

**Embodying Virtual War:  
Digital Technology and Subjectivity in the Contemporary War Film**

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Philosophy


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## Abstract

Addressing a perceived absence of critical attention to changes in the war film brought about by the advent of the digital, this thesis aims to construct an original study of contemporary (post-2001) US war cinema by exploring the shifting relationship between embodiment, subjectivity and digital (military-technological) mediation. In order to update the critical framework necessary for comprehending how the war film is altered by the remediation of digitised military interfaces, I draw on a highly diverse set of approaches ranging from journalistic accounts of the wars in Iraq (2003-11) and Afghanistan (2001-present), studies of military technologies from Paul Virilio to Derek Gregory and Pasi Väliäho, as well as film/media studies work on ethics and spectatorship. The corpus is similarly diverse, encompassing mainstream genre films such as *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), documentaries, and gallery installations by Omer Fast and Harun Farocki, thus offering a comprehensive and inclusive portrait of contemporary cinematic trends. The thesis begins by identifying the genre's post-Vietnam turn to embodied, subjective experience and explores the continuation of this tendency through films such as *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and its complicity with phenomena such as journalistic embedding. Subsequently, I trace how drones and simulations radically alter conventional cinematic constructions of subjective perceptual experience through readings of Omer Fast's *Five Thousand Feet is the Best* (2011) and Harun Farocki's *Serious Games* (2009-10), noting in particular the emergence of the virtualised yet embodied 'presence' of the drone operator and the conditioning of trans-subjective, cybernetic networks via CG simulations. Finally, I turn to the remediation of various digital interfaces in films such as *Redacted* (2007), comparing the emergent models of military subjectivity discussed in the previous chapters with the spectatorial positions evoked by this hypermediated aesthetic.

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## 1. Introduction & Literature Review

Over the last decade, numerous film and media scholars have begun to explore and theorise the changes wrought by the advent of the digital, through debates largely focussed on issues of convergence and the supplanting of film's indexical recording capacities. Yet, despite the proliferation of digital imaging technologies within the military apparatus, there remains a curious critical lacuna around the impact of digital technologies on the contemporary war film. This was recently highlighted by David Slocum's review essay "9/11 Film and Media Scholarship", which explicitly critiques academic work on the post-9/11 war film for a perceived 'dearth of attention to the intersection of military discourse, film and other media over the last decade' (187-188). Questioning 'whether the critical frameworks developed for the analysis of the Second World War, Vietnam, or even the Cold War are appropriate to the war on terror', Slocum calls for a wider focus upon 'how cinema's role has changed amid the transformation of the larger media ecosystem', particularly in relation to 'the new technologies, fragmentation, and interactivity increasingly characterising twenty-first century media' (192; 184; 181).

The reasons for updating film scholars' 'critical frameworks' in this context are manifold. Firstly, as Slocum acknowledges, the process of convergence effected by digital media has 'enabled an enormous capacity to reproduce images [...] shorn of their provenance or original context as they circulated nearly instantaneously across media platforms' (190). Given the increasing porousness of medial boundaries, the war film, like any other domain of film studies, can no longer be considered a technologically discrete object of study. The longstanding alliance between cinema and the military, developed through the propaganda campaigns of WWII and other conflicts, is beginning to be eroded by the formation of new alliances between the gaming industry and the military use of (gaming-derived) CG training applications, as well as new digital forms of war reportage such as military video diaries or embedded journalist reports whose speed of transmission lends them a greater degree of immediacy than the traditionally distributed war film. Even within the diegeses of Iraq War films such as Brian de Palma's *Redacted* (2007) or Nick Broomfield's *Battle for Haditha* (2007), there appears to be a growing recognition that an understanding of contemporary conflict is inseparable from the digital modes by which it is mediated, as these films draw extensively on the digital aesthetics of online video platforms, social media, surveillance and embed reports (to cite just a few examples).

While some of these issues affect the entirety of contemporary cinema, many of them are especially pertinent to the context of war. In particular, the burgeoning of digital modes of imaging warfare such as CG training simulations or the interfaces of remotely operated weaponry systems (drones, for instance) render the war genre as one perhaps most urgently in need of an expanded framework to theorise the effects of this digitisation. As such, I believe this study constitutes a highly specific, as well as politically- and ethically-charged, manifestation of the relationship between cinema and digital technologies, with the terms and implications of the debate reaching well beyond the reductive and polarising questions of cinematic indexicality and digital simulation by which the subject is often approached within the broader field of film studies.

The first step in this process of updating the critical framework for approaching contemporary war cinema is therefore to provide a fuller, more precise delineation of what Slocum refers to as ‘the intersection of military discourse, film and other media’ (188). This will constitute the first section of this introductory chapter, in the form of a literature review of recent works on military modes of imaging war by James Der Derian, Roger Stahl, and Tim Lenoir – all of which are significantly underpinned by the works of Paul Virilio and Jean Baudrillard. While Virilio and Baudrillard are occasionally invoked in contemporary analyses of war cinema, Der Derian, Stahl and Lenoir remain relatively unacknowledged. Yet their studies of how military imaging has evolved since Vietnam from the ‘cinematic’ (as per Virilio) to a virtualising network of digital interfaces offer precisely the kind of contextual update required for addressing cinematic representations of war in the digital era.

These studies of military imaging will be followed by a survey of several contemporary works on the war genre. This (deliberately) disjunctive juxtaposition will enable the identification of this thesis’ research questions by exploring the discontinuities (or underlying continuities) which arise from reading these accounts of the war film and of military imaging as parallel, interconnected histories. Specifically, I aim to extrapolate from the identification of the war film’s post-Vietnam turn to subjective experience, considering the extent to which this foregrounding of individual, embodied perception may be posited as a reaction to the virtualising distancing of remote imaging technologies such as satellites and drones.

Finally, I will turn to Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin’s *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, the works of Mark Hansen, and Marie-Laure Ryan, Alison Griffiths and John Belton’s studies of immersion, in order to construct an expanded framework for conceptualising the remediated relationship between cinema and digital

technologies. These three sections of the literature review will thus draw on a highly diverse range of discourses, incorporating studies of the history of technology, film history, new media, and theories of immersive subjectivity and embodiment. Since these fields have largely tended to function in relative isolation from each other, there is an inevitable degree of disjunction in terms of their terminology and range of references. Following an overview of their arguments, however, my discussion and formulation of research questions will aim to create an innovative dialogue between these diverse fields and thereby initiate productive new lines of enquiry for studies of cinematic representations of war.

My corpus for this study will comprise US war cinema from 2001 to the present, a period bounded by the initiation of war in Afghanistan in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. The focus will predominantly be on representations of the recent wars in Iraq (2003-11) and Afghanistan (2001-present), though given my overarching emphasis on digital military technologies I will also include depictions of contemporary drone warfare despite the legal and ontological ambiguities concerning its status as 'war'. I will, however, exclude films made during this timeframe which depict previous conflicts. Although it would be interesting to study the evolution of the genre from Vietnam through to the present in order to comprehensively track the digital turn in both military technologies and war cinema, such a vast historical scope would, I think, stretch the bounds of the thesis and potentially entail some compromises in the depth and complexity of contextualising each period/conflict. Similarly, a more international scope might produce some illuminating contextual comparisons of the ways such technologies are employed and cinematically remediated, but my decision to focus on the US is constrained by the availability of studies on military-technological developments since my sources tend to focus predominantly if not exclusively on the US military. Ascribing a singular nationality to a film is, however, increasingly difficult in this globalised era of international co-productions, and I have erred on the side of inclusivity in ambiguous cases. For instance, *Battle for Haditha* is listed by most sources as a UK film given Broomfield's nationality and the fact that its funding is derived largely from Film4, though the film's focus on the US military and employment of former US troops as non-professional actors makes a strong case for its relevance here.

The study will encompass both fictional and documentary depictions of war, and adopt a broad definition of war cinema that includes depictions of soldiers returning to civilian life in *Stop-Loss* (2008) and *In the Valley of Elah* (2007), as well as



representations of covert CIA-waged conflicts in *Body of Lies* (2008), *Syriana* (2005) and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012). Although the former fit with many contemporary definitions of the war genre (including Westwell, Eberwein and Barker's studies, which are surveyed below), the conformity of the latter group may appear somewhat contentious. I will discuss the reasons for their inclusion in greater detail in chapter three; broadly speaking, though, the administration of drone strikes by the CIA and JSOC (Joint Special Operations Command) represents a loosening of the definition of military action, a process which I intend to mirror in the corpus by considering the reconfigured relationship between the CIA spy thriller and the more traditional lineage of war cinema. Finally, I will also adopt what might be termed (following Gene Youngblood) an 'expanded' approach to defining cinema, incorporating some films exhibited in a gallery context – specifically, Omer Fast's *Five Thousand Feet is the Best* (2011) and Harun Farocki's *Serious Games* (2009-10) – which otherwise conform to the conditions of the corpus. Generally, I would consider this inclusive approach particularly beneficial by way of opening up the thesis to trends occurring across a broadly defined cinematic spectrum rather than solely within the mainstream genre film.

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A key work on the history of military imaging, Paul Virilio's *War and Cinema* charts the technologically and historically inseparable development of cinematic and military modes of vision from World War I to the Cold War and Vietnam. In the introduction, Virilio observes that 'alongside the army's traditional "film department" responsible for directing propaganda to the civilian population, a military "images department" has sprung up to take charge of all tactical and strategic representations of warfare', with the emergence of the post-WWII control centre uniting feeds of 'spy-satellites, drones and other video-missiles' (2). Although the first category of traditional cinematic propaganda is dealt with to the extent that it is complicit in military spectacle, Virilio's primary focus is on the second aspect: 'the systematic use of cinema techniques in the conflicts of the twentieth century' (1).

This notion of military 'cinematic techniques' is predicated on a view of cinema as effecting a radical breakdown of spatio-temporal continuity through the development of 'free montage' and 'narrative ellipsis' (18). Pastrone, he argues, 'showed that the camera's function was less to produce images [...] than to manipulate and falsify dimensions', while the employment of montage in Eisenstein's films contributed to

‘dynamically “finishing off” the dimensions of the world’ (21; 35). This process is mirrored in the increasing derealisation of warfare as face-to-face combat is gradually supplanted by spatial distancing, with visual feeds of the enemy location relayed back to a central command at ever increasing speeds. As such, Virilio claims that ‘*the history of battle is primarily the history of radically changing fields of perception* [emphasis in original]’, with the objective now being to gain control of ‘perceptual fields’ rather than ‘scoring territorial, economic or other material victories’ (10).

Such derealisation is effected primarily through the history of aerial reconnaissance, as Virilio charts an inexorable line from observation balloons to the ‘pilotless aircraft’ deployed in Vietnam, which progressively render the ‘target area’ a ‘cinema location’ (15; 16). This effects an alteration in the perceptual experience of warfare for both the ground level troops, who no longer ‘see whom they were killing, since others had now taken responsibility for seeing in their stead’, and for the pilots whose visual experience of warfare is ultimately mediated through a ‘digital display’, ‘radar screen’, and ‘onboard computer’, experiencing ‘a technological vertigo or purely cinematic derealisation’ as they are ‘imprisoned in the closed circuits of electronics’ (19; 105; 106). Weaponry too partakes in this cinematic spectacle, since ‘the advent of electronic war’ sees missiles equipped with cameras to relay real-time images back to military control centres (103). For Virilio, ‘nothing now distinguishes the function of the weapon and the eye: the projectile’s image and the image’s projectile form a single composite’ (104).

Virilio further notes how military strategy, particularly during WWII, begins to demonstrate an awareness of its increasingly cinematic nature. He cites as an example the Allies’ strategy of ‘tak[ing] part in the *mise en scène* of Hitler’s newsreel and intelligence films [emphasis in original]’, employing Shepperton studio to produce ‘phoney armoured vehicles or landing ships’ to be displayed as ‘visual disinformation’ to German aerial reconnaissance missions (80). As this example suggests, the transformation of war into a cinematic spectacle is paralleled by an increased awareness of the importance of simulated disinformation and the need for stealth, a process Virilio labels the ‘inverse of deterrence’ (4). Yet modes of military visualisation, at least by the time of Vietnam, would in turn develop counter-strategies to combat any attempts to elude aerial reconnaissance, as ‘physiological traces become accessible to a host of new devices’, such as infra-red and thermal imaging (24). Virilio concludes *War and Cinema* with a brief examination of late 1970s / early 1980s simulation technology, arguing that the ‘process of derealisation acquired fantastic proportions with the boom

in military flight and combat simulators' (107). He also notes the emergence of 'large-scale electronic games', as with the 'electronic battlefield' developed at the National Training Centre (NTC) in the Mojave Desert, employing MILES (Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement System) laser/infra-red ammunition (108; 110).

Twenty-five years later, James Der Derian returns to this very site as part of his study of contemporary military modes of mediating warfare in *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network*. Although Der Derian's style and objectives differ somewhat from Virilio's (most notably in the more journalistic approach), it is nonetheless possible to read *Virtuous War* as, at least in part, an updating of *War and Cinema*'s examination of military imaging for the digital era. Here, the technologies and processes of imaging war are no longer strictly cinematic, but rather a digital composite of 'computer simulation, media dissimulation, global surveillance and networked warfare' (xx). Like Virilio, Der Derian emphasises how such modes of visualisation serve to 'collapse distance' and continue a process of derealisation whereby 'the enemy disappeared as flesh and blood and reappeared pixelated and digitised on computer screens in killing zones, as icons of opportunity' (xxxiv; 14).

The focus of *Virtuous War* is primarily upon the simulated warfare environments used for military training and preparation, such as the NTC, the 'Synthetic Theatre of War (STOW), a prototype of immersive virtual environments that could use overhead reconnaissance, satellite communications, and massive parallel computing to integrate virtual, live, and constructive simulations of war in real time', and the Institute for Creative Technology's<sup>1</sup> 'totally immersive environments – where one can see, hear, perhaps even touch and emotionally interact with digitally created agents' (14; 167). The underlying aim of Der Derian's argument, however, is to question how these simulations are beginning to enact a collapse in the very distinctions between training simulations, war itself, and media representations.

Der Derian substantiates his claim that wars are now 'fought in the same manner as they are represented, by real-time surveillance and TV "live-feeds"' with the observation that, during the Iraq invasion, 'television studios introduced new sets that mimicked the command and control centres of the military [...] [employing] computer

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<sup>1</sup> The Institute for Creative Technologies is based at the University of Southern California. According to their website, the 'ICT brings film and game industry artists together with computer and social scientists to study and develop immersive media for military training, health therapies, science education and more'. See <http://ict.usc.edu/>. On the genesis, directives, and funding of ICT, see also Lenoir: 328-334.

generated graphics of the Iraq battlespace [...] created by the same defense industries [...] and commercial satellite imaging firms [...] that supply the U.S. military' (xxxix; 278). Furthermore, he questions the extent to which 'simulations can precede and engender the reality of war that they were intended to model and prepare for' (15). Citing the incident of the USS *Vincennes* shooting down an Iranian Airbus, Der Derian proposes that the crew's simulation training may have engendered such a response to the unexpected appearance of a commercial aircraft, since they 'didn't believe their eyes', but instead 'believed their own computer simulations and training, and shot it down' (138). In more general terms, Der Derian asserts that the visual equivalence between 'simulated preparations and virtual executions' of war may erode the 'gap itself between the reality and virtuality of war', perhaps effecting the full realisation of Virilio's claim that '*War is cinema and cinema is war* [emphasis in original]' – albeit in a slightly modified, digital form (xxxii; 10).

This account of the virtualisation of war through the convergence of training simulators, actual weaponry interfaces, and media representations is informed not only by Virilio's notion of the cinematisation of warfare, but equally by the work of Jean Baudrillard. Although some distinction must be drawn between Der Derian's use of 'simulation', referring primarily to specific military training applications, and Baudrillard's employment of the term to designate a sign with no real referent or the 'map that precedes the territory', there is nonetheless a clear sense that Baudrillard's conceptualisation feeds into Der Derian's reading of military simulations (*Simulacra and Simulation* 1).

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Tim Lenoir and Roger Stahl's work broadly complements that of Virilio and Der Derian in addressing the intersections between military and media modes of imaging war, though Lenoir adopts a more specific focus on collaborations between the gaming industry and the military in developing training simulations, while Stahl principally addresses the media-technological forms by which contemporary warfare is mediated as an interactive mode of entertainment.

Lenoir's article "All But War Is Simulation: The Military-Entertainment Complex" traces the historically inextricable development of military simulations and video game technology, locating their genesis in Ivan Sutherland's 1960s experiments with Head-Mounted Display systems. Although the notion of computer-generated,

virtual spaces was not yet technically feasible, Lenoir implies that their subsequent development stemmed from the possibility generated by these experiments. He then describes the thirty-five year history of work on such technologies, focussing in particular on the career trajectories of those involved in the Sutherland experiments across military and entertainment industry projects. From the collaboration between Sega and GE Aerospace (subsequently Martin Marietta / Lockheed Martin) in developing Real3D graphics for use in both military simulations and Sega arcade games, through to the implementation of the Institute for Creative Technologies, specifically charged with developing military simulations that can simultaneously crossover into gaming environments, Lenoir highlights the growing convergence between these two virtual modes of imaging war as definitive of the ‘military-entertainment complex’. If his concluding remarks on the ‘fusion of the digital and the real [...] and with it the disappearance of the boundary between fantasy and reality’ now appear somewhat simplistic, his work is valuable nonetheless as one of the earliest instances of highlighting the historical and technological complicity between military simulations and gaming (334).

Roger Stahl’s *Militainment, Inc.*, its title clearly positioning the work as continuous with that of Lenoir and Der Derian, examines the ‘intensification of the relationship between the Pentagon and the entertainment industries’ during the Gulf War and Iraq War (3). Against the background ‘process of uncoupling the military from public accountability’ via the abolition of the draft and increasing privatisation of the military, Stahl traces the modes through which war has become ‘a phenomenon available for consumption’ – specifically, in the forms of gaming, reality TV, television news, and merchandising (13; 15). Historically, Stahl posits ‘militainment’ as a reaction to Vietnam Syndrome, arguing that it ‘alerted policy planners that blind trust in government would not be enough to authorise war’ and thus engendered a ‘shift in the locus of authorisation, a shift from propaganda per se to the integration of war into existent practices of consumption’ (138). The Gulf War, Stahl argues, produced militainment according to the ‘logic of the spectacle’, through a simulative (in the Baudrillardian sense) ‘television war’ that ‘function[ed] to control public opinion by distancing, distracting and disengaging the citizen from the realities of war’ (22; 32; 3). By 2003, however, Stahl posits that ‘a new interactivity began to challenge the spectacle as the primary quality of the home front experience’ (20).

This emergent ‘interactive war’ is fundamentally characterised by a shift in the terms by which media address the viewing subject, from an assumed passive

consumption to an invitation ‘to step through the screen and become a virtual player in the action’ (16). Stahl theorises this as the evolution of the ‘citizen-spectator’ into a ‘virtual citizen-soldier’ within a discursive regime dominated by gaming as the ‘primary interface governing the civic experience of war’ (16-18). Thus, as television news coverage of Iraq began to incorporate ‘first person relationships with weapons’, video games ‘attempted to re-create the television war in playable real-time’ (42; 92). As such, this mode of immersive interactivity is fundamentally dependent upon the technological convergence highlighted by Lenoir. Stahl specifically notes that the weaponry interface of the AC130 Spectre gunship is technologically and perceptually indistinguishable in Pentagon-released war footage (replayed across news media outlets and archived on YouTube) and within the gameplay of the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* series (101-103). It is precisely this ontological levelling-effect of digital convergence (particularly the specific technological collaboration between the military and gaming industry) which enables the interactive mode to connect with, or ‘recreate’, the virtualised space of war as it is depicted in ostensibly non-fictional media sources.

Stahl’s account of how reality television adapts to this immersive ‘first person regime of signs’ has perhaps the most direct relevance to studies of the contemporary war film, since he explicitly situates shows such as *Military Diaries* (2002) as part of the post-Vietnam war film lineage (42). Stahl argues that the defining trend of war-themed reality TV has been to experientially approximate ‘the post 9/11 fever to virtually enter the body of the soldier through a first-person aesthetic’ (79). This, he posits, is the ‘culmination of wider cultural trends initiated during Vietnam and extending through the end of the century’ whereby discursive/political arguments have given way to a ‘gradual “zooming in” on the experience of the soldier’ (78-79). While Stahl acknowledges that films such as *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) retained vestiges of anti-war critique, he asserts that they nonetheless ‘portrayed war as an internal crisis located neither in the field of politics nor between combatants but within the soldier himself’, and thereby laid the foundations for a reality TV mode which accelerates this trend of ‘stripping off layers of political context’ in favour of a ‘personalised and experiential’ rendition of war (79; 81; 82). This experiential, first-person mode is stylistically epitomised by *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), which ‘demotes the camera/eye from its objective status, implies a subjective body in its place, and invites the viewer into that body’, exploiting ‘identification as and sympathy for the soldier’ to create the screen experience of a ‘death simulator’ (43).

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The above accounts usefully illustrate how digital imaging technologies have effected trends toward disembodiment and virtualisation within contemporary military modes of imaging war, as well as reconfiguring contemporary practices of representing war through the convergence of gaming and military simulations. Prior to a fuller explication of how such issues feed into this thesis' research questions, however, I will juxtapose these military-technological histories with studies of the war film as a cinematic genre over a loosely contemporaneous historical period. This will enable a more precise contrast between these two overlapping but currently disjunctive discourses and indicate some of the more subtle, unacknowledged shifts in the contemporary war film which could be posited as a reaction to military-technological evolutions since the advent of digital imaging.

Encompassing two broader overviews of U.S. war films by Guy Westwell and Robert Eberwein, as well as Martin Barker's study of Iraq War cinema, this section of the literature review aims primarily to delineate the approaches to military technologies and embodied subjectivities typically employed within the field, while simultaneously offering a broad overview of the main concerns of such studies. Following a brief summary of their arguments, I will explore the interrelationship between these histories of the war film and the above histories of military technologies, and begin to formulate my research questions around the issues raised by this process.

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Guy Westwell's *War Cinema: Hollywood on the Front Line* provides a concise, chronological overview of the development of the war film from 1898 to 2006. By structuring the book's chapters around specific wars and historical periods rather than iconic films, he implies the genre's distinctive rootedness in response to historical circumstance. This is expanded upon in the introduction, through an indication of 'the legacy of the propagandist role of the war movie', particularly during WWI and WWII, and the 'synergy' or relationship of 'mutual exploitation' between the military and the Hollywood film industry (3). Westwell outlines two principle effects of this partnership: the ideological function of the war film in determining the 'cultural imagination' of war for propagandist purposes, such as 'exaggerating an enemy's threat and potency, as well as their cultural otherness'; and the '*indexical* relationship between the war movie and

war proper [emphasis in original]', notably manifested in the use of 'the actual apparatus of war: real airplanes, real warships, real uniforms, even real soldiers who frequently act as extras and advisors' (3-7). Through a combination of textual analysis and informed engagement with socio-political context, Westwell aims to 'question whether the cultural strategies for representing war currently at our disposal are savvy enough to allow society to make informed choices about war's role in the world in the present and in the future' (8).

Prior to WWI, Westwell notes the significance of symbolic propaganda relating to the Spanish-American War in films such as *Tearing Down the Spanish Flag* (1898), and the 'blend of patriotic propaganda and more objective factual reporting' in the subgenre of 'Yellow Journalism', with its 'aggressively realist register' of stylistic immersion 'spiked' with the 'high melodrama' of heroic last-minute rescues (11-12). This tension between the real and the fictional is mirrored in later WWI propaganda, such as D.W. Griffith's *Hearts of the World* (1918), for which he purchased documentary footage of WWI combat and edited it into the fictional diegesis (15).

Following WWI, and the emergent anti-war sentiment in Europe, is the development of 'what critics would quickly label the "anti-war movie"' (18). Among these films, Westwell observes an intensification of the realist aesthetic, with both *The Big Parade* (1925) and *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) said to emulate newsreel footage (18-20). This realist register is, however, complicated in Westwell's reading by the observation that the foregrounding of soldiers' points-of-view can lead to 'a limited and limiting perspective that reduces war to often uncomprehending lived experience', eliding 'identification of the social and economic causes of war' (23-25).

Westwell notes two dominant trends among the war films made during WWII. The first looks back to WWI, with 'its aims clarified and renewed', in order to provide a 'conversion narrative' which justifies entry to the theatre of WWII through the dramatisation of a psychological/motivational shift from 'selfish neutrality' to 'the need for selfless sacrifice', as exemplified by *The Fighting 69<sup>th</sup>* (1940) and *Sergeant York* (1941) (28-29). The second group of films depict US defeats in the Pacific as incitement to revenge, and encourage the audience 'to take the powerful emotions of shock, anger and the desire for revenge out of the cinema into a world that Americans were beginning to accept was defined by war' (43). Westwell characterises these films through their distinctive leap from the historically specific to the mythic. Writing on *Wake Island* (1942), Westwell argues:



We are taken from the violent attack on Wake Island to the mythic narrative of American manifest destiny without any sense of what might be called mid-level history [...] This leap avoids the necessity of articulating how the wider historical forces of the economy, national self-interest and competing ideological systems have shaped the events under description [...] war is shown to be difficult work requiring great sacrifice at the local level, and this sacrifice is made in order to ensure the progressive advancement of American liberal democracy (33)

Westwell also observes the ‘continued symbiosis of fiction and nonfiction filmmaking’, with major Hollywood directors such as John Huston, Frank Capra, John Ford and William Wyler contributing documentary work, and the ‘increasingly common’ tendency ‘for dramatic action to be cut together with documentary footage’ (43-44). Further representative evolutions in the genre included ‘themes of democratic and social inclusiveness’ – particularly through the inclusion of a single, stereotyped black character within the ensemble – set against an ‘unashamedly racist description of the enemy’ (38).

While the Korean War film cycle of the early 1950s is characterised by a ‘profound cynicism’ and ‘questioning sense of war’, it is, ultimately, the advent of the ‘uniquely traumatic’ Vietnam War which most radically disrupts the generic conventions established during WWII and necessitates ‘the modification of America’s most powerful mythologies’ (51; 54; 57; 62). Thus *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Apocalypse Now* are considered ‘in generic terms, strange, rambling and inchoate’, and disruptive of the ‘clear structure of World War II combat movie’ (62-63). *Apocalypse Now* also generates a mythic critique of a ‘quasi-fascistic American military’ through the invocation of ‘historical precedents of previous racist and genocidal military campaigns’ (68). However, Westwell complicates any simplistic reading of these films as ‘anti-war’ by examining the implications of the genre’s foregrounding of the Vietnam veteran experience. Through the veteran figure, Westwell argues, the war is ‘psychologised and made open to the work of therapeutic narratives’, a tendency which renders a sense of closure to the war through the attainment of the ‘tangible goal’ of ‘psychological order’ at the expense of a political focus upon the ‘historical experience of the war and American military defeat’ (64).

Westwell also engages in an extended reading of *Platoon* (1986) in terms of its realist aesthetic, noting that the scene in which a character falls directly into the camera ‘carefully emulates the look of news coverage and documentary films of the 1960s and

1970s [...] [and] encourages the viewer to recognise the form of the movie as ‘authentic’, that is, it conforms to and confirms a pre-held sense of the event gleaned from television news and documentaries about the war’ (78). Westwell is sceptical of ‘the seductive nature of the film’s powerful reality-effect’, however, arguing that it conceals ‘considerable ideological work that is taking place under the cover of the film’s realist surface’ which ultimately conforms to the therapeutic template and renders the war a ‘personal ahistorical trauma that can be overcome’ (78-81).

In the final chapter, Westwell examines representations of contemporary ‘small-scale, contingent and intractable’ wars (84). *Courage Under Fire* (1996) is said to exemplify the ‘difficulty of representing the Gulf War, and perhaps war in general post-Vietnam’ through its incorporation of a ‘legal investigation narrative’ and emphasis on the (initially) problematic attempts to reconstruct events through conflicting subjective recollections (86). Yet this is ultimately resolved in the final flashback, as ‘Hollywood’s realism finally asserts authority over the hyperreality of the news coverage and the subjective, unreliable memories of the participants’ (89). The period under discussion, though, is dominated by the return of the WWII film as part of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary commemoration, a subgenre that in turn is clearly dominated by perhaps the most discussed and influential war film of the era: *Saving Private Ryan*. Westwell notes how the film’s testimonial structure is used to ‘validate claims to historical accuracy’ and engender a response of ‘celebratory and self-consciously deferential reverence’ (91). In an extended analysis of the famous Omaha Beach landing scene, Westwell meticulously details the stylistic components – particularly the cinematographic emulation of Robert Capa’s photographs and the use of surround sound to render an ‘off-screen space [...] perceived as deadly and dangerous’ – which serve to construct an ‘intensely subjective point of view’ (93-94). As in *Platoon* or *All Quiet on the Western Front*, however, Westwell argues that such an immersively rendered point-of-view is fundamentally incompatible with ‘any critical questioning of the war’ in historical or political terms (94).

Robert Eberwein’s *The Hollywood War Film* traces a similar trajectory in attempting to provide a historical overview of the war film, albeit with a slightly looser definition of the genre which incorporates films focussing ‘directly on war itself’, ‘the activities of the participants off the battlefield’ or ‘the effects of war on human relationships’ (45). In his introduction, Eberwein declares an affinity with a mythic, structuralist approach to genre drawn from the work of Thomas Schatz and Claude

Lévi-Strauss, yet the overriding theoretical concern of this work seems to be with the realist, indexical relationship between the war film and history.

Eberwein asserts that ‘the history of war is to a great extent the history of its representation’, since for many viewers ‘the actual war is known only as something experienced on a screen, not as something from immediate experience’ (53). Although this may suggest a somewhat Baudrillardian approach to the genre as simulated experience, Eberwein simultaneously posits a Bazinian mimetic relationship between the image and the profilmic through such claims as: ‘the images of war we experience in film have a built-in inflected valence of reality because of the indexical quality of the historical recorded images’ (54). This apparent contradiction is in fact resolved distinctly in favour of the realist approach, as Eberwein concludes:

War films seem real, in part because they actually use material taken from battlefields, but also because the reality of the actualities bleeds into the reenactments. The authenticity of the one generates an ontological authority for the other (55)

Eberwein does not problematise or question in further detail this notion of ‘seeming real’, but instead proceeds on the assumption that, since the genre makes at least partial use of documentary material, such indexicality lends a widespread historical veracity to the war film as a whole.

Central to Eberwein’s account of the war film is its genesis in a ‘specific, identifiable historical event’: the Spanish-American War (7). Eberwein outlines in extensive detail the range of early films depicting battle reconstructions and various aspects of soldiers’ lives, which he considers a unified though diverse group, or ‘elements in a larger “film” that recorded and documented what this war was like’ (9). This group of films is posited as the site of the genre’s formation, and Eberwein claims that their thematic unity, despite the lack of explicit ‘genre distinctions’, is mirrored in the diversity of war films produced in relation to all subsequent wars (9). Somewhat more problematic, however, is his insistence on a similar ahistorical continuity among the audience for such films, whose ‘viewing position’ relative to any ‘series of films about war’ is considered statically linked by ‘joint enthusiasm and support for the war efforts’ (45-50).

Eberwein peculiarly omits any extended consideration of films made during WWI, preferring to focus instead upon *All Quiet on the Western Front* and other post-

WWI films. These are proposed as almost universally anti-war, ‘utterly bleak’ depictions of a ‘hopeless cause’ (69). His consideration of WWII, however, particularly the ‘retaliation films’, does provide a greater degree of nuance in exploring the complex temporal and ontological relationship between film and history. Films such as *Bataan* (1943), which depict US defeats in the Pacific, are said to:

provide a fluid continuum in which the historical present and narrative time are capable of permutations, transcending the inevitability of chronology. A film celebrating what was not a tactical victory serves as a vehicle for its audiences who are watching from the vantage point of those who have seen victories in both factual and fictional accounts of the war (90)

Such passages begin to look beyond the notion of these films as simple incitements to revenge, and invoke the complexity of the audience’s position relative to diegetic ‘narrative time’ and the ‘historical present’. The notion that audiences would view such films as continuous with the later ‘legacy of victories that had occurred by the time of the film’s release’, conveyed through documentary and newsreel, is genuinely suggestive of complex continuity between fiction and non-fiction that Eberwein earlier claims (87).

Eberwein also suggests an analogy between this group of films and post-9/11 war cinema. The success of the ‘retaliation films’ is said to be rooted in audience knowledge of historical ‘evidence that the war would eventually end’, whereas the ‘lack of interest in films about the Iraq war’ is determined by the relative lack of ‘closure’, since ‘the fictional films are not complemented by a historical reality that suggests victory’ (92). Such a proposition, however, rests upon an awkward claim of equivalence between Pearl Harbour and 9/11, between propaganda films and more generally critical (or at least ambivalent) contemporary war films, and between public sympathy for two vastly different wars.

Like Westwell, Eberwein believes that the ‘enormous effect’ of the Vietnam War is mirrored in a fundamental disruption of the war film, making it ‘increasingly impossible to draw on the earlier myths and genre conventions’ (93). He considers the films (with the exception of *First Blood* [1982]) almost ‘uniformly critical’, however, and posits the defining trend as depictions of soldiers murdering their sergeants (93). In *Platoon*, *Apocalypse Now*, and *Full Metal Jacket*, Eberwein notes a ‘corruption of the generic conventions’, with the usual trajectory of the ‘inexperienced recruit learning

how to be a good soldier under the stern but compassionate tutelage of a tough but really kind sergeant' cynically transformed; in Kubrick's film, the young recruit Pyle instead 'join[s] the ranks of two men whose shooting skills are clearly respected and praised by Hartman: Lee Harvey Oswald [...] and Charles Whitman' (105).

Eberwein's overview of the two Iraq wars centres on readings of *Courage Under Fire*, *Three Kings* (1999) and *Jarhead* (2005), which he claims serve to 'destabilise generic expectations in ways that constitute a critique of United States policy and conduct in the conflict' (123). The multiple inconsistent flashbacks of *Courage Under Fire* are said to constitute a 'narrative form, unlike that of any war film made before it, [which] is itself related to the uncertain conflict it presents [...] [and] the dubious status of belief in regard to the validity of war itself and the United States involvement in it' (126). Eberwein also observes the generic innovation of *Three Kings*, which adopts the conventions of the heist movie as a parallel to the US objective of 'getting control of oil', and use of 'impotency' in *Jarhead* as analogous to the restricted nature of combat (130-131). This chapter is, however, heavily skewed toward films depicting the first Gulf War, with only a brief sketch of the films made on the Iraq War. Of this second group, Eberwein notes the 'distinctive mise-en-scene that immerses us in cramped doorways and narrow, almost impassable streets', the trope of 'soldiers [who] cannot tell whether they are seeing an enemy (the endless checkpoint confrontations) or are incapable of seeing them until it's too late', the proliferation of 'atrocities' captured by 'cell phone' images, and the overall 'despairing' tone (134).

A more thorough exploration of the contemporary subgenre of Iraq war films can be found in Martin Barker's *A 'Toxic Genre': The Iraq War Films*. Barker begins by outlining the history of collaboration between Hollywood and the military, from the propagandist role of the Office of War Information (OWI) during WWII to the Pentagon Film Office's conditions for providing funding and equipment. This brief history is intended to contextualise how 'any understanding of the "genre" of Hollywood war movies has to begin by seeing the conditions of their production as an institutionalised compromise' (11). In order to explore how such conditions operated during the Iraq War, Barker then examines the production context and discourse generated around the unreleased film *No True Glory* as an early indication of the demarcations of what specific topics and approaches are deemed commercially (and militarily) acceptable, finding:

Nothing “policy-oriented”, nothing “political”, just “human experience” and “grand natural human drama” [...] a widely-assumed and utterly disabling discursive argument: that to be patriotic is above and beyond politics. (21)

He also infers that ‘it is as if the actual 2004 [sic] invasion is off bounds’, since in a post-Vietnam context ‘there can be no ambiguity attached to the idea of “America winning”’ (25). This context seems to pre-determine a continuation of the situation whereby ‘studio films have mainly become virtual advertisements for “America” and its military’ (11). Yet Barker in fact considers many of the Iraq War films to be ‘Statement Films’, which evince a ‘will to challenge viewers and promote rethinkings about the war and the US’s involvement in it’ (118). He argues that this is made possible primarily through subtle generic reconfigurations of the soldiering experience, a terrain which is not so conclusively micro-managed by studio interference.

In Barker’s account, there are ‘three strands of “being an American soldier”’: the ‘disciplined, restrained and courteous’ mode of ‘parade behaviour’, ‘barracks-behaviour, which is crude, macho’, and ‘battle-behaviour, where American soldiers are constructed as confused, distressed and overwhelmed by experiencing hostility’ (32). He argues that in the ‘least political’ of the films, ‘the line dividing them is maintained’ (32). Thus, although the soldiers may appear offensive, casually racist and/or sexist when off-duty, ‘the moment they step out onto the streets of Iraq they become innocent, bewildered and desperate’ (33). In the ‘more political films’, on the other hand, ‘the line creaks if not breaks and [...] elements of the bad behaviour cut loose in their treatment of civilians’ (33). This is pushed to the furthest extreme in *Redacted*, which effects a ‘complete breakdown’ of these boundaries and ‘steps outside the realm of acceptable debate, because [de Palma] casts structured doubt on the innocence of American soldiers’ (40).

Barker’s reading of *Redacted* is also interesting in the relationship it posits between the ostensible evidentiality of soldiers’ video diaries and the critical mode of the Iraq war Statement Film. He notes that the wave of soldiers’ videos uploaded to YouTube (prior to military restrictions) ‘created a recognisable look to the conflict’ which has been cinematographically emulated in many of the fiction films, yet is sceptical about their ‘trustworthiness’ as evidential documents since ‘so much is clearly staged, posed, and edited’ (36). *Redacted*, he argues, ‘takes most seriously not just the look of soldiers’ videos, but also their implications for who is telling the stories, and what their accounts of war may reveal or hide [emphasis in original]’ (36). Barker

claims that the aesthetic of the film is not simply geared to convey some vague sense of authenticity, but rather to challenge the very perspective of such videos, emphasise that ‘soldiers’ self-accounts *should not be taken on trust* [emphasis in original], and demonstrate how they may be turned into ‘evidence against the military’ (131; 37).

Issues of indexicality and evidence are not addressed in much detail outside of the discussion of *Redacted*, with the focus of the work remaining largely upon fiction, to the exclusion of documentary. Yet Barker does specifically explore the employment of non-fictional tropes via the phenomenon of fictional war films which ‘put considerable effort into presenting themselves as “based in reality”’ (25). He considers this tendency as a deliberate agenda to simultaneously exploit ‘authenticating claims’ without the risk of being accused of historical inaccuracy, while employing fictional tropes to ‘maximise the emotional possibilities’ (120). This resembles the strategy of propaganda, in the sense of a fictional-historical hybrid which freely employs the generic tropes of fiction to allow the audience easy points of identification but also encourages ‘the application of these emotions to the lived world’ (120).

Finally, I would like to consider Barker’s account of PTSD in the Iraq war films as an adjunct to Guy Westwell’s view of the therapeutic trend in Vietnam films. Examining the group of films which depict the homecoming of US soldiers (notably *In the Valley of Elah*, *Grace is Gone* [2007], *Badland* [2007], *Home of the Brave* [2006] and *Stop-Loss*), Barker identifies a range of generic features which typify the split between ‘over there’ and ‘over here’. Soldiers return from an ‘unknown, unpredictable’ and ‘inexplicably hostile’ environment to an America dominated by ‘deceitful officialdom’ and a ‘glib uncaring civilian population’, rendering home ‘emptied of opportunities, of relationships, of fields of meaningful action’ (164). Yet the critical potential of such a division, Barker argues, is largely glossed through the notion of PTSD which ‘packages soldiers’ responses to war as bundles of symptoms within the individual’ (85). This forestalls political exploration of ‘soldiers’ increasing discontent with the war’, and, in the case of *In the Valley of Elah*, even functions as ‘an acceptable excuse for the soldiers’ brutality’ (85; 98). By individualising and psychologising their responses, then, it achieves an effect of depoliticisation which clearly parallels the Vietnam veteran’s psychological quest for order as identified by Westwell. Barker concludes that:

PTSD has come to function as a key metaphor for America inspecting itself within safe margins. What does it achieve? It offers soldiers a self-justifying

account of their situation. It “explains” abuses as unintentional outbursts. It generates positive-smelling narratives. It helps make suffering “American”. It provides a bridge across conservatives and liberals in America. And it buffers an entire Foucauldian industry [...] What it does not do is actually heal the psychic harm done to individuals and groups by their participation in the conflict (98-99)

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Collectively, the studies of the war film surveyed above largely subsume questions of technology within the framework of military authenticity and film’s capacity to indexically and mimetically represent the ‘the actual apparatus of war’ (Westwell 3). Digital modes of imaging war comprise a negligible element in each of these works. Eberwein’s brief analysis of Iraq War cinema notes the centrality of ‘cell phone images’ to their mise-en-scène, but does not extrapolate from this to discuss the wider relationship between film and new media (134). Westwell does implicitly relate the ‘difficulty of representing the Gulf War, and perhaps war in general post-Vietnam’ to *Courage Under Fire*’s diegetic conflict between ‘the hyperreality of the news coverage and the subjective, unreliable memories of the participants’, thus evoking a fundamental schism between digital mediation and military subjectivities, but ultimately folds these issues back into a more familiar framework of the propaganda function of television news and the possibility of ‘rescripting the disruptive cultural memory of the Vietnam War’ (86; 89). Martin Barker’s reading of *Redacted* perhaps comes closest to addressing the effects of digital media per se through the discussion of how soldiers’ video diaries assume a culturally-ascribed sense of authenticity which is interrogated by de Palma’s depiction of them, yet even here the theoretical framework applied remains distinctly anchored to the propagandist question of how war cinema combines non-fictional elements with an emotive mode of address in order to inspire ‘the application of these emotions to the lived world’ (120). No explicit attention is devoted in any of these works to theorising how digital technologies within the military apparatus (such as drones, satellites or simulations) may have affected the representational practices of cinema. Instead, these historical narratives of the war film tend to posit stylistic evolutions in the genre as fundamentally dependent upon political discourses, with the diegetic tendency to privilege the embodied perspectives of soldiers typically figured as enacting a withdrawal from political contextualisation. In accordance with the primary research question of this thesis, however, I intend to examine this turn to subjectivity a



little more closely, and explore to what extent it may be technologically, rather than purely politically, motivated.

Having juxtaposed these parallel histories of military imaging technologies and war cinema, it is, firstly, interesting to note that Vietnam emerges as a marked point of disruption in both accounts. Within film history, this crisis is posited in largely *political* terms, as a defeat which is irreconcilable with mythic notions of US military and moral supremacy developed (in part) through the propaganda campaigns of previous wars. It thereby instigates an inward turn for the war film, toward increasingly subjective and psychologised portrayals of the experience of war, with the restoration of the Vietnam veteran's psychological order attempting to synecdochically fill in for an implied mythic-historical order. In the post-Vietnam context, this tendency to focus upon subjective experience is not only generically perpetuated but, to a certain degree, institutionalised by the military funding conditions outlined by Barker, which explicitly substitute 'human experience' for the 'political' (21).

In Virilio's account of military imaging, however, the crisis point of Vietnam is essentially figured in *technological* terms, as the climactic moment of the 'derangement of perception in an environment where military technology is distorting not only the battlefield, but also, and especially, the space-time of vision' (90-91). The supplanting of embodied perception by a post-human form of machinic vision is encapsulated by the description of the pilot as 'imprisoned in the closed circuit of electronics', while the advent of 'pilotless aircraft' and 'large-scale electronic [war] games' also appear as definitive elements of the Vietnam era process of virtualising distanciation that Virilio demarcates (106; 15; 108). Within the contours of Virilio's argument this appears to constitute a continuation of the 'cinematic' derealisation of warfare, as experienced by military personnel, which he posits as a singular and continuous process dating from WWI. Yet by reading *War and Cinema* in conjunction with subsequent works by Der Derian, Lenoir and Stahl, it becomes more apparent that the cinematic techniques described by Virilio were, at the time of the Vietnam War, in the process of being supplanted by the digitisation of military technologies. Collaborations between the military and the gaming industry, as highlighted by Lenoir, feed into the production of the NTC and ICT's virtual warfare environments, while the digital interfaces of remotely operated weaponry subsequently begin to evince a stronger aesthetic continuity with the CG realms of gaming than with cinema per se. For Stahl, this is reflected in a new regime of digitally mediated warfare in which the interactive appeal of gaming becomes the 'primary interface governing the civic experience of war' (18).

This digital turn in the wider military-technological context thus appears, contrary to Virilio's framing of it, as somewhat disruptive of the historical alliance between the military and film. In aesthetic terms, the indexical bond between cinema and the military apparatus emphasised by both Westwell and Eberwein has been usurped by digital convergence, with new military modes of imaging war now more likely to be perceived as ontologically continuous with the realm of gaming. Furthermore, the digital enabling of remotely operated weaponry systems entails an increasing distancing of the (military) body from the space of combat, in a process of virtualisation which presents a peculiar conundrum for embodied cinematic representations of war. As the experience of war becomes inseparable from this kind of digitally networked, screen-based mediation, one might therefore question whether the war film's turn to embodied and/or psychological subjectivities might be posited not only as a retreat from the Vietnam War's traumatic disruption of mythic national identity, but also a means to escape the virtualising and potentially alienating effect of incorporating layers of extra-cinematic mediation within the frame. To give a contemporary example in which this trend of technological distancing is now greatly advanced, one could argue that the digital interfaces of satellite surveillance footage and remotely operated drone attacks are equally as disruptive to the aesthetic and moral codes of cinematically mediated war as was the historical experience of defeat in Vietnam. Does cinema's turn to subjective experience, then, aim to re-ground a nostalgically cinematic sense of realism, enacted as a withdrawal from the 'technological vertigo' of military personnel interfacing with digital screens (Virilio 106)? Might cinema in this regard serve a validating or authenticising function toward the scenario of contemporary warfare which counterbalances the wider tendency toward virtualisation and simulation?

This diegetic relationship between embodiment and military-technological mediation is under-theorised within film studies, yet is clearly a key issue for the continued relevance of cinematic representations of war in the digital era. Although the above accounts of the genre do not address remediations of military technologies as such, Westwell and Barker do however devote some attention to the authenticising evocation of other media technologies within the history of the war film. Indeed, in Westwell's *War Cinema*, the embodied perspectives of *Platoon* and *Saving Private Ryan* are not only allied to the depoliticising effect of therapeutic internalisation, but also interestingly linked to the heightened reality-effect of an aesthetic mimicry of documentary, war photography and television news. This conjunction of intensified

subjectivity and an authenticising hyper-realist aesthetic is in itself suggestive of the notion that the war film's subjective turn may be technologically motivated, since the desire to authenticise via the evocation of analogue media implies that the perceived authenticity of the war film's embodied mode of address is in some way threatened. Of course, this is not to say that the war film's references to other media emerge contemporaneously with the digital, since these genre histories emphasise that the practice may date back as far as the Spanish-American War. Nonetheless, there remains a distinct possibility that an increased dependence on asserting continuity with non-fictional forms of war mediation such as documentary/newsreel and journalistic photography may be considered an attempt to bolster the genre's realist grounding during a period in which military modes of imaging war were beginning to take on a digitised form that is somewhat less compatible with this cinematic aesthetic.

This raises the question of whether a comparable form of remediation persists in contemporary manifestations of this subjective turn in the genre, and of whether it has shifted to embrace digital forms of war mediation or remains anchored to these preceding analogue forms. The above delineated military-technological context, coupled with the possibility that online video platforms such as YouTube have arguably supplanted the documentary/newsreel tradition as the contemporary aesthetic benchmark of non-fictional authenticity, might suggest that there is an inherent dissonance between war cinema's embodied subjective grounding and remediations of the digital. Yet Barker's reading of *Redacted* suggests that this may be an emergent tendency within the genre. For even if de Palma is attempting to subvert the evidentiality of military video diaries, it still implies that the 'recognisable look' they have lent to the conflict is at least capable of being harnessed in a comparable manner to, for example, *Saving Private Ryan*'s citation of Robert Capa's photography (36). Of course, it is important in such discussions to avoid any essentialising claims regarding the inherent 'realism' of any particular media, speculative claims of which are impossible to measure and of dubious value. Yet it seems worthwhile nonetheless to trace the shifting values and aesthetics of realism as they correspond to differing media or platforms, since it has a significant bearing upon the war film's relationship to the wider media context and questions of technology. It also seems pertinent to question whether films such as *Redacted* are indicative of the war film's relinquishing of the subjective turn in favour of embracing the fragmentary and virtualising effects of digital convergence, or a sign that embodied and digital aesthetics might combine in contemporary war cinema in unanticipated ways. To clarify, though, my focus

throughout the thesis will principally be on specifically *military* forms of digital mediation rather than civilian/communicative modes of digitally mediating war, though the role of the latter in these studies of the genre should provide some indication of how the former may function. There is also inevitably some degree of overlap between them since drones, for instance, are increasingly being adapted for commercial purposes (such as Amazon's delivery drones) and as a (civilian) filmmaking tool.

In summary, then, there are three key interrelated issues raised by this disjunction between histories of military technology and of war cinema, each of which requires an expanded, inter-disciplinary framework to suitably address. The first, and broadest, concerns the relationship between the war film and digital technologies, which I will contextualise using Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Secondly, for the relationship between embodied and digital forms of mediation, I will turn to the works of Mark Hansen. Although a distinct theoretical framework for theorising embodiment within film studies does of course exist, I believe Hansen's innovative work on new media art and virtual reality provides a more pertinent contextualisation of the digital and intermedial role of embodied perception which is readily adaptable to analysing this dynamic with reference to contemporary military technologies. Thirdly, given that the above works serve to elucidate military subjectivities as increasingly defined by remote, screen-based mediation, there is a curious convergence of military and spectatorial subject positions relative to the (virtual) scene of contemporary warfare. This is principally emphasised by Der Derian's argument that wars are now 'fought in the same manner as they are represented', with the body relocated away from a combat space which is now militarily mediated in a manner similar to its representation for the civilian audience (xxxi). Stahl's notion of the 'virtual-citizen-soldier' provides one method of interpreting this link, and his account of the spectatorial experience of depoliticised 'death simulator[s]' clearly designates a significant ethical dimension which I will explore in the thesis' later discussions of spectatorial subject positions with reference to works by Michele Aaron, Lilie Chouliaraki and Libby Saxton (43). However, to theorise this relationship between diegetic/military and spectatorial subjectivities in more of an intermedial context, I will also draw upon three studies of immersion by Marie-Laure Ryan, Alison Griffiths and John Belton. Following summaries of each of the above mentioned works, I will briefly indicate how they will be deployed in the subsequent research chapters. I will then formulate my overarching research questions more specifically, and provide a concise outline of the structure of the thesis.

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Although it is now seventeen years since the original publication of Bolter and Grusin's *Remediation*, and certain sections may appear somewhat outdated (particularly the analyses of gaming, rooted in readings of *Doom*, *Myst*, etc.), its core concepts remain highly relevant to this study of the war film's permeation by digital interfaces. It may be useful to begin by defining some key terms, since I will be using 'remediation', 'immediacy' and 'hypermediacy' in the same sense as Bolter and Grusin, though applying them to new contexts. Remediation is, quite simply, defined as 'the representation of one medium in another' (45). The illustrative examples provided predominantly involve digital remediations of earlier media, such as viewing images of paintings through a web browser, yet it is simultaneously stressed that remediation precedes the digital, as in paintings which remediate maps or letters. As I have mentioned, my work will invert the more common focus on digital remediations of analogue forms to examine the incorporation of digital technologies within (war) cinema. The digitisation of cinema itself may initially appear to present something of a hindrance to the use of this framework, though it is worth highlighting that my use of the concept of 'remediation', following Bolter and Grusin, is not necessarily predicated upon the possibility of discretely distinguishing medial frames and ascribing distinct forms or effects to each. Contrary to the technological determinism that the authors ascribe to Marshall McLuhan, they repeatedly insist that they are not ascribing agency to technologies as such but rather examining material practices and contexts across a range of essentially hybrid media forms. The media hybridity of the digital era is most forcefully expressed in the claim that 'all mediation is remediation [...] at this extended historical moment', since no medium 'can now function independently and establish its own separate and purified space of cultural meaning' (55).

Among these hybrid forms, then, Bolter and Grusin argue that there exist 'twin preoccupations of contemporary media: the transparent presentation of the real and the enjoyment of the opacity of media themselves' (21). They emphasise that the notion of the 'real' in the above definition is not, however, intended in 'any metaphysical sense', but rather connotes 'that which would evoke an immediate (and therefore authentic) emotional response' in the viewer (53). The former tendency, typically referred to as transparent or immersive immediacy, is outlined primarily in relation to virtual reality as 'the medium that best expresses the contemporary definition of the self as a roving

point of view' through its 'refashioning point-of-view editing, as it has developed in the Hollywood film tradition' (161). The purest, albeit imaginary, instantiation of this logic is identified as the 'wire' in Kathryn Bigelow's *Strange Days* (1995), a 'fanciful extrapolation of virtual reality' in which the medium effaces itself entirely and thus reveals the 'goal of unmediated visual experience' (4). The 'enjoyment of the opacity of media', on the other hand, is designated as hypermediacy. In contrast to the 'unified visual space' of immediacy, Bolter and Grusin propose that 'contemporary hypermediacy offers a heterogeneous space, in which representation is conceived of not as a window onto the world, but rather as "windowed" itself – with windows that open on to other representations or other media' (34). This notion of 'windowed' has obvious computing connotations, but is also implicitly linked to modes of remediation which make little or no attempt to conceal such reframing (i.e. lacking transparency) and also to postmodern forms of reflexivity.

Though immediacy and hypermediacy thus appear to be opposed tendencies, it is consistently stressed that they are actually 'complementary rather than contradictory' (233). Hypermediacy is essentially considered by Bolter and Grusin as an alternative means of achieving the 'same desire' for authentic, 'real' experience that is provided by 'transparent media' in a more immersive fashion (53). One example provided to illustrate this convergence of hypermediacy with immediacy is a webcam stream from Mars, which manifests a high-tech spectacle consistent with hypermediacy but simultaneously offers a static and transparent point-of-view which provides the viewer with an immediate 'window onto the world' (205-207).

Bolter and Grusin further correlate immediacy and hypermediacy with the modes of spectatorial subjectivity that each entails under the rubric of "The Remediated Self", arguing:

Accordingly, there are two versions of the contemporary mediated self that correspond to the two logics of remediation. When we are faced with media that operate primarily under the logic of transparent immediacy (virtual reality and three-dimensional computer graphics), we see ourselves as a point of view immersed in an apparently seamless visual environment. In a virtual environment, we have the freedom to alter our selves by altering our point of view and to empathise with others by occupying their point of view – techniques pioneered in film and now extended and intensified in digital media. At the same time, the logic of hypermediacy, expressed in digital multimedia and networked

environments, suggests a definition of the self whose key quality is not so much “being immersed” as “being interrelated or connected” (232)

The description of spectatorial experience under the ‘logic of transparent immediacy’ will likely appear as the more familiar model of the two to film scholars, as Bolter and Grusin explicitly acknowledge that this form of embodied identification derives from cinema. The alternate mode of ‘connected’, hypermediated spectatorship, while somewhat ambiguously outlined here, may be indicative of an emergent mode of digitally networked spectatorial experience that correlates more closely with new media-technological forms of representing conflict. This networked logic may also function as an apt delineation of the modes of military subjectivity engendered by the digital interfaces of remote combat mediation. As such, this dynamic between immersion and connectivity will structure my analyses of both military and spectatorial subject positions relative to the immediacy or hypermediacy with which military technologies are remediated in the contemporary war film.

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Mark Hansen’s phenomenological studies of embodiment in works such as *New Philosophy for New Media* and *Bodies in Code* are oriented primarily around contemporary artists’ work with new media, and thus fall outside the typical purview of film studies approaches to the topic. The turn to this somewhat less familiar theoretical framework here can be partially attributed to Hansen’s engagement with a range of emergent digital interfaces such as virtual reality environments which (as I will discuss in further detail below) are central to the changes being wrought in the mediation of warfare by digital technologies. My recourse to Hansen’s work is further motivated, however, by the prevalence of a particularly reductive approach to digital media which permeates the established lineage of film-phenomenological theorisations of embodiment. This is exemplified by Vivian Sobchack’s “The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Photographic, Cinematic, and Electronic ‘Presence’”, a seminal work within the field which can arguably be framed as one of the key progenitors of a somewhat essentialist division between cinematic and digital forms of mediation.

First published in 1994, “The Scene of the Screen” posits a tripartite division of the ways in which spectatorial encounters with photography, cinema and digital media generate distinct forms of embodied experience and ‘transform us as *embodied subjects*

[emphasis in original]' (136). Each medium is ascribed a 'cultural logic' (drawn from the work of Frederic Jameson), to which Sobchack adds a further 'phenomeno-logic' (140). Thus, photography is aligned with market capitalism and realism, cinema with monopoly capitalism and modernism, and the electronic with multinational capitalism and postmodernism. The photographic, in Sobchack's account, offers a sense of 'objectification' and the 'material possession' of a moment in time, but at the cost of being able to 'entertain [...] the presence of a lived and living body' (144). Analogising the leap from the photographic to the cinematic with reference to Chris Marker's *La Jetée* (1962), Sobchack posits a 'difference between the transcendental, posited moment of the photograph and the existential momentum of the cinema, between the scene to be *contemplated* and the scene as it is *lived* [emphasis in original]' (145). Cinematic spectatorship is thus essentially characterised by a sense of embodied presence, which is further construed as 'subjective and intentional, as presenting representation' (148). Cinema's novel ability to make 'visible *for the very first time* [...] the very structure and process of subjective, embodied vision [emphasis in original]', coupled with the insight into intersubjectivity generated by the iteration of this process, is what distinguishes the medium as producing 'a meaningful aesthetically and ethically articulated experience' (147).

However, for Sobchack, the logic of the electronic enacts a fundamental rupture of cinema's 'mobile, embodied, and ethically invested *subject* [emphasis in original]' (147). Embodied presence cedes to 'an alternative and absolute electronic world of immaterialised – if materially consequential – experience [...] [which] incorporates the spectator/user uniquely in a spatially decentred, weakly temporalized and quasi-disembodied (or diffusely embodied) state' (153). Since embodiment and ethical value are so closely aligned in Sobchack's account of the cinematic, the disembodied effect of digital mediation further leads to a voiding of perceived ethical consequence via 'its lack of specific and explicit interest and grounded investment in the human body and enworlded action, its free-floating levelling of value, and its saturation with the present', which, Sobchack bluntly concludes, 'could well cost us all a future' (159). Although Sobchack attempts to circumvent charges of technological determinism through the Heideggerian refrain that 'the essence of technology is nothing technological' and an emphasis on the ways in which these 'phenomeno-logics' are contextually and socio-culturally determined, "The Scene of the Screen" nonetheless exemplifies a pervasive tendency within film phenomenology to exclude digital media from the privileged cinematic realm of embodied meaning and ethical value (137).



Indeed, the same underlying a priori value judgements of media can be seen in Jennifer M. Barker's work. "Touch and the Cinematic Experience" quite explicitly relies on the materiality of the filmic apparatus to link embodied spectatorship to the 'body' of the film. This process is analogised through the Quay Brothers' *Street of Crocodiles* (1986), with the film's archaic mechanical puppeteering said to 'literalise the palpable connection between film and spectator that exists in all cinematic experiences' (149). Barker rhapsodises 'the caress of shimmering nitrate and the scratch and dust and fibre on celluloid, [...] the film's rush through a projector's gate and the "breathing" of lenses', and characterises spectatorial sensation by 'the press of our bodies against our seat, the chill in the theatre', in the process revealing how this phenomenological framework is fundamentally embedded within a largely defunct conception of the (pre-digital) cinematic apparatus and a viewing scenario which is similarly being eroded by the ubiquity of digital viewing devices (151; 154). While Barker's view of digital media remains implicit within "Touch and the Cinematic Experience", *The Tactile Eye* engages with cinema's incorporation of digital techniques more directly (if somewhat briefly). Discussing the use of digital tracking shots in films such as *Run Lola Run* (1998), *Fight Club* (1999) and *The Matrix* (1999), Barker contends that they 'capitalise on computer imagery to mark an insurmountable difference between the film's body and the viewer's body', simultaneously 'thrilling' and 'unsettling' the viewer since 'these shots don't correspond to our body's experience at all' (117-118).

Clearly, adopting this kind of phenomenological framework to examine the remediation of military digital interfaces within war cinema would be somewhat problematic. My approach, as indicated by the use of Bolter and Grusin's *Remediation*, is premised upon a more poststructuralist view of film and digital media, one which acknowledges their inseparable hybridity in the production and dissemination of the contemporary war cinema. Although it is possible that certain forms of digital mediation – particularly within a military context – may engender some degree of disembodiment, I am disinclined to begin this study with the assumption that only the 'purely' cinematic image invokes an embodied mode of spectatorship, since this would appear to foreclose the reading of emergent digital forms (such as drones and simulations) on a rather technologically-determinist basis.

This is not to dismiss the entire realm of film phenomenology, of course, since works such as Laura U. Marks' *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* do evince a more nuanced approach to the relationship between film and digital media. For

instance, Marks parallels the materiality of ‘*this* video whose demagnetization speaks of memory loss [emphasis in original]’ with the ‘scratches and splices’ of film, as *Touch* explicitly sets out to ‘explore how a haptic approach might rematerialize our objects of perception, especially now that optical visibility is being refitted as a virtual epistemology for the digital age’ (xii; xiii). Significantly, this ‘optic visibility’ is not framed as an inherent quality of digital media, but rather as ‘the product of specific practices [...] centrally, the military, medical, and other instrumental practices that construct the user of interactive tools and games as a disembodied and sovereign subject’ (xxi). She then proceeds to examine how ‘electronic media’ artworks may contest such disembodied practices in favour of more ‘implicated and embodied’ applications of digital media (xxi).

Marks’ phenomenology of embodiment seems, therefore, better equipped than that of Sobchack and Barker to address the contemporary interrelationship between cinema and digital media. Indeed, *Touch* also employs a methodology that distinctly parallels that of Mark Hansen, particularly through the examination of ways in which new media art may catalyse new forms of embodied experience in contradistinction to military and other ‘instrumental’ applications of digital media. Yet my decision to draw more extensively on Hansen’s work is based largely on the more contemporaneous corpus of new media art encountered in *New Philosophy for New Media* and *Bodies in Code*, particularly the prevalence of virtual reality installations which overlap in intriguing ways with some of the military applications of digital technology which I will study in the following chapters.

Prior to a more substantial outline of the two above mentioned works, it is perhaps worth briefly noting the embodied phenomenology of cinema set forth in Hansen’s first monograph, *Embodying Technesis*. Drawing upon Walter Benjamin’s ‘tactile model of filmic reception’, Hansen suggests that it provides a productive ‘shift of focus from image content to medium as the locus of the image’s mimetic impact’ (247; 260). In this account, film is fundamentally a ‘shock experience’, which ‘impact[s] us at the deepest level of our embodied experience, prior to the mediation of memory’ and thus ‘fails to leave any cognitive traces’ (239). This is justified through the somewhat speculative neurological claim of a ‘third experiential agency (perceptual consciousness) [...] specifically intended to register the *corporeal* dimension of technology’s experiential impact [emphasis in original]’ as the site which receives the stimuli of film (245).

Hansen claims that film is therefore unique in this respect as a ‘predominantly corporeal form of art’ (255). Despite the ocular connotations of ‘perceptual

consciousness', Hansen forcefully emphasises that the experience of film is primarily tactile and affective, rather than visual and cognitive. This 'autonomous and potentially empowering' experience of the 'singularity of filmic tactility', Hansen claims, enables the restoration of a 'sensuous [...] contact with the cosmos', which is simultaneously 'our best means of insuring against a repetition of world destruction on the order of our century's great and horrible world wars' and an increase in 'our command over the very medium of capitalism's extensive mimetic power' (260-263). Finally, Hansen notes that 'Benjamin's example can help us construct the analytical tools we need to resist the seductions of disembodiment projected by contemporary reproductive and virtual technologies' (263).

*New Philosophy for New Media* picks up this thread of embodiment's relation to virtual technologies, and sees Hansen's focus shift rather definitively away from film towards new media art appearing in the wake of digital convergence. The overarching argument of this work is that, contrary to claims of humanity's redundancy in the face of formless digital information and machinic vision, the digital in fact necessitates a bodily 'enframing' of this information. From theoretical accounts of digital convergence such as Friedrich Kittler's, Hansen accepts the notion that the digital has erased (or at least has the potential to erase) the differences between media. The digital thus 'explodes the frame [emphasis in original]' of previously distinct media interfaces, resulting in a 'pure flow of data unencumbered by any need to differentiate into concrete media types, or in other words, to adapt itself to the constraints of human perceptual ratios' (35; 2). However, Hansen insists that this does not eliminate the human body from the loop of information, but rather provokes the realisation that '*there occurs a displacement of the framing function of medial interfaces back onto the body from which they themselves originally sprang* [emphasis in original]' (22).

This notion of the 'framing function' of the human body, which has been obscured 'beneath any concrete "technical" image or frame', is initially analogised through Henri Bergson's view of the body as 'a kind of filter that selects, from among the universe of images circulating around it and according to its own embodied capacities, precisely those that are relevant to it' (8; 3). Yet Hansen attempts to rework Bergson's theory of perception in adaptation to the digital era, such that it is no longer a flux of images from which the body selects or frames, but rather a flux of formless digitised information. Thus, he argues that 'rather than selecting pre-existent *images*, the body now operates by filtering *information* directly and, through this process, *creating* images [emphasis in original]' (11). For Hansen, this marks a creative

‘empowerment’ of the body since it ‘*enframe[s]* something (digital information) that is originally formless [emphasis in original]’ (11).

This shift is effected simultaneously (and in complexly interrelated ways) through a technological evolution from image to information and the parallel corporeal trajectory from perception to affect. On the technological level, Hansen notes how the inhuman speed which characterises machinic vision (i.e. the computerised processing of images) does, in a sense, render human perceptual capacities redundant. In other words, ‘because our bodies cannot keep pace with the speed of (technical) vision, we literally cannot see what the machine can see, and we thus risk being left out of the perceptual loop altogether’ (103). Furthermore, machinic vision simply has no correlate to a single or grounded human perspective, functioning instead as a total ‘dataspace’ and demonstrating a ‘radical resistance [...] to any possible human negotiation’ through the ‘abandoning of *any particular perspectival anchoring* [emphasis in original]’ (96). This is exemplified through the ‘perspectival crisis’ of viewing Robert Lazzarini’s *skulls*, which ‘confront[s] the viewer with a projection of a warped space that refuses to map onto her habitual spatial schematising’, and thus puts human perspective into conflict with ‘the weird logic and topology of the computer’ (200-202).

There is a disjunctive sense, then, that ‘the body is heterogeneous to the flux of information [...] [and] can only be *supplemental* to this flux – something introduced into it or imposed on it *from the outside, from elsewhere* [emphasis in original]’ (123). Yet, as Hansen demonstrates in his reading of *skulls*, the impossibility of visual mastery of this fundamentally ‘heterogeneous’ realm summons instead an affective response, as ‘our visual faculties are rendered useless and we experience a shift to an alternate mode of perception rooted in our bodily faculty of proprioception’ (203). This ‘*affective proprioception*’ is defined as ‘a form of bodily vision that has no intrinsic correlation with what is seen, that does not function in the service of perception, and that consequently defines a *creative, autopoietic* response *on the part of the body itself* [emphasis in original]’ (229).

Although this replacement of the perceptual with the affective may be, at least in part, technologically motivated, Hansen is eager to stress that the affective is in no way inferior, or merely a ‘supplement to perception’, but rather ‘*the* privileged modality for confronting technologies that are fundamentally heterogeneous to our already constituted embodiment, our contracted habits and rhythms [emphasis in original]’ (133). Indeed, Hansen attempts to undercut any sense of the superiority of the visual over the affective through the claim that ‘optical vision derives from proprioceptive and

tactile “vision””, that there is therefore an ‘affective basis for *all* so-called perceptual experience [emphasis in original]’ (110; 206).

This notion of the affective underpinning of vision is explored primarily through the body’s capacity to generate space in Virtual Reality (VR) environments. Hansen notes how new media artworks such as Simon Penny’s *Fugitive* employ the VR interface in a manner which ‘coupl[es] the user with the image *dynamically* [emphasis in original]’, such that the virtual imagery is literally created by bodily movement (165). Similarly, Jeffrey Shaw’s *Place: Ruhr* provides the participant an experience of the ‘exhilarating indifferentiation between your “subjective” embodied movement and the “objective” mechanical movement of the image’, and thus ‘collapse[s] perception back into (bodily) action, such that there occurs an indifferentiation between perception and the body’s kinaesthetic sense’ (47; 54). Such works, Hansen argues, serve to highlight the extent to which ‘perception in the VR interface [...] can *only* take place in the body [emphasis in original]’ (163). This ‘production of space in the body’ or ‘bodily spacing’, marks VR as ‘the first properly “postimagistic” technology’, since the medium no longer serves as a ‘frame for perception’ but rather as the ‘*technical supplementation* of the human capacity for simulation [emphasis in original]’, i.e. the ‘body-brain’ achievement of creating space (167-170).

Hansen’s view of VR, then, radically diverges from those who claim it to be a disembodied experience. This, in Hansen’s account, is primarily because it has thus far been conceived as a purely visual experience. He observes how systems structured around ‘VR goggles and helmet[s]’ serve to ‘deploy vision as the privileged sense endowed with the task of mapping the human sensory apparatus onto new dataspaces’, and locates the theoretical correlate to this practice in accounts of VR such as Lev Manovich’s, which demonstrate a ‘neglect of the tactile dimensions of the interface’ (162; 40). Against such views, Hansen proposes a focus upon ‘the *physical dimension* that is at issue in the body’s experience of space, regardless of whether the space concerned is an actual physical space or a simulated, virtual one [emphasis in original]’ (40).

Ultimately, Hansen believes that an embodied, affective engagement with VR (and, by implication, the wider field of digital information) can also serve to confer a sense of reality or belief to such experience in a manner that is no longer possible for purely visual perception, as summed up in the somewhat rhetorical question:

Faced with the all-too-frequent contemporary predicament of “not being able to believe your eyes”, are we not indeed impelled to find other ways to ground belief, ways that reactivate the bodily modalities – tactility, affectivity, proprioception – from which images acquire their force and their “reality” in the first place? (105)

For Hansen, then, purely visual interfaces with the digital appear to instil a sense of disbelief in the viewer/participant, while ‘putting the body to work (even in quite minimal ways) has the effect of conferring reality on an experience, of catalysing the creation of a singular affective experience’ (39). *New Philosophy for New Media*, however, contains a notable lack of examples regarding the former type of experience, the sole specific reference being to Paul Virilio’s description of the ‘virtual cockpit’ in *Open Sky*, which ‘recode[s] complexly embodied capacities as instrumental visual activities, entirely purified of any bodily dimension’ and thus instantiates the ‘tradeoff of visual automation: embodiment for efficiency’ (104).

*Bodies in Code*, Hansen’s most recent work, continues the exploration of bodily engagement with digital interfaces. Here, Hansen claims the inauguration of a new paradigm of the digital, a ‘reimagining of VR as a mixed reality’ (2). This ‘second generation virtual (or mixed) reality’ is characterised by a ‘fluid interpenetration of realms’ in the place of formerly distinct virtual and physical modes (26; 2). In this context, exemplified by ‘mixed reality situations’ such as ‘comparing a two dimensional architectural drawing with a real-time three-dimensional visualisation’, Hansen asserts that the fluidity of the user’s transitions are enabled by embodied interaction, and claims a more widespread cultural recognition that ‘motor activity – not representationalist verisimilitude – holds the key to fluid and functional crossings between virtual and physical realms’ (8; 2). Even the future of ‘contemporary consumer electronics’ now lies in ‘extended scope they afford human agency’, rather than investing in ‘ever more immersive illusory spaces’ (3). Hansen summarises this renewed understanding of the virtual as follows:

rather than conceiving the virtual as a total technical simulacrum and as the opening of a fully immersive, self-contained fantasy world, the mixed reality paradigm treats it as simply one more realm among others that can be accessed through embodied perception [...] emphasis falls less on the *content* of the virtual than on the *means of access* to it, less on what is perceived than on how it comes to be perceived in the first place [emphasis in original] (5)

The titular ‘body in code’ is defined as ‘a body submitted to *and constituted by* an unavoidable and empowering technical deterritorialisation – a body whose embodiment is realised, *and can only be realised*, in conjunction with technics [emphasis in original]’ (20). In order to theorise this contemporary conjunction of embodiment and technics further, Hansen turns to Merleau-Ponty’s ‘phenomenology of embodiment’ as the framework for a ‘philosophy of embodied technics in which the excess constitutive of embodiment – the horizon of potentiality associated with the body schema – forms a ready conduit for incorporating the technical at the heart of human motility’ (39). Specifically, Hansen considers Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the ‘body schema’, exemplified by the blind person’s stick as prosthesis, as the beginning of a theorisation of technics which accounts for ‘an increase in power and scope of the body’s coupling to (and indifferenciation from) the environment’ (44). Hansen attempts to expand the notion of a body schema for the contemporary mixed reality context (in a similar manner to his use of Bergson in *New Philosophy for New Media*) to account for the ‘total and seamless integration of the technical element into the perceptuomotor body schema’, since embodiment and technicity are now ‘complementary’, such that ‘neither one is the cause of the other [...] neither one can be understood as a fall or contamination (or even a humanisation) of the other’ (44; 79). In conjunction with this use of Merleau-Ponty’s body schema, Hansen also attempts to reclaim ‘psychasthenia’ – defined as a ‘dissolution of boundaries between self and environment’ – from an ‘image-based pathology’ into a creative account of the ‘tactile experience of the body’s interpenetration with the environment’ (126-130).

Among the new media artworks analysed in *Bodies in Code*, there is one with a particular thematic relevance to contemporary warfare: Maurice Benayoun’s *Worldskin*. A 3D environment populated with 2D media images of warfare, *Worldskin* equips participants with cameras and thus invites them to document this virtual landscape of war. Yet each image captured by the participant’s camera is simultaneously removed from the virtual world (replaced by a blank space) and inscribed in a paper printout for the participant to retain. In Hansen’s reading, *Worldskin* aims ‘to catalyse a jump from the superficial level of the image as a neutralising “capture” of the world to a deeper level where it forms a trigger for the viewer’s active engagement with his or her agency in the world’ (90). Each ‘intervention’ by a participant therefore effects a ‘transformation of the image from the superficial representation of the visible (the image of the body of the other) to the material traces or indices of the viewer’s

kinaesthetic movement (the blank spaces and the paper print-outs which uniquely inscribe the viewer's position and orientation toward the images)' (91). Hansen unequivocally privileges the bodily dimensions of interaction over any particular image content, and claims that the work 'aligns the storage function of photography (and of tertiary memory more generally) with the insulated, distanced stance of the first-world image consumer' (92). Ultimately, Hansen generalises this distinction between embodied interaction and 'image consumption', claiming a superior grounding and realising force for the former:

This agonistic face-off with photography yields a fundamental reorientation of virtual technology that exposes virtual reality – at least as it exists in the world today – as mixed reality, as a dimension or property of the “real” world. Normally understood to be a form of passive immersion, a distancing fascination that insulates “first-world” spectator-citizens from the realm, as Žižek famously contended in his denunciation of Western reactions to 9/11, virtual reality here becomes a technical interface to the world that succeeds because it taps into the transductive coupling of embodiment and technicity constitutive of the human. (91)

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In this final section of the literature review, my aim is to develop a more concrete theoretical framework for studying the immersive mode of spectatorship as it relates to the war film. The works I survey cover a variety of media, but loosely follow a trajectory from VR to film, thus providing a historicisation and contextualisation of both digital and cinematic modes of immersion and the concomitant modes of subjectivity they structure. Currently, the concept of immersion as a mode of address or type of perceptual interface with media is encountered most often in discussions of VR technologies. In Mark Hansen's work, the term appears initially in a discussion of Jeffrey Shaw's *Place: Ruhr*, which exploits 'the panoramic convention of immersive illusionism' (*New Philosophy for New Media* 49). The nineteenth century panorama, which Hansen considers 'the first system for immersing spectators *within* the space of a painting or two-dimensional representation [emphasis in original]', is indeed invoked with some regularity by theorists/historians as the medial origin of the immersive ideal (85). Yet the *Place* works, in Hansen's account, emphatically do not import the immersive mode into this new media context, but rather 'layer' media 'in a way that



catalyses an experience quite different from the immersion normally invoked in reference to digital works' (86).

Hansen addresses this digital context of immersion more explicitly in *Bodies in Code*. Here, immersion is aligned with modes of conceiving VR as a purely visual simulation, as opposed to the fundamentally embodied interface that he proposes. Hansen refers to the way this tradition claims VR as a 'total technical simulacrum [...] the opening of a fully immersive, self-contained fantasy world', and argues vehemently against such ocularcentric, disembodied modes of conceiving and employing VR technology (5). Reading Hansen's work, there is nonetheless a distinct sense that this immersive mode of VR remains dominant as the 'mainstream' of 'VR research', and the form in which it is most often rendered through 'popular culture' (45; 113).

Immersion can, however, be a rather slippery term to define, and is often applied inconsistently across differing critical approaches to media. While Hansen employs it to designate one specific mode of VR, Holly Willis, surveying many of the same new media artworks covered by Hansen, uses the term in almost exactly the opposite sense to designate 'immersive installations' which 'creat[e] spaces within which the body as an entire entity experiences the artwork' (85). Thus the term itself, in current employment, is somewhat lacking in exact signifiatory co-ordinates, particularly in relation to VR and the digital.

A brief survey of two works which attempt to provide a more precise genealogy and phenomenological definition of immersion is perhaps useful then. The opening chapters of Marie-Laure Ryan's *Narrative as Virtual Reality: Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media* chart the 'rise and fall of immersive ideals' in the 'history of Western art' particularly in structured opposition to a more formalist 'aesthetic of play and self-reflexivity' that characterises interactivity (2). Ryan fundamentally associates immersion with media that generate an 'illusion of their presence', particularly an 'illusion of penetrable space', and which thereby allow the viewer an experience of 'the projection of a virtual body in a virtual space' (2-3).

Ryan locates the origin of immersion in the Renaissance development of perspective, which transforms painting from the realm of 'symbolic representation' into 'the projection of a three-dimensional space onto a two-dimensional surface', a mode which clearly 'assigns spatial coordinates [...] to the body of the spectator' (2). She then traces the evolution of visual media with a 'sense of depth' through 'the stereoscopes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Cinerama movies of the 1950s, which conveyed a sense of depth when they were viewed with special glasses, and the large-

screen IMAX movies of the present' to what is implicitly rendered as the ultimate realisation of immersive media: VR (53).

In Ryan's reading, the immersive quality of VR is primarily 'facilitated by the illusionist quality of the display', a distinctly visual sense of 'the virtual world as autonomous reality' (13). Through a rather literal interpretation of VR's capacity to provide sensory engagement which equates the sense of touch with the use of 'data gloves', she claims that its 'potential contribution to the expansion of the sensory dimensions of an image is really quite limited' (55). Within the limited scope of visual experience, however, Ryan's account does attempt a specific delineation of the conditions of immersion, which she denotes as 'a sense of being surrounded, a sense of depth, and the possession of a roving point of view' (53). Ryan notes the partial correspondence of these conditions to other media, observing that 'movies allowed shifts in point of view [...] but the spatial location of the virtual body of the spectator in the movie-world was rigidly determined by the location of the camera', while the 'first person video game [...] offers a display that can be navigated' in a manner akin to a more active roving point of view but only does so through a screen lacking in 'three-dimensional stereoscopic effects' (54). VR, then, is 'the only medium that combines the three properties of 360-degree panoramic picture, three-dimensional display, and a point of view controlled by the user' (54).

Ryan also speculates on the functional role of immersion within VR environments, arguing that in 'practical applications', 'immersion is a means to guarantee the authenticity of the environment and the educational value of the actions taken by the user' (66). Within a flight simulator, for example, 'the usefulness of the system as a test of what a pilot will do with an actual airplane depends on its power to reproduce the complexity and stressful demands of real flight situations' (66). This is perhaps a rather commonplace observation, but nonetheless serves to emphasise the vital link between immersion as verisimilitude and the efficiency of VR environments as simulative training (particularly in the context of military simulations).

Alison Griffiths' *Shivers Down Your Spine: Cinema, Museums and the Immersive View* also aims to define the conditions of immersive spectatorship, and explore the ways in which, across differing media, such 'ways of seeing and signficatory practices associated with one space become frames of reference for understanding subsequent architectural spaces and visual technologies' (7). Griffiths focusses on 'alternative modes of spectatorship' – relative to the cinema – in cathedral architecture, the panorama, IMAX, the planetarium, and the museum (1).

Immersion is addressed at the level of ‘complex spatial relations and embodied modes of encountering visual spectacle’, and is defined quite extensively in an early passage (1):

I use the term *immersion* in this book to explain the sensation of entering a space that immediately identifies itself as somehow separate from the world and that eschews conventional modes of spectatorship in favour of a more bodily participation in the experience [...] The spatial relations in immersive viewing practices are often more complex, chaotic and improvised (with spectators being afforded a level of freedom to move and, in the case of the panorama, look where they want, for however long they want). One feels enveloped in immersive spaces and strangely affected by a strong sense of the otherness of the virtual world one has entered, neither fully lost in the experience nor completely in the here and now [emphasis in original] (2-3)

What unites immersive spectatorship across media, then, is a sense of relatively unencumbered bodily engagement in connection with an ‘other’, self-enclosed space which affords a ‘visual spectacle that fills our field of vision, especially our peripheral vision’ (3). There is, therefore, a sense of ‘simulation and transportation’ involved in the experience of such alternate spaces, or a ‘heightened sensation of moving out of the immediate and into the hyper-real’ (6-7).

Curiously, Griffiths omits any discussion of VR in this work, claiming that ‘what differentiates VR from the kind of immersive space I write about in *Shivers* is the intrinsically asocial nature of the VR experience’ since ‘the actual moment of donning headgear and gloves separates participant from spectator’ (8). Nonetheless, her case studies of the panorama and IMAX in particular do provide an insightful sense of the perceptual experience of immersive spectatorship and how these modes relate to other visual media.

Griffiths’ account of the nineteenth century panorama is especially attentive to how modes of framing impact upon the level of viewers’ immersion. Noting how the positioning of the viewing platform often served to obscure the boundaries of the panoramic space, she argues that:

With nothing within which to locate the canvas, the spectator was more likely to accept the realism of the visual field than if the painting had been conventionally framed and exhibited. Unlike the frame, which functions as a window onto an

illusionistically rendered space, the panorama attempted to create the sensation of the spectator's physical relocation into the centre of such a space. (39)

This suggests an intriguing link to Mark Hansen's notion of the de-framing effect of digital media, with the concurrent emphasis on how bodily immersion may be conditional upon the invocation of a total, unframed medial space.

More generally, Griffiths characterises panoramic immersion as being dependent on the 'scale' of 'huge canvases that literally surrounded them', an 'invocation of presence' or 'sense of "being in a different time and space"', and its function as a 'mode of virtual transport' (40). She also emphasises their predominantly nonfictional content and the particular popularity of battle panoramas which 'interpellated [viewers] into the role of historical witnesses or war reporters via the subject matter and immersive mode of address' (50). While 'witnessing' may appear to be an oddly passive role, given the emphasis on bodily implication in the diegetic space, it is perhaps countered somewhat by such works' 'jingoistic appeal', which aims to 'enhance support for empire by their transformation of war into visual spectacle' (77; 51). This distinctive combination of witnessing and immersive presence may be the source for Griffiths' speculative analogy that the panorama 'might have had the same impact back then as today's 24-hour cable news in its ability to virtually transport spectators to the battlefield through a heightened sense of immersion and realism' (49).

In Griffiths' account, IMAX establishes a degree of continuity with the panorama through the way that its commercial promotion draws on the panorama 'as a source of evocative metaphors of immersion', establishing a 'unifying discourse (and myth)' of 'virtual travel *to* and immersion *in* a represented scene [emphasis in original]' (81-82). She notes specifically the 'enduring fascination with panoramic vision', manifested in this case as 'the ability to make use of our peripheral vision, giving us close to a 250-degree (as opposed to the presumed 180-degrees) visual span of the world surrounding us', and the frequent use of 'perpendicular movement into the frame which evokes the sensation of penetrating space through heightened depth cues' (82). The IMAX mode of immersion is not entirely synonymous with the panorama, however, and Griffiths equally emphasises its links to other visual media, specifically 'a visuality of surveillance that comes from the aerial cinematography and sweeping crane shots' (83).

A further exploration of immersive spectatorship in cinema can be found in John Belton's *Widescreen Cinema*, a study of 1950s widescreen technologies such as Cinerama, CinemaScope and Todd-AO. Cinerama is explicitly linked to 'early

panoramas and dioramas' through its 'documentary-style spectacles', while its advertising copy clearly evokes immersive ideals in the claim that 'you won't be gazing at a movie screen – you'll find yourself swept right *into* the picture, surrounded with sight and sound [emphasis in original]' (94-98). Belton also notes the perceptual justification for such claims:

According to Fred Waller, the inventor of Cinerama, the medium owes its sense of audience participation to the phenomenon of peripheral vision. Waller's own empirical experiments with depth perception led him to conclude that the successful illusion of three-dimensionality derived as much from peripheral as from binocular vision [...] When projected on a deeply curved screen, this view tends to envelop the spectator sitting in the centre of the theatre. (99)

Although Belton does not specifically use the term 'immersion', his (frequently invoked) notion of an audience 'participation effect' clearly evinces some semantic overlap, particularly through the claim that 'widescreen cinema became identified with the notion of "audience participation", the experience of heightened physiological stimulation provided by wraparound widescreen image and multitrack stereo sound', in contrast to the 'passive viewing' of 'traditional narrow-screen motion pictures' (187). A sense of the dissolution of the frame recurs once again here, as Belton argues that cinemas specifically adapted for these widescreen technologies employed 'panoramic screens [...] [which] extended into the space of the audience and transformed the front of the theatre from an atmospheric frame within which a motion picture attraction was presented into an eye-filling, wall-to-wall display of image and sound, in which screens blended into the side walls of the theatre auditorium and the film was experienced directly, as it were, unmediated by theatre architecture' (196).

Finally, it is worth noting how such immersive views in film may be complicit with the spectacle of warfare, in a line of continuity that perhaps descends from the battle panorama as outlined by Griffiths. Belton's work provides a particularly illuminating example of this, noting how, in 1940, Fred Waller 'transform[ed] his Vitarama system into an aerial gunnery trainer, which the Army Air Corps, the Navy, and the Marines used during the war to instruct its machine gunners':

The Waller Flexible Gunnery Trainer consisted of five synchronised projectors which threw a continuous mosaic of attacking enemy fighters onto a large spherical screen [...] [as] trainees fired electronic machine guns at diving enemy

planes. Elaborate calculations involving air speed and ballistics enabled Waller to predict which electronic bullets would hit their target; these hits were noted by beeps broadcast through individual earphones to the gunners and their instructor, who were thus able to tell immediately whether or not they had scored a hit and which machine-gun bursts had been on target. (101)

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The above surveyed works of Bolter and Grusin, Hansen, Ryan, Griffiths and Belton expand considerably the interdisciplinary and intermedial framework required for this thesis' study of the interrelationship between the contemporary war film and digital military technologies. *Remediation* will, rather straightforwardly, serve to contextualise the war film's remediation of digital technologies. Immediacy and hypermediacy strike me as particularly useful concepts for assessing the degree to which these digital interfaces are integrated within any particular film, since immediacy would posit a transparent and immersive alignment between the two, while the heterogeneity of hypermediacy suggests some degree of formal disharmony. More broadly, both medial logics may also be applied to delineate the relative types of perceptual and ontological experience afforded by a diverse range of technologies for mediating warfare. This will be further correlated with the forms of spectatorial subjectivity which Bolter and Grusin delineate as 'immersive' immediacy and 'connected' or networked hypermediacy (232). I will, however, bear in mind Bolter and Grusin's notion that both logics strive for the same evocation of 'real' experience, and thus explore the ways in which the connectivity of hypermediated subjectivities may evoke, by a different formal means, the same sense of presence afforded more immersively by the logic of immediacy.

Mark Hansen's work will primarily be employed as a counterpoint to Der Derian and Virilio's arguments regarding the virtualisation and disembodiment concomitant with contemporary military-technological mediation. Putting these ostensibly disparate works into even a dialectical relationship may initially appear somewhat puzzling, yet the difference between the military interfaces addressed by the latter and the digital artworks discussed by the former is actually not as clear as one might suppose. Indeed, in chapter four my analysis of simulations will include a substantial discussion the US military's virtual reality treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder, which marks a striking convergence of these two apparently disparate fields. As such, I will complement the studies of this application's military lineage with

Hansen's notion of VR as a 'postimagistic' technology in order to further contextualise this form of mediation in relation to the representational regimes of cinema and digital media (167).

Although I am a little sceptical of the argument presented in *Embodying Technesis* that cinema constitutes an embodied and affective antidote to the virtualising disembodiment of digital imaging – since Hansen seems to have revoked this contention in his subsequent work to argue that embodiment and technics are 'complementary', such that 'neither one can be understood as a fall or contamination (or even a humanisation) of the other' – it does align intriguingly with the hypothesis that war cinema's turn to subjective experience may be considered as a reaction to the digital virtualisation of warfare (*Bodies in Code* 79). However, I will primarily be drawing upon *New Philosophy for New Media* and *Bodies in Code* to explore whether military subjects' interfacing with digital mediations of war may contain some elements of affect or embodied 'framing' that may not be identified by the works of Der Derian or Virilio. In structural terms, I should also note that, although Hansen's work may be referred to only briefly during the close readings of my films, it will play a more substantial role in structuring each chapter's concluding discussion as I zoom out from the specifics of formal analysis to a broader evaluation of the relationship between embodied perception and each digital form under consideration.

Finally, Belton's account of the Waller Flexible Gunnery Trainer will function as a useful reference point for the historical imbrication between cinema and immersive military modes of imaging warfare, while Ryan and Griffiths' work will serve to contextualise the intermedial spectatorial relationship to both cinematic and digital mediations of conflict. Immersion is generally figured here as broadly co-extensive with an embodied mode of navigation (if not necessarily identification per se), and thus will be explored principally in relation to the war film's subjective turn in order to more precisely characterise the link between diegetic/military and spectatorial subjectivities. However, since it is also arguably aligned with digital interfaces, and VR in particular, I will further examine whether there might be unacknowledged or under-theorised links between the de-framing effect of cinema's embodied and immersive mode of address and the 'virtual transport' of military interfaces such as drones.

This expanded, interdisciplinary framework will thus structure this thesis' consideration of the relationship between contemporary war cinema and digital forms of military-technological mediation. As a distillation of the above discussions, my principal overarching research questions will be:

- Is the war film's subjective turn identifiable as a reaction to the virtualising distanciation of contemporary digital forms of military-technological mediation?
- In what specific ways (particularly in terms of immediacy/hypermediacy) does the contemporary war film remediate the digital interfaces of military technologies such as drones and simulations?
- What kind of diegetic relationship is posited between the embodied perceptions of military subjects and military-technological forms of mediation?
- How are the modes of spectatorial subjectivity evoked by contemporary war cinema linked to these military/diegetic subjectivities, and what are the political and ethical implications of this link?

I will begin by addressing the first of these research questions, in the following chapter, through an analysis of what I have termed the 'experiential mode'. Defined by a privileging of the quotidian aspects of soldiering via an embodied mode of address, I will argue that this trend can be framed as the most direct inheritor of the war film's Vietnam era subjective turn. Through readings of Sebastian Junger and Tim Hetherington's *Restrepo* (2010) and Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker*, I will examine the extent to which this contemporary instantiation of the subjective turn can be posited as a reaction to the perceived virtualising distanciation effected by military technologies. I will then present comprehensive studies of two of the contemporary forms of military-technological mediation that are frequently cited as central to this digital turn: drones (in chapter three), and simulations (in chapter four). My examination of war cinema's remediation of these technologies will chiefly focus on the diegetic relationship posited between embodied and digital forms of mediation, thus addressing the second and third of my overarching research questions. Finally, chapter five will explore the spectatorial experience delimited by such hypermediated war films as *Redacted* and *Battle for Haditha*, and further examine how these forms of spectatorial subjectivity might be commensurate with the diegetic hypermediated military subjectivities outlined across chapters three and four.



## 2. The Experiential Mode

In the previous chapter's literature review, I highlighted the general consensus held by the authors of numerous studies of the war film that, around the Vietnam era, the genre was marked by an increasing predilection for subjective, experiential portraits of war. This trend for aligning the viewer's perspective with that of the soldiers depicted was often accompanied by a realist aesthetic rooted in imitation of television and documentary footage to heighten the sense of authenticity. While numerous films consistent with these trends (such as *Platoon* and *Apocalypse Now*) are broadly considered to espouse an anti-war sentiment, Guy Westwell and Roger Stahl are particularly sceptical of this mode of cinematically representing warfare, arguing that the myopic point-of-view tends towards a form of psychologising or internalising combat experience, often at the expense of analysing the wider political context.

This mode, which (for brevity) I will subsequently refer to as the 'experiential', has nonetheless proved immensely influential in determining the subsequent contours of the genre right through to contemporary representations of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. A significant and oft-cited example from the intervening years is Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* – or, perhaps more specifically, the film's famous Omaha Beach landing sequence. Westwell argues that the meticulous emulation of authenticising visual signifiers (such as Robert Capa's photographs) and stylistic construction of an 'intensely subjective point of view' in this sequence preclude 'any critical questioning of the war'; while Stahl considers the film the epitome of this subjectivising tendency which 'demotes the camera/eye from its objective status, implies a subjective body in its place, and invites the viewer into that body', rendering an experience akin to a cinematic 'death simulator' (93-94; 43).

*Saving Private Ryan* is also a key focal point for Jonna K. Eagle's concept of 'strenuous spectatorship', a mode of framing warfare drawn from early cinema's charge films<sup>2</sup> and battle re-enactments in which 'the body of the spectator is imagined as

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<sup>2</sup> This may be an unfamiliar term to many readers since, as Eagle notes, the genre has as yet received little critical attention. Essentially, the charge films are defined as sharing an aesthetic of frontal assault with the rather more well-known 'train films' such as *L'arrivée d'un train en gare de La Ciotat* (1896), yet substituting the cavalry or infantry charge in place of the oncoming train. Examples discussed in the paper include *Charge of the Boer Cavalry* (1900), *Charge of the Seventh French Cuirassiers* (1896) and *Advance of the Kansas Volunteers at Caloocan* (1899). Regarding the latter example, Eagle demonstrates that 'the spectator is invited first into a viscerally charged identification with the position of victim (situated as the locus of the rebels' fire), and then aligned with the forward motion of the US soldiers' efficacious

situated within the contemporary terrain of battle' (18). Regarding Spielberg's film, Eagle argues that:

In addition to its function in the Western, the paradoxical provision of "authentic" embodied experience through the mediated thrills of screen culture centrally relates to the visual and visceral signifiers of "being there" that have come to define representations of war across a range of media. These representations refer with a particular insistence to an embodied spectator, both in the visceral intensity of their address and in the imagination of space and place that animates their visions. The screen violence in a film like *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998), for instance, operates through a fantasy of location founded upon innovations of editing, camera angle and soundtrack that work to situate the spectator amidst the carnage of battle. Like "embedded" war reporting or first-person shooter games, recent war films invite identification with a specific somatic location within the visual, sensory and historical landscape of violence, drawing the spectator into an ever more intimate identification with an embodied imagination of the experience of combat. The spectator is sutured into the field of representation through a point of view that both refers back to and relies upon the relationship of the gaze to the body. (32)

Eagle's argument, with its emphasis on cinematically situating the body of the spectator 'amidst the carnage of battle', overlaps significantly with Stahl's account of contemporary war cinema's 'first person regime of signs' (42). Both writers highlight the prevailing cinematic tendency to invite audience identification with an embodied construct of militarised subjectivity, and note its partial conjunction with the aesthetic of first-person-shooter games. They also share an understanding of the authenticising function of this perspective, which privileges the value of 'being there', or first-person witnessing, over distance and mediation. The technical rigour of Eagle's paper, however, provides a more precise definition of the stylistic means by which this subjective position (and, as I will demonstrate, contemporary instantiations of the experiential mode in general) is figured as a specifically imperilled form of embodiment. This, she argues, has evolved from the frontal assault of the charge films to a more technically sophisticated rendition of three-dimensional space which

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advance', thus 'conditioning an embodied sense of threat which is then redressed through an identification with violent action' (31).

surrounds the point of spectatorial identification with the threat of violence, as exemplified by *Saving Private Ryan*.

It is noteworthy, though perhaps unsurprising, that the most prominent example of the experiential mode in 1990s war cinema looks back to World War II rather than to more contemporaneous conflicts. Indeed, the Gulf War of 1990-1 appears somewhat resistant to a cinematic style grounded in an embodied first-person point-of-view. The high-tech spectacle and lack of embodied interaction characteristic of this conflict resulted in media imagery that Patricia Pisters describes as effecting a ‘farewell to both the subjective eye behind the camera as well as to the human subjects in front of the camera’ (236). Pisters draws a sharp distinction between the dominant representational modes of the Gulf War – termed the ‘end of the logistics of perception 1.0’ – and the subsequent Iraq War’s ‘logistics of perception 2.0’, marked by their degree of ‘subjective and affective intensity’ (236; 241). As is implied by Pisters’ co-opting of the phrase ‘logistics of perception’ (the subtitle to Paul Virilio’s *War and Cinema*) her account of the relationship between military technologies and cinematic representation is deeply indebted to Virilio’s work, proposing the Gulf War as the culmination of an ‘aesthetics of disappearance’ whereby the subjective anchoring of perspective gives way to a disembodied military-cinematic spectacle (236). Jean Baudrillard’s *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* is an equally significant influence here, with Pisters echoing his critique of the manner in which this technological spectacle was harnessed primarily as a ‘media simulation of the war’ (235).

While this conceptual framework is certainly useful in distinguishing the differing aesthetics of these two conflicts, it does however serve to obscure some of the continuities between contemporary forms of the experiential mode and its historical legacy, particularly the cinematic approaches to Vietnam delineated above. Pisters does briefly note that the Gulf War demonstrated a ‘completely different strategy towards perceptual aesthetics than the Vietnam War’, though the paper (understandably, given its brevity) does not fully address the more complex overarching continuities that may complicate the oppositions established – such as, for instance, the possible similarities between Vietnam era and contemporary modes of positing cinematic subjectivity in this context (235).

Constructing a more thorough account of how the experiential mode of cinematic representation works in films depicting the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars is the principal objective of this chapter, as a key step towards the thesis’ overarching aim of examining the relationship between embodiment and digital military-technological

mediation throughout this corpus. This study will address both stylistic continuities and discontinuities with the lineage of the experiential mode outlined above, as well as political, sociological and technological factors which have altered the wider context of the war film. The following section will focus primarily upon the contemporary phenomenon of journalistic embedding, assessing its relation to the experiential war film by analysing a typical example of embedded literature – Sebastian Junger’s *War* – and the accompanying documentary *Restrepo*. Subsequently, I will present an extended close reading of Kathryn Bigelow’s *The Hurt Locker*, exploring the key stylistic components of the film’s experiential aesthetic, as well as addressing its relationship to technological mediation and critiques of the film’s perceived lack of political engagement.

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Among various contextual factors that have influenced the form of the Iraq and Afghanistan war films, the embedding of journalists with US military troops is evidently a significant determinant. The procedure is generally considered to have been initiated as a reaction to both the Vietnam War’s relative press freedom and its effect of eroding public confidence in the conflict, and the surreal television news reports from the first Gulf War in which, as Baudrillard famously argued, there was ‘nothing to see’ (*The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, 47). Though the program afforded journalists an opportunity for intimate access to frontline troops and, in many cases, actual combat experience, it has subsequently received widespread criticism for the ethical compromises involved. From the bias implicit in the initial procedure of selecting which journalists are granted embed assignments – as highlighted by Chelsea Manning’s recent article for *The New York Times* – to strict limitations on movement and the reliance on military officers’ information for a broader overview of the conflict, critics have argued that the level of military control over such reporting essentially renders it propaganda<sup>3</sup>.

The influence of embedded reportage on Iraq and Afghanistan war films is clear from even a cursory overview of the films’ sources. Mark Boal’s experiences of

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<sup>3</sup> For more extensive critiques of embedding, see (among others) Patrick Cockburn’s “Embedded Journalism: A Distorted View of War” for *The Independent*, Kylie Tuosto’s “The ‘Grunt Truth’ of Embedded Journalism: The New Media/Military Relationship” in the *Stanford Journal of International Relations*, and Chelsea Manning’s “The Fog Machine of War” for *The New York Times*.

embedding in Iraq in 2004 led directly to the screenplays for *The Hurt Locker* and *In the Valley of Elah*, while the subsequent *Zero Dark Thirty* somewhat more contentiously draws upon his research into the CIA's manhunt for Osama bin Laden. *Generation Kill* by Evan Wright details his experience of embedding with US Marines during the invasion of Iraq and was adapted into the 2008 HBO series of the same name. Likewise, Rajiv Chandrasekaran's *Imperial Life in the Emerald City*, based upon his embedded assignment in Baghdad, formed the basis for the Paul Greengrass film *Green Zone* (2010); while Sebastian Junger's *War* and the accompanying film *Restrepo* report from Afghanistan's Korengal Valley over the course of a year embedded with the army. This list is not exhaustive, and does not even take into account looser dramatizations of actual events such as *Redacted* and *Battle for Haditha*, or 'first-hand' documentaries such as *The War Tapes* (2006) and *Gunner Palace* (2004) whose point-of-view is literally that of US troops equipped with handheld cameras.

By way of illustrating the complicities between embedding and the experiential mode, I will analyse, in further detail, *War* and its subsequent screen adaptation as *Restrepo*. There are of course variations in both style and content among these assorted literary sources, though Sebastian Junger's work is a reasonably representative example. In an early passage from the book, Junger explicitly outlines his approach to the assignment:

This time, however, I'm not interested in the Afghans and their endless, terrible wars; I'm interested in the Americans. I'm interested in what it's like to serve in a platoon of combat infantry in the U.S. Army. The moral basis of the war doesn't seem to interest soldiers much, and its long-term success or failure has a relevance of almost zero. Soldiers worry about those things about as much as farmhands worry about the global economy, which is to say, they recognise stupidity when it's right in front of them but they generally leave the big picture to others. (25)

The terms of this definition overlap significantly with the tropes that I have begun to identify as constitutive of the experiential war film. Junger's precise focus on the infantry experience, to the exclusion of any 'big picture', clearly evinces a striving to understand and capture the subjective point-of-view of its subjects. It also displays a form of authenticising rhetoric to justify this potentially myopic perspective – whereby the experiential 'grunt's truth' is unquestioningly adopted as the author's own

framework – that is somewhat analogous to the experiential war films’ privileging of ‘authentically’ subjective experience.

Yet it is perhaps rather problematic to present this elision of the wider political context as a self-evident consequence of adopting the subjective perspective of its subjects, as Junger appears to do in the above construct, and particularly so in the assumption that the grunt point-of-view is incompatible with a political stance. The proclivity among both embedded journalism and experiential war films to focus almost exclusively on the subjective experience of lower-ranking troops in their portraits of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan represents a noticeable shift in relation to the Vietnam era turn to subjectivity. While these Vietnam War films assumed the point-of-view of officers and infantry alike, their contemporary equivalents tend to largely exclude the officer class. This tendency could be conditioned by the types of embed assignments made available by the US military, or may be motivated by a journalistic distrust of officers’ information as perpetuating misleading propaganda, with the grunt’s experiences seen as a relatively truthful alternative. Regardless of the instigating factors, there seem to be two interrelated underlying assumptions at work here: one of which presupposes the grunt as inherently lacking in political engagement – via the rather demeaning class implications of Junger’s comparison with the figurative ‘farmhand’ – while the second seems to posit this lack as enabling access to a more authentic realm of experience by virtue of its disconnection from the political.

Junger’s emphasis on subjective experience does not, however, extend to the point of literally shifting into first-person narration from the point-of-view of any of the soldiers. Nonetheless, distinctions between the roles of external observer and participant in the war are blurred throughout the book, particularly as Junger encounters dangerous combat situations, realises his reliance on the unit for safety and begins to assist them in tasks such as supplying ammunition. In doing so, the continuities between *War* and the tradition of ‘strenuous spectatorship’, as outlined by Eagle, begin to emerge. Indeed, Eagle’s article identifies the nineteenth century war correspondent (specifically, Stephen Crane in Cuba) as the archetypal, original figure of this convention:

Like Crane on the hilltop – at once impervious and vulnerable, removed from the scene of violence in which he is at the same time intimately engaged – the strenuous spectator occupies a privileged vantage point on action alongside a fantasy of assault. Rather than being cordoned off from an embodied sense of threat, then, as some early cinema theorists have argued, here the spectatorial

body, and the white masculine body in particular, is imagined as very much on the line. (19)

By embedding with the infantry, and attempting to capture the experience of the Afghanistan War from as close to their perspective as possible, then, Junger's work essentially activates this framework of strenuous spectatorship in which he is simultaneously 'removed' from the action (by virtue of his non-combatant role) yet 'engaged', with his body 'very much on the line'. Furthermore, this blurring of the boundaries between journalist and combatant is rather evocative of Roger Stahl's critique of embedding, whereby the 'war correspondent' develops into a 'soldiered journalist' due to the 'overwhelming bias' toward an authenticising mode of 'being there' at the expense of 'perspective, analysis, context, and history' (86). This definition of the 'soldiered journalist' overlaps significantly with that of the cinematic spectator as a 'virtual-citizen-soldier', thus suggesting that the (embedded) literary mode of mediating combat evinces a strong degree of complicity with the cinematic regime of experiential mediation. It further appears to corroborate Eagle's more explicit genealogy of strenuous spectatorship as a mode of representation – or, indeed remediation – that traverses its literary origins to subsequently fuse a range of contemporary media including 'recent war films' and 'first-person shooter games' (32). This mode of reporting allows Junger to explore various aspects of the soldiers' psychological response to war, and he develops a particular interest in the question of enjoyment:

War is a lot of things and it's useless to pretend that exciting isn't one of them. It's insanely exciting. The machinery of war and the sound it makes and the urgency of its use and the consequences of almost everything about it are the most exciting things anyone engaged in war will ever know [...] but the public will never hear about it. It's just not something that many people want acknowledged. (144)

This question of whether military subjects derive enjoyment from war, and particularly from the act of killing, remains rather contested. John Protevi (whose work I will return to in greater detail in chapter four) argues that the novel technological means of conditioning soldiers' affective responses to war studied in "Affect, agency and responsibility: the act of killing in the age of cyborgs" are fundamentally oriented toward overcoming an inherent 'inhibition on killing' based on 'proto-empathic identification', and ascribes this moral/psychological inhibition to around '98% of

soldiers' (406). On the other hand, Joanna Bourke's *An Intimate History of Killing* surveys combat veterans from WWI, WWII and Vietnam to find 'ordinary men and women [...] rejoicing as they committed grotesque acts of cruelty', leading her to argue for a fundamental 'association of pleasure with killing' (369). Bourke also extends this claim to encompass the spectatorial pleasure derived from witnessing acts of killing in the war film. Examining what attracted William Broyles, a US Marine who served in Vietnam, to the 'pleasures' of the military, she observes:

Despite the filthy, anti-heroic battle scenes in the films he mentioned, he was entranced by them. Realistic representations of combat are not necessarily pacifist or even pacificistic. It was precisely the horror which thrilled audiences and readers: gore and abjection *was* the pleasure, subverting any anti-war moral [emphasis in original]. (18)

This parallel between military subjects' enjoyment of killing and spectatorial pleasure in witnessing it might, in the context of my study of the experiential mode, be read as a prescient warning against the contemporary tendency (particularly manifest in journalistic embedding and the lineage of 'strenuous spectatorship') to collapse any mediating, contextualising perspective in order to strengthen the alignment of diegetic (military) and spectatorial (civilian) subject positions. For if Junger's model of soldiers revelling in the visceral pleasures of combat is conjoined to a mode of representation that decontextualises and depoliticises embodied experience while inviting identification with military subjects, this may open up a potentially problematic and complicit form of spectatorial pleasure.

However, since Bourke's 'audience' here is constituted exclusively by military personnel (or at least those who would subsequently go on to military service), it may be somewhat presumptive to generalise such particular case studies and thus assume that the broader spectatorship of war cinema operates upon the same principle. Indeed, the issue is rarely broached within film studies approaches to the genre, and thus remains an open question. Since my own study of the experiential mode of combat representation here is not based on any empirical research into spectatorship, it is somewhat beyond the scope of the thesis to posit any definitive answers to whether viewers actually pleasure from witnessing mediated acts of killing.

Nonetheless, (textual) readings of these films may still pertinently acknowledge the types of subject position and potential forms of enjoyment *offered* to the viewer by



particular modes of representation. In particular, the depoliticising trends I have discussed above appear to presume a form of spectatorial engagement that is derived principally from the immediate and subjective experience of embodied identification rather than any moral or political framework in which the violence is contained. This coincides pertinently with Stahl's contention, in *Militainment, Inc.*, that an interactive and embodied form of audience pleasure has come to supersede propaganda as the principal contemporary means of providing 'approval and authorisation of war' (4). Even if this embodied form of spectatorial identification does not quite shade into an explicit pleasure in killing, then, this collapsed distance between diegetic and spectatorial subject positions remains a key point of contention. As such, I intend to closely examine the embodied points of view proffered by *Restrepo* and *The Hurt Locker* in relation to these wider tendencies toward immersive and decontextualised mediations of combat, thus evaluating whether the experiential mode fosters a sense of complicity in military violence by appealing to spectatorial identification with the soldierly body.

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Given the 'soldiered journalist' content of Sebastian Junger's *War*, one might expect *Restrepo*, the documentary adjunct to / adaptation of the book, to be largely commensurate with the subjective, experiential mode of war filmmaking – and this expectation is likely to be reinforced by the initial evidence of the film's aesthetic choices. *Restrepo* opens with video diary footage shot by the soldiers themselves prior to deployment in Afghanistan, depicting a drunken revelry of (in their terms) 'loving life, getting ready to go to war'. This use of the amateur video diary is a familiar trope among Iraq and Afghanistan war films, originating primarily through soldiers' footage shared online through YouTube and subsequently imitated in both documentary and fiction films. Indeed, in Pisters' account of the genre, the video diary is said to be 'paradigmatic for a new logistics of perception', conveying 'affective and traumatic intensities' in stark contrast to the aesthetic of the previous Gulf War (241-242). Obviously, the pre-combat context precludes any sense of trauma here, and the affective power is perhaps only legible to repeat viewers of the film or those who have previously read Junger's book and thus realise its elegiac connotations, since the self-proclaimed narrator of this sequence, Juan 'Doc' Restrepo, died during the subsequent deployment. Nonetheless, such videos do typically link performativity to an affective sense of

transience and fear of death, as Pisters points out (regarding *Redacted*): ‘Through statements by the soldiers such as “you are making a video of me making a video of you” and promises to take care of each others’ videos should they die in combat, these war diaries confirm the soldiers’ existence’ (239). Aside from these affective associations, the video diary also serves in a more basic manner to authenticise and indexically validate the film’s aesthetic, fulfilling a similar role to that of newsreel or television news coverage during earlier phases of the war genre. Viewed historically, it is worth noting the greater value now ascribed to the element of subjectivity in this role since the video diary, as a mode of narrating the war, is rather more individualised in both the scope of its content, and its implicit audience (i.e. family and friends). This semantic overlap with the epistolary tradition, as well as its customary emphasis on affective and embodied subjective experience, serves to differentiate the video diary quite substantially from its formal predecessors in this authenticising role.

Following this diary extract, Junger and Hetherington use two brief title cards to contextualise the film. The first concisely identifies the protagonists (Second Platoon, Battle Company), timeframe (15 month deployment beginning in May 2007), and location (Korengal Valley, East Afghanistan), while the second warns ‘It was considered one of the most dangerous postings in the US military’. The latter is particularly evocative of the ‘strenuous spectatorship’ tradition in its manner of glossing the preceding contextual information as, seemingly, significant only to the extent that it promises an abundance of combat footage and a viscerally imperilled perspective. This expectation is immediately confirmed as the film cuts to footage of an IED attack, captured on what appears to be a video diary. The chaotic sequence is shot with a markedly handheld, first-person aesthetic, which is heightened by the manner in which the sound abruptly cuts out following the explosion. It is not entirely clear whether this is due to actual technical difficulties, whether it is intended to mimic a temporary loss of hearing as in the battle sequences of *Saving Private Ryan* (among other war films), or whether it simply a confluence of both. Furthermore, the author of this footage remains unidentified, creating a degree of ambiguity as to whether the first-person point-of-view here is that of Junger, Hetherington, or one of their military subjects. This indistinct perspective seems particularly significant in undermining any sense that Hetherington’s point-of-view – as a celebrated professional photographer – will legibly diverge from the amateur reportage shot by the soldiers.

It quickly becomes apparent that, in contrast to the mediating journalistic perspective of *War*, the film contains no visible or audible traces of Junger and

Hetherington's presence whatsoever. This is presumably intended to intensify its subjective sense of 'what it's like to serve in a platoon of combat infantry in the U.S. Army', to cite Junger's objective in *War*; in other words, to render the subjectivity of the film's perspective as being that of the soldiers rather than an embedded journalist (25). This trope is common to the vast majority of films adapted from embedded reportage, and tends to accentuate the focus on the immediate and experiential over the contextual. Indeed, among the above list of adaptations derived from embedded journalism, the only one which retains this mediating journalistic perspective is *Generation Kill* (2008), and it is notable that Evan Wright's focalising perspective in the series enables a more complex debate over the boundaries of civilian and military points-of-view. This is manifested quite literally during a nocturnal battle sequence, which cuts between the technologically and strategically enhanced points-of-view of Marines equipped with night vision goggles, and that of Wright's relatively unmediated observation. It also enables the series' ultimate critique of framing war exclusively from a militarised first-person perspective – a point conveyed rather didactically during the finale in which the audience for the soldiers' video diary react to the film with regretful disdain and gradually file out of the screening.

In *Restrepo*, however, the absence of this mediating framework precludes any critique of or distancing from the soldiers' perspective. In contrast to Junger's book, which still retained some degree of contextual analysis – as in, for instance, his discussion of the Afghan government's ban on lumber exports and its effect of turning local workers into potential al-Qaeda recruits – such political or economic factors affecting the war are simply not discussed or integrated into the film (47-52). Instead, the simplification of narrative perspective seems to restrict the film's focus to the day-to-day experiences of the soldiers which in this account are largely procedural rather than politically or idealistically oriented. Patricia Aufderheide, in her assessment of the Iraq War documentaries, is particularly critical of this tendency among the group of films which she terms 'grunt docs':

In fact, the directors of the grunt films usually do not directly address most American publics as voters. The grunt films function well, in fact, as a certain kind of entertainment. These films largely address us as viewers, usually as television viewers, who might happen to be war buffs or medical buffs. There is no public policy issue about the legitimacy or purpose of the war on the table in these films, because the soldiers can't tell you whether we should be there. As

soldiers, they have to fight under orders. So if a public is a group of people who come together around a common problem, these films do not directly address a national public. Rather, they address viewers as consumers, people making a selection among a broad number of channels. They may even quell debate, insofar as viewers echo the protagonists' stolid following of orders. (61)

The terms of Aufderheide's argument here echo Stahl's critique of 'militainment', in that the cinematic adoption of soldiers' subjective perspectives lends itself more to a form of experiential entertainment than contextual or political debate. The notion that, in acting 'under orders', the soldiers 'can't tell you whether we should be there' does echo Junger's assumption of the grunt's lack of political engagement to some degree. Yet Aufderheide's analysis also highlights the extent to which this is a result of filmmakers' typical approach to the material, manifested particularly in a 'liberal' concern 'not to demonise the soldiers' by any distancing from or critique of their performative self-presentation, and a procedural focus on 'the challenge of getting the job done' (59-60).

*Restrepo* largely conforms to this template. The fundamental compassion evinced for the film's subjects, as is essentially dictated by its status as an elegy for the medic Restrepo, is affecting yet does serve to preclude critique. Compounding the stripping away of context effected by the removal of journalistic mediation, its subjects are further portrayed as uninterested in wider debates over the war as a whole, and as such the film itself seems to plead a wilful ignorance on the question of 'whether we should be there'. This is of course not strictly an *apolitical* stance since the very notion of inviting subjective identification with military subjects is itself a mode of validation which, as Aufderheide notes, 'may even quell debate' (61).

While the film renders the experience of the war in procedural rather than political terms, Junger and Hetherington do thematise this procedural aspect to a greater degree than many similar documentaries by investigating the soldiers' attitudes to their work and its effects upon them in psychological and affective terms. Mirroring the many discussions of the pleasures of combat in *War*, the film's soldiers display a marked eagerness for 'contact'. Alongside numerous scenes of the troops idling around their outposts, itching for action, several combat sequences are followed by explicit expressions of delight, such as: 'Big firefight... that was fun. You can't get a better high. It's like crack, you know... Once you've been shot at, you really can't come down. There's nothing... you can't top that'. This sentiment is echoed, and enhanced,

by the film's sketchy contextualisation of their missions and the rendering of combat through a first-person aesthetic comprised primarily of handheld digital video (as in the opening IED attack sequence outlined above) with a marked predilection for intimate close-ups, occasionally augmented by soldiers' helmet-cam footage. It is also, in more general terms, fundamentally enabled by Junger and Hetherington's choice of the Korengal valley as the location for embedding, since there are relatively few combat zones which retain such a high degree of embodied 'contact' in the contemporary era of digital mediation. Nonetheless, the effects of technological distancing are still present here to a degree and do appear to have some impact on the soldiers' enjoyment. For instance, the film's final combat sequence features a long-range firefight, with the (off-screen) target visible only through the heavy-duty optics wielded by the platoon's sergeant, leading to one of the soldiers somewhat frustrated declaration that 'I just wish they were closer so I could've actually seen them when I killed them'. This notion that the pleasures of combat are reliant upon embodied intimacy, and potentially diminished by technological distancing coincides with the findings of Bourke's study, which notes that:

Combatants used their imagination to "see" the impact of their weapons on other men, to construct elaborate, precise and self-conscious fantasies about the effects of their destructive weapons, especially when the impact of their actions was beyond their immediate vision [...] What is striking is the extent to which combatants insisted upon emotional relationships and responsibility, *despite* the distancing effect of much technology [emphasis in original] (6-7)

While such aspects of the film may suggest that it is little more than a glib instantiation of Stahl's 'death simulator' militainment, this combat eagerness is ultimately balanced against at least one diegetic combat sequence imbued with a starkly contrasting sense of trauma, and the affective post-combat reflections captured through subsequently recorded interviews. The combat sequence in question is presented in far greater detail than any other and occupies almost thirty minutes of screen time. It is introduced through the interviews as the commonly agreed upon 'low point' of the platoon's deployment and, atypically, contextualised with both a mission name ('Operation Rock Avalanche') and a sequence depicting its tactical planning. The film also briefly diverges here from the dominant representational mode (i.e. the first-person perspective of handheld digital video), depicting the missile system interface of an H64

attack helicopter as it bombards what is subsequently revealed to be a civilian residence. The aftermath of this attack, as the platoon walk through the settlement and witness the devastation of the strike in the form of civilian corpses and wounded children, further diverges from the strictly military point-of-view which has primarily been engaged thus far. The contrast drawn between the clinical distancing of the missile interface and the affective, embodied rendition of its effects hints at a critique of US military operations otherwise largely absent from the film. Furthermore, the glimpse of civilian alienation afforded here is in itself a significant counterpoint to the militarised point-of-view, and a rare instance of such among the 'grunt doc' genre. The remainder of this mission fits more comfortably into the typically experiential first-person view of combat, and depicts an assault by Taliban forces resulting in a (US) casualty. It is shot in the same intimate handheld manner as the rest of the film, though it is notable that the sequence employs far longer takes, allowing the reactions to Sergeant Rugle's death to play out in closer to real time. The traumatic impact of this incident is thus rendered primarily through the physical display of affect, with one soldier in a particularly panicked, tearful state.

The film's other, more formal, counterpoint to experiential combat enjoyment is the use of individual interviews. Despite the occasional recourse to using extracts from these interviews as voiceover narration, for the most part they seem to exist in a somewhat differentiated diegetic space. It is evident from the tense employed by the interviewees that these were recorded after the platoon's return from Afghanistan, and this distancing from the film's otherwise relentlessly experiential combat representations allows for a more reflective consideration of its long-term effects. These are presented as almost exclusively psychological, ranging from mild disturbances to PTSD-induced sleeplessness. While many of the soldiers are uninhibited about discussing this, the filmmakers' consistent use of close-ups, which fill the frame with the subjects' facial outlines against a stark black background, clearly serve to heighten the visibility of their affective eliciting of their experiences in the Korengal. For instance, in discussing Rugle's death, it is the silent spaces in between the soldiers' monologues that are particularly evocative, with one interviewee trailing off mid-sentence. His eyes, which had thus far been piercingly focussed directly into the lens, take on a faraway glaze, while his mouth purses and hesitates around the sound of the words to come. He ultimately asks for a 'timeout', apologising for losing his 'train of thought'. Junger and Hetherington hold this shot for an almost uncomfortable duration, then subtly ease into footage of the actual incident via an evocative sound bridge. In

moments such as these, then, the nuanced detection of visual, embodied affect forms a stark counterpoint to the enjoyment of combat on display elsewhere. They further serve to effect something of a transition in the spectatorial relationship to military subjectivity, moving from the invocation of embodied identification, as suggested above, into a more detached, reflective mode whereby the viewer is placed in a position of scrutinising these somewhat more objectified witnesses.

Yet while these elements of *Restrepo* may enact some degree of aesthetic differentiation from the kind of thorough combat-immersion featured in, for instance, the similarly experiential year-in-Afghanistan documentary *Armadillo* (2010), it is worth noting that the interviews' strict adherence to evoking and internalising combat experiences is open to the same critique as the Vietnam war films discussed in the previous chapter. While Junger's book opens out occasionally to encompass discussions of the subjects' post-Army lives in terms of finding work, relationships with family, etc., *Restrepo*'s post-combat interviews focus almost entirely on their time in the Korengal and clearly serve to internalise and psychologise the experience. In doing so, they appear to perpetuate the tradition of using the combat veteran's psychological order as a synecdoche for the war as whole. Westwell argues that this 'recuperative ideological strategy' enables the restoration of psychological order to fill in for the implied mythic-historical order (64). However, the degree of therapeutic closure achieved in *Restrepo* appears to be negligible, with Staff Sergeant Joshua McDonough noting during his interview that 'there's no intel on how to treat us right now because they haven't had to deal with people like us since World War II and Vietnam... guys that are coming back from 15 month deployment with as much fighting as we went through'.

While this open-ended reworking of the Vietnam veteran trope may suggest a more subversive reinterpretation of it by refusing the reinstatement of psychological order, Aufderheide remains sceptical over the merits of such structures. She argues that within the typical 'course of a deployment' timeframe of most Iraq War 'grunt docs', character development tends to uniformly follow the 'trajectory [...] from young and naïve to young with post-traumatic stress disorder', and that 'what keeps us watching' in spite of this familiar pattern is 'a voyeuristic quest, the thrill of wondering if we will see someone get hurt or killed' (60). Ultimately, Aufderheide dismisses such content as amounting to little more than 'emotional pornography' (60). This may be a somewhat harsh verdict to apply to *Restrepo*, since the film's attempts to elicit sympathy for the troops' traumatic experiences and subsequent psychological effects are generally more

sensitive than sensationalist. However, the film's relentless emphasis on subjective experience and predominant conformity to the experiential mode does arguably solicit *identification* more than *understanding*. It is certainly significant that this identification takes place with a soldierly body both physically and psychologically scarred by the experience, yet the understanding achieved by this process is inward-looking and thus open to charges of voyeurism, rather than a stimulus to socio-political critique of the war itself.

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Having garnered multiple Academy Awards and inspired polarising critical debate, Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* is arguably the most prominent post-9/11 US war film. Its visceral, highly subjective depiction of bomb disposal in occupied Baghdad broadly aligns the film with the contemporary experiential mode, and has directly inspired both praise and criticism. Slavoj Žižek, in a now famous post for the *London Review of Books*' blog, attacked the film's 'pseudo-documentary style' and incitement to identification with 'our boys' [...] fear and anguish' as masking a pernicious and 'invisible' ideological complicity which precludes 'questioning what they are doing there'. Conversely, Amy Taubin's review for *Film Comment* revels in Bigelow's construction of a 'fully three-dimensional theatre of war [...] [which] make[s] you feel as if you, like the characters, are under threat from all sides.' Refuting Žižek's equation of subjective identification with an endorsement of the war, Taubin argues that:

Bigelow harnesses her action-movie chops in the service of allowing us not only to understand the addiction but to feel the adrenaline surge in ourselves. The opening sequence produces an immediate contact high that lasts through to the final frame. Bigelow's dedication to cinema as an experiential medium finally has a worthy subject. Which is not to say that the movie functions either as a recruiting tool, or as a panacea for the viewer, who, safe in her or his seat, might prefer to keep knowledge of Iraq or Afghanistan compartmentalized, neatly packaged as a two-hour movie. Like the great modern war films—*Apocalypse Now*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *The Thin Red Line*—*The Hurt Locker* depicts the war zone as a dystopia, where notwithstanding the horror, those who fight draw pleasure from how the possibility of imminent death concentrates the mind and sends the serotonin levels soaring.



Žižek and Taubin's readings of the film, then, seem to stem from a common understanding of *The Hurt Locker*'s form as broadly aligned with the experiential mode as I have defined it above, but differ radically in the political and aesthetic merits ascribed to this invocation to subjective identification. Žižek's claim that the film's rendering of the war as a 'personal account' in 'pseudo-documentary style' uses subjective experience to obscure political context echoes the critiques of Westwell and Stahl, whereas Taubin's argument frames the 'experiential' as a distinctly embodied and visceral 'pleasure' whose political implications are much more ambiguous given the apparent tension between a personalised 'contact high' and the overarching sense of 'the war zone as a dystopia'. Both, however, crucially hinge on the specific interpretation of the way Bigelow harnesses this experiential subjectivity. Addressing the implicit politics of *The Hurt Locker*'s experiential aesthetic will thus constitute one aspect of my focus in this final section of the chapter. However, alongside (yet intertwined with) this focus on the politics of the experiential mode, I will also approach the film from a somewhat different angle, attending to the relationship posited between the embodied grounding of the experiential and contemporary modes of military-technological mediation. This is thematised through the contrast established between the Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) squad's initial Sergeant, Matthew Thompson (Guy Pearce), and the subsequent introduction of his replacement, William James (Jeremy Renner).

The first point-of-view rendered in the film's opening sequence is that of the robotic device employed by the unit to investigate a potential roadside IED. The image is marked by digital static, a narrow focus and a shallow depth of field. The robotic device's progress toward the IED is intercut with a depiction of escalating panic in the area as Iraqis flee the scene and US military vehicles arrive. This is immersively rendered with quick cutting between multiple, undefined points-of-view which break the classical 180-degree rule of editing, creating a paranoia-inducing instantiation of what Taubin refers to as a 'fully three-dimensional theatre of war'. This kinetic style is fundamental to the film's sense of experiential excitement, yet here it is contrasted with the coolly distanced observation of protagonists Thompson, Sanborn and Eldridge as they assess the explosive device through the remote interface of the robotic camera and casually make phallic jokes about the investigative robotic prosthesis. The technological mediation of the robotic device is implicitly linked to a detached sense of mastery, as Thompson, preparing to remotely detonate the IED, precisely forecasts the intended blast radius.

Once the 'bot' breaks down, however, and Thompson is required to put on the protective suit and approach the IED himself, there is a fundamental shift from the detachment of technological mediation to a distinctly embodied sense of danger. Aesthetically, this is conveyed by a noticeable intensification in Bigelow's use of embodied first-person perspectives. These include, on the periphery of the scene, rifle sightings of observers from Sanborn's point-of-view, but are primarily organised around Thompson's perspective from the interior of the bomb suit. Its physical restrictiveness lends his movement something of the ethereal quality of a slow-motion dolly, while the soundtrack amplifies the experiential sense of subjectivity through the prominence of his breathing patterns echoing in the helmet. The gradual emergence of a suspenseful electronic drone on the soundtrack heightens the sense of threat while Thompson, now in the 'kill zone', lays the charge, and Eldridge sees a man with a mobile phone appear from a nearby butchers. Furious cross-cutting between these perspectives culminates in the highly aestheticized explosion of the IED, with extreme slow-motion and high resolution imagery employed to highlight the details of the scattering debris.

Following Thompson's death, James' first mission as the new team leader clearly establishes his alternative approach to ordnance disposal, recklessly premised on individual and embodied pleasure. The sequence is introduced through a dynamic construction of three-dimensional space, similar to that of the film's opening, with Bigelow cutting between interior shots from the EOD unit's vehicle and various undefined points from which they are apparently observed. The absence of any specifically identifiable grounding to these diverse views on the action again generates an edgy, paranoid sensation of being under panoptic surveillance. As the unit emerge into this scene, the film also utilises first-person points-of-view as a mode of embodied grounding, with the camera movements mimicking their scanning of the empty, littered street for signs of the IED as well as tracking across the overhead balconies to assess the gathering observers.

Having identified the location of the IED, James immediately dismisses Sanborn's assumption that they will use the 'bot' to investigate, putting on the bomb suit instead and grinning with pleasure in defiance of warnings that it is 'kind of tight down here'. Approaching the IED, James deploys a smoke bomb to visually isolate himself from the support of Sanborn and Eldridge and largely ignores their communications, as though his evident pleasure in the job is heightened by disconnecting himself from the wider military network and individualising the experience. It is at this point that the first-person point-of-view becomes more intensely

engaged, with the rhythms of James' breath inside the helmet serving as a particularly embodied evocation of his subjective, experiential sensation.

The mission is then brusquely interrupted by a peculiar scene in which an Iraqi taxi driver breaks through the military barricade set up around James. A tense confrontation ensues as the driver implacably and motionlessly stares back at James despite the plethora of guns aimed at him. James' warning shots eventually convince him to begin reversing away from the scene, at which point he is detained. The total ambiguity of the driver's motives is matched by the sheer redundancy of this scene in terms of narrative causality. As a somewhat enigmatic interlude, then, it serves only to amplify the scene's tension and perhaps to provide some degree of face-to-face contact (if not quite combat *per se*) in contrast to the technological anonymity of IEDs. I will return to this point, and more generally to the film's characterisation of Iraqis, in the discussion below.

As James returns to the procedure of disarming the IED, Bigelow reinstates the primacy of the first-person point-of-view. In visual terms, this is not strictly a sustained first-person view; although some shots heighten the sense of subjectivity by incorporating the edges of his visor as a frame within the frame, the scene also incorporates frequent cuts to perspectives that are just slightly askew from James' embodied position. Nonetheless, a sustained quality of embodied subjectivity is maintained throughout the entire sequence through the persistent use of the interiorised sound of his breathing. It is also worth noting the manner in which James seems to anthropomorphise the explosive by gently, almost sensuously brushing away the rubble which concealed it and intoning 'hello, baby'. After swiftly, almost anti-climactically disarming the IED, James discovers a larger 'secondary' explosive, the emergence of which is accompanied by a brief drone on the soundtrack, echoing that of the film's opening sequence. James' work on this second device is intercut with the point-of-view of an Iraqi on one of the balconies above. The significance of this observational perspective is subtly suggested by an initial match cut from inside James' helmet to a shot which frames him from above and uses the ovoid ornamental railing of the balcony to frame him in a graphically similar form. Although the technical details of the disarmament remain somewhat opaque, the viewer can nonetheless read this confrontation as a duel in which James is attempting to remove the detonator before the antagonist can trigger the IED, due to the cinematic grammar employed – specifically, an accelerating series of cross-cuts which culminates in a face-to-face, shot/reverse-shot confrontation.

The analysis of these two sequences enables an initial postulation of Bigelow's use of the experiential mode. As in *Restrepo*, there is certainly an overarching attempt here to convey a deeply subjective sense of the experience of war, particularly as filtered through the perspectives of Thompson and James from within the bomb suit. While *Restrepo* was grounded almost exclusively in first-person points-of-view, as mediated by handheld digital video, *The Hurt Locker*'s aesthetic is somewhat more diverse. For instance, in the both of the above scenes, Bigelow establishes the action with a rapid series of cuts between multiple, undefined perspectives which appear to be surveilling the protagonists. Breaking the 180-degree rule in this way may typically connote disorientation, yet here it actually serves to orchestrate a coherent and comprehensive sense of three-dimensional space. As Robert Burgoyne's article on the film notes, this spatialisation of the combat zone depicts 'an experience of war no longer defined by fronts or sectors, a war in which improvised bombs and irregular combatants are concealed in the folds and textures of urban life' (13). Furthermore, the speed of editing deployed here intensifies the affective sense of threat felt via the subjective points-of-view which are embedded within this space. Though similar to *Restrepo* in some regards, particularly the fluidity of fronts and omnidirectional nature of potential threats, *The Hurt Locker*'s spatial constructions do nonetheless reflect a more technically sophisticated means of heightening the tension implicit within the landscape of war in comparison with *Restrepo*'s elegantly composed yet more straightforward establishing shots, which primarily accentuate the landscape's natural beauty and occasionally suggest the significance of strategic vantage points.

The subjective perspectives contained within this three-dimensional space are principally conveyed through the use of first-person points-of-view. While these are not typically sustained throughout the duration of a scene, they are however crucially augmented by various sensuous details such as the distinctive quality of movement within the bomb suit and the prominent sounds of breathing within the helmet, which forcefully emphasise the embodied nature of the film's subjective perspectives. These two key aspects of the film's experiential aesthetic coincide, perhaps to an even greater degree than *Restrepo*, with Eagle's definition of 'strenuous spectatorship'. Indeed, it is striking that Eagle's analysis of *Saving Private Ryan* could just as easily be applied to *The Hurt Locker*. Bigelow's 'imagination of space and place' similarly 'operates through a fantasy of location founded upon innovations of editing, camera angle and soundtrack that work to situate the spectator amidst the carnage of battle', and grounds the point-of-view in an embodied form of subjectivity that 'draw[s] the spectator into an

ever more intimate identification with an embodied imagination of the experience of combat' (32). There are of course notable differences between the films beyond this 'strenuous' representation of the space of combat – most obviously, Spielberg's film embeds its combat within a present-day framing device which directly appeals to patriotic devotion and heroic self-sacrifice, while *The Hurt Locker*'s experiential portrait of combat is not contained within any comparable political rhetoric or context.

Indeed, Burgoyne's reading of the film posits the rupture between individual embodied experience and any conventional overarching political narrative as distinctly innovative, arguing:

Framing combat as an addictive pleasure, an ongoing, private and collective need, the film departs radically from genre convention, disdaining the formulas of older war films – the pathos formulas of sacrifice and loss – for a mode of address that emphasizes the adrenalized experience of risk [...] *The Hurt Locker* foregrounds the idea of private experience and pleasure in war, rendering war as a somatic engagement that takes place outside any larger meta-narrative of nation or history.  
(13)

This view of the film is apparently shared by Steven Shaviro, whose account of Bigelow's proceduralism (in the blog posts "Kathryn Bigelow" and "A Brief Remark on *Zero Dark Thirty*" for *The Pinocchio Theory*) posits that the intensive focus on 'operational techniques' in both *The Hurt Locker* and *Zero Dark Thirty* drain these works of any ideals or overarching rationale. Yet, as I have suggested in relation to *Restrepo*'s proceduralism (particularly with reference to Aufderheide's critique of the 'grunt doc'), one should be wary of the presentation of individual embodied experience as inherently apolitical.

While Burgoyne justifiably asserts that 'the palpable experience of [...] the body at risk' is radically disconnected from 'any kind of larger *national* narrative [emphasis added]', this is not to say that it is a site entirely purified of political implications or other discursive relationships (13). The citation above intriguingly suggests that it is framed as 'an addictive pleasure, an ongoing, private and collective need', and Burgoyne further suggests that the film in fact constructs something of a dialectical opposition between embodiment and technological mediation:

By underscoring the body at risk, *The Hurt Locker* also presents an implicit critique of the distance – moral and physical – of remote targeting and weaponry.

The reality of war as embodied activity and embodied violence asserts itself here in a visceral way. (12)

As I have emphasised through the earlier reading of the film's opening sequence, there is undoubtedly a significant body/technology dynamic at stake in the film. This is initially conveyed through the contrast established between Thompson and James, as the procedure for dealing with IEDs shifts from the detached precision of robotic mediation to the viscerally embodied risk of James' approach. James' association of embodied pleasure with a lack of technological mediation and isolation from the wider military network becomes even more pronounced after the initial mission outlined above, as he subsequently begins to work without the bomb suit and jettisons his radio. It may be possible, developing Burgoyne's line of argument, to read this shift from Thompson's technologically-aided insularity to James' riskier engagement as a metaphor for the degeneration of asymmetrical warfare with minimal casualties into a drawn-out counter-insurgency program throughout which the death toll escalated alarmingly.

However, while I concur with the suggestion that *The Hurt Locker* frames embodied experience and technological mediation as a key binary opposition – with James manifesting a similar proclivity for unmediated 'contact' as that expressed by some of *Restrepo*'s subjects – the claim that embodiment 'presents a critique' of technological distancing does not quite, I believe, satisfactorily address the significance of James' reckless endangerment as a willingly self-imposed form of pleasure. Furthermore, the film does not seem to posit either embodied or technologically mediated modes of warfare as the ontologically privileged 'reality of war'; indeed both are depicted as potentially lethal, and if the film ultimately focusses on the embodied form to a greater degree, it is primarily in order to explore this aspect of James' combat addiction.

This body/technology dialectic may appear somewhat disjunctive for a war film in which 'combat' is primarily constituted by the body-versus-anonymous-technology scenario of a man attempting to disarm IEDs, though Bigelow does just about manage to sustain this notion by consistently incorporating human antagonists, such as the taxi driver or, more frequently, a combatant who lingers on the margins of the scene waiting for an opportune moment to trigger the explosion. As this implies, the film's characterisation of Iraqis is particularly reductive. In the majority of cases, including those just mentioned, they simply represent an undefined threat. No attempt is made to

contextualise the reasons for insurrection against the US occupation of Baghdad, and the closest the film comes to ascribing an equivalent sense of subjective motivation is the vague implication that the taxi driver in the above described sequence may be mirroring James' enjoyment of embodied danger. Even the most prominent Iraqi character in the film – a young boy nicknamed 'Beckham' for whom James develops some paternal sympathy – appears to be defined solely through his relation to James. Beckham, however superficially, holds a flattering mirror to James' recklessness by praising EOD work as 'fun, it's cool, it's gangster, yeah?', which contrasts markedly with the suspicions and fears emanating from Eldridge and Sanborn.

The implied infantilism of James' self-image that emerges here is but one element of critique which suggests that James' position as the film's purveyor of embodied, experiential pleasure in war is perhaps not to be taken at face value. While his actions throughout (approximately) the first half of the film may be read as eccentric yet heroic, a degree of distanciation is introduced during a sequence in which Sanborn and Eldridge consider fragging him<sup>4</sup>, with the audience seriously invited to consider whether this action is justifiable as a means of self-protection for the unit. In the latter half of the film, James' escalating paranoia becomes increasingly difficult to identify with, and supplants his heroic self-image with delusions of persecution.

The first substantial evidence of this occurs during the sequence in which the unit find a 'body bomb', with James mistakenly identifying the victim as Beckham.<sup>5</sup> In stark contrast to the pleasure derived from earlier sequences of ordnance disposal, James is in this instance visibly disturbed and subsequently embarks upon a bizarre and clearly misguided nocturnal attempt to find the perpetrators. When he later discovers Beckham selling DVDs inside the military compound, James simply ignores him as though refusing to acknowledge the fantastical grounding of this escapade. The motivating factor behind this shift in James' character seems to be rooted in the very

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<sup>4</sup> Specifically, Sanborn and Eldridge ponder detonating the ordnance which the unit are assigned to dispose of before James can retreat to a safe distance. The term 'fragging' derives more generally from the Vietnam era practice of soldiers killing their own officers with hand grenades.

<sup>5</sup> This sequence has been the source of some confusion among viewers and critics. Robert Burgoyne's 'Embodiment in the War Film: *Paradise Now* and *The Hurt Locker*', for instance, assumes that the body-bomb *is* Beckham's corpse, and neglects to discuss his re-appearance (16). However, given the evident paranoia displayed by James from this point onward in the film, and the comparative clarity of identifying Beckham as such in his subsequent re-appearance in contrast to the distorted, bloodied corpse, I believe this reading has a greater justification. The commentary by Kathryn Bigelow and Mark Boal on the US Summit Entertainment DVD release confirms that this was the authorial intention.

notion of a body-bomb, which perhaps enacts a radically disconcerting literalisation of his anthropomorphising of IEDs; although it is also worth noting that the circumstances, in contrast to earlier ordnance disposal procedures, do not provide any identifiable human antagonist nor anyone to rescue, thus thwarting any opportunity to fulfil his perceived heroic role.

Structurally, this sequence plays a significant role in beginning to erode the degree of audience identification with James. The combination of his charisma and unconventional success with the use of a first-person, experiential aesthetic designed to induce audience identification may have precluded any critical reading of his character up to this point, yet Bigelow here begins to establish a degree of distance whereby one cannot simply identify with the delusional grounds of his decision-making. This is further developed during the following mission in which the unit are called in to assess an oil tanker explosion. Surveying the chaos of the aftermath, James refuses the straightforward terms of the mission. Invoking a paranoid vision of ‘guys watching us right now and laughing at this’ to justify chasing his ‘adrenaline fix’ (as identified by Eldridge), James leads the unit into a reckless pursuit of unseen perpetrators through unknown back alleys, which results in Eldridge’s brief capture and injury. Once again, then, the conjunction of arriving too late for any heroics and the absence of an identifiable antagonist seems to induce this paranoid delusion.

This notion of James as a victim of military circumstance is ultimately compounded by the film’s conclusion. During his brief sojourn at home, prior to re-enlisting, he explains his singular motivation to his infant son:

You love everything, don’t you? But you know what, buddy? As you get older, some of the things you love might not seem so special. Like your jack-in-the-box. Maybe you realise it’s just a piece of tin and a stuffed animal. And the older you get, the fewer things you really love. By the time you get to my age maybe it’s only one or two things. With me, I think it’s one.

Read in conjunction with the film’s opening citation from Chris Hedges’ *War Is A Force Which Gives Us Meaning* – ‘The rush of battle is a potent and lethal addiction, for war is a drug’ – this clearly posits James’ unrelenting compulsion to put his body ‘on the line’ as an addiction. Žižek’s critique of the film is equally sceptical of this construction as it is of the experiential aesthetic, arguing that:



*The Hurt Locker* brought back to Hollywood the trend which also accounts for the success of two recent Israeli films about the 1982 Lebanon war, Ari Folman's animated documentary *Waltz With Bashir* and Samuel Maoz's *Lebanon* [...] Maoz has said his film is not a condemnation of Israel's policies, but a personal account of what he went through: "The mistake I made is to call the film *Lebanon* because the Lebanon war is no different in its essence from any other war and for me any attempt to be political would have flattened the film." This is ideology at its purest: the focus on the perpetrator's traumatic experience enables us to obliterate the entire ethico-political background of the conflict.

Certainly, the general notion of victimisation in this context does appear to coincide with genre tendencies to circumvent politics by internalising and psychologising the soldiers' experience, as discussed above in relation to the Vietnam veteran figure and trauma in *Restrepo*. Additionally, *The Hurt Locker*'s diegetic restriction to James' experiences does preclude any engagement with the 'ethico-political background of the conflict'. Žižek's contention that 'we are there, with our boys, identifying with their fear and anguish instead of questioning what they are doing there' is justified, then, in the sense that the experiential rendition of disarming IEDs does not directly open up to questioning the political basis for the war, nor, to reiterate Aufderheide's critique of the 'grunt docs', does the film address its audience as a voting public. Furthermore, the flattening of distinctions between wars seems to have a particular validity with reference to *The Hurt Locker*, since political context presumably has no bearing on James' addiction to bodily risk.

Despite these pertinent criticisms of the film, I would nonetheless maintain that Bigelow's use of the experiential mode is rather more sophisticated than that of many similar films since the positing of combat addiction does suggest, albeit on an individual-subjective level, some sense of 'questioning what they are doing there'. By manifesting James' enjoyment of combat through a highly subjective aesthetic which invites audience identification, subsequently establishing a greater degree of distanciation through his escalating paranoia, and finally reframing the opening construction as an addiction, the film ultimately seems to imply a kind of auto-critique of the experiential mode.

Earlier in this chapter, I noted that the experiential mode of representing war may effect a collapse of the soldier/audience distinction through directly and immersively translating the soldierly pleasures of combat into a form of spectatorial pleasure fundamentally oriented around the experience of the body at risk. *The Hurt*

*Locker*, through the above structure, may suggest that the terms of this construction are reversible – in other words, that this particular type of ‘militainment’ may, at its most extreme, go some way towards producing soldiers like James, disillusioned with civilian pleasures and only able to derive enjoyment from the visceral, embodied danger of combat. Since Stahl notes that ‘militainment’ works to craft the ‘imperialist subject’ as one who ‘provid[es] approval and authorisation’ of war by interactively engaging with this experiential pleasure, and many of the products which accommodate this interactivity (such as the game *America’s Army*) ultimately function as recruiting tools for the military, the path from the cinematic experiential mode to combat addiction does not seem too far-fetched (4).

This reading of the film may be somewhat against the grain given Bigelow’s apparent predilection for this particular style of visceral action. Yet this almost paradoxical structure, whereby the subjective enjoyment of combat is both lavishly manifested and critiqued, does leave the film open to diverse and potentially contradictory readings which may account for both its wide audience appeal at a time when war films were proving largely unpopular and for the ensuing polarising critical debate over the film’s politics.

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This chapter has explored the post-Vietnam legacy of the war film’s turn to subjective and embodied experience in contemporary instantiations of what I have termed the experiential mode, as the initial stage in a wider exploration of the shifting relationship between embodiment and technological mediation in the genre. This tendency is defined initially in relation to Vietnam War films, drawing on critical work which highlights the privileging of subjective and embodied experience to the exclusion of wider socio-political analysis. For Westwell, this is fundamentally effected by the mediating figure of the Vietnam veteran, whose often traumatic embodied experience serves to psychologise and internalise the war and thus negate the potential political charge of disaffection. Stahl contends that a similarly subjectivised and embodied form of ‘militainment’, posited as a reaction to ‘Vietnam Syndrome’, continues to characterise cinematic and televisual representations of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which appeal to ‘the post 9/11 fever to virtually enter the body of the soldier through a first-person aesthetic’ (79). Like Westwell, Stahl explicitly frames this trend as incompatible with a critique of the war, with the ‘gradual “zooming in” on the

experience of the soldier' theorised as correlating inversely to socio-political analysis (78-79).

Positing this tendency as continuous across almost forty years does, of course, have its complications, despite seminal examples of the experiential tendency manifesting in the intervening years (such as *Saving Private Ryan*). The Gulf War, in particular, seems somewhat resistant to this characterisation given that it is commonly depicted as a postmodern media spectacle cut adrift from embodied experience. While it is somewhat beyond the scope of this chapter to comprehensively explore the mutations that embodiment in the war film undergoes during the Gulf War era, it is nonetheless worth noting how the foregrounding of the keenly-debated relationship between embodiment and technological mediation during this conflict perhaps comes to supplant the body-politics dialectic that dominates critical approaches to Vietnam era embodiment. Given this contextual issue, as well as my overarching hypothesis that the war film's embodied turn may now be posited as a reaction to the virtualising distanciation of digital mediation rather than simply as a retreat from politics, I have addressed contemporary examples of the 'experiential' in terms of the body's relationship to both politics and technology, and further explored some of the novel ways in which these terms may be intertwined (considering, for example, the political and ethical implications of rendering combat as an embodied pleasure that is only impeded by technological mediation).

Initially, I highlighted how the phenomenon of journalistic embedding is central to the contemporary strengthening of the experiential tendency, with embedded reportage forming the basis for many cinematic representations of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars including Sebastian Junger and Tim Hetherington's *Restrepo*. The discussion of Junger's *War* demonstrated how closely embedded accounts tend to reproduce the Vietnam era subjectivisation of war, particularly through the rhetorical justification of the 'grunt's' experience as inherently 'authentic' because of his/her presumed indifference to the 'big picture' of political context or ideology. Although the near-exclusive focus on the 'grunt' in such work differs slightly from the wider spectrum of rank encountered in Vietnam War instantiations of the experiential, this rhetoric nonetheless serves to filter the mediating frame of reference for comprehending the war down to a similarly myopic focus on the procedural and day-to-day experiences of soldiering. However, in place of the previously dominant internalising/psychologising mechanism, the emphasis here is primarily on the visceral enjoyment derived from embodied combat.

As is the case with virtually all embed adaptations, *Restrepo* jettisons the mediating figure of the journalist, largely attempting to align the spectatorial point-of-view with that of the diegetic combatants. This is formally implemented by the employment of a first-person aesthetic which seemingly deliberately obscures the formal differences between Hetherington's cinematography and video diaries recorded by the film's soldiers. While the 'grunt's truth' rhetoric (in both literary and cinematic forms) would posit this first-person perspective as an authentic and apolitical mode of witnessing, I have problematised the supposed neutrality of the experiential here by suggesting that this immersive identification with military subjectivities – particularly when coupled with a clearly embodied pleasure in combat – should instead be considered as a form of political and ethical complicity. Some distancing from this complicit perspective is opened up by the film's post-combat interview strand via its reflective tone and affective scrutiny of trauma. Yet this aspect of the film does ultimately serve to reinstate the psychologisation/internalisation of war to some degree, even if this particular instance does not quite offer the same sense of therapeutic closure as many of the Vietnam War films.

The relationship between embodied experience and technological mediation is touched upon briefly in *Restrepo*, as the film's subjects explicitly associate the pleasures of combat with an embodied witnessing that is apparently diminished by the distancing of long-range artillery. This theme is, however, more substantially developed in *The Hurt Locker*. Bigelow's film establishes an oppositional relationship between these modes of mediating war from the outset, contrasting Thompson's use of robotics with James' predilection for embodied risk. The latter emerges as the film's privileged perspective, aligned with an embodied and predominantly first-person aesthetic that serves to evoke James' enjoyment of the sensory experience of combat and invite identification with this imperilled point-of-view embedded within a technically sophisticated rendition of three-dimensional space. As such, *The Hurt Locker's* embodied form has been critiqued for what is often perceived to be a typically experiential focus on these sensory aspects of combat to the exclusion of any engagement with politics or ideology. Although this may appear to be a less problematic pleasure than that offered by *Restrepo*, given that it is fiction rather than documentary and deals with IED-disposal rather than the killing of Afghans, in formal terms it does nonetheless seem to perpetuate a similar complicity.

However, I have argued that the relationship between embodiment and technological mediation in *The Hurt Locker* is somewhat more complex than the

critiques of, say, Slavoj Žižek may suggest. As the film increasingly aligns spectatorial pleasure with James' embodied risk, it seems to reframe the use of robotics in the opening sequence, such that it begins to appear less like a prosthetic extension of human capabilities and more like a signifier of a kind of post-human remote warfare that negates James' skills and enjoyment. Reading this at face value though – as Bigelow's attempt to critique the unreality of technologically mediated warfare through embodied imagery – fundamentally neglects the significance of this elision of technology as a self-imposed form of pleasure and also fails to acknowledge the increasingly reflexive framing of the experiential as the film begins to distance itself from James' perspective, revealing this enjoyment to be a debilitating form of addiction. Indeed, these latter elements also open the film up to an alternative reading as a kind of auto-critique whereby the experiential mode given its most lavish incarnation yet ultimately somewhat problematised through the implicit suggestion that James' addiction may in a sense be mirrored by *The Hurt Locker*'s spectator: disillusioned with all aspects of warfare barring the visceral thrill of combat.

It is also worth noting how these two contemporary manifestations of the experiential conform in many ways to the critical delineation of immersive spectatorial subjectivities as outlined in the literature review. Of course, considered strictly in terms of medial frames, both *Restrepo* and *The Hurt Locker* are quite simply and conventionally cinematic, and their limited remediations of military-technological interfaces do not offer much opportunity for contrasting heterogeneous perceptual frames. Nonetheless, the aesthetic construction of embodied experience in these films corresponds quite closely to Ryan and Griffiths' definitions of immersion. Both fundamentally characterise immersion as an illusion or invocation of presence, which broadly corresponds with the transparent aim of the experiential mode in offering the viewer some simulated sense of what it is like to be in a combat zone via an approximation of military subjectivity. *The Hurt Locker*'s embedding of this presence within a distinctly three-dimensional space further coincides with Ryan's spatial conceptualisation of immersion as 'a sense of being surrounded, a sense of depth, and the possession of a roving point of view', as well as Griffiths' account of how battle panoramas envelop the viewer's perspective within 'huge canvases that literally surrounded them' (53; 40).

Interpreting frames in a more metaphorical manner, one could also claim that the de-framing effect of decontextualised embodied presence offered by these films – considered above primarily in relation to 'frames' of political context – may further

strengthen the alignment of the experiential with the immersive. In other words, the rendering of military experience as individualised and embodied, with little or no indication of what is at stake in national, political or ideological terms, serves to create a fundamentally immersive form of subjectivised enjoyment. In this sense, immersive spectatorship also acquires connotations of complicity, linking the spectatorial agency invoked by *Restrepo* and *The Hurt Locker* to viewers of battle panoramas who, in Griffiths' reading, are 'interpellated into the role of historical witnesses or war reporters via the subject matter and immersive mode of address' and thus implicitly grant 'support for empire' through the consumption of war as 'visual spectacle' (50-51).

I will return to Hansen's work in subsequent chapters, since his framework will be more useful for conceptualising spectatorial subjectivity in relation to digital interfaces, though it is perhaps relevant to note here that the oppositional relationship between embodiment and technological mediation does intersect with the conceptualisation of cinema in Hansen's *Embodying Technesis* as an essentially tactile, embodied and affective medium which can help 'resist the seductions of disembodiment projected by contemporary [...] virtual technologies [...] reclaiming a distinctly human perspective in the face of material and technological forces that for so many today portend the inevitable dawn of a new, radically posthuman epoch' (263). However, as I have suggested in my analyses of *Restrepo* and *The Hurt Locker*, embodied perception does not quite function as a straightforward humanist grounding in this context, but rather tends toward a more troubling form of complicity with military subjects' pleasure in the visceral thrill of the body at risk.

While Ryan and Griffiths thus seem to corroborate the findings of this chapter – with the use of their critical frameworks here leading to an outline of diegetic and spectatorial subjectivities that largely conform to earlier suggestions with reference to the 'virtual-citizen-soldier' and 'strenuous spectatorship' – Bolter and Grusin's concepts of immediacy and hypermediacy can be used to frame spectatorial immersion from a slightly different angle, one which perhaps enables a more pertinent contrast between the experiential mode and the digital forms of mediating war addressed in the subsequent chapters. Although *Remediation* pre-dates the films covered in this chapter by almost a decade, Bolter and Grusin do coincidentally draw attention to Kathryn Bigelow's earlier work *Strange Days* – or, more specifically the imaginary technology of the 'wire' within this film – as epitomising immersive immediacy. This 'fanciful extrapolation of virtual reality' is said to lay bare immediacy's 'goal of unmediated visual experience' (4). Of course (as Bolter and Grusin acknowledge), the very notion

of any medium offering ‘unmediated’ experience is a paradox, or non-actualisable myth, yet I believe that this concept quite accurately expresses *The Hurt Locker*’s distinctive sense of embodied presence articulated in opposition to technological mediation. This can be further clarified via Bolter and Grusin’s account of the ‘version of the contemporary mediated self’ (i.e. spectatorial position) expressed by the ‘logic’ of immediacy:

Accordingly, there are two versions of the contemporary mediated self that correspond to the two logics of remediation. When we are faced with media that operate primarily under the logic of transparent immediacy (virtual reality and three-dimensional computer graphics), we see ourselves as a point of view immersed in an apparently seamless visual environment. In a virtual environment, we have the freedom to alter our selves by altering our point of view and to empathise with others by occupying their point of view – techniques pioneered in film and now extended and intensified in digital media. At the same time, the logic of hypermediacy, expressed in digital multimedia and networked environments, suggests a definition of the self whose key quality is not so much “being immersed” as “being interrelated or connected” (232)

As noted by my analyses of *Restrepo* and *The Hurt Locker*, the restriction of narrative perspective to an embodied point-of-view is a key tendency of the experiential mode of the contemporary war film, and tends to delimit the spectatorial experience to a complicit form of ‘empathy’ with diegetic military subjectivities. The two films can be somewhat differentiated, however, by the spatial form in which this embodied perspective is embedded. I have argued that *The Hurt Locker*, unlike *Restrepo* (and indeed the majority of experiential war cinema), surrounds this point-of-view with a distinctly three-dimensional rendition of ‘seamless’ space. This cinematic spacing is highly technically sophisticated and relies on rapid, almost paranoid cutting between multiple, undefined points-of-view; yet this high-tech accomplishment is ultimately geared toward a sense of unencumbered presence. As such, the film replicates the curious technological paradox of immediacy since its evocation of ‘unmediated’ presence is effected by an effaced but nonetheless fundamental technicity. The spatial dimensions of *The Hurt Locker* could thus be said to bridge the experiential mode with immediacy by taking the characteristically embodied presence of this group of films and situating it within a more specifically immersive space.

The aesthetic correspondence between *The Hurt Locker* and a definition of medial immediacy which primarily refers to ‘virtual reality and three-dimensional computer graphics’ also seems to be a noteworthy outcome of this chapter. Bolter and Grusin do stress throughout this work that virtual reality should be considered a remediation of cinematic point-of-view rather than a transcendence of prior media, so to find some degree of continuity between them is perhaps not too surprising in itself. However, the way that this immediacy is founded upon a paradoxical sense of ‘unmediated’ technicity may suggest that the dividing line between experiential embodiment and the mediation of drones or CG simulations is not quite as rigid as some critics of military-technological virtualisation would suggest. The two subsequent chapters will address precisely this relationship between embodiment and technological mediation in relation to drones (chapter three) and simulations (chapter four) – exploring the extent to which the subjective experience of warfare is altered by the mediation of these technologies. Drones in particular are often posited as complicit with an emptying out of subjective and embodied experience, creating a distinctly virtual form of contemporary warfare to which the experiential mode is sometimes (as in Hansen’s *Embodiment Technesis*) considered a kind of antidote. The following chapter will reconsider this notion in relation to drone mediation, as well interrogating whether the specific modes of subjective experience afforded by this novel form of remote warfare are continuous with the type of embodiment that characterises the experiential war film, or whether new technologies may demand a new theoretical formulation of embodiment and/or subjectivity.



### 3. Drones

The escalating military use of Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) – or drones, as they are more commonly termed – has attracted an increasing degree of controversy over the past few years. Two principle reasons are commonly cited for this: the first regarding the ethics of remote warfare, and the second concerning the shift in military doctrine from geographically circumscribed conflict between nation-states to the global and amorphous series of ‘kill-list’ assassinations carried out by drones.

US drone missions in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Somalia and Yemen are typically run from control centres in the US, such as Creech Air Force Base in Nevada, with the drone remotely operated in real time via satellite link. Although many aspects of the drone program remain rather secretive, a part of the US military’s propaganda campaign against negative portrayals of drones in the media has involved allowing some degree of access to sites such as Creech, which can be seen in a segment produced for the CBS series *60 Minutes*<sup>6</sup> and in countless stills available online. These depict a control panel comprised of multiple screens streaming the drone video feed alongside maps, and a joystick-style controller similar to that which one might use for a flight simulator game. The apparent convergence of this apparatus with gaming, as well as the evident insularity of the drone operator who is able to kill at a distance without placing one’s body at risk, have been the target of numerous journalistic critiques which suggest that drones have reduced war to the level of gaming. For instance, Akbar Ahmed and Lawrence Wilkerson’s 2013 *Guardian* article, entitled “Dealing remote-control death, the US has lost its moral compass”, explicitly denounces these ‘armchair warriors’ as perpetuating a ‘dishonourable’ mode of combat by ‘making warfare more like a video game and giving technicians the dissociated power of life and death for the figures on the screen before them’. In such accounts, then, the analogies drawn with gaming tend to bolster an argument focussed primarily on the geographical and ethical distancing apparently inaugurated (or at least pushed to a new extreme) by drones’ particular form of screen mediated, remote combat.

While drones are, in part, used to supplement more conventional modes of combat – such as providing ‘overwatch’ support to ground troops in Afghanistan – they are also an integral component in a particularly divisive shift in US military doctrine. As part of the so-called War on Terror, drone strikes have been executed to target

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<sup>6</sup> “America’s New Air Force”; see <http://www.cbsnews.com/videos/americas-new-air-force/>

individual militants in numerous countries with which the US is not formally at war – which, as Medea Benjamin highlights in *Drone Warfare*, is in clear violation of international law (127-148). These strikes have attracted controversy for the discrepancy between the official rhetoric of ‘precision’ weaponry and the numerous civilians known to have been killed either as collateral damage or through instances of mistaken identity. Critics have highlighted several new policies, introduced as part of the US drone program, which may directly contribute to this apparent incongruity. Alongside ‘personality strikes’, which target known individuals, the policy of ‘signature strikes’ allows for the targeting of what Benjamin terms ‘groups of men who bear certain signatures, or defining characteristics associated with terrorist activities, but whose identities are not known’; while ‘double tap’ strikes, in which a first missile is shortly followed by a second aimed at the same location, are also widely considered to have escalated the number of civilian deaths (131). Furthermore, many drone missions bypass official military channels, being run instead by the CIA and JSOC (Joint Special Operations Command), an anti-terror unit that Benjamin describes as ‘even more cloaked in secrecy and less subject to accountability than the intelligence agency’ (62). As a result of the extremely loose definitions of ‘combatant’ instantiated by such practices as signature strikes, and the lack of transparency concomitant with running the drone program through the CIA and JSOC, the most reliable public statistics on drone strikes are available via the Bureau of Investigative Journalism<sup>7</sup>.

In short, drones are central to some of the most contentious and substantial changes being effected in contemporary warfare by digital technologies. Given that a central objective of this thesis is to re-establish a discursive connection between studies of the war film and the wider military-technological context, then, the representation of drones in contemporary war cinema is a key topic. Certainly, many of the above outlined socio-political issues relating to the use of drones are reflected in this corpus. The first instances of drones in film – in the CIA thriller cycle of 2005-8 typified by *Syriana* and *Body of Lies* – as well as the more recent *Zero Dark Thirty*, could be said to reflect the proliferation of drone warfare outside conventional military channels in a skewing of the war genre toward globe-spanning CIA, rather than strictly military, operations. Tonje Hessen Schei’s documentary *Drone* (2014) is a useful primer on these issues for a broad audience, outlining drones’ production and deployment, the experiences of drone operators from recruitment at gaming events to disillusion and

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<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/category/projects/drones/>

PTSD, and a useful counterpoint to Western perspectives on drones through its focus on their impact on residents of Waziristan and the efforts of Clive Stafford-Smith's charity Reprieve to bring legal justice for civilian victims in the area. Similarly, albeit in the realm of fiction, *Good Kill* (2014) crams its diegesis with topical concerns, addressing the ethics of signature and double tap strikes via the focalising perspective of a former Air Force pilot now reluctantly employed as a drone operator, as well as exploring the difficulties of the 'compartmentalisation' demanded by remote warfare on military personnel who 'blow up six Taliban and go home to barbecue'.

Yet cinema, of course, does far more than simply hold up a mirror to these socio-political issues. Integrating drone perspectives into cinema for the first time involves a series of aesthetic and ontological choices which have a particular resonance for the wider relationship between the war film, the military employment of digital technologies, and gaming. While an identification with the drone camera's roving point-of-view may appear somewhat commensurate with the cinematic apparatus itself – leading to an alignment of the viewer's perspective with that of the drone operator – critics' claims that drones turn warfare into something like a video game also suggest that in this realm of remote yet interactive digital weaponry, the interactivity afforded by gaming may facilitate a more exact reproduction of the drone operator's experience. The general scarcity of cinematic representations of drones, especially in relation to the veritable glut of films focussing on the Iraq War, may be partially due to the ongoing opacity of drone warfare compared to the visibility afforded by media embedding in Iraq, yet it may also owe something to this incongruity between the genre's dominant embodied/experiential mode (as outlined in the previous chapter) and the potentially rather static *mise-en-scène* of 'armchair warriors' physically confined to a small cabin.

As such, this chapter will interrogate not only these socio-political issues raised by the use of drones, but also the extent to which cinematic representations of drones may inaugurate a new visual regime of warfare. Does the framing of war through the drone interface, for instance, reshape cinematic notions of the subjective experience of war as developed through the embodied/experiential mode? How do we characterise the experience of drone operators, and how does this correspond to the viewer's perspective? How does the drone interface differ from prior aerial modes of imaging warfare, and how does this affect the genre's conventions?

In order to more rigorously address these questions, the chapter will begin with an overview of the ways in which drones have been studied and theorised within the lineage of aerial warfare, encompassing works by Medea Benjamin, Paul Virilio and

Derek Gregory, as well as studies of military satellite imaging. Drawing a contextual and conceptual framework from this discussion, I will then examine the panoptic model of drone imagery instantiated by *Syriana* and *Body of Lies*, before moving on to a discussion of the relationship between embodied human intelligence and drone reconnaissance in Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty*. Finally, I will present extended readings of Andrew Niccol's *Good Kill* and Omer Fast's *Five Thousand Feet is the Best*, focussing in particular on these films' accounts of the subjective experience of the drone operator and the radically different model of drone imaging suggested by the haptic yet disorienting aesthetic of Fast's film.

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Medea Benjamin's *Drone Warfare* provides a useful, albeit brief, sketch of the history of UAVs, noting their origins in 1930s experiments by US, UK and German military forces with drones implemented as the mobile, unmanned targets of 'anti-aircraft exercises' (13). By the time of the Vietnam War, drones were incorporated into US military reconnaissance practices, though Benjamin emphasises that *armed* drones did not appear until 1999, as part of the NATO Kosovo campaign (13-15). This spare contextualisation establishes the background for the journalistic discussion of contemporary applications and controversies around current drone wars to be found throughout the rest of *Drone Warfare*, though the lack of discursive discussion of the relationship between drones and other military technologies necessitates a turn here to more theory-oriented studies of contemporary military technologies in order to position drones within a more distinct military-technological lineage and explore more specifically the ways in which they conform to or depart from associated military imaging systems such as satellites.

Paul Virilio's seminal 1984 work *War and Cinema* is perhaps one of the first works to attempt this, positing a direct line of evolution from 'the first battlefield observation balloon' of 1794 through WWI aerial reconnaissance photography to the 'pilotless aircraft' deployed over Laos in 1967 (15). The early use of drones, then, is broadly claimed as the culminating achievement of a military-cinematic panopticism through which '*Direct vision was now a thing of the past: in the space of a hundred and fifty years, the target area had become a cinema 'location' [emphasis in original]*' (15-16). A significant intermediary step between manned aerial observation and the current use of drones can also be read in his description of the experience of piloting during

the Vietnam War, with his account of the pilot's 'technological vertigo' once 'imprisoned in the closed circuits of electronics' coalescing again around the substitution of 'digital display' for direct perception (104-106).

Furthermore, Virilio's foregrounding of 'a new type of headquarters [...] [the] central electronic-warfare administration' as a military 'images department' used to analyse the feeds of 'spy satellites, drones and other video-missiles' seems to anticipate the CIA's use of drone surveillance and thus their positioning at something of a tangent to what are conventionally considered military operations (2). Although Virilio does not explicitly isolate drones as an object of extensive study beyond these passages, his overarching thesis regarding the mutual imbrication of cinematic and military technologies can also be productively extended to the contemporary proliferation of drones outside of a strictly military context, as they are now appearing in various amateur and commercial guises ranging from the DJI Phantom model marketed for recreational aerial imaging to Amazon's delivery drones or their employment for environmental/ecological monitoring. As some of these examples suggest, Virilio's military-cinematic binary schema does perhaps risk appearing somewhat outdated in this contemporary context, since it is now not only cinematic techniques that reciprocally influence military practice, but also some degree of the interactivity and connectivity of digital media<sup>8</sup>. Nonetheless, the sense of drones as effecting a blurring of military-civilian boundaries is a significant theme in several of the films discussed below, although it is primarily instantiated in a psycho-geographic expression of the drone operator's experience rather than via direct reference to non-military drones per se.

While Virilio's work goes some way toward conceptualising broad trends in military technologies that have culminated in armed drones, a more specific predecessor can arguably be located in military satellites. Introduced in the early 1960s as part of the US military's covert reconnaissance of Soviet territory, satellite imaging offered a disembodied and remote means of surveillance that is comparable to the reconnaissance function of drones in the present (and, indeed, indispensable to the current drone apparatus in the live transmission of drone video feeds to operator bases across the globe). Paul B. Stares implicitly highlights this facet of satellites in his account of their genesis in an effort to reduce 'visibility' and avoid provocation following the Soviet capture of the U2 piloted by Gary Powers (62-65). Yet it is primarily their later

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<sup>8</sup> See, in particular, the work of James Der Derian and Tim Lenoir, as discussed in the literature review.

development, particularly during UN peacekeeping operations in Bosnia, the first Gulf War and the 2003 Iraq War, which demonstrates a much closer imbrication with contemporary drone imaging. Lisa Parks' *Cultures in Orbit* and Roger Stahl's article "Becoming Bombs" are useful sources for detailing the specific modes and functions of satellite imaging during these conflicts.

In her analysis of satellite imagery during the Bosnian War, Parks notes the sociocultural assumptions of military/scientific objectivity associated with the technology and argues that it is fundamentally tied to a visual regime which 'treated the surface of the Earth as a domain of unobstructed Western vision, knowledge and control' (79). This panoptic claim, however, is somewhat undermined by the 'excessive abstraction and emptiness of the satellite perspective' which creates a dependence upon annotation (often drawn from supplementary intelligence gathering or other circumstantial assumptions) in order to ground signification (89). Thus, in Parks' account, there was 'nothing evident' about the satellite-derived photographic 'evidence' of mass burials at Srebrenica, since the satellite imagery of this period constituted 'an abstract visual field that must be anchored and infused with meaning in order to signify anything other than its own orbital position' (89-91). Parks emphasises that a clear 'hierarchy of discourses' regulates this anchoring, with the 'dispassionate gaze of the intelligence analyst and anthropologist' systematically privileged above the 'embodied experience of victims and bystanders', both within actual military practice and the televisual realm of news programs' interactive annotations, zooms and various other animated transitions (96). Contrary to the real-time interactivity of contemporary drone operation, then, all of this post-event analysis and supplementation significantly suppresses the technology's 'capacity for liveness' (97).

In "Becoming Bombs", Roger Stahl argues that satellite imagery has been an 'integral part of the US civilian experience of war' since the first broadcast of a Libyan chemical weapons facility in 1989 (70). He notes that the 1991 Gulf War was the first 'to be waged using real-time, integrated, computer and satellite-based Geographic Information Systems', from which emerged a range of 'static satellite imagery' enhanced by 'flashy graphics' on CNN (70). The article primarily focusses, however, on the use of satellite imaging during the Iraq War, particularly through its reproduction on television news, and on the modes of spectatorial engagement effected by this aerial visual regime. Like Parks, he considers the technology complicit in an effacement of embodied experience, claiming that satellites 'reinforced the logics of the "clean war"', compounding the post-Vietnam trend of the disappearance of bodies and effecting a

‘shift in focus away from the axis of the body and toward the axis of technology’ (79). In its adaptation for television news, this aesthetic is supplemented by 3D animation such as the ‘earth zoom’ which ‘beheld the entire world before plunging down to claim possession of any one of its details’, thus ‘promot[ing] a more interactive aesthetic, immersing the civic eye in a theatre of virtual action’ while simultaneously ‘weaponising the civic gaze’ (80-83). Stahl’s study of the overlapping commercial/military origins of satellite imaging also significantly highlights how Keyhole’s ‘Earthviewer’ interface (subsequently used in television news coverage of Iraq) was explicitly modelled on flight simulators, thereby establishing a quite explicit convergence with gaming (71-72).

In addition to the basic similarity between satellites and drones as unmanned modes of aerial reconnaissance, then, the works of Parks and Stahl enable further comparisons to be drawn. Satellites are posited as concomitant with a panoptic regime of military knowledge and control, which coincides with Virilio’s account of drones in *War and Cinema* as well as several more contemporary accounts, such as Pasi Väliaho’s “The light of God: Notes on the visual economy of drones” in which he argues that:

drone assisted wars are driven by an imperative to establish unbounded, synoptic control of visibility from the heavens. The drone operator’s duties are focused on the administration of a visual economy (of people’s perceptions and actions) by controlling the vertical axis from a God’s-eye viewpoint. To this we should also add the ability to act – that is to say, to kill – at a distance by sending off, along with the laser beam, a Hellfire missile. Thus, we are called forth to imagine an omniscient eye and an omnipotent hand that rule Earth from the sky.

In Parks’ and Stahl’s accounts, this panopticism is also associated with a shift away from embodied experience, which is further compounded by the virtualising spatio-temporal effect of animated interactivity to which satellite imagery is subjected by television news productions. As such, one might consider whether many of the initial media assumptions about drone imaging – as virtualising and comparable to gaming – may be rooted in these discourses around satellites.

However, recent studies of drones by Derek Gregory, Caroline Holmqvist and Alison Williams have begun to dispute this oft-drawn analogy with the distanciation of

gaming. Examining the perceptual experience<sup>9</sup> of the drone operator in greater detail, these works reframe drone mediation as comprising a distinctive rupture from the military lineage of aerial abstraction or distancing, arguing instead that drones effect a highly sensory and intimate engagement with combat spaces and bodies.

Gregory's 2011 article "From a View to a Kill: Drones and Late Modern War" explicitly refutes 'critics who claim that these operations reduce war to a video game in which the killing space appears remote and distant', suggesting instead that the 'new visibilities' enabled by drone mediation produce a highly distinctive mode of 'intimacy' (193). Gregory expands upon this distinction between distance and intimacy in a later work, entitled "Lines of Descent", for the edited volume *From Above: War, Violence and Verticality*. Outlining the way in which 'distance threads through the genealogy of bombing', he argues that aerial warfare has since WWII 'typically work[ed] to render bombing an abstract, purely technical exercise for those who execute it' (42). Trends such as carpet bombing 'erased people from the field of view' and, via the 'language of patterns', created an abstracted yet 'deadly form of applied geometry' (48). During the Vietnam War, similar 'abstract geometries' were applied, although Gregory notes that the three key elements of 'the technical infrastructure for today's drone wars' – namely, 'remotely piloted aircraft, real-time visual surveillance and a networked sensor-shooter system' – simultaneously began to emerge (53-54). Once assembled and unified, a fundamental transformation from distancing to immersive intimacy appears to take place, for two primary reasons: the high resolution imagery of ground level events now enabled and instantaneously transmitted back to the pilot by drone video feeds, and the networked reconfiguration of subjectivity that takes place with the instantiation of the digitally connected kill-chain:

But the flight crews repeatedly insist that real-time video feeds bring them right into the combat zone: that they are not 7,000 miles away but just 18 inches, the distance from eye to screen. Insofar as this is a "videogame war" then it shares in the extraordinary immersive capacity of the most advanced videogames. This is significantly different from the detachment – the "distance and blindness" – experienced by bomber crews over Germany and Vietnam. And yet the reality-

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<sup>9</sup> More specifically, Gregory's focus is on the 'scopic regime' of drone imaging, defined as 'a mode of visual apprehension that is culturally constructed and prescriptive, socially structured and shared' ("From a View to a Kill" 190). An echo of this can be found in Holmqvist's attention to the 'ontology' of drone imaging; while Williams primarily (and complementarily) explores the relationship between drone imaging and embodiment.



effect this produces may be sufficiently powerful where remotely piloted aircraft are providing armed overwatch or close air support to convert proximity not distance, visibility not blindness, into a serious problem [...] [operators] interact regularly with troops on the ground through live video feeds and online communications, and the intimacy created by these new forms of military-social networking can predispose them to interpret the actions of others in the vicinity as a threat to their comrades and precipitate lethal action (62)

It is interesting to note here that, rather than refuting the analogies with gaming absolutely, Gregory instead proposes an alternate conceptualisation of gaming that is rooted in immersion rather than virtualisation. There is, of course, a substantial overlap between gaming and drone operation in terms of the individual skillset required (e.g. hand-eye co-ordination, multitasking), as highlighted by Medea Benjamin's account of the military's overt 'appeal to youth gaming culture' (86). Yet this does not serve to 'distance soldiers from the consequences of their actions' as Benjamin proposes (87). Instead, for Gregory, it leads to a novel perceptual experience of 'proximity' or presence generated by the immersive qualities of the drone video feed.

Caroline Holmqvist's "Undoing War: War Ontologies and the Materiality of Drone Warfare" echoes Gregory's claim that analogies between drones and gaming only begin to acquire substance when considered in relation to immersion. Dismissing the equation of drones, gaming and virtualisation as 'often simplistic', she argues that:

It is the *immersive* quality of video games, their power to draw players into their virtual worlds, that makes them potent – this is precisely why they are used in pre-deployment training. The video streams from the UAV are shown to have the same immersive quality on the drone operator – they produce the same "reality-effect" [emphasis in original] (541-542)

Furthermore, Holmqvist's study expands upon Gregory's account of how the drone video feed induces a sense of intimacy by exploring how the combination of the drone video feed's immersive and high-resolution imagery with a networked sense of '*proximity* to ground troops [emphasis in original]' may be responsible for the perhaps startlingly high number of incidences of PTSD among drone pilots (542). This is principally ascribed to the 'exposure to high-resolution images of killing, including the details of casualties and body parts that would never be possible to capture with the human eye' inaugurated by the drone assemblage in stark contrast to the distanciation

ascribed by Gregory to aerial bombing and also, more implicitly, to satellite imagery in the readings of Parks and Stahl (542). Indeed, Williams further characterises the experience as a distinctly ‘sensory engagement with the combat spaces’, suggesting a highly distinctive conjunction of affective embodiment and technological mediation (385).

The arguments of Gregory, Holmqvist and Williams thus suggest that the key differences between drones and earlier modes of aerial imaging relate primarily to the operators’ networked subjectivity and to a substantially higher resolution of imaging which is directly linked to affective, potentially traumatic, bodily experience and PTSD<sup>10</sup>. Contrary to assumptions regarding the disembodied, virtualising equivalence of drone operation and gaming, then, these articles suggest that drone warfare may in fact bear a greater resemblance to the embodied cinematic aesthetic of experiential, sensory and deeply subjective portraits of war as highlighted in the previous chapter. In the following section, I will therefore explore the extent to which cinematic representations of drones have conformed to this description, grounding the analysis through the key concepts of virtualisation, embodiment and subjectivity and exploring what is at stake in these alternate modes of conceptualising drone warfare as it is refracted through the realm of contemporary war cinema.

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As noted above, drones first began to appear in the subgenre or cycle of CIA thrillers around 2005-8, exemplified by *Syriana* and *Body of Lies*<sup>11</sup>. Stephan Gaghan’s *Syriana*, from 2005, is loosely based on *See No Evil: The True Story of a Ground Soldier in the CIA’s War Against Terrorism*, a memoir by former CIA agent Robert Baer. The film’s multiple, intersecting and globe-spanning narrative threads deal

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<sup>10</sup> I am aware that this discussion of PTSD among drone pilots could be misconstrued as advocating a misguided empathy for the drone operator at the expense of his/her victims, and it not my intention at all to minimise the suffering of civilians (or even combatants) in the countries (primarily Pakistan, Afghanistan, Yemen, Somalia and Syria) forced to endure this illegal and unethical bombardment. Yet, in the context of cinematic representations, I maintain that a questioning of our spectatorial and ethical subject positions (relative to the diegetically-constructed subjectivity of the drone operator) is valid and perhaps even necessary if we are to take seriously cinema’s role in shaping public understanding of the ways in which warfare is transformed by the advent of such technologies.

<sup>11</sup> One could also include, within this subgenre, films such as *The Kingdom* (2007), *Rendition* (2007) and *Lions for Lambs* (2007). The decision to focus on *Syriana* and *Body of Lies* is largely based on their more prominent use of drone imaging.

predominantly with the struggle for control of oil reserves in an unspecified Middle-Eastern emirate, focalising this geopolitical conflict through the perspectives of Prince Nasir (the unnamed country's foreign minister), a CIA agent assigned to assassinate Nasir, an energy analyst from Switzerland, two Pakistani migrant workers, and numerous US lawyers and lobbyists. Ridley Scott's 2008 film *Body of Lies* employs a similarly globe-spanning narrative structure, cutting fluidly between Iraq, Jordan, Syria, UAE as well as the US, UK, Turkey and the Netherlands to track the pursuit of terrorist Al-Saleem by CIA agent Roger Ferris. Video feeds from all these locations are relayed, via satellites and drones, to the CIA control room run by Russell Crowe's character Ed Hoffman.

With their aesthetics and narrative modes recalling 1990s surveillance / spy films such as *Enemy of the State* (1998) as much as what is more conventionally considered war cinema, *Syriana* and *Body of Lies* certainly pose an interesting ontological dilemma for definitions of the 'war film' itself in the digital era. Garrett Stewart, in *Closed Circuits: Screening Narrative Surveillance*, refers to them as 'the new Hollywood plots of surveillance paranoia, in overseas and homeland settings alike' in contrast to the 'traditional war (or anti-war) film', but does acknowledge that there is increasingly a 'dubious overlap' between these two 'intersecting spheres' of Iraq War era conflict films (173). The veneer of fiction cast over *Syriana* and *Body of Lies* also serves to detach them any specific conflict – via the coy refusal to specify the key oil-rich location in *Syriana*, and the pursuit of an individual terrorist without reference to any particular war between nation-states in *Body of Lies* – in a manner that is perhaps curiously out of synch with the framing of more conventional war cinema. Yet, while these aspects create a degree of ambiguity in defining my corpus here, they are simultaneously richly evocative of a shift in US military doctrine inextricably related to the advent of drone warfare. Specifically, the films' global, panoptic reach, fluid border-crossings, and focus on individual assassinations carried out by the CIA mirror the actual context of drones' use as part of the War on Terror more closely than the embodied/experiential conventions of the 'traditional' war film might allow. Thus, I think the representations of drones in these films should be taken seriously as a burgeoning branch of contemporary war cinema reflecting a shift in military doctrine from full-scale combat to counter-insurgency operations, rather than treated as distinct from the war genre per se and aligned with spy- or action-films.

Before moving on to analysing specific instances of drone imaging in these two films, I believe it is also worth observing how their very narrative structures are also

complicit with the digitisation of military technologies. Stewart suggests a sense of this through his claim that:

Screen narratives such as *Syriana* [...] are not political first of all in regard to the inferred content of their ideological stance and its typifying dialogue. They are political in the very form of their narrative mapping. In this way, they can almost unconsciously mirror what they might intermittently resist or critique. (*Closed Circuits* 34)

While the employment of multiple interconnected storylines pre-dates the digital as both a literary and cinematic technique, the particular engagement of parallel editing in *Syriana* and *Body of Lies* does suggest a distinctly panoptic instantiation of this device through the suggestion (occasionally explicit, but largely inferred) that the films' global scope is activated by and fundamentally reliant upon the CIA's surveillance network. It may even be said to evoke the 'time-space compression [...] [which] has brought all those in the network much closer to the killing space' that Gregory posits as a crucial characteristic of the digitally connected drone kill-chain ("From a View to a Kill" 196). However, as I will argue, since the films do not overtly distinguish a 'drone aesthetic' from the wider range of surveillance technologies (particularly satellites), this narrative structure seems to connote a more generalised panoptic model of digital connectivity.

This indistinction between drone and satellite footage is particularly apparent in *Body of Lies*. While the ground level agent (Roger Ferris) does intermittently make reference to his ability to spot the distinctive gleam of a drone in the skies above, they are otherwise figured as a mere extension of CIA chief Ed Hoffman's panoptic vision, with a complete absence of any sequences depicting drone piloting per se or an employment of their armed capacities. Instead, drones are represented as an interchangeable element in a uniform digital surveillance aesthetic. This is demonstrated most clearly in the montage sequences that bookend the film. The closing sequence, for instance, begins with a drone mediated shot of Ferris, overlaid with annotations of coordinates as well as a tag specifically marking the feed as 'UAV' followed by a string of numbers. The drone camera then begins to zoom out, and, without any legible cuts, seamlessly transitions into an extreme long-shot satellite image of the city (annotated once again, in this case as 'SAT KH11-12'). This satellite feed then begins to fragment, ultimately splitting the screen into four juxtaposed panels. The upper-left segment here appears to be the same satellite image as in the previous shot, while the lower-left

retains the drone annotations seen in the initial shot of Ferris; the specific source of the two segments on the right, however, remain unclear. Ultimately, this split-screen surveillance image begins to flicker and degrade, marking the close of the film with a haze of digital static<sup>12</sup>.

Garrett Stewart's reading of this sequence posits 'cancelled voyeurism' as 'the closest thing to narrative resolution', elaborating on the perceived equivalence between the film's diegesis and the panoptic model of surveillance evoked by the above montage:

There's nothing left to see if the technopticon has lost interest [...] To compensate for any lack of satisfying climax, at least we've supposedly been privy to some top-secret CIA feeds, allowing us for once to see the world the way the secret service does. And not, of course, just visually. For at a certain level of geopolitical oversight – to whose plotting our hero (any hero) is no longer instrumental – all monitored enemy activity, whether or not we foment or even fabricate it<sup>13</sup>, can be made to serve our militarist purposes. A film doesn't have to be even half good to be fleetingly brilliant, which is not to say popular, when it lets American imperialist logic declare itself so nakedly. (*Closed Circuits* 177)

The way that this 'technopticon' is distinctly invoked at the opening and closing of the film, with the digital noise serving as a kind of transition, does seem to imply that the film's diegesis is accessed by hacking into 'some top-secret CIA feeds' as Stewart suggests. However, this notion also sits somewhat awkwardly with the film's relentlessly technophobic moralising, which is perhaps the clearest instantiation of the tendency for a kind of 'high-tech technophobia' that Stewart elsewhere identifies as characteristic of this group of films (*Closed Circuits* 173). As such, I think that there is another, perhaps paradoxical reading to be made of this closing sequence.

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<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, this effect is mirrored by a sequence in Robert Greenwald's documentary *UnManned: America's Drone Wars* (2013). In the absence of any actual drone footage, Greenwald's dramatic recreation begins with an aerial shot of the Waziristan landscape, then begins the transition to a 'drone' aesthetic by bleaching all colour from the shot, overlaying the landscape with operational gridlines, and eventually destabilising the image itself with the embellishment of digital static. In a similar manner to *Body of Lies*, this fetishistic exaggeration of the drone interface seems to ascribe a deeply sinister, almost otherworldly ontology to it, and one that is equally alienated and detached from the main body of the film's diegesis.

<sup>13</sup> Stewart's account of 'fabrication' here refers to a narrative thread in which the CIA create a fake terrorist cell (replete with digital traces), who claims responsibility for a staged bombing of a Turkish air base in order to draw out the real terrorist, the egoistic and competitive Al-Saleem.

The reductive collapsing of drone and satellite imaging, coupled with the destabilising eruption of this exaggeratedly digitised static, may also be viewed as a kind of ‘othering’ of digital surveillance, as aesthetically and ontologically distinct from the realm of the cinematic – which is almost exclusively aligned, in this case, with the mediating point-of-view of the ground level agent, and his dangerous and embodied heroics. *Body of Lies* contrasts the methods of Hoffman and Ferris throughout, with a repeated privileging of Ferris’ embodied presence and capacity for adapting to the complexity of localised situations against the cruel, Machiavellian scheming of Hoffman, which is implicitly aligned with his panoptic power. This overt and somewhat facile character-centric critique seems to enforce a rather rigid distinction between the cinematic heroism of ground-level agency and the moral vacuum of the digitally enhanced aerial view. I hesitate to label the film’s rendition of drone imaging as disembodied since it is quite neatly aligned with Hoffman’s perspective, yet this binary opposition that the film establishes does seem to imply that drone mediated space differs ontologically from the properly cinematic diegesis, and in doing so perhaps ascribes to drones (via their indistinction from satellites) the values of virtualising distanciation and the effacement of embodied experience that are highlighted by Parks and Stahl’s analyses of satellite imagery.

In summary, then, the use of drones in *Body of Lies* seems to offer little more than the opportunity of zooming from an extreme long shot satellite image to the medium long shot of the drone, thus ultimately comprising little more than a slight tweak of cinematic grammar and a slight increase in the detail of panoptic imagery. By neglecting to engage with the contemporary assemblage of armed drones – in other words, the material context of their application including the subjective experience of piloting and the inter-subjective network of the so-called kill-chain – this representation fails to demonstrate any real difference between contemporary uses of armed drones and their use for unmanned aerial observation throughout the late twentieth century.

*Syriana*, on the other hand, does feature at least one key sequence which forcefully emphasises the armed capacity underlying the drone interface, although it simultaneously enacts a similarly problematic split between ground-level and aerial perspectives. The sequence occurs towards the end of the film, with the CIA attempting to assassinate Prince Nasir and his convoy while, at ground-level, a CIA agent (Barnes) opposed to the mission races to intercept the convoy and warn them of the impending strike. Gaghan composes this sequence from these two distinct points-of-view: the screen of the CIA control room, on which the drone video feed is blown up to gigantic

proportions for the assembled observers, and the ground-level perspective of Barnes. In the process, *Syriana* demonstrates a similar kind of aesthetic and ontological split between drone mediated space and embodied perspectives to that seen in *Body of Lies*.

Although the drone image is in colour, and unburdened by the clutter of annotations or overlays, it remains an extreme long shot with a distinct lack of resolution which, significantly, does not enable the identification of the individuals on the ground. The film therefore relies exclusively on the ground-level element of its parallel editing schema to depict the ensuing action with any narrative clarity. This aesthetic strategy purports to privilege ground-level complexity against aerial abstraction or virtualisation in the same manner as *Body of Lies*; and indeed, the film's sympathies are quite explicitly aligned with rogue agent Barnes, whose ethics remain untainted by the military-industrial machinations in which his superiors are enmeshed. The fact that Barnes remains unidentified, and thus that the film's most recognisable star (George Clooney) is killed as collateral damage in the strike is seemingly intended to emotively flag the wanton destruction unleashed by this mode of aerial warfare.

Nonetheless, it is rather problematic to perpetuate the notion that drone operators cannot necessarily verify the identity of their targets. Numerous studies of drones have emphasised the unparalleled detail that their high-resolution video feeds afford, which renders the verisimilitude of *Syriana*'s drone imagery somewhat questionable. Yet this becomes more significantly problematic when considered in relation to the infamously loose rules of engagement for actual US drone strikes, whereby any adult male of military age within a pre-authorized target area may be deemed a legitimate target. In this wider political context, *Syriana*'s drone strike sequence risks corroborating this procedure (in contradiction to the film's ostensible political sympathies) through the technological justification of low resolution imagery.

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With the fading out of this cycle around 2008, drone imaging was largely absent from cinema screens until the emergence of Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* in 2013. It may be worth noting here that this absence of cinematic representations of drones coincides with the peak of actual US drone strikes, as reported by the Bureau of Investigate Journalism, with the highest casualty rates in Pakistan occurring between 2008 and 2012. Whether this constitutes an active suppression of drone representations

during this period, a delay in the transition from public awareness to the emergence of further drone-related films, or simple coincidence, is up for debate.

In many ways, *Zero Dark Thirty* can be posited as a return to the form and concerns of the above sub-genre or cycle, since there are numerous generic parallels with *Syriana* and *Body of Lies*, with the film again demonstrating CIA, rather than strictly military, use of drones. For the majority of the film drones remain largely off-screen, as Bigelow focusses predominantly upon intelligence gleaned from interrogation/torture (euphemistically referred to as the ‘detainee program’). A brief reference to ‘actual intelligence, preferably something that leads to a strike’ does, however, imply their diegetic presence, but in doing so seems to establish a dynamic whereby intelligence is associated with embodied human agency, with drones fulfilling a simple role of precision weaponry rather than surveillance, and thus being merely the final link in the networked kill-chain. This seemingly straightforward, unchallenged linearity leading to drone assassinations is termed by Michael Atkinson, in his *Sight & Sound* article on the film, a ‘procedural soullessness’ (33). Comparing this streamlining of narrative whereby the ‘only objective is to find and exterminate’ to the *Call of Duty* games, Atkinson ultimately considers it to be ‘a hallmark of the Asymmetrical War Film’ (33). This underlying sense of drones as the end point of procedural narrative linearity is reinforced by the brief scene in which Maya watches the feed of a drone strike in the build-up to the Camp Chapman attack. The strike itself is not contextualised in any meaningful way, with no diegetic indication of where it may be taking place or who the target may be. Rather, it seems simply to serve as a narratively redundant visual background to Maya’s simultaneous telephone conversation with her colleague Jessica.

The binary opposition of embodied human intelligence and drone imaging is further reinforced during the sequence portraying the reconnaissance of the ‘fortress’ in which Osama bin Laden is suspected to be hidden. The embedding of satellite and drone imaging within the CIA ‘Predator Bay’ control room, combined with its surveillance function, does link it once again to a panoptic regime. There is also a hint of interactivity conveyed through the agents’ manipulation of reconnaissance imagery: rewinding, annotating, etc. Yet Bigelow rapidly establishes the limitations of this approach to intelligence gathering. The feed is monitored and studied for months without result, compressed by the film into a montage sequence in which Maya inscribes the days of inactivity upon the glass-walled office of her supervisor. Ultimately, bin Laden’s ‘tradecraft’ (i.e. evasion of observation) is portrayed as



fundamentally impenetrable through remote surveillance. It is only the interpretation of behavioural patterns, noting that the inhabitants consist of three women and two men and thus inferring the implied presence of a third male occupant, which gleans the faintest hint of evidence. The goal of panoptic vision is thus thwarted, with human intelligence and sociocultural reasoning posited as the motive force behind the necessarily tentative indication of bin Laden's presence.

In this sequence, drones and satellites are once again conflated as indistinguishable modes of aerial imaging. Yet there is a contrast to be drawn between *Zero Dark Thirty* and the earlier CIA films in the manner of editing together aerial and ground level perspectives. Here, in the absence of any operatives on the ground (barring the thwarted attempt to gain access under the guise of a doctor administering polio inoculations), the film's perspective is limited almost absolutely to the CIA control room. This does effect a certain virtualisation of the target space, as it is represented through rather abstract, low-resolution imagery that is only able to characterise individuals through general outlines (height, movement, etc.) and heat signatures, and subsequently reconstructed in the form of a scale model of the compound. This restriction of perspective suggests a potential exploration, in a more rigorous way than *Syriana* or *Body of Lies*, of how drone imaging has reconfigured the subjective experience of warfare for their operators along the lines of Gregory, Holmqvist and Williams' work. However, the lack of (image) resolution seems to preclude any form of sensuous, immersive engagement, and Bigelow simply does not linger over this imagery for long, preferring instead to compress the surveillance via montage and summarise key operational data in the context of strategy meetings.

The film's final section portraying the raid on the compound does however go some way toward demonstrating the use of drone imaging as part of a networked operation. Maya co-ordinates the stealth force of 'canaries' from a forward operating base (FOB) in Afghanistan, and is surrounded by screens: monitoring radar, the communications of the Pakistani military, and a drone feed tracking the helicopters (portrayed, presumably via infra-red imaging, as a sharp white silhouette). The landing sequence in particular attempts to unify the diverse mediations of the scene, rapidly cutting between the helicopter interior, a handheld ground view, the FOB control room, and the drone image itself. Yet the raid itself is subsequently portrayed from the distinctly embodied perspective of helmet-mounted cameras, reflecting a sense of subjective intimacy that appears to be the generally privileged mode of imaging warfare within *Zero Dark Thirty*.

Ultimately, the film's division between drone surveillance and embodied human perspectives mirrors the binary opposition of bodies and technology established in Bigelow's earlier war film *The Hurt Locker*, in which the initial use of a robot for IED disposal is displaced in favour of the haptic rush of a dangerous embodied proximity. This division, as it is played out in *Zero Dark Thirty*, essentially reinforces the notion of drones as a disembodied and objective means of surveillance. In comparison with *Body of Lies* and *Syriana*, there is a slightly more fluent sense of an integration of the drone aesthetic with ground level perspectives conveyed through the networked subjectivity of the raid finale. Yet even in this sequence there remains a sense that Maya's drone mediated perspective is more operationally significant than convincingly *cinematic*, as the embodied subjectivity (albeit somewhat technologically enhanced) of helmet-mounted cameras is ultimately asserted as the privileged mode for the film's culminating action set-piece. Thus, the general formal opposition established between drones and embodied perception seems to preserve the notion of drones as a mode of virtualising distancing, somewhat distinct from the cinematic diegesis and still far from Gregory, Holmvist and Williams' characterisations of the drone experience.

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Andrew Nichols' *Good Kill* and Omer Fast's *Five Thousand Feet is the Best* (henceforth *5,000ft*) – the two films which will occupy the remainder of this chapter's analysis – are significantly differentiated from *Syriana*, *Body of Lies*, and *Zero Dark Thirty* by the simple fact that both are set in Las Vegas. Neither film, therefore, contains any ground-level perspective on combat to complement the drone's aerial imagery, and thus the ontological split between the aerial and the ground-level perpetuated by the above films is not replicated here. This serves to embed *Good Kill* and *5,000ft* more firmly within the notion of remote warfare, and engenders a more substantial degree of reflection upon how warfare is altered when mediated exclusively via the drone interface.

Although released in 2014, Nichols' film is set in 2010, offering a slight historical distance on this period characterised by the peak of US drone strikes in Pakistan and an absence of cinematic representations of drones. This context is acknowledged by the film's opening titles, which declare 2010 as the year of 'the greatest escalation of targeted killings'. It is also narratively significant in situating the film amidst a boom in the recruitment of gamers as drone personnel – an issue

addressed most explicitly via an admonitory speech to the recruits which simultaneously acknowledges that war has become a ‘first-person-shooter’ while warning them that the consequences are real ‘flesh’ and ‘blood’ – and amidst a burgeoning of CIA-run drone missions, which are operated by the film’s Air Force drone crew.

The opening sequence of *Good Kill* immediately establishes an intimate, immersive conceptualisation of drone imagery that is closer to the accounts of Gregory and Holmqvist than to the disembodied, virtualising panoptic regime of *Body of Lies*. Forgoing establishing shots entirely, the film opens with a full-screen remediation of the drone interface, the drone camera thereby established as synonymous with the film camera. While the drone crew’s presence is conveyed via the soundtrack, with their radio communications played as voiceover, they are introduced in a visually striking manner that reinforces the sense of immersion suggested by the drone/film camera equivalence. Nichols gradually begins to cut away from the drone interface, establishing a shot/reverse pattern between the operators and the drone screen. Yet these reverse shots are uniformly extreme close-ups with a particularly shallow depth-of-field – first of an eye, then a mouth, a hand operating a joystick, and finally a foot pressing down on a pedal – that offer a highly fragmented sense of the operators and their location. The way that the drone operators’ awareness of self and space here is wholly subsumed by their absorption in the drone point-of-view clearly evokes the immersive ‘reality-effect’ of the drone feed, described by Gregory as the sensation of being ‘not 7,000 miles away but just 18 inches, the distance from eye to screen’ (“Lines of Descent” 62).

This immersion effect is implicitly ascribed as a point of equivalence between the drone screen and the film screen. The detail of the imagery – later described by *Good Kill*’s protagonist as ‘so beautifully clear...it couldn’t be clearer if I was there; you can see everything, the looks on their faces, everything’ – contrasts unambiguously with the soft, grainy appearance of the drone feed in *Syriana*. In a further contrast with the CIA films, the drone feed is here permitted to exclusively fulfil the role of combat mediation. Rather than employing a ‘cinematic’ ground-level perspective to complement aerial abstraction, *Good Kill* posits the drone feed itself as inherently cinematic, immersively transporting both operators and viewers into the film’s combat spaces. As the posters taped to the operators’ cabin doors claim, then, on entering the realm of drone mediation, ‘You are now leaving the U.S. of A.’.

Alongside this evocation of immersion, the fragmentation of the operators’ bodies in this opening sequence simultaneously renders them less as individual, distinct subjects than as a disjointed collection of organs and motor functions intertwined with

the drone apparatus. In doing so, Nichols presents drones as akin to what Alison Williams terms an ‘assemblage, composed of both human and machine elements’ (381). Williams’ study of the drone assemblage goes on to suggest that this kind of bodily fragmentation leads to a fundamental ‘interchangeability’ of the human element as bodies begin to ‘perform more like machine components’ (387). While this is consistent with the particular vision of the assemblage presented by the opening sequence, the majority of the film does however balance this fragmented, distributed sense of subjectivity with a dramatisation of the injurious psychological effects of drone piloting and a reflection on the ethics of remote warfare which are quite heavily dependent upon more conventional models of subjective agency.

Indeed, protagonist Major Thomas Egan’s sense of individual guilt and ethical resistance to drone operation is established quite early in the film. A former pilot made redundant by the Air Force’s increasing prioritisation of drone operations over piloted missions, Egan reluctantly works as a drone operator but still idealises the embodied ‘risk’ of flight above the ‘cowardly’ mode of remote combat in which he is now imbricated. This contrast between piloting and drone operation is suggestive of the binary relationship between embodied combat and the virtualising abstraction of drones that runs through *Body of Lies*, *Syriana* and *Zero Dark Thirty* – or perhaps more accurately, the relationship between embodiment and technological mediation proposed by *The Hurt Locker* – albeit with a notable concession to conceptualising drones through a more cinematic aesthetic. It remains somewhat ambiguous whether the film treats this distinction seriously, or simply employs it as a signification of Egan’s fantasy of escape from the drudgery of drone assassinations and surveillance, though it clearly also contributes to his tendency to assume *individual* responsibility for the killings carried out by his crew despite his Colonel’s repeated invocations of *networked* responsibility through such lines as ‘we all pulled the trigger in that box’.

In addition to this individualised sense of guilt, the film also posits an inability to adapt to drone warfare’s blurring of military and civilian realms as central to Egan’s descent into alcoholism, depression and marital discord. Initially, this facet of remote warfare is presented somewhat comically, with Egan baffling the sales assistant in a local shop with the declaration that he ‘blew away six Taliban in Pakistan just today; now I’m going home to barbecue’. However, this ironic approach quickly cedes to a more troubled incarnation of blurred boundaries, with the film drawing visual parallels between Vegas suburbia and Waziristan via aerial shots of the landscape, and highlighting Egan’s increasing detachment from family life as he repeatedly gazes

absently up to the skies. He is warned to ‘keep compartmentalising’, but evinces a nostalgia not only for flight itself, but also the clean lines demarcating military and non-military space, or war and peace, which have been fractured by drone mediation’s elision of distance.

At this point, Egan’s unit is selected to run secret drone missions for the CIA, and the film’s distinctions between embodied and remote combat gradually give way to more precise ethical distinctions among the procedural applications of drone strikes. This is neatly glossed in an introductory speech by Colonel Johns, who notes that the CIA have ‘progressed’ (a hint of irony in the intonation of this word) beyond personality strikes (i.e. targeting known individuals), operating under alternate rules of engagement which permit ‘signature strikes’ on unidentified individuals – or even groups – based on ‘patterns of behaviour’. Even more controversial than signature strikes, however, is the newly introduced practice of the ‘follow up’ or ‘double tap’ strike. During the unit’s first mission for the CIA, Egan and sensor operator Vera Suarez are apparently shocked by the instruction to carry out a second strike. The rich visual detail of the drone feed is particularly relevant here, allowing the viewer a window on the scene which is clearly populated by rescuers with spades rather than armed combatants. Although they reluctantly carry out the order, Suarez nonetheless rebukes the officers with the question ‘Was that a war crime, sir?’.

The CIA are villainously figured in the film as a disembodied voice over the intercom, addressed only as ‘Langley’. Although obviously connected to the same network – such that ‘we see what you see’ – there is clearly something of a disjunction between the tightly-knit drone crew and the near-anonymous CIA which is reinforced by the increasingly manifest differences in procedure and ethical decision-making. For instance, in response to the drone crew’s cautioning over likely civilian casualties, the CIA’s response is typically aloof and dogmatic: ‘In our assessment, the combatants we are targeting pose a grave enough threat to the United States to justify potential civilian casualties; not to mention that this pre-emptive self-defence is approved and ordered by the administration. Please engage’. Such callous applications of drone warfare ultimately emerge as the prime target of the film’s critique, especially as they are increasingly contrasted with the more idealistic aspect of ‘overwatch’. A sequence in which Egan willingly puts in overtime to watch over a ground patrol in Afghanistan as they sleep is framed as a somewhat redemptive release from the CIA missions, as he returns home content that he ‘did something good today’.

While this critique of ethical standards in the administering of drone strikes is more precise and insightful than the woolly distinction between piloting and remote warfare that preceded it, the way that the film ultimately resolves Egan's internal ethical conflict is perhaps the most deeply problematic element of *Good Kill*. Having been downgraded to surveillance duty after deliberately sabotaging one of the CIA double tap strikes, Egan finds himself once again watching the house of a supposed Taliban commander, a locale in which the crew had earlier witnessed the rape of the housekeeper by an unknown visitor. Recognising the return of the same man, Egan persuades the rest of his crew to exit the cabin for a break and assassinates the rapist with a Hellfire missile<sup>14</sup>.

The procedural details of this sequence mirror that of the CIA strikes, particularly Egan's disengagement of the drone apparatus' recording function, in a manner that might suggest a subversive parallel between Egan's assumption of a position of omnipotent and vengeful moral judgement and the CIA's dogmatic standards. However, as he triumphantly exits the cabin and drives off into the horizon, the film seems to frame this concluding act as one of liberation and catharsis for Egan, as though it were another 'good deed' to counterbalance his guilt over the civilian casualties inflicted during the CIA operations. This rather disturbing catharsis risks undermining the film's critique of the indiscriminate use of drones under the CIA. Although the rapist is undeniably guilty, Egan's vengeful judgement of him ultimately seems to advocate an *extension* of drone assassinations to any subject deemed guilty by the moral conscience of the individual drone pilot, rather than a restriction of their use solely for personality strikes without risk of civilian casualties.

If by this point *Good Kill* has substituted a somewhat retrogressive and problematic model of individual subjective agency for the more distributed, networked evocation of subjectivity articulated in the opening sequence, the film does nonetheless present a more substantial interrogation of drone warfare than any of the above CIA films. Rather than enforcing a binary distinction between the embodied, ground-level realm of cinematic space and the virtualising distanciation of drone/satellite surveillance, *Good Kill* does quite successfully demonstrate a more thorough integration of drone and cinematic aesthetics. The film also represents the material context of drones' use, ranging from the drudgery of reconnaissance to the varying frameworks for strikes, with a precision unparalleled in contemporary war cinema and, despite the

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<sup>14</sup> Hellfire missiles are the principal munition with which Predator drones are armed, and are used for so-called precision strikes of targeted individuals.

troubling resolution, is undeniably valuable for inviting its audience to reflect on the ethical considerations involved in their application.

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Omer Fast's 2011 work *Five Thousand Feet is the Best* straddles the boundaries between cinema per se and gallery artwork, and could equally be termed a short film or gallery installation. It was initially exhibited at the Venice Biennale, and subsequently at the Imperial War Museum in London. In the latter context, the film played on a permanent loop on an LCD screen situated in a minimally furnished room with no contextualising panels or information.

The film is composed of two interweaved parts which innovatively fuse aspects of documentary and fiction. In the ostensibly documentary strand, a former drone pilot (whose identity is obscured) recounts his experiences as part of the US military's drone program, covering an outline of his specific duties and broadly addressing the relationship between drones and gaming as well as PTSD. Most of this material is conveyed by voiceover and juxtaposed with drone tracking shots of US landscapes. In the other, fictional strand, is an apparently retired drone pilot being interviewed on film by a journalist in a Las Vegas hotel room. Clearly struggling with some sort of psychological disturbance, he repeatedly evades questions about his work by spinning a series of digressive anecdotes, most of which have no apparent relevance to drones beyond what he describes as the imperative to 'keep your work life and your domestic life separate'.

Through the voiceover of the actual drone pilot, drone imaging is described as richly, intimately detailed. At the optimal altitude of five thousand feet, he notes that 'I can tell you what type of shoes you're wearing... I could tell you what type of clothes a person is wearing, whether they have a beard, their hair colour, and anything else'. Even the imagery of the black-and-white infra-red mode is sensuously poeticised, as he describes the heat signature left behind by someone sitting on a cold surface as 'like a white blossom shining up into heaven'. This verbal description is augmented by a similarly affective sense of visual detail, as Fast juxtaposes the voiceover with a drone tracking shot which prowls over the landscape following a young boy, picking up on such haptic details as the churn of his bicycle's wheels through the dry earth.

As in *Good Kill*, then, the striking intimacy of visual and even haptic detail here diverges especially from the grainy drone mediation of *Syriana* or the merging of drone

and satellite imagery in *Body of Lies*, and is more consistent with Gregory, Holmqvist and Williams' descriptions of drone imagery – particularly Holmqvist's account of the 'hyper-vision of drone optics [which] far extends human vision' (545). This evocation of rich sensory detail refutes any sense of remoteness or detachment that is often associated with panoptic imagery and, significantly, does so through a distinctive conjunction of the body and technology – as opposed to *Zero Dark Thirty*'s binary opposition of these terms. While Pasi Väliäho's reading of the film links this hyper-vision from a 'God's-eye viewpoint' to a sense of the drone pilot as 'an omniscient eye and an omnipotent hand that rule Earth from the sky', *5,000ft* actually seems to render the pilots as rather more humbled, fragile and deeply disoriented figures whose experience of drone hyper-vision is more explicitly linked to PTSD. Indeed, the drone operator in the documentary strand of the film outlines the traumatic nature of witnessing drone mediated killings in remarkably similar terms to Holmqvist's account of 'exposure to high-resolution images of killing, including the details of casualties and body parts that would never be possible to capture with the human eye' (542).

This theme of psychological disturbance is, however, mainly dramatised through the disorienting and disturbing blurring of military and civilian realms in the film's fictional strand. These fictional sequences are layered as further repetitions within the film's overall looped structure, as each sequence begins with a near-identical variation of the introductory stages of an interview. Each time, the pilot strenuously objects to the question, 'what is the difference between you and someone who sits in an airplane?', insisting that 'the job is the same' despite the interviewer's apparent assumptions of difference regarding 'bodies and places...Euclidean shit'. He also appears to experience piercing migraines at each iteration of the opening question, which are sonically represented by a short burst of white noise. As mentioned above, this framing interview segues into three different monologues which play out as fully-dramatised short sketches anchored by the voiceover of the drone pilot. Two of these narratives – concerning a man masquerading as a train-driver for a day, and a casino-based scam designed to steal the target's wallet – have no overt relevance to drones, and seem intended instead as absorbing digressions designed to avoid any military-related questions. As such, they do nonetheless evince a conformity to the pilot's repeated maxim to 'keep your work life and your domestic life separate'. In the other narrative, however, this imperative seems to finally implode through its complex slippages between details of civilian and military life.



It begins, seemingly innocuously, as the tale of a family's weekend road trip, marred only by the odd detail of the father's potential 'problem with the provisional authority'. Soon, however, the family's exit from suburbia takes them through a military checkpoint manned by the 'occupying authorities'. This incongruous juxtaposition of civilian and military detail continues throughout, culminating in a sequence in which the family encounter three roadside workers who, via the voiceover, are implicitly depicted as insurgents burying an IED. Fast then begins to layer in cutaways to a drone perspective on this scenario, anticipating the culminating Hellfire missile strike which kills the three men, while the family seemingly arise from the dead to continue their journey.

In this sequence, then, what begins as small incongruous military details encroaching on an otherwise quotidian narrative ends up as a more comprehensive blurring of domestic life in the US with life in a war zone (or at least under permanent threat of a drone strike). This dissolution of military and civilian boundaries is clearly evocative of both the ambiguous status of 'drone war' (i.e. killings in countries that the US is not technically at war with), and of the drone pilot's novel ability to wage war remotely, travelling to and from work each day in Las Vegas while at the same time being virtually present and carrying out surveillance and strikes in, say, Pakistan. In contrast to *Body of Lies*, which plays this blurring of military and civilian realms as a kind of glib comedy, with the CIA chief joking that he knows more about his agent's relationship with his ex-wife than he did, or getting his son ready for school while casually directing operations in the Middle East, *5,000ft* takes this theme very seriously and matches it to a sense of formal experimentation. This ranges from the evocative employment of sensory and even synaesthetic detail to embody the film's conceptual dynamics – such as the sonic matching of the pilot's headache to the Hellfire missile in the above sequence through the repeated burst of white noise – to the disorienting narrative structure.

The sense of spatio-temporal fracturing conveyed by the pilot's narrative in the above sequence is deepened by the brief interludes between the interviews during which he escapes into the hotel corridor. His observations of other characters that he passes here seem to comprise the fragments out of which he constructs the stories that he tells to the journalist. Yet this space is also rendered strange and hallucinatory. There are off-screen echoes of what seem to be military communications, and the pilot also appears to re-enter the interview room through a different door each time. As such, the film's rendition of PTSD as a blurring of military and civilian realms seems to be evoked not

simply in order to enact a kind of return of the repressed, but rather a more wholesale disturbance of identity. Since all of this is triggered each time by the question of the drone pilot's 'difference from someone who sits in an airplane', it seems to be fundamentally linked to the virtual spatio-temporal experience of drone operation. As is emphasised throughout the film though, this particular notion of virtuality is not to be equated with disembodiment or abstraction in the same sense as *Body of Lies*, since the haptic imagery and embodied effects of PTSD seemingly disavow any sense of panoptic detachment. Rather, as in Gregory's account of drone operators, it is fundamentally 'proximity not distance [that] becomes the problem' ("From a View to a Kill" 201). Indeed, it is precisely the conjunction of virtual presence and the disturbingly affective imagery enhanced by the imaging capacities of drones that generates this refraction of subjectivity.

Furthermore, this spatio-temporal fracturing is not merely ascribed to the character of the drone pilot, but also mirrored in the very narrative structure of the film in order to effect a similar degree of disorientation for the audience. As a looped gallery installation, the viewer is clearly denied the linear narrative grounding of, say, *Zero Dark Thirty*. Yet within this overarching loop there are further layers of repetition, as outlined above with reference to the introductory stages of the interview, such that the viewer is never quite sure whether the film has finally looped back to the beginning (or, at least, the viewer's point of entry, given the lack of a 'beginning' or 'end' per se) or is continuing its pattern of repetition with a slight difference. Through this metafictional mise-en-abyme structure and complex intersections between documentary and fiction, as well as military and civilian realms, *5,000ft* ultimately comprises a series of recurring and destabilised fragments of haptic sensation which challenge both pilots and viewers to maintain coherent designations of identity, presence, and the real.

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To conclude, then, one can sum up the differing figurations of drone imaging that I have analysed in this chapter as corresponding to two distinct regimes: one, the reduction of drone imagery to purely optic information as part of a uniform digital surveillance aesthetic, and the other, a radically new, disturbingly affective and intimate means of remotely visualising war zones. The former tendency is most clearly exemplified by the collapse of drone and satellite streams in the closing montage sequence of *Body of Lies*; more generally, it manifests in the formal and ontological

distinction between disembodied drone mediated space and the privileged embodied perceptions of ground-level agents that characterises not only Scott's film but also *Syriana* and the later *Zero Dark Thirty*.

This division is maintained by a generally hypermediated remediation of drones in these films. Certainly, no sense of immediacy is conveyed by the low-resolution drone feed in *Syriana*; indeed, it is precisely because the drone feed does not seamlessly transport the viewer into the drone mediated space that Gaghan supplements this perspective with a complementary ground-level point-of-view deemed necessary to clarify the action. Although the drone feed in *Body of Lies* is somewhat sharper, it is even more bluntly differentiated from the cinematic through its fetishistic presentation as part of a uniform digital surveillance aesthetic that is bleached of colour, heavily annotated, and ultimately dissolves into a haze of digital static. In neither of these cases, then, is the drone image transparently 'poured into' the cinematic, with the viewer 'stand[ing] in the same relationship to the content as she would if she were confronting the original medium'; rather, one is made continually aware of the process of remediation itself (Bolter and Grusin 45). This sense of hypermediacy is further heightened by the embedding of the drone feed within a CIA control room in each of these (first group of) films, where it often nestles alongside satellite streams or maps, and may be interacted with through rewinding, annotating, or activating infra-red or thermal-imaging modes.

Despite these clearly hypermediated aspects of the films' remediations of drones, it nonetheless seems particularly significant that they do not quite conform to Bolter and Grusin's definition of hypermediacy in one key regard; that is, none of the films really seem to express an '*enjoyment of the opacity of media themselves [emphasis added]*' (21). Perhaps *Body of Lies*' tortuously paradoxical '*high-tech technophobia*' comes closest to a sense of enjoyment (Stewart, *Closed Circuits* 173). Yet for the most part the drone interface is presented more as a kind of unwelcome intrusion of hypermediacy, which is perhaps deemed necessary to depict contemporary warfare with a broad sense of technological verisimilitude but is nonetheless vilified and disconnected from the properly cinematic realm of embodied mediation as much as possible.

This division between embodied experience and technological mediation would seem to mirror the aesthetic and thematic concerns of the experiential war film as outlined in the previous chapter, albeit with drones figuring here as a more precise remediated signifier of the discrete realm of digital mediation which is typically elided

in the experiential mode. In the previous chapter's analysis of *Restrepo*, I noted the significance of the desire expressed by the film's subjects for a kind of unmediated 'contact', declared most bluntly in the frustrated lament of a long-range artillery operator ('I just wish they were closer so I could've actually seen them when I killed them'), and linked this to Joanna Bourke's account of combatants creating 'fantasies about the effects of their destructive weapons, especially when the impact of their actions was beyond their immediate vision' (6). In *The Hurt Locker*, James' disdain for the robotic device used to remotely disarm IEDs expresses a similar oppositional relationship between the pleasure of embodied combat and the distancing, almost post-human mediation of contemporary military technologies. This robot constitutes a relatively rare example of a specifically remediated technology in the experiential war film, though one might infer that the regime of drone imagery in this chapter's CIA films signifies an extrapolation of the same underlying assumption regarding the body's relationship to war and digital mediation.

In terms of *diegetic* subjectivities, *Body of Lies*, *Syriana* and *Zero Dark Thirty* do not express quite the same degree of craving for the 'contact high' of combat as, say, *The Hurt Locker*'s protagonist. This may be a simple consequence of the more investigative work carried out by these films' CIA agents in contrast to the more explicitly military realm of *Restrepo* and *The Hurt Locker*. However, it is worth noting that the key action sequences in the CIA films primarily tend to be mediated by a ground-level, embodied point-of-view; which may imply that on the level of *spectatorship*, the alignment of pleasure with embodied mediation persists just as strongly. The concluding raid on Osama bin Laden's compound in *Zero Dark Thirty* is perhaps the best exemplification of this, as the sequence finally abandons the strictures of the hypermediated CIA base (and its frustrated surveillance) in favour of the distinctly embodied points-of-view of Navy SEALs' helmet-mounted cameras. Indeed, critical opinion coalesced rather favourably around this sequence (in an otherwise controversial and divisive film), with Manohla Dargis' *New York Times* review lauding Bigelow's 'genius for infusing even large-scale action set pieces with the human element' ("By Any Means Necessary").

These CIA films thus mirror the experiential mode's fundamental division between embodiment and technological mediation as well as the presumed alignment of spectatorial pleasure with a kinetic form of embodied mediation particularly manifest in such action sequences. Given the fairly overt technophobia on display here, this schema is likely intended as a critique of drone warfare, with the disembodied travails of drone

mediated surveillance and assassinations deemed irreconcilable with the more ‘human’ pleasures of action-oriented entertainment. As such, the oppositional relationship between embodiment and drone mediation in this group of films corresponds to my initial hypothesis (in the literature review) that embodied perception in the contemporary war film might be posited as a reaction against (or grounding of) the virtualising distanciation of military-technological mediation.

However, this hypothesis is radically upended by the second regime of drone imagery discussed in this chapter with reference to *Good Kill* and *Five Thousand Feet is the Best*, as well as recent academic studies of drones by Derek Gregory, Caroline Holmqvist and Alison Williams. The mediation of combat in *Good Kill* takes place exclusively through the drone interface; and while *5,000ft* evinces a more ambiguous, even troubled, relationship to the very notion of ‘combat space’, it is composed primarily of drone footage. Neither film juxtaposes the drone perspective with a complementary ground-level point-of-view, thus avoiding the formal opposition between drone mediation and embodiment set out by the CIA films. Instead of rendering drone mediation as a mode of disembodied virtuality, then, *Good Kill* and *5,000ft* portray it as an intimate and immersive form of ‘hyper-vision’, with the drone camera figuring as a prosthetic extension of the operator’s embodied perception (Holmqvist 545).

The immediacy with which the drone perspective is remediated here is clearly evident in the way that *Good Kill* and *5,000ft* establish an explicit alignment of the drone camera and the film camera. As noted in my analysis, *Good Kill* opens directly onto a full-screen remediation of the drone point-of-view, and does not embellish this image with any signifiers of its digital ‘otherness’, but instead allows the roving, aerial point-of-view to function synonymously with the cinematic establishing shot. Similarly, the ostensibly documentary strand of *5,000ft* is composed near-exclusively of drone footage (albeit of US landscapes rather than war zones per se) as if to suggest that this remediated perspective can be seamlessly ‘poured into’ the cinematic (Bolter and Grusin 45). Indeed this latter example, with its blurring of military and civilian space, is particularly evocative of the wider process of convergence between drone imaging and cinema, whereby drone cameras are increasingly detached from their militaristic origin and marketed as a filmmaking tool. A further sense of immediacy is conveyed by the drone image’s strikingly intimate visual (and at times even haptic) detail in both films. The former drone pilot in *5,000ft* observes that ‘I can tell you what type of shoes you’re wearing... I could tell you what type of clothes a person is wearing, whether they have a

beard, their hair colour, and anything else', which is echoed in *Good Kill* by Egan's description of the drone image as 'so beautifully clear...it couldn't be clearer if I was there; you can see everything, the looks on their faces, everything'. Both, then, evoke the sense of presence and transparent mediation (as a window onto the world) which Bolter and Grusin define as the key elements of immediacy.

There are a couple of hints in *Good Kill* and *5,000ft* which suggest that this immediacy is achieved via hypermediacy, as per Bolter and Grusin's account of how these twin logics may be 'complementary rather than contradictory' (233). This can be identified primarily in terms of the models of subjectivity implied by the two films. The opening sequence of *Good Kill*, for example, introduces the characters through a series of extreme close-ups, thus fragmenting the body into a disjointed collection of perceptual and motor functions and evoking Alison Williams' account of drones as a hybrid human-technological 'assemblage' (381). This seems to approximate Bolter and Grusin's 'definition of the self' under the 'logic of hypermediacy' as one whose 'key quality' is a sense of being 'connected', often in relation to 'digital multimedia and networked environments' (232). At the same time, however, these fragmented subjects are intercut with a drone point-of-view which (as noted above) is made synonymous with the film camera itself. The contrast between the rich visual field of drone mediated space and the extreme shallow-focus on the drone operators, which elides the cabin setting in which they work, is highly suggestive of the immersive effect of the drone feed. This latter aspect clearly coincides with Bolter and Grusin's 'logic of transparent immediacy' in which the subject is characteristically 'immersed' (232). By simultaneously evoking an immersive/immediate experience of drone mediation and a 'networked' subject, then, the opening sequence of *Good Kill* can certainly be read as an expression of immediacy that is effected by the subjective logic of hypermediacy. Although *5,000ft* does not contain quite so precise a visual delineation of the networked subject, the disturbingly fractured sense of identity ascribed to the film's fictional drone pilot is nonetheless similarly evocative of a subject whose presence is radically distributed across vast spatio-temporal divides and across military and civilian space.

This evocation of immediacy via hypermediacy differentiates *Good Kill* and *5,000ft* from the more straightforward mode of immediacy characteristic of the experiential war film. The shared privileging of immediacy does create some formal parallels between the two groups of films and implies that drone mediation may actually (in contrast to the CIA films) be commensurate with a cinematic aesthetic historically grounded in the genre's predilection for the embodied and experiential. Yet the

alignment of embodied experience with drone mediation significantly relocates this presence from the curiously depoliticised and detechnologised realm of the experiential war film to situate it amidst the carnage wrought by extremely powerful aerial missiles whose impact upon the body was not quite so transparent prior to the advent of drones. It is almost as if drones thus fulfil the wish of *Restrepo*'s artillery operator to see the impact of long-range weaponry, yet by doing so extend the scope of embodied witnessing to encompass what Holmqvist terms 'exposure to high-resolution images of killing, including the details of casualties and body parts that would never be possible to capture with the human eye' (542). This is precisely why the immediacy of drone mediation entails that it is 'proximity not distance [that] becomes the problem' (Gregory, "From a View to a Kill" 201).

The very notion of proximity as a 'problem' indicates a substantial deviation from the experiential mode's implicit association of spectatorial pleasure with an immersive and visceral rendition of the body at risk. However, the evocation of a distinctly traumatic sense of witnessing here does open up another substantial and potentially problematic point of comparison between the experiential and this second regime of drone remediations: specifically, that the latter may reinstate the internalisation of warfare that, for Stahl, 'portray[s] war as an internal crisis located neither in the field of politics nor between combatants but within the soldier himself' (79). I think it must be acknowledged that *Good Kill* does effect an internalisation of war to some degree through the substitution of a more retrograde model of subjective agency and moral responsibility in place of the opening sequence's evocation of networked assemblage. The contrast drawn between Egan's guilt and willingness to assume individual responsibility for the drone strikes carried out by the crew (implicitly linked to his background as a conventional pilot), and the new recruits with gaming backgrounds for whom war is akin to a first-person-shooter, is presumably intended as a critique of the increasingly callous institutional negation of moral responsibility concomitant with drones' networked reconfiguration of the military subject. However, as the film gradually loosens the connection between Egan's guilt and the controversial drone strike practices inaugurated by the CIA missions, it does ultimately become a rather individualised, internalised and depoliticised sense of trauma. This is exactly what makes the film's ending so problematic, since Egan's rogue strike on the rapist is framed as a liberating moment of individual catharsis which is further accentuated by his joyous final drive into the horizon. By releasing the protagonist from his moral burden in this particular manner, *Good Kill* risks undermining the more pertinent and

precise critique of drone strike procedures established earlier in the film via the implication that Egan's cleansed conscience cathartically absolves him from a complicity in the institutionalised and indiscriminate killing of civilians. Drone war is thereby rendered (to borrow Westwell's phrase) 'a personal ahistorical trauma that can be overcome' (81).

One might consider the psycho-geographic rendition of warfare in *5,000ft* open to the same charge of internalisation. Yet, while the film does principally explore the psychological effects of drone mediated combat, it does so in a highly context-specific manner which manifests a much more complex conceptualisation of the subject. Where *Good Kill* may ultimately contain the experience of conflict within a clearly demarcated individual conscience, *5,000ft* problematises the very stability of the individual through the evocation of a networked subject whose presence is radically and ambiguously dispersed across the blurred realms of military and civilian space. The representation of PTSD is therefore intimately bound up with the specific effects of drone mediation's re-orientation of the subject, rather than a regressive retreat from political/technological context into the realm of the individual conscience. Furthermore, for Martin Barker, the evocation of PTSD in Iraq War films is primarily problematic because it glosses over the potential political charge of the disjunction between 'over there' (i.e. the hostile space of combat) and 'over here' (i.e. the civilian realm), with PTSD 'packag[ing] soldiers' responses to war as bundles of symptoms within the individual' (85). Yet the sense of PTSD in *5,000ft* is also distinctly shaped by drone mediation's erosion of the distinctions between 'over there' and 'over here'. As such, it cannot therapeutically and 'apolitically' bridge this dichotomy, since it actually figures as a specific symptom of the way that drones have broken this division down through the geographical implosion of remote warfare.

One must bear in mind, then, that psychologising warfare is not in itself problematic; it only becomes so when internalisation effects a withdrawal from the material, political and technological context of warfare into the therapeutically-resolvable plane of individual psychological experience. The depoliticised and detechnologised realms of *Restrepo* and *The Hurt Locker* might plausibly be considered as such, but this isn't quite the case with *5,000ft* – or, indeed, even with much of *Good Kill* (the individualistic and therapeutic ending exempted). This difference between the experiential mode and the second regime of drone imagery is, I believe, further explicable via the concept of immersion. I have employed the term 'immersion' throughout this chapter primarily to distinguish this intimate/immersive



conceptualisation of drones (derived from Gregory, Holmqvist and Williams) from accounts which claim that they effect a distancing virtualisation of embodied experience and ethical consequence. Yet the immersive effect of drones does require further qualification in relation to the experiential mode of immersion.

Alison Griffiths' definition of immersion as a sense being enveloped within 'a space that immediately identifies itself as somehow separate from the world' could be considered consistent with the experiential mode since the exclusive privileging of embodied experience in those films creates a distinct sense of disconnection from the technological and political context of contemporary warfare (2). The immersive effect of drone mediation here offers a similarly immediate 'mode of virtual transport'; however, it is not quite transport to a *separate* space (Griffiths, 40). Instead, the intertwining of embodied experience and technological mediation more closely approximates Mark Hansen's notion of 'mixed reality'. In *Bodies in Code*, Hansen defines mixed reality as the 'fluid interpenetration of [...] virtual and physical realms', relying on a conceptualisation of digital mediation which rejects 'conceiving the virtual as a total technical simulacrum and as the opening of a fully immersive, self-contained fantasy world' in favour of 'the mixed reality paradigm [which] treats it as simply one more realm among others that can be accessed through embodied perception' (2-5).

Extrapolating from Hansen's argument, then, I believe the division between embodied experience and technological mediation in both the experiential mode and the first regime of drone imaging seems to render both realms as akin to 'self-contained fantasy worlds'. The embodied realm, through its detachment from political and technological context, signifies a regressive fantasy of face-to-face combat following an assumed alignment of spectatorial pleasure with embodied mediation; while the discrete realm of digital mediation appears as a rather weightless, post-human construct due to its fundamental separation from embodied experience. In contrast, the regime of drone imaging suggested by *5,000ft* and *Good Kill* posits a thorough permeation of 'virtual and physical realms'. There is a broadly comparable sense of immersion, though it is not immersion within a 'separate space' or 'self-contained fantasy-world', but rather one in which the effects of drone mediation remain firmly grounded in embodied experience.

Finally, Hansen's account of the necessary entanglement of embodiment and digital mediation can also be used to further reflect upon the distinctive form of psycho-geographic internalisation in *5,000ft*. In *New Philosophy for New Media*, he acknowledges 'how radically alien the formal field of the computer is from the

perspective of the phenomenal modes of embodied spatial experience' (206). Yet, rather than producing the kind of disjunction between embodied perception and digital mediation that characterises *Body of Lies*, Hansen argues that the impossibility of visual mastery of such spaces produces a shift to a deeply affective, 'alternate mode of perception rooted in our bodily faculty of proprioception' (203). This 'affective proprioception' is a 'form of bodily vision' which constitutes a '*creative, autopoietic response on the part of the body itself* [emphasis in original]' (229).

While drone mediation's fusion of geographically distinct spaces does not produce quite so radically 'other' a space as the 'perspectival crisis' of Robert Lazzarini's *skulls* (to which the first quotation above explicitly refers), this account of 'affective proprioception' as a form of spacing produced by the body in conjunction with digital mediation can nonetheless be related to the virtual presence of the drone operator in *5,000ft*. The 'internalisation' at work in Fast's film is not quite so neatly bound within the circumscribable space of individual conscience, but rather appears as a direct effect of drone mediation's fusing of military and civilian space. As such, 'internalisation' may not even be the most apposite term to describe this psycho-geographic portrait of the drone operator's experience. Instead, one might consider it as the distinctive, disorienting and (in this context) traumatic subjective effect of the proprioceptive sense of being simultaneously 'embodied' in two distinct spaces that are conjoined by the drone interface.

I will return to Hansen's work in the concluding discussion of the following chapter, in order to explore how this sense of affective proprioception may function in relation to other kinds of digital environments. Specifically, the next chapter will address the US military use of networked digital simulations of combat for both training purposes and the treatment of PTSD, a theme which will be explored in relation to the documentary *Full Battle Rattle* (2008) and four short films by Harun Farocki collectively known as *Serious Games*.

## 4. Simulations

Continuing the examination of digital technologies' impact on contemporary war films, this chapter will explore the US military use of simulations for both training purposes and the treatment of PTSD. Simulations, also variously known as 'serious games' or simply 'war games', are not by definition digital. Indeed, while their origins are ambiguous, they do clearly pre-date digital media, stretching back at least as far as the Prussian 'Kriegsspiel' of the early 1800s. Historically, there has also been a significant degree of imbrication with the cinematic apparatus. The 1940 'Waller Flexible Gunnery Trainer', for instance, presented trainee anti-aircraft gunners with a dynamic onslaught of enemy fighter planes on the panoramic Vitarama cinema screen, at which they fired 'electronic bullets' (Belton, 101). Paul Virilio's *War and Cinema* details a comparable cinematisation of war, albeit primarily oriented around the remote, screen-based interfaces of actual weaponry rather than training simulations per se. This work is also among the first to note the technological transition from cinematic to digital war games, in a brief discussion of the emergent (in 1984) 'electronic battlefield' created at the US Army's National Training Centre (NTC) in Fort Irwin, California (110).

Indeed, contemporary forms of military simulations tend increasingly to be bound to digital technologies, ranging from live-action scenarios which incorporate digitised weaponry systems such as the Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement System (MILES) used in the US Army's war games, to the fully CG environments of gaming-derived simulation training programs, often navigated via Head-Mounted Display. Among critical writing on this topic, there are two institutions which recur with significant regularity: the aforementioned NTC, and more recently the Institute for Creative Technologies (ICT), based at the University of Southern California. The former is the primary focus of James Der Derian's 2009 work *Virtuous War*, a critique of the 'virtual revolution' in digitised military simulations which questions the extent to which such applications may virtualise warfare by eroding the boundaries between preparation and execution (xxxi). As implied by the timeframe of these references to Virilio and Der Derian, the NTC has developed from modelling Cold War scenarios through to its contemporary emphasis on counter-insurgency situations. Most recently, it has garnered attention for its large-scale simulation of Iraq, as depicted in the documentary *Full Battle Rattle*. This film tracks Army recruits' progress through a mission in the simulacral village of Medina Wasl, largely populated by Iraqi refugees

whose semi-scripted interactions with the troops form the basis of both cultural and military-strategic training.

While the Institute for Creative Technologies' links to military simulations may not be immediately apparent from a cursory glance at their website, the applications developed through this collaboration of film and gaming industry personnel as well as computer scientists are actually central to contemporary innovations in military simulation technology. The history of the institute's formation, and its centrality to the 'military-entertainment complex' are recounted in Tim Lenoir's 2000 article "All but War is Simulation: The Military-Entertainment Complex" (331-335). Exemplary among its outputs is the *Full Spectrum Warrior* software, a hybrid military training program and commercial video game. In 2005, this game was adapted as the basis for the *Virtual Iraq* application – essentially a set of customisable CG scenarios designed to treat PTSD among veterans of the Iraq War. The latter is depicted in one of a series of short films by Harun Farocki collectively known as *Serious Games*. Also featuring in these films is the software *Virtual Battlespace 2*, which seems to have supplanted *Full Spectrum Warrior* as the training application of choice (at least within the Marine units depicted in Farocki's films). This program overlaps with commercial gaming in a similar way, as its simulation engine is shared by *ARMA II*.

Thus, the NTC's training simulations, *Virtual Battlespace 2*, and the ICT-developed software *Virtual Iraq* will be the main focal points of this chapter's analysis, uniting the initial discussion of critical work on simulations and subsequent analyses of *Full Battle Rattle* and *Serious Games*. The chapter will begin by engaging with critical debates on simulations from both journalistic (Der Derian) and academic (Chris Hables Gray, Pasi Väliäho, John Protevi) sources, deriving from these discussions a theoretical framework for assessing digital war games' effects, particularly in terms of an alleged virtualisation of warfare and transfiguration of military subjectivity. As will become apparent, these critical perspectives span a range of disciplines from military history to biopolitics and affective neuroscience; among them, only Väliäho has any connection to film studies per se. The volume of critical work on digital military simulations is also rather slender, even in comparison to more recent technologies such as drones. As such, some of the discussions and analysis that follow will focus on issues (such as 'endogenous imagery') that don't typically fall within the purview of film studies, yet I believe this theoretical hybridity is a virtue (perhaps even a necessity) for examining the increasingly intermedial nature of contemporary conflict and its hypermediated cinematic representations.

Following this theoretical contextualisation, I will present extended readings of Tony Gerber and Jesse Moss' documentary *Full Battle Rattle* and Harun Farocki's *Serious Games*. To my knowledge, these are the only films within the corpus I have delineated to address contemporary digital war games<sup>15</sup>. Since they may both appear as outliers relative to some of the mainstream genre work that figured more prominently in the previous two chapters, I will briefly contextualise the directors' work here. Jesse Moss is a US documentary filmmaker who tends to work in a vérité style, and is perhaps best-known for winning the special jury award at Sundance film festival for *The Overnighters* (2014), a study of the North Dakota oil boom. His collaborator on *Full Battle Rattle*, Tony Gerber, is a director and producer with a somewhat more eclectic background that includes the Merchant Ivory produced *Side Streets* (1998), numerous *National Geographic* documentaries, as well as collaborations with artists such as Matthew Barney and Ann-Sofi Sidén. Harun Farocki's work, from the late 1960s through to his death in 2014, has always been positioned at a slight tangent to what one might conventionally demarcate as cinema. Towards the end of his career, Farocki was increasingly identified as an international video artist, with serial (short film) works such as *Serious Games*, *Parallel* (2012-14) and *Eye / Machine* (2000-3) appearing as gallery installations. The earlier works are somewhat difficult to categorise, moving fluidly between, and often exploring the interstices of documentary, the essay film and experimental work. Though Farocki's interests are notably diverse, the relationship between military and media technologies (particularly in reshaping the phenomenological and ontological role of images) is a recurrent theme from *As You See* (1986) and *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* (1989) through to *Eye / Machine* and *Serious Games*.

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While Virilio's brief discussion of the NTC's 'electronic battlefield' implicitly links this mode of military simulation to broader trends in the derealisation and cinematisation of warfare, subsequent critics such as Der Derian have more closely examined the links between military training and the gaming industry to suggest that this sense of derealisation is innately tied to the virtualising influence of CG

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<sup>15</sup> There are of course earlier precedents, such as *War Games* (1983). As per my definition of the corpus, science fiction treatments of similar themes in films like *Ender's Game* (2013) are excluded here.

environments. Analogies with cinema per se seem to have disappeared entirely, with the emphasis firmly placed upon the ways in which ‘video war games’ may effect a collapse of ‘the gap itself between the reality and virtuality of war’ (10).

Reflecting on his visit to the NTC, Der Derian expands on this notion of high-tech derealisation:

The reality of death had been twice removed, by video and by simulation. My grandfathers’ wars disappeared into the multiple levels of virtuality inscribed on the blank desert slate of Fort Irwin. There the landscape was a five-dimensional “battlespace”, with soldiers as “land warriors”, and the enemy not as flesh and blood but as iconic symbol, a “target-of-opportunity” on a computer screen [...] my grandfathers could not have even seen let alone recognised this virtualised enemy (9)

Thus, the realising force of warfare in Der Derian’s account is fundamentally an embodied sense of ‘flesh and blood’, and the simulation is critiqued specifically on the grounds of abstracting this in favour of a clinically distanced, increasingly virtualised process of killing.

This has, of course, become a somewhat commonplace observation, re-iterated in countless articles and employed in response to a range of technological innovations – including drones, as discussed in the previous chapter. Yet what really distinguishes Der Derian’s work is the more radical extension of this argument regarding the conflation of the real and virtual, in his suggestion that ‘simulations can precede and engender the reality of war that they were intended to model and prepare for’ (15). This theory is, within *Virtuous War*, not fully assessed in relation to the NTC’s simulation of Iraq, but is nonetheless illustrated through a series of infamous accidents such as the USS *Vincennes*’ shooting of an Iranian commercial airliner:

On a tour of one of your Aegis missile cruisers at the experiment, I was struck by the number of computers everywhere, how everyone was staring at screens, and not much else. I had this flashback to the USS *Vincennes*, where they had trained for months with computer simulations, and nowhere in the training had there been an Iranian Airbus in the skies overhead. Even when their screens told them there was something that did not correspond to the track of an F-14, they didn’t believe their eyes. They believed their own computer simulations and training, and shot it down. (138)

Such instances certainly go some way toward demonstrating Der Derian's argument regarding simulative preparation 'overriding' the immediate evidence of a present combat situation. However, Der Derian does not fully explore how the conditioning power of simulations may 'precede and engender' new 'realities' of combat on a subjective level. Thus, I will address this gap later in the chapter by juxtaposing Der Derian's argument with works by John Protevi and Pasi Väliäho which focus more specifically on the ways in which simulations may reconfigure and pre-determine the experience of war in subjective, perceptual terms. Arguably, the absence of such analysis in *Virtuous War* does seem to compromise the more radical implications of Der Derian's position, allowing him to instead revert to a sceptical critique of simulations' inability to 'survive first contact with the enemy' (281).

This critique is echoed in Chris Hables Gray's essay "Perpetual Revolution in Military Affairs, International Security and Information". Ostensibly assessing various post-modern 'Revolutions in Military Affairs' (such as 'electronic war', 'information war'), this piece nonetheless reads largely like a diatribe against military attempts to model and predict war through simulation, ultimately claiming that:

the fog of war will never lift, because it is generated by the three main "problems" of war – your side's behaviour, your antagonist's behaviour, and nature (the weather mainly). How will your soldiers act in the face of death? How will your machines perform? What will your enemy do and how will they react to what you do? How well will they perform? What will the weather be? These questions are not completely answerable, let alone predictable or controllable. They never will be. In terms of information theory, these are incomputable complex systems. War is an intractable problem conceptually; really the only way to know how a war is going to come out is to fight it. (204)

Gray's earlier monograph *Postmodern War* is similarly dismissive of military simulations, finding the seminal Battle of 73 Easting<sup>16</sup> model 'impressive' but of limited value for 'other kinds of battles', and generally asserting that 'simulations are not as important as the real' – as though they were simply a superficial technological gloss over 'war like war has been for thousands of years [...] real bodies really dead at another's hand, no matter how remote' (62; 48).

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<sup>16</sup> The Battle of 73 Easting features prominently in Tim Lenoir's historical outline of military simulations in 'All But War is Simulation'; see p.330.

*Postmodern War* is intermittently valuable as a descriptive record of the digitisation of military simulations and, like *Virtuous War*, evinces a distinct sense of (Virilio's) cinematic analogies being supplanted by gaming metaphors (as in the 'Nintendo' room used for Bosnian peace talks). However, the critique of simulations here is rather simplistic, particularly in postulating a fundamental division between the reality of the body and the corresponding, implicit unreality of simulations. If these two realms were really as mutually exclusive as Gray claims, then the technologies involved in simulating and waging war would be rendered fundamentally redundant and thus unworthy of this kind of critical examination. Yet this position arguably overlooks the sense that, for those who wage war in this technologically-asymmetrical way, the 'flesh and blood' victim does not appear such, but rather as (to borrow Der Derian's phrase) an 'iconic symbol, a "target-of-opportunity" on a computer screen' (9). This shows how the precise intersection of embodied reality and technological abstraction is not merely a superficial issue of representation, but a highly ethically-charged encounter. While acknowledging that 'compared to the real trauma of war, the pseudotrauma of simulation pales', Der Derian also emphasises precisely this ethical dimension in his claim that 'one learns how to kill but not to take responsibility for it, one experiences "death" but not the tragic consequences of it' (10). Gray's argument is also neglectful of the effects that simulative training may have on military subjects, and the ways in which this conditioning delimits the subjective experience of actual warfare as well as wider US military strategy. Some indications of how simulations may 'engender' new 'realities' of combat are, however, proposed in recent articles by John Protevi and Pasi Väliäho (Der Derian, 15).

Protevi's "Affect, agency and responsibility: the act of killing in the age of cyborgs" examines the modes of subjectivity at stake in both military training simulations and actual combat, and posits various strategies that are applied to transcend individual subjective agency. Noting a 'deep-seated inhibition against one-on-one, face-to-face, cold-blooded killing on the part of some 98% of soldiers' based on an affective 'proto-empathic identification', Protevi argues that this necessitates the activation of 'a de-subjectified state' (406-407). Historically, the most common mode of this is the 'berserker rage', yet Protevi emphasises how this is typically avoided (due to its tendency to exacerbate PTSD) in contemporary military training in favour of other, more controllable strategies:



(1) there is another sense of “agent” as non-subjective controller of bodily action, either reflex or basic emotion, and (2) that in some cases the military unit and non-subjective reflexes and basic emotions are intertwined in such a way as to bypass the soldiers’ subjectivity *qua* controlled intentional action. In these cases the practical agent of killing is not the individual person or subject, but the emergent assemblage of military unit and non-subjective reflex or equally non-subjective “affect program” (408)

Thus, the broad aim of military training in this account is to directly condition and control ‘affect programs’, glossed as pre-subjective ‘basic emotions [...] that run the body’s hardware in the absence of conscious control’, and to instil a sense of trans-subjective group identity (408). The former is targeted primarily via ‘shoot/no shoot’ simulator training, through repetitive exercises which establish a ‘conditioned response’ to key perceptual traits and are said to ‘operate at the very edge of the conscious awareness of the soldiers and involve complex subpersonal processes of threat perception’ (409-411). This is further augmented by the virtualising effect of CG environments which ‘increase the desensitisation effect of training’ (411). The latter sense of constituting ‘a new cognitive group subject’ is produced by the ‘extended/distributed cognition’ of networked simulation training (411). Protevi further outlines this process in a particularly significant passage:

In other words, contemporary team-building applications through real-time networking are a cybernetic application of video games that goes above the level of the subject. In affective entrainment, instant decision-making and cognitive “top-sight” the soldiers produced by rhythmic chanting and intensive simulation training are nodes within a cybernetic organism, the fighting group, which maintains its functional integrity and tactical effectiveness by real-time communication technology. It’s the emergent group with the distributed decisions of the soldiers that is the cyborg here, operating at the thresholds of the individual subjectivities of the soldiers. (412)

Protevi’s argument thus extends the understanding of how simulations may, in Der Derian’s terms, ‘produce and engender the reality of war that they were intended to model and prepare for’ at the level of subjective experience (15). It would also seem to problematise the dialectical use of subjective experience in the war film as a mode of critiquing the virtualisation effected by simulations and their gaming aesthetic by

demonstrating the complicity of these two apparently opposed concepts. The subsequent analyses of *Full Battle Rattle* and *Serious Games* will therefore attempt to extrapolate on this issue by examining in detail the modes of subjective and trans-subjective experience depicted, with a particular focus on the distributed group identities produced by networked simulation training.

Notably influenced by Protevi (as well as the work of neuroscientist Jaak Panksepp), Pasi Väliaho's "Affectivity, Biopolitics and the Virtual Reality of War" is also worth considering here for its complementary analysis of the military governance of 'affect programs' through the *Virtual Iraq* treatment for PTSD (73). This article will be particularly useful as a critical framework for discussing Harun Farocki's *Serious Games III: Immersion* (2009) (which focusses on *Virtual Iraq*) and also forms an interesting adjunct to the previous chapter's work on PTSD. Adapted from the *Full Spectrum Warrior* training tool, *Virtual Iraq* essentially allows for the recreation of traumatic scenes using a customisable base set of CG scenarios, with which the patient engages via a Head-Mounted Display interface. Väliaho broadly describes the program as 'an example of the biopolitical work of contemporary screen media in which the reality of images starts to concern the organism's internal functioning instead of being anthropological or communicative' (63). This is based primarily upon an understanding of PTSD as rooted not within conscious 'biographical memories', but rather pre-subjective 'affective and emotional charges' or 'bodily memory' (70). The program is thus termed an example of 'evocative media', in that its imagery is 'fundamentally endogenous rather than exogenous...they are not representations, at least in the traditional sense of mediators between inner and outer worlds, but [...] sensori-affectivo-motor evocations and modulations of a traumatic past' (70-71).

Through this notion of 'endogenous' imagery, Väliaho appears to be broadly following Mark Hansen's theorisation of digital imaging as formless and essentially produced by the body/brain of the observer/participant, which is echoed here in Väliaho's claim that 'VR completely abolishes distinctions between internal and external worlds [...] becom[ing] simulations of the brain's internal activity' (77). He expands on this notion in a key passage to summarise its centrality to simulations:

In a sense, then, the reality of the liberal war the soldiers wage does not originate in the brain's orientation toward and interpretation of the external world but, rather, in the media technological regulation of basic affect programs and the endogenous imagery they produce. This at least is the key function of the

immersive virtual environments, which are nowadays commonly used in military training and which basically replicate commercial first-person-shooters in the context of warrior production (76)

The prime function of *Virtual Iraq* as a specific instance of such virtual environments is, of course, to ‘revisit and revise the past so as to (re)produce subjects amenable to the contingencies of war’, which is achieved by ‘modulating the patient’s affective life and blocking and transforming the quality of emotional intensity attached to certain memories – from politically subversive “guilt” to de-politicised “acceptance”’ (65-69).

This notion of PTSD treatment as complicit in depoliticising soldiers’ responses to war coincides strikingly with Martin Barker’s account of it in *A ‘Toxic Genre’* as a repackaging of politically-charged discontent as treatable individual symptoms (85). Yet, while both effect a similar sense of depoliticisation, there is evidently something of a formal or ontological disjunction in terms of the way these two media operate. Where the contemporary war film often displays a tendency to ground this psychological ‘journey’ within a realist aesthetic, the endogenous imagery of *Virtual Iraq* in Väliaho’s account has no equivalent ‘orientation toward [...] the external world’. *Virtual Iraq* thereby radically erases the dependence on familial/social structures and perhaps the entire therapeutic narrative arc common to war cinema’s depiction of PTSD in favour of a pure (although paradoxically, highly technologically-enhanced) internality. The very notions of endogenous imagery and evocative media thus seem to break entirely with what Jonathan Crary terms the ‘referential illusion’ of cinema/photography, illustrating how digital media may effect a ‘sweeping reconfiguration of relations between an observing subject and modes of representation that effectively nullifies most of the culturally established meanings of the terms *observer* and *representation* [emphasis in original]’ (*Techniques of the Observer*, 1).

Clearly, these works by Protevi and Väliaho evince a radically different conceptualisation of subjectivity as it relates to ‘evocative’ digital media rather than a cinematic embodied grounding of representation. The following readings of *Full Battle Rattle* and *Serious Games* will thus closely examine the various modes of subjectivity engaged both diegetically within the simulations depicted and in more familiar terms of the cinematic language employed. Furthermore, I will explore how the films more generally posit simulations as reconfiguring the experience of war, and to what extent

they may fulfil Der Derian's claim regarding the engendering of new 'realities' of combat.

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*Full Battle Rattle* charts the progress of a US army battalion through training scenarios in the simulated Iraqi town of Medina Wasl, created at the Fort Irwin National Training Centre. The simulation – just one 'town' that is part of a larger, interconnected, simulation of Iraq – comprises role-playing Iraqi refugees as the local community, 'Anti-Iraqi Forces' (i.e. insurgents, played by trained US military personnel rather than Iraqis) who plot to disrupt the battalion's missions, and even a simulation of the media, who film and broadcast televised reports from the town. This is combined with a high-tech simulation of conflict, using the aforementioned MILES (Multiple Integrated Laser Engagement System) harness to record the outcomes of virtual combat with insurgents. Alongside the traditional emphasis on military strategic training (albeit specifically tailored to counter-insurgency scenarios), the film also captures what Scott Magelssen (in his article on the NTC) terms the 'human elements' of cultural sensitivity training and the indoctrination of a 'warrior ethos', specifically intended to achieve 'decreased collateral damage and improved US-Iraqi relations' (49-51). Interactions between the troops and the population of Medina Wasl within the film are as often diplomatic as they are militaristic, beginning with meetings between the Battalion's Commander Lt. Col. Robert McLaughlin and the local authorities (Mayor, Police Chief, etc.). Within the battalion, there is also a particular emphasis on transforming trainees' attitudes to what they initially dismiss as the 'Al Salaam a'alaykum shit'.

Formally, the film's opening sequence suggests an immersively rendered subjective portrait of the experience of war very much in line with wider genre trends. A series of static establishing shots seem to locate the diegesis within Iraq, depicting local inhabitants and an approaching US military convoy against an iconographic desert backdrop littered with burned out cars. This segues into a series of loosely connected, handheld, rapidly-edited action sequences of somewhat generic counter-insurgency scenarios including roadside checkpoints and IED explosions. The viewer's suspension of disbelief is, however, abruptly jolted as an off-screen voice yells 'everybody stop' and the seemingly dead and wounded rise to their feet.

The frenetic, handheld aesthetic employed here evokes a distinctly subjective perspective familiar from a range of Iraq War films, particularly the video diary

aesthetic which has migrated from documentary to fiction via films such as *Redacted* and *Battle for Haditha* or the television series *Generation Kill*. Coupled with the *in medias res* opening, it serves to immerse the viewer within the NTC's construct prior to any contextualisation or metafictional orientation. In doing so, it seems to promise a sense of formal experimentation that is deftly suited to the film's subject matter, with the blurring of the boundaries between documentary and fiction reflecting how the NTC's war games may erode distinctions between the real and the simulated. It may also imply the complicity of such immersive approaches to cinematically representing war with wider trends toward virtualising simulations.

However, beyond this brief yet canny metafictional commentary on the capacity of film to create similarly immersive, simulated 'realities', *Full Battle Rattle* is otherwise structured through a somewhat conventional mix of direct-to-camera interviews interspersed with occasional set-piece extracts from the simulation. Narrative point-of-view, contrary to the majority of Iraq War films, is omniscient rather than subjectively restricted, leading to an ostensibly more objective portrait of the NTC's machinations. Indeed, narrative perspective is fairly evenly balanced between trainee troops, Iraqi role-players and insurgents. For instance, the preparations for the initial meeting are shown from dual viewpoints, while the 'surprise' attack on the Forward Operating Base is preceded by a scene depicting the insurgents' planning of it. Furthermore, the limitations of individual agency are repeatedly highlighted by regular cutaways to interviews with the 'simulation architects' and the constant presence of advisors directing participants' performative interpretations of the scripted 'injects'.

This narrative structure does allow for an informative overview of the entire training process, mapping the consequences of each interaction between the troops and the population of Medina Wasl, thus outlining the ultimate control maintained by the architects and potentially allowing for political commentary on the US military 'script' for the occupation of Iraq. Although Gerber and Moss refrain from any explicit analysis of the underlying political/ideological assumptions, one can nonetheless construct a reading of this from the film's depiction of character construction and narrative causality within the simulation.

Two somewhat conflicting explanations are given for the presumed political inclinations of Medina Wasl's inhabitants at the start of the simulation. Firstly, simulation consultant Amber Gates notes that each role player is provided with 'as much information about their new family as we can possibly get', with a particular emphasis on family members who may be 'deceased' or 'out of town' in Syria or Iran.

This, she explains, determines ‘how they’re going to feel about US soldiers’, which suggests that the simulation is ultimately attempting to model a complex range of political inclinations. A subsequent gloss on this theme by the commander of Medina Wasl’s Anti-Iraqi Forces, however, claims that:

Medina Wasl starts off neutral, what we call grey, and as Blue Force [i.e. the US Army trainees] interacts with us correctly, they’re rewarded with less insurgent activity. But as they make mistakes, like killing innocent civilians through poor use of escalation of force and things like that, then it becomes a more hostile environment for them.

On the evidence of the film as a whole, it seems that the second of these explanations tends to override the first, since interactions with the troops tend to have a greater influence on events than any pre-existent political commitments. The sole exception to this is Medina Wasl’s insurgents, yet their oppositional ideology is largely neutralised by the fact that these roles are played by US troops with no evident political understanding of their characters. While Paul Greene, who portrays one of the insurgents, does assert the usefulness of the role in ‘making you think like them’, this is articulated only in the military-strategic sense of asymmetrical warfare, rather than as a coherent ideological alternative, as conveyed by his enthusiasm for the hijinks of acting the ‘bad guy’. Their politics are also entirely dismissed by the Army trainees, with the Battalion’s Commander (Robert McLaughlin) designating them as ‘thugs’, disruptive of the people’s desire for ‘peace and prosperity’.

Furthermore, as the US-Iraqi interactions are gradually reduced to the level of financial transactions, the model’s capitalist prejudices become ever more evident. The seemingly catastrophic series of errors committed by the trainees – from mistaken checkpoint killings of civilians and the neglect of Deputy Mayor Bassam Kalasho as a potential co-operator, to their inability to subdue Medina Wasl’s insurgent activity – are ultimately appeased by offers of bereavement pay and water/sewage treatment contracts. The simulation’s modelling of overarching political and ideological issues is thus revealed as distinctly privileging the conciliatory power of democratic-capitalist forces. It remains unclear whether this flaw in the realist value of the model is intentional or unconscious. It may be that, in confronting what Gray terms an ‘incomputable complex system’, the architects of the simulation optimistically chose to privilege desired results in an attempt to pre-determine the outcome (204). Either way, it

clearly serves a propagandist purpose by attempting to instil its trainees with a belief in the initial ideological neutrality of Iraq and the susceptibility of its power structure to the adoption of a capitalist democracy. By exposing the causal logic of the simulation in this way, the film does at least suggest some sense in which the NTC may, in Der Derian's terms, 'produce and delimit [...] the future [it] claim[s] only to anticipate' (33).

On the more subjective, experiential level, however, *Full Battle Rattle* is somewhat limited in its exploration of how simulations may reconfigure or pre-determine the experience of war, particularly in the modes suggested by Protevi and Väliaho's work. There is no attempt made to cinematically mirror the purportedly immersive subjective experience of the NTC as described within one of the film's interviews:

Everybody that arrives at the NTC knows that they're coming here for training. By the second or third day of the training that kind of disappears. The soldiers get into the reality of what they're doing, and even though they are out here in the middle of the Mojave desert, in a simulated Iraq, it gets real, and they get lost in the scenario.

Outside of the opening sequence, the viewer is afforded little opportunity for this kind of immersive experience of 'getting into the reality' of the simulation (in other words, for a cinematic suspension of disbelief). Thus, Mike Dillon's review of the film critiques its perceived 'fail[ure] to pursue the implications of its own status regarding media's engagement with a war famously called "fictitious" by fellow documentarian Michael Moore in his incendiary 2003 Oscar speech', arguing that it is ultimately 'uncommitted to any form of political commentary' (120). Certainly, the verisimilitude of the simulated Iraq afforded opportunities for the filmmakers to engage in a greater degree of formal or ontological play, perhaps through a more ambiguous and challenging blurring of the boundaries between real Iraq, simulated Iraq, and the complicity of media in virtualising such distinctions – an opportunity which is largely passed over in favour of more conventional documentary tropes which attempt to erect a critical distance from the simulation depicted.

Zack Whitman Gill's "Rehearsing the War Away: Perpetual Warrior Training in Contemporary US Army Policy" does, however, prompt a potential alternative reading on the virtues of immersion in the military simulation context:

The goal of military training is precisely not to have soldiers completely absorbed in the realism of combat and its simulations, but quite the opposite—theatre immersion works to institute combat-as-rehearsal, in which soldiers have already been exposed to the horrors of war and are trained to remain so collected in their decision making that combat becomes simply another rehearsal, always downplayed as merely another step towards a perpetually deferred performance. It is therefore of the utmost importance that the mimesis continuously fails, that soldiers never fully suspend their disbelief in training and remain capable of reflecting on their actions (154)

This would seem to contradict the opinions espoused by military personnel within the film, who repeatedly emphasise the simulation's comprehensive mimetic detail and intricate narrative design. Yet it chimes interestingly with Dillon's questioning of 'why the army would even grant a documentary team such access, given how disruptive their presence presumably would be amidst training exercises that rely on its participants not to question their realism' (121). For there are multiple layers of performativity evident in the film which may preclude total immersion in the scenario – from interpreting injects, demonstrating 'warrior ethos' and cultural sensitivity, interacting with the simulated media ('INN'), and, of course, performing for Gerber and Moss.

Perhaps, then, the issue of immersive realism in the NTC's simulation is somewhat more complex than a straightforward striving for maximum mimetic detail, designed to ontologically convince its participants into behaving as if it were the real Iraq. Instead, there may be a dual trajectory in play, which both strives toward realist detail but simultaneously incorporates timely, small reminders of its artifice. This seems particularly evident in the simulation of injuries – an issue of marked significance in this context given Der Derian's claim that simulations detract from the realising force of 'flesh and blood' (9). In *Full Battle Rattle*, the visceral force of realistically simulated injuries, created by make-up, is emphasised by the medical consultant interviewed, who notes the intense physical reactions (vomiting, fainting, etc.) of some trainees. However, this effect is somewhat countered by the use, alongside simulatively injured participants, of dummies. Of course, there are ethical and budgetary limits in simulating injuries to a fully realistic extent, yet the clear artifice of this element may be intended to resist complete mimesis in order to maintain the virtualising distanciation that Gill refers to.



By subtly highlighting this performative sense of ‘combat-as-rehearsal’ and resisting formal tendencies toward immersive subjectivity, *Full Battle Rattle* remains something of an anomaly in the war film genre. In contrast to the dominant experiential mode, the film does not substantially attempt to explore the subjective or psychological experience of soldiering and thus does not really enter into the terrain of Protevi and Vāliaho’s work on simulations’ alterations of the subjective, perceptual experience of war. In spite of this, the film does however seem to maintain a fundamental anchoring in individual experience, which emerges with particular clarity in the concluding ‘chapter’.

Within the bounds of the simulation, this is somewhat restricted given the recurrent emphasis on the role-players’ subservience to the script, expressed most explicitly through the supervisors of Medina Wasl’s role-players repeated injunctions to ‘read the inject’ whenever a performer is struggling to imagine their role. This does at least gesture towards the limitations of individual agency within the simulation. However, Gerber and Moss ultimately look outside the limitations of this simulated scenario for the cathartic, redemptive individual narrative arcs that conclude the film. In particular, they foreground the refugee tale of Nagi Moshi (playing an Iraqi police officer), detailing his heroic journey from Iraq to the US and his ultimately successful legal battle for US citizenship. Other individual stories addressed in the film’s final section include Bassam Khalasho’s return to his family, and Paul Greene’s emotional departure from his family for another tour of Iraq.

While the use of these dramatic yet resolutely individualistic story-arcs in the film’s concluding section may lend its finale a conventional sense of catharsis, they also serve to highlight the film’s ultimate inconclusiveness regarding the simulation as a trans-subjective, or even de-subjectified, *network*. There remains, therefore, a rather unsatisfying gap between the film’s representation of the simulation and critical literature on the subject. Interviews with the simulation architects may go some way toward explaining the overarching function of the NTC’s training, but, as Dillon’s review of the film notes, ‘any opinions about the American occupation of Iraq not finessed by the camp’s tacticians are left off the table’ (121). This is perhaps a somewhat harsh evaluation, since the film does implicitly draw out some of the ideological assumptions embedded within the architects’ script, as I have noted above. Yet there is certainly an element of validity to this critique of the film since Gerber and Moss do not demonstrate the structuring of the simulation network beyond the information offered up by the architects.

This may in part be due to the film's relative lack of emphasis on the role of digital technologies. Der Derian's account of the NTC in *Virtuous War* explicitly notes the 'digital buzz' with which it was marketed to the press, emphasising the novel means by which 'computers control the battlefield' (4). Since this is almost entirely absent from the film, one is simply left to speculate on the balance of control between the (visible) architects and the (elided) digital network. Admittedly, the film does directly address the digitised simulation of battle through its outline of the MILES harness, yet, on film, these are barely distinguishable from real weaponry. As such, the film may appear a little anachronistic to viewers with a keen awareness of critical literature on digitised military simulations: closer, perhaps, to Virilio's account of the cinematisation of warfare than to the digitised virtualisation explored by Der Derian. Furthermore, its formal conservatism can be justly critiqued for steering a middle ground between immersive subjectivity and an objective examination of the network as a whole, and thus not quite satisfactorily analysing either aspect.

Nonetheless, *Full Battle Rattle* remains a fascinating portrait of a vitally important yet largely under-acknowledged trend of contemporary warfare. Its opening sequence evokes the complex interplay of documentary/fiction and simulated/real, suggesting how an immersive, subjective aesthetic may be complicit in blurring these boundaries. Gerber and Moss also subtly expose the ideological assumptions embedded within the simulation architects' script for the Iraq War, and provide ample material for debating the immersive/performative aspects of role-playing in war games.

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While the focus of *Full Battle Rattle* was on the NTC's digitally enhanced yet largely live-action simulations, Harun Farocki's *Serious Games* is embedded within the more overtly digitised realm of the ICT-developed applications *Virtual Battlespace 2* and *Virtual Iraq*. Clearly, the very notion of documenting these CG training applications with a camera presents something of a formal challenge. In particular, the medial juxtaposition here raises the question of what kind of distance one assumes in relation to these CG environments; in other words, whether to seamlessly remediate the CG interface and thus elide any embodied depiction of the military subjects, or to focus on this material context to the exclusion of an immersive rendition of the CG realm. Farocki's solution to this is to employ a split-screen aesthetic throughout the majority of

the films, typically juxtaposing one screen set within a CG simulation with another recording the participants/trainees.

The first film of the four part series, *Watson is Down* (2010), opens with an armoured vehicle driving down a desert road, which is revealed to be part of the 'Recognition of Combatants – Improvised Explosive Devices' training mode of the *Virtual Battlespace 2* simulation. Short bursts of radio chatter imply the presence of the vehicle's operators, who are subsequently revealed in the right-hand panel of the split-screen. The remainder of the film tracks their progress through this landscape as they attempt to detect and avoid any IEDs while searching for enemy militants. Cutaways to an instructor depict the injecting of these IEDs and 'enemies' into the environment, which are selected from a drop-down list of objects (e.g. cement block, Coke can, dead dog) and customisable (in terms of clothing, but little else) yet generic combatants.

This split-screen juxtaposition is a novel and formally effective means of informatively and dramatically documenting the waging of virtualised war, since either of the two interconnected screens taken in isolation would perhaps appear insufficient. The former is essentially a filmed record of gameplay, dominated entirely by video game aesthetics and thus not necessarily 'cinematic'; the latter consists solely of a recording of military personnel interacting with screens and would be dramatically rather flat without the parallel visualisation of the simulated environment. It also, in the very act of separation and juxtaposition, might seem to effect a sense of formal resistance to what Der Derian terms the collapsed 'reality and virtuality of war' (10).

Beyond this technical innovation, *Watson is Down* has a more straightforward documentary value in depicting the processes of subjective perceptual conditioning described by Protevi. The primary aim of the training program is clearly to enhance reflexive identification of threats, whether IED or enemy combatant, and to elicit appropriate responses to each. This coincides precisely with Protevi's definition of cyborg simulation training in its emphasis on identifying the 'presence or absence of key traits in the gestalt of the situation' and reacting to this with 'instant decisions [that] are more than reflexes, but operate at the very edge of the conscious awareness of the soldiers and involve complex subpersonal processes of threat perception' (411).

As this suggests, there is also a distinctly reconfigured sense of subjectivity in effect here, which renders individual agency largely redundant in favour of an emergent trans-subjective group identity. Indeed, in contrast to *Full Battle Rattle*, *Watson is Down* seems largely uninterested in individual experience. Farocki's framing is predominantly static, using a medium-shot to depict a row of four uniformed Marines in profile. No

attempt is made to capture individual expressions via reframing or close-ups; indeed, throughout the film, Farocki does not even isolate any of them within the frame. The only exception to this is within a cutaway to the instructor, yet the close-up used here does not focus on his face, but rather on his hand clicking a mouse in sync with the juxtaposed menu of IED injects. To employ such an image as the sole close-up in the film suggests an ironic subversion of cinematic grammar, whereby a space customarily dominated by the affective has here been supplanted by an image of clinical functionality. In doing so, Farocki perhaps implies that this context has reduced the individual to little more than a series of trained reflexes.

Rather than individual experience, then, Farocki seems to be interested in the networked group itself and its functioning as what Protevi terms a ‘cybernetic organism’ with ‘distributed decisions [...] operating at the thresholds of the individual subjectivities of the soldiers’ (412). In its most basic form, this is conveyed by the perpetual presence on the soundtrack of communications between different units and the (off-screen) air support, and by the occasional cut to a dynamic, real-time map of the operation. The single instance of camera movement within the film is also directly motivated by this focus on teamwork: as a second vehicle enters the frame of *Virtual Battlespace 2*, Farocki pans to an adjacent desk to depict its operators. Though their actual proximity renders their radios largely redundant since they are clearly able to converse without them, it is notable that throughout these dialogues each Marine remains wholly absorbed in the screen before them, rarely if ever looking at each other. Ultimately, then, this networked identity is not so much an objectively identifiable element of either frame, so much as it is a process occurring in the interstices of the two juxtaposed frames. In other words, Farocki’s split-screen juxtaposition of the real and virtual can also be read as evoking precisely the ‘cyborg’ trans-subjective identity which transforms the distributed reflexes of the live-action screen into a coherent, unified operation within the realm of *Virtual Battlespace 2*.

In contrast to *Watson is Down, Three Dead* (2010) experiments with an alternative formal means of juxtaposing CG and live action. The split widescreen (2.35:1) format is here replaced with a single 4:3 frame, but the film is noteworthy primarily for two key cuts – from CG to live-action, then vice-versa. The film opens in a CG environment with a dramatic elevated tracking shot taken from the outskirts of a desert town as a group of helicopters swarm toward it, in a sequence that seems to resemble an introductory video game cutscene. Following this brief, virtual contextualisation, Farocki abruptly cuts to the live-action section of the film. Initially

rendered through static, elevated long-shots, these languorous scenes depict crowds milling outside a mosque kitchen and cheerily attempting to engage the dispersed military figures in casual conversation, yet hindered by the language barrier. At this point, Farocki briefly engages a more intimate aesthetic, bringing the camera down to human eye level for a series of two shots. This tranquillity is quite suddenly interrupted by the attack of two gunmen, who are subsequently detained by the soldiers. The violence is rendered rather mundanely, with no accompanying score and the camera position remaining fixed in a medium-long shot throughout the attack. Gradually, it becomes evident that this entire sequence is part of a live-action simulation exercise not dissimilar to that portrayed in *Full Battle Rattle*, in this case taking place in the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Centre at Twentynine Palms, California. Though this delayed revelation of the ostensibly ‘real’ as performed/simulated is similar in effect to the opening sequence of *Full Battle Rattle*, it is not quite as jarring given the forewarning of *Three Dead*’s virtualised introductory sequence. Nonetheless, there is a comparable sense of metafictional commentary on the inability of the film’s spectator to distinguish between the real, performed or simulated.

This is compounded by the final cut back to the CG simulation, as Farocki employs a sweeping, melodramatic tracking shot past troops marching in formation through the town, helicopter landings and perfectly aligned vehicle convoys, all accompanied by a rousing dramatic score. It is also notable that the bland, uniformly cream coloured exteriors of the town are here transformed by vivid and omnipresent billboards advertising Coca-Cola and Pepsi, as if the town has undergone a sweeping, corporate Americanisation. This overt exaggeration of the apparently cinematic nature of the simulation forms a somewhat odd contrast to the rather sober mechanics of *Watson is Down*. Yet it seems as though Farocki is attempting to gradually escalate the levels of virtualised dramatization throughout the film, demonstrating the performative transformation of the original event through its dramatic re-enactment, as well as its virtualisation through a kind of digitised cinematisation<sup>17</sup>. Through this virtualising process, Farocki also seems to be suggesting that a gradual homogenisation of the complexity of Otherness seems to take place, culminating in a perspective on warfare that explicitly aligns virtualisation with US imperialism.

*Immersion*, the third and longest of the *Serious Games* shorts, diverges slightly from the first two films in that it focusses on the *Virtual Iraq* treatment for Post-

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<sup>17</sup> The employment of cinematic grammar within the CG scenario here perhaps connects Virilio’s ‘cinematisation’ of warfare to the digital virtualisation outlined by Der Derian et al.

Traumatic Stress Disorder rather than a training application. As noted above, this program was however developed from the *Full Spectrum Warrior* software, which bears many similarities to *Virtual Battlespace 2* and as such has a comparable aesthetic despite the differing function. The film, which reverts to the split-screen aesthetic of *Watson is Down*, opens within a CG environment which is at first glance indistinguishable from the urban setting of *Three Dead*. As the camera begins to traverse this scenario, however, it becomes evident that the movement is of a rather different quality. In place of the smooth vehicular motion of *Watson is Down*, or the highly stylised tracking shots of *Three Dead*, the landscape of *Immersion* is navigated in a much more halting manner. The camera, clearly adopting a first-person point-of-view, is positioned at human eye level, moves at walking pace and perpetually adjusts perspective with slight pans and tilts in imitation of embodied vision. No contextualisation is provided for this pre-credit sequence, and the action proceeds in a seemingly uneventful manner (reading an inscription on the wall, passing a fruit stall) until the culminating explosion. The entirety of this sequence takes place in the right-hand panel of the split-screen, with the left remaining blank – perhaps evoking through elision (given the split-screen dynamic established in *Watson is Down*) the off-screen operator. Given the first-person point-of-view and lack of contextualisation, then, this *in medias res* opening can be posited as formally coinciding with the kind of immersive aesthetic encountered at the beginning of *Full Battle Rattle*, albeit in the markedly digitised form of a CG environment.

This is followed by a didactic introduction to the *Virtual Iraq* application, as a technical advisor outlines the various capabilities of the technology, giving a brief demonstration of the customisable scenarios (roadside ambush, military checkpoint, city ambush) and various real-time adjustments that can be made to light, smoke, and the spatial qualities of mortar/bullet sound effects. The individual nature of the user experience is implied by the presence of Head-Mounted Displays (henceforth HMDs), though the exact function of the software (i.e. PTSD treatment) is not made explicit until the following section's excerpts from *Virtual Iraq* treatment.

These three brief, overlapping accounts of a roadside IED explosion and subsequent ambush on a convoy outside Baghdad are visualised in CG form in the left-hand section of the screen, while the right depicts the soldier/patient, equipped with HMD, in a medium shot. For the first two accounts, Farocki alternates between depictions of soldiers describing the scene and the CG representation. For the third, more extensive account, he uses both sides of the screen simultaneously, with the CG

visualisation synced to the soldier's description. This is evident from both the simultaneity of movement (as the soldier turns his head, the *Virtual Iraq* POV pans at exactly same time), and from the real-time updating of the CG image based on the soldier's description. Following the IED explosion, for instance, he recalls that 'the sun was blacked out at that point, smoke everywhere' – a detail which is instantly incorporated into the *Virtual Iraq* visualisation.

It is also worth noting that the three monologues in this section of the film are not solely concerned with visual detail, but also encompass a raw sense of emotional response. These range from rage at seeing a fellow soldier wounded by shrapnel ('so mad that I just wanted to shoot somebody') to the fearful intuition that 'it had been a long day and there hadn't been any trouble and that had me worried... I remember just feeling like something bad might happen... it was right then that we got hit by an IED on the right'. Since this section of the film keeps the *Virtual Iraq* instructor(s) largely off-screen and mute, it is unclear at this point whether these kinds of responses are encouraged. Nonetheless, it is clear that these verbal descriptions of traumatic experience do contain an element of affective response in excess of what is strictly captured by the recreation in *Virtual Iraq*. Indeed, Farocki's split-screen aesthetic seems to heighten this contrast; despite the ostensibly more immersive style of the first-person POV in *Virtual Iraq*, it is actually the embodied performances of the soldiers filmed in mundane yet direct medium shots that carry the film's 'affective and emotional charge' – which is precisely the target of this treatment in Väliaho's account (70).

Following these three short excerpts is a longer, sustained session of *Virtual Iraq* PTSD treatment which occupies more than half of *Immersion*'s twenty minute running time. Formally, it is similar to the previous segment of the film, with a medium shot of the soldier on the right hand screen accompanied by a CG visualisation on the left. Thus the viewer is once again offered both an embodied first-person perspective within the CG environment, and a third-person perspective on the HMD-wearing soldier. Prompted by the off-screen instructor, the soldier (referred to as 'Kevin') describes the traumatic witnessing of his partner's ('Jones') death in an explosion during the course of a routine patrol of an unnamed city in Iraq. Once Kevin has recounted this memory in exhaustive detail, Farocki jarringly disrupts the audience's suspension of disbelief as the instructor announces 'cut', the applause of the heretofore unnoticed audience breaks out and the soldier removes his headset, casually joking that 'some of the nausea was real'. In a similar manner to *Three Dead*, or indeed *Full Battle Rattle*, Farocki once again reveals the ostensibly real to be a performative construct, thus cautioning the audience

against the passive, accepting consumption of such war narratives. Yet perhaps more interesting than this repeated metafictional revelation is the contrast drawn between the two screens as interrelated but somewhat divergent representations of the traumatic event, and the ways that this sequence may be read in light of Pasi Väliäho's theorisation of *Virtual Iraq* in "Affectivity, Biopolitics and the Virtual Reality of War".

The *Virtual Iraq* interface in this instance is notably lacking in some of the finer visual details of Kevin's monologue, such as the presence of 'posters and propaganda [...] everywhere'. As a demonstration of the technology's capabilities, it also appears somewhat flawed, repeatedly pulling the first-person perspective up towards a skyward gaze (contrary to Kevin's actual bodily movements) and requiring resetting by the instructor. Finally, as Kevin reaches the point in his narrative at which he finds Jones' corpse, Farocki fades the left screen to black. This perhaps raises the question of why Farocki chooses to use the *Virtual Iraq* representation here at all, since it initially appears to contribute little more than a generic visualisation of the setting.

As in the preceding excerpts of *Virtual Iraq* treatment, much of the affective power of the sequence is drawn from the intensely embodied performance of the soldier. As Kevin's reported SUDS (later glossed as Subjective Units of Disturbance Scale, rated between 0 and 100) ratings increase, this is notably accompanied by heavier breathing and stuttering. Furthermore, his description of finding Jones and 'freaking out' in fear is accompanied by a physical re-enactment of his defensive crouch as he 'curls up into a ball' and covers his head with his hands. This certainly suggests an embodied recurrence of the affect associated with the traumatic event, which again coincides neatly with Väliäho's definition of *Virtual Iraq* as designed to evoke 'affective and emotional charges' or 'bodily memory' (70).

As this recurrence of affect peaks, it is important to note how the spatio-temporal co-ordinates of the soldier's monologue begin to collapse. For instance, in noting 'I actually go to this one area...which is a little hard to get to right now', the temporal distinction between the original event and the relived experience seems to disappear. A similar spatial collapse is also evident as, in response to the instructor's question of 'how long are you there before you see someone?', he replies: 'do I have to be here that long?'. This effect seems to be specifically induced by some of the instructor's prompts, particularly the recurrent directive to 'stay with it, tell me what's happening now'. It may require something of a neurological leap to definitively posit this as corroborating Väliäho's argument regarding the pre-subjective nature of such



affect programs; at the very least though, it is clearly disruptive of a stable, coherent position of subjectivity.

Given this radical coinciding of the original traumatic event and the experience of using *Virtual Iraq*, it thus seems inaccurate to speak of the soldier/patient *reliving* the experience. The merest hint of a distinct present perspective – conveyed by Kevin’s assertion that ‘now I know it was a big deal’ to split up from Jones – quickly falls away in favour of an affective experience that is apparently (for the *Virtual Iraq* user) indistinguishable from the initial occurrence. As such, the production of spatio-temporal experience in *Virtual Iraq* does seem to conform to the ‘body-brain achievement’ of simulating space via VR enunciated in Mark Hansen’s *New Philosophy for New Media*, and to Väliaho’s description of the manner by which *Virtual Iraq* ‘abolishes distinctions between internal and external worlds [...] becom[ing] simulations of the brain’s internal activity’ (169; 77).

In this section of *Immersion*, Farocki’s multi-screen aesthetic achieves its richest expression of the complexity of simulated experience by depicting the operation of *Virtual Iraq* as an endogenous medium. Clearly, what the viewer sees in the left screen does not exactly coincide with what the patient/soldier sees in it. Yet one can only understand this difference by watching the soldier, in the right screen, as he experiences the *Virtual Iraq* scenario. It is only through his affective, embodied performance and the collapsed spatio-temporal co-ordinates of his monologue that the viewer can begin to comprehend the difference between the soldier’s experience of *Virtual Iraq* and one’s own viewing. While it may appear to the viewer as technically flawed and lacking in precise visual detail, it nonetheless seems to be sufficiently ‘evocative’ (to use Väliaho’s term) to induce this intense affective recurrence for the user. Thus, one can infer that the combination of the original traumatic experience, the immersive mode of navigation enabled by the HMD interface and first-person perspective, and perhaps also a forcefully conditioned subjective association of the CG environment (as used in the *Virtual Battlespace 2* training application) with actual combat, all contribute to producing this alternative, endogenous mode of interacting with (rather than merely viewing) *Virtual Iraq*.

However, while *Immersion* certainly demonstrates the affective recurrence which Väliaho defines as the prerequisite for therapeutic modulation, the degree of therapeutic value attributed to this process in the film remains somewhat more questionable. During Kevin’s apparent breakdown, he despairs, ‘I don’t want to do this anymore... Do people get worse doing this?’; and when asked to repeat the entire

narrative, he removes the HMD and incredulously exclaims, ‘Back to the beginning?!... I can’t do this again’. If this may be partially disregarded as a demonstration of the kind of resistance typical of the therapeutic process, it is nonetheless reinforced by Farocki’s open-ended, circular structure. This extends beyond the diegetic bounds of the therapy session – which in itself ends at the beginning, with Kevin re-initiating the traumatic narrative – to the repetition of *Immersion*’s opening sequence which closes the film. Contrary to many of the Iraq War films dealing with PTSD, then, the therapeutic closure achieved here remains indeterminate. Where, for instance, *In the Valley of Elah* and *Redacted* ultimately attain a sense of closure through the exposure of a repressed, traumatic truth and an (at least partial) assertion of familial reabsorption, *Immersion* refuses any such closure. Instead, the intensity of affective recurrence and collapse of the distinction between the original event and its evocation through *Virtual Iraq* seem to overwhelm therapeutic modulation, while the immersively individualistic nature of the HMD mediated environment further seems to preclude any sense of social assimilation.

In *A Sun Without Shadow* (2010), the final film of *Serious Games*, Farocki repurposes footage from the previous three films to (somewhat more didactically, via intertitles) compare the imagery used for training with that used for PTSD treatment, and draws conclusions which seem to diverge somewhat from this endogenous reading of *Immersion*. Farocki observes that ‘the follow-up images resemble those that prepare for war’ with one salient exception: ‘the follow-up images have no shadows’. He uses this detail to assert that ‘the system for remembering is a little cheaper than the one used for training’, implying the privileging of preparation over remembrance, and the relative importance of combat preparation over the mental health of veterans. While this is not strictly incommensurate with an endogenous understanding of *Virtual Iraq*, it does seem to overlook the point that ‘remembering’ via precise visual representation is not the purpose of PTSD treatment in this case. Rather, as *Immersion* has demonstrated, the lack of explicitly customised detail is no hindrance to its evocative purpose since what the patient/soldier sees via an immersive engagement with this environment is apparently not identical to what the viewer sees in Farocki’s representation of it.

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This chapter set out to explore the ways in which military simulations are reshaping contemporary warfare, and has certainly found enough evidence of this to refute Gray’s claim that simulations do not fundamentally affect ‘war like war has been

for thousands of years' (48). The other theoretical frameworks used to explore and conceptualise transformations in military strategy and subjectivity have proved more insightful. However, even Protevi and Der Derian's arguments posit somewhat generalised effects of simulations, as a singular concept, which do not comprehensively account for the sheer diversity in the specific types of simulations encountered via the readings of *Full Battle Rattle* and *Serious Games*. Protevi ascribes an innately desensitising effect to CG environments, while Der Derian similarly contends that the reality of war is increasingly eroded by the virtualising influence of 'video war games' (10). At the most basic level, these claims are difficult to adjudicate in relation to the predominantly live-action simulation depicted in *Full Battle Rattle*. Even within the more overtly digitised realm of *Serious Games*, I think they need further qualification. For instance, this position may have some validity in relation to the type of simulation depicted in *Watson is Down*, in which the generic CG insurgents coincide with Der Derian's questioning of the ethics of rendering the enemy as an 'iconic symbol, a "target-of-opportunity" on a computer screen' rather than 'flesh and blood' (9). Yet in *Immersion*, the CG simulation of traumatic experience is anything but derealising/desensitising, instead evoking a radically endogenous reality-effect. The 'virtuality' here thus corresponds less to Der Derian's sense of ethical distancing, and perhaps more closely approximates Mark Hansen's definition of the virtual as an embodied 'capacity [...] to be in excess of one's actual state' (*New Philosophy for New Media* 51). As such, I am reluctant to make this kind of broad classification of simulations (even CG simulations specifically) as inherently derealising. This is, in part, because such positions may tend toward a form of technological determinism that quashes significant contextual differences, but also because simulations do not really seem to constitute a uniform medium or technology. In comparison to drones, which the previous chapter was able to address as a singular object, the technological elements comprising simulations here are actually much more diverse, ranging from digital weaponry which supplements live-action simulations to the networked gaming interface of *Virtual Battlespace 2* and the HMD-navigated Virtual Reality of *Virtual Iraq*. For the purposes of this concluding discussion, then, I think it is beneficial to approach each type of simulation in turn, beginning with the live-action modes of *Full Battle Rattle* and *Three Dead* before moving on to the gaming network of *Watson is Down* and the VR of *Immersion*.

The live-action simulations in *Full Battle Rattle* and *Three Dead* are the most difficult to relate back to the thesis' overarching framework, simply because of the

decentred role of digital technology in both of these scenarios. Although this chapter parallels the preceding study of drones in many ways, the schema used in the previous chapter's concluding discussion, whereby I examined the cinematic remediation of digital technology in terms of immediacy/hypermediacy as well as embodiment, is not quite applicable as such to these two films. Indeed, the very notion of remediation may appear somewhat suspect here given that the semi-scripted, live-action role play has little to distinguish it from the pro-filmic field of cinema. Nonetheless, the study of these two films does contribute to the broader debate around the politics of immersion.

One interesting point of comparison that can be made with drones here is that these pseudo-cinematic recreations of Iraq and Afghanistan in the California desert<sup>18</sup> do evince some similarities with the parallels drawn in *Good Kill* and *Five Thousand Feet is the Best* between the desert landscapes of war zones and those of the Las Vegas area. The drone films used this geographic mirroring to reinforce the sense that remote warfare enacts a collapse in distinctions between military and civilian space. The same effect might in theory be ascribed to *Full Battle Rattle* and *Three Dead*, with their cinematic staging serving to obscure the fact that they are US-based simulations rather than representations of actual conflict (which is especially notable in the opening sequence of *Full Battle Rattle*) and thus creating a comparable sense of geographic indistinction. However, where drone mediation serves to splice two distinct but real spaces through prosthetically-enhanced action at a distance, any effects that these simulations have on actual combat space is much more indirect and can only be posited in terms of their somewhat more dilute influence on wider military policy and subjectivity. Rather than connecting disparate spaces, then, these simulations instead function to 'cinematically' replicate combat space, detaching it from its context and rendering it as a kind of weightless self-contained fantasy space. Recalling the previous chapter's discussion of this theme, one might say that these simulations similarly connote virtual transport to a space that demarcates itself as separate from the world (as per Griffiths' definition of immersion), rather than evoking Hansen's mixed reality paradigm which I used to characterise drone mediation's 'fluid interpenetration of [...] virtual and physical realms' (*Bodies in Code 2*).

These self-contained fantasy spaces are significantly delimited as such by the neutralisation of any substantial opposition or otherness. In *Three Dead*, Farocki

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<sup>18</sup> Specifically, the NTC's recreation of Iraq in California's Mojave desert (depicted in *Full Battle Rattle*); and the simulation of Afghanistan at a Marine base in Twentynine Palms, California (depicted in *Three Dead*).

explicitly aligns this with a mode of cultural imperialism through the rampant commercialisation of the simulated space, with Coca-Cola and Pepsi advertising boards appearing in the wake of the successful US military exercise. A comparable politics permeates the simulation in *Full Battle Rattle*, even if it is not foregrounded quite so overtly. As noted in my analysis, the NTC simulation attempts to model political interactions (as a test of cultural sensitivity training) as well as military engagement. Within this scenario, Medina Wasl 'starts off neutral', and the actions of the trainees determine the responses of both civilians and opposition fighters. Although this punishment/reward schema may have a certain functional efficacy, it does however serve to posit Iraq as little more than a blank slate prior to the arrival of the US troops. Despite the abject failure of the trainees in this regard, the simulation seems to assume that even the indiscriminate killing of civilians can be placated by bereavement pay and promises to develop the town's infrastructure, thus universalising the distinctly capitalist assumptions which underpin the political modelling of this simulation. In place of any oppositional ideology, the simulation contains only 'insurgents' portrayed by US soldiers who ultimately conform to the Battalion Commander's dismissal of them as disruptive 'thugs'. They do not embody or attempt to disseminate any alternative political stance, but appear solely as a strategic form of opposition.

Although the simulations depicted in *Full Battle Rattle* and *Three Dead* thus appear as immersive, self-contained fantasy worlds, the films' formal structures preclude any correlative spectatorial immersion. The bookending of *Three Dead*'s live-action simulation with CG scenarios akin to video game cutscenes lends the film a degree of hypermediacy which, coupled with the static framing and off-screen positioning of violence, significantly distances the film from the experiential mode's evocation of an immersively embodied presence. This near-Brechtian alienation effect would seem to render the viewer somewhat less complicit, relative to the experiential war film, in the diegetic military actions, with the emphasis placed upon a critical examination of the function of the simulation rather than the subjective experience of taking part in it. The form of *Full Battle Rattle* similarly inhibits spectatorial immersion. Although the opening sequence, with its iconographic evocation of Iraq, suggests a deeply subjective perspective on the NTC by blurring the boundaries of the real and simulated, the majority of the film comprises a more conservative documentary format which combines a few action set-pieces with a range of interviews taking place outside of the 'diegesis' of the simulation (i.e. with the subjects generally not in character). The film thus steers a rather unsatisfactory middle ground between an immersively

subjective portrait of the simulation – which, while open to charges of complicity, might have provided a more substantial insight into the simulation’s potential reconfiguration of subjectivity – and analysis of the inter-subjective network of the simulation as such. Arguably, Gerber and Moss do attempt to explore the latter through the multiplicity of interviewees, ranging from Iraqi refugees to the simulation ‘architects’, though I would contend that this structure is multi-subjective rather than truly inter-subjective, since the concluding emphasis is ultimately placed upon a series of individual narrative arcs rather than what Protevi might term the trans-subjective ‘new cognitive group subject’ (411).

A more substantial expression of simulations’ capacity to reconfigure subjective experience can be found in *Watson is Down*. Farocki’s depiction of a tank crew’s networked training within the CG environment of *Virtual Battlespace 2* coincides strikingly with Protevi’s account of how the ‘extended/distributed cognition’ of such applications transform individual agency into a ‘cybernetic organism, the fighting group’ (411; 412). In formal terms, this is adroitly conveyed by the framing which conveys this turn away from individual experience through a refusal to isolate any one subject, instead maintaining a medium shot of the four Marines grouped together throughout, diverging from this only for a close-up of the instructor’s hand (rather than, as one might expect, of an individual facial expression). This evocation of the trans-subjective unit evinces some similarities with the networked drone assemblage as outlined in the previous chapter. In particular, it distinctly recalls the opening sequence of *Good Kill*, in which Nichols similarly uses close-ups of an eye, a hand and a foot to suggest a fracturing of individual subjectivity and a turn toward the trans-subjective human-technological assemblage. The perpetual use of radio communications in *Watson is Down*, even when the Marines are physically close enough to converse without them, combined with their absolute fixation on the screens, simultaneously evokes the highly immersive effect of the simulation. This also parallels the shallow-focus elision of the cabin space within the same sequence of *Good Kill*, and as such both can be read as rendering an experience of immersive immediacy via the subjective logic of hypermediacy.

These similarities between the cyborg group subject of simulation training and the networked drone kill-chain appear to be indicative of a wider trend in the military deployment of digital technologies, whereby individual agency is increasingly displaced in favour of a trans-subjective unit. Of course, this distribution of agency is not specifically inaugurated by digital technology, as Protevi also links it to ‘team-building

applications' including 'rhythmic chanting' which pre-date these more technical instantiations of the military unit (412). Yet the causes cited for the creation of a digitised form of this network in the works of Protevi and Derek Gregory do suggest a certain continuity. Protevi fundamentally posits this activation of a 'de-subjectified state' as a means of overcoming a 'deep-seated inhibition against one-on-one, face-to-face, cold-blooded killing on the part of some 98% of soldiers', while Gregory argues that, historically, the 'production and articulation of what is now called the kill-chain typically works to render bombing an abstract, purely technical exercise for those who execute it' (406; "Lines of Descent" 42). In the case of the drone kill-chain, this sense of abstraction is not to be read simply as a kind of technological virtualisation or distanciation, since Gregory also emphasises that the intimacy of drone optics simultaneously effects a 'time-space compression [...] [which] has brought all those in the network much closer to the killing space' ("From a View to a Kill" 196). I would suggest that it does, however, connote an abstraction of individual responsibility which may well serve the same function of bypassing the inhibitions of individual agency. This would certainly coincide with the procedural context of administering drone strikes, as highlighted by Medea Benjamin's *Drone Warfare* and by *Good Kill's* depiction of CIA drone missions, particularly the shift from individual targeting to semi-automated 'signature strikes' based on increasingly algorithmically-determined patterns of behaviour.

Protevi contends that individual agency is also overcome by the conditioning of 'non-subjective reflex[es]' which 'operate at the very edge of the conscious awareness of the soldiers and involve complex subpersonal processes of threat perception' (408; 411). Farocki's depiction of the instructor injecting IEDs and generic insurgent figures within the simulated tank-training landscape can certainly be read as an example of this, with the drop-down menu of objects constituting a predefined catalogue of 'key traits in the gestalt of the situation' which the Marines must immediately, and possibly subconsciously, recognise (411). Somewhat more contentiously, Protevi also claims that situating such training within a CG environment 'increase[s] the desensitisation effect' (411). While this does coincide with Der Derian's argument that representing the enemy as an 'iconic symbol, a "target-of-opportunity" on a computer screen' rather than 'flesh and blood' marks an increasing virtualisation of conflict, I have some reservations about this hypothesis (9). It must necessarily remain somewhat speculative, at least within the bounds of this chapter's reading of *Watson is Down*, since there is no explicit comparison made here between killing within a CG environment and killing a 'flesh and

blood' target. As noted above, the characterisation of this kind of CG environment as innately desensitising also seems to contradict the starkly reality-conferring effect that it may have in comparable scenarios, not least the treatment of PTSD via *Virtual Iraq* as depicted in *Immersion*.

Although the CG environment of *Virtual Iraq* is derived from the *Full Spectrum Warrior* training application and video game, and evinces a strong degree of aesthetic continuity with the realm of *Virtual Battlespace 2*, it is significantly differentiated in terms of the subjective mode of navigation. In place of the trans-subjectively networked mode of operation exemplified by the tank crew in *Watson is Down*, there is a clear shift to a much more individualised interface in *Immersion*. The first-person point-of-view offered by *Virtual Iraq* is distinctly grounded in an embodied perspective that adjusts itself in relation to the HMD mediated movements of the user/patient, and as such can be more accurately characterised as VR. While both *Virtual Battlespace 2* and *Virtual Iraq* take place within similar CG environments then, this tweak in the interface does have significant repercussions for the specific type of subjective experience delimited by the simulation.

Farocki mediates this with a split-screen aesthetic which simultaneously depicts the user and his first-person perspective embedded within *Virtual Iraq*. This formal structure would initially suggest that what we see in *Virtual Iraq* precisely mirrors the HMD mediated image presented to the user. However, as the diegetic treatment (of Kevin, in the main section of the film) progresses, it becomes increasingly evident that this is not quite the case. The *Virtual Iraq* scenario does not represent the traumatic incident recounted with any conventional degree of verisimilitude so much as it appears to evoke the memory and corresponding affect along the lines of Väliaho's theorisation of VR as 'completely abolish[ing] distinctions between internal and external worlds [...] becom[ing] simulations of the brain's internal activity' (77). If this endogenous image is detectable at all within *Immersion*, it is not to be found in the *Virtual Iraq* screen in any traditionally representative sense of the image, but rather can be posited as produced or evoked in the interstices between the two juxtaposed screens. The 'affective and emotional charges' of 'bodily memory' (which *Virtual Iraq* targets in Väliaho's account) are visible in the shot of the patient, with his deeply affective and embodied re-experiencing of the death of his partner expressed by body language (most notably a defensive crouch and heavy breathing) and stuttering, and further intensified by the collapsed spatio-temporal co-ordinates of his monologue which ultimately lose their grounding in recollection to become wholly absorbed in the 'presence' of the scene



evoked (70). It is precisely through this depiction of embodied affect that the viewer realises that what the patient sees in the *Virtual Iraq* scenario differs from what we see in its remediation both qualitatively and perhaps, given that it ‘fold[s] perception back into the subject’s endogenous apparitions’, quantitatively (66).

The apparent reality-conferring effect of this endogenously produced image seems to necessitate some revision of the notion of virtuality in relation to CG environments. Contrary to Protevi and Der Derian’s views, which align the virtual with a presumed distancing or desensitising effect of digital technologies, Hansen’s enunciation of virtuality as a ‘quality of human [...] life’ rather than a ‘synonym of the digital’ corresponds more closely to the particular form of virtuality produced by the coupling of the PTSD-afflicted soldier with the *Virtual Iraq* interface (*New Philosophy for New Media* 50). More specifically, Hansen characterises the virtual as a technologically-enhanced yet embodied ‘capacity [...] to be in excess of one’s actual state’, which serves as an apt description of *Immersion*’s subject, with the endogenous re-experiencing of the traumatic memory transporting him to another time and space in a virtual and fundamentally embodied manner (51). Somewhat more speculatively, one might also note the correspondence between Väliaho’s account of the pre-subjective nature of these ‘bodily memories’, which he denotes as “‘affect programs”, that is, preprogrammed and automatic behavioural modules’ rather than ‘biographical memoires’, and Hansen’s claim that this type of virtual experience opens onto the affective ‘domain of the preindividual’ (70; 73; 267). Although this postulation of the pre-subjective nature of the VR experience is grounded in a neuroscientific framework which it is somewhat beyond the scope of this thesis to empirically interrogate, it does intersect intriguingly with the emergent military tendency to use digital mediation as a means of bypassing (conscious) individual agency or responsibility.

The notion of *Virtual Iraq* as producing an endogenous experience which differs radically from the paradigm of representational verisimilitude can also be further explored in relation to Hansen’s theorisation of the VR image. In *New Philosophy for New Media*, Hansen presents a critique of Lev Manovich’s dualistic conceptualisation of the image as either representational (as in cinematic indexicality) or simulated (ascribed to animation and CG). He argues that this overlooks a third and ‘entirely different regime of visual experience’ exemplified by Jonathan Crary’s account of pre-cinematic devices in *Techniques of the Observer*, in which ‘putting the body to work (even in quite minimal ways) has the effect of conferring reality on an experience, of catalysing the creation of a singular affective experience, that is, one that is qualitatively

different from (but can be deployed to *supplement*) the “verisimilitude” or “illusion” of the cinematic image’ (39). This alternate regime harnesses some degree of manual action in order to generate an affective production of the image within the body itself, which he loosely equates with ‘hallucination’:

As a kind of test case for Manovich’s concept of simulation, the example of telepresence underscores the limitation of his general distinction between representation and simulation and suggests the necessity of triangulating this binary with a third term, namely, hallucination (by which I mean, following recent research in perception, the fact that the embodied mind actually *creates* what it sees). For, in addition to the actual action facilitated through a telepresence interface (say, virtual surgery), there necessarily takes place, within the body of the participant, an embodied experience: a bodily processing of the action that has the effect of “making it real” for the participant. Indeed, it is precisely this “hallucinatory” dimension, applied to virtual reality more generally, that explains the capacity for the VR interface to couple our bodies with (almost) any arbitrary space [emphasis in original] (41)

While Hansen’s work may therefore suggest fascinating new possibilities in the realm of VR imaging which diverge radically from cinema’s representational paradigm, the specific use of the VR interface in this instance does however have the rather more narrowly circumscribed function of modulating the pre-subjective affect located at the neurological root of such experiences in order to overcome the condition of PTSD.

Väliaho’s reading of this VR mediated form of biopolitical regulation intersects significantly with critiques of the cinematic trope of PTSD encountered thus far in the thesis. Firstly, the depoliticising function of PTSD as articulated by Barker (among others) finds an echo here in *Virtual Iraq*’s modulation of ‘politically subversive “guilt”’ into ‘de-politicised “acceptance”’ (69). As in Westwell and Stahl’s critiques, this depoliticising effect is once again achieved by internalising the experience of warfare. Väliaho, however, extends the scope of this claim even further, such that it is not only media representations which serve to internalise conflict by containing it within a diegetic construct of individual conscience, but rather the actual military-technological apparatus itself which resituates the ‘reality of the liberal war the soldiers wage’ from ‘the brain’s orientation toward and interpretation of the external world’ to ‘the media technological regulation of basic affect programs and the endogenous imagery they produce’ (76).

The depiction of PTSD in *Immersion* can justly be considered, then, as the most extreme instantiation of these depoliticising and internalising tendencies. However, considering the form of the film itself, one should note that Farocki seems to present an implicit critique or undermining of the therapeutic value of *Virtual Iraq*. This may be partially ascribed to the hypermediated presentation, with the split-screen aesthetic and the viewer's relative lack of immersive or endogenous investment (compared to the patient) in the VR realm establishing a sense of distance which to some degree precludes spectatorial co-option in this depoliticised and internalised vision of war. Primarily, though, it is the open-ended structure of the film which disrupts any sense of therapeutic closure and instead evokes the endlessness of this process. *Immersion* ends with Kevin reinitiating the traumatic narrative (perhaps suggesting that the process itself is recursive), despite protesting that the treatment may be aggravating rather than appeasing his condition. This creates a diegetic temporal circularity which is mirrored by the exhibition context, as (according to Farocki's website<sup>19</sup>) gallery installations of *Immersion* were in fact also projected on a loop. Structurally, then, there is a distinct parallel between the recursive loop of PTSD as activated by the VR interface here and the circularity of the drone operator's traumatically disturbed sense of presence/identity in Omer Fast's *Five Thousand Feet is the Best*. Further comparisons with drone mediated PTSD are somewhat complicated, however, by the fact that *5,000ft* (in accord with the studies of Gregory, Holmqvist and Williams) aligns PTSD with the hyper-vision and fractured presence effected by drones, while the *Virtual Iraq* simulation attempts to treat the pre-existing condition. Nonetheless, Farocki's formal evocation of a comparable circularity may suggest a certain scepticism regarding the therapeutic closure attained by this process, evoking an endless re-circulation of traumatic affect as the inescapable 'reality' of contemporary hypermediated warfare.

Having addressed the mediating roles of the body, drones and simulations, the following chapter will turn to the broader role of digital media in the contemporary war film. Rather than specifically military technologies per se, I will examine the role of various digital formats such as video diaries in *Redacted*, *Battle for Haditha*, *Stop-Loss* and *In the Valley of Elah*. The chapter will also enact a slight shift in focus to more explicitly address the spectatorial modes of subjectivity delineated by these remediated digital elements, as a complement to and extension of the predominant emphasis placed upon diegetic military subjectivities thus far in the thesis.

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<sup>19</sup> See <http://www.harunfarocki.de/installations/2000s/2009/serious-games-iii-immersion.html>

## 5. Hypermediated Spectatorship

In chapter two, I argued that the embodied aesthetic of *The Hurt Locker* represents the epitome of a particular trend in war cinema that privileges first-person ‘experiential’ accounts of war. Drawing on Roger Stahl’s concept of the ‘virtual-citizen-soldier’, which posits a direct link between medial constructions of distinctly embodied experience and an assumed injunction to virtually or imaginatively occupy the soldierly body, it was suggested that these films (also including *Restrepo*) tend to achieve a rather limited understanding of war by restricting the narrative perspective to that of an embodied military point-of-view and thus typically eliding any engagement with the wider political or technological context. Across the subsequent chapters, I have demonstrated how emergent digital military technologies have begun to transfigure notions of embodied subjectivity through, for instance, the virtual presence of the drone operator and the networked subjectivities conditioned by simulations. This final chapter, through close readings of *Battle for Haditha*, *Redacted*, *Stop-Loss* and *In the Valley of Elah*, will focus on films which deny the viewer the kind of embodied first-person perspective on war that is promulgated by *The Hurt Locker* and instead flood the diegesis with cinematic remediations of digital media, including, but not limited to, the interfaces of television news, video diaries and their concomitant online platforms, and surveillance footage. The chapter is broadly split into two sections, the first of which explores how the remediated digital elements of *Battle for Haditha* and *Redacted* are combined with experimental docu-fiction structures in an attempt to authenticise their representations and perhaps instigate a reconfigured, digitally ‘connected’ relationship to the reality of the Iraq War, while simultaneously dissecting this mediatisation of contemporary warfare and exploring its consequences throughout the new media ecology. The second section examines the use of military video diaries in *Stop-Loss* and *Elah*, focussing particularly on the ways in which they are used as synecdoche for the experience of war, and on their framing of spectatorship as it relates to both military and civilian perspectives on the diaries’ mediation.

The heavily remediated aesthetics of these films would seem to challenge the post-Vietnam hegemony of the embodied/experiential mode, proposing an understanding of war that is rooted less in the cinematic emulation of first-person witnessing than it is in a hybridised sense of the diverse medial frames through which contemporary warfare is viewed. Clearly, this aesthetic shift represents an attempt to revise or update the conventions of the genre in line with contemporary media-

technological developments, and thus falls very much under the purview of this thesis' primary research questions. Broadly, then, this chapter aims to examine the ways in which the war film is altered by being brought so directly into contact with the competing frames of the wider new media ecology. The previous chapters' thread of subjective experience will not, however, be neglected here since this study will largely be oriented around an analysis of the mode of spectatorship implied (or, to use Crary's terminology, the 'observer' that is 'constructed') by the incorporation of digital media interfaces in these films.

Whether directly citing from archives of television news footage or attempting to simulate a video diary, it has become a critical commonplace to designate such cinematic remediation as an authenticising tactic. Stacey Peebles' essay for the recently published volume *The Philosophy of War Films*, for instance, explicitly aligns this propensity with the lineage of vérité, arguing that the use of a diverse range of 'lenses' or 'digital vérité elements' can lend some degree of 'immediacy' which makes 'the experience [...] more powerful for the audience' (134-135). Such realist readings of remediation would imply, therefore, that the role of first-person embodied witnessing has ceded some degree of authenticising power to the sense of connectivity engendered by the digital media platforms that now permeate these films as well as media coverage of the war itself. This chapter will address the degree to which this supposition is manifested in the films under discussion, as well as pursuing further the links between this hypermediated mode of viewing and the emergent models of subjectivity already discussed in relation to drones and simulations. How, for instance, does the sense of connectivity targeted by this heavily remediated aesthetic compare to the 'cybernetic', networked and trans-subjective identity outlined (in the previous chapter) in relation to Farocki's *Serious Games* and the work of John Protevi?

To clarify, this is not an exercise in reception studies per se. The study does not make use of any empirical audience research; rather, the aim is to extrapolate from the hypermediacy of these films' formal construction to assess the mode of audience reception implied thereby in a manner similar to that employed in Jonathan Crary's *Techniques of the Observer* and *Suspensions of Perception*. Rather than borrowing Crary's somewhat transcendent view of digital media as 'relocating vision to a plane severed from a human observer', however, I aim to study the complex and inseparably hybrid relationship between cinema and the digital as it is manifested in the films under discussion in a manner similar to Crary's assessment of the differing modes of

perceptual experience and subjective attention conditioned by the possibilities of pre-cinematic visual technologies (*Techniques of the Observer* 1).

Navigating the relationship between diegetic constructs of subjectivity and that of audience reception is obviously a somewhat delicate procedure, and requires the use of a further theoretical model since Stahl's 'virtual-citizen-soldier', while useful as a delineation of certain embodied/experiential genre tendencies, loses some degree of applicability with reference to this chapter's cinematic corpus given their relatively greater emphasis on a dispersed ensemble of characters (and the various medial frames through which their experience is filtered) rather than the embodied point-of-view of any single protagonist. Given the apparent shift in these films from an individualistic mode of projecting oneself into the soldier's embodied experience to a hypermediated depiction of warfare that may entail a more complex a form of spectatorial subjectivity than the kind of identification suggested by Stahl, this chapter's analysis will draw extensively on Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin's *Remediation: Understanding New Media*.

As has been the case throughout the thesis, this chapter will be concerned with cinematic remediations of digital forms. Previously, however, the focus on digital technologies of a specifically military provenance (such as drones) enabled a sharper degree of differentiation between the remediated content and the remediating medium than may be the case with some of the digital forms discussed in this chapter. This is not to imply that drones, or even simulations, do not evince some degree of convergence with cinema (indeed, I have addressed precisely this theme elsewhere in the thesis<sup>20</sup>), simply that this medial distinction is perhaps less defined with military video diaries.

Deborah Scranton's *The War Tapes*, for instance, is composed entirely of video diaries shot by three National Guard soldiers during their deployment in Iraq, and thus may render the very notion of remediation somewhat debatable. Nonetheless, I will argue that distinctions can still be drawn primarily in terms of distribution and exhibition – with video diaries typically uploaded to and accessed via YouTube or other online platforms – and in terms of spectatorship, given that the diaries tend to address a diverse yet connected network of family, friends and fellow soldiers. This latter aspect will be key to the following discussions of how video diaries are remediated in *Stop-Loss* and *In the Valley of Elah*, since the chapter's overarching emphasis on digital

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<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, the discussion of Virilio's *War and Cinema* and commercial/amateur uses of drones; and the outline of the 'cinematic' simulations in *Full Battle Rattle* and *Immersion II: Three Dead*.

modes of reorienting the subjective experience of spectatorship will in this instance focus on how these films' remediations of the video diary navigate this sense of networked connectivity.

Drawing on Bolter and Grusin's definitions of immediacy and hypermediacy, I will explore the effects of the densely remediated aesthetics of the above mentioned films via the contrasting spatial dynamics of immediacy's 'unified visual space' and the 'heterogeneous' or 'windowed' space of hypermediacy (34). The latter is also implicitly linked to postmodern forms of reflexivity, which will be especially significant in relation to the critical framework for spectatorial ethics invoked later in the chapter. Bolter and Grusin's account of immediacy and hypermediacy as 'complementary rather than contradictory', with hypermediacy manifesting an equivalent 'desire' for the 'real' experience that is provided by 'transparent media' in a more immersive fashion, also dovetails intriguingly with questions of the authenticising role of remediation in the war film (233; 53). As such, the following analyses will consider not only how the films construct a hypermediated aesthetic, but also the ways in which this is used to evoke in the spectator a sense of 'immediacy' or 'authentic' experience.

Finally, the section of *Remediation* entitled "The Remediated Self" will be particularly useful in attempting to synthesise notions of remediation and hypermediacy with my emphasis on the subjective experience of the viewer. Bolter and Grusin's outline of the viewer's experience is encapsulated most concisely in the following citation:

Accordingly, there are two versions of the contemporary mediated self that correspond to the two logics of remediation. When we are faced with media that operate primarily under the logic of transparent immediacy (virtual reality and three-dimensional computer graphics), we see ourselves as a point of view immersed in an apparently seamless visual environment. In a virtual environment, we have the freedom to alter our selves by altering our point of view and to empathise with others by occupying their point of view – techniques pioneered in film and now extended and intensified in digital media. At the same time, the logic of hypermediacy, expressed in digital multimedia and networked environments, suggests a definition of the self whose key quality is not so much "being immersed" as "being interrelated or connected" (232)

The viewing experience under the 'logic of transparent immediacy' described here coincides to a significant degree with the mode of subjectivity ascribed to films such as

*The Hurt Locker* and *Restrepo*, via Stahl's 'virtual-citizen-soldier', in chapter two. The restriction of narrative perspective to an embodied point-of-view in these experiential war films delimits the subjective experience of the audience to an immersive mode of empathetic identification by 'occupying' an embodied 'point of view' – or, to reiterate Stahl's terms, 'demotes the camera/eye from its objective status, implies a subjective body in its place, and invites the viewer into that body' (43). This POV then serves a transparent function as a window onto 'an apparently seamless visual environment', as highlighted by earlier analyses of the rigorously three-dimensional constructions of space in *The Hurt Locker*. Bolter and Grusin further describe transparent immediacy as perpetuating a 'visual construction of empathy' which is typically 'intimate, embodied, emotional' and suggest that this constitutes 'a common narrative strategy, almost the *only* strategy, in the "dramas" on American television and in whole genres of popular film' (246). Though they do not specify *which* genres, I have suggested that the embodied/experiential tendency that I have identified as a dominant mode of the war genre fits quite neatly into this categorisation.

In contrast, hypermediacy is said to induce a viewing experience lacking in this sense of immersion, yet compensating with some sense of 'being interrelated or connected'. Though Bolter and Grusin do not expound much upon this somewhat vague definition, it does nonetheless serve as an apt general description of the films under discussion in this chapter given the manner in which they tend to preclude any invitation toward identification with an embodied point-of-view, and instead juxtapose diverse medial frames which interrupt the continuity of any immersion. The notion of 'being connected' is obviously integral to emergent forms of spectatorship engendered by digital media ranging from the ubiquity of mobile yet connected devices to the interactivity solicited by online video-sharing platforms. Yet, while cinema has a venerable legacy of remediation (particularly theatre, television, etc.), the issue of how the war film may represent or translate these digital aspects of connectivity and interactivity remains rather underexplored. As such, the following readings of *Battle for Haditha*, *Redacted*, *Stop-Loss* and *In the Valley of Elah* will closely examine how the spectatorship of video diaries – to give but one example – is reframed by being detached from the interactive online context in which one would usually encounter it and repositioned within the hybrid war film. This question seems especially pertinent for an era in which the war zone is no longer the enclave of only military personnel and intrepid reporters, but rather brought into a much more intimate relationship with the civilian realm due to the plethora of media content now available near-instantaneously.



It is precisely this sense of ‘being connected’ that may be manifested in the films under discussion as indicative of a shift in what constitutes authentic or realist experience from the first-person witnessing simulated by a transparent or embodied point-of-view towards a hypermediated aesthetic that achieves this instead through the invocation of connectivity and interactivity.

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The four films selected for analysis here can be broadly subdivided into two pairs. The second section of the chapter will focus on remediations of military video diaries in *Stop-Loss* and *In the Valley of Elah*, both of which are set largely in the US, use the diaries as synecdoche for the experience of combat, and thus interestingly reframe issues around their spectatorship in a civilian context. This first section groups *Battle for Haditha* (henceforth *Haditha*) with *Redacted*, which are notable first of all for the sheer density of digital elements remediated. *Haditha* incorporates various television news excerpts and military press releases as well as amateur digital video recordings, examining the complexity of propaganda and competing historical narratives among the new media ecology; while *Redacted* is composed entirely of remediated forms such as video diaries, CCTV, online video platforms, etc. Furthermore, *Haditha* and *Redacted* hew particularly closely to actual events of the Iraq War and employ innovative docu-fiction structures to reinforce this claim to authenticity. This linking of remediated aesthetics and docu-fiction experimentation in the two films is in itself suggestive of Bolter and Grusin’s definition of hypermediated spectatorship, for if the claims to authenticity are explicitly bolstered by the incorporation of elements of digital media, this would imply that the ‘real’ is constructed here by digital connectivity rather than transparent immediacy.

*Battle for Haditha* is based on an incident which occurred in the eponymous city on 19<sup>th</sup> November 2005, in which US Marines killed 24 civilians, ostensibly in response to an IED attack on their convoy. It was initially reported (by the US military) that 15 civilians were killed in the explosion, with a further eight ‘insurgents’ killed by the Marines’ retaliatory fire. This account was contradicted, however, by the evidence of Thajer Thabet al-Hadithi’s video of the aftermath of the incident, which depicted the victims as unarmed civilians, including women and children. This video was sent to a *Time* magazine reporter four months later and prompted further investigation. Given that the 2007 hearings (contiguous with the film’s production) saw several charges

against the perpetrators dropped, the film may well be considered a politically-charged attempt to redress this injustice and perhaps prompt further legal action. Ultimately though, out of the eight Marines charged over the incident, only one was convicted (in 2012) for dereliction of duty and all escaped jail time.

Broomfield's recreation of this incident is pitched in the ambiguous margins between documentary and fiction. For instance, although the characters are all renamed and fictionalised to some degree, Michael Brooke's *Sight & Sound* review of the film notes how Broomfield nonetheless employed non-professional actors with 'near identical backgrounds to the real-life protagonists' and allowed them to contribute to the partially improvised dialogue (56). This grounding of the film in real events, coupled with the apparently authenticising production methods, may appear to evince some overlap with the lineage of films based upon embedded reportage as detailed in chapter two. Manohla Dargis' *New York Times* review seems to presume this connection in describing the film as 'located at the familiar intersection of nonfiction and fiction, where raw documentary grit receives an imaginary glaze' ("The Killing of Innocents"). Yet it is perhaps significant to emphasise here that *Haditha* (as well as *Redacted*) is not rooted in embedded journalism, a fact which may well contribute to its formal differences from the embed-based films, with the lack of an original first-person witness allowing for the development of a more hypermediated aesthetic.

*Haditha* opens with a series of four short interviews, all of which are with US military personnel discussing the reasons for their presence in Iraq. These monologues exhibit a sense of political alienation that is largely familiar from the 'grunt docs' discussed in chapter two; claiming, for instance, 'I don't know why we're here' and subsequently falling back on more individualistic motivations of survival and the deferred goal of returning home. Formally, this opening passage also serves to establish some sense of the film's hybrid, remediating aesthetic, as the distinctly cinematic 2.35:1 framing is combined with a somewhat grainy digital image that evokes the texture of amateur military video diaries. Dargis specifically cites this incorporation of 'digital artifacts' as contributing to the overall 'documentary vibe' ("The Killing of Innocents"). Although these video diary connotations fulfil the same kind of authenticising role as they do in, for example, *Restrepo*, they are nonetheless lacking the sense of 'affective and traumatic intensities' that I earlier identified, via Pisters, as operating in the latter film (242). In this instance, their over-familiar content and introductory brevity preclude any form of empathetic or identificatory viewer response. Furthermore, the dismissal of Iraq as the 'butthole of the world' and absence of political motivation throughout these

interviews does not really *contextualise* the conflict in any meaningfully specific manner. One might argue that the monologues unveil the dehumanising prejudices that enable US military personnel to kill without remorse (particularly the designation of war as ‘the ultimate style of hunting’), yet this section of the film ultimately seems to serve a role more akin to the cliché or archetype in evoking an overdetermined, but nonetheless authenticising, set of contemporary genre tropes. Furthermore, if this opening section evokes the decontextualisation inherent to such representations of war, the remainder of the film can be seen as counteracting this through an illustration of the diverse contexts in which the Haditha killings were understood and appropriated.

The ensuing narrative is composed around three broad yet distinct perspectives: a unit of US marines assigned to Haditha, two local men who plan and carry out an IED attack under the auspices of al-Qaeda operatives, and an extended family who, through the mere proximity of their home to the IED attack, become the inadvertent victims of the film’s conflict. The focus on Iraqi civilian life, with the inhabitants of Haditha inescapably pressured into complicity with both al-Qaeda and the US military, is one of the most distinctive facets of Broomfield’s film and works rather effectively in redressing the elision of quotidian Iraqi life from so many contemporary US war films. However, my focus throughout the rest of the analysis here will primarily be on the other two narrative perspectives, since it is these sections of the film that engage most explicitly with the mediatisation of warfare and are represented via a more highly remediated aesthetic.

In the first strand of the film to diverge from the perspective of the US military, Broomfield’s camera closely tracks a middle-aged Iraqi man (Ahmad) as he returns home from the local market. Complaining to his wife about the killing of an English teacher by al-Qaeda (the aftermath of which he has just witnessed), he proceeds to switch the television from a children’s program to an Iraqi news channel. Broomfield immediately expands the diegetic news broadcast into a full-frame remediation, aligning the viewer’s perspective with that of Ahmad. Given that the broadcast remains unsubtitled throughout, this engagement of Ahmad’s point-of-view is not merely structural but also, to some extent, cultural. The broadcast, apparently a genuine archival excerpt rather than a simulation or reconstruction, segues from brief clips of burning cars and vehemently protesting Iraqis – seemingly in reaction to American killings of civilians – into a well-known clip of George W. Bush, dressed in a US Army uniform, proclaiming the support of ‘liberated’ Iraqis fighting ‘for their country’ against insurgent ‘thugs’. This speech is actually asynchronous with the film’s diegetic events,

drawn from an event at Fort Carson, Colorado on 24<sup>th</sup> November 2003, in a brief departure from strict historical verisimilitude in favour of thematic resonance. Finally, Broomfield recomposes the frame, incorporating a profile view of Ahmad shaking his head and making a dismissive hand gesture in reaction to the speech.

This instance of remediation serves a dual purpose. Firstly, Ahmad's reaction to Bush – positioned as it is immediately prior to his planning of an IED attack with the support of local al-Qaeda operatives – seems to posit the news footage as a motivating factor for his actions against the US military occupation. It is clearly not the *sole* reason for the attack, as is revealed by a later discussion with co-conspirator Jafar in which Ahmad speaks bitterly of his enforced redundancy from the Iraqi army as a result of the US invasion. Nonetheless, the strategic placement of the Bush clip at this point in the film does invite a reading of it as leading quite directly to the IED attack, and frames the film's subsequent events as (at least in part) a critique of the notion that the US military occupation was broadly supported by the Iraqi population. Secondly, the remediation serves to explicitly link the fictional, diegetic killing of the English teacher with concurrent events in the wider conflict in Iraq, thus further stitching together the film's fictional and non-fictional elements.

The aftermath of Ahmad and Jafar's IED attack on a US marine convoy provides the next key instance of remediation in *Haditha*, as Broomfield charts the production and dissemination of a propaganda video depicting the ensuing rampage. From their vantage point atop a deserted nearby building, Ahmad and Jafar film the explosion on a small handheld digital video camera. Retreating to a safer distance, they then meet up with the Sheik who instructs them to 'film everything to show what the Americans are doing'. Though the film's representation of the killings mostly diverges from this remediated point-of-view, Ahmad and Jafar return to the scene the following morning to film the mourning ceremonies and recriminations against the Marines. They also interview a twelve-year-old girl named Safa, the sole survivor of her family, with Ahmad interrupting the filming to coach her response, feeding her the statement that the 'Americans hit me over the head'. Broomfield cuts abruptly from this sequence to a screening of the completed video, orchestrated by the Sheik in order to incite a wave of anti-American sentiment in his audience. The video is thus depicted as integral to this propaganda campaign, as the Sheik claims that 'The Marines have lost the battle for Haditha; everyone has joined us'. The official response of the US military to this incident is briefly conveyed via the remediation of a typed press release (also read aloud in voiceover), with Broomfield exerting some degree of editorialising influence by

highlighting the phrase ‘killing eight insurgents’. Four months later, Ahmad and Jafar’s video appears on the fictional US television news channel ‘Newline’ under the headline ‘Student footage reveals marine cover up’. Broomfield presents this as a full-frame remediation, replete with the hypermediacy typical of such platforms, including a scrolling bar of headlines along the bottom of the frame and frequent crosscutting between the studio and evidential video footage. Also included is a brief clip of George W. Bush apparently responding to the diegetic events, noting his ‘troubled’ reaction and the initiation of an investigation into the Marines’ actions. The film then concludes with a military tribunal as murder charges against four of the Marines are outlined.

Clearly, the density of remediation in this final section of the film renders it particularly significant to Broomfield’s dissection of the relationship between war cinema and the wider new media ecology, and thus invites further close reading. In general terms, Broomfield appears to be suggesting that the mediatisation of warfare, via Ahmad and Jafar’s video and its subsequent global dissemination, is integral to understanding how the film’s events are framed, understood and harnessed for political action. In many ways, this diagnosis coincides with the account of ‘diffused war’ developed by Andrew Hoskins and Ben O’Laughlin in their 2010 work *War and Media: The Emergence of Diffused War*. The authors define ‘diffused war’ as a new paradigm (coinciding with the invasion of Iraq) in which the ‘mediatisation’ of war leads to ‘more diffuse causal relations between action and effect’ (3). Attributing this primarily to ‘the proliferation of remote and mobile audiovisual recording devices’ and the ‘more chaotic patterns of vectors and greater connectivity’ that are thereby instigated, Hoskins and O’Laughlin argue that there is therefore a ‘radical new potential for a mediatised record of events to emerge [...] at unprescribed and unpredictable times’ with ‘phenomena’ no longer reducible solely to ‘the actions of major institutional actors’ (9; 121; 30).

This diminishing of centralised control is exemplified, in *Diffused War*, by the notion that anyone can potentially act in the name of al-Qaeda, and this is mirrored quite directly in *Haditha* by the difference in identity established between Ahmad and the wider organisation. During a meeting early in the film, their dialogue highlights the al-Qaeda operatives’ awareness that Ahmad drinks alcohol and would thus be precluded from any formal membership or alliance. Furthermore, Ahmad expresses numerous ideological differences from al-Qaeda, most emphatically his scepticism regarding the martyrdom of the Iraqi civilians who, through mere proximity, are subjected to the vengeful actions of the US Marines. Likewise, the US military officers’ attempt to control the media narrative of *Haditha* (signified here by the above outlined press

release) is compromised by the unanticipated emergence of Ahmad and Jafar's video on 'Newline'. The reporter explicitly notes that 'the case first came to light when a Time magazine reporter received video footage shot by a local Iraqi journalism student...if it had not been for the Time magazine report, this case would never have come to light'. This is clearly consistent with Hoskins and O'Laughlin's account of the manner in which amateur video recordings can 'shape news narratives in sometimes unpredictable and random ways' (9). The hypermediacy of this final section of *Haditha*, then, is geared toward a kind of medial analysis, with Broomfield narrativising and contextualising the remediated elements to emphasise the propagandistic nature of these competing, mediatised fragments of war reporting.

The use of a second clip of George W. Bush – which, in this case, is drawn from the aftermath of the actual Haditha killings, and represents Bush's first response to the event – also seems to reinforce the sense of authenticisation achieved via blurring the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction that was initially established during the film's opening sequence. In this instance, Bush appears to be responding to the events of the film itself, reluctantly acknowledging the civilian deaths and setting an investigation in process. This constitutes a particularly distinctive attempt to suture the film's diegesis into the historical narrative of the Iraq War. Indeed, the remediated elements highlighted above seem to consistently gesture outside of the (cinematic) text toward the real-life context, thus potentially inviting the viewer to, at the very least, acknowledge the connectedness of the film to the war itself, but perhaps also to instigate a more interactive response whereby the viewer is encouraged to engage with the ongoing (at the time of the film's release) legal proceedings against the US Marines. As such, Broomfield's film innovatively conjoins hypermediated spectatorship with documentary techniques in order to cinematically reconfigure connectivity and interactivity as integral to contemporary forms of reflexive and politically-engaged spectatorship for the era of mediatised warfare.

This turn to hypermediated spectatorship is, however, somewhat inconsistently evoked by *Haditha*, since the central section of the film (prior to this concluding wave of remediation) offers a rather more familiar viewing experience oriented around an empathetic response to the subjective experiences of its characters. Essentially, this can be characterised as a fundamentally humanist impulse to the film that invites empathy with the civilians caught between the US military occupation and insurgent violence, with Ahmad's troubled conscience, and with the psychological disturbances of Corporal Ramirez, the prime instigator of the civilian killings. The latter, in particular, is afforded

a notable degree of psychological depth through scenes in which he is refused permission to see a doctor for symptoms of PTSD and, following the civilian killings, suffers a wholesale breakdown. To be clear, this does not seem to be a reductive apologia for the psychotic individual who is assigned sole, individual responsibility for the massacre. Broomfield places a greater than usual emphasis (relative to the genre as a whole) on *institutional* responsibility, observing, for instance, how the Marines' training exercises clearly encourage a reckless targeting of 'men, women and children'. Nonetheless, there remains a suggestion that the cinematic 'truth' underlying the ensuing media spectacle is grounded in the subjective experiences of the lead characters and an empathetic understanding of their actions under duress. This returns the film to the realm of the experiential, perpetuating the fallacy which is also present in Hoskins and O'Laughlin's assumption that the 'truth of an experience is the person's subjectivity – their point of view, as the person they are', without which one cannot 'know what happened' (66-67).

Contemporary work on the ethics of cinematic spectatorship<sup>21</sup> is frequently critical of such tendencies. Developing Lillie Chouliaraki's critique of 'regimes of pity' and Susan Sontag's assertion that 'the manufacturing and experiencing of sympathy can thus be strategies of disavowal, ways of denying our agency and responsibility', Libby Saxton argues in *Film and Ethics: Foreclosed Encounters* that representations of war which 'foster a narcissistic pity which masquerades as altruism [...] shirk the ethical work of investigating how the viewer's privileges are connected to, or, in certain cases, predicated upon, the suffering of the person seen' (67). These aspects of *Haditha* undermine the appeal to hypermediated spectatorship to some degree, substituting empathy and identification for the distinctive combination of connectivity and politically-charged interactivity that is elsewhere evoked. Arguably, then, Broomfield does not quite follow through on the radical implications of reorienting the viewing experience solely around hypermediated connectivity. The film certainly diverges substantially from the immersive viewing typical of the experiential mode, since one is not merely invited to identify with a singular, embodied point-of-view; yet its emphasis on hypermediated engagement with contemporary warfare is perhaps, ultimately, a little

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<sup>21</sup> The choice of ethical theorists here is determined largely by their focus on spectatorial subject positions relative to the mediation of violence/conflict. As discussed in the literature review, phenomenological approaches to the ethical value of cinema and digital media, such as Vivian Sobchack's, have been disregarded due to the limited applicability of their reductive positions on the inherent ethical value of supposedly distinct media.

compromised by the ongoing reliance on internalised subjective experience as the determinant of the ‘truth’ of an event.

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Brian de Palma’s *Redacted* is based upon the Mahmudiyah killings of 12<sup>th</sup> March 2006, in which five US soldiers raped and killed a fourteen-year-old Iraqi girl and murdered her family in the village of Yusufiyah, near Al-Mahmudiyah. In retaliation, the Mujahideen Shura Council (subsequently incorporated into the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant), kidnapped and killed two soldiers from the unit, releasing a video of their bodies. The incident was briefly covered-up, with the soldiers involved blaming Sunni insurgents, yet it was revealed three months later following the testimony of another soldier from the unit. The trials of the soldiers involved were ongoing at the time of the film’s production, and in 2009 convictions and severe jail sentences were brought against them. This context immediately creates several parallels with *Battle for Haditha*, with both films clearly highlighting abuses by US soldiers and gesturing outside of the filmic text to real legal proceedings concurrent with the films’ releases.

Similarly, the expository opening credits of *Redacted* establish a blurring of fiction and nonfiction that may initially recall the form of *Haditha*. Where the structure of Broomfield’s film, however, is not entirely without precedent and is ultimately legible as a mode of documentary re-enactment with some degree of fictionalised character development, *Redacted* positions itself as a somewhat more challenging, even paradoxical, construction. It is, de Palma declares (in the opening titles), ‘entirely fiction’ while ‘inspired by an incident widely reported to have occurred in Iraq’, yet simultaneously an attempt to ‘visually document imagined events’. The evidentiary status of the original events is thus immediately placed in contention, as signified by the legal hedging of ‘widely reported’ followed by the further slip into the realm of the ‘imagined’, while the form of the film itself is expressed as both ‘fiction’ and, with more evidentiary connotations, a ‘document’.

In broad terms, *Haditha* and *Redacted* also share a proclivity for remediation that positions their aesthetic closer to hypermediacy than immersive immediacy. *Haditha* engages these remediated points-of-view sporadically, with the greatest concentration to be found in the authenticising evocation of video diaries and documentary techniques during the opening sequence, and the final section with its



hypermediated portrayal of the political and legal repercussions of Ahmad and Jafar's video circulating through various media platforms. Yet *Redacted* pushes this hypermediacy to such an extreme that there is no scene, no point-of-view within the film that is not already mediated in one way or another, thereby literalising Bolter and Grusin's claim that 'all mediation is remediation' (55). The two principal remediated forms are the video diary of US Army Private Angel Salazar, entitled 'Tell Me No Lies', and 'Barrage', a French documentary focussing on US-Iraqi interactions at the army checkpoint. Also included, albeit more briefly, are CCTV footage from the Army base, a Skype-like interface for video calls, an epistolary video diary blog ('Just a soldier's wife'), online platforms hosting jihadist recordings and the more US-centric 'Get Out Of Iraq Campaign', as well as two news channels named CEN ('Central Euro News') and ATV (seemingly a pastiche of Al-Jazeera).

The prevalence of social media among *Redacted*'s remediations highlights the general mediatisation of war in a fairly similar manner to *Haditha*, countering any sense of localisation in favour of an instantaneous networked connectivity such that, for example, the characters communicate with family members in the US more than they do with the inhabitants of Samarra. De Palma thereby collapses the distance between 'over here' and 'over there', bringing the space of the war zone into a more intimate relationship with the civilian realm. The diegetic space in which *Redacted* plays out is also extremely limited, being confined primarily to the barracks, checkpoint, and single civilian residence. Rather than a unified sense of geographic space then, de Palma employs what Bolter and Grusin would undoubtedly denote as a hypermediated 'windowed' space, with increasingly virtual transitions from one remediated form to another.

These remediations, however, differ from *Haditha* in the crucial sense that they are all (with the exception of the closing montage sequence, which I will return to in the discussion below) simulated. In contrast to *Haditha*'s use of actual televisual archival excerpts in order to suture the film's diegesis into the wider historical narrative of the Iraq War, the consistent and at times heightened artificiality of the medial frames cited in *Redacted* seems to point in another direction, one that is less concerned with authenticisation per se. Certainly, these remediations do not work, in Bolter and Grusin's terms, to preserve the 'illusion of immediacy' or erase the visibility of the process of remediation itself (44-45). As such, they raise the question of whether, by making the viewer particularly aware of the fact of remediation, de Palma is attempting

to establish some degree of distancing which may open up space for a potential critique of the partiality inherent to the medial frames contained within the film.

As I have demonstrated in relation to *Restrepo* and *Battle for Haditha*, the video diary is not typically used in such a reflexive manner, but is more commonly evoked as a means of authenticising the film's aesthetic and establishing claims to realism. This claim to authenticity is certainly espoused by *Redacted*'s diegetic diarist (Salazar), and expressed most explicitly in the title 'Tell Me No Lies'. It is also integral to Patricia Pisters' account of the video diary – predominantly constructed around a reading of *Redacted* – as inaugurating a 'new logistics of perception' which 'bring[s] back reality to the heart of the vortex of our multiple screens' (250). Yet de Palma provides a couple of early hints as to the performativity of this truth-seeking diarist construct, through the information that Salazar intends to use the finished film as a component of his application for film school and through the reflexivity of encountering fellow soldier McCoy 'making a video of you making a video of me'. Pisters attempts to reclaim this latter sequence as part of a fundamentally realist paradigm, arguing that the mutual filming and 'promises to take care of each others' videos should they die in combat' work to 'confirm the soldiers' existence' (239). Certainly, there is some sense of an emergent inter-subjective network at play here which may connote the realising force of connectivity, albeit within a specifically militarised perspective. However, while this may be an apt description of the role of the video diary's more general function within the genre, I would suggest that Pisters' argument is constrained by focussing only on this opening sequence and thus neglecting to discuss the diary's mediating role with reference to later events in the film – particularly the reflexive debate over the complicity of filming the rape of an Iraqi teenage girl and the murder of her family.

This incident is actively perpetrated by two soldiers, Rush and Flake, who are perhaps too easily dismissible as stereotypical 'bad apples'. Their characterisation and clear individual culpability appear somewhat reductive in comparison to *Battle for Haditha*'s more nuanced depiction of institutional responsibility and the abuses that may be engendered by standard operating procedure. Nonetheless, the issues of Salazar's complicity in filming the incident and the viewer's complicity in watching it are dramatised rather more effectively. Salazar justifies his presence at the scene, in an argument with McCoy, by attempting to stake out a position of impassive objectivity, claiming 'I'm the fly on the wall, I've got to get a record of what's happening'. Following McCoy's savage rejoinder, labelling him a 'jackal' akin to 'all your greedy media buddies who sold their soul for a talk-show and a book deal', Salazar lets slip a

more self-interested motive, realising that the extremity of the potential content could be his 'free pass into film school'. The manner in which the ensuing rape and murder is shot serves to emphasise the viewer's position of guilty, passive complicity through the explicit alignment of perspective with Salazar. His camera is helmet-mounted, lending a distinctly embodied quality to the first-person point-of-view, and the sequence plays out as an unbroken five minute take, with Rush and Flake soliciting the gaze of the camera throughout. This real-time temporality particularly heightens the sense of presence established by the first-person POV, as well as the corollary of the viewer's inability to intervene, while Rush and Flake's performative awareness of the camera's collusion in their action creates a further sense of unease since the viewer's suturing into the scene becomes a key determinant in the unfolding of the violence. During the fallout from this incident, de Palma explicitly reiterates this point regarding the viewer's complicity as McCoy – who at this point has become something of viewer-surrogate figure, empathetic to the extent that his passive witnessing and guilty conscience seemingly mirror the viewer's position – notes that 'there are things you shouldn't see... just because you're watching it doesn't mean you're not a part of it'.

This suggests that the reflexivity of de Palma's remediation of the video diary points beyond the discursive framework of authenticity and realism around which Pisters' understanding of it is constructed. The sense of connectivity evoked here is not entirely commensurate with a networked confirmation of existence, but is more specifically figured as an ethical connection between the viewer, the diarist and the perpetrators of a violent spectacle which solicits the gaze of the former. It is also important to emphasise that this relationship is dependent upon the militarisation of perspective enforced by the alignment of the spectator's point-of-view with that of the diarist. As such, the video diary in *Redacted* is not merely exploited for its authenticising connotations but reflexively questioned in terms of the partial perspective and ethically compromised vision of war that it may offer the viewer. Martin Barker's reading of the film as 'tak[ing] most seriously not just the *look* of soldiers' videos, but also their implications for who is telling the stories, and what their accounts of war may reveal or hide', thus seems to achieve a more pertinent level of insight than Pisters' broader account of the video diary's function (36).

The ethical framework evoked here contrasts markedly with *Battle for Haditha*, as de Palma largely dispenses with empathy and individual psychology in favour of a clinical depiction of the connection and power imbalance between the complicit Western viewer and suffering of the Other. Indeed, the reflexivity that characterises

*Redacted*'s hypermediated aesthetic seems to position the film within a lineage identified by Michele Aaron in *Spectatorship: The Power of Looking On*. Aaron argues that the reflexivity of films such as *Peeping Tom* (1960) and *Strange Days* threatens the fundamental disavowal of the cinematic spectacle by aligning the viewer's perspective with that of the murderer and thus burdening the spectatorial position with 'somasochistic intent' (93):

Primarily, these highly self-reflexive films inhibit the spectators' ability to do that "artful forgetting" by constantly reminding us that we are watching a film. We cannot suppress our status as spectators for the films are all about spectatorship. The radical charge of this spotlighting of the spectators' experience (as the films' self-consciously merged-perspectives make evident) is a fundamental avowal of the real. (94)

The remediation of the video diary in *Redacted* thus establishes a form of hypermediated spectatorship that targets this 'fundamental avowal of the real' not merely in a formally authenticising sense, but via a reconfiguration of digital connectivity as ethical complicity which overtly works to undermine what Aaron terms the 'irresponsibility or neutrality of looking on' (97). This sense of complicity is substantially distinct from that of the experiential mode, however, given the central role afforded here to hypermediated reflexivity. In contrast to the immersive immediacy through which the viewer was invited to experientially partake in a militarised subjectivity in films such as *Restrepo* or *The Hurt Locker*, the reflexive nature of this remediation may instead serve to highlight this complicity as such and thereby delineate 'how the viewer's privileges are connected to, or, in certain cases, predicated upon the suffering of the person seen' rather than merely reproduce this structure (Saxton 66-67).

Furthermore, Pisters' argument that the 'dynamic multiplicity' of remediated perspectives employed in the contemporary hypermediated war film will ensure a balanced, representative 'ethics of power' seems to be refuted by *Redacted* (241). The sense of connectivity as complicity is not merely confined to Salazar's video diary, but shown as comprehensively permeating the new media ecology. For instance, the checkpoint shooting of a pregnant woman is initially remediated through the French documentary 'Barrage', with its languorous pace and procedural analysis of checkpoint activity suggesting a degree of critical detachment that is lacking elsewhere. Yet for this incident, the gentle pans and slow tracking shots are instantly supplanted by the

immediacy of a handheld, first-person point-of-view tracking the woman as she is dragged from the car and taken to hospital. This segues into an ‘ATV breaking news’ report, in which the reporter invasively and voyeuristically follows the woman’s stretcher as it transported through the hospital corridors, and attempts to carry out an impromptu interview with the brother at her bedside as she dies. Similarly, the death of the army unit’s sergeant in an IED explosion is represented initially via the video diary and subsequently replayed (with only the slightest of differences in the camera angle) on a jihadist website, while the military retaliation to this incident is conveyed via an ‘Embedded Journalist Exclusive Report’, with flak-jacketed press storming a civilian residence alongside the army.

This juxtaposition of remediated frameworks thus seems to suggest continuity – in terms of a militarisation of perspective – across the medial frames, rather than diversity and balance. Indeed, this becomes a quite literal weaponisation of media with the later emergence of a hostage video depicting the beheading of Salazar. The phrasing of the ‘ATV’ news reports seems particularly pertinent here, as the anchor declares: ‘The Mujahideen Shura Council said it issued the *video as revenge* for the rape and killing of a fifteen-year-old Iraqi girl by US troops [emphasis added]’. In contrast to *Battle for Haditha*, which portrays insurgent use of new media as disruptive of the centralisation of power and is thus consistent with the thesis of *Diffused War*, *Redacted* seems to anticipate what Hoskins and O’Laughlin later devised under the rubric “Arrested War”, whereby such emergent disruptions have been subsumed by mainstream media. In a short article posited as a kind of post-script to *Diffused War*, they argue that:

There is nothing that can escape mainstream media now, nothing that mainstream media has not already foreseen escaping and that it has devised strategies to accommodate (the media ecology premediates itself, in Grusin’s terms). This means that there are no aspects of war and conflict that can escape the framing and analysis of mainstream media. This seems to make war more controllable by those fighting it, although not necessarily more intelligible and accessible to audiences seeking to be informed about it. But what is certain is that the mainstream has re-asserted its role and function within the latest turn of the media ecology.

This account, though somewhat abstract, appears to be consistent with de Palma’s figuration of his remediated frames as subsumed under a singular rubric that precludes

the diverse ‘ethics of power’ postulated by Pisters (241). The exhaustively hypermediated aesthetic of *Redacted* thus seems fundamentally geared toward a condemnation of these medial frames for perpetually soliciting the kind of complicit, sadistic gaze that emerges from the above analyses, rather than enabling any oppositional or critical perspective. This strategy also coincides interestingly with Garrett Stewart’s account of the genre in his recent work *Closed Circuits: Screening Narrative Surveillance*, in which he argues that:

Such a high proportion of the action in these recent screen treatments seems tied to the neo-Deleuzian agent as spectator – that is, to the soldier as himself an embedded videographer of his own tedium and ordeal, hooked on (as well as up to) the laptop relays (and morbid replays) of his digital record. Such war films are hampered by the very ethos of optical recording by which the narrated events are themselves navigated. As a result, these film narratives can make little sense of the remediated senses themselves under siege by the war machine, a machine that is thoroughly computerised and, indeed, increasingly remote [...] In this cinematographic syndrome, there is little distance, little chance of a measured and critical narrative detachment, little vision apart from an immersive wired sighting. (188)

The sole portion of *Redacted* that seems to escape this diagnosis is the closing montage, labelled ‘Collateral Damage’, in which de Palma remediates photographs of Iraqi civilian casualties. Following the release of the film, there has been some debate over the censorship of these photographs, with de Palma apparently angered by the decision of the distributor to blur the faces (Provencher 38). However ironically, this redaction actually serves to strengthen the film’s claim that any critical or oppositional point-of-view has been systematically elided from media representations of the war. Into this collage, de Palma inserts a single uncensored photograph of the teenage girl subjected to rape and murder by the US army – or, more specifically, of the actress in character. This suggests a similar kind of suturing of the film’s diegesis into the historical record as is effected in *Battle for Haditha* through the intertextual use of George W. Bush interview clips. Certainly, it is possible to read this final sequence as such; yet I think it is important to also acknowledge that, in the context of *Redacted*’s wider indictment of media complicity in the war, this image is intended to symbolise the emergence of a singular, oppositional perspective which is posited as distinct from the film’s other remediations. As the sole non-redacted photograph, it suggests the

emergence, from amidst the film's partial and complicit remediated framework, of an uncensored and critical point-of-view.

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In generic terms and aesthetic terms, *Stop-Loss* and *In the Valley of Elah* (henceforth *Elah*) may appear quite distinct from *Haditha* and *Redacted*. Neither film contains quite the density of remediation evident in *Redacted*, with borrowings from other media limited to military video diaries and, in *Elah*, the occasional background noise of television news reports on the Iraq War. Both are set predominantly in the United States rather than Iraq, and deploy more conventionally fictional narrative structures than the docu-fiction experimentation of Broomfield and de Palma's films. Yet it is precisely this juxtaposition of video diaries with US-set narratives that provides an interesting case study of the tendency toward an emergent hypermediated viewing experience in the contemporary war film.

As I suggested in the earlier discussion of digital convergence in relation to Bolter and Grusin's account of the 'logic of hypermediacy', the use of military video diaries in documentaries such as *The War Tapes* highlights how malleable the notion of cinema as a distinct medium has become, with the very concept of remediation stretched to its limits in this convergence of the video diary with the documentary war film. A similar argument can, of course, be made in relation to the hypermediacy of *Redacted*, whereby all mediation becomes remediation. In *Stop-Loss* and *Elah*, however, the distinctions between domestic and military space are significantly demarcated by the formal differences between a traditionally 'cinematic' aesthetic and the remediation of military video diaries. Given that both films are set in the US and thus at a distance from the locus of actual combat experience, the war itself comes to be almost exclusively mediated by digital video diaries. This simultaneously elevates the diary to the status of a privileged and singularly authentic signifier for the war itself, and establishes a diegetic replication of the process at issue here – in other words, a situation in which the characters are rendered spectators of a war that is accessed only via its digital mediation. The precise forms that this spectatorship takes – particularly in terms of networked connectivity, interactivity and their relationship to memory – will be a key concern in the analysis which follows.

It also worth briefly noting, before getting into closer readings of these two films, that the context in which they frame the video diaries evinces a distinct concern

with authenticity. Though they do not attempt the kind of painstaking recreation of specifically identifiable events familiar from *Haditha* (and, to a slightly lesser extent, *Redacted*), both *Stop-Loss* and *Elah* do nonetheless claim a similar grounding in the reality of the Iraq War. In *Elah*, this is established most explicitly, if somewhat loosely, via the opening title's declaration that the film is 'inspired by real events'. *Stop-Loss*, which is transparently constructed around the issue from which the film derives its title, further reinforces the relationship between its protagonist's dilemma over his forced enlistment and the reality of this situation by concluding with a series of statistics on the US military's stop-loss policy. In doing so, both Peirce and Haggis seem to be working to establish a sense that their films reflect something of the reality of the Iraq War, and this striving for authenticity certainly suggests at least one function of the aesthetic choice to mediate the war through video diaries.

So, as I have briefly noted, *Stop-Loss* is largely set in the US, and charts the attempts of three friends from the same army unit to re-adjust to civilian life following their deployment in Iraq. Prior to this, however, is a short preface (of around ten minutes) that is set in Iraq. This segment of the film is introduced by the remediation of a video diary, explicitly marked as such by the scrolling titles 'Episode 312... The Men of Shadow 3 Going the Fuck Home'. The choice of font here, which simulates a handwritten scrawl, is immediately evocative of a sense of amateur authenticity. Furthermore, the serial numbering ('312') of the diary entry, as well as the explicit specification of the unit depicted ('Shadow 3'), suggest that the implied series of videos is not confined to any one individual's production, but rather evokes a unit-wide continuity. This latter connotation is particularly significant in quelling the individualist connotations of the diary (particularly as drawn from its literary precursor) and instead associating the mediatisation of military experience with a collective, trans-subjective identity. Indeed, the film refuses to ascribe any individual authorship for these diaries throughout, and even suggests that the camera is typically passed around, resulting in a collective and collaborative mode of expression.

Content-wise, the video begins amidst a quiet interlude at the base camp, in which Tommy (one of three principal characters, all soldiers from the same unit) picks up his guitar and initiates a collective rendition of the song "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue". The video then segues into a series of loosely connected, rather mundane fragments of quotidian military life, ranging from short clips depicting soldiers cleaning their weapons to still photographs of grouped soldiers posing for the camera, which are cut to the diegetic performance of the song. This rapid montage ultimately creates a



kind of crossover form which merges the military video diary with the conventions of the music video, evoking what is often termed an ‘MTV aesthetic’ (it is perhaps also worth noting that the film is actually produced by MTV). Among other effects, this serves to highlight the significance of the specific choice of music as a central aesthetic factor in engendering the sense of group identity depicted. Indeed, the single “Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue (The Angry American)”, by the country singer Toby Keith, does come freighted with a significant degree of political baggage, having been the centre of a public feud with the Dixie Chicks, who dismissed it as ‘ignorant’, and also censored by the network ABC. The lyrics explicitly posit the Iraq War as a righteous response to 9/11, and venerate military revenge through such lines as ‘we lit up your world / like the fourth of July’, or ‘we’ll put a boot in your ass / it’s the American way’. This sense of vengeful patriotism is inextricably bound up with the collective identity established via this initial remediation of the video diary.

This opening diary segment is followed by the film’s sole combat sequence in which the unit track and kill a group of insurgents who have launched an attack on their roadside checkpoint. The firefight results in the death and serious wounding of several US soldiers, which sets up the context for the film’s primary subsequent use of the video diary as a form of memorialisation. The next remediation of the video diary occurs immediately after this combat scene, and begins with the scrolling title ‘In Memory of our Fallen Brothers’. It depicts the group huddled together in a circle, hands outstretched and piled in the centre, their movements lent an ethereal quality by the low-frame rate employed. Music – in this instance, non-diegetic – is again used to bridge the film’s short fragments, and the track is of a similarly militaristic provenance (“Matter of Time” by 4<sup>th</sup>25, a group of soldiers who recorded the album while serving in Iraq). The clips in this instalment are notably more graphic than in the first video, interweaving images of the dead and wounded soldiers with decontextualised combat scenarios and even glimpses of body bags being lined up. As such, this example clearly echoes Pisters’ account of the video diary as both highlighting and compensating for (by ‘confirm[ing] the soldiers’ existence’) the enhanced sense of mortality inherent to the soldiers’ situation (239). This is further reinforced by the film’s subsequent remediations of the video diary during a visit to the family of one the deceased soldiers (‘Preacher’), and during Tommy’s funeral.

Alongside this elegiac function, the video diary is also depicted as intimately bound up with the living soldiers’ memories in a rather more traumatic fashion. Pisters’ article makes note of this during her brief reading of *Stop-Loss*, arguing that ‘war diaries

become recurring flashbacks, undeletable memories' (245). This is most clearly expressed in Brandon's extended flashback to the opening combat sequence, in which the civilian casualties of that battle are revealed. The sequence employs the same slowed frame-rate as the opening of the 'Fallen Brothers' diary segment, as if to emphasise how the video diaries come to stand in for combat experience not only for the audience, but also for the soldiers' themselves in a remarkable expression of the mediatization of memory, or what Garrett Stewart terms 'flashback as digital playback' (*Closed Circuits* 179). Through the familiar framework of PTSD, the diaries become a traumatic bridge between past and present, disrupting the soldiers' attempts to readjust to civilian life. This association between digital screens and traumatic memory is further reinforced by a later sequence in which Brandon, having seemingly escaped to New York, encounters a screen in Times Square showing combat footage as part of a recruitment advert for the army. Peirce demonstrates an ironic subversion of the utopian promise of digital connectivity, reconfiguring the mobile spectator as one who is haunted by the omnipresence of screens, which here seem to return or invert the gaze and serve only as an unwelcome recollection of traumatic combat experience.

Ultimately, this externalisation and materialisation of collective memory is what binds the film's group of soldiers together in this post-combat context, despite the gradual evolution in the form of this trans-subjectivity from the camaraderie and ideological unity conveyed by the videos' content to a more conflicted form of embodied recurrence associated with PTSD. This shift is evident in the first screening of a video diary excerpt following their return from Iraq, in which the content – a glorification of macho energy – contrasts unambiguously with the creeping sense of disillusion conveyed by the actors' expressions as they gather around the laptop screen. It is also heightened by the immediately preceding scenes depicting violent incidents leading to Steve and Tommy's separation from their fiancées, which link their shared propensity for intense and embodied recurrences of their experiences during the war to an estrangement from civilian life.

Pisters' reading of *Stop-Loss* and *Elah* further links these 'recurring flashbacks, undeletable memories' to what she describes as a 'state of desubjectification necessary in combat', which manifests as symptoms of PTSD since it is 'not a simple on/off switch but has lasting, de-realising consequences on the mind' (245-246). This notion is rather inconsistently expressed in *Stop-Loss*, since the combat sequences are clearly overwritten with distinctly personalised sentiments, such as the heroic attempts to protect close friends and individually inscribed acts of mourning or elegy, such that the

collective identity portrayed feels closer to a conventional camaraderie rather than the kind of networked, pre-conscious trans-subjectivity outlined via Protevi and Väliaho's work in the previous chapter. Some sense of this 'desubjectification' is, however, conveyed by Brandon's urban skirmishes while on the run, particularly a sequence depicting his retribution on a group of car thieves. During the fight, Brandon experiences what may be described as a merging of the present scenario with an invocation of militarily-instilled combat reflexes. Having disarmed his assailants, the camera tightens its focus on Brandon as the diegetic sound is gradually supplanted by a stereotypically 'Iraqi' soundscape composed of indistinct voices, an escalation of traffic noise and eventually the eruption of gunfire. Brandon's cold-blooded stare intensifies as he barks his orders, 'Okay hajjis, on your knees'. Peirce's rendition of PTSD here clearly evokes a collapsed distance between past and present, and between military and civilian realms, through Brandon's apparently pre-conscious activation of a militarised state of mind that may aptly, in this instance, be termed 'desubjectification'.

The video diaries in *Stop-Loss*, however, are only tangentially connected to this pre-subjective state via the militarily-conditioned impulses of the soldiers. This exceptionalist approach, whereby the soldiers' experiences in Iraq seem to predetermine their response to the video diaries in a manner that specifically precludes their re-entry into civilian life, serves to maintain quite a sharp distinction between the effects of the medium for those within the military network and for its broader effects on (cinematic) spectatorship. As such, it would certainly be a stretch to claim that the diaries evoke any form of de-subjectified spectatorship, despite Peirce's attempts to express how this functions for Brandon and invite the audience to subjectively partake in this hallucination to some degree. Nonetheless, the film does generally depict military video diaries as enacting several key changes in the way that war is mediated. Most notably, they are portrayed as enabling a collaborative, collective authoring of the experience of combat which aesthetically and thematically serves to both establish a sense of trans-subjective identity and, subsequently, a haunting, inescapable form of mediated memory. While these effects remain confined to the military network in *Stop-Loss*, *Elah* more rigorously explores how video diaries may transpose such military subjectivities into a civilian realm.

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Paul Haggis' *In the Valley of Elah* similarly utilises the military video diary as a kind of synecdoche for soldiers' experience of the war, though in this case it actually becomes the film's exclusive mode of mediating combat. The complete absence of any other mediating perspective on the war is immediately suggestive of the culturally-determined value of authenticity ascribed to the medium, and in itself indicative of the (above outlined) trend in the contemporary war film toward emergent digital modes of rendering combat experience. In contrast to *Stop-Loss*, however, the soldier that shot this content (Mike Deerfield) is missing from the very start of the film – and soon to be found dead – such that the diegetic spectatorship of the diary takes place within more of a civilian context. Structurally, Haggis' film is composed around two interlocking investigations: that of a local police officer (Emily Sanders) into Mike's death; and Hank Deerfield's parallel investigation of his son's video diaries, which initially seem to proffer an explanation for his disappearance, and ultimately serve to reveal the behavioural transformation of Mike from a naïve and idealistic young recruit into the sadistic 'Doc', thus nicknamed for his propensity to torturously probe the wounds of Iraqi captives.

Due to Mike's phone being 'seriously fried' by the 'intense heat' of Iraq, the video diaries unfold serially throughout the film as a technician emails the unscrambled fragments to Hank. This aspect of the film is the focus of Nicholas Chare's article "Warring Pixels: Cultural Memory, Digital Testimony, and the Conflict in Iraq", which argues for 'a greater recognition of the materiality of the digital and an acknowledgement of its indexical properties', primarily by detailing the film's emphasis on Mike's phone as an essentially material and fragile container of the videos (334). Certainly, the film does place a greater than usual emphasis upon the evidential materiality of both the phone and its videos and photographs, with the latter particularly conveyed through a sequence in which Hank prints an enlarged still and runs his thumb over it, highlighting simultaneously the tangibility of the image and the significance of what is later revealed to be a child's dead body in the street.

Chare further proposes that the film's 'episodic' remediations of the video diary form a valuable corrective to the unassimilable 'glut of images [...] [that] overwhelmed any capacity of spectators to filter them or to engage critically with specific representations', which, in an echo of Hoskins and O'Laughlin's 'diffused war', Chare defines as the characteristic feature of television news coverage of the Iraq War (335). Specifically, he locates this possibility of critical contextualisation in the remediated video diaries' fragmentation, noting that instances in which the image freezes 'open a

space for thinking' by 'inviting reflection on what surrounds them' (342). Although this fragmentation is essential to the film's mystery/investigation structure, I would suggest that the close readings of the diary content that the film invites are rather a consequence of cinematically narrativising them in this way, especially in contrast to the way that such videos would appear to the YouTube viewer.

Though it remains unclear whether the videos unspool chronologically (i.e. according to their timecodes), their presentation within *Elah* outlines a clear arc from a buoyant optimism to an increasingly desensitised nihilism, and ultimately sadism. This trajectory can be productively situated in relation to actual YouTube videos from Iraq, as outlined in Christian Christensen's study "Uploading Dissonance: *YouTube* and the US Occupation of Iraq", which encompasses the full range of the medium from amateur atrocity footage to the official/propagandistic output of the MNFIRAQ ('Multi-National Force – Iraq') channel. I will also examine the further ways in which Haggis juxtaposes the diaries with remediated television news excerpts from the Iraq War, and with the parallel, present-tense investigation of Mike's death, for the allusive links that are thereby created regarding the state of the nation and the blurring of military and civilian realms.

The first video depicts Mike and his unit casually throwing a football before a raucous audience of Iraqi children, with Mike charitably offering the children their 'first time' playing with a 'real American football'. This innocuous content clearly echoes what Christensen terms the 'good deeds' genre among the MNFIRAQ videos, particularly 'Troops Give Gifts to Iraqi Children', designed to 'create the impression that the US military has a good rapport with Iraqi civilians' (166). However, in this case the video ends with Mike berating the children as they steal the ball and run away, presaging the diaries' subsequent darker turn. As befits the film's investigative structure, then, the videos begin by presenting the public face of the Iraq War, with just a sparing hint at the frustration and anger soon to be unleashed. This tone is also echoed in the fragments of television news remediated during the opening section of the film, which capture a distinctly optimistic post-invasion period characterised by Bush's proclamations that 'freedom is on the march, and we are safer because of it', or 'because we have done the hard work, we are entering the season of hope'.

The second video, heavily marred by glitchy transitions that leap from day to night, and across discontinuous scenes, begins with a (literal) window on the escalating destruction in Iraq, showing an iconographic urban roadside littered with exploded vehicles. It abruptly cuts to a low-angle on Mike driving in a convoy, distressed by

something in the road ahead. As the passengers fearfully bark orders for him to ‘speed up’, there follows a distinctly audible thump as the vehicle fails to avoid the collision. This is by far the most ambiguous of the diary entries, and the as-yet-unsolved mystery at its core drives Hank’s continued investigation. It is subsequently reframed as the central crisis which irrevocably alters Mike’s character, when in a later interview a soldier from his unit reveals that they ran over a child.

The remaining diary instalments are unabashedly graphic in their violent content, diverging starkly from the ‘sanitised’ and superficially ‘victimless’ violence that Christensen identifies in the MNFIRAQ videos (163-165). They begin to segue instead into the realm of ‘unofficial’, amateur footage which Christensen describes as frequently ‘disturbing’ not only in terms of their content, but also for the directorial pleasure evinced, such as ‘British Troops Beating Young Iraqis on Camera’ in which the soldier filming the incident ‘can be heard laughing violently and encouraging his fellow troops [...] even mak[ing] moaning noises suggesting a pleasure that borders on the sexual’ (168). A diary sequence in which Mike’s unit clear a bombed-out building, for instance, shows Mike voyeuristically scanning a charred corpse, noting with dispassionate wonder how the clothes remained untouched, and finally, callously, placing a Spitfire Wheels (a skateboarding brand) fireball sticker on the head of the victim. This scene immediately follows the discovery of Mike’s burned body, in an explicit parallel apparently intended to convey how such violence cannot be constrained to the realm of war and inevitably permeates the soldiers’ civilian behaviour. The final diary sequence represents Mike’s ultimate descent into sadism as, gleefully encouraged by his unit, he asks a hooded captive ‘where it hurts’ and proceeds to stick his fingers into the open wound, thus earning his ‘Doc’ sobriquet.

The latter videos are juxtaposed with remediations of television news which evince a clear undermining of Bush’s earlier declarations of victory through a shift to counter-insurgency rhetoric (particularly with reference to Fallujah), thus allusively mapping Mike’s moral and psychological deterioration onto the wider contextual degeneration from the ostensibly successful invasion to the escalating chaos in occupied Iraq. The climax of this theme is a didactic final sequence in which Hank hoists an inverted US flag as an ‘international distress signal’. The final unveiling of Mike’s evolution into ‘Doc’ is also paralleled by the conclusion of the investigation into his death, with Penning’s confession providing a further framework in which to read the diaries. A sense of the two characters’ equivalence is sketched through Penning’s observation that the ‘Doc’ scenario was ‘pretty funny’ and simply Mike’s ‘way to

cope', and further reinforced by his claim that 'on another night it would have been Mike with the knife and me in the field'. The murder is narrated passively, as if acting on uncontrollable instinct, through the line 'I look down and I'm stabbing him'. More than a simple avoidance of moral responsibility, this hints at the notion of military 'desubjectification' familiar from Pisters' reading of *Stop-Loss* and *Elah*, as well as Protevi's work on the conditioned responses instilled by military training simulations. Though this theme is rather hazily evoked, the collective pleasure and sadistic gaze solicited by the final diary instalment do nonetheless give a clearer impression of how this may function as a form of trans-subjectivity when compared to the rather more conventional camaraderie on display in *Stop-Loss*' video diaries. The film's twinned investigations also serve to emphasise how (to borrow Pisters' terms) this is 'not a simple on/off switch', as *Elah* matches the killing in Iraq to tangential incidents of domestic violence among the community of returning soldiers, as well as, of course, Mike's murder (246). This sense that the violence cannot be constrained to the warzone also has significant ethical implications regarding the viewing of the later diary videos, subverting the sadistic pleasure taken in the pain of the Other by ultimately turning it back upon the initial perpetrator.

The theme of spectatorship is further developed through the film's distinctive rendering of the way that Hank engages with his son's video diaries, which, in addition to the investigative structure, is also clearly concerned with notions of trans-subjective memory. In a few cases, this scenario is very straightforwardly represented with Hank, in his hotel room at night, receiving an email and opening the next video file. Yet Haggis soon begins to elide this preface to the videos, cutting rather abruptly into full-frame remediations of the diary, and immediately following them with a shot of Hank waking in the morning, as if to suggest that they are slipping into the more imaginative realm of fantasy or nightmare. This lingering aura of fantasy reaches its climactic fulfilment in a remarkable sequence in which Hank imaginatively reconstructs the incident in which Mike's convoy ran over the child. A part of this sequence is composed of the ambiguous video diary footage that Hank has already seen, yet in this fluid reconstruction, the diary material is supplemented by a series of diegetically-unmotivated camera angles, and further augmented by cutaways to Hank sitting at the wheel of his car to clarify the internal status of the sequence.

Developing his notion of 'flashback as digital playback', Garrett Stewart's perceptive reading of this sequence is particularly valuable here:

You don't have to have been there. You only have to be willing to envision it, to internalise the optic record as your own inherited flashback [...] The whiplash exchange between then and now, us and them, is the immediate political charge of this climactic montage. Digital surveillance via optical data mining, here on a one-to-one basis, breaking as it does with the system of suture, has brought the trauma into focus from another space and time. (*Closed Circuits* 182)

Where in *Stop-Loss* this notion of 'flashback as digital playback' is effected through an aesthetic and thematic convergence of the soldiers' memories with their video diaries, in this case the terms are intriguingly reversed, such that Hank imaginatively inhabits the video diaries' 'digital playback' as if it were his own memory or 'inherited flashback'. Furthermore, while *Stop-Loss* posited this form of trans-subjective, mediated memory as an exceptionalist construction clearly limited to its network of military personnel, *Elah* posits a similar effect as traversing its military origins to take place within the civilian realm. This radically posits the complicity of even the civilian viewer in the sadistic spectacle of the video diaries, collapsing the 'us and them' distance inherent in viewing war footage through the intimacy and (imaginative) interactivity of digital connectivity. One might even compare this model of spectatorial subjectivity with the experience of the drone operator as outlined in chapter three. There remains, of course, a clear distinction in moral culpability as defined by the difference between this imaginative, spectatorial interactivity and the actual, lethal effects of the drone operator's weaponised interactivity. Nonetheless, the notion of digital connectivity as instantiating a peculiarly intimate form of viewing at a distance, akin to a kind of virtual presence, does unite the subjective experience of the drone operator with the model of spectatorial subjectivity established by *Elah*.

Finally, it is worth noting how the film's use of the video diary to enact this imagined presence strikingly replicates the definition of hypermediated spectatorship outlined earlier in this chapter with reference to Bolter and Grusin's *Remediation*. They argue that hypermediacy and transparency are 'opposite manifestations of the same desire: the desire to get past the limits of representation and to achieve the real', which they define 'not in any metaphysical sense', but rather 'in terms of the viewer's experience [...] [as] that which would evoke an immediate (and therefore authentic) emotional response' (53). This 'response' is elsewhere glossed as a 'sense of presence' (22). Since *Elah* precisely and exclusively evokes this virtual presence as being enabled via the remediation of the video diaries – hence, achieved via digital connectivity rather



than the kind of immersive cinematic immediacy epitomised by *The Hurt Locker* – it appears to fully and richly instantiate a contemporary manifestation of spectatorship as evoking a transparent sense of presence via hypermediacy. In doing so, it clearly signifies a historic shift in the relationship between the war film and the wider media ecology. The Stewart citation above implicitly recalls an earlier passage in *Closed Circuits* in which he contrasts digital mediation with the appeal of cinematic spectacle relative to other media during the Vietnam era:

*Apocalypse Now* wanted to suggest that although you think you've seen it on TV, you've never seen it like this. You had to have been there, and 70mm is the next best thing [...] Sure, you may think you've seen it all on YouTube and cable networks, and this time you'd be right, you have: seen it the way the military itself has, at both ends of a lethal stealth – aerial hits and surveillance ambushes alike – each recorded in the real time of pending annihilation, zoom versus pan, impersonal targeting over against the jittery focus of patrol (173-174)

This cinematic appeal to embodied immediacy, or a sense of having 'been there' is clearly supplanted by digital connectivity and interactivity in all the above films, but particularly *Elah*, which privileges digital remediation as the definitive contemporary means of conveying an authentic sense of presence and thereby understanding the soldiers' experience of the Iraq War, thus signifying the evolution of the war film from a singular cinematic spectacle to a hybridised hypermediacy.

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Collectively, the four films discussed in this chapter can be seen as representative of a shift in the contemporary war film toward a form of hypermediated spectatorship engendered by their remediated aesthetics. This contrasts most notably with the model of spectatorship implied by the experiential mode, which I have argued is best characterised by Roger Stahl's notion of the 'virtual-citizen-soldier' and tends to foster an embodied identification with military subjectivities. It is precisely this experiential emulation of first-person witnessing that is supplanted by the alternative realising force of digital connectivity as the privileged signifier of an authentic depiction of contemporary conflict in the films covered by this chapter. Although the hypermediated aesthetic thus serves a broadly authenticising function, it differs substantially from the authentication of embodied, first-person witnessing in the

experiential mode. While *Restrepo* in particular harnesses this transparent perspective as a means of exploring the quotidian experience of soldiering and the visceral pleasures of combat, thereby obscuring the wider political and technological context in favour of a complicit identification with its military subjects, the remediation of digital interfaces here works to somewhat more reflexively posit digital connectivity as authenticating in the sense of evoking an interactive engagement with the real political context of the Iraq War.

*Battle for Haditha* exudes the most explicit concern with developing such realist vectors, aligning its remediations with docu-fiction techniques in order to suture the film's diegesis into the mediated history of the Iraq War. The film's remediated elements consistently function as an explicitly political motivation for the character's actions, with Ahmad's al-Qaeda sponsored bombing grounded (at least in part) as a reaction to George W. Bush's dismissal of Iraqi protesters as 'thugs', and the Sheikh's propaganda video of US military abuses apparently serving such a successful recruiting function that he proclaims 'The Marines have lost the battle for Haditha; everyone has joined us'. There is also a documentarian propensity evident in the analytical delineation of how such digital content feeds into diverse, competing political appropriations of the Haditha killings, as Broomfield charts the ways in which the terms of political debate are increasingly determined by the global dissemination of this kind of video evidence. In doing so, it is implied that an authentic understanding of the Iraq War cannot be constructed around a transparent emulation of first-person witnessing, but fundamentally depends upon a more reflexive form of spectatorship attuned to complex contemporary relationship between hypermediacy and political context.

As I have argued, the primary function of these remediations and of the docu-fiction style is to engender a form of hypermediated spectatorship which perceives the film as fundamentally continuous with, or at least connected to, the real context of the Haditha killings and the ongoing (at the time of the film's production) legal proceedings against the perpetrators. This particular form of spectatorial hypermediacy, however, has little in common with the hypermediated military subjectivities outlined across the previous two chapters. Where the military logic of hypermediacy can be broadly posited as geared toward the formation of trans-subjective networks which bypass individual agency in order to enable a de-subjectified state of killing, in the case of *Haditha* spectatorial hypermediacy points instead to the interactive formation of like-minded political communities. This digitally networked collectivity does not entail any comparable form of de-subjectification, nor does it seem to be complicit in militarising

the viewer's perspective as is the case with the experiential mode. Indeed, this form of spectatorship appears distinctly antithetical to the complicity of immersive identification, since it is founded upon a reflexive and critical distance from the diegetic military actions.

In ethical terms, one can theorise this spectatorial position as one which privileges reflexivity over empathy or pity. Some vestiges of empathy still remain, particularly in the characterisation of Ramirez's PTSD (which does serve to internalise the conflict to some degree), though relative to the genre as a whole *Haditha* does generally maintain a more reflexive distance. For Libby Saxton, this repudiation of 'regimes of pity' creates the possibility of an ethical turn to 'investigating how the viewer's privileges are connected to, or, in certain cases, predicated upon, the suffering of the person seen' (67). It also resonates with Lillie Chouliaraki's argument that 'the language of pity [...] is insufficient to properly translate distant suffering for the Western spectator', with a 'reflexive distance from the society of intimacy' posited as necessary for the creation of a 'cosmopolitan public culture' (217).

The issue of whether *Haditha*'s evocation of interactive, digitally networked spectatorship offers any concrete outlet for what Chouliaraki terms 'public action', or whether it simply constitutes a more abstract sense of 'disapproval', is debatable though (123). Certainly, the docu-fiction tendency to embed remediating fragments of actual coverage of the Iraq War within the film's diegesis does at least suggest the possibility of a politically engaged mode of viewing which looks outside of the text for ways to engage with the real context of the *Haditha* killings. However, these legal proceedings take place outside of the realm of influence of the vast majority of the film's viewers. Yet at the same time Broomfield does not really seem to imply that imprisoning the individuals involved constitutes an effective solution to the problem. Indeed, there is a discernible inference that this outcome would be mere scapegoating and does not address the more fundamental issue of institutional responsibility, as emphasised through the training sequences which explicitly encourage an indiscriminate targeting of 'men, women and children' in the kind of insurgency scenario that subsequently unfolds. While the lack of a specific outlet for 'public action' may thus reflect the 'narrow repertoire of participatory positions that [Western] public life makes available for the ordinary citizen', perhaps the more pertinent question is what kind of collectivity emerges from the film's broader critique of the US military's actions in Iraq (Chouliaraki 12). This coincides with Chouliaraki's overarching concern in *The Spectatorship of Suffering* with the question of whether media 'reproduce the

spectators' communitarian concerns in the zone of safety or cultivate new connectivities between spectators and distant sufferers' (196). In this regard, I would tentatively posit that *Haditha* does attempt to engender 'new connectivities between spectators and distant sufferers'. Although fully substantiating this claim may entail an analysis of the film's international distribution network which is somewhat beyond the scope of this chapter, from the textual evidence available I'd suggest that the emergent collectivity is not defined by a myopic focus on individual culpability with reference to legal proceedings taking place within 'the zone of safety', but rather by a more comprehensive critique of US military actions which reflexively foregrounds the suffering of Iraqi civilians as the inextricable consequence of the dogmatic Western war on terror.

On a formal level, the remediated aesthetic of *Redacted* seems to imply a similar mode of hypermediated spectatorship to *Haditha* given the privileging of digital connectivities over immersive presence. However, the films evince substantial differences regarding the function of these digital networks and the implications of hypermediated spectatorial subjectivity. Instead of striving for a reflexive docu-fiction suturing of the film's diegesis and the real political context, the remediations in *Redacted* appear to be more concerned with a performative (rather than authenticising) enactment of the ways in which the remediated forms are complicit in perpetuating escalating cycles of violence due to the voyeuristic and sadistic points-of-view provided by military video diaries, jihadist websites and embedded reportage (to cite just a few examples). This correlates with a bleak view of hypermediated spectatorship which, in stark contrast to the interactive and oppositional political stance of *Haditha*, is defined by a sadistic complicity in military violence.

More than any other film covered in this chapter, *Redacted*'s hypermediated aesthetic creates a distinctly 'windowed' sense of space which serves to collapse the geographical distance between military and civilian realms in a manner somewhat akin to that of drones. Of course, the remotely operated weaponry of drones is in this case supplanted by predominantly public and communicative forms of remote connectivity, but this fusing of windowed space does create a comparable scenario in which the soldiers are simultaneously enmeshed in military duties and civilian life. Social media figure prominently among the remediated digital elements, and serve to maintain a sense of 'remote' intimacy between, for example, McCoy and his father, with such hypermediated forms of communication largely usurping face-to-face interactions. On a diegetic level, then, the networks formed by digital interactivity tend to reassert existing

connections and divisions rather than engendering the kind of new and international critical collectivities implied by *Haditha*.

This insularity feeds into the characterisation of spectatorial connectivity too, as even the platforms which ostensibly provide a space for political critique of the war (such as the ‘Get Out of Iraq’ campaign site) are depicted as extolling – in visceral detail – violent retribution against the perpetrators of the Mahmudiyah killings rather than engaged political debate. Although *Redacted* does offer multiple points-of-view on the conflict, I think it is a mistake to read this as a typically postmodern diverse multiplicity or, in Pisters’ terms, a representative ‘ethics of power’ (241). De Palma seems to imply that there is more continuity than difference among these forms, with the key unifying factor being this sadistic point-of-view. Furthermore, since each of these remediated networks (whether pro- or anti-US) are portrayed as so entrenched in their own, self-enclosed moral convictions, there is no site of meaningful exchange or debate, only the incitement of further violence against the other.

Thus the version of spectatorial hypermediacy depicted in *Redacted* is essentially defined by complicity in the violent spectacle of not only the war as such, but also unsanctioned acts of violence. Indeed, the central rape/murder sequence marks the most explicit undermining of the ‘neutrality of looking on’ through the metafictional debate around Ramirez’s complicity in filming the scene as part of the video diary (Aaron 97). Although effected in a strikingly different manner from the complicity I have delineated with reference to the experiential mode, it is basically equivalent to the veneration of the visceral pleasures of combat in *Restrepo* or *The Hurt Locker*. In this case, though, it is not achieved through immersive identification with an embodied perpetrator of violence, but rather by a reflexive staging of hypermediated spectatorship as loaded with ‘sodomasochistic intent’ (Aaron 93). This particular form of reflexivity differs slightly from *Haditha*’s reflexive blurring of the boundaries between documentary and fiction. *Redacted* does parallel this docu-fiction structure to some degree (particularly in the opening titles); yet where *Haditha* harnesses this ambiguity in an attempt to establish the text as pertaining to the ‘real’ rather than the realm of mere fictional representation, the reflexivity of *Redacted* primarily concerns a performative and at times overtly metafictional staging of spectatorship whose realising force is derived from this ‘inability to suppress our status as spectators’ (Aaron 94).

Despite these vastly differing characterisations of spectatorial hypermediacy in *Haditha* and *Redacted*, it is interesting to note that both seem to evoke interactivity as delimiting a spectatorial experience which is essentially collective rather than

individualistic. This runs distinctly contrary to the prevailing tendency among film scholars to posit digital spectatorship as an erosion of the communality of the cinema auditorium in favour of increasingly personalised home/remote viewing scenarios. In these films, the hypermediated aesthetics evince a fundamental integration of cinema, digital networks and the real political context of the Iraq War, thus positing interactivity as a collectivising force which may even override any shift in the locus of viewing as a key determinant of the mode of spectatorial subjectivity.

Although a cursory glance at the aesthetics of *Stop-Loss* and *In the Valley of Elah* might suggest that they are somewhat less indicative of a shift toward hypermediated spectatorship than *Haditha* and *Redacted*, the manner in which they stage and thematise the spectatorship of military video diaries does coincide significantly with this chapter's discussion of digitally connected modes of spectatorial subjectivity. Indeed, the digitally networked collectivities that are implicitly evoked by *Haditha* and *Redacted* are manifested rather more literally in *Stop-Loss* via the network (of friends returning from duty in Iraq) which is circumscribed by the collective production and viewing of the video diaries. Initially, this collectivity figures as military camaraderie which manifests in the communal authorship of the diaries and the ideologically-binding force of vengeful patriotism elicited from the song "Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue". It verges on the properly trans-subjective collectivities delineated by Protevi, broadly coinciding with the type of 'team-building applications' (such as 'rhythmic chanting') that he cites alongside simulations as generating the 'fighting group', yet lacks the cyborg sense of de-subjectification found in, for example, Farocki's *Watson is Down* (412).

On re-entry into civilian life, however, the founding terms of this collectivity undergo a process of transformation, as the more ideological form of unity derived from the Iraq-set opening is supplanted by the shared experience of embodied manifestations of PTSD. These affective disturbances are tightly linked to the diaries as a form of mediatised collective memory which supply the 'recurring flashbacks, undeletable memories' constitutive of PTSD (Pisters 245). This particular representation of PTSD may appear somewhat peculiar in its very 'collectivity', relative to the tropes typically employed within the genre, since (as I have noted across the previous chapters) PTSD more often appears in a distinctly individualised form. From the individual Head-Mounted Display systems used to treat real soldiers, to fictional representations which internalise and depoliticise conflict by containing it within the realm of individual conscience (such as *Good Kill*), none of the depictions of PTSD encountered thus far

convey an equivalent sense of collectivity. Yet it is not entirely without precedent in theoretical terms at least, since Väliäho locates the source of PTSD in pre-subjective ‘affect programs’ which are also cited as the target of the simulation training in Protevi’s account of military trans-subjectivities (Väliäho 73; Protevi 408). Pisters also links the manifestations of PTSD in *Stop-Loss* to the ‘the state of desubjectification necessary in combat [...] [which] has lasting, de-realising consequences on the mind’ (247).

The clearest example of this ‘desubjectification’ occurs during Brandon’s brawl with two car thieves, as the sound design evokes a hallucinatory regression into a combat state of mind, and a disoriented Brandon mistakes the thieves for ‘hajjis’. Here, the hypermediacy of the video diaries as a materialisation of collective memory aligns with an experience that can only be described as one of immediacy, with the collapsed temporality effecting a sense of Brandon’s virtual transport back to Iraq. This is echoed in irrational outbursts of violence among others in the network, as well as Steve’s garden trench-digging incident. In each of these cases, the symptoms of PTSD are fundamentally embodied, and seem to refute the trope of internalisation through their distinctly physical and networked, mediatised presentation. An interrelationship between PTSD and the political context is also minimally established through the film’s critique of the US Army’s stop-loss procedure, with Brandon’s trajectory throughout the film essentially being one of escape from both a forced re-enlistment and the inevitable re-activation of a de-subjectified state that this entails.

This haunting form of hypermediated spectatorship as PTSD is, however, posited as pertaining exclusively to the military network established around the production and viewing of the film’s diegetic video diaries. Peirce does not imply that this is a generalised condition of digitally networked spectatorship; indeed, the foregrounding of de-subjectified states seems to bind it quite specifically to the types of military training that Protevi describes as constitutive of a ‘new cognitive group subject’ (411). As such, *Stop-Loss* marks a particularly notable conjunction of the military logic of hypermediacy discussed in the previous chapter with the digitally networked forms of spectatorship at issue here. In stark contrast to *Battle for Haditha*, which frames spectatorial hypermediacy as a potential site of interactive and critical political engagement, *Stop-Loss* evokes a continuity between military and spectatorial hypermediacy on the level of de-subjectification.

*In the Valley of Elah* similarly explores hypermediated spectatorship through the networked connectivity of military video diaries. The diaries once again figure as a

mediatised form of memory, unfold serially throughout the film and, in a distinct parallel with *Stop-Loss*, are narrativised in such a way that they demarcate a comparable trajectory from buoyant camaraderie to psychological disintegration and PTSD. Both films are clearly concerned with the proliferation of violence among returning soldiers, with Penning's confession to Mike's murder similarly evoking a de-subjectified state which closely resembles that of Brandon in *Stop-Loss*. Although this murder, as well as several other tangential incidents of domestic violence among the military community, may also suggest that there is an equivalent collective dimension to the film's rendition of PTSD, it is actually rather more individualised than in *Stop-Loss* given that the diaries are framed by the investigatory structure as pertaining primarily to how the war has affected Mike (and possibly led to his death).

Despite this individualisation, the representation of PTSD once again refutes the tropes of internalisation and depoliticisation. The former is countered by the mediatisation of Mike's memories (as well as the film's emphasis on the materiality of the digital), while the latter is forcefully repudiated through the allusive alignment of the diary extracts with remediations of television news coverage of the Iraq War, implicitly mapping Mike's individual and psychological deterioration onto the contextual transition from celebrations of a successful invasion to the difficulties of occupation and counter-insurgency. As such, the individual trauma here is not a reductive abstraction of political disaffection into 'a personal ahistorical trauma that can be overcome' since the suffering is directly contextualised by the film's remediations (Westwell 81). Additionally, the positioning of Mike's death at the opening of the film precludes any possibility of PTSD functioning as a therapeutic salve within the realm of individual conscience.

*Elah* is perhaps most interesting, however, in the way it differs from *Stop-Loss* by positing the trans-subjective mediatisation of memory as traversing the specifically military realm within which Peirce contains it. Where this trans-subjectivity effect is strictly circumscribed within the military community in *Stop-Loss* due to their shared propensity for a regression into de-subjectified states, in *Elah* the networking of memory between Mike and Hank emerges from the military realm into the civilian. Furthermore, although the link between them is furnished by the digitally connected logic of hypermediacy which characterises all of the films covered in this chapter, it also contains a strong sense of the physical presence which is typically provided by immediacy. This sense of presence is conveyed by Hank's virtual inhabiting of Mike's



frazzled diary extract, which is supplemented (in this sequence only) by additional footage in order to create a more fluid and transparent reconstruction of the scenario.

The remediation of the video diary in this sequence can therefore be designated as evoking an experience of immediacy which is effected by the subjective logic of hypermediacy. While the film remains grounded in a hypermediated form of spectatorship which foregrounds the networked role of digital video diaries, it also reasserts the value of first-person witnessing to some degree, suggesting that a viable understanding of the conflict is derived not only from the hypermediated connectivity of the video diaries, but also from a transparent form of bearing witness to the atrocities that Mike has committed. This is not to say that *Elah* advocates a kind of balance between hypermediacy and immediacy; rather, it is one of the few contemporary war films to express the interdependency of these ‘logics’, offering the immersive presence of the experiential mode but qualifying this precisely as the reality-effect of a hypermediated connectivity.

By extending this into the civilian realm, the film also implies some degree of spectatorial imbrication in the network. Yet, clearly, this is not quite the same vicarious enjoyment of the body at risk exhibited by the experiential mode of mediation. The viewer is not quite invited to partake in a militarised diegetic pleasure through an embodied mode of identification, since the extra layering of Hank’s presence here (as further mediating the viewer’s approximation of Mike’s experience) burdens this scene with a particularly traumatic sense of witnessing. Analogising this sense of immediacy via hypermediacy with that of drones, I noted earlier that it constitutes a distinctive form of remote intimacy or virtual presence. One might even extend this claim to note that the figuration of the hypermediated network in *Elah* serves, like the drone kill-chain, to ‘br[ing] all those in the network much closer to the killing space’ (Gregory, “From a View to a Kill” 196). *Elah* determines spectatorial imbrication through this kind of networked intimacy, suggesting that, in the era of instantaneous digital transmission of war footage, the witnessing of such violence is no longer constrained to a purely military realm but inevitably permeates civilian life as a form of ‘inherited flashback’ (Stewart, *Closed Circuits* 182).

## 6. Conclusion

Having examined the mediating roles of the body, drones, simulations and digital media – and contextualised them in relation to the contemporary war film’s strategies of remediation – I am now in a position to formulate more generalised answers to the research questions posed at the outset of this work. Firstly, the relationship between embodiment and technological mediation in the context of contemporary warfare appears to be rather more complex than was initially hypothesised. Among the sources drawn upon in the literature review, there is a near unanimous positing of distanciation as the prime effect of recent military-technological developments. Virilio contends that the supplanting of the body by remote forms of mediation constitutes a fundamental ‘process of derealisation’, while Der Derian’s account of ‘virtuous war’ extends this claim into the contemporary realm of digital mediation to argue that the virtualising effects of remote, screen mediated combat have obscured or even ‘removed’ the embodied ‘reality of death’ (107; 9). The parallels drawn between gaming, military simulations, and actual digital weaponry interfaces (particularly drones) in the works of Lenoir and Stahl evoke a process of convergence which also tends to be framed as an indicator of virtualising distanciation, as in Ahmed and Wilkerson’s *Guardian* article “Dealing remote control death” which suggests an aesthetic and moral equivalence between gaming and drone operation in precisely this manner.

However, Stahl’s work provides some indication of a countervailing tendency in which embodied experience and digital mediation are aligned in interesting new ways, rather than being considered as mutually exclusive. Theorising this relationship through the interactive appeal to become a ‘virtual-citizen-soldier’, he argues that gaming, television and cinema increasingly evoke a ‘post 9/11 fever to virtually enter the body of the soldier through a first-person aesthetic’ (79). Similar conjunctions of embodiment and technicity can be found in Gregory, Holmqvist and Williams’ studies of drone mediation, as well as Väliaho’s work on military simulations. The former refute the typical characterisation of drones as virtualising and morally distancing (as in the aforementioned *Guardian* article), arguing that the interface is better considered as a form of ‘hyper-vision’ whose intimate detail has ‘brought all those in the network much closer to the killing space’ (Holmqvist 545; Gregory, “From a View to a Kill” 196). The proliferation of PTSD among drone pilots further suggests that there is an embodied and potentially traumatic component to this ‘hyper-vision’, however geographically remote

the operator may be. Similarly, the treatment of PTSD in virtual reality environments is considered by Väliäho to have a fundamentally ‘endogenous’ reality-effect which enables the therapeutic modulation of pre-subjective ‘affective and emotional charges’ or ‘bodily memory’ (70). However problematic the classification of PTSD may be as a depoliticisation of soldiers’ responses to war (as well as a cinematic trope; a theme to which I will return in the discussion below), its association with drones and simulations does nonetheless suggest that these ostensibly distancing technologies are perhaps not quite as disembodied in their effects as some critics claim.

Though these ostensibly contradictory tendencies toward distancing and embodied immediacy may appear irresolvable, on closer consideration they actually seem to constitute a dual, though not mutually exclusive, trajectory. In a purely geographical sense, the process of distancing that Virilio dates back to WWI and the origins of cinema undoubtedly continues unabated. Bracketing the intimacy effected by drone optics for a moment, it is inarguable that drones epitomise the increasingly remote and post-human waging of warfare by supplanting embodied presence with unmanned vehicles. While I am sceptical of Der Derian and Protevi’s framing of the CG environments used in military simulations as inherently virtualising or desensitising, there is nonetheless a different sense of distancing which emerges through networked simulation training in order to overcome the ‘deep-seated inhibition against one-on-one, face-to-face, cold-blooded killing on the part of some 98% of soldiers’ (Protevi 406). In this context, Protevi contends that individual agency or responsibility is displaced by the activation of ‘de-subjectified state[s]’, most often appearing in the form of networked, trans-subjective collectivities in which ‘the practical agent of killing is not the individual person or subject, but the emergent assemblage of military unit and non-subjective reflex or equally non-subjective “affect program”’ (407; 408). As I have suggested, this broadly coincides with certain aspects of the administration of drone strikes, which may similarly work to undermine the weight of individual responsibility by the dispersal of agency through the kill-chain.

Thus, the tendency toward distancing can primarily be defined geographically (concerning the remote waging of war), and in terms of a trans-subjective dispersal of individual agency. Alongside this perennial distancing of the body from the scene of warfare, the tendency toward immediacy can be more precisely located in digitally networked, typically screen-based modes of mediating this distance. Indeed, in many accounts this distance is not merely mediated but essentially collapsed, with the emergent media’s extraordinary capacity for interpellation creating a peculiar form of

remotely mediated intimacy. This technological fusing of disparate spaces also serves to effect a degree of convergence between military and civilian subject positions relative to the space of warfare, as in Der Derian's claim that wars are increasingly 'fought in the same manner as they are represented by real-time surveillance and TV "live-feeds"' (xxxix). In the case of drones, the distancing of the body is counteracted by the screen mediated 'exposure to high-resolution images of killing, including the details of casualties and body parts that would never be possible to capture with the human eye' (Holmqvist 542). This is slightly more complicated in the realm of simulations, though the NTC and ICT training applications do typically strive to engender an immersive combat experience from the safe distance of California desert recreations of Iraq and Afghanistan, while the VR interface of the *Virtual Iraq* treatment for PTSD effects a similarly remote activation of endogenous immediacy. Generally, then, one can characterise this imbrication of distance and immediacy as a regime of combat mediation which twins the connected or networked subjective logic of hypermediacy with the more transparent sense of presence that is associated with immediacy. The former reflects the digitally networked and remotely operated interfaces which characterise the contemporary military-technological apparatus, while the latter is brought back into focus by the reality-conferring effect of screens which offer a hypermediated revival of the same sense of presence previously realised by embodied witnessing.

These emergent trends in the military-technological context have significant repercussions for the contemporary war film, particularly in terms of the remediated relationship between the body and digital technologies, and in terms of the subject positions that are thereby delineated. As such, my film analyses have focussed predominantly on issues of remediation, immediacy, hypermediacy and embodiment, as well as the ethical implications of both diegetic (military) and spectatorial (civilian) subjectivities.

As noted above, the experiential mode can justly be characterised as foregrounding embodied perception to the exclusion of technological mediation, in what likely constitutes an attempt to reassert the singularity of cinematic embodiment and its evocation of first-person witnessing as the privileged mode for mediating warfare in the face of burgeoning competition from gaming and new digital connectivities such as social media platforms. This exclusion largely applies to military as well as media technologies, since the films tend to frame this kind of remote mediation as detracting from the visceral pleasures of combat. This is implicit in *Restrepo*'s transparent and

embodied first-person aesthetic, and more bluntly declared by the long-range artillery operator who laments ‘I just wish they were closer so I could’ve actually seen them when I killed them’. The binary relationship between embodiment and technological mediation is more substantially thematised in *The Hurt Locker* through the contrast drawn between Thompson’s robotically mediated IED disposal and James’ pleasure in putting his body at risk by disarming them manually. This division has been framed as ‘an implicit critique of the distance – both moral and physical – of remote targeting and weaponry’ (Burgoyne 12). Yet I have suggested that such arguments tend to overlook the fact that James willingly jettisons any form of technological distancing in order to maintain the pleasure of (or even addiction to) the contact high of unmediated, embodied presence. Bigelow’s reflexive framing of this theme would also suggest that the very notion of critiquing technological distancing through embodiment is somewhat undermined by both the diegetic and, implicitly, spectatorial ‘addiction’ to a visceral form of military-cinematic pleasure. Considered in relation to the wider context, such critiques are also problematic in assuming that technological mediation and embodiment are mutually exclusive, rather than, as Hansen argues, ‘complementary’, such that ‘neither one can be understood as a fall or contamination (or even a humanisation) of the other’ (*Bodies in Code* 79).

The same underlying assumptions permeate the first wave of cinematic remediations of drones, particularly *Body of Lies*, *Syriana* and *Zero Dark Thirty*. By maintaining a sharp aesthetic and ontological distinction between drone mediated space and the ground-level realm mediated by the embodied point-of-view of the heroic CIA agent, these films perpetuate the same fundamental division between the body and technology as the experiential mode. This opposition is perhaps most notably encapsulated by the extremes of, on the one hand, *Body of Lies*’ hypermediated presentation of drones as part of uniform digital surveillance aesthetic, and on the other, *Zero Dark Thirty*’s embodied mediation of the concluding raid on Osama bin Laden’s compound. Each of these films purports to be broadly critical of drone warfare, in part enacted by privileging the immediacy of embodied points-of-view as a key determinant of spectatorial pleasure and maintaining a hypermediated ‘othering’ of the drone aesthetic. This seems to betray a certain unease with the notion of transparently remediating drones, as if any overlap between the drone interface and the cinematic aesthetic would potentially constitute a form of spectatorial complicity in the virtualisation of war. Yet this again relies on the problematic assumption that military-technological mediation is solely distancing and that the body is a site of potential

resistance to this rather than fundamentally imbricated in the production of novel forms of remotely mediated immediacy. This latter aspect, the ‘hyper-vision’ of drone optics, is entirely neglected by each of these films, which thus provide a rather narrow interpretation of and partial engagement with the military-technological context as outlined above (Holmqvist 545).

Furthermore, the type of subject positions articulated by each of the films which maintain this fundamental division between embodiment and technological mediation tend to undermine any critique of war by proffering an embodied mode of address which encourages a complicit form of identification with military subjects. This appears to have developed from the Vietnam era subjectivisation of the war film, in which embodiment and internalisation were foregrounded as a means of depoliticising and detechnologising cinematic representations of conflict. Embodied mediation continues to serve as means of obscuring the political and technological context here, though the bodies in question now tend to be those of actively serving military subjects rather than the scarred and traumatised figure of the Vietnam veteran. This shift is augmented by journalistic embedding, with the journalist’s point-of-view elided from cinematic adaptations of such material in order to strengthen the alignment of diegetic and spectatorial subjectivities, as well as the proliferation of what I have termed the ‘grunt’s truth’ rhetoric. The latter offers a self-justifying form of depoliticisation through the problematic assumption that the grunt is inherently disconnected from the politics of the war and interested only in the quotidian enjoyment of the visceral excitement of killing.

Contemporary forms of embodied mediation thus tend to be complicit not only in depoliticising the subjective experience of war but also fostering a potentially disturbing link this kind of diegetic military pleasure in violence and a mode of spectatorial engagement predicated on embodied identification. While the question of whether the viewer actually derives pleasure from acts of killing remains open and contentious, the identificatory space opened up by such texts nonetheless does not foreclose the possibility of precisely this kind of vicarious enjoyment of mediated violence. I have argued that this link is most aptly defined by Stahl’s notion of the ‘virtual-citizen-soldier’, which outlines the viewer’s position as one demarcated by ‘identification with and sympathy for the soldier [which] combine with exhilarating alchemy in a kind of death simulator’ (43). It also coincides, somewhat more broadly, with Bolter and Grusin’s outline of the ‘version of the contemporary mediated self... under the logic of transparent immediacy’, by which the viewer ‘empathise[s] with others by occupying their point of view’ (232). The sense of empathy foregrounded in

both of these accounts demonstrates precisely how the embodied first-person mode of address circumvents the supposed neutrality or apoliticism attributed to it by the ‘grunt’s truth’ rhetoric. Finally, I have also drawn upon the works of Ryan, Griffiths and Hansen to explore the immersive quality of this form of spectatorship. In particular, the evocation of embodied presence as a means of exploring the subjective experience of war, as well as the de-framing effect of this immersive sense of being enveloped within the combat space, contribute to generating a representation of war defined solely by the individualistic approximation of military subjectivity, without any elucidation of the wider political or technological context in which the conflict takes place. At its most reductive, this decontextualisation effect may engender a regressive fantasy of face-to-face combat within an oddly depoliticised and detechnologised representation of war. Ultimately, for Stahl, this immersive and embodied form of ‘militainment’ comes to supplant ‘propaganda’ as a new mode of civilian/spectatorial ‘authorisation’ by virtue of the ‘integration of war into existent practices of consumption’ (138).

However, this division between embodiment and technology does not permeate the entirety of the corpus here, and indeed I have encountered many films which intertwine the logics of hypermediacy and immediacy to posit a more complex diegetic relationship between the body and digital forms of military-technological mediation. In the realm of drones, both *Good Kill* and *Five Thousand Feet is the Best* evoke a hypermediated subjective logic of networked connectivity, most notably in the way that the former fragments the bodies of drone operators in the opening sequence to fashion a representation of the hybrid human-technological drone ‘assemblage’ as described by Williams (381). This is conjoined with a depiction of drone optics that differs from *Body of Lies*, *Syriana* and *Zero Dark Thirty* by virtue of its striking immediacy, both in terms of a transparent alignment of drone and film cameras, and in terms of the high-resolution intimacy outlined by Gregory and Holmqvist. Farocki’s *Serious Games* similarly engages a mode of military subjectivity defined by the networked hypermediacy of simulated training environments. The framing and editing in the first film of this series, *Watson is Down*, expresses a form of collective operation that distinctly parallels Protevi’s account of the ‘extended/distributed cognition’ of the trans-subjective ‘cybernetic organism, the fighting group’, while *Immersion* uses a split-screen aesthetic to evoke the endogenous immediacy of the *Virtual Iraq* treatment for PTSD (411; 412). The films covered in my final chapter (*Battle for Haditha*, *Redacted*, *Stop-Loss* and *In the Valley of Elah*) were included more for their articulation of spectatorial rather than (diegetic) military subjectivities, but it is worth noting

nonetheless that their aesthetics do evince a more fluid interpenetration of embodied and digitally mediated (though in this case, of media rather than strictly military technologies) points-of-view than the experiential mode and the first wave of CIA drone films.

Curiously, PTSD figures more prominently in this second group of films than it does in those which promulgate an embodied perspective to the exclusion of technological mediation. This marks a substantial difference from the Vietnam era figuration of PTSD as an internalising and depoliticising withdrawal which relocates war to the realm of an individual conscience. Indeed, PTSD demands to be treated somewhat differently here given that it is now intimately bound up with the immediacy of remote forms of mediation and thus rather more materialised and (technologically) contextualised than in previous incarnations. This is not to say, however, that the internalising trope has disappeared completely, but rather that this corpus reflects a greater diversity in the ways in which PTSD is represented. For instance, in *5,000ft*, the recursive and psycho-geographic disturbance of identity and spatio-temporal continuity is posited as a specific effect of drones' radical fusion of military and civilian space, as well as the transparent trauma of witnessing death through the hyper-vision of drone optics (as outlined by the voiceover of the drone pilot in the film's documentary strand). Although *Good Kill* does initially indicate a similarly contextualised grounding for its portrait of PTSD (particularly via the moral critique of CIA practices), the film ultimately resorts to a more problematic reinstatement of internalisation via the concluding act's troubling manner of cathartically cleansing Egan's conscience. Finally, *Immersion* encapsulates perhaps the most extreme form of internalisation through the endogenous imagery produced by the user's interactive experience of *Virtual Iraq*, yet the radically new conjunction of the body and VR here necessitates a reconceptualisation of the virtual as an embodied 'capacity [...] to be in excess of one's actual state' rather than a form of affectless distancing (Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media* 51).

While the films which maintain a division between embodied and technological forms of mediation can be ascribed a relatively consistent set of characteristics – particularly an immersive and complicit mode of embodied identification – the spectatorial subjectivities evoked by this second grouping of films (i.e. those which more pertinently reflect the new regime of combat mediation as conjoining the subjective logic of hypermediacy with a remotely mediated form of immediacy) evince a much greater variety. This is perhaps to be expected given that the embodied mode of



address has distinct lineage within war cinema while the remediated aesthetics of the drone interface, for instance, are relatively new and thus not yet bound up with any established set of genre tropes. Contrary to the implicit assumptions of those films which foreground embodiment to the exclusion of military technologies, however, the act of remediating these technological interfaces here does not inherently delimit a spectatorial position of complicity in the virtualisation of war. This is in part because, as I have argued, this assumption is embedded within a somewhat outmoded conceptualisation of combat mediation. Yet even if one sets aside the notion of ‘virtualisation’, it would still not quite be accurate to say that the remediation of these technologies necessarily entails the propagation of the militarised point-of-view of drone targeting or simulation training as a civilian mode of imaging war. Indeed, many of these films deftly negotiate a diegetic evocation of hypermediated, conditioned and de-subjectified military subjectivities while retaining scope for more critical spectatorial positions.

For example, the remediation of drones in *5,000ft* does evoke some degree of spectatorial immersion in drone mediated perception, yet this is fundamentally effected in terms of the disturbed subjective experience of blurred military and civilian space rather than complicity in drone targeting per se. This is primarily because Fast’s remediation of drones (while maintaining a sense of their high-resolution intimacy and aligning them with the film camera) performs a series of significant inversions such that the roving drone point-of-view in the documentary strand of the film turns its focus on civilian US landscapes rather than remote combat spaces, and the Hellfire missile in the fictional strand is deployed against, rather than by, a metafictional surrogate of the drone pilot. One might argue that the disorienting fracturing of identity and spatio-temporal continuity constitutes a form of virtualisation, if by ‘virtual’ one specifically denotes a sense of embodied presence which is distributed across military and civilian space, but certainly not in the sense of an affectless and morally-disengaged form of killing. The recursive mise-en-abyme structure and looped projection align diegetic and spectatorial subject positions but, in contrast to the complicity entailed by embodied identification, this psycho-geographic disorientation on both levels of subjectivity seems to denote a more context specific evocation of the ways in which drone operators’ remotely mediated immediacy increasingly converges with the civilian experience of digitally mediated conflict. Furthermore, the film does not neglect to address the traumatic aspect of this new, technologically enhanced form of intimate yet

remote witnessing, and thus redresses the visceral pleasure offered by the embodied mode of address.

Farocki's *Serious Games* similarly evokes hypermediated military subjectivities without translating this into a complicit spectatorial position. This is largely due to the employment of a split-screen aesthetic in *Watson is Down* and *Immersion* (though the oscillations between live-action and CG in *Three Dead* fulfil a comparable distancing function). The former simultaneously depicts the networked, hypermediated operation of the trans-subjective military unit and the CG training application in which they are collectively immersed; but by maintaining this dual perspective precludes any correlative spectatorial immersion in the affect- and reflex-conditioning realm of *Virtual Battlespace 2*. The split-screen serves a similar purpose in *Immersion*, depicting the HMD-wearing soldier/patient juxtaposed with his/her first-person point-of-view within the *Virtual Iraq* application. While the endogenous experience of the user here may mark the most extreme instantiation of depoliticised and internalised PTSD, this is not an experience that the viewer explicitly partakes in. I have suggested that Farocki uses the split-screen form to evoke this hallucinatory dimension as a process occurring in the interstices of the two frames, such that the affective disturbance visible in the patient's embodied performance determines an experience of *Virtual Iraq* which differs strikingly from the viewer's. As such, the juxtaposition of radically differing regimes of the image here engages analytically with the hypermediacy of contemporary warfare without co-opting the viewer into the depoliticised and internalised depiction of combat engendered by VR. Further parallels with *5,000ft* can be identified in *Immersion*'s circular narrative structure and looped projection, which in this case serve to disrupt the sense of therapeutic closure typically concomitant with PTSD as a cinematic trope.

Hypermediated modes of spectatorial subjectivity are evoked by the films covered in my final chapter to differing effects, yet the forms of networked connectivity demarcated by these films bear little resemblance to the de-subjectified states or dispersal of agency found in the hypermediated logic of military subjectivities<sup>22</sup>. While *Redacted* depicts digital mediations of the war as unanimously perpetuating a sadistic perspective which contributes to escalating cycles of retributive violence, *Battle for Haditha* deploys a similarly hypermediated aesthetic to suggest the formation of critical

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<sup>22</sup> There is a partial exception to this tendency in *Stop-Loss*, which does posit some continuity between military and spectatorial subjectivities, though this is because the mode of spectatorship staged in the film is that of the specifically circumscribed group of soldiers whose viewing of video diaries re-evokes the presumed conditioning of de-subjectified states of killing.

and interactive political collectivities through the metafictional suturing of the film's diegesis and non-fictional remediated fragments of Iraq War reportage. Both, however, essentially characterise hypermediated spectatorship as reflexive rather than empathetic, thus highlighting the shifting determinants of an authentic understanding of contemporary warfare from an approximation of embodied witnessing to a reflexive engagement with the hypermediated politics of this digitised context. *In the Valley of Elah* conjoins this hypermediated sense of digital connectivity, associated in this case with the networked spectatorship of military video diaries, with a sense of immediacy via Hank's hallucinatory inhabiting of his son's diary footage as a kind of 'inherited flashback' (Stewart 182). The immediacy afforded *via hypermediacy* here differs substantially from the embodied form of immediacy promulgated by the experiential mode; rather than fostering a complicit form of identification with military subjects, it transposes the sense of witnessing common to both into a specific effect of the fusion of military and civilian realms engendered by the networked connectivity of digital mediation. This constitutes a unique replication of the emergent regime of immediacy via hypermediacy on the level of spectatorial subjectivity, and one which thereby implies that the digital mediation of war, like the networked drone kill-chain, may 'br[ing] all those in the network much closer to the killing space' (Gregory, "From a View to a Kill" 196).

For scholars and critics who posit the embodied 'reality' of war as a privileged cinematic perspective from which to critique military-technological distancing, it may seem somewhat suspect to celebrate film's hybridisation with digital modes of mediating war in this manner. Yet I have demonstrated that it is actually the immersively embodied mode of address which tends to foster a rather problematic complicity in military-cinematic violence, while the films which evince a greater willingness to remediate these digital forms not only provide a more pertinent reflection of the contemporary regime of combat mediation but also seem to delimit more critical, reflexive and politically-engaged spectatorial positions.

Arguably, the identification of this trend toward a new, hypermediated form of ethically and politically engaged war cinema is made possible by the adoption of a hybrid critical framework that attends to the digital reconfiguration of war cinema and thus redresses (to return to the issue with which I began the thesis) what David Slocum refers to as the 'dearth of attention to the intersection of military discourse, film and other media over the last decade' (187-188). Slocum's critique of outmoded approaches to the war genre – explicitly, the question of 'whether the critical frameworks developed

for the analysis of the Second World War, Vietnam, or even the Cold War are appropriate to the war on terror' – seems especially pertinent given that the forms of political opposition articulated by many of these films are quite explicitly bound up with the digitally reconfigured spectatorial relationship to contemporary mediations of warfare (192).

Indeed, the highly fragmented political nature of the cinematic corpus which I have analysed here might further be considered as reflective of a distinct erosion of the ideologies previously employed to shape the political or discursive meaning of warfare. Certainly, the invocation of grand narratives of patriotic sacrifice so prevalent in WWII cinema finds little if any echo in Iraq and Afghanistan war films. The transformation of the historically specific into what Westwell terms the 'mythic' level of history, exemplified by *Wake Island*'s linking of 'difficult work requiring great sacrifice at the local level' with 'the progressive advancement of American liberal democracy', is largely absent even from ostensibly pro-war contemporary films.

This is particularly evident in debates around the politics of *The Hurt Locker*. For instance, although Slavoj Žižek contends that film's 'ideology' is basically equivalent to 'the sentimental celebration of the US Army's humanitarian role' in John Wayne's more bluntly propagandist *The Green Berets* (1968), it is nonetheless posited as present 'in its very invisibility', while Robert Burgoyne suggests that Bigelow's film 'departs radically from genre convention, disdaining the formulas of older war films – the pathos formulas of sacrifice and loss' in favour of a 'private experience and pleasure in war' which 'takes place outside any larger meta-narrative of nation or history' (13). Thus, even if *The Hurt Locker* is read as broadly enunciating a position in favour of US intervention in Iraq, it does so in terms that differ strikingly from the mythic discourse of a film like *Wake Island*. Distilling the narration of history down to the perspective of a soldier's decontextualised and embodied sensory impressions ensures that it remains pointedly specific, with the film's implicit ideology/politics hinging on the interpretation of a somewhat ambiguous individualisation of combat experience. *Zero Dark Thirty* – perhaps one of the most problematised and stigmatised of contemporary war films given its apparent advocacy of torture – adopts a similarly individualised and procedural approach to the manhunt for Osama bin Laden, while *Restrepo*'s complicity derives from the particular rendition of individualistic and embodied identification with a depoliticised construct of 'grunt' subjectivity rather than any mythic invocation of American values, identity, or historical destiny.

Likewise, the initial framing of the Vietnam War as a localised struggle between two ideologies competing for global dominance seems to lack any correlation with the context of Iraq and Afghanistan, especially during the invasion / early occupation timeframe of most of the films discussed here (though the later emergence of ISIS/Daesh might be considered partially analogous). Although this meta-narrative became more subject to contestation as the conflict continued, it did nonetheless envelop the war with a degree of ideological significance that is rarely even articulated in the present context. The overarching notion of a ‘War on Terror’ is perhaps the closest contemporary equivalent to these ideologically-driven grand narratives, yet this has failed to imbue recent conflicts and my cinematic corpus with any degree of the ‘mythic’ resonance underlying WWII and (albeit to a lesser degree) Vietnam. Typically, it manifests in little more than peripheral cinematic remediations of George W. Bush speeches, and is often dismissed as a feeble rhetoric serving only to obscure the falsified evidential grounds for the invasion of Iraq.

Contemporary cinematic critiques of the Iraq and Afghanistan Wars are equally subject to political or ideological fragmentation, especially in comparison to the Vietnam era’s more unified and cohesive anti-war movement. Even the most stridently anti-war films among the corpus, among which *Redacted* is often singled out as such, tend to ground their critiques in highly specific contexts, and may be perceived as singling out aberrant instances of the US military’s abuse of power rather than establishing a comprehensive ideological opposition to the war. Garrett Stewart’s “Digital Fatigue” laments precisely this lack of oppositional cohesion, claiming that in the ‘new digital milieu, anything approaching to [sic] oppositional cinema in a realist combat mode risks being thwarted by the requisite authenticities of its own visualization’ (47). Comparing cinematic critiques of the Iraq War with those of Vietnam, Stewart continues:

Retrospection is invaluable, but also needed is another kind of distance, technical rather than historical: a stylistic distance lately telescoped or vanished altogether in the new Iraq regime of participant record. The fact that the U.S. is still in the thick of the Mideast killing isn’t all that prevents a clear ethical and political perspective, then. On top of this, indeed layered directly over it, the continuous video traces of such violence within plot leave next to no space for the visual rhetoric of exposé. In analytic as well as digital terms, there’s no exposure time, no lag for ironic or polemical reframing. There’s only the electronic tracking of

terror moment by moment. The legacy of oppositional cinema, and its leverage, is in large part forfeited by just this relentless instantaneous videography. (47-8)

However, contrary to Stewart's contention that 'oppositional cinema' is compromised by the necessity of remediating such digital interfaces, I have suggested that this process goes beyond a mere striving for aesthetic authenticity to enact a subtle but significant development in the spectatorial relationship to mediated conflict. As such, contemporary cinematic forms of critiquing war may have undergone a wide-ranging transformation from previous eras in which ideological conflicts were more overtly staged, with resistance now to be located in a rather more micro-level enunciation of ethical subject positions which establish a critical and politicised distance from diegetic military actions.

This shift is, as I have argued, necessarily effected by a host of contextual factors – most prominently, the proliferation of new digital networks for mediating conflict within both the military-technological apparatus and the civilian realm. Given that this enacts a convergence of military and spectatorial subject positions relative to the contemporary mediation of war, then, the turn from embodied modes of representing warfare through an individualistic approximation of military subjectivity to a nuanced spectatorial ethics of digitally-connected, remote yet intimate witnessing, is key to the continuing relevance of oppositional war cinema. I have found evidence of this right across the spectrum of contemporary representations of war, from mainstream Hollywood genre pictures such as *In the Valley of Elah* and *Good Kill*, through more independent/auterist productions like *Battle for Haditha* or *Redacted*, to the gallery contexts of *Five Thousand Feet is the Best* and *Serious Games*. These films, I believe, directly address the vital issue of war's transformation by digital technologies and produce a pertinent spectatorial ethics of digital connectivity through which viewers finally confront warfare not merely via the imaginary occupation of the soldierly body, but as remote yet implicated viewers with distinct ethical and political responsibilities.

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## Appendix: Cinematic Corpus

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