

Film and racism in South Africa

In Darkest Hollywood: Cinema and Apartheid

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Previewed by Norm Dixon

“Just to sit in this dark place and see magic take place on the wall. For a moment we forgot there was apartheid. We forgot there was a world that wasn't good. We sat there and were carried away by the dream of these American movies.”

Like millions of other black South Africans who grew up during the reign of apartheid, veteran actor John Kani saved his pennies for the weekly pilgrimage to the pictures on Saturday night. His memories and thoughts are just some of the many included in this fascinating “must-see” documentary about the varied, and often paradoxical, relationship cinema has had with the apartheid system and the South African people.

For young blacks in the townships, B-grade US gangster films and westerns – and the few black actors in them – opened their eyes to other places and other cultures, and allowed them to escape the grim reality of apartheid for a while.

Township youth in the '50s were soon sporting hats raked at steep angles and flashy double-breasted suits in imitation of tough guys Richard Widmark and Bogart, or the latest Harlem “zoot suits”. Young men showed off their “can't gets” – flashy Florsheim shoes and Stetson hats, unavailable in South Africa, imported directly by catalogue from New York.

Film gangsters offered an example of an alternative way of life apparently free of control of the white “baas”. *Tsotsis* gangs cruised the streets of Sophiatown in the big North American cars and spoke a dialect that mixed US slang with African languages, English and Afrikaans. Township music and dance were irreversibly influenced by the music of African-American jazz and dance glimpsed in the music shorts of Cab Calloway and Louis Jordan.

White-owned South African film companies moved to break the Hollywood monopoly and make films for the black market, mainly lightweight racist musicals. Regardless of this, blacks celebrated the arrival of their first film stars as a victory. In *Jim Comes to Jo'burg*, the ignorance of the white producers allowed a scene with singing workers that included the subversive lyrics, “To hell with these goddamn white men who make us work so hard and pay us nothing”.

The late '50s also saw the first films to question apartheid and sympathise with the black majority. The first of note was the 1951 film version of Alan Paton's *Cry, The Beloved Country* starring Sidney Poitier. At the same time as it alerted the world to the awful conditions in South Africa, blacks criticised its paternalism and liberalism. This paradox was brought to life by the fact that the film premiered in Johannesburg to a whites-only audience, in the presence of D.F. Malan, apartheid's architect.

Another film, however, gave black South Africans the chance to speak out for themselves for the first time. Progressive US director Lionel Rogosin collaborated closely with the circle of nationalist intellectuals associated with now legendary Sophiatown-based *Drum* magazine –

giants such as Bloke Modisane, Can Themba and Ezekiel Mphahlele – to produce the watershed film *Come Back, Africa* in 1957. Actors were cast from bus queues, and the film included an amazing scene set in a shebeen in which Modisane, Themba and others heatedly debate in scathing terms the attitude of white liberals toward their struggle.

The openings to make dissident films were firmly closed following the 1960 Sharpeville massacre and the state of emergency. For more than a decade, all that emerged from South Africa were crude government propaganda and inane Afrikaans films that ignored the existence of apartheid.

Hollywood throughout took a typically opportunist approach of making money from black audiences while peddling racist and pro-apartheid storylines. US film moguls happily accepted the apartheid regime's censorship ratings, which lumped black adults in the same category as white children, ignoring black calls for intervention. Westerns were remade with Zulus recast in the place of "Indians" and Boers in the place of cowboys. Twentieth Century Fox even signed a deal with the regime to provide world distribution for apartheid propaganda films.

In the '70s and '80s, with the upsurge of the struggle and a growing worldwide sympathy for the black majority, South Africa began again to be a source of film stories. Hollywood wanted commercial stories, and it was no longer possible for major studios to be oblivious to their political content.

Films like *Cry Freedom* (1987), based on the relationship between Black Consciousness leader Steve Biko and liberal newspaper editor Donald Woods, reignited the debate around white liberal interpretations of the struggle against apartheid in film. While expressing appreciation for the anti-apartheid sentiments of the film, black critics like Professor Mbulelo Mzamane point out that the "conventions of Hollywood, but also a long tradition of racism, demand that [Hollywood movies] look through the eyes of a white star, a white hero ... [*Cry Freedom*] does not avoid the trap that Biko was teaching about: the tendency of white liberals to appropriate the struggle of black people and enunciate it in terms that are palatable to them."

Actor John Matshikiza adds, "When Donald Woods steps into the centre of the frame, the struggle of the black people, which is the most significant struggle in South Africa, appears to become something that can only be resolved by, yet again, leadership by a member of the white community".

More positive, however, were black director Euzhan Palcy's *A Dry White Season* (1989) and Oliver Schmitz and Thomas Mogotlane's *Mapantsula* (1988).

With the end of apartheid, South African film makers are optimistic that a new era will open in which the black majority will no longer have to rely only on well-meaning whites to put their side of the story. Let's hope that is true.



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