

FILM REVIEW

Rehad Desai, dir. *Everything Must Fall: The High Cost of Free Education*. 2018. 1hr 25 min. English. South Africa, Netherlands, Belgium. Uhuru Productions and Kittina media, Story House and ICONdocs. No price reported.

Before 1994, South African universities were structurally aligned with the apartheid grammar of racial separation and extreme inequality, an ugly dichotomy of well-resourced white institutions in the cities and under-resourced Black institutions on the urban peripheries and rural hinterlands. These so-called Black universities absorbed a pool of poorly-prepared Black learners, products of an equally inferior system of primary and secondary schooling. In many ways, the vestiges of inequality still hold. After 1994, Black students were allowed to enroll in formerly white universities. According to the Report of the Ministerial Committee for the Review of the Funding of Universities (2014), between 1994 and 2011, student enrolments in the entire higher education system almost doubled, from 495,356 to 938,201. While this reflected democratized access in contrast to the past, it also unmasked other problems, as many students could not complete their undergraduate education due to lack of funds. State subsidies also gradually decreased, which virtually made universities engines of their own financial stability. The universities increased tuition fees, leading to the financial exclusion of poorer students. These were strong motivating factors for a swell in student anger, culminating in a huge call for a moratorium on fees and eventually for free higher education.

The flag bearer of this call was a movement called Fees Must Fall (sometimes #FeesmustFall, or #FMF), an alliance of progressive student bodies, principally the African National Congress-aligned Progressive Youth Alliance and the Economic Freedom Fighters Youth Command, a student wing of the Economic Freedom Fighters party. When the outgoing State President Jacob Zuma announced in late 2017 that poor students would thenceforth get access to free education in higher institutions, the movement had achieved one of its key demands. The formation, consolidation, demise, and aftermath of the Fees Must Fall movement is the principal subject of the film *Everything Must Fall*. Its director, Rehad Desai, is most widely known for *Miners Shot Down* (2014), the documentary film on the police massacre of

mine workers in South Africa's platinum belt. *Everything Must Fall* is his latest contribution to a growing oeuvre that covers flash points of post-apartheid South Africa's national life.

The inauguration of Professor Adam Habib, the first Black person of Indian descent to be vice chancellor and principal of Wits University, introduces the film. Habib extols the virtues of the university and strikes a conciliatory tone "to those we might have done wrong by." Immediately after the footage of his speech, the viewer is confronted with a critical viewpoint by former student leader Leigh-Ann Naidoo, who makes clear the university's white patriarchal structure and cultural alignments with Cambridge University. This sets up the bias for a balance of opinion in the film, from there it switches between explication by the vice chancellor and counterpoints by students who repudiate the culture of the university.

Considered as a unit, the inauguration, Naidoo's counterpoint, and archival footage of Wits university form the backdrop to a film that starts properly with a provocative title track and the university's announcement of a 10.5 percent increase in tuition fees. The inclusion of the announcement, its being edited to be the first historical act against which the students rise, makes it an inciting incident of the film—a code borrowed from narrative fiction film. At the same time as it sets up the confrontation between the students and the vice chancellor as the film's central plank, the incident also determines the narrational structure of the film. A semi-sequential timeline of the movement—October 2015 to October 2016—underpins this structure. Alongside the timeline, student leaders, a worker, and the university lecturers express their opinions and analyses of the protests and the institutional culture against which they were set. Wits University, the setting of the interviews, is the institution from which all the student leaders who were interviewed were based. This is also the space where a large proportion of the filmed protests occurred. In a clever move that anticipates audience fatigue, the film integrates interviews with actual protest footage. Toward the end, the viewer contends with tragic outcomes of the movement, as students either were shot by the police, were arrested, or went into hiding. It closes with students expressing their opinions about the legacy of the movement and their hope for its revival.

If *Miners Shot Down* exposed raw state violence against workers, Desai's latest film forces the viewer to witness students and workers at the receiving end of multiple forms of violence: epistemic, structural, and statutory, among others. The film's resonant title, and its first critical register, captures this tragic state of affairs and more. It draws attention to the misnomer in the movement's name and invites viewers to its grander political outlook: resistance to all forms of inequalities. The "everything" in "everything must fall" is suggestive of the complexity of the students' and workers' cause, emotional investments, and at times tensions in determining the rationale and strategy of their praxis. The title sequence of the film, a playful and rapidly flashing montage of text against the background of a chalkboard, underscored by conscious hip hop beats by a youthful voice, highlights the various systems,

conditions, and attitudes that must be rejected: patriarchy, poverty, racism, outsourcing, privilege, homophobia, and other forms of inequality and injustice. The rap lyrics add to it a larger narrative of protest against the government's betrayal of the promises of 1994, when democracy was instated in South Africa. The title sequence prepares the viewer for a subject matter that exceeds student demands for an end to fee increases, but that also includes bigger national issues.

Everything Must Fall foregrounds tensions between different actors across identity variables of political affiliation, sexuality, gender, and institutional privilege. However, these are concentrated within the movement itself. The film allows accounts of differences in opinion and strategy among the students. We are shown how ANC-aligned students sometimes differ with EFF students over strategy, such as how to approach the ANC leaders during marches. One of the problems concerns the question of gender when the women leaders—both the incoming and outgoing SRC Presidents—were forced to invite their male counterparts to walk besides them as some kind of protection. But even at the level of reportage, the women students complained about gender biases in the media coverage of the movement, which favored male activists over the women leaders.

The film also raises the issue of media bias with regard to coverage of institutions of higher learning. It emerges that formerly white institutions attracted media attention while formerly Black ones, which probably have a more sustained history of activism post-1994, did not. As such, the relations in the movement are presented as being far from smooth, all due to both ingrained media biases and systematic injustices. It is an unfortunate omission that student leaders from the under-resourced institutions are not interviewed in the film. This repetition of the very problem it seeks to correct, by allowing student leaders to speak on camera, makes the film ripe for criticism.

Footage of the protests makes up most of the visual content of the documentary, while archival footage—which contextualizes the background to the film—is used sparingly. Interestingly, confrontational and protest scenes indirectly unmask the film's production background, which is that the filmmaker photographed the events as they were unfolding. At times, the camera appears to be on the sidelines of events such as gatherings and marches, but like a loyal companion, it is almost always lodged alongside the students as they advance or sit to lay out their demands. In moments of tension, such as when students storm the university concourse, set property alight, or confront each other, the camera's proximity to the action during and outside of protest is close enough to be regarded as embedded. This is one of the film's strong points. One can say that the film bears witness in close quarters to how history unfolded at a micro level. The active camera gives integrity of facticity and authenticity of the historical moment to the film. *Everything Must Fall* exploits handheld cinematography, which makes possible the correspondence of its visuals with convincing unevenness in bodily and spatial relations. This works well in the protest scenes where the voicing of

demands, tension between students and police, and acts of vandalism retain their context and temper. This penchant for a rough and edgy realism has the effect of engaged and real-time experience for the viewer, creating emotional and sympathetic appreciation for the students' cause. It also throws the film's voice into harsh relief.

Voice, à la Bill Nichols, is a text's social point of view achieved through a combination of its codes, not just dialogue and spoken commentary (Nichols, *The Voice of Documentary* [1983], p. 18). *Everything Must Fall* innovatively exploits the revolutionary aesthetics of its subject matter. Protest song, running text, graffiti of political slogans and twitter-inspired interfaces that are imports from the movement's social communication strategies guide its editing and visual aspect. There is a strong formal correspondence between theme and motif, in which the adoption of the politics and ideological motivations of the movement are encoded, thereby suggesting that the film is ultimately invested in the students' cause.

However, one ought not to lose sight of the fact that if unchecked, complexity can exceed the very logic underwriting the film's structure and focus. The representation of Professor Habib is a case in point. The film overly and unnecessarily focuses on the vice chancellor at the expense of workers' and students' perspectives. At one time, he is the adversary of the students, while at others, he is shown as being in competition with them with regard to his political credentials. The viewer knows this through archival footage of his activist past, arrest, and on and off-screen commentary about his credentials. It is in these moments that the film's thematic orientation seems compromised as it deflects attention from the students. This is not helped by the lack of dissenting voices, which was a feature of the Fees Must Fall Movement, when some students and faculty were critical of it for various reasons. The absence of students from marginalized institutions also compromises its complexity.

In spite of these shortcomings, *Everything Must Fall* is a worthy appointment with history, a reckoning with a fiercely revolutionary movement and the challenging events that gave shape to it. The signal achievement of *Everything Must Fall* is not just in its detailed documenting of a significant moment in post-apartheid times, but also the highly sophisticated surfacing of its complex politics. The challenges that these complex problems pose are a welcome provocation for the engaged viewer and society at large.

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