

Lord of War

Andrew Niccol's *Lord of War* is one of the most intelligent, ironic, condemnatory and fun movies of 2005. If those adjectives, in particular condemnatory and fun, seem contradictory (if not sadistic), my solution is simply this: you've got to see it to believe it. Niccol succeeds in obtaining a synthesis of these factors while condemning humanity – even, or perhaps especially, the one's comfortably munching popcorn while watching the film - without dire moralizing, all the while providing a visually pleasing and tremendously entertaining movie.

Yuri Orlov (Nicolas Cage) is a Ukraine native raised in Brooklyn who comes to realize that advancing via his family's small restaurant won't get him the success he desires, so he chooses instead the more financially rewarding calling of arms dealing. In one of the ongoing voiceovers, Yuri wryly notes that going into the arms trade is similar to entering the restaurant business, referring to both as “basic human needs”. The implication is clear: as much as eating is necessary for human survival, so too is killing.

Yuri's family faked Jewish heritage to flee the Ukraine and avoid persecution. This heritage reveals an important aspect of Yuri, one that will be the key to his success, and his soullessness. Yuri's a shifter, an unctuous chameleon, going easily from one language or passport to another. He's slippery in all facets, comfortable on a visceral level with disingenuousness, both in relation to others and himself.

The plot moves quickly through Yuri's rise in the international arms market, though not too quickly to overlook such ironies as Yuri obtaining his first weapon for sale from a member of his father's Temple. The big breakthrough for Yuri comes with the collapse of the Soviet Union: in Yuri's world, this is greeted not as the freeing of millions of people, but as the freeing of millions of weapons. It is these weapons that Yuri will provide to Africa, often in exchange for gems, affectionately called “blood diamonds” for their ability to finance Africa's ongoing violence.

Along Yuri's rise he is regularly confronted by, and subsequently able to ignore, the horrendous consequences that stem from his sales. Two key foils that confront him are his younger, drug-addicted brother Vitaly (Jared Leto), and a straight arrow, ever-pursuant Interpol agent (Ethan Hawke). Each of these figures calls to Yuri's attention the malevolence that his actions engender, and each figure is morally superior to Yuri, and he knows it all too well. But Niccol's world is not neatly reduced to black and white: everyone's complicit, and the hero remains Yuri, perhaps for the simple fact that he is the only one who acknowledges this situation.

Nicolas Cage has been doing films for a long time now, and with each film he continues to grow on me. His heavy, woebegone eyes droop expressively, though they are less the center of his acting than in his previous films. A common grumble about Cage is that he consistently over-acts, is too prone to thespian-ism. Whatever merits this may have, in the role of Yuri Cage gently slips between a man truly having fun and a man all too aware of the horror his career creates. Cage can sincerely hope that not one of his bullets injures another human, and there is no trace of irony in his voice; just as easily, he disgustedly throws away a toy gun belonging to his son, and there is no hypocrisy in his

action. Yuri stands in a morally murky gulf, and his all too clear comprehension of this situation leaves him with no choice but simply to continue.

Cinematographer Amir Mokri and Editor Zach Staenberg do a great job displaying Niccol's desires, and they capture one of the better opening sequences of a film I've seen in some time. We follow a bullet - shown from the cartridge's point of view - from its conception in an armament factory to its eventual delivery to an African fighter, at which point the bullet ends up in the forehead of a young boy. By choosing to have us niftily follow things from the bullet's point of view, Niccol's does a triple whammy, turning fun into death, pointing an implicating finger at our enjoyment of violence in entertainment, and suggesting that we are all complicit in the bullet's path. And this is only the first two minutes of the movie.

Most films worth watching attempt to demonstrate a way of looking at the world, and Niccol's is a burning indictment. He is unrelenting in his condemnation, in his emphasis that there is neither good nor bad, that blood is on everyone's hands. He is too damning to permit one to claim ignorance or non-participation; in his book, non-involvement is inactive proliferation of the status quo. And he has emphatically set his film in this world: instead of escaping towards fantasy, the film occurs in a real - and all too easily verifiable (as any check of recent history will reveal) - world, and this only lends strength to his perspective. Niccol's doesn't bother with what the stated case may be, and in a less than subtle jab at the current wars for democracy and freedom in Iraq and Afghanistan he notes that the results are the same: violence and murder are violence and murder, whether carried out for the progression of democracy or blatant despotism.

Niccol's belief that the one who concedes to this fact is the hero worth following will strike many viewers as difficult. We live in a country in which our leaders have consistently drawn simplified, reductionist views of the world (i.e. "You're either with us or against us"), and in which American exceptionalism has been emphatically declared. Niccol's emphasis on a gray, blurry world in which all Americans are guilty to some degree by virtue of being citizens of the world's largest arms dealer is not a message that will be easily received. For this reason, quite sadly, this is a film that has not nor will do well with American viewers (when I saw it after it had ended its run in the theaters, it had grossed well under \$30 million). Yet for all this, the movie is simply too much fun to explicitly make viewers feel bad, and its avoidance of overt, beat-you-over-the-head moralizing is welcome. Niccol's has succeeded in making a truly brilliant movie, full of probing, critical thought that never takes its eye off entertaining, and it saddens me that millions will choose to skip this movie in favor of any number of the other trash Hollywood has provided this year. Perhaps we're all too similar to Yuri's trophy wife, Ava: we want the largesse, the riches and luxuries that come from violence, whether they be oil or diamonds or security, yet we dare not ask their source for fear the trail will lead back to ourselves.