ON READING "ON READING THE S.A. FILM INDUSTRY"

Stan Miller

Isn't it both strange and indeed fascinating that two people can read the identical book and come up with two totally disparate conclusions as to what the author was trying to communicate?

The book in question being K G Tomaselli's The S A Film Industry . R W Harvey in his criticism of this much needed attempt at placing the S A Film industry in perspective opens with the following:
"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."

Perhaps it is because I don't happen to look at everything through the red-tinted spectacles of Marxism, or maybe it is just that the book was written that way, but as I read it Tomaselli, muddled as his concepts are, is crying out for a 'personalist' cinema here in South Africa. That is, a cinema that makes the statements its creators want it to make, despite financial restraint, despite ideological restraint Tomaselli points out that such a 'personalist' cinema already exists in the Third World, in France, in Italy. In fact he spends nearly half the book drawing comparisons between these alternate film cultures in other countries, and the emerging South African film infant (at this point in time in grave danger of being still-born).

Harvey dismisses all this (perhaps he skipped pages 29 to 92) as: "the idle dream of the sort of film he (Tomaselli) would like to see in South Africa: a mutant of the films of the New Wave, Italian Neo-realism or Third World cinema."

On page 8 of his book, Tomaselli gives a definition of the commercial film: " ... 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." A very comprehensive, totally factual account of what film is in a capitalist society (and let's not forget that we are in a capitalist society). But to our critic it is: " . a disastrous model .. its fundamental implication is that economic structure and culture occupy different places."

Harvey goes on from there to state, without any supportive evidence, that capitalist, free-enterprise economic systems are not the result of evolution, but carefully planned and structured by: " ... powerful interests". Strangely enough as . read Kapital, capitalism as the result of evolutionary forces is exactly Marx's thesis

What Harvey is leading up to is that film cannot " be commandeered by special interests for instance, by the artist to use as a tool for the investigation of reality " I recommend that our critic do a little cinema going On circuit at the time of writing is a film created in one of the capitalist holy of holies, financed by capitalist vested interests, that not only criticises, but viciously attacks the very foundations of the American capitalist system: Francis Ford Coppola's Apocalypse Now .

Off the cuff I can cite any number of films that have been "commandeered by special interests". Eisenstein's Ivan the Terrible was a direct criticism of Stalinism when Stalin himself was the patron of the Soviet film industry.

And please don't tell us Mr Harvey that this was possible because it occured in a "Marxist" state - the whispers of 20 million Stalin victims would contradict you.

While not denying the effect of the South African state on the South African film industry, be it through censorship, through the control of subsidy funds, I still believe it is possible for a director to make his personal statement - whatever the ideology of that statement may be - in the South African cinema. If can be done under the most repressive ideology - Soviet communism under Stalin - in history, it can be done here in South Africa (which brings us back to the as yet undefined notion of a 'personalist' cinema. In the first place, what is meant by the term 'personalist'? Very simply, not capitalist, not socialist, or anywhere in-between. It has in the past also been termed anarchist (remember Mr Harvey, the anti-political movement of the nineteenth century from which Marx got all the ideas he was later to muddle into a so-called system). I can already hear cries of: "Oh that's just a euphemism for capitalist individualism!" I want to be careful to stress the distinction between the concept of the individual and the concept of the person. An individual is how the mythical 'they' of society locks a person in the narrow fortress of ego. A person is how you and I experience our relationship to the world. You can be a person in solitude, the worst punishment for the individual is isolation.

And it is as persons and only as persons that "the investigation into the nature of reality" can be undertaken in candour and curiosity. All of which sounds very much like the elusive 'Art' that Tomaselli is in search of in the South African cinema. In so far as they were able to make the self discovery of their personhood, despite the "dominant ideology", through the medium of the commercial film in South Africa, directors such as Jans Rautenbach and Ross Devenish are deserving of Tomaselli's at times ill-argued, defence.

Mr Harvey warns us not to be "misled by the evidence of the goodwill of individuals. It is class relations that are in question rather than the integrity of certain individuals." If it is cinema as 'art' you're looking for, Mr Harvey, as I believe Tomaselli is in this book, it is not class relations or the integrity of individuals that is in question, but the personhood of every single cinematic creator in so far as he, or she, or they are able to stamp their vision on their productions, no matter who financed it, or who is going to censor it.

To end with I shall come back to the point about any film made for the commercial cinema in South Africa being a commodity. Harvey asks: "in whose interests is it made, whose reactions does it anticipate, in terms of whose desire is it evolved?" In terms of the market's desire. And the market happens to be free-enterprise, capitalist in orientation And it this "market" that Tomaselli is analysing in his book, not some mythical socialist utopia.

Economics, politics and art are cumberously intertwined, Harvey tells us. And because Tomaselli doesn't happen to agree fully with this statement Harvey concludes that the author condones white capitalist domination in the South African film industry.

Harvey's final words are: "Cultural life being rooted in political life, failure to take them both into account condemns one to an ineffectual cultural struggle." If you'll excuse the paraphrasing Mr Harvey, cultural life being rooted in personal life, failure to take this into account condemns one to the Gulag Archipelago.