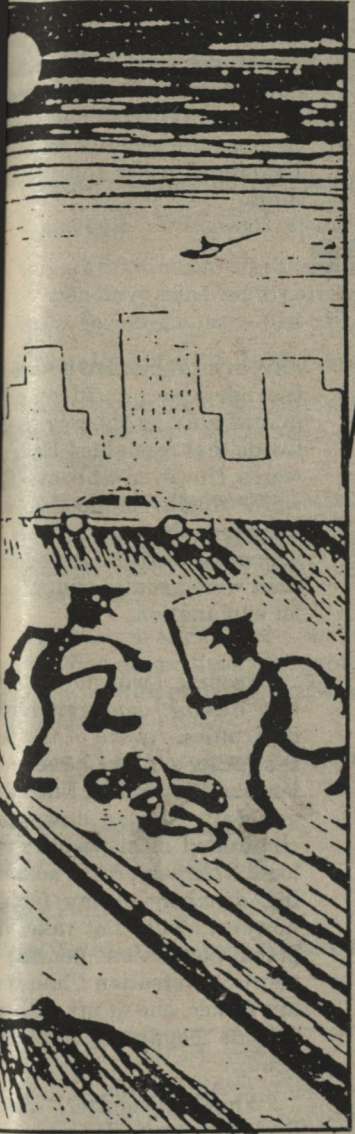


South Africa

by Sharon Sopher



release.

However, since the international showing of her film, many of its participants have been tortured. Some have ended up dead. Knowing this, Sopher says she cannot remain the purely detached objective observer she says she would like to be.

"I look at this film almost as a part of the history. I think the proportions of the brutality and inhumanity had just reached such a point that this film was just a part of what had to take place, as part of that history that was unfolding. I think that's why people were willing to take the risks involved. They wanted to be seen."

Sopher speaks of a black doctor, who spoke of treating black victims of apartheid violence in the film, who was picked up by the South African police when the 1986 state of emergency was declared. He had just recently been released and on Dec. 1, he was shot and killed along with his wife. I'm sure that being in the film probably had something to do with that," she said.

In the film, the doctor had explained typical torture procedures used by the police. Permanent visible wounds left on some victims were also shown in the film. One young victim was beaten so badly he was left with a head as permanently soft as a melon. "I feel like dying, no more living," said another victim, a 15 year old boy named Johnnie. After two weeks in prison, Johnnie was so beaten that he is now barely able to speak. He has suffered permanent brain damage.

"I keep in constant touch with people in South Africa and there has never been one instance when any of them (participants in the film) had expressed any reservation about showing the film because of the consequences it might have. The reality is that the chances of something happening over there are so great anyway — for no reason — that I think people figure at least they'll be telling 'the story.'"

When the film recently aired in the U.S., Sopher added an update to inform viewers of the deaths of participants in the film since its making. One of the white doctors in the film said he was concerned about what he said in the film because of its probable ramifications. "But," said Sopher, "as a doctor, all he said was that detention is so bad for one's health that when he sees what it does to people, he has to do what he can to expose it."

"The debates we get into over here are almost irrelevant..."

"I then came on camera and said the reason people were willing to expose themselves in order to expose apartheid is because they feel it's so important for people outside South Africa to understand that apartheid does not just discriminate — it kills."

Sopher is very critical of the way most of her colleagues cover events in South Africa. "I really feel a lot of disgust and moral outrage because I don't think they're carrying out what they're charged with. I think they're primary concern is maintaining their bureaus

rather than covering the story, and I really wonder," she says.

Journalists should operate out-

side South Africa "the same way I did — get a visa for one month, get the story and then, get the hell out. And if you get kicked out, if you get arrested, it doesn't matter because you shouldn't intend to go back anyway," she says.

Sopher has two conclusions about the way the mainstream media covers events in South Africa. "I sat down and thought about all the images I have seen that the networks use to tell you the story. I realized, with all the footage and all the time spent covering South Africa, essentially only two images were being used — and they both kept the story on a very abstract level."

Mass funerals and mass confrontations between the police and protestors are the two images, says Sopher, which mislead the public into believing that violence in South Africa does not occur on any other level. "They cover these mobs, which are not images we can relate to." It's hard to relate to seeing 40,000 people at a funeral, says Sopher, because "40,000 people are not going to come to my funeral."

While numerous mass funerals have been covered in the mass media, Sopher says that she has never seen an interview with a single black family as part of that coverage.

"The media is telling us that the loss of life there somehow isn't quite the same, or as important, as loss of life here," says Sopher.

"The human dimension is lost somehow. So when the regime says these people are under the control of outside agitators, manipulators, communists, it's fairly easy to believe because you see these mobs, which look mindless and you've never seen a single individual — it's as if they don't exist individually, as people."

Sopher says coverage of confrontations between police and protestors leads people to think violence only occurs during these confrontations. "I think that's why I was surprised when I began to see this other layer of violence which is the torture that takes place in custody; the indiscriminate shooting of people like the

death of that four year old girl (who was shot in the head by the police officer's rubber bullet). Obviously that four year old girl was not a threat to anyone," she says.

While Sopher has covered two wars in Africa, she said that nothing has shocked her as much as the evidence of the torturing of children. Sopher says she's "read so many affidavits where even doctors, psychiatrists, are telling the police that if they continue torturing these people, they'll end up vegetables. And what they do is put them (victims) in psychiatric hospitals, treat them so that they start responding and then they torture them again."

Sopher says she's shocked by the reaction of viewers to the South African president's wife, Mrs. Botha, who spoke in the film of desiring another "big wipeout" of the black South African population, like that of the 1969 Sharpeville massacres to solve what she calls "the problem."

Sopher says she can't understand why viewers of the film are so shocked considering the apartheid regime has been re-elected since 1948. "It's not as if it was a dictatorship," she says. "People know what they are re-electing because it is the government that legislates apartheid."

"that's what so unique about South Africa. It's all carefully laid out, right there to read. That's why I don't accept the myth that the whites there don't really know what's going on, when on-half of all Afrikaaners (whites of Dutch descent) are employed by the government."

Despite the need for North Americans to see the violence that underscores apartheid, Sopher has had some complaints what her film is too brutal to expose people to. "And I say, wait a minute. What do you think about the people over there for real? If man is capable of doing this kind of thing, men and women have to be capable of looking at it and doing something to stop it."

As far as the dichotomy goes between the objective professional aspect of her nature, and the more emotional, subjective part, Sopher quotes Margaret Bourke-White, the first female photographer for 'Life' magazine: "You have to be insensitive enough to get into the right position to be sensitive enough to record it."

over here are almost irrelevant to what those people (the African Blacks) were saying when I met them," she says. "I never heard any of them say 'God, I'm afraid of losing my job if sanctions are passed.' What they were all saying to me in one form or another was 'I'm afraid of losing my life: when my child walks out the door in the morning, I don't know if I'm ever going to see him again.'"

Somehow Sopher managed to smuggle the illegal film out of South Africa — she is reluctant to explain how — but not before she and the crew Sopher had assembled in the country were arrested and detained by the South African police. They were held for some hours and Sopher credits her American citizenship for their