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# Screening Historical Sexualities: A Roundtable on Sodomy, South Africa, and Proteus

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# SCREENING HISTORICAL SEXUALITIES

## **A Roundtable on Sodomy, South Africa, and *Proteus***

**Noa Ben-Asher, R. Bruce Brasell, Daniel Garrett,  
John Greyson, Jack Lewis, and Susan Newton-King**

*Proteus* (2003; 100 min., Canada and South Africa) is a low-budget feature film, directed by John Greyson (Toronto) and Jack Lewis (Cape Town), that made the international rounds of “art cinema” and queer festivals in 2003 and 2004, with limited theatrical release in New York, Toronto, and other cities. The film advances Greyson’s and Lewis’s experiments with political essay-narrative forms both in their respective documentary, experimental, and dramatic videos dating back to the early 1980s (including Lewis’s *Apostles of Civilized Vice* [1999]) and in Greyson’s theatrical feature films beginning with *Urinal* in 1988. Based on an early-eighteenth-century court record, *Proteus* narrates the meeting, sexual relationship, and eventual trial and execution for sodomy of two prisoners in the Dutch Cape Colony, the Dutchman Rijkhaart Jacobsz and the Khoi Claas Blank. Subsidiary narratives focus on the Scottish botanist Virgil Niven, who observed the prisoners, and on the contemporaneous crackdown on sodomites in Amsterdam. *GLQ* initiated the following “virtual conversation” among the two directors, Israeli queer legal theorist Noa Ben-Asher, American film scholar R. Bruce Brasell, American film critic Daniel Garrett, and South African historian Susan Newton-King. Though it will “spoil” the plot for readers who have not seen the movie, we offer it as a lively debate about one of the more interesting entries in the *new* “new queer cinema.” The debate explores the precarious and artful interrelationship of histories, nations, narratives, and the law; cinematic intent and spectatorial

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interpretation; same-sexuality, conjugality, and difference; and even, as one participant dares to put it, *love*.

### **Inspiration, Production, and Distribution**

*Jack Lewis:* We were working on the campaign to include [a provision prohibiting discrimination] on grounds of sexual orientation in the South African constitution. I was looking for a story that would relate the need for constitutional guarantees of equality for gays and lesbians to the lives of people today. The story of the two prisoners on Robben Island [just off Cape Town] was exactly that, an interracial love story but also a tragedy about two guys caught up in the geopolitics of the day. I like stories that link the personal and particular to larger themes. *Proteus* turned out to be much more than a civil rights movie. . . .

I was a late developer in terms of queer film festivals, having been involved in the antiapartheid struggle in the 1970s and 1980s. John Greyson had also done a piece called *A Moffie Called Simon* in the 1980s to support the late Simon Nkoli, who had been imprisoned for antiapartheid activities. So John was one of the few queer filmmakers who knew where South Africa was on the map. In 1989 I was in New York and went to my first queer film festival, the New Fest [New York Gay and Lesbian Film Festival]. John's film *Urinal* was showing, and I decided that I would like to meet this guy. When I launched South Africa's first Gay and Lesbian Film Festival in 1994, it wasn't long before John got himself invited, returning later to do script development workshops and other stuff. So we became friendly, and the project developed out of that. We were conscious that this was South Africa's first "gay" feature: through the semi-opaque text of the 270-year-old court transcript, we really believed we could discern the outline of a relationship [between the prisoners Rijkhaart and Claas]. Incidentally, the manuscript you see in the opening sequence of the movie is the actual manuscript record of the trial of the two men. When John and I were trawling through the Cape Town archives, it was quite spooky coming across the convict register in which the names of Claas and his "race" (registered as "Hottentot") and Rijkhaart were religiously entered year after year. Seeing all those records with the crudely drawn crosses where they signed their names made them suddenly feel mighty real! The fact that Claas was "Hottentot," or more precisely Khoi, made a huge difference: they are the "first peoples" of southern Africa, who have inhabited these parts for millennia. There was a genocidal campaign waged by the colonists to eradicate them, and it was going on at the time of the events described in the movie, as *Proteus* points out in various ways. So the burden of representation was pretty enormous. In fact,

the question of who represents what and how they represent it is one of the main themes of the film.

*Proteus* is not only aimed at conveying something to gay South Africans. It also asks questions about how we come to be who we are, and about the role of a “gay identity” in that. In the West things are getting beyond “gay identity,” which is correctly seen as kind of limiting. The film is about what it means to have lived at a time when that identity didn’t exist, when it wasn’t available, and how you defined yourself under those circumstances. It also points to the danger of homosexual panic. George W. Bush is having a homosexual panic right now, and so are Robert Mugabe, the president of Zimbabwe, and Sam Njumo, the president of Namibia, another neighbor. This movie is about a homosexual panic in the 1700s and how it affected two prisoners on Robben Island. But it reminds us that political and economic circumstances can cause politicians to play the homopanic card at any time.

Audiences around the world are getting to see this profoundly South African movie, but local [South African] audiences are not getting to see it, and that’s disturbing. I don’t think the narrow classification of *Proteus* as a “gay” movie in a niche market is adequate. The movie may appeal to a gay audience, but it can also appeal to a South African audience—everyone who has seen *Forgiveness* (dir. Ian Gabriel; 2004), *Promised Land* (dir. Jason Xenopoulos; 2002), or *Yesterday* (dir. Darrell Roodt; 2004) could also see *Proteus*. I recently attended a three-hour seminar with university historians on *Proteus*: they see it as a landmark in the treatment of an earlier period in South African history. Historically and aesthetically, it goes where no other movie has gone before in terms of everything from the destruction of the Khoi people, to “Cape liberalism” and the relationship between the Cape and the Netherlands, to the historical development of the idea of homosexual identity, both in the colony and in the Netherlands. *Proteus* is not simply a “gay” movie. To see it that way, even commercially, is to restrict unfairly its possibilities.

*John Greyson*: I’ve been bemused from afar by the epic struggle to get *Proteus* onto South African screens, and while the differences between the South African and Canadian theatrical markets for indie features can’t be overstated, there’s nevertheless some shared beats in two otherwise distinct tunes. Distributors in both countries seem to claim that the upfront costs of releasing a film are a formula etched in stone, as unchanging as Table Mountain [near Cape Town]: print costs, advertising costs—this is what it takes, period. Yet everyone knows you don’t have to catch the cable car to get to the top. Hiking up the back way is free! Here in

Canada, indie filmmakers have annually put forward any number of proposals to address the drought of Canadian features in our theaters, literally hundreds of low-cost, cost-effective, or no-cost initiatives, such as rotating repertory-house-style programs of linked titles. And every year we're told that, no, Canadian films will never be "respected" unless they're released exactly the same way as "real" Hollywood features. Well, so far such respect has doomed us to commanding exactly 1 percent of our national box office, and this despite huge expenditures of tax dollars on Hollywood-style releases of a few "mainstream" Canadian titles. If indie films, Canadian and South African, can't make back the costs of their release, maybe the problem isn't with the films but with the distributors. Maybe it's time to stay off the cable car and start looking for some protean back way up the mountain. More sweat, sure, but think how good our collective thighs will look.

### **History: Language and Labels**

*JG:* Jack Lewis and I arrived at our interest in nomenclature through a coincidence of history: Linnaeus named *Proteaceae* [including *Protea cynaroides*, the giant or king protea], the national flower of South Africa, in 1735, the same year that Claas and Rijkhaart were tried and executed in Table Bay [where Robben Island is located]. Further research led us to Virgil, a Scottish plant collector based in the Cape who became the protea king of Europe some thirty years later. The liberties we took in making his cultivation of that flower family take place on Robben Island at the same time as the decadelong relationship of our prisoners allowed us to mobilize the metaphors of binomial classification, and in a broader sense the central question of naming that drove our story: what names could Claas and Rijkhaart have for each other, for their feelings, for the sex they shared?

*Susan Newton-King:* It is very helpful to learn that this is the question that drove the story. It makes perfect sense from a historical point of view. Theo van der Meer has shown that a distinct sense of homosexual identity was only just beginning to emerge in the Netherlands in the early eighteenth century, and even then only in the towns.<sup>1</sup> The historical Rijkhaart came from Rotterdam and could conceivably have been acquainted with an emerging homosexual subculture in that town, but he was only eighteen years old when he was deported in 1713. As for Claas, no one knows anything about same-sex practices among the Khoi. . . . So it seems to me entirely convincing to portray the relationship between the two protagonists as fractious and ill defined until the very end of the film, when Claas's voluntary admission of guilt brings a resolution of sorts.



Figure 1. Class and Rijkhaart, taking a break from manual labor in the slate quarry on Robben Island, share a bottle pipe of *dagga* (weed). All images courtesy of Pluck Productions

*Noa Ben-Asher*: Overall, the film is cynical about academic attempts to historicize sexualities. In the opening scene, for example, as the 1950s-style ladies with typewriters try to translate *fucking*, they criticize themselves for being too modern, too contemporary. I think the film critically locates the viewer's relationship to sodomites as "premodern homosexuals," in parallel with the Dutch colonizer's determination to give scientific names to African plants and races. When we try to understand how the "modern homosexual" came about, we are engaged as voyeurs

in erotic acts of translation. For example, in the sex scenes the point of view is that of Virgil, who is getting safe pleasure by peeking at Claas and Rijkhaart. And the execution scene is also shot from his point of view: we watch his gaze, and also his sadness, when the sodomites disappear into the sea. This, the film argues, is analogous to the classification of people into races and of plant life into families of flowers. The process of naming is erotically charged, and the named becomes the subject of academic (fill in the blank: racist/botanic/homophobic) desire.

*Daniel Garrett:* Names are signs—they are organizational tools, and as such can be summaries of traits or experiences, curses or tributes; and when the European Virgil names a flower after the African Claas, calling it beautiful and rare, he affirms the physical presence and cultural (or botanical) knowledge of the African. That both Virgil and Claas have a sexuality that is fluid—difficult to define, more bisexual than homosexual—is itself an affirmation of human complexity. Very often what is read as gay history is actually bisexual history—or the manifestation of polymorphous sexuality.

In *The Devil Finds Work*, a book of film commentary, James Baldwin wrote that “a man can fall in love with a man: incarceration, torture, fire, and death, and still more, the threat of these, have not been able to prevent it, and never will.”<sup>2</sup> Baldwin, like Gore Vidal, among others, has made also a distinction between homosexual acts and homosexual persons. Anyone is capable of a homosexual act: that is a possibility of human freedom. But not everyone wants to make homosexual acts the defining characteristics of his or her life, becoming thereby a homosexual person. Claas, for most of the film, refuses to become a sexual “other” in his own eyes or that of society. Europeans have traditionally insisted on naming others and having the world use those names; and Western gays, like other minorities in the West, seem simply to want to be the new dictators of names and their meaning. Often, many Western gays, while dismissing discussion of phenomena many people associate with homosexual life—such as self-centered superficiality, promiscuity, indulgent alcohol and drug use, the experience of child molestation (as victims and abusers), and the abjection of prison as a doorway to sex between men—advance a view of gay life as a sexy, proud parade to the marriage bureau, and still find time to celebrate the pornography of producers like Bruce LaBruce and speculate about whether the anus is like a grave. It is possible that centuries ago, when the law named an act but not an experience, and today, when the air is full of names, an experience that goes unnamed is one that has the freedom of anonymity.



*R. Bruce Brasell*: Multiple languages are spoken in the film, with many of the historical participants bi- or trilingual, speaking Dutch, English, and/or Khoi. Not only are spoken dialogue and written words translated in the narrative of the film by one character for another, but the film itself then translates those diverse languages into English subtitles. At one point Virgil asks Claas for the Bushman name for some plants. As he pronounces a Bushman word, the subtitles translate one word as “cunt” and another as “fart.” Later in the film, when Virgil offers Claas a job in English, Rijkhaart asks Claas in Dutch what Virgil has said, to which Claas replies, “He wanted to know about the weather.” Given the incredible intertwining of languages in the film and the dependence of an English-only speaker on translations, such a spectator might wonder if the filmmakers, like Claas, are unreliable translators. Yet all that such viewers can do is nakedly trust the filmmakers not to mislead them as Claas does Virgil and Rijkhaart.

There are a few places in the narrative where the subtitles (which English-only viewers depend on) spell out what the character says in the other language. And these occurrences all relate to Rijkhaart’s and Claas’s confessions about their homosexual relationship. Preceded by the credit sequence showing the turning pages of the court record, interspersed with blooming proteas, the narrative begins with three court reporters transcribing the proceedings supposedly contained in the pages. Over their image, the voice of a judge reads Rijkhaart’s confession, “Send mij maar op; ik heb hem in’t gat geneukt” [Send me up [to the court in Cape Town]; I fucked him in the arse]; then we hear Rijkhaart’s voice-over yelling the same words while, as we learn later, he is tortured. Toward the end of the film both voice-over statements are repeated, with the complementing images now attached. When the three court reporters discuss among themselves how to translate Rijkhaart’s confession into English, English-language viewers are only provided with this partial clue as to what criminal act was confessed, that of fucking. When collecting shells for the lime kiln on Seal Island [in False Bay, east of the Cape of Good Hope], Munster [a fellow prisoner] asks Rijkhaart (per the subtitles), “Why’d you let that filthy Hottentot touch you?” to which Rijkhaart replies, “Wat raaktj’aan dat?” Later during the court hearing, when Munster recounts the incident, one of the court reporters provides a couple of possible translations for the phrase—“Mind your own business” or “It’s no concern to you.” The female reporters are surprised by the statement, because “he said it like it’s a small thing”; one retorts, “It’s like he’s not ashamed.” And, from our observation of Rijkhaart as he is presented in the narrative, we know he isn’t. He is proud of his love of Claas and desires reciprocation from him. A gradual slippage transpires in the



film. While the beginning of the film frames the trial through the issue of fucking, of raw sex, by the end of the film fucking has become, for lack of a better word, love, although one might label it mutual desire and respect. And of course, this issue of labeling human relationships, and in particular same-sex ones, is one of the many themes the film investigates.

*SNK*: The words “Send mij maar op; ik heb hem in’t gat geneukt” and “Wat raaktj’aan dat?” are among the few utterances in the court record that are presented as direct quotations. As such, they are very valuable to anyone wanting to lift the veil of legal language, which obscures the motives and feelings of the protagonists. In this case, both quotations give us clues to Rijkhaart’s state of mind, and it seems right that they should be rendered in the original Dutch. However, the directors have altered the context in which the words were spoken. “Wat raaktj’aan dat?” was addressed to a slave and fellow convict, Augustijn Matthijsz, who had twice seen Claas and Rijkhaart having sex on Dassen [not Seal] Island [about fifty miles north-northeast of Cape Town] in November 1724. The film presents these words as directed to Munster, who later plays a key role in the betrayal of the two protagonists. This makes for more tension in the narrative. The other quotation, “Send mij maar op; ik heb hem in’t gat geneukt,” was not in fact part of Rijkhaart’s final confession. The declaration was addressed to Sergeant Scholtz, the *posthouder* [warden] on Robben Island in 1732, when Rijkhaart and Claas were discovered in flagrante delicto by Munster and a second convict. Scholtz, as the film shows, chose not to report the incident, but the next day he had Rijkhaart (not Claas *and* Rijkhaart, as the film has it) flogged on the pretext that Rijkhaart had failed to doff his hat as he passed by him. Rijkhaart’s words were later (in 1735) related to the commissioners of the court by Munster, who seems (as in the film) to have been only too willing to come forward with evidence against the two men. Under interrogation during the lead-up to his trial, Rijkhaart said only that he had uttered the words in an attempt to end the beating. In this sense, the directors’ presentation of the fateful confession as having been extracted under torture is an approximation of the truth, but the actual trial and the process by which Rijkhaart was finally enjoined to confess were more complex and less dramatic.

I agree that translation (and mistranslation) is an important theme in the film. Claas is by far the most unreliable translator, but Rijkhaart too sometimes creatively adapts the truth, as in his accounts of the drowning cell [supposedly used to torture prisoners by immersion]. I think what the film alludes to here is the gap between worlds and the difficulty of communication across cultural boundar-



Figure 2. Following the death-by-salt of Ghust, the Robben Island prisoners are allowed fishing privileges on the beach facing Table Mountain

ies. But in a colonial context, as the filmmakers are well aware, lying and dissimulation also become strategies for survival. I think this is why Claas is allowed such freedom with the truth. There is also the unreliability of the trial record, which is captured in the quotation from Nelson Mandela at the end of the film [on being sentenced to life imprisonment on Robben Island in 1964: “Some of the things so far told the court are true and some are not true”]. I think the filmmakers knew very well that they were working with a text that obscured as much as it revealed.

*DG*: Claas's use of misleading language is one way for a man unjustly imprisoned and under surveillance to achieve a measure of independence, opportunity, and even revenge. His relationship to both Rijkhaart and Virgil is an accident of history and in the most dire circumstances Claas must find a way of making those men useful to him. In addition, I recall the conversation between the critic bell hooks and the cinematographer Arthur Jafa in her book *Reel to Real*, in which they talk about how "white" people are uncomfortable when "black" people refuse to externalize their subjectivity, refuse to perform their identity, insisting on complexity and mystery.<sup>3</sup> I suspect that many white viewers walk into situations distrusting black people and when a black person chooses an alternative representation (a strange face, or a lying face) to the one preferred by white viewers, no matter how understandable the cause, that initial distrust is corroborated, ending in a negative judgment.

*JG*: From the beginning, Jack and I were committed to at least approximating the lingual soup that animated social relations in the early-eighteenth-century Cape, where various Khoisan dialects were being exterminated or driven north and where the vernaculars of Indonesian slaves were cross-pollinating with the tongues of various French, German, and especially Dutch sailors and settlers, combining and creolizing to form what later emerged as Afrikaans. To accomplish this in practical terms (and thankfully not succumb to the extreme linguistic hubris of a Mel Gibson!), we used Afrikaans to stand in for the Middle Dutch of the guards and prisoners, while Nama (one of the few surviving Khoisan languages) was used for Claas, his fellow Khoi prisoners, and his mother. English in the Cape was still rare, but the presence of Virgil, his cousin Kate, and the educated Dutch governor gave this mother tongue a historical basis. Claas's ability to speak English to Virgil (he was the sole prisoner with this ability) was based on the linguistic prowess of the famous Robben Island prisoner Autshumato, who in the late seventeenth century served as translator for both the Dutch and the English between terms of imprisonment.

### **History, Sodomy, and Foucault**

*NBA*: Once we enter academic debates, the film uses historical events that took place in the Netherlands between 1730 and 1735 to problematize Michel Foucault's argument that modern sexual identities are products of nineteenth-century scientific and sexual discourses. A key criticism of Foucault has been that, contrary to his schematic model, discourses subsume acts. The film engages in this criticism

at two levels. First, it shows that as early as the 1730s sodomites were something more than individuals who performed acts of sodomy. Second, and more important, it addresses the problematic distinction between act and discourse. The film, for example, features a subculture in which sodomites met and cruised (and this is historically accurate); a sailor is introduced to us (perhaps cynically) as “faggot” (“Watch out for the faggot”; “He’s a two sexer?” “No, just a Dutch faggot”); and in a dramatic moment in their relationship the sailor begs Claas, “Say it. What we have. What is it called?” but Claas answers, “It has no name.”

*DG*: I don’t think men meeting in bars for alcohol and sex with men (or women) are worthy of the name of culture, nor do I think they amount to a significant subculture. Jean-Paul Sartre wrote in *Being and Nothingness* that existence precedes essence, and I think that means that a human being can have impulses and feelings that have not yet been made conscious or meaningful, and that acts can occur in society that have little or no personal or social importance. In *On the Down Low* J. L. King talks about men in the year 2004 who have sex with men and do not consider themselves bisexual or homosexual, men who have little language to describe the sex they have with other men—and, in fact, a couple of the men, including the author, describe the urge behind their encounters as akin to demon possession.<sup>4</sup> Culture, being the opposite of silence and obscurity, is language, relationships, established rituals, art, institutions—in short, resources—and it is the organization of such things as survival, transmission of values, and reward and punishment. Louis Crompton’s *Homosexuality and Civilization* answers and corrects the great Michel Foucault’s still useful analysis by documenting high-profile traditions of male love in ancient Greece, China, and Japan, relationships that coexisted with the desire for women and the production of children in families.<sup>5</sup> These relationships in Japan and China were represented in literature and paintings and were acknowledged in spiritual practices and philosophy. Crompton also describes how a provincial Jewish religion informed by narrow biblical interpretations and concerned for its population growth forbade homosexuality, and how when that religion grew in influence and became Christianity, its sexual morality became international, the law of many lands. The execution of sodomites in Holland, as shown in *Proteus*, followed the church’s Inquisition in many European cities, fueled by fear that the presence of sodomites would call forth the punishment of Sodom—the destruction of those cities. *Proteus* might have told us more about the 1730s Dutch and South African authorities who caused such havoc, not simply who they were but what they believed and why.



Figure 3. Rijkhaart is transported to the drowning cell of the Cape Castle for his second interrogation by Sergeant Willer

*NBA*: In terms of legal history, the film aspires to historical accuracy when touching on the following issues: the legal definition of sodomy, the rules of evidence, sentence, verdict, execution. Interestingly, it seems that the act-identity distinction works when we look at the language of the court, which is focused on anal penetration. The confession at the end, “We did it,” corresponds to the legal definition of sodomy. The investigation points to a concern about the sex between the men and not to their relationship, to love, or to monogamous commitments, but that does not

mean that those did not exist in various forms. Also, from a look at the names and jobs of the seventy people executed in Holland in the years 1730–32, it seems that the wealthier sodomites, like Virgil, managed to escape execution.

*JG*: Through the four years of writing the script we returned again and again to the transcript of the trial. Despite the streamlining of history that characterized this document, blithely erasing contradictions and questions, we constructed our story of Claas and Rijkhaart from three related details buried between the lines, details that required much speculation and interpretation. First, the chronology of the evidence suggested that they'd been having sex together for nearly twenty years on the island (we shortened it to ten years in our version, in an attempt to avoid the pitfalls of bad aging makeup). This to us indicated something more than coincidence—at the very least, Claas and Rijkhaart could be classified as fuck-buddies, or whatever the term might have been then. Second, the court particularly notes that the *crimen nefandum* was “mutually perpetrated”—the magistrates' surprise at this, in relation to the “Hottentot” especially, underlines how unusual such contacts between Europeans and natives were at the time. Third, Claas and Rijkhaart's sexual exploits were known about and ignored by the island authorities for much of those twenty years. The transcript gives little indication about what might have changed to trigger their arrest and trial. Jack and I elaborated many possible answers to this question, and the film includes or hints at several of them, all plausible, perhaps all interrelated: (1) the governor used Claas and Rijkhaart's trial as a showy distraction from political problems with the settlers; (2) the sodomy panic of Amsterdam inspired a local version of that panic in the colony; (3) the two men's arrest was a ploy by an ambitious soldier to depose the island's commanding sergeant; and (4) Rijkhaart's confession was revenge against Claas, who was being released into Virgil's employ.

The narrative strands and details that make up their world come from a multitude of historical sources, most obviously the transcript itself and the court procedures that defined it. The Dutch sodomy panic relies on van der Meer's work in particular, including the execution invoice that Kate discovers by accident. From other sources come the story of the Amsterdam orphanage drowning cell, the death by salting of the beaten prisoner, the /Xam tale of Khaggen's shoe, the pouch of the slain Khoi villager, the medicinal uses of various protea species, the routine but bureaucratized use of torture to extract confessions, all of which have been interwoven (with liberties) to address our central question: how did Claas and Rijkhaart speak of each other?



*SNK*: It is absolutely true that in sodomy cases at this time the courts were concerned with the details of the sexual act and not at all with the relationship between the sexual partners. Thus even rape victims were sentenced to death by the Cape court, and victims of molestation (without penetration) were flogged. But having said this, I think that John is right to suggest that, in this case, the reciprocal nature of the acts particularly offended the authorities. The fiscal (the official who prosecuted the case) mentioned several times that the two accused used one another “over en weder” [back and forth, mutually] against nature. Sexual relations in which the partners exchanged active and passive roles were, according to van der Meer, a prominent feature of the new forms of same-sex interaction that emerged at the end of the early modern period. I think it very likely that the court found Rijkhaart’s behavior particularly objectionable because he admitted to taking a passive as well as an active role with Claas.

*Proteus* takes enormous liberties with the legal framework of the trial and the court proceedings. But there are reasons for this: criminal cases were tried at the Cape (and in the Netherlands) under what was called “the extraordinary procedure.” This was an inquisitorial procedure, very different from the adversarial procedure followed in Anglo-Saxon courts at the time. The facts of the case were investigated before the trial, and the evidence was collected and collated by the fiscal, who used it to compile his *eijsch* [indictment]. Most of the evidence was given in camera, before commissioned members of the court; the witnesses were not present on the day of the trial, and the judges were not able to question them further. Rather, their written statements were circulated among the members of the court. Thus it would not have been possible for Virgil to testify at the last minute on behalf of Claas. An accused person had the right to ask the commissioners to hear evidence in his favor, but such evidence had to be recorded before the trial. Moreover, the accused had no automatic access to the evidence against him, except as it was summarized in the fiscal’s *eijsch*, which was read before the court on the day of the trial. If the court chose, the accused might be “confronted with witnesses” in an effort to enjoin him to confess (as happened in this case), but this too took place before the trial, and there was no formal cross-examination. In sum, this was not an easily filmable process! Too much took place behind closed doors. The drama lay in the secrecy and the agonizing uncertainties of the process rather than in an open confrontation between the accused and their accusers, and I think the filmmakers captured the inherent suspense in the inquisitorial process in the pretrial scenes between the two accused.



*DG*: *Proteus* is dense, imaginative, logical, and truthful. A good film does not show all possible forms of humanity, but it does reveal enough of the depth of human experience that one is so absorbed in the telling that one does not think of what is absent. While *Proteus* offers a specific story, its ideas are relevant to more than one situation, and those ideas include the following: law is not always just; intellectuals have limited control over the uses of their work; science sometimes bears the prejudices of its time and place; affection and desire come from unexpected places; identity is complicated; people are limited by social circumstances; Europe is responsible for advancing both civilization and savagery; and history can be redefined. These ideas are worthy of philosophical, not merely political, speculation, and such speculation could show how *Proteus* and the marginal experiences it embodies actually relate to issues of central concern to the world. A lot of films focused on homosexuality fail by stripping the lives presented of all other significant references, but at the same time I think it's dangerous and dull to read political meaning as the dominant meaning in every life, especially in the lives of people whose identities are contested. Is it possible that Claas and Rijkhaart did not speak *of* each other but *to* each other; and that their experience was more important than its interpretation? In the same way, I find myself wondering about Virgil's wife, his cousin Kate, and his nephew, people who are present in *Proteus* but whose stories are not told—and I find myself wondering not about what they called themselves but about their experiences.

### **Experimental Cinema?**

*RBB*: *Proteus* combines mainstream narrative storytelling with just a touch of experimentation—in other words, not enough experimentation to scare off the average viewer, but enough to intrigue those interested in such filmmaking practices. On an aesthetic level, that experimentation comments directly on the practice of writing history. Although the narrative occurs in the eighteenth century, twentieth-century objects intrude throughout the *mise-en-scène*. Pursuers use a Jeep to track Claas, the governor and his wife turn a radio on and off while they argue, prisoners store collected shells in plastic grocery bags, and court reporters use typewriters and wear twentieth-century costumes and hairstyles. This incongruence—or anomaly, if one prefers—functions as a reminder throughout the film that we are accessing the past, that is, history, through the present, and that our current perspectives and understandings cannot help but intrude on how we shape that past when we recount it.



Figure 4. Claas and Rijkhaart break slate in the quarry on Robben Island

*JG:* We purposely introduced anachronistic props and costumes from the 1960s (the concrete breakwaters and Coke bottles, the sunglasses and beehives, the pencil and radio) to reference the Robben Island that everyone knows, the apartheid-era prison of Nelson Mandela. Often in fiction films, it is the past that haunts the present-day narrative. In this case, we wanted the present to haunt the colonial past, with material ghosts from living memory interrupting and problematizing this account of Claas and Rijkhaart in 1735, a period of Dutch colonial history that barely exists in the popular imagination and that has almost no visual referent in the mainstream culture. We wanted to draw links between these two periods of island history, not to suggest connections or analogies between the prisoners of 1735 and 1965 (and certainly not to conflate sodomy with the antiapartheid struggle!) but to tease out the differences between the methods and vocabularies of the historical records in the two periods. The plastic bag was our most explicit link between these two chapters in island history. When Rijkhaart reveals that he and Claas were both tortured not by the drowning cell, an urban legend designed to pacify through fear, but by the wet bag, a notorious instrument of the apartheid era, he's proffering a bitter piece of truth to Claas that is logically impossible.

Faced with this conundrum, the audience returns to questions of history-writing itself.

*SNK*: I really like the idea of the present haunting the past. It's so true: how can we understand the repressions and injustices of the past except through our own experience of repression? There are dangers in this, of course—for example, twenty-first-century sensibilities are not those of the 1700s. . . . Perhaps the film also reminds us that, with respect to attitudes toward the expression of human sexuality, past and present remain all too closely connected. South Africa's liberal legislation in this area is very new and, as I think Jack has said, this film should remind viewers why it was so necessary. I watched this film with a group of colleagues, all of whom research the history of Dutch South Africa, and no one was bothered by the deliberate anachronisms, though some wondered whether all the references would be intelligible to a foreign audience.

*DG*: *Proteus* received many good reviews, but Dave Kehr in the *New York Times* called it “a heavy, pretentious and derivative film, deep in debt to such masters of the New Queer Cinema as Todd Haynes (*Poison*) and Derek Jarman (*Caravaggio*).” Stephen Rebello in the gay publication the *Advocate* described watching the film as hard labor, and said it was as clumsy as a historical pageant.<sup>6</sup> I think these are important reviews, even as I suspect that they are failures of interpretation rooted not in ignorance of film but in lack of attention to various kinds of sociological and philosophical discourses that surround film. Philosophy is the contemplation of existence, thought, values, and relationships; and a philosophical perspective would find *Proteus* of interest. Out of *Proteus*, and the works of artists and thinkers who have considered desire and love between men through the centuries—from Christopher Marlowe to Tony Kushner, from Pier Paolo Pasolini to Patrice Chéreau, from Caravaggio to Francis Bacon, and from Marcel Proust to Matthew Stadler—there is enough inspiration to produce philosophy on identity and self-knowledge, love and sexual ethics, and law and social organization, for the next hundred years.

### **National Allegory?**

*RBB*: The most surprising element of the film for me is its ultimate privileging of the romantic couple, albeit a same-sex one. I am reminded of the trend in the United States in which shows such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* position gay men as social conduits, facilitators for the reconciliation and formation of the heterosexual couple. *Proteus* appears to place gay men in a similar position, but

instead of contributing to the reconciliation of the sexes, it seeks to reconcile the races in a particular national context. Ironically, in its punishment of Rijkhaart and Claas for the crime of sodomy, the Dutch court—inadvertently, it appears—acknowledges (one might say recognizes) them as a couple by requiring that they “be bound together with chains and executed by drowning in Table Bay.” When confronted with permanent and irreversible separation from Rijkhaart, Claas realizes his affection or, what is implied by the film, his love for him. A label (faggot) that he was unwilling to accept and a coupling relationship (homosexual) that he was unwilling to acknowledge (although Rijkhaart encouraged him)—suddenly he chooses to embrace them both. Rather than some Foucauldian confession or the force of the law compelling him to speak the truth of sex, Claas utters the words “We did it!” voluntarily, not as a result of the force of the law but rather as a result of the force of love, his love of Rijkhaart. One detail turns this story about the formation of the gay couple into an allegory for the joining of the races in a South African context: Rijkhaart is a Dutchman and Claas a “Hottentot.” These men are able to transcend their racial and cultural differences and form a relationship of mutual trust and love, an analogy for what the relationship between the races in South Africa can become or is becoming. This particular textual reading of the film, if logically extended, acknowledges the sacrifice that black South Africans are called on to enact for the two races to be “bound together” into one nation.

*DG:* Claas, a man whose practicality indicates intelligence and self-regard, did not want to go to prison or to stay there; and his encounter with Rijkhaart was circumstantial—and to read this as a love story says more about our love-drunk world than anything about their lives. Men have sex in prison, even today, and usually do not emerge talking about the great love they found there. Claas’s confession at the end seems to come out of his desire not to go back to prison—death is preferable. The idea that an African or a person of color should sacrifice himself for anyone else’s benefit is repulsive. The closet has become one of the principal metaphors of homosexual experience and it is used inappropriately, falsifying consciousness, experience, and history. It’s insane to think that Claas should be having a “coming-out” experience when such an expression would lead to death. Such ahistoricism is questionable in film and in theory—and in the appropriation of other people’s lives and works. I would like to see a beautiful love story in which white settlers in America, Canada, Israel, South Africa, and elsewhere give up the land and resources they have taken from their darker brothers and sisters—a sacrifice in the name of spiritual enlightenment and political progress and love.

*SNK*: This is certainly a story about love transcending difference, though I doubt very much that it is intended as an allegory for national reconciliation. I don't think that the directors' designs are that grandiose. I do think that the ending works in the context of the story. It is believable. But—and this is the wet-blanket part—it is not supported by the historical record. There is evidence that the men were forced to confess. They were not formally tortured, but they were almost certainly coerced. For example, Rijkhaart confessed on August 9, 1735, that he and Claas had used one another “over ende weer” [mutually] against nature. Claas confessed on the same date that he had been “verleijd” [led astray, seduced] by Rijkhaart and that out of “onnoselheijd” [foolishness, ignorance] he had allowed Rijkhaart to use him against nature “and that he at that time also used Rijkhaart unnaturally.”

The wording of both confessions suggests much prompting by the interrogators (the fiscal had perhaps already cast Rijkhaart as the evil seducer), and the timing suggests that the prisoners were subjected to intense pressure, until eventually they were confronted with the witnesses. The film's presentation of Claas as the more recalcitrant of the two is thus consistent with the historical record. But Claas was not absolved by the court. He was sentenced to drown along with Rijkhaart, though not bound together with him, and the sentence was carried out the very next day. In reality, then, Claas was not confronted with the choice that the film has him make. What were his feelings about this? Perhaps very similar to the feelings attributed to his character in the film.

## Notes

1. Theo van der Meer, *Sodoms Zaad in Nederland: Het ontstaan van homoseksualiteit in de vroegmoderne tijd* (Nijmegen: SUN, 1995).
2. James Baldwin, *The Price of the Ticket* (New York: St. Martin's, 1985), 600.
3. bell hooks, *Reel to Real: Race, Sex, and Class at the Movies* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 177.
4. J. L. King, *On the Down Low: A Journey into the Lives of “Straight” Black Men Who Sleep with Men* (New York: Broadway, 2004), 53.
5. Louis Crompton, *Homosexuality and Civilization* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003).
6. Dave Kehr, “On an Island Where Sex and Death Loom,” *New York Times*, July 30, 2004; Stephen Rebello, “Black and White and Dull All Over: Interracial Sex Is Taboo in *Proteus*, but the Storytelling Fails to Arouse,” *Advocate*, August 17, 2004.