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Against the Odds: In Search of a National Cinema In South Africa

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To Change Reels, edited by Isabel Balseiro and Ntongela Masilela, looks at South African cinema from almost the earliest times up to the present. South Africa early on developed a film industry, but for a number of reasons was limited in its scope by restrictions that were partly self-imposed. So South African cinema in its entirety is not a large body of work, but while most of it cannot lay claim to the upper reaches of cinematic achievement, almost everything produced rewards study, from early epic to films made for miners to the ethnic pulp movies of the 1970s and 1980s. Everything was made within a peculiar dominant social structure such that, even when films avoided its direct representation, they were most revealing of it.

This book looks at film production in South Africa from a historical and social perspective, which inevitably—this being South Africa—involves the political. Indeed, it is hard to find another country (including Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia) where politics have been so deeply imbedded in all areas of film production and distribution as South Africa. But this statement comes with the caveat that what we are talking about is the politics of exclusion. This was the great paradox: that cinema, the most popular art form to evolve during the twentieth century, behaved in South Africa as if 75 percent of the population did not exist. In no other country that aspired to a national cinema did this happen: American, British,

French, German, Indian, Japanese, and Swedish cinemas all built on a solid domestic base. Even tiny Denmark did the same, and for much of the silent period at least, was a world cinema.

It is natural and fitting that the essays in *To Change Reels* aspire to look at South African cinema from the vantage point of the hitherto marginalized—this is the “change” referred to in the book’s title. While the book thereby ignores what constitutes South Africa’s most significant output of most of the last century—films for and about whites—it offers the most detailed analysis of what cinema meant to the black underclass—how, despite racial barriers, they managed to see films, the impact films had on them, and how their images were depicted in the handful of films in which they did appear.

We know that whites dominated South African cinema from its inception, and we know that their domination did not cease with the ending of apartheid. A new government with more revolutionary tendencies could, after 1994, have nationalized the film industry, and laundered it from top to bottom, ending up—as was the case with Cuba—with a state-run industry, with all its strengths and weaknesses. This might have guaranteed a new national cinema, but one that would have had to depend on a sustaining revolutionary spirit that could only exist in some kind of isolation from much of the world. That was definitely not the spirit of the new South Africa.

Now we are almost one decade after the ending of institutional apartheid, and the editors of *To Change Reels*

are still anticipating the rise of a national cinema as they pose the critical questions:

“Should a ‘true South African cinema’ be one where the means of production are in the hands of the majority of South Africans—or at the very least, in the hands of an intellectual black elite that claims to represent the interests of that majority more persuasively than has hitherto been the case? If the answer is yes, would it follow that ‘black films’ would then be made? And would ‘black films,’ by virtue of being made by blacks, fit the bill of being part of a South African national cinema?” (p. 6)

(These are only part of the nexus of problems that exist. To my mind, the more urgent issue of Hollywood’s domination is well addressed in the book.)

In fairness, it should be noted that Masilela and Balseiro in fact pose the question without giving any answer. They are not here describing the output of a rainbow nation, where race is irrelevant, but a transfer of the control of production from one racial group to another. I do not think this is either practicable or desirable, not least because the exclusion of one group is the negation of a cinema that is truly national.

I do not know of any guaranteed formula for cultivating a national cinema. In Cuba, after the Revolution there was an initial dynamism that was inspirational to those of the Left even outside Cuba, but which stagnated as the regime itself became more and more culturally repressive. Apartheid South Africa tried, with the aid of subsidies that hugely favored the Afrikaans minority, to create a cinema of many ethnicities, and failed dismally. But what is clear is that in order to create a national cinema—I am tempted to say, in order to preserve a national culture—indigenous production has to be nurtured and protected. In brutal terms, this means that it cannot be left to a free market, for it will be swamped by a generic Hollywood. I do not even have any faith in a globalized market, where the film may be produced in South Africa, but is financed from outside, in whole or in part, and with mandatory foreign stars playing the roles of South Africans. This leads to films like *Sarafina* and *Cry, the Beloved Country* (both versions), for example, which made the shameful choice of excluding South Africans from leading roles—a different kind of apartheid.

So government money has to be put into indigenous production, and I can see no compelling reason why this money should not favor the hitherto excluded majority; but just as important, this domestic production must have some protected access to the home market. This

still does not guarantee success, but it is the only way to have a chance. The struggle for access to and control of world markets has been part of film distribution from the earliest times and, for a variety of reasons, Hollywood has emerged triumphant and seems poised to stifle all other production. The threat to the emergence of a national cinema—whatever formulation that might take—I would argue does not now come primarily from the continuing racial and racist structure of film production, which I suspect will wither away, but from outside forces. South Africa is not the only nation to be faced with this dilemma—in my own country, Canada, it is at least as monumental. As opposed to most other nations, however, a truly national South African cinema may be stillborn at the very moment when it seems a possibility, for reasons beyond its control.

In the book, different writers offer a masterly overview of cinema, and then television, in South Africa from earliest times to the present. Ntongela Masilela’s look at the beginnings of film culture in South Africa documents a black interest not only in watching films, but also in using them for educational purposes. It is fascinating to learn that Sol Plaatje, brilliant in all things, actually traveled and lectured with a mobile projector (here, I am reminded of James Joyce’s early attempt to launch cinema in Ireland), and that Plaatje “complemented his pedagogical films with others that were for entertainment” (p. 19). In fact, mobile cinema was the way most Africans experienced cinema during most of the last century, since their access to theaters was strictly limited.

Masilela and Bhekizizwe Peterson, in their essays, record the deep resentment at the limitations on black access to films as articulated by intellectuals like H. I. E. Dhlomo and Lewis Nkosi. This was not only because of the lack of cinemas for blacks, but also because of censorship. The white authorities were well aware of the power of cinema, and terrified of its impact on “the African mind,” which they thought they understood so well. Everything was done to avoid exciting or inciting this fictitious entity; most of all, the censors were concerned about preventing blacks from seeing portrayals of debauched whites—the kind of characters that have constituted the basic ingredient of cinema from its beginnings, and which have proven so seductive.

The essays in part 2 of *To Change Reels* deal with three films about racial conflict in South Africa, *De Voortrekkers* (1916), *Cry, the Beloved Country* (first version, 1952, and the later version, 1995), and *Come Back, Africa* (1959). Edwin Hees describes in detail the political importance

of the making of *De Voortrekkers* as a concretization of the central myth of the Afrikaner volk, the Great Trek, and the claim to the land of South Africa through the defeat of the Zulus at the Battle of Blood River. Hees compares the ideology of De Voortrekkers with that of D. W. Griffith's notorious *Birth of a Nation*, which had come out one year earlier. Hees is not convinced that *Birth of a Nation* was a direct influence on *De Voortrekkers*'s producer Schlesinger and director Shaw. Yet I am still inclined to that view, since Shaw, whether he had seen the earlier film or not (it was shown in both Europe and South Africa), could scarcely have been unaware of its existence, as it was notorious for causing riots in the United States. I think the coincidence is too great for there not to have been a connection. And I also think that the one context missing from Hees's analysis, that of the Great War, is also worthy of mention. After all, the film did have to pass through a strict censorship, this being wartime, and the authorities must have seen some advantage in raising the martial spirits of former enemies, fourteen years after the ending of the Anglo-Boer War, in which many members of the audience must have fought and which held bitter memories for all. This is not essential to Hees's argument, but it does suggest that some kind of comfortable accommodation between English-speakers and Afrikaans-speakers was felt to have been achieved, and that the film would help the war effort by encouraging enlistment.

Schlesinger and Shaw likely felt that they were doing a service to the beleaguered empire in making the film, a sentiment that must have been shared by the authorities. Beyond that, Schlesinger may well have been reaching out to a section of the white population that, up until then, had not altogether succumbed to cinema's seductive power. Now, Afrikaners saw themselves cast in heroic roles on the screen, and a nationalist—that is, Afrikaner—cinema became a possibility. Twenty years later this was fulfilled with Joseph Albrecht's volk epic *Building a Nation*.

Mark Beittel gives a comprehensive account of what went into the making of the two versions of *Cry, the Beloved Country*, omitting only the negative reaction of black intellectuals to the 1951 version, which extended to the book also. But reference to this is made in Isabel Balseiro's following chapter on *Come Back, Africa*. For all its faults, the earlier version of *Cry, the Beloved Country* is powerful, and served a role in the anti-apartheid struggle, as did the book, although the film received rather poor distribution. The anomaly for me is the choice on the part of producer Anant Singh to make the second version. Al-

though Beittel offers the rationalizations given by Singh himself for this strange choice, they all seem desperate. Why, at the end of the apartheid era, revert to a story that goes back to the beginnings of apartheid? What possible purpose could it serve, other than as a star vehicle that could be dished up in color? For all its color, the later version seems to me drab compared with the first version, which was made in the townships of the early apartheid era, with an overwhelming sense of the desperate conditions. Beittel's analysis of both versions, which includes an examination of how both added strong visual elements to Paton's book, is a masterly example of the critical analysis of film iconography. His focus on the use of the handshake is especially acute.

Isabel Balseiro's essay on *Come Back, Africa* is titled "Black Claims on 'White' Cities." As she points out, *Cry, the Beloved Country* and *Come Back, Africa* have as their core theme the question of migration and belonging, which, in fact, is a theme, although dealt with in sanitized form, of even non-socially-aware B-movies from the fifties, like *African Jim* and *Song of Africa*. Balseiro's look at *Come Back, Africa*, which examines the work almost on a scene-by-scene basis, is penetrating, only confirming that this was the most important work to come out of South Africa during the early apartheid era, and for most of the forty-five-year history of apartheid, it was the only one to have empowered blacks by giving them free voice and including them in the production process. Balseiro refers to the difficulties some critics have in categorizing this film, but through television praxis, we do have a word to describe it, albeit a clumsy one: "docudrama." *Come Back, Africa* is neither documentary nor drama, but a melding of the two. It will not satisfy those who like their categories neat and clean, but it is a form that goes back to the inception of documentary. *Nanook of the North* is a docudrama, a scripted film in "realist" form. At least in *Come Back, Africa* it is easy to distinguish the two forms, whereas when practised by CNN, it is much more devious.

With the essays in part 3, the debate moves into contemporary issues. Jacqueline Maingard's essay inevitably includes an examination of television as well as cinema, and she wisely includes documentary as part of the national scene. Although not explicitly drawing the connection, Maingard enlarges on the debate about form that confuses some people in regard to *Come Back, Africa*. Maingard contrasts two forms of documentary, both made for and aired on television. One film is titled *Hlanganani*, dealing with the history of COSATU, and the other a series called *Ordinary People*, made by the

group known as Free Filmmakers, whose work during the apartheid period contributed so much to the struggle. As described by Maingard, *Hlanganani* belongs in the tradition of inspirational documentary that had its origins in the Russian Revolution. At once there are problems of taxonomy, because we are now in the realm of propaganda, although Maingard avoids the word. We are dealing with didactic cinema (masterfully executed, for example, by John Grierson in Britain and at Canada's National Film Board), and we are only a step away from the commercial. These are all very difficult to disentangle—it would be comforting to be able to say that that which is most truly “documentary” is that which is most pleasing artistically, but that is far from the case. I have only to invoke Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*.

In contrasting *Hlanganani* with *Ordinary People*, Maingard is marking the shift from a general to a personal treatment of a subject, something that occurred long ago in the West, and which had everything to do with television (where even the scale favors the close-up) and the hand-held camera—all part of the feverish search for “reality,” where such “reality” has come to mean the deeply personal, and where the sensational and the sexually titillating now strangle anything meaningful. Mercifully, *Ordinary People* does not plumb those depths of prurience. We can perhaps relate the shift in emphasis not only to an adaptation to a modern form, but surmise that the move towards an exploration of the individual (as opposed to a group) reflects changes in South African society, where people hitherto anonymous suddenly assume a recognizable face and voice. These are possibilities skillfully examined by Maingard.

I totally agree with Maingard that “there is no fixed way forward, no fixed formula for framing national cinema and television in South Africa, nor for its making” (p. 130). She also remarks on the lack of money for an increase in state funding of film and television. However, this is really a question of priorities: the present government certainly places a far higher priority on its defense budget than on funding the arts, or even fighting AIDS, which is a far greater threat than any conceivable outside enemy and, I would argue, one that is even greater than apartheid. It is noteworthy that the AIDS crisis has produced some of the most moving documentary in South Africa, just as it is to be lamented that this production happened with very little support from the government. Many of these documentaries were produced with the help of financing from Europe, just like the old apartheid days when money from outside South Africa was essential to underground filmmaking.

Lucia Saks, with her essay “Race for Representation,” enters into this debate with her critical look at the term “African Renaissance” and its implications. Is it acceptable to think in terms of high culture (which is precisely what the word “Renaissance” invites), when people “don't have bread, houses, jobs or adequate health care”? Is this not “a cover-up, or worse—a symptom of the government's despair at not being able to solve the country's real problems” (p. 137)? And she puts this in the context of a continent wracked with violence. It is absolutely no consolation to anyone, African or not, to recall that the Italy of the Renaissance too was wracked with war and pestilence, because I do not detect the remotest sign in Africa of the burst of miraculous creativity that was the Italian Renaissance. Behind the Renaissance lay the fabulous wealth of a few city-states, used for the creation of art and the enjoyment of the populace; in Africa, what I see is the export of Africa's resources for the enrichment of people of whom only a privileged handful are inhabitants of Africa, and certainly not the most needy. As described by Saks, the frequent invocation of the word “Renaissance” in South Africa makes it part of state propaganda.

Saks carefully lays out the economic topography in which the white Paper on the Film Industry came into being in 1996. She perceives the tension that lies in the stated aims of enabling “South African audiences to see their own stories reflected on local screens” (p. 141), while at the same time creating a film industry that is internationally competitive, as well as offering a service industry to overseas productions. These are laudable aims, but no country I know of has succeeded in reaching all three of them. Because the struggling film industry in South Africa relies on government subsidies, Saks believes that filmmakers with a personal vision (of which there is no lack in South Africa) have to struggle against “the dictates of political correctness” and “the hegemony of the market” (p. 143).

Saks digs deeper into the problem of the market, which is really the crux of what is a crisis for almost every domestic film industry except the American. Even the handful of countries that have had, until now, a robust film industry—such as China and India—are faced with decisions regarding world trade that may well lead to the destruction of their home-grown industries. The dimensions of this crisis cannot be overestimated. Throughout the world, except the United States, indigenous film production, national cinema, is an endangered species. Hollywood is the biggest weapon of mass destruction of cultures that the world has ever seen. The unindicted co-

conspirators in this annihilation are of course audiences around the world, who show their preferences for Hollywood films at the box-office.

The one area where the indigenous has not been overwhelmed is, as Saks points out, television. I suspect that this has a lot to do with the difference in scale, of screen size as of economics. Hollywood these days has almost given up on the human, concerning itself with technology and with special effects. On the television screen, these do not have the same impact. And the cost of making television programs—which can be as simple as a talk-show in a studio—are manageable for television just about anywhere. Beyond that, Saks invokes the example of the extreme popularity of locally produced soap operas above their imported equivalents, implying that here is an area where people prefer to be cozy with characters and situations they recognize as their own.

How in South Africa would you go about creating a national cinema out of so many different ethnic and cultural entities, especially where—I would argue—it is as important to preserve those entities as to meld them into an amorphous South African identity? Oddly enough, the country in which I live, Canada, has similar problems, all the more perplexing in that it sleeps next to the elephant, speaks the same language as the elephant, and is culturally very similar to the elephant. And yet it is decidedly not the elephant. Which leads Canadians to go around perpetually agonizing about “what is a Canadian?”

Saks notes that the origins of indigenous cinema on the African continent are intricately bound up with the spirit of post-colonial nationalism. She observes that a reaction on the part of African film-makers, even a reaction to being stereotyped as African filmmakers, has now set in. She feels it reflects an impatience at being expected by the outside world to represent an entire continent. While this seems healthy, I am alarmed at her report that francophone African filmmakers are considering making films in English, in order to enter the world market. What this might do to the subventions from France that have kept much francophone African production alive, I don't know—although it should not be forgotten that even the once-proud French film industry, for the very same reasons, has made productions in English. With cinema, which seems daily to be more of a business than an art, this may seem a logical course. Personally, I think that it is to court disaster for marginal film-making countries to think in world terms. I think it is essential to secure the home base first. This was always the Jamie Uys strategy. Uys does not get a mention in the book, but

he was, after all, the most successful African filmmaker ever, for all his political ambiguity.

The fourth section of the book begins with analyses by Laura Twigg and Kgafela oa Magogodi on the portrayal of women in *Jump the Gun*, *Mapantsula*, and *Fools*, from a strong feminist perspective. It is no revelation to state that “the female,” from the very beginning of cinema, has been an icon of sexuality, and without doubt has contributed to the dehumanizing of women on a cosmic scale—while, paradoxically (cinema is filled with paradoxes) also a source of their liberation. In South African cinema, depictions of women are a particularly sensitive subject because they have historically been inseparable from questions of race and class. We have only to look at the first version of *King Solomon's Mines* (1918), where the Zulu heroine Foulata was actually played by a white woman, to see what contortions this led to. Underlying this was the explosive element of black female sexuality, which had to be tamped down in this white-male-dominated society. (It was such a shameful matter that when their sexual relations with African women were revealed in the seventies, white pillars of a small Afrikaner community, Excelsior, actually committed suicide.)

In almost all white South African cinema the subject of black women as objects of desire by white men was avoided during the period of apartheid. On screen, black women were almost exclusively servants, and briefly in the more liberal early fifties, entertainers. I think it would even be hard to find a black nanny (ubiquitous in real life) in any of these films, because that would be to recognize, albeit covertly, a power relegated to black women. In the ethnic pulp cinema funded by government subsidies, of which I have seen only a few, the women are the familiar prizes for the male central characters, who are of course black. This role was not unique to South African ersatz black cinema during the apartheid period; it is widely seen in post-colonial African cinema, and persisted—as Kgafela oa Magogodi points out—even into such a breakthrough film as *Mapantsula*. But both writers detect a substantial shift in focus, one in *Jump the Gun* and the other in *Fools*. In terms of the treatment of an African reality, the depiction of women is probably the greatest challenge. And we should not be under any illusion that the problem has been solved in Western cinema either.

The last chapter (the last word) in the book belongs to academic and filmmaker—and, I would add, Pan-African—Haile Gerima. He casts his contribution in the form of accounts of his attendance at film festivals in Zimbabwe prior to the end of apartheid, and in South Africa after

apartheid. His observations are both sensitive and passionate. He is acutely aware of the persistence of the domination of film culture (most flagrant at the festivals and the events they encompass) by whites in South Africa, and of the consequent disorientation of blacks when trying to penetrate or compete in this world. Inevitably, this leads to frustration and even rage, a rage that in private conversations could express itself in terms of getting rid of whites. This Gerima totally rejects as any kind of solution. Which makes his employment of the derogatory term “settler white people” to describe the organizers of the South African film festival all the more surprising (p. 220).

Gerima denounces the road taken in some African countries of trying to create a cinema that will further political aims, and insists on the importance of Africans being allowed “to tell their story.” It is certainly true that generic Hollywood has no interest whatsoever in telling these stories. But when he writes “all the stories we heard from our neighbors and village elders have their own aesthetic guidelines” (p. 228), it conjures up in my mind a traditional rural Africa that may still exist to a degree in South Africa, but is rapidly disappearing under industrialization and urbanization. Experience of a rural, traditional Africa is now alien to probably a majority of South Africans. Most obviously in South Africa, but increasingly in the continent as a whole, cultural imperialism is already so far advanced that it is hopeless to think in terms of anything but a hybrid African cinema, if African cinema is to survive at all, which is by no means certain. Gerima recognizes the reasons for South Africa’s crucial role in continental cinema as being grounded in its pre-eminence as a wealthy and technologically advanced country (and I would add to this its common use of the

English language), but these are also reasons why it is easy for it to become a colony of Hollywood that draws all advantage from an African setting while not recognizing any obligation to the continent or even to its own cultural history.

Gerima’s narrative is so personal and so beautiful in expression that one would have liked to experience it as a documentary. And it is in fact precisely in documentary that I see some hope for the future of South African ... what? And now I am at a loss, because documentary is only a marginal form of cinema; television is its natural home. Well, so be it. A documentary like Lindy Wilson’s *The Guguletu Seven* is as exciting, and certainly as profound, as anything I can see in the cinema. It is only the dazzle of Hollywood that blinds us to the strengths of alternative forms. My own inclinations are towards independence of production and smallness of scale. This seems to me to make imminent sense when you cannot compete on a large scale. Look to the home market first, and if after that you reach a world market, then that is a bonus. The golden days of Channel 4 in Britain are, alas, over, sold out to commercialism, but I recall its breakthrough film *My Beautiful Laundrette*. It drew on Britain’s multi-ethnic society, its slant on interracial sex was gay, it was unmistakably of the society it depicted. It was made for television and for cinema, and was an international success. Notably, the same director, Stephen Frears, last year made a gem of a film, *Dirty Pretty Things*, which has as its hero an African immigrant in London. Shamefully, its distribution in the United States has been atrocious. Neither film could come out of a Hollywood sensibility; the closest Hollywood could get would be the Eddie Murphy vehicle, *Coming to America*.

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