

Hollywood Propaganda: Why do Critics Love “American Sniper”?

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I watched American Sniper the other night and it really is the most puerile propaganda imaginable. It is not even as though it is simply unfair to the “enemy” – that is, mostly ordinary Iraqis, who are shown to be ruthless and heartless killers filled with irrational hatred for the American soldiers sent to liberate them from ... well, in this re-write of history it is seemingly from al-Qaeda. It is equally unfair to the US soldiers there, presenting them either as good guys being heroes or as good guys being traumatised by their exposure to the natives’ savagery.

And, of course, it also massively distorts the truth about Chris Kyle – a man who at best was so blinkered by his own childish jingoism that, by his own account, he never entertained a doubt about killing “Arabs”, even women and children, and at worst was a psychopath whom the US army gave a licence to go on a killing spree.

But even if one ignores the movie’s politics and its absolute failure to grasp documented facts about the invasion of Iraq and instead assesses it purely on its technical aspects, it’s a pedestrian affair at most. The romantic scenes, for example, are cliched and poorly written.

In other words, the only reason audiences could be raving about American Sniper, ensuring it becomes one of the biggest-grossing films in history, is that it closely aligns with the mood of self-pity that currently dominates in the US: the sense that those dark-skinned foreigners we tried to liberate were not only evil but, worse, ungrateful too.

Matt Tabibi has a good piece in Rolling Stone that sums up my feelings about the film. But one thing he doesn’t address is this: why, if it’s so clearly a mediocre film that soft-soaps the central character, ignores or deceives its audience on the context that brought soldiers like Kyle to Iraq, and has a plot that ought to embarrass a Walt Disney production, do 83% of “top critics” on a review aggregator site like Rotten Tomatoes give it the thumbs up?

In practice, “top critics” means the 50 or so film reviewers who work for the most prestigious US media outlets. So almost all of the US media’s supposedly finest critical minds are in agreement in lavishing praise on this dud. It is apparently “breath-taking”, “gripping” and “emotionally complex”. Or it is if the only complexity that interests you is whether Kyle gets to save another US soldier from the dark-skinned bad guys before he succumbs to post-traumatic stress disorder.

Reading the US reviews of American Sniper is a good way to remind ourselves not only of the critical role Hollywood plays in popularising lies about the West’s recent history and in sanitising our crimes, but also of the vital role the mainstream media play in giving these

simplistic and duplicitous fables an aura of ethical complexity and intellectual respectability.

<http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/american-sniper-is-almost-too-dumb-to-criticize-20150121>

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