

Documenting the 'War on Terror'

Written by Bruce Bennett

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Over more than a decade the global 'War on Terror' has become a densely mediated, expanding and literally endless conflict that has produced a vast amount of coverage on film, television, print journalism and online media. French sociologist Jean Baudrillard observed that the 'first' Gulf war (1990-1), which was perhaps the first war to be fought with live TV coverage, resulted in such 'an improbable orgy of material' that it was impossible to discern what was *actually* taking place in Iraq, to distinguish between representation and reality (Baudrillard 1995: 58). That live-TV war also exemplified the way in which contemporary warfare has become a media-spectacle so that the geographically-dispersed battlefield extends across the computer monitor, tablet, smartphone, television screen and cinema. This is nothing new; for a long time propagandists and 'information warfare' strategists have conducted parallel campaigns through news media and communications networks to generate support and consent for wars or military strikes, or have employed these channels to spread disinformation.

What is different with the War on Terror is the sheer density of images and audio-visual accounts of this dynamically mobile international conflict that are in circulation through major commercial media channels such as newspapers and magazines, TV and radio networks, as well as through minor, alternative or personal media such as activist videos, independent news networks, internet discussion fora, blogs, tumblr, microblogging sites and Twitter feeds, amateur photographs and academic scholarship. As a result, Baudrillard's comment upon the deluge of information accompanying Gulf War is even more pertinent nearly twenty years later. Far from reaching a point of exhaustion, this orgy of material continues unabated.

One of the most striking ways Anglo-American filmmakers have responded critically to this global explosion of violence and its spectacular hypermediation, is through a generic and stylistic turn to the production of documentaries, docudramas and dramatized documentaries[i], and 'activist cinema'. There are several reasons for this. The first is financial, since documentary is a potentially inexpensive form, not reliant upon stars, large crews, complex special effects or elaborate sets. The production and post-production schedules for documentary-style films can therefore also be much shorter than for a conventional fictional feature, allowing a film to be released in rapid response to current events with films taking on the role of journalistic commentary. For example, it took only nine months from the initial idea for Hollywood director Brian de Palma's digitally shot docudrama *Redacted* (2007) to be released into cinemas (Burdeau 2008: 16).

A second reason is that documentary film and television is regarded by both film-makers and audiences as a suitable mode for exploring serious and upsetting topics since documentary is traditionally understood to be primarily educational and coolly objective in its treatment of sometimes shocking subject matter. While we can certainly find examples of comic, satirical or even luridly exploitative film and TV documentaries, nevertheless, documentary is generally understood to be the antithesis of commercially-driven, gratuitously sensationalist entertainment. Thus, the documentary theorist Bill Nichols, describes this form of film as a 'discourse of sobriety', aligning it with the serious-minded, socially committed cultural domains of science, politics and education (Nichols 1991: 3). This 'sobriety' is traditionally evident in the restrained stylization of documentary cinema (in terms of cinematography, editing, performance styles of the participants, music and sound design) ensuring that the film emphasises content over form. Documentary is therefore commonly regarded as an appropriately unfrivolous form for such weighty topics as war

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and terrorism.

A third reason for this documentary turn is that a documentary may also marshal greater rhetorical force than conventional fiction film and television due to an abiding impression of immediacy or indexicality. However sceptical we might be about the veracity and objectivity of documentary film and television, understanding that documentary production always involves staging and selection, the global explosion of reality TV suggests that documentary nevertheless retains a fascination for audiences through the promise of immediacy. Film theorist Vivian Sobchack suggests that documentary is distinguished from fiction film and TV by a particular 'affective charge', the sense of excitement at seeing what appear to be unmediated, unvarnished, unmanipulated representations of stubborn reality. This promise of immediacy or authentic truth underpins the plethora of War on Terror documentaries and documentary-style dramas from *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Moore, 2004), *Iraq in Fragments* (Longley, 2006), *Heavy Metal in Baghdad* (Moretti, Alvi, 2007), *Taxi to the Dark Side* (Gibney, 2007), *Where in the World is Osama Bin Laden?* (Spurlock, 2008), *The Hurt Locker* (Bigelow, 2009) and *Armadillo* (Pedersen, 2010), through to the TV series, *Generation Kill* (White, Clellan Jones, 2008) and *Occupation* (Murphy, 2009). Both docudramas and more orthodox documentaries depend in similar ways for their success on what documentary theorist John Corner calls 'the power of the particular' over and above the power of fictional characters and narrative scenarios, metaphor and symbolism (Corner 1996: 40).

Two types of film have emerged in this documentary turn. The first of these is the orthodox or conventional documentary, which ranges from activist or campaigning films that assemble footage in order to make a persuasive argument, such as *Fahrenheit 9/11* (which is probably the most well-known and certainly the highest-grossing of all these films) or *The Shock Doctrine* (Winterbottom, Whitecross, 2009) (which argues that the War on Terror is a recent instance of neo-liberal imperialism), through to 'observational' documentaries such as the films and TV programmes about coalition troops based in Afghanistan that include *Restrepo* (Hetherington, Junger, 2010) and *Armadillo* (which caused an outcry in Denmark since it appears to capture the summary field execution of an Afghan soldier by Danish troops).

However, what is perhaps more interesting is the proliferation of films that blend documentary with fiction in various ways since these hybrid films are often directly concerned with the unclear relationship between reality and representation that is a feature both of contemporary warfare and of contemporary culture. The most visible of these are thrillers like *United 93* (Greengrass, 2006) and *Green Zone* (Greengrass, 2010), *Battle for Haditha* (Broomfield, 2007), or *The Hurt Locker* (Bigelow, 2008) and *Zero Dark Thirty* (Bigelow, 2012). These films are gripping, tense narrative extrapolations from real historical events that fuse stylistic and formal elements of documentary film and TV (unsteady hand-held camera-work, natural light and location-shooting, sometimes employing individuals who were involved with the events depicted) with elements of fiction film (heroic protagonists, suspenseful narratives, dramatic and emotive musical scores) to generate the affective charge with which documentary is associated. However, a potential political problem with these films is that the documentary component can appear to present fictional passages as objective truth, leading to accusations that a film is at best, critically vacant and at worse, disingenuous and deceptive. For example, despite its apparent authenticity, journalist John Pilger condemned the Oscar-winning film, *The Hurt Locker*, as a 'typically violent all-male war movie' (Pilger in Bennett, Diken 2011), while Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek has written of the supposedly non-judgemental depiction of the use of torture in *Zero Dark Thirty* that, 'The most obscene defence of the film is the claim that Bigelow rejects cheap moralism and soberly presents the reality of the anti-terrorist struggle, raising difficult questions and thus compelling us to think' (Žižek 2013).

Leaving aside the specific content of these films, what makes it difficult for film-makers to get a critical purchase on the War on Terror is that cinema is a crucial element of the media environment in which the conflict is conducted. It is in the mainstream of the orgiastic flow of images, sounds and stories that issues forth continually. As US philosopher Judith Butler has observed, for instance, 'The operation of cameras, not only in the recording and distribution of images of torture, but as part of the very apparatus of bombing, make it clear that media representations have already become modes of military conduct. So there is no way to separate, under present historical conditions, the material reality of war from those representational regimes through which it operates and which rationalize its own operation' (Butler 2009: 29). In these terms, for all her protestations of objectivity, Bigelow is a component of part of

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the war machine, rather than a dispassionate observer. Therefore, some of the more critically productive films are those that engage directly with the mediation of the conflict itself, acknowledging the limitations of their own status as minor, fragmentary representations lost in a vast field of sounds and moving images.

Two of the more interesting examples of films from the lower-budget margins of mainstream international cinema that explore issues of representational politics, are Brian de Palma's *Redacted* and *A Mighty Heart* (2007), by British director Michael Winterbottom. The films tell the stories, respectively, of the rape and murder of a young Iraqi woman and her family by US troops in Iraq in 2006, and the abduction and murder of American journalist Daniel Pearl in Afghanistan in 2002. Both films isolate localized paradigmatic incidents and experiences through which to pose broader questions about the conduct of the war, and both films self-consciously reflect on the representation and reporting of the conflict. In their focus upon individual murders, they suggest contrasting solutions to the question of how cinema might make the violence of this conflict visible. De Palma's film is an imitation of a compilation documentary that tells its story by assembling simulated footage from CCTV cameras, a soldier's video diary, a French documentary, jihadist websites, YouTube videos and Arabic TV news reports. As the soldier explains at the beginning of his video diary, 'Don't be expecting any Hollywood action flick. There's not going to be smash cuts, no adrenaline-pumping soundtrack, no logical narrative to help make sense of it. Basically, here, shit happens.' This description also prepares the audience for the aesthetic of the film as a whole, carefully distancing it from the sort of film, such as *Mission: Impossible* (1996), for which De Palma is better known.

Winterbottom's film employs the British director's characteristic documentary-style to tell the story of the search for *Wall St Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl after he is abducted in Karachi while researching a story on terrorism. Its narrative focus is divided between the efforts of the Pakistani police and ISI (Inter-Services Intelligence) to track down Pearl, and the agonizing experience of his pregnant wife, French journalist Mariane Pearl (Angelina Jolie), as she waits to hear what has happened to her husband. Both films turn on a similar detail – a video of the beheading of a kidnapped American, perhaps one of the most historically important examples of the documentary form to emerge from the War on Terror – and the difference with which they treat this material is significant for thinking more broadly about the problem of how cinema can address political violence and the War on Terror. Where De Palma chooses to show us the sickening (simulated) video of the beheading of one of the soldiers involved in the atrocity against Iraqi civilians, Winterbottom's film shows us only the stunned reactions of police and intelligence agents when they watch the video of Pearl's murder. Both films are interested in the problem of finding an adequate way of representing facets of the war on terror, but their solution is quite different; for De Palma, the only way to make sense of the barrage of sounds and images that comprise contemporary warfare is to simulate that structure in the patchwork form of the film, but nevertheless his film cannot help but lead us towards the implicit conclusion that Americans (and American soldiers) are the primary victims since the murder of the American soldier is at the dramatic core of the film. By contrast, Winterbottom's film acknowledges Judith Butler's assertion that 'media representations have already become modes of military conduct' and refrains from offering us the inflammatory images of violence that we expect. This is undoubtedly a compromise, but in some respects, the film is one of the most thoughtful explorations of the problem of how cinema can document the War on Terror.

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[i] These terms are sometimes used interchangeably to describe films that are wholly or partly comprised from dramatized reconstructions of real events.