



Photo courtesy of The Kobal Collection at Art Resource, NY

From the movie, Battle for Haditha.

Cinematic War: More Truthful Than Your Video Journal

Kate Preston

Academic Writing (Fall 2011)
Writing War
Professor Jim Berkey

In November 2011, a YouTube search for “Iraq Soldier Videos” returned over 98,600 separate results. In an age when sharing personal digital documentation is as simple as clicking the upload button on your laptop or cell phone, the availability of perspectives on the War in Iraq is almost overwhelming. Combine all those 98,600 videos with the 29,600-plus YouTube results for “Iraq War Reports” and you could easily be watching recorded footage of the Iraq War for the rest of your life. This staggering amount of video documentation has caused University of Iowa professor Garrett Stewart to remark that “if Vietnam was the ‘TV War,’ our occupation of Iraq is instead a video and a laptop war, not only logged but at times waged by digital relays, with cell phones as well as infrared predator screens helping to trigger the same bombs whose carnage they may also record” (Stewart 47). Cameras are everywhere, recording every moment of military life in the Middle East. Any question about the War in Iraq has an answer on tape. Facts and visual documentation of and about this war are so plentiful that their sheer volume dramatically influences the artistic representation of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

In addition to the thousands of internet videos, Hollywood directors continue to fill screens across the country with their personal interpretations of the wars, further solidifying the long-standing relationship between war and film. Beginning with the First World War, film and war have been inextricably linked. Governments used the medium initially as propaganda encouraging support for



Writing is conversation. Everything we write—papers, poetry, novels, letters—interact with both the world and the other writing

around us. This is particularly true when writing about war.

Our modern cultural conversation about war is huge. PTSD. Grief. Censorship. Truth. Veterans. Soldiers. Civilians. Bloggers. Magazines. Newspapers. Poetry. Photography. Film. Diaries. All of these topics combine to form our contemporary understanding of war. So when we were asked to write a research paper about the modern discussion of war, the hardest part was finding a place to start.

Interested in the “truth” about war, I originally wanted to focus on censorship, or letters, or embedded journalists, or civilian blogs, or soldier blogs, or the difference between these two kinds of blogs. Luckily, we had a lot of conversations about our writing in and outside of class to help me focus my thoughts and finally pick a topic out of the zillions I considered. Once I had picked a topic, the conversations continued. Through multiple rounds of peer review, a shared class research blog and bouncing ideas off of my classmates, we each expanded our own conversations, tidbits of dialogue about war photography, embedded journalism, and veterans’ poetry, and worked together to add to the overall discussion. As my Writing 101 Professor Jim Berkey said, “Our writing does not exist in a vacuum; it is part of an ongoing dialogue and conversation.” With that in mind, I hope you enjoy my contribution to the discussion and that you as a reader continue the discussion as well!

conflicts, a function of film that has continued throughout the 20th century and into the 21st century (Pisters 234). Although film still retains some of its original purposes, it also has evolved significantly throughout the past one hundred years. Reiterating Garrett Stewart's notion that "the Vietnam War was the TV War," Patricia Pisters, a professor of Media and Film Studies at the University of Amsterdam, argues that the photo journalism and television images of the Vietnam War "changed the perception of the war: images of the atrocities of napalm attacks and other horrific events established a turning point in public opinion which changed from seeing the 'just war' to the 'dirty war'" (Pisters 235). Vietnam was the first in which TV, namely through the era's three main television networks—ABC, NBC, and CBS—depicted the war accurately as it happened and transformed widespread public opinion about the war (Beck 8).

If, therefore, Vietnam was the television war, the Persian Gulf was the cable news war. With the emergence of CNN and other 24-hour news networks, the public now had constant visual access to events in the Middle East. This non-stop reporting and perpetual recording of the Gulf War in turn set the stage for the astounding number of videos recording the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan (Pisters 235). When describing the volume of recorded footage regarding the current wars, Stewart writes, "In analytic as well as digital terms, there's no exposure time, no lag for ironic or polemical reframing. There's only the electronic tracking of terror moment by moment...Sure, you may think you've seen it all on YouTube and cable networks, and this time you'd be right, you have: seen it the way the military itself has, at both ends of a lethal stealth—aerial hits and surface ambushes alike—each recorded in the real time of pending annihilation, zoom versus pan, impersonal targeting against the jittery focus of patrol" (48).

Stewart argues that no aspect of these wars has been left undocumented, a feat largely accomplished by the military itself. Soldiers and embedded journalists are now able to capture every moment digitally, recording their experiences for themselves and those back home. This almost insatiable desire by the military to archive everything causes the digital documentation of recent war to lose its artistic merit, or any deeper meaning than just pure fact. Scholars like Stewart and Harvard's Richard Beck argue that while there is an overwhelming amount of primary recordings of these wars, they are missing something. These videos offer tiny snapshots of events in the Middle East, but individually they cannot create a full understanding of war.

They detail strategies, spout statistics, and supply facts, but hardly elaborate on the personal experiences and personal damage of those involved. The inadequacy of these homemade videos creates gaps in our collective understanding of the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. This is where feature films step in.

Recent films about these wars have been extensively criticized, with reviewers denouncing everything from the films' artistic merits, scarcity of plot, and lack of box-office success to the content of the genre itself. A film critic for *Variety* magazine, Todd McCarthy writes, "I'm in no rush to see the rest of the Iraq-centered fiction films (as opposed to documentaries) Hollywood will be serving up in the coming months, simply because I think I know exactly where they're coming from and that I'm not going to learn anything new from them...No matter the specific qualities of the writing, filmmaking and performances; the problem for me is that all these films emanate from precisely the same mindset, the safest, least provocative attitude it is possible to have: the war sucks, Bush sucks, America is down



AP Photo/Nick Ut

Unfettered journalistic access to Vietnam resulted in many iconic images from that war, including this photograph of a grandmother and child after a U.S. napalm attack.

the tubes” (1).¹ In addition to McCarthy, many other scholars offer an extensive array of explanations for the unpopularity of films about the two wars. Some argue the unpopularity is due to “narrative agency [being] subsumed to technology at every level” (Stewart 49). Much of the battle in Iraq and Afghanistan is not conducted on majestic fields, but rather in control rooms behind computer screens. Thus, in an attempt to accurately tell the real story of these wars, films must rely on surveillance tapes and embedded footage, thereby eliminating the “choreographed and panoramic staples of the combat genre” (Stewart 45). Others, such as Richard Beck, suggest the films are too focused on shock-inducing facts, a technique left-over from the 1960’s, unfortunately rendering them useless in an age where “facts are too easy to come by. They mass themselves and fly around at outrageous speeds, and before the hour is up everyone with an iMac knows everything there is to know” (Beck 9). Jane Gaines, a film studies scholar at Columbia University, suggests it is due to a general desensitization of the public to these images of war. “The popular paradox of the mass circulation image,” Gaines explains, is that “something thought to be so powerfully incendiary could, at the same time that it disturbs, *not disturb at all*” (39). Flooded by the overwhelming, continuous stream of visual images, audiences have lost interest in depictions of the war, causing many of these films to be regarded as box office failures. Yet another group of scholars argue that simply “many works of mainstream cinema that engage with recent history are regarded ambivalently,” indicating that it is not necessarily the subject, but the timing that is off (Chare 334).

Despite the criticism often surrounding contemporary films about the conflicts, with critics and audiences alike regarding many recent films as “economical failures,” “artistic failures,” or both (Beck 8), feature films about these conflicts are essential. By contextualizing personal understanding within our current institutional framework, these films create a deeper cultural understanding of the wars in a way pure statistics, soldier video journals, and constant news coverage cannot. One of the strongest cases for these films, contrary to McCarthy’s assertions, is that they can complicate viewer perceptions

of war. By combining different forms of media and different perspectives, films such as *Battle for Haditha* and *The Hurt Locker*, which address the complex nature of life in the Iraqi war zone, create a story that is neither black nor white, but rather an entire spectrum of gray. These shades of gray presented by the films provide more than just information about life in the Middle East. They deepen the collective understanding of the war by depicting the complicated, conflicting motivations of the soldiers, exploring the viewpoint of the war-torn civilians, and exposing the horrific side effects of war.

One of these harrowing side effects was first detailed in an exclusive article published by *Time* magazine in March 2006, and later depicted in Nick Broomfield’s powerful film,

Battle for Haditha. Both the article and the film describe the gruesome events of November 19, 2005, a day in which 24 innocent Iraqi citizens were unjustly killed by a battalion of U.S. Marines in the city of Haditha. The film begins with the convoy of Marines patrolling the streets of Haditha, monitoring check points, raiding homes, and capturing suspected terrorists—everyday activities for deployed soldiers. But when members of the convoy are blown up by an improvised explosive device, or IED, planted in the road, Corporal Ramirez, played by former Marine Elliot Ruiz, and his men lose control. They storm into nearby houses, giving rooms only quick glances before showering their contents—furniture, men, women, children, party decorations—with a stream of bullets and destroying everything in their path.

The media portrayal of these events and the controversy surrounding the investigation that followed is less than generous to the Marines. The initial exclusive, written by Tim McGirk, claims “the details of what happened that morning in Haditha are more disturbing, disputed and horrific than the military initially reported” (1). “The civilians who died in Haditha on Nov. 19 were killed not by a roadside bomb [as described in the initial military report] but by the Marines themselves, who went on a rampage in the village after the attack, killing 15 unarmed Iraqis in their homes, including seven women and three children,” McGirk writes. “Human-rights activists say that if the accusations are true, the incident ranks as the



The U.S. government used film for propaganda during the First World War.

¹In the same article, McCarthy argues that in regard to the Iraq War and other current events, “documentaries are far better equipped to tackle them than are fictional features.” He maintains that documentaries about the war provide a more analytical and forward-looking view of the conflict than the feature films produced in Hollywood, all of which he contends provide a similar, calculated perspective about the events and consequences surrounding the war. On the other hand, documentaries, by nature of the way they are constructed, create a more refreshing, methodical, specific argument about aspects of the war in Iraq, therefore creating more important, less “stale” interpretations.

**“As an audience
we do not want to
uncover this dark side
of our soldiers, but
we must. We need to
be confronted with
the whole truth about
war, both the positive
and humane, as well
as the negative and
uncomfortable.”**

worst case of deliberate killing of Iraqi civilians by U.S. service members since the war began” (1).

Calling the events “disturbing, disputed, and horrific,” “a rampage,” and “deliberate killings,” the initial article condemns the Marines right from the start. Subsequent articles published by *Time* magazine that year reflect this same mentality. Michael Duffy writes on May 28, “one morning last November, some members of Kilo Company apparently didn’t attempt to distinguish between enemies and innocents. Instead, they seem to have gone on the worst rampage by U.S. service members in the Iraq war, killing as many as 24 civilians in cold blood” (1). These journalists portrayed the events of that November day as an unspeakable tragedy, which it most definitely was, but they also demonize these soldiers without offering much explanation as to what caused this terrible incident to occur.

The cinematic portrayal, however, offers audiences the chance to see the killings through the eyes of the Marines themselves, making it more difficult to completely blame them for everything that happened that day. “The deeper I dug into the whole story, the harder I realized it was to take a side,” director Nick Broomfield explains in a 2008 interview. He admits that initially his “story was much more judgmental against the Marines... I realized that these soldiers were very, very poor kids, who had all left school unbelievably early. It was the first time they had all been out of the United States. They didn’t speak a word of Iraqi. They had no idea what they were doing in Iraq, and they felt let down by the Marine Corps. It was hard to condemn them out of hand as cold-blooded killers” (Calhoun 1).

After investigating *Haditha*, Broomfield discovered that the events were not simply black and white. They were caused by a confluence of many factors, and by making a movie about the events, the filmmakers exposed the shades of gray. The presentation of the story was complicated further by the filmmakers’ choice to cast Iraqi refugees and former Marines among the leads and to provide them with a script that allowed extensive room for improvisation. By using the former Marines’ personal experiences, Broomfield both exposes intimate, real damage done to American soldiers, creating a “kind of therapeutic quality to the entire enterprise” (Dargis), and makes the Marines from *Haditha* more relatable, giving each one a history. Instead of just nameless killers, these boys now have families and dreams; they have demons in their pasts and hopes for the future. They have been damaged by the war, and have created intense bonds with their fellow soldiers. When death destroys these bonds, the Marines are broken. Determined to find a method of coping with their grief, they unfortunately choose to express themselves in an extreme, horribly misguided way.

Despite their horrific actions, one can almost sympathize with the overwrought Marines. During the first half of the movie, we come to realize that these soldiers are not so different from ourselves; we all have families and we all have dreams and we all can relate to feeling the simultaneous guilt, anger, and hopelessness that come with losing someone we have loved. While we still condemn the soldiers’ actions, it becomes much more difficult to condemn the men themselves. This internal conflict forces the audience to think about the war; it forces them to try and understand the war as something complicated and intricate, something more than just a body count.

Battle for Haditha further complicates the War in Iraq by showing audiences the conflict from the perspective of both innocent Iraqis and insurgents. As the film depicts the Marines’ actions leading up to the killings, it intermittently cuts to the lives of the doomed Iraqi civilians preparing for a party and to the lives of the destitute insurgents who plant the IED. By incorporating the family and their festive preparations, the filmmakers give relatable, human faces to the citizens of an occupied country. We see the young love between Hida and her husband, as well as the joy at her pregnancy. We feel the closeness of her family and share in their excitement. But we also briefly experience the continuous terror they live with

every day. It is impossible not to relate to the people portrayed in the film. At the end of the film, when the few female survivors are shown wailing in grief, the effect is heart-wrenching. Through this film, Broomfield has given a much-needed face to the supposed enemy, forcing the audience to begin to understand the war from the civilian perspective.

Along with the powerful portrayal of an average Iraqi family destroyed by war, *Battle for Haditha* explores the battlefield from an insurgent's point of view. In this film, the insurgents plant a bomb not to forward any radical agenda but to feed their families. The older of the two insurgents was an officer in the Iraqi army until the military was disbanded. Now, devoid of a livelihood, he is broke and desperate to provide for his family. To make quick money, he resorts to planting bombs for radicals. He does not support the American occupation, but he has no personal vendetta against the soldiers—he just needs the job to create a future for his daughter. After being confronted with that truth, can we really blame him?

Can we really blame any of them? *Battle for Haditha* makes it hard to



Photo courtesy of The Kobal Collection at Art Resource, NY

entirely condemn anyone for the events of that day. The film gives humanity to all sides of the story of Haditha, thereby showing viewers the complicated nature of war. One thing the film makes perfectly clear however, is that war hurts everyone. Each side of the battlefield has decent people: people with dreams for the future, people with families, and people damaged by the war. After viewing *Haditha*, it is no longer so easy to frame one side as good and the other as evil.

The film's very human illustration of survivor's guilt complicates the story of these Marines further. The day after the shootings, Corporal Ramirez is moved to tears while expressing his remorse for what he has done and those he has lost. He says, "I just wish I could change a lot of shit man. I feel like a lot of those people I killed fuckin' personally, you know what I mean? Dude, I 'ma fuckin' live with this guilt for the rest of my life man. Nobody fucking understands it either man. I feel like I am personally responsible for all those motherfuckers who died underneath me" (*Battle*). Showing an uncharacteristic amount of emotion as he speaks these words, Ramirez is both distraught at the men he has lost, but also incredibly angered, as indicated by his heavy use of expletives. His disassociation between himself and

Explosion in The Hurt Locker.

the military—claiming that “nobody understands”—shows that he blames them for both the position he is in now and the emotional state in which he will leave Iraq. Without the commanders who sent him into battle, he would not be the damaged young man he is now.

Just before this confession, Ramirez also explains his recent nightmares. Clearly haunted by death, he envisions murdered women and children littering the street surrounded by pictures of his own family. This enduring guilt eats away at him and through his confession we see that he is not a mindless killing machine, but a shattered and wounded boy. The film depiction of his guilt adds another dimension to our understanding of the effects of war. We can feel the emotional pain that comes from simply surviving war. Here again, these Marines, who were often portrayed so heartlessly in the media, are given a chance to explain themselves and to show the world what has happened to them. Film is the medium through which they are allowed to fully express their humanity.

Kathryn Bigelow’s powerful film *The Hurt Locker* further dissects the soldier’s internalization and expression of grief. The winner of six Academy Awards including “Best Picture,” the film focuses on the lives of three very different men in Delta Company, a bomb-diffusing squad stationed in Iraq during the summer of 2004. First is Specialist Owen Eldridge, played by Brian Geraghty, a young soldier who, while eager to please, is nervous and consumed by survivor’s guilt. Next is Sergeant J.T. Sanborn, portrayed by Anthony Mackie and described by the *New York Times*’ A.O. Scott as “a careful, uncomplaining professional who sticks to protocols and procedures in the hope that his prudence will get him home alive, away from an assignment he has come to loathe” (Scott 2). Lastly is the team leader, Staff Sergeant William James, the impetuous, dangerous wild card, played by Jeremy Renner in his Oscar-nominated performance.

Throughout *The Hurt Locker*, we see different manifestations of grief, but initially, we explore Eldridge’s intense feelings of survivor’s guilt after the death of his original team leader, Sergeant Thompson. In an exchange with the company’s resident stress therapist, John Cambridge, Eldridge reveals how his guilt slowly destroys him:

Eldridge: This is a war. People die all the time. Why not me?

Cambridge: You got to stop obsessing. Change the record in your head.

Think about other things. Right now, what are you thinking about?

Eldridge: You want to know what I’m thinking about?

(Picks up his M4 Rifle, puts finger on trigger)

Eldridge: This is what I am thinking about. Here’s Thompson dead.

(He dry fires. CLICK.) Here, he’s alive. (Click) He’s dead. He’s alive. (Boal 31)

Eldridge is obsessed with Thompson’s death, the fragility of it, and his own perceived role in the death. In reality, there was nothing Eldridge could have done to change the situation, but the guilt persistently haunts him. The other distressing part of this sequence, expressed several times throughout the film, is Eldridge’s pessimistic attitude about life on the front. He believes he will die in Iraq, and while it is a distinct possibility, it cannot possibly be healthy to live with that mindset every day. Eldridge is a nice kid; he’s funny, relatable, and just normal. It is heart-breaking to see him give in to the dark thoughts inside his head. This depiction of grief slowly gnawing at Eldridge is one of the most powerful representations of how war affects soldiers in the whole movie. War wreaks havoc on the young men we send to battle and even though there are thousands of statistics detailing the extent of the damage, we understand so much more when we are shown that change. The depiction of Eldridge’s darker internal thoughts is right there, demanding attention—more than any statistic could hope to, even more than the current record suicide rate of American veterans. In December 2011, the U.S. Department of Veterans’ Affairs estimated that a staggering 18 veterans take their lives every day, an equivalent of one suicide every 80 minutes (Parrish).

While Owen Eldridge is a powerful portrayal of soldiers emotionally damaged by war, the true star of *The Hurt Locker* is William James. When beginning to describe James in his review of the film, A.O. Scott writes that he is a man who “approaches his work more like a jazz musician or an abstract expressionist painter than like a sober technician...he approaches each new bomb or skirmish not with dread but with a kind of inspired, improvisational zeal” (Scott 2). James is addicted to the constant adrenaline rush of war. Everything he does, he does with extreme intensity and an almost insane desire to risk his life. Indeed, one of his most prized possessions is a box of “things that almost killed him.” In the box are bits of every bomb he has diffused, testaments to the dangers faced and the risks taken. Also included in the box are pictures of his young son and his wedding ring, the two items that may have destroyed his life the most by preventing him from fully surrendering to the seductive thrill of the battlefield. At the end of the film, after returning home he whispers to his son “the older you get, the fewer things you really love. By the time you get to be my age, maybe it’s only one—or two—things. With me, I think it’s one” (*Hurt Locker*). Directly after this scene, the film cuts to James back on deployment, away from his family, returning to immerse himself in his one true love, war.

The dark character of William James serves to emphasize a sinister feature of war, an aspect difficult to watch and difficult to digest as an audience. He embodies the fact that not all soldiers are fighting for the idealized, noble intention of protecting our country, but instead are there because they are addicted to war. This message to the audience is reinforced by the opening shot of the film, a black screen with a quote from Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Chris Hedges: “The rush of battle is often a potent and lethal addiction, for war is a drug.” Some of these young men are addicted to the lifestyle, to the danger and the risk, or worse, to the hunt. To see this portrayal of soldiers is heartbreaking and unnerving. As an audience we do not want to uncover this dark side of our soldiers, but we must. We need to be confronted with the whole truth about war, both the positive

and humane, as well as the negative and uncomfortable. By examining the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan through multiple outlets and different perspectives, we have a greater cultural, personal, and collective understanding of this moment in history. We can see the true effects of war and therefore can make educated decisions about whether or not the perceived benefits outweigh the costs.

Despite the incredible volume of digital, visual documentation of the War in Iraq—the thousands of soldier videos, graphic photographs, and television broadcasts devoted to depicting life on deployment—scholar Nicolas Chare suggests that “there are still experiences for which there are no files, no zeros and ones able to communicate them” (344). Instead, Hollywood films capture and examine these elusive experiences. In an interview with Channel 4, a British television station, Nick Broomfield makes this same case. “There is a clear separation between cinema and television,” he argues. “With television you go to the news programming to get information, to get details and reports. With cinema you have the opportunity to put the human condition and the humanity of the situation back in. You can show what a particular situation means in terms of peoples’ lives... With the Iraq War, people are bombarded with statistics and information, such as a bomb went off here and killed this many people. What we don’t get from television is that human story, the humanity of it all (“Battle for Haditha”).

These films provide a necessary humanity to the war; they give personal stories and faces to all of those affected by war, both deployed soldiers and occupied citizens. They powerfully connect audiences to events happening half a world away, directly exposing the complicated nature of these bloody conflicts. The best ones not only present war in all its contentious intricacies, but artistically organize the facts to provoke thought and meaningful discussion about the essence of war. Through sharing, exploring and dissecting the conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, these films create a deeper cultural understanding of the wars than statistics, soldier videos, and television news could ever do by themselves. They are essential.

Works Cited

Battle for Haditha. Dir. Nick Broomfield. Lafayette Film, 2007. DVD.

“Battle for Haditha - Interviews - Nick Broomfield Discusses Battle for Haditha.” *Channel 4* 30 Oct. 2008. Web.

Beck, Richard. “Talking Point: Inanimate Fact and Iraq War Experience.” *Film Quarterly* 62.1 (Fall 2008): 8-9. Print.

Boal, Mark. *The Hurt Locker*. Shooting Draft. 7 June 2007. Web.

Calhoun, Dave. “Director Nick Broomfield on ‘Battle for Haditha’ - Features - Film - *Time Out London*.” *Time Out London* May 2008. Web.

Chare, Nicholas. “Warring Pixels: Cultural Memory, Digital Testimony, and the Conflict in Iraq.” *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies* 15.3 (2009): 333-345. Print.

Dargis, Manohla. “The Killing of Innocents Faces a Dry-Eyed Dissection.” *New York Times* 7 May 2008. Web.

Duffy, Michael. “The Shame Of Kilo Company.” *Time* 28 May 2006. Web.

Gaines, Jane M. “The Production of Outrage: The Iraq War and the Radical Documentary Tradition.” *Framework* 48.2 (2007): 36-55. Print.

The Hurt Locker. Dir. Kathryn Bigelow. Summit Entertainment, 2008. DVD.

McCarthy, Todd. “War Films Crash and Burn in Toronto.” *Variety* 14 Sept. 2007. Web.

McGirk, Tim. “Collateral Damage or Civilian Massacre in Haditha?” *Time* 19 Mar. 2006. Web.

Parrish, Karen. “Battaglia Calls Reducing Suicides a Top Priority.” *American Forces Press Service* 12 Dec. 2011. Web.

Pisters, Patricia. “Logistics of Perception 2.0: Multiple Screen Aesthetics in Iraq War Films.” *Film-Philosophy* 14.1 (2010): 232-252. Web.

Scott, A. O. “Perils and Addictions of a Bomb Squad.” *New York Times* 25 June 2009. Web.

Stewart, Garrett. “Digital Fatigue: Imaging War in Recent American Film.” *Film Quarterly* 62.4 (Summer 2009): 45-55. Print.