

The potential of African identity in advertising

 By [Anton Crone](#)

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While working as a creative director in Oslo, Norway, I gave a presentation to the local ad industry about the potential of Nordic identity in advertising. This came about because I was blown away by the quirks of their culture. One of the things that drew me to Norway - besides a Nordic wife and the endless variety of ski slopes - was their advertising. [multimedia]

Effects of globalisation

But while I was there I saw their ethos giving way to the effects of globalisation and a move towards emulating the styles of the West.

Nordic work had always been a breath of fresh air to me, a respite from the sameness one sees on the international awards circuit. Their strange (to westerners) humour and unique character used to help them pull international awards and my aim with the presentation, as a foreigner reflecting their own identity back at them, was to show them an unbiased and objective appreciation of it.

To back it up, I also highlighted the success of the Indian identity that was on the rise at the time, something even the West was emulating.

I recently gave a similar presentation to the Red & Yellow School of Logic & Magic, focusing on the potential of our own African identity, with inspiration garnered from travels and research done locally and elsewhere in Africa.

Judges on awards panels

Because of the variety of judges on international advertising award panels - the greater percentage of them being from the West - the South African work that is entered often tends to be Western in style in order to appeal to the tastes of the jury and communicate clearly to the broader spectrum.

There is no disputing that some of our favourite South African ads would not be understood there, but there is an opportunity we are missing. There is potential to leverage our own ethos. After all, there is a taste for it overseas; and we can start by looking at music videos.

Music videos



Beyonce's latest video, "Girls (Who Run the World)", is one. The dance style is derivative of our own Pantsula. The casting, environment and styling are African to the core. Photographer Pieter Hugo's powerful series, ["The Hyena & Other Men"](#), is the inspiration for one of the most impressive scenes.

Source:
www.pieterhugo.com
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In fact, much of Hugo's ["Nollywood"](#) series is directly emulated in another powerful music video: Nick Cave and Grinderman's ["Heathen Child"](#).



Source:
www.pieterhugo.com

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Smarteez by Chris Saunders.

Source:

lab.colors magazine.com

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Gnarls Barkley's recent video, "Going On", Is a wonderful expose of contemporary African fashion. The thing that grabs the viewer is the juxtaposition of styles - traditional African adornment mixed with western styles - outfits our own *Smarteez* would wear.

Films and books

Beyond music videos, the West is looking at contemporary SA culture with a keener eye. Look at the success of [Neill Blomkamp's "District 9"](#) and [Lauren Beukes'](#) internationally acclaimed novel, [Zoo City](#).

They both give science fiction - a popular "Western" genre - a contemporary SA slant. This is undoubtedly a huge part of their success. (Incidentally, one of the cover designs for *Zoo City*, by Cape-Town-based [Joey Hi-Fi](#) aka Dale Halvorsen, also picked up an [international award](#).)

Yet we do have stories that are distinctly African and important to tell to the international audience. ["Hotel Rwanda"](#) shone a light on the greatest African tragedy of modern times. It opened the West's eyes to something overshadowed in the media at the time, ironically by the genocidal war of Yugoslavia, and beyond that, the OJ Simpson trial.

["Blood Diamond"](#) was another and, although fictional, it brought attention to the important issue of illegal diamond trade. Then there is the recent ["Bang Bang Club"](#) that traces a pivotal time in our history, and no one can deny the success of ["Tsotsi"](#) to expose the darker and, paradoxically, the humane part of our society.

Little positive about Africa

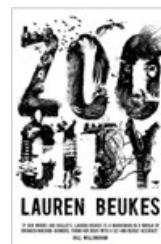
Sadly, if we look at international film exposure, there is little about Africa that seems positive. To be simplistic about it, Africans - white or black - often play the bad guy [*think of Arnold Vosloo* - managing ed].

The truth is our characters are often singularly inspirational *because* they are African. There's William Kamkwamba, the Malawian youth who made a wind generator from scrap to power his home and eventually his village. Kwame Nkrumah-Acheampong, aka *The Snow Leopard*, who was the first Ghanaian to compete in the downhill skiing at the Winter Olympics. The [late Wangari Maathai](#), whose tireless devotion to the environmental issues of Africa won her the Nobel Peace Prize - the first African woman to do so.

Then there is N'gan'ga Maruge, an ex Mau Mau freedom fighter who, in his old age, fought for the right to attend primary school so he could learn to read and write. It's heartening to know this is the subject of a new film, "First Grader".

Advertising

We have amazing stories and characters and I get piqued when, in advertising, we have to dig up [Louis Gossett Jnr](#) to sell beer and [Jamie Fox](#) to sell brandy. And since when is Ben Franklin the icon of Oude Meester?



Award-winning Zoo City cover by Joey Hi-Fi. Source: Books Live.

[click to enlarge](#)



District 9 poster. Source: MediaClubSouthAfrica.com

[click to enlarge](#)

I love the [Allan Gray "Beautiful" ad](#) and understand it is completely universal, but a Latin-American boy who stands up for an ugly girl because she is bound to grow up as hot as her mom, could have done just as well and been just as charming - perhaps more so - if they were African.

There were very few winners at this year's Loerie awards that resembled anything African. Spoek Mathambo's music video, "Control", was one, directed by two contemporary South African photographers, Michael Cleary and, of course, Pieter Hugo.

Another that stood out was Saatchi & Saatchi Cape Town's campaign for Sasko Flour. It showed a very clear understanding of the African market and appealed to the market's identity and needs with some very creative, contemporary solutions.

The only other work that was distinctly *ours* was by a very talented young student, [Lubabalo Mtati](#).

We are surrounded by incredible stories, people and art. Our advertising industry is full of talented,



Sasko Flour: Recipe

intelligent individuals who only need to close the International Print Bible, *Luerzers Archive*, and the [Cannes Lions Archive website](#) and look around them to find inspiration.

And if we believe "Africanism" won't resonate with international advertising judges, we might be wrong.

One example that proved this as far back as the late '90s was created by the Swedish directors, Traktor: They tapped into our own South African quirks with their ad for Miller Lite, "I can't control my arm." It cleaned up at the international awards shows.



Sasko Flour: Tea Towel Calendar

[click to enlarge](#)



Work by Lubabalo Mati

[click to enlarge](#)



Work by Lubabalo Mati

[click to enlarge](#)

Another winning example back then was Diesel's "Le Look le Plus Cool" campaign.

Much more recently, Sean Metelerkamp's music video for [Die Antwoord, "Zef Side"](#), was the only SA film to pick up a [Yellow Pencil](#) at the British D&AD this year. Who would have thought something so typically South African, so strange to foreigners, could resonate? But it does.

Lack of understanding

There is no question that we have a responsibility to marketers who focus on the buying public in SA with "Western" aspirations. But this does not rule out tapping into the idiosyncrasies that make that market uniquely South African. When we do try, sadly we often resort to character clichés. This probably stems from a lack of understanding and appreciation of our own culture.

Our marketers rely heavily on research but I believe most research groups only touch the surface. Their findings are often skewed by subjects who tell the researchers what they think they want to hear or play up their own tastes and ideals, therefore not speaking for the broader market. Most critically, I also believe we underestimate the intelligence of the lower income markets and we exploit their sense of aspiration.

Sadly, our marketing and creative backbone is predominantly made up of people who hardly venture across the cultural and economic barriers, and they rely too heavily on the findings of research. This is especially true of the growing market north of our border where, at best, we play the part of tourists.

Graphic and fashion designers

Thankfully, we are focusing more on recognising and nurturing African talent in some areas and this is vitally important. Our graphic designers and fashion designers are ahead in the game.

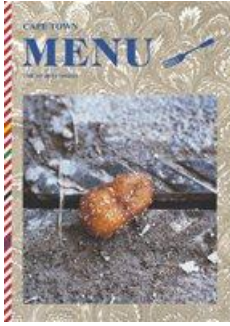
One of the best example I saw recently was graphic designer [Brandt Botes'](#) essay about the time he spent with one of his inspirations, [Victor Gardener](#), a sign writer from Adelaide in the Eastern Cape. Botes expounds on Gardener's talent and

how much a part of the community he is through his art and work.



Victor Gardener. Source:
Studio Botes.

[click to enlarge](#)



Menu by The President.

[click to enlarge](#)

Another is The President's magazine, *Menu: Cape Town's 167 Best Dishes*, [lauded by London designer Jeremy Leslie](#) as the magazine of the week on his blog, [MagCulture](#). He writes: "*Menu* is a guide to the independent food culture in the city. Malls are killing the culture, and the magazine is an attempt to retaliate."

The magazine introduction goes on to explain: "There are almost no good butchers left in the Cape Town CBD or street stalls selling Xhosa or Afrikaans food. Yet food is what most people can be creative in... food tells us who we are and where we come from."

"You took the time to get to know me before I had won anything"

I was lucky enough to meet [double Gold-winning student Mtati](#) at the Loerie Awards before he had won anything. I didn't know his work at all and I chatted with him for a while. He was such a humble guy and the most inspirational person I spoke to that evening.

In contacting Mtati to congratulate him a few days later, he said this very important thing to me: "You took the time to get to know me before I had won anything, and I really appreciate that."

Too often, as marketers and creatives, we wait for some justification of talent, some confirmation of a sure-fire winner, and most often we look to the West - for inspiration, for a formula. All we need to do is look around us. After all, the West is already looking to Africa for inspiration.

On returning from trips beyond our border, too often people ask me: "How was your trip to Africa?" Yet here we are.

For more:

- Bizcommunity: [Stop using varsity degrees as barricades to advertising, media](#) by Chris Moerdyk
- Bizcommunity: [Remember all those wonderful TV commercials?](#) by Mike Abel

ABOUT ANTON CRONE

Anton Crone writes for *Screen Africa* magazine and freelances as a writer and photographer. He is passionate about the people and potential of Africa, as can be seen on his website www.brightcontinent.co.za. Email Anton at ant@brightcontinent.co.za, connect on LinkedIn and follow [@antoncrone](#) on Twitter.

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