

The Yellow Birds: Damaged or destroyed by the Iraq War

By Joanne Laurier
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Directed by Alexandre Moors; screenplay by David Lowery and R.F.I. Porto, based on the novel by Kevin Powers

A yellow bird
With a yellow bill
Was perched upon
My windowsill
I lured him in
With a piece of bread
And then I smashed
His fucking head

—Traditional U.S. Army Marching Cadence

The Yellow Birds, directed by French-born filmmaker Alexandre Moors, is based on the 2012 novel of the same title by Kevin Powers. The story revolves around three American soldiers and the devastating impact of the Iraq War on their lives and psyches.

This is an important, tragic subject, but the work—like so many others in the same genre—is largely noncommittal and contributes relatively little to understanding the war and why thousands of US troops remain in Iraq.

The film opens with a voiceover by 20-year-old protagonist Brandon Bartle (Alden Ehrenreich), an American soldier deployed in Iraq: “The war tried to kill us in the spring. And the summer. It tried to kill us every day. It didn’t explain itself. It didn’t tell us why it brought us there or what it wanted. It just took. It killed some of us before we knew we were dead. Pretty soon it was hard to tell who was alive and who was just a ghost.”

At the heart of the movie is the mystery surrounding the fate of Daniel Murphy (Tye Sheridan), an 18-year-old soldier who eventually goes missing during an operation. Brandon and Daniel befriend one another on a tour of duty in Iraq. Each is completely unprepared for the chaos and unremitting violence. The pair become close to their unhinged sergeant, Sterling (Jack Huston), like drowning men clinging to a log.

One of the American officers motivates his charges for battle with this kind of blood-curdling exhortation: “Gentlemen, this is the final push. We’re gonna drop fire in this rat hole for the next two hours until dawn. We’ll still be shredding those palm trees when you get to them. We’ll take this city. Once we do, the insurgency will die on the vine.

“I know not all of you read the Bible, but those that do, you know this is the land where Jonah was buried, where he begged God’s justice to come. And we are ... we are that justice.”

At one point, Sterling, like a madman, pours salt on the Iraqi soil (reminiscent of the ancient ritual of spreading salt on a conquered city as a curse against its being rebuilt or reinhabited): “The earth will bear no fruit. There’ll be nothing to eat. These people will be no more. Their spirits will not come back to haunt us.”

The filmmakers treat these maniacal, fascistic comments passively, without offering audience members any means of criticizing or opposing them. “Justice”? What right do imperialist invaders—in the process of destroying an entire society—have to allow the word to pass their lips? It may well be that Moors is also appalled by these speeches, but one would never know it. This sort of “impartiality” and “straightforwardness” at a certain point amounts to acquiescence.

The Yellow Birds jumps from the mayhem of war to scenes of Brandon’s various visits home to Virginia, where his mother Amy (Toni Collette) lives. The film’s drama and action are deliberately fragmented, presumably to underline the character’s war-damaged mind. (Moors explains: “I like those [transition] moments particularly because it was the cinematographic transcription of that feeling of carrying the war within oneself and not being able to forget it or having PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder].”)

Daniel’s horrendous destiny weighs heavily on Brandon. And when army investigators come to his home to question him about his friend’s disappearance, Amy demands to know: “What’d you people do to him? He won’t get out of bed. He don’t care about nothing. It’s like he doesn’t know where he is half the time.”

In fact, Brandon and Sterling do find out what happened to Daniel, take action and keep the secret to themselves. This ultimately lands the former in the stockade, while the latter takes drastic action.

Brandon discloses to Maureen (Jennifer Aniston), Daniel’s mother, how her son died: “We were on a morning patrol a few days after the Camp got attacked by mortar fire. Murph was in bad shape. We all were, but they sent us back out anyway. I

guess they didn't want it to look like we got hurt as bad as we did. Murph was with us, but he wouldn't talk to anybody...

"Murph slipped away as soon as we stepped outside. Who knows what he was thinking? If he was even thinking at all."

John Mellencamp closes the movie with a song whose lyrics include: "Take this fighting / Make it forgiveness / Is there honor in what we've done?"

Director Moors, who has been in the US since 1998, has made two feature films. His first, *Blue Caprice* (2013), centered on the 2002 Washington D.C. area sniper attacks, committed by a Gulf War veteran. Now his second treats the Iraq War. Both subjects are substantive and worth tackling artistically. But what does Moors bring to *The Yellow Birds*?

The director clearly has opinions of one sort or another about the situation in the Middle East—and in the US. In a 2013 interview for *Blue Caprice*, for example, he noted that a newspaper he had been reading covered "the debate about attacking Syria (the ninth Middle Eastern country in some way impacted by Western aggression)" on one page, "and on the next page was an article about cuts in funding to food stamps. It seems pretty obvious it is easy for the society here to decide to go bomb a faraway country where you cannot actually see the repercussions, yet oppress those in need when you can. It seems like the death instinct is much stronger than the life instinct."

The issue, however, is not some vague and inexplicable "death instinct," but the connection between social inequality and crisis in the US and American capitalism's effort to overcome its decline through military means around the globe.

Whatever Moors' views about the Iraq War and the "oppression" of the poor in the US, *The Yellow Birds* ends up being all too nonjudgmental and restricts itself for the most part to little more than immediate emotional realities. The approach is misguided. One cannot grasp what happens to the US soldiers in Iraq, psychologically and otherwise, unless there is some insight into why they are there. That is, the artist has to go beyond the understanding of the soldiers themselves.

The alternative is not filming a political or historical treatise. If Moors had been driven by partisanship, with outrage against what has been done, including to American soldiers, he could have found the artistic means, in dialogue, imagery and editing, to bring out the deeper truth of the situation.

As it is, the actors have to maneuver within definite constraints, rendering their characters relatively one-dimensional and fixed in place: Brandon is passive and demoralized, Sterling deranged and Daniel traumatized.

In its self-limitation, *The Yellow Birds* never truly comes alive or feels genuinely authentic, concrete or convincing. Furthermore, the concentration on the suffering of the American soldiers and the dehumanization of the Iraqis as faceless terrorists is a political stance, and a wrongheaded one.

While Moors' film shows the terrible violence of war, the daily slog and mental grind undergone by the soldiers, it

abstains impermissibly on some of the most important issues. And, once again, a work cannot be described as "anti-war" when it only shows the suffering of one's own "side." A novelist or filmmaker intent on indicting war and militarism exposes, above all, what happens to the "enemy." But the misery of the Iraqis is largely missing here, and that is inexcusable.

Kevin Powers' novel is not free from these problems, but the author, who served in Iraq as a machine gunner in Mosul and Tal Afar, at least makes reference to what was done to the Iraqi people and how those crimes have destroyed young American soldiers. At one point, the narrator contemplates suicide:

"Or should I have said that I wanted to die, not in the sense of wanting to throw myself off of that train bridge over there, but more like wanting to be asleep forever because there isn't any making up for killing women or even watching women get killed, or for that matter killing men and shooting them in the back and shooting them more times than necessary to actually kill them and it was like just trying to kill everything you saw sometimes because it felt like there was acid seeping down into your soul and then your soul is gone and knowing from being taught your whole life that there is no making up for what you are doing ..."

The *Guardian* in 2012, interviewing Powers, observed that the song about the yellow bird "suckered in then set upon ... came to stand," in the novelist's words, for "the lack of control soldiers have over what happens to them. The war proceeds, no matter what you think or do; it's an entity unto itself. You're powerless, and powerlessness itself becomes the enemy. That was my emotional experience of the war. The idea of the bird resonated with the core of what I was trying to get at."

Moors' version of *The Yellow Birds* is an attempt at realism without providing the semblance of broader, "historical realism" (*why* an event occurs, its context and development) and an overall sense of the times.

It is telling that the director, according to one production company website, "is consistently called upon by Beyoncé and Kanye [West] to bring a distinct look to their content, including art directing for Beyonce and Jay Z's *On The Run* tour and Kanye's films *Runaway* and *Cruel Summer*." This is not the healthiest artistic training ground.

The US has been at war for Iraqi and Middle Eastern oil generally for more than a quarter century. Over a million people are dead, millions more have been displaced or made into refugees. A world-historical war crime has taken place. Can the artists not do better than this?

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