

## Open the hurt locker and learn how rough men come hunting for souls

By

**Roger Ebert**

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[http://blogs.suntimes.com/ebert/2009/07/not\\_the\\_army\\_would\\_fight\\_aliens.html](http://blogs.suntimes.com/ebert/2009/07/not_the_army_would_fight_aliens.html)

"The Hurt Locker" represents a return to strong, exciting narrative. Here is a film about a bomb disposal expert that depends on character, dialogue and situation to develop almost unbearable suspense. It contains explosions, but only a few, and it is not about explosions, but about hoping that none will happen. That sense of hope is crucial. When we merely want to see stuff blowed up real good in a movie, that means the movie contains no one we give a damn about.

We care a lot about the people in "The Hurt Locker." It does what many good movies does, and gives us a feeling for the personalities and motivations of its characters. What happens to Staff Sgt. William James *matters* to us. He is a brave and complicated man, and we worry about him. It is a good thing he is doing. He is risking his life to defuse bombs intended to kill and maim not only military forces but random civilians.

But my purpose is not to praise "James," as everybody always calls him. It is to praise Kathryn Bigelow, who comes into full focus in this film as an artist in the classical Hollywood tradition. She is, I wrote in my review, "a master of stories about men and women who choose to be in physical danger. She cares first about the people, then about the danger." If we create a list of other directors who did that, even crusty old Howard Hawks and Sam Fuller, it is safe to say they would have admired, even envied, "The Hurt Locker."

The imagination of the audience is the most powerful weapon in the arsenal of any director of suspense. We see what will happen when a bomb explodes. Then we spend the movie fearing it will happen again. Compared to this restraint, directors using unrestrained CGI effects are like children having a tantrum and throwing their toys around. It explains why a film like "The Hurt Locker" is objectively better than a gimcrack blockbuster.

A word about that explosion. It is a real explosion, rigged for Bigelow by her special effects supervisor, a man with an admirable name for his job, Richard Stutsman. The explosion is loud, large and sudden, of course. It is also dusty, grey and ugly. That is a contrast from the gorgeous billowing reds and yellows we get in the usual movie explosion. This one is grim and mean, and Thompson can't out-run it.

"The Hurt Locker" is about characters, not effects, and so it requires skilled actors. Jeremy Renner's lead performance is worthy of a nomination--the whole film is. Renner keys off a quotation that opens the film: "War is a drug." Nobody uses that line in the film, but Renner's performance illustrates it. He is not merely good at his job, he *depends* on it for psychic sustenance. Every time he dismantles a bomb, he keeps a small element of it as a souvenir--a little piece to remind him of the intelligence of his opponent. He approaches a bomb like a chess master approaching a board. He lives to understand bombs. So does a bomb builder; either one could lose their life with a tiny mistake. He wants to annihilate his opponent, as a chess master does, but has respect for him, and rather admires a worthy opponent in an abstract way.

One of the key roles in the film is played by Evangeline Lilly. I'll say no more; just remember I said tat much. The scenes involving her represent what any ordinary person would consider a blessed relief from the horror of war. That James doesn't demonstrate the opening quotation.

The key dynamic in "The Hurt Locker" is between James and Sanborn. Both are experienced veterans. Sanborn saw Thompson die. He is angered by the unnecessary chances James takes. To be sure, James is cocky, striding up to a bomb almost casually, and sometimes working without gloves, so that the best he can hope for after an explosion is to lose only his hands. Sanborn believes in operating by the book. James doesn't see his job as a set of Army procedures, but a mano-a-mano with a bomb maker. In a sense, he has to approach a bomb the way he does, or he could not approach one at all.

This is a surprisingly thoughtful film, and one of the reasons for that is the single-minded focus by Bigelow and her writer, Mark Boal, on the phrase "war is a drug." Some critics have said that a subplot, involving an Iraqi kid who is befriended by James, is a distraction, especially when it leads to James trying to track down the boy's killer. I came across a perceptive response to this complaint posted by a reader named "wrongshore" on Matt Zoller Seitz's excellent blog "The House Next Door."

"The brief mystery plot," wrongshore writes, "suggests that any attempt to give us meaning with this war will end in confusion and failure. When Sgt. James believes he has found the corpse of the boy he befriended rigged as a body bomb, he takes it upon himself to find the boy's murderer and unravel a plot that may include the infiltration of the American base. His search is fruitless. He's no detective. Outside the base--outside his narrow assignment--he's useless."

Exactly. The film uses that subplot to demonstrate that any subplot would lead nowhere. This is the story of Staff Sgt. William James, and he is addicted to deconstructing drugs, and in the Iraq war that is a job that needs doing and he is the best man to do it. His reasons are almost beside the point.

One of my readers questioned a point of factual accuracy. "Tom" wrote of unrealistic scenes:

*"I find it hard to believe that this EOD team consisting of three soldiers were going all over Baghdad by themselves, in one humvee. Is it not standard protocol to travel in much larger groups due to safety issues? In one sequence these three are out in the middle of an open desert detonating explosives. They would have been prime targets for insurgents. The most unrealistic sequence has the same three running all around the city at night, going on a hunt for a bomb maker."*

Tom has a point. But I suspect Bigelow had a reason for doing it her way. She and her associates *financed the film themselves*, and sold it to Summit after it won a grand prize at Venice 2008. Although this is a full-bore military thriller and not a quirky little indie, Bigelow has the conviction to back herself and make the film her way, with a small, mobile crew able to move quickly in the 120-degree desert heat. It would cost a lot of money to mount a larger-scale production with lots of uniformed extras, and my hunch is that if she had accepted that money she would have had to compromise her focus. Helpful producers and investors might have demanded a sexy female in a combat suit, a villain who killed the boy, an A-list star as James, and so on. There are still producers in Hollywood who know what a good movie is and how to make one, but the system seems hard-wired against them.

"The Hurt Locker" is completely apolitical. It has no opinion on the war in Iraq, except that there is on, and brave men like James and Sanborn are necessary, and rookies like Eldridge of course are sometimes terrified, and will get no quicker sympathy than from veterans like Sanborn and James. In that sense, "The Hurt Locker" is arguably the most pro-Army feature to emerge from the war. Pro-Army, not pro-war. But the U.S. military declined to assist in its production or allow the film on a U.S. base, and the Bigelow team shot with its own resources in Jordan, sometimes within three miles of the Iraqi border. It was not an easy shoot. Renner speaks of boards with nails in them being dropped on them from rooftops, and he was shot at more than once.

In contrast, another current film received lavish aid from the military. That would be "Transformers." According to a well-researched article in *Variety* by Peter Debruge, it was the first film ever to receive cooperation from the Army, Air Force, Navy *and* Marines. This taxpayer-supported assistance included use of uniformed and armed troops as extras, and a hardware display including, he writes, "Marine hovercrafts, Navy subs and nearly every kind of Army helicopter and Air Force plane in service (from the Frisbee-topped E-3 Sentry to a retired SR-71 Blackbird that transforms into the Decepticon character Jetfire), all coordinated through special arrangement with the Department of Defense." Some scenes were bankrolled as "training exercises," including, he writes, "a day at White Sands when a formation of six F-16s popped flares over the set, simulating a low-level, air-to-ground attack."

In what way was the military exposure in "Transformers" more beneficial than cooperating with "The Hurt Locker?" I am grateful to my reader Marie Haws for steering me to an interview with Bigelow's screenwriter, Mark Boal, in *Vanity Fair*. He says:

*"A lot of people in the military have seen the movie because there are pirated copies all over Iraq. People saw it almost six months ago. A few people have seen it here in film festivals. So far the response has been good. Although I'm sure people will say we got this or that detail wrong...Unless you are going to make 'Transformers.' I literally had a conversation with a guy who was telling me how realistically that movie is in its depiction of the military. I said to this senior military guy, 'What part of fighting aliens is realistic?' He replied, with a straight face, 'If we were going to fight aliens that's how we would do it'."*

Yes, that's how the Army would fight aliens, by playing a supporting role to a college kid, his girlfriend, his best buddy and his parents, who turn up in Egypt and save the day. And depending on the Egyptian military not noticing U.S. Army fighting with robots who are ripping apart the Great Pyramid. And depending on a pass from the Israeli army as the Americans and the robots cross their nation on the way to Jordan.

It must have been a dream job, being the military adviser on that film. His advice must have boiled down to, "Go for it!" It did, however, achieve one aim of Army recruiters: It made the Army look like fun. For James, Sanborn and their comrades, the Army is a lot of things they would risk their lives for, but fun is not one of them.

***After reading the Roger Ebert article answer the following questions in complete sentences.***

1. What point is Ebert making in this essay?
2. Why does Ebert think *The Hurt Locker* is an important film?
3. Do you agree that the film is "Important?" Why or why not?