



The Hurt Locker

What Do We Live For?

Thirty-nine. That is how many days Bravo Company has remaining on its rotation in Baghdad before shipping back to the States. With 90% of its tour behind them, the men are counting the days like children waiting for Santa Claus. But when their bomb tech sergeant dies while trying to disarm a bomb, the bomb disposal team faces a problem: a new and very different sergeant. This opening sets the stage for the violent but engaging *The Hurt Locker*.

Nine. That is the number of Oscar nominations this independent film garnered, the same number as *Avatar* (directed by James Cameron of *Titanic* fame). But while *Avatar* has grossed more money than any other film in history, *The Hurt Locker* (directed by Kathryn Bigelow, Cameron's ex-wife) earned less than \$13 million and cost only \$11 million. Yet, despite its size, *The Hurt Locker* won 6 Oscars, twice as many as *Avatar*, and picked up the big one: Best Picture. Of the 24 Awards given out on Oscar night, these two war movies picked up nine combined.

Speaking of wars, they never seem to cease. Every decade there is a new war. Jesus said there will be "wars and rumors of wars" before the end (Matt. 24:6) when he ushers in the millennial kingdom and 1000 years of peace. Until then, wars continue.

Hollywood's love-hate relationship with war seems to bring a key movie to the forefront each decade, one that is lauded by Oscar and often breaks new ground. In the 70s with the end of the Vietnam War came *The Deer Hunter* (Best Picture and Director, 1978), showing the dreadful effects of psychological torture on prisoners of war. The 1980s gave us Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986 Best Picture and Director),

where American soldiers were not always benevolent. By the time the 90s rolled around, the focus returned to WW2, with the 50th anniversary of D-Day and VE-Day. Stephen Spielberg directed *Saving Private Ryan* (1998 Best Director) and offered us a totally realistic and in-your-face look at war, and the Normandy invasions in particular.

The war film for the 00s (and even this decade) belongs to Kathryn Bigelow, with this movie about the Iraq war; or rather, the ongoing insurgency now that actual battle is over. This "war" is characterized by IEDs (improvised explosive devices) and urban guerrilla combat. *The Hurt Locker* vividly displays the chaos of war alongside the adrenaline rush that accompanies it.

The story revolves around the three soldiers in this elite unit: Sgt. William James (Jeremy Renner), Sgt. JT Sanborn (Anthony Mackie), and Specialist Owen Eldridge (Brian Geraghty). James is the actual bomb diffuser, while the other two are his support, guns to watch the civilians for signs of latent terrorism or violence.

The stark contrast between James and his predecessor Sgt. Thompson (Guy Pearce, *Memento*) is immediately apparent. Where Thompson relied as much as possible on

mechanical robots to work the IEDs, reasonably only donning the bomb suit when he has to, James is in the suit in a flash and has no time for robots. His world is one of hands-on, in-the-moment thrills. For this EOD (Explosive Ordnance Disposal) Unit, that does not make for great team-building.

There are two things that make this film so powerful. First is its screenplay, which won the Oscar for Best Original Screenplay. A film is built on a script and a poor one limits the final product. Mark Boal, the screenwriter, was embedded with a bomb squad in Iraq and experienced the tensions and violence that an EOD unit faces daily. He was able to pen an intensely personal portrayal of these soldiers who have the most dangerous job in the world.

The second is the photography by Barry Ackroyd. As he did with the suspenseful *United 93*, he filmed this with a documentary feel. The rubble and trash in the streets give the city a grim look. With numerous cameras surrounding the actors, there is a raw immediacy in the film. The action is visceral and bloody. Nothing pretty or glamorous. This is not a John Wayne war movie. It is not even a Tom Hanks film with beautiful French landscapes. Here, anyone can die at any moment, and moments of combat juxtapose with hours of boredom. Onlookers might be spectators or snipers, or even potential assassins who can detonate a bomb with a cell phone call.

In one scene, after disarming a car bomb and breaking all the rules of teamwork, James is confronted by an officer, who asks him, “What’s the best way to go about disarming one

of these things?” James thinks and then replies, “The way you don’t die, sir.” Over 800 bombs disarmed and he is still alive. The officer nails his character, “You’re a wild man. You know that?” James is a renegade, a reckless cowboy. He has no fear, he seems indifferent to death. He is perfectly willing to face his mortality but does not care that he is putting his teammates at risk, too.

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Bigelow makes it clear from the outset what the theme of the film is. Before the movie begins, a quote from journalist Chris Hedges appears on screen: “The rush of battle is often a potent and lethal addiction, for war is a drug” (from the book, “War is a Force that Gives us Meaning”). War is a drug and some soldiers are addicts. Certainly James is a war-junkie, a danger addict. He needs his daily fix. Without it life is banal, boring.

Sanborn confronts James: “But you realize every time you suit up, every time we go out, it’s life or death. You roll the dice, and you deal with it. You recognize that, don’t you?” Although not psychotic, in one sense James is similar to Christopher Walken’s character in *The Deer Hunter*, who was so traumatized by his POW torture that he plays Russian roulette. Life and death as a game. Will James win the next contest or will that be the bomb that finally kills him? He is as unstable as the lethal bombs he plays with. And he is as endless a serial risk-taker as the war itself.

The three soldiers of the EOD Unit provide a study in contrasts. Through these three Bigelow shows us the different ways that men seek to find identity in navigating the course between conformity and duty at one end of the spectrum and individuality and rebellion at the other. Sanborn is a by-the-book soldier who is clinging to the hope of survival, the conformist. Eldridge is young and insecure. He is trying to figure life out. But he is convinced he will die in the streets of Baghdad. He is wavering in the middle, lost. He has no anchor-point, no faith to hold him down. James is the renegade, break-all-the-rules non-com, at the rebellion end. In James, Bigelow gives us the non-conventional protagonist, a hero we do not identify with, but one we seek to understand.

Toward the end James lets us see beneath his bravado. There is one thing he loves, one thing he lives for: the thrill of facing death. It is ironic that James, who has a small son, is willing to wager his life for a daily fix of thrills while Sanborn, who has no family, wants safety and survival. Sanborn moves from not being ready for fatherhood, to seeing its necessity. He is living for the day he can go home and start a family.

The Hurt Locker, as intense a film as it is, leaves us reflecting on the question, what do we live for? What is the one thing we love more than anything else? Is it our family, like Sanborn? Is it pleasure or thrill-seeking, or our own form of

drug, like James? Do we even know? Are we immature and confused, like Eldridge? For those of us who follow Jesus, we look to him as our model. He lived for one thing: “my food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work” (Jn. 4:34). The will of God was paramount to Jesus. He was in war, one much like that shown in this film: an insurgent guerrilla war. That spiritual war continues today, with metaphorical IEDs in our paths and unseen enemies along the roadside. Our mission is to advance the kingdom of God while avoiding or defusing these hidden bombs.

Jesus also answered for us the question of the one thing we should love: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (Matt. 22:37). God is central to all that we are. But Jesus added, “Love your neighbor as yourself” (Matt. 22:39). When we love others in this way we will not put them deliberately in harm’s way, just to make ourselves feel good, as James did. Rather, we will seek what is right and best for them, even if it means setting aside our own thrill-ride to provide for their security.

Eighty-two. This is the number of years the Oscars have been honoring films. In all this time Kathryn Bigelow is only the fourth female to be nominated as Best Director. This month she became the first woman to win this coveted award. Up to now she was best known for her 1991 surfing cult classic, *Point Break*. *The Hurt Locker* will now be the film we remember Kathryn Bigelow for in years to come.

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Martin works as an engineering manager in the high tech industry. He leads a monthly film review group at Mosaic Church in Portland, Oregon. He writes film responses from a biblical perspective on his blog: <http://www.mosaicmovieconnectgroup.blogspot.com>

Contact: martinbaggs@gmail.com