




January 2017

The Wound

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Recommended Citation

Lyden, John C. (2017) "The Wound," *Journal of Religion & Film*: Vol. 21: Iss. 1, Article 14.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/jrf/vol21/iss1/14>

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Abstract

This is a film review of *The Wound* (2016), directed by John Trengove.

Keywords

Male puberty rituals, circumcision, homosexuality, gender roles

Author Notes

John Lyden became Editor of the Journal of Religion & Film in 2011. He was Professor of Religion at Dana College from 1991-2010 and is now the Director of the Liberal Arts Core at Grand View University. He is the author of *Film as Religion: Myths, Morals, and Rituals* (NYU Press, 2003), and the editor of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Film* (Routledge, 2009) and co-editor (with Eric Michael Mazur) of the *Routledge Companion to Religion and Popular Culture* (2015). He was the 2008 recipient of the Spiritus Award for Outstanding Contributions to the study of Religion and Film.



The Wound (2016), directed by John Trengove

Xolani works in a factory in Johannesburg, but every year he acts as a “caregiver” to the young “initiates” who participate in the traditional tribal ritual of manhood, as they undergo circumcision and live in the woods for several weeks. Not all the city boys participate in this ritual anymore, but the older generation encourages them to do so as they believe it is an important link to their heritage and their values. Xolani is asked by a family friend to be the caregiver of his son, Kwanda, as the father believes his son needs to return to traditional values and identity.

Another caregiver is Xolani’s old friend Viya, and they meet up every year to help with these rituals. But they are also secretly gay lovers, even though Viya is married.

The situation becomes tense as Kwanda suspects the relationship between Xolani and Viya is a sexual one. Kwanda is also gay, which his fellow initiates also suspect, and this creates problems for his acceptance among them. Xolani is caught in the middle, trying to help Kwanda

but also not wanting to lose his relationship with Viya. Kwanda believes that it is wrong to hide his own gay identity, just as it is wrong for Xolani and Viya to hide theirs; but Viya as a closeted married man cannot accept his own gay identity, and Xolani does not want to lose his relationship with Viya.

This film shows that even in a traditional tribal culture, there will be homosexuality, even if it is not acknowledged. It does not offer a hopeful vision for the acceptance of gay identity in this context, but it does show that one can become a man with integrity and also be gay. Such traditional rituals surrounding male puberty, often related to circumcision and undergoing ordeals in the wild, have not been shown to actually create better men—although the view persists that such ordeals of manhood are necessary to becoming mature. Even conservative American Christians speak nostalgically about the importance of some sort of transition to manhood connected to an affirmation of patriarchal culture and traditional gender roles. One wishes that the values of maturity and integrity, however, did not need to be tied to patriarchal values or heteronormativity. Is it possible to celebrate manhood and womanhood without stereotyping all gender roles? Can we have rituals that help us mature as human beings, without reinforcing discrimination or violence? This movie does not answer that question, but it raises it.