

Conservation is War: Representations of Conflict and Conservation in the movie “Virunga”

Film review by Marine Krieger



Image credit: virungamovie.com

Released in 2014, the movie *Virunga* caught the world’s attention and caused a rise in the global awareness of the ongoing conflict in the North-Eastern region of the Democratic Republic of Congo. In an ambitious bid to depict the complex context surrounding the Virunga National Park where some of the world’s few remaining gorillas reside, the movie touches upon multiple dynamics at play in the region, from private companies coveting the park’s resources to different armed groups’ territorial claims. This movie was rightfully applauded for raising awareness on a global scale about a conflict that is mostly ignored by consumers, while the demand for technologies based on resources extracted in the region has never been so high. Nonetheless, this review will adopt a critical perspective and illustrate how the movie’s representation of the region’s context as well as different parties involved is problematic.

Firstly, *Virunga* promotes specific voices at the expense of others, thus perpetrating harmful neo-colonial representations and systems. Indeed, Western figures are brought to the forefront and constitute the main characters, while locals are only represented by park rangers that are themselves subordinate to Emmanuel de Merode, a member of the Belgian royal family. This character is central to the movie and is immediately presented as a guiding, almost fatherly figure to lead the less knowledgeable park rangers. Like a modern missionary, de Merode is constantly seen explaining sometimes logical and simple situations to his subordinates. The other dominant Western voice is that of French journalist Mélanie Gouby, who tells the story of Congolese people and explains that she chose to be a war correspondent for the excitement of it, as she didn’t want a boring office job. While foreigners tell the story, local populations are rarely given a voice or even portrayed in the movie. Although four million Congolese people are living near Virunga (Baaz et al., 2015), they are

rarely shown on or near the grounds of the park. The movie not only under-represents but also fails to recognize their agency. The audience's main chance to see those living around the park is indeed as they flee the conflict, running on the streets with the few belongings they could take with them. However, Baaz et al. (2015) report that numerous civil society organizations, including environmental NGOs, have been documenting private companies' efforts to undermine the park and advocating for its protection. By ignoring the work done by those local actors, *Virunga* perpetuates the harmful conception that Africans can't save themselves and are dependent on external intervention.

Secondly, the portrayal of park rangers is problematic because of the way it legitimizes a militarized approach to conservation. The movie itself starts with the burial of a ranger who died while protecting the park, thus anchoring the story in a depiction of those guards as true heroes. Rodrigue, de Merode's second hand, is also the Congolese person who gets the most attention, and in the process further proves to the audience that park rangers are martyrs of conservation – "I could die anytime, in an ambush", he says when interviewed with his wife. With rangers unequivocally described as the 'good guys', their behaviour, including the violence they employ, is fully legitimized and put beyond scrutiny. However, Eric Mwamba, a Congolese investigative journalist, explains that reality is more complex, as these guards often come from private paramilitary backgrounds and have been known to protect wildlife at the expense of the people who once lived with and from it. In other words, *Virunga* legitimizes militarized conservation, reinforcing the idea that nature and men should be held separate to protect wildlife and that military or paramilitary techniques are legitimate means to achieve this vision (Lunstrum, 2014). While this idea is in itself problematic and highly debated among scholars, the movie provides no alternative voices on the methods used by park rangers. The local population, who has in reality been reported to show suspicion or even animosity towards the rangers (Baaz et al., 2015), is shown mourning the dead ranger with much affliction.

Locals are also never portrayed on the park grounds, and one of the first scenes of the movies shows rangers destroying a settlement that was built in the park because it was used by poachers hunting for wildlife. While this may be part of the reality, building such a one-sided narrative conveys the idea that local populations can only be a threat to the wildlife and can't co-exist with animals sustainably in or near the park. The absence of local populations on the screen also helps the audience accept the militarized portrayal of rangers. Despite weapons being omnipresent in almost all scenes of the movie, *Virunga* manages to make us forget these weapons are also there to be used on locals that 'break into' the park. Marijnen and Verweijen (2016) remind us that park rangers' activities indeed primarily consist of arresting people, destroying agricultural or fishing equipment and burning down settlements. Yet the movie sticks to a simplistic narrative, even excluding local populations from the official movie summary:

"A small and embattled team of park rangers (...) protect this UNESCO world heritage site from armed militia, poachers and the dark forces struggling to control Congo's rich natural resources. (...) VIRUNGA is the incredible true story of a group of courageous people risking their lives to build a better future in a part of Africa the world's forgotten." (virungamovie.com)

This summary not only fails to include the perspective of local communities but also reinforces the 'othering' of all those who are not participating in the park's protection, in

particular rebels and poachers (Neumann, 2004). In addition to the representation of park rangers and the absence of local populations, the movie uses some discursive and visual techniques to alienate all the other stakeholders involved and justify the militarization of conservation as a natural feature of conservation in a war zone. In particular, members of armed groups and employees of SOCO are systematically filmed secretly as part of the heroes' effort to gather evidence on the situation, and the audience thus only gets one perspective, which appears as the only true and legitimate one, while other actors and their views are only seen externally.

This leads to this review's final point on the way *Virunga* simplifies the conflict that surrounds the park as well as its historical roots. The one-sided perspective developed in the movie contributes to this over-simplification by shaping the storyline to focus on the resource curse as the sole driver of conflict in Eastern Congo. The fact that the audience only gets the perspectives of a chief conservationist and a journalist investigating SOCO naturally influences the information that is put forward. We are told by Mélanie Douby that "everyone wants a slice of the cake": The M23 [rebel group] primarily survive by exploiting natural resources or the economy that surrounds them; SOCO and its contractors are willing to do anything to access the park; local populations are after the wildlife to make a living. This representation of conflict is radically simplified and one-dimensional, positioning the abundance of natural resources as the sole cause of violence in the Congo. For example, a UN report showed M23 was largely funded and supported by foreign governments including Rwanda and Uganda (UNSC, 2012). Yet, the audience is given little to no context to understand these complex dynamics, as the movie provides a pre-packaged exciting consumer experience that doesn't foster any reflections on the portrayed violence's origins (Marijnen and Verweijen, 2016).

The choice to focus on the resource curse as a dominant narrative may have been a conscious effort to avoid tackling the country's colonial history and its persisting legacy. Indeed, Virunga park itself was created by Belgian colonizers and was first called Albert National Park after King Albert I of Belgium (Baaz et al., 2015). It is thus a symbol of the colonial power's appropriation and exploitation of the Congo, as its founders forcefully evicted the populations who had been living in the area and were dependent on natural resources for their livelihoods. Instead of addressing this problematic history, the movie exaggerates the pride of local populations towards the park, with rangers explaining that the park "contributes to the development of our country" and that the local population "is proud (...) and optimistic that the park will do even better one day". In reality, research has shown the population's mixed feelings towards the park (Vikanza, 2018).

To conclude, this review has been critical of *Virunga* because of its underlying white saviourism, the legitimization of militarized conservation and the simplification of the current context as well as its historical roots. Despite these shortcomings, it is important to recognize the significant awareness-raising impact this movie has had on a global scale. Realistically, simplifying, fictionalizing and popularizing complex situations may be necessary to reach such a wide audience. Despite the limitations pointed out in this review, the team behind *Virunga* should still be recognized for the major rise in awareness that its work has led to.

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