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South Africa from Text to Film: 'Cry Freedom' and 'A Dry White Season'

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Abstract

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Comments

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4. SOUTH AFRICA FROM TEXT TO FILM: *CRY FREEDOM* AND *A DRY WHITE SEASON*

Victoria Carchidi

IN THE LATE 1980s, two “major motion pictures,” as the saying goes, gave us cinematic treatments of South Africa. *Cry Freedom*, based on Donald Woods’s autobiographical accounts of being enlightened by Steve Biko, and *A Dry White Season*, based on André Brink’s novel of the same name, emerge from different genres, one explicitly fictional.¹ Yet each appends as code to the film a catalogue of death caused by apartheid, thereby adopting a time-honored method of attesting to a work’s factual base—like the *Sound of Music*’s note telling us what became of the family Von Trapp. With these explicit claims, the films raise questions about the historical accuracy of these large-scale productions. Do these films use their genre’s ability to represent real events—as in each movie’s reenactment of the Soweto riots—to explore and inform the audience about the central issues of apartheid?² Or in moving from text to film does South Africa evanesce, leaving at each film’s core a reflection instead of the audience’s preconceived ideas? This paper argues the latter point.

In 1977 Steve Biko died while in police custody. The next year Donald Woods published his account of that death in *Biko*. In 1988 Richard Attenborough gave the world his treatment of that death in the movie *Cry Freedom*. That the movie has attracted attention in a way the death did not, leading to *Biko*'s republication in paperback, is not the result of happenstance. The decisions governing the transformation of South Africa generally, and Steve Biko particularly, in Woods's book³ and Attenborough's film reveal a great deal both about the original source material and about our current society, although perhaps in ways not intended by either author or filmmaker.

Donald Woods wrote *Biko* under the shock of discovering the impact apartheid has on a white life. In *Cry Freedom* Biko tells Woods, "we [blacks] know how you [whites] live" by doing white people's chores, then asks, "Would you like to see how we live?" This line dramatizes the fact that every restriction on the black population involves a reciprocal restriction on whites. "Every person, black or white, has to live in an area designated as their 'own area.'"⁴ But it is not until Woods experiences the restrictions he has denounced for years in his paper—till suddenly *he* is the banned person, suddenly *his* friends are arrested and die in detention, suddenly *his* children are subjected to unpredictable, irrational attacks, that—suddenly—South Africa becomes unbearable for him. This is not to minimize Woods's anguish over Biko's death or his anger at the South African government, but simply to illustrate how ingrained the patterns of thinking fostered by apartheid are. Although angry at the oppression of blacks before he met Biko, Woods nonetheless continued to live with the unexamined security of being white under a white government.

The strength of Woods's book is its immediacy. Begun while he was under banning orders, it reflects the pain of discovering one's loss of sovereignty over one's own life: Woods describes the dread created by the ever-present threat of police searches. Since blacks in South Africa must live every day with the fear that their lives may be violently disrupted at any moment without cause or warning, the book suc-

cessfully conveys the oppressivity of the security forces, albeit not by direct representation of black conditions.

Its weaknesses stem from the same circumstances that make it worth reading: because of its passionate drive to testify against apartheid, the book is unwieldy, disorganized, and rambling. Writings by Nelson Mandela and Biko, banned in South Africa, are incorporated in undigested chunks, distorting any form the book might have had on its own: yet they also prove to be the most powerful and compelling indictments of apartheid, dispelling as they do any myth of black irrationality. Against the intense, articulate backdrop of philosophical debates and national priorities, the story of Woods pales into insignificance.

This, too, has been the major complaint with the film: that once Biko dies, Woods's story seems trivial. Yet the book draws strength from the format of *Everyman*—Woods—living and learning from the tumultuous events surrounding him; it manifests the human desire to illuminate the vast night of history with the pale beam of personal experience. In contrast, *Cry Freedom* cannot capture the sense Woods had that he was bearing witness, that his voice had to be heard because no one else could tell the story. The impulse behind a major film is completely opposite. Its urge is to tell a story that is spectacular, important, worthy of treatment on the Big Screen, and likely to draw big crowds. It is the end product of well-considered collaboration. As a forum for reaching the public, it is superior to a book; Attenborough states, "I wanted to reach people who were indifferent, who didn't know what was going on and didn't care."⁵ His audience, then, had not been touched by the book, but would be by the film. Although commercial film—even *Cry Freedom*'s three-and-a-half hours—cannot treat issues to the same extent as a text that can be picked up and put down at leisure, it does present events in a more visually realistic mode.⁶ It must, therefore, sustain the scrutiny of those who have attended the films not out of ignorance.

There are several threads of representation entwined in the *Cry Freedom* projects: the first is Steve Biko's life, the second is Woods's

book about Biko, and the reality that book creates, and the third is the film, to which Woods and his wife were advisors. Filmed in Zimbabwe, advised by someone not only exiled for a decade but with a vested interest in the version of reality he had published, *Cry Freedom* does not have an immediate connection to South Africa. Although it is remarkably faithful to Woods's version of South Africa, the film "is not a truthful one."⁷ That it tries to be, however, cannot be denied. David Denby describes Richard Attenborough's attempt to find a proper actor—that is, one of the right age, height, and looks—to play Biko. He interviews Denzel Washington and likes him, but "there was one problem—the space between Biko's front teeth."⁸ Luckily, Washington reveals that his teeth are capped, and gets the role. This same attention to veracity was not lavished equally on all aspects: posters in the movie's opening shots show Mandela's face, rather than the true heroes of the mid-1970s, such as Sobukwe (CD 42). Stanley Kauffman writes, "the need to stick to facts fractures the film cinematically."⁹ The comment reflects the same error that caught Attenborough—equating Woods's accounts with the real thing.

Woods could not help but put his story into his description of Biko: their friendship fueled his desire to speak out, and was the source of his unique vision. However, for the screenplay to follow this decision and present Biko as merely a catalyst for Woods's flight renders the story trite. Critics complained that Denzel Washington's Biko had more charisma than Kevin Kline's Woods, just as in *Biko* the subject's voice compels attention not commanded by the author. Yet when Biko's testimony at the trial of Black Consciousness Supporters appears in the film, the situation is unclear; without outside knowledge, viewers would find the scenes hard to place with any certainty. And the sound bites chosen to represent Biko's thinking—that whites are more pink than white, for example¹⁰—while cute, do not reflect the depth and profundity of Biko's thoughts. One critic suggests that "the radical cutting edge of [Biko's] views has been dulled to make them more palatable to Attenborough's intended white audience of millions" (CD).

It is understandable that Woods would write his book for a primarily white audience. After all, he grew up in a society predicated on white dominance and power: that he would find it difficult to break those habits of thinking is excusable (and Woods does excuse himself [BI 42]). But the film duplicates these attitudes unquestioningly. Denby writes, "There's an element of priggish self-congratulation in the movie's warmth: Isn't this wonderful! An intelligent white man and an intelligent black man can get along beautifully!"¹¹ This sentiment echoes Woods's own astonished perception of his ability to accept the unusual: "Few white males in South Africa have met a [black woman like] Dr. Ramphele who could say quite casually, 'Now you're really talking nonsense—here, let me get you another drink'" (BI 68). The gender choices in these two examples introduce a subject treated below, yet note that Woods's vision of equality requires Ramphele to serve him a drink to soften her critique. The most looming flaw of the film is, as Denby writes, that Attenborough:

wants to reach the mass of *white* viewers, and here his commercial and propagandistic ambitions become intertwined. The story of a white liberal's moral and physical journey is an adventure that ends happily. Donald Woods, Steve Biko's friend, becomes the lens through which we see South Africa. (OA 113)

Attenborough adopts Woods's reality, the film suggests, because he shares both Woods's mixed horror of apartheid and his paternalistic attitude toward blacks.¹²

A Dry White Season offers an interesting parallel to *Cry Freedom*. A pernicious—and not very covert—subtext of sexism plagues the novel by André Brink. The film, however, does not raise as strong questions about historicity, since its plot is drawn—and even then, rather loosely—from a fictional source. Yet this film, too, appends a hallmark of veracity at story's end, and the plot bears such striking similarities to the Biko story that the novel was banned in South Africa.

The differences from Woods's story inform Brink's own interests. Du Toit is an Afrikaner, rather than a "typical" British liberal. The subject of his investigation is a gardener killed in police custody, not an intellectual colleague, and Du Toit's concern at first is almost a matter of *noblesse oblige*—a suspicion that he gave the man bad advice. Finally, there is no happy escape from South Africa, though the film succumbs to a vision of poetic justice not available in the novel. In both film and novel, Du Toit is hit and killed by a car to silence him, but in the film his story is published by the papers; the novel leaves his material more ambiguously in the hands of a novelist—Brink, perhaps? These changes assure that Du Toit starts out as less of a hero than Woods does to those outside the Afrikaner community—and inside that community, they provide a dramatic conflict between true thinker and apostate. By raising the stakes, Brink increases both the potential impact of his novel and the difficulty of winning over his audience.

Further complicating Brink's task is the most radical difference between *Cry Freedom* and *A Dry White Season*—the role of women. *Cry Freedom* contains a number of powerful women: Woods's wife, Dr. Ramphela, Biko's wife. Even in her most critical scene, when Wendy Woods accuses her husband of using Biko's death for his own gain, the film gives credibility to her actions. In contrast, Brink's novel is riddled with incomprehensibly malicious and destructive women. As Du Toit pursues his labyrinthine investigation against the tide of his own upbringing, pressure from his employer, and mounting police harassment, his long-bitter, socially-disappointed wife takes the opportunity to berate him for ruining her dinner parties. His youngest, previously loving daughter deserts him at the behest of her dogmatic fiancé. His oldest daughter (a very bad mother to her children, we're told) sides with her mother against Du Toit. Only his young son is proud of his father and urges him to continue to search for the truth. Du Toit turns from his wife's hardheartedness to the arms of a young reporter, and extended descriptions of her body come to take on a far more central role in the novel than any investigation of apartheid. This seemingly

blissful relationship, consummated only once, results in photographs of the liaison that lose Du Toit his wife and job and isolate him from his community. Interestingly, although his troublesomeness causes the pictures to be taken, it is the pictures, not his inquiry, that shatter his life. Even the one woman described as truly loving helps destroy Du Toit. Du Toit's wife leaves him, and his eldest daughter, seeming to repent of her former cruelty, offers tea and a sympathetic ear. Du Toit learns she is betraying him to the police, and just has time to get his documents to the narrator before he is killed. Although Du Toit's hit and run death is supposed to be at the hands of irate security police, by the time one finishes the novel one may wishfulfillingly read the murder as the act of an irate reader.

Clearly, sexism is not a problem unique to South Africa. But the virulence of its expression—every woman either has a full and generous mouth (*DW* 116) or wears a "dress designed for a much younger figure" (*DW* 255); we are treated to a "voluptuous nude blonde" inset in a car's steering knob (*DW* 79), and shown a cigarette lighter "in the shape of a naked girl emitting a flame from her vagina" (*DW* 148)—in a text ostensibly critiquing intolerance, illustrates the linkage of misogyny and bigotry in the habit of oppression.

The film of *A Dry White Season* cannot evade the misogyny of its source completely, but it tempers it. Du Toit has only one perfidious daughter, and she is given a hint of complex motivations for her more ambiguous betrayal. Du Toit's affair is deleted, as is the novelistic frame complete with its debauched drone of casual quickies. Even Susan, Du Toit's wife, is made more sympathetic as we see her change from happiness in the film's early scenes to vicious rage. At her most bitter, she remains a loving mother to her son, and with the brilliant casting of Jürgen Prochnow as Stolz the film focuses attention not on the novel's sex war but on apartheid. But even Prochnow's smilingly evil Stolz demonstrates a problem.

A Dry White Season has some strengths absent from *Cry Freedom*: in addition to having Marlon Brando to balance Denzel Washington, it has a lighting that reveals the beauty of South Africa (or, rather,

Zimbabwe), and it gives a fuller, grim view of a township, complete with piles of rubble, that nicely plays off the Du Toit family estate. But it shares, even more pronouncedly, *Cry Freedom's* interest in the effects of apartheid on whites and its desire to find "easy truths" (OA 114) to the complicated problem of apartheid. There are two black victims in *A Dry White Season* to *Cry Freedom's* one¹³: both Gordon Ngubene and his son Jonathan are killed by the police. But the film concentrates on Du Toit's discovery of apartheid's horrors, and the need for him to find an audience. What he is trying to make public, like Donald Woods, is that the police are responsible for the death. But Du Toit is more specific: he knows the death was caused specifically by Captain Stolz.

In Brink's novel Stolz functions as a representative of the security police's brutal policies: the film makes him their embodiment. This both creates a more dramatic opposition of good and evil between Du Toit and Stolz, and sabotages this film's own efforts to portray the intertwined allegiances that developed from apartheid. Localizing evilness in Stolz leads to the film's "happy" ending: Stanley—he who has initiated Du Toit into black life—shoots Stolz as he is packing his car, presumably to leave town and escape the publication of his misdeeds. Unfortunately, this solution is pure theater. Only through cinematic convention do we see Stolz torture Ngubene and run over Du Toit. When the camera freezes on Stanley in the instant before he shoots Stolz, and the torture and killing flashback, these are not memories Stanley can have in his head. One of the most painful aspects of *Biko* is that only Biko and those who caused or allowed the death know what happened. Biko cannot talk, and the others will not. That absolute impenetrability, the fact that all the fragments from witnesses can never tell the whole truth, is erased in *A Dry White Season*. Our relief at Stolz's death is unalloyed because we see him commit the crimes; there is no complication, no doubt. The movie compels us to want a resolution that plays right into the propaganda of apartheid: free the blacks,

and they will slaughter all the whites on suspicion of abuse or complicity.

Notable as *Cry Freedom* is for its lack of gratuitous sexual innuendo and exploitation of women, it carries the stigma of sexism: the generic male pronoun predominates—Biko contrasts growing up in the township to life outside it, summing up, "no matter how smart or dumb a white child is, he has privileges." One might add, no matter how black or white a child is, *she* does not. A common argument against interfering in South African politics is the claim that blacks there have a better standard of living than blacks in other parts of Africa. This is a false comparison: their standards are sharply inequitable with white living standards in their own country. Beyond that barrier is that of sexual difference. Although a white girl will have more than a black girl, each has less than her male counterpart. This is demonstrated in a brief scene from the police attack on the Crossroads settlement during the film's credits: a young woman is pushed against a wall and her dress ripped off her breasts. By attributing the threat of rape to the "evil" police, the film has its cake and eats it too—the female audience is threatened, the male audience thrilled, all in a politically correct forum.

This criticism might seem overly fine, yet all decisions contain residual information. South Africa is distanced from us as it becomes text—as it can no longer be seen, its multiplicity of voices dwindle down to one. In *Biko*, Donald Woods speaks for the country, reflecting his personal anger and determination that economic sanctions, no matter how painful to the under class, will most quickly end apartheid and allow him to return to his house and Mercedes (Woods's lecture). Yet whispers interleave Woods's own voice: some he allows to speak through his book, as that of Biko, the court system, and the police: others slip in marginally—the sounds of complicity, privilege, habitual oppression—and render the text richer than Woods himself intended. He is a better representative of South Africa than he realizes, and convincingly embodies the dangers of apartheid. A notice about *Cry Freedom* states that the movie's emphasis on a white family is "redressed" "by framing the Biko-Woods story with larger historical events"—the at-

tack on the Crossroads township that opens the film and the brutal suppression of the Soweto riots that Woods recalls as he is flying out of South Africa. However, that context does not “redress the situation”: instead, it extends the patriarchal tactics of the film. The film’s choice to preserve Donald Woods as the central character discloses a belief that audiences will not identify with “Bantu” Steve Biko. Further, the decision to show examples of police force on a massive scale reflects a fear that Biko’s death alone will not bother this same audience. Although framing Biko’s death with the large-scale attacks—not chronologically accurate—may have been meant to show that the single death is part of a juggernaut, it actually works to play down the impact of the murder, as is shown by the number of commentators who effectively blame Biko for his death. Lally writes that Biko engaged in “dangerous” activities that “led inexorably to his death;” Richard Blake refers to “his suicidal rendezvous with fate,”¹⁴ and Stanley Kauffman complains:

Biko dies too senselessly and too early. He virtually invites martyrdom by insisting on a trip to Johannesburg to address students. 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 (PP 26).

While many may agree with Kauffman, as I do, that Biko dies too early and too senselessly, some may have difficulty with the implication that Biko’s death was his own fault. Such a surprising critique results from the elision of historical fact and cinematic structure. Kauffman later adds that Attenborough “had to find ways to beef up the account of a pitifully short life. The last hour of this film’s 157 minutes is a mechanical thriller.” Here again, the tone suggests that Biko’s life was pitifully short because it cannot fill three hours on film. In fact, it could, had the movie been about Biko. But it is not, in more than the obvious ways. The film uses Biko’s own metaphor of dinner guests—that blacks want to invite whites to sit at their tables, on their terms, rather than al-

ways accepting invitations to a condescending white table (BI 60). But every selection of the film makes clear that the only table that should be shown is a white one. Where Woods could not help including himself, the film *chooses* him as its hero.

In *Biko* the focus remains fixed on its subject, one of its most fascinating sections being the inquest into the cause of his death. Here South Africa is revealed through court records, in which facts and words change like quicksilver to reflect their user’s face. For example, one reason police and doctors failed to recognize the severity of Biko’s injuries was the almost magical power they ascribed to him: they thought that since he had once studied medicine he was capable of faking the symptoms of irreversible neurological damage (BI 318-20, 339). The film cannot linger on these aspects of the Biko story—the indeterminacy of what Biko actually experienced during August and September of 1977—out of fear of diluting its message that South Africa is evil. The stunning triviality of such a pat message is underscored by the irreverent comparison that kept creeping into my mind throughout Woods’s thrilling escape to Lesotho—that this was a 1988 remake of *The Sound of Music*, complete with the family Von Trapp producing a prize-winning chorus, not of “Edelweiss,” but of the African National Anthem. Film has a tradition it ignores at its own peril: in this instance the very simplification of the film’s content belies the dangers of apartheid, and elides it almost comically with Julie Andrews.

Cry Freedom reenacts oppression as it sanitizes the blacks of the film—one (white) viewer exclaimed in frustration. “They’re all so nice!”—the subtext reading, “if only the (black) people *I* knew were so sympathetic!” As Denby notes, “The blacks in Biko’s circle . . . are so dignified in speech and bearing that they border on absurdity. They speak one at a time, never interrupting or overlapping.”¹³ Human tumult and anger are not allowed these characters. Nor is squalor. Although we’re shown the destruction of a shantytown, the sheer horror of day-to-day life there is not depicted. Biko and Woods walk through a calm township at night seeming in total safety: everyone is wonderful,

culminating in Biko, the familiar Denzel Washington. In contrast, the Afrikaners are big, beefy rednecks who laugh at Biko's death. Our expectations are never disturbed, we know who to be for without any doubt, and the movie works hard to ensure that identification with the oppressed blacks will be as easy as possible. One writer tactfully notes that "its emphasis on Woods may at least bring home to a white audience how forceful and pervasive is the suppression of dissent in that country."¹⁴ The understanding is that like Woods, white audiences cannot really accept apartheid until it oppresses another white. Catering to such biases does not necessarily distort—Biko was a charismatic figure, Kruger did joke about his death, and apartheid is, today, widely accepted as morally repugnant. The film does the service of prettily presenting Woods's story. As Mark Gevisser memorably puts it, the film encourages the audience to escape Africa with Woods in his "Light Airplane of Political Awakening."¹⁵ It provides no insight into the vexed political situation of South Africa, nor into the conditions under which most blacks live.

By giving us such a tidy picture of South Africa, both these films reflect less pleasantly on their audiences. As the movies try to soothe and pamper us they hold a glass up to our faces: their strategies illustrate the significant and seemingly increasing role oppression plays in our own societies. Woods relates that black groups were consulted during the filming of *Cry Freedom*, but they wanted the story told through white eyes, to convert white audiences.¹⁶ The advice was followed perhaps too religiously—the paperback reprint of *Biko* contains photographs of Denzel Washington, rather than the actual pictures of Biko before and after his death printed in the 1977 edition. By playing to sexist prejudice, trying to allay bigoted reactions, the film demonstrates that its preferred audience embodies the values of a predominantly white, male, and middle class culture—the audience, admittedly, that holds the most power, and can most effectively change Western foreign policy toward South Africa.¹⁷ But will that audience feel anything remains to be combatted after having its conscience purged, after feeling

its own intolerances assuaged as if they were of a different ilk than the biases of South Africa?

Cry Freedom and *A Dry White Season* do not present the felt texture of South African life. Rather, through schematized representation of the extreme conditions in South Africa, the films effectively demonstrate that the habits of oppression underlying the South African Government remain in effect in the very countries that decry apartheid. Cicely Tyson writes: "*Cry Freedom* is the first movie that fully addresses the horrors of apartheid. Apartheid is not history. It is NOW."¹⁸ These movies are also not history, despite their inspiration in history and their addends. Yet both movies do show that apartheid is, indeed, NOW—and, more significantly, HERE. Its unseen roots infect us all. As charity is reputed to do, the battle against oppression must begin at home.

NOTES

¹See Donald Woods, *Biko* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1987); hereafter cited in the text as *BI*; and André Brink, *A Dry White Season* (New York: Penguin Books, 1979); hereafter cited in the text as *DW*.

²Clearly, some of these terms raise their own large philosophical questions, as "reality" does. Here I am relying on the simple observation that, "If the ideal of art is to create an illusion of reality, the motion picture made it possible to achieve this ideal in an unprecedented way," Gerald Mast and Marshall Cohen, eds., *Film Theory and Criticism* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1974) 1. These films could show their audiences South Africa in a way news censorship forbade.

³I limit my discussion to Woods's *Biko*, although *Asking for Trouble* was also used in the movie adaptation.

⁴Hilda Bernstein, *For Their Triumphs and For Their Tears: Women in Apartheid South Africa* (London: International Defense and Aid Fund for South Africa, 1985) 12.

⁵Chris Vieler-Porter, Interview with Richard Attenborough, *UNESCO Courier* (August 1989): 4.

⁶“(T)he novel is a linguistic medium, the film essentially visual,” George Bluestone, *Novels into Film* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973) viii.

⁷M.P., “Cambridge Diarist: Black and White” review of *Cry Freedom*, *New Republic* 21 (December 1987): 42. Hereafter cited in the text as CD.

⁸David Denby, “Denzel Washington . . .” *New York* 21 (September 1987): 54. Hereafter cited in the text as DW.

⁹Stanley Kaufman, “The Past in the Present,” review of *Cry Freedom*, *New Republic* 7 (December 1987): 26. Hereafter cited in the text as PP.

¹⁰*Biko*, 165.

¹¹David Denby, “Out of Africa,” review of *Cry Freedom*, *New York* 16 (November 1987): 114. Hereafter cited in the text as OA.

¹²For example, in assessing Denzel Washington’s acting ability he says: “Nobody has really taken on Sidney Poitier’s mantle yet, but I think Denzel can do it (DW 54).” A compliment, certainly—yet why must black actors be placed in a separate (but equal?) category?

¹³I refer here to characters developed and killed in the film. Both movies use the Soweto uprising to show that far more than the main subjects are hurt by apartheid.

¹⁴Richard H. Blake, “Nothing Personal,” review of *Cry Freedom*, *America* 19 (December 1987): 406.

¹⁵Mark Gevisser, review of *Cry Freedom*, *Nation* 9 (January 1988): 31.

¹⁶Tyson quotes an ANC official’s qualified approval of the film’s approach, but M.P. informs us that the ANC was at odds with Black Consciousness, Biko’s party.

¹⁷A point Attenborough makes explicit: “I wanted to reach an American audience because it was, I thought, in the United States that a

fundamental change in attitude towards the administration of South Africa was likely to be most influential” (4).

¹⁸Cicely Tyson, review of *Cry Freedom*, *Ebony* (December 1987): 66.