill Moyers (1999); Antjie Krog and Ronelle Loots’s The Unfolding of Sky: Landscape of Memory (1999) and Lindy Wilson’s Guguletu Seven (2000).
I wish to focus on the Guguletu Seven case to consider how Reid’s treatment of the face-to-face encounter between a former member of a secret government death squad and the mothers of seven young men that were assassinated in 1986 in the township of Guguletu in Cape Town provides insights into the process of forgiveness discussed earlier and invites contemplation about the possibility and limits of forgiveness. Emmanuel Levinas’s (1969) ethics of alterity offers a framework for examining the response evoked by the face-to-face concrete encounter with the suffering of another human being.

The segment begins with images of the township of Guguletu, accompanied by the voice of a narrator who provides brief information about the death of a group of young men that became known as the Guguletu Seven. A national news bulletin of the time reports that police had killed seven terrorists in an early-morning shootout in Guguletu after uncovering ANC plans to ambush a patrol. Footage shot by the police video unit shows the bullet-riddled corpses of the men lying in pools of blood on the road and in the bushes nearby a police van. One of the bodies is being dragged by a rope tied around the waist. The camera zooms in on weapons lying on or next to the bodies.

The next sequence intersperses on-screen text detailing the findings of an official inquest that absolved the police with the testimony of three of the murdered men’s mothers and footage of the TRC hearings in November 1996. The mothers describe how they had heard or seen images on the News of their sons’ deaths. Eunice Miya, Jabulani Miya’s mother, breaks out in tears. The camera cuts to members of the audience who are visibly moved. One of the Commissioners and Archbishop Tutu provide words of comfort.

In an external interview, Edith Mjobo, Zandisile Sammy Mjobo’s mother, describes the experience of having been arrested and beaten up during interrogation after her son’s burial while dealing with the pain of having lost her son. The vignette continues with the screening, in the

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7 See Bennet (2005) for a discussion of both the (dis) affect in Long Night’s Journey Into Day and the emotional responses to the mothers’ and the perpetrators’ testimonies.
hearings, of a police video detailing police action during and after the shoot-out. Nine policemen subpoenaed by the TRC (as witnesses to the Guguletu Seven incident), as well as the mothers of the murdered men, are present. When faced with gruesome images of the men’s corpses, accompanied by meticulous explanations in Afrikaans by police officers at the scene, some of the mothers lose control of their emotions and begin to wail and gesticulate wildly. The screening is brought to a halt while the distraught mothers and the impassive policemen are escorted out of the room.

The next sequence is composed of Sergeant Bellingan’s testimony at the scene of the shoot-out, followed by his and Constable Mbelo’s testimonies in the hearings.8 The two policemen who applied for amnesty provide opposing accounts of the event. Sergeant Bellingan’s is a calm, detached and unrepentant narration of why he shot one of the men. He believed his life was in danger. Conversely, Thapelo Mbelo claims that he was acting on orders: “The words that we used is that ‘they should be eliminated’”. He continues, “A man approached us, raising his arms […] He never tried to shoot us or even reach for his firearm. I shot him once. He was lying on his back. I shot him in the head”.

The camera cuts to an external interview with Mbelo, alternating between his testimony and a preparatory meeting between the family members of the victims and Pumla Godobo-Madikizela, a TRC Commissioner who counsels the mothers about a subsequent meeting that was to take place, in which they would come face-to-face with Mbelo. In the interview, Mbelo explains why he applied for amnesty. He reveals that all the policemen involved in the shooting had lied at a waiver trial and later inquest. He now wants to disclose the truth.9

At the preparatory meeting, Cynthia Ngewu articulates her anger about how Mbelo had deceived the youths, expressing little interest in his

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8 Sargeant Bellingan and Constable Mbelo were the only two of the more than twenty-five policemen involved in the Guguletu Seven shooting that applied for amnesty.

9 On-screen text reveals that Bellingan and Mbelo had been sent to Guguletu from Vlakplass, a secret government death squad centre. Bellingan was one of three black operatives who infiltrated a group of ANC activists. A TRC Commissioner explains that this had been a well-planned operation where the young men had been lured into a trap.
explanations. This impassioned outburst is validated in the next frame when Mbelo admits, “We didn’t have feelings. It felt just like a day’s work had been done”. He later reflects about what separates him from Bellingan, and why he needs to face the mothers: “Bellingan is a white man. I’m a black man [...] Every day he is going to the bar with his white friends. I have to go to my black brothers and sisters, so we are not on par”.

The last scene of this segment focuses on the private meeting between Mbelo and family members of the murdered men. The description of the sequences leading up to this meeting sought to provide a sense of how Reid frames and renders visible the tension and outburst, control, or even absence of emotion in the hearings, compelling the viewer to acknowledge the range of emotions and responses displayed by the participants in the testimonial process. Importantly, Reid reiterates the anguish and pain of victims/ victims’ family members as they relive traumatic events, opening up wounds that have not yet healed. One is led to question whether, in these circumstances, compassion and forgiveness are at all possible.

Establishing the camera as observer in the face-to-face encounter between Mbelo and the mothers of the victims, Reid offers the viewer a privileged insight into the dialogic and emotional engagement that takes place during the meeting. Speaking in a calm and quiet tone, and looking the women in the eyes, Mbelo addresses them with the following plea:

My name is Thapelo Mbelo. I am ashamed to look you in the face. I know that it is painful for you to be faced with a person who has done you wrong and talk to him. I know some of you may forgive me, others may never forgive me. I know that I have done wrong, that I have done evil things here on earth. And I want to say to you as parents of these children who were there that day, I ask for your forgiveness from the bottom of my heart. Forgive me, my parents.

Edith Mjobo responds contemptuously, asking Mbelo how he felt the day he saw the video footage. Confronted with the mothers’ inevitable rage,
Mbelo is only capable of voicing, “I feel bad”. Edith Mjobo is not appeased and continues to accuse him mercilessly of selling his own blood for money. Mbelo tentatively argues in his defence that he had been forced to do what he did. This only seems to infuriate the mothers even further. What they cannot accept is, as Cynthia Ngewu states bitterly, the fact that he betrayed his own people. Visibly disturbed, all Mbelo can add is, “Mama, I don’t know what to say. We have hurt you”.

Mbelo’s respectful address triggers an emotional response in Cynthia Ngewu, who tearfully recalls how her son was dragged through the dirt with a rope. In a shot/reverse shot sequence, the viewer’s attention is directed to Cynthia Ngewu’s grief, her facial expression revealing sadness and distress. Mbelo looks at her, transfixed, failing to respond in any way, other than with the gaze. The close-up captures Mbelo’s sad and subdued expression. A facial muscle twitches as he acknowledges this mother’s pain. The camera then focuses on another mother, who snorts, “Your face is something I will never forget. I have no forgiveness for you!” There is contempt and anger in the narrowed eyes and lips, scrunched nose and furrowed brow.

In this sequence of shots, the face becomes, to borrow Paul Coates’s (3) expression, “the primary site of human communicativeness”. The close-up heightens the spectator’s awareness of the range of feelings and emotions that come to the fore in the impassioned exchange between the participants in this encounter. In his meditation on the facial close-up in film, the screenwriter and director Béla Balázs (125) considers that the close-up reveals “shades of meaning too subtle to be conveyed in words”. As Balázs writes, “[I]n the isolated close-up of the film we can see to the bottom of the soul by means of such tiny movements of facial muscles which even the most observant partner would never perceive” (122). In effect, the expression on Cynthia Ngewu, Mbelo and the other mother’s faces, as revealed by the close-up, conveys a far deeper meaning than words could articulate.

The dramatic climax in this scene is followed by an unexpected turn of events. Cynthia Ngewu addresses Mbelo as if she were seeing him for the first time and, invoking her Christian faith, states, “I forgive you my child, and the reason I say I forgive you is that my child will never wake up again. And it’s pointless to hold this wound against you. God will be the judge […] I want to go home knowing the mothers are forgiving the
evil you have done, and we feel compassion for you”. The segment ends with a sequence of shots of some of the mothers embracing Mbelo. The focus on the display of forgiveness at the end of the film conveys the idea that the opportunity to express their anger, resentment and sorrow, has enabled the mothers to work through their trauma, transcend hateful emotions, and begin a process of healing.

Although it takes place on camera, the meeting between Thapelo Mbelo and the mothers is framed as if it was a private experience, quite different from that of the audience-packed halls where the hearings were held. In the hall, the policemen had their backs to the mothers who were sitting in the audience, and were therefore screened from the women’s rage. In the confined space of the private meeting, Mbelo is deprived of the support of his colleagues; he faces the women on his own. The camera takes on the role of a witness, encouraging the participants in the meeting to speak freely and earnestly whilst dramatising the tension in the face-to-face encounter.

Mbelo is met by the accusing looks, the hostility, resentment, sorrow, and angry words of the mothers who hold him accountable for their sons’ murder. Released from the carefully structured model of the hearing, the mothers let their emotions run free. The camera explores the expressivity of their faces. Discussions of the facial close-up in film theory describe the face as a site of signification, whilst stressing the capacity of the close-up to overwhelm the spectator (Balázs 2003; Epstein 1977). Jean Epstein (13) considers its magnifying effect, claiming that “The close up modifies the drama by the impact of proximity. Pain is within reach. If I stretch out my arm I touch you”.

I want to suggest that the facial close-up engenders compassion not only because of its intensifying effect, but also because it exposes what Emmanuel Levinas’s (Totality 75) calls “the nakedness of the face”. In the scene discussed earlier, the camera alternates between Mbelo’s face and that of the mothers, zooming in for a close-up, lingering there as the speaker looks the Other in the eye. There is, to borrow Levinas’s (Ethics 86)

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11 I am following the convention used in Levinas’s texts with regards to the “Other” (with a capital “o”) to refer to the personal other or other person.
words, “an essential poverty in the face” as the participants in the face-to-face encounter expose themselves, revealing their vulnerabilities. From a Levinasian perspective, “the face” is not, strictly speaking, the anatomical face. It is the locus of the encounter with another human being, which induces one to an ethical responsibility and an infinite respect for someone who confronts us. This stance is what enables the transformation witnessed by the viewer.

Concluding thoughts

Frances Reid’s treatment of the Guguletu Seven deepens our understanding of the effects of massive trauma on individuals and communities, and the painful emotions occasioned by the face-to-face encounters between victims and perpetrators during the TRC process. It promotes reflection on the difficulty and possibility of both forgiveness and transformation. Whereas for some victims it was possible to seek healing and closure, and perhaps even forgiveness, for others, feelings of anger, resentment and revenge were more easily sustained. Godobo-Madikizela (A Human 120) explains that “One reason we distance ourselves through anger from those who have hurt us […] is the fear that if we engage them as real people, we will be compromising our moral stance and lowering the entry requirements into the human community.” However, perpetrators’ sobering reflection on the deeds committed and the pain caused dispelled victims’ feelings of anger, hatred and revenge, revealing that an honest expression of apology can engender a transformative process, whereby victims let go of their anger and hatred and perpetrators reclaim their sense of humanity. As Godobo-Madikizela (A Human 99) observes,

A sincere apology does not seek to erase what was done. No amount of words can undo past wrongs. Nothing can ever reverse injustices committed against others. But an apology pronounced in the context of horrible acts has the potential of transformation. It clears or “settles” the air in order to begin reconstructing the broken connections between two human beings.
Works Cited


Filmography


Abstract
Change has been a recurring keyword in every domain of thought and action in South Africa since the dismantlement of apartheid and the implementation of democracy following the 1994 democratic elections. Politically, legally, and symbolically, this process broke with an extensive period of oppression and violation of human rights. However, the new government believed that the most significant change in social consciousness would take place at the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s public hearings. The TRC was seen as a vehicle for social repair which provided release from the legacy of fear, hatred, revenge and guilt, and redirected people’s desire for vengeance. I approach this theme by considering Frances Reid’s (2000) cinematographic treatment of the role of compassion and forgiveness in healing severed relationships and promoting a course of action capable of transfiguring social exchange and providing new grounds of human community in the documentary film Long Night’s Journey Into Day.

Keywords
Truth and Reconciliation Commission; remorse; forgiveness; apartheid; cinema

Resumo
A palavra mudança tem figurado em todos os domínios de pensamento e acção na África do Sul desde o desmantelamento do apartheid e a implementação da democracia a seguir às eleições democráticas de 1994. Do ponto de vista político, legal, e simbólico, este processo pós fime a um longo período de opressão e violação dos direitos humanos. Contudo, o novo governo acreditava que a mudança mais significativa da consciência social viria a ter lugar nas audiências públicas da Comissão da Verdade e Reconciliação. A CVR era considerada um veículo de reparação social que libertava as pessoas do legado do medo, ódio, vingança e culpa, redirecionando a sua vontade de vingança. Esta temática é abordada através da análise do documentário Long Night’s Journey Into Day (2000), de Frances Reid, em que o realizador se centra no papel da compaixão e do perdão na reconstrução de
relações destroçadas, fomentando uma conduta capaz de transformar e promover novas formas de interacção social.

**Palavras Chave**

Comissão da Verdade e Reconciliação; remorso; perdão; apartheid; cinema