The Cinema of Manie van Rensburg (Part 1)

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INTRODUCTION

The name, Manie van Rensburg, is virtually unknown in Europe and the United States of America. Recently, some of his work was screened at a South African film festival in Amsterdam at the Kriterion cinema and I had the honour to present a lecture there on 7 October 1995 regarding Van Rensburg and his presence in the cinema. His film work was also highlighted in a small retrospective during October 1996 at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel.

IT WAS NOT THE FIRST TIME a Van Rensburg film was screened outside the borders of South Africa. During the 1980s Van Rensburg received an International Film Festival of New York award for his historical TV drama series, *Heroes*, and a Merit Award from the London Film Festival was given to him for his filmed play, *The Native who Caused all the Trouble*. His mammoth production, *The Fourth Reich*, was screened at Cannes, however, in a version not acceptable to Van Rensburg. At an earlier film festival in Amsterdam, the so-called *Cinema under Siege*, his work was also presented.

Inside South Africa Van Rensburg was considered to be a "director with the talent and skill that could eventually put him with the ranks of the world's best" (Tony Jackman in the *Cape Argus* newspaper of 14 March 1983). He received a Honorary Prize from the South African Academy of Science and Art for Cultural achievements in cinema. *The Star* newspaper's *Tonight Award* was given to him four times. The South African Broadcasting Corporation's *Artes Award* was presented to him twice, and he also received awards from the *Afrikaanse Taal en kultuurvereniging*, the M-Net Vita Award for Best Director of *The Fourth Reich*, and the Idem Award for direction of *The Lighthouse* (Die Vuurtoring).

He was a very private person and to many people outside his small circle of friends, he remains an enigmatical figure. Even his suicide at the end of 1993 is clouded in mystery and my attempts to discover the *personal* side of Van Rensburg became a difficult voyage. I spent weeks at the South African Film Archives to look for information on Van Rensburg among his books, various scripts (some yet to be filmed), diaries and notes, but didn't discover the real motivation for his suicide. Yes, he was extremely lonely, and he suffered from stress and depression for many years. He was separated from his wife, the actress Grethe Fox in April 1992, after a marriage of 13 years. He broke his back and was thus confined to a wheelchair. He experienced severe pain and it made working difficult. But, it is amazing to see his output at the Film Archives: several new scripts, notes on new productions, many plans.

Van Rensburg was born on 24 October 1945 in Krugersdorp, a town in the former Transvaal province. He was part of a staunch, conservative Afrikaner family. Despite the restrictions imposed on him by this conservative upbringing, he tried to realise a dream to make motion pictures. The first step to this end was made when he bought his first movie camera at the age of 14 with his earnings as a church organist. Van Rensburg came from a strong musical background, which would later help him in creating lyrical images for the big screen.

Unable to further his education at an international film school due to financial and familial restrictions, he decided to go to the University of Potchefstroom where he obtained a degree majoring in English and Psychology. Following this academic period, Van Rensburg began an intense practical learning period in the artistic drought of South African film making of the 1960s. He tried to work for everybody who was somebody in motion picture production. In order to learn the trade thoroughly, he worked through all levels of film, from camera to editing to scriptwriting. He started as a darkroom assistant for a stills photographer in 1965. During 1966 he became an assistant cameraman. How did the South African film industry look at that time?

The South African film industry during the 1960s

It was the time of apartheid under Hendrik Verwoerd. During the first years of the 1960s while the main-

stream was producing musicals, adventure stories, comedies, romantic war films and films about our wildlife, the country was experiencing a stormy sociopolitical era. The large-scale opposition to apartheid legislation took on tragic dimensions on 21 March 1960 when at Sharpeville 69 people were shot dead, many in their backs, and 180 were wounded. A state of emergency was declared and over 11,500 people were detained. On 8 April 1960 the African National Congress (ANC) was proclaimed a legally banned organisation.

The run-up to a referendum to decide whether South Africa should become a republic or not was marked by internal political unrest and strong international criticism from abroad. On 31 May 1961 the Republic of South Africa was born. Black opposition became the order of the day; underground movements, including *Umkonto We Sizwe*, planned campaigns of sabotage. The main targets were petrol depots, power lines, government buildings, railway lines and communication networks. In 1963 the organisations were disbanded by the police and the leaders of *Umkonto We Sizwe*, including Nelson Mandela, were sentenced to life imprisonment.

No example of a major film made locally reflects the traumatic events of this period. Van Rensburg began as the cameraman on *Hoor My Lied* (*Hear My Song*, 1967), a soppy musical made with a large budget in the Western Cape Province and in the USA. The film was an enormous success with white Afrikaans speaking audiences and prompted the series of Afrikaans soap operas that appeared between 1967 and 1980. It was also the beginning of a highly fragmented South African industry with virtually no national film identity. The reason for this fragmentation and lack of identity is multifaceted, each facet interacting to produce a complicated set of associations and relationships. Various academic scholars such as Pieter Fourie of Unisa (Fourie 1981), Keyan Tomaselli (Tomaselli 1989) and John van Zyl (Van Zyl 1985), as well as research teams such as the Film and Allied Workers' Organisation's Film Commission spent time in identifying and analysing our business ills. Two books were published during the 1990s which also addressed these p;roblems (see Botha & Van Aswegen, 1992; Blignaut & Botha, 1992; see also Botha, Blignaut & Swanepoel, 1992).

Reasons for the fragmentation and lack of identity

In a nutshell, one could say that the apartheid policy as well as ineffective state-subsidised film structures have contributed to the severe fragmentation of our industry (Nathan 1991; Tomaselli 1989). Since 1956 and the introduction of a regulated subsidy system, government and big business have collaborated to manipulate cinema in South Africa. Ideology and capital came together to create a national cinema that would reflect South Africa during the Verwoerdian regime. However, it was initially a cinema for whites only, and predominantly Afrikaans. Of the 60 films made between 1956 and 1962, 43 were in Afrikaans, four were bilingual and the remaining 13 were English. The subsidy system rewarded box-office success. Once a film had earned a specific amount of money at the box-office, it qualified for the subsidy which paid back a percentage of costs. This percentage was initially higher for Afrikaans films than for English productions. It is therefore evident that the government of the day realised the potential influence Afrikaner-dominated film production would have on the growth and spread of the Afrikaans language. Since 1962, Afrikaner capital became a significant factor when the insurance company SANLAM acquired a major interest in Ster-films, a distribution company with the explicit intention to provide cinema predominantly for Afrikaner patrons. By 1969, Satbel (the Suid-Afrikaanse Teaterbelange Beperk) was formed, and the financing, production and distribution of films in South Africa were now virtually in the hands of one large company (except for a few cinemas owned by CIC-Warner). The white Afrikaans audience for the local cinema was relatively large and very stable, guaranteeing nearly every Afrikaans film a long enough run to break even as long as it provided light entertainment and dealt with Afrikaner reality and beliefs (Davies 1989).

With the exceptions of Jans Rautenbach and Manie van Rensburg, who turned to directing himself, the films were unremarkable. Fourie (1981) attributes this to the conservative attitude of Afrikaners at that stage towards the films. Afrikaners wanted their ideals visualised in these films. This idealistic conservatism was characterised by an attachment to the past, to ideals of linguistic and racial purity and to religious and moral norms. The films had to subscribe to these conservative expectations in order to be successful at the box-office. The films seldom attempted to explore a national cultural psyche. As such, they were a closed form, made by Afrikaners for Afrikaners, with little or no attention to their potential to say something important about their society to an international audience. The type of realism that could have analysed Afrikaner culture in a critical manner, was avoided. Instead use was made of folk stereotypes that showed the Afrikaner as chatty, heart-warming and lovable in a comedy tradition, or as beset by emotional problems that

had little to do with society, but much to do with the mainsprings of western melodrama about mismatched couples overcoming obstacles on the path to true love (see especially Pretorius, in Blignaut & Botha 1992). These films ignored the socio-political turmoil, as well as the realities experienced by black South Africans.

Fourie (1982) argued that most Afrikaans films communicated by means of obsolete symbols that had little intercultural communication value. They painted a one-sided and stereotypical portrait of the Afrikaner, leading to a misconception about who and what the Afrikaner was. Furthermore, the negative portrayal of blacks as a servant class in these films is a visual symbol of the deep-seated apartheid ideology.

Jans Rautenbach and Manie van Rensburg were the antithesis of these Afrikaans films. Rautenbach explored the problems of the Afrikaner psyche in impressive works ranging from the drama, *Die Kandidaat* (The Candidate, 1968) to the tragic love story, *Katrina* (1969) to the expressionistic avant-garde film, *Jannie Totsiens* (1970). Rautenbach was impressed by the *auteur* cinema of European masters like Ingmar Bergman and he consciously tried to create a similar style of filmmaking in South Africa. Unfortunately his work was not popular with the Afrikaans audiences and he turned to more commercial filmmaking.

Van Rensburg formed his own independent film company, Visio Films, in 1969. He was only 22 years old. He directed and financed a film about loneliness in an urban environment, *Freddie's in Love*. He started with R140 in the bank and a large section of the film was made in black-and-white, because he couldn't afford colour film stock. He didn't have any money for lights, so his production assistant who worked as a stage manager at Johannesburg's Civic Theatre would borrow what the film team needed. The film was eventually a character study of loneliness in cold, bleak Hillbrow. It was unique in that it didn't conform to any of the social norms prevalent in South African filmmaking at the time -- it was a film with avant garde tendencies. Local audiences rejected it outright and stayed at home.

A couple of years elapsed before he made a competent thriller, *Die Bankrower* (The Bank Robber, 1972). It received positive notices from the critics. After this feature, Kavalier Films (which was responsible for much of the escapism fare in Afrikaans film of the time), offered Van Rensburg a two-film contract. They would provide the finance for him to make one film of his own choice (provided it had commercial possibilities) on condition he made a feature of a radio serial for them. The film he made for Kavalier, *Geluksdal*, is his worst film and not at all different from the Afrikaans film junk of the period. The film was a financial success, but Van Rensburg admitted that this was not his finest hour.

The other film, one of his own choice, *Die Square*, was initially banned by the South African censors. Van Rensburg considered the film to be a fairy tale, which revolved around a political party break-away. A politician's wife leaves him which spoils his image, and in order to save face he has to get her back, which means he has to conform to her standards and become less conservative. The film became a satire on Afrikaner hegemony in the political and moral life of the country. Years later, with *Taxi to Soweto*, a similar plot was used by Van Rensburg to address Afrikaner fears regarding black South Africans.

Another contributor to the fragmentation of the national film industry was the creation of so-called "Bantu" film production during the 1970s. This boost to "black" films resulted in a large number of shoddy films in ethnic languages that were screened in churches, schools and community beer halls. It was contrary to government policy to allow black cinemas in the urban "white" areas, as this would concede the citizenship of urban blacks. The urbanisation of blacks was portrayed as uniformly negative and homeland life as more fitting (Gavshon 1983; Van Zyl 1985). At this stage, black and white audiences were treated differently. They were separated, each with its own set of rules and operations, films and theatres. Any film that managed to be made which in any way reflected the South African society in turmoil, was banned by the state, or received no distribution whatsoever, and thus did not qualify for any film subsidy. A true national film industry did therefore not develop through the Bantu attempt -- only a few inferior paternalistic films for blacks were made, chiefly by whites.

During the mid-1980s the production was further fragmented. By means of substantial tax concessions that made investing in film an attractive option, a boom occurred in the commercial industry (see Accone 1990a; 1990b; Powell 1990; Schoombie 1990; Silber 1990a, 1990b; Blignaut & Botha 1992). Several hundreds of films were made, mostly inferior imitations of American genre films (see for example Blignaut & Botha, 1992). The majority of these tax shelter films did not reflect any recognisable socio-political reality or national

culture. At the end of the 1980s, the scheme collapsed and the current subsidy system again only pays subsidy on box-office returns. Van Rensburg rejected any proposals from overseas producers to make one of these American imitations, and instead he directed *The Native Who Caused All the Trouble*, an extremely low budget film version of an anti-apartheid play. The film became a disaster at the box office.

The history of film distribution in South Africa has sadly been one of racism and segregation (see for example Tomaselli 1989). Only in 1985 did the distributors manage to desegregate some cinemas, and for the first time the existence and importance of the majority of South Africans, deprived both socially and economically of the chance to be part of a cinema-going public, were acknowledged.

Ster-Kinekor and Nu Metro, as well as UIP, control the distribution of films in South Africa. In contrast to these three giants, independent cinemas are largely second-run cinemas (screening films that have already played the major circuits), playing double-bill shows, at minimal ticket prices. There were approximately 202 independent cinemas in South Africa during 1992(1) and some were in the process of closing down (see Blignaut 1990). The independent cinema of the 1980s critical of apartheid (like *The Native Who Caused All the Trouble*) and which received international acclaim, was chiefly distributed through the independent venues. The independent theatres however do not qualify for state subsidy tied to box-office results. The makers of films critical of apartheid seldom see their work being distributed by the main distribution companies. In fact, American imports dominate the mainstream networks. Local films such as *Jobman*, *Mapantsula, Windprints, On the Wire* and several other examples of the independent film revival of the 1980s were seldom seen by the majority of South Africans. Although many of these films dealt with the realities of blacks in this country (see Bauer 1987; Botha 1990; Botha & Burger 1989; Botha & Van Aswegen 1992), they were rather exported.

The film movement of the 1980s and unification within the industry during the 1990s

Since the late 1970s and the early 1980s a group of film and video producers who were not affiliated to the established film companies in the mainstream industry, made films about the realities of the majority of South Africans(2). Most of them were shown at festivals, universities, church halls, trade union offices and the private homes of interested parties. Most of them experienced censorship problems during the State of Emergency. Made on small budgets, they were either financed by the producers themselves, by progressive organisations or with the assistance of the tax benefit system of the 1980s (Tomaselli, 1989). The films were chiefly the product of two groups that emerged jointly: a group of white university students opposed to apartheid, and black workers who yearned for a film form using indigenous imagery that would portray their reality in South Africa, that would give them a voice and space in local films.

This remarkable process led to a mass movement of workers, students and members of youth, sport and church organisations who united in their opposition to apartheid. The production of audio-visual material, forms of communication that required specialised production skills and money not necessarily found in the black worker class, was a further indication of the process of intercultural communication that was taking place. This process contributed to the formation of the progressive Film and Allied Workers' Organization (FAWO) in September 1988. One of the aims of FAWO is to unite all film makers within South Africa to establish a democratic society (Currie 1989; Metz 1990). Together with numerous documentaries, community videos and the rise of short fiction and animation film making, full-length films such as *Mapantsula* marked the beginning of a new, *critical* South African cinema. Botha and Van Aswegen (1992) referred to this cinema as the alternative film movement of the 1980s. It is evident that this new cinema is based on audio-visual material reflecting the realities of the black majority and constituting a valid part of our national film production (see Botha & Van Aswegen, 1992). It is from these films that the symbols and iconography of a national film industry can be drawn, rather than from the diversions produced by the Afrikaans and "Bantu" cinemas, and the tax shelter films.

Van Rensburg was initially not part of this movement of anti-apartheid filmmaking. He made drama series for the SABC from the middle 1970s until 1987. The advent of television in South Africa during 1976 gave many local filmmakers artistic opportunities that had not been available due to the ineffective subsidy scheme. Although censorship regarding political material was very tight at the SABC, Van Rensburg could make artistically successful drama series and films. He started with a ten part comedy series, *Willem*, which was a story of the trials and tribulations of a private detective. This series earned Van Rensburg his first SABC Arts Award for directing.

He decided to move from Johannesburg to Cape Town where he met Johan van Jaarsveld, a writer who became his partner, and under the umbrella of Visio Films, his best television work followed. This relationship with the SABC, however, was cut after Van Rensburg decided to join 52 prominent South Africans in 1987 to travel to Dakar, Senegal, in order to have discussions with members of the then banned ANC. The 52 South Africans mainly included Afrikaans speaking people, like Van Rensburg's friend, Van Zyl Slabbert, a prominent oppositional political figure of the 1980s. The conference in Dakar was a joint undertaking between the Institute for Democratic Alternatives in South Africa (Idasa) and the ANC, and discussions about a liberated economy, the form of a liberated government and solutions to South Africa's conflict took place. When Van Rensburg returned to South Africa, he found himself out of work at the SABC. For two years he couldn't work. With the establishment of FAWO he hoped to find a sympathetic, progressive group to support him in his work. *The Native Who Caused All the Trouble* was his contribution to the new critical cinema about apartheid, and it established him as part of the new movement.

With apartheid officially still in place during the making of films such as *The Native Who Caused All the Trouble*, *Mapantsula*, *Jobman*, *On the Wire* and *The Stick*, these features, together with numerous community and resistance videos became vital instruments in the anti-apartheid struggle. Three major elements of these features were that (a) they were produced by means of co-productions with or solidarity assistance from progressive non-South Africans; (b) South Africans were significantly involved in most if not all spheres of production as opposed to Hollywood films on apartheid; and (c) the exhibition and distribution of these films, especially the community videos and documentaries on the evils of apartheid faced enormous problems. *Mapantsula* and *The Stick*, for example, were only un-banned after 1990, and *Jobman* has still not been commercially released in our country. Most of these films were screened at alternative venues like community halls, churches in the townships, selected progressive film festivals and even at private homes.

As mentioned previously, it is from these films that the symbols and iconography of a national South African film industry can be drawn, although many questions regarding a national cinema ought to be addressed in future debates. These films can be described as progressive film texts in the sense that all of them are consciously critical of apartheid, either in a historic (*The Native Who Caused All the Trouble, Fiela se Kind*, *Jobman*) or a more contemporary context (the South Africa of the 1980s in *Mapantsula*). They deal with the lives and struggle of the people in a developing country and are mostly allied with the liberation movements for a non-racial South Africa.

Mapantsula is an example of local film making that represents a voice of resistance echoing in the popular culture and memory of the majority of South Africans. The existence and experience of township life was severely censored and withheld from the media before 1990. The workings of the Publication Control Act, coupled with the State of Emergency and the regulations accompanying it, were just two of the more obvious means to achieve this media "silence". Features such as *Mapantsula*, *Jobman* and *On the Wire* were a critical and necessary intervention in the representation of this usually hidden reality on South African screens. These films, like *The Native Who Caused All the Trouble* and the recent *Come See the Bioscope*, try to recover popular memory. They deal with events which were conveniently left out in official South African history books or in a contemporary context in actuality programmes on national television. Therefore, they became guardians of popular memory within the socio-political process in our country.

The films examine the South African reality critically. Existing myths and stereotypes associated with apartheid have been questioned, examined and their falseness revealed. South African reality is observed mainly from the viewpoint of black South Africans. For too long many whites in this country have ignored the values and norms of our fellow South Africans. In this respect the new critical cinema is meaningful for intercultural communication and intercultural relations: on the one hand it offers to South Africans who are opposed to apartheid a voice and space; on the other hand, many whites, who are accounted part of the status quo of apartheid, are given the opportunity of familiarising themselves with people who belong to other cultures and ideological groups and who have, due to racial segregation, different spheres of life. *The Native Who Caused All the Trouble* is especially successful in this regard (see Botha & An Aswegen, 1992).

Another positive development during the early 1990s was the perception from all sectors of the industry that cinema has a vital role to play in the forging of social cohesion and the process of democratisation and development that so urgently needs to take place. In 1991 the Film and Broadcasting Forum (FBF)

was established to address the problems of the industry. It was widely considered to be an important step in the consultation process that has resulted during 1993 in the creation of a single body, motivated by mutual interests. In composition, the FBF represented the widest possible cross section of industry interests, from producers through to directors, writers, actors, musicians, technicians, agents, managements and studios. It also included both progressive and more establishment-oriented groupings, some of whom have hitherto not been overly co-operative. The FBF described its prime objective as the creation of an environment in which its members could address strategic issues of common interest and to discuss such strategies with the state, political parties, cultural groups, broadcasters, distributors, exhibitors and others. A main aim was the establishment and development of a representative and indigenous South African film culture which would redress the political imbalance of the past to ensure equal access for all South Africans to film structures. From this consultative process, an interim consensus document emerged which tried to address the restructuring of the local film industry.

This resulted during 1993 in the creation of the Film and Broadcasting Steering Committee, representing the eight major film organisations in local cinema. The Film and Broadcasting Steering Committee has been painstakingly working on proposals for a South African Film Foundation for more than a year. The proposed structures will be modelled on the French film structures in France and Burkina Faso. By mid-1994 the Film and Television Federation emerged from the Broadcasting and Film Steering Committee.

Another fascinating development is the rise in local short film production which is presented to the public every year at the annual *Weekly Mail/Guardian Weekly* film festival's Short Film Competition. In the past films such as *Sales Talk* and the animation work by William Kentridge; *Sacrifice*, about the disintegration of an Afrikaner family and Guy Spiller's *The Boxer*, about white working class fears regarding political change in South Africa, stunned audiences. During 1993, thirty-seven short films were screened at the festival. Catherine Meyburgh's *The Clay Ox*, about white South Africans trying to redefine their role in an apartheid society and to come to terms with their heritage, gave one new hope for another revival in innovative local film making. A South African Film Foundation has been established by members of the Weekly Mail Film Festival, COSAW, the National Arts Initiative and others in order to stimulate the independent film sector, but this body should not be confused with the proposed statutory body.

The local pay-television network M-Net has provided funding for the making of 30-minute films in their project *New Directions: The Rhythm of our lives*. Kenneth Kaplan's *The Children and I*, Rozelle Vogelman's *The Apology*, Lance Gewer and Zaharia Rapola's *Come See the Bioscope* and Peni Flascas's *Learning the Hard Way* were broadcast on the network in February 1994. The project is an important showcase of new, young talent in this country and especially *The Apology* about pupils' reactions to an abortion case at school, and the evocative *Come See the Bioscope* about ANC member Sol Plaatje's attempts to educate rural blacks politically, stood out. One could simply wonder what Van Rensburg's contribution would have been to this revival if one take his short film, *Country Lovers*, into account. The film is based on Nobel prize winner, Nadine Gordimer's work, and forms one of seven short films, collectively titled, *Six Feet of the Country.* To date this series has been seen by over 300 million people world-wide. It has been accepted by the New York Film Forum, as well as being screened in Germany, Holland, Belgium, Italy and Channel Four in Britain.

Ironically these films were banned from general release in South Africa and screening was only permitted at South African film festival, despite the fact that six of the seven films were made by South African casts and crews. *Country Lovers* revolves around a young white Afrikaans boy's affair with a black farm girl he grew up with. As a result of the "immorality" of this situation, Van Rensburg's film was labelled as anti-South African propaganda by the South African censor board. The *New York Times*' critic described the film in a review of 18 May 1983 as "...a delicate and ferocious tale about a love affair of a young Afrikaner and the pretty black girl who grows up with the boy on his father's prosperous farm. The point of the story is the manner in which the innocence of the pair is ultimately destroyed by the Immorality Act. The tale is beautifully acted by Ryno Hattingh and Nomsa Nene as the lovers and is related in such a low key that the full horror of it is not apparent until it is almost over."

Its highly ironic that this short film, as well as Van Rensburg's *The Native Who Caused All the Trouble*, remain virtually unseen in South Africa, especially due to problematic distribution in this country. Film distribution remains a big problem in South Africa. The majority of South Africans are not reached by

means of Ster-Kinekor and Nu Metro's distribution networks. FAWO and the Film Resource Unit have, for example, embarked on the *Video Suitcase Project* which entails video distribution by means of mobile units. Videos of South African, African and Latin American directors such as Van Rensburg, Schmitz, Ousmane Sembene, Souleymane Cissé and Fernando Solanas, are distributed to new audiences in townships and rural areas. Slowly but surely a national film culture is emerging in South Africa. The training of especially black film makers at the Newtown Film and Television School in Johannesburg will give further impetus to this emerging film movement.

The new democratic government has also announced programmes for training black film makers. Furthermore, the rural university of Fort Hare has been proposed as a venue for a film school, and the African Film and Television Collective and the Black Film Foundation were established to assist black film makers. Co-operation with the Pan African Federation of Filmmakers seems to be a future possibility, turning South Africa into a potential new market for African cinema.

Although feature film production has dropped from 170 features per year in 1988 to less than 10 in 1996, the proposals by the Film and Broadcasting Steering Committee for new film structures and funding schemes, as well as the writing of a White Paper by members of the industry, will hopefully result in a true national, indigenous cinema. It is just that Van Rensburg will never witness these changes.

Themes and style in Van Rensburg's cinema

Throughout his television and film dramas, director Manie van Rensburg exhibits the same thematic preoccupations, the same recurring motifs and incidents and basically the same visual style. His work explores the psyche of the Afrikaner within an historical as well as a contemporary context. He is preoccupied with communication problems between people, especially within love relationships. The outsider is a dominant figure in his universe. By studying Van Rensburg's *oeuvre* over the past ten years, one realises that he is probably South Africa's most prominent contemporary auteur director.

I will focus on Van Rensburg's unique style, his treatment of location, time and place, as well as his thematic concerns of the political realities of South Africa in the past 60 years. His depiction of race and class relations and of the outsiders to the "normative society" are of importance to this discourse. The portrayal of communication problems between people and a unique historical documentation of the Afrikaner culture make Van Rensburg a chronicler of this part of South African society.

Themes that Van Rensburg tends to portray in his chronicles are: the psyche of the Afrikaner in a contemporary or historic situation (especially the period from the 1920s to the 1940s); the way of life of, and motivation for, individuals living on the 'edge' of society; loneliness; and the exploration of the communication potential of film and television to convey contextual and experiential information to the viewer. Within these themes Van Rensburg experiments with particular filmic codes not seen in the work of his contemporaries, Jan Scholtz, Daan Retief, Franz Marx and Elmo de Witt. Van Rensburg's cinema can be divided into three periods; his Afrikaans films of 1971 to 1975, his television work from 1976 to 1987, and from 1988 onwards, his shift towards the international film scene with *The Native Who Caused All The Trouble* (1989), *The Fourth Reich* (1990) and *Taxi to Soweto* (1991).

The first period includes *Freddie's In Love* (1971), *Die Bankrower* (The Bank Robber) (1973), *Geluksdal* (1974) and *Die Square* (The Square) (1975).

The second period includes drama and comedy series made for the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) after the introduction of television in this country in 1976. These television works include the ten-part comedy series, *Willem* (1975), starring the well-known comedian Tobie Cronje; another ten-part series, *Sebastian Senior* (1976), which concerned the adventures of a Johannesburg taxi driver; *Mickey Cannis Caught My Eye* (1979); *Good News* (1980); the authentic folk stories, *Doktor Con Viljee se Overberg* (1981), which earned him the Tonight Award in 1982; *Anna* (1982); *Good News* (1982), about issues of female rights portrayed in a contemporary vein; *Verspeelde Lente* (Wasted Springtime) (1983); *Die Perdesmous* (The Horse Trader) (1982); *Sagmoedige Neelsie* (1983), a light-hearted comedy based on the works of C.J. Langenhoven; *Die Vuurtoring* (The Lighthouse) (1984); *Heroes* (1985) and *The Mantiss Project* (1986).

I shall discuss Van Rensburg's *oeuvre* as chronicles of the Afrikaner psyche during three significant periods; firstly, the 1930s and the trauma of urbanisation and struggle to retain the land; secondly, the revival of

Afrikaner nationalism during South Africa's involvement in the Second World War; and thirdly, the modern, urban Afrikaner of the 1970s and '80s.

The 1930s: The Trauma of Urbanisation and the Struggle for Land

Van Rensburg's major works are set in the 1930s. These years, up to 1948, marked two significant stages in the rise of Afrikaner nationalism as the dominant political and social force in South Africa, and in the evolution of the country's segregationist race policies. At the beginning of the thirties, however, Afrikaner farmers had a traumatic struggle to retain their land during the Great Depression. The severe drought of 1932, the worst in living memory, heightened the sense of disaster among farmers.

General J.B.M. Hertzog's National Party was predominantly a rural party. However, it wished to promote the industrial development of South Africa rather than allow the country to remain economically a relatively underdeveloped colony of Britain. The Party's programme for industrialisation derived from the fear that gold-mining was a wasting asset. Consequently, the Party desired to expand the internal market for the products of South African agriculture. Allied to this was a determination to create employment opportunities for Afrikaners, who were often 'poor whites', moving from rural districts to the towns. A general concern with making the country more self-sufficient and with checking the drain on its reserves, was another important aspect of the Party's policy.

Verspeelde Lente (1983)

Verspeelde Lente (Wasted Springtime) portrays these historic events, drawing in culture, class and rural-urban conflicts, Pop le Roux, the daughter of a poor white family, so-called bywoners[(3)] on a farm, experiences hard times in a severe drought. Due to moral pressure from her parents, she decides to jilt her young mine-worker boyfriend, Hermaans, to marry a rich old widower, Jan Greyling, who is 51 years old. He has a son, Gert, of her own age.

The setting is not too far from the gold mines. Pop and Hermaans both come from poverty-stricken families who are no longer able to make a living from their small pieces of land. Hermaans goes to the city to find work on the mines in order to support Pop when they get married.

The wealthy landowner Jan Greyling, however, asks her to marry him. She is torn between her love for Hermaans and the security that a marriage to Jan Greyling will bring both her and her parents. The four-hour-long drama ends pessimistically, metaphorically admitting to the cultural trauma inherent in the Afrikaner's move to the city. This is symbolised in *Verspeelde Lente* by Hermaans who rends up as an embittered alcoholic, and to a lesser degree, his mother who still uses candles instead of electricity in their small urban household.

The first shots in the film are of poor whites in a drought-stricken landscape. There is nothing green, no crops only rocks. Van Rensburg's milieu is more than realistically depicted. It is, in fact, a metaphorically portrayed wasteland the end of the Afrikaner's Eden, that is, the unspoiled rural paradise. In the portrayal of Pop and Hermaans' living conditions, one sees poverty: Pop's father, for example, hunts spring-hare for food. But the film has its lapses into folk humour: Pop's father tells absurd stories to his neighbour. These rich rural tellings are reminiscent of Van Rensburg's remarkable television series *Doktor Con Viljee se Overberg*, based on stories by C.G.S. de Villiers. These anti-rational folk stories portray aspects of the rural Afrikaner's psyche. Some of the dialogue in *Verspeelde Lente* also gets a rich cultural significance due to these stories. The film is thus not only a sombre, pessimistic look at Afrikaner urbanisation and a struggle to retain the land.

The contrast between rich and poor is clearly visible in *Verspeelde Lente*: both Hermaans and Jan Greyling come to visit Pop to ask for her hand in marriage. The class distinction is made clear in shots of the two on their way to Pop: Greyling in his car, Hermaans on his bicycle, trying to stay on the road after Greyling has passed, leaving him in a cloud of dust.

When Pop arrives at Greyling's traditional Cape-Dutch style house with gables, wooden louvre shutters and a garden (the first signs of green in the film), she is confronted with a different style of living, depicted by shots of the table and food. Greyling's son, Gert, demands that she should have asked for Greyling at the kitchen door, not at the front door, meaning that he sees her as low class and subordinate.

There are other images of class distinction and poverty: Some linger in the mind of the viewer, for example a family on a donkey car travelling through the wasteland on their way to the gold mines and of Pop trying to plough the dusty, rocky earth powerful images of despair and the loss of Eden.

Verspeelde Lente is dominated by long shots of lonely figures breaking the horizontal lines of barren landscapes. The use of this milieu and the social and political background in Johan van Jaarsveld's complex script serve as motivation for Pop's decision to marry Oom Jan and to escape the hardship. Well-rounded characters are created, not the stereotypes of poor Afrikaners as is the case in Jean Delbeke's *The Schoolmaster* (1990). Van Rensburg has, in fact, created a four-hour epic of social realism, stylistically characterised by the use of minimal music, long shots of lonely figures against barren Cape landscapes and simply edited. In many ways Van Rensburg was a realist in his approach to filmmaking. In an interview with Schalk Schoombie in the *Burger* newspaper (17 July 1990) he stated that editing and camera movement should support the filmic narrative. He admired the neo-realism in European films and this realistic approach became his style throughout his work. Sometimes he would complemented his realism with real archival documentary footage and original recordings of popular music of a period to add authenticity to his work.

Verspeelde Lente characterises his close collaboration with a team of actors and actresses, scriptwriters, editors, and producers, who appear in the production teams of most of his dramas; Elize Cawood. Ian Roberts, Emile Aucamp, Jannie Gildenhuys, Wilma Stockenström, Limpie Basson, and later Mees Xteen, Grethe Fox and Ryno Hattingh; editor Nena Olwage; scriptwriter Johan van Jaarsveld and producer Richard Green.

When Pop moves to Jan Greyling's house, she effectively changes her class position. She learns to drive a motor car instead of a donkey car, has servants to do the chores she used to do, and is able to enjoy the luxury of leisure. All these are indicators of a lifestyle particular to the bourgeoisie and petty bourgeoisie. Pop slips relatively easily into the role of "madam", quickly leaving the drudgery of her past life behind. However, she retains her love for Hermaans and their encounters on his occasional appearances in the district demonstrate the growing rift between them. These meetings take place within the ruins of a building, a symbol of their wasted love. Gert's initial antipathy towards Pop slowly turns from camaraderie into love and when she falls pregnant, there is a hint of ambiguity about whose child it is. However, Gert is then free to go to the city to study medicine, as his father will have another heir for the farm. The film, however, re-emphasises the rural-urban clash, as Gert retains his link with the farm through his attraction to Pop.

After Jan Greyling's death on his birthday, Pop goes to find Hermaans in the city, but realises that their relationship is irreconcilable. She returns alone to her son and the farm. Her class position has changed at this stage and she is now the rural landowner placed in opposition to an urbanised working class wage-earner. It is apparent from their brief meeting that Pop and Hermaans have nothing left in common except the memory of their relationship and their backgrounds. This illustrates another important Van Rensburg thematic concern: the lack of communication between people.
In their conversation it is clear that communication is strained:

Money is the solution to the hardship depicted in *Verspeelde Lente*, either by moving to the cities to get work in the factories or on the gold mines, or by marrying a wealthy landowner. But the film is much more than just a portrayal of class distinctions and the traumatic urbanisation of the Afrikaner. It is also an authentic chronicle of the Afrikaner of the 1930s, as well as a sensitive portrayal of the female psyche, and human longings. Jan Greyling's loneliness after the death of his wife after a marriage of 28 years is prominent. It also ends with signs of loneliness in Hermaans, his life reduced to one-night stands and booze.

The Afrikaner wedding is an example of the authenticity of Van Rensburg's film and it shows the flaws in the depiction of similar social gatherings in Delbeke's *The Schoolmaster*. Pop's father's speech about the loss of a daughter, in fact, the gaining of a bourgeois lifestyle, beautifully symbolised by Pop's mother's new shoes, exemplifies Van Rensburg's knowledge of a specific culture and characterisation. The remarks of the guests are typical of the great rituals of Afrikanerdom. The jokes, Boer music and dances are also authentic perhaps one of the best portrayals of Afrikanerdom on the screen. Similarly brilliant scenes of Afrikaner rituals are to be found in *The Fourth Reich*. In this sequence, the moral dilemma of Pop (beautifully portrayed by Elize Cawood) regarding her marriage, is handled with great sensitivity. She goes to her bedroom. She tries to smile while watching children playing outside the house on a bicycle. This reminds her of Hermaans and,

possibly their children. She remarks to her mother: "I want to stay here ... I don't want to go away."

Van Rensburg's depiction of her anxiety on her wedding night is also remarkable. His detail of her initial class position is admirable, for example her reaction when she gets coffee in bed the next morning. She is not accustomed to such a lifestyle. At the breakfast table, she says: "I don't want to eat porridge ever in my life again." Her table manners and use of language also betray her class position. Van Rensburg shows her naivety in several memorable scenes: when Jan Greyling asks her what she wants from town, she says, "Sweets!" When he arrives from town, she jumps through the window and runs to him, not as a wife but as a child. When Jan tries to show her the vastness of his "kingdom", she remarks: "Are we going to stay here the whole day like baboons?" But everything changes and Pop changes: towards the end of the film, Jan brings her pearls, not sweets, and she has lost her naivety.

In another sequence, Van Rensburg touches upon the issue of Afrikaner nationalism that is a major theme in his later *Heroes* and *The Fourth Reich*. Hermaans and Pop meet in the ruins and Hermaans mentions to her that he is joining a union at the mines. He says:

> The workers are the bosses of the mine. We are many. Without us they can't do the work. If Hermaans Cronjé complains to the mine bosses, they only laugh. But we have a union, an organisation that exists for the workers. And if the union speaks, then the bosses listen. The days of exploitation, of treating the workers as slaves, are gone. It is not a scandal to be a worker. There is money. And if everyone stands together, we have power.

Van Rensburg probably refers here to the Afrikaner *Broederbond's*[4] attempts in the 1930s to promote both Afrikaner unity and Afrikaner economic power within the so-called 'economic movement'. For the *Broederbond*, class cleavages as well as political divisions threatened the prospects of Afrikaner unity, with the most glaring manifestation of class cleavage among Afrikaners being provided by the persistent 'poor white' problem. The purpose of the economic movement was consequently both to mobilise Afrikaner capital and to alleviate Afrikaner poverty.

At the same time, Christian National trade unions were promoted in opposition to existing unions in order to wean Afrikaans-speaking workers away from organisations based on class, to improve their position in the white labour force, and capture their support for nationalism. Hermaans probably refers in *Verspeelde Lente* to the *Afrikanerbond van Mynwerkers*[5], a union that was formed in 1937 in opposition to the Mine Workers' Union.

Van Rensburg refers in the series to the Fusion Government of General Hertzog and General Jan Smuts, and ultimately its break-up in September 1939 over the question of South Africa's neutrality or participation with Great Britain in WWII. This is also the theme of *Heroes* and to a large extent of *The Fourth Reich*. But let's move first to two other films that portray the struggle for land in the 1930s: *Die Perdesmous* and *The Native Who Caused All The Trouble*.

After the realistic style and linear structure of *Verspeelde Lente*, Van Rensburg used a complex narrative structure in both *Die Perdesmous* and *The Native Who Caused All The Trouble*. To some extent it is similar to the structure that he and scriptwriter Johan van Jaarsveld used in *Doktor Con Viljee se Overberg*. The structure consists of more than one character's perspective. There is also an element of a journalistic approach in terms of hand-held shots of quasi-interviews with characters giving their subjective opinion of an incident.

Die Perdesmous (1982)
Die Perdesmous (The Horse Trader) depicts the true story of an Afrikaner farmer, Sias Johannes Christopher Vlok, born on 17 December 1898 at Wolmaranstad. The film shows his struggle for his land during the 1930s as a 39-year-old outcast. He has been convicted for several offences: assault (19 April 1918), burglary (7 November 1918 and 23 October 1919), rape, assault with the intention to cause bodily harm, etc. These facts about the character are given by a voice-over commentator in typical documentary fashion at the beginning of the film. Van Rensburg uses this device throughout *Die Perdesmous* to give a context to the social and political meaning of the film.

The structure consists further of numerous flashbacks that serve as an explanation of Vlok's eventual killing of

nine people. The reasons for this bloodbath are given step-by-step within the non-linear narrative structure, but Van Rensburg also makes use of hand-held shots of witnesses, people in Vlok's life, who tell their side of the story some are lying, others not. These characters include Vlok's employee, Willie Krause; Vlok's wife, Mabel; and his niece and lover, Ester Cronjé. The scenes depicting the attempts of the police to arrest Vlok in his farmhouse are similar to those of the Native's arrest in *The Native Who Caused All The Trouble*, a film which has the same kind of narrative structure and also shows witnesses at a court hearing.

Vlok is a wealthy farmer in 1932. He and another farmer, Gericke, become involved in a court case about the price of cattle. Vlok loses the case twice with great costs and as a result starts to hate and mistrust the South African judicial system. He also becomes paranoid regarding the motives of the people nearest to him.

Greed plays an important part in Vlok's story several of his family members are involved in schemes to get his land. The scenes depicting their plotting take place in the dark interiors of farmhouses, symbolising a world of betrayal and intrigue. Similarly sinister scenes take place in *The Fourth Reich* and *Heroes.*

Die Perdesmous is Van Rensburg's most complex film. The absence of a linear structure, the multi-layered levels of narration and the several flashbacks within flashbacks lead to a mosaic of levels of meaning motivating Vlok's behaviour. Vlok, for example, is also a narrator.

Several reasons are given for Vlok's bloodbath at the end of the film, especially his childless marriage with his wife, (played by a Van Rensburg regular, Wilma Stockenström, a great name in Afrikaans literature and film), and her involvement with Muisen, the husband of her daughter by her previous marriage. Muisen antagonises Vlok from the start of their interaction by insulting him at his wedding by hanging a Union Jack over the wedding car. Within the Fusion Government of Hertzog and Smuts, Muisen supports the British elements of the Government. Vlok is probably an Afrikaner Nationalist, a supporter of D.F. Malan's Purified National Party. At the wedding the hatred between the two men is visually manifested. (It is also one of the rare moments in a Manie van Rensburg movie that classical music is used, in this case, Gounod. Another example is Schubert in *The Fourth Reich*. Van Rensburg usually relies more on indigenous music from South Africa and other African countries than Eurocentric influences.)

Vlok assaults Muisen after Muisen throws the Union Jack over his head. It is clear that the strife between the two men also has ideological origins, an aspect that is fully developed in *Heroes*. This incident between Vlok and Muisen leads to a court case regarding assault and an 18-month sentence for Vlok with hard labour. After the court case, his wife divorces him. She sells some of his belongings which leads to more hatred and paranoia.

Vlok's relationship with Ester is troublesome since she is a blood relative. A police captain, Willie Krause and 11 policemen try to arrest Vlok, and his relationship with the naive Ester is suddenly doomed. This relationship is to some extent similar to the initial relationship between Pop and Jan Greyling in *Verspeelde Lente*: he is the father and she the daughter. Ester's naivety is characterised by her words: "Let's flee to Angola. I have heard that there are people that speak Afrikaans. Nobody will know us there. There are even Afrikaners in Argentina."

After killing and wounding the policemen and Ester, Vlok becomes the typical outcast in Van Rensburg's films. He now lives on the edge of Afrikaner society, existing only to avenge the past. He tells another character in the film: "I have just shot a few policemen on my farm. I am going into town to shoot a few more people. Then my accounts will be paid."

The Native Who Caused All the Trouble (1989)
In *The Native Who Caused All The Trouble* the outcast, Tselilo, in contrast to Vlok, is not a violent person. He only wants to build a church for his God on a piece of land he had bought previously. The land now belongs to an Indian family. He drives them off the property and is confronted by the police. This leads, after several attempts to remove him, to his arrest and a court case. As with Vlok in *Die Perdesmous*, Tselilo loses the case and is sentenced to several years' hard labour. Both films can be considered critical of the South African judicial system.

But *The Native Who Caused All the Trouble* should be seen in a broader context, that is the Fusion

Government's development of South Africa's segregationist race policies. In 1935 Hertzog proposed the creation of an advisory Natives Representative Council of 22 members, presided over by the Secretary for Native Affairs. This Native Representation Bill provided for four African representatives in the Senate and for a Natives Representative Council. The Native and Land Bill allocated a further 7.2 million *morgen* (5.8 million ha) to be added to the 10.4 million *morgen* (8.3 million ha) already reserved for Africans under the 1913 Land Act. The Natives Representation Bill which Hertzog presented to the joint sitting of both Houses of Parliament in early February 1936 excluded any form of African representation in the House of Assembly, and placed the required two-thirds majority in jeopardy. Hertzog submitted a final version of the Native Representation Bill to Parliament on 17 February 1936, and proceeded to obtain the required two-thirds majority. The Native Trust and Land Bill, which did not need a two-thirds majority, was then passed.

The policy of segregation, both political and territorial, had been greatly advanced. Cape Africans had not only been removed from the common voters roll, they had also been deprived of their right to purchase land outside of the reserved areas. In 1937 the Native Laws Amendment Act followed, extending and strengthening the system of urban segregation and influx control.

In *The Native Who Caused All the Trouble* this dilemma faces the outcast, Tselilo (brilliantly played by actor John Kani). The conflict of value systems (Western Colonial versus African Traditional) is explored superbly in the movie. The laws of whites are the norm of the day.

This was the first film made by Van Rensburg's Film Theatre Institute to promote local progressive culture in contrast to *Doktor Con Viljee se Overberg. Die Perdesmous* and *Verspeelde Lente* which were made for the SABC TV1 Afrikaans Drama Department.

Due to criticism by Afrikaans viewers about the portrayal of themselves as poor whites, Van Rensburg turned to English language features, thus broadening his audience for his exploration of Afrikanerdom.

Structurally *The Native Who Caused All the Trouble* resembles *Die Perdesmous* and *Doktor Con Viljee se Overberg.* Although a filmed play, the film consists of a nonlinear narrative structure. The story begins with an establishing shot of a female narrator giving background to Tselilo in a monologue. This is followed by a sequence which indicates the beginning of the court case. Tselilo is led into the courtroom, which we see through his eyes. Behind him is a portrait of General Jan Smuts. By means of close-ups the most important characters of the film are introduced to the viewer. The court case is interrupted by flashbacks of Tselilo's arrest and discussions with his Jewish lawyer. The film ends with the narrator giving a pessimistic account of Tselilo's sentence and a bourgeois lifestyle being adopted by even the more socially conscious characters in the film. Bruce, the liberal white policeman who supported Tselilo, becomes more interested in buying a big car than in the struggle of the oppressed.

The film's criticism of the segregationist race policies takes the form of Tselilo's statements during the court case. He says:

> From the little I understand, the law is a way of judging under which all men are equal a way of judging that all men must respect a way of judging that started with the commandments from God. Every law that does not see the black man the same as the white man is a sin against God. Because of these things it is my duty to demand dignity for my God, my people and myself. Therefore, I cannot allow myself to accept your authority I cannot accept the authority of this court I do not accept your judgement I do not accept your sentence. Do what you will.

In stark contrast to the Africans in *Verspeelde Lente* and *Die Perdesmous* who are farm workers, the African as outsider gets a voice, and a strong one, in *The Native.* His attack on racial laws reaches its peak with the words: "If the people of this place cannot be taught of how much bloodshed there will be, if they do not find a way to become one people under God then they must fear for the lives of their children."

These words are prophetic: the eighties and early nineties have been characterised by an unsurpassed amount of violence in South Africa, leading to the scrapping of apartheid laws including the Land Acts and a call by President F.W. de Klerk to build one nation within a new South Africa. But strong right-wing elements exist

in South Africa during the nineties which could prevent his nation-building process. This is the warning in two of Van Rensburg's greatest historical dramas, *Heroes* and *The Fourth Reich*.

(***Conclusion in the Spring 98 issue***)

Notes

1. Statistics on the number of independent theatres were provided by Johan Blignaut of *Showdata* on 28 October 1994.

2. Publications by Blignaut and Botha (1992), Botha and Van Aswegen (1992) and Tomaselli (1989), as well as festival brochures by the Weekly Mail Film Festival have dealt in some detail with these film makers and their films.

3. People who live on another's farm under certain conditions of service.

4. Since 1918, this highly organised clique of so-called Super-Afrikaners has by sophisticated political intrigue waged a remarkable campaign to harness political, social and economic forces within South Africa to its cause of Afrikaner nationalism.

5. Afrikaner Union of Mineworkers.

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