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Matthew Alford
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A review of Martin Barker's, *A Toxic Genre: the Iraq War Films* (London: Pluto Press, 2011). \$30 Pp. 192
ISBN 0745331297

Martin Barker discusses the “struggle” of twenty-three 2005-2008 Iraq War films, focusing on their “toxic” production and the political environment during their reception. Barker convincingly contends that Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, effectively distilled and spun in Kathryn Bigelow’s critical and box office success *The Hurt Locker* and which ended the toxic cycle in 2008, is the “key metaphor for America inspecting itself within safe margins”, the “common ground” (88) that bridges the gap between liberals and conservatives and “helps make suffering ‘American’” (98-99). Otherwise, “no matter how crude, misogynistic and racist”, in his corpus of films soldiers invariably become “innocent, bewildered and desperate” as soon as they set foot in Iraq (33-4).

This is an excellent core argument, drawing attention to a much-neglected body of films that had the potential, at least, to have political significance. Beyond this, though, the book has some flaws and elisions. It summarises but does not answer some of the questions it poses, such as “How has Hollywood produced so many films about Iraq that have been judged failures?” Nor does it answer the question of how the “contexts” had a constraining effect on these films (14-15) and there is little examination regarding where the “comparisons” lie between these movies and Vietnam films (15). More broadly, it seems peculiar that the book does not discuss how the genre’s toxicity might be affected by the unpopularity of the war, inferior filmmaking, or their relatively low production budgets.

Usefully, Barker details the production history of the never-made Harrison Ford movie *No True Glory*, neatly outlines the history of Pentagon involvement in Hollywood (9-11), and provides an illuminating critique of the Rambo meme as the tainted heir to John Wayne (59-66) who had been “synonymous with how the US military wanted to be seen” (49). *A Toxic Genre* is worthwhile as a discussion on how a sub-genre of war films equivocate politically, though its lack of interest in sanctions/ bombing era Iraq (*The Peacemaker*, *Deterrence*, *Hot Shots*), broader representations of the Middle East/ War on Terror, and relevant metaphorical horror/ sci-fi films by Romero, Roth, and Boyle (which he discusses briefly) (2-3), attest to the problems of defining quite what we mean when we refer to the disaster that is “Iraq”.¹

Methodologically, Barker emphasises the importance of audience reception in order to identify the “terms of debate” and the “kind of engagement, pleasure and understanding” that can be derived (16). Barker criticises Doug Kellner, a leading scholar in the field of US film politics, for over-emphasising metaphorical readings but also because Kellner supposedly has “one criterion for evaluating films: do they overtly share my politics?” (14). In fact, Kellner has used audience surveys (Ryan and Kellner, 1988) and his work is not as prescriptive as Barker suggests, as shown by the fact that he routinely discusses the Gramscian dialectic in movies. Barker’s own politics are at least as problematic. Although he points out the “utterly disabling” Hollywood argument that patriotism is apolitical (21), he seems to equate “radicals” with “Democrats” (8).

As a result, Barker rightly contends that an anti-Bush, pro-conspiracy agenda generated Hollywood’s “will to resist and decry” whilst maintaining “an awareness that the charge of being soft on terror would easily stick” (7). However, he also says that this “challenge was undertaken” by *United 93* and *World Trade Center* in which “the careful insulation” of 9/11 “from the surrounding penumbra of ‘the war on terror’ was an achievement in itself” (7). In truth, *United 93* worked closely with the Pentagon and 9/11 Commission and outright ignored anti-Bush rhetoric and the conspiracy theories about 9/11. Similarly, *World Trade Center* was scrupulously silent on the actual War on Terror, so it is difficult to identify its cutting-edge contributions and importance as a challenging political work.

Barker highlights as “odd” an IMDB response to Peter Berg’s *The Kingdom* that criticises its endorsing Wayne-style politics because the film shows “the corruption of Saudi Arabia has been sustained by America’s thirst for oil deals” (108-111). *A Toxic Genre* emerged before Berg’s Pentagon-endorsed John-Wayne-style nonsense in *Battleship* & *Lone Survivor* or Berg’s 2012 interview in which he berated his interviewer to join the Israeli Defense Forces and insisted that the most important issue facing the world was whether Israel should bomb Iran now or allow it to acquire nuclear weapons. Still, given his focus on audiences, Barker could have referenced the well-reported test screenings that evoked racist reactions to *The Kingdom*, and, perhaps, he could also have mentioned Henry Kissinger’s McLarty Associates on-set advice, which were hardly indicative of the film’s critical credentials (Cieply, 2007).²

Such details and contexts are important concerns in what is, nevertheless, a worthwhile evaluation of an under-theorised body of cinema.

¹ See Jack Shaheen, *Guilty: Hollywood’s Verdict on Arabs After 9/11* (Northampton: Olive Branch Press, 2008).

² Michael Cieply, “The Kingdom Gambles That Entertainment Can Trump Politics”, *New York Times*, June 19, 2007.

Matthew Alford earned his PhD from the University of Bath in 2008 where he now lectures on courses in Sociology, Film, Media, and Politics. He has also taught at the **University of Bristol**. His work focuses on the relationship between entertainment, political power, and propaganda in the United States and has appeared in peer-reviewed journals such as **Scope: An Online Journal of Film and TV Studies**, Westminster Papers for Communication and Culture, and 49th Parallel, as well as in feature articles for the Guardian and New Statesman. Dr. Alford has been interviewed as an expert on Hollywood propaganda for publications and broadcasters including **Vanity Fair**, **BBC**, **Russia Today**, **Press TV** and **Al Jazeera**.

