

# THE BROOKLYN MUSEUM

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200 EASTERN PARKWAY, BROOKLYN, NEW YORK 11238

TELEPHONE (718) 638-5000 TELEFAX (718) 638-3731

presents

## MODERN DAYS

THE SECOND ANNUAL NEW YORK AFRICAN FILM FESTIVAL

## ANCIENT NIGHTS

May 14, 1994, 2 pm

*In Darkest Hollywood: Cinema & Apartheid*

(1992, 112 minutes, Video, USA)

Directed by Peter Davis and Daniel Riesenfeld

"... [To] recover our images of who we are  
and what we want to become."

This full-length documentary exhaustively traces the history of film as it has either buttressed or challenged the Apartheid<sup>1</sup> regime of South Africa, from its inception in 1949 to the present day. The films chosen for consideration include feature films produced in the country, local and international newsreel coverage of South African current affairs, and films produced overseas, mainly in Hollywood, that address the issues facing the country in direct or indirect ways.

Two periods are identified within the film: the first is before the Sharpeville massacre of March 21 1961 (which, incidentally, elicited the first condemnation of the Apartheid regime by the United Nations General Assembly); the second period runs through 1989. These two cycles in the history of the regime are differentiated by the increased radicalism and repression of the authorities after 1961. As for film, censorship was increased after Sharpeville as a state of emergency took effect: the images of a murderous South Africa were there for all the world to see and the propaganda machine was put into top gear to "correct" this "negative" slant.

Before the massacre, however, Hollywood action and gangster films acted as a liberating form of entertainment for the African population. Black South Africans who were involved in cinema in some capacity and who lived through the early years of segregation, are interviewed extensively in *In Darkest Hollywood*. They confirm that the gangster movie, to take one example, served as a stimulus because the gangster was seen as his own "boss", and thus became an emblem for a form of liberation. Cinema also brought a glimpse of the outside world to those who lived in the Apartheid dungeon and showed them that life could be different because it was different elsewhere.

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1. *Apartheid* is an Afrikaans word meaning, literally, "separateness." The population, under this system, was divided into three groups: whites, coloreds and blacks, each with separate identity documents as proof of their race. The last two categories had vastly reduced rights and had their movements restricted by such laws as the "white by night law," which effectively imposed a curfew on people of color. When some doubt existed as to the exact "race" of an individual, a pencil would be run through a person's hair; or the person would be poked by a sharp object and the ensuing yell would contribute to determining the person's race. If a brother and sister were unfortunate enough to have different skin coloring, they would be separated because they were considered of different racial categories.

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*In Darkest Hollywood* has no narrative voice, a definite recipe for success in this case, and all the comments made by the authoritative voices and witnesses (writers, directors, actors, and academics) in the documentary are backed up or exemplified by extracts from feature films and news, including advertising. <sup>2</sup> *Jim Comes to Jo'burg* / AKA *African Jim* (1949) put blacks on the screen in a semi-musical rags-to-riches story and the stars of the films became instant celebrities, proving, so it seemed, that it was possible to go beyond turgid semi-slavery. *Cry the Beloved Country* (1951), with a young Sidney Poitier, brought the plight of the blacks to the screen but at its premiere showing in Johannesburg, no blacks were present, unsurprisingly - not even Poitier himself. Hollywood came to South Africa to produce such films as *Untamed* (1955) produced by 20th Century Fox with Tyrone Power, in a version of the western in which the American Indian is replaced by the savage Zulu as a threat to white civilization as we know it...

*Come Back, Africa* (1959) is singled out for special attention as a ground-breaking film. The American director, who is white, spent many a month getting to know the intellectual fringe of the black South African community, based around the magazine *Drum*. The resulting film, by all accounts, made a new cinematic language available to the black community without the director, Lionel Rogosin, falling into the trap of paternalism. This step forward was soon to be annihilated by the events of 1961: the era of passive resistance based on the force of moral conviction was over.

Hollywood waited until the 1970s to render the system of Apartheid visible to the naked eye, albeit in a depoliticized way (*The Wilby Conspiracy*, 1974, with Poitier again in evidence in this Hollywood thriller). As the regime's day of reckoning approached, *Cry Freedom* (1987) and *A Dry, White, Season* (1989) are compared. Richard Attenborough, the director of *Cry Freedom*, is seen in a very harsh light: a recent review of *In Darkest Hollywood* notes that various directors "get their due as do[es] such misguided name directors as Richard Attenborough [...] whose shooting structure mirrored the segregated society surrounding him." <sup>3</sup> Also instructive are interviews with the co-directors of *Mapansula* (1988, shown at The Brooklyn Museum on April 24), one white, one black. Some idea of where South African filmmaking can go is gleaned from listening to them recounting their experience.

*In Darkest Hollywood* is a documentary feast. The editing (the directors themselves are responsible for this) is the driving force behind the film. Its apparent simplicity is genuine deftness. The wealth of archival footage and the choice of talking heads makes this a fascinating exploration of film and ideology in South Africa. It is also perhaps food for thought about the images that bombard us each day.