

EXTERMINATE ALL THE BRUTES

Directed by Raoul Peck

HBO Documentary Films, 4 episodes, 2022

Reviewed by **Jeanne Ferris**

TV-MA: Contains material that may be disturbing. Viewer discretion is advised.

DIRECTOR RAOUL PECK CREDITS THREE HISTORIANS WHO HAVE TAKEN A SLEDGEHAMMER, SHATTERED FALSE HISTORICAL NARRATIVES, AND GUIDED THE SPIRIT OF HIS DOCUMENTARY MINI-SERIES.

The first, the late Sven Lindquist, wrote the controversial *Exterminate All the Brutes*, the title a line taken from Kurtz, a character in Joseph Conrad's novel *Heart of Darkness*. (The line refers to Kurtz and his colleague's unrestrained brutality in colonizing the Congo despite his reservations.) Using a partial travel diary format, Mr. Lindquist unrelentingly examined European racism and the roots of genocide over two centuries.

The second, Michel-Rolph Trouillot, a Haitian American anthropologist, wrote *Silencing the Past*, a historical study that analyzes facts forgotten and left out, data recorded, and how the power of wealth influences history.

Embracing her maternal Cherokee heritage, Roxane Dunbar-Ortiz authored *An Indigenous Peoples' History of the United States*, which covers four hundred years from the perspective of Native Americans. Dr. Dunbar-Ortiz challenges the US founding myth and scrutinizes the colonist policies created to possess their territories by displacing them or eliminating them.

Her words echo throughout the episodes: "Awareness of the settler-colonialist context of US history writing is essential if one is to avoid the laziness of the default position and the trap of a mythological unconscious belief in manifest destiny."

Mr. Peck introduces himself as born in Haiti and raised in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Then, by interspersing his perspective of living under and escaping violent dictators with his family and how his formative years were shaped by racism in Brooklyn, he explains why his experiences informed his ability to narrate the film's entirety. "Our job as filmmakers, writers, historians, image-makers [is] to

WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY **RAOUL PECK**, DIRECTOR OF *I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO*



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Exterminate
All the

BRUTES

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deconstruct these silences," Mr. Peck said. Having served as Minister of Culture for two years in Haiti, he cites the Haitian revolution as one of the silences that ended the slave trade, and thus France's global domination.

PART I: CIVILIZATION, COLONIZATION, EXTERMINATION

The first episode addresses the origins of white supremacy and colonialism, using archival and documentary footage, dynamic animation, voiceover, and scripted fictional scenes, such as reenactments of a settler slicing off a Native American's scalp—an uncommon reversal of roles. You will want to look away, but don't. Instead, steel yourself as an eyewitness to the crime.

A cutthroat Josh Hartnett performs all the sadism of the "civilized" white overseer during six hundred years of history—same character, different settings. "Those who seek history

“Only through killing and displacement does [the US] become uninhabited. The first office of Indian Affairs began in the Department of War.” [The director] describes one of the colonizing army’s greatest adversaries as the famous Goyathlay or Geronimo (Apache). He also relates how “hunting Indians in California was legal and profitable: five dollars a head, fifty cents a scalp. In 1854, the federal government paid more than a million dollars to Indian hunters.”

with an upbeat ending, redemption, or reconciliation may search in vain. Such a conclusion cannot be expected,” Mr. Peck said, paraphrasing Dr. Dunbar-Ortiz.

Mr. Peck crisscrosses American and European histories like a truth-seeking missile. He demonstrates how in the years between 900 and 1270, the church of the European rulers maintained their wealth and power by making sure “race based on blood was used as law,” and that “the conditions of genocide were fanaticism, exploitation, slavery, conquest, contempt for aliens.” The Spanish Inquisition was another global contributor to “cleansing” or colonizing inferior races, and Mr. Peck points to how Muslim and Jewish converts in European countries suffered under conditions imposed by Christians.

“Inferior races were by nature condemned to extinction,” Mr. Peck explained. Thus, the financial industry of exporting human beings as enslaved people began. Using animated oceanic routes, he depicts how the for-profit Virginia Company of London invested in the West African slave trade as part of their colonial project, grabbing land from the Powhatan Confederacy and paving the way for a future US government takeover.

It was not until 1943 that the word “genocide” would be coined. Raphael Lemkin, a lawyer of Polish-Jewish descent, combined the ancient Greek word “geno,” which means race, tribe, or clan, and “cide,” which expresses the notion of

killing. After the Holocaust, in retribution for the six million Jews exterminated in Hitler’s death camps, for the first time former Nazi leaders were indicted and tried as war criminals by the International Military Tribunal.

Circling back to North America, Mr. Peck speaks about the genocide against the Native Americans, which included enslavement, starvation, killing, dispossession, separation of families, forced conversion, and reeducation.

An animated map chisels away the First People as a timeline delineates each fallen nation. Then, utilizing archival photographs, Mr. Peck touches upon the epicenter of the systematic colonization of Native Americans that began with the Carlisle Indian School, referring to it as part of the “settler colonization.”

Mr. Peck offers his Jesuit primary school memory in Haiti as a shared experience of cruelty and subjugation. Because of his involvement in a student altercation, the head priest’s gratuitous punishment of three lashes by a dry ox muscle whip left him raw, with a permanent scar. After that, “I rejected the rituals, the dogma, and the theatrics—saint, priest, and whip, in that order,” Mr. Peck said.

PART II: WHO THE F* IS COLUMBUS?**

Mr. Peck dissects the “doctrine of discovery” employed by Christopher Columbus with chronicles of the killing and enslavement of other humans in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, recorded in journals from expeditions out of France, England, and the Netherlands, countries that dominated the slave trade.

The soundtrack juxtaposes contemporary, cheerful standards with rhythm and blues songs by American musicians in contrast to the evil portrayed.

The Irish migration in the 1800s is another square in the quilt of US history that began as migration of indentured servitude, a civilized misnomer for slavery, albeit white man upon the white man, but still superior upon inferior. There was no mention of the thousands of Chinese laborers who participated in the creation of the transportation landscape at the same time.

This writer found it curious that Mr. Peck deemed it necessary to censor the bare breasts of African women in photographs, which included topless white women in illustrations, yet full-frontal naked photographs of children were not. Again, perhaps, because the women depicted were being exploited by men? Forgive this digression, but with the emergence of cryptocurrency and the “dark web,” human trafficking is now a terrifying instantaneous global market for pedophiles. So, with due respect to all filmmakers, protect the children first.

PART III: KILLING AT A DISTANCE

Colonization and extermination accelerated with the advancement of one tool: guns. Even though the Chinese invented gunpowder, they did not set out to conquer the world.

Artillery was used on the Moguls in fifteenth-century India, with “the Europeans as masters of cannons.” Mr. Peck states that civilizations of the past underestimated modern weapon power, as recorded by historical battles.

While Native Americans were suffering assimilation, relocation, and fractured communities, the British waged another battle in Sudan. The annihilation of Omdurman (which served as the influence for *Heart of Darkness*) left a young war correspondent and soldier, Winston Churchill, with profound memories, which he later published: “We are in the presence of a crime without a name.”

While the US-sanctioned assimilation campaign against Native Americans continued into the 1900s, the German Empire asserted its military strength upon Namibia’s Herero and Namaqua peoples to gain economic power. By using forced labor as extreme punishment, their methods resulted in ethnic extermination, considered genocide today.

“George Washington jumpstarted the world’s first arms manufacturer with Springfield Armory in the US.” Mr. Peck then illustrated how “laws made to bind the weak are broken by the strong” and linked “the resurgence of white nationalism with the global history of fascism, slavery, colonialism, and Nazism.”

Finally, the never-failing-to-shock images of the atomic bomb over Hiroshima and Nagasaki were the ultimate statements of killing at a distance—appropriately to a moment of silence. Some of the grislier photographs had more impact without sound.

Mr. Peck then blows up the Monroe Doctrine by referring to US origins as a myth: “Only through killing and displacement does it become uninhabited. The first office of Indian Affairs began in the Department of War.” He describes one of the colonizing army’s greatest adversaries as the famous Goyathlay or Geronimo (Apache). He also relates how “hunting Indians in California was legal and profitable: five dollars a head, fifty cents a scalp. In 1854, the federal government paid more than a million dollars to Indian hunters.”

Did you know that the Second Amendment was created to empower settlers to bear arms as militia?

PART IV: THE BRIGHT COLORS OF FASCISM

Mr. Peck includes the tragedy of Wounded Knee, the threat of Ghost Dancing by Lakota and Dakota concentration camp survivors at Pine Ridge Reservation, and the blame placed on Sioux leader Tatanka Yotanka (Sitting Bull) in detail. In deference, Mr. Peck uses Indigenous names when possible.

Utilizing a reenactment of General Sherman blaming the press for spreading rumors about the massacre, Mr. Peck includes estimated data of Native Americans killed (three hundred) and army casualties (twenty-five).

Following photographs of the loss, Mr. Peck quotes the medicine man of the Oglala Lakota people, Heháka Sápa (Black Elk): “I did not know then how much was ended. When I look back now from this high hill of my old age, I can still see the butchered women and children lying heaped and scattered all along the crooked gulch, as plain as when I saw them with eyes still young. And I can see that something else died there in the bloody mud and was buried there. It was a beautiful dream. The nation’s circle is broken and scattered. There is no center any longer, and the sacred tree is dead.”

Mr. Peck gives examples of euphemisms used in military training manuals. For instance, every US military aircraft bears Indian names like Apache, Cherokee, Lakota, etc., and the code name “Indian Country” designates territory behind enemy lines, all of which perpetuates a bias and condones hate-mongering language that filters into the subconscious mind as standard.

He cites military historian John Grenier’s admission of guilt: “Successive generations of Americans, both soldiers and civilians, made the killing of Indian men, women, and children a defining element of their first military tradition. And thereby part of a shared American identity.”

Erasing war crimes regarding the origin of California or the US in history books is just as heinous as taking money for pulling the trigger on a defenseless Indigenous child. The rain may have washed away the blood from the earth, but the bloody handprints remain a faint stain on this country’s flag.

The definition of patriotism is a devotion to the welfare of one’s compatriots or love of one’s country. Fascism is any system of strong autocracy or oligarchy, usually to the extent of bending and breaking the law, race-baiting, and violence against largely unarmed populations. One can see how this thin line between the two can quickly become blurred.

There is no escapism from reality in this film. But don’t look away. Instead, steel yourself and be an eyewitness to the monsters who can hide in plain sight.