

FILM REVIEW

Catherine Meyburgh and Richard Pakleppa, directors. *Dying for Gold*. 2018. 99 minutes. English, isiXhosa, and Sesotho with English subtitles. South Africa, Mozambique, Lesotho, and Swaziland. Breathe Films. No Price Reported.

In *Dying for Gold*, directors Catherine Meyburgh and Richard Pakleppa have compiled moving accounts of African mine workers suffering from occupational respiratory diseases (silicosis and tuberculosis or TB), along with testimonies from their families. These diseases are caused by an almost opaque dust resulting from the mining process that slowly infiltrates the lungs of the miners, causing disablement and eventually death. It is important to name the participants appearing in the film in this review, in keeping with the film's activist mandate. They are: Chabedi Moiketsi from Welkom (South Africa); Ramachakela Masenya from Lesotho; Mapiela Masenya from Lesotho; Mohau Manyokole from Lesotho; Bangumzi Balakisi from Eastern Cape (South Africa); and Albino Tivane from Mozambique.

The directors have produced a nuanced mix of history and film to take the audience through an emotionally charged journey of migrant labor demands that showcase the continuous exploitation of black males from rural areas in Southern Africa over the last hundred years. More poignantly, we learn of the medical negligence by doctors employed by the mining companies, who had a greater allegiance to the colonial administration than to their patients. The film sheds light on a modern-day version of slavery that thrives in an industrialized South Africa, which the directors deem as responsible for "mass murder over a century."

The film questions the morality of a capitalist system that continues to exploit economically disadvantaged black bodies, who are desperate for jobs to support their families. Silicosis serves as a metaphor for the effects of aggressive capitalist labor conditions, with untransformed colonial policies that are complicit with a medical system that is negligent of the miners' wellbeing. Preventative and diagnostic protocols against silicosis are lacking, leading to irreversible damage to the miners' respiratory systems. Young men who were once fit, having left rural areas in the hope of being able to

support their families, return home in wheelchairs, with ailing bodies and waiting to die what one can only imagine is a slow, painful death. The melancholic accounts of the miners' families narrate how they witness their loved ones living with silicosis and TB after working in the mines. As one widow shared, "My husband's family judged me because I decided to share the bed with him; I remember the smell; he had silicosis and I had to give him love."

The female voice is well represented in the film, perhaps to show the lasting effects of the illness on the families who are left behind and the lingering grief over lost lives. The women's trauma is evident in their eyes, even though they try to hide their grief. They speak fondly of their departed partners, reminiscing about their handsome looks before they left to work in the mines, and the gifts that they used to send home when they were still considered fit enough to work. There is an undeniable pain evident in the voices and faces of those who are awaiting their death and of the relatives who have already lost their loved ones.

There is also a sense of unspeakable truths and pain that miners do not share with their families. Fathers pass on the ill-fated baton to their sons, once they fall sick and are no longer able to work. In this manner, the cycle of black labor exploitation continues. As one of the younger miners states, "I started in January 2014 to replace my father who was sick with silicosis." Throughout the film, it is evident that the miners and their families are not well informed about their rights, or even about the illness itself. The miners talk about it among themselves: they know it, they fear it, but they have no other choice but to go underground. Their fear is numbed by the constant consumption of alcohol as a means of suspending the reality of the cycle of poverty and economic desperation.

As a film invested in creating a social impact, *Dying for Gold* uses a voice-over narrative to transition between the "real world" and colonial mining historical records. The editing juxtaposes colonial TEBA records accessed from the University of Johannesburg archives, old propaganda films, images of the Chamber of Mines (now called the Mineral Council of South Africa), geographical maps, and jarring chest x-ray visuals that serve as reminders of the realities faced by miners on a daily basis. The close-up camera shot technique draws the viewer in to connect and empathize with the protagonists through eye-level angles that put the viewer face to face with the speakers. This is further enhanced by still portraits of family members with the miners, which draw one in emotionally as they are displayed in moments of silence.

Dying for Gold creates a clear narrative of the way the miners continue to pay with their lives in order to keep the South African economy and gold mining industry going, yet they never benefit from this wealth. The documentary calls for change and accountability from the mining industry and the medical system that remain complicit in black lives that continue to be lost in

the name of gold. The high court in South Africa has recently ruled in favor of approving the historic silicosis settlement case. This settlement is a small victory for the many miners who are dead or dying and their families, victims of the capitalist mining industry.

Phemelo C. Helleman 

Rhodes University

Makhanda (Grahamstown), South Africa

pc.monnapula@gmail.com

doi:10.1017/asr.2020.9