

Unbroken: Mediocre Hollywood fare in the service of ... what exactly?

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Director Angelina Jolie's *Unbroken* is based on Laura Hillenbrand's 2010 non-fiction account of US Olympic athlete Louie Zamperini's harrowing experience in a Japanese prisoner of war camp during World War II. Hillenbrand's first book, *Seabiscuit: An American Legend* (2001), was an "inspiring" tale about the famous race-horse; it was also made into a Hollywood film in 2003.

Given the current state of global tensions, at their most intense since the period leading up to the Second World War, one might hope that the filmmaker would make an honest attempt to explore the Pandora's box of Zamperini's story, which involves, after all, some of the major events of the 20th century and some of the major powers.

Sadly, Ms. Jolie has chosen to make another Hollywood blockbuster featuring the stale story of an American tortured because he is superior to or morally stronger than others and who survives for the same reason.

Louis Zamperini (C.J. Valleray as the childhood Louie and Jack O'Connell as the young adult), the son of Italian immigrants, is regularly bullied for his ethnicity and then beaten by his father for fighting (the childhood scenes are presented as flashbacks).

After his older brother Pete (played by John D'Leo as a young boy and Alex Russell as an adult) notices how fast his brother can run, he convinces Louie to train seriously and go out for track. Louie quickly gains accolades for his performances, as well as confidence in himself. In fact, he is good enough as a high school senior to place highest among the American entries in the 5000-meter race at the 1936 Summer Olympics held in Nazi Germany.

Louie's further development as a runner is interrupted by the outbreak of the war. Worse still, he and the other crewmembers of an American bomber are forced to crash into the ocean. Louie and two others, Phil (Domhnail Gleeson) and Mac (Finn Wittrock), are the sole survivors.

After spending 47 days in a rubber raft and losing Mac, Louie and Phil are picked up by a Japanese ship and taken to a prison camp. Separated from Phil, who is sent to another camp, Louie, due to his Olympic notoriety and

unwillingness to give in, quickly becomes the target for the whippings and canings of the sadistic Colonel Watanabe (Takamasa Ishirara). This mistreatment comprises the bulk of the film.

Veteran cinematographer Roger Deakins (*Shawshank Redemption*, *No Country for Old Men*, *Skyfall*, etc.) has used new technology to create refreshingly authentic battle scenes. Enemy planes zoom from below, sending machine gun fire pinging through the bomber's metal skin (even the creaking of the plane as it moves through the air is audible); and a number of close-ups of the crew's faces, shot from different angles, create a believable sense of determination in the midst of uncertainty and fear.

Unfortunately, this camera work is the film's only exceptional or truly intriguing feature.

Virtually from start to finish, *Unbroken* concentrates on Louie's exposure to one form of torture and suffering or another, and makes the case that he becomes a far better person by surviving all of it.

His childhood beatings and subsequent rigorous training to become an Olympic-quality distance runner are followed by the six weeks of trying to survive at sea on the occasional raw fish while undergoing attacks by sharks and Japanese fighter planes.

The Japanese officer then singles Louie out for relentless physical abuse, sometimes administering it himself and sometimes forcing the other prisoners to beat Louie. The brief intervals between the violent sessions are largely devoted to close-ups of Louie's increasingly battered and bruised face or shots of him left alone in the prison yard after the beatings.

While Hollywood has a history of portraying the American hero as the victim of suffering and torture due to his mysterious superiority (Clint Eastwood's Western heroes come immediately to mind), the past three decades of war and growing social crisis, and accompanying ideological confusion and disorientation, have played at least an indirect role in the increasing number of movies based on the same theme.

Numerous critics have noted the film's association of Louie with Jesus Christ. This is most prominently the case when Colonel Watanabe forces Louie to hold a wooden railway tie over his head for a lengthy period of time. Louie's suffering and a high-angle camera shot clearly telegraph the Christ association.

Again, Hollywood has often used this identification, and *Unbroken* is cheapened by choosing to use this worn-out trope. But more damaging is the close similarity between *Unbroken*'s version of this image and the Christ of Mel Gibson's appalling *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), which reveled in scenes of torture.

Why has Jolie made this peculiar film? She claims to have been personally inspired by Zamperini, a "Christian inspirational speaker" in his later years, whom she got to know before his death at the age of 97 in July 2014. But are there also other forces pushing the actress-director on?

Given the nature of *Unbroken*'s subject matter, there are surprisingly few political or social references; in fact, the film seems intentionally apolitical. In making the choice to present the relentlessly cruel torture of Louie as a personal matter—the sadistic Colonel Watanabe is driven to single out Louie due to (a) the latter's athletic fame and (b) the disappointment of the colonel's military father over his son's inability to attain a higher rank—director Angelina Jolie deflects the viewer's attention from the real source of the prison camp and the use of torture: the brutality of class relations in Japan and its imperialist state.

If she had chosen to direct viewer attention to the state's role in promoting torture, and its purposes for doing so, the director would quite possibly have infuriated large sections of the Japanese state apparatus and media (the fact that various right-wing nationalist groups in Japan have demanded that Jolie be banned from visiting their country underlines the sensitivity of the Japanese elite). She might also have reminded audiences about American imperialism's history of state-sponsored torture, especially in light of the recently released Senate report on CIA crimes. Indeed, one is prompted to ask Jolie why she doesn't make a film about American torture of its detainees.

The screenplay, by Joel and Ethan Coen (what are they doing writing this sort of script?), contains very little dialogue that isn't reminiscent of other, similar Hollywood blockbusters; and the acting is pretty much of the same, lowest-common-denominator variety, although Ishirara uses his boyish, cherubic face effectively to convey conflicting emotions.

Jolie is a vocal opponent of torture, and she may be sincere in her opposition, but what does that mean concretely? As noted, she has not made a film about US "black sites" or the Guantanamo Bay detention camp or Bagram Airfield, all the

scenes of unspeakable abuse. She is terribly misguided if she believes *Unbroken* will serve as a wake-up call for those who are unaware of torture's connection to larger issues and consequences.

Rather, by presenting the issue as a personal ordeal in which a heroic figure is tortured because his superiority threatens a sadistic figure's ego, her movie joins several other current releases—including *Fury*, *The Interview* and *American Sniper*—in promoting myths about the American military-intelligence apparatus at a time when the crimes of the latter need to be systematically exposed.

The actress-director's conventional, conformist outlook, her alignment with the American establishment, came out in an interview she gave recently to *Military.com*, a web site aimed at members of the military:

"I'm not in the military," Jolie said. "I don't know what it is to be in the military, but to recreate these scenes and to see what it's like for these men to rely on each other, love each other, protect each other, fight together, fight for each other...you do realize that there is something that is so bonding, and so beautiful, with a common cause. It's unlike any experience, certainly anything that I know, and it was a real window into giving me a sense of what it would be like and it gave me all the more respect for people of service, the men and women of service."

Jolie may very well not be conscious of the larger implications of her work, or the influences that even bring it about, but it is impossible not to see *Unbroken* in the context of official US efforts on the "human rights" and other fronts. The celebrity faction in Hollywood, without a clue about the geopolitical questions at stake, rushes around here and there, shoots its mouth off about "democracy" and generally reinforces the arguments advanced by the State Department and CIA for US "aid" and "intervention."



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