Suicide Squad: The latest comic book film

David Walsh
10 August 2016

Written and directed by David Ayer

Suicide Squad is the latest large-budget film based on a comic book. Remarkably, the list of the top ten box office successes of 2016 in the US so far includes five animated or semi-animated films and five others based on comic books. There is not a serious drama among the top twenty films. The assault on popular consciousness continues.

David Ayer's *Suicide Squad* concerns a team of psychotics and criminals—all of them in a federal detention center, or "black site," in Louisiana when the film opens—recruited by the US government as part of a secret program to combat terrorism.

Deadshot (Will Smith) is an expert marksman and a hired killer. Harley Quinn (Margot Robbie) is a brain-damaged, bat-wielding former psychiatrist, and girl-friend of master villain, Joker (Jared Leto). El Diablo (Jay Hernandez) can set everything around him on fire. Killer Croc (Adewale Akinnuoye-Agbaje) is part-reptile, part-man, and a cannibal. And so forth.

Program leader Amanda Waller (Viola Davis), from some unnamed intelligence agency, is petitioning a skeptical US military for permission to unleash her team. She makes assertions such as the following: "It's taken me some time, but I finally have them. The worst of the worst," "I want to assemble a task force of the most dangerous people on the planet, who I think can do some good." When a crisis erupts, the authorities give her the green light.

Suicide Squad 's story is very difficult to follow at times. The super-villains are assembled before there is any particular "terrorist" threat, and when an emergency arises, it turns out to be the result, more or less, of the actions of one of the team's members. The "suicide squad" (a misnomer, since nearly all of them survive), fighting alongside US Special Forces and Navy SEALs and commanded by Col. Rick Flag (Joel Kinnaman), then has the mission of rescuing Waller herself from a skyscraper. What is she doing there? In the end, the team blows up a 6,000 year-old god, equipped with apparently limitless powers to lay low the entire country, with a small bomb …

And how, in the first place, does the brilliant, Machiavellian Waller think that a young woman with a bat and an Australian with a boomerang (yes!) are going to be much help in the struggle against god-like, nearly invincible terrorists? It's absurd and a little embarrassing to write about.

This is a very bad film, a jumble of clichés and ludicrous special effects sequences. The dialogue and relationships are hackneyed and almost entirely unconvincing.

Will Smith and Margot Robbie make an impression. They somehow manage to bring occasional signs of real life, or humor at least, to this squalid project. Adam Beach (as Slipknot, one of the villains), a talented performer, has only a few minutes on screen, in one of the film's many confusing aspects. Some of the other performances are best passed over in silence.

Ayer is making an unpleasant name for himself. His World War II film, *Fury* (2014), was a very nasty, misanthropic piece of work. A US army tank crew "trains" a newcomer to be a homicidal killer in the course of exterminating vast numbers of German soldiers.

I noted, "In *Fury*, although the subject matter is quite different than that in either [Quentin Tarantino's] *Django Unchained* or [Martin Scorsese's] *The Wolf of Wall Street*, one has a similar sense of being trapped in the middle of something foul and disoriented, a libel against the human race. … The visual and dramatic implication of Ayer's film is that the horrors of war arise from the rottenness of humanity itself, they speak to humankind's true self, or at least to one of its truest selves."

Taken at face value, *Suicide Squad* is an argument for recruiting fascist scum to fight in America's wars overseas and, presumably, at home. Anything goes in the fight against "terrorism." As Waller explains, "In a world of monsters, this is the only way to protect the country."

This is apparently Ayer's view as well. He told the *Los Angeles Times*, "The world it takes place in is very Cold War in outlook, and I'm a child of the Cold War … I liked

© World Socialist Web Site

the idea of the government running covert ops, using bad guys to do good things against other bad guys. It just seemed very close to the world we're in today."

Ayer has been quoted as claiming that *Suicide Squad* is "*The Dirty Dozen* with supervillains." This is turning reality on its head. Robert Aldrich's World War II film, released in 1967, deals with a group of the Army's most serious convicts, who are transformed into commandos and sent into France to carry out a top-secret and genuinely suicidal mission.

Whatever its ambiguities, as Tony Williams explained in *Body and Soul: The Cinematic Vision of Robert Aldrich*, *The Dirty Dozen* "captured the antiauthoritarian mood in American society fueled by Vietnam War demonstrations" and other developments. John Wayne turned down a leading role on the grounds that the screenplay was "unpatriotic and communist inspired." Among other things, the film exudes hostility toward the American high command.

Williams noted that Aldrich's work made an implicit comment "on what the Nazis themselves were doing to others as well as containing the radical suggestion that American soldiers were equally capable of the same inhumane acts." The director later commented: "What I was trying to do was say that under the circumstances, it's not only the Germans who do unkind and hideous, horrible things in the name of war, but that the Americans do it and anybody does it. The whole nature of war is dehumanizing." A far cry from Tarantino's *Inglourious Basterds* and Ayer's *Suicide Squad* !

Films like the latter demonstrate the degree to which the logic and framework of Washington's "war on terror" have been imbibed and assimilated by a considerable portion of the Hollywood filmmaking world, along with many others in affluent entertainment and music industry positions. These people have no argument with America's wars, no argument with the military, no argument with the CIA, no argument with "black ops" and torture. There is barely the pretense of opposition.

Along these lines, it is worth noting that a good deal of the criticism of *Suicide Squad* has addressed itself to the "sexualization" of Robbie's character and the "whiff of misogyny" in the DC [Comics] Extended Universe. Indeed, there are elements that seem an obvious pandering to adolescent fantasy. However, none of the same critics raise objections about the utter illegality of Waller's project and its authoritarian, police-state implications.

Crudely and disturbingly, the film's storyline and casting reflect something about the thrust of American foreign policy at present. In addition to making US Special Forces and Navy SEALs heroes in his work, Ayer has added an Australian and a Japanese (Karen Fukuhara as Katana) to his team. These allies of the US, one might say, are honorary Americans. At least for the moment. There are, of course, no Russian, Chinese or Iranian "bad guys" or "metahumans" who might lend a hand. Their "badness" is too serious an issue to joke about.

As is often the case these days, militarism-patriotism mixes with identity politics. Making the chief of the lethal program a black woman fits the bill (in fairness, this is not the filmmakers' doing—Waller was created as a comic book character in 1986). Waller is theoretically a villain herself, killing subordinates in cold blood when she is clearing out one office (they lack the security clearance to have knowledge of her sinister program). "Getting people to act against their own self-interest is what I do for a living," she cynically explains at another point. But the film's general attitude toward her is fawning and reverential.

Davis, a fine actor, told an interviewer in 2015 that she was "fascinated" by Waller. "She's this big powerful black woman, hard, ready to pick up a gun and shoot anyone at will. I'm fascinated in exploring her psychology, just put it that way. And I'm excited to pick up a gun." Of course, actors say stupid things in the course of publicizing their films, but still one hopes that certain performers will be ashamed of themselves in the years to come.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site