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Unveiling Complexity: Cinematic Representations of Apartheid History and the Post-Apartheid Dutch-Afrikaner Relationship in *Black Butterflies* (2011) and *An Act of Defiance* (2017)

Abstract

The cinematic representation of Apartheid, and in particular the tendency of using white protagonists to narrate the story of black suffering, has been the object of much scholarly enquiry but this has never included Dutch films. This article explores the representation of Afrikaner anti-Apartheid activism in Dutch cinema through an analysis of the films *Black Butterflies* (2011) and *An Act of Defiance* (2017). It investigates how these films perpetuate or challenge the paradigm of ‘white heroism’ and ‘white saviourism’ prevalent in cinematic portrayals of colonial and Apartheid history. Through a comparative study, it reveals nuanced narratives of white protagonists, highlighting their complexities as ‘tragic heroes’ rather than conventional ‘white saviours,’ yet at the same time suggesting a societal inclination towards absolving their past sins, echoing a broader post-Apartheid narrative of forgiveness and reconciliation. By contextualising these representations within broader societal discourses on colonialism and post-Apartheid reconciliation, the article sheds light on evolving Dutch attitudes towards Afrikaners, as the descendants of Dutch colonists, and their historical culpability, offering insights into contemporary Dutch engagement with issues of race, identity, and historical memory.

Keywords

Apartheid cinema | White saviour trope | Historical film genre | Dutch-South African relations

‘She was both a poet and a South African. In the midst of despair, she celebrated hope.
 Confronted by death, she asserted the beauty of life. Her name is Ingrid Jonker.’

– Nelson Mandela

‘Bram [Fischer] was a courageous man, who followed the most difficult course any man could
 choose to follow.’

– Nelson Mandela

Renowned Kenyan journalist and author Binyavanga Wainaina astutely observed in his seminal essay *How to write about Africa* (2005) that a recurring method employed by authors and scholars to showcase their purported concern for African issues is to invoke Mandela in their narratives.¹ Two Dutch films, namely *Black Butterflies* (2011) and *An Act of Defiance* (2017), delving into the historical contours of Apartheid in South Africa, echo this sentiment by very prominently incorporating a quote from Nelson Mandela. This quote, celebrating the heroism of both white protagonists and historical figures, serves a deliberate purpose in establishing a clear narrative, leaving no room for ambiguity regarding the heroic stature of the white characters. Despite the cautionary tone sounded by Wainaina, this article commences with these quotes, as they signify a prevalent narrative thread woven through these films, akin to numerous other Apartheid-themed movies, emphasising the ability of a 'noble' and 'enlightened' white individual to tell the story of black suffering.

Scholars have discerned a recurring pattern in cinematic representations of the colonial and Apartheid past, wherein racial tensions are oversimplified, portraying them as the struggles of the uneducated masses or otherwise the nefarious actions of a racist elite. Notably, 'white hero' characters emerge, embodying individuals with contemporary norms and values who challenge the status quo. However, this reductionist portrayal not only distorts the historical period but also perpetuates a form of hero worship that simplifies history, elevating messianic-like figures while marginalising the broader societal actions and the depth of suffering caused by colonialism. As Murphy and Harris underscore, 'films play a pivotal role in shaping public narratives about historical and contemporary racial relations'², making the perpetuation of a 'white saviour' and 'black suffering' narrative deeply problematic for a collective understanding of racism's historical trajectories.

The impact of cinema on shaping public narratives is particularly pronounced in European cinematic industries, where state funding plays a significant role.³ European films, including Dutch cinema, often prioritise historical films as a means of creating national myths and shaping collective memory.⁴ This genre of film, above all others, taps into the audience's sense of connection and identity by depicting historical events perceived to have moulded the nation. In particular, Dutch cinema 'works through national identification rather than pure entertainment or art,' playing a vital role in shaping a collective memory of the Dutch past.⁵ Against this backdrop, this article delves into the exploration of two Dutch movies, *Black Butterflies* (2011) and *An Act of Defiance* (2017), both focusing on the Apartheid era. Despite being directed by Dutch filmmakers and featuring Dutch actors, these films transcend national boundaries, prompting a critical

examination of their representation within the broader context of Apartheid cinema. This study fills a notable gap in academic analysis, as the Dutch cinematic perspective on Apartheid has been largely overlooked.

The significance of examining these Dutch cinematic representations of Afrikaner anti-Apartheid activism lies in the historical ties between the Dutch and the Afrikaner community, descendants of Dutch settlers who implemented Apartheid. Most international films on Apartheid often centre around English-speaking 'white hero' characters contrasted with the trope of the brutish Afrikaner 'as (ultimate) Nazi'⁶, perpetuating a narrative that paints all Afrikaners as (the sole) white perpetrators. Catherine Njeri Ngugi points out that this narrative caters to an English-speaking audience, portraying the 'British' and their descendants as innocent, deflecting moral responsibility for Apartheid atrocities.⁷ However, *Black Butterflies* and *An Act of Defiance*, while not necessarily challenging this essentialist trope of a white liberal 'hero', uniquely focus on an Afrikaner 'liberal hero'. Despite this shift, the central narrative remains anchored to a white protagonist telling the story of the struggle against Apartheid and, by extension, the story of black suffering in South Africa.

This article aims to investigate the extent to which these Dutch films perpetuate the paradigm of white heroism or the white saviour. Additionally, by studying these cinematic portrayals of Afrikaner history and anti-Apartheid activism, it seeks to illuminate contemporary Dutch discourses and representations of Apartheid, shedding light on the evolving Dutch attitudes toward Afrikaners in the post-Apartheid period.

Dutch-South African Relations

The director of *Black Butterflies*, Paula van der Oest, explained in an interview at the Tribeca Film Festival in New York in 2011, that indeed one of the main reasons for her to make this movie about the life of Ingrid Jonker, was because of the historical ties between the Netherlands and South Africa, and the necessity for the Dutch audience to be more aware of this past. 'I think it's good to have a consciousness for new generations,' Van der Oest said, and learn about 'an era in South Africa that was horrible. (...) We (the Dutch) have a very strong relationship with South Africa because we went there and the reason why the South Africans speak this beautiful language [Afrikaans] is because it is a form of developed Dutch.'⁸ In this one short statement, Van der Oest summarises the then changing view of the Dutch on the Afrikaners, ranging from feelings of shame and contempt, to feelings of

kinship and longing. These diverging emotions and views fit in the longer and rather ambiguous relationship between the two nations.

The largest segment of the white South African community is comprised of the Afrikaners, descendants of predominantly Dutch settlers who arrived at the Cape during the 17th and 18th centuries under the governance of the Dutch East India Company (VOC). After British conquest in 1806, contact between the Dutch and the now self-identified 'Afrikaners' dwindled. However, in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the two communities rekindled ties during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899-1902, when the Dutch and other European nations rallied behind the Afrikaners. This alliance fostered an affectionate kinship, symbolically reconnecting with a long-lost brother on the other side of the world. However, as Afrikaners rose to prominence in South African politics and implemented Apartheid policies in the mid-20th century, public sentiment in the Netherlands toward their once-considered kin soured. The Dutch, having endured foreign occupation during World War II, were dismayed by the openly fascist and racist ideologies of Afrikaner politicians, prompting growing support for the anti-Apartheid movement. In this climate, Afrikaans became viewed as the language of oppression.

Despite widespread public condemnation of Apartheid, the Dutch government initially hesitated to take corresponding actions due to the commercial importance of South Africa for Dutch companies like Shell and a reluctance to moralise on democracy, given their own chequered history.⁹ However, societal shifts in the mid-20th century, such as secularisation, anti-authoritarian protests, and immigration from former Dutch colonies, led to the embrace of multiculturalism and anti-colonialism. Civil society initiatives like the 'Boycott Outspan' campaign emerged, urging moral consciousness through protests and awareness campaigns. In the 1980s, amid global anti-racism and anti-Apartheid movements, broader support for Dutch anti-Apartheid associations grew, culminating in Nelson Mandela's triumphant reception in the Netherlands upon his release in 1990.

With South Africa's transition to independence in 1994, the Dutch swiftly rekindled ties with their 'distant cousins' in the southern hemisphere. Numerous cultural initiatives celebrated the Afrikaans language, fostering a renewed sense of kinship among Dutch, Flemish, and Afrikaans speakers. For example, the highest literary prize in the Netherlands, the P.C. Hooft prize, was awarded in 1991 to the Afrikaner poet Elisabeth Eybers.¹⁰ Interest in Afrikaans poetry and literature resulted in translations to Dutch, among others a translation of Ingrid Jonkers' by National Poet Gerrit Komrij in 2000.¹¹ Other examples of this new found interest in Afrikaans and the Afrikaners were the

reinstatement of the chair of Afrikaans Literature at the University of Amsterdam in 2002, a television series named *Stellenbosch*, a fictional drama about the lives of Dutch immigrants in South Africa, which aired on Dutch and Flemish television in 2007, or the 'Festival for Afrikaans' which was first hosted in 2011 in Amsterdam.¹² Joan Hambidge, a literary scholar from South Africa was one of the few academics from both the Netherlands and South Africa voicing critique on this new and rapid blooming of Dutch-Afrikaans relations. She mainly denounced the paternalistic attitude exhibited by the Dutch towards the Afrikaners which according to her were 'symptomatic for the attitude of the imperial "motherland" towards its colony.'¹³ In a similar fashion, the Dutch historian Gerrit Schutte, 'provocatively characterised the sense of historical responsibility for South Africa that many Dutch felt [during and after the Apartheid period] as a form of "cultural imperialism".'¹⁴ Indeed, despite the wide public support for anti-Apartheid and anti-imperialist struggles during the mid-twentieth century, the Dutch had not dared to turn a critical eye on themselves regarding the enduring colonial discourses in their contemporary culture and as Pamela Pattynama has stated 'failed to acknowledge the continuing influence of its colonial legacies.'¹⁵

The adoption of an international discourse of 'postcolonial critique,' which scrutinises ongoing colonial legacies, was slow in Dutch academia and societal discussions. Gert Oostindie attributes this delay to the 'absence of a widely shared colonial and postcolonial experience and language within the former Dutch empire.'¹⁶ As opposed to the British colonial Empire or the French colonial Empire, the Dutch language did not become a lingua franca for the colonial subjects within the Dutch Empire, reducing the possibility of a collective discussion in Dutch among those who share a Dutch colonial past, and as such limiting the number of critical voices from the (former)colonies that could enlighten the Dutch debate. Moreover, economic pressures and uncertainties due to globalisation led to disenchantment with the multicultural ideal around the turn of the millennium, and the Dutch society became divided on the viability of a multicultural society.¹⁷

The 150th anniversary of the abolition of slavery in the Kingdom of the Netherlands in 2013 prompted increased attention to the long-term consequences of the Dutch colonial past and hidden forms of racism. This period saw the publication of significant works such as Philomena Essed and Isabel Hoving's *Dutch Racism* (2014) and Gloria Wekker's *White Innocence* (2016). Concerns about rising intolerance and a desire for a more nuanced understanding of the colonial past and hidden forms of racism led to a more broadly embraced 'postcolonial turn' in Dutch academia and political debates.

The two movies examined in this article, produced in the second decade of the twenty-first century, are products of these societal developments: the renewed interest in Afrikaners and the Afrikaans language since 1994 and the discussions about postcoloniality and racism emerging in the new millennium. These cinematic representations of Apartheid history in the twenty-first century offer insights into how Dutch society has culturally and societally processed this history since the end of Apartheid in 1994.

Biographical Narratives in Historical Films

Historian Robert Rosenstone has underscored the prevailing scepticism among historians towards historical films, noting a pervasive inclination for both movies and documentaries to narrate the past ‘as the story of individuals.’¹⁸ This inclination is particularly pronounced in the historical film genre, with biographical films emerging as a favoured subgenre. Robert Burgoyne posits that the appeal of this subgenre lies in its ability to effectively convey the narrative of a traumatic historical period through the perspective of a singular individual, fostering a relatable connection with the audience.¹⁹ However, the peril inherent in this approach lies in the reduction of historical developments to the personal experiences or triumphs of an individual, thereby neglecting the broader societal forces influencing historical change.

Black Butterflies, directed by Paula van der Oest with a screenplay by Greg Latter, can be unequivocally categorised as a biographical film, narrating the life of Afrikaner poet Ingrid Jonker (1933-1965). Jonker was associated with the *Sestigers*, an Afrikaner artist collective renowned for openly criticising the Apartheid regime. While the film incorporates elements of the anti-Apartheid struggle, its primary focus revolves around the strained father-child relationship between Ingrid Jonker, portrayed by Carice van Houten, and her conservative, patriarchal, and controlling father, portrayed by Rutger Hauer, within the context of mid-twentieth-century South African society. While this strained relationship could be interpreted metaphorically as a symbol for the deteriorating relationship between the Afrikaner people and the broader South African nation, the inclusion of internationally acclaimed Dutch actors suggests a deliberate emphasis on personal relationships as the film’s central narrative. Notably, key supporting roles are filled by non-South African actors such as Liam Cunningham and Candice D’Arcy, while local actors like Thami Mbongo and Grant Swanby are relegated to marginal roles, and as such symbolically marginalised in their own country’s

historical narrative. Furthermore, despite the film's overt celebration of Jonker's poetry, it fails to honour the authenticity of her work by presenting the originally Afrikaans-language poems in English. Jane Bryce contends that this trend of casting international stars or translating artistic works to English to broaden the audience reflects the irony of these film projects. Despite their intention to challenge neo-colonial discourses on Africa and highlight overlooked African historical events, commercial pressures often compromise these endeavours.²⁰ While the selection of English as the language of communication can be rationalised in certain instances, the decision to predominantly employ English in recounting the history of Ingrid Jonker, as celebrated Afrikaner writer, and the poet society to which she belonged is incomprehensible. This choice becomes especially confounding given the historical context, as the significance of the *Sestigers* as cultural protest movement during Apartheid rested on its utilisation of Afrikaans, the language associated with the Apartheid government, as a means to critique that very government. Omitting the Afrikaans language component results in a complete forfeiture of the historical importance of this movement within the film. Indeed an Afrikaans speaking film critic, cited in one of the largest daily newspapers of the Netherlands, stated that by choosing for English "the (Dutch) filmmakers completely lost the essence of the story."²¹

In contrast, the movie *An Act of Defiance*, directed by Jean van de Velde; screenplay by Dominic Morgan, Matt Harvey and based on the book by Joel Joffe, has apart from Dutch actor Peter Paul Muller, a full South African cast. Director Jean van de Velde has always been very adamant in his wish to work predominantly with South African actors. In an interview in a Dutch newspaper he said about this:

In previous adaptations, Mandela was played by British or American actors, but I absolutely wanted a South African. All eyes were on him [Sello Motloutse], it's like when someone in the Netherlands plays Anne Frank. His first scene was in court, where Mandela says, "Innocent." Everyone on the set was cheering with emotion after that scene.²²

Moreover, the movie is narrated largely in Afrikaans and as such stays closer to the historical reality. Nevertheless, this production also chose to cast a non-South African actor to play the leading part of Bram Fischer (1908-1975), the Afrikaner anti-Apartheid activist and lawyer of Nelson Mandela. Director Jean Van de Velde has said about this that the history of Afrikaner anti-Apartheid

activism is a sensitive topic in South Africa. This story could not (yet) have been told, nor perhaps acted, by a white South African, according to Van de Velde, as it would have been seen as an attempt of Afrikaners to downplay their collective guilt for creating the Apartheid state.²³

An Act of Defiance unfolds a short but crucial part of the life of Afrikaner lawyer Bram Fischer, who became most known for being the lead defence counsellor of future South African president Nelson Mandela. The movie can clearly be classified as a biographical film, but whereas *Black Butterflies* focuses predominantly on personal relationships of the protagonist, the movie *An Act of Defiance* centres on personal life choices which were impactful for South Africa as a country. The narrative centres on the lead-up to the infamous historic Rivonia Trial (1963-1964), where anti-Apartheid activists, including Nelson Mandela, faced the charge of high treason. Fischer, a key figure in the trial's defence, and as the audience learns covertly the secretary-general of the South African Communist Party, navigates personal and professional turmoil, constantly fearing exposure as an anti-Apartheid activist. The film as such offers a poignant exploration of sacrifice and conviction against the backdrop of a pivotal moment in South Africa's history, and as such transcends the biographical genre.

From White Saviour to Anti-Hero: Nuances in White Protagonist Representation

A significant concern within historical films addressing race relations and colonialism/Apartheid is the recurrent inclination to focus on a white protagonist as the primary narrator in historical events characterised by diversity and non-European contexts. This potential pitfall is conspicuously manifested in the two films being examined. *Black Butterflies* exemplifies this narrative pattern, highlighting the strained relationship between Ingrid Jonker and her father. The film conforms to a prevailing archetype found in various Apartheid-themed movies, portraying a benevolent white figure engaged in direct confrontation with a representative of the oppressive regime. This binary representation, as observed by Julie Reid, dichotomises white characters into the roles of 'good' and 'bad,' a dynamic that oversimplifies the complexities of Apartheid-era ideologies.²⁴ In such an approach, the struggle of the 'white hero' is individualised, and to some extent takes the shape of a hagiography. The film's depiction of Ingrid Jonker as the compassionate 'good white' in contrast to her father's unequivocal racism perpetuates this binary opposition. Noteworthy scenes illustrate this dichotomy, such as Jonker's civil interaction with a black maid disrupted by her father's bigotry.

The film strategically employs this stark contrast to symbolise the broader societal struggle between the forces of progress and the forces of racial prejudice and white supremacy.

Moreover, *Black Butterflies* veers into a perilous oversimplification by portraying Ingrid Jonker's father as an outright villain, culminating in the scene in which he dramatically destroys Jonker's poem, *Die Kind* (The Child), the poem which would eventually make her famous and establish her reputation as an activist and dissident.²⁵ Director Paula van der Oest acknowledges the deliberate choice to underscore the challenging father-daughter relationship as a symbolic representation of the 'good' and 'bad' white dynamics. 'It works on a metaphorical level, because her father represents Apartheid because he is on the censorship board and she is the free spirited person, the artist, someone who doesn't feel the boundaries of politics.'²⁶ However, this reductionist approach to individual actions and the creation of a caricatured, malevolent white figure fails to adequately explore the pervasive and enduring nature of racist ideologies within society. The film perpetuates the notion that extreme forms of racist thinking are confined to unsociable individuals with irrational prejudices, absolving the audience from critically engaging with the lasting impacts of such ideologies. As Madison asserts, this approach misguidedly presents racist hatred as a historical oddity far removed from the audiences own time and place, rather than an ongoing concern.²⁷

Conversely, scholarly examinations of white anti-Apartheid representation often discuss a variant of hagiography – the emergence of an 'anti-hero.' The anti-hero narrative portrays a character who is not immediately sympathetic nor obviously morally superior, so to not alienate the audience. The character experiences a profound revelation, either thrust upon them or self-initiated, resulting in a transformative adoption of a staunchly anti-racist position. Despite enduring hardships for their convictions, they ultimately triumph, presenting an almost messianic overcoming of adversity – a compelling exemplification of moral superiority in action.²⁸ Remarkably, the films *Black Butterflies* and *An Act of Defiance* diverge from this prevailing narrative. Instead of the 'bad turned good hero,' both films present protagonists as 'tragic heroes.' In *Black Butterflies*, Ingrid Jonker is depicted as an outsider and victim, emphasising her early struggles and familial neglect and her constant and often self-destructive search for love and approval. This portrayal seeks empathy from the audience, positioning Jonker as a lost soul, whose anti-Apartheid activism fits within her larger quest to challenge a harsh and loveless world, without rendering her a conventional martyr.

Similarly, *An Act of Defiance* initially introduces Bram Fischer as a privileged Afrikaner lawyer detached from anti-Apartheid struggles. Contrary to the expected 'anti-hero' trajectory, Fischer's true

allegiance to the anti-Apartheid movement is only gradually revealed. The movie's initial scene adheres closely to historical events, portraying the arrest of key anti-Apartheid figures, including Nelson Mandela, Govan Mbeki, Walter Sisulu, Denis Goldberg, and Ahmed Kathrada at Liliesleaf Farm in Rivonia near Johannesburg on July 11, 1963. Yet notably, Bram Fischer, then the secretary-general of the South African Communist Party and a member of the Rivonia meetings' inner circle, is introduced without explicit association with the anti-Apartheid movement. Instead, he is depicted as an influential Afrikaner lawyer specialising in mining law and leading the Bar Association in Johannesburg. The revelation of Fischer's deeper connection to the anti-Apartheid cause occurs only midway the movie in the scene when state-witness Joseph Mtolo identifies Fischer as a South African Communist Party member in court. Subsequent scenes depict Fischer in a clandestine meeting with ANC and SACP members, confessing to co-authoring the Manifesto of Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK). This departure from the conventional narrative structure challenges the audience's preconceived notions of moral decency in white protagonists. Moreover, the late revelation of Fischer's involvement with the South African Communist Party disrupts the expected moral clarity attributed to white heroes. This departure from the typical portrayal of white protagonists as unambiguous heroes is again highlighted in one of the last scenes of the movie during which one of the members of the legal team of Bram Fischer asks him, at the funeral of his wife and on the eve of his arrest, whether the personal sacrifices were worth it. Fischer is shown to respond by saying: 'Have you ever asked this of Mandela?!', thereby returning the attention of the audience to the sacrifices of the majority of black South Africans and demythologising his own role within the anti-Apartheid movement.²⁹

In contrast, the film *Black Butterflies* vividly portrays a narrative of a white saviour, exemplified by the protagonist Ingrid Jonker, who is celebrated as a free and anti-racist spirit and who primarily engages intellectually with other white South Africans, but nevertheless is presented as an important voice against Apartheid. Within the movie, Jonker's association with the anti-Apartheid network *Sestigers* is depicted as predominantly white, with these individuals serving as the voice to explain the wrongs of Apartheid and advocate resistance. Conversely, the limited representation of black South African figures in the film fails to present them as the moral voice of their country's struggle. This phenomenon appears to reflect the Dutch public's selective interest in anti-Apartheid cultural productions during the Apartheid era. While celebrated black South African writers, poets, and musicians, who had escaped Apartheid South Africa and forced to live in exile, gained international recognition and their work was eagerly embraced by anti-Apartheid activists globally, the Dutch

audience sympathetic to the movement seemed primarily interested in the contributions of (exiled) Afrikaner anti-Apartheid activists such as Breyten Breytenbach and André Brink.³⁰

Illustrative of this dynamic are the scenes involving a fictional character named Nkosi, a black South African writer, interacting with white South African writers. In one instance, he arrives at a house party of white progressive anti-Apartheid activist writers but is met outside, immediately evoking an image of segregation and centre/periphery dynamics between white and black intellectuals. Another scene, set at a writers' party in Paris, depicts an exiled Nkosi ecstatic to meet his fellow South African comrade in the struggle, Ingrid Jonker. He celebrates and thanks her for her words and poetry that give voice to the anti-Apartheid movement. Citing from Jonker's most political and famous poem, *Die Kind*, Nkosi appears to suggest that Jonker's expressions better articulate his personal suffering and instigate renewed energy to fight the Apartheid state when he says: 'I am waiting to become the child in your poem, waiting to raise my fist and shout Africa.' Through such scenes, Jonker, along with her fellow Afrikaner anti-Apartheid activist, assumes a much more prominent role in the South African and international anti-Apartheid struggle, overshadowing the contributions of black South African artists like Mazisi Kunene, Sipho Sepamla, or Miriam Makeba.

Furthermore, by portraying Jonker as a central figure in the anti-Apartheid movement, the film adopts the strategy of featuring a white protagonist elucidating the injustices of Apartheid. In doing so, it assumes the role of the intellectual who confronts evil not out of self-interest but due to nobler motivations such as the universality of human rights. MaryEllen Higgins has observed that 'White Western men [or women] as the protagonist who mediate viewers' experiences of events, are not only central to the plot, but their ability to recognize the human rights disasters that they encounter is central to the positioning of the viewer.'³¹ The portrayal of Jonker as a central character not only reinforces the narrative of white innocence but also perpetuates the notion that it is primarily the responsibility of privileged white individuals to recognise and combat societal injustices, thereby overshadowing the agency and contributions of marginalised voices in the struggle against Apartheid.

In *An Act of Defiance*, a moment of lost innocence of the white protagonist is also given some prominence. In the scene depicting Fischer's closing plea at the Rivonia Trial, he recalls his childhood memories of interracial friendships while growing up in rural South Africa. He recounts having had many black South African friends as a child, but explains that he lost this innocence when he was integrated into the formal structures of South African society, particularly through the schooling system, and developed a fear of the 'other.' Fischer concludes in his speech that one night,

overwhelmed by shame after his behaviour at a multiracial student debate in university, he realised that ‘it was I and not the black man who had changed.’³² By including this monologue in the film, the director implies that Fischer did indeed speak these words during the Rivonia trial, directing the audience’s attention towards Fischer as the main mediator of the viewers’ understanding of human rights as well as invoking a narrative of lost innocence destroyed by the Apartheid system. However, in reality, these words were never uttered during the Rivonia Trial. Instead, this monologue originates from Bram Fischer’s own statement from the dock two years after the trial, in 1966, when he was himself on trial for conspiracy to overthrow the government and ultimately served a life sentence. This scene could be interpreted as a classic example of the ‘tragic-hero’ narrative of ‘bad turned good,’ or rather ‘white innocence corrupted’ character development. Nonetheless, it downplays some of the more explicitly postcolonial strategies employed throughout the movie, as it places undue emphasis on Fischer’s personal struggles rather than focusing on the central case at hand—the sentencing of the ‘Rivonia 8’ and its immediate consequences for the continuation of the anti-Apartheid struggle.

However, this one scene does not suffice to categorise the entire film under the ‘bad-turned good’ narrative. This sudden realisation was not an integral part of the character development in the movie. Instead, this decision by Dutch director Jean van de Velde to focus on the retrieval of ‘childish innocence’ as a means to combat racism could be interpreted as a reflection of the post-Apartheid Dutch attitude of forgiveness towards the Afrikaner community and to some extent the prevalent Dutch patronising discourse portraying Afrikaners as the ‘prodigal son’ emerging from their racist delusions and finding their moral compass. Just as ‘the Dutch anti-Apartheid movement was part of an ongoing dialogue with the Afrikaners,’ we can interpret these films as part of an ongoing dialogue between the Dutch and Afrikaners, and a Dutch search for a post-Apartheid reckoning of Afrikaner guilt.³³

In Dialogue with History

Wendy Burke has asserted that cultural representations, particularly in films, inherently fall short of accurately capturing reality or replicating real-life events due to the inevitable passage of time. Instead, the scholarly focus should lie on understanding why such representations are crafted in specific manners.³⁴ Positioning these two films within the broader societal discourses on the Dutch

colonial past and the historical connection between the Dutch and Afrikaners indeed reveals a noteworthy alignment with the anti-hero narrative. The production of two movies about Afrikaner anti-Apartheid activists only a few years apart, clearly fit within the period of a renewed interest in Afrikaans and the Afrikaners in the Netherlands, while at the same time not abandoning the previous public interest in and support for the anti-Apartheid movement in the Netherlands. The anti-hero narrative seems to mirror a broader societal wish to recognise the transformative adoption of a multicultural democracy in South Africa as the moment of epiphany among the Afrikaner people. Indeed through the archetype storyline of ‘bad turned good’, a narrative of forgiveness and absolution is advocated with the underlying message that white racism was something of the past, but now the white community has turned good.

The movies seem to encourage the Dutch, as well as international, audiences to ‘forgive the good white’³⁵ and at the same time condemning the ‘bad white’ as a relic from the past. In particular *Black Butterflies* with its oversimplified good vs. evil narrative seems to advocate this message. Indeed the film was received and praised as a story well worth telling about anti-Apartheid activism, narrating the life of Ingrid Jonker who resisted Apartheid as well as her father, one of its strict executors.³⁶ The reception of *An Act of Defiance*, in Dutch cinema simply titled *Bram Fischer*, the title character was literally hailed by several film critics as a hero.³⁷

Such an interpretation of the colonial and Apartheid past as a closed chapter is one which is heavily criticised by postcolonial thinkers, who aim to make the enduring legacies of such racist regimes visible. Public reception of *Black Butterflies* was in fact more divided when it came out in cinemas in the Netherlands in 2011. Whereas many critics praised the powerful acting, culminating in the win of the Dutch National Film Prize for best Lead Actress in 2011, several film critics and journalists lamented in particular the absence of Afrikaans, with some even calling it ‘a neglect of colour and sound, of the soul of her [Jonker] work.’³⁸ During a time marked by a resurgence in appreciation for Afrikaans as a language of artistic expression, the widespread frustration over its omission from the film can easily be understood in its societal context, and the choice for English as main language in the film interpreted as a failure and capitulation to commercial interests. Some critics furthermore recognised that the film applied oversimplified oppositions to tell the story of Jonker’s life, notably contrasting between ‘daughter versus father, [...] freedom versus captivity, black versus white, love versus indifference.’³⁹ Reducing her life story to that of conflicts in the relational sphere as opposed to understanding her work in light of the more complicated history of

Afrikaners and Apartheid.⁴⁰ Despite the director's aim to teach the audience 'about an era in South Africa that was horrible,' one critic observed that in fact 'In the movie, the political-historical context [of Apartheid] is incidental.'⁴¹ The unwavering ideological stance against Apartheid of the art collective the *Sestigers*, as well as their bohemian camaraderie, as depicted in the movies, also received some scorn, with one critic stating: 'The portrayal of the South African literary world in the 1960s struck me as a romanticized fantasy, as readers hope writers and poets interact.'⁴²

Curiously, the scene that most clearly deviates from 'historical reality,' and depicts one of the most memorable events in the anti-Apartheid movements, the Sharpeville Massacre, received mostly praise and justification from film critics. In this scene Ingrid Jonker and Jack Cole are seen driving through Nyanga, a township for black South Africans in Cape Town, to deliver a message to the brother of Nkosi. On the way they see protesters gathering in the streets. Ingrid asks: 'What is going on.' Jack Cole replies: 'They are protesting against the pass law.' Both Cole and Jonker are then shown to witness the historical event which came to be known as the Sharpeville massacre of March 1960, during which the police shot at unarmed protesters in several townships across the country including Sharpeville, near Johannesburg, and Langa and Nyanga near Cape Town. In reality, Ingrid never set foot in Nyanga nor Sharpeville, and can't have seen a little boy being shot by the police. Instead, she read about the pass law protests in the newspapers. Director Paula van Oest has said about this free interpretation of the historical reality that:

The reason why I placed Ingrid there [in Nyanga], was that I wanted to show what it was like, in the townships, how the police acted, and how desperate the black population was. You need to feel that, just like Ingrid Jonker had felt that, she lived in that country.⁴³

As few images were taken of the Sharpeville Massacre, and in particular the massacres in townships near Cape Town, the scene reproduces several iconic images of another protest march from the anti-Apartheid movement, the Soweto uprising of 1976 and to some extent recreating Sam Nzima's iconic photo of Hector Pieterse's death. As such the movie does deliver on making the invisible more visible for the Dutch as well as international audience. Yet, by positioning Jonker as an ignorant and seemingly 'innocent' bystander in this scene, the power of this scene is reduced to one in which the institutionalised racist segregation and violence of the Apartheid state is again presented as something separate, irrational and invisible for the white liberal anti-racist activist,

thereby deflecting critical reflection of the shared responsibility of both those whites who actively participated in the regime and those who voiced criticism of the regime but nevertheless benefitted directly and indirectly from the system.

Pierre Sorlin has noted that while cinematic images of the past do not constitute reality, nor do they promise to be, they nevertheless serve as our primary means of interacting with and understanding reality. Societies' perception of events and historical individuals is shaped by these images.⁴⁴ In light of this, the portrayal of characters like Jonker as innocent bystanders, can be seen as dangerous as it undermines the acknowledgment of the complicity and responsibility of all members of society, including those who may outwardly oppose systems of oppression but still benefit from them. The embellishment of historical reality in *Black Butterflies* was met with mixed reception among Dutch film critics. While some questioned the accuracy and usefulness of portraying Ingrid Jonker as an eyewitness to the Sharpeville and Nyanga massacre, others approved of the choice for such dramatisation to highlight the societal backdrop that influenced her artistic expressions.⁴⁵ This cinematic approach aimed to foster greater awareness of Apartheid and its atrocities among Dutch audiences, albeit at the expense of strict adherence to historical fact, seems to have mostly been understood as a framework to position Jonker as a clear anti-racist hero. As such, this most important scene showing the extent of violence of the Apartheid state might have been useful in making certain historical events more visible, yet it obscured the complicity of both active participants and passive beneficiaries of the Apartheid regime and as such failed in reinforcing the need for a deeper examination of white responsibility and privilege within the system.

An Act of Defiance did much better in terms of film critics appreciation for the movie's historical 'accuracy.' The movie was described as 'historically accurate' and 'solid (...) meticulously composed (...) the historical reality comes to life perfectly.'⁴⁶ Director Jean van de Velde emphasised the sense of importance he felt of capturing the historical events surrounding the Rivonia trial faithfully, expressing his fascination with the selflessness exhibited by individuals who risked everything for the rights of others, contrasting it with contemporary political movements often driven by self-interest. In an interview at the movie festival *Movies that Matter*, he was quoted saying: 'Behind the figure of Mandela lies a whole history, and a large group of people who supported him. Each of these people deserves a film (...)'⁴⁷ Through this lens, Van de Velde underscored the crucial role of historical films in conveying significant narratives from the past, utilising them to convey a compelling societal message. Similarly, South African film producer Michael Joseph-Hayes Auret celebrated the film as a

depiction of a man who ‘chose to sacrifice himself to defend those on trial, and help with others to get what we have today [i.e., democracy],’ situating the story as not only one of self-sacrifice but also as a foundational tale of modern democratic South Africa.⁴⁸ These remarks echo Robert Rosenstone’s early observation that film possesses a unique ability to ‘tell stories that situate us meaningfully in a value-laden world,’ emphasising the medium’s capacity to convey narratives that resonate deeply with audiences.⁴⁹

Conclusion

Both films delve into the narratives of white activists, risking the perpetuation of a colonial narrative portraying white protagonists as saviours or heroes, a common trope in Apartheid-themed movies. *Black Butterflies* employs narrative strategies that reinforce notions of white innocence and present Jonker as a white saviour, simplifying complex race relations into a narrative of individual triumph. In contrast, *An Act of Defiance* avoids this trope by focusing on a single event in Bram Fischer’s life—the Rivonia Trial—presenting him in service of a broader anti-Apartheid movement and highlighting the collective struggle against Apartheid. This approach encourages viewers to empathise not only with Fischer but also with the accused, such as Mandela and Sisulu, who faced the death penalty. Consequently, *An Act of Defiance* aligns more closely with postcolonial discourse, which was gaining prominence in the Netherlands at the time of its production. These contrasting approaches reflect broader societal attitudes towards reconciliation and accountability.

The cinematic representations of Apartheid history in the films *Black Butterflies* and *An Act of Defiance* offer valuable insights into how Dutch society has grappled with its historical connections with South Africa, particularly in relation to the Afrikaner community, and the broader discourse on colonialism and racism. These films, produced in the second decade of the twenty-first century, are products of societal developments, including a renewed interest in Afrikaners and Afrikaans language since 1994 and discussions about postcoloniality and racism emerging in the new millennium.

Through the lens of biographical narratives in historical films, we witness the intricate portrayal of historical figures such as Ingrid Jonker and Bram Fischer, whose lives intersect with the turbulent socio-political landscape of South Africa during the Apartheid era. While *Black Butterflies* focuses predominantly on personal relationships and individual struggles against oppression, *An Act of Defiance* delves deeper into the societal and political implications of anti-Apartheid activism.

Both films navigate the complexities of race, identity, and morality, challenging conventional narratives of heroism and victimhood. Moreover, the portrayal of white protagonists in these films reflects broader societal attitudes towards reconciliation and accountability. While *Black Butterflies* tends to reinforce a narrative of white innocence and redemption, *An Act of Defiance* offers a more nuanced exploration of white privilege and complicity in systemic oppression. The divergent approaches taken by these films underscore the ongoing dialogue within Dutch society regarding its colonial past and its relationship with the Afrikaner community.

Critiques of these films highlight the complexities of representation and the dangers of oversimplifying historical narratives. While both films contribute to the understanding of Apartheid history, they also face scrutiny for their selective portrayal of events and characters. The absence of Afrikaans in *Black Butterflies* and the romanticised depiction of the anti-Apartheid movement in both films are notable points of contention, reflecting broader debates about cultural imperialism and historical accuracy.

In essence, the cinematic representations of Apartheid history in *Black Butterflies* and *An Act of Defiance* serve as valuable reflections of Dutch society's evolving relationship with the legacies of its colonial past and its engagement with issues of race and identity. These films invite audiences to critically reflect on historical legacies and challenge prevailing narratives of heroism and victimhood, ultimately contributing to a more nuanced understanding of the complexities of Apartheid-era South Africa.

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