

The “madness” of war dimly understood in *Hacksaw Ridge* and the world set right by aliens in *Arrival*

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Hacksaw Ridge

Hacksaw Ridge, directed by Mel Gibson, screenplay by Andrew Knight and Robert Schenkkan; *Arrival*, directed by Denis Villeneuve, screenplay by Eric Heisserer, based on a short story by Ted Chiang

Mel Gibson’s *Hacksaw Ridge* recounts the story of Desmond Thomas Doss, the first and only conscientious objector to receive the Medal of Honor in World War II for his courageous role in the Battle of Okinawa in 1945. The latter, 82-day conflict involved the largest amphibious landing in the Pacific theater of the war. It resulted in the deaths of over 100,000 Japanese and 50,000 Allied forces.

Doss (1919–2006) was a US Army corporal and combat medic, who waged a fierce struggle against the army brass and his fellow enlisted men in defense of his right *not* to bear arms. He was beaten, imprisoned and faced innumerable reprisals after he was assigned to a rifle company of the 1st Battalion, 307th Infantry, 77th Infantry Division.

Hacksaw Ridge consists of two nearly distinct movies. Gibson’s initial presentation of Desmond Doss (Andrew Garfield) is measured, and is even sympathetic to a man who is morally opposed to killing, but wants to assist the war effort. The portion introducing Doss’s story and unusual situation is generally well done. The film’s battlefield scenes, however, are violent beyond measure and grotesque, filled with vast quantities of blood, guts and feasting rodents, and constructed with sado-pornographic relish. These provocatively brutal sequences test the viewer’s endurance.

After a brief opening battle scene, the film rolls back to 1929 and the poverty-stricken Doss household in Lynchburg, Virginia in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Desmond’s father, Tom Doss (Hugo Weaving), is haunted and driven to drink apparently by the traumas of fighting in the First World War. He frequently visits the graves of his three best friends. Tom is now a bitter, broken man who abuses his wife Bertha (Rachel Griffiths) and their two sons.

Desmond’s childhood involves scampering up and down mountainsides. His physical prowess will later play a significant role during his military service. He is also a Seventh-Day Adventist and deeply believes in the Ten Commandments, especially “Thou shalt not kill.” Desmond’s avowed non-violence is further deepened after he nearly kills his brother during horseplay and watches his father threatening his mother with a gun.

Before he leaves for basic training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, Doss asks his sweetheart Dorothy (Teresa Palmer) to marry him when he comes home on leave.

At boot camp, Desmond, who excels at all the physical elements of the training process, steadfastly refuses to touch a gun. He is under the command of Sergeant Howell (Vince Vaughn) and Captain Glover (Sam Worthington), who berate him, turn a blind eye when he is severely beaten by his fellow soldiers, force him to perform demeaning and revolting tasks, incarcerate him and then put him on trial where it is assumed he will be forced out of the military. But at a crucial juncture, his father barges into the courtroom with a letter from his former commanding officer proving that Desmond’s refusal to carry a firearm is a

protected Constitutional right. This portion of the film is done with a certain degree of skill and feeling.

Then Gibson goes into overdrive as he recreates the 1945 Battle of Okinawa, in which American troops must scale the steep cliff face of the Maeda Escarpment, dubbed “Hacksaw Ridge,” to confront the Japanese enemy. During the largely unwatchable carnage, Desmond, in a religiously driven fever (“Please Lord, help me get one more”), rescues 75 mangled American soldiers who had been left for dead after his unit retreats. The heroics of the “cowardly” CO provide the US platoon with a second wind.

Hacksaw Ridge’s postscript includes a video clip of the real Desmond Doss—who died in 2006 at the age of 87—and a few of the men whose lives he saved.

Gibson is a talented actor and occasionally demonstrates a certain flair as a director. Unfortunately, he seems possessed of a largely primitive outlook. His backwardness and crudity are most evident here in his depiction of the Japanese as little more than bloodthirsty, wanton savages. In this manner he accepts uncritically—and passes on—the official narrative about the second imperialist war, as a “good war” between democracy and barbarism.

Gibson seems mesmerized, perhaps both horrified and fascinated, by violence, but is unable to place human cruelty in any social or historical context. He is almost continuously and irredeemably over his head in his directorial efforts.

The representation of incredible levels of mayhem appears to be his favored solution to the difficult social and psychological problems he encounters. The films (*Braveheart*, *The Passion of the Christ*, *Apocalypto*) are fatally and hopelessly flawed as a result.

Arrival

Extraterrestrial spacecraft, nicknamed “shells” by the US military, land in several places on Earth in French-Canadian filmmaker Denis Villeneuve’s science fiction movie *Arrival*. Villeneuve’s (*Prisoners*, 2013, *Enemy*, 2014, *Sicario*, 2015) new film is an unconvincing, feeble parable about a divided world that gets set straight through the intervention of aliens, and a female

protagonist.

Dr. Louise Banks (Amy Adams), a linguist, is haunted by the death of her teenage daughter. Colonel Weber (Forest Whitaker), a high-level US military official, drafts her into going to Montana where one of the alien shells has set down. There she will collaborate with a team of military, CIA and other specialists, including Ian Donnelly (Jeremy Renner in the unlikely role of a military astrophysicist).

The team makes contact with the extraterrestrials in an effort to determine their intentions. Meanwhile, similar outfits are operating in other countries, but the various nations do not share information. Louise and Ian take the lead in attempting to communicate with two aliens they jokingly name “Abbott and Costello”—creatures that look like giant elephant legs and who write in elegant, circular ink-like markings.

But as the inevitably aggressive Chinese and Russians gear up to attack the visitors from outer space, Louise figures out the secret of the alien invasion (which involves a soothing, liberal and simplistic message) that changes the way she understands life and death.

Arrival, for the most part, is achingly slow-moving and lacking in tension. The filmmakers have added an intrusive score punctuated by loud, reverberating horn blasts (reminiscent of whale sounds). This is one of many elements that create more flash than substance.

Although it is certainly obnoxious that Villeneuve paints the Chinese and Russians as warmongering villains, one feels it is an act of laziness—in line with the movie’s general carelessness—rather than a politically or ideologically driven conviction. Blaming the Chinese and Russians for evil-doing is something of a default setting in film industry circles these days.



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