Conflict, Image, Narrative: Hollywood in the Middle East

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There are significant ways in which Hollywood representations of conflict in the Middle East are similar. This is not to say that there are not differences – and most of these disparities occur in the narrative and its progression, as we will see – but rather that Hollywood's attitude to most, if not all, Middle Eastern conflicts in which they are involved (Iraq, Kuwait, Afghanistan, Syria) is fairly homogenous. Observing key moments from, and characteristics of, the two films *Three Kings* (1999) and *The Hurt Locker* (2009), this paper contends that a hyper-mediated world has changed the way Hollywood represents war on screen. The intention of this paper is to demonstrate how Hollywood's stories of conflict have changed since films about the First and Second World Wars, and how they have remained the same. Working from Basinger and her comprehensive study of the World War II combat film, the article moves through the relationship between war and the media, before meeting Virilio and Baudrillard, and analysing the two key films.

Basinger's (1986) work on the combat films of World War II, particularly 1943's *Bataan*, serves as a benchmark for the representation – and subsequent analysis – of war on film. She lists a number of key components that each of the films in the World War II combat canon must possess. These include both key tropes – 'The hero has leadership forced upon him in dire circumstances', for instance (p. 74) – as well as basic narrative elements such as 'The hero', 'The objective', and 'Death/Sacrifice/Loss' (p. 77). Basinger's outline can be applied to many films about conflict, and has been used by Binns (2013) in order to map changing representations of war from the World Wars through to more recent conflicts in Afghanistan and Syria. Basinger writes:

> *By using this outline and applying it to a particular film, the relationship of that film to the rest of the genre (its inconsistency or matching qualities) can be determined. Also, its position in the evolutionary process is established, as well as its overall relationship to history and reality. It demonstrates how a primary set of concepts solidifies into a story – and how they can be interpreted for a changing ideology.* (p. 78)

In the case of films about the World War I and II, the tools of war – 'guns, machinery, uniforms,' as well as the men themselves (p. 72) – are portrayed using the most innovative of camera movements, making them seem vital and essential to success. There is a prolonged charge sequence in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, for example, that takes place about a third of the way into the film[1]. The men, waiting in a bunker, are roused when a whistle sounds. They take up positions all along the line of the trench, sitting their rifles along the rim, and mounting machine guns in tactical locations. Protracted shots along the line show the men in readiness, their weapons loaded and poised: the meat and machinery of warfare ready to fulfil their purpose. Reverse shots show the enemy slowly advancing, and highly innovative – for its time, mere months after the widespread acceptance of film sound tracks – sound design creates an atmosphere of impending Armageddon. This charge sequence, and the resulting battle, comprises some eight minutes of Lewis Milestone's film, depicted and edited in real time. This almost gratuitously long portrayal of the machinery of warfare is at odds with the film's intent, which mirrors that of the original novel: to question the necessity of war. In other films of the era, produced during and between the World Wars, the presentation of men and weaponry glorifies – and, to an extent, justifies – the use thereof. The opening shot of Michael Curtiz's *The Charge of the Light Brigade* (1936) shows a long rank of cavalry proceeding along a narrow pass. Every horse is as strong, proud, and well-groomed as the pristinely uniformed soldiers astride them. While the events at the centre of Curtiz's film took place some eighty years prior to the Second World War, the depiction of the might and discipline of the military would no doubt have resonated with cinemagoers of the time. The middle

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[1] The sequence begins at timecode 40:48 on the 2012 Universal Bluray reissue.

acts of both Howard Hughes' *Hell's Angels* (1930), and William A. Seiter's *Destroyer* (1943) are occupied with showing men operating sleek aircraft and bulky, heavily-armoured warships, respectively. In presenting military hardware and its operators in a similarly awestruck way, however, Milestone subverts this resonance, turning it instead into a gruesome demonstration of man's inhumanity to man. It can be seen that the portrayal of soldiers and their tools of war are a common feature among most war films.

As Basinger and Binns note, the effects of such features change with the era. Binns's research suggests that the Vietnam War was the one period in Hollywood's engagement with conflict that diverges from a nationalistic, almost propagandist, trend, in favour of a more personal and introspective one.

> *'… the cinema of Vietnam represents a break from the 'grand narrative.' They speak to no nationalist imperative, herald no universal triumphalism, and certainly do not sing the praises of combat. They are films out of time … for a war that felt much the same.'* (Binns, p. 108-9)

The character of Captain Willard, for example, in Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979), is a solitary figure, often removed from his companions, lost in thought. Indeed, the constant voiceover narration reiterates Willard's contemplative, brooding character. However, it took only a decade for Hollywood to begin portraying war archetypes in the older, more patriotic style, often reviving stories of much older conflicts, from the World Wars and American Civil War. The result of this retrospective, reflective representation of conflict is what Westwell (2006) describes as 'a cultural imagination of war predicated on a powerful sense of an integrated America constructed as victim that perceives military action to be a just and necessary response to unwarranted aggression.' (p. 43).

How then, does Hollywood's representation of conflict in the Middle East differ from that of the World Wars? America's reliance on the positive media portrayal of conflict in this region is significant. Advancements in news reportage in turn affect the way war is presented in popular entertainment. Before, during, and after

the Gulf War of 1990-91, it became clear that journalists could be utilised to deliver messages tailored to garner support for the conflict. These messages would be encoded in the dialect of independent, impartial journalism. Fisk (2006) writes of the somewhat terrifying JIB – Joint Information Bureau – established by the US military for disseminating information about US involvement in the Gulf.

> *'All the promises of military potential, the inescapable firepower, the expressions of confidence, the superiority of technique and equipment, took on a subliminal quality. For while you might learn all you wished about the squash lead of a 155-mm shell or the properties of a cluster bomb, you were not permitted to dwell upon the results of its use… For this was war without risks, war made acceptable. It was clean war – not war as hell, but war without responsibility, in which the tide of information stopped abruptly at the moment of impact.'* (p. 737)

With the development of telecommunications networks, news and information services (including the 24-hour news cycle), the Internet, and videogames – the enmeshing of 'the huge industrial and military machinery of defense' with the tendrils of the media was almost inevitable. James Der Derian details this amalgamation: from technologies that changed the nature of battle, to the role of the media in shaping public perception of conflict, Der Derian suggests that this combination of the machines of war with the channels and distributors of information (or misinformation) and entertainment, will lead to something akin to automatism.

> *'If you have these virtual environments based on worst case scenarios, which indicate how we're going to represent the enemy, their threats to us, and how we respond quickly, because speed is of the essence, then all of the human attributes – deliberation, empathy, and experience – become secondary to a machine-like response.'* (Der Derian, in Dialogic, 2008).

Der Derian writes that it is not only news that becomes subsumed into this sphere of influence, but also cinema, the Internet, and video games. Society is bombarded

by stories of conflicts in far-flung parts of the world, and when we try to escape it, by going to the movies or playing a game, the same messages are drilled into us, albeit coded somewhat differently. This 'automatism' Der Derian warns against is a product of what he calls 'virtuous war,' where a given conflict is sanitised for a television-viewing audience, offering 'a vision of bloodless, humanitarian, hygienic wars' (Der Derian, 2000, p. 772). The role of technology must not be downplayed: from warfare's execution, to its representation, and eventual reception, the machines involved dictate terms of engagement and of perception. Particularly in modern warfare, where battle is often orchestrated from a great distance away from the action, problems of image and perception are very much at play. With satellites and surveillance drones hovering overhead, and reconnaissance patrols making use of helmet-mounted cameras, the perception of war is dependent on those viewing devices presenting information correctly; deception is reasonably simple: like cinema, war is 'a trade in dematerialization, a … market which no longer produces matter but light' (Virilio, 1984, p. 41). War, certainly according to Virilio and Baudrillard, is now much less a battle of weaponry than it is a battle over control of the image.

The link between media representation and war – and its inherent tension – was made most clear-cut with the advent of twenty-four hour television news. This coincided with the introduction of television networks wholly dedicated to the presentation of news and current affairs – forever changing the role of the media in everyday life, the way news and information is disseminated, and its very construction. Suddenly, there was no relief from the realities of the world: footage of bodies, coffins, overlaid with statistics, body counts, collateral damage, 'attack breakdowns,' would be entirely foreign during coverage of the conflicts in Korea or Vietnam. But come the embedded journalist with a skeleton camera crew, there was renewed pressure on networks to find stories to fill the twenty-four hours. There was also increased concern from older forms of news dissemination – mainly print – that they were becoming irrelevant. This was made difficult by a twenty-four hour news cycle dedicated to presenting exciting vision, crossing to correspondents in far-flung corners of the earth, reporting on natural disasters, bloody political coups and harrowing civil and international conflicts. These

dedicated news networks are often privately funded – owned by media conglomerates with interests in media both old and new – and as such put forward the biases and interests of their advertisers, owners and stakeholders. In order to hold advertisers news networks became more and more competitive, searching for the bigger story, the better shots, and the greater spectacle: '[T]he press has moved toward sensationalism, entertainment, and opinion' (Weaver et al., 2007, p. 226).

What is different about these contemporary conflicts, and their intrinsic link with the media-industrial complex, is that many different voices can be heard. This is the cinema of geopolitics – a cinema as much of political 'space' as to purely filmic space – and nowhere in the history of war film has it operated, informed opinion, offered perspective, on so many levels. Jameson (1995) even goes so far as to suggest that the geopolitical film helps to 'map' the unmappable: where space, ideology, and politics cannot be drawn along latitude and longitude, these films help structure thought itself[2]. (p. 3) Politics, the media, culture and warfare collide in a heady and intense mixture of the style of reporting or documentary, and of cinematic modes and technologies both traditional and avant-garde. The fragmented political landscape of these troubled regions manifests itself cinematically in a disorienting, unnatural, unconventional visual frame, in a jarring editing style, and in narrative structures occasionally tending to the post-modern, but with narrative *content* taken straight from the 'grand narratives' of the World Wars. This is an aesthetic informed by digital technologies, media coverage, and modern weaponry. The stories vary, as do the way those stories are told, but primarily Hollywood considers the Middle East in terms of 'the other'. Much like the untamed plains and ranges in the Western film, the Middle East, too, is seen as dangerous and unpredictable. Chapman and Cull (2009) summarise the similarities between the war and Western in their discussion of the rise of 'empire cinema':

> *'The two genres [war and Westerns] share common ground – the*
> *narrative of expansion, the taming of the frontier, the clash*

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[2] Most of Jameson's examples of a conspiracy thriller nature, such as Alan J. Pakula's *The Parallax View* (1974), though I would certainly argue that Stephen Gaghan's *Syriana* (2005) fits this model.

between civilisation and savagery – and both feature outdoor action and spectacle. It is no coincidence that the end of the empire cycle in 1939 coincided with the revival of the 'A' Western: Stagecoach*,* Dodge City*,* Union Pacific*,* Jesse James*.'* (p. 7)

I would certainly contend that films about the Gulf War and the more recent conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria, hold a great deal in common with this 'empire cinema'. However, underlying this near-jingoistic fervour is a sense of unease, of paranoia. The fragmented structure and aesthetic reinforces this feeling, making the audience as on-edge as the characters themselves.

Three Kings and *The Hurt Locker* are clearly different films. The former is a story of what might happen in the wake of a war where no one is really sure who won or lost; the latter is something of an existential comment on the essence of conflict. Neither film is pro- or anti-war, necessarily, despite a long history of films across that spectrum. Both films are character pieces, certainly, and signal a return to the group dynamic that marked a number of films from or about the World Wars. The films, too, have something to say about what war does, not just to soldiers, but to all those embroiled in conflict.

In *Three Kings*, Privates Barlow (Mark Wahlberg), Chief Elgin (Ice Cube), and Conrad Vig (Spike Jonze) know that the Gulf War is over. They spend the final days of their tours of duty playing football, drinking, and embarking on small and largely uneventful patrols. However, when they discover a map hidden in the anus of a captive Iraqi, they immediately surmise it details the location of many millions of dollars in gold bullion, stolen from Kuwait by Saddam Hussein. Archie Gates (George Clooney) is two weeks from retirement when he hears of the discovery, and decides to cash in before he leaves the army for good. The vault containing the gold is in a village inhabited by a community of Iraqis oppressed by the members of Hussein's Republican Guard. On witnessing the horrors perpetrated by Hussein's men, Gates and his men decide to try to help the villagers escape across the border to Iran. Directed by then-unknown filmmaker David O. Russell (later nominated for multiple Academy Awards for 2010's *The Fighter*, 2012's *Silver Linings Playbook* and 2013's *American Hustle*), *Three Kings* is a stylised war

fairytale, where the main characters try to screw the army they seemingly serve, but inevitably get swept up in a righteous quest to save the local population. The conflict is apparently over, but the men still witness atrocity. In one very memorable moment a woman wails as her husband and child are taken away; to stop her wailing the guardsman shoots her in the head. Many, if not most, of the tropes of the World War II combat film are revisited in the context of this new region and conflict. The central group of the film is diverse: Barlow is cocky, self-confident, and arrogant – the quintessential white alpha male; Vig – according to the film itself – wants to be Barlow, but remains inexperienced, anxious, and afraid; Elgin represents a diverse America, as the almost tokenistic African-American character, however he remains 'one of the guys'; and Gates – mere weeks from retirement – is the only soldier who has experienced combat, and therefore assumes a leadership role. There is death: at the end of the film the group, including a battle-shocked Barlow, must come to terms with the loss of Vig. The men also discuss the war itself, trying to figure out why it took place, if it ever did, and if it is even over. From a tactical point of view, the men are on their own, having devised their own mission with their own objectives – they do this with no support from their superiors or soldiers outside the group. Cinematically, too, the group operates *outside* or *apart from* the conflict, able to engage with it, dissect it, observe it, from a relatively objective point of view: this narrative defamiliarisation also operates on the viewer, who is drawn into the conspiracy.

The presence of the media in this film is constant, but what is different between this and other representations of the press (film crews in *Apocalypse Now* and *Full Metal Jacket*, reporters in *Patton*) is the level to which they are involved. Television news reporter Adriana Cruz (Nora Dunn) relentlessly tails Archie Gates in her search for a story. At one point Gates sends her off with slightly thick Specialist Walter Wogaman, purely to get rid of her, and distract her from their plans to steal the Kuwaiti gold. Cruz's set-up on the American base is indicative of the level of press involvement in conflict: she has an air-conditioned trailer filled with banks of televisions, editing equipment, and communication tools. Despite this close proximity to the military presence, however, her role is marginalised. She finds it tough to engage with the men on the ground. Part of this, certainly, pertains to

gender, but more broadly the journalist's job is made more difficult by those in charge. De Franco (2012) writes that one of the primary characteristics of modern conflict 'is that it is mediated'. (p. 2) To some extent re-working Clausewitz, she adds:

> '[T]he media, *old and new alike – understood as complex organisations but also* à la *McLuhan as environments* – mediate the interaction between the agents of war and politics.' (ibid., original emphasis)

Fisk's comments earlier, too, gave some idea as to the scale of the control exerted by the military and governments over media images and messages. Between the official messages, those of a largely corporatised media (with its attendant biases), and those put forth by investigative reporters, bloggers, citizen journalists, and civilians on social media, it is little surprise that confusion, frustration, and misunderstanding feature prominently in Gulf War films. Such frustrations manifest themselves in dialogue and characterisation set within an interleaved story structure that aligns itself with the sharpness of documentary and news reporting. The central characters of *Three Kings* are three disgruntled soldiers. Unhappy with their lot and tired of their deployment, they seek their own way out of their situation. Though there are fewer characters than early war films, the banter between these men is reminiscent of the group dynamic of films such as *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930). These older films, according to Basinger, sought to present a cross-section of America, with the intention of imparting a 'we're in this together' mentality (Basinger, p. 34). There are no single characters on which to focus, and while they all seem self-centred at first, they soon have their eyes opened as to the larger environment and the machinations of the conflict and region: in this way they become the device through which the audience can experience the conflict, as in films about the World Wars.

The Hurt Locker (2009) tells the story of a bomb disposal team working during the Iraq War, and focuses on central character Sergeant First Class William James (Jeremy Renner), the unpredictable, enigmatic leader of the team. With its focus on three main characters, *The Hurt Locker* echoes the structure of *Three Kings*. The

character of Sergeant First Class James feels more prominent, but he is made so only through the observations of the other two soldiers – Sergeant JT Sanborn (Anthony Mackie) and Specialist Owen Eldridge (Brian Geraghty): a technique that divides the dialogue and screen-time more evenly between the three men. Sergeant James is a reluctant leader, matching the tropes of World War cinema. While reluctant and often recalcitrant, James proves himself more than capable: at one point in the film, Eldridge is taken captive, and James wastes no time in engaging in a siege and rescue mission.

Khatib (2006) writes that in films set in the Middle East, the desert is almost a character in and of itself; it is certainly treated that way by the camera. The landscape plays a pivotal role in the narrative in that it isolates and diminishes; it also reinforces ideological constructs that underlie that narrative, most often the foreign policy of the United States (p. 22). Further, the division and ownership of the desert has been but one of the catalysts for conflict in the Middle East. In THREE KINGS, the desert provides a backdrop to the events of the film, but also provides a barrier to the team's objective: the group must cross the desert with the gold and 'conquer' the mountains and the landscape as a whole before they reach the Iranian border. As Khatib points out:

> *Mountains are traditionally viewed as the most inaccessible parts of landscape … and so conquering them infuses the American soldiers with power over the Other landscape and consequently over the people who inhabit it.* (ibid., p. 27).

The Hurt Locker juxtaposes the desert with a war-torn urban landscape, most notably in the bomb disposal scenes themselves. In the opening of the film, urban sounds congeal seamlessly into a thematic hub-bub; this fused with the dizziness of the film's visuals, and the integration of the disposal robot's point of view into the cinematography. This 'digital aesthetic' informs the film's narrative and ideology as much as its technical construction: this is a global, technological conflict, constructed as much around its technology as around its geography and political machinations. It estranges the audience, and prohibits them from finding anything relatable in the landscape, the people, or their depiction. Virilio traces

the changes in the shape and dimensionality of warfare, as it evolved from the two-dimensional battlegrounds of the American Civil War and earlier, to the three dimensions of World War I, and on to the global, orbital, planetary conflicts of the Gulf War[3]; 'the history of battle,' he writes, 'is primarily the history of radically changing fields of perception' (Virilio, p. 10). The larger the conflict, though, the harder it is for commanders and troops to trace the standard chronology of conflict; this is presented in *Three Kings*, as not all of the soldiers are aware who won, or even if the conflict is over at all. It is not only battlefield commanders that must contend with this change in strategy and the nature of the wars being waged. This technological advancement necessitates a shift in representation for society at large. Virilio writes: 'the concept of reality is always the first victim of war' (ibid., p. 43). This shift is predicated on an indexical relationship between the 'real' and the representation – be it on a screen in a command centre, or a cinematic rendering of the battle after the fact. In war, '[s]imulation is the real master, and we have only a right to the retro, to the phantom, parodic rehabilitation of all lost referentials' (Baudrillard, 1994, p. 39). Carrying this onward to the filmic depiction, Virilio suggests that the representation affects the nature of the battle itself, even in retrospect. There is a necessary split between the real and the represented – 'cinematic derealization [sic]' (Virilio, p. 99):

> '… sequential perception, like optical phenomena resulting from
> retinal persistence, is both origin and end of the apprehension of
> reality, since the seeing of movement is but a statistical process
> connected with the nature of the segmentation of images and the
> speed of observation characteristic of humans.' (ibid.)

The changing nature of conflict, then, will *necessarily* – by its very nature – confuse, unsettle, and estrange a moviegoing audience. The creators of dramatic cinema, then, must determine ways to make their stories accessible, while still considering the complex political undercurrents of the Middle East. In both *Three Kings* and *The Hurt Locker*, this is done by anchoring the stories on a central ensemble of

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[3] It could be argued that the global battleground of the Gulf War was itself an evolution of the international power-plays of the Cold War.

characters, and then reorienting the story from a single character's perspective to a multi-layered, omniscient story structure. A central group of characters, and a wide-reaching, all-encompassing narrative, are both storytelling techniques that hark back to the cinema of World Wars I and II: I argue here that this is not a mistake, but rather an observable trend. In *The Hurt Locker*, there is a continuous rotation of troops through a war zone where the conflict is without a foreseeable end. This is shown via a text overlay, which states how long the team has left before they can go home. This anchors the story within a military protocol accessible to an audience and also gives the film a clear timeframe. Politics is notably omitted from *The Hurt Locker*: the characters do not question why they have been posted, or the motives of their superiors. This omission speaks to a world-view where this conflict is a necessary one. The same view of combat as essential is posited in many World War I and II films. The necessity of combat is never questioned; those who order it to be carried out are portrayed as above the criticism of lower order men. Consider *Patton* (1970), for example: While General George S. Patton is a central character, he is still one of the men, and still very much a part of the military machine. In this 'classic' philosophy of war film, we see a genuflection to authority figures. The conflict in *The Hurt Locker* occurs among the team – among James, Sanborn, and Eldridge – as shifts in power and perspective, doubts and delusions, rise and fall. This banter and power play occurs in any kind of team, but lends itself well to a platoon of soldiers, where a wrong decision could end in severe injury or death. Banter and dramatic conflict also lends itself to a scripted feature film – as with a theatrical play – where an audience relies on the characters to provide a relatable experience. In *Three Kings*, the three men generally accept Archie as their superior without concern, but there are still significant differences between the capabilities of each of the men—which lead to squabbles. Archie seems to be the elder of the group, to whom we are offered a counter-point, Troy, representing youth, vitality, and virility. Elgin represents machismo and toughness; there is a sense that none could stop him. Conrad, by comparison, is weak, weedy, and not especially bright. All the characters fall into their respective places in the unofficial chain of command (or pecking order), until Conrad's death. Death is the equaliser: it brings all the men to the same level in the realisation that none are superior to any of the others if the enemy's bullet finds

its target. *Three Kings*, like *The Hurt Locker*, eschews a wider view of the command and control structures of the military, but consistently questions the role of the media, public opinion, and the purpose of the war. It does so in quieter moments, such as when reporter Adriana Cruz opens up to Walter Wogaman at the beginning of the film's third act:

> ADRIANA: *The war is over and I don't fuckin' know what it was about. What was this war about? I was managed by the military.*

Both films anchor a deep discussion about war and its consequences in the interaction and conflict of the central groups of characters and in the individual characters themselves. This approach is not dissimilar from that of Milestone in *All Quiet on the Western Front*. The 1930 film grounds its exploration of the reasoning for World War I in an informal discussion between the men while they share a meal. These scenes are often isolated from the narrative, separated from the rest of the film, like a vignette. The audience can look through a particular window and consider the justification or ramification of warfare without sacrificing narrative consistency or propulsion: a key consideration for filmmakers exploring the World Wars *and* conflict in the Middle East.

Arguably, *The Hurt Locker* is a quintessential war film: it takes key war film tropes and combines them all into a story that consists of the suspense of disarming explosive devices, the tension of long-range sniper battles, the excitement of a rescue mission under heavy fire, and the quiet moments between these episodes where the men talk and reflect on their experiences. Each of the film's 'episodes' can be linked to the changing technology of warfare: the large-scale explosive detonations, the high-powered sniper rifle, the dynamics of urban warfare. The changing face of warfare necessitates a story structure that deconstructs a complex, large-scale conflict into small sections: skirmishes easy to present on film, and that characterise modern conflict.

The use of camera, in particular, helps to anchor the narrative, and guide the audience through it. If we take a standard scene from *Three Kings* – defining 'standard' as a conversation scene featuring a group of characters – we see that

this film takes a much more conventional approach to editing; this is in spite of a predominantly hand-held cinematographic style. When Gates hears of the discovery of the map to the gold, he meets Elgin, Vig, and Barlow to take control and formulate a plan. The scene begins with a medium close-up shot, with the three junior soldiers standing at attention, and Gates moving between them (Figure 1). When Gates finds the map there is a close-up of the object of his search, followed by an extreme close-up of Barlow's face (Figure 2), which shows Barlow's uncertainty about this new figure. There is then a cut to Gates after he moves around in front of Barlow (Figure 3), and there is a tense exchange between the two men. When Barlow realises that Gates wants to help, the camera moves back, and the editing becomes more relaxed, shifting between the men as they speak (Figures 4 and 5). Though the camera is hand-held, the framing of the subjects and the cutting between them is functional, and adheres to the classical Hollywood 'invisibility of style'[4]. Furthermore, this reinforces the group dynamic of earlier films about war and conflict.

Figure 1: 'This the proctology tent?'

[4] See Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson (1985).

Figure 2: 'You're on the path to truth when you smell shit.'

Figure 3: 'Don't get grabby, Sergeant.'

Figure 4.

Figure 5.

Seeking a synergy with the realism, grittiness, and immediacy of news reportage and documentary, filmmakers telling the stories of the American incursion into Iraq (and the surrounding conflicts and operations) often eschew tripods in favour of a shaky, unstable, and baseless image. The cinematography of Gulf War cinema is ever-moving, constantly being knocked around, and often hiding the main characters behind props and the miscellanea of the *mise en scène*. The audience's eye, then, must actively work around obstacles to discern the action of the sequence, as it is presented in a disjointed, unexpected way. Used to being given the story on a palatable platter, the audience must think for themselves, to determine what is most important. The language of this kind of cinema is synchronous with asynchrony – cinematographic chaos – designed to estrange at every opportunity. Shklovsky (1998) writes of authorship in literature:

> *'...we find everywhere the artistic trademark - that is, we find material obviously created to remove the automatism or perception; the author's purpose is to create the vision which results from that deautomatized* [sic] *perception.'* (p. 21-2)

Despite its origins in news reportage and documentary, the handheld camera remains a very definitive authorial statement, aligning a film with a credible, real-world analogue. *The Hurt Locker* adopts this realist bent. With an image washed of all colour, the film itself is visually bland, bleak, and dull. Cinematographer Barry Ackroyd prefers close-up and mid-shots that follow the characters and their

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actions. However, these shots are inter-cut with wide establishing shots that show the expanse of the Middle Eastern landscape and cutaways that emphasise the 'otherness' of the Iraqi townships. A sense of scale is created by the use of multiple cameras in the one space: this also offers the effect of many eyes watching the action unfold. At approximately twenty minutes into *The Hurt Locker*, there is a scene in which Sergeant James approaches a buried explosive device. This sequence is particularly demonstrative of this unconventional cinematographic approach. Suspense is built as James approaches the device, by filming the character from a number of different angles (Figures 6, 7). These character shots are inter-cut with people watching James – in his cumbersome protective suit – approaching the object of interest (Figures 8, 9).

Figure 6.

Figure 7.

Figure 8.

Figure 9.

The frame is shaky, constantly moving, and zooms in and out for no clear reason. A camera constantly in motion achieves two effects. Firstly, it re-works the visual syntax of news reports and documentary filmmaking into a narrative framework. Secondly, it re-orients the perspective of Vietnam cinema – a highly subjective, introspective point of view – from one central character to a protagonist *plus* a series of observers. Thirdly, it infuses the sequence with a sense of paranoia and menace. This uncertainty is reinforced in the editing of the scene, as it jumps between these various perspectives, these multiple cameras, with no apparent

continuity. The visual syntax is one that imparts a feeling of being watched, and also of doing the watching. The notion of surveillance, of eyes everywhere, is a key part of modern warfare: these are battles where perception is everything. Virilio offers the following:

> *'The offensive arsenal has equipped itself with new devices for a conflict in which optical and motor illusion have fused in the cinematic delirium of lightning-war.'* (Virilio, p. 95).

Moments of action in films like *Three Kings* and *The Hurt Locker* are often shown via screens or from multiple points of view. These moments are necessary to the narrative, contribute greatly to character development and, through the characters, an exploration of thematic concerns. This process complies with three of Basinger's tropes: the presence of a commentator, the juxtaposition of action and repose, and the effects of various modal devices.

> *'[The] group contains an observer or commentator.'* (Basinger, p. 74)

In *Three Kings*, this role is partly played by Archie Gates. At one point, Gates succinctly summarises the situation: 'Bush told the people to rise up against Saddam. They thought they'd have our support. They don't. Now they're getting slaughtered.' *The Hurt Locker*'s commentator is much less objective. Sergeant James is addicted to the thrill of combat. While aware of the importance of military protocol and procedure, and of his family waiting at home, his perspectives on war are much less global and a great deal more personal. On a rare visit home, he is talking to his infant son as the boy plays with his toys:

JAMES: 'As you get older, some of the things you love might not seem so special anymore. Like your jack-in-a-box. Maybe you'll realise it's just a piece of tin and a stuffed animal. And the older you get, the fewer things you really love. And by the time you get to my age, maybe it's only one or two things. With me, I think it's one.'

> *'A series of episodes occur which alternate in uneven patterns the contrasting forces of night and day, action and repose, safety and danger, combat and noncombat, comedy and tragedy, dialogue and action.'* (ibid.)

The 'action,' in terms of traditional screen combat, in both *Three Kings* and *The Hurt Locker*, is sparse. While the third act of *Three Kings* involves an incursion into a bunker to retrieve an American prisoner, the other combat in the film is limited to a brief skirmish outside Saddam Hussein's bunkers after Gates and his men steal the Kuwaiti gold. This is also the case in *The Hurt Locker*, although the combat-oriented episodes of the film tend to be built on suspense, rather than all-out action. The sequences of 'repose' allow the characters to postulate on the reasons for their being involved in the war, or on justifications of the conflict itself. By structuring the films according to sequences of combat and non-combat, the filmmaker allows the audience time to recover from the more harrowing scenes. In *The Hurt Locker*, though, the build-up of suspense lessens the relief of these periods of recovery.

> *'The tools of cinema are employed for tension (cutting), release (camera movement), intimacy and alienation [sic] (composition), and the look of combat (lighting) and authenticity (documentary footage).'* (ibid., p. 75).

In the scene from *The Hurt Locker* deconstructed earlier – wherein James discovers and defuses the multiple buried explosives – the unfolding of the action as seen from different perspectives could be interpreted as a comment on competing opinions or viewpoints about the Iraq War. However, the desire for 'authenticity' when portraying the 'look of combat' necessitates a mixture of 'intimacy and alienation.' The 'tension' and 'release' noted above are used in all war films to keep the audience on the edge of their seat, putting forward notions about how war happens, what sacrifices must be made, and why the end supposedly justifies the means. If we consider war as an object, and these films as images of that object, then Shklovsky offers the following:

'An image is not a permanent referent for those mutable complexities of life which are revealed through it; its purpose is not to make us perceive meaning, but to create a special perception of the object – it creates a "vision" of the object instead of serving as a means for knowing it.' (Shklovsky, p. 18)

On the basis of the theory of Barthes and Sontag, I would concur that an image on its own is not, as Shklovsky suggests, the ideal index for what it depicts, but it can be argued that the *alignment* of images can impart a great deal of meaning. Bazin (1967), for instance, suggests that narrative and meaning are maintained by the arrangement of images by an editor. 'It is montage,' he writes, 'that abstract creator of meaning, which preserves the state of unreality demanded by the spectacle' (p. 45). In allowing the alignment of images to create meaning in the mind, the viewer is subsumed into the industrial, machinic process of cinematic meaning-making, as per Heidegger's notions of automatisation. But the automatisation – the unstoppable flow and duration – of the moving image led Deleuze (2003) to deduce the 'artistic essence' of that image: 'producing a shock to thought, communicating vibrations to the cortex, touching the nervous and cerebral system directly' (p. 156). Deleuze neatly sums up defamiliarisation in recognising that the 'shock' of the unstoppable moving image forces a viewer into thought, into an immediate process of decoding and deconstructing. The balance between tension and release – encoded in the editing of a given sequence or in the structure of an entire film – shocks the viewer into considering the implications of the action or tension (the combat) and the themes raised during periods of inaction or release (the repose).

To extrapolate a single discursive thread from the multitude of competing narratives around Middle Eastern conflicts is nigh futile. With oil companies fighting for control, governments fighting for ties with those oil companies, insurgencies rising to quell rebellion, and ancient civilisations struggling for relevance in a changing modern world, there are just too many interests to portray. The construction of many of these films is jarring, disorienting, and consciously designed to estrange. The construction, though, is also very apparent to the viewer – with cinematography, editing, and *mise en scène* influenced directly

by television news reportage and documentary. Hollywood's presentation of conflict in the Middle East tries to present coherent stories, but is nonetheless imbued with a tension: advanced filmmaking techniques – with attendant innovations in cinematography and visual syntax – used to reinterpret the narratives of old: grand, nationalistic ideas that pervaded the cinema of the World Wars. This tension persists in *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), *Argo* (2012), and *American Sniper* (2014). As more conflicts spring up, with political motivations becoming harder and harder to trace, so will such representations continue to appear. The necessity of tracing these representations then, analysing these films and their estranging effects, is clear.

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