

# THE VIEWER AS CONSCRIPT

Dynamic struggles for ideological supremacy in  
the South African Border War film, 1971-1988

by

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*What should or could even be done about the horrors perpetrated by man against man, about the secretion of evil which stained whole communities – justified, we are told, by considerations of national security or reasons of state? How did it happen, when we had the means of flashing back history on our screens of illusion or perusing it at leisure in libraries with the soft smell of time, that our century turned out to be so much more totalitarian than any comparable period of mankind's itinerary? And when a rotten system with its polluted ideology is brought down, or when it flounders in its lues of corruption and cruelty, how is a repetition of the same abuses to be prevented?*

- Breyten Breytenbach

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**Compulsory Declaration:**

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed, and has been cited and referenced.

Signed by candidate

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## **Abstract:**

Fourteen South African films made between 1971 and 1988, and dealing with the Border War, are examined. The focus of this examination is on the ways in which films were used to persuade the white public to accept the legitimacy of the Border War. The period under examination is one during which the Apartheid government moved South African society ever closer to what has been termed a 'garrison state'. Rather than following the approach indicated by the notion of 'film as history', the current work attempts to use films as sources of data to explicate the nature of the ideological manipulation at stake in each case. The literature reviewed clarifies the socio-political context around both the Border War and South African Border War film, and justifies the use of these films as sources of data for a historical analysis. A close analysis of the films reveals the appearance, growth in prominence, and disappearance of several critical themes in Border War films during each of the war's main phases (1971-5; 1975-80; 1980-8). Moreover, what is clear from the analysis is the relationship between each film's thematic composition and particular developments in the Border War and/or the South African government's strategies for fighting it, at the time. By subjecting the critical themes identified and the changes in these to further theoretical refinement, three analytic categories are suggested: changes in the structures of power, social transformation, and the government's shifting ideological agenda. These categories allow the dissertation to be concluded with an evaluation of the thesis that locally made films between 1971 and 1988 portray dynamic struggles for control over the ideology that sanctioned the legitimacy of the Border War.

## List of Abbreviations

BOSS	Bureau for State Security
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency
FAPLA	People's Armed Forces for Liberation of Angola
FNLA	Front for the Liberation of Angola
FRELIMO	Mozambique Liberation Front
JMC	Joint Management Centre
MK	Spear of the Nation (military wing of the ANC)
MPLA	The Popular Movement for the Liberation of Angola
NIS	National Intelligence Service
NSMS	National Security Management System
PAC	Pan African Congress
PLAN	People's Liberation Army of Namibia
RENAMO	Mozambique National Resistance
SAAF	South African Air Force
SABC	South African Broadcasting Corporation
SADF	South African Defence Force
SAP	South African Police
SAS	Special Air Service
SSC	State Security Council
SWAPO	South West African People's Organisation
TRC	Truth and Reconciliation Commission
UDF	United Democratic Front
UN	United Nations
UNITA	Union for the Total Independence of Angola
ZANLA	Zimbabwe African National Liberation Army
ZANU	Zimbabwean African National Union
ZAPU	Zimbabwean People's Organisation
ZIPRA	Zimbabwe People's Revolutionary Army
ZNDF	Zambian National Defence Force

## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

In this dissertation, a body of film becomes the subject of historical analysis. While the study of film by historians is not a new phenomenon internationally, in South Africa this discipline is entering a growth phase, with the first African History and Film conference being held in Cape Town in July 2002. The South African context affords such growth several advantages, both in terms of the new post-liberation freedom to speculate on the construction of identity and discourse, and in terms of the pressing need for such work in the name of learning from South Africa's troubled past. It is these concerns that motivate this project. More particularly, this dissertation undertakes a detailed analysis of fourteen South African films that, in retrospect, seem crucial both in understanding and producing the identity and moral discourse central to the militarised Apartheid state between 1971 and 1988.

An examination of the South African socio-political situation during these years is undertaken in **Chapter 2: South Africa at War**, specifically because a clear understanding of the intricate processes of militarisation and ideological manipulation engaged in over time by the Apartheid government is crucial for any complex grasp of the data produced by the film analysis. One of the central themes of this section is the notion of the 'garrison state': a blurring of boundaries between the civilian, governmental, and military spheres of society which was not only actively sought by various groups within the Apartheid government, but also carried with it a clear set of requirements in terms of national ideology. As is shown in Chapters 4-6, it was these needs which Border War films were positioned to support.

The relationship between film and history, both generally and with specific reference to the South African Border War film, is reviewed in **Chapter 3: The Border War at the Movies**. The central debate in this regard concerns how films can be used as sources of historical data, and in this respect the positions of two primary figures in the study of film as history, Robert

Rosenstone and Robert Brent Toplin, are discussed. Such a discussion is necessary if the question, ‘can films not conceived as traditional historical documents still serve in that role?’, is to be answered. With respect to the particular films dealt with here, at least a partial answer is provided: that is to say, not only are the films imminently suitable for the purposes of historical study, but they also show very clear links to crucial features of the era under discussion. However, it is important to emphasise that this dissertation’s concern is with history *through* film, not film *as* history. If ‘film as history’ involves the analysis of films to understand the past, this dissertation is concerned with using the *past* – in this case, a detailed understanding of the South African situation between 1971 and 1988 – in order to understand the *films* which emerged from it. These points are dealt with in more detail in Chapter 3.

The local study of film and history, as embarked on by Baines, Bickford-Smith, Botha, Davis, Marx, Tomaselli, and many others, has to date focused largely on movies dealing with the domestic struggle by marginalized South African communities against Apartheid. Feature films such as *Mapantsula* (1988) and documentaries such as *Robben Island: Our university* (1988) fall into this category, and their prominence is understandable in terms of the instrumentality of such struggles in bringing down Apartheid. Movies dealing with the Border War and military service, on the other hand, have only been examined in passing or as components of larger studies; no substantial current work of history examines Border War movies in their own right. There is therefore a clear need for attempts, albeit as limited in scope as this dissertation, to attend to this lacuna. As will be made clear in what follows, there is something out of the ordinary to be found within the Border War film; identifying and explaining what precisely this is, and how it can further our understanding of a society which sent its young men to ‘the Border’ and kept the government which demanded their service (and occasionally their lives) in power for over forty years, is a central concern of the work conducted here.

This dissertation's central thesis can now be stated: that locally made films between 1971 and 1988 portray dynamic struggles for control over the ideology that sanctioned the legitimacy of the Border War. The Border War is defined in this dissertation as the pre-liberation South African government's military involvement in its neighbouring states, primarily Angola and South West Africa. 'Ideology' is defined in terms of the (i) system of *meaning* that furnishes the concepts and categories that govern our perceptions, (ii) shared understandings or *norms* that sustain social relations, and (iii) aesthetic and/or ritual *practices* that direct and contain shared meanings and norms. The other sources and organisations of power are economic, military and political.<sup>1</sup> Given this definition, the focus of this dissertation is the ways in which films were used to persuade and dominate public opinion concerning the Border War.

From the film analysis conducted in chapters 4-6, it is clear that not only did Border War movies explicitly address ideological issues concerning the war, but that this relationship changed over time to keep up with the developments both in the war itself and in the society the films were intended to appeal to. Furthermore, the difference between Border War films and the treatment of the war in other media reveals the full extent of the ideological manipulation applied to the genre.

The dissertation is concluded in **Chapter 7: The Battle for Hearts and Minds**. Here, the theoretical and empirical justifications for the thesis that locally made films between 1971 and 1988 portray dynamic struggles for control over the *ideology* that sanctioned the legitimacy of the Border War, are discussed. More particularly, three categories – changes in the structure

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Mann, *The Sources of Social Power* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 22-28. The use of these criteria to describe and understand the South African situation was not only a matter of sociological theory. In 1977, Major-General W Black, Director-General of Operations for the SADF, said. 'We already exist in political, economic, ideological, and military circumstances usually associated with a state of war' (quoted in Unknown, *IDAF Fact Paper on Southern Africa No. 8: The Apartheid War Machine*, (London: IDAF, 1980), p.5). The dynamic relationship between these sources and organisations of power, specifically the military and ideological, is further discussed in Chapter 3.

of power, social transformation, and the shifting ideological goals of the Apartheid government – become the framework within which to conclude the evaluation of the thesis.<sup>2</sup>

Border War films maintained a fairly simplistic pro-regime view of the war's morality until the mid-80s, while other media which exhibited less vulnerability to financial manipulation, such as Afrikaans Border War literature ('*grensliteratuur*') and independent South African folk and rock music, had grown beyond this stage as early as 1974. This disparity, which is discussed in greater detail in Chapter 3, is unsurprising given the way that South African Border War film also inverted the tentative approach by film-makers in less regulated societies to similar wars. The bulk of American and French filmic treatment of those countries' involvements in Vietnam and Algeria, for instance, occurred after the cessation of hostilities (or at least during the closing phases of these wars) and tended to only move beyond their preoccupation with the internal (i.e., ideological and psychological) implications of war rather than its external manifestations, once society had shed some of its sensitivity to the scenes a 'combat movie' might depict.<sup>3</sup> This stands in stark contrast to the South African situation, where the South African film industry followed the troops into action, as Tomaselli puts it, without a single qualm.<sup>4</sup> Most Border War movies were made alongside the very events they were attempting to depict, and the few genuine attempts to place the viewer's perspective within the characters' psychological experience only occurred in the late 1980s, after the government had already given the war up as unwinnable. In this respect, Border War films have more in common with the Second World War movies of previous generations, an ancestry which is supported by the clear presence of several features common to movies of that genre in Border War films.

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<sup>2</sup> Baines embarks on a categorisation of the discursive formations applied to the Border War, whether official or unofficial, and it is this approach that motivates the present analysis. See G Baines, 'South Africa's Vietnam: Literary History and Cultural Memory of the Border War', in C van der Merwe and R Wolfswinkel, *Telling Wounds: Narrative, Trauma and Memory* (Van Schaik, 2002).

<sup>3</sup> T Christensen, *Reel Politics: American Political Movies from Birth of a Nation to Platoon* (NY: Basil Blackwell, 1987), p.147

<sup>4</sup> K Tomaselli, 'The Border War: Cinematic Reflections', in *Reality*, vol. 11, no. 5, September 1979, p.16

In this dissertation, as with any interpretive project, a multiplicity of perspectives and theoretical approaches could reasonably have been adopted. For instance, it would be equally legitimate to examine the films under discussion in their own terms, solely as 'visions of history'.<sup>5</sup> This would have required closer attention to box-office figures, production histories, and directorial *curricula vitae* than this dissertation's emphasis allowed. On the other hand, it is conceivable that a similar approach to history through film might produce different interpretations of the data to those suggested here, perhaps ones in which the extent of government control over the films appears *less* significant in the shaping of Border War film than public opinion and audience tastes. Rather than regard the existence of these and other standpoints as potential criticisms of the analysis conducted here, it seems more fruitful to view them as productive possibilities for further engagement with what is clearly a very rich source. As Ricoeur points out with respect to conflicting interpretations:

*... all interpretations in [the] social sciences may be challenged, and the question 'what can defeat a claim' is common to all argumentative situations. Only in the tribunal is there a moment when the procedures of appeal are exhausted. But it is because the decision of the judge is implemented by the force of public power. Neither in literary criticism, nor in the social sciences, is there such a last word. Or, if there is any, we call that violence.*<sup>6</sup>

Given a bigger scope, this dissertation would have included analyses of the films that appear in Appendix 1, and movies such as *On the Wire* and *The Quarry* (both released in 1989). However, in the case of those movies made after 1988, to broaden this study out to include post-fact Border War retrospection would be to open up another dimension of examination entirely, and dispense with the clear delineation provided by the war's end. Once again, that there is more to be gained from the study of the Border War than this dissertation is able to offer will thus not, it is hoped, be seen as a weakness in the present project, but rather as a challenge to ongoing and future work.

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<sup>5</sup> R Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to Our Idea of History* (UK: Harvard University Press, 1995), p.15

<sup>6</sup> J Thompson, *Paul Ricoeur: Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* (Cambridge University Press, 1984), p.215

Finally, as regards the format of this work, thick description of each film's elements, characters, and themes was judged to be the best method of emphasising the dynamic relationship between Border War film and Apartheid society, and is also used to compensate for the difficulty readers may experience in viewing the films given their various archival locations. However, thick description takes up space, and in order for thick description and substantial conclusions (supported by coherent analysis) to exist within the same dissertation, modification of the mini-dissertation format in terms of length has been necessary. It is hoped that the reader will appreciate this and be able to derive the intended benefits of this modification to the standard format.

## Chapter 2: South Africa at War

The review of available literature on the militarisation of societies that follows, is required to frame the following argument: that South African society between 1971 and 1988 was, as a result of the efforts of hardliners in the government and military, slowly transforming into what Patrick Regan calls a 'garrison society'. In examining this transformation, the ways in which a garrison society suited the aims and methods of what would become the Botha government is outlined, as are the steps taken – some overtly, some covertly – to achieve it. Understanding the socio-political context of the thesis in these terms provides a framework through which to interpret the Apartheid government's concerted programme of information and disinformation, allowing the rationale behind some of its actions to be laid bare.

Regan outlines the consensus on the characteristics of a 'garrison society', as follows:

*A garrison society is one in which it makes no sense to ask whether or not civilians control the military. It is a society in which the institutions and the men who hold military, economic and political power have become so dependant on one another; in which their goals and interests are so complementary; and in which the traditional boundaries between military and civilian spheres have broken down to such an extent, that the very conception of civilian versus military control has no meaning ...*<sup>1</sup>

Two features of this important definition bear closer examination before its applicability to South Africa from 1971 to 1988 can be considered. Firstly, the condition referred to hinges on the idea that society's 'normal' condition – that is, able to be divided into civilian and military spheres – is absent or has somehow broken down. Secondly, it hinges on the presence of common interests – whether abstract or concrete in nature – which link the objectives of the various spheres that make up society, including (but not limited to) the civilian and military sectors. In what follows the degree to which both of these features were clearly and explicitly

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<sup>1</sup> P Regan, *Organising Societies for War: The Process and Consequences of Societal Militarization* (USA: Westport, Connecticut, 1994), pp. 5-6

present in South Africa during the Border War, and their transformations over the years leading up to the fall of the Apartheid regime is examined.

That South Africa was a *militaristic* society in the early Seventies and that it became increasingly so as the Border War increased in intensity, is beyond doubt. This can be clearly seen in the government's attempts to inculcate pro-violence, pro-military sentiments in white South Africans from an early age: the violent history of settler expeditions such as the Great Trek featured strongly in the Apartheid government's *Christelike Nasionale Onderwys* ('Christian National Education') system, which lionised martial settler heroes such as Andries Pretorius, and this militarism was backed up by several other youth-oriented initiatives, such as the cadet system, the *Voortrekkers* (an Afrikaner youth movement similar to the Scouts), and the 'veldt school' programme in which schoolchildren spent a week or two every year in bush camps under army supervision – playing sport, going on hikes, and attending lectures on topics including national security and how to contribute to the fight against 'insurgency'.<sup>2</sup> Over 361 of these camps were run in 1984 alone, while participation in the cadet system had been mandatory for white government schools since 1977.<sup>3</sup>

Were these measures successful? White South Africa's enormous appetite for the kind of images the government was giving them a taste for can be clearly seen in its reading habits. Prior to the introduction of television in the mid-1970s, one of the most popular media in the country (especially among 14-19 year olds), were Afrikaans-language photo-story books such as *Kaptein Caprivi* ('Captain Caprivi') and *Grensvegter* ('Border Fighter'), which enjoyed a

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<sup>2</sup> Frederikse quotes the text of one such lecture as follows: "We must make use of our superior knowledge to outwit the communists. How do we get this knowledge? Listen to the radio. Read all the papers. We must be spiritually prepared." This remark highlights the established and well-recognised importance of the mass media in the government's war for ideological control of the white public - see J Frederikse, *South Africa: A Different Kind of War* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1986), p.9.

<sup>3</sup> G Cawthra, *Brutal Force: The Apartheid War Machine* (London: International Defence & Aid Fund (IDAF), 1986), p. 67. Rondebosch Boy's High School in Cape Town, an exemplar of the cadet system, had gone so far as to include an artillery section in its cadet force under the direct supervision of the SADF.

circulation of around 40 000 per issue.<sup>4</sup> In a society with a white population of only around two million, these figures represent a considerable demand, which is rendered even more significant when the content of these publications is examined. Both *Kaptein Caprivi* and *Grensvegter* feature white male heroes meeting the incursions of European communists and their African lackeys with swift and decisive retaliation; typically, their victory is shown as making South Africa a safer place for peace-loving whites and gaining them the ‘adoration of their girlfriends’.<sup>5</sup> Concepts such as the *rooigevaar* (‘Red threat’) and *swartgevaar* (‘black threat’) were thus already well established in the South African media in 1971, as was the need to meet these threats with violent force. By 1971, the counter-insurgency conflict against SWAPO (South West African People’s Organisation) in Angola was already five years old, and it was from this fertile source that the photo-stories drew their inspiration.<sup>6</sup>

However, despite this clear evidence of the militarism of South African society, the blurring of borders between the civilian and military spheres was not yet as pronounced as it later came to be, and thus while white society was certainly militaristic, it was not yet militarised to the degree required for it to be considered a garrison state. Indeed, during this period government policy kept military commitment to clandestine and deniable levels and strictly delineated parameters, with the government’s primary approach being based on the détente politics favoured by Prime Minister BJ Vorster. Vorster’s intent in his use of détente politics was to achieve the support of black Africa for the Apartheid government, and such an approach precluded unpopular moves such as direct military intervention in neighbouring

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<sup>4</sup> K Jochelson and F Bluntman, ‘Shopping for war: an analysis of consumerist militarism’, in J Cock and L Nathan (eds.), *War and Society: The Militarisation of South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1989), p.303. Of course, a circulation of 40 000 implies a much higher readership – perhaps in excess of a million.

<sup>5</sup> Cawthra, *Brutal Force*, p.51

<sup>6</sup> W van der Waals, *Portugal’s War in Angola* (SA: Ashanti Publishing 1993), p. 151. Significantly, the SADF also funded similar comics and photo-stories (such as *Warrior*) aimed at black readers, but because black South African were excluded from the military until much later in the war, these works focused more on the importance of resisting terrorist infiltration and propaganda than on organised military service for the good of the mother country.

states.<sup>7</sup> While Angola remained a Portuguese colony certain limited military actions were entered into after being deemed acceptably low profile; one such initiative was the establishment in 1968 of a joint South African/Portuguese air command in South West Africa to provide air support for joint anti-insurgency operations.<sup>8</sup> However, these operations were kept small and remained the province of the police and special forces.

In a similar vein, in the early 70s the establishment of strong interest links between the commercial and military spheres of South African society had not yet taken place. While the need for a local arms industry after South Africa's transition to a Republic (and exit from the Commonwealth) in 1961 had led to the creation, in 1968, of two parastatals – Armscor and the Armaments Board – through which arms development and procurement respectively could be managed, these bodies were mere shadows of the state-financed juggernauts they would soon become. Armscor's starting capital, for instance, was only R100 million; by 1986, just seven years after the rise of the post-Vorster hardliner government, it would be worth R1.4 billion and form, with its fifteen factories and eight directly owned subsidiaries, the third largest industrial concern in South Africa.<sup>9</sup>

South Africa before 1975 was thus a society in which the civilian sectors of government and society, although under threat from a nascent military-mindedness within the Nationalist party, still maintained their own distinct agendas and identity. This bipolar state, however, was not to last. When Portugal began its rapid withdrawal from Angola and Mozambique in 1974, increasing pressure from military hardliners like Botha led to a parliamentary decision to send South African advisors into Angola to support the FNLA<sup>10</sup> and UNITA against the

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<sup>7</sup> P Stiff, *The Silent War: South African Recce Operations 1969 – 1994* (SA: Galago Publishing, 1999), p.59.

<sup>8</sup> Van der Waals, *Portugal's War in Angola*, p. 134

<sup>9</sup> Cawthra, *Brutal Force*, pp. 98-99

<sup>10</sup> Here and elsewhere in this dissertation, abbreviations are used. These are clarified on p. iii.

MPLA.<sup>11</sup> However, the first clash between the MPLA and UNITA at the battle of Norton de Matos accomplished little except to show how outmatched UNITA really was, and with great reluctance Vorster increased the South African force to battalion strength and provided for light armour backup – exactly what the hardliners had been asking for all along.<sup>12</sup>

The hardliners' frustrations at the failure of détente and the increasing relevance of military action to the escalating Border War situation, as well as Vorster's failure to 'contain' the Angolan intervention, sounded the death knell for the civilian faction of the Nationalist government. In a 'bloodless coup' in the wake of the Information Scandal of 1978-9 (in which the Vorster government's complicity in an international disinformation scheme using state funds was publicly exposed), Botha leapfrogged Vorster's heir apparent, Connie Mulder, to become State President. The securocrats were now firmly in control, and, as Tomaselli and Louw put it, 'South Africa woke up one morning in August 1979 to the discourse of 'total strategy', the 'total onslaught', and 'total war'.<sup>13</sup> The Botha faction had already formulated a strategy to avoid the failures of inaction they attributed to their predecessors; as early as 1975, Botha had outlined this strategy in a Defence White Paper:

*Defence strategy embraces much more than military strategy. It involves economy, ideology, technology and even social matters, and can therefore only be meaningful and valid if proper account is taken of these other spheres ... [this], in fact, is the meaning of 'Total Strategy'.<sup>14</sup>*

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<sup>11</sup> Stiff, *The Silent War*, p 105. Stiff further suggests that this move by the hardliners was specifically timed to coincide with the absence of Vorster's right-hand man, General Hendrik van den Bergh, from South Africa. Van den Bergh, as head of BOSS, was Vorster's primary policy advisor with respect to military matters, and had been involved in an energetic 'dirty tricks' campaign against Botha and his supporters (who were mostly based in BOSS' rival department, Military Intelligence) for several years at this stage. This had included bugging phone lines and interfering in operations such as the disastrous Operation DINGO in November 1974. DINGO, a military-run project best thought of as South Africa's equivalent to the 'Bay of Pigs' fiasco, involved the training and equipping of Zambian refugees with the aim of unseating Kenneth Kaunda. It came to a miserable conclusion when BOSS operatives arrived at the training camp without warning, loaded the dissidents into trucks, drove them to the Zambezi River, and convinced them to cross – only to be annihilated by a strong Zambian force waiting in ambush. To this day suspicions remain that BOSS and Van den Bergh tipped off the Zambians and brought about the end of Operation DINGO to appease Kaunda (Stiff, *The Silent War*, pp. 39-41).

<sup>12</sup> H Hamann, *Days of the Generals* (Cape Town: Zebra Press, 2001), p.30.

<sup>13</sup> K Tomaselli and E Louw, *Militarization, Hegemony and the South African Media, 1976-1986*, paper presented at the 19th Annual ASSA conference, University of Durban Westville, July 1988, p.6

<sup>14</sup> Cawthra, *Brutal Force*, p.27

Under Botha, therefore, the military sphere had gained control of the government, thereby erasing the distinction between the regime's political and military objectives and taking South Africa one step closer to Lasswell's garrison state.

Following the imposition of an international arms embargo against South Africa in 1977 in response to the security forces' brutal suppression of the Soweto riots, another change of the *status quo* with respect to the sources of social power became necessary. Since the embargo outlawed all arms and equipment sales to the security forces (including the Department of Prisons and BOSS), new sources of war material for the burgeoning security forces had to be found. In many cases, this was achieved through front companies located outside South Africa such as 'Electronic Magnetic Logistical Component Technical Consultants and Manufacturers (Pty.) Ltd', which only existed to purchase weapons and war materials on the international market and feed them back to the Reconnaissance Commandos. In other cases, weapon systems were also manufactured locally by subsidiaries of the armaments giant Armscor, which gained considerable prominence during this era, as mentioned previously.<sup>15</sup>

While Armscor may have embodied the notion of intertwined military and civilian spheres (its board of directors included the Chief of the SADF and the SADF's Director-General of Finance), such closeness had many direct equivalents in the rest of the private sector. This occurred on two levels: firstly, a direct level in which companies depended on the military for income. This was the case for Armscor's estimated 1500 civilian subcontractors and for firms such as Nissan, Mazda, Atlas Aviation and Magirus-Deutz who had entered official partnerships with the SADF to produce military vehicles.<sup>16</sup> In addition, various corporate concerns depended on the SADF not only for advertising revenue (the SADF being a major customer through its need to promote national service and the various attendant programmes

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<sup>15</sup> Stiff, *The Silent War*, p.233

<sup>16</sup> Cawthra, *Brutal Force*, p. 99

such as Ride Safe, Sleep Safe, and the sale of Defence Bonds), but also for access to the national serviceman market through SADF-published armed forces periodicals.

The second level on which the boundary between civilian and military interests had become erased was a more subtle one, based on the Botha government's explicit goal of soliciting business support through a commitment to providing a stable local business environment, highly conducive to easy investment and low running costs through investment incentives and anti-union action. In much the same way as the rise of the Botha government represented a fusion of military and political objectives, therefore, it also came to represent a fusion of military and business objectives. Tomaselli characterizes this 'marriage of convenience', with particular reference to the English-language media, as follows:

*... the English press is as much a part of the System as its Afrikaans counterpart. While it wishes to see the end of apartheid, it remains wedded to the class structure which underlies racial capitalism. Although scornful of the politics of 'total strategy', it is tied to it because the strategy is designed to ensure economic stability in the face of change.*<sup>17</sup>

By the late 1970s, therefore, the transformation of South Africa from the Vorster-era police state, in which domestic action took precedence over foreign intervention, to the Botha-era military state, was irreversibly under way. This transformation can be thought to have reached its conclusion in 1986 with the declaration of the first national State of Emergency, when the reporting media – the primary *means of norm creation* in Mann's model of social power – were officially placed under the regulatory control of the Department of Information.<sup>18</sup> This control, exercised through a variety of channels, was at once blatant and subtle; under the

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<sup>17</sup> K Tomaselli, "'Adapt or Die': Militarization and the South African Media 1976 – 1982', in *Reality*, p.10. Tomaselli's criticisms may well overstate the point, and their application to *all* South African media is perhaps unfair; certainly, several media groups (such as the *Vrye Weekblad* and *Weekly Mail and Guardian*) remained committed to unbiased reporting despite press restrictions.

<sup>18</sup> K Tomaselli, "'Adapt or Die': Militarization and the South African Media 1976 – 1982', in *Reality*, vol. 16, no. 1, January 1984, p.6. From this point onwards, the terms 'ideology', 'ideological war' and 'propaganda' are used interchangeably in this dissertation simply because the ideology (or, system of ideas) supposedly held by the Apartheid government, with all its talk of 'separate development', peace and stability, had from the very beginning been little more than a tissue of lies over Apartheid's real agenda – the promotion and preservation of Afrikaner interests. Hence, any promotion of 'ideology' was 'propaganda' or, given the embattled status of Apartheid, 'ideological war'.

National Security Management System implemented in the early 1980s, a shadow government of five hundred Joint Management Centres staffed by military personnel was put in place alongside the regular organs of government and industry – from iron and steel production to forestry and mass media – to ensure that ‘nearly every governmental action, particularly in black areas, [stemmed] from the State President’s “total strategy” perspective’.<sup>19</sup>

From the JMCs information flowed upwards to the State Security Council, an extra-parliamentary body comprised of the State President, the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Justice, Defence, and Police, the Director of the National Intelligence Service, the head of the SADF, the Commissioner of the SAP, and the Secretaries of Foreign Affairs and Justice. The SSC’s task was to ‘to implement ... total strategy and to co-ordinate the activities of all branches of the government in response to the “total onslaught”’.<sup>20</sup> The SSC’s had direct access to several implementary arms (such as the NIS and security police), and could therefore act completely independently to keep a tight reign on the press and society at large.

Davis attributes the Apartheid government’s success in this regard to three factors: the maintenance of a facade of press freedom, the ‘broad and ill-defined’ guidelines which separated legal versus illegal reportage (and thus gave editors the unenviable task of self-censoring their texts rather than risk a punitive government reaction), and the campaign of intimidation and climate of scrutiny created by the security forces’ untiring efforts to probe ‘suspect reporters’ through mail interception under the Postal Act and the use of informers and undercover investigators.<sup>21</sup> Davis’ first point is well encapsulated by Phelan, who after a

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<sup>19</sup> S Davis, *Apartheid's Rebels: Inside South Africa's Hidden War* (Craighall, RSA: A.D. Donker, 1988), pp. 162-163

<sup>20</sup> HD Stadler, *The Other Side of the Story: A true perspective* (Pretoria: Contact Publishers, 1997), p.149

<sup>21</sup> Davis, *Apartheid's Rebels*, p. 168

page-long description of the various regulatory arms and powers of the South African censors, writes (presumably for the benefit of American readers):

*Finally, picture these agencies of repression presiding over a plethora of varied media that in no way resemble the great gray yea-saying of totalitarian states, but rather remind one of our own vulgar and sassy, bright and brave, deep and honest confusion of voices ...*<sup>22</sup>

These points are worthy of reinforcement. It is difficult for post-liberation readers (and, indeed, writers) to imagine that the Apartheid government could have exercised the kind of control it did. Certainly, Apartheid South Africa had no *TASS*, no House Un-American Activities Committee hearings for prominent film stars and directors, and no Glorious People's Cinema. Many people, too, nowadays exhibit a peculiar pride that within their own mind, at least, the Apartheid government never managed to co-opt them into becoming supporters of its policies – but for the vast majority of these well-intentioned supporters of the rights of the individual, this is the only victory they can claim. By as early as 1982, white South Africans had generally come to believe the government's view on the need for national security: Grundy, quoting from a 1982 opinion poll, indicates that 80% of white respondents chose either 'definitely disagree' or 'inclined to disagree' as their response to the statement 'the communist threat against this country is exaggerated by the government'. Even among supporters of the official parliamentary opposition (the Progressive Federal Party), who voted against the Nationalists and proclaimed themselves liberals, a majority (56.1%) of respondents did not feel the government's claims to be far-fetched.<sup>23</sup>

In such an environment, with the vague and ill-defined threat of security force action against anyone who dared oppose those explicit control measures that did exist, white South Africa fairly fell over itself to appropriate those aspects of the social control process that lay beyond the government's reach. It was this self-policing and self-censoring behaviour, supported by

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<sup>22</sup> J Phelan, *Apartheid Media: Disinformation and Dissent in South Africa*. (Westport: Lawrence Hill, 1987), p. 9

<sup>23</sup> K Grundy, *The Militarization of South African Politics* (Oxford: OUP, 1987), p. 12

strong reinforcement of the status quo by the government's propaganda machine, that makes it possible to speak of government 'control', albeit indirectly, of South African film.

By the mid-1980s, then, the war on the border was being fought with a hitherto unprecedented level of commitment and aggression, South Africa was practically in a state of civil war, with large areas of the country only partially under security force control, and government intervention in the economic, political and ideological lives of South Africans was, as demanded by 'total strategy', finally concrete and comprehensive. However, the Apartheid garrison state's final form in 1986 was the clear result of its growth during the late 70s and early 80s, and was in many senses simply a formalisation and integration of the social control policies developed during these years. As such, any understanding of South Africa post-1986 is best informed by an examination of the years leading up to the State of Emergency.

Laying the groundwork for the embattled final years of Apartheid had been no easy task for the government. Resistance to conscription was high and military morale low; between 1976 and 1980, the number of court-martials increased from 486 to 2146 per year, with all but 58 of these resulting in convictions.<sup>24</sup> Among the major problems facing the SADF in 1980, as identified by Major-General Pretorius, its Director-General of Civic Action, were the lack of appeal national service held for white conscripts, the prevalence of conscientious objection, and difficulties with pay.<sup>25</sup> The Border War was also becoming extremely expensive; even the official figures indicate that defence spending had quadrupled from R692 million in 1974 to R2 465 million in 1982 (some 20% of total government spending).<sup>26</sup> These figures, of course, do not reflect amounts spent in black-market deals and other non-disclosed trades.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> P Frankel, *Pretoria's Praetorians: Civil-military relations in South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p.135-7

<sup>25</sup> Cawthra, *Brutal Force*, p.46

<sup>26</sup> *Cape Times*, Friday 4 January, and Frankel, *Pretoria's Praetorians*, p.72

<sup>27</sup> M Wetz, 'This is an off-the-record discussion tonight', in *Noseweek*, No. 15, April/May 1997, p. 5 & p.15

A large component of this expense stemmed from the way Armscor, the supposed great white hope of the SADF, had begun to haemorrhage money. Despite its claim to use a majority of locally-produced parts to assemble weapons built under license like the Mirage fighter jet, most of these systems had to be extensively supplied with foreign-made parts which could not be manufactured in South Africa, and this – as well as the expensive weapon licenses themselves – cost Armscor far more money than it was able to bring in. According to a 1984 report to the United Nations, R900 million out of South Africa's total arms procurement budget of R1620 million was spent on overseas purchases, while attempts to create a strong export flow over the same period failed dismally, bringing in no more than R150 million despite the far-ranging efforts of Armscor representatives.<sup>28</sup> By this stage of South Africa's international isolation, few countries combined the wealth to place large orders for South African military goods and the dubious moral compass to wish to do so, and in this light Armscor, despite several hard-won deals, never quite managed to pay its own way.

For the Botha government's total strategy-motivated garrison state to work, however, such obstacles had to be overcome. As Regan points out:

*Organising a society around the military is, of course, not a straightforward task ... the public must be socialised to accept the condition of the continued expectation of violence, lest they resist the transfer of resources from civilian to military consumption. The perception of a threat is a necessary condition for this diversion of resources ...*<sup>29</sup>

The Apartheid government approached this challenge through the use of a highly efficient and well-developed propaganda machine. Building on the *rooigevaar* rhetoric already popular with Vorster-era politicians, the various public figures of the Botha regime took pains to vilify the methods and motivations of liberation forces whenever possible, thereby supporting the financial and manpower requirements of the state in terms of the security forces. At a Red Cross dinner in Windhoek in 1978, Justice MT Steyn, the Administrator-General of South

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<sup>28</sup> Cawthra, *Brutal Force*, p. 99

<sup>29</sup> Regan, *Organising Societies for War*, p.144

West Africa, characterised the liberation movements as 'ever-hungry' and prone, in their attacks on civilian society, to target 'the aged, the very young and the female part thereof'.<sup>30</sup> Depictions of this type, in which terrorists were described as cruel and murderous, were enthusiastically adopted and developed upon by the Botha administration. By 1980, according to an International Defence and Aid Foundation pamphlet, the media had become 'instrumental in bombarding its audiences with the government's ideas on "communism", "terrorism", "swartgevaar", and "patriotism"'.<sup>31</sup> Tomaselli and Louw consider the aims of such depictions to have been an attempt to 'generate a "war-psychosis" amongst whites, while trying to pacify blacks'.<sup>32</sup> The military actions justified by these attributions, in turn, served to further consolidate the sense of urgency within the white electorate. As Grundy points out:

*Every raid into Angola and Mozambique, every cross-border strike was used to reinforce this viewpoint as arms, literature, and captives were displayed to confirm the Soviet penetration of the region.*<sup>33</sup>

Once again, this practice evokes Regan's depiction of the garrison state in which the 'structure of military influence is dependent on the perception of an external threat'.<sup>34</sup>

Ascherson, writing in 1985, confirms Grundy's view, stating that

*Many [Afrikaners] subscribe to the new propaganda concept of 'total onslaught', the idea that the Soviet Union has now launched its final do-or-die offensive against South Africa through the black states to the north.*<sup>35</sup>

How close to the truth was the view of reality propagated by the government? An examination of the available figures both in terms of the Border War and the ANC/MK-led local struggles suggests that it was close enough to demonstrable reality to convince a significant proportion of whites. Although incidents of domestic sabotage and bombings had been a feature of the ANC's armed struggle since the 1960s, between 1976 and 1986 the frequency of these

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<sup>30</sup> *What the South African Red Cross did for our prisoners of war in Angola, Jun. 1976 – Aug. 1978*, pamphlet.

<sup>31</sup> Unknown, *IDAF Fact Paper on Southern Africa No. 8: The Apartheid War Machine* (London: IDAF, 1980), p.49

<sup>32</sup> Tomaselli and Louw, *Militarization. Hegemony and the South African Media, 1976-1986*, p.3

<sup>33</sup> Grundy, *The Militarization of South African Politics*, p.12

<sup>34</sup> Regan, *Organising Societies for War*, p.10

<sup>35</sup> Ascherson, N, 'The Fire This Time', *The New York Review of Books*, July 18, 1985, Volume XXXII, Number 12, p.4

incidents more than tripled.<sup>36</sup> The number of people injured or killed annually by ‘terrorist attacks’ also rose sharply, from less than 100 in 1982 to more than 500 in 1988.<sup>37</sup> Simultaneously, a study conducted of media reports dealing with bombing indicated a drift in target preference: while 88% of targets in 1981 were ‘hard’ (militarily significant), by 1986 this percentage had shrunk to a mere 10.3%.<sup>38</sup>

Bringing the war to the white population had been a stated goal of the ANC since its 1985 ‘Call to the Nation’ proclamation in which it urged ‘our people and, more specifically, our fighting youth’ to ‘find ways of organising themselves into small mobile units [to] act in an organised way in both black and white areas against the enemy’.<sup>39</sup> The government’s propaganda response, predictably, was to denounce the ANC’s strategy as an incitement to race war and a massacre of all whites. In reality, the ANC’s shift in strategy was the inevitable response to the adoption by the SADF in the early 1980s of ‘Area Defence’ as a cost-cutting anti-insurgent tactic. Area Defence shifted border monitoring and civil defence responsibilities to paramilitary groups of local farmers trained and equipped by the SADF; in 1982 General Constand Viljoen called such groups ‘our first line of defence [against] any terrorist threat’.<sup>40</sup> This attitude prompted Joe Modise, the head of MK, to make the following statement in a press conference:

*[These farmers] have been organised into military formations and their main task is to inform on us and to confront us when they feel strong enough to do so ... we feel the time has come to clean them out.*<sup>41</sup>

Irrespective of where the blame for this re-targeting should be most appropriately laid, the fact remains that the ANC’s armed struggle was increasing in vigour, sophistication, and

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<sup>36</sup> Cawthra, G, Kraak, G, and O’Sullivan, G (eds.), *War and Resistance: Southern African Reports* (UK: Macmillan Press, 1994), p. 123

<sup>37</sup> Stadler, HD, *The Other Side of the Story*, p. 194

<sup>38</sup> Stadler, HD, *The Other Side of the Story*, p. 67

<sup>39</sup> Cawthra, Kraak and O’Sullivan, *War and Resistance*, p. 123

<sup>40</sup> Cawthra, *Brutal Force*, p. 229

<sup>41</sup> Cawthra, Kraak and O’Sullivan, *War and Resistance*, p. 125

prominence in the white mindset, reaching a point where in June 1986 an advertisement containing the following text could appear on the front page of the *Cape Times*:

*Beware of urban bombings! Flying glass disfigures. Mr Solar-Man makes glass safer by applying a clear safety film. OFFICES, VEHICLES, SHOPS, FACTORIES.*<sup>42</sup>

The white electorate had clearly internalised the Apartheid government's propaganda message regarding the danger posed by 'communist subversives'. The obvious question in this respect, and the concern of this dissertation, is how this was achieved in an ongoing way through film during the period under review. This question is addressed both in the examination of the South African media and film industries conducted in Chapter 3 and subsequently, by way of an analysis of the fourteen films under examination, in chapters 4-6.

By 1986, the government was no longer even attempting to convince white society that a permanent state of war could be avoided. As Botha told the nation that year, the choices for South Africa had now come down to 'war and a dishonourable, fearful peace'.<sup>43</sup> If South Africa had been approaching the status of a garrison society since 1975, by the end of 1986 the transformation was complete and the Border War – for soldier and civilian alike – had 'become a permanent and inescapable part of South African reality',<sup>44</sup> with almost one out of every two white males aged 18 to 45 either actively engaged in military service or directly eligible for call-up into the reserve forces.<sup>45</sup> The war that they were being deployed to fight, however, was hardly a static affair, and as will be discussed in Chapter 7, the government's response to it and the ideological shifts made in its name remained dynamic right up to the South African withdrawal and the beginning of the transition to democracy in 1988-89. However, a brief summary of the war's course (which will be dealt with more thoroughly alongside the movie analyses) is useful before concluding this chapter, to provide a general

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<sup>42</sup> *Cape Times*, 16 June 1986

<sup>43</sup> *The Cape Times*, 13 June 1986

<sup>44</sup> Frederikse, *South Africa: A Different Kind of War*, p.68.

<sup>45</sup> Unknown, *The Apartheid War Machine*, pp. 35-38

overview of the war and to familiarise the reader with the four main phases of hostilities. Each of these phases had its own character and propaganda requirements with respect to the South African public, and an analysis of Border War movies made between 1971 and 1988 can only be conceived through an awareness of these particularities.

The first phase of the Border War, stretching from 1966 to 1974, involved a low-profile counter-insurgency war fought with the assistance of the Rhodesian and Portuguese colonial governments in Mozambique and Angola in defence of the so-called Zambezi river line.

The second phase, stretching from the Portuguese withdrawal and the commencement of Operation SAVANNAH in 1975, to the formation of Zimbabwe in 1980, involved heightened aggression and increased commitment of conventional as well as counter-insurgent forces.

The third phase commenced with Operation PROTEA in 1981, South Africa's first explicit confrontation with FAPLA (the military wing of the MPLA), and lasted until the Lusaka Accord of 1984, and involved large-scale conflict between FAPLA and South Africa's army-in-occupation in southern Angola.

The final phase, following the resumption of hostilities in 1985, was characterised by battles on an unprecedented scale as the Cuban expeditionary force and South African armoured, mechanised infantry, air, and artillery units each tried to win an ideologically and militarily significant last battle, and lasted until the cease-fire in 1988. For Angola, of course, this was far from the end of the war – but it is as far as this dissertation goes.

### Chapter 3: The Border War at the Movies

Before directly addressing the issue of film as history/history through film as exemplified by the Border War genre, it is useful to first examine the work of several writers on the South African government's propaganda aims of the time. Although limited in particular references to the South African motion picture industry, the work of these writers nonetheless serves to illustrate the presence of explicit, targeted aims, varied by type of media and intended audience, in the government's campaign against dissent and uncertainty. These aims, and the degree of success enjoyed by the government in realising them, allows the status of the films as objects of history to be assessed; furthermore, it allows the ways in which Border War films adopt the template established by other propaganda-as-entertainment media (such as many Second World War Hollywood films) to be examined.

One writer who has paid particular attention to the Apartheid government's attempts at ideological manipulation is anti-Apartheid figure Donald Woods, who was forced into exile for his liberal stance and association with Black Consciousness leader Stephen Biko. Woods, examining externally (i.e., internationally) presented government-backed views of South Africa, writes that 'Pretoria works partly through indirect or subliminal methods, but most visibly and challengeably through media statements, both editorial and advertising.'<sup>1</sup> Woods categorises the ten main types of pro-government statement found in these media items; of these, one ("Power") is of relevance here because of its applicability to depictions of the Apartheid military.<sup>2</sup> Woods' definition concerns overt and subtle statements implying

*... that white control of South Africa is complete and comprehensive; that Pretoria's military might guarantees the status quo permanently, and that black opposition is neither significant nor strong enough to challenge it effectively.*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Woods, D, *Apartheid - the propaganda and the reality* (London: Commonwealth Secretariat International Affairs Division, 1985), p.3

<sup>2</sup> His categories are: Power, Vital Economic Link, Allies of the West, Apartheid Reformed, Black Wellbeing, Black Disunity, Freedom and Democracy, Economic Strength, Historic Right, and Appropriate Moral Standards.

<sup>3</sup> Woods, *Apartheid - the Propaganda and the Reality*, p.3

Filmic statements of this type are common in the Border War film genre as examined in this dissertation, and their classification – under the category ‘South African forces are superior in every sense to their opposition’ – is discussed in more detail in the movie analyses.

The government’s propaganda efforts with respect to the popular broadcast media is also examined in the work of Louw and Tomaselli. Here, the government’s objectives are given as the following: marginalisation of the extreme right, increased prominence of tactical/military terminology, depiction of the ANC/UDF as lacking popular support, avoidance of any depictions of overt racism, and strengthening the ‘influence of military strategists’ definition of reality’ and the ‘rhetoric of siege’.<sup>4</sup> The successful attainment of these objectives, they claim, was crucial in concealing the ‘fractionalisation’ (splitting into interest groups and power blocs) of the Apartheid regime and getting the public to internalise the idea of ‘total war’, thereby legitimising the Apartheid state’s cross-border raids and the conscription system, and creating a sympathetic climate for the permanent arms industry.<sup>5</sup>

Tomaselli, Louw, and Woods concur, therefore, that control of the South African media was crucial in hijacking public opinion (foreign and domestic) during this time. Prior to the State of Emergency, this was achieved in three main ways – disinformation, concealment from the public eye through censorship, and subsidy incentives. These, as the processes by which troublesome media content was concealed from the public and replaced with information confirming the *status quo*, merit closer attention in order to expose the lengths to which the Apartheid government was willing to go to control South Africa’s ideological climate, and the techniques it used for doing so. As will be made clear in Chapter 7, these techniques had direct equivalents in the government’s attempts to control the content of the Border War films examined in this dissertation.

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<sup>4</sup> Tomaselli and Louw, *Militarization. Hegemony and the South African Media, 1976-1986*, pp.5-6

<sup>5</sup> *Idem.*, pp. 39-42

Disinformation as a tactic for social control in South Africa was far from the invention of the Botha government. Indeed, the very scandal which allowed it to seize power – the Information Scandal of 1978-9 – had revolved around the exposure of the Vorster government's involvement in shady deals around public media companies which were intended to serve as fronts for disinformation. Disinformation, or the creation of 'false news' to broadcast the government's views and advance its aims, was however more cautious under the Botha government than under its predecessor – perhaps because the control of existing news sources was seen as more important than creating them from scratch. Nonetheless, the Botha government enthusiastically used disinformation to support its military commitment to Jonas Savimbi's UNITA in Angola, providing extensive radio facilities and logistical support for that movement's propaganda radio station VORGAN ('The Voice of the Resistance of the Black Cockerel'). VORGAN, an anti-MPLA 'hate radio' station supposedly located at Savimbi's media nexus at his base in Jamba but actually located in and relayed by South Africa).<sup>6</sup> Brittain describes how South Africa also ensured a steady supply of sympathetic media attention for Savimbi:

*[The] centrepiece of the Jamba experience was Savimbi himself. He honed his public relations skills in press conferences and interviews, mainly with the lazy and compliant Johannesburg press corps or selected European and American journalists keen on the anti-communist cause of the time. His fluent duplicity was swallowed uncritically by many journalists who should have known better ...*<sup>7</sup>

Disinformation also occurred closer to home. In 1980, the SADF revealed that it was currently either involved in, or directly responsible for, the production of no less than 20 separate print publications at a total cost to the government of over R300 000.<sup>8</sup> These publications included a glossy magazine for each of the branches of the security forces, propaganda comics and brochures aimed at black and white South Africans alike, an

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<sup>6</sup> E Windrich, 'The laboratory of hate: The role of clandestine radio in the Angolan War', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, August 2000, Vol. 3, Issue 2, pp 208-211. VORGAN was eventually classified as hostile propaganda during the UN-mediated cease fire 1998/99, and was briefly shut down. However, with the resumption of the civil war, VORGAN – also known as the 'laboratory of hate' – was soon back on the air.

<sup>7</sup> V Brittain, *Death of Dignity: Angola's Civil War* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), pp. 11-12

<sup>8</sup> Cawthra, *Brutal Force*, p.44

orientation guide for conscripts featuring a cartoon character called *Roger Raakskiet* ('Roger Shoot-Straight'), and other pro-war items.<sup>9</sup> According to a 1989 assessment by the ECC:

*The white community is exposed to pro-conscription propaganda daily... [there] are countless television and radio news reports, documentaries and dramas that portray military service as a worthwhile personal experience and as essential for the defence of the country. SADF publications are sold through news agencies, glossy pamphlets are sent to conscripts with their call-up papers, and the Chief of the SADF writes open letters in the press to incoming National Servicemen...*<sup>10</sup>

Disinformation was thus certainly a part of the Apartheid government's media arsenal. However, as mentioned previously, disinformation of the type examined by Woods was more often aimed at overseas sources less able to experience the reality of the South African situation for themselves, while control of the domestic media environment was achieved through the process of concealment.

Concealment had two main forms. One was outright suppression under the Defence Act. Targets for suppression included not only the domestic media but also any foreign news source containing material unacceptable to the government's aims.<sup>11</sup> The very fact that suppression was occurring was often concealed through the government using media editors to do its dirty work, ostensibly for the good of the country; an example of this practice occurred during Operation SAVANNAH in 1975, when an 'inner circle' of newspaper editors were gathered together and bound to secrecy regarding the (as yet undisclosed) South African involvement. In this case, the suppression was justified by the government's claim that revealing the situation while it was still occurring might 'cause panic or harm the country's international relations.'<sup>12</sup> Suppression was also considered useful for preventing the

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<sup>9</sup> For an examination of depictions of the war in SADF periodicals of the time, see C Erichsen, 'Shoot to kill: Photographic Images in the Namibian Liberation/Bush War', *Kronos*, No. 27, November 2001, pp. 158-182.

<sup>10</sup> Unknown, *Out of Step: War Resistance in South Africa* (London: Catholic Institute for International Relations (CIIR), 1989), p.54. The ECC, or 'End Conscription Campaign', was a liberal human-rights oriented anti-draft organisation which was eventually banned under the State of Emergency, according to Minister of Law and Order Vlok, because of the '... dangers posed by the ECC to the safety of the public, the maintenance of the public order, and the termination of the State of Emergency' (*Cape Times*, 23 August 1988).

<sup>11</sup> R Harvey, 'SABC TV' in Burgess et al, *The Great White Hoax: South Africa's international propaganda machine* (London: Africa Bureau, 1977), p.19

<sup>12</sup> H Hamann, *Days of the Generals*, p.34

'contamination' of South African society by the international protest culture, which had arisen in the 1960s. For this reason, many foreign anti-establishment anthems of the time – including 'We Shall Overcome', 'If I Had a Hammer', 'Blowin' in the Wind', and 'The Times they are a-Changing' – were branded as subversive by the SABC and consequently denied airplay.<sup>13</sup> A similar attitude was taken to locally produced protest music.<sup>14</sup> Given that the SABC had full control of the means to broadcast, and a virtual media monopoly in this regard, such a denial was a potent mode of concealment.

The second form of concealment was censorship. Censorship allowed seemingly non-aligned media statements and films to be released into the public awareness having been subtly altered to match the government's propaganda aims. For instance, the 1976 film *Terrorist* could only be released after several government-ordered cuts and additions had taken place. These cuts were not aimed at those elements of the movie that might shock or offend the viewer, such as graphic depictions of violence or sex, but rather at the movie's treatment of the three terrorists whose attack on a white farm it portrays. This treatment was considered too positive: the filmmakers were told to re-edit the movie so that '[the] emphasis is thus changed from a successful to an unsuccessful terrorist attack'.<sup>15</sup>

An incomplete version of *Terrorist* was all that could be located at the NFVSA. Even this truncated version, however, suggests that the government's final agenda regarding the movie was eventually served, as it manages to portray the terrorists as somehow both menacing and incompetent. Noteworthy is the movie's depiction of household servants as potential allies of the terrorist cause; Paulus and Selina, the farm servants, change from innocent and loyal caricatures busying themselves with their daily tasks, to inscrutable agents of the enemy, all

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<sup>13</sup> Phelan, *Apartheid Media*, p.118

<sup>14</sup> M Drewett, 'It's my Duty, Not My Choice', in van der Merwe, *Telling Wounds*, p. 127

<sup>15</sup> K Tomaselli, *The Cinema of Apartheid: Race and Class in South African film*. (London: Routledge, 1989), pp. 20-21.

within a few minutes. No other stimulus is needed for this transformation than the arrival of the 'real' terrorists at the farm – a clear reference both to the idea of the black masses as fundamentally untrustworthy, and to the idea of terrorism as a contaminating presence, whose eradication served the best interests of all South Africans regardless of colour. Direct censorship of this kind existed side-by-side with a more subtle form involving the withholding of critical production assistance. One of the movies examined in this dissertation, *Grensbasis 13* (1979), had to undergo five script re-writes before the security forces would approve the script and extend their considerable prop and location aid to the film.

The forms of disinformation and concealment mentioned above, however, were only a prelude to the much harsher media regulations of the State of Emergency, a nation-wide declaration of martial law made by the government in July 1986.<sup>16</sup> Under these regulations, many forms of reporting previously controlled at an editorial or censorship level were made explicitly illegal; these included reporting on the conduct of the security forces, promoting a 'subversive statement', or reporting from any black residential area without prior permission.<sup>17</sup> The application of these procedures benefited from a neat set of circular definitions, enshrined in law, which allowed them to forbid any media activity in an 'operational area' under the Defence Act, and declare any area as an 'operational area' under the Police Act.<sup>18</sup> To screen a certain area from media attention, therefore, and render any reportage issuing from it illegal, all that was needed was this simple process.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> A partial State of Emergency had been declared the year before. However, the 1986 declaration was the first time that such a proclamation had been extended to cover all of South Africa.

<sup>17</sup> G Slovo, *Subverting Apartheid: Education Information and Culture under Emergency Rule* (London: IDAF, 1990), p.12

<sup>18</sup> Cawthra, Gavin. *Brutal Force*, p.49

<sup>19</sup> As mentioned previously with respect to certain mainstream media groups such as the *Vrye Weekblad*, the government did not always succeed in this regard. In addition, far beyond the censors' reach, the ANC merely switched to less formal media such as taping broadcasts from their own clandestine radio station, Radio Freedom, and smuggling them into the country for later distribution. For more information on this topic, refer to Unknown, *Addendum to ANC Submission to TRC on The Role of Media Under Apartheid*.

If the State of Emergency represented the pinnacle of the government's attempts to prevent dissident messages from reaching the public, the subsidy system acted to support films containing the 'right' kind of message. Although the subsidy scheme predated the Botha government, paying out over R10 million in subsidies to local film-makers between 1971 and 1977, this was a mere shadow of the massive support the industry would receive after 1977.<sup>20</sup> Between 1979 and 1981 the amount paid in subsidies amounted to over R100 million, with R50 million going to 'A-Scheme' films directed at white audiences and R34 million to 'B-scheme' films directed at black audiences.<sup>21</sup> This money was not provided up front; to achieve an A-Scheme subsidy, which could cover up to 70% of costs, a film had to make at least R100 000 at the box-office within two years; the percentage covered dropped off as box office revenue increased, but overall the benefits remained high, with a minimum subsidy of 30% even if the film earned over R500 000. To encourage Afrikaans-language filmmakers, the subsidy scale was more generous for these films than for English films; in addition, South African cinema theatres relied heavily on the two-movies-a-week ritual of the loyal Afrikaans-speaking families who accounted for 50-60% of their revenue.<sup>22</sup> These factors combined to make the creation of local movies a delicate process based heavily on the projected popularity of the movie and the ease with which it could be screened: a bad box-office take would leave the financiers unable to recoup most of their costs, and any failure to appeal to the movie-watching core of Afrikaner filmgoers was tantamount to financial suicide. The inevitable result was self-censorship. As Botha and van Aswegen put it:

*Gedurende die jare sestig en sewentig het veral die subsidiesisteem die vervaardering van sosiaal-kritiese rolprente ondermyn ... selfsensuur het 'n groot rol gespeel: min finansiers was bereid om finansies aan 'n film te gee wat die gevaar sou loop om verbied te word of 'n kommersiële mislukking te wees.*<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> K Tomaselli, *The S.A. Film Industry* (Johannesburg: African Studies Institute, 1980), p.19

<sup>21</sup> Blignaut and Botha, *Movies - moguls - mavericks*, p. 80

<sup>22</sup> M Botha and M van Aswegen, *Beelde van Suid-Afrika: 'n Alternatiewe Rolprentoplewing* (Pretoria: Raad vir Geesteswetenskaplike Navorsing, 1992), pp. 16-17

<sup>23</sup> Botha and van Aswegen, *Beelde van Suid-Afrika*, pp. 16-17. 'During the 60s and 70s, the subsidy system undermined the production of socially critical movies more than anything else ... self-censorship played a big role: few financiers were prepared to give money to a film which ran the risk of being banned or being a commercial failure'

Ostensibly put in place to encourage the growth of a local film industry, therefore, the subsidy system in fact punished dissent and rewarded affirmations of the *status quo* as comprehensively as the processes of disinformation and concealment examined above. Its creation and continuance under the Vorster and Botha administrations ensured a steady flow of ideologically manipulated locally made films into the public domain. The messages of such films, dependant as they were on government goodwill and (as mentioned previously) security force support for any topic involving the military, could be more easily controlled by the government, and films featuring Afrikaans dialogue and recognisable local scenes also provided an efficient means of communicating with the heartland of the Nationalist support base – the primarily Afrikaans-speaking rural areas. Movies were a highly popular media in these areas, with takings providing around 25% of the film industry's annual national revenue, and thus any message successfully introduced to audiences through them was ensured of high visibility and direct transmission to a sympathetic electorate.<sup>24</sup>

It is thus clear that South African films (in general) and Border War films (in particular) underwent manipulation at several stages to ensure their compliance with government-backed ideology. This interweaving of filmic depiction and historical context allows the films under discussion to be located within two relevant issues: the first concerning the debate over the role of film in history as encapsulated in the writings of central figures in the field such as Robert Rosenstone and Robert Brent Toplin, and the second concerning other films (most notably Second World War Hollywood films) which attempt a similar use of propaganda as entertainment. In what follows, these debates form the background to, or justify, the study of Border War films, the appropriateness of these films for historical examination, and the form that this examination takes.

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<sup>24</sup> Tomaselli, *The S.A. Film Industry*, p.95

Robert Rosenstone, a pioneer of the new kinds of thinking which have emerged about film as history in recent years, writes that '[a] century after the invention of motion pictures, the visual media have become arguably the chief carrier of historical messages in our culture.' Such a claim does not require much beyond ordinary reflection to substantiate, at least with respect to the enormous presence and prominence of the visual media in modern life. Besides the world-spanning television and motion picture industries, other media such as the Internet and even printed material have attained a visual richness unprecedented in their respective histories and the messages they carry are indeed lent power and gravity through the growing use of image-rich visual techniques and eye-catching graphic design. Historical film has been one of the media forms to benefit from this trend, as computer technology and huge budgets allow movies with historical settings to dramatically recreate the past for their viewers.

However, as Rosenstone points out, films with a historical setting and historical films are not necessarily the same thing, and it is here that he draws the distinction between 'traditional' and 'new' historical film, a distinction firmly rooted in three factors: intent, content, and form.<sup>25</sup> Intent can be understood in terms of the motive behind the creation of a movie, typically education or entertainment in traditional historical films such as costume- or docudramas and a many-layered understanding of an event or situation in new historical films; with respect to Border War movies, as will be discussed in what follows, the intent is to confirm and strengthen the Apartheid state's militarised ideology. Content, on the other hand, is defined by Rosenstone as the route by which the film attempts to reach its intended goal, whether through an academic approach aimed at revealing truth in traditional film, or the desperate search for a historical connection or a viable heritage in new film. In Border War films, evocative and familiar stereotypes (such the elite Afrikaner warrior who out-guerrillas the guerrillas), presented alongside authentic props or familiar locations, often constitute the

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<sup>25</sup> R Rosenstone, *Revisioning History: Film and the Construction of a New Past* (USA: Princeton University Press, 1995), pp. 4-5

film's content and the route by which it achieves the 'authentic' feel necessary to co-opt audiences into internalising its message. Finally, form refers to a film's narrative structure – a spectator's-eye third person view within a linear narrative progression (and minutely detailed environment) in traditional historical films, and an increasingly free-form reliance on new presentational forms such as montage, symbolism, and narrative discontinuity to bring meaning to the events portrayed in new historical films. In the case of Border War movies, the traditional 'invisible observer' storytelling mode was favoured over more experimental styles. This was to ensure audience support, a crucial consideration under the subsidy system.

Awareness of the characteristics distinguishing traditional from new historical film (as briefly introduced above) is necessary, Rosenstone says, because film-as-history should not be forced to play by the same rules as traditional written history. Strict empiricism, and the supremacy of the article or monograph, are out of place in Rosenstone's conception of 'history as vision' – that is, film as an interpretational medium closer to the oral than the written tradition, and one whose strength lies in creating a 'notion of cause and effect that is fictive – that cannot itself be documented'.<sup>26</sup> As Rosenstone puts it:

*A film is not a book. An image is not a word. This is easy to see (and say) but difficult to understand. At the very least it means that film cannot possibly do what a book does, even if it wanted to do so. And, conversely, a book cannot do what film does ... [the] rules of visual history have yet to be charted ...*<sup>27</sup>

At first glance, this seems a coherent position and one embodying the general trend towards a more open-minded approach to what is true and defensible in academic inquiry. However, historians such as Robert Brent Toplin view Rosenstone's approach with a degree of scepticism. Toplin, while acknowledging that the positions taken by Rosenstone and several filmmakers such as Daniel Walkowitz and Oliver Stone have 'awakened us to the need to

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<sup>26</sup> Rosenstone, *Revisioning History*, p.6

<sup>27</sup> R Rosenstone, *Visions of the Past: The Challenge of Film to our Idea of History* (UK: Harvard University Press, 1995), pp. 14-15

greet cinematic history with more tolerant and curious eyes', also points out that 'a consistently open-minded view ... [would] leave us unprepared to discriminate between an admirably filmed presentation of history and a poor one.'<sup>28</sup>

Toplin, thus, devotes his work to defining the 'rules of visual history' that Rosenstone refers to as 'uncharted' by examining the approaches filmmakers take to their subjects in the medium of historical film. He neither ignores nor trivialises the difficulties faced by the makers of historical film in terms of having to 'fill in the blanks' where the historical record is incomplete (frequently requiring the provision of thick description where there is none), cope with the influence of popular myth both on the interpretation of history and on any given audience's taste in film, and render significant stories down to medium-friendly chunks suitable for sale and screening. However, he does attempt to lay down the rules for how these difficulties might be faced and overcome without losing too much of their claim to the banner of 'history', and in the course of this systematisation of technique he identifies the 'four principal methods of cinematic history':

*... mixing fact with fiction, shaping evidence to deliver specific conclusions, suggesting messages for the present in stories about the past, and employing a documentary style to develop the 'Great Man' perspective on the past.'*<sup>29</sup>

Of these four, only one – the concept of the use of a 'Great Man' perspective – is not self-explanatory. It refers to the tendency to present a single character or small group as the main movers behind social change, rather than socio-structural forces such as class conflict, *à la* Marx. In film, the 'Great Man' perspective serves to satisfy the tastes of audiences for a recognisable hero. Toplin cites *All the President's Men* and *Norma Rae* (which deal with the Watergate scandal and unionisation in a textile mill respectively) as examples of this technique, although of course many others exist.

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<sup>28</sup> R Toplin, *History by Hollywood: The Use and Abuse of the American Past* (USA: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 9

<sup>29</sup> Toplin, *History by Hollywood*, pp. 13-14.

Toplin's aim in detailing these 'shortcuts of necessity' is twofold. Firstly, it provides a counter-argument to positions such as Rosenstone's, which hold that the medium of film as history is so different to the mediums already established in the traditional academic project that a systematisation of procedure is self-defeating because it robs film of precisely that which makes it unique. Toplin conducts just such a systematisation; whether or not his classification is complete, or represents the pinnacle of such an initiative, is irrelevant – the important thing is that it can be done at all. Secondly, Toplin might say, once the techniques used by filmmakers to overcome the difficulties mentioned above are clearly defined and understood, surely the same rules as apply elsewhere in academia – rigour, logic, coherency – can be applied to the study of film as history.

Before the products of Toplin and Rosenstone's positions can be profitably applied to the films under examination, however, one obvious problem presents itself: the fact that the fourteen films analysed were simply not conceived as works of history. As has already been mentioned, and as will be dealt with in more detail at a later stage, South African Border War movies were not made with the same 'view from the future' as movies dealing with similar wars elsewhere in the world. Rather, they were made *alongside* the war while it was progressing, even managing to foreshadow some elements of the war (such as South Africans fighting Cubans, as depicted in *Die Banneling* in 1971) rather than represent them some years after they had happened. In this respect, they resemble more closely the movies of earlier wars such as the Second World War, and indeed many conventions and techniques pioneered in these films will be shown to be clearly present in Border War films. It is this ancestry that allows the difficulty of reading them as historical films to be overcome.

Although the Border War films under examination did not post-date the war itself, like many 'command-level' Second World War movies (such as *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo*, made in

1944) they nonetheless attempt to answer a question – ‘how did we get here?’ – which is itself a (perhaps *the*) central concern of history and thus historical films. In the case of Border War films, however, it is not the only question for which answers are presented – answers to questions such as ‘where do we go from here?’ and ‘how do we get there?’ are also present in the moral and military landscape displayed in these films. The ‘here’ referred to is the state of interminable counter-insurgent and conventional war experienced by South Africa between 1970 and 1988; the ‘we’ may start off meaning ‘we viewers’, but if the film is doing its job this quickly changes to ‘we good South Africans.’ Like Hollywood war movies of the early forties, Border War films make attributions about friend and enemy alike, drawing the viewer into a conjured moral paradigm in which ‘we’ are right and ‘they’ are often beyond wrong – they are also bestial, cruel, incompetent, deluded, or any mix of these four. In this respect the military’s exclusive provision of material aid to pro-regime filmmakers is even more significant, as it enabled only those films supportive of the Border War to maintain the façade of ‘telling it like it is’ through the use of high-detail sets and authentic props – the same technique used by filmmakers attempting to ‘tell the true story’ of the Vietnam war ten years later (and a full twenty years after the war’s conclusion).<sup>30</sup>

It is also important to be aware of the general media blackout imposed by the Apartheid censors on the Border War. This feature was of great significance in establishing viewers’ relationships to Border War movies. Unlike the war in Vietnam, in which images direct from the combat zones were broadcast directly into American homes via television every night, South African audiences were not exposed to unrestricted reportage about the Border War either in visual or textual form. All that was allowed through – in addition to the doctored and manipulated reportage discussed above and (after the advent of television) several pro-war documentaries – were the Border War movies. Framed in dramatic terms and directed at

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<sup>30</sup> L Dittmar and G Michaud (eds), *From Hanoi to Hollywood: The Vietnam War in American Film*. (London: Rutgers University Press, 1990), p. 9

information-starved and receptive audiences (more than half of South Africa's cinema screens in 1988 were located in the Transvaal, the heartland of Nationalist support),<sup>31</sup> these films thus enjoyed a fairly clear field in terms of shaping the public imagination with respect to the war's causes, course, and likelihood of conclusion.<sup>32</sup> This made them a prime and profitable target for government intervention and the efforts of sympathetic (or, at least, non-dissident) filmmakers, and their consequent depictions of national service in palatable terms ranging from heroic endeavour to opportunity for personal growth were clear concessions to the propaganda goals of the government made under the guise of popular visual entertainment. Once again, the precedent offered by Second World War movies is clear. The war films of the 1940s were also released into a society that relied on them, both directly and through the use of newsreels, for information on the war, and the existence of the command-level films discussed above indicates that this prominence did not go unexploited.

The Apartheid government's attempts to manipulate the perceptions of the South African populace had been foreseen as early as 1969 by those opposed to its policies. In a strategy document created that year the ANC outlined this fear as follows:

*The enemy is aware, as we are that the side that wins the allegiance of the people wins the struggle. It is naïve to believe that oppressed and beleaguered people cannot ... [be] won over by fear, terror, lies, indoctrination, and provocation to treat liberators as enemies. In fact history proves that without the most intensive all-round political activity this is the more likely result.*<sup>33</sup>

All these factors suggest a single conclusion: that Border War movies can, indeed, be analysed as historical movies. They may not have been made to serve as historical documents for future generations – indeed, some might have seemed embarrassingly dated had they been watched even five years after their release – but they were produced to answer questions (or, stated differently, to dispel doubt and shape public opinion concerning the war), and it is

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<sup>31</sup> J Blignaut and M Botha (eds.), *Movies - moguls - mavericks: South African cinema 1979 – 1991* (Cape Town: Showdata, 1992), p. 77

<sup>32</sup> C Draper, 'Discourses of the Border War', in C van der Merwe and R Wolfswinkel, *Telling Wounds: Narrative, Trauma and Memory* (Cape Town: Van Schaik, 2002), p. 180

<sup>33</sup> Unknown, *Addendum to ANC Submission to TRC on The Role of Media Under Apartheid*, p. 5

precisely these answers which historical analysis, grounded in a conscious socio-political awareness of each film's context, is perfectly positioned to extract and interrogate.

Returning, by way of conclusion, to the usefulness of the debate on film as history introduced earlier in this chapter to the films under discussion in the following chapters, it seems clear that the unique position afforded by the films' half-in, half-out positioning with respect to the history of the Border War, and the style in which their analysis is to be conducted, allow a middle point between Rosenstone and Toplin's views to be achieved. Rosenstone's vision, while allowing for the traditional analysis of the films as 'reflections of the political and social concerns of the era in which they were made'<sup>34</sup> (which forms the bulk of the work done here), also transforms the irreducible atmospheres and senses of each film into rich sources of data thus allowing for a more open interpretive project. On the other hand, Toplin's more traditional approach allows the processes of invention present in each film – for the degree to which these movies are fiction dressed as fact rather than the reverse cannot be understated – to be understood and meaningfully reviewed in terms of their intent, content, and form. It is with these powerful tools that the movie analyses in chapters 4-6 are conducted.

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<sup>34</sup> Rosenstone, *Revisioning History*, p. 1

## Chapter 4: 'A Heroic Struggle against the Red Threat'

On 26 August 1966, 130 heavily armed South African policemen led by members of the newly formed Reconnaissance Commando entered into a brief skirmish with a unit of thirty SWAPO infiltrators entering South West Africa over the border with Angola.<sup>1</sup> This battle, instigated by the South Africans under the title Operation BLUE WILDEBEEST, was to be the first between the South African security forces and SWAPO in the area, but far from the last; for the hostilities initiated during BLUE WILDEBEEST would eventually become the opening salvoes of a conflict that would last more than two decades – the Border War.

Following the successful conclusion of BLUE WILDEBEEST, the 'Recces' were semi-permanently based at Rundu to counter further infiltrations; frequently operating without government sanction, Breytenbach's teams would cross into Angola and Zambia as the situation demanded to engage in a long-distance landmine duel with SWAPO. Back in Pretoria, the number of ZNDF casualties caused by the Recces' home-made landmines led to an angry summons from the head of BOSS; Breytenbach, knowing that General van den Bergh would take a dim view of his 'initiatives', blamed the Portuguese – who were, as it happened, engaging in similar actions against UNITA and its SWAPO allies at the time.<sup>2</sup>

Elsewhere, plans were being laid to ensure the defence of the 'Zambezi River line' via a tripartite defence agreement between Rhodesia, Portugal, and South Africa. From the South African position, the loss of the buffer zone offered by the white-ruled states on its northern borders would let the rising tide of black nationalism into South Africa itself – an African

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<sup>1</sup> Stiff, *The Secret War*, pp.36-37, and Van der Waals, *Portugal's War in Angola*, p. 151. Lieutenant van der Waals was the South African military attaché to the Portuguese government in Angola, and second in command of the unit during the operation after Captain Jan Breytenbach, the brother of poet Breyten Breytenbach and a soldier who would continue to have an extremely high profile in the special forces throughout the war.

<sup>2</sup> Stiff, *The Secret War*, p.45. According to Stiff, however, Army Chief General Louw not only knew about the Recces' activities but unofficially condoned them – yet another example of the military/civilian division in the pre-Botha Apartheid state.

version of the “Domino Theory” which had taken the United States to war in Vietnam on the other side of the world. As a highly-placed official in the Ministry of Defence put it:

*... in the light of black nationalism, it would be of great importance for the RSA that Angola, as a well disposed neighbouring state, should remain under Portuguese control. It was consequently of the utmost importance that South Africa should support them in their struggle.*<sup>3</sup>

This support extended beyond the moral; besides a joint air command mentioned previously, South Africa assisted Portugal in commando operations against FRELIMO as far afield as Dar es Salaam.<sup>4</sup> By 1973, the SADF was launching raids against SWAPO from a 1250km long demilitarised zone, designated ‘1 Military Area’, along the Angola/South West Africa border, and was assisting Rhodesian forces in raids against ZANLA forces in Mozambique.

1974 brought a severe upset to the Zambezi River Line alliance with the release in Lisbon of *Portugal e o Futuro* (‘Portugal and the Future’), a book by General Antonio Spínola, second in command to Portugal’s chief of Defence. Spínola had penned the first text to pin-point and vocalise the Portuguese people’s dissatisfaction with their government’s African wars – wars which, over 13 years, had seen over 41 000 Portuguese soldiers killed or wounded and whose drain on the treasury had resulted in an inflation rate of 23%.<sup>5</sup> The book’s first two print runs sold out almost immediately; by the time the third was ready, the Portuguese government under Marcello Caetano had realised the danger it represented, banned it, and fired Spínola. But it was too late. Capitalising on the widespread dissatisfaction of the Portuguese people, a cabal of highly placed army officials seized control of the government and, on 27 April 1974, announced that Portugal would be withdrawing from Africa and granting Angola, Guinea-Bissau and Mozambique their independence. One leg had crumbled underneath the tripartite alliance.

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<sup>3</sup> Van der Waals, *Portugal’s War in Angola*, p. 134

<sup>4</sup> Stiff, *The Secret War*, p.46-52.

<sup>5</sup> Hamann, *Days of the Generals*, p.2

In South West Africa, South Africa and Rhodesia, a flood of Portuguese soldiers and special forces operators, seeing little future for themselves under majority governments, left their homelands and were absorbed into their adoptive nations' security forces. In Angola and Mozambique, meantime, Portugal was hastily putting its house in order by assembling coalition governments from the major political factions of each country. By mid-1975, though, amidst the Portuguese pullout, the makeshift Angolan government had disintegrated leaving three factions – UNITA, the MPLA, and the FNLA – battling for supremacy. International aid poured in to these groups with the CIA, Zaire and South Africa funding, arming, and training the secessionist FNLA and (ironically) Maoist UNITA, and Soviet Russia sending vehicles, tanks, and weapons to the communist MPLA.<sup>6</sup> The date for independence had been set – 11 November 1975 – but none of the factions seemed to be prepared to share an independent Angola with the other two. An MPLA attack on Nova Lisboa on 2 October drew South African troops into the fighting alongside their UNITA protégés, leading to the bloody battle of Norton de Matos and, indirectly, the uncontrolled escalation of the South African armed involvement at the insistence of the military establishment. Small-unit antiterrorist actions had finally become a Border War.

It was in 1972, amidst the approach to war outlined in the preceding pages, that the first true Border War movie was released: *Kaptein Caprivi* ('Captain Caprivi'), directed by Albie Venter for Brigadiers Films. Although *Die Banneling* ('The Exile'), another war film examined in this dissertation, had been released the previous year, the box-office success of *Kaptein Caprivi* and its sequel as well as the fact that they were both based on a popular and long-running photo-story series of the same name (and as such embody a conceptual approach to the war which predates the movies themselves), necessitate a suspension of the chronological narrative of this chapter.

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<sup>6</sup> Stiff, *The Silent War*, pp.100-112

*Kaptein Crivier* opens to military marching band music over its opening titles and the red gauntlet logo of Brigadiers Films, a martial tone that effectively foreshadows the film's content. Its ideological positioning is firmly established within the first few minutes, in a prologue delivered by none other than ex-State President C.R. Swart. Swart walks on-screen, sits on a park bench, removes his hat and addresses the viewer directly in the style of a senior politician delivering a fireside chat. South Africa, he says, is a land of beauty, unparalleled diversity, and above all peace. This peace between its people is maintained through order, and this order makes it a focus of the envy of other nations. The background music swiftly changes to a menacing orchestral score as the screen displays a black-and-white close-up of Mao Tse Tung; following this, a succession of images in ever-increasing close-up depict aggressive and heavily armed black soldiers in camouflage, who are identified as terrorists by Swart's voice-over. It is forces such as these, the viewer is told, who wish to bring down the idyllic South African state, and that is why South Africans must remain vigilant – '*dag na dag, nag na nag, jaar na jaar*'.<sup>7</sup>

In the movie's opening shot, two white *bakkies* – the iconic light delivery vehicles of the South African farmer – drive slowly towards the camera across rolling hills. Suddenly, one explodes in a titanic blast, having struck a landmine. The occupants of the other *bakkie* (all white men dressed in South African styles no doubt familiar to the audience) scramble out of the vehicle with expressions of anguish on their faces, only to be met by a host of leering guerrillas led by a podgy Red Chinese officer. The movie's plot foundation thus established, the scene cuts to a sleek SAAF Mirage jet on a photoreconnaissance mission. Colonel Hugo, a senior officer in civilian clothes, uses these photos to brief the square-jawed Captain Crivier himself, on the mission that forms the film's central concern – rescuing the kidnapped farmers. Crivier, played by Will Seale, is a mountainous man with blonde hair, a Kitchener-

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<sup>7</sup> 'Day after day, night after night, year after year.'

esque handlebar moustache, and strongly defined (perhaps plucked) eyebrows constantly set in a fierce arch. The viewer learns that the four farmers from the opening scene have been taken hostage by the terrorists, and taken over the border; the South African government has been given seventy-two hours to release all political prisoners, or they will die. Caprivi says that he assumes that the government will not dignify their wishes; Hugo is quick to put him at ease:

*Soos jy weet, Caprivi, wat hulle 'politiese gevangenes' noem en wat ons 'politiese gevangenes' noem, verskil hemelsbreed. Vanselfsprekend sal ons nie aan hulle eise oorgee nie.*<sup>8</sup>

Caprivi learns that the landmine was set and the kidnap conducted on South African soil by terrorists operating from a base 'across the border' (we are never told in which country; here, as elsewhere, 'the border' is a socio-military state rather than a geographical certainty). It is against this backdrop of complete moral legitimacy, thus, that Caprivi is told to assemble a trustworthy group of men for a daring rescue attempt.

His first recruit, Buks, is shown operating a tractor-driven plough on his farm as Caprivi's helicopter arrives. He is, at first, reluctant to go along with the plan; obviously the demands of civilian life have softened his resolve to fight. But between Caprivi's stern rebukes and Buks' discovery that one of the captives is his own brother, he eventually agrees.<sup>9</sup> The second recruit is Clive, played by real-life mercenary Ken Hare. Clive is English-speaking, a master of stealth and hand-to-hand combat, and requires only the sight of Caprivi to know that duty calls – not a word is exchanged between the two men, only a nod of assent. Tommy, a rear-echelon soldier desperate for action, is the third member of the team; Caprivi himself and Filemon, his faithful black tracker (whose presence, of course, is taken for granted, with no appeals to duty or lust for action seemingly required) make five.

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<sup>8</sup> 'As you know, Caprivi, what they call 'political prisoners' and what we call 'political prisoners' are as different as can be. It goes without saying that we will not accede to their demands.'

<sup>9</sup> Buks and his brother are orphans, who grew up without anything after '*daai spul*' ('that bunch') took their land. This features strongly in his decision to finally go along; he wants a better future for his own kids. 'That bunch' are never identified, but in the early 70s in post-colonial Africa it most likely refers to black nationalists.

Caprivi's team is briefed on the task that awaits it; Hugo's plan of attack involves nothing less than the complete extermination of the camp and all its inhabitants. The men are also given the identity of the man behind the terrorists, the heartless Colonel Ling Fu, (played by Manny Parkes). Ling Fu is a ghoulish and haggard figure, eyeless behind John Lennon-style sunglasses, and his manner and fondness for his vicious-looking quirt is a clear evocation of the stereotypical 'cruel Jap' of Second World War movies. He proceeds to torture and kill one of the prisoners, intending to force them to sign a declaration that they are spies, not farmers, captured on the terrorists' side of the border abducted from South Africa.

This is a neat piece of ideological positioning, one typical of the movie's overall stance; the terrorists are obviously aware of the power of international opinion, and seek to turn it against the beleaguered South Africans. Of course, their lust for execution belies their supposed plan to exchange the hostages for the freedom of South African political prisoners – they are obviously not planning to hand over the captives even if their demands are met.<sup>10</sup> The film's visual treatment of the terrorists builds an atmosphere of bare savagery; fast, jerky action shots of terrorists at bayonet drill and shouting war cries, interspersed with extreme close-ups of their contorted faces and glaring eyes, leave the viewer in no doubt that in the terrorist, one finds some ghastly piece of primordial Africa coiled and ready to spring. It is this impulse which the communists are nurturing and exploiting to suit their own nefarious ends.

Waiting for the three surviving South Africans to crack, the terrorists pass their time with perverse acts of cruelty; in one such case, the prisoners are allowed to spend hours digging an escape tunnel, only to find concrete foundations a metre down while their captors chuckle outside. In the face of this kind of intimidation, the prisoners are sorely tempted to give in;

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<sup>10</sup> Only once does Ling Fu's second-in-command query what will happen if the South Africans find out that some of the prisoners are dead; Ling Fu merely grins and assures him that this will not happen.

however, all but one remain steadfast – after all, their deaths once they have given the terrorists what they want, are certain – and even the single waverer is bullied back into line. As Caprivi’s team draws ever nearer the prisoners, led by the handsome Beukes (Rob Alexander), manage to escape in a jeep. However, the jeep becomes stuck and when the wavering prisoner deserts them rather than help push it free, they are recaptured. For his pains, the coward is machine-gunned in the back.

No sooner has the escape attempt been foiled than the other prisoner is executed right in front of the horrified Beukes. He is now alone, and back in Ling Fu’s power. But the viewer knows that the indestructible Kaptein Caprivi is drawing relentlessly near, and it has become clear by now that a few hundred terrorists are not even going to slow him down. Caprivi and his men are super-soldiers; they never miss a shot, and their martial arts skills repeatedly allow them to beat the howling Chinese in hand-to-hand combat. They reach the camp, and infiltrate it effortlessly; Filemon strips a uniform from the first terrorist they kill, in an unintended nod to the practice of disguising black Recce operators and members of 32 Battalion as terrorists while on ‘pseudo-ops’, and takes up a position in one of the camp’s machine-gun towers.<sup>11</sup> When they spring Beukes and learn of the fate of Buks’ brother, Buks goes berserk and charges into Ling Fu’s office, raking it with bullets; Ling Fu goes down in a heap, and the camera lingers on the walls as Buks’ bullets shatter photos of Chairman Mao and send them tumbling to the floor next to him. Buks pays for his lack of discipline with his life; Ling Fu’s aide shoots him in the back from an adjacent room.

Suddenly, all is chaos. Caprivi’s men detonate the explosives with which Clive has seeded the camp; their aim of seeing the camp ‘*in die lug.[ge]blaas*’<sup>12</sup> is quickly realised. During this, the

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<sup>11</sup> A ‘pseudo-op’ was an operation in which black troops, disguised as SWAPO/PLAN guerrillas, would conduct attacks on the civilian populations in the operational area which would hopefully be traced back to rogue elements of these organisations rather than the SADF. See Stiff, *The Hidden War*, pp 161-362

<sup>12</sup> ‘Blown sky-high’

climactic final scene, the only black soldier doing any fighting is Filemon; the terrorists' only resistance comes from the Chinese officers while the black troopers stumble from explosion to explosion and are ripped apart by ground fire and deadly volleys of tracer bullets from Filemon's position. To say that they die in their droves is to accurately gauge the movie's intention in this scene; Caprivi and his men literally annihilate the terrorist presence, comprising several hundred men, in just a few minutes before retreating victoriously with Beukes in tow. The day is saved, and (presumably) the South Africans can now avoid the unacceptable option of freeing political prisoners.

It is perhaps easy to dismiss *Kaptein Caprivi* as simplistic war-fantasy. However, the film (and many other Border War films) contain clear references to the Second World War films produced in Hollywood during the 1940s, a feature which merits closer examination; in addition a close reading of *Kaptein Caprivi* permits the extraction of several points embedded in the film's moral stance with regard to depictions of counter-insurgent warfare and the nature of duty. These points crop up again and again in the films that follow *Kaptein Caprivi* (most obviously, of course, its sequel – *Aanslag op Kariba*), becoming a kind of ideological template for all films dealing with the border conflict, and are as follows:

Firstly, **South Africa never attacks; it only counter-attacks.** Terrorist forces always initiate hostilities by crossing the border to perpetrate their crimes; if this is to be countered (or, just as frequently, avenged), retaliation must find them on their home ground. When they do counter-attack, however, **South African forces are superior in every sense to their opposition.** Obviously, *Kaptein Caprivi* represents an extreme form of this super-soldier status in which only the undisciplined Buks falls victim to an enemy bullet. This point ties in clearly with the previous one; the understanding given by these films is that terrorists are

cowards who pick unarmed targets and avoid the security forces precisely because they are well aware that they will lose in any kind of 'fair fight'.

Another clear feature of the *Caprivi* movies is that **terrorists are cruel, rapacious and bestial**. They have no respect for the 'rules of war', and condone any kind of vicious act. Similarly, they cannot be negotiated with. In *Kaptein Caprivi*, for instance, the Chinese do not hesitate to beat information out of a nun at a mission station, and will not give the rest of the prisoners their freedom if Beukes agrees to sign their document. This makes it clear to the viewers that **fighting terrorism is the right thing to do**. Caprivi tries to strengthen Buks' resolve by pointing out that, '*Alles is verlore as ons nie ons land verdedig nie*.'<sup>13</sup> This line, which occurs twice in the movie (once in conjunction with Buks' family and once with his death) has a clear message; fighting terrorism may be a dirty business requiring dirty work, but sacrifices – of life, of married bliss – must be made to protect those we love.

With such a clear definition of the duty of moral man, it is unsurprising that, in the *Caprivi* movies, **shirkers put themselves and others at risk**. The cowardly prisoner who deserts his friends in *Kaptein Caprivi*, Sam the bus driver in *Aanslag op Kariba*, and many others die terrible deaths due to their own cowardice. Their ends make it clear that the pitiless forces of terrorism can neither be fled from nor avoided, only faced head-on. In a similar vein, **the best fighters are disciplined, just, and compassionate**. After nearly falling victim to a sniper, Tommy shares his fear that he doesn't have what it takes to fight terrorists – specifically, that he is not able to kill – with Caprivi. Caprivi counsels him; later, Tommy elects not to kill a radioman clubbing him unconscious with his rifle before joining the general melee outside. Tommy has thus shown mercy without losing his effectiveness; by contrast, Buks' frenzied attack on Ling Fu causes his own death. Clearly, a good warrior is not a red-eyed killer (a

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<sup>13</sup> 'All is lost if we do not defend our country'.

depiction which is reserved for the black terrorists); he is a soldier, a man of honour, and one whose moral position is as unassailable as his military one. Finally, in the Caprivi movies and those that draw from its precedent, **African terrorists are the dupes of overseas powers.** It is only through the self-serving interference of foreign communists that the black man – shown by the presence of ‘good blacks’ such as Filemon to be essentially decent in the right circumstances – participates in the savagery of terrorism.

As well as the thematic conventions listed above, the Caprivi movies – and Border War films made before 1980 in general – also included elements from sources external to South Africa. Of particular interest here are the many conscious evocations of World War Two Hollywood movies such as *The North Star* (1943), *Thirty Seconds over Tokyo* (1943), and *The Purple Heart* (1944). These movies fell into clear patterns depicted by Quart and Auster as follows:

*The Pentagon and Hollywood did not want films which filled the screens with images of [dead GIs] ... what they did want were war films which exhorted Americanness, creating mythical, ethnically and occupationally heterogeneous platoons which were supposed to be the embodiment of American democracy.*<sup>14</sup>

The resulting blend of entertainment and ideological conditioning relied as heavily on negative depictions of the enemy as it did in harmonious and positive ones of US troops. Higham and Greenberg characterise these movies’ depictions of the Japanese – cut loose from the concession made to Germans in similar films who, while certainly cruel or malevolent, were still familiar to and descended from common European stock to American audiences – as ‘snarling ... rapists and torturers. Yellow perils incarnate, with identical horn-rims framing their slit Oriental eyes, who grunted and jabbered their way through countless Pacific jungles’.<sup>15</sup> The presence of these two thematic conventions – heterogeneous and ‘good’/competent against homogeneous and ‘evil’/incompetent – in the Caprivi movies is clear, with Caprivi’s team as the heterogeneous heroes and Ling Fu’s men and the guerrillas

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<sup>14</sup> L Quart and A Auster, *American Film and Society since 1945* (UK: Macmillan, 1984), p.14

<sup>15</sup> C Higham and J Greenberg, *Hollywood in the Forties* (London: A. Zwemmer, 1968), p. 87

as the opposition, a clear indication of the similarity in function between these movies and World War Two movies introduced above: both entertainment and ideological conditioning.

*Kaptein Caprivi* was followed a year later by its sequel, *Aanslag op Kariba*. Ostensibly set in and around the Kariba dam complex, the film was in fact shot at a dam in South Africa because the Kariba area was, at that stage of the Zimbabwean independence struggle, too dangerous. This led to some obvious factual discrepancies – the presence of a slipway rather than sluice gates, for one – and this estranged relationship with fact in favour of convenient fiction is one that permeates the rest of the film in varying degrees. Another Brigadiers release, *Aanslag op Kariba* follows in its successor's footsteps almost exactly, especially with respect to its foregrounding of international, rather than home-grown, terrorists. Apart from the usual Red Chinese (played by several of the same actors as in *Kaptein Caprivi*) and a hulking monolithic Eastern European, there is only one black terrorist – and his Air Libya suitcase marks him from the very first scene in which he appears as a protégé of overseas powers.

Facing them (although they do not know it yet) is the original *Kaptein Caprivi* team (minus Buks, of course), who have assembled to be the grooms at Beukes' wedding and accompany him on his honeymoon trip to Kariba. Beukes and his angelic wife Anna are on a tour bus when the terrorists hijack it. The bus contains a range of characters which would have been familiar enough to the audience to serve as a cross-section of white society: a soon-to-be-grandmother (played by the ubiquitous Beth Finney), a giggly society girl, a misanthropic professor of entomology, a pair of squabbling sisters, a priest, and the newlyweds themselves. Of course, everyone (like in *Kaptein Caprivi*) speaks Afrikaans – including the Rhodesian soldiers.

The three terrorists who perform the hijacking, on the other hand, represent the three faces of terrorism in the landscape of white fear: black, Russian, and Chinese. Their emergence from among the ranks of the passengers, if the bus can be taken as a microcosm of white society, is thus a clear metaphor for the ‘hidden threat’ of concealed terror. They use the bus to get past the Rhodesian and Zambian customs posts,<sup>16</sup> rendezvous with the rest of their team to pick up more supplies,<sup>17</sup> and then take over the dam facility in a welter of bloodshed in which anyone they encounter is shot without hesitation, whether soldier or scientist. It is at this point, when the terrorists broadcast their ransom demands to the horrified public that Caprivi and his men learn of their friend’s fate. The terrorists – calling themselves the ‘Free People of Africa Movement’ – are demanding the immediate resignation of Ian Smith and an immediate pledge before the UN to create a majority government in Rhodesia.<sup>18</sup> If these demands are not met, they will blow up the dam, causing widespread flooding and death as well as striking a mortal blow to Rhodesian industry through the loss of the dam’s hydroelectric output.<sup>19</sup> If a rescue attempt is made, they will execute the bus passengers.

Once Caprivi and his men have heard of the situation at the dam, they lose no time in making themselves known to the Rhodesian authorities, who (confusingly) seem happy to hand over both support and authorisation for a rescue attempt despite describing Caprivi’s plan as ‘*byna onmoontlik*’.<sup>20</sup> The team lifts off into the sunrise in borrowed helicopters and to the strains of ‘*Die land is joune, die land is myne*’.<sup>21</sup> Caprivi and the others are not fighting for South Africa

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<sup>16</sup> True to the traditional depiction of black characters in the other *Caprivi* movies, the Zambian border guards are by turns ruthless and comical; rather than detecting the terrorist hijack in the first place, their only concern is to make sure the tourists buy souvenirs and that the bus’ floor is (sloppily) disinfected.

<sup>17</sup> The opening scene shows three unwitting white fishermen stumbling across the terrorist cache: they are machine-gunned where they stand and their boat sinks into black water as the titles scroll.

<sup>18</sup> The choice of ‘outlandish demands’ in the *Caprivi* films is an ironic one, given that both freedom for political prisoners and majority government in Rhodesia/Zimbabwe would become reality less than twenty years later.

<sup>19</sup> The viewer has, at this point, been made more than aware of Kariba’s significance as a wonder of forward-thinking engineering and progress. By associating themselves with its potential destruction, the terrorists are being depicted as forces of reversal and regression, willing to return Africa to savagery to achieve their goals.

<sup>20</sup> ‘Practically impossible’.

<sup>21</sup> ‘This land is yours, this land is mine’. It is not clear whether this song was a commercial release or written specifically for the movie. Certainly, Brigadiers also operated a record label, and the theme song for another of their movies – *Flying Squad* (1971) – had made it to the top of the South African charts the same year.

here, but for the principle that terrorists must not be allowed to dictate the lives of others, and in support of the friendly, professional, and doughty Rhodesians.<sup>22</sup>

Arriving at the dam, Caprivi quickly formulates a plan; Tommy and Filemon are to create a distraction by provoking a firefight with the Zambian guards on the other side of the bridge while Clive rappels down an elevator shaft and Caprivi gains access via the outflow pipes. This is no sooner said than done, and the infiltrators effortlessly penetrate the 'well defended' dam interior. Things go less well for Tommy and Filemon, though; Tommy is captured by the terrorists and Filemon is forced into hiding.

The situation is similarly parlous inside the dam. As hysteria and defeatism begin to rear their ugly heads, Sam – the bus driver – begins to plead with the others not to do anything that will jeopardise their safety. His sabotage of their first escape attempt earns him widespread scorn. Even Frieda, the society girl who has already had to be slapped into a composed state by Professor Swart, viciously calls him a '*swaap*'.<sup>23</sup> Nonetheless, after the priest shows them a ghastly scar across his entire stomach – wide enough to have disembowelled him – and grimly intones '*Dit het my eie mense aan my gedoen ... dit is terrorisme*',<sup>24</sup> even Sam's resolve is temporarily hardened. Led by the indomitable Beukes (and assisted by Tommy once he is thrown in with them), the prisoners kill their guard, and begin clambering through the bridge's internal structures towards freedom. The camera shots and hazards encountered during this phase conform to the likely tastes of its target audience; manly strength and dexterity are all that keep the group moving, and the attractive female characters (Anna and

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<sup>22</sup> As Caprivi grimly declares at the beginning of the movie, '*Geen grensmoelikheid gaan hierdie troue verhinder nie*' ('No border trouble is going to interfere with this wedding').

<sup>23</sup> 'Imbecile'. Professor Swart is played by none other than Franz Marx, who would later become the soap opera king of South Africa with *Egoli*.

<sup>24</sup> 'My own people did this to me... *this* is terrorism'; '*mense*', used in this context, probably means either 'farm workers' or 'flock', although it translates directly to 'people'. The priest, dressed in an unlikely combination of khaki safari suit and dog collar, has already been firmly established for the viewer as a brave and serious man, and furthermore as one who knows what he is talking about. A scar as ugly as his, the brutal attack which must have caused it, and the idea that those closest to him could have been influenced by outsiders to do such a thing, is another assault-in-passing on the terrorists' methods.

Frieda, both of whom are wearing mini-dresses) spend an unlikely amount of time in leg-level low angle shots or being caught in gushing torrents of water. At some point, with the terrorists close on their heels, Sam's courage fails him again and no amount of urging or manhandling will convince him to go any further. Beukes leaves him with the team's only weapon (lifted off the corpse of their guard during their escape) to give him a fighting chance, but it does them no good; Sam is killed without getting off a shot and the others are trapped in a sump as the water level slowly rises.

Fortunately, Caprivi and Clive are not far behind, and in a fast-paced hand-to-hand melee and gunfight, three terrorists are killed and the hostages are saved. Only two terrorists remain now, planting a mine against the dam wall. Filemon spots them and sneaks after them, but meets with some unspecified fate off-screen and is killed. Caprivi sees his drifting body and leaps in after it, thereby discovering the terrorists in SCUBA gear planting the bomb. A fight with spear guns and diving knives ensues, with Caprivi (as always) victorious. The bomb, however, cannot be disarmed; it must be flown as far from the wall as possible, and Clive is flown out at the end of a helicopter tether to effect this. But catastrophe strikes when his sleeve becomes snagged on the mine. Rather than doom the pilots too, Clive unclips himself and falls with the bomb into the water, where a titanic explosion signals his end. Once again, the familiar notes of '*Die land is myne, die land is joune*' start up over Caprivi's grim features and the titles. Clive has died bravely, sacrificing his all for the cause and victory; Rhodesia is safe, and the dam intact. Caprivi's team has done it again.

Despite its obvious similarities to its predecessor, *Aanslag op Kariba* nonetheless manages to introduce some new conventions to the South African Border War film. Firstly, we are introduced to **noble sacrifice**; Clive dies that others may live, a kind of death that is absent from *Kaptein Caprivi*. It is tempting to classify Filemon's death in a similar manner; however,

it is more likely that like his motivationless entrance, Filemon's exit from the *Kaptein Caprivi* storyline is not regarded as significant enough to warrant depiction. The camera's lingering pan over his floating face is no doubt intended to convey a sense of loss, and we know that he exists within the same bounds of group loyalty as Clive, Tommy and the others (his presence at the wedding being sufficient evidence of this, and the care with which Caprivi extracts a primed landmine from under him during the camp assault in *Kaptein Caprivi*), but the absence of even a death scene is a convincing argument against him being a fully-fledged character on the same level as the other (white) soldiers. We never know how Filemon meets his end – shot, stabbed, or ambushed – and although his body leads Caprivi to the mine and saves the day, this is more of a coincidence than an act of post-mortem heroism. It thus seems that **black heroism is subordinate to white heroism**; black troopers may do their duty in Border War films, and rightly so, but it is whites who must save the day.

*Aanslag op Kariba* was the last of the *Kaptein Caprivi* titles released by Brigadiers, and the waning appeal of the franchise can be attributed to the increasing burdens placed on the common South African citizen in the name of national security. Caprivi and his super-soldiers, while no doubt good entertainment and popular with white, mainly Afrikaans-speaking youth, were leagues apart from freshly recruited national servicemen. Only one Border War movie of the time could be said to have such a focus, and until the release of *Ses Soldate/Six Soldiers* in 1975, it stood in a field all of its own. This was *Die Banneling* ('The Exile'), produced in 1971 by David Millin and Roscoe Behmann.<sup>25</sup>

*Die Banneling* focuses on the character of Ben Gericke (played by Francois van Heyningen), once a doctor but, as the movie starts, just released from Pretoria Central Gaol after serving a sentence for the murder of his wife – a charge he maintains to be false. Gericke wants nothing

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<sup>25</sup> Behmann and Millin were, by this stage, a well-established team whose credits included popular movies such as *Majuba* and *Shangani Patrol*.

more than to return to his neglected role as a parent and provider for his son Rudi (played by Dirkie van den Bergh), but he is plagued by debts arising from his legal defence, and is at his wit's end when a chance encounter with Major John White, a mercenary recruiter, ends up with him being offered a six-month contract with a mercenary outfit. The mercenaries are engaged in a brutal battle in the Katanga province of the Congo, and are in bad need of doctors; the amount they offer is enough to convince Gericke to reluctantly bid Rudi goodbye and set off for the Congo.

Within twenty minutes, however, the viewer is hard pressed to spot anything resembling the Congo. As well as the mercenaries, the unusual number of beautiful single women who populate the landscape are all Afrikaans-speaking, and the terms in which they describe the area – ‘*n fantastiese land ... minerale rykdom, volop geleentheid vir industrieële ontwikkeling*’ (‘a fantastic country ... mineral resources and plenty of opportunity for industrial development’) – as well as the complete absence of black characters (major or minor)<sup>26</sup> make it clear that this is only ‘the Congo’ in the same way as ‘the Border’ lies along South Africa’s frontiers – in other words, metaphorically. Ben Gericke is journeying into the allegorical landscape of threatened white colonial Africa, and once again the agents responsible for the threat are, in the words of one of the mercenaries, ‘*Kommuniste, Kubane, ander*’ (‘Communists, Cubans, and others’). The lack of Cuban brigade-size involvement in Congo’s real-world history speaks for itself, but in *Die Banneling* the Cubans are as real as the mercenaries themselves; bearded, leering, merciless, and prone (during their few moments of speaking screen time) to glossolalic outbursts, *sans* subtitles, of Castro/Guevara worship.

Things are made more complicated for the main characters when Rudi, who has run away from home and somehow walked and hitchhiked into Katanga with no money and only an old

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<sup>26</sup> Only two black characters – a dead houseboy, and a dishwasher – appear in the movie, and even then, for no more than a few seconds each.

hobo named *Rooie* ('Red') for company, is kidnapped during a Cuban raid on the mercenary camp. The Cubans' demands in exchange for his release and the life of the captured mercenary leader are the complete withdrawal of mercenary and Katangese forces from the district, a demand which is met with scorn by all except Ben (whose concern for his son excuses him from having to make the right decision). Luckily for them, it happens that Ben's love interest, a fiery farmer's daughter named Maxie, is captured at the same time; she helps Rudi escape to tell his father that David, her brother, is in league with the terrorists and has been paying them 'protection money' in the form of guns and livestock. David is confronted and forced to reveal the location of the Cubans' camp.

A daring counter-attack follows, during which many mercenaries are killed (but only after dragging many times their number of Cubans down with them), Maxie and the kidnapped mercenary leader are freed, and the Cuban general himself is captured. David, of course, has only a traitor's just desserts (as typified within the Border War film genre) to look forward to. Handcuffed to the wheel of his car by the mercenaries to prevent him escaping, he is riddled with bullets by a jumpy Cuban soldier. Ben and Maxie declare their love for one another, as do Maxie's father and Gwen (yet another of the single, beautiful woman who seem to be ubiquitous across the district)<sup>27</sup>, and all is once again well.

*Die Banneling*, despite supposedly being located in the Congo, bears – as highlighted above – almost all of the hallmarks of a Border War film. The Cubans, transplanted across the continent to provide a 'Red Threat' to the white colonial idyll, are handy enemies against which the characters can be set; their behaviour falls under the same processes of negative

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<sup>27</sup> Some mention of the film's treatment of Gwen is merited, although it does not tie in directly with the Border War film template. Although she speaks fluent Afrikaans throughout the movie, she is identified as English; and in contrast to the other female characters, she is flighty and delicate, practically unable to care for herself and – whether creeping through the house in a purple bathrobe after hearing noises outside or clutching a thermos rather than a gun during the hunt for Maxie – patently ridiculous in any active role. It would be years before Border War films attempted to bridge the gap between English and Afrikaans-speaking South Africans; in 1971 English people were still largely treated as being somehow ridiculous.

stereotyping as the behaviour of the Red Chinese in the *Kaptein Caprivi* titles. When the mercenary leader reminds the Cuban general that they are prisoners of war and must be protected from injury or intimidation ‘under the Geneva convention’, the Cuban merely sneers and says, ‘Geneva ... is a long way away.’<sup>28</sup> Doughty, fair, professional soldiering by heroic whites, occasionally involving noble sacrifice, is the only way to handle these merciless foreign terrorists, and those that shirk or try to buy their way free end up dead. *Die Banneling* adds two new concepts to the Border War film template, though; firstly, that **it is everyone’s duty to fight terrorism**, whether through picking up a weapon, alerting the security forces to the presence of terrorists, assisting medically (like Ben himself, and later Maxie<sup>29</sup>), or simply (in the case of Gwen) being there for one’s man. The mercenaries in this film are far from being super-soldiers like Kaptein Caprivi and his team; instead, they are simply decent folk with the spine to resist the terrorist onslaught.

This introduces the second new point, that **moderate losses are to be expected**. In the *Kaptein Caprivi* films, nobody dies without asking for it, somehow – the terrorists because they are evil and the protagonists through error, lack of discipline, or noble sacrifice. In *Die Banneling* and increasingly in films thereafter, this immortality is somewhat tempered. In the movie’s first combat scene, Gericke and several others are only saved from an ambush when a mercenary named Decker bravely exposes himself to a fatal burst of machine-gun fire in order to toss a grenade into their position. Almost a dozen mercenaries are shot down, including several named characters, in the film’s various battles; the terrorists, while nowhere near as competent as their opponents, nonetheless know how to operate their equipment and are capable of disciplined movement and effective weapon use. This evolution of the antagonist from comical to potentially dangerous must be seen in the light of the increasing effectiveness

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<sup>28</sup> The 4th Geneva Convention only stripped mercenaries of their claim to prisoner-of-war status in 1977.

<sup>29</sup> Ben remarks to Maxie that he is surprised to see her in the hospital. She replies, ‘*Ek voel skuldig om by die huis te sit as daar so veel is om te doen en so min mense om dit te doen*’ (‘I would feel too guilty to sit at home when there is so much to be done, and so few to do it’)

of anti-regime forces in Angola, South West Africa, and Rhodesia at the time, an effectiveness which must have made flights of fancy like *Kaptein Caprivi* less appealing.

Some years would pass before these developments were to reach full prominence, however, and in the mean time the growing commitment of conventional (meaning the air force and the navy) rather than simply counter-insurgent forces (the army and police) to the struggle against terrorism allowed yet another theatre of war to be opened up to the viewing public. This was achieved in 1974 with *Mirage Eskader* ('Mirage Squadron'), the first of a new generation of Border War movies focusing not on the efforts of superhuman characters but on the more everyday struggles of characters closer to the audience's hearts – ordinary men and women called to serve their country on the border.

## Chapter 5: Sacrifice on the Border

On 15 October 1975, under the codename Operation SAVANNAH, a column of 1000 South African troops and fifty Eland<sup>1</sup> armoured vehicles crossed the Angolan border.<sup>2</sup> The soldiers wore Portuguese uniform and carried documents absolving the South African government of any responsibility for them or their actions, Vorster's détente politics still rendering him unwilling to commit to a public display of aggression against Angola.<sup>3</sup> Over the next 33 days, the South African column covered 3000 kilometres across Angola, mostly knocking out MPLA strong points so that UNITA could 'liberate' the towns they defended. However, to the northwest, a FNLA infantry attack intended to capture Luanda by November 11 was so severely routed, despite energetic support from a South African artillery contingent, that the survivors dubbed the battlefield *Nshila wa Lufu* – 'the death road'.<sup>4</sup> As the November 11 deadline came and went, South Africa began to experience international pressure to withdraw following the first reports of their involvement in several international news sources, alleging that a South African presence was engaged in the Angolan conflict. The CIA had already disappeared, just ahead of a decision by the US Senate subcommittee on foreign relations to suspend aid to the MPLA's opponents; this decision would eventually be formalised as the Clark Amendment in 1976, removing the 'official' CIA presence in Angola until the mid-80s.<sup>5</sup> On 27 March, after five and a half months in Angola, South Africa withdrew its forces.

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<sup>1</sup> A locally-produced light armoured vehicle based on the Panhard AML-90 and armed with a 90mm gun.

<sup>2</sup> H-R Heitman, *War in Angola: The Final South African Phase* (Gibraltar: Ashanti Publishing, 1990), p. 10. This was not the first South African entry into post-independence Angola. In August, three companies of South African mechanised infantry had occupied the Calueque pumping stations in southern Angola, ostensibly to protect South Africa's R261 million investment in the Ruacana hydro-electric scheme (Stiff, *The Silent War*, pp.107-108). Hamann, however, quotes General Constand Viljoen, SADF Director of Operations at the time, as follows: 'It is true [that the scheme was valuable in many ways], but I must be honest, I always got the impression it was a handy way of explaining an operation that didn't have the intention of protecting Calueque and Ruacana. It was a handy explanation for the rest of the world' (Hamann, *Days of the Generals*, pp.22-23). R Leonard, *South Africa at War: White Power and the Crisis in Southern Africa* (USA: Lawrence Hill, 1983), pp 78-79.

<sup>4</sup> P Stiff, *The Silent War*, p.127. The MPLA's 122mm rocket batteries, nicknamed 'Redeyes' by the SA troops, consistently outperformed the SADF artillery, which was mostly of WW2 vintage. This deficiency was compensated for, to a degree, by adopting high-speed hit and run tactics, and later corrected by Armscor's development of the Valkyrie rocket battery – a design based, unsurprisingly, on systems like the 'Redeye'.

<sup>5</sup> Windrich, *The Laboratory of Hate*, pp. 211-212, and W Steenkamp, *Borderstrike! South Africa into Angola* (RSA: Butterworths, 1983), p.4

Back in Pretoria, blame for the failure of Operation SAVANNAH was laid squarely at the foot of the Vorster administration. Their restrictions on the amount, type and activities of the SADF's intervention force were, perhaps justifiably, considered to have handicapped it into ineffectiveness. Despite costing South Africa over R100 million and the deaths of 35 SADF troops, SAVANNAH had not really achieved anything, and the generals held Vorster and Van den Bergh responsible. As General Magnus Malan put it, 'We were let down by our politicians.'<sup>6</sup> Echoing the US military's post-Vietnam disillusionment, this attitude permeated all levels of the South African armed forces; twenty-seven years later, Colonel Lionel Crook, commander of the Cape Field Artillery during SAVANNAH, recollected that 'the political situation was changing the military situation all the time, and ... [we] couldn't keep up.'<sup>7</sup>

Over the next five years, the SADF's special forces maintained a presence in Angola under the leadership of Jan Breytenbach while in Pretoria, the 'Vorster men' were gradually being replaced with adherents to the doctrine of 'forward strategy'. Forward strategy involved the use of coercive military force to 'persuade' foreign governments not to harbour liberation movements, and was to become the watchword of Botha-era policy towards the Front Line States.<sup>8</sup> Forward strategy, coupled with support of the rebel organisation RENAMO, was also being employed by Rhodesia against the ZANLA/FRELIMO alliance in Mozambique – leaving South Africa free to concentrate on Angola, where Breytenbach's men were being nothing if not thorough; between them and the police counter-insurgency units (which would, in 1979, form the basis for the notorious *Koevoet* or 'crowbar' units), they were achieving up to 100 'contacts' a month and kill ratios of 10:1.<sup>9</sup> In July 1976 alone, SADF forces in the area reported 11 engagements with SWAPO infiltrators, or cadres from its military wing, PLAN.

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<sup>6</sup> Hamann, *Days of the Generals*, p.44

<sup>7</sup> Address to the South African Military History Society, "Rosedale", Rosebank, Cape Town, 11 July 2002.

<sup>8</sup> A Seegers, *The Military in the Making of Modern South Africa* (London: Tauris Academic Studies, 1996), p.239

<sup>9</sup> Stenkamp, *Borderstrike!*, p. 8

It was in an attempt to choke off these infiltrators that the SADF launched Operation REINDEER, the largest military action since Operation SAVANNAH, in 1978. REINDEER involved a three-pronged strike against three SWAPO facilities in southern Angola; a camp at Cassinga (designated 'Moscow' in the mission orders), a camp at Chequetera (designated 'Vietnam'), and a defensive cluster around a single staging base known as 'Target Thirteen'. Elements of the Reconnaissance Commandos, Parachute Battalions and 32 Battalion (a 'mercenary' unit composed of the last remnants of Angolan faction leader Holden Roberto's FNLA troops) were selected for the assault; the SADF's Directorate of Public Relations was given the responsibility of concealing the preparations behind a screen of disinformation. Accordingly, reports about a nonexistent set of 'manoeuvres' to be conducted near Bloemfontein and codenamed Operation KWIKSILVER, were concocted.<sup>10</sup>

Troops called up for KWIKSILVER were rerouted to the SADF base at Rundu, and attacked their targets in May 1978, achieving great successes against what the SADF's media machine depicted as hardened terrorist cadres and SWAPO claimed to be unarmed refugees. Either way, the SADF claimed to have killed or captured over 1200 PLAN fighters for the loss of only six soldiers.<sup>11</sup> SWAPO's retaliation attack, a rocket strike on the border town of Katima Mulilo, brought the South African government some public relations difficulties when ten national servicemen died after a 122mm rocket hit their barracks, but overall the operation – according to the SADF, at least – had been a complete success.<sup>12</sup> In the wake of REINDEER, high-profile commando attacks on SWAPO encampments in Zambia – such as the one from which Katima Mulilo had been bombarded – provided evidence that Vorster-era attempts to secure the support of Zambia's president, were a thing of the past. Détente had failed.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Steenkamp, *Borderstrike!*, p. 31

<sup>11</sup> An international outcry followed REINDEER as predicted. However, it was not until after the government's brutal response to the unrest in 1976 that this outcry was given substance through the arms embargo.

<sup>12</sup> Steenkamp, *Borderstrike!*, pp. 145-163

<sup>13</sup> Stiff, *The Silent War*, p.230-233

These changes in the conflict on and beyond South Africa's borders did not go unnoticed on the cinema screen. The Border War films of the late 1970s bore the marks of a reconfiguration very similar to that experienced in the war itself; the Olympian super-heroes of the *Caprivi* movies had made way for a new generation of heroes, ones fighting a far more complex war against a far more familiar breed of foe. This kind of movie is exemplified by *Mirage Eskader*, directed by Bertrand Retief for Kavaliers Films in 1975, which starred James White and Lieb Bester as two trainee fighter pilots admitted to the prestigious 2 Squadron ("The Cheetahs") to fly Mirages.

The film has a convoluted plot involving crises of identity, self-doubt and the power of the family, but its core narrative involves the journey of these two young men into manhood, associated in this case with combat duty in Mirages against the enemy. Interestingly enough, the explicit and repeated evocation of the Cheetahs' distinguished service record in the Korean War serves not only to provide a warrior heritage for the two fliers, but also the continuation of a 'Red Threat' dimension into the movie's depiction of South Africa. This is never explicitly addressed, but the absence of references to any other wars, such as World War 2 (in which South African pilots served with distinction) despite the presence of characters easily old enough to have served in such wars, is a notable one. Gerhard (White) wants to fly because his father and grandfather were war heroes; as their enemies were the Russians and Red Chinese MIG fighter aircraft in Korea, so Gerhard's enemies will be the communist-sponsored terrorists on the ground in South West Africa.

The movie does not make all its ideological points so subtly. The central importance of a strong military (and all the civilian sacrifices that go with it) is directly addressed during a scene in which a man complains to his wife about the racket of jet fighters overhead while walking in the Union Gardens in Pretoria. Martin (Bester) immediately confronts him and

points out that '*Sonder daai geraas sou jy nie 'n lugmag gehad het nie. Sonder 'n lugmag sou jy nie 'n land gehad het nie. Geen job, geen fancy suit... net mooi niks.*'<sup>14</sup> This, of course, is an extension of the 'fighting terrorism is everyone's duty' theme highlighted previously, and serves to situate the film squarely within the Border War film genre. The choice of the Union Gardens is unlikely to have been accidental, even though most of the film is set in and around the Waterkloof Air Force Base in Pretoria. Various prominent landmarks are used in the film to situate the narrative and provide a referential landscape; two such locations are the statue of Afrikaner war hero General Louis Botha in the Union Gardens, and the Union Buildings themselves, a powerful symbol of national identity and the achievement of political maturity. Even the Mirages themselves are elevated to the status of Afrikaner cultural icon during the film, when Martin indicates his admiration of the craft by remarking in awe that it must have been raised on '*plaasbotter en mieliepap*' (farm butter and maize meal porridge), despite the fact that, as mentioned previously, the Mirage was a French design assembled locally using only a handful of non-imported parts.

Eventually, after many trials and ongoing conflicts between themselves, their instructor (Kommandant Fourie, played by Barry Trengrove), the unit's commanding officer, and his daughter (Gerhard's mother), the boys earn their wings and are rewarded by a call into action. Somewhere in the operational area, over two hundred terrorists have surrounded an 11-man commando unit, and air support is critically needed. Led by *Kommandant* Fourie, six Mirages scramble; Gerhard is in one of them. The aircraft unleash their devastating munitions on the ragged but heavily armed terrorist hordes in an overly long pyrotechnics sequence, putting them to rout almost immediately, but Gerhard is wounded by a terrorist shooting up at him with an AK-47. Despite fading consciousness, he nurses his failing aircraft (his ejector seat's mechanism having been destroyed) back to Waterkloof and the rapturous welcome of his

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<sup>14</sup> 'Without that racket, you wouldn't have an air force. Without an air force, you wouldn't have a country. No job, no fancy suit ... just plain nothing.'

family and comrades-in-arms. The Air Force has saved the day, and the last image of the film has barely faded when it is replaced by a title screen dedicating the film to the men of the SAAF – ‘Faster than Eagles, Stronger than Lions’.

Certainly, many of *Mirage Eskader*’s scenes – especially the in-cockpit and pilot’s eye view scenes – would have been impossible to depict without the SAAF’s assistance, but the film’s dedication and its treatment of the motivations of the young fliers indicates more than a simple desire to please one’s patrons. Between these elements, the use of actual 2 Squadron members as extras on the film, and the inclusion of long snatches of flight radio traffic within the dialogue, *Mirage Eskader* makes as if to leave the realms of fiction behind and present an almost docudramatic view on the airborne war against terror, maintaining an authoritative stance despite the absence of any substantial attention to the reality of the Border War. By concentrating on themes popular with young men of draftable age such as heroism and individual prestige, and maintaining the façade of hyper-realistic attention to set detail, *Mirage Eskader* presents the Border War (and the need to prepare the country to resist conventional onslaught of the type encountered in Korea) as a palatable and noble *fait accompli*, thereby serving the ideological needs of the armed forces down to the last detail.

It is thus no great surprise that a year later, in 1975, the first of the full-fledged Border War films – *Six Soldiers/Ses Soldate*, also directed by Bernard Retief – would spring to the screen following the same template.<sup>15</sup> Barry Trengrove reappears as Sarge, Lieb Bester becomes ‘Liebling’, one of the two heroes, and Ken Hare (Clive from the *Kaptein Caprivi* films) now fills the shoes of ‘Tiny’ Pellegrini, the film’s comic relief.<sup>16</sup> The film follows six men from their call-up for the ‘commando forces’ (one assumes this to be one of the Reconnaissance Regiments) to their deployment in the operational area, showing their gradual acquisition of

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<sup>15</sup> The film was filmed and released in both Afrikaans and English to ensure the broadest exposure.

<sup>16</sup> Tiny’s name is a nod to famed South African cameraman Ivo Pellegrini, who worked on *Six Soldiers/Ses Soldate*, the *Kaptein Caprivi* movies, and many others.

the skill and certainty of the professional soldier. In many ways, the first half of this movie is reminiscent of Stanley Kubrick's 1987 war movie, *Full Metal Jacket*, but played with a completely straight face rather than the sense of duality and chaos Kubrick intended to invoke. Given that *Full Metal Jacket*'s training sequences were themselves a parody and subversion of the stereotypical 'tough leader merges heterogeneous recruits into effective fighting force' themes of World War 2 movies like *The Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949), the way *Six Soldiers/Ses Soldate* segues directly into this thirty-year old formula provides yet more evidence of its position as a transplanted descendant of the propaganda/entertainment movie. This link is also clearly visible in the heterogeneous 'microcosm of society' makeup of the team, which includes a snobbish English-speaker ('Limey', played by Richard Loring), a down-to-earth Afrikaner (Liebling), a capable Sergeant, a fumbling recruit who learns to 'be a man' ('SS', played by Frederick Stark), and a comic relief character (Tiny). These archetypal characters were all repeated endlessly throughout the World War 2 film genre.

The crucial difference between *Six Soldiers/Ses Soldate* and other, more self-conscious films which attempted to realistically depict military life, is that in *Six Soldiers/Ses Soldate* the recruits are never broken down, only built up; Limey loses his scorn for all things Afrikaans through exposure to his Afrikaner platoon-mates and, after being confronted by Sarge for having a bad attitude,<sup>17</sup> gradually comes to believe in the military's mission and the need for energetic action against terrorism. The other five make equally impressive gains, especially the incredibly shy SS, who comes out of his shell, drinks his first beer, and gets a beautiful girlfriend. The idea of national service as a rite of manhood (and, consequently, of the security forces as a surrogate family), although not prevalent enough to merit inclusion in the general Border War filmic template, is however clearly present in two other films: *Die Winter van 14 Julie* (1977) and *Jantjie Kom Huis Toe* (1984).

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<sup>17</sup> Sarge accuses Limey of being 'one of those persons who would rather leave the fighting to soldiers like Liebling and the others. You don't believe we're fighting a war here, do you?'

The film's message in this regard is thus clear, and provides the first occurrence of a theme which would reoccur regularly in future Border War movies; the notion that **being in the security forces is fun**. The recruits in *Six Soldiers/Ses Soldate* drill convincingly, but they never seem to break a sweat; they do without the comforts of civilian life, but there is no shortage of leave, beer, girls, and personal development. Even the officers really care for their men; Sarge covers up for SS when he goes AWOL to visit his sick girlfriend, and is demoted for it, but never lets SS know and doesn't speak up even when his demotion gets him sent to the operational zone alongside the others.<sup>18</sup>

Their deployment heralds the movie's movement into its second phase – that of a Border War action film. The men are assigned to patrol an area in the southern Angolan operational area that has been unusually quiet recently. Assisting them in this is Chico, a black tracker, who soon provides another of the film's less-than-subtle ideological moments: when asked by Limey why he is fighting, he grabs a handful of earth and solemnly says, 'It's my country too'.<sup>19</sup> Of course, no sooner have they started their patrol than the men encounter signs of a significant terrorist presence; the first being a burning farmhouse in which every inhabitant, regardless of age or race, has been butchered. The terrorists have provided additional proof of their cruelty by booby-trapping the corpses, and Tiny is almost killed. Following the terrorists' tracks, they encounter an enormous force encamped in a gully. Wisely, they begin to withdraw, but a black homesteader they encounter betrays them to the terrorists and a brief gunfight during the terrorists' first assault disables their radio.

The chase is now on; unless the heroes can make it all the way back to the camp – 90 kilometers – before the terrorists catch up with them, they are doomed. Several skirmishes

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<sup>18</sup> The movie enters one of its least subtle moments when the men refuse to call Sarge, now a corporal, anything but 'Sarge'. 'Pellegrini,' shouts Sarge, 'how many stripes do you see here?' 'Two, Sarge,' replies Tiny. 'And what does that make me?' 'A corporal, Sarge.' And so on for another five minutes.

<sup>19</sup> Chico is played by Sidney Charmo, who also played the terrorist leader in *Aanslag op Kariba*.

with the terrorists occur before the film's climax; sometimes the commandos ambush the terrorists, sometimes advance parties of terrorists briefly get in the way of their flight, but it is always the terrorists who come off second best – until the penultimate firefight, in which Sarge dies saving SS's life. This event makes the remaining soldiers decide to stand and fight rather than continue running; the enormous battle which follows, in which the terrorist forces are led by Cuban officers, claims the lives of Tiny and SS, but Chico, Limey and Liebling, firing from the hip, survive and triumph. As reinforcements arrive, a rising crane shot pulls the viewer high above the battlefield revealing enemy corpses strewn around in their dozens. A final title screen, bearing the words 'Inspired by and dedicated to the South African armed forces' heralds the end of the movie and sums the film's pro-war stance up perfectly.

*Six Soldiers/Ses Soldate* can be considered the first complete synthesis of the disparate propaganda threads introduced by its predecessors. Brutal foreign terrorists must be faced with force by common men; the greater burden of this task is shouldered by whites, although there is a place for faithful blacks such as Chico. Some men will die, whether nobly and through plain bad luck (Sarge) or as a result of some personal failing (SS is daydreaming about his girlfriend when the Cubans' first salvo rips into him, and Tiny charges a Cuban position in a berserk rage), but in the end South African military might always triumphs.

The next three years saw little action in the Border War genre, with only one title addressing the war in any detail; *Die Winter van 14 Julie* ('The Winter of 14 July'), produced and directed by Jan Scholtz in 1977. Like *Mirage Eskader*, this film is also situated within the Air Force rather than the conventional ground-based security forces, to once again enable maximum interaction between the civilian world and the protagonists. *Die Winter van 14 Julie* is mainly a love story – or, rather, a 'lovers in trouble' story – focusing on the obstacles between Frans Moolman, a young Air Force recruit played by Martin Dreyer, and Helene

de Villiers, the sister of his best friend (played by Karin Scholtz). Frans and Helene meet, fall in love instantly, and sleep together.<sup>20</sup> Frans' reckless love brings him into conflict with the Air Force due to his repeated periods of absence without leave, and he is eventually thrown into detention for a protracted period. During this period, the boyfriend Helene dumped for Frans (Dreyer, played by Eon de Vos) and her own mother, attempt to destroy their relationship. Frans is an orphan who dropped out of university; he has no prospects, and when Helene discovers she is pregnant she allows Dreyer and her mother to talk her into breaking things off. She never tells Frans about the baby, and asks Dreyer to arrange a secret abortion.

Frans and 'Chappies', Helene's brother, have by this stage been sent to the remote Grootfontein Air Force base near the border, and are on a train with other servicemen. When Frans reads a letter sent along with Chappies by Helene, and learns what she is planning to do; he throws himself from the train and makes it back to Pretoria just in time to stop her from taking what the movie's moral framing clearly indicates to be a grave and irrevocable step.<sup>21</sup> The two lovers marry; her parents try to intervene once more, but Chappies' comes to the defence of his sister and wins them over, and all ends well.<sup>22</sup>

*Die Winter van 14 Julie*, while certainly played more for tears than gung-ho war readiness, nonetheless finds time to include two pro-war (or, rather, pro-military) threads from the growing list identified previously. The first is the notion of the army as surrogate family as found in *Six Soldiers/Ses Soldate*; this feature, a variation on the 'being in the security forces is fun' theme, is far more clearly established in *Die Winter van 14 Julie* than in any other Border War movie. The Air Force officers, without exception, genuinely want to help and

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<sup>20</sup> In Afrikaner society in 1977, something more of a crime than it is now. When the news comes to light, Helene's mother accuses her husband of allowing Helene to escape parental supervision: 'Jy wou haar daardie woonstel koop!' ('You were the one who wanted to buy her that apartment!').

<sup>21</sup> Frans extracts Helene's location, incidentally, by beating it out of the recalcitrant Dreyer, thus 'punishing' him in the viewer's eyes for his part in the abortion plot.

<sup>22</sup> Helene's father is played by David van der Walt, last seen as Maxie's father in *Die Banneling*.

understand Frans. As the counsellor brought in to try and extract the reasons for his repeated disappearances assures him, '*Die Weermag is nie onsympatiek nie, al dink jy so ... ons is jou vriende, nie jou vyande nie*'.<sup>23</sup> When Frans will not tell her, she concedes that she appreciates his decision and tells him that she is available to listen any time he wants to talk. Similarly, on the train before Frans discovers Helene's plans from a letter she sends via her brother, the commanding officer of their unit shares a snack with him and points out that, '*As jy weer 'n probleem teekom, onthou dat die Weermag baie mense het wat bereid is om jou te help*'.<sup>24</sup> The message that life in the armed forces is fairly comfortable provided you play by the rules and come clean with your superiors, is thus made perfectly clear.

*Die Winter van 14 Julie*'s other pro-military slant is visible in the scene in which Chappies, in all other senses a useless (even comical) soldier, takes Frans to task for his inability to buckle down and stop going AWOL. '*Elke ou in die kamp wil graag sy meisie gaan sien.*' he scolds, '*maar's hul almal AWOL, waar's die lugmag dan?*'<sup>25</sup> Chappies, in contrast to Frans, is the movie's moral compass throughout; he is unfailingly loyal (covering up for Frans' absences, smuggling letters to Helene while Frans is in detention, and jumping out of the train after him), faces up to his father when he threatens to disown Helene, and confronts Frans about sleeping with his sister out of wedlock. Set alongside these potent confirmations of the moral *status quo*, thus, his criticism of Frans' lack of discipline has a great deal of power and allows the movie to highlight the 'shirkers put themselves and others at risk' theme present in other Border War movies. Between this and the movie's portrayal of the armed forces, it can be clearly seen that *Die Winter van 14 Julie* has more interaction with the South African military than simply using it as a setting; it finds the screen time to portray the military in a moral and constructive manner intended to leave a positive impression on the viewer.

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<sup>23</sup> 'The Army isn't unsympathetic, even if that's what you think ... we are your friends, not your enemies'

<sup>24</sup> 'The next time you encounter difficulties, remember that the Army has plenty of people who are willing to help you out'.

<sup>25</sup> 'Every guy in this camp wants to go visit his girlfriend. But if they all go AWOL, where does that leave the Air Force?'

However, despite the pro-military slant of *Die Winter van 14 Julie*, the South African fiction film industry did not directly approach the counter-insurgent war between *Six Soldiers/Ses Soldate* (1975) and the action blockbuster *Grensbasis 13* (Border Base 13) in 1978. During this period, as indicated previously, the war on the border had escalated greatly and the Soweto Uprising had brought the struggle against repression onto the home front as well. It was into this context of increasingly intensive armed conflict that *Grensbasis 13* was released.

In many ways *Grensbasis 13* represents the pinnacle of the Border War movie. It certainly represents a more mature and skilful approach to the Border War than any of its predecessors, involving a high degree of technical proficiency with respect to special effects and camerawork and with a well-developed plot. However, the movie's maturity – an attempt to keep pace with the public's growing concern with and awareness of events occurring 'on the Border' – caused the moviemaker, Elmo de Witt, several inconveniences, despite his position as an established player in the South African film field with a string of successes to his name. The most particular difficulty came in connection with the script, which had to be rewritten five times before the security forces would agree to extend their considerable assistance to de Witt's project. *Grensbasis 13* contains some fairly harrowing scenes; the script rewrites were undoubtedly attempts to ensure that the film's grittiness and the introduction of blood packs and pyrotechnics for more realistic combat scenes did not get in the way of its pro-war stance. It is hard to imagine young men wanting to sign up for active duty after watching *Grensbasis 13*, but it is equally hard to imagine information-deprived South African audiences being able to do anything other than offer up a silent prayer for the bravery of the men of the security forces after internalising its message.

*Grensbasis 13* tells the story of Captain Mike Steenberg (played by Danie Joubert), a police officer in a paramilitary counter-insurgency unit in the operational area. Mike's unit is

visually indistinguishable from a regular army unit; viewers unfamiliar with the SAP's insignia and uniforms might watch the entire movie without being aware that the men doing the fighting are police rather than soldiers – indeed, the film's only explicit reference to the police force comes in its dedication at the end.<sup>26</sup> Mike and his men, therefore, are simply archetypal white soldiers fighting terrorists, and the precise details of their identity are sidelined. The border base of the title contains the unit's commanding officer and the movie's love interest, the beautiful Jane (Karin Kritzinger, who also played Gerhard's girlfriend, Ingrid, in *Mirage Eskader*). Jane is a doctor at the base, familiar with the men and presumably behind their efforts one hundred percent. She stands in contrast to Mike's girlfriend Elise (Karin Scholtz from *Die Winter van 14 Julie*), a beautiful but 'soft' civilian girl. Work by Tomaselli and van Zyl has indicated that in the character of Jane, the evolution of the Border War film intersects with another movement in South African film which they term the 'repurification of the *boeredogter*' ('farmer's daughter') – an attempt to resurrect the pure, virtuous, and certainly semi-mythical Afrikaner youth ideal by the provision of appropriately moral and innately good characters in the films of the era. The presence of this feature is another indication that Border War film was a dynamic genre that underwent constant revisions as the society around it (and, as is argued here, the government) changed its priorities, concerns, and fears.<sup>27</sup>

In the movie's first combat scene, Mike and his troops are caught in an ambush by a group of black terrorists. The camera follows these capering, animalistic figures as they swarm down from the hills; vastly superior in numbers, they surround and decimate Mike's forces despite heavy losses. The treatment of the terrorist hordes in these scenes is clearly evocative of

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<sup>26</sup> Possibly the notorious *Koevoet*, but this is unlikely seeing as *Koevoet*'s creation and the release of *Grensbasis 13* came in the same year. However, *Koevoet* was created out of paramilitary police counter-insurgency units already in existence, and it is doubtless one of these units that Mike serves in.

<sup>27</sup> K Tomaselli and M van Zyl, 'Themes, Myths and Cultural Indicators – The Structuring of Popular Memories', in J Blignaut and M Botha (eds.), *Movies - moguls - mavericks: South African cinema 1979-1991* (Cape Town: Showdata, 1992), pp. 444-446. A.

movies such as *Zulu* (1964), especially in scenes such as the one in which a wounded policeman, floundering in a pool, is bayoneted where he lies. Mike's best friend Pieter (Tommie Erasmus) is shot in the stomach while he and Mike are attempting to withdraw; Mike drags him as far as he can and holds off the terrorists bravely, but when he runs out of ammunition for his rifle he is wounded, loses consciousness, and is left for dead. The terrorists drag Pieter away as a prisoner. Back at the camp, Mike recovers quickly and vows to recover Pieter. Adding impetus to his vow is the fact that Pieter is Elise's brother, and Mike has promised to keep him safe.<sup>28</sup> That Pieter must be rescued almost goes without saying; the movie shows him being cruelly tortured by the terrorists and denied medical attention. But, as any viewer familiar with Border War movies would have known by now, no better can be expected from terrorists: even Mike's commander reflects, '*As hulle hom doodgeskiet het, sou dit genadig gewees het.*'<sup>29</sup>

The rescue attempt is not long in coming. An informer (one of the movie's few 'loyal blacks') is quick to provide the location of the terrorist camp and without a single glance back to whichever command structures might be required for authorisation in the 'real world', Mike and his team are given clearance to parachute into Angola to fetch Pieter. While all this is happening, Elise is attending (at her mother's insistence) a house party back in the civilian world, and politely rebuffing the affections of Charles, a doctor. She has no idea of the danger Mike is putting himself into for her brother's sake; nor, indeed, is the viewer led to believe that an innocent child such as her would be capable of understanding the situation; once again, in this respect she is set in contrast with Jane, whose presence at Mike's side and awareness of the realities of war make Elise seem even more flighty and useless.

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<sup>28</sup> In an early scene, we see Pieter and Mike, both in dress uniform, breaking the news that he has signed up for active service on the border to Pieter's family. His mother rants and raves, blaming Mike for Pieter's decision, but Mike calmly replies, '*Met ander woorde, mevrou, ander mense se seuns moet die werk doen – net nie jou seun.*' ('In other words, madam, other people's sons must do all the work – just not yours')

<sup>29</sup> 'It would have been a mercy if they had shot him dead,' Mike's commander, although misogynistic and prone to sleeping with a loaded pistol under his pillow, is nonetheless framed as a battle-hardened soldier who cares for his men and does his duty, so the viewer is encouraged to take his words at face value.

The mission goes without a hitch until the policemen actually retrieve Pieter from his cell; security is bypassed and sentries eliminated without a single hitch.<sup>30</sup> But a counterattack from an unexpected direction temporarily drives Mike's team back, and they have to abandon Pieter behind a building while they regroup. Before they can return, Mike is grievously wounded and in the confusion Pieter is recaptured. Mike's team is evacuated, their mission irretrievably compromised; apart from Mike, one member of the team lies dead and Smitty has been shot in the knee. The fortunes of the film's characters' reach their lowest point; Smitty is forced to undergo an amputation, and Mike is told that the bullet that wounded him is lodged in his heart. Surgery is impossible; he has no more than a few months to live.

Not wanting to burden Elise with his impending death, he conceals this fact from her, and tells her that things between them are over.<sup>31</sup> She leaves, falling into the arms of Charles, and Mike (once discharged) falls into a period of passive depression, during which Jane visits him. Jane has always understood things better than Elise: she tells him, '*n Mens kan 'n hele lewe in drie maande leef. Ek wil hierdie tydjtjie met jou wees*'.<sup>32</sup> Mike sees sense in her words, and they pass several idyllic weeks together (mostly shot through a series of filters to set them apart from the grittiness of the action scenes). But news comes through to Mike that the ANC is holding a press conference in a neighbouring country, at which they intend to display Pieter to the international press and get him to make statements indicting the South African government. The opportunity is too good to miss; Mike and his men gleefully concoct a plan to snatch Pieter from under the ANC's very noses at the conference. This is the first explicit reference to the ANC in the Border War film genre – a significant update to the thematic template and one whose significance will be discussed in due course.

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<sup>30</sup> Smitty (Willie Erasmus) provides one of the film's overtly racist moments when he kills a bushy-haired sentry with a catapult while sneaking into the camp. Previously, practising on beer cans back at the camp, he complains that he always misses the Black Label cans; pausing over the body of the sentry, he mutters, '*Hier's een Black Label wat ek nie gemis het nie*' ('That's one Black Label I didn't miss').

<sup>31</sup> As Mike tells Jane, '*Ek het nie tyd of lus om lief te hê. Dis dinge vir 'n leeftyd*' ('I don't have the time or the inclination for love. Those are things for a lifetime').

<sup>32</sup> 'A person can live a whole life in three months. I want to spend this short time with you.'

In a fast-paced montage sequence, they outfit themselves and their van with a collection of unlikely gadgets, including rear-firing rockets and submachine guns concealed inside boom mikes. Their 'disguises' are the apparel of the 70s counter-culture; bell-bottoms, floral shirts, unlikely hairstyles (achieved through the application of wigs), and beaded necklaces. The fact that the viewer is expected to believe are the outfits which will allow them to blend in at the ANC conference, and the ease with which this does in fact occur, can be read as a direct comment on the link between war-resisting 'hippies', overseas media crews (their van's logo reads, 'Global TV Networks: New York, London'), and terrorism. Mike and his men also adopt English once they cross the border, but whether this implies that English is another point of contact with international communism, or simply that no-one Afrikaans could ever hope to sneak into the conference, is not clear.

A tear-filled (on Jane's side, anyway) parting between Jane and Mike follows. The team bribe their way past the simple-minded border guards with three bottles of alcohol and reach the 'ANC press conference' without incident. To the post-liberation viewer, the movie's depiction of the ANC is puzzlingly unrealistic – a decrepit collection of ragged generals and brigadiers outside a mud hut, with Mike's team the only media crew present. The scene creates a direct link between the ANC and the murderous terrorists the viewer has already seen bayoneting the wounded and torturing prisoners, making a clear statement for the audience about the ANC's aims and motivations (publicity and bloodshed), sympathisers (English-speaking left wing hippies), and methods (torture and barbarism) and once again serving the aims of the government of the time. The ANC officers line up obediently for the shot, but the 'shot' is less cinematic than ballistic as the team's concealed weapons gun them down.

The protagonists manage to escape with Pieter, leaving their faithful black tracker dead behind them,<sup>33</sup> but the brief resistance offered by a pair of bridge guards on their way back delays them enough that they are caught. Mike leaps out to blow the bridge behind them, and succeeds, but is fatally shot in the back as he runs back to the van. The camera speeds away from him, explicitly putting the viewer in the van with the other policemen, and his body disappears into the distance. The film's final scene shows Jane, dressed in bright Republican orange, at a dress ceremony receiving Mike's posthumous medal. She smiles proudly into the distance as the camera zooms in on the medal, whose blue and white ribbon against her orange dress evokes the old South African flag as the titles roll.

Tomaselli makes the following observation about *Grensbasis 13*:

*Grensbasis 13 is action, an accurate reflection of battle in the bush. This facade, however, does not last and is simply camourflage [sic] for yet another Elmo de Witt conflict-love-type story.*<sup>34</sup>

Such a reading, however, mistakes the movie's simpleness for simplicity. While the love affair between Jane and Mike does enjoy a certain degree of prominence, *Grenbasis 13* is far more than a love story set against the backdrop of the Border War. Its relationships are used as vehicles through which notions of sacrifice and loyalty are addressed; Jane's informed and loyal love is contrasted with Elise's flighty and fickle affections. Elise, of course, finally comes to her senses; this occurs during a fight with Charles. After he urges her to emigrate with him to escape the war, she angrily shouts, '*Kyk, as jy die soort is wat wil vlug, dan doen dit*'.<sup>35</sup> Like Elise, the viewer is encouraged to side with the noble Mike against the unpatriotic Charles; similarly, the movie's foregrounding of Jane's selflessness (even after she discovers that she is carrying Mike's baby) is a clear attempt to display willing sacrifice in the face of war loss as a noble and worthwhile thing.

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<sup>33</sup> Like Filemon in *Aanslag op Kariba*, we are never shown the moment of the tracker's death – only his wound and crumpled body after the van roars away. The protagonists do not even seem to notice.

<sup>34</sup> Tomaselli, 'The Border War: Cinematic Reflections', p.16

<sup>35</sup> 'Look, if you're the type who wants to run, then do it.'

What little screen time is given over solely to the four lovers, thus, also serves to advance the movie's ideological goals; and as for the non-romance scenes, these too carry their fair share of pro-war elements. *Grensbasis 13* faithfully validates the standard Border War filmic themes, most prominently that of noble sacrifice; its primary innovation lies in its use of the ANC as the power behind the terrorist hordes rather than the usual foreign powers. This modification is well in line with the progress of events in South Africa, such as the Soweto Uprising and the growing prominence of the ANC as the armed agents of danger in the views of the Apartheid government and cinemagoers alike due to the success of armed resistance. Their plans for Pieter are also an indication of the changing public awareness of the 'threat' posed by black nationalism to the Apartheid state; the ANC wants to use Pieter to attack South Africa in the international media. Such a situation had occurred for real in Lagos in 1975, when four South African soldiers captured in Angola by the MPLA were put on display for the world media, and it is this practice that *Grensbasis 13* attempts to vilify through the experiences of Pieter.<sup>36</sup> The ANC's objective, and the complicity of English-speaking international news organisations as discussed previously, make it clear to the viewer that the international press is simply a mouthpiece of the ANC. In *Grensbasis 13*, it is only the brave, battle-hardened veterans (including Jane) who know the real truth about the Border War.

The South African film industry avoided the Border War for several years after *Grensbasis 13*, preferring to focus on comedies and cheap karate-action movies built around foreign B-list actors – perhaps as a result of the growingly unrepresentable nature of the Border War as fought on behalf of UNITA. Of those films which did deal with social issues in the now-unsteady Apartheid state, such as *April 1980* (1980), which dealt with security force infiltration of student organisations, and Nadine Gordimer's *My Country, My Hat* (1983), and *Broer Matie* (1984), both of which explored racial consciousness and identity in segregated

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<sup>36</sup> Hamann, *Days of the Generals*, p.34.

South Africa, none strayed into the domain of the Border War movie. However, 1979 saw another movie being made in South Africa whose treatment of the Rhodesian conflict and use of South African characters has direct bearing on an examination of the body of South African Border War films; this was *Game for Vultures*, an internationally-funded film directed by James Fargo and starring Richard Harris and Richard Roundtree.

*Game for Vultures* follows the parallel stories of a freedom fighter (Gideon Marunga, played by Roundtree) and a sanctions-buster for the government (David Swansey, played by Harris) and their respective involvements with a consignment of decommissioned US Air Force helicopters bound for Rhodesia. Along the way, both characters are forced to confront their own certainties about their part in the struggle; several times, innocent bystanders are caught in the crossfire as the two sides battle it out.<sup>37</sup> The theme of a battle without a winner is highly prominent in the film's final show-down, where an exhausted Marunga, sick of killing for the cause, releases his stranglehold on Swansey and wearily asks, 'Who's winning?' – to which Swansey replies, 'Nobody. Nobody's winning.' The war, in the film's final analysis, is indeed nothing more than a game for the carrion birds that follow in the wake of its carnage.

Such an ambivalent stance has more in common with the Border War films of the late 1980s than with other films of this period; viewing *Grensbasis 13* and *Game for Vultures* back-to-back makes it hard to believe that two such different films on practically the same subject could ever have been produced in the same year and country. However, such a view does not account for the fact that *Game for Vultures* was intended for the international market, and *Grensbasis 13* for the domestic one; foreign audiences, more accustomed to a critical view of the southern African situation than information-deprived local audiences, would have

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<sup>37</sup> In one of the movie's most harrowing scenes, a group of rebels and a unit of Rhodesian soldiers are struggling for possession of a bewildered crowd of school children 'liberated' by the rebels from a mission school some days previously. Both sides end up with some children to show for their efforts, but most of the kids die in the fire-swept river between them. The scene's final shot is a torn maroon school blazer sinking beneath the water.

expected a less sympathetic treatment of the embattled Rhodesians. In addition, in a North American and European context where introspective approaches to the Vietnam war like *Coming Home* and *The Deer Hunter* (both released in 1978) were achieving prominence in the United States, it seems unlikely that a less than even-handed approach to any war, especially as morally complex a conflict such as the Rhodesian counter-insurgency struggle, would have succeeded in meeting the expectations of international audiences.

The film delivers on this sense of ambiguity; but although the main character on the freedom fighters' side (Marunga) is a good and humane man, his comrades are either hardline hawks or merciless killers (such as Daniel Batton, played by Tony Osoba). By contrast, the Rhodesians – although far from angelic – are at least the forces of order and still 'fighting by the rules'. Seen from this perspective, *Game for Vultures* emerges as subtly pro-Rhodesian; and because two South African characters (a diplomat and the commander of a military airfield) are present and prominent in their assistance of the Rhodesians (the airfield commander goes as far as to verbally commend Swansea for his efforts), they too are admitted into the audience's sympathies. It is this element of the movie that explains the evidence of South African military assistance the film bears. Although it is not acknowledged in the film's credits, it is evident that the SAAF must have lent a hand to the film-makers; in one scene, supposedly an airfield in West Germany, Swansea is shown taking delivery of the 'decommissioned US army helicopters'. Lined up on the airfield outside, however, are Alouette helicopters – not a vehicle in service with the US army at any time, but certainly the workhorse of the SAAF – and if the scene is watched closely, the SAAF Springbok emblem can be clearly seen on their fuselages. A squadron of South African military helicopters was thus obviously made available to the makers of *Game for Vultures*; the film's subtly positive treatment of the southern African situation is the most likely reason for this concession.

However, as mentioned previously, *Game for Vultures* was very much a foreign film aimed at overseas audiences. It would not be until 1984 that the Border War resurfaced in the South African public view, this time played for comedy in Regardt van den Bergh's *Boetie* series. In these films and their contemporaries, the previously clear ideology of the Border War film reflected several significant changes which had taken place both in the war and in the public's awareness of its relationship to and responsibility for fighting it, changes which are more fully explored alongside the films themselves in the next section.

## Chapter 6: The Fragmentation of Ideology

With the Rhodesian situation rapidly approaching settlement following the Lancaster House talks of late 1979, South Africa was rapidly running out of allies to guard the walls of its 'buffer zone'. Even as it repeated the events of 1974, taking in those members of the Rhodesian SAS and Selous Scouts who felt that their service against ZANLA and ZIPRA might cause them difficulties post-transition, South Africa was thus attempting to increase UNITA's share of the war against the MPLA and SWAPO. Simultaneously, the growing prominence of the ANC and PAC's armed struggles within South Africa was forcing a revision of 'forward strategy' to include attacks on liberation organisations not simply residing in clearly identifiable camps within a neighbouring country's borders but, indeed, tucked into their metropolitan centres. One such raid, designated Operation BEANBAG, hit two ANC/MK training facilities in the town of Matola, near Maputo, in 1981; another, Operation LEBANTA, targeted ANC facilities in Lesotho.<sup>1</sup>

However, farming out the defence of southern Angola to UNITA was no easy task. Despite his pretensions, Savimbi was little more than a local strongman, able to command great influence in the southeast but nowhere else in Angola. Despite the Clark Amendment of 1976, CIA aid was still trickling into the UNITA's coffers courtesy of American die-hard anticommunists like Colonel Oliver North and the right-wing 'Free Angola Foundation'. However, this was little more than a trickle compared to the weight of Cuban and Soviet aid which the MPLA, as something of a success story for anti-imperialist aid through its weathering of SADF aggression, could count on.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, rather than achieving clear military goals, the SADF's support of UNITA focused on saving Savimbi's home ground from the enormous FAPLA assaults which periodically rolled southwards. Operations

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<sup>1</sup> Stiff, *The Silent War*, pp.327-338 and 412-426.

<sup>2</sup> Windrich, 'The Laboratory of Hate', p.212

SKEPTIC/SMOKESHELL and KLIPKLOP, launched in 1980, both fell into this mould. The SADF also conducted several limited sweeps, very much in the style of Operation REINDEER, against SWAPO bases during this period and, in 1981, against its first FAPLA target in Operation PROTEA.<sup>3</sup> PROTEA was concerned with eliminating FAPLA bases near Xangongo and Ngiva, which had become too strongly defended for UNITA to attack. Backed up by the heaviest air support the SAAF could muster, 32 Battalion and several Reconnaissance Commando groups attacked the FAPLA bases, destroying them and punching a large hole in the Angolan air defence network, up till this point a severe danger to the SAAF presence in the area. The SADF claimed to have inflicted over 1000 casualties and captured 3-4000 tons of Soviet-supplied war materials including a Russian advisor, Sergeant-Major Nikolai Pestretsov.<sup>4</sup> Operation ASKARI, conducted in 1983, had a similar objective to PROTEA: to force FAPLA to abandon fortresses at Cuvelai, Caindo, Mulondo, and Cahama. This was easily achieved, with the SADF capturing a great deal of Soviet materiel including the first complete SA-9 anti-aircraft missile system to ever fall into non-Soviet hands.<sup>5</sup> ASKARI had also seen South African troops meeting Cuban troops in pitched battle for the first time, although accounts still differ about the extent of these engagements.

By 1983, then, UNITA – following cautiously in the footsteps of Operation PROTEA – had re-established control over southern Angola. A temporary respite from war was gained through the signing of the Lusaka Accord in 1984, in which South Africa agreed to a cease-fire and general withdrawal in exchange for an MPLA promise to restrain SWAPO in southern Angola. The last South African garrisons were withdrawn over the next year, although cross-border actions by commando units were to continue unabated.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Anti-SWAPO operations during this period were CARNATION, DAISY, SUPER, MEEBOS and PHOENIX. Operation KERSLIG ('CANDLELIGHT'), although aimed at Lusaka harbour, can also be considered an anti-SWAPO operation because it was intended to interrupt supplies reaching SWAPO through the port facilities.

<sup>4</sup> Stiff, *The Silent War*, p.357

<sup>5</sup> *Idem.*, pp.354-366

<sup>6</sup> A du Pisani. *Beyond the Barracks*, (SA: South African Institute of International Affairs, 1988) p.12

The character of South Africa's proxy war between 1981 and 1983 can be clearly seen in the immensely popular *Boetie* films which it gave rise to, produced and directed by industry stalwarts Philo Pieterse and Regardt van den Bergh with the assistance of the SADF, but bearing little resemblance to the Border War films of earlier years. Boetie van Tonder (played by Arnold Vosloo) is a playboy who ends up in the army to settle a bet, and joins a unit of no-hopers under the vociferous Corporal White (Ian Roberts). The films' main concerns are with Boetie's love life and attempts to duck responsibility; noble sacrifice, desperate combat and savage terrorism are nowhere to be seen. However, the extensive support provided by the various arms of the security establishment is an indication that these movies are not entirely without ideological loading – *Boetie op Manoeuvres*' assistance acknowledgements include the SADF's Department of Public Relations, Director of Logistical Support, Northern Transvaal Command, and the State President's Guard.

What did the army get for its assistance? Firstly, Boetie, while not exactly a National Service 'everyman' (on account of his wealth) is nothing if not a likeable hero with which a viewer might identify. His successes in the two films become the audience's; the military setting becomes a playground wherein *chutzpah* and quick wits make any unlikely escapade possible – with Boetie, of course, always getting the girl (Elize, played by Janie du Plessis). Secondly, the *Boetie* films use the main protagonist's triumphs as a paean to the capabilities of the ordinary soldier. In *Boetie op Manoeuvres*, Boetie's unit must participate in war games against a crack squad from the Reconnaissance Commandos; despite early setbacks and the obvious skills of the Recces,<sup>7</sup> Boetie and his sidekicks pull together, triumph, and win glory both for themselves and their unit. Not only is eventual triumph theirs, but their actions occur within a framework of respect and support offered to them by their officers. Even Corporal

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<sup>7</sup> In their dress, nomenclature, and utterances, the Recces provide a number of interesting intertextual references to classic Vietnam war movies. Their leader (played by Paul Slabolepszy) is called 'The Horror', and two of his lines – 'Troepie [Trooper] don't surf!' and – 'I love the smell of cordite in the evening ... it reminds me of mayhem' – are direct revisions of lines from *Apocalypse Now* (1979).

White confides to another officer that he loves his men despite their being ‘useless... slapdash... second-hand.’ The ‘national service is fun’ theme, therefore, is as much a feature of the *Boetie* films as it is of *Six Soldiers/Ses Soldate*, *Mirage Eskader*, and the other Border War films of the 1970s.

However, both *Boetie op Manoeuvres* and its predecessor inhabit a subtly more critical and tongue-in-cheek position with respect to the security forces. This extends beyond jibes directed at the character of the Recces portrayed in the film; De Kok (Frank Opperman), one of the unit’s drivers, is prone to muttering, ‘O, *Vlok!*’ when things go wrong. This is not only a neat sidestep on Pieterse’s part with regard to the attentions of the censors, but it also allows the insertions of a pun of association between ‘*fok*’ (‘fuck’) and ‘*Vlok*’ (Adriaan Vlok, who served the Apartheid state as Minister of Justice and Minister of Law and Order) into the film’s script. Such additions can only exist to cater to audiences with an existing awareness of certain features of the politico-military landscape of the time; namely, that Recces were reputed to be ‘wild’, and as difficult to predict as the terrorists they faced, and that Minister Vlok was exceedingly unpopular. That these elements existed, and survived the intense scrutiny of the security force censors, indicates two things: firstly, a shift in the priorities of the military establishment’s ideological strategy from vilifying the enemy for the benefit of an unconscientised audience, to comedic damage control intended to shore up the floundering conscription system for the benefit of audiences increasingly aware of its shortcomings. Secondly, perhaps, it shows that even filmmakers who were prepared to entertain a relationship with the SADF to get their film the support it needed may have harboured various kinds of resentment of their patron’s excesses. South African filmmakers were not, after all, a homogeneous mass of Apartheid ideologues; as discussed in Chapter 3, not everyone who toed the Apartheid line did so because they stood in agreement with its policies.

A solid indication that the altered focus of the *Boetie* films was an artificial change of direction rather than a natural evolution in the history of the Border War movie is the survival of the original Border War template – to the last detail – in the SADF-sponsored *Jantjie Kom Huistoe* ('Jantjie Comes Home', 1984). While the *Boetie* films encouraged white audiences to laugh along as they signed up, *Jantjie Kom Huistoe* was bringing a very different message to another group – the coloured population of the Cape Province.

While technically exempt from military service, South Africa's non-white population groups were increasingly the focus of interest from a military concerned at the public relations effects of white deaths 'on the border' as the Border War dragged into its tenth year. Volunteer-only mechanised infantry groups like the Cape Corps, which only accepted coloured recruits, were seen as a good way to reassure the white electorate visibly that – with the advent of the new Tricameral Parliament – the country's non-whites were now also doing their bit in the name of 'separate development'. It is in this spirit that *Jantjie Kom Huistoe* operates – portraying armed forces service as the same blend of patriotic duty and voyage of self-discovery as was common fare for white audiences five years previously.

The movie tells the story of Jantjie Cornelis (Neville Nash), a restless young coloured man from the Bo-Kaap area of Cape Town. He has a girlfriend, Katryn (Foziah Davidson) who is as refined and ambitious as he is rough and unfocused; nonetheless, the pair love each other greatly and are shown enjoying many happy times together. Jantjie is stuck in a dead-end job that he hates, as a counter hand in a fish shop; Katryn works at a ladies' outfitters, and it is their professional lives which provides the seed of the conflict which is the root of the movie. Katryn's boss Mich (Roderick Rudolph) has a more than avuncular interest in Katryn; promising that he will take her designs to a prominent fashion mogul, he begins to woo her away from Jantjie – who, while upset, is too passive and sullen to mount any kind of effective

response. His mother angrily blames her husband for her son's weakness: '*Dag vir dag het hy [Jantjie] gesien hoe sy pa se ruggraad slap geword toe hy hom soos 'n man moes gedra het.*'<sup>8</sup>

Matters reach a head when Jantjie, who has quit his job and moved out of his parent's house, sees his friend Sardyn (Joseph Mitchell) killed in a street brawl with knife-wielding gangsters. The gangsters are driven off after the arrival of two uniformed members of the Cape Corps on weekend pass; impressed by their vigour and discipline,<sup>9</sup> Jantjie decides to sign up for military service. Visiting his father to say goodbye, Jantjie explains that service in the Corps is '*nie oor baklei ... dis ook oor mens wees ... ek is moeg vir verloor, Pa.*'<sup>10</sup> He also extols the exclusivity of the Corps and the idea that not just anyone can join up ('*Ek hoor hulle is baie streng, maar ... my record is skoon, ek het my Matriek, ek hou my uit die moeilikheid ...*'<sup>11</sup>); nonetheless, Jantjie is accepted and true to his expectations, the tough life in the Corps transforms him from a second-rate young man to a first-class soldier. Discipline, neatness, and regard for others replace his previous idleness; on weekend passes, he rekindles his relationship with Katryn.

Unfortunately, Jantjie sees Katryn and Mich embracing outside her house one day, and reaches the conclusion that his emotions are being toyed with; feeling hurt and betrayed, he shuns Katryn and departs for 'the border' without speaking to her again. The border section of the movie is a short one, only twenty minutes in length, but nonetheless contains several critical themes. The viewer is introduced to Jantjie the soldier, now holding the rank of corporal and commanding his men with bravery and professionalism. While on patrol, their vehicle is caught in a terrorist ambush; the ragged AK-47-wielding terrorists, despite mortar

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<sup>8</sup> 'Day after day, he [Jantjie] watched his father's backbone grow slack, when he should have been carrying himself like a man'. Ironically, Jantie's mother, is referring to her husband's passivity in his unwillingness to protest their eviction from District 6 during this scene; Jantjie's military service is thus an attempt to set right the effects of an act perpetrated by the same security apparatus he is attempting to enlist with!

<sup>9</sup> His admiration has already been established in a previous scene. Passing two soldiers on Darling Street, he remarks, '*Netjiese manne daai, Sardyn ... netjies.*' ('Squared-away men, Sardyn ... squared away.')

<sup>10</sup> 'not about fighting ... it's also about becoming a person ... I'm tired of losing, Dad'

<sup>11</sup> 'I hear they are very strict, but ... my record is clean, I've got my Matric, I've stayed out of trouble ...'

support and the element of surprise, are unable to withstand the Corps counter-attack and scatter in all directions. Jantjie and Dienkie (David Solomon), his podgy machine-gunner, track two terrorists to a nearby farm, where they have taken hostages. Dienkie is badly wounded during their approach, and Jantjie is clipped in the leg dragging him to cover; despite his wound, Jantjie assaults the farmhouse single-handed, gunning down both terrorists and rescuing the hostages. He returns home a hero, complete with medal and flashy new scooter, just in time to save Katryn from marrying Mich. The idle young man who couldn't stand up to anything has become the all-conquering hero, secure in the love of his family and fiancée and with the world at his feet – all through service in the Cape Corps.

*Jantjie Kom Huistoe*'s main themes, as mentioned previously, are a direct and explicit return to the conventions of movies such as *Grensbasis 13* and *Six Soldiers/Ses Soldate*. The terrorists, although their ideology remains opaque,<sup>12</sup> are brutal and animalistic cowards who think nothing of assaulting a family at prayer – a significant choice of timing, because while the film cannot portray Jantjie's own (coloured) community as threatened by terror, having the terrorists disrupt the (white) family at their prayers nonetheless allows some degree of outrage to be inculcated in Christian or simply religiously tolerant audiences. As to the film's treatment of the terrorists' capabilities, while they approach with enough skill to kill the farmer's guard dog and catch him unawares, their initial ambush is a complete fiasco, a clear implication that while SADF-trained soldiers are far their superior on the battlefield, it is ordinary civilians that are most at risk from their predations.

Sacrifice is also reintroduced as a major theme, with Jantjie sacrificing his life of ease for the rigour of the Corps, as is the moral certainty of the SADF mission in the operational area. Most prominently, Jantjie's experience serves to introduce the 'national service is fun' theme

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<sup>12</sup> The fact that one of the terrorists calls the other 'Abdul' does suggest non-South African (and, for that matter, non-Namibian) origins, but this is not explored within the movie.

so central to Border War movies post-1975; although Jantjie's officers are tough,<sup>13</sup> the men have plenty of smiles on their faces and enough time to listen to the radio, call their girlfriends, and go on leave. Even while recovering from his wound in a military hospital, Jantjie is moved to thank the staff for treating them so well. The implication is once again clear; the SADF takes care of its own.

If the juxtaposition of *Jantjie Kom Huistoe* with the *Boetie* films is evidence that a split was occurring in depictions of the Border War in locally produced movies in the mid-1980s, further evidence can be had in the form of Frans Nel's 1987 adaptation of Alexander Strachan's book, '*n Wêreld Sonder Grense* ('A World Without Borders'). In this film, which stars Scot Scott and Brumilda van Rensburg, the 'border' is an internal rather than an external one: one man's journey through a term of service in the Reconnaissance Commandos provides an examination of how war interacts with the internal landscapes of those who fight it and those around them. Drawing heavily on Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) for its second half, the film tells the story of a young man (Scott) who tries to please his mother (van Rensburg) by joining the Recces. He goes on active duty, and proves himself to be an able warrior, but eventually tires of the lifestyle and quits. He marries, but finds civilian life unsatisfying; finally, the military call on him one last time to go after his old comrades and bring their rogue commander Jock (Danny Keogh) back to his senses – or kill him.

An analogue for his mental progression from civilian life, through his training, to active service and the movie's conclusion is provided in the screams he gives vent to throughout the movie; these are an exhilarated whoop while jogging on his parents' farm in the movie's first section, a primal roar of regression while lifting a training weight in its second, a shout of rage when smashing his wife's flowerpot in its third, and a growl of triumph when emerging from

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<sup>13</sup> As the men are about to embark on their first weekend pass, their corporal makes it clear that '*As een man hier 'n minuut oor twaalf inkry gaan die aasvoels party hou ... het julle my?*' ('If one of you gets in even a minute after twelve, the vultures are going to have a party here ... have you got it?')

Jock's tent at its conclusion. His screams underscore the themes of each phase of the unnamed main character's development; childish joy, savagery, frustration, and triumph. But the 'triumph' is the murder of his old commander, and the frustration comes as he flings an enormous pot down next to his wife when her nagging momentarily punches through his passive exterior. He is obviously a man whose internal battles have left him prone to strange, immense emotions, and it is the army that has set these battles in motion. As an instructor tells the recruits, '*Dis 'n geveg met jouself. As jy wen, kan ons julle gebruik.*'<sup>14</sup>

Such a complex agenda is unprecedented in Border War movies, and indicative both of the growing gap between the story the military might have wished told and the story more and more film-makers wished to tell, and of the influence of the more mature and unregulated Vietnam war movie genre in the US. However, '*n Wêreld Sonder Grense* did not perform well at the box-office. With the first large-scale military confrontation between South African and Cuban forces during Operation ASKARI still fresh in the public mind and the border conflict taking on more characteristics of an all-out war by the day, it appears that the viewing public was not yet ready for its ambivalent treatment of the reasons behind the war and the methods by which it was being conducted. As an independent production, too, '*n Wêreld Sonder Grense* could not rely on local funding through the subsidy system; this rendered certain types of depiction off-limits in a purely practical sense, forcing the movie into an at-times awkward personal and introspective narrative style which may have alienated audiences used to more obvious ideological filmic agendas. Pretorius sums these failings up in his review of the film:

*'n Wêreld sonder grense ... is a commendable effort to deconstruct the military genre, particularly the Boetie films, by showing the soldiers as having to cope with brutality. The enemy, for a change, is visible. But the film fails to engage the political realities of the Border War in a meaningful way, in spite of its being made, unlike the Boetie films, without the co-operation of [the SADF].'*<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> 'It's a battle with yourself. If you win, we can use you.'

<sup>15</sup> W Pretorius, 'Afrikaans Cinema in the Eighties – Soothing Images', in J Blignaut, and M Botha (eds.), *Movies - moguls - mavericks: South African cinema 1979 – 1991* (Cape Town: Showdata, 1992), p. 389

The fact that the film was based on a book (and not just a photo-story) merits closer examination, as this makes it unique among Border War films. *Grensliteratuur* ('border literature'), the treatment of the Border War through the printed-text medium, dates back to 1974 and P.J. Haasbroek's book *Heupvuur* ('Shooting from the Hip'). In stark contrast to their filmic equivalents of the time, *Heupvuur* and its sequels, *Roofvis* ('Piranha') & *Skrikbewind* ('Reign of Terror') approach the war in an clearly unsanitised manner, including scenes of illegal killing by SADF troops, the torture of suspected insurgents, and the practice of trophy-taking a full ten years before these scenes would emerge in *'n Wêreld Sonder Grense* and *The Stick*. Haasbroek claimed to have based his work on personal experience; other early writers in this genre also concentrated largely on the personal and descriptive dimensions of the Border War, exploring their own experiences of it. Later examples from the genre, which became known as *grensromans* ('pulp border fiction', as embodied by the work of authors such as Strachan and Kruger), focus on the moral and social displacement created, sustained and propagated by the war. The existence of such literary treatments of the war in the non-mass media supports the argument that the evolution of Border War film was not a natural one, but rather explicitly directed by the strict controls imposed by the government, and that in a freer society its progression might have been completely different.<sup>16</sup> This idea will be picked up again in Chapter 7.

An examination of the movie's main points is highly rewarding in terms of its subversions of, rather than adherences to, the Border War filmic template. Like *Six Soldiers/Ses Soldate*, *'n Wêreld Sonder Grense* chooses to focus on elite troops rather than National Servicemen. However, unlike the earlier film, *'n Wêreld Sonder Grense* portrays these men as cruel and debased. When they are not in the field, killing, they are on leave in Durban causing trouble

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<sup>16</sup> HE Koornhof, 'Works of friction: current South African war literature', in J Cock and L Nathan (eds.) *War and Society: The Militarisation of South Africa* (Cape Town: David Philip, 1989).

and picking fights.<sup>17</sup> Keogh and Scott's characters run a pedestrian down for refusing to get out of the path of their truck; later, Scott's character and another member of his unit cruise the streets hassling women until they finally succeed in picking up a pair who are so drunk that one of them vomits on the floor of the two men's barracks room.<sup>18</sup> Even in their leisure time, few of the characters are ever far from alcohol; they drink beer while showering, smuggle liquor into hospitals for their wounded comrades, and quaff so much rum at funerals that, as the one character says, '*Hierdie dae is jy nie meer so drunk soos 'n lord, jy's so dronk soos 'n korporaal op 'n militêre begrafnis*'.<sup>19</sup> By the end of the movie, they have such a thirst for inebriation that they turn on the army that created them. When Jock's unit goes rogue, they begin raiding the SADF as well as SWAPO for supplies, after one such raid, the booty brought in consists of case after case of whiskey and Coco-Rico. Alongside the prominence of meat in the narrative (via several butchery and *braaivleis* scenes), these elements allow *'n Wêreld Sonder Grense* to present the Recces to the viewer as ravenous and out of control, rather than elite super-soldiers.

*'n Wêreld Sonder Grense* was thus almost as far from *Kaptein Caprivi* as a Border War film could get. However, its confusing narrative structure (with most of the story occurring in flashback sequences), difficult internal focus, and low budget meant that it would soon be overshadowed by another independent movie, the last to be made about the Border War before its conclusion and one which would be banned until 1991, supposedly for depictions of violence and bad language. This was Darrell Roodt's 1987 war/horror movie, *The Stick*.

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<sup>17</sup> The Reconnaissance Regiments' headquarters had been situated in Durban's military district in the Bluff since 1974 (Stiff, Peter. *The Silent War*, p.59)

<sup>18</sup> As the two women are loaded into their car before being taken back to base, the camera lingers on one's buttocks as the foregrounded hand of the second Recce curls into a fist in the centre of the shot – a chilling gesture of appropriation and an evocation of the potential for sexual violence in the situation.

<sup>19</sup> 'These days you're not as drunk as a lord anymore, you're as drunk as a corporal at a military funeral.'

Taking its lead from Oliver Stone's Vietnam war movie *Platoon* (1984) both in terms of its first-person narration and attitude to warfare, while still echoing the World War 2 conventions present in mainstream Border War films such as *Six Soldiers/Ses Soldate*. *The Stick* has as its focus a small group of soldiers sent out into the operational area on a dangerous mission. With a cast list including several actors who had starred in the *Boetie* movies (Greg Latter, Frank Opperman, and Kerneels Coertzen), *The Stick* takes its audience into the heart of the Border War darkness, a supernatural landscape in which the troopers meet the enemy and find them to be both invisible and unkillable. As the cohesion of the unit disintegrates, they turn their guns first on civilians and then on each other; eventually, stripped of weapons and reduced to headlong flight, the unit's sole survivor barely makes it back to friendly lines. After debriefing in a mental hospital, he is discharged under a cloud. Like Kurtz in *Apocalypse Now*, it seems, the army 'didn't dig what [he] had to tell them'.

*The Stick* explicitly subverts nearly every aspect of the conventional Border War film template. Although the characters are sent out to avenge the deaths of two previous patrols, these patrols were themselves deep in enemy territory and looking for a fight. The usual 'South African retaliation for terrorist outrage' pattern is thus turned on its head; it is the SADF who is making the first move here, on a sweep and clear mission where, as their commander tells them, they 'don't need no prisoners'. Similarly, the movie convincingly dispels the myth of white military invulnerability; the strange tribesmen meet and surpass the skills of the South Africans whether fighting with assault rifle or spear, while the only kills the *troepies* manage to achieve are innocent women and children. Lastly, while the tribesmen are certainly depicted as primitive through their dress and face-paint, it is the white soldiers who are cruel and bestial in *The Stick*, and the only indication of 'communist subversion' in the lives of their enemies is the tribesmen's use of AK-47s.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Only once does the team manage to spot an organised Soviet-protégé-style military unit, standing by the fireside the night before the assault on the village. However, these soldiers have disappeared by daybreak, and no

The film's depiction of the 'enemy' and his motivations is not the only dimension in which it subverts the Border War genre, however; the South Africans themselves deviate strongly from the filmic norm established by previous movies. The unit's lieutenant, played by Franz Dobrowsky, is ineffectual and passive; O'Grady (Sean Taylor), the unit's best fighter, is a murderous maniac who, with his long hair and bad attitude, is hardly depicted as an ideal soldier. By contrast, the neat and efficient Corporal Evans (James Whyte) is almost gutted by a spear before losing his life to a landmine, denied even the heroic death amidst a hail of bullets that such a character might have had in, for example, *Grensbasis 13*.<sup>21</sup> In yet another subversion of type, the unit's black tracker – Mkhonto (Dixon Malele) – makes a suicidal attempt on the lieutenant's life when ordered, at gunpoint, to kill the Witchdoctor (Winston Ntshona). Mkhonto's 'subordinate black heroism', thus, rather than serving the aims of the SADF, stands in opposition to it.<sup>22</sup>

But perhaps the most significant deviation from the Border War filmic norm lies in the Lieutenant's persistent refusal (and Evans' frustrated inability) to report back to base. This element depicts the SADF troops as cut off from any imaginable lifeline while out 'on the border'; although the film portrays this lifeline as a metaphorical rather than an actual one, with its loss depriving the team of clarity and understanding rather than the air, armour and artillery support which South African forces relied on in reality, its absence is nonetheless critical. Whatever the mission, whatever the circumstances, the pro-regime characters in previous Border War movies have always been able to rely on the military/police establishment completely. In *The Stick*, that establishment's motives are shown to be opaque

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trace of their presence is ever found. The film thus leaves open the possibility that they never existed in the first place – that the SADF troops imagined them because they were simply looking too hard. If this is the case, it may be a comment on the way counter-insurgency actions (like the Border War) create their own enemies: the sterner the repression, the faster rebel organisations gain support.

<sup>21</sup> Indeed, death comes silently, senselessly, and without pause to the embattled South Africans, with the good and the bad (or, given the movie's overall tone, the better and the worse) struck down without any obvious favour being shown to either side. There is no trace of the moral classification of deaths as 'well deserved' or 'bravely endured' evident in previous Border War movies.

<sup>22</sup> Mkhonto's name, of course, clearly evokes '*Mkhonto we Sizwe*' (or MK, the ANC's armed wing)

and its grasp of the situation obviously patchy. The Lieutenant knows that his unit is simply being used as terrorist bait; consequently, the talismanic potency ascribed to the radio by Evans and the others is – to the viewer’s eyes, at least – mere naiveté.

As detailed previously, the team is forced to flee the operational area after taking heavy casualties, and only Cooper (Greg Latter) makes it back alive. Their mission has thus been a failure, and the military is no closer to determining the whereabouts or disposition of the ghost-faced killers. In effect, thus, the men of *The Stick* have died in vain. This adaptation of the Border War template is best understood in terms of the high profile of liberal opposition to the war at the time, and the state of the war itself as discussed previously. By 1986/87, PW Botha had denied the presence of South African troops in Angola several times; each time, the troops had been ‘withdrawn’ only to be quietly re-inserted the moment international pressure abated.<sup>23</sup> This pressure, coupled with attempts to farm off responsibility for beating FAPLA to Savimbi’s UNITA movement, meant that while South African troops might successfully assault an area, they would not be permitted to hold it: this task would fall to UNITA, who would inevitably be driven out by the FAPLA counter-attack. The harder South Africa tried to shore up Savimbi’s position, the more he seemed to lose ground.

This state of bloody Sisyphean stalemate is the environment which *The Stick* attempts to depict, and in this regard it achieves its goal not only by having the protagonists’ mission fail but also by detailing the fragmentation under pressure, lack of control over the situation, and inability to come face-to-face with the enemy on anything resembling equal terms discussed previously. The men of the ‘stick’ fail in their mission, the movie’s subtext goes, and the rest of the SADF isn’t doing too well either; consequently, *The Stick* stands out among its peers as

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<sup>23</sup> The South African public, fortunately, was rarely fooled. Even without the growing number of post-service veterans in civilian society slowly getting the real story behind the war out, soldiers often managed to include coded messages in their letters back home indicating their real location, and access to unmonitored phone lines was nowhere near as difficult as the generals may have thought.

the only Border War movie released during the actual conflict which both explicitly comments on the war and portrays it negatively, and despite its forays into hallucinatory horror and moral allegory, its message was obviously clear enough – even at the time – to contribute to the Censorship Board’s decision to order its immediate banning. If no other information about the film existed, this fact alone could (and perhaps does) serve as its major recommendation; however, Roodt’s other films – *City of Blood* and *Place of Weeping* (both 1986) before *The Stick* and *Jobman* (1989) following it – indicate a director with a strong taste for critically positioned social awareness. *City of Blood* deals with a cover-up of the Biko-like death in police custody of a black political figure, *Place of Weeping* with the agonising realities of racism in a farming town, and *Jobman* with the persecution of a coloured farmer. Roodt was thus an established independent director with a strong anti-Apartheid track record, a feature of crucial importance given that *The Stick* was not only financed independently but also underwent post-production in Los Angeles and London. Every prop, every piece of military equipment had to be built from scratch or rented; even the helicopters had to be hired. A less well-reputed and connected director would certainly have found the difficulties of making a movie such as *The Stick* practically insurmountable, and this is perhaps the reason why the simultaneously-released and equally mature ‘*n Wêreld Sonder Grense* failed to make the same impact as its better-financed rival.

It appears that Roodt was aware of his own position as an anti-establishment filmmaker; making the following comments about *Jobman*:

*Jobman might appear to be nothing more than a Western transferred to the exquisite wastelands of the Karoo, but I hope it is imbued with all sorts of political and social ramifications pertinent to the struggle against apartheid.*<sup>24</sup>

However, it must be pointed out that *The Stick* was only released in English. This leaves the issue of the extent to which it was aimed at local (primarily Afrikaans-speaking) audiences –

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<sup>24</sup> Blignaut and Botha, *Movies - moguls – mavericks*, p. 14

the 'hero' is, after all, English-speaking and most of the Afrikaners in the story are relegated to the roles of hidebound thugs or superstitious thrill-seekers such as Visser – open to debate. It is clear that a film-maker could probably either have international funding for an English-language film or local audiences for an Afrikaans-language film, but not both; and as has already been discussed, multiculturalism with respect to English-speaking South Africans was paid lip service in the SADF but nothing more. The SADF's primary source of conscripts, Afrikaner males, thus remained isolated from the influence of films such as *The Stick*.

Nevertheless, it was *The Stick* that allowed Roodt to achieve a position as the Border War's primary dissenting filmic voice; Steele-Taylor, for instance, described *the Stick* as the 'diametrical opposite to Regardt van den Bergh's *Boetie Gaan Border Toe*'.<sup>25</sup> *The Stick* certainly shows an awareness of the Border War's reality for those that fought it that only serves to highlight the kind of fantasy the *Boetie* films attempt to serve up. Cooper and his fellow soldiers are a collection of depressed drug abusers rather than laughing icons of Afrikaner youth common in pro-regime Border war films, a view supported by an army survey conducted in 1985 which indicated that between 30 and 40% of SADF troops routinely used drugs ranging from *dagga* (marijuana) to ethyl nitrate, sodium seconal, synthetic adrenaline, and anything else that could be 'lifted' from base medical stores. When getting high was not enough, many resorted to suicide; three times as many soldiers attempted suicide in 1986 as were killed in combat, with the favoured method being drug overdose.<sup>26</sup> Cooper 'prays' that O'Grady '[doesn't] try to rape [one of the village women]'; in Windhoek during the height of the SADF occupation, 42% of all criminal cases issuing from the Attorney General's office involved soldiers raping civilians.<sup>27</sup> Such assaults were not confined to the operational area; in one well-reported incident, soldiers 'letting off steam' while on weekend

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<sup>25</sup> T Steele-Taylor, 'Genres in Accented English – Ninjas in the Third World', in J Blignaut and M Botha (eds.), *Movies - moguls - mavericks: South African cinema 1979 – 1991* (Cape Town: Showdata, 1992), p. 142

<sup>26</sup> Cawthra, Kraak, and O'Sullivan, *War*, pp. 177-180

<sup>27</sup> Cawthra, *Brutal Force*, p. 214

leave from their border base attacked a group of schoolgirls on a train to Johannesburg, forcing the girls to barricade themselves into their compartment.<sup>28</sup>

In the mid to late 1980s, thus, it is clear that the SADF presence on the border was undergoing a crisis of morale; this only increased the pressure on the military planners to achieve some kind of lasting stability in Angola so that the South African troops could be withdrawn. Initially, the Lusaka Accord and the gains of PROTEA and ASKARI seemed to have given UNITA the space it needed. As the South Africans withdrew, UNITA faced and defeated two FAPLA attacks supported by tanks and Soviet Mi-24 helicopter gunships, without losing any ground or suffering heavy casualties. The repeal of the Clark amendment by the Reagan government also seemed to herald renewed CIA interest in the region. The SADF therefore turned its attention back to fighting the war at home against the ANC. In June 1985 it launched Operation PLEXI, a series of seventeen separate strikes against ANC safe houses, administrative offices, and intelligence-collation centres in Gaborone, Botswana, utilising a total of 63 operators, 53 of which were black soldiers from the assimilated Rhodesian and Portuguese security forces chosen to enable the assault teams to blend into the local population more easily.<sup>29</sup> Raids on the ANC in Harare, Gaborone, and Lusaka followed PLEXI, due to the increasing number of ANC attacks in the northern and eastern Transvaal, during 1986, each conducted with a similar no-prisoners attitude towards the ANC members.

Unfortunately for the SADF's military planners, UNITA's strong position suddenly began to decay in late 1985, and the decision was taken to intervene before FAPLA could push it too far back from its 1983 positions. Operations MAGNETO, WALLPAPER, and CHUVA, along with several smaller strikes on SWAPO bases, were conducted between 1985 and 1987 to reinforce UNITA and disrupt the FAPLA build-up. But by August 1987, FAPLA was on

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<sup>28</sup> *Cape Times*, January 5 1985

<sup>29</sup> Stiff, *The Silent War*, p.474

the offensive near Mavinga and UNITA showed no signs of being able to hold them back. A significant South African presence was ordered into Angola under the operational designation MODULER to check the advance of the strengthened FAPLA 47<sup>th</sup> Brigade; this was achieved in a series of pitched battles around the Lomba River and the FAPLA column ground to a halt in the fortified town of Cuito Cuanavale.<sup>30</sup> MODULER was renamed, first to HOOPER and then to PACKER, as its objectives changed from halting the FAPLA advance to scoring one last resounding victory against them; by now, peace talks were in the air and a strong South African position would have meant concessions from the Cuban and MPLA governments. More hung on this than the fate of Angola; also at stake was the future of South West Africa, which the UN was insisting be allowed to regain its independence. If the MPLA could be pushed back, the South Africans would be able to dictate the region's future from a position of strength. The Cuban contingent in Angola were equally set on a propaganda victory, however, and the veteran Cuban General Cintra Frias had been dispatched to Angola by Castro himself with orders that Cuito Cuanavale was to be held at all costs.

Despite constant attacks from the South African forces, and the commitment of the SADF's prized Olifant tanks<sup>31</sup> from the President Steyn, Groot Karoo and Mooirivier Regiments for the first time, the defenders of Cuito Cuanavale could not be dislodged. Then, in May 1988 while the treaty which would end the war was being formulated in Brazzaville, Cairo and New York, the faltering South Africans were dealt the very kind of blow they had been seeking to deal the Cubans when six MiG-23 aircraft managed to launch a strike on the Calueque pumping stations in southern Angola. One MiG was shot down and another two damaged, but twelve South African national servicemen were killed by rocket fire. That the Cubans could pull off such a daring strike right under the noses of the strong SAAF contingent in the area clearly contradicted the myth of military invulnerability which had been

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<sup>30</sup> Hamann, *The Days of the Generals*, p.90-92

<sup>31</sup> A local copy of the British Centurion, still in service (barely) with the SADF at the time of writing.

so central to the South African public's understanding of the war, and constituted a public relations disaster for the SADF. As Hamann puts it:

*The deaths [that day] caused waves of anger in the Republic. The fact that the oldest of the victims was only 23 made it seem even worse ... [just] before midnight on 27 June 1988 the field commanders inside Angola were told to withdraw immediately and ...[were] reportedly told by their senior officers, 'from that night onwards not a toe was to be put across the border into Angola'.<sup>32</sup>*

The South African military, unwilling and unable to re-escalate the war following this setback, withdrew from their positions in Angola and refrained from retaliatory action until the ratification of the Brazzaville Protocol on 22 December 1988. The treaty called for South Africa to withdraw from Angola, and allow the free elections in South West Africa/Namibia that would lead to that nation's independence.

The Border War was over, and the same could almost be said of the Apartheid government's attempts to shift public opinion through intervention in local film. While censorship remained in effect, and continued to be an active force for several years – as is clear from the suppression of films such as *Cry Freedom* (1987), *Mapantsula* (1988), and *A Dry White Season* (1989) – two factors had arisen which mitigated government control over films being made about the South African situation. Firstly, the subsidy system had begun to flounder: the South African market was simply not large enough to render the eighty or so films being created every year profitable, and as the system became increasingly expensive (costing the government up R900 million annually), payouts became increasingly erratic.<sup>33</sup> When the system was finally dissolved in 1989, it took with it the means to the provision of incentives for pro-regime filmmakers, and freed production studios from the pressure to choose 'safe' films over more 'contentious' ones simply to protect their bottom line. Secondly, and perhaps more significantly, the struggle against Apartheid had gained considerable international prominence by this stage, and both funding and receptive audiences were becoming

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<sup>32</sup> Hamann, *Days of the Generals*, pp.99-100

<sup>33</sup> Botha and Blyden, *Movies – moguls - mavericks*, pp.122-123

increasingly available to anti-Apartheid filmmakers outside South Africa.<sup>34</sup> As the government lost control over the means to exercise financial coercion over film-makers, therefore, foreign sources appeared in its place; films such as Elaine Proctor's *On the Wire* (1989) took advantage of this change to address issues surrounding the war that could never have been dealt with in a subsidy film. While the many other reforms brought into being by the de Klerk government in 1989 may have attained more prominence in the public eye (and rightly so), for the purposes of this dissertation 1988-89 can be taken as the end of an important era in South African film and the Border War film in particular: the first hints of the birth of independent, unrestricted filmic interpretations in South Africa.

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<sup>34</sup> V Bickford-Smith, 'Screening Saints and Sinners: The construction of filmic and video images of black and white South Africans in Western popular culture during the late Apartheid era', *Kronos*, No. 27, November 2001

## Chapter 7: The Battle for Hearts and Minds

In this chapter the question to be addressed is: what is the theoretical and empirical evidence for the thesis under discussion – that locally made films between 1971 and 1988 portray dynamic struggles for control over the ideology that sanctioned the legitimacy of the Border War? As such the focus is on a discussion of the ways in which films were used to *persuade* and *dominate* public opinion in the name of the Border War. Before these can be examined, however, a methodical review of the discussion points already introduced in Chapters 2 and 3 must be conducted. The salient features of each discussion point are reviewed below.

The **first discussion point** involved an analysis of the *militarisation of South African society*. In this respect, the government's creation and use of notions such as *rooigebaar* and *swartgebaar*, the failure of détente politics, South Africa's growing military commitment in Angola (despite Vorster's objections), and the steady rise in prominence of Botha and his hardliners were made explicit.

The **second discussion point** concerned the Border War film's gradual *assimilation of the norms of the garrison society era between 1971 and 1988*. To facilitate the examination of this process of assimilation, analyses were conducted of the erasure of distinctions between the civilian and military spheres of society, the growth of military-related commercial interests, the growing use by the government of local media as a propaganda outlet, the adoption of total and forward strategy, and the rise of the State of Emergency.

**Thirdly**, the *propaganda goals of the Apartheid government* as they appear in the films examined were discussed. In this respect, the official recreation of the 'communist threat', attempts to counter resistance to conscription, the creation of a sense of South African

military might, and attempts to familiarise the population with the 'rhetoric of siege' have been made clear.

**Lastly**, with respect to the mechanisms employed by the government to achieve the goals detailed in each of the movies, this dissertation has detailed the way that disinformation, the twin forms of concealment (suppression and censorship), subsidy incentives, and banning, affected the Border War film genre and the South African film industry.

Against this theoretical background, Chapters 4-6 were concerned with an analysis of movies made between 1971 and 1988 and the way in which the war's four phases – escalation, commitment, building up UNITA, and the fighting withdrawal – fed into the movies that attempted to represent them. Several recurring filmic conventions were identified and their appearance in, growth throughout, and disappearance from the genre were followed and related to the creation and eventual failure of the Apartheid garrison state.

While it may be the easiest route to take, it is not enough in terms of this dissertation's objectives to simply evaluate the applicability of its central thesis chronologically, film by film. If the meaning and significance of the themes themselves are to be examined over time, they must be 'lifted' from the films by the use of an analytic framework. A similar approach is taken by Baines in his comparison of the dominant themes of literary history and cultural memory of the Border War to their equivalents in the Vietnam War.<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this discussion, therefore, the sub-points and points mentioned in Chapters 2-3, as well as the data produced in Chapters 4-6, are re-ordered and examined within three analytic categories; changes in the structures of power, the resultant social transformations, and the Apartheid government's ideological agenda, and their impact on the Border War film. Evaluation of the

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<sup>1</sup> G Baines, 'South Africa's Vietnam: Literary History and Cultural Memory of the Border War', in van der Merwe, *Telling Wounds*, pp. 159-70

evidence that Border War films were intended to *persuade* and *dominate* public opinion concerning the Border War, therefore, is examined within this framework in what follows.

### 7.1 – Changes in the structures of power

The movies studied and their grouping into the three phases dealt with in chapters 4 – 6 provide a clear means of examining the various changes in the ‘structures of power’ – the institutions and sites of deployment of power in the South African social context, whether military, ideological, economic or political – between 1971 and 1988.

*Die Banneling*, *Kaptein Caprivi*, and *Aanslag op Kariba* are clearly films of the détente era. In these films, the terrorist war is either localised (in the *Caprivi* movies), or allegorical (in *Die Banneling*), and always instigated by external forces – never other African states, which while occasionally deluded, can nonetheless still become worthwhile places if patient and industrious whites take an interest in them. Small teams of professionals are depicted as being the most effective in protecting the safety of the land and its inhabitants; additionally, the retaliatory or defensive mode of their actions is portrayed as the best and most intuitive means of conducting such a war. *Die Banneling* provides some dissonant elements to these overall categorisations, but they are easily resolved; for instance, although Gericke is in one sense an Everyman rather than a professional fighter, his role in the actual combat scenes is minimised (he never carries a gun) and the status and authority afforded him by his medical training goes some way towards elevating him above the common masses of humanity.

However, the failure of détente politics, the resultant emphasis on ‘forward strategy’, and the growth of homegrown resistance as exemplified by the Soweto Uprising, spelled the end of such simplistic depictions of the Border War. Constituting an Apartheid military machine capable of intensive operations beyond South Africa’s borders meant more men, more

weapons, and a massive increase in public support for, and interest in, a growing commitment on the border; the harnessing of political, economic and ideological power in the service of this military goal through ‘total strategy’ was the means through which this was to be achieved. Movies of this phase (1974-1984) exchange the Marxist/Maoist foreign enemy of their predecessors for a black nationalist local one; the foe is now best fought not by small teams of men but by concerted effort and an extensive arsenal including the fighter planes of *Mirage Eskader* and *Die Winter van 14 Julie*. ‘Doing one’s duty’ and the notion of ‘noble sacrifice’, whether on active service or the home front, become foregrounded to an extent not previously seen; this reflects the SADF’s return to intensive call-ups and reserve mobilisations during this period, and the increasing number of casualties flowing back across the border from the SADF’s new no-holds-barred fighting style, all of which were carefully reproduced for public consumption in *Ses Soldate/Six Soldiers* and *Grensbasis 13*. Both of these movies also feature loyal black soldiers doing their bit to hold back terrorism, albeit as irregular troops attached to more professional bodies of white soldiers, and in *Ses Soldate/Six Soldiers* one of them is even given a moment of screen time to explain his motivations for accompanying the main characters. Rather than some kind of return to the ‘black Africa as ally’ concepts of détente, these characters instead represent the regime’s increasing hope that black proxy forces such as UNITA and RENAMO would start to carry more of the Border War load. It would be tempting to suggest that they also represent a glimpse of things to come in terms of as the inclusion of black South Africans (as opposed to Zambian, Angolan, Rhodesian and Mozambican refugees) in the SADF, but this only became a reality in the mid-80s, long after the release of *Ses Soldate/Six Soldiers* and *Grensbasis 13*. Movies of this era also begin to pave the way for the approaching structural changes represented by the State of Emergency; this is particularly visible in *Grensbasis 13*’s portrayal of the international media as stooges of the ANC and *Game for Vultures*’ positioning of a rabidly anti-Rhodesian journalist as Swansea’s major opponent while in the UK.

The movies released in the wake of the 1984 Lusaka Accord and South Africa's return to the war in 1986, however, contain a very different set of relations to the contemporary structures of power, and once again a parallel development in cinema and reality can be seen. During South Africa's fighting withdrawal in the course of Operation MODULER, tactical considerations and the rhetoric of 'preserving democracy against communism' had begun to lose their ability to explain the war to the South African public. MODULER, after all, had been a simple attempt to kill as many Cubans as possible; the unrelenting siege of Cuito Cuanavale, similarly, was not intended to capture the city but rather to break its defenders.<sup>2</sup>

Films from this phase of the war contain a similarly post-ideological position to MODULER. While the pro-conscription *Boetie* movies cope with this by dropping the patriotic line of their predecessors and making national service seem like some kind of holiday camp, the more anti-war '*n Wêreld Sonder Grense* and *The Stick* depict the absence of ideology in a rather more chilling sense, with their protagonists adrift in a fractured and reasonless abyss of death and murder. The only exception to the trends of this phase of film is *Jantjie Kom Huistoe*, which (as discussed previously), fits into the late 1970s better than it does into the mid-1980s. This deviation can be understood in terms of the government's attempt to ease the burden of 'total strategy' for the white electorate by shifting more responsibility to black troops.

As the institutions and sites of deployment of power in South African society evolved and were changed to reflect the changing needs of the Apartheid state across the period under review, therefore, a parallel series of developments were occurring in the Border War film genre. Like the changes in society, some of these were explicitly directed by those in control (such as the revision of *Terrorist's* ending) while others occurred as a spontaneous response

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<sup>2</sup> Even Lieutenant-General Liebenberg, Chief of the Army at the time, conceded that had the South African forces succeeded in taking possession of the areas they were attacking at this stage, they would have been 'like the dog that finally caught the bus' (Heitman, *War in Angola*, p. 31).

to the changing nature of the stories to be told – about, for instance, the war on the border as the war itself moved through the phases identified in Chapters 4-6.

## 7.2 – Social transformation

The modification of the sources and deployment of power as South Africa moved from the Vorster-era civilian administration to the Botha-era military administration has been analysed with reference to the ‘garrison society’ described by Regan. The attainment of this state prompted yet another dynamic struggle for ideological control, one which is clearly mirrored in the Border War films. The two central characteristics of the garrison state – the erasure of the division between the civilian and military elements of society and the growth of military-related economic and commercial interests – provide another set of criteria against which to chart the evolution of the films under analysis.

Once again, *Kaptein Caprivi*, *Aanslag op Kariba*, and *Die Banneling* provide an analytical starting point; in these movies, the civilian world and the military world are kept clearly separate. Ben Gericke spends the first ten minutes of his freedom in *Die Banneling* wandering through the familiar landmarks of downtown Pretoria, establishing this as a known environment. By contrast, Katanga province (after he leaves to join the mercenaries) is left completely vague. No references to landmarks, actual cities, or any feature of the landscape that might serve as an orientation point for the viewer is provided. The Katangese war, therefore, is an unknown environment, and entering military service transports Ben from the familiar to the foreign.

The *Caprivi* movies, through their creation of Kaptein Caprivi as a superheroic figure, embody a similar worldview – especially *Aanslag op Kariba* in which the terrorist incursion into unguarded civilian lives is the only thing that brings Caprivi and his men into the main

story. That the civilians are incapable of saving themselves (despite bravery and pluck, such as that displayed by Beukes in *Kaptein Caprivi*) is a foregone conclusion; their proper place in the Vorster-era scenario is to sit tight and await rescue by trained professionals whose existence outside society, like that of some sect of celibate warrior monks, is necessary to ensure their continued skill (witness Buks' 'corruption' by the simple pleasures of home life).

Appropriately to their semi-mythic frontier warrior status, all Caprivi's men need to beat back their foes are their trusty rifles – the prominence of an intricate South African military-industrial complex is neither suggested nor promoted. By 1974, however, movies like *Mirage Eskader* were extolling the virtues of weapon systems like the Mirage as a necessary, even crucial component of national defence, treating them as if they were as South African as 'plaas botter en mieliepap' even though they were really imported from France.<sup>3</sup> The prominence of expensive armaments is not the only change across the Border War films during these crucial years. Besides the new conscription-inspired focus on the importance of the ordinary citizen featured in films of this era already discussed in this chapter, Border War films released between 1974 and 1984 also bring the military into contact with civilian society on an unprecedented level, an unsurprising move given the growth of the domestic front in the fight against 'terror' post-1976. This change in focus is achieved through the use of love subplots and the technique of cutting directly between events 'back home' and 'on the border' in *Mirage Eskader*, *Ses Soldate/Six Soldiers*, *Die Winter van 14 Julie*, and *Grensbasis 13*. Such techniques tie all the characters into each movie's main plot, not just the soldiers, and (except in *Die Winter van 14 Julie*) this plot is often a military one. Thus, these films make it clear: one can no longer sit back and let others fight the war for one. Those who attempt to do so are morally deficient (Charles in *Grensbasis 13*), aged or disabled (Commandant Muller in *Mirage Eskader*), or both (Dreyer in *Die Winter van 14 Julie*).

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<sup>3</sup> B Munro, *Jane's Combat Aircraft* (UK: HarperCollins, 1995), pp.90-93

Traces of the transformation of citizens to willing conscripts for the military-industrial cause are even visible in many of the films of the post-ideological era. The *Boetie* films and *Jantjie Kom Huistoe* all present the viewer with dissolute young male protagonists who gain love and self-respect – in other words, success in the civilian sphere – through a period of military service in which armoured vehicles, heavy weapons, rocket launchers and the other sophisticated weapon systems of the twilight years of the Apartheid military are prominently showcased. The lack of similar depictions in *The Stick* and *'n Wêreld Sonder Grense* is a subversion of these blurred boundaries rather than evidence of their absence; the military in both films is an uncaring and almost alien entity that withholds ‘truth’ from those who serve it and kills or exiles them when they learn too much, and civilian society is neither ready to understand the war nor, indeed, capable of it. Similarly, the soldiers in both movies are stripped of precisely the neat appearance and high-tech weaponry which allows them to be visually distinguished from the so-called ‘jungle bunnies’ they hunt; and, in *The Stick*, it is not the white soldiers who are able to move effortlessly between the high-tech world ‘back home’ and the savage world ‘on the border’, but the tribesmen – both in terms of being able to fight equally well with gun and spear, and the witchdoctor’s reappearance in suit and hat at the movie’s conclusion.

Between 1971 and 1988, thus, Border War films once again echoed, evoked, negotiated and assisted the evolutions occurring throughout their social context, in this case with respect to the social transformations of South Africa into its State of Emergency era garrison society form. This complex interaction is visible in the way these movies both pick up on (in the case of the post-ideological anti-Border War movies) and dictate, dynamically over time, the Apartheid government’s position on the correct place of the military in civilian life (and vice versa) and the importance of war technology in national defence.

### 7.3 – The Apartheid government’s ideological agenda

The growing prominence of the popular visual media as means of waging an ideological war is also clearly visible in the films under review. As mentioned previously, prior to the introduction of television in the mid-70s, the most popular form of militaristic anti-communist media was the photo-story book; consequently, the government’s careful manipulation of the public’s perception of a communist threat revolved around a faithful reproduction of the types of terrorism seen in these stories. This involved the use of Chinese, Soviet, Cuban, and East German *agents provocateur* as the puppet-masters behind terrorism; this depiction is clearly transplanted directly to the screen in the early Border War movies. In *Die Banneling*, for instance, an entire Cuban guerrilla army is invented to provide a source of enemies for the tough Afrikaner mercenaries in the Katangese war of succession. The *Caprivi* movies, of course, were no different – and foregrounded the threat posed by international communism even to the point of distributing fake ‘Little Red Books’ as a promotional release gimmick.<sup>4</sup>

By 1974, as the end of *détente* began to lay more blame for supporting terrorists at the feet of local black states, the foreign evil is replaced by an indigenous one as black faces become the ones leering into the camera over the sights of an AK-47. While *Ses Soldate/Six Soldiers* retains Cubans as the crack forces facing the six protagonists at the movie’s conclusion, the rest of the terrorists are black, as are the traitorous locals who inform them of the team’s whereabouts; similarly, *Mirage Eskader*, while also pitting its heroes against black rather than non-black opponents, makes the Korean War such a prominent theme that it is difficult to separate the two sets of foes. It is also during this phase that the growing prominence of the ANC leads to its first inclusion as a component of the Border War, in *Grensbasis 13*. This progression continues into the 80s, with both pro- and anti-Border War films basing the enemy much closer to home – in the case of the anti-war films, within the white psyche itself.

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<sup>4</sup> Tomaselli, *The S.A. Film Industry*, p.79

In some senses, however, the proximity of the enemy is screened as well as being made explicit; *Boetie op Manoeuvres* conceals the enemy entirely, with not a single reference to the liberation movements, and while ‘the border’ has become ‘where the soldiers are’ rather than ‘the frontiers of South Africa’, the civilian world is still presented as a safe world full of distractions, whether pleasant or simply domestic.

Identifying the communist enemy, of course, was not the Apartheid government’s sole agenda. Apart from conditioning the white populace to support and endure conscription, as discussed earlier, the government also intended for them to internalise a sense of Apartheid’s invincibility through their media diet. This required an increasing use of the ‘rhetoric of siege’, and the attainment of this objective between 1971 and 1988 can also be traced through the Border War films of this period. *Kaptein Caprivi* and *Aanslag op Kariba* both rely heavily on the notion of the disciplined and superior soldier of Apartheid effortlessly beating his ragged (but often more heavily armed) opponents. The *Caprivi* movies also introduce authority figures (such as CR Swart and Colonel Hugo in *Kaptein Caprivi*) to vocalise the Apartheid government’s position, providing explicit support to each film’s implicit ideology.

*Mirage Eskader*, in 1974, takes white invincibility to a new level with the situation of its protagonists in fighter aircraft during its combat scenes. The Mirage attack near the movie’s conclusion is not only, as mentioned previously, overly long but clearly filmed not with the goal of advancing the plot or providing suspenseful action but to promote a single message: Mirages deal death. The jets strafe the veldt and blast it with rockets until, quite literally, nothing is left standing. This, then, is the sharp edge of white invincibility, and a similar attitude – through depictions of crack marksmanship and an array of hard-hitting equipment – continues throughout the Border War films of the 70s, all of which feature a confrontational scene addressing some aspect of the war in ‘rhetoric of siege’ – whether bolstering conscript

commitment as discussed previously, or familiarising the viewer with the central concepts of forward strategy and total war.

White invincibility disappears from the later war movies, however, mainly because in a group as small as white society in the 70s and 80s, concealing the number of casualties suffered in the Border Wars after 1975 was an insurmountable challenge for the military's engines of disinformation. While official figures represented the number of deaths as a few dozen per year, many sources claim that these did not include non-combat deaths in the operational area, and that casualties among special force units and black troops were not added to the tally.<sup>5</sup> Woods, quoting Professor RH Green of the Institute for Development Studies at Sussex University, estimates that as a proportion of South Africa's white population, the number of deaths 'on the border' was three times the relative rate of American deaths in the Vietnam War. Before 1984, therefore, and in the pro-war movies thereafter, these casualties are promoted as noble sacrifice rather than concealed as evidence of a strong opponent.<sup>6</sup> The government even managed to use Border War casualties themselves as a propaganda channel. At the close of the SABC's broadcast schedule, the most recent casualty lists would scroll over the statue of a soldier against the sunset while the national anthem played solemnly in the background – '*dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*' in its clearest form.<sup>7</sup> An identical effect is prominently achieved through the dedication screens at the conclusion of many of the Border War films (in which the brave, strong, helpful, or simply heroically dead members of the security forces are openly lauded) and through the closing scene of *Grensbasis 13* which features a lingering close-up of a medal against the chest of the dead hero's proud girlfriend.

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<sup>5</sup> Unknown, *Out of Step*, p.120

<sup>6</sup> Woods, *Apartheid - the propaganda and the reality*, p.6; also see *The Cape Times* of Friday 4 January 1985, in which a military spokesman dismisses Green's figures as 'unfounded and speculative.'

<sup>7</sup> 'It is sweet and fitting to die for one's country.'

This dual-objective process, in which the number of white casualties relative to the number of opponents they take with them is downplayed with the exception of the few required to propagate notions of noble sacrifice, is absent from the Border War films made after 1984. The *Boetie* movies, of course, are so far from bloody death as to hardly be 'war films'; in contrast, in the anti-war movie *The Stick* (and, to a lesser extent, '*n Wêreld Sonder Grense*'), ignoble white casualties are almost all we see.<sup>8</sup> Once again, while the pro-military film bloc in the 70s and 80s coped with the development of the war and the strict controls on what depictions reached the public by downplaying those aspects unpopular with the authorities and foregrounding those deemed appropriate, the anti-military films of the late 80s specifically addressed these issues and subverted their use by their predecessors.

#### **7.4 – Effects on the Border War film**

The significance of the apartheid government's 'carrot and stick' approach to the cinema of the Border War has already been discussed in Chapter 3. Taken together with the movie analyses conducted in chapters 4-6, however, the increasingly strong relationship between Border War film and its environment becomes clear, as follows: the government creates a militarised climate through its control of the media. The viewing public internalise this climate, becoming more militaristic in their outlook and less critical of the government's claims. Hence, the government has more support for its war, more willing draftees – and more opportunity to recreate and strengthen its 'rhetoric of siege', and so on. In addition to the evidence of direct attempts by the government to create and steer the Border War movie, it seems likely that such a model is an appropriate one, with the military and bureaucratic censors acting as the forces of 'unnatural selection' by restricting unwanted features and extending support to films that did not contain them. According to this model, then, the Apartheid-era Border War movie was almost *bred*, rather than created, through a gradual

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<sup>8</sup> While most of the casualties in '*n Wêreld Sonder Grense* happen off-screen, the number of funerals we see the protagonists attending provides a strong indication that death is a strong presence within their ranks.

process of conditioning; if this is the case, *Kaptein Caprivi* is the venerable patriarch of the genre and *The Stick* represents a rogue infant bearing all the carefully repressed genes of its ancestors.

Whatever the case, the gradual attainment by the Apartheid government of its ideological goals and a society capable of internalising them provided an unusual kind of context for locally made movies. This context ensured that mediocre movies were more popular than their own merits might suggest; even Albie Venter, producer/director of *Kaptein Caprivi*, acknowledged his greatest work in the Border War genre as a 'bad film (which) struck the right cord [sic]:'<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the very ordinary movies of the middle phase of Border War film were almost all runaway successes.<sup>10</sup> This success went beyond the fictional depictions reviewed in this dissertation; the SADF also had a hand in the making of several documentaries about the war such as *The Infantryman*, *Twenty Four Hours on the Border*, and *Brug 14/Bridge 14*, which were screened on SABC TV to rapturous public applause. As one reviewer said of *The Infantryman*:

*It doesn't take an expert to know that what these soldiers showed last night was the last word in competence and effectiveness ... Raymond Hancock has again come up with a winner ... [the] face of war has changed, but this film showed that the SADF is a couple of steps ahead of the latest technology.<sup>11</sup>*

More critical reviewers often did not share this attitude. This was particularly the case for *Brug 14/Bridge 14*, a supposed re-enactment of a battle in Angola during the early stages of the Border War made at the insistence of the SADF in 1976 to promote 'national readiness' and also with an eye towards international distribution as part of South Africa's ongoing

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<sup>9</sup> Tomaselli, K. *The S.A. Film Industry*, p.63

<sup>10</sup> Some exceptions did, of course, exist. *Escape from Angola*, a film directly financed by the Department of Information, plummeted from the circuit after a dismal showing, leaving hardly a ripple. A copy could not be traced for viewing, so further analysis of why this might have been has not been possible. See Tomaselli, "'Adapt or Die": Militarization and the South African Media 1976 – 1982', p.10.

<sup>11</sup> *The Cape Times*, 27 May 1980

public relations campaign.<sup>12</sup> Reviewing the result in *The Star*, film critic Robert Grieg panned it for its racist overtones:

*This is basically a rah-rah act about the boys on the border - the South African boys that is ... the black enemy soldiers are offensively jeered at ...*<sup>13</sup>

Grieg was similarly scathing in his review of *Grensbasis 13*, especially with respect to the section of the movie's obvious propaganda stance embodied by the character of Jane:

*I infer ... that marrying policemen is the patriotic duty of white South African girls. An interesting idea, on a par with making babies for Botha.*<sup>14</sup>

Grieg was not alone in his antipathy for the pro-war efforts of most Border War filmmakers. While many industry professionals were prepared to work arm in arm with the security forces, others – especially in the television industry – were uneasy about being co-opted into the role of the war propagandist. After the SADF's success in the commercial film field between 1974 and 1977, it once again turned to the SABC in 1978 and instructed their English Documentaries Department to put all other projects on hold and prepare a 'top priority' military-focus documentary aimed at enlisting the support of English-speaking viewers. All seven of the producers in the department refused, suffering transfers to other departments and other career difficulties as a result.<sup>15</sup> However, the fact that the SABC continued to make pro-war movies and documentaries indicates that other less principled (or perhaps just more practical) producers were soon found to replace them. South Africa, this suggests, had more than its share of Leni Riefenstahls – one such figure being prominent Afrikaans director Jan Rautenbach, who left mainstream cinema to make SADF-funded propaganda films for UNITA.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Harvey, 'SABC TV', p.13

<sup>13</sup> Tomaselli, *The Cinema of Apartheid*, p.115

<sup>14</sup> Tomaselli and van Zyl, 'Themes, Myths and Cultural Indicators', p. 444

<sup>15</sup> Tomaselli, "'Adapt or Die'", p.10

<sup>16</sup> Pretorius, 'Afrikaans Cinema in the Eighties', p. 378

Zwelakhe Sisulu of the Writers' Association of South Africa (WASA) made the following statement at the association's 1980 conference:

*In our situation the question is not whether one is a propagandist or not, but whether one is a collaborationist propagandist or a revolutionary propagandist. Because we have expressed a desire for radical change in the scheme of things, we must be propagandists for change. If expressing the aspirations of the people is propaganda, if propaganda denotes one who opts for a commitment as an alternative to non-commitment, then surely we are propagandists.<sup>17</sup>*

The central idea behind this statement is one of obvious relevance to the movies under examination. If filmmakers chose to adopt the party line on the Border War – as all but two of those examined did – can this really be considered a purely artistic choice, divorced from the context of the final years of militarised Apartheid? The answer to such a question can only be no. As has been pointed out before, this is not to say that every non-dissenting South African Border War filmmaker was an Apartheid ideologue or a willing functionary *à la* Rautenbach. However, while Border War films sent young men to the SADF or convinced their loved ones to give them up willingly, their creations certainly operated as *de facto* agents of the Apartheid propaganda machine and can, as in this dissertation, be read as such.

In terms of the analyses conducted above, therefore, a definite link between the thematic composition of Border War films, particular developments in the Border War, and the South African government's strategies for fighting it, is clearly present. The appearance of two films dealing frankly with the alienation and horror of the war as experienced by veterans and those around them (*The Quarry* and *On the Wire*) within a year of the war's end is also significant. As mentioned previously, films dealing with other countries' wars during this era began with the figure of the traumatised veteran; freed from having to serve the SADF's need for willing soldiers, South African films were now ready to do the same.

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<sup>17</sup> M Pissarra, *Criticism and Censorship in the South African Alternative Press*, B.A. Honours Dissertation, Department of Art History, UCT, January 1991, p.14

## 7.5 – Conclusions

The 1978 symposium on National Security held in Pretoria featured a paper containing the following statement:

*... interdisciplinary, interdepartmental and inter-institutional action is not only possible but essential for an effective strategic policy in South Africa ... to quote General Dwight D Eisenhower: "No matter how much we spend for arms, there is no safety in arms alone. Our security is the total product of our economic, intellectual, moral and military strengths."*<sup>18</sup>

It is ironically appropriate that an American president whose term of office included both the McCarthy witch-hunts and the second half the Korean War should be used as an exemplar of South African national policy twenty-five years later. The Eisenhower presidency contained the same uneasiness about foreign influence, the same over-eager military establishment, and similarly out-of-control tensions within society as South Africa would one day experience; but unlike the United States in 1953, South Africa in 1978 was an international pariah wracked by a brutal war on, beyond, and often within its own frontiers – a garrison society under self-imposed siege. Accordingly, the embattled Apartheid government treated the militarisation of its white supporters as a clear priority; with this objective in mind, it maintained close links with the means of norm creation across the popular media, maintaining dynamic control through a blend of suppression and inducement to ensure that no version of events divergent to its own could emerge to cause dissent or unease.

What kind of border war films might have been made had the Apartheid government not placed the restrictions it did on the genre? The existence of border war literature (*grensliteratuur*), which frankly approached the 'war on the Border' as early as 1974, suggests that a far more honest public awareness of the war might have prevailed – and this is precisely why such a focus could not be permitted to develop in the visual or textual mass media.

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<sup>18</sup> M Louw (ed), *National Security – A Modern Approach*. Papers presented at the symposium on National Security held at Pretoria, 31 March – 1 April 1977. (Pretoria: Institute for Strategic Studies, 1978), p.199

Davis sums this attitude up as follows:

*Looming in the minds of National Party leaders was the spectre of Vietnam, which had been 'lost' to America through the machinations of the 'liberal press', wittingly or unwittingly playing the communist game. The liberal press had 'lost Vietnam' and it could 'lose South Africa'.<sup>19</sup>*

In the early years of the Border War, the Apartheid government had seen a single piece of literature (Antonio Spínola's *Portugal e o Futuro*) literally smash Portugal's colonial ambitions in Angola and Mozambique in a single stroke. That such a blow could have fallen without giving any indication of its presence to Portugal's allies badly unsettled South Africa's defence planners.<sup>20</sup> They were also aware that mere censorship had not been enough to prevent it – Caetano's dictatorial rule had benefited from one of the most stringently controlled media systems in non-Soviet Europe, one in which 'only the palest shades of opinion [were] permitted even in the so-called independent papers'.<sup>21</sup> To prevent the same thing happening in South Africa, then, the media had to be not only controlled but also manipulated, and hence the creation and development of the ideological template isolated in Chapter 2 and expanded upon through the literature reviewed in Chapter 3.

Through this manipulation – achieved in the case of Border War movies by ensuring that only stories supporting the war had access to the authority and authenticity allowed by government support – the Apartheid government ensured that the public believed what they saw in the self-censoring local media and not the 'rumours and slander' in the international and dissenting media. An ideologically saturated filmic reality confirming the military objectives of Apartheid thus replaced actual reality, simultaneously paving the way for the military policies of the government and the manpower needs of the SADF. Awareness of these, and other, co-options of the seemingly independent media remains crucial to an understanding of the final years of militarised Apartheid and their uneasy aftermath.

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<sup>19</sup> P Davis, *In Darkest Hollywood* (Johannesburg: Ravan Press, 1996), p. 95

<sup>20</sup> Hamann, *Days of the Generals*, p.3

<sup>21</sup> K Olson, *The History Makers* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1966), p.297.

## Appendix 1: Viewing Border War movies

Although every effort was made to view as many significant Border War movies as possible for this project, a few remained beyond reasonable reach. Most of those that were available could only be viewed at one place in South Africa – the National Film, Video, and Sound Archives (NFVSA) in Pretoria. These films, and their formats, were:

<i>Kaptein Caprivi</i> (35mm)	<i>Boetie op Manoeuvres</i> (VHS)
<i>Aanslag op Kariba</i> (35mm)	<i>Die Winter van 14 Julie</i> (VHS)
<i>Six Soldiers/Ses Soldate</i> (VHS)	<i>Die Banneling</i> (VHS)
<i>Mirage Eskader</i> (VHS)	<i>Terrorist</i> (35mm, incomplete)
<i>Grensbasis 13</i> (VHS)	<i>Game for Vultures</i> (35mm)
<i>'n Wereld Sonder Grense</i> (16mm)	

Apart from these, one film was viewed on a digital archive tape at the SABC archives at Auckland Park (*Jantjie Kom Huistoe*), one was recently screened on a local TV channel (*The Stick*, eTV), and one was loaned from a private VHS collection (*Boetie Gaan Border Toe*).

Four films dealing in passing with terrorism, the police, or the security forces were also located and briefly examined at the NFVSA, but not judged rich enough in content for inclusion within this study's main discussion. They may, however, prove of interest to other researchers, and are thus listed below:

*Flying Squad, Gold Squad, and Dog Squad* (3 films, all 35mm)  
*Hank, Hennery, en Vriend* (35mm)

Finally, several films of potential relevance to this dissertation could not be located at all. In the case of *Doodkry Raak Min* (a feature film), a copy exists at the NFVSA, but permission could not be gained from the *Afrikaanse Taal en Kultuurvereniging* (who hold the film's copyright) for it to be viewed. The other films are as follows:

<i>Brug 14</i> (docudrama)	<i>The Angola File</i> (feature film)
<i>The Infantryman</i> (documentary)	<i>Escape from Angola</i> (feature film)
<i>24 Hours on the Border</i> (documentary)	<i>Reece 1 and 2</i> (both feature films)

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## Filmography

1. *'n Wêreld Sonder Grense* (A World Without Borders), dir: Frans Nel (Satellite Films, 1987)
2. *Aanslag op Kariba* (Assault on Kariba), dir: Albie Venter (Brigadiers Films, 1973)
3. *Boetie Gaan Border Toe* (Little Brother Goes to the Border), dir: Regardt van den Bergh (Philo Pieterse Films, 1984)
4. *Boetie op Manoeuvres* (Little Brother on Manoeuvres), dir: Regardt van den Bergh (Philo Pieterse Films, 1985)
5. *Die Banneling* (The Exile), dir: David Millin (RPM Studios, 1971)
6. *Die Winter van 14 Julie* (The Winter of 14 July), dir: Jan Scholtz (Winter Films, 1977)
7. *Game for Vultures*, dir: James Fargo (Pyramid Films/Columbia Pictures, 1979)
8. *Grensbasis 13* (Border Base 13), dir: Elmo de Witt (Mimosa Films, 1979)
9. *Jantjie Kom Huistoe* (Jantjie Comes Home), dir: unknown, (SABC, 1984)
10. *Kaptein Caprivi* (Captain Caprivi), dir: Albie Venter (Brigadiers Films, 1972)
11. *Mirage Eskader* (Mirage Squadron), dir: Bertrand Retief (Kavaliers Films, 1975)
12. *Ses Soldate* (Six Soldiers), dir: Bertrand Retief (Kavaliers Films, 1975)
13. *The Stick*, dir: Darrel Roodt (Distant Horizon Pictures, 1987/88)
14. *Terrorist*, dir: Neil Hetherington (Keystone Film Group, 1978)

*Crystallized, hardened public opinion becomes violence upon man. Man can be a slave to public opinion, a slave to custom, to morals, to judgments and opinions which are imposed by society. It is difficult to overestimate the violence which is perpetrated by the press in our time. The average man of our day holds the opinions and forms the judgments of the newspaper which he reads every morning: it exercises psychological compulsion upon him. And in view of the falsehood and venality of the press, the effects are very terrible as seen in the enslavement of man and his deprivation of freedom of conscience and judgment. And all the while how comparatively little this form of violence is noticed. It is noticed only in countries which live under dictatorship, where the falsification of men's opinions and judgments is an activity of the state.*

Nicholas Berdyaev,  
*Slavery and Freedom*, 1944