

Waiting for the Barbarians: “You are an obscene torturer. You deserve to be hanged!”

David Walsh
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Directed by *Ciro Guerra*, *written by* *J.M. Coetzee*, *based on the novel by* *Coetzee*

Ciro Guerra’s *Waiting for the Barbarians* is a remarkable work that outrages one, and ought to outrage one. In our view, it is a film WSWS readers and others ought to see and support.

Based on the 1980 novel by South Africa-born writer J.M. Coetzee, with—importantly—a screenplay by Coetzee, the film is set on the remote outskirts of a fictional (or composite) “Empire” sometime apparently in the 19th century.

The viewer is first introduced to the Magistrate (Mark Rylance), a middle-aged civil servant attempting to work and live out his days without too much stress and bother, who spends much of his time researching artifacts produced by the local “barbarian” population—nomads who live some distance away in a mountainous region—and dallying with various local women.

The Magistrate receives a visit out of the blue one day from a member of the state security, a policeman, one Colonel Joll (Johnny Depp), complete with an unusual pair of dark glasses, who goes on about the danger represented by the indigenous tribes. True to his word, Joll has a man and his nephew jailed (at this point the outpost has no proper cells) as sheep rustlers. (“Soldiers stopped us for nothing,” they tell the Magistrate). Joll presides over the torturing of the pair, leading to the older man’s death and the nephew’s making a fantastical confession about a planned uprising, grist for Joll’s mill. After all, his position depends on the existence of such threats to the Empire.

The Magistrate remonstrates with the state security man, pointing to the absurdity of the supposed conspiracy. The latter then explains his general theory of extracting information from prisoners, which requires “patience” and persistence. When he is probing for the “truth,” he needs to exert pressure to find it. “First I get lies ... then pressure, then more lies, then more pressure, then the break, then more pressure, then the truth. That is how you get the truth.” Pain is truth, explains the torturer, all else is subject to doubt.

Colonel Joll embarks on various missions. Prisoners, innocent nomads and others, are brought back, and beaten and abused. The Magistrate objects at various points, to no avail. Joll plans a longer, more ambitious excursion. The Magistrate tells him, “If you get lost, it will be my job to bring you back to civilization. I advise you not to go.” Joll, of course, goes off again. The Magistrate assures everyone that “they” will “soon be gone” for good and everything will “return to normal.” He frees the “barbarian” prisoners and has the area in which they were held scrubbed clean.

In Joll’s absence, the Magistrate encounters a young woman (Gana Bayarsaikhan), who appears to be crippled, begging in the street. She turns out to be one of the former prisoners, who was tortured, nearly blinded, and witnessed her father killed. The Magistrate treats her kindly, mending her mangled ankles (the work of Joll and his men, the Magistrate presumes), and develops an affection for her. His servants assume she is

now his concubine. “What are they doing up there?” “The usual.”

After refusing for a long time to answer the Magistrate’s questions, the woman finally explains that the interrogators broke her feet and held a red-hot fork to her eyes. “Do you want me to take you back?” he asks, hoping she will say no. Eventually, the Magistrate and several of his men return the woman to her people. On his arrival back at the outpost, the Magistrate is accused of “consorting” with the enemy (there’s “no enemy that I know of,” he responds blandly), treason and so forth.

Later, a new group of prisoners is brought back. They are attached by a wire, as the novel explains, that “runs through the flesh of each man’s hands and through holes pierced in his cheeks. ‘It makes them meek as lambs,’ I remember being told by a soldier who had once seen the trick: ‘they think of nothing but how to keep very still.’”

The Magistrate, now freed, intervenes vainly to save the detainees from a horrible fate, which also involves the authorities implicating the local population in their depravity. Brought in for further questioning by Joll and his equally sadistic accomplice, Mandel (Robert Pattinson), the Magistrate turns the tables, accusing them of being criminals. Joll mockingly observes that the Magistrate apparently desires to be “the one just man,” when, in fact, he is nothing but an insignificant “clown.” “This is nowhere—people are not interested.”

Events unfold. Joll’s imperial mission ends in a disaster for nearly everyone involved.

This is a very strong film, painful at times to watch, and a thoughtful, devastating work of art, rare in our day. Colombian director *Ciro Guerra* (*Embrace of the Serpent*, *Birds of Passage*, *Green Frontier*) has taken considerable care with every aspect of the production.

He is assisted immensely by the great British cinematographer *Chris Menges*, who began working in the film industry in the late 1960s and early 1970s with *Lindsay Anderson* (*If...*), *Ken Loach* (*Poor Cow*, *Kes*) and *Stephen Frears* (*Gumshoe*). In an interview with *Cineuropa*, *Guerra* explained that *Menges* “was a pleasure to work with, both for me and for my regular cinematographer, *David Gallego*, whom I brought in as a camera operator so that he could learn from a real master. For me, though, I always work very closely with my cinematographers, and I try to study their process, but in *Chris Menges*’ case, I just have no idea how he did it. It was astonishing. I could not hope to replicate it. He’s 78 years old but had more energy than any of the rest of us.”

Rylance is one of the most extraordinarily intelligent and sensitive contemporary theater, film and television performers. It is difficult to imagine him offering the public a single dishonest, fraudulent or unnecessary word or gesture. *Depp*, at long last, has done something worthy of his genuine talents, after appearing in a great deal of junk. *Guerra*, in the same interview, noted, a little irreverently, that *Depp* “was very happy to work with actors again—when you do special-effects films, it can be lonely with all the green screens. So he jumped at the opportunity from page one.” *Pattinson* too, a victim at an early age of the dreadful *Twilight Saga* film series, demonstrates his artistic seriousness, bringing a

brutal policeman to life.

Guerra's *Waiting for the Barbarians* is unusual in that, for once, an "allegory," often a weak, abstractly "universal" device, which drains the specificity and concreteness from people and events, serves here rather to heighten the overall historical and social realism. Although the time period and setting—Mongolia, Morocco, Afghanistan?—are vague, the hard, cold facts of life presented are not. There is no way to seriously interpret this film as anything but a searing indictment of imperialism, and American imperialism in particular. Indeed, it is hard to think of a more uncompromising indictment in recent decades.

Coetzee's short novel focused a good deal on the position and tragedy of an older, liberal-minded figure who suddenly encounters the savagery of the administration he has complacently served for decades, and subsequently becomes one of its victims. In the novel, at one point, the Magistrate asks himself: "Why should it be inconceivable that the behemoth that trampled them will trample me too? I truly believe I am not afraid of death. What I shrink from, I believe, is the shame of dying as stupid and befuddled as I am." He later adds, "What, after all, do I stand for besides an archaic code of gentlemanly behaviour towards captured foes, and what do I stand against except the new science of degradation that kills people on their knees, confused and disgraced in their own eyes?"

In a 1982 interview, the novelist explained that the Magistrate's situation was "riddled with contradictions. On the one hand he wants the ease of the life that he has had. That is an imperial life. It's a life that has been based on conquest. It's just that the sharper edge of conquest isn't visible to him during his particular lifetime. And then he is brought up against the reality of what imperialism is and makes a choice in that situation but it's not a choice that is historically viable, that people can follow on a large scale as a way of life."

In the novel, the Magistrate finally recognizes the disagreeable truth that he has not been, "as I liked to think, the indulgent pleasure-loving opposite of the cold rigid Colonel. I was the lie that Empire tells itself when times are easy, he the truth that Empire tells when harsh winds blow. Two sides of imperial rule, no more, no less."

The screenplay simplifies, uncomplicates the novel, and, in many ways, improves upon it. The Magistrate's somewhat murky sexual and fantasy life, along with his self-interrogations and self-recriminations, is pushed into the background. The need to create a two-hour work for the cinema no doubt had something to do with that, but one would imagine that two decades of unceasing imperialist violence in the Middle East and Central Asia have also played a role. In his screenplay, Coetzee unapologetically places central emphasis on the unrestrained aggression and viciousness of the occupying forces.

In any case, the writer has retained the novel's strongest moments. Rylance's impassioned, but level-headed speech before Joll is a moment of great moral power in both works. "You are the enemy," he declares. "You are an obscene torturer. You deserve to be hanged!" How rarely contemporary filmmakers and others dare to put such honest words in their characters' mouths, words that millions will agree with, and how healthy, how refreshing, how necessary it is!

Likewise, the Magistrate later mildly inquires of Mandel, referring to the latter's torture activities, as the novel puts it (condensed somewhat in the film), "How do you find it possible to eat afterwards, after you have been . . . working with people? That is a question I have always asked myself about executioners and other such people. . . . Do you find it easy to take food afterwards? I have imagined that one would want to wash one's hands. But no ordinary washing would be enough, one would require priestly intervention, a ceremonial of cleansing, don't you think? Some kind of purging of one's soul too—that is how I have imagined it. Otherwise how would it be possible to return to everyday life—to sit down at table, for instance, and break bread with one's family or one's

comrades?"

Waiting for the Barbarians, as it should, has made the critics generally nervous and uncomfortable. Who wants to see a film like this when, after all, it is perfectly possible—and quite easy—to avoid such unpleasantness and remain a self-satisfied philistine?

The *New York Times* sneeringly disparaged the film. Depp, for instance, its review claims, "makes a show out of pretending to be understated and seems under the impression that he's still working with Tim Burton." Pattinson, "as a cruel Joll underling, joins the evil-doing, kicking in a few cartoon-imperialist sneers and sadistic laughs."

The *Times*, as it must, cynically and deceitfully harnesses the dismissal to its identity politics obsession. Its comment points out, grudgingly, that the magistrate "is not posited as a potential white savior." Then why bring it up, except to plant the inference in the readers' minds? The review goes on to argue that the central character is "also not meaningfully aware of how, as a functionary of colonialism, he's part of the problem. The movie's disinclination to dig into this circumstance deprives it of potential dramatic depth. *Barbarians* instead aspires to hook an anti-colonialist mentality to an old-school Orientalist narrative style." What nonsense. The film's unabashed anti-imperialism is what the *Times* cannot stomach.

Such reviewers dare not suggest their hearts lie with Joll, but they barely conceal their resentment of the Magistrate's moral qualms and pestering. They would have preferred a more "nuanced" treatment of these murderers, whereby everything is relativized and made conveniently ambiguous, and where the dividing line between criminality and humanity is effaced, and the torturer and his victim are equally deserving of sympathy, or hostility.

The condescending half-heartedness—or worse—of the reviewers as a whole (*Waiting for the Barbarians* is "dramatically ponderous," "proudly unsubtle," "a sinister, heavy-handed allegory," "a misguided straight-faced bore"), a bare majority of whom gave this extraordinary work a positive treatment, speaks unmistakably to their social position. An art work that directly addresses the ferocity of colonialist violence is not what this affluent layer, benefiting from the stock market boom and other parasitic financial operations and immersed in gender and racial concerns, would prefer to see—or have anyone else see. There is an awareness, partial or otherwise, within this milieu that imperialist violence at home and abroad protects their wealth and privilege. Hence, their effort to place a *cordon sanitaire* around Guerra's film.



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