

The myth of white innocence in *Detroit*

## **Kathryn Bigelow's film lays bare our assumptions about guilt and race.**

by [Kathryn Reklis](#) in the [September 13, 2017](#) issue



A scene from the film *Detroit*. Photo by Francois Duhamel. © 2017 Annapurna Pictures All rights reserved.

Kathryn Bigelow's film *Detroit* opens with a police raid on a party for two black soldiers who have returned from Vietnam in 1967. "Welcome home," a friend quips to one of the veterans as both are shoved into a police van with dozens of other black citizens. Once the riots have begun and the National Guard is called in, war is no longer something that happens overseas. Armored tanks and battalions of soldiers divide the city into military zones.

The action zeroes in on real-life events at the all-black Algiers Hotel. Police, state troopers, and National Guard swarm the building searching for a sniper. Things take a turn for the worse when police discover two white women in the room of one of the black soldiers. The raid turns into a vendetta.

Bigelow concentrates the chaos of violence in claustrophobic spaces. The camera moves from wide overhead shots of the riots to scenes inside the building, then into one cramped hallway. In that hallway, black victims and white interrogators are compressed into a few feet of space. Black suspects are pushed one at a time into the hotel rooms on either side for questioning. In those rooms, the violence expands in accordance with each officer's need to demonstrate his power.

Each of the police officers is convinced of something that the viewer knows is completely wrong: that he is fundamentally innocent, only doing his duty. He cannot be held personally responsible for the violence he inflicts.

I thought of this sense of innocent obligation while I was watching *Dunkirk*, a World War II film that came out at the same time as *Detroit*. Christopher Nolan dramatizes a similar innocence in his depiction of 400,000 soldiers trapped on the beaches of France as the German army advances. Just as viewers know almost nothing about the police officers in *Detroit*, nothing is revealed about the soldiers on the beach, not even their names in most cases. Long scenes unfold with no or minimal dialogue. In the absence of names and speech, it is easy to mistake one young white man with disheveled brown hair for another.

This anonymity is morally powerful: it shows that war will inhale a whole generation of young men irrespective of their personal stories. There is nothing special about these men that will make them a bulwark against the crushing tide of Nazi victory, but their very interchangeability is a reminder that ordinary people sometimes surrender their personal stories to a bigger story and greater cause. This theme relies on deep cultural assumptions about the innocence of soldiers in war: they do not deserve what is going to happen to them nor can they be held responsible for what war will ask them to do.

This is also the rationale that the young white police officers in *Detroit* use to excuse their atrocious actions at the Algiers. Maybe they made mistakes, they think, but their fundamental innocence is unassailable.

But *Detroit* challenges the characterization of white men in uniform as good boys caught in a rough situation. Early on in the film, a state trooper reports to his superior the civil rights violations he witnesses in the hotel. Rather than enforce the law, the state troopers leave. When violence escalates, the National Guard leaves too. They act to protect the white police officers, not the black victims. By the time the officers are tried and an all-white jury returns its verdict, the cloak of innocence has become impenetrable armor.

Bigelow juxtaposes the anonymity of soldiers and police officers with the specificity of two characters, Larry (Algee Smith) and Fred (Jacob Latimore), who are part of the R&B group called The Dramatics. Their entry into the music industry is cut short by the riots, and they check into the Algiers to lay low until things calm down. As terror turns deadly, they serve as a reference point amid the senselessness of what unfolds. Larry and Fred are in the wrong place at the wrong time.

The film suggests that to be black in America in 1967 was always to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. For black citizens, whether protesting or not, there was no cloak of innocence. Innocence was the special prerogative of whiteness and reserved for the soldiers and police charged with keeping the black rebellion in line.

The myth of police innocence continues to surface whenever there's a police shooting, especially of a black person. Officials invariably suggest that the victims "were not so innocent," and that the police were "doing their best in a tough situation." *Detroit* reveals the stories we tell about ourselves and helps us face the myth of white innocence and the havoc it can wreak.

*A version of this article appears in the September 13 print edition under the title "The myth of white innocence."*