

# Kathryn Bigelow's *Detroit*: Mind-numbing violence and racial politics

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*Directed by Kathryn Bigelow; written by Mark Boal*

Kathryn Bigelow's new film, *Detroit*, a fictionalized account of an incident that occurred during the July 1967 rebellion in the titular city, the police murder of three young black men at the Algiers Motel, premiered on July 25 at the Fox Theatre in downtown Detroit.

More than 2,000 people attended the gala event. Significant figures from the local political establishment, including the city council president and the chief of police, were on hand, along with numerous film and music industry celebrities.

Michael E. Dyson, academic, Baptist minister and *New York Times* op-ed writer, addressed rambling remarks dominated by his usual racist demagoguery to the city's selfie-taking movers and shakers. The latter were there primarily to celebrate their own success and wealth, amassed during Detroit's "rebirth" and "renewal," a process that has only benefited big business and a stratum of the upper middle class.

Dyson, a Detroit native, gave Bigelow a fulsome introduction, after which the filmmaker brought several survivors of the Algiers Motel killings on stage.

As for the film itself, *Detroit* opens with an animated sequence of painter Jacob Lawrence's acclaimed series on the "Great Migration" of African Americans from the rural South to Northern and Midwestern industrial centers. Setting the tone for what is to come, the prologue, written by Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr., presents the migration and subsequent history in racial terms. It makes no mention of the fact that the Detroit area was the center of titanic struggles of the working class, black and white, whose objective unity was forged in the giant auto plants.

Fifty years ago, on July 23, the Detroit riot erupted. It was one of the largest and bloodiest of the series of urban rebellions that occurred in the US in the 1960s. The official record indicates that disturbances took place in 150 cities in 1967 alone. These revolts by some of the most oppressed sections of the working class and poor were fiercely suppressed by city and state police and, in some cases, the National Guard, who occupied urban centers such as Los Angeles, Chicago, Cleveland, Newark and Minneapolis. In Detroit, the US army was also mobilized by President Lyndon B. Johnson.

The uprisings were part of a radical, global upsurge that lasted until the mid-1970s. As the WSWs explained in articles originally published in the *Bulletin* newspaper in 1987 and recently reposted on this web site: "The riots occurred in black ghetto sections of the Northern cities, but they were not 'race riots.' ... They were explosions directed against the most brutal levels of capitalist exploitation and poverty, as well as the pervasive racial discrimination which reinforced these conditions among black and other minority sections of the working class."

The state responded with great violence to this challenge to its authority. Sidney Fine's comprehensive *Violence in the Model City: The Cavanagh Administration, Race Relations, and the Detroit Riot of 1967* cites a Vietnam veteran who survived the Algiers Motel events as saying that he

had "lived through a night of horror and murder in Detroit" worse than anything he experienced in Vietnam. Officially, 43 people died, nearly 1,200 were injured and more than 7,200 were arrested over the course of five days of fighting.

Sparking the Detroit outburst was a police raid on an after-hours social club, a "blind pig," that sold liquor without a license. The rough treatment the police meted out in arresting some 82 people at the bar who were, ironically, celebrating the return of two soldiers from Vietnam provoked hundreds of angry residents to take to the streets. Bigelow's *Detroit* begins with this incident and proceeds to concentrate on one of the most infamous police actions, which occurred during the night of July 25-26—the massacre at the Algiers Motel.

Staying or hanging out at the motel on the night in question were six young black men—Carl Cooper, Aubrey Pollard, Fred Temple, Michael Clark, Lee Forsythe and James Sortor; five members of the singing group, The Dramatics; Robert Lee Green, a black veteran from Kentucky; and two young white girls from Ohio, Julie Hysell and Karen Malloy. (The characters' names in the film have either been shortened—first names only—or altered.)

On the pretext that a sniper had fired from the motel, Detroit police sprayed a volley of bullets at the motel and then charged inside.

Three white cops, David Senak, Ronald August and Robert Paille (in Bigelow's movie, a thinly disguised Senak, the chief instigator of the mayhem, becomes Krauss, played by Will Poulter) slammed the residents against the wall, beat them to a pulp and taunted them with racial slurs. The girls were struck and made to strip. Both in the historical event and the film, the ensuing savage torture-murder session leaves three men dead: Carl (Jason Mitchell), Aubrey (Nathan Davis Jr.) and Fred (Jacob Latimore). The three cops, and a black security guard, are eventually charged but acquitted.

The Algiers Motel event was a horrible crime and fully deserves to be dealt with artistically. It should be lodged in popular consciousness as a prime example of the essential cruelty and ferocity of social relations in America, when the "democratic" trappings are stripped away, as well as the ruthless determination of the ruling class to crush all resistance. It is appropriate that there should be widespread interest in this tumultuous history.

However, reproducing the immediate, horrific reality of violence is not the same thing as bringing out the deepest truth about that violence. From that more serious point of view, *Detroit* is an aesthetic and political failure.

To begin with, the movie's title conveys the notion that the city is identical with the Algiers Motel killings, that Detroit has been nothing more than a center of organized brutality against the African American population. A few characters express opposition to the racism of the police, but their sentiments take up a minuscule portion of the film.

In a work that runs well over two hours, some 70 percent is given over to scenes of psychopathic racist violence. This kind of intrusive, porno-

sadistic, claustrophobic filmmaking is emotionally manipulative and prevents reflection. Through its images and sounds, *Detroit* tells its audience that the savagery of the Algiers incident was the result of paranoid, sexually charged white racism. No other explanation is offered and no wider context is presented, encouraging the idea that race and race alone was responsible.

(In terms of the violence itself, incidentally, one of the victims, Julie Delaney, nee Hysell, told the *Los Angeles Times* recently that what happens in the movie “is like ‘The Smurfs’ compared to what really happened.” Delaney told the newspaper, “People were begging for their lives. I just kept thinking ‘they killed three people, and there’s one person they haven’t taken, then I’m next.’ I remember the voices of the cops yelling, again and again and again.”)

Bigelow has never made a dramatically coherent or convincing work. Her new film is awkwardly, disjointedly constructed. When the characters are not screaming abuse and things quiet down, the banality of the dialogue and the flat, undeveloped characterizations—devils or angels—make themselves felt. Unhappily, Larry Reed (Algee Smith), a traumatized survivor and member of The Dramatics, draws both racistist and mystical conclusions.

The brief courtroom scene represents something of an exception. Presumably based on the actual trial record, it shows a slick defense attorney for the cops (John Krasinski) viciously berating black witnesses and has a certain ring of truth to it.

The decision by Bigelow and screenwriter Mark Boal to make Melvin Dismukes (John Boyega), a black security guard who ends up being an accomplice to the three killer cops, the chief protagonist, is extremely problematic. (In 1968, Dismukes was found not guilty of felonious assault.) Bigelow’s hero is a contradictory, murky figure, who, if he were white, would probably be treated as another homicidal maniac, rather than as a man of considerable wisdom, who anchors the film.

As mentioned above, Bigelow’s *Detroit* was introduced July 25 at the Fox Theatre by Michael E. Dyson, who was present to give the film and its director his imprimatur. A good deal, politically and financially, is riding on the movie and the producers and distributors (including Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer) were taking preemptive action to forestall any possible attacks from identity politics critics, who might raise objections to a white filmmaker “appropriating” black suffering.

On the Red Carpet, Dyson offered Bigelow special dispensation for her whiteness: “That a white woman directed this film is extraordinarily important. Because had a black person directed it, they might say it was being politically correct ... But as a white woman [she was] leveraging her authority, her privilege, in defense of vulnerable people who are incapable of expressing themselves or not being taken seriously.”

Along the same lines, in the August issue of *ELLE* magazine, Dyson wrote: “Is Bigelow going to tell what cynical racists, and systemic racism, did to black folk? Yes... And what does she know about black folk? Enough to limn our fragile, beautiful, worthy humanity with a discerning eye, and enough to know that telling the truth about the devastating consequences of structural racism and police brutality is one of the greatest gifts we can be given.”

Dyson’s intervention is a type of political-commercial advertising. He is plugging the film on behalf of racial politics and the Hollywood studios.

Bigelow has told the media that she made *Detroit* because the wave of police violence in Ferguson, Missouri and elsewhere left her no moral choice. As to her solution to the killings, whose victims of course are both black and white, she limply told the *Detroit News*, “I think the movie speaks to the necessity for a dialogue ... The necessity for a conversation is now, and this has to change. And that’s not about Detroit, that’s about this country.”

Boal too sees the Detroit riot and current issues in exclusively racial terms. In “Why I wrote *Detroit*,” at *Vulture.com*, one of *New York*

*Magazine*’s web sites, he blamed the Algiers Motel killings on one “sociopathic racist patrolman.” Boal did not apparently intend to write a historical or social drama, but found himself “working in horror-genre veins, except that in my case, the supernatural element was replaced with the all-too-real terror of racism.” Moreover, explaining the film’s high level of irrational, visceral terror, Boal explains, “We wanted viewers not so much to watch the story as absorb it like a physical sensation.”

Bigelow’s trajectory, as we have noted before, is especially telling. She studied painting at the San Francisco Art Institute before winning a scholarship in 1971 to the Whitney Museum in New York. There she immersed herself in the “avant-garde art scene,” and, later, at Columbia University she came under the influence of French postmodernist thinker Sylvère Lotringer, an admirer of Michel Foucault, among others. One of her earliest film projects, *Psychological Operations in Support of Unconventional War*, made in 1975, critiqued US counterinsurgency methods and the use of death squads.

After a number of mediocre commercial efforts, Bigelow burst into wider prominence with *The Hurt Locker* in 2008, accommodating herself to the US war on terror. From there, she graduated to the “art-torture” film *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), a purported account of the endeavors by one indefatigable female CIA agent to track down Osama Bin Laden.

In the course of making the film, Bigelow and scriptwriter Mark Boal received assistance from the highest levels of the CIA and the American state. *Zero Dark Thirty* was not only filthy, it was sheer fantasy, as journalist Seymour Hersh has revealed. In any event, this is a team clearly enthralled by men in uniform!

Along with a good portion of her ex-left generation, Bigelow today combines support for the US “war on terror” with the most emotive, calculated attempts to whip up racial animosity.

In the end, what cripples Bigelow’s *Detroit* are its false conceptions.

Social conditions for the mass of Detroit residents today, a city illegally forced into bankruptcy in 2013, are worse than they were in 1967. The population suffers from high levels of poverty, unemployment and every form of social misery, including utility and water shutoffs. On the basis of Bigelow’s racialism, this is inexplicable. Some 63 percent of Detroit police officers are now black, one of the highest percentages of any major city police department in the US. Detroit has had a succession of black mayors, city councilmen and women, and police chiefs since the mid-1970s.

A better, more insightful, more honestly dramatic film would have to take as its premise a different starting point, that the great problem in Detroit is the profit system.



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