

“Detroit”

The Film More Horror Story Than History

William Boyer (Bill Boyer)

2017

a review of

Detroit (2017)

Director: Kathryn Bigelow

143 min.

The misnamed film “Detroit” is more about a triple slaying by police than the city’s 1967 Rebellion. It first opened in the Motor City in July, and then nationwide 50 years to the day of the final riot fatality, a firefighter electrocuted trying to put out one of the last of the smoldering fires.

Despite the expected fadeout to on-demand sofa screenings and high school social studies classes, this troubling reenactment of looting and burning amid murderous police repression deserves a viewing by all people, black and white, even if it’s more horror story than historical study.

The cinematic efforts of director Kathryn Bigelow (“Zero Dark Thirty” and “Hurt Locker”) and her screenwriter on both films, Mark Boal, both white, seem to say, we’ve visited your city, don’t worry, black folks, we got this.

In interviews, Bigelow boasted of as much accuracy as humanly possible although almost all of the film was shot in Massachusetts. This might have been true had there been local involvement and a greater recognition of systemic racism with scenes that stuck closer to its major uncredited source material, the disturbing, astonishing, *Algiers Motel Incident*, by John Hersey.

Bigelow did do some of her homework, even opening the film with an animated 350-year crash course on the nation’s racism, and the mass black exodus from the South to Detroit’s pot of automotive gold (which had severely eroded by 1967).

The animated summary quickly descends into the flashpoint of a vice squad raid that began the five days disturbance and police and National Guard killings. On July 23, 1967, 83 black revelers were arrested by a 99 percent white police force for the crime of celebrating a Vietnam veteran’s safe return at a blind pig, an afterhours drinking spot.

As the film’s first segment of action turns lethal, the second and longest act settles into one particular killing zone at the rundown Algiers Motel on the city’s main drag.

Feverish mass rumors of ubiquitous sniper-fire rapidly energized the trigger-happy police and National Guard to discharge wild fusillades of gunfire which rained down on other units giving rise to the unfounded claim of mass armed black assaults. According to the extensive 1968 Kerner Commission study, which cited the cause of all 43 deaths, 37 were traced to police, security or National Guard troops.

A firefighter, Carl Smith, was felled by shots of unknown origin, and Jack Sydnor was shot to death after firing his revolver at police from his third story window, giving rise to the heavily-loaded term, sniper, which became the shoot-to-kill rallying cry for everyone in uniform.

At the Algiers, the green light to kill reached a brutal extreme. In the movie's pivotal scene, the filmmakers manufacture an additional reason for a wave of police ferocity by having the first fatality, Carl Cooper, one of the three teenagers killed by the cops, repeatedly fire a starter pistol from a second-story window. According to the Hersey book, a starter pistol sound may have been heard at the motel, but the fake gun was never found.

This artistic license eases the motive for police methodically rounding up and torturing several young, unarmed African American men and two white women inside the motel. While not rationalizing the execution-style murders of three defenseless teenagers, it further reduces imbedded historic racism into one insufferable incident, including the obvious hysteria of white women with black men as a chilling pretext for the slaughter.

Here the accusation of torture porn against Bigelow and Boal seems appropriate, for like most pornography there is little or no character development before the actors mechanically draw out the basic sadistic plot as Cooper's corpse lies nearby. Like other Bigelow films, she uses a cinema verite style with a hand-held camera in a type of realism most effectively utilized in Gillo Pontecorvo's 1966, coincidentally titled, "The Battle of Algiers," about the Algerian uprising against the French.

The short third act of "Detroit," condenses the show trial of the three killer cops (their names changed for legal reasons), in a small town near the Michigan capital, after a hack prosecutor and change of venue motion, unexplained in the film, guaranteed an all-white jury and a ludicrously complete acquittal.

There is no happy feel-good ending or trite message of hope, yet there's also no critique of any institutionalized savagery, even as to why blind pigs existed as legitimate, often integrated alternatives to continued bar, dub, and restaurant segregation. The film's position seems to say the entire tragedy can be traced to just a few bad apple pigs.

The most expensive medium has always been way behind the times in dealing with racism or how capitalism has always profited from such inequity. The origin of the modern feature film, D.W. Griffith's silent "Birth of a Nation" (1915), exalted the Ku Klux Klan. President Woodrow Wilson conducted screenings at the White House believing the new form portrayed a favorably accurate view of American history.

Hollywood's white monopoly would remain effectively silent on bigotry for much of the last century, with notable Sidney Poitier exceptions from the 1950s and decades later with the determined talent of a few black directors, most remarkably Spike Lee. After the critical and commercial success of "12 Years a Slave" (2013), movies about racism became fashionable, with major financing belatedly backing films about Jackie Robinson, Jesse Owens, Martin Luther King, the Nat Turner slave revolt, and even the obscure, anti-confederate Mississippi uprising, "Free State of Jones" (2015).

What sets Bigelow's film apart is its immediacy with clear, if unstated, parallels to today's Black Lives Matter movement and some subtle self-awareness over the difficulty in even approaching the subject matter. She warrants some praise, especially as a white director kicking in one revolving door of police-led barbarism.

I was fortunate to view the film in Detroit's Cass Corridor with an unusual talkback session afterwards. About a hundred audience members remained, collectively detoxing what they just witnessed, with the majority being older African Americans sharing some intense memories of the riots. Towards the end of the spirited community discussion, I spoke up about the necessity for whites in particular to avoid the temptation of letting this important history fade into fleeting museum exhibits.

While white guilt should not be a reason for seeing such art, white privilege should not give whites a free pass to skip the movie. For white audiences, the real life discomforts of racial injustice are too easily avoidable, even in the most segregated city in the country where the urban population remains 82 percent African American after several decade-long stages of white flight to its surrounding geographic donut.

If "Detroit" does nothing but motivate people to read Hersey's Algiers Motel Incident, while compelling interracial audiences to talk more to each other, than that's a start worth commencing.

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