First, a parental advisory: this film is not called ‘State of Violence’ for nothing. Those of you who are a tad squeamish will have reason to be so during the first twenty minutes of the film especially. There are moments of violence which are, in my view, of the most difficult kind because they are personal, intimate, cruel. They are not many in the movie, but they are hard—hard to watch, hard to take, at least for me. We—or at least some of us—are used to seeing a kind of cartoonish violence on screen, where bodies are blown up and blood flows, but it is generally impersonal and therefore denuded of meaning and impact. Everyone knows the cult of violence in American movie-making; if we are going to talk about transgression, my basic view is give me sex instead any day. A film such as ‘State Violence’, however, does not let us get away with the cartoonish or cultish view. Its director has clarified that the violence in the movie is intended to make us flinch, feel its impact directly. Indeed, at its depths, a movie such as this is meant to challenge the history and meaning of violence as it is inscribed in individual minds and bodies.

Violence, far from being a matter of display or spectacle, becomes a different kind of exploration. The meaning of violence changes in front of our eyes, and with some luck it changes in our hearts as well.

Some context is in order, for the movie’s title, ‘State of Violence’, is not accidental. ‘State’ here is fittingly doubled, ambiguous: ‘state’ is a condition of being, and it is also ‘the state’—the country, the nation. The two are intrinsically connected, and at its core
the movie raises the question of what happens to the individual when it comes to being, or emerges from, a wider ‘state of violence’. The soul is written on, fractured by, the ‘state of violence’, and it helps create that state too.

What then was that ‘state of violence’ in South Africa? Intrinsically, violence was inseparable from more than three hundred years of the country’s history. There was colonial settlement and appropriation by the Dutch and the British Empire, there were wars of conflict on the frontiers between white settler and indigenous African societies. Within African societies there was violence too, as in the rise and rule of Shaka in the Zulu nation. During the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902, the British set up concentration camps for nearly the first time in global history (the Germans had set them up earlier in Namibia). There was conquest for gold and diamonds, and after Union in 1910, massive violence against black South Africans as part of the institutions and practice of the state. People and communities removed from their homes; the violence of a migrant labour system which broke up family continuity and cohesion; punitive tax laws which forced blacks to work for minimal amounts on mines and farms; the daily violence of the pass laws that made African men and women subject to search and arrest for not having the ‘proper’ documentation; the violence of not having the vote; the violence of hunger and malnutrition; the violence of laws of detention without trial, of torture, of deaths in prison: all these were part of the South African ‘state’, its ‘state of violence’.

In response, the oppressed—or some of them—took to violence as well. After decades of nonviolent resistance—of ‘knocking politely at a closed and barred door’, as one of the African National Congress leaders put it—in the early 1960s the ANC took up an armed struggle against the South African state. It was a disciplined and restrained transition: here were no suicide bombers, nothing that today would count as terrorism. It
was then that Nelson Mandela was arrested and put in prison for some twenty-seven years. But the pace and intensity of violence only increased, as in 1976, when the police opened fire on unarmed schoolchildren, and uprisings spread around the country. By the 1980s there was rolling unrest around South Africa, and some of it was directed by blacks against other blacks. These were the ‘morbid symptoms’ of the interregnum that Nadine Gordimer, quoting Antonio Gramsci, wrote about. One manifestation, which has some relevance for the movie, was the practice of ‘necklacing’, where zealous comrades would place rubber tires around the necks of suspected traitors, and, dousing them with gasoline, set them alight.

It is not an uplifting story, though my purpose in telling it to you is not to depress you more than you may be depressed at the world around you. For on one level, it had an unexpected and even contradictory resolution when, in 1994, apartheid formally came to an end, and Nelson Mandela became president. This was a peaceful resolution, a peaceful revolution of sorts, so rare in places of conflict around the globe. South Africa stood out as the exception; this was the South African miracle that we are apt to talk about, the miracle that showed how peace could emerge from violence where there are leaders and societies prepared to commit themselves to an overarching moral vision of justice and inclusion. As if to put the seal on this, the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission—which many of us know about—for all its faults found a way to catharsis, a way out of the violence of the past towards forms of acceptance, recognition, and even forgiveness.

To this day, I believe, South Africa remains a model in that respect, yet the South Africa that emerged in 1994 was not in any simple terms the promised land, for problems still abounded. There was (and still is) an AIDS epidemic, compounded by forms of
government denial; sexual violence too became epidemic; unemployment ran upwards of 40%; crime, often accompanied by horrific and gratuitous violence, was the order of the day, especially in cities such as Johannesburg. It is this more recent history that tonight’s movie emerges from, but its sense of violence is more specific, and this is where it becomes so interesting. For the violence in this movie is not abstract, nor is it general. Instead, it explores the life of a character whose past as an opponent of apartheid was connected with a defining moment of violence, and now that past has returned to haunt him in ways he could never have foreseen. Across the divide of 1994 the movie inspects two moments: the past, and the present, and it also explores the divided soul of its protagonist. This ‘double’ perspective, incidentally, reminds me very much of the work of David Goldblatt, who will be on tonight’s panel, and whose work we celebrate on campus this week. Some of his work in his current exhibition features sets of paired photographs, in each case one taken before 1994 and one after, and what arises in the mind of the viewer are the echoes and resonances between them. Goldblatt’s work is not directly concerned with violence in the same way, but the doubled vision is, I think, common.

Tonight’s movie does not have one white character in it—quite a relief, given recent movies such as Clair Denis’ White Material which continue to see the African story only insofar as it affects whites. Instead, this movie, made by a young director, Khalo Matabane, gives a sense of the texture and range of black life in South Africa. Here is the mix of languages—Zulu, English, Afrikaans, tsotsitaal; here are class differences within black society, with the central character now clearly a member of the new black business elite; here, at the other end of the scale is Alexandra township, just outside Johannesburg, where the vast majority of people live still in poverty.
But for all the interest of the setting, at the heart of this film is a conflicted soul, a man who benefited from his violence, who is now elevated, set apart from most of his family and his community, and whose arrogance is his driving force. The patterns are to some extent those of Greek tragedy: we have the prominent man with the tragic flaw, who must confront the fact that he cannot control the terms of his own existence. And what we see in this movie is that violence does not have boundaries or edges. Once it is set in place it travels, and there is no telling where it will stop. In ‘State of Violence’ we see the meaning of violence as trauma, both for its victims and its perpetrators. The dividing line of 1994 becomes then like a cracked mirror, and the reflection of what happens after contains the broken image of what happened before. I don’t believe this is a perfect movie, but that is not the point. With great precision and courage, it is prepared to look in that mirror and explore what it finds there. I am reminded of a moral drawn by Elie Wiesel from the original story of Cain and Abel, the Bible’s original brothers, the Bible’s original murder. Wiesel’s moral is, ‘Whoever kills, kills his brother.’ But here that thought is taken further. Whoever kills also kills himself—though he may live on in some way.

Here is another level of meaning in the idea of a ‘state of violence.’

Enjoy the movie!