The Mythical Boer Hero:
Deconstructing Ideology and Identity in Anglo-Boer War Films

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Abstract

In this paper the author deconstructs the role of the Hero character in a sample of South African- or Anglo-Boer War[1] case study films. The author argues that the Boer soldier, one of the prominent figures of White "Afrikaner" history, has been transformed into a mythical hero during the past century. The key question the author investigates is how the predominant historical myth of a community (in this case that of the White South African "Afrikaner") influence the narratives told by its popular culture. Starting with the first South African "talkie" film, *Sarie Marais*, the Boer hero-archetype has been used as a vehicle for ideological messages in an attempt to construct White Afrikaner identity from an Apartheid Nationalist Party perspective. Through investigating the various archetypical guises of the Boer Hero in the films *Die Kavaliers*, *Verraaiers*, and *Adventures of the Boer War* the author reflects on how the various case studies' historical contexts directly correlate with the filmmaker's representation of the hero. Therefore, the predominant ideology or the identity that the creator subscribes to directly influences the representation of the hero figure in the story.

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[1] Worden (1998: 144) states that the term South African War is more accurate than the term "Anglo-Boer War" in reflecting *"that many other South Africans were caught up in the conflict"*; whilst Pretorius (2009a: ix) argues that the former term was adopted in the 1960's by British and English-speaking South African historians that disregards the involvement of Great Britain, *"the party all historians now agree had a major share in causing the war"*. There does not seem to be consensus on the use of either the term "South African War" or "Anglo-Boer War", but as most South African and international scholars are currently using the term "Anglo-Boer War", the author has elected to use the latter term in this paper.

INTRODUCTION

The media, whether we speak of the old traditional media or the new social media, is concerned with the production and distribution of knowledge. As McQuail (2010) points out, this knowledge assists the audience in making sense of their social world: from certain historical events to the present society that surrounds them. The information, images and ideas communicated through the media are "maps of who we are" and "where we come from" and therefore serve a purpose of identity construction whilst orientating the audience towards the future (Abercrombie & Longhurst, 2007).

The idea of identity construction through media consumption of "who we are is affected by what we watch and listen to", has long been established by scholars such as Stuart Hall, Pierre Bourdieu, Elizabeth-Noelle Neumann, Douglas Kellner, Raymond Williams and countless others from the Global South who have not achieved as much academic fame as their peers from the Global North. Therefore this paper builds on these well publicised theoretical frameworks, whilst applying it to specific historical film case studies. In choosing to specifically study *historical films* as case studies, the author pays homage to predecessors such as Browne (1983, p. vi) who wrote that, of all media, the audiovisual is the most effective tool to create a concept of a specific history amongst users, because "although words lie flat and dormant to some readers, it is difficult to miss messages carried in a motion picture."

In discussing the myths and ideological presentation of the Boer hero archetype, one needs to first understand the term "Boer" (which literally translated to English means "farmer" and the historical and ideological connection to this film. The "Boers" (the protagonists of these selected case studies) were the founders of the two independent republics (The Transvaal and the Orange Free State) within the borders of the country that is now known as South Africa. They were the descendants of the *Voortrekkers* - white settlers from the Cape Colony who rejected British colonial rule and its policies. This resulted in "The Great Trek", a migration of these settlers (and their black workers) from the South to the North of the country, within the period of 1835 to 1845 (Pretorius, 2009). However, this paper is concerned more with the myths created around the Boers in popular culture, than with actual historical Boer figures.

The myths surrounding the "Boer Hero" already emerged within the time period of the Anglo-Boer War[2] itself, with authors such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1902, p. 1) drawing on the Boers' history to praise their prowess on the battle field:

> "Take a community of Dutchmen, of the type of those who defended themselves for fifty years against all the power of Spain, at a time when Spain was the greatest power in the world. Intermix with them a strain of those inflexible French Huguenots who gave up home and fortune and left their country for ever at the time of the revocation

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[2] The armed conflict between forces from the British Empire and the Boers occurred from 1899 to 1902. The Boers fought for the sovereignty of their two republics which was then known as the Transvaal and the Orange Free State. In the last couple of decades, local historians have tried to emphasise that although little has been written on the role of other indigenous groups in the war, they played an integral part in the conflict. As Pretorius (2009, p. ix) explains:*"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"*.

of the Edict of Nantes. The product must obviously be one of the most rugged, virile, unconquerable races ever seen upon earth."

Doyle does not hold back in the rest of description:

> "Take this formidable people and train them for seven generations in constant warfare against savage men and ferocious beasts, in circumstances under which no weakling could survive, place them so that they acquire exceptional skill with weapons and in horsemanship, give them a country which is eminently suited to the tactics of the huntsman, the marksman, and the rider. Then, finally, put a finer temper upon their military qualities by a dour fatalistic Old Testament religion and an ardent and consuming patriotism. Combine all these qualities and all these impulses in one individual, and you have the modern Boer-, the most formidable antagonist who ever crossed the path of Imperial Britain" (Doyle, 1902, p. 2).

Doyle's writing is a valuable definition one could use to read, analyse and decode the fictional representation of the Boer, as its portrayal in popular culture can be seen in a sense as the continuation or extension of the myths already created by the foreign media during the time of the actual Anglo-Boer War.[3] The Boer republics' struggle for freedom and independence from the British were revered by the rest of the world who had come to loathe the Empire and what it stood for – and this reverence can be seen in various European and North American newspapers at the time, depicting the Boer Nation as "David", standing up to its "Goliath" (KrugerHouseMuseum, 2015). It therefore illustrates Abercrombie & Longhurst (2007)'s definition of myths: Those narratives that reveal the "core aspects, understandings or assumptions" of a society or culture.

The "David and Goliath"-image that the media used to as an indexal semiotic representation of the Boer and Brit conflict, also reminds one of the works on mythology by 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 (2007, p. xxvii) appropriated the latter monomyth to form the Hero's Journey; a structural pattern that many screenwriters use in plotting their screenplays.

The author used a theoretical framework based on the works by the aforementioned authors on myths and archetypes for this paper. She used narrative textual analysis to interpret the overall mythical pattern and portrayal of the hero archetype in the case study films. (Stokes, 2003, p. 67) states that narrative "conveys the ideology of a culture". Therefore by analysing these films' narratives, it will give one an insight into the social and cultural context within which the filmmakers created these Anglo-Boer War films.

It is also imperative to note that although the author tried to remain as objective as can be possible within a semiotic narrative textual analysis, she is a White Afrikaans person or so-

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[3] For examples of these foreign media representations, one can visit the house museum of the then president of the Transvaal Republic, Paul Kruger, in Pretoria, South Africa (KrugerHouseMuseum, 2015).

called "Afrikaner" and as objective as she might try to be, the discourse on Afrikaner identity will influence the spectacles or frame from which she approaches this paper's analytical discussion.

The author selected case studies from a large body of films (created from 1931 to 2013) that portray the historical time period of the Anglo-Boer War. As the author subscribes to the view that the visual medium plays a fundamental role in the creation, dispersal and negotiation of ideological meaning between the filmmaker and the audience, her sample mainly consists of case studies that she could use to illustrate that the dominant interests or ideologies of a specific society have a profound influence on its films and drama series (albeit the filmmakers may choose to support or oppose it through their films).

The representation of the "traditional" mythical Boer Hero: A Historical context

Sarie Marais (1931)

The short film *Sarie Marais* (1931), is recorded by historians as being the first South African so-called "talkie"[4] (Maingard, 2007). *Sarie Marais* was made whilst the country was still a dominion of the British Empire, known as the "Union of South Africa" (Ross, 2002)[5]. It is also an important contextual factor that South Africa was under the rule of the Empire, precisely because the Boers lost the Anglo-Boer War - the same War that was now being represented in this short film.

The film narrates the story of a Boer prisoner of war, Jan, who writes a love letter to his girlfriend, Sarie. He tells her of his longing to return to her and his farm in the Transvaal. Then a British officer arrives with the news that a peace treaty has been signed and that the war is over. A joyous celebration follows and at the end of the film Jan manages to reunite with Sarie (Albrecht, 1931)[6].

Starting with *Sarie Marais* (1931), followed by the short *Moedertjie* in the same year, Afrikaans language films were used as part of a much larger campaign to propagate White Afrikaner Nationalism in South Africa (Jansen van Vuuren, 2014). Throughout this cultural campaign of the 1930's and 1940's, the myth of the "strong and courageous" Boer became the cornerstone of the South African Nationalist Party's construction of White Afrikaner Identity (Giliomee, 2003). The National Party's propaganda made fruitful use of the Anglo-Boer War, using this historical conflict as a metaphor for their struggle to preserve the national identity of the White Afrikaans people, and a justification for their Apartheid ideology (Pretorius, 2009, p. 4). Therefore the representation of the mythical Boer Hero in *Sarie Marais* clearly illustrate the argument that representations in films, similarly to other media, are also related to the power relations of a society.

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[4] A film that uses audible dialogue to tell the story. It is contrasted with a silent film that marked the first phase of cinema history.

[5] Historically it is worth noting that in the same year the Statute of Westminster got passed. This Bill gave the country sovereignty. Although the country was still regarded as being under the British crown, the UK could no longer make laws on behalf of them (Ross, 2002).

[6] See the author's Ph.D. thesis for a complete discussion of the film *Sarie Marais* (JansenVanVuuren, 2016).

It is also worth mentioning that in the same time period the German Nazi regime used the Anglo-Boer War, and more specifically, the Boer President Paul Kruger, for their own nationalistic purposes (Steinhoff, 1941). Director Hans Steinhoff created the film *Ohm Krüger* as Nazi propaganda by painting Queen Victoria, Winston Churchill and Joseph Chamberlain in a negative light (Van Nierop, 2016, p. 46). He also drew parallels between Paul Kruger and Adolf Hitler, which caused of a lot of controversy within South Arica in 1941. The censorship board made quite a few cuts and changes to *Ohm Kruger* before releasing a dubbed Afrikaans version of the film to local audience (Botha, 2012; Van Nierop, 2016).[7]

Die Kavaliers (1966)

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" (Botha, 2012, p. 50). Therefore this became the ideal time to celebrate their victory in gaining their independence from their former "enemy" through the filmic medium (Jansen van Vuuren, 2014).

From the 1930's to the 1960's, the South African film industry was predominantly producing musicals, adventure stories, comedies, wildlife and romantic war films - even at the height of the late 1950's, when the anti-apartheid movement reached a climax with the Women's March in 1956 and the Sharpville massacre in 1961. Botha (2012, p. 51) states that "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[8] regime of the 1960s," (Botha 2012:51). The clash between ideologies could especially be witnessed in South African films of the 1960's and the 1970's, because most of these films were made with either a pro- or an anti-apartheid stance, even if it was not overtly visible in the narrative of these films (Tomaselli, 2013).

In the 1960's, seven feature films set in the time period of the Anglo-Boer War were released (Le Roux & Fourie, 1982, p. 71), causing the author of this paper to dub the sixties "the decade of the Boer Hero" (JansenVanVuuren, 2016). When analyzing these films it becomes quite clear that they are all predominantly stories of willing Boer Heroes fighting their "enemies" (the British) in an archetypical storyline reminiscent of Campbell's "hero myth" (JansenVanVuuren, 2015).

A classic example of an Anglo-Boer War case study that demonstrates these archetypical characteristics is the feature film *Die Kavaliers* (1966). As already indicated in the title, the film tells the story of a group of Boer soldiers (called 'the Cavaliers') who is fighting for a "just" cause, namely the freedom, independence and land of the Boers. The Hero of the film, Field Cornett Chris Botha, is a courageous willing hero who encompasses all the aspects of the "mythical Boer Hero".[9] Therefore one may argue that *Die Kavaliers*' representation in the

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[7] Van Nierop (2015: 46) comments that it is ironic that the German film attacks the British concentration camps, whilst they themselves would later implement the Nazi "death camps" during the 2nd World War.

[8] Reference to the then Prime Minister and so-called "architect of Apartheid", Hendrik Verwoerd (Botha, 2012).

[9] Refer to Jansen van Vuuren (2015, pp. 57 - 66) for an in-depth analysis of the film *Die Kavaliers* (1966).

film is a visual demonstration of the National Party's definition of a "the true Afrikaner", described by Botha (2012, p. 52) to be an ideology characterized by idealistic conservatism, an attachment to the pastoral past, the ideals of linguistic and racial purity and an adherence to religious and moral norms.

These films were also used by those in power, at a time when Black Freedom Fighters and other opposition groupings led a struggle against the government, to remind White Afrikaans audiences of the suffering their ancestors went through to protect their land in the Anglo-Boer War (JansenVanVuuren, 2015). This is a typical example where the ideological context of a film directly influences it's subliminal messages, as Lambrechts & Visagie (2009, p. 76) explains: "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." However, in 1994 South Africa became a democracy and the fall of the white Afrikaans Nationalist Party from power led to the rise of an era where filmmakers would challenge the traditional White Afrikaner identity through their representation of the Boer Hero. These post-1994 Anglo-Boer War films will serve as the case studies of the second part of this paper.

Redefining the mythical Boer Hero: A post-1994 perspective

Verraaiers (2012)

The nineties defined a new era in South Africa where artists and filmmakers (especially white liberal ones) had freedom to challenge the status quo (De Jager, 2014). Nevertheless, it would be almost 20 years before a new feature film about the Anglo-Boer War to be made. With the film *Verraaiers* (2012), the writer-producer, Sallas de Jager, and executive producer, Piet de Jager, redefined the mythical Boer Hero that generations of White Afrikaners used, in the words of Nel (2010, p. 2) "to legitimise their identity and foster a sense of belonging in South Africa".

The story's protagonist, Commandant Van Aswegen, is set up as a willing hero that defends the Boer republics in the raging conflict with Britain (JansenVanVuuren, 2015). However, he gets branded as a traitor after he surrenders and signs the peace treaty, even though it is to prevent his family from being sent to a British concentration camp. Van Aswegen, his son and two sons-in-law are tried for treason and at the end of the film three of the four characters are executed for treason (Eilers, 2013).

Scholars such as Browne (2013, p. 449) applauded the film for challenging the preconceived myth of the "pure and innocent Boer" fighting for their land in a "just manner" "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".

Adventures of the Boer War (2011-2014)

The author found *Adventures of the Boer War* one day during a random search on You Tube using the key words "Anglo-Boer War Films". It is a series of web based short films in which the producers use Lego figures to tell stories set against the backdrop of the Anglo-Boer War. It is interesting that the creator used Lego as a medium for his films before Hollywood

popularized it again with the *Lego-movie* (2014). The *Lego Movie* coincidentally was released in the same year in which Kramer stopped making *Adventures of the Boer War*. According to the writer and director, Kevin Kramer, (2015) he stopped making these films because of a lack of time and academic pressure.

The author analysed five of Kramer's episodes/short films, namely *Getting ready for the trip* (Kramer, 2011a), *Recruiting Tards* (2011b), *Sergeant Peter's marching band* (Kramer, 2011c), *The Thing* (Kramer, 2011d), and *Screwy Drill* (Kramer, 2012). An interesting first observation when one watches these films is that there is no attempt at historical or period accuracy. It is basically a "sendup" making use of slapstick comedy. In his e-mail correspondence Kramer (2015) states that he created *Adventures of the Boer War* when he was only 15 years old. At the time he was learning about the British colonial period in his high school curriculum. He explains that through this series of short films, he tried to combine his passion for Lego with his admiration for the vintage North American series from the 1960's, *F-Troop*.

F-Troop tells the story of a group of misfits at a desolated army post during the American Civil War. According to its description in the International Movie Database, *F-Troop* relied on character-driven humor such as verbal and visual pranks as well as slapstick, burlesque and physical humor (IMDB, 2003). According to Kramer (2015) *F-Troop* frequently changed and adapted historical facts, events and people to fit into their own comical stories, and he wanted to use the same style in *Adventures of the Boer War*. This is evident in the opening title of his films which read: "The story taken place tells of the Past (*sic*). Its characters portrayed are fictional (*sic*). It deserves no place for hate (*sic*)," (Kramer, 2011b). It appears as if Kramer has put a disclaimer at the beginning of his films to avoid a backlash against his satirical and mocking use of historical facts in his films.

In the selected film case studies analysed, Kramer represent his main characters, who are mostly British soldiers, as idiots that gets captured or caught out by the Boers. However, he doesn't really portray the Boer soldiers in a positive light. He mostly uses the Boer characters as anonymous side characters that have to 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 deeds of the characters at both side of the spectrum are. This might be attributed to both his anti-war approach (revealed in the e-mail correspondence with the author) and his North American background. He explained that he has no ancestors or relations who fought in the War. When asked why he decided to specifically set the series within the time period of the Anglo-Boer War, he responded that he did it because through his studies he had grown to detest British Imperialism, and secondly, that "it had never been done before" (Kramer 2015).

Conclusion

In this paper the author identified certain elements in the construction of the mythical Boer Hero in selected Anglo-Boer War film case studies. Historical films build on existing myths or create new myths through their representation of historical events or figures. Through these myths the filmmaker gives ideological messages that either corresponds to or challenge those of the dominant society. These ideologies in turn shape and construct the consumers' identities.

The paper starts with a brief discussion of two prominent Anglo-Boer War films that were made from a White Afrikaans Nationalist perspective, namely *Sarie Marais* (1931) and *Die*

Kavaliers (1966), before introducing the reader to the first Anglo-Boer War feature film made post-1994, *Verraaiers* (2012). Thereafter she discusses a series of Anglo-Boer War short films, namely *Adventures of the Boer War*. Therefore, through analyzing the case studies, an argument is made that the predominant ideology or the identity that the creator subscribes to directly influences the representation of the hero figure in the story.

The Apartheid government tried to use these Anglo-Boer War films from the 1930's onwards to promote the Afrikaner Nationalism Ideology. Where "living on a farm" used to be the material base for "Boer identity" in South Africa, the Nationalist Party used everything in their means to create a new White Afrikaner identity that would also suit the urban White Afrikaner. Turning the Boer-figure into a mythical hero with whom which all White Afrikaans speakers could identify, they used the films made from the 1940's to the late 1960's to represent narratives of a historical struggle where the willing Boer Heroes fought a just cause for land, freedom and independence.

Since the democratic transition in 1994, filmmakers have challenged the mythical willing Boer hero and reconstructed their own representations of this archetypical character. A good example of this is the feature film *Verraaiers* (Traitors) that was made by a White Afrikaans filmmaker. In contrast, short film series *Adventures of the Boer War* was made by an American who has no ties to South Africa or this historical conflict. This clearly influenced his approach to the subject matter, as he made these films using a satirical gaze that pokes fun at both the Boers and the British soldiers.

From the brief analysis and interviews with the filmmakers, this paper illustrates that the media and especially historical films construct identities through the representation of "myths", and that a new generation is challenging traditional myths by redefining the mythical Boer hero identity on film.

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