

When the Shit Starts Flying

Literary ghosts in Michael Raeburn's film *Triomf*

by Swantje Buddensiek



Eduan Van Jaarsveldt (Lambert) & Pam Andrews (Cleo)

Summary:

Triomf, ©photo: Alex Flynn

Marlene Van Niekerk's novel *Triomf* tells the story of a Boer family living in decline. The Benades appear to be haunted by their family history as well as, more subtly, by the guilt-laden past of their district in Johannesburg. Uncanny disturbances occur in their living situation and in the unstable ground of the narrated space — even graves do not keep in their place. *Triomf* has been adapted into a film by Michael Raeburn in 2010, and while the degeneration and tragic insight of the family are illustrated vividly, the literary ghosts become lost in the story's visualization.

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Triomf has been first published in 1994, in a time of the country's almost completed transition. A new order of a 'post-Apartheid South Africa' had just been set in political terms, and more or less so in peoples minds. The author Marlene Van Niekerk, a South African of Boer origin herself, depicts descendants of the Dutch immigrants who built a Christian and agrarian orientated society in the settlement colony that later became an Apartheid state. Van Niekerk's novel, originally written in Afrikaans, illustrates the decay of Apartheid, exemplifying the Benades in their house as the last 'stuck' wagon of the Boers' *Great Trek* — a central historical event for their settlement in South Africa. Each of the four main characters tells the story from his or her perspective. The plot duration is set in the very days and weeks before the first free election, including this event as turning point for the nation and for the family.

The Benades are not longer landowners or part of the privileged white community in South Africa, although one could regard their beneficiary of social welfare (including the social housing space they inhabit) as a privilege, compared to the millions of South Africans without any support from the state. The parents of the protagonists had once owned a farm, but lost it during an economic depression, which forced them to move to Johannesburg in order to find an employment.

The inhabited space plays a mayor role in the peculiar mode of haunting in the text. 'Triomf' is the Afrikaans name of the neighbourhood in Johannesburg that the family lives in, but this district has actually been built upon another one. Until the late fifties, the area had been called Sophiatown, and it was well known for its culturally vibrant scene and the mix of people. For these reasons, the Apartheid regime gave order to demolish the entire neighbourhood. It was then destroyed completely, against strong resistance of its inhabitants. While most of the people were sent to live in townships outside of the city centre — Sophiatown was the last central area in any South African city in which persons classified as 'coloured' did own houses — the buildings were flattened with all remaining content. Later, 'Triomf' was built upon this levelled ground, the name speaking for itself. This historical background sets the novel in a sombre light: it is the space of Triomf, or rather Sophiatown, that appears to be haunting the protagonists, however they also go after themselves.

Failures

The Benade's four family members are Pop and Treppie, who are in their fifties and sixties, and the only female, Mol, perhaps in the same age. Then there is Lambert, who is about to turn forty. Formally, he is the son of Pop and Mol, and Treppie a 'distant family member' from the Cape region. But as Lambert uncovers the family secret on the day of South Africa's first free elections, he finds out that the older three are siblings and have had a sexual relationship since their troubled childhood. Now he finally knows why he is different than others, with his knobby body and epileptic seizures. His own pondering of his difference and the following rages liken him to a tragic, monstrous figure. But the bitter part of the family life does not start or end with Lamberts descent.

The Benade's cohabitate is marked by alcoholism, social isolation, and frequent aggressive outbursts that let Treppie and Lambert repeatedly demolish everything they can find in the house and garden, and later repair the very same things again and again. At one point Lambert even shuts his mother inside of a fridge, together with some fireworks already lit.

The Benades do not have any friends; they regard others with both curiosity and contempt. At times, Lambert prompts conflicts due to his lack of social appropriateness. Neighbours look down on the four family members, who can be seen on their veranda and in the garden every day – drunk, desperate, and insufficiently clothed. The only frequent visitors the family has are



Eduan Van Jaarsveldt plays Lambert

Triomf, ©photo: Alex Flynn

delegates from both the National Party and the Jehovah Witnesses. Each of those parties considers the family as degenerate, and the protagonists are aware about this. The novel's irony and tragedy lies in this aspect: the Benades represent the failure of 'white supremacy', and they know and reflect on this. Treppe has a notable insight into their situation and finds cynical and sometimes poetic ways to describe it. But it does not change a thing.

The incest continues between the siblings. Even worse is the fact that all of the three men sleep with Mol, including her son Lambert. She sustains this habit because she believes that the family has to be strictly kept together. In this way, the text draws a horrible picture of Apartheid politics from 'within'. It is explained that the Benades had been rigidly taught to look after themselves.

'Look after' was supposed to mean they were valuable. More valuable than other people. Most other people couldn't look after themselves properly. That was Old Mol's opinion in those days. She clung to that belief, even though she knew there was something wrong with it. What's more, it also meant that if they wanted to fight or look for trouble, they had to do it with each other and not with other people. A 'well-looked-after' person was someone who stayed the way he was, a person who kept to himself, to his own kind. (Van Niekerk 2004:138-139)

There is little surprise that the family feels haunted in their house. In a certain way, the Benades resemble the image of a decadent family in a haunted mansion. But their ghosts are not restless ancestors in their own old house.

Haunting patterns

Ghosts do not appear as such in *Triomf*. Still, the novel deals with aspects of South Africa's past that keep on returning and even seem to have a dynamic of their own. The present time is unsettling for the family in their home in *Triomf*. As a last refuge for poor whites, the ideals of the Apartheid society and 'white supremacy' are already put into question. Also, the order of the state, as a wider sense of 'home', is about to fall apart. In this way, the living situation in the narrated space is altogether disturbed and uncanny. The term 'uncanny' is commonly considered to refer to the German word '*unheimlich*', defined by Sigmund Freud as something repressed re-appearing in the familiar setting as estranged, disturbing its order. (Royle 2003) Representing some 'thing' that returns when not expected, wanted, nor allowed to become visible, the notion

does remind of the structural changes in South Africa in the narrated time. A related term is *Heimsuchung*, among whose connotations are both 'uncanny visitation' of either a guest or a ghost, and 'search for a home'. The notion of *Heimsuchung* fits well to the events in *Triomf*: something un-settling is going on in the former settlement colony.

The past resurfaces in various ways: Lambert digs holes in the garden and therefore produces things that once were part of Sophiatown's homes. He collects these remainders in his own private museum. Furthermore, the ground beneath the narrated space seems unstable. Mol often wakes up because she hears a rumbling underneath, she can sense hollows that originate in old mining tunnels and in the built-over ruins of Sophiatown. This apprehension causes an uncanny feeling: Mol fears that the house will sink in and fall downward through an endless tunnel. This notion is consolidated in the fact that their dog's grave sinks deeper in the ground of their garden. That is especially unsettling for Mol. Following Jacques Derrida in *Spectres de Marx*, one of the main elements that enable haunting is mourning, which has to be connected to a fixed place, most likely a grave (Derrida 1994:9). Otherwise there cannot be a secure situation for the dead and the living; the line between both needs to be clear. Derrida illustrates the importance of mourning at a certain space as in the following:

It consists always in attempting to ontologize remains, to make them present, in the first place by identifying the bodily remains and by localizing the dead. [...] One has to know. [...]. Now, to know is to know who and where, to know whose body it really is and what place it occupies - for it must stay in its place. In a safe place. [...] Nothing could be worse, for the work of mourning, than confusion or doubt: one has to know who is buried where-and it is necessary (to know-to make certain) that, in what remains of him, he remain there. Let him stay there and move no more!
(Derrida 1994:9)

On many occasions, the line between the family members and their dogs and even between living and dead dogs seems to blur. There are 'ghost dogs' hunting for their lost homes in Sophiatown, crying nightly in Triomf's streets. Likewise, the Benades often howl together in order to stir up the dogs in their neighbourhood and the 'ghost dogs' of Sophiatown. Their own two dogs are descendants of Sophiatown's ones: When the district had been destroyed, many domestic animals were left behind in the chaos and kept on searching for their

lost homes. The Benades had at this time visited the place and picked up two abandoned dogs which they named after the streets where they found them, Toby and Gerty. These names in turn go back to the daughters of a farmer who settled in this same space long before it became part of a city. In this way, aspects of the past are being conjured up again. Ever since the Benades had them, the dogs reproduced (incestuous and through rape of a policeman's sheepdog) and were repeatedly given the same names in each generation. The deceased ones were buried in the garden, composing layers in the ruins of their ancestor's homes.

Inside of the Benade's house, marks of both human and animal house-mates decorate the walls: "[Y]ou'll find their personal effects all over the house. Their spit and their blood and their breath. And paw marks, all over the walls." (Van Niekerk 1994:359). Concerning this *modus vivendi*, one feels reminded of how Roland Barthes enquires the term 'bestiality'. In his disquisition on various modes on how to live together, *Wie zusammen leben*, the relationship of humans and their domestic animals can seem ambivalent (Barthes 2007:73-74). Often, animals are treated almost like human beings. At the same time, their natural behaviour has to be repressed when they are trained to fit into the orderliness of a home. Regarding animals with such a trained behaviour, the opposite tendencies in their human counterparts seem to become more visible. According to Barthes, one often finds features of bestiality in the cohabiting of animals and their owners. Their co-living can raise the question who is actually 'human' and who is 'bestial'. Regarding the Benades, this question definitely comes up. The family's dogs do have more rights and get more affection than their human cohabitants, as Treppie complains. The dogs are the only ones in the house who are not doing terrible things. But generally, the dogs represent uncanny space in the way that they remind of the lost homes underground. Together with the ghost dogs, which are heard howling at night, their existence is almost subverting present time and space.

The inward spiral

There is a particularly uncanny dynamic in the decline of the Benades, which is illustrated with various metaphorical images throughout the novel. Firstly, it is shown through images of infertility. The succession of generations comes to an end with Lambert, who cannot find a woman and perhaps could



Lionel Newton plays Treppie

Triomf, ©photo: Alex Flynn

not have children due to his constitution. His elders (it remains unclear whether Pop or Treppie is his biological father) worry about this, and sense the family's end in *Triomf*. Similarly, the space of *Triomf* is infertile. With Sophiatown underneath, there is no ground on which anything bigger than weeds could grow. A tree's roots would have to reach at least six feet deep to find soil, just as deep as a grave usually is.

Another uncanny dynamic is in the repeating prophecies about Pop's death, which then happens as foretold. Throughout the text, he has visions and 'visitations' predicting his death. He does not see a phantom or ghost, but repeatedly dreams of a complete and excruciating 'whiteness' suffocating him. Ironically, he dies exactly on the day of the first free elections, when craftsmen come to paint the Benade's house white. One of them covers the furniture with white cloth, together with Pop, who is overseen sleeping in his armchair. At the same time, Lambert finds out about the family secret and unintentionally kills Pop when ravaging in the house. He could not make Pop out in all of the white: In the very same moment, he inherits Pop's fear of being inside of a suffocating whiteness. The family plans to flee north 'when the shit starts flying' or 'when the shit hits the fan' — that means, in the case of the end of Apartheid. They fear possible consequences and that they might lose their home, which is already a last resort for them. Lambert imagines a 'decent life for whites' somewhere else, as if the *Great Trek* of the Boers could go on for the Benades. It is Lambert who keeps on trying to establish normalcy and de-

gency within their home, in spite of his own contradictory actions. In the end there will be neither a flight north, nor any decency. Symbolically, everything about the Benades is growing inward and falling together.

At one point, Treppie wonders about possible ways in which his family could be shown on television:

He's already warned them, one day the TV people are going to come and make a movie about them. He's not sure what kind of a movie, a horror or a sitcom or a documentary. He thinks they're too soft for horror and too sad for sitcom, so maybe they're just right for a documentary. Documentaries are about weird things like force-feeding parrots for export. He told Lambert he'd better behave himself, otherwise they'd come and ask him to make a special appearance on Wildlife Today. Lambert said only threatened species got shown on that programme. The poor fucker kids himself. (Van Niekerk 2004:129)

These are just the reasons why an adaptation of their story into a movie script has to be challenging. Obviously, Michael Raeburn could not shoot a documentary about the family in his film *Triomf* (South Africa 2010). Still, he takes on the contradictory issues that the novel provides. The movie depicts both the sadness and tragic elements the family faces alongside funny action. It is not easy to see Lambert sleeping with his mother and laugh about a funny scene a few minutes later. But, considering the topic, it makes sense that the audience is forced to feel uncomfortable when watching the movie.

For a transformation of this lengthy and very dense text into the dramatic structure a film needs, the plotline understandably had to be fitted. Perhaps for this reason, there are some crucial changes to the story. One of them is that the family is depicted as younger. A series of events the film focuses are the preparations for Lambert's twenty-first birthday. In the text, it is his fortieth birthday. But, both in the novel and in the movie, similar events happen on this day: Treppie hires a prostitute for Lambert to celebrate the occasion, a coloured girl called Cleo, whom he asks to wear a blonde wig and play the role of a good Christian Boer girl. Mol and Pop speculate about a potential relationship that might develop from this 'date', and Lambert even dreams about her fleeing north with them 'when the shit starts flying'. The movie's plot culminates in Lambert's birthday and the following day of the first free elections. Both dates are highly expected and feared — while the 'date' goes terribly



Lionel Newton (Treppie) & Paul Luckhoff (Pop)

Triomf, ©photo: Alex Flynn

wrong, the political event seems to bring rather peaceful and hopeful moments with it. Still, the ending of the Benade's story in the movie is changed into Lambert killing Treppie and Pop in his rage.

After Cleo got scared of Lambert during their 'date', she insults him and eventually runs away, leaving him alone in a seizure. When the returning family finds him, Treppie deliberately reveals to him their family secret, in front of the others. Treppie does so because he could not find peace for himself, he has always been strained and destructive because of their past and has passed this on to Lambert. As a consequence to the revelation, Lambert starts to hallucinate his family members as monstrous animals, leading to the deadly showdown.

This hallucination is depicted visually, as there is a different level of visions in the movie. They illustrate only Lambert's perspective, especially in moments of despair. In the novel, he rather appears to be obsessed with 'insides' in these moments. In the visions, he can see the insides of humans and things mashing into each other. This reflects his obsessions with interior of any kind: digging Sophiatown up, opening up all kinds of things, and trying to look inside of anything possible. It also fits into the chain of metaphorical motives that Van Niekerk implemented in the text: Lambert's obsession increases up to a seizure, which is when he can see everything and everyone melting into each

other. According to Nicolas Royle, this can be understood as an uncanny effect.

The uncanny has to do with the sense of a secret encounter: it is perhaps inseparable from an apprehension, however fleeting, of something that should have remained hidden but has come to light. But it is not 'out there', in any simple sense: as a crisis of the proper and natural, it disturbs any straightforward sense of what is inside and what is outside. The uncanny has to do with a strangeness of framing and borders, an experience of liminality. (Royle 2003:2)

In the movie, Lambert's visions show distorted faces and his family members with the heads of rats. Although he is scared of what he sees, the visualization lacks the depth and the uncanny notion of the visions described in the novel. Also, Pop's white dreams and his subsequent death according to them, and even the growling, threatening, hollow ground underneath are not depicted at all in the film's visual solution. Consequently, this visualization turns out to actually kill the ghosts that haunt in the text.



Obed Baloyi (Sonny), Vanessa Cooke (Mol) & Eduan Van Jaarsveldt (Lambert)

Triomf, ©photo: Alex Flynn

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Filmography:

Triomf, South Africa, 2010, dir. Michael Raeburn, Afrikaans and English.