

MOFFIE

A FILM BY
OLIVER HERMANUS

MEDIA RESPONSE DOCUMENT



IFC FILMS PRESENTS A PORTOBELLO PRODUCTIONS FILM IN ASSOCIATION WITH PENZANCE FILMS WITH THE SUPPORT OF THE DEPARTMENT OF TRADE AND INDUSTRY SOUTH AFRICA
STARRING KAI LUKE BRUMMER RYAN DE VILLIERS MATTHEW VEY STEFAN VERMAAK AND HILTON PELSER
DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY JAMIE D RAMSAY EDITORS ALAIN DESSAUVAGE & GEORGE HANMER PRODUCTION DESIGNER FRANZ LEWIS COSTUME DESIGNER REZA LEVY CASTING DIRECTOR JACI CHEMAN COMPOSER DRAAM DU TOIT
SCREENPLAY OLIVER HERMANUS AND JACK SIDEY BASED ON THE BOOK BY ANDRÉ CARL VAN DER MERWE EXECUTIVE PRODUCER PHILIP PRETTJOHN
CO-PRODUCERS THERESA RYAN-VAN-GRAAN LAMIES ALBERTUS GENEVIEVE HOPMEYR PRODUCERS ERIC ABRAHAM & JACK SIDEY DIRECTED BY OLIVER HERMANUS

Portobello

IFC FILMS

Review: In ‘Moffie,’ brutal intolerance in ‘80s South Africa

Associated Press

8 April 2021 | Jake Coyle

[Article link ›](#)

The main character of Oliver Hermanus’ shattering “Moffie,” set in 1981 South Africa, is a handsome, white 18-year-old. In the country’s system of apartheid, he is a member of the ruling class, but he’s no insider.

Shy, timid and closeted, Nicholas van der Swart (Kai Luke Brummer) is conscripted into the army as part of regulated military service for white males over 16. There, the film’s title — an Afrikaans’ anti-gay slur — isn’t directed at him but it’s hurled all around — an ever-present threat of ostracism and abuse. In brutal basic training, it’s as if bullets are already flying perilously close to Nicholas.

But “Moffie,” which opens in theaters and on-demand Friday, is more than a coming-of-age story about a young gay man in an unprogressive society. In following Nicholas into basic training, the film wades into the dark heart of apartheid and a cauldron of destructive masculinity. There, young men are indoctrinated, through the barks of drill sergeants, to an ideology of fear, oppression and nationalism endemic to 1980s South Africa but also to most any other place or era. Nicholas has been conscripted into an army of intolerance, one that sees him as an enemy.

From the start, the imagery by Hermanus and cinematographer Jamie D. Ramsay is grittily intimate, tactile and vivid. The score by Braam du Toit sets an ominous tone. The camera trails overhead the train that will take Nicholas to the barracks as it snakes slowly over the grasslands. We only briefly glimpse his life beforehand; his father hands him a girlie magazine for “ammunition.” On the train, a soon-to-be-friend (Stassen, played by Ryan de Villiersoffers) offers him a drink. When Nicholas declines, Stassen replies, “Are you sure? Do you know where we’re going?”

They’re in training for the border war with Angola and the perceived threat of communism. The training, at the orders of Sergeant Brand (Hilton Pelsner), is grueling. While suffering under the hot sun, they’re not just turned into warriors but brainwashed into believing communists, “Black savages” and “moffies” are all to be “cured” by killing them. Some of the scenes of bodies in the desert suggest Claire Denis’ “Beau Travail.” Life in the barracks nods to Stanley Kubrick’s “Full Metal Jacket.”

For Nicholas, it means keeping himself hidden except for a stolen glance or a moment of understanding from another in the same predicament. So silent and interior is the performance by the striking Brummer that Nicholas stays, to a certain extent, hidden from us, too. A single flashback to his life beforehand gives a hint at how he has been conditioned to feel only guilt about his sexuality. As time goes on, Nicholas realizes he’s not alone, and our sense of the many lives — both Black and white — left broken, beaten or dead by a heinous othering only expands.

It’s an usual perspective for an apartheid film, something the director — who is gay and mixed race — has acknowledged initially recoiling from. But that point-of-view only makes Hermanus’ mission all the more laudable. His film, adapted from a novel by André Carl van de Merwe, is like an inside job. By burrowing within the brutal propaganda of apartheid, Hermanus, in his intensely expressive, achingly sorrowful fourth film, has captured a mean machinery at work — one that still abides, long after the end of apartheid.

“Moffie” an IFC Films release, is unrated by the Motion Picture Association of America but contains intensely violent scenes. Running time: 106 minutes. Three and a half stars out of four.

Review: 'Moffie' adroitly depicts a gay man's life in the apartheid-era South African army

Los Angeles Times

8 April 2021 | Robert Abele

[Article link ›](#)

Apartheid South Africa was expert at churning out hate in its ruling white minority, and if one happened to be gay — then a literal crime — the loathing was conditioned to turn inward, too, like a self-throttling. Key to the sanctioned barbarism that defined the regime was its conscripting of young white males into their ongoing border wars, a brutalizing passage into toxic hetero-manhood depicted with pressurized sensitivity and artful dread in Oliver Hermanus' compelling dramatic feature "Moffie," named for the Afrikaans homophobic slur that followed anyone perceived as insufficiently masculine.

The story, adapted from a memoir-like novel by André Carl van der Merwe, is set in 1981, when fair-haired, soft-featured teenager Nicholas Van der Swart (Kai Luke Brummer) is about to start two years of compulsory military service in the South African Defense Force, feeding a campaign at the northern border (what is now independent Namibia) shooting at USSR-backed Angolans. The patriotic line was about stopping communism; the reality was defense of a racist state. And from the jolting train journey to the first grim days in uniform — intensified by a square aspect ratio that acts as a vise on Nicholas' viewpoint, and a groaning, plucked-strings score like an upset stomach — these early scenes are a charged sequence of ritualistic brutality and dehumanization, devoid of any hint of basic training as some romanticizing shaper of healthy discipline.

These are young men reinforced in violent bigotry. The more wild-eyed conscripts are already equipped enough in hate to gleefully hurl invective at a Black man waiting at a station platform; at camp, they in turn get abused into a more systematic compliance in sour machismo by snarling Sgt. Brand (a pulsating Hilton Pelsner), nastily fixated on ridding his ranks of any homosexuality. (One imagines this version of a well-trod military archetype wouldn't even abide the "this is my gun" gesture in the Marine chant made famous in "Full Metal Jacket" — might lead to the wrong kind of "fun.")

The atmosphere readily breeds macho policing. For Nicholas, being gay means being hyper-aware, a survival-minded observer shrewd enough to deflect any aggressive jock talk that grows threatening. Though the parting gift of a porn mag from his caring dad initially seemed clueless, at the right moment it proves useful as a badge of straightness. But Nicholas — played with magnetic reserve by Brummer — also recognizes a kindred partner in concealment when he sees one, allowing friendly exchanges with compassionate fellow recruit Dylan Stassen (Ryan de Villiers) to become an unspoken desire and watchful caring. That's all it may get to be, too, considering the punishment not only meted out in front of the recruits to those caught in homosexual acts, but also the rumors of a horrific place some are being sent to for further "treatment."

Hermanus, as a Black, queer South African, isn't about to paint Nicholas' predicament as on a par with apartheid's true victims. But the emotional intelligence he infuses "Moffie" with — all the way through its inevitable march to the front line — feels personal nonetheless, and empathetically inquisitive about the kind of masculine indoctrination that fuels oppression through rituals of violence and the criminalizing of identity. It's especially resonant in the brilliantly shot flashback scenes dramatizing a memory of Nicholas' from a swimming pool incident — one in which his dad memorably figures — and how distractive curiosity becomes the stuff of abiding, debilitating shame.

Aside from the many fine performances and the aforementioned boxed framing of Jamie Ramsay's coolly evocative cinematography — a still-refreshing aesthetic choice that rewards attention to close-ups, bodies and landscapes — Hermanus' use of different music styles is enriching, too, mixing Braam du Toit's score with recordings (from classical to opera to disco) that atmospherically complement the emotional timeline. Closing the film after an enigmatic, melancholy beach scene is a haunting cover of the Rodriguez song and unexpected apartheid-era anthem "Sugar Man," like a solemn coda about who we are after we've been taught not only to kill others, but something inside us.



‘Moffie’ Review: A Bleak Coming-of-Age

The New York Times

8 April 2021 | Glenn Kenny
[Article link ›](#)

This grueling film about the South African military going to war with Angola is replete with vicious, stark depictions of racism and homophobia.

From the mid-1960s to 1990, South Africa not only imposed apartheid but in a sense exported it. In Angola and nearby regions, white South African armies ostensibly fought communism in a long border war. Starting at age 16, white South African boys went through a period of mandatory military service.

The title of the often grueling movie “Moffie” is a derogatory Afrikaans term for homosexual. As young Nicholas (Kai Luke Brummer) heads off for training in 1981, his father hands him a rolled-up girlie magazine. “For fuel,” he explains, as Nicholas shrugs, clearly bemused. In a trench much later on, he forges a mild physical connection with another soldier.

This is not a prudent move. This young man’s army is a particularly brutal one. The training sequences bring to mind Stanley Kubrick’s “Full Metal Jacket,” but with a lot more racism. Not that these young men need to be trained in racism itself. The way a gaggle of them terrorize a lone Black man at a train depot, where they stop

on the way to camp, is stomach-churning. And the homophobia displayed by the recruits isn’t casual; it’s vicious.

Hilton Pelser, playing a berserk drill sergeant named Brand, sometimes makes R. Lee Ermey of “Jacket” look like Don Knotts. (For Pelser, this is an almost shocking reversal from his work in both “Kissing Booth” movies.) There is talk of a secret ward where soldiers with psychological issues — mostly discussed in terms of sexuality — are shipped and subjected to further trauma.

Brummer, who bears a passing resemblance to a young Peter O’Toole, is attractive and enigmatic as a young man finding himself in less-than-encouraging circumstances. The movie’s story line, adapted from a 2006 novel of the same name by André Carl van der Merwe, keeps its feet on the ground, rarely allowing the characters to express desire beyond implying it.

Because, as the movie shows, in the world of this army, merely exchanging a glance with another soldier could kick up enough homophobic fear and rage to start a riot. The director Oliver Hermanus also draws from Claire Denis’s “Beau Travail” in depicting attractive young male bodies. He gets too arty with the soundtrack at times — scoring a “Fight Club”-like “spin the bottle” game to Bach’s Toccata and Fugue in D minor is a bit much — but in depicting the horrific specifics of this particular man’s awful military experience, Hermanus delivers in abundance.



Int'l Critics Line: Todd McCarthy On BAFTA-Nominated 'Moffie'

Deadline

29 March 2021 | Todd McCarthy
[Article link](#) ›

Given the Apartheid-era backdrop of *Moffie*, there are more than enough prejudices to go around — anti-black, anti-gay, anti-communist, anti-British, for starters — and South African director Oliver Hermanus makes nuanced use of all of them in his very fine fourth feature. Premiered at the Venice Film Festival in 2019, the film is at last being released in the U.S. by IFC beginning April 9 and is nominated for a BAFTA for Outstanding Debut By A British Writer, Director or Producer,

The title is derogatory local slang for queer and, from the evidence on view here, one gleans that there cannot have been many less gay-friendly places on Earth in 1981 than South Africa. Based on an autobiographical novel by south African writer Andre Carl van der Swart, the film lifts the lid on same-sex desire just enough to stir the pot but refuses to indulge in any unrealistic wish fulfillment when depicting a time when discovered transgressions provoked the most extreme consequences.

The geo-political situation of the period was extremely complicated and represented one of the last East-West conflicts fueled by Soviet and Cuban involvement. These global issues matter not one whit to the story at hand other than

for the way they triggered the enforced army proscription of all late-teenage Afrikaner men.

Thus swept up is Nicholas van der Swart (Kai Luke Brummer), a good-looking lad who, as *Full Metal Jacket* hadn't been made yet, couldn't possibly have been properly prepared for what was in store for him in basic training. His drill lieutenant might not be as colorful as R. Lee Ermey, but he does offer as motivation, "The black savages are on our doorstep. So close we can smell them." Cheekily, Hermanus here tosses in a little Kubrick tribute by way of a classical excerpt from the *Barry Lyndon* soundtrack.

Thus inspired, the young white soldiers are shoved into a very close approximation of hell. Without spending undue time on it, the screenplay by Hermanus and Jack Sidey acutely captures the middle-class, well-educated nature of most of the conscripts who suddenly find themselves under the boot-heel of a ferocious officer who enjoys reminding his charges that, "You are no longer someone."

There's no such thing as privacy at boot camp, but there are group showers and a boxing match as well as momentary looks and even some brief touching that suggests a live current between Nicholas and another, seemingly more savvy lad, Stassen (Ryan de Villiers). This does lead to some momentary touching and solitary self-satisfaction on Nicholas' part. But both know that to go further would be ruinous. The



boys are daily trained and worked to the limit and sometimes beyond, so much so that one recruit blows his brains out while the others play volleyball.

The homoerotic vibe running beneath the surface is unmistakable, but so is a sense of constraint that keeps most, if not quite all, of the lads on the straight-and-narrow. As if this were not enough, Hermanus chooses this moment for an extended flashback in which a curious pre-pubescent Nicholas is ferociously accused of “spying” upon a fellow in a pool locker room. This little excursion to another time, another place, effectively locates the origins of Nicholas’ prudent caution in revealing his sexual hand, but it also yanks you out of the building narrative a bit at a pivotal moment.

Just as *Full Metal Jacket* made the abrupt jump from training camp to the heart of darkness, eight months later — and after an hour of screen time — *Moffie* moves its young soldiers to the front. Rarely has a more beautiful spot served as a combat zone. Sent on a nocturnal patrol in a savannah (the nighttime footage is particularly well shot by cinematographer Jamie D. Ramsay), the boys receive fire and are sobered by their first taste of death in warfare.

The very end is bit soft compared to most of what’s come before, but this doesn’t alter the fact that Hermanus has delivered a war film distinctively different from others, partly due to the particular conflict he’s chosen to dramatize, but much more from the perspectives through which he asks the viewer to consider things, historically and personally. Based on what he’s done here, it wouldn’t be surprising to see him make the jump to bigger international projects sooner rather than later.

Moffie review: fear and desire brutally collide in apartheid South Africa ★★★★★

The Telegraph

23 April 2021 | Tim Robey

[Article link ›](#)

Bigotry under apartheid came in more than one shape – like a hydra, and one born from a type of grotesque machismo, it lunged out in all directions. *Moffie*, the new film from South African director Oliver Hermanus, relates a yet-to-be-told story focusing not on race, but sexuality, in an era when lockstep conformity was state-policed, and military service helped inculcate some horrifically illiberal values. The main character, in this loose adaptation of an autobiographical book by André Carl van der Merwe, is Nicholas (Kai Luke Brummer), a gentle, blond 18-year-old whose call-up comes in 1981, during a time of government incursions into neighbouring Angola to destroy ANC bases. Before his active service, there are eight hard months of training, which Hermanus – who was born in Cape Town in 1983 – details as a bludgeoning process of dehumanisation. The structure of the film, which jumps to the front line midway, feels openly indebted to *Full Metal Jacket*, and the use of Schubert's Piano Trio in E♭, famous from Barry Lyndon, is a further nod Kubrick-wards, with coolly ironic impact in context.

Even before Nicholas's conscription, a note of worry is sounded when his father, as a parting gesture, gives him a contraband girlie mag, meeting at first with his son's blushing bemusement. "For ammunition," dad cryptically explains.

Nicholas is gay, which puts him in a deeply uneasy predicament among his peers, and means some part of him is in hiding at all times, including from himself. In a single, brilliantly contained childhood flashback, Hermanus gives us the key to his inward mortification: an incident at the showers near a public pool, when he was caught peeping while not yet into his teens by someone's outraged dad, and had to be whisked away by his own parents with dozens looking on.

Nicholas has never got over that moment, and his exposure to barrack-room rough-housing, with all the blend of homoeroticism and roving

suspicion thereby implied, hardly proves therapeutic in that regard. He can hardly help developing feelings for a fellow recruit, Stassen, played by Ryan de Villiers, who has something of the young Rupert Everett's insolent allure.

In a wet ditch one night, shivering during outdoor survival practice, they're thrown together in *Brokeback*-esque proximity. We're not privy to what may or may not transpire, but the contact alone is life-changing. While nothing as cute or generic as "forbidden romance" has any chance to develop between these two, the merest flicker of another man's curiosity opens up, in Nicholas's caged imagination, some hope for a future.

It's a tricky path Hermanus needs to tread here – inching his hero's destiny ajar, while always realistically reflecting the unyielding culture he's stuck with. Far from slipping the shackles of his government's brutal ideology, Nicholas is forced to become a soldier, and won't see out his stint without innocent blood on his hands. Around him, fellow conscripts taunt each other with violence or succumb to morphine addiction as a bored refuge. All he can do is ride it out. Hermanus gets a terrific performance from Brummer, who holds secrets magnetically on screen while disclosing them in close-up just to us.

The film ends on a questioning, uncertain beat that's clearly deliberate, but undeniably a little deflating. Intellectually one knows it's the honest place to stop, but viewers caught up in Nicholas's fortunes could be forgiven for finding it a tad provisional. It's a little like reading *Regeneration*, the first part of Pat Barker's outstanding trilogy about the First World War, but being brought up short without the instant promise of a sequel.

Still, *Moffie* – the word is derogatory slang for a gay person, derived from Afrikaans – is more than good enough to get away with its slightly wobbly landing. It does such a thought-through, empathetic, and powerful job of exploring homophobia as part of a root-and-branch mentality in South Africa's white patriarchal psyche. Like *Beauty*, Hermanus's starkly disturbing 2011 drama of sexual obsession, it isn't afraid to scour the depths of his country's repressed and repressive soul.



Moffie review — victory for this brutal army tragedy ★★★★★

The Times

24 April 2021 | Kevin Maher
[Article link ›](#)

A drama about military service in 1980s South Africa is nuanced and surprising

The psychopathic drill sergeant is a well-worn archetype, and is the screen villain we love to hate. Think of Louis Gossett Jr in *An Officer and a Gentleman*, screaming: “I’ll rip your eyeballs out of your sockets and skull-f*** you to death!”

Or there’s an unhinged Christopher Walken constantly clashing with Matthew Broderick in *Biloxi Blues*. Or, best of all, there’s real life US Marine Corps staff sergeant Lee Ermey, playing Gunnery Sergeant Hartman in *Full Metal Jacket* and delivering what is widely regarded as the definitive roaring forces martinet, with iconic lines such as: “You are nothing but organised grabasstic (sic) pieces of amphibian shit!”

None of these characters, however, is quite as terrifying and inherently disturbing as the South African drill sergeant in this extraordinary and brutalising military memoir (based on an autobiography by André Carl van der Merwe).

He’s the fearsome Sergeant Brand (Hilton Pelsner), the basic training nemesis of our sensitive hero

and new army recruit Nicholas van der Swart (Kai Luke Brummer). It’s 1981, and 18-year-old Van der Swart has, like his teenage peers, been dragged into military service on the pretext of halting the spread of communism from neighbouring Angola and ensuring the continued supremacy of the whites-only government.

“Black savages are on our doorstep, so close we can smell them!” an officer warns at the start as the weary recruits stumble into a far-flung desert base for their first encounter with army life, deprivation and, of course, Sergeant Brand.

“You shrivelled dick ass-f***er!” “You pimped c***!” “You English faggot!” Brand’s mouth is the source point for a constant stream of searing invective. His sentences are mostly delivered in Afrikaans and are punctuated, almost every second word, with “fokken” this, and “fokken” that (no need for translation).

And what makes him genuinely unnerving as a character is that his threats of bodily harm and, ultimately, actual death, unlike the more florid examples from his American counterparts, seem real. When Van der Swart falls over on the training ground, for instance, Brand kicks him full in the face (there is blood). When a recruit vomits with exhaustion, he pushes him into the dirt and yells: “Put that puke back into your fokken mouth!” And when ordering soldiers to lie in hastily dug ditches in the middle of a storm



for an entire night, he barks: “If you climb out of these trenches I’ll fokken shoot you!”

Brand’s greatest peeve, however — greater than communists, wimps, or “black savages” — is the presence in his ranks of “moffies”. The word, an Afrikaans insult, translates as “faggot” and is wielded on Brand’s base with totemic power, chanted by the men, shouted by the officers, as if there were nothing worse on this Earth and beyond (a moffie is “an insult to the laws of this country and the Bible”, the army chaplain claims) than being gay.

Which is a problem for Van der Swart, who, as training begins, is questioning his sexuality and is drawn to dashing and slightly fey fellow recruit Dylan (Ryan de Villiers — think early Rupert Everett). The film, thus, hinges on the horrible tension created between Van der Swart’s emerging feelings for Dylan and the fact that he might, literally, be killed by Brand for daring to express them.

It is at times a difficult watch, especially when the brutality spreads out across the base, and the threat of darkness and dread hangs over any moments of light relief. During a funny flirtatious down-time volleyball game, for example, a crazed soldier, broken by Brand, simply runs on to the pitch and shoots himself in the head. It is, as that other great military epic, *Apocalypse Now*, reminds us, the horror. The horror.

It’s also an incredibly nuanced film. It’s directed by Oliver Hermanus, a black South African, and though it features, near the beginning, a vile act of racism (involving a bag of vomit and an elderly rail passenger), Hermanus digs deep into the South African psyche and teases out the contradictions within white society itself, especially the fracture between South Africans of English origin and Afrikaners.

Van der Swart, alas, has English blood (the surname belongs to his stepfather) and so is doubly damned (a moffie and a pom). A flashback to his youth, in which his biological father is bullied by a gruff and nakedly homophobic Afrikaner underscores the seeming toxicity of that identity.

In the end there’s a gorgeous beach-set reunion, and a hint of hope for our hero. But it’s slim and fragile, and nothing, this profoundly compelling movie says, compared with the damage that has already been done.

Little White Lies

23 April 2021 | Hannah Strong
[Article link](#) ›

A pair of conscripts find love amid the chaos of Apartheid in Oliver Hermanus' queer war drama.

There's no shortage of films which focus on a young man's sexual awakening, and even before *Call Me by Your Name* made a heartthrob of Timothée Chalamet, queer narratives were among the most heartfelt and vital of these, from James Ivory's *Maurice* to Hettie MacDonald's *Beautiful Thing*.

Oliver Hermanus' *Moffie* is indeed a coming-of-age story centred on a gay protagonist, but set against the backdrop of 1980s South Africa it becomes a punishing, heartbreaking tale of clandestine longing and aggressive masculine performance.

The film's title refers to the Afrikaans slang word for a gay man – in particular, it implies weakness, effeminacy and abnormality. Nicholas van der Swart (Kai Luke Brummer) is aware of this as he enters compulsory military service, defending the Apartheid regime against the so-called “wart gevaar”, or “black danger”. Quiet and brooding, Nick does his best to fit in alongside his fellow recruits, which largely means taking orders and engaging in a suitable amount of brotherly hijinks.

Structured in a similar way to Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket*, the first half of *Moffie* sees Nick engaged in basic training, while the latter sees him deployed with his South African Defence Force unit. The young men are detached from the war, with little interest in who they're fighting or why – fatigued and brutalised by training, their main focus is maintaining a pack mentality and not doing anything to draw the ire of their commanding officer.

But fellow soldier Dylan Stassen (Ryan de Villiers) draws Nick's attention, disinterested in roughhousing or the pursuit of warfare as glory. Nick knows that his desire is considered a perversion – to be outed would be a death sentence – yet Dylan offers much-needed

tenderness that can't be found anywhere else in a warzone. And Hermanus never pretends it's anything else; the film is often loud and bloody, gruelling and violent. It's a difficult watch, but not half as difficult as surviving it must have been for André Carl van der Merwe, who wrote the memoir of the same name.

Although Nick remains quietly hopeful that he can emerge from his military service unscathed, and that love can indeed be found in a hopeless place, *Moffie* isn't a romance. There's stark realism in the beauty of the country, with its stunning blue skies and crystal clear oceans. It could be paradise, but the greed and rampant hatred that rule in the Apartheid regime infect everything. *Moffie* is a bleak but necessary reminder that we still have so far to go before everyone is allowed to love who they love without living in fear.



'Moffie' Review: A Brutal but Radiant Queer War Film From South Africa

Variety

5 September 2019 | Guy Lodge

[Article link ›](#)

South African auteur Oliver Hermanus makes his masterpiece with this brutal but radiant story of young gay desire on the Angolan war front.

The Afrikaans word “moffie” is South Africa’s answer to “faggot”: an anti-gay slur used liberally and illiberally across the country’s tangle of languages, in casual playground teasing or brutal bigoted assault alike. If it sounds ineffectively soft and silly on the tongue, trust that it can land with the targeted force of a bullet. We inevitably hear it a lot, hurled with equal viciousness and exuberance, in “Moffie,” the piercing, perfectly formed new film from Oliver Hermanus — in which a closeted, terrified teenager is conscripted and sent to war on the Angolan border in 1981. Each time the word is spoken, it burrows a little deeper under the skin: Anyone who grew up gay in pre-millennial South Africa may need to dig their nails into their armrest to get through what is both a shiver-delicate exploration of unspoken desire and a scarringly brilliant anatomy of white South African masculinity.

Following three fine features of steadily increasing ambition, “Moffie” is Hermanus’ masterpiece in the true sense of the term: the film that consolidates all the promise and preoccupations of his previous work into one stunning feat of formal and narrative artistry, establishing him quite plainly as South Africa’s most vital contemporary filmmaker. That it’s premiering in Venice’s Orizzonti sidebar rather than the main Competition — where Hermanus’ last film, the impressive but flawed “The Endless River,” played to mixed notices in 2015 — feels like a major oversight. No matter: “Moffie” still looks set to be the filmmaker’s most broadly acclaimed and exhibited film to date, with LGBT-oriented distributors and festival programmers sure to lead all takers.

This is Hermanus’ second gay-themed drama, following 2011’s vivid, profoundly upsetting “Beauty,” and the two films prove complementary in a variety of ways, both exposing the violent homophobia prevalent in the country’s heavily patriarchal white Afrikaans population. They come at it from different angles, however. Where “Beauty” centered on a self-loathing gay Afrikaner trapped by his own society, “Moffie” examines prejudice from the stunned, stifled perspective of an English-descended soldier learning to adapt or die in his Afrikaner-ruled barracks. While most films set in the Apartheid era focus on the crucial black-white divide, Hermanus and Jack Sidey’s perceptive, economical script — adapted from an autobiographical 2006 novel by André Carl van der Merwe — articulates with unusual nuance and specificity the raging English-Afrikaans conflict within the country’s formerly ruling race.

18-year-old Nicholas van der Swart (Kai Luke Brummer) may have an Afrikaans last name — a resented imposition, courtesy of his stepfather — but the fine-featured, well-spoken lad risks sticking out like a sore, pink thumb when, like all white boys his age, he’s drafted into two years of compulsory military service. His family puts a brave, bluff face on it, throwing him a send-off party that pretends this is a man-making rite of passage: No one is keen to mention that he’s in fact being groomed for the dangerous, futile, long-running South African Border War, spun by the Apartheid government as a mission of anti-communist protection.

Only Nicholas’ meek birth father seems attuned to his terror, solemnly presenting him with a stack of pornographic girlie magazines “for ammunition” — a gesture that becomes more poignantly obvious as the boy is plunged headfirst into a shouting, sweating nightmare realm of boys playing roughly at manhood. It’s not clear whether the reserved, introverted Nicholas has yet resolved his own sexuality. Still, he knows enough to hide a part of himself from the viciously bullying horde of mostly Afrikaans men, led by the supremely sadistic Sergeant Brand (Hilton Pelsner), that he faces in basic training. What ensues is a literal assault course



of abuse, humiliation and physical exhaustion, in which any boy who briefly wavers or steps out of line — or, in one case, is shown to have the faintest scar of an ear piercing — is labeled a “moffie,” as if no greater failing could be imagined of a man.

More effeminate recruits are weeded out for special torture; Nicholas, who is at least tall and physically nimble, stoically gets by as much as any of the English — uniformly derided as lily-livered liberals by their Afrikaner peers — can in this environment. But when a silent mutual understanding flickers between him and rebellious squad member Stassen (Ryan de Villiers), gradually growing into deeper, desperate affection, it becomes that much harder to keep his head down. Hermanus and cinematographer Jamie D. Ramsay observe throngs of worn young bodies in motion with something of the tactile, sensually tilted gaze that Claire Denis applied to “Beau Travail”; in the film’s wittiest scene, off-duty soldiers play volleyball in a scene that expressly parallels the equivalent match in “Top Gun,” correcting its famously winking subtext to more overt, unembarrassed homoeroticism.

Often, the camera in “Moffie” seems to be looking on behalf of our protagonist, shooting even desolate natural landscapes in warm shades of skin, candidly expressing curiosity and desire where he dare not. A single, heart-stopping flashback to Nicholas’ childhood shows us why and how he has learned to avert his eyes, as an innocent, unconscious glance in a public-pool shower stall unleashes a grotesque explosion of masculine insecurity and aggression. Unlike the often hushed, humdly dreamlike style Hermanus employs for scenes at the front, he shoots this flare of trauma with buzzing war-zone kineticism — an exquisitely placed reminder that for gay or nascently gay men in a hostile society, everyday life is one minefield after another.

Just about every shot, every cut, every music cue in “Moffie” is aesthetically considered and thematically connective, yet the film never feels overdetermined or airless: Vast, tacit emotion swims to the surface throughout, up to a coda of such suspended, silently symphonic yearning, it fair takes your breath away. Hermanus’ young ensemble plays it with sensitivity and skill, but this is a director’s triumph first and foremost: a dogs-of-war hellride of “Full Metal Jacket” intensity, a queer coming-of-age meditation with something of “Moonlight’s” salt-on-skin tenderness, and a scorching evocation of South Africa’s Border War shame with no major precedent in a national cinema still working through its blind spots. “Moffie” achieves some hard grace in under two hours: Never has the titular slur borne such beauty.





‘Moffie’: Film Review | Venice 2019

The Hollywood Reporter

5 September 2019 | David Rooney

[Article link ›](#)

Oliver Hermanus explores the toxic masculinity of Apartheid-era South Africa and the twin forces of racism and homophobia that fed it in ‘Moffie,’ a drama about a young gay military conscript trying to remain invisible.

The vicious racism of Apartheid is eloquently equated with the shame, humiliation and psychological violence of institutionalized homophobia in *Moffie*, a powerful drama set in 1981 South Africa, when homosexuality was still a punishable crime. Director Oliver Hermanus returns to Venice and to top form after the visually stunning but narratively muddled genre exercise of his 2015 competition entry, *The Endless River*. His new film feels intensely personal in its intimate observation of a closeted gay military conscript, played with mesmerizing internalized anxiety by Kai Luke Brummer. It's often tough to watch, but that harshness is mitigated by moments of aching tenderness and desire.

Based on the autobiographical novel by Andre Carl van der Merwe, the film takes its title from a common Afrikaans anti-gay slur. Its unflinching depiction of intolerance fanned by the diseased ideology of white supremacy will make the drama of interest to international LGBTQ audiences and beyond.

That word, “moffie,” is hurled often, most distressingly when a full platoon of young soldiers going through a hellish months-long boot camp is ordered to shout the insult repeatedly at a pair of conscripts singled out to be made an example of after apparently being caught having sex. Their training commander, the sadistic Afrikaner Sergeant Brand (Hilton Pelter), reminds the assembled troop with lofty contempt that homosexuality is a crime against God and country. Compounding the brutality of the ordeal are the rumors of a possibly even worse fate in Ward 22, the psych facility where offenders reportedly are drugged to the gills and stuck in among the clinically insane.

The film opens with an arresting wide shot of a car's high-beam headlights piercing the darkness of a vast, empty landscape at night, before dropping in on the send-off party for 18-year-old Nicholas Van der Swart (Brummer), who's heading for two years of compulsory military service. He will be sent to the southern border with Angola to fight in the containment

campaign against Soviet expansionism, which has been sold to the public using anti-communist rhetoric. But for most of his fellow conscripts the objective is to defend the Apartheid regime against the so-called “swart gevaar” or “black danger.”

Nick’s stepfather is gung-ho about the adventure that awaits him while his mother seems more anxious and his biological father slips him a heterosexual porn magazine, cryptically suggesting he’ll need it as “ammunition.” The fretful strings of Braam du Toit’s score scarcely hint at the nightmare to come.

The train journey — masterfully captured by cinematographer Jamie D. Ramsay, with snaking drone shots juxtaposed against the claustrophobic cauldron of testosterone inside — gives Nick his first taste of the volatile situation into which he’s stepping. He’s already an outsider by virtue of his English education, but he gets lucky in forming a bond with a mellow cabin companion, Michael Sachs (Matthew Vey), seemingly impervious to the mob mentality of the noisy, drunken throng elsewhere on the train. Their collective abuse of a well-dressed black traveler on the platform of a station they pass through again serves as a portent of more violent inhumanity down the track.

Nothing can quite prepare Nick (or the audience) for the trauma awaiting them at their destination, however, where the verbal humiliation starts the minute they step off the train into a chaotic din of barked orders. The bullying hard-ass Brand sets out to make their time there “unbearable,” carrying out a sustained physical and psychological assault to break them down in order to toughen them up, and singling out the weaker elements for special cruelty.

Hermanus shows the end result of this for one unfortunate conscript as a short, sharp shock during an otherwise relaxed interlude rippling with homoerotic undercurrents, while the shirtless guys are playing volleyball in the sun before a weekend furlough.

An incident that plays on Nick’s mind for the duration of his service and on into his return to civilian life occurs during a grueling exercise in which Brand has the platoon digging trenches and then remaining in them overnight through a heavy downpour. Nick is paired with Dylan Stassen (Ryan de Villiers), who urges him to huddle together under their one dry blanket.

The physical attraction between them stops at a gentle caress of Stassen’s hand on Nick’s face, but the sexual and emotional hunger resonates.

The ways in which the macho environment is designed to crush such feeling are conveyed as much by intimation as by action in the screenplay by Hermanus and Jack Sidey. Stassen’s abrupt removal from the camp leaves Nick with unanswered questions and unsatisfied longings. Later, when one visibly damaged platoon member returns from Ward 22, Nick begs him for information. While Nick remains at least outwardly in denial about his homosexuality, the other soldier advises him: “Do whatever you can to stay invisible.”

Nick’s isolation is suggested in one particularly evocative image of him swimming — or perhaps drowning — in bloodied water. That ties visually into an extended flashback to his scarring preteen experience at a country club swimming pool, where the abundance of barely clad male flesh on display has a hypnotic effect on him. When he’s caught unconsciously gazing at a man in the showers, the explosive reaction of an angry witness and the disgrace in front of Nick’s parents scalds the boy’s psyche in ways that still haunt the young man.

The latter part of the film covering the transition from training to the harrowing combat of the border tour tends first to meander and then feel a little rushed, sacrificing some of the fluidity and focus of the establishing sections. Scenes drift between male sensuality that appears to reference Claire Denis’ *Beau Travail* and cold-sweat terror out of Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket*. Both modes are effective, played with a raw tangle of violence and violation by the talented young ensemble. But a slight repetitive feel creeps in, despite inventive use of music.

What keeps it gripping is the underlying dread of exposure for Nick, present in every moment of suppressed fear and contained intensity in Brummer’s strong performance. The dual depiction of a young man still in his formative years, keeping his head down and his emotions guarded while remaining alert to the more physical dangers of landmines and snipers makes for unsettling viewing. Hermanus wraps up the drama with an exquisite open-ended coda of lingering melancholy that hints at the resilience of Nick and other soldiers like him, as well as the sobering price they pay.



Moffie: White-knuckle view of homophobia in apartheid South Africa ★★★★★

The Irish Times

24 April 2020 | Tara Brady

[Article link >](#)

Review: This film makes the training section of Full Metal Jacket seem less stressful

Moffie has an aesthetic sweep to match Céline Sciamma's swooning *Portrait of a Lady on Fire*. It is a breath-taking piece of cinema whose beauty heightens the ugliness at the heart of the film.

The year is 1981, and South Africa's apartheid government is embroiled in a brutal and pointless war on the Angolan border. In common with all white boys over the age of 16, Nicholas Van der Swart (Kai Luke Brummer) is conscripted for two years of national service to fight on behalf of the minority white government against the threat of communism and "die swart gevaar" ("the black danger").

For Nicholas, the brutality of military training under the sadistic Sgt Brand (Hilton Pelsner) is made all the more hellish when he finds himself attracted to rebellious fellow conscript, Dylan Stassen (Ryan de Villiers). Suddenly the training section of *Full Metal Jacket* seems a lot less

stressful.

A chilling flashback to Nicholas's childhood – in which an unknowing glance at a swimming pool shower – provokes a torrent of homophobic abuse from an adult, dovetails with the narrow, ghastly definition of masculinity found during service.

The loaded word "moffie" – the Afrikaans equivalent of "faggot" – is a tool used to shape and beat the teenagers into a twisted patriarchal, white supremacist ideal. No deviation, even a leftover scar from a removed earring, will be tolerated. Long before he gets to the front, war is hell for the young protagonist.

This Afrikaans bildungsroman, adapted from André Carl van der Merwe's semi-autobiographical 2006 novel drawn from his experiences as a gay teenage conscript, isn't an obvious fourth feature for Oliver Hermanus, as a person of colour. But *Moffie* does build on the film-maker's breakthrough picture, *Beauty*, as an excavation on the violent homophobia lurking under apartheid culture.

The film's silent sensuality echoes the delicate gaze found in *Moonlight* and *Beau Travail*. Unlike those titles, the rising sense of panic makes for white-knuckle viewing.

Moffie review – soldiers on the frontline of homophobia ★★★★★

The Guardian

4 September 2019 | Xan Brooks

[Article link ›](#)

Hidden passions add to the brutish hell of apartheid-era South African conscripts in Oliver Hermanus's skilfully tense drama

Moffie, screening in the Orizzonti sidebar at Venice, is a tense, stealthy rites-of-passage drama from the dog days of South Africa's apartheid regime, a tale of callow young conscripts inside a corroded old system. Set in 1981 during the country's border conflict with communist-backed Angola, Oliver Hermanus's film manages an unflinching portrait of a society in spasm; paranoid and brutish and largely screaming at itself. It's a war story of sorts in which the battle has already been lost.

Kai Luke Brummer gives a fine performance as Nicholas, a willowy 18-year-old at a sun-blasted army boot-camp. Nick and his fellow soldiers are supposed to be fighting the enemy, but the only action they're seeing is on the volleyball court, or the dorm, or sometimes in the toilet cubicle, much to the sergeant's horror. The way the officers see it, the very worst thing a soldier can be is a "moffie", an Afrikaans insult that the subtitles translate as "faggot". "Moffie!" they scream – as though they regard homosexuality as a mad dog that has somehow got under the fence, or an invading swarm of wasps, liable to sting any man who isn't properly covered up.

Nick has a porn mag, which surely means he's protected. But he's also drawn to handsome, sophisticated Staffen (Ryan de Villiers), who helps him dig a trench. But men have orders to remain in the pit until dawn. It's cold and it's wet. They're only snuggling up to keep warm.

Hermanus, a black South African film-maker, has said that he initially balked at the prospect of making a film about the plight of his nation's white minority. But he was swayed by the power of Andre-Carl van der Murwe's memoir (Moffie's source material) and by an unexpected sense of kinship with the desperate duo at its centre.

Without ever glossing over South Africa's culture of institutionalised racism, Hermanus suggests that its rampant homophobia is creating its share of casualties too.

Staffen, for starters, will not be tolerated. "He's a piece of shit," says the sergeant; he's contaminating the barracks. But after the boy is shipped off for re-education, Nicholas is left turning in circles, exposed beneath the big bruised skies, only dimly aware that he is about to be deployed. Meanwhile Moffie maintains its own holding pattern, ratcheting up the tension and wringing optimum menace from the conscripts' simmering levels of boredom as Braam du Toit's superb atonal soundtrack hints at mounting psychological unease. Hermanus favours handheld cameras, brought in so close to the actors that every sudden movement, however mundane, carries the threat of violence and you're never entirely sure whether somebody is about to be punched or kissed – nor which outcome would be the more disastrous.

Moffie is measured, remorseless; it crawls right under your skin. By the time these virgin soldiers are removed from the barracks, sent into the rushes where the enemy lies in wait, it almost comes as a sweet relief.

Moffie review – swooning eroticism in apartheid South Africa ★★★★★

The Guardian

23 April 2020 | Peter Bradshaw

[Article link ›](#)

A gay, white teenager endures the terrors of national service while hiding his sexuality in a drama that's grimly compelling – and beautifully tender

Oliver Hermanus delivered a gut punch in 2011 with his powerful film *Skoonheid*, or *Beauty*. Now he has directed a fiercely engaged, complex drama of sexual identity and suppressed yearning in apartheid-era South Africa – a film with a humid intensity. It is also a war movie about a country at war with itself, with its neighbours and with the whole world. Hermanus and his co-writer, Jack Sidey, have adapted the novel by André Carl van der Merwe, entitled *Moffie* – the (still very much unreclaimed) Afrikaans word for “faggot”.

Kai Luke Brummer plays Nicholas van der Swart, a white South African teenager in 1981 who has to do two years' national service. This means grisly basic training and then a terrifying “border tour” – young trainees must move upcountry to engage the enemy in a real shooting war. Angola and the Soviet-backed MPLA (immortalised in the Sex Pistols' *Anarchy in the UK*) loom on the border of the South West Africa territory – now Namibia – and are used as an ever-present bogeyman to keep South Africa's young white manhood in a permanent state of aggressive paranoid readiness and to provide an ideological anti-communist rationale for apartheid itself. Young van der Swart suppresses his fear at this vicious dehumanising experience and also his own gay sexuality, because “moffies” are treated as the enemy within and could expect to be beaten and brutalised.

Hermanus creates some grimly compelling scenes as Nicholas arrives at the training camp after a gruesome train journey, during which the young proto-squaddies indulge in racist insults at black men on station platforms. The drill sergeant is a traditional figure here, and Hilton Pelser's performance as the monstrous Sergeant Brand measures up in sadism and abuse. Hermanus shows how, from the very first, Brand displays his own mysterious enthusiasm for homophobic abuse, screaming into the young men's flinching faces his sneering

questions about their alleged interest in each other's bodies. In the camp, furtive glances in the showers and lavatories mean more, and the stakes are much higher. The same is true for Nicholas's emotional connection with fellow trainee, Dylan (Ryan de Villiers).

Nicholas's family background is what further complicates the dynamic. Despite his soft “English” looks, he has an Afrikaans name, but he has to explain he has taken the surname of his more robust stepfather after what appears to have been his parents' divorce. His father (whose photograph Nicholas poignantly carries with him to the camp, almost like that of a sweetheart) is a gentle soul who, in an excruciating act of misjudged manliness, has given Nicholas a porn magazine to take to the camp with him. And it is his father who is to be at the centre of an enigmatic, superbly filmed and rather shocking “flashback” scene of Nicholas's childhood, when he and his family were horribly humiliated at a holiday resort.

There is, arguably, a complication with regards to race. The story of a young white man seeing military action in the service of the apartheid regime, finding comradeship with other white men and never for one moment questioning what he is doing might look now like a tragic or pathetic story of naivety. (One of them, Sachs, played by Matthew Vey, offers some limited leftist talk of Mao and Che in a bar.) But, in this context, it is the gay white man, not the black man, who has victim status. Perhaps it is a stretch to find their intersectional common cause.

As with Claire Denis in her 1999 film *Beau Travail*, a reworking of the homoeroticism of *Billy Budd* in the context of the French Foreign Legion, Hermanus responds directly to the beauty of male bodies. This, too, is a complicated reaction. Most of the time the physicality on display is intimidating and violent, and yet it can also be a swooning epiphany of carefree beauty, more beautiful, in some forbidden and unknowable way, because of the violence.

We are accustomed to talk about toxic masculinity – and of course the masculinity of this film is mostly very toxic. But then, almost like a reflective object being turned a fraction of an inch to catch the light, the masculinity becomes non-toxic; it becomes supercharged with beauty and eroticism and tenderness.



Moffie ★★★★★

Time Out

24 April 2020 | Dave Calhoun
[Article link](#) ›

This often bruising bootcamp drama expresses the pain and uncertainty of coming out with real tenderness and subtle beauty.

A viciously homophobic South African military training camp in 1981 is no place to be considering and exploring your sexuality like any teen might – but that’s exactly where 18-year-old Nicholas (Kai Luke Brummer) finds himself for the majority of ‘Moffie’ (the title is an Afrikaans slur against gay people). Nicholas arrives in this dusty hellhole of thrown-together barracks and scratched-out parade grounds armed with little more than a rucksack and a rumpled porn mag given to him by his nervous dad. From there, writer-director Oliver Hermanus (‘Beauty’, ‘Shirley Adams’) gives us an atmospheric and extremely tense war film that features little actual war – although there’s plenty of threat and conflict to go around.

These young men spend each day training under the sweltering sun, preparing themselves for action on their country’s border with Angola.

The training sergeant (Hilton Pelsner) is a vicious brute, a caricature of nastiness, and complicit in a wider culture of terror. A warped sense of power colours everything, whether seen in a horrifying act of racism at a train station or the constant threat that any unmasculine behaviour will lead to violence or worse. There’s another factor at play: Nicholas is of English descent, while the majority of his fellow recruits are Afrikaans, and that carries with it a batch of specific prejudices and grudges.

Among it all, Nicholas becomes close to another trainee, Dylan (Ryan de Villiers), with whom he spends a freezing night in a ditch during a training exercise. Hermanus sensitively sketches the physicality of all these young soldiers sweating in the African heat – necessarily hard on the outside, but barely formed and still kids on the inside. It’s a poetic, lightly experimental spin on a culture entirely devoid of empathy and nuance. You expect an explosion, a showdown, but Hermanus’s approach is more careful and circumspect than that. He gives us a simmering pot of tensions and attractions, dotted with wider, half-glimpsed political ideas and social realities. But he preserves something special: the unknowability of half-formed, emerging teenage desire.



‘Moffie’: Venice Review

ScreenDaily

4 September 2019 | Jonathan Romney
[Article link ›](#)

A young South African man struggles to hide his homosexuality in 1980s military service

South African drama *Moffie* is an altogether intense experience that often feels as punishing for the viewer as it is for the characters. Based on the fictionalised memoir by André-Carl van der Merwe, this depiction of a young gay man’s army training lays bare the ideology and the ruthless mechanisms of apartheid, as applied to the young white males tasked with implementing it. It is also an unsparing analysis of institutionalised homophobia, ‘moffie’ being a derogatory term for gay men.

The film marks a triumphant return to forceful form from South African director Oliver Hermanus, after the more oblique narrative experiment of ensemble thriller (and 2015 Venice competition title) *The Endless River*. This powerful, ambitious film is likely to outdo the director’s earlier *Shirley Adams* (2009) and Cannes Queer Palm winner *Beauty* (2011) in terms of international exposure.

The time is 1981, with 18-year-old Nicholas van der Swart (Kai Luke Brummer) bidding goodbye

to his family before reporting for the army conscription then mandatory for young white South African males. His Afrikaner stepdad is bullish about what awaits the boy, while his divorced father quietly gives Nick a straight porn mag as ‘ammunition’, as if knowing he’ll need it to protect him. As Nick heads off on a train journey to boot camp, this sensitive young man looks lost among the aggressive machismo that surrounds him, but bonds en route with another recruit, Sachs (Matthew Vey), who proves to have a more than sceptical attitude to the ideology that’s drummed into the men.

Prior to being stationed on the border of Angola, to confront what they’re constantly told is the black Communist threat to the mother country, Nick’s platoon experiences unforgiving basic training under the command of Sergeant Brand (a terrifying but utterly realistic performance by Hilton Pelsner). He plays this martinet as coldly efficient, in stark distinction to the grotesque but characterful depictions that have often made such figures perversely charismatic – the most obvious comparison being R. Lee Ermey in Kubrick’s *Full Metal Jacket*.

During one exercise, Nick finds himself sleeping close to fellow recruit Stassen (Ryan de Villiers), and the two clearly feel a strong mutual attraction. But homosexuality is regarded as a crime against the nation and God, and men suspected of being gay are viciously humiliated

– as in a scene where the platoon is ordered to chant “Moffie! Moffie!” at one victim – and brutalised, not least at the much-feared facility known as Ward 22. In this environment, Nick learns to survive by keeping his sexual identity invisible.

The film’s extensive depiction of boot camp instantly sparks comparisons with *Full Metal Jacket* – something Hermanus acknowledges by having his soldiers sing an Afrikaans version of its famous drill chant. It also echoes that film in eventually following its men into combat, although the climactic patrol sequence here is brief and tightly focused. A long flashback to his childhood, executed in a complex extended take, further illustrates the intensity of the homophobia he has grown up among.

This sequence, set at a whites-only country club, sees Hermanus put his cards on the table about the fact that this depiction of apartheid focuses on a white character from a privileged background. The homophobia shown is, of course, wholly congruent with the racial oppression that the young soldiers are made to serve. But the concrete violence of apartheid is brought home very starkly when the young recruits on the train harass a solitary black man on a railway platform. That Hermanus is able, subsequently, to portray these young white men as human, vulnerable, even sympathetic, is a sign of the moral seriousness and subtlety of his approach.

An extraordinary young ensemble cast, predominantly newcomers, give their all, not least in the training sequences which look authentically rigorous, both physically and emotionally. Alongside outstanding performances by de Villiers and Vey, Kai Luke Brummer makes a magnetic centre, convincingly depicting Nick’s passage from shy novice to tested soldier, and the cost of that graduation.

Jamie D. Ramsey’s photography captures the claustrophobic austerity of the soldiers’ world, while Braam du Toit’s often mesmerising score – centred on nerve-scrapingly spare strings – is complemented by more familiar, contemplative classical passages (Bach, Vivaldi, Charles Ives). There’s subtle allusion also to ‘Sugar Man’, the song by US artist Rodriguez, whose work was a rallying point for South African counter-culture and anti-apartheid feeling in the 70s and 80s.





‘Moffie’ Review: One of the Best Films About Gay Repression Ever Is Also a Disturbing Apartheid Story

IndieWire

9 April 2021 | Ryan Lattanzio
[Article link](#) ›

Oliver Hermanus’ shimmery and sensual military drama locates war zones in South Africa and in the closeted mind of its young protagonist.

There is no more delicious agony than the one felt when you’re sitting millimeters from your crush, wondering who’s going to make the first move, or if someone will at all. That unbearable, painful erotic tension is more or less the sustained mood of Oliver Hermanus’ shimmery and sensual military drama “Moffie,” which is easily the best movie about gay male repression since “God’s Own Country.” Set in 1981 South Africa at the apex of the South African Border War, the film’s story of gay unrequited desire turns out to be a casing for something far more lethal in its marrow.

“Moffie” is Afrikaans slang for “faggot,” and the film, which is based on André Carl van der Merwe’s autobiographical novel of the same name, attempts a bold gesture in reclaiming epithet as an emblem of power. It’s 1981, South Africa, which means it’s not okay to be a “moffie”; effeminacy is a sign of weakness, and being gay

is also illegal. It’s also a moment of compulsory military conscription that all (white) boys over the age of 16 must endure, and so that means, as the film begins, Nicholas Van de Swart (Kai Luke Brummer) is readying to ship off to defend colonized land. On its face, the war is between the white minority government and Angola, whose Communism the South African Defense Force wants to stop from spreading; but really, the atrocities as seen inflicted in this movie are governed by the power-seeking regime of Apartheid, and not any real threat.

Before Nick heads off to military service, his divorced dad drops by the house his son shares with his mother and stepfather to offer some “ammunition” — a nudie magazine — and just what he means by “ammunition” will become more complicated and apparent as Nicholas’ journey wanes on. Hermanus gorgeously follows Nicholas from afar as he sprints into the darkness we’re meant to read as a metaphor of things to come, and as on-the-nose as it is, it’s deeply effective.

Nick’s trek to the border via train is filled with the fratty, boys-will-be-boys vibes that will become increasingly darker as his military service lurches on. The train journey is suffused with a cacophony of a soundtrack, with strings wailing and screeching like the sounds of a highbrow horror movie. Upon reaching the border, the men are stripped, degraded, and thrown into

grueling bootcamp-style activity without pageantry — placing “Moffie” somewhere between “Full Metal Jacket” and “Beau Travail” in how it juxtaposes masculine displays with their inherently homoerotic subtext (barely subtext at all, really). Beautiful, shirtless men engage in faux combat, or goad each other in the showers. A volleyball game, gaying-up the macho politics already intrinsic to volleyball games, is all rippling muscles in slo-mo, but the beauty of the scene is interrupted by a shocking act. It’s this tipping point between sensuality and violence that “Moffie” is constantly twirling on.

Nicholas is a melancholic who’s clearly hiding a secret, but just barely. When two of his comrades who engaged in homosexual activity are trotted out before the brigade, a bloodied cautionary tale for all to see, Nicholas retreats further into the closet. But during a rainy night, passion awakens in the trenches as a spiteful commander orders the men to stay down in the ground, which brings him literally closer to the (also stunningly beautiful) Dylan (Ryan de Villiers). An erotic attraction is sparked, but a relationship never quite sizzles as both remain, by the powers of the social hegemony, in the closet. But maybe it’s there that they can find something like freedom, if just for a moment.

Shooting in the Academy ratio with cinematographer Jamie Ramsay is certainly a choice to evoke that feeling of boxed-in-ness, but it also heightens the claustrophobia of life in the barracks, rehearsing for war, while simultaneously allowing the landscape of the Angolan border to breathe. When Nicholas is given leave to return home for a long weekend, the film achieves something no short of spellbinding in, instead of taking us on that

trip home, taking us back to a primal moment of trauma from Nicholas from his youth — specifically, when at a public pool Nicholas was caught staring at a naked man in the showers, and is humiliated by his father in front of the whole scene. The way the editing (by Alain Dessauvage and George Hanmer) so gracefully unfolds from present to past suggests a kind of cinematic Proustian madeleine, conjuring how involuntary memories can be jolted again by encounters in the present.

Nicholas’ heightening obsession with Dylan, with whom he’s shared only a few words and one brief but palpably affecting kiss, parallels the ratcheting reality of what the soldiers are actually about to endure on the border. The violent and crushing final act shows the soldiers realizing, in painful relief, just how much they are the mere instruments of perpetuating racism, in action. The connection Hermanus and his co-screenwriter Jack Sidey draw between colonial destruction and sexual repression is a bold one, but it becomes easy to follow as Nicholas’ desires and military destiny become inseparably intertwined.

What’s even more suspenseful, though, is the question of where Nicholas and Dylan can go, if anywhere at all, as two men who are possibly falling in love with each other. On the other side of savagery, the film concludes with a lush, sensuous, beachside epilogue that almost feels like a dream, some sun-soaked last sentence run off from another brighter, more hopeful movie. Hermanus leaves you suspended in that same state of agony promised by the little beginnings of their romantic affair. Realistically, it’s 1980s Africa, there’s no hope for a future for these two. But isn’t it pretty to think so?





‘It’s a triggering film’: visceral South African drama Moffie

The Guardian

15 April 2020 | Guy Lodge
[Article link ›](#)

The story of a gay conscript in the army in the 80s gave one critic a panic attack – but its director says it sheds light on the nation’s toxic masculinity

From an outside perspective, South African cinema tends to announce itself through occasional breakout films rather than consistently visible directorial careers. Back in the 1980s, *The Gods Must Be Crazy* was a global hit that didn’t do much to raise the profile of its director, Jamie Uys. Fourteen years ago, gritty township fable *Tsotsi* won the country one of its first Oscars, only to send director Gavin Hood directly into a proficient but culturally anonymous Hollywood career.

In Oliver Hermanus, however, the country has produced its most significant auteur in several generations. The 36-year-old Capetonian studied at the London Film School, but returned home for his art. His 2009 graduation film *Shirley Adams*, a tough-minded mother-son portrait set on the Cape Flats, set the tone for a career marked by global critical acclaim. He stepped up to Cannes with his follow-up, *Beauty*, a startling

study of a closeted Afrikaner that made it to UK cinemas; his third film, *The Endless River*, did not.

Moffie, Hermanus’s poetic yet visceral fourth feature, feels like the one that will cement him in the contemporary arthouse canon. A war film that returns to the anxious queer terrain of *Beauty*, it has been collecting awards and plaudits – including three British Independent Film Award nominations – since premiering at Venice last autumn. It’s his most pristinely accomplished film yet, though, in its conception at least, not his most personal: it adapts André Carl van der Merwe’s semi-autobiographical 2006 novel, based on his experiences as a gay teenage conscript sent to fight in the South African Border War in the early 1980s.

A gay director born after the events depicted in the film, Hermanus was intrigued by the possibilities of exploring a regimented realm denied to men of colour in the apartheid era, while finding common ground in his closeted white protagonist’s suffering under a vicious Afrikaner patriarchy. “The subject matter did bother me at first,” he says from his home outside Cape Town, where he’s self-isolating under coronavirus lockdown. “It was my mum who actually said to me, ‘Why make another film about white men in apartheid South Africa?’

“But the challenge is to find the centre of it that resonates with you completely. And for me, that



became not just about the character's sexuality, but about the shame factor: the fact that under this regime, boys were sort of shamed into becoming a certain kind of man. Because we keep asking the question, especially in South Africa: where does our toxic masculinity come from? When I looked at it that way, when I sort of saw this as an exploration of our past that informs our present, I was more comfortable with it."

Van der Merwe's novel had a more defined romantic throughline; though Hermanus's film outlines an attraction between protagonist Nicholas (Kai Luke Brummer) and a fellow misfit recruit, he deliberately downplayed the love story. "A key rule of mine from the very beginning was that there was going to be no kind of conventional love scene: it wasn't going to be a relationship drama," he says. "It was going to be more about our connection to this problematic era, and the generation of men who lived through that."

In doing so, Hermanus was prepared to be confrontational – taking the book's title, a common Afrikaans anti-gay slur, as his cue on that front. "I know it's a very triggering film – it had to be," he admits. "We've had an overwhelming range of reactions to the film in South Africa: some from gay men who had been to the army and felt identified and recognised, some from men who don't necessarily acknowledge the fact that they are still traumatised. One member of the press had a panic attack at a screening. These are common experiences but they haven't been widely addressed in South African culture."

Though the film is set in the whites-only domain of the army, Hermanus doesn't skimp on depicting anti-black violence: "It was a dangerous choice, I know, to have all of the black characters be physical objects, victimised on the sidelines. But that's how it was: there's a white gaze there, and we needed to see that." He cites inspiration from the 2010 Abdellatif Kechiche historical drama *Black Venus* – which depicted the white objectification and abuse of black South African performer Saartjie Baartman, to divisive effect.

Hermanus is prepared for pushback on the point of view he's taken, but doesn't see South African cinema evolving via kid-glove treatment of its own ugly history. "The challenge in the South African film landscape right now is that it still seems to exist very much within racial boundaries: white money making nostalgia pieces for white people that are devoid of black people, and then you've got black film-makers making romantic comedies and genre films about black lives," he says. "The films I make don't really exist in that market. And then I didn't want to make a safe film like *Long Walk to Freedom*, where you kind of get everyone's perspective on everything.

"So I decided we were going to put the world in the headspace of white South Africa in the 80s, to show what that looked like from the inside," he concludes. Moffie delivers vividly and discomfitingly on that promise: Hermanus continues to make films that feel as bracing and urgent to locals as to international onlookers.



Oliver Hermanus on Moffie: “Apartheid created a very binary code”

Sight and Sound

26 April 2020 | Ben Walters
[Article link](#) ›

Skin colour wasn't the only marker of difference weaponised for repression under South African Apartheid. Oliver Hermanus looks back at the male sexual stigma and fear imposed under military service that he has dramatised in his new film Moffie.

When we speak on the day of Moffie's UK release, the film's director, Oliver Hermanus, is on lockdown in South Africa. The pandemic has him reflecting on the politics of viral outbreaks, particularly former president Thabo Mbeki's damaging denial of the link between HIV and AIDS. “One leader can disrupt the flow of a public health crisis in ways it can take decades to recover from,” Hermanus notes. “And a respiratory virus like coronavirus is much more

infectious than HIV. We will always be at risk.”

The perception of risk – and what that perception might justify – is at the heart of Moffie. Loosely based on André-Carl van der Merwe's memoir, the film follows Nicholas (Kai Luke Brummer), a white teenager conscripted to the South African Defence Force in 1981, as he undertakes basic training and infantry service. It frames the state as a case study in paranoid aggression, understanding itself as facing threats from the anti-apartheid movement worldwide, Angolan communists at the border and ANC terrorists at home. As Hermanus notes, “‘communist’ was interchangeable with ‘terrorist’ was interchangeable with ‘Black man’. Apartheid created a very binary code.”

There was another perceived risk: the threat to manhood. Nicholas is gay, leaving him vulnerable to identification as a ‘moffie’, which Hermanus suggests is “like ‘sissy’ and ‘faggot’ in one word”. It's a slur emblematic of failed manhood as much as homosexuality per se. “‘Moffie’ was interchangeable with ‘paedophile’ was interchangeable with ‘atheist’. Every

gay man remembers the first time it was weaponised against them. It's not just about whether you're gay or straight, it's used to challenge heterosexual men's masculinity too. It identifies a lack. It's a measurement system: are you a man or not?"

In this sense, the word constitutes an important psychological tool in the boot camp arsenal of depersonalisation and brutalisation – a label to be avoided at all costs. The film powerfully conveys this social and cultural stigmatisation while only gesturing at the extent of the material consequences for those identified as actually homosexual. "You were the property of the state," Hermanus says. "They could do anything to you. People were mutilated, given conversion therapy, even unwanted gender reassignment surgery. But that's a film in itself."

The generation depicted in *Moffie* are now in their late forties and early fifties and Hermanus suspects their military experiences continue to shape national life. "You don't come out of that situation unaffected. Every white boy aged 16 to 20 was sent into this space – you have to wonder how that relates to the very high levels of gender-based violence in South Africa today." One thinks too of the terrified self-loathing associated with same-sex attraction that underpinned Hermanus's earlier film, *Beauty* (Skoonheid, 2011).

Discussion of such subjects can still raise hackles in South Africa. "Most of the men who took part in [that military culture] took pride in it and still do," Hermanus says. But the film has catalysed a national conversation that has mostly been constructive. "We took out massive billboards all over the country with just the word 'moffie' and the main actor. There was a huge reaction.

We created a discourse. Framing it around masculinity [rather than only sexuality] opened it up to the mainstream."

Hermanus is of a younger generation than Nicholas, hasn't served in the army and isn't white. "I saw that as a problem in the first place but then realised this is why I should make the film," he says. "It's a challenge to look at apartheid through a slightly different lens. Black South African trauma dwarfs anything a white South African could understand but it's still complex. We have this assumption that white people are born racist but of course they're indoctrinated. And the regime's demand for unflinching, total control looks differently to each of us."

If Hermanus doesn't share Nicholas's racial categorisation ("I'm a Coloured South African – a minority making a film about another minority," the whites), he does share his sexuality. One of the film's most powerful sequences – a flashback to a humiliating childhood experience at a swimming pool – was Hermanus's invention, drawn from his own life. "I remember the first time the word 'moffie' was used against me as a child and I started to hide myself," he recalls. "The moment you recognise that might be what you are, and that it's bad, that's when you start editing and stunting who you are and building this second version of yourself."

The understanding that no one escapes undamaged from systems that violently demand such conformity and self-rejection is what gives *Moffie* its power. Hypervigilance, whether in the minefield or the barracks, takes its toll.



From a South African Slur to a Scathing Drama About Toxic Masculinity

The New York Times

11 April 2021 | Roslyn Sulcas

[Article link](#) ›

The new film “Moffie” examines the brainwashing of a generation of white men in the twilight of the apartheid regime.

“Mo-FFIES!” chant the soldiers, precisely lined up under a baking sun, as a screaming sergeant reviles two men reported to be lovers. “Mo-ffies! Mo-ffies! Mo-ffies!”

The word is a homophobic slur in Afrikaans, and the scene comes about 30 minutes into Oliver Hermanus’s new film, “Moffie.” It depicts South Africa in the early 1980s, when the country’s white government saw threats from the communists at the border, terrorists at home and the anti-apartheid movement worldwide. Every white man over 16 had to do two years of military service, and “Moffie” suggests the story of a generation through the shy recruit Nicholas van der Swart (Kai Luke Brummer). He endures the brutal basic training designed to brainwash the young men into a paranoid, aggressive defense of the apartheid regime, and is sent to fight on the border, while quietly experiencing an awakening of sexual identity in the worst possible context.

“A scarringly brilliant anatomy of white South African masculinity,” Guy Lodge wrote in *Variety* upon the film’s premiere at the 2019 Venice Film Festival. It was equally well reviewed in South Africa before its distribution was derailed by the pandemic. The drama is reaching American theaters and video on demand on April 9.

Telling a story set in the apartheid era from a white point of view was not an obvious choice for the Cape Town-born Hermanus, 37, who is mixed race (known as “colored” in South Africa), and did not join the army.

“I did wonder whether my first film set in the apartheid era could really be about white South African men as victims of apartheid,” Hermanus

said in an interview in London, where he is about to begin filming an adaptation of Akira Kurosawa’s “Ikiru,” written by Kazuo Ishiguro. “It’s not quite doing Winnie or Nelson Mandela!”

It was the title that intrigued the South African-born producer Eric Abraham (“Ida”), when he chanced upon the novel “Moffie” by André Carl van der Merwe a few years ago in London. “Anyone who has grown up in South Africa knows the power of that word to hurt,” he said in an interview. “It was the most demeaning, derogatory term you could come up with, used by white people to intimidate and de-select those who they feared infecting their ideology.”

Abraham and his fellow producer Jack Sidey approached Hermanus, whose 2011 film, “Beauty,” they admired. He was initially skeptical. “In South Africa, you always arrive with a racial perspective, and that’s how I first thought about ‘Moffie,’” he said. “But something about it gripped me, and I realized that it is really about shame and indoctrination.”

The word, he added, is equally vicious for a straight or gay man, “because it identifies you as an outsider, a man who does not embody the qualities of the strong hypermasculine dominator.”

After working with two writers, Hermanus and Sidey eventually wrote the script together, moving away from the novel’s more personal love story.

“I was more interested in the hurt and indoctrination than the protagonist’s catharsis,” Hermanus said. “I didn’t want to make another gay-centric relationship drama set in the army. I wanted it to be a serious portrait of this generation.”

Hermanus obliquely and subtly evokes Nicholas’s shifting emotions, as the soldier gradually forms a silent attachment to a fellow conscript, Dylan Stassen (Ryan de Villiers). The price of expressing such feelings is made clear in that early scene when the two lovers, bloodied and trembling, are taunted and humiliated. Later, we learn they have been sent to the fearsome Ward 22, where

they are the subject of brutal experimental treatments intended to cure homosexuals, drug addicts and others deemed to be deviant.

“It was very important to both Oliver and me that Nicholas wasn’t certain of his sexuality,” Brummer said in a video interview from Cape Town. “His focus is survival, finding out how to fit in, and in finding Dylan something in him ignites, and his understanding of the world shifts.”

The deep social repression of sexuality and of otherness is evoked midway through the film in a brightly colored, sun-dappled flashback to a childhood experience of humiliation, which Hermanus drew from his own memories. It is shot in a single take, one of several unpredictable cinematic decisions that inflect the movie. “We set a lot of rules beforehand about our choices, but sometimes you just surrender to what is there,” said Jamie D. Ramsay, the director of photography, who had worked with Hermanus on two previous films. “Oliver is brave and will commit and say, ‘OK that’s the shot.’”

Hermanus, who was 11 when apartheid ended, said that he had always been obsessed with films, shooting his first movie — “a horror movie, terrible, starring my cousin” — at 13. After earning a degree in film and media studies from the University of Cape Town, he worked at a film production company (“as a slave”) eventually becoming a newspaper photographer. All the time, he said, “I wanted to be a filmmaker, and was living through a depression as a colored South African who just didn’t know how to make that happen.”

A chance meeting with the director Roland Emmerich and his cinematographer, Ueli Steiger, in a Cape Town restaurant led to a friendship that changed everything. “One day Roland said to me, if you can get in to film school, I’ll give you a scholarship,” Hermanus recounted. “Somehow they saw something in me; it’s a perfect example of what it means to invest in people.”

Hermanus went to the London Film School for three years, and made the full-length “Shirley Adams” as his graduation movie. “You are supposed to make a short film, but I wore them out,” Hermanus said. The film’s critical success in South Africa and abroad led to the invitation of a residency in Cannes, where he began to work

on “Beauty,” a study of a gay obsession in a tight Afrikaans community.

Like Hermanus’s other films, “Moffie” is the product of what he describes as “forensic” preparation. He researched the era, helped by Ramsay, who had collected images of the South African border war in the ’70s and ’80s before he was involved with the movie. And the director met regularly with the actors for months, working out their back stories, then sent them to a boot camp for a week.

“Oliver created an environment in which anything was possible because we understood our characters and that world,” Hilton Pelser, who plays the terrifying Sergeant Brand, said in a video interview. “I came to understand what Brand is trying to do; in a very dark, very violent way, he is trying to save their lives.”

The movie, Hermanus said, is a reflection of the crumbling of apartheid, the moment when the minority government cranked up fear and distrust because it was losing its grip. There are very few Black figures in the movie, and all are the brief subject of violence or contempt. “I wanted the film to be from the perspective of white South Africa,” Hermanus said, “and that was its reality.”

Despite that perspective, Hermanus feels “Moffie” resonates in broader ways. “I see it as a portrait of the factory, how men were being made in the service of an ideology,” he said. “That relates to their treatment of women, their treatment of other races, how they potentially become the men we identify as problematic today.”

Apartheid, he added, “isn’t one face. It’s a bit like World War II — there are lots of different films you could make. ‘Moffie’ is about just one facet of that history: the beginning of the end.”

How Should Black and Indigenous Directors Depict Generational Trauma?

Vanity Fair

7 April 2021 | Cassie da Costa

[Article link](#) ›

Four new works—Raoul Peck’s *Exterminate All the Brutes*; Oliver Hermanus’s *Moffie*; Sky Hopinka’s *Malni—Towards the Ocean, Towards the Shore*; and Lemohang Jeremiah Mosese’s *This Is Not a Burial, It’s a Resurrection*—make different yet complementary arguments about how to challenge dominant narratives.

There’s an ongoing debate about what kinds of films nonwhite filmmakers ought to make. Haven’t we seen enough slave, genocide, and colonization narratives? Has a spring of rom-coms and movie musicals been duly earned in the wake of such suffering, both onscreen and off? On its face, it would seem preposterous to demand that artists satisfy the sensibilities of some amorphous public (or a random assortment of hypervocal Twitter users). On the other hand, it’s true that movie executives seem eager to market the suffering of Black and Indigenous people, and fairly indifferent to depictions of joy, play, or simply something in between.

This past week has brought us three films and one hybrid docuseries that take opposite yet complementary approaches to depicting Black and Indigenous life and history across the globe. The docuseries *Exterminate All the Brutes* and the South African film *Moffie* offer unflinching depictions of suffering—walking us through historical moments of white patriarchal violence and connecting them to the present. The documentary *Małni—Towards the Ocean, Towards the Shore* and the feature *This Is Not a Burial, It’s a Resurrection*, meanwhile, are both lyrical art films that use ancestral storytelling techniques to share experiences of Indigenous living and political resistance. Instead of presenting two opposing arguments, these works exist in the same continuum, offering

a vision for how thoughtful film curation may be essential to appreciating—rather than lamenting—the often stark differences in how Black and Indigenous artists share their ideas about land, empire, and the self.

Raoul Peck’s four-part *Exterminate All the Brutes*, debuting April 7 on HBO, comes in hot. In the first episode, or chapter, we review—through archival footage, documentary, and reenactments featuring professional actors—centuries of genocide conducted or organized by white Western empires and enacted upon various ethnic minorities and Indigenous populations. The series is adapted from the book of the same name by Sven Lindqvist; for fictionalized scenes of Native American genocide in the U.S., Peck turned to Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz’s *An Indigenous Peoples’ History of the United States*.

Early in the first chapter, Peck—who both appears on camera and narrates the series with his fittingly dramatic and gravelly voice—states that in previous films he made about political radicals, from *Lumumba* and *I Am Not Your Negro* to *The Young Karl Marx*, he sought to remain hidden, “objective.” But when it comes to this question of extermination, of powerful countries like the United States systematically eliminating undesired groups (often Black, brown, and/or Indigenous), there was no way to keep up that distance.

It’s a relief that Peck has put aside the posture of directorial objectivity in order to engage more intimately with such a tremendous subject. *Exterminate* communicates the unbearable proximity Peck feels to its themes in part through a relentless depiction of colonial violence. Peck, who is Haitian by origin, immigrated to New York City as a boy before moving to the Congo, where his father worked in the country’s newly formed, turbulent post-Lumumba government. The arc of history, as he knows, rarely bends toward justice, because its most powerful manipulators—Western monarchies and governments—have continually chosen violence.

As a boy, he moved through the world in the

shadow of this violence; it's not far-fetched to guess he became a director in part so that he could show the things he has witnessed. The series takes a curious, almost childlike perspective, using clips from *On the Town* (1949), *An Outpost of Progress* (2016), and *Shoah* (1985) to illustrate the subliminal reach of racist propaganda as well as reflections on that propaganda throughout cultures. Like the young, so many of us are impressionable, fragile, and naive when it comes to understanding what our world is and how it came to be. Peck allows us to reexamine images we may have taken for granted in the hopes that we might adjust our gazes toward an apparent truth.

Oliver Hermanus, a director of mixed racial background known for hard-to-watch films that connect interpersonal and systemic violences in South Africa, is up to a similar task in *Moffie*. The film, which takes its title from a South African gay slur, came out in virtual theaters April 2. It follows the drafting and training of a young, white, closeted gay man, Nicholas van der Swart (Kai Luke Brummer), in the South African army during the South African Border War, a conflict also known as the Angolan Bush War or Namibian Independence War, which lasted from 1966 to 1990.

It's a severely beautiful film. The brutality these drafted young men, all white, face at the hands of sergeants and lieutenants is set against the piercing backdrop of South Africa's dazzling coastline. For that reason, the film has drawn comparisons to Claire Denis's *Beau Travail*—but Hermanus's film is much more troubling. These new soldiers are told that their enemies are “commies,” “n-ggers,” and “f-ggots.” They are not to show sympathy or mercy to any of the above, especially not before they're shipped off to Angola to thwart the communist government its Indigenous people wish to install. Over the course of the film, Nicholas goes from observant and (mostly) obedient to tough and emptied. The army, in South Africa, is not merely a training camp, but a reeducation camp. These English- and Dutch-origin white boys, whoever they are, will not leave it intact.

Both *Exterminate All the Brutes* and *Moffie* take an aggressive and sweeping approach to revealing the gruesome details of colonial and fascist violence. They both focus on how whiteness as a construct (i.e., a made-up category with real social and historical





significance) has been shaped over time through brutality. And in both works, white people—usually representatives of empires like Great Britain, Belgium, or eventually, the United States—enact violence on both some chosen “other” (whether Native American, Black, Jewish, Roma, Asian, homosexual, communist, Muslim, etc.) and themselves (via military training, child abuse, homophobia, and the like). Peck and Hermanus turn the viewer into a witness rather than a receptacle; you do receive a bevy of historical information, but mostly, the filmmakers just ask you not to look away. Yes, this sort of thing is hard to watch, Peck says, but ignorance won’t save you from the far-reaching consequences of these events.

In the course of such reckonings, various connections are made and several repetitions occur. Moffie’s lieutenants impress upon their charges the ugly repercussions for getting caught engaging in homosexual activities; Josh Hartnett, playing a ruthless colonizer/slave owner in *Exterminate*, murders and mutilates without hesitation. White people, powerful and impoverished alike, project their insecurities upon an imagined other that Black bodies are typically made to symbolize.

So after watching all that, what does one do? Go to bed depressed, or step out into the world with a revitalized drive to change things? How can those of us who descended from historically “othered” ancestors muster the energy to fight for a world where brutal dominance has always had nearly insurmountable sway? Two films

released April 2, Native American director Sky Hopinka’s *Malni—Towards the Ocean, Towards the Shore* and Lesotho director Lemohang Jeremiah Mosese’s *This Is Not a Burial, It’s a Resurrection* (available on Metrograph and in virtual theaters, respectively) mount subtle arguments for life beyond—yet in acknowledgement of—generational trauma for Indigenous populations who have survived on colonized land. Neither film is a direct response to colonial violence, but neither denies its enduring presence, either. Instead, both allow their subjects’ and characters’ lives to bloom onscreen, in moments of reflection, joy, and—especially in the case of *This Is Not a Burial*—grief.

Hopinka, a member of the Ho-Chunk nation and a descendant of the Pechanga Band of Luiseño Indians, was born and raised in Washington state. Since graduating with an MFA from the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, he has made several critically acclaimed short films focusing on Indigenous language, landscape, and modern Indigenous life. *Malni* is his first feature, and like his other films, it foregrounds Chinuk Wawa, a language indigenous to the Lower Columbia River Basin.

Hopinka narrates the film in Chinuk Wawa, following two of his friends through the Pacific Northwest’s forests and coastline. One, Sweetwater Sahme, visits a waterfall for a blessing. She’s pregnant, and in English (with Chinuk Wawa subtitles) she shares her philosophical and spiritual outlook on birth and death, motherhood and childhood. Fully clothed,

she steps into the waterfall, hands open towards the sky. Another friend, Jordan Mercier, speaks with Hopinka in Chinuk Wawa, reflecting on the effects of assimilation he sees on children in his community—who cut their hair rather than wearing it long in order to avoid sidelong comments from white people.

Mercier himself is often taken for white, and growing out his hair has, in some ways, allowed him to outwardly express his Native American identity and culture. He's also been building a canoe, another traditional practice that, he says, has given him a sense of strength and self-knowledge. Hopinka frames his conversations with Sahme and Mercier with a kind of spoken prose poem, a series of open-ended ideas and reflections on existence, permanence, and impermanence. Watching *Malni* a day after finishing *Exterminate All the Brutes*, I felt a sense of replenishment. Catastrophizing in the face of the world's cruelty is an understandable impulse—but while confronting those truths, it's crucial to develop a concrete understanding of what's worth preserving and creating a future for.

Mosese is also interested in what comes next for the traditional communities that get edged out for modernity's sake. Lesotho, the very small country entirely contained within South Africa, exists in a state of extreme vulnerability. Mosese accentuates the grandness of the hilly Lesothan landscape and pastoral culture as a way of introducing the bold yet observant Mantoa (played by the late Mary Twala Mhlongo, who also appeared in Beyoncé's *Black Is King* movie), who lives in a small cottage and is regularly visited by a local priest who lost his wife not long ago.

Death rebounds for 80-year-old Mantoa; she has also lost both her husband and her son, and is ready to pass on herself. But a different kind of death stops her. After her son's burial, the villagers learn of a dam being built nearby, which means she and the rest of the inhabitants—even those who reside in the village's enormous gravesite—will be relocated. Mantoa knows, however, that not all the bodies can be accounted for; there has simply been too much death. She pushes past the village chief in order to put up a fight against their assimilated government representative, and manages to organize her village—including its leaders—around the cause.

Mosese takes an alternately explanatory and subtle approach to revealing the systematic disenfranchisement of villagers in Lesotho. The priest is a talented writer; the villagers choose him to voice their demands to the government in a letter. Sitting with Mantoa as she cares for another elderly villager who is ill, the priest becomes introspective, monologuing about the change in religion and culture his people have experienced throughout history. Mantoa doesn't respond kindly to his idea that these changes are profound and defining. To her, the losses she and others have experienced as a result are "meaningless."

Yet despite Mantoa's near atheism, a thread of magical realism runs through the film. Lush visuals and textured fabrics pop through the screen; images fade in and out, events sequenced not according to chronology but feeling. A griot of sorts tells Mantoa's story from inside a shadowy Lesothan club, likely in the city. Mantoa defiantly sings from the hilltop, beckoning her neighbors not for another funeral, but for a meeting. *This Is Not a Burial* gradually reveals the ways in which cultures within cultures have been erased in the face of globalization, and how the only way to carry on our most life-affirming traditions is to honor what and who is no longer present.

Films can tell us about anything, and Black and Indigenous directors have the right to woo or disturb us. Of course, there are cynical and clumsy approaches, those more attendant to shock value or term-paper hypothesizing than to working out ideas. *Exterminate All the Brutes* and *Moffie* come close to crossing this line, with almost relentless approaches to depicting systematized terror and destruction. Yet both manage to transmit lucid and rigorous thinking about our past and current conditions. For the dominant narrative to be challenged, its distortions have to be laid bare.

Malni and *This Is Not a Burial*, though, refuse to frame their ideas through the lens of white patriarchy. Black and Indigenous people have indeed lived, have built communities and pooled resources, rebelled and refused, charted a course to life beyond survival even against the grimmest circumstances. We need to be reminded of this.



Interview: Oliver Hermanus on *Moffie* and the Making of *Men in South Africa*

Slant Magazine

9 April 2021 | Marshall Shaffer

[Article link ›](#)

The filmmaker discusses how he found his way into a story about white men as a mixed-race South African.

To those who hail from outside South Africa, the title of Oliver Hermanus's fourth feature, *Moffie*, might roll softly and smoothly off the tongue. But it only takes one utterance of "moffie" in the film's apartheid-era military setting to understand the venom with which the word is spewed by figures of authority. The Afrikaans slang has no exact English equivalent, but the closest translation is "faggot." As Hermanus depicts, the conscripted soldiers in the South African Defence Force wield the term not merely to denigrate gay men. "*Moffie*" functions to police an appropriate display of masculinity.

Hermanus's film closely tracks a gay teen, Nicholas van der Swart (Kai Luke Brummer), as

he navigates his two-year army conscription while attempting to hide his sexuality from his peers. Without short-changing Nicholas's character development, *Moffie* trains its lens on how institutions like the military impress themselves on individuals by breaking them down and regimenting a limited range of acceptable behaviors. The perspective necessitates limiting the film's point of view to that of young white South African men, an unusual and often uncomfortable one through which to experience the horrors of apartheid. But under Hermanus's steady direction, *Moffie* sheds light on the mechanisms that turn boys into brutes.

I spoke with Hermanus prior to the film's stateside release, which comes over 18 months after its premiere at the Venice Film Festival. In our conversation, the filmmaker discussed how he found his way into a story about white men as a mixed-race South African, why he was so restrictive about the portrayal of sexuality in the film, and where people have projected influences and interpretations onto *Moffie* that he did not intend.

How did you triangulate the portrayal of racism and homophobia without necessarily drawing a false equivalency between the two? The forces are definitely intertwined in a form of toxic masculinity, but their expression and impact are quite different.

I think maybe because I'm not white myself, I approached the whole process of untangling the dynamic of the setting from that kind of outsider perspective. I think it probably gave me a little bit more freedom to be confident in positioning the racial perspective of the film because my lens wasn't from the perspective of a white South African man. I didn't really think about it because I felt like it was just natural for me to be interrogatory on the setting.

When you're getting inside the headspace of men acculturated to perpetuate racism and other forms of bigotry, how do you find points of empathy and connection without tipping over into excusing and justification?

I think that's often the challenge of a film, especially in the context of South Africa. We're a people trying to understand each other, our perspectives, and how we operate in the past. I think there's a common ground in a sense of humanity. That was what I latched onto, going, "What is the humanity of these young men? What is the thing about them that I understand and connect with and find to be connected to me?" I think with all of those characters, including all the other guys, it was about knowing that it's true of any human being that there are positive and negative attributes. It was about finding the balance within those young men.

What was the goal of portraying violence against black men by really lingering on the victim following an attack?

The South African narrative of racism is kind of world famous; we had one of the most restrictive societies in the past known to many, many countries. I'm a product of that. There was an intention, of course, to make the perspective of the film that of white South African men. But as a film, there's definitely a commentary on the nature of racism, the shame of racism. For me, personally, what lingers is this feeling of being dismissed and just being othered in a very profound way. I wanted at least each interaction that we had [to capture that], in particular the vomit-throwing scene. That scene needed to end

on the face of that man. The last beat needs to be his perspective on what we've just seen.

Your films are great at capturing how men communicate so sparsely with words but convey plenty with gestures and other body language. How do you calibrate the way characters express themselves and ensure that the performers are equipped to act that?

Each one is a gamble. In one of my films [2011's *Beauty*], the protagonist is more challenging because he ultimately commits atrocities with sexual violence. But, in the same way, I had to find an "in" with that character, and the actor had to find an [entry point] with the character in a way that was connective and honest. It's the joy of filmmaking, for directors and for actors, the opportunity to step inside of other people's minds and, without a sense of judgment, navigate and see the world from their perspective in a kind of non-biased way. Ultimately, just to demonstrate that in so many ways, who we are is rooted in similar things.

It's my understanding that you fought hard to shoot *Moffie* in Academy ratio. Why was that so central to your vision of the film?

In my research, I found the South Africans collected Kodak [photos]. The Kodak generation of the '80s had all these personal memories that I uncovered from different soldiers and families. It just felt natural to me that we would tell the story with that aspect ratio. Everything about the photography is reflective of Kodak: the saturation of the colors, that aspect ratio, the nature of the blue in people's skin tones. Jamie Ramsay [the film's cinematographer] did a great job referencing not just the photographs, but how they aged over time.

There's a duality to your shot selection, alternating between emotionally resonant close-ups of the conscripts and longer shots where we view their bodies almost like objects. How did you find a balance of these two ends of the spectrum in the edit?

There's always the fear of making a film that's about the coming of age of a gay kid that's superficial in its treatment of physicality. A film whose story is set in the army, featuring young men in the prime of their lives, is going to unfortunately—because the film is set in the '80s—going to have a lot of people in short shorts. It's a dance of visualizing this and



representing their youth and physicality without it being indulgent. I was quite severe about that; I didn't want the audience to be distracted by a fantasy. In fact, one of the strangest things that came out of the film's Venice premiere is that many critics thought I had an homage to a volleyball scene in *Top Gun* in there. But I can't even remember that film, because it kind of predates me. People apply these things as the male gaze, and there was an argument that I was reclaiming the volleyball scene with that setting. But obviously, I wasn't, so it's always up for interpretation. But, from my point of view, I was trying to be as restrictive as possible about the sort of visualizing of their bodies.

And, even still, the film picks up on a lot of the latent homoeroticism in these spaces.

It's unavoidable, isn't it? If I'm going to put men in tight outfits on the screen, the context is sexualized. There's nothing you can do to stop the audience from making those assumptions.

It helps that you avoid ironic distance. The camera never seems to be objectifying them.

Thank goodness, because you have to actively work toward that. It can so easily become that. One of the very first scriptwriting decisions that I made for *Moffie* was that [I wouldn't make room] for an intimate sex scene. My version of a sex scene in the film is somebody touching somebody else's face because of the nature of the army, particularly in South Africa. I knew it was such a fear-mongered environment that that act of softness, of interhuman gentleness, would have been transgressive. It was about how you retained that tension that any sense of being human, any sense of sensitivity would be the greatest kind of gesture.

The shower room is such a fascinating, almost liminal space in the film. How did you approach the way you'd portray it and make it such a dynamic setting?

The shower scenes are supposed to represent their own little narrative. There's a shower scene in the beginning where [the guys are] all being very playful, and it's kind of like rugby. It's this completely innocent context. And then it changes after they've been brutalized, and they've experienced a really difficult 24 hours. Then the [next] shower scene is the silent, traumatizing kind where no one's speaking. The guys are standing in lines, all changed. Before they were in this little bubble of freedom, but it changed because their headspace has changed. That was the intention: You sense that they've internalized something, and so the party's over.

Which ties into the flashback at the pool that gets to the root of Nicholas's trauma.

There are many theories that I have an obsession with water, but I really don't. [laughs] It's more the theme of trauma!

At what point did you realize it was necessary to break with your visual rhythm through the rest of the film and do the scene as an extended, single-take tracking shot?

That's a scriptwriting decision. When I was approached to make this film, I didn't immediately connect with the narrative because it was about white men in the '80s suffering trauma, which is a very difficult idea because, given the nature of apartheid, we expect films set during the time to be about the trauma of black people. And so, when writing the script, I had to find something that was connected to

me, and that flashback sequence is something more personal to me. It happened to me not in such an extreme way, and that scene is the most personal moment in the film for me, and so I wanted to shoot it in a way that unfolds in real time. The tension of it is real because it plays out as this difficult six minutes of an innocence that's lost.

The shower scenes seem like the journey of the film in microcosm—taking an innocent person and watching what brutality and shame takes away from them.

We were interested in how men are made. This question of white men and the problem of white men globally, the question of entitlement and white privilege—all of these themes, I think, are at their root about how people's viewpoints of the world are established. There's something about these kids, about how, when they arrive, they're completely uninformed. They don't have these hard-wired views, but by the time they've done two years of [military service] in which they could have gone to the border, they might have killed people, hardened themselves, developed an absolute sense of racism, hate, and conservatism. This happens all over the world; militaries are used to limiting people's individuality.

As a white man, I grapple with this. On the one hand, our stories have dominated culture for so long, and we should really be centering the impacted in these narratives. But at the same time, addressing the damage done by white men in the world does require introspection and analysis of them, too, if we want to break the cycle.

South Africa is a country of 11 languages and multiple races that had a regimented, racialized political system for half a century. The nature of how we reintegrate is about having to acknowledge our perspective and our perceptions. It's not like the problem lies entirely with white South Africans, who must reform themselves to understand and integrate with black, mixed-race South Africans. We all arrive, in the South African context, in interactions with each other with a racial perspective. It's about how we transcend the limitations on integration and post-racial thinking. The way in which societies reach a new point of view is through a collective kind of introspection. Because racism is a particular thing, but racial prejudice is quite

specific. I always say that when South Africans of different races get into a car accident, when they get out of their cars, it's not two people meeting. It's two different races, and it'll influence how that interaction happens. It's going to be loaded with history.

In South Africa, you've got a majority of black people who are policed and restricted by a white minority. In America, there's an institutionalized racism, but it's a minority black population that is [contending] with a white majority. And institutionalized racism takes a very long time to tear down. I think what's happened in the last year has been particularly seismic because we've all just had an opportunity, globally, to look—because we've been sitting at home—at the nature of those institutions, of racial profiling, of how we're not acknowledging that we do arrive at pre-judgments. We're in a very difficult time, particularly I think for Americans because you're having to face a very entrenched way of being.

Some have said that the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission should be replicated in America, particularly after the Capitol insurrection.

I'm meant to make a film set during the commission about Eugene de Kock, who was the death squad leader of the Security Police in South Africa and nicknamed "Prime Evil." But the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, its idea was that it didn't want to be Nuremberg. Its idea was that, after the Second World War, the nature of Nuremberg was that if you were convicted of war crimes, you were killed. You were hung, or you were shot. There was this idea that the nature of the Holocaust was beyond forgiveness. And in South Africa, our structure with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission was to create an environment where we were prepared to forgive. If you told us what you did, if you were honest, if you relieved victims' families of the unknown of what happened to their loved ones, if you just told the truth, you would be forgiven. It's a big question whether, as a society globally, we value forgiveness enough.

LGBTQ Cinema Comes Out on International Stage

Variety

1 April 2021 | Guy Lodge

[Article link ›](#)

Introducing a musical performance at the Academy Awards isn't normally the biggest of deals, but for Chilean newcomer Daniela Vega, it was a landmark opportunity: At the 2018 ceremony, she became the first transgender person ever to present at the Oscars. The film that got her there, meanwhile, had already made history that same night. Sebastián Lelio's uplifting drama "A Fantastic Woman," in which Vega gave a luminous performance as a trans woman battling heartbreak and discrimination, won that year's international feature award — becoming the first film with a transgender lead to win an Oscar in any category.

"Thank you so much for this moment," Vega said from the stage, before segueing into a tribute to gay Italian filmmaker Luca Guadagnino's much-nominated queer romance "Call Me by Your Name": It was a minute of airtime that contained more global LGBTQ visibility than many a previous broadcast.

"A Fantastic Woman's" triumph was a clear marker of a rising tide of international LGBTQ cinema, making its presence felt at festivals, awards ceremonies and arthouses alike: No longer a fringe concern, queer cinema from across the globe appears to cultivate a larger and more diverse audience every year: witness the across-the-board adulation for French director Celine Sciamma's lesbian period romance "Portrait of a Lady on Fire," which took the 2019 Cannes Film Festival by storm and amassed a swooning cult from there.

At that same festival, veteran queer filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar's autobiographical "Pain & Glory" became one of his most broadly acclaimed films, eventually taking \$38 million worldwide (and a couple of Oscar nominations to boot).

Even given the restrictions of a global pandemic, the past year has been a rich and varied one for queer cinema of many stripes, both on the festival circuit and multiple avenues of

distribution — with the streaming realm an increasingly vital ally in amplifying LGBTQ film and filmmakers.

This year's international Oscar race hasn't been as kind to queer cinema as the one that culminated in Lelio's victory: no LGBTQ-themed films made the final five in the category, though several were submitted by their respective countries, with a couple making the pre-nomination shortlist.

Most prominent among those is "Two of Us," an assured, emotionally rich debut from French-based Italian director Filippo Meneghetti, which seeks to rectify the ageism that prevails even in this liberal-minded film sector. A rare portrait of older same-sex romance, its study of a covert, decades-long love affair between two women in the same apartment building is tender and empathetic, but takes some surprising genre turns as their secret is threatened. (As a portrait of everyday lesbian life within the boomer generation, it stands comparison with a Paraguayan festival standout from 2018: Marcelo Martinessi's Berlinale-laureled "The Heiresses.")

If "Two of Us" fell just short with Oscar voters, the French Academy was more generous: Meneghetti won the Cesar for first feature earlier this month, while leads Barbara Sukowa and Martine Chevallier both received actress nods. Merely being selected as France's Oscar entry, meanwhile, entailed beating one of the country's most celebrated queer filmmakers to the punch: Francois Ozon's "Summer of '85," a rollicking fusion of gay coming-of-age romance and teen tragedy, was among the films shortlisted and passed over by the French selectors. (It also racked up a formidable 12 Cesar nominations, though left the ceremony empty-handed.)

Joining Meneghetti's film on the international Oscar shortlist was a filmmaker who could hardly be less of a newcomer. Polish-born but well-traveled in terms of film production, Agnieszka Holland helmed the Czech Republic's entry "Charlatan," an absorbing biopic of Communist-persecuted Czech faith healer Jan Mikolášek that is most interesting in its dramatization of Mikolášek's rumored gay romance with

his devoted assistant. A quarter-century after her English-language Leonardo DiCaprio vehicle “Total Eclipse” probed the historical affair between poets Rimbaud and Verlaine, Holland once demonstrates a subtle, sensual understanding of gay male desire in challenging circumstances.

Also shortlisted for the Oscar: gay Guatemalan writer-director Jayro Bustamante, who has almost singlehandedly put his country’s cinema on the arthouse map with his first three features. (Prior to his 2015 debut “Ixcanul,” Guatemala had only once submitted a film in the Oscar race.)

The film that earned the Academy’s attention, “La Llorona” — a powerful, politically resonant horror film acting as an allegory for lingering trauma over native Mayan genocide — is not expressly queer in its themes, though Bustamante shot it back-to-back with an equally potent film that very much is.

Granted a limited U.S. release in late 2019, “Tremors” tells the story of a well-to-do family man vilified by his evangelical Christian community when he belatedly comes out, leaving his wife for a lower-class man. It’s a sharp, upsetting portrayal of the challenging realities of LGBTQ life in Guatemala, where homosexuality is legal, but not protected by anti-discrimination laws.

Another study of a family shaken by taboo queerness in its midst, the well-regarded “Funny Boy,” from Canadian director Deepa Mehta, had high hopes in the international Oscar race before being disqualified over its proportion of English-language dialogue. Adapted from a best-selling autobiographical novel by Sri Lankan-Canadian writer Shyam Selvadurai, it’s a bright, accessible tale of a young boy from a conservative Colombo family, coming to terms with his sexuality as the Sri Lankan civil war brews in the background.

Picked up by Ava DuVernay’s diversity-oriented Array distribution company, it achieved wide exposure in the U.S. and other regions via Netflix. It wasn’t the only subcontinent-set queer film to find a mainstream audience in 2020. Though India’s commerce-driven Bollywood industry largely shies away from LGBTQ themes, Hitesh Kivwelya’s gay romantic comedy “Shubh Mangal Zyada Saav-dhan” was a surprise success, topping the domestic box office before COVID-19 shuttered cinemas the very next week.

Queer self-discovery and political bedfellows are once more narrative bedfellows in “Moffie,” a gut-punching war drama from South Africa’s Oliver Hermanus that recently landed a best British debut BAFTA nomination for producer and co-writer Jack Sidey. Set in South Africa’s apartheid era, it brings vivid, visceral immediacy to its story of a closeted gay teenager sent to the frontline of the Border War with Angola in the 1980s, examining the violent masculinity that sustained a whole country’s history of hate. Hermanus, a Black gay director, previously examined the corrosive effect of same-sex desire on a white Afrikaner man in his Cannes-selected 2011 stunner “Beauty”; “Moffie,” which finally gets a U.S. release in April after premiering at Venice in 2019, arguably establishes him as Africa’s foremost queer filmmaker.

Still, his isn’t the only such voice emerging from a continent where LGBTQ themes are frequently a source of controversy: Kenyan director Wanuri Kahiu’s youthful, candy-colored lesbian romance “Rafiki” hit headlines in 2018 when it was banned by Kenyan censors for its positive depiction of same-sex romance, but became a global festival favorite.

From the same country, Peter Murimi’s stirring documentary “I Am Samuel” depicts the struggle of a rural preacher’s son to be with the man he loves in the face of familial and governmental oppression, and was a staple of last year’s largely virtual doc festival circuit. It’s a modest film that nonetheless makes a seismic statement in the context of its origins — and joins a global chorus of queer voices in the medium that will no longer be sidelined or silent.



The Best Movies of 2021 (So Far)

Vulture

3 May 2021 | Bilge Ebiri, Alison Willmore
[Article link ›](#)

Theaters are cautiously reopening, Cannes is back on the calendar (with fingers crossed) for July, and jittery studios have been shuffling around release dates for all the blockbusters that were bumped from last year. In other words: Movies are back, baby! Though, of course, they never really went away. Even in these early months of 2021, streaming and on-demand releases have offered up a slew of treasures worth seeking out, from a tender documentary about stray dogs on the streets of Istanbul to a delirious Kristen Wiig comedy about two Midwestern women finding themselves (and stopping an archvillain) while vacationing in Florida. Here are the best movies Vulture has seen and, in many cases, reviewed so far this year, according to critics Bilge Ebiri and Alison Willmore.

(A reminder about methodology: This list is restricted to films that have had their first official release in 2021 — so no *The Father*, *Minari*, *Night of the Kings*, or *Nomadland*, which all had qualifying runs in 2020 — and we will continue to update it throughout the year.)

Moffie

Thrumming with danger and eroticism, Oliver Hermanus's adaptation of André Carl van der Merwe's apartheid-era memoir centers on a gay South African teenager who's sent to complete his compulsory military service. It's 1981, a time when anti-Black and anti-communist fears are being stoked to an all-time high, and Nicholas (Kai Luke Brummer) is one of a group of young men being readied to participate in the country's border war with Angola. It's a coming-of-age movie that plays like a thriller, its main character navigating a brutal institution in which masculinity, racism, nationalism, and violence are all inextricably linked, and finding an unexpected connection with fellow conscript Dylan (Ryan de Villiers).—A.W.



The 10 Best Movies of 2021, So Far

Vanity Fair

10 June 2021 | Richard Lawson

[Article link](#) ›

It's been a slow return to the regular movie release schedule, but at least ten great movies have made their way to American audiences this year.

Movies are back! Okay, technically they never went anywhere—but theaters are reopened in most places in the U.S., meaning we have a summer of big blockbusters and hopefully some interesting smaller movies to look forward to. Some worthy films were also released prior to our great vaccine summer, or just in time for it. To that end, with half the year done, here's my list of the 10 best movies released so far this year. (Note: Some of these films were eligible for, and included in, the 2020 Oscars, but we are counting them as 2021 films because, well, they had their U.S. release in 2021.)

Moffie

Reminiscent of Claire Denis's elusive masterpiece *Beau Travail*, Oliver Hermanus's dreamy-dreadful film trades Denis's almost mystical, danceful meditation for a bleaker grounding in reality. The film is based on Andre Carl van der Merwe's memoir about his time as a closeted young soldier in the white South African army during apartheid. The army's horrific enforcement of South Africa's stringently racist policies commingles terribly with its violent homophobia, as young Moffie (expressive newcomer Kai Luke Brümmer) engages in a tentative flirtation with a fellow draftee. A story of repression forced into the service of an even broader oppression, *Moffie* is a sorrowful observation of the forces that enable and sustain white supremacy and patriarchy, a damning portrait of a nation's past and the whole world's present.