



A War (Krigen)



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THE current war in Afghanistan – “one of the most immoral acts in modern history”, according to Noam Chomsky – is now almost 17 years old and shows no sign of ending. The Taliban are gaining ground and control nearly half the country’s districts. There are still 10,000 American troops there and a few hundred British in a NATO force numbering a few thousand more. It is a war with huge civilian casualties: 31,000 killed and 29,000 injured since 2001. In July 2017 the UN reported that civilian deaths have reached a record high, with 436 children killed in the preceding year. A later report in February this year reported 10,453 civilian casualties in 2017 (3,438 people killed and 7,015 injured).

Denmark was one of 50 countries fighting in the NATO coalition. Danish politicians framed it from the beginning as a humanitarian campaign, assisting Afghans in retrieving their country from the Taliban and helping women gain rights, rather than a retaliation for 9/11, as it was generally seen in the United States. When they pulled combat troops out in 2013 after 12 years – disillusioned and convinced that their soldiers were sent on a wrong and impossible mission – their forces had lost 43 men, the highest per capita casualty rate of any coalition member. Today there are about 150 Danish soldiers in Afghanistan in a largely advisory role.

This is the background to writer-director Tobias Lindholm’s film *A War*, (*Krigen*) nominated in the Best Foreign Language category at the 2016 Academy Awards, shown recently on BBC4 and available on DVD. Lindholm is already known as a screen writer for the Danish TV series *Borgen* and the films *Submarino* (2010) and *The Hunt* (2102), and as director of the films *R* (2010) and *A Hijacking* (2012).

A War is a compelling movie about a Danish army commander brought to trial for killing 11 civilians in Afghanistan. It’s a work of two halves: a nerve-wracking portrayal of the horror and fog of war and a court-martial drama that teases out the ethical dilemmas of military violence.

Pilou Asbaek (who also starred in *Borgen* and *A Hijacking*) plays Claus Pederson, commander of a unit of Danish peacekeeping soldiers in Helmand province. The men exist in a climate of fear, boredom and frustration, not knowing whom to trust and wondering why they are even there in



the first place. When one of them is killed by an IED and another, Lasse Hassan, is left an emotional wreck, Pederson decides to try to boost morale by sharing the burden and leading the daily patrols himself.

One day a local man arrives at the Danish base pleading for his family to be given refuge, but Pederson rejects the request because it’s against protocol. Next day, he decides to lead a patrol to the village where the family live and root out the Taliban, but they’re too late and find the family’s dead bodies instead. It becomes clear that the Taliban have set an ambush and, when Lasse Hassan is critically injured, Pederson sends a message that he has visual confirmation of the enemy position in Compound 6 and asks for an air strike. He can’t actually see whether the Taliban are inside but orders the bombing because otherwise he couldn’t have had the wounded man airlifted to hospital. A few days later, it emerges that 11 innocent civilians including 8 children have been killed and he is arrested for a war crime and sent back to Denmark.

Throughout the first half of the film, Lindholm intercuts the Afghan drama with scenes back home in Denmark, as Pederson makes regular contact with his wife Maria (Tuva Novotny) by satellite phone and skype. She is struggling to bring up their three children on her own. Their eldest son Julius is in trouble at school for fighting with another pupil and their youngest Elliot has to be rushed to hospital after swallowing pills.

Kids are also prominent in many of the Afghan scenes: sharing a kite with the soldiers and clustering playfully around them; being used as human shields by the Taliban; and seeking refuge along with their parents. Also, if Maria is currently the sole protector of their children, her husband is the protector of his fellow soldiers, who call him ‘Papa’ for good reason. Yet he is also meant to be the protector of Afghan children. Where does Pederson’s primary duty lie? To his family? To his men? Or to Afghans and their children?

At the court martial, Pederson’s defence lawyer tells him that the key question is whether he had reasonable certainty of a PID (Positive Identification). Was Compound 6 a civilian or a military target? Perhaps it was both. Maria, horrified by the prospect of him being locked up for the next four years, persuades him to say that he had PID. “Never mind what you should have done, the >>>

important thing is what you are going to do now". And she adds: "You may have killed eight kids but you have three living ones at home".

She is not the only one to believe that a lie is justified in the circumstances. One of his men testifies that he reported to Pederson about seeing a muzzle flash from Compound 6. Although the prosecution expresses surprise at this late evidence, it is accepted and Pederson is acquitted. But he is tormented by guilt, and clearly his life will never be the same again. This kind and thoughtful man feels like a war criminal. At the end, while tucking in his son, he notices the way his feet resemble the feet of the corpse of the local Afghan's daughter. He then goes outside for a smoke and gazes into the night where he sees only the darkness in his own soul.

At a personal level, the real war in *A War* is waged within the mind of Pederson himself. It is his moral struggle as he makes a choice in the heat of battle, then later when he has to make another choice relating to this first one, and finally when he has to live with the consequences of those choices. Yet the movie is also a thoughtful examination of the moral morass of war itself, where there are no black and white choices. The title of 'a' war is not only specifically about one man's war but also about the hell of all wars, which deprive us of our humanity and make us less than we are.

There are no heroes in *A War*, and no 'villains' either, for there are no close-ups of the Taliban. In fact, some ex-Taliban fighters feature in the cast, as well as Afghan refugees. Noticeable, too, is the fact that Lasse Hassan

is played by Dulfi Al-Jabouri and Pederson's second-in-command and close friend Najib Bisma is played by Dar Salim. This appears to add a further laudable dimension to Pederson's desire to protect his men.

Lindholm's extraordinary film is such a welcome change from the usual Hollywood war fare – nationalist gung-ho heroics by 'good' guys taking out the 'bad' guys, typified by *American Sniper*. It is also a total contrast to Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty*, a film about the hunt for Osama bin Laden, which was also nominated for an Oscar, and which clearly justifies torture and extra-judicial execution. Bigelow plays silly cinematic war games while claiming to be 'neutral' or even anti-war. *Zero Dark Thirty* followed in the wake of her Oscar winning movie *The Hurt Locker*, another hollow apology for American imperialism.

That is indeed the crucial point. America dragged 50 countries into an immoral and unjust war because she hit out in revenge for 9/11. Not a single American feature film has exposed this war for what it really is. What does it say about the land of the free and the home of the brave that its culture cannot even be remotely critical of its government's foreign policies, especially when it has had 17 years to grasp the truth?

While *A War* does not openly question the Afghan invasion, it contradicts the claim that the coalition was there to protect the civilians and therefore invites us, by implication, to ask why they were there at all. Stripped of the usual American melodrama and heroics, it invites us to think. And that is a great achievement. □

Call Me By Your Name

GAY cinema romances are all the rage. In 2017 *Moonlight* won the Best Film Oscar, and this year *Call Me By Your Name* won the award for best adapted screenplay by 89-year-old James Ivory. *God's Own Country*, about a love affair between a Yorkshire farmer and a Romanian migrant worker, has received several awards, including a nomination at the 2018 BAFTAs for Outstanding British Film, and it won the Best Film award at the Berlin Film Festival.

Call Me By Your Name sucks the viewer in with a sumptuous setting in a spacious stone villa in Northern Italy. In this sultry summer of 1983 youthful tanned bodies soak up the sun, pluck juicy apricots from the orchard, swim in the nearby river, cycle along dusky lanes and dance and copulate in the moonlight. As if that wasn't enough sensual pleasure, there's even a thick layer of high culture on top: Lisztian variations of Bach on piano and guitar, medieval poetry, references to Stendhal, Heraclitus and Heidegger, and learned discussions of archaeology and philology.

In the midst of this aesthetic plenitude a romance develops between 17-year-old Elio (Timothée Chalamet) and 24-year-old Oliver (Armie Hammer), hired for 6 weeks by Elio's archaeologist father as a research assistant. At first, Elio resents this smug usurper who has taken his bedroom, while Oliver seems more interested in the female talent who swoon over his Adonis physique. But soon it is Elio who is smitten. After small initial signals by Oliver who massages Elio's shoulders ostensibly for relaxation, Elio makes the first hesitantly reciprocated move.

To read some reviews, this might seem to be the beginning of a beautiful love affair,

but it's nothing of the sort. Elio has had a girlfriend, so presumably his sexuality is in a state of adolescent flux. Oliver has also had a girlfriend back home for two years, as we and Elio discover when he rings him six months later to say that he is about to marry her. This hammer blow (pun intended) establishes that for Oliver there was nothing deep or meaningful in their relationship. It was just a summer fling. But Elio of course sees it differently. The first cut is the deepest, and his heart is broken.

This imbalance in the romance is accentuated by the two actors. Chalamet is very good, but at times he looks even younger than 17 (he is now 22), whereas Hammer looks even older than his real age of 31. Moreover, he is very wooden in the part, which tends to exaggerate the vacuousness of the character he plays. Ultimately, he appears as a predator, which is hardly the film's intention.

Even the sex scenes are clinical and unconvincing. For real passion and real love, Francis Lee's *God's own Country* is a much better film. Its two protagonists – played by Josh O'Connor (Larry of *The Durrells*) and Alec Secareanu – are men of the soil with no culture or pretensions, but we can believe that their love affair is for keeps. BMCC

