

## ISSUES IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN CINEMA

by

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The initial wonder that characterised descriptions of pictures that moved on a screen was very soon replaced in South Africa by a comparative negligence on the part of the Press . . . Interest in films as historic documentary material was, with most unfortunate results, very slight in South Africa. As early as 1919 . . . Owing to their low wage level, the provision of special cinemas for non-Europeans could not be contemplated for many years.

- Thelma Gutsche, **The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa: 1895-1940** .

Like practically everything else in South Africa, in which the economy is directly determinant, the evolution, the structure and the ideological complications of the South African cinema is to be explained in the context of the historical intractables and the social contradictions that were the outcome of the mining revolution. This revolution in South African economic history occurred following the discovery of diamond and gold in Kimberley and in Johannesburg, respectively in the 1860s and in the 1880s. The effect of the process, the industrialization of the country through the mining industry, had consequences nationally and internationally. Internationally, it facilitated the deeper penetration of English national capital in the country, whose exploitative ventures continues today under the protection of the ideology of Thatcherism. In other words, it was in the context of this economic revolution that English imperialism, supported by other European imperialisms, cemented its strangle-hold on the many strands of cultural formation which were then emerging or in a process of taking a particular mutation. Nationally, the effects of this historical event were even profounder: it made possible the accumulation of capital from the surplus extracted from labour, particularly black labour; it transformed the demographic composition of the country, qualitatively and quantitatively shifting the population from the rural areas to the urban cities; it altered the country's cultural coordinates in immeasurable ways, specifically in relation to film culture, changed music halls into cinema halls, thus making way for the penetration of this new culture.

The first serious theoretical formulations of the ideology and philosophy of Apartheid, which has had horrendous consequences on South African film culture to the present, found expression in mining publications. [1](#) This ideology was to be transposed stock and barrel into the structure of South African films. From the moment of its emergence, the South African cinema has been obsessed with the ideology of Apartheid, not in opposition to it, but rather, in attempting to imprint it completely on the historical imagination and consciousness of black people Africans, Indians and so-called Coloureds). The South African cinema in exile has been contesting this attempted imposition of cultural hegemony.

The importance of the mining revolution in making possible the early penetration of film culture in South Africa is beyond over-estimation. Although films were shown on a permanent basis in the country from about 1909, the first film was shown in Johannesburg on Monday the 11th May, 1896. [2](#) The cultural formation of the audiences for these early films had been prepared indirectly by the mining industry. The audience consisted of two large groups: the black peasantry which was in the process of being proletarianized into mine workers, and white agricultural workers who were also of being transformed into an industrial proletariat. This reservoir audience, which was located in the mining compounds, was previously entertained with musical hall art forms. The new art form of film destroyed and colonized the previous art forms, and equally, colonized their cultural space. Also a large segment of the immigrants, especially the Jews who were fleeing the unending epidemics of pogroms in eastern Europe, who had come to South Africa in search of fortunes in the mining industry, constituted a large portion of the audience. In the major towns, it was the emerging white middle class which patronised film, some of its wealth came from the developing manufacturing industries, industries which were given impetus by the diversification of expanding mining capital. In other words, it was the mining industry which gave impetus to the development of film culture in South Africa. To be sure, the interest it had on this new art form was governed more by profit motive, rather than for purposes of cultural enlightenment.

Besides facilitating the material cultural conditions which made possible the transplantation and growth of film culture and cinema in South Africa, the mining revolution was the reason the outbreak of a modern imperialist war in Africa. Modern, in the sense that the war was not over land and territory, but rather, it was over the nature of control of the State and the industrialization process. The Boer War of 1899-1901, between British imperial interests and Afrikaans (Boer) nationalistic interests, gave the historical context in which perhaps for the first time propaganda films were made. Major British film companies (British Mutoscope and Biograph Co., R. W. Paul, and the Warwick Trading Company) and various other companies (Pathe, Gaumont, Gibbons, Edison) were at the

center of this propaganda warfare. As Elizabeth Grottle Strebel, the social historian of film writes, the British film companies were merely interested in perpetuating ". . . the myths and symbols of British imperialist iconography." [3](#) Two kinds of films were made during this imperial war: the raw documentary film and the staged propaganda films. As Strebel continues, these anti-Boer propaganda films had the same preoccupations as those present at the birth of the cinema: the realism of Lumiere and the magic of Melies. [4](#) This transplantation of film culture as propaganda in the making of films has had a profound consequences on the development and history of film culture in South Africa.

First, this particular form of imperialist transplantation of film culture, that is, film as the battle-ground of iconographic representations and interests, has had the effect until recently that film production in South Africa was never viewed as an artistic creative act, but rather, as a propaganda instrument against one perceived as one's enemies. If in 1900 British imperial film iconography took Afikaneer people and culture as the very essence of 'barbarism', from 1910 (the date of the political formation of present-day South Africa) the very same Afrikaneer people in defense of white state interests have developed a complex film iconography at whose center blacks (Africans, Indians, so-called Coloureds) are depicted as demonology itself. In other words, the history of South African film iconography is a movement constructed on lies and falsehood, not on authentic representation of history. It is not surprising that hegemonic film culture in our country, controlled by the Broederbond (an elite political and cultural organisation whose intent is to perpetuate the hegemonic control of Afrikaans culture and the dominance of white nationalism), is a 'national culture' of mediocrity. No film of outstanding quality, which could define the patterns of our national culture, has emerged from the ideology of white supremacy. Interestingly and paradoxically, the two most important film features made in the history of South African cinema were made by two American film directors. They will be referred to in a moment, for they represent the two opposed extremes apparent in South African film history. They both indicate clearly that the history of our film is Janus-faced.

Secondly, the implantation of film culture was concurrent with the penetration of American and British film companies. The transformations in our film culture mentioned earlier, were effected by many of these foreign companies. Between the closing phase of the Boer War in 1901 and the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910 many short films and documentaries were made mostly by English companies. Perhaps this is understandable since South Africa was still in many ways a British colony, even though the provinces of Transvaal and Orange Free State had already become independent republics in the second half of the nineteenth-century. It was at this moment that the British film company, Warwick Trading Company, dominated our film screen through production,

distribution and exhibition. But appropriately enough, the first film feature was made on this critical date of 1910 by the Springbok Production Company. As our leading film historian, Keyan Tomaselli, has indicated, there is some confusion as to the origins of this company. [5](#) The film was called, *The Great Kimberley Diamond Robbery*. The title itself indicates the importance of the mining revolution to the then developing historical imagination in our film culture.

In fact, the historical imagination, in a true sense, its failure, was what characterised the film which really defines the origins of the South African cinema: *De Voortrekkers/Winning a Continent*. This film of 1916 was produced by a South African owned company, the African Film Productions Limited, under the directorship of I W. Schlesinger. [6](#) The formation of this film company and the making of the film were defined by the historical coordinates of the First World War conjuncture. During the war period, because of blockages and shortages, Hollywood's hegemony in supplying films to the world market was seriously curtailed. In Russia this made possible the material and cultural conditions which facilitated the emergence of the cinema of Dziga-Vertov, Pudovkin, Kuleshov and others, however much they drew their inspiration from the work of Griffith. At a much lower level of intellectual inspiration and cultural richness, the complications of this war severed the coordinates of dominance of foreign film companies in South Africa. The market for films was expanding while the supply of films was contracting. Hence the historical logic in the founding of companies like African Film Productions Limited and the making of block-buster films like *Winning a Continent*. Unlike in the Russian context, in which socialism was being constructed and intellectual capital was given premium, in our context, in which capitalism was consolidating itself, it was the capitalist market itself which was demanding and applauding the absence of originality in our historical imagination.

The poverty of historical imagination is in full splay in this film which defines our (both black and white South Africans) cultural origins in cinematic terms. Because of the shortage of intellectual capital, which perhaps continues to the present, the production of *De Voortrekkers/Winning a Continent* necessitated the importation of the American film director, Harold Shaw, who earlier had worked for Edison. The film has been a subject of many essays. [7](#) The film articulates the complex structure of South African history in Manichean terms, the Manicheanism so characteristic of the philosophy and ideology of Apartheid: the unending struggle between the forces of civilization (read white South Africans) and the demons of barbarism (read black South Africans). This racist iconography blighting this film was modelled on Griffith's *Birth of a Nation*. Whereas for Russians what fascinated them about Griffith was his invention of new film grammar and syntax, for some of our white compatriots, it was his

racist iconography. This iconography was to poison the whole film culture in South Africa for approximately four decades, until another American independent film director overturned the terms of its articulative dominance. De Voortrekkers was much more about the fragmentation and distortion of the unity of South African history, much more than it was about British imperialist ideology or about Afrikanerdom.

This fragmentation of South African history was in correspondence with the fragmentation of our social reality, in class and racial terms. The ideology of Apartheid dictated that there should be separate and distinct cinemas for the 'different' public spheres. It was with this aim of differentiation that a cinema which could be best designated as apartheid black cinema was founded in 1920 on the suggestion of an American pastor, Ray Phillips of the American Board of Missions. [8](#) This cinema was originally directed at the African public sphere in the mining compounds with the intent of 'sublimating criminal tendencies'. The Chamber of Mines and the Municipal Native Affairs Department took an interest in developing this cinema. In time, the apartheid government was to fund it extensively through various ministerial departments. This apartheid black cinema was made by white South Africans (directors, cameramen, editors, etc.) on the basis of the dominant ideology of apartheid and fed to the black public sphere. With the passage of time, it has extended its diabolical tentacles from the mining compounds to the black urban areas and to the Bantustans ('Homelands'), While the production side has been absolutely controlled by whites, and the enormous profits going to them, the performers are usually Africans. Recently, Africans have entered the production side. These films are usually made in the Zulu language. The specific aim of this apartheid black cinema is to corrupt and demobilize the historical and political imagination of black people. The controlling factor in its making is the ideology of apartheid, an ideology which has spelled the mediocrity and disaster of the South African cinema. Keyan Tomaselli, in an excellent article, has delineated the ideology and structure of this apartheid black cinema. [9](#)

Parallel with this making of apartheid black cinema, the Afrikaans language cinema deepened its structural form. On the whole, the structure of the films in this tradition, as Tomaselli has convincingly argued, is predicated on the dialectic of the insider versus the outsider. [10](#) He delineates how this structure developed from the intractables of South African history: the fact that the gold mining industry was dominated by British imperial interests against Afrikaner national interests. Hence, the theme of xenophobia, which was to exude large segments of this cinema. With time, this xenophobia was to be projected against black people. Originating in the economic sphere (white versus white), this xenophobia was mastered on the political plane (white against black), where it remains until the present. In its essentials, it was part of the ideological shield of

Afrikanerdom (white nationalism).

It was exactly thirty years ago that a film was secretly shot in South Africa which, with the passage of time, has prefigured as to what an authentic national cinema in our country could possibly be. *Come Back Africa*, by the independent American film director, is undoubtedly the highest achievement of film culture in South Africa. It is indeed a momentous occasion that today, May 1st 1988, Rogosin's film is scheduled to make its first public appearance of any kind in our troubled country. [11](#) This lifting of the ban, which was imposed in 1959, can only represent a great victory for the people of South Africa. What makes this film such a great cultural document it is! But first, who is Lionel Rogosin? Rogosin's first film made in 1955, *On the Bowery*, about New York City's skid row was part of the emergence of the New American Cinema of Jonas Mekas, John Cassavettes, Maya Deren, Hollis Frampton, and the consolidation of the British Free Cinema of John Schlesinger, Lindsay Anderson, Karel Reisz. One has only to consult Basil Wright's superlative praise Rogosin's film on its first appearance, even comparing it to Dovzhenko and Dostoevsky, to understand what a momentous occasion its appearance signified. [12](#) Its poetic intermixture of documentary and fiction was a culmination of a tradition of Flaherty, as well as the beginnings of a lyrical form that was to find supreme expression in Alvarez.

Lewis Nkosi, who wrote the script of *Come Back Africa* with Lionel Rogosin and Bloke Modisane, and acted in the film, was well aware of the historic importance of the film at the very moment of its making. In the article immediately following the international appearance of the film, he praised it in the following terms: "The film is not great by any standard. There are too many technical weaknesses in the development of the story. However, with all these faults, the story emerges as a powerful document of social truth such as no other producer's camera has unfolded in this country." [13](#) This judgement, by one of Africa's foremost literary critics, has stood the test of time. One of the things that makes *Come Back Africa* one of the serious documents of our cultural history is that it is the last intellectual snapshot of a brilliant literary generation before its destruction in the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960: in the film, we encounter Bloke Modisane, Lewis Nkosi, Can Themba, Miriam Makeba and others.

Literally, the historical fascinations concerning South Africa present in this film are beyond enumeration. On the linguistic plane, as much as on the historical projection of reality, the film displays its certainties and certitudes. Linguistically, the film employs three South African languages which are at the center of our historical and cultural experience: Zulu is spoken by workers in the mining compound, Afrikaans is spoken by policemen arresting Africans, and English is spoken by African intellectuals in a shebeen as well as by

businessmen. In other words, the film projects the Zulu language as the language of class solidarity, the Afrikaans language as the language of coercion and repression, and the English language as the language of commerce and intellectual exchange. Though in a sense these designations are simplistic, they nonetheless capture abstractly an element of historical truth. Iconographically, the film opens with the silhouetted scenes of the mining compounds towards which the miners are herding. This is undoubtedly an intuitive brilliance on the part of Lionel Rogosin, for as the present essay has attempted to indicate, the mining revolution was at the center of the South African historical experience: in other words, the film opens on the question of labour and capital. It is the dialectic between the two which determines the structural splay of the film.

Still on the iconographic plane, *Come Back Africa* has to be one of the very few films at the time of its production in which there is a positive image of Africans on the screen from beginning to end: not a romanticisation or distortion of black imagery but a concretisation of its cultural forms. From the first appearance of Zacharia, the chief protagonist, among a group of workers, to the closing moments of the film, when crying in despair banging the table at the death of his wife, we sense the film is attempting to convey the sense and structure of South African history. The film equally attempts to draw attention to the tension between town (urban) and country (rural), the latter being the supposed center of traditionalism and the latter the locale of cosmopolitanism. In the famous shebeen scene, if Zacharia is the force of traditionalism, then Lewis Nkosi playing himself, is the pole of cosmopolitanism. Can Themba in the film is the representation of anarchism; no doubt Miriam Makeba is a nightingale of angelism. The film is a rich tableau of representations, of historical and iconographical contrasts. The true significance of *Come Back Africa* is that since its making thirty years ago, and its first appearance on the public screens today back at home, it poses one fundamental question: what ought to be the nature and structure of an authentic South African national cinema. This question at the moment is beyond our immediate comprehension, for we do not possess adequate intellectual instruments with which to unravel its intractable complexities. With the passage of time, this question will become one of the crucial issues in our cultural history.

In the meantime, within the past decade, an independent film culture has been flourishing in South Africa. Its defining center is its unmitigated hostility to the cultural politics of apartheid. With the unbanning of *Come Back Africa* as of today, this emerging independent film and video culture will find its cultural history mirrored in this film. On another occasion it will be necessary to reflect on this historical rendezvous. Judging by the quality of films and videos shown in Amsterdam in a two-week festival, "Culture in Another South Africa", from December 8th to December 21st 1987, in a few years time, an independent film

culture in South Africa will command world-wide recognition. Undoubtedly, still more outstanding things are still to be expected from the post-Ngakane independent film makers like, Barry Feinberg, Harriet Gavshon and others.

1 Belinda Bozzoli, **The Political Nature of a Ruling Class** , Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1981, pp.111-128.

2 Thelma Gutsche, **The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa 1895-1940** , Howard Timmins, (1946) 1972, p.95, p.13.

3 Elizabeth Grottle Strebel, "Primitive Propaganda: The Boer War Films", *Sight and Sound* , Winter 1976/77, vol.46 no.1, p.45.

4 *ibid.*

5 Keyan Tomaselli, "Capitalism and Culture in South African Cinema", *Wide Angle* , vol.8 no.2, 1986(?), p.43.

6 Thelma Gutsche, *op. cit.*, p.312.

7 The article by Keyan Tomaselli referred to above; Hannes van Zyl, " De Voortrekkers : Some Stereotypes and Narrative Conventions", *Critical Arts* , vol.1 no.1,1980; Elizabeth Grottle Strebel, " The Voortrekkers : A Cinematographic Reflection of Afrikaner Nationalism", *Film and History* , vol.9 no.2, 1979.

8 Harriet Gavshon, "Levels of Intervention in Films made for African Audiences in South Africa", *Critical Arts* , vol.2 no.4, 1983, p.14.

9 Keyan G. Tomaselli, "Class and Ideology: Reflections in South African Cinema, *Critical Arts* , vol.1 no.1, March 1980. Tomaselli's criticism of Thelma Gutsche's book, a text which founded film studies in South Africa and which this essay attempts to honour, is unfounded. We, who follow after her, stand on her shoulders.

10 *ibid.*, p.7.

11 In a private letter of April 18, 1988, Lionel Rogosin indicates from London that the film will open today, May 1st, at the University of Witwatersrand, in Johannesburg and also in Cape Town. Michel Lazarus of Osprey Films in Cape

Town, in a private letter of March 11,1988, alludes to this date mentioned by Rogosin. For over a year Michel Lazarus has struggled with the censors to lift the ban on Come Back Africa .

[12](#) Basil Wright, "On the Bowery", Sight and Sound , vol.26 no.2, Autumn 1956, p.98.

[13](#) Lewis Nkosi, "Come Back Africa", Fighting Talk , February 1960, no pagination. This source was given to me, for which I'm thankful, by Professor Jacques Alvarez-Pereyre in a letter from Grenoble.