



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

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

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

## Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### ***Skoonheid's* slow image**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### ***Alienation and incommunicability***

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

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

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

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

### ***Self-loathing existence***

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

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

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

### ***Queer sex***

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

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

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

## Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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## Notes

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

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