Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk: Ang Lee on the Iraq war and American hoopla

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Directed by Ang Lee; written by Jean-Christophe Castelli; based on the novel by Ben Fountain

Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk is the latest work from veteran Taiwanese-born filmmaker Ang Lee, probably best known for *Sense and Sensibility* (1995), *The Ice Storm* (1997), *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) and *Brokeback Mountain* (2005). The new film is based on the novel of the same title by American author Ben Fountain, published in 2012.

The drama takes place in 2004. A unit of American soldiers, who have survived a brief but fierce battle with Iraqi insurgents, are being celebrated as "heroes" on a nationwide tour. Thanksgiving Day finds them in Dallas, where they are to take part in halftime festivities at a Dallas Cowboys football game. Despite the media hoopla and public attention, the group of soldiers is on the eve of being shipped back to Iraq.

Billy Lynn (Joe Alwyn), the central figure in the novel and film, is a 19-year-old US serviceman whose effort to save his beloved sergeant (Vin Diesel) in Iraq was captured on film and has earned him a Silver Star. We follow him as he navigates the goings-on at the football stadium, and we also see what he remembers about the battle in Iraq and other recent episodes in his life, including his first visit home since his deployment. His sister, Kathryn (Kristen Stewart), to whom he has been very close, is working on Billy to find a means (medical, psychological) to avoid returning to the war zone. The young man also encounters and becomes infatuated with a Cowboys cheerleader, Faison (Makenzie Leigh).

Accompanying the "Bravos," as the media has dubbed the group of young soldiers, is a Hollywood wheeler-dealer, Albert (Chris Tucker), who is trying to put together a film deal. The "heroes" are the guests of Dallas Cowboys' owner, Norm Oglesby (Steve Martin), who talks cheaply and indiscriminately about God and country. He pompously tells Lynn, "Your story, Billy, no longer belongs to you. It's America's story now." Ultimately, which should surprise no one, Oglesby proves to be a first-class chiseler along with everything else.

Before discussing the substance of Ang Lee's film, it is necessary briefly to consider its "groundbreaking…technical breakthroughs." *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* was shot in 3D, in high resolution (4K, or twice the number of pixels, both horizontally and vertically, as an ordinary film) and in "a history-making frame rate" (120 frames per second, as opposed to the normal 24).

According to *Billy Lynn* 's production notes: "The movie even set up its own lab in Atlanta in order to process a vast quantity of data, as Lee and [cinematographer John] Toll invariably relied on two cameras running at five times the normal speed with twice the amount of data running on each of those cameras. That translated into *twenty times the data storage* of a normal high-quality Hollywood film on a daily basis."

The technology is impressive and certainly deserves to be explored. However, the claim that technical means by themselves will advance cinema is simply unwarranted. Lee comments, "To me, when we see movies, it's as if we're watching someone's story from a distance. My hope with this new technology is that it could allow for greater intimacy, to really convey the personal feelings of a conflicted young soldier."

It is difficult to know precisely what this means. We are always watching someone's story from a distance in a film. Greater physical proximity does not necessarily bring us any closer to the truth of someone's life. For that, social and psychological knowledge are required. Compared to present-day filmmakers, Murnau, Renoir, Eisenstein, Kurosawa, Ford and Chaplin worked with primitive equipment, but they were able to present far richer pictures of life.

Co-producer Stephen Cornwell: "In some ways the language of cinema hasn't really evolved for a hundred years. The frame rate's been the same. The way things are performed, spoken and constructed and the way narrative unfolds is something that we've all come to accept as norms. And what Ang has done is ask how do we evolve cinematic language to stay relevant, distinct and unique in the post-digital age, in an age where cinema is plateauing, where story telling has become very familiar? To do that, we have to change the way people experience cinema, and that's what Ang's reaching for, what we're all reaching for in this film."

The problem with contemporary filmmaking is not primarily mechanical or organizational, but artistic and social. Cornwell seems to imply that the present stagnation can be overcome by astonishing technical knowhow. This is obviously not true. What's needed, above all, is not greater "technologically induced realism," but greater historical and psychological realism.

Human beings and objects have always appeared to me to be three-dimensional on screen, at least physically. The 3D technology is often a distraction, and it certainly proves so in Lee's new film. So-called 3D films sometimes appear to be composed of cardboard cutouts standing in front of one another.

Filming *Billy Lynn* apparently had its peculiarities. Fewer takes were possible, for example, because of the expense. Also, according to the British-born Alwyn, "The cameras were absolutely huge. … Because of how intimate Ang wanted the shots—so close to the faces—you would be performing to the black-matte box around the camera, rather than being able to see the other actors. Oftentimes, you'd just be following bits and pieces of tape, moving around a black space, and delivering your lines to that." These circumstances may help explain

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why there is much stiffness and awkwardness in a number of the performances, especially in those of Steve Martin, Vin Diesel and Chris Tucker.

In any event, the filmmakers have done a reasonable job of adapting Fountain's book, which—as I noted previously—"is not so much a novel about Iraq…as it is a sharp look at phony patriotism, hypocritical religiosity and corporate greed in [George W.] Bush's Texas.

Fountain notes that the idea for the novel originally came to him at home while actually watching the Dallas Cowboys' Thanksgiving Day football game in 2004.

"This was three weeks after the general election when George W. Bush had beaten [Democrat John] Kerry. I felt like I didn't understand my country." Fountain explains that he remained seated during halftime and "started watching the halftime show—I mean *really* looking at it. And it's very much the way I write it in the book: a surreal, pretty psychotic mash-up of American patriotism, exceptionalism, popular music, soft-core porn and militarism: lots of soldiers standing on the field with American flags and fireworks. I thought, this is the craziest thing I've ever seen."

Presumably, writing the novel was a means by which Fountain attempted to "understand" his country. He succeeded, however, only in fits and starts. The book has amusing and useful features. *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* pours a good deal of satirical cold water on the professional sports-military complex, with its unsavory mix of patriotism, meaningless spectacle and violence.

The novel's generally hostile tone is legitimate, but the targets, including Bush and his administration, are fairly easy ones at this time. In the end, despite its decent intentions, the book is a little too light-hearted and "soft."

Ang Lee has never appeared to possess a satirical touch. His films have tended toward the earnest and literal. He is a competent, dogged filmmaker, who is capable at his best of shedding light on human relationships and of generating emotion.

The new film alternately and regularly advances toward certain harsh truths and retreats from them.

There are good, serious elements here.

–In one scene, Billy and one of his fellow soldiers, "Mango" Montoya (Arturo Castro), sit and talk with a stadium bartender. The latter is thinking of enlisting, because there is nothing for him in civilian life. They agree that the economic situation is poor and the rich live in another realm from them.

–During a dinnertime conversation at home, Kathryn quizzes Billy about the war, and its purpose. Is it for oil, she asks? Where are those WMDs [weapons of mass destruction] we've been hearing about? (In the novel, she says: "Then let me ask you this, do you guys believe in the war? Like is it good, legit, are we doing the right thing? Or is it all really just about the oil?" Billy replies, "You know I don't know that," and, later, "I don't think anybody knows what we're doing over there.") Kathryn is the most intelligent, sensitive individual in the film and her antagonism toward official society and propaganda is contagious.

–While the Bravos are sitting around at the stadium at one point, an oilman (Tim Blake Nelson) approaches and commends them on their "service." Sgt. David Dime (Garrett Hedlund), the leader of the squad, responds with excessive, implicitly bitter and sarcastic zeal to this odious individual, "You keep on drilling, we'll keep on killing!"

–In the only scene that gives some sense of the reality of the Iraq war and occupation, the squad bursts into a house at night and generally terrorizes the residents. They eventually place a hood on the head of the man of the family and take him away.

–In the incident for which he received his decoration, Billy ends up wrestling with one of the insurgents and cutting his throat. We watch as a pool of blood forms around the dead man's head. Lee shows this image twice. It is the most disturbing in the film.

–The football halftime show itself is a scathing comment on the cultural-political state of things in America. Destiny's Child (with a Beyoncé stand-in) and groups of dancers perform, marching bands march, fireworks explode, the Bravos stand at attention or move around in a daze. All the while, Billy recalls the mayhem and death in Iraq. Lee effectively brings to the screen Fountain's "surreal, pretty psychotic mash-up." It is impossible not to feel the absurdity and monstrosity of the situation, the horrible reality that America's rulers are sending young men and women to die to ensure business as usual.

At the same time, unhappily, there are numerous moments and elements that undermine or offset much of what is strong in the work. Lee's approach is too non-committal in many of the sequences, too "even-handed." The early portions of *Billy Lynn* are especially flat. One can also feel where Lee gives in to political pressures, to pro-military, "support the troops" rubbish. The assault in Fountain's book on the businessman at the center of the whole reactionary business, Oglesby (Martin), is considerably downplayed and weakened. One hardly knows what to make of him in the end. Moreover, the evasive note on which the film concludes, a variation on the "band of brothers" theme, is another accommodation to bourgeois public opinion.

The production notes for *Billy Lynn* include a comment from Alwyn, whose thrust one suspects reflects Ang Lee's thinking: "The film doesn't go into the politics of war or why they guys are fighting over there…but it brings the war home and explores people's projections on the soldiers rather than getting into the morality and the politics of it so much."

Yes, and this is the movie's most damaging failing and what prevents it from being a more consistently powerful and artistically satisfying experience. We will make the point one more time—it is not possible to make a coherent and convincing film about the criminal invasion and occupation of Iraq, with all its devastating and ongoing consequences, without treating *in some fashion* the driving forces of the war and its broader significance. Every deliberate act of avoidance eats away at the sincerity and depth of a work of art.

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