

Fury: What is “realism”? What is an “anti-war” film?

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Written and directed by David Ayer

Fury, written and directed by David Ayer, is a film about an American army tank crew, led by battle-hardened Don “Wardaddy” Collier (Brad Pitt), in the final days of World War II in Europe.

As the film opens, one member of the crew (which has been together since the early days of US intervention in the war) has been killed in action, and a youthful “clerk-typist,” Norman Ellison (Logan Lerman), shows up to replace him. Collier and the others in the tank, Boyd “Bible” Swan (Shia LaBeouf), Grady “Coon-Ass” Travis (Jon Bernthal) and Trini “Gordo” Garcia (Michael Peña), are hostile to Norman, who is both inexperienced and “dangerously” averse to violence and butchery. Much of the film is devoted to the process, treated as a positive development, through which the tank crew and events themselves break Norman’s will and teach him to be an unthinking killing machine.

In a relatively crude and transparent fashion, Ayer stacks the deck in his favor throughout. Norman’s reluctance to shoot an adolescent German attacker leads to the destruction of an American tank and the death of the convoy’s commanding officer. Therefore Norman must be taught to be more bloodthirsty. Collier forces him to shoot a defenseless German prisoner of war.

After taking a small German town, Collier and Norman impose themselves on a local woman, Irma (Anamaria Marinca), and her younger cousin, Emma (Alicia von Rittberg). Norman and Emma have a brief, unlikely dalliance. She is perhaps his first love. The girl comes to a tragic end and Norman has new, compelling personal reasons to become murderous.

The tank crew is assigned to hold a crossroads vital for an Allied operation. The assignment becomes a quasi-suicide mission after the Sherman tank is disabled by a landmine, but Collier and his crew accept their fate, reluctantly or otherwise. They take on an SS battalion of hundreds of well-armed men and mow down a good portion of them. By this time Norman has learned to scream “F----g Nazis!” as he mans his machine-gun.

In the end, the film relies on a host of clichés that Hollywood’s better filmmakers in an earlier age would have been ashamed to make use of. As a breathless press release explains, “Outnumbered and outgunned, and with a rookie soldier thrust into their platoon, Wardaddy and his men face overwhelming odds in their heroic attempts to strike at the heart of Nazi Germany.”

Many critics have chosen to describe *Fury* as “realistic.” What does that word mean today? In far too many cases, by “realism” commentators have in mind presenting humanity in the dimmest possible light. Film writers and directors seek to outdo each other at present in their depictions of people’s depravity and sadism.

The work’s tone is set in its opening sequence when “Wardaddy” knocks a German officer off his horse and stabs him repeatedly in the face and eye, before benignly setting the animal free. One of Norman’s first tasks is to clean parts of his predecessor, including a portion of his face, out of the tank’s lower depths. His tank mate, “Coon-Ass” Travis, is portrayed as a leering psychopath, a near-Neanderthal, itching to kill and, by implication, rape; “Gordo” Garcia is not a much better human specimen. Ayer favors shots of the tank rolling over and flattening corpses in the mud. The score adds its own morbid touch to the imagery.

The overall mood that Ayer establishes during the scenes of Norman’s first encounters with his fellow soldiers, all mindless bullies, is deeply pessimistic and misanthropic. It brought to mind a comment in our review of Martin Scorsese’s *The Wolf of Wall Street*.

“At the mid-way point ... it struck me that the film’s sordid and demoralizing tone reminded me of Quentin Tarantino’s *Django Unchained*. Bodies were not being torn apart by dogs, but the same cynical and morbidly misanthropic atmosphere prevailed. Everyone, the film tells you, is backward, corrupt, monstrous. ...”

In *Fury*, although the subject matter is quite different than that in either *Django Unchained* or *The Wolf of Wall Street*, one has a similar sense of being trapped in the middle of something foul and disoriented, a libel against the human race. (Tarantino’s *Inglourious Basterds*, which also starred Pitt, is another appropriate reference point, a World War II film whose heroes “are sadistic killers who relish their mission of torturing, killing and even scalping their enemy. Fighting fascism with fascism.”)

The opposite of this notion of almost universal debasement is not sunny, unthinking optimism, but a genuinely “realistic” and historically concrete appraisal of such phenomena as war, slavery and corruption, all products of class society. The visual and dramatic implication of Ayer’s film is that the horrors of war arise from the rottenness of humanity itself, they speak to humankind’s true self, or at least to one of its truest selves.

There is no indignation here at the terrible conditions *imposed* on soldiers and civilians alike by imperialist war. One feels instead a warm, almost grateful acceptance of the filthiness. “This ain’t pretty. This is what we do,” says Gordo proudly, after one bloody encounter. “Wardaddy” (the nickname makes one cringe) tells Norman bluntly, “Ideals are peaceful. History is violent.” Each of the crew members intones, semi-ironically or not, “Best job I ever had,” referring to his role as a soldier. Toward the end, Collier observes, “I love it in here.”

Realism, in any meaningful sense, involves something other than sticking in all the sordid details one can think of. Above all, in relation

to a war, it means paying attention to the social dynamics, the intellectual-moral-historical truth of the given conflict and its combatants.

By such a standard, *Fury* offers no genuine “realism” or accuracy at all. These characters are not products of their time and circumstances. As we commented in relation to Steven Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan*:

“Concretely, World War II soldiers were creatures of the stormy events of the Depression years. Is there any sense of that in the film? Without idealizing for a moment the level of consciousness that existed at that time, I think it is clear that such a group of soldiers would have had some political views, expressed with different degrees of sophistication. A common concern among the soldiers, for example, was whether or not they would have jobs when they returned from the war.”

Ayer’s soldiers, like Spielberg’s before him, “have no social identity, or any kind of real existence.” The filmmakers “have created figures in conformity with prevailing attitudes. In fact, they are cardboard figures.”

By the same token, *Fury* is not “anti-war” in any coherent sense. It is entirely possible to paint warfare in the grimmest colors and still conclude that it flows inexorably from our sinful nature, that one must accept it as part of the human condition, that unpleasant, even occasionally evil tasks must be carried out for the greater good, etc. At a moment in time when the US ruling elite is launching unequal, neo-colonial wars around the globe, modern-day American nationalism and patriotism often leans in this direction. Outside of comic book and super-hero films (and not always there), “heroism” today generally involves celebrating the most brutal, murderous conduct.

As long as one’s heroes and heroines pull long faces at the end, à la Clint Eastwood at his weakest and most self-serving (*Million Dollar Baby*, for example), they are permitted to carry out virtually any act of barbarism. Kathryn Bigelow’s *The Hurt Locker* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, which treated CIA torture with approval (and whose creators had the permission and cooperation of the intelligence agency at every stage of production), are good examples of the same approach. At the end of *Zero Dark Thirty*, Jessica Chastain’s Maya is heartsick at all the cruelty she has helped inflict. It even makes her weep. Pitt doesn’t shed tears, but one can feel his anguish.

Moreover, *Fury* is not really about World War II. It is directed in large part, consciously or not, toward the defense of current American military involvements and war crimes. Ayer told the *Oregonian*, for example, “By the end of the war [with Germany], they were facing 12-year-old kids with anti-tank rockets. Women would be forced into combat. They’re fighting a fanatical enemy, they’re invading a country now. They’re facing some of the same moral hazards that our soldiers down-range face today in the Middle East. There’s really nothing new under the sun.” In *Fury*’s final confrontation, the SS officer orders his men to repel the invaders, crying “This is our land!”

Likewise, paradoxically, Ayer uses current justifications for war crimes to legitimize the atrocities carried out in the past in his film. Just as the US military today, we are continually told, confronts “terrorists,” “unlawful combatants,” who do not qualify for prisoner-of-war status under the Geneva Conventions, the writer-director points to an enemy in World War II “with no concept of human rights” and who “threw the rule book out on fighting.” Hence, “our men who fought did a lot of things that are pretty edgy, pretty tough.”

In interviews, Ayer echoes Bigelow’s defense of her indefensible film and its protagonists, the various CIA and military officials, who,

in Bigelow’s phrase, “sometimes crossed moral lines.” Asserts Ayer, “The question then becomes, how do you maintain your humanity—your moral center—as a soldier when you do have permission to cross the line sometimes? How do you not cross that line and maintain who you are?”

The protagonists in *Fury*, in particular, are free to do whatever they like because, thanks to Ayer’s spiritual double book-keeping, absolution is always available to them no matter what crimes they commit.

Ayer is “a full subscriber to Christianity,” in the words of one of his actors, Shia LaBeouf. Speaking of LaBeouf’s bible-thumping character, Ayer told a “Christian” magazine interviewer: “It was important to me to show how someone can lean on Scripture and their relationship with Christ in an environment where they’re seeing this much inhumanity and destruction.”

The interviewer later noted that “the characters in this film have lost something of themselves to both what they have experienced and what they have done” and asked, “Is redemption possible for them?” To which the filmmaker replied, “Absolutely.”

Ayer is an open admirer and defender of the American military and the police. Here is one of his many reactionary pronouncements: “Having served in the military, I’ve always been interested in law enforcement, the military and those people who serve society, especially those people who are franchised to exercise force on our behalf. ... The people who go down range and fight for us and confront the enemy so we can sleep safely in our beds ... that separates them. That creates a brotherhood and a sisterhood and separates them from the society they protect.”

The authoritarian implications of *Fury* are hinted at in Sony Pictures’ “Digital Discussion Guide”: “Wardaddy is a good leader—and we hear this from the men in his crew. They say—and they show—that they would follow him into any battle. What makes Wardaddy a good leader? How might these leadership skills translate into civilian life? Which leadership skills are really only useful in combat?”

This is not simply a matter of one film, or one filmmaker, but of an entire upper middle class stratum that is becoming unhinged and driven in a sharply rightward direction by the social and economic crisis in the US. As America’s wars grow more and more unpopular, as the military and the police represent an ever greater threat to democratic rights, as the inevitability of a mass popular response to the present conditions pushes itself to the forefront, this privileged layer turns instinctively, and ominously, to “law enforcement” and to strong “leaders” and “leadership skills.”



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