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Victoria K. Carchidi
University of Pennsylvania, vic@design.upenn.edu

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Representing South Africa: Apartheid from Print to Film

Victoria Carchidi

Cry Freedom, A World Apart, A Dry White Season--three major films on South Africa released within two years of each other--share two striking facts. In each a black man is arrested, detained, tortured, and killed by South African police; and in each the focus is on apartheid's impact on its central white character. This anomaly reflects the difficulty of portraying apartheid to audiences outside South Africa.

Any form of representation, indeed any description, relies on selectivity. Some elements are highlighted at the expense of others, a simplified picture is compiled so that one unified effect emerges. Such Procrustean reduction occurs whether translating the world to a written text or translating a written work to the screen. Yet these distillations are not simply a shopping cart of random images taken from the supermarket of impressions. Rather, in every case the author or director strives to enrich what is retained, to imbue every selected element with the resonance of all that is omitted: to make one filmed minute feel like an event that took perhaps a week of real time or fifty pages of print to experience.

The three films under discussion doubly refine South Africa, as they are based on texts that span the range of print media: Donald Woods' autobiographical, journalistic, *Biko*;[1] Shawn Slovo's "semi-autobiographical" screenplay, *A World Apart*; and André Brink's straightforward fictional novel, *A Dry White Season*. Each author writes from memories of living in South Africa, drawing upon the authority of having been there, having felt apartheid at work. All three films play on this witnessing, and append a coda testifying to the veracity of their subject matter: a list of victims of police detention for *Cry Freedom* and *A Dry White Season*, a statement of Ruth First's assassination for *A World Apart*. But of course none of the films was actually produced in South Africa or stars South Africans. Each was shot in Zimbabwe, and although some used actors and crew familiar with and even native to South Africa,[2] the major

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Victoria Carchidi, Ph.D. teaches in the English Department of Emory & Henry College, VA. She is completing a monograph on South African literature and culture.

figures are played by actors not even remotely imaginable as Southern Africans. Rather than discovering new actors that could unsettle and transport us to a land long sequestered behind a curtain of news censorship, on the screen we find the faces of Barbara Hershey, Kevin Kline, Susan Sarandon, Donald Sutherland, Denzel Washington, and Marlon Brando. This discrepancy between the films' insistence on their factual basis and their glossy high-profile packaging is symptomatic of the films' ambivalence, an ambivalence that has communicated itself to audience and critics alike.

The texts on which the films are based have clear, direct motivations: Woods wrote *Biko* in horrified revulsion against his sudden understanding of apartheid's brutality; Shawn Slovo wrote the screenplay of *A World Apart* in response to her mother's murder. Only Brink's novel has the aesthetic distance of a traditional fictional work, and indeed it does veer sharply away from issues of apartheid, happily miring itself in a sexual subplot. But the film of *A Dry White Season* ignores Brink's fetishes for the plot of a white man awakening to the evils of apartheid. Each of the films, then, is polemical--a point that has garnered them criticism from all perspectives: that the issues are presented simplistically, that the filmmakers are on the side of white supremacy; that the films exploit apartheid for money. Whether accurate or not, these claims make indisputable the inextricability of South African politics from the films.

On the face of it, such content would seem all to the good. These pictures are not just Hollywood fluff, they aim to educate as well as entertain. As David Shipman wrote of *Cry Freedom*, "would that most of the films discussed in *Sight and Sound* were about anything at all, let alone something as important as this [apartheid]!" However, although the aspirations are noble, the texts chosen for these films exacerbate the problem of dealing with complex politics in the cinematic medium. Rather than choosing to film a provocative exploration of the sources of bigotry and oppression, the movies adopt the moral righteousness of anti-apartheid South Africans, straitjacketing themselves to texts with the authority of witnessing. The results are not good cinema. The texts' strengths fail to transfer to the big screen, and their flaws multiply.

Cry Freedom most obviously illustrates this tendency. The movie attracted harsh comment for its depiction of Steve Biko as a man whose eminence lay in his friendship with Donald Woods.[1] Critics wrote: "Attenborough has made his black protagonist a stick figure whose only triumph is one white man's putative emancipation" (M.P. 42); and "*Cry Freedom* might itself be said to indict white liberals, proving how their good intentions can deform the black struggle: The film kills off Biko (Denzel Washington) in the first hour and leaves the screen to Woods [Kevin Kline]" (Gevisser 31). As these quotations make clear, the film

flounders, its focus oddly opposed to its effect. The cause of the difficulty is its rigorous rendition of its source.

Based on Donald Woods' autobiographical account of his friendship with Steve Biko, and advised by the Woodses, the film follows its textual model to the detriment of its own medium. For Woods, Biko's most important effect was the one made on him, and in his book he cannot help but focus on the event central to his enlightenment--his discovery that apartheid is no respecter of race. For him, his escape from South Africa with the exposé of Biko's death radically and irreversibly changed his life. For a movie viewer, however, that thrilling episode--complete with choruses of the African anthem--may seem like nothing less than a 1980s remake of *The Sound of Music*.

Cry Freedom successfully captures some of Biko's charisma, but then distances us, forcing us to live through Woods' awakening rather than allowing us to undergo the metamorphosis ourselves. In addition, by limiting itself to Woods' perspective, the film curtails its ability to show the face of apartheid beyond the gates of the Woods estate--we see a township only when Woods strolls through it accompanied by a philosophical Biko.

These strategies derail the film, leading its critics to see Biko finally as nothing more than a cinematic device. Blake writes, "Biko never deviates from his rendezvous with fate" (486). Kauffman comments: "Biko dies too senselessly and too early. He virtually invites martyrdom ... He uses no kind of evasive action, he simply dives right into a police checkpoint. He is arrested and beaten so badly that he soon dies" (26). Certainly Biko did not choose to die, either "too early" or at all: this question of whether to expediently conform to, or dangerously resist, governmental tyranny, is central to apartheid. Statements like Kauffman's reflect the uneasy coexistence of artistic and historical pressures in this picture of South Africa, pressures that erode *Cry Freedom*'s ability to plumb its subject.

A World Apart[4] avoids many of the pitfalls of translation, as it is based on a film screenplay; nonetheless, the published text includes an introduction and comments by Shawn Slovo that flesh out its autobiographical motivation, a luxury the film must forego. Here again, political history mixes uneasily with cinematic concerns. Slovo's journal records the political tension: Shawn's father, Joe Slovo, the only white on the National Executive of the African National Congress (ANC), makes Slovo an inflammatory name in Southern Africa (3). Therefore, the Zimbabwe government refused to guarantee the cast and crew's safety if Shawn were present during shooting (10) and, before allowing the film to begin, required ANC approval of the script (1). Furthermore, it asked the film crew to "play down the politics in the film and to stress the

mother-daughter aspect of the script" (16), and mingled plainclothes security men with the crew (11). The volatile presence of South Africa looms over all--extras were reluctant to participate in an anti-apartheid film for fear of reprisals from their powerful neighbor (20), and a crew member was seriously hurt by a car-bomb planted by South African agents (30). Yet in the film, these pressures evaporate.

Chris Menges, the director of *A World Apart*, wanted "to show apartheid in action," but Slovo notes in her journal, "There's a limit to how many situations showing the brutalities of apartheid a thirteen-year-old white middle-class child would witness" (5). One of the most striking moments in the film occurs when Molly (Jodhi May) is told she can't walk around the corner to her mother's office alone--it's too dangerous. A protagonist like Molly sees even less of the layered fabric of South African life than does a privileged white editor like Donald Woods.

In this vacuum, ironically, the few scenes that do illustrate apartheid reject interpretation. In one such scene Molly (Jodhi May) gives a stick of gum to a black newspaper boy. Neither child acts surprised, but given how Molly's friend, Yvonne treats her black servants we are presumably to register the event as unusual. However, the film gives us no grasp on whether the act reflects Molly's upbringing in a liberal household, her natural friendliness, a theoretical position, or something entirely different. Again, by limiting itself to the viewpoint of its central white character, the film destroys its ability to show apartheid at work.

A World Apart does, in fact, center around the relationship between Molly and her mother, Diana (Barbara Hershey). News of her mother's death, not escalating interest in apartheid, prompted Slovo to write the screenplay (x). Unfortunately, once that is given, the politics become almost irrelevant: Molly understands little of her parents' political work, other than that it functions to keep Diana from remembering important details like getting lace for her daughter's dancing costume. Her perspective does not illuminate the South Africa of 1963. Significant as that backdrop is, it cannot disguise that the story is predominantly a complaint against working mothers, albeit focused on those with particularly dangerous jobs. Perceived through eyes more mature than a young child's, this tack could effectively depict the scope of oppression found in South Africa. In the film's most absurdly telling scene, a security police interrogator, Muller (David Suchet), yells at Diana: "you're a terrible mother!" (93). Earlier, another frustrated interrogator tells Diana, "You're lucky we're decent people. We have a feeling for women in this country" (74). The veiled menace in these words terrifies more than any explicit threat of torture could, and these scenes reveal the ambiguous position women hold in South Africa.

However, the power of these scenes is undercut by Molly's denunciation of Diana's poor mothering in the final resolution--she concurs with the security police's evaluation.

Slovo writes in her introduction that she "struggled to turn what was a confused, unresolved and highly personal story into something that would touch others." The film succeeds in this aim, as illustrated by reviewers moved by the human drama. Blake, for example, writes that Diana is "a cold ideologue," who "can be tolerated only because Molly obviously loves her." But Slovo also wanted "to merge the politics with the personal, without detracting from the importance of either" (x), and here the text functions better than the film. The text tells us that Diana is named after Britain's Princess of Wales--"I figured I needed all the help I could get to make ... a Communist sympathetic to western audiences" (9)--but in the film Diana's communism is never made clear. All we know without a doubt is that she's not a good mother. The film is poignant in the context of Slovo's grief for her mother, but the motive of resolving childhood issues pales in the shadow of apartheid, seemingly raised here only to make more dramatic a plot of familial estrangement reserved to no one setting. The treatment belittles both the personal and the political tragedy.

The adaptation of *A Dry White Season* offers the greatest hope for expressing a true filmic vision of apartheid. Euzhan Palcy wanted to film the novel as soon as she read it; the project was clearly personal (Thomas). In one interview Palcy describes undergoing racist treatment as she was passing through Customs at Los Angeles International Airport (Lacher 72), and John Simon quotes her as describing the film's violent ending--when Stanley shoots Stolz--as a "message of warning...that this decent man can be pushed to violence." Such direct involvement indicates a director willing to take charge, to shape her source text into an effective film; and the text is a novel, suitable for such molding. But reality intrudes again. Traditionally, Brink disclaims any real-life correspondence for the characters and incidents of his novel, but the note on the copyright page states, "Nothing in this novel has been invented, and the climate, history, and circumstances from which it arises are those of South Africa today."

Thus it is not surprising that the anti-apartheid plot line follows *Biko* quite closely, narrating a white man's discovery that he cannot roam with impunity across racial or political barriers. This plot Palcy changes little, and that fidelity makes the revisions she does choose to effect fit awkwardly in the overall scheme.[5] The best instance of this is the violent ending mentioned above. Stolz (Jurgen Prochnow), a security policeman, runs down Ben du Toit (Donald Sutherland). The next day we see Stolz packing, apparently about to escape all retribution, when Stanley (Zakes Mokae), du Toit's black friend, drives up and

shoots him. Palcy constructed this entire episode: in the novel the hit-and-run killer remains anonymous, and the novel provides the only forum du Toit's papers will ever get.

To Richard Blake the film's ending implies "that the situation is so desperate that violence is the only possible response to the repression. It is a courageous statement, and one that is morally defended in many quarters" (353). This interpretation reads the scene as supporting the ANC's espousal of violence in response to apartheid's monolithic presence. Yet, as Stuart Klawans notes, the scene strikes a "very false note at the end--an event that gives the audience its chance to cheer and thereby diminishes the tragedy" (508). In fact, some audiences applauded (Simon). That reaction results in part from a filmic simplification: in the novel Stolz merely represents the security police's brutal policies; the film makes him their embodiment. Therefore, Stanley's act of violence in the film's context is not perceived as a tragic inevitability, but rather as a cathartic assertion that justice will be served; indeed, apartheid seems to die with Stolz. The novel far more effectively conveys the juggernaut of apartheid: the newspapers refuse to print du Toit's story, his killer goes unnamed and at large, and all that results from his investigation is his own murder. Palcy's changes, ironically, dilute the novel's inescapably claustrophobic effect.

On a different front, the film fails to capture *A Dry White Season*'s very accurate if unintended reflection of South African daily life. John Simon decries the film's lack of "the poetic richness of the book's style, the general thoughtfulness of Brink's novel" (57). Yet perhaps what Simon really misses from the film is the egregious sexism that permeates Brink's novel. He regrets that Palcy chooses to omit "the love affair between Ben and Melanie [Susan Sarandon]," and "Ben's absorbing interior monologue" (57). I am grateful that Palcy steers clear of both these expressions of Brink's misogyny: Ben's "absorbing" ruminations generally involve his wife's "wrinkly neck" and "sagging breasts," or savor Melanie's "small breasts bruised," and "in the dark mat of her love-hair the exposed and mangled furrow" (273). Such attitudes toward women as sexual victims is so common as to be banal; it's not what attracted Palcy to the novel. Yet sexism is a pervasive problem in South Africa, one in many ways inextricable from racism (Bernstein 10). Palcy allows its shadow to darken the film, retaining du Toit's wife and daughter as hard-line conservatives; however, she enriches the characters, clothing them in moral ambiguity rather than casting them as the black-and-white villains of the novel. This resolution works uneasily. It neither erases the taint of misogyny from the film, nor does it force audiences to face sexism as a concomitant of apartheid. *A Dry White Season* finally subverts its attempts to depict South Africa: it conveys neither the

explicit nor the implicit picture presented by its source text, and fails to fill that absence with more than beautifully filmed images.

One result of these films' tenacious hold on texts written by those who have lived with apartheid, one result of locating this problem simplistically and in South Africa, is the adumbration of apartheid's most important lesson: that it is not unique to South Africa, that it did not develop, like the platypus, in isolation on some foreign shore, but rather that it is an only mildly exotic offshoot of attitudes that continue to flourish in Europe and America. It is not accidental that the central figures in these films are white: the film industry simply ignores what won't sell to a predominantly white audience.

One could imagine a film raising issues central to apartheid through a story not localized by place or time, but by a plot focused on the self-feeding cycle of misunderstanding, oppression, hatred, and violence. Such an imaginary product could well succeed in portraying South Africa where these laboriously "true" attempts have failed. Shawn Slovo felt she had to "explain the political background to potential audiences who would know nothing about the system of apartheid" (x). Had she instead realized how universal are the politics, as well as the emotions, she dramatizes, her film might finally have shown us the mirror of apartheid.

Notes

[1]Although I limit myself here to a discussion of *Biko*, *Cry Freedom* also cites Woods's *Asking for Trouble* as a source.

[2]Notably, Chris Menges, director of *A World Apart*, worked in South Africa in 1963 and meticulously compiled historical documentation for the cast and crew to review during filming (Slovo 15). He also cast as many South African exiles as he could (Slovo 12).

[3]*Biko* and *Cry Freedom* relate the (true) story of Donald Woods, white, English South African newspaper editor: he editorializes against Steve Biko's Black Consciousness until he meets Biko, learns from him, and becomes friends with him. Biko is banned and restricted to his house by the government, and on an illegal excursion out of his banning area, he is picked up at a routine road check, detained, and dies in police custody. Woods investigates the death, and is himself banned. He and his family flee the country, and he publishes the manuscript detailing their friendship and all he discovered about Biko's death.

[4]In brief, the story centers on the relationship between 13-year-old Molly Roth and her mother, Diana, a political activist so caught up in her work that she has little time for her children. It is based on Shawn Slovo's memories of the period when her mother, Ruth First, was detained for 117 days under sweeping new security provisions. Unless otherwise noted, all facts concerning this film have been obtained from Slovo's introduction and journal.

[5]Briefly, the film and relevant portion of the novel tell the story of an Afrikaner, Ben du Toit, who turns against the government when he cannot receive a satisfactory account of the deaths, while in police detention, of a black gardener and the gardener's young son. Du Toit begins

to gather evidence that the two were killed by the police, becomes the target of harassment, and is finally killed himself.

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