

'Moffie' and Me

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South African filmmakers are confronting an aspect of the apartheid era that marked my generation: an abusive masculinity defined by its homophobia.

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IFC Films

Matthew Vey as Michael and Kai Luke Brummer as Nick in Oliver Hermanus's *Moffie* (2019)

On my first trip home from university, in April 1983, I borrowed my father's Mercedes and drove from Johannesburg out to the South African Defence Force (SADF) barracks in Potchefstroom to see my best friend. J. and I were just nineteen: while he had decided to get his two years' compulsory military service over with, I deferred my call-up by registering at the University of Cape Town. And so, when we met on the parade ground, he had a shaved head and was buttoned into tight-fitting military khakis; I had grown out my Jewfro and was wearing the ethno-boho attire befitting the campus radical I had become, newly initiated into the student anti-apartheid movement.

At this time, South Africa was involved in a bloody, US-backed war defending white civilization against black communists and terrorists on the Namibian border; J. could expect at least one "border tour" during his service. But even as I vocally disapproved of what he was being trained to do, and feared for him, I found him sexier than ever. He was the object of my deep, unrequited passion and, for years

afterward, whenever I looked at a photo of us from that visit—he in his martial glory and me mugging a salute—I was filled with feelings of longing and shame.

The shame was complex. It stemmed from my illicit desire for my straight friend, from my sexual attraction to the man in a uniform that repelled me ideologically, and from my sense that I was not “man enough” for this army or any other. Short-sighted, plump, and clumsy, I would be as hopeless at war as I had been on the rugby field. Was I even “man enough” for the struggle? Before long, I would leave South Africa to study in the US rather than follow a path into activism that might see me beaten up, jailed, or banned from public activity.

I would never have gone into the SADF—because of my politics, because of my family’s resources (enabling me to travel abroad), because of my fearfulness, and because I was a “moffie.” That word is roughly the South African equivalent of “faggot,” but with more breadth and bite. Although it is sometimes used merely descriptively, an equivalent of “queen,” it is usually spat out as a harsh insult—and it is sprayed like tear gas all over Oliver Hermanus’s film of that name, *Moffie*, which has just been released in the US: “Communism, laziness, faggotry [*mofdadigheid*], kaffir sympathy, and all manner of subversion will not be tolerated,” yells the lieutenant at his new troops on their first day, in early 1981, the border war already well underway. “The black savage is on our front porch, so near we can smell him,” the officer barks, “but we will defend...our women and children.”

The film follows one of these recruits, a tight-lipped English-speaking boy named Nick van der Swart (Kai Luke Brummer) with a golden beauty that reminds me of J.’s, from his unhappy departure from home, nonplussed at the way his Afrikaans stepfather says that military service will “make a man” of him. Nick’s induction into this world of men is one of the most arresting first ten minutes of a film I have ever experienced, from the brutal bullying of the commanders to the vicious racism of his fellow recruits. This constant abuse is leveled primarily at black people, but also at the English-speakers among them, whom they call *soutpiele*, “salt-dicks,” to suggest a penis dangling in the ocean, because, unlike Afrikaners, Anglo South Africans are still perceived to have one foot in Europe.

Hermanus, a mixed-race South African who grew up in the “coloured” community, is interested in the way white men, too, became victims of masculinist apartheid. His 2010 film *Skoonheid* (Cleanness) is almost unbearable to watch for the sense of shame it captures in a married Afrikaans man who becomes sexually obsessed with his daughter’s handsome boyfriend. Here, in *Moffie*, the shame resides with Nick van der Swart. Although it takes us a while to understand the film’s contours—the plot involves Nick falling for another recruit—

Hermanus alerts us early on to his theme with a montage set to the aching beautiful strains of the second movement of Schubert's Piano Trio No.2 in E-flat major.

Film buffs will recognize the music from *Barry Lyndon*, where Stanley Kubrick uses it to excess to set the relaxed pace and lush tone of a film all about form. In *Moffie*, it plays, at first with seeming irony, behind the ugliness of the lieutenant's speech. But then it continues as the conscripts do push-ups and stand on parade, the images shot with an aesthetic geometry that recalls Leni Riefenstahl's *Olympia* and an eroticizing eye like that of Claire Denis in *Beau Travail*. To a particularly languid passage of the music, a sadistic sergeant major kicks a recruit to the ground for no apparent reason. Then the melody, carried by the strings, swoons to a shot of naked, muscular men horsing around in the showers. The camera pans slowly across to where Nick is standing apart, turned away, his back broad yet vulnerable.

The point of view is not Nick's—we don't yet know anything about his desire, and never really will—but the one Hermanus chooses to show us, so that, watching this sequence, I felt rising the same mix of longing and shame I connect with my photos of J. in uniform. Like Denis in *Beau Travail*, Hermanus captures both the eros and the vulnerability of men at war, but he wishes to implicate us, too—as he implicates himself, in an idealizing gaze that has, we will come to see, a violent dark side. Two soldiers caught having sex are beaten up by their commanders and sent off to the notorious Ward 22. When, at length, one returns to barracks, he uses his rifle to kill himself in full view of Nick and his platoon. Later, Nick's love interest, Dylan (Ryan de Villiers), is sent to the same unit simply for being different and a little subversive. The men of *Moffie*, encouraged to bond together in service of the war machine, may long for one another but they dare not touch.



Moffie is based on a messy but moving autobiographical novel of the same name, published in 2006 by André Carl van der Merwe. In it, Van der Merwe describes the way new recruits are shorn of their identity upon arrival: “As we get closer, young men with bleeding heads walk past us. The shapes of their heads are awkward, and their scalps look blue-white—stubble over sensitive, pale skin.” The brutal barber hurts each boy “in some way, either kicking the recruit as he leaves the chair or hitting him when he’s done. Sometimes he rams the tiny steel teeth into the scalp, hacking out chunks of flesh or nicking ears with the greasy razor.”

I have heard some version of this from every person I know who was called up, from the late 1950s when compulsory military service began to 1993 when it ended. (Mercifully for me, the authorities stopped enforcing it in 1990, on the eve of the release of Nelson Mandela, just as I failed to get another study deferment.) And yet, in *Moffie*, the recruits keep their hair. Nick’s golden thatch expresses his stolid beauty; his friend Michael (Matthew Vey), a Jewish boy, has lavish blond curls, and Dylan’s dark hair falls with a *Brideshead*-like flop. And every young man has a gym-built or rugby-field body, another key that *Moffie* is not a documentary, or a work of gritty realism: rather, it has constructed a fictional world that is concerned with the complex erotic imagination of war, and its legacy. If Hermanus idealizes his young soldiers, its purpose, paradoxically, is to make real what has become a buzz phrase of our times: their fragile masculinity.

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It is fascinating that three of the best South African films of recent years tell gay coming-of-age stories within all-male environments. The first was *The Wound* (2017), a brilliant first film by John Trengove, cowritten with Thando Mqolozana, about a queer boy attending an initiation camp where Xhosa adolescents are circumcised and admitted to manhood through rituals of deprivation and bonding. The second was *Kanarie* (2018), by Christiaan Olwagen, a film with a setting similar to *Moffie*’s, as both tell the story of homosexuals in the SADF during the 1980s. But if *Moffie* tilts toward stylized tragedy, *Kanarie* plays with edgy farce: a musical set in the military’s church choir, it provides a camp retort to the oppressive masculinism that flings the “moffie” slur at anyone who deviates from the norm, especially “The Canaries,” as the choristers are known.



Breaking Glass Pictures

Beer Adriaanse as Corporal Crunchie and Schalk Bezuidenhout as Johan in Christiaan Olwagen's *Kanarie* (2018)

But *Kanarie* offers an unexpected counternarrative to *Moffie*'s world, inviting us into a military environment where gay boys could find their own space. *Kanarie* was cowritten by the composer Charl-Johan Lingenfelder, who drew extensively on his own experience of military service. In 1985, he was a member of the actual "Canaries," traveling around the country to entertain both the soldiers and their families back home. This at a time when the country was under a state of emergency and SADF troops were being deployed not only on the border but also in the country's black townships .

In some respects, *Kanarie* follows the same narrative arc as *Moffie*. Like Nick, *Kanarie*'s Johan (Schalk Bezuidenhout) is a quiet, diligent boy, who, though obsessed with Boy George (a photo of whom he keeps in his Bible), just wants to keep his head down and get through his service. Both films' protagonists struggle with their sexuality: Nick with quiet intensity, Johan with more expressive angst. Both fall in love with fellow soldiers; both are pitched against their own shame and self-loathing, accentuated by the masculinist, homophobic culture of the army. Yet the two films view their protagonists very differently.

There is something heroic in Nick's stoicism, whereas Johan is an antihero: his very surname, Niemand, while common enough in South Africa, actually means "nobody." Scrawny, with a rubbery face, he immediately gets the nickname "Beanpole" from his squad's sergeant major, who also decides Ludolf, a campy tenor magnificently played by Germandt Geldenhuys, will be "Fatso." The film's induction sequence mirrors that of *Moffie*, from the hellish train ride to the barracks to the deliberately dehumanizing processing on arrival, but in *Kanarie* we see the recruits in a different way: scrawny, pimply boys, too young for

the stuff of war. There is nothing erotic about these startled and disoriented children (white boys were eligible for recruitment once they left school, from sixteen). Even the sex scenes between Johan and his boyfriend Wolfgang (Hannes Otto) have a kind of frantic urgency that is the opposite of sexy. They remind me of my own guilty teenage sex, uncoupling before we might be discovered.

“My job is to make men out of you moffies,” says the drill sergeant in *Kanarie*. “If you buttfuckers thought you joined the Canaries to skive off, think again.” But unlike his counterpart in *Moffie*, Hilton Pelsner’s truly terrifying Sergeant Brand, the drill sergeant in *Kanarie* is played for laughs by Beer Adriaanse—and mocked behind his back. When, later, Johan has an epic collapse about his sexuality, involving self-harm, he is comforted by the choirmaster (Jacques Bessenger), himself probably a gay man, and counseled that he needs to find a way to accept himself. During his service, Johan finds others like him, and even if some, like Ludolf, are threatening at first, he finds *himself* through them.

Therein lies the main difference in perspective between these two films: beyond the homoerotic gaze, there is no sense in *Moffie* of what might be called a queer sensibility or gay community. By contrast, *Kanarie* abounds in Olwagen’s deep appreciation of camp’s power to “dethrone the serious,” as Susan Sontag put it. And his gay characters acquire resilience in fellowship, even amid the violence and the homophobia of the army.

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In a groundbreaking essay published in 1996 (in an anthology that I edited), the South African writer and artist Matthew Krouse described how, in 1984, he was part of an army drag troupe called “The Arista Sisters” that traveled the country performing to both servicemen and the top brass. The Sisters were even part of a TV special that had other gay boys doing a dance around a captured Cuban jeep. Of his experience, Krouse wrote:

We are not quite the enemy. Unlike in other national defence forces (the United States being an infamous case in point), we will not be excluded simply because we sleep with other men. We will be included—and then censured. We may fight but we may not fuck. And perhaps we are very important, for, in the eyes of the authorities, our supposed “womanliness” can be used to reinforce what it means to be a real man.

This is a critical insight about the way macho homophobia has its roots in misogyny: in both *Moffie* and *Kanarie*, the recruits are repeatedly disparaged as “ladies” or “girls,” or by a notorious army insult used in both films, the horribly alliterative “*puisiepoese*” (“pimpled pussies”). Krouse, writing that homophobia was “encouraged in the barracks,” describes witnessing a corporal being stripped of his rank because he is found with another man, and of

rumors of more extreme punishments: queers being incarcerated, or sent for “treatment”. Sodomy was, after all, a criminal offense until as late as 1998. “But these are the extremes,” he cautions, and his essay offers a factual plumb line against which one can measure the representations of both *Moffie* and *Kanarie*:

Not every gay boy is arrested and tried, or insulted and then assaulted. But there is an ever-present threat that is constructed by the rank. It is an open discouragement of any form of queer behavior. And since mere discouragement is never enough to do away with normal impulses, a form of hidden terrorism against gays prevails which permeates every echelon of the military environment.

Krouse’s work is currently the subject of an online retrospective, an exhibition curated by the artist Adam Broomberg for kunsthallo.com. One of Krouse’s underground films, *The Soldier* (1989), depicts a male recruit being raped by his commander, who places a girlie centerfold on the young soldier’s back. The scene captures the violent misogyny of war, displaced onto a subordinate man in a display of brutal power.

In the face of this, Krouse has no illusions about the subversive power of his army drag, concluding that it enacts “a complex contradiction between collaboration and defiance.” *Kanarie* explores a similar complexity: the Canaries might camp it up and even try (unsuccessfully) to smuggle Culture Club into their repertoire, but they have been ordered to sing for their country, and are berated by an irate liberal concertgoer for “pretending that God supports this war.”

While on tour, the choristers are billeted in civilians’ homes. In one of these, a fashion designer (Anna-Mart van der Merwe) drunkenly leads the morose Johan into her studio and drapes him in one of her creations. “Look how beautiful you look!” she coos. “Promise me one thing. When your cage opens, fly away. Away from this crappy country with its...rules and its laws, its hate and its bullies.”

“I will try,” he mumbles. The film ends with the hope that he will succeed—if not by fleeing, then by accepting himself.

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IFC Films

Oliver Hermanus's *Moffie* (2019)

It's been a long time since I felt shame about my youthful desires. When I dug out that photograph of J. and me on the Potchefstroom parade ground while writing this essay, I felt something akin to the warmth of nostalgia rather than the prickle of humiliation. The longing is still there—for youth—though present also is relief, that those times have passed. But we still live with their legacy, as one particularly unsettling shot in *Moffie* suggests. It is a long, still close-up of a dying black soldier whom Nick shoots during a border skirmish. Why does the camera linger, from Nick's point of view, for several uncomfortable beats after the victim's last breath? Toward the end of his film, Hermanus will not have Nick, or us, turn away: he wants to remind us who the real victims of apartheid were.

This leads me to think about the very particular dissonance in South African society today, and how this dissonance might have produced this recent burst of filmmaking: the gap between South Africans' formal, constitutional rights and the actual lives of its still-impoorished black majority. This gap is present in so many ways—unemployment, homelessness, maladministration—but perhaps nowhere more emblematically so than between gender and sexuality rights and their persistent violation. South Africa was famously the first country in the world to explicitly outlaw discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in its constitution (in 1996), and one of the first to permit same-sex marriage (2006). Women, too, have full equality and protection under the law. Yet we have one of the highest rates of gender-based violence in the world, a subset of which is the abuse of gender-nonconforming people: butch lesbians who are subject to what is termed “punitive rape,” and femme men or trans women who are beaten, raped, or murdered at horrifying rates. In the last month alone, two such victims, Andile Nthutela and Siphomandla Khoza, were killed in what appear to be hate crimes. The suspects are

black men, from the victims' own communities, but the violence against them is a product of the hatred, rooted in the country's martial history, of those who threaten traditional gender roles.

Although Archbishop Desmond Tutu's storied Truth and Reconciliation Commission midwifed the political transition that saw white people give up their political power peacefully in a negotiated settlement, it could not begin to deal with this legacy of violence. The consequences are expressed, unforgettably, at the end of *Moffie*, when Nick is demobilized and his father asks him how it was. "Okay" is all the boy can muster.

"And the border tour?"

"Fine."

The reticence is devastating, given all we have seen our hero endure. His inability to talk to his father about his trauma, or about anything, reveals the way military service *did* make him "a man," as his stepfather toasted in the preceding scene. He learned not only how to kill enemies of the state, but also to suffocate his own emotions and desires.

Moffie, directed by Oliver Hermanus, is in theaters and on demand from IFC Films; *Kanarie*, directed by Christiaan Olwagen, is available on Amazon Prime; *Matthew Krouse*, an online exhibition curated by Adam Broomberg, is showing at kunsthallo.com.

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