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History Period 7
Feb. 2003

Cry Freedom; Accurate?

Have you ever seen a movie based on a true story and wondered if it was truly and completely accurate? Many movies and books documenting historical lives and events have twisted plots to make the story more interesting. The movie Cry Freedom, directed by Richard Attenborough, is not one of these movies; it demonstrates apartheid in South Africa accurately through the events in the lives of both Steve Biko and Donald Woods. Cry Freedom has a direct relation to black history month, and has been an influence to me in my feelings about racism and how it is viewed and dealt with today.

Cry Freedom was successful in its quest to depict Steve Biko, Donald Woods, and other important characters as they were in real life. Steve Biko was a man who believed in justice and equality for all races and cultures. The important points in his life such as his banning (1973), his famous speeches and acts to influence Africans, the trial (convicting the nine other black consciousness leaders) in which he took part, his imprisoning and ultimately his death were documented in Cry Freedom, and they were documented accurately.

Steve Biko was banned by the South African Apartheid government in 1973. Biko was restricted to his home in Kings William's Town in the Eastern Cape and could only converse with one person at a time, not including his family (The History Net, African History <http://africanhistory.about.com/library/biographies/blbio-stevebiko.htm>). In the movie, this is shown when Biko first meets Donald Woods where he explains his banning situation. Also in the movie (and in real life) they show two police guards watching him

all the time; however, he escapes from them often. Many black leaders spoke at illegal gatherings to spread black consciousness. In Cry Freedom Steve Biko is shown speaking at an illegal soccer game. Although this exact event may not have occurred Steve Biko made many appearances at illegal gatherings protesting against South African Apartheid according to many sources.

In the movie Cry Freedom, Biko is called to the stand in a trial of nine other Black Consciousness Leaders (Richard Attenborough, Cry Freedom, A Pictorial Record, 20). Although the scene is very short it resembles the trial accurately. According to BIKO, a novel by Donald Woods, the things Biko says and the attitude he has toward the white prosecutor are exact even though the trial was obviously longer in real life. Biko's imprisonment is another significant event acknowledged in the movie. In Cry Freedom and in actuality, Biko and his friend Peter Jones were flagged down at a road block on their way to Capetown. At that time Biko had been put on South Africa's most wanted list because he had escaped the security guards. He was caught and taken into police custody (Richard Attenborough, Cry Freedom, A Pictorial Record, 37).

Biko's death was yet another important event in the movie. The South African Police claimed that Steve Biko had gone on a hunger strike. They said he died of starvation but many believe that he was beaten to death (this was a conjecture Woods made after seeing his deceased body's scars and bruises). The condition of Biko's body was shown in the movie.

Woods also remembered Biko telling him that if he was ever killed the cause of death would be a lie if it was: self-inflicted hanging, slashed wrists, suffocation and starvation. Biko told Woods he was a fighter and would never kill himself (BIKO, Woods 166).

“You are either alive and proud or you are dead, and when you are dead you can’t care any ways,” (I Write What I Like, Biko 152). This quote by Steve Biko is another example that demonstrates Biko’s belief in life and death. He was a man who cared deeply about the people of South Africa and would never die and stop caring if he had the choice. This further proved the point that Biko would never go on a hunger strike. The last event documented in Cry Freedom almost precisely as it occurred in real life was Biko’s funeral. 20,000 blacks were at Steve’s funeral with posters of praise, they all sang and honored Biko just like the funeral shown in the movie. The representation of Biko’s life in the movie was one of exactitude.

The events of the life of Donald Woods are also shown accurately in Cry Freedom. Some of the major events involving Donald Woods were the first time he met Biko, his first trip to a black township, his banning and his escape. As described in BIKO, and shown in Cry Freedom, the first time Woods and Biko met was at a church that had been converted into many offices and a black community center. He was greeted by the wife of Steve Biko, Ntsiki. They met in the back yard of the community center both in actuality and in the movie. The words in BIKO of their first conversation are exactly as it was in Cry Freedom proving the historical accuracy of their first dialogue together. As time went by, both in the movie and in real life, Woods and Biko developed a respect and friendship. This was extremely unique between two people of different colored skin in South Africa during that time. Biko wanted to show Donald Woods what a true black township was like so he took Woods to one. The name or people in the township might have been different but the impression one gets of the township is probably similar to the township it self.

In the movie Cry Freedom, Biko is shown dancing with an older woman at a party and socializing while Woods speaks with various town people. Specific events at the party like Biko dancing with a women, and Woods drinking beer with the men might be put in the movie to show their forthcoming personalities. The banning of Donald Woods was another occurrence in Woods' life that was shown and documented truthfully in Cry Freedom. Shortly after the article released in *The Daily Dispatch* (the newspaper for which Donald Woods was the editor), about the truth of the death of Biko, Woods was banned by South Africa for treason. His conditions were the same as Steve Biko's during the duration of his ban. Both in the movie and in Woods' life he was supposed to have been banned for 5 years; however, he was only banned until he escaped to England and became a free man. The journey in which he and his family took to England was yet another event documented accurately in Cry Freedom. He and his family had to escape the border separately. Donald Woods pretended to be a priest and his family met up with him after they escaped the South African border. The documentation of these events in Donald Woods' life in Cry Freedom is also one of reality.

The movie, Cry Freedom, confirmed to me that there have been many attempts of genocide in many different cultures. For example the Jews in the Holocaust, the Japanese in WWII, and the Black people in African Apartheid. Cry Freedom has shown me the truth about how black people were treated in South Africa and how unjust the white police really were. This shows there is no excuse for treating anyone differently because of their race. That is why Cry Freedom has such a direct relation to Black History Month.

Black History Month is about Black people who made a difference spreading the ideas of Black freedom, education, liberty and more. Steve Biko is a man that did as much as he could to spread Black Consciousness, and for that he is a man deserving of being a part of Black History Month. The things he did changed the way we look at racism eternally; he had the courage to make us realize that there was inequality between whites and blacks in South Africa. He showed this to Donald Woods and Woods spread Biko's beliefs through the wonderful book he produced, changing the beliefs of all who read his book forever. However, even today there are people who stereotype others by the way they look. Sadly, somehow certain visions have not been erased from society yet; for example, the stereotype of Jews having horns, abusive parents being men, or thieves being black...there are countless examples. The solution to this problem is yet to be found. Time and awareness are the tools we need to show us these stereotypes are not true.

In conclusion, the events in Cry Freedom are ones that are portrayed accurately. Biko's banning, some of his famous speeches, and acts to influence Africans; the trial, his imprisoning, and his death were acknowledged in Cry Freedom as they were in his life. The first time Donald Woods met Biko, his first trip to a black township, his banning, and his escape were also events that were truthful in the movie.

To sum up, the movie Cry Freedom was an accurate movie. The events and people were portrayed correctly and successfully. The movie also has a direct link to Black History Month because it represents the "stride toward freedom" (Stride Toward Freedom, Martin Luther King, Jr.) which Black people had to face to become a free people. It confirms my views on how horrible racism is and my belief that unfortunately

racism still exists today. Cry Freedom is a thought provoking, powerful, passionate and truthful movie that has further influenced my view on life, stereotypes and racism.

(Bibliography on the next page)

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History Period 7
February 2003

Cry Freedom Annotated Bibliography

Attenborough, Richard, Dir. Cry Freedom. MCA Home Video, inc. 1988.

This Movie showed me the lives of Steve Biko and Donald Woods during South African Apartheid.

Ayittey, George B.N. Africa Betrayed. New York: St. Martin's Press inc., 1992.

This book talked more generally about Apartheid in South Africa verses what Steven Biko did for Apartheid.

Biko, Steve. I Write What I Like. San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1978.

This book gave me a sense of Biko's personality and I could understand where he was coming from and his ideas and beliefs.

King, Jr., Martin Luther. Stride Toward Freedom. San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1958.

My use of this book was helpful but brief; it gave me some views of another great leader for the black people, Martin Luther King, Jr.

Lapping, Brian. Apartheid, A History. New York: George Braziller, Inc. 1987.

This book had a lot of hard facts about the African people and the suffering they did.

Woods, Donald. BIKO. New York: Paddington Press Ltd. 1978.

This book gave me the most information to compare accuracy to the movie. The movie, Cry Freedom was based on most of the events occurring in his book so I used this source to compare the way certain events and people were portrayed in the movie and in Woods' eyes.