

THE BORDER WAR: CINEMATIC REFLECTIONS

by Keyan G. Tomaselli.

It has taken the American film industry more than 10 years to come to terms with the Vietnam war. Apart from a few isolated allegorical references to America's conduct in South East Asia in films like *Lawman* and *Easy Rider*, American film has, until recently, ignored this area of social and political experience. The reasons for this were manifold. At the height of the war more than 45% of the United States economy was dependent on income derived from war related industries. Big business therefore ensured continuing involvement. The ordinary public wrenched apart by the savagery of the war were psychologically shattered and unwilling to face the real issues. Watergate ensured status-quo-oriented impulses from the media, while 50 000 American dead was considered more of a social indictment of the arrogance of US foreign policy than of romantic heroism.

One of the first films to confront the reasons underlying aims of Vietnam was *Twilight's Last Gleaming*. Using rather dated techniques, this film was significantly made in Germany, away from the system-maintaining influences of Hollywood. In 1979, no less than five years after the termination of hostilities did the American film industry dare to broach this subject openly. *Coming Home* and *The Deerstalker* dominated the 1979 Academy Awards. They deal not with the Vietnam war per se, but with the social problems and personal guilt experienced by demobilized soldiers back home. These films are highly critical of America's involvement in South East Asia and all point to the devastating social consequences wreaked on American society.

In contrast to the American experience, the South African film industry followed the troops into action with no qualms at all. The clumsy and superficial images seen in *Kaptein Caprivi* (1972), *Aanslag op Kariba* (1973), *Ses Soldate* (1975) and *Hank, Hennery and Friend* (1976) are indicative of a society which confronts reality and the complexities of life by a simplistic reduction to binary opposites — good vs. bad, war vs. peace, black vs. white, cops vs. robbers, communism vs. capitalism etc. The oppositions found in most local films with a war theme can be likened to terrorist (black) = bad; soldier (white) = good and 'loyal' black = good + bad (a sort of reformed black). The same dialectic was true for the early Westerns made in Hollywood, viz., "The only good Indian is a dead Indian".

Terrorist (1978), based on the Grootfontein murder, encapsulates this process without questioning. Yet this film offers possibly the truest and most disturbing reflections of white South African perceptions regarding the guerilla war — the mindless slaughter, the tacit acceptance that black must kill white, the lack of motivation for such killings, the ubiquitous Kenyan who fled from the Mau Mau who talks endearingly about "black bastards" — are all true to type. *Terrorist* is a window to the perceptions of an

unthinking white population which cannot comprehend that 'terrorists' may also have valid reasons to account for their actions. In contrast, *Wild Geese* (1978) is an embarrassing example of racial moralizing where black and white solve their problems under the auspices of official government policy.

The Angolan border war has become part of our traditional linguistic patterns. The implication that someone is at "the border" is seen in an increasing array of films of all genres, even those intended for the overseas market where references to the border are meaningless — for example, *Someone Like You* and *Fifth Season*.

The two most recent offerings in this vein are *Grensbasis 13* and *40 Days*. *Grensbasis 13* is action, an accurate reflection of battle in the bush. This facade, however, does not last and is simply camouflage for yet another Elmo de Witt conflict-love-type story. The classic triangular love affair involving a police lieutenant, a female doctor and a stay-at-home girlfriend is further complicated by elements of what Robert Greig calls the 'key plot' which can be conceptualized as the insider versus the outsider. The outsider in this instance is a smooth, materialist Afrikaner "wat die Land wil vlug". He is predictably rejected by his girlfriend who remains torn between him and her mortally wounded lieutenant ex-fiance. The lieutenant, on the other hand, has no doubt what his true mission is: to rescue his captured comrade-in-arms from the dastardly terrorists. This is the surface structure. The hidden unconscious meaning is contained in de Witt's treatment of his subject matter. Firstly, like all other references to 'the border' no motivations or reasons for this state are offered — it's there, omnipresent and continuous, a state to be expected, inevitable — like sleeping or death. Secondly, implicit in this film is the assumption that border duty is voluntary. The South African Police and not the Defence Force is involved. A passing reference to the possible expose on foreign TV, that the captured policeman might be forced to acknowledge that his role was not voluntary, is given as the official reason for a daring raid to secure his rescue. Thirdly, this conflict is not related to the larger politico-economic situation, the battle of opposing ideologies. The reasons for the war and the resulting social dislocations are ignored. The rescue has nothing to do with social remorse or societal guilt, but is a device to satisfy the conventions of melodrama in that the lieutenant considers himself responsible for the safety of his captured friend, simply because he promised the family that he would look after him.

As with all de Witt's love stories, one of the lovers dies an unnatural death (usually at the hand of the jilted party). This film departs slightly from this formula for the lieutenant is shot, not by his lover, but by the enemy. Hence the breakdown of the various relationships is implicitly blamed on the enemy and not on the personal foibles of the partici-

pating characters. The enemy of Afrikaner society is shown to be influences emanating from outside that society, rather than attributable to sources within Afrikaner society. The group remains closed and is symbolically cemented in a military ceremony honouring the dead lieutenant and his comrades.

40 Days is frivolous, fast moving and humorous. Its surface structure camouflages a deeper ideological tension. The dialectic is quite blatant: police (good) versus disco sub-culture (bad); Defence Force (good) versus personal chaos (bad) which in a broader context can be seen as Institutionalism (good) versus Individualism (bad).

The police are portrayed as charming, friendly fellows, always ready to help and paternalistically guide young men in danger of falling into bad ways. It is significant that scriptwriter Pieter Dirk Uys and director Franz Marx should have chosen the disco scene to characterize civilian life, which is, after all, a highly atypical experience for a returning trooper. In this case the disco represents the shady and sinister activities of the underworld.

The film reveals a social dependence on the Defence Force and Police as the only viable agents of stability, law and order. Throughout the film is the insistence and reiteration of the help and guidance offered by the Defence Force which is contrasted with a demonstration of the pitfalls of going it alone: "I don't need the army — they ran my life for two years" is shown to be wilful and counter-productive. Predictably, it is police who save the two ex-soldiers from their own determined obstinacy.

A recurring thematic element of the film is the socially condoned submerged violence. The most obvious example of this is where the hero attacks and robs a homosexual who solicits him in a bar. In a later scene the attacker

is remorseful only over the fact that he is guilty of robbery; it is almost as if violence against homosexuals is justified.

40 Days marks a departure from the films hitherto in that it attempts, albeit in an incomplete way, to account for the difficulties experienced by young men in a war situation and separated from their families for two years. However, despite the two nightmare sequences, the effects of the traumatic experiences are not adequately dealt with, nor is the adjustment to ordinary civilian life for which the two characters and thousands like them are completely unprepared. These should be the primary themes of the film, but are submerged in the drawn out disco sequences and the strident upbeat soundtrack which consistently works against the picture.

Whereas America's post-Vietnam war films provide an almost painful self-examination of both the reasons for the war and the effects of that war on American society as a whole, and particularly on the men involved in it, South African films are more superficial and even glib. In both **Grensbasis** and **40 Days**, the war is there — a fact of life, not discussed or rationalized — simply accepted. In both films the police who represent Institutionalized South Africa are lauded and made out to be pillars of society. Both portray the population back home as uncaring, uninterested and unable to comprehend the rigours of Border Life. These issues are best left to those who know — the Defence Force and Police Force.

In the same way as American film ignored Vietnam during the war itself, South African film is still at a stage where it shies away from an honest examination of conscience.

The salient question is, however, is this a stage in the development of our film, or is it more symptomatic of the general malaise afflicting South African society? □

DIALOGUE

by Vortex

We're rather proud
of our racial plan:
it's a way of dividing
man from man.

The blacks are with us
but we say they're not:
we give each nation
a barren plot.

It's all quite just,
it's all quite fair:
each tribe has its own
little volume of air.

It's a bit of a ruse,
but who would guess?
The blacks, you say?
We couldn't care less.

The outside world
makes a bit of trouble?
We don't count **them**:
their standards are double.

By our fine scheme
we've proved we're right,
we've shown that — well —
we're bright, and white.

Ah no, my friends,
you've got it wrong:
you've shown something else
in your little song.

You've shown quite well
by your strong intent
that you don't belong
in this continent.

How can you claim
this is your home
when you send black people
out to roam?

Your very acts
define your fate:
you've said 'separation'
and that you'll get.

Some will leave
for other lands,
bemoaning the work
of their own hands.

Others will stay
and fight till they're dust, proclaiming (no doubt)
that life's unjust. □