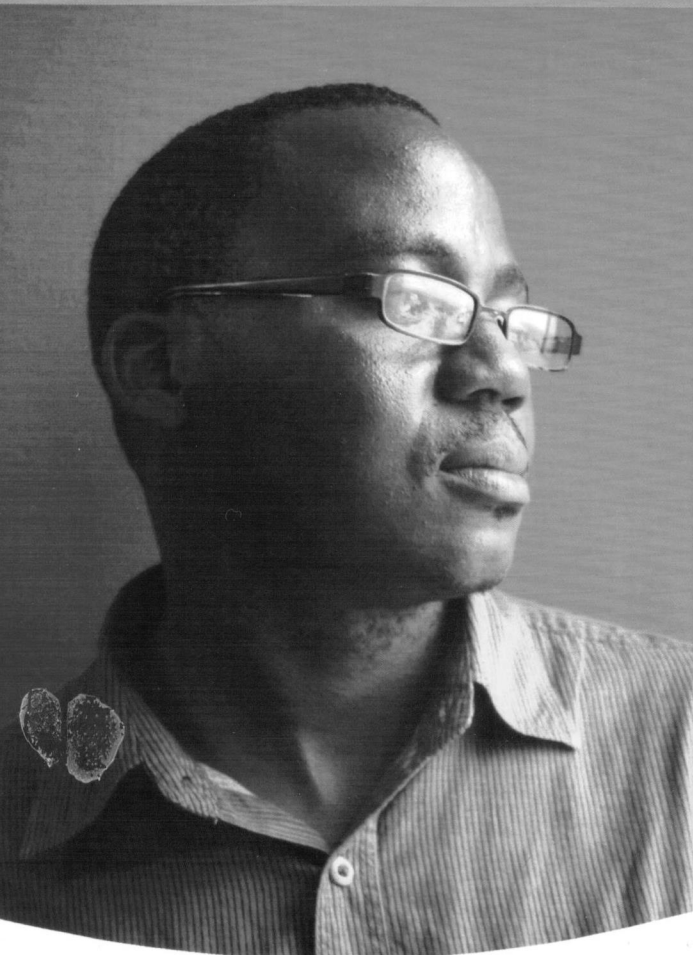


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Review essays

Who am I? Portrait of the life and art of Dumile Feni. *Zwelidumile*. Dir. Ramadan Suleman. Co-production South Africa and Belgium. 2009. 115 min.

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I was 15 years old when my art teacher introduced us to South African township art, notably the work of Dumile Feni. Feni's life, like that of many artistic geniuses, seemed to be tragic; his artwork fuelled no doubt by the tragedies themselves. Years later, in 2005, I had the privilege of seeing a major retrospective of Feni's work curated by Prince Dube at the Johannesburg Art Gallery, which confirmed for me that Feni was one of the greatest visual artists. Two years later, South African filmmakers Bhekizizwe Peterson and Ramadan Suleman put together a documentary entitled *Zwelidumile* (2009). I imagined a Picasso-like figure, with a lavish lifestyle and a conscience to boot. I did not expect that Peterson and Suleman would deny us the romanticised, neatly packaged biography of an artist; creating instead a fractured and complicated portrait which highlights how little is known about Feni.

Zwelidumile does not offer a chronological narrative of Feni's life. The viewer has to piece together timelines as an almost schizophrenic picture of Feni emerges: snippets of a young Feni who demonstrates artistic ability from a young age, becomes acquainted with various visual and musical artists in his twenties, holding successful exhibitions at Gallery 101 in Johannesburg in the late 1960s (at the same time loathing the dependence on the white liberal art scene). Feni emerges as a stylish member of the activist cultural circle, who feels compelled to leave South Africa for the United Kingdom (UK) and then, against the advice of friends, leaves for the United States (US) where his alcohol, drug and financial problems increase. Further complicating this schizophrenic portrait is the fact that the questions the film asks about Feni, the exiled artist, coincide with those his daughter, Mirriam Diale, asks about her father.

Throughout *Zwelidumile*, viewers are introduced to different people in Feni's life – friends, family and colleagues. The documentary emphasises Feni's social relationships with different people who talk of him as difficult to engage with, a 'prima donna', a laughing man, a serious artist, a sickly person, a man of extravagancies. Yet, Feni simultaneously emerges as a private person who kept his relationships with his family and certain women close to — or closed in — his heart; with many of his very intimate

friends and colleagues in exile unable to tell one anything about his biological family, wife or daughter. Feni seems to have had a complex relationship with the various women in his life: Kuli, his eldest sister; Fazila, his wife; Mirriam Diale, his daughter; and Nina, a friend in New York.

Upon their mother's passing, Feni's sister Nomakhula Mgxaji (Kuli) took on that role and it is evident that he never forgot it for the rest of his life. A family interview with Kuli, Feni's sister-in-law and his nephew, provides insights into the young artist. He disappeared from their lives before he went into exile, and the family only learnt of his death from a newspaper article. Moreover, they were unaware until after his death that Feni was married, had a daughter and was aligned with the Islamic faith. This seems to be a point of contention that is hinted at in the documentary: he is buried under his Muslim name (Osman), but clearly his biological family is unhappy with these arrangements. In one of the scenes, we see his daughter Diale changing Feni's graveyard plaque from 'Osman D. Fanie' to 'Osman D. Feni'. Unfortunately, neither this alternation (reclamation?) nor his San heritage is explained.

The film's recovery narrative is structured around Diale who has a pathos about her struggle of knowing an 'absent' father to which many viewers can relate. Feni for her is a gap in her own life, a few lines of communication, a dead body returned to South Africa. The phrase 'the personal is political' could not sum up Feni's life any more succinctly, but Diale represents those left behind and without by the anti-apartheid struggle. She is the human face of a corrosive socio-political system that destroyed many family structures and relationships. Through Diale and her mother, the film brings to the surface the scars that remain airbrushed off the glossy pages of history. Viewers feel her hurt and pain as she tries to find the right questions to ask about her father and gains few insights into him (and presumably herself); although she does recognise Feni's importance to South African cultural and political history.

Though featured in the documentary, Feni's wife, Fazila Florrie Morris, hardly speaks. Morris appears as a shadowy presence in her daughter's quest to trace her father's story. Morris was seven months pregnant when Feni left the country. He did not inform her of his leaving, though viewers learn that he hosted several farewell parties. There are many questions about Morris and Feni's relationship: Why didn't he keep in contact to find out about the daughter he had left behind? Why didn't he introduce her to his family? Why did he give her the impression that he was an only child? How come she is recognised by the ANC as his wife and his body is returned to her? Was she the family he would have returned to in October 1991? These are all private, uncomfortable questions evoked by the glaring silences surrounding Morris's presence. In response to these questions, Peterson acknowledges that although Morris participated in the documentary willingly, the producers respected her privacy and the limits of what she was willing to share. In time of no-holds-barred, shameless self-exposure on reality TV and documentaries, it is rather jarring to come across some level of ethics and respect in documentary practice. These unanswered questions are not a case of staged mystery for dramatic effect, but rather an acknowledgement of the difficulties of putting human experience into a linear narrative which establishes a definite beginning and end and all the facts in-between.

the same vein, Peterson and Suleman have not provided a narrator, preferring to let the documentary inhabit a space of creativity in which the audience is required to participate actively in recovering and structuring Feni's life and history.

Nina Bergmann and Feni established a strong friendship during his last years in New York, when he became arthritic and she assisted him. She was with him the night he had a massive coronary that killed him in a few minutes in a Tower Records music store. She, like Morris, seems tentative and one senses her reluctance to discuss her relationship with Feni. One of the key remarks Bergmann makes is about her being harassed by the ANC in the US after Feni's death for his works. Who is this faceless ANC that keeps cropping up on the periphery of Feni's life? None of their names is revealed, neither is their role in the life of the exiled Feni (and his role in the organisation), nor which works they 'collected' on Feni's death. Bergmann hints at a fraught relationship when she says, 'when we [Feni and Bergmann] connected, it wasn't heavy, it wasn't the ANC saying paint this for Mandela, and you owe us this and you owe us that and if you want us to help you, you have to make another mural or another painting'. Although Wally Serote and Albie Sachs would seem to represent the ANC in this documentary, they are never questioned on these issues, but come across only as dedicated supporters of his work.

The documentary returns to these issues of intimate relationships time and again. Dr Cyril Khanyile, another exiled friend whom Feni lived with for a period in the US, summarises this as a condition of living in exile without any hope of returning home. Various fellow exiled cadres seem to identify with the need to ration out personal truths during apartheid, when family and friends could be subjected to surveillance, interrogation and torture to disclose information on the whereabouts of 'political agitators'. Khanyile suggests that to keep one's sanity, one had to sometimes physically and emotionally separate oneself from loved ones. For some, like Feni, it seems the more physical distance there was, the more necessary it was to not even talk about your loved ones back home, where you could not return. These feelings of dislocation and suppression of memory are hard to imagine living in post-apartheid South Africa, but seem to be pervasive amongst oppressed persons. One is reminded here of Toni Morrison's characters in her novel *Beloved* (1988), who embody such 'privacy' as a coping strategy to forget the horrors of their past enslavement. Morrison's characters know what it means to have to bury things within oneself and the pain of 'rememory', which is not simply the act of remembering, but allowing memory the 'luxury' of being drawn on at will, of excavating that which has been buried or the painful recollection forced upon one.

Though it may seem unsatisfactory, it is important that Peterson and Suleman contextualise Feni's strange behaviour towards his family within this condition of exile, as a possible coping mechanism in a warped social system. There are times when the act of remembering and forgetting seems absurd, not just in understanding Feni's behaviour, but readings of Feni's life. Different authors underscore the contradictions in his life story and even basic facts about his birth date, names, siblings, etc. Sometimes it is easy to forget that for some generations of South Africans, such basics were not necessarily accessible and that the act of trying to figure out that which was not documented immediately is a difficult task. Heavy alcohol and drug use also seem to have featured strongly during

that time. One wonders whether it was the influence of the flower power generation or perhaps a reaction to the suppression of rage which created the self-harm that seems to have plagued many black exiles. In the face of dehumanisation, is it surprising that hedonistic 'because-you-can' excesses may seem like a response?

There are certain formal and stylistic elements which I found distracting in the documentary; for example, the inconsistent titles given to people e.g. Wally Serote (Friend/Writer); Louis Maqhubela (Friend/Visual Artist) but then Omar Badsha is simply 'Friend', as are Moji Mokone and Dr Cyril Khanyile. Often, viewers are presented with still photographs of Feni with different persons who are not consistently identified. Similarly, for the first half hour of the documentary, the journeying and spaces are established through visual markers of New York, London and Cape Town, but after that, viewers are never quite sure where they are. There are also scenes that are strange: the longish scene where Feni's sister drinks a glass of water yet the interviewer does not establish how many siblings Feni had nor why Khanyile mentioned Feni having two (?) daughters. The opening sequence with friend/jazz musician in New York, Lloyd McNeill, is also bizarre as he calls someone – I presume the owner of the Tower Records store – who either cannot or will not meet with Diale and her mother. McNeill says he met Feni through another friend, Franklin, who he proceeds to call and ask, 'How's your memory today? Fairly decent?' A seemingly insignificant conversation which Feni ends with McNeill saying '... and listen, B Flat, that's the key'. The conversation struck me as a grown-up version of Chinese whispers that seemed unnecessary given the wealth of other people interviewed. Mokone's stories, for instance, show a humorous playful relationship between him and Feni; as do those with South African jazz musician Julian Bahula, also in exile in London, and Badsha's intimate friendship with Feni.

The DVD does not stick to a particular style of documentary practice. The interviewer's voice (Suleman) comes across strongly but viewers are never introduced to him. At other times, this style of *cinema vérité* gives way to a more 'direct' method where the camera seems to follow the actions and gaze of Diale. Ultimately, the documentary is a series of interviews which one can interrogate interestingly in terms of interview methodology as it seems to draw deliberate attention to its constructedness. Peterson and Suleman use a range of visual aids in their documentary, from newspaper clippings, to stills photographs, archival South African TV footage, Feni's short film and a US interview with Feni. I found the documentary within a documentary interesting, as viewers get a sense of Feni's strong presence in the way he speaks about his artistic practice, his fame and even his many names (reminiscent of a famous Malcolm X television interview). The filmmakers allow viewers to hear the unedited voice of the interviewer where she and her colleagues are trying to get Feni to repeat or clarify what he just said so as to get the 'proper edit', thereby underscoring once again the constructedness of documentary practice itself. One cannot ignore the 'truth-telling' aura of documentary practice (be it stills or video) and the audience's belief in its seamless truths. Recently, a particularly horrendous 'documentary' on Haitian faith practices, which was a 38 minute visual onslaught of stereotypes of black Africans, made me appreciate Peterson and Suleman's refusal to provide the typical

'doccie', by using various strategies to reveal the slippages of narrative, disjunctures in story-telling, lapses and tensions in the normalisation of apartheid and silences and gaps in memory, history, archival and ultimately canonisation processes.

Knowledge, which one could argue is a key aim of a documentary film, lacks coherence and is contestable in *Zwelidumile*. In doing so, this documentary compares with artistic initiatives which have questioned the mechanisations of the documentary process (for example the works of Lebanese artist Walid Raad and the Atlas Group). While this documentary may be viewed as an anti-romanticised biography of a great artist, so many more questions open up that it may end up perpetuating the notion of 'the artist as enigma'. In South Africa, where so many persons simply vanished during the anti-apartheid struggle, within the country and outside, this documentary may be reflective of how difficult it is to piece together a life narrative. There is a sense that there is much more to be said about Feni, but it seems that decorum about death or history prevents people (especially the exile community) from saying more than is necessary to sustain the aura of Feni.

Disk Two provides more candid interviews, Feni's short film, catalogue stills of Feni's work and a gallery of photos. The choice of people interviewed continues the focus on personal relationships and viewers do not get to hear much from curators, patrons and collectors of his work except in these additional interviews. It would have been important perhaps to hear from people who are participating in the process of 'restoring Feni to his rightful place in South African art' (*Zwelidumile* DVD blurb), such as Prince Dube, who did much leg-work on establishing facts on Feni's life and accessing his works for the retrospective; Monna Mokoena, owner of Gallery MOMO who is charged by the Feni Trust to sell his artwork; as well as other notable South African artists who knew Feni before and after he went into exile but who themselves remained in the country.

Art historian Anitra Nettleton's text 'Writing artists into history: Dumile Feni and the South African canon' (2011) is contained in the booklet of the DVD (albeit marred by a problematic layout). Nettleton attempts to contextualise Feni and his works by unpacking some of the categories that have labelled and claimed the artist. Noting why his works relate but also transcend such narrow definitions, Nettleton reminds readers that in Third World contexts, creative and intellectual persons are often unable to move outside of these boxes. She discusses different aspects of his motifs in relation to how this has been taken up to make Feni embody a particular category or ideology. Nettleton importantly does not dismiss Feni's overtly political work (one would not do so with the court works of Francisco Goya and Diego Velazquez). Neither can one relegate certain themes that preoccupied Feni to a lesser status (his studies of animals and athletes or his 'erotic' works). Eroticism and the symbolism of bestiality have not been sufficiently deconstructed in discourses on Feni despite apartheid being a condition that regulated even sexual relations. Nettleton's concluding remarks strongly articulate against Feni merely being a great South African artist: 'he was a great African artist of the twentieth century, perhaps one of the greater African artists of this period; but he certainly was more a great artist of the twentieth century, who happened to be African' (ibid., p. 20). Nettleton's observation about appropriately situating Feni within an international modernist discourse stresses the point that the Western epicentre of modernism as a global visual arts practice still

needs to be interrogated to recognise the many manifestations of styles and ideals within various local contexts and specificities around the world.

While the second disk provides invaluable material for researchers and students of Feni, the static placing of still images from the *Retrospective catalogue* is a bit of a missed opportunity in which the video lens could have been used to pan and move over, as well as focus on different aspects of his drawings and sculptures thereby adding to the reading of the works and keeping more with the possibilities of video. (In an interview with the reviewer, Peterson did mention their struggle to access Feni's works which are mainly located in private collections.) There are sometimes too many repetitive images of Feni in the gallery and often viewers are not introduced to the people in these photographs. A greater variety of interviews and/or longer interview excerpts would have been welcome as it stands the second disk of the DVD seems a little under-utilised.

Peterson and Suleman are said to be interested in producing more documentaries on visual artists, which would no doubt add to the rich cultural archives of the country. If the reader is familiar with Feni, this documentary provides a poetic yet uneasy image of an artist in exile, not only through the fragmented narrative but also through consistent disjunctures in the visual strategies employed. In fact, I would argue that the filmic considerations in *Zwelidumile* invite further critical investigation of the subversive potential of documentary practice. If one has never heard of Feni, *Zwelidumile*'s portrayal of the artist might feel like playing with a Rubik's Cube and not managing to complete a single side. Either way, viewers should be intrigued enough to want to learn more. The story of Dumile Feni is above all a tragic one. He died at the age of 49, days away from returning to South Africa and, possibly, forging another chapter in his unforgettable life.