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LIONEL ROGOSIN: MAKING REALITY EXCITING AND MEANINGFUL.

by

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To make the infiniteness of reality exciting and meaningful is unquestionably an artistic process. Reality---as close as we can come to it---is rarely seen on the screen, but when reality is seen it is strongly felt. This quest for reality is not the only definition of cinematic art; it is simply the way in which I personally have worked. Art may be indefinable, but for me it is important to do something significant. It needs a form which grows from its subject and its time, and the artist must do it in the strongest way possible.

-Lionel Rogosin, "Interpreting Reality (Notes on the Esthetics and Practices of Improvisational Acting)", *Film Culture*, 21, (1960).

Lionel Rogosin is one of the brilliant masters of compassion and empathy in the history of cinema, or more specifically, in the history of documentary film. This was the view endorsed by no lesser master than Basil Wright, one of the principal exponents of the British Documentary Film Movement of the 1930s. In a widely enthusiastic review of Rogosin's first film, *On the Bowery*, Wright not only places Rogosin within the great tradition of documentary film making represented by figures like Robert Flaherty, Mark Donskoi, Humphrey Jennings, Vladimir I. Pudovkin and Alexander Dovshenko, but also, and this is truly astonishing, he goes on to compare the film with Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Wright, whose own *Song of Ceylon* is usually designated as one of the high points of the British documentary film movement, and was warmly respected for his severe defense of the fundamental principles of documentary film making, makes clear that his salutation of Lionel Rogosin's

entrance into the world of film culture is not made lightly. In this review of 1956, which appeared in *Sight and Sound*, Wright poses the question as to whether a film consisting of staged scenes, as seems to have been the case with *On the Bowery*, could still be designated as a documentary film. He answers in the affirmative, indicating that also Flaherty's classics, like *Nanook and Moana*, were restaged, or more appropriately, reconstructed. It ought perhaps be emphasised that this review by Wright is both a celebration and a critique of *On the Bowery*.¹

Perhaps the most innovative and dominant figures in the history of documentary film were Robert Flaherty and Dziga Vertov. Whereas the American was more interested in establishing the realistic principles of documentary film making as a secure tradition, the Russian did impose experimentalism and innovativeness as the dominant constructs of documentary film. Today if we can trace a particular tradition in documentary film stretching from Dziga Vertov through Joris Ivens to Fernando Birri and Santiago Alvarez, we could equally chart another documentary film tradition extending from Robert Flaherty through John Grierson and Basil Wright to Frederick Wiseman. The Dziga-Vertovian tradition has always sought to integrate to each other the forms of fiction and documentary film, while the Flahertian tradition has felt the need to articulate the uniqueness of documentary film form. It is therefore not accidental that for the former tradition historicism is an important guiding philosophical construct, while for the latter tradition naturalism is a crucial poetic principle. One of the most authoritative works on the history of documentary film, *Documentary Film* by Paul Rotha, posits Dziga-Vertov and Robert Flaherty as founders of distinct documentary film schools, the former being the forger of the News-Reel tradition and the latter being the creator of the naturalist (romantic) tradition.² The legitimacy and pertinency of these designations need not detain us for us to see their cogency. It was within this complex ensemble of historical and artistic relationships that Rogosin had to situate himself. It is clear, as it was to Rogosin when he wrote his manifesto in a 1960 issue of *Film Culture*, "Interpreting Reality (Notes on the Esthetics and Practices of Improvisational Acting)", that the major contention between the Dziga-Vertovian and the Flahertian tradition was on the question of realism: What is reality in documentary film making?

In this manifesto of 1960, which seems to be the only extant document where Lionel Rogosin fully articulates a philosophical position on the nature of documentary film tradition, while acknowledging the influence upon him of Flaherty and De Sica, as creators of great poetry on the screen, paradoxically disputes the designation of Flaherty's work as documentary film, as much as disowning it for the designation of his own work, because according to Rogosin, documentary film form is more akin to the factual report of a

sociologist than to the creation of great poetry on the screen.³ For him 'documentary' is only a "meaningless catalogue of stale, factual representation". It was this characterisation of documentary film which led Peter Davis in an essay, "Rogosin and Documentary", which appeared in the 1962 issue of *Film Culture*, to protest vehemently against Rogosin's understanding of documentary film form.⁴ That Rogosin's position on documentary film in this manifesto is untenable is quite clear, but what is still fascinating about it, as it will be clear in a moment, is its theorising on realism in relation to film.

When we look at the universally accepted formulation of the fundamental principles of documentary film by John Grierson, which because of their authoritativeness and validity have become classical, it becomes all the more clear that Rogosin has mis-apprehended the structure and constituents of documentary film, even if paradoxically in his filmic praxis, especially *On the Bowery*, confirms the validity of the classical principles. Probably the most universally accepted definition of documentary film is that formulated by Grierson: documentary as 'the creative treatment of actuality'. This definition encompasses a multiplicity of poetic documentary film styles ranging from the lyricism of Joris Ivens to the stoicism of Santiago Alvarez. Grierson has postulated three principles of documentary film: that documentary film should capture or convey the essence of a living story or living scene; that non-professional actors in their 'natural' environment offer a better possibility for the film documentarist to present a complex interpretation of the real world; and lastly, that the materials or stories informing the structure of documentary film should be raw and taken from real life rather than from acted circles.⁵ Practically all the films of Lionel Rogosin, *On the Bowery*, *Come Back Africa*, *Good Times*, *Wonderful Times* and his several short films, are inscribed by these principles formulated by Grierson. That Rogosin's films belong within this genre of film making is clear, what is contentious and debatable is the poetic nature of their realism.

In the aforementioned manifesto, Lionel Rogosin defines as one of his principal tasks the interpretation of reality into exciting and meaningful constructs, which he sees as an artistic process, rather than the mere presentation of objective reality, which to him is usually than not a false image of reality. It would seem then, that for Rogosin the authentic reconstruction of reality in exciting and meaningful ways should be the cardinal construct of documentary film, in so far as this genre for him is exemplified by the works of Robert Flaherty. That Rogosin in *On the Bowery* has spontaneously captured the reconstructed reality of the hopelessness of alcoholics on Skid Row, and that in *Come Back Africa* he has meaningfully rendered the complex reality of apartheid and its complex byways, and that in *Good Times*, *Wonderful Times* he has in significant ways conveyed the distance between the horrendous

reality of war and the illusion of their understanding in the minds of middle class intellectuals, these are achievements which have made these film texts the reference point of documentary film history. In them, a powerful re-interpretation of reality is realized. The realism in Rogosin's documentary films is of a general human interest, which Bertolt Brecht postulated in opposition to Georg Lukacs: "Realism is an issue not only for literature: it is a major political, philosophical and practical issue and must be handled and explained as such---as a matter of general human interest."⁶ This is the realism of transposition rather than of mere reflection; the transposition process facilitates the intervention of historical knowledge.

It is in the imparting of the various forms of historical knowledge that inform the poetic structure of Rogosin's documentary films. In the context of Rogosin's filmic praxis, historical knowledge means living knowledge which can open a way to intervention thus facilitating the possible alteration of the situation depicted in them. This is the meaning of what Rogosin writes in the 1960 manifesto as his central concern in making documentary films: "I want to give man a new dignity, to make a true national hero of a Nebraska farmer, a Pennsylvania coal miner, a Harlem taxi driver. One of the mainstreams of American art---from Whitman to Flaherty---aimed at precisely this goal. . . The face of an American coal miner is as unique as a Zulu tribesman or a homeless Bowery man." Indeed, it could be said that Rogosin in his documentary films attempts to capture the poetry and passion of everyman who Walt Whitman celebrated in his poetry. It is this everyman that Basil Wright was alluding to when he kept on making references and similarities between Lionel Rogosin and Fyodor Dostoevsky: "'I do not bow to you personally, but to the suffering humanity in your person.' Thus Raskolnikov to Sonia. Thus, too, Lionel Rogosin to the people of the lower depths to whom his deeply compassionate film is in its entirety dedicated. . . And Rogosin insists that we must love them; he seems to say, with Dostoevsky, that 'the sense of their own degradation is as essential to those reckless undrilled natures as the sense of their own generosity.' . . . Such phrases are irrelevant and misleading, unless you apply the same ruling to Dostoevsky's work---no apologies by the way for the constant references." A recent authoritative study of the history of documentary film, Richard Meran Barsam's *Nonfiction Film: A Critical History*, draws historical and critical parallels between Flaherty and Rogosin: "Like Flaherty with *Nanook of the North*, Rogosin tells the story from the inside, and, like Flaherty, he tells it with keen observation and deep compassion. And also like Flaherty, he was able to go into the open with his portable equipment, to record the sights and sounds of a world that his audience knew mostly by superstition and stereotype."⁷ From these observations, one from Basil Wright, one of the outstanding film makers within the British documentary movement of the 1930s, and another from Richard Meran

Barsam, one of the leading authorities on the history of non-fiction film, one can see that the appearance of Lionel Rogosin as a documentary film maker was a truly memorable occasion.

Part of the auspiciousness of Lionel Rogosin's emergence within documentary film culture lay, beside the brilliance and originality displayed in his feel for film form, in the fact that his films intersected within three different national cultural experiences: the founding of the Free Cinema in Britain of the early 1950s; the consolidation of Cinema Verite (Direct Cinema) in the early 1960s in America; and lastly but not least, the emergence of the South African Sophiatown Renaissance (a literary and cultural movement) which was subsequently destroyed by the political forces of apartheid. *On the Bowery* (1954) inspired and gave form to the formation of the British Free Cinema, which included among others, Tony Richardson, Karel Reisz, John Schlesinger, Lindsay Anderson; it was through this film that these film makers established contact and continuity with Basil Wright's *Song of Ceylon*, Grierson's *Drifters* and *Industrial Britain*, and other films of the 1930s. *Come Back Africa* (1959) was the mirror in which the Sophiatown Renaissance (it included some of the leading black South African writers of that generation, Can Themba, Lewis nkosi, Bloke Modisane, Nat Nakasa, Ezekiel Mphahlele, Henry Nxumalo), in many ways similar to the American Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s, saw reflected its own death at the hands of white political oppression and repression. *On the Bowery* and *Good Times, Wonderful Times* (1966) defined the critical forms of the American Cinema Verite, in which Pennebaker, Maysles', Cawston and others were to follow. In the short documentary films of the 1970s, *Woodcutters of the Deep South* (1973) being representative though dealing with white and black workers in the American South, Rogosin attempted to formulate the iconographical structure of African-American culture, in the same way that Walker Evans had done in some of his great photography.

I

If it should appear as if Lionel Rogosin was the only outstanding American avant-garde film director, that would be misleading, for he was in fact part of the then emerging New American Film Movement which consisted of among many others, Jonas Mekas, Stanley Brakhage, Shirley Clark, Ricky Leacock. In a stimulating and contentious essay written for a West German film magazine, *Filmkritik*, Jonas Mekas, editor of the most avant-garde film review in America, *Film Culture*, argued that this new constellation of Underground avant-garde film makers should be situated within a context of particular political, cultural and historical coordinates. In this essay of 1961, "Rebellen Gegen Hollywood: Neubeginn im US Film", Mekas the following points: first,

this new film movement sought, and did establish, cheaper methods of film production; secondly, it was part of a cultural movement which was accompanied in its path by the Theater 'Happenings' of Julian Beck and Judith Malina, as well as the movement of the Beat Generation, consisting of among many others, Allan Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, and last but not least, this new film movement was bathing in the aura created by Abstract Expressionism, perhaps the last great artistic movement in the West before the recent descent into the postmodern chaos; thirdly, that Lionel Rogosin and Company were not intellectuals, having no confidence and trust in film theory and film history, and hence, Mekas believes, they made better and authentic films than their predecessors; fourthly, that when this new generation of film makers had problems in having their films distributed, they solved this problem by buying film houses, as Rogosin did by buying the Bleecker Street Cinema at the Greenwich Village; fifthly, as a consequence of all this, this new independent film movement believed strongly in their emotions and little respect for film traditions and film conventions, despising all kinds of cliches, trusting strongly their intentions, intuitions and visions.⁸ Mekas believes that all these factors and processes made it possible for this pleiad of avant-garde and experimental film makers to discover new unexplored film territories. Though one may agree with practically all these points, it is incomprehensible how Mekas could seriously believe that his generation of film makers had no confidence in film theory and film history, when in fact, for example Lionel Rogosin had published in Mekas' *Film Culture*, a year earlier before the publication of Mekas' essay, an essay to which we referred to earlier, articulating a coherent theory of realism as well as theorising Rogosin's own self-understanding of his position in film history, stretching from the documentarism of Flaherty to the Neo-Realism of De Sica! Nonetheless, the editorial board of *Filmkritik* in a rare statement of editorial endorsement, thus confirming the importance that was attached to Mekas' essay in West German film circles, rightly states that ethics rather than aesthetics constituted the central and fundamental component of the New American Film movement.⁹ The films of Lionel Rogosin more than confirm this seminal observation.

Indeed, ethics and empathy are the principal philosophical constructs which govern the unity of all Lionel Rogosin's three major films: in *On the Bowery*, he sought to explore the nature of ethics in the sphere of social reality through the hopelessness and tragedy of alcoholism in New York City's Skid Row; while in *Come Back Africa*, he succeeded in indicating the strength and resiliency of ethics in the domain of politics in the context of resistance to the madness and tragedy of apartheid in Johannesburg and Sophiatown's black community; and lastly in *Good Times, Wonderful Times*, he exposed the weaknesses of ethics in the realm of history in preventing the outbreak and tragedy of war as is reflected in the intellectual lethargy of London's pseudo-

intellectual and middle-class community. That these film texts are artistic documents of astonishing accomplishment more than justifies in considering Lionel Rogosin as one of the outstanding poets of whics in the whole history of film.

The preparation for, and the filming of, *On the Bowery*, provides some insightful information as to the striving for ethics in Rogosin's filmic praxis. Fortunately, Mark Sufrin, collaborator on, and writer of the screenplay of, this film, has in an illuminating essay, "Filming on Skid Row", which appeared in the *Sight and Sound* issue of 1955/56, presented a narrative sketch of the practical methodological approach in the making of the film.¹⁰ According to Sufrin, the principal aim of the film was to capture the state of marginality, alienation and anomie of alcoholics within an individualised and dramatic structure. The intent was not to make a typification or symbolic representation of alcoholic life on Skid Row, but rather, "to extract a simple story" which would give "an essence of truth of the place". Hence the story-line *On the Bowery* was reconstructed from the actual life experiences of alcoholics on the Bowery. This necessitated on the part of Rogosin, Sufrin and Richard Bagley, the cameraman, their having to interact intensively with the marginalised people on Skid Row. Simultaneously, they undertook extensive research on the social psychology of Skid Row life at Yale University and consulted with medical and clinical specialists, including social workers. It was from the multiplicity of these converging processes that a narrative documentary script was written. The leading actors, or more appropriately, recreators, in *On the Bowery*, were chosen from the Skid Row social milieu itself.

In the main, Rogosin in his essay concurs with Sufrin's interpretation of the reality of making *On the Bowery*, for he writes: "Making *On the Bowery* taught me a method of molding reality into a form that could touch the imagination of others. . . . To capture reality spontaneously and to give it life, more is involved of course than simply casting people of the milieu. They must be allowed to be themselves, to express themselves in their own manner but in accordance with the abstractions and themes which you as the director must be able to see in them." The molding of reality into form: that is the essence of Rogosin's filmic praxis. In another context, in an interview with an East German film journal, *Film, Wissenschaftliche Mitteilungen*, on the occasion of presenting *Good Times, Wonderful Times* at the Leipzig Documentary Film Festival in 1966, Lionel Rogosin was compelled to articulate the philosophic and aesthetic foundations of molding reality into form. The theoretical construction of this transformation was formulated by him in the following manner: first, in order to establish the inner logic of the object, particularly an artistic object, the natural form of art should not be dislocated, for this naturalness causes form always to embody or take on particular instrumentation; secondly, hence form

in the context of different themes and objects changes itself in the process of formation. Rogosin believes this to be the manner of the principle of art. Though the form of each of his three major films is always different, the style remains the same throughout. The livingness or beingness of art lies in the fact that different artistic materials signify different forms.¹¹ With these somewhat abstruse formulations Rogosin was attempting to establish the credo of his aesthetics.

In the interview Rogosin states that a film should express a principle idea and a fundamental theme. For him the principle idea behind *Good Times*, *Wonderful Times* is the tragedy of war, hence it is an anti-war film; in as much as the main idea behind *Come Back Africa* is against racism (racialism) and the oppression of humanity; and in *On the Bowery* the main idea captured there is against social and spiritual misery and poverty. All these films show Lionel Rogosin to be a man of deep social conscience and his films have wider implications. For instance, on the surface *On the Bowery* is a poetic reportage on the hopelensness and degradation of life lived by alcoholics in a particular segment of Manhattan (New York City), one cannot fail to notice that it poses a wider question, namely, the nature of the ethics of living today. It was perhaps this question that Basil Wright was alluding to when in an enthusiastic review of this film, mentioned earlier, compared Ray, the principal character of the film, with Ivan Karamazov and Raskolnikov. In a paradoxical and strange way also, the film is a celebration and lamentation of New York City, a love of New York comparable to that found in the poetry of Walt Whitman and Hart Crane. Crane writes of this great city:

Under thy shadow by the piers I waited;
Only in darkness is thy shadow clear.
The City's fiery parcels all undone,
Already snow submerges an iron year. . .

And Whitman:

Stand up, tall masts of Manhattan! stand up, beautiful
hills of Brooklyn!
Throb, baffled and curious brain! theow out
questions and answers!
Suspend here and everywhere, eternal float of
solution!

It is the darkness on the Bowery that makes clear the overwhelming shadow of New York, as much as the solutions reside there and everywhere.

II

Nathaniel Nakasa, the political and social historian of the social space of Johannesburg, who tragically committed suicide at the age of 27 in 1965 in New York City, has captured in his collection of writings, *The World of Nat*

Nakasa, the moment when Lionel Rogosin in the late 1950s was seeking and making the reality of black existence under South Africa's political system of apartheid exciting and meaningful. In a social sketch, "Between Two Worlds", the 'golden boy' writes:¹²

Once, an American film producer visited Sophiatown shortly before it was demolished by officialdom.

It was during one of these evenings when 'Soft-town' listened to jazz, and Shakespearean plays. There were a few young citizens of Sophiatown and several young women from the white suburbs. Suddenly, police materialised with their heavy knocks at the door.

'One minute, Sergeant', Bloke said, turning to his gram to put on Julius Ceasar. Immediately after, he opened the door with a smile which looked perfectly normal, although it was a put-up job.

'Do come in Sarge', Bloke said. 'Can I help you at all?' The Sergeant's face turned pink instantly. The floor was covered with liquor. He stammered at last, 'We're searching for drink, you're not keeping any liquor illegally here, are you?'

Realising the helplessness of the man, Bloke picked up a glass and poured out a stiff one for the Sergeant. "This is just a gathering of my friends, Sarge, and I'm sure you have noticed that yourself. You really ought to go further down.'

Bloke and his friends got away with it then. They had much less difficulty than the English young man who visited a friend in Sophiatown, and found only the sister at home. While the girl was explaining to the visitor that her brother was out, the police arrived.

This long passage is very significant for several reasons: first, it shows Lionel Rogosin doing extensive research in preparation of the script for *Come Back Africa*, for as he has written in his manifesto:

"I believe in a sound and thorough preparation, in absorbing as well as researching, in taking in all the images, sounds and nuances that the time and place of the subject have to offer."; secondly, the 'Bloke' mentioned in this passage is non other than William 'Bloke' Modisane, the author of *Blame Me On History* and one of the script writers of *Come Back Africa*. In his manifesto Rogosin pays tribute to Modisane: "My friend William ('Bloke') Modisane. . . I wrote the [film-script] with the guidance of two Africans, Lewis Nkosi and William Modisane, as a composite of events which the African faces every day of his life." Lewis Nkosi, part of the Sophiatown Renaissance and writer of highly acclaimed literary studies on African literature, has referred warmly to

Rogosin in his book, *Home and Exile*. On the other hand, Bloke Modisane has captured in memorable phrases in his book, his decision to leave his work on *Drum* magazine, which was the inspirer and reflector of this Renaissance, and devote himself completely to the making of the film. Thirdly, the friends of Bloke mentioned by Nakasa, could have included Miriam Makeba, who is a world famous singer and was featured in the film, and Can Themba, who was the best literary stylist of this great generation of black South African writers, and acted his real life role in the film. Fourthly, among the white young women, this could have included Nadine Gordimer, the great writer. Among the other participants of the Sophiatown Renaissance, one could include Peter Magubane, the great photographer, and Sylvester Stein, the author of *Second-Class Taxi*. The mention of Nadine Gordimer and Sylvester Stein in this context, indicates very well that one of the fascinating episodes, which as yet has not been studied with the profound seriousness it deserves, was the intermixing of Jewish culture and African culture in the Sophiatown Renaissance. The importance of this historical moment and cultural period cannot be overestimated for a future democratic culture in a free and liberated South Africa. The brilliance of *Come Back Africa* is in many ways an astonishing documentation of this moment in South Africa's cultural history.

In the interview with the East German film journal, Rogosin states that *Come Back Africa* is a combative anti-racist film, which crosses false barriers in an attempt to forge the unity of humanity. But the film is much more than this, for it is one film made in a pre-democratic South Africa (i.e., in the Apartheid era), that possesses within its structure some of the components that will be of essential importance in forging a truly authentic national South African cinema in a post-revolutionary, and hopefully democratic, South Africa. Then, undoubtedly, Lionel Rogosin will be embraced as the god-father of that authentic cinema, as much as it will recognize in Lionel Ngakane its exiled father, however contentious that judgement unquestionably will be. Should the above claims on behalf of Rogosin and his film sound extravagant and unsupportable, one needs only reflect on the following factors which inhere in its structure: first, linguistically, an African language, specifically in this instance Zulu, is used in the film commensurate with its historical and cultural importance. Zulu and English are used interchangeably suiting the logic of circumstance within which the narration of the film is moving. That a predominant part of an authentic national South African cinema will have to be in the politically liberated African languages is determined by the logic of our history, momentarily and presently tragic. Secondly, the narration of *Come Back Africa* is predicated on the central forces and the conflictual processes of our national history, in that Zacharia, the main protagonist of the film, who is an agricultural worker, is uprooted and transformed into a worker by the forces of capital and its concomitant repressive political agents (this is beyond the

Jimmy to Jo'burg utter nonsense in some of the literary writings of the 1930s and the 1940s). Rogosin in his film shows us the tragic consequences of splitting the family between the rural and the urban spheres. What is even more important, is that *Come Back Africa* reveals to us the historical fact that the migratory labour system is the fundamental and foundation stone of South African capitalism. That system persists to the present unabatedly. Thirdly, the film not only conveys the last moments of the then dying Sophiatown Renaissance, but in fact, it is itself that last snapshot of a great literary generation (Bloke Modisane, Lewis Nkosi, Can Themba, Miriam Makeba and others) before it was scattered into exile by the political repression following the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960. The shebeen scene in the film makes it clear, why Nat Nakasa, in one of the pieces in the collection of his writings, has with every justification called the shebeen, 'our national institution'. Fourthly, the politics of Apartheid philosophy are exposed, their diabolical nature conveyed, in those scenes in which Zacharia works as a domestic servant to a white family. Other factors could be enumerated, but these suffice to indicate the historic importance of *Come Back Africa* in our cultural history.

If we have dwelt long on the ethics of representation of South African national and cultural history rather than on the aesthetics of presentation in this film, it is because the dialectics our present national history necessitate the historicism of the former rather than meditative poetics of the latter. Nonetheless, the visual poetics of the film are impressive, some of the scenes shot secretly can compare with the most astonishing in the history of documentary film.

Beyond the context of the developing political situation in South Africa today and its possible outcome in the near future, *Come Back Africa* has had its own particular impact on the international film community. In an essay of 1961, two years after the appearance of the film, Reinold E. Thiel in an essay, "Film in Afrika - Afrika im Film", surveying the African film scene of that year, emphasised that *Come Back Africa* should always be viewed in comparative to *Cry The Beloved Country* (based on the novel of the high priest of South African Liberalism, Alan Paton), released in 1951.¹³ The same point was raised four years later by Ulrich Gregor (the present co-director of the Berlin Film Festival), in a review essay on the occasion of the showing of *Come Back Africa* on West German television.¹⁴ The contrast between the two films, besides the evident difference in the talent of their directors, lies in the fact that while *Cry The Beloved Country*, directed by an Englishman, Zoltan Korda, was continuing a tradition and discourse of false representation of South African history began by the 1916 film, *Die Voortrekkers/Winning A Continent*, *Come Back Africa* was opening new frontiers in the interpretation of our political history, authentic history. Keyan Tomaselli, the leading authority on the history of the South African cinema, has analysed the ideological effects of the false

representation of South African history apparent in *Winning A Continent*.¹⁵ It is perhaps the authentic representation of the contradictions and dilemmas of our national history that makes *Come Back Africa* the authentic film it is. Ulrich Gregor emphasised the authenticity of the film, commenting that it had few parallels in the history of documentary film.

One thing is certain, *Come Back Africa* is one of the highest points, if not the highest achievement, within the history of film production in South Africa. The achievements of this film are such that it has posed one great historical question, to which as yet there has been no response: what ought to be or should be the essential cultural components of an authentic South African national cinema? Perhaps we South Africans are living in the pre-history of understanding such a question

III

Whereas the two earlier films by Lionel Rogosin have been universally praised and acclaimed, *Good Times, Wonderful Times*, has met from many quarters studied indifference punctuated by negative appraisals. What accounts for this contrast in the evaluation of Rogosin's major oeuvre? After all, this film is a fully realized anti-war film, very insistent on showing the horror of war. In the interview with the aforementioned East German film journal, Rogosin passionately articulates the philosophy which informs the structure, narrative process and the iconography of the film. Made in the context of the then unfolding Vietnam War in 1966 (i.e., American imperialist aggression in South-East Asia), and being interviewed in East Berlin, a divided city as one of the resultant consequences of the Second World War, Rogosin interestingly enough states that his film is not particularly an anti-Korean war film, or for that matter, specifically an anti-fascist film (i.e., anti-Second World War film). These series of disclaimers on the part of Rogosin are a prelude to a greater claim on behalf of *Good Times, Wonderful Times*: that it is an anti-militaristic and anti-war film beyond social and class systems.¹⁶ Disowning the designation that his position is that of a pacifist, which the interviewers were quick to categorise as such, he nonetheless calls for complete disarmament. He even states categorically, that under a process of complete disarmament, it would be easier or should be lighter for the people of South Africa to overthrow their oppressive and fascist regime; then it would be impossible to delay or halt the developing insurrection of oppressed South African peoples. Without necessarily responding to the specificities of Rogosin's approximations and formulations, it can be said that he does not sufficiently differentiate the historical causes of wars and their specific forms. In other words, though all wars should be condemned, as Rogosin passionately does in *Good Times, Wonderful Times*, it is wrong to equate all wars or the reasons for their

outbreak, as he does. It is perhaps of its collapsing all categories together that on its first appearance on West German television, the film was negatively reviewed.¹⁷ As to its possible reception within the American context, for which it was principally intended, it is truly shocking that none of Lionel Rogosin's major films have ever been shown on American television.¹⁸

In the interview Rogosin states that his principal aim is to fight against the pessimistic philosophy according to which war is unavoidable and unpreventable, it is supposedly part of the natural order of humanity. This is indeed a noble aim. As to whether *Good Times, Wonderful Times* does attain this aim that war is preventable, is debatable. Since the film consists mainly of intercutting between original film material (from the First World War, the Second World War and the bombing of Hiroshima) and a group of English middle class intellectuals talking endlessly about their personal feelings about, and their personal experiences in, war, it is the dispicableness of this class, because of their intellectual shallowness displayed in the film, rather than the tragedy of war which remains in memory after seeing the film.

Nonetheless, it may perhaps turn out that the true historical significance of Lionel Rogosin may only come to the fore in the context of a democratic and post-revolutionary South Africa, when the presently awaited event will make possible a profound reading of *Come Back Africa* and *Good Times, Wonderful Times*. Then Rogosin will perhaps be placed in the pantheon of film directors.

1 Basil Wright, "On the Bowery", *Sight and Sound*, vol.26 no.2, Autumn 1956, p.98.

2 Paul Rotha, *Documentary Film*, Faber and Faber, London, 1966 [third edition], pp.75-101.

3 Lionel Rogosin, "Interpreting Reality (notes on the Esthetics and Practices of Improvisational Acting)", *Film Culture*, no. 21, 1960, p.21.

4 Peter Davis, "Rogosin and Documentary", *Film Culture*, no. 24, 1962, pp.25-28.

5 John Grierson, "First Principles of Documentary" (1934), *Grierson on Documentary*, Praeger Publishers, New York, 1971, p.146-147.

6 Bertolt Brecht, "Against Lukacs", *New Left Review*, no. 84, 1976, p.45.

7 Richard Meran Barsam, *Non-Fiction Film: A Critical History*, E.P. Dutton and Co., New York, 1973, p.240.

8 Jonas Mekas, "Rebellen Gegen Hollywood: Neubeginn in US Film", *Filmkritik*, no. 4, 1961, s. 179-184,

9 *ibid.*, p. 184.

10 Mark Sufrin, "Filming on Skid Row", *Sight and Sound*, vol.25 no.3, Winter 1955/56, pp.133-139.

11 Friedrich Hitzer and Hermann Herlinghaus, "Lionel Rogosin im Gespräch

mit Friedrich Hitzer und Hermann Herlinghaus", Film, Wissenschaftliche Mitteilungen, 2, 1966, pp.128-138.

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