

The Hurt Locker: Part of a deplorable trend

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Directed by Kathryn Bigelow, screenplay by Mark Boal

The Hurt Locker is introduced by the words of former war correspondent Christopher Hedges: “the rush of battle is a potent and often lethal addiction, for war is a drug.”

Thus is established one of the central themes of the new movie by Kathryn Bigelow, the director of such murky and violence-laden works as *Blue Steel* (1989), *Point Break* (1991) and *Strange Days* (1995). She persists in her belief that “violence in a cinematic context can be, if handled in a certain way, very seductive” in *The Hurt Locker*.

Set in Iraq in 2004, the film is structured around the 38 days of deployment left for an Army bomb deactivation, or Explosive Ordnance Disposal, squad. After the previous team leader (Guy Pearce) is blown up, Staff Sergeant William James (Jeremy Renner) arrives to take his place at Camp Victory, formerly known as Camp Liberty. (The question arises as to whether the character, a soldier custom-made for the US war drive, is named after one of the founders of American pragmatism.)

The team also includes Sergeant JT Sanborn (Anthony Mackie), a clear-eyed survivalist, and the jittery Specialist Owen Eldridge (Brian Geraghty), who wants nothing more than to get out of Iraq (“Pretty much, if you’re in Iraq, you’re dead”).

Daily life for the trio involves detecting and defusing improvised explosive devices or IEDs. James is a reckless hotshot who gets the job done, usually by putting everyone else at risk. Sanborn, who takes the safety of his men seriously, initially tags James as a “redneck piece of trailer trash.” Eldridge requires therapy to deal with his fear of being killed. The latter two are counting the days until they are decommissioned. On the other hand, James, although he has a wife and child, lives for the adrenaline spike provided by war.

The Iraqi population serves merely as a human landscape in the tense conditions in which the bomb defusers operate. It is the enemy, the bearded Other to the clean-cut US soldier. The local people are portrayed in the film as either faceless, darkly clad terrorists or recognizable types, like the neighborhood merchant...who are also terrorists.

The Iraqi characters, such as they are, function largely as prop devices. Unpleasantly, in one extended sequence, the presence of insurgents allows the filmmakers to examine the psychology of soldiers on the verge of a kill. This is passed off as “realism.”

The storyline is fairly meager. The movie devotes itself to showcasing a few action-packed days in the life of a bomb tech. James is the ultimate fighting machine. He is contrasted to Sanborn and Eldridge, whose vacillations are depicted as understandable. Nonetheless, for the task at hand, Bigelow finds it reasonable to suggest that they are insufficiently committed to “being all they can

be.”

In between the edgy, at times violent, scenes of the team maneuvering in Iraq’s devastated streets and buildings are the conventional interludes of male bonding via violent, drunken, macho horseplay in the barracks.

Sensitive moments are rare, and awkwardly scripted. In one contrived sequence, the camp psychiatrist, Colonel John Cambridge (Christian Camargo), learns the hard way that talk is cheap when it comes to combat.

When James finally goes home to his family, the odds are crudely stacked by the filmmakers against his adapting to domesticity. The implications of the ending, of which Bigelow is probably not fully conscious, are very nasty. She seems to be celebrating a dedicated, fearless military caste, permanently on call. Has she thought about the consequences in the twentieth century of the activities of such forces?

The Hurt Locker was written by Mark Boal, an embedded journalist in Iraq in 2004 with *Playboy* magazine. According to Bigelow, he was very much the driving force behind the film’s production. In interviews, she also credits Hedges’ book, *War is a Force That Gives Us Meaning*, as the movie’s inspiration. Perhaps the filmmakers chose Hedges because of an anti-war reputation that stemmed from a past run-in with the establishment.

In May 2003, two weeks after president Bush’s infamous “mission accomplished” speech, Hedges delivered a commencement address at Rockford College in Illinois in which he said: “We are embarking on an occupation that, if history is any guide, will be as damaging to our souls as it will be to our prestige and power and security.” He was booed by some of the students and had to be escorted off the campus by security. The *Wall Street Journal* denounced him, and his employer, the *New York Times*, demanded he cease talking about the Iraq war. As a result, he left the newspaper to become a Senior Fellow at the left-liberal Nation Institute.

Since *The Hurt Locker* begins with comments by Hedges, it is worth citing more fully the featured passage from his book: “The enduring attraction of war is this: Even with its destruction and carnage it gives us what we all long for in life. It gives us purpose, meaning, a reason for living. Only when we are in the midst of conflict does the shallowness and vapidness of our lives become apparent. Trivia dominates our conversations and increasingly our news. And war is an enticing elixir....

“The rush of battle is a potent and often lethal addiction, for war is a drug, one I ingested for many years. It is peddled by myth makers, historians, war correspondents, filmmakers, novelists and the state—all of whom endow it with qualities it often does possess: excitement, exoticism, power, chances to rise above our small stations in life, and a bizarre and fantastic universe that has a grotesque and dark beauty.”

One is obliged to say, speak for yourself! But Hedges apparently also speaks for the filmmakers, and his conceptions have contributed

to the creation of the James character as the definitive warrior. Not burdened with doubts, fears or personal attachments, he is “the twenty-first century soldier,” as Bigelow puts it. If war, “the ultimate canvas” (or the global aggression of US imperialism, to be more precise), is to be a permanent feature of life, then there must be a genetic encoding to meet the new requirements. The movie’s makers, unfortunately, want to do their part for the cause. In the film’s production notes, Bigelow asserts that “Fear has a bad reputation, but I think that’s ill-deserved. Fear is clarifying. It forces you to put important things first and discount the trivial.”

The director no doubt would aver that as a bomb disposalist, James saves lives, even Iraqi lives. To emphasize the point, she has him befriending a young Iraqi boy for whom he is prepared to walk through fire, and risking his life for a repentant suicide bomber. Most of this attempt to show the “positive” side of an American fighter in an occupied country is unconvincing.

The film’s greatest fallacy is that its makers apparently believe it possible to accurately portray the psychological and moral state of US troops without addressing the character of the Iraq enterprise as a whole, as though the latter does not affect how soldiers act and think.

The Hurt Locker has major artistic problems. How could it not? The film’s premise is deeply false, and to be blunt, stupid—i.e., that one can treat the Iraq conflict “neutrally,” without rendering judgment on its rights or wrongs, as an example of war “in the abstract.”

It is tedious to watch the heroics of the Americans. It is tedious and worse to listen to the musings of soldiers who are essentially oblivious to the Iraqis and have no reaction to the people they are slaughtering or whose land they are occupying. (The film was shot in Jordan, and it is a sad irony that the Iraqis in the movie were actually Iraqis displaced by the war. Bigelow states that “the [Jordanian] royal family was very supportive of this production.”)

The Iraq invasion and occupation is one of the great crimes of modern times. The US-led operation, launched on the basis of lies against a virtually defenseless country, was and is a war of aggression, illegal under international law. During the postwar prosecution of the Nazi leaders, in fact, aggressive war was defined as “the supreme international crime, differing from other war crimes in that it contains within itself the accumulated evil of the whole.”

An estimated 1 million or more Iraqis are dead, millions more have been displaced, entire cities have been razed to the ground, the country has been divided along communal lines, which may at any point lead to a new, fratricidal civil war. For the vast majority of the world’s population, and certainly its Middle Eastern and Muslim component, the US occupation of Iraq is associated with Abu Ghraib, Haditha, Fallujah—torture and abuse, atrocities, mass destruction. None of this seems to concern Bigelow or Boal, or the complacent American middle class “intelligentsia,” in general. It is outrageous that they are not outraged.

The lives of many of the US military personnel returning from Iraq have been shattered. In the first place, the majority are not coming back to tranquil, economically stable home lives, as James does. Moreover, the atrocities that American combat troops are committing in Iraq and Afghanistan—the inevitable outcome of a neo-colonial war—are transforming a section of veterans into a severely damaged and even psychopathic layer.

A recent article on the WSWS referenced news reports about an Army unit based at Fort Carson, near Colorado Springs, Colorado. (See: “What imperialist war produces: Iraq veterans charged with murder and other crimes”) The unit’s members, who saw intense and

sustained fighting in Iraq, have committed dozens of crimes back home, including murder, attempted murder, rape and robbery. A number of them are in prison serving long sentences for brutal acts.

In interviews with a local newspaper, several of the soldiers detailed the sorts of horrendous crimes they had participated in or witnessed while in Iraq: massacres of civilians, torture of detainees, the dismemberment of bodies. The Colorado newspaper commented, “More than half of the charged or convicted soldiers said they had seen war crimes during their deployments that included the killings of civilians.”

Is this what Hedges means by the “enduring attraction of war”? He should tell us.

A number of critics assert that *The Hurt Locker* follows in the tradition of anti-war films such as Oliver Stone’s *Platoon* or Stanley Kubrick’s *Full-Metal Jacket*. This is absurd. Whatever the weaknesses and eccentricities of those films, they were unambiguously hostile to the Vietnam War and to the military’s dehumanizing impact on young people. Comparisons of *The Hurt Locker* to Francis Ford Coppola’s devastating *Apocalypse Now* are even more farfetched.

The almost universally favorable treatment of Bigelow’s film at the hands of the critics is a phenomenon in itself. Many of the commentators, after declaring that *The Hurt Locker* and its performances are “Oscar material,” observe that the film’s major advantage over previous Iraq war films is its “apolitical” stance. Who is fooling whom?

A social process is under way. An entire layer of the liberal middle class is accommodating itself comfortably to American neo-colonialism, justifying its attitude by references to the new, “progressive” administration in Washington that is conducting a different kind of intervention, for different aims. Different in what way no one can quite explain. The corpses continue to pile up.

Behind the talk about a film that avoids “ax-grinding rhetoric and posturing” and “suppresses the politics of war” lies a definite *political* viewpoint. This is perhaps best summed up by journalist George Packer (in the *New Yorker* magazine), an early supporter of war against Iraq: “Above all, this [*The Hurt Locker*] is an Iraq movie with a modest agenda and no obvious political views. That, more than anything, is the source of its strength.... Perhaps, with the departure of the Bush administration, the withdrawal of American combat units from Iraqi cities, the attention of the new President shifted to Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran...Iraq can start to become a real war, not a symbol of all-consuming evil—the subject of movies that try to be good movies rather than major statements.”

Long live the US surge in Iraq! Long live Obama! All’s right with the world.



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