

The Hurt Locker and the rehabilitation of the Iraq war: New York Times journalists weigh in

David Walsh
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On Sunday and Monday, the *New York Times* carried no fewer than three columns in which the supposed merits of *The Hurt Locker*, Kathryn Bigelow's film about the Iraq war—which won major prizes at this year's Academy Awards—were extolled. The various writers can hardly contain themselves.

As we have noted, honoring Bigelow's film has become one of the vehicles for rehabilitating the illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq, now about to enter its eighth year. Whatever tactical misgivings sections of upper-middle-class liberals may have had about the war in 2003-2008 have largely given way to support, now that Barack Obama is president and the parlous state of the American economy has made even more urgent the US drive to dominate the globe.

There is an overall understanding, in some cases perhaps only a strong intuition, within these well-heeled circles that their financial condition and creature comforts are bound up with the ability of the American military to conquer territories, overthrow unfriendly regimes, and generally make the world safe for *New York Times* journalists, their families and friends.

It is repugnant.

On Sunday, television reviewer Alessandra Stanley, in a piece purportedly devoted to a new HBO series about the Second World War, felt obliged to include this penultimate paragraph out of the blue: “ ‘The Pacific’ comes at a time when American troops are once again fighting on two fronts against an implacable enemy that combats advanced weaponry with fanaticism and suicide bombers. The series makes its debut a week after ‘The Hurt Locker’ won the Oscar for best picture, and like that film, its tone is in somber tune with the times.”

Not for the first time, one wants to rub one's eyes in disbelief. Stanley, known for her right-wing views, is here conflating a war against Imperial Japan and Germany's Third Reich with the current US military aggression in the Middle East and Central Asia, aimed at securing that region's oil and energy reserves for the American financial-corporate elite.

If by today's “implacable foe” the *Times* columnist has Osama bin Laden's Al Qaeda in mind, she is comparing a ragtag band of Islamic fundamentalists (initially incited by the US in the course of its efforts to destabilize the USSR in the 1970s and 1980s), desperately operating out of caves and mountain hideouts, with the

millions-strong armies of two great economic powers. What world is she living in?

That Stanley feels capable, without fear of rebuke, of resorting to such an intellectual stupidity, which ignores every obvious, *defining* historical and social difference between the two conflicts—World War II being an inter-imperialist war and the present “war on terrorism” being a cover for neo-colonial aggression—indicates confidence that a good portion of her readership will be receptive to her arguments. As for *The Hurt Locker*'s “somber” tone, that seems entirely irrelevant. Whether a film tells the truth about the Iraq war or conceals it, as *The Hurt Locker* does, it is hardly likely to be cheery.

Another issue that resonates powerfully with the *Times* staff is Bigelow's gender. Her status as the first woman to receive the Best Directing award overrides every other question as far as certain sections of the complacent middle class are concerned. An African-American in the White House, a female winning the Oscar for best director—all must be right with the world! This is a utopian moment for those heavily invested in identity politics.

Manohla Dargis, one of the *Times* film reviewers, devoted an article March 14 to *The Hurt Locker*'s director and focused entirely on this side of the matter.

Last year, it should be noted, Dargis penned a piece lauding Bigelow's career (“Action!,” June 21, 2009), as well as her person (a typical passage: “She works to put you at ease, but even her looks inspire shock and awe”). The comment was so fawning it could have been released by the director's talent agency.

The *Times* journalist labeled Bigelow “a great filmmaker,” without making any effort to substantiate the dubious claim. In fact, Bigelow has behind her a string of unappealing and unconvincing genre films (focusing on vampires, bikers, bank-robbing surfers, serial killers, and so forth), appropriate to a film school graduate shaped by semiotics and various other fashionable trends in the late 1970s.

In that June 2009 article, Dargis cited, with apparent approval, Bigelow's elaboration of her first film's themes: 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.”

In her latest piece, “How Oscar Found Ms. Right,” Dargis is equally uncritical, and even more ecstatic. She describes

Bigelow's win at the Academy Awards as "historic, exhilarating, especially for women who make movies and women who watch movies.... It's too early to know if this moment will be transformative—but damn, it feels so good."

Astonishingly, Dargis does not devote a *single* mention in her article to the content of *The Hurt Locker*. The words "Iraq," "military," "bomb," "Hussein" and "Baghdad" do not appear. She really couldn't care less what Bigelow's film is about.

Or, rather, what it is "about" is the *Times* reviewer's own extremely limited political agenda. If one confines oneself to judging a film primarily on the basis of its maker's gender, that does make life and criticism a relatively simple matter. But why then has Dargis not dedicated herself to publicizing the career of the late German filmmaker Leni Riefenstahl, who celebrated Hitler's movement and regime in such infamous works as *Triumph of the Will*, shot at the 1934 Nazi Party congress in Nuremberg?

The *Times* and its milieu collectively value *The Hurt Locker* so highly because the latter is a work about the Iraq war that has a semblance of "grittiness" and "realism," has artistic pretensions appealing to the pseudo-intellectual, and even purports to disclose "the brutality and the futility of this conflict" (Bigelow's own words to an interviewer), without indicting the American military and government for its criminal policy.

This is an "anti-war" film for those disturbed, in general terms, by the "tragic" and "dehumanizing" character of military conflict, but who see compelling reasons why the US, now that it's involved in Iraq, "can't simply pull out." This is an "anti-war" film, in other words, for those who are not terribly opposed to the Iraq war *in particular*, and who would prefer that its origins and aims be left in the shade.

Times op-ed columnist Ross Douthat, in his "Hollywood's Political Fictions" published on Monday, spells that out rather clearly. In his piece, Douthat, who joined the newspaper in April 2009 and also functions as the film critic of the ultra-right *National Review*, takes the new film, *Green Zone*, to task for allegedly simplifying the complexities of the Iraq situation.

The latter movie, starring Matt Damon, according to the *Times* columnist, "has the same problem as nearly every other Hollywood gloss on recent political events: it refuses to stare real tragedy in the face, preferring the comforts of a 'Bush lied, people died' reductionism."

This "reductionism," firmly grasped by millions and millions of people worldwide, contains, of course, an essential truth: the US government falsified claims about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction and invaded a sovereign nation in contravention of international law. Massive death and destruction, with no end in sight, have followed. Bush, Cheney, Rove, Powell, Rice, Rumsfeld and company should face war crimes trials.

Douthat plunges ahead, offering his "nuanced" account of events: "The narrative of the Iraq invasion, properly told, resembles a story out of Shakespeare. You had a nation reeling from a terrorist attack and hungry for a response that would be righteous, bold and comprehensive. You had an inexperienced president trying to tackle a problem that his predecessors (one of them his own father) had left to fester since the first gulf war. You

had a cause—the removal of a brutal dictator, and the spread of democracy to the Arab world—that inspired a swath of the liberal intelligentsia to play George Orwell and embrace the case for war."

This is preposterous and only worthy of derisive laughter. Douthat proceeds from the premise, not to be challenged, that the underlying motives for the Iraq war were honorable. Everyone, it seems, simply got caught up in the inescapable, "Shakespearean" tragedy of the post-9/11 condition. One would have to be a small child, and intellectually stunted at that, to fall for this argument.

On the other hand, *Green Zone* has the audacity, according to Douthat, to place the blame for the criminal invasion on "neoconservatives...capable of any enormity in the pursuit of their objectives." The op-ed columnist contrasts the new film's "glib scapegoating" with Bigelow's effort, "the first major movie to paint the Iraq War in shades of gray. But *The Hurt Locker*, of course, was largely apolitical. Throw politics into the mix, and there seems to be no escaping the clichés and simplifications," writes Douthat, that mar the Damon film.

This is reactionary rubbish. But Douthat goes one better. He informs his readers that the duty of art is "to be interested in the humanity of all its subjects, not just the ones who didn't work for Rumsfeld's Department of Defense." On general principles, art should regard all individuals as human beings, even mass murderers, but that hardly exonerates the latter of their crimes, which is what Douthat has in mind.

He complains that "radical sympathy, extended even to people who presided over grave disasters, is in short supply all across America at the moment." It *is* disturbing, when one thinks about it, how little sympathy the American people, so cold-hearted and unfeeling, are currently extending to the politicians who launched unprovoked and brutal wars, along with the bankers who looted the economy of trillions of dollars.

Supposedly "neutral" and "non-partisan," Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* is now serving, for an unholy assortment of liberals and right-wingers, as a means of inducing political amnesia in the population. Such an effort needs to be strenuously rejected.



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