



# INTERVIEWS

# ENTREVISTAS





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## CINEMA OF EXPLORATION: IN CONVERSATION WITH OLIVER HERMANUS

by  
Chris Broodryk

Nearly a year after winning the so-called Queer Palm for his film *Skoonheid* (Afrikaans for “beauty”), South African writer-director Oliver Hermanus still gets excited talking about his critically acclaimed feature. I am grateful for being able to meet up with one of world cinema’s foremost filmmakers in Café Lola’s in Long Street, Cape Town, before he jets off on a three city press tour starting with London, moving on to Istanbul and finishing of in New York, where *Skoonheid* opened in May this year. Like Iranian filmmaker Asghar Farhadi, Hermanus is a singular voice in world cinema based on a major cinematic accomplishment. Early in our conversation about world cinema, South African cinema and the cinematic wonders of Hitchcock, the Dardennes and Haneke, he talks about the *Skoonheid* characters as if they’re family. He understands the relationship between characters, their bodies and their location, their environment. As it emerges throughout our conversation, nothing is more important to Hermanus than character.

*Skoonheid*’s narrative anchor is Francois (Deon Lotz), a middle-aged Afrikaner man who runs a timber mill in Bloemfontein. Married and with a daughter, Francois seems distanced from his existence, as if he’s not really part of this own world anymore, as evidenced by numerous scenes in the film. None of this comes as a surprise, as the film opens with an exquisite long shot that slowly

zooms in on twentysomething Christian (Charlie Keegan), only to cut to the holder of this gaze, Francois. Hermanus, a self proclaimed devotee of Hitchcock, here introduces the driving force and theme of the film that was also a favourite of the old master’s: obsession. Of all the guests at Francois’s daughter’s wedding, Francois’s gaze – and, in complicity, ours – seeks out Christian. Twenty years younger, filled with the energy of youth and with a full head of hair, Christian is the visual antithesis of the balding Francois, whose appearance and the way in which he carries himself have been eroded by advancing age and the mundane stressors of family life and parenting. Christian is beautiful and unattainable, a perfect focal point for the somewhat unhinged Francois.

The film details Francois’s participation in a lifestyle that is kept secret from his family and friends, all the while still participating in the culturally sanctioned rituals of manhood and masculinity such as drinking, watching sports and “braaiing” (barbecuing meat on an outdoor grill). By detailing Francois’s increasingly obsessive and irrational behaviour, the film culminates in a moment of extreme violence and in its aftermath denies the viewer the narrative safety of resolution and closure. *Skoonheid* is an unsettling film regardless of one’s familiarity with Afrikaner culture. Obsession and violation are universal.



## Notes on Film Style

Hermanus's film plays with tension and audience anticipation in a manner reminiscent of a British master of suspense. While editing *Scoonheid*, Hermanus, who cut the film alone, watched a lot of Hitchcock, paying close attention to how the director manipulated his camera. Hermanus describes the editing process as "a strange incubation period. It's you and this film, it's very stressful." Hitchcock provided some guidance<sup>2</sup>. "I like bad Hitchcock, like *Topaz*. He's good to watch for looking at the function of film, not form."

Referring to *Scoonheid's* opening scene, Hermanus comments how "the camera mustn't do too much thinking". If a "pan and zoom [can] provide point of view", then a filmmaker should stick to these tools. For Hermanus, a film must not come across as "too constructed"; by calling attention to its own artifice, it risks removing the viewer from the immersive cinematic experience altogether. "Consider [Welles's] *Touch of Evil*", he says. "Film students love deconstructing the camerawork in that film. But it's too constructed." While we're on Hitchcock, I refer to that filmmaker's infamous statement about actors being cattle. To this, Hermanus shakes his head. "Film directors are scared of actors. They don't know what to do with them." Any director has a vision that envelops the totality of the film, but it is the performances that resonate, and "the performance must be [in the actor's] eyes". Hermanus puts his money where his mouth is, often showing Francois in a series of close-ups, emphasising actor Deon Lotz's striking eyes while never coming across as indulgent. After all, *Scoonheid* is about the looking/gazing body as much as it is about the body looking/gazing. The character needs to inhabit a convincing diegetic space.

## Realism and Authenticity

For Hermanus, the sense of realism constructed by a film depends heavily on the authenticity of its character and his psychology. "I find it difficult to tell a story as an omniscient storyteller"; in his aim of psychological realism, he creates dramas driven by a single character. In the case of Francois, the main character "becomes aware of himself " and of what could happen "if Christian would reciprocate his feelings". Towards the end of the film, where other filmmakers would have opted for a more audience-friendly conclusion, Hermanus mentions how "Christian has become irrelevant to Francois, so he [Christian] has become irrelevant to me as well". This explains why his film denies the viewer a sense of consequence as far as Christian is concerned. Once Francois detaches himself from his object of obsession and seeing as this is exclusively Francois's story, it would not be justifiable to return to Christian's participation in Francois's life. In addition, Hermanus does not like to patronise his audience: "Film is a language and you have to understand the words". If it happens that you don't, it is not a suggestion of the viewer not 'getting' the meaning of an image or narrative event, but rather that the image or event stills needs to be engaged with. Hermanus emphasises that there is no right or wrong

in reading his films – "you don't own how your film is interpreted" – and refuses to fault any of the slightly negative readings of the film he has come across.

## "Men Having Sex With Men"

I ask him about other films labelled as queer cinema, particularly *Brokeback Mountain*, that invited a far less visceral audience reaction than his own film as far as I can tell. I comment that *Brokeback Mountain* was a safe queer film as it was a rather formulaic story told in a typical three-act structure. "But also," Hermanus adds, "the original story [by E. Annie Proulx's] twist was the appearance of the characters; her book is powerful because it is unconcerned with looks and appearances", whereas the film cast establishment hunks Heath Ledger and Jake Gyllenhaal in the film. "It was an economic decision." Hermanus's producers battled for local funding, lacking known talent, but it is to the film's benefit that one sees the characters, not the actors playing them.

Hermanus is somewhat puzzled by *Scoonheid's* label as gay film. While it holds that the film explores the male body as an entity of sex, power and violation, he warns that one must use caution in labelling it a "gay movie", much like it is not a film of gay bodies or characters. In fact, "for Francois, it's love", an experience characterised by an "electric affinity" for Christian. In broad terms, Francois's renewed awareness of not only his own body but also Christian's constitute an acute mid-life crisis where the body, its desires and lust stand central to the crisis. The body, so manifestly anchored in all facets of daily activity, now takes on an element of fantasy, as Hermanus explains it. Francois is supposed to "have the foresight that he is not going to get what he wants. The bubble will burst." Which brings us to the film's climax, a moment of explicit, explosive violence that demonstrates the impossibility of Francois's desires and fantasy. Francois "risks his own sense of self-identification. He reclaims some amount of power," says Hermanus, though "power" may be too strong a word. Does this misguided attempt at assertion change anything though? Francois returns to the routines of daily life in Bloemfontein. This is, Hermanus explains, exactly how someone would react who "has compartmentalised his life" and must return to it to maintain an impression of sanity. Considering the film's final shot, Hermanus visually conveys the idea that Francois will not be able to maintain this image forever.

## On Race and Place

*Scoonheid* speaks to certain South African ideas of race as associated with place. While Hermanus doesn't see Bloemfontein, where much of the film is set, as the quintessential Afrikaner habitat, he opted for this location as its rural-esque setting and atmosphere is so different from cosmopolitan and constantly moving Cape Town. "In Cape Town, the center of the city is populated by white people, and as you move out into the suburbs the city becomes more black. On the other hand, Bloemfontein is black at its city centre and becomes more white the further you

go from there." Hermanus is aware of race, although it is not a central theme to *Scoonheid*. During an all-male "sex club" meeting in a Bloemfontein farmhouse, the members – none of whom are familiar to each other outside of the context of the club – are angered by one them bringing in a young Cape Coloured (brown skinned) man to participate in the group sex. Through a series of slurs it is evident that the boy is not welcome. Also, bringing in that kind of stranger (someone who doesn't look like them) may threaten the club's secrecy. What if someone were to tell on them and expose these hypermasculine men as practicing homosexual intercourse? The Bloemfontein setting emphasises the Afrikaner-

ness of the event, inviting a perspective on the city not yet seen on film.

However, "setting the film in Bloemfontein was [also] out of curiosity", says Hermanus, for whom part of the creative process and pre-production research is locating a film "in a placing it somewhere outside of yourself". Weeks of location scouting around Bloemfontein resulted in the crew finding the perfect exteriors to showcase superficial domestic stability.

## Denouement

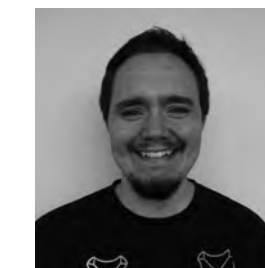
Overall, Hermanus seems unfazed by the film's success and takes its acclaim and awards in his stride. Not long into our conversation a stranger comes over to our table to congratulate him on yet another award, this one for outstanding achievement in South African film (SAFTA), and he shrugs it off – not out of arrogance or a grandiose sense of achievement, but because *Scoonheid* is part of a much larger South African cultural shift than any award could indicate. It is one of the notable world cinema releases of 2012.

As our discussion comes to an end, I cannot help but put to Hermanus the question that became the driving force in Bazin's writing on film: in light of all that has been said, what is cinema? Specifically, is it the art of the real? Hermanus shakes his head. "It is the art of telling stories with your camera", an experience that involves "a different psycho-cultural space." And if a film works for what it is, as *Scoonheid* certainly does, "you tend to 'mute' your surroundings". Indeed, after seeing *Scoonheid*, the ideas that were etched onto my mind had to do with Francois, naturally, as a powerful and paradoxically impotent demonstration of the body as cultural signifier, as enacted desire and as psycho-social prison.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The Afrikaner is a subsection of the Afrikaans speaking white population in South Africa. The term has many derogatory connotations, especially regarding the dominant role of the Afrikaner during South Africa's oppressive apartheid era, and is often understood to signify a loss of political power in the democratic South African cinescape. The term is also associated with various forms of repression, notably sexual oppression.

<sup>2</sup> Hermanus also expresses a debt to renowned South African photographer Roger Ballen whose work served as an inspiration for *Scoonheid's* images.



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Chris Broodryk lectures in Drama and Film Studies at the University of Pretoria, South Africa. He is interested in the intersections between psychology and cinema, as well as South African national cinema, Zizek's political thought and the failures of evangelical cinema. He recently contributed a chapter to 'Sacred Selves: essays on gender, religion and popular culture' and is working towards his PhD.

