Peter Davis, an Englishman, and Dan Riesenfeld, an American, have collaborated in producing a prize-winning film documentary which shows with startling effect the power and influence of cinema over the lives of black South Africans this century. Their story begins conveniently around 1948, with the ascension to power of the National Party government, and they conclude it with the rise of local cinema when South Africans began to produce their own films. Through film clips, newsreel footage and filmed interviews with a cross-section of black and white South Africans, Davis and Riesenfeld reconstruct the history of cinema in South Africa against the background of an intensifying apartheid ideology.

Their two-part film documentary, *In Darkest Hollywood: Cinema and Apartheid*, which won first prize at the Chicago Film Festival last year, begins by showing the impact of Hollywood films on the lives of black South Africans which coincided with the acceleration of the urbanisation process, a time when for better or for worse urban blacks seemed to have turned their backs forever on traditional life-styles in favour of something more flashy, more 'sophisticated' and citified, however deleterious its effects. Hollywood could not, therefore, have arrived more punctually with its meretricious but dazzling products offering consolatory images for the loss of traditional ways of living. And yet what is finally gripping about this well documented impact on black life-styles is not so much the tawdriness of the Hollywood product as the genuine hole it seemed to fill in the lives of black South Africans. This gap was only partially filled by music. At the time there was no theatre for the townships and in the absence of urban nar-

could afford to buy a hat, wore it at the same angle.'

Understandably, Erica Rutherford, one of the producers of *African Jim* (otherwise more widely known as *Jim Comes to Jo'burg*, and the first locally made film with black actors aimed specifically at the 'black market') saw the Hollywood contribution differently. 'We saw the situation where the African population were being fed these miserable films. They were full of violence, trivial lives, and as I say, they were the

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cheapest kind of film you could get out of Hollywood.' This may be so. In any case, Rutherford and her partners tried with *Jim*, but it's fair to say that not many black intellectuals thought *Jim* was such great shakes either! Nevertheless, like its Hollywood counterparts the immense popular success of *Jim Comes to Jo'burg* pointed to one important fact: the enormous hunger in the townships for images with which the black victims of apartheid could identify. As Kani puts it during the interview: 'We'd never ever seen a black person on the screen. That was a

and the whole social misery the film tried to portray did not prevent Prime Minister D.F. Malan, one of the principal architects of apartheid, from turning up for the film's world premiere at the Johannesburg Coliseum from which all blacks, including the actors themselves, were excluded. Davis and Riesenfeld use newsreel clips in which an ecstatic announcer proclaims over snapshots of Paton and Malan: 'This is truly a momentous occasion ... particularly so for Mr. Alan Paton, the author of the book and producer of the film, for whom the Prime Minister had congratulations.' It is as if at the now historic 1936 Olympic Games Hitler had been moved to congratulate a black Jesse Owens for winning his four gold medals.

One possible explanation for this level of tolerance is to be found in the content of both the book and the film which, while assigning guilt to Absalom Kumalo for the murder of a white man, fails to attribute any responsibility to the South African state for the social conditions which daily gave birth to so many Absaloms. But even as we frown upon such artistic evasiveness, we are compelled to return again and again to the essence of what was at stake for blacks in the presentation of such films; and again it is John Kani, whose own work as an actor is chiefly concerned with the projection of images, who brings the issue of representation into our focus: 'I know it was a white story. I know it was written by a white person. But again, you must understand, to see our people on the screen, to see people who will become our heroes in it. And to be able to say, I'm not Tex Ritter, I'm not Roy Rogers, but I'm Sidney Poitier.'

tary, which takes up the story after the Sharpeville massacre, Davis and Riesenfeld begin to focus more and more on what I can only describe as the 'politics of representation', on the split developing within the local film industry carefully nourished by government subsidies, between those film-makers frantically trying to use the camera to repair a badly damaged image of a benevolent apartheid state and those film-makers bent on challenging it and even hastening its demise. Some interesting examples of the growing crisis, which was only a symptom of the larger national crisis, can be discerned in the careers of film-makers like Anthony Thomas who at twenty-one produced an apologist film for the South African Information Service, *Anatomy of Apartheid*, a film, Thomas says, 'which was based on what I believed then, that we were providing the blacks the means of self-determination,' but later became disillusioned, and ended up producing work like his documentary of the 1976 Soweto Uprising, *Six Days in Soweto*, which was oppositional in orientation. 'That film was a bit of extraordinary wishful thinking,' Thomas now says of *Anatomy of Apartheid*. 'But it gave me something that few other white South Africans had, it gave me free access to the townships ... I was so shocked by all the things that I discovered during the process of making that film, that I went through a very complete political conversion.'

Although I participated in the production of the Davis/Riesenfeld documentary I have to confess that until I saw it, nothing had quite prepared me for the Jamie Uys footage in which he talks about the making of his film *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, which purports to be a true story about a so-called 'Bushman', one named N'gao. After seeing this footage, I said to myself,

umented impact on black life-styles is not so much the tawdriness of the Hollywood product as the genuine hole it seemed to fill in the lives of black South Africans. This gap was only partially filled by music. At the time there was no theatre for the townships and in the absence of urban narratives to replace traditional forms urban blacks took to the cinema like stranded fish to the Hollywood pool of muddied waters.

Not surprisingly, the most telling moment in the first part of this documentary is John Kani's eloquent testimony of why he became an actor. 'Just to sit in this dark place, and magic takes place on the wall. For a moment we forgot apartheid, we forgot that there was another world that wasn't good, we sat there and were carried away by the dreams of these American movies ... We used to hustle right through the week, carrying old ladies' bags; try to do everything, be nice to mum and dad, especially Friday. Because the biggest outing was Saturday, going to the cinema. We used to pay seven pennies. It was incredible. In fact, the whole bug of me being an actor is a result of those movies.' As for the influence in shaping the life-styles of township dwellers we have, among others, the word of Arthur Maimane who as *Drum* reporter not only observed the phenomenon at close range but supplemented his own fictional narratives by borrowing directly from the milieu and language of the American 'B'-movie: 'These films were influential in the way people dressed,' Maimane explains during the interview. 'Richard Widmark for instance. He wore a hat raked at a very snappy angle. And after that, everybody who wore a hat, or

Nevertheless, like its Hollywood counterparts the immense popular success of *Jim Comes to Jo'burg* pointed to one important fact: the enormous hunger in the townships for images with which the black victims of apartheid could identify. As Kani puts it during the interview: 'We'd never ever seen a black person on the screen. That was a whites' only affair. And when *Jim Comes to Jo'burg* was shown, it was like a miracle. We saw black people in this movie. We saw black people talking.' And Maimane adds that: 'The plot didn't matter. A film shot with people you recognised, on the streets you knew ... sometimes it was difficult to hear the dialogue because people were shouting, 'Hey, that's my street, I live on that street ..!' You know, they sort of became like home movies.'

This partly explains the immense excitement which even a feeble attempt at representing black lives on the screen could generate within the black community. Thus, Zoltan Korda's filming in South Africa and subsequent showing in local cinemas of Alan Paton's novel *Cry, The Beloved Country* proved to be a major event in itself and a severe test of good faith on the part of both the film industry and the South African government. To begin with, the film bore the authority of professional black actors — Sidney Poitier and Canada Lee — who were themselves still novelties in racist USA. Having come to South Africa to capture for the screen a slice of social reality, Sidney Poitier and Canada Lee at once found themselves obliged to act out in real life a 'slice of that reality.' They could not, for example, be accommodated in any of the country's hotels and the film producers were forced to 'get a house outside town' for the pair. Astonishingly, this

again, you must understand, to see our people on the screen, to see people who will become our heroes in it. And to be able to say, I'm not Tex Ritter, I'm not Roy Rogers, but I'm Sidney Poitier.'

In contrast, Hollywood's attempts in films like *Untamed* (20th Century Fox, 1955) to import and adapt the cowboys/Indians genre for local conditions proved to be an unmitigated disaster. Grotesque Hollywood inventions only vaguely connected with any historical reality, no African could believe in these cartoon Zulus the film tried to project onto the screen in which even Tyrone Power's personal servant is absurdly named 'Shaka'. 'Shaka, you lead the spare horses to the ammunition.' Tyrone Power briskly instructs his servant. 'Christian, we'll charge through the Zulus around the laager.' And after the battle, Tyrone Power encounters Susan Hayward, still glamorous though slightly smudged: 'I can hardly believe it,' he exclaims. 'You, Katya, here in Africa fighting Zulus!' Neither can I. As Meyer Levy, owner of the Johannesburg Cinema Museum puts it: 'From the early 1900s, there was a little Hollywood in South Africa.' A film clip from *De Voortrekkers* confirms it. 'If our reinforcements don't arrive before the Zulus, we're lost!' shouts one character in what must be our version of an Indians-and-cowboys 'Western'.

In the second part of the documen-

mentary I have to confess that until I saw it, nothing had quite prepared me for the Jamie Uys footage in which he talks about the making of his film *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, which purports to be a true story about a so-called 'Bushman', one named N'gao. After seeing this footage, I said to myself, here is an instance of that ideological construction of the 'colonial subject' we often theorise about but never actually witness in process. The unsettling effect in the Jamie Uys segment is produced by juxtaposing two interviews: one with Uys explaining how *The Gods* was made, and the other with an ethnographic film-maker, John Marshall, who each time he speaks undoes everything Uys has just said.

For instance, Uys explains: 'I came across these Bushmen, fell in love with them ...' In the very next segment, Marshall is saying: 'The first thing you have to understand is that there's no such a thing as a Bushman. The people I knew in the 1950s, when I first met them, are "Junt-wasi" ... Bushman is a racial classification that has no meaning. It's only meaning is in its use by the people who make the classification. And in South Africa the use has been to exterminate and dispossess people who are classified as Bushmen.' Uys claims that when casting for *The Gods* he decided he had to see 'every Bushman in the whole world' of whom only about 30,000 were now still existent before he stumbled upon one called N'gao. 'And this one N'gao,' Uys says, 'his hunting ground straddled the border between Botswana and Namibia.' Cut to John Marshall: 'N'gao never supported himself by hunting and gathering in his life, and when Uys *discovered* him, N'gao was working as a cook.' *(contd on next p.)*