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VIR LETTERKUNDE

New Afrikaans-language cinemas





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New Afrikaans-language cinemas / Nuwe Afrikaanstalige rolprenttrigtings

Chris Broodryk

Introduction

This issue of *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* offers four investigations of contemporary Afrikaans-language cinemas. The emphasis in this issue is on ‘the new’: new ways to interrogate Afrikaans-language films, or Afrikaans-language films that in a new way deal with themes or content that had not been explicitly addressed in Afrikaans-language cinema. Such is the variation of the themes and aesthetics of contemporary Afrikaans-language filmmaking that it is best to refer to Afrikaans-language *cinemas* in the plural. This plurality confirms the degrees of range and differences—in themes, aesthetics, intended audiences—that constitute contemporary Afrikaans-language filmmaking.

Keyan Tomaselli is particularly astute about the use of the plural ‘cinemas’ instead of the singular ‘cinema’, where cinemas “implies the study of form, political economy and the regional, national and local historical contexts a within which industries and their associated productions practices and aesthetic regimes are located” (“Africa, Film Theory and Globalization: Reflections on the First Ten Years of the ‘Journal of African Cinemas’” 18). Such an understanding of cinemas foregrounds the multiplicity of Africa and Africans “exuding thousands of identities, languages, ethnicities and societies exhibiting myriad values” (“Africa, Film Theory and Globalization” 18). The variation and difference that Tomaselli refers to above also apply to the context of the smaller, yet dynamic, Afrikaans-language film industry, which has increasingly shed a historically dominant conservatism (of politics, gender and sex) in favour of more progressive approaches to and representations of being and living in South Africa.

Some contemporary Afrikaans-language films are increasingly focused on the socio-political forces that shape life in South Africa, and that inform the identities of various Afrikaans-speaking individuals.


Consider this limited sample of Afrikaans-language films from 2016 to 2020: the crime drama *Noem my Skollie* (2016); the historical drama *Krotoa* (2017), with its critical lens on South Africans history and race; the social realism of *Tess* (2017); the queer dynamics of *Kanarie* (2018), *Die stropers* (2019) and *Moffie* (2019); the celebration of individual liberation and actualisation in *Wonderlus* (2018); the politically incisive science-fiction *Wesens* (2020) with its emphasis on emergent technology in place and mythmaking. These films often provide a reckoning with the past; give voice to marginalized communities (see also the socio-politically grounded thriller *Nommer 37*); promise aesthetic innovation; and display a considerable concern with gender, specifically masculinity. Taking the above titles into account, one might propose an Afrikaans-language queer cinema, for instance, as well as an Afrikaans cinema of critical historical retrospection.

A selective cursory glance at Afrikaans-language films from 1994 to 2022

In his report on the notion of an African film history, Michael Eckardt notes that “South Africa experienced all stages of the historic development of film and cinema almost simultaneously with Europe or the USA” (75). South African film history is no less impressive than those of other national cinemas. Martin Botha recounts how “[i]deology and capital came together to create a national cinema that would reflect South Africa during the Verwoerdian regime of the sixties” (4). The myriad challenges that politically liberal South African filmmakers faced have been well-documented and will not be recited here.

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Throughout seismic political change, Afrikaans-language films have persevered. *Paljas* (1997) was a major milestone, bringing Katinka Heyns back into the film scene five years after *Die storie van Klara Viljee* (1992) in a country that had publicly entered a new political era. Between Heyns's films, another Afrikaans-language film made headlines: the satirical comedy *Lipstiek dipstiek* (1994), written and directed by Willie Esterhuizen.

Esterhuizen would prove to be one of the most enduring of Afrikaans filmmakers. His ability to work in limited locations with a minor budget is a boon to producers (he is still behind the camera for Afrikaans television series for kykNet). Esterhuizen's films were often maligned for indulging juvenile sexual innuendo. The similarly sexually playful *Kaalgat tussen die daisies* (1997) directed by Koos Roets did not achieve the same box-office heights as Esterhuizen's film. Martin Botha takes *Lipstiek dipstiek* to task for its flamboyant stereotypes, while *Kaalgat tussen die daisies* in the end completely nullifies its gay representation when it is revealed that a major gay character was an undercover policeman pretending to be a drag queen during an official police investigation (Botha 5). In some of the most popular South African films from 1980s and 1990s, the comedies of Leon Schuster, audiences were subjected to numerous "homophobic and derogatory fag jokes and references" (5) and racial stereotypes.

After the release of *Paljas* in 1997, not a single Afrikaans feature film was released into commercial cinemas for a number of years (Steyn 67). Although it underperformed at the box-office and underwhelmed critics, it was Gustav Kuhn's drama *Ouma se slim kind* (2007) that signaled the return of the Afrikaans feature film and heralded a new era in Afrikaans cinema. This period drama identified the dominant 1940s Afrikaner culture as the cause of the failure of any promise of non-racialism in South Africa (Botha, *South African Cinema 1896–2010* 188). For most part, from 2007 until 2014 Afrikaans cinema was artistically and creatively limited. While Jans Rautenbach and Manie van Rensburg's politically dissident voices in Afrikaans filmmaking in the 1970s and 1980s were innovative and ambitious, this new era of Afrikaans cinema seemed primarily devoid of sophisticated and powerful political commentary. Mainstream Afrikaans cinema churned out a deluge of nostalgic musicals (*Liefeling* 2010; *Ek lief jou* 2011; *Platteland* 2011; *Pretville* 2012) that often featured popular singers in their cast, as well as more of Willie Esterhuizen's scatological comedies (*Poena is koning* 2008; *Vaatjie sien sy gat* 2008; *Stoute boudjies* 2010).

A number of high-profile literary adaptations updated for contemporary audiences such as *Wolwedans in die skemer* and *Ballade vir 'n enkeling* banked on the (nostalgic) popularity of its source materials on Afrikaans radio and television. However, this period also delivered the first of the company Bosbok Ses Films' feature films, *Roepman* (2011), adapted from the novel by Jan van Tonder; Katinka Heyns's latest return to cinemas, the Eugène Marais-drama *Die wonderwerker* (2011); the culturally subversive entertainment-industry spoof *100 Meter leeuloop* (2013); and, arguably most significantly, Oliver Hermanus's exploration of Afrikaans identity, queer desire and repression in *Skoonheid* (2011).

Before *Skoonheid*, a number of South African films had explored queer identities in South Africa. Melanie Chait's short film *Out in Africa* (1989) was the first South African film to openly deal with queer liberation struggles in South Africa (Botha, *South African Cinema* 242). Other notable queer-themed films of the 1980s included two 1988 releases, Cedric Sundstrom's horror *The Shadowed Mind* and Helena Nogueira's drama *Quest for Love*. However, "Afrikaans characters were always heterosexual, and although a film like *Forty Days* hinted at the 'perverse' homosexual subcultures of Hillbrow, it remained virtually unsaid" (Botha 4). After 1994, Jack Lewis and John Greyson's *Proteus* (2003) was a landmark queer film. Jesse Arsenaault lauds this South-African Canadian co-production for its multiple levels of queering, especially its queering of South African history and its archives, and of particular landscapes such as Robben Island. The film is about the real-life intimate, sexual relationship between a Khoi man, Claas Blank, and the white sailor Rijkhaart Jacobsz, whom he meets on Robben Island in 1735 (Lewis). Anachronistically navigating its period trappings, *Proteus* "places queerness within South Africa's historical narrative where it has been effaced and queers the landscape of South Africa's history by putting a same-sex interracial romance on a geography crucial to South Africa's post-apartheid national identity (and, I add here, a particularly masculine identity bound up with anti-apartheid heroism)" (Arsenaault 41). The film foregrounds how history, identity and language itself are, as Botha (*South African Cinema* 247) puts it, unstable sets of signifiers. For Arsenaault, *Proteus* shows how queer desire can constitute new subjectivities (56).

2015 was a turning point in Afrikaans feature filmmaking, with the release of Jans Rautenbach's elegiac *Abraham* and Brett Michael Innes' *Sink*, as well as Sara Blecher's adaptation of the non-fiction bestseller *Dis ek, Anna* (2015). In 2016, *Johnny is nie dood nie* was awarded top awards at the annual Silwerskermfees. The nostalgia and cheap laughs popular in previous years had been challenged, if certainly not wholly replaced, by a more aesthetically sophisticated and politically astute filmmaking that addressed identity in South Africa across a

number of dimensions including gender, race and class. In 2020, only two major Afrikaans feature films made it to commercial and established art-house cinema screens due to COVID-19 necessitated lockdowns and restrictions: the period drama *Toorbos*, based on the novel by Dalene Matthee, and the light romantic drama *Vergeet my nie*. The science fiction found footage film *Wesens* also saw a limited release in 2020.

The continuing COVID-pandemic and national lockdown periods meant that in 2021, only two Afrikaans feature films reached mainstream cinema screens: the critically maligned, commercially underperforming comedy dramas *Kaalgat Karel* and *Klein Karoo 2*. In 2022 the ecological drama *Gaia* and the drag-thriller *Stiekyt* would garner critical acclaim on the festival circuit. *Stiekyt* was at the centre of the controversial, bizarre decision by the National Film and Video Foundation (NFVF) to not enter a South African film into the Best International Feature Category for the 2023 Academy Awards (Vourlias).

Towards selected new Afrikaans-language films

In their articles, the contributors to this theme issue honour the primary task of theory, which, as Eugenie Brinkema reflects in her perceptive review of Brian Price's monograph *A Theory of Regret*, consists of "contemplation, speculation, to look at something (otherwise; *in a new light*") (185, emphasis added). For Nico Baumbach, the film theorist's work is overtly ideological: the figure of the film theorist analyses the work of ideology and also how such work on ideology enables or facilitates new cinematic ideas (163).

The articles in this issue are demonstrations of theory, description, and ideological critique. From diverse backgrounds and in distinct voices, a number of the authors in this issue are emerging scholars who may not be able to speak Afrikaans and watch Afrikaans films without subtitles, yet encounter resonances with the films' themes and ideological intricacies. These authors wrestle with the complexities of 'Afrikaner' and 'Afrikaans' past and present, demythologizing and challenging historically dominant ideas about gender, identity and nationalism.

In their critical engagements with selected Afrikaans-language feature films, the authors pay particular attention to the formal or stylistic qualities of the films in question, and describe these forms and creative expressions to the reader. As Timothy Corrigan notes, "films have innumerable qualities and ways of being rhetorically described" (473); Corrigan himself follows Lesley Stern's discussion of description where description is "always rhetorical" as all films are "live in the world" and "open out onto other films, worlds, histories, political landscapes" (qtd in Corrigan 473).

Thomas Nagel in his essay "Sexual Perversion" (1969) maintained that "the object of sexual attraction is a particular individual, who transcends the properties that make him attractive" (8). Nagel's description here applies to the film *Skoonheid*, where middle-aged Francois becomes infatuated and then obsessed with the younger man Christian, whom Francois sees as irredeemably free and thus irresistible. Emmanuel Wanyonyi considers this film from a slow cinema lens, offering a different way to contemplate the film's representation of queerness and repression. Wanyonyi correctly notes that *Skoonheid* has already enjoyed much scholarly attention in its depiction of repressed queer desire.

Wanyonyi's reading of the film as slow cinema, and of locating its protagonist Francois at the centre of the film's deliberate character and plot indeterminacy, opens up a new way in which to think about and engage with this landmark film. Structured as a thriller indebted to Alfred Hitchcock, *Skoonheid*'s intrigue unfolds slowly as its insular protagonist experiences a crisis of existence in his yearning to be free from a particular inheritance of repression and conservatism. For Wanyonyi, the queer dynamics that drive the film and its protagonist are however only part of *Skoonheid*'s vitality. Wanyonyi argues that *Skoonheid* invites the viewer's active contemplation of the film's thematic emphasis on alienation, incommunicability and the existential quandary.

In addition to the queer currents of *Skoonheid*, a focus on contemporary Afrikaner masculinity and its discontents are at the centre of two contributions to this issue: Gibson Ncube's examination of queerness, libidinality and religion in the feature film *Kanarie* and the documentary film *Skeef*, and Danel Boshoff and Annemi Conradie's exploration of various forms and performances of masculinity in the film *Die stropers*. As these articles are explorations of identity expressions and negotiation, these queer-centered articles flank Danielle Britz and Chris Broodryk's investigation of post-heroism in *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux* and *Verraaiers*.

Kanarie sets its story of a young white gay Afrikaans man, Johan Niemand, who joins the South African Defence Force (SADF), in small-town Afrikaner religious conservatism. (The surname "Niemand" directly translates as "nobody", which emphasizes the fluidity of this character's becoming and the unfixedness of his identity.) Gibson Ncube's exploration of queer identities in *Kanarie* and *Skeef* highlight the tensions of being queer

and religious in a context where homosexuality and the Afrikaans churches remains an unresolved subject. Ncube maintains that these two films “gesture, in generative ways, to how queerness and Christianity can be rendered compatible within Afrikaans-speaking societies of South Africa”. In his sensitive engagement with both films, Ncube finds the encouraging presence of queer agency, and locates the libidinal as crucial in “the transgression of heteronormative Christian norms”.

The small-town conservatism in *Kanarie* is echoed in the covert family tensions in *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux* and the rural, farm-based repression in *Die stropers*. In the film *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux*, the farm is where long-hidden family secrets are finally revealed, and a hero is demythologized when his failures are finally exposed. Julie Reid’s investigation into contemporary (counter) mythologies of race identifies the figure of South African rugby legend Francois Pienaar as a “good white” in Clint Eastwood’s film *Invictus* (2010). That Pienaar is a “good white” is beyond a doubt as he “accepts the new dispensation, shows sympathy for the past suffering of Mandela and attempts to quell the racial animosity shown by his white team-mates” (56–7). As Jesse Arsenault points out, “figures like Mandela embody a sort of politically aseptic and supremely benevolent form of masculinity in part because of their heteronormativity” (40). (It helps that in addition to this sanitised depiction of Mandela, Eastwood peppers the film with feel-good soundbites about a ‘new’ South Africa and shared humanity.) Even in this American-made film, viewers encounter the Afrikaans white man in heroic form; this is likely due as much to the American propensity for emotionally uplifting sport films about heroes defeating the odds as it does with a broader depiction of white heroism in contexts of profound racial inequality such as South Africa.

It is this particular representational strategy that Danielle Britz and Chris Broodryk address in the Bosbok Ses film *Stuur Groete aan Mannetjies Roux*, bringing to the film the conceptual framework of post-heroism developed by Thomas Elsaesser. The authors demonstrate that this film stands in contrast to many other South African films centred on a noble hero figure often seen serving national(ist) interests, by instead presenting a post-hero whose personal and public failures serve as an entry point for greater political exploration. This type of exploration is also central to the thematic dynamics of the other Bosbok Ses film *Verraaiers*, which takes place during the South African War. Here, too, key characters emerge as post-heroic figures who embody and invite multiple perspectives about major national events and themes such as the war and the notion of treason.

The queer-centred film *Die stropers* has a somber aesthetic that often evokes a claustrophobia similar to Jason Xenopoulos’s *Promised Land* (2002). Similar to *Promised Land*, *Die stropers* also sets its narrative events on a farm in South Africa. Adriaan Steyn observes that the farm remains, for a number of Afrikaners, “the bastion of a unique way of life” (68). In certain Afrikaans-language feature films such as the thriller *Die laaste tango* (2013) and the romantic comedies *Semi-soet* (2012) and *Vrou soek boer* (2014), the farm is the site of heteronormative romantic activity or nostalgia (68–70). Steyn finds that these (and many other) films construct the farm and countryside as “authentic and wholesome” (70), in contrast to the comparative moral devaluation of urban spaces (also see Keyan Tomaselli’s discussion of the rural-based *Eden* film, its nostalgic sheen and its character types in *Encountering Modernity*, 143–4).

This dichotomy in Afrikaans-language films is an established representational strategy that found an invigorated resonance with some contemporary South African audiences. However, the films discussed on the following pages explicitly or implicitly challenge the idea of the farm, countryside or rural space as somehow more “authentic and wholesome” than the city. In *Skoonheid*, the mundanity of Bloemfontein and surrounds cannot completely repress queerness (later in the film, Cape Town is briefly shown to embrace queer identities). In *Kanarie*, Johan Niemand traverses small-town conservatism and military hypermasculinities towards queer self-actualisation. In *Die stropers*, the cultural purity and disciplined labour leave a space for overt and covert subversion, as queer masculinities threaten to destabilise traditionally dominant forms of masculinity.

Emphasising the site of the farm and the socio-cultural conservatism of rural Afrikaans communities, Danel Boshoff and Annemi Conradie critically discuss the ways in which agents in such conservative contexts can offer productive (if latent) resistance to the idealized heteronormative masculinity traditionally associated with the Afrikaner. In *Die stropers*, adoptive brothers Janno and Pieter embody different responses to Afrikaner conservatism’s insistence on heteronormativity. As Boshoff and Conradie put it in their article, “their [Janno’s and Pieter’s] navigation of hegemony in this white, Afrikaner community through resistance and consent, might point to a claiming of space for queer identities and the continued transmutation of hegemonic masculinity”.

Conclusion

The arguments put forward in this theme issue open up a range of further research possibilities related to identity expression, representation and negotiation in contemporary Afrikaans-language cinemas. Beyond such a critical textual engagement with Afrikaans cinemas, there is also the political economies of Afrikaans filmmaking that could benefit from renewed scholarly interest. In addition, the films discussed in this issue are all traditional cinema releases; however, across television and digital media, there are new Afrikaans-language cinemas that arose in tandem with specific technologies as well as major events such the lockdown periods during the national response to the COVID-19 global pandemic—for example, kykNet's *storiefilms* (story films).

I would like to thank Jacomien van Niekerk for her sustained support and patience in guiding this issue to completion. I could not have asked for a more committed and clear-sighted colleague. I extend my gratitude to the former Dean of Humanities at the University of Pretoria, Vasu Reddy, for suggesting this themed issue to me and the editor. Finally, I would like to thank the contributors to this issue for their collectively lucid and critically informed engagement with what is considered 'new' in selected films in Afrikaans-language cinemas. The feedback we received from peer reviewers was without exception generous and acute.

Finally, I also give thanks to those colleagues who urgently wanted to contribute to this themed issue, but whose developing thought and scholarship were too severely impeded by post-COVID health and wellbeing challenges, as well as by the neoliberal nature of the tertiary higher education sector, to do so.

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Inleiding

Hierdie temanommer van *Tydskrif vir Letterkunde* bestaan uit vier ondersoeke na kontemporêre Afrikaanstalige rolprentgtinge (in Engels *cinemas* genoem). Die klem in hierdie uitgawe is op 'die nuwe': nuwe maniere om Afrikaanstalige rolprente te ondersoek, of te kyk na dié wat op 'n nuwe manier temas of inhoud hanteer wat nog nie eksplisiet in Afrikaanstalige rolprente aangepak is nie. Die temas en estetika van kontemporêre films in Afrikaans is so gevarieerd dat dit die beste is om na Afrikaanstalige rolprentgtinge in die meervoud te verwys. Hierdie pluraliteit bevestig die grade van omvang en verskille wat betref die temas, estetika en beoogde gehore van kontemporêre Afrikaanstalige rolprentproduksie.

Keyan Tomaselli is besonder skerpsinnig in sy gebruik van die meervoud *cinemas* in plaas van die enkelvoud *cinema*, waar *cinemas* "die studie impliseer van vorm, politieke ekonomie en die streeks-, nasionale en plaaslike historiese kontekste waarbinne industrieë en hul gepaardgaande produksiepraktyke en estetiese regimes hul bevind" ("Africa, Film Theory and Globalization: Reflections on the First Ten Years of the 'Journal of African Cinemas'" 18).¹ Sodanige begrip van *cinemas* belig die veelheid van Afrika en Afrikane "wat duisende identiteite, tale, etnisierte en samelewings uitstraal wat talle waardes vertoon" ("Africa, Film Theory and Globalization" 18). Die verskeidenheid en verskil waarna Tomaselli hierbo verwys, is ook van toepassing op die konteks van die kleiner, maar tog dinamiese, Afrikaanstalige filmbedryf, wat toenemend 'n histories dominante konserwatisme (van die politiek, gender en geslag) afskud ten gunste van meer progressiewe benaderings tot en voorstellings van bestaan en leef in Suid-Afrika.

Sommige hedendaagse Afrikaanstalige rolprente fokus toenemend op die sosio-politieke kragte wat vorm gee aan die lewe in Suid-Afrika, en wat die identiteit van verskeie Afrikaanssprekende individue rig.

Wat is dan nuut in die Afrikaanstalige rolprentwese? Dit is in hierdie opsig moontlik om te verwys na onder meer die volgende voorbeelde van Afrikaanstalige films van 2016 tot 2020: die misdaaddrama *Noem my Skollie* (2016); die historiese drama *Krotoa* (2017), met sy kritiese lens op Suid-Afrikaanse geskiedenis en op ras; die sosiale realisme van *Tess* (2017); die queer-dinamika van *Kanarie* (2018), *Die stropers* (2019) en *Moffie* (2019); die viering van individuele bevryding en aktualisering in *Wonderlus* (2018); die politieke insiggewende wetenskapsfiksie *Wesens* (2020) met sy klem op ontluikende tegnologie in plek en mitevorming. Hierdie films behels dikwels 'n afrekening met die verlede; gee 'n stem aan gemarginaliseerde gemeenskappe (let ook op die sosiopolitiese gegronde riller *Nommer 37*); belowe estetiese vernuwing; en gaan krities om met geslag, spesifiek manlikheid. Met inagneming van bogenoemde titels, kan 'n mens byvoorbeeld 'n queer Afrikaanstalige rolprentgting voorstel, asook een wat krities omgaan met die verlede.

'n Selektiewe, oorsigtelike blik op Afrikaanstalige rolprente van 1994 tot 2022

In sy verslag oor die idee van 'n Afrika-filmgeskiedenis, merk Michael Eckardt op dat “Suid-Afrika alle fases van die historiese ontwikkeling van film en filmtradisies byna gelyktydig met Europa of die VSA meegemaak het” (75). Die Suid-Afrikaanse filmgeskiedenis is nie minder indrukwekkend as dié van ander nasionale filmgeskiedenis nie. Martin Botha vertel hoe “[i]deologie en kapitaal bymekaargekom het om 'n nasionale filmtradisie te skep wat Suid-Afrika tydens die Verwoerdiaanse regime van die sestigerjare sou weerspieël” (4). Die talle uitdagings wat politieke liberale Suid-Afrikaanse filmmakers in die gesig gestaar het, is reeds goed gedokumenteer en sal nie hier bespreek word nie.

Die Afrikaanse rolprentbedryf het seismiese veranderinge oorleef. *Paljas* (1997) was 'n belangrike mylpaal, wat Katinka Heyns vyf jaar ná *Die storie van Klara Viljee* (1992) teruggebring het na die filmwêreld in 'n land wat 'n nuwe politieke era betree het. Tussen hierdie twee films trek 'n ander Afrikaanstalige film die aandag: die satiriese komedie *Lipstiek dipstiek* (1994), uit die pen van Willie Esterhuizen wat ook die regie behartig het. Esterhuizen sou een van die mees blywende filmmakers in Afrikaans word. Sy vermoë om in beperkte ruimtes en met 'n skamele begroting te werk, is 'n seën vir vervaardigers (hy is steeds agter die kamera vir Afrikaanstalige televisiereekse op kykNET). Esterhuizen se films is dikwels aangevat vir die uitbeelding van kinderagtige seksuele innuendo daarin. *Kaalgat tussen die daisies* (1997) onder regie van Koos Roets wat op soortgelyke speelse wyse seksuele temas aangeroei het, het nie dieselfde loketsukses as Esterhuizen se film behaal nie. Martin Botha kritiseer *Lipstiek dipstiek* vir die gebruik van flambojante stereotipes, terwyl *Kaalgat tussen die daisies* uiteindelik sy gay-voorstelling verydel wanneer onthul word dat 'n prominente gay karakter 'n geheime polisieman is wat tydens 'n amptelike polisie-onderzoek voorgee dat hy 'n fopdosser is (Botha 5). In sommige van die gewildste Suid-Afrikaanse films uit die 1980's en 1990's is gehore onderwerp aan die komedies van Leon Schuster met hul talle “homofobiese en neerhalende grappies en verwysings na *fags*” (5) en rasse-stereotipes.

Ná die vrystelling van *Paljas* in 1997 is nie 'n enkele Afrikaanstalige speelfilm vir 'n aantal jare in kommersiële teaters vrygestel nie (Steyn 67). Alhoewel dit onderpresteer het by die kaartjieskantoor en resensente nie juis daardeur beïndruk was nie, was dit Gustav Kuhn se drama *Ouma se slim kind* (2007) wat gedui het op 'n terugkeer van die Afrikaanse speelfilm en het dit 'n nuwe era in die Afrikaanse rolprentbedryf ingelui. Hierdie periodedrama het die dominante Afrikanerkultuur van die 1940's uitgesonder as die oorsaak van die mislukking van enige belofte van nie-rassigheid in Suid-Afrika (Botha, *South African Cinema 1896–2010* 188). Van 2007 tot 2014 was daar meestal 'n tekort aan kreatiewe en kunstige visie in die Afrikaanse rolprentwese. Jans Rautenbach en Manie van Rensburg se politieke andersdenkende stemme was innoverend en ambisieus in Afrikaanse rolprentvervaardiging in die 1970's en 1980's, maar in die era wat daarop volg, was die Afrikaanstalige filmbedryf hoofsaaklik sonder gesofistikeerde en kragtige politieke kommentaar. In die hoofstroom van die bedryf het 'n oorvloed nostalgiese musiekblyspele die silwerdoek gehaal (*Liefeling* 2010; *Ek lief jou* 2011; *Platteland* 2011; *Pretville* 2012) wat dikwels gewilde sangers in hul rolverdeling ingesluit het, sowel as meer van Willie Esterhuizen se skatologiese komedies (*Poena is koning* 2008; *Vaatjie sien sy gat* 2008; *Stoute boudjies* 2010).

'n Aantal hoëprofiel literêre verwerkings soos *Wolwedans in die skemer* en *Ballade vir 'n enkling* wat bygewerk is vir hedendaagse gehore het staatgemaak op die (nostalgiese) gewildheid van die bronmateriaal op Afrikaanse radio en televisie. Hierdie periode het egter ook die volgende rolprente opgelewer: *Roepman* (2011), aangepas uit die roman deur Jan van Tonder; Katinka Heyns se jongste film, die Eugène Marais-drama *Die wonderwerker* (2011); die kultureel ondermynende vermaakbedryf-*spoof* *100 Meter leculoop* (2013); en waarskynlik die belangrikste, Oliver Hermanus se verkenning van Afrikaneridentiteit, queerverlange en onderdrukking in *Skoonheid* (2011).

Voor *Skoonheid* het 'n aantal Suid-Afrikaanse films reeds queeridentiteite in Suid-Afrika ondersoek. Melanie Chait se kortfilm *Out in Africa* (1989) was die eerste Suid-Afrikaanse film wat openlik die stryd om queerbevryding aangepak het (Botha, *South African Cinema* 242). Ander films uit die tagtigerjare met dié tema is die riller *The Shadowed Mind* van Cedric Sundstrom en Helena Nogueira se drama *Quest for Love*, albei uit 1988. Volgens Botha (4) was Afrikaanse karakters egter altyd heteroseksueel, en hoewel 'n film soos *Forty Days* in die rigting van die 'perverse' homoseksuele subkulture van Hillbrow geskimp het, is dit so te sê verswyg. Ná 1994 was Jack Lewis en John Greyson se *Proteus* (2003) 'n belangrike queerfilm. Jesse Arsenaault loof hierdie Suid-Afrikaans-Kanadese koproduksie vir sy veelvuldige vlakke van queering, veral die queering van die Suid-Afrikaanse geskiedenis en sy argiewe, en veral landskappe soos Robbeneiland. Die film handel oor die werklike intieme, seksuele verhouding tussen 'n Khoi-man, Claas Blank, en die wit matroos Rijkhaart Jacobsz, wat hy in 1735 op Robbeneiland ontmoet (Lewis). *Proteus* verken op anachronistiese wyse die gegewe van die periode en “plaas queerheid binne

Suid-Afrika se historiese narratief waar dit verwerp is en verkeer die landskap van Suid-Afrika se geskiedenis deur 'n romanse tussen twee mense van dieselfde geslag en verskillende kulture en rasse in 'n ruimte te plaas wat deurslaggewend is vir Suid-Afrika se nasionale identiteit ná apartheid (en hier voeg ek by, 'n besonder manlike identiteit vervleg met anti-apartheidsheldisme)" (Arsenault 41). Die film belig hoe geskiedenis, identiteit en taal self, soos Botha (*South African Cinema* 247) dit stel, "onstabiele betekenisstelle" is. Volgens Arsenault wys *Proteus* juis hoe queerverlange nuwe subjektiwiteite kan vorm (56).

2015 was 'n keerpunt in die vervaardiging van die Afrikaanse speelfilm met die vrystelling van Jans Rautenbach se elegiese *Abraham* en Brett Michael Innes se *Sink*, sowel as Sara Blecher se verwerking van die niefiksie-topverkoper *Dis ek, Anna* (2015). In 2016 word *Johnny is nie dood nie* bekroon met toekennings by die jaarlikse Silwerskermfees. Die nostalgie en goedkoop humor wat in vorige jare oorheers het, is uitgedaag, indien nie selfs heeltemal vervang nie deur 'n meer esteties-ge sofistikeerde en polities skerp rolprentkuns wat verskeie aspekte van Suid-Afrikaanse identiteit, waaronder gender, ras en klas, verken. Weens die inperkingsmaatreëls wat COVID-19 meegebring het, is slegs twee belangrike Afrikaanse speelfilms in 2020 uitgereik, naamlik die periodedrama *Toorbos*, gebaseer op die roman deur Dalene Matthee, en die ligte romantiese drama *Vergeet my nie*. Die wetenskapsfiksie film *Wesens* het in 2020 'n beperkte vrystelling beleef.

Die voortslepende COVID-pandemie het tot gevolg gehad dat slegs twee Afrikaanstalige films in 2021 hoofstroomrolprentteaters bereik het: die komediedramas *Kaalgat Karel* en *Klein Karoo 2* het kommersieel onderpresteer en erg onder kritiek deurgeloo. In 2022 is die ekologiese drama *Gaia* en die fopdosriller *Stiekyt* gunstig by rolprentfeeste ontvang. *Stiekyt* was sentraal in die omstrede, bizarre besluit deur die National Film and Video Foundation (NFVF) om nie 'n Suid-Afrikaanse film in te skryf vir die Best International Feature Category vir die 2023 Academy Awards nie (Vourlias).

Op weg na geselekteerde nuwe Afrikaanstalige rolprente

Die bydraers tot hierdie temanommer huldig die primêre taak van teorie. Eugenie Brinkema se waarneming in haar oorsig van Brian Price se monografie *A Theory of Regret* is dat teorie bestaan uit "nadenke, spekulatie, om na iets te kyk (anders; in 'n nuwe lig)" (185, beklemtoning bygevoeg). Vir Nico Baumbach is die werk van die filmteoretikus openlik ideologies: die filmteoretikus ontleed die werk van ideologie en ook hoe sulke werk oor ideologie nuwe filmiese idees moontlik maak of fasiliteer (163).

Die artikels in hierdie uitgawe is demonstrasies van teorie, beskrywing en ideologiese kritiek. Die bydraers tot hierdie uitgawe is opkomende kundiges wat uit uiteenlopende agtergronde en in verskillende stemme skryf. Sommige van hulle kan moontlik nie Afrikaans kan praat of Afrikaanse films sonder onderskrifte kan kyk nie, maar tog vind hulle aanklank by die films se temas en ideologiese verwickeldhede. Hierdie skrywers worstel met die kompleksiteite van 'Afrikaners' en 'Afrikaans' van die verlede en hede, terwyl hulle die histories-dominante idees oor gender, identiteit en nasionalisme demitologiseer en uitdaag.

In hul kritiese betrokkenheid by geselekteerde Afrikaanstalige speelfilms gee die skrywers veral aandag aan die formele of stilistiese kwaliteite van die betrokke films, en beskryf hierdie vorme en kreatiewe uitdrukkings aan die leser. Soos Timothy Corrigan opmerk, "beskik films oor 'n magdom kwaliteite en maniere om retories beskryf te word" (473); Corrigan gebruik Lesley Stern se formulering wat beskrywing beskou as altyd retories aangesien alle films "lewendig in die wêreld is" en "oopmaak na ander films, wêreld, historiese, politieke landskappe" (aangehaal in Corrigan 473).

In sy opstel "Sexual Perversion" van 1969 het Thomas Nagel aangevoer dat "die voorwerp van seksuele aantrekkingskrag 'n spesifieke individu is, wat die eienskappe oortref wat hom aantreklik maak" (8). Nagel se beskrywing is hier van toepassing op die film *Skoonheid*, waarin die middeljarige Francois verlief raak op en dan geobsedeer raak met die jonger man Christian, vir wie Francois as onherroeplik vry en dus onweerstaanbaar beskou. Emmanuel Wanyonyi analiseer hierdie film vanuit die invalshoek van "slow cinema" en bied 'n ander manier om na te dink oor die film se voorstelling van queerheid en onderdrukking. Wanyonyi merk tereg op dat *Skoonheid* reeds baie intellektuele aandag geniet het in die uitbeelding van onderdrukte queerverlange.

Wanyonyi se interpretasie van die film as "slow cinema" en van die plasing van die protagonis Francois in die kern van die opsetlike onbepaaldheid van die karakter en plot van die film, ontsluit 'n nuwe manier om na te dink oor en te reageer op hierdie rigtinggewende film. Gestruktureer soos 'n riller en beïnvloed deur Alfred Hitchcock, ontvou *Skoonheid* se intrige stadig namate die bekrompe protagonis 'n bestaanskrisis ervaar in sy verlange om vry te wees van 'n bepaalde erfenis van onderdrukking en konserwatisme. Vir Wanyonyi is dit die queerdinamiek wat

stukrag aan die film en sy protagonis gee, egter slegs deel van *Skoonheid* se lewenskragtigheid. Wanyonyi voer aan dat *Skoonheid* die kyker uitnooi om op aktiewe wyse na te dink oor die film se tematiese klem op vervreemding, onmeedeelbaarheid en die eksistensiële dilemma.

Benewens Wanyonyi se analise van die queeronderstrominge in *Skoonheid* is die fokus op kontemporêre Afrikaner manlikheid en die ontevredenheid daarmee die middelpunt van twee bydraes in hierdie uitgawe: Gibson Ncube se ondersoek na queerheid, libidinaliteit en godsdiens in die speelfilm *Kanarie* en die dokumentêre film *Skeef*, en Danel Boshoff en Annemi Conradie se ondersoek na verskillende vorme en voorstellings van manlikheid in die film *Die stropers*. As verkennings van identiteitsuitdrukking en -onderhandeling, verskyn hierdie queersentriese artikels weerskante van Danielle Britz en Chris Broodryk's se ondersoek na post-heroïsme in *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux* en *Verraaiers*.

Kanarie se verhaal van 'n jong wit gay Afrikaanse man, Johan Niemand, wat by die Suid-Afrikaanse Weermag aansluit, speel af op 'n klein dorpie af wat gekenmerk word deur die godsdienstige konserwatisme van die Afrikaner. (Die gebruik van die van "Niemand" beklemtoon die vloeibaarheid van hierdie karakter en die onvastheid van sy identiteit.) Gibson Ncube se ondersoek na queeridentiteite in *Kanarie* en *Skeef* beklemtoon die spanning wat daarmee gepaard gaan om queer en godsdienstig te wees in 'n konteks waar homoseksualiteit en die Afrikanerkerke 'n onopgeloste vraagstuk bly. Ncube voer aan dat hierdie twee films "op generatiewe maniere daarop dui dat queerheid en Christendom versoenbaar is binne Afrikaanssprekende samelewings van Suid-Afrika". In sy sensitiewe benadering tot albei films vind Ncube die bemoedigende teenwoordigheid van queer-agensie en identifiseer hy die libidinale as deurslaggewend in "die transgressie van heteronormatiewe Christelike norme".

Die kleindorpse konservatisme in *Kanarie* herhaal in die verborge familiespanningspunte in *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux* en die landelike, plaasgebaseerde verdrukking in *Die stropers*.

In die film *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux* is die plaas die plek waar die lang verborge gesinsgeheime uiteindelik onthul word, en 'n held ontmitologiseer word wanneer sy mislukkings uiteindelik ontbloom word. Julie Reid se ondersoek na kontemporêre (teen-)mitologieë van ras identifiseer die figuur van die Suid-Afrikaanse rugbylegende Francois Pienaar as 'n "goeie witte" in Clint Eastwood se film *Invictus* (2010). Dat Pienaar 'n "goeie witte" is, word nie betwyfel nie aangesien hy "die nuwe bedeling aanvaar, simpatie toon vir die lyding van Mandela in die verlede en pogings aanwend om die rasse-animositeit van sy wit spanmaats te onderdruk" (56-7). Soos Jesse Arsenaault uitwys, vergestalt "figure soos Mandela 'n soort politieke-aseptiese en uiters welwillende vorm van manlikheid deels vanweë hul heteronormatiewiteit" (40). (Hierdie gesuiwerde uitbeelding van Mandela gaan in die film gepaard met goedvoel klankgrepe oor 'n 'nuwe' Suid-Afrika en gedeelde medemenslikheid.) Selfs in hierdie Amerikaanse-vervaardigde film tref kykers die Afrikaanse witman in heldhaftige vorm aan; dit is waarskynlik net soveel toe te skryf aan die Amerikaanse geneigdheid tot emosioneel-opheffende sportfilms oor helde wat teëspoed trotseer as wat dit te make het met 'n breër uitbeelding van wit heroïsme in kontekste van diepgaande rasse-ongelykheid soos dié in Suid-Afrika.

Dit is hierdie spesifieke representatiewe strategie wat Danielle Britz en Chris Broodryk in *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux* ontleed aan die hand van die konseptuele raamwerk van post-heroïsme wat deur Thomas Elsaesser ontwikkel is. Die skrywers demonstreer dat hierdie film in teenstelling staan met baie ander Suid-Afrikaanse films wat sentreer om 'n edel heldefiguur wat dikwels gesien word dat hulle nasionale (nasionalistiese) belange dien, deur eerder 'n post-held, waarvan die persoonlike en openbare mislukkings dien as 'n toegangspunt vir groter politieke verkenning uit te beeld. Hierdie soort verkenning is ook sentraal tot die tematiese dinamika van die film *Verraaiers*, wat tydens die Suid-Afrikaanse Oorlog afspeel. Ook hier verskyn sleutelkarakters as post-herotiese figure wat verskeie perspektiewe oor belangrike nasionale gebeure en temas soos die oorlog en die idee van hoogverraad beliggaam en uitnooi.

Die queersentriese *Die stropers* het 'n somber estetika wat dikwels kloustrofobie ontlok, soortgelyk aan Jason Xenopoulou se *Promised land* (2002). Net soos *Promised land* (2002) speel gebeure in *Die stropers* ook af op 'n plaas in Suid-Afrika. Adriaan Steyn merk op dat die plaas vir 'n aantal Afrikaners "die bastion van 'n unieke lewenswyse bly" (68). In sekere Afrikaanstalige speelfilms soos die riller *Die laaste tango* (2013) en die romantiese komedies *Semi-soet* (2012) en *Vrou soek boer* (2014), is die plaas 'n ruimte gekenmerk deur heteronormatiewe romantiese aktiwiteit of nostalgie (68-70). Steyn bevind dat hierdie (en baie ander) rolprente die plaas en platteland as "outentiek en heilsaam" (70) uitbeeld, in teenstelling met die vergelykbare ontaarding van stedelike ruimtes (sien ook die

bespreking van Keyan Tomaselli oor die landelike Eden-film, sy nostalgiese glans en die karaktertipies daarvan in *Encountering Modernity: Twentieth Century South African Cinemas* 143–4).

Hierdie digotomie in Afrikaanstalige films is 'n gevestigde representatiewe strategie wat op verkwikkende wyse aanklank gevind het by sommige hedendaagse Suid-Afrikaanse gehore. Die films wat op die volgende bladsye bespreek word, bevraagteken op eksplisiete of implisiete wyse egter die idee dat die plaas, platteland of landelike ruimte om die een of ander rede as meer “outentiek en heilsaam” as die stad beskou word. In *Skoonheid*, kan die alledaagsheid van Bloemfontein en omgewing nie heeltemal die queerheid bedwing nie (later in die film word Kaapstad vlugtig uitgebeeld as 'n stad waar queeridentiteite wel aanvaar word). In *Kanarie* navigeer Johan Niemand kleindorpse konservatisme en militêre hipermanlikheid onderweg na queer selfaktualisering. In *Die stropers* laat die kulturele suiwerheid en gedissiplineerde arbeid 'n ruimte vir owerste en koverste subversie, deurdat queermanlikheid dreig om tradisioneel dominante vorme van manlikheid te destabiliseer.

Met die klem op die ruimte van die plaas en die sosio-kulturele konserwatisme van landelike Afrikanergemeenskappe, bespreek Danel Boshoff en Annemi Conradie die maniere waarop agente in sulke konserwatiewe kontekste produktiewe (doglatente) weerstand kan bied teen die geïdealiseerde heteronormatiewe manlikheid wat tradisioneel met die Afrikaner geassosieer word. In *Die stropers* vergestalt die aangenome broers Janno en Pieter verskillende reaksies op Afrikanerkonserwatisme se aandrang op heteronormatiewe. Soos Boshoff en Conradie dit in hul artikel stel, “[Janno en Pieter se] navigasie van hegemonie in hierdie wit, Afrikanergemeenskap deur weerstand en akkoord, kan dui op 'n aandrang op ruimte vir queeridentiteite en die voortgesette transmutasie van hegemoniese manlikheid”.

Slot

Die argumente wat in hierdie temanommer voorgehou word, maak verskeie navorsingsmoontlikede oop oor identiteitsuitdrukking, -representasie en -onderhandeling in kontemporêre Afrikaanstalige rolprenttrigtings. Benewens die kritiese tekstuele omgang met hierdie nuwe rolprenttrigtings, kan die politieke ekonomie van Afrikaanse filmvervaardiging baat by hernude navorsingsbelangstelling. Verder is al die films wat in hierdie temanommer bespreek word teaterverystellings; daar is egter op televisie en in digitale media nuwe vergestaltungs van Afrikaanstalige rolprenttrigtings wat saam met nuwe tegnologieë ontwikkel het en selfs gepaardgegaan het met grootskaalse gebeurtenisse soos die inperkingsperiodes gedurende die nasionale reaksie op die COVID-19 globale pandemie (hier is kykNet se *storiefilms* 'n goeie voorbeeld).

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Ten slotte bedank ek ook die kollegas wat met mag en mening tot hierdie temanommer wou bydra, maar wie se ontluikende denke en kennis te erg belemmer was om dit te doen weens post-COVID gesondheids- en welstandsprobleme, asook deur die neoliberale aard van die tersiêre hoërondwyssektor.

Eindnote

1. Alle vertalings uit Engels is my eie.

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Slow beauty: Refocusing Oliver Hermanus's *Scoonheid* through a slow cinema lens

Emmanuel Wanyonyi

Slow beauty: Refocusing Oliver Hermanus's *Scoonheid* through a slow cinema lens

Oliver Hermanus's *Scoonheid* is often read as a representation of South African queer realities and political progressiveness both during and since the dissolution of apartheid. Consequently, Hermanus's contribution to the aesthetic of slowness in *Scoonheid* has gone largely unnoticed in the broader context of slow cinema. In this article, I examine how Hermanus, through the slow cinema conventions, urges the viewer to contemplate issues of crucial importance to human behaviour, thereby putting *Scoonheid*'s meditative qualities on display. Drawing on Ira Jaffe's concept of expressive minimalism, Emre Çağlayan's poetics of slow cinema, and Thomas Elsaesser's observations on the virtues and demands of slow cinema, I analyse the narrative and aesthetic strategies deployed in *Scoonheid* within the purview of slow cinema and beyond a representation of queer sexuality. This analysis reveals that *Scoonheid* represents a mode of narrative-formal expressiveness distinct from, yet in dialogue with, slow cinema in its emphasis on contemplation. Principally, Hermanus finds a way to testify to some of the most urgent concerns in contemporary society through the film's contemplative approach, which draws the viewer's attention to the mystery and ambiguity of human experience. *Scoonheid*'s contemplative approach is informed by the film's processes and experiences of alienation, incommunicability, and existentialism. **Keywords:** *Scoonheid*, slow cinema, contemplation, alienation, narrative, slow image.

Introduction


Oliver Hermanus's film, *Scoonheid* (Beauty) from 2011, is a representation of race ideologies, conservatism, and enduring queer recesses of contemporary South Africa. *Scoonheid* is critically acclaimed for exposing the anguish that plagues the ego of contemporary middle-aged Afrikaner men in South Africa (De Waal). This anguish is rooted in a version of Afrikaner masculinity that represses desire for intimacy and "the othering of non-heteronormative self-expression in post-apartheid South Africa" (Grant 32). The film won the Queer Palme d'Or at the Cannes Film Festival (2011) and the Best South African Feature Film at Durban International Film Festival (2011).

Scoonheid chronicles the journey of François van Heerden (Deon Lotz), a married, closeted, and materially successful Afrikaans businessman in his mid-forties, facing an existential crisis. He finds himself captivated by the beauty of the much younger Christian Roodt (Charlie Keegan). Unable to sustain the surface control of his personal life, François's infatuation with Christian culminates in violence.

Previously published studies on *Scoonheid* have focused on queerness and racial dynamics and have not addressed its slow cinema capacities. In "The Boundaries of Desire and Intimacy in Post-apartheid South African Queer Film: Oliver Hermanus's *Scoonheid*", Grant Andrews specifically demonstrates how *Scoonheid* gives an important voice to suppressed sexualities and highlights some of the tensions that "underlie relations in post-apartheid South African society" (30). Chantelle Gray's paper, "The Spectre-image: A Hauntology of *Scoonheid* and *Kanarie*", looks beyond *Scoonheid*'s representation of Afrikaner queer masculinity to determine whether the film is as politically progressive as it appears to be, since the dissolution of apartheid (1). Gray concludes that *Scoonheid*, specifically, raises issues concerning the geographical, racial, and gender aspects of the apartheid landscape, significantly disrupting the echo chambers of Afrikaner assemblages in the process. Beyond the abovementioned studies, I argue that it is possible to situate the narrative-formal expressiveness of *Scoonheid*—with all its attendant politics—in slow cinema.

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Acknowledging *Skoonheid*'s depiction of its protagonist's insulated character interiority, Hermanus's slow cinema film constructs a narrative of contemplation that aims to arouse an intense and reflective level of engagement in the viewer. He urges the viewer to contemplate themes of beauty and obsession through the complexity of François's character and his lustful pursuit of Christian. Consequently, in this article I consider contemplation as an aesthetic category of slow cinema, whose narrative is largely characterised by stillness. The phrase "contemplative cinema", as Warner (46) suggests, is frequently used to delineate a diverse corpus of films that have been variously styled as slow, pensive, minimal, and even 'anti-cinema'. Inspired by Johann von Goethe's novel *Elective Affinities*, which challenges its protagonists with the horrific repercussions of repression, Hermanus's "cautionary tale" (Hermanus and Smith) about the risks of repression is premised on the central character (François) confronting and suppressing the truth of his queer desire. I contend that Hermanus's use of narrative and aesthetic devices in *Skoonheid* constitutes a South African—and Afrikaans-language—contemplative slow cinema. As such, Hermanus's artistic expression in his feature film invites an analysis of its slow mode of address.

Hermanus has praised the oeuvres of slow cinema auteurs such as Carlos Reygadas (Mexico) and Béla Tarr (Hungary). In a *Channel 24* column, Hermanus asserts his support of slow cinema: "just because it's slow, doesn't imply it's uninteresting" (Hermanus, "Slow and Boring for Dummies"). Hermanus's statement is in response to *New York Times* film critics expressing their disdain for the slowness of Tarr's *The Turin Horse*. Moreover, Hermanus identifies a similar treatment of his own film: *Skoonheid* was, as he puts it, "sliced and diced by a local film critic as slow, uninteresting, and pretentious". In response to such critical derision, Hermanus ("Slow and Boring") is clear about the value of slowness, inside and outside of film: "When tasting wine, do you not sip slowly, you know, soaking up the flavours, investigating the after-tastes, discovering the blend of ingredients? So why then, when you go to the movies, is it always about binge-watching? And more importantly, when did our connoisseur film critics become the pimps of fast and furious flicks?"

Hermanus emphasises that slow cinema is a contemplative and thought-provoking way of watching and making films that, because of its purposeful, functional slowness, holds the viewer's interest. *Skoonheid* aligns with slow cinema in reference to contemplation, visual minimalism, and narrative tropes—as I will discuss in the sections to follow. These aspects of slow cinema shape and style the ways in which *Skoonheid* presents alienation, incommunicability, and the protagonist's existentialism.

Slow cinema scholar Ira Jaffe describes the quality of slowness in a slow cinema film as containing, among other elements, moments of stillness and austere *mise-en-scène* (3). This stillness, argues Jaffe, may prompt contemplation about the meaning of life, while austere *mise-en-scène* constitutes visual minimalism in terms of lighting, décor, and colour in the slow cinema film. Another eminent scholar, Emre Çağlayan, affirms that slow cinema is shaped around specific themes rooted in nostalgia, absurdism, and vacuity of purpose that breeds boredom, anxiety, alienation, desperation, and monotony (*Poetics of Slow Cinema* xii). Similarly, American film critic Roger Ebert acclaims slow cinema's capacity to portray the physical, mental, and social spheres of human life (921). It is equally worth noting that a number of slow cinema scholars agree on the term "slow cinema" being used to describe a style of film that emphasises the passage of time in the shot, as well as an undramatic narrative or non-narrative mode intended for contemplative spectatorial practice (Boczkowska 229; Çağlayan, *Poetics of Slow Cinema* 16; Grønstad 274). Therefore, in this study I consider the above descriptions to offer a close reading of *Skoonheid*'s slow mode of address in my discussion of the film's slow cinema themes: alienation, incommunicability, and existentialism. It is necessary to, firstly, discuss the film as a narrative of slowness and, secondly, its use of slow images in order to offer an informed discussion of the above themes. Throughout these discussions, I will foreground how prominently *Skoonheid*'s slowness, slow image, and slow cinema themes facilitate opportunities of contemplation for the viewer at different moments in the film.

The analysis proceeds from a textual analysis framework, which involves the notion of examining film as text based on its "contextual embedding and social functions" (Wildfeuer 9) or "assessing texts from various cultural settings" to increase understanding of constructed meaning (Lockyer 865). It is therefore possible to show with this framework how the specific slow cinema devices described in the previous paragraph are deployed in *Skoonheid* to illustrate the film's contemplative qualities. In the following section of this article, I offer a critical analysis of *Skoonheid* based on the film's contemplative narrative, visual minimalism, and narrative tropes derived from social, cultural, and ideological contexts.

***Skoonheid's* narrative of slowness**

The “narrative of slowness” in this analysis draws on what Çağlayan (*Poetics of Slow Cinema* ix) refers to as “a mode of contemporary art cinema” that slows down time, complicates causality, and abandons traditional storytelling techniques in favour of creating and maintaining ambiance and mood. These elements are frequently used to force the audience to confront cinematic temporality in its extensiveness. In the absence of a clear-cut and overt narrative resolution, the viewer is forced to redeploy their attention away from narrative resolution or the resolution of specific character trajectories towards contemplation, while shifting their attention to the very slowness of the film in its temporality, image duration, and character trajectory. I will now analyse *Skoonheid's* narrative of slowness based on how it prioritises contemplation mainly through the interiority of its protagonist, François.

To analyse *Skoonheid's* narrative in the context of slowness, I highlight Thomas Elsaesser's views on the virtues and demands of slow cinema (220). Elsaesser cites two film directors in particular whose work exemplifies the narrative-formal expressiveness of slow cinema: Tarr (*The Turin Horse*, 2011) and Pedro Costa (*In Vanda's Room*, 2000). These films, according to Elsaesser, emphasise visual minimalism; they focus on the everyday, the mundane, and they maintain a fixed gaze on characters who are disinclined to sympathy and empathy. These characters are too discomfiting to invite the viewer's easy recognition of and identification with the character. Elsaesser also identifies qualities in these slow cinema films that hold the viewer's attention, including the composition of objects within the frame, the characters' relationship with the spaces they inhabit, and the characters' refusal to be viewed as either victims or sociological case studies, regardless of their choices or dire socio-economic position. Therefore, on Elsaesser's account, I contend that Hermanus's *Skoonheid* fulfils the virtues and demands of slow cinema.

While it is possible to examine *Skoonheid* as a close counterpart to *The Turin Horse* or *In Vanda's Room*, I maintain that Hermanus's slow cinema is additionally structured as a psychological thriller. He uses slow cinema techniques and devices, such as those discussed above, to serve the film's thriller aspects of anxiety, anticipation, unpredictability, and surprise. Should *Skoonheid's* slowness threaten to dislodge the viewer's investment in narrative and character, these thriller genre elements maintain the viewer's interest. For example, when François arrives at a Bloemfontein farmhouse to the call of birds, domestic animals, and the off-screen utterances of his acquaintances, Hermanus slowly introduces the viewer to the protagonist's “elective affinities”, which, for François, include queer love and intimacy. The explicit all-male orgy that follows embodies François's repressed desire for queer intimacy. Additionally, the orgy is sandwiched between landscape shots that register a sense of emptiness and isolation. The thriller's initial shock and surprise of the minimalist matter-of-factness of the sex invites the viewer to contemplate the slowness and mundanity of how this event is represented on screen as anti-sensational.

Hermanus cues this anti-sensationalist approach from the start of the film. In *Skoonheid's* opening wedding reception scene, Hermanus announces the film's general sense of interiority and François's suppressed emotions and internal states, to which the viewer has no access. In this scene, François's gaze on Christian invokes the depth of his interiority, which is a metaphor for a version of Afrikaner masculinity that represses desire for intimacy. Jaffe calls this repression “expressive minimalism” (3), which is typical of an unyielding slow cinema narrative that is anchored in silence, inaction, duration, and contemplation. Hermanus curtails François's expression of the self by cutting him off from any productive interactions with the invited guests at his daughter's wedding reception. Hermanus often concentrates on François's visceral sensations without integrating him into a larger social (community or family-based) system of meaning and purpose. François's interiority comes into play again towards the end of the film when he accompanies his wife Elena (Michelle Scott) to a book launch. As the event concludes, François steps away in a lonesome moment before turning his gaze to one of his queer acquaintances who is also attending the book launch in the company of his wife.

Another significant constituent of *Skoonheid's* expressive minimalism and its protagonist's interiority is further depicted in François's wanderings (in itself indicating the character's own indeterminacy) with his wife, peers, and acquaintances. Hermanus appears to borrow a trip form, which Gilles Deleuze (9) describes as “a train journey, taxi ride, bus trip, journey by bicycle or on foot”. Despite the road movie's usual association with speed, Michael Gott (299) affirms that slow cinema and road movies are a “natural pairing” because in the contemporary European context, for instance, slow cinema ‘road movies’ highlight unresolved political and economic issues, with the road itself being used as a metaphor in the journey's transforming experience. In *Skoonheid*, scenes depicting

François driving around in silence, sitting in his car and submerged in thought or fixing his gaze on Christian, buttress his journey of sexual imprisonment. Throughout, the narrative remains tonally confined and restrained, and does not reveal François's thoughts and feelings as much as it emphasises his psychological torment. Yet it is worth noting that modernist slow cinema auteur Michelangelo Antonioni (qtd in Tomasulo and McKahan 14) once considered his 1962 film *L'eclisse* (*The Eclipse*) as "a story of imprisoned sentiments, where the characters are all trapped—literally and figuratively—in their respective psychological situations". I consider Hermanus's film in similar terms because of François's interiority and slow drift into a world of queer intimacy and queer social economy. Overall, François's wanderings in his car or on foot obstruct narrative progression to the point where it allows the viewer to experience contemplation rather than an attentional investment in causality and plot.

Causality is the primary unifying principle in David Bordwell's (157) formalist analysis of classical storytelling, which traditionally encompasses two plotlines. The first concerns heterosexual romance between boy and girl or husband and wife, while the second pertains to the protagonist's work, quest, or personal dealings. Moreover, according to Bordwell, each plotline will contain a goal, obstacles, and climax (157). In *Skoonheid*, Hermanus appears to grant a twofold causal construction: one concerning François's pursuit of intimacy with Christian, while the other follows the surface-heteronormativity of his mundane married life. François's primal goal is to fulfil his desire for love and intimacy with Christian. François must, however, overcome the obstacle of Afrikaner masculinity that prevents men from expressing themselves non-heteronormatively in post-apartheid South Africa. In the climax, François's desire for queer love and intimacy is unrequited, culminating in his sexual assault of Christian.

An instance that complicates causality in *Skoonheid*'s slow narrative relates to the penultimate sequence which takes place in the aftermath of the sexual assault. François withdraws money from the bank, walks through multiple spaces as he clutches onto the brown envelope containing the cash, then enters a restaurant. Moments later, François directs his gaze to a young and visibly happy gay couple in the restaurant who are at ease to engage in public display of affection. While the above sequence has causal significance, Hermanus slows down narrative pacing and comprehension through François's silence, inaction, and emotional inwardness, resulting in a rather psychologically opaque protagonist. In relation to the above sequence, François's primal goal of love and intimacy with Christian remains unaccomplished against the corresponding obstacle of Afrikaner masculinity and related social codes that suppress his queer desire. A clear cause and effect logic, according to Miklos Kiss and Steven Willemsen (3) should have a perceptible mode of address and expose the psychological state of the protagonist to the viewer. However, in Hermanus's slow cinema film, the protagonist's psychological opaqueness and indeterminate character trajectory—where François's final fate or the precise consequences of his action remain unspecified—offers a contemplative opportunity to the viewer.

Through *Skoonheid*'s languid narrative pacing and its focus on François's experience of repression and obsession, Hermanus addresses pressing issues in contemporary South African society. He constructs an attritional account of François's struggles to understand his existence amid the agony of sexual repression, cultural and gendered traditionalism, and self-loathing. To that end, the subtle workings of *Skoonheid*'s slowness put the notion of narrative exposition under threat. I will now discuss four narrative strategies deployed in Hermanus's slow cinema film, derived primarily from the exhibition of its temporality, the delinquency of its chief protagonist, its indeterminacy of plot, and a focus on the mundanity to François's daily life.

Firstly, *Skoonheid* offers a distinct mode of slowness, in terms of how it generates its own form of temporality in slow cinema. Though Hermanus attends closely to the poetics of slow cinema in *Skoonheid*, he occasionally imputes to the film certain classical narration devices. For instance, scenes that intensify François's wanderings in Bloemfontein and his fixed gaze on Christian at the wedding reception and later in Cape Town have a languid narrative pacing to appeal to the viewer's contemplative consciousness. Scenes that involve François's conversations with his wife, daughter, friends, and specifically Christian's parents, have been made to appear insignificant to the main plotline. At the same time, these seemingly insignificant scenes are thematically and aesthetically important as part of the mundane, the everyday, the indication that, for François, only Christian promises excitement and exuberance. Overall, Hermanus's flexibility with the film's temporal arrangement incentivises the viewer to continue watching the film despite its languid pace.

Secondly, in a film about queer male desire, Hermanus presents the sexually repressed François as a culturally delinquent character: a voyeur who studiously maintains a strict separation between the public, the private, and the internal. Tiago de Luca and Nuno Jorge (9) claim that delinquent characters are more attuned

to a contemporary slow cinema narrative because they epitomise a solitary contemporary individual's existential crisis. François's delinquency arises from his sexual repression, and manifests in his voyeuristic tendencies, his private queer activities, and eventually his violence. François's voyeurism signals his existential crisis, his burden: for a long time, François looks and gazes from the inside out, failing to adequately observe himself. His voyeurism is not an act of pleasure, but of self-evasion. As Hermanus himself puts it, "François's habit of watching people, or being a voyeur, is a way of guarding his true thoughts and intentions" ("Director's note" 5). The narrative aspects of François's voyeuristic experience are effectively shared with the viewer from the film's opening image at the wedding reception, where François gazes intently at Christian. This voyeurism persists throughout the film as Christian's "beautiful individuality" seems to undermine François's carefully constructed and maintained traditional Afrikaner male identity. In this way, the viewer becomes part of François's frustrations while trying to make sense of his world amid the gaps in the narrative prompted by continuity editing.¹ The delinquency of François's voyeurism enables the story to gravitate towards a violent conclusion that manifests in the attempted rape of Christian.

Thirdly, withholding a certain amount of narrative exposition or closure is a familiar device used in many slow cinema films. This withholding technique is referred to as "indeterminacy", which András Bálint Kovács attributes to an "open-ended structure that features unpredictability or uncertainty manifested in the story" (77–8). *Skoonheid's* slow narrative facilitates the viewer's contemplation of incrementally developing internal conflicts that arise from François's sexual repression, thereby supporting Karl Schoonover's views on slow cinema "as an otherness to be recognised and mined for its profundity, beauty, or meditative qualities" (74). François's desire for Christian, for example, is driven inward into a slow cinema psychological thriller that features a slow-paced and open-ended narrative structure that typically eludes tidy closure, resulting in narrative indeterminacy. By focusing on François's interspersed wanderings throughout the film, Hermanus provides an ambiguity and unpredictability that fosters a contemplative mode of spectatorship in the viewer. Similarly, François's lack of emotional expression foregrounds problems of disconnectedness; here, the plot often drifts into "stillness and silence, tending, in any case, to be minimalist, indeterminate, and unresolved" (Jaffe 3). *Skoonheid's* narrative indeterminacy is most prominent in the denouement when François drives away from the restaurant where he had sat with the money in his usual thoughtful mien. The closing image is of his car following the circular exit route from the parking area in a looping circular motion. The images suggest that unless François takes steps to liberate himself, he will remain subjected to the agony of his repression. As the final scene implies, order has not been restored in the universe of the story, the protagonist has not successfully overcome obstacles toward public self-expression and acceptance, and the plot remains indeterminate. As a result, the viewer is offered experiential indeterminacy, which forces them to understand the narrative in ways unrelated to the resolution of plot.

Lastly, Hermanus impedes narrative closure in *Skoonheid* by foregrounding mundane events and practices that do not relate to the central plotline in the narrative. For instance, before the orgy, Hermanus incorporates an exterior shot of the Bloemfontein farmhouse showing rusty water tanks, abandoned farm tools, and a lone dog, complete with natural sounds of birds and rustling trees. Immediately after the orgy scene, Hermanus inserts a landscape shot that registers emptiness, while offering a contemplative gesture to the viewer. According to Matthew Flanagan, a slow cinema film often sustains a focus on "meticulously composed images emptied of narrative information" or the mundane as depicted in the two shots described above, thereby valorising form over content (99). Slow cinema filmmakers such as Tsai Ming-liang, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, and Lisandro Alonso tend to "fill the narrative void in their films with everyday practices", including washing, eating, or sleeping (Thomson 50). Similarly, Hermanus fills the narrative void in *Skoonheid* by integrating the following scenes: François sharing a meal with Christian and his parents, François sleeping next to his wife Elena, François showering after the all-male orgy, and François washing his hands regularly. In these ostensibly mundane moments, the slow narrative allows for the viewer's contemplation.

Above, I framed *Skoonheid* as slow-paced, voyeur-centric, and for the most part lacking plot-based dramatic urgency partly due to its indeterminate protagonist. Hermanus gives the viewer the opportunity to "see moments and sequences as François would" ("Director's note" 5). Ultimately, the narrative techniques of Hermanus's restrained style of filmmaking in *Skoonheid* enables the viewer to contemplate what is seen and experienced, and to interpret the film from the position and experience of this slowness.

***Skoonheid's* slow image**

Having established the slow narrative's role in facilitating contemplation, I now seek to locate what might constitute a slow cinema aesthetic in *Skoonheid*. Andre Bazin (24) defines image, broadly speaking, as "everything that the representation on the screen adds to the object there represented". Thus, according to Bazin, the set, make-up, and performance styles together comprise the image. These techniques naturally incorporate lighting, while shot framing produces composition (24). Analysing the material quality of the slow image in *Skoonheid* highlights the relationship between the viewer and the film, where the viewer is asked to contemplate how the film medium functions.

Similarly, my discussion of the slow image in *Skoonheid* is informed by Jaffe's and Çağlayan's recent appraisals of slow aesthetics. First, Jaffe notes that the camera in a slow cinema film often remains motionless, and moves slowly when it does so, to allow the viewer to linger on the image. Jaffe further maintains that editing in a slow cinema film tends to be sporadic to prevent the spatio-temporal leaps and breaks in the narrative, and that the austere *mise-en-scène* deployed avoids "intricate and vibrant décor, colour and lighting" (3). Second, for Çağlayan, a slow cinema film emphasises a mannered use of the long take and minimalist aesthetics but he places a high premium on "dead time", which in his considered view fosters a mode of narration that initially appears "enigmatic, genuinely inconceivable, and impenetrable" ("Screening Boredom: The History and Aesthetics of Slow Cinema" 1).

Skoonheid demonstrates this slow aesthetics to varying degrees for its visual style and hence exceeds slow cinema norms in that regard, in addition to framing human subjectivity through what Hermanus (Hermanus and Barlet) calls "the character's elective affinities" and François's existential wanderings referred to above. Hermanus allows the film to take on a life of its own as a self-conscious image with slow-moving camera movements, lingering shots of the landscape and city life, and long takes suggesting boredom and unproductivity, restiveness, and slowly unfolding temporality. In this sense, Hermanus calls upon the viewer to exercise what Bazin (38) calls "the democracy of vision", allowing the viewer to let their eyes wander and pay attention to what they want to instead of being prescribed to look at certain objects by, for instance, quickly edited alternating close-ups. Bazin's "democracy of vision" is signalled, for instance, by François's deep gaze on Christian lying on the beach or François intensely watching Christian's interaction with his peers at the University of Cape Town. The slow camera movements and long takes used in the scenes described above allow the viewer time to dwell on different parts of the image, and where relevant, to pay more attention to François's facial expressions, posture, gestures, his positioning within the frame, and the film's colour palette.

Skoonheid's colour palette alternates between the vibrant lavishness of nature, bodies and city life, and the subdued (as per Jaffe) mundanity of, for instance, the orgy. Hermanus's attention to his film's colour palette also extends to the opening image (the wedding reception), which runs for approximately three minutes and nine seconds. The shot that occupies the opening scene starts on a wide frame to capture a milieu accentuated with warm lighting, colourful costumes, and vibrant décor. A close-up shot of François's face invites the viewer to witness his attraction to Christian as François is apparently unable to tear his gaze away from the object of his desire. The camera gradually zooms into Christian to establish François's sight vector. The opening scene's leisurely changing images and the measured rhythm created in the shift from shot to shot complement the slowness advanced by the film's dialogue and plot. The slow image and deliberate editing enhance the relationship between the viewer and the film. Later in the film, long and medium shots show environmental surroundings in Bloemfontein and Cape Town that appear to be imposing on François; the viewer lingers on these images. Consequently, the film allows the viewer to see François's devalued sense of self and his diminishing presence in his own world.

As far as shot length is concerned, Hermanus alternates between long takes and short takes to allow for some variation in the film's narrative pacing. For example, scenes of activity involving François's queerness rely on shorter takes to express sexual urgency. In contrast, scenes that show François's contemplative moments in his car unfold in longer takes at a more languid pace. As a result, the slow image created from the long takes is liberated from the constraints of space and time that arise from the stillness of the camera. Based on the alternating long and short takes, the viewer can distinguish meditative qualities in *Skoonheid*, interpreted as a specific contemplative effect, which is mediated by the techniques described above. As such, the average shot length (ASL) in *Skoonheid* is shorter than in other slow cinema feature films such as *The Turin Horse*. The relative shortness of most of the shots does not, however, prevent *Skoonheid* from generally being purposefully static or even fulfilling the requirements of slowness.

The shot-reverse-shot technique is hardly associated with slow cinema, but Hermanus consistently enlists it in dialogue scenes between François and other characters.² In effect, Hermanus is not entirely devoted to the meditative poetics of slow cinema because he insists on using slow cinema techniques and devices to serve *Skoonheid's* thriller aspects of anxiety, anticipation, and unpredictability. For example, in the film's second scene, when François shows little interest in his wife's bedtime conversation, the camera is much more dispassionate as it ventures into the conventional shot-reverse-shot sequence. Intriguingly, the close-up shots of each character in the scene are framed in separation, emphasising the distance between François and his wife. Furthermore, even when there is a close-up shot of François's face, the character's interiority remains impervious to the viewer. As pointed out earlier, Jaffe (3) ascribes this "expressive minimalism" to slow cinema's aesthetics. Later, when François visits his doctor, Hermanus reorders the screen direction of both characters within the frame to disorient the viewer: François and the doctor are not looking at each other, signifying that they are communicating at cross-purposes. This shot sequence underscores the queerness of François's malaise, which the doctor is obviously unable to diagnose. With a hint of absurdity, the doctor advises François to count from one to ten to alleviate his irritability. Beyond his repression and desire, François remains an indeterminate character.

Editing also contributes to *Skoonheid's* slow images. As stated above, Hermanus combines long and short takes to enhance his film's visual appeal, establish motifs and parallels, and emphasise François's existential crisis. Consequently, the editing style in *Skoonheid* is purposefully frugal in some instances and intensified in others, but throughout it foregrounds themes of alienation and a sense of existential paralysis besetting François. Even in scenes that rely primarily on a long take and slow pacing, Hermanus strategically includes a single cut to suggest a sudden change in mood or character dynamic. François follows Christian to Cape Town and eventually locates him on the beach. As usual, François remains at a distance, watching Christian and listening in on his conversations. Oblivious to François's presence, Christian is relaxed and with his friends. The editing of the scene, which is primarily hinged on the long take, emphasises the intensity of François's seething jealousy. Informed by Hamish Ford's (183–4) understanding of indeterminacy in modernist aesthetics, I propose that Hermanus's intensified long takes and the unexpected sudden cuts between shots—as described in the above scene—ultimately enhance the film's sense of indeterminacy because the film's particular temporality frustrates narrative closure.

In addition, Hermanus also uses a deliberate cut between long takes to draw attention to a sudden shift in the above scene's emotional weight. For example, it suggests that Christian's unreserved expression of his own identity continues to devastate François. Similarly, in the beach scene where François stares intensely at Christian from a distance, Hermanus deploys a long take, which contributes to the scene's slow pace and complements François's selfish act to isolate Christian and have him for himself. The film brings the viewer into the aesthetic of temporal indeterminacy, which, as Mary Doane (163) implies, presents the [slow] image as "the symbol of a particular moment". Hermanus's attentiveness to the slow image is an interpreted aesthetic strategy because he largely bases this effect on the expressiveness of the cinematic apparatus's mechanical temporality to repeatedly punctuate human drama and pain.

Finally, Hermanus creates tension between sound and image by adding offscreen presences that tend to be inconsistent with the film's spatio-temporal order. This technique is a crucial component of many slow cinema films used to enhance dramatic tension and heighten the viewer's curiosity (Kovács 142; Lovatt 198). In *Skoonheid's* 45-second-long opening credits sequence, Hermanus announces the film's impending slowness when he adds offscreen sounds to the opening credits. These offscreen sounds come to serve as a sound motif that also foregrounds the mundane and its repetitive nature. He repeats this technique when François arrives at a Bloemfontein farmhouse for the orgy; at night in a Cape Town street when François is heading to a gay nightclub; and back at home in Bloemfontein when François and his wife are watching television in the offscreen presence of their daughter, Anika. In all of the above instances, the mechanics of offscreen presences heighten the contemplative effect of Hermanus's slow cinema thriller. The viewer is implicated in an indeterminate cinematic space and experience.

***Skoonheid's* slow cinema themes**

In the previous sections, I demonstrated how Hermanus's slow cinema film lacks plot-based dramatic urgency, while generating its own form of temporality and indeterminacy. These techniques facilitate the viewer's contemplation of François's incrementally developing sexual repression. I also argued that Hermanus is not entirely devoted to the poetics of slow cinema in terms of how he deploys *Skoonheid's* slow aesthetics and in

his framing of François's existential crisis. From the outset, it is clear that *Skoonheid's* protagonist represses his queerness at great socio-psychological cost. The film demonstrates the damage wrought by this repression as much as by surrendering to desire in an act of violence. The film's slow cinema qualities—such as its measured temporality, long takes, and slow images—allow for additional thematic excavation.

It is possible to derive thematic meanings from a slow cinema film, as Çağlayan (“Screening Boredom” 27) and Jaffe (680) explain. Çağlayan in particular foregrounds films that emphasise “a pessimistic vision of the world and emptiness of meaning” (27) within the larger context of slow cinema. These themes investigate and ponder what it means to be human by focusing on unlikely relationships and spiritual narratives centred on the notions of guilt and atonement. Of particular relevance in *Skoonheid* is the focus on alienation and incommunicability. In addition, the film's exploration of an existential crisis rests on François's experience of self-loathing and queerness.

Alienation and incommunicability

Hermanus evokes dominant sensations of social alienation, disconnectedness, and moments of emptiness, which are amplified by François and the world around him in an interplay of close-up and long shots. In a South African society that had become starkly adversarial, François appears to vacillate between being an outsider and an insider. As an insider, François's longing for queer love and intimacy is evident. However, François's presence in the gay nightclub in Cape Town highlights his sustained separation from the gay community, as an outsider here bearing witness to gay individuals in moments of fun and pleasure. Because François is aware of his existential distress and a sense of alienation, he recognises at this point that he lacks the queer freedom inhabited by the clubgoers; the clandestine all-male sex meetings back home in Bloemfontein are no substitute for this freedom. According to Hermanus (“Director's note” 5), these conflicted and conflicting realities demonstrate the failure of François's desire and his management of his repressed queerness. Therefore, Hermanus used a distinctive and extensively layered cinematic approach to make this aspect of François's psychology vital to his personal, social, and political aims of articulating his innermost thoughts and desire for queer love and intimacy within his Afrikaner identity.

Additionally, as Hermanus (“Not a judgement of character”) explains, François subsequently realises he is displaced and disconnected as a result of his desire for intimacy with Christian, which in turn becomes both an existential venture in understanding his social and political place—and self—in post-apartheid South Africa. In Hermanus's view, François spent his entire life being classified into and outside of strict apartheid categories and was compelled to build rigid moral and behavioural modes for himself (“Not a judgement of character”). These rigorous behavioural and moral standards are validated by Tiffany Jones (397), who asserts that heteropatriarchal conceptions of sexuality have normalised heterosexuality and promoted white male power systems in post-apartheid South Africa.

Slow cinema's philosophical relevance relates to the contemporary tragedy of the individual (de Luca and Jorge 9). This tragedy is constructed in Hermanus's dispassionate view of François's psychological and sexual predicaments. A primary instance would be the scene where François finally cleans the swimming pool. In subduing the filth that has plagued the swimming pool for a long time, François presents a transformational relevance to his objectives and purposes. He must now review his original affinities and govern all his future plans accordingly. It must be noted that due to the character's indeterminacy and Hermanus's occluded access to the character's interiority, the viewer only later recognises this scene as indicating the possibility of an internal shift in François.

Incommunicability is evident in François's inability to interact with his family and peers in a meaningful way and share his inner struggles, especially with those who care for him. This incommunicability is evidenced by the unsuccessful attempts by Elena to communicate with him on separate occasions. François seems to be nestled in his precious fantasy world, unwilling or unable to intrinsically invest in his social role even as he on the surface fulfils his duties as a husband and father. For François, distance and proximity are constantly at odds as he is often keen to keep conversations with his wife, his daughter, and his peers fragmented, random, and to a minimum. Interestingly, François's incommunicability is momentarily reversed by a twist of fate that finally brings him face to face with the object of his desire in a late-night diner. I associate François's character with the view that alienation and incommunicability are potent forces that can move an individual towards negative impulses of self-possession, susceptibility, and aggression.

Self-loathing existence

Beyond the queer readings of the film, I position *Skoonheid* as an individual's solitary slow journey into the core of his self-loathing, queer existence. Hermanus arrives at a similar conclusion in his description of *Skoonheid* as a story that explores "one man's disdain for himself and his hatred leading to self-destruction" ("Director's note" 4). More specifically, François is envious of Christian's free interaction with all types of people, regardless of their race, gender, or sexual orientation. François, who is still on the journey of self-discovery and attempting to forge meaningful connections with himself, feels jealous and resentful of Christian because of how at ease he is with himself. François's resentment increases along with his self-loathing, which eventually leads to violence. Hermanus himself succinctly describes the conflict between Christian and François's existences:

Christian, the object of François' affection, is a man born with physical form and beauty that gives him power in the world. It provides him currency to manipulate and take from the world what he wants. François is, in turns, disarmed and disgusted by Christian's power. He wants to be him with him, own him, 'have him', yet the ease with which Christian floats through life, the charm of his form enrages François to the core. ("Director's note" 5)

François's intense longing for Christian dominates his every thought and act. Coupled with his self-loathing, this propels his existence throughout the film. François remains firm in his desire for Christian. François's self-loathing existence is especially salient in his ritualistic cleansing because he is not comfortable in his own skin. François repeatedly washes his hands, face, and body after the orgy.

Queer sex

In the world of François and his ironically homophobic male sex partners, sexual pleasure is a momentary superficial sensation and a covert exercise of power. This sensation is reminiscent of Antonioni's portrayal of the "sexual crisis" of modern humanity, which he called "*malattia dei sentimenti*" (disease of love or Sick Eros), where some individuals are sexually voracious while others (especially women) are bored (qtd in Tomasulo and McKahan 40). In other words, modernism has distorted human values, even those related to sexuality. Echoing Antonioni, Hermanus is interested in the sociopolitical determinants of the failures of contemporary sexual or erotic behaviour. In a sense, François's sexual desperation hardly seems benign, and the peculiar conversation with his physician reinforces his mental anguish. In François's case, the sickness referred to here is that of the repression of the queer Eros.

The relationship between François and his wife also evokes Antonioni's Sick Eros, where François is "voracious" and Elena is "bored". François's relationship with Elena is one of surface contentment and deep resentment; Christian, on the other hand, dynamises him. This excess of desire is essential to the impetuous François, who in a seemingly vulnerable moment in a hotel room alone with Christian sexually assaults the young man.

The only way for François to attempt to temporarily satisfy his unfulfilled Eros is through his occasional sexual liaisons with a few other married, white men. These men are overtly heterosexual. They impose their own restrictions on their desire for queer intimacy when they congregate in a private location in Bloemfontein. One of the white men, Gideon, arrives in the company of a seemingly queer coloured man. The other men are indignant, with François emphatically stating, "we're not queers". Another man says that coloured people are prohibited from their group. As a result, Gideon is expelled for constantly flouting the group's rules. The group's aggressive display of force may suggest the fragility and anxiety that is latent to hegemonic Afrikaner masculinity, which is maintained through violently regulating the behaviour and identities of its members. There have been attempts to closely link slowness to queerness or what it means to live queerly. For instance, Schoonover has theorised that slow cinema's temporality may invite the notions of dissident practices because "queerness often looks a lot like wasted time, wasted lives, and wasted productivity—queers ostensibly luxuriate while others work" (74). The idea of waste or wastefulness contrasts normative practices of productive time and effort, which the clandestine queer interactions in *Skoonheid* undermine. The viewer observes these white Afrikaner men's deviant immersion in queered temporality and spatiality as part of the film's slow aesthetic. If, as Schoonover (74) postulates, there is a causal relationship between slow cinema and queered temporality, that investigation falls outside the purview of this analysis.

Conclusion

In this article, I have firstly set the aesthetic of slowness apart from conventionally Eurocentric notions about what constitutes a slow cinema film throughout the spectrum of world cinema, and instead considered it from the perspective of post-apartheid South Africa. This enabled me to analyse the narrative and aesthetic strategies deployed in *Skoonheid* through the lens of slow cinema. Secondly, I have read *Skoonheid* beyond its representation of race ideologies, conservatism, and queer recesses and refocused it as a South African—and Afrikaans-language—slow cinema film, as well as how it urges the viewer to contemplate issues of crucial importance to human behaviour. Thirdly, I have argued that *Skoonheid*'s contemplative approach is informed by the film's slow narrative tropes, visual minimalism, and experiences of alienation, incommunicability, and existentialism.

Guided by the conceptual frameworks of Jaffe, Çağlayan, and Elsaesser for characterising slow cinema, I have demonstrated how Hermanus's slow cinema film is structured as a psychological thriller to maintain the viewer's interest. Hermanus uses interiority to curtail François's self-expression by cutting him off from any productive interactions with other characters while simultaneously facilitating the viewer's experience of contemplation in the act of watching the film. *Skoonheid*'s slow narrative pacing often threatens the notion of narrative exposition, especially due to the display of its temporal order, François's delinquency, indeterminacy of plot, and an emphasis on the mundane and everyday practices. *Skoonheid*'s narrative style ultimately enables the viewer to slowly interpret the film rather than rushing through it and hoping for it to catch up. I have also located what might constitute a slow cinema aesthetic in *Skoonheid*. For the most part, Hermanus uses a slow-moving camera, lingering shots of the landscape and city life, and long takes which suggest boredom and restiveness.

Additionally, *Skoonheid* is inhabited by offscreen sounds which implore the viewer to read beyond the material surface of the film.

Finally, I have explored how *Skoonheid* connects closely to the thematic traditions of slow cinema. Hermanus uses a slow and distinctively layered cinematic approach to present a dispassionate view of François's psychological and sexual predicaments. This approach evokes dominant sensations of alienation, incommunicability, and existential paralysis. Consequently, the philosophical thrust of Hermanus's slow cinema film aims to spur the viewer's contemplative consciousness with regard to the human condition.

The above analysis of narrative and aesthetic strategies makes it possible for Hermanus's *Skoonheid* to be understood as a South African—and Afrikaans-language—slow cinema film, and as a framed experience of contemplation for the viewer. The *Skoonheid* I have analysed here—through a slow cinema lens—offers a distinct mode of slowness, in terms of how it complexifies narrative exposition and generates its own form of aesthetic contemplation in the form of a slow-paced thriller. Though Hermanus attends closely to the poetics of slow cinema in *Skoonheid*, he occasionally ascribes to the film certain conventional narrative and aesthetic devices to incentivise the viewer to continue watching the film despite its languid pace. *Skoonheid* complicates the traditional poetics of slow cinema in ways that can attest to selected urgent concerns in contemporary South African society.

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Notes

1. In continuity editing, the director reorders story material by freely "cutting within a scene and crosscutting between various locations" (see Bordwell 160–1).
2. A shot-reverse-shot technique is used in film editing to maintain a sense of seamlessness in a conversation between two characters. The technique may, for example, involve a close-up cut of the first character shot in separation, interacting with the second offscreen character also in separation. The next close-up cut then shows a reverse angle of the second character. Therefore, cutting between the two characters completes the shot-reverse-shot technique (Cutting and Candan 47).

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Gibson Ncube

Queer, Christian and Afrikaans: the libidinal, sexuality and religion in *Kanarie* and *Skeef*

Religion is often viewed as incompatible with queer sexualities and genders. In the Afrikaans-speaking communities of South Africa, Calvinist doctrine and dogma have been used to marginalise and ostracise those sexual and gender identities that stray from the heteronormative scripts sanctioned by cultural and religious practices. In this article, I examine how the libidinal is central to the way in which queer and faith communities interact in Afrikaans-speaking communities in two films: *Kanarie* and *Skeef*. The two films represent different filmic genres with *Kanarie* a fictional feature film and *Skeef* being a documentary. The two films, despite their different genres, broach the difficulty of being queer and religious. At the same time, the films show that it is possible to rethink religions/faith communities. Such rethinking creates accommodative spaces within faith communities in a way in which queerness is not viewed as a deviance or an abomination. I read these Afrikaans-language films against the conceptualisation of the libidinal offered by Keguro Macharia together with the ideas of queer agency proposed by Adriaan van Klinken. This queer agency marks not just a transgression of heteronormative Christian norms but also engenders expansive ways of understanding human sexuality and gender identities.

Keywords: Afrikaans film, queerness, libidinality, religion, *Kanarie*, *Skeef*.

Introduction

Afrikaans societies, contends Kobus du Pisani, were for a long time imagined as being entrenched in “an unyielding Protestant view based on pure New Testament principles, and rigid austerity and strictness in conduct and morals” (158). For Marius Crous, Afrikaner societies could be encapsulated in three words: “Puritan, God-fearing [and] heterosexual” (50). These statements by Du Pisani and Crous point to the centrality of religion in shaping lived realities in Afrikaans communities of South Africa. Religion especially had an impact in the way in which people experienced and expressed their sexualities. This was particularly the case for non-normative sexualities which religious dogma framed as “sinful, unnatural and abnormal” (Du Pisani 169).


The idea of the sinfulness and abnormality of non-normative sexualities, which I will refer hereafter as “queer sexualities”, was further bolstered by apartheid legislation which, in addition to policing races, was particular in its regulation of sexualities and sex-lives of South Africa citizens. Nicky Falkof explains pertinently in this regard that:

One of the many ways in which this system [apartheid] secured itself, alongside legislation, military force, racial and religious ideologies, and control of the economy, was through the willing compliance of the privileged white electorate, maintained by a set of behavioural codes that included injunctions around ‘appropriate’ gender performance. White men, women, boys, and girls were expected to behave in ways that were coherent with the rigid traditionalising structures of apartheid. (274)

Falkof further contends that as apartheid and its traditionalising structures began to collapse, diverse anxieties and moral panics gripped white communities of South Africa, especially the Afrikaans ones. In addition to the ‘black peril’ known in Afrikaans as the *swart gevaar* (see Durrheim), one other anxiety was embodied in the figure of the white Afrikaans gay man who through his very existence “suggested a possible weakness in the ideal of the white South African patriarch. Fears about this weakness were even more potent during the late

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apartheid period, when both the system and the form of masculinity that supported it were seen by whites to be endangered” (Falkof 274). Glen Elder also expresses a similar point of view and contends that, “[u]nlike the spatially-containable threat of black masculinity in the mines, white male homosexuality threatened the very existence of a patriarchal apartheid system. The predominantly white masculine parliament and legal system of apartheid, which had sought to categorise [...] the South African population as a form of control, found itself under threat” (56).

Against such a background, I set out in this article to examine how two films document and register the intersection of queerness, Christianity and Afrikaansness. Documenting and registering offer two important and complementary modes of representing lived realities. Documenting is involved in the processes of capturing and keeping record of realities. Registering, although similar, can refer to the diverse iterations and hues of the recorded lived experienced. I will focus on *Kanarie* (2018), directed by Christiaan Olwagen, and the documentary *Skeef* (2020) directed by Renaldo Schwarp.

Kanarie has previously been examined by different scholars. For example, Grant Andrews finds that “*Kanarie* is [...] decidedly camp, with the gay male characters allowed to embrace non-normative gender expression, and to find intimacy and camaraderie with other gay men even if they cannot ‘come out’ in their oppressive environments” (56). Annel Pieterse contends that members of the *Kanarie* choir are “insulated in a white, Afrikaans world” (380) and that through the film “the viewer is invited to read *Kanarie* as an excavation of the violence and trauma inflicted on young men by state apparatuses of control and compounded within the family unit and the broader Afrikaans community” (381).

Despite its critical acclaim, *Skeef* has not elicited any scholarly engagement. Be that as it may, the two films have fascinating parallels and points of similarity. For example, it is quite evident that the imagined target audience of these two films is similar. Because of the predominant use of Afrikaans in the films and their overarching themes, the presumed target audience is Afrikaans-speaking and gay. Andrews attests that with regard to *Kanarie*, the “imagined gay white audience is almost decidedly Afrikaner, due to the film’s cultural specificity and the lack of an English-speaking audience surrogate that would more easily appeal to international audiences” (57).

I seek to offer a new appreciation of *Kanarie* and *Skeef* by bringing the two films into conversation. Despite the differences in cinematic vision and genre, my interest is in the convergent ways in which they register the intersection of queerness, religion and Afrikaansness. I should point out that, for the purposes of this article, I use the term Afrikaans to refer to the language and to refer to the diverse people who speak the language and share its culture. I do not use the term ‘Afrikaner’ because the term remains largely contentious. Anna-Marie Jansen van Vuuren points out in this regard that originally, “the term ‘Afrikaner’ was more inclusive and could be used to refer to both white people and coloured people who spoke Afrikaans and were loyal to the South African cause. However, with the rise of Afrikaner nationalism, especially from the 1930s onwards, the term ‘Afrikaner’ came to be associated exclusively with white Afrikaans speakers, who were culturally signified by strong religious Calvinism” (32).¹ Chris Broodryk contends that the appellation “Afrikaner” continues to be “a contentious and shifting notion” (6) with some experiencing discomfort in being identified as such. Given such a situation, I use the term ‘Afrikaans’ to capture the diversity of Afrikaans-speaking communities.

The two films that I analyse in this article give a sense of the changes and (dis)continuities that take place from the Border War up to the contemporary post-apartheid moment. In my analysis of *Kanarie* and *Skeef*, I want to highlight the changes that have taken place in how queerness is considered in the Afrikaans-speaking communities depicted in the films and especially how religion is central in how queerness is constructed, understood, and performed.

The libidinal and its intersections with theology and (queer) sexuality

In this article, I integrate two theoretical perspectives: Keguro Macharia’s theory of frottage and Adriaan van Klinken’s work on the intersection of theology and sexuality in the understanding of queer African realities and lived experiences. In conceptualising frottage as an analytical method, Macharia considers the place of the libidinal or “sex practice” in uncovering “the creative ways the sexual can be used to imagine and create worlds” (4). Frottage as a method of the libidinal foregrounds relationality and the contact of rubbing of different bodies and surfaces. The libidinal, according to Macharia, has the potential of “leading, at times to pleasure, and, at other times, to irritation, and even possibly to pain” (5). My interest in evoking the libidinal is that it is often marginalised in the consideration of religion. When religion is evoked, in many instances, it is framed as chaste and spiritual.

Mainstream white Afrikaans-speaking churches are seldom associated with the libidinal. In fact, the libidinal is not only removed from traditional Afrikaans-speaking churches but it is cast as antithetical to religion, religiosity, and religious practices. I use the concept of frottage to show that religion is libidinal and that the libidinal should not in any way be marginalised in the consideration of religion.

It is precisely because frottage focuses on the libidinal that I also draw on and incorporate Adriaan van Klinken's intersectional work which looks at how religion converses with sexuality. Van Klinken's work focuses on how "religious beliefs and practices [are] negotiated, appropriated and transformed" (*Kenyan, Christian, Queer: Religion, LGBT Activism, and Arts of Resistance in Africa* 13). He maintains that "queer theorists and scholars in the field of queer studies have generally not seen the need for, or demonstrated an interest in, thinking about religion". Such a disregard and ignoring of religion and its role is meaningless in contexts such as Africa, "where religion is a highly significant locus of social, cultural, and political power". Van Klinken further argues that religion by its very nature is queer in that "it is not reducible to one essence but is open to multiple interpretations, and it is therefore potentially disruptive of any established hegemony or normativity" (*Kenyan, Christian, Queer* 14, 15). I find these ideas by Van Klinken to be productive in thinking of the place of religion in how characters in the films *Kanarie* and *Skeef* negotiate their gender and sexual identities.

By using the theoretical work of Macharia and Van Klinken, I aim to demonstrate that religion is important in understanding queerness in the selected films. In fact, I want to refigure the place of sex, sexuality and the libidinal in religion and concurrently how in the context of *Kanarie* and *Skeef* religion can help us understand the performance of queer gender and sexual identities. In the selected films, queerness should not be understood separately from religion but with(in) it. I will show that the protagonists in the two films exercise their agency in rethinking religion and forging new ways of considering their sexuality. Van Klinken explains that queer agency is "located in acts (how-ever subtle) of resistance to, and transgression of, the norms of sexuality in a heteronormative, dominantly Christian society" ("Towards Humane Scholarship: Postsecular, Queer Theological, and Self-Reflexive Turns" 640). The new ways of considering queer sexuality depart from essentialising discourses. The films gesture, in generative ways, to how queerness and Christianity can be rendered compatible within Afrikaans-speaking societies of South Africa.

Negotiating guilt and shame: on the (im)possibility of coming out in *Kanarie*

Christiaan Olwagen's film *Kanarie* is a musical coming-of-age film which focuses amongst other themes on the negotiation of queerness, masculinity, and religion in apartheid South Africa. *Kanarie* is set during the apartheid era Border War, which is also referred to as the Namibian War of Independence. Before examining the film, it would be important to consider what it meant to be a gay Afrikaans man during the time of the Border War. Young white men who had matriculated from high school were conscripted into the South African Defence Forces (SADF) (see Baines 17). Ernst van der Wal explains that to understand the Border War is to understand the idea of the enemy (63). The main enemy was evidently racial: the black communist. The other enemy as pointed out by van der Wal was "often skewed towards sexual and gendered biases" (63). Glenn Retief clarifies that the two ideas of the enemy were embodied in apartheid legislation: "Racist legislation and iron-fisted rule have, since the earliest days of Nationalist government, gone hand-in-hand with an obsessive interest in sexual policing. This policing has been based on the values of Christian Nationalist apartheid ideology: the need to keep the white nation sexually and morally pure so that it had the strength to resist the black communist onslaught" (100).

Similarly, Glen Elder attests that male homosexuality, unlike the "swart gevaar" clearly defied the very fundamentals of Afrikaans domination. As Elder posits,

Unlike the spatially-containable threat of black masculinity in the mines, white male homosexuality threatened the very existence of a patriarchal apartheid system. The predominantly white masculine parliament and legal system of apartheid, which had sought to categorise (and in the postmodern terminology 'other') the South African population as a form of control, found itself under threat. The idea of white male homosexuality in turn objectified the apartheid architects and practitioners. The idea sent panic down through the trenches of an unassailable order. (56)

The idea of the space of the Border War being both racist and homophobic comes out quite clearly in another film, *Moffie* by Oliver Hermanus (see Ncube, *Queer Bodies in Africa Films* 101–4). During the initial parade, recruits are instructed by a sergeant who exactly the enemies were in the Border War: "communism, laziness, faggotry, kaffir sympathy and any kind of undermining will not be tolerated". After two recruits have been caught engaging in "the

most disgusting, revolting act”, they are instructed that “faggots do not belong with us”. The “us” in this instance refers to white Afrikaans people. In my book I explain in this regard that: “Behind this assertion is an intersection of religion and ideas of gender performativity. Religion intersects with gender and race in constructing queerness as an unacceptable way of being. Queerness is constructed as wayward to both Christian beliefs and whiteness” (*Queer Bodies in African Films* 104). To deal with queerness, aversion was used especially on conscripts who were suspected to be gay (see Jones 403). Aversion therapy was supposedly a way of dealing with deviance and “curing” those suspected of harbouring gay inclinations. This, of course, framed queerness as a pathological conditional from which one could be healed and cured.

It is against such a background that *Kanarie* must be understood. The film follows a military choir, affectionately known as the Kanaries (Canaries), which tours the country during the final years of the Border War. The film’s protagonist is young man named Johan Niemand (Schalk Bezuidenhout) and the film focuses on his coming of age as he is compelled to question many things about his life, things that he had come to take for granted: his race, his sexuality, his religion and ultimately his beliefs and his thoughts on the role he plays in the war. In his audition to join the Kanaries choir, he explains that his life revolves around his religion, his love for music which tied to the love that he has for his country: “Music is my life. And being a Christian and a South African are equally important to me. I see the South African Defence Force Church Choir and Concert Group as the ideal opportunity to live all that I believe, all that I love, all that I am, to the fullest.”

Johan is a young man whose identity refuses to conform to what is expected of him by the very conservative society in which he grows up. In the opening scene of the film, Johan is with two female friends. The friends dress Johan up in a mock wedding dress and apply make-up to his face. They then dare him to walk down the streets of their neighbourhood in the dress. This scene has diverse signs and symbols that point to how the film grapples with issues of contestation of the status quo and negotiation of gender identity.

Of note is the way in which religion infiltrates this process of identity formation and negotiation. As Johan walks down the streets, a reverend from his church who is driving out of his home calls for Johan to come closer. Johan removes the wedding veil that he is wearing and bows to speak to the reverend. The reverend looks sternly and in a judgemental way at Johan’s dress, and states: “I suggest you go and change, before your father sees you like this.” What is interesting in this scene is the way in which the camera angles shift between Johan’s view and that of the reverend. When the reverend looks at the young man, the low angle shot at Johan bowing suggests how his queerness will need to be subsumed to the power of religion, represented in this scene by the reverend. The reverend orders Johan to go and change insisting that his manner of dressing and being are incorrect and do not fit into what is required of him in that community. In this scene, as with others that I will examine, the expression of queerness is always in friction with religion. The friction often leads the protagonist to recede into the closet as he “assumes the scorn and shame that are heaped on queerness” (Ncube, “Queer Afrikaner Masculinities in Oliver Hermanus’ *Skoonheid* (2011) and Christiaan Olwagen’s *Kanarie* (2018)” 97).

At one point in the film, Johan reveals to a fellow gay character that when he was a child, he had wished that Boy George had openly declared that he was gay as this would have given him the strength to embrace his own homosexuality. However, his queer godfather does not openly declare his sexuality and the possibility of being openly gay vanishes for young Johan, whose only choice is to carry a poster of Boy George in his Bible. The picture of the gay icon placed in the Bible is symbolic and points to the continued friction and rubbing between queerness and Christianity. The friction in this instance is very literal, as the picture of Boy George literally rubs against the words of the Bible. As Macharia explains, such friction can be the source of irritation and pain (5). There is obvious pain in that the picture inside the Bible symbolises the way in which Johan is torn between the dictates of two diametrically opposed ideologies and discourses.

On the one hand, he wants to be free and to fully embrace his difference. On the other, his religion constantly tells him that his difference is not only undesirable but also morally wrong. Because it is a space used by Johan to hide his queer godfather, the Bible is transformed into a form of closet. The closet in this instance is not just a space of hiding, but also a space that accommodates difference. In fact, the very presence of Boy George’s picture within the Bible queers the holy book. As such, the closet that is the Bible is at once a space of accommodation and contestation. There is simultaneous accommodation of queerness and resistance of the heteronormative ideals that are propagated in and through the Bible.

Against such a sociocultural background in which Christian mores impose themselves on the diverse aspects of the lives of people, *Kanarie* follows Johan as he leaves his hometown of Villiersdorp in the Western

Cape and goes to the military camp of Valhalla in Pretoria as he prepares for his two years of military service in the Kanaries choir. From their very arrival at the camp, the corporal who oversees their military training informs the conscripts that his main objective is “to make men out of you Marys”. At the training camp, the intersection of hypermasculinity, whiteness, Afrikaansness and Christianity makes the camp a space that compels the juvenile protagonist to rethink his place in South Africa and the world. During their first parade, Dominee Koch, the chaplain who oversees the Kanaries, explains to them in Afrikaans that one of the main goals of them being at Valhalla is to instil the word of God in them: “We are here to equip you in the line of duty. Myself and Dominee Engelbrecht are your chaplains. Ministers who are familiar with the military and who know how to uphold the word of God in this situation.” He further points out that the conscripts need to each become a “singer, saviour, soldier”. Being singers means that they needed to fulfil their roles as musicians in the Kanaries choir. Saviour suggested that the singers in the choir were undertaking an evangelising mission as Christians. As soldiers, they were required to defend the ideals and interests of the nationalist party and state. Moreover, as soldiers, the conscripts were required to perform a particular form of “militarised masculinity” which thrived on “dominating women and also looking down upon other masculinities that were deemed inferior” (Ncube, “Gender and Naming Practices, and the Creation of a Taxonomy of Masculinities in the South African Soap Opera ‘The Queen’” 6).

It is within this hyper-masculine, hyper-religious and hyper-nationalist space of the military camp that Johan is compelled to come to terms with his sexuality and religious and political beliefs. I set out to examine three specific scenes in which there is an exploration of the irritation that is engendered by queerness encountering Afrikaansness, and Christian mores.

The first scene involves the first time that Johan kisses one of his fellow Kanarie members, Wolfgang. The Kanaries have gone to church where they are to perform. In a stolen moment, Johan and Wolfgang kiss. Afterwards, Johan is quick to point out that the kiss was the “grossest thing that has ever happened to me.” The camera moves from Wolfgang whose face expresses enjoyment and pleasure and offers a close shot of Johan’s face which conveys a combination of disgust, guilt, shame, and horror. The contrast between the pleasure in Wolfgang’s face and the disgust and horror in Johan’s speaks to Macharia’s postulation of the concomitant sensual gratification and irritation that accompanies the libidinal. It is fascinating that this scene is superimposed by the voice-off in which Dominee Koch offers a sermon in which he talks about fighting against an ‘onslaught’: “The onslaught is out there. It’s in our homes. In our streets. In this very building. Amongst us. Now is not the time for peace. Now is the time for us Christians to take up the sword, in order to defeat the power of darkness.” Although the sermon could have been a reference to the Border War and the fight against communism, Johan is convinced that the sermon is about homosexuality.

The fact that Johan and Wolfgang have their first kiss within the grounds of a church is itself telling of the ways in which the film articulates the idea of transgression. Sealing a nascent gay relationship with a kiss on church grounds directly challenges what the church represents. The nascent queer relationship challenges and refigures what Adriaan van Klinken and Martin Zebracki refer to as “moral geographies” (91). There is indeed a reframing of what is considered morally accepted and morally correct. In the moment that the two men kiss, there is a suspension of a particular Christian morality. If the Border War grappled with the panic generated by the *swart gevaar*, then the queer kiss certainly represents a moral panic in which queerness is seen as inconsistent with Afrikaansness, and Christianity.

The second scene that I will analyse involves another instance in which Johan and Wolfgang are intimate. After heavy kissing, Wolfgang masturbates Johan. Although during the masturbation Johan’s facial expressions reveal pleasure, his face transforms immediately when he orgasms. He appears to be overcome by guilt and shame. He tells Wolfgang: “What we are doing is illegal, Wolfgang, do you get that? We could go to jail”. In this instance, there is reference to the legal framework which criminalised queerness. If, as I have previously pointed out, the *swart gevaar* posed a moral panic in Afrikaans society, the fear of the male gay was a palpable threat to white Afrikaans masculinity. Theo Sonnekus explains that the male gay threatened the controlled, sanitised and compartmental notion of sexuality (29). Queerness threatened the hegemonic form of Afrikaans masculinity which as pointed out by Sonnekus was a manifestation of “Christian Nationalist ideology, buttressed mainly by the Dutch Reformed Church, which placed great emphases on morality, asceticism, industriousness and heteronormativity” (24). So, when Johan refers to the illegality of their affair, he is at once underscoring how queerness is considered wrong by their religion and the legal regime that was in place at that time.

To especially buttress the idea of their actions being wrong in the eyes of their religion, Johan is also quick to remind Wolfgang that he comes from a very strict and religious background: “My father is a church elder, my mother is the secretary of the Women’s Society.” He goes on to tell Wolfgang that their relationship has disrupted his life and that he no longer understands who he is: “I was fine until you came along and fucked everything up. I don’t know who or what I am anymore.” In this scene, it seems that religion appears to counter the expression of queer desire. The impression given by this scene is that Johan and Wolfgang cannot be queer, Afrikaans and Christian because queerness is diametrically opposed to being Afrikaans and Christian.

I move on to analyse one last scene in which Johan visits his sister, Marilette, during a weekend break. He talks to her about an infantile love affair that he had with a boy named Gavin when they were in primary school. He is at the point of coming out as gay to his sister when he reads in her countenance disbelief and shock. He quickly assures her that the time he has spent at the training camp has allowed him to appreciate that loving a boy was just a phase and that he had outgrown that phase. He leaves his sister’s house at night to return to the training base. We next see him in the car of a mysterious man whose face is never shown. This man comments on how Johan’s hands are beautiful and then goes on to use them to masturbate. Once this mysterious man has orgasmed, Johan storms out of the car and we next see him at the training camp where he has an emotional and psychological breakdown. This breakdown is represented by a sequence that combines flashing lights and loud rock music. During this sequence, Johan is in a trance-like state in which he dances. He thereafter goes to see Dominee Engelbrecht, covered in blood from wounds he sustains from his dance routine which involved throwing himself against objects and the floor. As he chats with the Dominee, he asks that he pray for him. The Dominee attempts to offer emotional counselling, but Johan finds a dictionary in which he asks the Dominee to read the definition of the word “homosexuality”. This is the first time in the film that Johan gives a name to his difference. Hitherto, all he has done has been to perform his difference without naming it. Once he has named his queerness, he explains that: “I’m just sick and tired of feeling shit about who I am and what I like.” Johan’s implosion at the end of the film stems largely from his failure to harmonise his desires with the expectations of his Afrikaans society and upbringing, as well as the Christian faith into which he was born.

The negotiation of queerness that *Kanarie* proposes takes place within white Afrikaans spaces. As alluded previously, queerness, as is certainly the case with blackness, was during the apartheid era considered a threat to the hegemony of white Afrikaansness. As the conscripts go through their training, they are taught to look down on and hate otherness. This otherness took the form of racial and sexual others. Queerness, in this instance, was viewed as not having a place within white Afrikaansness. When Dominee Koch suspects that Johan and Wolfgang might be having a gay relationship, he takes them on a ride in his car. During the ride he tells the young men of the importance of them knowing and distinguishing between what is wrong and what is right: “In our hearts we know the difference between left and right, true and false, right and wrong”. He does not state plainly that he is referring to their queerness but he accelerates the car and removes his hands from the steering wheel and asks the young men to choose what they think is right. This is a telling scene of how queerness is considered wrong within the space of white, Christian, and Afrikaans community. Andy Carolin contends in this light that “the normative power of whiteness mitigates the otherness of same-sex sexualities, while it simultaneously constructs an imagined transnational gay community that is blind to its own constitutive racialisation” (99). By setting up the young men to choose between right and wrong, Dominee Koch is interested in safeguarding the purity of white Afrikaansness by getting rid of queerness from the imagining of white Afrikaansness. This elision of queerness from the definition of white Afrikaansness, of course, is self-defeating in the film *Kanarie* because the protagonists do not shy away from embracing the diverse facets of their being. They accept that they are white, Afrikaans and Christian and acknowledge the privilege that this brings. They also assume their queerness, which they find to be an integral part of their being.

The film’s parting note is that of Johan coming to terms with the fact that the greatest acceptance that he can achieve is not from God, his society or even his family. Rather, it is his own self-acceptance which is of paramount importance. This self-acceptance requires that Johan liberates himself from the yoke of the cultural and religious beliefs which frame his queerness as a deviant form of being and experiencing his sexuality.

Queer within faith communities in the documentary *Skeef*

The documentary film *Skeef* also deals with the difficulty of being Afrikaans, queer and Christian. Renaldo Schwarp explains at the start of the documentary what his mission was in filming this documentary:

We all have parts of ourselves that we really don't like. I battled with my sexuality for the longest time. So much so that I had the realisation at a young age that being gay would make my life a tad bit more difficult and the fact that I grew up in a pretty conservative, coloured Afrikaans Christian household wouldn't make things any easier.

Schwarp highlights above the intersection of numerous issues. This documentary sheds light on the lived experiences of a group of Afrikaans individuals who are marginalised owing to their race and sexual orientation. In South Africa, coloured identity, as argued by Mohamed Adhikari, has occupied a liminal space in which coloureds are considered as neither white enough nor black enough (168). Adhikari further attests that:

This claim has very rapidly become cliché, because it reflects popular sentiment within the greater part of the Coloured community and highlights key dilemmas Coloured people face in coming to grips with the post-apartheid environment. Besides accentuating their interstitial position within a transforming South African racial hierarchy, it very neatly captures their perennial predicament of marginality. (168)

Skeef shows that the marginality of coloured people is further complicated when individuals are also queer and they negotiate their queerness in societies that are entrenched in religious piety and practices. Schwarp interviews different Afrikaans people, some well-known and others just ordinary people. Through their shared struggles, Schwarp weaves together a narrative of the challenges that these queer Afrikaans individuals face in growing up and living in conservative Christian communities. Although the documentary film also focuses on the experiences of white Afrikaans queer people, I am particularly interested in the experiences of the coloured Afrikaans people who must navigate racial, sexual, gender and religious marginalisation.

One of the interviewees in the film is a coloured young man who was a minister in the Dutch Reformed Church. He is compelled to quit the church as he is unable to be ordained a minister owing to his sexual orientation. He explains: "I want to live my truth, I don't want to be a religious leader and a moral leader and not be able to be the person I really am inside the community." The unnamed young man decides to leave the Dutch Reformed Church because this faith community is unaccepting of his queerness. Jodi O'Brien explains that renouncing Christianity is the common reaction to the failure to harmonise queer sexuality and religion: "Doctrines that condemn homosexuality constitute the ideological backdrop against which Christians initially experience their homosexuality. At worst, they are irredeemable sinners: at best, they suffer from problems or afflictions. Given this discourse of rejection, non-Christians might assume that the simplest path would be the renunciation of religion" (184).

The young man in *Skeef* does not take the route of renouncing his Christianity. Instead, he decides to practise his religion outside of the church in which he was born. He does not abandon his religious beliefs altogether. Rather, he seeks to forge and find a faith community in which he can experience his sexuality without having to struggle with shame and guilt. He accepts his sexuality and accepts that he cannot dissociate it from his religious convictions and beliefs. This young man is certainly different from the protagonist of the film *Kanarie* who is initially unable to accept himself for what and who he is. Instead of considering himself the problem, he locates the bone of contention as "the literal reading of the Bible." This minister highlights the need to reconsider Christianity away from the myopic readings of the Bible in ways in which there is no place for queer individuals.

The suggestion here is that it is possible to forge faith communities and spaces where sexual orientation is not a hinderance to full spiritual fulfilment. In this way, the libidinal and the sexual are not elided from the full human experience. Rather, the libidinal and the sexual form an integral part of experiencing human existence. The journey towards self-acceptance and acceptance by others is not an easy one. Van Klinken clarifies in this regard: "This [reconciling queer sexuality and religious faith] is not an easy process and it often involves a spiritual struggle, not only with the church but also with the God preached about in church—and both struggles are now always things of the past" ("Queer Love in a 'Christian Nation': Zambian Gay Men Negotiating Sexual and Religious Identities" 955).

Joe Forster, a singer, shares with Schwarp that he also struggled to come to a point of accepting himself for who he was despite his Christian upbringing which made him feel like a pariah and leper:

It was hard for me to deal with it, I didn't want to accept it. I didn't want to be gay, because I didn't want to live with the stigma, you kind of get treated like a leper, and I felt I was going to kick against it. I prayed and I hoped, and in this process I got very depressed. I lost myself in the process, my whole life was one big filter of darkness.

The use of the metaphor of the leper is particularly telling of how Foster considered himself and points to the kinds of discourses that pathologize queerness. Gregory Tomso offers an apt comparison of queerness and the disease of leprosy and argues that “gay desire itself as a form of contagion, a continually circulating form of bodily ‘corruption’ whose origin, like the origin of leprosy, can never be definitively located in time or space” (747). In thinking of himself as a leper, Forster internalises Christian mores which deem queerness to be a corruption of what was intended by God. Moreover, the leper, as is the case with the figure of the queer, evokes in other people feelings of hatred, fear and uneasiness. The internalisation of Christian beliefs by queer individuals is itself pivotal in how they embody self-hatred, loathing and shame. David J. Allen and Terry Oleson find such a reaction to be normal and expected given that “[a]s a result of developing and living in an environment of hostility towards homosexuality, homosexuals inevitably internalise anti-homosexual views. This anti-homosexual bias in the homosexual psyche has been termed ‘internalised homophobia’” (33–4).

What is, however, worth noting is that the people interviewed in *Skeef* do not dwell much on the internalised homophobia. Instead, they accept themselves and set out to live their lives the best way that they see fit. This then compels others to accept themselves as they are. It is on this point that *Kanarie* ends where the individual has grappled internally with the shame, self-hatred and loathing and comes to a space of self-acceptance. *Skeef* presents individuals who identify as queer who have accepted themselves and are living their truths. The mostly coloured people who are interviewed in the documentary film do not grapple with the idea of race, per se. Instead, the main issue for them is that their sexual identities are diametrically opposed to the religious beliefs. In a way, coloured Afrikaansness appears to be relieved of and from the burden of race with which white Afrikaans characters such as Johan in *Kanarie* must deal. In *Kanarie*, the protagonist is compelled to rid himself of queerness because he is white, Christian and Afrikaans.

More than highlighting the diverse ways in which *Kanarie* and *Skeef* offer innovative ways of understanding how queer individuals negotiate their gender, sexual and religious identities, the main intervention that I have made in this article is to show that the libidinal should not be imagined outside of religion. In fact, (queer) sex and sexuality can be imagined within Christian dogma. The films register the diverse ways in which it possible to rethink Christian mores in the Afrikaans communities of South Africa in ways in which there are capacious considerations of difference and otherness. *Kanarie* and *Skeef* show that queerness can be liberated from the conservative religious and cultural practices of Afrikaans communities. As shown by the interviewees in *Skeef*, it is possible to find spaces away from the traditional contexts such as those of the Dutch Reformed Church and imagine new spaces where queer people do not have to struggle to harmonise their sexual identities with their religious beliefs. One character in *Kanarie* tells the protagonist Johan that he should embrace and fully live his difference: “As soon as your cage door opens, you fly away. Away from this God forsaken country, with all its sirs and madams and rules and regulations and all its hate and its bullies, its fucking bullies.”

Conclusion

Kanarie and *Skeef* are part of a growing body of Afrikaans-language films which broach queerness in the Afrikaans societies of South Africa. These films are important for the ways in which they discuss the question of queer agency and how queer individuals can exercise this agency in forging communities, especially faith communities. *Kanarie* and *Skeef* demonstrate that queerness and religion, especially as they intersect in Afrikaans societies, do not necessarily have to be antithetical.

In the two films, the characters rethink and negotiate their sexualities not from outside their religions but from within them. Johan in *Kanarie*, for instance, struggles with his sexuality within the faith community in which he has been born and raised. He questions his faith and especially what it says about his sexuality. His conversation with Dominee Engelbrecht shows him that he can in fact accept his sexuality despite what is stated and implied by the religious mores.

This article has demonstrated that it is possible to harmonise how queerness, Afrikaansness and Christianity intersect. Instead of viewing libidinality as irreconcilable with how Christianity is performed and practiced, it can be imagined as part and parcel of how religion is understood and enacted. Whilst shame and guilt seem to be the common and initial reaction, it is also possible to envision futures and spaces where being queer is not antithetical to being either Christian or Afrikaans.

Films such as *Kanarie* and *Skeef* are crucial in opening discussions on what it means to be queer and Afrikaans in South Africa. These films show that although religion is often a hinderance to queer individuals accepting their

sexual identities, it is possible to realise freedom within faith communities and rethink the place of libidinality within the practice of religion.

Notes

1. In this article, I use the terms 'black', 'white' and 'coloured', not because they have any scientific or genetic basis, but because of how South African society has been saddled with apartheid categories that continue into the present.

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Filmography

- Kanarie*, directed by Christiaan Olwagen, Marche Media, 2018.
- Moffie*, directed by Oliver Hermanus, Portobello Productions, 2019.
- Skeef*, directed by Renaldo Schwarz, Sharp Pictures, 2020.



The post-heroism of *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux* and *Verraaiers*

Danielle Britz & Chris Broodryk

The post-heroism of *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux* and *Verraaiers*


There is much scholarship on the linkages between Afrikaner nationalism and South African (Afrikaans-language) filmmaking. Within the context of a sustained post-apartheid renegotiation of Afrikaans or Afrikaner nationalism in the popular imagination, in this article we argue that two feature film historical dramas from the production company Bosbok Ses Films, *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux* (2013) and *Verraaiers* (2013), resonate thematically and aesthetically with Thomas Elsaesser's notion of post-heroic cinema. While a number of pre-1994 Afrikaans-language films celebrated Afrikaner nationalism as personified in the figure of the hero, this article positions and uses Elsaesser's post-heroism as a critical lens through which to demonstrate the ways in which these two films call attention to a post-hero whose actions and behaviour (often inadvertently) renders a productive renegotiating of the hero figure within a post-apartheid cinematic context. To supplement Elsaesser, we also draw on Johan Degenaar's writing on political pluralism. In this article, we find that an Elsaesserian post-heroic approach to the two films allows the following constitutive components of post-heroic cinema to surface: atemporality as opposed to linear narrative time, parapraxis (productive failure) as opposed to traditional iterations of heroic acts and valour, and conceiving of the film screen as a surface in flux as opposed to the screen as a mirror. The article's contribution to existing scholarship on contemporary Afrikaans-language cinema is three-fold: it is the first to utilise an Elsaesserian approach to Afrikaans film and as such to foreground and investigate the figure of the post-hero, it provides a critical account of two independently-made feature films that remain under-researched in current South African film scholarship, and it contributes to discourse around the ways in which popular media inform and respond to the renegotiation of Afrikaans (or Afrikaner) identity. **Keywords:** Afrikaner nationalism, atemporality, Bosbok Ses Films, parapraxis, post-heroism, *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux*, *Verraaiers*.

Introduction

There is considerable scholarship about Afrikaner nationalism in Afrikaans-language filmmaking and the nationalist hero figure in several South African (predominantly Afrikaans) films produced under apartheid. In Martin Botha's (*South African Cinema 1896–2010* 77) assessment, Afrikaans-language filmmaking of specifically the 1960s and 1970s avoided the issue of apartheid and offered stereotypical, one-dimensional representations of the Afrikaner. Of the nearly 229 feature films made between 1969 and 1979, "less than 5 percent could be considered cinematically innovative", writes Keyan Tomaselli (*The Cinema of Apartheid: Race and Class in South African Film* 90), indicating that most of these feature films tended towards an aesthetic tedium. Some post-apartheid Afrikaans films such as *Verraaiers* (2013) provide a different kind of central protagonist, which certain scholars may term a "tragic hero" (Jansen van Vuuren, *Kavaliër tot Verraaiër, Zombië tot Legoman: mites en die ideologiese uitbeelding van die held in geselekteerde rolprente en dramareeks oor die Anglo-Boeroorlog* 49) to describe such a character instead of "hero". We contend that within the dynamic political landscape of contemporary South Africa, conceiving of this new hero figure as simply 'tragic' fails to fully grasp such characters' implied renegotiation of Afrikaner identity, and in the


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case of *Verraaiers*, his political activity. In addition, the notion of the tragic hero is, as in the case of Anna-Marie Jansen van Vuuren's (*Kavalier tot Verraaier* 57) research, linked to conceptually prohibitive screenwriting formulae. We propose that Thomas Elsaesser's notion of a post-heroic cinema enables a critical reading framework that captures these characters' complexities and locates these complexities within a kind of film that is narratively and aesthetically markedly different from traditional Afrikaans mainstream filmmaking.

This article is situated in a range of scholarship that has critically investigated Afrikaner identity since 2007, when the popular but divisive Afrikaans song "De la Rey" by Bok van Blerk was released (Vanderhaeghen 29). By evoking the figure of reluctant Afrikaner Anglo Boer War hero General Koos de la Rey, the song was a nostalgic invocation of selfless heroism against an insurmountable danger (such as British armed forces) at a time where critical reflection on and renegotiating of the Afrikaner carried considerable cultural currency. As Gary Baines (258) describes it, "De la Rey" resonated with younger Afrikaners' sense of victimhood in and alienation from the so-called 'new' South Africa.

In this article, we briefly explore the historical links between Afrikaner nationalism and period-specific Afrikaans-language heroic cinema. We then demonstrate how two Afrikaans-language feature films, *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux* (My Regards to Mannetjies Roux) and *Verraaiers* (Traitors)—both produced by the film company Bosbok Ses—constitute thematic and aesthetic articulations of post-heroism in Afrikaans cinema. We foreground some of the links between Afrikaner nationalism and Afrikaans-language cinema and draw on Elsaesser's scholarship on post-heroic narratives in European cinema to critically discuss the ways in which *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux* and *Verraaiers* constitute its post-heroism. In addition, we refer to South African philosopher Johan Degenaar's writing on political pluralism to further inform our discussion. In this article we demonstrate that an Elsaesserian post-heroic approach to the two films allows a number of constitutive components of post-heroic cinema to surface, such as the use of atemporality as opposed to linear time. This post-heroic cinema also foregrounds productive failure (parapraxis) over heroic acts of valour and conceives of the screen as a surface of flux.

The official website for the South African film production company Bosbok Ses Films lists their four Afrikaans feature films released between 2011 and 2013: the coming-of-age period drama *Roepman* (Star Gazer, 2011); the treason drama *Verraaiers* (Traitors, 2012); the music drama *Musiek vir die agtergrond* (Background Music, 2013); and another coming-of-age period drama, *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux* (My Regards to Mannetjies Roux, 2013). *Roepman*, *Verraaiers*, and *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux* were all directed by Paul Eilers.

Based on a popular stage musical written by Chris Torr, *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux* uses Laurika Rauch's eponymous Afrikaans song as an impetus for its narrative by constructing a family drama based on key lyrics. In contrast to the song's nostalgic reminder of the traditional *volks* song genre associated with traditional Afrikanerdom, the anti-nostalgic *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux* casts an anti-nationalistic cinematic gaze on its characters and events. In the film, teenager Engela (Lizelle de Klerk) visits her uncle Frans (Ian Roberts) and his wife Koba (Anna-Mart van der Merwe) at their Karoo farm during the school holidays. When Engela's mother Anna (Steffie le Roux) arrives unexpectedly, the family is confronted by the truth of Frans's infidelity and the revelation that he is in fact Engela's father. *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux* emphasises the interiority of its characters, locating its character relationships set in 1970s South Africa within a larger mytho-political framework of rugby. In the analysis that follows, we will demonstrate that Frans is a post-hero and that the film itself can be positioned as a post-heroic narrative mainly due to its atemporality; the screen as surface of flux; and, additionally, the notion of double occupancy.

Verraaiers is set against the event and the memory of the South African War. Critic Leon van Nierop praised *Verraaiers* for avoiding any claims to accurate historical portrayal (332). Based on Albert Blake's book *Boereverraaier* (Boer Traitor, 2010), *Verraaiers* depicts the topic of treason and the idea of betraying the Afrikaner nation. *Verraaiers* is set during the South African War between South Africa and Britain; by the time this conflict started on 11 October 1888, republican forces had already been mobilised by Boer military leaders such as Commandant-general Piet Joubert (Grundlingh, *The Dynamics of Treason. Boer collaboration in the South African War of 1899–1902* 19). These republican forces were often criticised for a lack of proper military discipline (*Dynamics of Treason* 23–4). In response to the announcement of the British army's scorched earth technique, Boer commandant Jacobus van Aswegen (Gys de Villiers) and his sons abandon the Afrikaner war effort to return to their homes and protect their families and property. Van Aswegen and his sons are tried for high treason and sentenced to death. As producer and screenwriter Sallas de Jager told Screen Africa, "[the] subject of Boer traitors is still a controversial

issue in the Afrikaner community [...] That time period had a massive impact on history and on the South Africa we're seeing now". In the analysis that follows, we demonstrate that *Verraaiers*'s protagonist Jacobus van Aswegen is a post-hero, and that the film itself is post-heroic in its emphasis on the parapraxis of the body. This post-heroism is further illustrated in the way *Verraaiers* uses *mise-en-abyme* to call attention to the use of the screen, and the film's deployment of multiple perspectives on key ideological and political matters.

Since *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux* and *Verraaiers* can be read to respond to previously dominant traditions of Afrikaner nationalism in their post-heroism, it is necessary to provide a brief overview of Afrikaner nationalism as well as the links between nationalism and historical Afrikaans-language cinema.

The development of Afrikaner nationalism

Rising from historical challenges and traumas, Afrikaner nationalism, writes Hermann Giliomee, "is arguably the single most important political development of the first half of twentieth-century South Africa" (*Maverick Africans. The Shaping of the Afrikaners* 196). Such was the eventual impact of Afrikaner nationalism that Dan O'Meara ("Thinking theoretically: Afrikaner nationalism and the comparative theory of the politics of identity" 2) describes Afrikaner nationalism as the most severe of the "ethnic legacies which transfigure[d] [South Africa's] history".

Afrikaner nationalism "as a conscious movement" developed in the 1870s and 1880s (Giliomee, "Western Cape farmers and the beginnings of Afrikaner nationalism, 1870–1915" 38). Later, the subsequent development of an increasingly pronounced Afrikaner nationalism in the Western Cape (1870–1915) was influenced by a series of key events that posed numerous challenges to Afrikanerdom, including the South African War ("Western Cape" 62–3), which informs the narrative setting of *Verraaiers*. By 1938, "the great mass of ordinary Afrikaners" had been converted into "a consciously nationalist ideology" (Moodie, "The rise of Afrikanerdom as an immanent critique of Marx's theory of social class" 6). It is in the context of such strong, ideologically forged bonds and loyalties that even in-group "[political] differences seemed to dissolve in the heat of 'oxwagon sentiment'" in the kinds of centenary celebrations held in major cities such as Pretoria (Moodie, "Rise of Afrikanerdom" 7). This sentiment extended into various areas of political and economic activity. As T. Dunbar Moodie reflected at the time, "[the] Afrikaner state in South Africa has been absolutist over against blacks and protectionist over against foreign competition" (Moodie, "Rise of Afrikanerdom" 16).

For Degenaar, Afrikaner nationalism consists of four cornerstones: *selfbeskikking* (self-assertion), *volk*, race, and structural exclusion as constitutive of Afrikaner nationalist power and rhetoric (Degenaar 13–6). *Volk* translates as "the people", where the people in question are a culturally distinct and ethnically recognised group called the Afrikaner. As such, *volk* is a cultural concept based on a shared language, religion, and history, and is often associated with a sense of exclusivity. Structural exclusion refers to organisational instruments and support in ensuring the power of the Afrikaner and was originally enforced through two main organisations, the Afrikaner-Broederbond (Afrikaner Brotherhood, or AB, 1927–1948) and the National Party. Political power, in the context of historical Afrikaner nationalism, is dictated by ideological production of *selfbeskikking*, *volk*, and race, justifying the maintenance of Afrikaans power.

Against this exclusionary nationalist backdrop, Degenaar emerged as a "dissident professor of philosophy at Stellenbosch University" (Barron), who clashed with various Afrikaans authorities about religious dogma in his discussions of political philosophy. Degenaar explains that self-assertion is the mentality of the Afrikaner which ensures the freedom of the Afrikaans nation to view themselves as superior, as it is a seemingly self-created freedom, with institutions such as the Afrikaner-Broederbond, as ideological production of Afrikaner nationalism.¹

Degenaar's criticism of Afrikaner self-assertion and ideological state apparatuses leads Moodie ("N. P. van Wyk Louw and the moral predicament of Afrikaner nationalism: preparing the ground for *verligte* reform" 200–1) to offer a positive evaluation of Degenaar's contribution to discussions around race in South African—and primarily Afrikaans—circles. With reference to race, Degenaar was critical of the apartheid policy of separate development in which race was formalised as category for geographic placement, often limiting black South Africans to so-called homelands. In opposition to this policy, Degenaar argued that ethnic identity "in a multi-cultural state must necessarily involve sharing political sovereignty" where ethnicity—or "voluntary ethnic attachment"—is fluid. Degenaar was one of the Afrikaans critics of Afrikanerdom who had anticipated the collapse of an unsustainable Afrikanerdom (Moodie, "N. P. van Wyk Louw" 209) and its nationalism.

This collapse of Afrikanerdom and its myths plays out implicitly as a political commentary across the melancholic landscapes and moral quandaries of the historical dramas *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux* and

Verraaiers. We identify a constructive resonance between the demise of the Afrikaner's structural political power in a democratic South Africa, and a narrative feature film structure which does not reassert a nationalist Afrikaner self-identity. Instead, these narrative feature films propose a post-heroism in which identity is "not a God-given but [...] the product of voluntary identification with a group and its values", as Degenaar describes it, where individuals think "in moral terms about survival" (Giliomee, *The Rise and Demise of the Afrikaners* 79). After 2010, *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux* and *Verraaiers* sustained the call from politically dissident Afrikaans filmmakers in the 1970s and 1980s such as Jans Rautenbach and Manie van Rensburg (Botha, "Die Suid-Afrikaanse filmbedryf sedert 1994") to critically reconsider what it means to be an Afrikaner in relation to the persistence of a 'volk' in the Afrikaner's social imaginary and in the social imaginary of contemporary white Afrikaans-speaking individuals who recognise themselves as Afrikaans and/or Afrikaners.

Afrikaner nationalism and Afrikaans-language cinema

In 1923 the first production company based in South Africa, African Film Productions (AFP), was established. This British-funded production company produced *De Voortrekkers: Winning a Continent* (1916), which reinstated a sense of pride in the recently defeated Afrikaners after the South African War (Tomaselli, *Encountering Modernity: Twentieth Century South African Cinemas* 26–7). Such was the film's cultural impact that General Louis Botha, then South African prime minister, praised the film's intense investment in history and historical accuracy (Van Nierop 27–8). While one should not overdetermine the influence of this single film on Afrikaans-language filmmaking, *De Voortrekkers* "established a powerful precedent for the coding of race and nation" in South African cinema (Moyer-Duncan xvi). Also in 1916, *A Zulu's Devotion* was about an elderly Zulu man who is taken in and cared for by a white family (Van Nierop 25) while in 1938, Joseph Albrecht's *They Built a Nation* celebrated Afrikaner history as part of a larger civilising mission benefitting Africa (Van Nierop 37). If it holds that over time "the 'strong and courageous Boer' became the figurehead of the myth of white Afrikaner identity and later the cornerstone for the Afrikaner Nationalist ideology from the late 1930s until the end of Apartheid [sic]" (Jansen Van Vuuren, "Challenging the Mythical Boer Hero Archetype in Anglo-Boer War Short Films" 6), then both *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux* and *Verraaiers* are overtly conscious of humanising and also demythologising the Boer—family man, father, soldier, provider, and farmer—and positioning the emergent figure within the post-heroism of a more introspective and possibly politically progressive rethinking of Afrikaner nationalism.

As we will demonstrate later in this article, approaching these films through the lens of post-heroism enables a reading of these films as humanising—and demythologising—its main characters.

From the 1950s to the 1980s South African cinema often served the apartheid government by validating Afrikaner cultural values (Moyer-Duncan 33). Botha ("Suid-Afrikaanse filmbedryf") describes the often politically unresponsive, escapist South African (often Afrikaans) films of primarily the 1960s and 1970s as *verstrooiingsvermaak*, a pleasurable light-hearted diversion or distraction from the political tumult of the day. Unlike the more politically conscious films of filmmakers such as Ross Devenish, these escapist movies avoided explicit socio-political commentary in favour of formulaic and predictable genre fare. *Verstrooiingsvermaak* persisted in the more than 30 Afrikaans feature film released between 2006 and 2013, which consisted of teen comedies, adaptations of young adult novels, musicals, and other genre fare (thrillers and romantic comedies) that borrowed heavily from American counterparts. In this environment, Katinka Heyns's *Die wonderwerker* (The Miracle Worker, 2012) was an award-winning prestige drama about the Afrikaans poet and naturalist Eugène Marais. Botha ("Suid-Afrikaanse filmbedryf") identifies Heyns's film as well as Eilers's *Verraaiers* as two of the post-2010 feature films that confront the viewer with the traumas of South African history. In this sense, our position is that *Verraaiers* is the more politically and aesthetically productive of the two films. This status of productivity is linked to positioning *Verraaiers* as a post-heroic film featuring a post-heroic figure at its centre.

Rachel Browne points to an important contrast between the social realities depicted on screen in *Die wonderwerker* and *Verraaiers*. For Browne, *Die wonderwerker* "seemed to be suspended in non-reality, and as an historical drama it was [...] utterly at odds with the actual history providing the context for the times" while *Verraaiers* shows the Van Aswegen farm neighboured by black African occupants (Browne 452). About the exact status of these black African farmers, Browne adds: "it is not stated [what kind of farmers these characters are], but they were there and are woven into the fabric of the story. This is an important factor in the film, as it contributed towards its gravitas while unmistakably locating the tragic events, infusing them with veracity and integrity" (452). Indeed, some viewers anticipated that *Verraaiers* would be received as an attempt to humiliate the

Afrikaner by making them revisit the war they had lost and by showing why many Boers had chosen to abandon the republican forces and return home (Son). As Jansen van Vuuren puts it, *Verraaiers* was “the first commercial feature film made about the Anglo-Boer War since the end of Apartheid [sic]” (“Challenging the Mythical Boer” 7). For Jansen van Vuuren, the film “openly challenge[s] the myth of the pure and innocent Boer fighting for their land in a just manner” (“Challenging the Mythical Boer” 7); the De Jagers had fortuitously laid the groundwork for a post-heroic Afrikaans cinema.

While the constituent parts of post-heroism draw on the scholarship of Elsaesser, we borrow the spirit of this version of post-heroism from Degenaar and his critique of Afrikanerdom recounted earlier. For the purposes of this article, post-heroism refers to a shift away from narratives built around heroic figures in pursuit of a specific goal, where this goal is explicitly or implicitly linked to aspects of Afrikaner nationalism; a shift towards narratives that call for a new thinking of ‘community’ where, in a South African context, a critical engagement with historical and contemporary tenets of Afrikaner nationalism takes place; and is characterised by a sense of aesthetic innovation and cinematic self-awareness that is indicative of a break with what might be considered aesthetically conventional in much of mainstream Afrikaans cinema, including an emphasis on the mortality and even abjection of the human body.

Atemporality, double occupancy, and parapraxis in *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux*

Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux introduces numerous perspectives on its characters, events, and environments through its atemporality: deliberate shifts in time that lead the viewer to question or acquire insights into the characters and, for instance, event causality. The film’s first image is a medium long shot of a voluptuous woman, Anna, undressing and approaching a bed. There is a radio in the foreground of the shot. The next scene is set in the future where the older Engela (Laurika Rauch) enters a room at the old farmhouse and reads a letter addressed to her that is written by Frans. Through these opening images the film introduces various perspectives or points of view of the woman getting undressed, the radio commentator who celebrates Mannetjies Roux’s rugby skills, the older Engela, and Frans. These images and figures speak to each other in a way that becomes clearer as the film’s temporality gradually crystallises into a narrative of conflicting perspectives in which truth elides Engela (and the viewer), at least up to a point.

Director Eilers is conscious of the importance of perspective through the constant shifting of character perspectives and through characters’ dialogue. Toemaar, the nomadic coloured worker staying on the farm, explicitly advises young Engela against a single perspective by stating “*dis soms partykeer beter om dieselfde ding in ’n ander lig te sien*” (it’s sometimes better to look at the same thing from another angle). This foregrounding of perspective shifts reminds the audience that the film screen is a surface of flux, not a mirror. For Elsaesser the screen as a surface of flux is an essential element of a post-heroic narrative in that it undermines audience-hero identification and instead invites the audience to navigate through various perspectives on narrative events (Elsaesser, “European Cinema and the Post-heroic Narrative: Jean-Luc Nancy, Claire Denis, and Beau Travail” 711).

Linearity in heroic narratives depicts the screen as a window, or mirror, to reality which creates a sense of temporal exactness to the film as events are represented chronologically. This film’s atemporality presents the screen as a surface of flux, without suggesting any accurate, realistic representation. The film evokes trauma as personal (deceit, infidelity, and betrayal) and political (apartheid). The atemporal structure also implies the mortality of the human body; the film codes the mortality of the human body in regular flashbacks and flash forwards: time and the human body are exposed as time-bound and fragile. At the end of the film, the older Engela visits the graves of her parents, Anna and Frans. The long shot of the graves reveals that Anna and Frans were buried next to one another on the farm, indicating that Koba must have forgiven her sister. This single shot confirms the deaths of Anna and Frans, while evoking the dual figures of a younger and older Engela. In this evocation of aging and death, the scene establishes the film’s awareness of the mortal body. Engela’s navigation of memory and filmic time moves between youthful immaturity and innocence (teenage Engela) and self-reflection in the wisdom of age and experience (older Engela).

Double occupancy refers to the multiplicity of identity across spatial displacement and historical shifts, where the space is already occupied by power structures associated with history (Elsaesser, “Space, Place and Identity in European Cinema of the 1990s” 650). Double occupancy challenges grand narratives of history, geography, and place. Such a double occupancy is conveyed through close-ups in *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux*.

The film includes shots of bodies making physical contact with the space—the farmland—such as a close-up of Katie leaning against a table kneading dough and a close-up of Toemaar’s feet walking on a dust road approaching the farm. In the latter shot, Toemaar is immediately cast as an outsider, the other, who is literally excluded from the farm community. The coloured characters in the film are displaced as they are working on a white-owned farm during apartheid. These characters are further displaced because they are away from their homes, and their presence on the farm signifies space that is doubly occupied.

The inclusion of the other in this doubly occupied space points to the paradox of an Afrikaner-shaped national identity of the 1970s (Elsaesser, “Real Location, Fantasy Space, Performative Place: Double Occupancy and Mutual Interference in European Cinema” 48). The characters Katie and Toemaar are imbued by the parameters of their social roles during apartheid and they operate within and beyond these confines in alignment with the film’s narrative realism as agents of moderate social change in shaping the thoughts and lives of Engela and her family. *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux*’s representation of the repetition of 1970s Afrikanerdom’s failure to fully represent its racial and political other constitutes a corrective to earlier, more stereotypical representations.

Elsaesser finds that one can mourn the trauma of the past through the necessary repetition and mimicry of failure, or parapraxis (Elsaesser, “Absence as Presence, Presence as Parapraxis: On Some Problems of Representing ‘Jews’ in the New German Cinema” 113). Trauma causes a gap in memory, and this gap is often filled with false perceptions and versions of events and people. A narrative of memory work positioned as a ‘true depiction’ of historic (or current) events, is incapable of mourning the past because trauma is non-representable. Parapraxis successfully repeats history’s failure. Parapraxis, as a repeated failure, takes on the first two of Freud’s stages of mourning, remembering, and repeating (Elsaesser, “Absence as Presence” 110).

Parapraxis is derived from Sigmund Freud’s concept of *Fehlleistung*, which evokes the performative aspect of absence and failure (Elsaesser, “Absence as Presence” 109). Parapraxis implies a performed failure, often an action which unintentionally fails to achieve its apparent aim yet opens up productive possibilities of social and political activity. Performance and failure are seemingly contradicting terms as it implies that the result of an intended action is a failure and that the failure then has the possibility to mock the intention (Elsaesser, *German Cinema—Terror and Trauma: Cultural Memory since 1945* 9). Frans embodies this parapractic paradox. After sleeping with Anna, he repeatedly fails at working through this betrayal. Frans as the parapractic post-hero performs Elsaesser’s description of parapraxis as the “the right thing at the wrong place, or the wrong thing at the right time” (Elsaesser, *German Cinema* 9).

Frans’s past failure is always catching up with him, specifically when Anna arrives at the farm years after their adultery. Frans then fails to conform to the traditional heroic figure of the community saviour. Instead, he is haunted by his repeated failures both in other characters (such as Anna) and in memory. Traumatic events, such as his betrayal of his family, are omnipresent, suggesting that the past cannot be changed and that the present is as precarious as the future. Instead, the failures of the past can be remembered and repeated, serving as the first two stages of Freud’s memory work.

Despite his best efforts, Frans fails in his attempts at heroism, specifically the notion that it is through his apparent self-sacrifice that his family can resolve their conflict. Elsaesser explains that the post-hero is parapractic when the hero’s active efforts to accomplish something (even something praiseworthy or otherwise laudable) lead to unintended politically positive results, by doing “the right thing at the wrong place, or the wrong thing at the right time” (Elsaesser, *German Cinema* 102). In fact, Frans goes so far as to physically remove himself from family disputes by resigning to the nearby wind pump, which becomes a significant object in the film. The wind pump becomes an object of isolation and social impotence associated with the parapractic figure of Frans. It is appropriately symbolic of Frans’s passivity: it too is moved to action by external forces, not by an own volition. Frans’s ritual of sitting on the wind pump and enjoying the silence and isolation of the space to apparently gain insight into the family problems never leads to any action or tangible solution. Ironically, by finally falling off the wind pump Frans saves the family. Frans’s death is not self-sacrificial as it is Anna who accidentally pushes him off the wind pump.

As Giliomee (*Maverick Africans* 165) describes it, apartheid would persist in ideology and practice “as long as the church continued to endorse some basic idea that God had willed the existence of Afrikaners and, indeed, all nations”; that is, as long as there was a distinct religious exceptionalism to the Afrikaner. Although Christianity was a cornerstone of Afrikaner nationalism, *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux* is for the most part secular. One of the few references to God in the film is a conversation between Koba and the farmworker, Toemaar. When Koba

leaves the farm to stock up on supplies, Toemaar asks her for matches and coffee, to which she responds: “Jy’t ’n probleem, Toemaar. Jy moet daaroor bid” (You have a problem, Toemaar. You must pray about it.) He answers her with a significant reference to the absence of God: “Maar die Here is dan so ver en Mevrou is dan net hier langs my” (But the Lord is so far away and Ma’am is right here next to me.) Unfortunately, the film does not further explore the materiality of Toemaar’s recrimination of Koba: why appeal to an immaterial supernatural force when Koba is right there to attend to earthly challenges? The most divine figure in *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux* is the rugby *volk* hero, Mannetjies Roux. The rugby legend’s solo try against the British Lions in 1962 would become entrenched in the collective memory and imagination of the Afrikaner, and would on occasion serve as a nostalgic point of re-entry into South African history (Grundlingh, *Potent Pastimes: Sport and Leisure Practices in Modern Afrikaner History* 71). While rugby remained for decades a male-dominated space in which men performed a particular masculine identity in the public space of the sports stadium, Grundlingh notes that “there seems to have been a residual and subconscious hankering to personalise and domesticate what took place on the field and to bridge the divide between the public and the personal” (Grundlingh, *Potent Pastimes* 90). When Frans tells the tale of Mannetjies Roux, he mythologises the rugby player for doing the humanly impossible, explaining that the odds were stacked against him in the match. Frans’s story of Mannetjies Roux’s try is also deployed whenever he consciously distracts himself from his adultery, positioning Mannetjies Roux as a morally pure icon.

Frans’s constant reference to Mannetjies Roux’s try is not only significant as he uses it as an alibi for his own infidelity, but also because of rugby’s historical political connotation. Stephanus Muller emphasises that, at times throughout South African history, rugby represented group cohesion and a collective dominance of Afrikanerdom (20). Rugby, then, has particular significance in the collective Afrikaner imagination and has informed Afrikaner popular culture as well as Afrikaner nationalism (Grundlingh, *Potent Pastimes* 11). In fact, rugby became interwoven with Afrikaner nationalism specifically in the 1930s and 1940s—which Giliomee calls “a radical [...] Afrikaner ethnic movement [...] which would insist on political supremacy and which would define the group exclusively in terms of an elaborate ethnic ideology” (*Maverick Africans* 100)—attaining a symbolic value “closely associated with resurgent Afrikanerdom” in which rugby was “closely aligned to the overall nationalist Afrikaner enterprise in its various cultural and political manifestations” (Grundlingh, *Potent Pastimes* 55, 62, 64).

Historically, rugby players could be claimed as *volk* heroes of the Afrikaner, where a victory on the field signified a victory of the Afrikaner over an enemy force such as the British. Mannetjies Roux’s victory on the field came to be read as a symbolic victory for the Afrikaner nation. Mannetjies Roux as *volk* hero is not physically present in the film but is a presence evoked by another character. The mythology of Mannetjies Roux underscores Frans’s parapractic status as Roux’s accomplishments are mostly present only in Frans’s reminiscing, a combination of memory and imagination. *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux* presents a post-heroism informed by parapraxis, double occupancy, and atemporality.

Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux lays bare the political impotence of nostalgia in favour of a potent demythologisation of the traditional hero figure and a particular Afrikaner ideological orientation. This demythologisation occurs in the film in its use of post-heroic mechanisms in which the politics of othering in the period setting (its double occupancy), together with the post-heroic Frans and the film’s facilitation of multiple perspectives on its characters, themes, and events. With reference to Degenaar’s work from earlier, *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux* complicates the idea of self-assertion and of the exceptionalist *volk* through double occupancy. Post-heroism counters structural exclusion by demythologising traditional ideas of Afrikaner nationalism.

Multiple perspectives, parapraxis, and fragile bodies in *Verraaiers*

Verraaiers follows the experience of Boer soldiers in the South African War who are put on trial for high treason after signing a neutrality oath and withdrawing from combat. Indeed, in its post-heroism we argue that *Verraaiers* represents and repeats a humanistic re-envisioning of the South African War which contrasts with the heroic narratives of Afrikaans feature film war dramas including, but not limited to, *Kaptein Caprivi* (Captain Caprivi, 1972), *Aanslag op Kariba* (Assault on Kariba, 1973), *Ses soldate* (Six Soldiers, 1974), and the more contemporary *Modder en bloed* (Blood and Glory, 2016). *Verraaiers* also preceded the releases of the critically introspective Afrikaans-language war films *Recce* (2018), *Kanarie* (Canary, 2018), and *Moffie* (Faggot, 2019).

Betrayal, in *Verraaiers*, is then explicitly linked to those Boer soldiers who had given up arms and returned to their homes in the face of the British onslaught, especially following the scorched earth mandate. Grundlingh (*Dynamics of Treason* 11) defines the controversial figure of the surrendered Boer as “a conscripted male burgher

from either of the two Boer republics, who first fought on the Boer side, after which he voluntarily withdrew from the conflict and handed over his weapons to the British military authorities". Boer soldiers "realised that Britain could call upon an almost inexhaustible number of military reinforcements" which increasingly eroded the Boers' chances of winning the war and convinced many of them to abandon the war effort and return to their homesteads (11).

Similar to *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux*, *Verraaiers* introduces the audience to a multiple characters' perspectives from the start of the film. *Verraaiers* accomplishes these multiple perspectives by shifting from 1950s Pretoria to the early 1900s. The film opens in 1953 in the Magistrate's Court in Pretoria, then shifts time and perspective as the judge recalls the events from 1900. This interplay between flashbacks and the present set the temporal pattern for the rest of the film to shift between 1953, 1900, and 1901. In doing so, *Verraaiers* positions the screen as a surface of flux. There are also various characters who deliberate on matters of war and high treason, providing various perspectives and even opposing views on the same events. The film reminds the audience of the importance of perspective when Gerrie, the young lawyer and soldier acting as confidant to General De La Rey, explains that "verraad lyk heelwat anders elke keer as jy van 'n ander hoek na dit kyk" (treason looks different every time you view it from a different angle), echoing a similar line of dialogue in *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux*. Through these various perspectives, the audience is not manipulated into an immediate, exclusive loyalty towards specific characters.

Although the film positions Jacobus van Aswegen and his sons as the protagonists, it also articulates the perspectives of those characters who view the van Aswegens as traitors. Consequently, the relationship between the van Aswegens and these other characters can be described as antagonistic. The protagonists are viewed as traitors by the antagonist, Gerrie. Gerrie is a differently abled "traitor" who worked for the British and warned them that the Boers are planning an attack. After the British retreat, his allegiance shifts once more to cooperation with the Boers. The protagonists who have fought for the Boers in the war are tried for high treason, yet the traitor to the Boers is praised for his hard work and loyalty. In the film, the Afrikaners' mutuality is due to a shared enemy, the British, yet the Afrikaners are antagonistic towards one another for being traitors.

The film's provocation to engage with conflicting political and moral actions and to shift one's empathy away from or towards certain characters is a cinematic iteration of pluralist thinking. Pluralism counteracts the one-man-one-voice model of Afrikaner nationalism (Degenaar 110). Pluralism offers such an alternative by allowing for freedom of social configuration. *Volksnasionisme* (Afrikaner nationalism) included and excluded individuals based on race, language, religion, and culture, viewing the nation as a static construct. In contrast, pluralism positions a nation as a dynamic identity, with fluctuating social associations. *Verraaiers* facilitates a multitude of fluctuating social configurations through the various characters' perspectives. These perspectives accommodate a sense of personal, social, and political animosity in instances where individuals want to form part of a community or society, but also on some level resist such a potentially assimilative process. If these individuals prioritise their individual interests over that of the collective—the community—they put the idea of community and society at risk.

Verraaiers further positions the screen as a surface of flux through the characters' reflections in mirrors. These reflections are visually prominent in numerous scenes throughout the film, such as General de la Rey and Gerrie's reflections in a mirror whilst passing by in the military court. It also occurs quite regularly with Jacobus's wife, Gerda, whose reflection is visible in mirrors or windows. These mirror reflections function as *mise-en-abyme*, which stimulates the viewers' awareness of the screen by creating an inside-outside relationship between the audience and screen (Elsaesser, *Film Theory: An Introduction Through the Senses* 56). *Mise-en-abyme* negates the notion of the screen as mirror or window to reality. Instead of reflecting or revealing reality, the awareness of the screen created by this cinematic reflexivity challenges the viewer to become aware of the form and language of what they are watching.

In *Verraaiers*, protagonist Jacobus van Aswegen has no agency in the resolution of events, as he and his sons are finally executed for high treason despite Jacobus's plea with General de la Rey and the military court to save his sons and execute him instead. He volunteers to be the self-sacrificial heroic figure but his attempt at self-sacrifice for the sake of the community fails. Jacobus is incapable of redeeming himself through self-sacrifice. His repeated failure to undo past events and mistakes, including encouraging his sons to sign the neutrality oath with the British, positions him as *Verraaiers*' primary parapractic post-hero. This performed failure occurs when the unsuccessful result of an active effort mocks the very intention of the effort (Elsaesser, *Film Theory* 102).

Verraaiers also provocatively positions the traditional Afrikaner *volksmoeder* (mother of the nation) as parapractic post-hero. The *volksmoeder* in traditional historical Afrikaans cinema serves as a moral beacon of hope to unify the Afrikaner nation (Tomaselli, *Encountering Modernity* 148). In *Verraaiers*, Jacobus's wife Gerda initially reminds the men in the film of Afrikanerdom's faith in God:

Moet ons dit nie vir ons Hemelse Vader oorlaat om die besluit te neem wanneer hierdie stryd oor is nie? Ek glo vas die Here sal vir ons 'n oorwinning gee. Ons moet hom net vertrou.

Must we not leave it to our heavenly Father to decide when this struggle is over? I believe that He will give us a victory. We must just have faith.

The youngest son, Karel-Jan, reminds her that Christianity and faith are not the exclusive domains of the rebels: *Ma, voor elke veldslag bid ons in Afrikaans en hulle in Engels vir dieselfde God en dieselfde verlosser en net daarna moor ons mekaar uit. As ons wen het God vir ons 'n oorwinning gegee, maar as ons verloor was hulle te veel of iemand het ons verraa, of die omsingeldes wat opgegee het is lafaards, of iets. Daar's altyd 'n verskoning. Maar die hemele behoed ons as God sy ander kinders se kant kies.*

Mother, before every battle we pray in Afrikaans and they pray in English and just thereafter we kill each other. If we win God gave us a victory, but if we lose, they were too many, or somebody betrayed us, or the surrounded men who gave up are cowards, or something. There is always an excuse. But heaven forbid if God chose his other children's side.

Despite the characters' strong faith in God as their saviour, all the men are executed. Jacobus's death results in profound trauma for Gerda towards the end of the film. Here, in an extreme long shot of her alone in the harsh veld close to the farm, Gerda removes her dress, sets it on fire, and walks naked into the veld, away from the camera. As she slowly fades into the background, her burning dress remains in the foreground of the shot.

This scene suggests how the news of her husband and sons' execution has driven Gerda to abandon her traditional duties of wife and mother, and to surrender to a self-imposed isolation, probably death. As a *volksmoeder* she fails in her duties to be a moral beacon of unification through this action, despite her prior active efforts to forge cohesion amongst the community. This failure can lead to politically positive results (Elsaesser, *German Cinema* 102). In her failure, Gerda stands as part of the larger failure of Afrikaner nationalism with its myth of a single unified Afrikanerdom and proposes a call to renegotiate what it means to be an Afrikaner. Martha, Jacobus van Aswegen's daughter-in-law, suffers a miscarriage upon hearing about the executions. Demythologising Afrikaner nationalism points to a cinematic post-heroism explicitly tied to a unique contemporary context in which the Afrikaner continues to renegotiate their political role and participation in the post-apartheid dispensation.

Over time, the Afrikaner prisoners' bodies have become abject; physically, the men had become strangers to their former selves as a result of the physical degradation of their flesh. Elsaesser explains that in becoming the other, one is forced to confront the other within the self and overcome the binary between self and other (Elsaesser, "European Cinema" 723). It is only through confronting the other within the self that these men, associated with an Afrikaner war effort, accept the other and thus overcome the self-other binary, embracing antagonism. A physically strong masculine body is historically associated with acts of valour and courage performed by more traditional fictional heroes in Afrikaans cinema. The decay of the characters' physical bodies in *Verraaiers* represents both the ideological and biological decaying of Afrikaner nationalism. The combination of these bodies and ideas in decay with multiple perspectives, the screen as surface of flux, and a parapractic post-hero, renders *Verraaiers* a post-heroic film.

If it holds that the main aim of "the politics of historical memory is the justification of the entitlement of the group (called 'nation') to territorially delineated political sovereignty—which in turn is the principal aspiration and objective of nationalism" (Bauman 62), then the post-heroism of *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux* and *Verraaiers* challenges the notion of a God-given territory associated with an exclusive Afrikaner nationalism in which failure and treachery are categories assigned to specific actions and activities. This latter aspect of nationalism is exactly the "chauvinistic ethnonationalism" Degenaar decried in favour of an "open plural society" (Giliomee, *The Rise and Demise* 78). Through the interrelation between double occupancy and parapraxis cinema can demonstrate ways in which individuals can be politically and socially responsible for each other by showing how identity is "wholly relational and unsecured", where "each being exists in the space of the other [towards] cooperation and interdependence" (Elsaesser, "Real location" 60), echoing Degenaar's notion of the fluidity of voluntary social association.

With reference to Degenaar's work mentioned earlier, *Verraaiers* exposes treason as a parapractic and post-heroic iteration of self-assertion. The *volk* as homogeneous unified entity is itself a myth that has served its initial purpose and, in this film's commentary, run out of ideological momentum. The post-hero in this film and in *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux* is conceptual nexus—a character as question mark—and not the heroic figure of 1970s Afrikanerdom. *Verraaiers* specifically foregrounds the traitor figure as post-heroic in a film that additionally deploys the instability of the screen (the surface of flux) to facilitate multiple perspectives on the theme of betrayal and its continued haunting of an Afrikaner psyche.

Conclusion

In this article we drew on Elsaesser's research and followed Degenaar's political thinking to argue that the two Bosbok Ses films *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux* and *Verraaiers* demonstrate a framework of post-heroism in contemporary Afrikaans cinema by demythologising an exclusive nationalistic Afrikaner *volk* identity. The link between Afrikaner nationalism and a certain kind of earlier Afrikaans filmmaking was addressed. While a number of Afrikaans-language feature films indulged nostalgia in a *verstrooiingsvermaak*-manner, these two films ask critical questions of Afrikaner and Afrikaans identity as these identities remain contentious in South African discourse around history, race, and place.

To revisit the explanation of post-heroism from earlier, *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux* and *Verraaiers* demonstrate a shift away from narratives built around heroic figures in pursuit of, and accomplishing, a specific noble goal where this goal is linked to aspects of Afrikaner nationalism. In addition, the films call for a new thinking of 'community' due to its deployment of double occupancy and the evocation of multiple perspectives on ideological and political matters. Both films offer a cinematic self-awareness *vis-à-vis* the screen as surface of flux and its use of narrative atemporality, which indicates a break from aesthetic conventions in much of mainstream Afrikaans cinema. In light of the above, *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux* and *Verraaiers* offer a critical engagement with historical and contemporary tenets of Afrikaner nationalism. This engagement results in the demythologisation of the *volk* and its traditional heroes: the highly masculine Frans and his rugby hero Mannetjies Roux and the abjected Boer fighters in *Verraaiers*.

In conclusion, this overall post-heroism of the Afrikaans-language historical dramas *Stuur groete aan Mannetjies Roux* and *Verraaiers* invites viewers to speculate about the implications of a pluralist society free from imposed social association. This society nonetheless bears the weight of history, which may aid the successful mourning of social traumas emanating from South Africa's complex past.

Notes

1. The Afrikaner Broederbond was a secret society which was exclusively reserved for Afrikaans, Christian men and played a determining role in the establishment of Afrikaner political power by promoting the National Party's agenda (see O'Malley, "Afrikaner-Broederbond (AB)") in its capacity as a "policy-making and coordinating body" (O'Meara, "The Afrikaner Broederbond 1927–1948: Class vanguard of Afrikaner nationalism" 184).

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“It’s easy to just be normal”: Performative masculinities in *Die stropers*

Danel Boshoff & Annemi Conradie

“It’s easy to just be normal”: Performative masculinities in *Die stropers*

In post-apartheid South Africa, the representation of queer identities in Afrikaans-language films have become increasingly prominent. However, many such films focus on past contexts or serve as comedic depictions, failing to confront the complex issues faced by individuals in contemporary Afrikaner communities. Etienne Kallos’s 2018 coming-of-age film *Die stropers* (*The Harvesters*) candidly depicts the challenges faced by adoptive brothers Janno and Pieter, who must negotiate desire and gender in a conservative, Afrikaans farming community. Drawing on Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity and recent reformulations of Raewyn Connell’s notion of hegemonic masculinity, we examine the discursive (re)production of hegemonic Afrikaner masculinity within the boys’ adoptive family and community. We investigate how the protagonists strategically deploy performative masculinities to achieve belonging and acceptance as heirs, even if the ideals they emulate oppress and restrict them. We propose that the protagonists’ strategic deployment of performative masculinities represents their claiming of agency in contexts where gender and desire are aggressively policed. Furthermore, their navigation of hegemony in this white, Afrikaner community through resistance and consent might point to a claiming of space for queer identities and the continued transmutation of hegemonic masculinity. **Keywords:** performativity, hegemonic masculinity, *Die stropers*, Afrikaner nationalism, Afrikaans-language film, queer cinema.


Introduction

Etienne Kallos’s *Die stropers* (*The Harvesters*) from 2018 addresses the intersections of same-sex desire and hegemonic Afrikaner masculinity, topics that are infrequently represented within Afrikaans-language films. *Die stropers* depicts the challenges faced by Janno and Pieter, adoptive brothers who must negotiate the values of a conservative farming community as they explore sexuality, desire, and their own gender identities. Martin Botha (“The representation of gays and lesbians in South African cinema 1985–2013” 1) argues that films have the potential to bring about social change and it is, therefore, essential for mainstream cinema to explore how people of different communities navigate dominant constructions of gender and sexuality. Writing on global queer cinema, Karl Schoonover and Rosalind Galt (89) argue that cinema “is always involved in worldmaking” and that “queer cinema creates different accounts of the world, offering alternatives embedded in capitalist, nationalist, hetero- and homo-normative maps. It creates new and dissident modes of affection and pleasure as well as new modes of cinematic style”. Queer cinema, then, is a space of aesthetic innovation and identitarian alterity.

We propose a theoretical lens that uses the concepts of hegemonic masculinity and performativity to investigate how the brothers rely on and deploy performative masculinities to achieve belonging and acceptance as worthy male heirs of their parents’ farm. Drawing on Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity and recent reformulations of Raewyn Connell’s notion of hegemonic masculinity, we argue that idealised masculine


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ideals such as those depicted in *Die stropers* restrict the boys' ability to freely explore and experiment with gender identities and desire. We propose, however, that the protagonists' strategic deployment of performative masculinities represents their claiming of agency in contexts where gender and desire are aggressively policed. As hegemony is relational and dialectical, we suggest that hegemonic Afrikaner masculinity, as displayed in *Die stropers*, is constantly subverted, reproduced, and hybridised by subordinate, marginalised masculinities, as represented by Janno and Pieter. As the two brothers variously perform gender and cultural identities to fit into or make space for themselves in the patriarchal, ethno-nationalist context of the film, they affect their context as it affects them.

Die stropers was released at the 2018 Cannes Film Festival and is Greek-South African director Kallos's feature debut. At the time of writing, the film is available for view on Showmax, a mainstream entertainment streaming service. Similar to Oliver Hermanus's film *Skoonheid* (2011) and John Trengove's *Inxeba* (2017), *Die stropers* explores hidden and suppressed homosexual desire in the contemporary South African cultural context (Van Hoeij). It is a coming-of-age story set against the backdrop of a central Free State farming community where a white ethnic minority clings to the belief that they are God's chosen people, forced to fight for cultural survival. Kallos (qtd in Dercksen) refers to this area as "the Bible Belt of South Africa", suggesting that here too—as in the southern United States—conservative Christianity has a powerful influence on politics and culture.

Central to the film's narrative is the white, Afrikaans-speaking family of Jan and Marie, who farm cattle and maize. They adopt white, Afrikaans children to raise as their own and fulfil a divine calling to preserve the customs and continued existence of their people. The conservative farming community depicted in the film idealises a form of masculinity that adheres to traditional values and manifests through displays of self-discipline, religiosity, and physical and emotional toughness. The eldest son, Janno, is presented as different from this model. He is quiet and reserved, is keen to please others and, unlike the other men, shows tenderness and emotional fragility. He further hides his admiration and desire for his best friend, Hennie, whose photograph he displays on the inside of his closet door.

Janno's fragile sense of belonging is shaken when his mother adopts Pieter, an orphaned drug addict from the city. Unlike Janno, who is shown to carefully construct his identity to fulfil the ideal of the perfect son, Pieter does not care what people think of him. He initially rebels against his peers and authority figures by mocking and challenging the ideals forced on him. Following a dramatic intervention by his parents, he seemingly adjusts his behaviour and appears to be an obedient and religious son. Fearful that he cannot meet his parents' expectations, Janno sees Pieter as his replacement and the two boys increasingly compete for their parents' approval. Pieter's conflict with other characters, and his own outsider's gaze on the conservative rural community, expose the contradictions that underpin the values that the community holds dear and the brutality at the heart of hegemonic masculinity.

Afrikaner nationalism, gender, and Afrikaans-language films

According to Thomas Blaser and Christi van der Westhuizen (381), "the idea that there ever existed such a group as 'the Afrikaners', a group of people with self-imagined commonalities who intended to be seen as a singular group, was always contested and subject to fluctuations". It is therefore important to note that there is no homogenous, static group or identity of 'the Afrikaner'. In our critique of the ideals and actions of the characters depicted in *Die stropers*, we are not suggesting that all white, Afrikaans-speaking individuals have these same beliefs and ideals, or that they espouse the restrictive patriarchal norms seen in the film. Our discussion is focused on the specific conservative community depicted in *Die stropers*, which represents a minority group among diverse white, Afrikaans-speaking communities in contemporary South Africa.

In the past two decades, scholars in various fields have re-evaluated Afrikaner nationalism and its relationship to gender and visual culture.¹ The foundational myths of Afrikanerdom have been critiqued as deeply gendered and, from the early twentieth century, were perpetuated in the tropes of the ideal man as farmer, soldier, protector, and leader, and model Afrikaner women as modest, loyal wives and mothers (Webb and Kriel 25; Pretorius 180). According to Anne McClintock (71), nationalist representations of community and identity often use gendered constructions and depictions of national identity, and therefore rely on familial imagery and ideals. In the film, Marie adopts children to produce her own family and to produce and maintain an Afrikaner ethno-nationalist family, which she believes is threatened with extinction.

Afrikaner nationalist ideology was founded on patriarchal, Calvinist principles and configured Afrikaner communities as heterosexual family structures, with men appointed as the head of the family. Clear social roles and responsibilities were determined along hierarchies based on age and gender, producing a male-dominated mechanism for control over numerous facets of social organisation, including gender relations (Lauenstein, *et al.* 311). The notion of hegemonic masculinity offers a useful lens for examining gendered power structures and the policing of 'acceptable' or 'unacceptable' gendered behaviour in the setting of *Die stropers* (Whitehead 93). Hegemonic masculinity is described by James Messerschmidt (86) as "a specific form of masculinity in a given historical and society-wide social setting that legitimates unequal gender relations between men and women, between masculinity and femininity, and among masculinities". According to Theo Sonnekus (23), "hegemonic Afrikaner masculinity is a compartmentalised identity shaped by ingrained prejudices buttressed by a combination of whiteness, racism, and homophobia". In this context, the ideal masculine subject is a white, Afrikaans-speaking man who looks, acts, and carries himself in ways that are understood as heterosexual; Christian; physically able; and dedicated to the idea of a white, Afrikaner nation.

Hegemonic masculinity is context-specific and, within the rural Afrikaner community depicted in *Die stropers*, it is characterised by displays of masculinity such as physical labour performed in the outdoors, playing contact sports, being stoic, and disparaging gay individuals. In a critique of Connell and Messerschmidt's writings, Yuchen Yang (319) returns to Antonio Gramsci's original articulation of hegemony to reformulate the concept of hegemonic masculinity as the "dominant masculinity in a consensual relation of domination: it subordinates other masculinities with a combination of force and consent". Yang (324) further emphasises that hegemony is dialectical and reciprocal interaction between dominant and subordinate groups, rather than a fixed binary opposition. In depicting the interactions of queer men with their restrictive community, *Die stropers* captures the relationality of hegemony.

Normative heterosexuality and reproduction within the nuclear family are considered central pillars of preserving a nation and its cultural traditions, and, according to Grant Andrews (3), this positions queer identities and homosexuality as potential threats to the survival of the national family as this is considered a form of 'pollution' of white purity. During apartheid, the film industry in South Africa was predominantly controlled by the state and was used as a mouthpiece for Afrikaner nationalist discourse. According to Botha ("South African film industry" 1), conservative official attitudes towards film contributed to Afrikaans language films having very few openly gay characters before 1994. The portrayal of homosexuality as comedic or corrupted in many twentieth-century Afrikaans-language films may therefore be attributed to the protracted effects of the nationalist view that homosexuality is 'unmanly', degenerative, and threatening. In twenty-first-century South Africa, the representation of queer identities in mainstream Afrikaans films and media has become increasingly prominent.

However, of the almost 100 mainstream Afrikaans-language films released since 1994, only a handful of those showcase characters with queer identities as central characters or explicitly focus on masculinities that identify as gay or express same-sex desire (IMDb).² In 2007, Sheng Kuan Chung (101) argued that in mainstream Afrikaans media the prevalence of heterosexuality is re-inscribed through the mostly marginal, stereotypical, or comedic representation of gay subjects.³ A 2022 list of Afrikaans-language films compiled by IMDb still reflects Chung's perspective. The stereotypical portrayal of homosexuality in some Afrikaans-language films reinscribes notions of homosexuality as socially marginal or trivial and normalises heteronormativity (Raygan and Lynette). In a context where contemporary queer experiences in white, Afrikaner communities are under-represented in film, *Die stropers* offers opportunities to reflect on such stories and to interrogate the foundations of the gender and cultural hegemonies that often silence them.

Gender performativity and hegemonic Afrikaner masculinity

We use Butler's theory of gender performativity to investigate how the two brothers Janno and Pieter navigate gender and social norms within their Afrikaner family and community. We argue that the protagonists perform expressions of hegemonic masculinity to fit in and avoid being ostracised from a community where homophobia is prevalent. Butler (*Gender Trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity* 6–7) argued that neither gender nor sex are natural (biological), but that both are historically and culturally situated. Here, gender is a part of identity that is learned (Crous, "Die uitbeelding van gay manlikheid in die werk van drie debuutdigters" 444). In Butlerian (*Gender Trouble* 2) terms, the concept of performativity describes the "reiterative and citational practice by which

discourse produces the effects that it names”, and it is “the discursive mode by which ontological effects are installed” (*Gender Trouble* 38). The argument that gender is performative, and not an inborn essence, suggests that gender is continually produced through particular actions and stylisation of the body that communicate gender (*Gender Trouble* 136). “Gender is real only to the extent that it is performed”, wrote Butler (“Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: an essay in phenomenology and feminist theory” 527). However, unlike performance, performativity is “not a singular or deliberate act” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* xx), but rather refers to acts that consciously or unconsciously (re-)iterate, sustain, and legitimise the cultural norms that often shape and maintain it (Weems 103).

Individuals perform gender daily, and everyday performance constructs gender within social and cultural discourse (Xue 55). Gender discourse includes various symbolic and performative activities, including style of dress, behavioural patterns, verbal communication, and the expression of interests (Xue 55). In *Die stropers*, the instructions that Pieter receives as his family tries to make him one of their own, often pertain to his envisioned place as a gendered subject—a young man—within that community. For example, following Pieter’s conflict with his adoptive father, Janno tries to help his brother by saying, “Dis maklik om net normaal te wees. Jy steek jou hand uit en jy sê ‘Bly te kenne’. Noem die mans Oom en die vrouens Tannie” (It is easy to be normal. Hold out your hand and say, “Nice to meet you”. Call the men Uncle and the women Auntie).

To be considered ‘normal’ in this community means understanding one’s place in the social hierarchy and acting accordingly. Janno’s instructions highlight the significance of age and gender in the social order. When a boy or man greets others, he gives other men a firm handshake, while women are kissed. If it were a woman or girl greeting a man, she would kiss him rather than give a firm handshake, which is seen as a masculine way of greeting. According to H. M. Tapaswi (30–1), gender performativity is not about who one is, but what one does, and the subject is therefore ‘done’ by their gender. In other words, the subject simultaneously becomes gendered and is constructed by gender. In the performative social ritual, both the self who is greeting and the ‘other’ being greeted are repeatedly constituted, through both speech and action, as gendered subjects (either men or women).

If gender can be considered as a series of acts and gestures that reiterate cultural norms (Hall 186) in patriarchal societies where heterosexuality is prized as natural and ideal, the performance and imitation of gendered acts aid in maintaining heteronormative ideals. In *Die stropers*, Marie’s sons are urged to do farm work like their father, while the girls are pictured almost exclusively inside the home, assisting their mother with tasks. Gender is further established through the stylisation of the body, and gestures or style of dress can create the impression of an ideal gendered self (Butler, “Performative acts” 519). In the film the dress of all the men, women, boys, and girls conforms to gendered norms of that community. Men and boys are frequently shown in khaki shirts and shorts, which in South Africa has become synonymous with farmers, and almost stereotypically with white farmers. The only one who looks radically different is Pieter who, when he first arrives on the farm, appears androgynous in a pair of skinny jeans and a pink tank top, accessorised with a necklace and earring. Shortly after his arrival on the farm, Marie’s sister shaves his head and strips him of these outward signs of gender variance.



Figure 1: Pieter (back, left) stands in the bath as Marie's sister rolls up her sleeves to shave his hair. Marie (front, left) and her other children look on as Pieter is transformed. Film still, used with permission of Pyramide Films and Cinéma Defacto.

By the end of the film, Pieter has adopted the dress code of the dominant men in the community, presumably signifying his inclusion and membership in the community as a young farmer.

According to Connell and Messerschmidt (843), masculinity can be described as the repetition of gendered acts by both men and women. Although with different attitudes, Pieter and Janno's actions include the performance of gendered dispositions that resemble the form of masculinity that is prized in their white, Afrikaans-speaking community, even though this iteration of masculinity restricts and oppresses them. We suggest that Pieter's behaviour can be read as a strategic appropriation of culturally specific acts and dispositions, performed to be accepted by the Afrikaner community in the film. Pieter's cynical, strategic practice of using context-specific gender acts shows up and exploits the performative nature of the gender ideals of this community. In his article about the film, Andrews (13) proposes that the brothers, especially Pieter, play with gender norms and are able to 'queer' and disrupt the patriarchal, repressive rural environment space, in the process "showing up the unstable foundations of these identity concepts, still perpetuated in post-apartheid". Our investigation into the challenge that the boys represent to the repressive heteronormativity of the farming community considers Yang (319, 322) and Demetrakis Demetriou's Gramscian (245) emphasis that hegemony is relational and dialectical, and that subordinate masculinities are constitutive parts of hegemonic masculinity. The adopted brothers are affected by their environment's dominant structures, but as they resist, critique, and appropriate aspects of the hegemonic order, it does not remain unaffected by them.

Hegemony implies both force and consent, often through subconscious accommodations of power and dominant ideologies that occur in the ongoing interpellation of subjects that are part of a bigger whole (Yang 324). Subjects will receive subtle and direct rewards, prompts, and rebukes of 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate' gender behaviour from those around them. Subjects may agree or desire to perform, perpetuate, and sustain these dominant ideals through performative iterations of gendered identities (Yang 325). Janno attempts to earn acceptance and praise from his father by rising before dawn to herd cattle. In addition, despite his distrust and jealousy of Pieter, he desperately seeks to win his mother's approval by being a good older brother and moral anchor for the rebellious newcomer. Janno further models his behaviour on that of his best friend Hennie, the most popular boy at school who leads the town's youth both on the rugby field and at church.

Hegemonic masculinity manifests in ways that are context specific. Van der Westhuizen ("Afrikaners in post-apartheid South Africa: Inward migration and enclave nationalism" 2) writes that, in some communities, Afrikaner identity can be understood as favouring white, heterosexual, and middle-class individuals who fit into a particular political category of ethnicity. In the social context depicted in the film, this ideal of masculinity is embodied by the hardworking farmer, a heterosexual husband and father who is loyal to his family, his god, and his nation. Feminine and queer identities are situated as subordinate and 'other' to white hegemonic masculinity and occupy a relational, dialectical position to it.

Connell and Messerschmidt's (848) research addresses the creation of hierarchies among masculinities and the marginalisation of queer men through prejudice and violence. This marginalisation not only affects gay men but also involves the regulation of heterosexual men in contexts where homosexuality is stigmatised and pathologised (Connell, "A very straight gay: Masculinity, homosexual experience, and the dynamics of gender" 745).⁴ Homophobia is used as a tool to perpetuate, police, and sustain hegemonic gender relations, which may find expression through bullying, verbal, or physical assault (LaSala).

In several scenes in *Die stropers*, the derogatory term "moffie" (faggot) is used by men to reproach or demean other men, revealing the community's homophobic attitudes. Fearing any indictment that he might be unmanly or a "moffie", Janno denies his feelings for Hennie when confronted by Pieter, and unsuccessfully protests when his grandfather calls him "moffie gemors" (faggot trash). Homophobic slurs and even physical violence are used to regulate male sexuality within this community, which can be connected to the more widespread, historical regulating of sexuality within the Afrikaner national family to safeguard its alleged purity.

Andrews (3) writes that "whiteness was constructed at various points around myths of racial and sexual purity, with the requirement for intra-race sex and heterosexuality both implicitly and explicitly codified into identity constructs. Sexual 'immorality' was concurrently seen as a threat to white Afrikaner ideologies of nationhood and identity, as a form of 'pollution' of white purity". While the film does not as overtly focus on race, *Die stropers* explicitly addresses this emphasis on immorality and its alleged risks. When Pieter, after a drunken night at a local shebeen, sells his sexual services to an old man he encounters at the venue, Janno begs him not to tell anyone what he had done with the old man. He adds, "Netnou dink hulle ek doen dit ook, en ek doen alles reg!" (They might think I do that too, and I do everything right!). Janno's plea exposes his awareness and fear of his community's scrutinising gaze. Motivated by his need to be accepted, Janno follows what he perceives as the rules and carefully monitors which emotions and desires he reveals in public. His fear is that Pieter's actions may reflect on him, tarnishing his good record and leaving him vulnerable to suspicion and scorn. Kobus du Pisani ("Puritanism transformed: Afrikaner masculinities in the apartheid and post-apartheid period" 157) points out that although Afrikaner masculinity and views on Afrikaner masculinity have changed since the demise of apartheid, "it did not lose its essential puritan character". Hegemonic Afrikaner masculinity still asserts itself and is sustained through social roles, media, and popular culture. According to Sonnekus (23), this assertion of masculinity may be explained by a nostalgic yearning for the benefits that this identity formerly provided some white men and the fear of racial and sexual 'others'.

One can suggest that such nostalgia finds expression in cinematic and popular culture images of traditional manhood embodied in the figure of the white farmer who is a hardworking and religious head of the household (Crous, "En ek sê dis 'n trassie': perspectives on Afrikaner homosexual identity" 51). For Marius Crous ("En ek sê" 51) and Du Pisani ("Ek hou van 'n man wat sy man kan staan': Puriteinse manlikheidsbeelde in die Afrikaanse kultuur tot 1935" 90), the farmer has always been one of the primary expressions of manhood within rural contexts in South Africa. Several Afrikaans-language films produced across various genres since 2010—the musical *Western Platteland* (2011), the war drama *Verraaiers* (2013), the farm thriller *Treurgrond* (2014), the romantic comedy *Vrou soek boer* (2014)—depict traditional, ideal manhood through male protagonists who are white farmers. In *Die stropers* this ideal manhood is initially seen in the figures of Jan and Hennie, and it is what Janno aspires to. However, the arrival of the outsider figure, Pieter, exposes the aggression that is used to reinforce and maintain social order and cohesion in a community that is a precariously constructed (national) family.

Performative masculinities in *Die stropers*

The two protagonists might rely on and deploy performative, ideal masculinities to achieve belonging. However, there is substantial resistance from the two boys, initially from Pieter and later from Janno. Their negotiation with hegemonic masculinity is therefore neither exclusively consensual nor resistant. Through performativity, the boys are constantly untangling and figuring out, *vis-a-vis* hegemony, their identities within their specific community and culture. As they do so, they are also reconfiguring the hegemonic masculinity they encounter in their adoptive family and community.

The opening scene of the film establishes Janno as a diligent boy who loyally performs his duties on the family farm.



Figure 2: Janno walks into the veld in the cold morning to herd cattle. Film still, used with permission of Pyramide Films and Cinéma Defacto.

Dressed in khaki shorts, coat, and cap, he is first pictured at the centre of a long shot, walking through an open gate and toward the viewer. The light is dim and the shadows deep, the blue-grey hues and the boy's red cheeks suggesting an icy, cold Free State morning. Janno's expression is resolute; he smacks his whip down on the frozen soil with vehemence as he moves toward some cattle. The sequence suddenly cuts to a closer shot of the boy's profile and the camera moves horizontally, slightly unsteadily, as though the viewer is walking next to the boy.

A monotone score of an isolated drumbeat starts to play. As Janno walks further into the veld, a woman's voice is heard in prayer, pleading with God to "*Maak die seun sterk. Maak sy hart sterk. Maak sy saad sterk*" (Make the boy strong. Make his heart strong. Make his seed strong). The voice belongs to Marie, Janno's adoptive mother, who is shown in the next shot standing in the veld, the sun rising behind her. Significantly, hers is the first voice we hear in the film. The camera pulls back to expand the view of a wide landscape that includes a dam, farmhouse, cattle, a windmill, and mountains in the distance. The audio-visual layering connects the mother's prayer, the boy, and the landscape: the prayer is for the boy, that he may be strong, courageous, and fertile in this beautiful yet harsh land. In addition, the word 'seed' in Marie's prayer resonates with the film title's evocation of a harvest and of harvesting. The film's opening establishes that it is the future of Marie's family, not just a good harvest, that occupies her words and which in turn stresses the importance of genealogy, masculinity, heterosexuality, and procreation for the family. Marie's prayer establishes the themes of procreation, sowing and harvesting, and male fertility as central to the narrative. Marie's prayer is a plea that her son might live up to a particular ideal of manhood.

The emphasis on fertility foregrounds his assumed capacity and responsibility to continue the family bloodline through procreation. Unable to have children of their own, Marie and her husband Jan have adopted a number of white, Afrikaans children to fulfil what they perceive is a divine calling: to preserve the customs and continued existence of their people. The rural socio-cultural context in which the two boys find themselves requires them to conform to specific historical and cultural ideals that are already evident in the behaviour, speech, sexual preferences, and sexual orientation of respected community members such as Jan, Marie, and Hennie. Janno is repeatedly shown working on the farm and he exhibits an acute awareness of what is expected of a boy destined to inherit the family farm. In one scene, Janno is woken by Marie. Realising that he has overslept, he gruffly reprimands himself saying, "*Ek weet ek moes al buite gewees het. Op my ouderdom is manne al reg, aangetrek, en buite op die lande aan die werk*" (I know I should have been outside already. At my age, men are already dressed and working in the fields by now). Janno's self-rebuke shows his awareness of the patriarchal and masculine standards of his community, and of having to live up to gendered expectations in this regard.

From the start of the film, Hennie is positioned as a foil to Pieter's rebellion and deviance, as well as to Janno's timidity. Hennie performs the role of moral and religious mentor for the children and teenagers of the local town and farming community. During a rugby game in the veld, he breaks up a fight between Janno and another boy, hugging Janno tightly to calm his temper. At a church youth gathering, Hennie leads a group of teens and children

in prayer. The scene is cast in low light as warm sunlight streams in from a window behind the group; this light illuminates Hennie, the tallest boy in the group.



Figure 3: Hennie leads a group of children in prayer. Film still, used with permission of Pyramide Films and Cinéma Defacto.

In this scene, Hennie appears divinely appointed as spiritual beacon and leader of a new generation of Afrikaners.

A combination of over-the-shoulder shots and close-ups highlights Hennie and Janno's position at opposite ends of the circle. As Hennie prays with his eyes closed, the camera pans across the circle from Hennie to Janno.



Figure 4: During the group's prayer, Janno opens his eyes to sneak a glance at Hennie. Film still, used with permission of Pyramide Films and Cinéma Defacto.

When Janno opens his eyes, the camera cuts to a close-up of Hennie, suggesting Janno's lingering gaze on Hennie's face and implying his secret, forbidden infatuation with this model peer. Janno's idealisation of, and adolescent crush on Hennie, complicates his struggle to belong and be 'man enough' in a community that is intolerant of forms of sexual desire that defy cis-heterosexual normativity. The intolerance towards gender and sexual difference in the devout family and community is increasingly exposed through Pieter's conflict with community members such as other young men and his adoptive parents. Pieter's open rejection of community-sanctioned sexuality, body language, dress, vocabulary, and insubordination of authority marks him as an outsider and potential threat.

In one scene, Pieter and Janno encounter Hennie and his friends in town, back from a fishing trip to which Janno was not invited because of his association with Pieter. The latter's rebellious behaviour gained him a bad reputation soon after arriving in the community. As the group drives away in a bakkie, Pieter calls them "faggots",

rushes after them and, standing in the dust road, pulls his shirt over his head to bear his naked torso, shouting, “Dis gay-for-pay hier en ek’s way oop!” (It’s gay-for-pay and I’m wide open). The driver reverses the bakkie, the boys jump at Pieter, beating and kicking him as he lies on the ground, laughing and taunting them. While Hennie does not take part in the beating and calls his friends back, his words are no less bigoted than their actions. He warns that they “will contract AIDS” just from touching Pieter, revealing associations between the queer body, disease, and contamination.

The boys’ collective intolerance and animosity towards Pieter reveal to both the viewer and Janno that the community does not allow for masculine identity constructions or performances that deviate from the cis-heterosexual ideal. In our reading of the film, the group’s aggressive display of force further suggests the fragility and anxiety that is latent to the film’s depiction of hegemonic Afrikaner masculinity and which motivates the regulation of the behaviour and identities of its members. Pieter embodies the threat of non-heteronormative sexual immorality that will corrupt the community’s social fabric. Hennie, who was earlier in the film deliberately introduced as tender and pious, resorts to brutality to enforce the hegemonic cultural and behavioural codes of the community, presumably to protect it from what he perceives as Pieter’s corrupting influence.

The same regulatory-protective conduct counts for Pieter’s father, Jan, who ironically resorts to violence when he instructs Pieter on appropriate social behaviour and how to be “*ordentlik*” (respectable). In a scene where the family arrives at church on a Sunday, Pieter refuses to get out of the car. Jan then violently drags him out of the vehicle and marches him into the church. In the church, in front of the congregation, Pieter has a scuffle with Jan, runs out of the church and slams the door, publicly defying his father’s authority. Both Hennie and Jan’s repeated use of force can be read as reiterative gender performance and maintenance of their own dominant position within the community. In our reading of the film, this gender performance and maintenance also serve as a rejoinder to the latent anxieties that underscore Afrikaner hegemonic masculinity.

In light of the above, Pieter’s socio-cultural interactions with his family (brother, parents) and community (primarily his peers) reveal moral contradictions and aggression as underlying to the seemingly pious community’s social unity, a unity that is maintained through both care and force. When Marie and Jan’s efforts to reform the rebellious Pieter ultimately fail, they send him to a ‘*mannekamp*’ (men’s camp) to be reformed and turned into a ‘proper’ man.⁵ Upon his return, in the privacy of their room, Pieter shows Janno welts and bruises on his back, and reveals that he was assaulted by other young men at the camp, including Hennie, who presumably attended in his capacity as youth leader. Janno is shocked to learn the truth about not only the object of his adolescent desire, but also the religious and familial institutions that he holds dear.

The ‘*mannekamp*’ functions as a disciplinary instrument designed to produce what Michel Foucault (136) calls a docile body: “the body that is manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skilful and increases its forces [...] that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved”. In this context, the body becomes the site on and through which power functions to create disciplined and productive male subjects. The young men are shaped and taught to conform through both pastoral care and violence, as sanctioned by the church and Pieter’s parents, that must transform a sexually deviant city boy into a man who manifests his heterosexuality and respectability in word and deed. Over time, however, Pieter learns to strategically appropriate the ways in which external forces attempt to fundamentally alter his selfhood.

After the camp, Pieter seems reformed and conforms to a particular gender identity that is entangled with the social codes of his Afrikaner family and community. Pieter’s physical appearance and dress, behaviour, manner of speaking, and movement and gait stand in stark contrast to his earlier appearance and comportment. Gone are the tight-fitting jeans; the loose sweatpants; low-cut, wide-necked T-shirt; jewellery; and hunched walk with his head hidden in his hoodie. At the end of the film, he is shown dressed in khaki shirt and shorts, a veritable mirror image of Janno. Pieter no longer hovers and skulks on the periphery of social interactions and farm activities but is shown sitting at Jan’s side at the dining table, reading to his sister, and rising at dawn to herd cattle. While Pieter is away at camp, Janno moves further away from being the perfect Afrikaner man and son his parents expect him to be. He moves closer to the periphery of this community as Pieter increasingly performs the hegemonic ideal, a shift in the family dynamic that is reflected in his depiction in the shadows or on the margins of domestic and outdoor scenes.

After Pieter is sent to the camp, Janno follows Marie to a secluded part of the farm where she kneels in the cornfield to pray.



Figure 5: Marie kneels in a cornfield to pray for Pieter as Janno looks on from the distance. Film still, used with permission of Pyramide Films and Cinéma Defacto.

She recites the same prayer that was heard in the film's opening scene, but this time she prays for Pieter. Janno stands on the edge of the field, looking at her from a distance and through the cornstalks. The camera is angled upward, pointed at Marie, showing only Janno's blurred silhouette in the background. This scene represents a turning point as Janno is now depicted as the outsider looking in. On their way home from the cornfield, Marie pleads with Janno that she cannot save Pieter without his help. Janno retorts that perhaps Pieter had a good and a better life in the city. He continues by saying "*Miskien is hierdie die slegte lewe. Miskien is ons die slegte mense*" (Maybe this is the bad life. Maybe we're the bad people). Janno not only voices his suspicion of the righteousness of his family's values but also subverts the status quo by challenging his mother's worldview and refusing her request to assist her in reforming Pieter.

Shortly after Pieter's return from the camp, Janno becomes frustrated with Marie's affection for the seemingly rehabilitated son. In the dimly lit hallway, Janno gives in to his desperation for Marie's affection and hugs her tightly. Marie shoves him away, leaving a disappointed and heartbroken Janno to sulk in his bedroom. As Janno sits on his bed, half-dressed and with his back towards the viewer, Pieter enters the room and walks to the bed.



Figure 6: Pieter enters Janno's room. Film still, used with permission of Pyramide Films and Cinéma Defacto.

Pieter kneels in front of Janno, placing his hands on his thighs. As Pieter starts to speak, he leans in close to Janno's face, whispering in his ear. The scene's erotic intimacy is emphasised by its bedroom setting, soft lighting, and extreme close-up camera angles.

The room is cast in darkness with the only source of light coming from Janno's bedside lamp casting a soft glow across the boys' faces and bodies. The film cuts from Janno's face to Pieter's hands, to close over-the-shoulder shots of Pieter speaking, and then back to Janno's face to reveal his reaction to Pieter's words.



Figure 7: Over-the-shoulder shot of Janno and Pieter in the former's bedroom, as Pieter shares his view on life and survival. Film still, used with permission of Pyramide Films and Cinéma Defacto.



Figure 8: Close-up of Pieter's hands on Janno's thighs. Film still, used with permission of Pyramide Films and Cinéma Defacto.



Figure 9: Over-the-shoulder shot of Pieter. Film still, used with permission of Pyramide Films and Cinéma Defacto.



Figure 10: Over-the-shoulder shot of Janno. Film still, used with permission of Pyramide Films and Cinéma Defacto.

The scene is one of the most intimate moments in the film. Here, with Janno and the viewer as his audience, Pieter articulates his understanding of the local community's double standards in which the private and the public are to be kept ever separate:

Ek laat mans aan my vat vir geld en ek is trots daarop. Dink jy ek sou survive het as ek ook liefde by hulle gesoek het? Ek het myself aan hulle verkoop en hulle het cash betaal, so ek kan enige iets survive. Tot 'n kak broer soos jy. So moenie vir my pity nie. Actually pity ek vir jou. Jy dink ek weet nie van grootmense se respek nie, om hulle klam, nasty hande te skud nie? Die stad is vol outjies wat baie mooi "Hallo, Oom" sê vir mans wat in karre sit. En nou het ek myself alweer verkoop vir kos en 'n warm bed. En dit voel great. Sy [Marie] kan my maar drukkies gee as sy wil, maar ek weet haar hart is yskoud. En ek gee nie 'n fok om nie.

I let men touch me for money and I'm proud of that. Do you think I would have survived if I wanted love from them too? I sold myself to them and they gave me cash, so I can survive anything. Even a shit brother like you. So, don't feel sorry for me. Actually, I pity you. You think I don't know how to show respect to elders, how to shake their sweaty, perverted hands? The city is full of boys saying "Hello, Uncle" to men in cars. And now I've sold myself again for food and a warm bed. And it feels great. She [Marie] can hug me if she wants, but I know her heart is cold as ice. And I don't give a fuck.

Pieter's message to his brother highlights the blurred boundaries between previously clear binaries such as good and evil, intimacy and conflict, love and disgust, perversity and *ordentlikheid* (socially respectable behaviour). This intimate scene finally reveals that Pieter's reformation at the camp is a façade. Pieter plays with gender performance,

and his dramatic shift in disposition reveals him as an astute reader of the nuances between gender and power. Furthermore, Pieter understands and potentially exploits the reciprocal relationship between dominant and subordinate groups in his local community. Similar to how he refined his identity to survive in the city, Pieter consciously calculated how to perform to meet the expected gender norms of the Afrikaner community in which he finds himself. If he succeeds in pleasing Marie and Jan by performing the socio-culturally compliant obedient son, he gains a home, an inheritance, and—importantly—the promise of a position in the local community.

In his short monologue, Pieter further highlights the depravity of all gendered social and intimate relationships that become transactional, where one party relinquishes autonomy to survive. Pieter's monologue seems to strike a chord with Janno. In the next scene, Janno wakes up early, takes one last look at the photo gallery of his parents' forefathers in the darkly lit hallway where Janno and Jan had previously showed Pieter the family lineage, demonstrating the importance of family legacy and bloodlines. Janno's last look at the family photos before turning his back on the house suggests his renunciation of his heritage and family legacy. Before leaving the farm, Janno sets fire to his father's fields, the inheritance that he should have 'reaped' as the eldest son. He frees himself of the weight of the farm and its obligations while Pieter, along with his parents and other farm workers, struggle to put out the fire. In our reading of the film, Janno's action is a symbolic rejection of the burdens of hegemonic masculinity intertwined with Afrikanerdom: farming the land, preserving the bloodline, maintaining the morality of the Christian faith, and adhering to certain conservative family values.

The final scenes of the film take place after Janno's climactic escape and confirm that Pieter has replaced Janno as heir to the farm. The penultimate scene captures the nuclear family seated around a bountiful breakfast table in a sunny kitchen. Pieter is placed in the centre of the shot, seated between his adoptive parents and sisters as they dish up food and banter amicably. This image of family harmony and togetherness is disturbed when they bow their heads to say grace and Pieter's chin remains lifted and his eyes wide open as he stares straight into the camera. His direct gaze seems to signal to the viewer that he has not relinquished his critic's gaze of his adoptive Afrikaner family and community.

In our reading of the film, alongside Andrews's (12) argument, this shot is a sustained yet covert queering of the family unit and the farm space since Pieter's adherence to the heterosexist foundation of the Afrikaner family is a deliberate fabrication. In addition, we suggest that Pieter's final position points to the inevitable changes that hegemony undergoes, since it exists in a dynamic, dialectical relationship with the subordinate and subversive. As Demetriou (355) points out, hegemony is heterogeneous, unstable, and hybrid because of its constant appropriation of, and negotiation with, that which is subordinate, counter-hegemonic, and progressive. In this final scene, the queer 'other' has orchestrated his own incorporation into the family, and the outsider's firm gaze suggests that he has not been completely transformed or reformed. Through Pieter's insertion of himself into the white family (and by extension, a larger Afrikaner community framework of values) it is hybridised, pointing to the potential of different futures for Afrikaner masculinities.

Conclusion

In this article, we examined the cinematic depiction of two boys navigating hegemonic Afrikaner masculinity as it manifests in a conservative, white farming community in the Afrikaans-language feature film *Die stroopers*. We investigated how gender and gender hierarchies are (re)produced, deployed, and challenged by subjects who are themselves continually gendered according to the values and norms of their context.

Drawing on the work of Butler and other scholars of gender, culture, and identity, we argued that both protagonists strategically deploy performative masculinities that follow and reproduce the hegemonic Afrikaner ideal. Initially a rebellious outsider, Pieter's concern for his own gain and survival motivates his performance as the good, 'normal' son and he makes space for himself as an insider. By 'doing' this gendered role so convincingly, he shows up the performative nature of hegemonic Afrikaner masculinity. This is contrasted with Janno's gender performance as he performs (if sometimes unconsciously) a masculine identity that conforms to the norm to gain acceptance from his family, avoid bullying, and ultimately inherit the family farm. The same ideals that Janno aspires to oppresses him and intensifies his anxiety about his affection for another boy. The sanctioned brutality with which Pieter is forced to conform stirs Janno's alarm, criticism, and ultimately—in the film's climax—rejection of his family, their values, and legacy as he sets off to make his own way in the world.

In different ways, the two boys ultimately claim agency to find or make space for themselves by either rejecting or strategically performing hegemony. In addition, the closing scenes may be read as portends of

changes to Afrikaner hegemonic masculinity. These shifts and potentially new configurations and expressions of masculinity are motivated by the ongoing processes of negotiation between dominant, subordinate, and counter-hegemonic masculinities within the context of post-apartheid communities (Demetriou 355). *Die stropers*, as an Afrikaans-language film that represents marginal and often omitted subjectivities and experiences within white, Afrikaner communities, can thus be read as ‘world making’ cinema as it offers critical insights on restrictive cultural contexts such as a selected Afrikaner conservatism and points to different possible futures in the dialects of power and insubordination.

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Notes

1. For selected scholarship on Afrikaner nationalism in a historical context, see the work of Vic Webb and Mariana Kriel and Fransjohan Pretorius. The following authors address Afrikaner nationalism and gender: Du Pisani (“Ek hou van ‘n man”, “Puritanism transformed”); McClintock; van der Westhuizen (*Sitting Pretty: White Afrikaans Women in Postapartheid South Africa*).
2. Some examples include *Kanarie* (2018); *Moffie* (2019); *Proteus* (2003); and *Skoonheid* (2011).
3. The comedy *Kampsterrein* (2017), for example, features two heavily stereotyped gay characters—gaudy and outspoken—in supporting roles.
4. While not within the scope of this article, it is worth noting that there is a close relationship between hegemonic Afrikaner masculinity, compulsory military conscription during the apartheid era, and the regulating of sexuality. Conscription served as an important system for (re)producing notions of ‘normal’ masculinity and it intensified the policing of masculinities and gender identifications (Mankayi 24).
5. Men’s camps (*mannekampe*) are popular in white, post-apartheid Christian institutions. These men-only camps focus on character-building and spiritual growth through physical, outdoor activities; religious study; and prayer. More military-style men’s camps, such as the infamous Kamp Staalraad attended by the South African national rugby team in 2003, deploy physically and mentally stressful activities to enforce discipline, or religious and political ideology.

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**African(a) Queer Presence: Ethics and Politics of Negotiation.**

S. N. Nyeck.

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ISBN 9783319612256.

S. N. Nyeck's *African(a) Queer Presence: Ethics and Politics of Negotiation* interrogates African queer identity politics and theorizing from an interdisciplinary perspective that is, at once, enlightening, and challenging. The book proposes that queer scholarship can no longer lurk at the margins of African studies and that, instead of queering Africa, there is need to Africanize queerness in inclusive ways that nullify gendered and geo-political boundaries. In this regard, Nyeck suggests ways of re-imagining queerness, Africanness, and postcoloniality beyond the binary logics of Western dialectics that have shaped the consciousness of both colonial and post-colonial societies.

In the introductory chapter of the book, Nyeck mentions that she partly draws on her personal experience, as a black queer immigrant teaching in an American college, to challenge queer negation and the homophobia often targeted at black bodies. She then delves deeper to engage with intersecting theoretical positions in her scrutiny of queer presences in African locales where she argues that queer agency and unthreatened futures can only be attained through negotiation and social integration. Nyeck further contends that the African queer discourse must not only concentrate on the origins and indigeneity of these identities but should adopt holistic approaches that consider the present and the future, since such perspectives tend to be agentic. Much of her analysis is contained in the third and fourth chapters of the book where she discusses two films: *Proteus* (2003) by Jack Lewis and John Greyson, and *Karmen Gei* (2001), directed by Joseph Gaï Ramaka. Both films are set in prisons (the former in South Africa and the latter in Senegal), which perhaps ably communicates one of the central messages in the book—queerness as a “captured identity” in the postcolony.

It is in chapter two where Nyeck sets forth her agenda and expounds on the theoretical leanings of her analysis. Among others, she draws on ideas from Theodor W. Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* (1973), Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation* (1994), Michael

Chwe's *Jane Austen, Game Theorist* (2013), Nnaemeka Obioma's nego-feminism, and Leopold Senghor's formulation of politics as *présence virtuelle*. Interestingly, Nyeck settles for Senghor's negritude as her central analytical tool in dismantling and rethinking authoritative narratives that negate queer presence in African spaces. She capitalises on negritude's affirmation of the humanity of black people in her endeavour to expand the paradigms of the human to queer identities whose Africanness and humanity is often challenged by homophobic publics. Her argument is that queer negation in Africa generally emanates from regarding the self as “being in-self” (124) rather than adopting the Ubuntu philosophy, core to negritude, which proposes the ethics of “being for another”. In this way, she abandons Cartesian binary logic for an Africana ethics of inclusivity and concludes that the sensibilities of Senghorian negritude “offer ethical responses to queer negation in postcolonial contexts” (21).

Nyeck dismisses the misleading homophobic claim of an exclusionary African imagination by establishing that the existence of alternative worlds and forms of being present in Voodoo practices, for example, testifies to the fact that indigenous African cosmologies are fecund with inclusive imagination, which give room to multiplicities of identity. She attributes the challenge to Africana queer presence to what she terms “the two problems of evil”, which are (i) queer negation and (ii) the temptation to invent the self by assigning evil and/or immorality to others. Both are products of compulsory heterosexuality and lead to queer marginalization. This is what ought to be negotiated in an ethical encounter for peaceful and progressive co-existence.

In chapter three, the discussion dwells on *Proteus*, focusing on the film's representation of the conflicting presence of queerness alongside Christian/colonial establishments and traditional (Nativist) African(a) ideals of culture and essentialized values. In the film, one encounters different strategies adopted by colonial authorities in their effort to subdue both people of colour and queer sexualities in South Africa. Religion and the law become central to this project. Nyeck concludes that, in its deconstructive stance, the film presents queerness as “a larger project in the

imagination of Africana subjectivities that cannot be understood outside the systemic and institutionalized contingencies that it must confront” (50). In this regard, she redefines queerness as being “out of order” in that it cannot be normatively comprehended, nor can it be ordered around. It is a rejection of tradition, oppression, and commandment as seen in the persona of Claas Blank, one of the protagonists in *Proteus*.

Chapter four discusses *Karmen Gei*, which evokes religious tensions on ideal and non-ideal sexualities in Senegal. It fuses the queer subject together with their postcolonial counterpart as sites of political resistance in their struggle to affirm their contested subjectivities. In her analysis of the church sermon that takes place at the burial of one of the film’s protagonists, Angelique, Nyeck asserts that “postcolonial rigid binaries, single stories/visions, and self-images must be examined if meaningful inclusion of all is to take place” (109). Essentially, she establishes that queer negation in Africa is a post/colonial problem of exclusion that needs to be addressed as such.

Chapter five concludes the book, and in it, Nyeck contends with positions that challenge her thesis that Africa’s interiority is fertile with queer and inclusive imagination. Here, her arguments heavily rely on Eboussi Boulaga’s *Muntu in Crisis: African Authenticity and Philosophy* (2014). In the end, the book is basically an exposition of some of the central debates on queerness in Africa and it forges the trajectory for new perspectives in queer theorizing. However, it should be mentioned that one of the challenges one encounters going through the monograph is that it proves to be a heavy read due to Nyeck’s overreliance on multiple theoretical and philosophical positions that have not been adequately watered-down to speak to uncomplicated subjects and audiences. Nevertheless, I would recommend this book to advanced readers eager to explore new ground in African queer theory.

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Mobilities and Cosmopolitanisms in African and Afrodiasporic Literatures.

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Mobilities and Cosmopolitanisms in African and Afrodiasporic Literatures (2021) is an ambitious reading of practices of mobility, with the stated intention of analysing the “outcomes of movement rather than movement itself” in postcolonial literature. Situated within the analytical frameworks of mobility studies, postcolonial and literary studies, the book cleverly addresses the overrepresentation of the figure of the migrant, or reductive readings of postcolonial mobility in migration and diaspora studies. Engaging a range of Francophone and Anglophone African and Afrodiasporic literatures, the study expands the sometimes narrow scope of mobility to encompass technologies and sites of mobility. This conceptualisation of the signifiers of the porosity of a globalised world, taking seriously the mobilities produced by technologies such as cell phones or television, or locations such as hotels and airports, results in a rich and layered analytical base. Moreover, it enables Toivanen to extend her inquiry to the relationship between mobility and cosmopolitanism as a signifier of utopian “worldliness”. Consequently, the study also sets out to problematise the rather reductive readings of privileged African mobilities through the contested notion of Afropolitanism. These intersecting lines are neatly structured into the three analytical sections of the study—namely, “Trouble in Business Class”, “Budget Troubles, Practical Cosmopolitanisms”, and “Abject Travels of Citizens of Nowhere”. While Toivanen makes it clear that mobility alone does not necessarily produce “cosmopolitan consciousness, ethic, or aspiration” (9), this structure delineates forms and outcomes of mobilities based on social class.

The first section, “Trouble in Business Class” most closely aligns cosmopolitanism with representations of economic power and transnational mobility in third-generation African literature. Toivanen cleverly subverts expectations by opening with an analysis of a novel by Ama Ata Aidoo, an author whose representation of the class dynamics of a newly independent Ghana is used to read seemingly banal access to mobility in the form of automobiles, hotels and travel agencies, as a precursor to contemporary readings of transnational Afropolitanism, positing the existence of “Afropolitans *avant la lettre*”.

Subsequent chapters explore the more conventional terrain of Afropolitanism, examining the short stories of Afrodiasporic writers Sefi Atta and Chimamanda Ngozi (Chapter 2) and the homecoming narrative of the Francophone writer Alain Mabanckou (Chapter 3). Toivanen's association of various types of class privilege with anxiety produced by the contradictory freedoms of "modern forms of mobility" creates a thread of postcolonial *malaise* running through the "troubled" psyche of the privileged postcolonial subjects examined in this section, countering the myth of carefree and somewhat facile cosmopolitanism defined by Taiye Selasi in "Bye-bye Babar (Or: What is an Afropolitan?)", published in 2005.

The middle section of the book, "Budget Travels, Practical Cosmopolitanisms", moves further down the economic ladder, reading technologies of mobility through selected works by Liss Kihindou, Véronique Tadjo, NoViolet Bulawayo and Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche. Given the number of texts in this highly interesting chapter (Chapter 4), one wishes that more space could have been given to delving deeper into the texts and developing ideas around the "mobile poetics of communication technologies" (91). The idea of non-physical or virtual mobilities of producers of an accessible form of "worldliness" or practical cosmopolitanism offers a fresh perspective on these texts.

In subsequent chapters, the notion of practical cosmopolitanisms is related to urban mobilities through works by Alain Mabanckou and Michèle Rakotoson (Chapter 5), and migrant mobilities in Fabienne Kanor's *Faire l'aventure* (Chapter 6). Again, the strength of Toivanen's analysis lies in the cartographies of the everyday, and quotidian acts of crossing social, economic, and cultural borders. Within the urban context the French concept of "*débrouillardise*" (resourcefulness) emerges as a term that encapsulates the sort of practical cosmopolitanism that is developed by the need to adapt to new or unfamiliar environments and technologies (115–9). Productively, the line of argumentation around anxieties produced by Western modernity, developed in the first section of the study, is connected to the fragilities that necessitate "*débrouillardise*" as a border-crossing strategy of survival (136).

The final section of the study, "Abject Travels of Citizens of Nowhere", takes us to the bottom of the socio-economic ladder, covering the familiar representational terrain of clandestinely, precarity and unbelonging. This culminates in the chapter that reads "zombification" as the ultimate failure of

cosmopolitanism through an analysis of J. R. Essomba's *Le Paradis du nord* and Caryl Phyllip's *A Distant Shore* (Chapter 9). Although the metaphor of the zombie is developed with reference to imaginaries of "contagious alterity" and Fortress Europe protecting itself against a "contagious blackness" (202) is evocative, this as Afropean mobility unwittingly precludes a discussion of the mobility with reference to longer histories of African descendants being European. That said, this weakness does not necessarily undermine the critical intervention made by Toivanen's study.

Overall, the book is structured, through its three sections, as complex taxonomy of cosmopolitanisms produced by class-based forms of mobility. Moreover, the fine-grained reading of an impressively broad corpus produces a multi-layered understanding of postcolonial African and Afrodiasporic cosmopolitanisms and mobilities that complicates the simplistic opposition between the privileged Afropolitan at one end of the scale, and the abject figure of the migrant at the other.

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Can Themba: The Making and Breaking of the Intellectual Tsotsi, a Biography.

Siphiwo Mahala.

Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2022. 288 pp.

ISBN 9781776147311.

The biography has become a staple of Wits University Press's catalogue over the past decade. Regina Gelana Twala, Patrick van Rensburg, Richard Rive, and Dorothea Bleek are some of the figures who have seen their life and work be the object of sustained critical inquiry in this series of biographies. Joining this list is Siphiwo Mahala's study of Can Themba, a "Drum Boy" best known for his short stories.

A notable difference between the other biographies and this one is the relative prominence of Themba. Whilst Twala, Van Rensburg, and others are by no means unknown, Themba has a more prominent stature as an oft-anthologised, studied, and re-interpreted figure. However, as Mahala reminds us in the introduction, "reference to [Themba's] biographical background is scant [, and w]here reference is made to

biographical details, there are barely any substantive facts that give an epistemological account” (5). This is what the book seeks to address—both life history in the general sense, and artistic and intellectual history in particular.

Being a creative writer of plays and short fiction that explicitly speak to Themba’s life as well as being an academic, Mahala is particularly well-suited to write this biography of a figure who was equal parts writer and intellectual. It is also this duality that makes the Themba-biography a difficult one to approach. For whilst the biographical genre follows a rather simple rule, i.e., encapsulate the life of a specific figure, the specificities of the figure places certain demands on the researcher. In Themba’s case, the duality demands both an artist and intellectual biography.

In relation to the artist biography, Mahala’s position as a writer and literary scholar allows his research to offer a scintillating synthesis of readings of both historical data and literary texts; with the literary texts being Themba’s and the writers Themba regarded as influential to his own style. Mahala analyses, for example, the influence of Shakespeare on Themba’s formative poetry as a student at the University of Fort Hare, discussing how “[t]he metrical feet and rhyme are typical of the linguistic nuances and the quintessential Shakespearean rhythms” (28).

Literary texts, however, remain a limited source. And here Mahala deserves a great deal of praise. His incorporation of oral history, and in particular his approach to the inclusion of long sections—sometimes entire paragraphs—of oral testimony leads to the book having a feel of immediacy and generosity: immediacy in relation to memory, and generosity in relation to highlighting the sources of memory (rather than hiding them in footnotes and endnotes).

Beyond shaping an intimate relationship to sources, this approach also allows a great deal of complexity to bubble to the surface throughout the book. Speaking on the ‘nature’ of Themba’s intellectualism, for example, Mahala argues that the “closest we can come is to label him a pragmatist, simply because he adapted to different situations and contexts; but this is not always an accurate assessment, as testimonies by people close to him, such as Jean Hart, reveal that he was never afraid of taking unconventional or extreme positions at times” (147). The oral, then, becomes a source for complexity—offering as much intimacy into the memory of those who knew him as uncertainty about how much we could ever truly know of him.

The intellectual biographical dimension of the book is satisfied through Mahala’s discussion of

the concept of the ‘intellectual tsotsi’. As evidence of his stature as intellectual, Themba’s living room in Sophiatown was famously known as the ‘House of Truth’. This reflects the space created therein for probing debate and the fearless pursuit for knowledge. And although it is mostly his time as an adult in Sophiatown that is associated with his ‘intellectual tsotsiship’, Mahala’s narration points to Themba being a leading intellectual amongst his peers throughout his life.

‘Intellectual tsotsi’ is a concept that has been used elsewhere (Anon; Nkuna), but which has not been teased out in a sustained way. The entirety of chapter 12 is devoted to this question and focuses on the concept in relation to Antonio Gramsci’s well-known notion of the ‘organic intellectual’ specifically, and the ‘public intellectual’ more generally. As Mahala notes, Themba ‘fits’ Gramsci’s description of the intellectual in many ways yet diverged from it as well. Notably, whereas Gramsci regarded a fascination with abstract thinking as foundational to the ‘intellectual’, Mahala points to Themba’s groundedness that made him engage more widely than purely through traditional intellectual avenues.

Here I would posit Mahala misses an opportunity to offer a substantive delineation of the ‘intellectual tsotsi’. Beyond drawing on Gramsci’s understanding of the intellectual, Mahala also refers to Mari Snyman’s argument for regarding Themba as a ‘shebeen intellectual’. Where Mahala notes some differences between the figure of Themba as an intellectual and Gramsci’s theorisation, he offers no substantive critique of Snyman’s thesis—which begs the question why ‘intellectual tsotsi’ would have to be used at all. Considering the centrality of this concept in the biography’s title, it is a missed opportunity that could have offered a novel understanding. In a time of township studies, this could have been particularly generative.

Beyond the possibility for Mahala to have demarcated the distinctness of the ‘intellectual tsotsi’ as a figure more clearly, the only other point of criticism I could level at the book is Mahala’s focus on Themba’s reception and legacy in singular terms. Mahala notes in the introduction that a central motivation for writing the book was to provide an account different from the overwhelmingly group-centric approach that dominates studies of the Drum Boys. There is, Mahala convincingly argues, a need to understand Themba in relation to his own history, not only as ‘another’ Drum Boy. At the same time, the individualised focus on Themba, I would argue, leads to statements reflecting

exceptionalism—statements that are, in fact, often true in relation to leading artists and intellectuals who had a similar life trajectory. For example, when Mahala notes that “[i]n yet another paradox, his [Themba’s] passing sparked interest and breathed new life into his oeuvre, thus entrenching his name in the annals of journalism and the literary landscape in South Africa” (5), one only has to turn to a myriad of leading figures in world history, such as Vincent van Gogh, Emily Dickinson, and Franz Kafka, to see a similar pattern unfold. In this sense, a more historicised view of Themba would have benefited the biography.

Despite these criticisms, Mahala’s biography paves the way not only for a historicised understanding of Themba and his work, and, by implication, the lives and legacies of the Drum Boys generally, but offers a rare example of an artist-intellectual biography; a book that marries literary analyses and reflections on intellectual development. That Mahala further draws on rich oral history makes this a uniquely stimulating read. It has the potential to become an important archive unto itself, offering a writerly map for South Africanists working in biography, intellectual history, and literary studies going forward.

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Foundational African Writers: Peter Abrahams, Noni Jabavu, Sibusiso Nyembezi & Es’kia Mphahlele.

Bhekizizwe Peterson, Khwezi Mkhize & Makhosazana Xaba (reds.).
Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2022. 472 pp.
ISBN 9781776147519.

Hierdie publikasie open met ’n huldeblyk aan Bhekizizwe Peterson, in lewe ’n professor in Afrika-

letterkunde aan die Universiteit van die Witwatersrand, wat op 15 Junie 2021 aan Covid-verwante oorsake oorlede is. Peterson word gehuldig as een van die leidende figure wat die projek, Narrative Enquiry for Social Transformation (NEST), onderliggend aan die publikasie, gerig het. Dit is onder meer deur sy toedoen dat Peter Abrahams, Noni Jabavu, Sibusiso Nyembezi en Es’kia Mphahlele as die eerste skrywers van Afrika-letterkunde as ’n instelling (“the institution of African literature”) aangebied word.

Hoewel al vier hierdie Suid-Afrikaanse skrywers ’n mate van bekendheid geniet, is die skrywerskappe van Abrahams en Mphahlele wat uitsluitlik in Engels gepubliseer het, meer bekend en is heelwat sekondêre werk oor hulle gepubliseer. Die meeste van die hoofstukke in die boek handel dan inderdaad ook oor hierdie figure. Vir die gewone leser sal die skrywerskap van Jabavu, ’n tydskrifredakteur en die outobiograaf van *Dawn in Colour* (1960) en *The Ochre People* (1963), minder bekend wees. Juis hierdie feit word deurlopend in die teks aangespreek, veral in Athambile Masola se hoofstuk getiteld “A Footnote and a Pioneer: Noni Jabavu’s Legacy”. Die insluiting van die vierde skrywerskap, dié van Nyembezi, bring ’n belangrike kwessie, naamlik die omskrywing van “Afrika-letterkunde” (“African literature”) te berde.

In ’n tradisie wat “African writing in English” as “African literature” bestempel en tot die publikasie van Chinua Achebe se *Things fall Apart* in 1958 teruggevoer word, is die plek van Nyembezi wat in Zoeloe geskryf het, in dié opsig opvallend. (Kyk oor die debat oor “African Literature in English” ook Simon Gikandi se Voorwoord en Khwesi Mkhize se hoofstuk “Es’kia Mphahlele and the Question of the Aesthetic”). Dit, in die woorde van Sikhumbuzo Mngadi in sy hoofstuk “Situating Sibusiso Nyembezi in African Literary History”, “complicates the colonial and postcolonial historical and literary historical trajectories” (75) rondom letterkundige tradisies. Die debat oor wat African Literature is en of dit mondelinge oordraging en inheemse tale insluit, is een wat sedert die vroeë 1960s in Afrika-letterkundige kringe voortduur en nog nooit werklik bevredigend bygelê is nie.

Die punt van Mngadi na aanleiding van ’n uitspraak van Mũkoma wa Ngũgĩ maak, is ter sake, naamlik dat die onderbestudering van inheemse tradisies daartoe lei dat “early African writing has not yet become part of the African literary and critical imagination” (76). Dat Nyembezi in hierdie konteks betrek en aan ’n breër (nie-Zoeloe-lesende) akademiese gehoor bekend gestel word, is dus ’n verruimende meevaller. Mngadi waarsku dat die skryfwerk van Nyembezi “outside

the colonial, decolonial and neocolonial framework, may very easily drop off the African literary map and timelines, if such a map and timelines fail to account for this literature and various cultural forms to which it has been adapted” (79). Dié waarskuwing geld veral vir radioverwerkings gebaseer op Nyembezi se romans wat deel van die “oral and listening tradition” geword het.

Soortgelyk, maar breër gesien, sou in hierdie konteks ’n debat oor die plek van inheemse tale en tale soos Afrikaans en die Afrikaanse letterkunde tot uiteenlopende gesigspunte lei wat inderdaad die tradisie en grense van “African literature” sal toets.

Hierdie omvangryke versameling akademiese artikels word in drie hoofafdelings vervat wat onderskeidelik soos volg ingedeel is: “Remapping en Rereading African Literature and Cultural Production” (deel 1), “South Africa and Fugitive Imaginaries” (deel 2) en “In the Eye of the Short Century: diaspora and Pan-Africanism Reconsidered” (deel 3). Elk van die vier skrywerskappe word telkens in die drie afdelings (gesamentlik 19 hoofstukke) behandel waarin die temas van ballingskap; tuiswees en uithuisigheid; kolonialisme, apartheid, antikolonialisme en verset; en Pan-Afrikanisme op verskillende wyses terugkeer. Raakpunte tussen hierdie skrywerskappe as “grondleggers van Afrika-letterkunde” word op hierdie wyse benadruk. In haar hoofstuk brei Mkhize op van die temas uit, dus nie net in fiksie of outobiografiese werk nie, maar “die tirannie van plek” en die bewustheid van ballingskap beïnvloed ook die skryf van literêre kritiek soos in Mphahlele se *The African Image* (1962).

Hierdie is ’n teks oor Suid-Afrikaanse skrywers en hulle lewens geprojekteer op die breë doek van Afrika-letterkunde en ’n Pan-Afrikanistiese bewustheid. Peterson in sy hoofstuk “The ‘Crossroads and Forkways’ of Pan-Africanism between 1948 and 1968” toon aan hoe die verdingliking van ras en die etnisiteit in Suid-Afrika ook hierdie skrywers se perspektief op politieke vryheid, die breë kontinent en hul verhoudings met ander Afrikane beïnvloed het: “the crossroads and the forkways of blackness are numerous and complex” (341). Abrahams, Jabavu en Mphahlele se ideologiese keuse in hierdie opsig, karteer Peterson as “political (and nationalist)” met ondertone van individualistiese, pan-etniese en universalistiese beskouinge en formasies, terwyl Nyembezi Zoeloe-identiteit wou ontkoppel van “segregationist and apartheid inscriptions” en wou laat saamhang met nasionalistiese identiteit.

’n Kort resensie kan nie reg laat geskied aan die diepgang van die perspektiewe wat in *Foundational African Writers* aan die orde gestel word nie. Ek het

elkeen van die artikels, sonder uitsondering, besonder insiggewend gevind. Dit is die soort “grondleggende teks” wat studente in Afrika-letterkunde ryklik sal beloon omdat dit gesigspunte open wat ’n hele tradisie in perspektief stel.

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Lesser Violence: Volume 1.

Amie Soudien (ed.).

Johannesburg: MaThoko’s Books, 2021. 135 pp.

ISBN 9780620958653.

Lesser Violence opens with a note reminding the reader to be careful with themselves: to take breaks from the book as needed. This mode of address conveys the intentionality of the contributors to embed care into the reading experience. Their openness around the process of creating this volume extends the sense of safety co-cultivated in the reading group the book is named after.

The reading group’s conveners had their expectations of what should take priority in such a group: “Participants were not only interested in talking about the texts. They wanted to talk about their experiences [...] It wasn’t simply about ‘reading’” (12). The conveners note how academic spaces and practises limit what knowledge can be generated about violence. One convenueer says such environments are alienating and truncate possibilities of knowing through emotion and experience (12). Another convenueer says that in prioritizing personal experience, the reading group countered the extractive nature of academia: “In the reading group, nothing was the ‘other’. It was us.” (13).

The collection focuses on experiences of violence through the lens of artistic practices. The contributors experiment in conveying meaning, from conversational interview to poetry to theatre script. As one of the conveners reflects, art offers “room for not knowing, not understanding...” (16). Art is generative in the context of representing violence because it offers the possibilities of conveying affective elements of the experience, especially in cases where words fail.

This is demonstrated through Gabrielle Goliath’s contribution. Goliath analyses their installation titled

This Song is For ... which explores “the afterlives of rape through the reimagining of the dedication song” (7). Goliath’s collaborators share a song that holds some importance to them, speaking to their experience of rape. As these songs are played by an ensemble during the installation, a disruption is staged through a record scratch. Goliath writes, “The scratch [...] offers to those present an opportunity to affectively inhabit a contested space of traumatic recall ...” (35). In using the song and the scratch “as an alternative modality of representation” to encapsulate the experience of rape, Goliath shows the potential for us to access modalities which not only represent but affect too (38).

Reading this contribution, wherein lyrics from the songs chosen are interspersed in between Goliath’s analysis, I was reminded of the songs that I leaned on after experiencing sexual assault. While I can tell you what happened to me, with thanks to Goliath’s intervention, I realized another way—just as meaningful—through which I could convey something of that experience. Instead of using speech, I might now play you Lira’s live rendition of “Something Inside So Strong” on repeat and through it, you would come to know the part of me that needed it as lifeline. In this teaching, Goliath illustrates one of the aims of *Lesser Violence*, which is to point us to different ways that we might come to share knowledge about the violence we experience.

One reading group convenor says, “to recognise [raced, gendered and sexualized] violence as normative [...] is to recognise also our own entanglement, our implication.” (10). Building on this, M Neelika Jayawardane writes on art institutions and their role in protecting abusers from social repercussions. Jayawardane notes how—regardless of the medium—art industries share several traits which enable violence. These include a) glorifying hypermasculinity, b) power imbalances between employees and employers and c) gatekeepers who punish and exclude those who speak up against abuse (104).

Jayawardane says art institutions often construct “an individual—an artist, photographer, or director—as “genius” (104). Jayawardane continues, “The genius artist was, and continues to be, framed as a magical if temperamental person [...] who was able to harness the alchemy of commercial success with public adoration and critical approval—and therefore had to be catered to at any cost.” (105). In a presentation in 2019, visual artist Sharlene Khan spoke to this glorification of the ‘genius’ artist, and the separation of art from the artist. Khan encourages their audience to consider their complicity in violence as it relates to

their consumption of art. After detailing accusations of abuse against prominent artists, Khan asks, “How great was [the abuser’s] language, their vision, their lyrics, their familiarity of your situation that granted them unrestricted access to their daughters, wives, partners’ bodies? [...] How cheap is the price of that movie ticket, that song, that exhibition against the huge price of personal and collective trauma that is being paid by victims of abuse daily?”. Jayawardane’s argument is extended by Khan, both writers insistent that a change in institutional cultures within the arts is necessary to meaningfully address gendered violence.

Throughout the volume, there is a strong evocation of spirit. In Nondumiso Msimanga’s interviews with the cast of the play *No Sunday Easter for Queers*, several actors signal the impact of performing on the spirit, as well as sensing spirits as they are performing (84, 95). In Msimanga’s commentary, they ask what it means to perform being dead or alive (85), ultimately uncovering the purpose of acting out stories of violence: “Feeling unfree makes us feel dead, so we act to feel alive” (98).

Donna Kukama’s contribution tends to the spirit by recalling the names of women artists who have been “omitted from the gallery’s archive, [...] queer people murdered [...] in hate crimes, and [...] those who survived the violent attacks against them.” (6). B. Camminga’s invocation of spirits tends to transgender people who died migrating across the Mediterranean. Camminga lays the violence faced by trans people who make it to shore—how they are misgendered upon arrival—as well as the erasure of those who die during the journey. Here, Camminga highlights a project to count the number of murdered trans people across the globe: a practice of “bringing out your dead” inspired by James Baldwin. Here, Camminga drives home that trans lives matter, that “these deaths are not unimportant or forgotten or worse, coincidental” (79).

Finally, Saarah Jappie draws attention to the act of *sitting* with violence. Reflecting on their collaboration with Gabrielle Goliath, where they commemorate women and queer victims of gendered and sexual violence, Jappie is struck by the audience’s difficulty in sitting with the performance. Jappie highlights the endurance needed of us all in witnessing and responding to violence: how we must “sit with discomfort”, with the fact and impact of violence (27). Jappie’s meditation returns us to the starting point of tackling violence: that what is needed of us before anything else is to bear witness and sit with mourning (27). In multiple ways, the contributions in *Lesser Violence* speak to this, providing leads on how the weight of bearing witness might be borne.

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Bot.

Carien Smith.
Kaapstad: Tafelberg, 2022. 160 pp.
ISBN 9780624092872.

Carien Smith se kortverhaalbundel het onlangs die UJ-debuutprys (2023) gewen. Smith dra haar debuut *Bot* (2022) op aan alle medereisigers in die sesde massa-uitwissing—die leser word welkom geheet tot sy eie afsterwe. Reeds met die eerste kortverhaal "Trein" word die leser geneem na Valhalla, die volmaakte samelewing sonder hedendaagse (oftewel toekomstige) probleme. Dit is die "Finale oplossing" (14) om die mens uit sy ellende te red. Net soos 'n *ander* finale oplossing, bevind die ek-verteller haar nie by die poorte van 'n veilige hawe nie, maar sy is vasgekeer in 'n kajuit met geslote vensters en die verstikkende reuk van amandels. Wees gewaarsku dat die kortverhale grotesk-aangrypend is, en sonder hoop.

Die kortverhaalbundel is 'n versameling van reise, onder meer geografies, filosofies, biologies en tegnologies. Die leser word saam met die verskillende ek-vertellers op reis geneem. Kwessies oor kuns, progressie en menslikheid word deurgaans aan die leser geopper. *Bot* is die bot mens, die natuur wat bot, en die robot. Elke kortverhaal is soos 'n episode van *Black Mirror*—die mens se bestaan word bevraagteken en die klimaks van die verhaal laat die leser in angsworstel, enige lafenis is slegs 'n illusie.

Carien Smith is besig met haar doktorsale studies rondom die epistemologie en etiek van klimaatsverandering, en dié is temas wat sterk aanwesig is binne die verskillende narratiewe en beelde van moontlike toekoms. Ander tematiese aspekte wat ook ondersoek word, sluit onder meer die volgende in:

die rol en mag van sosiale media, die verbrokkeling van die familiestruktuur, eibelang teenoor menslikheid, die afwesigheid van empatie, die oorheersende rol wat tegnologie in die mens se daaglikse lewe speel, totalitarisme, eugenetika, kloning, virtuele realiteite, kunsmatige intelligensie, die mens se afhanklikheid van tegnologie, klimaatsverandering, vlugteling, die verwoesting van die natuur, die genetiese manipulasie van diere, biotegnologie, eutanase, geweld, solastalgie, en konflik tussen dit wat wettig is en dit wat moreel is. Wat is die verskil tussen 'n mens en 'n bewuste of gevoelige robot? Waar begin die een en waar eindig die ander? Hedendaagse krisis en tegnologiese moontlikhede is die speelgrond waarop bogenoemde temas uitgespeel word in 'n bloeddorstige apokalipsbingo.

Die gruwel word verdoesel met die prag van die bundelomslag. Die konflik tussen die natuur en tegnologie word beklemtoon. Dit dui op die bevordering van die een ten koste van die ander. Die verhale word mooi verpak, maar die inhoud is beklemmend. Dit speel ook in op die idee van 'n perfekte samelewing: dit lyk mooi van buite, maar dit is 'n vervalste en oppervlakkige beeld. Dit is slegs vir 'n klein groep 'n utopie.

Bot is wetenskapfiksie op sy beste. Alhoewel sommige verhale afspeel in 'n futuristiese Suid-Afrika, is die verbeelde samelewing herkenbaar vir die hedendaagse leser. Krisis in die hede word geëkstrapoleer: dit is 'n waarskuwing vir wat moontlik mag gebeur indien die krisis nie opgelos word nie. Smith verweef wetenskapfiksie met magiese realisme. Aan die een kant is die speling tussen wetenskapfiksie en magiese realisme prikkelend en dit skep interessante scenario's wat die leser dompel in 'n filosofiese foltering. Aan die ander kant verbreek die magiese realisme die bereidwilligheid van die leser om die ongeloofwaardige (naamlik die futuristiese uiteensetting) as gebeurlik te aanvaar. Die geloofwaardigheid van die toekomstige moontlikhede word belemmer met die wete dat sommige verskynsels beperk is tot fantasie (die magiese). Ten spyte hiervan is die vermenging van hierdie twee uiteenlopende genres fassinerend.

Daar word deurgaans in die bundel gebruik gemaak van verskillende vroulike ek-vertellers van 'n verskeidenheid ouderdomme, van tieners tot 'n ouma, selfs 'n robot. Die verskillende ek-vertellers gee 'n beknopte, maar veelseggende blik op vroulike ervarings en die verskillende rolle wat sy deur haar leeftyd vervul. Só word daar ook kritiek gelewer op die verwagtinge wat op vroue geplaas word. Die leser word meegesleur en die spanning bou op maar die kruks van die verhale bring telkens geen verligting nie. Die leser word gelaat

met 'n opbou van energie, 'n mislukte veg-of-vlug respons omdat hierdie spanning nie verwerk is nie. Lesers is tog medereisigers en die ek-vertelling maak die leser deel van die chaotiese samelewing. Almal is aandadig aan die volgende massa-uitwissing, ons is die Antroposeen wat ons eie menswees en wêreld se ondergang gaan veroorsaak.

Soos die meeste distopiese werke speel *Bot* met die idee van die verlede. Die toekomstige uitgebeeld in die kortverhale weerspieël gebeurtenisse uit wat herkenbaar is. Geskiedenis word herwin. Daar is skeiding tussen verskillende groepe. Die skeiding is nie weens ras nie (alhoewel rasseskering nie totaal uitgewis is nie). Mense word verdeel volgens hulle (skynbare) perfektheid of die rykdom wat hulle besit. Daar is 'n groot gaping tussen dié wat 'n gemaklike lewe van oorvloed geniet en dié wat veg om oorlewing. In "O₂" is dit die mense in privatopieë wat suurstof en inentings kan bekostig, en die res word uitgesluit en ingesluit in 'n toksiese wêreld, onbeskermd teen die elemente. In "Laemens" woon die ryk en byna perfekte mense in die veilige Koepeldorp (Stellenbosch), terwyl die arm en defekte mense buite plak. Hulle is proefkoninge in eksperimente om enige afwykings uit die menslike DNS te verwyder. Daar is 'n kastestelsel, eugenetika is belangrik en mense word deur bio-ingenieurs verbeter. Slegs die bes-aangepaste mense mag voortbestaan. Hierdie evolusie is "God se plan" (49).

Die tema van mense wat God speel, kom deurgaans in die bundel voor. In die slotverhaal, "god die Robot" kom mense per trein na die goddelike rykdom van die Robot en moet hulleself oorgee aan hierdie nuwe tegnologiese heerskappy. Dit is interessant om die eerste en laaste verhaal saam te lees. Die sestienvoortverhale skakel nie aan mekaar nie, maar tog is daar 'n verbintenis tussen die vertellers en samelewings wat nie neergegeen kan word nie. Die eerste en laaste verhale (naamlik "Trein" en "god die Robot") maak die verhale siklies van aard, en dit laat die leser vir oulaas in 'n toestand van skok, veral met die twee laaste paragrawe van die slotverhaal.

Bot laat die leser 'n tuimeltrein van emosies beleef. Dit forseer hulle om oor hulle menswees te dink, maar ook die mens se posisie in die groter raamwerk. Die stryd tussen natuur en tegnologie word op die voorgrond geplaas en dit verg 'n reaksie van die leser. Indien die noodkreet geïgnoreer word, sal Suid-Afrika se toekoms donkerder as haar verlede wees. Soos gesuggereer in "Fel" sal daar in die toekoms klimaatsvlugtelinge wees, moord sal gepleeg word vir drinkwater, en geweld van onbeskryflike wreedhede is die norm.

Waar postapartheid Suid-Afrika die Waarheids-en-Versoeningskommissie ingestel het om geregtigheid te herstel, sal daar in die toekoms 'n Nasionale Klimaatswaarheid-en-Versoeningskommissie wees om oor die misdade in die klimaatkrisis te oordeel. Die kommissie kan nie die mense red nie, dit is 'n leë seremonie en weerspieël die president se leë woorde in die slotparagraaf. Die aanslae duur voort. *Bot*, en alle slagoffers van die Antroposeen, spook by jou.

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Die kapokdokter.

François Loots.

Kaapstad: Umuzi, 2022. 162 pp.

ISBN 9781415211106.

In 1816 stap ene dr. James Barry die Kaap de Goede Hoop aan wal. Teen hierdie tyd is die Kaap al lankal 'n kolonie van die magtige Britse Ryk en lord Charles Somerset dien as goewerneur. As dokter in die Britse Leër maak Barry vinnig opgang, veral ná sy aankoms in die Kaap en weens sy goeie verhouding met goewerneur Somerset. Dit is hierdie tydperk van die werklike dr. James Barry se lewe wat as kweekvywer dien vir François Loots se nuutste historiese roman, *Die kapokdokter*.

Loots het met twee van sy vroeë romans, *Rooi Jan Alleman* (2012) en *Die diepblou see* (2017) die lewens van onderskeidelik Bram Fischer en Jan Hofmeyr herverbeel, en in 'n *Spook in die huis* (2019) betrek hy ook figure uit die veelbesproke Anni Dewani-saak van jare gelede. In my resensie van *Die diepblou see* het ek dié roman as grootliks geslaagd beskou, al het ek die outeur se gekose styl en herhalende gebruik van sekere beelde steurend gevind (Fourie). Nietemin, in die geval van Hofmeyr het ons te make met 'n belangrike geskiedkundige figuur wat jammer genoeg grootliks in die vergetelheid verdwyn het, en *Die diepblou see* staan steeds as beskeie korrektief hierop. Van dr. James Barry kan egter nie gesê word dat hy 'n geskiedkundige randfiguur is nie, aangesien sy verhaal reeds sedert enkele jare ná sy dood mense fassineer. Om maar een ou en een nuwe voorbeeld te noem: Charles Dickens publiseer in 1867 'n kortverhaal oor Barry, "A Mystery Still", en selfs die plaaslike uitgewer Book Dash het

so onlangs as 2014 nog 'n kinderboek, *The Cottonwool Doctor*, oor Barry se lewe uitgegee. Wat Loots se roman wel laat uitstaan, is dat dit vrygestel is in 'n tyd waarin daar opnuut heftige gesprekke gevoer word oor gender, genderidentiteit, die patriargie en genderkonstruksie. Soos met Fischer en Hofmeyr se verhale die geval was, kan die geskiedenis alleen nie die narratiewe gapings oor Barry se lewe vul nie, en die outeur verbeel dus iets as antwoord hierop.

Baie lesers sal waarskynlik reeds in breë trekke van Barry se lewe bewus wees. Gedurende sy nadoodse ondersoek is bevind dat sy geslag eintlik vroulik was—hy is later geïdentifiseer as 'n persoon gebore Margaret Bulkley—en die dokter wat die ondersoek uitgevoer het, het verder vermoed dat hy op 'n stadium selfs 'n kind in die wêreld gebring het. (Ek verwys deurgaans in hierdie resensie na dié figuur se identiteit as manlik, met die gepaste voornaamwoorde, aangesien sy eie persoonlike dokumente daarop dui dat Barry verkies het om as 'n man geken te word.) Terwyl hierdie opspraakwekkende saak vroeër jare waarskynlik meestal beskou sou word binne die raamwerk van die patriargie en die beperkings wat daardeur op vroue geplaas is, is dit haas onmoontlik om Loots se roman buite die eietydse gesprek rondom genderidentiteit te situeer. Die leser word immers aanvanklik bekendgestel aan die protagonis, 'n man, dr. James Barry, maar later in die roman leer ons dat Barry net een gedeelte van 'n persoon is, en dat die ander ene, 'n vrou, Margaret heet.

Dit is dan nie verbasend nie dat hierdie spanning tussen die uiterlike aanbieding van Barry as 'n man, enersyds, en sy biologiese geslag as vrou, andersyds, vir die narratiewe spanning in die roman sorg—en dit word meestal behoudend aangebied. Dr. Barry as militêre geneesheer is voortvarend en selde op sy mond geval, altyd maar alte bewus van ander se waarneming van sy klein hande, hoë stem en jeugdige voorkoms. Wanneer ons uiteindelik voorgestel word aan Margaret, sien ons iemand wat miskien meer terughoudend as Barry is, maar ook hiërdie skeiding vervaag soos die verhaal vorder en ons meer oor Margaret se verlede leer.

Soos Dan Sleight se *1795* (2016) is Loots se roman geskoei op navorsing oor die Kaap gedurende die koloniale tydperk, en anders as wat die geval is met geskiedkundige tekste wat handel oor 'n figuur soos Barry bied *Die kapokdokter* 'n boeiende, byna lewende blik op die dag-tot-dag bestaan van mense in dié kolonie. Dit is veral die spanning tussen die koloniale administrasie onder lord Somerset en die bestaande “Hollandse” magstrukture aan die Kaap waarin Barry verwickel raak. Die outeur slaag daarin om uit te brei oor die details van Barry se werksaamhede as mediese

inspekteur aan die Kaap (én sy werk as alledaagse geneesheer) sonder dat die leser verveel of vermoei word. Die hoofkarakter se energieke persoonlikheid en drif maak dit geloofwaardig dat hy hom oor allerlei dinge sou bekommer—van die kleiner probleme soos die stryd om die bedrywighede van kwaksalwers met hulle rate te beperk, tot die sistemiese kwessies soos die onmenslike behandeling van gevangenis in die Kaap se tronke—en sodoende ontkom die roman aan daardie achilleshiel van historiese romans wat die leser enduit verveel met oordrewe beskrywings van banaliteite wat dalk geskiedkundig noemenswaardig mag wees, maar verhalend lief aan historici en hulle geskifte oorgelaat moes word.

Soos reeds genoem, is die roman duidelik geskryf met 'n sekere bewustheid van eietydse gesprekke rondom gender. En hoe trakteer 'n mens dan literêr 'n figuur soos dr. James Barry? 'n Voorspelbare benadering sou vereis dat die fokus van die roman sou val op die skepping van James Barry as persona as 'n gevolg van die onderdrukking wat vroue indertyd ervaar het. Barry se lewensverhaal sou vertel kon word as 'n voorbeeld van weerstand teen hierdie onderdrukking, en terselfdertyd ook as hartseer voorbeeld van die drastiese stappe wat vroue moes doen om 'n soort geslagsgelykheid te bewerkstellig. Die minder voorspelbare aanpak sou wees om Margaret/Barry se genderidentiteit op 'n minder eenvoudige wyse aan te bied. Wat as Margaret se skepping van James Barry nie net was om bo haar stand as vrou in die 18de en 19de uit te styg nie, maar ook omdat sy diep ongemaklik gevoel het met die idee van 'n gekonstrueerde “vroulikheid”? Daar is elemente van albei benaderings in *Die kapokdokter*. Veral deur Barry se behandeling van sekswerkers en swanger vroue word sy diep ongemak verraai jeens aspekte van 'n vrou se (en sy eie) liggaamlike ervaring van die wêreld, en tegelykertyd bied dit ook 'n (onvoltooide) betragting oor die idee van 'n sogenaamde essensiële vrouwees. Hier word iets uit sy verlede opgediep wat Barry se knapheid as verloskundige verduidelik. Maar hierdie idee word myns insiens nie in betekenisvolle en volgehoue diepte uitgewerk nie, net soos daar net aan die oppervlak geraak word wat betref hierdie karakter se seksuele en emosionele begeertes en drange—waarskynlik omdat die roman meestal ingestel is op die dokter se bewustheid van die beperkte wyse waarop hy met sy wêreld kan omgaan, en weliswaar net ongeveer twaalf jaar van sy lewe dek.

Met *Die kapokdokter* bied Loots aan die leser 'n leesbare en genotryke roman, en die besluit om Barry se jare in die Kaap te gebruik as die historiese agtergrond vir die romangebeure (met enkele terugblikke na die

karakter se grootwordjare, wat redelik spaarsamig gebruik word) het 'n meer gefokusde teks as sy vorige werke tot gevolg. Terwyl daar seker nog heelwat gesprek gevoer kon word oor die dalk verspeelde geleenthede om verdere diepgang en vernuwing te bewerkstellig oor die hoofkarakter se genderidentiteit, bied die roman tog 'n interessante blik op die enigmatiese dr. James Barry se lewe. Uiteindelik slaag *Die kapokdokter* daarin om 'n gekonsentreerde blik op Barry se lewe te skets sonder dat dit in enghed, verveligheid of lastige stilistiese toertjies verval.

Geraadpleegde bron

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Doolhof.

Rudie van Rensburg.

Kaapstad: Queillerie, 2022. 320 pp.

ISBN 9780795802553.

Doolhof is die tiende Kassie Kasselmann-dossier en jongste boek van Rudie van Rensburg. Van Rensburg het 'n indrukwekkende en vinnig groeiende oeuvre met titels wat bykans elke jaar, soms tot twee titels 'n jaar, verskyn. Hy is 'n oud-joernalis en deesdae gewilde en bekende skrywer. Hy skryf meestal misdadadiksie maar het 'n aantal humoristiese romans oor Hans van Kraaienburg wat deel is van sy oeuvre.

Die ondertitel van *Doolhof* lui "ses verdagtes, ses motiewe om te moor". Dit is 'n ondertitel wat van toepassing is op een van die storielyne in die verhaal. Daar is inderwaarheid drie skynbaar onverwante stories wat vertel word. Die moord op oud-politikus en sakeman Armand Deysel is die grootste raaisel vir Kasselmann en sy regterhand Rooi Els. Die sakeman is een aand vermoor terwyl die elektriese heining van sy woning nie werk nie. Vir 'n omstrede persoon soos Deysel is daar nie 'n tekort aan vyande nie. Vinnig is daar ses verdagtes op die lys, elkeen met 'n baie goeie rede om die moord te kon pleeg. Geld laat inderdaad die wiele van die (onder)wêreld draai en Kasselmann en Els is vasgevang in 'n doolhof van doodloopstrate.

Vivian Thompson is 'n private speurder in Londen wat pas haar eie onderneming begin het. Gelukkig vir haar kom die skatryke Sir James Evans op haar webwerf af en kontak haar om 'n waardevolle familieskat op te spoor: die doolhof-halssnoer wat oupagrootjie Evans vir sy verloofde laat maak het. Ongelukkig maak Thompson die fout om die aandag van 'n berugte sindikaat se aandag te trek. Kort voor lank moet sy heelyd oor haar skouer loer om seker te maak sy bly een tree voor die uitgeslape bende.

Waldo Smit is 'n *loser*. Hy het net 'n matriekkwalifikasie en nou is hy sy werk, sy geld en al sy besittings kwyt. Hy het te maklik in die kloue van 'n manipulerende vrou ingeloop wat hom van al sy besittings en waardigheid gestroop het. Hy is kwaad, kry skaam en kan slegs bekostig om in 'n kamer van iemand se vervalde huis te bly. In 'n desperate poging om iewers werk te kry loop hy by 'n boekwinkel in Loopstraat in Kaapstad in. Daar ontferm meneer Finkelstein hom 'n bietjie oor die gehawende man. Waldo probeer optimisties bly en om nie in sy ma se voetspore te trap en ook selfmoord te pleeg nie. Dit is egter nie so maklik nie. Dit is dalk al opsie wat vir hom oorbly. Tensy hy op een of ander wonderbaarlike manier 'n klomp geld erf.

Hierdie drie storielyne maak vir 'n storie wat spannend uitgebou word en 'n goeie pas handhaaf. Die skrywer strooi broodkrummels subtiel in die storie wat 'n mens lei om so half en half die storie bymekaar te sit, maar die boek lewer nie 'n voorspelbare einde nie. Eerder 'n bevredigende, byna gelukkige en vrolike einde. Dit bewys dat dit 'n lekkerleesmisdaadroman is—al is daar 'n moord en ongure karakters betrokke.

Soms kan dit voel of die leidrade bietjie maklik na vore kom, amper soos 'n episode van die TV-reeks CSI waar 'n lukrake, byna nuttelose brokkie inligting of objek lei na die ontdekking van 'n groter leidraad. Die karakters se probleme word ook meestal netjies opgelos en hulle beleef selfs groot geluk. Dit is miskien 'n bietjie te goed om te glo, maar nietemin doen dit nie afbreuk aan die roman se lekkerleesbaarheid nie en dit is maklik om verdiep te raak in die storie.

In die misdadadiksie in Afrikaans is daar heelwat hoofkarakters wat interessant en boeiend is. Die karakters het later hulle eie reekse gekry en dit sorg vir 'n groot aanhang by lesers. Daar is Bennie Griessel, die hardgebakte speurder van Deon Meyer, en onlangs Ami Prinsloo, die vat-g'n-nonsens-nie joernalis van Irma Venter, om maar 'n paar te noem. Kassie Kasselmann is nog so 'n bekende karakter. 'n Mens sal die hele reeks waarin hy voorkom moet lees om 'n beter idee van hom as speurder en karakter te kry. Hy het net 'n bietjie te

ver van die hierdie storie gevoel, asof mens nie heeltemal 'n greep op hom kan kry nie. Dat hy 'n ervare speurder is wat 'n oog en intuïsie soos min van sy kollegas het, maak wel van hom 'n aangename karakter.

Die storie bevat verwysings na hedendaagse politiek, karakters wat swaarkry in die ekonomiese klimaat ná die pandemie en oomblikke van humor en skerpsinnige sêdinge (meestal van Dan Piedt, die navorser vir die Spookeenheid). Die boek se titel doen die storie se kinkels gestand. *Doolhof* bied 'n lekkerleeservaring wat lesers vasgenaël gaan hou. Nes 'n mens dink alle hoop is verlore, lewer die doolhof 'n opening wat al die drade netjies aanmekaar bind.

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Hou jou oë oop.

Brian Fredericks.

Kaapstad: Human & Rousseau, 2022. 296 pp.

ISBN 9780798182744.

Brian Fredericks se *Hou jou oë oop*, sy debuut as romanskrywer, is 'n voortsetting van die temas in *As die Cape Flats kon praat*—die kortverhaalbundel waarmee hy in 2020 as skrywer gedebuteer het en wat met die K. Sello Duiker-gedenkprys bekroon is. Die lewe op die Kaapse vlakte, armoede, geweld, dwelms en nommerbendes word weer betrek, maar hierdie keer is daar 'n sterker fokus op identiteitspolitiek.

Hou jou oë oop is die verhaal van Ricardo wat in Athlone saam met sy ma, broer en suster leef. Die negentienjarige Ricardo se grootste begeerte is om te gaan studeer en iets te maak van sy lewe, anders as sy suster Tracy wat in 'n verhouding met die bendeleier Capone is, en sy broer Anton wat deel is van die struggle teen Apartheid. “Hier moet ek wegkom. Dis my plan” (14), sê Ricardo oor sy ambisie om uit sy omgewing van geweld en armoede te ontsnap, woorde wat herinner aan dié van Tiemie in P. G. du Plessis se drama *Siener in die Suburbs* (1971): “Ek wil nie hier bly nie. Ek wil nie hierdie lewe hê nie. [...] Ek wil van geweet wees” (26).

Die eerste deel van die roman begin in 1985 waar Ricardo in die tuin van die Prinsloos in Constantia gaan werk om geld te spaar vir UWK, want “[e]ducation kan my 'n platform gee om rêrig weg te kom”

(98). Maar dan sterf sy broer in die struggle, en kort daarna sy ma, en dan begin Ricardo se drome ontspoor. Deel twee van die roman speel af in 1997, en van die ambisieuse Ricardo wat “matriek met A's geslaag” (66) het, is daar min oor: “In dié tyd begin ek drink en rondslaap met verskillende vroumense. Beweeg van een werk na die ander. Koppel met vrinne wat net naweke in die smokkeljaart sit” (136). Later het hy geen keuse as om agter in die jaart van Capone te gaan bly nie.

Wanneer Ricardo die enigmatiese Luigi ontmoet, lyk dit of daar uiteindelik 'n uitkoms vir hom is wanneer hy 'n beurs ontvang om by Luigi se College of Knowledge te studeer, maar dan dwing Capone hom om by sy kriminele aktiwiteite betrokke te raak, en Ricardo se lewe verander radikaal. In die derde deel van die roman wanneer Ricardo in Drakenstein-gevangenis by 'n tronkbende ingelyf word, dink mens aan Adam Small se gedig, “Die Here het gaskommel”: “die dice het verkeerd gaval vi' ons / daai's maar al”.

Ricardo gaan sit egter nie in sak en as oor die manier waarop die dice vir hom geval het nie, maar erken aan homself dat hy sy oë van die “goal” (284) afgehaal het: “[...] ek het myself geketting aan opinies van mense [...]. Mense wat nie vir my as persoon gesien het nie, [...] net my velkleur [...]. Ek is vir jare as niks minder as 'n negative stereotype gesien nie. Die ergste van alles is, ek het dit alles entertain” (293).

Ricardo is deur verskeie karakters gewaarsku om sy oë oop te hou en die realiteit te aanskou (16, 74, 185), wat die titel as motief in die roman laat funksioneer. Dit is egter eers tydens die slot van die roman waar Ricardo vir die eerste keer gehoor gee aan hierdie waarskuwing en sy situasie in aanskou neem. Die selfinsig waartoe dit Ricardo laat kom, wys op die kwessie van identiteitspolitiek wat Fredericks in die roman ondersoek. Dit geskied grotendeels deur middel van bruin identiteit wat geobjektiveer word.

Adriaan, seun van die Prinsloos, noem byvoorbeeld aan Ricardo: “Kleurlinge fassineer my. [...]. Julle hele geskiedenis. Daar's 'n soort aura rondom julle.” (69). Adriaan versoek dan ook om vir Ricardo te teken vir 'n kunswerk. Waar “toi-toi, die necklacing [...], swartes wat in aanhouding doodgaan. Skoolkinders wat in die strate doodgeskiet word” (113), deel is van die harde realiteit op die Kaapse Vlakte waarvan Ricardo wil wegkom, gebruik Adriaan dit as “vrugbare stof vir sy kuns” (113).

Al wil die twee UWK-vrouestudente stem gee aan die weerloses en daarom versoek dat Ricardo hulle deur Athlone begelei sodat hulle foto's kan neem en onderhoude met mense kan voer, objektiveer hulle ook bruin mense. Luigi is eweneens besig om die

maatskaplike omstandighede van bruin mense op die Kaapse Vlakte uit te buit vir sy eie politieke redes (286).

Een van Ricardo se onderwyser het destyds verklaar, “Ek’s nie ’n kleurling nie” (73). Volgens die onderwyser is die woord “kleurling” ’n vloekwoord, ’n naam wat die regering op bruin mense afforseer. Hierdie sentiment sluit aan by die storie oor die jazz-groep wat Ricardo se pa destyds in Distrik Ses begin het, wat musiek gemaak het “[o]r hoe jou velkleur jou ambition kan stop” (88). Ricardo besef uiteindelik dat hy toegelaat het dat sy velkleur sy ambisie kelder, deurdat hy ingegee het tot die stereotipe rondom bruin identiteit. Wanneer hy met ’n tandeborsel die 26-tatoeëermerk op sy duim uitbrand (293), maak hy dit duidelik dat hy nie langer gaan toelaat dat sy velkleur (of sy omstandighede) in die pad van sy drome en ambisie staan nie.

Hierdie slotgedeelte aktiveer die sirkelstruktuur van die roman. Wanneer die maatskaplike werker vir Ricardo vra waarom hy in die tronk is, begin hy sy storie—die roman wat die leser pas gelees het—aan haar te vertel (294). Die sirkelstruktuur se oop einde word uiteindelik ook simbolies van Ricardo se deurstellingsvermoë, en dat hy ten spyte van sy verslaentheid, steeds vasklou aan sy drome en ambisie: “Ek hustle my hele lewe lank, ek’s nog nie klaar nie” (256).

Dit is jammer dat Ricardo se wispelturige gebruik van taalregisters en die feit dat sy perspektief nie deurgaans sterk genoeg deurkom nie, die eerstepeersververtelling soms belemmer. In die enkele hoofstukke waar bendeleiers as vertellers optree en in tronktaal oor die nommerkultuur praat, word die fokus insgelyks verloor en haper dit die vertelling as karakterroman.

Ten spyte hiervan is dit interessant om te sien hoe Fredericks se roman aansluit by veral P. G. du Plessis se Hertzogprysbekroonde drama, *Siener in die Suburbs* (1971), deurdat beide tekste die mens se verhouding met sy omgewing ondersoek, asook die futiele wyse waarop daar uit troostelose omstandighede ontsnap probeer word.

Aan die einde van 2022 is die Jan Rabie en Marjorie Wallace Skrywersbeurs vir 2023 aan Fredericks toegeken op grond van ’n voorstel vir ’n beoogde roman in fragmente oor ’n vergange gemeenskap waar die lewens van mense van diverse kleure, kulture en herkomste verweef was. Hierdie verhaalopsomming herinner sterk aan A.H.M. Scholtz se bekroonde *Vatmaar* (1995). Ek hou my oë oop om te sien op watter eiesoortige wyse Fredericks ook met hierdie ikoniese Afrikaanse teks in gesprek gaan tree.

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Eugene.

Kirby van der Merwe.

Kaapstad: Human & Rousseau, 2022. 253 pp.

ISBN 9780798182645.

Kirby van der Merwe is bekend as digter, joernalis, kortverhaalskrywer, asook outeur van die roman *Klapperhaar slaap nie stil nie* (1999). Ná verloop van meer as twee dekades verskyn sy tweede roman getiteld *Eugene* (2022), wat in 2023 die Eugène Marais-prys vir prosa verower.

Die gebruik van ’n eienaam as titel is treffend aangesien hierdie naam die leser binne die Suid-Afrikaanse sosio-politieke konteks aan omstrede figure soos die oud-polisiekolonel Eugene de Kock (wat aan die berugte Vlakplaas verbonde was), asook die voormalige leier van die regs-ekstremistiese Afrikaner Weerstandsbeweging, Eugène Terre’Blanche, herinner. Naas die titel word die leser se nuuskierigheid deur middel van die manlike figuur wat op die voorplat verskyn, geprikkel, om meer omtrent die Eugene-karakter te wete te kom.

In die roman versinnebeeld die fiktiewe Eugene-karakter vanuit ’n politieke verwysingsraamwerk presies die teenoorgestelde politieke ideologie as sy voorafgenoemde naamgenote. Simbolies dra die hoofkarakter se naam gewig aangesien sy vriend Alan se een broer, Huey, Eugene se naam met Pink Floyd se lied “Careful, careful, careful with that axe, Eugene” (98) assosieer. Laasgenoemde assosiasie aktiveer vroeë rondom temas in die roman naamlik moord, vriendskap en verlies.

Die boeiende verhaal fokus op Eugene, ’n welbelese joernalis wat tydens die sestiger- en sewentigerjare in die Boland grootword. Sy liefde vir boeke en die gedurige soeke na kennis kom vroeg in die roman aan bod wanneer hy in standerd vyf ’n eksemplaar van Leo Tolstoy se magistrale *War and Peace* by ’n klasmaat se huis steel. Weer eens is Van der Merwe se verwysing na die spesifieke roman veelseggend aangesien oorlog en geweld as temas tydens die apartheidsjare, maar ook met die aanbreek van ’n demokratiese bestel in 1994 sterk in die roman figureer.

Die narratief word in ses afdelings deur middel van 'n raamvertelling aangebied. Deur middel van tydsprong tussende hede en verlede word Eugene se lewensverhaal soos spreekwoordelike legkaartstukke fragmentaries aanmekaargesit. Van der Merwe se fyn waarnemingsvermoë as joernalis is opvallend in die beeldryke vertelwyse waarop veral Eugene se kinderdae beskryf word. Hy slaag daarin om dié tydvak (1960–76) in Suid-Afrika se geskiedenis op onderhoudende en besonder geloofwaardige wyse aan te bied. Verskeie aspekte soos die kleredrag, taalgebruik, verwysings na handelsmerke asook geskiedkundige gebeure gee gestalte aan die karakters se lewe binne die konteks van 'n pynlike tydperk vir talle gemarginaliseerde groepe in Suid-Afrika se verlede.

Alhoewel die narratief vanuit 'n reeds volwasse agternaperspektief aangebied word, is dit interessant om Eugene-as-kind se siening op die ruimte waarin hy homself bevind het, te lees. Dit herinner sterk aan Jeanne Goosen se karakter, Gertie, in haar novelle *Ons is nie almal so nie* (1990) en die wyse waarop die leser die wêreld van die storie vanuit 'n onskuldige en natêwe kinderverteller se perspektief waarneem. “Kampong Boland, 1960's-1970's” kan myns insiens as een van die interessantste afdelings in die roman beskou kan word. Met tye voel dit vir die leser asof die verteller hom of haar in 'n tydskapsule terug in die verlede neem op soek na die antwoorde op verskeie vrae waarmee die leser in die roman gekonfronteer word. Van der Merwe se kleurryke vertelwyse slaag egter daarin om die leser deurentyd aan die raai te hou.

Eugene se karakter is egter meer kompleks as dit wat op die figuurlik gesproke oppervlak sigbaar is. Vanuit 'n psigologiese raamwerk slaag Van der Merwe daarin om die leser enduit te laat kopkrap oor Eugene se psigiese toestand wat veral sterk na vore tree nadat hy deur 'n vigilante-dominee en 'n paar boere in die Oos-Vrystaat aangerand word. Hierdie gebeurtenis in Eugene se lewe laat vrae ontstaan oor sy rol as vryheidsvegter tydens die onstuimige sewentiger- en tagtigerjare in die stryd teen die apartheidsregering. As gemarginaliseerde figuur word Eugene se karakter simbolies van talle Suid-Afrikaners se ervaring van onderdrukking en die ontmensliking wat op gewelddadige en psigologiese wyse deur die apartheidsregime toegepas is.

Die gebruik van 'n bobbejaan as metafoer vir Eugene se geestestoestand dui daarop dat hy moontlik breinskade opgedoen het weens die aanranding, maar aktiveer ook die idee dat dit weens trauma of skuldgevoel as spreekwoordelike uitlaatklep

gebruik word om met sy hede en verlede te versoen. Dit is opvallend dat Eugene se bobbejaan telkens sy verskyning maak wanneer hy in nood verkeer hetsy fisiek of geestelik van aard. Tonele waarin hy verneder word wanneer hy met 'n tuinslang agter in 'n voertuig natgespuit word, dui op die gruweldade waaraan talle politieke vryheidsvegters blootgestel is.

Op vernuftige wyse slaag die verteller daarin om gestalte te gee aan die hoofkarakter se ervarings, maar skep tegelykertyd twyfel by die leser rondom die karakter se fiksionele wêreld teenoor sy verbeeldingswêreld. Wat is werklik en wat is moontlik verbeel weens die effek wat trauma en skuldgevoel op Eugene as karakter uitgeoefen het? Op dié wyse word Eugene se verhaal die verhaal van 'n getraumatiseerde individu wie se geestesgesondheid met tye die leser tussen feit en fiksie, werklikheid versus die realiteit, asook trauma versus moontlike skisofreniese gedrag laat wonder.

Die slot van die roman is myns insiens bot. Alhoewel die narratief op verrassende wyse afgesluit word, het dit dié leser met 'n gevoel van onvergenoegdheid gelaat. Heel moontlik het die skrywer doelbewus die slot op so 'n wyse beplan dat dit die leser met meer vrae laat omtrent die misterieuse Eugene-karakter. Ten spyte van laasgenoemde opmerking is *Eugene* 'n boeiende roman en 'n welkome toevoeging tot Kirby van der Merwe se literêre oeuvre. Dit is een van daardie tekste wat die leser sonder twyfel tot nabetragting stem.

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Moederland.

Madelein Rust.

Kaapstad: Human & Rousseau, 2022. 333 pp.

ISBN 9780798183192.

Die skrywer Madelein Rust is bekend vir haar spanningsverhale, veral die topverkoper *Malan & Coetsee*-reeks, wat onder meer *Monstersaad* (2015), *Bloedlyn* (2016) en *Moordhuis* (2017) insluit. Met haar jongste roman, *Moederland* (2022), spits Rust haar egter toe op die genre van toekomsfiksie.

Moederland is 'n postapokaliptiese roman wat afspeel in 2070, ná die Derde Wêreld Oorlog en twee

burgeroorloë Suid-Afrika se stede in puin gelê het. In die nuwe slimstede soos Xīn Xiānggǎng (voorheen Bloemfontein), woon die elite en die Chinese en Russiese kaders in relatiewe weelde, terwyl gewone burgers op die platteland uitgelewer word aan hongersnood, gewelddadige bendes en die elemente. Nuwe wetgewing plaas 'n verbod op swangerskap sonder 'n regeringspermit en pasgebore babas wat onwettig aan die lewe geskenk word, word summier genadedood toegedien deur middel van 'n Medi-Bot.

In *Moederland* ontmoet ons die 27-jarige Jenesis Baron. As enigste kind van Jericho Baron, die skatryke uitvinder van die drakoniese regime se vreesaanjaendste tegnologie, is Jenesis 'n lid van die bevoorregte elite. Veilig in haar vergulde kou, hou Jenesis haar besig deur rubrieke te skryf wat die huidige regime se lof besing. Enige ongure gerugte van magsvergrype deur die regering word blindelings deur haar as fopnuus en samesweringsteorieë afgemaak.

Toe Jenesis egter onwettig geboorte skenk aan 'n tweeling en deur Generaal Ben Wagner van die regering se Gewapende Magte gedwing word om toe te kyk hoe haar kinders aan die Medi-Bot uitgelewer word, begin die skille van haar oë afval. Na die moord op haar pasgebore babas, gaan soek Jenesis die pa van haar kinders, professor Adam Bormann, by die universiteit op. Hier word sy onverwags vasgevang in 'n gewelddadige studente-optog en word gevolglik betrokke by 'n groep ondergrondse rebelle wat die huidige bewind omver wil werp.

Só begin Jenesis se missie van wraakneming en bevryding.

In die tradisie van spekulatiewe fiksie, verweef *Moederland* elemente van die kritikus Darko Suvin se konsep van die 'novum'—die 'nuwe ding' of 'punt van verskil' wat wetenskapfiksie van konvensionele letterkunde skei—en van hedendaagse regte wêreldkwessies (Roberts 6).

In *Moederland* se toekomstige Suid-Afrika kry ons te doen met tegnologiese nuwigthede soos robotsoldate, kunsmatige intelligensie, hologramme, hommeltuie en eksoskelette wat soldate meganies versterk. Hierdie 'nova' word slim aangewend om kommentaar te lewer op die huidige stand van ons samelewing, in ooreenstemming met een van die spekulatiewe fiksie-genre se kenmerkende stylfigure: waarskuwing deur middel van ekstrapolasie.

Die trajek van die verval van die beskawing word aan die begin van die roman deur middel van grepe uit fiktiewe media-berigte vir lesers geskets. Rust volg die drade van huidige globale wêreldkrisisse tot hul

mees vreesaanjaendste moontlike gevolge. Kwessies soos korrupsie en magsvergrype in die Suid-Afrikaanse regering, Rusland se ekspansionistiese optrede in die Oekraïne, China se betrokkenheid in Afrika, die Covid-19 pandemie en die anti-vaksinasië beweging word onder die loep geneem.

Veral interessant is *Moederland* se behandeling van omgewingskwessies soos aardsverwarming en die broosheid van die natuur. In 'n onderhoud met *Sarie*, vertel Rust hoe haar navorsing tydens die skryf van die roman haar oor en oor gelei het tot die kwessie van die verwoesting van ons planeet: "Om die boek te skryf het ek 'n enorme hoeveelheid tyd bestee aan navorsing oor toekomskundiges se voorspellings, en die een ding wat oor en oor voorgekom het, was die kwesbaarheid van ons planeet en die skade wat ons elke sekonde aanrig."

Moederland kan as 'n eko-distopie of klimaatsfiksie (ook bekend as 'cli-fi') beskryf word. Die Suid-Afrika van 2070 is 'n onherbergsame woestynland, die natuurlike omgewing onherroeplik verwoes deur die aardgas-emissies van WOIII se oorlogsmasjiene.

Nou verweef met die ekologiese tema is dié van moederskap, wat ook in die titel van die roman weerspieël word. Dit is moederskap, hoe vlugtig óók al, wat Jenesis tot die besef dwing dat alles nie pluis is met die regering wat sy eers so sterk ondersteun het nie.

In teenstelling met Ben Wagner en die regime se verwoestende onderdrukking van die land en sy mense, word die beskermsdrang en krag van die moeder gekoppel aan die hoop op die herstel van 'n vrugbare landskap en demokrasie. Jenesis, die moederfiguur, die Joan d'Arc van die rewolusie, sal (soos haar naam aandui) 'n nuwe begin vir haar mense oopvee.

Ten slotte is Madelein Rust se *Moederland* 'n uitstekende bydrae tot die groeiende genre van Afrikaanse spekulatiewe fiksie. Die roman worstel met groot kwessies, maar lesers wat bekend is met Rust se spanningsverhale kan gerus wees dat *Moederland* oorgenoeg van haar kenmerkende humor, aksie-belaaide storielyne en intrige bevat.

Geraadpleegde bron

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Op pad na Moormansgat.

Chris Karsten.

Kaapstad: Human & Rousseau, 2022. 480 pp.

ISBN 9780798183222.

Aanhangers van Chris Karsten se misdaadverhale weet teen hierdie tyd watter interessante dinge gebeur wanneer hy sy hand aan geskiedkundige materiaal slaan. Sy jongste boek, *Op pad na Moormansgat* is gebaseer op ware verhale, dié van die berugte bendeleier Billy Foster en dié van die Boeregeneraal Koos de la Rey, teen die agtergrond van die Rebelle van 1914 in Suid-Afrika. Alhoewel die roman ryklik put uit hierdie ware verhale, beklemtoon Karsten dat alle geskiedskrywing onderhewig is aan interpretasie, met die aanhaling van J. M. Coetzee “a history is nothing but a certain kind of story that people agree to tell each other”, wat hy as een van die roman se motto's gebruik.

Die eerste verhaallyn word op 'n breë palet geskilder deurdat dit begin met die ontleding van 'n “kiekie” wat geneem is toe die hoofverteller Helena 'n baba was. Dit was kort ná 'n polisieman (wat ironies genoeg bekend was as 'n besonder swak skut) genl. De la Rey se lewe by 'n padblokkade beëindig het met 'n skoot wat vir Helena se pa, die bendeleier Billy Foster, bedoel was. Die verhaal verloop nie chronologies nie en strek tot in 1937.

Hoewel die politieke onrus en noodlottige botsings tussen Afrikaners van 1914 bekend is, staan die leser steeds gefassineerd wanneer genl. De la Rey op 'n amper deus-ex-machina-manier verlos word uit die dilemma wat hom in die gesig staar: hoe om te weier om deur die Britse magshebbers in die dreigende oorlog in Europa gedwing te word sonder om bloedvergieting en broedertwis onder sy volk aan te moedig.

Die generaal se vrou, Nonnie, spreek sy tweestryd só uit: “Ag, Koos het niet nodeloos aan my geseg dat die toekoms vir hom so donker syn dat hy aan God geseg had: Heere neem my, maar dink aan my Volk en wys vir hulle die weg ten goede aan. Ag, en toe kom dit soo dat hy werklik op soo 'n wonderbare wyse weg geneem word.” (458). Sy het egter vriende en familie aan die kant van die koloniale regering én van die rebelle. “[...] die een is vir my so dierbaar as die ander een en ek sien nog aan geen kant lig en ons weet niet aan welke kant die lig sal skyn.”

Die verwoesting van vroue- en kinderleuens, opstalle en vee tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog was immers nog so vars in die geheue, soos *Het Volk*-redakteur Harm Oost dit roerend stel: “[...] die Empirerowers in Londen wil hê die Unie moet in Duitswes 'n landroof gaan uitvoer, en Lewies Botha

en Slim Jannie [Smuts] sê goed, ons sal dit gaan doen. Maar ons, die patriotte, ons geheue is lank en bitter. Dis net 12 jaar en ons woude het nog rowe. Die einste Kakies het ons Boere van hul grond verja, hulle plase gestroop en verskroei” (421).

Die tweede verhaallyn, wat die eerste afwissel, is dié van Billy Foster, 'n belowende fotograaf, maar heethoofdige seun van Ierse immigrante, wat in 'n reeks vinnige rykwordskemas telkens met die gereg bots omdat hy glo die lewe skuld hom voorspoed en rykdom. Hy en sy vrou, Peggy, raak voortvlugtig in 1914, juis toe die politiek in Suid-Afrika onstuimig raak. Bekend as die berugte Fosterbende met 'n klomp moorde op Billy se kerfstok, word hulle in 'n grot in Kensington, Johannesburg, vasgetrek en laat Helena as baba agter.

Haar oupa John het baie kleinkinders, maar Helena, wat eers net Baby genoem word, is die spesiale kindskind—“by gemis aan Billy, wat Oupa se spesiale kind was, en sy hart versplinter het” (31). Vir haar gee hy 'n verkleurmannetjie present, maar sy druk die diertjie onder 'n baksteen dood omdat hy nie regtig van kleur kan verander soos die grootmense belowe het nie. Dit is 'n sinspeling op die kind wat dit later ook nie regkry om haar pa se nalatenskap af te skud nie.

'n Betekenisvolle simbool in die roman is die voël, die sakaboela, wat telkens as 'n soort gewete verskyn en stip na haar kyk, die eerste keer net nadat Baby die verkleurmannetjie verbrysel het (31–2). Sy onthou haar tant Cissy het kort daarna vertel 'n engel het haar ouers kom haal, maar Baby het geglo dis nie 'n hemeling met wit vlerkies wat buite die grot gewag het waar die polisie haar ouers vasgetrek het nie, maar die sakaboela. Sy sê sy het geweet: “Daar by die koppie het hy geduldig op 'n struik gewag, stil met sy stip ogies, reg om Peggy se siel vir die hemel te gaan onderskep sodra dit uit die grotbek gesweef kom. Vir Billy s'n sou hy nie ook krag en tyd gehad het nie, dié sou maar verlore moet gaan” (33).

Uit vrees vir die gemeenskap se herinnering aan haar berugte pa, word die dogtertjie, 'n eenkantkind, in haar vyfde jaar uit Johannesburg Grahamstad toe geneem na verlangse familie van haar ouma. Hier kry sy by 'n liefdevolle gesin vir die eerste keer 'n regte naam: Helena Breitenbach. “Ons wou jou die merk van Kain spaar” (28), bieg haar tant Cissy 18 jaar later.

Op haar beurt bots Helena ook met die gereg ná 'n reeks ongelukkige verhoudings met dieselfde soort mans as wat haar oorlede pa was. Haar laaste vryer, Andries du Plessis, lei haar as sy handlanger in misdaad in. Uit Helena se voorafgaande liefdesgeskiedenis voel die leser dit is 'n katastrofe wat gewag het om te gebeur. Sy glo haar pa se gene bepaal haar lotgevalle en dit bring

die oeroue vraag na vore: wat speel die bepalende rol in 'n mens se lewe, oorerwing of omgewing? Andries se onwettige goudtransaksies lei tot vyf moorde waarvoor hy uiteindelik boet, terwyl Helena ná 'n paar dae in die tronk en ondervraging vrygelaat word.

As volwassene het Helena 'n obsessie om alles moontlik oor haar herkoms uit te vind en dit in haar “memoriebundels” op te teken. Amper aan die einde van haar speurtog gee sy 'n digbundel met 'n stertveer in vir Isak Heyns, die polisieman wat Andries se misdade ondersoek en tot wie sy aangetrokke voel. Helena hou op pad Lichtenburg toe in die veld stil met haar motor, waar sy ontsenu word deur die sakaboela. Die voël staan weer in die teken van die doodsengel en dit dui moontlik daarop dat sy besig is om haar greep op die lewe te verloor. Hulle kyk mekaar aan en sy vra die voël waarom hy haar agtervolg (304).

Dit sou sinvol wees as Helena se besoek aan genl. De la Rey se graf op Lichtenburg beter gemotiveerd is, maar die skrywer laat dit aan die leser oor om uit te werk wie uitgebeeld word “in die hol oë van daai bronsbeeld met die groot baard en die haakneus” (308). Wanneer Helena haar verhaal aan die borsbeeld op die graf vertel het, sê sy “sal hy verstaan hoekom hy so 'n groot deel van my verlede is, miskien die heel grootste deel” (308). Karsten erken in 'n radio-onderhoud met Ilse Salzwedel in die RSG-radioprogram *Skrywers en boeke* dat daar baie min biografiese feite oor Helena is en dat hy hom hier grootliks tot fiksie moes wend.

Afgewissel met die twee verhale is dié van Isak Heyns en sy ouers wat die lotgevalle van Afrikaners voor, tydens en ná die Anglo-Boere-oorlog uitbeeld. Sy pa Segryns, oud en afgetakel, was 'n hensopper wie se redenasies met sy agterryer, Tapiwa Mahlangu (Tappies), soms vir komiese afleiding sorg. Isak beskou sy pa as deel van die arm en swakker klas wat aan die hoogs aansteeklike siekte luiheid ly. “Hy sien die beeld van Sitman, die meeldiaken met sy ongebleekte bedelsloop, die man wat sit waar hy sit, die elfde plaag onder diesulkes—willoos, vol ingebeeelde kwale, vyand van alle vaste werk” (115).

Die drie lang afdelings *Stemme van oorlog*, *Stemme van Protes* en *Laaste stemme* waarin baie rolspelers figureer soos politici, 'n kampdokter, 'n Britse sersant, 'n Boerekryger, Emily Hobhouse, genl. De la Rey se vrou en dogter, Sol Plaatje, koerantredakteurs en 'n Moslemwinkelier, se waarnemings en interaksie met genl. De la Rey, werp lig op die geliefde generaal se persoonlikheid.

Tog doen die uitvoerigheid van hierdie figure se kommentaar en briewe afbreuk aan die romanmatigheid van die onafwendbare sameloop van die gebeure. Die nou reeds welbekende belewenisse in die konsentrasiekampe lyk of dit ingesluit is ter wille van die skrywer se uitvoerige navorsing. 'n Korter weergawe van die gebeure rondom die mynopstande en die rebellie sou wel funksioneel wees, want dit het direkte betrekking op genl. Beyers se noodlottige verontagsaming van die padblokkade wat sy passasier, genl. De la Rey se dood veroorsaak.

Karsten het meer as 100 geskifte geraadpleeg, onder meer joernale, argiewe, koerante, tydskrifte, uittreksels en verslae van ondersoeke. Hy vertel in die genoemde radioprogram dat hy hierdie magdom navorsingsresultate moes verwerk en uiteindelik nie verder kon of wou sny aan sy manuskrip nie. Hy verdedig sy stelling deur te sê dat elke karakter met 'n doel in sy verhaal ingesluit is. Só byvoorbeeld is Tappies se rol om te wys dat die Boere die Mapokkers van hulle grond beroof het net soos Brittanje die Boere-republieke beroof het.

Die werk van ongeveer 'n dekade, soos vertel deur Karsten in die onderhoud, getuig van sy noukeurige navorsingsingesteldheid wat ook sy misdaadromans kenmerk. Die soms argaïese woordgebruik en woordeskat word funksioneel gebruik in *Op pad na Moormansgat*—selfs die roman se titel is ontleen aan 'n gedig van C. Louis Leipoldt.

Kritiek kan uitgespreek word teenoor die algehele afwesigheid van aanhalingstekens in die dialoog. Dit skep verwarring en bemoeilik die leesproses onnodig. *Op pad na Moormansgat* is egter steeds onteenseglik 'n meesterlike vermenging van fiksie en geskiedenis in die hande van 'n skrywer wat sy spreekwoordelike storie ken.

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Don Jadu.

S. E. K. Mqhayi.

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Samuel Edward Krune Mqhayi's novella *Don Jadu* is a complex work and truly ahead of its time. It was first published in 1929 with only sections one and two. Section three was added in 1935 and led to Mqhayi receiving the first May Esther Bedford prize.

On the opening page Mqhayi specifically states the purpose of the book: "A story that encourages unity and development." The "vehicle" he uses to explore unity and development is the journey. The plot is built around three journeys. In the first the narrator and main character, Dondolo Jadu, sets off on foot to visit a relative and encounters a series of 'characters'—both human and non-human. These specific encounters form the building blocks of the other later journeys as they take on metaphorical qualities. The first encounter in chapter one, titled "The spark", happens when Jadu is accosted by two policemen, one black, one white, who demand to see his Reference Book (*dompas*).

This stirs Jadu's inner journey and provides a theme of the rest of the story: the injustice towards black people and how this injustice is cruelly perpetuated by black people themselves. Two elements form the basis of the story: how to adapt with agency and vision to circumstances and how to motivate fellow black people to build a prosperous community that benefits everybody.

Subsequently Jadu is attacked by robbers, but saved by a Khoi man, chased by ostriches, just missed being bitten by a puffadder, heavily assaulted by Boers, then given food and lodging by a kind Boer, meets young boys, young girls. Through these metaphorical encounters, Mqhayi paints a vivid picture of the negative political space amaXhosa inhabited at the turn of the twentieth century, and the inner resources called for to survive. The narrator uses these encounters as teaching lessons to himself on which he then builds guidelines and principles for a vision of a community, proud and independent.

The second journey is taken years later, and the reader realises that although the plot is simple, it is bifocal. With nifty summarisation, Mqhayi's plot spans years. By the end of the first part, the young man is no more—Jadu is now married with children. The girl briefly met and much admired during the first journey is now his wife and a minister in the church. Jadu takes a group of people with him as they start their

journey by train. Arriving at his destination he finds much to do. As he himself is educated, he assists people engaging in labour relations, in how young men are housed and taught skills. He is pleased to see that on the place where the robbers attacked him, a beautiful education centre was built. But as the community is finding its upkeep difficult, Jadu draws up plans for them. The assaulting Boers wanted a hotel and some shops nearby, there are plans for a harbour, for buying farms, building a hospital, schools, and so the story continues with a desire for progress, but not blind to the many obstacles.

From the personal Mqhayi quickly takes the reader to the more overtly political. This trip is about black empowerment—a hint even in the place names: Zathuza ("to reason") and Mnandi ("splendour"). This second journey, as the earlier one, is not without problems. Jadu's reputation spreads as does his popularity. He is a man much respected and selflessly of value to others.

The third and last journey takes place against the background of the community's plea for Jadu to return and help them to self-govern. This he does and the third part of the book, epitaphed by the words "The waking up of black people in accordance with their tradition", mainly deals with rules, morals, codes and how to engage with both tradition and modernity, taking what is good and leaving behind what is harmful. Jadu is not alone and the company he has chosen, shows who he is and what he is about. Integrity and related characteristics are spelled out. This is about leadership, agency and respect for self, community and reciprocity.

Interestingly enough, people of various races and from across Africa, as well as from overseas, come to join this new country and nation under black rule. Jadu is made prime minister and after the opening of their parliament the book ends as follows, gracefully linking black excellence, based on indigenous tradition, with external support and tradition.

This is history seen through the eyes of the protagonist with power unobtrusively inveigled—a sign of Mqhayi's prowess as a wordsmith. With sparse prose, seemingly 'lean', he manages to convey a whole range of political spaces and faces. The novella is less than a hundred pages—but abounds with wisdom, wit, and philosophy. Today's readers may find it hard to engage with Jadu's attitude towards women and corporal punishment; but that shows the inevitable change time brings.

Mqhayi is first of all a poet. He can describe the smallest detail: "The snake looked like part of a rocky

outcrop and had the colour of an old weathered white shirt [...]” (14).

He can also paint a large canvass:

Burning pieces of firewood were whipped around by the wind and sparks spattered. The wood packed for later use caught fire and simply swallowed everything lying around. The fire also reached the kraals. E-e! [...] terror hit people [...] Some, when they took fright, took things from their houses and threw them outside. When others became afraid, they took things that were outside and threw them inside their houses; according to *their* judgement the fire was outside! [...] All of us were fighting the enemy of the whole tribe: fire. (49)

Of course, Mqhayi also has a traditional narrative style. What he conveys, he knows will be understood not only by his people, amaXhosa, but also by other black Africans of the southern region of the continent as all share similar myths, legends and beliefs.

He also touches on issues such as racialism, taxes, new diseases, drought, as well as education, religion, and industrialisation—in the new there is both good and evil. He urges his people to honour their own potential through hard work, honesty, and respect for others. Mqhayi has faith in his people.

The *great* country of *magical* change (my italics) highlights the mood, enabling the reader to suspend belief. This comes directly from the storytelling tradition: a narration filled with the magical and exaggerated for effect. His use of the narrative tradition shows how Mqhayi merges tradition (oral literature) and modernity (a story to be printed) resulting in a richer blend. Mqhayi then delves into the importance of self-governance—the ultimate goal. This is not political independence but management of the region’s affairs by the people who live there. Advocating agency, Mqhayi asserts that it is not enough to gain independence—law and order must prevail.

This seems to be the author’s message to his people: Live honourable lives. From the new, take what you deem worthy of knitting into what you have, from which you discard only that which no longer works or no longer serves, weighted against what you now know. Thus, Mqhayi gives a nod to the fact that tradition is time sensitive—an issue that deserves attention even today and even among highly educated people.

In his thesis “The Sociological Imagination of S. E. K. Mqhayi: Towards an African Sociology”, Leo Jonathan Schoots (48) suggests the following about Mqhayi’s writing:

His work is all the more powerful because he is able to maintain coherence within the ‘Xhosa worldview’—reinterpreting it and using its metaphors and ‘common sense’ knowledge to interpret the new world. By drawing on concepts that already exist as ‘given’ or ‘taken for granted’ in the Xhosa knowledge system he is able to make the new world intelligible by people who inhabit the ‘old world’. It is this ability to explain the new as a continuation of an older tradition that makes Mqhayi’s work so powerful and explains why he has been so revered as a public figure in his own time and why his work is still drawn on today.

Much of what we now know of Mqhayi’s philosophy and beliefs forms part of *Jadu*, who functions as a kind of alter ego. Mqhayi and *Jadu* have a lot in common. Both are religious and educated. No revolutionary, Mqhayi, in this novelette, comes across as an earnest evolutionary, battling to envision how a society could survive socio-political change. *Don Jadu* is a book of its times. Insightful? Certainly. But within the limitations that time and period impose on even the most insightful genius. Let me conclude with the words of Ncedile Saule (128): “[...] when Mqhayi implored the powers that be to work towards creating a South Africa in which all people would enjoy equal rights irrespective of colour, creed and nationality—he was far ahead of his time with his prophetic images.”

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Narreskip.

Johan Myburgh.
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In 2022 seil “n skifgevrete skip” die Afrikaanse letterkunde binne met ’n “onverkose skriba” aan boord wat verslag lewer oor die “kaders en kamerade” wat plunder en verorber en nes in Sokrates se geval, die “mees geslepe een” tot stuurman verkies. Reeds die woord *kader* laat ’n mens se nekhare rys, want dit is een

van die woorde wat die meeste met ons ANC-regering geassosieer word.

Plato oor Sokrates oor skeepskapteine wat naragtig optree, was die voorganger van die Switser Brant se *Das Narrenschiff* (1494), waarin hy 'n skerp satiriese aanval loods op veral die kerk. Myburg verwys in sy eietydse *Narreskip* na “raconteurs soos Basjan Brant” wat leef in Schlaraffenland of Kaukanië en sluit sy intertekstuele spel met hierdie drie tekste soos volg af:

Inkontinent droom ons nie meer van vader-
of van vastelande nie—niks is meer so vas
soos die grond eens was nie. Suipers, flierefluiters
lanterfant ons, dobbel ons ontfut, ontlas
van kaart, transport en 'n landskap met eindens.
Ontkim dobbel ons, sekerder van die onwis
as die ontwykende wis, boude, oorboord poog
ons nie eens meer om drolle uit drinkwater te vis. (11)

'n Vonds in dié bundel is die spel met die toentertydse taal om die historiese konteks op te roep. Mettertyd besef die leser dat Myburg besig is om te spot met ons eie suipers en flierefluiters. In die gedig “Reinaard” (12) is ons in die Middeleeuse Nkandla, Malpertuis. (Laasgenoemde is weer die naam van 'n rillerroman en fliet en is ook 'n skeepsverhaal.)

In teenstelling met die eerste reeks verse in die bundel, word 'n gedig gewy aan Frans de Waal se boek oor die era van empatie (13), waar die lesse te leer uit die natuur toegelig word. Myburg bring dit ook in verband met ons politiek-korrekte samelewing waar dit gebruiklik is om mense wat van jou verskil, te kwets, solank jy hulle nie ape noem nie. En eintlik is dit geen belediging nie, want ape is “verrassend meelewend”.

Die ontnugtering oor “die postkolonie en standaard wat finaal duik” sluit aan by Myburg se vorige bekroonde bundel *Uittogboek*. Verse in die derde afdeling van die bundel word gegroep onder die titel, “Museum van verlore objekte” (35). In hierdie verse betreur die digter die steel en vernietiging van antieke kunswerke. “Lamassu” (35) handel oor die gevleuelde leeu met menskop en vlerke wat die stadspoorte bewaak, maar wat verniel word deur:

... 'n sot met 'n lugdrukboor [wat] die beitel in die
pupil
druk en in 'n oogwink die klipiris moer toe kraak.

Kunswerke wat strydig is met dogma word vernietig. Hier ter lande word die brand in die Jagger Leeskamer ook beskryf en met verwondering word die red van 'n skaars manuskrip deur Cervantes beskryf.

Myburg se kritiese blik op vernietiging en verval kom in die vierde afdeling nader aan die been, wanneer inbrake, rooftogte en moorde binne die veilige ruimte van die huis beskryf word. Skokkend is ook die gejam na liggaamsdele om in moeties te gebruik, wat soos volg afsluit:

[...] Hoe harder die slagoffer
skree des te sterker die krag
van die moeties en groter die opbrengs
wat hardhandigheid eindelijk gee. (48)

Met 'n grimas en afgryse lees mens die gedig oor die seuns wat ter wille van viriliteit 'n wyfiekrokodil vang om haar “reptilies [te] naai” (49).

In “Kwarantynkwatryne” (65) word verskeie kwatryne aangebied waarin die ervaring van die inperkings tydens die pandemie die kern vorm, terwyl in die daaropvolgende afdeling besin word oor die rol van kuns, die verhouding tussen mens en hond, asook die vernietiging van grasperke en tuine.

In die sewende afdeling is ons weer terug by die heer Brant en sy satiriese blik. In die eerste vers word die uitbuiting van die mens deur straatsmouse en geldskieters krities bespot. “Fuifliedere” sluit aan by die wêreldse musiek van *Carmina Burana* en die rol wat wyn en beskonkenheid speel om pyn te verdring. “Hillbrow” (100) is 'n nostalgiese teruggreep op die kinderjare, maar ook die verval van die stad wat metafoeries vergelyk word met 'n boek waarvan die rug gebreek is.

Die essensie van die digter se intertekstuele spel met die narreskip, word soos volg in die slotvers verwoord:

In dié boekhou van die kwaad wat weinig
verskil van vroeë vergrype—boos bly
onverbiddelik boos, soms meer bisar,
nietemin nie minder wreed nie [...] (106)

Alles word gerelativeer en daar word nie tot 'n slotsom gekom nie. Die stuurman wat belangrik voel as sy muitende matrose hom prys, is steeds met ons—en aan boord het hy 'n Johan Myburg as waarnemer en skriba, wat die wandade op- en oopskryf.

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Plunder.

Antjie Krog.

Kaapstad: Human & Rousseau, 2022. 126 pp.

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Antjie Krog wen in 2023 vir die derde maal die Hertzogprys vir haar mees onlangse bundel, *Plunder*. Dié bundel is reeds in vele resensies beskryf as 'n kragtoer en as meesterlik, uitsprake wat 'n mens teen hierdie tyd van 'n Krog-bundel verwag. Inderdaad is dit 'n troos en 'n toevlug om in 'n wêreld waar ontnugtering en teleurstelling aan die orde van die dag is, te kan weet dat 'n nuwe Krog-bundel keer op keer alle verwagtinge oortref.

Om te skryf oor 'n bundel soos *Plunder* is 'n intimiderende onderneming. Hierdie bundel is só dig verweef, boordensvol betekenis en intrinsieke nuanses, dat die leser met elke terugkeer na die gedigte, om weer én weer te lees, iets nuut ontdek. Die titel bied reeds 'n belangrike sleutel tot die bundel, want dit is 'n plundering in verskillende gedaantes wat in hierdie bundel ontmasker, maar ook ontgin word. Daar is die plundering van die self en die ondersoek na hoe taal geplunder word; die plundering van liefde, die liggaam en geweld; die plundering van armoede; en hoe die aarde geplunder word.

Die bundel open met 'n programmatoriese en poëtikale gedig, "dit kom nie meer op my af nie" (11–3). Reeds die openingsreëls "dit kom nie meer op my af nie / die geluid / die geluid van 'n gedig / kom nie meer op my af nie" lei *Plunder* se gesprek met Krog se vorige bundels in. 'n Mens kan nie help om hierdie versreëls te lees en dadelik te dink aan "digter wordende" uit *Kleur kom nooit alleen nie* (2000). Laasgenoemde gedig verheerlik "die geluid van 'n gedig", maar in *Plunder* word dit gestel dat dié geluid die digterspreker nou ontduik. Die res van die bundel bewys egter hierdie siening verkeerd, want dit is duidelik dat die geluid van 'n gedig nog immer teenwoordig is in die skrywer se oor en pen.

Die problematisering van taal word bekendgestel deur "dit kom nie meer op my af nie" met verwysing na "opgesaalde woorde", "verspilde taal" en "afgrondvers". Tematies verwys dié gedig ook vooruit na die ouerwordende liggaam, selfbesinning oor die aard en skryf van poësie, die bevraagtekening van die self, die Covid-virus, asook die klem op die aardse en die funksionele gebruik van natuurbeelde. Die gedig sluit af met "eenmalig het ek behoort tot die brandendes / nou wil my stem iets dryf / sidder dit walglik klammerig van omgee en vergifnis". Hiermee word 'n totale digterskap opgeroep en word die leser herinner aan die brandende Krog wat sê "ek skryf omdat ek woedend

is" (*Otters in bronslaai*, 1981) én die Krog wat 'n taal van medemenslikheid en versoening—"n taal van onseheid" (68)—wil konstrueer in onder meer *Kleur kom nooit alleen nie* (2000) en *Mede-wete* (2014).

Plunder is deurgaans bestrooi met poëtikale besinnings en uitsprake, maar "die vulgariteit van verse" (102–3) is besonder noemenswaardig vir die veelvuldige perspektiewe wat dit op die poësie lewer. Hierin word gestel "mens skryf om jouself te herinner / hoe onmoontlik dit is om een persoon te wees". Die kwessie rondom die (outobiografiese) "ek" in die poësie word aangespreek deur onder meer "tog is die 'ek' juis nooit ek wanneer 'ek' gebruik word nie". Dan is daar besinnings soos "n gedig boor aan die omhulsel van die woord / priem, porieer, omvorm, prut tot multiversums / en verbreed die marge". Die gedig sluit af met 'n uitspraak wat herinner aan Krog, die "eens" "brandende": "ek vysel taal soos ek wil / en fok julle".

Die plundering van die liefde word veral geïllustreer in die bundel se eerste afdeling. Die bundel se opdrag lees "vir John—soos altyd" en stel dus vanuit die staanspoor die outobiografiese lees van in die besonder die liefdesgedigte op. Ses liefdesgedigte wat elkeen begin met die woorde "dis wanneer" kan as gedigsiklus opsigself bestudeer word, een waarin die volle spektrum van liefde en intimiteit verken word. Seksualiteit en liggaamlikheid speel ook 'n belangrike rol, en veral laasgenoemde word voorgehou as verweer teen die dood: "kom ons lê bymekaar, ons lywe nog verhewe bo die dood" ("die wanneer ek weg van jou is", 16–7).

Die dood staan ook telkens teenoor die beswerende krag (en onmag) van die skeppende woord, soos in "dis wanneer alles lyk of dit ineestort" (19–24): "om ons duikel die swier van swaels / alles wat leef is sterflik en verplig / my lessenaar is die veiligste plek wat ek ken". Die liggaam se fisiese teenwoordigheid blyk dikwels selfs groter beswering te bied as die poësie self, "ek omhels jou deur al die versperrings van die gedig" (16). Dit is egter ironies genoeg juis die liggaam wat feilbaar is en die mens blootstel aan siekte, verwerking en die dood.

Tematies word liggaamlikheid ook uitgebrei tot die plundering van geweld teenoor die liggaam en in die besonder die vroulike liggaam. Hier is twee gedigte, naamlik "dit spuls die aarde vol" (46–9) en "ukuhamba ze / anasyrma (omhoog-rok)" (50–2) noemenswaardig. In hierdie gedigte is die liggaam weer die broosheid en die verweer van die mens, dit is wat vroue blootstel aan seksuele geweld, maar vanuit die vrou se liggaam bring sy ook nuwe lewe voort, vanuit haar liggaam klink haar stem. "ukuhamba ze / anasyrma (omhoog-rok)"

sluit af met die kragtige beeld: “maar hoor, my hart, die verbete lied wat vroue sing / o dit gaan mooi wees as die amandels bloei!” (52).

In hierdie bundel loop die plundering van die liggaam hand aan hand met die plundering van die aarde: “hoe kan ons die planeet versorg as ons nie mekaar versorg nie / hoe kan ons mekaar versorg as ons nie die planeet versorg nie?” (106). In afdeling ses word die kerklike mis met digterlike vernuf omvorm om ekopoëtiese besinning aan te bied. Weereens is dit ’n afdeling wat opsigself ’n onafhanklike studie waardig is.

Buiten die samebindende implementering van die plundertema, is ’n ander belangrike organisatoriese beginsel wat hydra tot die bundelstruktuur die gelykstel of saamdink van aspekte wat op die oog af opposisioneel is. Hierdie tegniek word so vaardig uitgevoer dat die leser deurgaans besef daar is verskillende perspektiewe op elke kwessie. Opposisies word tegelyk met mekaar gelees en word selfs soms vervangbaar met mekaar in die spel met perspektief en betekenisontginning.

Bogenoemde tegniek word dikwels ingespan om uiters sensitiewe kwessies tot die been toe oop te vlek. So word Wit/Swart, die Wit Staar/die Swart Staar, verken in “work in progress” (96–101) en word historiese lyding van verkillende bevolkingsgroepe ook naasmekaar geplaas (“7. Dies Irae”, 120–1). In afdeling ses word hierdie tegniek van gelykstelling toegepas op God/die goddelike en die Natuur/aardse. In tipiese Krog-styl word die liefde vir en weersin in Suid-Afrika ook meesterlik saamgedink (“jou eerste nag in die tronk”, 80–81 en “familiekersfees op ’n vakansieplaas”, 82–3).

Daar is nog soveel wat oor *Plunder* gesê kan word, soos byvoorbeeld die tematiese rykheid van “die durf van 8 liedere” (57–69)—elkeen opgedra aan of handelend oor ’n bepaalde persoon (publieke en anonieme figure, persoonlike kennis)—soos Mantombi Matotiyana, John Coetzee, Remco Campert, Dot Serfontein, Lady Anne Barnard, en Desmond Tutu. Wanneer daar in “#FeesMustFall—Oktober 2015” (37) gestel word “gotweet ons het hierdie land tot verwarde stuk geleef / nie eens gedigte kry meer iets saamgeweef nie”, moet ek tóg verskil. Miskien is gedigte nog al wat ons saam kan weef. Veral die gedigte waarmee ’n mens hier te doen het.

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Sanctum.

Joan Hambidge.

Pretoria: Protea Boekhuis, 2022. 100 pp.

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Sanctum is die jongste toevoeging tot Hambidge se gepubliseerde digterskap van byna veertig jaar. Elke digter se werk beskik oor spesifieke eienskappe wat veral in ’n voortgesette en produktiewe oeuvre duidelik naspeurbaar is. In terme van die Hambidge-oeuvre en haar nuutste bundel is dit ook nie anders gesteld nie. Weereens is sprake van digterlike gesprekke, ’n netwerk van intertekstuele verwysings, herhalende temas soos jeugervarings, die dood, reis en digterskap asook die beoefening van minder bekende digsoorte en versvorme. Met verwysing na laasgenoemde herskep sy haar digterlike repertoire opnuut met die insluiting van vorme soos die redondilla en katauta. As bonus is daar ook ’n bedrewe vertaling van Sylvia Plath se “Morning Song” en C. P. Kavafy se “The City”. Dit is verblydend om te sien dat Hambidge toenemend haar hand aan literêre vertaling waag. Sy beskik beslis oor die taalsensitiwiteit en digterlike gereedskap vir dié uitdagende taak.

Nog ’n belangrike kenmerk van Hambidge se poësie wat opnuut ter sprake kom, is die soeke na dinge en mense wat verlore geraak het op die lewensreis. Dié soektog is nou verbind aan gesprekke met afgestorwe digters, vriende en familiefigure. ’n Skitterende voorbeeld van respekvolle huldiging is “Die Tao swyg” (14) waarin die spreker in gesprek tree met Petra Müller, een van vele digters teenoor wie Hambidge haar eerbied betuig. Die slotstrofe is ’n slim toespeling op Müller se bundel *Om die gedagte van geel* (2012): “Net een beeld, een footage behoef ek nou: / geen kanola voor oestyd in Swellendam” (15).

In ander verse soos “Repatriasie van pyn” (50) en “Ruie tuin” (65) hinder die futlose oornam van frases en bundeltitels, asook die opstapelings van verwysings. Soms voel ek gefrustreerd omdat Hambidge nie intertekstuele verwysings spaarsamiger en op ’n weldeurdagte wyse benut nie. Kwaliteit is waardevoller as kwantiteit en soms behels poësie meer

as 'n intertekstuele spel. 'n Veel beter aanwending van verwysings is aanwesig in ekfrastiese verse soos “Velázquez”: Las Meñinas” (92) waarin die verwysings digterlik verwerk word om 'n spesifieke invalshoek op die kunstenaarskuns werkte bewerkstellig. Hambidge het haar reeds onderskei as 'n gedugte beoefenaar van beeldpoësie. Haar digterlike interpretasie van Marilyn Monroe-foto's is maar één voorbeeld.

Ek vind Hambidge se gekondenseerde en gestroopte verse veel beter as haar digterlike pakhuis. Dikwels beskik dié soort gedigte oor groter emosionele slaankrag vanweë 'n streng minder-is-meer-benadering. 'n Paar voorbeelde uit haar oeuvre is onder meer “Westdene” uit *Palinodes* (1987), “Lyftaal” uit *Verdraaide raaisels* (1990) en “Foto: man wat val” uit *Ruggespraak* (2002). 'n Goeie voorbeeld van só 'n gesnoeiende vers in *Sanctum* is “Geestelike eskerp”—'n digterlike gesprek met Johann Lodewyk Marais—waarin die spreker haar jeuglandskap herbesoek. Dié gedig getuig van funksionele strofepbou, woorde ekonomie en 'n treffende beeld in die slotstrofe: “Onvermeld: / die sipresse / langs ons huis/dood se posmeesters” (26).

Die terugkering na die verlede om sin te maak van die hede is opvallend in *Sanctum*. Die verlede, teenswoordige en toekomstige funksioneer nie as losstaande eenhede nie, maar is deurlopend vervleg. Dit geld vir die aanwesigheid van ontslapenes in drome en die geweld van eenvoudige herinneringe: “'n Tirannie van die Verlede / word 'n oop-breek in die Hede” (49).

In 'n groot mate verteenwoordig die bundel 'n bestekopname van die spreker se lewe. Die gedig “Stansas” (78) is tekenend van dié werkswyse en kan as 'n soort digterlike outobiografie beskou word. 'n Komponent hiervan behels dan ook selfrefleksie oor 'n nuwe lewensfase. Dit word goed in die gedig “Pensionaris” belig en veral hoe taal en 'n terugblik op die verlede verweef is met huidige selfbewussyn: “Maar so is dit nou: vandag amptelik 'n pensionaris: / retraitée soekend na woorde vir die nuwe IS” (77). Dié soort digterlike bestekopname is volop in die Hambidge-oeuvre en herinner aan soortgelyke gedigte van Eybers en Krog—dink byvoorbeeld aan Krog se “ouma”-gedigte en verse oor die menopousale vrou in *Verweerskrif* (2006).

'n Ander aspek wat opval is dat verskillende betekenisassosiasies van heiligheid op verskeie maniere uitgebou word. Die sanctum-motief word deurlopend as 'n funksionele bindingslement benut. Die spreker beskou verskillende ruimtes as heilige plekke—die verlede, reisbestemmings en veral die digkuns wat in die gedig “Totem” (37) tot 'n tempel verhef word:

Net die allergroot verhouding
met die groot aktiewe woord
daardie tempel staangemaak in *Tristia*
maak nog sin tot die dood
ons skei—leser, jy of u. (37)

Die soeke na heilige plekke word vir die spreker 'n obsessie wat baie te make het met die ontwrigtende Covid-tydperk. Siekte lei nie slegs tot liggaamlike disfunksie nie, maar kring uit na alle vlakke van die menslike bestaan, insluitende perseptuele beleving van ruimte en tyd. Dié aspek word oortuigend verwoord in “Google Earth” waar die spreker virtuele herbesoeke bring aan die plekke waarheen sy eens op 'n tyd gereis het: “Nou in Covid-tyd / word reis 'n herinnering / 'n virtuele direkteif” (33). Ander Covid-gedigte is “Bethlehemster” (41), “Covid-prosodie” (43) en “Grievable lives: Mournable bodies” (45). Dié siekteverse sluit aan by die uitmuntende “Illness as metaphor” (62) asook ander voorbeelde van mediese poësie in die Hambidge-oeuvre soos “By 'n besoek aan die oogarts” uit *Bitterlemoene* (1986), “Die Anatomieles van dr. Tulp (1632)” en “Outopsie” uit *Matriks* (2015) en die aantal Covid-gedigte in *Nomadiese sterre* (2021). Hambidge lewer voldoende bewys dat sy ook goeie mediese gedigte kan skryf en dit is 'n tematiese landskap wat sy gerus verder kan verken.

Ek is wel minder beïndruk met sommige liefdesverse soos “Abandonment” (20), “Eenoog” (31), “Cabeza de Lobo” (40) en “Kodeks” (42), omdat hier minder sprake is van afronding en dieselfde patroon oor en oor voorkom. Die geliefde word gevind, verloor en weer in 'n kuberruimte, gedig, hotelkamer of wêreldstad teruggevind. Die speker verdwaal telkens in 'n donker labirint van aanwesigheid/afwesigheid en ongefokusde oordad. Die liefde neem tog 'n duisend vorme aan, maar Hambidge se verse oor die liefde bereik dikwels 'n impasse. “Inuïet-gedig” (55) is wel 'n uitsondering en beskik oor dieselfde mate van beheersing as die uitstekende liefdesverse in *Ewebeeld* (1997).

Soos altyd is Hambidge se lykdigte voortreflik—'n digsoort wat sy deurlopend vernuftig en vanuit verskeie perspektiewe beoef. Weereens beïndruk lykdigte soos “Die man van God versus die hand van God” (84) en “Johan van Wyk (1956–2022)” (88) deur funksionele verwysings en 'n delikate balans tussen intellek en emosie.

Sanctum is 'n skaflike bundel ten spyte van 'n paar gebreke. Dit is veral 'n bundel waarin gesprekvoering met mense en dinge voorop staan—mededigters, ontslapenes, literêre tradisies en die aktuele wêreld. Die

belangrikste diskoers is egter met die ouerwordende self.

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an/other pastoral.

Tjawangwa Dema.

Bristol: No Bindings, 2022. 70 pp.

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The Botswana-born poet Tjawangwa Dema's second collection *an/other pastoral* follows on the heels of her prize-winning debut, *The Careless Seamstress* (2019). Dema performs her poetry around the world, lectures at the University of Bristol and has been involved in various collaborative projects. *an/other pastoral* also forms part of a larger collaboration, including beautiful illustrations by Tebogo Cranwell which subtly speak to the poems, an audio work and archive. These can be accessed by sending photos of the illustrations in the collection to a Whatsapp number, opening new layers of world-making and reading.

The first poem in the collection, "Prologue: Hypothesis" (12–4), elaborates the main themes that Dema weaves throughout the rest of *an/other pastoral*. Through her deft use of form, Dema establishes a dichotomy between an "I"—who is other—and a "you"—the reader, the colonial interlocutor—who is walking in nature. The "I" longs for home and is alienated from the "you", specifically through language ("the word is the cruellest flower," the speaker muses). And yet the distance between the "I" and "you" is dismantled when a child enters the poem. The speaker shares how the honeyguide bird shows people where to find honey: "all nature speaks if we listen," she tells the child. Despite this, the child laughs incredulously, but the speaker is not offended; she sees it as an opening, an opportunity to break through received understandings of our relationships to nature. The poem ends with these powerful lines:

here is the line between man and man
and nature,
man-made
as all false boundaries are.

"Prologue: Hypothesis" touches on themes of belonging, movement, borders, the possibilities and shackles of language, legacies of colonialism, and our relationship to the more-than-human world. In the process, Dema offers what Craig Santos Perez calls a "diasporic African ecopoetics" (back cover), submerged in an awareness of the artificiality of borders and the ways in which the more-than-human world continues to resist the divisions we impose on each other and nature.

The theme of movement figures strongly in "Binocular or As Fast As" (28–9), where the speaker is jogging through the woods before realising that someone is watching her. At first startled by this voyeur, she finally realises the power of her body and its freedom of movement in the face of danger: "I'm fast / fast or slow as I wanna be." The next poem, "Meditations on Fugitivity" (30–1), qualifies this freedom for Black bodies throughout history and in the present, and expands these restrictions to include the borders that language imposes wherever "we" and "you" are pitted against each other. And yet, in "Even the Thorns" (58–9), the speaker reaffirms her freedom through movement: "I am always already on my way somewhere else." Relatedly, in "Biography or The Good News" (63–5), journeying is offered as a way of world-making through multiple senses of belonging.

The experience and roots of present-day climate collapse also figure strongly in *an/other pastoral*. In "This is not a matter for" (21–2), the speaker thinks through natural/man-made disasters, including fires in the Gulf of Mexico and the Amazon, and the Covid pandemic. She muses that these disasters have become unending because of our apathy and lust for things:

we've finally done it
altered our object
its permanence
we are enchanted by loss
this is what our having brings us

In the poem "Commons" (42–3), the speaker makes a strong case against the false divisions we impose on nature when we claim possession. What distinguishes us from the rest of nature, it seems, is that humans always want more—everything is never enough. But boundaries are man-made, as we have seen: "what boundary shall we insist upon for the air?" the speaker of this poem asks.

By choosing to centre the text in "Commons", the poet mirrors the borderless belonging that she invokes. There are various other instances in *an/other pastoral* where Dema experiments with form to support meaning. "Bread for the Birds: Act One"

(52–5), for instance, is presented as a dramatic text, thereby heightening the interpolation of the reader as addressee, as co-conspirator in climate collapse. In “You, the One Leaving” (40–1), the poet slightly indents each second line, concretising the theme of borders and edges that the speaker explores through the narrative of a traveller being detained at border control.

In addition to form, Dema also leverages the musicality of language to contribute to a multiplicity of meaning, especially through rhyme and wordplay. The poet does what the “you” of the prologue cannot: “to speak and mean at the same time”. This strategy is key to Dema’s poetics, which she unpacks in “The Netmenders” (37–9). Here, the poet uses net mending as an extended metaphor for poem creation, thereby suggesting that creating poems like nets can restore the possibilities of language which are stripped when the colonising “I” piths language, splitting brother from brother (see “Meditations on Fugitivity”). Thus, language becomes a bridge instead of a border, an

opening instead of a closing, facilitating movement. Read in this way, *an/other pastoral* represents Dema’s expertly woven answer to a frayed world:

That’s how you make a net whole,
one eye on the sun
and what’s left on the sea
of threads.
[...]
A hole small enough for the sea
and big enough for the light and minnow
to pass t’r’u.

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Tribute

Desmond T. Cole (1922—2018)

Andrew van der Spuy



Desmond Cole with Naureen Cole and Keith Green.
Photo: Keith Green

Desmond Thorne Cole passed away in 2018; his wife, Naureen, died in July 2023. Cole was professor of African Languages at the University of the Witwatersrand from 1954 to 1982, succeeding the long-serving Clement Doke, who founded the Department of Bantu Languages (as it was then) in 1922. Cole's speciality was Setswana: he had a near-mother tongue command of the language, and an intimate knowledge of its dialects and varieties. The work which is undoubtedly his magnum opus in the field of Bantu languages is his *Introduction to Tswana Grammar* (1955), which is still today one of the leading reference grammars of Setswana. It is known for its comprehensiveness and depth of scholarship. This work also showcases another aspect of Desmond Cole's scholarship: his dissatisfaction with what he regarded as inaccuracy and inefficiency. In this grammar, he put forward a number of suggestions for the reform of Setswana orthography, one of which was that the language should be written conjunctively, following the model advocated by Clement Doke (1944). Cole also

criticised the use of orthographic <e> for the two phonemes /e/ and /ɪ/, and orthographic <o> for the two phonemes /o/ and /ʊ/. He suggested that /ɪ/ and /ʊ/ should be represented as <ɪ> and <u>. Needless to say, neither of these reforms was ever implemented, perhaps fortunately in the case of conjunctivism, as Doke's approach to wordhood was purely phonological rather than morphological or syntactic. The use of <ɪ> and <u> for the high lax vowels would have reduced a substantial amount of phonological ambiguity in Setswana orthography, but by 1955, the <e>/<o> convention was too well established to make such a change feasible.


Cole also took an interest in the Bantu languages of Sub-Saharan Africa generally, being particularly concerned with their history and relationships with one another. He wrote a series of articles on Ganda grammar and several important articles on the history of studies of the Bantu languages (e.g., "African Linguistic Studies, 1943–1960" and "Bantu linguistic studies in South Africa"). He concentrated on works that dealt with the more southerly Bantu languages, unfortunately neglecting the more northerly ones. Yet within these limits, his work is solid and comprehensive as always. It is a great pity that he did not continue this work beyond 1969, as his insights into more recent work would have been invaluable.

In the 1970s, Cole's interest in Bantu appears to have waned somewhat. Both he and Doke had worked very much from a descriptivist perspective. Neither of them paid much attention to their contemporaries, the American and European structuralists. This approach, it seems, left Cole unwilling to accommodate or respond to the highly theoretical approach taken by Chomsky and his followers, which dominated linguistics in the sixties and seventies. Furthermore, Cole served as dean of the Arts Faculty at the University of the Witwatersrand from 1972 to 1973, and thus had less time to devote to research. It was probably these factors that led him to concentrate on his other passion, namely botany. He published a distinguished series of works on plants of the genus *Lithops*, and is acknowledged as a world expert on the subject.

My personal acquaintance with Prof. Cole began at the end of his teaching career when I took his highly informative class on the historical linguistics of the Bantu languages in 1982. His manner of dressing, and his

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attitudes, harked back to a more formal era. He always wore a jacket and tie, the latter tucked into the top of his trousers. He did not like to have his authority challenged—when I met him again years later at the memorial for Prof. Tony Traill in 2007, he remembered me as a ‘cheeky student’ who asked too many questions. His Zulu colleagues referred to him as uChili (Pushing Away). Nevertheless, despite his professional standoffishness, I am glad of the opportunity to express my gratitude for what I learnt from him, and my regret that he did not do more to record his vast knowledge of the Bantu language family.

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Huldeblyk

Dolf van Niekerk (1929—2022)

Willie Burger

In 2019 publiseer Dolf van Niekerk (in die jaar waain hy 90 jaar oud geword het) *Legkaart van 'n jong lewe. Essays oor wat was en geword het* by Protea Boekhuis. Die boek gaan nie, soos Elsa Joubert se *Spertyd* en Karel Schoeman se *Slot van die dag*—ook outobiografiese boeke wat deur gevestigde skrywers op 'n laat stadium van hulle lewens geskryf is—oor die oudwordproses en aftakeling nie. Die kort stukkie (“essays”) is in baie gevalle nie 'n akkurate woordkeuse nie) is almal grepies uit sy jeug—herinnerings van toe hy sowat vier of vyf jaar oud was en sonder 'n eie ma grootgeword het, skoolherinneringe en sy universiteitservarings totdat hy op 21 as omroeper by die SAUK aangestel is.

Die herinnerings is nie noodwendig chronologies nie en skakel nie nou met mekaar nie—hulle bly los grepies, legkaartstukkie. Sommige is blote staaltjies (en daarom nie “essays” nie). Baie van die staaltjies sal ook waarskynlik slegs vir 'n ouer generasie lesers interessant wees. Iets van die temas, vertelwyse en denke, bly vassteek in 'n vervloë era.

Maar soms, hier en daar, word die stukkie meer as staaltjie, meer as herinnerings wat spaarsamig met die woorde vertel word. Dan roer die vertellings mens tot nadenke. Telkens is daar vertellings waarin Van Niekerk jou emosioneel oorweldig met alles wat nie gesê word nie.

Legkaart bied heelwat insig in Van Niekerk se skryfwerk en denke. Hy verduidelik hoedat sy eie skryfwerk eintlik die gevolg is van 'n soeke na “iets”. Hierdie bewuswees van “iets”, van 'n deel wees van 'n groter werklikheid, het hy al op vyfjarige ouderdom beleef. Hy sit uiteen hoedat hy hierdie ervaring probeer begryp het, hoedat die denke van Plato, Herakleitos, Kant, Nietzsche, Hegel, Van Wyk Louw en Dostojevski hom in sy soektog na begrip van daardie “iets” begelei het en hoedat hy dit verder ondersoek het deur self te skryf.

Op universiteit soek hy in die filosofie na antwoorde: “Die wysbegeerte prikkel my om verder te dink as die gegewe dinge. Iewers in my kop wil ek dat bewussyn die grond vir skepping is en nie bloot die vermoë om te dink en jou eie handeling te ken nie”. Dit is veral hierdie skeppingsdrang as deel van menslike bewussyn wat op boeiende wyse blootgelê word as belangrike grond vir menslike bestaan.


In een van die 48 kort essays waaruit *Legkaart van 'n jong lewe* bestaan, skryf Dolf van Niekerk oor boeke. Dit gaan spesifiek oor die boeke wat hy as kind gelees het en wat 'n groot vormende invloed op hom gehad het. Hy skryf dat hy in sy matriekjaar N. P. van Wyk Louw se bundel opstelle, *Lojale verset* (1939), gelees het. Van Niekerk skryf dat die boek vol “vreemde begrippe” was wat by hom “'n gevoel van ontoereikendheid en onvermoë om te verstaan” gewek het, maar dan vervolg hy: “Dit raak byna ondraaglik om alles in te neem en te probeer begryp. Jy bevind jou in 'n nuwe wêreld, verhewe bo jou klein verwysingsraamwerk. Oplaas dring dit tot jou deur jy is deel van 'n groter geheel, selfs 'n groter opset as jou land en jou mense.”

Hierdie woorde resoneer iewers in my. In my eie matriekjaar was Dolf van Niekerk se roman, *Die son struikel* (1960), vir ons voorgeskryf. Dié boek, met sy modernistiese vertelwyse waarin tye oor mekaar skuif, waarin gebeurtenisse uit die verlede steeds indring in Diederik se hede en waarin Diederik worstel met sy onvermoë om tuis te voel in die lewe, was vir my ook vol vreemde begrippe en het 'n gevoel van ontoereikendheid en onvermoë om te verstaan by my gewek.

Die son struikel is 'n boek waarop generasies Afrikaanse skoolkinders grootgeword het. Dit was waarskynlik vir die meeste 'n vreemde leeservaring, moeilik, duister. Maar vir my (wat die roman as buitestander in 'n vreemde dorp se skoolkoshuis gelees het) en baie ander was dit die een van die eerste boeke wat jou laat besef het dat romans nie net stories is nie maar boeke wat jou laat dink op ander maniere, wat jou op verhelderende wyse

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laat bemoeienis maak met ruimtes van taal en idees en ervarings waaraan jy oor die algemeen nie blootgestel word nie, 'n wêreld wat veel groter is as my skool, my kerk, my mense, my land.

Diederik se eensaamheid, sy onvermoë om op enige plek in te pas, om nie 'n tuiste te kan vind in godsdiens, politiek of in sy volk nie, het egter in my, en sekerlik talle ander jong lesers, iets wakker gemaak van 'n eksistensiële angs en 'n bevraagtekening van die maklike antwoorde wat ons Christelik-nasionale onderwys aangebied het.

Ook *Skrik kom huis toe* het sekerlik op menige jong leser 'n blywende indruk gelaat, terwyl die bewaringstema wat deesdae sentraal in literatuuronderzoek staan, reeds jare in Van Niekerk se werk teenwoordig is, eintlik al sedert hy in die laat-1950's by landbou betrokke geraak het as omproepeer vir Landbouradio. Sy proefskrif in die filosofie het ook oor omgewingsbewaring gegaan: *Bewaring as sedelike prinsipe in die Suid-Afrikaanse bodembenuutingsituasie: 'n Kultuurfilosofiese studie*. Hiermee, en die manier waarop omgewingsbewustheid neerslag in sy werk vind (dink veral aan *Koms van die hyrcën*), was hy 'n voorloper.

Uiteindelik word Van Niekerk (ten onregte) hoofsaaklik as die skrywer van *Die son struikel* onthou, 'n sestigerroman wat die eksperimentele grepe van die modernisme aangewend het, waarin tye oor mekaar skuif en die grens tussen individuele bewussyn en werklikheid soms moeilik onderskeibaar is. Dalk is dit vir so lank voorgeskryf omdat dit een van die groot prestasies van die Sestigterskrywers was wat "veiliger" was as Brink of Leroux se werk waarin die seks of politiek veel sterker op die voorgrond gestaan het. Maar dit maak nie saak nie, want dit was en is 'n uitstekende roman waarin Van Niekerk menslike bestaan bedink het teen die agtergrond van geskiedenis en samelewingsbande. Hierin, soos in al sy ander werk, blyk 'n sensitiwiteit en deernis met die mensdom, 'n fyn waarnemer wat 'n mens sommer oor die broosheid van die mens laat huil terwyl hy jou verwysingsraamwerke verruim.

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Dolf van Niekerk (1929—2022)

Joan Hambidge

I

Daar was maar één Dolf van Niekerk. Veelkantige skrywer, filosoof en vriend. By sy huis het ek tweekeer gesmul aan sy vrou se heerlike osstert-gereg.

Dolf was romanskrywer én digter. Mens-sonder-fieterjasies.

Sy dood was 'n enorme verlies. Ons het mekaar gereeld gebel en veral 'n humoristiese vriendskap gedeel. Oor die eensaamheid van die skryfproses en hoe takserings verdwyn, maar die boek bly staan. As digter was ek vol bewondering vir sy gestroopte verse, veral oor die Karoo. Min woorde met enorme trefkrag.

Daar is twee boeke wat ek weer en weer besoek: *Legkaart van 'n jong lewe* en *Splintertyd*.

II

In my jeug was daar so 'n lelike bruin boek in ons dorpsbiblioteek met die titel *Herinnering se wei*. Dit is 1966 uitgegee. Hoe wonderlik was hierdie jeugherinneringe nie wat my na skrywers se ervarings vervoer het. En my gelei het na hulle boeke.

In 2013 het Leti Kleyn en Riana Scheepers 'n opvolg saamgestel met die uitstekende titel *Spoorvat*. In 2019 publiseer Dolf van Niekerk, 'n gesoute en bedrewe, veelkantige skrywer, *Legkaart van 'n jong lewe*.

Die jeug of herinneringe aan jeugervarings het 'n vormende invloed op 'n skrywer se psige. Die Pools-Joodse psigoanalise Alice Miller meen jy moet 'n pynlike jeug herleef sodat jy dit kan besweer. Die uwe is van mening: dit is nooit te laat om 'n gelukkige jeug oor te hê nie; om die bekende stelling effens aan te pas.

'n Legkaart is 'n *puzzle*. Party mense (soos skrywers) het eindelose geduld om die verskillende stukkies in mekaar te pas; ander het nie. Hierdie boek gee dan sulke stukkies weer wat 'n mens telkens kan inpas by 'n gedig, jeugverhaal of dramateks.

Van Niekerk het 'n doktorsgraad in die filosofie behaal. In *Legkaart* daar dan dikwels verwysings na Nietzsche, Dostojefski, Van Wyk Louw, en ander denkers. Terselfdertyd word sekere stukkies van 'n legkaart vir die leser gegee uit die beskeie jeug soos 'n kind wat vals beskuldig word van diefstal of per ongeluk 'n suster se pop beskadig. Hierdie sketse het my opnuut na Miller se *The drama of the gifted child* (1978) teruggeneem. Hierin beweer sy: "Experience has taught us that we have only one enduring weapon in our struggle against mental illness: the emotional discovery and emotional acceptance of the truth in the individual and unique history of our childhood."

Die voortydige dood van sy moeder, 'n moeilike stiefmoeder, sy andersheid as jong kind, hul armoede, oorloë en ander onsekerhede wat die jong gemoed kwel, word in hierdie onthouskrif onder die loep geneem. Soms neem hy jou na gedigte wat jy nou anders vertolk; ander kere is dit 'n stuk Boeregeskiedenis of die Voortrekkers se manier van doen. Daar is ook humor.

'n Mens het dus twee stemme tegelykertyd aanwesig. Die onskuldige kind wat deur die wyse en terugkykende (en vergewende) skrywer bekyk word. Van Niekerk is outobiografie aan die woord en wat hy nie vertel nie, kan die leser self invul. Of uit sy fiksie byvoeg.

Hy vang 'n vervloë era vas en hierdie leser moedig almal aan om hul herinneringe of memories op te teken sodat *niks* verlore gaan nie, om met Hennie Aucamp saam te praat. Jy kan net wees wie jy is, en jy is wat jy word, meen Van Niekerk. Die boek karteer in 48 sketse en essays sy lewensloop van vyf tot twintig jaar. Maar deur die ouer skrywer opgeteken. Die dubbelperspektief van die memoir of herinneringstekste is immers bekend, tegelyk karakter en verteller. Die koshuislewe, die gespook om geld te kry vir studies, die vriendskap met G. A. Watermeyer, die meisie wat 'n blaas pos aan die ouer Dolf, is so helder weergegee dat dit 'n mens altyd sal bybly.

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Die betekenis van briewe in “Posjong” is ’n hoogtepunt soos die aanhoor van D. F. Malherbe. Wie kén vandag nog die verskil tussen bo-dorp en onderdorp? Of President Steyn se uitspraak dat die veroweraar se taal van mense slawe maak? Ons lees hoe die vader gedwing is om uniforms te maak anders verloor hy sy werk. Smoelneukers, leiwater, vandisiekrale, skotige—begrippe wat ’n ou vergange wêreld aktiveer. Nes byname (Hansie Grootkrik of oom Johnnie Botter-by-die-vis).

Die impak van die Tweede Wêreldoorlog word helder vertel, soos die jong kind se voortdurende blootstelling aan siekte en die dood. Rasverskille kom eweneens aan bod en so gelees, is die boek ’n historiese dokument. Sou kinders byvoorbeeld soveel mog deurmaak vandag?

Edenburg word ’n argetipiese dorp. Hier is die lewendes en dooies en die skrywer se teks bewaar. Hierna keer hy telkens terug.

Die digter praat saam: “Die ou jaar is ’n geliefde, ’n bēreplek vir die smart. En die hartseer oor sy einde is ’n bymekaarkomplek vir al die ander verdriet.”

Proust het met ’n madeleine-koekie sy assosiasies losgemaak; Dolf van Niekerk doen dit met ’n kerfie biltong. Alles keer in sy tekste in siklusse terug.

Die voorblad is aangrypend mooi met die jong, maar terselfdertyd ou, wyse mensie op die voorblad saam met die sibbe.

Mag niks verlore gaan nie en mag almal ouer as sestig hul herinneringe opteken.

III

Dolf van Niekerk se 2021-bundel *Splintertyd* (Imprimatur) was ’n belangrike bundel in ’n tydsgewrig gekenmerk deur Angs, Onsekerheid, ’n volledige nuwe bestaan, wat in Maart 2020 aangebreek het. Grendeltyd het, soos ons almal weet, op alle vlakke sy tol geëis. Mense is ingeperk in hierdie versplinterde tyd en veral digters het skerp gereageer op hierdie inperking. Splinter is immers ook ’n werkwoord (afsplinter) en die vele assosiasies word deur hierdie titel oopgemaak.

Van Niekerk is ’n gerekende prosateur en digter. Van sy bundels is *Karoosange* (1975), *Dubbelster* (1996), *Nag op ’n kaal plein* (2006), *Lang reis na Ithaka* (2009), *Bleek planct* (2013), en *Portrette in my gang* (2015) is van die bundels uit Dolf van Niekerk se pen. En op sy 90ste verjaarsdag verskyn *Berigte uit die skemerland* ook by Imprimatur.

Die digter is ook ’n filosoof en in sy gedigte vind ons dan sterk besinnings oor die mens se lot. “Skaduwoord” is ’n sentrale vers:

Ek wou liefde onder woorde bring
soos die HAT, nuanses
van toegeneetheid tot plante,
diere, mens en God, vibrasies
van die brein en hart.
Ontsê hiervan sal die mens
iets soos liefde versin
in sy verlange na versoening,
onbewus van tye waar
liefde en haat verstrengel was;
dors na ’n bries van liefde
met die laaste onsekerheid
voor ewigheid. (*Splintertyd* 25)

Die dood is ’n “inwonende aanwesigheid”, skryf die digter, ingeperk ook deur siekte waar reën die suising word van iets anders:

Middernagreën

Middernagreën, maar dis geen reën.

Dié suising is een bed ver, of is dit my suurstofmasker,
’n drupspoor op my huis se dak in tye van ’n ou normaal,
se glo ’n Hoër Hand bepaal die reën. (*Splintertyd* 31)

In die volgende vers word Sartre se die-hel-is-ander-mense aangespreek:

Hel is nie nadoods,
hel is 'n virus van die aarde
Hel is nie nadoods, hel is 'n virus van die aarde,
ontspring uit kweekgrond vir hebsug en haat.
Waar liefde en waarheid weerstand bied, muteer hy
in variante van lewensagterdog, ondergrawing
en verdagmaking—tas die siel aan en verban
die wese na ewige kwarantyn binne die self. (*Splintertyd* 46)

IV

Linda Hutcheon & Mario J. Valdés voer 'n gesprek oor nostalgie, 'n begrip wat 'n terugkeer én pyn in sig dra. Ons kan terugkeer na 'n ruimte, maar tyd kan ons helaas nooit weer terugvind nie. Ons lees:

Nostalgia, in fact, may depend precisely on the irrecoverable nature of the past for its emotional impact and appeal. It is the very pastness of the past, its inaccessibility, that likely accounts for a large part of nostalgia's power—for both conservatives and radicals alike. This is rarely the past as actually experienced, of course; it is the past as imagined, as idealized through memory and desire (Hutcheon en Valdés 31).

Wanneer ons die verse deur die oë van Hutcheon lees, is die ingeboude ironieë opvallend. Die woord *nostalgie* beteken sowel 'n terugkyk as pyn; 'n geïdealiseerde, opgemaakte wêreld wat aanklop by Van Wyk Louw se *Nuwe verse*, 'n bundel met gestroopte verse.

Dié nag het nie ure nie

Dié nag het nie ure nie, elke uur is nag; oorlewing wankel op die grens van lig en duisternis; uitweg neig na nag terwyl 'n kakofonie suising in die brein begelei van êrens na nêrens, nêrens na êrens waar nag en dag gebore word. (*Splintertyd* 50)

Dit is ook 'n bundel van liminaliteite en oorgange: dag na nag, lewe na dood, siekte en herstel met die poësie wat alles registreer. Die pragtige voorblad—met die handskrif van die digter—is tekenend hiervan. Hierom word alles 'n “dubbeldag” in 'n pynlike binnereis. Plato se grot is ook hier aanwesig wat die dubbel-kyk aktiveer.

Die digter-as-filosoof dink geweldig na oor die mens se verbintenis met die kosmos en die ewige soeke na sin:

Ek vors bestaan en wese na
Ek vors bestaan en wese na,
die wese van wees
in die labirint van ewige dinge;
of alles oplaas saamvloei
in Is en Is deel is van syn,
sinoniem vir die Romein
se sistere, omvorm tot eksisteer;
staan tussen nou en ewigheid,
'n pendulum in tyd
van kosmiese wordingsdrif. (*Splintertyd* 15)

Die bundel is laatwerk en die gesprek met Elisabeth Eybers is tersaaklik, want daardie digter het oor ouderdom, siekte en die sin-van-die-lewe uitsonderlik goed gedig. Wat veral vir die speurende leser opvallend sal wees, is die self-palindodes en vele gedigte wat terugkeer na bestaande verse in 'n proses van self-kanonisering.

Twee tye

Een en twintig jaar,
op die drumpel van die onbekende
en ongekaarte weë,
met drif om woord by idee te bring,
toe gesproke taal
'n ompad word vir die gedig;
ná sewentig jaar en baie gedigte
in een en twintig dae van gedwonge kwarantyn
—vrees dat praat pandemie word—
soek ek steeds na die groot idee
en 'n volmaakte woord. (*Splintertyd* 17)

V

Dubbelster : Dubbelportret
Dolf van Niekerk (1929–2022)

Die dood immer 'n toeskouer
in jou lewe op jou lang reis
na Ithaka. Vele portrette
van geliefdes met berigte
uit jou strak skemerland.

Hoe sal ek jou nou opsom
tot klarigheid finaal kom?
Dat alles wat jy skryf gestroop
en sonder fieterjasie was,
nes legkaarte ingepas?

Dood se siklusse—'n posjong
met swart briewe—ervaar
jy as jong kind toe jou moeder sterf.
'n Jong meisie versend 'n blaar
in 'n onthouboek gepars.

Dalk tog eerder my dubbelkyk:
of/of , én/én, dan/nou ...
saamgevoeg soos 'n spreuk:
Draai jou gesig na die son
en die skaduwee val agter jou.

Nou vlieg jy saam met die albatrosse
teen die skemer wat sy geheime verklap,
wég van hierdie skelet van 'n vers:
op my moeder se verjaarsdag, 'n lament
vir jou meester van die allegorie-van-elke-dag.

Joan Hambidge

Erkenning

Hierdie huldeblyk is gedeeltelik gebaseer op resensies wat ek op die blog *Woorde wat weeg* gepubliseer het.

Geraadpleegde bronne

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