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# Church and Media at a Film Festival

*Some thoughts on images by PETER BENTLEY*

**D**uring the recent Sydney Film Festival there were some fascinating portrayals of the church. Two documentaries in particular stood out. One only briefly touched on an example of the church, while for the other, the church was the main reason for the making of the documentary.

Rarely do you see a documentary of such intimate style which actually spends little time with the main subject of interest. Nick Broomfield's film of *The Leader, the Driver and the Driver's Wife* is a bit like a quest. He aims to interview South African right-wing leader Eugene Terreblanche, the Leader of the Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging Party (its acronym AWB is also said to denote "Afrikaners Without Brains"), but does not get much farther than talking to Terreblanche's driver and his wife.

We see Terreblanche from a distance or with other people at various meetings and rallies. It is only at the end that Broomfield actually co-ordinates his own arrival with that of Terreblanche. (In one early episode, Broomfield had not arrived on the stated time for the interview with the Leader and this we later learn was the unforgivable sin.)

The interview with Terreblanche turns into a comic disaster, with Broomfield not being able to make Terreblanche understand the meaning of his questioning. The whole documentary

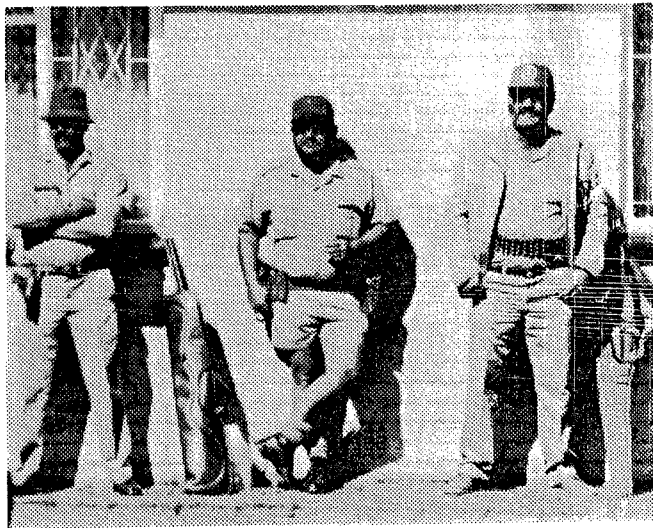
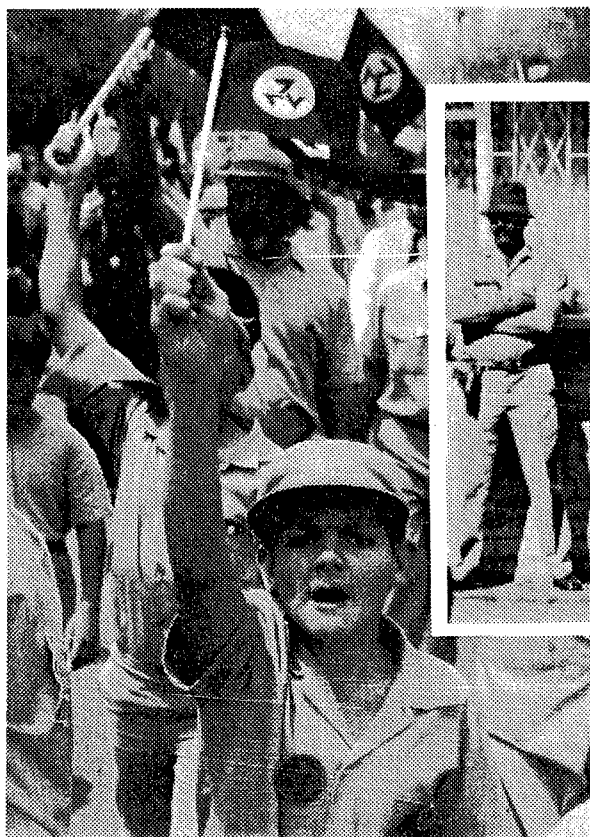
provides the viewer with an enlightening encounter with the environment of the Leader, rather than with the man, and may indicate why even white, right South Africans find it difficult to take Terreblanche seriously. This encounter provides the personal context which enables the viewer to feel they have experienced more of the Leader than has really been the case.

The driver J.P Meyer and his wife Anita are both very personable characters and provide us with some contradictory images of right-wing activists. Perhaps this is why J.P Meyer eventually leaves the AWB, though the reasons are never clearly stated.

Though the church reference is only a brief example in Broomfield's documentary, it is nevertheless illuminating. At one stage, Broomfield goes to the breakaway Dutch Reformed Church which Terreblanche and his family attend.

Broomfield doesn't meet Terreblanche, although he is confronted by other members who refuse to let him film in the church or film those in the service. It is quite clearly indicated that the church is off-limits, it is the rest area, the restricted area.

Broomfield's style of documentary raises the usual ethical questions concerned with privacy and rights. He attempts to film the church area even after the warnings and later he films



*Terreblanche's disciples at a rally (left) and watching a black protest march.*

Terreblanche's daughter at a AWB dinner dance.

In the other Broomfield documentary screened at the festival, *Juvenile Delinquents II* (about the operations of a juvenile offenders scheme in England), he evens goes further. He covertly records one officer (who had been involved in the scheme) while speaking to him on the telephone, and subsequently incorporates this into the documentary.

In *Stop the Church*, the main issue is not so much the filming of the church environment, it is the actual event they are filming.

Tension within various groups concerned with AIDS in New York reached an explosive point during 1989. Many people wanted to do something radically active that would publicise their concerns and also highlight what they believed to be the most inflammatory and dangerous views about AIDS within New York. ACT UP, the AIDS Coalition To Unleash Power, organised a protest against "the Church" (the Roman Catholic Church) and its representative in New York, Cardinal O'Connor.

The date set was Sunday, December 10, 1989. It was public information. There was no secret. Protesters gathered and marched.

It was the first time I had seen a cardinal depicted in a documentary as a murderer, liar, bigot and genocidal maniac all rolled into one. Many protesters had entered St Patrick's Cathedral earlier and during the service began to shout or protested by lying down in the aisles as if they had been struck dead by O'Connor's words.

The church was portrayed as the enemy. It was something to be opposed and ridiculed. During the planning of the protest, a question was raised about the ethics of disrupting a mass, but this was rejected after one person spoke about the tradition of disruption within churches which had questionable social systems or views.

The apartheid example was the one which stuck in my mind, particularly after viewing Broomfield's documentary. White and black people had disrupted white-only church services in the United States in order to demonstrate

that the gospel of Jesus Christ, which promoted equality before God, had become perverted.

The protest organisation and the protest itself at St. Patrick's were very poorly filmed, mainly because the equipment used was non-professional, but nevertheless, the documentary does capture the significant difference in views of most of the church people and the protesters.

People carry on with their singing, trying to avoid contact with the events which was often happening at their feet. Police arrive and cart the "bodies" away. What about the representative of the church? His voice is heard praying for what he believes are deluded and mistaken protesters. Not the type of peacemaking approach I would have recommended.

Lastly, I should mention a film which did not contain any reference to the church, but really fits into the category of those not of this world. *Heroes of Our Time* records the workings of Greenpeace and in particular the operation against the Caltex Company, which succeeded in returning to Caltex several barrels of waste from their oil refinery in Sydney. This showed a group which had taken over the media. They knew how to use media to secure prime rating coverage and public recognition.

This film stands in contrast to the two mentioned. The groups in these two films were targeted by the media and seemed unable to really appreciate the pragmatics of the encounter. Greenpeace, surely a representative for many people today of what a church should be like — prophetic, activist and concerned with life and the world — was also portrayed as being like a church hierarchically. There is no room for democracy in the battle against the forces of darkness. ■