An Approach to Afrikaans Film

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Introduction

Among ways of regarding South African films, derision is most popular. In aesthetic terms, this is entirely justifiable: having identified kitsch, unless one wishes to dignify it, no more need be said; and there is little doubt that most South African films are kitsch.

Yet the problem is a little more intricate. For one thing, the purely aesthetic judgement is itself questionable, like the method, not least of all in a post-colonial society where aesthetics imply politics. For this reason, if for no others, the ungraceful eagerness with which our intellectuals employ received frames of criticism is not without interest. The frames are of two kinds.

First, there is the dismissive comparison with the monuments, real, alleged or apparent, of Western film and holding up these monuments as goals. The pages of whatever film journal seems to be up-market come in useful.

Whether one can actually and seriously compare our works with the products of developed industrial societies is still an open question. For that matter, whether our works can escape such comparison is as open a question.

One argument for making the comparison hinges on the mode of film production. Here and elsewhere, it is an industrial process, or can be viewed as such, whose division of labour and marketing can be safely compared to the division of labour and marketing of, for example, motor cars.

But the analogy is only an analogy. A car has functions; it is tangible: a film may serve functions but is not tangible. The functions, in any case, are of entirely different kinds. You cannot take a film with you, except in the enthusiastic gush of reviewer's jargon.

When the house lights go down, the analogy with industrial processes must perforce yield to another image of film – that of the network of relationships with the society, as represented by the viewer. This network is immensely complicated, often subtle and probably inexhaustible: an adequate theory of film would have to embrace the complexity and subtlety and range as best it could.

This is where the second frame of criticism comes into play. Unfortunately, it often does so in reaction against the preciousness of aestheticism. The mien is that of the tough neo-Marxist, the dedicated, up-front follower of the latest Left Bank thinking – allowing for the five year time lapse that intervenes. All that actually happens is that, instead of tuning into the London hot-line, a snobbery has been attached to other, less familiar sources. This is not to deny the value of insights gained from homage to the greats, from nagging cultural inferiority or from a desire to play the international guru slumming it among the hicks back home. As long as our film is an aspect of a borrowed culture and as long as it is a Whites-only affair, this will continue.

The crucial need, of course, is to connect ways of seeing film to the ways life is actually lived in South Africa. Until this happens, our film criticism is bound to be indifferent.

Given that, the structuralist, semiotic, Marxist, auteurist, thematic, literary or even - to use a current swear-word - the prac. crit. approach to South African films is as good or bad, useful or useless as any other.

The most one can hope for is that whatever approach is provisionally adopted be free of jargon and accessible to non-specialists. That may be a lame request, but the ways of seeing will only change usefully when the objects of vision do substantially.

This brings us to a discussion of the paradigm employed by Keyan Tomaselli (1979a; 1979b). Tomaselli's argument is as follows: the genre film embodies and affirms the existing social relationships of a given society. Afrikaans films, dependent for their eventual screening on investment capital, distribution and state approval, express the dominant social ideology. "Breakaway" films, on the other hand, by postulating alternatives, challenge that ideology.

Similarly, films made for the Black market project the ideology of class domination: they explain to the Black audience the fact of class/race domination.

Afrikaans films, he notes, are also beginning to reflect a disintegration of the society on which the ideology is based. Until recently, the Afrikaans film was characterised by social withdrawal; more recent films reflect a conflict of social roles. The war film is an example.

Tomaselli concludes that the "goal" of the Afrikaans film is "anaesthesia" and its function "the externalization of a disintegrating social structure, the result of inevitable forces arising outside Afrikanerdom".

Afrikaans films and the market.

It should also be remarked here that the financial plight of the Afrikaans filmmaker is a direct result of his unwillingness to separate himself from the ideology-forming structures of society.

In other words, the filmmaker has tended to automatically accept the fact that he should go to Afrikaans financiers for capital; should anticipate censorship; and should make films with an eye to the history of Afrikaans films.

He has been reluctant to perform market research and has therefore tended to confuse political and cultural attitudes with audience attitudes. Obviously, these are intertwined but there is a difference of emphasis.

Whereas political attitudes tend to be rigid, market attitudes tend to be more fluid. Katrina for example, was perceived by the Nationalist establishment as controversial and, perhaps, abhorrent. But Katrina was seen and enjoyed as a different kind of South African film, a welcome rarity.

On the rare occasions that filmmakers have tried to appeal to the market for "different" kinds of South African films, they have emphasised the political controversy implicit in the subject matter. Inevitably, this has provoked state interference and the timidity of distributors. If, on the other hand, they had stressed the difference of the film, as a film, the results might have been different.

Because of their incestuous links with capital and government, the Afrikaans filmmakers have tended to assume that capital and government are the audiences they want to appeal to. The result has been a static view of the cinema-going audience, one that assumes that the audience wants cultural or political reassurance; and one that, inevitably, leaves the field open for overseas filmmakers who have no exaggerated conceptions of their social roles.

Afrikaans films: New and Old.

The first question that comes to mind is whether we are faced with a new
Afrikaans film or the old Afrikaans film in new clothes. Secondly, if we are
indeed faced with a new Afrikaans film, in what ways is it new?

Tomaselli notes that the standard structure of the Afrikaans film is based on
a conflict between the outsider and the group. Up till recently, the group
representative is based upon a farm, usually a Cape wine farm. This outsider is
usually a city-dweller and often a woman. Conflict is usually in the form of
competition for the soul of the pure young farmer. He is tempted to abandon his
blonde fiancee, also a farm girl, for the outsider, frequently a flashy and
unscrupulous city girl.

This seems to be the usual formula. Several observations are pertinent.

First, the insider-outsider conflict is not peculiar to Afrikaans film, least
of all as a conflict between urban and rural values. The conflict seems to
be archetypical or, to be more precise, it is found in modern English and
American fiction; it runs through European melodrama; and it is the mainspring
of Black township plays.

Without detailing the history of this theme, one can say it is common in the
narrative arts of industrialising countries, and even more strongly in the arts
of industrial countries.

It seems that a common feature of the urban consciousness is a tendency to
explain itself nostalgically in terms of a Fall from pastoral Grace, with
all positive values assigned to town and negative ones assigned to country.

As George Steiner (1971) has remarked, if there is any recurrent myth running
through Western art, it is that of a Fall from the Garden of Eden, where man
lives in amity with man and nature. The myth offers an explanation of urban
discontent and offers hope of a remedy in return. These functions the Afrikaans
film performs.

However, to remark that a myth is generally found does not account for its
specific and different usages. (This is the point where most of our local
luminaries of cultural life duck out. The heights of Shakespeare, *Bergman*
et al., however well-travelled by better minds than theirs still provide an
irresistible temptation to the neo-colonial sensibility which, at bottom, is
as profound as an American tourist's.

To explain the precise relevance of the Eden myth to Afrikaners, one must look
at their history. (The distance between the history and the Eden myth is an
indication of the nature of the ideology. Ideology is, in a sense, a selective
reading of history. To put it another way, for an ideology to exist, history
must be revised, parts turned to myth, the rest discarded like soggy portions
of an old apple.)

Two versions of history co-exist in what may be called "the Eden film".

One suggests that, once upon a time, the Afrikaner was the independent master
of his own pastoral destiny. He lived, as is common in myths, in amity with
nature and his surroundings. These included his Coloured servants. Neither
Blacks nor the English disturbed the idyll.

16

This implies, too, the absence of the internecine quarrels that characterise Afrikaner history; the absence of the need for the Great Trek and the various wars out of which the Afrikaner grew, as Afrikaner.

A myth cannot be dated, of course. It takes place "once upon a time" ("in illud tempore", as Mircea Eliade (1928) calls it). What is significant about this myth is that it denies the existence of the Afrikaner in returning so rigorously to origins. It is essentially a myth in revolt against the consciousness of individual identity.

The second version admits the Fall. The presence of the urban visitor is an admission of chronological history and of social forms. It admits the fact of the Trek, of urbanisation and concedes the limitations of Eden.

The second view, also implicit in what Tomaselli calls "the key structure of Afrikaans film", portrays the urban Afrikaner as threatening and malevolent. This is a given. Usually the urban visitor is antagonistic to the natural harmony of relationships on the farm. The visitor is usually a woman and characterised by icons of a foreign way of life. She wears nail and face paint; she drives an open car; she "throws herself" at the man; she is disrespectful to the matriarch on the farm; and she is disapproved of by the servants.

(Again, it should be remarked, that these characteristics are not peculiar to such figures only in Afrikaans films. Every Mills and Boon novel, for example, contains a villain with such equipment.)

A significant feature of this figure is her accent. The accent of villainnesses in Afrikaans films is usually the artificial, precious, slightly Frenchified accent of Waterkloof, Pretoria. It is contrasted with the earthy Boland accent. (There is an additional irony here: Afrikaans actresses, born and bred in the Transvaal, frequent travellers abroad and to all intents and purposes detribalised, have told me that their popularity depends in part on the ability to assume a Boland accent. This apparently says to the audience that although the actress belongs to a slightly disreputable profession, she is nevertheless in tune with the traditional verities of the Afrikaner!)

In the context of Afrikaans films, however, the villainness is identified ambiguously. The Afrikaans director will not be so blatant as to cast an English-speaking actor in the role of villain or play the villains role in English. However, the verbal signs to an Afrikaans audience are that the villain is an outsider - a non-Afrikaner. Whether the villain is a fallen angel or an alien proper is unclear.

For example, it is possible to read this as a sign that the Afrikaner is split into two streams: the urban and the rural and that these are antagonistic. Certainly, this is defensible. In terms of this, the Eden film portrays a clash within cultures and a reaffirmation of traditional values. But in so doing, it acknowledges the fact and the potency of the urban culture; it admits a strain of South African history which contains the Great Trek, the dispossession of the Afrikaner, the migration from the country to the town; the modernisation of South Africa - and the capability of the outsider to destroy the insiders way of life.

An alternative reading is at the level of myth, where the Afrikaner is portrayed as rural, threatened by the modern, urban world and yet, through his fidelity to traditional values, able to counter this threat.

17

The point of this discussion is that one has to tread warily in stating that the Eden film is either a clash between cultures or a clash within a culture.

A crucial factor in deciding is the audience. The question is, how does the audience see the villainness and how is the audience intended to see her?

First, the villainness is contrasted with the blonde boeredogter. The villainess is dark and sexy and free-thinking; the boeredogter is blonde, chaste and linked to traditional values. The boeredogter is marked, from the beginning, as a proper companion for the boereseun. But the link with the villainess is sexual and violent. The villainess is a witch, the boeredogter a mother; the boereseun as boereseun is destined for the boeredogter, but the boereseun as individual is drawn to the villainess.

The villainess is portrayed, therefore, as the outward manifestation of indiv-idualism, of the forces that threaten group identity. In terms of the challenge this poses to the farm, she must be destroyed. Literally and figuratively, she does not fit in; allowed to remain, she will tear down the structures of authority and traditional values which the farm represents.

To this extent, then, the outsider-insider structure is a replay of a recurring theme in Afrikaner history – the tension between the individual and the group. At the same time, this structure seeks to explain existing conflicts by suggesting that the conflict began with the move from the farm. And finally, the structure is allegorical, depicting, as a warning, the danger that outsiders pose to the group identity, and the continuing value of rural-based traditional values.

Functions

From this, one can hazard a guess about the functions of such films. A limitation is our lack of knowledge about audiences.

Nevertheless, it is safe to say that in asserting traditional values, seen at source, the Eden film reinforces such values where they are held. This is chiefly in the country district, where there is something of a literal connection between the life of the viewer and life depicted on screen.

In the case of the urban viewer, the function is more complex. It is likely, given the short time that the Afrikaner has been urbanised, that the urban Afrikaans viewer retains a physical memory of the farm. He knows farms, he may have grown up on one or migrated from one to the city; at the very least, his parents or grandparents would have had that direct knowledge.

Though within living memory, the relationship between the film farm, Eden, and the surroundings of the urban dweller is indirect. Eden has metaphorical tinges. Thus the functionof Eden films for the city film-goer is nostalgic. For some viewers, the Eden film will fulfill the functions that pastoral poetry fulfilled for a Restoration court: it is a recollection of things past; it represents a never-never land; it provides a stylised set of values, etched with quaintness for the contemplation of the viewer. The function, then is to provide values which are, as it were, preserved in amber. The viewer can choose whether or not to make the connectionbetween them and his world. That discretionary power limits their effectiveness as ideology.

On the other hand, it could be argued that it is upon those values that the ideology is based. The objection that Afrikaans films are "crude" is an objection to that remainder.

The War Film

Tomaselli's (1979;1979b) thesis seems to be that the war film is a response to external circumstances and the reflection of a disintegrating social structure. The move is from the slightly obsessive privatization of the Eden film to the film that deals with a conflict of social roles.

If evolution has occurred, it is within the conventions of the love-story genre. But emphases have changed and it seems that the Afrikaans film has reached the point where the genre itself is dissolving, revealing the tentative outlines of a new one.

This process is by no means simple. A genre breaks down according to an alteration of existing social pressures.[1] The indication of either of these, in a work of art, may be as subtle as a change of locale or as obvious as three acts of a play instead of five.

Nor are casual effects easily traced. Rather than talking of a change in social circumstances leading to a change in a work of art, it could be more helpful, if less precise, to use the analogy of an electrical field which includes ideas, human behaviour, institutions and works as different manifestations of the field. The problem here is partly the problem of using a language which seems bound to subject-object relations.

The Social Circumstances

The obvious change in the last few years has been the intensification of the war on the border. The facts of this are generally known; suffice to say that may white South Africans feel threatened by the fact of the war "on the border"; and because it is a querilla war, the exact position of the border is unknown: the term "border" indicates a locale potential or actual conflict and not a political or geographical or topographical division.

This means, then, that "the farm" (see Tomaselli, 1979b p.39) is no longer secluded and safe, no longer a shrine of group values. The farm, like the city, is a potential area of conflict: it, too, is a border.

Yet the war has exacerbated racial thinking: it is perceived as a struggle between Black and White, however tactfully it is couched in terms of communism versus capitalism, or bad versus good.

Because of this, though, the definition of the Afrikaner has had to widen; foreigner and outsider no longer mean merely non-Afrikaner: outsiders are Black.

The effect, in Afrikaans films, has been to alter the insider-outsider axis. The outsider now becomes a dark, inscrutable and inhuman enemy: to portray the outsider would entail humanising him and this would imply at least a partial denial of the category of enemy.

Caricature offers little scope to the film-maker because it depends upon rigid and static relations to what has been caricatured. These relations are portrayed in the action sequences of war films. But a large portion of war films is the portrayal of relations between characters on the inside.

This is one of the chief differences between the Eden and the war film. The focus of the former was the relationship between insider and outsider; the focus of the latter is on relations between insiders, in the context of a war against the outside.

Changes in the Film Industry

It would be wrong to attribute this change solely to the war. Other important factors in the film industry are at work too.

a. The audience

Though, by large, the filmmakers are the same and distribution and censorship barely changed, the audience is different from what it was.

Because of TV, the rural drive-in audience, the mainstay of the Afrikaans film in the country has shrunk.

The urban Afrikaner apparently now has an aversion to Afrikaans films. In any case, they are not felt to compete with overseas films in terms of entertainment or technical skill.

In addition, for some sections of the urban Afrikaans audience, it is unfashionable to go to Afrikaans films -a sign of being a plaasjapie. Thus the audience for the Afrikaans film diminished: the war, with its associated issues of patriotism, provided an opportunity for filmmakers to recapture the audience.

b. The industry

An increase in availability of foreign product and a desire in the industry to capitalise on this, cut the amount of viewing time available to the local industry.

The industry also showed signs of feeling that only films which would also succeed overseas were a worthwhile financial; the tendency for finance was therefore to back overseas directors making films in English.

Then, Ster-Kinekor, the major distributors, announced that they would enter prod-uction (see Tomaselli, 1979a,p.22), effectively creating a monopoly that excluded independent filmmakers, making it hard for them to secure resource, human and financial.

c. The actors

Why should an actor spend six weeks on location earning R3 000 to R4 000 in a leading role in a film so bad that his future career might be damaged when a series of commercial slots on TV will guarantee him stage work and even an income of R36 000 over three years?

d. The Afrikaans press

The days when the Afrikaans critics loyally praised even the worst Afrikaans films are gone. If anything, Afrikaans critics are more damning of Afrikaans films than English-speaking critics.

In any case, changes in the newspapers generally put the power of drawing audiences, English and Afrikaans, in the hands of a single evening newspaper. And even when their critics praised Afrikaans films, few members of the urban public believed them. (2)

Changes in the Films

Superficially, the way Afrikaans films adapted to changed circumstances were dramatic. More different kinds of films were made: the local production also intended for overseas consumption; the local rip-off of the overseas success; and the war film, which had elements of both.

The villainness became a black guerilla and an urbanised stay-at-home comtemplating a future in Houston, Texas. But that is not the only change.

It is in the various guises assumed by the old female siren that the chief differences of the war film lies.

Paradoxically, in order to discuss this, one must first discuss the "new" male hero.

One caveat: comparatively few war films have been made. To generalise about them, their heroes or their villains may therefore be presumptuous. On the other hand, it is true that the pattern of a genre are set early; what follows is a sequence of minor variations.

The New Male Hero

In war films, partly because war is perceived as a male activity, women are portrayed "at home". The men pair up as twins, one tough and hard, the other sensitive and soft. In the Eden film, the outsider-woman died; in the war film, the soft, sensitive man dies.

Those females portrayed in war films are matriarchal figures - the blonde boeredogter of the Eden film. (At the end of Grensbasis 13, significantly enough, the boeredogter receives a medal on behalf of her dead man.)

Again, it is worth referring again to Western art generally. The stereotypes are similar.3 An illuminating parallel is between Afrikaans films and early modernist drama in Europe. Like Afrikaans films, this drama was based on forms whose sources were in a rural-urban tension and whose audiences were recently urbanised as the result of the Napoleonic Wars.

In the drama, Woman is cast as an antagonist, a destroyer of civilisation, a force of nature in much the way that the Afrikaans villainess is opposed to the manmade farm - though, of course, the outsider is a city girl. (4)

Woman is usually killed or commits suicide or is expelled from human society in modernist drama, leaving man alone. The next phase in the drama portrays men with men.

Similarly, the Eden film shows the elimination of the female threat. The war film portrays the resurrection of it as terrorist and as feminized male; both must die for the sake of South Africa.

The latent theme of the war film is a homosexual relationship.

The relationship is marked by caring, emotional generosity, continual physical proximity, if not intimacy, and understanding. Yet it is illicit, not because it is homosexual, but because it is a display of personal feeling in a context that apparently demands group loyalty. This tension is solved by the death of the feminine partner.

The underlying conflict in Afrikaans films is between the safe tepidity of sentiment - the blonde boeredogter being the subject of this - and the steamy dangers of sex (the dark ravisher). In the war film the terms of the conflict are modified, but the outlines are the same: it is conflict about reconciling the claims of group identity and responsibility with individual impulse, feeling and sympathy.

In the war film the conflict is couched in the symbolism of a man divided and having to lose that side of himself that might threaten his group membership. To the extent that war is meant to involve the individual as a member of society, the personal ties are anti-social.5 Both literally and symbolically, Afrikaans war films deal with civil war: within the body politic and within the individual.

21

The Buddy System

There are strong resemblances between Afrikaans war films and the American genre known as "the road movie" which is characterised by "the buddy system".

The prototype of the buddy system in the relationship between Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer where the pair "light out", away from the voracious power of a woman who represents civilisation and its constraints.

As Leslie Fiedler (1974) has noted, the road movie developes the role of Jim, the Negro servant who, ideally, is the companion of the hero escaping from a female world. Again, in the road movie, the relationship between the men is doomed by a hostile world and therefore idealised. Male bonding ends in death and the triumph of society.

Some Conclusions

The most striking feature of the Afrikaans war film is the emergence of a homosexual theme. The trauma this reflects, if "trauma" is not too inexact a metaphor for conflict, is the same as that represented by the death of bad women in Eden films.

At one level, it could be described as a trauma about sex and lost opportunities for love in a society that demands the inadequate substitute of sentiment for its male members.

At another, it is a trauma about the competing claims of private feeling, collective responsibility and the demands for sexual gratification.

2. To claim that the "goal" of Afrikaans film is "anaesthesia" says too little and too much. Within the grave limitations of a genre, crucial problems are, if not discussed, embodied.

Some of these can be traced back to the structures of the society, others only reveal themselves in a comparative analysis of symbols, associations, themes, characters and situations.

In other words, a social analysis of South African film may tend to reflect the judgements on the society, unless that analysis includes one of cultural ikons.

3. It is the lack of artistic control that makes popular art such a mine of social significances and ambiguities and even contradictions. An analysis that proceeds inductively, rather than deductively, runs the risk of blurring many layers into one. Though Afrikaans films do reflect a ruling ideology, they also reflect a broad cultural tradition in Western narrative art. They also include doubts about that ideology though, to be sure, those doubts are often buried in symbolism.

4. The existence of conflicting messages in Afrikaans films must exact wariness in making broad statements about their "goal" and their "function".

Perhaps, as with most mass media, one must examine not the medium but the relationship between it and the audience and the relationship with different audiences.

To not do so, is to run the risk of assuming that the goal, of, say, Afrikaans films is to purvey a reigning ideology when, in fact, the ideology explains the way the film looks - and not how an audience perceives it.

5. Finally, all significant research into the role of the narrative arts in South Africa is severely restricted by a reluctance of organisations like Ster-Kinekor,

~ut;clet and the Performing Arts Councils to make their market research public.
' try and make them do so, with the assurance that their figures will not be
frivolously used, is a major task.

Certainly, it is beyond the capability of the individual who is not backed by
institutional support. And, sadly, in South Africa, few institutions are
interested in supporting such research.

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Notes

1. Here one heads for a chicken-egg argument. Which comes first?

2. The Star's Tonight entertainment guide canaffect the fortunes of minority-
   appeal films adversely. Its effect seems to be chiefly negative: a Superman
   is impervious to reviews, however.

3. For example, plays by Ibsen, Wedekind, Loria and Strindberg

4. Hedda in Hedda Gabler; Lulu in the Wedekind plays of the same name; Nora
   in A Dolls House etc.

5. E.M. Forster's remark: "If I were given the choice between betraying my
   country and betraying a friend, I would without hesitation, betray my
   country" is an unconscious acknowledgement of the mutually exclusive claims.