





# 1. ‘Is freedom really worth this much?’

## Smuts, De la Rey, and rethinking grand narratives in the film *Verraaiers* (Traitors)

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### Introduction

*Verraaiers* (Traitors) (Eilers, 2012) is the first South African-made Second Anglo Boer War feature film produced since South Africa’s political transformation in the nineties. *Verraaiers* is the inversion of the typical war film: exposing the maladroit exercise of state power and darkly parodying the equilibrium of justice. It interrogates the fine line of treason during the war and, similar to the film *Breaker Morant* (Beresford, 1980), re-enacts the violence and emotional horror of executions by firing squad. Existing South African-made Second Anglo Boer War film stereotypes from the era of Afrikaner nationalism are rethought in the context of post-1994. The main narrative unfolds during General Kitchener’s ‘scorched earth policy’ when British soldiers were given the command to burn down the Boers’ farmhouses and all their belongings before taking the women, children, and farmworkers living there to concentration camps (Grundlingh, 2013:34). Commandant van Aswegen and his sons try to protect their families and their

farms by signing the oath for British amnesty.<sup>1</sup> However, they are put on trial as traitors and sentenced to death on orders of Generals Koos de la Rey and Jan Smuts. Smuts is set up as the antagonist who initiates the order. A parallel storyline is set in the early 1950s. It depicts Van Aswegen's youngest son, Carel-Jan (who survived the executions), in dialogue with Gerrie – General de la Rey's former right-hand man who saved him from the brink of death.

*Verraiers* received critical accolades at film festivals but failed to resonate with target audiences during its cinema release due to its pessimism and controversial messages. The chapter examines the historical context in which the film was made. We argue that the depicted interaction between Smuts and De la Rey represents the place that the two historical figures hold in popular memory. We critique aspects of *Verraiers*' aesthetic execution, including its narrative structure and screenplay, while arguing compassion from the audience for the screenwriter and the difficulties one faces in realising a film text that negotiates a sensitive and contested cultural terrain of history.

## **Background on the historical context and the film's production**

In the words of Jan Smuts, much of history does not appear in public records. 'It is in the realm of ideas, personal pleas and visions and unspoken motives that largely drive the wheels of action' (Smuts, quoted in Opperman Lewis, 2016). Thus, representing 'history in the visual media can be a unique way of rendering and interpreting the past' (Rosenstone, 2001:4). Therefore, this unique filmic representation of historical personages and events in the South African-made

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1 According to Afrikaans grammar rules, the surname 'van Aswegen' is written with a small 'v' if it is preceded by a first name or a title like "Commandant", but with an uppercase 'V' if the surname stands on its own. Similarly, 'De la Rey' is written with a smaller case 'd' if preceded by a first name (such as Koos) or a rank (like General), but in uppercase if the surname is used on its own, i.e. De la Rey.

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Second Anglo Boer War film *Verraaiers* are elaborated on in this chapter. Firstly, we contextualise it within the broader historiography of South African movies set against the backdrop of the Second Anglo Boer War.

The Second Anglo Boer War (1899-1902) was the first war of the twentieth century, and like many other historical conflicts, 'it turned out quite differently from what had been expected' (Woronoff, 2009:vii). Whereas the British government expected a swift end to the war, they had to revert to a scorched earth policy and turn the fertile countryside into a barren wasteland before claiming victory. The scorched earth policy also entailed the British incarceration of Boer women and children, as well as their black servants, in concentration camps. Grundlingh contends that: 'It was a strategy employed by the British high command to curtail the activities of Boer guerrilla fighters who lived off the land and used their farmsteads as bases. Through neglect and incompetence, 27 929 Boers died from disease [in these camps]' (Grundlingh, 1999:21). Therefore, this war left a sensitive and contested cultural legacy of bitter memories and mutual recriminations.

Yet the war's harshness was generally not represented in South African period piece films about the conflict, especially those produced during the Afrikaner nationalism era (from the 1940s to the 1990s).<sup>2</sup> This trend began with one of South Africa's first feature-length films, *De Voortrekkers* (The Pioneers) (Shaw, 1916). Though the film depicted the Great Trek, a mass migration of white farmers from the Cape Colony to flee British Imperialism, *De Voortrekkers*'s narrative and plot steered clear of the friction between Afrikaans and English white South Africans and conformed to a prevailing hegemony of a unified white nation (Tomaselli, 1985:18). Prime minister Jan Smuts's pro-British regime constructed this 'unified

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2 Our chapter uses the term 'Afrikaner' as a cultural signifier for white Afrikaans-speaking South Africans who identify with the culture. They are primarily descendants of the Boer nation. Though most current Afrikaans speakers hail from the Khoisan or so-called coloured people, with the term "Afrikaner", we refer to white Afrikaans-speakers only.

nation' narrative following the end of the Second Anglo Boer War because he needed the white English-speaking vote to maintain power (Smith, 1999:174).

Though many Afrikaans films set against the backdrop of the Second Anglo Boer War, such as Joseph Albrecht's short film *Sarie Marais* (1931) as well as the features *Die Ruiters in die Nag* (The Rider in the Night) (Perold, 1963), *Die Kavaliers* (The Cavaliers) (De Witt, 1966), *Die Kavaliers's* sequel, the musical drama *Kruger Miljoene* (Kruger Millions) (Hall, 1967) and *Majuba: Heuwel van Duiwe* (Majuba: Hill of Doves) (Millin, 1968), depict the friction and English and Boer characters at war with each other, they still present an 'underlying civility, real or imagined, between the two sides' (Jeffery, 2017:160). Therefore, these representations could be interpreted as trying to maintain a status quo of unity between Afrikaners and English-speaking white people in the context of the sixties – especially since it was in this decade that the South African government announced its withdrawal from the British Commonwealth and declared the country a republic (Jansen van Vuuren, 2016:38).

In the decade after South Africa became a democracy in 1994, academics discussed the so-called Afrikaner identity crisis (Lambrechts & Visagie, 2009). Yes, Afrikaners were embraced by then President Nelson Mandela as part of the 'Rainbow Nation', yet with the new dispensation, they had to come to grips with a loss of societal prominence and, even more importantly, the unmasking of many of the myths constructed by the former Nationalist government's ideological apparatus.<sup>3</sup> Reid contends: 'White identities... had

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3 The population of South Africa is often referred to as the 'Rainbow Nation' since it consist of many cultural, racial and ethnic groups. However, like the different colours of the rainbow, these groups exist as one unit. See: Times of India. 2007. Why is the Republic of South Africa referred to as a Rainbow Nation? [online]. Available from: <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/why-is-the-republic-of-south-africa-referred-to-as-a-rainbow-nation/articleshow/2515812.cms>

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to be renegotiated, but... needed to speak the reconciliatory ideological discourse of the new South Africa and the Rainbow Nation myth' (2012:47).

With the changing of street, city, and municipality place names to reflect and pay homage to stalwarts of the anti-apartheid struggle, not only Afrikaners but also English-speaking minorities in KwaZulu-Natal felt as if their heritage was symbolically targeted because attacking a cultural icon is often taken quite literally as a personal attack on an individual or culture. (Krog, 2013). Meanwhile, some Afrikaners were rebelling, and this rebellion was reflected in their music. In 2006, two prominent songs tapped into a broader sentiment, especially amongst young white Afrikaners who were 'fed up with being demonised as nasty racists who have done nothing right while constantly being reminded of their 'shameful history'' (Oelofse, 2007). In a local radio hit *Nie Langer* (No Longer) from the Pretoria-based band *Klopjag* (Raid), its lead singer, Sallas de Jager, sang the lyrics that he would 'stand at the back of the queue and wear my rainbow on my sleeve, but I will not say sorry anymore' (*translated from the original Afrikaans song's lyrics*)<sup>4</sup>. However, what drew the most attention and focused the public sphere's attention on the so-called 'Afrikaner plight' was the singer Bok van Blerk's song *De La Rey*, which was released in 2007.

General Koos de la Rey, the 'Lion of the Western Transvaal', is historically known for his outstanding military achievements during the Second Anglo Boer War and 'the good treatment he gave to the wounded British officer Lord Methuen and other prisoners of war' (Krog, 2013:180). His steadfastness as a *Bittereinder* (bitter ender) who refused to surrender, has made him revered amongst Afrikaners. Therefore, the anthem calling for De la Rey to return and be a leader to the Boer descendants found an audience proudly singing along to the song's lyrics in restaurants, pubs and traditional *sokkie* (an Afrikaner dance style) dance venues.

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4 This is the same Sallas de Jager who wrote and produced the feature film *Verraaiers*.

The song 'made front-page headlines in the USA and the U.K., and an extraordinary number of radio and television hosts, intellectuals, commentators, editors, journalists, politicians and ordinary letter writers felt obliged to give their interpretation of the song' (Krog, 2013:177). The ruling ANC government felt uncomfortable enough with the song's lyrics to release a media statement titled *De la Rey and its coded message fermenting revolutionary sentiments*. Within this statement, the Department of Arts and Culture (DAC, 2007) warns explicitly against the chorus line 'De la Rey, De la Rey, will you lead the Boers once again', being used as a rallying cry for right-wing Afrikaner movements. The song's popularity spurred the songwriters Sean Else and Johan Vorster to collaborate with playwright Deon Opperman in creating the stage musical *Ons vir Jou* in 2008 (We for You, Else, 2008). The musical focuses on the exploits of De la Rey and his family from the lead-up to the war until the peace agreement was signed.

In 2011, Sallas de Jager wrote the screenplay and produced the film *Verraaiers*. *Verraaiers* premiered at the 2012 *Silwerskerm* (silver screen) film festival in Camps Bay, South Africa. Festival-goers voted the film the 'audience's favourite feature', and Gys de Villiers won the Best Leading Male Actor award for his portrayal of Commandant van Aswegen. As the film was made predominantly by Afrikaans filmmakers (descendants of the nation who lost the war), many viewers expected it to portray the Boers' heroic exploits during the war.<sup>5</sup> However, in contrast, the filmmakers distinctly consider the film's post-apartheid context in constructing its core theme. This theme underwrites a mature and circumspect criticism of war by focusing on its victims, specifically those who did not subscribe to the dominant Afrikaner hegemony

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5 *Verraaiers*'s main credits include nine Afrikaners: director Paul Eilers, screenwriter (and producer) De Jager, producer Danie Bester and six executive producers. The 'other' executive producers (who are not native Afrikaans-speakers) are Michael Auret, Joel Phiri and Themba Sibeko.

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and thus were branded as traitors (Jansen van Vuuren, 2015:58).

### **Verraaiers's Narrative and Structure**

*Verraaiers* is the saga of a tragic hero or so-called traitor, Commandant van Aswegen, his young son Carel-Jan, his sons-in-law, Henry Ahrens and Robert Machlachlan, and their close friend Ronald Boyd, who find themselves on the wrong side of history. Upon hearing about Kitchener's scorched earth policy and how Boer women and children are put into concentration camps, they take up the British-offered amnesty and surrender to save their farm and reunite as a family unit.<sup>6</sup> The world-famous soldier, statesman and intellectual, General Jan Smuts, is depicted as the character who convinces General de la Rey (and the other Boer commanders) that they should prosecute and execute Boers who surrender before the end of the war. Therefore, the Van Aswegens are convicted of treason and sentenced to death. After much inner turmoil and reflection, De la Rey rejects Smuts's decision and pardons all extended Van Aswegen family members. He sends his assistant Gerrie to Wolmaransstad to convey the message, but Gerrie arrives too late to save the men, as they are executed mere minutes before his arrival. Only the youngest son, Carel-Jan, is spared.

*Verraaiers'* producer and screenwriter, Sallas de Jager, and his father, the film's executive producer, Piet de Jager, were inspired to make the film after reading Albert Blake's book *Boereverraaier: Teregstellings tydens die Anglo-Boereoorlog* (Boer Traitor: Executions during the Second Anglo Boer War) which was published in 2010. Blake, in turn, acknowledges the groundbreaking research conducted by historian Albert Grundlingh and originally published in 1979 as *Die 'Hendsoppers' en 'Joiners': die rasionaal en verskynsel van*

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6 Machlachlan is married to Van Aswegen's daughter, Martha. Though he sympathises with the Boer cause, he is not cut out to be a soldier.

*verraad* (The 'hands-uppers' and 'joiners': the rationale and phenomenon of treason) (Grundlingh, 1979)

De Jager adapted Chapter 7 of Blake's book, which documents the treason trials of the Boers that happened in the Wolmaransstad area.<sup>7</sup> Blake conducted extensive research from courts material contained in the archives and narrated the events that led up to the treason trials of the 48-year-old Jacobus Petrus Daniel Theunissen, his son, Christiaan Jacobus Theunissen, his two sons-in-law, Henry Ahrens and Robert Machlachlan, and their friend, Ronald Boyd. De Jager changed two of the central characters' surnames (from Theunissen to Van Aswegen). He also took more freedom in their characterisation, making the older Van Aswegen more sympathetic and likeable to the audience. Whereas Blake depicts Theunissen's motivation as being greed, since he does not want to lose his properties to arson, Van Aswegen is depicted as a family man who puts their interest and safety above all else.

In his book, Blake writes that the so-called Boer traitors' execution is 'one of the greatest tragedies of Afrikaners' history' and that the shame and trauma associated with it urged the 1970s National Party government to prohibit the publication of the names of Boer *hendsoppers*' (Blake, 2010b:13). Thus, apart from Albert Grundlingh's book (mentioned above), most twentieth-century authors ignored this section of Second Anglo Boer War history. Blake further alleges that in 1910, Louis Botha burned documents containing information about the Boers who fought on the British side (the so-called *joiners*). However, he could not find documents as evidence to substantiate this. Blake adds, 'More than just the names of the traitors were kept silent. There was a definite opinion that it was better to withhold their deeds and influence from the descendants [of the Boer *volk*]' (*authors' translation*). According to him, the Boer treason and the resulting

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7 Wolmaransstad is today located in the North West province of South Africa. At the time of the war, it was a town located in the geographical area of the Transvaal, also known as the Zuid-Afrikaansche Republiek.

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executions have formed part of the so-called 'memory loss' that existed amongst Afrikaners for most of the twentieth century (Blake, 2010a:17).<sup>8</sup> This memory was revived with De Jager and director Paul Eilers' film, *Verraaiers*.

*Verraaiers* falls in the court-martial courtroom drama genre like its perspicacious counterpart, *Breaker Morant*. Yet, its structure is different. In *Breaker Morant*, the trial proceeds from the beginning to the end of the film, functioning as a unifying spine from which the story is told. In the form of testimonies or evidence put before the court, the past is then revealed to the audience as flashbacks. In contrast, *Verraaiers* is structured with two separate narratives. In the 1953 opening scene, High Court Judge Gerrie prepares his closing statements for a court case dealing with treason charges. He reads his key arguments out loud to himself, and thus, it plays out as a monologue. Looking at the camera, he concludes with the words: 'War is madness... and treason is a broken term...'

We then cut to November 1899 and meet De la Rey in a hospital tent. He bids farewell to his son Adaan, who was fatally wounded in a surprise attack that the British launched on the Boers. In the next scene, De la Rey meets Commandant van Aswegen and expresses his internal conflict and doubts about the war. De la Rey looks at Adaan's corpse before asking Van Aswegen, 'Is freedom really worth this much?' These words would continue to haunt Van Aswegen and play an influential role in his decision to take the neutrality oath. The viewer is finally introduced to a third narrative on 23 February 1953, featuring a grandfather (a much older Carel-Jan) and his grandson travelling to Pretoria by motor car.<sup>9</sup>

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8 Similarly, the black experience and suffering during the Second Anglo Boer War were relegated by historians until S.J. Maphalala's 1978 Master's thesis, J.S. Mohlamme's 1985 publication, *Black People in the Boer Republics during and in the Aftermath of the South African War of 1899-1902* and other authoritative publications by E. van Heyningen and S.V. Kessler.

9 Later in the film, these two meet Gerrie at the Paul Kruger statue (close to the Palace of Justice on Church Square) in Pretoria. We then discover that the characters are

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The following sequence is set in August 1900. Van Aswegen finds out about Kitchener's scorched earth policy when he applies for leave from the commando to attend his daughter's wedding. His superior tells him that this policy would entail that Boers' farms, livestock, and towns would be torched and that the British would relocate Boer women and children (as well as their black farm workers and servants) to concentration camps.

At the wedding, we witness his daughter marrying a Scottish treasurer, Robert Machlachlan. Machlachlan and his best man, the shopkeeper Ronald Boyd, were born in Scotland but grew up in the Transvaal. The wedding scene establishes the closeness of the family unit and foreshadows that Van Aswegen will make sacrifices to protect them. He tells his family about the new policy and convinces his son, Carel-Jan, and son-in-law, Henry Ahrens, to also take the neutrality oath.

When the Van Aswegens receive orders to return to the front, Machlachlan and Boyd offer to assist them in escaping to the British Cape Colony. However, all of the men are arrested. During the treason trial, it is argued that the two Scottish men are Transvaal burghers, and thus, they are also convicted of treason charges and are executed with the Van Aswegens.

The film starts in 1953, introducing an aged Gerrie and Carel-Jan, and ends with them reminiscing on Church Square in Pretoria. Thus, one deduces that the main narrative (set between 1899 and 1902 and culminating with the Van Aswegens' execution) is a prolonged flashback. This establishes a creative interplay between a past and a future and vice versa. The complex story structure results in an impressionistic mosaic of meaning that is not easily absorbed in a single viewing of the film, but strongly impacts the viewer's subconscious. The narrative design makes the film more realistic than a formulaic 'classic' movie structure. Though the film ends with Gerrie and Carel-Jan reminiscing

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commemorating the Van Aswegen family's deaths annually on the day that the executions happened.

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on Church Square and thus bringing closure about the war events, it remains unfinished in viewers' minds in a continuing interaction with a meta-narrative.

Though this chapter's authors revere the narrative design, we acknowledge that it also could have led to *Verraiers* being classified as an art-house film, which would have limited a broad uptake of the film by South African audiences.

With its sombre gravity, reminiscent of the works of the novelist William Faulkner, *Verraiers* quite literally, through its opening monologue, denounces war as insanity. Moreover, while the anguish expressed through films such as *Breaker Morant* (1980) or *Gallipoli* (Weir, 1981) is of an order that can still be soothed through hero redemption, *Verraiers* interrogates the militaristic hero ethos and, through multiple dialogue lines, questions if freedom is worth the consequences of war.

Following in the footsteps of director Katinka Heyns's iconic South African drama series *Feast of the Uninvited* (Heyns, 2008), written by P.G. Du Plessis, *Verraiers* is an imperative film in the Second Anglo Boer War canon. The post-script in the film's closing titles is a quotation from the same P.G. du Plessis that reads: '*But it will take generations before the wailing of our wounding of others - our leprosy of unreality, the leprosy in our genes that wounded us so much will die down over the lakes*'. This quote might suggest a degree of self-consciousness amongst those who call themselves Afrikaners about their historical apartheid sins.<sup>10</sup> This self-consciousness might account for the decline of Second Anglo Boer War-themed filmic narratives produced after the end of apartheid in the early nineties. *Verraiers* deals with the war's continuing repercussions on South African society.

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10 In H el ene Opperman Lewis' book *Apartheid, Britain's Bastard Child* (2016:7), she argues that these sins of the Afrikaans Nationalist government can be partly blamed on the collective memory amongst Afrikaners of Boer suffering and the far-reaching effects of the humiliation suffered during the Second Anglo Boer War and its immediate aftermath.

With its post-1994 context, it might be regarded as an emergent new form and a significant turning point of its oeuvre, a sociologically braver and more liberating film compared to the Second Anglo Boer War films of the 1960s that scholars aptly referred to as unremarkable *escapist* films (Botha, 2012:51).

### **The significance of De la Rey and Smuts as film characters**

According to historians, De la Rey was a man of peace. On the eve of the outbreak of the Second Anglo Boer War, De la Rey clashed in a secret crisis meeting of the Transvaal Parliament with the party of Boers led by President Kruger and his adviser Jan Smuts, at the time State Attorney of the Transvaal Republic.<sup>11</sup> In the crisis meeting, De la Rey warned that Britain was a great power that could not be defeated in the imminent war. He had advocated that the Boers adapt and temporarily cooperate to co-exist with British Imperialism (Armstrong, 1937). In response, Paul Kruger branded De La Rey a *coward* and a *traitor*. However, after war was declared, De la Rey proved true to his words and, as a General, was the greatest military tactician the Boers had (Pretorius, 2009:115). One of South Africa's earlier colonial historians, George McCall Theal, wrote that in 1899, the Boer population that had evolved in southern Africa already numbered four hundred thousand (McCall Theal, 2012). Some speculate that had Kruger heeded De la Rey's judgement of voluntary coexistence with the British and the war had not happened, these statistics (by the generally current population growth rate before the war) meant that today, Afrikaners would have been one of the

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11 Some argue that the Boers were led into the trap set by Lord Milner and Joseph Chamberlain, Britain's Colonial Secretary, when neither side had *casus belli*. According to Armstrong (1937), Cecil Rhodes and the significant City of London financial houses like Werner & Beit urgently needed the war for their Imperialist expansion plans.

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largest population groups in South Africa (Opperman Lewis, 2016).<sup>12</sup>

Jan Smuts studied law at Cambridge University and achieved brilliant academic qualifications. After the failed Jameson raid, Smuts distanced himself from Cecil John Rhodes and even went as far as renouncing his Cape Colony citizenship and moving to Johannesburg to become a citizen of the Transvaal Republic.<sup>13</sup> In the lead-up to the Second Anglo Boer War, Smuts initially 'pleaded with the Kruger government not to give the British government any cause to encroach on the independence of the Transvaal and urged Kruger to introduce franchise reform' (Pretorius, 2009:419). In a memorandum that was released in September 1899, Smuts suggested that 'if war did break out [the Boers should implement] a quick republican offensive before British reinforcements could arrive' (Pretorius, 2009:419). However, these suggestions were not fully implemented.

Smuts drafted the ultimatum to Britain declaring the War of 1899-1902. Pakenham (1979) writes that the Boer ultimatum gave notice that if the British troops built on the borders of the Boer Republics and other apparent preparations for war were not curtailed and reversed within a specific time, the Boer Republics would take the offensive. The British side used this ultimatum to make the Boers appear to be the belligerent party. The British press publicised the ultimatum to inflame British public opinion. After the Jameson Raid, Cecil Rhodes was temporarily in England. At the time, he stated

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12 On this basis, most scholars agree that colonialism and its Imperialism have much to answer for in South Africa, Australia, the United States and Canada. Yet some argue that the genocide in the British concentration camps was self-inflicted because of the *Bittereinders*' persistence in continuing to fight after the Boer capitals of Bloemfontein and Pretoria had fallen (BBC Rees-Mogg, 2019).

13 When Paul Kruger appointed Smuts as State Attorney of the Transvaal, *The Star* newspaper wrote: "Though he may have all the precociousness of a Pitt, we consider twenty-eight is rather too young an age for the State Attorney of the South African Republic" (Farwell, 1976:335).

that he did not think there would be a war and that President Kruger ‘was not such a bad fellow after all’ (Pakenham, 1979).<sup>14</sup> Smuts became a Boer general, and ‘from July 1900, Smuts was attached to the commando of General De la Rey in the western Transvaal’ (Pretorius, 2009:419). This is the period depicted in *Verraiers*.

Smuts was a ruthless and pragmatic political strategist and, in the not-too-distant future, was destined to become a significant player in international relations. He participated in the Versailles Peace Conference after World War I, drafted the document upon which ‘The League of Nations’ was founded, and contributed to forming the British Commonwealth. He outlined the Union Constitution of South Africa, bringing the single state into being in 1910.<sup>15</sup> Under his leadership, the country became a prominent member of the British Empire and, subsequently, the British Commonwealth (Steyn, 2015).

Judging from the brief description above, we argue that Smuts and De la Rey are not only key historical figures but have also been made into myths by their depiction in oral tales, the media, and popular culture (Krog, 2013). They continue to hold a powerful mythological status, especially amongst South Africans. Post 1994, as South Africa made the transition from apartheid to democracy, many creatives aimed to use their art to reconfigure certain myths created by the colonial and later the apartheid government (Reid, 2012:49). Therefore, one could argue that depicting these characters (De la Rey and Smuts) in the same film would, in advertising terms, be regarded as a unique selling proposition (USP) of *Verraiers*.

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14 Some scholars argue that the real reason causing the Second Anglo Boer War was the intention of World Capital to expand through a vast source of gold supply. This required Britain to destroy southern Africa’s agricultural economy to ensure a supply of cheap and disenfranchised labour to realise the potential of gold production (See Friedman, 1975; Meredith, 2008).

15 Smuts rejected a Federal Constitution like Australia’s because it would be “too expensive” to run (Friedman, 1975; Meredith, 2008).

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Smuts is such a complex personality that historians will never be able to gauge whether he was collaborating with the British Empire to his advantage.<sup>16</sup> He was not exceptionally compassionate to his Afrikaner people, and scholarship attesting to this strongly influenced De Jager while creating Smuts as the antagonist of *Verraaiers*. Smuts is the one who sends the Van Aswegens to their death even after De la Rey intercedes on their behalf – and pleads that their sentences be lifted.<sup>17</sup>

Historically, while leading the pro-British United Party as South African Prime Minister after World War II, Smuts was unexpectedly defeated by the Afrikaner National Party in 1948. After this apparent victory of Afrikaner nationalism, South Africa began steadily descending from its pedestal on the world stage. South Africa was later to be labelled as a threat to world peace and the world's most significant pariah state. The damaged Boer victims of the concentration camps and their following generation were destined to cast themselves as the predators exploiting South Africa's black population. Some have argued that this was partly caused by the Second Anglo Boer War's scorched earth policy. Its aftermath seriously crippled Afrikaners by wiping out some of their most prominent family lines, and some also argued their democratic values and culture of non-racism (Opperman Lewis, 2016:371).

### De la Rey pitted against Smuts

The opportunity to write a scene depicting Jan Smuts and De la Rey interacting and facing each other is an audacious act. It

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16 Pakenham writes about reading these confidential War Office files: "...those that survived a bizarre decision to 'weed' them out in the 1950s – the files on which much of Amery's and Maurice's work had been based" (Pakenham, 1979:xv).

17 De Jager discussed his process of researching and writing *Verraaiers*'s screenplay after the film's première at the 2012 *Silwerskermfees*. The festival was hosted by kykNET (Multichoice) in partnership with the film distributor Nu Metro.

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presented screenwriter De Jager with a unique challenge to pen an encounter that stays with the audience through the film.

In a critical moment of the narrative, the Boer commanders (under De la Rey's leadership) discuss a response to the large number of Boer men who are surrendering to the British to return to their farms. Smuts then proposes that these men should be given an ultimatum: to return to their commandos or to be arrested on treason charges (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1:** In *Verraaiers* (2012), Morné du Toit portrays the role of Jan Smuts

True to life, De la Rey is represented as a gentleman, but perhaps in the film, he is more naïve than historians credit him to be (See Figure 2). However, his historical stature is not entirely reduced, and the myth survives fairly in this filmic portrayal. Smuts argues for the use of the death penalty to deter the Boers from taking the neutrality oath (which they took in return for British amnesty to save their families, farms, and properties). The film shows that even while under the spell of Smuts's logical argument, De la Rey's conscience is in a dilemma of trying to reconcile his integrity as a human being with the matter of state hegemony, as cogently expressed by Smuts (see Figure 3).

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**Figure 2:** De la Rey, portrayed by actor Deon Lotz in *Verraiers* (2012)



**Figure 3:** Smuts making a compelling argument to the Boer Generals in *Verraiers* (2012)

In the film's dialogue, the Smuts character argues, 'The death of 10 or 15 cowards is nothing compared to gaining 2 000 or 3 000 men'.

As might be expected according to his mythical reputation, Smuts appears to be quite cunning, expressed

through his eye contact and eye movements. As shown in Figure 3, the acting and direction of these particular shots of Smuts is an excellent example of Orson Welles' claim that the camera can sometimes speak a greater truth than words. Smuts counters De la Rey's questions about needing a defence counsel at the trial and designs the trial process to ensure that executions will take place. He gets the better of De la Rey by overcoming the latter's reservations with an assurance that his proclamation will provide representations of mitigating circumstances to military command before death sentences are carried out. Smuts's arguments seem logical and pragmatic, with De la Rey showing the younger Smuts due regard and deference.

This scene is superbly written and executed by Paul Eilers and cinematographer Tom Marais. Smuts's complex and coldly pragmatic personality is characterised by playing on existing Afrikaans viewers' distrust about his bona fides and instilling apprehension about what will become of the Van Aswegens.

The level of intrigue surrounding the trial and convictions in *Verraaiers* parallels that of *Breaker Morant*, where it is made apparent that the convictions are to be secured regardless of any merits that the defence might hold. Van Aswegen argues that before the announcement of the scorched earth policy, he was a brave leader who secured many victories for the Boers. He also contends that he was the one who convinced his son-in-law, Henry Ahrens, and son, Carel-Jan, to lay down arms and take the neutrality oath. The Scottish shopkeeper, Boyd, pleads that he offered all of his shop's supplies to the Boer's war effort and that this action even bankrupted him. These arguments dispel earlier notions upheld by Afrikaans Second Anglo Boer War films that 'no sacrifice was too much for the Boer and the Afrikaner cause' – a belief supporting the tenancies of Afrikaner nationalism during apartheid. Therefore, this film rejects illusions that the war was an 'era of innocence' for the Afrikaners and instead points to a sense of shame held by Afrikaners, notably 'a shame that is not desired' (Krog, 2013:185).

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Later in the film, De la Rey's concerns about the subsequent treason trials led him to inspect the court and prison on an abandoned Boer farm. Only then does he discover that the same Van Aswegen (previously directly under De la Rey's command and a close advisor to him) heads the condemned group. However, despite his rank, De la Rey finds himself unable to release the prisoners because he recognises their trial and conviction in an official court of law. State procedure cannot simply be overridden, and the proper channels must be followed in consultation with State Attorney General Smuts. De la Rey also offers to write a mitigation letter to Smuts to plead for a pardon from the death penalty.

Still, Smuts stubbornly refuses to accept any of the mitigations sent to him by the Van Aswegen family and the two Scots, Machlachlan and Boyd, as extenuating circumstances sufficient to reprieve the death sentences. His subsequent response to De la Rey's letter is polite but firm, impatient, and relatively insensitive to the sanctity of the human lives at stake. He writes: 'Indeed, I was wrong. I think Van Aswegen senior, Ahrens and the two Scots' sentences should be carried out. However, concerning Van Aswegen junior [Carel-Jan], given that he is so young, I suggest we reduce his sentence to five years of hard labour. I leave the decision up to you'. After that, De la Rey, in exasperation, finally shouts: 'To hell with Smuts. I am going to pardon all five of them!'

In these later sequences, particularly when he is psychologically breaking free of the spell cast by Smuts's forceful reasoning, De la Rey is depicted in his characteristic mythical long cloak jacket, where he replaces his hat on his bald head to connote a recovery of his power and potential resurrection of the Afrikaner nation. De La Rey orders his legal adviser and assistant, Gerrie, to ride to the farm in haste to stop the executions. The executions are supposed to occur at 7.00 am, but the overeager prison warder moves the execution time forward and leads the prisoners out for execution at 5.30 am. Gerrie is only in time to save the youngest son, Carel-Jan. Since the executioners did not receive the pardons from Smuts

and De la Rey in time, they were also on the verge of shooting Carel-Jan when Gerrie arrived.

The film then closes with a return to the 1953 narrative. Gerrie and Carel-Jan are lost for words when Carel-Jan's grandson asks whether they might also build a statue for his great-grandfather (Commandant van Aswegen), who was shot in the war. Gerrie responds by saying, 'I hope so, I really hope so.'

### **Protagonists, Antagonists, and Filmic Legacy**

Film theory holds that the protagonist is the main character the audience identifies with and through whose eyes the story is usually told. It is also often the character who learns how to overcome an inner flaw and thus goes through psychological change (Russin & Downs, 2012). *Verraiers* presents the audience with various heroes to associate with, depending on their ideological outlook and beliefs: Van Aswegen, De la Rey, and Smuts. The viewer could also choose to identify with Carel-Jan and Gerrie, the protagonists of the 1953 plotline, and the characters from whose memories the more extended narrative is derived.

Before *Verraiers*'s production, Smuts and De la Rey existed as mythical heroes and great leaders in the public domain. Therefore, we argue that their depiction overshadows Van Aswegen's in the audience's after-memory of this film. The interaction between De la Rey and Smuts within the film has a coded allegorical meaning open to various interpretations. However, most importantly, their first (and only physical) interaction in *Verraiers* is neither minor nor peripherally incidental. It is a turning point in the plot and the catalyst that sets the ball rolling for the arrest and subsequent trial. This leads to the film's climax – the execution of the apparent anti-hero and tragic protagonist, Commandant van Aswegen, and his family.

A counter-argument could thus be that De la Rey is the real protagonist of *Verraiers*, most notably in overcoming his flaw and learning to stand up to Smuts – to which the

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story of Van Aswegen and his sons are a foil. Where the de facto executioner of the Australians in *Breaker Morant* is Lord Kitchener – an Englishman, not an Australian, in *Verraaiers*, the Van Aswegens' execution is condoned by their fellow Afrikaner and supposed comrade, Jan Smuts. After the first screening of *Verraaiers* at the *Silwerskerm* Film Festival in August 2012, some viewers also recalled Smuts's historical role in Jopie Fourie's 1914 execution. Taking the topical significance of the 2007 De la Rey song (and the controversy of calling for De la Rey's reincarnation to come forth) into consideration, it makes one wonder if Carel-Jan's survival in the film is perhaps a hopeful message to Afrikaners.

Given the apparent similarities between *Breaker Morant* and *Verraaiers* and the former film's success amongst international audiences, it was surprising to some that South Africans treated *Verraaiers* with indifference when it was released at the local box office in 2013.<sup>18</sup> It was previously argued that it could be attributed to the portrayal of the main protagonist, Van Aswegen, as a tragic anti-hero. Usually, audiences desire a willing hero with whom they can identify, and the Van Aswegens' death and the film's end message might have left the viewers disillusioned (Jansen van Vuuren, 2015:59). However, giving too much importance to archetypes may underestimate cinema audiences, and encourage formulaic and stereotypical storytelling concepts. Other reasons for its lack of success at cinemas could be attributed to its complex narrative structure that might not appeal to the average blockbuster filmgoer. Furthermore, Judge Gerrie's monologue, aimed directly at the camera and critiquing war and subsequent treason trials, is perhaps too preachy for a modern audience.

Britz agrees with Krog's 2013 sentiments about Afrikaners' post-1994 aversion to change. She argues that

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18 Despite its initial failure at local cinemas, the executive producer told the authors that sales of the film in DVD format were quite successful. *Verraaiers* was also subsequently screened multiple times in the years since then by Multichoice's DSTV channels, kykNET and fliekNET.

*Verraiers* falls into the category of films that receive a lukewarm response from an Afrikaans audience that believes that they are not like the characters portrayed on screen, thus 'indicating the audience's avoidance of being confronted with contradictory representations [of what they believe to be] the Afrikaner' (Britz, 2017:101).

The target Afrikaans audience is asked to make a problematic subconscious decision after seeing the film: to choose whether they can still identify with either De la Rey or Jan Smuts as heroes. In this sophisticated film, the revered peacemaker (De la Rey) and diplomat (Smuts) make decisions that ultimately led to the destruction of the Van Aswegens, a nuclear family consisting of both Afrikaners and the two white English-speaking Scots. Thus, *Verraiers* could also be regarded as putting Smuts and De La Rey on trial, where the film audience is the jury. It is also a very pessimistic film about the helplessness and betrayal of citizens at the mercy of those entrusted with the powers of the state and the danger of trusting political songs or advertisements for any 'great' leaders from wherever the source. The reason why *Verraiers* failed at the box office might be that the truth is too bitter a pill to swallow, or it could more probably be that the film was not exhibited long enough to become fully appreciated through word of mouth.

## Conclusion

This chapter examined the historical context in which the film *Verraiers* (2012) was produced and released. The film's failure at the box office was attributed in past scholarship to the portrayal of Van Aswegen as a tragic hero who dies at the end of the story. While the above deduction is partly correct, the explanation should also be sought regarding other factors, such as its narrative design (which can be confusing to a non-film literate viewer) and its grave message. We conclude that though Commandant van Aswegen is set up to be the main protagonist in *Verraiers*, the characters of De La Rey and Smuts loom larger than life, and, in a sense, 'steal the show'

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from Van Aswegen. Therefore, after careful consideration, we argue that De la Rey is the real main protagonist and Smuts the film's antagonist. However, *Verraaiers* covertly hides this fact. The film's true meaning has to be searched for in the meta-narrative beyond any hegemonic strictures.

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