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In Country

Narrating the Iraq War in Contemporary US Cinema

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Introduction

In this chapter I aim to use the documentary feature *Iraq in Fragments* (directed by James Longley, 2006) and the feature film *The Hurt Locker* (directed by Kathryn Bigelow, 2009) to examine how the Iraq War has been represented in US popular culture. I am interested in how these films give their viewers an understanding of Iraq as historical event – as an adjunct to senses of the war taken from newspapers, television coverage, and other sources – and how this understanding will, given time, form part of the basic stock of images and story structures related to the war that will shape future cultural memory. I take these films to be, as they say, an attempt at a first draft of history.

In order to describe how these films participate in the writing of history and in the settling of cultural memory, I will adopt a comparative approach. The first point of comparison that I wish to explore is the way in which the films describe the war in Iraq as a particular kind of event. The commonsense use of the word "event" presupposes that historical occurrences are discrete entities that possess their own intrinsic and unalterable structure. According to this view, events happened the way they did, and not otherwise, and it is the business of historical representation to identify this unalterable structure and to describe it by using the resources of language and narrative in an analogous way. In contrast to this commonsense view, H. Stuart Hughes argues that "what we conventionally call an 'event' in history is simply a segment of the endless web of experience that we have torn out of context for purposes of clearer understanding" (quoted in Bentley 1997: 483). Or, as David Lowenthal puts it:

> Like other synthetic constructs, such as "the middle ages" or the "renaissance," the historical event hardens and reifies thought about the past; the nineteenth century

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> or the 1930s becoming a "thing" like a battle or a birthplace, and the cause of causes. (Lowenthal 1985: 221)

Hughes and Lowenthal claim that, rather than simply producing an analogous or indexical representation of the past, the process of writing – or narrating – history marks out certain events as discrete occurrences and, in doing so, gives them shape, structure, order, and potentially lasting significance. For example, as an event such as the war in Iraq unfolds, it is difficult to see the clear, orderly structure that is the characteristic feature of later historical accounts such as John Keegan's single volume *The Iraq War* (Keegan 2004). Further, Louis Mink argues that the meaning of an event will have as much to do with the kind of narrative used to give the past order as with anything intrinsic to the event itself. In consequence, the event and its representation are interdependent and mutually constitutive. Mink notes:

> it is clear that we cannot refer to events as such, but only to events *under description* [. . .] "Events" (or more precisely, descriptions of events) are not the raw material out of which narratives are constructed; rather an event is an abstraction from a narrative. (Mink 1978: 147)

The war that comes into focus in Keegan's book, for example – which focuses on the military campaign leading to the fall of Baghdad – is as much a consequence of his decision about what events to include, how to order them chronologically and causally, and how to give them some kind of narrative resolution, as it is an indexical account of what happened in Iraq during the US invasion.

The historian and the filmmaker work in different media, have different working practices, and are not beholden to the same kinds of discipline. However, there is much to be gained by asking how *Iraq in Fragments* and *The Hurt Locker* place the Iraq war *under a description*; that is, how their directors have decided which of the potentially infinite number of battles, initiatives, statistics, experiences, and data available and relating to the war would form the central events of their narratives. For example, the war in Iraq can be placed under description in relation to a number of different historical frameworks, including the history of western colonialism in the region, the dependence of the US on Middle Eastern oil, Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait, and, in the aftermath of 9/11, the threat of terrorism and Iraq's purported weapons of mass destruction (WMD). All are plausible ways of framing and explaining the war; and yet these are not frameworks that you will find addressed in most film representations. In fact, the majority of feature films and many of the documentaries showing the war tend to focus on day-to-day fighting by US troops in and around Baghdad or Fallujah in 2004–2005. The focus of these representations on this particular aspect of the war and the process of repetition from one film to the next result in the military campaign taking precedence over other frameworks. As we shall see, this process of "hardening" and "reification" around the military campaign has significant implications for historical understanding (Lowenthal 1985: 221).

A key question here is not only which events are selected and which ones are omitted, but how the resources of film narrative, especially point of view and resolution, give these events meaning and in doing so shape the wider historical sense of the war. The second point of comparison I wish to explore is how a film's narrative structure will offer the viewers a position from which they will inhabit the story world presented. The point of view offered to a viewer by a film creates a structured and determinate relationship "between *who* 'experiences' and *what* is experienced" (Bordwell and Thompson, quoted in Montgomery, Durant, Fabb, Furniss, and Mills 1992: 187). David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson use the term "focalization" to describe the specific way in which a film establishes a particular perspective on the world for its viewer. The work of focalization in film representations of the war in Iraq very often places the viewer "in country," alongside a low-ranking US soldier. Thus placed, we see the war through the eyes of a young man who experiences intense scenes of combat interspersed with the mundane activities of a tour of duty. This "embedded" point of view – a feature of *The Hurt Locker* – tends to limit severely the way in which the event is narrativized, not least in its almost total exclusion of an Iraqi perspective – something that *Iraq in Fragments* seeks to correct.

My third point of comparison examines the endings of my two chosen films. As already noted, the production of any representation – be it a journalistic account, a history book, a documentary, or a feature film – requires the myriad competing and contested data and discourses of a historical event to be synthesized and given order. A key element in this ordering process is usually the imposition of a story structure that leads to a logical end point, which will offer some kind of "fictional coherence, causality, and closure to events" (Kellner 1987: 24). Examining the endings of my chosen films for signs of this fictional "closure" is a particularly illuminating line of inquiry, because, although the war in Iraq has twice been declared to be over, at the time of writing the country remains in turmoil.[1]

By drawing these three points of comparison – how the event is reified through decisions about what stories to tell; how point of view is orchestrated; and how the films seek resolution – I aim to demonstrate how *Iraq in Fragments* and *The Hurt Locker* give shape to the Iraq War. My choice of films – an intellectually challenging, independently produced documentary, side by side with a commercial and mainstream feature film – is driven by a desire to show how the historical film can work to extend and deepen our understanding of war (and of history more generally) or, conversely, how it can close down our horizons and limit historical knowledge.

Iraq in Fragments (2006)

Around twenty feature documentaries showing the war in Iraq have received limited theatrical releases.[2] Pat Aufderheide usefully divides the films into three groups, and her taxonomy can be taken as evidence of how a historical sense of the war is being shaped through a process of selection and deselection, each group of films delimiting the event according to its own logic. The first group Aufderheide labels "Why-Are-We-in-Iraq Docs"; these are essay films that analyze and extrapolate motives for the US government's decision to invade Iraq. They include *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), *WMD: Weapons of Mass Deception* (2004), *Iraq for Sale: The War Profiteers* (2006), and *No End in Sight* (2007). In these films, left-liberal filmmakers take a broad historical perspective, in which the Iraq War is seen as one part of a neo-conservative project seeking to secure a strategic hold over Middle Eastern oil and to generate large profits for civilian contractors involved in reconstruction. The selection of events in these films is partisan and at times polemical, and, although ostensibly they attempt to show the bigger picture, they are hindered in this by a view of history in which the Iraq War appears as the consequence of the self-interested, semi-criminal actions of a small group of policy-makers in high office. In a reversal of the "great men" theory of history – we might call this the "dastardly men" theory – history is understood as a process given shape by people who, through their intelligence and will, shape events as they unfold. The second group, labeled "Grunt Docs," focuses on the experience of US combat troops. It includes *Gunner Palace* (2004), *The War Tapes* (2006), *Off to War* (2005), *Occupation: Dreamland* (2005), *The Ground Truth* (2006), *Baghdad ER* (2006), and *Jerabek* (2007). As noted above and as we shall see in relation to *The Hurt Locker*, this focus on the grunt's (or ordinary soldier's) experience is a strategy the war movie genre in general tends to adopt and, as I argue in my book *War Cinema*, it is a tried and tested way of closing down historical understanding by separating out the day-to-day action of fighting from the wider historical and political discourses that might explain why the fighting is occurring (Westwell 2006: 109–115). Aufderheide labels the third group, including *My Country, My Country* (2006) and *The Blood of My Brother* (2005), "Learning from the Iraqis Docs." In these films "an independent American filmmaker documents daily life in the midst of an Iraqi family" (Aufderheide 2007: 62). As with the "Grunt Docs," Aufderheide argues, in these films there is also something of a making safe; the focus on the experience of the family unit – universalized, recognizable, and narrow in its point of view – once again dramatically reduces any wider historical contextualization of the war.

Where does *Iraq in Fragments* fit within this wider corpus, and how does it represent the Iraq war through the selection of some stories and omission of others? Aufderheide includes the film in her third category; but I wish to argue that it has distinct and complex qualities that make it a powerful alternative to the party political alignment and "dastardly men" approach to history of the "Why-Are-We-in-Iraq Docs," the embedded point of view of the "Grunt Docs," and the heartfelt but universalizing tendency of the "Learning from the Iraqis Docs."

Iraq in Fragments received a limited theatrical release in 2006 and won Best Director, Best Cinematography. and Best Editing awards at the 2006 Sundance Film Festival, as well as being nominated for an Academy Award in 2007. The film's title refers implicitly to Iraq's formation in 1921 as a colonial amalgamation of "fragments" of the disintegrating Ottoman Empire and to the present-day disintegration of the country as a result of the war. There is also some self-reflexive comment in the film's title on the process of editing itself, whereby stories are selected and deselected and images of the world are assembled into a coherent picture of a particular time and place. The film's director, James Longley, is American, but he studied film at the All Russian Institute of Cinematography in Moscow, as well as spending time living and working in Russia as a journalist. These experiences perhaps allow Longley to look at Iraq as an American who has lived and worked outside the US, in a cultural context where assumptions about the driving factors of historical change stem from a different root, especially through the legacy of Marxist concepts such as the centrality of the industrial mode of organization and class conflict. In the majority of documentaries that show the war in Iraq, filmmakers foreground individual experience (of US soldiers, generals, policy-makers, and politicians) and describe history as a process driven by the actions of these historical agents. In contrast, Longley searches for a way of extending the range of narratives in play through the inclusion of multiple Iraqi perspectives and through the telling of stories of people who are dispossessed, marginal, and with little historical agency. He also searches for ways of telling these stories whereby structural elements rise to the surface (social class, religious difference, geographical complexity, and generational change being considered essential to historical understanding). His distinctive approach – which, I am suggesting, is informed by a Marxist view of history – is nowhere clearer than in the arrangement of his stories into three strictly bracketed 30-minute sections. This narrative design has no corollary in the wider cycle of Iraq War documentaries and, as we shall see, it offers a challenging, thought-provoking view of history.

The first section, titled "Mohammed of Baghdad," focuses on the story of 11-year-old auto-mechanic Mohammed Haithem, who lives in the Sheik Omar district of Baghdad – a poor working-class area. This section begins with a montage sequence composed of shots of bridges across the Tigris, vignettes of city life, US troops in military vehicles on patrol, and a surreal superimposed image of a goldfish swimming in a tank.[3] The opening montage sequence is followed by a carefully crafted description of Mohammed's life – his struggle at school, his relationship with his violent adoptive father – over which is layered a soundtrack composed of his thoughts, feelings, and hopes for the future. Another montage sequence – Aufderheide labels these sequences "visual poems" – captures the beauty, vitality, violence, and confusion of Iraq under occupation and is used to make the transition to the film's second section, titled "Sadr's South" (Aufderheide 2008: 92). This section focuses on the followers of the cleric Moqtada al-Sadr, as they rally for regional elections in the Shiite South. We follow in particular 32-year-old Sheik Aws al Kafaji, who is in charge of the Sadr office in Naseriyah. The film shows political strategy meetings, religious rallies, the Mehdi Army militia enforcing the prohibition of selling alcohol, a violent encounter with NATO (North

Atlantic Treaty Organization) forces, and the celebration of an Islamic festival, which features violent self-flagellation. The third section, titled "Kurdish Spring," focuses on a family of sheep farmers in the village of Koretan, in the Kurdish North. As in the first section, there is an emphasis here on the experience and thoughts of children, in particular on the friendship of two boys and their fathers, who live on neighboring farms. This section also shows scenes of workers making bricks in large ovens, the observance of Islamic religious custom, and enthusiastic voting in regional elections, amidst clear signs of a strong Kurdish nationalism.

In his production notes, Longley describes how, at the time of filming, the Sunni Arabs in Baghdad and other areas were boycotting elections and as a result falling outside the official political process. At the same time, the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution was lobbying for a separate Shiite state in the oil-rich South, and the Kurds were pressing for independence and seeking to retain control over oil-rich Kirkuk (Longley 2006). Observing these events, Longley sought out micro-narratives that would speak to these complex historical forces (each pulling in different directions) in a suitably complex way; he explains in his production notes that "the fracture lines had been drawn that would permanently split Iraq," and these fracture lines are marked by the film's separation into three parts (Longley 2006). As Aufderheide notes (2008: 91): "The tripartite organization recapitulates the argument of the film, made by several of its subjects: that the American invasion precipitated a political crisis that will shatter the country formerly known as Iraq."

Longley invites his viewers to question preconceptions of the Iraq War as a *singular*, unified event and instead to hold in tension the deterioration of security in Baghdad, the strengthening of a well-organized, sectarian insurgency in the South, and the depiction of a region of relative peace. The decision to structure his documentary in this way is driven by a concept of history in which context and deeper structures of historical change are placed in a dialectical relation with day-to-day events. The selection of these events and their placing in juxtaposition one with the other is not organized via a continuity system or ordered by an omniscient narrator. Rather, the editing system in play is closer to that of a dialectical montage; that is, to the theorized approach to film editing associated with Soviet cinema – and especially with the historical films of Sergei Eisenstein – which claims that it is via editing that meaning is made, especially through the juxtaposition of distinct and different shots that, in the mind of the viewer, combine into explosive new concepts (Robertson 2009). The lack of explicit linking or explanation between the different parts forces the viewer to make sense of them in relation to their own knowledge of Iraq and of the Iraq War and to the film as a whole.

Selmin Kara observes that this dialectical relationship – which I have described as part of the film's narrative structure and editing system – is also integral to its sound design, noting:

> The sonic contrasts among the vernacular urban noise of Baghdad streets in the segment on the Sunnis, the overpowering sectarian sounds of the Shiites, and the

> suspenseful quiet of the rural Kurds up north open up a dissonant space in which each fragment of the film becomes a testimony to both the cultural, ethnic and religious disquiet of the nation and the heterogeneity of its sonic landscape. (Kara 2009: 263)

Kara concludes: "Together the fragments portray Iraq as an assemblage of discontinuous noises, sights, sounds, voices, and music, which implies that it is impossible to capture the nation (or life under occupation) in its totality" (264).

As the brief description of the film offered above indicates, Longley uses dialectical montage in a thorough and principled way, to organize shot-to-shot relations (in his "visual poems"), narrative structure, and sound design. The result is a film that aims to foster an "intellectual montage" taking place inside the viewer's mind, in which the Iraq War is understood as the explosive combination of these different, disparate, and often contradictory parts.

Each viewer will likely undertake the intellectual work of understanding the relationship between the different parts in different ways, depending upon their knowledge base and frame of reference. However, it seems likely that, for most, the dialectical relationship between the three parts of Longley's film will contrast sharply with western media representations, which have shown the war in relation to the "shock and awe" invasion stage and the ensuing military stalemate. Against this, the structure of *Iraq in Fragments* encourages the viewer to understand the war as a fluid, changing, and complex reality, within which the US invasion is formative but not absolutely so. This is signalled through the way Longley presents the dominant western news discourse in the film. At one point we see George W. Bush's acknowledgment that prisoner abuse had taken place at Abu Ghraib military prison: this is part of a news report playing on a television in the background in a cafe, barely noticed by the clientele. The marginalization of Bush here is a challenge to the approach found in the "Why-Are-We-in-Iraq" documentaries, which, as noted previously, describe the Iraq War as the result of the actions of the president and his advisors. In *Iraq in Fragments* this pivotal news story – so central to the shaping of western public opinion – is shown as something blended into the everyday reality of life under occupation and, crucially, as something relatively unremarkable.

This clever dialectical design extends to the way in which point of view is orchestrated in the film. Longley shot more than 300 hours of film, spending over a year with some of his subjects and over two years in Iraq in total. Indeed, the film's "visual poems" can be read as an attempt on his part to sum up his visual experience of the places he visited. Aufderheide claims that this is the organizing principle around which the film's point-of-view system is ordered. The montage sequences, she claims, "underscore the way in which the foreigner's gaze soaks up surfaces where a resident would see only background" and signal to the viewer "the multi-faceted, partial knowledge of the foreign observer" (2008: 91–92).[4] In other parts of the film we are made aware (especially through the decision to leave considerable amounts of speech untranslated) of the difficulty (perhaps impossibility) of ever fully understanding the experience of the people we see on screen. Aufderheide concludes that the film "says much, and gracefully, about Iraqis, but much more about what Americans do not know about them and, even more, if indirectly, about the wealth of ambiguity in cross-cultural encounter" (91).

While I am in agreement with Aufderheide's observation, I wish to argue that this is only part of the picture. As my description above of the film's structure has indicated, Longley is keen to find ways of bringing together different perspectives, and the film attempts to offer points of view that are distinct from his own (while still acknowledging that these are, to a great extent, his own constructions). Thus the film carefully details a number of key characters: as noted, a 13-year-old boy in the first section, a Muslim cleric in the second, and two families (with focus on two children) in the third.[5] We might think of Longley looking as if from their perspective, acknowledging that he (and likely the viewer) is an outsider, but at the same time attempting – through a careful editing together of voice-over, dialogue, ambient sound, music, and sound effects – to give the viewer some sense of how the war is being experienced from that particular character's perspective. In his production notes Longley writes: "I didn't just want to bring the viewers into Mohammed's neighborhood – I wanted to put them inside his head. I wanted them to see what he saw, hear what he heard, including the sound of his own thoughts," and the meticulous layering of point-of-view shots and translated recorded interviews indicates that this is not merely hyperbole (Longley 2006). Longley attempts to reconcile his limited viewpoint with the experience of others in such a way as to capture the war from his and their perspective at one and the same time. As a result, point of view in the film oscillates in an intentionally dialectical manner, which complements the film's narrative structure.[6]

Rather than making use of the child's perspective in any sententious way – as numerous other Iraq War feature films and documentaries do – Longley uses children as ciphers. One scene must suffice to illustrate how the interior world of the film's children is dovetailed with the other elements of the documentary: we see Mohammed watching a group of adult Iraqi males (including his violent adoptive father) who are discussing the why and wherefores of the war; the men are cynical and angry, Mohammed's face is blank, his brow furrowed. Here the viewer is placed alongside Longley, witnessing a small child trying to understand the adult world at a time of war. To this Longley adds a voice-over consisting of Mohammed's thoughts – a heartfelt description of his ambition to become a pilot, so as to be able to escape the difficulties of his life as an auto-mechanic – which provides a powerful counterpoint to the difficult reality of the machine shop and to the dark fatalism of the adults' conversation. This layered and unsentimental presentation of Mohammed's lived experience – the mise-en-scène of the machine-shop registering Baghdad as an urban, industrialized city with a marked class divide; the father's physique displaying injuries sustained during the Iran–Iraq War; Mohammed's diminished size as the result of malnutrition suffered during the United Nations' sanctions period following the Gulf War – speaks of the ways in which structural historical factors have impacted on Mohammed's everyday life, making him who he is. The power of the scene stems from the way in which the camera records and reveals the stark contrast between Mohammed's thoughts and hopes for the future (and those of the other children featured in the film) and the viewer's understanding that in war-torn Iraq these hopes will never be realized. Our point of view here is in part objective, distant, looking on, but also embodied, anchored, and specific; it is observational, and yet framed by wider historical structures. Empathy and sympathy are activated (some ethical demand is being made here that the lives of these children should be better than they are), but this response conjoins with the intellectual work demanded by the film in its entirety; these children are historical subjects, and their futures will be dictated by the interplay of forces modeled by the film's dialectical structure and composition.

As already noted, the types of stories told and the dialectical structure of *Iraq in Fragments*, along with its careful orchestration of point of view, seems designed to refuse the security of knowledge provided by narratives more conventionally deployed. There is nothing immanent in the first section of the film that is tied up in the third, for example. Themes recur – relationships between fathers and sons, the difficulty of self-realization, the presence of more extreme alternatives, concern for the future – but they are not geared to a narrative logic that moves toward resolution. The decision to place the "Kurdish Spring" section last does point toward an ending of sorts, at least for that particular region; but there is no sense that Iraq as a whole has moved toward democracy or freedom.[7] Using material shot while making *Iraq in Fragments*, Longley has subsequently released a short film called *Sari's Mother* (2007), which tells the story of an Iraqi mother trying to find help for her 10-year-old son, Sari, who is dying of AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome, contracted during a blood transfusion). Longley's desire to continue to add to his documentary perhaps indicates his desire to make clear that *Iraq in Fragments* constitutes only a first draft of history and that history is a process that narrative can place into a neat order only at the expense of the past's infinite complexity.

The historical film can enable what David Lowenthal calls "vivid intimacies" with past others. But, while this intimacy can usefully promote historical empathy, there is also a danger that the telling of stories about the past in this way can "attenuate historical understanding, underscoring universal constants of human feeling while obscuring or ignoring the broader social and cultural trends that both link and differentiate past and present" (Lowenthal 1989: 30). It is precisely this tendency toward the universal that Aufderheide identifies in the "Learning from the Iraqis Docs." However, I hope that I have demonstrated how, through the choice of which events to show, through the dialectical organization of narrative, editing, and sound design, through the orchestration of point of view, and through the refusal of any impulse toward resolution, *Iraq in Fragments* offers its viewers this "vivid intimacy" while never allowing the historical structures in which the lives shown are lived to slip from view. As such *Iraq in Fragments* can be placed alongside those other history films that, as Robert Rosenstone puts it, search "for a new vocabulary in which to render the past on the screen, an effort to make history [. . .] more complex, interrogative, and self-conscious, a matter of tough, even unanswerable questions rather than slick stories" (Rosenstone 2006: 18).[8]

The Hurt Locker (2009)

A significant number of feature films relating to the war in Iraq have been released, including *GI Jesus* (2007), *The Situation* (2007), *Home of the Brave* (2007), *In the Valley of Elah* (2007), *Redacted* (2007), *Badland* (2007), *Grace is Gone* (2008), *Conspiracy* (2008), *Stop-Loss* (2008), *The Lucky Ones* (2008), *The Hurt Locker* (2008), and *The Green Zone* (2010).[9] These feature films can be organized into two broad groups: a home-front cycle (although films in this cycle do contain scenes of combat, such scenes are usually short and contextualized as a flashback or some sort); and a combat cycle with a more resolute focus on the experience of US troops on tours of duty. As depicted via these representations, the Iraq War is an event defined by military operations and by the journeying of US troops as they serve their tours of duty and return home, often finding this return difficult. *The Hurt Locker* belongs to the latter group. The film's release began with a lengthy, award-winning tour of the festival circuits in late 2008/early 2009, where it picked up garlands and critical acclaim; this was followed by a wider release in the US from June 2009, and eventually the film was shown in 535 theaters. By August 2010, it had taken $48.6 million at the box office worldwide, a sum that made it a clear commercial success in a difficult climate for war movies. The film was nominated for nine Academy Awards in 2010 and won six, including Best Picture and Best Director for Bigelow – the first woman to win this award.

The narrative of *The Hurt Locker* focuses on the day-to-day experiences of Staff Sergeant William James (Jeremy Renner), a bomb disposal technician. Amy Taubin notes that the film could be titled "Seven Instances of Dismantling an Improvised Explosive Device" (Taubin 2009: 32), and Joshua Clover argues that this loose, repetitive narrative structure is driven by Bigelow's desire to represent the seemingly endless task of trying to impose order in Iraq. Clover compares the film to the HBO (Home Box Office) television series *Generation Kill* (2008), which, he argues, has an "episodic aimlessness" that "summons up the unnarratability of the Iraq adventure, its unreason, and inevitably the idea that there was no reason to start with" (Clover 2009: 9). This claim suggests that Bigelow has attempted to select events – in fact the same event, repeated seven times – that function metonymically and metaphorically, and that this particular choice was driven by a desire to critique the ineffective and seemingly endless prosecution of the war. Counter to this view, I wish to argue that, against a backdrop of news reporting in which the war had seemingly become "just one damn IED after another," Bigelow's instinct is to repeat the bomb disposal scenario, each time using the resources of narrative in order to find a more redemptive line (Carruthers 2008: 73). As such, *The Hurt Locker* does not attempt to seek a suitable narrative form to depict the war (or, as in Longley's film, to indicate the difficulty of attempting such a description), but presents each act of bomb disposal as replete with the potential to redeem the experience of roadside bombs, military stalemate, and steadily growing casualties. The film's structure does indeed call on the viewer's sense of the war as episodic and aimless, as Clover argues; but it then works toward a more positive formulation, focused on the counter-entropic quest to locate and defuse IEDs (improvised explosive devices) before they detonate. The bombs James defuses prevent a UN building and its civilian workers from being destroyed (we might recall that the UN headquarters were bombed in Baghdad in August, 2003); and he attempts to save an innocent Iraqi, press-ganged into being a suicide bomber. Most dramatically, he risks his own life to prevent the desecration of a dead child's body. The underlying humanitarian impulse behind each of these acts leads Taubin to describe James as a conventionally heroic "equal opportunity saviour," and it is telling that not one of these sequences shows an IED in its most commonly used scenario, as a roadside bomb targeting US convoys (Taubin 2009: 35). James's actions offer a corrective to the inertia that had come (by 2004) to typify the stand-off between heavily protected US forces (only vulnerable when moving by road) and the guerrilla tactics of the insurgents. The tagline for the film reads "You don't have to be a hero to do this job. But it helps," and the implication is clear enough: *The Hurt Locker* seeks to reclaim a sense of the heroic and effective US soldier, who puts his life at risk in pursuit of a mission informed by a moral imperative.[10]

In contrast to the complex narrative structure and description of historical subjects and of their limited agency in *Iraq in Fragments*, *The Hurt Locker* is driven by a desire to convert the intractable political, ethnic, and religious conflicts that had come to define the war in Iraq into tangible, reducible, and solvable problems. The bomb disposal technician's carefully demarcated role, its peripheral relationship to the military, and its potentially neutral position in relation to the wider aims and objectives of the war all serve as an accessible and redemptive cipher for the experience of the war more generally. James is not mired in atrocity, not even in actual combat, but he is instead actively attempting to save lives and to establish order. He is, in effect, on a rescue mission. This trope also has a corollary in the wider popular cultural response to 9/11. As Susan Faludi notes, in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks the narrative trope of *rescue* prompted the emergency services to be lauded as heroes, and their commitment, obedience, and bravery dovetailed with a wider culture of jingoism, which consolidated the move to war (Faludi 2007: 46–64). Even when placed in the context of films showing military operations, this extremely narrow perspective – in which a number of successful bomb disposal operations are chosen as the events that best sum up the Iraq War as a historical event – ensures that the film shows only a small, unrepresentative aspect of the war.

In *The Hurt Locker* the choice of the events to depict, the positive characterization of James as a hero, and the symbolic meaning of "redemptive" accorded to his actions are augmented through an extremely narrow and limited point-of-view system. Through clever direction and careful technical choices (the latter being the work of Barry Ackroyd, Ken Loach's long-time cinematographer), the viewer is immersed in the action alongside the bomb disposal squad. For example, the film's opening sequence shows James's predecessor, Staff Sergeant Matt Thompson (Guy Pearce), defusing an IED. A point-of-view shot from inside Thompson's heavy, protective helmet immerses the viewer in his experience of bomb disposal, and as he walks down the road a hand-held camera pans from left to right, to show us what he sees. The sound design here foregrounds Thompson's nervous breathing and the sound of American voices speaking desperately via internal communication devices. The world beyond the bomb's perimeter – brought to life so vividly in the dialectical sound design used in *Iraq in Fragments* – is reduced simply to eerie quiet and occasionally untranslated voices. Thompson doesn't survive the opening sequence, but our positioning in this scene is indicative of the orchestration of point of view in the film overall (the pattern continues as James replaces Thompson as key focalizer) and of Bigelow's desire to depict the experience of fighting in Iraq (in her words, "a war of invisible, potentially catastrophic threats") through a tight focus on the experience of the combat soldier (Bigelow, quoted in Macaulay 2009: 33).

The film's large sets (often extending in excess of 300 metres in every direction) were designated as "360 degrees active," with up to four camera operators given license to roam around the central bomb disposal event and shoot footage as they saw fit. A consequence of this is, as Alpert notes, that

> Throughout the film Bigelow shows us all perspectives – a shot from behind Iraqi snipers or a videographer taking pictures of Eldridge, a close-up of the eye of the cab driver focusing on James holding a pistol on him, a long shot of James' squad from behind the bars of a window, a foreshortened close-up of a white building seen through the scope of a rifle, or a helicopter seen high above through the visor to Thompson's helmet. "There's lots of eyes on us," Sanborn says at one point with fear in his voice. (Alpert 2010)

However, these frantic cutaways, appearing in the heat of the film's action sequences, are commonly point-of-view shots, looking on at James and his men from diegetically unanchored positions. On occasion, these point-of-view shots are embodied; but they remain at all times thoroughly decontextualized, with no attempt at characterization. The effect of these cutaways, then, is to make the threat more apparent. When the film switches back to seeing through the bomb squad's gun sights, the viewer, like James and his team, feels under surveillance from all quarters.

Robert Sklar argues that this orchestration of point of view is reinforced by the fact that the Iraqis in the film are represented in prejudicial terms (Sklar 2009: 55–56).[11] Most locals are seen at a distance (often through the sights of a rifle), and in the small number of sequences where characters come into focus – James's stand-off with a taxi driver, his surreal conversation with an academic who claims to work for the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency) – the film does not convey any clear information. Presumably this is intended to reflect the difficulty James faces in trying to make sense of the war (something Longley achieves through his dialectical approach to point of view), but it also has the effect of casting all Iraqis as inscrutable, masked, and potentially dangerous. In the film's perhaps most powerful dramatic line, James befriends an Iraqi child nicknamed "Beckham." As a result of his friendship with James, Beckham is kidnapped and killed, and his body is discovered, stuffed with explosives, in an abandoned factory. In the absence of any reporting of similar cases or of any imaginable strategic purpose to the preparation of a body-bomb of this sort, this scene seems designed to symbolize the barbarity and inscrutability of the enemy, as well as to posit Iraq as the home of a civil struggle (with Iraqi killing Iraqi) in which America has a role only as an unwitting and well-intentioned catalyst.

By such means, a reversal of power relations is effected, American soldiers being portrayed as imperiled, powerless, and victimized, in contrast to the realities of the balance of power between an insurgency and the world's most powerful army.[12] The film's restricted point of view is also reinforced by the way the squad is shown to be isolated from wider military command structures. Hunter notes, for example, that their support and intelligence systems are rendered "almost as shadowy nuances" (Hunter 2009: 78). This decision not to show the chain of command absolves the film from drawing attention to how the soldiers' actions on the ground are governed by decisions taken by superiors and policy-makers. Reviewing the film in the *New Yorker*, David Denby writes that it "narrows the war to the existential confrontation of man and deadly threat," allowing it to be enjoyed "without ambivalence or guilt" (Denby 2009: 84). Denby's comments indicate how the film's orchestration of point of view licenses a detachment from the wider discourses pertaining to the war, a detachment that limits understanding, allays critique, and keeps at bay the everyday realities of the war shown so vividly and with such complexity in *Iraq in Fragments*.[13]

While the event is being sifted, ordered, and made subject to narrative sense and structure, the question of endings (as indicated by Longley's refusal to give his film closure) remains a fraught one. At the time of the production of the films discussed in this chapter (and indeed of the writing of the chapter itself) the war had not provided any kind of ready-made ending.[14] So, how does *The Hurt Locker* negotiate this irresolution? As stated, James is presented in fairly conventional heroic terms, but he is also shown to be experiencing combat stress – he is prone to lapses of judgment, disobeys orders, and displays an unhealthy addiction to taking risks. James's combat stress is shown to be the result of the incremental day-to-day strain of saving lives and helping people. The US is figured here as an irrepressible, skillful, decent young man who has been harmed by his desire to be a good soldier. James's suffering points to the possibility of a certain type of ending. In an article for *The New York Times*, A. O. Scott (2010) tracks the widespread denial of politics/ideology in Iraq War movies and argues that this is a consequence of a focus on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), which is leading to the Iraq War (like the Vietnam War before it) being reduced to a thoroughly psychologized, ahistorical American experience. Scott is here referring to the way in which the difficult legacies of the Vietnam War were subject, during the 1980s, to a widespread revisionism designed to reclaim credibility for the military and to rebuild national self-esteem. One of the key strands of this revisionism was an insistent focus not on the war itself (and its political, geographical, and symbolic complexity), but on the suffering of the Vietnam veteran, who, according to revisionist logic, had merely done his patriotic duty in difficult circumstances. As Keith Beattie notes, a number of films showed Vietnam veterans overcoming their struggle with PTSD, and this process of "healing the wounds" became the dominant metaphor for rendering the war less divisive a decade after its end (Beattie 1998: 142). This filtering of the experience of the war through that of the Vietnam veteran enabled key aspects of that experience to be screened out – in particular, the motivations and struggles of the Vietnamese, and the mistakes and misjudgments of politicians and policy-makers. By such means the complex history of US foreign policy and international relations was transformed into an individual experience, and the wider culture accommodated, and even celebrated, this experience. It was as a result of this process, in confluence with many others, that by the early 1980s the divisive and troubled memory of the war in Vietnam had been settled; and this enabled the US to reclaim faith in its foundational narratives of masculine, military, technological, and political superiority, arguably ensuring the necessary preconditions for further wars in the 1990s and 2000s. Scott suggests that the same kind of strategy (this time working in parallel with the war rather than following it) is now under way in relation to Iraq, where the experience and suffering of US troops is being used as a way of screening off the complexity of the war. As Douglas Kellner notes, the logic here is clearly "to redeem the terrible losses of the destructive invasion and occupation through the heroic struggle for recovery and redemption of the returning US soldiers" (Kellner 2010: 222). Putting it more bluntly, Slavoj Žižek argues that this focus on the suffering of the soldiers is "ideology at its purest: the focus on the perpetrator's traumatic experience enables us to obliterate the entire ethico-political background of the conflict" (Žižek 2010).

Scott's comparison is valid, yet such a generalization surfaces over crucial differences. In Vietnam War movies such as *First Blood* (1982), *Casualties of War* (1989), and *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989), and in a number of films in the contemporary Iraq War cycle such as *In the Valley of Elah* and *Stop Loss*, PTSD is shown to be precipitated if a soldier is a perpetrator of, or witness to, atrocity. Hence the process of "healing the wounds" shown in these films must, at least in part, acknowledge these atrocities, even as the traumatized veteran "moves on" from them. In marked contrast, *The Hurt Locker* shows PTSD simply as an inevitable consequence of soldiering. As with Captain Miller (Tom Hanks) in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), whose shaking hand testifies to the toll the work of war has taken on a humble and decent man, *The Hurt Locker* presents PTSD as an inevitable response to combat. Stripped of its implicit negative connotations as a measure of the traumatic nature of war, the symptoms of PTSD remain available for treatment, indeed they are all the more treatable as a result of this process of amendation.

The mechanism for this ideological recuperation can be seen in a range of recuperative war movies such as *Coming Home* (1978) or *Courage Under Fire* (1996). These films, which deal with the wars in Vietnam and in the Persian Gulf respectively, show that trauma can be worked through, masculine capability can be reestablished (often through the love of a good woman), and the honorable hard work of soldiering can be reclaimed and remythologized. At first glance, a move toward resolution of this sort doesn't seem a key feature of *The Hurt Locker*. James returns from Iraq and, confronted with the glossy surfaces of US consumerism and the grinding chores of family life, he confesses to his infant son that he only loves one thing, and in the next shot we see him striding toward an unexploded bomb.[15] However, the eschewal of the therapeutic move and the return to war feels provisional, more like a temporary deferral.[16] In contrast to Longley's attempt to find form specific to the event under description and to refuse any kind of straightforward resolution, Bigelow strikes a provisional note. The redemptive ending is not yet fully available, but it is perhaps hinted at, and, as time passes, it will likely be seen more clearly in further additions to the cycle. It is significant that James is divorced but living as if married, almost as if the structures are remaining in place, ready for him to be reintegrated (if his wife would only listen and understand him, for example). This redemptive narrative trope can be found in *Brothers* (2009) – admittedly a film about the war in Afghanistan. At the film's end, Captain Sam Cahill (Tobey Maguire) finds the courage to tell his wife (named Grace) of the atrocity he has committed (the murder of a fellow soldier, a fratricide that recalls *Platoon*'s "We did not fight the enemy, *we fought ourselves*"), and the film shows Grace and Cahill's family pulling together to help heal the wounds the war has inflicted. If the two films are read alongside each other, *The Hurt Locker*'s moral heroism, limited and prejudicial point of view, and decontextualized PTSD presents us with a positive formulation of the war on the ground, while *Brothers* enfolds the returning traumatized combat veteran in discourses of healing and redemption, discourses that will likely shape the stories of return that will follow the war's close.

Conclusion

It is my view that film should be considered not just as a representation of history but also – through its agency in determining how we understand the past – as an historical event in its own right.[17] Philip Beck urges us to discard

> the analytical model that regards film as an object responsive to, or determined by, discourses outside itself, and [to recognize instead] its participation in history as an

> act or event of history itself – part of the configuration of economic, social, political and ideological practices that constitute the mobile historical forces of a period. (Beck 1985: 12)

In this chapter I have attempted to indicate the ways in which the Iraq war is placed *under a description* by my two chosen films. I contend that their different views of the war have a role to play in how the historical event that we label the Iraq War is given shape and structure.

The Hurt Locker is the most successful, and arguably most influential, film in the recent cycle of Iraq War movies. The view of the war, and of history more generally, offered by the film's selection of events, narrative structure, orchestration of point of view, and qualified ending (in which redemptive narrative closure remains a possibility) is an extremely limited and myopic one. The stakes are high here: understood according to the logic offered by *The Hurt Locker*, the war in Iraq is the result of the immoral actions of a group of Iraqi fundamentalists. The war is inscrutable, and possibly also unwinnable; and yet America's role in the war is moral, worthwhile, and productive. This simplistic view has the potential not only to obfuscate intelligent discussions of the whys and wherefores of US involvement, but also to discourage dialectical historical thinking. What's more, if a redemptive ending is made possible, this prepares the ground for further war. *Iraq in Fragments*, on the other hand, invites us to consider war as a complex dialectical process. War is not just something that happens in the abstract, something reducible to the military operation and its soldiers, it is a structural intervention in the lives of millions of ordinary people and its effect on them may be, as the film shows, debilitating, unjust, and long term (perhaps even playing out across generations). In view of these features, the film counsels caution and restraint.

In the US, the range of films (especially outside of feature film production) depicting the war in Iraq has been considerable and varied, and – alongside films of the Iraq War produced in other countries – these films can augment our understanding of the lived experience of this war in significant and productive ways.[18] That said, films like *Iraq in Fragments* remain rare and are, more often than not, quickly marginalized by the mass media. Although Longley's film had some purchase upon its release in 2006, when the war in Iraq was being subjected to the greatest critical scrutiny, its complex, dialectical view of the war has now given way to the myth-making of *The Hurt Locker*. The critical and commercial success of Bigelow's film has exceeded all expectations, suggesting that its myopic view of the war is likely to become the preferred mode as time passes and history is written. Ernst Gombrich poses the question: "Who would find it easy, after a visit to Ravenna and its solemn mosaics, to think of noisy children in Byzantium, or who thinks of haggard peasants in the Flanders of Rubens?" (Gombrich, quoted in Haskell 1993: 5). This question encourages us to think about how the ruins, remains, and representations of a historical event (the forms in which it survives into the present and remains active in cultural memory) dictate what kind of historical event we understand it to be. I hope this chapter has given some indication of how films like *Iraq in Fragments* and *The Hurt Locker* will function as historical artifacts that will shape our sense of what happened in Iraq in the first decade of the twenty-first century – and also of the potentials and pitfalls of the latter being favored over the former.

Notes

1 George W. Bush declared "mission accomplished" in May 2003, and Barack Obama announced the end of combat operations in September 2010. See http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/iraq for latest reports from the country.

2 Most of the documentary feature films were produced and released mid-decade. The films tend to focus on a period when jingoistic "mission accomplished" rhetoric confronted the reality of a strengthening insurgency and breaking news of prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib and Bagram Airbase. Hence this cycle of films was produced during a period of the war that presented limited opportunities for positive formulations.

3 Longley successfully exploits the luminous and vivid color palette of digital video (and the vivid light conditions of Iraq itself). Indeed Longley's use of color seems to seek to counter the denotative, plain images seen on the television news and the washed-out, bleach-bypass processes used in numerous Iraq War feature films, including *The Hurt Locker*.

4 Between September 2002 and April 2005 Longley spent long periods of time in Iraq, and this commitment to inhabiting the war alongside ordinary Iraqis stands in stark contrast to the embedded and securitized filmmaking that typifies almost all the other feature documentaries – which approach Iraq either from afar and within the military's security cordons or alongside Iraqi families (usually middle-class ones) in relatively safe areas. Fiction films such as *The Hurt Locker* tend to emulate this embedded and securitized perspective.

5 In the second section children are also brought to the fore. For example, a child sings a song/prayer that is used as as a soundtrack as the Mehdi army prepare to arrest the alcohol traders. However, in this section focalization is not orchestrated solely around a child's point of view.

6 This interest in the use of a child's gaze to explore historical experience can be traced back to Longley's first feature documentary, *Gaza Strip* (2002), which shows the lives of ordinary Palestinians in Israeli-occupied Gaza and privileges in particular the point of view of a 13-year-old boy.

7 In fact Longley's journey north is precipitated by the deteriorating security in the other parts of the country, and, in this respect, the narrative structure is an index of the chaotic wider event rather than an attempt to find closure.

8 Rosenstone considers the following films to be examples of good practice for the historical filmmaker: *Walker* (1987), *Thirty-Two Short Films about Glenn Gould* (1993), *Underground* (1995), *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989), *Far from Poland* (1984), *Shoah* (1985), and *The Family Bartos* (1988). I propose that *Iraq in Fragments* should be added to the list.

9 Two television series, *Over There* (2005) and *Generation Kill* (2008), also provide useful points of comparison.

10 This dynamic is echoed in the HBO (Home Box Office) documentary *Baghdad ER* (2006), which Pat Aufderheide describes as "one life-or-death medical drama after the next. The gurneys roll in and the problem is presented. We hope they live, and some of them do. It's a race, a performance, a drama. There are heroic moments every time" (Aufderheide 2007: 60). One aspect of the film that has been lauded by reviewers (the source of many of the claims that James's heroism is somehow qualified) is its willingness to acknowledge that, for some people, war carries an intrinsic dramatic charge. The film prefigures its action, for example, with a quotation from journalist Chris Hedges: "The rush of battle is often a potent and lethal addiction, for war is a drug" (Hedges 2002: 03). Admittedly this is a truth not often acknowledged in Hollywood war movies – where killing is usually presented as grim work in the pursuit and/or defence of noble ideals. Yet, unlike the soldiers who appear in Joanne Bourke's book *An Intimate History of Killing* and who testify to the pleasure of killing in battle, James engages in very little killing per se (Bourke 1999: 1–12). The war he loves is replete with humanitarian acts of bravery designed to save lives, and when he does kill he does so only to protect himself and his comrades.

11 For a provocative discussion of the way race is treated within the American ranks, see Whitsitt (2010).

12 This sense of victimization is central to "home front" movies that show traumatized Iraq war veterans struggling to come to terms with their experience of waging war.

13 A number of other feature films follow this template for the orchestration of point of view, namely *Home of the Brave* and *The Lucky Ones*. However, there are signs that feature film directors have sought alternatives: the restricted point of view that governs the investigation at the heart of *In the Valley of Elah*, for example, ensures that the questions of what can be known and how remain open and difficult. *Redacted* offers multiple perspectives as a defining principle of its construction, and *The Green Zone* and *The Situation* attempt to triangulate between the different perspectives of Americans, Iraqis, soldiers, and civilians.

14 It remains to be seen how the killing of Osama Bin Laden will alter this sense of irresolution; indeed, Bigelow is currently in pre-production on a project with the provisional title *Kill Bin Laden*, which will no doubt go some way toward offering some resolution to the events of 9/11 and its aftermath (including the tangential war in Iraq).

15 A similar desire to return to the war gives shape to other films in the cycle, including *Home of the Brave* and *The Lucky Ones*. Even a seemingly critical and anti-war film such as *Stop Loss*, in which desertion is considered and seems worth pursuing, ends with a soldier deciding to drive back to his unit.

16 I would argue that this circular movement contrasts markedly with the neurotic journeying that typifies the 1970s' Vietnam war movie (for example Willard's return to the jungle in *Apocalypse Now*, 1979) – a journeying that marked the continued irreconcilability of the experience of Vietnam in the decade following the end of the war.

17 A number of documentaries and feature films showing the war in Iraq – *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004) and *Redacted* (2007), for example – were conceived as part of the process of resisting the war. These films, and the act of resistance they wish to contribute to, have not been particularly successful. Nevertheless, they do constitute active interventions in the historical process and, as such, they meet all the criteria of a historical event.

18 A number of Iraq War films by non-US directors have received limited distribution, including *The Short Life of José Antonio Gutierrez* (2006), *Invierno en Bagdad/Winter in Baghdad* (2005), *Return to the Land of Wonders* (2004), *Kurtlar Vadisi: Irak/Valley of the Wolves: Iraq* (2006), and the British productions *Battle for Haditha* (2007) and *The Mark of Cain* (2007).

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