

Themes in the Cinema of Darrell James Roodt

By Martin P. Botha

Spring 2011 Issue of KINEMA

WOMEN ON THE MARGIN OF SOUTH AFRICAN SOCIETY: THEMES IN THE CINEMA OF DARRELL JAMES ROODT

South African director Darrell James Roodt is one of the most dominant and prolific figures in the South African film industry (Armes 2008: 112), having made a total number of 25 feature films and three television series to date. Surprisingly few academics have devoted chapters in books or doctorate dissertations to his work (Blignaut & Botha 1992; Botha & Van Aswegen 1992; Murphy & Williams 2007; Treffry-Goatley 2010).

*Roodt's oeuvre includes some of the milestones in South African cinema since 1980s, as well as genre films such as *Dracula 3000* (2004), which received negative notices by critics (Murphy & Williams 2007). This article forms part of an ongoing investigation into the cinema of Roodt and is an attempt to explore some of the major themes in his oeuvre.*

Darrell Roodt was born in Johannesburg in 1962 and attended the King Edward School. He enrolled at the University of the Witwatersrand to study drama, but left after one week to make films.

Early Roodt

Roodt's *A Place of Weeping* (1986), made at the age of 23, was produced and marketed internationally by Anant Singh, who became one of South Africa's most prominent film producers. The film deals with racial conflict. A black farm worker is beaten to death by his employer after complaining about his poor wages. The murder goes unreported since the other labourers fear for their future. A news reporter, however, becomes involved when a housemaid on the farm attempts to report the incident. Although seriously flawed due to poor performances from the actors, the film features striking cinematography by Paul Witte. Notably the film also features a strong black woman and her struggle against social injustice, a theme which would become a strong motif in Roodt's *oeuvre* during the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s.

Roodt's *The Stick* (1987) was the first South African film to examine the deployment of South African troops in cross-border raids during the South African Border War. The war is also commonly referred to as the Angolan Bush War in South Africa and is also known as the Namibian War of Independence. It refers to the conflict that took place from 1966 to 1989 in South-West Africa (now Namibia) and Angola between South Africa and its allied forces (mainly UNITA) on the one side and the Angolan government, South-West Africa People's Organisation (SWAPO), and their allies - mainly the Soviet Union and Cuba - on the other. It was closely intertwined with the Angolan Civil War.

The film begins with an introductory sequence filmed in one long take in black and white: One of the white heroes of the film (Greg Latter) is shown in his school uniform and his voice-over on the soundtrack states: "My father sent me to war to make a man of me. He was wrong". The character is part of a "stick" of men. Seven soldiers and a black tracker enter presumably Angola on a mission to exterminate a traditional healer, whose advice to rebel forces is regarded as destructive to South African security force efforts. Roodt's personal vision of the South African border war between South Africa and SWAPO is one that is linked to the genre of the American war film of the 1970s and 1980s, films praised for their critical examination of the psychological scars left on soldiers by the Vietnam War. These films (for example, *The Deer Hunter*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July*) are characterised by their graphic, detailed depiction of war. Roodt's film is no exception in this. By portraying war vividly and emphasising fear and confusion through the use of first-person narration on the soundtrack Roodt aligns himself with the anti-war genre (Botha & Van Aswegen 1992).

What fascinates Roodt is the physical and mental disintegration of the white protagonists after they have destroyed African lifestyles by wiping out a village of women and children, as well as the traditional healer. The film becomes a surreal and nihilistic work - that which is incomprehensible to the white protagonists,

namely Africa, is portrayed as sinister and irrational. They are clearly not equipped to combat this "supernatural" force. The film becomes an allegory of South Africa's political and military failure in Angola and Namibia to defeat SWAPO and the Ovambo population. This sentiment is made clear by the young hero's words to a senior military officer at the end of the film. When the soldier returns to South Africa he is confronted by the traditional healer in the shape of an ordinary black man. In other words, Africa still surrounds him - he cannot destroy it. To fight against it means self-destruction.

The film was initially banned in South Africa and the ban was upheld through various applications for screenings at film festivals until it was finally allowed to be screened at the Weekly Mail Film festival in 1989. The censors ordered 48 cuts before they would consider re-appraising the film (Ozynski 1989).

Stylistically *The Stick* is a remarkable film and forms part of auteur Roodt's trilogy on racial conflict in a rural milieu (*A Place of Weeping*, *The Stick* and *Jobman*). In the rural "wastelands" of animal carcasses (*The Stick*) or wrecked cars (*Jobman*), over which the camera of Paul Witte slowly pans in long takes from left to right, Roodt envisages a disintegrating white middle-class (magnificently conveyed in the party scene in *Jobman*). The pastoral Eden of the earlier Afrikaans cinema of the 1970s (see Botha 2011) has given way to an inhospitable symbolic "wasteland" in which people eventually would die (for example the final shootout in *Jobman* or battle in *The Stick*). David Barkham's art direction contributes significantly to the representation of this wasteland.

In *Jobman* (1989) the protagonist is a 25-year-old deaf and mute "coloured" man (Kevin Smith), who has been messed around and misunderstood all his life. When the film opens he is in Kimberley. The setting is Christmas 1960. Jobman is picked up by the police and stripped of his humanity. A parallel story moves the setting to a Karoo farm, where Jobman was born. The farmer dies and the farm is reluctantly inherited by his son, Carel (Tertius Meintjies in an award-winning performance). Jobman returns to the farm to fetch his wife and child, but is rejected by his own community as a social outcast. He also provokes fear in the white community. The only person who sides with him is the young farmer. As the situation finally ends in violence, a confrontation arises between the man and his former friend. Roodt's film vividly analyses the tragic paradox and practice of Christian brotherly love during the first years of the Verwoerdian regime. The images depict a disintegrating white middle-class trapped in its laager in an arid landscape strewn with wrecked cars and the carcasses of animals. David Barkman's art direction is excellent. The film was the last one shot by Paul Witte, who was tragically killed in a car accident in 1990.

Roodt's *Sarafina!* (1992) based on Mbongeni Ngema's stage musical about the school boycotts of 1976 and their brutal suppression by the police, resulted in international recognition for the director. It received a ten-minute standing ovation at the 1992 Cannes Film festival where it was shown in the official selection. It stars Whoopi Goldberg, Leleti Khumalo and Miriam Makeba. The film once again features strong women, who demonstrate some form of resistance against social injustice (Murphy & Williams 2007). *Sarafina!* also characterises Roodt's use of genre (the musical) in combination with strong socio-political content (the Soweto youth uprising of 1976). *Jobman* is a western, which features a marginalised character in South African society of the early 1960s. *The Stick* fits into the Vietnam War genre, but also explores South Africa's military involvement in Angola and Namibia.

It was thus no surprise that Roodt would also explore the period drama. In the early 1990s Ronald Harwood adapted Alan Paton's novel *Cry the Beloved Country* for Roodt and producer Anant Singh. Set in the 1940s it follows the journey of a Zulu pastor, Stephen Kumalo (James Earl Jones), from rural Zululand to Johannesburg to look for his son. Kumalo's journey brings him into direct conflict with a white man, James Jarvis (Richard Harris), who has lost his son in a violent crime. Through various tragic events, both men are forced to learn the lesson of forgiveness with dignity, a theme relevant to post-apartheid cinema. Visually the film is exquisite and John Barry's musical score enhances the deep-felt sadness of the events in the film. Anant Singh has been an important partner for Roodt over the years. They met as anti-apartheid filmmakers, felt a connection, and have been making films together ever since (Treffry-Goatley 2010). Singh has worked as a producer on many of these films, and the distribution arm of his company, Videovision, has also been responsible for certain international and local sales. Videovision, as the production company for many of these films, has also been an important source of finance for Roodt, who noted on the director's commentary for *Yesterday* that he is very lucky to have Singh's support because he has sometimes financed

entire productions such as *Faith's Corner* (2005).

Although Roodt has made many politically and socially conscious films, he has also shot numerous genre orientated films for the foreign market. These include *Blood City* (1987), *To The Death* (1991), *Father Hood* (1993), *The Second Skin* (2000), *Pavement* (2002), *Dracula 3000* (2003) and *Prey* (2007).

Roodt and the cinema of marginality

During the past decade Roodt moved away from his genre work to a series of remarkable films about South African women on the margin of South African society. These independently made features form part of a broad focus in post-apartheid cinema on people living on the periphery of society. Since 1994 South African audiences have been exposed to certain marginalised communities, such as the homeless in Francois Verster's remarkable documentary *Pavement Aristocrats: The Bergies of Cape Town* (1998), the Himbas of Kaokoland in Craig Matthew's *Ochre and Water: Himba Chronicles from the Land of Kaoko* (2001), AIDS victims in *Shouting Silent* (2001), the gay subcultures of the fifties and sixties in *The Man Who Drove With Mandela* (1998), street children in *Hillbrow Kids* (1999), prison inmates in Cliff Bestall's *Cage of Dreams* (2000) and the San in the Foster Brothers' visual poem *The Great Dance* (1999). The latter has already won more than 35 international and national awards, the most for a single film in the history of South African cinema. Wynand Dreyer's trilogy of documentaries about ordinary lives on the Cape Flats, *Ravensmead*, *A Piece of Life*, *A Piece of Death* and *Steel upon Steel* is a lyrical and moving document.

The term marginality used in this article to describe the poor economic and social conditions of individuals within a society, social classes within a nation, or nations within the larger world community. It also refers to poverty-stricken groups left behind in the modernization process. They are not integrated into the socioeconomic system and their relative poverty increases.

A gallery of marginal lives is seen in a variety of post-apartheid features, documentaries and shorts:⁽¹⁾

- Homelessness and poverty - *Angel*, *The Wooden Camera*, *The Flyer*, *Under the Rainbow*, *Boy Called Twist*, *Stompie and the Red Tide*, *Pavement Aristocrats: The Bergies of Cape Town*, *Malunde*, *Hillbrow Kids*, *Faith's Corner*, *Tsotsi*, *Boesman and Lena*, *Tracks*, *Azure*, *Life is Hard*, *Zimbabwe*, *Meisie*, *My Secret Sky*.
- AIDS orphans - *Shouting Silent*, *The Sky in her Eyes*, *A Child is a Child*, *Lucky*, *Zimbabwe*, *Life, Above All*.
- AIDS victims - *Yesterday*, *It's My Life*, *Beat the Drum*, *Considerately Killing Me*, *Nkosi*, *Themba*.
- Gays and lesbians - *Proteus*, *Property of the State: Gay men in the Apartheid military*, *The Man Who Drove With Mandela*, *Skilpoppe*, *Apostles of Civilised Vice*, *The World Unseen*.
- "Cultures under threat" - *Ochre and Water*, *The Great Dance*.
- Foreigners in South Africa and xenophobia: *The Foreigner*, *Conversations on a Sunday Afternoon*, *A shadow of hope*, *The Burning Man*, *District 9*.
- Victims of institutionalized violence during apartheid: *Zulu Love Letter*, *Ubuntu's Wounds*, *Forgiveness*, *Red Dust*, *The Guguletu Seven*, *What happened to Mbuyisa?*, *Between Joyce and Remembrance*, *Betrayal*, *Drum*, *Skin*, *The Cradock Four*.
- Victims of colonial racism: *The Life and Times of Sarah Baartman*.
- Victims of child rape: *And there in the Dust*.
- Intellectually-challenged youths and the community's discrimination: *Ouma se Slim Kind*.
- Victims of drug addiction: *Ongeriewe*, *My Black Little Heart*.

Marginalised communities thus finally feature in South African cinema after a silence of more than 90 years due to colonialism and apartheid. Of major importance in this regard is the cinema of Roodt (*Sarafina!*, *Yesterday*). Roodt's recent films (*Yesterday*, *Faith's Corner*, *Meisie*, *Lullaby*) have all explored marginalised female characters. His film, *Zimbabwe* (2008), continues the director's studies about vulnerable women challenged by politics and social circumstances. Armed with only a Sony PD150 camera and no budget whatsoever Roodt successfully made a film about an 18-year-old AIDS orphan who travels to South Africa in an effort to support her and two siblings. Apart from the main character's traumatic story, the film vividly reflects the bleakness of a Zimbabwe in ruins.

Zimbabwe opens with an overwhelming sense of the rural landscapes - a strong feature in Roodt's other

work (*Yesterday*, *Meisie*, *Cry the Beloved Country*, *Jobman*). The gaze is observational and the narrative structure almost impressionistic. Without any dialogue the viewer witnesses a burial. Scenes of attempts to survive in a harsh rural environment follow. Zimbabwe, the main protagonist, is an orphan. Her parents and sister have died of AIDS. The members of her community are not able to look after her and she is forced to travel to a family member in Beitbridge, a town on the border with South Africa, for support. Roodt brilliantly integrates the rural landscapes with the socio-political realities of the characters without explicitly commenting on the politics of Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe. He accentuates the physical challenges of Zimbabwe's journey to an urban area. Gradually the pastoral images are replaced by an urban landscape, which is characterised by social decay. Zimbabwe's family member is an alcoholic and she lives in difficult circumstances. The surrounding landscape is marked by wrecked cars as in the case of *Jobman*.

Zimbabwe's situation worsens when she is forced to work as an illegal domestic worker in Johannesburg, where she is exploited by both the agency, which is supposed to act on her behalf, as well as by her white male employer, who rapes her on several occasions. Her name is changed to Miriam and she is not allowed to display her identity as a Zimbabwean due to xenophobia and her illegal status in South Africa. Roodt's examination of the exploitation of Zimbabwean citizens in South Africa is brutal and moving. In the end Zimbabwe is forced to return to her homeland and an uncertain future.

Another significant film is *Faith's Corner* (2005). The film follows the life of Faith, a homeless beggar and a single mother of two young sons. They live in an abandoned car in an alleyway of central Johannesburg. Faith spends her days begging for money from disinterested commuters on the streets. Darrell Roodt's experimentation with film form is remarkable: Shot in the style of the silent cinema, complete with intertitles to capture the dialogue, the film sensitively confronts social issues of poverty and joblessness in South Africa. It is a vivid combination of social concern and formal experimentation. By using the silent format it almost makes a statement that social conditions for the poor haven't changed over the decades.

Both the Oscar nominated *Yesterday* (about AIDS), as well as *Meisie*, a multi award-winning film, focused on poverty in rural South Africa. *Meisie* (Girl) is a slice of life about a girl in a rural community who is prevented from attending school by her father who believes that she should spend her days tending goats instead. Shot in the style of neorealism the film features wonderful, natural performances by non-professional actors from the remote community of Riemvasmaak, on the edge of the Kalahari.

These films display Roodt's cinematic humanism in his representation of (black) women on the edge of post-apartheid society, which do get a voice in his work. At the same time, his deviation from the Hollywood classical narrative structure has resulted in fascinating experimentation with form - neorealism and oral narrative structures in the case of *Meisie* and partly *Yesterday*, *cinéma vérité* in *Zimbabwe* and the silent film with avant-garde elements in *Faith's Corner*.

Yesterday is in particular a fine example. It tells the story of a young black woman with AIDS. Within the temporal frame of the story, which is barely a year, Yesterday's life undergoes radical change. Physically, socially and existentially, her fortunes are profoundly altered when she becomes ill (Horne 2005). The significance of time is also seen in the importance of history in Yesterday's experience. There is considerable irony in Yesterday's father's belief that the world of yesterday was better than the world of the present, since the tragic turn his daughter's life takes is directly linked to events in the past. The importance of time also features in the chronological structure of the narrative which is explicitly marked by the naming of the seasons as these pass. This sequencing device creates a sense of the relentlessness of the passage of time and the inexorability of death. Roodt brilliantly depicts a socio-political milieu characterised by rural poverty, an inadequate primary health care system, a lack of a support base, community stigmatisation, domestic violence, a lack of formal education, as well as a lack of empowerment (Horne 2005; Treffry-Goatley 2010).

Significantly however, the film is about the main character's growing sense of empowerment, not her misery. Although she is representative of nameless millions with no status in the social hierarchy of South Africa, Roodt inverts the social order, adopting the discourse of transformation during the duration of the film (Horne 2005; Treffry-Goatley 2010). His achievement, as in the case of *Meisie*, is the representation of a character, who ultimately transcends her marginal status. *Yesterday* remains an important, progressive addition to the post-apartheid cinematic repertoire. Furthermore, Roodt's application of certain neorealist elements in the film might also be seen as a breakthrough in an industry where the pervasive influence of Hollywood is

evident not only in the distribution, exhibition and consumption practices of the country, but also in the widespread application of the classical narrative conventions in cinematic production (Treffry-Goatley 2010).

It seems that Roodt's latest work *Winnie* (2011) will continue his concerns about black women who rise above their marginal status in South African society. The film is based on *Winnie Mandela: A Life*, an unofficial biography by Anna Marie du Preez, a South African journalist. From the 1960s to the 1980s, Winnie Madikizela-Mandela was a widely admired symbol of the anti-apartheid struggle. She suffered harsh reprisals for the beliefs of her husband, Nelson Mandela, with whom she lived for only five weeks before he was arrested and imprisoned for 27 years.

Notes

1. See Botha (2011) for a comprehensive discussion on Marginality and post-apartheid cinema.

References

- Armes, R. *Dictionary of African filmmakers*. Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2008.
- Blignaut, J. & Botha, M.P. (eds.) *Movies Moguls Mavericks: South African cinema 1979-1991*. Cape Town, Show data, 1992.
- Botha, M.P. *South African cinema 1896-2010*. Bristol, Intellect Publishers, 2011 (Forthcoming)
- Botha, M.P. & Van Aswegen, A. *Images of South Africa: The rise of the alternative film*. Pretoria, Human Sciences Research Council, 1992.
- Horne, F. J. 'Yesterday, AIDS and structural violence in South Africa'. *Communicatio* 31:2 (2005): pp. 172-198.
- Maingard, J. *South African national cinema*. London, Routledge, 2007.
- Murphy, D. & Williams, P. *Postcolonial African cinema: Ten directors*. Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2007.
- Ozynski, J. (ed.) *Film: What the censors think*. Johannesburg, Anti-Censorship Group, 1989.
- Pichaske, K. *Colour Adjustment: Race and Representation in Post-Apartheid South African Documentary*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cape Town, 2009.
- Saks, L. *Cinema in a democratic South Africa: The race for representation*. Bloomington, Indiana, Indiana University Press, 2010.
- Tomaselli, K.G. *The cinema of apartheid: Race and class in South African film*. London, Routledge, 1989.
- Tomaselli, K.G. & Prinsloo, J. Third cinema in South Africa, in J. Blignaut & M.P. Botha (eds.) *Movies Moguls Mavericks: South African cinema 1979-1991*, (Cape Town, Show data, 1992), pp. 329-373
- Treffry-Goatley, A. *The representation and mediation of a national identity in the production of post-apartheid South African cinema*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cape Town, 2010.

Darrell Roodt Selected Filmography

1983

City of Blood

1986

Place of Weeping

1987

Tenth of a Second
The Stick

1989
Jobman

1991
Sarafina!

1993
To the Death
Fatherhood

1994
Cry the Beloved Country

1996
Dangerous Ground

2000
The Second Skin

2003
Pavement
Sumuru

2004
Dracula 3000
Yesterday

2005
Number Ten
Faith's Corner

2006
Prey

2007
Meisie

2008
Lullaby
Zimbabwe

2010
Jakhalsdans

2011
Winnie

Author Information

Martin P. BOTHA is Associate Professor of Film and Media Studies at the University of Cape Town. He has published more than 200 articles, reports and papers on South African media, including six books on South African cinema. His most recent book is *South African Cinema 1896–2010* (Bristol: Intellect, 2012).