

2. Film as a media platform

Anant Singh

The medium of film has the ability to influence society as it's considered an effective agent for social change. In producing over 90 films since the mid-1980s, I always strove to be socially relevant.

When Nelson Mandela was in prison and the African National Congress (ANC) leaders in exile in the eighties, a call was made for people to protest against apartheid. It was at that point that I decided to make a film that reflected life under such an evil system, the result being *Place of Weeping* that was directed by Darrell Roodt. The film portrays the injustices experienced by a black farm worker because of the callous attitude of the white farmer for whom he worked. The worker complains about the meagre rations, and the farmer catches the worker stealing a chicken. The worker is beaten to death by the farmer. A brave young woman, played by Gcina Mhlophe, from the farm-working community, places her life at risk when she becomes the voice of the oppressed people as she fights the unfair conditions of the labourers. *Place of Weeping* was a low-budget film, costing R100 000 in the days when there was no digital capacity. However, the film had a huge impact because it dealt with social dilemmas at the time. When the film was released in Los Angeles on 23 January 1987, Mayor Tom Bradley proclaimed it *Place of Weeping Day*. The film received great reviews from the most respected film critics, including those from the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, and Wall Street Journal.

“the medium of film communicates stories from society”

With the experience of *Place of Weeping*, especially the telling of a story that would have normally been suppressed by the authorities, I felt it my responsibility to make films that reflected the society in which we lived. The following year, the anti-war film *The Stick* was produced. As cinemas were segregated in South Africa in 1987, Director Darrell Roodt and myself could not view the film together. It was a film that dealt with soldiers fighting a cross-border war that mirrored the activities of the apartheid army. The focus was on wars fought in Angola and other neighbouring countries. The emotional toll suffered by soldiers who were forced to kill was highlighted. *The Stick* struck a chord with the apartheid authorities who promptly banned the film. In 1988, it opened the Montreal Film Festival, and, a year later, screened at the Moscow Film Festival.

The early experiences in making these films informed my decisions when considering future film projects. I discovered

that my creative choices should be driven from the heart and from what I cared about. However, it had to be borne in mind that commercial films generate revenue and this would help to fund films that were socially relevant and echoed societal experiences.

In the early 1990s, shortly after the release of Mandela from prison, a series of films reflecting the changing South Africa were made. *Sarafina!*, which starred Leleti Khumalo, dealt with school children who adopted a campaign of resistance against the presence of the police in their schools - a common occurrence! The lead character, Sarafina, imagines the support of her role model, Nelson Mandela who was in prison. He was her inspiration, and he was the inspiration that motivated the youth of the time to protest against apartheid. To capture the excitement around the first democratic elections in 1994, I collaborated with documentary filmmaker, Danny Schechter to make *Countdown to Freedom*. The film documented the first free and fair elections in South Africa, and followed Mandela as he took the final steps on his walk from prisoner to president. The 10 days of change chronicled an event of global importance, taking the audience inside President Mandela's election campaign. Shortly after the first democratic elections in 1994, *Cry, the Beloved Country*, based on Alan Paton's classic novel, was re-made. At the heart of the film, is the story of two fathers, one black and one white, with James Earl Jones and Richard Harris in the roles. Each of them has lost a son to the violence in South Africa, and, despite their differences, they find common ground . . . which heralds the 'coming together' of these two men. For me, it was a story that reflected the national reconciliation that South Africa was going through. The closing words of the book are most profound, and reflected the new dawn that South Africa was experiencing: “Yes, it is the dawn that has come. The titihoya wakes from sleep, and goes about its work of forlorn crying. The sun tips with light the mountains of Ingeli and East Griqualand. The great valley of uMzimkhulu is still in darkness, but the light will come there. For it is the dawn that has come, as it has come for a thousand centuries, never failing. But when that dawn will come, of our emancipation, from the fear of bondage and the bondage of fear, why, that is a secret.”

After the unbanning of political parties, hundreds of political prisoners were released from jail. Most of them were still active in politics after their release. In 1995, President Mandela convened a reunion on Robben Island of all the surviving prisoners who served their sentences there. The film, *Prisoners of Hope* recorded this historic event of over 1 200 former political prisoners meeting at their place of incarceration, and featured emotional footage of comrades and their fascinating anecdotes as they reminisced about their experiences on Robben Island.

As the HIV/AIDS pandemic took its toll on the South African

nation, 10-year-old Nkosi Johnson emerged as the face of all children afflicted with the disease. Inspired by his courage, the documentary *Nkosi – the Voice of Africa’s AIDS Orphans*, was made in 2001. It captured the courageous campaign waged by Nkosi and delved into the issues that he took up as the lone voice that represented not only Africa’s AIDS orphans, but those around the world too.

As South Africa transitioned into the democratic era, it was necessary to heal the wounds of apartheid. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was the mechanism that was created to play this role. The 2004 film *Red Dust*, starring Hilary Swank and Chiwetel Ejiofor, focused on the TRC. In the film, the apartheid victim must relive his torture and imprisonment at the hands of the police, while his lawyer helps him uncover the truth at a TRC hearing. *Yesterday*, made in 2004 in isiZulu and starring Leleti Khumalo, spotlighted the ravages of HIV/AIDS and the stigma that victims of the dreaded disease suffered. This was a partnership with the Nelson Mandela Foundation, and the film was used as an effective tool in the HIV/AIDS awareness campaign. It went on to achieve significant success and received South Africa’s first-ever Academy Award nomination in 2005, and an Emmy Award nomination a year later.

Tackling the issues of drugs and crime in the Cape Town townships, the film *Dollars and White Pipes* was based on the life of Bernhard Baatjies. It follows his journey from the drug and gang culture. He transcends the issues of race, education, addiction and racketeering, and finally becomes a well-respected, law-abiding business entrepreneur. He emerged as a shining example in overcoming the social ills of gangsterism and drugs.

The 2006 documentary *The Journalist and the Jihadi - the Murder of Daniel Pearl* tracked the parallel lives of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl and jihadi Omar Sheikh. Both were highly educated individuals from privileged backgrounds, one was a humanist, who spent most of his career reporting from the Islamic world on a quest to promote cross-cultural understanding, while the other was a militant who ultimately chose a deeply violent path to express his views. After 9/11, their paths crossed in Pakistan, resulting in the murder of Pearl as he was investigating a money trail that would ultimately have led him through the ranks of al-Qaeda to Osama bin Laden. The September 11 attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York by al-Qaeda, shook the world. As a result, Muslims and Arabs in general were looked at as being terrorists. Produced in 2006, *American East* focused on Arab-Americans living in post-9/11 Los Angeles, and examined long-held misunderstandings about Arabic and Islamic culture.

The watershed election of Barack Obama as the first black president of the United States of America in 2009 was documented in *Barack Obama: People’s President*. The film showed his campaign mantra of “Yes We Can” becoming “Yes We Did”. It is the story of Obama inspiring and organising millions of new voters to support him, and the brilliant use of the internet as a communications and networking tool. The film goes inside the grassroots campaign, and speaks with activists, journalists and political leaders like South Africa’s Desmond Tutu and former

US presidential candidate Reverend Jesse Jackson.

In the run up to the 2010 FIFA World Cup in South Africa, with the euphoria around football at fever pitch, the documentary *More Than Just A Game* was produced. It was directed by Junaid Ahmed. Told through the stories of five former prisoners, it illustrates political prisoners on Robben Island in the 1960s rising above their incarceration by creating a football league, the Makana Football Association. In 2007, the league was accorded honorary membership of FIFA. Following the FIFA World Cup tournament, *2010 - Once In A Lifetime* explored South Africa’s successful hosting of the extravaganza integrating inspiring visuals, exhilarating music and compelling interviews with a range of people – from football officials, government representatives, high profile personalities, celebrities and, most importantly, to the man in the street. It was narrated by renowned international football commentator and Guinness World Record holder, John Helm. The film captures the passionate commitment and vision of South Africa and its people as well as the continent of Africa to the beautiful game.



Produced in 2010, *My Hunter’s Heart* explores the world’s most ancient shamanic culture which is severely threatened as their traditional way of life and skills have been taken away from them. It tracks the Khomani San of the Southern Kalahari, the oldest living indigenous tribe in the world and who are genetically linked to every human being on Planet Earth. The film follows younger members of the clan as they embark on an epic journey to try to recapture some of the knowledge and skills of their ancestors. The death penalty has always been a contentious issue in society. *Shepherds and Butchers*, based on the award-winning book by Chris Marnewick, takes a look at this grave issue. Inspired by true events, the entire system of legally-sanctioned murder

through the death penalty is examined. The film screened at the 2016 Berlin International Film Festival where it received a Panorama Audience Award prize.

The highlight of my career is *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom*. My interest in making a film about the life of Mandela started while he was still in prison. It was through perseverance and his words “nothing is impossible until it is done” that spurred me to make the film. One of the biggest challenges was trying to make a film which would encapsulate his amazing life into two hours. The result is a piece of work that perpetuates Madiba’s inspiring life story, spanning his childhood in a rural village through to his activism and imprisonment, and culminating with his inauguration as the first democratically elected president of South Africa. The film is my tribute to an ordinary man who rose to the challenge of his times and triumphed, becoming a global icon. Released in 2013, the film received wide critical acclaim, garnering prestigious award recognitions including Academy Award and BAFTA nominations and a Golden Globe Award win. In honour of the centenary of Mandela’s birth in 2018, I produced the documentary *Celebrating Mandela One Hundred* which traces Mandela’s life from his roots in a rural

village to becoming one of the greatest statesmen the world has ever seen. The film takes us beyond the political and into the personal, and features exclusive interviews with family members, close friends, comrades, politicians and international celebrities, telling the story of a man who became an international icon.

On the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the birth of Mahatma Gandhi in 2019, *Ahimsa – Gandhi: The Power of the Powerless* was released. The film brings to the fore the impact of the Gandhian message of non-violence worldwide: its inspiration on Martin Luther King Jr and the Civil Rights Movement in the United States, the Solidarity Movement in Poland, Velvet Revolution in Czechoslovakia, and the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa.

The medium of film is an important aspect of the creative industries and serves not just as a form of art, but also as a reflection of society. Further, film is a form of communication – it communicates stories that come from society, both past and present, and looks to the future of society. It is special in that you share the experience with hundreds of people in a dark theatre. That, for me, is the magic of the medium of film.



Anant Singh, recognised as South Africa’s pre-eminent film producer, has made more than 90 films, including the Academy Award® nominated films *Mandela: Long Walk to Freedom* and *Yesterday*. He is the chief executive and chairman of the Videovision Group of Companies, chairman of Cape Town Film Studios, and member of the Academy of Motion Pictures Arts & Sciences, International Academy of Television Arts & Sciences, and International Olympic Committee (IOC). Anant is the recipient of numerous awards, and has been conferred with honorary doctorates from the University of Port Elizabeth, University of Durban-Westville, Durban University of Technology and Cape Peninsula University of Technology.