

The boundaries of desire and intimacy in post-apartheid South African queer film: Oliver Hermanus's *Skoonheid*

> Grant Andrews

Research Fellow, English Department, Stellenbosch University, Stellenbosch, South Africa
Lecturer, School of Education, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa

grant.andrews@wits.ac.za

ABSTRACT

South African cinema is still dominated, both in terms of number and commercial success, by films featuring white Afrikaans-speaking characters. These films are mostly politically voiceless, ignoring the contentious racial and economic dynamics in the country, and they fail to represent queer realities. *Skoonheid* [*Beauty*] (2011), the powerful South African film directed by Oliver Hermanus, challenges this trend and offers a portrayal of sexualities and racial hostilities which are often silenced or ignored in mainstream cinema. The film depicts a white Afrikaans-speaking man named François, who becomes obsessed with his friend's son, Christian. François has secret sex with a group of other white Afrikaans-speaking men on a farm near Bloemfontein. The group has strict rules that “*moffies*” (queers) and “*kleurlinge*” (“coloureds” or people of colour) are not welcome to join their sexual gatherings. These regulations and the secrecy that enshrouds same-sex attraction in the film belie François's longing for intimacy, a longing which develops into an obsession with Christian that ends violently. In this paper, I locate the film within the broader trends of Afrikaans cinema and queer cinema in the country. I then perform a reading of the film to show how it offers an important voice to repressed sexualities, and exposes some of the hostilities which underlie relations in post-apartheid South African society. I focus on how intimacy, both cultural and personal, is impossible for François, and the film reflects how these intimacies are threatened by hostilities and marginalisation within South African society.

Keywords: *Skoonheid*, Oliver Hermanus, South African film, sexuality, queer film, masculinity.

South African queer film and post-apartheid social divides

South African queer¹ realities have been greatly underrepresented in local cinema. Even though roughly between fourteen and twenty-five feature-length films are produced in the country annually, in addition to many films produced for television and DVD release (Burnett 2014:14), only a handful of films from major studios have centrally dealt with queer themes in South Africa. These few representations include *Proteus* (2004) by John Greyson and Jack Lewis, *The World Unseen* (2007) directed by Shamim Sarif, *Skoonheid [Beauty]* (2011) directed by Oliver Hermanus, *While You Weren't Looking* (2015) directed by Catherine Stewart, and *Inxeba (The Wound)* (2017) directed by John Trengove. Martin Botha (2012:248), in his review of queer cinema throughout South African history up until 2010, explains that 'images of gay men and women are limited and still on the margin of the film industry. One ends up with less than 20 short films, a few documentaries and less than 10 features with openly gay and lesbian characters'.² *Skoonheid*, the first Afrikaans film to screen at the Cannes Film Festival, received the Queer Palm in 2011 for its contribution to queer cinema (Sonnekus 2013:27). Unfortunately, this has not translated into a great deal of scholarly attention, and the rich themes, dynamic characterisation and important work of representation which queer films undertake have not been met with as much academic scrutiny as they deserve.

South African queer films have a complex relationship with other cinemas in the country, simultaneously fitting within the post-apartheid milieu and challenging dominant narrative conventions. These queer films seem to fall under the imperative of a great deal of South African creative works to represent the realities of continued marginalisation, racial segregation and the highly contentious gender and identity politics which plague the country even after the formal end of apartheid (Burnett 2014:29). As Ashraf Jamal (2005:4) puts it, 'cultural expression continues to be stalked by the apartheid imagination'. While a large amount of escapist romance films and comedies are produced in the country, particularly for the sizable white Afrikaans-speaking market,³ many films catering to broader audiences or falling outside of the comedy or romance genres tend to touch on socio-political issues linked to the legacy of apartheid (Burnett 2014:29). These films include the 2004 Oscar-nominated drama *Yesterday* by Darrell Roodt and Oscar-winning drama *Tsotsi* (2005) by Gavin Hood.

It is significant that the white Afrikaans-speaking⁴ market is so dominant as well as being so frequently devoid of significant political themes. This indicates both the economic advantages afforded by the legacy of apartheid that allows for the group

to disproportionately produce and consume film media, and also indicates the ways in which many Afrikaans-speaking people refuse to confront the political realities of a country still reeling from the horrors of the past. Chris Broodryk (2016:1), in his detailed study of Afrikaans cinema, explains that 'Afrikaans cinema between 1994 and 2014 [is] a cinema of political impotence, a cinema devoid of a political voice'. As Broodryk (2016:7) notes, Afrikaans cinema is distinct from other post-conflict cinemas worldwide as it does not demonstrate political engagement or interrogation, and is largely homogenous. South African films marketed to white Afrikaans audiences hardly ever offer historical accounts that authentically address the role of Afrikaans people in the system of apartheid, or which give nuanced, multifocal perspectives on history or the post-apartheid landscape.⁵

By contrast, the South African queer-themed films mentioned above all directly and critically deal with issues of race and othering within South Africa, both historically, as in the case of *Proteus* where a white and black man are executed on Robben Island because of their physical relationship,⁶ and contemporarily as with *Skoonheid*, *While You Weren't Looking* and *Inxeba (The Wound)*. *Skoonheid*, as an Afrikaans film starring a mostly white, Afrikaans-speaking cast, serves as doubly challenging in the post-apartheid cinematic landscape, not only representing repressed queer sexuality, but also breaking with the mainstream of Afrikaans cinema by focusing on socio-political issues of racism, sexual violence and stifling gender norms.

The film, through its study of obsession, repression and the longing for intimacy through the perspective of a conservative, patriarchal, white Afrikaans-speaking man, exposes many underlying dynamics of gender, race and sexuality in post-apartheid South Africa. The film offers a powerful lens on how repression, and identities framed within strict boundaries of desire, conduct and gendered social interactions, are linked to instances of discrimination and violence. Importantly, it seems to problematise the versions of Afrikaner masculinity which are espoused in most contemporary Afrikaans-language films (Broodryk 2016:13). This paper discusses Hermanus's film with reference to its representation of the repressed desire for intimacy, expressed as obsession and eventually violence, and how this theme can be read as speaking to the lingering racial divisions and the othering of non-heteronormative self-expression in post-apartheid South Africa. The fact that queer realities are underrepresented in media can be seen as symptomatic of this repression within broader South African society, and the film offers a form of counter-narrative, asserting the existence of repressed queer identities in heteronormative, patriarchal spaces.

As Saint-Francis Tohlang (2012:1) holds, queer filmmakers particularly have agency 'in shaping, creating, imagining, acting and documenting their own history in a socio-political context where their histories have been marginalized and silenced for decades'.⁷ Richard Dyer (1993:15) explains that, within the gay rights movement, the media was often seen as 'a carrier, reinforcer and shaper of [...the] oppression [of queer people]'. Thus, by offering representations that complicate and expand understandings of queer realities within South Africa, these filmmakers play a part in reshaping media and informing understandings of socio-political dynamics within the country. Queer cinematic cultures in South Africa were instrumental in reshaping the gay rights movement, especially after apartheid, and Ricardo Peach (2005:xi) elaborates on how the *Out in Africa Gay and Lesbian Film Festival*, an annual festival launched in the year of the country's first democratic elections in 1994, was instrumental in fostering a public sphere for queer representation which was vital for legal change. Patricia Pisters (2010:208) reinforces the importance of using cinema as a lens into understanding social dynamics, arguing in her analysis of postcolonial cinema that it functions not merely as a representation of a society, but instead 'operates as a performative speech act that plays a part in constructing reality'. In this vein, queer cinema particularly is instrumental for social change in various ways, such as fostering visibility, combatting discrimination, leading to greater human rights, presenting diverse and balanced representations, and leading to queer people gaining more autonomy in how they are represented (Peach 2005:48). For many queer communities within South Africa, cinema offered transformative potential, and the chance to assert their rights to dignity and fair representation. As the introduction to the program of the first *Out in Africa* film festival explains, even after protections for sexual minorities were included in the young democracy's constitution, there was more work to be done:

Gay rights may be in the constitution – but they're not yet in our lives ... What we need to do is get people talking. And how better to do this than through movies? Movies introduce ideas, and spark off new ones ... We believe this festival will give gay men, lesbians and bisexuals a chance to build their self-recognition and self-worth (Peach 2005:22).

By representing these silenced realities and the heterogeneous and complex identities and lives of queer South Africans, queer cinema can serve an important function in social change.⁸ *Scoonheid* represents the protagonist's deep yearning for intimacy, and by extension speaks to the divides which are created by the many forms of repression and hostility that are shown in the film. Michael Herzfeld's (1997:34) concept of cultural intimacy, which is the vulnerable, tenuous, yet treasured unified identity of groups within a nation-state, and includes 'cultural embarrassment and solidarity', is also useful in understanding François's character in the film. François represents the

resistance to such intimacy, the lack of empathy to marginalised groups and the resistance to the rhetoric of the so-called rainbow nation, which South Africa was said to become after the fall of apartheid. François, yearning for male-male intimacy, is symbolic of these broader national fissures, as well as demonstrating one of these disunities in particular, namely the cultural exclusion and repression of queer people within South Africa. This exclusion is shown both in how rare a film about queer realities still is in South Africa, in François's repression, as well as in how hostile François himself is towards those he considers "moffies". In addition, the lack of emotional intimacy for François, especially the male-male intimacy which he is shown to crave, evinces the barriers that stifling cultural mores can create. For François, the intimacy he desires never comes, and eventually, with an act of violence, the possibility for any intimacy for the protagonist and the object of his desire is severed for good. This paper discusses the techniques used to represent the lack of intimacy in the film, and link these techniques to the issues of race, gender and sexuality in South African society to show how the protagonist represents the ways in which particular iterations of Afrikaner masculinities place barriers on intimacy and limit the transcendence of societal divides.

Skoonheid's representation of Afrikaner men and barriers to intimacy

The film focalises François (Deon Lotz) as he begins to develop an obsession with his friend's son, Christian (Charlie Keegan). François is a white Afrikaans-speaking family man living in Bloemfontein, husband to Elena (Michelle Scott) and father to two daughters. François is depicted as being conservative and patriarchal, enacting strict control over his wife and daughters. Theo Sonnekus (2013:24), in his analysis of the film, explains that François is for the most part the embodiment of Afrikaner ideology, which relied on strict boundaries of gender and 'machismo' to support the power of white men in the country. This construction relied on 'the need for apartheid ideology to project a discernible image of superiority and prosperity through its most valued agents, white Afrikaner men, in order to strengthen and legitimise its racist, political agendas' (Sonnekus 2013:24). The director of *Skoonheid*, Oliver Hermanus (2012:4), explains his perspective in the film by noting that 'the collective guilt and subconscious need to defend their heritage are what most conservative [Afrikaner men] battle with every day', setting the groundwork for a constant policing of identity which forms the basis of François's conservative character.⁹

However, despite his seemingly traditional, hypermasculine presentation, François regularly has secret sex with a group of other white Afrikaans-speaking men in his community. While this might seem to undermine his reliance on machismo, these conflicting elements in François's character are reconciled by the strict control that François and the other men place on their lives and the lives of others. François's patriarchal role sees him exercise control over his wife and daughters in ways that come across as cold and stern. Similarly, the group sex is stringently policed with exclusive parameters, and it is only practiced within the shroud of secrecy. Once this control starts to crack, and once François realises that he cannot control Christian or suppress the unwanted desire for genuine male-male intimacy, François is seen to react with rage.

The group sex comes very unexpectedly to the viewer; what seems like a scene of male bonding over beers and small talk about sport, what Nicky Falkof (2016:18) refers to as being 'awkwardly framed within a social discourse of heterosexual machismo', sees François being introduced to a new member of the group who glances suggestively at him, and transitions to group sex in a darkened room with same-sex pornography displayed on a television. Even though the men are engaged in explicit sex acts, the scenes are not constructed as erotic, and there is no emotional intimacy shown between the men beyond their sexual pleasure. François's face is not shown as the new member of the group performs oral sex on him; another man's face is shrouded in darkness as he penetrates another man on the bed next to François; figures move in the background noiselessly, their faces not shown. The dark, small room and the expressionless faces, mostly hidden from the view of the camera, heighten the sense of secrecy and taboo of these men's sexual activity, but also create tension in the scene. The scene is much less one of pleasure and much more one of some sinister and even disturbing undertaking. The camera is positioned above François's head at one point, looking down at the figures below, a regularly employed angle in the film which demonstrates a feeling of abstraction even in seemingly "intimate" settings. The suggestion is that François is never fully present in the scene, detached from the sexual activities and observing his life from a remove. The shot periodically shifts to an outside scene, to the brightly-lit surroundings of the farmhouse in which the men have sex, with the camera stalking the house, indicating the need to maintain complete isolation from the community. The composition of this scene demonstrates the repression of the male-male desire which these men face; the only place they can demonstrate their same-sex attraction is when they are hidden in darkness, confined in a small room. When the sex is over, François leaves alone. The implication is that these encounters never bring any sense of closeness between these men, and never amount to more than sex.

What is significant about this group-sex arrangement is that the boundaries placed on male-male interactions are not only externally imposed by an unaccepting community forcing these men into secrecy and repression, but the men also enforce their own boundaries on their desire from within the private space. When one of the white men who is part of the group, Gideon, brings along a companion, a dark-skinned man who is effeminate in presentation, the other men are outraged. When Gideon tries to explain himself, François says of the dark-skinned companion, ‘Look at him. We’re not *moffies* [queers/faggots], Gideon’, and another man says that no ‘*moffies*’ or ‘*kleurlinge*’ (coloureds/people of colour) are allowed into their group. As this is shown to be a repeat offence by Gideon, he is expelled from their group. These boundaries on desire construct the group as not only exclusionary, but also as framed within discourses of patriarchal masculinity and racial separateness, two themes pertinent to the South African post-apartheid landscape. Only white, “masculine” and “straight” men are allowed to participate in the group sex encounters, even though the same-sex encounters would undercut the definition of “straightness”. These men define themselves within very rigid limits, and these limits, ostensibly, are not threatened by their sexual behaviour. As Falkof (2016:20; emphasis in original) notes, François’s ‘apparent deviance is expressed *within* his Afrikanerness. His violent desire and consequent degeneration are shocking because they reference South Africa’s earlier version of hegemonic masculinity: the wealthy, successful, modern yet traditional Afrikaner patriarch’. The men do not consider themselves “*moffies*”, and actively exclude anyone who would fall under their definition of this label. They still consider themselves separate from, and by implication *superior to*, ‘coloureds’. These boundaries on their sexual activities suggest that these men are reinforcing aspects of their identities of power even in the setting that performs same-sex sexuality; they are reifying the power associated with their whiteness, their maleness and their self-defined “straightness” even through male-male sex. Falkof (2016:21) notes that ‘[t]he word “*skoonheid*” has a double meaning in Afrikaans: it means cleanliness, purity, as well as beauty. The aggressive expulsion of the non-white, openly gay interloper suggests a purification of the body politic, a sanitisation of the closed community of ethnic whiteness’. In this complex scene, the men are able to enact and indeed reinforce their patriarchal positions and ideologies through same-sex behaviour.

Defining “*moffies*” and “*kleurlinge*” as marginalised groups

The two terms used to describe the outsiders to the group are complex and carry varied meanings in South Africa, and briefly exploring these terms is useful in making sense of this group’s identity formation and to show how intimacy is limited for them.

The term “*moffie*” is a highly contentious one in the Afrikaans-speaking South African cultures. It is most often used as a pejorative for gay or gender-nonconforming men in white and so-called coloured Afrikaans cultures, its roots pointing to men who are viewed as ‘delicate’ or weak (Luirink 2000:150), but the term has been reclaimed within some queer communities as a proud identity marker. As Pieterse (2013:620) notes, homosexuality was seen as threatening to white Afrikaans-speaking hegemony and the types of masculinities which were foundational for the power of white people within South Africa, and the association of the word “*moffie*” with effeminacy ‘did not fit into the prevailing meta-narratives of Afrikaners as heroic *volk* [nation or people]’. Within the context of the film, the term is used to create otherness with the undesirable femininity that contradicts the rigid patriarchal masculinity which the men exhibit. The behaviour itself, namely having sex with other men, is not seen as qualifying them as “*moffies*”. Only effeminate or feminised self-presentation would warrant this label. This definition is reinforced when the word “*moffie*” is used at another point in the film, when François’s family has dinner with Christian’s family, and Christian’s mother describes a fight between him and a man who was harassing him at the University of Cape Town (UCT). His mother thinks that this man had a crush on Christian, and describes the attacker as ‘[a] skinny guy. He looked like a bit of a *moffie*’. François responds that ‘[y]ou never know with these *moffies*. They get away with a lot these days’. The man is cast as the villain by being labelled a “*moffie*”, and for overstepping his boundaries and ‘get[ting] away with a lot.’ This fact that François essentially condones this violence against what he considers to be a “*moffie*” speaks to many themes in the film. The construction implies that so-called “*moffies*” are meant to know their place in society, to remain disempowered lest they ‘get away with [too much]’, and in François’s view, they are threatening and unpredictable when they assert themselves. It could speak to François’s hostility towards people he considers to be “*moffies*”, and allude to the anger and violence he enacts when others resist his will just like how “*moffies*” resist their marginal place in society. This form of dominance can be seen in his outburst when his daughter uses his car to drive to Cape Town, or his violent reaction when Christian does not return his affections. Essentially, François’s patriarchal dominance is hinted at in this construction of “*moffies*”.

The term “coloured”, or the Afrikaans version “*kleurling*” as it is used in the film, often refers to mixed-race groups in South Africa or those descended from Malay or indigenous South African (Khoi or San) people. However, the use of the term in the context of the film would imply the exclusion of all people of colour from François’s group, as they base their identities on whiteness and hegemonic masculinity (Folkof 2016:21). Within this framework, the exclusion of many forms of masculinities and racial groups is again symbolic of resisting intimacy through rigid control; the racial

separateness which defined apartheid South Africa is the same separateness which François and the rest of the group rely on to frame their sexual activities and their identities. It is also the factor that necessitates the compartmentalisation of François's own behaviour and identity markers, and that lead to his emotionlessness, isolation, anxiety and eventual violence; by enforcing separateness and exclusion, François seems to preclude the chance for intimacy and necessitates hostility and the potential for violence. François is not the only person enacting violence in the film with his sexual assault of Christian; indeed, the group of Afrikaner men perpetuate the violence inherent in the type of racist and patriarchal masculinity which forcibly excludes the Other, the type of violence that formed the foundation of apartheid. Martin O'Shaughnessy (2010:39) notes that violence is a common and in fact central feature of political film, where subjective violence can be linked to systemic violence, and in this film, I argue, François's violence is an extension of the exclusion practiced by this group and a reflection of post-apartheid societal hostilities. The violence of François's group is enacted through enforcing racial and gendered divisions which still plague post-apartheid South Africa, what Spivak (1988:281) calls 'epistemic violence', or the 'violence of imperialistic epistemic, social and disciplinary inscription' (Spivak 1988:285), defining and excluding the Other by the categories "*moffie*" and "*kleurling*". As Astrid Treffry-Goatley (2010:2) puts it, '[m]ore than 400 years of colonial rule and 46 years of apartheid had resulted in a severely divided society with little sense of national identity or togetherness'. The idea of multiracial cultural intimacy still does not reconcile with the deeply divided South African society. In a post-apartheid climate where "nation-building" and inclusive identity politics became strategies for dealing with the aftermath of apartheid (Broodryk 2016:77), these endeavours do not reconcile with the reality of a country still visibly and epistemically divided in terms of race. At a dinner with his friend Willem, an exchange highlights these hostilities; Willem says to François, 'I know that things were bad in the old days, but at least we felt safe. Now they *force you to be racist*' (emphasis added). François responds: 'You're telling me'. These men cast their racism and homophobia as the fault of the Other, legitimising their hostility towards people of colour and queer men due to the perceived threat these groups pose. Since the "*moffie*" could attack Christian at UCT, and Willem and François do not feel safe in post-apartheid South Africa as white men, hostility, and even violence, are justified.

It is clear that François frames himself in opposition to people of colour and openly queer people, and that the group sex paradoxically facilitates this identity construction. However, despite its utility in framing François's patriarchal identity, the group sex does not satisfy him. He is shown to be uncomfortable with the impersonal, secretive male-male sexuality depicted in the group sex scenes. Many other scenes in the film

depict a sense of anxiety in François, showing that he is uncomfortable with the compartmentalisation of his identity and of restricting his same-sex desires to only being expressed in the secrecy of the darkened room with the other middle-aged white men.

François demonstrates these conflicts in a scene where he visits his doctor. François is aware that there is something out of place, but he cannot express what it is to the doctor. He tries to explain how he is feeling, saying, 'I feel irritated all the time. I just don't feel well'. Sonnekus (2013:29) reads this moment as evincing an 'inexplicable malaise, which could be interpreted as representing a pathological view of homosexuality as a "disease" that has sullied his mind (and body)', and argues that François's constant acts of cleansing in the film – washing his hands, showering, brushing his teeth and cleaning the pool – all represent the psychological need to clean this unwanted part of his desire, to find *skoonheid* (cleanliness). However, in my reading, the scene in the doctor's office seems to suggest something deeper. François is not necessarily conflicted about sex with men, since he is able to casually engage in sex with the group of other Afrikaner men, but instead he is conflicted about that next step that the group does not allow; the intimacies that are forbidden. He is frightened of being a "moffie", someone who desires more than just sex with another man but instead is truly *intimate* with another man, and he is frightened of the blurring of boundaries which might result if he pursues his obsession with Christian. The boundaries represented by François's repression, those boundaries excluding "moffies" and "kleurlinge", can be linked to the larger societal divides that still exist after the end of formal apartheid. These boundaries are poignantly captured by Jacques Derrida's (1985:292) characterisation of the word 'apartheid', as he reflects on how the word captures the '[s]ystem of partition, barbed wire, crowds of mapped out solitudes [...] The word concentrates separation, raises it to another power'. While the system may have fallen, the divisions and boundaries remain in multiple ways, including the epistemic ways they are represented in films like *Skoonheid*. François embodies these 'solitudes' and boundaries, and exhibits the violences inherent in them. He says to the doctor, 'I've had bad moments lately [...] I haven't lost control', and when the doctor asks him if he might lose control, he responds that he does not know. The anxiety and repression are building towards violence, or towards a moment where François finally loses control.

Christian as the object of obsession and the representation of intimacy

The only way that François can express his desire for intimacy is as an observer, stalking Christian and idealising the young man. François's gaze throughout the film could be linked to the objectifying male gaze theorised in the work of Laura Mulvey (1975:7), where power is situated in the ability of men to take sexual stimulation from others through the gaze; the gaze is linked to scopophilia, the pleasure in watching. However, Mulvey's theory constructed the object of the gaze as female, and the male object, Christian, subverts the power of the gaze, particularly when he looks back at François who is gazing at him. The position of Christian as resistant to the objectification of the gaze might hint at the fact that he will deny François's advances later in the film.

The film masterfully represents the painful longing that François feels to be close to Christian. The opening scene is at the wedding reception of François's daughter Linda, where he first sees Christian. The scene highlights distance and repression and shows the obsessive, longing gaze as François spots Christian across the room. The camera zooms in on the young man, representing François's desire to be close to him. When Christian stares back at him, François becomes embarrassed and looks away, the scopophilic gaze broken by the fear that his repressed desire would be acknowledged. The spark of François's obsession has been ignited, and throughout the film, Christian represents not only the person François wants to be with, but also stands in contrast to the repression that he lives under.

François eventually learns that Christian has returned to Cape Town with his family to resume his studies at UCT, and decides to pursue him there. The claustrophobic, stifling atmosphere created by many of the scenes in Bloemfontein is contrasted with scenes where François goes to Cape Town. The first scene in Cape Town is of François's hotel room where he opens the large curtains to let in a flood of light and a view of the ocean. The sense of the vastness of the ocean and the bright light of his surroundings reflect François's feeling of hope in Cape Town; light could never enter the group sex scene in Bloemfontein, and now François wants to expose his desires to the light. Falkof (2016:23) explains that '[t]he symbolism of the city as a place of both freedom and temptation is expressed in relations between light and shade, and between birdsong and urban noise. This is a city both bright and dark, welcoming and alienating, in contrast to the frozen spaces of Bloemfontein'. In Cape Town, François sees the possibility to explore his longing for intimacy with another man, not merely to be pleased sexually.

Despite these lofty hopes, François's own self-imposed barriers, informed by his separatist, patriarchal masculinity, are what cost him the chance at intimacy. In the final act of the film, François visits the now defunct Bronx nightclub in Green Point, Cape Town, observing all of the men whom he might assume to have found the intimacy that he has never had with another man.¹⁰ His eye is drawn to the white, young men, but they pay him no attention. Instead, an effeminate, so-called "coloured" man comes up to speak with François, flirting with him. François immediately rejects this man, the barriers still excluding "queers" and "coloureds" from those whom he could be close to. Despite his desire for Cape Town to bring him the male-male intimacy that he craves, his own prejudice limits the experiences he can have. Sonnekus (2013:32) explains that the scene 'is rife with anxiety as [François] resorts to copious amounts of alcohol in order to curb the space's emphatic "Otherness"'. François's anxiety and isolation are now showing the signs of aggression as he lashes out at the coloured man who approaches him. Eventually, his intoxication and the loneliness he feels even in the gay nightclub lead him to call Christian to give him a ride back to his hotel.

In the following scene, Christian's differences from François are again highlighted. The two men stop at a diner once Christian picks him up from the nightclub, and François asks Christian if he ever goes out in Green Point with its many gay nightclubs and bars. Christian says that he sometimes does, indicating that Christian might be same-sex attracted, and suggesting that he is not as confined by the restrictions of patriarchal heterosexist masculinity as François is. This revelation is compounded by the fact that earlier in the film, when François is stalking Christian at UCT, he witnesses Christian hugging and kissing the cheek of a dark-skinned, effeminate young man, exactly the kind of person François's group would have excluded in Bloemfontein. François stares keenly, the distance from the scene highlighted by his elevated position as he watches through the window of a high building nearby. In this scene, Christian represents the softening of the boundaries that plague François, boundaries of race, gender and sexuality which cause François so much anxiety. This scene of intimacy between Christian and the other man, in the light of day and surrounded by many other students, stands as a powerful contrast to the only place François is allowed to be physical with other men, namely the small, darkened room in Bloemfontein.

François's distance from the openness that Christian represents is shown more directly in the scene at the diner after Christian picks him up from the nightclub. Newspaper clippings with the headlines 'Free at last' and 'ANC unbanned' are pasted on the wall of the diner. François embarks on a diatribe about the failings of the African National Congress (ANC), blaming the post-apartheid government for the problems of the country. Falkof (2016:25; emphasis in original) holds that this reinforces François's

position of power as a white Afrikaner man, and informs the later sexual assault of Christian already hinted at through François's hostility to the man who flirts with him in the nightclub, as François 'does not stop inhabiting that half-hegemonic role but rather enacts his violence *from that position* so that it is in keeping with his subjectivity'. François's rage comes not only from the failure to find intimacy with Christian, but also from not having his assumed power and superiority recognised. The boundaries which supported François's seemingly failing power are no longer holding, and the result is explosive violence.

When they leave the diner, Christian goes into the hotel room with François, but will not kiss François when the older man makes advances on him. François lashes out in anger, mirroring earlier scenes of lashing out at his wife and daughter, and lashing out at the coloured man who propositions him. François now seems to abandon his quest for intimacy, returning to the domineering, cold character he was earlier. His obsession turns into violence when he realises that Christian will not reciprocate his feelings. He begins to beat Christian brutally and sexually assaults him. Interestingly, the scene of sexual violence begins to resemble the earlier scene of group sex. Now, François's room is darkened, with only a lamp illuminating the scene. The window, and the ocean beyond it, are now out of view, with the frame of the two opposite walls of the small hotel room seeming to box François and Christian in. Even though François sought something different in Cape Town, this moment demonstrates the destructive elements of his character and shows that intimacy is impossible for him. The implication is that he is unable to escape his controlling, repressive patriarchal masculinity.

The "beauty" which the protagonist had craved is tainted by his own hand, the face of Christian which so artfully graces the promotional material for the film left bloodied. Christian's face becomes hidden, just like the faces of those men in the group sex scene, as François turns Christian on his belly in preparation to rape him. Christian's exposed buttocks as François pulls down his pants highlight the impact of the violence; that body that once represented the possibility for intimacy and the allure of something forbidden now only shows vulnerability in the face of violent rage. François is unable to get an erection in the scene, frantically masturbating as he faces Christian's exposed buttocks, frustration building in his expression. He ultimately abandons his sexual assault, looking resigned as he sits on the bed next to Christian who is squirming in shock and pain. Again, the two figures are framed by the walls of the darkened room, François with his expression of longing and failure, and Christian, a look of horror on his face as he stays frozen in the vulnerable position. The moment amplifies the broken, destructive character of François. He has betrayed and violated Christian, never achieving the intimacy which he craved. As Sonnekus (2013:30; emphasis in original)

explains, 'his pursuit of Christian [...] could have been nothing but circuitous and voyeuristic, since an explicit admission of attraction will, *and does*, end tragically'. There was never the possibility for genuine intimacy for François; his identity and the boundaries he inhabits make this impossible. Only obsession and distant longing are possible. François's impotence in the moment of rape demonstrates his inability to transcend the barriers of his repression, never able to fully possess the body of Christian. Violence is the logical conclusion of François's character; he could never be a "*moffie*" (read: feminine) by allowing himself to be rejected or allowing his desires to be unsatisfied without asserting his power in retaliation.

In the next scenes, François is seen returning to his life in Bloemfontein. He returns to work and goes about his days, seemingly unaffected by what he has done. However, he receives a phone call that visibly unsettles him, and he withdraws money from the bank and sits in a restaurant alone at the end of the film. The assumption is that Christian is blackmailing him in exchange for staying silent about the sexual assault. The film ends with François staring at two young men at the restaurant, laughing with each other, and finally sharing a kiss, a scene of the type of male-male intimacy François will never have, and reflecting everything that Cape Town represented to him but which François was unable to find there. François's face is expressionless as he watches the two young men with their carefree laughter. Again, like Christian in the opening scene of the film, the young men notice him staring, and he averts his eyes. The separateness he inhabits, the boundaries placed on his desires both by himself and by his culture, consume him, and as he drives away with the same blank stare, going down a circular ramp that represents the 'circuitous' (Sonnekus 2013:30) nature of his attraction to Christian, the film ends.

In many ways, the film can be read as a story of the fissures in post-apartheid South Africa and the construction of a hegemonic Afrikaner identity based on hostility to otherness. Sonnekus (2013:30) holds that 'if blackness and gayness exist to define hegemonic Afrikaner masculinity through 'difference', then homophobia and racism become displays or visible performances of this gendered construct'. The film offers a vital and complex view of South African queer realities by portraying repression and silencing of a subset of queer people, and shows how repression and cultural factors can inform hostilities and violence. It plays an important role in post-apartheid queer cinema, expanding the forms of representation and challenging restrictive cultural constructions. While François is unable to find intimacy in a very different South Africa than he grew up in, the image of the young same-sex couple at the end, able to share an intimate moment in public, alludes to a changing culture which can emerge despite the oppressive patriarchy and hostile repression which François represents.

Notes

1. The term “queer” is used in this paper to refer to individuals who are part of sexual and gender minority groups, or those with non-normative gender expressions and same-sex sexual behaviours, desires and identities. Annamarie Jagose (1996:1) shows that the term is used in multiple ways, both as a political movement against oppressive heteronormativity, and as a category of identity or desire to include those with same-sex sexualities or non-normative gender expressions, who fit into or transcend traditional gay and lesbian studies (Jagose 1996:5). While this paper sees François in *Skoonheid* as reinforcing patriarchal and racist ideologies, the film is still seen as portraying queer themes in demonstrating François’s repressed same-sex sexuality, and thereby deconstructing the rigid culturally-defined masculinity of François and other men in the text. “Queer film” in this paper refers to film primarily depicting queer characters, as well as demonstrating expressions or suggestions of same-sex desire as a sustained or central focus.
2. While Botha (2012:56) traces moments that could be read as queer in many apartheid-era films and Ricardo Peach (2005) lists many Afrikaans-language films that portray moments that can be read as queer, these portrayals predominantly involved men cross-dressing in ways that were intended for humour, and almost never offered the space for sensitive, authentic portrayals of queer identities (Tohlang 2012:35-36). A few notable exceptions exist, like the film *Quest for Love* (1988) by Helen Nogueira, which depicts the story of a lesbian relationship in a fictional country resembling South Africa and Mozambique.
3. Of the twenty-two non-documentary films released by major studios in 2016, fourteen were presented either primarily or at least partially in Afrikaans (with all of these films starring almost exclusively white Afrikaans-speaking actors), and six of the mainly Afrikaans films were listed as romances. In addition, there is a healthy Afrikaans independent film industry in the country. However, in 2017, there seemed to be a shift in representation. Of the eight South African films that were among the top 100 financial performers in South African cinemas, five were Afrikaans films, but the representations were much more diverse than in previous years. Films like *Krotoa* and *Vaselinetjie* gained large audiences and represented politically-conscious Afrikaans films. The top performing South African film in 2017 was *Keeping Up with the Kandasamys*, an Indian-South African comedy film (South Africa [Entire Region] Yearly Box Office 2018:[sp]). This might indicate that trends in consumption and production of film media are changing in the country.
4. Racial and cultural identity are extremely complex and controversial subjects in South Africa. The descriptor “white Afrikaans-speaking people” will be used most often in this paper rather than the term “Afrikaner,” which, while widely used, is often associated with conservative and exclusive political, religious and cultural beliefs and practices, and which many white Afrikaans-speaking people do not identify with, while people of colour might still see themselves as identifying with the label “Afrikaner” (Broodryk 2016:4-5). The term “Afrikaner” will be used with caution where it refers specifically to the ideological aspects that underpin a unifying identity, particularly under apartheid, that relies on conservative and narrow constructions of gender, race and sexuality.
5. There are of course films which look critically at white Afrikaner identity, such as Jason Xenopoulos’s *Promised Land* (2002) and Ian Gabriel’s *Forgiveness* (2004). Broodryk (2016:3) also notes that Afrikaans comedies like *Kaalgat Tussen Die Daisies [Naked Amongst the Daisies]* (1994) by Koos Roets managed to be subversive in mocking religious hypocrisy, but that ‘the form of its mockery – vulgarity and scatology – lack political purpose and permanence’.
6. Jesse Arsenault (2013:52-53) notes that the fact that the characters die off screen indicates that the political significance of their plight lives on.

7. See Tohlang (2013) for an explanation of how heterosexism is reinforced through various forms of 'media pedagogy', a useful concept in the context of my argument since counter-narratives to hegemonic heterosexism, like these queer-focused films, can voice marginalised or repressed realities and offer more diverse media pedagogies. Tohlang (2013:5) argues that 'mass media has been a reinforcer of the oppression of [...] queer identities, [and] film is that medium which [...] queer communities have utilised as a space to resist and counter those oppressive forces'.
8. This function of queer cinema also highlights the importance of increasing the representation of black queer realities, especially rural or township-based black queer realities. As Xavier Livermon (2012:301) explains, 'The recent high-profile cases of rapes, beatings, and murders of black lesbians combined with other forms of homophobic violence experienced by black township-based queers further archives the high level of resistance to black queer visibilities in specifically black cultural and political contexts'. The recent film *Inxeba (The Wound)* (2017), dealing with queer characters who take part in Xhosa initiation rituals, offers a rare look into queer black lives that could lead to greater social awareness. The fact that this film was given an X18 rating after appeals by the Congress of Traditional Leaders and others, effectively banning it from mainstream cinemas, speaks to how contested these representations are.
9. As the outline of Afrikaans-language films in this study shows, it is hard to read guilt in either Hermanus's film or in the vast majority of contemporary Afrikaans-language films. Hermanus's statement thus might offer insight into another form of repression, the repression of culpability or complicity in the system of racial and economic exploitation that was apartheid. Afrikaans-speaking people confront the reality that the language itself is associated with domination and control (Coombes 2003:25), and as Dlamini (2010:136) notes, the word apartheid, which has 'so seared itself on the global imagination that it requires no translation', is itself an Afrikaans word, signifying the impact of the language on the conservative politics of the country's past.
10. The Green Point gay scene has itself been the subject of much controversy, and thus it is not presented as unproblematically accepting in the film. In 2003, constitutional law professor Pierre de Vos and his partner at the time, Marcus Pillay, were assaulted outside of the Sliver nightclub after Pillay, a "coloured" man, was denied access to the club. The resultant case was brought to the then-newly established Equality Court, and in the settlement the club freely admitted to policies of racial discrimination (Tucker 2008:186).

REFERENCES

- Arsenault, J. 2013. Queer desire and the men of the nation: reading race, masculinity, and South African national identity in John Greyson's *Proteus*. *Safundi* 14(1):37-58.
- Botha, M. 2012. *South African cinema 1896–2010*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Broodryk, C. 2016. Absences, exclusivities and utopias: Afrikaans film as a cinema of political impotence 1994-2014. DPhil Dissertation, University of Cape Town, Cape Town.
- Burnett, C. 2014. When granny went on the Internet: the screenplay and the search for content and tone in South African screenwriting. MA Dissertation, University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, Durban.

- Coombes, AE. 2003. *History after apartheid: visual culture and public memory in a democratic South Africa*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Derrida, J. 1985. Racism's last word. Translated by P Kamuf. *Critical Inquiry* 12(1):290-299.
- Dlamini, J. 2010. *Native nostalgia*. Johannesburg: Jacana Media.
- Dyer, R. 1993. *The matter of images: essays on representation*. New York: Routledge.
- Falkof, N. 2016. ENG/AFR: white masculinity in two contemporary South African films. *Critical Arts* 30(1):15-30.
- Gabriel, I (dir). 2004. *Forgiveness*. [Film]. Giant Films.
- Greyson, J (dir). 2003. *Proteus*. [Film]. Pluck Productions.
- Hermanus, O (dir). 2011. *Skoonheid [Beauty]*. [Film]. Swift Productions.
- Hermanus, O. 2012. Director's Note. *Skoonheid* Promotional Material: Nederlandse Release. [O]. Available: https://cinemien.nl/downloads/movie/11174/6277_persmap.pdf Accessed 20 March 2018.
- Herzfeld, M. 1997. *Cultural intimacy: Social poetics in the nation state*. London: Psychology Press.
- Hood, G (dir). 2005. *Tsotsi*. [Film]. Industrial Development Corporation of South Africa.
- Jagose, A. 1996. *Queer theory: an introduction*. New York: New York University Press.
- Jamal, A. 2005. *Predicaments of culture in South Africa*. Pretoria: University of South Africa Press.
- Livermon, X. 2012. Queer(y)ing Freedom: Black Queer Visibilities in Postapartheid South Africa. *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 18(2-3):297-323.
- Luirink, B. 2000. *Moffies: gay and lesbian life in Southern Africa*. Cape Town: David Philip Publishers.
- Mulvey, L. 1975. Visual pleasure and narrative cinema. *Screen* 16(3):6-18.
- Nogueira, H (dir). 1988. *Quest for Love*. [Film]. Distant Horizon.
- O'Shaughnessy, M. 2010. French cinema and the political. *Studies in French Cinema* 10(1):39-56.

- Peach, R. 2005. Queer cinema as fifth cinema in South Africa and Australia. DPhil Dissertation, University of Technology, Sydney, Sydney.
- Pieterse, J. 2013. Dictionaries and discourses of deviance: Changing lexical representations of 'moffie' and the reorganisation of sexual categories among Afrikaans speakers during the second half of the twentieth century. *South African Historical Journal* 65(4):618-637.
- Pisters, P. 2010. Violence and laughter: Paradoxes of nomadic thought in postcolonial cinema, in *Deleuze and the Postcolonial*, edited by S Bignall & P Patton. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press:202-219.
- Roets, K (dir). 1997. *Kaalgat Tussen die Daisies*. [Film]. C-Films.
- Roodt, D (dir). 2004. *Yesterday*. [Film]. Distant Horizon.
- Sarif, S (dir). 2009. *The World Unseen*. [Film]. Enlightenment Productions.
- South Africa (Entire Region) Yearly Box Office. 2018. [O]. Available: <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/intl/southafrica/yearly/> Accessed 20 March 2018.
- Sonnekus, T. 2013. 'We're not faggots!': masculinity, homosexuality and the representation of Afrikaner men who have sex with men in the film *Skoonheid* and online. *South African Review of Sociology* 44(1):22-39.
- Spivak, GC. 1988. Can the subaltern speak? In *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, edited by C Nelson & L Grossberg. Basingstoke: Macmillan Education:271-313.
- Stewart, C (dir). 2015. *While You Weren't Looking*. [Film]. Phat Free Films.
- Tohlang, SF. 2012. Documenting gay identity through the cinematic lens: An investigation of representations of South African gay identities through film. MA Dissertation, University of Cape Town, Cape Town.
- Treffry Goatley, A. 2010. The representation and mediation of national identity in the production of post-apartheid, South African cinema. DPhil Dissertation, University of Cape Town, Cape Town.
- Trengove, J (dir). 2017. *Inxeba (The Wound)*. [Film]. Urucu Media.
- Tucker, A. 2008. Framing exclusion in Cape Town's gay village: The discursive and material perpetration of inequitable queer subjects. *Area* 41(2):186-197.
- Xenopoulos, J (dir). 2002. *Promised Land*. [Film]. Film Afrika Worldwide.