

## **Marcel King is Dead: A Review**

Andile Mngxitama

Heinrich Bohmke's debut 12-minute film, *Marcel King is Dead*, captures the events which led to and followed the brutal murder of nineteen-year-old Marcel King by ANC-led Durban metro security guards on June 24, 2004 in Phoenix, Durban. Marcel's mother was part of a community resistance against the electricity disconnections faced by the poor of the democratic South Africa. In the ensuing struggle, one security employee cocked his gun. Aimed. Marcel King used his body to shield his mother from the eminent gunfire... He was shot in the head at short range. The film tells the story which unfolded from death to burial in a fast-paced tempo, revealing in the process the callousness of the neo-liberal project and its assault on the poor in the low intensity war which has now been raging for ten years in South Africa.

This film is perhaps the most eloquent statement to emerge from the lens of an activist filmmaker in SA in the past few years. It focuses our gaze powerfully on the state of affairs of the poor who have progressively been pushed further down the neo-liberal hell-hole. This is a critical intervention in a time when our society is immunized against seeing the pain of the wretched existence of the free poor.

The film has haunted me for sometime. I must have tried to block my mind from remembering the image of Marcel's body as it lay in the morgue, a suffocating testament to the cruelty of our freedom without respect for the poor and their lives. I was forced back to the film and its impact on me when I heard the piercing cries of my daughter's new puppy recently. My brother had stepped on it accidentally, but I could not sleep... and in that fleeting floating moment of struggle between being asleep and being awake, the rough, uncut message of this equally raw film returned to me... neo-liberalism kills for sure.

I took a friend who is lost to the corporate world to see the film, during the Three Continents Film Festival in Johannesburg. The organizers were so kind to screen *Marcel King is Dead* just before the acclaimed *Fourth World War* and we are richer for it. "The film gave me goose pumps, how can life be so cruel?" asked my corporate friend rhetorically as we walked away from the cinema house. True, this film invites both outrage and rebellion, but more important is its double move: it makes a statement against neo-liberalism's death machine while it affirms life in resistance. In just 12 minutes the film achieves what reams of statistical and sterile analysis have not – it shows how neo-liberal plunder destroys lives of real people. The product of neo-liberalism goes beyond physical extermination, as in the body of Marcel King. The attack goes deep, into the very souls of poor communities.

Through the death of Marcel we are brought into the living spaces of the people of Phoenix. We can see how they try to make life out of nothing. Through the defiant tears of Marcel's mother and sister we are invited to rebellion. These people are not just victims and have not lost their capacity to be outraged and demand respect and justice... But the message also coming through from the ground is that we have every right to break unjust laws and we are planning to do just that...

The cinematographic "weaknesses" pointed out by "seasoned" filmmakers in the corridors of Cinema Nouveau: Did Heinrich shoot, edit, produce the film all by himself? I hear one ask sarcastically. The music is too cheesy, I hear another comment. The editing is bad... All of these pale against the power of the message. Heinrich had two advantages: the instinct to follow the story as it unfolded and to find people willing to talk, and talk with righteous eloquence against injustice. If the film seems flawed technically, we are likely to plead in mitigation that it's because form may have been compromised in the quest to capture the raw madness of the killing of Marcel King by the democratic government's bullets in defense of modern-day plunder and looting.

The family of King, particularly his mother for whom Marcel took the fatal bullet, shows remarkable fighting spirit. Their demands remain basic: if the ANC government, a government they have fought to bring into power cannot fulfill the dream of liberation – of a decent life for all – the community has every right to claim that life. The film shows with impeccable, passionate clarity the impact of poverty and unemployment, and how these limit the possibility of people to buy services to satisfy their basic human needs – services which should never be bought and sold in a just society. The film also portrays the reduction of the local councilors, by the same neo-liberal forces, to what Ashwin Desai has described as "cruel debt collectors". 'If you cannot pay, you will bleed' is the actual message carried by the actions of local governments across South Africa. Through their actions, they have produced death and rage – Marcel King is one of about seven people killed by government bullets this year alone. The people are set on a collision course with a government that pays lip service to the needs of the poor. *Marcel King is Dead* shows the high price the poor are paying in South Africa in their quest for a de-commodified life.

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