

On Reading "The S.A. Film Industry"

• M. Harvey

Tomaselli's analysis of the S.A. film industry rests on two observations - that it is financially not self sustaining and that the films it produces are not artistic. He argues that the fault is to be corrected by altering the formula the state uses in granting aid to local productions. I believe that the analysis and proposals contain critical misunderstandings, that I will try to identify.

Undoubtedly the questions raised in the study are enormously complex, involving relationships between art, economy, ideology and the state - theoretical problems crucial in a discussion of film production. Tomaselli's account of all this is muddled because his concepts are simply not adequate for so complex a task. I hope nevertheless that his publication may stimulate criticism and discussion of cinema, South African and other, in a more rigorous mode than the connoisseurism of the film society movement.

Political Economy of Film Production

The root ambivalence in Tomaselli's book can be inferred from these two sentences:

(The film industry) should not have to rely on tenuous lifelines like subsidy systems and state hand-outs. (p.114)

Society cannot rely on the free market to create cultural and social services to serve the needs of the nation. (p.120)

There's a fascinating drift of tendency from the one position to the other. On the one hand Tomaselli proposes financial independence as a defence against state control; on the other hand, he looks for a defence against the 'bad art' of commercial enterprise, in some form of social control. It is an engaging paradox, and gives rise to all sorts of approaches: but at the bottom the problem is wholly factitious, based on superficial notions of capital and society. Putting the case like this does a disservice too, for it tends to obscure real social operations that must be analysed accurately if one is ever to be in a position to develop an alternative film culture in this country.

Tomaselli's economic framework derives from the neo-classical, free-enterprise model:

... film is basically a commercial product. As with other goods a film is produced and consumed, it earns an income, makes a profit or a loss and is subject to market trends and potentials. (p.8)

Now this is a disastrous model for anyone seeking to provide an analysis of cultural action, because its fundamental implication is that economic structure and culture occupy different places, so that, while at certain moments they may meet, agree, conflict or whatever, they are not of the same cloth. Even on the level of economics it is thoroughly misleading to conceptualise the ideal of commodity production in conditions of free-enterprise. No part of any economy is without extensive structuration and management. Rails, road-grids, dams, power supplies, health, agriculture - these are not accidentally determined, nor are they the product of benign evolution. Taken together the infrastructure reveals a particular conformation, shaped and defended by powerful interests. Perhaps most particularly when model-building, one should make an effort not to isolate economics, but to see, in its stead, political economy.

BOOK REVIEW

A notable feature of the model I have criticized is that it tends to present products as being, so to speak, ideology-free. To say of a film that it is "basically a commercial product" is to separate it conceptually from the social formation in which it is conceived and where it will play a part. It also insulates it from the details of the relations of production in which it is, of course, grounded. The consequence is a specific problematic, a certain way of thinking about films, that in Tomaselli's work can be identified in three prominent instances:

He is inclined to treat the 'product' film as if it could be commandeered by special interests: for instance, by the artist to use as "a tool for the investigation of reality".

Secondly, he does not feel obliged to examine in detail the social formation from which film emerges.

And thirdly, he develops the idle dream of the sort of film he would like to see produced in South Africa: a mutant of the films of the New Wave, Italian neo-Realism or Third World Cinema.

The South African commercial film emerging from the South African film industry, is the product of long established industrial structures; and this means that it is the product of defined social relations. Long before it becomes what Tomaselli calls a 'commercial product', the social character of a movie has already been substantially determined, and it is responsive to special agency, for instance the state, or the artist, only within very narrow margins. It is not characteristic of the movie industry for its products to be the work of isolated forces.

Products embody social relations. However they may appear as commodities, neutral, purely themselves, the fact they have come into being at all, proves that they are not so. Again, while it may be convenient to regard them as objects while they are being traded, their identity, their presence, cannot be understood except in relation to the social forces, and the relations of production, in which they are embedded. These facts should be particularly obvious in the case of film, which, being a prime ideological medium, puts more at stake, so that the struggle for control is by that much the more especially marked. Finance, the state, producers, directors, technicians, exhibitors all have objectives that they strive to realise in the production of films. This mass of conflicting and corresponding purposes forms, by overlap, a sieve, through which movies must be shaped to go. The industry anticipates the product. We are therefore looking at a multiform, heterogeneous production, in which it is not typically direct intervention that dictates the character of the event, the object, but rather a struggle, or mutual accommodation among interests. One factor will be the state, using the subsidy to nudge in a certain direction; another will be the malign threat of censorship; a third, the energetic work of the director; a fourth, the calculations of distributors and the effects of their advertising campaigns.

It is with all this in mind that we should assess the strategy of the state. The state has no interest in 'art' - it does not understand the term, except as one of the obsessions of people it is sometimes able to manipulate. One should, perhaps, pose the question thus: since the state has means of direct intervention in media production, why has it ever interested itself in the other commercial film industry, where its role is inevitably modified by the forces I have described? One of the interesting revelations of the Information Affair, was the evident need the state felt to short circuit the social process, and possess itself of media industries, without seeming to do so. It is precisely the myth of the neutrality of film, that is most useful to partisan forces like the state. We must firmly, therefore, reject any suggestion that the state may have the benevolent intention to support an 'art' form - a cultural worthy cause - and that its subsidy might be directed to ends that are, by their nature, irrelevant to, or even distasteful to, the state. The state uses direct means, like SATV; it uses repressive means, like censorship; and it uses the disguised route of influence within the film production industry, where it is obliged to rub shoulders with its cronies, capital, and its servants, white directors and film technicians.

And all this produces a certain ideological product. It is not at all easy to characterise this, or to elaborate the modes of narrative, the themes, the styles of acting, the vocabulary, all of which contribute to a useful ideological effect in South African produced films. They do not all work the same way; but I would admit that the area of agreement far exceeds the area of difference.

I have the impression that until recently the usefulness of locally produced films has been rather limited for the state; perhaps confined to the conservative role of presenting the absence of a problem. But no doubt the pay-off is to be seen in current 'terrorist' movies, of which Grensbasis 13 is exemplary. It is a film marvelously suited to the work of adapting white South Africans to conditions of total war. In characterization and style of narrative it is conventional: but its contents are revolutionary. The screen is astonishingly flooded from time to time with guerilla forces, between whom and the whites there is no longer the appearance of paternal relations, of patronising contempt, but instead a steady, simple recognition of fractured relations and contradictory interests. Taking a retrospective glance from the vantage of this film, one can see that the subsidy has never been innocent, never undirected. This is to see, at the same time, how mediated the direction has been, how the state has relied on a consonance of interests between itself and other parties, capital, the public, authors and directors. To ignore this mediated connection between state assistance, and the quality and kind of movies emerging from the subsidised industry, is to miss the crucial link in the capital/state/ideology chain.

The way Tomaselli habitually formulates the situation implies a passivity in movie production:

South African cinema has become entrenched in colonial values which reflect dominant ideologies, stay clear of social issues, and ignore political problems. (p.119)

There is a misunderstanding here of the reciprocal movement between ideology, which is a form, and its material instances - in this case cinema. Ideology is shape stitched together, composed by productions such as cinema. Ideology must not be separated from 'social issues' and 'political problems', since what ideology is, is precisely an articulation of these things; it is an arrangement, the point of which is to contain and cope with social issues and political problems. What the cinema says, or what it leaves unsaid, are inescapably traces of ideology. Moreover, what is referred to as the 'dominant' ideology, is not a conveniently enumerated group of ideas, but consists in an overall organising of all ideas; a structuration that suits the dominance of the hegemonic class.

A consequence is that one must beware of the illusion that some movies can easily be seen to reflect the dominant ideology, while others avoid doing so. Dominant ideology has ways of coping with rebel instances; and in most cases uses the appearance of dissent to project its forms more insidiously.

Such is the complex field referred to by the term 'ideology'; a crowded arena of impulses, objectives, practices, kept overall in line by the institutions of the dominant class. And it is within this formation that movies, too are elaborated, distributed, viewed, discussed, put into storage.

If we are now to ask whether a challenge to conformist cinema in South Africa is possible, the question is put with some awareness of the pervasive presence of ideology, that is, of the structuration of the state. This, let me here add, though it is always established with method and intention, soon comes to seem natural, and, seeming natural, comes then to be invisible. It is from a consciousness of ideology, from it having been made visible again, that one may be able to estimate the direction from which to challenge, and determine the strength needed to be successful.

Art/Aesthetics/Politics

Tomaselli identifies the thrust of opposition to current conventional S.A. Cinema as requiring a convergence of Art and Social Criticism. These are complex concepts, not easily analysed or easily deployed, and Tomaselli's treatment comes nowhere near doing justice to the matter.

For one thing, his critical parameters are shallow. His comments on films are confined to vigorous approval, or repudiation in strong terms:

... low grade S.A. movies supported by Spaghetti Westerns, American "B" pictures and trash which specialise in cliché and convention.

It is an emotive and subjective style unfortunately common in critical journalism in South Africa. Van Zyl is another whose adjectives are in excess of his power to enlighten:

... another quickie film based on some saccharine love story or some other equally useless subject.

And here is Barry Ronge:

Pappa Lap was a glowing gem ... the rest ... were merely trite, clumsy and stupefyingly dull.

These are all taken from Tomaselli's book, so that I feel entitled to infer reliance on a mode of criticism that is not only outdated, but in itself reactionary, for it places the focus of interest on areas of experience that do not help anyone penetrate the film form and get to the social forms that support it.

The purpose, I think, of massing repudiative terms, is to create the illusion that there is some sort of ideal, the opposite of 'trash', and that it is Art. Reasoning thus, however, makes art a term with position but without content. It becomes useless.

There is also too shallow a development of the important notion of social criticism. This is, in a way, more serious than the failure with the concept of art, because it leads to a dubious defence of directors like Devenish and Rautenbach. It should be emphasised that it is eminently possible to use film in a way that appears critical, liberal, tolerant, yet is in fact reactionary. One is led to ask if any challenge to the Ster Kinekor type of South African film has ever been produced: and then one is forced to acknowledge, that although there have been films make locally that object to apartheid thematically, all films nevertheless, whether those that Tomaselli knocks for their colonialist character or those that he praises ("Art, not soap opera, is their norm"), have been rooted in an industry that subscribes to, reproduces and supports the apartheid state. This is not, of course, what it sounds like - direct aggression.

It is more a case of complicity, by enforcement or by indifference doesn't matter; the effect is the same. You find the phenomenon in a blythe note on Tomaselli's first page:

Unless otherwise indicated, references refer to the white South African population.

In this way, by footnote or by fiat, seven tenths of the South African population is submerged. They surface elsewhere in the bantustans; in the so-called black film industry; in elite roles as wonder actors. In one way or another they are made to exist as subjects of a different space. In what we are calling the South African

the industry, however - that is, the industry that produced The Guest and Grensbasis ... the mass of the social formation is excluded from financing, producing, making, distributing and, 'except where otherwise indicated ...' even from viewing films.

We must not here be misled by evidence of the goodwill of individuals. It is class relations that are in questions rather than the integrity of certain individuals. To conceptualise a critical, alternative, oppositional film practice in the conditions I have adduced involves questions of class position and class sympathy: with whom would a film identify, in whose interests is it made, whose reactions does it anticipate, in terms of whose desire is it evolved? No film made for white interests, financial or political, South African or foreign, nationalist or liberal in form, can possibly be set up to launch a real challenge to the social arrangement or to the movie practice dominant at present in South Africa.

Economics, politics and art are tumbrously intertwined: it is impossible to choose to wage a campaign in one but not another. Undoubtedly the social and economic fact of greatest significance in the question of film production is suppressed in Tomaselli's book, as it is suppressed in the country - that is, the exclusion of blacks from participation. And Tomaselli's recommendation are ultimately based on that suppression, and therefore implicitly condone white capitalist domination. The effect of his recommendations were they to be followed (which I have explained is not likely) would merely be to redistribute incentives among members of this white elite.

Cultural life being rooted in political life, failure to take them both into account condemns one to an ineffective cultural struggle.

The S A Film Industry is published by the African Studies Institute, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, 1979

OTHER BOOKS RECEIVED

Television Through The Front Door by Michael du Preez. Published by McGraw-Hill Book Company, Johannesburg, 1979, 69pp.

Although this book was sent out for review, the recipients refused to submit anything. The reason is that this publication is nothing more than a publicity handout for the SABC television service. It purely describes how and what to do during auditions for beginners wanting to perform on television.
