

Article

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The Cinema of Ross Devenish



(Charlesy Whaley, Ross Devenish and Martin Botha)

Academic scholarship about South African film directors

South African film history is captured in less than 20 books. Developments in early South African cinema (1895–1940) have been chronicled in Thelma Gutsche's *The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa: 1895–1940* (1946/72). Other significant studies include Keyan Tomaselli's *The Cinema of Apartheid: Race and Class in South Africa* (1989), Johan Blignaut and Martin Botha's *Movies Moguls Mavericks: South African Cinema 1979–1991* (1992), Martin Botha's

edited volume, *Marginal Lives and Painful Pasts: South African Cinema After Apartheid* (2007), Jacqueline Maingard's *South African National Cinema* (2007), André le Roux and Lilla Fourie's *Filmverlede: Geskiedenis van die Suid-Afrikaanse speelfilm* (1982), Peter Davis's *In Darkest Hollywood: Exploring the Jungles of Cinema's South Africa* (1996), Martin Botha and Adri Van Aswegen's *Images of South Africa: The Rise of the Alternative film* (1992), Tomaselli's compilation of revised and reworked papers and chapters published elsewhere, *Encountering Modernity: Twentieth*

Century South African Cinemas (2006), Isabel Balseiro and Ntongela Masilela's edited volume, *To Change Reels: Film and Film Culture in South Africa* (2003) Martin Botha's *South African Cinema 1896 – 2010* (2012), Lucia Saks's *Cinema in a Democratic South Africa: The Race for Representation* (2010), Litheko Modisani's *South Africa's Renegade Reels: The Making and Public Lives of Black-Centered Films* (2013), Leon van Nierop's reflections on the history of Afrikaans cinema in *Daar doer in die fliiek* (2016), as well as an invaluable recent study by Cara Moyer-Duncan's *Projecting Nation South African Cinemas after 1994* (2020).



(Klaus Eder and Ross Devenish)

In the 125-year history of South African cinema only two books have been devoted to South African film directors: Martin Botha and Hubert Dethier's *Kronieken van Zuid-Afrika: de films van Manie van Rensburg* (1997) and Martin Botha's *Jans Rautenbach: Dromer, Baanbreker en Auteur* (2006).

In general the artistic achievements of film directors received little scholarly attention. Attempts to rework the history of South African cinema such

as Isabel Balseiro and Ntongela Masilela's edited volume, *To Change Reels: Film and Film Culture in South Africa* (2003) as well as Jacqueline Maingard's *South African National Cinema* (2007) devoted entire chapters to the ideological analysis of films such as *De Voortrekkers* (1916), *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1951) and *Come Back, Africa* (1959), but in the process they ignored the significant oeuvres of directors such as Jans Rautenbach, Ross Devenish, Manie van Rensburg, Katinka Heyns, Darrell Roodt as well as many of the directors of the 1980s and 1990s. Surprisingly Heyns and Roodt, and other significant (and internationally acclaimed) post-apartheid directors such as Gavin Hood, Mark Dornford-May, Rehad Desai, Francois Verster, Ramadan Suleman, Madoda Ncayiyana, Craig Matthew, Craig and Damon Foster, Jack Lewis, Liz Fish and Ntshaveni Wa Luruli, are absent from the list of 25 film-makers and cultural leaders whom the American scholar Audrey Thomas McCluskey interviewed for her publication on post-apartheid cinema titled *The Devil You Dance With: Film Culture in the New South Africa* (2009). There is a serious neglect in academic scholarship regarding Ross Devenish and more troubling a lack of preservation of his film oeuvre in South African archives, a matter, which I raised at the BRICS Film festival in Brazil during 2019.

This article forms part of an ongoing investigation into the cinema of Ross Devenish. It forms part of more than 30 years of research about the director's oeuvre and hopefully will be considered as Part One of a long-term study. It will serve as an introduction to members of FIPRESCI to the extraordinary work by this director.

Apart from Jans Rautenbach and Manie van Rensburg another outstanding South African filmmaker of the 1970s was Ross Devenish, who made three internationally praised South African films, *Boesman and Lena* (1973), *The Guest* (1977) and *Marigolds in August* (1979).

Devenish, one of the most internationally acclaimed South African directors, was born in Polokwane (Pietersburg) in 1939. During his childhood years in Brits, a town outside Pretoria, he dreamt about becoming an engine driver. His father

served in the South African Air force in the Second World War. When his dad returned from the front he brought with him a roll of 16mm film, which had been taken from the camera filming engagements over enemy territory. Devenish became fascinated with these film rolls and he decided to make films.

At 19 he went to study film in London at the London School of Film Technique. He made several documentaries during the 1960s in war zones such as the Civil War in Yemen, Borneo, Malaysia, the Congo and Vietnam. He worked for Associated Rediffusion, which was the precursor of Thames Television when he filmed conflict in the Congo during the sixties. His last war experiences were in Vietnam just before and during the Tet Offensive. At that stage he worked at that stage for ITV – Thames television. The Vietnamese war had a huge impact on Devenish and he realised that the very same thing could happen in apartheid South Africa.

Before working in South Africa Devenish received international acclaim for two documentaries: *Now that the Buffalo's Gone* (1968), a moving account of Native Americans, and *Goal!*, a film about the World Soccer World Cup competition held in England in 1966. *Now that the Buffalo's Gone* won the American Blue Ribbon Award. *Goal!* received the Robert Flaherty Award from the British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA).

Boesman and Lena (1973)

In the 1970s Devenish and playwright Athol Fugard created three highly acclaimed films, *Boesman and Lena*, *The Guest* and *Marigolds in August*. *Boesman and Lena* (1973), based on Fugard's play, was the first local feature to portray the poverty and enforced removals of South Africans classified as "black" under apartheid. The film won a gold and silver medal at the 6th Atlanta Film Festival in the USA. Fugard himself played the part of the bitter Boesman, with Yvonne Bryceland as Lena, his common-law wife, who complains constantly of his ill-treatment of her. The opening sequence of *Boesman and Lena* is haunting: Boesman taunts the driver of a bulldozer that is leveling their makeshift house. In helpless rage he and Lena take their belongings and take to the road in search of a new home. By the end of the film they

are still homeless. They became the marginal characters, which who would dominate post-apartheid cinema. The film is a searing portrait of marginality.

The Guest (1977)



In *The Guest* (1976) director Ross Devenish examines Afrikaner intellectual, poet, writer and opium addict, Eugene Marais's fight against drug dependence during an incident at the end of his life. In stark contrast to several Afrikaans language films of the sixties and seventies with their idealised depiction of white Afrikaners, Devenish provided a critical portrait of this part of South African society. Morphine addiction changes Marais's life completely and transforms his promising future into an existence of terrible pain and loneliness that finds expression in the sombre vision in forming his poems and other literature.

In a sequence, while Marais is preparing an injection, one hears his voice-over:

The supreme danger which lies in the use of intoxicants as a cure for mental suffering and which often renders the remedies worse than the disease is of course the morbid organic changes resulting from habitual use. Cessation of use causes what are known as symptoms of abstinence, of a severity and painfulness proportionate to the usual dose and the duration of the habit. These symptoms are always painful and a dose of the poison invariably affords relief from their immediate effects. Long-continued usage therefore sets up in time the so-called 'double pull' – the

craving for the characteristic euphoria and a dread of the painful symptoms of abstinence. There is a continual alternation between the deepest gloom of abstinence and a mental state . . . which through continuous use of the drug resembles sluggish mental anaesthesia rather than positive happiness. But for the individual concerned this temporary respite is preferable to the normal condition of suffering (Fugard & Devenish 1992:76)

Morphine became the catalyst in the life of this respected Afrikaner; his dark vision emerges from the euphoria and the pain; it is this knowledge that dictates his ideas and actions. Devenish focuses on a small period in Marais' life, going 'cold-turkey' on a farm called Steenkampskraal. Athol Fugard plays Marais as he staggers inevitably towards suicide. Devenish cuts incisively through the mythical stereotype of Marais, who believed that the existence of life is founded on pain and sorrow. This pain is the subject of a graceful, austere and controlled film, which handles its themes almost with musical skill. It is passed on and explored with an almost fugue-like pattern, from person to person, from voice to voice, until Marais' point seems irrefutable (Ronge 1977). The mood is brilliantly enhanced by the use of music by Johann Sebastian Bach on the soundtrack.

Devenish also brilliantly depicts two contrasting worldviews. The Meyer family, who hosts Marais, is a simple, conservative Afrikaner group. The father (Gordon Vorster) and mother (brilliantly played by Wilma Stockenström) are initially unaware of Marais's addiction. Although alienated by his social aloofness the family still tries to be friendly and supportive hosts. Marais, however, is experiencing an existential crisis and he is withdrawing more and more from society. Only his friend A.G. Visser (Marius Weyers) provides some form of comfort, especially when they engage in literary and philosophical discussions.

While most South African films of the 1970s approached their subjects by means of social melodrama *The Guest* is influenced by Italian neorealism, as well as the style of the Indian master Satyajit Ray. It is an austere film which wasn't

popular with South African audiences, but received ecstatic international acclaim (Tomaselli 1989). This masterful film won numerous national and international awards, including a Bronze Leopard Award at the Locarno Film festival.

Marigolds in August (1979)



Marigolds in August (1979) portrays the tension between a poor, black man, Daan (Winston Ntshona), and an unemployed black man, Melton (John Kani), who is struggling to support a family in a township near Port Elizabeth. The film was made at Schoenmakerskop, a "white" beach resort on the outskirts of Port Elizabeth. Some ten kilometres from Schoenmakerskop is Walmer, a "black" township where servants who work in the resort live. The township is a place where malnutrition is rife and where unemployed blacks and squatters gather. It is from this place that Daan walks in early morning light to work in the "white" beach resort as a gardener. His security, however, is threatened by the presence of Melton (movingly played by Kani), who is looking for work. One of Melton's children has died recently and his wife and a second child suffer from malnutrition. He has no money or food and is desperate.

Melton's presence in the town means danger to Daan since his own passbook is not in order in apartheid South Africa and Melton's presence could attract the attention of the South African police. A fierce conflict develops between Daan and Melton and this becomes a struggle for self-preservation, one in which Paulus (played by Fugard), a man who ekes out a meagre living by catching snakes for the snake park, serves as a catalyst. Gradually Daan grows to

understand his dilemma. He realises that the apartheid system divides blacks and plays them off against each other. Solidarity and compassion towards each other is the only solution.

The third of director Ross Devenish's collaborations with playwright Athol Fugard, the film was one of the few local features in the 1970s, which examined the conditions of blacks in South Africa. While most of local filmmaking created an idealised South Africa in which blacks didn't exist in the 1970s Devenish confronted the dilemma of black unemployment in a universe where whites are only seen behind glass, in their houses or cars, separated from the socio-political realities of apartheid South Africa. It is shot in the style of Italian neorealism and the **fifties' work by Satyajit Ray**, and the film consists mostly of exteriors, shot in natural light.

The film, shunned by South African audience during its release in 1980, became an international award winner at various film festivals, including the Berlin International Film Festival, where it won two awards, including the Silver Bear. Despite the international acclaim Devenish found it impossible to work under apartheid and went into exile. *Marigolds in August* was his last South African feature.

Devenish left for the United Kingdom in the 1980s, where he directed several acclaimed television dramas such as an eight-part series of *Bleak House* and features such as *Happy Valley* (shot in Kenya), *Death of a Son* (1987) and *Asinamali* (1987), a BBC adaptation of Mbongoni Ngema's stage play about the State of Emergency in apartheid South Africa. *Bleak House* won three BAFTA Awards.

Devenish returned to South Africa in 2002. Unfortunately once again he was faced by a funding climate, which thus far hasn't been supportive of his film projects. His screenplay *Ways of Living*, an adaptation of Zakes Mda's novel *Ways of Dying*, has been rejected twice by the National Film and Video

Foundation (NFVF) due to the fact that the screenplay structure deviates from a three act structure and embraces oral aesthetics in storytelling. Devenish also removed his directing credits from a screen adaptation of John Kani's successful stage play, *Nothing but the Truth*, after filming finished in December 2006. He resumed his professional relationship with Fugard and co-directed the playwright's *The Train Driver* at the Fugard Theatre in Cape Town in 2010.



(Ross Devenish and Martin Botha)

Filmmakers such as Devenish and Rautenbach found it difficult to make the kind of film which deals critically with socio-political issues. They have encountered problems with subsidy, the censors, distributors and the predominant white audiences of the 1970s. During the 1970s black and white audiences were still treated differently. The audiences were separated, each with its own set of rules and operations, films and cinemas. Only by 1985 were cinemas in South Africa desegregated.

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