

Paper

Martin P. Botha

## Chronicles of Apartheid and Colonial South Africa: Remembering Manie Van Rensburg



*Hubert Dethier, Martin Botha and William Pretorius*

### Academic scholarship about South African film directors

South African film history is captured in less than 20 books. Developments in early South African cinema (1895–1940) have been chronicled in Thelma Gutsche's *The History and Social Significance of Motion Pictures in South Africa: 1895–1940* (1946/72). Other significant studies include Keyan Tomaselli's *The Cinema of Apartheid: Race and Class in South Africa* (1989), Johan Blignaut and Martin Botha's *Movies Moguls Mavericks: South African Cinema 1979–1991* (1992), Martin Botha's

edited volume, *Marginal Lives and Painful Pasts: South African Cinema After Apartheid* (2007), Jacqueline Maingard's *South African National Cinema* (2007), André le Roux and Lilla Fourie's *Filmverlede: Geskiedenis van die Suid-Afrikaanse speelfilm* (1982), Peter Davis's *In Darkest Hollywood: Exploring the Jungles of Cinema's South Africa* (1996), Martin Botha and Adri Van Aswegen's *Images of South Africa: The Rise of the Alternative film* (1992), Tomaselli's compilation of revised and reworked papers and chapters published elsewhere, *Encountering Modernity: Twentieth Century South African Cinemas* (2006), Isabel Balseiro and Ntongela Masilela's edited volume, *To*

*Change Reels: Film and Film Culture in South Africa* (2003) Martin Botha's *South African Cinema 1896 – 2010* (2012), Lucia Saks's *Cinema in a Democratic South Africa: The Race for Representation* (2010), Litheko Modisani's *South Africa's Renegade Reels: The Making and Public Lives of Black-Centered Films* (2013), as well as Leon van Nierop's reflections on the history of Afrikaans cinema in *Daar doer in die fliek* (2016).

In the 125-year history of South African cinema only two books have been devoted to South African film directors: Martin Botha and Hubert Dethier's *Kronieken van Zuid-Afrika: de films van Manie van Rensburg* (1997) and Martin Botha's *Jans Rautenbach: Dromer, Baanbreker en Auteur* (2006).

In general the artistic achievements of film directors received little scholarly attention. Attempts to rework the history of South African cinema such as Isabel Balseiro and Ntongela Masilela's edited volume, *To Change Reels: Film and Film Culture in South Africa* (2003) as well as Jacqueline Maingard's *South African National Cinema* (2007) devoted entire chapters to the ideological analysis of films such as *De Voortrekkers* (1916), *Cry, the Beloved Country* (1951) and *Come Back, Africa* (1959), but in the process they ignored the significant oeuvres of directors such as Jans Rautenbach, Ross Devenish, Manie van Rensburg, Katinka Heyns, Darrell Roodt as well as many of the directors of the 1980s and 1990s. Surprisingly Heyns and Roodt, and other significant (and internationally acclaimed) post-apartheid directors such as Gavin Hood, Mark Dornford-May, Rehad Desai, Francois Verster, Ramadan Suleman, Madoda Ncayiyana, Craig Matthew, Craig and Damon Foster, Jack Lewis, Liz Fish and Ntshaveni Wa Luruli, are absent from the list of 25 filmmakers and cultural leaders whom the American scholar Audrey Thomas McCluskey interviewed for her publication on post-apartheid cinema titled *The Devil You Dance With: Film Culture in the New South Africa* (2009).

This article forms part of an ongoing investigation into the cinema of Manie van Rensburg. It forms part of more than 30 years of research about the director's oeuvre.

Most Afrikaans language films of the 1960s and 1970s ignored the socio-political realities of apartheid, especially the realities experienced by black South Africans (Botha 2012). The majority of

Afrikaans language films communicated by means of obsolete symbols that had little multicultural communication value (Botha 2012). 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 (Botha 2012). The exceptions were very few in the 1970s. Director Manie van Rensburg entered the field of Afrikaner culture through political satire and became one of the leading filmmakers in the 125-year history of South African cinema.

Ironically, the first retrospective of Van Rensburg's oeuvre was held in Brussels during 1996, not South Africa, where he still needs to be fully acknowledged by many academics with the exception of Botha (2006), Broodryk (2015), Tomaselli (2006) and Van Nierop (2014). The retrospective formed part of a launch of a book on Van Rensburg co-authored by Martin Botha and Prof. Hubert Dethier (1997) from the Free University of Brussels. It is important to reflect on the significant academic contribution by Dethier (1933 – 2019) to South African cinema and in particular his brilliant philosophical understanding of the oeuvre of Manie van Rensburg.



*Hubert Dethier*

I have dedicated my last book on South African cinema to Hubert Dethier. During 1993 he did a lecture at the then Pretoria Film School. The text was never published, but I still have a copy. Hubert compared the work of Andrei Tarkovsky with Ingmar Bergman, Antonioni and Luis Buñuel, with the emphasis on a philosophical analysis of thematic

concerns in the auteurs' oeuvres. It was a masterclass.



*Hubert Dethier at Apollo Film Festival*

During 2006 Dethier returned to South Africa, to the Apollo Film Festival in Victoria West, where he received a special award for his contribution to South African cinema. Dethier was one of the outstanding scholars on film in Europe. He was born on 21 July 1933 in Lembeek (Halle). He received a doctorate in 1967. Since 1969, Dethier was a senior lecturer at the Vrije Universiteit Brussel, lecturing on Classical and Medieval Philosophy, The History of Religion, Philosophy and the Criticism of Religion, Textual Theory, Semiotics, as well as Introduction to Communication Systems. He also lectured at the Universiteit van Amsterdam for the following courses: Marxist Aesthetics, Structuralism, Cultural Philosophy and Contemporary French Philosophy. From 1966 to 1973, he lectured at the Antwerp Royal Academy of Fine Arts (Philosophy and Aesthetics). From 1973 to 1980, Dethier was also a member of the Board of Directors of the *Marxistisch Studiecentrum* (Marxist Research Centre) of the A.B.V.V. [The F.G.T.B., socialist trade union] for the Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde region. The author of numerous publications on Art, Aesthetics, Literature and Cultural Philosophy, in late 1992 the VUB-Press published his overview of the major movements in philosophical thought entitled *The Face and the Riddle. Profiles from Plato to Derrida*. His background in philosophy contributed significantly to his analysis of Manie van Rensburg's oeuvre. With regard to African and South African cinema

Prof. Dethier supervised several M. A. and Doctorate dissertations, including a groundbreaking study by Kris Govaerts on South African cinema during the 1980s and early 1990s. During 1992 Prof. Dethier organised a conference and film week on the theme **Cinema and Apartheid** at the Free University of Brussels. It was the first academic conference of this nature in Belgium.



*Martin Botha with Hubert Dethier*

During 1996 Prof. Dethier co-authored the book on a progressive South African film director, Manie van Rensburg, in Flemish. It was the first book on a South African director in the history of South African cinema. The book formed part of an in-depth conference on the work of Manie van Rensburg at the Free University of Brussels. The major works of Van Rensburg were also screened in Brussels. Prof. Dethier also organised a photo exhibition on South African cinema of the 1980s at the Free University of Brussels.

Prof. Hubert Dethier died in 2019.

### **Career history of Manie van Rensburg**

Hermanus Philippus (Manie) Janse van Rensburg was born on 24 October 1945 in Krugersdorp, a town in the former Transvaal province (Botha 2006). 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 (Botha & Dethier 1997).

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 (Botha & Dethier 1997). 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. Van Rensburg continued his career as the cinematographer 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 (Botha & Van Aswegen 1992).

Van Rensburg formed his 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 rand in the bank. 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 moving character study of loneliness in cold, bleak Hillbrow (Botha 2012). 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 Bankrover (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 for them based on a radio serial for them (Botha 2012). The film he

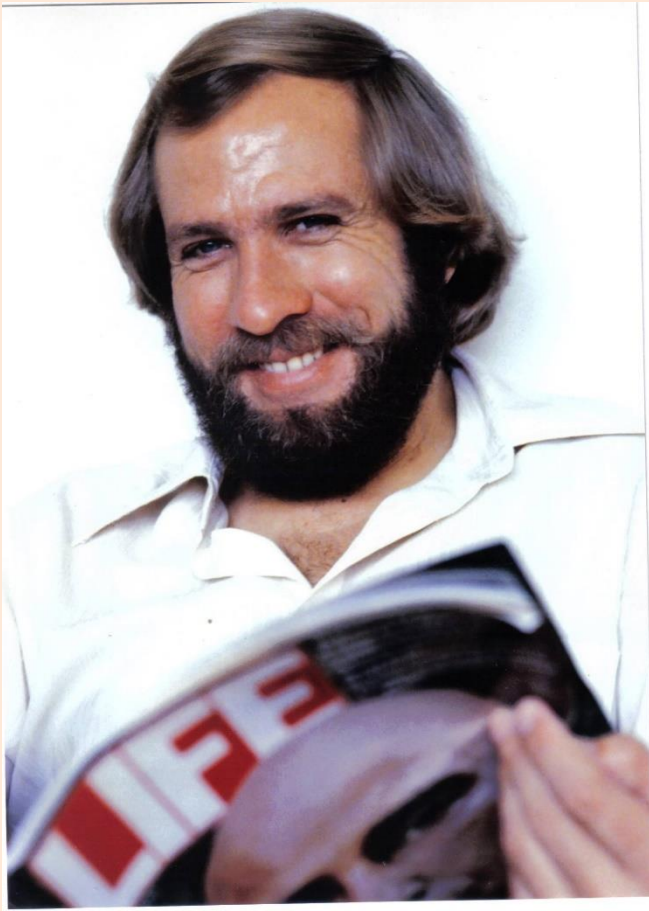
made for Kavalier, *Geluksdal (1974)*, is his worst film and not at all different from the Afrikaans film escapism of the period. The film was a financial success, but Van Rensburg admitted that this was not his finest hour (Botha & Dethier 1997).

The other film, one of his choices, *Die Square (1975)*, 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 (Botha 2012). 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 (1991)*, a similar plot was used by Van Rensburg to address Afrikaner fears regarding black South Africans.

**Van Rensburg was initially not part of the movement of anti-apartheid filmmaking.** He made TV drama series for the South African Broadcasting Corporation (SABC) from the middle 1970s until 1987 (Botha 2012). 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.

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 who travelled to Dakar, Senegal, in order to have discussions with members of the then banned ANC (Botha 2012). 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, with 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 the Film and Allied Workers' Organisation (FAWO) he hoped to find a sympathetic, progressive group to support him in his work (Botha 2012). *The Native Who Caused All The Trouble* (1989), a film about a black man's struggle to get his the land back he lost because due to racist colonial legislation, was his contribution to the new critical, anti-apartheid cinema of the 1980s, and it established him as part of the anti-apartheid movement.



*Manie van Rensburg*

Van Rensburg's short film, *Country Lovers* (1982), also criticised apartheid policy and is based on the work by Nobel Prize winner, Nadine Gordimer's work, and forms one of seven short films, collectively titled, *Six Feet of the Country*. 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 special screenings were only permitted at South African film festivals during the 1980s, 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 (Botha 2012). 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."

### **Thematic and stylistic concerns**

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 (Botha & Dethier 1997). 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 years, one realises that together with Jans Rautenbach he could be regarded as South Africa's most prominent film auteur.

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 (Botha & Dethier 1997). Within these themes Van Rensburg experiments with particular filmic codes not seen in the work of his contemporaries, Jan Scholtz, Daan Retief, Franz Marx, Bertrand Retief, Ivan Hall 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 brilliant comedian Tobie Cronjé; 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 of, *Doktor Con Viljee se Overberg* (1981), which earned him the Star 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).

Van Rensburg's oeuvre should be seen 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 (Botha & Dethier 1997).

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 during the previous century will be examined in the remainder of this article. His representation of race and class relations, as well as the outsiders to the "normative society", is 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. In many ways his oeuvre depicts chronicles of Colonial and Apartheid South Africa.

### **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 (Botha 2012). 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 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 ends up as an embittered alcoholic.

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 (Botha & Dethier 1997). 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 hare for food.

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 louver 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 Uncle Jan and to escape the hardship. Well-rounded characters are created. 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 (Botha & Dethier 1997). In many ways Van Rensburg was a realist in his approach to filmmaking. He admired the neorealism in European films and this realistic approach became his style

throughout his work. Sometimes he would complement his realism with real archival documentary footage and original recordings of popular music of a period to add authenticity to his work (Botha 2012).

*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 cart, 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 (Botha 2012). Pop slips relatively easily into the role of "madam", quickly leaves 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 in contrast 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 (Botha & Dethier 1997).

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 (Botha & Dethier 1997). 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.

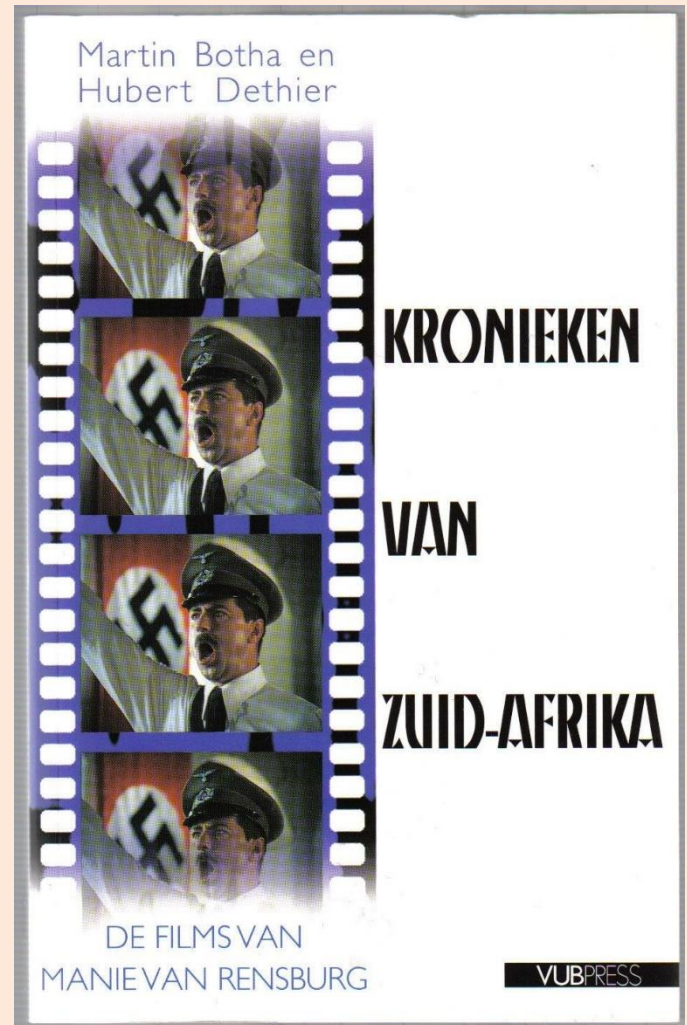
Van Rensburg touches upon the issue of Afrikaner nationalism that is a major theme in his later *Heroes* and *The Fourth Reich*. Hermaans and Pop meet in the ruins and Hermaans mentions to her that he is joining a union at the mines. Van Rensburg probably refers here to the attempts by the *Afrikaner Broederbond's* 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 persisting '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*, 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 World War II. This is also the theme of *Heroes* and to a large extent of *The Fourth Reich*.

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.



*Book about Manie van Rensburg*

### ***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 Wolmaransstad. The film depicts 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 (Botha 2012).

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 (Botha 2012).

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 are found 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 (Botha & Dethier 1997).

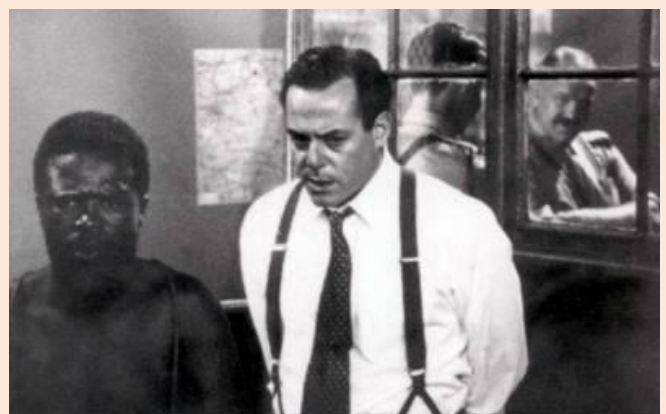
Several reasons are given for Vlok's bloodbath at the end of the film, especially his childless marriage with his wife, (played by a Van Rensburg regular, Wilma Stockenström, a great name in Afrikaans literature and film), and her involvement with Muisen, the husband of her daughter by her previous marriage. 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.

Vlok assaults Muisen after Muisen throws the Union Jack over Vlok's 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 of hard labour for Vlok with hard labour. After the court case, his wife divorces him. She sells some of his belongings which lead 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)



*The Native Who Caused All The Trouble*

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 during colonial times (Botha & Van Aswegen 1992).

But *The Native Who Caused All the Trouble* should be seen in a broader context, which 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 (Botha 2012).

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 (Botha 2012).

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 (Botha & Van Aswegen 1992).

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 had 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 existed in South Africa during the nineties which threatened the peace process (Botha 2012). This is the warning in two of Van Rensburg's greatest historical dramas, *Heroes* and *The Fourth Reich*.

### 1939-1948: The Rise of Afrikaner Nationalism

Fusion, and the consequent split between General Hertzog and D.F. Malan, was of the greatest

significance in the history of Afrikaner nationalism (Botha 2012). Although Malan's Purified National Party was numerically exceptionally weak, confined largely to the Cape Province and with only 19 seats in the House of Assembly, within 15 years it had established itself as a dominant force in Afrikaner political life and as the new governing party in South Africa. In its ideology and institutional grounding in Afrikaner life, the party represented a fundamental departure from the Hertzog traditions of Afrikaner nationalism (Botha & Dethier 1997).

The focus of Hertzog's nationalism was the legal status of Afrikaners. As such, his principal objectives had been the securing of language equality for Afrikaners, the civil rights of Afrikaans-speakers, and the constitutional independence of South Africa. His definition of an Afrikaner was not narrowly exclusive, and embraced not only Afrikaans-speakers but also English-speaking whites who were loyal to South Africa and accepted language equality. A powerful sense of "South Africa First" distinguished his nationalism, and this helped to shape his foreign and economic policies (Botha 2012).

Malan's new party was formulating a far more aggressive nationalist ideology. Strongly republican, and ethnically exclusive, it stressed the distinctiveness of Afrikaner culture, and saw as a priority not merely the legal parity of Afrikaners but their social and material predicament. These objectives were given institutional form in a range of political, cultural, and economic agencies with and through which the party worked to articulate Afrikaner aspirations, and to develop and entrench its hold on Afrikaner voters (Botha 2012).

When the British Prime Minister, Neville Chamberlain, announced on Sunday 3 September 1939 that Britain was at war with Germany, Hertzog presented his colleagues with his decision that South Africa should adopt neutrality, a decision which he had reached in the knowledge that Malan's Purified National Party would support him. The Cabinet was irrevocably split by the decision. Smuts, however, proposed an amendment that the Union sever its relations with the Third Reich, and refuse to adopt a position of neutrality. Hertzog, however, compared Hitler's behaviour with his own struggles in the cause of Afrikaner freedom. Smuts replied that it was impossible to reconcile neutrality with South Africa's obligations towards Britain and the Commonwealth. Hertzog's motion was defeated. He resigned, and Smuts was invited to form a

government. On 6 September the new government issued a proclamation to sever relations with Germany. More than two million South Africans volunteered for service in World War II, including 120 thousand blacks (Botha 2012).



*Martin Botha with Hubert Dethier (at the right)*

In *The Fourth Reich* this split between Smuts and Hertzog is portrayed in a long sequence. Relations between supporters of Smuts and those of Malan worsened, as depicted in *Heroes*. Under the leadership of Hans van Rensburg, the *Ossewabrandwag*, The *Ossewabrandwag*, or Brigade of Ox wagon Sentinels, a paramilitary, ultra-nationalist mass movement, was formed in 1939 following the Voortrekker centenary celebrations. It sought to arm the Afrikaner nation for the coming struggle to conquer the English-dominated urban centres. The right-wing organisation had initially enjoyed cordial relations with Malan and Hertzog's newly formed National Party, and many prominent party members had joined the movement. The *Ossewabrandwag* grew massively during the early war years; by 1941, its membership had reached between 300 000 and 400 000 thousand. It also became increasingly militaristic in style. A crack elite corps, the *Stormjaers* (Storm troopers, similar to the *Nazi Sturmabteilung*) was established. Acts of sabotage carried out by members of the movement embarrassed the National Party, which, as Malan primly pointed out, relied on constitutional methods to achieve its objectives (Botha & Dethier 1997).

It is within this context that both *Heroes* and *The Fourth Reich* must be understood. During these stormy times of the Second World War the hatred between Smuts and Malan supporters was blatantly obvious.

## *Heroes* (1985)

*Heroes* portrays an Orwellian world during the beginning of the forties in a linear narrative structure and a realistic style. Van Rensburg returned to the format of *Verspeelde Lente*. The viewer sees figures, faces and farmhouses in dark spaces, while paranoia and corruption reign everywhere. The complexity of the socio-political situation of this period was remarkably well-portrayed for a local television production about this period (Botha & Dethier 1998).

The friendship between an Afrikaner, Hendrik (played by Ian Roberts, one of the regulars in Van Rensburg's work) and an Englishman, Patrick Joseph (played by Neil McCarthy), is the central focus of the narrative. Both are in love with an English-speaking nurse, Isadora Collins. Hendrik works in a garage for an elderly Jew, Mr Hymie Galgut. Isadora becomes a lodger with the Galgut family whose son, Ira, wants to join up in the war to fight Hitler and fascism. His father replies by identifying the enemy as being local feelings of anti-Semitism, telling his son: "We don't have a country. We have only ourselves." Mr Galgut tends to exploit his employees, a practice to which Ira strongly objects (Botha 2012).

The tension between those South Africans who have joined the war effort and those who haven't, is visible from the first sequence in the movie when Hendrik accidentally bumps into soldiers at the station. The soldiers demand an apology. The initial feelings of anti-Semitism are also visible in a sequence in which Isadora buys food in a shop and some Afrikaners make rude remarks about Jews.

The scene changes to the *Stormjaers* trying to sabotage the railway line. General Fourie of the *Ossewabrandwag* arrives on the scene and is seriously hurt after an explosion. Hendrik, on his way home in his car, is asked by a member of the *Stormjaers*, Uncle Willem (Mees Xteen, who played Vlok in *Die Perdesmous*), to help him tow his car to a farmhouse (Botha 2012).

He tells Hendrik: "We Afrikaners must stand together, Hendrik." The wounded body of General Fourie is in the car, but being hidden from Hendrik. Unconsciously Hendrik, who is not politically polarised towards the right, becomes involved in *Stormjaer* activities.

Patrick is also not politically polarised, although his father, an English doctor, tries to persuade him to join the armed forces in the war. Patrick remarks that he will only join up if the Germans attack Jamestown. The change in the characters of these two men, initially friends, makes up the narrative of *Heroes*, a development in character that is no less remarkable than that of Pop in *Verspeelde Lente*.

Van Rensburg also portrays the tension in the relations between the Afrikaner nationalists in the town and the Jewish family. In order to get medicine for the seriously injured General Fourie, some *Stormjaer* members kill Patrick's father and flee with the medicine. Hendrik meets with members of the *Stormjaers*, including Gerhard Lombaard (played by Ryno Hattingh, who also portrays the Robey Leibbrandt character in *The Fourth Reich*). They try to persuade him to join the ranks of the *Stormjaers*.

When Patrick's father dies in hospital, the scene intercuts with the death of General Andries Fourie. The ideological polarisation now begins in the lives of Hendrik and Patrick. The latter is embittered and changes from a womaniser into a determined volunteer for the war. He objects to Hendrik's involvement with the *Stormjaers* at Stutterheim. Now, *Heroes* becomes a vivid exploration of growing fascism in South Africa with uncomfortable parallels with similar white right-wing sentiments in South Africa of the early 1990s (Botha 2012).

Patrick tells Hendrik: "It is impossible to stay neutral in this war." When he tries to make love to Isadora, he suffers from impotence. In a moving scene the friends have a farewell party in the fields and nothing is the same after that.

Patrick joins the armed forces and his mother collapses, but finds emotional strength in Isadora, while Hendrik becomes a member of the *Stormjaers* after a quarrel with Mr Galgut, who becomes more and more isolated in the community. The growing polarisation mirrors the same tendencies in South Africa during the PW Botha regime of the 1980s. The extreme of this polarisation in the film is portrayed in a gruesome physical assault on the young Jew, Ira, forcing the Jewish family finally to leave the community.

Van Rensburg's major achievement in the film is in giving every side a human perspective: the Jewish family, the Afrikaner Nationalists, and Patrick's the

family of Patrick. People are caught up in the spiral of violence (Botha 2012). One of the most remarkable scenes in the film is when Hendrik is sworn in as a member of the *Stormjaers*. Van Rensburg repeats this ritual several times in *The Fourth Reich*. He touches here at the heart of Afrikaner extremists, in an emotional ceremony that frightens the viewer due to its emotional intensity. Hendrik is now part of “the war within South Africa” (as opposed to the war outside the country) and the ideology of Afrikaner nationalism. He begins to cut ties with Isadora and the communication between them suffers.

Hendrik is arrested after he tries to sabotage the railway line and realises later he has been set up by his new friends who are not prepared to perform the act themselves because of the danger involved. In his discussions with the police, explaining his motives, he refers to the traumas of urbanisation, the drought on the farms and the absence of capital to save Afrikaner farmers. In the concentration camp, Hendrik’s humiliating physical check-up and his detention again show clear parallels with the 1980s State of Emergency in South Africa and the thousands of detentions without trial (Botha 2012).

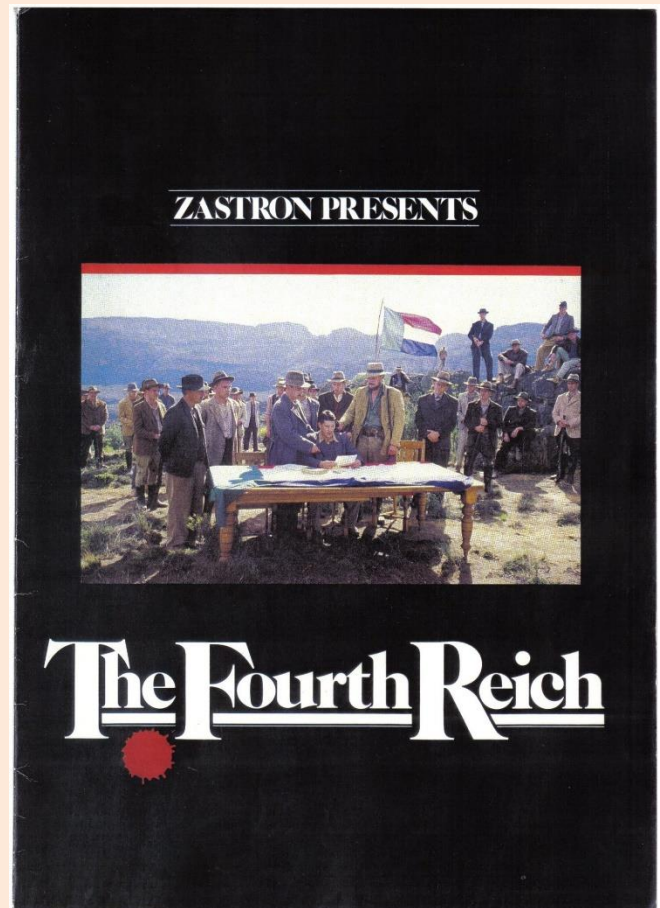
Both Hendrik and Patrick betray their friends, returning home with physical and emotional scars. This makes the title of the film highly ironic. Neither the volunteers in the war nor the *Stormjaers* fighting their own war inside the country can be regarded as heroes in Van Rensburg’s filmic world (Botha & Dethier 1997).

Hendrik, disillusioned by the *Stormjaers*, informs on them to the security personnel in the camp. (This incident is reminiscent of a similar act in *The Fourth Reich* when Jan Taillard betrays Robey Leibbrandt at the end of the movie.) Patrick too, acts in a cowardly fashion when he tries to run away from a hand grenade that falls between him and his buddies on the battlefield, instead of throwing himself on it, and giving up his life in order to save theirs. He is, however, wounded in the back. Hendrik becomes the Van Rensburg outcast, living in paranoia on the edge of society. At the end of the film he is shot by the fascist, Gerhard.

### ***The Fourth Reich* (1990)**

The director’s cut of *The Fourth Reich*, also linear in structure and realistic in style, is Van Rensburg’s greatest achievement. The film is basically

structured as a thriller, a hunt by a dedicated Afrikaner policeman, Jan Taillard (Marius Weyers), working undercover to expose and capture the fascist, Robey Leibbrandt (Ryno Hattingh), before he carries out his plan to assassinate General Smuts. Van Rensburg’s themes of betrayal, the outcast, communication problems in relationships (in this case between Taillard and his wife) and Afrikaner nationalism are all present and brilliantly developed in the director’s cut which runs for over three hours (Botha & Dethier 1997).



The controversy surrounding the production has suggested that the shorter theatrical version is perhaps not fully the film Van Rensburg made, and that to see his concept at its best one should watch the three-hour television version (Botha & Dethier 1997). But even the shorter version is still an impressive achievement: it depicts, as does *Heroes*, a time when the country was divided, as thousands of Afrikaner patriots, instead of joining the war effort, flocked to an ultra-right-wing organisation violently opposed to the British (Botha 2012).

Right-wing extremist sentiments are personified in the Leibbrandt character. He objects to his parents’ friendship with a Jewish family. According to him, they are exploiting the Afrikaner nation. Later in the film, he and members of the *Stormjaers* blow up the

shop of the Jewish family. During the recruiting of members, he remarks: "The Afrikaner grew up with his Bible in his one hand and his gun in the other. This is why we are still here." After this sequence, he starts a sabotage campaign.

The film is well structured and edited. Its linear structure involves two parallel narrative lines of Leibbrandt and Taillard respectively starting their missions, receiving instructions and making contact with crucial people. These storylines become one in both characters' involvement with a German woman (brilliantly played by Grethe Fox). Taillard cannot tell his wife about his mission. His obsessive involvement in his work contributes to the separation between them. It is never resolved (Botha 2012).



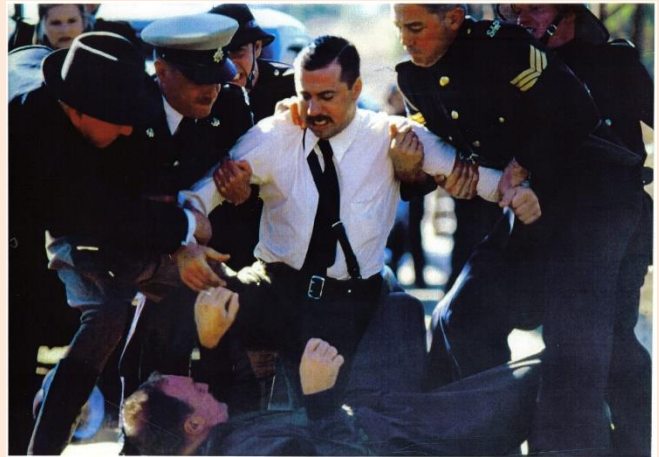
*The Fourth Reich*

*The Fourth Reich* is one of the few South African films to make the great landscapes of South Africa (in particular the Cape Province, a recurring landscape within Van Rensburg's oeuvre) an integral part of the narrative structure.

Visually the film is hauntingly beautiful, photographed by Dewald Aukema. It fully deserved the 1990 AA Life Vita Award for best cinematography. The film's authentic images consist mostly of long shots of figures against the landscapes of a rural South Africa in contrast to medium and close-up shots of characters within darkly lit indoor settings.

Louis van Rensburg composed a remarkably authentic musical score for the film, developing specific musical themes for the key characters. Concertinas and violins were used throughout, as well as the Second Movement of Franz Schubert's

Piano Trio in E-Flat Op 100, for the characterisation of the German woman, Frau Dorfman.



*The Fourth Reich*

The failure of the film at the box office, however, was a shock for the industry. It cost some R16 million rand to make, raised mostly through the tax incentive scheme of the 1980s. The film opened with 20 prints, a saturated media and highly favourable reviews. Van Rensburg took best director at the Vita Awards. It featured great acting talent: Elize Cawood, Grethe Fox, Ryno Hattingh, Marius Weyers, Tertius Meintjies and Ian Roberts. Mark Wilby's art direction is brilliant. One explanation for its failure is that the main distributors, Ster-Kinekor, Nu Metro and UIP, only cater for a small portion of the South African population. Only a small section of moviegoers had theatrical access to the film. There are no cinema outlets to which the black majority has easy access, the multiplexes only being in the major cities in shopping malls. Cinemas may be multi-racial, but outside the major cities there are no substantial distribution chains to ensure that the majority of the South African population will see South African films on the big screen.

### **The 1970s and 1980s: The Urban Afrikaner**

Van Rensburg's best work is set in the past. His work about the psyche of the contemporary urban Afrikaner is placed within the conventions of light comedies like *Die Square*, suspense dramas such like *Die Vuurtoring* and *Die Bankroter*, or adaptations of radio stories such as *Geluksdal*. Subsidy based on box-office income, censorship of political local political films and the lack of audience demand for risky, experimental work during the seventies might have inhibited Van Rensburg in fully exploring contemporary issues. Although some of these films do not attain the same standard as his period dramas, they are still

examples of Van Rensburg's thematic concerns, and *Die Vuurtoring* especially is a major achievement (Botha 2012). For the purpose of this article only *Taxi to Soweto* (1991) will be discussed. The others films are analysed in Botha (2012).

### ***Taxi to Soweto* (1991)**

In this Ster-Kinekor released film, Van Rensburg sets him the tricky task of balancing sentiment and humour. *Taxi to Soweto* principally concerns a bored, middle-of-the-road, middle-aged, over-pampered, rich, urban Afrikaans woman, Jessica du Toit (played by Van Rensburg's regular, Elize Cawood), her workaholic husband, Horace (Marius Weyers) and a snappy street-sharp taxi-driver, Richard (Patrick Shai), whose lives become entwined despite the chasm known as the great South African racial divide (Botha 2012).

Horace and Jessica's marriage has settled into stagnation in the "wastefully wonderful white-washed world of the old South Africa" (Botha 2012). But, a series of unexpected events signals a swift reversal. On her way to fetch Horace from the airport, Jessica's car breaks down. She is 'rescued' by Richard who in turn is hijacked at gunpoint and Jessica is thrown headlong into 'the black experience' of Soweto. Her restricted white perspective of South African life is about to change forever.

Van Rensburg explores communication problems within many spheres of South African society: between people of different race groups and especially within the urban rat-race of wealthy whites. He does not flinch from showing the class differences between people living in poverty in sectors of Soweto and the rich whites of the northern urban areas of Johannesburg (Botha & Dethier 1997).

Horace and Jessica's life is characterised by a lack of communication due to Horace's obsession with his work. Communication takes place within the restrictions of telephone answering machines and short telephone calls. Horace and his employer simply do not have the time for personal phone calls from their wives. Horace and Jessica's house looks like a fortress, with a sophisticated security system, a vicious dog and high security fences. The purpose is to keep the 'enemy' out. In a very funny moment in the film, this security system literally backfires on

Horace when he is attacked by his own dog and the security agency considers him to be a burglar.

When Horace arrives home after a business trip his world crumbles on finding a message from a black man on the answering machine, referring to Jessica as "Baby". He starts a long quest to find her. Suddenly his work loses its meaning. Horace sees the break-up of his relationship with Jessica in the form of a television *soapie*. In a way this sequence becomes a critical comment on the portrayal of relationships in the Afrikaans film "soopies" of the local industry during the seventies (Botha 2012).

The people who bring Jessica and Horace together again are, in fact, the 'enemy', the blacks from Soweto. Jessica and Horace do get a new perspective on their lives and marriage, and on a changing South Africa. In *Taxi to Soweto* there are no outcasts, nor liberal whites who fight for the rights of blacks such as in *A Dry White Season* (1988), nor are there the ultra-right-wing Afrikaner stereotypes of Roodt's *A Place of Weeping* (1984). A human face, although critical, is given to both the activists and the rich whites (Botha & Dethier 1997).

The film was shot in Soweto and Johannesburg. Several languages have been used: Afrikaans, English, Zulu, Xhosa and Sotho. This reflects the rich cultural diversity Van Rensburg is portraying. In many ways this is the first filmic presentation of the dawn of a post-apartheid South Africa. The award-winning performances by Patrick Shai, Ramalao Makhene and Mary Twala were highlights of Van Rensburg's last feature.

### **Conclusion**

Manie van Rensburg's chronicles of Afrikanerdom are noted for their humane treatment of the characters, including outcasts and the political right wing. These films and television dramas are more than mere profiles of the politics of the time. Most of his work addresses communication problems between people in a universe that is characterised by distrust, paranoia and eventually betrayal (Botha & Dethier 1997). Even comedies such as *Die Square* and *Taxi to Soweto* address the issue of mistrust between humans. Van Rensburg's work as a whole gives a portrait of the strange, complex and divided creature who is the Afrikaner. This portrait is an important alternative to the oversimplified images of Afrikaners as mere racist villains usually depicted in some anti-apartheid images of this society.

Van Rensburg placed him within the Afrikaans lager and, with films such as *Die Square* and *Verspeelde Lente*, managed to upset the establishment. *Die Square* caused a stir by depicting Afrikaners as hypocrites. *Verspeelde Lente* upset Afrikanerdom with its images of poor, lower class Afrikaners. Being Afrikaans was a source of tension, but also creativity in his work. **He wasn't interested in portraying Afrikaner history, but in exploring Afrikaners against the larger history of the country.** Later, examinations of racism and anti-Semitism became important themes in his work such as *The Native Who Caused All The Trouble*, *Heroes* and especially *The Fourth Reich*. The latter examined the destruction caused by fascism, power, racism and anti-Semitism (Botha 2012).

If his work has a common theme, it is the conflict between the outsider and communal acceptance, an aspect he experienced in real life. His trip to Dakar during the repressive days of State President P.W. Botha got wide, somewhat hysterical publicity in Afrikaans newspapers, and meant an effective end to his career in the local mainstream film industry and unofficial blacklisting by the SABC.

He divided his career into his pre- and post-Dakar periods. Before Dakar he had work. After Dakar he found himself out of business. He was suddenly a filmmaker in search of a spiritual home; after being a sought-after, popular director, he struggled to make films. And the Left also held pitfalls. One remembers an interview with him where he stated his dissatisfaction with FAWO (the Film and Allied Workers' Organisation). Someone there phoned him and asked why he hadn't yet submitted his script on *Taxi to Soweto* for approval. His answer was unprintable. He didn't need anyone's seal of approval, from the Right or the Left. He was too honest to take an approved political point of view, and too independent to leave artistic and political judgment to others.

**At the time of his suicide on 3 December 1993, he was only 48 years old (Botha 2012).**

His last film, *Taxi to Soweto*, dealt with racial reconciliation as far back as 1991, years before the historic democratic elections of 1994 and other South African filmmakers produced numerous 'Rainbow Nation' comedies such as *The Angel, the Bicycle and the Chinaman's Finger* (1992), *There's a Zulu on My Stoep* (1993), *Soweto Green* (1995),

*Inside Out* (1999), *Mr Bones* (2001), *Mama Jack* (2005) and *White Wedding* (2009).

In 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 an 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* (Afrikaans Language and Culture Society, ATKV) bestowed awards on him. He also received the M-Net Vita Award for Best Director of for *The Fourth Reich*, and the Idem Award for direction of for *The Lighthouse (Die Vuurtoring)*.

In the 1990s the Award for Lifetime Achievement in African Cinema by the pay TV channel M-Net's award for Lifetime Achievement in African cinema was named after Van Rensburg during the 1990s. At the 2007 edition of the Small Karoo National Arts Festival (KKNK) the first ever South African retrospective of Van Rensburg's oeuvre was arranged by the director of the Cape Winelands Film Festival, Leon van der Merwe.

The significance of Manie van Rensburg's contribution to Afrikaans and South African cinema needs urgent attention by academics and filmmakers. The current revival in post-apartheid Afrikaans cinema is based on escapism and nostalgia and in many ways resembles the cinema of the 1970s (Botha 2012). In his PhD study about contemporary Afrikaans cinema Chris Broodryk (2015) focuses on Afrikaans film as a cinema of political impotence. With a very few exceptions Afrikaans cinema does not reflect processes of political engagement and interrogation as other, ostensibly similar post-conflict cinemas do. While German filmmaker Rainer Werner Fassbinder's films made reference to German's "monstrous" political pasts and presents, Afrikaans cinema seems oblivious to its own 'indebtedness' to a specific identifiable historical "monstrosity". It is not that Afrikaans cinema attempts to "represent the unrepresentable", as Elsaesser (2001:195) puts it, but that there is no acknowledgement of anything unrepresentable (history, exploitation, political killings, effects of migrant labour and so forth) to



engage with. Unlike the cinema of Manie van Rensburg and sadly since 1994, Afrikaans cinema has abandoned its occasional sense of political urgency in its near totality in favour of what can broadly be described as safe, sanitised non-political narratives, films that fail to transcend their genre trappings and seem to reify stereotypes of Afrikaans speaking South Africans in especially comedies, to not even mention the conspicuous absence of blackness in these films.

In his study Broodryk (2015) presents a detailed examination of the claim that Afrikaans cinema has indeed shifted from occasional political potency to near complete political impotence. He was personally drawn to the issue of cinematic impotence by a growing realisation that Afrikaans cinema is a cinema that fails to come to grips with South African history and politics in general, a cinema that finds a critical engagement with the multicultural South African present equally problematic.

Broodryk's appraisal of Van Rensburg's oeuvre is significant for our understanding of his seminal contribution to a cinema beyond apartheid. Van Rensburg was critical of the cinema of diversion and its economic emphasis. He said: "[w]e have a system geared to promote soap operas only, which, in turn, will prevent our films from reaching any other audience ... Art goes out the door; the money comes in" (as quoted in Tomaselli 1989:41). The director would later scathingly comment on South African cinema's alleged ignorance of the country's socio-political realities:

"It somehow seems ridiculous to make King Lear while the black townships are burning. It seems like sacrilege to ignore the suffering, of especially the black people, in any film one makes in South Africa. [...] The problem here, however, is that when any other images are shown, the filmmaker is easily perceived as an apologist for the Government. The challenge for the South African filmmaker is, like anywhere else, first and foremost, to make a good film, to explore the areas of South African society; to be intolerant of any form of discrimination, not to lose track of various shades and perspectives of South African life" (quoted in Blignaut & Botha 1992:102).

As his films reveal, Van Rensburg was not only committed to exploring the diverse "shades and perspective of South African life", but also to

demonstrate that white people, as well as black people, can be economically disadvantaged. In so doing, Van Rensburg challenges Afrikaner exceptionalism and the numerous cinematic portrayals of white Afrikaans characters middle class at worst. With his Afrikaans television series *Verspeelde Lente* (1982), Van Rensburg challenged the dominant Afrikaner establishment just as he did with his English films (Botha 2012). *Verspeelde Lente* centered on poor, lower class white Afrikaners, and as such presented an uncomfortable mirror image to a society that preferred to keep such social issues quiet.

*Taxi to Soweto* (1991), a "socially serious comedic film" (Tomaselli 2006:47), was released during the build-up towards the finalisation of democratic transition. While this film is made from "quite decidedly white" position, it nonetheless promotes the idea of an intercultural perspective in a visually accessible manner (2006:58). The film is "critical of white racial attitudes and experiences" (2006:121). Van Rensburg's *The Native who caused all the Trouble* (1989) and *The Fourth Reich* constituted part of the new, critical South African cinema referred to earlier, specifically the "post-1987 new wave (Botha and Dethier 1997)"

Sadly Van Rensburg never experienced the birth of a democratic South Africa. He committed suicide in December 1993, a mere few months before the historic general elections were held in South Africa between 26 and 29 April 1994.

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