

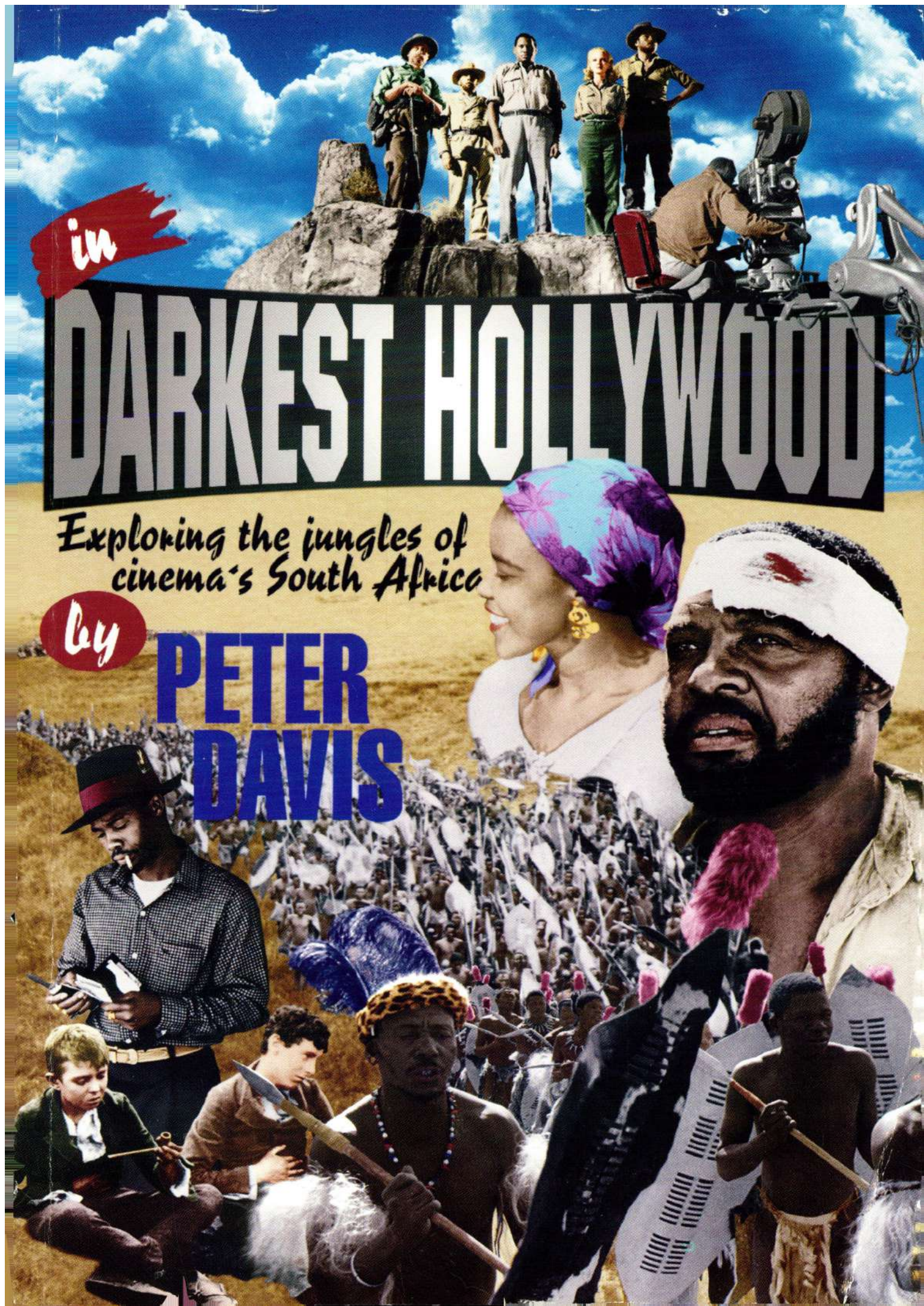
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# DARKEST HOLLYWOOD

Exploring the jungles of  
cinema's South Africa

by

**PETER  
DAVIS**



*IN DARKEST HOLLYWOOD*

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*Exploring the jungles of cinema's*  
*South Africa*

**PETER DAVIS**



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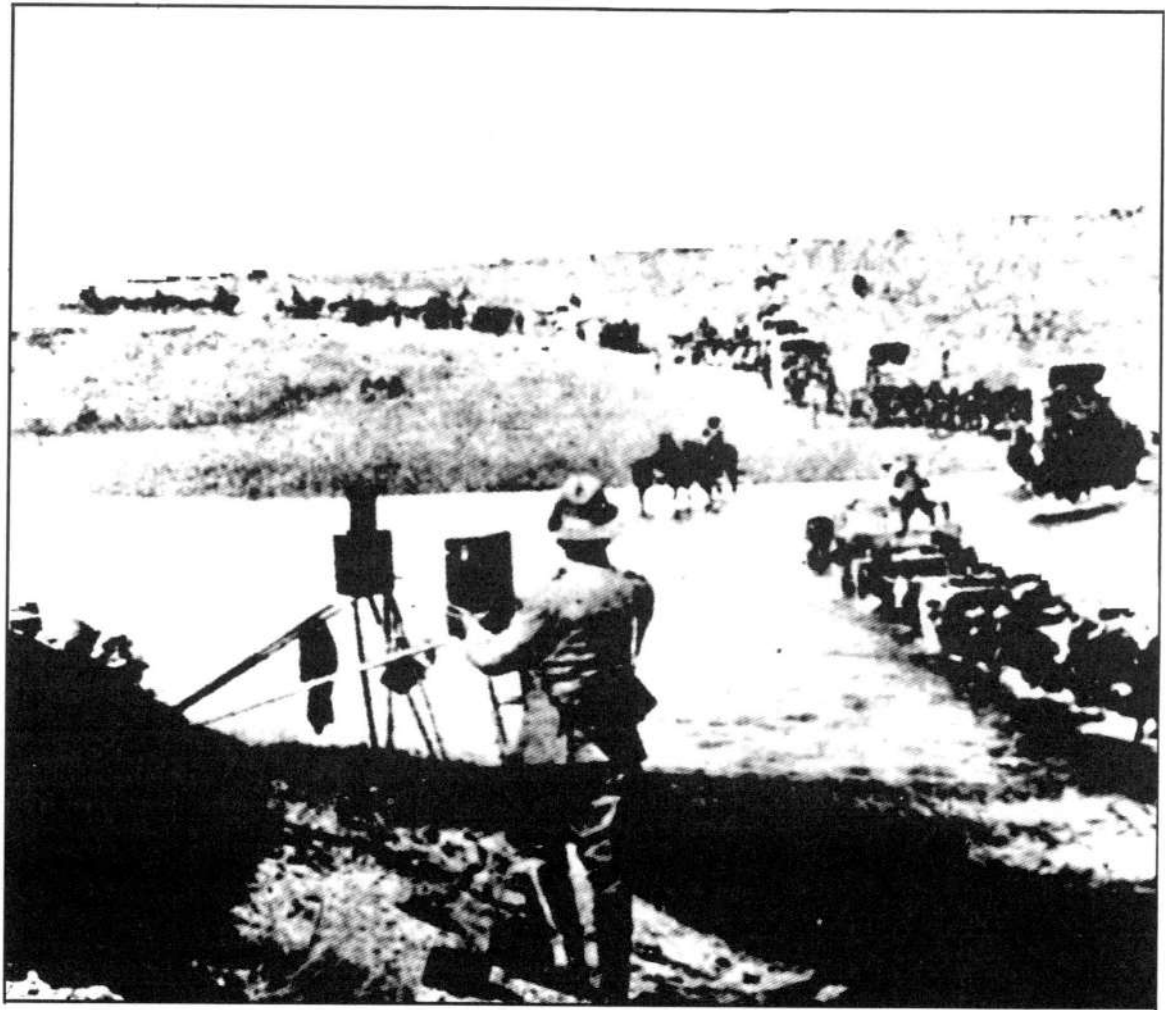
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*Dedicated to author Mary Benson, a friend deeply cherished*



Much of this book is the outcome of research undertaken by Daniel Riesenfeld and myself as co-producers of the two-part television programme *In Darkest Hollywood: Cinema and Apartheid*, a five-year project. I would like to extend special thanks to the personnel of the National Film Archives, Pretoria, and to Madeline F Matz of the Motion Picture Division of the Library of Congress, Washington, DC.

*A note on spelling:*

In the discussions of films, the names of historical characters are spelled as they appear in the particular film's cast-list. So, for example, Cetshwayo is spelled Cetewayo in the credits for *Zulu*, and Cetswayo in those for *Shaka Zulu*.



## *Introduction*

The nineteenth century, spilling over into the early years of the twentieth, saw the European conquest of Africa. This was justified in terms like 'civilising', 'Christianising', 'enlightenment', but basically it was a sordid grab for land and resources. Colonial conquest was firmly embedded in a racism that gave superhuman pre-eminence to white people. The fact that small European armies could prevail, and prevail so decisively, seemed in itself to be Darwinian proof of racial superiority. There were few who would openly admit to the real reason, revealed in Hilaire Belloc's trenchant couplet:

*'Whatever happens, we have got  
the Maxim gun, and they have not.'*

In a romantic age, when the function of romance seems in large degree to have been to varnish over the desperation and degradation of masses of people, not least in Europe itself, the preference was for emotional invocation of 'heroism', of 'patriotism' and of 'national destiny'.

Around the apex of the age of empire there occurred a phenomenon that seemingly had nothing to do with massive land-theft and subordination of native populations. It was, however, part of the technological advancement and industrial development – which had also produced the Maxim gun – that characterised the Western powers at that time. The invention of motion pictures towards the end of the nineteenth century had an impact more subtle, but arguably no less profound, than imperialism itself, since the impact of cinema – followed by television – is ongoing, and, moreover, the numbers touched by these mass media in a single day can be compared with the numbers of those touched by imperialism over three centuries. The movie camera opened up the world in a way that no other medium had ever done. Oral and written descriptions of faraway places left much to the

imagination; and even still photography, because it was linked to printing, was not easily accessible to the masses of people who could not read. But films, rapidly established as popular entertainment, displayed other people, other customs, other places in a way so lifelike that it seemed undeniable. Films gave the illusion of reality. Just like freebooting imperialists in their quest for plunder, motion picture photographers scurried all over the globe, frenetically gathering images – exotic, arcane, bizarre, sensational, revelatory – which became ‘the reality’ about the world for millions of people.

From the beginning, these images were ‘property’: pictures did not belong to the people they portrayed, but to the person who took them. There is even a kind of rapacity lurking in the very phrase ‘to take’ a picture. Image control – which meant choices in selection of subject, of camera angle, in editing, in dramatic effect, in distribution – existed from the very beginning. Greatest of all was the image control (as yet unsensed by the beholder) exercised by the cameraperson, usually unconsciously, that was dictated by his or her culture.

The invention of the movie camera began a second conquest of Africa, not merely in the acquisition of images, but in the way these images were presented. The bloody safari of the former American president Teddy Roosevelt through Africa during the early years of the twentieth century was documented on film, and the pictures of the native people are scarcely distinguishable from those of the animal trophies. Africa was a vast hunting-ground for the white man, and when Hollywood seized on Africa, this was the Africa it offered.

The literature of empire that had come into being during the nineteenth century found its second wind in the cinema – *King Solomon’s Mines*, *Prester John*, *Stanley and Livingstone*, *Rhodes of Africa*, *Trader Horn*, *Symbol of Sacrifice*, *Sanders of the River*, *Untamed*, *Zulu*, *Zulu Dawn* and *Out of Africa*, to name but a few, from the earliest years of the century to the latest. Hollywood made this literature even more vivid and accessible to many more people. Evidence of the direct link between the literature of empire and the film-making imagination is epitomised in Michael Korda’s description of the young Alexander Korda reading to his little brother Zoltan from Henry Morton Stanley’s *In Darkest Africa* – and this in Hungary, in the early years of this century. Michael Korda points out that Zoltan Korda went on to make *Sanders of the River*, *Elephant Boy*, *Four Feathers* and *Sahara*, all of them celebrating heavily romanticised aspects of white rule.

Dozens of similar films, as late as *The Power of One* (1992), emphasised the supremacy of the white race, directly and indirectly justifying conquest. Imperial and racist images, messages, codes, cyphers, attitudes and behaviour were copied indiscriminately. Up to the present time, Hollywood perpetuates the ethos of empire.

In this new geography revealed by the movie camera, what was shown specifically about South Africa around 1900, when motion pictures were fast

becoming an industry? The era coincided with a great struggle for power among competing white groups at the tip of the continent, a struggle that became known as the Anglo-Boer War. It was one of the earliest wars to be recorded by the movie camera. A handful of snippets remains, mostly of columns of troops filing past the camera. One of these shows mounted troops fording a river, a vast array of cavalry with baggage trains. Near the end of this very short film, an ox-driver carrying a whip moves lower right frame to control his ox-cart. In the military mass, his is the only African figure, one of the very few to be recorded by the movie-camera in this war. In his solitariness, he takes on symbolic significance. The war, after all, was *about* the soil of southern Africa, but in it the principal inhabitants of the land have been reduced to worse than irrelevance – if they participate at all, they do so as servants of the white combatants, on both sides. The camera casually reveals a significant fact: by 1900, the political decisions about South Africa were being made exclusively by whites, shutting out the African majority.

What happened in South Africa happened all over Africa. The placing of Africans on the cinema screen reflected their dispossession, for their loss of political power on the field of battle determined their siting in the field of focus: they forfeited the right to appear centre-screen. That position was reserved for white heroes and heroines. When Africans did appear on the screen, it was as adjuncts to whites; in that role, they told us more about whites – how whites saw themselves, how they reinvented and re-enacted mythologies of white supremacy – than they ever revealed about African lives. Africans in the cinema were but as dark shadows affixed to white foreground figures. Throughout Africa, in countries ruled by French or English or Portuguese colonial powers, Africans were deliberately blocked from access to the technology of cinema. This was a political decision on the part of the colonial authorities, who recognised the enormous power of cinema to influence and propagandise, and who wanted to retain that power for themselves.

As African countries, from the 1950s on, became liberated from European colonialism, many started to make their own films, with African heroes. Francophone Africa (albeit with considerable help from France, which now wanted to retain influence over a newly liberated people) has produced hundreds of films, and directors of the stature of Gaston Kaboré (Burkina Faso) and Ousmane Sembène (Senegal). Western fables about Africa continue to be repeated. But there now exists a considerable canon of African cinema to offset these fables – if the distribution system would allow free access to them, which it seldom does. Cornelius Moore, of California Newsreel, probably the leading distributor of African films in North America, points out that no more than twenty cinemas throughout the entire USA have ever shown an African film, and that this situation is worsening as art theatres continue to close down.<sup>1</sup>

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1 *Africa Film & TV*, 1994.

Where South African film is concerned, even though Africans have begun to move out of the shadows, the arc light is still controlled by whites. One hundred years after the birth of motion pictures, there is still no authentic black cinema coming out of the African country that, almost from the beginning, was the best equipped technically to produce one. This is so despite the fact that South Africa has been consistently popular in the cinema, perhaps the most popular African locale. Its appeal came from the raw material of fable that it had to offer – its wealth of gold and diamonds, intrepid pioneer history, and savage Zulus.

In studios inside and outside South Africa, these elements, often woven together into the same plot, were spooled in celluloid throughout most of this century. I do not think that it is an altogether fantastic hypothesis that the persistent presentation of South Africa in cinema as a country appropriately ruled by whites, to whom all the wealth of the country rightfully belonged, and in which the only Africans depicted were marauding savages, was a massive propaganda gift to the forces of racism and apartheid. This may go a long way in explaining why it took the world community over forty years, after the United Nations' Declaration of Human Rights to mobilise sufficient pressure to bring about effective change in South Africa.

This book is about the power of cinema, and about the devastating impact of a generic 'Hollywood' that is constantly protesting that it is apolitical, even while it stamps stereotypes and projects behaviour that is as profoundly political as it is influential. At the same time, I shy away from the accusation of 'cultural imperialism'; people everywhere were not coerced into going to the cinema (quite the opposite in South Africa, where there were few cinemas available for blacks). On the contrary, they eagerly allowed themselves to be seduced into an addiction that is well-nigh incurable. For decades, Native Americans, Africans, women, went to see films that seemed to demean them, and were apparently entertained by what they saw. Nowadays, when most national cinemas are in decline, the cry of 'cultural imperialism' levelled against American films reaches an hysterical pitch; but the plain fact is that in France, Sweden, Germany and all over the globe, people prefer to see American films above their own indigenous cinema. And that is their choice. This does not stop me from believing that American films have had a devastating effect on human behaviour.

Although I draw from the entire range of South Africa in cinema during this century, this does not attempt to be a comprehensive history of cinema depicting that country. My concern is with selected genre films, and other exemplars fall outside my area of interest. I do not touch on Afrikaans cinema, nor on the considerable canon of African-language films. Both these categories are relatively narrowcast. A film like *Ohm Paul* (1941), made in Nazi Germany for a very specific propaganda purpose, is fascinating, but not relevant to the study. An oddity like *Diamond Safari* (1958), which stitches together plots from what were intended

to be two different films, one about diamond theft, another about lion-hunting, reveals something about rag-trade aspects of film-making, but does not fit into my overall plan. My principal concern is with an image-bank relating to South Africa, especially the way that black South Africans have been presented on film, how the image-bank changed (or significantly failed to change) during this century, what impact this may be presumed to have had, and what it reveals about those who created, and continue to create, the images. Because of what has happened in South Africa during this century, this has had implications that are profoundly political.

I have identified a number of themes, which I have separated into different chapters; inevitably, several themes may be discernible in the same film – for example, the theme of the Faithful Servant existing together with the theme of South Africa's wealth. One I have not dealt with is that of Sisterhood. Cinema about South Africa up until most recent times has been about the doings of men, with women in largely submissive sub-roles. In the 1980s this began to change, with *A World Apart* and *Mapantsula*, and into the 1990s with *Sarafina!* and *Friends*. The women in these films mark the beginning of a new sensibility, coinciding with a new South Africa, not the South Africa of apartheid and before.

Peter Davis  
Johannesburg 1996





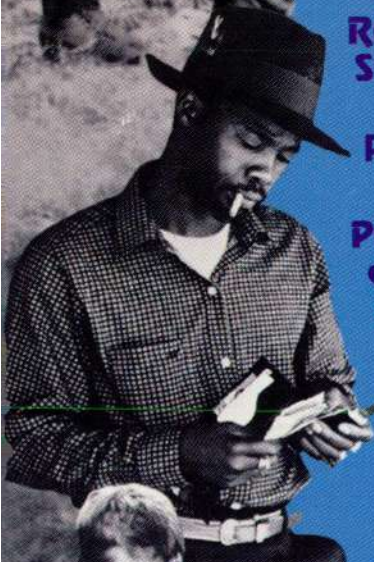
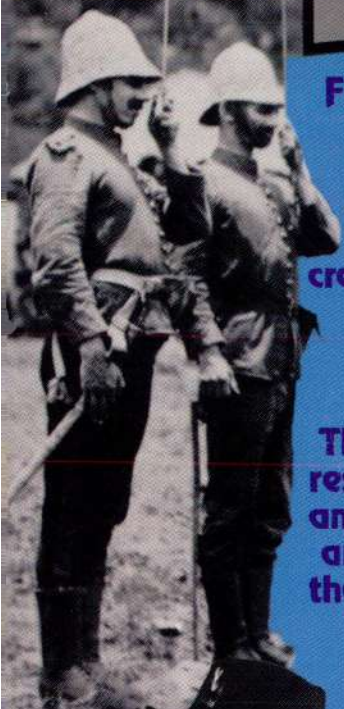
# DARKEST HOLLYWOOD

From the earliest days of cinema, the idea of South Africa – the land of gold, diamonds and Zulus – captured the imagination of film-makers. In Hollywood as much as in Johannesburg, cinema uncritically took over the image of South Africa created by the literature of imperialism. Whites occupied centre frame, with Africans depicted as adjuncts (the faithful servant) or the enemy (the 'savage other').

This path-breaking study, based on years of original research, interviews with directors, scriptwriters, actors and historians, analyses and describes the development and history of films on South Africa. It encompasses the racist and the colonial, the subtle and the poignant, the commercial and the politically committed.

Relating film-making to broader changes both in South African society and elsewhere, **In Darkest Hollywood** provides a comprehensive and profusely illustrated history and deconstruction of fiction cinema on South Africa.

Peter Davis is an independent producer of social and political documentaries. Since 1974 he has made numerous films on apartheid, including the two-part **In Darkest Hollywood: Cinema and Apartheid**.



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