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Nationalism, victimhood, martyrdom and intangible heritage: Portraying Harry Morant and Gideon Scheepers in film

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Abstract

Historical film can transform individual lives into enduring symbols of national identity and collective memory. This study is a comparative analysis of two films, *Breaker Morant* (1980) and an Afrikaans film, *Gideon Scheepers* (1982). It examines how each constructs nationalist narratives within the distinct yet historically entangled contexts of 1980s Australia and apartheid-era South Africa. While scholarship on South African War films and literature is extensive, comparative analyses remain rare, often confined to national frameworks. Both films depict their protagonists as martyrs, using emotional engagement, narrative simplification, and selective historical framing to produce 'victimhood nationalism', where collective suffering defines moral and national identity. This paper employs two of the three stages of Richards's analytical framework, those of identifying narrative strategies and assessing audience reception, to explore how these cinematic representations mobilise contested histories. Findings show that both invite audiences to identify with protagonists cast as victims of Empire, reinforcing a sense of moral superiority and historical grievance. At the same time, their selective focus on white protagonists marginalises other victims of colonial violence, highlighting the risks of nostalgia-driven, exclusionary historical storytelling. The study also demonstrates that *Gideon Scheepers* and *Breaker Morant* function as tools of intangible cultural heritage, shaping collective memory and transmitting contested narratives.

Keywords: Breaker Morant; Gideon Scheepers; nationalist mythmaking; victimhood; nationalism; apartheid; Australian identity; Afrikaner identity; collective memory; historical trauma; intangible heritage.

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Opsomming

Historiese films beskik oor die vermoë om individue se lewens in blywende simbole van nasionale identiteit te verander en in die kollektiewe geheue vas te lê. Hierdie studie vergelyk *Breaker Morant* (1980) en die Afrikaanse film *Gideon Scheepers* (1982) en ondersoek hoe elkeen nasionalistiese narratiewe konstrueer binne die uiteenlopende, maar histories-verwante kontekste van Australië en apartheid-era Suid-Afrika van die 1980's. Alhoewel navorsing oor Suid-Afrikaanse oorlogfilms en -literatuur uitgebreid is, is vergelykende ontledings skaars en dikwels beperk tot geïsoleerde nasionale raamwerke. Beide films beeld hulle protagoniste as martelaars uit, gebruik emosionele betrokkenheid, narratiefvereenvoudiging en selektiewe historiese raamwerke om 'slagoffer-nasionalisme' te genereer, waar kollektiewe lyding morele en nasionale identiteit definieer. Hierdie artikel maak gebruik van twee van die drie fases in die analitiese raamwerk van Richards, naamlik die identifisering van narratiefstrategieë en die assessering van gehoorontvangs, ten einde te ondersoek hoe hierdie kinematiese uitbeeldings betwiste geskiedenisinterpretasies in die hand werk. Bevindinge toon dat beide films die gehoor aanmoedig om met die protagoniste as slagoffers van die *Empire* te identifiseer wat gewaarwordinge van morele meerderwaardigheid en historiese gegriefdheid teweegbring. Terselfdertyd marginaliseer die selektiewe fokus op blanke protagoniste ander slagoffers van koloniale geweld, wat lig werp op die gevaar van nostalgie-gedrewe, uitsluitende historiese uitbeeldings. Hierdie studie dui ook aan dat *Gideon Scheepers* en *Breaker Morant* as instrumente van geestelike kultuurerfenis funksioneer wat kollektiewe geheue vorm en betwiste narratiewe oordra.

Sleutelwoorde: Breaker Morant; Gideon Scheepers; nasionalistiese mites; slagoffer-nasionalisme; apartheid; Australiese-identiteit; Afrikaner-identiteit; kollektiewe geheue; historiese trauma; en geestelike kultuurerfenis.

Introduction

Historical films, in particular, construct narratives that reflect and reinforce national identity, often elevating contested events and figures into symbols of heroism or martyrdom. For example, films such as *The Patriot* (2000, Roland Emmerich) and *Dunkirk* (2017, Christopher Nolan) demonstrate this by showing how societies remember and interpret contested events.[1]

This study provides comparative analyses of two films, *Breaker Morant* (1980, Bruce Beresford) and the Afrikaans film, *Gideon Scheepers* (1982, Henk Hugo), exploring how each constructs nationalist narratives within the distinct yet

1. *Dunkirk* (2017) and *The Patriot* (2000) depict historical conflicts, highlighting heroism and national identity while also shaping collective memory, although *The Patriot* has been criticised for oversimplifying the American Revolutionary War.

historically entangled contexts of Australia during the 1980s and apartheid-era South Africa, respectively. Drawing on theories of victimhood nationalism and collective memory, the study examines how these films shape and mobilise historical narratives centred on martyrdom and imperial justice, while recognising film as a form of intangible cultural heritage through which societies remember, reinterpret, and transmit contested pasts.

The South African War (1899-1902) presents few parallel stories as closely aligned as those of Gideon Scheepers and Harry 'Breaker' Morant. Despite fighting on opposing sides, both were swiftly tried, sentenced and executed in early 1902. Each claimed to have acted under superior orders, yet courts found insufficient evidence to accept these defences. Their expedited trials and lack of access to defence witnesses culminated in executions that ignited public controversy and both men were later enshrined in nationalist mythologies. In Australia, Morant has been portrayed as a martyr, scapegoated by British authorities, while Afrikaner[2] nationalist narratives memorialised Scheepers as a heroic Boer who was unjustly executed.

These narratives found cinematic expression during the 1980s, reflecting broader cultural moments marked by resurgent nationalist sentiment. In Australia, *Breaker Morant* emerged amid debates over national identity, post-colonial independence, and military history.[3] Concurrently, *Gideon Scheepers* was produced when intense apartheid-era propaganda and Afrikaner nationalism were rife, a time when the regime sought cultural tools to legitimise itself.[4]

While scholarship on South African War films and literature is extensive, comparative analyses of these two particular films remain scarce. Existing research treats them within isolated national frameworks, that of *Breaker Morant* through Australian post-colonial and anti-imperial lenses[5] and *Gideon Scheepers* within Afrikaner identity and nationalism.[6] Divergent socio-political contexts and language barriers further hinder cross-national study.

2. In this paper, 'Afrikaner' refers to a white South African of mainly Dutch, German, or French descent who speaks Afrikaans and identifies with a distinct cultural heritage, though not all Afrikaners shared the same views or loyalties.
3. R. Jolly, '"Frontier Behaviour" and Imperial Power in Breaker Morant', *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 32, 2 (1997), 125-139.
4. D. Verkerk, 'The South African War and Afrikaner Nationalism in Afrikaans-language Films and Television: Changing Representations circa 1930s-2000s' (PhD thesis, University of Pretoria, 2023), 136-174.
5. S. Dermody and L. Jacka, 'An Australian Film Reader in Question', *Continuum: Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, 1, 1 (1988), 140-155; A. Munslow, 'Film and History: Robert A. Rosenstone and History on Film/Film on History', *Rethinking History*, 11, 4 (2007), 566.
6. Verkerk, 'The South African War and Afrikaner Nationalism', 136.

Film's legitimacy as a historical source remains contested. Critics argue that films may romanticise or distort complex histories,[7] prioritising emotional and ideological impact over archival precision.[8] Yet scholarly perception is shifting, recognising film as a significant mode of shaping cultural memory and engaging publics beyond formal education.[9]

Applying two steps from Richards's three-step framework – identifying central themes through content analysis and situating films within their political, social, and economic production contexts – this study focuses on ideological and narrative frameworks, excluding audience reception.[10] In doing so, it demonstrates how these films function as tools of ideological persuasion, shaping collective memory and national identity, while highlighting their limitations in excluding marginalised voices and simplifying complex histories. As intangible heritage, *Breaker Morant* and *Gideon Scheepers* participate in the ongoing negotiation of historical meaning, illustrating that film does indeed have the capacity to transmit, contest, and preserve collective memory amid competing political and cultural forces.

Literature Review: The South African War and its cinematic representations

The South African War has been widely studied, with early historians such as Pakenham, Wessels, and Pretorius[11] focusing primarily on military strategies and leadership, reflecting top-down narratives. Subsequent scholarship shifted towards social dimensions,[12] foregrounding the experiences of black South Africans,

7. R. Rosenstone, 'The Historical Film: Looking at the Past in a Postliterate Age', in *The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media*, ed. M. Landy (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2001), 50; Munslow, 'Film and History', 566.
8. N. Pronay, *Propaganda, Politics and Film, 1918–45* (London: Routledge, 1988), 42-45; M. Hughes-Warrington, *History Goes to the Movies: Studying History on Film* (London: Routledge, 2007), 10-15.
9. Rosenstone, 'Historical Film/Historical Thought: Film and History in Africa, *South African Historical Journal* 48, 1 (2003), 10; Munslow, 'Film and History', 566.
10. J. Richards, 'Film and Television: The Moving Image', in *History Beyond the Text: Student's Guide to Approaching Alternative Sources*, eds S. Barber and C. Peniston-Bird (New York: Routledge, 2009), 76.
11. See T. Pakenham, T*he Boer War* (Johannesburg: Jonathan Ball, 1993); A. Wessels, *The Anglo-Boer War (1899–1902): White Man's War, Black Man's War, Traumatic War* (Bloemfontein: UJ Press, 2011); F. Pretorius, *Die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899–1902* (Kaapstad: Struik, 1998).
12. See P. Warwick, *Black People and the South African War, 1899–1902* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); S. Kessler, *The Black Concentration Camps of the Anglo-Boer War, 1899–1902* (Bloemfontein: War Museum of the Boer Republics, 2012); D. Verkerk, 'Africans in the South African War (1899–1902): An Archaeological Research Study of an African Concentration Camp' (MA dissertation, University of Pretoria, 2017); G. Benneyworth and War Museum of the Boer Republics, *Work or Starve: Black Concentration Camps & Forced Labour in South Africa, 1901–1902* (Bloemfontein: War Museum of the Boer Republics, 2023).

previously overlooked in mainstream accounts. These historical studies provide a foundation for understanding how the war has been remembered and mythologised, particularly in the Afrikaner and Australian contexts.

Films about the South African War translate these historical events into visual narratives that reflect and shape contemporary consciousness, as exemplified by Afrikaans and Australian films produced on the conflict. Afrikaans films include *Sarie Marais* (1931, Joseph Albrecht; 1949, Francis Coley), *Voor Sononder* [Before Sunset] (1962, Emil Nofal), *Die Kavaliers* (1966, Elmo de Witt), *Krugermiljoene* (1967, Ivan Hall), *Gideon Scheepers* (1982), *Danie Theron* (1983, Fred Nel), *Arende* [Eagles] (1994, Dirk de Villiers); *Verraaiers* (2013, Sallas de Jager), and *Modder en Bloed* [Mud and Blood] (2016, Sean Else), as well as the series *Fees van die Ongenooides* (2008, Katinka Heyns) and selected episodes of *Donkerland* (2013, Jozua Malherbe).[13] In contrast, the only Australian film directly addressing the conflict, is *Breaker Morant* (1980).

In the Afrikaans context, film portrayals frequently reinforce Afrikaner nationalist narratives, emphasising suffering, endurance, and stern, moral authority.[14] This is evident in *Danie Theron*, which celebrates elusive guerrilla warfare tactics and frames Theron as a symbol of resilience and moral courage. Post-1994 films, however, show evolving attitudes toward the war and its heroes, reflecting the political and cultural shifts of post-apartheid South Africa.[15] For example, the television series *Fees van die Ongenooides* briefly focuses not only on the suffering of Afrikaners, but also the travails of black South Africans. Yet the representation of specific military figures, such as generals Danie Theron and Gideon Scheepers, remains largely underexplored. Only a few Afrikaans films, including *Danie Theron* and *Gideon Scheepers*, have addressed these prominent figures, revealing 1980s ideological anxieties on Afrikaner masculinity, sacrifice, and nationalist myth-making.[16]

In the Australian context, *Breaker Morant* stands as the principal cinematic engagement with the war. While scholarly attention has often focused on legal and

13. Verkerk, 'The South African War and Afrikaner Nationalism', 23-24.
14. See M. Coetzer, 'Die Anglo-Boereoorlog en die Vroeë Ontwikkeling van die Rolprent' (Hons mini-dissertation, University of Pretoria, 2003); S. Bottomore, 'Filming, Faking and Propaganda: The Origins of the War Film, 1897-1902' (PhD thesis, University of Utrecht, 2007); E.G. Strebel, 'Primitive Propaganda: The Boer War Films', *Sight and Sound*, 46, 1 (1976), 45-47; Verkerk, 'The South African War and Afrikaner Nationalism'; A van Vuuren, 'Kavalier tot Verraaier, Zombie tot Legoman: Mites en die Ideologiese Uitbeelding van die Held in Geselekteerde Rolprente en Dramareekse oor die Anglo-Boereoorlog' (Proefskrif, University of Pretoria, 2015); R. Marais-Botha, 'Die Representasie van die Anglo-Boereoorlog in Afrikaanse Romans en Rolprente ná 2002' (Proefskrif, North-West University, 2021).
15. D. Verkerk, 'Voorstellings van die Suid-Afrikaanse Oorlog: Afrikanernostalgie in Post-apartheid Suid-Afrika', *Tydskrif vir Nederlands en Afrikaans*, 30, 2 (2023), 71-97.
16. See Verkerk, 'The South African War and Afrikaner Nationalism'.

military-historical aspects,[17] the film also embodies cultural and ideological narratives of settler nationalism, white victimhood, and colonial ambivalence. Comparative scholarship rarely situates *Breaker Morant* alongside Afrikaans films, leaving a gap in understanding how different settler societies mythologise the South African War through film.

The war itself functioned as a crucible for national identity formation. In South Africa, it became central to Afrikaner nationalism, with the British scorched-earth policy, destruction of farms, and concentration camps leaving deep psychological scars.[18] Approximately 27 000 Boer women and children died in concentration camps, and the collective grief and sense of injustice became central to Afrikaner memory and identity.[19] Thus, there is a substantial body of scholarship examining how the South African War influenced the development of Afrikaner nationalism.[20] Much of this literature specifically emphasises the emotional and symbolic weight of the concentration camps and their central role in the construction of Afrikaner nationalist sentiment.[21] The narrative of Afrikaner victimhood was reappropriated in the 20th century to legitimise policies of ethnic self-determination, separation, and control under Afrikaner rule. In addition, a growing number of studies have explored how post-1994 political and cultural shifts have shaped contemporary Afrikaner memories of the South African War.[22]

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17. See M. Heung, 'Breaker Morant' and the Melodramatic Treatment of History', *Film Criticism*, 8, 2 (1984), 3-13; R. Haines, 'Closing the Debate: Critical Methodology and *Breaker Morant*', *Critical Arts: A Journal of South-North Cultural Studies*, 3, 3 (1985), 39-47, N. Bleszynski, *Shoot Straight, You Bastards! The Truth Behind the Killing of "Breaker" Morant* (Milsons Point, NSW: Random House Australia, 2002); A. Davey, *Breaker Morant and the Bushveldt Carbineers* (Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 1987).
18. A. Wessels, 'A Historical Overview of Boer Guerrilla and British Counterinsurgency Operations During the Anglo-Boer War, 1899–1902', *Small Wars & Insurgencies*, 34, 2 (2023), 339.
19. A. Grundlingh, 'Die Anglo-Boereoorlog in die Bewussyn van 20ste Eeuse Afrikaners', in *Verskroeide Aarde*, red. F. Pretorius (Kaapstad: Human en Rousseau, 2001), 244; 'Anglo-Boer War: How a bloody conflict 125 years ago still shapes South Africa', The Conservation, accessed: 24 December 2024, https://theconversation.com/anglo-boer-war-how-a-bloody-conflict-125-years-ago-still-shapes-south-africa-240162.
20. See H. Giliomee, *The Afrikaners: Biography of a People*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press; Cape Town: Tafelberg Publishers, 2003); A. Grundlingh, 'Reframing Remembrance: The Politics of the Centenary Commemoration of the South African War of 1899–1902', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 30, 2 (2004): 359-375.
21. See L. Stanley and H. Dampier, 'Aftermaths: Post/memory, Commemoration and the Concentration Camps of the South African War 1899–1902', *European Review of History: Revue européenne d'histoire*, 12, 1 (2005), 91-119; E. Van Heyningen, *The Concentration Camps of the Anglo-Boer War: A Social History* (Auckland Park, South Africa: Jacana Media, 2013).
22. See B. Theron, 'Remembering the Anglo-Boer War: Its Place, 100 years later, in our Historical Consciousness', *African Historical Review*, 33, 1 (2001), 114–143; Verkerk, 'The South African War and Afrikaner Nationalism'.

For Australian participants, the war reinforced imperial loyalty while simultaneously fostering discussions about national autonomy, marking the conflict as a symbolic 'coming-of-age' for the new Commonwealth of Australia.[23] Some Australians began to question British imperialism, especially as the war dragged on and the brutal impact on Boer civilians became widely known.[24] Lee suggests that these Australians looked to the Boers as a potential model for Australia's own defence policy, which emphasised the capability of a small, underpopulated, and remote state to defend itself.[25]

Yet, the war's role in Australian national identity is comparatively marginal, often overshadowed by later commemorations such as the ANZAC myth. As McQuilton notes, the South African War is often referred to as Australia's 'forgotten war'.[26] Field and Wilcox argue that the conflict has largely faded from national memory, surviving only in occasional references to home dissent, Breaker Morant's trial, and scattered memorials.[27] Although Australian troops participated in the war prior to federation in 1901, national identity is more commonly associated with the First World War and the 1915 ANZAC myth, often seen as the symbolic birth of the Australian nation. McQuilton shows how this narrative downplays Australia's first major imperial military engagement, focusing instead on the war's local impact in North Eastern Victoria.[28]

Despite limited sources, Murfey, Slattery and Wilcox examine Australia's role from enlistment to commemoration.[29] Others, such as Connolly, examine public opinion, revealing divisions between imperial loyalty and Boer sympathy.[30] Karageorgos complicates these narratives by showing that not all Australians saw the

23. B. Penny, 'The Australian Debate on the Boer War', *Historical Studies*, 14, 56 (1971), 52; A. Henry, 'Australian Nationalism and the Lost Lessons of the Boer War', *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, 34 (2001), 274.
24. E. Karageorgos, '"Educated, Tolerant and Kindly": Australian Attitudes towards British and Boers in South Africa, 1899-1902', *Historia*, 59, 2 (2014), 124.
25. A. Lee, 'What the Boers Did Australia Can Do, and Do Ten Times Better': The Impact of the Boers on Australian Defence Policy, *The International History Review*, 44, 3 (2022), 478.
26. J. McQuilton, *Australia's Communities and the Boer War* (Cham: Springer, 2016).
27. L. Field, *The Forgotten War: Australian Involvement in the South African Conflict of 1899–1902* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1979); C. Wilcox, *Australia's Boer War: The War in South Africa 1899–1902* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2002).
28. McQuilton, *Australia's Communities*.
29. G. Murfey, "'Fighting for the Unity of the Empire': Australian Support for the Second Anglo-South African War 1899–1902" (PhD thesis, UNSW Sydney, 2017); M.J. Slattery, 'The Boer War and its Influence on Modern Australia', *United Service*, 70, 3 (2019), 17-20; C. Wilcox, 'Australia's South African War 1899–1902', *Scientia Militaria: South African Journal of Military Studies*, 30, 1 (2000), 1-12.
30. C.N. Connolly, 'Class, Birthplace, Loyalty: Australian Attitudes to the Boer War', *Australian Historical Studies*, 18, 71 (1978), 210-232.

Boers as enemies,[31] while his later work explores how Australian portrayals of black South Africans often reflected racial condescension rooted in imperial ideologies of whiteness.[32]

Existing scholarship on military figures like Harry Morant and the Bushveldt Carbineers has largely emphasised legal injustice, war crimes, and ethical dilemmas.[33] However, these studies rarely consider how such figures influence national identity, collective memory, and notions of heroism in both Australia and South Africa. By integrating historical and film scholarship, this study addresses that gap, examining *Breaker Morant* and *Gideon Scheepers* through the lens of victimhood nationalism and cultural memory. This approach highlights how each film constructs narratives of injustice, sacrifice, and identity, offering a comparative perspective on how settler societies negotiate historical trauma and shape national mythology.

Theoretical framework

Victimhood nationalism, as conceptualised by Lim, refers to the process through which nations construct collective identity by centring narratives of past suffering.[34] Lim frames victimhood nationalism as a 'working hypothesis' for understanding how competing national memories of historical trauma both reconcile with and politicise the past.[35]

This article acknowledges that victimhood nationalism often highlights a single group, marginalising others. Such selective memory influences how history is commemorated, as memorials for the South African War in South Africa and Australia predominantly honour white soldiers and civilians, shaping who is remembered as part of the nation and who is excluded from official historical consciousness.

Building on this, Al-Ghazzi argues that victimhood narratives often distort history to validate contemporary political agendas, especially populist claims.[36] Similarly, Fröhlig contends that these narratives create a cyclical logic of

31. Karageorgos, "Educated, Tolerant and Kindly", 120-135.
32. E. Karageorgos, '"War in a 'White Man's Country': Australian Perceptions of Blackness on the South African Battlefield, 1899–1902', *History Australia*, 15, 2 (2018), 323- 338.
33. G. Witton, *Scapegoats of the Empire: The Story of the Bushveldt Carbineers* (Melbourne: D.W. Paterson, 1907).
34. J. Lim, 'Victimhood Nationalism in Contested Memories: National Mourning and Global Accountability', in *Memory in a Global Age: Discourses, Practices and Trajectories*, eds A. Assmann and S. Conrad (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2010), 142.
35. Lim, 'Victimhood Nationalism', 142.
36. O. Al-Ghazzi, 'We Will be Great again: Historical Victimhood in Populist Discourse', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 24, 1 (2021), 45.

remembrance, driven by the fear of recurring injustice, thereby shaping identity through the lens of collective trauma.[37] Okawara emphasises that this often leads to a binary simplification of history into 'good' versus 'evil,' which, though emotionally persuasive, obscures historical complexity.[38] According to Brand, such binaries are rarely stable; individuals and groups often occupy contradictory roles as both victims and perpetrators.[39]

This instrumentalisation of victimhood, what Bartov calls the 'glorification of victimhood',[40] suggests how memory and identity become entwined with emotional symbolism and moral exceptionalism. Lerner critiques the political power of such narratives, arguing that their legitimacy stems more from emotional resonance than factual precision.[41] Often, these narratives justify actions against third parties, holding present generations morally accountable for historical injustices they did not commit. As Loytomaki notes, such memory work can fuel political mobilisation by transforming perceived historical wrongs into contemporary struggles for recognition or reparation.[42]

The theoretical foundation of this analysis is grounded in Maurice Halbwachs's theory of collective memory, which posits that memory is socially constructed and shaped by present needs.[43] This concept helps explain how national victimhood serves not only as a retrospective view of the past but also as a tool for legitimising political authority. Simplified, emotionally charged re-tellings of history are embedded in national identity and reinforced through cultural forms like film.

Film as a lens for victimhood and collective memory

As a form of intangible heritage, film serves not only as a cultural artifact but also as a living medium through which societies remember, reinterpret, and transmit their histories across generations. Through emotionally evocative storytelling, film transforms historical trauma into accessible narratives that shape national

37. F. Fröhlig, 'Victimhood and Building Identities on Past Suffering', *Essay* (2020), 23.
38. K. Okawara, 'A Critical and Theoretical Re-imagining of "Victimhood Nationalism": the Case of National Victimhood of the Baltic Region', T*alTech Journal of European Studies*, 9, 4 (2019), 206.
39. R. Brand, 'Identification with Victimhood in Recent Cinema', *Culture, Theory & Critique*, 49, 2 (2008), 167.
40. O. Bartov, 'Defining Enemies, Making Victims: Germans, Jews, and the Holocaust', *The American Historical Review*, 103, 3 (1998), 774.
41. A.B. Lerner, 'The Uses and Abuses of Victimhood Nationalism in International Politics', *European Journal of International Relations*, 26, 1 (2020), 62.
42. S. Loytomaki, 'Law and Memory: The Politics of Victimhood', *Griffith Law Review,* 21, 1 (2012), 1.
43. M. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992 [1950]), 38.

consciousness and reinforce dominant ideologies. For example, *Schindler's List* (1993, Steven Spielberg) foregrounds moral heroism and Jewish suffering during the Holocaust, becoming a key global reference for remembering Nazi atrocities.

As Vasudevan and Kearney note, film generates empathetic identification not only by representing physical events, but also by conveying emotions, memories, and imagined experiences.[44] This aligns with Durkheim's concept of collective consciousness, where shared beliefs, values, and symbols unify society.[45] Film reflects Durkheim's concept of the 'collective conscience', acting as a modern ritual that transmits values and reinforces norms. War films portraying heroes or martyrs foster collective memory and belonging, while shared viewing – at cinemas, festivals, or broadcasts – creates communal emotional experiences. Similarly, McQuail highlights the media's role in reflecting and shaping public reality through emotional engagement.[46]

Landsberg's concept of 'prosthetic memory' explains how audiences can develop deep affective relationships with historical events they have not lived through themselves.[47] These mediated, embodied memories transcend traditional collective memory by being transferable and inclusive, enabling emotional and ethical connections across cultural and racial lines.[48] While commodified, such memory work may cultivate political awareness and new solidarities.[49]

Yet these emotionally potent narratives often rely on reductive binaries. As Plantinga notes, historical films often simplify traumatic pasts by using narrative conventions – especially those of classical Hollywood – that prioritise emotion over accuracy.[50] In *Hotel Rwanda* (2004, Terry George) the genocide is depicted through a stark dichotomy of innocent Tutsis and violent Hutu perpetrators, overlooking deeper colonial and socio-political causes.

This strategy, while effective in eliciting emotional engagement, also reinforces national myths and legitimises selective historical interpretations. By casting one group as victims and another as perpetrators, such films create moral

44. P. Vasudevan and W.A. Kearney, 'Remembering Kearneytown: Race, Place and Collective Memory in Collaborative Filmmaking', *Area*, 48, 4 (2016), 457.
45. É. Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* [1912], trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995), 348.
46. D. McQuail, *Mass Communication Theory: An Introduction* (London: Sage, 1983), 45.
47. A. Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 3.
48. A. Landsberg, 'Prosthetic Memory: The Ethics and Politics of Memory in an Age of Mass Culture', in *Memory and Popular Film*, ed. A. Landsberg (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 149.
49. Landsberg, 'Prosthetic Memory', 146.
50. C. Plantinga, 'Collective Memory and the Rhetorical Power of the Historical Fiction Film', *Global Storytelling: Journal of Digital and Moving Images*, 1, 1 (2021), 113-119.

clarity at the expense of historical nuance. For example, The *Battle of Algiers* (1966, Gillo Pontecorvo), praised for its realism, depicts the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) mainly as heroic freedom fighters, downplaying mention of internal divisions and controversial tactics. Such portrayals risk reducing complex histories to binary moral narratives.

As Anli Le Roux notes, these films engage audiences on deep psychological and emotional levels and function as a potent form of mass communication, especially during times of conflict.[51] She argues that 'films were the blank canvases onto which the colours of a current (and ongoing) wartime experience could be projected'.[52] Similarly, Mohammed and Vafa emphasise that films tend to exploit ethnic and cultural tensions, exaggerate nationalist sentiments, and foreground external threats.[53] In doing so, they permeate multiple societal institutions, such as religion, politics, and economics, thereby shaping public consciousness in ways that both support and resist globalisation.

Victimhood in film often highlights a single group, marginalising others who also endured trauma. Holocaust films, for example, focus on Jewish suffering while often overlooking Romani, disabled, and LGBTQ+ victims. Similarly, *Breaker Morant* and *Gideon Scheepers* emphasise the martyrdom of their protagonists while downplaying their crimes against marginalised people. This selective representation reinforces nationalist narratives and obscures the broader moral and historical complexities of the South African War.

Films and other cultural representations, as forms of intangible heritage, play a crucial role in shaping public understanding and remembrance of historical events. However, when these narratives privilege one perspective, they risk silencing the diverse contributions and sufferings of others. Such exclusions limit the inclusivity and richness of collective memory, and by extension, the cultural heritage passed down to future generations.

These portrayals reduce complex histories to emotionally resonant myths of loyalty, betrayal, and suffering. As Siebert et al. argue in *Four Theories of the Press*, media systems often reflect dominant political ideologies.[54] Though emerging from liberal democracies, these films reinforce nationalist identity and legitimacy through emotion-driven stories of heroes and national struggles.

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51. A. le Roux, 'The Union of South Africa Propaganda Campaigns during World War II', *Kinema: A Journal for Film and Audiovisual Media* (2012), 3.
52. Le Roux, 'The Union of South Africa Propaganda Campaigns', 1.
53. A. Vafa and Y.E. Mohammed, 'Propaganda and Ideological Representation of Women in The Secret of Women (2014) and Maleficent (2014)', *Research Journal in Advanced Humanities*, 5, 2 (2024), 144.
54. F.S. Siebert et al. *Theories of the Press* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956), 23.

Methodology

This article employs two of the three stages that Richards puts forward as a framework for film analysis.[55] It does so by comparing the narratives in *Breaker Morant* and those in *Gideon Scheepers*, focusing on how each film constructs national victimhood through characterisation, plot structure, and thematic emphasis. His method is useful for this study because it enables a holistic analysis of narrative, historical context, and reception, all of which are key aspects for understanding how films shape collective memory and national identity.

First, the analysis identifies the central themes and ideas conveyed through content analysis.[56] It focuses on recurring motifs in *Breaker Morant* and *Gideon Scheepers*, such as betrayal, injustice, and sacrifice, which serve to promote Afrikaner and Australian victimhood. These themes construct a sense of moral superiority and collective suffering, reinforcing narratives of historical trauma within collective memory.

Second, the analysis considers the production context by examining the political, social, and economic conditions at the time of each film's release.[57] It examines how the 1980s ideological climate – Australia's post-imperial shift and apartheid South Africa's militarised nationalism – influenced the focus in each of these films, on identity, loyalty, and betrayal.

Murderers and martyrs: Gideon Scheepers and Breaker Morant in dialogue

Historical films like *Breaker Morant* and *Gideon Scheepers* served as ideological tools to construct and reinforce narratives of victimhood, national identity, historical grievance, and cultural sovereignty, especially within the turbulent 1980s. In both South Africa and Australia, this particular decade saw intensified debates over national identity, collective memory, and postcolonial belonging, making film a powerful medium for cultural expression and political contestation.

In Australia, this decade represented a pivotal moment of cultural and political redefinition. A key turning point came in 1973, when the United Kingdom joined the European Economic Community, ending the preferential trade agreements that had long linked Australia to Britain.[58] This economic rupture symbolised a deeper cultural shift, compelling Australia to forge closer ties with the Asia-Pacific region and the United States.

55. Richards, 'Film and Television', 72–89.
56. Richards, 'Film and Television', 76.
57. Richards, 'Film and Television', 76.
58. J. Doig, 'New Nationalism in Australia and New Zealand: The Construction of National Identities by Two Labour Governments in the Early 1970s', *Australian Journal of Politics & History*, 59 (2013), 560.

This distancing from Britain intensified after the 1975 Constitutional Crisis, when the British-appointed Governor-General dismissed the elected Prime Minister, sparking disillusionment with imperial influence. By the 1980s, debates over republicanism and national sovereignty grew, with increasing calls to sever symbolic ties to the monarchy. As Gallop observes, the monarchy, for long a 'symbol of deference to all things British', began to feel increasingly out of place in a society redefining itself through ideals of multiculturalism, globalisation, and egalitarianism.[59] This generational shift fostered an Australian identity shaped by victimhood narratives, portraying the nation as subjugated by Britain. *Breaker Morant* expresses this through scapegoating, an emphasis on tragic heroism, martyrdom, and a markedly 'us versus them' framing.

Breaker Morant portrays Australian soldiers – particularly Harry "Breaker" Morant – as scapegoats of British imperial justice. White agrees that the film *Breaker Morant*, uses the themes of scapegoating and how behaviour is shaped by context.[60] Morant and his co-accused – Lieutenants Peter Handcock, executed alongside him, and George Witton, later reprieved – are depicted as tragic heroes, sacrificed by the heartless monolith of the British Empire, to deflect international criticism of its conduct during the South African War.[61] This is emphasised in the film when Morant declares bitterly: 'We're scapegoats to the bloody Empire!'[62] a line that powerfully captures the film's thesis of betrayal and injustice. Morant's statement reflects how the film frames their trial as politically expedient rather than legally just.[63] This framing invites audience sympathy and encourages a nationalist reading of Australian innocence and moral superiority. As Morden notes, nations often construct myths around collective suffering, referred to as 'chosen traumas'.[64] Such tragic narratives are especially common among threatened minorities and conservative nationalisms that mourn perceived national decline and attribute it to societal change or foreign influence.[65] This aligns with the construction of Australian victimhood in the film, as Australians were a colonial minority within the larger, more powerful framework of the British Empire during the South African War.

Another key theme of victimhood in the film is the portrayal of Morant, Handcock, and Witton as martyrs – figures who suffered and, in the case of Morant and Handcock, died not for personal guilt, but rather for Britain's national cause. Their

59. G. Gallop, 'A Republican History of Australia', *Labour History*: *A Journal of Labour and Social History*, 107 (2014), 204-205.
60. L.T. White, 'Exercising with *The Breaker*: An Analysis of *Breaker Morant*', *Contemporary Social Psychology*, 15, 3 (1991), 92.
61. *Breaker Morant*, directed by Bruce Beresford (Australia: Kennedy Miller, 1980).
62. *Breaker Morant*, 01:37:46.
63. *Breaker Morant*.
64. M. Morden, 'Anatomy of the National Myth: Archetypes and Narrative in the Study of Nationalism', *Nations and Nationalism*, 22, 3 (2016), 459.
65. Morden, 'Anatomy of the National Myth', 459.

sacrifice is framed as unjust, further reinforcing the film's narrative of imperial betrayal and national martyrdom. For example, Morant and Handcock calmly face the firing squad, symbolising stoic martyrdom and reinforcing the idea that these Australian heroes were abandoned.[66] The emotional impact of this scene, intensified by sombre music and restrained performances, evokes what Plantinga refers to as 'emotional allegiance', encouraging viewers to align morally with the condemned men.[67] In doing so, the film humanises them, not as war criminals, but as noble victims of political convenience.[68] This emotional depth allows the audience to grow attached to the men, even as it is confronted with the gravity of their actions.[69] By juxtaposing scenes of brutal wartime conduct with moments of humour, tenderness, and camaraderie, the film complicates moral judgment. We are encouraged to empathise with them, to see their vulnerability and pain, even as we grapple with their culpability.[70]

The men are further humanised through flashbacks that reveal their psychological strain and moral dilemmas. While confined to their prison cell, each reflects on his past in a series of three dream-like sequences.[71] Morant is shown in evening dress, singing before dinner guests including his fiancée – the sister of the slain Captain Alfred Taylor Hunt, leader of the Bushveldt Carbineers. Handcock bids farewell to his wife; and Witton receives a toast from his father.[72] These glimpses contrast with the war's brutality, portraying the men as ordinary figures sacrificed to reinforce the film's theme of Australian victimhood under British imperial rule. As Turim argues, flashbacks in film serve to merge personal memory with historical context, creating a 'subjective memory' that links individual experience to wider political and social histories.[73] In this way, *Breaker Morant* not only engages with questions of military justice but also frames its protagonists as embodiments of national suffering, shaping collective memory through the interplay of personal recollection and political injustice.

The film argues that the men are innocent because they were merely following orders. In *Breaker Morant*, it is alleged that Captain Hunt issued verbal instructions to execute Boer prisoners. Morant is portrayed as initially reluctant to obey such a command, citing protection under military law. However, following Hunt's death, he

66. *Breaker Morant*.
67. C.R. Plantinga, *Moving Viewers: American Film and the Spectator's Experience* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 140-168.
68. 'Breaker Morant: The Hypocrisy of War', Film Obsessive, accessed 2 September 2025, https://filmobsessive.com/film/film-analysis/film-genres/world-cinema/breaker-morant-the-hypocrisy-of-war.
69. 'Breaker Morant: The Hypocrisy of War'.
70. 'Breaker Morant: The Hypocrisy of War'.
71. Heung, '"Breaker Morant" and the Melodramatic Treatment of History', 7.
72. Heung, '"Breaker Morant" and the Melodramatic Treatment of History', 7.
73. M. Turim, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History* (London: Routledge, 2013), 2.

embarks on a retaliatory killing spree, leading to his arrest. The film frames Morant and his co-accused as scapegoats, sacrificed to conceal either ambiguous or unlawful orders allegedly issued by the British Commander-in-Chief, Lord Kitchener.

According to the film, these orders were transmitted verbally from Kitchener to Hunt and Taylor and then relayed to Morant. Yet no documentary evidence of such orders has ever been found. As Benneyworth notes, it is highly unlikely that Lord Kitchener who was surrounded by legal advisers, intelligence officers and the Colonial Office while he was in South Africa, would have issued explicitly illegal orders that violated the 1899 Manual of Military Law.[74] While verbal orders during combat were not unusual, issuing illegal commands in a formal setting with full staff present would have been improbable. No evidence has ever surfaced proving that Kitchener authorised the unlawful killing of Boer prisoners of war. What is documented, however, is that Kitchener issued legal orders permitting the execution of Boer combatants captured wearing British khaki uniforms – after proper court martial. These directives were public, aligned with international military norms of the time, and discussed openly in the British Parliament on 18 March 1902.[75] The execution of enemies disguised in enemy uniforms was, under the laws of war, a recognised and lawful act.[76]

Furthermore, the film presents the court-martial as a farcical and deeply unjust process.[77] The narrative repeatedly underscores how the trial is rushed and comes across as biased in favour of the prosecution. As Jansen van Vuuren and Holt note, the trial forms the structural backbone of the film, with testimonies and evidence triggering flashbacks that gradually reveal past events.[78] This narrative device connects personal memory to broader questions of justice and historical accountability.[79]

The film portrays the British not just as indifferent bureaucrats but as imperial antagonists willing to sacrifice Morant, Handcock, and Witton for political gain. Their court-martial is framed as a strategic move – a 'small sacrifice' to secure peace with

74. War Office, *Manual of Military Law*. Nowhere in the Manuel is the killing of prisoner's war under any circumstances permitted.
75. 'South African War-Boers in British Uniform', HANSARD, Accessed 10 December 2024, https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1902/mar/18/south-african-war-boers-in-british.
76. 'Commandant Gideon Scheepers in the Cape Colony', *Military History Journal*, S. Watt, accessed: December 2024, https://www.samilitaryhistory.org/jnl2/vol185gs.html.
77. *Breaker Morant*.
78. A. Van Vuuren and A. Holt, '"Is Freedom Really Worth This Much?" Smuts, De la Rey, and Rethinking Grand Narratives in the Film Verraaiers (Traitors)', in *Reappraising the Life and Legacy of Jan C. Smuts*, ed. D. Boucher and B. Ngqulunga (Johannesburg: UJ Press, 2024), 29.
79. Van Vuuren and Holt, '"Is Freedom Really Worth This Much?"', 29.

the Boers. Lord Kitchener sees their execution as necessary for the upcoming peace conference, dismissing concerns about Australian reactions, highlighting colonial troops as expendable pawns.[80] According to White, the film depicts Britain scapegoating the Australians and sacrificing them to appease Germany after the missionary's death, since they were outsiders who were merely following orders to kill Boer prisoners.[81]

The film also emphasises that while Witton, an Australian by birth, claims he fights out of familial loyalty to the British Empire, and Handcock joins for economic reasons during Australia's economic depression,[82] their motivations are portrayed as practical rather than ideological. This highlights the film's broader critique of how imperial wars exploit ordinary men for political ends. As Heung notes, this irony is central: Australians are willing to fight and die for an empire that ultimately betrays them.[83] This sense of betrayal is poignantly captured when Morant tells Handcock, as they walk toward their execution: 'This is what comes from empire building'.[84] In a striking moment, Morant also invokes Scripture, quoting Matthew 10:36: 'A man's enemies will be the members of his own household'.[85] This biblical allusion highlights the film's tragic irony: Morant, Handcock, and Witton are condemned not by wartime enemies but by the very empire they served, reinforcing the theme of betrayal from within.[86] As Van Patten notes, the English – Morant's allies – proved more dangerous than the Boers; through the trial he exposed their actions, becoming a witness and, in a sense, having the last word.[87]

In contrast, South Africa had already declared itself a republic in 1961.[88] However, by the 1980s, the country was engulfed in an entirely different ideological crisis – a crisis rooted in apartheid's growing unviability on both domestic and international fronts. The aftermath of the Soweto Uprising in 1976 – where students protested the imposition of Afrikaans as a medium of instruction, galvanised the global anti-apartheid movement.[89] Mounting international condemnation led to economic sanctions, cultural boycotts, and increasing diplomatic isolation.[90]

80. *Breaker Morant*.
81. White, 'Exercising with *The Breaker*', 94.
82. *Breaker Morant*.
83. Heung, '"Breaker Morant" and the Melodramatic Treatment of History', 7.
84. *Breaker Morant*, 01:39:31.
85. Matthew 10:36 (New International Version).
86. J. K. Van Patten, 'The Trial of Breaker Morant', *South Dakota Law Review*, 65 (2020), 144.
87. Van Patten, 'The Trial of Breaker Morant', 144.
88. Verkerk, 'The South African War and Afrikaner Nationalism', 136.
89. Verkerk, 'The South African War and Afrikaner Nationalism', 136.
90. Verkerk, 'The South African War and Afrikaner Nationalism', 136.

It is in this context that *Gideon Scheepers* was produced – a film that idealises the titular Boer leader as a tragic martyr of British imperial oppression.[91] The film constructs Scheepers as a symbol of Afrikaner victimhood, emphasising his moral integrity, his youth and his vulnerability. Key themes reinforcing this narrative include his martyrdom and his tragic heroism. They emphasise the humanisation of his character, and portray his trial as unjust and politically motivated. The film memorialises Scheepers as a hero wronged by the British Empire, reinforcing Afrikaner narratives of suffering, sacrifice, and moral superiority.

Gideon Scheepers, like Breaker Morant, is portrayed as a tragic hero, with the film strategically playing on the audience's emotions by emphasising his physical decline. Most scenes depict Scheepers as visibly weak, often bedridden, assisted by others, or confined to a hospital bed. For example, in the first scene there is a battle between the Boer and British forces.[92] In this scene Scheepers's men try to get him away from the battle, but he is too weak to walk so they carry him to a nearby wagon.[93]

Scheepers's physical decline becomes symbolic of the Boer nation's own perceived victimisation under British imperialism. As scholars such as Lim and Fröhlig argue, victimhood nationalism often centres on figures who suffer unjustly at the hands of a more powerful enemy, casting them as moral exemplars and reinforcing narratives of national innocence.[94] In this context, Scheepers's inability to fight back and his inability to save his men in the film, is not portrayed as weakness, but as tragic nobility. His suffering is not just personal, it is also national.

This emotionally charged portrayal is heightened by its contrast with earlier depictions of Scheepers as a capable and loyal Boer officer, intensifying the emotional impact of his downfall. Originally, Scheepers was shown as a strong and willing participant in the war effort – one of General Christiaan de Wet's foremost, most trusted men. As Shearing and Shearing note, 'Gideon Scheepers was a first-rate telegraphist, heliographer and a scout that Boer leader, Gen Christiaan de Wet, prized'.[95] Despite his capabilities and military importance, he became seriously ill from unknown causes.

The ambiguity surrounding the source of his illness and decline further deepen the film's sense of tragedy and injustice. Some scholars, such as Constantine, speculate that treason, betrayal, poisoning, and conspiracy played a role in his

91. Verkerk, 'The South African War and Afrikaner Nationalism', 136.
92. *Gideon Scheepers*, directed by H. Hugo (South Africa: SABC, 1982).
93. *Gideon Scheepers*.
94. Lim, "Victimhood Nationalism," 142; Fröhlig, 'Victimhood and Building Identities'.
95. T. Shearing and D. Shearing, *Commandant Gideon Scheepers and the Search for His Grave* (Sedgefield, South Africa: T. and D. Shearing, 1999), 9.

surrender and eventual execution.[96] However, others – like Shearing and Shearing, argue that it is more likely that he suffered from a bowel obstruction or acute appendicitis.[97] This conclusion is based on medical evidence: doctors did not report symptoms such as a distended stomach, acute neuritis, or paralysis, all of which are signs typically associated with arsenic poisoning.[98]

In addition to portraying his physical decline, the film *Gideon Scheepers* also foregrounds the unfairness and illegitimacy of his trial. Firstly, it emphasises that Scheepers was not a Cape Colony rebel, but a burgher, a citizen, of the Transvaal Republic.[99] Koch notes that Scheepers argued that he was not a Cape rebel but a prisoner of war.[100] Thus, he insisted that he should be treated as such – as a citizen of – the Boer Republics.[101] This distinction is historically accurate: Scheepers was born in Middelburg, then part of the eastern Transvaal, now Mpumalanga Province.[102] Although he later joined the Orange Free State Artillery Corps to assist in establishing a field heliography unit,[103] this affiliation did not alter his citizenship. As such, he was technically not guilty of treason against the British Crown, which point the film subtly but consistently stresses – to cast doubt on the legitimacy of his prosecution and capital sentence.[104]

The trial itself is framed not merely as a legal proceeding, but as a colonial performance of power. Taking place after the British had annexed the Boer republics of Pretoria in 1900, it served to assert imperial sovereignty. This context underscores how Scheepers's trial functioned as an imperial assertion of legal authority, where law became an instrument of conquest rather than justice.

Secondly, the film emphasises that Scheepers had no witnesses to testify on his behalf, because most of his men were still engaged in combat.[105] His family tried to attend the court proceedings, but Lord Kitchener forbade them from doing so for unknown reasons.[106] The film further notes that witnesses against Scheepers either

96. R. J. Constantine, *The Poisoning of Gideon Scheepers: The Anglo-Boer War 1899–1902: A True Incident from the Guerilla War in the Cape Colony* (Cape Town: Africana Institute, 1998), 2.
97. Shearing and Shearing, *Commandant Gideon Scheepers*, 144.
98. Shearing and Shearing, *Commandant Gideon Scheepers*, 144.
99. *Gideon Scheepers*.
100. R. Koch, *Van die Oewer, van die Dwyka na Graaff-Reinet se Sand: Kommandant Gideon Scheepers, sy Lewe, Gevangeneming en Teregstelling*, (Bloemfontein: Die Oorlogsmuseum van die Boererepublieke, 1998), 25.
101. Koch, *Van die Oewer*, 25.
102. D. Harrison, *The White Tribe of Africa: South Africa in Perspective* (Johannesburg: Southern Books, 1987), 42.
103. Harrison, *The White Tribe of Africa*, 405.
104. *Gideon Scheepers*.
105. *Gideon Scheepers*.
106. Koch, *Van die Oewer*, 47.

had not seen him closely or could not identify him conclusively,[107] thereby raising questions about the credibility of the charges. The absence of defence and family support symbolises the 'silencing' of Boer voices and Scheepers's martyrdom.

Lastly, it portrays Scheepers as an innocent man who was merely following the orders of Boer generals.[108] As Jooste and Oosthuizen observe, Scheepers engaged in the destruction of British homes as part of a retaliatory strategy formally communicated by the Boer command to Lord Kitchener.[109] Boer General Christiaan De Wet and the President of the Orange Free State, Martinus Theunis Steyn, urged the Cape rebels to destroy British property in retaliation for the scorched-earth policy that displaced thousands and devastated Boer infrastructure.[110] Accordingly, both the film and historical record frame Scheepers's actions as sanctioned acts of military reprisal rather than indiscriminate violence.

The film further humanises Scheepers by portraying him as gravely ill, using his physical decline to evoke sympathy and frame him as a martyr.[111] Illness becomes a narrative tool, highlighting Scheepers's vulnerability and humanising his suffering. Close-ups and dim lighting frame his frailty with pathos and dignity, deepening emotional identification while reinforcing victimhood nationalism by elevating personal suffering into collective trauma and national sacrifice.

Furthermore, the film portrays Scheepers as a chivalrous and highly principled officer who upholds the codes of war, treating prisoners with dignity and compassion, qualities he himself recorded in his diary.[112] This depiction contrasts with the brutality of British forces, reinforcing Scheepers's moral superiority. Portrayed as a civilised, honourable figure unjustly punished by empire, he becomes a martyr and an idealised embodiment of Afrikaner virtue, reinforcing nationalist narratives of heroic resistance and victimhood.

Nor is this all. The film also humanises Scheepers through his heartfelt letters to his mother.[113] These letters, which form a recurring motif in the narrative, highlight his emotional vulnerability and deep familial bonds. According to Koch, Scheepers and his mother had a very close relationship, as seen in the numerous letters he wrote

107. *Gideon Scheepers*.
108. *Gideon Scheepers*.
109. G. Jooste and A. Oosthuizen, *So het hulle Gesterf: Gedenkboek van Teregstellings van Kaapse Rebelle en Republikeinse Burgers tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog 1899–1902* (Pretoria: P. Van der Walt, 1998), 162.
110. Koch, *Van die Oewer*, 27.
111. *Gideon Scheepers*.
112. *Gideon Scheepers*; G.J. Scheepers en G.S. Preller, *Scheepers Se Dagboek en die Stryd in Kaapland: (1 Okt. 1901–18 Jan 1902)* (Kaapstad: Nasionale Pers, 1938), 27.
113. *Gideon Scheepers*.

to her.[114] Koch further notes that Scheepers's mother was protective of her 'soft-hearted son'.[115] Despite her grief at losing her beloved son, Scheepers's mother played a pivotal role in reshaping public perception of him. As Shearing and Shearing note, she moved his name from that of a brigand to that of a martyr – out of the empty grave and into the hall of fame.[116] 'For her son, Sophie fought the hardest campaign of all – that he not be forgotten'.[117] She continued to search for his grave until her 100th birthday. Despite desperate pleas in newspapers and following every available clue, she never found her son's remains.[118]

Only a few hours after the Coldstream Guards executed Scheepers, his body was exhumed from its temporary burial site and re-interred in an unmarked, unknown location.[119] The British feared Scheepers's exhumation would make him a martyr, and his missing grave became a symbol of loss and unresolved trauma in Afrikaner memory. To this day, it remains unclear who ordered the reburial; all parties involved have denied responsibility.[120]

Lastly, the film uses flashbacks to depict Scheepers's life before the South African War, suggesting that he was not merely a soldier but also a man with a meaningful emotional world. As Verkerk notes, a key flashback shows his beloved gifting him a pendant engraved with the word *liefde* [love], evoking a sense of emotional depth and lost potential.[121] These flashbacks are visually softened and saturated with warmth, in contrast to the cold institutional greyness of his imprisonment. This tender memory from the past contrasts starkly with the grim present, reinforcing the tragedy of his fate and inviting the audience to empathise with his personal loss as symbolic of national suffering.

Murderers and martyrs in motion: Filmic representations of heroism and injustice

Both *Gideon Scheepers* and *Breaker Morant* deploy narrative and cinematic strategies to reframe historical injustice as nationalist martyrdom, inviting audiences to identify emotionally with protagonists portrayed as victims of imperial overreach. These films do not merely recount past events; they participate in ideological meaning-making by selectively reconstructing history to support a moral narrative of victimhood.

114. Koch, *Van die Oewer*, 43.
115. Koch, *Van die Oewer*, 47.
116. Shearing and Shearing, *Commandant Gideon Scheepers*, 189.
117. Shearing and Shearing, *Commandant Gideon Scheepers*, 189.
118. Shearing and Shearing, *Commandant Gideon Scheepers*, 189.
119. M. Burgess, 'The Karoo's Eternal Commandant: Rural Insight', *Farmers Weekly*, 32, 99039 (2009), 41.
120. Burgess, 'The Karoo's Eternal Commandant', 41.
121. Verkerk, 'The South African War and Afrikaner Nationalism', 163; *Gideon Scheepers*.

At the heart of both films are nationalist figures who have become symbolic in Afrikaner and Australian cultural memory – Gideon Scheepers and Breaker Morant. In the 1980s, *Breaker Morant* re-emerged as a potent symbol in Australian cultural memory, particularly through the film *Breaker Morant*, which portrayed him as a courageous soldier betrayed by the British Empire.[122] Morant was reimagined as a scapegoat – an ordinary soldier, ruthlessly sacrificed by imperial authority to protect British political interests. This interpretation resonated deeply with Australians of the 1980s, who were grappling with questions of national identity, post-imperial independence, and the legacy of colonial subservience. The film's focus on Morant's trial and flashbacks casts him as a victim of injustice and a national martyr. In this way, *Breaker Morant* functions not only as historical drama but also as a cinematic intervention in the construction of Australian victimhood nationalism.

Similarly, *Gideon Scheepers* constructs its titular character as a moral martyr embodying Afrikaner nationalist ideology of unwavering patriotism, Christian morality, and youthful sacrifice.[123] Verkerk argues that Afrikaners of the 1980s needed such symbolic heroes to inspire hope and defend the imagined *volk* during a time of political uncertainty and cultural anxiety.[124] South Africa of the time was seen as ungovernable due to widespread sanctions, protests, and violence, intensifying pressure that ultimately contributed to the end of apartheid.[125]

The film uses flashbacks to Scheepers's earlier acts of bravery and faith, as well as scenes portraying his physical decline, to evoke sympathy and reinforce his moral righteousness. By portraying Scheepers as a hero, the film reinforces Afrikaner identity and a narrative of resilient, righteous struggle. According to Verkerk, *Gideon Scheepers* was vital in giving the *volk* a hero who personified their struggles and aspirations, thereby sustaining a sense of unity and purpose amid broader social challenges.[126]

To reinforce these nationalist narratives, both films emphasise the legal trials of their protagonists, using courtroom drama to underscore themes of betrayal and moral injustice. Scheepers's trial, in particular, resonated with Afrikaners of the 1980s, who faced increasing political and international pressure amid the decline of apartheid.[127] His unjust conviction by the British Empire was seen as paralleling the

122. *Breaker Morant*.
123. *Gideon Scheepers*.
124. Verkerk, 'The South African War and Afrikaner Nationalism', 145.
125. Various events in South Africa rendered the country ungovernable and contributed to the end of apartheid; however, due to space and time constraints, and as this is not the main focus. See Verkerk, 'The South African War and Afrikaner Nationalism' for more on the 1980s context.
126. Verkerk, 'The South African War and Afrikaner Nationalism', 145.
127. Verkerk, 'The South African War and Afrikaner Nationalism', 145.

perceived unfair condemnation of Afrikaners by the international community.[128] In this framing, Scheepers's not-guilty plea symbolises a collective Afrikaner refusal to accept moral culpability, reflecting the belief that their actions were vital for cultural and racial survival.

In a parallel manner, *Breaker Morant* uses its courtroom scenes to highlight the scapegoating of Morant and his fellow officers, who are portrayed as loyal soldiers following orders in a brutal guerrilla war.[129] Their execution is seen as a political move, casting Australians as pawns of empire; 1980s audiences viewed Morant's victimhood and battlefield flashbacks as a symbol of national defiance and moral clarity.

Both films depict their protagonists as ordinary men betrayed by empire, reinforcing their status as national martyrs. Their deaths symbolise broader injustices, resonating in the 1980s as Australian and Afrikaner societies reassessed their colonial pasts. Morant's execution dramatises imperial betrayal, while Scheepers's youth and frailty evoke sympathy and moral innocence. Verkerk notes that Scheepers's portrayal offered Afrikaners a powerful analogy for their perceived victimisation in the face of international criticism and political isolation during the late apartheid era.[130]

To solidify their nationalist appeal, both films selectively construct antagonists that heighten the protagonists' suffering. In *Breaker Morant*, the British are portrayed as calculating and indifferent, willing to sacrifice their colonial subjects for political convenience.[131] The court-martial serves as a theatrical display of imperial expediency, heightening the sense of betrayal and reinforcing Australian nationalism. Likewise, *Gideon Scheepers* casts British officers as unsympathetic agents of an unjust empire.[132] They condemn a mortally sick and morally resolute Scheepers, reinforcing the idea of imperial injustice. As Verkerk notes, such portrayals serve to affirm the righteousness of the *volk* and their struggle for cultural preservation.[133]

The limited portrayal of black South Africans in *Gideon Scheepers* underscores its white-centric memory politics. Hendrik, Scheepers's loyal *agterryer*, appears briefly and lacks narrative agency. While acknowledging black involvement, his marginal role mirrors a broader trend in Afrikaans historical films: Afrikaner suffering is central, while black South Africans' traumas – displacement, forced labour, and violence – are largely erased.

128. Verkerk, 'The South African War and Afrikaner Nationalism', 145.
129. *Breaker Morant*.
130. Verkerk, 'The South African War and Afrikaner Nationalism', 145.
131. *Breaker Morant*.
132. *Gideon Scheepers*.
133. Verkerk, 'The South African War and Afrikaner Nationalism', 164.

This selective memory is heightened by the apartheid-era context in which the film was produced. As Verkerk (2023) notes, the 1980s saw the intensification of Afrikaner fears around *swartgevaar* – the perceived 'black peril' threatening white security and power.[134] The film subtly reinforces this fear through scenes like the one where a black soldier bursts through a door, startling a woman who is hiding Scheepers.[135] This scene evokes anxieties about black resistance, linking political assertiveness with violence. As the African National Congress (ANC) gained momentum and township protests escalated, such imagery resonated with white audiences, amplifying fears of unrest and loss of political control.

Indeed, the real-life political climate of 1980s South Africa amplified these fears. Black South Africans were increasingly frustrated by apartheid's injustices, and their exclusion from the Tricameral Parliament deepened their discontent.[136] As protests and uprisings surged, many Afrikaners interpreted these events through the lens of *swartgevaar*, further entrenching the idea of being under siege. Verkerk argues that *Gideon Scheepers* catered directly to these sentiments, portraying Afrikaners as moral victims while downplaying the legitimacy of black resistance.[137]

Despite – or perhaps because of – these biases, both films resonated strongly with their audiences. *Breaker Morant* revived its titular character as more than a historical figure, presenting him as a symbol of national betrayal. Van Patten argues that the courtroom drama in the film serves to illuminate broader questions of justice, loyalty, and identity.[138] At a time when Australian nationalism was undergoing transformation, *Breaker Morant* helped solidify a narrative of sacrifice and moral independence. This is encapsulated in Handcock's declaration: 'Australia first', a phrase that rejects imperial loyalty in favour of national identity.[139]

From a critical standpoint, Keyan Tomaselli argues that *Breaker Morant* ultimately functions as nationalist mythmaking.[140] While acknowledging its cinematic strengths, Tomaselli critiques the film for its lack of ideological self-awareness.[141] Rather than challenging imperial power structures, it reinforces them by centring emotional identification with white victimhood. For South African viewers, the film's appeal may have stemmed from this construction of betrayal, yet it fails to critically examine the broader imperial system in which such injustices occurred.[142]

134. Verkerk, 'The South African War and Afrikaner Nationalism', 166.
135. Verkerk, 'The South African War and Afrikaner Nationalism', 166.
136. Verkerk, 'The South African War and Afrikaner Nationalism', 166.
137. Verkerk, 'The South African War and Afrikaner Nationalism', 166.
138. Van Patten, 'The Trial of Breaker Morant', 144.
139. *Breaker Morant*.
140. K. Tomaselli, 'The South African and Australian Film Industries: A Comparison', *Critical Arts, Monographs*, 1 (1981), 1-15.
141. Tomaselli, 'The South African and Australian Film Industries', 5.
142. Tomaselli, 'The South African and Australian Film Industries', 1-15.

Similarly, *Gideon Scheepers* aired on TV1, targeting white South Africans – especially Afrikaners and English-speakers – and received its strongest reception among Afrikaner viewers. According to Bothma, Afrikaners in the 1980s enjoyed economic stability and cultural dominance, and the appeal of nationalism shifted from asserting power to preserving it.[143] Verkerk contends that films like *Gideon Scheepers* offered reassurance through heroic narratives.[144] Comments on YouTube, such as 'Ons dapper volk, wat het van hulle geword?' [Our brave people, what has become of them?][145] reflect a longing for lost strength and unity. Yet, English-speaking white South Africans did not relate to the film in the same way. As one viewer remarked sarcastically, 'I didn't know that Afrikaans was the standard language of communication within the British Army at the time',[146] suggesting a cultural and historical disconnect. Ultimately, *Gideon Scheepers* offers a nostalgic and exclusionary vision of history, elevating Afrikaner suffering while rendering other narratives – especially those of black South Africans – nearly invisible.

Together, *Breaker Morant* and *Gideon Scheepers* serve as powerful examples of how film can shape and sustain nationalist memory. Both invite audiences to identify with protagonists who are cast as victims of empire, reinforcing a sense of moral superiority and historical grievance. Yet, their selective focus on white suffering and exclusion of other perspectives, highlights the dangers of nostalgia-driven historical storytelling – especially when used to legitimise nationalist ideologies.

Conclusion

Gideon Scheepers and *Breaker Morant* both construct powerful narratives of injustice, using film to transform historical figures into national martyrs. Through emotional engagement, narrative simplification, and selective historical framing, these films contribute to the creation of victimhood nationalism, where national identity is anchored in collective suffering and claims of moral superiority.

While these portrayals resonate deeply and serve important political functions, they also risk reinforcing exclusionary memories. By focusing narrowly on white protagonists and marginalising other victims of colonial violence, the films offer an incomplete and ideologically charged version of history. This selective remembrance

143. J. J. Bothma, 'Hemel Op Die Platteland': The Intersections of Land and Whiteness in Selected Afrikaans Language Films: 1961–1994' (MA dissertation, University of Pretoria, South Africa, 2017), 50.
144. Verkerk, 'The South African War and Afrikaner Nationalism', 234.
145. "Noordman," *YouTube video*, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bxms7v2kcEc&t=5s, accessed 7 October 2022.
146. "Arkuis," *YouTube video*, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=Bxms7v2kcEc&t=5s, accessed 7 October 2022.

underscores how film – as a form of intangible cultural heritage – not only shapes what history is remembered but also whose stories are told, and for what purposes.

Morant was reimagined as a scapegoat – an ordinary soldier sacrificed by the British Empire to protect imperial interests. This narrative struck a chord with 1980s Australians who were grappling with national identity, post-imperial independence, and colonial legacies. Similarly, Afrikaners reinterpreted Scheepers as a martyr betrayed by imperial injustice, viewing his trial and execution as symbolic of their own historical victimhood.

Both figures thus serve parallel ideological roles: articulating nationalist sentiment, reframing historical trauma, and asserting moral legitimacy through sacrifice and injustice. By portraying Morant and Scheepers as victims of imperial betrayal, the films elevate their deaths beyond personal tragedy to symbols of collective national suffering. In doing so, they construct enduring narratives of nationalist victimhood that shape cultural identity and historical memory.

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