

What is the responsibility of the documentary filmmaker?

by Frank Meintjies

Power in our society is not distributed evenly. There are divisions between black and white, educated and uneducated, working class and capitalists. In effect, this means that a tiny few are powerful to the point of corruption while others are so powerless that their very lives have become precarious.

The media is a powerful instrument and an instrument of the powerful. It can shape attitudes, set debates and even save lives in the sense that it has the power to create a public outcry that can change the course of events.

Progressive-minded film makers in South Africa have an important role to play. Through the documentary they inform, question and analyse. They can help explode the myths, prejudices and customs that inevitably underpin oppressive systems. They can expose how these myths are crumbling after reigning for decades.

Providing information brings documentary filmmakers into conflict with oppressive

regimes which invariably have a lot to hide. But follow-

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ing 3 states of emergency there is an even bigger investigative and watchdog role for the camera to play.

There is also an educative role: by stirring debate on alternatives to apartheid and exploitation, one is assisting the democratic process. In this connection, I believe it is important to give voice to democratic non-racial organisations which are rooted historically and culturally, precisely because these groupings are being so fiercely repressed.

What is needed is more investigative reporting: television crews go into the heart of war situations in other countries, why can't they take the same risks here. Why can't TV people do more to probe the real links behind phenomena such as vigilantes, MNR support, and AWB and corruption.

Furthermore, there is a need for better local distribution systems.

Underlying all our struggles in COSATU is the struggle for control over our own lives.

This raises the question: do skilled people use their skills in a way that empowers and humanises, or do they use it to entrench existing relations of power and powerlessness. This presupposes that if we are to be involved in a documentary in any way, we must know who is making it, what is the line they are taking and where it will be broadcast. We can not be regarded as inanimate objects. This means also that unskilled rank and file members should be made aware of the dangers involved (e.g. prosecution or other state reaction). We want to decide whether to take the risks, rather than have it simply imposed on us.

One problem from our side is that the structures which give protection to our members have been battered by the state of emergency. This means that rank and file members are very often approached as indi-

viduals and do not have a collective or reference group to assess requests and discuss consequences.

A good starting point for greater cooperation is greater sensitivity on the part of filmmakers about the problems and dangers we face. We would also have to give thought to the difficulties and constraints that apply in the world of documentary filmmaking.

This relates very crucially to where you locate yourself. Documentaries are about values and principles. In this regard, the documentary tells us as much about those who make it as about the subjects on the screen. The launch of FAWO represents recognition of this and an alignment of values which forms a basis for consultation with organisa-

tions which also believe in true democracy and non-racialism.

This process of consultation must also explore the question of cooperation on grassroot

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level. If there is no sensitivity on issues of security nor faithful recording of our views, the response from rank and file will be withdrawal and reluctance in stead of cooperation. We have already seen this happen. Because for our members there is too much at stake: we are involved in a struggle for survival in which our very lives are at risk.

We would like to be in touch with, and involved in debates within FAWO about the role

of the documentary filmmaker. Your discussion papers could easily be disseminated and discussed through our culture and education departments. Furthermore, we would dearly like to

be more involved in the making of our own in-house films and videos, but this is difficult to realise since we are constantly under attack and are engaged in many crucial struggles. A start has been made though: COSATU and its affiliates have made several documentaries on various issues.

Through following debates and working with film, we could deepen our understanding of the medium, its power, its constraints as well as its proper function in the democratic struggle and democratic society.



*Documentary film-makers on shoot in Bushmanland.
(photo by Paul Weinberg)*