



Brian McClinton

Palms and Oscars

The White Ribbon, The Class and *The Hurt Locker*

THE CONTRAST between Hollywood and European cinema is nowhere more starkly revealed than in this year's Oscar success *The Hurt Locker* and last year's Palme d'Or winner *The White Ribbon*, both now available on DVD. The former has been described as 'apolitical', 'neutral' and 'anti-war', but it is in reality a hollow apologia for American imperialism that reduces cinema to a clichéd collection of cheap thrills and set pieces.

The Hurt Locker, directed by Kathryn Bigelow, is about three members of a US army bomb disposal unit operating to disarm improvised explosive devices (IEDs) in Iraq in 2004, a year after the invasion. The three are presented as brave heroes doing their duty to save the world and the human race. One in particular, Staff Sgt William James (Jeremy Renner) is reckless and puts himself and his colleagues in constant danger, but it is emphasised that he is not psychotic because he loves his family and is kind to children, including Iraqis. The Iraqis themselves are stripped of all humanity and shown as feckless, shifty, menacing men (they even put bombs in dead bodies) or screaming and hysterical women. This is even worse than Fox News.

The setting is a real and ongoing conflict, yet we are meant to regard it as 'neutral', even though the perspective is entirely one-sided and there is no attempt to question the presence of US forces as an army of occupa-

tion. It is also difficult to regard it as anti-war when its hero finds war so seductive that he prefers it to civilian life and when violence is glamourised as a kind of heightened emotional response. The result is a film which is all cheap suspense, bad politics, and no plot.

In its vicarious thrills *The Hurt Locker* is no different from other recent Oscar winners, including *Gladiator* (2001) and *No Country for Old Men* (2008). This glorification of violence in cinema is both a reflection and a source of violence in the wider society. The US is seriously in need of some self-questioning, especially about its habit of demonising, invading and destroying other countries. Hollywood is, sadly, a willing tool of this brutal militarism.

THE PALME D'OR is the highest prize awarded to films competing at the Cannes Festival in May. Winners in recent years include *The Pianist* (2002), *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (2006), *The Class* (2008) and *The White Ribbon* (2009). Without exception, these five films seek to engage the viewer, to heighten awareness, deepen emotions, question assumptions and expand horizons. We may disagree about whether or not they succeed, but we cannot argue that it is a different world from the candy floss, semi-fascist excuse for culture churned out by Hollywood.

The Class, which was the first French film to win the Palme d'Or in 21 years, is an absorbing drama documentary set in a multi-ethnic comprehensive school in a working-class Paris suburb. François Bégaudeau, a former teacher, plays a version of himself in a screenplay largely of his own devising that is based on the novel *Entre les Murs* ('Between the Walls'), which he himself wrote. He is superbly assisted by a group of non-professional 14-15-year-olds who partly improvised the classroom scenes.

The Class doesn't follow the usual Hollywood school trajectory where the teacher goes from zero to

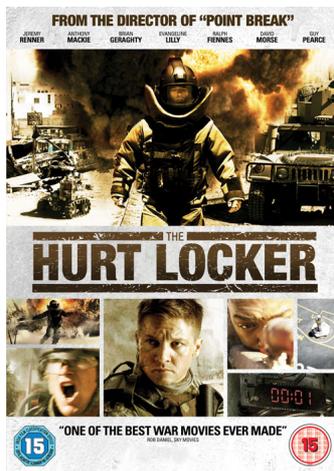


hero, though it tricks the viewer into thinking it is. François, who tries to be both friendly and firm, has a few victories, notably over the Mali teenager Soulemayne's photographic self-portrait, but they are short-lived: the unruly but generally articulate and politicised kids fall out with him over his careless use of a single word, which is ironic because he has been spending the whole year attempting to teach the importance of linguistic precision.

Thanks to the subtle direction of Laurent Cantet, *The Class* has the appearance of an artless, fly-on-the-wall reality TV show rather than a work of fiction. It also achieves a greater degree of objectivity than *The Hurt Locker* by not taking sides and having no apparent message, apart from highlighting the problems of teaching in a multi-ethnic society where democracy extends to having pupil representatives sit in on pupil progress staff meetings.

Triumphantly exploiting the Aristotelian unities, *The Class* generates a boiling cauldron that proves infinitely more tense and gripping than *The Hurt Locker's* bomb-littered Baghdad streets.

The White Ribbon, which won last year's Palme d'Or, is directed by the Austrian filmmaker and writer Michael Haneke, who also directed the 2005 hit *Caché* and the two versions of *Funny Games*. His latest is set in a North German village on the cusp of World War One. Its main character, now in old age, narrates the story of a series of sinister incidents in the village where he was a teacher (played by Christian Friedel).





He says that they may help to ‘clarify some things that happened in this country’, which presumably refers to

However, these crimes and misdemeanours, which are largely intended to draw the viewer in, to encourage the asking of questions, are never really solved. This is not so much a whodunit as a whytheydunit, and the answer does relate to punishing the children for the sin of the fathers to the third and fourth generation (Exodus 20:5). The white ribbon represents innocence, and the pastor’s son and daughter are made to wear one to remind them of the purity they have lost.

The pastor (chillingly played by Burghart Klaussner) is the closest the film has to a villain, with his absolutist morality and ruthlessness towards his children. When we see, for example, that the elder son Martin (left) has his hands tied to the sides of the bed at night to prevent him from masturbating, we realise that the children are essentially the victims of their parents, and we have to look to them for the source of the evil. What we see is a highly structured, patriarchal society obsessed with power and authority. The village is a microcosm of Germany at the beginning of the 20th century, with its repressive religious and moral code, its feudal social structure, its authoritarian politics and its economic inequality. Here are the seeds of the totalitarian mindset that consumed the country after 1933 and the terrorism of modern times.

The painterly black and white photography, absence of a score to ratchet up the emotions and stark, barren images make *The White Ribbon* seem like *The Village of the Damned* remade by Carl Dreyer or Ingmar Bergman. But it is part and parcel of Haneke’s attempt to counter the mind-numbing barrel-down Hollywood cinema and instead create a Brechtian

alienation effect that enables the viewer to become a consciously critical observer.

So we should not judge *The White Ribbon* in conventional terms. It is not like *Heimat*, the series which began in the 1980s and which dodged the central issue of Nazism in favour of the ordinary lives of Teutonic country folk. Haneke clearly does address the question. He may not say anything new about the origins of Nazism, but at the very least he asks the right questions.
