'I Just Wanted You to Know': War Testifies through the Camera

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UNIVERSITY OF MIAMI

“I JUST WANTED YOU TO KNOW”: WAR TESTIFIES THROUGH THE CAMERA

By
Seyda Aylin Gurses

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to the Faculty
of the University of Miami
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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December 2009
A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of 
the requirements for the degree of 
Doctor of Philosophy 

“I JUST WANTED YOU TO KNOW”: WAR TESTIFIES THROUGH THE CAMERA

Seyda Aylin Gurses

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This work is a textual analysis of selected documentary films whose common theme is the inevitable discrepancy between the realities of the Vietnam and the 2003 Iraq War from the perspectives of the veterans and soldiers, and the assumed reality that is constructed in the media. It is at this point that the inextricable link between documentary cinema and reality proved fundamental to the developing discourse of the entire study ahead. Since the manner in which the world is both transformed and depicted strongly depends upon the tools available to the director, the technological innovations and the emergence of portable cameras, by granting the documentary filmmaker flexibility, irreversibly solidified this link between non-fictional act of narrating and its approach and proximity to reality. Four works that are picked among a large body of documentary films are Winter Soldier (1972) directed by Winter Collective; Gunner Palace (2004) directed by Petra Epperlein and Michael Tucker; Full Battle Rattle (2008) directed by Tony Gerber and Jesse Moss and finally Standard Operating Procedure (2008) directed by Errol Morris. Even though the films are historically ordered, this study’s concern is to be systematic thematically than chronologically. In the course of these analyses, discussions of notions like reality and truth, the relations of the makers of the films, the camera and editing process to the subjects of the films, will naturally emerge, as will issues related to the political and social roles of documentary cinema.
To my grand grandfather Eyup Numanbayraktaroglu.
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Chapter 1: Overview

[N]othing has been experienced but what has been lived and made conscious. Albert Camus

It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his job depends on not understanding it. Upton Sinclair

It is the first day of the Winter Soldier Investigation in 1971 and over a hundred young men and women have confined themselves in the ballroom of a hotel in Detroit Michigan in the hope of changing the course of the Vietnam War. Almost half way into the shooting of the Winter Soldier documentary, everyone is already overwhelmed by the gravity of the stories flying about the ball room. The next veteran to testify looks at the camera with weary eyes. His short talk begins in language as plain as the way he looks: “I can’t really say why we did it. Maybe it is because we are taught to hate them.” In order to exemplify this, he tells the story of a bracelet he was wearing, which was given to him by a Vietnamese boy. His lieutenant threatened him with drastic punishment if he did not take it off. The simplicity of the story is incommensurate with the grievousness of the preceding testimonies but it nevertheless points at one of the underlying realities that made the My Lai massacre possible: hate. In his considered judgment, we should not feed our soldiers any more “blood stories”. The bottom line, he says, is that “…the people over there aren’t treated as human beings.” Then he leans forward; looking down, he ends his testimony with an economical but sincere statement. His words, which affected me deeply and inspired the title of this dissertation, speak more profoundly than any other utterances of the veterans who speak in this documentary: “I just want you to know about it.”
In 2003, as a master’s student in Turkey studying film, I began working as a volunteer in anti-war organizations. I was involved in organizing peaceful demonstrations and panels opposing the occupation of Iraq. In 2004 I had the opportunity to work as the executive producer and a reporter for an acclaimed news documentary program produced for the national television system of Turkey.

For the first episode on which I worked, we spent two weeks in Iraq, visiting several cities and towns, interviewing people and obtaining valuable footage. During our stay, we were astounded by the beauty of the land. However, we could see the devastating consequences of the war and the ensuing occupation, the escalating violent clashes between the occupying forces, the Iraqi Army, and the Iraqis (and others from neighboring countries) who had joined the various resistance groups, had laid siege to the land and its people. Turmoil was the inevitable outgrowth of the conflicts among these multiple players, all seeking their own self-interest. The ever-shifting balances of power, as well as the thin and fading moral line between resistance and terror, fed the insecurity and distrust among the people and rendered their lives unstable and precarious. I did not witness graphic scenes of violence during my stay in Iraq. Nor was my life ever threatened. Nonetheless, I felt an unbearable tension, as did the other members of our
production team. All of us had trouble sleeping. This was a problem widespread among the Iraqis we interviewed or chatted with off-camera. Needless to say, during my stay in Iraq I merely get a small taste of the disorder and turmoil that was an everyday reality for the Iraqis who were forced to live under conditions that were difficult or impossible to comprehend. However, my short stay in Iraq was the closest I could come to what Iraqis were—and still are—experiencing. And it has continued to move and inspire me to learn what I can about the evolving conditions and realities of this conflict and the issues they raise.

As a doctoral candidate studying film, and especially nonfiction film, I have been exposed to visual materials that enabled me to explore these issues from several different perspectives. Documentaries like those that are the subject of this dissertation have a unique first-hand quality that has sustained and guided my thinking throughout my doctoral studies. At the University of Miami, initially I have directed my research to exploring the intersections of film and concepts like anti-militarism and war. In preparation for writing this dissertation, I also watched and analyzed numerous fictional films that address these issues one way or another. Fictional films about war can be as effective and moving as their documentary counterparts, of course, and like them can channel crucial insights about historical events and, perhaps more importantly, human responses to the panorama of world history. Nevertheless, I have chosen to focus on a number of documentary films that approach more directly the reality, that sense of firsthand experience that I tried to get in touch with in Iraq. Documentaries such as these have the power to convey not only information that has not been provided by the mainstream media, but also images of reality that give rise to real insights. As Bill
Nichols eloquently puts it, “At the heart of documentary is less a story and its imaginary world than an argument about the historical world” (Nichols, 1991, p.111). In writing this dissertation, my goal is not only to provide critical readings rooted in my personal experience of these particular films, but by so doing to discover in these films, collectively, a kind of wartime chronicle, a record composed of images of real places and real people of a journey—their journey, my journey—of acknowledgement.

In analyzing selected documentaries on the Vietnam War and the 2003 invasion and subsequent occupation of Iraq, I anticipated discovering in these films, despite their stylistic differences, a common theme of the irrationality and absurdity of war. The idea of absurdity, as famously expounded by Albert Camus, is one of the major concepts that guide my thinking about the films. Absurdity, for Camus, emerges from the “confrontation between the human need [for clarity] and the unreasonable silence of the world” (Camus, 1991, p. 28). What to Camus’s conception is the contradiction, the paradoxical discrepancy, between what is expected and what actually happens.

In the four documentaries this work examines, the soldiers, veterans and Iraqis, and even the voiceless footage of the Vietnamese people in Winter Soldier, are longing for clarity, for some rational explanation for the conditions they encounter in Vietnam and Iraq, that would provide them with some kind of solid ground upon which to stand. For the soldiers introduced in these films, the ideals or rational reasons they were given are rendered nonsensical by the paradoxical realities they encounter. Their experiences are incomprehensible to them unless they create their own explanations for them. This becomes, in some instances, a matter of survival that seems to justify all kinds of violent
and unethical acts, or a soldierly and / or personal mission of “recording”¹ their life on the battlefield. Especially in the case of the latter, the soldiers-turned-documentarists were able to hold on to a more virtuous and self-forgiving role, as opposed to the ambiguous, challenging and sometimes distinctly immoral orders they were given.

The four documentaries I have selected to address in this dissertation are *Winter Soldier* (1972), directed by the Winter Collective; *Gunner Palace* (2004), co-directed by Petra Epperlein and Michael Tucker; *Full Battle Rattle* (2008), co-directed by Tony Gerber and Jesse Moss; and *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008), directed by Errol Morris. The chapters are ordered thematically rather than chronologically. It is a goal of this dissertation that the writing itself reflect the progressions it discovers not only within the narrative structures of the individual films, but from film to film as well. When addressed in this order, these films collectively tell a story over and above the stories they individually tell. The order of chapters registers the project’s attempt to understand the distinctive bonds between the camera, director(s), subjects and viewers of these films. Also, an ongoing exploration of the relationship of these integral points of analysis to reality itself is another element that holds together the readings that comprise each chapter.

The overall strategy of this dissertation is, first, to help readers to find their way through the difficult terrain that these films individually and collectively chart. To this end, I encourage the reader to think of this dissertation as a journey. I am hoping that reading this document--following the road map that the films themselves provide when

¹ In the last chapter on *Standard Operating Procedure*, this is what Sabrina says she did in the Abu Ghraib Prison by taking pictures of the abuses she witnessed.
viewed in this order and in this way—will become a personal voyage of discovery, a journey of acknowledgment. These films take us to real places, and introduce us to people who really exist in our world. To make the lives of real people part of our lives, to motivate us to acknowledge our connection with them and hence our responsibilities toward them, is not a possibility for fictional films. It is a possibility for documentaries.

Documentary films, such as those addressed in this dissertation, employ cinematic devices much like those fictional films employ. They do not simply reproduce reality, but interpret reality, highlighting elements of reality in order to make a point. Bill Nichols emphasizes that in documentary cinema “representation is allied with rhetoric, persuasion, and argument, rather than with likeness or reproduction” (Nichols, 1991, p.111). In Nichols’ understanding, documentaries modify the world as we see it. It is “heightened, telescoped, dramatized, reconstructed, fetishized, and miniaturized [as in Full Battle Rattle and Standard Operating Procedure]” (Nichols, 1991, 113).

Chapter One analyzes Winter Soldier, a documentary made in 1972, which immortalizes the historic Winter Soldier investigation in which 109 veterans testified to the atrocities they witnessed or committed while they were in Vietnam. There has been no study of this film as detailed as mine. The chapter on Winter Soldier will elaborate on my rationale for selecting this film and making my analysis it the first chapter of this dissertation. In various places within the textual analysis that constitutes the body of the chapter, I refer to the soldiers as performers, having in mind both their relationship to the camera and to the immediate audience they were addressing as they presented their testimonies. In using this term, I am following the Canadian-American sociologist Erving Goffman, who in The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life defines interaction as “the
reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another’s actions when in one another’s immediate physical presence” (Goffman, 1959, p. 15). When there is a camera involved, one will always be concerned with how one is perceived by others, and will make an effort to present to the camera the self as one believes it ideally ought to be. A person is being watched by an audience, but at the same time is an audience to those who him or her. Thus the subject of the camera is also watching the camera and its operator, and in a way watching us. This means in our film viewing experience we are both objects and subjects. If real people are also actors and if “we play the characters we, and others, imagine us to be, the characters we are capable of becoming” (Goffman, 1959, p. 3); if the real people in front of the camera in a documentary film are playing themselves instead of just being themselves--if it is even possible not to put on an act while interacting with others within a social environment--then who are these veterans in Winter Soldier, sitting in front of a large group of people and several cameras? What are the components of their existence that particular day, at that unique moment? Who are they in that moment? To me, they seem to be in purgatory, somewhere between being soldiers and whoever they were before. With their testimonies they will perhaps acquire a new identity, or rather a new start, with their acknowledgement and realization of what happened to them in Vietnam.

Goffman’s performance theory complements Camus’ notion of absurd. He says “nothing has been experienced but what has been lived and made conscious” (Camus, 1991, p.15). Again in Winter Soldier, the testimonies of the veterans help them to realize and acknowledge what they had lived and make it conscious. Filming, or taking pictures of the war in Vietnam, even for training purposes, can be interpreted as a way of altering
reality. The soldiers with cameras need to film what they see and do not to understand reality, but to give it a new form that eliminates the sense of reality from their experience. Holding a camera might be a better way of rationalizing their existence at the time, giving them the opportunity to become human observers of the powers of nature and chain of command, rather than obedient animals.

What unites these young men is the violence they shared. “Shared violence can be unifying. It has always drawn man together, whether in revolution, counterrevolution, or almost any form of indiscriminate mass slaughter.” (Summers et al., 1999, p.51). The veterans in Winter Soldier, with the collaboration of the soldiers and the directors, demonstrate the transformation of guilty memories of wrongful actions into a counter-weapon to be used in order to refute the rationale put forward for this shared violence.

The subsequent three chapters undertake close readings of three documentary films on the 2003 Iraq War, analyzing the affinities and the direct associations, both thematically and stylistically, among them. All three films focus on the same war, so it is hardly surprising to find certain names of certain people and locales as common elements. On the other hand, these commonalities imply more than what they readily give out: the organic bonds that their separate stories form will also guide the remainder of the study and help it to complete its journey.

Chapter Three initiates our first meeting with the Iraq War and the American soldiers on the eve of their deployment to Iraq. Full Battle Rattle, released in 2008, is a very strange documentary, not only because of the ways the directors handle the visual material, but by virtue of the nature of the story. The film documents the artificial Iraq
created by the U.S. military for training purposes, with real soldiers and real Iraqi refugees employed in it. Here we witness the soldiers and the Iraqis role-playing the characters designed for them based on the horrific stories reported back from Iraq. The war we watch in the film is not real. Iraqi exiles play the civilians. while the American soldiers are assigned to the roles of insurgents and, not surprisingly, soldiers. After being trained in this virtual Iraq, they are deployed to their locations in the real one. Since the simulation is where the soldiers go before Iraq, it is a good place for us to start as well. With the exception of the experienced soldiers, no one, including us, has any idea of how the real Iraq will be. The simulation may stand for an idealized version of the war. It may even reflect our own second-hand perceptions of Iraq. Because we have not seen the real Iraq yet, the absurdity here is not about the war. The absurdity is in the disharmony between the goals of this expensive fairground-like training center, and the impossibility of reaching these goals. At the end of the film, everybody is confused and things are more complicated than they were before. The only fact that the soldiers realize is that they will soon be going to the real Iraq. The simulation, which was originally meant to be a functional learning experience, not only is proven inadequate, but also turns out to be a lie. In this sense, it is no different than the “rabbit lesson” in Winter Soldier. It can be considered a new and perhaps a more “fun” way of preparing, or rather conditioning, the soldiers for the “wild.”

Soldiers in the simulation and us, the people watching the war at home through the filtered reports of the mainstream media, have to be taught to believe in the necessity

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2 Sgt. Bangert in Winter Soldier tells the story about the rabbit lesson they have at the staging battalion at Camp Pendleton, in their last day in the States. This sequence is discussed in Chapter 2 on Winter Soldier.
of the invasion. In this lab-like environment, the soldiers tend to generate some kind of faith in their presence in Iraq. Barthelemy De Ligt (1883-1938) explains this relationship between a person and his/her military service as “the exploitation of moral courage.” He says, “The exploitation of moral courage in wartime depends on the study of the very springs of human emotion and their adaptation to the necessities of warfare; it is through psychic research that moral courage can be strengthened, if its results are directed towards action, or at least are given professional study.” (De Ligt, 1937, p.27) My analysis in this chapter emphasizes the ironic distance that the camera establishes between the invented meaning (the simulation) and the anticipated, implied or sensed reality that contradicts this meaning. At the end of the film, we are left behind and forced to stay with the families of the soldiers when their plane takes off. This is where the journey charted by this dissertation begins. Now we know how they are prepared. In the chapter that follows, and in the next film Gunner Palace, we pay them a visit. It is only after this next level of our experience that we come to realize the faults of our previous perception of war, as in Full Battle Rattle, a perception that resembles the simulation in its falseness.

In Chapter Four, we “wake up” in Iraq in the company of other newcomers, waiting to settle at a base. In Michael Tucker’s Gunner Palace, the issue of war comes into view as the film exposes the inconsistency between the reality of the war and what we are told back home. Tucker impresses me with his distinctive way of incorporating himself and the soldiers into the narrative. The media and our submission to it are criticized throughout the body of the film. Masterfully executed scenes expose the controversies and contradictions between the promoted so-called facts about the war and
the realities that Tucker records with his camera. The film has a very direct tone in exemplifying the paradoxes of the stated policy and the desperation of both the American soldiers and the Iraqis, even in the most creative scenes where Iraq looks like a stage meticulously designed for a tragedy.

Tucker’s own gradual inclusion into the film also carries us to our next level of understanding this war: we become part of the film and are allowed to sink into the story, empathize with the characters, and especially with the director, and become a member of the “crew.” Tucker’s experience of the war becomes our own. During my initial proofreading of the chapter, I realized that I had not used first person anywhere in the chapter on *Gunner Palace*, as I often had done in the previous and subsequent chapters. Now it has become apparent to me that this authorial choice is the result of my full identification with Tucker and his camera. In this sense, I become Tucker as well. His camera is his tool of expression; my computer is mine. Hence, as I see my hands “typing my mind,” like Tucker’s hand holding the camera over his shoulder and filming the other who prepares coffee for him, I enter into the next level of my analysis: I become my writing.

*Gunner Palace* ends with Tucker’s implied departure from Iraq. The fact that we do not see him boarding supports my claim that the films I analyze share a common theme. The film comes to an end, but the war—and our journey—continues. In the last chapter, the dissertation closes a circle by returning to the “talking head” style of documentary: Errol Morris’s 2008 film, based on the infamous photographs made public in 2004 that reveal the inhumane treatment of prisoners in the Abu Ghraib Prison in Baghdad. Morris efficiently and skillfully evaluates the visual material in *Standard*
Operating Procedure (henceforth referred to as “S.O.P.”). Creating dramatically powerful enactments that hit the mark and inserting them between the interviews he conducts with the key characters of the Abu Ghraib scandal, Morris succeeds in highlighting emotions and actions.

Aside from Morris’s query into the nature and the mystery of the still photographs, which dominates the narrative, the other important issue the film addresses is the soldiers’ association of their duties with the absurd conditions of the war. In Winter Soldier and S.O.P., the soldiers are shown removed from the almost surreal world of war and provided with a relatively comfortable environment in which to speak up and directly address an audience. In S.O.P., the directness is established thanks to Morris’ “Interrotron” device and the illusory face-to-face conversational mood he designed it to create. In this context, I invoke a social psychological phenomenon known as the “bystander effect” with regard to the inaction of most of the convicted soldiers being interviewed here. First demonstrated by social psychologists John Darley and Bibb Latane in 1968, this effect is observed when individuals do not attempt to intervene and help in an emergency situation in the presence of other people. According to the first and strongly replicable experiments conducted in the late 1960s, two of the major factors in the failure to act on the part of a group of bystanders failure are pluralistic ignorance and diffusion of responsibility (Darley & Latane, 1968). This issue will be discussed in detail in the last chapter.

What is comprehensively studied by Morris is the question “Do photographs reveal the truth to us, or do they, in fact, hide the truth?” As argued by Andre Bazin, the concept of cinema existed in men’s minds long before moving pictures were invented. He
also underlines the objective nature of photography, images of real life and the fact that “we are forced to accept as real the existence of the object reproduced” (Bazin, 1974, p.13). At this juncture, Errol Morris’ question gains another dimension. Are we questioning the so-called objective nature of a photograph or the so-called objective nature of the investigation pursued by the U.S. Army? The issue of objectivity evokes Adorno and his puzzle-like observations about the accepted definition of objectivity and the very nature of the phenomenon itself.

According to Adorno’s “Minima Moralia”:

Objective means the non-controversial aspect of things, their unquestioned impression, the façade made up of classified data, that is, the subjective; and they call subjective anything which breaches that façade, engages the specific experience of a matter, casts off all ready-made judgments and substitutes relatedness to the object for the majority consensus of those who do not even look at it, let alone think about it – that is the objective (Theodor W. Adorno, Minima Moralia, 1978, p.69).

From this point of view, this last chapter follows Morris by asking what it is that we do not see in these photographs and who defines the rules and limits of objectivity, which in this film can itself be claimed to be a “standard operating procedure.”

The veteran we meet in Winter Soldier who testifies to the atrocities he committed or witnessed, who desperately tries to express his feelings while supporting his overall argument with his photographs from Vietnam, has more in common with the “bad apples” of S.O.P. than just being a “talking head.” In their own ways, they question their presence in Vietnam and Iraq respectively. war zones. The audience that we saw in Winter Soldier listening and watching in wonder to the veterans as they testify is no different from us, listening to Lynndie and Sabrina in S.O.P. Are we ready or willing to see or seek the truth?
At this point in the dissertation, we are ready to divorce ourselves from the status of passive viewer and participate actively in the interrogation. We are expected to assist Morris in his deconstruction and reconstruction of the story. I would even suggest that this expectation points to the umbilical cord that connects all the director’s cinematic material and devices to reality; at the same time implying that the documentary film is part of reality. In that sense a documentary film rightfully expects more from its audience. The mystery that Errol Morris invokes at the end of the film has yet to be solved. I argue that if a documentary film is linked to a very important solution of a very important problem, our questioning mind, which will be activated by our sense of responsibility and acknowledgement, is perhaps the most vital tool for solving this mystery.

At the beginning of my writing of this dissertation, I thought of the films as being about the soldiers and veterans and the wars in which they fought. However, as I approached the end of my analysis, I realized that they are actually about us, or, rather, whoever watches them automatically becomes the leading character in their narratives. If viewers are honest with themselves about the ways in which war exist in their lives, these films will reveal themselves to them as their own personal journeys of acknowledgement. They will become aware of their fundamental responsibility.

In light of this idea, S.O.P, with the brilliant mind of Errol Morris behind it, proves to be the ideal film with which to end this work. S. O. P. points its finger at the absent characters in the photographs—namely, us—who are as responsible as the “bad apples.” Perhaps that is as close as we can come to solving the mystery, to discover the truth that Morris so earnestly undertakes to find. As Carl Plantinga points out in his
insightful essay on Morris, it is Morris’ understanding that objective truth exists. It is
difficult for the director of a documentary film to reveal the truth, but it is not impossible.
(Plantinga, 2009, p 45)
Chapter 2: Winter Soldier (1972)

No fiction film about Vietnam has ever come close to Winter Soldier and its portrayal of the war, the veterans and their guilt which also speaks for the American guilt about Vietnam. The whole body of the film seems to open itself to a close analysis easily due to its talking head quality. However, in the course of the analysis, I realized the complexity of the micro-details of each story and each image of the faces I am looking at, as well as the diligent ways in which they are edited in order to shape the story of an event with historical significance. All the testimonies assert more than the words that constitute them refer to; the faces of young men in their early twenties reveal so much more than the cameras might have intended to capture. The textual study of this documentary gradually and inevitably will challenge the unidimensional approach of a less perceptive mind and will demand a peculiar, multidimensional attentiveness of a comprehensive and susceptive mind.

Winter Soldier documents and immortalizes a substantially momentous ‘investigation’, organized by the Vietnam Veterans against the War (VVAW) in 1971 in Detroit Michigan. From January 31 to February 1-2 1971 a large group of veterans of the Vietnam War got together before an audience to testify to the atrocities they committed in Southeast Asia. The name “Winter Soldier” is a paraphrase derived from The Crisis pamphlet series written by Thomas Paine in 1776 in order to encourage the colonists in their resistance. The Investigation contains over hundred straightforward testimonies; all of them point at the deformity of the national policy of the time and aim to establish a larger discourse. The complete testimony was read into the Congressional Record, still accessible.
Given the fact that reporting the efforts to end the war were not favored by the American media, VVAW and the supporters decide to film the event in order to render the testimonies permanent. They were aware of the cinema’s potential to reach a wider audience and its inherent transcendence over time. This is what they needed since their immediate cause was to end the war and prevent future repetition; therefore participation of the camera becomes an indispensable part of the investigation. A conversation with the makers of the documentary, recorded some thirty years after the investigation, is included in the DVD version distributed by the Millarium Zero. In the conversation David Grubin, one of the filmmakers, recalls the phone call he received from the VVAW. He was asked if he has had a camera. The voice on the phone was so excited that it did not even ask if the Grubin was interested. The veterans from Vietnam were willing to speak against something that everybody wanted to believe; this must have been anything but uninteresting! Eventually a film crew made up of seventeen people left their respective home towns and met in Detroit Michigan to document the Winter Soldier Investigation with donated film stocks and equipment in their hands. Donations included the out of date black and white 16mm film strip from a lab that made porno movies at night easily recognized by its grainy quality. The shooting was divided between four film crews, filming around the clock; the crews were screening the footage that they obtained during the day for each other and planning the following day. A very important aspect of this film is the fact that the directors and the film itself –by the nature of the final product- consciously avoid attributing the film’s existence to one name. In fact, a director’s name might have damaged the historical credibility and the spontaneity of the film. In that sense Winter Soldier stands out as a fabled work of independent, adversarial cinema,
created by an anonymous filmmaking collaborative that refused any sort of authorial grandstanding out. They believed that a directorial credit would detract the audiences from the film’s powerful content. Despite the film’s cinéma-vérité approach, which strives to record, provoke and reveal the truth with a less interventionist –but provocative- camera and director, and despite its collective nature, the strong commitment of the film collective to the anti-war movement and their concrete faith in the truthfulness of the testimonies are apparent as they transport themselves through the camera work into our minds. They do not bother hiding their true intention, and it projects from the screen targeting the “hearts and minds”\(^{3}\) of the audience members. This chapter analyses mainly the role of the camera, how this affects the film’s approach to the subjects and how certain cinematic techniques are brought out by the mediation of the camera in order to establish and reinforce a certain point of view. It is not this study’s goal nor is it possible to assert what really happened in Vietnam based on the testimonies of the Vietnam veterans. However through the examination of the camera work, its association with the filmmakers and pointing out the approach that guides the filming and editing processes, that is to say how the film is shot and put together so as to assert a particular standpoint, the analysis may reveal how *Winter Soldier* creates the impression of disclosing the truth. Sympathetic viewers can easily identify themselves with the curious camera or the filmmakers’ emphatic style, and be inclined to take the testimonies for granted. In fact it is this chapter’s goal to read how the filmmakers use cinematic devices to obtain this emotional reaction and maintain an impression of truthfulness.

\(^{3}\) Ironically the phrase “hearts and minds” is used by the President Lyndon Baines Johnson several times in order to gain support of the American public and the Vietnamese people for the Vietnam War, as well as it is used by the American military in a campaign with a similar intention.
Panels that took place during the investigation were divided into combat units in order for each one to expose the overall policy of their respective divisions. The film itself is composed of four visual components: conversations between the veterans that usually take place between panels; interviews with an individual veteran or a group of veterans; the hearings; and the war footage, stills brought by the veterans and the protest stills that are used with the end credits. These ingredients are intertwined in such a fashion that each one either refers to the preceding or sets the base for the following. The thematic structure of the film organizes and controls the otherwise mind-exhausting rhythm of the event and provides us with an overall view of the investigation. This well-designed outline establishes the base for the film’s main discourse, which purposes to smoothly lead the viewers to reconsider what they knew of the war and to take notice of the power of collective memory against the established public opinion. The event was almost completely ignored by the national media. This, paradoxically, increased the historical importance of the film. Some of the things that were articulated during the investigation had never been mentioned by these men before. To the directors of the film and the VVAW, once the memories are unearthed for the first time, “they must be activated and woven into a narrative context.” (Lazzara, 2006, p. 131) Thus the historical value of the testimonies bestows timelessness and a transcendent quality on the film; and it becomes the filmmakers and the veterans’ calling to speak to their future audiences. Despite the almost non-existent media coverage, the 16mm film prints of Winter Soldier were brought to the public in small community venues, colleges and in people’s houses by the members of the VVAW or the filmmakers.
The film is narrated by the veterans themselves whether during the testimonies, the showing of the war footage or the interviews where we rarely hear the questioners. As a matter of fact we need their guidance. They are our volunteer tour guides in this nightmarish attraction; they, who know the area better than anyone. Furthermore while doing this, they also transform their otherwise humiliating memories into something immensely crucial. While providing the image with an audio aspect, giving voice to the framed scene as well as what is outside the frame; to a certain degree they are unburdening themselves of the horridness.

“In the winter of 1776 at Valley Forge, Tom Paine wrote ‘these are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldier and the sunshine patriot will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country; but he that stands it now deserves the love and thanks of man and woman.’ This is how Winter Soldier starts, in a very unpretentious yet penetrative manner. Right from the beginning, and before hearing what the Vietnam veterans have to say, the film demands a certain perspective from the audience through the monotone yet at the same time strangely dramatic female voice over in the opening title. It is more of a demand than a kind request or a suggestion. Its poetic and simplistic structure is manipulative. Considering the young men in this film who certainly did not look like soldiers, or even the veterans that people at the time were used to seeing, this deliberate admonition makes more sense. The voice over narration on behalf of the Winter Collective asked the audience to take these long-haired, anarchist-looking veterans and their stories seriously.

Indeed the following image, the first shot after the title, certainly requires this brief dramatic opening, especially for skeptical and less considerate audiences. Within
the frame there are two young men, sitting across from each other, on both ends of a table that stands between them. One of them is asking formal questions in a very friendly manner. Yet there is nothing formal about his easy-going mood. At the same time he inscribes the answers given by the addressee on a form in front of him. Rusty Sachs, the young man who is answering the questions, is sitting backwards on his chair, a sign of ease, insubordination, childishness, anything that challenges the notions of “sunshine patriot”, “a soldier at the service of his country”, “a man”. This is a kitchen of a Detroit hotel room, where the hearings also took place.

As if this is not enough, the happy and carefree looking young men both have long and messy hair. Later in the film, Rusty will be questioned about his hair and he will give a well articulated answer. How the camera can be so misleading sometimes! If you turn off the volume and watch their mouths moving, you can easily assume that they are talking about a girlfriend, or that this is just an informal survey on something insignificant. Once listened though, the audience direfully realizes what they are getting at. The first young man with a dark shirt on asks Rusty about his age. Rusty hesitates and looks up, as if it requires an effort to remember his age. Has he forgotten his age because he saw things that made him feel older than he is? Or is it possible that giving thought to the severity of experience and what life confronts him with, passing time and age prove absurd, it no longer really matters to him anymore?
The banality of the demographic inquiry is cut short by a jump cut. Ever-smiling Rusty is next asked about his military training. He was a helicopter pilot, trained as a Marine Aviation Cadet. These are all basic questions about the veterans’ positions within the military that as soldiers they are well prepared to respond to. Their training, units and ranks are not only formal affiliations but they determine almost everything they are and they do, how they position themselves in this world, in their society and most importantly in wherever they will be stationed as soldiers. It is this affiliation that made most of the things they regret doing legitimate. However the brutality of killing, the hideousness of the approved and crowned actions change their whole perception of their ranks in the military; as in Rusty’s case, the change asserts itself in the gloom of his eyes that contrasts with his smile. His motives for becoming a soldier are not there; however, whatever compatibility he believed he had between his duty and his self no longer seems to be fostered by these motives. The controversy between his current moral status and his past actions defines new motives of rejection; the absence of affirmative stimuli transforms compatibility into contrariety which displays itself, for instance, in Rusty’s participation in the Winter Soldier Investigation and in his new image with messy hair. Both defy the military requirements in appearance and action and suggest disobedience. Scott Camil, another veteran we will be introduced later in the film, who after this investigation becomes one of the most inspiring anti-war activists, says in another
documentary made about him in 2002 \(^4\) that throwing away of the medals meant cutting of the emblematical cord between him and the government. With his long hair, along with the absence of his medals, he felt independent.

As Rusty mentions his military training, the hand held camera zooms in almost with curiosity, right after excluding the questioner, and allowing itself and the audience to examine this young curly-haired blond man and whatever it is behind his strangely enduring smile. The camera being the primary, if not the sole, viewer frames certain parts of a wider area, limits what secondary viewers, that is to say the audiences are able to see. This limitation, however, accentuates the subject of the frame and puts forward its link to the overall theme. As things stand, when viewers adopt camera’s and the filmmakers’ predetermined perspectives, and partner the act of recording by being the one for whom the camera films, they also endeavor to generate their own particular understanding of the story unfolding before them. In that case the camera’s curiosity, as well as its gaze, naturally activates the viewers’ curiosity and their intentional, self-driven contemplation.

Meanwhile a viewer may not need to see excluded parts of the recorded reality; for he or she is capable of integrating what is visually present and what is not\(^5\). In this sequence, they are joking about rank and Rusty’s being a Marine Aviation Cadet. The joking is important because this is what is different between this section and the investigation testimony. There are no jokes and no insider remarks as they testify. Going back to the close-up of Rusty, it brings out the privacy of this moment, and grants the audience-viewer with a somewhat uncomfortable meddler-observer status. This uneasiness in

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\(^4\) *A Seasoned Veteran* is directed by Benito Aragon, Melinda Kahl and Michael Kirschbaum in 2002.

\(^5\) This capability—or incapability in that manner—will be the major issue in the last chapter on *Standard Operating Procedure*, directed by Errol Morris.
meddling would not be the same had this zooming motion of the camera was handled smoothly and pre-planned, like in classical Hollywood cinema. Then it would have been part of the story, almost like a necessity since actors need their performances to be seen as much as the audiences need to get into the story. Only here, the zooming motions are clumsy and spontaneous; because even if people have “roles” in life, in as much as life is unannounced, unscripted human acts that pertain to these roles cannot be preplanned. Although the Winter Soldier Investigation itself is in fact a preplanned and an announced event, each moment and each unique facial expression is incalculable. How the stories and reactions they receive would have turned out were probably a complete mystery to the participators, the filmmakers, and to the first time viewers of this documentary unless they read the transcription of the hearings or run an eye over comments in the congressional record on conspicuous moments beforehand. It is important to point out that there are two different groups of viewers that correlate with the Winter Soldier event. First is the group of people who were in Detroit in 1971, seeing and listening to the testimonies without the agency of a camera and/or a sound recorder. This apparatus naturally becomes one of the components of the audio visual material that the subsequent audiences watch and listen to by means of a recorder and a player. There is a spatial and a temporal difference between these two experiences, both of which have, to a certain degree, an influence on how the reality of the event and the politics of the Vietnam War in general are perceived.

In that first segment where he is being questioned about his vital statistics and his memories, Rusty has no knowledge of camera’s penetration because even though there is limited number of plausible and probable camera movements due to technical and
practical conditions, none of them are diligently pre-planned; the camera zooms in almost clumsily out of an instantaneous interest. This signalizes the fact that the conversation between these two young men and the whole event are not scripted; the camera runs simultaneously as life in 1971 in Detroit Michigan flows by, which accordingly suggests the inevitable: the testimonies are also real. On the other hand, there is of course the process of editing, through which these simultaneously captured moments are “woven into” a particular narrative, serving a particular point of view. Hence when the sudden appearance of the black and white still image of a soldier with dark shades sitting inside a helicopter with his decently cut hair disrupts the close-up, the viewer cannot pass it off as just an ordinary image. The timing of this insert is not coincidental. It is there for the mind to start making immediate connections between this photograph and the post-Vietnam Rusty; the aforementioned conflict or perhaps the clarity of mind that he is at confirms itself by means of these two contrasting images of the same man.

The still image and the motion picture image of Rusty mirror each other not only because they indicate the same man, but also because they authenticate and corroborate his presence in two conflicting locations and stand points. The man who is about to testify to the atrocities he witnessed and participated is the helicopter pilot in the picture. Yet again, the man to testify is the man who will disown and denounce most of the justifications the helicopter pilot had in the first place to be in Vietnam. As viewers we
are able to anticipate that this man, and not necessarily the man in the photograph, has issues with a particular war and war in general. At least in the photographic image of Rusty any possible moral conflicts are not on the surface yet. Once this inseparability and a secondary spatial–temporal difference between the conditions and the perceptions of the two images are acknowledged, then the imperative fact that they are the same person and a possible vital change in mental status contingent upon time, can only reinforce the documentary value of his words. The fact that his curly hair is long -and it takes a long time for curly hair to grow that long- indicates the time passed. He was once a soldier at the service of his country; he was a “man”. Less sympathetic viewers among us now know that he was once somebody they would have appreciated and taken seriously. This stark contrast makes us wonder what happened to him. Here now, everyone is ready to listen.

The film cuts back to the room and the present time of the session. The questioner asks Rusty Sachs his rank in the military, only to qualify his own question: “The highest rank attained.” He knew Rusty’s rank and he is asking it as part of formality. He then wittingly tells Rusty to “whip it on us baby!” This discloses some kind of a relationship between the two. Rusty confirms that he has attained the highest rank: captain. The questioner cheers, as if he is trying to warm up the atmosphere, since he knows so well that what they are about to talk about is not easy to swallow, nor easy to hear or tell. We hear the cheer but do not see the source. All we see is Rusty, looking down; his eyes engulfed in the memory of, perhaps, what it means to be a captain. There is a frozen smile on his face, but the smile is not for the present moment. It is like the still image of
him seconds ago. His mind is in Vietnam and in present time, simultaneously. One evokes the other.

The smile is redolent of the Kuleshov effect. An image of a man smiling juxtaposed sensually but not visually with some memories of the past. What we read from that face has strikingly changed. Now, as his eyes are looking inward, perhaps he is thinking how pointless the rank itself is. Does anyone have any idea what this rank brought him, and made him to do? This is such a strong and sad moment, contrasting with the youthfulness and the ease of the previous moment the camera records. The camera revealed something about Rusty that cannot be expressed otherwise, unfurled something about this young man’s troubled mind, heart and conscious. Who can say that this is not real?

Next question brings Rusty back from his thoughts. He was asked about his duty period in Vietnam. This is an easy question just like his age. He looks up and thinks momentarily about it. Then firmly closes his eyes, heavily sighs and reports his duty period.
It is as if these questions are gently torturing him since he was probably asked numerous times about it. “August 66, September 67” says Rusty. Now considering that this was filmed in 1971, it is clear that it has been four years since he had returned. Yet the concretization and the remembrance of his existence in Vietnam wipes the smile off of his face. Rusty is no longer that recovered child anymore. He is back to his manhood, images of his abused humanity. At that moment, we go back to a two-shot, as though the camera felt that it provoked Rusty, invaded his privacy enough.

With the two-shot, the questioner veteran comes back to the frame as the questions get tougher and more formal. “Have you ever witnessed any of the following?” opens up a list of incidents that will help the organizers of the event to categorize and document the testimonies. The formal style of the questions protects both men from the implications and personalization. “One: A prisoner shot.” Rusty takes a moment; he is willing to get caught in the seriousness of the moment. Later on he says “I don’t know whether if I have or not.” How can he not know? As Ben Marco (Frank Sinatra) similarly asks Raymond Shaw (Lawrence Harvey) in The Manchurian Candidate (1962)⁶, ten years before the Winter Soldier, “What have they built him to do?” Next situation, as remarked by the questioner, is more relevant: “Prisoners thrown from helicopters”. Rusty recuperates his smile, only this time it has a cynic facade. Without hesitation he says “Yes, I’ve seen that.” He was a helicopter captain after all. His ensuing words are somewhat engrossing and exemplary: “I’ve never seen them thrown out of my airplane because it’s behind me.” If such is the case, then what he said he saw apparently

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⁶ Directed by John Frankenheimer, this adaptation from Richard Condon’s 1959 novel, tells the story of a brainwashed, or rather hypnotized, son of a right-wing political family, playing with the idea of an international Communist conspiracy.
happened in front of him, that is to say, he might have seen prisoners thrown out of other airplanes. What is behind him he did not see and he cannot be held responsible for. So we can assume that he does not say it never happened in his airplane but he did not witness it if it did. Whatever has happened, it has happened behind him. Whatever has happened is also behind him now, bygone. Quickly he skips to another memory about his squad, related to prisoners thrown out of planes. He is clearly not comfortable with the subject, yet at the same time eager to spit out what he knows. Here, it seems as if he goes back to that mischievous, smart kid mood, telling what actions he saw in the adult world with the acknowledgement of how evil these acts are. His smile is lost between several gestures and pantomimes that succor him while trying desperately to depict what had happened to the captives. The impossibility of having people envision the image in his head, as well as the futility in rationalizing what took place there, intersects.

This is the first of the many naked, brutal stories that we are going to hear about Vietnam. As the story gets darker and incredibly gruesome, Rusty gets nervous. Now he is talking about the contest between soldiers, seeing how far they can throw the bound bodies out of the airplane. The questioner clears his throat and asks how many incidents like that he came across. Rusty avoids giving a specific number and implies that it has two digits, only to indicate an approximate number immediately after: “15 to 50”. Is the truth of an exact number so intolerable or insignificant at this point? Does he give an
inexact estimate because he cannot remember the exact number, or because he actually can? Bashfulness or embarrassment because of witnessing such incidents - and may be partaking in some of them - and perhaps remembering the number of incidents becomes clear in Rusty’s nervous and almost threatening reaction. It is as if by provoking these young men, the presence of a camera and the feeling of being watched it brings along, as well as the questions are also preparing and perhaps training them for the suffocative and staggering moments of testimonies to come; just like in military training.

A sudden cut to a profile shot of another young man suddenly chops Rusty’s talk. He is again in the same Detroit hotel but probably in another room. Rusty and this new man will become the poster boys of Winter Soldier and the disobedient young veterans of the time.

Like Rusty, Scott Camil does not look like a veteran. An off-screen voice, the source to which he is looking up to from below like a mischievous child, directs him to fill out a questionnaire with probably the same questions that Rusty had been asked. The camera pulls back only to fill the frame with another veteran asking Camil to “just tell a little bit of what you saw, to make it more clear [sic], you know, exactly what happened.” From this moment on, Camil will amaze the audience with his unique character as the most outspoken veteran in the film, and with his unexpurgated stories of his own troubles.
with the law as a teen, military training, and the war. We learn from the 2002 documentary on Camil that he decided to participate in the investigation only to show them that they were wrong and that the war was right. Here in Winter Soldier, we also learn that the things he was asked during the investigation, as well as the things he read and learned after he was discharged and went to college, made him question himself and consider things that never occurred to him before. In this film, we actually witness Camil’s gradual opening up and transformation from a soldier to an activist veteran.

Going back to the sequence being discussed, someone from outside the frame, to Camil’s surprise, calls his name: “Sergeant Camil?” This smiling head, long hair, mustache and beard, looks like everything but a sergeant. The significant camera work in this curious moment indicates a conscious camera as well as a camera that is caught off guard by the spontaneity of life. For a while the camera consciously leaves the source of the voice outside, perhaps thinking it is nothing important and the intruder will soon leave the camera in peace with Camil. This effect cannot be added later in the editing because there is no cut to indicate otherwise. Until the camera realizes that Camil is also interested in this person, who seems to know Camil’s unit and duty period, it preserves its composure and keeps Camil in the middle of a close-up, as he is looking at and talking to someone off-screen. The male voice is clearly trying to figure out if he is the Camil that he knew from Vietnam. Once he is sure, he fidgets with enthusiasm and contentment which disturbs the camera and forces it to swiftly turn its gaze to him. Filming from down below, the camera provides the young man a dominating position.
He obviously intermeddled with reality and changed it irreversibly. The camera follows the motion and goes wherever this spontaneity of the actions of beings takes it to. Therefore, at least in this sequence, it is not aesthetically autonomous but an object that is being dominated by its subjects. Furthermore it is this man who has the complete control of this particular moment in that particular corner of a hotel room. Confidently announcing that he knows Camil, he steps forward to give him a handshake, pushing the frame from the right. The camera follows his move, anticipating the hand shake, zooms in to isolate the friendly embracing of the two hands while the intruder introduces himself as “Singer”. This is a good old symbolic gesture of friendship and solidarity between Camil and Singer. It is also a timely placing of an image that is implicitly indicating the filmmakers’ support of the veterans. Next, the camera slightly pans and tilts down until it reaches the eye level. This is its own coming to terms with Singer as it finally accepts him; turning him into one of its familiar subjects, and perhaps its equal.

In *Winter Soldier* there is not even one moment where camera films its subjects from an elevated position. It treats them as equals; or acquires the role of a silent and
cautious observer from down below until the threat is resolved. The camera was explicitly heedless of Singer, which indicates its consciousness. Another thing about this brief segment is that it also functions as a confirmation of life happening outside of the camera’s frame. It shows that life continues in each and every corner of that room; that the camera is incapable of capturing everything. Therefore the directors have to select and juxtapose certain images from the given reality and conceive a particular one out of it; that this is not a scene set up in the corner of an otherwise empty studio set; that this is real. It also acknowledges the fact that the veterans are truly aware of the camera and performing for it. In this sense, we are also forced to consider the many probable images that we would never be able to see because of the technical limitations of the camera and the crucial choices made both on location and in the editing room. This is a warning for us to not to confine ourselves and our senses with only what is visible to the eye, but to be aware of the stories told, and the ongoing reality around the cinematographically selected parts of it, since the unseen dramatically influences what is visible within the frame. So, not capturing Singer when he first interrupts the close-up is a conscious choice on the camera’s side as well as a consequence of its vulnerability in the face of the unpredictability of life. Nevertheless, the camera is aware of the surprises a documentary film has to encounter, and in order to cope with them, it reduces its malleable nature to an observer’s point of view. This observer status certainly should not be confined to the operators of the camera or the editors, but it is a necessity to acknowledge how the camera naturally possesses a subject’s body and mind, just like a specter, to provoke the real subject or the event. The camera possesses its prey with close-ups and sometimes by simply turning its viewfinder to them. It does that without the knowledge of Singer for
instance, and encourages him with a tight close-up to push Camil into recalling a particular operation in a village which was apparently a well-known incident among the troops in Vietnam and in the national media. What is also interesting is that along with the camera’s and the almost concrete yet invisible audience’s heartening presence, Singer’s memory about the incident is also triggered by the slide that Camil looks at and talks about. This is also the first photographic color image from Vietnam in the film.

Color makes these images seem more recent and perhaps more believable for us, since the viewers of today are now more prone to ascribe realistic quality to color images. However, being realistic does not always suggest genuineness. In this image we only see a damaged hut; part of its roof looks like on fire and there is smoke coming out. There are no human beings and no indication of a struggle. How can we be sure that this was taken in Vietnam and not produced in a studio? Camil, on the other hand, describes the picture as a village getting burnt since that is what he sees when he looks at it. He recalls the image of the hut perhaps an hour before this picture was taken while the inhabitants were still around. According to Camil, they forced the villagers to leave or else they were going to get burnt. As our narrator, he is able to see the ghosts of this desolate village, the unseens in the picture are visible to his eyes. The mentioning of the village stimulates Singer’s memory. He has been trying to find somebody who might know something
about a particular operation that took place in another village. It is possible to observe this domino effect in the recollections of the veterans throughout the film; nonetheless it is a consequence of their eager minds to expose memories to view with the help of the irrepressible spontaneity of life itself. The impact of a random, simple word or a look in the eye, or stories instigating one another in an improvised fashion is fortuitously caught by the camera. In the meantime another young man, checking up on the photo slides must have called the camera’s attention, for it moderately abandons its non-interventionist manner and consciously frames him between an over the shoulder shot of Camil facing Singer. Instead of leaving him out of focus, the camera deliberately includes him into the composition, linking him to the figures in the foreground.

This shot is also reminiscent of the triple shot of classical Hollywood where the director places the most important character, as part of the mise-en-scène, right in the middle of the two other characters. This character in the middle is usually the focal character around which the events of the story revolve. The viewers cannot help but recognize him. Here, Camil and Singer are so engulfed in their conversation that they seem to be oblivious of this young man eavesdropping behind them; and perhaps they are even forgetful of the existence of a camera that films their little chitchat; the camera becomes a device that we use like a glass compressed between our ears and the wall. Young man is listening to Camil and Singer with curious yet worried eyes. In fact at some point he asks
some questions to Singer, only to immediately look down at the slides he placed on his thigh. Even though it is too late since the camera already picked up on him, he obviously does not want to be the center of attention. As he testifies in the following sequences, we will find out that he, Scott Moore, decides to talk only because Mark Lenix, another veteran friend of his, was committed to the Winter Soldier Investigation and convinced him to join the hearings. This shot acts almost as a subliminal message for us to keep this blond young man in mind, for he will utter one of the most important messages in this documentary at the end regarding why the veterans needed to testify. Noticing the anxiety in Scott Moore’s eyes and his avoidance of eye contact with the camera, and comparing it to the maturity and inertia as an outcome of the “communion” he experienced with his fellow veterans, we become capable of realizing the importance of this need. We may perhaps regard his more direct glances at the camera by the end of the film as a concrete evidence of this link that we have just established between his two states of mind. At this point the camera becomes more mobile allowing us to catch glimpses of the activity in the room. We were always able to hear other voices coming from all around but with the camera becoming more active, we became more aware of other voices and able to see other people in and out of the frame. With our emphasized awareness of things unframed by the camera, the three-shot continues until Singer asks Camil whether he knows something about a village in Quang Tri that was wiped out. Camil not only knows about the incident, he was also there. At this moment we switch to a different camera or the camera we began with switches places, only to establish another three-shot with Camil positioned in between Singer and Moore. Once again he perches in the center of our
attention. This brief but appalling anecdote is the last rehearsal, so to speak, of the official testimonies that we are going to watch shortly after.

Camil’s easy going style and the almost stolid-like look in his eyes are actually deceptive. He is so direct and so comfortable, with a generally relaxed attitude, that his genuineness may sometimes evoke suspicion as to whether or not he is mocking us and amusing himself with the perplexity he is causing with his words. The impish troublemaker kid that he said he was seems to be back and projecting his anger on us for no rational reason. However the color photographs of him in Vietnam and the proof value of the photo slides of the Vietnamese villages and people he shows are on his side. Camil, and other testifiers, become the remorselessly objective and distant voice over narrator of the horrific images of the war. In this sequence Camil is the mesmerizing storyteller with his listeners gathered around him as he talks about how they killed everybody in that village just to “set the example to show that they weren’t fucking around.” An even more hair-raising statement comes immediately after. He says, with a confused smile, that he had not even remembered that event. At this moment the camera zooms in only to establish an empathetic close-up that anticipates Camil’s emotions; the sincere maze and embarrassment on his face fills in the frame.
The camera zooms out again to include Singer suggesting that he talk about the incident during his testimony. Camil agrees but it seems as if he cannot shake the stupefaction that sweeps over him. It eventually makes him repeat the fact that he had forgotten all about that. Once again the camera zooms in simultaneously with Singer’s compassionately accusatory words: “How could you forget that? I remembered it and I wasn’t even in on it.”. The zoom engraves Camil’s face to our minds as he looks down with a frozen, baffled smile on his face just as Singer starts asking “how could you…” If the camera had fingers, this zooming in would be the camera pointing its condemnatory finger at Camil. Where it points at, we look, and we see the surprised face of Camil. Why didn’t he remember the Operation Stone that was even on the news when it happened?

The answer is so strikingly banal and simple that it sends shivers down the spine. He did not remember it because there are so many operations exactly like that one; it must have become such a routine that if asked he probably would not be able to give even an approximate number of operations, like Rusty did for the tortured prisoners. As the unstoppable recalling process proceeds, Camil’s words accelerate. He remembers that
this was one of the last operations they performed, because they went home after that; and others did the same thing after he left. The vicious cycle that the U.S. Military tried to hide in vain becomes evident as we understand that operations like that happened before and after Camil. His overall testimony, including the private interviews, will be the film’s strongest examples in order to lead the viewers to develop an understanding of a bigger scheme of which these veterans were only pawns. They were used in order to implement the standard operating procedures. In this specific sequence about an isolated incident, as we get closer to a bigger picture by induction, Camil’s memory starts branching out with details. They killed every one in that village, including women and children. He even remembers the newspaper headlines: “Operation Stone like the World War II Movie”. His following words supposedly reinforce another absurdity between what really took place and what the public thought happened, that is, between what Camil experienced and what the newspapers wrote. As opposed to the analogy made by the media, he declares how many people they killed in that operation: “two hundred and ninety one of them.” He remembers the number errorless. The camera zooms in to a tight close shot of his face, as he hears four seconds of silence. In his mind, the heroism that was announced by the press clearly does not match up with the number of innocent people they had killed. The reality of the war fails the virtue of bravery and altruism. The empathetic “collective” gaze of the camera steps in once again, seeing Camil’s heavyheartedness, cuts to the next scene.

This is one of the most well-known sequences of the film: the interview seen is conducted by the future senator John Kerry, then a Lieutenant. Perhaps as they wait at the hotel lobby for the hearings to start, young Kerry interviews his fellow veteran Steve
Pitkin what brought him there and why he feels the need to testify. Pitkin is clearly having a hard time wording his thoughts. In the middle of the question, the film cuts from a profile close-up of Kerry to another image, a profile tight close-up of Pitkin, overlapping Kerry’s last words with Pitkin’s carefully listening but evidently troubled face. His mouth is open; as if desperately waiting for the words to come out.

Finally he says “I’d almost need a book to answer that”. Now we understand that it is not the lack of words that kept him quiet and his mouth open hopelessly waiting for an utterance, it is the heaviness and the crowd of words lined up in his throat up to his mouth, suffocating him and keeping his mouth open to facilitate breathing. There are so many things that bothered him about being in Vietnam and being in the army, and he remembers himself and the other people he saw in Vietnam turning into animals. Upon mentioning other people, the camera goes back to its inclusive style, this time by changing focus, and bringing a background character to front only to leave Steve in the foreground out of focus.
As a matter of fact the young man in the background was already partaking in Pitkin’s tight close-up as seen in the previous image. Even though his face was out of focus, we were still able to discern his gaze on Pitkin, and tell he is all ears. Shallow focus is usually used to isolate the subject from the background or the foreground. However in this sequence, by going back and forth from Pitkin to his eavesdropper, the camera links the speechmaker to the listener. This draws, both physically and emotionally, a dramatic action line between characters, as well as between them and us. Still-out-of-focus Pitkin’s following words confirm this figurative link, so to speak. As the camera pans through the veterans in the same room, one by one, he remarks his wish to relate his two distinct experiences in Vietnam and in his homeland, to use this event as a means to construct a bridge between the two. That way he will offer himself as some sort of a bridge for the people in his homeland to cross over to that distant land as he calls it. At that moment with the panning movement, the camera corroborates this particular relation that Pitkin hints at, and at that, in its own way connecting these people with each other, thus emphasizing the collective nature of the event and the film. From Pitkin’s words we can infer that he wishes for people to acknowledge the physical distance between the two lands and experiences, as well as the distance that we put between the fundamental things about life like being a human being and the responsibilities it brings and our personal lives swarmed by everyday anxieties. Until we “grasp” that as Pitkin says, we will never be able to get wise to the inconsistencies and irrationalities between the ideals of the war and the war in practice. To him, “it hurt a whole generation of Americans and Vietnamese and that’s the biggest atrocity” that he wants to testify. He is pointing at himself and his traumatized life, in a manner of speaking, as one of the consequences of
the war; and by doing that he is turning his body into an evidence for the irrational horridness still continuing in full speed.

Roughly the first eight minutes of the film serves as a prologue before the hearing. Segments are carefully edited in order to accentuate the common denominator of all the testimonies: that none of these were isolated incidents, that there is an inconvenient irrationality, a logical flaw between what is foreseen and what really happened. The statements will gradually establish the overall objective of the Winter Soldier Investigation: they are not there merely to tell what happened. Through their testimonies the veterans want to evoke awareness for the established policy of the state, and initiate discussions to question this policy and why they were in Vietnam in the first place. They need people to understand that they are not just bunch of youngsters complaining about their bad experiences but actually adults who are demanding a rational explanation for the things they were expected to do as soldiers. In the last segment of the opening, this is exactly what Scott Shimabukuro, one of the testifiers, points out addressing the media and warning them to not only capitalize on the atrocities they will be talking about, but also to lead the public into considering why they were in Vietnam in the first place. Only minutes away from the first hearing, as they wait to enter the ballroom, this call to the media, the camera’s level of mobility and the liveliness of the atmosphere scaled up. With a cut to the ballroom, the camera returns to its less active mood, acquiring the perspective of an audience.

There are two important aspects of this prologue that need mentioning before moving on to the main body of the film. It functions as a registration process, introducing the young veterans to us, and them to one another. Most of these young men, with the
exception of the organizers, possibly had not seen each other before or for some time, unless they had stayed in touch after they came back from Vietnam. So far the camera has been a stranger, sitting and observing people like a first time guest in a social gathering. Regardless of the fact that its presence there clearly has a purpose, the camera is still an outsider and in this sense we can easily identify ourselves with it. These young men share a common goal for getting together. However the audiences and the viewers at the time and the viewers of today and the filmmakers certainly do not have a participatory function in this gathering, at least not in a personal level. Though they do have a very important mission: to stay quiet and listen, to observe and record, and relate it to their present. As a matter of fact, if it was not for them, Winter Soldier would not be happening after all; for the existence of the event, the film and the speakers presuppose an audience.

Another momentous thing is the authenticity of the Winter Soldier Investigation that this opening sequence suggests; and that is the simple fact that no one, including the testifiers, has any idea what it is going to be like. They are merely trying to determine and organize the testimonies, checking up on the slides that they are going to be showing during the talks. Therefore this behind the scenes footage also allows us, as the audiences of the film, to see the preparations for an upcoming performance. It is also safe to point out that since this is a film, the performance has already started. The veterans who will be testifying that day and the following days are a group of performers, and they know that they are the center of attention with their radically different perspective on a particular issue, and with the help of the camera, they are becoming part of history. Therefore for both parties, that are the veterans in the film and the subsequent audiences, this
introductory, warm-up prologue plays an important role in terms of their connection to the event. This might be associated with the experience of seeing famous actors when they are not acting, namely when they are just ordinary human beings, walking down the street, minding their own business. In this instance identification with the veterans, like celebrities, becomes possible, and the memories that they talk about might acquire a genuine quality that distinguishes them and their tellers from the scripted, fictional versions of their story. Once we see them sitting before a live audience testifying, we will recall these moments. The testimonies might reveal more to us because we had the privilege to see them without the formal distance of an interview format.

Joseph Bangert is the first veteran whose testimony we hear. Bangert is the person who helped Rusty fill out the form at the very beginning of the documentary. The gruesomeness of the stories he tells contradicts his cheerful voice and mood that we remember from the opening. The camera does not have many options in terms of cinematography in the ballroom where the investigation is taking place. The hall is chockablock with people comprised of fellow veterans and the supporters. As Bangert proceeds to talk, the camera pans through the long panel table elevated by a platform, facing the audience and the other cameras inside the room. There are several long-haired young men sitting at the table, some with familiar faces, some hidden behind their facial hair but certainly all of them are unconventional young veterans. Bangert’s jaw-dropping story of little kids being blown away is met with sad, quiet but attentive eyes. Bangert stutters every so often as he moves on to his second, worse story about a Vietnamese woman whom a former major cold-bloodedly tortured and killed. The way he describes the killing brings Pitkin’s animal comparison to mind. According to Bangert, this former
major who served in the U.S. military for twenty years comes back over because he gets hungry, only to work with the U.S. Aid International Development. Considering what he did to the woman, his hunger can hardly be a reference to his passion for serving his country and “aiding” people but perhaps to the passion of a monster in him who needed more prey. Bangert’s shaky voice resolves into a bitter chuckle that lasts only a brief second. The camera and he appear to be cautious not to make eye contact.

When it seems like he finished his story, a rapid cut takes us to the temporary comfort of the second testifier. Once this next veteran begins to speak, a rational mind –and a rational camera- can no longer hold on to the futile hope that this would be a less terrible story. The camera spends most of the time panning over the audience, one by one, while this doctor veteran tells how he was not allowed to help a wounded woman and her two unconscious five to six years old kids in a village they bombed and later got in to see the casualties. At first the doctor veteran says “two babies”, then almost apologetically corrects himself and says “not babies but like five, six years old kids.” It is striking to notice that he puts his hand against his forehead, most probably with shame.
At first glance this section of *Winter Soldier* may look like nothing but footage of talking-heads. Yet soon enough the inquisitively filmed and selected testimonials out of 109 veterans, their visual organization and the sophisticated camera work prove the narrative power the film has. Talking head style may not be recognized as creative or interesting; however captured facial expressions here are as important as, and in some instances more important than, the uttered words. It is as if the filmmakers, while editing the material, tried to generate their major discourse by using a depictive alphabet of visual signs obtained from facial expressions. For instance, as the camera roams around the audience, faces of women, men silently disclose the intensity of heavy emotions. Almost all the women in the audience seized by the camera are staring at the testifier without blinking: one with a sad face that befits a painting, is sitting next to another one with an obvious contempt and disapproval behind her dark, thick-framed glasses; another one with her hand on her chin, is scowling earnestly while the other sitting close to her is compressing her lips; another one closer to the stage is frantically moving her eye balls from one side to the other as if trying hard not to look at the young man speaking.

In the course of its panning motion that captures these images of the women audience, the camera spends a little bit more time on some of the young men. As indicated before, we cannot know for sure but may feel almost certainly that they, too, are veterans. In the brief instances that the camera focuses on the young men, none of them
are looking at the speaker’s direction. They are gazing low. While the doctor talks about the shrapnel wounds of the kids, this particular young man takes a puff of his cigarette, his knowing eyes are perhaps engulfed in his own Vietnam, overpowered by the privilege of recognizing exactly what the veteran doctor is talking about. Has he ever caused a kid to sustain a shrapnel injury?

The last image before cutting back to the speaker is the incredibly sad face of possibly another veteran and a frowning woman sitting behind him, leaning her face on her palm. This image has the potential to represent the shame and the grief hanging heavily in the air.

With the cut, the change in doctor’s mood and posture is easily recognizable. It is of course impossible not to be affected by this weighty atmosphere. His left hand is covering the left side of his face almost completely now, perhaps instinctively hiding his eyes from the camera; this is also a sign of desperation and shame while describing with great difficulty how this soldier from his unit shot two little boys in a village.
From this moment on the camera goes back and forth from the testimonies to the private interviews with veterans mostly in close-up, or to the groups of testifiers chatting. In the testimony sequences, we see speakers in medium shots and close-ups, usually looking away from the camera, and the audience reactions in master shots and close-ups largely obtained by zooming in. Most of these zoom motions are unplanned and instantaneous as the shocking words of veterans do not come in an orderly fashion. They are not handled with refinement yet they have the quality of life as the way it is; and it appears that despite the emotional heaviness in the air and the exhaustion they suffer from, until all things that need to be said are out, no one is going to leave the ballroom. After hearing only a few of the testimonies, it looks like the audiences, with determination on their faces, have already acknowledged the seriousness of this disclosure. Testimonies differ from the use of white phosphorus, a chemical munition known more commonly in the military as “willy peter” to “the rabbit lesson”; from beheadings to artillery games; from interrogation procedures to building links between past massacres and Vietnam, and so on and so forth.

“The rabbit lesson” is part of the military training specifically designed for war craft. It strikes the first time hearers as how soldiers are conditioned to believe in the legitimacy of atrocities, but it also serves as a good example for the purpose of comparing the military’s approach to war-time training in 1960s to the 2000s. This issue will be diligently discussed in Chapter two on Full Battle Rattle (2008). Told by Joseph Bangert, the rabbit lesson is the last lesson they learn in the States before going to Vietnam. To him, it is the reason why he was not shocked to see his superior in Vietnam disemboweling a woman “so horribly”. This is a performance by a sergeant in Staging
Battalion as part of the basic training, aiming to teach “escape, invasion and survival in the jungle”. As part of this training, the sergeant first allows the fresh soldiers to feel sympathy for the rabbit, then unexpectedly skins and disembowels it, and tells them that this is how it is supposed to be done in Vietnam. While Bangert tells his story, a portrait of him in uniform is inserted and the camera zooms in closer to his face. We return to Banget’s testimony; Bangert’s rapid breathing and the timidity apparent in his body language lead us to compare him to the unfortunate rabbit. The young man in the picture with an honest, good-hearted look about him looks as innocent as a rabbit; there is no reason to hurt him. However the sergeant, by abusing and killing the rabbit, also destroys the innocence of the young Bangert watching him.

The cruelty of killing, the guilt of not preventing it from happening, is suppressed and justified by the imposed belief that it was necessary, and in the extraordinary atmosphere of war they will have to do the same in order to survive. The cut to Bangert’s photograph also juxtaposes the then and now of a testifier, a precautious attempt of the filmmakers to secure the believability of Bangert’s words, as well as to show the effort of these men in distinguishing themselves from their experiences and the war. This is the story of the young man in the picture who is part of the past, told by the same young man from the present time. So Bangert and the other veterans, by bringing their past to their present and confronting it, they may also change their future.
Camil, sitting between Rusty and Singer, is invited to testify next. A voice coming from outside of the frame begins to list the issues he committed to testify to and asks him to talk about some of them. Camil looks overwhelmed by the length of the list. The last of the two stories he picked deals with cutting off of heads from the Operation Stone, the one that media compared to the World War II. According to Camil’s account, they cut off two people’s head and put them on stakes; however later on they were notified not to do it again because there was press covering the operation. It seems that the presence of the press and its cameras in the battlefield at the time ironically and unintentionally hinders this “tradition” of war. This observation effect of the camera may indicate that they knew what they did was wrong so they did not want to get caught or the coming of a device that they associate with their own, familiar, humane world, a world that they define as civilized as opposed to the jungles of Vietnam and its less civilized inhabitants, they came to their senses. Regardless, Camil must have sensed some kind of hypocrisy. The media’s evaluation of the footage and their Vietnam experience is a matter of media ethics and politics. Even though the camera is just a device used in many areas, by whom and with what motivations it is used mark the difference. The camera is to reveal, to document, to deceive, to manipulate. In this film one can talk about five groups of cameras, each with five different intentions: the camera of the press that covered the war; the slides and video footage taken by the soldiers; the cameras that filmed Winter Soldier, images of which used manipulatively by the filmmakers; the media cameras that we see in the film, interviewing veterans; and the cameras that tool the stills of the protests we see during the end credits.
The footage of war is used as the mindscreens of soldiers, in order to concretize or project what their eyes and their minds once physically saw. Do they originate from the recollections of the untainted mind? Are they the antidotes of the diseased souls of these men? What did carrying cameras in the battlefield mean to them? Soldiers did not really document their own combat experience until the Vietnam War. It is striking how the technology did not lend itself to amateur moviemaking or cinéma-vérité until the arrival of the smaller handheld cameras. Today, having captured a firefight on video, a soldier can create a movie and distribute it via e-mail, uncensored by the military. [As emphasized in Brian de Palma’s *Redacted* (2007).] Most of this footage is used for training purposes but it might also find a way to commercial or non-commercial websites as well. Some soldiers are known to take this footage as a trophy. It may be considered as a keepsake of their achievements in the battlefield, and images that immortalize moments that every war has in common.

In one of the hearings, a veteran shows an image of himself taken in the battlefield in the back of a truck, smiling. He says he is extremely shameful of it as the camera tilts down only to expose what the smiling soldier was holding: it is the dead body of a prisoner he most probably just killed.
He explains why he wanted to share this image, with the hope that people will see what terrifies him the most about it. He says “Don’t let your government do this to them”; and then he declares “It’s me! Holding a dead body, smiling.” It is obvious from his voice that he is in pain at that moment. The tilting stops and the camera fixes its gaze on the dead body. The camera goes back to the young man testifying. When finished, he sinks back to his seat and looks down. The cut to another testifier shows the filmmakers’ respect for his pain, but also serves as a dramatic moment to keep the tension high.

Closer to the end, we are exposed to more video footage of civilians and soldiers. With the video footage, Vietnamese people become more than just an image: they move and they blink just like us. The fear and desperation in their eyes is overwhelming. If the photographic images gave Vietnamese subsistence, then the moving image gave them life. If the use of photographic images function as evidence of these young men being soldiers once, the use of moving images also function as eyewitnesses of their actions. In the course of the testimonies we were told many stories that included children, but it took almost an hour into the film to see live footage of a child. Up until now, the filmmakers prepared the viewers for this encounter. The heart rending footage of a child in a woman’s arms comes after seeing a crowd receiving violent shakes and pushes. The child’s face is burnt and bruised; his facial muscles are stretched with agony and fear. Suddenly he notices the camera, and looks directly into it.
Whatever we feel at that brief second, his eyes reflect it back at us like mirrors. Whatever that soldier, or a press photographer, who filmed the child saw, must have made him turn off the camera. In the next footage we see women weeping, begging, and groaning, among them an old woman opening and closing her toothless mouth like a fish in a tank never been expected to speak. The footage has no sound yet it is as if we can hear them clearly, indicating the impassive ears, lack of translation and the obstinate existence of their cries.

The film ends with three individual interviews one of which is the last segment of Scott Camil’s close-up interview; followed by Scott Moore and Mark Lenix interviews. Camil is representative of the young kids who were once troubled, pushed into the army to serve their country and supposedly get fixed up, only to kill and got medals for it. Camil is now condemned by the same country and put into the Nixon’s list of potential enemies after an education that led him to contemplate and be critical. His interview is one of a kind in the film, with a constant close-up image of him which makes this conversation all the more private and engraves his face in our minds forever.
This testimony is a privilege for the viewers of the documentary. As he talks about Vietnam, the smile that occasionally appears on his face can be interpreted as a sign of recklessness. However laughing about it is his way of dealing with it. He explains that attitude with the way he was brought up. He was supposed to act like a man, be brave and hide his feelings. These things still challenge him even though now he believes that revealing emotions is acceptable. In the first segment of the private interview, we do not hear any questions. The following segments include the vaguely heard voice of the female and male questioners. Camil’s gaze switches back and forth between them and the camera. The tight close-up creates a sense of privacy as well as violation of that privacy due to the curiosity of the camera, its interrogative nature and claustrophobic proximity. Camil is indeed a very intriguing, copious and an easygoing person to film and talk to. In this last segment of his interview when the voices of the questioners are almost as loud as Camil’s, the camera becomes all the more sensitive to every sound and every facial expression. It is possible that the camera is operated by one of the questioners, which explains why right after hearing a question the camera slightly zooms in as if with the intention of not missing anything. The questioners and the camera make a great effort to understand this young man and why it took him several killings to awaken to the situation. Likewise Camil is desperate to be understood and is tempted to spill out everything regardless of its terribleness. The female questioner’s soft voice vocalizes an emphatic question: “Has the concept of what a man is changed?” Camil confirms the change. Yet it is also clear to him that it is not complete and the process may be easier said than done. The laughter he defined as his old way of dealing with things that he otherwise could not cope with comes back to him as he smiles once again. However this
time there is a little bit of cynicism in it that mocks his previous state of mind, which was a reflection of his traditional upbringing. There is also his sincerity in front of the camera that develops itself into a self-aware coziness as he, almost like a professional actor, begins to control and play with it as well. That is to say, his self awareness reaches to a point where he begins to manipulate the camera’s gaze in order to emphasize certain parts of his speech. This attitude establishes a private relationship between him and the camera—and accordingly with us, the viewers- excluding whoever is physically with him at that moment. This is as clear as the light of day in his confirmation of the change in his conception of being a man. He says “I had some sensitivity courses, and it got where, you know, sometimes guys would cry,” and he stops, looks directly into the camera, strikes a pose and keep it for a brief second with a charming smile on his face.

Quickly he resumes his answer careful not to look directly into the camera again. Following his gaze, we realize that there are at least three people that partake in this interview: The female and male questioners and the camera (and through the camera, numerous viewers). Camil is conscious in selecting his audience whom he is addressing. Sometimes he does not address anyone in which case he looks down as he speaks. By the agency of his consciousness, the sequence acquires a structure which eventually keeps the viewer in alert. This is simply a demonstration of his ability to keep control of our
attention and his natural talent as a public speaker. “Sometimes I felt like crying; like really see a sensitive film and get in to something really deep, but I start to and I think about something else. Even though I know I shouldn’t think of a man the way it is, I just can’t change. I try to change but I still try to be brave and things like that, rather than in heart and emotionalist.” At this point the ever-insightful female voice declares with hope that he wants to change, thinking she got him right. Camil, however, says he is afraid because he is not sure about what he wants, whether he really wants to change. He is afraid of being vulnerable. Things that he once believed in have proved wrong and people might judge him harshly when all he does is express himself because he needs to and wants to let them know what is going on. This takes our mind back to the very beginning of the documentary where we were warned by a female voice over—which strangely sounds like this emphatic female questioner who is actually one of the filmmakers-. Remembering someone he encountered before the investigation who asked him if he was bothered by them being hostile towards him because of what he had done, it is hard for Camil to understand how sometimes people cannot conceive or make sense of his experience when it is an experience that is lived anyhow. To him it should be comprehensible to any human being due to a simple logical reasoning that if he is one of them and if he could comprehend his experience, therefore others can too. Furthermore, he cannot perceive it being hard for other people to comprehend because, to him, it is not simply a matter of difficulty in understanding what he did. He is striving to find out why he had thought that going to Vietnam was the right thing to do in the first place. Basically he believes that he found flaws in his previous reasoning that inevitably caused irrational actions. In this case the irrationality is his involvement in Vietnam and the violence he
performed caused by the false reasoning he was taught in the military and the principles he was raised with. That is to say that these principles failed to provide Camil with substantial answers. At that point, if the confrontation of the irrationality in one’s action and a longing for clarity compose absurdity, then it asserts itself in Camil’s case in two points. First is the above-discussed irrationality he found himself in. Second appears as the reality in Vietnam is divorced from the reality that he experience now and the reality that is perceived by other people who have not been to Vietnam. Therefore these conflicts and the constrained combination of the two realities in his mind generate discrepancies in his life and in his own mind. The film leaves Camil here, confused and yet aware of his need to speak out, and cuts to another personal interview.

Mark Lenix is the last interviewee shown. After witnessing the preparations and the event, Lenix’s words and the intuitive camerawork that visually underscores his most important words, masterfully declare the overall motive behind testifying and making this film: for Lenix to become human again; for the filmmakers to make the viewers acknowledge this. As Lenix talks about what it means to be a soldier, how emotionless and lifeless they become, and how inconceivably powerful the indoctrination and the military training they have, the separation of sound and image isolates him from the source of the diegetic sounds we hear.
He is, however, certainly not as squeezed into the frame as Camil was since that was a special treatment for the trouble kid and the future activist. In Lenix’s case, his words about the struggle to become human again with the bitter realization of his wrongdoings require him and only him inside the frame. The camera gradually zooms out after inserting color still images of him posing for a snapshot in his uniform. To Lenix it is important to face the Vietnam experience openly and bring it to the public because otherwise this will be a denial of the priorities of being a human being. Just as we begin to wonder what priorities he is talking about, the film cuts to a little girl, not older than three or four, drinking water from a giant cup with the U.S. flag pattern on, oblivious of the camera filming her. With this shot, we notice that we are no longer in the hotel room or the ballroom as many of the others, but it seems to be his or someone’s home. This is the first and the last time that we are allowed in the private life of a veteran.

We still hear Mark’s voice and feel his presence in the room. The little girl notices the attention locked on her as she finishes drinking from her cup and put it on the table between her and the camera, never taking her eyes off of the camera.
The camera starts to pan left carrying the child’s gaze with it. Even before the panning movement we were able to make a connection between the man, the little girl and her mother sitting on the floor and watching her; yet with the pan the camera establishes the physical line, as well as the emotional bond between the father and the daughter.

Now we know his priorities as the image of Mark with his little girl declares him as human again. From now on, the microphone stays with his speech but the camera is obviously drawn to the little girl and films only her, recklessly and joyfully running around, playing with her mother and talking loud. Mark’s voice gets excited as he talks about how he felt dehumanized in Vietnam, not capable of seeing the enemy as a person with a wife and a child. Right at this moment, it is as if his daughter’s high-pitched and cheerful voice and her playful image with her mother, the image of Mark’s family, breaks the numbing spell put on Mark by his memories of the war. Mark’s persistent words about how uselessly he tried to justify his actions in Vietnam and eventually realized that there was not anything justifiable, followed by his daughter’s powerful innocence and joy of life as her body dangles between her father’s legs, elevate the emotions right before the credits and monumental photographic black and white stills of veterans protesting.
With a Delta Blues song accompanied by a harmonica in the background, Winter Soldier ends with documentary still images of veterans in anti-war demonstrations. The viewers are ensured that it did not end in Detroit. The editing of the last couple of photographic images maintains the symbolic honorary medal throwing action which is generated from their juxtaposition. The familiar face of Rusty Sachs, this time with disgust and pain in it, appears: he is holding his medal and about to throw on to the pile of other medals.

This chapter does not intend to imply that the testimonies are accurate or not. However it aims to point out how the film frames the whole event to create the desired emotional reactions and overall meaning, at least in the minds of the sympathetic viewers. This detailed analysis of the film, I believe, exposes the presence of the directors and their clear-cut motivations. These motivations are masterfully declared in each sequence by the ways in which the camera is employed, by its unique character, as well as by the supportive usage of other cinematic devices. The directors are clearly driven by the intention of convincing the viewers to believe in the veracity of the testimonies and
the wrongfulness of the war. As discussed here in terms of several selected sequences, what strengthens the efficacy of the film’s style is the intensity of the director’s commitment to end the war, their respect and the nature of their belief in these young men who were taking the risk of humiliation and the psychological consequences of public confession. In the eyes of the collective and through the lens of the political atmosphere of the time, the potency of the anti-war movement, and filmmakers’ individual involvement in relevant prior demonstrations, these young veterans were speaking the truth. Although it is the viewers who must ultimately decide the credibility of the testimonies, the chapter shows how the filmmakers employed the cinematic devices in order to influence this decision and to convey their apparent belief in and support of the words and intentions of the veterans.

Even though *Winter Soldier* is exclusively about the Vietnam veterans and their effort to end the war as well as to help people recognize the war from their perspective, I believe today in 2009, it is able to speak for a wider concept of war. The experience of listening to the terribly disturbing stories one by one alters after a while. The stories begin to sound the same. This is not because they prove to be insignificant and boring but because a pattern that dominates the film, the psyche of each veteran and each member of the audience begins to appear. Through this pattern we begin to notice a general picture of the war, the military training, how soldiers in their early or mid twenties felt deceived, and the difficulties they face with life and their haunting memories after coming back from Vietnam. As the readers will realize in the following chapters of this work, these issues repeat themselves over generations.
Vietnam War, in many ways, is considered a symbol of the anti-war effort. Therefore it does not surprise me that the media compared the 2003 occupation of Iraq to the Vietnam War multiple times. Both wars are unpopular among the US citizens. Both wars, at first, were supported by the public; however as years go by the public opinion drastically turned against them. In the case of the recent Iraq War, according to a Gallup Poll of 2003, 75% of the U.S. citizens felt the occupation was not a mistake. The same poll retaken in 2008 shows 63% of the participants stated that the initial attack was a mistake; that the US should have stayed out. Each of these wars has different strategies of warfare due to several reasons, and one may expect the Vietnam War to be more violent than the occupation of Iraq. However, most of the films in this study that are about the Iraq War prove the opposite. Based on what we hear from all the veterans or soldiers that I introduce you to, I contend that the nightmarish war experience in 1972 or the 2000s is beyond what we call normal, or even real. Readers may suggest other documentaries on the Vietnam War they think could replace Winter Soldier, yet I am fully convinced that there is no better visual document like it that has the same textual and visual power to establish a temporal and thematic bond between the aforementioned wars. Besides, without any doubt it is the best documentary film that acquires the conceivably comprehensiveness to embrace and purposefully complement the last chapter of this work –Errol Morris’ Standard Operating Procedure- and finally complete the circle.

7 http://www.gallup.com/poll/1633/Iraq.aspx
Chapter 3: Full Battle Rattle (2008)

*Full Battle Rattle* opens with a sunrise; reminding me of the old saying “the sun rises in the East”. The sun appears behind low rise structures, a slender tower that looks like a minaret. This composition is surrounded by the silhouette of hills that dissolves into the orange sky. An exotic music constantly plays in the background, complementing the strange atmosphere, conditioning our minds to locate the scene in the Orient. It reinforces the uncomfortable feeling of foreignness and obscurity, as well as excitement for a world far different than ours.

The day has just begun, marking the beginning of the film. This gradually prepares us for the unforeseen that is yet to occur. Between the first foggy lights of the day we cut to a closer shot of the town we were just glancing at. We are still not sure where we are.

The day breaks and the light grants us visibility, and now the camera appears to think it is secure enough to wander around and get a closer look in order to find some interesting details about this town. The folks must be sleeping; the jerry-built structures and the
feeling of desolation substantially indicate that this strange town may not be in its heyday. The third image that follows is an abandoned junk car with no tires. It is immobile and condemned to stay there. Something in Arabic is written on its side which strongly suggests that this might be somewhere in the Middle East where Islamic belief is prominent. The deserted car matches the in-the-middle-of-nowhere character of the background, and the writing on it can be regarded as signs of disorder, poverty and desperation.

The stillness and the almost perfect composition of these last three images make them look like pieces of art photography. The only exception is the faint motion of the sun. Our eyes need something that moves to attest for life, perhaps a human being. Another cut blows exactly that unto the film, so to speak, and starts the action. Two people, gender undefined, are walking towards the camera. There is nothing behind or around them to cue their whereabouts; but they are the sole proof of motion and progression we needed to see.
As the light gets brighter, the viewfinder is able to find more things to show. With a cut to the next scene the music gets charged with tension as we see a poster hanging loose on the wall. On the visible side of it there are Arabic writings and a picture of a bearded and turbaned man, looking at us with a threatening look in his eyes.

For those who know even a little bit about the most recent Iraq War, the Shi’a leader Muqtada al-Sadr’s familiar face leaves no doubt about this place’s identity. His picture is dangling on the wall just like his political power over Iraq and the untrustworthy socio-political status of the country. With the inclusion of percussions to the music, the film gains momentum. A series of rapid cuts drags us along, starting from a borrowed point of view of an American lieutenant sitting in a small tank, driving to the center of the town. Then his silhouette in a close-up shot speaking to the tank in front of them cuts to a long shot of tanks approaching the town we briefly observed. This also sets off the story of the documentary we have just begun to watch.
Even though the daylight provides a clearer vision, the suspenseful music and the uncertainty of the situation keep the viewer on alert. Even the close-up shot here, which is supposed to help us get to know the character better, is blocked by darkness. We the viewers are no different than the town residents because none of us yet had the privilege to see the people in the tanks. The first images of soldiers and the military vehicles are deliberately shot facing the sun in order to hide them behind shadows, in an attempt to perhaps establish the heroic quality of a savior.

Contrary to this preserved mystery, the town people, who already noticed the troops, are visible, accessible and vulnerable.
With all the clichés, this is the Middle East that the West is most commonly exposed to. This is Iraq which once was a land known as the cradle of civilization, now a land in which almost everything points to poverty, ignorance, suppression and terror. The sun is no longer there to function but to scorch. The heat consumes life and is the symbol of the escalating socio-political turmoil. The light that once symbolized the ancient civilizations of the East has been taken away or taken over by the West as a symbol of enlightenment. Now in this town it merely seems to limit the visibility of the folks who are forced to face the sun. They can see nothing but the shadows of tanks, soldiers and the mountain range. What is coming upon them, they do not seem to know yet. As viewers we knew that this was going to be a documentary film, and yet so far everything looks like neatly arranged, and coming from within the world of the film, rather than a world of the real. Furthermore, it gives the impression of a trailer that prompts and justifies the U.S. entry to Iraq. There is a strong symbolic value in the image of American soldiers acquiring the support of the Western ‘light’ behind them, and walking determinately towards these people who are used to darkness and therefore shielding their eyes with their hands against the sun. It is too strong and somehow artificial to be a spontaneous sequence from a documentary film. At this point the film does look like pro-war; however it has not revealed whether it is made from the perspective of the voluntary soldiers or with the supposedly democratic priorities of the government. In addition to this, by exhibiting the points of view from both sides it might also be declaring its approach to the issue from multiple perspectives and granting the viewers the opportunity to identify themselves with both sides.
The following sets of rapid cuts and the dominating drum beats portend the beginning of something chaotic. There are rapid images of civilians and soldiers running around, bombs exploding, tanks horizontally traversing the frame, women screaming, armed men and soldiers yelling frantically and shooting ceaselessly, an ambulance coming and blood flowing. We are trapped inside a wild combat, as desperate as the civilians, trying to understand what is going on. In the middle of this mess, something odd about this sequence settles in the corner of our minds. How come the camera is able to capture such elaborate shots and sophisticated close-ups almost like a big budget production?

Even the sudden zooming motions of the camera give the feeling of a pre-planned spontaneity. However we are too busy to contemplate on this fakeness due to the pace and the tension of the scene. Suddenly the drum plays the last beat, the music and the
action come to a halt as a sign on a tank fills the frame. The sign serves as a film clapper that starts and ends a film.

Then we cut to a scene where a soldier is lying on the ground, dead or seriously injured, only to be touched by a hand penetrating into the frame from the upper left corner almost like Michelangelo’s hand of a god, giving life to him followed by a beep sound. Just in case as viewers we might still be struggling to understand what has just taken place, an image of another soldier comes to rescue. His painfully twisted face instantly transforms into a flashy smile in a split second, catches us by surprise.

Now the dead arises; they are saved and all look merry and healthy. It is clear to us now that everything we saw so far was bogus. The woman who was weeping a while ago in fluent Arabic asks if they’re done in English almost free of accent. The opening segment of the film ends with one last, but strong, blow of trickery. The crowd of people who were in a mad combat a minute ago, turn their back to the camera, and walk away, slowly
dragging their feet like zombies. The pace of their steps overlaps a digital, hypnotic music for a brief second, and then we cut to a yellow ice cream truck where a familiar digital tune is coming from. It is nothing but the good old ragtime hit “The Entertainer” composed by the African American musician Scott Joplin in the 19th century.

The opening of this chapter is as deceitful as the opening of the film. It would be illogical to think that the chapter starts without the knowledge of the nature of it. However in order to emphasize what is unique about it and its subject, this type of reading with a supposedly unaware eye was necessary. Full Battle Rattle is an idiosyncratic documentary of an illusion created by the U.S. Army for the purpose of training its units before deploying them to Iraq. This sui generis quality of the film and the simulation theme almost entirely come from an effort to dispel the absurdity that is between the outcome of war and what was expected to come out of it in the first place. The outcome of the war here refers to the discrepancy between the extraordinary conditions of and the actions taken in a battlefield. Furthermore it indicates the repercussions in the less extraordinary, postulated normal life in general. Therefore it may not be hyperbolical to compare this phony universe with an intermission, as in the short break between two parts of a performance. It is an imaginary land where reality and fantasy overlap. This fake, unnoticed Iraq that is the National Training Center stands in
the middle of the Mojave Dessert California, a couple of miles away from Hollywood where fantasies are created. The operations are supported by the military city Fort Bliss which welcomes its visitors and inhabitants with a cheerful sign: “It’s a great day to be a soldier”. Army Battalions spend two weeks inside this warfare simulation, in several bogus villages one of which is called Medina Wasl, and try to prevent civil war. This whole painstaking effort is to prepare the American soldiers—and perhaps the Iraqi expatriates too—not only for the war, but also for a cultural, political and a personal challenge. The chapter focuses on the personal challenge aspect, and presents an in-depth analysis of the role of the camera in order to reveal considerably interesting relationships among the occupants of the simulation, and their association to role playing vs. reality.

The personal challenge aspect is pertinent to a strive for reason that is necessary to abate the conflict between certain actions that may challenge morals but are considered inevitable for desired outcomes, and the unwanted side effects of these outcomes on human experience. Related to this, Hannah Arendt argues that “the need of reason is not inspired by the quest for truth but by the quest for meaning. And truth and meaning are not the same” (Arendt, 1971, p. 15). She finds it as the basic fallacy to interpret meaning on the model of truth. In this sense, if there is a quest for something more personal to the soldier and to the civilian in the simulation, other than training purposes, it would be inadequate to think that, in an environment sterile and to some extent controlled, the quest is to figure out what is really happening, that is perhaps the truth. Whereas the goal is actually to conceive meaning or strengthen the existing one in the name of reason that could deemphasize or remove absurdity. This also relates to Albert Camus’ idea of absurd and human’s demand for a meaning in life in the face of it. Seeking meaning to go
to Iraq as a soldier is no different than this attempt to give meaning to one’s life. Though in the case of the Iraqi role players and American soldiers it can even be an issue of creating that meaning by means of their performances in a simulated world where they have the power to change their fate. The problem is that the imitated atmosphere of Iraq is similar to the real Iraq only in appearance. The simulation cannot unmitigatedly create the socio political conditions of Iraq. This also means that it will never be like being in Iraq for real, even though the scenarios they play are based on reports from Iraq. It is like lab work, where problems they deal with are extracted from the field like samples, and processed in the lab in order to find a solution. However the solution is not indisputably scientific but a descriptive and subjective element necessary to make life worth living or a certain action worth taking. Full Battle Rattle and the simulation will prove that it really is not easy to come up with satisfactory results.

After spending weeks in the dessert, the battalions are sent to Iraq. The occupants of Medina Wasl are American soldiers and hundreds of Iraqi exiles who are playing their past life in their home country they may not return again. The story of Medina is told from the perspectives of the Iraqis, soldiers in the Battalion and the insurgents played by American soldiers. In 2006, filmmakers Tony Gerber and Jesse Moss spent three weeks there, shooting and recording sounds by themselves; one of them staying with the American Army, the other with the Iraqis in the village in order to capture both sides simultaneously. In the film’s official website the directors state that they were given “complete editorial freedom” and that the army never interfered in their work. As provocative as it is, the chapter will leave this “interference” issue for other studies and may touch upon the matter when it is related to the cinematic elements. Going back to the
training camp, this is not the first time that the U.S. Army has used a simulation for training troops deploying to a war zone. In fact this same camp was once a training simulation for the Cold War. Only now, not necessarily the wars but as the war techniques themselves become more sophisticated and complex, so do the simulations. Despite the subsequently added, prefabricated details that superficially and stereotypically associate the scene with particular cultures or places, the lack of character in the locality is still apparent. This is a very surreal place, or a large inn where travelers going east and going west meet before heading to their respective destinations. Here the Iraqi exiles fleeing from the war see the American troops off to Iraq. This theme park, so to speak, is their meeting point before going back to their real lives: soldiers to Iraq, expatriates to San Diego where they live now. The question is what reality was before, what it is there and how it is going to be after this experience. Thinking of the simulation as an amusement park mischievously brings the ice cream truck to my mind again. Right above the front mudguard of the truck it says Children Crossing, and two American soldiers are buying ice cream. The image creates a strange analogy, considering them as kids and perhaps accordingly what we have just witnessed as a game. Regardless of its seriousness, it is indeed a game. The military is having its boys and girls play make-believe game right before they are sent to Iraq. Just as the rabbit lesson in Winter Soldier meant to teach soldiers what the war and survival in Vietnam would be like, this role playing seems to be a game of idealism in order to teach soldiers their noble calling and righteous cause, and help them find their own meaning. The duality of fakeness and inevitable reality, created out of materials retrieved from real situations in order to imitate reality, the film intends to make sure we have an idea about where we are. This dramatic
and feature-film like opening is impressive and enticing as well as it is a declaration for our attention. It is like the demanding female voice over at the beginning of Winter Soldier. This opening stresses that everything we will see in this film is a serious attempt of recreating Iraq. Therefore no matter how fake they look, this is how we are supposed to perceive it and this is how the trainees are experiencing it after a while. Besides, with this immediate tour de force, the filmmakers are reminding us the power they have over our perception, and that they can persuade us if they want to, even through this blatantly fake world.

The film is divided into seven chapters: the occupation; insurgency; counter-insurgency; collateral damage; civil war; the withdrawal and finally an episode that shows what happens after the simulation program. There are also three types of events, each of which has been filmed with a different cinematic style. The scripted and staged scenarios, referred to as “on-stage” events by the makers of the film, are the first category of visual materials, and they include improvised responses of the soldiers who are trained to react in a certain way, and the insurgent attacks. The directors use a feature film approach in these segments as demonstrated in the opening. The second group of events is called “off-stage” where subjects do not act. This is where the directors interviewed the soldiers and the Iraqi role players in cinéma-vérité style. Perhaps the most important segment of the film is when we see the “actors” in the real world, once they are out of the simulation. At this point the viewers might ask themselves how real this world that we share with them is. The fictional on stage segments are filmed like a feature film, while off-stage events are filmed in fly-on-the-wall style. However they don’t have clear-cut
separations at all since the feature film like approach fails to make the viewers forget about the fakeness revealed by these segments.

After the opening the title of the film appears, and then we zoom-out to a graphic design of the facility plan. For the first time we are formally introduced to the Training Center followed by real aerial shots, with caption inserts briefly describing the center. This inclusion of the title within the graphic image associates the film with the virtual version of the simulation. In other words the film declares its existence as the mirror image of the simulation that exists in the real world, and also manifests its place in the world of film as a manipulated reflection of the world.

The aerial shot of the center that looks like a small colony is exactly the same as the graphic one.

In the course of the film, we see dualities such as this in supposedly injured real humans versus injured robotic mannequins and fake identities versus real life identities. This duality emphasizes that there are at least two parallel worlds. First there is the real world, the world that all living creatures exist in. On the other hand the simulation here is the
mirror image of, or rather an alternative to the real world. This alternative is created by the U.S. Army and perhaps developed by the residents of Medina Wasl and soldiers. Therefore it also validates the existence of the original. Then there is the third world - the world of film - that reflects a selected part of this corporeal simulation and the “real” world that it partakes in and emerges from. Therefore this third world not only individually encompasses the other two and their interaction, and perhaps in a dialectical manner, produces a new meaning out of them. From a different perspective, two of those parallel worlds, the simulation and the world of film, are the respective imitations or reflections of the real world. Medina Wasl is of this “real” world, meaning it is a model of an imagined world that exists, that can be touched and seen in physical reality. The artificial world of film shares certain elements like plastic mannequins and fake blood with the simulation, and adds computer graphics that can only be seen in its abstract existence.

The next shots display Medina Wasl as it really is: “a giant stage, a giant set with several different stages, or one big large reality TV show,” as the chief of plans and operations, Lt. Col. Cameron Kramer, says. The Iraqi role player #4491 Azhar Cholagh whom we will get to know better in the following sequences, translates the name of the town as Junction City, neatly referring to the intersectionality of the real and the fake. Another instance of duality appears in juxtaposing her real name to her numerically defined fake identity. With her introductory words the film smoothly switches from feature-film style to documentary as the camera begins to assume an observer’s role. We will return to her and other significant Iraqi role players in Medina Wasl several times in the course of the film in short inserts. Above all, Bassam Kalasho is probably the most
colorful character in Medina. According to him, they do everything just like they were in Iraq. He is one of the many role players who enjoys his fake identity more than his real one. Outside of this world where he is the deputy mayor, he is a convenience shop owner. As if trying to convince the filmmakers and the viewers about the persuasiveness and thus the success of their “game”, he says “Sometimes I believe I’m in Iraq”. This is unsurprising considering he spends two weeks at a time with his fake identity since he has had this job for three years. Simulation consultants are extremely careful to provide players with as many details about their parts as possible. More details mean greater believability of the characters.

The two weeks of simulation starts as the players are given their role files and the props that are necessary for their characters. In rapid cuts they begin to read significant parts from their role definition cards. The details of their characters start with what they do for living, which religious sect they are affiliated with, and then the text goes on to dictate their general motivations, making their roles more tangible. These are extremely vivid details, and when read by these non-professional Iraqi actors, it makes me think how they might be feeling about their predestinated life stories since they may not be too dissimilar from their previous lives in Iraq. In another corner of this giant stage, in the battalion headquarters, Army Colonel Robert McLaughlin is preparing his brigade for their mission to secure Medina Wasl. This is his first National Training Center experience and he is a true professional with high hopes. As he says to his soldiers, their number one priority is to “provide hope to the people.” They are to be “respectful to the culture”; they must be “professional”, “polite” and “vigilant”. A handful of soldiers who are in the tent are clearly aware of the camera’s presence, as is Colonel McLaughlin who warns a
soldier mixing bad words with an Arabic salutation. There is a camera involved, they gave the permission to this filmmaker to film their routine, and they have to be vigilant.

Now everyone is in their roles, ready to start their intense training. Medina Wasl is an Iraqi town suffering from the criminal elements in it. The majority of the town wants to live in peace but the insurgency won’t allow it. That is when the battalion steps in. The first day of the simulation starts with the sectarian violence number one: insurgents murder the deputy mayor’s son. In this sequence, there is a cross-cut between a discussion among the simulation architects and the actual scene they are talking about at the command and control facility. The simulation architects are the group of people, who actually write these roles and the scenarios, or “injects” as they call it. As we are watching the preparation of the assassination, one of the architects reads the motivation behind it and how it is supposed to be done. The executer, played by a young American soldier, obediently stays still while possibly one of the Iraqi role players wraps his face with a scarf, leaving his blue and worried eyes uncovered. We are supposed to believe that this is a reenactment of his initiation.
The execution will be filmed by a hand held video camera so that, according to the script, they can send it to the town administration as a threat. The army official with them shows the soldier-actors how to play for the camera and shoot the captive who is played by an Iraqi role player. The viewers might have confused feelings in the face of the awfulness of what is about to take place and the obvious fakeness of it. It seems fake because not only the army official’s presence disturbs the perception of the whole event since this is an insurgent activity, but also he keeps interrupting with his directions like a film director. Although this might actually be an accurate demonstration of how it is with the real insurgents. It is like a snuff-film where an actual death or murder is recorded. They would know that they are doing this for a specific audience and since they cannot do it physically right in front of them, they need to film it from the right perspective, that would leave no doubt as to the assassination being committed. It is highly possible that one of them, much like a film director, would be directing the scene. The two Iraqi women role players that we know from the opening are sitting in a crouched position, munching on their dinner and watching the scene. They are part of the film crew. This supporting side story can very well be the back stage footage of a real insurgence operation. It is interesting how our eyes are looking for something almost like a Hollywood seamlessness in order to believe in the authenticity of it. We get what we want as soon as the filming starts. The camera shows the assassination both from its
bystander position and the small monitor of the hand held camera. This image will be the only one the rest of the world will see. This is another duality of the “real” event and its projection.

The mystical music the film opened with starts again, this time evoking feelings of stress and sadness. The killing takes place followed by the cries of “Allah!” It looks so real, that according to the army commander, it almost made him pull his pistol. They might not want to “act too well”. They know they are impersonating real people and their real actions and even though right now it is a role play, they are perhaps capable of doing the same thing. As we continue watching the documentary and the fake events we come to realize how the fantasy mirrors these people’s true fears about the war.

The next daytime shot of Colonel McLaughlin, unaware of what happened the other night, shows him speaking with self-convincing words about how he wants to “get a good relationship” with them and how he aims to bring a sense of “normality” and “security” to the people of Medina Wasl. The camera stays with him even after he is finished. It feels as if the filmmaker hesitates to turn off the camera. McLaughlin, who is always ready for the camera with the well-intentioned and hopeful look in his eyes, also hesitates this time and looks away from the camera. Then he twists his lips which gives him an even more suspicious look, resembling disbelief. He knows he desperately needs to put faith in his own well-memorized words because bringing a sense of normality,
“whatever that may be” as he says, is not going to be easy. Perhaps it is this uncertainty, or the ambiguity of normality that makes him more worried. What exactly do the Army and people in Iraq expect him to do? How can he properly bring prosperity and normality? With this shot from below, the colonel acquires a heroic image of himself, alone with his noble thoughts of saving people.

The camera that the veterans used actively as a confession mechanism, now becomes a mirror that the soldiers, like McLaughlin, use to repeat things for themselves that they need to keep in mind, or to state the things that they want others to know. They recognize the immediate presence of the camera and an outsider in their organization. They are careful with their words and actions, and eager to get the message across at the same time.

In another sequence, we are with the battalion on their way to their friendly visit for a town hall meeting with the officials. This is an opportunity for the Colonel to practice his commitments of good-will. As they approach the town in a military vehicle, the soldier whom McLaughlin warned earlier in the film about being respectful to the Iraqi culture talks about the visit. His threatening words sound like a message to the people expecting his actual visit to Iraq. Talking to the camera sitting in the front seat while he drives, he says “either they can work with us and we can achieve a better Iraq, or they can work against us and we can…send shit storm on them every day.” Achieving
a better Iraq and bringing peace and prosperity apparently construct their abstract notion of goal and the reliable meaning of their existence in a foreign land. On the other side, Iraqi role players are given their instructions about this visit. The Deputy Mayor is discussing his role with a captain before the first episode of the simulation takes off. He acts like a professional actor, looking extremely serious while quickly explaining how he is sad, his son was killed, and that he needs their help.

The first episode *the occupation* of Medina Wasl starts as American soldiers step out of their military vehicles and meet the Iraqi Security Forces. They are all in their roles now. Once again we are introduced to the residents in their daily routines through Col. McLaughlin’s voice over narrative. The struggle will be between the American soldiers and the insurgents who aim to prove that Americans cannot provide security, as he describes it. The meeting at the town hall starts with good wishes on both sides. McLaughlin’s smiling face, oblivious of what took place the other night, shows his enthusiasm to communicate. He is happy about hearing the mayor’s willingness for cooperation; while the deputy mayor is certainly not having a good time. McLaughlin’s cheerful mood and the meeting are cut short by the unpleasant news and the deputy mayor’s departure for his son’s funeral.
The fiction style and the uninterrupted flow of the on-stage events create the feature film / audience relationship that was missing at the beginning. At the same time the directors consciously insert off-stage events or voice over narrations in the middle to keep us from being sucked into the story and forgetting about the significance of the simulation. In the meantime a role-player reporter who is also the anchorman of the fake TV channel, that becomes one of the narrators of the film due to its journalistic nature, now informs us of McLaughlin’s and his team’s whereabouts. He has to do multiple takes due to amateur mistakes. The directors deliberately show these back stage of a back stage moments in order to emphasize the fact that we are witnessing something that only few people are allowed to see as well as the elements of the film’s reflexivity. In the meantime during the funeral, the film cuts back and forth between the funeral crowd and the soldiers watching them with interest and caution.

Later on we learn from the personal interviews with the soldiers, that after a while, even though they don’t have a neatly edited scene in front of them just like us, it
gets real for them more so than it does for us. Both the viewers and the people are aware of the fakeness but because the players are part of the scene it is only normal for them to become almost wholly absorbed in the scene. Erving Goffman explains this with the fact that “life itself is a dramatically enacted thing” (Goffman, 1959, p. 72) which allows even unprofessional players to make the scripts come to life. Another thing that transforms this town into reality for them is the fact that they are actually part of the real story that the simulation mirrors, which takes place outside of the training center. Even the Iraqi-American role players’ association with Iraq has changed which accordingly allows them to stay in the U.S., but for the soldiers, Iraq is still their destination. At the end of the day, as McLaughlin reports his successful meeting to the other towns and army officials in the simulation who are getting on with their own scripted realities, the camera locks its gaze on one of the soldiers. He is staring blankly at the aquarium screen saver of his laptop. McLaughlin’s words declaring them as being well on their way of having a successful mission overlaps with the image of swimming digital fish. Here the duality of this real but fake world and a real fakeness that is the digitally produced aquarium simulation again mirror each other. The viewers cannot help but identify the blank face of the soldier with the fish in the tank.

He is indeed part of his own fakeness and could be asking himself at that specific moment what is real? His ears clearly do not hear and thus his face does not react to his
commander’s words of hope. After reporting their success McLaughlin turns to his men with a big smile on his face and utters these primarily self-soothing words “Piece of cake! We’re not going to blow it.” He is being sincere but it is hard to tell whether he is fully convinced.

The film cuts from the thoughtful soldier, who is now looking down with a frozen and ambiguous smile, to McLaughlin, and then it stops at the residuals of McLaughlin’s smile. The same ambiguity and perhaps uncertainty displays itself in McLaughlin’s hand placement on his forehead, a sign of concern and contemplation.

The camera stays with the image of the Colonel. His voice over narration that talks about his childhood and how he decided to join the forces, due to his liking of team activities and discipline, overlaps the image. We are taken away from the simulation for a while into McLaughlin’s private world; this will help us get to know him better. As he is speaking we see his old pictures from twenty two years ago. We find out that he likes the old John Wayne films and those ideals which are about “doing the right thing, when the
chips are down, making it happen, taking care of the guys” as he puts it. With this emotional yet soft closure, we cut to another day in the simulation.

This segment of the documentary goes along with the brief interviews with some of the Iraqi role-players and it is our introduction to the insurgents for the first time. In the meantime this opens up another aspect of this role-playing: this whole production can also be functioning as a psychodrama and a sociodrama for both the Iraqi expatriates, but mostly for the soldiers. As a psychological group work method, psychodrama establishes human development through dramatic action and helps them explore their problems and concerns, and develop new solutions. The scripted dramatic action is based on the past experiences of the members of the group, and with this controlled environment, they are given a second chance to think things over and develop a new and more beneficial reactions to them. Goffman, on psychodrama, stresses the significance of “anticipatory socialization” which is a process that comes from organizational communication, in being “able properly to manage a real routine” due to previously being “schooled in the reality” (Goffman, 1959, s.72). In the documentary, the Iraqi-American residents and the American soldiers are playing a psychodrama of life in ‘Iraq at war’ based on their shared memories or the reports from the army. Except the new recruits, all the soldiers had been to Iraq once which means they are schooled in reality, and now in the simulation they are being trained, once again, to recreate the already experienced tough problems, only to find better solutions. Sociodrama on the other hand, contrary to the individualistic nature of psychodrama, deals with studying problems in groups. In that sense, this may be what the training center aims. The simulation conducted is more likely to deal with collective relationships in general, rather than communication mishaps on a personal level.
Nevertheless, all members of this simulation develop their own experiences on a personal level. Leaving their country and their family behind to come to the States and now living a safe life in San Diego, Iraqi role-players might as well be feeling guilty. Bassam Kalasho, who plays the deputy mayor, misses Iraq and his past life but is happy to be in the United States. His participation is partly his contribution to end the war and partly his own way of dealing with the tensions that are created by living in a foreign country and being forced to claim a new identity. To him, they are teaching the army how to deal with the Iraqi people “making sure they don’t kill innocent people in Iraq and for the safety of the U.S. forces and the Iraqi people.” In that sense, he goes a little further and declares that himself and other Iraqis are like soldiers in the training center and they deserve to be recognized as one by the then president G. W. Bush and the Secretary of Defense. Whatever they are paid, it is not worth leaving their families in San Diego. Nagi Moshi, who plays the Iraqi deputy chief of police, had escaped Iraq alone by himself and it took him a year and a half to finally get to the United States as an illegal immigrant. Before this job, he used to work in a store, but now he is helping the U.S. Army and hoping to become a legal resident. His job in the simulation is the best reference he has and he likes being the chief of police. He is shown putting on his uniform because this is a very important ritual for him in becoming somebody else who is much more powerful, important and respected than he really is in real life. The change of clothes functions almost like a metamorphosis, a shift of spirits. After putting on his uniform, we cut to Nagi in front of a mirror, brushing his hair with his fingers and watching himself in his new and strong personality. Duality here becomes visible with Nagi turning his back to us and facing the mirror, reflecting his simulated identity towards us, that is to the
camera. Nagi gives himself one last look at the mirror, this time entirely in his role with a threatening gaze, and then steps out for duty.

His duty is to help Americans catch the insurgents. Before moving on to introduce one of the insurgents, we are given a brief demonstration of Nagi’s performance. This does not look like part of an on-stage event but an exclusive show for the filmmakers. The camera films Nagi like a Middle Eastern version of the familiar detectives of a CSI show. He is the brave policeman who skillfully catches a bad guy who is played by an American.

This little show also prepares the viewers for their acquaintance with the bad guys of the film. The caption identifies the insurgents yet the only other thing we see on the screen is couple of men playing basketball or shaving in front of a rear-view mirror. They are the American soldiers, casted as the subversive element in Medina Wasl. As they cheerfully play basketball these young men do resemble mischievous kids pestering the neighborhood. After that we cut to Sergeant Paul Greene, the leader of the insurgency, who had been to Iraq twice. We see pictures of him in Iraq as he talks about his previous deployments. Compared to the differences we see between the photographs of Vietnam
veterans and their images from after the war, Sergeant Greene’s pictures do not show any changes in him since 2003. As mentioned in chapter two, the change in their appearances indicates a mental transformation, a change in the way they perceive the war. We can tell by their long hair that they are not going back to Vietnam. In Greene’s case, however, there is no visible change. He does not sound patriotic either, nor does he state anything against the Iraq War. Furthermore it will not be the best day of his life when, at the end of the film, he finds out that he is going to go back to Iraq for the third time.

Greene in the simulation though, just like Nagi, enjoys acting a lot, as much as he enjoys chasing bad guys and “kicking down doors” in Bagdad. Playing the bad guy and causing chaos are both fun and beneficial to him. He believes that taking on a predetermined insurgent role helps him think like them. This strikes me as a poor and incomplete judgment since it must be extremely hard to think like the insurgents in Iraq unless you empathize with them in order to understand their motivations behind their attacks. It could have been helpful to find out what their role cards say, assuming that these soldiers who play the insurgents have detailed background stories as well. If they do, then the film fails to emphasize that. If they do not, then the simulation underestimates the importance of their existence and fails to make a thorough analysis of the Iraq War.
As their leader, Greene opens the doors to the world of the insurgents and provides the camera with crucial inside footage. In this sequence we find out about the surprise attack they have been planning. The attack to McLaughlin’s army base does not take too long, but it ends with several jump cuts that show supposedly wounded soldiers, fake body parts and mannequins. With these last images, film switches to a different aspect of the simulation. Now we get to observe the medical aspect of the simulation which apparently requires a considerate investment. The robotic mannequins and fake body parts look like expensive toys designed to train and prepare medical soldiers for what they might see in the battlefield.

Medical Training Instructor Sergeant Richard Ramsey shares the mannequins and fake body parts reserve with the camera. All models are exact replicas from the photographs that he took in Afghanistan and Iraq. The fake body parts appear to be the reflections of the real world onto a parallel one, which is the training center simulation. These injuries look like three dimensional versions of the photographs Sergeant Ramsey took. The framing of the camera causes these images to resemble the Holocaust pictures or a fatal epidemic.
Reminding ourselves that this is just a simulation and these are merely the props that the army uses in order to train soldiers does not help us ignore the reality of the torn body parts. Thanks to the Sergeant’s assurance, we know they look exactly like their real counterparts.

After this bizarre rendezvous with Richard Ramsey, which almost seemed to be an intermission between acts, we go back to Medina Wasl and the fake war. We find out that the counter-insurgency operation failed, and according to the flexible script they have, the insurgency actions escalades. So Colonel McLaughlin pays another visit to the town council. The obvious desperation on his face evokes the feelings of shame and anger.

People of Medina Wasl are very upset and they continue to protest against the presence of the soldiers until McLaughlin and a group of soldiers leave the town. Things are not going to become easier for Colonel and his team. They are about to fail their mission and on top of that his town is the only one that American soldiers killed civilians. Later on, to arrange a settlement between the Americans and the town administration, the deputy
mayor attempts to visit McLaughlin, but the word never gets to the Colonel. Under these circumstances, Medina Wasl decides to take care of its problems that left the town on the brink of a civil war. Despite the efforts to settle the issue, sectarian violence starts on the 8th day of the simulation. As the conflict escalates, the camera dives into the action. Apparently hand held, it moves and pans frantically, and captures spontaneous shots like a war reporter’s camera.

Colonel McLaughlin plays his last trump card as he meets the town administration. He offers them already approved projects that are designed to improve the town’s infrastructure. He wins back the mayor’s heart but as things become more complicated for them and for us, we realize that this is not going to be “a piece of cake” after all. Going to the real Iraq is becoming more real than the simulation they are about to complete. Approaching the end of this game, the soldiers encounter several disheartening incidents, including another fierce attack from the insurgents that results in so many casualties. Unfortunately the temporary happiness a Sunni wedding brought and the hopes that the proposed projects offered cannot help the town prevent the catastrophic civil war. An image of the mosque tower barely visible in the middle of a dust cloud, and an image of an injured soldier, who looks like he is crying blood, symbolizes the destruction of the town the failure of the American soldiers.
The simulation ends with the fake funeral of the supposedly dead soldiers. Already overwhelmed by their failure, some of them seem extremely touched while they wipe their eyes. Perhaps the simulation paid off bitterly and now the soldiers are learning to accept death as an inevitability of war.

In their last day at the training center, Sergeant Greene’s unit finds out about their immediate deployment to Iraq. This is a very dramatic scene as the town looks phonier than ever, and Greene and his friends are alone with their gloomy thoughts. Greene does his best to comfort his wife on the phone, assures her that he will be back. In the meantime, Greene and the viewers see some of the Iraqi role players who are obliviously and cheerfully fooling around. As he lifts up his head while still on the phone and looks to his right, the film cuts to Nagi and some other Iraqis. Greene and we see them happily joking around and laughing out loud. This is what Greene’s eyes are seeing, and he looks utterly upset with their merry mood.

At that moment, a strange overlap takes place as we hear Scott Joplin’s tune begins to play. Greene and his friend constitute the picture of desperation.
The Entertainer also heralds the withdrawal episode. The song and the soldiers’ cheers create a cacophony that sadly absorbs Greene’s sadness. This is one of the last injects, and it shows the transfer of authority to Iraqi leaders. Everybody seems to be happy but the script architects have a one last surprise for them. As the last inject unfolds and perhaps the viewers start wondering what happened to the insurgents, the mayor’s car gets attacked by them and he gets murdered. The film cuts to Bassam, the deputy mayor, who previously expressed his desire to become a mayor one day. He looks into the camera and ironically declares his mayorship of two hours.

As the residents of the town starts leaving their fake world, Lt. Kramer and the leader of the simulation architects state their satisfaction with the job and their belief in the program. According to Kramer, it is enduring and will last for a long time; it will always be valid no matter how fake it is. In this instance, the filmmakers cut to the transportation of the props, among which we see monopoly and risk board games. On one of the boxes it reads “the game of global domination”. It is an interesting juxtaposition as Kramer declares the simulation’s dominance over military training, almost as if the directors warning him to be careful for what he wishes for. This is the only image that most likely speaks for the directors’ personal points of view in the war.
Junction City becomes the ghost town again. Everything is cleaned up; there are no signs of body parts, bombs, or weddings. The wishy-washy town begins to wait for its new occupants.

The last segment of the film is reserved for the characters we met in the simulation and their real homes. We see them with their real families and watch them in their real work places, unless they are soldiers. The McLaughlins with their five children present a different Colonel. When his elder son asks him what he is going to do in Iraq, his mischievous little girl cuts him short and yells happily from the table top she perches.

“You’re gonna kill people!”
The response catches the Colonel by surprise and leaves him speechless. To his relief the mom steps in and tells the little girl that “this is not even something to laugh about.” Colonel McLaughlin forces himself to smile but witnessing his devastation, the camera follows the transformation of his genuine smile to sadness. Are the young men in the simulation, who had never been to war before, perceive going to war this way as well? Is it going to be another simulation to them?

Leaving Colonel alone with his dilemma, the film moves on to show us what the Iraqis are doing. Among them, Nagi is finally granted asylum in the United States and goes out with friends to celebrate his confirmed new identity. The fake becomes real for him. Before stepping out of his apartment, he gazes at his reflection on the mirror. The image makes a reference to the previous sequence where we saw him looking in the mirror and his character in the simulation. Here, he appears to be a powerful gangster; the hooka smoke coming out of his mouth and the way he watches himself also indicates a sexual power as well. He looks confident, and his eyes affirm his big achievement in life. The last image of a sexually charged Nagi dancing with a blonde woman conveys his self-confidence and self-dominance over his fate.
The Iraqi expatriates clearly have a new life in the U.S. and they mark the beginning of another post-war generation, this time to be called Iraqi-Americans. At the end of the film with a caption, the filmmakers declare that there are 2.1 million refugees as a result of the Iraq War. In the meantime on the soldiers’ side, the atmosphere is dominated by tears and extreme uneasiness. Their preparation for their trip overlaps the then President George W. Bush’s speech in Fort Irving. As Bush emphasizes how important it is to see them going to Iraq, the film shows the soldiers boarding to their plane, which will take them to the real war. It is important to us as well, to see the soldiers going to Iraq but not necessarily because of same reasons. Their departure to Iraq signifies e new phase in our position as the audience. In the course of the film, we are being exposed to, or rather taunted with our own incomplete and sometimes naïve conception of the Iraq War and the people who are directly involved in it. In this sense the failure of McLaughlin’s team becomes our deficiency of apprehension. As much as we waited for some sort of a comprehension to dawn on us, at the end of the film, we are even less knowledgeable than the audience in Winter Soldier. Nevertheless, starting the chapter with a Winter Soldier experience, briefly but surely in 2009 we witness the miserable despair of the soldiers and the Iraqi refugees –despite their allegedly happier lives in the U.S. – This yields, if not knowledge, a curiosity that will guide us in the following chapters. Full Battle Rattle does not provide us with any other positions but the position of the audience. We are with the families of the soldiers who send them off to Iraq at the end of the film, with no clear knowledge of their journey. The families and we are left behind at the end of the film but as a continuation is implied with their departure,
we realize that our journey has just begun. With the following chapter and the film, we will follow the soldiers from *Full Battle Rattle* to the *Gunner Palace*.

Rabbit lesson was a more direct conditioner compared to this simulation; and the discussion of the psychological consequences of the simulation is beyond this study. However both lessons clearly defy ethical duties that humans are thought to have and replace them with the flexible ethics of survival. In this chapter, through the analysis of camera’s role, what it reveals about the soldiers, civilians and the ways in which they associate themselves with the simulation exercise, it became clear that the real struggle that awaits them may not be between the American soldiers and the insurgency, but between justifications of this leap of faith and the conditions that defy them.
Chapter 4: Gunner Palace (2004)

Co-directed by Petra Epperlein and released in 2004, Gunner Palace is Michael Tucker’s first documentary on the Iraq War. Later, in 2007 Tucker made another renowned documentary about an Iraqi journalist who was accused of planning to assassinate then British Prime Minister Tony Blair. His subjective camera and his presence as a person, as well as a director, first exhibit themselves in Gunner Palace, his first encounter with Iraq. Tucker spends two months at intervals in Baghdad with 2/3 Field Artillery who calls itself the Gunners. What is left from the palace that once belonged to Saddam Hussein’s son Udah now hosts 2/3 Artillery and it is named after them as “The Gunner Palace”. As history shows on several different occasions, change of name is a clear indication of a change in the balance of power and signifies who has the control at the time. The conqueror renames specific locations or buildings that also have a symbolic value in an attempt to show the acquired power. This is how it appears to be with the entitlement of Udah’s palace as well. However as the film shows, nothing is crystal clear in this war and the soldiers are bitterly aware that this is a “lose-lose” situation and no one is winning, because in the middle of this frenzy, to them they are not protecting their country or the Iraqis but themselves only.

The film employs camera and other cinematic devices in such a way that it creates a unique language of its own: mostly personal point of view shots and journalistic camerawork establish an embedded director’s gaze, and assign the camera a humanlike and subjective vision. Therefore Tucker’s presence is felt not only from his voice over narrative but also from his apparent friendship with the soldiers, which is a natural outcome of his experience that allowed him to access their activities and privacy. He follows the soldiers and their sometimes troublesome relationship with the Iraqis in their
raids and in other casual occasions, as well as documenting their “free” time in their daily routines. Therefore he gives them opportunities to express themselves in the most creative way and sometimes allows them to use the camera almost like a private journal, or like the sympathetic ear of a companion. Tucker’s personal approach enables him to humorously or empathetically join the soldiers in their good and bad moments, and this transforms the journalistic material into one of the most realistic and fascinating stories that resembles ancient Greek tragedies. This collective look and unprecedented insider footage allows the film to divulge a solid and clear message from the soldiers to the mass media audiences and triggers their ephemeral memories. It becomes a “freestyle” message board dedicated to what this war really means to them as opposed to the fable promoted by the American media and Bush administration that the film and the soldiers sarcastically make fun of. Through close analysis of selected sequences and the use of specific cinematic devices in them including, but not limited to, diegetic and non-diegetic sound, music and captions, the chapter aims to single out how Iraq and the war appear in the film.

Right from the opening, Michael Tucker sets the ironic tone with an ambiguous image of people sitting under the shade of patchy tents. The caption reads it is “September 5, 2003 - Bagdad Iraq” which means it is four months after the occupation. A secondary caption underneath the date reads: “Greetings to the Iraqi people…” In the meantime we hear a familiar tone that plays in amusement parks, usually on a carousel ride. If the film is greeting Iraqis, then it has an odd sense of humor.
The use of soft focus makes the image obscure and unreal. In fact this effect and the oriental look remind me of *Casablanca* and certainly not a documentary film. Tucker’s opening shot seems no different than the opening sequence of this 1942 film, where we see a crowd of people in a bazaar set –created in the Warner Bros. studios–. Only with the following image and its caption, does the quality of this opening shot, its “greeting” caption and the music begin to make sense, and we get a strong feeling that something cynical is about to take place. It appears that Michael Tucker is citing a speech that the then U.S. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld gave to the Iraqi people on one his visits after the occupation.

Rumsfeld’s cheerful words, which give the feeling of a template rather than something particularly written for Iraq, are in contradiction with the inertia in the image. We do not see any extraordinary changes taking place or a Baghdad that is bustling with commerce. If anything, there seems to be a curious calmness, a time supposedly away from the chaotic atmosphere of the earlier months. The first foggy image might as well be the ill
shaped reflection of Iraq Rumsfeld imagines or the way he wants us to imagine it. It is as if taken from Rumsfeld’s myopic mind; as blurry as his words. Based on what he says, this is how Iraq must have looked like. A voice inside of each and every one of us suggests that this image is utterly different than the Iraq that Michael Tucker went to and filmed with his camera. Considering how seriously he takes his words, the carousel music distinctively defines the ironic tone of the film. In both of these images the camera and most parts of the framed scenes are immobile. In the first image, it feels like the camera is resting like the other people. The second image starts with someone putting the camera on the ground. This is probably Michael Tucker himself, given the fact that he is the only one in the picture without a uniform. It appears that he has just arrived with others accompanying him, and started filming the moment he put his foot on Iraq’s soil. We see American soldiers leisurely unloading a military pick-up truck, careful not to block the camera’s view. The feeling of time, without beginning and ending, makes it unimportant how many soldiers came before them and will come later. The lethargy and the placidity that dominate the image suggest that not only the film but also these soldiers would not be excited by Rumsfeld’s words at all, if they had heard them. This discrepancy and the indifference of the image seem to be mocking the then Secretary of Defense.

The civilian person, whom I thought of as Tucker, approaches the camera with his luggage, and then picks it up as the screen fades to white. He may or may not be Tucker, but he certainly is the owner of that camera. In this eccentric opening, the camera is not interventionist at all; and yet its presence and the absence of an operator is something that we clearly feel. This stands as a pure example of the power of the camera: even without an operator, consciously or not if you simply place the rolling camera somewhere and
then leave, the basic function will be achieved in any case, and the footage will still be valuable. A camera may be left just like that for candid shots, which indicates awareness and style in filming on the operator’s part. The camera is used for its most basic and one of its most potent functions: to record and therefore to document.

A cut breaks in on Rumsfeld’s speech. The caption reads: “Meanwhile…” and the camerawork changes entirely. Tucker becomes a war reporter and his camera is fully charged with his adrenaline, shaking with every move. First he is behind a press cameraman, filming a minor combat operation from the corner of a building, while bullets are freely flying about the whole street.

![Image of a war scene](image.png)

The sequence is just as out of place as the first, dramatic soft focus image of soldiers. With a rap song, and several freeze frame shots that matches the rhythm, it looks more like a Beastie Boys video clip or an action movie than war footage. This deliberate imitation of two adverse film genres also foreshadows the criticism of the media and the soldier’s emphasis on people’s insusceptibility to their conditions that we will see in the course of the film. Since people around the world see this war as a show that they watch on TV every night or a show they ignore unless there is action in it, Tucker will give them what they want. The rightful cruelty in his style of slapping the audience in the face is like a symbolic statue of genocide made out of real human bodies. As viewers, we realize that as Tucker runs with his camera on his side in the middle of a cacophony of
Little E’s rapping and the interminable sound of bullets, this is not a scene they are filming that will be cut by a director once Tucker turns the corner. Most of the time in the film, his camerawork and his association with the device feel like he is the camera, or that the camera is a part of his body, hence we are able to understand Tucker’s feelings based on the camera’s moves. For instance a faint and sudden pan to the left is capable of channeling his excitement and fear to us more explicitly than his words are. Then his voice over narrative is heard as if to complete the subjectivity of the shot. He says “most of us don’t see this on the news anymore. We have reality TV instead. Joe Millionaire, Survivor… Well, survive this – a year in Baghdad without changing the channel.” Tucker is considerably clear and lucid in his opinion of the media’s interest in the war. It is the action that they care about, and since they can achieve this with reality TV shows without sending reporters over in the middle of war only to risk their lives for some footage, we don’t see Iraq war like that on the news anymore. News shows are nothing but “shows” anyway. Now we know what we are about to watch.

The following sequence, which will lead to a humorous introduction of the actual Gunner Palace by the “mayor”, follows a group of soldiers patrolling on their vehicle in Adhamiya –Baghdad, Iraq: home of the 2nd Battalion 3rd Field Artillery Regiment, 1st Armored Divison. The significant combination of non-diegetic sounds establishes the second and certainly not the last contrasting image. In this film almost none of the voice over narratives we hear will match what we see. The freestyle song sung by a soldier that rhymes about the hardship and futility of their existence in Iraq, is cut buy the azan which is the diegetic sound of the scene, and the AFRTS news talking about a general who has just returned from Iraq. AFRTS aka American Forces Radio and Television Service is a
worldwide broadcasting service that is part of the Department of Defense. The news will be with us throughout the film echoing what the public knows in the U.S. and how their apprehension of the war is manipulated, as well as how the soldiers are supposedly encouraged. According to the general whose words disclaim the song they just interrupted, “the morale is high and troops are committed to getting the job done. They understand why they are in Iraq, and they understand the greater mission that the war in Iraq is just one part.” There is also something commanding in the way he speaks. As the general ends his words by saying how the soldiers accept their conditions, and that they are working on the quality of life to make it better for the soldiers, it almost feels like the soldiers are obliged to accept their conditions and they have to understand their mission. His words are meant to be unquestionable. Meanwhile the camera with a dolly shot approaches SPC (Specialist) Stuart Wilf holding a piece of paper that says “Gunner Palace.”

Tucker uses all the audio visual material he has to contradict and mock the General’s words. By holding the caption, the soldier also asserts his voluntary participation in and his approval of the film. The theatrical exaggeration in his pose discloses his wicked and humorous character and foreshadows the intermissions and the background music he will create. Concurrently it implies an interesting use of cinematic reflexivity. In film, and mostly in features, reflexivity is used to make the viewers aware of the fact that they are
watching a film. We know that *Gunner Palace* is a non-fiction film and the visual material we see is not produced for the film. What we are exposed to is a selected part of reality. However the reflexivity here is trying to point its finger at the “created” or “imposed” reality that contrasts with these soldiers’ reality. The film implies that the war, unless we have firsthand experience, is just a film or a show that we watch on TV. This effect is not only because of the secondary ways in which we encounter war, but also because of the extraordinary nature of it which makes it hard to identify with.

Theatricality of the film is emphasized with the use of music, and sequences of freestyle that function as intermissions. Another aspect of reflexivity is Wilf’s and other soldiers’ integrations into the scenes. Their status is reflexive since they are both the instigator and the recipient of their actions. In art this is when artwork exposes its status as artwork. Here the soldiers are revealing what is fictional about their situation by creating fabricated, performative scenes, or simply by acknowledging the fact that they are being filmed.

From Wilf’s handmade caption, we cut to SFC (Sergeant First Class) Jessie Potts, also known as The Mayor of Gunner Palace. This is going to be the main setting so we are now being introduced to this strange installation. The mayor gives us a brief history of the palace. As he speaks about how Saddam’s son Udah had wild parties there, we cut to the ornaments and the ruins of the ballroom that now host the soldiers. He points his finger at the rubble. At that moment, another cut shows a soldier doing heel-toe dance at the same spot.
With a rapid cut we go back to the Mayor as if nothing happened. He invites us to a large indoor area where we can get a good view of Baghdad. Another sudden cut shows SPC Richmond Shaw whose art we will appreciate in the following sequences, freestyling in front of the same large area that the Mayor was just showing us. In his song, which we hear briefly, he says that Bagdad is so sad. Therefore if we ever attempt to get a good view from where he is standing, it is as if we can see the sorrow of the whole city. We hear Shaw singing until the Mayor shuts the door.

The rubble in each inserts seem to be merely a background setting of a huge stage that they perform on, which is another reference to a stage act. These strange inserts also give hints of the concepts and the themes of the documentary. Each room we enter is almost like a trailer of significant sequences we will be seeing shortly. After the introduction of the main stage, the “Gunner Palace”, we now begin to observe the routines of its occupants. Tucker’s camera and also Tucker himself, as he also mentions in his online journal, not just films them but he becomes one of them. His personal connection to the
soldiers and their lives asserts itself through the ways in which he uses captions, sound, music and the editing of the raw footage. He does this in order to participate in their jokes and their sorrows and in the story, rather than just be present and observe.

In almost all the raids, patrols or just their regular visits to institutions that we witness in the film, farcical moments are naturally conceived by the simple juxtapositions of the non-diegetic AFRTS news reports with what our eyes see within the frame. In some cases, Tucker makes captions from certain words that soldiers have said, lines from AFRTS news, or some other information related to the scene which generally refutes what is being said or seen. These clearly emphasize significant points and the director’s attempt to prevent viewers from missing a particular line which has importance to the director. Regardless of the action potential of the sequence, the director focuses on the interactions between natives and the American soldiers, allowing the human aspect to take the lead even on the brink of fatal instances. The other two groups of sequences are the musical performances of soldiers and Iraqis, and the private, candid-like interviews with soldiers and Iraqi collaborators which I will be referring to as “square interviews” due to the ways in which the character is framed in a tight square, leaving the rest of the big frame black. Instrumental rap beats sung by talented soldiers are used to start the patrol sequences, and it gives the feeling of a little break in between events. Musical expression is not endowed only to American soldiers. In another sequence, images of palace ruins are accompanied by an Arabic song sung live without instruments. The person who sings also creates a rhythm pattern by tapping on the hood of a car; his singing resembles rapping. As in this instance, music is a major tool that the characters
are allowed to express themselves with, and through that they also define their
association with their environment.

The instance when they took a glue-sniffing kid off the street is one of the most
striking patrol sequences. The soldiers come across the kid in one of their routine patrol
along the famous Abu Hanifa Market Square. The kid does not look older than twelve;
his slim figure is hardly covered by a ragged and tattered white shirt. Three soldiers lift
him up like a feather and put him in the back of their humvee. In addition to his
intoxicated head, this encounter seems to confuse and disorient him more.

He does not speak but moans and groans as he frantically tries to rip off his already torn
shirt by pulling it at both ends. Remembering my own Iraq experience in 2004 as a
reporter, I know that he is just “another sad story” just like the Lieutenant, who narrates
the sequence, says. Born and raised in the middle of conflicts and a dictatorship, holding
guns since adolescence, being orphaned and homeless, these kids do not know anything
but war and oppression, and have no sense of security. Suddenly the boy becomes aware
of the camera and Tucker, who had been filming him since they saw him on a street
corner. He stops moaning and ripping his clothes off; then with a futile attempt he tries to
put his shirt back on as if he is embarrassed. The Lieutenant says that there is not much
really you can do for these kids rather than handing them over to an institution. The kid
shows signs of discomfort as though he heard the Lieutenant and fears of being
abandoned. It may not be hard for him to see the common denominator between the camera that films him and the Lieutenant. Then, we cut to a soldier standing in the humvee watching the street as the AFRTS news reporter announces the Iraqi children at school cheering for US soldiers in Abu Ghraib City. With the world “children” the film cuts to the glue-sniffer kid. He looks calm, and engulfed in his thoughts. As soon as the cheers start, he turns his head as if he heard them. However this is a non-diegetic sound which is added later during the editing, so he cannot hear the radio. This is Michael Tucker who put the two contrasting things together in order to highlight the contradiction between reality and what is constructed in the news.

In his confused and unstable condition, the kid’s gaze travels from whatever attracted his attention to his own feet. Randomly or not he seems to notice something. Tucker and his camera, or rather Tucker’s careful eyes follow the gaze. At this moment, the integration of the camera and Tucker’s body becomes more visible. As it follows the kid’s gaze and the scars that he points at on his feet and his knee, the camera’s gaze slowly tilts up, like a person’s head, curiously staring at the kid.
He is aware of what a camera does and he seems to know that being filmed is important, as it means not being invisible and poking others to see you. As the kid’s head clears up, his eyes focus on Tucker. His acknowledgement of the camera and Tucker’s receptive curiosity encourages him to communicate more. As the radio heralds how the troops took care of the damage done to the children’s school, the kid in the truck gestures with his hand and looks down as if to say “well yea that is how it is, what are you going to do?” This is a sign of both acceptance and complaint. He is unhappy, purposeless and alone, and there is nothing Tucker can do about it. The soldiers arrive at the institution and we leave the boy there.

Throughout the film there are several encounters of American soldiers with Iraqi children since they are the two major groups of people that are always on the street. Tucker’s camera sometimes randomly, sometimes out of interest, captures these unique and gripping moments. In most cases the children in groups are approaching soldiers with cautious smiles, touching their guns in order to make sure that they are harmless and to get over their own fear. Children instinctively need to feel safe especially in an unsecure place such as Iraq. If someone is carrying a gun, they need to make sure that it is to protect them, so they touch the gun. While they make jokes with the soldiers, the presence of a camera is also a stimulator for the kids to wave their hands, run after and sing for them. Tucker’s camera films the kid singing “America good America, chocolate, America” with the sun and a soldier following him. It is as if he is assuring himself with this repetitious, made up song; America is powerful and a savior, and brings good chocolate. Among the wavers, there are stone throwers and spitters as well, which
perfectly reflects the various attitudes towards Americans. Fear is what they all have in common.

A Saturday morning Al Najat Orphanage visit of the soldiers provides the film with incomparable images. The level of innocence and the submission of a newborn bring out a different and undeniably humanistic aspect of a soldier’s, or rather an adult human being’s relation to children and life. The baby girl in Chaplain Doug Hoover’s arms looks at him with frowning brows and instinctively worried eyes. The expression on her face surprises the chaplain and the camera as well. “Her features are so formed” says Hoover. She is submitted to him physically but her eyes cannot hide her concerns and fear. Sensing that she has become an orphan possibly in her first month in this world, it is as if she, if not physically but at least, mentally needs to grow up as fast she can. The first thing she learned is the fact that this world is not a safe place. However since babies are always a symbol for hope and the future in almost all visual and literal arts, she is willing to trust the arms that embrace her, and her eyebrows loosen as she falls asleep. In another corner of the room SPC James Moats is holding another orphan baby while happily
talking about his newborn. Considering the fact that SPC Moats has not seen his son yet and the baby is least likely to know his/her parents, the way they look at each other becomes suggestive of a mutual surrogation between the two.

Other than Moats and Hoover, most of the soldiers among Gunners are too young to buy alcohol in the States. Yet here in Iraq, along with other dangerous weapons, they have guns that they not only hold but use as well. They get to interrogate people and they are considered old enough to check suspicious bags on the streets to make sure they are not bombs. One of the most colorful characters in Gunner Palace is SPC Stuart Wilf who one day wants to become a rock star. He plays his acoustic and electro guitar occasionally and Tucker uses samples of his music as a background in several sequences. Nineteen years old Wilf is also the youngest in the group and he joined the army right after high school when he was seventeen. With his waywardness, humor and crazy looking eyes, he reminds me of Scott Camil from the Winter Soldier. He is almost hyper active much like his peers. The best way for him to deal with this wildness is to make music and have fun. Tucker’s presence with his camera means so much to him as he finds the best outlets for himself and his music. He collaborates with the director and plays along with the camera most of the times. In fact he becomes the poster boy, or sometimes the jester of his troop.
Like every jester in history though, Wilf is the philosopher as well. Whether as part of his theatrical act or not, he is the one who questions reality, the credibility of his mind and the absurdity of it all. In a close-up shot, fixing his eyes somewhere off screen, with the ornate columns behind him like a stage set, Wilf dramatically says “may be this whole war thing wasn’t even true. May it’s all just burned into my mind now. I’m just imagining all of it.” Then allowing the azan to fill our ears he pauses, only to gulp and add: “Who knows?”

Wilf and Tucker make another shot in front of the palace which seems as though it started out as “fooling around” with the camera. Tucker asks him a curious and somewhat ironic question which was masterfully answered by the jester. However the last question and Wilf’s almost stuttering response turns the whole sequence upside down. Tucker’s original question, which also appears on the screen as a caption and narrated by Tucker, is “What is so great about this place?” Wilf takes a moment to think about it. This suggests that this little performance they stage is an improvisation. Perhaps he thinks too long or Tucker wants to use jump cuts to enhance the feeling of make-believe and
playfulness, or to make the scene appear more active; the questions come with rapid jump cuts. With stagey gestures Wilf points at the entrance of the palace as “lovely sights”, a soldier lazily passing by as “happy people”, the “flag”, and finally he lifts up his machine gun and says “I’ve got a gun”. Some kind of a sarcastically proud and mischievous smile settles on his face until with the next question, it is replaced by a slight dumbfoundness as he is caught on the wrong foot.

At this moment, even though we hear Tucker’s voice off the screen, because he is there and facing Wilf with his camera, he accentuates the question in point with a caption: “Have you ever fired your weapon?” This indicates that he senses the alteration in the mood and the impact of his question. Wilf loses his witness as he says “Yes”. Since the fun is over, or perhaps he did not want to distract viewers, Tucker switches to a long take which includes his questions about how and when he used his gun and Wilf’s answers. He says he had used his gun once in a building but no one got hurt. He appears to be embarrassed which pushes Tucker to ask more. He is very instinctive and precise about his questions and remarks. He says there could have been someone in the building. Wilf agrees while his eyes look down and begin to view what he remembers.
SPC Stuart Wilf and SPC Tom Susdorf are like Tucker’s best friends in Gunner Palace. In his online journal on the official website of the film, he talks about them a lot and publishes some of the e-mails that they sent him. Susdorf, also nineteen, likes to play Counterstrike, a computer game, and he is an Intelligence Analyst. He was given the job to sit and listen to the detainees through an interpreter, and figure out if they are telling the truth or not. At the age of a high school graduate, but with the experience of an elder man, he practices the variations of truth and lie.

Susdorf’s pretty face and what he is commissioned to do define the dynamics of the relationship between Iraqis and foreign - mostly American - soldiers. There is always something so deeply human between them due to the adversities and concerns, as well as a common fate they share. On the other hand there is also a mutual suspicion, mistrust and rage behind almost every action and contemplation. Iraqi adults, for instance, show the same pattern of fear and they search for an assurance of safety, just like children and infants, when they encounter the soldiers. A woman in a house suspected as one of the weapons caches ecstatically thanks to the soldiers five times in a row after they found out
that the house is safe. Suddenly relieved, yet still afraid, she desperately tries to explain her friendly feelings for the American soldiers by swiftly repeating “I love you!” Tucker’s camera films her in between two soldiers trying to calm her down.

As humans sometimes do in a moment of fear, she needs to hold on to a supposed image of these threatening strangers as harmless and capable of understanding. Her hands are raised submissively and as an assurance that she does not have a gun. This gesture contradicts her words because as a matter of fact her “I love you” also involves a statement of “I fear you”. This may be read as a plea to the camera as well. If not by the soldiers, at least she can be heard by someone through the camera.

Here it is important to point out that the only Iraqi people that the director ensures the privilege of verbal or aural expression are either children or suspects like this woman, or detainees who are caught with something that is considered as threat. In most cases they are aliens to the “English speaking” camera. Their words, in Arabic, are not translated. Is it because these words are unimportant or unworthy? Why didn’t Tucker weave their words into the verbal fabric of his documentary? Unless they speak English and unless viewers speak Arabic, what come out of their mouths are not words but grunts to us. As English speakers, we are only granted access to the lives of American soldiers. The disproportion between the screen time of the Iraqi people and the American soldiers cannot only be tied to Tucker’s preference. However, even though it is more reasonable
to think that the director might not be allowed to speak to the detainees, it still begs an explanation as to why he did not translate their words into English. He could have talked to the Iraqis on the street with the help of a translator in order to give us a wider sense of that specific area in Bagdad. Yet it was also his decision to dedicate the film to the soldiers and the war through his own perspective.

Images of the detainees and suspects are either taken from post-raids with their scared and dazed faces or from their brief encounters with the camera while they were captives. In this last group of images, the detainees are not always able to look into the camera for they are either bound, facing the floor, too scared to look, or just playing to the camera.

After a raid called “Operation Grabass” on suspected bomb builders, the soldiers capture three men and bind their hands behind their back. In the meantime the camera candidly captures an image of a woman inside the same house, sitting on a chair, who is obviously worried. If she wants she can look back and easily spot the camera, but she does not as if she is not allowed to. It is perhaps valuable to recognize here, that women have almost no voice in Iraq, or in Tucker’s documentary; they are either just mentioned as wives or secretly filmed behind something else. Therefore these almost voyeuristic shots and proscriptive images of women speak on behalf of all the silenced women’s situation in the war and generally in Iraq.
Tucker films one of the detainees from behind, who is on his knees in a dark corner. He cannot speak English and it is as if his inability turns him into the familiar pictogram of a captive but not a spokesperson. The other one who speaks Arabic is granted a frontal view but not a translation of his words.

The third one, whom Tucker is interested in, persistently speaking in English in spite of a soldier’s nervy warnings of “Keep your mouth shut”. The man says that he is a journalist, thinking this would change everything.

The soldier who kneels down to talk to him says he does not care; they have a journalist filming with them right now, referring to Michael Tucker. The man says “It’s OK, it’s OK” in a displeased manner. We cannot be sure if he misunderstood the soldier or it is
okay that he does not care. Tucker cuts to the other “Arabic speaking” detainee but as one of the soldiers tells him to be quiet, the camera, once again, cuts to the “journalist”. He is now looking at the camera’s viewfinder. He knows where to look and he knows the importance of being seen. The camera fixes its gaze on him; the link is formed, in a manner of speaking. However the camera makes strange focusing motions even when the image is sufficiently clear. Is it because he is not allowed to communicate to the detainees? In that sense, Tucker might be pretending to adjust his camera but in reality provoking his ‘forbidden’ subject to speak. The captive utilizes the camera and attempts to ask help from the operator to send a message to his potential viewers. With his broken English he says he is a journalist and they are making a mistake.

Off the screen a soldier yells at him to shut up. He looks away from the camera, waits, and then keeping his eyes on the soldier, starts talking only to be silenced by another soldier’s warning. This image of him strangely suggests the trial scenes in Akira Kurosawa’s Rashomon.
In this 1950 film issues like the subjectivity and obscurity of the truth arise as the film shows four contradictory stories told about an event. Also underlining the idea that knowledge is perspectival, *Rashomon* carefully places the actors within the frame and puts the audience in the place of a judge. The characters, one by one, testify before our court. In the documentary this chapter analyzes, the Iraqi journalist is sitting on his knees, with hands bound behind his back just like the bandit suspected of murdering the samurai. He is looking at his judge who never speaks. It is Tucker and us; and just like the soldiers and those who are in the middle of this war, we too are literally suffering from the obscurity of the truth. In the meantime, while we are already confused and touched, twenty eight minutes into the film, this little “shut up” game between the captive and his capturer goes on until the soldiers lose their patience and take him outside the wall of the courtyard. He keeps on talking as they take him out and the camera follows him without moving from its original position. Then the director’s voice over informs us that they could not find anything related to bomb building yet all brothers were detained and sent to Abu Ghraib prison. As they were leaving the courtyard, the camera captures one last image of the woman inside which is one of the few in the film.

Throughout the film, the private interviews that we see are given a special character and thus recognition by Michael Tucker; with tightly squared framing which leaves the rest of the image in black, thus differentiating the interviews from the
journalistic, véréité-like style of the rest of the movie. Most of these “square interviews”
are with the soldiers. Only one of them is with an Iraqi interpreter. Everything except the
sanguine remarks of the interpreter, has the common theme that the viewers of this film,
the director and people back home will eventually forget about it once the footage is over.
While watching the war on TV, no one can grasp what goes on in Iraq and in the lives of
the soldiers. Another characteristic of these interviews is the blurry quality that distorts the
image. It feels as though there was no time to fix the focus because they were candid camera shots. Therefore it gives the feeling of privacy, the ability of the candid camera to capture something that is beyond what is visible within the frame. Candid is when the subject is unaware of an observer thus does not have the tendency to reconsider or alter a behavior. That is why we may not even call it private because it demands the presence of a recognized threat. However in these interviews, even though we know that Tucker did not use hidden camera, the ways in which he treats the image creates the illusion of an oblivious subject, speaking in its ultimately natural state, unaware of being watched.
Another aspect of this shot pertains to the black parts of the frame. A narrowed frame within a frame creates a sense of a deliberate attempt to limit perception and vision. Even though hardly it seems to be Tucker’s intent, one cannot help but think why would the camera be unwilling to show us more? What could be is that since these interviews contain somewhat personal and emotional thoughts, and they speak to the incomprehensibility of the war and the passivity of the viewers and TV audiences, Michael Tucker wants to narrow the focus, making them distinguishable above all sequences.
The first square interview is with PFC (Private First Class) Michael Commissio whose genial face naturally attracts children. He is nineteen and coming from a small town where there are not many opportunities for people fresh out of high school. So he picked army and traveling the world while getting paid for it over community college. Talking about experiencing Iraq, he looks down and says “There’s nothing else like it.”

When Michael says his friends cannot grasp the life “and the way these people have to live” in Iraq, we cut to a medium shot of him standing guard, watching the surrounding area with worried eyes.

Reflecting the confusion on his face in the previous image, he continues to explain that no one, not even him, can make sense of how life is in Iraq. In another square interview with him close to the end of the film, he elaborates on the ambiguity that he feels about his presence in Iraq. Michael no longer feels like defending his country anymore but he is also proud of being a nineteen year old who fought in a war.

Almost after an hour into the film, shifting away from the soldiers, Michael Tucker informs the viewers that he is going back home. Random shots from his camera
allow us to witness a small part of his journey and as he steps out of the plane in Germany, the screen dissolves to white. Soft and soothing sounds of a piano accompany us as we walk around Tucker’s kitchen, and watching one of his hands over his shoulder as the other prepares him a cup of coffee. The manner in which he films this sequence may suggest his alienation to his own hands; or rather a disattachment of his mind from his body in a world where everything is sterile. In this world, as Tucker indicates, for him the war is over.

On the fridge we see his pictures with his family. There is something so unreal about this sequence that makes the viewer wonder if this is just a fantasy, that perhaps Tucker never left Iraq. In fact, we are in the very private world of the director. It appears to be his home, and that it is, but the point of view shot makes the whole scene appear like a dream. We are wandering around Tucker’s thoughts and may be after such an experience, the calmness of home looks incredibly unreal to him. As viewers we always sense that this is not just a film to the director but there is also something very personal. However starting from this sequence, the director’s vulnerability and his penetration into the film as a character do not manifest themselves anywhere in the film as clearer as they do here.

Transition is not easy when the madness in Iraq feels more real to him. This may also be a deliberate attempt on the director’s side to give us, the viewers, a sense of how people, and in this case soldiers, who experience extraordinary circumstances cannot
immediately adapt to their previous and more ordinary lives. Neither home nor the world
over there feels right. Furthermore, while we are housed in dangerously sterile worlds
and therefore supposedly segregated from the craziness of the outside world, we are
unable to grasp the truth about the war; this false sense of security brings along
ignorance, as well as it feeds indifference. With this acknowledgement, the film and
perhaps Michael Tucker shift mood drastically. Moving in the apartment with him, we
end up in his study and see his computer and the monitor where he edits the Iraq footage.

This is not only a reflexive moment as it exposes the process of making a film,
but it also serves as a mirror inside a mirror, the footage seen on the monitor is life in Iraq
and it is so real, we know it; yet it is an image on a monitor now. This whole thing is also
an image on my monitor, or the big movie screen that I watch the documentary on. Out of
these telescoping images, the only real thing is Iraq, like the image in the sight of
binoculars. As he puts his coffee on his desk, Tucker reenacts a very sad moment when
he received an e-mail from Wilf notifying him of the death of Lieutenant Ben Colgan
whom he thought of as a good friend. At that moment, piano music dissolves into the
sorrowful sound of gayda as we see images of Colgan on duty. This is how Tucker
remembers him. We are still in the director's head, now engulfed in his memories of a
good friend he lost.
After Colgan’s death, the film gains a sober maturity. Until the very end, the apparently mourning mood stays with us as the pace of editing changes and slows down. No more jokes from Wilf. Tucker is back in Iraq and this is the very first time he films himself as a character. He is sitting in a moving car, on his way back to Iraq, holding Colgan’s picture in one hand. The camera films him from down below, possibly from where he placed it. He is sad, and he needs to show his pain.

His image is accompanied by SPC Richmond Shaw’s “freestyle” which also mourns for the loss of Colgan. The sad chant of gayda and the rapper’s words intertwine. As Shaw’s poem continues, the intensity that was evoked switches from elegy to socio-political poetry. The last line of the first part of this freestyle poem “Living only for the day is the motto we follow” overlaps a frontal shot of ruins of the Gunner Palace. The vivacity that we know from Tucker’s last visit is long gone. Now it really looks like wreckage. The feeling is almost as unreal as the director’s home. Iraq is real, but what is taking place here belongs to the theatre stage where great fantasized tragedies were performed.
The poet, SPC Shaw, speaks over this isolated desolation of their army base. This is such an out of this world sequence. The name of this young black man, who is introduced as the ‘palace poet’, triggers our imagination: Richmond Shaw, as in George Bernard Shaw, the Irish playwright most of whose plays deal with social problems.

As we watch the emptiness of the palace with our blank faces, Shaw’s words wakes us up, just like the ringing alarms he talks about:

\[I\text{ speak that real flow after ringing alarms}\]

He is coming after the carnage, as a witness after all the violence. His words juxtapose “real flow” to “ringing alarms”. This is his discourse which bears sanity and lucidity as opposed to the perplexing and misleading ringing alarms which create nothing but panic and false decision making simply by distorting the perception of reality. Fortunately he, as a poet, transcends the chaotic bustle and speaks the real flow.

\[This\text{ country needs us way more than when we needed Saddam}\]

Considered as a whole, this line is the poem’s most explicit political and sarcastic comment. When did the U.S. need Saddam? Why would the U.S. need Saddam anyway? It is historically known that the United States supported Saddam once, needing his power over that region. Later on it used his tyranny as the main excuse to occupy Iraq and start the war. Is that what he is referring to? If so, then there was no real need indeed. Perhaps Shaw believes that Iraq did not need the American soldiers. He does not feel needed since fewer people are friendly to him, and as in the chicken-egg controversy, his presence with guns and tanks is not perceived as a friendly gesture either. These first two lines set the tone of the poem. After the second line, we cut to the poet, behind him the ruins.
He speaks like the chorus of a Greek tragedy. He is not part of this story, but just a wise messenger. That is why the debris of calamity is behind him, he is beyond it and free from the confusion. He might also be the ghost of all the soldiers who are dead. Therefore he sees what no one can see, and he tells what no one dares to speak. His poem continues:

_We start out our day by readjusting our sights_

_And checking out the damage that happened from mortars last night_

They are readjusting their sights not only as a daily patrol, or to figure out what has taken place the night before. Sight is not just about vision, just like vision is not only about seeing through the eyes. The ideas they sleep with may change the next day. What they expect to find may surprise them. Readjustment is a necessity to survive. Readjustment is a requirement when conditions change. Sight readjustment may become more necessary when the lights are down at night. For darkness the human eye switches to another mood, or just wear special night goggles. However they need the readjustment even during the day, when the vision is supposed to be clear. The days are just like nights, and metaphorically as blurry, ambiguous, untrustworthy and nocturnal as the night. As the narrator of this horrific tragedy, the poet looks back and points out to us the damage from mortars.
Yeah, I think the ICDC is starting to snitch

Telling what goes where and which places to hit

ICDC is Iraqi Civil Defense Corps. They are Iraqi men under the command of Coalition Forces. They are considered to be “the cornerstone to building the new Iraq”.8

Apparently the poet, or the chorus, heard rumors about ICDC betraying them; snitching about the American soldiers’ whereabouts to the insurgents. As things look now, he is more prone to believe in the word on the street.

If they prove me otherwise, no intend to be shady

However he is not completely sure and does not mean to put the word out for the sake of it. He is aware that it may not be true. In fact there is hope in his words that they would prove him otherwise. He needs people around him he can trust, it would only make him happy to find out the rumor is false.

I blame it on this war that made me paranoid and crazy

It is so hard or even impossible to know whom to trust anymore. As he said before, even the day with all its light is ambiguous. If he is being paranoid and crazy, it is certainly this war’s fault but nobody else’s.

But this ain’t fact, it’s only theory

In my statements about the struggles, stress and pain every day we facing

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8 http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iraq/icdc.htm
Trials and tribulations daily we do

As a theory of paranoia and madness, it also reflects the pain and tribulations which became part of their daily routine. Extraordinary becomes the ordinary, and the mind is pushing its limits to adjust itself to it. Side effects come as paranoia and craziness.

And not only this life’s pain we wash away in our pool

In the previous sequences we saw them having fun, taking a dip and relaxing in the pool. What the camera is able to show may be deceptive sometimes. So it is the poet’s duty to help us see further. Even if they swim in the pool to release the stress, the water is inadequate to wash away their pain. The pain sticks on their bodies and souls.

When we take a dip, we try to stick to the script

Sticking to the script may be referring to the militarist discipline, all the rules they are obliged to obey, and the rules of engagement. These rules are to put them—and their feelings—into order, to robotize them so to speak. So even though they take a dip in the water, which is usually depicted as an experience of solitude, isolation and being in peace due to distancing yourself from everything that is outside of the underworld; even there they try to stick to the script of rules that control their action.

But when those guns start blazing and our friends get hit

That’s when our hearts start racing and our stomachs get woozy

However, when life starts to unfold with blazing guns and dying friends, when life proves to be unexpected and stays silent in their pursuit of meaning, like in Camus again, the rules become dysfunctional, irrational and meaningless. Rules cannot influence their emotions; the heart races and the stomach gives way to that fuzzy and uncomfortable feeling.
Cause for y’all this is just a show,
But we live in this movie.

Because that is when they realize that they are all alone out here, the epics fail them; the reality pulls the strings on its own accord, and while we all see him as the chorus, as the narrator of a story, this is not a show the way we think it is. Therefore the camera’s framing, that resembles the contours of a stage, fails us as well. If this is a movie, than all these people we see in it, the soldiers and non-soldiers are all trapped in this box, asking for the acknowledgement of the absurdity they are living in. Then gracefully he turns away and leaves the stage.

As we go back to the more real daily lives of soldiers, we get out of the trance and the two dimensional world of the theatre stage that Shaw and perhaps Tucker’s opening of this second part of the film put us in. More aggressive raids and more patrols come in a successive fashion. Despite the new gloomy and mature climate, Michael Tucker continues to juxtapose AFRTS news, mainly Rumsfeld’s statements with his footage. For example in one particular scene, he overlaps a general’s talk about how strong the soldiers’ armor is, with the image of their laundry drying on a rope. Coming to the end of the film, it is clear now that AFRTS is Rumsfeld’s voice, not the soldiers’. It is actually the only sound from the United States that we hear in the film, and it reinforces the sense of loneliness, or rather the sense of being forgotten.
Rumsfeld and the government’s presence can only be felt when AFRTS informs us and the soldiers about his actions and latest words. All these, after a while, become insignificant, and in fact something that the soldiers can easily prove wrong and make fun of. Tucker has been juxtaposing the Rumsfeld news with his own footage which contradicts the announced statement. At this point in the film, he no longer has to put two things together to display the inconsistency between what the world is told and what is really happening. In one instance, the soldiers sarcastically give him a performance, and without naming Rumsfeld, they demonstrate to the camera what they think of the $87 billion budget requested by the then President and found rational by Donald Rumsfeld in order to continue “the war on terror in Iraq.” After we listen to AFRTS, a soldier explains how a portion of this budget is used, pointing out certain parts of an army vehicle that had been attacked and seriously damaged that same day.

He is clearly being cynical when he supposedly brags about the secondary armor to “put on top [of] our thin-skinned Humvees” that this budget has provided for them. Then he knocks on the armor and appears to examine the material, only to inform the camera that the armor is made in Iraq and it is high quality metal. At this moment, Tucker joins in the show, it is obviously a decision made in the editing room, and he puts a caption that contradicts the soldier: “Armor made from scrap metal”.

There he is enjoying the sardonic comment of the soldier and participating in the spectacle that meant to make other soldiers who are watching them laugh; but at the same time he is securing that the soldier will evoke understanding in the viewer, so that they will recognize the magnitude of his sarcasm since it also reflects the severity of the situation that has been mocked. So it is also Tucker’s responsibility to make things clear for the viewer and justify the soldier’s performance. Once the soldier is done, he gives this cocky but challenging look to the camera and goes back to his friends who had been watching him all along and are now cracking up almost superfluously, some of them unable to stand.

It is as if, if they stop laughing, they have to cry. There’s no other feeling in between when you are faced with an ironic and frustrating situation such as this. Right as the emotions reach the crescendo level, the scene freezes and the first line of a poem is heard;

*Be strong without it, when people finally see my pain*

*Switches lives to see why we insane*
With these lines, the whole meaning of the frozen image changes drastically. The Kuleshov effect emerges between these lines and the image of one soldier lying on the ground, bent double, bursting into laughter. With the words “pain” and “insanity”, the cheerfulness of the soldier laughing dissolves into the metaphorical image of a man writing in pain or laughing like a crazy person whose insanity is caused by a tremendous pain. In either case, the image switches from one aspect of the life of this soldier to the other, revealing the pain underneath this laughter. Once this pain is finally seen by “the people” through “switching lives” which inferson an act of empathy, they may not hold on to the laughter so Shaw wishes to be strong without it.

After these lines, once again the poet makes his entrance. It would have been exactly like that had this been a tragedy that was put on stage. In this case we cut from the frozen image of laughing soldiers to Shaw. Again the ruins are behind him, only this time he is sitting with his gun handle resting on the ground.

*We wearing clothes a week in a row*

*This ain’t a thug thing, it’s ‘cause we’re at war*

*Dark colors to cover mud stains*

*The world’s weight is starting to weaken our back*

*Considered a ravenous beast*

Here again, the poet attempts to show us what lies underneath, a plea for us to see what may not be visible to the eye. The circumstances of war have turned them into
something they are not. They no longer resemble their true selves, or how the rest of the world, including their families and friends are used to seeing them. This is a deception. Since they cannot change clothes every day, like a normal person is expected to be doing, they wear dark clothes that match the surrounding so that they can hide. Dark colors also conceal the mud stains that indicate of the hardship and pain they are in. Yet the stains are perhaps making them look darker and grimmer. This hurts them deeply as they feel the whole world over their shoulders. In order not to be crushed under the load, they crouch down, almost on all fours. Like that they look like an animal. Gradually they are losing their assets that make them human. They kill, they hide, yet they become “a ravenous beast”. It is worse than that: they are considered as one; and since they are not beasts, unfortunately they can feel how they are perceived.

*If we just launch an attack, lose-lose situation we face*

*In anticipation and hating*

*Although we hunted by Satan,*

Even though it is the residuals of the Saddam regime they are fighting against, which he calls Satan, because of what they have become, after a while it turns into a fight where no one wins. When such is the case, their “anticipation” and the “hate” that they feed on fail them. Hate casts a shadow on the sight and makes what they anticipated become ambiguous and untrustworthy. Moreover, as in Camus’ absurd, what they anticipated by means of hate corresponds to nothing in life.

*Where frustration abating*

*The situation we facing*

*Not only follow but chasing*
Those moving with hatred,

The frustration is so acute that it makes even the baleful situation that they are in bearable. The frustration not only obediently follows those who are enslaved by their own hatred, but it also feeds off of this fatal feeling and gets stronger, begins to chase them as if they are just the prey of their own emotions.

That’s why we feel so neglected

I’m protecting life in the present

In the middle of all these, those who try to hold on to their humanity feel left out and forgotten; not only because they become insignificant among all the mess, but also because they are reduced to numbers which originally started the process of dehumanization and an inevitable neglect. In the end, that is his life. It is survival and he belies or disavows the original meaning of his existence there; that is to protect other people’s lives. There is no past or future. The present is so maddening and so alive that it is only you and the instinctive emergence of preventing your own death.

The film cuts to a medium shot, displaying more of the ruins. It does that as if to emphasize “this” that Shaw points out:

No need to like this, but please respect it.

This is life.

“This” is the destruction that we don’t need to like; but what is underneath we shall respect. Respect requires remembrance. Zooming out of this particular war, “this is life”
just like he says. Those ruins are also piles of our memories as humans. Human history has a massive collection of destruction and deepest sorrows. Respect and recollection brings acknowledgement, and perhaps form the strongest weapon we might think that can prevent a catastrophic future.

Shaw’s last line “This is life” and the image of himself overlap an image of dawn. Tucker uses dissolve a lot in order to accentuate transitions and links between situations and people.

The dissolve effect also declares the inseparability and the intertwined destinies of good and evil, right and wrong, friend and foe. After the dissolve, the director exemplifies this ambiguity and the frustration that Shaw alludes to. One of the Batteries is faced with the alleged betrayal of their former interpreter Mohammad, known as “Mike Tyson”, whom they worked with in several cases and supposedly became good friends. Mohammad has been accused of identifying and photographing targets for insurgents. Tucker’s own voice over narrative one more time refers to the theme of ambiguity: “Nothing is black and white anymore”; or as in Shaw’s poem, “dark colors cover the mud stain”. Truth and commonsense are obscured, they are somewhere under the mud stain. Tyson is more likely to be sent to the Abu Gharib Prison.

The film ends with the spectacle of raid on a suspected mortar cell, followed by square-interviews and Tucker’s departure from Iraq with the wounded soldiers. The raid is the most aggressive one we see throughout the film and the camera work significantly
adjusts itself to the intensity of the action. Non-diegetic sounds include guitar distortion and the sound of a helicopter. The raid is divided into segments depending on the aggression. In the first segment, which is the sudden entrance of the soldiers and the roughing up of almost everyone in this café, the camera is on the shoulder and bouncing considerably. Even the boys are pressed on the ground. One wonders, does everything we saw so far justify this treatment? Who are we, as viewers to empathize with in this sequence?

The image freezes and we cut to a couple of minutes later. The mood shifts to something milder which accordingly influences the camera’s sensation. Now everyone is sitting with their hands up.

Soldiers begin to search people, one by one. It is humiliating treatment for the Iraqis and the camera captures the anger that arises from this insult. Respect to elders is a primary teaching in most Eastern cultures and no translation is necessary to recognize the anger on the face of a white bearded old man, and the tightly stretched hand of another one.
After the search is done, we cut to the people they detained and put in the back of a truck. Detainees are loaded on top of each other like sacks. Only their feet are visible to the camera.

The raid ends with the Lieutenant apologizing to the rest of the crowd in the café for the inconvenience they caused; ironically their arms are still submissively folded above their heads. Lieutenant says goodbye, giving them the traditional Islamic salute. It seems like the tension is suddenly replaced by waving hands. However when the viewer pauses and looks carefully to the faces, it will be apparent that this is a combination of relief, fear, anger and frustration.

As the soldiers leave the café, Wilf’s acoustic guitar solo begins to hit the minor chords. The square interviews begin to come in succession like individual Q&A sessions. The
questions are vocalized by Tucker himself and appear on a black screen as a caption. They vary from “Will it be hard to give up this place?”, “Do people at home understand what is going on here?”, “How do you feel about soldiers dying here?” to “How do you rationalize the loss of life?” These are actually the questions that this chapter’s writer only thinks and the film tries to respond to. Out of the many, SPC Tom Susdorf, the intelligence analyst’s words harmonize with Wilf’s moving tune as he talks about soldiers dying.

Looking down, with a heavy hearted face, Tom says “I don’t think anywhere in history has somebody killed somebody else and something better has come out of it. It’s just not possible.”

The interviews end as we cut to the source of the sad guitar tune. Here we see Wilf with his Iraqi best friend Basil. Basil is an old man that works as an attorney during the day and an interpreter for the soldiers at night. They rarely talk and Basil usually enjoys his cigarette, silently listens to Wilf’s guitar while his eyes engulfed in thoughts. Music is a communicator between them; and in fact between viewers and them, and perhaps between Iraqis and them as well. Two different worlds are sharing the fatigue and frustration that this war brought on to them. Basil’s silent watch mirrors our own speechlessness. Once again the film ends with Tucker getting on the plane to go back home.
From the first sequence to the last, *Gunner Palace* insistently stresses the discrepancies between life in Iraq that Michael Tucker’s camera captures, and what is presented by the officials and the media. The whole film, as real as it is, acquires a poetic musical character which inevitably turns into an expressive tragedy. Obtaining almost theatrical performances from the soldiers, the film does not blind us to the realities of this war; on the contrary by accentuating the ‘mimetic’ quality of tragedy and film he exposes the undeniable fallacy of our understanding of the war; according to the film this is mostly due to the distractive and paralyzing bombardment of information coming from the media and other second hand sources. On the other hand, the cinematic and theatrical methods of representation help the director to conceive a particular acknowledgement in the viewers by juxtaposing the dichotomy in the truth; and he is doing this by simply putting the two simultaneous and essentially related worlds together: our world as viewers and our perception of the Iraq War – as also represented in *Full Battle Rattle* in chapter three- and their world in Iraq and how they experience it for real. Tucker creates this collusion of the two worlds, our world and the soldiers’ world, within the world of film. This collusion, thanks to the illuminative world of film, naturally brings out the inconsistency and the absurdity it leads to. In this sense, he is building a film set out of reality and communicating to us by means of film, revealing the determinants of our perceptions through the agency of the camera.
To me, the most crucial and unique attribution of *Gunner Palace* and its director transpires half way into the film, when Michael Tucker returns home, experiences the change in his comprehension of the world and the war which is complemented by the death of a close friend. The notion of death is important here, since it not only makes the consequences of this war incontestably real but it also stabilizes the change in Tucker. I read this sequence as an abstract representation of Tucker’s mind. It also functions as his initiation to the film as a character. That is why for the first time, the camera shows him as a corporeal presence. However the uncanny and dream-like representation of his material existence deepens the meaning of his inclusion to the film and renders the scene multi dimensional. The aforementioned brief sequence where we partially see, or rather feel him in his kitchen and his study, in my understanding, is also our initiation to the film and to the war for the first time. Therefore our identification with the director becomes strong and his Iraq experience nestles in our memories as well. Moreover, after several sequences bustling with action and human interaction, this visit to Tucker’s home and the way it is reflected on the screen compels us to conceive of Iraq and the previous sequences more convincing, hence more real. The way his home appears through the lens of his new state of mind, becomes a micro-representation of our ‘perfect’ world as well. This is the same world that “encapsulated” us in *Full Battle Rattle*; it is the same sterile world from where we previously looked at the other worlds. From where we stand now, our early –false- perception of the world, established and distorted by the bombardment of information we are exposed to before our *Gunner Palace* experience, appears segregated from the truth.
The film opens with a dated and yet timeless image and it ends the same way suggesting the continuity of things even when the camera stops running. Tucker, narrating the closure of the film says: “Unlike a movie, war has no end.” In this instance we see the preparation of the Army aircraft for the take off. Tucker here, right before the screen fades to black only to end the film, returns to his observer position as he moves away from them. It is as if he does not want to be a part of this closure because even though he goes back to the States in that plane, his journey, like ours, has no end. This also feels like a reattribute to a soldier from earlier in the film who said that once the film is over, we will go back to the kitchen and take our food out of the microwave and forget about the whole experience. By framing the film with two similar images, the director assures and insures that the film - by the agency of its existence - and we will remember, and what is exposed will be preserved.

At this point recalling names like Donald Rumsfeld and Abu Ghraib prison, which are merely mentioned by Tucker, the readers of this work, as well as its author, proceed to enter into another story from Iraq that takes place in that very prison. This last documentary will complete the cycle I inclined to create. Going back to the talking head style, the next chapter, accompanied by the experiences gained in the previous ones, joins Errol Morris in his thorough examination of the “preserved” and “exposed” images of the infamous Abu Ghraib scandal.

In 2004, a scandal about Abu Ghraib Prison in Iraq regarding the shameful and inhuman interrogation techniques used by the 372nd Military Police Company of the U.S. Army and some of the U.S. Governmental Agencies have been revealed through a criminal investigation and shook the world public opinion. Eleven of the Company’s members, referred by the media and the Army as “bad apples” were charged and found guilty for taking photographs of the abuse and their ostensible involvement seen in these images. None of the governmental officials and high-ranking members of the U.S. Army was charged. As for the murderers of the Iraqi prisoner Al-Jamadi, they were not exposed nor even tried. Only eleven low-ranking soldiers, though they were certainly not innocent, were picked on as scapegoats since people were eager to see someone answer to the consequences and close the case. What is equally striking is that the U.S. media did not find it interesting enough to announce when the first reports of abuse came to light in 2004. It was not until several months after the investigation that the media broadcasted and printed the stories and exposed the pictures of the abuse. It appeared that all the guilt and shame was laid on these eleven, almost in an effort to firmly isolate the incident. In that sense it is Errol Morris’ concern in the Standard Operating Procedure (S.O.P.) (2008) to ponder whether this was a cover-up operation achieved by the help of photographs, and in that sense to examine the power of photography within this particular scandal.

The scandal immediately reminds me of Winter Soldier Investigation and the My Lai massacre which was at first presented by the U.S. Army as an isolated incident. It was the goal of the investigation and the film Winter Soldier to explain American public
that this was in fact an established policy of the state and that My Lai was not the only place where such atrocities took place. As claimed by the Vietnam Veterans against the War and the film collective that achieved the project, it was a truth-telling effort. They used photographs taken by American soldiers while they were in Vietnam in order to provide solid, visual evidence supporting their testimonies. The images were either for training purposes or for private use. Ironically enough, the same kind of photographs taken by American soldiers in Iraq for non-official purposes more than forty years after Vietnam, had been used to prosecute them. While photographs and videos were considered reliable in *Winter Soldier*, Errol Morris in *S.O.P.* takes the standpoint of a skeptic as to where the photographs stand in revealing the truth.

The photographs and the soldiers who took them are the only evidence and witnesses the world was given regarding the scandal. Most of the people Errol Morris interviewed in *S.O.P.* had been demoted and / or punished. At this point, Morris actually reopens the Abu Ghraib case which he finds incomplete, pulls out over two hundred pictures taken in the prison, adds more images and enactments to support the narration and for almost two hours establishes a sterile and uninterrupted experience for us to reconsider what these people have to say five years later. Aside from the enactments, his use of still images, non-diagetic sound and voice over narration strongly bring Chris Marker’s 1962 film *La Jetée* to mind, This story of time travel was constructed from optically printed photographs like a photomontage. Therefore *S.O.P.*, by traveling in time by means of photographs, becomes a historical travelogue taking advantage of cinematic devices. At the same time, though, the film cross-examines the photographs or questions what was made out of them. This is from the point of view of a filmmaker who, without a
doubt, knows quite a lot about interpreting an image possibly better than anyone involved in the investigation. This unique treatment of the images clearly shows the importance Morris gives to the form, as well as the content of his films. As Ira Jaffe implies, form defines our experience of a Morris film as much as the content does (Jaffe, 2009, p.20).

An Academy Award winning documentary filmmaker Errol Morris has been known not only for his challenging and masterfully crafted documentaries but also for his use of a device called interrotron. Combining the concepts of terror and interview, interrotron is an adapted teleprompter technology combining a screen placed in front of the lens of the camera. That way Morris and his subjects maintain eye-contact by looking at each other’s reflection on the teleprompter, while at the same time looking directly into the camera. In the meantime the viewers of the interview are addressed directly by the interviewee who in this context becomes the storyteller simply because the interotron method, by its nature, allows the story to be told from a first person perspective. It enables Morris and the viewer to examine the nature of the person, while at the same time reveals “how people see themselves… through how they use language” (Rosenbaum, 1999). In this respect S.O.P. brings the “bad apples” into view by means of their words and has them open up in front of the camera, Morris, and the members of the public. Before this film none of them have had as personal an interaction as this one with the ‘condemned’. As much as his subjects are given the narrator’s role, Morris has his own agenda, and much like his voice interrupting the illusion of a one-on-one private conversation between us and the first person narrator, the editing of the film drives us and the film’s material to the ultimate question he had in mind that motivated him to make
this film in the first place: “Do photographs reveal the truth to us, or do they, in fact, hide the truth?”

The film of an interviewer starts with Timothy Dugan, a civilian interrogator for the CACI Corporation, who was on duty in Abu Ghraib in 2003. Dugan is a key character and it takes Morris so much effort to convince him into being part of the film. Dugan’s discomfort is so apparent that, contrary to almost all characters in the film, he constantly turns his eyes away from the camera, away from Morris gazing at him from the teleprompter. He does not seem to enjoy being on either side of an interrogation; and thus this interview, especially Morris’ style, may explain his uneasiness.

Extremely disturbed by his experience as an interrogator in Iraq, Dugan’s last words are juxtaposed with images of a sunset at an unknown place. These images of the wisps of clouds and soothing mountain silhouettes conflict with Dugan’s sarcastic comment at the end of the segment: “I wouldn’t recommend a vacation to Iraq anytime soon.” Whatever peaceful feelings or get away plans they may promote by means of another communication medium; in the world of Errol Morris and Tim Dugan even the sky evokes suspicion.

This series of images of the sunset gradually becomes the suggestive credit sequence. Sunset intrinsically signals the connotative meaning of the ending of a day.
However with the scent of ambiguity that is transmitted by Morris’ questioning mind, these pictures also generate a discomforting sense of infinity, timelessness and accordingly, obscurity. Discomfort is intensified by the agitating piano score, while obscurity and timelessness emerge out of the very essence of the sunset: it is the familiar, good old sky that we are looking at, and it can be anywhere in the world. As a frequent symbol of endlessness, the sky is also the only part of endlessness, or rather the universe, that we are able to look at with naked eye from where we stand on earth, instigating the idea that there is more beyond what we see. So the sky might also be hiding something from us. To take it a little bit further, capturing the image of the sky which represent limitlessness and restricting only a small portion of it within a frame, also represents the acknowledgement of the inherent incapability of our sense of vision in fully grasping the extent of the universe. Even so, as intelligent creatures, we acknowledge this restraint and the physical existence of a beyond. So in this sense, examining a small portion of an incomprehensibly large phenomenon may imply or even reveal certain things about it. However the reliability of implications will always be controversial. Therefore photography and the photographer play on this very idea when hiding or drawing attention to a particular point by limiting the perception of the viewer. As opposed to our inherent restriction in our visual comprehension, this is a deliberate constriction in an attempt to focus the viewer’s attention to a selected area that stands for the point being made. Going back to the concept of endlessness, by nature of our relation to the extent of the universe, we are not capable of fully comprehending this phenomenon and attain its secrets. Nevertheless it is our perpetual ideal to understand the universe and solve its mysteries. Photography, in this sense, by freezing – and isolating - a critical fragment in
life may enable us to examine something otherwise ephemeral, and help us speculate on the whole. Since our visual perception in photography and life is physically—and for some people mentally—limited, in speculating on the whole, we try to broaden our perception with the employment of other senses we have. In the DVD commentary Errol Morris compares the photographic images from Abu Ghraib to “peepholes” we dare to open into the wall of “history” that sometimes hides the truth from us. However for Morris what is intriguing, and perhaps what is much more valuable a resource in getting closer to the truth is to consider what we do not see in the images rather than what we do see. Things that are absent in these images seem to be either removed from our attention, or rather deemphasized. In that sense, Morris is also questioning what the investigators were and perhaps the whole American public was bound to and preferred to see in them. These images from Abu Ghraib prison were accepted as legal evidence which were found sufficient enough to jail most of the soldiers we are going to meet in the documentary. What they did not—prefer to—see may lead us to other people who should seriously be held accountable for what happened in the prison. So there may even be a deliberate negligence of the truth, which is what we don’t see in these pictures. By re-introducing the well-known photographs and by having those who are in them and those who took them narrate the images, Morris not only humanizes those that are condemned by the media and public opinion, but indines the viewer to reconsider almost every aspect of the story. So what these photographs are not showing is more critical than what they reveal. Why we did not consider this issue from that perspective before Morris suggested us to, is a moral question we should deal with on our own.
As the credits roll, the last image of a sunset pulls back into the infinity of the black background. This is perhaps the world of film or the still unknown depths of our minds to which all visual arts at some point apply. Morris continuously plays on this idea of ambiguity and our incapacitated perception in comprehending an image. The last image of sunset blends in a group of small images that appears on the screen; they seem to flow independently in this magical universe of visual expression. Indeed this universe of human creativity is endless, albeit comprises of products that essentially expose one of our physical incompetence.

As the music gains momentum, the orchestrated score suggests a supernatural scene from a film where photographs are animated by the magical wand of a wizard, mesmerizing the audiences. Similar to the universe where our relatively small planet carefully floats, in the world of photography and film there will always be unknowns. Film, for that matter, is indeed a world full of fantasies and illusions, stimulated by magic lanterns. However this macrocosm of images in the credit sequence, or rather the idea of infinity represented in each image does not seem to augur anything auspicious. The beautiful yet uncanny image of the sky, with an ambiguous backdrop of blackness, signalizes the closure of a dreadful day and an inevitable beginning of another one. This new day may merely be a continuation of horrific incidents, piling up on top of the nightmares of prisoners and some of the members of the Military Police (MP) in the Abu Ghraib prison.
Following the credits we begin meeting the characters. Name captions do not appear until Morris finds the right moment to expose their identities. The digitized name captions match the digitized blue prints of the prison, put the characters inside the prison complex and therefore foreshadow the association between them and Abu Ghraib. With the exception of the Army Special Agent Brent Pack and the civilian interrogator Tim Dugan, all characters that speak in front of the camera are the former members of the U.S. Army. They were labeled as “bad apples” by the G. W. Bush administration, demoted and/or jailed due to their involvement in the scandal. Other names that we hear, who are also directly related to the story, are either in prison, dead or they were in the higher ranks of the Army or the government at the time this film was made.

If Dugan defines the mood, then I cannot think of anyone more appropriate than Janis Karpinski, the demoted Brigadier General of Military Police, to launch the story of the prison. She was responsible for reconstructing the penitentiary system in Iraq, and as the commanding officer she was in charge of Abu Ghraib as well. The killing of Saddam Hussein’s sons Uday and Qusay was a key operation and yet made it harder to locate Saddam Hussein’s whereabouts. After that, ‘finding Saddam’ becomes the major interest for the United States. Karpinski’s story begins right here and Morris links this incident to acynical representation of his opinion on the U.S. foreign policy. Two playing cards with Udah’s and Qusay’s pictures on them fall vertically on the wooden floor in slow motion. Two strategically important cards are lost. As much as it was a blow to Saddam and his dominance over Iraq, the fact that crucial information on Saddam has been lost for good. We will come across the same pattern in the course of the film as the politics of the United States in Iraq is apparently nothing but a dangerous card game to Morris. Another
curious thing about this image is the fact that we do not see the players. Just like in the photographs of Abu Ghraib, we solely see the cards that are being used rather than those who actually shuffle the deck.

Karpinski continues to add significant details to her story, which gradually define the outline of the notorious prison, and her words are highlighted by still images and non-diegetic sounds. Following the deaths, the then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld visits to Iraq and wants to inspect the prison facilities. This is a very interesting moment for those who have seen Michael Tucker’s *Gunner’s Palace*. The 2/3 Artillery, introduced in chapter four, move in to Udah’s palace right after his death. So in another dimension, *Gunner Palace* starts. Although there are no visual materials of Rumsfeld, his voice is a significant element in Tucker’s documentary, and he uses it in order to create or reinforce sarcasm. This usage reveals the irony embedded in the sequences. *S.O.P.*, on the other hand, uses images of Rumsfeld rather than his voice. While Michael Tucker deconstructs the context of his present moment with the help of the voices from the past, Errol Morris uses still images of a specific incident that had already happened. His deconstruction of the context is supported by the enactment inserts. These enactments appear to be his way of studying history, as well as his mental and intellectual journey to Iraq. The story of Rumsfeld’s arrival is told by Karpinski and visualized by the pictures that show him smiling at the soldiers, shaking Karpinski’s hand and walking about the
Abu Ghraib prison. The image and the non-diegetic sound of a helicopter represent the actual one that brought him to Baghdad. In the first group of pictures that follows, Rumsfeld’s grin, his relaxed posture and how he holds his jacket at his back signify his joyful introduction to the American soldiers in Iraq.

Next group of images shows him examining the hanging facilities of the prison, used by Saddam regime. His jacket is still hanging behind his back but his other hand rests on his hip. This pose can be interpreted as a sign of concern, as he is clearly not smiling. After spending some time in the hanging facilities, his discomfort becomes more apparent. The next image reveals his frowning face, listening to Karpinski with his arms crossed. According to Karpinsky, Rumsfeld cancels his scheduled visits to the other parts of the prison, and asks a soldier to take pictures of them for him. As a matter of fact this is exactly what happened. The soldiers took pictures of the prison and of their daily routines which shocked the world.
Little does Karpinski know that this visit would determine the prison’s fate. General Miller, whom Karpinski mentions with an exaggerated mockery, comes to visit the day after Rumsfeld. Karpinski has huge facial expressions that one can decode based on certain emotions. It is obvious that she does not want us to undermine this next visit. Her contempt for Miller is piercing through the camera. She calls him as “the guru of interrogation and obtaining actionable intelligence”. According to his plan, Abu Ghraib was supposed to be like “Gitmo” which led to the arrival of contract interrogators, military people who are mainly from Guantanamo Bay.

There is no apparent zooming motion because Morris divides the interview into segments, and later, connects them by fade to black transitions. Although it is noticeable that the more agitated Karpinski gets, the closer her image becomes. Her restless figure sometimes goes out of the frame. We know she is addressing Morris but there is also a sense of great effort on her side to convince us as well, into believing her. She looks almost desperate but curiously in control of herself. Perhaps she is deliberately exaggerating, assuming it looks more genuine this way. On the other hand, this does not mean that she is not telling the truth; yet she does not want it to be a tossup either.

Generally speaking, the structure and the atmosphere of the interviews, with a mono colored background and no other distraction, put the people forward. Disregarding Morris’ presence for a moment, this particular arrangement heightens the directness of
the unidirectional dialogues and intensifies our relationship to the speakers. Now, it is up to the viewers to decide whether they are telling the truth or not.

Karpinski’s statement recounts the functional formation of the Abu Ghraib that we know, and depicts a general outline of the facility. After these two visits, the prison becomes the interrogation center of Iraq, and it is used for “higher value military detainees”. Next, Morris presents the first image of the prison. This is a digitally manipulated bird’s eye view of the entire facility. Soon, we will be inside examining, and sometimes through reenactments, testimonies and pictures, witnessing the past.

The so-called bad apples will be our tour guides as we take a glance at some infamous pictures of the scandal. Sabrina Harman is probably the most important character in the investigation and in this film because she is the one who took most of these pictures. She is also one of the several soldiers convicted by the U.S. Army in connection with the scandal, and she spends six months in prison. In the course of his research, Morris finds out about the letters that Sabrina sent to her partner from Abu Ghraib. They are almost as important as the pictures, and given proper treatment within the film. In the letters that are shown, we see amateur sketches of hanging facilities or the specific cell block that Sabrina writes about. Coming after the satellite shot image of the facility, these raw sketches are the second group of visuals that depicts the prison. From a bird’s eye view, we descend to see smaller but significant details. Before we see Sabrina,
we hear her voice that reads parts of a letter she wrote on her first day at Abu Ghraib. The letter is dated as October 2003. This crucial detail refers to the time dimension and it is reinforced by an elegant close up shot of the stamp, printed on the actual envelope. It is followed by the image of the original letter in Sabrina’s handwriting.

Her lines, lit by a dramatic light, are followed by the camera as she reads them. Her voice is so calm and hoarse that it is as if she is reading it to herself. This is Sabrina in 2008, reading something that she wrote five years ago. The letter is a genuine evidence of how Sabrina and possibly other young soldiers must have felt to be in this terrible environment where 30,000 human beings were killed by Saddam’s regime and everything about it goes against the Geneva Convention. Morris goes back to these letters multiple times in the course of the film. Prior to the exhaustive pictures and specific incidents, the film constructs the context of this incubus-like and almost surreal experience. It is surreal in the sense that presumably none of these horrific events would have taken place under rational circumstances. Morris does not try to clear them of their responsibilities but most definitely he focuses on questioning who put them into this position in the first place, why they were so quickly stigmatized as monsters and the case is closed. Therefore, this preliminary introduction of the “bad apples”, where we hear how they felt and reacted in their first days, is not only for the sake of a chronologically accurate narrative, but also for granting these young people the opportunity to humanize themselves in our eyes and
therefore to demand a fair evaluation. A link of sympathy is constructed, and for some
instances an empathetic interaction rises up between us and them. This provokes us to
think about the elements that are excluded in the photographs. To punch up this link and
create a stronger rhetorical emphasis Morris employs short but dramatic enactments, most
of which are visual figurations of emotions, dreams, or significant details of the instances
recalled by the characters.

Next person we meet is the then sergeant Javal Davis, who is very communicative
as he creatively uses his mouth to make sound effects. He is very good with language
while depicting both physical and emotional conditions in an actual third-person
storyteller style. With his idiosyncratically descriptive style he describes the prison as the
way it was when he first came to the neighborhood. Morris, as expected, supports the
narrative with images that correspond to Javal’s words.

This is not only a strange land but there is also something so horribly unreal about the
degree of devastation there. The soldiers in the Military Police Force had to stay in the
prison and they had to stay inside the cells. Almost every day there were mortar attacks,
and the prison was their only shelter. We now have an idea about how it must have felt to
live in Abu Ghraib and ready to see more about the living conditions. Through the
pictures we will observe the dramatic effect these conditions may have on the behaviors,
especially when they are combined with social and sexual pressures already involved in
the rigid world of the military. Javal is the first person to talk about the treatment of the prisoners. From the main portion of the prison to the tier 1-A – also known as the “hard site” - and tier 1-B where they kept the intelligence detainees, Javal remembers the first time he saw the naked prisoners with sacks or their own underpants over their head, hand cuffed in disturbing positions or tortured with sleep and food deprivation. He finds out that these scenes are known as military intelligence technique.

As we go further, the stories become more personal and complex. One of the major and publicly well-known characters of the scandal, Lynndie England, appears as a troubled and highly disturbed young woman. Her story is about a young and ignorant girl who falls in love with the wrong guy who made her do wrong things. With the introduction of Lynndie, infamous photographs begin to spill out in an irrepressible speed since she is one of the most well known characters in them. Therefore her exposure legitimizes the exhibition. Morris also changes his style there and does not wait to put the name caption. On top of her name, he adds two of her pictures that were taken when she was on duty in the prison. This juxtaposition of two Lynndies from different time periods, helps the viewers recognize the interviewee and establish a cognitive bond between the unpleasant newspaper headlines they may recall and this woman addressing them.

Lynndie no longer look like the smiling twenty years old girl with short hair in the photographs. She is extremely uptight; it does not seem to be easy for her to smile. It is
likely to reckon her as still angry, feeling humiliated, and under a considerable weight of
guilt. As much as she seems to blame her then boy friend Charles Graner on a regular
basis for almost everything, she cannot keep her eye contact with the camera as she
indicates that they knew the prevalent treatment of the prisoners was unusual, weird and
wrong but “the example was already set, that’s what [they] saw”. Can she still blame her
own inaction on Graner? Is she aware of her passivity, and are we to judge her for not
opposing to what she saw and what she was told to do, considering the extraordinary
conditions and her inexperience at the time?

Sabrina Harman, on the other hand, looks more comfortable in communicating to
the camera. It is her turn now to speak for the pictures she took.

With her, the images of torture begin to show up. In another letter she wrote to her
partner Kelly back home, it is Sabrina who defines what she saw as “molestation” and
that she has to “record” what was going on. With a tracking shot the camera forces us to
follow her lines, and then it zooms in on the word “record” for emphasis. In this instance,
Morris’ intervention and authoritative direction become fully apparent. He clearly
expects us to regard her as a documenter and unlike what most people thought of her and the rest of them, he wants the viewer to acknowledge that they are not devoid of morality and conscience. Her letters show how confused, emotionally and mentally disturbed she was about being in that place. She remembers a man with his underwear on his head, hand cuffed backwards to a window while others were questioning him. Shrugging her shoulders she points out that this is when she started taking pictures. After that, the image of the detainee that she has just described appears before on the screen. This woman that we are looking at has witnessed many scenes like this one, and documenting what she sees becomes her mission “to prove that the U.S. is not what you think”.

As we try to recover from these two images, Sabrina looks directly into the camera and says “you probably wouldn’t believe me unless I had something to show you.” Thus makes it almost morally mandatory for us to really look at the pictures. If she has proof, “you can’t deny it”. This remark revolves around the proof value of photography and Errol Morris thrusts in a brief enactment with a jump cut, surprising us with the flash of a camera. The insert, to our surprise, turns the lens to us and then the camera takes our picture. Hands holding the camera are wearing latex gloves, like a forensic photographer. Is that what Sabrina is? Furthermore, if Morris wanted us to feel like being photographed or rather documented by a forensic, who does he identify us with?
In the same letter that we have just seen, Sabrina asks a critical question: “what if it was me in their shoes?” This clearly denotes the feelings of empathy and sympathy: two fellow-feelings that Morris expects us to generate as well. He inserts one of the pictures she took to underline Sabrina’s self-questioning. This is a close–up shot of a prisoner wearing woman underwear over his head.

At this point in the film, Sabrina’s initiative brings to mind a social psychological phenomenon known as the bystander effect, briefly discussed in the introduction. This is in fact applicable to all the characters, including us, in this film. As a matter of fact, with that camera flash exploded in our eyes, we are already included in the narrative, as a bystander. The bystander effect may create a diffusion of responsibility. It occurs in the presence of a group of people where you may expect someone else to intervene and thus feel less responsible. In a hierarchical environment such as the military, it is more likely for individuals, especially low-ranking reservists to refrain from doing anything. Also in the female soldiers’ case there is the additional stress element of gender disparity. As a female soldier and a lesbian struggling to survive in a highly masculine world, Sabrina
was capable of identifying herself with the prisoners. It can be applied to Lynndie’s case as well since she was severely subjected to Graner’s domination as seen in the pictures and as told by Lynndie herself. However, also because she was subjugated to Graner’s control and “love”, we do not know of many instances where we see her taking the initiative. It is also possible that with the dehumanization of prisoners, by stripping them naked and putting underwear or sacks over their heads, and the soldiers’ apparent power over them may reduce elements of empathy and help them feel more compatible with and able to compete with men. Sabrina’s torn mind is a good example for both instances. She proves to be more understanding and quick to recognize molestation. These feelings will naturally bring in some sense of compassion to her actions. In the DVD commentary, Errol Morris refers to his private conversations with some of the former prisoners of Abu Ghraib who recall her as being nice and compassionate. “Compassion is much like sympathy in that it stems from the suffering of another, but it also includes the need or desire to alleviate suffering” (Eisenberg, 2002.) Even though she could not or did not do anything concrete to alleviate suffering, given the circumstances, documenting the torture has served its purpose. In fact, the role that Sabrina takes upon herself also makes her some sort of a whistleblower who when confronted with a behavior she considers as unacceptable and wrong, takes action and documents things. It is true that were it not for her pictures, we might have never had a solid proof of this abuse. The other side of her, however, poses for the camera, several times, smiling over the dead body of a tortured prisoner or the human pyramid made out of naked prisoners.
It is almost fifteen minutes into the film that we are locked up in the prison, getting into the ever disturbing world of photographs, and finding out more about specific incidents which the chapter will elaborate on. The prisoner with the nick name of “Gus” is the first famous case the film studies. The story includes the prisoner, a tie-down strap, Lynndie and Chuck Graner who was at the time and still is in jail. Gus was a regular prisoner but mistaken by some soldiers as a politically important detainee. His pictures with Lynndie became one of the most famous photographs from Abu Ghraib. The incident of putting the strap is first told by Chuck Graner’s current wife, Megan Ambuhl Graner, who was there with them as military police and having an affair with Graner at the time he was dating Lynndie. Megan understandably does not seem so comfortable speaking about it.

Chuck Graner puts the strap around Gus’s head who does not want to stand up while naked, and then he hands it to Lynndie and takes her infamous pictures with Gus. Contrary to what people may think, Megan makes it clear that Lynndie was not dragging him on the floor, that it was just a pose. When Lynndie details the story, it is supported
by Morris’ reenactments. Both Megan and Lynndie speak about Gus crawling on the floor, but their story is more centered on Graner rather than Gus. That could be why Morris inserts an extreme close up of a naked male body, crawling by the camera, accompanied by a disturbing music and bitter sighs of a man.

The scene she vividly describes later comes into view in the photograph. Megan is in the picture as well, watching the scene. What is interesting about both of these women’s testimonies is that none of them speaks of feeling guilty about not doing anything and meekly being obedient. Both underline the fact that Lynndie did not pull the strap. To Morris, this picture is an ironic representation of the American foreign policy; and if that is the case are we then Megan the Bystander, watching and validating this policy?

There will be several other instances like this that will be brought up in the following segments; but at this point Morris brings Brent Pack to our attention. He was one of the chief prosecution witnesses, working for the Criminal Investigation Division
of the Army as a forensic expert, and I believe he is a man that Morris identifies himself with.

Pack’s job was to analyze thousands of pictures from Abu Ghraib and establish a chronological order in order to figure out whose camera took which pictures, to detect prisoner abuse, to determine which people involved or were present as witnesses at the time of abuse. Much like what Morris aims to do in this film, Pack too tries to make sense of the pictures and he does that by putting them into timely and spatial order. The difference is that he was only concerned with what the photographs show rather than questioning what they don’t, and why they don’t. So in this sense, their interview and the encounter of a director and a “forensic” editor is significant as to how these investigations intersect. Tapping on this commonality and professional association, Errol Morris takes us back to the universe of images, only to display a sophisticated, science-fiction like representation of Pack’s system of analysis.

“The pictures spoke thousand [sic] of words” says Brent Pack, but in order to figure out what story they were telling him, he needed a chronological regulation as well. Using the
modern technology he lines up all images and establishes a time line between them.

Morris visualizes this process of extraordinary analysis using graphics. As a film director, his excitement for the digital photography and cameras is prominent in the way he depicts and spends time on this high tech puzzle solver. With the digital imprint of each photograph, Pack was able to catalogue individual incidents, determine when an event started and when it ended, or what went on in other parts of the prison at the time of a certain event.

As Pack speaks over the graphic demonstration of his research, the sharp difference between what these two men were looking for in the pictures becomes evident. Where Pack asks who else was there at the time the event had occurred, Morris goes on to wonder: who was not there? In Pack’s universe, he was able to sync up images from different cameras, which gives him different angles of one incident.

Pack’s last inquiry about the images shadows out a more personal curiosity rather than an objective forensic preparing a neat and unquestionable report for the jury: “How could all this go on without anybody noticing it?” Morris picks out this question that marks the
intersection point of two curious minds and puts it at the end of first Brent Pack segment
to pull us back to his own investigation as a filmmaker.

Buying cameras was an ordinary deal in Abu Ghraib. This perfectly explains how
thousands of pictures were produced and eventually ended up in Brent Pack’s
investigation: how could all this go on without anybody noticing it? To Pack, taking
pictures of a crime is the stupidest thing to do, when digital photographs can reach
millions of people with a single click. How could Graner and those like him not think of
that? Were they so sure what they did was legitimate or could simply be covered up?
Most of these soldiers, who were barely in their twenties, came from all walks of life, and
did not have proper life experience, nor that did they have the military training to deal
with such things. Eventually the abuses were committed. Perhaps the pictures that they
took were mostly just for fun, because they had nothing better to do, they wanted
trophies, or it was cool to show friends how tough and crazy the whole thing was. Things
were previously recognized as abuses of human rights now seemed ordinary to them. It
appears as though wherever and whenever they took a random picture, on one
insignificant corner of the image there would be the naked body of a prisoner.

All look the same while their faces were hidden under sacks or underwear. So again, how
could all this go on without anybody noticing it? How come high-ranking officials, even
Rumsfeld himself, did not know anything about the fashion of prisoner treatment there?
As proven by the court systems’ failure in exercising jurisdiction over them, the commanding officers must have been very sure of their total insulation from any risk due to their actions and decisions.

Errol Morris, despite his physical absence and the heaps of time he grants his interviewees with, his presence and his pattern of thought is almost always felt. His persistency in humanizing the “bad apples” without wiping off their accountabilities, while drawing solid links between the military system and personal stories of each person, are exceptional. Sabrina’s and Lynndie’s stories and the rest of the women characters in the film little by little and substantially reveal a carbon copy of the situation of women in the military. One of the most dramatic and expressive sequences in the film is about Lynndie England and her involvement in the military when she was only twenty years old. This is when she can easily be recognized as the victim of an irrationally masculine and absurd world of the military. Speaking after five years and her prison experience –both in Abu Ghraib and her three years of confinement after that– Lynndie’s words and her unforgettable face which externalize all the pain and suffering she still bears, transforms her from being the evil icon of Abu Ghraib scandal to the symbol of women in the military. One of the things that is remarkable about this sequence is that the woman that we are listening to is speaking to the Lynndie and Chuck Graner we see in the pictures from five years ago, more than she is to Morris or to us or to other young women in the military. The confidence and assurance that she lacked earlier in the film, now shine out of her face. Her main argument is that when she was in Abu Ghraib, every woman was there for a man; no matter what they say “it’s a man’s world”. As she says that, the shadow of disappointment falls on her confident expression.
She acknowledges her then-presence in the army as a two way road both of which serve to anything good. As a woman you have to either be their equal or be controlled by a man. Being equal comes to mean the necessity of being strong. The sign of strength for Lynndie today is to step up and show him who the boss is because “they are going to try to control you.” How do you achieve strength and be their equal? It is interesting to see that strength and being a man are combined in two pictures, the first of which shows Chuck Graner, which Morris juxtaposes with Lynndie’s depiction of a man’s world. In both of these images, being strong is associated with a man’s body in the most primitive way.

Though Lynndie, who looks like a little boy, gives the impression of anything but strong in the following two images.
She is not the one to match Graner’s standards of being strong. She has become his object of power as seen in almost all of their pictures together. It also naturally entails psychological domination of the experienced over inexperienced. Lynndie’s well-known picture with Gus is the representation of not only the American foreign policy, but also Graner’s ascendancy over her as well. Graner’s somewhat visible body and invisible but tangible dominance over Lynndie’s hand holding the strap, reveals itself in these pictures. Her own blinding love for Graner and Graner’s body literally and figuratively envelops her.

Lynndie today knows the way, if not the ideal, to oppose a man like Graner. According to her you should tell that man who tries to overpower you “I’m not gonna take that, I’m not gonna let you power me, control me; because I’m a woman and you’re a man. Even though it’s the military, I mean, hell, I got a gun, use it!” Because of the direct and seemingly unmediated nature of the interview, suddenly we realize that almost essentially and unwittingly she is speaking to herself. The dichotomy that Sabrina writes about in her letter is right here in this sequence as well, clearly demonstrated by Lynndie. She is both the smart and experienced woman giving a piece of her mind to that little short haired girl in the pictures, while she is also the grown-up version of that same girl still being troubled by what she had experienced.
During this oscillation between characters – or rather states of minds – Lynndie pauses and then adds with intensified facial expressions “If I had thought about that then by God I would have!” After that she goes back to her null face. I believe because of his respect for this moment and his will to examine her face, Morris waits patiently. “But I was blinded by, being in love with a man.” Her face literally switches back and forth between her null state and contrived smile.

It seems that behind her smile there is an expectancy of perceptiveness and sympathy from her listeners. Yet she appears unsure if she is going to get them, because she was already stigmatized and pointed at several times as the symbol of evil in the scandal.

In Morris’s respect for Lynndie, there is also an ethic responsibility asserts itself. This is what he always does in his interviews not only due to his empathetic “gaze” but also in order to provoke the subject to speak more. “An ethic responsibility” says Nichols, is “channeled primarily through empathy rather than intervention, legitimates the process of continued filming” (Nichols, 1991, p. 87). Although Morris does not try to purge her wrongdoings, it is important to him to show how Graner responded to her need for love,
her insecurity and inexperience unlike him who, according to Lynndie, “knows what to do and what to say”. In order to cultivate that, Morris uses a video that was taken by a cell-phone camera which shows Graner with a little kitten. Based on the context of the previous sequence, the kitten is quite clearly Lynndie, wandering aimlessly and timidly. She is approached by Graner’s hand descending from above. The hand is dominating and scary, and also protective and loving at the same time. It starts fooling around with the cat.

We cannot be sure if there are other parts of this video where we can see Graner’s face and if Morris is purposely not showing them to us. However, albeit the kitten may not realize that this caring hand can also break its neck, Morris lets us see the hand with its strained, claw-like fingers grasping for the kitten, an image reminiscent of the famous shadow of Nosferatu’s hand firmly clutching the heart of its prey, which also represents the evil powers of the vampire that can grab hold of you and control your feelings.

Physical and emotional domination is achieved by committing vulgar acts, taking pictures of sexual domination of men over women and being all reckless and fearless about it. Considering the twisted circumstances of a militaristic world and specifically Abu Ghraib, these practices, because you can do them, because no one told you not to do them, seems to be the recognized interpretation of power.
Millitary Intelligence Interrogator Roman Krol, who pled guilty and was sentenced to ten months confinement in 2005, is the subject of an interesting sequence where Errol Morris once again combines visual graphics with the chronic and spatial dimensions of photography. In this instance, he is looking at his pictures with other soldiers on a teleprompter. The individuals in the photographs are selected and given name tags as he goes on to recognize them. This is Brent Pack’s style of examination and Morris will combine this method with his own observant eye and short inserts.

Morris takes his time and as Krol studies the pictures, he examines Krol, trying to see something about these pictures that he may not be seeing but Krol may. This is such a strange instance where Krol looks like he is studying us, trying to identify his audience, while we intern our striving to understand what he is doing and is about to say. This feels like a forcibly created moment of mutual effort to understand one another; the scene harkens back to a primitive stage where one human meets the other and they are curiously staring at and examining each other to locate hostile or friendly signs. This is what Errol Morris is willing to do with the photographs as well. He is trying to solve the mystery of the pictures and find out what they say about reality.

Krol breaks eye contact with the image as most likely the prompter goes back to Morris’ face instead, and he starts talking about “what we have just looked at”. In the pictures, the military police and interrogators are yelling at a detainee who is lying on the
floor, in the middle of cells with prisoners in them. Morris once again joins in with a long and expressive enactment where we see hands hanging loosely from prison cells, and heads facing the corridor watching the scene. The enactment does not show Krol or the humiliated prisoner, but their audience. Krol calls them “spectators” and the yelling as a “show” but not an interrogation. It was “to show that this would be done to anybody that breaks the rules.”

It is a show that represents a threat towards the prisoners. Rather than just verbally yelling it out, the MI officials are demonstrating what they mean. It is interesting, at this moment, to think that, not only the dramatic and stylistic enactments, but also this film is a show in the sense that the characters are performing before the camera and an invisible audience represented by Errol Morris’ image on the teleprompter. In the meantime the interrotron creates an artificial face to face dialog, which in that sense is a representation in its own right. To take it a little bit further, even the war is the United States’ demonstration of power over another country. The size of the armed forces, the acquired military technology and the political strategies are all displays of power, which mean nothing if there is no audience involved. As for the interviews and the interrotron technique, even though it creates an artificial and sterile environment, in relation to Goffman’s conception of self representation, it feels more like a performance of characters in an isolated atmosphere sitting before a camera, rather than parties of a one
on one conversation. It is because of this particular isolation and the less interventionist style of Morris that his subjects cannot help but give in and open up while they stare at the unblinking and direct gaze of the camera. These moments of acquiescence occur not as they speak but during pauses in between the lines, or when they finish talking. Morris deliberately does not stop recording; instead he waits, in a way making his subject feel constrained or obliged to continue. This continuation may lead to a facial expression denoting a genuine sensation that cannot be hidden anymore, a useless repetition or an important follow up statement.

Another very strong and affective enactment is about an Iraqi General and his interrogation that is narrated by Tim Dugan and Sabrina Harman. This sequence exemplifies Dugan’s disappointment and his ongoing anger about Abu Ghraib. The General was willing to give out information regarding the whereabouts of Saddam’s vice president and yet the interrogator did not ask him where that person was. Instead, they shave his eyebrows to humiliate and break him. While Sabrina slowly explains how it happened and how she felt, an extreme close up and a highly disturbing enactment of a razor shaving a person’s eye brow comes into view. The slow motion effect turns this scene into never-ending torture for the viewer.

The most striking thing about eye brow shaving is that it not only makes the person unrecognizable, but it also expands the social distance between the prisoner and the
interrogator. That way the prisoner is dehumanized and will not be taken as a significant human being, and in this case the man is no longer elderly and respected General. Since our eye brows or our hair adds character to our face and makes us unique, their absence will take away the familiarity of our face and our peculiar personality. This type of an act in an interrogation also validates the superiority and the power of the interrogator. It is the same thing as the distancing language used in the military to shield its members from the impact of their work experience. These distancing terms like collateral damage, friendly fire and casualty or other terms used for the combatants on the opposing side are employed to avoid the stressful implications of actions or events. Therefore the crippling humanistic qualities like empathy are left out, and the enemy is dehumanized. So, the importance of this enactment is the fact that by slowing down the action and disturbing us, Morris immortalizes the act of dehumanization and hinders us from forgetting about it. Consequently, we never get to the point where we completely dehumanize the person.

The last incident that this chapter analyzes is about a prisoner, nicknamed “Gilligan”, and the way he was treated which is another version of the dehumanization of prisoners being tortured. Gilligan’s pictures, taken by Sabrina, are probably the most famous of all the Abu Ghraib collection. He is the hooded one on the box with wires wrapped around him. He was accused of killing two agents from the Criminal Investigation Division of the Army and later on proven innocent. Before getting into the details, we are given a reminder of what he looks like.
According to Sabrina’s testimony, he was not physically damaged but they did their best to wear him out. He was forced to stand on a small box, with wires wrapped around his fingers and genitals; he was told he would be electrocuted if he fell off. As she speaks, Morris visually represents her words and helps the pictures of Gilligan that we are about see, come to life. Most of the inserts are again extreme close-up shots of a man that looks exactly like the prisoner in question. According to what Sabrina states, Gilligan was taken off the box right after his pictures were taken, which suggests that this scene was specifically designed for the photographs. In this case Morris first introduces ‘the stage’ before it is occupied by actors and when the lights are off. This is Morris’ representation of the stage and the major piece of the décor, which is an MRE (Meal ready to eat) box:

Then we see Gilligan carrying the box. He looks like the tortured Sisyphus carrying his rock submissively but he looks like he does not even have the obstinate hope that keeps Sisyphus going. From then on, real images will be juxtaposed with moments of enactments, eventually creating the illusion that we are actually witnessing the incident.
Millions of people have seen the images of Gilligan. However seldom do we might think how and why these pictures were taken. As Sabrina continues to depict the scene, we are shown close-up shots of feet standing on a box and fingers with wires around them. It is as if with a magnifying glass we are studying the famous Gilligan picture that made it’s way to the cover of Time magazine.

The weak lighting on these two images again brings to mind the idea of a staged play. The Gilligan here is supposedly an actor, quietly waiting for the curtain to be lifted. These are not still images and if you look carefully, you can feel the motion and life in them. This is such an important connection we are expected to establish with the original picture of Gilligan and the 25 year old human being nicknamed as Gilligan. In order to create this “moving” still photographs effect and vitalize the images, Morris uses a camera called Phantom V-9. This device is capable of slowing down the motion 25 times slower than the actual speed of motion.
The scene and the actors are ready, and we see the same camera that we had already
associated with Sabrina in the previous sequences. It is indeed she who took two of the
four Gilligan pictures. The flash of the camera explodes in our face, and with a jump cut
we witness the same flash lighting up on Gilligan’s body below the knees. This
enactment and others that follow establish a sense of ‘being there’ that reconstructs our
perception of the production of these images and the world that surrounds the
photographs. In that sense, it is also reflexive in the way it shows the process of taking
photographs from both the photographers and the subject’s points of view.

An image that shows the upper part of Gilligan’s hooded head with dust flying
around the sack is followed by an image which is the very first time we see him fully.
However this full image is from the little preview monitor of an amateur digital camera
and it is the moment that the camera focuses on its subject. As the photographer hits the
shutter release, a blinding flash explodes and we see the immortalized image of a hooded
man, hardly standing on a small box. Here, we are looking at him through Morris’ camera
that looks at him through supposedly Sabrina’s camera monitor. Beyond the camera
though, there is a blurry image of Gilligan’s actual body. This is again the moment when
the photograph was taken and even though we still have the filmmaker’s camera between
us and the subject, we acknowledge that Gilligan is a human being: flesh and blood.
To reemphasize the connection between the reality of an actual object and its photographic representation, Morris brings in two images of Gilligan’s right hand. The first image gives the impression of an unmediated view of the human eye compared to the second one taken from a monitor screen. What essentials does an object obtain or lose in its photographic image, or how do we perceive things while looking at them through our camera, as opposed to a direct observation with our eyes? Do we unknowingly dehumanize our subjects as well, by distancing ourselves from them and avoiding personal connection? As discussed in chapter one of this study, taking pictures and hence aloofness might be therapeutic for the soldiers in war zones, but is it also true that it may immunizes the person from his / her responsibilities?

The illuminating flash of the camera lights up the hand once again, powerfully representing the moment when these pictures were taken and puts us in the position of an eye-witness.
Our perception of the most famous picture from the Abu Ghraib Prison is perhaps deconstructed and reconstructed, and now we are ready to look at these two images from Sabrina Harman’s camera once again or perhaps for the first time.

In the first image, Ivan Frederick is standing next to Gilligan, looking at the digital picture he has just taken by his camera. Staff Sergeant Frederick is the highest rank of the eleven military police personnel who have been charged with torturing prisoners. After reconsidering the whole story, it is more likely that this was specifically staged for a photo session, and yet one may not come up with a satisfying answer as to why these photographs were taken. Is it because keeping him awake was their given duty and, without even touching the prisoner, soldiers did a good job; so they wanted to have a memento? Were they expecting to set an example? Should it make us feel better to find out that after proven innocent, Gilligan was given a job in the prison, allowed to go out every day and rewarded with extra food and cigarettes by soldiers for his good service?

Approaching the end of the documentary, we are still not able find the answer to what these images are telling us and why the higher ranking officials were never
prosecuted or held accountable for anything related to the scandal. Brent Pack’s short lecture on separating images that are evidence of an act of crime from those that show a standard operating procedure makes the quest of finding the answer almost futile. If for any reason we are expected to regard any of these pictures as judicious, aiming to find who is more responsible would become a cover-up for our own relentless hypocrisy and crime.

Pack informs us that putting somebody into sexually humiliating positions is a criminal act, as seen in this image of the “human pyramid”:

The following two images, however, are considered a “standard operating procedure” since supposedly there is nothing that constitutes a crime. The term indicates the approved set of actions and performances of a unit. So, according to Pack, Gilligan is an example of forcing somebody into a stressed position in order to prepare him for an interrogation; and therefore what happened to him is seen as a standard operating procedure.
Are these two images above really examples of a standard operating procedure? If this is the case, then while forcing naked people to climb on top of each other is regarded as humiliation, how can striping them off naked and having them spend the rest of the day like that with a sack over their heads not be humiliating? This argument infers that there are humiliations that are acceptable as opposed to those that are not. Who separates the two and defines the criteria of distinguishing between an act of crime and a standard procedure of mortification? Brent Pack speaks about his extensive experience in several other prisons all around the world and the torture techniques and s.o.p.’s he studied. Then he goes on to say “People that haven’t been where I’ve been, I can’t expect them to see the pictures in the same way.” From which perspective these pictures are acceptable or standard? From which perspective does the image of Al-Jamadi below, a ghost detainee whose name was never logged in the prison records, who was brought in and then murdered by a CIA agent whose identification is known, not deserve further investigation and punishment? What is the rationale in charging Sabrina Harman for taking the pictures of a dead man but never prosecuting the person who is responsible for this death?

How do you normalize images such as these? If being at war is the only excusable condition, it shall be our responsibility as human beings to question this very mentality in the first place?
Errol Morris treats the photographs that are taken inside this surreal world of a notorious prison as pieces of a jigsaw puzzle and makes a story out of them. However, the puzzle comparison is somewhat preconceptional in the sense that a puzzle anticipates a final and a complete picture that can be achieved by putting the pieces in their predetermined places. The truth may look different when seen from various perspectives; from the editing of a film divergent meanings may emerge. *S.O.P.*’s narrative is composed of talking head interviews, still photographs, enactment inserts and computer graphics put together in a successive or an overlapping fashion. Furthermore, a photograph in essence shows only a selected part of reality. That is, as much as a picture exposes something, it also conceals other things by simply not including them. Likewise a film made out of images will operate towards a certain point of view since they are purposely taken and edited afterwards. Therefore by showing the free flowing images in the infinite darkness of a universe, Morris not only implies what is inside and beyond the limits of a photograph, but he also depicts the creator mind of an editor in which thousands of images fly about. His treatment of the photographs from the Abu Ghraib prison is different than the courts and Brent Pack, both of who are bound to evaluate what is visible in the pictures, rather than what they may imply. To Morris, the photographs that prove the presence of certain soldiers in Abu Ghraib also conceal the implied interference or influence of other people. In order to demonstrate this idea, he questions the perception of their evidence value and points to the convenience and effortlessness demonstrated by the courts in resting the whole case on the low-ranking soldiers. To Morris there are people who are not part of the images but are far more responsible than the accused soldiers.
I believe as human beings, none of us are exempt from responsibility. If a fact is concealed, it is not the photograph but our eyes and our minds that hide the way that leads to the truth. Therefore as put finely by the director of this film, “what is it that we are looking at” is still a mystery that has yet to be solved.
Conclusion

In the course of viewing the films and getting involved with their visual and textual constructions, I came to understand the structure of my study better. I attempted to avoid being too personal with my writing and hence missing what the films and their characters sometimes struggle to tell me. On the other hand, I had to open up my mind to this exhausting experience in order to rightfully acquire the position of a mediator. I am, indeed, the mediator of these films in my study, and moreover I am eager to dedicate myself and my work as some type of a transmitter through which fundamental issues declare their existence and accordingly demand consideration. The issues that emerged from and carefully and repeatedly discussed in this literary piece altered the original goal of exposing and “examining the points of convergence between the films” as I gradually discovered the purpose of this dissertation when I finished my analysis in the last chapter.

Concepts like reality and responsibility that find their way from the film into our minds also claim their existence in our lives and therefore demand a thorough consideration. It is because of this inherent presence that most documentary films activate an almost organic and unique bond they have with their audience. Participation and awareness which are the two prominent requisitions of the experience of viewing a documentary film, also force us to acknowledge the already existing place of “the responsibility” I frequently highlight, that we perhaps ignored until now. When it comes to issues like war or occupation, we seldom see our association to it unless we are directly related to them one way or another. For some reason, supposedly it appears to be easier to evaluate them objectively if they are in a land far away from ours, or if they had taken place many years ago; then we are inclined to think that they do not require a
participatory stance. Therefore, putting together documentaries on the war in Vietnam and the occupation of Iraq, not only I accentuated the similarly experienced foreignness of the two lands, but also I managed to draw a connecting line between two periods of American history.

As much as this is my journey as the author of this work, it can become the voyage of the reader as well. Readers who are coming from the Winter Soldier, Full Battle Rattle and Gunner Palace, when they look at the pictures of Abu Ghraib, they can be able to seek for the unseen, just like Morris. I believe this ability and maturity is enabled and reached by reading the preceding chapters and the stories depicted in them. If the order in which they are read changed, the experience acquired may also be altered.
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