

# Die Moord

Johan Bruwer

DIE MOORD, Chris Pretorius' second short film, is curiously frustrating. It leaves a sense of incompleteness, the feeling that you've "missed something" - or, more expressly, that the director has been unfairly and wilfully obscure.

In fact, Pretorius claims that one of his main objectives was precisely to frustrate the viewer "by turning the camera away whenever something important seems about to happen". This objective is reached by the film as a whole, but Pretorius' statement is not literally true: quite a lot does happen in the film and is seen to happen more or less when you expect it.

Much less "happened" in his first film Angsst - yet, paradoxically, it seems more "complete" than Die Moord. This is confirmed by sampling viewer reaction. Angsst - a simple portrayal of a young man poised between two apparent choices: an undressing girl and a masked male death-figure - left audiences not so much bewildered as stimulated into trying to analyse their emotional involvement in this portrayal.

Apparently, viewers accept the whole of Angsst as a ready-made, significant symbol - a symbol that can be fitted to a variety of personal interpretations. In a sense, one could liken the film to a frozen tableau, which each viewer would "read" according to the personal mythology it evoked. (One viewer, in fact, described Angsst as an "animated Expressionist painting".)

Viewer reaction to Die Moord is quite different. One hears questions like "Why did that happen then?"; "Why put the body on a zebra skin?" and "What was the detective doing with his hand?". These questions underline an extreme difference between Pretorius' first and second films. From painting a still life, he has jumped to telling a "story". Angsst was the sustained portrayal of a static symbolic unit; Die Moord unfolds in a more explicitly narrative progression.

One could say that Die Moord is really Pretorius' first "movie". In telling a story - and a murder story at that! - it comes closer to what commercially conditioned convention expects of a film. And it's because conventional expectations are both specifically evoked and evasively denied in this film, that it frustrates the general viewer so.

After the indeterminate title Angsst, the title Die Moord already denotes the new, narrative approach. And in the conventional title sequence, Pretorius establishes the first of a chain of links with the commercial "thriller" which are continuously broken. The ominous stamping of names on a "murder file" evokes an expectant tension, promising the unravelling of an interesting "case".

Yet, just as one has "suspended one's disbelief" in readiness for a good yarn, the dramatic tension is refuted by the sudden intrusion of what is obviously waste footage. Indiscriminate parts of actors' bodies flit briefly across the screen and someone says in mock French: "My director!" The inclusion of this strip underlines the theme of the film as game: that one shouldn't read it at the literal face value, but as a subjective manipulation of images.

The opening shot is perhaps the most important set scene in Die Moord. It starts a continuous cycle in which initial expectation and the subsequent refutation of that expectation are juxtaposed. To a commercially conditioned viewer, Pretorius' most bewildering technique is simply to ignore the conventional "lively" rhythm of editing. In a popular thriller it isn't unusual to hold a

static scene for a few moments. This builds tension and the expectation of a horrifying revelation, which usually comes as a sudden climax after a certain height of tension is reached.

In *Die Moord*'s opening shot this point is reached - and passed. The view of a bedroom seen through a door seems insufferably long. But the length of the shot has an interesting effect on the viewer: he feels tension at first and then boredom as nothing happens. Yet, as nothing continues to happen, he feels tension again: surely something must happen? Here the camera remains static until one attains an almost painful familiarity with the bedroom scene.

The aimless wandering of the female figure when she appears, establishes another of Pretorius' contra-narrative tricks. Action appears when it can no longer be bearably put off, and thus fulfills a certain expectation. But, while initially releasing tension, the action brings a new perplexedness, because it isn't "explained". This happens throughout the film, which employs a conventional plot skeleton, but removes the rationale of the plot.

The only possible "key" to an unravelling of the action is the scene which is most pertinently obscured. If plot hinges on cause and effect, the scene where the man reacts in horror to the woman is the single motivational "cause", the rest all "effect". But the motive for the man's subsequent killing of the girl remains unknowable, as we don't know the reason for his horror: the girl is invisibly hidden behind a wall.

Because the viewer realizes after this "hidden" scene that his rational expectations have been thwarted, the film thereafter does not regain the tension of the opening scene with its evocative possibilities. The viewer follows the rest of the action - the shooting, the remorseful nausea, the intrusion of the police - with detached interest, as if he has been externalized from the events. (Contrary to commercial convention, the director has refused to conspiratorially "let him in on the secret".)

Apparently Pretorius anticipates this externalization of interest, for as the film progresses both cutting and camera movement, although in a slow rhythm, become relatively more frequent. Having been emotionally detached from the plot, the viewer is lured into a visual involvement with the strikingly graphic quality of set compositions - that betray Pretorius' background as an artist.

Yet, the visual compositions again have an "obscuring" effect similar to the plot. Pretorius uses visual symbols - a zebra skin, the still-life of a body on a table, etc. - without explaining their significance cinematically. One feels the emotive symbolism of the film is hampered by the static intellectual dryness of set graphic symbols that are not employed cinematically or atmospherically.

The film is indeed wilfully obscure, both in plot and execution - the more so because of its seeming analogies to conventional, narrative film. But it is stimulating precisely because of this disharmonic relation to convention - also in its perversely "incorrect" editing. It challenges the viewer to question his accustomed way of reading a film and to exchange conditioned expectations for a more immediate scrutiny and reassessment of the images presented. (I.e., Pretorius attacks the viewer syndrome of knowing "how and in what manner things are going to turn out" - a syndrome that can cause one to watch a commercial film without seeing it.)

Nevertheless, the "obscurity" of the film will irritate many. Though, perhaps, neither of Pretorius' films is all that obscure: they contain enough thematic material to construct a "hidden meaning", however subjective or personal it may read.

Subjectively, one could, for instance, read both films in a sexual context, as exploring a fear of women. Both films are set in a closed interior, evoking a closed ego. Both hinge on irony. In *Angsst* the young man ignores the undressing woman (with connotations of fertility and procreation) only to be confronted with death on the other hand. In *Die Moord* the intrusion of the woman in the intimate space of the bedroom seems to present an unbearable invasion of the man's privacy. But precisely through trying to get rid of her by killing her, he becomes again irrevocably possessed by her. His privacy is invaded by an enormous guilt, and "society" itself bears down on him in full force in the form of the policemen who trample into his house and tauntingly confront him with the body.

But the value of Pretorius' experiments lie not so much in what they say as in exploring - successfully or unsuccessfully - an alternative way of saying it.

## Angsst — Same Time, Same Place

John van Zyl

If one wanted to be unkind, one could say that *Angsst* could only have been made in South Africa. To be as hung up on sex as the young hero is could only happen in a society in which certain sections have not even begun to experience the permissive society in any form - visual, verbal or physically. If I had known how, this would have been the film I would have made in my childhood in Kroonstad in the Forties.

The sense of Woman being Other, if not The Other, reifies her visually into a squirming wet dream, and verbally into what Lawrence would certainly have identified as "sex in the head". Even the last glimpse of the woman as she sheds her blouse and discreetly shows her naked rump to the camera as she disappears around the door frame is the way out of any adolescent male's dreams - after the lubricious offering of herself the female leaves before her offer can be tested.

Apart from a content then that is neither anarchic nor Expressionist, the actual time sequence in the film gives the lie to any attempt to see the images in any terms other than in the strictly realistic.

The cigarette that the young man lights and smokes, he smokes in real time, both the action and the causality contained within the visible expression of lighting and smoking a cigarette remain obstinately undreamlike. This makes the attempted atemporality of the long takes impossible to maintain. The fact that Warhol's experiments in perception (especially cinematic perception) involving the Empire State Building and an ice-cream sundae have been invoked regarding Pretorius' style is misleading. Warhol's point is a cognitive one, Pretorius' is an artistic one - a muddled artistic one.

In an Expressionist film like *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, the mise-en-scene is uniformly unreal, in *Angsst* the mise-en-scene is inconsistently symbolic and realistic. The man in the mask is neutralized by the actions and reactions of the young man with the cigarette, the girl's auto-eroticism by the self-censorship of the director. It is finally, neither porno nor poem, thorough-going experiment nor homage to Expressionism.