# Challenging the Mythical Boer Hero Archetype in Anglo-Boer War Short Films

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## Abstract

According to Roland Barthes, archetypical myths and folktales were used in the past to order chaos and gain insight into life. At present, it is mostly the media that represent certain ideologies and therefore directly or indirectly "give an insight" into the lives of the citizens of that society. Therefore, this article will focus on the role of the archetypical representation of the hero archetype in short films; and how this ideological representation "gives one an insight" into the society in which these films were created. The case studies selected for this article are three short films set against the backdrop of the Anglo-Boer War: *Commando* (2009), *Bloedson* (2013) and *Adventures of the Boer War* (2011–2014). The author uses narrative analysis combined with open-ended interviews conducted with the creators of the selected short films to analyse their intention to construct the hero archetype in a specific way. At the end of the article her argument is that these three case studies use avant-garde techniques to challenge the traditional way that the Boer hero is represented in Anglo-Boer War films. Through representing this archetypical hero in a different way, the filmmakers are demonstrating to us how South-African society has changed since the fall of Apartheid, although one does see in popular culture that some white Afrikaner are still yearning for their so-called "age of innocence".

**Keywords**: representation, ideology, South Africa, Boer, war, zombie, historical film

**Introduction**

> "*Pictures, as history, are exceptionally effective because, although words lie flat and dormant to some readers, it is difficult to miss messages carried in a motion picture*"
> Browne, 1983, p. vi

Film, and more generally narrative, plays a fundamental role in the creation, dispersal and negotiation of ideological meaning between the filmmaker and the audience. This could especially be witnessed in the films produced in the 1960's and the 1970's in South Africa, because most of these films were made with either a pro- or an anti-apartheid stance (Tomaselli, 2013). In the 1960's, seven feature films set in the time period of the Anglo-Boer War[1] were released (Le Roux & Fourie, 1982, p. 71). Also known as the South African War, this armed conflict between the British Empire and the Boers[2] from the Transvaal and the Orange Free State occurred from 1899 to 1902 (Pretorius, 2009a, p. 2). But why did so many filmmakers choose to portray the Anglo-Boer War instead of other historical events in the Afrikaner's history?

The answer to this question might be traced to the roots of the South African film industry. The first South African "talkie" (films that made use of dialogue), *Sarie Marais* (1931) narrates the story of a Boer prisoner of war during the Anglo-Boer War (Jooste, 2013, p. 16). More than ten years later, the "strong and courageous Boer" became the figurehead of the myth of white Afrikaner identity and later the cornerstone for the Afrikaner Nationalist ideology from the late 1930s until the end of Apartheid (Jansen van Vuuren, 2014). One of the key reasons for this emerging myth was the Boer republics' struggle for freedom and independence from the British. This struggle in turn was used in white Nationalist propaganda as a metaphor for their struggle to preserve the national identity of the white Afrikaner people in South Africa as a whole (Pretorius, 2009, p. 4).

Therefore, starting with *Sarie Marais* (1931), followed by the film *Moedertjie* in from the same year, Afrikaans language films were used to propagate Afrikaner Nationalism (Jansen van Vuuren, 2014; Maingard, 2007). South Africa became a republic on 31 May 1961, and with this the white Afrikaans government managed to shed the shackles that bound them to "the antagonistic British Empire" to whom they had lost the war (Botha, 2012, p. 50). This was then the ideal time to celebrate their victory in gaining their independence (through gaining a republic) on film.

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[1]Worden (1998, p. 144) argues that the term South African War "is now acknowledged by historians as more accurately reflecting the fact that many other South Africans were caught up in the conflict." Pretorius (2009a, p. ix) explains that the "South African War" is a contemporary name that was adopted in the 1960's by British and English-speaking South African historians. Pretorius acknowledges that the term has merit as it describes where the war was fought, and it recognises that the entire South African population was affected by the war: "In the past, mistakenly, the war was seen as a clash that only involved the Boers and the British. Now we recognise that black people played an important part in this war and they were deeply affected by it." However, he criticises the term "South African War" for disregarding the involvement of Great Britain, "the party all historians now agree had a major share in causing the war" (Pretorius, 2009a, p. ix). There does not seem to be a single name for the war that is fully acceptable to the exclusion of all others, but for this article the author will use the term currently used by most South African scholars, that is the Anglo-Boer War.

[2]The ancestors of the *Voortrekkers* (the white settlers who moved from the Cape Colony from 1835 to 1845 as a rejection of the British policies) who established two Boer republics in the north of South Africa (Pretorius, 2009a, p. 2).

Botha (2012, p. 51) argues that the Nationalists also used film to visualise their ideal of "the true Afrikaner": "This idealistic conservatism was characterised by an attachment to the pastoral past, the ideals of linguistic and racial purity and to religious and moral norms. "In this time the South African film industry was producing musicals, adventure stories, comedies, wildlife and romantic war films whilst the country was experiencing a stormy socio-political era, "since the introduction of a regulated subsidy system in 1956, the Nationalist government and big business collaborated to manipulate local filmmaking. Ideology and capital came together to create a national cinema that would reflect South Africa during the Verwoerdian regime of the 1960s" (Botha, 2012, p. 51). According to Botha the government, under leadership of Hendrik Verwoerd, realised the potential of a white Afrikaans dominated industry to influence the growth and spread of the Afrikaans language and culture.

The filmmakers specifically used the Anglo-Boer War as the setting for their films, because the war is seen as the so-called "age of innocence" of the white Afrikaner (Krog, 2007). The Anglo-Boer War films of the 1960's and 1970's told stories of willing Boer Heroes fighting their counterparts in a very traditional storyline. Therefore, Afrikaner Nationalists used these films, at a time when Black Freedom Fighters and other opposition groupings led a struggle against the government to remind white Afrikaans people of the suffering their ancestors went through to protect their land in the Anglo-Boer War (Botha, 2012, p. 51). This reminds one of what an ideology can achieve: "Born in a context of suffering, it elevates certain ideals to an end that, in time, begins to exert an absolute attraction for people. It subtly draws a false image of reality before their eyes, an illusion from which images of ideological opponents are generated" (Lambrechts & Visagie, 2009, p. 76).

However, in 1994 South Africa became a democratic society and the white Afrikaans Nationalist Party was replaced by the ANC. This became a time when artists and filmmakers had more freedom to challenge the status quo (P. De Jager, personal communication, March 12, 2014). In 2012, *Verraaiers*, the first commercial feature film made about the Anglo-Boer War since the end of Apartheid, was released. In this film, the writer and producer, Sallas de Jager, and executive producer, Piet de Jager, openly challenged the myth of the pure and innocent Boer fighting for their land in a just manner.

In *Verraaiers* (2012), one of the protagonists, a Boer commander named Commandant van Aswegen, gets branded as a traitor after he signs a peace treaty to prevent his family being sent to a concentration camp. At the end of the film the Boers execute van Aswegen and his sons-in-law after being found guilty of treason (S. De Jager, personal communication, February 26, 2014). Scholars applauded the film for challenging the preconceived ideas about the Boer and cinematically redefining historical identities (Browne, 2013, p. 449). According to Nel (2010, p. 2), "generations of Afrikaners have developed myths to legitimise their identity and foster a sense of belonging in South Africa." Browne (2013, p. 450) explains that with *Verraaiers* the producers tried to reimagine that myth: "There appeared to be an attempt to unlock long-secured memory chests and reveal that which, for many Afrikaners, could be distasteful and awkward truths."

There have also been other films that challenged the traditional myth of the Boer Hero. Three of these will be the focus of the remaining article. The author used narrative analysis to deconstruct the overall mythical pattern of their stories. Stokes (2003, p. 67) states that narrative, among other things, "conveys the ideology of a culture." Therefore, analysing a film's narrative gives one an insight into the creators as well as the consumers of its content (Reid, 2008, p. 207). To test the findings of narrative analysis, interviews were conducted via

e-mail with the directors of *Commando*, *Adventures of the Boer War* and *Bloedson*. The author chose these films because apart from the fact that they are the only known short films within an Anglo-Boer War setting produced in post-1994 democratic South Africa; they all seemed to breakaway from the stereotypical portrayal of the Boer War Hero that audiences became used to between the period of the 1930's to the 1980's.

## Cinematically Redefining Historical Identities in Selected Anglo-Boer War Short Films

### *Commando*

*Commando* is a short film made by English South African Stephen de Villiers in 2007, as part of the MNET EDIT competition in which the pay-TV channel MNET awarded a select few film students a budget to produce a 17-minute film. The protagonist of the film is a young soldier, Deneys Reitz. Reitz, whose father was the state secretary of the Transvaal, enlisted for the war when he was 17 years old (Smuts, 1929, p. 1). He wrote a journal that would later become the base for the book *Commando* whilst in exile in Madagascar. In the words of Smuts[3] (1929, p. 2), "these memories were written in the intervals of malaria and transport riding."

The opening title of the film reads: "The following is inspired by true events" (*Commando,* 2008). In an e-mail to the author, De Villiers (personal communication, August 26, 2015) contextualises the film's opening statement by saying that although the film is strongly based on the events described in the book, he did take some poetic license when adapting the story to a screenplay. The film's exposition shows Reitz and three of his band of Boer brothers packing up camp. Reitz fetches something from the horses that are grazing a bit further on. When he returns, he witnesses two of his friends getting shot and killed by British soldiers (De Villiers, 2008).

De Villiers (personal communication, August 26, 2015) states that although brotherhood and the relationships men forge while at war were strong themes of the book, he found the parts of the story where Reitz was alone to be the most interesting material. Therefore he used these moments to create a narrative where the hero needed to undergo and overcome a number of mythic challenges. "His journey became one of separation and isolation. Only once he had overcome the challenges before him and received the gifts (elixir of the gods) would he be capable of reintegration as a more whole, authentic individual (S. De Villiers, personal communication, August 26, 2015).

These statements immediately draw to mind the works on mythology of Vladimir Propp, Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell. Joseph Campbell interpreted Jung's theories on psychological archetypes to establish his theory on Hero myths, "those myths that attribute inferred events to legendary or historical personages" (Segal, 1999, p. 33). Campbell also coined the term "monomyth" to explain narratives that display the same essential pattern in which the mythological hero departs on a journey, overcomes many obstacles, undergoes a supreme ordeal, and returns with a treasure or elixir (Campbell, 2008). Christopher Vogler appropriated the latter monomyth to form the Hero's Journey; a structural pattern that many screenwriters use in plotting their screenplays (Vogler, 2007, p. xxvii). De Villiers is one of these screenwriters, "I approached the story of the short film very much from a mythic or hero's journey perspective. I have read both Campbell and Vogler's seminal works on myth and it

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[3] Jan Smuts also led a Boer commando during the Anglo-Boer War. As leader of the South African Party he would later become a prominent South African and British Commonwealth statesman and prime minister of the Union of South Africa.

became something of my bible going into the writing and indeed production of Commando" (S. De Villiers, personal communication, August 26, 2015).

As constructing filmic stories on the mythic Hero's Journey model has become somewhat of a standard in screenwriting, this may lead the reader to ask why *Commando* would fit into a study of counter-narratives. It should be emphasised that De Villiers' *Commando*, with its theme of reconciliation, broke away from the previous Anglo-Boer War films where the narrative was mostly focused on a Boer Hero leading his group of men in fighting a war where only one could be the victor (Le Roux & Fourie, 1982).

*Commando* tells the story of Reitz wounding a British soldier, Vivian. Reitz shows the soldier mercy and Vivian repays the favour by giving him his jacket as a gift. During Reitz' darkest time in the film, when he is ill and without shelter during a storm, a mythical mentor figure finds him and nurses him back to health. The mentor appears to be a Zulu traditional healer or perhaps even a sangoma[4]. After his recovery, Reitz thanks the mentor. He replies to Reitz by quoting Aristotle, "The antidote to fifty enemies is one friend" (*Commando,* 2008). In these words, the mentor figure sums up the entire thematic premise of the film and breaks away from the stereotypical "hero-" and "shadow" archetypes one has come to identify with war films. De Villiers (personal communication, August 26, 2015) says that it was important for him to make the Aristotelean statement. At the time when he made the film, he was, in his own words, a "21-year-old left wing student with liberal humanist beliefs," who always found his own fascination with the war challenging. At the end of the film, the audience sees Lord Vivian, forty years later, visiting Reitz at the South African High Commission in London, to return Reitz' old gun that he left behind in the field with the wounded soldier (*Commando,* 2008).

De Villiers (personal communication, August 26, 2015) chose to portray the mentor character as a black sangoma, a choice he felt could be read as counter-hegemonic "in a society where race is such a distinctive factor". Deneys Reitz (2010, p. 182) wrote in his autobiography that whilst the commando was cornered on top of a hill with foul weather and British soldiers approaching, the group of men stumbled upon a hunchback living in a small shack. He led them down the hill on a secret path. De Villiers (personal communication, August 26, 2015) explains that when he read this part of the original book, the scene struck him as being dramatic and archetypical: "When drawing in the mythic energy of the scene, I could not help but visualize a mythical, mysterious "sangoma-esque" character  a character who defies convention."

According to De Villiers (personal communication, August 26, 2015), the mentor character is not *definitely* a sangoma: "He has traits of western influence, like wearing an old dilapidated top hat. This is a man who might have been educated at a university abroad, we do not know. The point is he could perhaps be counter-hegemonic on both fronts." The black "sangoma-esque" mentor end up the "elixir" in mythical terms for the hero, Reitz. The advice of a black character being regarded as the "treasure" for the white hero is not the type of situation one would previously have seen in an Anglo-Boer War film.

### Adventures of the Boer War
Kevin Kramer, the writer and director of the short films known collectively as *Adventures of the Boer War*, created these films when he was only fifteen years old. At the time he was in high school and busy studying the British colonial period. Kramer is North American and has no ancestral ties to the Anglo-Boer War. In an e-mail from Kramer he states that he loved Lego

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[4] Traditional African healers steeped in tribal ways and ancient wisdoms.

characters and just wanted to use them as characters in short films with a similar style as the American "*F-Troop*". The latter is a series from the sixties that was set at a desolated army post during the American civil war. The series relied on character-driven humor such as verbal and visual pranks as well as slapstick, burlesque and physical humor. (F Troop, IMDB 2003). When the author asked Kramer why he decided to set his films against the backdrop of the Anglo-Boer War, he merely replied: "It has never been done before," (K. Kramer, personal communication, Augustus 7, 2015).

The series *F-Troop* frequently changed and adapted historical facts, events and people to fit into their own comical stories. According to Kramer (personal communication, Augustus 7, 2015) he tried to use the same formula in his films. Therefore, in the opening title of his first film he already states: "The story taken place tells of the Past (sic). Its characters portrayed are fictional (sic). It deserves no place for hate (sic)," (*Adventures of the Boer War – Recruiting Tards,* 2011). It almost seems as if Kramer wanted to put a disclaimer at the beginning of his films, because he suspected a backlash about his satirical dance with history in the film.

Thus the author regards it as a good decision of the filmmaker to use Lego figures to tell his stories, as it fits the tongue-in cheek style of Kramer's films. It also adds a bit of a fantasy element to the characters. It is worth noting that he used Lego-animation for his films about four years before the Hollywood *Lego-movie* (IMDB 2014) popularized the use of these toy characters in films.

In his first films Kramer represent his main characters, who are mostly British soldiers, as idiots who get captured or caught out by the Boers. However, he does not really spare the Boers either. He mostly uses the Boer characters as anonymous sidekicks that serve as villains or enemies for the British. And in most of the storylines Kramer's purpose is to show how funny or naïve the characters' deeds are at times of war (*Adventures of the Boer War: Recruiting Tards; The Thing;* 2011).

Kramer (personal communication, Augustus 7, 2015) emphasizes that he only made these films for comical effect, and not to serve some form of propaganda. According to him he really tried to steer clear of true historical events: "*Yes, war is a horrible thing, but it happens in history, and whatever atrocities happened in that war I wanted to REALLY avoid and show a different side of a war not many people are familiar with. The show is literally a pop culture reference to something,*" (K. Kramer, personal communication, Augustus 7, 2015). Kramer did not explain in the e-mail what the "something" is that he is referring to in the former statement, however, as he already mentioned the satirical sitcom set during the 1860s Wild West, the author concludes that it is a popular culture reference to *F Troup* (1965–1967).

### *Bloedson*
*Bloedson* was one of the thirteen short films that were produced in 2013 as part of the talent development initiative of the *Silwerskermfees*; a local film festival hosted annually by the pay-TV channel, *Kyknet*. It is the first Zombie film that has ever been produced in the Afrikaans language (Pienaar, 2014).

Abercrombie and Longhurst (2007, p. 305) write that "texts are thought to represent some form of external reality more or less accurately." However, many audience members complained on

Kyknet's [5] website that the film *Bloedson* (2013) did not give an accurate portrayal of the "conservative", "loyal" and "religious" Afrikaner (Pienaar, 2014). In the latter horror apocalypse film, Boers fighting in the war turned into zombies.

The film's narrative centres on two brothers who are fighting on different sides of the war. Dirk, a *bittereinder*[6] Boer soldier is being chased by his older brother, Brink, a *hensopper*[7] and bounty hunter for the British. He turned against his fellow Boers when Dirk married the woman that he loved (*Bloedson,* 2013). The title literally means "Blood sun" and it refers to the sun witnessing all the blood that gets spilled; but not because of the "bloody war", as one would initially think, but rather because of the bloodthirsty zombies (*Bloedson*, 2013).

The filmmakers had a definite theme in mind and a goal, namely to break a pre-established myth. One of the directors, Albert Snyman (personal communication, May 4, 2015), explains that he has constantly been irritated with the way the Afrikaners have represented themselves. According to him the cultural grouping that calls themselves Afrikaners have inherited an image of how their ancestors looked like and behaved, "and beware if you try to cross or change that perception" (Snyman, personal communication, May 4, 2015). He feels that the later generations of this group do not have the right to decide how their ancestors behaved: "The Boer has become a mythical figure, almost like a zombie. There is this idea about them, and it feels like this idea is becoming more like a myth, whilst with all the Hollywood Zombie films, the myth of the zombie is becoming a lot more real" (Snyman, personal communication, May 4, 2015).

The opening scene of the film already grabs the attention of the viewers and makes them aware of the fact that the filmmakers intend to challenge this myth. Similarly to *Commando*, *Bloedson* is set up in a way that makes the viewer think that it will be just another traditional war tale. It opens with a traditional Boer funeral with the minister and small congregation singing the Afrikaans hymn *Nader my God* (Nearer to God). The suspense begins to build when the corpse twitches. The shocked minister leans over to look inside the coffin. He is then devoured by a flesh-eating zombie (*Bloedson*, 2013). From this moment forward, the role of the traditional antagonist in an Anglo-Boer War film told from an Afrikaner perspective (that is, the British Empire exemplified by the British soldier) has now been taken over by Boer Zombies that will attack *both* Boer and Brit (Pienaar, 2014). With this cinematographic trick, traditional loyalties are erased in the film.

Hall (1980, p. 171) argues that film codes or messages might be encoded or decoded in different ways depending on the filmmakers or the audience. He explains that a reader of a text may have a preferred understanding of that text depending on his/her own positioning on a certain topic or ideology (Hall, 1997, p. 172). In the case at hand, the general Afrikaans audience did not enjoy *Bloedson*. According to Snyman (personal communication, May 4, 2015), they received many messages from disturbed viewers in which they expressed their discontent with the film. One reviewer states that together with the Great Trek, the Dutch Reformed Church and the Border War, the Anglo-Boer War is one of the most deep-rooted phenomenon in the

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[5] Kyknet is the Afrikaans Pay TV channel on DSTV. Owned by Multichoice, it is currently the biggest commercial broadcaster in South Africa. Short films like Bloedson that are produced for the Silwerskerm film festival is usually broadcasted on Kyknet. Users usually comment online on the schedule, and their comments on the time of *Bloedson's* first screening, are the ones that Chris Pienaar (2014) refers to in his film review.
[6] A Boer soldier that fought until the "bitter end" of the Anglo-Boer War (when many of their fellow Boers had already surrendered).
[7] A derogatory term for a Boer soldier that surrendered. It literally refers to a man that puts his "hands-up".

Afrikaner psyche, and that challenging these historical parts of their identity is most likely to result in stirring up emotions:

> With Bloedson, the Anglo-Boer War, that holy cow of contemporary Afrikaans culture, upheld as the epitome of Afrikaner pride – is re-envisioned as a zombie apocalypse. The filmmakers question tradition, pride and its value in a contemporary society. Bloedson satirises Afrikaans culture and history like few other South African films dare to, with a blatant disregard for old-fashioned Afrikaans sentiment (Pienaar, 2014).

Although *Bloedson* is intent on mocking the horror genre and its conventions, it still contains the essential elements to make it a zombie film. Snyman (personal communication, May 4, 2015) explains that zombie films are usually more about how people react towards the half-dead creatures. The zombies are catalysts that invoke the survival instincts of the characters and test how they will react in extreme situations. It usually ends up with the characters turning against each other.

> I think the way that Afrikaners react towards each other in South Africa can be compared to a Zombie film. We never stand together, and we usually split into groups. Some run away and some blame the government, or any other party that they can point a finger to – instead of searching for the faults amongst ourselves (Snyman, personal communication, May 4, 2015).

Snyman states that the worst kind of Afrikaner are those that simulate ostriches by putting their heads in the sand and pretending that nothing is wrong, "so that they can continue to braai (barbecue) and watch rugby" (Snyman, personal communication, May 4, 2015). And he admits that, to his shame, he suspects he is also one of them. Here Snyman contextualises many scholars' viewpoint that the media not only construct and shape identities but also awaken audiences to new perspectives of themselves (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 2007, p. 177).

Media representations are also related to the power relations of a society (Wasserman, 2008, p. 247). By attacking the mythical image of the Boer, Snyman and his co-director, Louis Pretorius, were attacking one of the core beliefs many Afrikaners had of themselves. "*Bloedson* was a mockery of the idea that all Boers are perfect and that the myth of the Boer would drown or perish the moment it gets put in a modern context or setting, that is, faced with a Zombie, he would not survive" (Snyman, personal communication, May 4, 2015). Snyman himself seems to be the true example that even identity – that sense of self arrived at through a range of psychological, cultural and social processes – is subject to historical change:

> I am proud to be Afrikaans and from childhood I have been in love with the idea of the "Boers": real men that could trek across the mountains and carve a new world from rock. But now I am older and wiser and I know that image is not as perfect as the beautiful sketches that always used to hang on the wall of our school's history classroom (Snyman, personal communication, May 4, 2015).

Snyman dared to dismantle that image with this film.

**Conclusion: Counter-hegemonic Narratives for a New Era**

This article aimed to show that unconventional counter-narratives in short films can shift accepted ideological and historical identities. Where "living on a farm" used to be the material base for "Boer identity" in South Africa, the social grouping that speaks Afrikaans and subscribes to Afrikaner culture, has always represented the Boer-figure as a mythical hero. As ideological paradigms have always shaped the intellectual content of represented images, it seems that the Apartheid government tried to use these Anglo-Boer War films from the 1930's onwards to promote the Afrikaner Nationalism Ideology. However, even after South Africa became a democratic society it seems that Afrikaners still prefer to hold on to the idea of the mythical Boer Hero archetype that can represent their "age of innocence" – that time before Apartheid when they were still fighting for a cause that was just; their land, freedom and identity. This view connects with the main theories of mythology and the view that myth originates and functions to satisfy a need on the part of individuals or a community.

Although the Anglo-Boer War was used as the backdrop of many films that made use of the Boer myth when trying to construct an Afrikaner Nationalist identity, a small number of films made in the period following 1994 have tried to challenge that cultural construct; most notably films like the feature film *Verraaiers* (Traitors) and the short films *Commando*, *Bloedson* and *Adventures of the Boer War*.

Writer-director Stephen de Villiers' film *Commando* represents an episode in the life of the Boer soldier Deneys Reitz "more or less accurately," and he does deviate from the traditional representations by creating a story that is spurred on by the theme of reconciliation as well as a black mentor figure that literally voices the story statement "the antidote to fifty enemies is one friend."

The short films *Adventures of the Boer War* is not made from a Boer or British perspective, but rather from a North American satirical gaze that pokes fun at the various sides that fought against each other in the war. The director, Kevin Kramer, uses humour in his films to criticize war and the deeds it makes one do.

The Zombie horror film *Bloedson* literally slaughters the holy cows of the cultural grouping that are still associated with the myth of the traditional, heroic and pure Afrikaner by showing Boers turning into zombies and devouring each other. From the brief analysis and interviews with the filmmakers, it seems that if the media construct identities through the representation of "myths", these short films have paved a way for challenging these myths and redefining the Boer hero identity on film.

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