

An exchange on “The Hurt Locker, the Academy Awards and the rehabilitation of the Iraq war”

15 March 2010

This exchange was in response to the comment “The Hurt Locker, the Academy Awards and the rehabilitation of the Iraq war,” posted on the World Socialist Web Site on March 11.

While the film does not offer a political commentary on the War in Iraq, it more than brings home the insanity of all wars. No sequence in any recent war film is more horrifying than the scene in which [William] James has two minutes to dismantle a time bomb strapped to an Iraqi suicide bomber. There is no way that any rational person could consider this a pro-war film.

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David Walsh replies:

“While the film does not offer a political commentary on the War in Iraq, it more than brings home the insanity of all wars,” you write, as though the supposed refusal to ‘offer a political commentary’ on the Iraq war were a small matter, or artistically irrelevant. It is, in fact, a rather huge matter, especially for an American filmmaker.

The invasion and occupation of Iraq was and is a major war crime, which was justified by countless lies and has resulted in untold death and destruction. The US government and military, obviously, have played the central role. They have counted all along on their ability to confuse and distract public opinion in this country. American filmmakers have an equally central responsibility to shed light on and expose the crimes committed by their government and military against various peoples around the world. With whatever contradictions and limitations, directors such as Francis

Ford Coppola and Oliver Stone, and others, recognized that responsibility in regard to the Vietnam War.

Not to take a position on such a massive crime is itself a position. It represents, in one form or another, political acquiescence. Kathryn Bigelow’s appalling performance at the Academy Awards confirmed this. Not only did she insist on dedicating her award to the troops, she informed her audience that the latter were in Iraq and Afghanistan “for us.” This is a falsehood. They are there “for” the American financial elite, which covets the vast natural resources in the region.

From the point of view of constructing a drama, it is absurd to argue, as Bigelow and many others do today, that the social and political content, that the driving forces of a war have no necessary bearing on the behavior of the participating human beings, i.e., it is possible to treat soldiers in general and war in general, as though they were governed by universal laws of behavior. Do you believe there was no difference in psychology and attitudes between, say, a member of the German army taking part in massacres in Eastern Europe during World War II and a Union soldier liberating slaves during the Civil War? Or between a Vietnamese guerrilla who fought for decades against foreign occupation and a US soldier sent to perpetuate neo-colonial rule?

Bigelow’s refusal to recognize the specifically colonial-style, mercenary and overwhelmingly brutal character of the US army intervention in Iraq helps to lend her characterizations their abstract, unconvincing quality. The scenes of horse-play, drinking, etc., are as predictable as they are empty and stale, in my view.

However, if I used the expression ‘pro-war’ in regard to Bigelow, I had something still more concrete in mind, as the article suggested.

It seems unlikely that she has worked this out fully, or perhaps she might call herself up short, but I referred to “half-baked Nietzscheanism” for a reason. You can find, if you look hard enough, statements in which Bigelow deplores war in general and even the Iraq war in particular. However, far more often, and far more tellingly, you will find fragments of a very nasty or deeply confused outlook. I cited bits of it. As opposed to the leftists of the 1960s, Bigelow says, ‘we now know’ that the source of violence is not the police, government, society—it is us, we reproduce fascism on a continuous basis. What are the consequences of such a view?

As I noted, she may at times lament this tendency. But, if you watch her films and read her comments carefully, something else emerges: a fascination with violence and mayhem, the notion that war is innate to the human condition, that ‘some people’ experience an addiction for war, that for ‘some people’ violence is seductive and ‘heightens their sensations.’

Bigelow is not a fool, and she may even be torn, but the implications of the drama in *The Hurt Locker* are fairly clear: William James is one of those ‘special people,’ addicted to and seduced by war, an “adrenaline junkie,” not one of the common herd. For him (and for the Patrick Swayze character in *Point Break*, and for Willem Dafoe in *The Loveless*, etc.) there are different rules, or rather, the ordinary rules do not apply. He is one of the ‘supermen.’ The final shot is telling. You suggest that the filmmaker must have an unfavorable attitude toward “the insanity of all wars.” I think that is extremely naive. It is also possible—and there are many instances of this in right-wing (and now postmodernist) 20th century ideology—to argue that the “insanity” lies within humanity itself and that this insanity, approve of it or not, needs to be ‘embraced.’

Now, as I say, there may be elements of real (or feigned) criticism or regret attached to this notion (James almost gets Eldridge killed and looks sorry about it), but it is very much present. For Eldridge and Sanborn (the other two members of James’s bomb disposal squad), war is hell, something they want to get out of at all costs, their only thoughts are of home. In the end, they are lesser creatures. For William James, and his ilk, home and family, on the other hand, are a tedious, excruciating experience, something to be avoided. Their psychic lives depend on war and

violence. Bigelow clearly favors this sort of a ‘superman,’ with all that implies. She may not be fully conscious of where her ideas are leading her, but it is the job of the critic to point that out.

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