

Da Five Bloods: Spike Lee's History Lesson. A film review by Bennett Roth PhD

Da Five Bloods is an important film and perhaps Spike Lee's most complex film so far. It is a Kaleidoscope of a film revealing and confronting in almost every scene. If the viewing audience is white or Caucasian, we are on the outside looking in and it may be hard to find the normal cinematic "hero" to identify with in this film. On the surface it is constructed about the return of 4 Afro-American veterans to Viet Nam to find and return their platoon leader's body for burial to the USA. While this device allows for the exploration of the emotional power of reunion of former soldiers it offers the opportunity to view that war and its traumatic effects within an Afro-American lens through flash backs and current trauma. This openly contrasts with the "heroic" war films Hollywood continued to churn out with either political overtones or preoccupied with American heroism. Recent viewing of the film "Curtiz" (2018) reveals the real and subtle presence of political influence in war films and the director's struggle to make "Casablanca" with government intervention.

War bonds men and that is a constant in this film. Lee captures the emotional connections in the familiarity of language, handshakes and disagreements with their repair in this small group. Most important is the emergence of shared language. "Bloods" taken from the LA street gang name, with its double meaning is their unifying name: of the same blood. In this film the politics are local, the magnification of the painful effects of the dubious war often brutal: land mines, agent orange, graft, betrayal are still in currency. In the self-destructive center of the pain is Delroy Lindo as Paul, a damaged survivor carrying his guilt and pain. In this Lee returns to the individualistic themes of many films in this genre using the character Paul to illustrate the forms of damage: with Paul we are dealing with an icon of courage and damage in a man of painful contradictions: capable of saving his son David from a land mine and emotionally rejecting him the next day.

The never-ending brutal contradictions of that war-that-never-ends are presented in all the men and in the film with little time to emotionally steady one self. The neglect by the VA, the appeals of Hanoi Hannah directly to "black" soldiers, the inability of Paul to relate to his son David after his wife died in childbirth, echoes the struggle of black men/ fathers in their families. The pain of the inter-racial child of Otis and Tien that he finally acknowledges are the seeds of prejudice and anguish articulated after American wars fought in France, Italy, Korea and Viet Nam. "David" seeking out "Paul" is the Telemachian child seeking to care for a warrior father damaged by his defensive vanities. All the Afro-American men are tortured and Paul is their spokesperson.

My analytic curiosity was heightened by the revelation that "Stormin' Normin," the platoon leader and articulate oracle of his platoon is killed by accident in battle. This echoes a theme through the movie's historical flashbacks of strong Black leaders being murdered creating a void that requires emotional acknowledgement, anger and repair. The writers may have intended this scenario.

Betrayal and redemption, or its repair, are themes through out in this film. Knowing whom to trust an ever-present theme. The French colonial men are not to be trusted

while the women turn out to be whom they present in the dialogue. The residual burden of Viet Nam is everywhere from landmines to parentless survivors selling chickens in open-air markets to the guide referring to "Uncle Ho." This is a movie about the destructive power of the American nation to invade, move gold around, hide bombings and intervene in a civil war. But this is also a movie about the people who seek to disarm land mines and support a better way of life. The violence in the past is intimate and in the present results in efforts to take the accidentally found gold away from the veterans. Paul, like Fred Dobbs before him in "Sierra Madre" (1943), becomes disoriented by the gold or his physical condition and walks into a trap. There are casualties from the land mines and a western movie style battle that serve as a climax but not the end of the film. For Lee has a broader message. Embodied in this film is the conflict among Democracy (the group) the power of capitalism (the gold) and gangster-ism stealing the gold that reflects the intersecting struggle from within Lee's post war vision.

There is one odd cinematic quirk in the battle scenes as there was no make-up employed to make the "Bloods" appear younger. At first it was disconcerting to see the older Bloods in scenes fictively taking place years earlier. Then it molded into dream like sequences as I tried to erase the visual incongruity. The message of the film is prescient regarding Black Lives Matter's but that is not the only message of the film. Lee has created a unique intimacy in this film that is beyond the political. He has brought us close to black's life that matter to us.