

THE DAMNED

A FILM BY
ROBERTO MINERVINI



FESTIVAL DE CANNES
UN CERTAIN REGARD
2024 DIRECTING PRIZE



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Winter 1862. In the midst of the Civil War, the US Army sends a company of volunteer soldiers to the western territories, with the task of patrolling the unchartered borderlands. As their mission ultimately changes course, the meaning behind their engagement begins to elude them.



A CONVERSATION WITH ROBERTO MINERVINI

BY DENNIS LIM

All your previous films have taken place in present-day America. What drew you to the historical past, and to the genre of the war movie?

I've always had an issue with war movies because of the archetypes that are present in them: the idea of the just cause, good versus evil, revenge, heroism. There's never been an approach that I would call humane. Instead we have archetypes that propagate false ideas and beliefs about war. It's crazy to me that people tend to trust a government — especially here in the U.S. but not only here — in matters of war and defense. War becomes an untouchable thing and the heroism of war becomes something sacred.

Your reservations remind me of a quote by François Truffaut — he said that every film about war ends up

being pro-war. Does that align with your thinking?

I absolutely agree with that. Even films that depict tragedy and self-destruction emphasize martyrdom and sacrifice. There is always a reason or a justification, an idea that makes the war perversely sacred, even God-given, something that we cannot grasp. And yet, war is arguably the most dehumanizing event and experience that there is. I don't know if my goal here was to make an anti-war film, but to emphasize certain personal aspects of the journey rather than to conceive of war as something that exists above and beyond the individual.

It's interesting that you turn to the 1860s after a series of films about the American South today. The American Civil War is not just a defining moment in U.S. history but one in which many of the themes that

animate your other films are present in earlier forms, notably fears and resentments around race, class, and religion.

This film is heavily informed by my previous work, for sure, and by my experience of living in the South for more than a decade. It was a very conscious choice to go back to a moment where a lot of these roots were being planted: the great divide between North and South, Christianity, a kind of toxic masculinity. I wanted to understand how these issues persist, why there is still a lot of nostalgia for the Civil War, how that time shaped a sense of distrust toward institutions. I wanted the film to tie into the experience of people who were left in limbo during the war, in the middle of a transition from very conservative values to a new society: people who didn't even know what to fight for. Many in the



U.S. Army were mercenaries who enlisted without fully grasping the cause. With a country in shambles, people took sides, sometimes geographically, sometimes opportunistically. The approach here was to put a bunch of people in the middle of nowhere, or rather in the wilds of Montana, who are trying to figure out why they are there.

Why did you set the film in the West? It's a part of the country that typically receives less attention in accounts of the Civil War, but it's also a time and place that brings in this other genre, this other mythology, of the Western.

It was important not to be too submerged under the heaviness of history. For this group of interpreters, they are observing at the margins, almost as if they are watching themselves, which is a line in the film. It would have been completely different if they were in Virginia, for example. I wanted to shed the weight of history a little bit to facilitate this experiential journey, to allow for something more cathartic and more primordial to come from within and from these individuals. As for Montana and the Old West, 1862 is the year the Gold Rush started there. This is land that is still untouched, still Dakota territory, but something bigger is starting that reshapes the idea of who you're fighting for and who you're fighting against. I wanted to put them somewhere that was almost like a lookout, without feeling the burden





and the responsibility to represent this war, but at the same time to be in a land that has meant so much in history, and certainly for the American Indian Wars — an energetically, and we could even say spiritually, special place.

You have developed a very particular process in your films, in which fiction and documentary methods are productively entangled. You've worked collaboratively with your subjects, who are observed by your camera but also perform to it. How much of this process were you able to retain here, given the distinct fictional framework?

I would say almost everything. The pillars of the way I work were the same, using fictional situations and moments of observation. Something I've always done is to use every element, whether it's fictional or organically present, as a way to deepen the experience. It can be an emotional trigger, it can be the temperature, it can be the wardrobe, and how that affects the mood of the characters and the way they are present informs the story. I didn't write anything and I didn't go in with a clear idea of the story. But I did have in mind, like with all my films, how we could move structurally. I knew that since war is a series of battles, there would be a before, a during, and an after the battle. The second part was shaped based on the battle. Some of the decisions were truly last-minute. The decision to send four of the men

off on their own and relocate them two hours away, that was made the night before. The ultimate goal was to make sure my way of working would fit with and not undermine the fictional aspect of the film. Because we were in conversation more with fiction, with genre, this time, the aesthetics changed a bit. There's a stillness, a steadiness of the camera, and that was physically demanding, especially with the harsh weather and this being an entirely exterior film. I developed kidney stones on the shoot due to dehydration. The physical aspect of the experience was much more prominent than in the other films.

You've often found your collaborators through existing relationships or an extended exploratory process. How did you put together the ensemble cast of this film?

I brought some people I had worked with [members of the Carlson family who were in *Stop the Pounding Heart*]. Since I was making the leap to something so fictional, I felt the need to have some allies I knew I could rely on. There are also a few people in the film who have experience in the arts, with literature or performing backgrounds, like Jeremiah Knupp who was in a short film I made 20 years ago. Then we went to Helena, Montana, and we opened the door to the local community. We had an open call and told everybody they were free to participate. Many members of the National

Guard stationed in Montana showed up. A group of firefighters came and participated for a few hours. It's very dear to me that, in my films, people come and go, I like this idea that you can't grasp defined groups, you can't put a perimeter around them. It's the beauty of an open-door casting, which has its drawbacks because everything has to be constantly reshaped. I had to depart from what I thought I was doing and take other routes because characters were not working. But I'm very familiar with that process. This way of working means the film is ever evolving and constantly in motion. The point is to experience it collectively, and there is a natural selection of characters as we film. The ones who make it to the end are the ones who are more committed to it, where there's a kind of symbiosis between them and me and the environment.



On the subject of the battle, I wonder if you have thoughts on how combat is usually shown in movies, and what kind of cinematographic language you wanted to use to depict the fighting.

I had a few starting points. One was to always be like a reporter following people who are in the middle of the action, adopting their point of view and their field of view. Second, in battle, the most important thing is not to be seen, so I didn't want to show any moments of seeing the enemy in a close encounter — I wanted the enemies to be hidden, just as we were. And third, I wanted to ditch this idea of the front, which is usually very important in showing and thinking about war. The front line gives us this idea of an orderly attack, of competence. It reassures you but it's the first assumption to get shattered because chaos reigns supreme and it's absolutely impossible to detect where shots are coming from. The lack of visibility of the enemy and losing perception of time and space was important.

Was there much discussion about politics and the Civil War with your actors? Did you work with them differently than your collaborators on other films?

If I had to go back and decode what the characters say, it all stems from personal experience. What I find interesting when I watch it back is that the guys start with their own experiences and reflections — this is who I am and why I'm here and how I see it — and then they



make it about the Civil War, they're always engaged in this dialectic. The difference compared to the other films was that this time, I worked by omission, in a way. I abandoned my characters, making sure that I wasn't necessarily being the reference point, the one who dispenses wisdom and awareness about what we were doing. I did the opposite: I set up a camp, made sure there were provisions, and left them to figure things out about the experience and the process, which I think caused an emotional shock for them. I didn't ask them to come with knowledge of the Civil War. But I trusted that some of them probably would and so they all had different degrees of knowledge, which also served a purpose because that's a reflection of reality and it creates an interesting dynamic. There was leadership in place to take care of the logistics of the shoot but not for any of them individually. There was no paternalistic approach. I did that because the film called for it in a way, and also because I knew they could bring a lot to the table from being left alone.

What is the significance of the film's title for you?

It came before everything. There's a playful aspect to it — it sounds a little Sergio Leone, it sounds very genre. It's also a bit of an homage to a punk-rock band I like. Also there's this idea that once you enter a war, once you go through battle, that's the end of something, you're kind of condemned. Damnation versus condemnation,

there is a strong religious component, too, that is an integral part of the Civil War. So it's a title that points at genre but also at a religious, higher experience that the film puts into question.

Your films have always dwelled on the contemporary American psyche. How much did the circumstances of the present day weigh on you as you worked on it?

The pertinence of the film to the present is certainly heightened today. I conceived it in 2020 and shot it in 2022, and the world was maybe slightly different a few years ago, but I moved to New York 11 months before the Twin Towers fell and the presence of war as a supposedly necessary evil has been a constant in my own experience living in America. The fact that war accounts for a massive chunk of the U.S. economy, the fact that some people feel safe and protected through war, the fact that there is a blind faith in war that bypasses body counts, the fact that there is an economic machine justifying the loss of human beings. All this was very present especially living in the South, and has been very troubling to me. This is a film in a way about my experience of being shaped as an American citizen. ■

New York, April 25th, 2024



CAST AND CREW

directed by
written by
main cast

Roberto Minervini
Roberto Minervini
**Jeremiah Knupp, René W. Solomon, Cuyler Ballenger,
Noah Carlson, Judah Carlson, Tim Carlson, Bill Gehring**

director of photography
editing
sound
sound editing
re-recording mixer
colorist
original score
line producers

Carlos Alfonso Corral
Marie-Hélène Dozo
Bernat Fortiana Chico
Ingrid Simon
Thomas Gauder
Natalia Raguseo
Carlos Alfonso Corral
Francesca Vittoria Bennett & Biliana Grozdanova

produced by

**Paolo Benzi (Okta Film), Denise Ping Lee & Roberto Minervini (Pulpa Film),
Paolo Del Brocco for Rai Cinema**

executive producers

Teresa Mannino, Jean-Alexandre Luciani, Annette Fausboll

coproduced by

Alice Lemaire & Sébastien Andres (Michigan Films)

a production

Okta Film and Pulpa Film

with

Rai Cinema

in coproduction with

Michigan Films, VOO OBE Be tv, Shelter Prod

in association with

Stregonia, Moonduckling Films

with the support of

**MiC – Direzione Generale Cinema e audiovisivo, Centre du cinéma et de
l'audiovisuel de la Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles, Fondo Audiovisivo Friuli
Venezia-Giulia, Taxshelter.Be and ING, Tax shelter du Gouvernement fédéral
de Belgique, Film Commission Torino Piemonte, Federal tax credit program of
Canada (Cavco), Provincial tax credit program of Québec (Sodec)
Kaibou Production (Canada)**

in collaboration with
international sales
& french distribution

Les Films du Losange



ROBERTO MINERVINI

Roberto Minervini is an Italian-born film director, who lives and works in the U.S. He is widely considered to be one of the world's most prominent auteurs of narrative documentaries, which combine dramatized and observational elements. After completing a Master of Arts in Media Studies at the New School in New York City in 2004, Roberto taught Documentary Filmmaking at the university level in Asia. In 2007, he moved to Texas, where he directed three feature films, *The Passage*, *Low Tide* and *Stop the Pounding Heart*, a Texas Trilogy that focused on rural communities in the American South. He then went on to direct two feature films set in Louisiana, *The Other Side* and *What You Gonna Do When the World's on Fire?*, shifting to the political realm of American society and touching on social injustice. In more recent years, he has begun to produce the work of other visionary filmmakers through his production company Pulpa Film, including Payal Kapadia's first fiction film *All We Imagine as Light* and Lisandro Alonso's *Eureka*. Roberto's latest film, *The Damned*, is his first fiction film. ■

ROBERTO MINERVINI'S FILMOGRAPHY

- **The Damned** 88' / 2024 / Italy, USA, Belgium
World Premiere – Cannes Film Festival 2024 – Official Selection, Un Certain Regard
- **What you gonna do when the world's on fire?** 123' / 2018 / Italy, USA, France
World Premiere – Venice Film Festival 2018 – Official Competition
Winner, Grierson Award Best Documentary Film – BFI London Film Festival 2018
Winner, Viennale Standard Readers' Jury Prize – Vienna International Film Festival 2018
Winner, Best Director, Best Actress, & Best Editor – Mar del Plata Film Festival 2018
Winner, Grand Jury Prize – La Roche-sur-Yon International Film Festival 2018
Winner, Fritz Gerlich Prize – Munich International Film Festival 2019
- **The other side (Louisiana)** 92' / 2015 / Italy, France
World Premiere – Cannes Film Festival 2015 – Official Selection, Un Certain Regard
Winner, Cinephile Award – Busan Film Festival 2015
Winner, Best Director & Best Photography – Seville European Film Festival 2015
Winner, Best Cinematography – RIDM Montreal International Documentary Festival 2015
Winner, Student Jury Prize – IFF Message to Man 2015
Winner, Best Documentary – Nastro d'Argento (Italian Film Critics Award) 2016
- **Stop the pounding heart** 98' / 2013 / USA, France, Belgium
World Premiere – Cannes Film Festival 2013 - Official Selection, Special Screenings
Winner, Special Jury Prize, International Documentary – Torino Film Festival 2013
Winner, Best Documentary – David di Donatello (Italian Academy Award) 2014
- **Low tide** 92' / 2012 / USA, Italy, Belgium
World Premiere – Venice Film Festival 2012 – Official Selection, Orizzonti
- **The Passage** 85' / 2011 / USA, Belgium





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