

***Manhunt*: A dark tale of violence that provides little illumination**

Erik Schreiber
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Manhunt (2026), a new film by Canadian director Wayne Wapeemukwa, follows two teenage friends who are attracted to violence and the far right. At the end of their senior year of high school, they leave their homes for the wilds of northern British Columbia, taking a 3-D printed rifle with them. Their plans are unexplained (and perhaps only half-formed). Premiering during an international resurgence of extreme right-wing movements, the film is timely and disturbing.

Joey and Kit (whose names are also terms for young animals) spend their free time playing first-person shooter games online together. As they play, they vape constantly, tease each other and casually make antisemitic and misogynistic remarks. They also read and post on right-wing message boards where people share pornography and discuss racism and Nazism. Each of these details reinforces a sense of foreboding.

Joey, the more sensitive of the two, lives in a modest house with his grandmother, who has dementia and takes lots of medications. His father has a steady blue-collar job and lives in a motel-style apartment but struggles with a drinking problem. His mother is out of the picture. Joey himself works at a thrift store.

We learn far less about Kit's circumstances. When he says goodbye to his parents, we glimpse his suburban house. But he is the more defiant and unstable of the two friends—and clearly the leader. He doesn't graduate from high school with Joey, having been suspended for bringing a switchblade to class. He admires the hierarchy of the Bronze Age and shows little interest in women. In a rambling manifesto, he deplores inequality, exploitation and ecological damage but also modern civilization. His misanthropy commingles with thoughts of suicide.

The two set out in a deteriorating minivan, camping

and fantasizing about engaging in military combat. Things get complicated when they meet Dani and Becca at a roadside diner. The two outgoing Austrian sisters are traveling during their gap year. Kit doesn't bother to hide his disdain for them, but Dani and Joey take a liking to each other. When the rising tension reaches a climax, Joey and Kit find themselves more isolated than ever.

Manhunt was inspired by a series of three murders that were committed in British Columbia in 2019. Over the course of several days that July, two young tourists and a 64-year-old man were found dead of gunshot wounds near highways in the northern part of the province. Evidence led police to suspect teenagers Kam McLeod and Bryer Schmegelsky, who initially had been reported as missing, of the murders. Investigators found a photo of Schmegelsky wearing a swastika armband and brandishing a Hitler Youth knife. Online accounts linked to the teenagers featured a strange mix of far-right ideology and Soviet imagery. A manhunt ended in the discovery of the teenagers' bodies. McLeod and Schmegelsky had filmed a series of videos in which they confessed to the murders without showing remorse. They also announced their plans to commit suicide.

Joey and Kit are entirely believable characters who, in many ways, act like other teenagers on the brink of adulthood, trying to define themselves. What accounts for their fascination with Hitler, their racism and their love of violence? What drives young men and women to the far right? The answer lies in the objective social and political conditions and historically determined ideological problems that these young people confront.

Having endured decades of attacks, the Canadian working class faces falling wages, rising rents, collapsing public services and a surge in homelessness.

About 13 percent of Canada's youth is unemployed, and many others have insecure, low-wage jobs. Young people's tuition and debt are soaring. Rather than organizing the resistance to these attacks, the putative leaders of the working class (the trade unions and "left-wing" parties such as the New Democratic Party) have suppressed strikes, divided workers and upheld the interests of finance capital.

The far right is attempting to divert the resulting social anger in a reactionary direction. Conservative Party Leader Pierre Poilievre and others offer the poisons of nationalism and anti-immigrant incitement while enacting corporate tax cuts and militarization. All Canada's official political parties have moved so far to the right that it has become hard to distinguish between their programs. The standing ovations that Liberal Prime Minister Justin Trudeau and the entire Canadian Parliament gave to Yaroslav Hunka, a Ukrainian former member of Hitler's Waffen SS, are an unanswerable self-indictment. The ruling class, in Canada and worldwide, is rehabilitating Nazism and genocide.

British Columbia in particular has historically been the arena of sharp class struggle and home to some of the most militant workers in North America. The "socialist" NDP was swept to power in B.C. in 1972 on a wave of left-wing sentiment. It proceeded to betray its supporters, producing widespread disappointment and disillusionment, and opened the door to extreme right tendencies.

But the conditions that make possible a turn to the far right among disoriented youth are not explored in *Manhunt*. The little we learn about Joey's circumstances does not explain why, while a school picture is being taken, he shouts, "Heil!" And Kit's family life remains a mystery. The film follows the two friends so closely that we get little sense of the world that they inhabit.

It is not surprising, then, to learn that among the movies from which Wapeemukwa drew inspiration for *Manhunt* are Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* (1997) and Gus Van Sant's *Elephant* (2003). Haneke's film presents violence with disturbing realism while omitting all the social circumstances that give rise to it. Van Sant's film not only provides no social context for the Columbine High School shooting of 1999 but also refuses to offer any explanation for it. Whatever psychological effects these films may achieve, they do

not illuminate the subject of violence—and even discourage the search for answers.

"I wanted to make a film that listens rather than lectures," Wapeemukwa, who is of Métis descent, wrote in his director's statement. This approach parallels Van Sant's explicit refusal to investigate and analyze the Columbine shooting. But Wapeemukwa is not strictly listening. His film is not a documentary but a drama, and his directorial choices reflect his judgments about the world.

Wapeemukwa's perspective comes across more clearly in his press notes than in his film. *Manhunt* is about "masculinity, loneliness and the haunting afterlife of colonial desire," according to the director. The film explores misogyny and constitutes "a critique of whiteness."

These are the preoccupations of identity politics, which focuses on subjectivity and the self rather than on the objective social world. The universities (including the film schools), the so-called intelligentsia, the official political parties and the media promote an obsession with gender, race, sexuality, ethnicity, etc. to the exclusion of history and social and economic life. This ideology conveniently distracts attention from class exploitation and generally dismisses the working class as an agent of social change, even smearing workers as bigoted or backward.

Manhunt conveys something of the brutality and senselessness of right-wing violence. The feeling of dread and wasted potential that the movie evokes does not soon leave the viewer. Kit's manifesto gives a hint—but only a hint—of the confusion and social misery that foster the pessimism, fatalism and misanthropy on which the far right thrives. But even with the best intentions, a director cannot say anything enlightening about far-right violence without examining the socio-economic and historical conditions that foster it.



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