Following the banning of the ANC and the PAC at the beginning of the 1960s, participation of black people in South Africa’s public life was de facto prohibited. The intensification of the state’s oppressive measures was simply not conducive to free cinematic experimentation with black related themes. As a result, and with the exception of Jamie Uys’s Dingaka (1964), the production of black-centered films in South Africa—a phenomenon of the 1940s and 1950s—came to a definite halt. Black-centered films only made a comeback in the 1970s. This partly happened, ironically, as a consequence of the state’s renewed interest in film. No longer would black centered films be a prerogative of independent white expatriates. Through a subsidy scheme, the state would thenceforth be directly or indirectly involved in their production. uDeliwe is a product of the subsidy scheme.

uDeliwe is a film adaptation of a popular 1964 Radio Bantu serial of the same name.¹ Set up to implement apartheid ideology, Radio Bantu targeted a black South African listenership (Gunner 2005: 161–169).² Emerging in a context of important changes in South African film culture, when the world of filmmaking gradually opened to black artists, uDeliwe—the chapter shows—signaled a turning point in black South Africans’ experiences of cinema. Yet, as a product of Heyns Films, a production company later exposed as a front for the state Department of Information, scholars have read uDeliwe along with other films aimed at urban black audiences, largely
in relation to the question of whether they fulfilled apartheid propaganda. In the process, they have lost sight of its possible critical effects as a circulating text. I suggest that this approach is premised on a monolithic and fixed idea of apartheid ideology, which is oblivious of its historical internal rifts and contestations. In the so-called crisis years of apartheid, there were some Afrikaner ideologues (verligtes) who were advocating racial integration and the abolition of petty apartheid. In addition, there were others (verkramptes) who sought to maintain ethnic separation, Bantustanism, and the containment of black South Africans in rural traditionalism. I propose that this contestation constituted an opening, which made public engagements on uDeliwe that exceeded any apartheid propaganda possible, especially with regard to black identity. I argue that in spite of its derivation from a state-related institution, uDeliwe harbored a critical value that subverted any objective of coopting blackness in the service of apartheid propaganda.

The narration by the veteran Radio Bantu broadcaster, K. E. Masinga, inaugurates the story of a young girl called Deliwe. Through the narrator’s voice-over, we learn that her father passed away and is survived by Deliwe and her mother. Thereafter her sickly mother passes away and a local teacher, Mgathi and his wife adopt her. They reluctantly decide to send Deliwe to Johannesburg to stay with her uncle. In an unfortunate twist of circumstances, she fails to meet him. However, the opportune offer of accommodation by a benevolent stranger, Reverend Makhathini, reverses her misfortunes. Jack, a young thug, takes Deliwe on a date to the cinema. On their return, Jack tries to have his way with Deliwe, who runs away only to be nearly molested by a group of young men. Embarrassed and overwhelmed by boredom, Deliwe steals out of the reverend’s house for a domestic job. She befriends two young ladies and begins an affair with a young man called George. Shortly afterwards, she finds fame in the world of mail-order fashion and beauty pageants. At the height of her success, Deliwe finally meets her uncle Mabaso. However, Mabaso’s conservative airs do not accommodate Deliwe’s blossoming career. In one of his characteristic rages, Mabaso forcibly takes Deliwe away from a film set. Consumed by rage, he drives his car recklessly and it rolls over, instantly killing him and injuring Deliwe. Deliwe is hospitalized and no one visits her in all the time she is at the hospital. Toward the last days of her stay at the hospital, George visits Deliwe. In the final scene, Deliwe reconciles with George, Reverend Makhathini, and his wife. She returns to stay at their residence. The narrator, in voice-over, ends the film on the note of Deliwe and George’s matrimony.

Structured in the mode of classic narrative realism, the plot of uDeliwe borrows heavily from established Hollywood conventions. In classic narrative realism, the construction of film narrative is governed by the verisimilitude of its fictional world and a coherent, linear movement of its plot from a state of