Invictus (2009)

Sarah Marak

dir. Clint Eastwood; prod. Clint Eastwood, Robert Lorenz, Lori McCreary, Mace Neufeld; screenplay Anthony Peckham; photography Tom Stern; music Kyle Eastwood, Michael Stevens. 35mm, color, 134 mins. Liberty Pictures, distrib. Warner Bros.

Courtesy of the Everett Collection

Set in South Africa, *Invictus* is one of the few movies directed by the »quintessentially American« actor-director Clint Eastwood not primarily concerned with the United States (Gentry qtd. in Sterritt, 7). Focusing on racial reconciliation in the post-Apartheid era, *Invictus* is an unusual mixture of biopic and sports melodrama, mythologizing the role of the 1995 Rugby World Cup in building the new »Rainbow Nation.« With Nelson Mandela, the first black South African to be elected president, as the main protagonist (played by Morgan Freeman), *Invictus* exhibits »the central fixation of the biopic on ›Great Men‹ doing ›Great Things‹« (Cartmell and Polasek 2). However, with its 2009 release and with racial reconciliation and forgiveness as the film's main themes, critics have argued that Eastwood's movie is not so much about South Africa as it is about the United States (Roy 111). Barack Obama had been elected as the first African American President just the year before, prompting fantasies of a post-racial U.S. and questions about »who makes up the ›we‹ of the nation« that have been negotiated in American melodrama time and again (Poole and Saal 11). As Sohinee Roy writes, Obama era films thus often »gravitated toward racial reconciliation because reconciliation fits the optimistic white narrative of a nation that has repaid its historical debts with the election of its first African American President« (112). Based on the book *Playing the Enemy: Nelson Mandela and the Game that Made a Nation* by journalist John Carlin, *Invictus* »stitches together elements of documentary realism, melodrama, and sentimentality to heighten its appeal for a global audience with only a limited knowledge of South African politics and popular culture« (Fu and Murray 25). Despite criticism, the

film gained two Academy Award nominations (for Morgan Freeman and Matt Damon) and critical acclaim in the U.S., along with positive reviews in South Africa.

The film's opening shots show two sports fields divided by a road. On one field, a group of kids practice rugby on lush green turf, enclosed by an impressive iron picket fence, led by a coach. On the other side of the road, another group of kids chases a soccer ball on a dusty field surrounded by chain-link fence. When a motorcade passes through on the dividing road, the soccer kids run to the fence and start chanting, while on the other field the coach tells his rugby team to »remember this day«—February 11, 1990. »It is that terrorist Mandela. They let him out […]. This is the day our country went to the dogs.« In these opening shots, the conflict is quickly established: Racial tension and hostility abound, and the nation's division is also prominently reflected in its sports culture. Rugby, being the favorite sport of the white Afrikaaner minority, is played by white kids only; soccer, favored by black South Africans, is played by a group of black kids, excited to see Mandela released from prison after twenty-seven years. With this dichotomy established from the start, despite being a biopic on a world-famous politician, *Invictus* abstains from showing in more detail the political and social problems of post-Apartheid South Africa and instead focuses on depicting the unifying power of sports in a divided nation.

Fast forward to 1994: South Africa is to host the Rugby World Cup the following year, which the newly elected President Nelson Mandela sees as a political opportunity to unite the nation's people behind a shared cause: the national rugby team. Despite a general disinterest in—if not outright disdain for—the Springboks among his black staffers, Mandela continuously campaigns for every South African to support the team. He even prevents the disbandment of the Springboks, who are viewed as a remnant of the former Apartheid regime and a symbol of Afrikaaner nationalism by many of his fellow black South Africans. Mandela's vision is to unite the nation behind the Springboks as a sign for forgiveness and a step towards reconciliation, and he seeks to realize it with the help of the world championship. While the viewers accompany Mandela as he gets used to the duties of the presidential office and tries to integrate his black and white bodyguards, the Springboks suffer a humiliating defeat and are ridiculed on national sports television. Clearly, they are the underdog in the upcoming World Cup—just as Mandela is in the eyes of many on the political stage. On several occasions, Mandela meets team captain François Pienaar (played by Matt Damon) and the team. As goes the message of *Invictus*, he inspires them to, in the end and against all odds, win the World Cup—and inspires South Africans to embrace the notion of the »Rainbow Nation.«

Despite the centrality of music for melodrama, the first half of *Invictus* makes use of it only sparingly, yet to great effect. After the opening scenes, music is conspicuously absent as long as racial boundaries remain strictly drawn. When President Mandela is picked up by a unit of bodyguards, consisting of a black and white agent, the score sets in for the first time, accompanying a dialogue that establishes a central motif of *Invictus*: Mandela's white bodyguard, unaware of the president's own family situation, happily answers a question about the well-being of his family, and asks Mandela the same question in return. Irritated only for a brief moment, and with background music for the first time, the president replies: »I have a very large family. Forty-two million.« The South African nation, thus, is his metaphorical family, and it is also within familial structures that *Invictus* depicts the process of racial reconciliation. The film thus ne-

gotiates post-Apartheid South Africa's racial divisions not on a structural and political level but rather in classic melodramatic fashion on an intimate familial level (Elsaesser 72). Racism is not depicted as structurally entrenched here, but as a personal issue of prejudice that can be overcome by empathy and a shared enthusiasm for sports. The plot of *Invictus* thus unfolds in two interconnected »domestic« spheres—the national is always also mirrored in the domestic. When he is not shown playing rugby, Pienaar, the captain of the Springboks team which has only one black player, is shown in his parents' home discussing political developments and the upcoming Rugby World Cup, and often watching Mandela on the news. The family's black maid, Eunice (played by Sibongile Nojila), is always present, yet stays in the background, seemingly unfazed by Pienaar's father's racist statements and open disdain for the president. When Pienaar, who functions as a »mediating white presence« (Roy 126), gets a call from the president's office—an invitation to have tea with Mandela—only Eunice smilingly asks him to relay her concerns to the president.

Pienaar, at first somewhat skeptical about the president's hopes for a Springbok title, is inspired by Mandela's moral integrity and tries to incorporate some of his ideas into the team's routine: for example, by singing »Nkosi Sikelel' iAfrika« instead of the previous national anthem. Before the final match against New Zealand's All Blacks, Pienaar takes the team and their families on a visit to Robben Island, where Mandela was incarcerated for most of his prison sentence. In a highly emotional scene, he locks himself into Mandela's tiny former cell, measuring it with his arms, and envisions Mandela reciting »Invictus«—a poem by British poet William Ernest Henley that the president gave to Pienaar during one of his visits. With the final lines of the poem spoken by Morgan Freeman (»I am the master of my fate, I am the captain of my soul«), Pienaar seems to envision Mandela staring up at him from the prison's stone pit below, and dramatic music underlines the completion of the Springbok captain's racial education.

Over the course of the tournament, previously skeptical characters successively fall for the fascination of rugby, among them Mandela's political advisor, Brenda (played by Adjoa Andoh), as well as his black bodyguards, who are even taught the basics of the game by their white colleagues. Before the final game, Pienaar returns to his family's home to drop off tickets—one for his wife, two for his parents, and, to the surprise of his father, a fourth ticket for Eunice, thus symbolically turning her into a member of the family. On game day, we see Mandela's bodyguards united in their duty to protect the president, the Pienaar family in the stands accompanied by Eunice, Mandela's estranged family listening to the match on the radio, and people in townships watching in bars. Mandela, seated next to the president of New Zealand, is wearing a green-and-gold Pienaar jersey, as well as a cap given to him by the team. The match is shown in meticulous detail: Action-packed scenes alternate with slow-motion shots, interspersed by scenes from outside of the stadium and the stands. In several intercut scenes, *Invictus* shows people, black and white, overcome by emotion and celebrating South Africa's historical win together: the reluctant but happy bodyguards, Pienaar's family with his mother and Eunice hugging each other in joy, and people in the stands singing and waving the new flag. The development from disdain and rejection to forgiveness and reconciliation is reflected once more in a series of scenes featuring a young black boy lingering next to a police car, wanting to join two white officers listening to the match on the radio. At first, they chase him away. But as the events in the stadium become more and more suspenseful and emotional, they let him come

closer—until at one point he sits on the hood of the car, drinking a can of Coca-Cola. With victory now secured, in an emotional eruption one of the officers lifts the black boy up in the air with a police cap on his head, which, analogous to Mandela's cap, symbolizes shared victory, forgiveness, and a united nation. Reconciliation—if but for a brief moment—is achieved by this one »magical event« (Roy 117). *Invictus*, thus, not only »contruct[s] a […] mythical past suited for the present« (Fu and Murray 25) in a South African context but can also be read as a projection of U.S. American post-racial fantasies.

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