
A 'Toxic Genre': The Iraq War Films

By Martin Barker, Pluto Press, 2011

Reviewed by John Trafton

A “toxic genre,” argues Martin Barker, is one where “the production and reception environment already guarantees a struggle for any film” associated with a politically polarizing topic. Recent scholarly work on the crop of Iraq War films has addressed their revisions of war film codes, issues of agency, and the narrative role of trauma, but Barker’s book neatly binds together these approaches in pursuit of the answer to why these war films are deemed “toxic.” By posing this question, and going beyond textual analysis, A ‘Toxic Genre’ provides a more complex overview of contemporary war films, their function within popular cultural, and their role in the overall evolution of the war film genre.

With the plausible exception of Kathryn Bigelow’s *The Hurt Locker* (2009), the vast majority of these films have been commercial, and in some cases critical, failures. In examining the various reasons behind this trend, Barker engages in an extensive series of approaches: identifying what kind of stories these films tell, what tropes and themes provide the genre with connective tissue, the evolution of the figure of the American soldier, the spectre of war trauma in American culture, as reflected in these films, how these films chose to “explain the Iraq War” to their respective audiences, and how liberalized mass media informs the revisions to the genre’s visual codes. The best demonstrations of these ideas intersecting are in a chapter on the “success” of *The Hurt Locker* and a chapter on the pre-production of *No True Glory* – an Iraq War film that never came to fruition. Barker critiques *The Hurt Locker*’s critical impact and questions the film’s status as a financial success in contrast to other Iraq War films. With *No True Glory*, Barker outlines the history of the film’s pre-production and, based on the production and reception of actual Iraq War films, surmises what the result may have been like.

A strong feature of Barker’s book is its broad scope. A ‘Toxic Genre’ provides an expansive overview of the genre, indexing the important thematic and cultural content of these films and identifying the common threads that link them. This approach widens the book’s appeal from film academics to undergraduates and non-film scholars; the focus on reception makes this study accessible to a wide range of fields and interests. Additionally, courses in genre studies and film history would do well by engaging with Barker’s work, as his book is a valuable contribution to recent dialogue in both disciplines.

By contrast, Barker's attempt to tackle a wide range of films and critical issues presents a minor shortcoming: questions remain that could have been clarified through more focused and in-depth textual analyses. Nevertheless, Barker's multi-faceted approach provides new depth to the field and the construction of new methodologies for approaching it. Barker reminds us that, in his view, although *The Hurt Locker* represents the end of one cycle of Iraq War films, Hollywood is "not finished with Iraq."