

SOUTH AFRICAN DIRECTOR MEETS NOBLE SAVAGE

In a recent telecast of Sneak Previews (PBS) Jeffrey Lyons and Neil Gabler discussed changing film portrayals of aliens--from other countries, "primitive" cultures, and outer space. From dangerous, cruel, and "inhuman" beings, aliens in recent years have begun a return to Rousseau's "noble savage" represented by E.T., the Iceman, and Tarzan's ape mother. As technological progress threatens to destroy the world rather than save it, some films may be expressing a desire to return to a simpler, preindustrial "Garden of Eden". But, when such films draw on anthropological data, an important line between documentary and fantasy blurs.

In The Gods Must Be Crazy, a highly successful South African comedy, the San (bushmen) are depicted as remote inhabitants of the Kalahari desert--in the 1980's. They are innocent of any contact with the harried, materialistic and purposeless life of the European industrialized societies which South Africa (much sanitized in this film) supposedly exemplifies. Although the bushmen utterances are as unintelligible to most viewers as the musical whistles of R2D2 in Star Wars, the viewer finds much to admire in this portrayal of their simple life with its ample food, shelter and clothing, and its lack of materialism, jealousy, and poverty.

The introduction of the most minimal contact with the West threatens to destroy this happy society. A coke bottle from an airplane drops at the feet of Xiang who immediately interprets it as a gift from the gods. Though the bottle offers multiple uses, it creates new desires and jealousies. Unlike the apple in the "Garden of Eden," the bottle was given "by the gods," so Xiang sets out to remove the irritant by returning it to its owners. This journey to the gods'

home at the edge of the world offers many occasions for gentle humor, poking fun at the innocence of a man who thinks trucks are rude noisy animals and who wonders how little people get into telescopes.

The portrayal of other African societies in the film represents another extreme--the Hobbesian view of the cultural "other" as savage, cruel, stupid, and childlike. So heavy-handed is this caricature of emergent black African countries that one Washington reviewer (City Paper, November 15, 1984) thought Botswana was an imaginary country. While it is easy to see bias in this negative view of black Africa, it is harder to see it in the "noble savage" portrait of the bushmen. Yet bias is no less prominent there.

The film fails on two levels to give an accurate picture of bushman life. On one level, the bushmen in the film do not behave "naturally" or



according to their own cultural rules. Instead, they move and speak according to direction given by someone not versed in their culture. They walk too quickly and too closely together when going out to gather. They behave in an uncharacteristically demonstrative way, weeping, laughing, and embracing, at the departure and subsequent return of Xiang. A single oversized hut, rather than a circle of small huts, serves far too many people for a single "family" or hearth group. The camp is located in the midst of a treeless grassy area, unsuited to a climate where air temperatures in the shade regularly exceed 110 degrees. In addition, the bushmen speak !Kung, but extra clicks were overlaid on the sound track to make the language seem even stranger. Throughout, the translator uses the English word "thing" to refer to the coke bottle, although Xiang is using the !Kung word for bottle "n!abesa"!

The second level of bias is immediately apparent if the film is compared with John Marshall's N!ai: The Story of a !Kung Woman, filmed for the Odyssey television series in the same place (Namibia near the Botswana border), in the same year (1980), and using many of the same people as The Gods Must Be Crazy. From N!ai it is very clear that the !Kung San are hardly isolated from western influence today. A remnant of their ancient territory has been made a bushman "homeland." There, an administrative center has been established where !Kung are encouraged to settle and to become dependent on handouts of mealie meal from the white administrators. It is also evident that the !Kung are not unaware of bottles, particularly those which contain alcoholic beverages.

The "Garden of Eden," if any, in N!ai lies in her childhood memories. Returning to the hunting and gathering life of that "Garden of Eden" is impossible, since the resources no longer exist given the numbers of people crowded into the homeland. In

any case, few would wish to give up their new life entirely, despite its drunkenness, fighting, army service, and jealousy.

Even in the hunting and gathering past, life was more difficult than The Gods would suggest: infant and maternal mortality was high, girls were jealous of each other, young women were married to husbands chosen by their parents, and people accused each other of adultery and fought about it. N!ai shows the ambivalence of the hunter-gatherer in transition, for both the present and the past have attractive and unattractive aspects.

N!ai is an ethnographic document, an extraordinary window into the life of someone in another culture. It is not without bias either, since N!ai is not entirely representative of women in her culture. Furthermore, Marshall focuses more on riveting scenes of contemporary cultural clash and disintegration and less on ordinary scenes of peaceful daily life. But choosing scenes is not the same as directing actors from an alien culture in actions they never would have performed.

In real life, the bushmen share our humanity, as aliens such as E.T. and R2D2 cannot. The idealized portrayal of the bushmen in The Gods Must Be Crazy is as much a rejection of that common humanity as is the negative portrayal of black Africa. It is good theatre but poor ethnography.

Alison Brooks