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The untold story of the making of South Africa

BY

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The quest to understand the real cost of gold in our lives and the fate of those trapped in the mining economy's cage.

A few short years into the age of the camera drone, the fly-over is already a documentary film cliché. It is therefore testament to both the surrealism of the southern African mining industry and to the visual sophistication of South African Catherine Meyburgh and Namibian Richard Pakleppa's *Dying for Gold: The Untold Story of the Making of South Africa* that the opening shot is so profoundly disturbing: From mostly empty veldt, the camera creeps over the fortress-like wall of an East Rand mine operation. The unfolding complex appears as a tidy penitentiary. A miner's disembodied voice confirms that this category confusion will be the animating spirit of the ensuing film: "A mine," he says, "is a prison."

Indeed, the narrative arc of *Dying for Gold* is the unpacking of that simple premise at multiple scales. For over 90 minutes, the camera travels across southern Africa, drops into the dark, dangerous tunnels, and wanders more than a century of archives. The goal, according to Meyburgh's voice over, is "to start to understand the real cost of gold in our lives today." There is nothing subtle or surprising in the message. But deft cinematic storytelling makes *Dying for Gold* surprisingly nimble for an advocacy film. It brings to the familiar story of mining a remarkable portrait of those trapped in the industry's cage.

Formally, *Dying for Gold* is a mélange. The film tacks between original and archival footage: environmental shots of downtown Johannesburg, leafy suburbs, rural villages, and train stations—all interspersed with state propaganda, newsreels, and pop culture visions of the

mines and the lifestyles they enabled. The images bounce from the 1920s to the present, often paired with readings from mine company and government communiques. Dates rarely match, but together the text and image couplings explore common themes. They make clear that the need for black bodies to work the mines, and the devastation done to those bodies and lives, has changed little since the Witwatersrand Gold Rush.

One of the most powerful of these mashups comes roughly twenty minutes into the film. A voice reads excerpts from a 1903 commission of inquiry into the labor requirements of South Africa's expanding mine and agriculture sector. The principle threat to the economy, the voice states baldly, is that "the African native tribes are in possession of large areas of land." Played over scenes from the 1940s film Matsela, in which a helpful friend advises the fictional title character to leave his mountain village for the mines below, the narrator drones on. "A great modification of these conditions" of land ownership must be enacted, according to the commission. "[T]he proposals put forward to improve the supply of natives recommends that the existing native social system should be attacked with the object of modifying or destroying it." While the machinations that drove thousands of laborers into the mines are no secret, there is chilling poignancy in seeing that story told simultaneously over two decades, at macro and micro scale, and in both fact and fiction.

Original interviews with miners and their families across South Africa, Mozambique, Swaziland, and Lesotho then form blocks that separate these archival collages, illustrating in fine detail the inescapable traps that mining set throughout the "native social system." The Manyokole family of Lesotho is a case in point. Liao Manyokole is a young man who travels to South Africa for extended stints underground, while Matisetso, his wife, works as a sharecropper on land they do not own. She makes enough to eat, but not enough to pay their debts. Liao's father Mohau was a miner until lung disease allowed the company to release him, without support, from his contract. Every night, his daughter-in-law says, Mohau lay in bed, trapped and suffocating in the ruins of his own body. His wife Mamatselio was in turn imprisoned by her relationship to a dying husband. When he finally passed, Liao borrowed money from the mining firm for his father's funeral, trapping the entire family in indenture. As Liao recounts the pride in being passed to manhood through initiation, finally able to earn money like a man, masculinity itself reads as a death sentence. The mining economy imprisons everyone, though the terrible beauty of the film is its effectiveness in capturing how mining imprisons each protagonist in a unique way.

There is a good deal of stylized visual work in these interviews. Colors are lushly rendered and the frame holds for long seconds on individuals and family groups posing for portraits in rural settings poignantly devoid of other people. Subjects routinely stand with their backs to the camera, looking out at empty fields, depopulated mountains, and vast skyscapes. Such deliberate visual work reinforces one of the more interesting archival discoveries in the film, one that ties the interview segments to the historical samplings: mining companies and their state allies saw film as a tool for sustaining the mining economy.

The cinematic trap is literally set in a series of memoranda exchanged in the 1920s among officials of the Native Recruiting Corporation. Mr. C.G. Taylor, district manager in Vryheid, writes to his bosses that he is "of the opinion that meetings and mere talk of the work of the gold mine are not sufficiently impressive, nor lasting enough on the native mind." What is called for is the creative use of the "open air cinematograph." To get them to the mines, the natives need movies—depictions of the modern city of Johannesburg, the money to be made, the vast housing compounds, and the "comfort and safety of mining." White South Africans, too, are trapped in a kind of image cage. A more pleasant one to be sure, but no less phantasmatic. South Africa as it appears in government and popular film across the decades is a prosperous land, a place of racial harmony, a healthy mix of industry and leisure that benefits everyone—though admittedly white South Africans appreciate it more. The camera may not have been the most important weapon for dispossessing Black labor of its land and "modifying or destroying" the social system, but it was certainly a powerful one. And *Dying for Gold* is a richer film for effectively using the camera to make that point.

Ironically, the film's effectiveness at avoiding the visual clichés of contemporary documentary and the easy outrage tropes of activist filmmaking make the final moments of the film among the weakest. *Dying for Gold* ends with a pitch for support for the half million South African miners demanding just compensation for their work, in part through a class action lawsuit against the major mining companies. As the drone once again flies over South Africa—massive slag heap, urban center, township—Meyburgh concludes that it would be too easy to point fingers at the mining companies and the state. The archives, she intones, are shocking "because all of us who benefit from this economy are complicit." This is undoubtedly true. But if *Dying for Gold* has shown us anything, it is the strategic cynicism of the world created by those who built the mining economy and the state that supported it. We may all be complicit, just as we may all be trapped. But the burden of mine work is differentially distributed. *Dying for Gold* is compelling evidence that we still need justice.

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