

Media Review

- Raoul Peck, dir. *Exterminate All the Brutes*. New York, HBO Documentary Films, 2021. 4 Episodes, 60 minutes each.

This spring, as I was scrolling through Twitter instead of grading exams, my jaw dropped when I saw the trailer for Raoul Peck's four-part documentary, *Exterminate All the Brutes*. I had difficulty containing my excitement. As a fan of Peck's work—which includes biopics of Karl Marx and Patrice Lumumba, as well as *I am Not Your Negro*, a stunning profile of James Baldwin—I will watch just about anything from the acclaimed Haitian filmmaker. When I learned that the series was drawn from Sven Lindqvist's "*Exterminate All the Brutes*": *One Man's Odyssey into the Heart of Darkness and the Origins of European Genocide*, my brain began to melt. Lindqvist's book is one of the most important influences on my own research on imperialism, racism, and genocide. My anticipation got even more intense as I read that Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* was also source material for the series, as was Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz's *An Indigenous People's History of the United States*.¹

When *Exterminate All the Brutes* aired on HBOMax, HBO's streaming service, I was far from disappointed but also left wondering how a mainstream media company came to make this radical critique of American history. These films are an incredible achievement and should be required viewing for all world historians. The combination of Peck's artistic genius, fearless discussion of the darkest aspects of history, and unparalleled ability to show the humanity of what Fanon called "the wretched of the Earth" make the series an instant classic. However, educators need to think long and hard about strategies for their successful use in the classroom. There are elements of the films that are both intellectually and morally challenging, and they may not be appropriate for or accessible to younger students.

Exterminate All the Brutes is composed of four one-hour segments. Each episode focuses on a theme with an argument that builds across the arc of the series. Perhaps "argument" is not the correct word. Following in the style of Lindqvist and Trouillot, *Exterminate All the Brutes* is really a meditation on several inter-related themes. In Part I, "The Disturbing Confidence of Ignorance," Peck introduces the historic development of hate and bigotry in several contexts: the American government's extermination of Indigenous

people, “the creation of ‘race’” as a category of people, Nazi and American eugenics, and the Scramble for Africa. Part II has the unforgettable title “Who the F*** is Columbus” and begins with a reimagining of the explorer-cum-genocidaire’s landing on Peck’s home island. Inspired by Trouillot’s *Silencing the Past*, Peck forces us to question our received historical knowledge. This episode challenges the conventional narrative of the Western “discovery” of the allegedly “new” world, as well as the history of the Alamo and the Trail of Tears. The episode also links the colonization of the Americas to the development of the slave trade, all the while reminding us of the Nazi genocide to come. Part III, “Killing at a Distance or . . . How I Thoroughly Enjoyed the Outing,” discusses the development of European weaponry and then explores their horrific use in the battle of Omdurman and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Arguing that Western military superiority fed into notions of racial supremacy, Peck engages the intellectual founders of racism such as Robert Knox, James Hunt, Richard Lee, Frederic W. Farrar, and Joseph Firmin.² Once again, following Lindqvist’s line of thought, Peck links nineteenth century imperialism to the twentieth century Nazi genocide and provocatively pairs Margaret Sanger with the Third Reich’s eugenicists. The final installment, “The Bright Colors of Fascism,” raises the paradox of the United States of America’s ideals of freedom and democracy with the reality of Indigenous genocide and Black slavery. Once again, America’s domestic violence is linked to the brutal excesses of imperialism in Africa and Hitler’s necropolitical regime; but it is also explicitly linked to contemporary bigotry, xenophobia, and white nationalism.

The series is not an empirical or encyclopedic history, nor does it follow chronology, and Peck rejects neutrality. The director is really inviting us into his mind as he ruminates on roughly 1,000 years of Western expansion. Citing Lindqvist (who he endearingly refers to as “Sven,” as he calls Trouillot, “Rolph,” and Dunbar-Ortiz, “Roxanne”), Peck says we already have all the information we need. The question is what to do with it. While *Exterminate All the Brutes* addresses specific historical turning points in the construction of global racial inequalities, the episodes jump back and forth in time and make frequent references to current events. Serving as a history of the present, the series aims to find the roots of contemporary social inequalities and to illustrate how events from the Atlantic world reinforced an increasingly arrogant and militarist Eurocentrism. Aside from archival footage, first-rate animation, and a handful of surreal re-enactments, Peck’s gravelly voice guides the viewer through the series. In foregrounding his literal and metaphoric voice, the director makes this a very personal account of the history of racism, colonialism, and genocide. Peck’s frequent asides about his childhood in Haiti, New York City, and the Congo, as well as his years as a film student in Berlin and time spent building houses in Castro’s Cuba, his inclusion of clips from Peck family home-movies, and his use of the first-person in his narration center his subjective experience. He explains that, “because I am an immigrant

from a shithole country, neutrality is not an option.” This line underscores his connection to the scholarly anti-racist activism of Lindqvist, Trouillot, and Dunbar-Ortiz, all three of whom he warmly identifies as not just sources of intellectual inspiration but as good friends (indeed, there are touching moments when he reflects on the death of both Lindqvist and Trouillot). By directly addressing the viewer and putting his identity into the film, Peck makes his cosmopolitan Blackness part of the conversation.

Peck’s surreal reenactments demonstrate his powerful and unique artistic vision. Josh Hartnett (star of the saber-rattling *Black Hawk Down* and the appallingly misguided *Pearl Harbor*) plays a recurrent character. Like a racist Zelig or a genocidal Forrest Gump, this generic “white man” reappears time and time again to commit sickening acts of violence in the Seminole homeland, the Belgian Congo, and a royal scientific society in Victorian London.³ After the white man does something truly horrific such as sever the hand of a rubber collector or murder and scalp an Indigenous woman, there are repeated depictions of him bathing. Like Lady Macbeth, the “white man” never seems to be able to get himself clean. This serves as a metaphor for the Global North’s lingering guilt and inability to absolve itself of past sins. Despite their artistic achievement, these reenactments may be the most difficult scenes for many viewers for several reasons. First, they contain moments of nauseatingly graphic violence. The series is rated TV-MA, indicating that the “program is specifically designed to be viewed by adults and therefore may be unsuitable for children under 17.”⁴ While many American high school students are likely exposed to similar violent programs and video games, educators should think carefully before using the series in the classroom. Second, some of these vignettes are radical thought experiments that re-envision and re-imagine the past. Peck mischievously flips a few scenes. For example, in his recreation of slavery in the Belgian Congo, he casts white children as the slaves and Black men as the slave traders. In his version of Columbus landing in what is now Haiti, he has local Haitians dressed in surf shorts and t-shirts mock and eventually murder the Iberians. In perhaps the most powerful and distressing scene, Frederick W. Farrar (1831–1903) gives a lecture on the “scientific” basis of white supremacy. While set in London’s Royal Society in the mid-nineteenth century, the multi-ethnic audience wears twenty-first century attire. As Farrar’s argument gets more and more racist, Black, Indigenous, and mixed-race individuals heckle the speaker and leave in protest. Then Hartnett’s “white man” enters and leads an actor playing Trouillot out of the lecture hall. In the basement, Trouillot is murdered, and his corpse added to the institution’s collection of human remains. While a piercing critique of anthropology and the Enlightenment, the shocking and disturbing scene may be too graphic and too allegorical for less mature or less sophisticated viewers. As with the images of the “white man” bathing, some viewers may be confused. Third, these reenactments contain revenge fantasies that will challenge and possibly alienate the audience. If some will find a catharsis in seeing the Taino kill Columbus before he can start

his genocide, a Congolese domestic servant/sex slave pull a gun on her captor as he sits in a bathtub, or the murderous “white man” surrounded by Black men and women intent on tearing him limb from limb, these sections of *Exterminate All the Brutes* will be grist for the mill of right-wing critics. Personally, I dread seeing decontextualized segments on Tucker Carlson’s show. Considering the hysterical reaction to the *1619 Project* and the use of Critical Race Theory as some sort of cultural Marxist boogeyman, I fear the worst.

Fortunately, HBO has Raoul Peck’s back. In addition to giving the filmmaker generous funding and creative freedom, the network built and hosts a [website](#) for the series. Here one can find interviews with Peck, a range of suggested readings, and the “[Exterminate All the Brutes Syllabus](#).” While educators should view the entire series and make shrewd choices about which segments to use, there are many sections that will work well in the classroom. I strongly recommend the animation of the Atlantic Slave Trade. These few minutes follow the course of slave ships as a counter tracks the total number of enslaved people sent on the Middle Passage year by year, giving viewers an excellent sense of the growth and intensity of trade. Likewise, educators could easily excerpt the portrait of Las Casas’ attempt to defend the New World’s Indigenous population and the Iberian turn towards importing enslaved Africans.

Because it is such an important intervention in the popular representation of history, all world history teachers should see the entirety of *Exterminate All the Brutes*. Peck draws from excellent source material and offers a provocative reflection on race and violence in the modern world. However, because of its graphic violence and sophisticated artistic choices, most educators will be unable to use the series as a whole. That said, a careful and judicious selection of specific scenes should be a valuable addition to the curriculum.

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NOTES

¹ Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples History of America* (New York: Beacon Press, 2014), Sven Lindqvist, *“Exterminate All the Brutes”*: *One Man’s Odyssey into the Heart of Darkness and the Origins of European Genocide* (New York: New Press, 1996), Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (New York: Beacon Press, 2015).

² Robert Knox, *The Races of Men: A Fragment* (London: Renshaw, 1850), James Hunt, “On the Negro’s Place in Nature,” *Journal of the Anthropological Society of London*, Vol. 2 (1864), pp. xv–lvi, Richard Lee, “The Extinction of Races,” *Journal of the Anthropological Society of London*, Vol. 2 (1864), pp. xcv–xcix, Frederic W. Farrar, “Aptitudes of the Races,” *Transactions of the Ethnological Society of London*, Vol. 5 (1867), pp. 115–126, Joseph Anténor Fermin, *De l’égalité des races humaines* [*The Equality of the Human Races*] (1885).

³ Hartnett’s role recalls the horrific racial violence of Jack London’s Tarantinesque short story, “The Inevitable White Man, in which an Anglo-American man slaughters scores of Melanesians: <https://americanliterature.com/author/jack-london/short-story/the-inevitable-white-man>.

⁴ TV Guidelines Monitoring Board, “Understanding the TV Ratings and Parental Controls.” http://www.tvguidelines.org/resources/TV_Parental_guidelines_Brochure.pdf.