

“The Militarization of Hollywood”: Unlocking “The Hurt Locker”

War Propaganda wins the Academy Award

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In-depth Report: [IRAQ REPORT](#)

Why did “The Hurt Locker,” a well-acted, tension-filled but otherwise undistinguished Hollywood war movie focusing on a military bomb-disposal team in Iraq, win the 2010 Academy Award for Best Picture?

After viewing the film recently, it appears to us that the main reason the U.S. movie industry bestowed the honor is that Kathryn Bigelow, who also received the Best Director prize, concealed the real nature of the American war in two distinct ways.

1. The film did not even hint that the three-man Army elite Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) squad operating in Baghdad a year after in the U.S. invasion was engaged in an unjust, illegal war, and thus were participants in what international law defines as a war crime.

According to the film website, the task of the GIs in question was “to try and make the city a safer place for Iraqis and Americans alike.”

Unmentioned is the fact that the war destroyed perhaps a million Iraqi lives, and created over four million refugees. Or that it took Washington’s divide-and-conquer policy of exacerbating sectarian religious and ethnic rivalries to produce a stalemate instead of a humiliating defeat for the Pentagon at the hands of up to 25,000 poorly armed, irregular and part-time guerrillas.

The film’s odd title, according to the producers, “is soldier vernacular for explosions that send you to the ‘hurt locker.’” But in the “collateral damage” of this unnecessary war — the civilian dead and wounded and millions of wrecked lives — has no place in “The Hurt Locker.” Only American pain is stored there, not Iraqi.

2. Director Bigelow and the film’s big money backers mischaracterized their efforts as “nonpolitical,” as did virtually all the American reviewers.

As one reviewer wrote, it was “remarkably nonpartisan and nonpolitical.” Another wrote: “It’s a nonpolitical film about Iraq. Many films about the Iraq war have fallen into a trap of appearing preachy or at least having a strong point of view.” The New Yorker’s David Denby said the film “wasn’t political except by implication — a mutual distrust between American occupiers and Iraqi citizens is there in every scene,” but the real meaning is that it “narrows the war to the existential confrontation of man and deadly threat.”

If “war is a mere continuation of politics by other means,” as von Clausewitz famously and correctly surmised, a “nonpolitical” film about what is virtually universally recognized as an unjust war is a conscious misrepresentation of reality. “The Hurt Locker” is an extremely political film, largely because of what it chose to omit, masquerading as apolitical in order to disarm the viewer.

Bomb disposal teams exist in all modern wars, but they do not exist in a moral or political vacuum. One side often represents the oppressor, and the other the oppressed, and it is morally dishonest to conceal the distinction.

For example, one assumes Japanese bomb teams were at work during the Nanking Massacre in China, and the time of the notorious Bataan Death March in the Philippines; and that German teams worked in Poland during the Warsaw Uprising in the Jewish ghetto, and during the horrific Nazi siege of Stalingrad.

These Japanese and German handlers of unexploded bombs were extremely brave, as are their American counterparts today, and some lost their lives, particularly since they didn’t have all the protective gear and bomb destroying robots available to Explosive Ordnance Disposal teams in Iraq or Afghanistan.

But what should we think about a German war film dealing with the Warsaw rising and the slaughter of Stalingrad, or a Japanese film about Nanking or the death march, that focused only on the heroism of their bomb-disposal troopers, without any reference to the aggressive wars that situated them in Poland, Russia, China and the Philippines? Most people would characterize such films as “enemy propaganda,” particularly while the wars were still going on, as are the U.S. wars in Afghanistan, Pakistan and Yemen (as well as Iraq, despite Washington’s claim that “combat operations” are now over).

Suppose you were an Iraqi, who lived through 12 years of U.S.-UK-UN killer sanctions that took another million Iraqi lives, followed by seven years of invasion and occupation. What would you think of a U.S. war film where nearly all the Iraqi characters were villains or crooks, and the occupying GIs were depicted as heroes and at least well-meaning?

What would you think when you read from the producers that “The Hurt locker” is “a riveting, suspenseful portrait of the courage under fire of the military’s unrecognized heroes: the technicians of a bomb squad who volunteer to challenge the odds and save lives doing one of the world’s most dangerous jobs.... Their mission is clear — protect and save.”

You’d probably think this film, which won six Academy Awards while the war was still going on, was enemy propaganda.

Well, propaganda is propaganda no matter who’s the perpetrator. Most Americans, it seems to us, are unable to distinguish self-serving war propaganda from reality when it is delivered from the U.S. government, the corporate mass media, or the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

We can’t read director Bigelow’s mind, but objectively “Hurt Locker” seeks to justify the Bush-Obama wars. It does so by suppressing the political context of the wars, and by individualizing and conflating the scope of the conflict to resemble, as reviewer Denby

suggests, an “existential confrontation [between] man and deadly threat.”

The “Hurt Locker” war is no longer a matter of U.S. foreign policy, military power, and the quest for geopolitical advantage and hegemony over the world’s largest petroleum reserves. It’s simply a matter of how three American guys in a very dangerous military occupation respond emotionally to the extraordinary pressure they are under.

“The Hurt Locker” is a movie of pro-war propaganda. Had this powerful war film instead told the truth about America’s ongoing imperial adventure in Iraq, even as it continued to focus mainly on the dilemmas confronting the bomb disposal team, it never would have been nominated for, much less become the recipient of, the most prestigious award in world filmmaking.

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