

## HISTORY IN WHITE AND BLACK: EUZHAN PALCY'S *A DRY WHITE SEASON*

CHRYSAVGI PAPAGIANNI

The desire to be a director came out of rage. I loved film since I was a little girl. But every time I saw an American film with Black people getting kicked in the backside or dancing and singing and with white eyes rolling — that would make me so mad. I was mad.... But I told myself to stop complaining and do something about it. So I said, 'I want to be a filmmaker. I want to show these people that we can do it, that we can be different'.

Euzhan Palcy (Glicksman, 'Tempest: Euzhan Palcy's *Dry White Season*' 66)

'What does it mean for women to decide to enter the production of mainstream culture?' asks film critic and filmmaker Michelle Citron (45). Feminist critic Christina Lane in her *Feminist Hollywood: From Born in Flames to Point Break*, argues that when women 'enter the Hollywood industry, which has traditionally functioned as a male institution, inevitably (though sometimes subconsciously) confront the question of whether or not to reclaim...[Hollywood's] male vision' (11). To extend Lane's argument, for women directors of colour the dilemma does not simply refer to the reclaiming of the 'male vision' but also of the white one. This is the dilemma that Euzhan Palcy seems to have faced while directing *A Dry White Season*, the first major studio film to be directed by a black woman. Based on Andre Brink's 1979 novel of the same title, Palcy's film, released in 1989, focuses on apartheid and the violent repression of black resistance against it. The protagonist, Ben DuToit, a white, high school history teacher, comes face to face with the horrors of the inhumane regime and as a result he undergoes a transformation that leads him to fight for the rights of black people in South Africa and eventually to lose his life.

In an interview with Joan and Dennis West, Palcy talks about the challenges and difficulties she had to face while working for Hollywood. She admits that even though her gender and colour have not been a problem the subject matter of her film has often been, since her intention

was to talk about black people to a white audience (1199). As she explains,

I can take a project featuring black people to Hollywood, but they would prefer a white lead with black as secondary characters; or they try to make me create a white sister or a white brother for the lead character just to give them, as they say, ‘something to sell to the white audience’. (1199)

This is exactly what happened with *A Dry White Season*. Palty knew that her wish to make a film about black history and more specifically about the uprisings in Soweto would not be welcomed unconditionally since ‘no producer in the States would put one penny into a Black story’ (qtd in Southgate 31). As she explains in her interview with Marlaine Glicksman, it took her no time to understand that the people who ‘have the money, the power to say “Okay”, are white and don’t give a damn about apartheid and so will never put one dollar into it. For them black is not commercial except as comedy’ (65).<sup>1</sup> Thus, to make her film more commercial Palty chose a story with a white protagonist even though she wanted to tell a story about black people. The question, of course, is whether through this compromise Palty essentially reproduced or not Hollywood’s predominantly white, male vision.

Obviously, Palty’s attempt to make a film with wide distribution can be easily interpreted as selling out to Hollywood’s demands. For instance, critic Victoria Carchidi in ‘South Africa From Text to Film: *Cry Freedom* and *A Dry White Season*’ has complained that ‘the film concentrates on DuToit’s discovery of apartheid horrors, and the need for him to find an audience’ (54). Although we cannot deny that the film appears at first sight to be a story of character development, essentially a *Bildungsroman*, as is also the case with the novel, yet I argue that Palty ultimately manages to include an equally valid and strong black perspective alongside DuToit’s white one by shifting the novel’s emphasis to promote her own agenda. The shifts of emphasis she performs add a black feminist perspective to the narrative which undercuts ‘from within’ Hollywood’s white, male vision. Naturally, at first sight it may seem erroneous to claim that there is a feminist vein in the film given its male protagonist. However, Palty’s interest in race and her portrayal of black life and history align her with what Nancy Caraway describes in *Segregated Sisterhood* as the key concerns of black feminism which, unlike white feminism, is interested in establishing a ‘connection with a broader global community’ (Durham

160). It is noteworthy that bell hooks has praised the film and pointed out that DuToit's dismissal of white patriarchy draws attention to the connection between race and gender, between power and sexuality (361). Her appraisal can be regarded as an indication that the film does indeed reflect the concerns of black feminism and thus cannot promote Hollywood's vision.

Palcy also acknowledges the film's disruptive quality despite the concessions she had to make. As she argues, 'the way I made the film and wrote the script I didn't make it a white man's story. We have also a very strong black presence along with the white man' and that is why people should not 'perceive this simply as a white man's story at all' (qtd in Leslie 42). Instead, they should perceive it as 'a story about people in South Africa. You have a black family and a white family' (Glicksman 66). Several critics seem to agree with Palcy that the film projects an equally strong black perspective since it focuses on several characters simultaneously and makes their stories equally important, something that is not true of Brink's novel (see Southgate, Leslie 43, Glicksman 66). The story of the Ngubene family, for example, is central in the narrative since it is their deaths that trigger DuToit's transformation and provide some of the most dramatic moments in the film. It is also their deaths that expose the brutal reality of apartheid and underline the need for justice and action. We even come to see what happens to Gordon's wife, Emily, and their children after Gordon's death. Their violent removal from their house by the police and their abandonment in the Zululand desert to fend for themselves is not in the book. Unlike Brink, then, Palcy finds the life of her black characters as important as DuToit's, and she shows this by granting them narrative space and attention.

In order to enhance the film's black perspective and thus offset the centrality of the white protagonist, Palcy chose her actors very carefully (Leslie 43). More specifically, she selected South African actors to depict the blacks in the film. Ntshona as Gordon is a man of great dignity and courage who works hard to provide for his family. He does not hesitate to confront the inhumane regime, and he loses his life as a result when his son disappears. As Palcy says, 'it was important to see Gordon as a family man...a well-respected man in his community in Soweto, just as Ben was well-respected in Johannesburg' (qtd in Leslie 42-43). Indeed, Palcy is successful as it is hard not to sympathise and even identify with his efforts as a father to discover the truth about his son's death and retrieve his body, efforts which lead to his arrest, the inhumane torture in the prison cell, and eventually his death.

Gordon's noble determination underlines the strength of his character. Palcy makes sure that we perceive him as strong from the very

beginning. For instance, in the film's opening scenes we see him discussing with DuToit and informing him that his son has been arrested. It is noteworthy that when DuToit asks Gordon why he did not come to tell him immediately, the latter looks DuToit directly in the eyes and says: 'I am telling you now'. In her interview with Glicksman, Palty talks about the strength of her black characters (66) and brings this scene between Gordon and DuToit as an example.

The strength and dignity of black people in *A Dry White Season* actually set it apart from other, contemporary films about apartheid such as Chris Minge's *A World Apart* (1987) and Richard Attenborough's *Cry Freedom* (1987).<sup>2</sup> As Glicksman observes, black people in *A Dry White Season* are 'neither leaders and intellectuals, like Steven Biko, nor the usual house help. Nor are they silent or symbolic faces' as is the case in Minge's and Attenborough's films (65). Instead they are very dynamic and active, like Gordon and like Stanley, the black taxi driver, played by Zakes Mokae, who also has a very strong presence in the film. After Gordon's death he is the one who initiates DuToit into the secrets of black resistance and gradually raises his awareness of the horrors of apartheid. To be more specific, it is with his help that DuToit has access to Gordon's dead body, an event that becomes a turning point in DuToit's life. Indeed, although he has been exposed to various pieces of evidence up to that point, the real climax, the turning point in his transformation is when he sees Gordon's tortured body. From that point onwards, DuToit undertakes with the help of Stanley the difficult task of exposing the injustices of the regime.

Even though Stanley functions for the most part as DuToit's guide and protector he is the one who kills Captain Stolz, the evil representative of the monstrous regime, and thus becomes an 'avenging angel' who 'administers justice and channels emotional and political release on behalf of the audience' (Kolokotroni and Taxidou 50). In fact, one could further argue that more than an 'avenging angel' Stanley appears in the end almost as the film's protagonist, if we take into consideration how traditionally it is the protagonist that triggers these feelings of release, the so-called 'catharsis'. The fact that Brink's novel ends with DuToit's death whereas the film associates Stanley with the real resolution is very important, as it shows how the film is interested in telling more than just DuToit's story; it is interested in making a political statement about apartheid and about the importance of resistance. As Palty puts it, what the film advocates is that black people 'have no alternative other than to fight back. At the end, it's a black struggle' (Glicksman 69). The fact that *A Dry White Season* was initially banned in South Africa, even though Brink's novel had already been published

and widely read in the country, shows that Palty's interventions in the novel, subtle though they may appear, were effective enough to disturb the apartheid regime.

Apart from the addition of Stolz's death, another important intervention Palty makes is the omission of the novel's white narrator. Such a choice is important because the presence of the narrator adds 'to the pervasiveness of the white mediation of the story' (Kolokotroni and Taxidou 40). Hence, Palty keeps the white protagonist because she has no choice but opts to leave out the journalist–narrator, reducing in this way the dominance of the white point of view and allowing for the inclusion of more voices, more viewpoints. Overall, if we compare again Palty's film with Menge's and Attenborough's films, we could argue that Palty is careful not to underrate her black characters for the sake of the white ones. That is why *Cry Freedom* and *A World Apart* 'were widely criticized, in contrast to Palty's film, for what Shickel calls the "practice [of] unconscious apartheid", that is the privileging of white protagonists at the expense of blacks' (Durham 159).

Another important revision is Palty's decision to omit the erotic element from DuToit's and Melanie's relationship. Indeed, in Brink's novel the two have an affair which actually occupies a central place in the narration. At one point, DuToit claims that it is this relationship that actually makes it meaningful for him to risk everything (272). As a result of this affair, he loses his job and his family whereas in the film the losses he experiences are a result of his political activism against apartheid, a fact that moves the emphasis in the film 'from the personal and the individual to the political...from relationships between men and women to those between blacks and whites' (Durham 159). Obviously then, the omission of the love story was a conscious choice on the part of the director, a choice for which she had to fight. Palty herself explains how Warner Bros., the studio that had initially agreed to finance the film, 'were more interested in a love story' and that is why they 'wanted a Robert Redford or a Paul Newman to play the lead' (qtd in Johnson 58). Nevertheless, Palty was far from interested in turning the film into a love story in order to make it more appealing to the audience. Determined not to make further concessions and thus compromise her project, she disagreed with casting someone like Redford or Newman knowing that 'their presence is so great that they can overshadow what you're trying to create'. Instead, she insisted on Donald Sutherland who, as she explains, 'was perfect because he is a great character actor' (qtd in Southgate). As a result, she managed to keep the focus on the history of apartheid in South Africa and in this way to teach the audience about its

horrors while simultaneously advocating the need for action on behalf of black people.

Despite this prioritising of race over gender, Palty can still be considered a feminist director, as Durham also claims, if we consider her work from the perspective of black feminism or, as Ehrahim argues, from the perspective of ‘pan–African feminism...[which] is intended to counter the tendency of mainstream western feminisms to dismiss work that does not privilege gender as the most worthy focus of analysis’(146). Ehrahim also discusses how ‘African/Diaspora feminisms’ are interested in exploring the intersection of feminism with other systems of oppression, focusing as a result on the collective rather than on the individual, on ‘male–female complementarity’ instead of sex–rivalry. Melanie’s and DuToit’s cinematic relationship is, indeed, one of respect and complementarity. The two of them work together as equals to make the story of the Ngubene family public and to ensure that justice is administered, something that does not happen in the novel, where Melanie remains trapped in a consuming sexual relationship that literally objectifies her.<sup>3</sup>

It is noteworthy that Melanie in the film is directly linked to the writing of history or, rather, to its rewriting since she is the character that publishes DuToit’s story little by little. According to critic June Gill, making the story public is crucial in ‘getting history rewritten to reflect the brutal repression of the black resistance. Once in print, the truth can no longer be denied; it becomes part of history’ (375). In the same way, the truth of apartheid can no longer be denied after watching a film such as *A Dry White Season*. As Palty explains, she wanted to make ‘people who don’t know anything about apartheid, who don’t feel concerned or who forget what it is, to understand it’ (Glicksman 65). For Palty the white people’s lack of awareness concerning the atrocities enacted by the apartheid regime is similar to the ignorance of Germans during World War II: ‘It’s like in Germany when they were killing the Jews, putting them in crematoria. Many people were sincere when they said, “I smelled some bad smell, but I would never have imagined for one second what was going on”. But now they cannot say that they don’t know what was going on’ (66). Indeed, one can hardly insist that they do not know what apartheid is after watching *A Dry White Season*, given that the scenes of graphic violence portrayed have the power to shock the audience out of its complacent existence.

The horrors of apartheid become alive indeed through the stark portrayal of institutionalised violence. Again the torture scenes are absent from the book which, in comparison with the film, seems more concerned with exploring DuToit’s journey rather than in making a

political statement. It is important that Palty's addition of the torture is the result of extensive research she undertook. As Palty says, 'I went to South Africa and met people who showed me their bodies and what was done to them.... I learned. I read' (Glicksman 65). Palty successfully incorporates all this new information into her film by showing more than once on the screen the tortured black body, a direct comment on the effects of apartheid on black people. Thus we see young Jonathan Ngubene's wounded back in the beginning of the film. We also see the back of the black officer while he testifies in the court. Yet nothing compares to the wounds inflicted on Gordon Ngubene's body while he is in prison. The brutal tortures he has to undergo are shown in shocking detail as the camera lingers on his swollen face and gives the audience a clear view of his eye that is ready to drop out of its socket. All in all, the image of his wounded body along with the images of the dead bodies of the children in school uniform lying in the morgue after the uprisings are a definite call for action. This is the call that mobilises Ben DuToit himself since the image of Gordon's tortured body lying in his deathbed shakes him up, and the truth finally hits him head on.

The fact that Palty based these scenes on actual events, having seen for herself the tortured bodies of South Africans, makes the violence we witness even more disturbing. As Gill posits, such 'graphic scenes of police torture [are] not shown in other anti-apartheid movies' (374).<sup>4</sup> This is significant because it shows how Palty adds a page in the book of the cinematic history of apartheid that has so far been absent. From this point of view, Palty enriches the 'official version' of history and by doing so leads to its revision.

Generally speaking, the film seems to advocate a connection between the black body as an indisputable form of knowledge and history; in fact, it appears as if history itself is written on the black body. The attempt to conceal the injuries inflicted on it is then similar to official history's attempt to suppress the reality of experience. Within such a context *A Dry White Season* can be approached as a film that attempts to document black history and in so doing to alter it. This is also evident in the film's closing statement: 'The film is dedicated to the thousands who have given their lives and to those who still carry on the fight for a free and democratic Africa'. Thus, once more, Palty makes clear that this is not simply a film about an individual, Ben DuToit, but about those who have died and those who still struggle in the fight against apartheid. Obviously, Palty's revisiting of the past, namely the Soweto events, is linked to the present and by extension to the future. As Gill argues, Palty's 'notion of history is closer to Foucault's view of the writing of history as an act committed to the concerns of the present, a

form of intervention in contemporary reality' (375). That Palty's intervention is successful is evident, as I have already mentioned, in the fact that the film was banished from the cinemas of South Africa.

All in all, it seems that despite working within the Hollywood conventions Palty managed to claim some space for black people and black history in her film by addressing issues and events that, according to Peterson, are 'marginalized or ignored by the rules of safe politics...that underlie historical accounts' (5). *A Dry White Season* is then proof of how, as Claire Johnston has argued in 'Women's Cinema as Counter-Cinema', female directors can work for Hollywood and still undermine dominant conventions and ideology from within (210, 217).<sup>5</sup> In this respect, Palty lives up to the challenge that Hollywood, as Lane claims, poses to women directors for she does not simply reproduce its 'white vision'. Instead the film opens up an alternative understanding of apartheid history while simultaneously prompting the audience to change their reception of the larger historical narratives that have so far been overwhelmingly white.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Brian Johnson in his review of *Dry White Season* also discusses Palty's difficulties in selling a story told from a black point of view. He quotes Palty who explains how 'in Hollywood it's impossible to make a movie with a black person in the lead role, unless it is Eddie Murphy or Bill Cosby' (Johnson 58).

<sup>2</sup> Talking about the differences between her film and the other two films in her interview with Glicksman, Palty also says that her black characters are strong and respectful whereas white directors usually 'portray blacks as weak, they make them dependent on the white man. They give all the initiative to the white hero'(66).

<sup>3</sup> See for instance p.272, where DuToit gazes at the naked Melanie in utter adoration.

<sup>4</sup> This could actually be the reason for the film's initial 'ostracism' by the apartheid regime, especially if we consider that other anti-apartheid films like *Cry Freedom* and *A World Apart* do not resort to such graphic portrayals.

<sup>5</sup> More recently Judith Mayne in 'The Woman at the Keyhole: Women's Cinema and Feminist Criticism' (1981) and Teresa de Lauretis in *Technologies of Gender* (1987) have argued that resorting to alternative representations and unconventional techniques is not the only

way of developing a feminist discourse. Instead, women can use the ‘master’s tools’, to destroy ‘the master’s house’.

### WORKS CITED

- A Dry White Season*. Dir. Palcy, Euzhan. Perf. Donald Sutherland, Zakes Mokae, Susan Sarandon. Twentieth–Century Fox. 1989.
- Brink, Andre. *A Dry White Season*. London: Flamingo, 1979.
- Carchidi, Victoria. ‘South Africa From Text to Film: *Cry Freedom* and *A Dry White Season*’. *Literature and Film in the Historical Tradition*. Ed. John. D. Simons. Gainesville: Florida University Press, 1994. 47–61.
- Citron, Michelle. ‘Women’s Film Production: Going Mainstream’. *Female Spectators: Looking at Film and Television*. Ed. Diedre Pribram. London: Verso, 1990.
- Durham, Carolyn. ‘Euzhan Palcy’s Feminist Filmmaking; From Romance to Realism, From Gender to Race’. *Women in French Studies* 7 (1999): 155–65.
- Ehrahim, Haseenah. ‘Sugar Kane Alley: Re–reading Race, Class and Identity in Zobel’s *La Rue cases negres*’. *Literature/Film Quarterly* 30.2 (2002): 146–52.
- Gill, June M. ‘The Films of Euzhan Palcy: A Voice For Black History’. *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 17.4 (Nov 2000): 371–81.
- Glicksman, Marlaine. ‘Tempest: Euzhan Palcy’s *Dry White Season*’. *Film Comment* (Sept–Oct 1989): 64–69.
- hooks, bell. ‘A Call For Militant Resistance’. *Multiple Voices in Feminist Film Criticism*. Ed. Diane Carson et al. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994. 358–64.
- Johnson, Brian. ‘*A Dry White Season* (movie review)’. *MacLean’s* 102.39 (25 Sept 1989): 58.
- Johnston, Claire. ‘Women’s Cinema as Counter–Cinema’. *Movies and Methods*. Ed. Bill Nichols. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976.
- Kolokotroni, Vassiliki and Olga Taxidou. ‘*A Dry White Season*’. *Cinema and Fiction: New Modes of Adapting 1950–1990*. Ed. John Orr and Colin Nicholson. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1992. 39–53.
- Lane, Christina. *Feminist Hollywood: From Born in Flames to Point Break*. Detroit: Wayne State University, 2000.
- Leslie, Karani Marcia. ‘Filmmaker Euzhan Palcy: A Palette of Passion’. *American Visions* (Aug–Sept 2000): 40–43.

- Peterson, Nancy. *Against Amnesia: Contemporary Women Writers and The Crisis of Historical Memory*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001.
- Southgate, Martha. 'Euzhan Palcy, The Director Of *Dry White Season* May Well Be The First Black Woman Ever To Direct A Major Studio Film'. *Essence* 20:6 (Oct 1989): 31.
- West, Joan M. and Dennis West. 'Euzhan Palcy and Her Creative Anger: A Conversation with the Filmmaker'. *The French Review* 77:1 (Oct. 2003): 1193–203.