

Two poor films on the Afghanistan war— *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* and *A War*—and Jonás Cuarón's *Desert*

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Whiskey Tango Foxtrot, directed by Glenn Ficarra and John Requa; screenplay by Robert Carlock, based on a memoir by Kim Barker; *A War*, written and directed by Tobias Lindholm; *Desierto*, directed by Jonás Cuarón, written by Cuarón and Mateo Garcia

The war in Afghanistan, now in its 15th year, continues to rage. The US and its allies have ravaged the country, killing tens of thousands of Afghans directly and hundreds of thousands indirectly through malnutrition, disease and other causes. Millions of people have been turned into refugees, who, if they manage to escape the war-torn hellhole, are treated as pariahs by European governments.

Why was the war launched and why has it continued so long?

At the time of the US invasion in October 2001, the WWSW—rejecting claims that the assault on Afghanistan was a response to the 9/11 attacks and an attempt to provide security for the American population—outlined the driving forces of the war:

“The US government initiated the war in pursuit of far-reaching international interests of the American ruling elite. What is the main purpose of the war? The collapse of the Soviet Union a decade ago created a political vacuum in Central Asia, which is home to the second largest deposit of proven reserves of petroleum and natural gas in the world. ...

“These critical resources are located in the world’s most politically unstable region. By attacking Afghanistan, setting up a client regime and moving vast military forces into the region, the US aims to establish a new political framework within which it will exert hegemonic control.”

How has the global film community responded to this neo-colonial invasion and war, one of the major crimes of recent history?

Although a number of films dealing with the war in Iraq have offered critiques of one sort or another, a few of them fairly scathing, the treatment of the war in Afghanistan has generally been limp and confused. Sadly, the vast majority of artists has apparently either accepted the argument that the conflict is a legitimate (if overzealous) response to 9/11, or has been intimidated into silence. As well, since 2009, of course, the Afghan conflict has been Obama and the Democrats’ war, and this confers further legitimacy in the eyes of many artists and intellectuals.

Two new fiction films, one American and the other Danish, illustrate our arguments.

Whiskey Tango Foxtrot

Whiskey Tango Foxtrot is the second “comedy-drama” about the Afghan war involving members of the former Saturday Night Live crowd. Barry Levinson’s 2015 *Rock the Kasbah*, starring Bill Murray, released shortly after the Obama administration announced an extension of the occupation of the country, is an unfunny, boorish and insensitive work (and was a fully deserved flop at the box office).

Tina Fey’s new project *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* (or WTF, What the F---!), based on journalist Kim Barker’s 2011 memoirs, *The Taliban Shuffle: Strange Days in Afghanistan and Pakistan*, is directed by Glenn Ficarra and John Requa, and written by Fey’s long-time collaborator Robert Carlock. It was produced by Fey and SNL creator Lorne Michaels.

The movie stars Fey as a fictionalized version of Barker named Kim Baker, a television network news writer in New York who volunteers to go to Afghanistan and serve as an onscreen war correspondent both to advance her career and to shake up her dull existence.

Kim “embeds” with military units overseen by Marine Col. Hollanek (Billy Bob Thornton) and at times recklessly ignores the advice of her Afghan handler Fahim (Christopher Abbott) in order to obtain video footage of shootouts.

Pursuing stories also involves establishing connections with corrupt Afghan grandees like the country’s attorney general (Alfred Molina). Barker spends an inordinate amount of time sampling the social life in “Kabubble,” housed in a downscale hotel where foreign journalists bivouac and party constantly with lots of booze and sex. There, Kim befriends colleague Tanya (Margot Robbie) and begins an intimate relationship with the charming, foul-mouthed Scottish journalist Iain (Martin Freeman).

Although *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* does not paint an especially flattering picture of the war (how could it?)—it does not offer criticism either. Most of all, it is unserious. Its most repellent, and telling, aspect is Kim’s sycophancy toward the American military. (A far cry even from Robert Altman’s *MASH*, 1970, set during the Korean War but clearly speaking to anti-Vietnam War sentiment.) The film blandly identifies one locale as Bagram Air Base. Are the filmmakers even aware that for many, many people Bagram is primarily identified with US military torture and murder? Likewise, *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* includes a drone strike. The events are a little confused, but, in the end, it would appear, the filmmakers have chosen to present the strike as life-saving.

Fey’s film—far from concerning itself with the misery of the Afghan people, who essentially function as “background noise,” much less asking questions about why the US is in the country—focuses primarily on the careers of and intrigues among the journalists, putting some sort of equals sign between the adrenaline of chasing war stories and the wild night and sex life.

With a small curtesy to feminism, the movie is predominantly a story of “self-realization.” In the end, Fey’s Barker rejects the life-threatening rush of wartime reporting (more suited for the single and childless) in the Central Asian country for a more responsible, adult position in front of the television camera in New York.

(It is not to the film’s credit either, incidentally, that it brings back the bad, old Hollywood days when white actors played Native American

warriors, Chinese detectives and so on. It is peculiar in this day and age that the British-born Molina and the American Abbott play key Afghan roles.)

Whiskey Tango Foxtrot, one might say, represents the summing up by the American comedy establishment (Fey, Michaels, SNL) of its view of the last 15 years of warfare in Afghanistan and the general character of Washington's geopolitics. One could throw into this general mix as well Jon Stewart's *Rosewater*, about Iranian mistreatment of prisoners, and Seth Rogen-Evan Goldberg's *The Interview*, about a plan to assassinate North Korea's Kim Jong-un (both 2014), along with Murray's *Rock the Kasbah*.

What do we see? Films that toe the US State Department line on America's foes and justify or semi-justify ongoing aggression and military violence. The Fey-Michaels-Stewart-Colbert-Letterman-Murray-Rogen grouping came of "artistic" age during years of stagnation and reaction, at a time when popular opposition to the American government and capitalism was at its lowest ebb in the modern era and when considerable sections of the affluent middle class were moving in the direction of self-involvement and social indifference. This wealthy comic layer, not by any means individually untalented or insensitive in every case, has been schooled in complacency and self-satisfaction. These people know very little about history or society and they are especially vulnerable to the siren song of identity politics and the Democratic Party.

Some of the ignorance, one has to say, seems willful. In one of *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot*'s final scenes, an injured US soldier recites a potted history of Afghanistan's woes, going back as far as the efforts of the British Empire in the 19th century. Only the bloody machinations of various American administrations (Carter, Reagan, Bush, Clinton, Obama), the CIA and the US military are left out.

Afghanistan is the longest war in US history. It has taken up an entire epoch. For young people it has filled up much of their entire lives. As *Whiskey Tango Foxtrot* itself suggests, in one of its stronger moments, it threatens to go on indefinitely into the future. Isn't it time that American film artists treated this conflict in a more serious manner?

Why are Danish troops in Afghanistan?

Tobias Lindholm's *A War* (*Krigen*) deals with a company of Danish soldiers operating in Afghanistan's Helmand Province. The film's central figure is the unit's commander, Claus Pedersen (Pilou Asbæk), portrayed as a fair-minded leader and loving family man.

After certain preliminary skirmishes and a fateful encounter with a local Afghan family, Pedersen's company comes under attack from Taliban forces. He calls for an airstrike that leads to the death of 11 civilians, including children. It is unclear whether he followed the Danish military's "rules of engagement," and he eventually faces a court-martial. Meanwhile, Pedersen's wife, Maria (Tuva Novotny), struggles to cope with his absence and its impact on their three children.

A War is one of those "non-judgmental," "apolitical" films (like the documentaries *Restrepo* and *Armadillo*) that is, in fact, thoroughly judgmental and political—its assumptions are simply so in tune with official public opinion as to go unnoticed by the filmmaker and critics. As noted above, *A War* accepts without criticism or even comment the framework of the "war on terror" and proceeds from there. The spectator is meant to identify fully with the handsome, stalwart Pedersen and the beautiful, long-suffering Maria.

Lindholm stacks the decks in the trial scenes in favor of the accused commander, making his prosecutor-persecutor the embodiment of bureaucratic cold-heartedness. The film goes out of its way to emphasize the supposed objectivity and essentially impartial character of the Danish military-legal system.

Tellingly, Lindholm has entitled his film "A War," apparently intending

to underline the universal character of the ~~disillusion~~ *disillusion*. By Afghanistan war into "every war," the filmmaker is *absolving* the Danish ruling elite and armed forces of any particular responsibility—as though the murkiness and brutality portrayed were inevitable features of each and every conflict.

Denmark has had one of the largest troop commitments in Afghanistan relative to the size of its population. The Royal Danish Army has been there since 2001. The intervention expresses the determination of the Scandinavian nation's establishment, including its Social Democratic and "left" component, not to be left out of the imperialist repartitioning of the globe.

Specifically, the Danish participation in Afghanistan was guided by a desire to maintain a close alliance with Washington. Denmark was a founding member of NATO and has enjoyed close ties with the US ever since. The Danes also involved themselves in the Iraq war, unlike many other European countries. In part, this was to secure US backing in areas where Denmark has its own interests, such as the Arctic region.

This is the country, after all, where leading bourgeois journalists staged the anti-Muslim cartoon provocation in September 2005 and whose government has now enacted some of the harshest measures against refugees, including the confiscation of their personal belongings, calling to mind Nazi measures against the Jews. The Danish working class as a whole is under attack. Denmark ranked among the top five European Union members for the fastest increase in economic inequality between 2008 and 2012.

Lindholm, who has often worked with Dogme 95 filmmaker Thomas Vinterberg (director of the overrated *Celebration* and the recent version of *Far From the Madding Crowd*), seems to be carving out a particular and not very savory place for himself. *A War* follows *A Hijacking* (about Somali pirates taking over a Danish merchant ship) and *April 9* (about the Nazi invasion of Denmark in April 1940, inspiring one local journalist to note that in the film "Danish soldiers regain their honor"). Lindholm seems to be making an effort to create a national-patriotic mythology, portraying the Danes as hardy, stoical and "straight-shooting," precisely at the historical moment when anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim sentiment is being stoked up in the country.

Desierto: "Nobody is illegal"

Desierto, directed by Jonás Cuarón, is opening this week in the US. This is what we said about the film at the time of the 2015 Toronto International Film Festival.

Gael García Bernal and Jeffrey Dean Morgan face off in Mexican director Jonás Cuarón's parable, *Desierto*, about the travails—and murder—of a group of immigrants attempting to cross the border from Mexico into the US. A third character in the movie is the parched, treacherous terrain (most of the filming took place in the southern Baja California desert). As the director (the son of *Gravity*'s Alfonso Cuarón) acknowledged at the end of a public screening at the Toronto International Film Festival, it was a dangerous place to film.

When their truck breaks down, fourteen Mexican migrants are forced to continue on foot through the dangerous "badlands." Moises (Bernal)—who is trying to reenter the US, where he was forced to leave his family when he was deported—takes the lead when they are confronted by a vigilante, Sam (Morgan), who, together with his attack dog, is picking the defenseless Mexicans off one by one. ("Welcome to the land of the free.") A former military man, saturated with booze and hatred, Sam is a disoriented and pathetic fanatic who shows no mercy—"Let's go huntin'."

Although the film is narrowly focused, it is a tense and loud protest against an egregious and pervasive social ill.

After the public screening in Toronto, Bernal observed during the question and answer session that "we are all immigrants. This genocidal war and hate are unsustainable—detention centers, illegal methods, a

system that criminalizes forced immigration. To call someone illegal is already illegal. Nobody is illegal.”

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