

Specialist Writing Option C: Film Criticism  
Pro or Anti War

**Tara McKelvey, The American Prospect, July 2009**

For a supposedly anti-war film, Kathryn Bigelow's *Hurt Locker* serves as a rather **effective military recruiting tool**. An Iraqi butcher holds a cell phone as he stands near the site of a bomb -- or an improvised explosive device (IED), as it is known. The Americans shout at the butcher to put the phone down and point their guns; he smiles and waves back, nodding his head reassuringly to show them everything is fine. Then he presses a button on the cell phone and detonates a bomb, killing one of the soldiers.

From that point on, **you, as viewer, sympathise with the soldiers** as they travel along dangerous roads and walk through Baghdad's narrow alleys, seeing all of the Iraqi men, women and children around them as potential terrorists. Just as American horror movies shifted at some point in time and invited the moviegoer to take on the point of view of the killer tracking down the victim, rather than the perspective of the victim fleeing from a psychopath, ***The Hurt Locker* places the viewer squarely in the mindset of a soldier on the verge of shooting someone.**

*The Hurt Locker* shows the paranoia, rage, and brutal recklessness of soldiers trapped in the downward death spiral of the Iraq war: the American soldiers fighting the very people they had once attempted to liberate. **It sets itself up as an anti-war film.** It opens with Chris Hedges' quote, "War is a drug," Yet for more than two hours, the film presents Baghdad's combat zone with excitement and drama. In one scene, a bomb-defuser, Staff Sgt. William James (Jeremy Renner), searches for a detonator in a car loaded with explosives, and later he tries to save an unfortunate Iraqi man who has been forcibly strapped with homemade bombs. The tense moments are set to creepily compelling music and the cinematography **captures the beauty** that is found in the desert landscape and even in the casing of a bullet. **It is easy to understand why the soldier, William James, would take so much pleasure in his work as a daredevil bomb-defuser in Iraq,** and find so little to be happy about in the difficult, messy world of America when he comes home.

Back in the United States, James finds himself in a supermarket aisle, trying to decide between Lucky Charms and Cheerios. He stares at those brands and then at dozens of others on the shelves, feeling overwhelmed by the dizzying array of breakfast cereals, in a scene of American consumerism gone mad. He then spends part of the day cleaning soggy leaves out of the gutter of his house. It is a **dull, dreary world.** A moment later, however, a

soldier is shown striding down a wide, dusty Iraqi road in a NASA-like bomb suit, filled with a sense of purpose, courage, and even nobility that does not exist in suburban America.

**The film draws a sharp contrast between the tedium of American life**, with its grocery-shopping, home repairs, and vapid consumerism, and the heart-pounding drama of the combat zone in Iraq. The fact that the war itself seems to have little point fades into the background. For all the graphic violence, bloody explosions and, literally, human butchery that is shown in the film, ***The Hurt Locker* is one of the most effective recruiting vehicles for the U.S. Army that I have seen.**

## Acknowledgement

Review <http://prospect.org/article/hurt-locker-propaganda> [ateuscher@prospect.org](mailto:ateuscher@prospect.org)