Revising Documentary Modes: a Critical Study of American Iraq and Afghanistan War Documentaries, 2003 – present

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis identifies and examines a corpus of American documentary films, released between 2003 and 2014, that concern themselves with the US' recent concurrent land wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Employing Bill Nichols six-mode model of documentary classification as a theoretical baseline, the thesis argues that such traditional means of documentary classification are insufficiently capable of accounting for the dynamism and diversity of the aforementioned body of films. This thesis then proceeds, based on case-studies of existing Iraq and Afghanistan war documentaries, and on Nichols' conception of "Social Issue and Personal Portraiture" film, to a propose a new three-mode model of documentary classification, better suited to accommodating and elucidating this corpus of films as it currently exists.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED

CIA   Central Intelligence Agncy

FOB   Forward Operating Base

I&A   Iraq and Afghanistan

JSOC   Joint Special Operations Command

NATO   North Atlantic Treaty Organization

UN   United Nations

US   United States

USMC   United States Marine Corps.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

As many observers have noted, America's recent concurrent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have been more visually accessible than any other wars in history: news networks have provided American viewers with almost constant – albeit highly regulated – coverage of both conflicts (Jaramillo, Kellner); online video streaming sites such as YouTube have increasingly granted American internet-users access to first-hand, often disturbing, footage from the warzones (Andén-Papadopoulos); and, despite their cataclysmic failure-rate over the past decade (Blackmore, Muralidhar), Hollywood continues to pump out feature-length fiction films dealing with the two wars.[1] Each of these visual phenomenon, in turn, has received its due academic attention. Douglas Kellner and David Holloway deal effectively with the news coverage of the wars in their books *Cinema Wars* and *Cultures of the War on Terror* respectively. Kari Andén-Papadopoulos shows the potentially problematic role of sites like YouTube in her essay "Body Horror on the Internet." Countless articles and essays have attempted to tackle the relationship between fiction film and the two conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. Despite this substantial concentration of academic attention, however, one significant visual representative of the wars seems to have slipped by academia almost entirely unnoticed: documentary film.

Despite what the lack of academic attention might suggest, the Iraq/Afghanistan (I&A) wars have both provoked a dramatic influx of publically well-received and financially successful American documentary films (Klaus 483), films that tackle the myriad social and political consequences of those two wars. So dramatic is this influx, in

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[1] These now number greater than fifty. See Tim Blackmore's essay "Eyeless in America" for a fairly comprehensive list.

fact, that a number of industry commentators have seen it fit to hail I&A war documentaries as forerunners in a "Golden Age of Documentary" (Grant xxiii, James, Kellner 53). Despite their apparent significance, however, very little has yet been written on these films, leaving I&A war documentaries, as a corpus, to remain somewhat of an enigma: a body of work with no defined limits, and no real theoretical framework.

The first function of this paper, then, will be the identification of films within this corpus: the setting down of a comprehensive working list of films that should rightly be considered I&A war documentaries (an endeavor which, to my knowledge, has not yet been attempted.) For the sake of clarity – and to avoid arbitrarily conflating the cultural interests of a plethora of different nations – I have restricted this paper's area of interest to those films which might appropriately be considered "American": that is to say, I have only included I&A war documentaries directed by American filmmakers that were subsequently distributed in the United States between January 2003 and July 2014.[2] As a result, the list of films appended to this paper necessarily excludes a number of significant films made by non-American filmmakers – Canadian, Australian, Danish, French, Afghani, Iraqi etc. – which, though certainly meriting further study, have no bearing on this particular paper. A comprehensive list of American I&A war documentaries can thus be found in Appendix A of this paper, and should be understood to represent the corpus of films upon which the remainder of this paper's discussions are predicated.

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[2] Though the US' war in Afghanistan began in 2001, documentary films about the conflict were slow to arise and did not really start appearing until 2003: the year the US began its war in Iraq..

The second – and indeed more significant – function of this paper, then, having established a working corpus of American I&A war documentaries, is the construction of a new framework of categorization by which this dynamic corpus might be better organized and understood. Using Bill Nichols' *Introduction to Documentary* as a theoretical baseline, I will work to show that American I&A war documentaries, in many instances, resist categorization by traditional methods. Many I&A documentaries entirely elude, or at least blend beyond recognition Nichols' six traditional "modes" of documentary classification, such that these "modes" – when applied to American I&A war docs – seem somewhat insufficient. To rectify this shortcoming, I will work to establish a new corpus-specific three-mode model of documentary classification, based upon more loosely defined ideas in the penultimate chapter of Nichols' book. This three-mode model will serve to highlight the inability of Nichols six-mode system to fully account for all American I&A documentaries, while simultaneously proposing a more effective framework by which these films might better be understood moving forward.

Recognizing that these films comprise a novel and dynamic corpus, and providing a means by which to group these films by their guiding methodological practices, are both essential endeavors; not only will this process help promote the better understanding of a little-discussed corpus but, if extrapolated upon in the future, it may also serve to shed light on the current state of documentary film as a whole, and American public perception of war writ large. The shifting and blurring of traditional modes in I&A war documentaries may simply be an isolated phenomenon, specific to that corpus; depending on what is triggering these shifts, however, changes occurring in I&A war documentaries may instead be a preliminary indication of changes waiting to come about in

documentary film as a whole. If these shifting boundaries have come about because of

recent developments in filmmaking technology, for example, or as a result of society's

growing acceptance of documentary as a means of common entertainment, the modal

changes occurring in I&A war docs of the last eleven years are likely to replicate

themselves near-term – if they haven't already – in other sub-bodies of contemporary

documentary film. Furthermore, understanding the overarching emphases that drive these

I&A war documentaries is liable to provide increased insight into the political and social

mindset of the American war-time public: after all, a society's films have long been

recognized "as barometers of changing social norms and values" (Spector 1). These

questions, themselves, will not be taken up within the bounds of this paper, but serve as

testament to the type of academic activity possible once an effective classification system

has been established that can fully account for current body of I&A war documentaries.

Before I proceed to propose such a classification system, it behooves me, first, to

delineate the terms by which documentary films have typically been understood over the

past two decades.[3] As previously noted, I will be taking as a baseline the six "modes" of

documentary filmmaking put forward in Chapter 6 of Bill Nichols' 2001 book

Introduction to Documentary: "poetic, expository, participatory, observational, reflexive

and performative" (99);[4] as Nichols explains, these "six modes of representation…

function something like sub-genres of the documentary film genre" (99). Though many

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[3] Bill Nichols's six-mode model, as it now exists, is best represented in his *Introduction to Documentary*, published in 2001; his 1991 book *Representing Reality* presents a similar model, but less explicitly so – and without the clarity of his *Introduction.*
[4] For a detailed account of the stylistic tendencies and historical evolution of these modes see Chapter 6 of Nichols' *Introduction:* "What Types of Documentary Are There?"

of these terms were most certainly circulating prior to Nichols' 2001 book,[5] *Introduction* is by far the most lucid, comprehensive discussion of these documentary "modes", and serves to set the current standard in the field; Nichols' *Introduction* also provides us with an understanding of the state of documentary film classification as it existed in 2001, the same year that the United States began its war effort in Afghanistan. Nichols' *Introduction* thus represents a cohesive, comprehensive guide to documentary mode theory as it existed immediately prior to the origin of the corpus of films discussed herein.

As Nichols explains on page 100 of his *Introduction*, his modal classification system unfolds chronologically, with "the order of the presentation of [his] six modes correspond[ing] roughly to the chronology of their introduction" to the world of film. In this sense, his documentary modes seem, quite effectively to coincide with "a history of documentary film" (100) (Figure 1, 138), which stretches from the poetic documentaries of the 1920s to the performative documentaries of 1980s. Each mode of film in

Documentary Modes
Chief Characteristics
—Deficiencies

Hollywood fiction [1910s]: fictional narratives of imaginary worlds
—absence of "reality"
Poetic documentary [1920s]: reassemble fragments of the world poetically
—lack of specificity, too abstract
Expository documentary [1920s]: directly address issues in the historical world
—overly didactic
Observational documentary [1960s]: eschew commentary and reenactment; observe things as they happen
—lack of history, context
Participatory documentary [1960s]: interview or interact with subjects; use archival film to retrieve history
—excessive faith in witnesses, naive history, too intrusive
Reflexive documentary [1980s]: question documentary form, defamiliarize the other modes
—too abstract, lose sight of actual issues
Performative documentary [1980s]: stress subjective aspects of a classically objective discourse
—loss of emphasis on objectivity may relegate such films to the avant-garde; "excessive" use of style.

Figure 1   Chronology of "documentary modes" from page 138 of Nichols' *Introduction to Documentary*

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[5] Erik Barnouw was certainly referring to 'observation' and 'participation' in his 1974 *A History of Non-Fiction Film*

Nichols' chronology "arises in part through a growing sense of dissatisfaction among filmmakers with previous mode" (100): that is to say "new modes arise partly in response to perceived deficiencies in previous ones" (101). At first glance, then, Nichols' categories seem closer to 'movements' than to 'modes,' closer to an evolutionary history than a breakdown of the filmmaking methodologies that are actually being practiced at the time of his writing.

Nichols very quickly allays this concern, however, suggesting that, though his modal system represents an evolutionary chain, it is not one "in which later modes demonstrate superiority over earlier modes and vanquish them. Once established through a set of conventions and paradigmatic films, a given mode remains available to all" forever (100) – for each one of these modes, Nichols then proceeds to provide the reader with a comprehensive list of each mode's standard "conventions and paradigmatic films" (100). By proceeding in this fashion, Nichols seems to conflate "historical movement" and "current mode", suggesting that these modes have not risen and conquered, but instead have risen and have coexisted, unchanged, right up until the current day. By Nichols' reckoning, then, every dominant mode of documentary film over the past hundred years, is still a viable mode in 2001, and still exhibits the same fundamental features at it did up to eight decades ago. This is fine in theory, but is does not necessarily work wonders when applied as a practical system of classification.

Perhaps the biggest problem with Nichols' system is that does not take into account internal evolution or the potential for modes to fade out of practical usage. Of course, filmmakers can still sit down today and, using the appropriate tools and techniques, create films in the poetic mode; the fact of the matter is, however, very few

people today *are* doing that, especially in the field of I&A war documentary. The poetic mode, while still existing in principle, and in the annals of documentary theory, is simply not functionally relevant to certain corpuses of contemporary film. In a similar vein, the expository documentaries of today, while certainly still exhibiting a number of the more significant traits of their 1920s predecessors – such, at least, that they can still be recognized as expository documentaries – exhibit many other traits that are entirely different.

Nichols' system, at a basic level, by promoting itself as an historical evolution, and by drawing these aged and beleaguered modes into a perpetual present, fails to accommodate for the fact that these modes may fade out of practical relevance, may develop within themselves over time, or may combine with one another to such a degree that their origin can no longer be recognized. The truth is, though Nichols' modal classification system is effective at categorizing patterns in documentary filmmaking that have formed *throughout* history, it cannot realistically be brought to bear, on a specific moment *in* history – especially one so far beyond the upper limit of his chronology. We must of course remember that Nichols' model ends with performative documentaries of the 1980s; though performative documentary is certainly still alive and well in the current day, Nichols' model does not account for any new modes that may have developed over the past 30 years.

Though it is useful as a baseline of historical understanding, and though some of its modes still persist, relatively unchanged, Nichols' model clearly has its limitations with regard to practical application for understanding much of contemporary documentary practice. A system that encompasses sixty years of stylistic and

methodological development simply cannot be brought to bear on a corpus with a lifespan of merely a decade – especially one that has come to fruition a quarter century beyond the system's last upgrade. The modes described in Nichols' book simply do not exist in the same practical way they did thirty, fifty or even ninety years ago – that is if they even still exist at all.

Looking at I&A war documentaries of the past eleven years then, we see a significant number of documentary films that, quite understandably, seem to "flaunt their lack of concern with conforming to the style(s)… dictated by documentary history and theory" (Bruzzi 7) – a trend that Stella Bruzzi identifies, generally, with post-1990 documentary as a whole. Though a number of I&A war docs can still be seen to take root in one or another of Nichols' modes, more and more frequently we are seeing films that appear to challenge the efficacy of his modal structure, films that push the limits. Many of these films seem to push the limits to such a degree that they can hardly be located on Nichols' spectrum at all. In order to effectively classify these I&A war documentaries then – rather than rely on a system that was built to encompass sixty years of film and all subgenres of documentary – it becomes essential to create a new system based exclusively on patterns that exist in the I&A war docs that are currently on display: a modal structure specific to, and contemporaneous with the corpus which it deigns to interpret. This new modal structure, of course, can neither replace nor entirely eschew Nichols' six-mode model as it currently exists. This is simply because a number of Nichols' modes have come through in I&A war docs partially unscathed; even those that seem to have fallen by the wayside, or have evolved to become entirely unrecognizable, are still relevant in that they, at one point, had a significant influence on how the current

modes have developed. As such, a number of Nichols' six modes will factor sporadically into the discussions that follow hereafter, though more as historical reference points than as presently useable frameworks.

Over the course of the next three chapters, then, I will attempt, using Nichols six mode system as a theoretical backdrop, to parse the current state of I&A war documentaries, dividing this corpus' films by overarching methodology into more relevant, more presently useful groupings than those found in Nichols' *Introduction.* As a result of the stylistic fluidity of I&A war documentaries, these boundaries will be drawn, not necessarily along the lines of specific filmmaking technique, but along the lines of filmmaking emphasis: that is, connections will be drawn based on what ideas/emotions these documentaries are working to communicate, more so than the technical measures used to communicate them – though both will certainly be discussed. Once broad lines of filmic emphasis have been established, case studies of specific films will then be undertaken to highlight some of the contemporary conventions and techniques currently being used by I&A war documentarists to achieve their communicative goals.

Interestingly enough, having worked so hard to stress the current inadequacy of his six-mode system, it is Nichols' again to whom I turn for the guiding premises of my own classification system. In the last section of the penultimate chapter of his *Introduction* Nichols introduces two ideas, two overarching filmmaking strategies completely distinct from his six-mode model: the twin concepts of "Social Issue" and "Personal Portraiture" documentary. The former term connotes a vast body of films that can be seen to tackle broad social issues intellectually, wherein a "right to know guides a quest for knowledge" (166); the later term connotes a distinctly different body of films

that tackle smaller social issues, emotionally, at the level of the individual, "stressing the drama of experiencing a problem" rather than the necessity of "finding a solution" (167).

These two categories are introduced by Nichols at the end of his book in what seems almost like an afterthought. Far from the rigid, outdated modes laid forth in the previous chapters, these two premises are essentially timeless, and together serve as somewhat of a catch-all for documentary film classification. Nichols describes these two premises, not as modes, but as overarching "emphases," emphases that between them effectively "characterize the political voice of many" if not all documentary films (Nichols 163). He goes on to explain that these two emphases, far from being rigid and immovable, "present a spectrum of possibilities" that include, but are not dictated by, his "six modes of documentary representation" (163). These two overarching categories can be seen to account for most all documentaries, and are loose enough to accommodate any 'blurring' that might occur between the more specific individual modes. Though Nichols does not develop these ideas in any significant way, his determination to establish a higher-tier organizational rubric, devoid of historical attachment, seems to anticipate a future circumstance that renders his "six modes" obsolete. I believe that the I&A war documentaries are an example of such a circumstance, and it is for this reason that I have chosen to employ Nichols' guiding "emphases" – and not his six modes – as the basis of my organizational strategy.

My first body chapter, Chapter 2, entitled "Let Me Tell You," coincides loosely with Nichols conception of "Social Issue" documentary. This chapter deals, as the title suggests, with I&A war docs that follow an instructional or argumentative logic: films that work to convince the audience of a specific point for the purpose of eliciting a

specific response. This category is comprised of films which, like an article in a magazine or a presidential speech, work to persuade or to prove. These films, without fail, are constructed around a central problem or question (Nichols 167); this question can be either explicit or implicit, and does not necessarily have to be answered by the time the film concludes. As such, this chapter will be split into two sections: the first section will deal with films which, having posed a question, proceed to answer it – using persuasive argumentation and factual instruction to achieve a specific goal of 'education'; the second section will deal with those films which construct themselves around unanswered questions, and are more exploratory in nature: films that venerate the individual search for knowledge rather than its blind acceptance. What binds these two sub-modes of film, then, despite their seemingly disparate approaches, is the fact that they both work persistently –through either the absence or presence of information – to change what or how we think.

Chapter 3, entitled "Let Me Show You," deals with films which – unlike those in the first chapter – work to harness the emotional character of a given situation. These films, largely in line with Bill Nichols' conception of "Personal Portraiture" documentaries, are less concerned with engaging in argument than with providing access to an emotional experience. Rather than the persuasive presentation of factual information, these films are constructed around taut emotional situations, and usually at least present themselves as being devoid of bias; they serve to show aspects of the war from a specific emotional perspective, but ostensibly leave the viewer to interpret the experiences presented in any way they choose. In essence, they work primarily to change how or what we feel.

Chapter 4 deals with a relatively new breed of film which – though nowhere near as prevalent as films from the previous two categories – is slowly gaining traction as a mode of I&A war documentary. This chapter, entitled "Let Them Show You (What I Think)," deals with a small subset of films in which the director relinquishes control of the shooting process; these films move beyond the reach of traditional observational documentary and, rather than being shot by an onsite director, are constructed from raw footage captured by the subjects themselves. These films extend beyond the reach of classic observational documentary and beyond the reach of both Nichols' six-mode system and the first two chapters of this paper. These films are not constructed purely in the emotional sphere, nor are they explicitly argumentative. Indeed, more often than not these films provide an unusual compromise between the two forms. The emotional, self-reflexive, autobiographical footage shot by the subject, is frequently manipulated by a filmmaker during the editing process into a subtly persuasive, ideologically biased film. In this sense, these films provide an interesting meld of the "Social Issue" documentaries of Chapter 2 and the "Personal Portraiture" documentaries of Chapter 3.

Throughout this paper I work to provide a modal classification system by which we might better understand the evolving methodological trends of a burgeoning corpus of films; I hope, through the detailed dissection of archetypical I&A war documentaries, to establish lines along which this dynamic corpus might be better understood as it continues to develop. Beyond simply establishing rules by which we might classify I&A war documentary, however, I hope that this paper will serve to encourage, and to highlight the necessity of, further investigation into this little-discussed field of study. Iraq and Afghanistan war documentaries represent an incredibly diverse and fertile

corpus of contemporary films, and one that requires significantly more academic

attention than I, in these few brief pages, am able to provide.

CHAPTER 2: LET ME TELL YOU

In March 1989 death row inmate Randall Dale Adams, of Grove City Ohio, was exonerated of his crimes and released from prison; wrongfully convicted of the murder of a Dallas police officer, Adams spent twelve years behind bars before evidence arose, proving his innocence.[6] In June 2001, the prominent American retail chain K-mart announced its plan to stop selling handgun ammunition in its 2,000+ store locations; the announcement came only days after K-Mart executives met with three survivors of the 1999 Columbine High School massacre – a tragic school shooting in which K-Mart bullets were purportedly used.[7] In March 2004, fast-food giant McDonald's began phasing out its "Super-size" option; a month later, it introduced "go-Active" Happy Meals for adults, which included a bottle of water and pedometer. What do these events have in common? Well, nothing really, except the fact that they were all was precipitated in some form or another – at least ostensibly – by the efforts of a documentary filmmaker. Michael Moore was in the process of filming *Bowling for Columbine* (2002) when he chose to orchestrate the meeting between the Columbine victims and K-Mart execs. Morgan Spurlock's *Supersize Me* (2004) highlighted the potentially life-threatening consequences of eating too much McDonald's food; this in turn caused large-scale public concern, which likely factored in to MacDonald's' decision to trim their menu. In the process of filming *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) Errol Morris uncovered information about prosecutorial misconduct and hidden exculpatory evidence, resulting in

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[6] National Registry of Exonerations: Randall Adams.
http://www.law.umich.edu/special/exoneration/Pages/casedetail.aspx?caseid=2984

[7] <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/2001/06/28/kmart-guns.htm>

the subsequent exoneration of Randall Adams – Morris even managed to record an admission of guilt from the actual killer.

Though these cases may seem completely unrelated in nature, their combined testimony serves to confirm one salient fact: that documentary film, and indeed the process of documentary filmmaking itself, maintains the capacity to provoke tangible, far-reaching social change. Of course, this idea is not a novel one. Documentary films have been working to elicit broad social change for decades – long before Randall Adams went to prison, and at least a quarter century before the first Big Mac. Leni Riefenstahl's 1935 film *Triumph des Willens* (better known in English as *Triumph of the Will*) was pivotal in garnering public support for Nazism, just as Frank Kapra's retaliatory *Why We Fight* series (1942-45) served to bolster the hearts and minds of the war-wearied Allies. In a similar vein, the "Black Film" movement that spread through Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia throughout the 1950s and 60s, saw a slew of similarly politicized films targeting issues from institutionalized childcare[8] to military occupation (Barnouw, 264-6). Indeed, the idea that films might be used as a medium for the elicitation of social action is as old as film itself and, despite the myriad superficial changes that have affected the documentary medium over the past ninety years,[9] is an idea that shows no sign of dying out in the contemporary era. Every week, it seems, documentary filmmakers are lending their hand, and their camera's eye, to new and pressing social causes, hoping that, through film, their ideas might be presented in an engaging and persuasive way to the widest possible audience; this audience, in turn, if all things go as

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[8] See Kurt Goldberger's 1964 film *Children Without Love (Děti Bez Lásky)*
[9] Assuming, as most critics do, that the documentary form as we know it was first exhibited in 1922 in Robert J. Flaherty's *Nanook of the North*. *it should be noted, though, that the term "documentary" itself was not coined until four years later, in 1926.

planned, will then rally to affect the social change necessitated by the film. Whether it's

rallying support for the legalization of marijuana, or condemning the practice of offshore

oil-drilling, contemporary "documentar[ies] are one of the [preeminent] forms through

which new attitudes enter wider circulation" (Chanan 7).

The US' concurrent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have, by no means, escaped the

attention of change-seeking documentarists. At least half of the films currently existing

that deal with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan openly strive to elicit a change in the way

we understand, and thereby position ourselves around these conflicts; these films might

broadly be categorized as "Social Issue" documentaries (Nichols 163) as their prime

motivation lies in raising awareness of, and working to resolve broad social issues. These

films trend to eschew emotional narrative and aesthetic extravagance, and operate instead

through the practical and efficient presentation of a distinct point of view; they are

concerned primarily with persuasion and rhetoric, with changing *how and what we think*,

and should thus be distinguished from "Personal Portraiture" documentaries, which,

through the foregrounding of emotional experience and through the avoidance of overt

politicization, strive primarily to change *how and what we feel* (see Chapter 3) (Nichols

166-7). That is not to say that these two broad intentions do not, at points, intersect:

indeed, personal emotional struggle can be employed in a "Social Issue" documentary as

a stylistic means to facilitate higher-level political instruction, just as political rhetoric

may factor into a primarily experiential film. Despite this distinct possibility of overlap at

the level of content, however, most I&A war documentaries (with the exception of those

exhibited in Chapter 4) center themselves around one emphasis or the other: they either

propose to *tell us how to think* about a given issue or attempt to *show us how to feel* about it.

As its title should suggest, this chapter deals with films that fall into the first category: with films – like *Blackfish* (2013) or *An Inconvenient Truth* – which exist primarily to convince, to persuade or to provoke large-scale re-thinking; films which propose to answer, or at least draw attention to, an important social question; films that, through rhetoric and the presentation of evidence (or lack of evidence), work to explain the past, to politicize the present, and to encourage action in the future.

Within this "Social Issue" subset of I&A war documentary, there exist two predominant artistic frameworks, two distinct methodologies, each meriting discussion in this chapter; these two groups of films can be identified simply by their ability to answer the questions at hand: those that can (the 'instructive' film), and those that can not (the 'exploratory' film). Each organizational framework has its own strategic value, its own bank of recurring cinematic elements, its own way of eliciting popular support for a given point of view.

2.1 – THE INSTRUCTIVE FILM

The first of these two types of film, the one that indubitably 'has all the answers,' might aptly be dubbed the "instructive film" as a function of its habitually didactic disposition. This type of film works to elicit social change through education; it works to establish a common base of knowledge upon which its viewers might act, if and when they are given the opportunity. Typically speaking, this is an imminently persuasive style of film – if somewhat bland and authoritative in nature. The "instructive film" works

from a firm baseline of 'irrefutable' knowledge, established prior to the film's conception; it usually begins by establishing the parameters of the question that has necessitated its creation, and then ends once that question has been sufficiently answered. In this sense, the "instructive" variety of "Social Issue" film operates in much the same way as a strict university lecture, wherein the possibility of IFs and BUTs is kept to a strategic minimum, and every question is a stupid question, assuming they're permitted in the first place. The information provided is organized, persuasive – if a little dry – and meticulously constructed so as not to invite the possibility of contradiction. Nature documentaries like BBC's *Planet Earth* might be this film's slightly less-politicized cousin. Statements are made, evidence is given, conclusions are drawn and inevitably proven right – often simultaneously. Within the world delimited by the "instructive film", facts exist only to bolster the central assertion; any information with the potential to undermine the logic of the film is strategically avoided. These films do not stimulate thoughts, but present them, fully formed, for assimilation by viewers who – having likely entered the film, willingly, from a position of ignorance – are encouraged to accept them wholesale. These films are often aesthetically quite spare and, because they typically rely on multiple intercut interviews to provide evidence for their case, tend to neglect basic narrative elements such as continuity editing (Nichols 27) and character development. Because of this tendency, the instructive documentarist "often has greater freedom in the selection and arrangement of images than [even] the fiction filmmaker. (Nichols 107). Visual creativity and narrative excitement are habitually sacrificed at the altar of efficiency; strong characters and narrative drive are often substituted by authoritarian voice over and the ceaseless recounting of fact.

Perhaps the two best examples of this particular category – and two documentaries that practically beg to be dealt with side-by-side – are Robert Greenwald's 2003 film *Uncovered: The War on Iraq* and Charles Ferguson's 2007 film *No End in Sight*. Despite being produced nearly four years apart, and despite the monumental situational shifts that certainly took place in the interim, the films are remarkably similar: both in terms of content and technique. Where Greenwald's film handles America's initial decision to invade Iraq, Ferguson's film works to explain the events that took place in Iraq after the 'successful liberation' of Baghdad. Despite their temporal remove, these films both seem to argue essentially the same point, they seem to lay blame on the same individuals, and seem to substantiate that guilt using the same filmic and rhetorical devices. Both films work from the baseline assumption that America's war in Iraq was/is an entirely unjustified endeavor, and both work to answer the same central question: how did this happen? How, with our massive intelligence community, with our experts on foreign policy and the Middle East, with our commitment to global justice, how was this event even possible?

Almost out of necessity, both films are highly critical of the Bush administration's handling of events, and strive tirelessly to establish a foundation of blame – pinning the nation's ostensible blunder, perhaps rightly so, on three or four high-ranking individuals; as an interesting counterpoint, both films simultaneously strive to exculpate the CIA officers, the policy advisors and the associated military commanders who may otherwise have been caught up in the line of fire. For the sake of the many, it seems, these films condemn the few. This eventuality is achieved in a very methodical, very strategic manner and, in both films, is essentially complete by about the thirty-minute mark.

In their attempts to garner public support, campaigning politicians tend to gravitate towards two broad stratagems: (1) they either work, in the vein of self-promotion, to bolster their own credentials – earning the audience's trust, and demonstrating their own aptitude – or (2) they work, in the vein of defamation, to undermine their opponent's credentials – diminishing his authority and/or his trustworthiness. The best political campaigns do both simultaneously.. "Instructive films," in this sense, particularly the two exemplars under discussion here, operate much like practiced politicians: they work to promote the authenticity of their own ideology, while simultaneously working to discredit the ideology of their absent opposition.

Film, as a medium, lends itself particularly well to this stratagem; this is simply because, in a film, unlike in a political debate, one's opponent is not usually present to defend himself. Even when he is – thanks to the marvels of modern editing – his counterpoints can be manipulated and shown out of context. As a result, a persuasive uncontested argument is never further away than the editing table, and is not necessarily dependent on the validity/superiority of the points presented. Instructive filmmaking, in this sense, is more of a dictatorship than a democracy: the director's argument is best because it is the only argument present.

Both Greenwald and Ferguson take advantage of film's innate authoritarian capacity for the presentation of uncontested truth, and use elements of rhetorical strategy to establish an essentially bulletproof line of argumentation; both work hard to establish the moral and intellectual superiority of their witnesses – "an A-list of highly placed Washington insiders with a great deal of credibility and authority" (Mackey-Kallis 154) – and work equally hard to diminish the moral and intellectual character of Bush and his

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compatriots. This weighted dynamic is firmly established within the first thirty minutes of each film, allowing the remainder of the film to be dedicated to what Bill Nichols terms "demonstrative rhetoric" (50): wherein the pre-established trustees of factual information "us[e] real or apparent reasoning… [to] prove, or give the impression of proving" the films' respective arguments.

Greenwald's film begins with a series of brief, medium-close range shots of professional-looking men and women; each sits comfortably in an office, a library, a living room (or some other appropriately comfortable yet business-like setting), and looks directly into the camera. After a brief title slide introducing them collectively as 'The Experts," these men and women – who, as we soon learn, are a hodgepodge of military and government officials, CIA analysts, NATO employees etc. – proceed to speak; each witness, in turn, provides an index of his/her personal accolades, before being cut off prematurely by a fade to the next witness – as a result, the voice of the second witness often coexists briefly with the image of the first. This abrupt, overlapping style of editing gives the impression of overload, of superfluity, almost as if to say: 'there are so many important people here, with so many qualifications that we could barely squeeze them all in.' For about four minutes, this hurried montage of professional faces rolls on: no single voice taking more than eight seconds of screen time, most taking less than five. In terms of documentary film logic – in terms of any film's logic – four minutes is a disproportionally long time to spend on a single visual element; after about two, the average viewer is liable to start fidgeting in their chair, wondering when this steady stream of important people is going to end. It doesn't. The message is clear: 'disagree with us if you want, but for every witness you present we have fifty better ones.'

Ferguson, at the beginning of *No End in Sight*, introduces his star witnesses in a

similar fashion – some of them actually the same as Greenwald's; after a brief opening

Figure 2	Various shots from the opening sequence of Charles Ferguson's 2007 film *No End in Sight*

montage depicting chaos and violence in Iraq, interspersed with clips of George W. Bush

speaking to the public, two black title screens appear, providing, essentially, the entire

crux of the film. They read: (1) "This is the story of America's invasion of Iraq." (2) "It is

a story in which many people tried to save a nation" (Figure 2). These title screens are

subsequently followed by a series of very brief shots – much like Greenwald's –

depicting well-dressed professionals in business-casual settings; these professionals –

unlike Greenwald's – however, do not introduce themselves, do not list off their

professional accomplishments; they simply sit there, looking dejectedly into the camera:

speechless, frustrated, visibly in anguish (Figure 2). Later in the film, these people will

be identified as the same sort of high-ranking officials that inhabit Greenwald's opening

scene, but for now, Ferguson is quite happy to leave their qualifications aside, focusing

instead on their visible regret. The implication of this combination of shots is explicit,

and powerful. The viewer automatically recognizes these people as the budding 'saviors'

referred to in the previous title slide; simultaneously, however, the viewer infers from the

expression on their faces that, though they may have tried to 'save a nation,' they have since undoubtedly failed. This fifteen-second segment establishes three key points: (1) somebody placed Iraq in a position such that it required saving; (2) whoever it was, it wasn't these people; (3) despite having been powerless to prevent this catastrophe, they still feel remorse. Before establishing their professional characteristics and their intellectual superiority Ferguson has established the purity of their collective moral character.

These introductions represent but two ways in which filmmakers might use editing techniques and filmic processes to enhance the legitimacy of those people whose words will inevitably tell their version of the truth; Greenwald emphasizes his witnesses' positional authority where Ferguson works to emphasize the superior moral character of his. If history has taught us anything, however, it's that being well intended and in a position of power doesn't necessarily guarantee legitimacy, or righteousness. Proving the moral integrity and institutional clout of a witness, while certainly useful tools, are of no significant value, unless the witness's testimony is simultaneously perceived to be factually accurate. Even Winston Churchill – as internationally respected and as rhetorically gifted as he may have been – would have been hard-pressed to convince the war-time public that Russia was controlled by hyper-intelligent jellyfish, or that Germany was in fact a giant volcano. This is simply because, in an age of scientific justification, people largely require demonstrative proof before allowing themselves to be swayed.

Non-Fiction film, again, is remarkably well suited to this process of demonstrative substantiation; this is simply because, in an 'occularcentric' society (Askew 3), people tend to equate raw footage uncomplicatedly with reality (Bruzzi, 14).

This is particularly true of our current age, in which cameras are mounted on the corner of every building, on the dashboard of every car; even the cheapest, most basic cell-phones nowadays have 5 mega pixel video cameras. We have learned to equate "the jerkiness of handheld cameras [with]… immediacy" and reality (Auferheide 11). In an age in which everyone and everything is recorded on video, we have learned to accept recorded video, unhesitatingly, as evidence.

As a result of this cultural development, finding visual substantiation for a given point is easier than it has ever been. Not only is there an incredible abundance of video 'evidence' but, as a result of our "visualist bias," we are also eminently predisposed to accept visual evidence without question. We, as a society, are in fact so trusting of visual evidence, so ready to accept video as proof that we have learned to create causal connections between text and video, even when they don't actually exist. Take, for example, a 2009 television advertisement for Cymbalta[10] (a drug that fights major depressive disorder): a happy couple runs through the woods, another happy couple runs along the beach, a man leans dejectedly against a bookcase, a woman stares blankly into the distance, all the while, voice-over narration reads: "depression hurts in so many ways: sadness, loss of interest, anxiety. Cymbalta can help." By synchronizing the video and the voice over, the ad uses "a logic of implication" (Nichols 29) to suggest that the people on the screen (video) all suffer from depression (audio); and that their lives have been improved by using Cymbalta. This is never stated, but is instead automatically assumed by the viewer. Do these actors suffer from depression? Probably not. Are those actors

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[10] "No One." Cymbalta. Advertisement. Eli Lilly and Company, 20 Jun. 2009. Television. (Can be found online at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OTZvnAF7UsA>)

taking Cymbalta? Probably not. Does Cymbalta work? Perhaps. Regardless, we accept

the video as visual proof of the accompanying statement; in situations where no actual

correlation exists between the video and the narration, we have learned to follow a "logic

of implication" (Nichols 29), and unconsciously create one.

Both Greenwald and Ferguson are well aware of this phenomenon – our innate

ability to infer logical connection between two simultaneous elements – and use it

throughout their respective films to enhance the credibility of their witnesses'

testimonies. A common technique, employed by both Greenwald and Ferguson, is the

transition between diegetic and non-diegetic sound. Diegetic sound, briefly, is any sound

in a film that can be understood, logically, to emanate from the world depicted on screen;

non-diegetic sound, then, is any sound that originates from outside the realm of visual

representation – that bears no immediate physical connection to the events unfolding in

the filmic world (Donnelly 9). Imagine a scene that depicts two men talking in the woods:

their voices, the birds, the wind, the rustle of leaves, a shotgun in the distance, these are

all diegetic sounds; the playful orchestral music drifting through the background is non-

diegetic, as there is no physical logic linking those sounds to the scene (assuming there is

not an orchestra in the woods). Oftentimes directors will have music shift from being

diegetic, to being non-diegetic without breaking the rhythm of the song, having once-

diegetic music continue to "play[] over scenes from which it can't possibly be

emanating" (Garner 189). A song that begins on a car radio in the Bronx, for example,

might continue non-diegetically overtop of a following scene – underwater, in the middle

of a jungle, in outer space. This effect allows for the creation of an emotional connection

between two events or locations that are not spatially, or obviously connected.

"One typical device [used by both Greenwald and Ferguson] is to cut from the shot of a speaking character to other images, while the character continues to speak in voice-over" (Jaffe 22). A testimony that begins diegetically in a darkened room in America, can thus continue non-diegetically as narration over footage shot in Iraq. Rather than creating an emotional connection between two spatially removed scenes, this transition from diegetic to non-diegetic speech creates a substantive logical connection between fact and footage. 'It's chaos over there' is paired with images of violence and mayhem, 'Bush had no idea what he was doing' persists over archive footage of Bush garbling his words, or stumbling on his way into a press meeting. This technique pervades both Greenwald's and Ferguson's films, and allows the statements of their 'experts' to be verified – by undeniable visual evidence – the moment they are uttered. The devious part about this machination is that, much like the Cymbalta ad., the connection between image and narration doesn't have to be explicit, or even inherently logical; the images on screen "are only given a specific connotation by being juxtaposed with the interviewee's personal account" (Bruzzi, 33). Simply, if the two are presented simultaneously we accept them as logical counterparts. Video and voice are mutually affirming: video serves as proof of the statement, the statement serves as meaning for the video. Greenwald and Ferguson provide the raw material and we, the viewers, through our own predisposition to manufacture causal logic, ascribe that material with meaning and authenticity.

Greenwald and Ferguson, having established the credibility of their witnesses, and having constructed a system by which their every word is simultaneously converted into fact, are then free to fill ninety minutes of film with whatever lesson, or with whatever

proposed ideology they so choose; in the case of both of these films, this happens to be a moderate left-wing – specifically anti-Bush – ideology, with a dedicated effort toward the exculpation of the American intelligence community. There is no room within the films for ambiguity, and no hint at the possibility of a counter argument; with the abundance of archive footage depicting the Bush administration, however, there is plenty of opportunity to preemptively discredit the opposition, should the viewer go on in the future to engage with a more right-leaning documentary.

The political leanings of these films, and indeed their specific arguments are largely irrelevant; the filmic techniques employed by Greenwald and Ferguson are symptomatic of an entire sub-mode of I&A war documentary – one open to any range of ideologies, and any number of specific points of view. Through the analysis of two relatively typical instructive films, I have worked to highlight a number of common techniques through which directors are able garner the belief and support of their viewers. This was by no means a comprehensive guide; indeed, as is always the case, the techniques used by directors to compel belief in a given theorem are as and diverse as the films themselves. What these films, and indeed all instructive documentaries, have in common is that they have a theory that they wish to present. It is a theory developed prior to the conception of the film, and supported consistently throughout. It is a theory, grounded in fact and supported by evidence, that works to provide a solution to, or encourage a specific line of discussion surrounding, a pertinent social issue. There is no room for uncertainty, no room for counterargument; these films, by nature, are persuasive and compelling: they strive, *through the presentation of knowledge*, to change *what we think*.

2.2 THE EXPLORATORY FILM

What happens, however, when a director doesn't have all the answers? Surely there are still pertinent issues in the world that have not yet been solved by documentary filmmakers? Of course, instructive films are very good at proposing solutions to problems that already exist in the public eye: Davis Gugenheim's (2006) film *An Inconvenient Truth* is a paramount example of this. Instructive films are also good at mining recent history for crises and issues – those that have long since passed the point of being solved – and, through a process of deconstruction, educating the public about why they occurred, ostensibly in order to prevent future repetition: the films of Greenwald and Ferguson, discussed above, fall into this category. Instructive films, however, are not very good at presenting issues that have no clear cut solution; because instructive films work to present fully formed thoughts for assimilation, and because they rely on a pre-established baseline of knowledge, they are not able to effectively engage with issues that predicate themselves on an absence of knowledge – what Ferguson's friends in the CIA might call 'an intelligence gap.' Instructive films do not provoke thought, they do not encourage inquiry, and they do not take on questions that they might have to leave unanswered.

This is where exploratory films come in. Exploratory films, unlike like their instructive counterparts, are more interested in changing *how* we think than providing guidebooks on *what to think*. Exploratory films tackle those questions which – largely under-addressed – have, as of yet, not been solved and likely will not be solved through the course of the film; these films provoke thought, provoke inquiry and, more often than not, leave the viewer dumbfounded, with more questions at the end of the film than they

had at the beginning. Instead of speaking from a position of uncontested knowledge, exploratory films tend to work through a line of inquiry, documenting the – often-fruitless – process of acquiring knowledge; these types of films, rather than teaching, represent an exercise in problem solving, one which engages the viewer, making him/her complicit in the hunt for knowledge. In this sense, exploratory films are perhaps closer to detective films than to documentary; Rick Rowley's *Dirty Wars* (2013) is certainly closer to an episode of *TinTin* than it is to anything by Greenwald, and Amir Bar-Lev's *The Tilman Story* (2010) is practically the pilot episode for a new season of *Cold Case*. In fact, many of these films are deliberately structured in such a way as mimics the framework of a fiction film – presumably to heighten the tension of the plot for the purposes of entertainment. This is possible, even encouraged, because these films are not meant to be purely instructive, and, as such, are not necessarily restricted wholesale by the boundaries of pre-established fact; exploratory films, instead, to a considerable degree, are free to engage in speculation and critical thinking. The attainment of factual knowledge – or 'the truth' – certainly plays a role in these films; indeed, without a stalwart belief in 'the truth' these films could not exist. The primary goal of these films, however, is not to present a solution, but to draw attention to a problem that has not been solved, to prompt people to engage in the act of asking questions rather than simply allowing their world to unfold around them.

Visually speaking, these films tend to be a lot more aesthetically appealing, a lot more visually intricate than their instructive counterparts. Because exploratory films are more heavily invested in sustaining a provocative linear narrative, they tend to minimize their reliance on jump cuts and sudden transitions between composite elements. Though

these types of sudden transitions cannot be avoided entirely – because these films too, like their instructive counterparts, rely on a mélange of photographic evidence, archive footage and witness testimony – the effect of these transitions is somewhat dampened by the exploratory film's regular return to a central narrative line. Unlike in an instructive film – where it becomes the crux of the plot – photographic 'evidence' in an exploratory film is usually seen as tangential, a protuberance, a detour from the film's primary path.

Depending on the problem at hand, this primary path line may take one of a number of distinct forms. Regardless of the specific formulation, however, exploratory films, in general, tend to exhibit a number of elements largely neglected by instructive films: exploratory films usually have a protagonist; this can be the director himself – as in the performative style of Mike Shiley or Morgan Spurlock[11] – or it can be a particular individual upon whom the director has chosen to focus. Importantly, though, the protagonist will be a single person or a very small group of people;[12] exploratory films tackle the issues of the many through the eyes of the few, taking a more personal tack than the broad, often detached instructive film. As a result, exploratory films usually have a small cast of developed characters (sacrificing impressive quantity of witnesses for intimate quality), they are usually more emotionally involved (though this always remains secondary to the issue at hand), and they usually rely more heavily on character witnesses than on 'experts.'

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[11] Perhaps one of the most unique films of this category is Morgan Spurlock's surprisingly funny film *Where in the World is Osama bin Laden?* (2008); unfortunately one of his lesser known projects, this film sees Spurlock head to the Middle East in an ironic attempt to single-handedly track down Osama Bin Laden. Stylistically typical of the exploratory documentary, this film stands alone as the only comedy-documentary of the I&A corpus.

[12] In *The Tilman Story*, for example, the entire Tilman family can be considered protagonists.

One film, in particular, that exemplifies this sub-mode, is Rick Rowley's 2013 film *Dirty Wars*. This film follows the progress of independent journalist Jeremy Scahill, as he works singlehandedly to unearth the secrets of US covert operations abroad (yes, it's as open-ended as it sounds); the film follows Scahill to Afghanistan, Somalia and Yemen, and documents his struggle to understand, in particular, the role and responsibility of the secretive Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). The central question motivating Scahill's investigation – 'what's going on behind the curtains of American society?' – is so broad, and so loosely defined that a satisfactory conclusion never really seems a possibility; and that, we must assume, is precisely the point. Rowley and Scahill are not producing this film for the sake of providing answers; they are producing this film in the hope that it will raise doubts about the things that American viewers take for granted, that it will motivate viewers to be curious and inquisitive.

Rowley's film is effective in achieving this goal, primarily, because of the way it presents itself: just like a fiction film. Rowley's film falls right into a niche group of global adventure stories that has steadily been gaining popularity among moviegoers over the past ten years. Dan Brown's 2003 book *The Da Vinci Code*, and the 2006 film of the same name, were (and still are) both immensely popular; the American re-release of Steig Larsson's Millenium Triolgy,[13] and the two recent *National Treasure* films (2004, 2007) have also done remarkably well in bookshops and in movie stores. What do all these book/films have in common? They are all investigative adventure stories that follow a single protagonist around the world; tension is always high, danger is always imminent,

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[13] *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo, The Girl Who Played with Fire* and *The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest* (Penguin: London, 2005, 2006, 2007). In 2011 the first of these books, *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo*, made its Hollywood debut in David Fincher's films of the same name.

the lead figure is constantly tested and thwarted by an enemy with much better resources, but always eventually succeeds in solving the film's driving mystery. Rowley's film, despite being a documentary and not a fiction, works hard to have itself included in this category. The viewer watches as Cahill traverses the Middle East and Africa, his search for clues leading him into some of the world's most dangerous places; his determination to resolve the mystery gets him into trouble with the government, but he is undeterred and indomitable in his search for the truth. Even the film's promotional material sells it as a detective film (Figure 3).

Figure 3   Digital media used to publicize Rick Rowley's 2013 film *Dirty Wars*

Dirty Wars has everything a detective film needs – it has intrigue, suspense, mystery, an engaging protagonist – everything except the conclusive the ending. Unlike Nick Cage and Daniel Craig, Jeremy Cahill does not solve the riddle, he does not beat the bad guys and he does not find the treasure. *Dirty Wars* encourages the audience to believe that this is just another in a stream of action/adventure global detective stories; it

encourages the viewer to join in the investigation, to ride shotgun in Cahill's journey around the world, before abandoning the case in an unsatisfactorily conclusive way.

American viewers – especially fiction film viewers – are reliably accustomed to conclusive endings. Bruce Willis always kills Hans Gruber, Tom Hanks always makes it to the top of the Empire State building, and the Goonies always never say die. When the film ends, the story ends, and the viewer goes home content to forget about the whole thing – at least until the sequel. Thus, when a documentary film exhibits itself as a fiction film, structures itself like a fiction film and entertains like a fiction film, people expect it to end like a fiction film: with America ahead, and all the loose ends tied up. When, instead, the film ends with a giant question mark, viewers are immediately unsettled – if you have ever seen *Inception* (2010) or *Vanilla Sky* (2001) you know the feeling. Of course, films like *Inception* and *Vanilla Sky* employ ambiguous endings purposefully, to drive home a point; they leave the viewer unsettled intentionally. This is no different for Rowley's film. By leaving the question open ended – not that a conclusion could really have been possible – Rowley passes the onus of inquisition on to the unsettled viewer; having raised a question, and having provided enough information to assure the viewer that it is an important one, Rowley and Cahill depart, leaving the viewer curious and unsatisfied. *Dirty Wars* convinces its viewers of the necessity of active social inquiry – if not into the film's particular instance of social inequity, then into social inequity in general. As an exploratory film, *Dirty Wars* encourages the viewer to change *the way they think* about every day events; it shows them that the world is not as uncomplicated as they may previously have imagined. It does not, however, let them off the hook by giving them the answers.

2.3 SUMMARY

As should now be clear, though they take rather different logical tacks, both variations of the contemporary 'Social Issue'-style I&A war documentary strive to call attention to problems that exist or have existed in our society; these films do not focus on vicarious emotional experience, but rather work to educate through the disseminate knowledge. That is not to say that emotional struggle does not factor into these films; on the contrary, instances of powerful emotion are often incredibly persuasive and, as such, frequently feature as an element of social issue documentaries. Sensation and experiential empathy, however, do not propel or motivate these films; emotional content, though it may be strategically included, is certainly secondary to, or supportive of, a higher didactic agenda.

Instructive films, with their evidentiary burden, rely heavily on witness interviews and technical diagrams and tend to eschew aesthetic extravagance and elaborate narrative structure. These films work to prove and they work to persuade; they work to validate and propagate a distinct point of view by establishing a firm – albeit partisan – foundation of knowledge. Instructive films pose a question to which they already know the answer.

Exploratory films, on the other hand, predicate themselves on the absence of knowledge. Rather than working from a baseline of understanding, these films work from a baseline of curiosity. These films deal with important social questions that – usually as a result of governmental secrecy and duplicity – have yet to be fully answered. Exploratory films, like instructive films, rely on secondary evidence in the form of witness testimony and archive footage; because their framework allows for a margin of

speculation, however, they do not carry with them quite the evidentiary burden of their instructive cousins. As a result, exploratory films tend to be more aesthetically pleasing, and more narratively driven – though certainly not in the same way as personal portraiture documentaries (see Chapter 4); they work to elicit popular interest through intrigue rather than through the presentation of a particularly impressive line of argument.

If instructive films are a murder trial, exploratory films are the televised search for a missing child. Both are publicized with the intent of drawing attention to a particular social issue; where one condemns the past, however, the other inspires future action. Where one is decisive and persuasive, the other is frustratingly inconclusive. Despite their methodological differences, however, both strategies share one important commonality: they both concern themselves with rectifying social issues, through the dissemination of important information. They both strive to impress upon us intellectually, with the eventual hope of eliciting or contributing to significant social change.

CHAPTER 3: LET ME SHOW YOU

Those who have ever witnessed a physical manifestation of social revolution – a rally, a protest, an uprising – will know, quite well, that social change is not often a primarily intellectual enterprise, especially when that change is occurring at the level of the masses; virulent, publically-inspired social movements – with a few marked exceptions – are usually founded on blood, sweat and tears: so much so that the 'intellectual' reasoning and logic behind an event is often lost ten minutes after it begins. Indeed, throughout history emotion, and not intellect, has often proven the more powerful social-mover – why else would we have a special designation for 'crimes of passion'?

Of course, there are certainly a number cases in which society has been drastically changed – both intentionally and unintentionally – by impersonal, practical, strategic decision-making, at a level far removed from the complicating interference of emotion: ex. the passing of new legislation. This sort of social development, however, indubitably unfolds in a top-down fashion, and relies on administrative power and a broad strategic perspective that is certainly not available to the general public. Certain 'unemotional' options, of course, are still available to the average citizen – (s)he can sign petitions, (s)he can write letters, (s)he can propose a logical strategic schema to her local political representative – but these are hardly effective means for inciting reformation. The truth of the matter is that the average person is not capable of eliciting wide-scale social change through reason and logic alone; publically-motivated, bottom-up social transformation – the type available to the class of people who consume documentary films – is heavily reliant on emotion.

Of course, we like to think of ourselves as eminently rational creatures, so we appreciate it when someone takes the time to present us with a coherent, logical argument; we like to be informed, to be up-to-date, so that when the time comes to act, we can do so confidently, providing rationale for our decisions as we go. Unfortunately, the 'time to act' rarely ever presents itself, and the well-informed, unemotional person is liable to go to their grave with the December issue of *American Spectator*, never having been moved to action. Realistically, if you want to provoke a person into action, it is more effective to insult them than it is to ask them a question; this is simply because, regardless of any aspirations toward the contrary, we are exceedingly emotional beings: we tend to find anger faster than inspiration, to choose impulse over insight.

In recent years in particular, news networks have caught on to this inclination, and have engaged with it as a way to boost viewership, shifting focus away from major geopolitical events, and onto a never-ending slew of personal interest stories. To provide a very recent example, news coverage of the recent MH17 plane crash[14] seems, on the whole, to have been concerned more with the identities of the individual victims, than with the event's potentially tremendous geopolitical consequences. Emotionally engaging the public, it seems, has become just as important as practically informing them. This type of emotive reporting has indeed become the norm. Likely, this is because people in contemporary society find it hard to rationalize – or sympathize with – events with which

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[14] On 17 July, 2014 a Malaysian Airlines plane was shot down near the Ukraine/Russia border, as a byproduct of violent tension between the two countries. At the time of this writing, an investigation is underway to determine the party responsible. Regardless of the outcome, this event is likely to have a significant impact on Russia-UN relations: a sobering fact that has surprisingly taken a back-seat to emotion-driven stories about the incident's victims.

they have no personal connection; as Alan Rosenthal astutely notes, contemporary society seems to have become desensitized to strategic-level incident reporting:

> While the crusading examination film has never been better done, we have seemingly reached the point of saturation and apathy. Gas bombings in Yemen, atrocities in Vietnam, the rape of Czechoslovakia no longer stun or shock. The first thing a producer learns is that he will get more sympathy and action for his ten-minute film about the condition of one blind child than for his masterpiece on racism in the South that took a year out of his life to make. (Rosenthal 16)

While 'Social Issue' documentaries are certainly effective at engaging the political mind of the average viewer, for predisposing them to a particular point of view, or for persuading them to align themselves with a specific ideology, they are not necessarily effective at propagating emotional experience. 'Social Issue' documentaries are very good at instructing viewers what to think, or encouraging them to be inquisitive, but are largely not tailored towards making people care. This is where 'Personal Portraiture' documentaries come in.

Rather than work to predispose viewers to a particular point of view through the dissemination of information, 'Personal Portraiture' documentaries exist with the primary intention of providing access to a foreign emotional experience: of placing the viewer in someone else's shoes. These experiences do not have to be unusual or astonishing, or emotionally strenuous – though these type of experiences tend to attract the widest audience – they simply have to be "a fair and honest representation of somebody's

experience of reality" (Auferheide 3). Experiences that are wildly unique –Carl

Hindrich's *I am the Elephant Man* (2008), for example – are obviously harder to relate to,

and may elicit less empathy, but are more fundamentally intriguing; experiences that are

closer to home for most viewers – perhaps Allan King's *A Married Couple* (1969) – are

less inherently intriguing, but are likely to elicit a much stronger empathetic response. Of

course war, as it unerringly bisects every echelon of society, provides an abundance of

material at any given point on this spectrum: from the extraordinary, esoteric experience

of live combat, to the ordinary, relatively accessible experience of being left behind.

Regardless of specific circumstances, 'Personal Portraiture' I&A war

documentaries are defined by their central focus on the non-partisan presentation of

unique emotional experiences. Distinct from 'Social Issue' documentaries, these films are

not overtly concerned with the propagation of a specific ideology.[15] Despite the fact that,

by necessity, these films focus in on an incredibly narrow fragment of humanity, they

tend not take an overt political stance on the material presented: these films strive to

"leave viewers to make their own judgments" (Chapman 182).

> The implicit assumption here is that if right-thinking people become aware
>
> of the way things 'really are,' they will take steps to correct injustices and
>
> inequalities. The advocacy of a specific program of change is not the
>
> filmmaker's task; it is enough to reveal the 'truth' of a social situation to
>
> the viewer. (Allen 234)

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[15] That is not to say that the do not *have* a specific ideology, or that political partisanship
is not present; it is simply to say that political advocacy or objective opinions are not the
driving force behind these films. If political biases exist, they exist invisibly; objectivity
is relatively incompatible with the 'Personal Portraiture' aesthetic.

Personal Portraiture films tend to be created with more of an eye toward poignant, aesthetic qualities, as these qualities play into the emotional experience of the viewer (Nichols 167). Because they tend to neglect the presentation of secondary evidence, 'Personal Portraiture' documentaries are largely able to avoid sharp cuts and harsh transitions;[16] as a result these films – especially those featured in the second half of this chapter – tend to adopt visual and stylistic tendencies similar to fiction films: establishing shots, scenes dedicated specifically to character development, fades and continuity editing, sound effects and inspiring accompanying music. This is simply because, like a fiction film, these documentaries are dedicated to providing a unique and powerful emotional experience: an effect that is best achieved through the meticulous development of character and plot.

Within this broad category of 'Personal Portraiture' I&A war documentaries, there are two distinct subcategories; these can be distinguished, quite simply, by the way in which they engage with a single philosophical problem: authorial presence – is the director a part of the experience, or is (s)he distinct from it? As a 'Social Issue' documentarist, authorial presence is not really pressing concern. Whether or not the director is physically present within his film, is largely irrelevant; even if he cannot be *seen*, his presence can always be *sensed* as a result of the films deliberate argumentative logic and obvious editing. In 'Personal Portraiture' documentary, however, the choice to be physically present on screen is an important one; if the documentarist chooses to remain *unseen*, (s)he too can plausibly remain *unsensed*, allowing for the sustained perception of unmitigated reality or 'raw experience.' Contrarily, if a documentarist

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[16] The notable exception to this is *The Unknown Known*, Errol Morris' 2013 film about Donald Rumsfeld. This will be dealt with in the first subsection of this chapter.

chooses to be present in his film, because of 'Personal Portraiture's inherently experiential focus, (s)he is likely to become an active participant in the experience being documented.

3.1 THE PRESENT VOICE

The first section of this chapter will deal with two films in which the director has chosen to be actively present in his own documentary, though each does so in a distinctly different way. Errol Morris' *Unknown Known* (2013), and Jake Rademacher's *Brothers at War* (2009) both provide unique examples of the effects of authorial presence in an experiential film – the former an interview-based character sketch, the latter a self-documented journey of personal discovery. Both films work on a primarily emotional level, both endeavor to capture a specific personal experience, and both do so in such a way that blatantly implicates the director; in fact, without the presence of the director, these films would hardly be possible – even if they were, I doubt they would elicit the same emotional response.

Errol Morris' film, at first glance – and, indeed, at pretty much every glance after that – looks very much like a 'Social Issue' documentary: as an hour and half long film about Donald Rumsfeld, it certainly deals with the right subject matter; with its abundant use of interview and its frequent reliance on archive footage it also seems to fit stylistically. *Unknown Known*, however, cannot be categorized as a 'Social Issue' documentary for its lack of one important characteristic: a specific political agenda. It doesn't have one. Despite its overwhelming potential for political partisanship, this film is more of a character sketch than anything else. Rather than work Rumsfeld's interview

into a broader argumentative framework, rather than manipulate Rumsfeld's responses to suit a persuasive political tack, Morris focuses on figuring out what makes Rumsfeld tick. As Carl Plantiga explains:

> Errol Morris's films are not first and foremost about politics, religion, history, or science. They are about people, and especially the content of and motivations for people's beliefs. Morris makes strategic use of the filmed interview…in part because he is fascinated by the mental landscapes of his subjects. (Plantiga 49)

This non-partisan approach to Rumsfeld is a distinct methodological choice, and certainly should not be mistaken for indifference on the part of Morris; one need only read some of Morris' writings post-film to gain a grasp for his true feelings about Rumsfeld (Morris, "Certainty"). Despite his personal distaste for the fellow, however, Morris' does not vilify Rumsfeld – as so many documentarists do – nor does he glorify him; instead, he sets out to document him, to showcase him as a human being, so that the viewer – and indeed history – might judge his righteousness or wrongfulness all by themselves.

Perhaps Morris' most important stylistic choice – one which he also employed to great effect in *Fog of War* (2004) – is his use of the unimaginatively-named Interrotron, a device of his own invention. The Interrotron essentially acts in the same way as a teleprompter, allowing a digital version of Morris to conduct the interview while the interviewee stares directly through him into the camera ("Interrotron")(Figure 4). This device "provides a sometimes unnerving concentration of the face" (Plantiga 52) and is

used by Morris to establish a sense of direct dialogue between Rumsfeld and the viewer.

When Rumsfeld speaks he is making eye contact directly with the camera, rather than a

detached interviewer – creating what Morris calls "the true first person" ("Interrotron").

Morris creates this one-on-one dynamic from the outset of the film, and then largely

refrains from commenting on Rumsfeld's dialogue; Rumsfeld is "allowed to speak at

length but [is] left on [his] own, and we are left on our own to assess the truth of what

[he] say[s]" (Perez, 13-14). Every so often this sense of intimacy is broken, however, as

Morris' voice pops in from behind the camera, prompting a new question. These

interventions are few and far between, and never react to or provide subjective

commentary on what has just been said; they occur often enough to remind us that Morris

is still there, behind the camera, but not in any way that might shape our opinion of what

is taking place. But why do this? If Morris is trying to provide us with an intimate
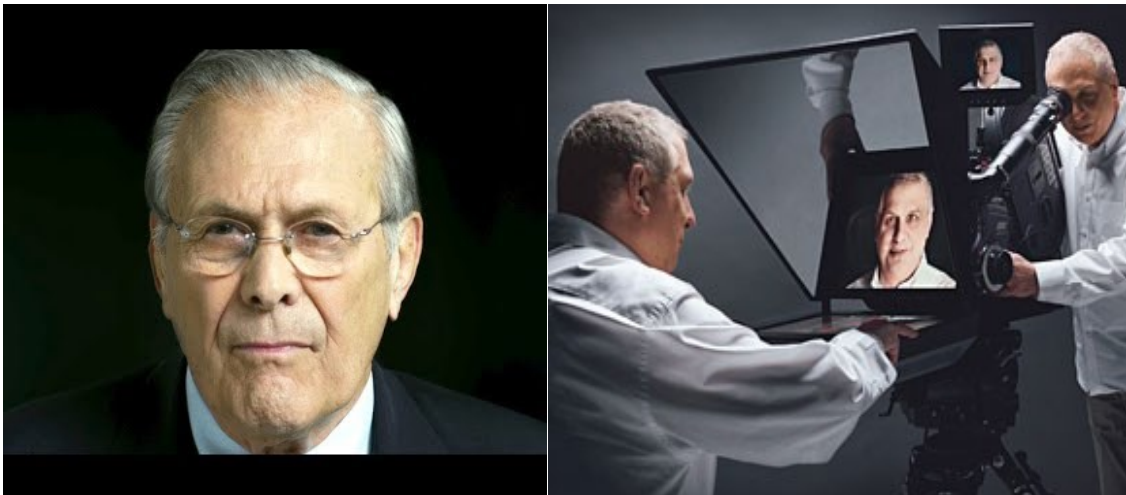
emotional experience, why disrupt the monologue?

Figure 4   (Left) Donald Rumsfeld as shot by Errol Morris' "Interrotron" in
                Unknown Known (2013). (Right) Errol Morris testing the
                "Interrotron"

The answer is simple and actually suggests a desire, on the part of Morris, to

make our judgment even more impartial. As Carl Plantiga notes in his article "The

Philosophy of Errol Morris," and as we may have already surmised from his involvement in *The Thin Blue Line*, Errol Morris has a profound interest in the truth (44-7). For anyone familiar with documentaries of Errol Morris, this reputation precedes him. On the other hand, anyone familiar with Donald Rumsfeld will know that, for him, quite the opposite is true; particularly within press circles – though anyone in possession of a television set between 2001 and 2006 can likely affirm this – Rumsfeld is well known for his impressive ability to evade answering questions, and to flabbergast budding journalists with seemingly nonsensical responses (Morris, "Certainty"). This is something that a majority of American viewers would know, entering in to the documentary.

Morris, when editing the interview for the film, could quite easily have removed himself from the soundtrack, posing Rumsfeld's speech as an unsolicited explication, a willing and unprovoked testimony. To most viewers, this simply would not have been believable. Never before had Rumsfeld seen it fit to explain himself; indeed, before now, he had taken incredible pains to avoid such an endeavor. For him to offer this information up willingly and unsolicited, to most Americans, would seem unusual and unbelievable. The emotional impression with which they entered into the film, would undoubtedly be the impression with which they left it, because they would assume they were being fed a propaganda piece. Seen in this light, Morris' periodical interruptions act almost as a pacifier, as an assurance that someone – with a distinguished reputation for truth-seeking – is in the room maintaining quality control.

The use of the Interrortron creates a sense of intimacy, and encourages independent judgment on the part of the viewer – a judgment that is not perceptibly affected by Morris' interruptions. The viewer is able to listen to Rumsfeld's account of

his time in office, of his life, of his philosophies devoid of a guiding ideology and is encouraged to choose for him/herself what they make of it. Morris' audible presence serves not to orient or persuade the viewer, but to ensure the authenticity of the dialogue; in this sense Morris serves as both interrogator and as witness.

Though stylistically very different from Morris' film, Jake Rademacher's 2009 *Brothers at War*, shares a number of the same general principles. Rademacher, like Morris, is physically present within his film; he also, like Morris, strives to provide the viewer with a unique emotional experience devoid of overt ideological direction. As somewhat of an autobiography, however, *Brothers* requires that Rademcaher play a much more apparent, much more integral role than Morris did in *Unknown Known.* I say 'somewhat of an autobiography' because, the film initially aspires to be biographical. Opening titles suggest that Jake Rademacher, a civilian, intends to document his brothers' military involvement with the 82nd airborne in Iraq. He wants to figure out why they do what they do, and to understand what has motivated them to go back for second and third tours respectively: "I wanna know what's going on in Iraq, because I have two brothers serving there. These guys are putting their lives on the line, why are they doing it? I need to know. I have a personal stake in it" (*Brothers*).

As the film progresses, however, the story more and more begins to revolve around Jake himself; rather than focusing on the experiences of his brothers, the film documents – perhaps unintentionally – Reademacher's own feelings: his disappointment at not being allowed to serve in the military himself, his resentment towards his brothers who got to live out his dream, and his anger that they no longer consider him 'part of the group.' Instead of providing the viewers with an emotional account of two soldier's lives,

Rademacher provides us with an uncomplicated insight into the feelings of a disenfranchised sibling, a man who having (emotionally) lost his brothers to the war, feels unjustly deprived.

This transition raises a number of questions that can be applied, if not directly then at least in principal, to all 'portraiture films' in which the director is present on screen: how much of the film's subject matter is dependent on the director's on screen presence? How many of these events would have occurred if the film had not been made? These questions, for the most part, do not apply to the instructive documentaries of the second chapter, nor the observational films in the latter half of this one. They certainly do not apply to the proxy films discussed in chapter five.

What makes these types of film different from all of the other types of films examined in this paper – with the exception, perhaps, of some exploratory films – is that, the very act of filmmaking is integral to the events that are being filmed. If it weren't for this film, these events, arguably, would not have taken place. If it weren't for *Brothers* Jake Rademacher may never have been forced to openly confront his own feelings. If it weren't for Errol Morris, Donald Rumsfeld may never have been forced to give an open account of himself and his behavior. This particular brand of 'Personal Portraiture' documentaries, while providing insight into a unique emotional experience, do not do so unproblematically; though, there is no questions about the authenticity of the emotions or experiences presented on camera, we must wonder what effect the director's engagement has had on the situations being filmed.

3.2 THE ABSENT HAND

Presumably, the above argument could be made for most, if not all, documentary films that involve first-hand footage; surely the mere presence of the camera, in any situation, so long as it is acknowledged, has the potential to cause subjects to self-edit or "self-project" (Chanan 12): to play to certain parts of their personality while concealing others.[17] Of course, unless the director is willing to conceal cameras without his subjects knowing they exist, this problem is relatively unavoidable. As seen above, however, some types of film invite this sort of inquiry more than others. In order to question the legitimacy of a director's involvement in a given sequence, we must first be made aware of it.

Of course, nobody is quite naive enough to believe that films shoot themselves; as such, we acknowledge, broadly, the existence of directors and cameramen. When we actually sit down to watch a film, however, particularly a fiction film, we tend to suppress that knowledge in order to facilitate our enjoyment of the film – in this sense films are a lot like hotdogs: if you want to enjoy them you have to forget you know what goes into making them. By the time the credits eventually roll down and remind us of the truth, we've already finished enjoying the film proper. Thus, unless something happens in the interim to remind us of the processes taking place 'behind the scenes', we are quite happy to selectively forget the existence of camerapeople and directors alike.

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[17] An interesting discussion of this phenomenon takes place in Alan Rosenthal's *The New Documentary in Action* (29) wherein Rosenthal asks Allan King (director) about observational subjects "putting on an act for the camera" (29) in his film *A Married Couple.*

Up until this point, we have dealt solely with films that, in some way or another, draw attention to their own processes, films that identify themselves as a construction. The films discussed in this chapter, however, strive to do the exact opposite, to conceal the nature of their construction; these films, unlike their 'present voice' counterparts, work to fully immerse their viewer into an intricate, eminently real, emotional experience, without an on screen director to guide their eyes and ears. By removing himself from the film, by concealing his existence, the director is able to establish a baseline of unadulterated 'realism' from which he can work, in subtleties, to exaggerate the emotional quality of a given situation; "It is perhaps [this type of film] which best illustrates the documentary ideology in terms of what it claims to promise and what we, as viewers, expect from it" (Roscoe 205).

Referred to in documentary theory as 'observational films,' this category of film has remained largely 'true' to its prescribed boundaries throughout the course of the last decade. This is simply because, in terms of its methodology, observational film presents very little room for evolution: the director and his camera crew anticipate an event, set up their cameras, and do their best to capture compelling footage. This style of filming, characterized by

> "long, unscripted, hand-held takes[, is] structured only by the
> [cameraman's] response to pro-filmic stimuli. Narration, musical scoring,
> analytical editing – all potentially aspects of authorial voice – [a]re
> sacrificed at the altar of the movement of recording, with the aim of
> 'showing, not 'telling.' (Chapman 101)

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This style of filming , for lack of a perceivable intermediary, is eminently powerful in terms of its ability to elicit emotion; this is simply because the viewer perceives no arbitration between themselves and 'real life' events. Arbitration is certainly taking place, but is taking place at a level that is not seen nor even hinted at; worked carefully, this dynamic allows directors the opportunity to emphasize the emotional character of an experience, without sacrificing their film's purely realist aesthetic.

One problem that traditionally plagued observational documentary filmmakers – particularly advocates of the "Rouch style of *cinema verite*" (Barnouw 254) – was the impracticality of predicting future action; unable to know the likelihood of significant events in advance, observational film crews were often forced to take their "camera[s] to a situation of tension and [simply] wait for a crisis to unfold" (Barnouw 254). Historically speaking, when those crises finally did unfold, large often awkward filming equipment had to be transported to the site of the action, hopefully arriving before it was over.

In a contemporary war-time scenario, these issues are largely non-existent. Lightweight portable digital cameras make mobilization simple in instances that require immediate action or high levels of maneuverability; additionally, and perhaps more importantly, in instances of modern warfare, moments of intensity are relatively frequent and relatively easy to predict. A majority of observational documentaries of this period center themselves around a specific platoon of allied infantry troops – usually located in a high risk area of Afghanistan, most often stationed in a Forward Operating Base (FOB). Because most high-risk contact situations occur while on patrol outside of a FOB, and because the patrols are scheduled hours if not days in advance, it has become relatively

easy for documentarists of this sub-mode to determine the instances at which they are most likely to record useful, high-intensity footage.

Predictable action, however, is not the only the only aspect of military life that lends itself well to the observational form. Observational films, like fiction films, work to present their viewers with a compelling emotional experience; this involves both the development of strong unique characters, and the construction of a tidy narrative structure. For fiction films, these can simply be created, manufactured. For documentary films, however, these need to be found. Depending on the subject of a specific documentary, finding a reliable and interesting group of real-life characters can present a significant challenge. Even when this problem has been solved, when characters have been found, and months and months of footage have been shot, a second issue almost inevitably arises: the issue of finding a suitable narrative structure in which to organize this material. The useful part about shooting an infantry platoon in a war-zone is that both the body of characters and the narrative structure are already present: an infantry platoon of approximately 40 soldiers is likely to have at least eight of nine diverse and interesting personnel and, regardless of its length (usually a year), a tour will always have a beginning, an end, and a series of crisis points in between.

A number of excellent films have been made, in recent years, following precisely this schema: find a group of soldiers, follow them everywhere they go, film everything they do and come home with a prize-winning film. Notable examples of this ilk include *Gunner Palace* (2004), *Occupation Dreamland* (2005)*, Armadillo* (2010) and the two very recent films *Korengal* and *The Hornet's Nest* (both 2014). Perhaps the most emotionally powerful of them all, however, is Sebastian Junger and Tim Hetherington's

2010 film *Restrepo.* Though organized and constructed in a similar way to a number of other documentaries, this film is somewhat unique in its astute development of character and atmosphere.

The film focuses on Battle Company's 2nd Platoon, a small contingent of US airborne infantrymen dropped into the Korengal valley; set in a small, scantly-protected mountain outpost (O.P.), the film follows the men's trials and tribulations as they spend 15 months in the 'deadliest place on earth.' Indeed, as Sebastian Junger notes, at the time of filming, almost 20 per cent of all the combat in all of Afghanistan was happening in [the] six miles" surrounding O.P. Restrepo: in front of his eyes, and in front of his camera "a hundred and fifty men absorb… almost a fifth of the combat for all of NATO forces in

Figure 5   Infantrymen taking fire in Sebastian Junger's 2010 film
                 Restrepo

that country" ("Why Veterans Miss War"). The fact that these men were engaging in "as many as 13 fire-fights" a day (Danchev, 436) – though certainly adding to the immediacy and excitement of the film – is not necessarily integral to *Restrepo*'s intense emotional

quality; though these fire-fights certainly get some screen-time, the key to of the film's impact lies in its ability to effectively develop seven of eight central characters, and unite them in a single emotional experience.

As Alex Danchev astutely notes, a large portion of the documentary is "filmed in close-up, often shakily, like a home movie or an amateur video;" this, necessarily adds to the raw, uncut quality of the experience at hand – and, for at least half of the film, is an unavoidable side-effect of Tim Hetherington trying not to get shot. This inelegant, uncensored style of close-range filming generates the effect of vicarious involvement; the dirt, the shrapnel, the sparks from ricocheting bullets can all be seen flying an inch in front of the camera lens as it dips and dives to find cover – as *we* dip and dive to find cover (Figure 5). This overwhelming visual experience, is enhanced sevenfold by Junger and Hetherington's astute use of sound volume. The *ping* of ricochets and the repetitive *thdoo-thdoo-thdoo* of the mounted fifty Cal. are inordinately amplified, while background noises are all but silenced; the screech of the radio comes in loud and clear – so clear in fact that it hardly seems to exist diegetically – drowning out the crunch and crumble of the Humvee's mountain ascent. Even the footsteps seem to have an inordinate clarity to them, as they pound on the ragged dirt. By playing with the film's diegetic sound levels – instead of overlaying rock music, or Ride of the Valkyries – Junger and Hetherington amplify the intensity of their scenes without detracting from the film's complete immediacy; they are able to keep the viewer within the bounds of the immediate experience, while contributing their gradual sensory overload.

This sensory overload is juxtaposed throughout the film by moments of audiovisual 'quietness', brief testimony given by the soldiers at home, upon their return

from Afghanistan; these testimonies are filmed in extreme close up, against a black

background and often include lengthy periods of silence – the camera unsympathetic and

unwavering as imperceptible emotions choke back the soldiers' words. Atypical of the

observational documentary form, Junger and Hetherington's choice to include these

interviews provides the films with two distinct emotional advantages: (1) the

juxtaposition of action against inaction, of noise against unbearable silence, causes the

viewer to reflect on the distinct psychological impact of returning home after an

experience at war (Creekmur 90); we, who so often take it for granted, are forced to

experience peace from an entirely different angle, are forced to understand how

uncomfortable it might be for someone who is accustomed to a lifestyle of sensory

excess.[18]

The second advantage afforded by the inclusion of these interviews is the

humanization of the soldiers. So often in films we are called to think of soldiers as

automatons, as uniformed units of mass conditioned not to think, but to obey. Certainly,

this type of soldier exists; by and large, however, this is not the norm but the anomaly.

Junger and Hetherington, by allowing these men to speak – in extreme close-up – directly

to the viewer, force viewers to recognize 'soldier' as an occupation and not as an identity.

The bravado and the boisterousness exhibited in the Afghanistan sequences are

powerfully contrasted by the seriousness and fragility of the same men at home – once

the adrenaline and sleeplessness has worn off, and they've had time to reflect on their

experiences. Hetherington and Junger, through their use of strategic juxtaposition of

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[18] Indeed, this is a topic which Sebastian Junger takes very seriously; for an incredibly interesting insight – and a unique textual accompaniment to *Restrepo* – check out the transcript of Junger's TED talk entitled "Why Verterans Miss War."

sensory extremes, provide their viewers with a unique emotional insight into the experience of combat; not only is the viewer presented with a virtual combat experience, but they are forced to appreciate the emotional consequences of leaving this experience behind.

3.3 SUMMARY

Through the presentation of a unique emotional experience, 'Personal Portraiture' documentaries work to elicit empathy and understanding from their viewers, encouraging them to engage with a situation – if only briefly – from the dedicated perspective of another. These films do not propose to tell the viewer how they should react to a given situation but instead work to present that situation for the viewer's own emotional analysis: the hope being that such empathetic engagement will inspire "right-thinking" people into positive social action.

Present Voice documentaries tend to sacrifice a portion of their claim to objectivity in order to benefit from the authorial presence of an on-screen director. Whether this comes in the form of an autobiographical narrator, an emotionally inspired interviewer, the presence of an authorial voice in some way precipitates the action occurring on screen: that is, the author is actively invested in the events taking place. As a result, the director has an opportunity to frame the emotional experience as it is occurring. Contrarily, in absent hand-style documentaries, directors work to erase themselves, sacrificing the ability to intervene in unfolding events to preserve the viewer's experience of unmediated reality; though they are then able to enhance and manipulate this emotional experience at the editing table, by removing themselves from

the on-screen action the directors of these types of documentary are able to prevent the viewers' minds from registering intervention and are thus able preserve the essence of real-time, real-life events.

Personal portraiture documentaries work to capture the essence of a distinct and unique emotional experience, and to present that experience to the viewer for assimilation; whether these emotional experiences are precipitated by the director him/herself, or simply captured as they unfold of their own accord, both styles of personal portraiture filmmaking work towards the same ultimate goal: emotional enlightenment through vicarious experience.

CHAPTER 4: LET THEM SHOW YOU (WHAT I THINK)

A grown man walks into a doctor's office. The doctor asks him what is wrong. The man proceeds to provide the doctor with a list of his ailments. The doctor, in turn, assesses the situation and, based on his learning and his past experience, works to resolve the man's infirmities. I know this seems a strange way to start a chapter on documentary film. I merely mean to illustrate, in plain terms, what we all already know as the most efficient way to correct an everyday health concern: face to face with the person who we expect to correct it. Why send someone else to the doctor on our behalf? Of course, if you're a child, perhaps a parent will speak for you; if you're deaf, maybe a signer; if you're in a foreign country, maybe a translator. As a free-speaking, uninhibited individual, however, why would you want someone else to do your talking for you – especially if your situation is dire?

It seems a stupid question, I know, but, with specific regard to documentary film, it is an important one. If you are a child in poverty, a family dealing with disability, or an Afghani civilian beaten senseless by American soldiers, who knows how to articulate the facts and feelings of your situation better than you? Who knows the feeling of war better than a soldier? Who knows the facts of Iraqi life under occupation better than the Iraqis? If you want to appeal to the global community for aid, for justice, for empathy, or simply for the purpose of having your plight understood and respected, who is better equipped to do that than you, directly?

This certainly makes sense from the perspective of the afflicted party; even as a doctor, however, this dynamic seems to be the most efficient. Whom would you rather

have come in to your office: a man with a picture of his friend's broken ankle, or a man with a broken ankle? The answer, I think, is obvious. Of course, a man with a broken ankle can't always walk, just as an impoverished child can't always access state of the art film equipment. At some point, however, if the problem is going to get solved, if one party is to fully understand the other, the two must come into contact, with as few intermediaries as possible.

This is, by no means, a novel conception; observational documentarists have long dwelt on the ethical and theoretical considerations associated with documenting the experiences of others. Perhaps, then, as a reaction to the observational film, and perhaps as an evolution of the participatory/anthropological film – likely both – during the 1960s there arose a number of ethically minded films that might be considered post-observational, or perhaps facilitative: wherein the documentarists provided material and/or training that enabled the subject to visually represent him/herself, or otherwise collaborated with them intimately.

Indeed, various efforts have been made by well-intended documentarists over the past fifty years to erase themselves from their films, not just visually but ideologically, working with afflicted or otherwise marginalized parties to help them tell/show their own experiences. In 1966, Sol Worth and John Adair did precisely this in Pine Springs, Arizona, "where they taught a Group of Navajo students how to make their own documentary films" (Navajo Film Themselves); as Barnouw notes:

> The researchers taught the Indians to use the cameras and editing
>
> equipment and encouraged them to make films about their lives. No

specific content was suggested. Similar experiments were done with black

ghetto teenagers in Philadelphia. The results were often difficult to

interpret, but tantalizing in their revelations. (Barnouw 258)

A year later, in 1967, as part of the NFB's Challenge for Change initiative, Colin

Low travelled to Fogo Island – a small island off Newfoundland's Northern coast – to

document the natives' resistance to governmental relocation. Though Low, himself,

retained physical control over the camera throughout the series, he undertook a number of

precautions so as not to misrepresent the locals' plight. In an attempt not to

> impose his own interpretation on their views, needs and histories, Low
>
> opted to film interviews with different members from each community.
>
> The members not only chose the topics they discussed but viewed the
>
> rushes afterward and could demand omission of any material that did not
>
> properly reflect them. (Marchessault 357-8)

What these two initiatives have in common – and indeed a number of others that I

have neglected to mention – is an altruistic desire to help others construct or otherwise

manage their own stories; both initiatives understand the ethical consequences of

appropriating the voice of the other, and put safeguards in place to protect the final

product from distortion and misrepresentation. These documentary series both arise from

an altruistic intention to "ethical[ly] engage with the process of representation"

(Marchessault 358); to propagate important social information without imposing an

external agenda upon it: facilitating its transmission, with maximum efficiency and

minimal interference, from source to destination.

On the subject of interference it is of importance to note that, when Sol Worth and

John Adair went to Pine Springs, they taught the Navajo the physical procedures of

'editing', but refrained from providing them with guidance when asked about theory, or

stylistic techniques (Worth and Adair 108). When Colin Low made the Fogo Island film,

he kept editing to

> a minimum, and intercutting between people on the basis of issues was
>
> eliminated altogether. This practice, according to Low, functioned to keep
>
> [his] interventions and value judgments to a minimum, facilitating more
>
> self-directed community expression and democratic communication
>
> (Marchessault, 358)

Both sets of filmmakers, it seems, were aware that the editing process itself – at one

remove from raw visual input – might be a possible ingress for unwanted directorial

influence. They realized that, even if the subjects filmed themselves – or in the case of

Low, were allowed to quality-check the rushes – the editing process, if mishandled, was

still a potential site for manipulation or distortion. Because of the anthropological nature

of their respective endeavors and because of a shared belief in the ideological purity of

their respective films, both teams cited above put in place safeguards to limit the potential

for manipulation in the editing process. Unfortunately, this is not a practice that has

transitioned seamlessly into I&A war documentary.

4.1 THE PROXY FILM

The corpus of I&A war documentary is certainly not at a loss for films in which the subjects 'record themselves;' with the modern-day surplus of lightweight recording apparatus, this practice is increasingly common. People worldwide, particularly those who hail from more developed countries, have the means to produce feature length films about themselves on a weekly basis; even the age-old insistence on 'technical skill' and classic modes of 'aesthetic style' are becoming less and less relevant. As a result of the profusion of self-shot footage accessible on the internet and on television, people have become accustomed to, perhaps even enamored by, shaky, grainy, unstable quality of amateur video: in fact, in recent years, an entire corpus of low-budget, 'found footage' horror films has exploited the amateur video style with enormous financial return.[19]

Considering this contemporary trend, the need for documentarists to provide subjects with either equipment or training for anthropological or ideological reasons, at least in most cases, seems almost a moot point. Documentarists are no longer needed, as they were in the 60s, to help people to film their own struggles – people, for the most part have got it figured out. What many established documentarists can do, however, that most ordinary citizens cannot, is take that footage and make it marketable in such a way that it reaches a vast movie-going audience. Though the average American or Iraqi citizen might capable of operating a video camera, very few have the creative acuity necessary to frame their story in such a way that is engaging, memorable and – frankly – worth going to watch. While American audiences have grown accepting to degrees of

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[19] The *Paranormal Activity* series (2007, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2014) between them have taken more than USD811,000,000 worldwide at the box office, while working from a combined budget of only USD18,000,000 – that's a profit of about 4400%.

amateur-style footage, they have not – at least at the time of my writing this – given up their penchant for compelling, well-structured narratives.

Contemporary American audiences, though their pursuit of 'real' unfiltered information makes them amenable to raw footage, shot by a film's subject, are largely unwilling to sit through a film in which this footage is not organized into a coherent, logical, well-structured 'narrative'.[20] As a result of these conflicting desires, I&A war documentary has seen a number of films released which, although they seem to adopt a similar methodology to "Navajo Film Themselves" and "Challenge for Change: Fogo Island," are, paradoxically, quite opposite in ideology: films that, though composed of raw, subject-shot footage, do not necessarily put in place the safeguards to protect the subjects' visions from manipulation and subjective influence on the part of the director. Through the process of editing, and the construction of linear narrative, certain I&A war documentarists – while positing their films as unmitigated reality – essentially impose their own interpretation upon the stories of their subjects. This manipulation may be conscious or unconscious on the part of the director – ex. he/she may endeavor to be as true as possible to the ideas presented by his subject – but without implementing, like Low, a second round of subject-verification, the integrity of the subject's experience will always be diminished. It is for this reason that I have entitled this final mode of film, the 'proxy film'.[21] Though the footage of these films is shot by the subjects themselves and, as such, retains the emotive biographical quality of a 'personal portraiture' documentary,

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[20] I say narrative in the sense that it can be read linearly – it does not necessarily have to conform the traditional narrative structures of literature or fiction film.
[21] Admittedly, every documentary I have discussed in the paper, might be considered a Proxy Film, as each in its own way is a product of the creative process of a director – at one remove from the subject; this particular mode of film, however, is the only one which claims, in and of itself, to have avoided this process.

it is edited and imbued with meaning by an external director with distinct ideological

preferences – much like a social issue documentary. In essence, then, these films provide

a unique middle ground between the types of films discussed throughout the last two

chapters. On the surface they appear to be personal portraiture documentaries, providing

the viewer with a vicarious emotional experience distinct from their own – in doing so

evoking empathy and experiential understanding; underneath the surface of the films,

however, is a distinct ideological undertone, working to align the viewer with a particular

opinion or point of view.

Perhaps the two most notable proxy films of the Iraq War period are Martin

Kunert's *Voices of Iraq* (2004) and Deborah Scranton's *The War Tapes* (2006). Both are

composed of amateur footage, shot by the films' subjects in the absence of the

filmmakers themselves. Though the filmmakers, in both cases, were able to select the

people who initially received the cameras, they were almost entirely removed from the

actual process of filming;[22] as a result, both directors are effectively able to promote their

films as objective insights into the reality of war, unmodified from battlefield to big

screen. As you should by now expect, however, this is not the case. These films, like

most feature length films, have been cut down from countless hours of disparate and

incoherent footage into a concise, elegant, linear structure; this process of construction, of

selection, is inherently subjective and, though the footage they are showing is certainly a

glimpse into reality, it is a reality tempered – whether consciously or unconsciously – by

the subjective preferences of the filmmaker.

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[22] I say 'almost entirely' because Susan Scranton's film also contains footage shot by her
and her team in the US, while her subjects, three members of the New Hampshire
National Guardsmen, were on deployment in Iraq.

The first of these films, Martin Kunert's 2004 documentary *Voices of Iraq* is the more ambitious, and perhaps the more subjectively rendered, of the two. Between April and September 2004, Kunert and his two colleagues – fellow York University grad Eric Manes, and Gulf War veteran Archie Drury (USMC) – distributed 150 lightweight digital video cameras to members of the Iraqi public; they then encouraged them to videotape themselves and the conditions of their day-to-day life under the American occupation, before passing the cameras on to their friends and family. Having been shot in this way, the film seems to promise, by virtue of its "methodology," that the "resulting footage [will be] an accurate reflection of the plurality of voices in Iraq" (Prince, 227). From school children to war widows, from mechanics to religious leaders, the cameras were passed among more than 2,000 Iraqi citizens, all of whom, collectively, produced more than 450 hours of footage. This footage was then edited down to a final product of about 85 minutes: a sporadic mesh of seemingly uncoordinated clips, presented one after another to the score of Iraqi hip hop – the fast pace and heavy beat of the accompanying music seeming to corroborate the relative incoherence of the images on screen.

Indeed, with 2,000 diverse, often conflicting voices competing for a mere hour and a half of air-time, one would expect this type of film to be incoherent. If the filmmakers are going to fulfill the stated intention of their film – to authentically represent the heterogeneous sentiments of an entire nation – the viewer might enter the film expecting chaos over structure. Unsurprisingly, the filmmakers play into this expectation. In keeping with the observational/anthropological film tradition, Kunert and his colleagues work to erase their presence (Bruzzi, 14), hiding behind home-video style

transitions and amateurish text overlays, and allowing the Iraqi people, ostensibly, to speak for themselves.

As I have already mentioned, Kunert and his colleagues managed to condense more than 450 hours of footage into a film of about 90 minutes. This means working at an approximate shooting ratio of 300:1 (1 minute of footage used for every 300 minutes cut). With such a vast body of material from which to work, the filmmakers are allowed to be extremely selective about the footage, and indeed the voices that they choose to include. As Douglas Kellner notes, the voices that are finally chosen to appear in the film seem largely to adhere a single point of view. "Although there are [people in the film] who claim that life was better under Saddam and who complain about the U.S. invasion and occupation, *Voices of Iraq* overwhelmingly shows positive views towards Americans and hopes for democracy" (202). Kellner then goes on to explain that, with this abundance of footage, and "in a country as divided as Iraq[,] it [could have been] possible to construct a documentary using Iraqi voices to support any number of positions" (202).

In the case of this film, as Kellner suggests, most of the voices chosen, when linked together, serve to validate the American occupation by shifting focus away from the Americans and on to the previous – and much more horrible – atrocities of Saddam Hussein's recently toppled regime. Relatively scant commentary is provided regarding the U.S. Military and their deadly bombing campaign leading up to the 'fall of Baghdad' – which killed approximately 7,000 civilians (Dardagan, 13); instead, a majority of the clips dealing with the U.S. military express a positive attitude, and are almost always juxtaposed against corresponding frames in which Iraqi's condemn Saddam Hussein. This bias is perhaps most evident when, at one point in the film, the juxtaposition of shots

serves to make light of the events at Abu Ghraib. In this section of the film, the viewer is shown a group of Iraqi men eating dinner. They laugh and joke about the U.S.'s "nice" application of torture, before agreeing, one by one, that Saddam's torture was "much worse;" one man even jokes about wanting to be an Abu Ghraib prisoner, so that he could "have a soldier – a woman – … undress him and play with his penis." This scene is accompanied briefly by a rather ominous overlaid news heading – "Photos of Naked Iraqi Prisoners Outrage Arabs: *LA Times* May 2, 2004." – which, in contrast to the men seen guffawing into their dinner plates, is wildly, and I think intentionally ironic. This scene is then sharply juxtaposed against archive clips – ostensibly "Uday Hussein's personal videos" – that show Iraqi citizens being thrown from bridges and decapitated.

As Stephen Prince notes, "the abuse and homicide at Abu Ghraib prison damaged U.S. standing throughout the world and harmed the war effort in Iraq" (Prince, 212). Due to its raw visual power, and its blatant overstepping of human rights, the Abu Ghraib scandal garnered an enormous amount of media attention, presenting undeniable evidence of military misbehavior; thus, the events at Abu Ghraib were treated by many American people as a symbolic manifestation of the immorality and impropriety of the U.S. military's occupation. By undercutting the seriousness of this event, and by placing it in stark contrast to a number of Saddam's more egregious human rights violations, Kunert's film seems to suggest that Iraqis are comparatively indifferent about Abu Ghraib and, by extension, any of the other potential immoralities that might plague the American conscience. This suggestion plays into a larger theme, one that persists throughout the length of the film: that the disadvantages of American intervention – civilian casualties, torture and an increase in sectarian violence –are negligible, at least

when compared to the benefits of ousting Saddam. As we can see, the strategic selection of voices, and the dedicated juxtaposition of thematically disparate images work to promote a subjective, largely exclusionary, frame of reference. By disproportionately limiting anti-American voices, and by shifting attention onto the past horrors of Saddam's now-extinct regime, whether consciously or unconsciously, Kunert Et. al effectively propose an Iraqi "advocacy for the war's political project" (Prince, 227).

Though the biased selection of voices and their strategic juxtaposition are certainly the most conspicuous examples of bias in the film – and consequently the two that critics most frequently turn to – they are, by no means, the film's only entrepôts for subjectivity. Though certainly less noticeable, the overarching narrative structure of the film also works diligently to support the film's pro-occupation stance. Though the word 'narrative' may seem a bit out of place when referring to a film composed of hundreds of disparate, seemingly unconnected clips of home video footage, a close look at *Voices of Iraq* will reveal that it does, indeed, work to 'tell a story'. The film does not present itself as a narrative in the traditional sense – by developing characters and by presenting a coherent stream of obviously connected events; it is my contention, however, that *Voices of Iraq* can be, and indeed begs to be, read linearly, and that such a reading, when completed, serves to coincide with the film's already established pro-occupation stance.

When watching a fiction film, there are number of visual cues or signifiers that, though the viewer may not consciously recognize them, suggest a logical connection between two or more shots. If we see a woman leaving a room through a door in one shot, and then entering a room through a door in the next shot, we automatically assume that those rooms are adjacent and that we are seeing two sides of the same doorway.

These sort of assumptions happen unconsciously in a fraction of a second, and are the result of our ability to read a film's visual language; these are what allow us, as viewers, to recognize and appreciate the narrative flow of a film. Fiction filmmakers, when filming shots to create a narrative, rely on our ability to read these visual cues and, for the most part, we are very good at it.

For a fiction filmmaker, this process is relatively easy: they simply shoot the shots necessary for a given sequence to make sense. Documentary films, then, particularly those constructed from candid home video footage – which can only be shot from one point of view – have a much harder time engaging with the traditional processes of continuity editing, and usually must rely on other methods to suggest a linear connection between sequential shots. Martin Kunert, when constructing *Voices of Iraq*, makes a number of astute editing choices, linking disparate shots in ways that essentially mimic the visual cues of a fiction film. Early in the film, for example, we are presented with a shot of children swimming in the river. The cameraman, whose voice we can hear from behind the camera, wanders around talking to and making fun of the children. There is an explosion in the distance. Immediately the film cuts to a shot of car wreckage, consumed by fire. A caption appears letting the viewer know it was a car bomb (Figure 6).

Much as with a fiction film, the viewer is liable to unconsciously connect these two images, assuming – probably incorrectly – that the explosion heard in the background of the first shot, is the same explosion that is seen in the foreground of the second shot. This effect recurs throughout the film: shot of traffic from above, shot of man in a car/ shot of house from outside, shot of house from inside etc. Whether it is, in fact, the same explosion shot by two separate, conveniently located cameramen, we will never know; and, indeed, it is irrelevant. By mimicking the visual cues of fiction film, Kunert suggests that, like a fiction film, the viewer should be reading this film as a linear whole: that despite the apparent incoherence of these images, there is an overarching narrative that connects them from start to finish. This pursuit is encouraged throughout the film by two series of intermittent captions: one that tells us we are moving forward in time ("Apr 2004", "May 2004", "June 2004" etc.), the other that we are geographically moving around the country.

Figure 6   Bomb blast montage from Martin Kunert's *Voice of Iraq* (2003)

But what happens when we try to read this film linearly? A man doing an interpretive dance in his yard, a woman crying, a

man fixing a car and a group of people watching the World Cup don't seem to have any logical narrative connection – and, to a degree, they don't. At a purely visual level, the incoherent clips presented throughout *Voices in Iraq* are just that: a series of incoherent clips – an aesthetic model which sustains an immediate claim to authenticity and objectivity. On a symbolic level, however, if we were to reduce the thematic crux of each of the films clips to a single word, and relay those words in order, a pattern would start to emerge: a car bomb (destruction), clips of torture (inhumanity), dirty displaced children (poverty), man speaking about Saddam's trial (watershed), scenes from police training school (order), a university graduation (progress), men repairing damaged buildings (reconstruction), a woman talks about free elections (democracy), two people get their passports and aspire to travel (transnationalism). Admittedly, this is a fairly simplistic snapshot of scenes from the film; and, for the sake of sustaining a sense of disunity, the filmmakers do allow a number of exceptions to this pattern. Holistically speaking, however, if this exercise were performed for the entirety of the film, the list of thematic keywords would be essentially the same, as would the overall message. The film essentially reads, at a subliminal level, like a pamphlet for democracy.

At this point it becomes clear that, despite the seemingly non-partisan nature of the project, and despite, perhaps, the best intentions of the filmmakers to provide an objective and unbiased outlet for the voices of the Iraqi people, the final product is significantly biased in favour of American intervention. Through the selection and omission of footage, through the juxtaposition and association of sequential images, and through the construction and promotion of a logical linear narrative, Kunert and his

colleagues, whether consciously or unconsciously, tailor the Iraqis' raw footage to conform to a distinctly subjective, largely pro-American point of view.

Perhaps the counterpoint to *Voices of Iraq* – at least in terms of its underlying ideology – is Deborah Scranton's *The War Tapes*. Scranton's film uses a number of very similar editing techniques but serves, overall, to promote an almost opposite outlook on the war: one that regrets American intervention, and strives "to make viewers feel more sympathetic to the fate of the soldiers serving in Iraq" (Chapman 82). In 2004 "Scranton declined an invitation to embed with the New Hampshire National Guardsmen, instead negotiating a deal to give" (Piccalo) the soldiers cameras and have them film their own experiences. Indeed, on the film's website, and on promotional material for the film's release, *The War Tapes* is lauded as "the first war movie filmed by soldiers themselves." According to Gina Picallo, in a review of *The War Tapes* for the *L.A. Times,* "Scranton deliberately avoided going to Iraq… to prevent her own perspective on the war from infiltrating the film." Clearly, Scranton is cognizant of the possibility for subjective distortion, and attempts strategically to avoid it, at least throughout the filming phase.

Indeed, Scranton's film as a whole seems to continue in this vein and, at least at first glance, appears relatively free of bias. Of the three men whose tours comprise the majority of the film, only one is explicitly and overtly skeptical about America's motivations for entering Iraq; the others seem, at various points in the film, as if they could go one way or the other. Unlike in *Voices of Iraq*, then, the primary characters in Scranton's film are not the principal means by which the film asserts its ideological leanings. In Scranton's film, instead, the anti-War bias – though, not nearly as

pronounced as the bias in *Voices* – is delivered, most effectively, by the soldiers' families.

Much like *Voices of Iraq*, Scranton had no dearth of footage from which to compile her film. Twenty-one soldiers filmed for the project, mounting tripods on gun turrets, inside dashboards, attaching cameras to their Kevlar helmets and vests; between them, the soldiers produced 800 hours of footage: about enough for about 1200 feature length films.[23] Despite this, however, Scranton chose to supplement this footage with another "200 hours of tape documenting the unfolding lives of the soldiers' families at home" ("About: *The War Tapes*"). This rather deliberate choice, subsequently allows Scranton to shoot her own footage, juxtaposing "the combat, carnage and terror of war…with the day-to-day tedium" (Piccalo) of everyday life in suburban/rural New Hampshire: two perspectives which can never authentically co-exist in the eyes of a single individual. These domestic shots of the soldiers' families, force the viewer to consider the – unilaterally negative – effects of the war, outside of the war's immediate environment: a consideration that, while certainly more inclusive, perhaps does not do justice to the immediate concerns of the soldiers themselves. The decision to include the families is a personal decision on the part of Scranton: an assumption, on her part, that the plight of the family left at home is an immediate and pressing concern of the soldier at war. Though I can imagine this is certainly somewhat true, the inclusion of the families – and the significant degree to which they are included – serves to color the experience of war in a more negative, disparaging light than the soldiers' themselves may perhaps have

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[23] If we follow the lead of the British Film Institute and the American Film Institute, and assume that a feature film is defined by its running longer than 2400 seconds, or 40 minutes.
http://afi.chadwyck.com/info/faq.htm

agreed with.[24] Without a second-round screening process, however, in which the soldiers

get to approve or correct her vision, Scranton cannot know if this is in fact the case –

despite, perhaps, her best intentions.

What is most interesting about Scranton's choice is that the objective quality of

the raw combat footage is carried over into the – fully controlled – domestic footage

(Figure 7); thereby blurring the line between amateur and professional recording.

Scranton's voice is never heard in the domestic scenes, nor do the family members ever

acknowledge her presence. If we try hard we can imagine the characters' statements as

responses to unspoken questions, but their
speaking parts in the film are always portrayed
as unsolicited exposition – as if they had been
taping themselves. Scranton's decision to
remove herself from this dialogue, speaks to a
desire to conform with a purely observational
style of filmmaking, and subliminally
dissuades any suspicions of interference.

Figure 7   Domestic shots from Deborah Scranton's *The War Tapes* (2006)

This stylistic choice is evident again, in

the framing of the film's domestic shots.

Almost as if to mimic the shooting style of the raw combat footage, the film's domestic

footage is often shaky and partially obscured; this relatively loose filming style persists

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[24] Sebastian Junger suggests, in his TED talk "Why Veteran's Miss War," that many soldiers get used to war, even enjoy war; if given a choice, many veterans, he suggests, would prefer to return to combat rather than remain static in a state of domesticity. This is a conclusion corroborated by a myriad of veterans, both in written literature and throughout many of the films discussed herein.

until a family member speaks directly into the camera in which case the camera seems to be inelegantly placed upon a desk or a tripod – again, as if they were filming themselves. "Such techniques create an impression of fidelity to [a] pro-filmic event that is in fact being constructed' (Chapman 12); by employing these techniques, Scranton is able to insinuate that the footage of the soldiers' families is, indeed, as real and as unaffected as the footage of the soldiers themselves. This is of course, untrue.

One aspect of Scranton's film that does work toward the authentic wartime experience is her unflinching inclusion of gore. At numerous instances throughout the film Scranton features soldiers' footage of mangled, burnt, and bloodied human flesh, torn limbs and bullet-ridden corpses. Despite often being decisive in a solder's psychological experience of war, this sort of imagery is something that most documentaries tend to censor for the sake of their viewers feelings. Indeed, for most viewers, the inclusion of these images must seem both shocking and inappropriate; this is simply because the average person has no real visual precedent for this material. "Media coverage of the war in Iraq… tend[s] to focus on video game- like imagery of missiles hitting buildings, photographed from miles away and without visible human casualties" (Prince, 204). Fictional depictions of war, too, "often steer clear of powerful, bloody and unambiguous imagery, in favor of images that come at the horror of war through side channels, showing generic grief, generic destruction, generic traces of blood or physical agony" (Kennicot). When a bomb goes off in a fiction film, we see broken glass, and rubble, and smoke, and a single survivor walking haphazardly toward the camera, a trickle of blood, perhaps, running down one side of his blackened face; this set of filmic objects, for most casual viewers, has long sufficed as a visual stand-in for the actual

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effects of an explosion on the human body. In reality, when a bomb explodes, those people who don't immediately evaporate come away looking more like a plate of spaghetti than Bruce Willis at the end of *Die Hard*.

Scranton does not shy away from presenting the war as it really is, nor is she afraid of showing the real effects of war on the human body. As Stephen Prince notes, Scranton's "film does not dwell on the gore but…illustrates [the]… "body horror" necessary for an honest accounting of the war" (204). This decision, I think, certainly contributes to restoring Scranton's claim to an authentic representation of a soldier's war-time experience.

4.2 SUMMARY

At the most basic level, proxy films can be seen to operate around a central paradox. Composed of raw footage shot by the subjects themselves, these films seem to promise, by virtue of their methodology, unmediated access to a real-life experience; because they generally rely on a second-party editing process, however, the resulting films are often more misguided, more misrepresentational than the observational films against which they propose to react. I&A proxy films, though they seem – stylistically – to be following the footsteps of Challenge for Change and Navajo Film Themselves, lack their inherent ideological impulse for pure and honest representation. Though some proxy films certainly seem to be more concerned with authenticity than others – Scranton's film, for example, certainly seems to care more about accuracy than Kunert's – without the appropriate quality assurance filters, second-party editing will inevitably lead to the introduction of bias, and the distortion of reality. These films are often inherently biased,

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"their moral or ideological standpoint[, however,] is subtly cloaked in the rhetoric of

"naturalism and realism" and [as such] tends to go unquestioned" (Roscoe 206).

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

As I hope to have demonstrated throughout this paper, Iraq and Afghanistan war documentary represents a vast and steadily expanding corpus of significant original films, films that require far more academic intention than they are currently receiving. Since the commencement of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, no less than sixty[25] independent feature-length American war documentaries have been produced (see Appendix A) dealing with those conflicts. From the close-quarters field work of artists like Junger and Hetherington to the emotionally-reserved political montages of Greenwald, from the suspenseful thriller-esque adventures of Rick Rowley and Jeremy Scahill to the vivid character sketches of Errol Morris, the recent torrent of engaging and inventive I&A war documentaries seems unlikely to abate in the short to medium term. Despite the vastness of this steadily expanding corpus, and despite its immediate social and theoretical relevance, however, I&A war documentary seems, thus far, to have eluded substantial academic interest.

What I hope to have provided in this paper, then, is not a comprehensive guide to I&A war documentary but rather a baseline framework of understanding that future works might fine-tune, or from which they might extrapolate. This paper, more than anything else, represents a call to attention: a testament to the possibilities presented by this field of study, and a theoretical baseline from which those possibilities might more easily be explored in the future.

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[25] This number does not include the countless documentary series and made-for-TV specials produced during this time; though difficult to count accurately, these additional films represent a body of work considerably larger.

My efforts towards achieving this baseline have been twofold. First, as per Appendix A of this document, I have compiled a list of feature-length American documentary films, released over the last eleven years, which deal with one or more aspect of the concurrent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. This list, for the sake of cohesion, necessarily neglects a number of similarly-themed documentaries produced by non-American filmmakers; for studies in American documentary filmmaking, however, this list is – to the best of my knowledge – comprehensive. By compiling this list, by identifying the constituents of this important corpus of films, I hope to have provided a starting point from which studies in American I&A war documentary might progress.

Knowing *which* films to look at, obviously, is an essential step in understanding I&A war documentary, as a unified body of film; beyond this, however, the next logical step is determining *how* those films should be looked at: for without a means to effectively speak about these films, what use do we have for a list? As a means of categorizing and understanding I&A war documentaries, pre-existing documentary classification models – specifically, the one presented by Bill Nichols in his *Introduction to Documentary* – prove insufficiently capable of accommodating the innovative techniques being employed by many I&A war documentary directors. Nichols' six-mode model – structured as a historical overview of significant documentary movements throughout the 20th century – is fairly incapable of shedding light on what is proving to be a very dynamic, very contemporary corpus. Because Nichols' modes are rooted in the past, and because his system fails to adequately account for modal evolution and blending over time, it cannot be effectively applied to a very specific – comparatively short-lived – time-period in the present. As a result of this incompatibility, those who might wish to

speak of I&A war documentaries in terms of modal similarity, are left at a bit of a loss; the traditional modes laid down by Nichols are unsuitable for the task, and yet there is no more recent more relevant model to which we might turn.

It is this shortcoming that I, throughout the main body of my paper, have worked to rectify. Following on from where Nichols left off, and filling in where his system seems to have fallen short, I have worked to establish a three-mode classification system specifically tailored toward making sense of the burgeoning corpus of I&A documentary. This classification system, as it is delineated in the three body chapters of this paper, is based exclusively on films produced and released within the last decade and is restricted to a specific range of subject matter: the US' two recent land wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. As a result of this relative specificity, the modal system contained herein is somewhat relieved of the burden of having to accommodate – like Nichols' system – upwards of eighty years of modal evolution, and is able to avoid assimilating the methodological trends of a variety of subject matters. Because American participation in Iraq and Afghanistan, at least for the moment, seems to have been minimized, and because public interest in these conflicts has all but worn itself out, the recent torrent of I&A documentaries – though certainly liable to continue unabated for years after the wars have officially ceased – is likely to peter out into a trickle in the medium term, with I&A docs being made only sporadically thereafter; this prospective decline in volume – coincident with an anticipated decline in public interest – effectively minimizes the distance into the future that this system will be forced to reach. Even if this current influx of films were to continue for another half-century, because this classification system is based on broad ideological trends rather than specific technical or methodological details,

its modal boundaries are apt to be versatile enough to accommodate a wide-range of methodological variations and evolutions: at least wider than the than the range of Nichols' six mode model.

The first body chapter of this paper, entitled "Let Me Tell You," was constructed loosely around Nichols' idea of "Social Issue" documentary and sought to deal exclusively with films that base themselves around the discovery and/or dissemination of information: films that "try to account for aspects of the historical world" (Nichols 165) in a factual, intellectual manner. As explained in that chapter, I&A documentaries that fall into the "Social Issue" mode can be seen to "take up public issues from a social perspective" (163), and unilaterally construct themselves around a central problem or question (167). Whether or not a given "Social Issue" film solves its central problem, or answers its central question, forms the distinction between my two subsets of the "Social Issue" mode: the 'instructive film' and the 'exploratory film' – sections 2.1 and 2.2 respectively.

The first of these two categories, the instructive film, "might seem to go with the expository mode" (162), and indeed, differs little from its brethren of "an earlier moment in documentary" (163). These instructive "documentaries set out to *explain* aspects of the world to us" (165), they provide the viewer, wholesale, with fully formed ideas and work to elicit his/her "support for one position instead of another" (165). Instructive films answer the question they pose. Exploratory films, on the other hand, raise issues and questions without providing the solutions. These films, unlike typical expository documentaries, focus on stressing the necessity of inquisition, rather than the simply presenting information for straightforward assimilation by the viewer. Exploratory films

focus on the process of problem-solving, without necessarily seeing that process through to fruition; they encourage social/political activity, more so than specific partisanship – though, oftentimes, one is not far from the other. What these two subsets of the "Social Issue" mode have in common, is that they deal in terms of factual knowledge: they work to pursue and disseminate information, to "take up public issues from a social perspective" (Nichols 163)

In the second body chapter of this paper, entitled "Let Me Show You," I went on to deal with films of a more emotional nature, films that, rather than pursue or provide information, sought primarily to promote experience and empathy. Based loosely around Bill Nichols' conception of "Personal Portraiture" documentaries, these documentaries "place their focus on the individual rather than the social issue – [though] at the best they reveal the one by means of the other" (Nichols 164). Unlike "Social Issue" documentaries that "*explain* aspects of the world to us," "Personal Portraiture" documentaries "invite us to *understand* aspects of the world more fully" (165) by immersing us vicariously in the experience of another (or other) human being(s). Rather than work to promote a certain ideology, or to predispose viewers to a certain way of seeing, "Personal Portraiture" documentaries work simply to show what life is like under a given set of circumstances, allowing the viewer, ostensibly, to decide for him/herself how, and under what pretenses, (s)he takes meaning from it. In opposition to "Social Issue" documentary's somewhat omniscient social perspective, the films dealt with in Chapter 3 have engaged with social situations from a limited, personal perspective: "stress[ing] the drama of experiencing a problem or situation" (Nichols 167) rather than working to provide resolution.

In the final body chapter of this paper, entitled "Let Them Show You (What I Think)" I worked to engage with and describe a relatively new breed of film which – though not yet as prevalent as films from the other two sections – has slowly been gaining traction as a mode of I&A war documentary. This body of films, which I have termed "proxy films," represents a distinct deviation from – or, at least a barely recognizable fusion of – both the "Social Issue" and "Personal Portraiture" modes of documentary. Propelled by recent technological developments in lightweight, versatile digital recording equipment, this mode of I&A documentary is comprised of films shot first-hand by the subjects themselves – amateur cameramen, often soldiers – but that are subsequently 'directed' and edited by a professional filmmaker. On the surface they carry the raw, personal quality of a (self)observational film, but a closer look will reveal that these films are often imbued during the editing phase, with a particular ideology – courtesy of the director – making them characteristically similar to the expository mode. These "Proxy Films" both show and tell simultaneously; they show us raw, unfiltered, emotional experience (à la Personal Portraiture) through the telling lens of an, often overtly partisan, filmmaker (à la Social Issue). These films, by virtue of their methodology, promise to be even more purely observational and unbiased than their traditional observational cousins, whose directors – though usually effacing themselves – are nevertheless part of the filming process. In reality, however, these "proxy films" are in many cases more partisan, though they are able to conceal this partisanship behind the rawness and authenticity of the composite footage.

Throughout the past three chapters, then, I hope to have provided a prospective schema by which we might better understand dynamic and rapidly expanding corpus of

Iraq and Afghanistan war documentary. By compiling a list of films that currently comprise this corpus, and by working these films into a coherent modal framework, I hope to have created a baseline from which future scholars might expand their efforts into this fascinating and little-acknowledged field. That said, this work, by no means intends to present a comprehensive overview of I&A war documentary; much, much more still needs to be done before even a foundation of knowledge can be said to exist in that field. What this essay represents, then, is not a manual or a guidebook, but an acknowledgement of a deficiency in contemporary film study, and but one step towards rectifying that deficiency. With the recent rise in popularity of I&A war documentary – and, indeed, documentary film as a whole – I suspect it will not be long before this corpus begins receiving the critical attention it deserves; at which point, I am sure, much more satisfactory, more comprehensive solutions will arise than those presented herein. Until then, however, I&A war documentaries will continue to thrive, unchecked, in an evolving yet fertile climate; they will continue to blur boundaries, to pose questions, unanswered, as they force their way into the future.

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APPENDIX A:

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Fighting For Life. Dir. Terry Sanders. Truly Indie, 2008. Film.

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Ghosts of Abu Ghraib. Dir. Rory Kennedy. HBO Home Entertainment, 2007. DVD.

Ground Truth, The. Dir. Patricia Foulkrod. Focus Features, 2006. Film.

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Hell and Back Again. Dir. Danfung Dennis. Independent, 2011. DVD.

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