

Canada's role in Afghanistan

Hyena Road: Neither pro- nor anti-war? Not so fast, Mr. Gross...!

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18 December 2015

Written and directed by Paul Gross

“Despite what you may think about the virtue or lack thereof [in] any given mission, our soldiers represent us very well.” So said actor-director Paul Gross in an interview with the CBC, regarding the Canadian mission to Kandahar, Afghanistan, over the last decade—the backdrop for his latest film, *Hyena Road*, which he wrote, directed and stars in.

“I have absolutely no political axe to grind nor do I have any particular opinion about whether we should or should not have been there,” Gross told the *Calgary Herald*.

Tens of thousands of Afghans have died in the war, including many women and children—millions more have been turned into refugees. Hundreds of Canadian soldiers have died, nearly 2,000 have been wounded. Some of the atrocities carried out by the US, Canadian and allied forces against the civilian population have been exposed—many others have been concealed. The Canadian military Gross proudly supports has been at the center of a major neo-colonial intervention—but the director would have us believe that our overall attitude to the war should not matter!

Despite his reticence, Gross’s positions are of course revealed in the film. In any event, everyone should know by now that those who claim not to be taking a position on the Iraq or Afghanistan war but merely “supporting our troops” are, in fact, *always* endorsing the entire enterprise. This is the case with Gross and his *Hyena Road*.

Canadian forces played a leading role in the Afghan war for 10 years, the longest war the country has ever waged, with central responsibility in the offensive in the southern region of Kandahar from 2005 through 2011.

In scenes, and even shots, crudely appropriated from Hollywood precursors such as *American Sniper*, *Hyena Road* follows the construction of a tactically important road being built in the heart of Taliban territory by Canadian forces in southern Afghanistan. That becomes secondary to the central story about the efforts of intelligence officer Pete Mitchell (Gross) to ferret out new allies in what he nevertheless regards as an unwinnable war.

The battle-hardened, wisecracking Mitchell is not only at war

with the Taliban. He also has to contend with a general whose only concern is the completion of the highway, dubbed the “Hyena Road,” which must be constructed in the face of hostile fire, ambush and IEDs along the way. We see very little actual road building, but lots of fighting and killing. The “bad guys” get slaughtered in lots of shoot-ups in what might as well be a video game.

Mitchell makes it his mission to track down a mythical fighter known as Ghost (Neamat Arghandabi), a former mujahideen who has great influence in the region and could help tip the scales against the Taliban.

The moments of irony in *Hyena Road* are welcome leavening to its general self-seriousness. The ceremonial opening of the road—which is something of a joke, being little more than a dirt track—is a sad little affair that comically falls flat, and our proud warriors scurry back to their war.

A PR coup

This is Gross’s third feature film and follows the box-office flop *Passchendaele* (2008)—an even more patriotic and mawkish effort. The Battle of Passchendaele (1917), one of the great military debacles of the First World War, has served over time as one of the most damnable nation-building legends of Canadian militarism.

The *Globe and Mail* asserted that “the realism with which it [*Hyena Road*] observes military life is remarkable.... If Gross’s First World War movie *Passchendaele* was a sloppy and melodramatic attempt to depict Canada at war, *Hyena Road* now hits the mark.” Like the director’s previous film, this one—as we see here—has also been handled with kid gloves by the press despite its poor quality.

The same media, for the most part, lied to the Canadian public about the real motives behind the continuing conflict in Afghanistan. Canada’s elite saw the war as an opportunity to legitimize a more aggressive foreign policy and to condition the

population to the spilling of blood. Conservative prime minister Stephen Harper set out to recast Canada as a “warrior nation,” in opposition to its earlier, largely mythical role as a “peacekeeper.”

Gross’s public equivocation about the war is a recognition, at least in part, of its wide unpopularity in Canada. Despite an endless barrage of propaganda, 52 percent of Canadians polled still consider the mission to Afghanistan a failure.

Gross has received both financial and logistical support from the Canadian government and military. How conscious he is about his role in the “re-branding” of the Canadian armed forces and their mission is a matter of debate. It seems likely, in any case, that he would approve of such an operation.

Made on a relatively small budget (C\$12-C\$13 million), the movie has done fairly well at the box office, having been shown on 184 screens across Canada in October. It was recently sold to Samuel Goldwyn Films, for distribution in the US, a marketing coup for a Canadian production.

An irresponsible patchwork

Bound up with its political taint and falsity, *Hyena Road* seriously lacks substance. Despite the dramatic backdrop and weighty subject, it is slight in every other regard. The story is flimsy, predictable and unconvincing; the sincerity of the actors cannot offset the cookie-cutter character of the personalities and relationships.

There is the requisite romantic subplot of forbidden love, involving our hero sniper, Ryan Sanders (Rossif Sutherland—son of Donald), and a fellow officer (Christine Horne). This is one of the numerous casting choices and combinations that falter badly despite the actors’ talents. Sutherland, seemingly plucked from a Sam Spade private eye movie, mixes it up erotically with Horne who would be more at home in a film like the Coen Brothers’ *Fargo*. It is simply awkward.

The origins of *Hyena Road* shed some light on its markedly incoherent feel. Gross took part in a “Team Canada” visit to Afghanistan in 2010, a “goodwill” junket that included a number of celebrities. The director later returned to Afghanistan with a film crew and began shooting apparently without a clear idea of what film he was making. As Gross describes it, the story was basically shaped from anecdotes he was told and from episodes involving soldiers and others he met in and around Kandahar.

An improvisational approach has its value, under the proper artistic circumstances and in the hands of talented directors. For various reasons, that is not the case here.

Culpable bias

The one stated aim of *Hyena Road*—to show the public what it is that (supposedly “pacifist”) Canadians ask their soldiers to do—amounts to a cloaked apology for Canada’s predatory wars. Gross: “The Canadian Forces represent our country with amazing dignity and honor and we should be very proud of them.” Again—not so fast.

Alongside his blithe indifference to the bloodshed, Gross reveals an adolescent awe for the allure of the battlefield. He states, “At its heart there is a kind of strange brutal kind of poetry—it’s completely compelling.” With the rope given him by an uncritical press, Gross hangs himself repeatedly.

The “moral dilemmas” Canadian soldiers face—which always involve killing someone—are presented limply, as difficult but necessary duties—civilian deaths are conspicuously omitted. Speaking admiringly once again about Canadian soldiers in an interview with CBC radio, Gross extolled what he called their great restraint in not killing more Afghans.

In fact, Canadian forces were reported to be particularly aggressive and indiscriminate in their dealings with civilians. As one commentator, Jerome Klassen, has written, “Canadian soldiers were guilty of killing civilians, including children, on a regular basis.” Their actions “often engendered public demonstrations, including a number of ‘death to Canada’ protests in Kandahar.” Additionally, numerous legal actions were launched over the handing over of Afghan detainees by Canadian forces to known torturers.

Gross’s professed bewilderment over the purpose of the war—“I don’t particularly blame anybody”—is reprehensible. This pose of concerned impartiality is belied by his blaming the media for doing “a bad job in presenting the war to the public.” That his film, along with his commentary on it, avoids “taking a stand”...while actually *taking a stand strongly in favor of* one of the major crimes in recent history is repugnant.

This was an opportunity to expose the hypocrisy and criminality behind the war in Afghanistan. Such a film, however, would require a different sort of director.



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