

The Russo brothers' *Cherry*: The cumulative social trauma

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Cherry is a drama directed by Anthony and Joe Russo from a screenplay by Angela Russo-Otstot and Jessica Goldberg. It is based on the 2018 semi-autobiographical novel of the same name by Nico Walker.

The Russos first came to prominence with *Welcome to Collinwood* (2002), about a dilapidated working class neighborhood in Cleveland, their hometown. After a 20-year hiatus during which they gained enormous success directing several of the Marvel films, the brothers have situated their new film in the same devastatingly decayed Ohio city, the second poorest in the US in 2022 (with an official poverty rate of 32 percent). Conditions are desperate in Cleveland. By an objective standard, examining them would be an urgent matter. Who is responsible for the two-decade gap? We will return to this.

In 2002, Cherry (Tom Holland) is a college student drifting through life. He is bowled over at first sight by his classmate Emily (Ciara Bravo). When Emily decides to leave and study in Montreal, a devastated Cherry impulsively enlists in the Army as a medic. Cherry cannot back out of the military when Emily decides against studying in Canada. Nonetheless, they marry before his deployment.

After the brutality of basic training, the teenager is thrown into the furnace of imperialist war and occupation in Iraq. This segment is the film's strongest. Cherry witnesses US military atrocities against the Iraqi population, officers boasting of their dozens of "Haji" kills and fellow soldiers with their guts ripped out. "Most days it felt like we were glorified scarecrows," and pawns in the service of American imperialist ambitions. "Eat shit and die" is the military's attitude towards elderly Iraqis in need of medical attention. Absent is any notion of "winning hearts and minds." Hatred and contempt for the population, including the children, is hammered into the soldiers' psyches.

After Cherry's traumatic tour of duty he returns home with a Medal of Valor ("My main accomplishment [when receiving the citation] was not yelling"). Despite the official promise of a future for Cherry and Emily, life spirals out of control as a result of the former soldier's post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). ("I didn't sleep and whenever I did, I dreamed of violence ... the horrors I'd seen.")

A Veteran Affairs psychiatrist prescribes OxyContin, unaware of its highly addictive nature. Soon the couple is drug dependent and in the clutches of an aptly nicknamed dealer "Pills and Coke" (Jack Reynor), a condition that then leads Cherry to rob banks around the Cleveland area. Names like Shitty Bank, U.S. Prank, Capitalist One and Bank F—s America are on the buildings' marquees. Unable to bear his existence, Cherry deliberately sets up his own arrest and incarceration.

Commendably, *Cherry* addresses the critical issues of war and opioid addiction, filmed with the Russos' trademark stylishness. Walker's book, which in fictional form examines the author's own experiences, evidently struck a chord with the filmmakers. They link images of the decay and poverty of the Midwest rustbelt with the nightmare of war, which between them are responsible for high levels of despair and addiction.

As noted above, Anthony and Joe Russo have directed four "blockbuster" Marvel movies—including *Avengers: Endgame*, the highest-grossing movie of all time (\$2.8 billion). Their films are calculated to have earned a combined \$6.8 billion at the global box office, placing them second only to Steven Spielberg for that kind of success.

Speaking about Cleveland, Anthony Russo told an interviewer from *observer.com* that the city "has had a difficult economic road for many decades now, as has the entire industrial Midwest." As manufacturing "has declined in this country, the economies in those

cities—Cleveland, Detroit, etc.—have just fallen apart and haven’t had a lot to replace them.” Russo went on, “We loved and grew up right in the city. But when you grow up in a city watching jobs and people leave the city by the tens of thousands, you’re watching neighborhoods around you decay and completely disappear. It has a strong impact on you to see that and how it affects people.”

The elder Russo (by one year) described the opioid crisis as an “existential” one. There’s “an anxiety of [how] the future doesn’t hold as much promise as it once did. I think that’s why places like Cleveland have been ground zero in many ways for the opioid crisis. The crisis took place in places like the industrial Midwest first, and I think the crisis has raged more severely there, and it’s still raging. This past year has seen the highest number of deaths from opioid overdoses yet.”

Furthermore, Anthony Russo explained to *looper.com* that the incident in the film in which the VA doctor mis-prescribes OxyContin “to treat problems that aren’t going to be fixed by opioids was a problem throughout the wider medical community, and that’s not specific and unique to the VA. There were a lot of problems, both with the medical industry and the pharmaceutical industry, in terms of how that drug was being pushed and used and abused by the system.”

In a *Variety* interview, Joe Russo condemned the pharmaceuticals for “scientifically” engineering drugs that are super cheap and “super addictive.” It’s “very hard to get off of them, especially if you don’t have the means to get off.”

Author Nico Walker is also from Cleveland. A *Buzzfeed* profile notes that Walker served as an Army medic in Iraq from 2005 to 2006, involved in more than 250 combat missions. “He came home and fell into a desperate rut of opiate addiction. To fund his habit, he robbed 10 banks around Cleveland in a span of four months, beginning in December 2010. He was arrested in April 2011, pleaded guilty in 2012, and was given an 11-year sentence.”

As the WSWS recently wrote: “More than \$1 trillion is expended on the US military every year, while they claim that no money is available to provide decent living conditions for workers. One veteran kills him or herself every 80 minutes in the US, the consequence of post-traumatic stress disorder from what they saw and experienced at war. As soon as their bodies are no longer useful to the ruling class, veterans are essentially discarded by the government.”

Cherry is a commendable film, but certainly not without

weaknesses. It is limited by its general air of pessimism and resignation. The best one can do, the film seems to argue, is try to navigate with decency as an individual through the massive chaos and worse, to face up to one’s personal responsibilities in a dignified manner. “Suffering because of” the choices one makes “and finding redemption,” as Joe Russo told an interviewer.

Welcome to Collinwood was a generally amiable, amused (perhaps too amused) take on a section of the population facing very hard times in the wake of the collapse of Cleveland’s manufacturing industries. The mood in *Cherry* is considerably grimmer. The conditions have only become bleaker. How is it that the vast amount of human misery briefly suggested by the new film’s opening images, for example, has gone largely unrecorded?

It is not primarily the Russos’ fault that they did not return to the subject matter sooner, although they are not entirely blameless. The indications are that if they had lived in a different era, the brothers would have likely been able to pay more attention to the social devastation.

The American film industry and its hierarchy, part of the corporate-financial oligarchy, are to blame. That industry has pushed, almost obliged filmmakers to work along certain lines and not along others. For a variety of reasons, it has no interest in holding up a mirror to the reality of American life.

Cherry has been largely panned by the critics, who would much prefer a Marvel movie. Presumably everyone around the Russo brothers is advising them against making another foray into social realism any time soon. We have already commented on *The Gray Man*, a very poor, formulaic “action” film they directed after *Cherry*. What lies ahead for these filmmakers and others depends above all on events outside their narrow, immediate world, in the social struggles unfolding in the US and globally.



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