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# "We're not faggots!": Masculinity, homosexuality and the representation of Afrikaner men who have sex with men in the film *Skoonheid* (*Beauty*).



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# "We're not faggots!": masculinity, homosexuality and the representation of Afrikaner men who have sex with men in the film *Skoonheid* (*Beauty*).[1]

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In 2011, *Skoonheid* became the first Afrikaans film screened at the Cannes Film Festival, and also a significant 'critical commentator' about some enduring qualities of traditional Afrikaner masculinity (Crous 2006). This paper employs the film to explore how this gender construct expels homosexuality from its self-definition. At the centre of the film's portrayal of homosexual desire is a man, Francois van Heerden, who is a far cry from the upwardly mobile, urban gay man, which arguably constitutes 'gayness' in the heterosexual imaginary (Sonnekus 2009: 42).

Francois is, in fact, not stereotypically gay, but rather archaically 'Afrikaans'. His rural, ascetic existence, heterosexual marriage, and 'upright godly morality' present an all too recognisable image of hegemonic Afrikaner masculinity (Mail

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[1] This paper was originally presented at the *Work/Force: South African Masculinities in the Media* conference at Stellenbosch University, 13–14 September 2012. A more comprehensive research article, which includes an exploration of Afrikaner men who have sex with men and online communities, is available:
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.

[2] Theo is a scholarship holder with the Graduate School in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Stellenbosch University. He is undertaking a PhD in Visual Studies on the topic of nostalgic and parodic representations of Afrikaner ethnicity and speculates on whether such images form part of the global fascination with historicity and retro chic in youth culture.

& Guardian, 5 Aug. 2011). Therefore, the film does not represent 'out' Afrikaners, but rather illuminates a deliberately hidden, or 'closeted', group of Afrikaner men who have sex with men.

Accordingly, *Skoonheid* lends itself to the representation of men who enjoy gay sex, but in no way transcend their already established heterosexual personas. The film's director, Oliver Hermanus, was inspired to make this film after discovering newspaper classifieds for 'sex clubs' that facilitate the meeting of married, 'straight' men with other married, 'straight' men (Sunday Times Lifestyle, 14 Aug. 2011; Mail & Guardian, 15 Jul. 2011). In conversation with Lin Sampson from the Sunday Times, Hermanus states

> The starting point for me was discovering these clubs in the Free State and Durbanville where men would meet to have sex with one another. You have to be married, kissing on the mouth is prohibited and you must be white … I couldn't go to them because I am coloured. It interested me that, in my own country, my race stops me at the door. (Sunday Times Lifestyle, 14 Aug. 2011).

In the film's most telling scene, Francois meets several other white, Afrikaner men at a secluded farmhouse to have sex. The men's reaction to the introduction of a young, coloured man to the group, however, reveals the conflicted sexuality that these men simultaneously possess and disavow: Before having sex, their conversation is interrupted by the arrival of a bearded, white man and a coloured youth, meant to join in their hedonism. Almost immediately the lines between 'invited' and 'uninvited' are drawn as the coloured boy is expelled. Thereafter, Francois and the other men confront their pal about his 'different' companion, and reject him as well.

This scene is significant, because it is indicative of the manner in which Afrikaner MSM 'lock themselves into a given identity [, thereby creating] a communal identity of sameness achieved through the elimination of' the Other (Du Plessis 2006: 35). Yet, the nature of this 'identity' is not novel or without existing, engrained ideological bases. In other words, it recycles an outmoded

version of Afrikaner masculinity that harkens back to apartheid's project of maintaining absolute binaries (Stobie 2008: 71; Du Pisanie 2001: 172):

> The typification of the Other has a determining influence on individuals' definition of the Self and their behaviour. By defining the Other's role beforehand, the individual takes on a predefined role … The fragmentation of the Self into certain typical roles explains how Afrikaners could call themselves Christians [or comparatively heteronormative], in one role, but still regard themselves as superior to black people in another role [or engage in gay sex]. (Fourie 2008: 246)

In fact, the duplicity of Francois and the other men's sense of Self is highlighted at two levels. The coloured boy's racial and sexual identities coalesce to present an even greater threat to their controlled, compartmental notion of sexuality. For these men, gay sex is more illicit when it transgresses not one, but two taboos. In other words, the coloured boy's Otherness affronts these men by confronting them with a dual dose of deviance.

This is emblematic of black homosexuals in terms of being twice removed from the 'standards' of white heteropatriarchy: they are too gay and too black (Sonnekus & Van Eeden 2009: 95). Despite their evident hypocrisy, these men still attempt to revive the 'moral superiority' attributed to white men under apartheid – an imagined authority that allows them to define certain individuals, or individual acts, as abominable (Du Pisanie 2001:165, 169).

The men's disgust at the mere thought of interracial sex therefore recalls pre-liberation Afrikaner ideologies and its puritanical ideals. The notion that whiteness could be soiled by blackness comes to mind as the 'divinity', 'light' and 'goodness' of Afrikanerdom is again juxtaposed with the assumed 'heresy', 'darkness' and 'evil' of Other races (Dyer 2002: 127; Pieterse 1992: 128). Yet, the coloured boy's expulsion from the 'club' does little to appease Francois' enduring sentiment of homosexuality as akin to sin and 'impurity'. The viewer encounters him in various scenes voraciously washing his hands and face, taking showers,

rinsing his mouth with water, brushing his teeth and cleaning a foul swimming pool (Crous 2011: 2).

Indeed, the connotation the word *skoonheid* has to 'cleanliness' in Afrikaans is unfortunately lost in its English translation as 'beauty'. Nonetheless, the 'degenerated but socially binding descendent, which could value "cleanliness", is strongly present in *Skoonheid'* (5 Aug. 2011). The rigidly moral ideals that developed with the Dutch Reformed Church and Afrikaner nationalism can therefore be viewed as still reverberating in particular masculine expressions (Du Pisanie 2001: 158; Mail & Guardian, 5 Aug. 2011).

Considering that this also suggests a degree of repression, one can infer that Afrikaner MSM may be attempting to 'resurrect a core aspect of their essential selves that was buried as a result of conscious or unconscious consequences of stigmatisation' (Malcolm 2000: 267). Sadly, such 'resurrections' sometimes result not only in self-flagellation or internalised homophobia (Malcolm 2000: 267), but also violent, externalised homophobia.

In other words, if blackness and homosexuality exist to define hegemonic Afrikaner masculinity through 'difference', then homophobia and racism become performances thereof (Du Plessis 2006: 27; Connell 1992: 736). The economic and political 'emasculation' of white men in the New South Africa has arguably prompted increased instances of domestic abuse, rape and homophobia as some men attempt to reclaim lost power in a postapartheid world (Van der Watt 2005: 127; Walker 2005: 226-228; Du Pisanie 2001: 171).

An anecdote about Francois' object of affection, Christian, being involved in a physical altercation with a young man that may or may not have propositioned him, makes him sneer: 'You never know with these faggots. They get away with a lot these days' [translated from Afrikaans; emphasis added]. This scene gives expression to the disillusionment possibly shared by men who formerly bent the South African landscape to their will. Yet, as he secretly watches Christian affectionately interacting with a coloured, male student on campus, his endearment speaks not only of adoration for the boy, but also admiration.

He could never breach the invisible, ideological walls behind which homosexuality and blackness lie. His pursuit of Christian (as he travels from Bloemfontein to Cape Town) is therefore circuitous and voyeuristic, and ultimately ends tragically: Francois violently rapes Christian in his hotel room after his sexual advances are rejected. Through this act, he rids himself of vulnerability and reasserts his masculine power at the expense of destroying the 'beauty' he so coveted. Crossing borders is one of *Skoonheid*'s central themes. Metaphorically, Francois' besotted pursuit of Christian signals a departure from his shameful trysts with other men. He also morally crosses 'the line' by raping Christian as retribution for the humiliation he experiences when his affections are not returned.

For the purposes of this paper, the shifts in geographical space and place are of central concern. They reveal the untenable situation of MSM who are alienated from the 'culture' that surrounds commodified, male homosexuality. Through the itinerant pursuit of Christian, *Skoonheid* juxtaposes the tedium and routine heteronormativity of Francois' Bloemfontein (emphasised by slow, patient cinematography) with the cosmopolitan and gay spaces of Cape Town.

Yet, it is Francois' awkwardness in the latter that emphasises the major role that territories or 'comfort zones' play in the construction and maintenance of cultural identity (Du Plessis 2006: 30). The scene in which Francois enters Bronx, a once popular, now defunct gay nightclub in De Waterkant's gay village, is rife with anxiety. Francois manages to build up some Dutch courage, but it is soon deflated and replaced by hostility when an effeminate, coloured man flirts with him. The 'Otherness' of the space, it seems, has delivered its coup de grâce.

It is now Francois who is the 'outsider', in much the same way that the coloured boy, refused participation in the orgy, was marginalised because of his perceived homosexuality. The space facilitates this shift in power, since it relegates heteronormativity to a vulnerable position by inverting the dichotomies of minority/majority and uninvited/invited (Sonnekus 2010: 196). The social reality, however, is that gay spaces are few and far between. Spaces and places are

assumed to be 'always already' heterosexual, because of the sheer ubiquity of heteronormative culture.

Therefore, 'closeted' MSM mostly steer clear of streamlined 'homosexuality' because of the belief that 'even the most masculine gay man's homosexuality denies him the ability to truly achieve the power inherent in [patriarchy]… because he will always be marginalised simply because he is not heterosexual' [emphasis added] (Clarkson 2006: 203). In other words, the threat that 'out' homosexual men present also extends to the spaces, media and commodities that are typically conceived of as defining their homosexuality (Du Plessis 2006: 30; Sonnekus 2007; Sonnekus & Van Eeden 2009).

By maintaining a public image of normative heterosexuality, MSM seem to be having their proverbial cake and eating it too, because they 'enjoy the general advantages' of traditional heteropatriarchy while secretly sating their appetite for gay sex (Connell 1992: 737). Yet, the irreconcilability of homosexual feelings with culturally embedded ideals of Afrikaner masculinity, must present an untenable situation for some MSM. Many still uphold the notion that a stable heterosexual relationship is the only viable option for living a happy, healthy life, while others believe the myth that marriage to a woman 'cures' homosexuality (Du Pisanie 2001: 163; Crous 2006: 50; Smith 2009: 418).

Therefore, the disconnections between 'being' straight and 'acting' gay find expression in extraordinary levels of homophobia, deception and repression (Malcolm 2000: 293). For closeted MSM, their refusal to identify as homosexual; negative perceptions of homosexuality; poor levels of comfort with gay people; and moral or religious objections to homosexuality all negatively impact on their social and sexual lives. Alcohol and drug abuse; low self-esteem; risky sexual behaviour and a high rate of HIV infection have all been reported as social dilemmas affecting these men (Williamson 2000: 100-101; Smith 2009: 418).

Ultimately, this paper has illustrated that acts of homosexuality are sometimes incorporated by conventional, Afrikaner masculinities, provided that they in no discernible way connect with 'homosexuality'. Finally, Francois fails to wholly

conform to either Afrikaner heteropatriarch or gay man, which sends him spiralling into self-loathing, shame and pathos.

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