



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

Danel Boshoff & Annemi Conradie

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

Introduction

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

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

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17159/tl.v60i1.14099>

DATES:

Submitted: 9 June 2022; Accepted: 29 March 2023; Published: 23 May 2023

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

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

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

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

Afrikaner nationalism, gender, and Afrikaans-language films

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

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

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

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

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

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

Gender performativity and hegemonic Afrikaner masculinity

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Performative masculinities in *Die stropers*

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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



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

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

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



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



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



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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Conclusion

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

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

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

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

Acknowledgement

This article is based on the MA thesis “Homomasculine performativity and the legitimisation of hegemonic Afrikaner ideals in Oliver Hermanus’s *Skoonheid* (2011) and Etienne Kallos’s *Die stropers* (2019)”, completed under the supervision of Dr. Annemi Conradie-Chetty at the North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa. The degree was awarded on 21 June 2022.

Notes

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

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