

# WAVING OR DROWNING

Alex Davids

Although Keyan Tomaselli's book The S A Film Industry is "no more than a statement on the status of the film industry", his account and analysis of the impasse existing in that industry is, in effect, an account of the fruits of the sterility at the core of South African society.

Tomaselli begins by rather briefly skimming over the links between cinema and society, thereby establishing the economic and political pressures operating on any film industry. He then focuses his attention more specifically on aspects of the South African film industry before making some "modest proposals" towards revitalising it.

One cannot escape thinking that the analysis itself is as much a document reflecting the needs and prejudices of a society, as it is a specific look at an industry. The figures quoted throughout the book almost exclusively refer to the white cinema-going public. As such, little account is taken of the potential role of the black market in revitalizing the flagging cinema industry. Part of the economic hardship experienced by the industry is magnified by the fact that it caters for a minority of South Africans in the first place. Although Tomaselli correctly pinpoints the anomalies of the local subsidy system in a white context, he simply fails to link these shortcomings with the real needs of the South African community at large: a viable indigenous film industry that confronts and exploits the interests of and problems faced by a heterogeneous population. Certainly, as it stands, the local subsidy system entrenches mediocrity: it is based on local box office takings and Afrikaans language films receive a higher subsidy. No account is taken of any potential overseas marketing; Afrikaans films would have to be dubbed or sub-titled to exploit such a market anyway. Moreover, the subsidy system takes no account of the quality of product produced. Local film-makers have thus gained their subsidies by exploiting the platteland/drive-in circuit with stock situation comedies and dramas that have no real appeal to urban audiences, used to more sophisticated fare or, presumably, black audiences, whose experience is remote from Tant Ralfe and Makouviele. A poor film that makes money is subsidised, even though it may (and does) generate a feeling that local films are just not worth watching.

In trying to motivate his feeling that the potential exists in South Africa for the production of a top-rate product by the film industry, Tomaselli compares the situation here with that in France prior to the emergence of the French New Wave. However, his own view of the local industry argues against such a comparison. For one thing, the emergence of a film movement is generally closely allied to a group of film-makers who are opposed to the status quo. With producers being dependent on a state subsidy, and ultimately on distributors, whose interests are entrenched in the status quo for a viable release pattern so that the film can make money at the box office anyway, surely a film vitiating against such interests would be ignored. The experience of The Guest is a case in point. It appears that distributors were uncertain of how to cope with a film that simply did not fit into the general pattern of films released. Moreover, the French New Wave did not emerge from the type of cultural vacuum that exists in South Africa: an audience conditioned to accept Hollywood-style films is hardly going to view with pleasure ambitious and, in their eyes, unconventional local productions. There is also, at present, no real theoretical basis fomented by critical debate, to give the impetus to the emergence of such a movement. The role played by the cinema here is that of an anaesthetic, and this role is reinforced by the lack of public debate about films. The role of so-called critics is seen to be that of a godlike figure who recommends which films

one should see, based on gut-level appeal. As in most areas of our social lives, we are unable to exchange ideas: instead we shout at one another from behind barricades. Surely film-makers and critics should be engaged in a cross-fertilization of ideas, aimed ultimately at educating a public towards a finer, more discriminating appreciation of films and of the role of the cinema as a communications medium. Finally one cannot forget the disheartening part played by the system of censorship operating in South Africa. Censorship often denies the public its right to see some of the most important films being produced at present, and inhibits film-makers (dependent on local box-office for their subsidy) from tackling any subject that may be too 'controversial', and hence, banned. (This of course excludes them from examining any really South African issues based on either racial or more overtly political themes.) Admittedly film festivals have become an outlet for more 'unconventional' films, but do these not really only attract the same minority audiences that are interested in "art films" anyway?

Tomaselli does mention the potential effect of television on the film industry through its creation of local stars and, because of the dubbing into Afrikaans of fairly sophisticated overseas productions, a demand on the part of Afrikaans-speaking audiences for more skilfully made local films. He does not really indicate, however, whether the actual infrastructure exists within the local film industry, as presently constituted, to exploit these new audience needs resulting from their exposure to T V.

The conflict between viewing film as an art form and viewing it purely as a commercial product is at the core of the sterility pervading the local film industry at present. The type of film that the film-going public "wants to see" is, of course, dependent on the type of film offered to them. Thus audience taste is to a very large extent controlled by distributors, and moulded by pre-release advertising campaigns. Presumably Tomaselli's close examination of the advertising campaigns for Dit was aand en dit was more, The Guest and Superman serves to demonstrate the lack of clear direction and shortage of funds available when one compares the selling of a local product with a "block-buster" like Superman.

At the end of his book Keyan Tomaselli makes some modest proposals towards stimulating the local film industry; proposals that deserve wider exposure. Unfortunately at their core is an implicit change of attitude which is hardly likely to occur, given the present apathy and sterility that dominate our social intercourse. One can applaud his statement that "film should be regarded as a communication medium which serves groups and individuals, not only as a moneymaking device", but one could argue that the South African Film Industry, by being enslaved to the latter view, fulfills the former. As Tomaselli so clearly has observed "Anaesthesia, not questioning is the goal. The Afrikaner identity must be mythified and the Black man saved from himself." So the present impasse in the film industry bolsters up the status quo by drugging the masses and keeping them happy through mediocrity. To base the State subsidy on quality ratings decided by a South African Film Board is a laudable proposition, but one fears that the committee of experts judging such ratings will in effect become another body for appointees with entrenched interests in maintaining present attitudes. What is lacking in the final analysis, is a solid infrastructure of dynamic debate in all echelons of the film industry - from producers through critics and academics to the audiences themselves. Whether Mr Tomaselli's proposals answer his own analysis of the stagnation plaguing our film industry remains an open point. Ideas directed towards encouraging new film-makers to break into the feature film industry are positive suggestions. However, the making of short films given present circumstances, is a self-defeating proposition, as

there is no adequate place for exposure of the finished product: cinemas are not keen to include such offerings in their supporting programmes, and T V keeps an iron fist on all that it beams out to a happy nation.

And so, a uniquely dynamic art form flounders through the lack of dynamism in ideas and attitudes surrounding it. Only once we, as a nation, relax rigid preconceived attitudes and engage in an open and genuine interchange of ideas at all levels, can we hope to produce the atmosphere in which the artistic creativity Tomaselli envisages is encouraged and flourishes.

If Tomaselli's book in any way foments more open debate within film circles, its appearance is to be welcomed. However, at times its main thrust is obscured by its fairly amorphous structure and Tomaselli's propensity to side track main issues, especially in the case of one or two overdone wishful comparisons (to the French New Wave and Jean Vigo in particular).

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### Notes

Keyan Tomaselli - The S A Film Industry. Published by African Studies Institute. University of Witwatersrand, Braamfontein, Johannesburg. R2,75 (including tax). First edition out of print. Second edition is scheduled to appear in September 1980.

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## REPLY TO R.W. HARVEY

Harriet Gavshon

Harvey offers some valuable criticism of Tomaselli's book, The S A Film Industry (Critical Arts, March 1980, vol. 1, no. 1). His comments on the subsidy system, for example, are especially useful as it is obvious that the state does not have a neutral interest in subsidising films. Much of his criticism, however, is marred by academic obscurity. This allows him to reach such vague conclusions as:  
"It is from a consciousness of ideology, from it having been made visible again, that one may be able to estimate the direction to challenge, and determine the strength needed to be successful." (p.59)

In addition even within the brevity of the critique, Harvey's analysis is not always consistent. He states that "... S A commercial film ... is the product of long established industrial structures" (p.58) - a static view of artistic production which takes no account of the dynamism that emerges from the specificity of artistic production. Later he discusses its ideological function but there seems to be little connection between the two points. What Harvey should be discussing is the specificity of the production of an ideological commodity and as such is subject to different forces which must be taken into account.

Moreover, film production is not merely "the product of defined social relations" but a force in defining those relations.

Harvey also suffers from some "critical misunderstandings". He seems to be inventing a contradiction in Tomaselli which does not exist. No one would