

# Book Reviews

ILHA DO DESTERRO



## REVIEWS/RESENHAS

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***South African National Cinema.* Maingard, Jacqueline. 2007. London: Routledge. 221 pages. Contains 40 black and white photographs. Part of the National Cinemas-series editor Susan Hayward. ISBN: 978-0-415-21680-7.**

by Chris Broodryk

With contributions to esteemed journals such as *Screen* as well as a number of books, Jacqueline Maingard is an established authority in South African cinema. *South African National Cinema* joins the ranks of earlier critical investigations into filmmaking in the African continent, including work by Thelma Gutsche, Roy Armes, Martin Botha and Keyan Tomaselli. For Maingard, the main discussion points in an investigation of South African cinema are notions of history—Maingard refers to the book as an opportunity to “re-view history” (2)—and how it speaks to nation and identity, including the often contentious associated issues of

representation. Representations of race and culture, so integral to any discussion of South African national cinema, are associated here with apartheid and post-apartheid frames that involve not only a changed (and changing) film industry but also a conceptual framework in which to make sense of changing power relationships in the country.

If Maingard then emphasises the ideological intersections between history and nation, it follows that she opens her book revisiting *De Voortrekkers* (1916), the “volksmoeder”<sup>1</sup> of white South African filmmaking, a film famed for its suggestions of white imperial conquest and ownership and a major contributor to white South African mythmaking. It is here that Maingard sets out her methodology for most of the chapters in the book. The author first collects numerous thoughts on the film by key film scholars, and then endows it with a comprehensive historical context. Here, *De Voortrekkers* is compared to its American counterpart, D.W. Griffith’s notorious American epic *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), before its own production context is addressed. It is here that

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Maingard's opportunity for re-viewing history enters the picture as she identifies the prominence of figures such as I.W. Schlesinger in South African film industry. To the book's credit, such factualities and biographies are never disassociated from ideological and hegemonic forces that shaped the film industry at different moments in which religious and gender frameworks are also brought into the discussion.

The discussion of *De Voortrekkers* serves as a lucid gateway to an in depth investigation of South African myths and 'fictions' as articulated in subsequent releases, including *The Symbol of Sacrifice* (1918) and *Moedertjie* (1931), which in turn invites a chapter on films that explicitly link to nation-building, such as *They Built a Nation* (1938). Here Maingard points out that the film was released in conjunction with commemorative celebrations of a decisive battle, the *Battle of Blood River* (1838), in which a white minority defeated a vast horde of Zulu warriors. The historical is always linked to cultural output, and there are few South African events as significant to the Afrikaner collective as Blood River. Indeed, Maingard here points to previous research that informs her own in argument on how "cinema was deeply linked

with cultural events promoting Afrikaner nationalism" (65).

Having established a clear and articulate framework of national mythmaking, stereotyping and Afrikaner hegemony over three chapters, Maingard now turns her attention to black South African audiences for the next three chapters. In these investigations, some key issues include the screening of films to black audiences from the 1920s to the 1950s, which highlights the presence of miners as early black movie audiences (according to Maingard, these audiences were particularly receptive to Charlie Chaplin, who was christened SiDakwa, or "little drunk man" (69). Interestingly, it also speaks to general white apprehension of black capacities for violence and sexual deviance, which is linked to the development of censorship during this time.

The author also provides a discussion of the seminal *Jim Comes to Joburg* (1949), which presented a black identity related to gangsterism. This is significant as black audiences were viewing 'themselves' as embedded in a culture of crime. Also, South African cinema would return to this theme regularly, using the genre conventions and codes to criticise the apartheid regime

(Schmitz's *Mapantsula*, 1986) or to highlight the social ruin of post-apartheid poverty and crime (Hood's *Tsotsi* 2005 and Ziman's *Jerusalema* 2008). Maingard's discussion of "concert films" (105), particularly *Song of Africa* (1951), explains how mythmaking was not limited to 'whiteness', and that with their access to resources, white filmmakers constructed images of blackness for consumption by black audiences. It was only a matter of time before films about blackness would become more socially conscious and develop a sense of social realism, which Maingard also investigates for its socio-political significance even if the adaptation of Alan Paton's *Cry the Beloved Country* (1951) employed a mainstream visual language to envision its tale of black struggle under political oppression. In all this, Maingard consistently cements the role of the government in visualising oppressive governmental policies on screen.

White resistance filmmakers such as Darrell James Roodt do have a place in Maingard's re-viewed history. Of Roodt's problematic mainstream remaking of *Cry the Beloved Country* (1995), the author diplomatically states that the film fails to attain the goals the film claimed for itself; for example, that it would be for

apartheid what *Schindler's List* (1994) was (or claimed to be) for the Jewish holocaust. Maingard does not problematise Roodt's *Sarafina* (1992) in the same way, missing out on an opportunity to address this film's customisation of 'blackness' to be consumed by a European white mass audience. Later, she refers to Roodt's Oscar nominated *Yesterday's* (2004) rural landscapes, where the Drakensberg mountain are "towering majestically over the village" (161-162), not commenting on how the film invites the tourist gaze to approach the sublime beauty of the South African landscape while the HIV/Aids theme is (momentarily) overshadowed by spectacle.

As can be seen in her discussion of Roodt and references to other filmmakers such as Jans Rautenbach, Maingard is clear that the apartheid era social set-up cannot be reduced to a black against white binary. As much as there were films for black audiences that were compliant with apartheid ideology, there were films by white filmmakers that argued against this system, such as *Katrina* (directed by Jans Rautenbach in 1969). Referring to a specific shot in which a main character is framed in close-up, Maingard articulates the political ramifications of what the image represents: "It is

a powerful, defining statement of human trauma [...] deeply etched by longing and belonging while also reflecting a conservative view of a closed ‘coloured’ identity, that could be seen to fit with the government rhetoric of the time” (137). The author’s voice is authoritative, linking the image with notions of community and identity, suggestive of how Maingard never loses focus of her key aims. A discussion of *Mapantsula* (1986) is inevitable, and Maingard uses the film to highlight notions of landscape and geography in constructing political space, something she refers to throughout her writing.

*South African National Cinema* is an accessible and erudite discussion of key South African films, clearly positioned within a complex historical frame. It is an important addition to the existing knowledge base, and is too critically interrogative for most part to be considered as just a rehearsal of previous research. Incidentally, Afrikaans film specifically is currently enjoying somewhat of a revival—interestingly, these films, such as *Bakgat 1* and *2* (2008 and 2010) and *Liefing* (2010) are almost a-political and explicitly modelled on the classical Hollywood narrative—and issues of identity,

nation and community are integral to discourse on these films.

In light of Afrikaner tendencies to construct images and narratives of white supremacy, as Maingard demonstrates, these films emerge at a time where the very issue of Afrikaner identity is difficult to pin down. This struggle is at least implicit in almost every Afrikaans film released since the fall of apartheid. (The relationship between “Afrikaner” and “Afrikaans” is itself too complex to address in this review). It appears as if these films, along with the religious redemption narratives of *Faith like Potatoes* (2006) and *Hansie* (2008), both directed by Regardt van den Bergh, inevitably links the image of being white and Afrikaans-speaking in post-1994 South Africa with notions of religious revival and nostalgia for ‘simple stories’, choosing safe and familiar storytelling over anything narratively subversive. Here is an area demanding interrogation so as to further expound on Maingard’s thesis on how nation is informed by identity.

*South African National Cinema* is recommended to students and film scholars alike who express an interest in national cinema and who would like to critically engage with one of the world’s oldest film industries.

Note

1. “Volksmoeder”, an Afrikaans term, literally translates as “mother of the nation” and suggests the prominence of a certain type of white South African female: the all-caring, triumphant mother figure that stands in contrast to the ‘savagery’ of non-white existence.

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**Coetzee, J. M. *Verão*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2010. 280 páginas.**

by Marília Fatima Bandeira

O escritor sul africano J. M. Coetzee nasceu em 1940, oito anos antes da oficialização do apartheid, numa sociedade que, antes da institucionalização do racismo, já mantinha os diferentes grupos étnicos separados por barreiras sociais e financeiras.

Coetzee recebeu duas vezes o prêmio Booker e também o prêmio Nobel de literatura em 2003, sendo um dos autores vivos mais premiados da atualidade. Contemporâneo de Nadine Gordimer, André Brink, Breyton Breytenbach, Ezekiel Mphahlele e outros, Coetzee

manteve-se à parte das lutas políticas e sociais ocorridas na África do Sul durante o apartheid, recebendo duras críticas de seus pares, mais politicamente engajados. Duas de suas obras lhe renderam muitos desafeitos: *Disgrace* (1999), seu primeiro romance pós *apartheid* ambientado no país, onde retrata o estupro de uma mulher branca por três jovens negros, e *A Vida dos Animais* (1999), no qual o autor, vegetariano ferrenho, compara os abatedouros de gado aos campos de Auschwitz, enfurecendo os judeus, que o acusaram de anti-semitismo. Em 2002 Coetzee auto-exilou-se na Austrália, onde vive até o momento, como professor da Universidade de Adelaide.

Em seus dois primeiros livros com viés autobiográfico, *Infância* (1997) e *Juventude* (2002), Coetzee reconstrói suas reminiscências e memórias, entrelaçando à sua história pessoal as suas impressões sobre o regime em que vivia. Especialmente em *Infância*, percebe-se a tensão entre ingleses e africanos, e como as relações de poder entre negros e brancos são não só arbitrarias como desumanas. O escritor resgata, juntamente com as memórias de sua meninice, a intolerância e a desigualdade que corriqueiramente presenciava e o sentimento de não-pertencimento e opressão causado pela experi-