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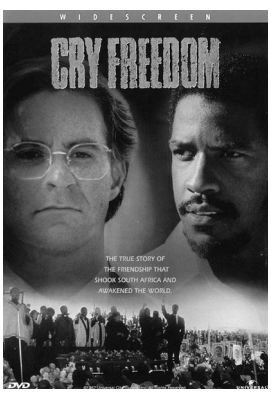
›TO MAKE A STATEMENT‹

The Representation of Black Consciousness in Richard Attenborough's *Cry Freedom* (1987)



Cry Freedom (United Kingdom, 1987), 157 min.,
director and producer: Richard Attenborough,
screenplay: John Briley (based on books by Donald Woods),
music: George Fenton/Jonas Gwangwa, camera: Ronnie Tailor,
cast: Denzel Washington, Juanita Waterman, Kevin Kline et al.

As one of the most viewed films on apartheid South Africa, Sir Richard Attenborough's Oscar-nominated *Cry Freedom* helped push the atrocities of the apartheid system to the forefront of public attention. The screenplay was based on South African journalist Donald Woods' autobiographical books *Biko* (1978) and *Asking for Trouble* (1981), which detail Woods' relationship with Biko and the court trial following Biko's death in police custody.

The plot runs as follows: despite being the editor of a liberal newspaper, Woods is initially dismissive of the ideas and methods of the Black Consciousness Movement, believing that it advocates racism towards white people. He soon changes his mind, however, when he learns more about Biko's philosophy, and the two become close

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friends. Due to his function as de facto leader of the Black Consciousness Movement, Biko is harassed and put under observation by the South African authorities; halfway through the film, he is arrested and dies in police custody. The last part of the film portrays how Woods and his family plan and finally manage to escape from South Africa.

Attenborough's decision to recount Biko's story mainly from Woods' perspective is a narrative technique that encourages the audience to identify with Woods and his admiration of Biko's character and rhetorical finesse. The effect of this technique is that Biko appears as more of an icon than an actual person; in fact, he is first introduced as a silhouette surrounded by what could almost be interpreted as a divine light. Yet while Biko in the film could at times be seen as somewhat one-dimensional or overly polished, this may also be a deliberate strategy to present Biko as more than a man: the Biko character radiates pride, self-confidence, and other values central to the Black Consciousness program. In other words, Biko in the film may be said to embody the values of the movement, thus adding more nuance to the depiction of Black Consciousness as explained through dialogue.

Attenborough's depiction of Biko has been compared to his portrayal of Gandhi in his 1982 film by the same name; historian Alex von Tunzelmann suggests that the two characters have almost identical personalities.[1] Similarly, the two massacres featured in the two films (Amritsar in 1919 and Soweto in 1976) serve as emotional and political backdrops to the films' plots. In *Cry Freedom*, the scenes that feature confrontation with the South African authorities have the dual function of framing Biko's ideas and creating suspense.

In this article, I seek to offer a more nuanced picture of Black Consciousness and Biko than is presented in *Cry Freedom*. I will begin with a short overview of Biko's central ideas and the importance of race in his writing. Since the main criticism leveled at the film deals with issues related to race, I will then discuss whether or not this is justified.

1. Biko and the Importance of Race

Following the banning of the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan Africanist Congress (PAC) as well as the consolidation of apartheid laws, there was a call to reinvent black identity in South Africa. Black Consciousness was ›more an intellectual orientation than a political grouping‹ and it was difficult to ›capture analytically because it was represented by a scattering of proponents and small organizations rather

1 Alex von Tunzelmann, Cry Freedom: Richard Attenborough Makes a Mandela of Steve Biko, in: *Guardian*, June 10, 2010.

than a single party‹.[2] The movement arose as an extension of student groupings, and at the inaugural conference in 1969, the word *black* was redefined to convey a stronger sense of ›unity and liberation of the oppressed‹; at the same time, the term *non-white* was deemed to be a ›negation of their being‹ (i.e., a negation of black people's existence).[3]

Biko presented two central ideas: first, being black was not a matter of pigmentation but rather a reflection of a mental attitude, and second, self-identifying as black was necessary in order to achieve emancipation.[4] Put differently, part of Biko's endeavor was to recapture and redefine the term *black* in an effort to deflect its oppressive and discriminatory implications. Black Consciousness theorists deliberately included in the term *black* all those oppressed by apartheid; this served to unite groups divided into Africans (subdivided into ethnic groups identified with the Bantustans), Coloreds, and Indians.[5] In *Cry Freedom,* one of Biko's friends points to the use of color as an instrument of oppression when he explains to Woods that ›in your world, anything white is normal, the way the world is supposed to be‹, to which Biko adds: ›And your real genius is that for years you have managed to convince most of us of that, too.‹

Millard Arnold, who has written on Biko and human rights, has identified the movement's strategy as ›nonpolitical politics‹.[6] In Biko's own words, the Black Consciousness approach would be ›irrelevant in a colourless and non-exploitative egalitarian society‹.[7] And, as we hear Biko explain in *Cry Freedom,* his vision for South Africa does not entail a mix of white racism and black unity but a ›complete transcendence where race would not be a factor‹.[8]

2. Criticism of *Cry Freedom*

The film has received widespread criticism for its focus on Woods rather than Biko, and for the fact that its screenplay is based on Woods' account of Biko.[9] Peter Davis, a director, author and journalist who has dealt with Hollywood's representation

2 William Beinart, *Twentieth-Century South Africa*, Oxford 2001, p. 232.
3 Nigel Gibson, Black Consciousness 1977–1987: The Dialectics of Liberation in South Africa, Centre for Civil Society Research Report (University of KwaZulu-Natal) No. 18/2004, pp. 1-27, here p. 7.
4 Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like*, Portsmouth 1978, p. 48.
5 Thomas McClendon/Pamela Scully, The South African Student Exchange Program: Anti-Apartheid Activism in the Era of Constructive Engagement, in: *Safundi. The Journal of South African and American Studies* 16 (2015), pp. 1-27, here p. 3; Steve Biko, *Black Consciousness in South Africa*, ed. by Millard Arnold, New York 1978, p. xxv.
6 Biko, *Black Consciousness* (fn. 5), pp. xx-xxi (Arnold).
7 Biko, *I Write* (fn. 4), p. 87.
8 Gibson, Black Consciousness (fn. 3), p. 11.
9 Rob Nixon, Review: Cry Freedom, in: *Cinéaste* 16 (1988) issue 3, pp. 38-39.

of apartheid South Africa, specifies the problematic relationship between historical fact and fiction in *Cry Freedom*: ›There are multiple mediators: there is the real Biko, whose teachings were absorbed by the real Woods; these in turn were transformed into the screen Biko's teachings, as mediated by the screen Woods, *as interpreted by the scriptwriters and director.*‹[10]

I will refrain from entering into a close examination of the potential distortion of Biko's message; instead, what is important to keep in mind here is that the film is a dramatization rather than a historical document. Yet what seems to be the issue for some critics of *Cry Freedom* is that both the title and much of the first half of the film suggest that Biko is the main focus of the narrative, while in fact Woods is the real protagonist. From this point of view, the fault lies in the apparent claim to be a depiction of Biko and his aims without properly effectuating this claim. Davis further argues that the film's focus on the friendship with Woods serves to render Biko ›non-threatening to whites‹, which was contrary to the general perception of Biko at the time.[11]

On the one hand, the film has been criticised on the grounds that Black Consciousness, which ›fundamentally questions the dominance of whites on South African soil‹,[12] is not central to the plot. On the other hand, and perhaps more significantly, Davis explains that ›most devastating[ly] for those who knew what the black consciousness movement had meant was the distortion of its ideology‹.[13] Yet in reply to this position, Wally Serote from the ANC asserted that the film ›may not always be totally accurate, but the justness of our struggle is so overwhelming that even if people try to distort it, it will always stand out‹.[14]

While I sympathise with the gist of these contextual criticisms, I would assert that the Biko portrayed in the film does not in fact stray far from the content of the historical Biko's writings. In the courtroom scene, for instance, Biko presents his view on the objectives of Black Consciousness: ›People must not just give in to the hardships of life, they must find a way, even in this environment, to develop hope. Hope for themselves, hope for this country. Now, I think that is what Black Consciousness is all about. Without any reference to the white man, to try and build up a sense of our own humanity, our legitimate place in the world.‹

This interpretation of Biko's message is, to my mind, admissible in the sense that the essential meaning is maintained, though his rhetoric is somewhat moderated. While he was influenced by Frantz Fanon and *Négritude* and sought to articulate differences between white and black people in his writings, Biko was in fact more concerned with the economic and political bettering of the conditions of the non-white

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10 Peter Davis, *In Darkest Hollywood. Exploring the Jungles of Cinema's South Africa*, Randberg 1996, p. 103 (original italics).

11 Ibid.

12 Njeri Ngugi, Presenting and (Mis)representing History in Fiction Film: Sembène's *Camp de Thiaroye* and Attenborough's *Cry Freedom*, in: *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 16 (2003), pp. 57-68, here p. 64.

13 Davis, *In Darkest Hollywood* (fn. 10), p. 103.

14 *Anti-Apartheid News*, Jan./Feb. 1988, p. 10.

population in South Africa than with questions of race. These issues are largely inseparable in an apartheid society, which is why it is indeed important to discuss race in connection with the socio-economic sufferings experienced by the non-white population; nevertheless, I would argue that the approach taken in *Cry Freedom* can be justified on the grounds that Biko's principal message is communicated to the audience.

Cry Freedom did not gross particularly well domestically, coming 16th in a ranking of the top-grossing opening weekends in American cinemas in 1987.[15] Worldwide, however, it grossed an estimated USD 25,900,000 during its cinema run.[16] While much criticism of *Cry Freedom* outside of South Africa was aimed at the ›non-threatening‹ characterization of Biko, the film was considerably more controversial domestically: it was distributed in South Africa in 1988 and then immediately withdrawn because of several bomb threats (two bombs actually went off at the premieres in Durban and Johannesburg). It was subsequently discovered that the security apparatus had been involved in these events.[17]

Significant to the reception of *Cry Freedom* in South Africa is also the fact that the ANC fully supported Attenborough and his film. Acknowledging that the film was not a comprehensive depiction of the domestic struggle against apartheid, the ANC nevertheless saw the benefits of increased international exposure to this struggle. In addition, a feature film could affect its audience emotionally in ways that a documentary or a news report could not.[18] Attenborough himself stated: ›I'm interested in cinema's ability in narrative form to make a statement, set up a circumstance, question a view, challenge a position. I'm a political animal.‹[19]

At the same time, however, it should be kept in mind that a blockbuster film such as *Cry Freedom* has to present dichotomies in order to make the narrative accessible to a large and diverse audience. The balancing act between a historically accurate account of Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement, on the one hand, and the desire to reach as large an audience as possible, on the other, is undoubtedly a complex task. Watching the film, anthropologist and critic Njeri Ngugi maintains, ›cinema audiences will be outraged by the patently unjust and barbaric nature of the apartheid system – but they will not have been asked to question too deeply why the world allowed such a system to endure for so many years‹.[20]

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15 <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/weekend/chart/?yr=1987&wknd=45&p=.htm>.

16 <http://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Cry-Freedom#tab=box-office>.

17 Patrick Lynn Rivers, Governing Images: The Politics of Film and Video Distribution in Late-Apartheid and Postapartheid South Africa, in: *Journal of Film and Video* 59 (2007) issue 1, pp. 19-31, here p. 23.

18 Davis, *In Darkest Hollywood* (fn. 10), p. 104.

19 Ibid., p. 99.

20 Ngugi, History in Fiction Film (fn. 12), p. 66.

3. Conclusion

Although the film ultimately represents a compromise, its political impact and its contribution to the anti-apartheid struggle are a measure of its success. Despite the fact that *Cry Freedom* presents Biko's philosophy and the atrocities of the apartheid system in a product of popular culture, the political message was translated into actual increased support for the transnational anti-apartheid movement.[21] According to the *Anti-Apartheid News*, the film accomplished ›in a few hours what it would take many of our comrades and politicians much time to achieve‹.[22] Other products and events of popular culture such as Peter Gabriel's song *Biko* (1980), Paul Simon's album *Graceland* (1986), and the Free Nelson Mandela concert in 1988 also helped to put South Africa on the map internationally.[23] Irrespective of its possible shortcomings as a historical document, then, *Cry Freedom* should also be viewed as an important addition to the popular legacy of Biko and the Black Consciousness Movement. The almost 30 years that have passed since its release have not rendered the film any less relevant as a valuable visual contribution to this area of research, and its effort to communicate Biko's message to a global audience through means other than writing should be seen as an important tool for historians and researchers in the field.

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21 Davis, *In Darkest Hollywood* (fn. 10), p. 109.
22 *Anti-Apartheid News*, Jan./Feb. 1988, p. 10.
23 Cf. Detlef Siegfried's contribution in this issue.