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"De Voortrekkers" (1916): Some Stereotypes and Narrative Conventions

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De Voortrekkers was the first of five expensive film epics produced by African Film Productions between 1916 and 1922.¹ With these films, and with a number of less expensive productions, the young company sought to secure a place in the international film market, an ideal which never quite materialized.²

Harold Shaw was brought out from London to direct the film and the Afrikaans historian and writer Gustav S. Preller was commissioned to write the screenplay and to see to the historical accuracy of costumes and settings

It is probably not entirely accidental that De Voortrekkers is the only one of all the early South African feature films still available for study.³ Of all African Film Productions' early films it seems to have been the biggest commercial success both abroad and locally. But it was more than just a commercial success. Besides having an initial record-breaking three week run at the Johannesburg Palladium, it was to become a regular feature at Day of the Covenant celebrations every year for at least three decades.⁴ Dr. Thelma Gutsche in her study of the history of motion pictures in South Africa notes that in 1938:

De Voortrekkers (now twenty years old, silent, jerky and antiquated) was shown extensively in the Transvaal and particularly along the Reef where it played to thousands of people even more enthusiastic than its original audiences. At Germiston, crowds numbering 1 100 waiting for the fifth performance of the film caused serious disturbance by rushing the doors of the Apollo Cinema, bursting in and knocking over the manager and attendants. The police had to be called and order was not restored until queues were formed. In subsequent years, the showing of the English They Built a Nation and the Afrikaans Die Bou van 'n Nasie (both talkies) as well as the amateur production 'n Nasie hou Koers failed to break the hold of this remarkable national film which, forgotten throughout the year, punctually appeared on the 16th December and played to packed audiences.

(Gutsche, 1972, p.316)

In this paper some of the narrative conventions at work in this rendering of history will be discussed. Without going into the complexities associated with the concepts of 'type' or 'genre', and simply assuming that one recognizes a film as belonging to a certain type (on such grounds as iconography, structure and theme) De Voortrekkers will be looked at as an epic.

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Structure of the Epic

The epic is an expansive form. Every epic usually contains a number of different narrative styles, but there is almost always close attention to realistic detail. It often deals with history, and in doing so, it often explains a society's own social contract with God, as well as the origin of the social structure, the validity of certain norms, and other such matters that are of central importance to a community's faith in and concept of its identity (Frye, 1957)

In film, the epic is usually also long, spectacular and obviously expensive. Big casts, spectacular costumes, impressive and usually pyrotechnic decor and the like are part of the iconography of the epic and visible proof that a lot of money has been spent on the production of the film! Early film epics were also permeated with the conventions of popular melodrama and with evidence of a crude faith in visual realism.

De Voortrekkers contains most of these elements. It has a cast of thousands; numerous crowd scenes; burning ox-wagons; realistic costumes and settings etc. It also contains various narrative styles, while historical documents such as the treaty between Retief and Dingaan are an integral part of the film's structure. And the film indeed illustrates a special contract between God and the Voortrekkers. With the inclusion of the treaty between Retief and Dingaan and of the text of the Covenant⁵, the film attempts to place both God and justice on the side of the Trekkers, and so to explain - in so far as black and white are concerned - the contemporary social structure and division of land.

The film thus takes an epic story form which has been well-known at least since Old Testament times: a persecuted group, confronted by a powerful tyrant, is supported by God and gains a victory that will have substantial historical significance. As such it is a story about the birth of a society. The society finds its identity in opposing the powerful villain, who almost by definition is a force outside that society.

In De Voortrekkers there are two villains:

1. The two Portuguese traders, two conventional melodramatic villains and Dingaan, the real villain, who is verbally and visually identified with a powerful and possibly dangerous animal, the elephant.

There might conceivably have been a third villain: the British colonial government, whose policies are conventionally given as one of the reasons for the Great Trek. For a very long period, Britain and her representatives in Southern Africa have been a major force against whom the Voortrekkers and later the Boers defended and identified themselves. And in his historical study of Piet Retief, Gustav Preller concludes that the utterances of British representatives at Port Natal and their hostile views of the Trekkers at least contributed to Dingaan's decision to murder Retief and his followers. This view was formulated almost a decade before Preller wrote the script for De Voortrekkers, but it was reiterated (in the face of arguments to the contrary) in editions after the completion of his screenplay (Preller, 1916 and 1920, p. iv and pp. 329-344).

But it is perhaps relevant that De Voortrekkers was produced by African Film Productions, a company controlled by English money, and directed by Harold Shaw, a British director. That African Film Productions was not anti-colonial, however, is clear from their early publicity material, as well as from a film such as Symbol of Sacrifice, the company's second big epic. This film, dealing with the Zulu wars of the 1880's and with the death in battle of the Prince Imperial, portrays the British flag as a worthy symbol for which one may sacrifice one's life.

Thus the two trader-villains in De Voortrekkers are not English, as one might have expected, but Portuguese. And while it is briefly mentioned that Retief left the Cape Colony because of bad administration, the government responsible for that administration or the precise nature of the grievances are not referred to. The film ends on a note of victory, without any mention that Britain annexed the new Republic (of Natal) shortly afterwards. The kindhearted missionary, the Reverend Owen, figures as the only trace of the British presence in Southern Africa.

Of course, one might imagine that the very mention of villains functioning within a conventional narrative structure would have bothered members of the audience who watched the film during the Day of the Covenant premiere at Krugersdorp or during its record-breaking run at the Johannesburg Palladium immediately afterwards. In almost all the early references to the film - from that in the publicity material to that made by Gen. Louis Botha, the then Prime Minister, and other politicians - the historical accuracy of the picture is mentioned.

Yet if the film seems now much less historically accurate, it is probably not because of obvious errors, such as the cleft-stick runners or the horses and cart on trek, or even because of assumptions of truth which have since been challenged (the text of the Covenant, for example). It is perhaps rather because the narrative conventions, and the values implied by those conventions, have to some extent become dated. And because they have become dated, we are more aware that we are looking, not at history, but at a story-shaped historical interpretation. This applies especially to our reading of the various subordinate plots, especially when seen in the light of contemporary comment(6)

Someone without any knowledge of the historical facts upon which the film is based, might conceivably be led to think that the death of Retief and his men was the result of the evil machinations of two dishonest traders who persuaded Dingaan to kill them. For this is what happens in the film: the two traders, fearing that the Trekkers might expose their exploitation of the Zulu's, rush off to Dingaan, supply him with liquor, and then persuade him to deal firmly with the Trekkers. Hidden within Dingaan's hut they follow the negotiations between the Zulu chief and Retief, and hear his command to have the Trekkers killed.

Popular Melodrama

All this is part of a very conventional melodramatic conspiracy. Other elements in the film's narrative also fall within the conventions of popular melodrama. These are:

First, one of the typical structures of melodrama at the time that De Voortrekkers was made, was that of the virginal heroine, the virtuous hero and the wicked villain who threatens to seduce the heroine.

In De Voortrekkers Johanna Landman, daughter of one of the prominent Trekkers, figures as heroine. Early in the film the two Portuguese traders, Perreira and Diaz, visit her father. They are described as 'ongebooide gaste' (unwelcome guests), and their dark hair, eyes and mustaches are immediately recognized as indices of villainy. While the one talks with the father, the other moves in close to the daughter, invading her proxemic territory. He takes her to a bench on the stoep and immediately tries to hold her hand, that is, threatens her with seduction, the worst possible crime that can be perpetrated against a virtuous heroine. She declines to take his hand and before he can make any further moves she is saved by the arrival of a letter from the hero, Jan Faber, son of the Trekker Willem Faber.

Later in the film the heroine is twice saved by her young hero. Once, while crossing the Great River - a trial of strength and symbolic rite of passage for the Trekkers - and later again, when Dingaan's impi's attack the Voortrekkers at Bloukrans. In the course of the film, various short scenes show the flourishing romance between the hero and heroine. The very last shot in the film is a shot of them in the Covenant church with a baby between them, indicating not only the ultimate reward for a virtuous hero and heroine, but serving also as a symbol for the new society whose birth has been witnessed in the course of the film.

Second, another very popular component in early melodrama was that of the revenge. In De Voortrekkers, initially, the battle of Blood River is depicted as a proper revenge for the murder of Retief and the Trekkers at Bloukrans, and especially, Sobhuza avenges his previous humiliation by killing Dingaan. Finally, although it is not so much a matter of revenge, the deaths of the two Portuguese conspirators satisfy a similar expectation.

First, in order to create the suspense proper to melodrama, historical time of more than ten months and travels over more than a thousand miles, are telescoped into one continuous action in the film. This is sometimes done verbally, as when the two Portuguese traders race to beat the Trekkers to Dingaan's kraal ('As ons nou vertrek, is ons voor die Boere by Dingaan se kraal'). But more often it is done by means of editing techniques that had been exploited with a fair amount of sophistication by, among others, D.W. Griffith.

This is not the place to deal with these editing techniques in any depth. It need only be pointed out that there is constant cross-cutting between the different groups: the Trekkers; the traders; Dingaan; Sobhuza; and so forth. For example, just before the murder of Retief and his men the sequence of shots are as follows: Owen and the other missionaries leave/Dingaan/impis's/Portuguese traders in Dingaan's hut, listening/impis's/Voortrekkers/Retief/impis's/traders/Retief and son/traders/impis's ... and so on.

In reality, Andries Pretorius arrived in Natal almost a year after the death of Retief. In the film the editing creates a continuous tension as the impis's and Sobhuza both race towards Bloukrans, where the remaining Trekkers are surprised. After the attack there are two shots of Jan Faber at the house of Andries Pretorius, then shots of cleft-stick runners carrying messages to Pretorius' neighbours. Then follow shots of heavily bandaged Voortrekkers at Bloukrans; Sobhuza with his ear to the ground and pointing towards the horizon; and then Pretorius and his commando galloping over the horizon to rescue the Trekkers.

A fourth typical melodramatic structure present in *De Voortrekkers* concerns the idea that God's providence or some other benevolent moral principle is directly at work in ordering the lives of the characters. This ties in with the epic structure where a story is used to explain and illustrate a society's social contact with God. The point about this kind of narrative structure is that God, or the benevolent moral principle, is seen to endorse the social values implied by appearances and actions of the heroes and heroines. These values of course contrast with those implied in the appearances and actions of the villains.

In *De Voortrekkers* Protestant Christianity, democracy, family life, honesty and idealism are set against barbarism and Catholicism, authoritarianism, egocentricity, dishonesty and greed.

There are four groups of characters in the film: (1) the Trekkers and the missionaries, who are White, Protestant, honest, loyal, concerned with good-will of their families and of society; (2) Dingaan and his tribe, who are Black, bloodthirsty, and barbaric; (3) the traders, who are dishonest opportunists, White and Catholic; and (4) Sobhuza, who is converted to Protestant Christianity and accepted as a servant and ally of the Trekkers. The fundamental distinction in this grouping, then, seems to be that between (Protestant) Christianity and barbarism. Protestant Christianity serves as an index for civilized values, which are depicted as morally superior to those of barbarism.

In the eyes of the Trekkers and of the missionaries, then, a Black savage can transcend his savage status only by adopting the White man's religion and his framework of law and order. It is tempting to offer, as an analogy, Trekkers attitudes to wild and tame animals. In the main, wild animals are dangerous, whereas tame ones are useful in a number of ways. But this analogy would not be quite justified, for although domesticated animals (oxen, horses, etc.) are shown - like the Black servants - to share in the struggle of the Trek, there are no hunting scenes to establish a definite attitude toward wild animals.

Some specific instances where oppositional values are implied are the following:

1. Protestant Christianity versus barbarism and Catholicism

Protestant Christianity is shown to be an integral part of the lives of the Trekkers and a force behind their democratic ideals in their politics. Retief states, in a declaration of policy before leaving for the North, that they are "Godvresend" (God-fearing). When he is elected leader of the Voortrekkers, the Reverend Erasmus Smit is at his side, while a Bible is prominently displayed on the table in front of them. Before Blood River they make a Covenant with God. Afterwards, at Bloukrans, they thank Him for the victory which he awarded to them. The last shots of the film are of the Voortrekkers attending a service in the church that they promised to build.

By contrast, Dingaan recognizes no God other than himself; and the two traders are shown to cross themselves (an index of Catholicism) in Dingaan's hut when they overhear the Zulu chief's order for the killing of Retief and his men.

2. Democracy versus authoritarianism

As *de Voortrekkers* is largely an epic about the political aspirations of a group of people, it is natural that political aspirations should play a central role in the film. These ideals are directly stated in the opening shots: the subtitles inform the viewer that Retief, "moedeloos en ontevrede met die slegte regering" (discouraged and dissatisfied with the wicked government) decided to lead the Trek to the "onbekende Noorde, waar hulle grond wou koop van die kaffers, om 'n Vrye Republiek te stig" (unknown North, where they would buy land from the kaffirs, to establish a Free Republic). Then Retief addresses his people: "Ons Volk is Godvresend. Ons sal eerlik handel met die inboorlinge en grond koop vir 'n modelstaat..." (Our nation is God-fearing. We will deal fairly with the natives and buy land for a model state).

The ideal of the model state is also affirmed by some of the other Trekkers, and it is also implied in their actions. Thus Retief is shown to be the democratically elected leader of the Voortrekkers. Both he and Pretorius are seen at various times to be shaking hands with all the other men, including the young ones. And at Dingaan's kraal all the men (with the exception of two small boys) sign the treaty with the Zulu chief, and so forth.

In contrast, Dingaan is clearly shown to be an autocratic ruler. He is shown several times giving orders. He is depicted resting on the backs of two wives while he is having his food. He arbitrarily decides to have people executed on different occasions, among them his own son and, of course, Piet Retief and the other Trekkers.

3. Family life versus egocentricity

Three Voortrekker families are sympathetically introduced to the viewer: those of Piet Retief, Karel Landman and Willem Faber. At all times the family members show concern for one another. The parents take pride in their children; the children show respect towards their parents. The film ends with a shot of a fourth family: Jan and Johanna Faber, with their young baby.

In contrast, Dingaan deliberately murders his own children, while the two traders have no family attachments. The one trader features briefly in the role of (potential) seducer. It would seem that the trader's 'dishonest' intentions towards the fair Johanna, and the prominent display of Dingaan's regiment of wives, hints at sexual perversity if the actions of the Trekkers and the missionaries are to be accepted as the norm.

In addition to these oppositions, various complementary oppositions are implied. For example, the Voortrekkers are honest and loyal to their ideal of a model state, while the lives of Dingaan and of the traders are shown to be directed by greed for power and money respectively.

It would seem that the initial popularity of De Voortrekkers may at least be partly explained in terms of the film's combination of a fair amount of realistic, historical detail with popular story conventions and with stereotypes believed by the majority of its potential public (which would mainly be contemporary Afrikaners, but also the Anglo-Saxon public in South Africa, Britain, Australia, New Zealand etc.).

The world of De Voortrekkers would probably have been much more symmetrically contained had it not been for two conflicting claims: the need, in terms of the revenge structure of the story, for a character to kill the villain; and the need, in terms of the film's claims on historical accuracy, for a Black character to revenge the death of Retief by killing Dingaan.

There seems to be little historical evidence for the character of Sobhuza other than the fact that some unknown Black man probably killed Dingaan (8). Sobhuza's role in the film stems from the demands of popular story conventions, rather than from historical fact. These conventions demand that the villain should eventually die, especially if he and his villainy have been prominently displayed in the course of the film (the only exception being films which form part of a series which will allow a fascinating villain to appear again).

Since claims to historical truth prevented a scene where the Trekkers kill Dingaan, a Black character had to be created for this purpose. And in order to make the death of Dingaan significant in terms of the structure of the film, the chosen character had to align himself with the Voortrekkers. He also had to identify with the framework of values of the Voortrekkers. Only then will his action be not only revenge for the death of Retief, but a clear moral victory as well, evidence of the superiority of their set of values.

Sobhuza is thus converted. When, as a result of his conversion to Christianity, he refuses to kill an old woman and child, Dingaan humiliates and symbolically emasculates him by taking his assegai away. When Sobhuza cannot survive in the wilderness (in which he grew up), he is 'rescued' by the Voortrekkers and gratefully accepts Retief as his new leader. But this does not restore him to his former role as a man a warrior. He remains emasculated, in the role of a woman, preparing food for the men/warriors. (And that this is indeed a woman's role is innocently borne out in the film in scenes such as the one where Dingaan has his meal or when the Reverend Owen's wife cooks for the two visiting missionaries)..

Yet for Sobhuza to fulfil his role in terms of the narrative structure, he must - temporarily - revert back to his earlier role of Zulu warrior. This he does, and kills Dingaan after a long search.

In the end, Sobhuza is once again converted to a Western way of life, and is seen sitting outside the church where the Voortrekkers are congregated. From those stairs just outside the church building he follows the sermon earnestly, emphasising phrases with a nod of his head.

That all these conversions are hardly credible in terms of the film's claim to realism, is implicitly acknowledged in the movie itself. Sobhuza is cast as

one of the conventional stock characters of melodrama: the benevolent comic. The claims of reality are thus met, or smoothed over - depending on one's point of view - by reference to a conventional and popular narrative device.

Conclusion

De Voortrekkers seems to have differed in some essential aspects from the other early epics made by African Film Productions. A closer investigation of these differences (relying on scripts and of fragments of film available) should reveal more information on the institutional framework of the South African film industry and the composition of its audiences during those years.

The most popular of those early epics, De Voortrekkers helped to establish a pattern for the interpretation and manipulation of history in later epics such as Die Bou van 'n Nasie/The Building of a Nation (1938, commissioned by the government) and Doodkry is Min (1961, commissioned by the FAK).

A departure from this pattern occurred in Sven Persson's Land Apart (1973), film wherein the interpretation of history is not radically different from that of the earlier films, but where a concern for the future is substituted for a concern for the past. Land Apart did not have a favourable reception: it was banned, and when it appeared later after extensive cuts and alterations as The South Africans (1976), it was not distributed by any of the major distributors.

A comparison of all these epics may well provide an insight into various controversial aspects of the institutional world of film in South Africa.

References

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Notes

1. De Voortrekkers was distributed abroad under the alternative title of Winning a Continent. The film was directed by Harold Shaw, a well known producer for Vitagraph and London Films. The script was written by Gustav Preller. The film lasted almost two hours and cost R40 000 to produce. AFP's other four epics from this period were Symbol of Sacrifice (1918, R60 000); King Solomon's Mines (1918, R28 000); Allan Quatermain (1919, R34 000); and Swallow (1922, R46 000).
2. To ensure international distribution the company had offices or agents in a number of cities abroad, among them London, New York, Sydney, Calcutta and Bombay.
3. The existing fragments from Symbol of Sacrifice, King Solomon's Mines and Copper Mask will probably be fully restored by the National Film Archives in years to come.
4. The year of the Voortrekker centenary celebrations.
5. That is the assumed text - there is no documentary proof of the exact wording.
6. Among those quoted in the Stage and Cinema of 2nd December, 1916:

Louis Botha, Prime Minister of the Union of South Africa:

Producer and author are both to be congratulated on the completion of a great picture - a film of tense dramatic interest and fine historical accuracy, which few of the children of the Voortrekkers will ever view without a tear. To the world it will give a better conception of our stirring story, and the youth of our country it ought to inspire with greater reverence for that historic past.

H.C. van Heerden, Cabinet Minister:

The film is perfect from every point of view ... All who see it will now be able to follow the exact history of the Voortrekkers...

H. Mentz, Cabinet Minister:

... I wish that every child, of an age to appreciate the historical and moral precepts it contains, could see it ... In other respects I feel that, if one sat next to one's deadliest political enemy when viewing this great picture, one would feel constrained to grasp his hand, and say: "My friend here we meet on common ground. Let us both try to win more of it, which those who come after us may love equally well.

H.S. Bosman, pastor of Dutch Reformed Church:

It is a grand, magnificent picture. Personally, I wish that every child in South Africa may see it. It depicts the history of the period in a very realistic manner, and there is nothing in it to offend the susceptibilities of any section of the community.

S.B. Joel:

I have seen The Birth of a Nation, and I think De Voortrekkers is a greater film ... It portrays the history of those stirring times in a manner that grips ... its educational advantages are enormous.

7. Their democracy is, of course, limited: it does not extend towards the women or the Black servants among them. Neither group is represented at the political meetings.
 8. Dingaan was probably killed by a small tribe, the Nyaaos. Earlier it was thought that he was killed by the Swazi's, and that is probably where Sobhuza's name came from (sobhuza being the name of the contemporary Swazi leader). The makers of the film evidently have been less concerned with historical accuracy in these instances
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