

## Movie Review: *Moffie* (2020)

Director Oliver Hermanus

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I watched the much-acclaimed local movie *Moffie* last night. As expected, it brought back many conflicting memories of my own experiences as a conscript in the former South African Defence Force (SADF). "Rites of passage" movies that explore the induction, basic training and further deployment of soldiers in an operational area or warzone are nothing new, it is well-trodden cinematic territory. The benchmark is undoubtedly Stanley Kubrick's masterpiece, *Full Metal Jacket* (1987). No other movie comes close to depicting the chaos, vicious incongruities and brutal reshaping of young men's minds and bodies in preparation for making war. More recently there was *Jarhead* (2005), and closer to home, there was the locally produced, *Kanarie* (2018), which offered a convincing and well-crafted depiction of the conscript experience in the SADF.

*Moffie* takes its place as a powerful and worthwhile movie experience within the genre. It gives voice to a largely silenced aspect of South Africa's history, touching on issues of whiteness, hyper-masculinity, conflicting sexualities and a gay man's experience of the military machine that was the SADF. There are sequences where *Moffie* sweeps the viewer along with scenes of masterful cinematography, often juxtaposed with intense machinegun-like bursts of violence. There is a scene depicting a group of conscripts enjoying a game of volleyball in the afternoon, a brief respite from the brutal intensity of basic training, but the calm is shortlived when the moment is jolted by the sudden shock of a conscript suicide. Of course, some would argue there are possible references to the homoeroticism of the volleyball match in Hollywood's *Top Gun* (1986), but the skilful manner in which Oliver Hermanus immediately obliterates any sense of respite, frames the cinematic power of the movie. *Moffie* is interspersed with further moments of beauty, and even tenderness, that are also viciously smithereened in seconds. Then there are instances where Hermanus comes close to replicating the surreal beauty of Terrence Malick's war movie "The Thin Red Line" (1998); watch out for the swimming scene where Kai Brummer, who plays the protagonist Nicholas Van der Swart, is immersed in the sunlit brackish water of a pond with fellow conscripts. It feels similar in tone and atmosphere to the Private Wit (Jim Caviezel) swimming scene in "The Thin Red Line".

However, despite the movie's ability to construct moments of striking shock and awe, it lacks fundamental narrative strength - the storyline ambles along a predictable path towards its expected arthouse conclusion. I never felt invested in any of the characters; Hermanus manages to keep the tribulations, trauma and ecstasy of Nicholas Van der Swart at a distance, so when he is eventually thrust into a life-threatening or life-altering moment, the audience feels little concern for his welfare. Hermanus' manner of keeping his

characters at a distance tends to blur the details and poignancy of the moment, whatever the outcome might be.

Van der Swart's enemies are mostly faceless, and combat takes place under the cover of darkness, again distancing and even *othering* the enemy. A brief face-to-face encounter with an enemy soldier follows the template of most war movies and does little to encourage any real human connection. Hermanus avoids capitalising on this pivotal moment in the movie, leaving me and Van der Swart in the dark of the Angolan bush. There is a scene from episode three of the landmark series *Band of Brothers* (2001), directed by Mikael Salomon, where Corporal Blithe (Marc Warren) fatally wounds a German soldier from a distance. After the battle, Blithe finds the dead German soldier slumped against a tree and notices an *edelweiss* flower in the dead soldier's lapel. Blithe removes the flower and his world crumbles under the weight of the knowledge he has killed a fellow human being. It is this deep sense of human connection that is missing from a similar scene in *Moffie*.

Nonetheless, Hermanus manages to weave the almost exclusively white universe of apartheid South Africa convincingly. The scene at the caravan park offers an eerie and somewhat disturbingly nostalgic peek show into white South Africans "at play and leisure" during the 1980s. It is one of the most engrossing sequences of the movie. Hermanus sustains the tones and textures of 80s South Africa by employing a subtle desaturated colour palette, excellent costume design and the intelligent choice of a traditional 4:3 television screen format that emulates the viewing experience of a by-gone era.

There were some minor errors and breaks in continuity. Actual hands-on physical abuse by SADF instructors was forbidden and rare, although this happens regularly throughout the basic training segments of *Moffie*. My point does not refute that abuses did not occur, but an experienced SADF instructor would have employed less hands-on methods if he wanted to punish troops or individuals. Furthermore, all conscripts would have been subjected to a military-style haircut. In the case of *Moffie*, this does not occur. Conscripts sport the very same hairstyles before and after induction, which in turn, waters down the stark transformation from civilian to soldier. I am perplexed as to why Hermanus avoids this crucial military *ritual* that marks the shedding of a conscript's civilian identity to create a sense of complete uniformity. *Moffie* also raises pertinent questions about the pervasive threat of communism or *rooigevaar* as a mean to "justify" conscription and apartheid ideologies. Interestingly, many ex-conscripts continue to believe that national service was part of a righteous national effort to stem the tide of communism, without which South Africa would have become a Soviet puppet state.

Although the soundtrack dovetails well with the visual style of *Moffie*, there are instances where it suffocates, rather than supports the narrative or visual sweep of the movie, to the point where I was wishing I could reduce the volume of the music so I could simply focus on

the cinematography. These are all relatively insignificant points of criticism or irritation and do little to detract from the movie's core message.

During 2016, I conducted numerous interviews with ex-conscripts, and as expected the plight and abuse of gay conscripts by instructors or fellow conscripts was rarely mentioned. Instances of abuse no doubt occurred and the horrors of *The Aversion Project* led by Dr Aubrey Levin in Ward 22 at 1 Military Hospital in Voortrekkerhoogte were silenced by the regime and hastily consigned to the dustbin of history in the post-apartheid era. Although *Moffie* skirts the actual details of *The Aversion Project*, it nonetheless draws attention to the horrors of Ward 22 as a human rights violation. Sources indicate that almost 900 male conscripts, between the ages of 16 and 24 years old were “surgically turned into women and given birth certificates to fit their modified anatomy”.

The power of *Moffie* is that it ultimately gives voice and draws attention to the oft-hidden and largely silenced history of a particular generation of white South African males, irrespective of their sexuality. Much like apartheid, the militarised childhoods of white males and their subsequent conscription into the SADF is one among many painful and traumatic South African histories, and the full extent of its damage will never be quantified. Ultimately, *Moffie* lifts a sharp-edged cinematic mirror to South African audiences that reflects the deep and endemic pain of all South Africans.

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