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Matthew Moser Miller
Denison University

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What Else Can You Ask For?: *The Struggle for Hegemonic Masculinity in* The War Tapes

Matthew Moser Miller '10

The 2006 film *The War Tapes* would arguably represent the most "realistic" film portrayal of the American soldier's experience in the Iraq; taken from footage shot by the soldiers in-country and interviews with their families and significant others, the characters in the film are real people living their lives. At the same time, *The War Tapes* being viewed is a distillation of roughly 1000 hours of footage into a 90-minute film (Greene). The integral part played by both the editor and director of *The War Tapes* (and film in general) in the creation of the film's narrative is acknowledged by the motto of Docurama, the video label producing the DVD: "Everything else is pure fiction". But within the constructed narrative of the film, the three main characters can be seen simultaneously constructing their own masculinities and having those masculinities being constructed by the cinematography and editing of the film. Although Sergeant Steve Pink, Sergeant Zack Bazzi, and Specialist Mike Moriarty come to the National Guard from a variety of backgrounds and are motivated by different pressures, each one struggles, through the course of the film, to validate and adequately perform his masculinity for families, communities, superiors, and the American people at large. In their struggles for masculine validity, these soldiers are faced with the competition between and the contradictions within the United States' overarching hegemonic masculinity and the particular hegemonic masculinity of the American military.

The primary theoretical framework for this argument is drawn from R.W. Connell's articulations of hegemonic and marginalized masculinities. Connell uses the term "hegemonic masculinity" to refer to whichever "form of masculinity is culturally exalted" in a given time or context, and stresses that such hegemonic masculinities are fluid, subject to constant modification and challenge by alternative masculinities (38). This conceptualization of hegemonic masculinity as *temporarily* dominant and subject to change is an essential one to my argument; at the same time, I qualify Connell's contention with the explicit acknowledgment of hegemonic masculinities that exist simultaneously and that can act severally upon a given individual through that person's membership in overlapping or multiple group identities. Pink's, Bazzi's, and Moriarty's position as National Guardsmen make explicit their inhabiting of both the civilian and military spheres, and provide an apt study for the mulitiplicity of masculinities, each hegemonic in its particular arena. Connell's description of marginalization, which characterizes "the relations between the masculinities in dominant and subordinate classes or ethnic groups," also accurately addresses the treatment

of those *within* a given group whose masculinity is marginalized for its differences (as is the case for Bazzi).

Additionally, the theoretical structure of my argument relies heavily on Judith Butler's idea of "performativity" as it relates to gender. While Butler originally applied her theory of performativity to alter the definition of gender and allow for a multiplicity of genders, the concept of gender as a performance which is not "an internal essence of gender… [but] manufactured through a sustained set of acts" applies particularly to the ways in which individual create their masculinities (Butler xv).

It is through this lens of masculinity as performative that we can analyze the efforts of Pink, Bazzi, and Moriarty to conform to the expectations of hegemonic masculinities—that, rather than being inherent, an individual's masculinity exists in a negotiated and enacted form that, in these soldiers' cases, centers on acceptably embodying the ideals of their hegemonic masculinities.

In Sergeant Steve Pink, the film creates a character that embodies the struggles an individual can have to conform to the ideals of an emotionless soldier while still satisfying the arbiters of military masculinity—namely, his superiors. When Pink is first introduced, he states straightforwardly that his motivation for joining the National Guard in college was for the economic assistance, "a rash decision". Immediately, however, Pink begins hedging, and tells the audience that those years were a "time in my life I needed to test myself, to make sure I could accomplish something". Even as he offers us a logical motivation for involvement in the military, he is quick to support it with an ideological underpinning. The military masculinity argues that participation will constitute an accomplishment, a test. It is not enough for Pink to have an understandable motive—he must have one that will play into the narrative of military masculinity.

Prior to his deployment (in the film), one of Pink's voiceovers acknowledges that fear exists among the soldiers and that it is, to an extent, understandable. According to Pink, this is neither the norm nor desirable; "if you let fear get to you…you're really not going to be doing your job". It is clearly a struggle for the soldiers to conform to the hegemonic masculinity's expectation that there will be no fear. Because it interferes with the mission (both military and masculine), that fear is suppressed as unacceptable and dangerous. Soldier must enact a masculinity that discounts their fear in order to behave acceptably in the hegemonic military masculinity.

Pink later draws other connections between an acceptable masculine identity and the ability to do one's job. This is most apparent after the car bombing outside Taji, where we have footage of the spot beside an exploded car where an Iraqi body had just been removed. His tone as he describes the scene is matter of fact, and is careful to have no emotion as he views the blood stains from the largely destroyed torso. An exhibition of sympathetic emotion in the circumstance is unacceptable to the conception

of appropriate masculine behavior. Pink's account of some of the soldiers "shaking and screaming," of "medics who were terrified and couldn't perform," is devaluing of these soldiers partly because of their inappropriate display of emotion—that taboo terror and its physical expressions—and partly because it made the individuals unable to act in their duties. His description of the medics has connotations of sexual inadequacy, but they also speak to Butler's performativity. On the one hand, medical care has associations of the feminine; on the other, the concept of "brothers in arms" and a duty to help those in need that is so strongly emphasized in the American military's identity. This contradiction is a sign of overlapping masculinities, as the men are pulled at once to eschew caregiving and to do their duty as military personnel. Because the medics are unable to perform their quasi-masculine role of helping the wounded, that contradiction is erased; their masculinity is unacceptable because their behaviors are not acceptable in either of the hegemonic masculinities (that of the American civilian and of the U.S. soldier) that they are expected to embody. Because of this, they lose any status of respect that embodying a military masculinity would otherwise have garnered. Had "one of those incompetent medical officers" instructed Pink to stop helping the Iraqi civilians (who were not allowed to die in U.S.-controlled Camp Taji), he "would have slit his throat right there".

A common theme of Pink's struggle to control his sympathetic emotional expressions is the way in which he funnels these emotions into the anger that functions as the only acceptable emotional response for a soldier. His sympathy and desire to help the injured Iraqis is subverted into a form of anger; were he forbidden to help, he would have reacted with violence to a superior officer. His response is similar when he discusses the conditions faced by the TCN (third-country national) employees of Halliburton-owned shipping company KBR:

> "[This driver] is expected to drive a
> vehicle with no window and no
> windshield. Ya know why? 'Cause he's
> not KBR. 'Cause he's not worth enough
> to this operation for him to have any
> kind of safety whatsoever."

His understandable sympathy for these drivers cannot be expressed in positive terms (that is, as a helpful urge); rather, it must be expressed negatively toward KBR.

This diversion of emotion into anger as a means of reinforcing masculine identity is nowhere more apparent than in Pink's actions and later video responses to the scene of a firefight in or around Fallujah. His first emotional expression is one of guilt at "comin' in and takin' pictures" where "a lotta guys lost their lives"; he quickly covers this by expressing pride about "the job the guys in first squad did" (whose masculine performance is again tied to work) and saying that he was "jealous we [his company]

weren't able to get those guys and kill 'em". This desire to kill the enemy is both understandable in the context of Pink's exposure to a military masculinity and in light of the serious injury of one of the sergeants of first squad. These emotions are likely what motivated him to film the bodies of the enemy dead accompanied, as Pink puts it, by "a few choice words".

As Pink describes the command's assessment of the footage as "unappropriate," his frustration is clear. This anger is two-fold; he has been denied the opportunity to validate his masculinity by facing direct combat, and then applied his anger at the enemy dead (in the form of verbal rather than physical abuse). His subsequent chastisement for his statements about the dead suggests that his commanders, as arbiters of acceptable military masculinity, do not recognize this behavior as within suitably "masculine" bounds. Pink's tone nearly pleads with the interviewer as he addresses the military's contradictions by reminding them that "if we're trained…to kill these guys, how do you expect us to talk? Whadda you want me to say? 'Aw, jeez, I'm sorry'? I don't know". The frustration that Pink feels stems from the contradictory directions of acceptable masculine behaviors. He is trained to demonize and kill the enemy, then expected to switch off that animosity as soon as they are dead. In effect, Pink isn't allowed to embody the military masculinity (which will, in turn, validate his masculinity in the broader hegemony) that he's told he ought to enact.

Unlike Pink, Sergeant Bazzi seems fully comfortable with the shifts between his military masculinity and that of the civilian hegemony to be accepted as a valid masculine actor. Instead, Bazzi's struggle for masculinity moves beyond the contradictions between politics and combat and surface in his marginalization within his military unit. He initially cites travel as the primary reason he joined the military, and flatly states that most of the other soldiers probably don't want to go to Iraq; later in the film (particularly while in-country), Bazzi repeatedly asserts that all soldiers want combat. In his early interviews, Bazzi's statement that, despite most soldiers' reticence, "they're doin it [going to Iraq]. What else can you ask for from a man?" suggests that he has been indoctrinated to think of military duty as an obligation for masculine performance. Bazzi continues, throughout the film, to acknowledge both his personal recognition of the war as immoral and his desire for action. In an expression of sympathy unmatched by any of the other characters, Bazzi relinquishes the moral high ground, saying that "the insurgents' got their principles, and we got ours. You gotta respect that". His recognition, on a cognitive level, that the insurgency has the same validity as the American military presence does not prevent him from "wanting one thing, and one thing only: combat…The hell with the morality of it". For Bazzi, his masculinity is not contingent upon marginalizing the masculinity of the enemy, but on expressing it as a soldier.

Bazzi's sympathy and refusal to marginalize the Iraqis stem partly from his position as the internally marginalized masculinity. Born in Lebanon and fluent in Arabic, he is viewed by his fellow soldiers with a sort

of joking suspicion. One of the other soldiers, while filming Bazzi interact with several Iraqi youth, claims to "think he's a spy, don't quite trust him; he [Bazzi] is plotting against us…what a traitor". Despite his position of authority as both an NCO and a member of the military, his masculinity is marginalized because aspects of his identity stray from the hegemonic ideal. In that same scene, another soldier states, as some laugh off-screen, that "today we kill Bazzi and everybody that looks like Bazzi". Even to his fellow soldiers, Bazzi is conflated with the enemy because of his aberrances from the acceptable masculinity. It is revealed, late in the film, that Bazzi's name is Zahir; his choice to go by "Zack" suggests an effort to fit in that belies his claims of indifference to others' opinions.

This need to affirm his masculinity as American is made explicit by Bazzi's mother. She asserts that "he felt the Army give him this plan and make him man, more than raised by woman," linking Bazzi's career to a desire to be suitably masculine despite the absence of American male role models in his life. In order to be a suitable man, Bazzi must be *made* into one. Furthermore, Bazzi's status as a legal alien is revealed near the end of the film—significantly, after his deployment to Iraq. Although Bazzi claims that his role as a soldier was "not…to make [him] more of an American or legitimize [him] in someone else's eyes," the juxtaposition of the voiceover with the footage of his swearing-in ceremony of citizenship is clearly intended to suggest the opposite to the audience.

Of the three characters, Specialist Mike Moriarty provides the most detailed portrayal of an individual struggling to reassert his masculinity as a part of the hegemony. Throughout the film, we see signs of Moriarty's modification of his past and his motives to fit his narrative with that of the ideal hegemonic masculinity. When Moriarty is first introduced, he tells a version of his military origin story that has his presence in the National Guard as a response to the attacks of September 11th (thereby claiming patriotism as his motive); at the same time, he describes telling the recruiter to slot him "into a unit only if they go into Iraq". This temporal inconsistency at first seems to be representative of his desire to justify his Iraq deployment in patriotic terms. When it is later revealed that Moriarty's National Guard unit (in his first stint) was nearly deployed to Iraq in the Gulf War, an additional layer of meaning is added to his qualification to the recruiter about any future deployment. Previously denied the opportunity to be in a combat zone and fully prove his military masculinity, Moriarty's can be read as viewing Iraq as the site where his masculinity might be reasserted. By deploying in Iraq—by 'finishing the job' that he had been denied—Moriarty could validate his masculinity in his own eyes.

Moriarty's account of his history are, however, noticeably silent on certain issues. It is Randi, Mike's wife, who reveals that he had been laid off from his job and had worked for a year as a "stay-at-home dad". This inability on Moriarty's part to provide for his family economically and his adoption of a traditionally feminized role struck blows to his ability to

perform the hegemonic masculine ideal; it becomes clear through the course of the film that one of Moriarty's motivations for going to Iraq was the belief that combat service would serve to validate his aspirations to hegemonic masculinity. Randi references this hole in Moriarty's masculinity, saying that "he felt…something was missing…Mike needed to do this". The need to reassert his masculinity also comes through in many of Moriarty's statements; at one point, he expresses his wish to "hopefully…[become] someone's hero" through his military service. But the clearest articulation of Moriarty's hopes come in an instant message to his wife shown in the film: "This is what I want:…you to be proud of your husband and for the kids to see daddy as a good man who was brave". Moriarty not only reiterates the characteristics of the hegemonic masculinity's ideal male, but also treats them as literally performative—that is, he wants his actions to create a desired perception in his audience.

Moriarty, more than either Bazzi or Pink, expresses a personal frustration when he returns from deployment. He has physical problems with his back and hands from the body armor and gunner duties, but his primary anger comes from his interaction with the people he has returned to. A voice-over from Moriarty's civilian supervisor recounts the assurances given to Mike that "when you come back through that door, it's gonna be like you never left". While this statement was no doubt intended to reassure Moriarty of his job security, it contains a subtext: nothing will have changed, including the way you are viewed. Moriarty, who hoped to have his masculinity validated by his combat duty, is not viewed any differently by his coworkers or community members. He tells the audience in an interview that

> "My frustration coming back is, I talk to
> guys at work, an' nobody cares. I guess
> it's [that] they don't understand…You
> asked me to look at them [Moriarty's
> war pictures],…give me the goddamned
> respect of looking at my pictures. [Do]
> you have any idea what I've done?"

Even when only viewing it in text, the anger and bewilderment are palpable. Moriarty is outraged and helpless because his masculinity isn't confirmed; no one *does* have any idea what he's done. Even his wife, whom "he so badly wants…to understand what he went through" flatly states that she "will never understand". His effort to perform his masculinity, regardless of how closely his performance adhered to the script, has not altered the way in which he and his masculinity are viewed.

With each of the soldiers, we see men striving to fit in, to be accepted into the hegemonic masculinity of American society. Each has many of the components of the ideal American male: one has a college education; another, a family; all three (in the eyes of the U.S. Census Bureau) are white. But this, in the end, makes no difference. Pink, Bazzi,

and Moriarty all try to more closely fit into the hegemony's ideal through their military participation, and they fail to do so. The metaphorical chinks in their masculinity are more important than what they have. Pink enacts his military masculinity, and is reprimanded for it; Bazzi, whose story is quintessentially American, remains a marginalized actor within even his own unit; Moriarty, so desperate to have his military service alter the way he is viewed, feels he is met with a vague acknowledgement and lack of understanding. The military masculinity that all three soldiers invested in was not able to provide them with the wider validation in the American hegemonic masculinity. The film leaves the audience with a bitter subtext: that regardless of a man's efforts to achieve full membership to the hegemonic ideal, to perform his masculinity just as he is directed, it cannot win him unqualified recognition as 'a man'.

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