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Fighting Form: Post-9/11 War Cinema Aesthetics and the Anomaly of *Redacted*

Abstract

Contemporary war films revel in the experience of combat. In order to successfully render these stories cinematically, most movies follow the generic conventions of the war genre. The war genre often ably communicates the horrors of war for American soldiers without detailing the impact of combat for others. This essay analyzes Brian De Palma's *Redacted* (2007) in order to explore role of form in rendering non-dominant perspectives of the United States' post-9/11 wars.

Lone Survivor (Berg, 2014) and *Boys of Abu Ghraib* (Moran, 2014), two mainstream American films based on the post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, respectively, were released between December, 2013 and March, 2014. The two films reenact specific occurrences during these wars, using the formal and narrative conventions characteristic of traditional Hollywood filmmaking. As with many recent war films that use conventional modes of storytelling, viewers are encouraged to identify with the experiences of the central protagonist: a young American soldier.

That these stories recount these military experiences from an American point of view has little to do with access to information about the experiences of the combatant and non-combatant communities involved in these engagements. Instead, the one-sided perspectives characteristic of these films are borne, at least in part, out of the formal and narrative tropes used to represent these events. The relevance of form to the retelling of these war stories is demonstrated clearly in *Boys of Abu Ghraib*, which recounts the experiences of a prison guard working in the eponymous prison during a time of rampant prisoner abuse. As Martin Tsai notes, "Unlike the few documentaries on

the subject, the film views the events through an American serviceman's perspective and argues that Abu Ghraib was as much a prison sentence for some of the captors as it was for their detainees."¹ By retelling the history of torture at the prison through conventional Hollywood modes, the film trivializes the systemic violation of the Geneva Conventions by focusing instead on a single individual's inability to cope with the pressures of combat. Such a framework obfuscates the underlying failures of military protocol in fostering a hostile environment and makes these prisoners' mistreatment merely a backdrop for a character study. Similarly, *Lone Survivor*, based on a failed Navy SEALs mission, uses the standard narrative and formal conventions of an action film. Much like *Boys*, Peter Berg's film focuses exclusively on the experiences of American soldiers. Moreover, despite the graphic nature of the violence shown in the film, its narrative and aesthetic tropes resist any critical interrogation of warfare itself.²

The Form of the Fight

In addition to the aforementioned narrative tropes, recent approaches to the representation of war rely

FIGHTING FORM

upon the pervasive employment of hyper-mobile handheld cameras, digital multi-channel sound, digital special effects, rapid editing, and close framing. While scholars such as David Bordwell have noted the use of these aesthetic tropes and technical tools throughout contemporary American cinema, the consistency with which they are used to portray war marks the consolidation of a representational approach to warfare.³ This manner of depicting combat not only seeks to simulate the chaotic experience of battle, but also to define the quintessential trait of warfare itself as a particular brand of experience that is reproducible via the technologies of contemporary media. This new style, as Roger Stahl notes, “Modifie[s] the usual narrative filters to promote first-person fantasies of war.”⁴

A film like *The Hurt Locker* (Bigelow, 2008) is indicative of this larger trend insofar as a sense of liveness, of immediacy, is an integral component of the film. Rather than shooting on film with stationary cameras or even a Steadicam, four handheld digital video cameras all rolled simultaneously. This particular decision often gives the film an aesthetic that is reminiscent of live news coverage; the camera constantly shakes, disorients the viewer, and draws the audience into the chaotic, confounding world of war. This type of depiction has much in common with what Robin Andersen has termed the “new war film,” which, she argues, has “defined itself by sacrificing all else to deliver a virtual experience of combat.”⁵

Certain documentaries, such as *Restrepo* (Hetherington and Junger, 2010), embrace a similar “interactive” visual style that strives to replicate in the viewer the physical experience of combat. For example, within the film’s first three minutes, an Improvised Explosive Device (IED) strikes the convoy of Battle Company’s second platoon. Yet, rather than seeing the explosion from a distance, the surprise attack is witnessed by the camera of the filmmakers, who are themselves inside the Humvee. The camera falls over, dirt sprays the windshield and dust fills the cabin of the personnel carrier. As the soldiers exit the vehicle and prepare to defend themselves, the camera’s sound capabilities fail. Silent, unstable images give a visceral account of the engagement, a perspective afforded by the filmmakers’ embedded status.

In addition, this limited perspective, one that deemphasizes the political stakes of combat, is further constrained by the use of immersive formal techniques that privilege an embodied experience of combat. As David James has argued of Vietnam War representations, “The affirmation of and commitment to presence in the film image presupposes an aesthetic of empiricism, a repression of knowledge that can be countered only by an engagement with what it must suppress, history.”⁶ The current style, also uses similar visual language that foregrounds the soldier’s perspective. Consequently, given James’ assertion, it becomes evident that, while the face-value of war imagery appears to tell the whole story, the privileging of presence conceals the broader historical and political context of these engagements. That is to say, the ability to achieve such a present, virtual experience comes at the cost of being able to see the bigger picture. Likewise, by structuring narratives in the immediate, mortal danger of combat experiences, these media make consideration of the larger historical and political context of these wars secondary to the interactive experience of war. When these partial histories begin and end with troop experiences while on deployment, there is often a de facto exclusion of the politics that have brought about the situation. Indeed, it is precisely the conscribed nature of such a perspective that shapes and constrains the role such imagery can play in the cultural transformation of broader opinions of the role of the US, and its military, in global geopolitics.

Even so, this manner of representation, one that is explicitly linked to the experience of soldiers, has been proffered by numerous filmmakers as a way of providing unmediated access to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. In contrast to films such as *Body of War* (Donahue and Spiro, 2007), *No End in Sight* (Ferguson, 2007), and *Green Zone* (Greengrass, 2010), which provide information within a carefully-constructed argument against the wars, the majority of these “first-person” media texts are positioned as “just the facts”; they are assumed to speak for themselves.⁷ These war films fall into this trap because, as Calum Marsh has argued, avoiding this situation “would mean humanizing rather than simply lionizing your heroes; doing that means risking the impression of disrespect. Doing so would [also] mean making warfare unappealing

rather than exciting; doing that would mean risking the alienation of your audience.”⁸

The potential power of alienating one’s audience in the service of offering a more comprehensive depiction of warfare is precisely why Brian De Palma’s 2007 film *Redacted* remains relevant today. Over seven years after the film’s release, *Redacted* maintains its distinctiveness for the searing critique of war produced via its formal and narrative contrivances. Indeed, despite the prevalence of embedded, first-person modes of representation, the film uses many of the aforementioned formal tools in opposition to the way they have functioned in other recent texts.

The Function of Form in *Redacted*

In November of 2007, De Palma and Magnolia Pictures released a “movie” whose status as a cinematic object was quite unstable due to the director’s overt manipulations of the medium-specific qualities of film. Over the course of the film text, *Redacted* skips between footage from a War Diary (or home video journal), a French documentary entitled *Barrage*, a journalistic program called ATV News, a Jihadist website, footage from a base security camera, an embedded journalist’s NVG camera, a military wife’s vlog/blog, recorded psych evaluations of soldiers, a Skype-like video conference call, and Central Euro News. All of the aforementioned media were constructed for the film. Still, the constant shifting of the “medium” through which the story is being told, each of which contains its own spectatorial orientations, can be seen as disruptive of the immersive potential of the embedded perspective and the medium-specific spectatorship of cinema. Via multimedia storytelling, De Palma adulterates traditional modes of representation in order to forge a formalist critique of warfare. In doing so, De Palma reveals the problematic resonances of recent approaches to the depiction of combat. De Palma’s representational shifts thus evince the limitations of certain generic and formal conventions of the war genre when used to present oppositional discourses.

In contrast, De Palma distinguishes his employment of contemporary aesthetic tropes from the very first moment. The film opens with a title card that warns viewers that the film, while fictional, is not mere postulation. Using existing reportage

about the rape and murder of a 14 year-old Iraqi girl by US soldiers outside Mahmudiya, Iraq on March 12, 2006, the film mobilizes narrative and formal strategies to access and recover the reality of the event. De Palma’s use of a fictionalized story and crude formal techniques to present actual events that have not received sufficient media attention and analysis stands in stark contrast to the approach of many other recent war media. Unlike *Redacted*, the majority of films about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq privilege visual veracity over and above any attempt to explore the historical context and implications of the outcomes and byproducts of a given engagement.

While *Redacted* has been called both “inept” and “a mess,” the majority of the critiques are the result of the film’s 18-day shooting schedule and use of novice actors.⁹ Despite these issues, the film is still a generative example of how the manipulations of a genre’s formal conventions can produce concomitant shifts within a film’s narrative. De Palma’s experimentations in *Redacted* continue to privilege visual immediacy, yet because he renders them differently, the film’s imagery resists reductive identification with the plight of the soldier. One clear example can be gleaned by comparing the film to the majority of recent documentaries that have been shot by embedded documentarians and provide shocking, close-up encounters with combat. In contrast, De Palma’s fake documentary segment *Barrage*, named after the shortened form of the French phrase, *barrage de police* (roadblock), details the boredom experienced by soldiers as they man a security checkpoint day in and day out. Although documentaries have covered similar topics elsewhere, one key formal intervention De Palma makes in this segment is to shoot the majority of this “documentary” in long or extra-long shots. The shots use deep focus, giving a fuller picture of the environment and the lives moving within that space. More than simply Jersey walls, stop signs, guns and soldiers, the shots contain goats and herders, the surrounding neighborhoods, and the mountains in the distance. De Palma’s decision to frame the shot in this way is thus about more than a simple shot choice. To frame these events as occurring within spaces where lives are lived and livelihoods are made is to visually assert the impact of war beyond American military personnel. Since the

FIGHTING FORM

consequences of war for a multitude of life forms are put on display, it is far more difficult to collapse the spectatorial position with the point of view of the soldier. This perspective is one rarely offered in “embedded” documentaries, such as *Restrepo* and *Armaddillo* (Metz, 2010).

The *Barrage* section of the film is also useful in that, although shot in high definition, this high degree of visual detail is paired with slow zooms in lieu of the fast-paced editing that is common in war films and documentaries. Moreover, the sounds emphasized are not those of explosions and gunfire but the noises of an empty water bottle being squeezed or of a woman cleaning a rug. These sounds do not fill in multiple audio channels in order to enrich the complexity of the ambient aural environment; instead, they dominate the soundtrack and disrupt the ability to romanticize the battlefield. In addition, the score during this segment replays George Frideric Handel’s “Suite No. 4 in D Minor, Sarabande.” This piece is overly melodramatic and is notably distinct from the heavy metal music that is often used in other war films to convey the rush of battle.

Accordingly, formal decisions such as these bring into focus the monotony of routine and diminish the intensity that often provides an interactive thrill to viewers. Even when the pace is more characteristic of the genre, such as during the scenes that follow missions, the engagements are filmed so coarsely as to induce nausea. Here, instead of reveling in the fear and adrenaline experienced by the soldier, De Palma uses these shifts in representational technique to foreground the experience of violation felt by civilians living in war zones when soldiers’ missions come into conflict with their everyday lives. The use of hand-held cameras, a night vision filter, and close-up framing convey vividly the harrowing experience of the young girl being assaulted, of being on the receiving end of the abuse of military power. All of the pleasure these formal techniques often produce within the war genre is evacuated within this scene. This is readily seen when, instead of simply functioning as an interesting way of filming a nighttime landscape, De Palma’s use of the green hues of night vision transforms the soldiers into monsters. It is precisely this manipulation of prevailing formal tropes that denatures the audio-

visual techniques that are currently being used to represent war in cinema.

Another way De Palma achieves his formal critique is by heightening the sensory experience of war to the point of unpleasant absurdity. His particular deployment of formal tropes is thus geared toward distanciation, a critical mode of spectatorship wherein a more encompassing perspective might be achieved. This approach is seen in the crudeness of the film’s representational style, one David Denby describes as, a “jaggedly assembled [,] clumsy, [and] off-center representation.”¹⁰ This style consciously works in opposition to the prevailing tendency to make this sort of martial violence palatable. As one prominent character states to the camera: “Don’t be expecting any Hollywood action flick. There’s not gonna be smash cuts, no adrenaline pumping soundtrack, no logical narrative to help make sense of it.” Accordingly, transitions are equally important in distancing the audience from the narrative. Many of the transitions, such as the use of split-screen wipes between the opening video journal and the French documentary, have a prosumer quality to them in that they are not used ineptly, but rather call attention to their presence in ways that are uncommon in mainstream industrial media.

The final aspect of *Redacted* that merits consideration is the film’s use of documentary images. Most often, war films, such as *Lone Survivor* and many others, incorporate actual war footage and images through video journals and personal photos. Instead of showing happy photos of the soldiers upon their return home or memorializing pictures of fallen comrades, De Palma includes a montage of images of civilian casualties of the Iraq War as the film’s conclusion. De Palma’s use of photos of Iraqi casualties thus subverts what is often the patriotic, emotional climax of war films based on real conflicts.

The decision to include these photographs was a perpetual point of contention between HDNet Films, the now defunct production banner of Magnolia pictures, and De Palma.¹¹ During the final 24-hours before the film opened at the 2007 New York Film Festival, the producers decided to redact the film’s concluding montage by blotting out the faces of the victims. Citing fear of litigation because there was no way to obtain releases for the photos, the production company argued that featuring the



Fig. 1: Taryn Simon, *Zahra/Farah*. Staged photo of the rape/murder scene of Abeer Qasim Hamza. The image is the final frame of *Redacted*.

photos unaltered was too great a risk.¹²

The only photo that remains as De Palma had intended is the film's final image. Not willing to shield viewers from the horrifying reality of what these soldiers had done and of what war can sometimes entail, De Palma hired a New York-based photographer Taryn Simon to stage the photo of the girl's dead body (Fig. 1). As the final frame of the film, this act of staging, once again, opens up a view of combat from outside the realm of the soldier. The photo attests to the assaulted girl's experience, which is radically different from the soldier's perspective that is otherwise dominant in recent war media. In this way, *Redacted*, at least in regards to combat experiences, provides a more comprehensive picture of the stakes of war.

As *Redacted* makes clear, there is a great need to grapple with the formal tools currently being used to represent war. Despite the anti-war rhetoric

that often accompanies contemporary war films, many still construct a convenient fiction of warfare whereby the consequences for those living in Afghanistan and Iraq are erased and "civic attention [is turned] away from debates about legitimacy and toward the war machine itself."¹³ If, as Stahl argues, the citizen's relationship to war is structured through "dominant generic alignments, narratives, and images, [then] certain practices, habits, and dispositions toward war [can become normalized]."¹⁴ That is to say, if the soldier's perspective becomes the dominant perspective through which American spectators come to know war, an empathetic understanding of the effects of military intervention becomes exceedingly difficult. Moreover, if these representational practices are so geared toward a particular understanding of military engagement, a perspective currently only concerned with the lives of American soldiers, do these practices then foreclose the alternative readings that critical post-9/11 narratives are attempting to insert within these established frameworks? There is always the possibility of multiple readings, but it seems here that narratives which purport to engage these issues and seek to transform our understanding of war often stand in conflict with the representational style used to visualize them. Texts like *Redacted*, which forcefully interrogate the formal tropes used to represent war, assert the necessity to question the politics of generic convention.

This article is part of a larger dissertation chapter that considers the role aesthetics play in the limitations of the representational field of war.

Stephanie M. Yeung received her PhD at the USC School of Cinematic Arts in 2014. Her dissertation, *Framing the Fight: Post-9/11 Warfare and the Logistics of Representation*, examines the fraught relationships between war media, aesthetics, and brand culture after 9/11.

Notes

1 Martin Tsai, "Review: In 'Boys of Abu Ghraib,' echoing opinions about torture," *Los Angeles Times*, 27 March, 2014.

2 Throughout the essay, the terms "form" and "formal" will be used to explore the conventions and codified practices of filmmaking within the war genre in terms of narrative structures and audio visual techniques.

3 David Bordwell has termed these changes "Intensified Continuity" in "Intensified Continuity: Visual Style in Contemporary

FIGHTING FORM

American Film," *Film Quarterly* 55 no.3 (2002): 16-28. Matthias Stork has argued elsewhere that this style has evolved further into what he terms "Chaos Cinema," an aesthetic style that "trade[s] visual intelligibility for sensory overload, and the result is a film style marked by excess, exaggeration and overindulgence." Matthias Stork, "Video Essay: Chaos Cinema: The Decline and Fall of Action Filmmaking," *Indiewire*, last modified 22 August, 2011, accessed 5 April, 2012, http://blogs.indiewire.com/pressplay/video_essay_matthias_stork_calls_out_the_chaos_cinema#.

4 Roger Stahl, *Militainment, Inc.: War, Media, and Popular Culture* (London: Routledge, 2009), 3.

5 *Ibid.*, 41.

6 David E. James, "Presence of Discourse/Discourse of Presence: Representing Vietnam," *Wide Angle* 7, no. 4 (1985): 44.

7 Although these films are both fictional and documentary, they are characterized by similar representational aesthetics that strive to insert the viewer into the war. Moreover, as Vivian Sobchack argues, "Cinematic identification does not depend necessarily [...] on the 'type' of film objectively unfolding on the screen [...]. Thus [...] a fiction can be experienced as [a] documentary, a documentary as [a] fiction [...]. Existential knowledge and forms of attention structure cinematic identification with – and of – the cinematic object." Vivian Sobchack, "Toward a Phenomenology of Nonfictional Film Experience," *Collecting Visible Evidence*, eds. Jane M. Gaines and Michael Renov (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 246.

8 Calum Marsh, "Lone Survivor's Takeaway," *The Atlantic*, 10 January 2014, accessed 29 January 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2014/01/-em-lone-survivor-em-s-takeaway-every-war-movie-is-a-pro-war-movie/282812/>.

9 Kenneth Turan, "'Redacted' is One Big Mess," *Los Angeles Times*, 16 November, 2007.

10 David Denby, "Obsessed: *Redacted*, *Love in the Time of Cholera*, and *Margot at the Wedding*," *The New Yorker*, 19 November, 2007.

11 Steven Zeitchik, "Sides Trade Shots Over 'Redacted'," *The Hollywood Reporter*, 12 October, 2007.

12 *Ibid.*, 2.

13 Stahl, 29.

14 *Ibid.*, 15.