



Popular Memory and the Voortrekker Films

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The South African political discourse of the 1980s roots itself in absolutes -- facts, objectiveness and the 'hard, tangible and exploitable images of reality'¹-- but paradoxically, it also implies *degree of fact*: fact, true facts and hard facts. This semantic contradiction hides a welter of political machination as language and other forms of semiotic sign locate the site of struggle between dominant and opposing ideologies.

Each participant in the debate is convinced that s/he or his or her political party has sole claim to reality and the so-called facts which constitute it. If reality is indeed indivisible -- something out there -- which exists irrespective of wo/man, then radically differing interpretations of that reality need to be explained in terms other than that they are 'faulty'. One approach is the Afrikaner Nationalist effort which absolutises reality through Calvinism. However, as history tells us, absolutes are not fixed, realities are not static, nor truth indivisible. The oscillating political position of coloureds in South African society is but one case in point. The growing criticism of apartheid by an expanding number of Afrikaans-speaking theologians is another.

If ideology accounts for the 'lived' relations between people and their world², then we must accept that meaning is saturated with the ideological imperatives of a society. Ideology is the code of representations through which we are able to build up a picture of the world around us. Although the meaning embodied in this code may seem self-evident, this does not mean that it is a direct reflection of actual conditions. In nearly every case, the conditions we 'see' through decoding the signs contained in the code are only *imaginary* in the sense that they are a mental construction distilled from what the individual consciously or unconsciously elects to absorb from his/her environment. That is, meaning is self-evident in the images that are presented even though they may mask actual relations and conditions. Despite this, the code has the force of an objective

reality and individuals then assume that their 'reality' is the only valid one, and that it is a fixed set of immutable laws which cannot be questioned.

The way a society is economically organised has the apparent naturalness of biological certainty and is legitimated through ideology: capitalism in the United States, communism in the Soviet Union, and racial capitalism in South Africa. Resistance to these dominant organisations and their corresponding ideologies does often occur. The discourse of resistance is an oppositional one which points to different interpretations to those taken for granted by those in control of the economy and society. Thus, the dominant ideology is locked in a battle with counter-ideologies, Afrikaner Nationalism versus Black Consciousness, or capitalism versus communism, for example. This means that the ideological struggle is also a struggle for meaning. Signs are the vehicles of that meaning. Therefore, at the most basic level of political conflict, the struggle is for the sign.

Dominant codes and meanings are not invulnerable. They are susceptible to co-option, persuasion and can be overthrown. The media are the prime site of struggle for the sign. Where counter-ideological or alternative discourses have limited access to the commercial media, they develop their own channels through oppositional networks, community newspapers, pamphlets, posters, video, film and so on. Social struggle therefore is simultaneously a struggle for political power through the struggle for the sign.

Social, political and economic struggle is particularly evident in South Africa where the SABC Language Services Department and the Department of Bantu Education are consistently engaged in semantic engineering, manufacturing culturally derived linguistic signs imbued with apartheid-based imagery. This attempt to mould the popular memory does not, however, prevent oppositional groups from countering the SABC transmitted discourse with counter-ideological meanings. Though *Nkosi Sikelele iAfrika* has been co-opted as the national anthem by the Ciskei¹, for example, it is sung in the context of a massive sub-continental conflict where the original connotations of freedom derived from its adoption by the ANC in 1912 remain visible. Depending on where the song is sung -- the Bisho Independence Stadium or Regina Mundi in Soweto -- this act of national dedication can mask an act of resistance because there is a struggle for meaning embodied in the anthem.

In cinema, a struggle has been evident during specific periods since the Anglo-Boer War (or was it the Second War of Independence?) newsreels. That these films reflect a jingoistic flavour is not surprising as Britain retained ownership and control of the cinematic apparatus and film stock. The Boers had photographers but not movie cameras or operators. That struggle was won by England for the War was seen from the British point of view by audiences all over the world. In propaganda films of the War, the British Tommy is fighting for 'a trinity of God, motherhood and country'. While the British are shown as ever heroic and duty-bound, the Boers are represented as unscrupulous villains, as evil and lacking in morals or a sense of justice.

The Boer War was waged because of the Anglo-Afrikaner struggle for the sub-continent. Yet, not thirteen years later, South African feature films were suggesting that historically, the political conflict was not one between Briton and Afrikaner, but between Zulus on the one hand and, believe it or not, Britain and Afrikaners on the other⁵.

'DE VOORTREKKERS/WINNING A CONTINENT': SEMIOTIC HEGEMONY OF ENGLISH CAPITAL

Though hailed by informed commentators as one of the most outstanding films of the year⁶, the significance of *De Voortrekkers* lies more in the ideological and cultural domains than box-office return or technical competence. Despite the fact that it was produced by an English-speaking company, African Film Productions (AFP), the film was first screened at the Voortrekker Monument in 1916 and was repeatedly revived in later years for Dingaan's Day Celebrations. The film became one of the rallying points during the 1938 Centenary of the Great Trek. A study of publicity and the comments of Afrikaans politicians and Dutch Reformed Church ministers on the film at the time of its release suggests that it was historically accurate. The Prime Minister, General Louis Botha, stated that *De Voortrekkers* was a

film of intense dramatic interest and fine historical accuracy ... To the world it will give a better conception of our stirring story, and the youth of our country it ought to inspire with greater reverence for that historic past⁷.

A Cabinet Minister commented that "The Film is Perfect from every point of view ... All who see it will now be able to follow the exact history of the Voortrekkers". Observed a Dutch Reformed Church minister, "It depicts the history of the period in a very realistic manner, and there is nothing in it to offend the susceptibilities of any section of the community". In all, seventeen views of primary definers of the time were published in *Stage and Cinema*. All lauded the accuracy of the film's depiction of the Great Trek.

The responses of contemporary commentators need to be assessed within the ideological context of the time. The film is by no means an accurate re-creation of history, despite the fact that it was scripted by a noted historian and Voortrekker descendant, Gustav Preller. That the treatment was accepted at face value by South Africans was because it coincided very closely with the dominant ideology and hegemonic relations of the period. These had replaced the earlier Boer-Briton conflict with an economic and cultural alliance which extended to the support of Britain during World War I. The underlying ideological, cultural and economic schisms, however, were never fully eradicated and were to be progressively manifested in cinema from the late 1930s onwards (as early as 1930 in politics) as Afrikaners systematically accumulated economic and political power. In other words, there was a lag between what was happening in the social formation and depictions in cinema. For the moment though, these contradictions remained hidden, notwithstanding the harsh consequences of the Anglo-Boer War for Afrikaners.

Hannes van Zyl has tried to explain away the textual contradictions of *De Voortrekkers* by claiming that the narrative conventions used in the film have dated and that today's viewer is aware that s/he is looking "not at history, but a story-shaped historical interpretation"⁸. Ignoring the influence of ideological discourse on the shaping of the narrative, Van Zyl claims that the film is

an epic form which has been well-known at least since Old Testament times: a persecuted group, confronted by a powerful tyrant, is supported by God and gains a victory that will have substantial historical significance. As such it is a story about the birth of a society. The society finds its identity in opposing the powerful villain, who almost by definition is a force outside that society⁹.

Northrop Frye's theory of the epic is employed by Van Zyl to bolster his analysis. In particular, the epic places high emphasis on realistic detail. Realism is one of the film's strongest points -- the sight of real wagons pulled by hundreds of oxen through the spectacular scenery, over mountains, in valleys and through raging rivers, underlies the epic nature of the film. Van Zyl describes *De Voortrekkers* as an epic which presents a view of history, and tries to explain the Afrikaner's social contract with God. Other elements include reference to the origin of social structure, norms, values, motivations and so on which are crucial to a community's faith in its identity. As Van Zyl remarks of *De Voortrekkers*:

With the inclusion of the treaty between Retief and Dingaan and the text of the Covenant, the film attempts to place both God and justice on the side of the Trekkers, and so to explain -- in so far as black and white are concerned -- the contemporary social structure and division of land¹⁰.

The blame for the Voortrekkers predicament and the massacre of Piet Retief and his party by Dingaan, is displaced from the British Colonial government from whom the Trekkers were trying to escape and onto "two conventional melodramatic villains and Dingaan"¹¹. The film was aimed at an international, primarily British audience, and might have elicited a negative word-of-mouth had it been an accurate reflection which placed partial blame at least at the door of the British. Such a treatment would almost certainly have alienated British audiences, not to mention English speakers in South Africa who contributed to the film's profitability. As the *Stage and Cinema* commentator put it, "the film/ has probably done more to bring Dutchmen and Englishmen together and to help each other to a better understanding of the other's point of view, than anything that has ever previously happened"¹². Shaw and Preller's plot structure thus had the effect of displacing the conflict from one between Trekker and Briton onto savage natives and traders of Portuguese East Africa. The latter took on the guise of folk devils and were characterised as the confidants of Dingaan. The Portuguese traders were seen as dirty, catholic idolators who had the cheek



to pre-empt trade with the Zulu nation. So, far from there being "nothing ... to offend the susceptibilities of any section of the community", the stereotypes imposed on the Portuguese characters intercepted both British and Trekker prejudice of the period, both groups disliking the Portuguese intensely. 'The community' to which the Dutch Reformed pastor was referring must therefore be defined as consisting of Afrikaner and English South Africans only.

Van Zyl appositely reminds us that *De Voortrekkers* was produced by AFP, "a company controlled with English money, and directed by Harold Shaw, a British director"¹³. Shaw was not, in fact, English, but American. Of more significance is van Zyl's observation that AFP "was not anti-colonial" and Shaw's remark that the "Colonial always appeals to me"¹⁴. This neo-colonial attitude led Shaw to overlook the issues that led to the Trek in the first place. Although Van Zyl consistently alludes to the relationship between capital and ideology, he refuses to move to a structural analysis which would explain this relationship and its externalization in the film. Only with the investigation of deeper structures encoded in the text in relation to the common sense of the period, will we be able to account for the incorrect conclusions of contemporary critics. We will, furthermore, be able to show how Shaw managed to co-opt the signs of Nationalism in the interests of profit by English-dominated capital.

I agree with Van Zyl that narrative conventions are able to obscure historical accuracy, but the process by which this occurs is mediated through the ideological orientation of the text. *De Voortrekkers* seemed "accurate", "faithfully detailed", "realistic" and "perfect" because it reinforced the ideological discourse -- that is, the common sense -- and cultural striving of the time and operated within the then current orbit of hegemonic relations. To identify the nature of that world we need to understand the relationship of the Union's economy to that of the British Empire. It is these politico-economic relations which informed the content and treatment, not to mention the structured absences of *De Voortrekkers* which shifts the blame for the Zulu-Afrikaner conflict onto savage hordes who were at the time of the film's release competing with Afrikaans-speaking poor whites for jobs on the mines¹⁵. It was this competition for unskilled work, more than anything else, which cemented the alliance between the Afrikaner labourer and the imported English-speaking miners which in the 1922 strike culminated in the forced acceptance of the job colour bar by mine owners. Thus, although there was a compromise of convenience between the predominantly Afrikaner mineworkers, and the dominantly English-speaking mine owners, epitomised in the PACT government elections of 1922, this alliance was never a firm one and served only to camouflage the contradictions between the two. By foregrounding the text and ignoring the context, Van Zyl could not explain why an English-funded film could be so convincing to Afrikaners, many of whom themselves must have been descendants of the Trekkers, and who had participated in two wars of independence, particularly where Britain was the transgressor of the peace in each case. Only a contextual analysis is able to link signs on the screen to underlying material and social processes which are present or absent in the film's code, and which lie hidden beneath the observed surface text.

Van Zyl concludes that *De Voortrekkers* "helped establish a pattern for the interpretation and manipulation of history in later epics". The cultural imagery and ideological discourse seen in the film was already part of the popular memory of South African whites during the teens of the century. The unspoken assumptions of the common sense that made up that memory were to have been radically altered by 1938/39 when *Die Bou van 'n Nasie/They Built a Nation* was made. This, despite the fact that the film was also made by AFP, and also directed by a foreigner, British-born Joseph Albrecht. Whereas the only reference to the British in *De Voortrekkers* is indirectly made through a kind-hearted missionary working amongst the Zulus, in *Die Bou van 'n Nasie*, the British stand accused of persecuting Dutch-Afrikaners, and thus causing them to leave the Cape Colony.



Die Bou van 'n Nasie/They Built a Nation was sponsored by the Publicity and Travel Department of the South African Railways and Harbours Administration. This state body had been continually active in the sponsoring of scenic, industrial and ethnic documentaries since 1910. An office located in London in 1920 disseminated these films overseas, most of which were made by AFP. Concerned not only with attracting tourists and presenting a positive industrial image of South Africa, it operated as an ideological node which ensured that the dominant ideological discourse and cultural perception was maintained for visitors, both potential and actual, as well as South African citizens.

Impressed by the way film was being used by Germany to project its national image, the Cabinet Minister of SA Railways and Harbours, Oswald Pirow, motivated the government sponsorship of *Die Bou van 'n Nasie/They Built a Nation*, produced during 1937 and 1938. The film was to cover the entire history of South Africa from the rounding of the Cape by Bartholomew Diaz in 1486 to the Act of Union in 1910. Pirow took a personal interest in the film and granted permission prior to its completion for its screening at the Voortrekker Centenary Celebrations to be held in Pretoria at the Monument in 1938. The production of this film should therefore be seen against the background of Pirow's political views. As Dunbar Moodie observes:



As early as 1934, he had declared himself for a republic and dictatorship. At the same time, he eschewed in Hertzogite fashion any ethnic classification of the Afrikaner people, declaring that "Our People" included all of those who make South Africa their home, regardless of their European origins or their home language" (*Die Republikein*, October 19, 1934). In 1940, Pirow announced himself in favour of a "New Order" which would consist of a strongly centralised white South African state in which home language would be unimportant. Its appeal was explicitly white, middle class, anti-communist, and racist - rather than ethnic¹⁶.

Against this portrait it is possible to explain why the Afrikaans version was only considered as an afterthought and why AFP was subjected to attack from the Afrikaans press which alleged that the Afrikaans version was receiving less attention than the English edition¹⁷. Nevertheless, at its first invited screening on 12 December 1938 the film was "accorded rapturous praise" by the Afrikaner press¹⁸.

The film was bitterly attacked by the South African English-language press. Where, in previous historical dramas such as *De Voortrekkers* and *Symbol of Sacrifice* (1918), Briton and Boer had stood together, now complained the editor of the *Sunday Times* of *Die Sou van 'n Nasie/They Built a Nation*:

It has very few bouquets to throw in the direction of Great Britain. England, in a nebulous sort of way, is the 'villain of the peace' and although there may be some historical authority for British shortcomings, it is scarcely meet that a Fusionist Government, asking for English-speaking support, should dig so industriously in the graveyard of the past, particularly in the face of all that British enterprise and British magnanimity have done to make the Union of South Africa a concrete fact¹⁹.

The film was not released until May 1939, five months after its preview, having also missed the Centenary Celebrations for which it had been promised by Pirow. While the English press complained about the omission of blacks in the evolution of South African history and its overly Afrikaner slant, the Afrikaans press considered it to have accurately portrayed the historical processes which would ultimately lead to the "free republic of South Africa"²⁰. The *Cape Times*, on the other hand, noted the "one-sidedness of the film ... in its handling of some of the historical passages, its perfunctory treatment of Rhodes and Milner and its silence about the part played by South Africans of British descent in the building up of the nation"²¹.

The change in interpretation of both director and audience is not necessarily because *Die Sou van 'n Nasie* is any more accurate than *De Voortrekkers*, but because the dominant ideology of British imperialism was increasingly coming under attack from Afrikaner Nationalism. In other words, the signs of the Great Trek encoded in *De Voortrekkers* were symbolic of English-Afrikaner 'co-operation', whereas twenty two years later, these same signs foregrounded the contribution of Afrikaners over

English speakers in the growth of the nation, and who were now linked to the 'enemy'. The later film thus reflected the ascendance of Afrikaner political power over English-speaking South Africa which had mobilised mainly in the area of finance and commerce. Unlike Afrikaners who mobilised culture in the pursuit of political and economic ends, English speakers, AFP included, simply saw the chance to make a profit. And as one of IW Schlesinger's henchmen put it, Schlesinger's policy was "to support wholeheartedly whichever government was in power"²².

In this case, the struggle for the sign was waged at a dual level: a political one in which Afrikaners were fighting for ascendance over English-dominated capital; and an economic one where English capital became subordinate to Afrikaner socio-political objectives geared towards the establishment of a *Volkskapitalisme*. The singular popular memory and common sense perspective which had existed at the time of the release of *De Voortrekkers* had mutated into two separate strands as internal contradictions worked themselves out relative to movements in the political economy. In other words, the community of viewers had changed. There was no longer any need to smooth over English-Afrikaner hostility for the respective audiences had developed separate ideologies. Each of these was real in terms of their respective common sense.

In the case of *De Voortrekkers*, the ruling class wished to convey a sense of ideological unity. Financed by English-dominated capital, this film was directed with a view to popularising that sense of unity. *Die Bou van 'n Nasie/They Built a Nation* on the other hand, sponsored by the SA Railways,

In the case of *De Voortrekkers*, the ruling class wished to convey a sense of ideological unity. Financed with English-dominated capital, this film was directed with a view to popularising that sense of unity. The sponsors of *Die Bou van 'n Nasie/They Built a Nation* on the other hand, had less interest in maintaining the facade of unity. The film reflected the groundswell of disaffection between the two language groups. This was intensified by the poor white problem and the imminent outbreak of hostilities in Europe and the ideological polarisation that the Second World War brought with it.

Afrikaner Nationalist ideology was to become the ruling political reality in due course. The contradictions within the social formation remained, however. After 1948 two fractions struggled for power within the bloc, the ruling fraction of Afrikaans Nationalists who held political power, and the dominant fraction, which had economic power. I do not intend to go any further into these very complex issues, but merely to signal the need for contextual analysis which can account for the dynamism of social discourse and the signs by which we interpret it.

The centre of that dynamism is the struggle for the sign, if not between opposing fractions of capital, then within fractions of capital. It is through this struggle that the level of the symbolic/ideological is activated. Far from being superficial renditions of reality, such films offer a vast body of data available for semiotic analysis in relation to context.



CONCLUSION

To understand the significance of signs in particular films it becomes necessary to analyse the historical form of the code. I have shown how signs and codes are read differently in response to varying political, economic and social contexts. Reality thus has to be measured in terms of ideology, the common sense of the period. At the time of its release, *De Voortrekkers* WAS an accurate reflection of the common sense of the time, as was *Die Bou van 'n Nasie* of the common sense of Afrikaner Nationalism in the late 1930s. The films did not have to be historically accurate to be accepted as 'realistic', for reality is not measured by experiences of actual conditions of existence, but by the *imaginary* relations which arise out of those conditions. Viewers are more critical today, not because they know they are watching "a story-shaped interpretation" but because the ideology of present viewers differs from that of their earlier counterparts, a result of different political, social and economic conditions which shape those ideologies.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. This expression was used *ad infinitum* in the Steyn Commission Report on the SA Mass Media, 1981
2. See Althusser, L. and Balibar, E. 1970: *Reading Capital*. MLB, London
3. The song is also sung at UNISA graduation ceremonies, and is also the Transkei national anthem
4. Strebel, E. 1977: "Primitive Propaganda: The Boer War Films", *Sight and Sound*, Vol 46 No 1
5. The 1965 version of *Die Voortrekkers* concentrated on the internal rifts that divided the various trekker parties from each other in the context of Zulu hostility. This later film was made on a very low budget and totally lacked the epic qualities of its predecessors
6. This and other comments on the film are all quoted in *Stage and Cinema*, 23 December 1916
6. See Strebel, E. 1979:
7. This and other comments on the film were quoted in *Stage and Cinema*, 23 December 1916
8. Van Zyl, H. 1980: "De Voortrekkers: Some Stereotypes and Narrative Conventions", *Critical Arts*, Vol 1 No 1 p. 25
9. Ibid. p. 25
10. Ibid
11. Ibid
12. *Stage and Cinema*, 1 September 1917, p. 3
13. Van Zyl, *op. cit.*, p. 25
14. Shaw, H. 1916: "Filming De Voortrekkers", *Stage and Cinema*, 30 December, p. 2
15. For more information on the effect of mining on the structure of the social formation, see Johnstone, F. 1970: *Race, Class and Gold*. OUP, London

16. Moodie, T.D. 1975: *The Rise of Afrikanerdom: Power, Apartheid and the Afrikaner Civil Religion*. Univ. of California Press, Berkeley, p. 210. Also see Pirow, O. 1941: *Nuwe Orde vir Suid-Afrika*, Christelike Republiekeins Suid-Afrikaanse Nasionaal Socialistiese Studiekring, Pretoria. First published in 1940
17. See *The Star*, 25 February 1938
18. Gutsche, T. 1972: *The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa 1895-1940*. Howard Timmins, Cape Town, p. 348
19. *Sunday Times*, 25 December 1938
20. *Die Transvaler*, 26 May 1939
21. *The Cape Times*, 29 May 1939
22. Quoted in Stodel, J. 1962: *The Audience is Waiting*. Howard Timmins, Cape Town, p. 148

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