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POWER

One Battle After Another Sees America Clearly



By Andrea González-Ramírez, a senior writer for The Cut who covers systems of power.

10:50 A.M.

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Photo: ©Warner Bros/Courtesy Everett Collection

Spoilers for One Battle After Another below.

State-sanctioned violence is everywhere in Paul Thomas Anderson's most recent film, *One Battle After Another*, beginning from its explosive opening sequence. A group of guerrillas meets near the U.S.-Mexico border with a mission to storm the Otay Mesa Detention Center in San Diego — a real immigration-detention facility that is one of the largest in the country and has a history of alleged human-rights abuses — and liberate the migrants being held there. The border wall, so prized by the right wing, looms large. Images of children incarcerated inside a chain-link pen are unsettling to watch

because they so closely mirror both the horrors of family separation and the mass-deportation agenda that the Trump administration is violently implementing at this very moment.

The film, loosely based on Thomas Pynchon's 1990 novel *Vineland*, takes place in an undetermined, contemporary year in which the revolutionary group the French 75 — which includes leader Perfidia Beverly Hills (Teyana Taylor) and her lover, bomb-maker Pat (Leonardo DiCaprio) — rebels against the federal government. At Otay Mesa, they square off with Colonel Steven J. Lockjaw (Sean Penn), a hateful bigot who is nevertheless infatuated with Perfidia and blackmails her into starting a clandestine affair. After a bank robbery gone bad leads to Perfidia's arrest, the rest of the French 75 is assassinated or forced to go underground — including Pat and Perfidia's baby Charlene (Chase Infiniti). Pat and Charlene adopt the identities of Bob and Willa Ferguson. The film then jumps ahead 16 years as Lockjaw returns to hunt them down.

This second act kicks off when Lockjaw seeks to join the hilariously named but nevertheless menacing Christmas Adventurers Club, a secret society of wealthy, far-right white supremacists that gives off much of the same energy as the broligarchs who've latched on to Donald Trump in recent years. They appear to be a caricature until you remember that we no longer live in a world where people who believe in the "Great Replacement" theory feel they need to meet in secret. They are now pulling the strings of the federal government and literally tweeting it out. When one Christmas Adventurer tells Lockjaw, "Our aim and your aim is the same: to find dangerous lunatics, haters, and punk trash and stop them. No more lunatics," I hear the echo of the president saying, "We have to beat the hell out" of "radical left lunatics" after Charlie Kirk was assassinated.

When Lockjaw later manufactures an immigration-enforcement operation at a chicken factory in order to cover up his actual goal — dispatch with Bob and capture Willa, who he suspects is his biological daughter — his deployment of agents and the subsequent riot look hauntingly similar to Trump setting

loose the National Guard in an attempt to militarize Democratic-led cities and respond to anti-ICE protests with outsize violence. “This is a sanctuary city full of thousands of wet and stinkies,” Lockjaw sneers, using the same casually dehumanizing language Trump officials spout in public and the sort of slurs they apparently sling in private. His cruel bigotry would fit right in with the current administration.

It’s worth noting that Anderson, who spent two decades working on the film before production began in early 2024, could easily extrapolate from the darker elements of modern U.S. history in order to build this fictionalized America that so eerily mirrors our current political moment. Perfidia crying out, “Free borders, free bodies, free choices, and free from fuckin’ fear!” could apply to every presidential administration in recent memory. The infrastructure for Trump’s current mass-deportation machine was built by both Republicans and Democrats. The U.S.-Mexico border wall we see in the film may have been Trump’s calling card for the past decade, but the Clinton administration built its first fences as part of its “get tough policy” on immigration. In *OBAA*’s first act, the French 75 bombs the office of a politician who voted to pass an abortion ban; right-wing politicians, sometimes with the help of their Democratic colleagues, enacted abortion restrictions well before Trump-appointed Supreme Court justices overturned *Roe v. Wade*. Even a standoff between riot police and protesters that takes place in the sanctuary city where Bob and Willa have built their new life looks like it could have been plucked straight from news footage of Ferguson in 2014 or the summer of racial reckoning in 2020. And when an undercover cop throws a Molotov cocktail to spark a confrontation at that protest, the scene is not far-fetched — it’s well established that American law-enforcement agencies have deployed officers to secretly join and destabilize progressive movements.

Several filmmakers this year have tackled American power and politics and the way racism influences them, whether that’s Ari Aster’s cynical view of modern society in *Eddington* or Ryan Coogler’s powerful mining of the past in *Sinners*. But *OBAA* stands alone in reflecting the current state of America, down to

the systems that are allowing a would-be authoritarian government to flourish. It's a grim and unrelenting portrayal, from the migrant children wrapped in Mylar blankets at Otay Mesa to the federal officers rounding up high-schoolers at a dance for questioning and the group of powerful old men clandestinely discussing their plans to make America white again.

It's no wonder, then, that the film has caused a collective crashout among conservative commentators, who've called it an "apologia for radical left-wing terrorism" and an "insidious piece of propaganda that speaks to the depravity of the left." In the Blaze, Peter Gietl writes, "Lockjaw is evil because he wants border security and has a Nazi haircut. Hollywood eschewed subtlety a long time ago." Gietl conveniently ignores the rest of Lockjaw's arc in this screed: A virulent racist who is only deemed worthy by the Christmas Adventurers Club because of his successful and violent immigration crackdowns, he attempts to murder Willa, whom he unflinchingly calls a "mutt," in his quest to prove his racial purity to the club.

But Anderson doesn't leave viewers to dwell on all that darkness. While there's no neat ending here that easily gets rid of the Bad Guys, the film does offer a compelling vision of how to survive under a fascist police state. Long after I left the theater, it was the "Latino Harriet Tubman situation" engineered by Willa's martial-arts instructor and his allies that most stuck with me. "Sensei" Sergio St. Carlos, played by Benicio del Toro, has been offering migrant families refuge and safe passage through town. As immigration-enforcement agents descend at Lockjaw's direction, Sergio begins moving dozens of people who've been living under his roof toward the safety of a sanctuary church with calm competence. Later, after Bob is arrested, Sergio and a few well-placed women at the local police station and hospital help him escape from the clutches of the Feds. These scenes suggest Sergio and his neighbors have formed trusting relationships that they can rely on in moments of crisis. We don't know how many times the strength of the network has been tested, but everyone in town knows their role and they execute it, presumably at great personal risk, for the betterment of the community.

These pockets of resistance have always existed in real life, from the Underground Railroad and clandestine abortion providers to mutual aid, bail funds, and sanctuary spaces. But *OBAA* underscores their urgency as the country continues its full tilt into authoritarianism. The film reminds us that the key to meaningful resistance is showing up with love, through each battle, over and over again: for those who make up your family, your community, your town or city. Progress occurs along a continuum that requires generational persistence against seemingly insurmountable odds. In the face of violent systems of power intent on oppressing us and keeping us living in terror, it is imperative that we stand up in small and large ways, to lead with hope even when filled with righteous anger, and to use whatever tools we have at hand to help create a more just world.

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