

The Hurt Locker, the Academy Awards and the rehabilitation of the Iraq war

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This year's Academy Awards ceremony was a spectacle of banality and cowardice.

The three films the Academy rewarded most highly, *The Hurt Locker*, *Precious* and *Inglourious Basterds*, collectively embody something retrograde and foul in the film industry, and all fly under false flags.

The Hurt Locker, despite claims about its "apolitical" or "non-partisan" character, proves in its own unsavory fashion to be a pro-war and pro-imperialist film. Far from offering a compassionate view of inner-city African-American life in America, *Precious* wallows in social backwardness, which it blames on the oppressed themselves. Quentin Tarantino's repulsive *Inglourious Basterds* postures as an "anti-Nazi" film, but offers its own brand of porno-sadism, which has more than a whiff of fascism about it.

Three genuinely appalling works.

Seven years ago, in March 2003, only days after the launching of the illegal invasion of Iraq, documentary filmmaker Michael Moore—accepting an Oscar for *Bowling for Columbine*—denounced George W. Bush as a "fictitious president," adding, "We live in a time where we have a man sending us to war for fictitious reasons... [We] are against this war, Mr. Bush. Shame on you."

Seven years after Moore's principled statement, the film industry officially threw in the towel last Sunday night in the most disgraceful manner, giving up even the pretense of opposition to the colonial-style wars in the Middle East and Central Asia. The choice of *The Hurt Locker* as Best Picture, in fact, is part of an ongoing and concerted rehabilitation of the Iraq war taking place within the liberal political and media establishment.

From the *Nation*, whose Robert Dreyfuss sees "Hopeful Signs" in the recent fraud of an election in Iraq, to the Democratic Party think tank, the Center for American Progress, which claims that the same elections "represent the latest step by Iraqis to reassert control of their own affairs," the official left and liberal milieu is signaling its endorsement of the permanent US presence in Iraq, aimed at controlling the country's vast oil reserves.

The well-heeled "anti-war" liberals in Hollywood, for whom

opposition to the Iraq invasion in 2003 had a great deal to do with a cultural, psychological animus toward the Bush administration, have also come around. The election of Barack Obama represented for them, as for an entire social milieu, the fulfillment of their political aspirations.

The director of *The Hurt Locker*, Kathryn Bigelow, in her acceptance speech for the Best Directing award, took the opportunity "to dedicate this to the women and men in the military who risk their lives on a daily basis in Iraq and Afghanistan and around the world." Later, accepting for Best Picture, she reiterated, "Perhaps one more dedication, to men and women all over the world who... wear a uniform... They're there for us and we're there for them."

They are not there "for us." The US military is a professional, not a conscript army, operating as something akin to a hit squad on a global scale in the interests of the American financial elite. All sorts of ex-lefts and liberals are now rallying around the imperialist war efforts, often through the formula of the need to "support the troops." This is a miserable and cowardly slogan. In practice, it means the effort to discourage and suppress criticism of the origins, conduct and aims of the brutal conflicts.

The success of the awards campaign for *The Hurt Locker* speaks to the intellectual bankruptcy of critics and the Hollywood elite alike. The film did not go over well with the public, but, as Jeremy Kay, writing in the *Guardian*, noted, "the thriller had become a critical darling, hailed as the best Iraq war film to come out of the US, and indeed the best visceral slice of war on screen in many a year." It is no such thing, but far better films such as *Battle for Haditha* and *In the Valley of Elah*, and others, were deliberately marginalized by the American media.

The public relations firm hired to handle *The Hurt Locker* focused on the prospect of Bigelow as the first female director to win an Oscar. "The idea was intoxicating," writes Kay, "and I can attest to the speed with which it coursed through Hollywood's bloodstream. Within a day of the nominations on 2 February, there was barely talk of anything else."

In other words, the director's gender trumped everything else. Of course, this is not the whole story. Academy voters also flocked to *The Hurt Locker* because of its theme.

In the guise of objectivity and "authenticity," Bigelow's film

presents the Iraq war from the vantage point of a “wild man,” bomb disposal expert Staff Sgt. William James. The presence of US forces as an army of occupation is never questioned, and the work of this fearless (frankly, psychotic) individual is presented as heroically saving thousands of lives.

The short stretches of dialogue placed between the various bomb disposal set pieces are contrived and unconvincing. Bigelow has no sense of what soldiers are like, or how human beings interact. Her films (*The Loveless*, *Near Dark*, *Blue Steel*, *Point Break*, *Strange Days*) are not made from life, but from confused and murky schemas, including bits and pieces of post-structuralist and postmodernist philosophy.

In her first film, *The Set-Up* (1978), for example, two men slug it out in an alley while, according to the *New York Times*, “semioticians Sylvère Lotringer and Marshall Blonsky deconstruct the images in voice-over.” Bigelow once elaborated on its theme: “The piece ends with Sylvère talking about the fact that in the 1960s you think of the enemy as outside yourself, in other words, a police officer, the government, the system, but that’s not really the case at all, fascism is very insidious, we reproduce it all the time.”

One wants to say, one more time, speak for yourself! Bigelow is obviously fascinated by violence and power... and war, which she considers seductive and “exceedingly dramatic.” Bigelow adheres to the idea “that there’s probably a fundamental necessity for conflict” and finds herself drawn to the notion of “a psychology of addiction, or attraction, to combat.”

Admirers claim Bigelow is lamenting or criticizing such a supposed state of affairs. On the contrary, *The Hurt Locker* glorifies in and glamorizes violence, which the filmmaker associates with “heightened emotional responses.” All of this, including its element of half-baked Nietzscheanism, is quite unhealthy and even sinister, but corresponds to definite moods within sections of what passes for a “radical” intelligentsia in the US.

Bigelow’s movie, from a script by former embedded reporter Mark Boal, is not anti-war. It merely pauses now and then to meditate on the heavy price American soldiers pay for slaughtering Iraqi insurgents and citizens. As long as they pull long faces and show signs of fatigue and stress, US forces, as far as Bigelow is apparently concerned, can go right on killing and wreaking havoc.

As the *World Socialist Web Site* review noted last August, “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 succeeded with the Hollywood voters, as one commentator noted approvingly, because it “doesn’t force viewers to make a political judgment about the war,” i.e., it accommodates itself to the ultra-right, the Pentagon and the Obama administration.

The annual Academy Awards ceremony is more than simply an opportunity for Hollywood to celebrate itself. The broadcast (seen this year by some 40 million people in the US) has become one of the rituals of American public life, a further way in which public opinion is shaped and manipulated.

Hence, in line with every other such occasion, the awards show is now an entirely canned and sterile event from beginning to end. No one is allowed—or would apparently think—to get out of line, there are virtually no unscripted moments. While the Oscar ceremony may never have had a golden age, there was a time when the event included the possibility at least of genuine sentiment, even of opposition.

Even the documentary feature award, which Moore won for his film in 2003, was tightly controlled. Judith Ehrlich and Rick Goldsmith’s *The Most Dangerous Man In America: Daniel Ellsberg and the Pentagon Papers* was one of the nominees this year in that category. Ellsberg, who made public the Pentagon’s secret history of the Vietnam War in 1971 and delivered a blow against the government’s version of events, was present for the Academy Awards ceremony last Sunday. In the present atmosphere dominated by corruption and fear, how embarrassing it would have been to be reminded about someone who once stood up to the authorities!

Instead, *The Cove*, a film about a Japanese fishing village where thousands of dolphins and porpoises are harvested annually, took the prize. The subject may be a worthy one, but it is considerably less important than stopping the murderous Vietnam War, or its equivalents today, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

This year’s academy awards, in short, was a new low point. Honest directors and writers and actors in Hollywood will have to open their mouths and act. The present situation is simply untenable from the point of view of filmmaking, and society as a whole.



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