

Guilt and Grievability at War:

Military Accountability and the Other in *Mark of Cain* and *Battle for Haditha*

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Abstract:

This article conducts a critical reading of the British war films *Mark of Cain* (Munden, 2007) and *Battle for Haditha* (Broomfield, 2007). Establishing the significance of cultural representations for politics and collective memory, I first locate both films in their historical and cultural contexts before I offer analyses that focus on the representation of US and British soldiers, Iraqi insurgents, and Iraqi civilians. I argue that *Mark of Cain* dissects how misunderstood loyalty, peer-pressure, and military organization facilitated abuses by British soldiers against Iraqi prisoners, but at the same time narrowly frames the Iraqi other as either largely invisible threat or hyper-visible helpless victim. In contrast, *Battle for Haditha* draws a more sophisticated picture of the Iraq war focusing on structural aspects of the conflict. In presenting the Iraq theater of war as a complex political economy with shifting allegiances and blurring loyalties, Broomfield offers insights in the backgrounds and rationalities of US soldiers, Iraqi civilians, and insurgents and this way alerts the viewer to structural aspects of evil in war as a system that reduces the paradigm of possible actions on all sides until only wrong decisions can be made. This, I conclude, makes *Battle for Haditha* an anti-war film proper.

Keywords:

Battle for Haditha, *Mark of Cain*, war films, character engagement, ungrievable life, othering

Introduction

In his article about the function of point-of-view in the Hollywood war film, Richard Misek (2008: 123) asserts that “films, like *Saving Private Ryan*, which restrict themselves to one point of view, propagate the unnatural divisions that cause war in the first place”. In similar terms, Jutta Weldes (2003: 7) argues for a constitutive function of cultural expressions in political discourse. She writes that film, television and other entertainment media create “backgrounds of meaning” that render plausibility to certain articulations and make others appear unjustified or problematic, and thus become part and parcel of how “power is produced and reproduced culturally” (6). According to both scholars, the way popular movies represent the world matters for how we approach this world in real life both individually and collectively.

In their works, both Misek and Weldes tap into currents of critical thinking about the political implications and effects of popular cultural representations. For instance, Siegfried Kracauer’s (1974 [1947]) symptomatic readings of popular German interwar cinema argued that these works both reflected and reinforced the mass psychological dispositions that facilitated the formation of the Nazi dictatorship in the country. Alternatively, research conducted at the Birmingham School for Cultural Studies embedded representation in capitalist relations of production and argued for reception as an active process oscillating between ideological interpellation and resistance (see for instance Hall, 1973 and 1997). Besides Kracauer and Hall, many other scholars have addressed such and similar issues and showed the importance of cultural expressions for politics and in particular for the understanding and potential justification of violent conflicts and military interventionism (Kellner, 1995; Andersen, 2006; Alford, 2010; Robb, 2004; Weber, 2006); Erll, 2010; Artz, 2015).

What surrounds us in the cultural sphere, it seems, tacitly influences attitudes and guides behavior – and this matters with regard to politics and issues of war and peace (DiMaggio, 1997; Hunzaker and Valentino, 2019). As James Der Derian (2002: 110) puts it: “More than a rational calculation of interests takes us to war. People go to war because of how they see, perceive, picture, imagine and speak of others; that is, how they construct the difference of others as well as the sameness of themselves through representation.” Similarly, Judith Butler (2009: 22) writes that the field of culture production has political effects in that it predisposes what can and cannot be seen and what can and cannot be valued. As such, she continues, the cultural sphere – including both factual and fictitious media – becomes a sphere of appearances and disappearances where distinctions between “lives worth living and lives worth destroying” are established and negotiated. Hence, according to her, the grievability of life is a variable dependent upon representation. In accordance with such arguments, Johan Galtung (1975) has suggested that cultural violence constitutes a key component of escalation and de-escalation processes and, thus, becomes equally important as its more familiar siblings, structural and direct violence. The cultural and medial representation of self and other matters. Therefore, this sphere of public appearance and disappearance merits continued critical attention.

In this article, I will initially offer a critique of the classic story-telling schemata of conventional war films. Building my argument on the analytical framework of Murray Smith (2022) and drawing upon insights from neo-formalist and cognitive film theory (Bordwell, 1985; Thompson, 1988), I argue that, to enable an entertaining engagement with deeply tragic incidents such as the killing of other human beings on a massive scale, commercially focused war and action movies need to invite audiences to morally disengage from the enemy. This is often achieved through a biased structure of sympathy that systematically directs viewers’

identification and empathy away from one of the conflict parties. In creating such an “embedded dramaturgy” (Lacey, 2015: 35) that aligns and allies audiences with only one of the conflicting groups, the genres cue enemies as ungrievable lives as conceptualised by Butler (2009)– imminent threats, the nature of which justifies all available measures of containment. This way, conventional commercial film productions not only secure box-office numbers by making the depicted violence digestible to mass audiences as strictly necessary and measured responses to evil acts conducted by easily identifiable wrong doers, but also, at an implicit level, partake in the formation of a horizon of plausibility that bellicose political rhetoric in real life can draw upon to increase its discursive weight and effects.¹

After this theoretical framing, I offer readings of two British war films – Marc Munden’s *Mark of Cain* (2007) and Nick Broomfield’s *Battle for Haditha* (2007) – to show how these works attempt to balance their presentations of the Iraq war and problematize alleged distinctions between Western soldiers and Iraqis. Here, Judith Butler’s (2009) ideas as well as Murray Smith’s concepts will be crucial. Their works will enable me 1) to show how *Mark of Cain* attempts to offer a critical account of the British intervention in Iraq yet ultimately fails to include the narrowly framed Iraqi other into this project, and 2) to understand how *Battle for Haditha* develops a multiperspectival account of the Iraq war that dedicates attention to all conflicting groups depicted in the film and thereby enables an investigation of structural aspects of evil in war.

Representation, Cognition, and Ideology: Neo-Formalism, Cultural Studies, and the War Genre

Amongst the most important tenets of neo-formalist cognitive film theory associated with such scholars as David Bordwell (1985), Kristin Thompson (1988), Edward Branigan (1992),

and Murray Smith (2022) is that a film's stylistic devices constitute empirical material that can be observed and described to gain an understanding of how specific audience responses are systematically cued by a work's formal properties. This view enables a dynamic approach to reception as an active, yet restrained, process as it can show how intentionally deployed formal aesthetic structures predispose audiences' meaning producing practices without, however, determining these in the last instance. Film viewing emerges as a constant process of negotiations and renegotiations of meaning that are predisposed by formal stylistic devices. These processes happen in different contexts and are carried out by variously situated audiences leading to continuously varying outcomes of acts of interpretation. A film's form, as such, functions as a pattern of support and restraint that, dependent upon the genre of the work, more or less systematically ties down viewers' meaning-producing practices.

Once focus is moved away from formal properties and toward a description of the contexts that predispose both the production and reception of cultural expressions, it becomes possible to bring neo-formalist film analysis and cognitive film theory into dialogue with cultural studies, and more specifically Stuart Hall's (1973) encoding/decoding model. Taking his cues from semiotics, Hall sets out to conceptualize how the emergence of a specific 'textual' form (for instance Hollywood film) can be explained. He argues that dominant discourses (including genre conventions), available technologies, and established relations of production (including profit considerations) systematically limit what film makers can show and include in their works. For example, in cultural production under capitalist conditions, return-of-investment considerations by production companies predispose both form and content of the emerging work and align it with the presumed tastes and expectations of the targeted segment of the audience. The tacit adaptations to such economic considerations and frames are not

politically neutral but often insert an ideological bias that privileges established power relations and hegemonies (Artz, 2015; Pöttsch, 2019).

Drawing upon similar insights, Alford (2009, 2010, 2011, 2018) has criticized the US war film genre. Taking Herman and Chomsky's (2003) propaganda model as a point of departure, he has shown that ownership in the industry, the power of investors (including government agencies), business models, profit interests, available sources, as well as the need to avoid critical reviews constitute tacit filters that influence both the content and form of commercial aesthetic products – in particular of those dealing with issues of foreign policy, war, and peace.² Based on Alford's framework, one can deduce that the more costly a production is, the more it will be dependent upon box-office-numbers to generate profit. Meeting such requirements of the market, again, necessitates an avoidance of certain contentious yet potentially important issues or, in cases where such issues are taken up, implies a mainstreaming of how they are presented and an aligning to, and therefore a reproduction of, hegemonic ideological biases.

Even though for instance Sokolowska-Paryz and Löschnigg (2018: 5) are surely right in asserting that films are multi-faceted phenomena that may “equally effectively promote nationalist politics” as they can “advocate a need for the reconciliation of former enemies”, received business models adapting mainstream products to hegemonic tastes insert a systematic bias that is detrimental to such potentials of “de-enimization” (ibid.: 3) inherent in cultural representation of wars and other violent conflicts. In this perspective, Weldes's (2003: 7) “background of meaning” and Galtung's cultural forms of violence become conceivable as the contingent effects of empirically observable ‘textual’ structures and

devices that are predisposed by business considerations in commercial mass cultural production.

Once released, the economically predisposed formal meaning potentials of mainstream cultural products – war films included – are actively received and negotiated by situated audiences in various contexts of reception engaging in either dominant or subversive acts of interpretation (Hall, 1973). In 1) conducting analyses of the formal frames of interpretation laid out at the level of ‘textual’ means, and of the specific dominant meaning potentials these invite, and 2) in combining this approach with critical attention to contexts of production and reception, arguments about probable effects of the ideological biases of cultural expressions can be made without assuming either a determining text or an all-empowered viewer.

Genre, History, Film: Situating *Mark of Cain* and *Battle for Haditha*

Scholars such as Eberwein (2010), Burgoyne (2008), Westwell (2006), and others have shown that the war film is a multifaceted and complex genre. Often treated as a subcategory of the historical film (Burgoyne 2008), war films can focus on mythological wars, modern violent conflicts, and even take up overly fantastic or possible future scenarios. The genre spans such different types as the combat film, homecoming movies, works of social realism, historical reenactments, docudramas, horror films, SciFi movies, and more. Both *Mark of Cain* and *Battle for Haditha* bring together aspects of several of these subcategories. They combine, for instance, elements of the combat film with the homecoming movie and social realism (Cain) or show features of docudrama, combat film, and historical reenactment (Haditha).

Munden’s and Broomfield’s films locate themselves in a critical realist tradition of British film making. Opposing the heroic triumphalism of mainstream British post-World War II

combat cinema that, according to Flanagan (2019:62-63), was characterized by a “pleasure culture of war” and a celebration of “martial masculinity” inspired by classic Hollywood story-telling schemata, *Mark of Cain* and *Battle for Haditha* set out to question and challenge such received hegemonic understandings of British war history. Flanagan distinguishes between different critical responses to the classic Hollywood-inspired British war films that were enabled by the relative stability and prosperity of the post-war years – most notably a turn towards tragic stories and comedies from the 1950s onward. While *Mark of Cain* most clearly aligns to a turn to tragedy and actualizes it with reference to the newest theatre of a still-ongoing military conflict, *Battle for Haditha* mixes tragic elements with a focus on aspects of wars that often have remained peripheral in a British tradition of historical film making, realist or otherwise. For instance, *Broomfield* includes multiple and often contradictory perspectives on a specific past event. By these means, his film both explodes a supposedly monolithic soldier’s view and includes the vantage points of non-combatants and even enemies to challenge received generic conventions and problematize seemingly straightforward understandings of war. This move undercuts a tradition of filmmaking often bent towards spectacle rather than critical inquiry and self-reflective introspection (Hammond, 2011).

In terms of the Iraq war, this critical tradition has not been without challenges for film production. Barker (2011) has shown that, due to the Iraq invasion’s ambivalent and contradictory moral and ethical terrain, war films about the occupation have long constituted a ‘toxic genre’ for Hollywood and other commercial production models targeting Western mainstream audiences. On the one hand, given the contentious character of, and repeated atrocities connected to, the illegal occupation of the country, attempts to simply retell generic Second World War-inspired hero-villain stories met with unprecedented challenges. On the

other hand, opting for an outright critical focus including both ambivalences and tragic elements, even though seemingly required by the historical context, always runs the danger of pushing away key segments of the audience or of harvesting negative responses by influential actors thereby endangering box-office success and returns-of-investment (see Alford, 2009, 2010, 2011, 2018; Pötzsch, 2019).

Both films under scrutiny in this article were produced for British television and released in 2007. They deal with the illegal occupation of Iraq and adopt a decidedly critical perspective on the conduct of American and British forces stationed in the country taking cues from critical trends in film making identified by Flanagan (2019). Neither of them did particularly well at the box-office. Both production and reception of the films must be seen in the light of the political discourses of their time, in particular the still open wounds of gradually emerging systematic prisoner abuse at Camp X-Ray, Guantanamo Bay and various black sites run by US authorities across the world (see for instance Pugliese, 2013), as well as of the highly publicized torture scandal at the US-controlled Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq (for a careful discussion, see Butler, 2004). The latter case, in particular, brought the gritty and inhumane realities of a military occupation to the sudden attention of Western mass audiences and cast earlier propagandistic attempts to embellish the invasion into sharp relief. The simmering unease connected to Guantanamo also among UK audiences combined with repeatedly emerging abuse scandals connected to British soldiers deployed in Iraq undermined attempts of perception management and white-washing of the invasion by US and allied governments also in Britain (Lacey, 2015; Cobain, 2010; Michlin, 2018).

In a UK context, several high-profile cases of military misconduct by British soldiers and officers had emerged both prior to and after the Abu Ghraib scandal (for an overview, see for

instance Cobain 2010 and the preliminary proceedings of the ICC)³ and made a one-sided positive depiction of the UK military in the post-Second World War tradition of a cinematic “pleasure culture of war” (Flanagan, 2019) a less feasible endeavor. In addition to this, as Ortega Breton (2015: 86) points out, the inability of the BBC to retain the anonymity of government scientist Dr. David Kelly, who had had a leading role in revealing the faulty evidence behind the Weapons of Mass Destruction claims raised against Iraq which in turn led to his suicide, further complicated the picture as it had strained the relations between the UK government and the media significantly.

This socio-political context has kept British television’s engagement with the Iraq war at a minimum (Harper, 2013) and reduced the leeway of film makers for how issues pertaining to military misconduct and abuse can be taken up (Lacey, 2015). As I will show in the sections following below, in *Mark of Cain* and *Battle for Haditha*, Marc Munden and Nick Broomfield chose different strategies when maneuvering these contentious discursive terrains. Both works, however, align to a critical tradition identified by Flanagan (2019) and exhibit what Michlin (2018: 16) has termed a “post-Abu Ghraib-scandal consciousness” in that they retain awareness not only of the Iraq war’s contentious moral and political terrains, but also of the power of digital imageries to quickly disseminate in an unpredictable fashion entailing a gradual transformation from an inherently propagandistic “virtuous war” (Der Derian, 2010) into “diffused war” (Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2010) – a chaotic meshwork of visuals spread via social media and other networks that is difficult to predict and control.

Imag(in)ing Atrocities: Military Misconduct, Loyalty, and Accountability in *Mark of Cain*

Marc Munden's *Mark of Cain* is a British television drama produced by Red Production Company and screened at Channel 4 in May 2007. The film follows a group of British soldiers stationed in occupied Basra, Iraq and shows the gradual breakdown of moral codes and ethical reasoning leading up to atrocious acts committed against a group of Iraqi prisoners. The film is a fictionalized account of an actual past event and is based on extensive research among British Iraq war veterans and their families conducted by script writer Tony Marchant. The narrative closely resembles aspects of an actual court case raised against Fusilier Gary Bartlam, who was charged with and convicted of prisoner abuse at Camp Breadbasket in Basra, Iraq in 2003 (Thompson, 2007). *Mark of Cain* explores questions of guilt and accountability and problematizes, and ultimately undermines, war-apologetic slogans such as the British Army's concept of 'moral courage' which is presented as enabling individual soldiers to withstand peer-pressures and stresses in war, and refrain from overly brutal conduct. In telling the story from the perspective of regular British soldiers, Munden balances between condemning their deeds and making them understandable with reference to situational contexts in a chaotic occupation and conditions conducive to group-think leading to acts of misunderstood loyalty in military organizations (Weissberg, 2007).

Film, and in particular historical film, is an important medium of history and cultural memory (Sturken, 1997; Rosenstone, 2006; Erll, 2010; Flanagan, 2019). Films that are subject to mass consumption take part in the formation and reproduction of shared frames for remembrance that predispose how a collective understands itself and its past. This is valid also in relation to *Mark of Cain* that enables a vicarious documentation and collective recollection of an important past event. From the very beginning, the film deploys devices that activate a

“memory-making rhetoric” (Erll, 2010) thus asserting the film’s relevance for historical discourse and memory politics pertaining to the Iraq war that is presented within the frames of a tragedy-oriented tradition in British critical film making (Flanagan, 2019).

Mark of Cain opens with a series of intrusive close ups on parts of a naked male body in a bathtub frantically engaged in vain attempts to scrub off some invisible stain from his skin. A brief glimpse of a name tag makes the person identifiable as a soldier. These scenes are crosscut with sequences showing a bruised soldier marching towards a court martial hearing in a military facility in England. By these means, the opening sequence cues for the adoption of a perspective on the past based on the experiences of individual soldiers, and establishes trauma, guilt, and accountability as main themes of the developing narrative. Combined with an epitaph that asserts that the narrative presented is based on actual events and that “extensive research” had been conducted for the film script, *Mark of Cain* at once asserts its relevance for historical discourse, while at the same time deflecting possible factual criticism by stating its own fictionality. In this way, Munden’s film also points beyond the frames of a singular historical event towards general aspects of war and military endeavors.

A dramaturgy “embedding” (Lacey, 2015) itself with a specific military unit often entails the use of stylistic devices that focus events through individual soldiers’ eyes and minds, presenting them in a variety of both military and civilian roles and offering insight into the rationalities behind and reasons for their actions. This makes even the atrocious conduct by British soldiers shown in the film explainable to audiences, thus inviting strong emotional engagement and even “allegiance” (Smith, 2022) with the perpetrators. This is precisely what plays out in Munden’s film that employs a series of classic cinematic devices to offer access to the thoughts, feelings, doubts, and various social relations of a selection of British soldiers.

Iraqis, on the other hand, are confined behind what Pöttsch (2013) has termed an “epistemological barrier” that prevents similar insights regarding the opposing side and thus invites for a reduction of the other to the limited roles of threatening aggressor or helpless victim. In Munden’s film, such a barrier makes Iraqis emerge as ubiquitous and absent at the same time as the presentation of them is made to oscillate between their hypervisibility as helpless victims and their invisibility as an anonymized massified threat.

The devices used to present self and other in *Mark of Cain* cue what Murray Smith (2022: 81) has termed a biased “structure of sympathy” that offers audiences differentiated access to film characters enabling the strongest form of engagement – allegiance – only with certain protagonists on one side of the depicted conflict – a small group of British soldiers with particular focus on two individuals. The film then lays out at length the complex context of the lives of British soldiers in Iraq focusing on issues of demanded loyalty, peer-pressures, frustration, and (justified) rage at the death of one of their own explaining why the abuse of Iraqi prisoners could happen and showing how military structures and conduct can develop their own (self-)destructive dynamics. Even though following perpetrators, *Mark of Cain* always also retains a perspective on the individual soldiers as victims of processes beyond their own reach, thereby somewhat absolving them not of guilt, but (at least partially) of responsibility. By these means, the film puts the good intentions of genuinely human beings up against the harsh and ugly realities of war, thus aligning to a tragic mode of critical British war cinema identified by Flanagan (2019).

In contrast, Iraqi protesters and combatants are largely deprived of individuality and shown by such means as quivering long-shots and unsteady hand-held camera that makes engagement with them as fully-fledged characters difficult. During the entire film, they remain

anonymous, confined behind an epistemological barrier that renders them a “ubiquitously absent” (Pötzsch, 2013) amorphous mass posing a constant threat to British soldiers.

A second category of the Iraqi other is the hypervisible helpless victim of torture and abuse. For most of the time, Munden’s film avoids a direct depiction of the violent acts committed by British soldiers against Iraqi prisoners and merely suggests atrocious conduct by means of sound and the reactions exhibited by key protagonists. In doing so, the film initially draws upon what Pötzsch (2012b) has termed a “poetic style of realism” that invites for creative reimagination rather than blunt depiction of the suffering other, thereby preventing possible voyeurism and an instrumentalization of the victims’ plight for political purposes (Sontag, 2003; Dauphinee, 2007). In the end, however, Munden abandons this poetic approach and reverts to a “mimetic realism” (Pötzsch, 2012b) with an intrusive camera dwelling upon the abused bodies of the confined Iraqi other. By these means, the film undermines its initial invitation of an inherently haunting active reimagination and reverts to a simple surface realism purporting to be able to show the real thing. This, of course, also enables a hypervisibility of the victimized other that is exposed to a penetrating, potentially voyeuristic, gaze (Sontag, 2003) of both soldiers and audiences thereby affording what Dauphinee (2007) terms a “double-injury” that adds a representational and mediated dimension to the corporeal mistreatment suffered by the Iraqi prisoners.

The final move to verisimilitude and direct depiction might have been motivated by a desire to visually connect the abuse to the Abu Ghraib scandal and to pinpoint and vicariously document the atrocity, thus subverting attempts to deny or downplay the abuses committed by British soldiers in Iraq. *Mark of Cain* combines a reductive presentation of Iraqis as either a threatening amorphous mass or helpless victims with a multi-faceted and careful presentation

of British soldiers that affords, if not justification of, so at least understanding for their actions. In doing this, Munden's film runs the danger of ultimately playing into forms of othering that in the long run might "propagate the unnatural divisions that cause war in the first place" (Misek, 2008: 123) rather than offering a fundamental challenge to these.

Ultimately, it seems, Munden's film fails in the important task of presenting Iraqis as more than objects of audience affect – be it shock and fear, compassion, or even voyeuristic pleasure. Iraqis never assert an own position that might function as an actual alternative or corrective to a narrative "embedded" (Lacey, 2015) in a British soldiers' point of view, and that might have invited a more thorough problematization of the multiple consequences of war and militarism. Rather, the Iraqis are instrumentalized in attempts to bring to light and explain individual evil acts in war – in this case British soldiers' atrocities and war crimes. As I will show in the next section, for a fully-fledged anti-war movie this is not enough.

Multifocalisation of Violent Conflict: Agency and Systemic Evil in *Battle for Haditha*

Produced by Han Way Films and screened on Channel 4 in 2007, documentary film maker Nick Broomfield's *Battle for Haditha* sets out to reenact a massacre committed by US soldiers in the Iraqi town of Haditha in 2005. After a suicide bomb attack, US forces assaulted and killed 24 civilians, an act that contributed significantly to the rising influence and power of insurgents in the city. Similar to *Mark of Cain*, Broomfield's film aligns to what Flanagan (2019) has termed a critical tradition in British war cinema that brings forth tragic aspects of the war in Iraq. In contrast to Munden's film, however, *Battle for Haditha* also includes perspectives that are often treated as peripheral or are entirely overlooked in the war film genre, namely the vantage points of autonomously acting civilians and opposing combatants. In doing so, Broomfield's film subscribes to a systemic understanding of evil in war that

detaches the term from individual characters' malign actions (evil enemies or bad apples in US/UK uniform) and points to structural aspects behind the misconduct that has been committed.

As an authentication strategy, Broomfield taps into techniques that are familiar from the documentary tradition of direct cinema developed in France and the US during the 1960s (see Saunders, 2007). New portable cameras and sound recording technologies had enabled film makers to embed more closely in real life without drawing too much attention to themselves or their equipment while at the same time avoiding what was perceived as the limiting artifice of the studio system. This brought forth an activist form of film making bent on both accurately recording real life conditions on the spot and at contributing to progressive change in relation to the depicted problems and contradictions.

When making *Battle for Haditha*, Broomfield used techniques from direct cinema to get close to the subjects of his film combining this with an ethical imperative of telling the truth about an event largely overlooked in Western mainstream reporting. The director used hand-held cameras and portable sound equipment when following US soldiers, Iraqi civilians, and insurgents. He largely refrained from using professional actors and rather recruited staff among US Iraq veterans and Iraqi refugees living in Jordan. As the director explains in the commentary track of the DVD edition of the film, this often led to unplanned scenes where lay actors relived real past experiences. Often, he states, the camera would just continue running while scenes unfolded their own dynamics. This, combined with filming at original locations and largely without a set or props, served to increase the perceived authenticity of the depicted characters and events thus enhancing the film's "memory-making potentials" (Erl1, 2010).

Similar to *Mark of Cain*, *Battle for Haditha* also initially focalizes the events through a group of young soldiers deployed in Iraq, making available inside perspectives on their identities, mutual relations, fears, hopes, and aspirations. In contrast to Munden, Broomfield opted for a case involving US rather than British troops, a move that might have been motivated by the difficult political and discursive terrains regarding audio-visual representations of British involvement in the, ultimately illegal, occupation of Iraq highlighted earlier in this article. By directing attention to abuses carried out by US rather than British military personnel, the director might have tried to secure greater leeway to engage in contentious issues in the style of a partly fictionalized documentary drama made for British television and to reduce the risk of an overly hostile response from the country's authorities.

In the beginning, *Battle for Haditha* activates a “subjective memory-making rhetoric” (Pötzsch, 2012a). The camera focuses on individual US soldiers who engage the camera with disparate and often contradictory responses to the question of why the US military is currently in Iraq. The sequence effectively dislodges any master narrative or totalizing perspective on the events. Instead, what emerges is a meshwork of different idiosyncratic ideas, beliefs, and doubts that do not cohere around a specific point of view. Iraq and the war become a variable dependent upon the eye that sees and voice that speaks and an overarching ‘soldier’s view’, that the camera could possibly embed itself with, inevitably dissolves. With this frame in place, the film then follows the soldiers through their daily routines dissecting the military structures and institutions that condition warfare and become instrumental as the very frames that predispose individual performances towards the atrocity. For instance, Broomfield alerts the viewer to exhaustion, traumatic experiences, constant stress, and lack of sleep and psychological support as key factors conducive to the massacre.

In contrast to *Mark of Cain*, however, *Battle for Haditha* not only explodes a usually monolithic (and at best dichotomous) US military view into multiple and often contradictory gazes and voices, but also switches perspective entirely after the opening sequences and continues the story from completely different vantage points. First, the film re-focalizes events through Iraqi civilians and then through Iraqi insurgents thereby offering counter-positions and alternatives to a usually dominant Western soldiers' view of the world that had been implicitly reified also in *Mark of Cain*. By "embedding" (Lacey, 2015) the narrative with different opposing groups, Broomfield creates a balanced structure of sympathy that invites for an encounter with, recognition of, and ultimately allegiance to the usually confined Iraqis who assert their presence and emerge as more than one-dimensional threat or hypervisible helpless victim.

In long, dwelling shots Broomfield, for instance, shows the various roles of Iraqi individuals and their manifold mutual relations and bonds. Considerable focus is dedicated to discussions and deliberations of the Iraqi family who witnessed the planting of a roadside bomb aimed at US patrols close to their property. In these conversations both men and women contribute with the same authority removing a standard stereotype and beloved trope of Western representations of gender relations in Iraqi society.⁴ In the discussions, it quickly emerges that the family is in an impossible situation, located between a powerful local sheikh affiliated with Al-Qaeda and the US occupation forces that offers them no other choice but to work against and attract the wrath of either of these. Ultimately, this conundrum culminates in the massacre committed by US soldiers against the family seemingly siding with the insurgency.

Finally, offering a third vantage point, Broomfield's film shifts perspective again and embeds itself with Iraqi insurgents offering inside views into the reasons and rationale behind their decision to plant the bomb. The camera follows a former member of the Iraqi military who had been decommissioned by Paul Bremer's occupation regime and left without income to support himself and his family. The man is shown in a variety of roles and contexts, for instance as a father playing with his daughter in the living room, as husband cursing Al-Qaeda for their murder of a local teacher, and as unemployed and desperate for work and an income such that he can make a living. Ultimately, *Battle for Haditha* suggests, what led the man to plant a bomb on behalf of the Islamist insurgency is not evil cunning, ideological conviction, or religious extremism, but poverty and a lack of social institutions to support him. This inside perspective explaining the rationalities and reasons behind the acts of the normally confined other put Broomfield's film apart from more generic representations of the occupation that usually embed themselves with only one of the parties to the conflict.

By means of this multi-focalization *Battle for Haditha* enables a detailed study of power relations and escalation logics in violent conflict that brings forth the systemic nature of evil in war. In the film, war emerges as a complex political economy with shifting allegiances and blurred morals – a system that incrementally reduces the paradigm of possible actions on all sides until actors only can take wrong decisions.⁵ As a logical conclusion, the film finally assigns ultimate responsibility for the atrocities at the top of the command chain on the US and insurgent sides, both represented as foreigners to the country and beholders of an abstracting gaze that signals epistemological supremacy and dominance, yet at the same time also making palpable a willful ignorance towards the intricacies of Iraq's complex and multifaceted life worlds. Both the Islamist Sheikh and the US general are shown as wielders of a top-down god's eye view on the events – 'seeing' Iraq from the minaret of a local

mosque as well as through US drone feeds and helicopter camera footage respectively. Ultimately, Broomfield suggests, these power structures are the true culprits and the reason for the massacre and the deterioration of the security situation in the city that follows. Evil emerges as a systemic feature of war rather than the result of individual perpetrators' cunning and malign actions.

As with *Mark of Cain*, *Battle for Haditha* stamps individual soldiers as the culprits effectuating the atrocity and rightfully being court-martialed for this by the US invasion force. In addition to this, however, Broomfield's film locates these actions not only in the frames of military logics, peer-pressures, and group think, but also in a complex political economy that problematizes the notion of evil in war and locates it at a level of structural conditions setting genuinely humanized individuals on all sides up against one another in a configuration that ultimately engenders catastrophic consequences. By these means, the film also points beyond its own story and the events in Haditha, Iraq in 2005 and makes a general argument about logics of escalation, guilt, and accountability in war.

In *Battle for Haditha* the lives of all groups and individuals entangled in the military logics of violent othering and war are brought to emerge as equally "grievable" in Butler's sense of the term (2009). They all are deserving of inclusion into the shared "sphere of appearance" conceptualized by her as the core of functioning democratic societies. And with the disappearance of mainstream commercial war and action cinema's recurrent tropes of monstrous enemies and helpless victims, the preferred justification of war and violence ultimately evaporates into thin air. This makes Broomfield's film a convincing anti-war movie bent on revealing structural aspects behind evil deeds and atrocities in war rather than putting

unequivocal blame on an invisible and at the same time hyper-visible, yet ultimately confined other – be this Iraqis or ‘bad apples’ in US or British uniforms.

Conclusion

Both *Mark of Cain* and *Battle for Haditha* have critical potentials. Munden’s film dissects the problematic implications of military logics, loyalty, and group think among British soldiers, yet ultimately falls prey to a generic audiovisual regime that narrowly confines Iraqis as either “ubiquitously absent” threat (Pötzsch, 2013) or hypervisible helpless victims. Broomfield’s documentary drama on the other hand offers a multiperspectival view on the conditions in occupied Iraq that pays due diligence to all involved parties and offers empathetic as well as compassionate insights into the life worlds and rationalities of US soldiers, Iraqi civilians, as well as insurgents interlocked into the deadly escalatory logics of war. While Munden’s film is a critical war film that casts an honest light on the difficult conditions of soldiers explaining why they acted in the atrocious manner they did, Broomfield’s work can be conceived of as an anti-war film as it suggests that the ultimate evil of war is not due to individual misconduct or malintent but emerges as a necessary consequence of the very logics and structures of military endeavors. To end this systemic form of evil in war, *Battle for Haditha* suggests, we have to end war and rather direct attention to alternative conflict resolution mechanisms such as those inspired by, for example, the thought and actions of Mahatma Gandhi (see for instance Bühler, 2006).

Both the US and Britain have produced a significant number of films that focus on the invasion and occupation of Iraq. Many of these attempted to account for the complexities of the occupation but often fell back on a biased structure of sympathy implicitly privileging a US or UK soldiers’ view on the events (see for instance Ridley Scott’s *Body of Lies* from

2008 or Paul Greengrass's *Green Zone* from 2010). Others tried to offer an explanation for US and British soldiers' misconducts in a manner comparable to *Mark of Cain* (see for example Paul Haggis's *In the Valley of Elah* from 2007). Few war films, however, have followed the example of *Battle for Haditha* and directed attention to systemic aspects of war that presents atrocities and misconduct by all involved as a necessary consequence of, rather than a legitimating frame for, warfare (one example would be Philip Haas's *The Situation* from 2007).

As Galtung (1975) puts it, cultural violence is an important precondition for the acceptance of structural and direct violence. Wars can be rationalized only once we "see, perceive, picture, imagine and speak of others" (Der Derian, 2002) in specific ways conducive to such war-prone rhetoric. As opposed to critical war films, anti-war films need to extend the "public sphere of appearance" and the "grievability of life" (Butler, 2009) also to the normally confined enemy, this way preventing partisanship and both voyeurism (Sontag, 2003) and a "double betrayal" (Dauphinee, 2007) of the victims. *Battle for Haditha* succeeded in doing precisely this thereby undercutting one of the most important elements of a rationalization of warfare as a viable conflict resolution mechanism – the existence of an evil other seemingly enforcing own military conduct even at the cost of severe negative implications for societies, civilians, and own troops. In particular the horrifying events in Gaza from October 2023 onward give Broomfield's film new urgency. The resounding silence of our democratic governments and their combined incapacity to adequately respond to the atrocities brutally exposes the inherent relativity of their postulated universal values and makes the message conveyed by *The Battle for Haditha* even more important.

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