



The Dual Representation of the Social Problem Film:

Commercial Apartheid Movies of the 1980s

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IN THE LATE 1980S, three commercial films that addressed life under South Africa's apartheid government were released to a mass, international audience. *Cry Freedom* (Attenborough, 1987), *A World Apart* (Menges, 1988), and *A Dry White Season* (Palcy, 1989) were unique: prior to them, no commercial movie with an antiapartheid theme had been produced. South African filmmakers, under decades of restrictive measures from their government, had been largely unsuccessful in spreading an antiapartheid message through cinema across their own nation, let alone the international community. Coupled with growing international interest in South Africa's social and human rights crisis, a solution finally emerged as foreign filmmakers and producers began to take interest in South Africa's failed government, leading to the arrival of the big-budget apartheid movie. Each of these films tried to promulgate an antiapartheid message while retaining marketability to an entertainment-hungry audience, relying heavily on emotion, melodrama and a personal story to relate apartheid's horrors to an alien audience. The pictures were well received by critics and audiences, garnering strong returns at the box office and numerous international film festival nominations and wins. Still, many were quick to criticize the films for the common misconceptions and misrepresentations in their narratives. Critics attacked, in particular,

the films' white-centered perspectives, the absence of any profound political discussion offering solutions to South Africa's predicament and their reliance on Hollywood formats, such as the melodrama and the white-black buddy relationship, thereby distorting the events and figures that the movies were based upon. By reexamining the historical context and aesthetics of these three 1980s commercial apartheid films, using contemporary media and human rights theories, we can begin to understand the complexities of the social problem film, its transnational derivations and its engagements with issues of social injustice.

From a South African perspective, before the 1980s, it was twenty years of stagnation. Not since *Zulu* (Endfield, 1964), the story of the 1879 Zulu warriors' defeat of British forces, had South African cinema achieved international acclaim. Under permanent and oppressive governmental regulation of the film industry and the conservative holding groups that controlled it, South African cinema had a crippling homogeneity that, for two decades, produced essentially unoriginal films void of substance. Independent films that challenged apartheid could only be produced and distributed clandestinely, never making it very far outside the nation's borders. In 1963, the Publications Control Board, a censorship panel, was established and immediately banned the screening of *Zulu* for black audiences. From that point on, films that carried any message critical of the government, apartheid or South African society stood no chance of finding production approval or distribution. Further undermining a more liberal cinema was the dominance of the South African Theatre Investments Company (Satbel). Armed with right-wing Afrikaner capital, Satbel controlled the production, distribution and exhibition of cinema in South Africa from 1969 to 1986 (Tomaselli 1988). Antiapartheid cinema existed during this era and included several landmark South African films – such as *The Guest* (Devenish, 1977) and the documentary *A Land Apart* (Persson, 1974) – but these films were far apart and few in number because of the massive obstacles that stood in the way of their production, exhibition and distribution. As a result, the national cinema of South Africa in the 1960s and 1970s produced mostly generic and uncontroversial films. It was only in the 1980s that the film industry saw promise again.

In 1980, the government offered large tax concessions for national film investors, and in 1986 Satbel was sold to progressive-minded owners willing to challenge the nation's social and political issues. This led to the production



BELOW Michael Caine as Lieutenant Gonville Bromhead in *Zulu*

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of several hundred commercial films over the following ten years, but the majority of these films were still superficial, with most of them poor imitations of American movies (Maingard 164). Spurred by the promising, recent changes, liberal South African filmmakers became increasingly restless with their industry's limitations. Luckily, the mid-1980s brought a growing foreign interest in their cause. Writers, directors, producers and actors from in and outside of South Africa began to seek new ways to bring the nation's struggle to the silver screen and to a mass, international audience.

By the mid-1980s in America, the antiapartheid movement was at its peak. Protests were being staged on college campuses, news coverage filled household television sets and Jesse Jackson and Randall Robinson pressured Congress to take action against the apartheid government (Nixon 82). A lifelong activist against racism and prejudice, British director Richard Attenborough adapted a 1970s antiapartheid novel with the intention of bringing South Africa's struggle to the American and British public. Produced in the United Kingdom and released in 1987, *Cry Freedom* was the first large-scale effort to deal with apartheid on international screens. With the prospect of a new market in the American public and media, it was able to find \$21 million in financial backing from Marble Arch Productions (Yarrow 87). Featuring stars Kevin Kline and Denzel Washington, the film was based on the story of Steve Biko, a Black Consciousness leader who was murdered in

police detention in 1977. Prior to shooting, Attenborough admitted that the “sufferings, defiance, political ideas and murder of a black South African leader stood no chance on their own of succeeding as a major movie” (Nixon 82). As a result, the film killed off Biko early on and inserted a white male protagonist, a journalist friend of Biko's. The last hour and a half became a melodrama about the journalist and his family, ignoring Biko's philosophy and ideas. By using “Hollywood's formula for dealing with the ‘third world’” (Nixon 82) – such as star actors, a white-black buddy drama, a white protagonist and the deradicalization of Biko's personal philosophy – the film was designed to penetrate a broader, overseas audience. Many critics of the film were angered by the suggestion that a political solution to the apartheid fundamentally lay in an integrated buddy movie, but this prioritization of marketability over accuracy was soon to become a model for introducing apartheid to foreign audiences.

The following year, two native South Africans, director Chris Menges and writer Shawn Slovo, released *A World Apart*. Similar to *Cry Freedom*, it was a transnational effort that demonstrated how South African cinema, and its voice against apartheid, had been forced to rely on the international community to be produced. To avoid the complications of shooting the film in South Africa, they used British financing, shot the film in Zimbabwe, and coproduced it using United Kingdom and Zimbabwean companies. The story focused on the South African police's detention of Slovo's activist mother, Ruth First, in the

turned to pictures of Afghani women veiled in burkas while reporters described their oppression and hailed their liberation through American and allied military intervention” (32). Kozol believes that to exploit visible cultural characteristics is to cement the hegemonic attitude of American imperialism, rather than move toward an equal, unified humanity. *Cry Freedom*, *A World Apart* and *A Dry White Season* all focused on white perspectives for the purpose of relating the films to mass Western audiences, even diminishing the stature of the black characters at times. Does Kozol’s cautionary advice apply?

Perhaps one of the most sound assessments of the dangers of producing media to document social injustice and disseminate awareness is Michael Ignatieff’s “Is Nothing Sacred? The Ethics of Television.” Here, Ignatieff reflects that, although “television has contributed to the breakdown of barriers of citizenship, religion, race and geography that once divided our moral space,” it conversely renders its audiences powerless spectators to the suffering of others: “Tourists amidst their landscapes of anguish.” Ignatieff points out the beneficial effect that media coverage has had on famine and war, recalling how continuous pressure from television on European governments during the 1984 Ethiopian famine compressed time and space, leading to more than sixty million pounds of food being donated to famine relief agencies in Britain alone within a year of the famine’s first coverage in October 1984. However, Ignatieff cautions that the same immediacy of television can lead to misanthropy because of television’s tendency of “pointing to the corpses rather than explaining why violence may, in certain places, pay so well” (25). Reflecting upon media coverage of modern civil wars – such as Lebanon, Bosnia and Rwanda – Ignatieff points out that television’s role in those conflicts was to synthesize and broadcast a quick, black/white, right/wrong stance on a complex, deeply rooted conflict. Ignatieff warns that this approach is illegitimate and can spread a dangerous, misplaced sentiment of misanthropy among its vast audiences – “that the world has become too crazy to deserve serious reflection” (25).

Applying these media theories to films such as *Cry Freedom* unearths troubling questions. Beneath the harmless guise of a mainstream film designed to generate empathy and spread awareness for a movement against a racist government, are there dangerous, unintended side effects? In Ignatieff’s model, the films are guilty of presenting a political, economical and social crisis as a far simpler situation than it is in reality, obviating solutions to racism at the macro level, even insinuating that biracial

friendship will lead to a happy personal/social ending. Kozol’s article resonates particularly in terms of the films’ use of white perspectives as an empathetic way into everyday social horrors; however, it could be argued that the explicit message of racial equality in each of the movies might balance out such problems. It is also important to keep in mind that no financier would readily spend millions of dollars on a project that risked losing money for lack of potential audience. Without creating a film with characters and a plot that widespread Western audiences could immediately relate to, there would have been no international feature film about apartheid. In the case of Keenan and Hesford, there is no quantifiable way of measuring the films’ beneficial roles, versus apartheid, in creating witnesses. Because of this, it is necessary to contextualize these films within the decline of apartheid.

The demise of South Africa’s government was the result of an intricately woven web of national and international disownment, ranging from the divestment campaign to the boycotts of culture, sport, trade, oil and military hardware. In *Homelands, Harlem, and Hollywood South African Culture and the World Beyond*, Rob Nixon asserts, “No other post-World War II struggle for decolonization has been so fully globalized; no other has magnetized so many people across such various national divides, or imbued them with such a resilient sense of common cause” (introduction). The failure of South Africa’s apartheid government reflected, then, the rapid acceleration of globalization and the growing importance and power of transnationalism. Television made it possible for audiences across the world to watch “nightly reports of massive resistance to apartheid, the growth of a democratic movement, and the savage police and military response” (Knight). The result of the highly publicized antiapartheid movement in the 1980s was “a dramatic expansion of international actions to isolate apartheid, actions that combined with the internal situation to force dramatic changes in South Africa’s international economic relations” (Knight). The United States’s Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986 perhaps best exemplified the incredible power of the civil movement against apartheid. The act banned new U.S. investments in South Africa, prohibited the import of South African products and sales to their police and military. Vetoed by President Ronald Reagan and then overruled by Congress, it marked the first time in the twentieth century that a U.S. president had a foreign policy veto overridden, testament to the growing power of the antiapartheid

movement (Knight). Before judging the commercial apartheid films of the 1980s as successful documentations of a human rights crisis, or generators of empathy and witnesses, we need to understand that ultimately the same transnational forces and antiapartheid movement that led to the – perhaps compromised – production of *Cry Freedom*, *A World Apart* and *A Dry White Season* also, in turn, led to the demise of apartheid. The films were simply reflections – or mediascapes, in Appadurai’s equation – of a global, cultural economy, configured by the vast political, economical and social factors that dictated the failure of the apartheid government.

The commercial social problem film prioritizes entertainment first in its portrayal of trauma and injustice, for the simple fact that a feature film large enough to reach a mass, international market must be backed by financiers and studios with very deep pockets. This equates to movies that follow formulaic, Hollywood conventions, providing a level of accessibility for audiences and profitable returns for its producers. Keeping in mind the mainstream feature film’s rigid norms and structures, it is difficult to critique this type of movie when it becomes a vehicle for human rights coverage, because its first priorities will always be to make profits, disseminating awareness only as a side effect. Any benefit it provides to a social movement will be just that – spreading awareness to those who watch it. Nothing mandates a high standard of accuracy and representation in the film, or a self-consciousness of the consequences its representation produces outside of connecting emotionally with the viewer.

When analyzing the commercial social problem film, perhaps it is most salient to look at *what* it represents rather than *how* it represents its subject matter. Regardless of whether the millions of filmgoers who watched *A Dry White Season* left theaters as witnesses or spectators, the sole *existence* of a transnational multimillion-dollar production (one that also managed to lure Brando out of his ten-year retirement) testifies to the power of the transnational antiapartheid movement. Because they were each a product, side effect and catalyst in the global system of social change, the commercial apartheid films of the 1980s were perhaps most valuable as a collective gauge of public concern over a looming social crisis. The most useful function of the social problem film, with regard to a human rights movement, may well be its ability to unite a common viewer, maintaining its vitality within the globalized network of forces that shape conflict resolutions and actions against human rights crises. /END/

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