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In-your-face atrocities retold in ‘Detroit’ spotlight social failure

Film’s audience will feel the brutality, and director could have still pushed it further

Kathryn Bigelow, the director of “Detroit,” and writer-producer Mark Boal are an Oscar-winning team that specializes in combat, chaos and terror.

Previous movies collaborated on by the two have featured gripping central characters through whom the audience experiences the tension, anxiety and exhilaration of a maverick Iraq War bomb diffuser (“The Hurt Locker”) and a female CIA intelligence analyst who hunts Osama bin Laden (“Zero Dark Thirty”). We stood in their shoes and we felt their pain.

Set during the city’s riots of July 1967, “Detroit” is a fictionalized version of an infamously brutal and bloody police action that was memorialized through interviews of participants, family members and other witnesses in “The Algiers Motel Incident,” a book by New Yorker writer and war correspondent John Hersey who won a Pulitzer Prize for his book “Hiroshima.”

The tension of the movie is amplified by Bigelow’s diffused focus on a few characters rather than a single one. Thrown against the

tattered papered walls among the patrons of the Algiers Motel, listening to executions — staged and real — we the audience are also intimidated and brutalized.

There’s no lifeline out of this ghastly ghetto circle of hell.

There is no hero to save us. We are on our own.

Responding to the raging streets, the Michigan National Guard and state police descended on Detroit to join the city’s police force. Tanks rolled down its boulevards, and a curfew was imposed.

Unable to motor through Motown or hang out in the summer night,



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These young men in their 20s were as boisterous and immature as the guys who ride the Red Line with open containers on game days. But they did not deserve to be executed for being obnoxious.

The patrons of the Algiers annex where the incident took place were mostly black men. Significantly, pivotally, catalytically, there were two young white women with them as well.

Anthony Mackie (“Captain America,” “The Hurt Locker”) delivers a quiet, forceful performance as Greene, a seen-it-all Vietnam vet. Algee Smith (“The

alistically believes he can head off trouble by extending assistance to the police, then is swept into the melee. The incongruously freckled, Alfred E. Neuman-faced Will Poulter (“The Revenant,” “We’re The Millers”) is terrifying as the dominant corrupt cop Krauss.

The movie depicts the psychological torture, physical abuse and ultimate murder of three motel occupants. All the dots of fear, confusion, ambush and weaponry, directly connect “Detroit” to Bigelow’s earlier war movies.

They also connect to today’s headlines.

African-Americans who have seen the film tend either to applaud “Detroit” for keeping the incident alive in memory or are repulsed by the spectacle of abuse. (No one discusses “Detroit” as entertainment.)

Bigelow may seem to have gone too far, but she didn’t go all the way. She doesn’t share that the bodies of the murdered victims were mutilated and sodomized or the extent to which the two white women were sadistically stripped and sexually humiliated as part of the raid.

Hersey wrote “The Algiers Motel Incident” to create a nearly contemporaneous record of the atrocities.

He stood firmly in the “never forget” camp and famously opined that it is the memory of what happened at Hiroshima, not deterrence, that keeps the world safe from the bomb.

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Bigelow reminds us that we live a hurt locker.

What then is the role of a remote, disturbing, documentary-ish movie like “Detroit” in spotlighting a social failure that is continuous?

staying indoors and avoiding violating curfew (and inevitable arrest), several young men gathered at an alternative venue for socializing. They checked into the \$11-per-night Algiers Motel, which was something of a party scene.

New Edition Story”) provides a humanizing presence as Larry, the lead singer of the Dramatics, whose story arc is the most completely traversed in the film.

John Boyega (“Star Wars: The Force Awakens”) is sympathetic as a security guard who unre-