

*The following review was written after a preview at the George Street cinema, Oxford, for the Cherwell student newspaper.*

*Cry Freedom* is the story of Steve Biko and newspaperman Donald Woods. Together, for a brief time back in the 70s, they stood as an example of black/white entente in South Africa.

This is also a Richard Attenborough film. His penultimate venture as director was of course *Gandhi*, a long-cherished project which dealt with many of the same themes. Gandhi too, like Biko, was an intelligent and articulate man who wanted nothing so much as peace with the occupiers of his country, and Candice Bergen played the newspaperwoman. Biko, though, also wants freedom for his people: equal terms with white South Africans.

Attenborough, a confirmed liberal, certainly has a flair for this type of material, his films often showing the unattractive or unseen side of our history (*Oh What a Lovely War!* *Young Winston*, *A Bridge Too Far*). *Cry Freedom* is as smooth and highly produced a piece of film-making as ever.

Divided into two parts, the first shows the meeting and relationship of Biko and Woods up until the former's death in custody. The second tells of Woods's ban and his escape with his family to Botswana. Biko's 'presence' in the film is carefully maintained through use of flashback clips previously unseen, but the general opinion after the preview seemed to be that the film broke down in the second half. True, it falls into a more conventional thriller narrative in its concentration on Woods's family, their separation and reunion.

Undoubtedly far more of interest occurs in the first part. Kevin Kline and Denzel Washington (American actors, note) are perfect in their roles and their scenes together, as well as Biko's confrontations with authority, are handled with maximum effect. There is also a wealth of reliable British support (as always with Attenborough) – Timothy West, John Thaw, Ian Richardson, Alec McCowen. The latter plays a British ambassador who actually asks Woods, just safely over the border: 'Would you care for a cup of tea?' An unworthy lowering of tone? Well, it seems this was in fact said, but it is an example of a truth stranger than fiction best left out.

The film has two bravura sequences, neither of which has anything to do with either Woods or Biko. They are also the opening and closing sequences: a police raid on a shanty town, and suppression of a demonstration in a Black township, superior to the similar episode in *Gandhi*. Here Attenborough the political historian in the Eisenstein mould is most in evidence and the sequences gain from their impersonal quality, less choreographed than the Odessa Steps but calculatedly cut and presented all the same. He wanted to wake people up to the horror of Apartheid, and he succeeds perhaps. But the danger of rhetoric like this is that its urgency recedes once the film is over. *Cry Freedom* is worthy film-making but ultimately too plainly just that to change your life.