

making reality

cinema

APART FROM THE FIELD

"If Hollywood had intended to influence the development of a particular kind of person, I am that product; the tinsel morality, the repressed violence, the technicolour dreams, these are the things I absorbed in the name of culture."

— Bloke Modisane, *Blame Me on History*

by David Pottie

Indeed.

And when blacks in South Africa had to be off the city streets by 9 pm, Hollywood's diversions were welcome escapes from apartheid, opening a world of zoot suits, Floorsheim shoes, and the latest adventures of Clark Gable, Betty Grable, and Tyrone Power, or in a later era, Kevin Kline and Donald Sutherland. But this was no ordinary *Teen Beat* dream boat world, at least not in the eyes of Daniel Riesenfeld and Peter Davis, makers of *In Darkest Hollywood: Cinema and Apartheid* (Canada, 1993).

Instead, Riesenfeld and Davis shed clear and uncompromising light on the role of feature films in South Africa. And they do so by collecting some wonderful footage from South African and Hollywood films alike, interspersed with very effective linkages to oral histories from actors, filmmakers, and other observers. The result is a unique cultural perspective on the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa.

Most of us are now familiar with a broad sketch of the transition from apartheid in South Africa. The years of mass resistance and violence, the central role of the African National Congress, the strikes, boycotts and stay-aways, the international campaign for economic and cultural sanctions, the 1990 release of Nelson Mandela, and the April 1994 elections that brought an ANC-led government of national unity to power. But these outlines have also come alive to most of us across our television screens or through the occasional Hollywood film — *Cry Freedom*, *A Dry White Season*, *A World Apart*. If our understanding is at least partially the result of perceptions filtered through a world communications industry, we need to account for the way the story was written to expose its underlying values, assumptions, silences, and prejudices. This is what filmmakers Riesenfeld and Davis try to do.

But this route is a two way street and Peter Davis and Daniel Riesenfeld take us in both directions, accounting not only for how apartheid has been represented to the outside world, but also how cinema within South Africa was itself marked by the histories of repression and resistance. *In Darkest Hollywood* is organized chronologically, drawing extensively on newsreel footage, film clips, and interviews to wind its way through a unique picture of South Africa. Deft engagement with the material saves *In Darkest Hollywood* from succumbing to trite pronouncements on the evils of apartheid as reflected in film policy. Instead, the documentary carries its own weight by framing the history of film within the history of national liberation in South Africa.

But most of all, *In Darkest Hollywood* is steeped with people who love making and watching films. Their reminiscences and experiences are here catalogued in such a way that a dialogue is created between artists and the history of apartheid on film. *Cinema and Apartheid* demonstrates, for example, how Hollywood has established a series of black-white pairings in its film treatments of South Africa: 1974's *Wilby Conspiracy* with Sidney Poitier and Michael Caine, 1987's *Cry Freedom* with Denzel Washington and Kevin Kline, 1989's *A Dry White Season* with Zakes Mokae and Donald Sutherland. But the documentary reveals such pairings to be cinematic conventions (and over-simplifications at that) of the idea of dialogue. For Riesenfeld and Davis, the idea of dialogue is more complicated. To this end they document a number of political reflections and "conversations" of filmmakers and actors in the years following these artists's earlier works. One convert, Anthony Thomas, originally a self-described propagandist for the South African Department of Information, later came to reject even acting in South African feature films on the basis of their portrayal of a white world. He then became a director of anti-apartheid films.

In Darkest Hollywood's interviews with Thomas and others, white or black, reflect a sense of an inexorable movement of South Africans, in the words of novelist Lewis Nkosi, seeking to "recover their voice." Perhaps more importantly, the film documents the ways in which the cinema in South Africa has been both disempowering and empowering to the majority of South Africans. It exposes marginality as a position of inequality as well as a site of resistance.

Davis and Riesenfeld's documentary is perhaps at its strongest when it deals with the Sophiatown culture of the 1950's. Sophiatown, a former Johannesburg suburb, was the brightest and most symbolically charged of inroads of resistance, a cultural beacon wiped out by a series of forced removals from 1955 to 1960. In particular, the spirit of Sophiatown is captured in the segment on U.S. filmmaker Lionel Rogosin and his 1959 film *Come Back, Africa*. Some of the black intellectuals of the day — Bloke Modisane, Lewis Nkosi, Cam Thamba, and others — discuss race relations in a Sophiatown shebeen (illegal Booze can). The segment burns with the intellectual ferment of the day, as the passion and strength of the ideas cross from Rogosin's original work to mix with *In Darkest Hollywood's* own depiction of cinema and apartheid.

As this segment approaches us from the past, *In Darkest Hollywood* reminds us that the issues of apartheid have never been clear-cut. To

regulation of the symbolic order of the imagination. Actor-director John Kani remarks that not only was everything controlled by whites but that "apartheid divides even the way of thinking."

Small wonder, then, that *Cinema and Apartheid* exposes director of *The Gods Must Be Crazy* Jamie Uys' disingenuous insistence that he is apolitical and wanted only to "restore dignity to Africans" with his film. Uys claims that comedy, politics, and entertainment don't mix, but both John Marshall, a filmmaker and ethnographer, and G/oag, the lead in Uys' film, reject the film as a complete fabrication in its representation of the Kalahari "bushmen." Where Uys claims that G/oag and his fellow bushmen didn't understand the concepts of money or work, Marshall tells us that G/oag earned a better salary as a cook prior to the film than he did as its star. Mbulelo Mzamane agrees that Uys is politically suspect. Mzamane wonders how audiences can imagine Africans governing a complex industrial society if, as Uys portrays it, they are mystified by a coke bottle.

But it is the very nature of cultural work to institute a break between the production and consumption of art. And while films are the result of both technical and artistic achievements, they are often viewed with a sense of wonder. However, it goes too far to say that the cinema in South Africa was merely escapist. On the contrary, the cinema may be treated as an approximation of social reality or, as John Kani remembers it, an

Is it possible to think of ways in which cinema

be sure, a series of laws known as "petty-apartheid" treated colour as the basis of identity, and treated the body as the irreducible element of social being. It was upon the body that all the social forces of apartheid were brought to bear: who could work and sleep where, who could marry whom, who was South African and who was not. But in the cinema, this social ordering and regulation of the body was extended not only through segregated cinemas, but to the very

opening to a larger world beyond South Africa.

So gangsterism on the screen was not merely a glossy celluloid fantasy because, as the noose of "petty-apartheid" legislation was tightened throughout the 1950's, it became easier to live illegally than legally. Petty thievery, shakedowns of local merchants, and booze cans became ways of coping with the growing restrictions and laws regulating township life. The popularity of such films as William Keighly's

Street With No Name starring Richard Widmark as gang boss Stiles, drew a loyal cult following from Sophiatown youth. In a sense, the tsotsi¹ or gangster stood as the Sophiatown expression of the Hollywood image. As Nkosi comments, gangsterism was suggestive of an alternative, however limited, to the structure of power under apartheid.

In the politicization of the cinema we find a facet of the struggle between the society and the symbolic forms which it produces. A propaganda model suggests that far from providing the public with meaningful control over the political process, the cinema's "societal purpose" is to inculcate and defend the economic, political, and social agenda of the privileged groups that dominate the society and the state. South Africa is striking in this regard. Unfortunately, this is also an area where Davis and Riesenfeld's efforts fall short. While the filmmakers note that constraints on the practicalities of filmmaking in South Africa are rooted in the socio-economic conditions of movie production, they fail to fully account for the production practices and economic structures of the South African film industry as industry. As Erica Rutherford, producer of *Jim Comes to Jo-burg* asked, "Why don't we make films in South Africa with South Africans?" *Jim Comes To Jo-burg* became the first Hollywood-style feature film made in South Africa with African actors. And granted, it was no small feat just to get African

not so much African cinema as the Hollywood fare of the day in black face.

Cinema and Apartheid does end with the recognition that South Africans have to take stock of the existing film industry, but this needs to be more than a footnote pointing to the struggles of a later day. While the documentary calls South African cinema to account for the extensive censorship and racist grading system which determined who could see what films, and notes the extensive collusion between the Department of Information and global distribution network of Twentieth Century Fox Newsreel, it does not carry these same linkages into the contemporary context. Such acknowledgement is important because the ideological functions of the cinema in South Africa are more than idiosyncrasies and irrationalities of the apartheid system. Further interrogation of the film production and distribution process would help us link the content of film in South Africa to the social conditions of their production and circulation.

In the new South Africa, will film be a straight forward tool for empowerment and, in the mode of "social art," a register for social concerns? It is now popular throughout Africa to see film as such a tool, and to find common cause in the use of film as revolutionary tool. Is it possible to think of ways in which cinema can participate in a decolonization of the mind? Lewis Nkosi, upon whom the makers of *Cinema and Apartheid* rely

can participate in a decolonization of the mind?

faces on the screen, in a variety of roles, and it is also difficult to convey the significance of showing black faces in a so thoroughly white-dominated society, let alone black stars such as Dolly Rathebe, lead of *Jim Comes to Jo-burg*. In *Darkest Hollywood's* relative silence on the organization of the film industry in South Africa makes it hard for us to understand how "black" cinema in South Africa was so dominated by Hollywood. A film like *Jim Comes to Jo-burg* was

extensively, thinks so. Nkosi argues that the history of cinema in South Africa has been a process of Africans recovering their voice and recapturing their history. Such authenticity holds a particular kind of appeal in the politics of representation, but regaining the cinema, owning it in a sense, will be no small feat in South Africa.

Any evaluation of the context from which a post-apartheid South African cinema is to emerge will have to confront the corporate control

of the media in South Africa. Monopolies dominate the media. For forty years the state-run South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) has given exclusive support to the National Party government and its policies. It rigidly segregated its stations and programming, and then slowly added black faces in order to establish a multi-racial front. With its radio and television stations combined it reaches well-over two-thirds of the South African population every day.

The privatization of regional broadcasting networks and the licensing of local stations in the period of "reform" prior to this year's elections will make it difficult to extricate the media from the policies of apartheid, thus extending the privilege of white control beyond formal apartheid. The SABC is locked into long-term multi-program contracts with production companies that have been long-standing participants in the apartheid system. The ANC-led government, or any independent production company for that matter, will be denied direct control of what it broadcasts or access to the physical resources to produce alternatives. And with well over half the population functionally illiterate, the power of the image is crucial.

Things aren't much better in print, either. Four corporations control almost 98% of newspapers published in South Africa, and one of them also owns the only non-government television station. There are also monopolies in paper and retail outlets that are able to alter the prices to turn books and magazines into luxury items. All have been busy finding ways of placing media control beyond the reach of a post-apartheid government should the ANC decide to nationalize the media. Ownership is a key element to how media can set the boundaries of political discussion and representation.

What value is assigned to those images will be as important as the ability to create them in the first place. If we accept the significance of the symbolic representation in cinema, then everyday terms like "race" and "democracy" need to remain contested concepts in the new South Africa. Keeping the value assigned to such concepts open means allowing for the rearticulation of political identities. It is precisely

this rearticulation of value that has been a constant feature of cinema in South Africa.

In Darkest Africa reveals that while in the 1950's white foreigners were not associated with the same oppressiveness as white South Africans, by the 1970's and 80's there was a definite skepticism of the tendency of white liberals to appropriate the struggle. Mbulelo Mzamane notes that Hollywood demands that we look at South Africa through a white man's eyes, a practice evident in Richard Attenborough's film *Cry Freedom*. Through his adaptation of newspaper editor Donald Woods' encounter with *Black Consciousness* leader Steven Biko, Attenborough implies that the struggle in South Africa can only be resolved by the involvement of members of the white community.

"South Africans will recover their voice." But the question of whose voice, whose image is always fluid. Lewis Nkosi laments that the years of struggle will have been in vain if national liberation only serves to sustain the representation of South Africa by whites. To be sure, Nkosi is correct; yet what meaning are we to give to "cultural autonomy"? As Riesenfeld and Davis acknowledge, 1988's *Mapantsula* is generally hailed as a "black" film since it featured the stories of black characters. But what they do not note is that of *Mapantsula*'s 50 person crew, only 13 were black, and only one of them was a key technician. We need to question, then, what makes this film "black" while a film like *Cry Freedom* is unacceptably "white" — both films had a white director.

All films are authentic in that they convey the view of the individual directors, albeit from within the confines of their respective production practices. But filmmakers also intervene at different levels of struggle, and in turn audiences will continue to locate themselves in shifting relations to the films. Whose image, whose South Africa is a question we should ask each time we read, "Coming soon to a theatre near you."

David Pattie is currently writing and researching on South Africa and is a member of the editorial collective for South Africa Report.

1 The term *tsotsi* is a rendition of the American term 'zoot suit.'