Article

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Marginal Lives, Female Agency and Male Angst In The Cinema of Darrell James Roodt: 1986 – 2026

Darrell James Roodt

Introduction

South African director Darrell James Roodt is one of the most dominant and prolific figures in the South African film industry (Armes 2008: 112), having made a total number of 54 feature films and several television series to date during a period of 40 years. Surprisingly few academics have devoted chapters in books or post-graduate dissertations to his work (Blignaut & Botha 1992; Botha 2012; Botha & Van Aswegen 1992; Mdege 2015, 2017, 2020, 2024; Murphy & Williams 2007; Ntabo, Nyandoro & Barasa 2022; Treffry-Goatley 2010; Waddell 2025). Roodt's oeuvre includes some of the milestones in South African cinema since the 1980s such as the Oscar-nominated *Yesterday* (2004), *Sarafina!* (1991) and *Cry the Beloved Country* (1994), as well as genre work like *Dracula 3000* (2004), which received negative notices by critics (Murphy & Williams 2007).

In a valuable interview with Roodt film critic Shaun de Waal captures the fascinating,

contradictory nature of Roodt's career, positioning him as a filmmaker who oscillated between critically acclaimed political pieces and commercial B-grade projects (De Waal 2013). Roodt is unique because he moves effortlessly between high-art prestige cinema and low-budget genre exploitation. His career spans from pioneering anti-apartheid films in the 1980s to an Oscar nomination in 2004, alongside straight-to-video B-grade horror movies. Because his filmography is so diverse and contradictory, it offers rich material for academic research and a book publication. De Waal concludes that Roodt is ultimately an artist driven by an absolute compulsion to create, quoting Roodt's own philosophy on his relentless work ethic: "When it's in your blood, it's in your blood" (De Waal 2013).

This article forms part of an ongoing investigation into the cinema of Roodt and is a follow-up on earlier attempts to explore some of the major themes in his oeuvre (Botha 2011; 2012; 2013). Recurring themes include marginal characters in apartheid and post-apartheid landscapes, female dreams and agency, as well as male angst.

The research approach to his oeuvre consists of historical research, auteur analysis and a close examination of Roodt's representation of women and men in his work.

Biographical details: Roodt as Cinephile

Darrell Roodt was born in Johannesburg on 28 April 1962. He grew up in Hillbrow, a cosmopolitan area at the time (RapidLion TV 2017). His mother was divorced. He shared a small flat with her and his sister. The cheapest entertainment available at the time was movies. His mother introduced him to the cinema. Musicals made a significant impression. He bought soundtracks and for him and his sister life was a musical theatre. His mother was a major influence – a true inspiration and facilitator of his love for cinema.

He attended the King Edward School for 12 years. He stated that the liberal teachers encouraged him to think for yourself. By standard 8 he was writing a column called The Second View for *The Star* newspaper. Roodt claims that the better film directors loved movies, especially when they were young (RapidLion 2017). His generation grew up with a film culture involving independent art house cinemas and film festivals in Johannesburg. In the late 1970s international film festivals in South Africa became crucial to break the sense of isolation felt by South African audiences. In some cases the censors of the 1980s were more lenient with regarding to film festival screenings and allowed some nudity and sex in films. The Weekly Mail Film Festival, hosted under the umbrella of the independent newspaper *The Weekly Mail* (later *Mail & Guardian*), offered an invaluable festival of independent, oppositional filmmaking in South Africa from 1987 till the early 1990s (Botha 2012).

Festival director Liza Key also included milestones from other African countries to break the isolation between South

African filmmakers and their colleagues elsewhere on the continent. At the Weekly Mail Film Festival of 1990, for example, co-hosted by *The Weekly Mail* newspaper and the Film and Allied Workers' Organisation (FAWO), a collection of rare films on South Africa found in archives around the world, examples of resistance cinema never seen publicly in this country, as well as 20 films by independent South African filmmakers and over 20 short films in a short film competition were screened (Botha 2012).

He enrolled at the University of the Witwatersrand to study drama, but left after one week to make films. After working as assistant for Gray Hofmeyr on a TV-series *City People* (1983) he left the SABC at the age of 20 to start a career in the South African film industry.

Roodt is a cinephile. In many of his interviews he refers to directors and films, which he admires. The list includes *Barry Lyndon* (Kubrick), *Umberto D* (Vittorio de Sica), *There Will Be Blood* (Paul Thomas Anderson), *The Enigma of Kaspar Hauser* (Werner Herzog), *Farewell my Concubine* (Chen Kaige), *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Peter Weir), the films of Wong Kar-wai and many other classics in the history of World Cinema. In his informative interview with Devnarain (2024) Roodt discusses his cinephilia, as well as his approach to film directing, art direction, acting, film composers and audiences. Roodt claims that the best directors are those, who have a singular vision. He also reflects on the film culture of the 1980s: "When I was growing up there was a culture of cinema, which was electric. You would go to the film festivals. You watch the new Bertolucci, the new Werner Herzog. It would inspire you and you would have all these discussions and it will take you on an epic journey".

As a young white male Roodt became aware of the socio-political conditions of the apartheid state and some of his most significant films combined a passion for cinema with social critique. His taste is not restricted to art house productions, which explains his oeuvre. He admires genre work such as *Jaws*, *The Towering Inferno*, *The Omen* and *The Shining* (see Devnarain 2024). He stated that he admires horror films, but at the same time loves intimate dramas.

Cry, the Beloved Country

Roodt presents a fascinating case study in directorial identity because he seamlessly switches between high-concept prestige films and absolute B-movies. Contrast his beautifully shot, socially conscious pieces (*Cry, the Beloved Country* or *Yesterday*) with his commercial B-movies like *The Queen's Messenger* (2001) or his notoriously fast-shot sci-fi horror *Dracula 3000* (2004). Although Roodt has made many politically and socially conscious films, he has also shot numerous genre orientated films for the foreign market. He also boasts a highly prolific, eclectic career in the horror genre. His horror filmography spans from campy, low-budget

cult films to psychological thrillers and creature features, which will be discussed later.

Yesterday

There is no public record indicating that Roodt adheres to a specific religion. While his personal religious beliefs are kept private, theological elements, faith, and the concept of theodicy (the question of why a good God allows evil) frequently appear in his cinematic work. Instead of an official personal declaration of faith, Roodt's worldview is best understood through his creative work and social commentary. Religious themes will be highlighted in my analysis of his films.

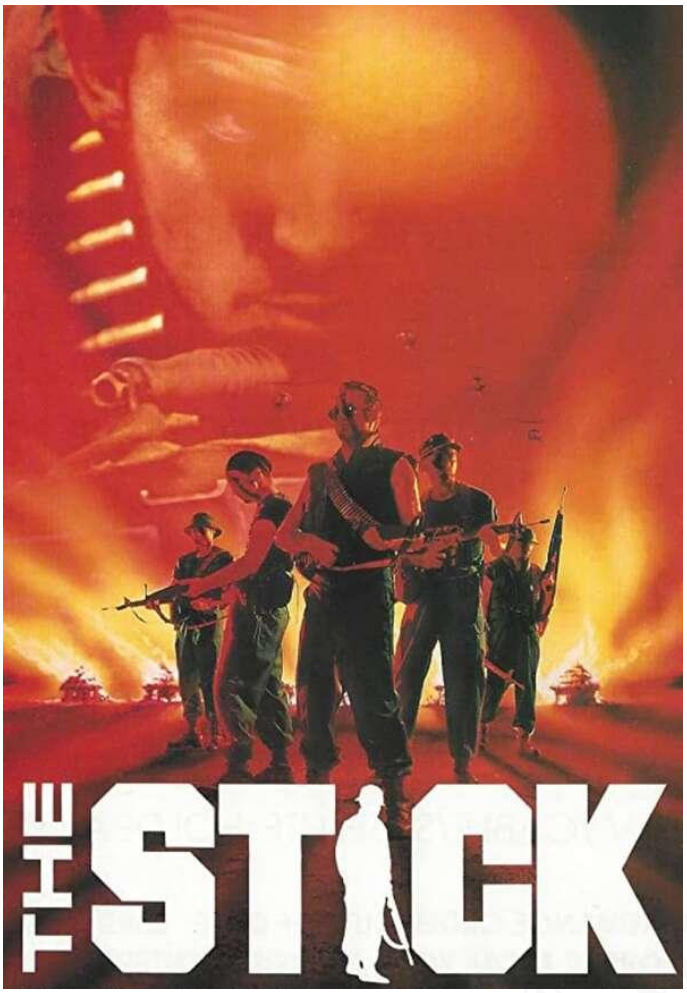
Humanism seems to form as a core philosophy owing to his mother's influence in his upbringing (Devnarain 2024). Roodt has explicitly noted that his primary driving philosophy leans toward human dignity rather than specific religious dogma. In a 2015 interview with LitNet, he summarised his guiding principle: "My political point of view has always remained the same. I strongly believe in the essential dignity of all human beings" (Marais 2015).

Early Roodt and his gallery of characters at the margin of apartheid and post-apartheid society

Roodt's *A Place of Weeping* (1986), made at the age of 23, was produced and marketed internationally by Anant Singh, who became one of South Africa's most prominent film producers (see Singh 2021). The film deals with racial conflict. A black farm worker is beaten to death by his employer after complaining about his poor wages. The murder goes unreported since the other labourers fearing for their future. A news reporter, however, becomes involved when a housemaid on the farm attempts to report the incident. Although seriously flawed due to poor performances from the actors, the film featured striking cinematography by Paul Witte. Notably the film also features a strong black woman, although living at the margin of apartheid society and her struggle against social injustice, a theme, which would become a strong motif in Roodt's oeuvre during the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s.

Roodt's *The Stick* (1987) was the first South African film to examine the deployment of South African troops in cross-border raids during the South African Border War. The war is also commonly referred to as the Angolan Bush War in South Africa and is also known as the Namibian War of Independence. It refers to the conflict that took place from 1966 to 1989 in South-West Africa (now Namibia) and Angola between South Africa and its allied forces (mainly UNITA) on the one side and the Angolan government, South-West Africa People's Organization (SWAPO), and their allies – mainly the Soviet Union and Cuba – on the

other. It was closely intertwined with the Angolan Civil War.



The film begins with an introductory sequence filmed in one long take in black and white: One of the white heroes of the film (Greg Latter) is shown in his school uniform and his voice over on the soundtrack states: "My father sent me to war to make a man of me. He was wrong". The character is part of a "stick" of men. Seven soldiers and a black tracker enter presumably Angola on a mission to exterminate a traditional healer, whose advice to rebel forces is regarded as destructive to South African security force efforts. Roodt's personal vision of the South African border war between South Africa and SWAPO is one that is linked to the genre of the American war film of the 1970s and 1980s, films praised for their critical examination of the psychological scars left on soldiers by the Vietnam War. These films (for example, *The Deer Hunter*, *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon* and *Born on the fourth of July*) are characterised by their graphic, detailed depiction of war. Roodt's film is no exception in this. By portraying war vividly and emphasising fear and confusion through the use of first-person narration on the soundtrack Roodt aligns himself with the anti-war genre (Botha & Van Aswegen 1992).

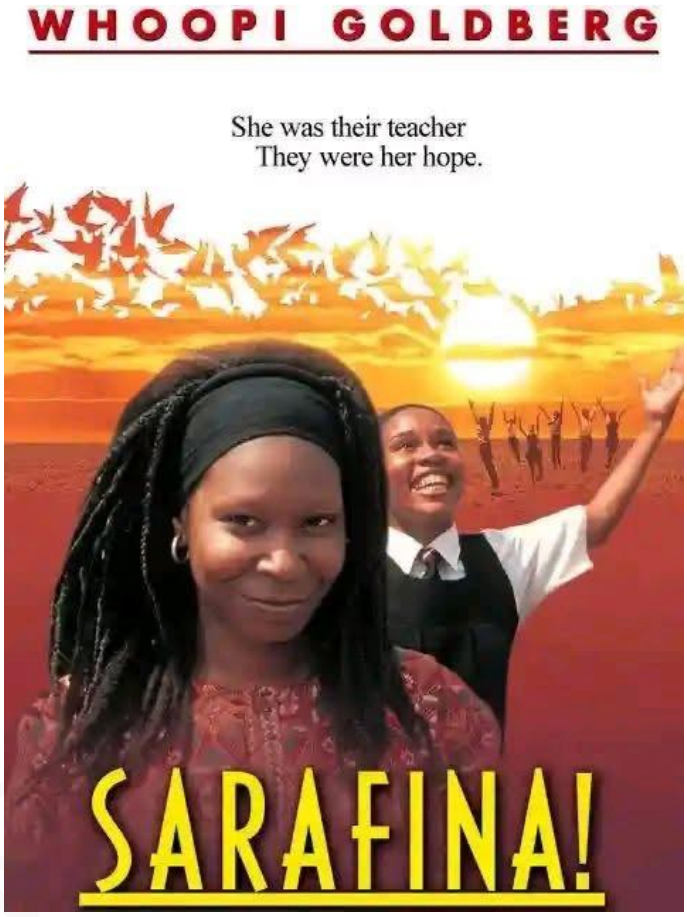
What fascinates Roodt is the physical and mental disintegration of the white male protagonists after they have destroyed African lifestyles by wiping out a village of women and children, as well as the traditional healer. The violence is directed at characters living at the margin, powerless to defend them against the military brutality. The film becomes a surreal and nihilistic work – that which is incomprehensible to the white male protagonists, namely Africa, is portrayed as sinister and irrational. The soldiers are clearly not equipped to combat this "supernatural" force. The film becomes an allegory of South Africa's political and military failure in Angola and Namibia to defeat SWAPO and the Ovambo population. This sentiment is made clear by the young hero's words to a senior military officer at the end of the film. When the soldier returns to South Africa he is confronted by the traditional healer in the shape of an ordinary black man. In other words, Africa still surrounds him – he cannot destroy it. To fight against it means self-destruction. It also introduces Roodt's exploration of male angst in later features.

The film was initially banned in South Africa and the ban was upheld through various applications for screenings at film festivals until it was finally allowed to be

screened at the Weekly Mail Film festival in 1989. The censors ordered 48 cuts before they would consider re-appraising the film (Ozynski 1989).

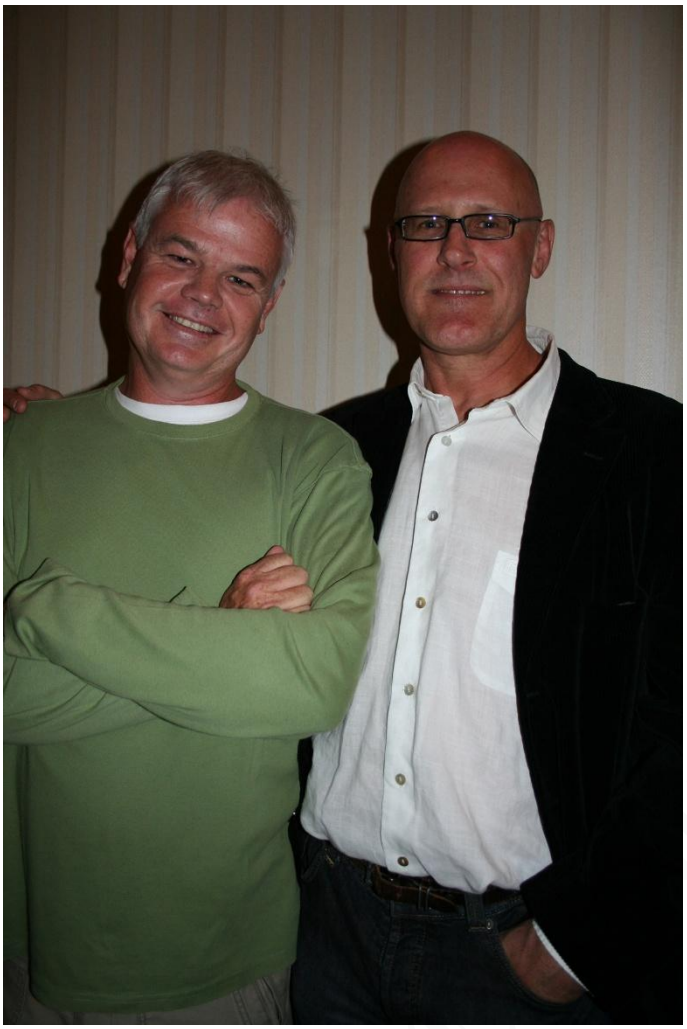
Stylistically *The Stick* is a remarkable film and forms part of auteur Roodt's trilogy on racial conflict in a rural milieu (*A Place of Weeping*, *The Stick* and *Jobman*). In the rural "wastelands" of animal carcasses (*The Stick*) or wrecked cars (*Jobman*), over which the camera of Paul Witte slowly pans in long takes from left to right, Roodt envisages a disintegrating white middle-class (magnificently conveyed in the party scene in *Jobman*). The pastoral Eden of the earlier Afrikaans cinema of the 1970s (see Botha 2012) has given way to an inhospitable symbolic "wasteland" in which people eventually would die (for example the final shootout in *Jobman* or battle in *The Stick*). David Barkham's art direction contributes significantly to the representation of this wasteland. The landscapes, which are sometimes characterised by wrecked cars, are a motif in Roodt's films of the 2000s.

Roodt's *Sarafina!* (1991) based on Mbongeni Ngema's stage musical about the school boycotts of 1976 and their brutal suppression by the police, resulted in international recognition for the director. It received a ten-minute standing ovation at the 1992 Cannes Film festival where it was shown in the official selection. It stars Whoopi Goldberg, Leleti Khumalo and Miriam Makeba. The film once again features strong women, who demonstrate some form of resistance against social injustice (Murphy & Williams 2007). *Sarafina!* also characterises Roodt's use of genre (the musical) in combination with strong socio-political content (the Soweto youth uprising of 1976).



Jobman (1989) is a western, which features a marginalised character in South African society of the early 1960s. *The Stick* fits into the Vietnam War genre, but also explores South Africa's military involvement in Angola and Namibia. It was thus no surprise that Roodt would also explore the period drama. In the early 1990s Ronald Harwood adapted Alan Paton's novel *Cry the Beloved Country* for Roodt and producer Anant Singh. Set in the 1940s it follows the journey of a Zulu pastor, Stephen Kumalo (James Earl Jones), from rural Zululand to Johannesburg to look for his son. Kumalo's journey brings him into direct conflict with a white man, James Jarvis (Richard Harris), who has lost his son in a violent crime. Through various tragic events, both men are forced to learn the lesson of forgiveness with

dignity, a theme relevant to post-apartheid cinema. Visually the film is exquisite and John Barry's musical score enhances the deep-felt sadness of the events in the film.



Darrell James Roodt, Heinrich Dahms

Roodt's cinematic analysis shifts the story's emphasis from a broad, systemic social protest to an intimate, character-driven narrative about personal transformation, grief, and reconciliation. Roodt centres the film heavily on the parallel journeys of the two grieving fathers, While Paton's novel uses these characters to illustrate a larger societal breakdown, Roodt focuses on the immediate, human scale of their shared sorrow. Forgiveness is presented as an intimate, emotional bridge built directly between two individuals.

Roodt uses sweeping, cinematic shots of the lush but failing rural valleys of Ndotsheni to capture the elegiac mood of Paton's opening chapters, underscored by John Barry's evocative music. The countryside represents untouched virtue and traditional peace, juxtaposed against economic desperation. As in the case of later films by Roodt Johannesburg, as the urban landscape, is framed as a chaotic, alienating labyrinth. Roodt captures Kumalo's sensory overload and deep alienation using tight camera angles and jarring transitions, visualising the breakdown of the tribal support system upon entering the city.

Roodt compresses the expansive theological and political debates found in the text. Characters like the political activist John Kumalo or the soulful priest Msimangu are streamlined to keep the main narrative thrust locked onto Stephen's quest to find his son.

The screenplay selectively elevates specific dialogue from the book to ensure its simple eloquence translates effectively to the screen without making the characters feel like mere political mouthpieces. The climax of the film follows the trial and subsequent execution sentence of Absalom. Roodt preserves the spiritual weight of the book's ending, concluding with Kumalo praying on the mountain at dawn. This scene cements the film's overriding thesis: Despite absolute tragedy, individual grace and cross-racial cooperation offer a tentative blueprint for a future South Africa.

His adaptation of Alan Paton's novel heavily deals with Christian ministry, the crisis of faith, and racial reconciliation.

Anant Singh has been an important partner for Roodt over the years. They met as

anti-apartheid filmmakers, felt a connection, and have been making films together ever since (Singh 2021: Treffry-Goatley 2010). Singh has worked as a producer on many of these films, and the distribution arm of his company, Videovision, has also been responsible for certain international and local sales. Videovision, as the production company for many of these films, has also been an important source of finance for Roodt, who noted on the director's commentary for *Yesterday* (2004) that he is very lucky to have Singh's support because he has sometimes financed entire productions such as *Faith's Corner* (2005).

Of crucial concern in my discussion about characters on the margin of South African society is an earlier landmark by Roodt. In *Jobman* (1989) the protagonist is a 25-year old deaf and mute "coloured" man (Kevin Smith), who has been messed around and misunderstood all his life. When the film opens he is in Kimberley. The setting is Christmas 1960. Jobman is picked up by the police and stripped of his humanity.

A parallel story moves the setting to a Karoo farm, where Jobman was born. The farmer dies and the farm is reluctantly inherited by his son, Karel (Tertius Meintjies in an award-winning performance). Jobman return to the farm to fetch his wife and child, but is rejected by his own community as a social outcast. He also provokes fear in the white community. The only person who sides with him is the young farmer. As the situation finally ends in violence, a confrontation arises between the man and his former friend. Roodt's film vividly analyses the tragic paradox and practice of Christian brotherly love during the first years of the Verwoerdian regime. The images depict a disintegrating white middle-class trapped in its laager in an arid landscape strewn with wrecked cars and the carcasses of animals. David Barkman's art direction is excellent. The film was the last one shot by Paul Witte, who was tragically killed in a car accident in 1990.

Jobman begins with a quote from Bertolt Brecht: "Pity the nation which has no heroes. No. Pity the nation which needs heroes". Within the context of *Jobman* the statement is ironic since the main character has been born without a tongue and can't speak. He forms part of a gallery of marginal lives in Roodt's remarkable recent films about South African women on the margin of South African post-apartheid society.

These independently made features form part of a broad focus in post-apartheid cinema on people living on the periphery of society. Since 1994 South African audiences have been exposed to certain marginalised communities, such as the homeless in Francois Verster's remarkable documentary *Pavement Aristocrats: The Bergies of Cape Town* (1998), the Himbas of Kaokoland in Craig Matthew's *Ochre and Water: Himba Chronicles from the Land of Kaoko* (2001), AIDS victims in *Shouting Silent* (2001), the gay subcultures of the fifties and sixties in *The*

Man Who Drove With Mandela (1998), street children in *Hillbrow Kids* (1999), prison inmates in Cliff Bestall's *Cage of Dreams* (2000) and the San in the Foster Brothers' visual poem *The Great Dance*.(1999). The latter has already won more than 35 international and national awards, the most for a single film in the history of South African cinema. Wynand Dreyer's trilogy of documentaries about ordinary lives on the Cape Flats, *Ravensmead, A Piece of Life, A Piece of Death* and *Steel upon Steel* is a lyrical and moving document.

The term marginality will be used in this article to describe the poor, economic and social conditions of individuals within a society, social classes within a nation, or nations within the larger world community. Here it also refers to poverty-stricken groups left behind in the modernisation process. They are not integrated into the socioeconomic system and their relative poverty increases.

Marginalised communities feature strongly in post-apartheid South African cinema after a silence of more than 90 years due to colonialism and apartheid (Botha 2012). Of major importance in this regard is the cinema of Roodt (*Sarafina!, Yesterday*). Roodt's post-apartheid films (*Yesterday, Faith's Corner, Meisie, Lullaby, Little One, Zimbabwe*) have all explored marginalised female characters. A major motif in almost all these films, including *Jobman,* is the representation of the attempts by the characters to survive. A major part of the depiction of the marginalised characters' struggle is the emphasis in many features by Roodt on the physical journey. A journey is the act of travelling from a departure point to a destination. Physical journeys in particular encompass this fundamental process; however, the physical journey is much more than that. It is a combination of the physical movement and the challenges and obstacles which can face the traveller emotionally and spiritually. Images of homeless characters walking for kilometres through barren rural landscapes or decaying urban environments dominate Roodt's cinema of the 2000s.

Rayda Jacobs, Darrell James Roodt

The journeys of the marginalised and female agency

Zimbabwe (2008) opens with an overwhelming sense of the rural landscapes – a strong feature in Roodt's other work (*Yesterday, Meisie, Cry the Beloved Country, Jobman*). The gaze is observational and the narrative structure almost impressionistic. Without any dialogue the viewer witnesses a burial. Scenes of attempts to survive in a harsh rural environment follow. Zimbabwe, the main protagonist, is an orphan. Her parents and sister have died of AIDS. The members of her community are not able to look after her and she is forced to travel to a family member in Beitbridge, a town on the border with South Africa, for support. Roodt brilliantly integrates the rural landscapes with the socio-political realities of the characters

without explicitly commenting on the politics of Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe. He accentuates the physical challenges of Zimbabwe's journey to an urban area. Gradually the pastoral images are replaced by an urban landscape, which is characterised by social decay. Zimbabwe's family member is an alcoholic and she lives in difficult circumstances. The surrounding landscape is marked by wrecked cars as in the case of *Jobman*.

Zimbabwe's situation worsens when she is forced to work as an illegal domestic worker in Johannesburg, where she is exploited by both the agency, which is supposed to act on her behalf, a well as by her white male employer, who rapes her on several occasions. Her name is changed to Miriam and she is not allowed to display her identity as a Zimbabwean due to xenophobia and her illegal status in South Africa. Roodt's examination of the exploitation of Zimbabwean citizens in South Africa is brutal and moving. In the end Zimbabwe is forced to return to her homeland and an uncertain future.

Jobman's journey is more tragic. The film's opening long shot frames him in a dust road, walking through the barren landscape of the Karoo, a semi-desert in South Africa. He wears no shoes. The next sequence depicts his birth in 1933. His mother dies during the process and the child has no tongue and thus no voice. In the next sequence Jobman is now a young adult. It is 1960, the height of apartheid under Prime Minister Hendrik Verwoerd. The country was experiencing a stormy socio-political era.

The large-scale opposition to apartheid legislation took on tragic dimensions on 21 March 1960 when at Sharpeville 69 people were shot dead, many in their backs, and 180 were wounded. A state of emergency was declared and over 11 500 people were detained. On 8 April 1960 the African National Congress (ANC) was proclaimed a legally banned organisation. White racism is rife. Several young white men confront Jobman and demand that he speaks to the white "bosses". His inability to communicate is perceived as being defiant and he is severely beaten. On the wall behind him are posters with the caption: "Vir Volk en Vaderland" (For the nation and the homeland). While he is lying in a pool of blood homeless people strip him and take his clothes. He is discovered by the police. At the station the doctor confirms that he is not able to speak and should go to a hospital for the treatment of his head injuries. Instead the white police drop him at an industrial site and shoot warning shots at him. He runs away, half naked. Due to Jobman's lack of speech it is difficult to obtain a nuanced understanding of him as character, as well as what motivate his actions. A full backstory also doesn't exist. We learn later as viewers that he was a troublemaker on the farm, where he was born and that Karel and he were childhood friends. His decision to return to the farm and be reunited with his wife, Anna, and his child, lacks clear motivation. As a mute, marginalised character does Jobman represents the voiceless black majority of the apartheid state during the 1960s? Or is the film about male angst? It is difficult to arrive at an ideological reading.

Roodt vividly emphasised the challenging nature of Jobman's physical journeys. He walks endlessly without shoes

along a dirt road or railway line. These shots will be repeated in many of Roodt's work of the 2000s. The houses of the farm workers are within a few hundred metres from wrecked cars. Jobman, Anna and the baby try to make a living in an old church, but Karel requests them to leave his farm. Karel destroys the church and once again Jobman and his family are wandering through the barren Karoo landscapes – homeless, hungry, without shelter. A confrontation with the police results in a bloodbath and Jobman becomes an outcast and like a character in a Western a wanted man. Sadly, despite the visual poetry of the film, Roodt allows the narrative at this stage to develop into a conventional Western with the final confrontation between Jobman and Karel at a train station. Whereas several characters in Roodt's subsequent films will transcend their marginal status Jobman dies as a voiceless victim.

Roodt's internationally acclaimed film *Yesterday* (2004) is one of the studies of characters on the margin of South African society where the main protagonist transcends her marginal status towards the end of the narrative. It tells the story of a young black woman with AIDS. Within the temporal frame of the story, which is barely a year, Yesterday's life undergoes radical change. Physically, socially and existentially, her fortunes are profoundly altered when she becomes ill (Horne 2005). The significance of time is also seen in the importance of history in Yesterday's experience. There is considerable irony in Yesterday's father's belief that the world of yesterday was better than the world of the present, since the tragic turn his daughter's life takes is directly linked to events in the past. The importance of time also features in the chronological structure of the narrative which is explicitly marked by the naming of the seasons as these pass. This sequencing device creates a sense of the relentlessness of the passage of time and the inexorability of death. Roodt brilliantly depicts a socio-political milieu characterised by rural poverty, an inadequate primary health care system, a lack of a support base, community stigmatisation, domestic violence, a lack of formal education, as well as a lack of empowerment (Horne 2005; Treffry-Goatley 2010).

Significantly however, the film is about the main character's growing sense of empowerment, not her misery. Although she is representative of nameless millions with no status in the social hierarchy of South Africa, Roodt inverts the social order, unlike in *Jobman*, adopting the discourse of transformation during the duration of the film (Horne 2005; Treffry-Goatley 2010). His achievement, as in the case of *Meisie* (2007), is the representation of a character, which ultimately transcends her marginal status. She is part of female characters in Roodt's oeuvre, who demonstrate remarkable female agency.

The long opening shot of *Yesterday* establishes the time-frame, setting and crucial thematic elements of the narrative. In a way it resembles the opening shot of *Jobman* and the viewer's first impression of the main protagonist. It is a long take of a vast, empty, rural landscape – an area in KwaZulu-Natal. The environment is barren. As the camera slowly tracks, a dirt road slowly comes into view and along this we see two tiny figures walking towards the camera, "their smallness in the vast space around them suggesting their insignificance" (Horne 2005: 173). They

remain indistinct for some time because of the distance, dust and heat haze. The take continues for more than four minutes uninterrupted as the two people slowly become visible. The length of time this long take indicates the length of their journey and the unhurried pace of life. "Only after several minutes, during which time the audience is left to wonder who these obscure individuals are, where they come from, and where they are going, do they become recognisable as a black woman and a child - the main protagonist, Yesterday, and her daughter, Beauty. As their isiZulu dialogue becomes audible, we hear the child asking why they cannot fly like birds: she is clearly tired of walking. The mother's patient and good-humoured answers indicate a close and loving bond. The dialogue calls attention to how poor they are: travelling by motorised transport seems as much of a possibility as flying" (Horne 2005: 137). This remarkable sequence forms part of a type of iconography in Roodt's cinema about physical journeys by characters on the margin of society.

On several occasions Roodt accentuates Yesterday's challenging physical journeys to get medical assistance only to be turned away to come back the next week since the rural clinic can't cope with the numbers of patients. The filmic device of repetition, where Roodt shows her going through the same futile process week after week, builds concern for her as well as an awareness of the inadequacy of the health services available to her (Horne 2005). Highlighted in her encounter with a doctor is Yesterday's lack of education, as in the case of Faith in *Faith's Corner* (2005). Following the doctor's instructions to inform her husband, John Khumalo, of her HIV status, so that he can be tested himself, Yesterday makes another difficult journey – this time to the mines of Johannesburg. As in the case of *Zimbabwe* and *Faith's Corner* the viewer observes the urban landscape through the eyes of the female protagonists as the camera shows the intertwined shadows of the urban crowds on the pavement and the skyscrapers filmed from low, oblique angles, accentuating their height and making their shapes seem grotesque. The tilted camera angles have a confusing, destabilising effect so that we experience the urban jungle from Yesterday, Faith and Zimbabwe's perspectives as an alien, intimidating and threatening place.

Yesterday's encounter with her husband is one of the most disturbing moments in the film. There is some stilted dialogue between them before the scene cuts to the interior of a room where the viewer sees, but cannot clearly hears, them speak: We as observers are left to imagine the conversation that takes place. Visually, their figures are vague as the encounter is shot from the window of the adjacent office where the same mine official sits reading the newspaper, his back to the window. When the tall silhouette in the room behind him lunges forward and strikes the smaller one and we hear Yesterday's faint screams, the mine official turns around and observes what is happening, but dismisses the sight with a regretful, fatalistic shake of the head. He does not intervene. The focus remains on him in the foreground while the husband's actions of repeatedly punching Yesterday's cowering body are kept in the background. The camera's physical distance from the action conveys the official's (and society's)

emotional detachment. The background goes more and more out of focus so that it becomes increasingly blurred and shadowy, and Yesterday's screams become inaudible, suggesting how successfully the official shuts the assault out of his consciousness (Horne 2005).

When Yesterday's husband returns to the village in Kwazulu-Natal, his fragile frame indicates that he is suffering from full-blown AIDS. Instead of being resentful Yesterday treats him with compassion. She is unsuccessful to get him into hospital due to fact that there are just too many patients. Yesterday's strange plan of building her own 'hospital' for the husband some distance from the village is an indication of the desperation to which she is driven because of the lack of space at the hospital and the villagers' hostile attitude towards her and her husband as AIDS sufferers. He is regarded with a mixture of suspicion and aggression by the other villagers, who, having guessed that he has AIDS, are eager to expel him from their midst, perceiving him as polluting (Horne 2005). It is an important moment in the narrative since Yesterday is taking control of her situation. Her psychological strength is even more impressive than her physical endurance.

Displaying independence, resourcefulness and courage, Yesterday shows that she has assumed complete power over her situation. Her actions show her refusal to live fearfully and be at the mercy of the villagers' intolerance. In the absence of outside help, she finds her own solution, imperfect though this is. In a dramatic reversal of their original roles, her husband ends his days totally dependent on her (Horne 2005).

In the end she assists him to pass on and she manages to stay alive till her daughter goes to school. In a parallel of the opening scene, the film's closing take shows Yesterday's figure making its way slowly along the deserted dirt road winding into the distance. This time, however, she is alone, dressed in black and walking away from - rather than towards – the viewer. The differences are subtle but powerful signifiers of imminent death. “Her metaphorical journey transcends the mundane and takes on an epic quality, elevating the meaning of her life and suffering” (Horne 2005: 182).

Yesterday remains an important, progressive addition to the post-apartheid cinematic repertoire. Furthermore, Roodt’s application of certain neorealist elements in the film might also be seen as a breakthrough in an industry where the pervasive influence of Hollywood is evident not only in the distribution, exhibition and consumption practices of the country, but also in the widespread application of the classical narrative conventions in cinematic production (Treffry-Goatley 2010). It reflects Roodt’s admiration for the Italian neorealism giants like Vittorio de Sica.

The physical journey is also a strong feature in *Faith's Corner* (2005). The film follows the life of Faith, a homeless beggar and a single mother of two young sons, Siyabonga and Lucky. They live in an abandoned car in an alleyway of central Johannesburg. Faith spends her days begging for money from disinterested commuters on the streets. Darrell Roodt's experimentation with film form is

remarkable: Shot in the style of the silent cinema, complete with intertitles to capture the dialogue, the film sensitively confronts social issues of poverty and joblessness in South Africa. It is a vivid combination of social concern and formal experimentation. By using the silent format it almost makes a statement that social conditions for the poor haven't changed over the decades. The film also directly explores Christian undertones of perseverance, survival, and faith through a homeless mother named Faith struggling in Johannesburg.

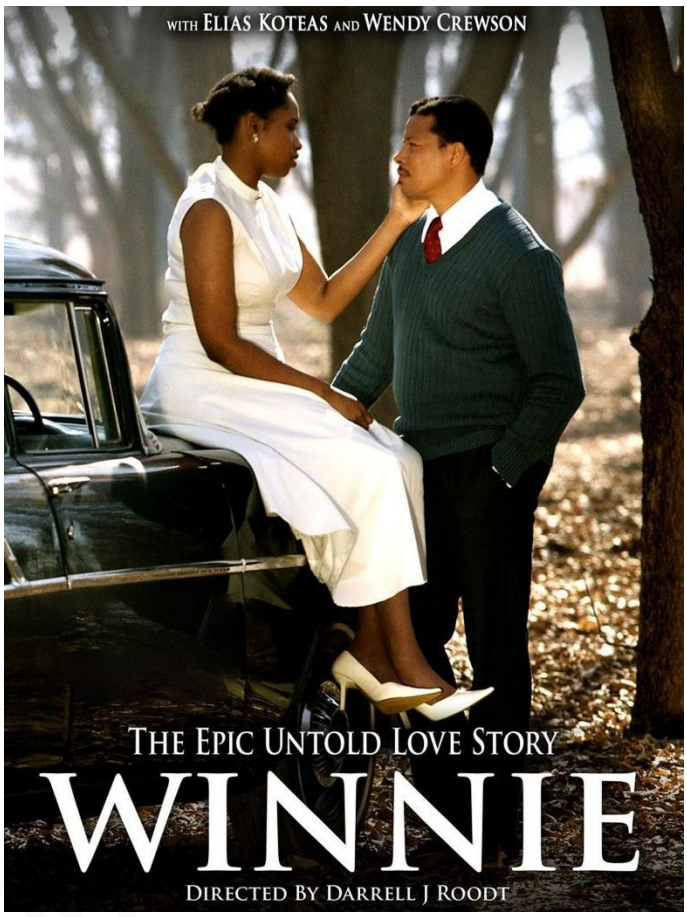
The rural landscape of *Yesterday* is now only a memory in a story Faith conveys to her children. The only signifiers of the farm are the noises of animals on the soundtrack while Faith and her children are sitting outside the abandoned car in a filthy alley in Johannesburg. The wrecked cars in the rural landscapes of *Jobman*, *Zimbabwe* and *Yesterday* are now the homes for the homeless. When the car is not available anymore the family seek shelter in a graveyard. Roodt depicts within repetitive sequences Faith's desperate attempts to beg money from passing motorists at a busy street junction. The viewer seldom sees the drivers – mostly only Faith's reflection in the windows of the cars. With the little money she makes Faith tries to raise her children, though they often go to sleep hungry. Faith deals with the apathy of the motorists that pass her, but also the distrust and anger of other homeless souls on the streets of Johannesburg. Most of the narrative consists of a brilliant representation of survival on the streets and the physical journeys of the characters – to get money, food, shelter or in one sequence Faith carrying her sick child to hospital. Images of Faith and her children working in the streets of the city are a haunting memory of Roodt's finest film to date. A new version of the film retitled *Don't Give Up*, was released in 2025.

Yesterday and *Zimbabwe*, as well as *Meisie*, a multi award-winning film, focused on poverty in rural South Africa. *Meisie* (Girl) is a slice of life about a girl in a rural community that is prevented to school by her dad who believes that she should spend her days tending goats instead. Shot in the style of neorealism the film features wonderful natural performances by non-professional actors from the remote community of Riemvasmaak, on the edge of the Kalahari. The landscapes resemble the barren landscapes in *Jobman*. The impressionistic narrative structure consists of glimpses of life in this semi-desert environment. Meisie lives in a shack with her dad in the mountain, about 15 kilometres from the small town and the school. The plot deals with the attempts by the new teacher, Esmerelda September, to convince Meisie's dad to allow her to attend school. Her attempts include several physical journeys to Meisie's home and a spot underneath a tree, which serves as a school. It is a journey of 15 kilometres by foot – and once again Roodt visually emphasises the process of walking by means of long shots and takes. Meisie also transcends her marginal status. She finally attends school and her future seems brighter than that of the other female protagonists in Roodt's recent cinema. In exploring a rural girl's battle to stay in school against her father's wishes, Roodt engages with themes of education as a tool for female emancipation. These narratives often show young women actively pushing against the boundaries of

tradition, even when deeply hindered by socio-economic constraints. Roodt frequently highlights the plight of women who are marginalised by poverty, disease, and political injustice.

Female agency in Roodt's oeuvre is highly debated. While his narratives frequently centre on courageous, resilient women fighting oppressive conditions, feminist critics such as Norita Mdege (2020) argue that his humanist approach often frames female characters as passive victims of structural violence, ultimately stripping them of true long-term empowerment. Critics debate whether Yesterday's ultimate assertion of will—walking her sick husband to the hospital and ensuring her daughter receives an education—represents profound inner agency, or if the film's intense focus on victimhood ultimately reduces her to an object of pity. Mdege (2020, 2024) argues that his work tends to focus so heavily on the oppressive structures shaping women's lives that the female characters are occasionally portrayed with little control over their ultimate destinies.

Sarafina! centres on a young female student who actively leads protests against the apartheid regime. While Sarafina's agency is overt, militant, and central to the narrative, one could argue that the film's male-centric lens occasionally filters this power through a framework of martyrdom rather than genuine, self-directed liberation. The film was rereleased in June 2026 to celebrate the Soweto Uprising of 1976.



Starring Jennifer Hudson, Roodt's biopic *Winnie Mandela* (2011) directly tackles the political agency of the prominent female activist navigating decades of state persecution. The film frames her political power as forged through systemic opposition; however, reviews were mixed regarding whether it captures her complex political agency or reduces her narrative to an extension of her husband's plight. Roodt was not happy with the final film: "It got emasculated in the editing process because it was trying to be honest," he says. "I think the producer just got nervous. There were just too many things in it that would offend too many people. It breaks your heart. You get judged even before you make the movie. I hadn't even begun shooting it and I was condemned." (De Waal 2013).

In Roodt's 2012 film *Little One*, female agency is the core engine of the narrative, explored primarily through the characters' refusal to accept the tragic status quo of gender-based violence. Pauline (played by actress Lindiwe Ndlovu) is the central agent of salvation and justice. After finding a six-year-old girl who has been raped, beaten, and left for dead near a Johannesburg township, Pauline takes immediate, decisive action to rush the child to the hospital and save her life. Pauline actively facilitates the physical and psychological rehabilitation of "Little One" (Vuyelwa Msimang). She crafts a mask to conceal the child's severe facial disfigurements, helping her slowly reintegrate into the outside world. Dissatisfied with institutional shortcomings, Pauline utilises her own agency to launch a localised, grass-roots investigation into the assault, refusing to let the attacker remain anonymous. Pauline actively defies the demands of her husband, who is unsupportive of her caring for the victim, and fights through bureaucratic and legal hurdles to adopt the child herself. Through Pauline, Roodt illustrates how women in marginalised communities actively take responsibility, demand justice, and rebuild shattered lives in the face of structural violence.

Male Angst

Male angst in the films of Roodt manifests differently depending on the socio-political context of the movie. While his internationally acclaimed dramas centre on women's survival, his thrillers and historical epics explore themes of white male guilt, displacement, and the psychological fallout of political violence.

In Roodt's earlier, anti-apartheid films and historical works, white male characters are often positioned at the intersection of complicity, guilt, and existential crisis. *The Stick* (1987) serves as a harsh critique of the South African Border War. It portrays white male conscripts descending into madness as they are haunted by the guilt of the colonial atrocities they are ordered to commit against indigenous populations. Their angst is rooted in the inescapable realisation of their own villainy. While cantered on the black experience, *Cry, the Beloved Country*, delves into the angst of the white patriarchal figure grappling with his privilege and the devastating, intergenerational consequences of colonial segregation.

With the dismantling of apartheid, Roodt's focus shifted to the anxieties of white South Africans navigating a rapidly changing country where their former dominance had been lost. Starring Ice Cube as an African-American man caught in the Johannesburg underworld, *Dangerous Ground* (1997) depicts the urban landscape as chaotic and unforgiving. It features white male characters, who have been pushed to the fringes, embodying the desperate anger and aimless angst of the post-apartheid criminal underworld.

In Roodt's 2014 film *Seun: 81457397BG*, male angst is not just an emotional state, but a structural by-product of toxic apartheid-era militarism. The film follows Paul, an ambitious young man conscripted into the South African Border War in 1981, who returns home paralysed from the neck down. Roodt uses this premise to dismantle traditional Afrikaner masculinity, replacing the myth of the heroic

soldier with profound, localised despair. The thematic execution of male angst in the film manifests across several core areas. Paul's angst stems heavily from a total loss of autonomy. The body that was supposed to defend a nation becomes entirely dependent on women—specifically his mother and his love interest—for basic survival. Instead of entering a career of healing others as a doctor, he must be constantly tended to, creating a deep psychological shame and resentment. The state-sponsored ideology of the *Rooi Gevaar* (the communist threat) forced young men into a meat grinder under the guise of duty and Christian nationalism. Paul's angst is exacerbated because his sacrifice yields no personal or moral victory. He is broken by a war fought on distant borders for a political system that treats him as disposable asset "81457397BG". The rigid social expectations of the era leave no room for men to voice psychological vulnerability. Paul's anger is trapped internally, manifesting as bitter outbursts and withdrawal because he cannot openly grieve his lost future.

Unlike traditional war movies that focus on combat, Roodt traps the audience in the claustrophobic domestic sphere after the injury. Paul's interactions with his mother (played by Elzette Maarschalk) are thick with tension. He feels like an immense burden, and his inability to escape his own skin turns his angst outward into verbal cruelty toward the people trying to love him. The contrast between the romantic summer holiday before the war and his post-war reality highlights his perceived loss of sexual and social maturity, sealing him in a permanent state of arrested development.

It is a significant film within the context of Chris Broodryk's study of post-apartheid cinema. The current revival in Afrikaans-language cinema is mainly based on escapism and nostalgia. In his PhD study about contemporary Afrikaans cinema 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", but that there is no acknowledgement of anything unrepresentable (history, exploitation, political killings, effects of migrant labour and so forth) to engage with (Broodryk 2015). 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. Roodt's film seems to be an important contribution to occasional political potency by directors.

Composers

Roodt has collaborated with prominent international and local composers across his extensive filmography. Because his films

range from anti-apartheid historical dramas to Hollywood action features and local Afrikaans productions, the musical styles accompanying his work vary significantly. Philip Glass composed the minimalist score for Roodt's 2005 silent film drama, *Faith's Corner*. Glass reportedly agreed to score the film for free out of passion for the project. As mentioned earlier John Barry scored *Cry, the Beloved Country*. He dedicated the score to Nelson Mandela.

Stanley Myers wrote the dramatic orchestral score for *Sarafina!* (1991) and Mbongeni Ngema wrote the original songs and co-arranged the music, adapting his famous Broadway stage musical.

Roodt's horror features

Roodt's expansive filmography reveals a highly prolific parallel track in the horror genre. Roodt's horror ventures are remarkably diverse, spanning from gritty, politically charged 1980s thrillers to direct-to-video creature features and deeply unsettling psychological horror (see Waddell 2024).

Before pivoting to mainstream monster movies, Roodt used elements of the genre to examine the terrifying realities of South African history. In *City of Blood* (1987) Roodt explores the horror genre through a gritty, slasher-adjacent mystery. A medical examiner in Johannesburg investigates a string of brutal murders that appear to be committed by ancient tribal warriors. Beneath its B-movie exterior, the film serves as a tense commentary on apartheid-era racial tensions, transforming systemic political violence into visceral horror.

A lot has been written about *The Stick* (1987). Though primarily an anti-apartheid war film following a South African military unit deployed in a frontline conflict, it heavily incorporates psychological horror and supernatural dread. The dense bushveld operates as an omnipresent entity, driving the soldiers into insanity and reflecting the moral decay of the regime.

During the 2000s and 2010s, Roodt embraced commercial, high-concept genre filmmaking—often leaning into tongue-in-cheek excess or traditional survival tropes: *Dracula 3000* (2004). This campy, direct-to-video space-vampire mashup relocates Bram Stoker's classic tale onto a derelict spaceship in the deep future. Starring Casper Van Dien and the rapper Coolio, it is widely considered an intentional, low-budget guilty pleasure. Roodt notoriously shot the film in just three days, affectionately referring to it as "wonderfully awful" (De Waal 2013). Starring Bridget Moynahan and Peter Weller, *Prey* (2007) captures the horror of the natural world. It locks a family inside an unarmoured safari vehicle while they are stalked and systematically attacked by a pride of man-eating lions. The horror relies entirely on claustrophobia and raw primal vulnerability. In 2018 Roodt directed *Lake Placid: Legacy*, the sixth and final instalment of the killer-crocodile franchise. Operating as a television monster movie, it isolates a group of urban explorers inside an abandoned, secret research facility where they are hunted by genetically engineered apex predators.

Roodt's most critically acclaimed modern contribution to horror eschewed cheap monsters in favour of deeply internalised, domestic trauma. *The Lullaby / Siembamba* (2018) tracks a 19-year-old runaway mother who returns to her critical

mother's home and descends into severe postpartum depression. She experiences horrific visions of a spectral crone urging her to harm her baby. Named after a traditional Afrikaans folklore song often associated with infanticide, the film channels the style of Roman Polanski's psychological thrillers, as well as Asian horror films, capturing the disorienting, claustrophobic terrors of early motherhood.

Roodt's new film is another horror film, *Morningstar* (2026).

Conclusion

It is impossible to do justice to Roodt's oeuvre in an article of limited scope. A book publication would do justice to his work. Roodt's most significant films display cinematic humanism in his representation of women on the edge of post-apartheid society, which do get a voice in his work. At the same time his deviation from the Hollywood classical narrative structure and for example using the conventions of the Western in *Jobman*, has resulted in fascinating experimentation with form - neorealism and oral narrative structures in the case of *Meisie* and partly *Yesterday*, cinema verité and neorealism in *Zimbabwe* and the silent film with avant-garde elements (especially the experimentation with sound) in *Faith's Corner*.

Further research needs to address various questions: How does a singular director reconcile auteur-driven socio-political commentary with hyper-commercial, low-budget genre pastiche? What does this duality reveal about the economic survival mechanisms required in the South African film industry?

Roodt is a pioneer in using cinema to directly critique the apartheid regime from inside the country. Future research should trace his trajectory from *Place of Weeping* — the first overt anti-apartheid feature film made by a South African—through *The Stick* (1987) and up to his post-1994 cinema. How did the spatial aesthetics and depiction of the South African landscape change from the claustrophobia of late-apartheid violence to the disillusioned realities of the postcolonial transition?

Does Roodt portray marginalised rural women and children merely as passive, tragic victims of structural violence (such as poverty and HIV/AIDS) as suggested by Norita Mdege, or do he afford them genuine agency? How do these representations impact international spectatorship? Roodt has frequently been critiqued for oversimplifying deeply polarised South African political landscapes in projects such as his embattled biopic *Winnie Mandela* (2011), and his contentious look at farm attacks in *Treurgrond* (2015). How does Roodt navigate the "responsibility of the filmmaker" when handling sensitive historical atrocities or ongoing national traumas?

Hopefully this article will contribute to more scholarly research.

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1986
Place of Weeping (Darrell Roodt)
1987
City of Blood (Darrell Roodt)
Tenth of a Second (Darrell Roodt)
The Stick (Darrell Roodt)
1989
Jobman (Darrell Roodt)
1991
Sarafina! (Darrell Roodt)
1993
To the Death (Darrell Roodt)
Fatherhood (Darrell Roodt)
1994
Cry the Beloved Country (Darrell Roodt)
1996
Dangerous Ground (Darrell Roodt)
2000
The Second Skin (Darrell Roodt)
2001
Witness to a Kill (Darrell Roodt)
2003
Pavement (Darrell Roodt)
Sumuru (Darrell Roodt)
2004
Dracula 3000 (Darrell Roodt)
Yesterday (Darrell Roodt)
2005
Charlie Jade (Television series)
Number Ten (Darrell Roodt)
Faith's Corner (Darrell Roodt)
2006
Prey (Darrell Roodt)

2007
Cryptid (as Darrell Michael)
Meisie (Darrell Roodt)
2008
Ella Blue (Television series)
Lullaby (Darrell Roodt)
Zimbabwe (Darrell Roodt)
2010
Jakhalsdans (Darrell Roodt)
League of Glory (Television series)
2011
Winnie Mandela (Darrell Roodt)
2012
Little One (Darrell Roodt)
Room 9 (Television series)
Stilte (Darrell Roodt)
Wild at Heart (Television series)
2013
Stealing Time (Darrell Roodt)
Die Ballade Van Robbie De Wee (Darrell Roodt)
2014
Seun: 81457397BG (Darrell Roodt)
2015
Treurgrond (2025)
2018
The Lullaby (Darrell Roodt)
2018
Lake Placid: Legacy (Darrell Roodt)
2024
Greytown Girl (Darrell Roodt)
2026
Morning Star (Darrell Roodt)

Stills Credits
Videovision, Anant Singh, KKNK, Karoo Film Company, Azari Media, Cape Winelands Film Festival, Blue Rock

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