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## Review of *Amandla!: A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony* (film)

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### **Comments**

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other yellow. As the flesh-like tones play off each other, the gritty, tactile nature of the surface tempts the touch of the viewer. Appropriately, further investigation into the context of the painting's creation leads to the discovery that the ochres used as pigments in the painting are also applied to the skin of participants in initiatory ceremonies in the Transkei region of South Africa. Not coincidentally, deeper investigation will reveal that the Transkei is also where Nelson Mandela was born and where he went through ritual initiation.

So, Karel Nel is not an overtly political artist. His work is wide in scope and multivalent in meaning, two characteristics that will grow and deepen not only upon further investigation into the work but also upon fur-

ther personal rumination. Although new to U.S. collectors and museums, the artist has displayed ingenuity and potential to such a degree that curators in the Department of Modern Art at the Metropolitan Museum deemed it appropriate to acquire a Nel for their own collection. This exhibition was a small but noteworthy step toward redefining contemporary African artists of indubitable promise, such as Karel Nel, as, simply, contemporary artists. ■

*The catalogue Karel Nel: Status of Dust (Art First Contemporary Art, New York and London; 29 pp., 17 color illustrations, \$10 softcover) contains essays by Jessica Dubow and David Bunn. It is available from Art First New York or Art First London.*

## film/video



### Amandla! A Revolution in Four-Part Harmony

Directed by Lee Hirsch  
Produced by Sherry Simpson

*Kwela Productions, 2002. 108 minutes. U.S. distributor: Artisan Entertainment.*

Reviewed by Ian Barnard

This documentary film by first-time U.S. director Lee Hirsch chronicles the role of music in South Africa's antiapartheid movement from the 1940s through the 1990s. *Amandla!* argues that music took on numerous functions in the Struggle. It was able to reach and politicize people who might not be moved by speeches and pamphlets; it served as a source of strength, pride, and support; it boosted morale and inspired action; it served as a secret communication tool among activists; it chronicled the history of the Struggle; and it even acted as a weapon in itself, as with the fear-instilling Toyi-Toyi dance-song combination. Moreover, as musician Abdullah Ibrahim says in the film, music was not only part of the liberation struggle but also part of the process of self-liberation for black South Africans. In addition to being heard as a soundtrack to visual images, the music per se is presented a) in the form of archival footage of singing and dancing in concert and other public settings (such as political rallies), b) in contemporary community and studio performances (presumably created for *Amandla!*), and c) in the more informal singing of many of the performers and activists interviewed (who sing unaccompanied, often in their own homes and usually seated in their "interview" chairs).

The film has a potentially important point to make about the imbrication of politics and

music (and art in general); and its attention to superstar professional musicians, such as Miriam Makeba and Hugh Masekela, together with singing individual activists and groups of everyday citizens suggests a democratic view of art, a view contrary to those paradigms that normalize individual star "specialists" and narrow aesthetic criteria. Such paradigms are tellingly exemplified in Christopher Null's review of the film on the Web site filmcritic.com: "Note to filmmaker Lee Hirsch: A bunch of people singing out of key is not a four-part harmony."

British and U.S. punk musicians of the 1970s and 1980s similarly challenged political and artistic norms with their usurpation of elitist assumptions of qualifications for musicianship: according to their democratic adage, anyone who could hold a guitar could be a good punk musician (see Hebdige 1979). The recent controversy around the Poets Against the War in the U.S. has rightly renewed debates about definitions of "good" art. *Amandla!*'s filmmakers are to be commended for not whitewashing the militancy of some of the freedom songs' lyrics ("We will shoot them with our machine guns") in order to placate more conservative viewers, such as the author of a letter to South Africa's *Sunday Times*, who wrote in response to the newspaper's review of *Amandla!*: "'Whites watch out, we are going to kill you...slowly' even as a quotation from the past is still shocking, vicious, racist, barbaric, uncalled for, and damaging. Living in southern Africa as an elderly white male is stressful enough without having ignorant American revolutionaries cashing in on the situation" (Thesen 2002).

And just when we might be wondering about the many pieces of music in South Africa that, even in the midst of the most dire conditions of discrimination, oppression, and brutality, must not have had overt political content, the film shows how this "non-political" art becomes unexpectedly politicized in the context of apartheid. Thus a love song becomes a Struggle song as it functions as a means of communication between an underground guerrilla fighter and her or his lover; a

song like "Nkosi Sikelel'i Afrika" ("God Bless Africa"—now the official national anthem of South Africa), which has no "political" content, becomes politicized by reason of the contexts in which it is sung; people transform a seemingly innocuous old song into something more militant by "putting an 'AK' [machine-gun] there, taking out a 'Bible' there" to reflect growing protests against apartheid; and linguistically challenged white South Africans paternalistically applaud the singing of black South Africans, symptomatically oblivious to the fact that the songs are actually criticizing and threatening the white listeners, and are not about the stereotypically banal matters the onlookers clearly think the singers are addressing.

Given these promising premises, it is disappointing that *Amandla!* doesn't explore the wider (and more challenging) implications of its thesis about the interweavings of music and politics. Such an exploration would necessitate moving beyond the specifics of music and South Africa to at least a gesture in the direction of what this thesis means for art in general and for music and art in the rest of the world. This extrapolation is especially important given that the filmmakers are U.S. Americans and that the film has, until now, been most widely shown in the U.S. (The recent controversies around the timid and subsequently retracted antiwar statements of Madonna and the Dixie Chicks point to the need for this kind of discussion in the U.S.) Alas, *Amandla!* resists making such connections by emphasizing the specialness of the South African case; it ends with Abdullah Ibrahim asserting that the South African "revolution" was the only one to have been "done in four-part harmony." It also reinscribes racist essentialisms. All the black people in the film sing; the white antiapartheid activists make speeches and write poetry. Its ultimate effect is to rehearse the distance between subject and object that made antiapartheid activism such a comfortable cause in the U.S. in the 1980s: as long as American liberals could decry the exceptional horrors of South Africa, they didn't have to interrogate racism in their own country or delineate the continuities between South African apartheid and U.S. racism.

Ironically, *Amandla!*'s ideological specificity does not translate into visual precision. In fact, as a film, *Amandla!* often doesn't work at all. Despite the claims of the official Web site that "In form as well as content, *Amandla!* breaks new ground" (*Amandla! The Movie*), the film's visual iconography and methodology are frequently dominated by well-worn and uninspired mainstays of bad documentary filmmaking. Thankfully, it is not weighed down by voice-over narration, but it is populated by many talking heads, numerous cringeworthy reenacted scenes (in one, a close-up shot of a pair of legs in camouflage pants walking through some bushes, accompanied by bursts of gunfire on the soundtrack, is meant to illustrate the guerrilla war waged on South Africa's borders), and seemingly random insertions of archival footage. This is the technique of lackluster music videos or

most U.S. television news, where sound bites and overused visual clips stand for a particular event or idea or feeling—reductionism replaces critical analysis or development.

*Amandla!* was made in 2002, many decades after countless documentaries and feature films first started chronicling the horrors of apartheid, and during a time when many more challenging films about apartheid are being produced. A spate of provocative recent films about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission come to mind here: *Long Night's Journey into Day*, *Ubuntu's Wounds*, and *The Guguletu Seven*, for instance. However, instead of creating a complex and nuanced visual depiction of apartheid, *Amandla!* can only rehearse simplistic platitudes. The generic images are duplicated by predictably vacuous captions: the film opens with the assertion that under apartheid, black South Africans "were denied the most basic rights of African citizenship." *Amandla!* can only give us Apartheid 101 over and over again. Random images of shoppers, of people walking, of someone smoking, of a white military officer moving through a bus of black passengers are no doubt supposed to stand for apartheid's horrors, its victims and resisters, and for everyday life in South Africa. But these images are neither specifically connected to the music in the film nor given any particular location of their own. We are seldom told what incident a particular piece of footage is showing, and we are hardly ever given a time or place. In the familiar trope by which the Other is simplified, commodified, and fixed in time, these times/places/people are all the same (see Fabian 1983).

Some specific scenes in *Amandla!* are powerful: Hugh Masekela's concert performance of "Stimela," a song re-creating the train journeys of migrant workers leaving their families to work in South Africa's cities; Miriam Makeba's simple a cappella rendition of "Bahlel Bonke," a litany of leaders imprisoned under apartheid; ex-guerrilla Lindiwe Zulu's dirge for a dead comrade. Disappointingly, though, it's almost as if the filmmakers didn't have enough faith in the film's music—both the sound of the music and the images of its being performed—to sustain viewer interest or adequately represent its political implications. Thus the music is "complemented" by the most banal of illustrative imagery.

When the film moves from the specifics of the music to the general (South Africa), the general becomes generic. Critics and artists have insisted for a long time that the specific is the richest source of commentary on the general. The paradox of *Amandla!* is that its many heavy-handed attempts to depict politics depoliticize South African history through decontextualization. In its eagerness to rightly place South African music of the past sixty years in the context of its politics, *Amandla!* attempts to survey, in 108 minutes, all of South African history and politics of the time. This superficial treatment results in a documentary film that is often filmically static and that fails to live up to its intellectual promise. ■

References cited, page 96

## current events



Information subject to change

### ■ western states

(by closing date)

#### Kilengi

African Art from the Bareiss Family Collection

Through October 19  
Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA

#### A Maasai Community Adorns a Bride

Through October 19  
Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA

#### Wall Painting from an Ndebele Community

Through October 19  
Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA

#### Mexican Trees of Life

Through December 14  
Seattle Art Museum, Seattle, WA

#### Partners of the Soul

African Art of the Baule

Through January 4, 2004  
San Diego Museum of Art  
San Diego, CA

#### The Beginning of Seeing

Tribal Art and the Pictographs of Adolph Gottlieb

September 3, 2003–January 4, 2004  
Cantor Center for Visual Arts, Stanford University  
Stanford, CA

### continuing exhibitions

(by state)

#### African Trade Beads

A Comprehensive and Aesthetic Approach  
Picard African Trade Bead Museum, Carmel, CA

#### African Gallery; Pre-Columbian Gallery

Selections from the Proctor Stafford Collection of West Mexican Ceramics  
Los Angeles County Museum of Art  
Los Angeles, CA

#### Matthews Collection of African Art; Harer Collection of Egyptian Antiquities

Fullerton Art Museum, California State University  
San Bernardino, CA

#### Africa, Oceania, and the Americas

Gallery DeRoche, San Francisco, CA

#### Fiber, Feather, Shell and Stone Shaping Culture in Native California; Power and Creation

Africa beyond the Nile; Realms of the Ancestors

Arts of Oceania;

Arts of Native America;

Vision of the Shaman, Song of the Priest

Bowers Museum of Cultural Art, Santa Ana, CA

#### Africa, Oceania, and the Americas

Cantor Center for Visual Arts  
Stanford University, Stanford, CA

#### Exploring African Art; Native American Art; Power and Prestige

The Royal Arts of Polynesia  
Denver Art Museum, Denver, CO

#### Multiple Visions

A Common Bond

Folk art from more than 100 countries  
Museum of International Folk Art  
Santa Fe, NM

#### Art of Cameroon; Elizabeth Cole Butler Collection of Native American Art; Art of the Northwest Coast

Portland Art Museum  
Portland, OR

#### Traditional Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas

Utah Museum of Fine Arts  
University of Utah  
Salt Lake City, UT

#### Africa Possessed; Katherine White Collection of African Art;

Pre-Columbian and Oceanic Art; Australian Aboriginal Art

Seattle Art Museum  
Seattle, WA

### ■ central states

(by closing date)

#### The Quest for Immortality

Treasures of Ancient Egypt

Through September 14  
Kimbell Art Museum  
Fort Worth, TX

#### Remnants of Ritual

Selections from the Gelbard Collection of African Art

Through October 26  
Kranert Art Museum, University of Illinois  
Champaign, IL

#### African Art/Western Eyes

Through December 19  
Kresge Art Museum,  
Michigan State University  
East Lansing, MI

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