

Documenting South African History.

Interview with Peter Davis by Samuel Lelièvre
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Peter Davis is a British documentary filmmaker based in Canada. He is the author of *In Darkest Hollywood: Exploring the Jungles of Cinema's South Africa*, a reference book about South African cinema before and during apartheid, and the result of research undertaken for the making of the eponymous two-part documentary released in 1993. Davis has made numerous films about South Africa, clandestinely sometimes. Most of them have been used throughout anti-apartheid networks in order to inform people about the terrible realities of this country. As we celebrate the ANC's hundred year's anniversary, those films remain important documents about South African contemporary history. Working on the archives that he has built up for nearly fifty years, I have discussed with Peter Davis about his background, his long experience, as well as his on-going projects.

You were born in United Kingdom before the Second World War... Did you have a long lasting interest towards cinema?

I was born in England in 1933. When I started to study at Oxford University in 1954, there were no courses in cinema studies. I intended to work in films, but I studied English literature, with the intention of eventually becoming a scriptwriter. Before that, I was an avid film-goer, like most people at that time. During the thirties and forties, there were children's films every Saturday morning. We saw Westerns, Abbott and Costello comedies, adventure and science-fiction films, mostly serials. I was a kid among dozens of others, screaming at the films, singing while following the bouncing ball on the screen. Complete ecstasy, the closest to paradise one could imagine.

What type of films has impressed you the most during your youth and while being a student?

When I was a teenager, I would say that the films we most preferred were French and Italian. We lived in a suburb near London, a city where you could find a lot of cinemas showing European films. After school finished, we used to cycle the 20 kilometers to London to see the films we liked, cycling home afterwards. I have fond memories of *Clochemerle* (1948) by Pierre Chenal, *Jour de fête* (1949) by Jacques Tati, *La Ronde* (1950) by Max Ophüls, *Jeux interdits* (1952) by René Clément, *Salair de la peur* by Henri-Georges Clouzot (1953), and *Un condamné à mort s'est échappé* (1956)

by Robert Bresson. Later, once I had graduated, there were no clear ways to enter the film industry, I had no connections there. So I became an English teacher, first in Italy and then in England, in the same high school where I had been a pupil – and where I found the same teachers I had as a student, which was quite a strange experience. But I wrote and shot my very first film at that time, highly influenced by *Zéro de conduite*. It was the story of two boys (played by two of my students) imagining the murder of a hated teacher. This early work was quite well received in amateur film circles, much less so within the school. The head of my department had an apoplectic fit! That was my only attempt at fiction film. Thanks to the help of the father of one of my students, I was able to get work in a studio for commercials, Merton Park, where I started from the lowest position – apprentice to the assistant editor. I worked there for several months. Because of a love affair with a Swedish woman (Ingmar Bergman's films were popular at that time), I went to live in Sweden, where I started to work as editor for the young national television service, and stayed there for six years. Because of this professional experience, which proved very important to me, I found myself involved in the independent documentary film world. I have never regretted staying with non-fiction.

What were your first professional productions?

I made my first documentary film in 1961, entitled *El Masna (The Factory)*, for Swedish television. It was shot in an Egyptian village where young artisans made tapestries depicting everyday scenes. I had to do everything solo, script, camerawork, and editing. I actually made most of my films in those rudimentary conditions, with a crew of at most two or three people and in most cases without enough money. I made several films while living in Sweden, including a series on Central America, and another on Britain at that time. When I returned to England, I tried to get work in television, but as I was not a member of the union, which ran a closed shop, very difficult to penetrate, I could not find work. So when an American friend asked me to go to the United States to work with him, I immediately accepted his offer.

Do you remember when your interest toward South African matters started, regarding what was going on in this country?

I was always interested in what was going on in South Africa. I remember taking pictures in 1963 in Trafalgar Square, during a protest against apartheid. British Conservatives, by kith-and-kin relationships and through trade, had always had a close relationship with South Africa. South African politics were thus part of British politics. Even before going to university, I was aware of the meaning of apartheid. At Oxford, I remember chatting with an Afrikaans student, very sincere, who tried to explain to me the advantages of apartheid for both blacks and whites – without succeeding, of course. Later, he became a promising member of the South African Nationalist Party. He was actually murdered in his home along with his wife. Anti-white slogans were written on

the walls with their blood, to make it look like a racist killing. But at the time of this killing, he was making enquiries about corruption among some of the highest members of the Nationalist Party. This crime has never been solved

I first met black South African refugees while living in Sweden. While there, I also saw *Come Back, Africa* by Lionel Rogosin, which was for a long time the best film made on apartheid; I reviewed it for the American magazine *Film Culture* at that time, and much later edited a book about the making of the film, *Lionel Rogosin: a Man Possessed*. I was later honoured to meet Lionel Rogosin and to work with him on his legacy. When asked where my interest in South Africa comes from, I would say that I took it as a personal affront as well as an insult to humanity. I made my first film on South Africa for the American channel CBS (*Hello from Swaziland!*, 1974) and it was on a quite special subject-matter: gambling and interracial sex (prostitution and mistresses kept by white South Africans) in Swaziland, two things strictly forbidden in South Africa, but inevitably very popular among white South African tourists. It was a way to show both the reality of Southern Africa and the genuine perversity of apartheid.

What films did you made in South Africa and what were the main difficulties you had to face?

Beside a number of unfinished projects, I should mention the completed titles *Hello, from Swaziland!* (1974), *White Laager* (1977), *Generations of Resistance* (1979), *The Nuclear File* (1980), *Winnie Mandela: Under Apartheid* (1986), *Remember Mandela!* (1987) *South Africa: Under the Gun* (1988), *In Darkest Hollywood*, Parts I & II (1993). After the fall of the apartheid regime, I made *Sangoma* (1997) and contributed to many other films made by colleagues. My crew and I were imprisoned and expelled from the country while shooting *White Laager*, but partly by luck I managed to keep the rushes we had shot. For this film, I got financial support from the United Nations and Swedish television, as well as from WGBH, an American public television station, for the PBS chain. But this did not stop a WGBH employee from phoning me to demand changes in the narration (apparently to reduce white culpability, it seems). And this was only a few months after the Soweto Uprising of 1976! I have never been able to understand why he wanted to protect the racists, other than for some perverted concept of « balance ». Later on, I clandestinely returned to shoot *Generations of Resistance* and my films about Winnie and Nelson Mandela. I was able to accomplish this by luck rather than skill – I was persona non grata, I could have been arrested anytime while working on these projects. *The Nuclear File*, made before the actual testing of a South African nuclear device, is a film about the secret co-operation between Germany and a few other countries to allow South Africa to get a nuclear bomb. WGBH in the United States had promised to finance this project but they finally did not, I don't really know why. Eventually I got some support from Swedish television.

Later, I had to produce *Remember Mandela!* with my own money.

Your film, In Darkest Hollywood, was released in 1993. What interested you in this project?

With the establishment of the second State of Emergency in July 1985, the South African government for the first time imposed their own censorship on the foreign media. Failure to submit to their censor meant withdrawal of the journalist visa. This censorship was mainly aimed at foreign television reporters whose reportages were presenting a very negative image of the country. This censorship imposed an almost total control over information to the outside world which the large American networks were not willing to bypass, although others did. It also favoured dissemination of South African propaganda which depicted black activists as « terrorists », and which secretly paid rogue Zulu Inkatha elements to fight against black activists, and so deliver the message that only a strong white government could prevent the country from falling into anarchy and black violence. My co-worker Daniel Riesenfeld and I spent a lot of time looking for support from different television channels, but in vain. We finally decided to go in another direction by making a documentary about the « cinema of apartheid » as such, that is, about a cinematic genre of white superiority, working both on a national and on an international level, which had the effect over the last half century or more of encouraging, through different rhetorical strategies, a certain tolerance towards the apartheid system. For this project, we did extensive research in film archives in the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe and later, when we were allowed access once more, South Africa. We also interviewed producers, directors, actors and writers living in South Africa or in exile. Through this research, we were able to trace the historical evolution of a cinema and of an imagery that, in a very insidious way, succeeded in making acceptable the idea of white supremacy. Even today, we have to be conscious of such history (applied to the whole of Africa, not just South Africa) if we really want to overcome the tragedy of apartheid. The cinema of apartheid was both a copy of Hollywood and a reflection of Hollywood's domination; it was a white, capitalist, colonialist industry at the service of a racist propaganda. In re-articulating our project that way, we managed to find financial support, especially from American liberal foundations. The two documentaries were well received and won several awards. They have been screened almost everywhere – but only on one American television station, in New York. And not yet in South Africa!

How would you describe the years of struggle up until Mandela's election of 1994?

I always received the maximum of support from organizations and individuals involved in the anti-apartheid struggle. The role of IDAF, in particular, was always remarkable. I benefited greatly from the support and invaluable advice of South African activist Mary

Benson. Mary was a deeply committed woman who, while always keeping a low profile, had a deep influence on the movement. But I also had some distasteful experiences. While making my documentary about Winnie Mandela (1986), my associate-producer, who was an African-American, refused to give me the rushes he shot in South Africa. He did not give any reason for such refusal. Meeting him in New York, he physically assaulted me, again, without any explanation. I had to resort to a legal procedure to get back the rushes and finish the film. The only reason for this attitude I could imagine was that he could not accept that a « white man » could make a film about a « black subject », and that he probably wanted to become the sole producer for such a project. But his hatred and resentment threatened to sabotage the film completely, and in fact did delay its completion by some months. If he had been successful, he would have served the apartheid ideologists. It was certainly one of the most painful experiences of my life.

What memories have you kept for your field trips or as an observer involved against apartheid in South Africa?

I deeply appreciated the co-operation existing at all levels and among people from very different backgrounds. While traveling clandestinely in South Africa, I was helped by all kinds of people, who risked jail on my behalf. On a different level, I found support in unexpected areas. For instance, as I was visiting friends working at the United States Information Service in Washington, I mentioned the difficulties I was having in sending copies of *Generations of Resistance* (1979) to South Africa, where of course it was banned. I was immediately told that they could send it via diplomatic pouch. Later, after the fall of the apartheid regime, I often met people who told me that they saw my films when they were student activists. This was proof that, although modest, my efforts had proved useful for the cause, inside as well as outside of South Africa. On a more negative level, I deplored the fractious quarrels between the ANC and the PAC, which split anti-apartheid unity. Also, I was able to perceive the racism at the core of American politics, still existing, although in a more subtle form, today. The shameful strategies at work during the Cold War, which made any enemy of Communism an ally of the West, enabled the South African government to get covert support from NATO. And in general, I was disgusted by those who paid more attention to their own personal ambitions than to the collective struggle.

How do you consider today's situation in South Africa and do you still have project of films about or in this country?

I have been profoundly disappointed by some events, by problems of corruption, by attacks on freedom of speech, by the violence – especially against women – and by the self-seeking attitude and arrogance of some politicians, similar to what Georges Orwell describes in the *Animal Farm*: « the pigs who become men ». At the same time, you

also see an extraordinary optimism and good will, perfectly « illogical », in many South Africans from all areas of society. The worst and the best can happen in South Africa

As for my current interests, I do have an ongoing project: the odyssey across North America of Dolly Rathebe, the great voice of township music, whom I took on tour some years ago now. It will be a documentary in three parts, of which I have completed the first, *Travels with Dolly: Vancouver*. I have another documentary project about the making of *Siliva the Zulu*, a silent film shot in 1927, the first full-length film made in South Africa with an all-black cast. But I also dream of a fiction film about the great strike of 1922 (the « Rand Rebellion »), a revolt during which white communist miners tried to overthrow the government, but who refused the offer by black miners to join their struggle.

Were you interested in the political impact of cinema, by its relationship with history?

That is a question I often confront. I think that making documentaries was a way I found to study and interpret social questions, and to pass on what I learned, I hope in an engaging form. I obviously was not the only independent director working on South African themes at that time, my work, like the others, played an educational role in the world. Remember, I was working in the United States, where, unlike Europe and Canada, there was appalling ignorance, and unfortunately, often indifference, to apartheid. My research on available documentaries between 1948 (when the apartheid system was established) and 1976 (the Soweto Uprising) turned up not more than at most a dozen titles broadcast by American television. Beside production issues such as finding financing, those of distribution and exhibition were significant – even if one could find the money to make a documentary, how to get it to an audience? Films I directed for the UN (*White Laager, Generations of Resistance, Winnie Mandela*) were financially supported by a few television networks, but were also available in all of the member countries of the UN (except South Africa). I had another distributor at that time, and films were accessible to different institutions or rentable for private screenings. Also, I exhibited my films through presentations at universities, churches, ciné-clubs and trade-unions. Furthermore, a photo exhibition I made about Mandela's life (« 25 Years in Prison ») was mounted for the Democrat Party National Convention held in Atlanta in 1988, whose opening day coincided with Nelson Mandela's seventieth birthday. I always considered American popular opinion crucial for the South African struggle; so, documentary films such as mine, exhibited as they were outside television networks, played a role to some extent in informing the American people about apartheid. While the main commercial television channels in the US were very little concerned with apartheid, there was a massive propaganda campaign on the part of the South African Information Service (SAIS) aimed at the United States. Free copies of their films were

sent to Senators. In the schools, the only information available to students about South Africa often was films supplied by SAIS. It was the dissemination of our films (in the early days, these were not inexpensive videos, but costly 16mm films) that counteracted, to a certain degree – and probably to the most important, the activist element – the influence of the apartheid regime. It should be remembered that President Reagan had dismissed Nelson Mandela as a terrorist. When the American people finally turned against apartheid, it came from the grassroots, not from the top

With time, one inevitably becomes part of history, especially when one has spent his life recording notable events, struggling to show the world as it is. Among the wisest decisions I ever made is to keep my films' out-takes (i.e. the material not used in the edited product), which are often discarded. I conserved almost everything. Images used in the edited film obviously represent the choice of director; however, the others, those existing outside the film, also become historically important. That is how I run my archives while working on new productions.

Peter Davis lives and works in Vancouver (Canada).