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## Documentary realism and film pleasure: Two moments from Euzhan Palcy's *A Dry White Season*

### Abstract

*This essay examines some of the strains and tensions around the notions of film pleasure and documentary realism in the film A Dry White Season. It offers a schematic analysis of the history of the idea of a politics of film pleasure in the early work on mass culture of the Frankfurt School and F.R. Leavis, and more recent debates in feminism. This general account then provides the context for the examination of some of the problems in Palcy's film, focusing particularly on the question of Palcy's claims for a documentary realism, and two particular moments in the film itself.*

"The fact is I was reproducing history, not fiction" (Euzhan Palcy).<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Economy/Ideology/Pleasure

"That is the kind of question that we should ask the people with the money and the power to produce films." Thus Euzhan Palcy in reply to a question at the London Film Festival in 1990 after the screening of her film version of André Brink's *A Dry White Season*. The question remains whether it is possible to make a commercial film about South Africa which doesn't turn into a story about a white middle-class family. The question and the answer point to the necessity for understanding film in relation to questions of the politics of pleasure. For we need always to understand that the industry which is cinema always functions on two intersecting levels. First, *economically*, as the material industry of machinery, investment, contracts, advertising and finance which makes and sells films; and second, as Christian Metz pointed out long ago, *ideologically*, as an industry of the

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<sup>1</sup> Palcy's remark - and the further remarks from her quoted in the essay - are taken from the article "London Film Festival: South Africa Focus" (Anon, 1990:27). Further references in the essay are to the page numbers only. Parts of the first section of the essay were originally written for the *Weekly Mail Film Festival* programme, *The Politics of Film Pleasure*, in 1991. A version of these was published in *New Contrast*, 77(20):38-42. A version of the second section of the paper was delivered at the *Politics of Film Pleasure* conference organized by the journal *Pretexts: Studies in Writing and Culture* in September 1990.

imaginary, one which makes and sells films on the basis of the spectator's pleasure.<sup>2</sup> This pleasure, the multiple delights offered by narrative cinema, is always bound up with the production of meanings, and therefore with a consequent politics, even though on a first view, pleasure and politics may seem to be mutually exclusive. For pleasure belongs to the world of the private individual, is a question of self-pleasing and a matter of self-indulgence, while politics is concerned with the public world, with social collectivities and social action. Pleasure is a matter of sensual distraction from the harsh edges of the world, while politics confronts the world's harshness, challenges it, and seeks to transform it. But to transform it how? Answer: to make the harsh world yield more pleasure to us. At that point – where we begin to realize that the aim of all politics is finally utopian, is ultimately to increase our pleasure in the world – our confidence in that apparently simple opposition begins to wane.

How does this general paradox and this apparent opposition work in relation to film? What are the politics of film pleasure? Before turning to some of the particular problems posed by Palcy's *A Dry White Season* it is worth examining, even very schematically, the historical contours of the existing debate.

## 2. The politics of film pleasure

In a first moment of analysis, that opposition remained intact. For the Frankfurt School, the politics of film pleasure are clear. Film pleasure is an enemy to politics because the film industry works to create a compliant and submissive audience of passive consumers. Film pleasure saps the potential political consciousness of the masses who are doubly exploited: publicly, as workers in the labour market, and privately, as the passive consumers of the culture industry's standardized products. The emancipatory aspects of high culture – the ways in which it could raise a critical consciousness – are lost or parodied in the routines and repetitions of the culture industry: "As soon as the film begins, it is quite clear how it will end, and who will be rewarded, punished, or forgotten" (Adorno & Horkheimer [1979:125] in *Dialectics of Enlightenment*). The politics of film pleasure are, in this view, simple. Film pleasure is antithetical to the development of political consciousness. Film has become what religion was to the nineteenth century: the opium of the masses. It is a pleasure which is addictive, enervating and finally destructive. It must be resisted at all costs.

The nascent English studies of the Cambridge school had already shown similar resistance to and distaste for the new mass art form in the 1930s. F.R. Leavis gave a notable characterisation of film in his early pamphlet, "Mass Civilisation and Minority Culture". Here, because of its greater power and immediacy, the cinema was seen as even more of a threat to the vitality of culture than the emergent tabloid press pioneered by Lord Northcliffe:

... films have a so much more potent influence. They provide now the main form of recreation in the civilised world; and they involve surrender, under conditions of hypnotic receptivity, to the cheapest emotional appeals, appeals the more insidious because they are associated with a compellingly vivid

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<sup>2</sup> See Christian Metz (1982:7): "the cinematic institution is not just the cinema industry, it is also the 'mental machinery'..."

illusion of actual life. It would be difficult to dispute that the result must be serious damage to the 'standard of living' ... it will not be disputed that broadcasting, like the films, is in practice, mainly a means of passive diversion, and that it tends to make active recreation, especially active use of the mind, more difficult (Leavis [1933:20-21] in *For Continuity*).

In brief, if the purpose of the new literary studies was to save the world from mass culture, as it was for Leavis, then film should *never* receive a place in the curriculum. Implicit in Leavis's argument is, of course, the idea of English studies as a form of 'active recreation', a training in the 'active use of the mind'. But if we attend to this idea seriously, then the arguments for keeping film out of the canon dissolve. For what if making film the object of serious attention and analysis resulted in just such an activity of mind, just such a critical literacy? Leavis's argument relied upon a claim that literary texts were intrinsically capable of generating intellectual activity, and refused to see that this activity of the mind might itself be simply a product of critical attention and analysis.<sup>3</sup>

### 3. The feminist slant

Something of this same opposition – though in a different register – is repeated in the second major phase of attention to the question of film pleasure. This second phase is the feminist attack on film pleasure, an attack which still owes a great deal to Laura Mulvey's seminal essay of 1975, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema". For Mulvey, the visual pleasure of narrative cinema had its roots deep in the psychic structures of patriarchy. Here the sadistic and controlling power of the gaze belongs to the man while the woman is reduced to being the object of that gaze, and is always at the mercy of its violent voyeurism. The relative subtleties of *film noir* only express the same structural violence to women as the most banal slasher movie. Even masterpieces such as Hitchcock's *Rear Window* and *Vertigo* only make apparent the ways in which cinema is a patriarchal institution in which the role of woman – the force and necessity of her representation – is always and only to pleasure the male spectator. Indeed there is even the suspicion that these films are regarded as *masterpieces* precisely because they embody in the most subtle and sophisticated ways the repressive structure of patriarchal representation. "It is said that analysing pleasure, or beauty, destroys it. That is the intention," writes Mulvey. "Traditional filmic pleasure," she insists, "must be broken down".<sup>4</sup>

Feminists and Frankfurt school theorists agree that film pleasure should be opposed on political grounds. But these grounds differ in important ways. For the Frankfurt theorists,

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<sup>3</sup> Francis Mulhern notes that the "consensual judgment of the *Scrutiny* group was crushingly negative. O.D. Leavis saw the cinema as one of the 'disruptive forces' that now threatened to extinguish the culture of the working class. For L.C. Knights, it was part of the coalition of interests that stood ranged against valid cultural ideals. And in the writings of Denys Thompson, as in those of F.R. Leavis, cinema figured in the company of the Press, radio and motoring as a familiar of the 'machine'" (Mulhern, 1979:52).

<sup>4</sup> See Laura Mulvey (1985:305-315). Tania Modleski, in *The Woman Who Knew Too Much* (1988) seeks to give a more modulated approach to Hitchcock focusing on the ambivalence of his films towards femininity: "... what I want to argue is *neither* that Hitchcock is utterly misogynistic *nor* that he is largely sympathetic to women and their plight in patriarchy, but that his work is characterised by a thoroughgoing ambivalence about femininity" (3). Lesley Brill, in *The Hitchcock Romance* (1988) also argues against "recent feminist attacks on Hitchcock" in favour of a reading of Hitchcock "as a creator of romance. I find his films to be powerful criticisms of patriarchal assumptions rather than symptoms of them" (xiv). The debate is clearly far from over.

film pleasure is wrong because it is a distraction from political reality, a sapping of the public into the private realm. In contrast, feminists argue that the dominant forms of pleasure should be resisted because these forms of pleasure are part and parcel of an oppressive political reality. Film contributes to political reality because its pleasures are in large part pleasures of representation and identification: film is not ideological just because it represents reality wrongly, but because it helps to create and sustain the identities we have in the world. Film pleasure is then a question of representation in the two main senses of the word: as the aesthetic category of mimesis, as a question of realism, and also as the crucial political category of delegation. Thus while the Frankfurt school theorists feared that film pleasure contributed to the weakening of the public sphere of political action by redirecting the energies of the masses into the private sphere, feminists, refusing the division between public and private ('the personal is political') and the consequent relegation of film to the anti-political, accept the question of film pleasure as fully political, as a question of ideology.

Mulvey's polemic set the terms for a controversial and ongoing debate; and established the framework for a research programme for a history of women's representation in film. Whatever the theoretical flaws in Mulvey's original arguments, her programme has nonetheless helped to produce a substantial quantity of research into the film archive which without her work might never have been done. Critics have pointed, in general, to two weaknesses in her account. First, for all its focus on the representation of women, the theory seemed to leave no place for the specifically female spectator. If cinema was a purely male institution, yet another 'bachelor machine', how and why did women get to enjoy films? And secondly, Mulvey's call for an avant-garde destruction of film pleasure (apparent in Godard's films of the sixties and early seventies, and in Mulvey's own work with Peter Wollen) seemed to work only for an elite audience, one educated in film history enough to appreciate the shock of a formalist assault on film pleasure. Was there any space in Mulvey's paradigm for a politically progressive cinema for the masses?<sup>5</sup>

Do such theoretical questions have a particular force in the discussion of progressive South African cinema? Some might assert that attention to these First World debates can have little or no relevance to the South African situation, particularly when feminism as such remains a deeply marginalized political force. Feminists would reply that in this context, there is all the more urgency to seek to bring these questions to the fore. Two particular areas of work suggest themselves. First, regarding education in the analysis and interpretation of film and visual narrative, including not only film as such but also the analysis of TV and advertising. And second, with regard to film, video and TV production.

#### 4. The centrality of filmic pleasure

With regard to education, the question of pleasure is central. Ask anyone why they go to the cinema, and the answer is likely to be escapism, the pleasure of escaping the self, of leaving daily cares in suspension for 90 minutes or so of what we can call narrative dreaming. For the pleasure of the film is akin to the pleasure of dreaming: our usual sense of self-consciousness is suspended and another voice takes over that ongoing narrative

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<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Teresa de Lauretis *Alice Doesn't* (1984); Mary Anne Donae *Femmes Fatales* (1991-17-43); Constance Penley (1985:36-66), and Mulvey (1990).

which makes us the subject of our consciousness. In this suspended state, the film does our dreaming – tells our story – for us. The spectator and the analyst enjoy different positions in relation to this pleasurable narrative.

A condition of the pleasure of that narrative is that the spectator can ‘make sense’ of the film and the spectator’s reading of a film is concerned above all to ‘make sense’ of it, to achieve the position of understanding that which the film narrative attempts to inscribe for the spectator. The analyst’s reading of a film is a meta-reading; it is concerned primarily with the understanding and analysis of that inscription. The film analyst attempts to understand how the film is understood; how the film seeks to position the spectator so that the film can be understood. While the spectator reads the narrative of the film, the analyst reads its narration, its address, its construction of that narrative which is entertained by and which entertains the spectator. While the spectator enjoys the film, the analyst reads how that enjoyment – how that pleasure – is constructed.

Such a reading – which necessarily takes a critical distance from the film – can become a political act, a raising of political consciousness, in itself. For the pleasures of the film are generated not only by the enormous visual pleasures of film narration itself, with its larger than life but true to life images, but at the same time by the film’s dreamlike flow of meanings. Those meanings are always social and political, are always ideological. Our pleasure in film always has a price beyond that of the cinema ticket, and that is the subscription – at least for the moment of the film itself – to its ideological position. Unless we enter the cinema in a doggedly critical way, intent on refusing the pleasures of the lowering of self-consciousness associated with film viewing, then it is only when we come out of the cinema, and break with that dreamlike state, that our ordinary self-consciousness returns, and with it, the potential for discussing and criticising the film.

There are then two moments to film pleasure and they need to be sharply distinguished. These are the pleasure of the moment of consumption – an essentially supine and passive pleasure; and the pleasure of the moment of discussion (like the retelling of a dream) – a potentially active as well as enjoyable moment. The skills and techniques of film analysis and interpretation can improve and increase the pleasure of that second, more sociable moment when the private spectator rejoins the public crowd. The focus of the moment of pleasure can be shifted from within the cinema – the moment of entertainment, the pleasurable passive consumption of meaning – to outside the cinema-machine where that passivity gives way to the active production and analysis of meaning. Our educational task is to make available the tools and resources of analysis to better enable such active debate.

For the film analyst, it little matters whether a film text intends to be progressive or not. Through active discussion and interpretation, any film text can be made the object of progressive analysis. A significant part of such analysis is likely to concern the question of film pleasure, both as a general theoretical question (involving questions of voyeurism, gender, questions of feminism) and with specific regard to the operation of the particular film in question – the issues it raises and its adequacy in dealing with them.

## 5. Ideological representation of apartheid

Regarding production in South Africa, the main tasks are surely to dismantle the system of representation which apartheid has put into place as a significant part of its ideological project. The first thing to question is its representation (here news, fiction and documentary come together) of the social totality. For apartheid not only divides; it also makes invisible. The first task is to make as widely available as possible representations of the whole of South African society, so that the invisible is made visible, so that the human consequences of economic, social and racial division can be articulated. One of the major consequences – in representation – of apartheid has been to make South Africa a foreign and unknown country to its own citizens. The first task is then one of reflection: but not, I believe, only of reflection, but also for active and critical analysis.<sup>6</sup>

For how can the divisions of apartheid be shown? They must also be understood. As I argue elsewhere, the task should also be a critical task. A truly democratic cultural practice should encourage the agency and activity of its users, should seek to empower them as readers rather than have them conform to the aesthetic of a passive realism. Here the question of the politics is again an inescapable one. Production and education must work together and refuse the easy separations of commercial definition, the opposition of entertainment to education, of the academy to the market place. We need to tell our own stories, we need to dream our own dreams. To do this, the politics of film pleasure must not be neglected, particularly in relation to a film such as *A Dry White Season*.

## 6. *A Dry White Season*: An intersection of the financial and the ideological

Palcy was quite clear on the good intentions of her film, and these I do not deny.<sup>7</sup> Nonetheless, I wish to raise some problems concerning the ways in which these intentions are themselves threatened by the double economics of film pleasure, that crucial intersection of the financial and the ideological. Two moments of the film interest me in this regard.

The first takes place early on in the film and occupies some five or seven seconds. Here the militant children are addressing Wellington, the gardener, explaining to him the necessity for their demonstrations, one of which has already resulted in some brutal sjambokking. One of the children explains:

We don't want to learn Afrikaans, we want to learn English. They want to teach us Afrikaans so that we can only get jobs as garden boys, or delivery boys, so that we will stay ...

And Wellington, the gardener, breaks in "Just like me", with obvious emotion and pain. Afterwards, in the demonstration, the son is shot and killed and the story of the film's search for the truth of the matter is fully launched.

This is a key moment in the narrative of the film. First, in the sense that it is one of the few occasions when the specific time of the film's action – the time of the film's fiction – is

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<sup>6</sup> See Higgins (1991).

<sup>7</sup> See Anon (1990:27).

specifically situated. The reference to the question of Afrikaans as the medium of instruction in black schools locates us in, or refers us to the historical time of the diegesis, to 1976 and the mass demonstrations – particularly in Soweto – in which some five hundred to a thousand people, many of them young students, were killed by police in scenes similar to those shown in the movie. There is no strong narrative motivation for this information. We need to know that there are demonstrations (this we are shown repeatedly), but we are not usually told why there are demonstrations (this scene stands out because it does seek to give us some information, an expansion of the earlier key phrase – "How can we fight for freedom when our elders sit drinking the beer that buys the bullets that shoot our brothers?"). It is a scene which appears to address us in a strictly documentary mode, acting as the guarantor of the film's good faith, the documentary realism which Pally so "insisted upon when she stated: "The fact is I was reproducing history, not fiction."

But I want to suggest that the scene operates in another way as well, one in which its documentary appeal is contradicted or subverted. This is due, in the first instance, simply to the scene's insertion in a sequence of scenes and individual shots, the very basis, as Jurij Lotman reminds us, of the production of cinematic meaning.<sup>8</sup>

## 7. Narrative meanings constraining the film's documentary referentiality

What I am referring to is the fact that the documentary message of this scene – the information about the occasion of the Sowetan uprising of 1976 – that message is given *verbally*, and that on a first level of interpretation. Especially for literary students, with their reliance on the word, it might seem that this documentary aspect is able to dominate the semiotic process. But I want to suggest that this 'documentary message' is itself threatened, is already in a sense dispersed, by the fact that the spectator does not simply 'hear' the words, can not simply refer them to that historical context (which they cannot by their act of reference recreate for viewers, only ever, possibly, in the real sense of the word, refer them to, point them towards other sources, other reconstructive texts); but that the words themselves are uttered in a narrative sequence which is itself generating a powerful structure of meanings and that these narrative meanings act to constrain – at this point – the film's documentary referentiality, its attempt at a documentary realism.

I refer of course to what I emphasized in my description of the scene – to Wellington's pain, to the pathos of the scene, the shift from the shot of the child's speech to the close-up of Wellington's face. For what I am trying to suggest is that the documentary import of the utterance – its reference to the events of 1976 – is doubled by and perhaps undermined by the ways in which it is immediately narrativised, is subsumed by the relentless sequentiality of film into the emotional response of one of the characters of the film. And this is particularly the case in a film of this kind, for one of the main aspects of the novelistic film is to go for the effects of interiority usually associated with the novel. We might say that the act of external reference – reference to real historical events – is immediately

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. Jurij Lotman (1976:42): "The image automatically becomes a carrier of *cinematic information* precisely because of the montage of two internally conflicting visual images which together become an iconic sign of some third concept which is not merely the sum of the first two. *Cinematic meaning is meaning expressed by the resources of cinematic language, and it is impossible outside that language*" (author's italics).

narrativised, is immediately made into a meaning for a character in the film, is given a bearing on and for the character, becomes in fact less a reference to that external reality than to the inner life of the character. Indeed, in my view, it threatens to become *solely* a sign of that interiority.

These few seconds of the film are exemplary, for me, in their posing of a problem for a film of this type, and for the kind of pleasure associated with it. For the pleasure of the novelistic film, if we accept this as one particular sub-genre in classic Hollywood narrative, are the pleasures of identification with characters in a narrative which can be read as the story of a universal search for truth.

The main character's dilemma – the search for truth – is universal, though placed in South Africa by the kind of reference we have just discussed. But then, the force of that context itself diminishes, shrinks to becoming mere background or backdrop – not foreground, matter of analysis – for the narrative. It loses its point, just as here the very brief attempt at foregrounding the film's reference to historical reality is soon resolved into a background, in this example, the background for the expression of Wellington's pain as a human being, the pathos of Wellington as a representative of universal divisions (between child and adult, father and son) – the object, then, of identification for an undifferentiated audience, the audience projected as the universal singular of Hollywood cinema.

Indeed, for the local South African viewer, many details necessarily intrude upon the attempted smoothness of this pleasure of universal (read American/European) identification. Foreign accents – even or perhaps particularly when imitating the local – sound provocatively off-key, refuse to ring true, offend the documentary pleasures offered by the movie.

## 8. The tension between documentation and universalising

Let us follow up an example offered by Palcy herself, one in relation to the question of the documentary realism of the film. "I would like to say," she urges, "that the pictures Marlon Brando shows when he challenges Captain Stolz are photographs that I got from Amnesty International. They are not just photographs that we made for the film" (27). This connects to the general question of the reproduction of history in film and can be stated as a question regarding the semiotic significance of Marlon Brando's commanding presence in the film in the role of Advocate De Villiers.

For me, the problem comes through the close-up of Brando uttering the following words: "Justice in South Africa is misapplied when it comes to the question of race." For isn't this the essential message of the film? The something which everyone can agree on as a constituents of that universal subject? In a sense, the question *pleases*, gives pleasure, when uttered by Brando. It sums up the situation for the spectator; but in summing it up, is it not a statement which expresses, simplifies, distorts, projects? It is a sentence which works to represent South African reality in a particular way, to convert the raw and brutal material of that reality into commodity form, into the form of the commodity *as* meaning. Brando in this represents the liberal conscience of the West, and in so doing, places the spectator in it.

The pleasure of the documentary, the pleasure of a documentary realism, is then obtained at a price, the price of universalising the concerns of the film; and, in the context of Hollywood cinema, this universalising means, of course, making South Africa familiar to the American viewer.

And what is lost in this representation is just what that earlier moment tries to contain, wishes to express: something of the precise constituted materiality of South African history, South African reality. It is in this tension between these two moments from the film, the moment, soon lost, of documentation, and the moment immediately found again of universalising, that we find some of the major constitutive tensions of documentary realism itself, and the paradoxical film pleasure it realises, the ideology of film pleasure which it allows, and which it contains: and which we should, as critical viewers, question. The question that we should ask the people with the money and the power to produce films is always then a form of the question of film pleasure.

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