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CAMERA, COLOUR AND RACISM: SHAKA ZULU

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"Shaka's life was originally recorded by white historians who imposed upon their accounts bigoted and sensationalist values -- often labelling the Zulus as savage and barbaric. It is our intention with this series to change that view"

William C Faure (1)

While watching SHAKA ZULU I found myself consistently recalling earlier cinematic epics made by South African companies of white encounters with Zulus. Where DE VOORTREKKERS/WINNING A CONTINENT (1916), SYMBOL OF SACRIFICE (1918) and DIE BOU VAN 'N NASIE/THEY BUILT A NATION (1939) were in monochrome, SHAKA ZULU seems to have been shot through a sepia filter, at least where the indigenous tribal scenes were concerned (2).

The over emphasis on yellow/brown/red was probably intended to create an impression of 'old' times. While much of this colour could be argued to be the reflection of fire light (though it doesn't flicker), its emotional effect alternates between warm, engaging colours to chilling blue, particularly in the thunder and lightening shots which are associated with sorcery, magic and the supernatural. In contrast, shots of the 'white' areas are filmed in stark 'true', bright colours. There is no clash of hot and chilling colours within the scenes about whites. This colour contrast -- in conjunction with the camerawork and mise-en-scene -- sets up the series of oppositions of a racist nature that manifest themselves in the narrative.

It is also significant to note how many of the 'black' scenes deal with the ceremonies and rituals of Zulu life. Since such occasions are associated with 'extraordinary' (ie non main-stream) behaviour in any society the result is the representation of Zulus as a rather bizarre and violent people. 'Normal', mundane life was seldom to be seen. If white rituals such as marriages, public hangings, funerals and pomp and ceremony were shot in the same way, the camera deliberately seeking out the ritualistic order and latent violence of such scenes, it would be just as possible to make white society as incomprehensible, threatening and overly ordered as the director has done with the black society depicted. British institutional violence is decentred, signalled through verbalisation -- they talk about it, but they don't DO it. 'British' politicking (Somerset's court) is presented as rational, King George as a buffoon. Shaka's court is never imbued with the same rationality, but his utterances are seen to be opportunistic distortions of simplistic white, mainly religious, logic.

Cinema and television are inadequate vehicles for the depiction of history and historical process. Film makers rarely possess the methodological skills to marry historiography (or any other academic discipline for that matter) with cinematography. Furthermore, because film/video takes place in the perceptual present, historical reconstructions are always at a disadvantage and, in any case, subject

to marketing decisions which themselves are subject to contemporary ideological discourse. DE VOORTREKKERS, for example, made during a time of rapprochement between English- and Afrikaans-speaking South Africans, absolves the British of any culpability in the reasons for the Great Trek. Twenty years later, in DIE BOU VAN 'N NASIE, the British were depicted as a hostile and ruthless enemy. By 1965, in DIE VOORTREKKERS, British ruthlessness was backgrounded and the conflicts amongst the various trekker parties played up. The British were no longer a problem: the Republic having been established five years earlier.

In the case of the SHAKA ZULU series no attempt is made to contextualize the rise of Shaka. His rise to power was presented in terms of the 'great-man' theory. As Faure himself states: "Licence has been taken, but always with one aim in mind -- to tell the story of a man, who in his own time, became a living legend! We had to do justice to that story while at the same time bringing to life the traditions and mythology of that period" (3). I will argue that Faure's 'licence' is little more than apartheid propaganda which does no justice to either Shaka or history. The viewer, for example, is not presented with a hint of the conditions in south-east Africa that could have led to the phenomenon of Zulu ascendancy, such as drought, the disruption of Zanzibar trading routes by the Portugese, and so on. The result is a nationalist 'myth' centred upon the personality of one man. It is a myth which complements contemporary apartheid-ordered South Africa.

The film epic is an expansive form of narrative. Common to cinematic epics are:

- * a close attention to realistic detail;

Epics involve large casts, spectacular costumes, boast impressive decor and highly detailed mise-en-scene, usually enhanced by the use of complicated special effects and pyrotechnics. Witness the elaborate sets, emphasis on costume, ritual, actual locations (Faure saying that he would shoot the series in Zululand or not at all), gallons of smoke and so on;

- * The epic most commonly deals with history;

SHAKA ZULU expediently endorses the revisionist history which serves contemporary political maneuverings of both the South African and KwaZulu governments.

- * The epic tends to examine a society's social contract with God;

In SHAKA ZULU the various religious systems are shown to be in opposition with each other.

- * The epic deals with the origin of social structure;

The TV series offers an interpretation of how Shaka forged the Zulu empire, and contemporary utterances by Chief Buthelezi have endorsed the series' perspective in a way which reinforces the current nationalistic political strategies of Inkatha.

- * The epic validates social norms and values that are of central importance to a community's faith in and concept of its identity.

The norms that SHAKA ZULU validates are those of political struggles currently unfolding in South Africa. The series seems to be designed to legitimate Zulu national identity (in accordance with apartheid ideology), and naturalises the concept of ethnicity which is correlated with 'nation', independence and cultural integrity.

Often, epics are little more than popular melodrama. In SHAKA ZULU we have the heroine, Shaka's mother who is seduced by the villain, Senzalakona. Revenge is a component and Shaka spends most of his life apparently wreaking revenge on everyone about him because of his unhappy childhood. Decades of history are collapsed into ten 45 minute episodes, give or take a minute or two for advertisements. This means that social processes and complex historical contradictions are reduced to the actions of individuals and simplistic oppositions. This flow of history is further punctuated by 'natural' visual/narrative breaks which facilitate the flighting of advertising spots. Finally, there is the conflict of moral and religious principles.

The point I am building up to is that epic films like SHAKA are not history, but reinterpretations clouded by the conventions of narrative, conventions specific to the particular medium in which it is recreated, and in terms of the current hegemonic representations of social forces, ideology and history. SHAKA ZULU has to be examined not in terms of 'history', but in terms of its relationship to contemporary social, political and economic processes.

Let me return to my comments about the use of colour filters to set up the ideological oppositions -- sepia for the Zulu scenes and a much 'whiter' hue for the white scenes. The oppositions created are multiple:

- truth vs paganism
- civilization vs barbarity
- white vs black
- light vs darkness
- rationality vs magic
- science vs superstition
- education vs ignorance
- 'normal' behaviour vs ritualistic order
- defence vs offence
- peace vs war
- nation vs tribe
- king vs king (on both earthly and spiritual levels)

and, most important, a clash over territory, north vs south.

Various historians have argued that SHAKA bears little resemblance to history, and never threatened the Cape. That might have been so, but the contemporary Zulu 'nation' is seen as a threat, Chief Buthelezi's impis being regarded with fear by the average Afrikaans-speaking South

African. That fear is reinforced by the tribal regalia so often worn by Buthezi at mass rallies broadcast on SABC-TV, by his references to the past and by Inkatha mobilising politically through ethnicity and culture. Since these -- ethnicity and culture -- are taken by Afrikaner intellectuals and politicians as being synonymous with the idea of 'nation', then SHAKA the television series becomes an affirmation of apartheid, of blacks being a threat, not only to themselves (eg the vicious way in which Shaka governs through force), but to whites as well. Capable of unspeakable brutality as in the scenes where people are impaled on thin logs, such images intercept the dominant white stereotype of savage blacks who are unable to govern in any other way. (We are not shown the savagery of executions in the British Cape Colony during the Shaka era). This endorses apartheid discourse which holds that blacks are 'different' and should develop in their 'own' way in their 'own areas', safely out of the way of white civilization.

The punchlines of the series occurred in the 7th episode. As Shaka's predecessor appeals to his victorious general for "subjugation" rather than "destruction" he launches into what can only be described as liberal discourse as he pleads for the sanctity of human life and individual freedom. Shaka responds by mouthing General Magnus Malan and SABC New Comment's total war doctrine, painting the enemy, Zwide, in the same kind of language as the National Party uses to discredit anyone who opposes its policies. Shaka demands total control over the armed forces and the state. He gets it, just as PW Botha got it.

I'll now return to discuss cinematic style. First, the clash of colours:

Sepia, a dark greyish yellow-brown, which filters the light in most of the afternoon shots of the kraals and interior shots in the huts, together with buckets of shiny sweat (oil, actually) on black skins and clouds of smoke made by fog machines tends to obscure detail and meshes specific objects and people into a single writhing, pulsating and faceless mass. Yellow and brown are colours which do not stand out, which lack definition on the edges of the objects depicted and which tend to elicit emotional responses in viewers. In Zululand, these emotional warm colours are starkly contrasted with the white, chilling blue of thunder, rain and lightning, which always occur with the representation of the 'witchdoctors', who are depicted as superhuman, as people separated from ordinary people, as scary and monsterish -- a typical white (mis)interpretation so often seen in films made by whites 'for blacks' and legitimised under the anthropological category of 'mythology' (4).

Against these warm/chilling colours are the 'true' and seemingly 'natural' colours which fill the frames when scenes of Cape Town (or the young Port Natal) are depicted. It never seems to rain in Cape Town, the light is neither an emotional dark grey yellow brown, nor a chilled blue. While the narrative might be criticising the racist and pompous attitudes of the white British governors, this criticism is not emphasised by the use of hue.

Finally, we need to ruminate a little on the camerawork. Like all epics since the earliest Western cinema, the camera shows large

expanses of land. It sweeps through tracking shots, long pans, zooms and crane tilts -- up and down. Viewers are positioned by the camera to feel that they are witnesses to significant historical events which must follow an inevitable pre-ordained course, which cannot be interfered with and which must continue on their way. Privy to a God's-eye-view, high angle and sweeping shots place the viewer in a dominant position, deemphasising the Zulu impis into tiny figures as they rush this way and that across the landscape in their last and only hour of glory. Again, this dynamic style of camerawork is absent in the shots of Cape Town and the 'white' areas. The camera here is at eye-level.

Faure persuaded the Zulu King to endorse the project with the statement: "It's a mutual history, Europeans live in Europe, Americans live in America. I live in Africa and therefore I am an African, a white African" (emphasis added).

Faure, you said it ...

Notes

1. Quoted in SHAKA ZULU: the official souvenir brochure. BMS Publications in association with William C Faure, Howard Place, 1986, p. 3
 2. The yellow may have been encoded by any one of a number of means. The film stock used, Eastman High Speed Negative 5294 ECN process has a tendency towards yellow in low light situations, while able to expose correctly where wide contrasts of light are found within the frame.
 3. Faure, p. 5
 4. These wierd depictions of 'witchdoctors' seem to be largely derived from the H Rider Haggard literary stereotypes.
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