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in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Gerrie and Louise. First Run/Icarus Films.

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Published on H-AfrLitCine (December, 1999)

Gerrie and Louise is a darkly fascinating film that uses the unlikely marriage between Gerrie Hugo, a whistle-blowing one-time Colonel in the South African Defence Force, and Louise Flanagan, the investigative reporter employed by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission who used Hugo's inside knowledge in her own attempts to bring to light the horrific truths of the apartheid era. While the film focuses on the couple in the manner of documentaries of private life, it also necessarily serves a broader documentary purpose. Director Sturla Gunnarsson graphically illustrates the material and moral ugliness of South African society from the late 70s, when Hugo got his start in the South African military in the invasion of Angola, through the period of "total onslaught" in the late 80s, during which Hugo was chief of a covert operation that included the assassination of the so-called "Cradock Four," up to the present time and the hopes held out by Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the TRC that South Africans might be reconciled with each other through telling and facing the truth of the apartheid years. The film is very effective in exposing the neurosis of contemporary South Africa—the violence, the lack of trust, the guilt—and thus revealing the precarious and tenuous nature of its young democracy. Cinematographer Kirk Tougas sets the tone from the outset with a shot of Gerrie Hugo's eyes caught in a rear-view mirror as Hugo heads down a dark road. Hugo's nervy watchfulness as his eyes flick between road ahead and mirror hint both at the paranoia of former apartheid agents, and the sense that the past is ever-present. That sense of the indelible presence of awful memories is heightened by the film's use of skillfully selected archive footage—including shots of the Angolan invasion, a police raid on a township, a necklacing, and the Bisho massacre when Ciskei police fired round after round into a fleeing crowd. These archive shots shift between black-and-white and color, heightening the sense of their subjectivity at the same time as underscoring for the viewer

what exactly is meant by the euphemistic and evasive terms used by Hugo and other former apartheid agents and victims in the film. It is apparent fairly early on in the movie that Hugo's motives for blowing the whistle on what had gone on in the last days of apartheid are not exactly pure. In fact, Louise Flanagan recognized that his primary motive initially was to get revenge on another covert operator who had been undermining Hugo's role as intelligence chief to the then Ciskeian leader Oupa Gqozo. Likewise, the former Colonel Laurens du Plessis, who admits to having added three names to the order to assassinate Matthew Goniwe, wishes that he had not done so, not because he now thinks what he did was wrong, but because for him personally, the consequences of his actions were unpleasant. As Louise Flanagan comments in a telling cross-cut, "That's really frightening." What is really intriguing, however, is how Flanagan herself ever came to trust Hugo enough to marry him—against all the advice of her friends and colleagues. One of the most riveting moments of the film comes at the end when that trust is sorely put to the test. After one of Hugo's former operators comes forward with his plea for amnesty, Hugo's evasions become less and less credible. "People probably got killed," he says. "I don't know." And this just after Flanagan has told Gunnarsson that she would not have married Hugo if she'd thought there were still things to find out about him. The couple's caginess in the presence of the camera in the final shot speaks volumes, leaving implicit the big questions facing their relationship and South Africans generally: how much truth are they really going to tell, how much are they going to be willing to overlook? And what about the consequences for black South Africans? What, for instance, are the consequences of living in a society where a former activist, Coesta Jack, can point someone out on the street and say to his wife, "There's the one who tortured me, darling"? For most of the film, Jack is all smiling benevolence and suaveness as he discusses what happened to him

and how he now employs du Plessis to do his books for him; his most vehement statement in the film comes when he virtually bangs his fist on the table to deny the value of revenge which, he says, will “spoil a good party.” The other black South African focused on in the movie is Nomonde Calata, widow of the murdered Fort Calata, who is shown giving her harrowing testimony at the TRC in East London. Afterwards, as her image is instantly but momentarily beamed around the world via international news networks, she says with apparent satisfaction, “They listened to me with

full attention.” Let us hope that <cite>Gerrie and Louise</cite>, with all its complexity and horror, will help to keep world attention on the victims of human rights abuses in South Africa long after the TRC has packed up. <p> Copyright (c) 1999 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu. <p>

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Citation: Simon Lewis. Review of , *Gerrie and Louise*. H-AfrLitCine, H-Net Reviews. December, 1999.
URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14894>

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