

Cultural Bites

with Fernando Gómez Herrero, Visiting Assistant Professor of Hispanic Studies

The Hurt Locker Shows U.S. Foreign Policy

The recent movie *The Hurt Locker*, directed by Kathryn Bigelow, is a harrowing film illustrating the militarization of our collective sensibility. Do we have to embrace it? Not me. With or without the Hollywood machine, the basic message appears to be: Suck it up! Or, in military lingo: "Embrace the suck."

But we do not have to go gently into Bigelow's Cameronian fantasy world. With or without the Oscars, *The Hurt Locker* offers the same formula that animates the *Terminator* and *Aliens* series, dealing with a post-utopian not-too-distant Los Angeles run (down) by brown faces, and there is a bit of a white panic in Bigelow's latest.

The Hurt Locker is mediocre and forgettable, a troubling sign of our belligerent times. This diagnosis applies to the film's craft but is most important in relation to the political message: violent nihilism representing American imperialism among the brown faces of Iraqis.

At the level of form, the recent television series *Over There* (2005), created by Chris Gerolmo and Steven Bochco (who was involved in the good police drama *NYPD Blue*), has already done what *The Hurt Locker* does, but much better: the close-up sweat-and-blood portrayal of a small band of American males in a foreign land with no patience for justifications, let alone celebrations. The audience gets exposed to the hand-held camera footage of fast-moving bodies, surprise shooting thrills and unexpected too-loud blow-ups.

We see the whole thing from the perspective of the American soldiers: "Engagement" means destruction of foreignness, as in the military lingo, and foreignness is decoration in the mess of life. Iraq is devastation that could be any place or no place. It certainly holds no meaning. It is "us" — white, English-speaking, "nice" people — gritting our teeth in the middle of it, with no apple pie at the end of the day.

The final cynical smile of the main protagonist in the bomb suit leaves no doubt as to the message of the movie: better to be in war than buying goods in the supermarket and having fun with the baby and the girlfriend. Males do not do domesticity in a warrior culture, thank you very much. There is an air of futility, of dissolution of social bonds, of males getting wasted and punching each other in the stomach. This is homotopia, or a vision of society only or mostly inhabited by men, amid suicidal acts of bravery; the protagonist is called "wild man," and he is fighting for no good reason.

There is no philosophy as to why we need violence: the military complex says you do it, so you do it. And *The Hurt Locker* stays in this circle of futility without going anywhere. Life is Hobbesian, history is violence and tough males stick it out. Period. The language of the film is telling in its interrupted condition — the pro-

tagonist sports a bomb-suit helmet, the soldier calls his girl but doesn't talk with her, the "wild man" runs away in a hoodie in the middle of the city.

The insidiousness of *The Hurt Locker* has to do with the systematic inequality of the exchanges between "our" soldiers and the "others." Our machine of destruction is always playing defense. "Our" soldiers disable bomb devices and keep the peace in the streets. They want out while they buy CDs from kids and try to rescue a suicide bomber with one too many locks. The main soldier is a brave soldier — he apologizes for not saving the life of a suicide bomber with a change of heart and gets angry when he thinks an Iraqi kid has been killed by hiding explosives in his stomach.

The film is composed of loose vignettes in a crescendo structure. There is no goal. Our fundamentally nice protagonist is a hurt Harry Houdini going for the most difficult device next time: one explosive disabled today, three tomorrow and 33 the day after tomorrow. The title of the film refers to the disabled bomb souvenirs kept underneath the hero's bed, souvenirs of pain and bravery. How many bombs has he disabled? Three hundred! He is a superhero! And his locker also contains the wedding ring emblematic of boring family and American life, from which he is totally alienated.

Bigelow's *Hurt Locker* is scrupulously male-only (add white and American and perhaps Western for the complete geopolitical color line still largely with us in regular visual culture entertainment). The absence of explicit statements about the war should not be confused with any appearance of "neutrality," which is fundamentally obscene, indefensible and hypocritical, also from a purely filmic standpoint. My repudiation of the film is not on pacifist grounds. It has to do mostly with the normalization of the abject position of foreignness in which the non-American dimension is systematically subordinated and made insignificant. The camera lens catches predominantly women, children and old men, and dubious men at shooting range.

The modern foreign language dimension in this film will make you run for cover. *The Hurt Locker* is identical to another notorious film: *Black Hawk Down*. The representatives of the most powerful army in the history of the world are almost always under siege in an asymmetrical guerrilla warfare in the foreign land. Should we have sympathy for the underdog who happens to be the big dog? I would argue that the quality of this unequal interaction between the predominant perspective embedded in this film-making corresponds marvelously to the standard transfer inside fields of study such as international relations and area studies, including foreign languages, literatures and cultures.

Crossword Answers

P	O	T	S	B	A	S	A	L	C	A	W			
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A	N	T	S	I	N	T	H	E	P	A	N	T	S	
R	E	T	O	G	S	I	S	I	N	O	H			
P	E	R	F	U	N	I	N	T	H	E	S	U	N	X
S	L	A	M	S	N	O	F	A	R	U	N	I	C	Y
O	U	T	A	N	D	A	B	O	U	T	S	C		
I	Q	L	L	O	S	S	S	N	S	C				
D	U	M	B	A	S	T	H	E	Y	C	O	M	E	
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S	T	Y	A	W	A	R	E	U	S	E	S			

College Students Are Musical, Too

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year, I was a musical studies major, and in the fall of junior year my design for my major and my concentration in American music history were approved.

My capstone project for the major is a research project on the history of interest in and development of jazz at Oberlin. I am focusing on two events: one, an October 1944 concert in Finney Chapel by the Frank Williams Sextet (which, according to my sources, was sponsored by the *Review*) and two, the beginning of the jazz studies program in 1973.

With regards to the second event, from what I have learned so far, I can tell you that, without the activism by the Oberlin African-American student body of the late '60s and early '70s, there might not have been a new building ready to open this weekend. Student organizations such as the Oberlin College Alliance for Black Culture—which later became Abusna—effectively let it be known to the administration that they wanted more black faculty, more coursework related to black history and society and more black arts and cultural events. As a result of the persistence of these students, Wendell Logan, our esteemed professor of African-American music, came to campus in the fall of 1973 to single-handedly begin the African-American music program, and the rest is—well, you know.

Oberlin College students are among those credited with bringing jazz to Oberlin. Why should we be nervous about being musicians or feel intimidated to walk into the Conservatory when we are responsible for so much of the music that permeates this campus? Let's be happy about the specifics, shall we?

We have student-facilitated and -taught ExCos that lead to awesome performances—including Oberlin Steel, Oberlin Talko, Marching Band, Turntablism, Music of North India (star) and Gamelan—and some on topics such as the history of hip-hop and the mentoring of young musicians. We have

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are also the Oberlin College Arts and Sciences Orchestra, which I co-founded two and a half years ago along with College senior Jeffrey Sanders so that College students could perform in a full symphonic orchestra; a variety of shows presented every year by the Oberlin Musical Theater Association; and, of course, really good student bands to play at our parties.

There are so many groups that I would not be surprised at all if I've forgotten any of them, but I do apologize if I did.

One student organization that I want to take special note of is one of Oberlin's largest: WOBC 91.5 FM, Oberlin College and Community Radio. From the first semester of my freshman year, when I was SO excited to hear one of my best friends on the radio for the first time, to this semester, when I'm having a blast as a first-time DJ, WOBC has been getting more and more awesome. This is evidenced by extensive community outreach, thought-provoking talk shows, and so many different kinds of music, with theme nights every night of the week (punk, metal, hip-hop, etc.). Check out www.wobc.org to listen live on your computer and see what kind of programming is offered—I'd say the chances are pretty good you'll find something you like!

Next week: a lot more on community outreach. In the meantime, go make some music!

