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Between Unsanitized Depiction and 'Sensory Overload': The Deliberate Ambiguities of Generation Kill (HBO, 2008)

Monica Michlin

- ¹ The HBO mini-series *Generation Kill* (2008) is a faithful adaptation of most of the events narrated in Evan Wright's eponymous, embedded "invasion diary" published in 2004. In doing away with the journalist's first-person voice by shunning voice-over narrative, the series squarely shifts its focus to the grunts, replicating the point of view of most combat films on Iraq – in particular Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* released that same year. It also mirrors the perspective of (earlier) embedded documentaries like Tucker and Epperlein's *Gunner Palace* (2004), Ian Olds and Garrett Scott's *Occupation: Dreamland* (2005) or Deborah Scranton's *The War Tapes* (2006). Simon and Burns' fiction, adapted from a non-fiction narrative, seems mainly intent on revising the 2003 media coverage of the invasion, which, by 2008, was old news for viewers who had watched documentaries deconstructing media representations of the rationale for war and of the war itself¹. The series has to address both the artistic difficulty of renewing war film tropes as well as the paradox of construing a variety of publics, from active duty Marines (who have left hundreds of laudatory commentaries on YouTube²) to anti-Iraq war spectators.
- ² Disillusionment in part characterizes its discourse and aesthetic: David Simon's deliberate rejection of the soap codes of the Steve Bochco and Chris Gerolmo series *Over There* (2005) and his selection of a partly "real-life Marine" cast (including Eric Kocher, the Marine who served as adviser on the set) point to the blurring of the lines between faux-documentary mode and fiction, which also characterizes Simon's other series *The Wire* (HBO 2002-2008) and *Treme* (2010-2014), while his emphasis on the sordid and the absurd hail to such classics as Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961) and other ironic takes on the "heroic" war narrative. While the series is intent on revising the mainstream media

presentation of Operation Iraqi Freedom, it espouses the embedded “Marine perspective”, relying only on the polyphony allowed by the ensemble cast for a dialogical critique of the massive carnage of civilians, of the psychopathic bloodlust of some young recruits, and of imperialism, even if the actual rationale for war is only questioned by the embedded reporter and one (Native-American/Mexican-American) soldier.

- 3 The series’ discourse on war unfolds simultaneously, in the visual track, in what it depicts of combat, and how it stages, in a *mise en abyme*, armed invasion and the *spectacle* of war, somewhere between orgasmic excitement and boredom, between “sensory overload” as one Marine will call it in the last minutes of story, and radical alienation. In its self-reflexive references to famous war films, its recycling of stereotypes and/or archetypes – the mad officer (Dave “Captain America” McGraw) versus the good one (Nate Fick), and the psychopathic “born to kill” Marine (Trombley) versus the rigorous and glamorous warrior embodied by Brad “Iceman” Colbert – the series seems to deliberately contradict itself, over and over, as to whether or not war is a desirable all-male adventure or if it is born of training men to be “pit bulls” (1.1) who must obey the chain of command and disregard their conscience – in particular when orders result in killing civilians. Between the opening sequence and the final one, when in the last minutes the soldiers gather around to watch the war as their buddy has filmed it, in a short montage that “recaps” (as in “recapitulate” as much as “recapture”) what the series has immersed us in all along, some viewers and critics see an ethical arc. Indeed, as images of carnage replace those of war-as-adventure, the soldiers, one by one, desert the “(re-)viewing”, until the set is left bare. But is this an ethical and political “turning away” from the horrors of war, or rather, a purely aesthetic moment of reflexive “dismantling” of the set and of the series, one that echoes how Simon and Burns ended most seasons of *The Wire*? And what is one to do with the final voice-over during the end credits, that seemingly reestablishes this last voice – the allegorical Marine’s voice – as moral authority?

The Adaptation of Evan Wright’s Narrative and the Absence of Voice-Over

- 4 The HBO miniseries is an adaptation of the embedded report by *Rolling Stone* journalist Evan Wright, published in 2004³; it is an extremely faithful adaptation on the whole, but one that does not provide in voice-over the type of background information provided in the book. Wright, in a dry and humorous fashion, is extremely clear about the machismo and exultation in “toughness” that these Recon (i.e., Reconnaissance) Marines, who represent the elite two percent of all Marines, live by:

For many, becoming a Recon Marine represents one of the last all-male adventures left in America. Among them, few virtues are celebrated more than being hard—having stronger muscles, being a better fighter, being more able to withstand pain and privation. (*ibid*, p. 38).

- 5 While one might argue that Burns and Simon and their film directors *show* this rather than tell it, over the course of seven 70-minute episodes, one can also argue that the framing ideological discourse, and the distance between the voice of Wright’s account and the Marine unit, are lost. Wright’s character, simply nicknamed “Reporter”, “Scribe”, or “Rolling Stone”, mainly acts as a figure of slapstick humor – for instance when he puts on a MOPP suit during a simulation of a chemical weapons attack on the camp, and has to

beg the Marines to release him, being under the double threat of choking behind his mask and of castration because of the suit's too-tight groin straps. This scene obviously also functions, in its symbolic play on his ineffective masculinity, as a satire that echoes the Marines' own stand on the "liberal media" that they abhor as being "pogues": the embedded reporter is only belatedly told it means "P.O.Gs" or "people other than grunts, rear-echelon guys, pussies" (1.2, 10:00). While this incident was featured in Wright's book, it served to prove he had a sense of humor; here, it establishes a hierarchy between journalist and warrior, civilian and Marine, with obvious implication for the civilian viewer – that of being "othered".

- 6 The distance provided by the journalist who saw the Marines as an object of study was evident everywhere in his account, from the immaturity of the troops to their seeing war as the ultimate form of excitement:

The invasion all comes down to a bunch of extremely tense young men in their late teens and twenties, with their fingers on the triggers of rifles and machine guns. (*ibid*, p. 195)

One thing the Marine Corps can bank on is the low tolerance for boredom among American youth. They need constant stimulation [...]. They need more war. (*ibid*, p. 364)

- 7 Instead of such distance – or the sociological snippets that Wright interspersed between anecdotes of the invasion, the TV series offers a beginning *in medias res*: a sequence of militainment⁴ in which war is both an adventure and a spectacle, experienced from up close. This cold yet *hot* open is, however, *also* intent on unsettling viewer expectations, as in all Simon-Burns narratives. Indeed, as the first seconds of the pilot make obvious, the creators of the series choose, as they did in *The Wire*, to withhold essential "telling" that might explain anything – from the characters' back-stories, to the meaning of the military jargon heard on the radio comms. This is part of Simon's design, which he summarizes, in the DVD commentary, as wanting his viewers to "lean in" towards their TV set, and to *work* to understand the story.

The Opening Sequence: Militainment, Cannibalized or Debunked ?

- 8 From the initial, mirage-like vision of five Humvees⁵ abreast in the desert in the distance, to adrenalin-packed close-ups of the various controls inside one of the rattling vehicles, to the staticky sound of loud radio communications in military code, and jumps from shaky camera shots to final, perfect, *The Hurt Locker*-like shots of explosions against desert sand and blue sky, filmed with extremely fast speed digital cameras, the first minutes make war appear like an adrenalin- and testosterone-fueled video game, and a pyrotechnic spectacle.

Plate 1: Humvee video-game aesthetics (1.1)



We are instantly immersed in the story and embedded⁶ within the lead vehicle of Bravo Company with the three soldiers. From the bag of Skittles on the dashboard to the close-ups of the comms system, to the frame that seems to accidentally catch the tag on a uniform reading “U.S. MARINE”, to close-ups of the tires spinning in the sand, or of the gloved hands holding the video-game like steering-wheel, everything points to an aesthetic of realist fiction (one bordering on documentary) meeting the world of video games (particularly first-shooter and racing games).

Plate 2: *Militainment* aesthetics (1.1)

The quick cut to the startling blue eyes of Alexander Skarsgård, now of *True Blood* (HBO, 2008-2014) fame, then back to him as he scopes, prepares the shift to the explicitly militarized vision captured by the scope and the reverse shot of the shooter.

- 9 A veritable gallery of militainment shots follows: the long cannon of the gun repeatedly firing, in phallic symbolism; the red reflection of war in the scope as the handsome soldier fires away; the empty casings falling out of the ammunition belt; the low-angle shots of the helicopter sweeping into view and letting loose a missile, in an obvious image of war-like ejaculation. In case we had missed this point, the driver of the car, Ray, yells “Yeah! Get some!” (01:27), a call that, throughout the narrative, refers to killing as the ultimate form of sexuality.

Plate 3: Pyrotechnics and “get some” symbolism (1.1)



When the sequence ends on a pan shot of the five Humvees driving single file from right to left across the screen, tiny against the wide blue expanse of desert sky, the epic effect is complete, in a scene that has used every trick to make us feel caught up in the action (low-angle shots, high-angle shots, zooms, close-ups, but also amplified audio, overexposure to make us feel the heat of the desert, etc.). This grandiose imagery is, however, suddenly deflated as the team lean over their “man down”. One soldier cruelly asks: “How does it feel to be fucking dead?” and the “dead man” after murmuring “I feel sad, I feel very alone”, comes back to life with the crass rejoinder: “and also... I got to take a shit”. [*They all guffaw.*] (03:10)

- 10 We thus belatedly understand the first three and a half minutes of the pilot to have been war games: maneuvers and training. The pilot episode thus starts ironically with the soldiers gathering for some “after-action” debriefing: the dialogue itself directs our attention to the ambiguities of action cinema, while playing on false starts in showing us war games passing for war. The *mise en abyme* of the fictional construct of the war series can be read variously either as a deconstruction of the war film and of the war film genre, or, as it appears here, as a “coming attraction” for war as spectacle, even if this first spectacle is retrospectively unmasked as a fiction. Simon’s commentary on the DVD highlights that the team of writers and the director were very aware of the conventions of the war film genre and suggests they were trying to live up to it, not undermine it, in this opening sequence, which could be a *Top Gun*-like recruiting ad⁷—but with its side order of irony. Indeed, Simon and Burns were simultaneously announcing that the invasion as depicted by the series would not conform to this glossy militainment canon – and indeed, reviewer after reviewer has noted how *Generation Kill* enacts the aesthetics of boredom typical of the Iraq war film, whether in embedded documentary or in the antiwar fiction films (“going full bore” as one reviewer⁸ punned of the documentary

Occupation Dreamland). Simon, in his interview with Richard Beck, highlighted that too-obvious camera work was excluded:

One of the things I'm very conscious of is not making the camerawork the story. These are writer-driven projects. That tends to militate against a certain amount of stylization. If we're confident that the material is there on the page, then we just want it to breathe normally. At no point do you want to remind people that it's a movie. If the camerawork reminds them that it's a movie, the camerawork is failing in its job⁹.

But this seems disingenuous: a TV series – or, as Simon seems to think of his creation, a film in seven installments – is not a radio play. While Simon was undoubtedly speaking of attempts to avoid too-visible artifice, *Variety*'s Brian Lowry, who lauded the “fly-on-the-wall perspective” also noted the camerawork used in “tension-filled action sequences – especially those mounted at night and seen through night-vision lenses¹⁰.

- ¹¹ On the face of it, *Generation Kill* defines itself against the different modes of representation it includes – first-person shooter video games, reality show, *Band of Brothers* melodrama, war film (from *Apocalypse Now* to *Platoon*), antiwar film, absurd comedy like *MASH*, snuff film, etc. – while also vampirizing them and capitalizing on them. Stacy Takacs points to the series' mobilization of the video game mode: “Its immersive ‘lean forward’ approach to representation approximates the interactive immersion of a videogame”¹¹. The film's title insert, however, projects its political as well as its proclaimed aesthetic project: that of hardboiled reportage, with a dose of realism and a dose of black humor.

Plate 4: Title credits of the series



- ¹² The black crosshairs instead of the apertures in the letters “R” and “A”, and the red crosshairs within the “O”, which is framed in red, marking the bullseye shot, combined with the deliberately smudged aspect of the letters bespeak the apparent *cinéma vérité* of war that Simon, Burns and Wright are looking to create: “a raw, gritty, so-real-you’ll-forget-it’s-drama miniseries” (Lowry, op.cit.). But this certainly does not preclude entertainment, as Laura Shepherd foregrounds¹². More importantly, this, like the opening sequence, participates in the series' defining itself as an “after-action” review of the real

invasion too: “both *Over There* and *Generation Kill* serve more as ‘after-action reviews’ of the invasion than as critiques of war”¹³. While *Generation Kill*'s main intertext may be the embedded documentaries *Gunner Palace* and *The War Tapes*, Bochco and Gerolmo's short-lived *Over There* (FX, 2005), as the only other TV series to have featured the early days of the Iraq War, is indeed a “compulsory” intertext. Indeed, Simon and Burns are clearly intent on avoiding a number of its tropes.

Rejecting the Soap Codes of *Over There*

- ¹³ *Over There* ran for just thirteen episodes. It was conceptualized by Steve Bochco as a “workplace drama” about an army unit of “eight coworkers stationed in a place called Iraq”. In the extra features on DVD, Bochco states one of his goals – “I think we’ve humanized these young men and women and dramatized their heroism” – a form of storytelling made possible by crosscutting from the war in Iraq to their families and spouses back home. While Gerolmo confusedly denies a pro-war perspective¹⁴, numerous snippets of dialogue swipe at the antiwar arguments. From the pilot episode, the brave American sergeant yells in the first combat scene, “We didn’t come for your oil, we came to kick your ass” (1.1, 25:30). The real war is about a clash of civilizations, as marked by the apostrophe “Why have you come here, infidel?” which instantly disqualifies the follow-up question, “Why have you come to steal our oil?”, as “jihadist” propaganda (1.1, 44:00). Although this is soon revealed to be a dream sequence – the young soldier, Bo, who lost his leg in an IED ambush is about to wake up amputated in a US hospital bed in Germany – the script in his dream is that he is being tortured in an Abu Ghraib-like prison by an Iraqi, who is setting his leg on fire.
- ¹⁴ This reversal of reality – the Arab putting the American in a stress position and willfully torturing him – is part of the systematic revision of the Abu Ghraib scandal, which unfolded as *Over There* was under way. It is referenced once earlier in the pilot episode, when a combatant rants “Now we will taste your American freedom – now you will take me to Abu Ghraib!” (1.1, 26:00). In a later episode (“Prisoner”, 1.3), Stinger missiles have been stolen from US troops, and the unit falls upon Special Forces using “heightened interrogation techniques” on a prisoner. One of them remarks that for similar abuses “guys at Abu Ghraib got their ass court-martialed” (1.3, 16:45), but they agree to keep silent. The episode ends in a justification of such collaboration with prisoner abuse and psychological torture (threats of rape and killing): the last shots are of the weapons of mass destruction being taken out by an air strike, thanks to intelligence thus obtained; the blackout as the episode ends could involuntarily sign this “redacting” of History.
- ¹⁵ Like *Generation Kill*, *Over There* 1.6, “Embedded”, featured an embedded reporter, initially viewed by the soldiers as the enemy, intent on “framing” them, literally, if anything were to go wrong – a discourse one finds in *Generation Kill* too, in a “preventative” denial that liberal journalists who report civilian deaths merely report the reality of war against the Pentagon-spun fiction of “clean” and “surgical” wars¹⁵. *Over There* already disguised hostility towards journalists in humor – one soldier quips: “he could film himself dying. Get an Oscar”. When the intellectual points out that in broadcast journalism you get “an Emmy or a Pulitzer”, not an Oscar (09:50) this slyly serves to reinforce *Over There*'s identity: not fiction film, but “TV broadcast”. The heart of the “Embedded” episode is the journalist’s filming the unit killing an Iraqi mother and child. While this actually happens, the context makes it a *bad guy*'s fault: an insurgent has lured the child out, thus

deliberately causing both deaths by American fire and causing them to be filmed and broadcast worldwide. When the journalist however seeks to confront those who have deformed the truth, he is kidnapped by the insurgency; and beheaded just as the soldiers he was embedded with are attempting to rescue him. As a result, he is given a warrior's symbolic ceremony, with his camera in lieu of a gun beside his boots and helmet, marking the fact that he was no longer in need of "babysitting", as one soldier had quipped, but had turned into a "glass warrior" as Duncan Anderson has called war reporters¹⁶. Being a warrior as well as a reporter was in fact, in the Marine adviser of the show's view, the ideal role embedded journalists could play, as he pointed out in the extra feature interview on DVD¹⁷.

- 16 More generally, as Stacy Takacs claims, while both *Over There* and *Generation Kill* argue for "the 'blood-and-guts' traditions of the warrior ideal"¹⁸, the earlier series does not *overtly* make this claim, cloaking itself in *soap* as much as in the war film genre¹⁹. The 2005 series features women (including one Latina mother of a small child), African-American men placed in stereotypically opposed roles ("Smoke" from the ghetto, versus "Angel" the choirboy), and a liberal intellectual nicknamed "Dim" who has enlisted to escape an unhappy relationship with a poor white divorcee. Although Dim's is supposedly a critical voice, he constantly subverts the antiwar perspective to revalidate the heroic reading of war: "The tragedy here is we're savages. We're thrilled to kill each other. We're monsters... But there's a kind of honor in it too. A kind of grace" (1.1, 31:00). This "grace" was very much tied to the series' war-as-spectacle aesthetics. Beyond lofty claims as to having "navigated the political waters" to "raise the rhetorical level of discourse here about the war"²⁰, Bochco recognized that they were intent on making war an embedded 'experience' through such techniques as jiggling the camera, alternating long and close shots, creating what he calls a "monochromatic, overheated look" and "washed-out, blasted out" landscape (Bochco, 04:20), through "smoke and blown dust and orange filters," which has indeed come to be associated with the Iraq war look²¹.
- 17 Takacs points out that this, along with other "gimmicky visuals" including "low-key lighting, off-kilter compositions, fisheye lenses, color filters, and extreme high-and-low angle shots") participates in the series' ideological representation of Iraq as a "space of ontological disorder":

Thus the Iraq constructed in *Over There* is largely metaphoric – a fantasy space within which the producers and viewers can collaborate on a mythic tale of American regeneration through violence. Frequent inserts of sunsets, tumbleweeds, and dust blowing across the inhospitable desert make Iraq look like the "Wild West" of Hollywood film, an "alien" landscape inhabited by "evil others"²².

This Orientalist perspective is perhaps made more problematic in *Generation Kill*, if one has an ear for irony²³ – but both series without a doubt embed themselves within an imperial perspective, in which Iraqis are not, whatever might be said to the contrary in the dialogue to protect the series' overt politics, actually *people*; they remain vague figures falling into the categories "bad guy", "angry civilian", "dead or wounded civilian", "histrionic and unreliable interpreter"... and are always "othered". While this is unsurprising given the history of Hollywood representations of Arabs²⁴, it is effected somewhat differently in the two series.

- 18 The two main points of contrast between *Over There* and *Generation Kill* are the time of filming – *Over There* when the war was still popular with a majority of Americans – and

the soap codes the 2005 series mobilized: slow-motion to convey emotion, an emphasis on the home front sub-plots (the cheating wife, the amputated soldier seeking rehabilitation to return to the war front, etc.). While it was “contemporary” in its use of digital technology to show soldiers communicating with their loved ones in the USA (through Skype and video messaging), and in its use of militarized shots in infrared, it remained very classically soap in its dialogues – what the hardcore marines in *Generation Kill* would call “moto” (emotional and pathetically “motivational”), as Ray says of patriotic country music, for instance (1.2, 01:30).

- 19 The theme song for *Over There* is a case in point; it takes up the World War One classic “Johnny Get Your Gun”²⁵. While the 2005 song, composed and performed by co-creator Gerolmo, avoids the jubilant gung-ho note, and showcases imminent death, it is political in its explicit refusal to question war²⁶. As opposed to this mobilization of “patriotic” music²⁷, *Generation Kill* rejects all post-synchronized music completely. The “musical interludes” consist in Ray and Colbert’s routines in which they mock various pop songs, like Minnie Riperton’s “Loving You” (complete with the “la la la la” of the chorus, 1.1), reappropriate anti-war songs like Country Joe and the Fish’s “I-Feel-Like-I’m-a-Fixing-to-Die” (aka “One Two Three, What Are We Fighting For?”, 1.4) or sing some of the Iraq War soundtrack (“Bodies”, aka “Let the Bodies Hit the Floor”, 1.2)²⁸; 1.4 ends on their singing “Teenage Dirtbag”. In this last instance, the inset performance is underlined, since the last cues before the cut to black are Colbert’s: “Thank you, Ray”; and Ray’s answer: “Thank you, Sergeant”. This is part of the soldiers’ ironic performance of popular culture, which also includes skits from *South Park* or sardonic references to Tim Burton’s *Mars Attacks* (1996), as well as cultural analyses of *Pocahontas*.

The Unsanitized Depiction of the Marines

- 20 While some of these performances serve to relieve the boredom and the tensions on the Road to Baghdad, as a form of *comic relief* between moments of combat, or the viewing of atrocities, much of this humor is deliberately offensive. Apart from Sgt. “Poke” Espera, who regularly pinpoints white imperialism, almost all the soldiers’ idea of humor is racist, sexist, and especially homophobic. In a clear break from *Over There*, the screenwriters make no attempt to cue us to “feel” for the Marines. On the contrary, from the start, we are made aware that they are an all-male, all-white group (the only Latino who does not identify as white is Espera) that bonds over its love of killing. The title references what Cynthia Fuchs spotted as a break from “romanticized” views of troops in previous wars:

Unlike previous generations of troops – at least as such generations are venerated in books and movies – this one is, as Wright characterizes them, raised up to feel abandoned, frustrated, and angry. The generalizations aren’t all right all the time, but they resonate especially for the kids who end up recruited in this volunteer military. Expecting elders to be out of touch and uncaring, they seek models in pop culture, in superheroes, killers, and cowboys. Told they’re supposed to be “America’s shock troops,” they perform for one another, most of the time vulgar, confused, and hostile²⁹.

- 21 Indeed, the “performances” by these shock troops are also, quite deliberately, *shocking*, as evidenced from the pilot episode, as the Marines read out loud the letters schoolchildren have sent them. Ray pounces on one from a little Frederick from Maryland: “Peace is

always much better than war and it would be nice if no one would be hurt". Ray comments: "That's some fucking hippie communist shit right there. Where the fuck is this weak-ass child from?" (1.1, 14:45) and immediately improvises a lengthy, histrionically martial and insulting response:

RAY. I am actually a US marine who was born to kill—

THE OTHER MEN. Hoorah!

RAY. ...whereas clearly you have mistaken me for some sort of wine-sipping communist dick-suck; and although peace probably appeals to tree-loving bisexuals like you and your parents, I happen to be a death-dealing blood-crazed warrior who wakes up every day just hoping for the chance to dismember my enemies and defile their civilizations. Peace sucks a hairy asshole, Freddy. War is the motherfucking answer.

THE OTHER MEN. Hell, yeah! (1.1, 15:00)

- 22 Although this is played out for the inset Marine audience by the "motormouth absurdist comic"³⁰ that Ray, cranked on Ripped Fuel, constantly seems to be, it is also meant to appeal to an extradiegetic "gung-ho" or profanity-loving audience too. This supposes that viewers do not care either about the sexism of this text or the pedophile content of one Marine's comment on viewing a photograph of a little girl, enclosed with her letter ("I would eat a mile of her shit just to see where it came from"). This justifiably angered some critics, like *Slate's* Troy Patterson:

But the characters here, more often than not, amount to cretinous psychopaths. We have a white supremacist or two, some garden-variety misogynists, a majority of experienced xenophobes. All are bellicose (by definition) and bloodthirsty (by necessity), with one expressing regret that he hadn't been around to pilot the *Enola Gay*.

[...] They're not above half-assed pedophilia jokes at the expense of fourth-graders writing them letters. [...] *Generation Kill* [...] plays like it's been built for antisocial boys – armchair heroes in love with guns and in search of demented adventure³¹.

- 23 Very few critics have had anything to say about the constant sexism of the dialogues or the scene in which the Marines come across a woman soldier (1.6, 33:00), act in particularly offensive ways and engage in an aggressive, sexist chorus of harassment³². That this can be seen as harmless entertainment plays into a culture of sexual violence against women, both within the military, where its epidemic proportions are now known³³, and in the broader culture. On the commentary of the pilot episode featured on DVD, Burns denies that the gay jokes and racist/sexist banter "mean anything" and is surprised that viewers read so much into it, putting this down, as explained in the pilot's dialogue, as macho men's way "to get under each other's skin [...] to determine who is alpha dog". The vast majority of reviewers, like Richard Blanco, negotiate the crudeness and the constant homophobia³⁴ as merely realistic:

These are men who are good at doing what we ask them to do. But what we've asked them to do is kill, so don't expect them to behave as if they're at the church social. No sensitivity is safe, no bigoted insult is unexpressed – and they're so outrageously homophobic it borders, as one Marine points out, on the homoerotic³⁵.

- 24 The "unsanitized" depiction of the grunts is also seen, more broadly, as part of the "unsanitized" representation of the war:

But as combat narrative of one military unit – the Marines' 1st Reconnaissance Battalion, or "1st Recon" – this is as authentic as it gets, and far less sanitized than television coverage of the war has been. Viewers will see more mangled bodies of Iraqi civilians in each episode than in a month of network newscasts³⁶.

This is read within an overall rejection of idealization, of neat storytelling, of soap codes, including those of "retro" World War II series like *Band of Brothers*, within a political refusal to romanticize the Iraq War itself:

The main people in *Generation Kill* are numerous and hard to distinguish, and even the most basic story lines are blurry and difficult to follow. It's as if the creators wanted to resist any comparison to HBO's classic World War II series *Band of Brothers*, by Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks. That could stem from a desire to stake out a different kind of wartime storytelling. But it is also a way to avoid condoning or romanticizing a war that most Americans no longer view as necessary, or even wise³⁷.

The Critique of "Manœuvre Warfare", of Inadequate Logistics and Cynical or Incompetent Officers

- 25 The only way *Generation Kill* is explicitly critical of war, however, is, as Takacs points out, in its critique of the much-vaunted Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA)³⁸. The First Recon, instead of being used for what they have been trained to do as shock troops, are being used, as Brad Colbert will put it, like "perfectly tuned Ferraris in a demolition derby" (1.5). Ray, in an early speech, points to the fact the system works to "keep [Marines] angry. If Marines could get what they need when they needed it, we would be happy and we wouldn't be ready to kill people all the time. The Marines are like America's little pit bull... once in a while they let us out to attack someone" (1.1, 26:00). There are not enough maps to go round, or batteries for night-vision goggles; when the story starts, Colbert is still waiting for a new gun turret he has mail-ordered with his own money (reminding military families of how many of them had to buy body armor and metal plates, not adequately provided by the Pentagon in the early years of war). But their ability to tough it out is construed as a badge of honor: the much-admired Lt. Fick quips to Colbert: "for logistics, join the Army! Marines *make do*" (1.3, 02:00).
- 26 Fick is an exception among officers; many are incompetent or dangerous, as the nicknames given them reflect: "Encino Man"³⁹ (a former football player, who is as arrogant as he is moronic); "Godfather" (aka Lt. Colonel Ferrando), thus nicknamed because of his raspy voice, but also, in an intertext to the ruthlessness of the character played by Marlon Brando; "Captain America" a former hero who has snapped and now "spazzes" (as Ray puts it) over the radio communications in fear, but is ready to abuse prisoners and to send his own men into danger uselessly). One of the most memorable quotations of the series, capturing both its imperial politics and its grunt's perspective, is: "It ain't the Hajis gonna kill us, man. It's the fucking command" (1.4, 03:00). The fact that most episodes begin and end with the static and jargon of radio comms⁴⁰ could be seen as remediating into the *chatter of war* the image of the *fog of war* within which the grunts operate, never seeing the "bigger picture." From this point of view, the multiple remediations of maps, the filming in a near-dark shade of anthracite grey, anticipating the aesthetics of Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) are not just a form of inset

militainment, and of sick humor on “monstrous” optics (we will later see how the motif of the wounded eye returns within the 7 episodes) but also an ironic take on the impossibility of seeing without prosthetics⁴¹.

Plate 5: The dark of war (1.5)



This lack of perception and this “dark” of war, rather than fog, do not preclude the chain of command’s constantly “mapping” the invasion like a game.

Plate 6: Mapping the invasion (1.6)



- 27 Indeed, “the game” remains the driving metaphor for the chain of command. The decent NCO who tries to prevent Encino Man from calling an air strike when they are “fire close” tells Fick: “It’s the oldest play in the book” (1.3, 17:00) – officers calling in air strikes to get medals. “Godfather” is obsessed with being “point” on the invasion, something he celebrates with the game metaphor: “We’re getting back into the game.” Although one recognizes this as a metatextual image for the series itself, much as it was in *The Wire* – a video game instead of a chess game this time – it also describes the lower-echelon “noble” individuals’ fight against the top command and the absurdity of the war machine, particularly in the issue of the “rules of engagement” (ROE). The lesson of the series is that the “decent” soldiers see the lack of real strategy and of real “rules”: in episode 3, in the rush to get first to an airfield, Godfather changes the ROE to “free fire zone” – translated thus, by one officer who refuses to pass down this change of ROE: “Godfather just lowered the bar... shit, he’s removed the bar” (1.3, 35:00). A number of critics focused on this depiction of the “brightest men” being crushed by the hierarchized system of the military:

That’s how it is in Burns’ and Simon’s worldview: there’s always an inescapable, intrinsically unfair system in control, and, despite its general indifference to human life, the system is always eager to grind down the brightest men on the streets, whether they’re in Baltimore or Baghdad⁴².

- 28 From an ethical point of view, right until the very end of the series, the fiction that there are rules at war will, however, be maintained by the likeable Lieutenant Fick, time and time again, raising the issue of what *Generation Kill* truly has to say about the horrors of war, versus what it has to say about the individual versus the system:

FICK. North of our position is the Wild West. We all know we’ve killed bad guys already.

POKE (*angrily*). Sure. Must be some bad guys in all those women and children we've been stacking along the roads. (1.5, 22:00).

And later:

BRAD. We're fast becoming an army of occupation. We can't just shoot civilians like we're doing.

FICK. Marines aren't cops, Brad. We're an aggressive force. (1.6, 07:45)

Although Brad regularly tries to limit civilian casualties, he in turn participates in placating the Mexican /Native American⁴³ sergeant disgusted by the (imperial) carnage they leave in their wake:

POKE. Do you realize the shit that we've done here, the people we've killed? Back in the civilian world, dawg, if we did this, we would go to prison. [*Long silence*].

BRAD. Poke, you're thinking like a Mexican again. [*Poke turns his head away*]

BRAD [*smiles*]. Think like a white man. Over there, they'll be laying on the medals for what we did. (1.6, 32:00)

While this could be construed as Simon's critique of war as a series of war crimes, reception by Marine viewers, who have left hundreds of comments on YouTube, says otherwise. Simon insists in an interview on what he wanted viewers to take from the series:

If you watch the miniseries conscientiously – whether you're conservative or liberal – the one thing that you ought to be able to come out with is that war is disorder and mayhem and brutality. Like Sherman said, it cannot be refined. With all our technology, with all our precision, with all our rules of engagement, with all the good will and best intentions, it doesn't prevent the tragedies⁴⁴.

Showing the Reality of Civilian Casualties

- 29 The limits of the “embedded” fictional approach are highlighted by Finer, who was an embedded war correspondent himself, and who highlights the blend of Orientalist depiction of the Iraqis and honesty as to massive casualties in the HBO series:

Both the best and worst attributes of the embedded approach, often criticized for compromising objectivity, are on display here. On the one hand, *Generation Kill* reduces Iraqis to empty caricatures: a hapless translator, masked gunmen and wailing mothers of the wounded. Interviewing civilians was all but impossible for those who covered the invasion the way Wright (and I) did. Telling someone you're not a fighter doesn't get you very far when you're wearing a camouflage chemical suit and riding in a Humvee.

“What we see of Iraqis”, says Ed Burns, Simon's collaborator on both *Generation Kill* and *The Wire*, “is that which was done to them”.

But *Generation Kill* also should put to rest the notion that hard-hitting coverage by embedded reporters is impossible. The killing of civilians by U.S. forces is depicted with unsparing honesty – in one scene, a house with children playing soccer out front is engulfed in a fiery blast⁴⁵.

- 30 The sordid reality of war is first spotted upon catching sight of Iraqi civilians all along the highway: a dead woman, charred civilians who had attempted to flee war (1.2, 26:00).

Plate 7: Iraqi civilians as collateral damage (1.2)

This is complicated instantly by the *mise en abyme* of filming and representation: not only is the “Scribe” going to take pictures, but one of the Marines, Lilley, is making a film of his company’s war (1.2, 27:00). One notices that Lilley, like Iceman or Nate Fick, is conspicuously handsome – in this, *Generation Kill* follows classic Hollywood codes in its casting and perhaps hints at whom we should identify with.

Plate 8: Handsome soldiers, seductive war ?

CORPORAL JASON LILLEY IN 1.1, ABOVE AND SERGEANT BRAD 'ICEMAN' COLBERT IN THE OPENING CREDITS, BELOW

- 31 Besides, a number of Marines are going to spontaneously comment on what they see unfolding before their eyes, the choral function of the ensemble cast becoming almost didactic, here. In response to Lt. Nate Fick's noble speech prior to combat – "Gentlemen, our A.O. is now Mesopotamia, the land between the Euphrates, the Tigris, cradle of civilization"⁴⁶ – one Marine cracks: "Marines sure civilized these motherfuckers" as we discover shots of dead Iraqi combatants to the sound of flies buzzing around them (1.2, 32:00). Trombley, later known as "he's a psycho but at least he's our psycho," laughs when he sees charred Iraqi bodies in vehicles: "It's like a Halloween funhouse!" (1.2, 34:30). Brad, as leader of the Humvee, orders: "Stay frosty." This is the title of the episode itself, and a reminder of why Brad is nicknamed "Iceman". As the reporter snaps a picture of little civilian girl whose legs have been blown off, Ray, catching his horrified gaze, immediately interjects: "She's dead, nothing we can do", while Ray, in a denial of the reporter's aim in taking this photography, gloats: "Well, well, well, who's the sicko in our Humvee now? The psycho-ass jarheads or the fucking liberal media just looking for a little exploitation?" (1.2, 35:00).

Plate 9: War as carnage (1.2)

The crosscut to the soldier who at that point is filming for Lilley, and who is something of a twin for Trombley, justifies Ray's reading. As we see the atrocities through his viewfinder now, Lilley calls for him to turn it off: "Hey, Christopher, man, turn it off." / "Huh?" / "Turn the camera off, brah". Poke, who is portrayed as a decent man throughout, mutters in disgust, "So it's a snuff film now?"

Plate 10: "Not a snuff film" (1.2)



- 32 The point of this sequence is to question the meaning of filming the horror of war. Though none of them have read Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others*⁴⁷ and though officially, the action takes place more than a year before the Abu Ghraib scandal, revealed by the digital photographs and video taken by the perpetrators themselves, by 2008, this scene could only be interpreted in a post-Abu Ghraib perspective. Neither snippet of dialogue puts forward the notion that war photography or documentary is about bearing witness or memorializing the facts: such pictures, taken by warriors seem to other warriors a combination of trophy imagery⁴⁸, snuff film, and militainment delight. This of course raises the issue: what is the framing series, *Generation Kill* itself, mobilizing these images for?

Empathy for Slaughtered Civilians or "Staying Frosty"?

- 33 Several of the Marines are shown as deeply affected by the deaths of children. First Brad Colbert, when he announces that the rules of engagement have been lowered to "free fire" in the effort to race to a (deserted) airstrip. As the Humvees roll forward, four cars abreast, this seems *déjà vu* of the action sequence seen in the opening (1.3, 39:00): an ominous vision, since *Generation Kill* started with a critique of militainment as unreal⁴⁹. When women bearing two wounded children arrive at the camp, the soldiers do everything they can to save them – in the process, viewers learn that the sole aid legally due to civilians is that which they would receive by their country's standards (meaning, the Marines who have grievously wounded these children are under no obligation to medevac them).
- 34 Simon, Burns and Wright use this episode to emphasize the various Marines' contrasting reactions: Brad is devastated – but, in a macho depiction of the handsome warrior, he will

not cry on screen (whereas he did in the book). Trombley, who shot the children, and who now receives the nickname “Whopper Jr.”, (shorthand for “Baby Killer”), feels no guilt at all. But as the hours go by and Colbert is still affected, we increasingly hear other Marines decrying his emotion as weakness. One points out: “In Nasiriyah, we seen generals drop mad arty rounds on an unarmed civilian city [...] Thousands in legit officer-called air strikes. So what? *It’s war, Dawg!*” (1.4, 01:30). Another complains: “I finally get on his team, he goes all weak-titty on me” (01:35). Brad similarly questions orders, at roadblocks they are ordered to set up, to shoot anyone who either forces the roadblock or runs from their vehicle. In a particularly abject scene, we witness through night-vision goggles the execution of unarmed men.

Plate 11: Night-vision war (1.4)



When Brad tells Lt. Fick that the Iraqis may not understand warning shots and adds, “The ROE aren’t a whole lot of help”, Fick justifies the orders: “There are seventy of us, Brad, holding this road”. Seemingly to prove Brad right, a new atrocity happens at the checkpoint: a little girl, shot dead at the back of the car her father was driving. The Marines are horrified when they see her dead body; one asks the translator “Ask him why he kept coming?” (1.4, 56:00).

- 35 The way this incident is represented, however, is disturbing on multiple accounts. First, as a watered-down version of Wright’s book, as one critic also noted:

But one of the most sickening episodes in the book is whitewashed in the series. In the book, as a marine reaches into a car that’s been riddled with bullets to pick up a little girl, “the top of her head slides off and her brains fall out”; in the series, the girl is dead, but intact. In a show like this, if you’re going to get real, you have to go all the way⁵⁰.

Second, there is no explanation, by the translator, as there is in Brian de Palma’s *Redacted* (2007) or by a Lebanese-American soldier in Deborah Scranton’s *The War Tapes* (2006), of the huge cultural confusion as to what the soldiers’ “stop” hand signal means (it is

mistaken for “hello” in Iraq). Third, there is no counter-discourse to the translator’s explanation that instead of expressing anger the father simply says “sorry”, because Arabs do not mourn the way Westerners do⁵¹; no soldier suggests another explanation. Such scenes of civilians dying are repeated again and again throughout the seven episodes. On the one hand, this is the creators’ way of highlighting that the successful invasion was already turning to a hated and failed occupation. Although one can read Brad’s angry retort “[If] we keep killing civilians, we’re gonna waste this fucking victory.” (1.7, 35:00) as an intelligent pun on the slang meaning of “waste” (killing victory itself) and on how war defeats its own purpose, it is also likely that most viewers are not shocked by Iraqi deaths being referred to in the neutral “we keep making the same mistakes.” Although “mistake” at least recognizes fault, it resembles “collateral damage” in minimizing the thousands of deaths and of mutilated civilians.

- 36 There is no doubt that the creators of the series meant viewers to feel the grim ironies under which the soldiers are told to operate: from the order to “unsurrender” (1.1, 60 :00) prisoners of war, once they have been disarmed, and are sure to die if turned back out on the highway, to the order to escort refugees fleeing US bombs, and then, just as suddenly, *not* to escort them (1.6, 27:00), or to take note of civilian complaints in occupied Baghdad⁵² but not to do anything about them (1.7), the soldiers constantly rail against the absurdity they operate under. But that absurdity is often turned into forms of sick humor, as are the scenes of carnage. When a soldier ordered to use a smoke grenade to halt a car mistakenly hits the line of refugees fleeing the invasion, one man’s head explodes (1.6, 27:54). Poke expresses extreme anger in the quip “Well, at least we gave him a happy meal before he died”. The episode ends in gore: dead bodies litter the highway, gnawed at by dogs; a severed head on the road prompts Brad to order: “Do not run that over, Ray!” (1.6, 29:09). In swerving away from the head, they run over the rest of the body, prompting the cue “You just can’t win” – which, while it carries a double meaning as to the war itself, remains a form of levity for an atrocious moment fans of zombie films, torture porn, or other forms of teen entertainment may in fact find to be comic relief, not the highlighting of tragedy.

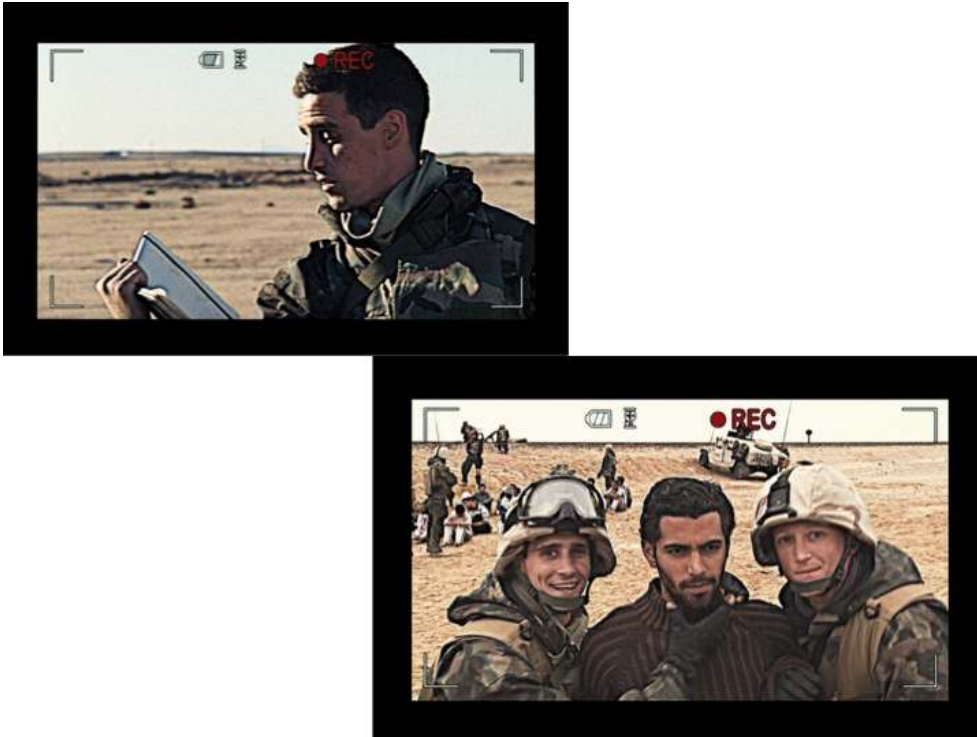
Plate 12: Graphic realism (1.6)



Absurdity and Mock-heroism as a Protection for the Return of Militainment

- 37 Mock-heroism (which, likewise, might be seen as deflating heroic representations of war)⁵³ serves as a cover for the renewed celebration of the warrior mystique. “Yes, we are the conquering heroes”, says Brad Colbert, as they start out on the invasion. In a *mise en abyme* of the war diary used to protect the series’ “warrior discourse” through contrast with its pretentious double, Ray grabs one man’s written diary and reads it on video-camera in episode 2, mocking its rhetoric: “Leading men into battle is my calling... Since I was young I’ve been drawn to the warrior society” (07:30). Ray’s comment, that this sounds “gay”, protects the series’ portrait of his own NCO, Iceman, who is precisely such a leader. What is mocked is the flowery style of the “other diarist” that contrasts with “staying frosty” – and with the aesthetics of *Generation Kill* itself.

Plate 13: The inset war diary (1.2)



- 38 But this aesthetics is ambiguous: if the opening of the series seemed to signal a rejection of militainment, videogame-like filming of war recurs regularly, between moments of “boredom” or of banter. As the troops enter Nasiriyah, Simon and Burns insert a shot of a helicopter framed within the videocam viewer shooting a missile (1.2, 27:57).

Plate 14: War as “drama” to be sold to CNN (1.2)



The soldier's commentary – “CNN would definitely pay for drama like that, brah. That shit was extreme” (28:00) – shows how *Generation Kill* can display its share of war-as-spectacle, while critiquing this view of war at the same time⁵⁴. The same could be said for the moment when “Fruity Rudy” (played by a real-life Marine) scopes for the sniper he is paired with; the blowing up of the hostile's head is seen through scope, video-game style (1.2, 41:30). This scene is not shot in unbearably suspended time, as a similar scene is in *The Hurt Locker*. The audio track is ironic in both works of fiction: in *The Hurt Locker*, despite the tragic weight of the entire scene, the US soldier quips, when he hits his target, “Good night! Thanks for playing” (60:00); while in *Generation Kill*, Rudy, the soldier with a scope who happens to be a Buddhist, murmurs a chant of “Om”. This does not preclude a deliberately gory shot of the insurgent's exploding head:

Plate 15: First-person shooter aesthetics (1.2)



The same is true, again, of a missile shot from a helicopter, viewed through Brad's scope while others yell: "Get some!" (1.5, 42:35). When Trombley states: "I know I just get more nervous at home watching a game on TV than I do here" (43:00) as a wrap-up to this combat sequence, he reinforces the notion of war as a form of game.

Plate 16: *Militainment* logistics of perception (1.5)

- 39 The audio track is similarly ambiguous. Brad's quip – "From now on, gentlemen, we're going to have to earn our stories" (1.2, 53:00) – as he should his gun, can be seen as typical of war film. It coexists with, but does not erase, moments of absurdity when the good officer (Patterson) points out that "kill[ing] a lot of sand" when the commanders give the order to bomb an imaginary army⁵⁵, rather than killing civilians, is a "win-win" (1.4, 19:00). When Poke rails against the use of massive mortar fire against civilians: "Pouring down hate and discontent like a motherfucker," (1.5, 38:00) his inventive hijacking of Shakespearian vocabulary announces Brad's reciting of *Henry V*: "Once more into the great good night, Cry 'Havoc!' and let slip the dogs of war" (1.6, 50:00), which one cannot construe to be ironic. The series works hard to maintain the idea of the warrior's nobility, mobilizing both Shakespeare as cultural capital and as "high culture" to be pastiched (Trombley mistakes a sexual comment added by Ray as part of *Henry V*), while still playing on the visuals of videogames for the same (or another) audience. Thus, the enemy is shot by night (1.5, 35:00) thanks to tracers that light up the night sky, for instance.
- 40 In the course of the seven episodes, the turn from heroism to gore is also ambiguously exploited, including in its filmic *mise en abyme*. In episode 1, Lilley quips, "This is us invading a country right here", but cuts himself off ("oh, shit!") when, watching through the monitor, he sees the "horror flick" image of arm rising out of the ashes (47:14). This is an inset metatextual image of the ambiguities of the series.

Plate 17: "Horror flick" aesthetics (1.1)



The same ambiguity – denouncing tragedy, or exploiting gore? – resurfaces when the soldiers view by daylight an Iraqi shot at night: “Right between the eyes. Well, where his eyes use to be” (1.4, 57:51); Trombley lauds such a shot as being “Rob Zombie shit”...

Plate 18: "Rob Zombie shit" (1.4)



- 41 When in a later episode, Ray himself narrowly escapes the same fate, he cannot reverse the perspective (which is always from this or that side of the windshield or of the gun scope).

Plate 19: Dead/Alive (1.5)



Instead, the scene turns into a Freudian “*Fort-Da*” attempt to fully realize his luck at being alive and/or his mortality⁵⁶ as he aligns the shot with his eye, then bends down to safety again, repeating (until Brad stops him): “Dead here. Alive. Dead. Alive.” (1.5, 50:00).

Is There an Ethical Arc to the Series ?

- 42 In the pilot episode, Trombley expressed envy for the pilot who had dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, creating the most massive body count: “That fucking rules” (1.1, 44:00). In the final episode, before Lilley shows the company the film of ‘their war,’ various Marines make comments that illustrate how little the sight of civilian casualties has changed their desire to kill. The following exchange occurs:

STAFFORD. What I wish I’d seen? A grenade go up someone’s body and just... boom.

Blow that shit up.

POKE. Crazy motherfucker.

STAFFORD. I mean it. (1.7, 38:00)

Just then, a soldier whose weapon has tangled into a chain-link fence takes a tumble on the stairs, bringing comic relief; Lilley laughs: “That was slapstick” (38:18). We see the moment through his camera, as he records it (38:20) even as he is asked: “Did you catch that?” In the reflexive countdown to the end of the “movie” and of the 8-hour “movie” *Generation Kill* forms, Lilley confirms: “Yeah, that one’s in my movie for sure, brah”. (38:25). But Redman, an older Marine, picks up Stafford’s thread of the conversation: “You know the military can fuck up anything. They can even make going to the beach suck. But one thing that ain’t overrated is combat. You take rounds, you shoot back, shit starts blowing up... *fucking sensory overload!*” (38:30).

- 43 This praise of war as the ultimate adventure, and implicitly, of fiction that immerses the viewer in war as “sensory overload” signals the unresolved ambiguities of the series itself. Poke’s facial expression signals his utter disagreement. Moments later, he summarizes to the reporter what war has meant to him. First by giving an element of his autobiography that one can understand as his fear of repeating the past (“My dad, he was this psycho ex-Marine Vietnam vet”); then by reading aloud a letter to his wife:

POKE. [reading] I've learned there's two types of people in Iraq: those who are very good, and those who are dead. I'm very good. I've lost twenty pounds, shaved my head, started smoking, my feet have half-rotted off, and I move from filthy hole to filthy hole every night. I see dead children and people everywhere, and function in a void of indifference. I keep you and our daughter locked away deep inside, and I try not to look there.

SCRIBE. Tony, you know, you think way too much. [Chuckles. Poke does not] (1.7, 42:35)

One is reminded here of what Poke had confided earlier to Brad, that the title of his book on his former life as a 'repo man' in Los Angeles would be *Nobody Gives A Fuck* (1.7, 37:00). Simon and Burns are obviously suggesting the same is true of war; that one Marine's experience of war (and one supposes, one viewer's reception of war) is unbearable to another; that even the Reporter cannot deal with Poke's confronting of the 'void of indifference' he must function in, the compartmentalization of his family versus the families he kills or sees killed, or the fact that "good" is not opposed to "evil" in the context of Poke's letter, but simply means good at killing, at doing one's 'job' as a soldier⁵⁷

- 44 One might be tempted to think, as some critics have, that the narrative arc through combat weariness implies moral judgment: "There's an emotional punch to *Generation Kill* that war buffs and informed readers know is coming, but the series manages to build the inevitable nature of combat weariness into a compelling (and often damning) narrative" (Goodman 2008). But several caveats must qualify this reading. The first is that Nate Fick, the idealized Lieutenant, constantly denies the gravity of killing so many civilians. When Brad is appalled that an entire village has been wiped out by mistake (before our very eyes), his answer is: "Look, Brad, you can't live in the past. A lot of stuff ahead, you need to snap to" (1.3, 12:00). Not once, but again and again, he puts "combat readiness" and the safety of the troops above any ethical question concerning civilians. The last exchange, with both Poke and Brad, at the close of the series, seems to say it all:

POKE. I just wish I could go back to that roadblock in Al Hayy. See if those guys I shot in that truck were enemy or just confused.

FICK. Could have been a truckload of babies. Within our Rules of Engagement, you did the right thing.

POKE. The priest told me it's not a sin to kill if you don't enjoy killing. My question is whether indifference is the same as enjoyment.

BRAD. All religious stuff aside, the fact is people who can't kill will always be subject to those who can. (1.7, 57:00)

Fick ultimately holds up the "rules of engagement" above any form of morality; Brad thinks only the warriors cannot be subjugated; only Poke worries about the act of killing. This exchange echoes the scene in the pilot episode when the men were told to shout the battle cry "Kill". As the platoon gathers around to watch Lilley's film in the final sequence, we will be reminded that killing remains an orgasmic experience for many of the Marines: when Lilley calls his fellow soldiers to gather round to watch his film, he teases: "You're all going to jerk off".

- 45 This reminds us of a number of references to the 'excitement' of war. In episode 5, when the reporter shivered uncontrollably after having come under heavy fire, Trombley told him that feeling cold comes from excess of adrenaline – "stay frosty" turned literal. The reporter naturally asked: "Is that what happens to you?" – and Trombley answered: "No, I get a woody" (1.5, 35:00). Just before Lilley shows his film, the reporter has taken his leave of the company and talked to "Godfather" Ferrando, who, beyond justifying his actions as commander, deliberately insinuates that the reporter now shares a form of excitement he

himself has discovered, in getting shot at: "Something else I'm struggling with is the excitement of getting shot at. It's just something I hadn't anticipated about war" (1.7, 52:00). This sets up a "sexualized" reception of Lilley's film, which one can see as a "mash-up", "recap", or "best of" compilation of *Generation Kill* itself. The *mise en abyme* of viewing is highlighted, to make viewers aware of their own expectations, as the soldiers gather round the computer screen and Lilley asks: "You guys ready?" and we cut to the inset screen to the sound of Johnny Cash reciting the beginning of "When The Man Comes Around".

The Inset Viewing of Lilley's Film: An Apparently Reflexive Ending...

- 46 No officers are present; Brad also (mutely) declines to view the film, and leaves, in the background, as it is being displayed. Initially the men cheer the video of their Iraqi adventure; but when the first civilian victims are shown, Poke predictably walks away. When cutouts from porn magazines are displayed, to offensive comments, the soldier who received news his wife is divorcing him also leaves. One thus sees the Marines peeling away from the viewing, one after another, as the "reflection" of their war comes home to hurt them, grating on their own self-image. This is the ultimate reflexive ending, as each member of the cast "bows out" – the bow, here, is each man picking up his gun and leaving the set. The last two left standing are Trombley, and Ray. Trombley, despite the death and destruction seen over and over, breathes to Ray, as he gazes at the last shots of war: "It's fucking beautiful." (61:00). This is too much, even for Ray – he stares at Trombley and leaves. The inset film ends on a shot of a dead civilian, synchronized with the last lines of the Johnny Cash song: "And I looked, and behold, a white horse / And his name that sat on him was death / And Hell followed with him". (62:00). As this last line is recited, the "white horse" that is Trombley picks up his gun and leaves the set too⁵⁸.
- 47 It would be a mistake, however, to see this ending as an antiwar statement. While this reflexive wrap-up to the series would have been as perfect as its militainment opening, *Generation Kill* does not end there. As the end credits unroll, one hears a Marine recite the following text, belligerently, at 62:40:

UNIDENTIFIED MARINE. 10 November 1775, I was born in a bomb crater. My mother was an M-16 and my father was the devil. Each moment that I live is an additional threat upon your life. I eat concertina, piss napalm and I can shoot a round through a flea's ass at 300 meters. I travel the globe, festering on anti-Americans everywhere I go, for the love of Mom, Chevrolet, baseball and apple pie. I'm a grunt. I'm the dirty, nasty, stinky, sweaty, filthy, beautiful little son-of-a-bitch that's kept the wolf away from the door, for over 225 years. I'm a United States Marine. We look like soldiers, talk like sailors, slap the shit out of both of them. We stole the Eagle from the Air Force, the Rope from the Army, and the Anchor from the Navy, and on the Seventh Day, when God rested, we overran his perimeter and we've been running the show ever since. Warrior by day, lover by night, drunkard by choice, Marine by God. *Semper Fidelis*.

This speech, which is just one version of a text credited to an anonymous Marine on numerous US Marine postings and websites on YouTube, is obviously an allegorical celebration of the USMC and of all things American ("Mom, Chevrolet, baseball and apple pie") that the Corps defends. Referenced in popular culture – a Marine played by Clint Eastwood in *Heartbreak Ridge* (Eastwood, 1986) speaks the line "I eat concertina [...]"

meters" – and impossibly hyperbolic in its boasting of violence, it nevertheless seems to reassert, in its structure of address, the Marines as ultimate outlaws. It is difficult, on hearing this speech, to think that it was referenced for another purpose than the aggrandizement of the "warrior" ethos.

- 48 The politics of this paratext and of the second speech it immediately segues into, which seems like a real-life recording (with numerous expletives) from a Marine NCO in Ramadi, Iraq, but may very well be a performance for the show⁵⁹, both indicate that the series is not meant to end on a consensual note, except to "support the grunts" as those who "ke [ep] the wolf at the door" and perform "selfless sacrifice":

UNIDENTIFIED MARINE. The selfless sacrifice of day-to-day military personnel, especially combat veterans, is under-appreciated. I mean, you got the American society want to run fast as they can to the counter shop, to the motherfucking newsstands and grab fucking *House Weekly* and fucking *People Magazine* just to see what fucking Jake Gyllenhaal did on Thursday afternoon. You know what I did Thursday afternoon? I put one of my motherfucking Marines on a plane. I put that motherfucker on a bird to fucking nowhere. I picked his lifeless ass-up body, put him on a stretcher and put him off. Why don't they put that—why don't *that* be in a motherfucking magazine? Or how about let's put a day in the life of fucking any average Marine out here, going through the street of Ramadi? Their biggest concern is that, you know, they couldn't buy a mocha latte at fucking Starbucks because it was under construction. Our biggest motherfucking concern is getting blown up on fucking 295 and Michigan. But we're going to go home, and they'll wave their little flag and say, "Welcome home. Thanks for preserving our right to go on not giving a fuck".

OTHER MARINE. There it is, folks. We're sitting here fighting for your freedoms. You got the right to say what you want. We got the right to punch you in your fucking mouth if we disagree. (65:00)

This last line, while it plays on the Looney Tunes famous "That's all, folks" wrap-up line, undoes any unproblematic, purely reflexive reading of the "When the Man Comes Around" sequence. The true reflexive ending comes now: the HBO logo's appearance is synchronized with the last word uttered, before the cut to black. This tends to collapse the miniseries' political discourse with the Marine getting the last word: the final paratext thus seems to "embed" the series within the Marines' perspective politically.

- 49 This must also serve as a reminder that *within* the series, antiwar or anti-occupation statements do not get the last word in any dialogue between pro- and anti-war speakers. For instance, the educated Iraqi woman who sarcastically thanks the soldiers (in English) for letting her walk on the roads of her own country gets called an "ungrateful bitch" (1.6) to her face; when Ray remarks, on the lack of "proportional response" to one Marine getting wounded, "We had one guy get shot in the foot and we level half the town", Trombley answers: "Haji's gotta learn" (1.5, 57:00). The Marines' desire to kill (no matter how unjustly) gets the last word too when the reporter realizes, when they are all told to shed their anti-chemical protective suits for ordinary camouflage as they near Baghdad, that the war was probably waged on lies:

REPORTER. No; really: if we're not in our MOPP suits, that means there's no WMDs. And if there's no WMDs, then why are we here in the first place?

RAY. I knew you were a fucking gay-ass liberal. You tried to pretend by invading Iraq with us, but I knew.

TROMBLEY. The point is, we get to kill people, you dumb fuck!

RAY. What's the difference, anyway, man? The war's almost over. We're just about done with *this* bitch. (1.6, 48:00)

50 Ultimately, just as *Generation Kill* deliberately comes across as an ambiguous series in its gendered, macho representation of war (*war is a bitch*), it also remains ambiguous in its aesthetics. Simon and Burns seem to hesitate, in their adaptation from Wright's to the grunts' perspectives, between a political series with an ensemble cast to show the full span of points of view on war, and a form of gritty macho adventure, capitalizing on war-as-spectacle even as it lambasts CNN and others for such bogus "reporting" of the invasion. Even when it denounces the cost of war to civilians, or the inept chain of command, through caricatures like "Captain America" and "Encino Man"⁶⁰, it stays within a teenage repertoire of gore shots and *Jackass* humor. Simon and Burns do bring to the TV fiction series the flavor of embedded documentaries on the Iraq War that show war-as-tedium as much as war-as-action, and the forms of resisting narrative that had won them fans in *The Wire*. Numerous fans obviously adore the teenage humor: Ray's ad-libbing about famous Marines, from John Wayne Bobbitt to Lee Harvey Oswald (1.5, 12:00) or his constant profanity. These viewers enjoy its adult depiction of war-as-adventure⁶¹, one that oscillates between boredom and sensory overload, between moments of camaraderie⁶² and tension, its constant irony that cuts both ways:

The ironies *Generation Kill* offers are more along: burning the village to save it, winning the war but losing the peace, the odd fact that a Marine without a war is a man with nothing to do. Even the sensible men here are anxious to "get in the game," to "be part of the show," as if war is (*sic*) a thing too good to miss⁶³.

51 Others will deplore the "adventure" aspect of the film, its grunt's-eye-view, and its tardiness⁶⁴:

At the start of the war, it was useful to be reminded of what was involved in being a soldier, but at this remove such a "faithful" depiction comes across as an abdication, a moral failure to judge and to acknowledge the horrors that followed—it makes the war in Iraq feel like little more than an adventure story with a few unpleasant wrinkles and an occasional nod to the ethical dilemmas and battlefield difficulties unique to this conflict⁶⁵.

This is not an unfair assessment: Wright himself touted the "embedded" perspective of the adaptation as a "medal of honor" of sorts:

Avoiding the temptation to turn war movies into soapboxes, the creators refrained from making a larger statement about Iraq. "I don't care about the American public", says Wright, a co-writer and producer of the show. "I made this for, like, twenty Marines I know"⁶⁶.

52 Neither completely embedded in sensory overload nor radically distanced from the spectacle of war, *Generation Kill* is an exercise in ambiguity; and although most fans seem not to perceive it, it is more part of Hollywood's war machine⁶⁷ than of its dismantling, in its celebration of the warrior ethic, and of the warrior's gaze.

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Filmography / TV series

Generation Kill (HBO, 2008)

Gunner Palace (Petra Epperlein and Michael Tucker, 2004)

Heartbreak Ridge (Clint Eastwood, 1986)

The Hurt Locker (Kathryn Bigelow, 2008)

The Invisible War (Kirby Dick, 2012)

Jarhead (Sam Mendes, 2005)

Militainment, Inc: Militarism and Pop Culture (Roger Stahl, 2007)

No End in Sight (Charles Ferguson, 2007)

Occupation: Dreamland (Ian Olds & Garrett Scott, 2005)

Operation Hollywood (Emilio Pacull, 2004)

Over There (FX, 2005)

Redacted (Brian de Palma, 2007)

Top Gun (Tony Scott, 1986)

The War Tapes (Deborah Scranton, 2006)

WMD: Weapons of Mass Deception (Danny Schechter, 2004)

Why We Fight (Eugene Jarecki, 2005)

NOTES

1. See Monica Michlin, "War on the War in Iraq: Antiwar Documentary Film 2003-2006", *Images of War and War of Images*, Karine Hildenbrand and Gérard Hugues (ed.), Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Cambridge Scholars, 2008, p. 171-191. In the series' defense, a number of fiction films that had come out the year before – Robert Redford's *Lions for Lambs* – or that were to be released later – Paul Greengrass's *Green Zone* (2010) starring Matt Damon – also found it necessary to return to what was the prevailing "wisdom" for the grunts as they invaded Iraq: that Iraq had WMDs, in particular chemical weapons, or that the invasion would be a "cakewalk" and that American soldiers would be greeted as heroes.
2. Even if this might prove to be in part a USMC PR ploy.
3. Evan Wright, *Generation Kill: Living Dangerously on the Road to Baghdad with the Ultraviolet Marines of Bravo Company*, London, [Bantam 2004] Corgi, 2009.
4. I use the term "militainment" as defined by Roger Stahl in *Militainment, Inc.: War, Media and Popular Culture*, New York and Oxon, Routledge, 2010, and in Stahl's eponymous 2007 documentary. One can also see Maurice Ronai and Ernesto Pacull's 2004 documentary *Operation Hollywood (Hollywood-Pentagon)* for more on this topic.
5. "Humvee" is no longer "heard" as a military acronym, but it is one: HMMWV stands for "High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicle". It is thus part of the military lingo that has entered contemporary American English.
6. Neither *Generation Kill* nor the earlier FX series *Over There* (2005) were embedded in the official sense of the term: they did not sign a contract with the Pentagon to obtain military equipment in

exchange for oversight of the script. They did, however, employ a Marine technical adviser (in both cases, a veteran of the war in question). See David L. Robb, *Operation Hollywood: How the Pentagon Shapes and Censors the Movies*, Amherst, NY, Prometheus Books, 2004.

7. Although the series was not “embedded”, it did have a Marine adviser and Marine actors like Reyes who lauded it; Burns and Simon showed it at Camp Pendleton and in the commentary on the pilot episode, the director, Susanna White, and creators say that it was like “coming home”; the many commentaries one can find online show rank-and-file Marines massively identifying with the show. Contrary to what Tim Goodman, the *San Francisco Chronicle* online reviewer thought, it probably did not discourage recruitment at all. See Tim Goodman, “*Generation Kill* Feels Real”, *SF Gate*, July 11, 2008. <http://www.sfgate.com/tv/article/TV-review-Generation-Kill-feels-real-3277337.php> last accessed April 14, 2016.

8. Stephen Hunter, “Going Full Bore in Iraq: War is Hell, but It’s Also Tedium.” *The Washington Post*, September 30, 2005. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/29/AR2005092902142.html> last consulted April 14, 2016.

9. Richard Beck, “Beyond the Choir: An Interview with David Simon”, *Film Quarterly* vol. 62, No. 2 (Winter 2008), p. 46 [44-49].

10. Brian Lowry, “Review: *Generation Kill*”, *Variety*, July 9, 2008. <http://variety.com/2008/scene/reviews/generation-kill-1200508469/> last accessed April 14, 2016.

11. Stacy Takacs, *Terrorism TV: Popular Entertainment in Post-9/11 America*, Lawrence, Kansas, University Press of Kansas, 2012, p. 167.

12. Drawing a sharp contrast with the Simon and Burns early miniseries, *The Corner* (HBO, 2000), which was later expanded into *The Wire*: “*Generation Kill* is entertainment. *The Corner* is anything but”. Laura J. Shepherd, *Gender, Violence and Popular Culture: Telling Stories*, London and New York, Routledge, 2013, p. 107.

13. See Takacs, *op. cit.*, p. 145.

14. “We don’t have to have a view that it was a good idea to go to war” (Gerolmo, 8:50)

15. A fantasy that led to Baudrillard’s famous contention during the First Gulf War that it had not taken place: see Jean Baudrillard, “The Gulf War Did Not Take Place” (1993), reprinted in *Hollywood and War: The Film Reader*, J. David Slocum, (ed), New York and London, Routledge, 2006, p. 303-314. Yet this fantasy remained the dominant trope during the “Shock and Awe” campaign on Baghdad at the start of the 2003 war. See Stahl’s 2007 documentary *Militainment, Inc.* on “clean wars” and technofetishism.

16. Duncan Anderson, *Glass Warriors: The Camera at War*, London, Collins, 2005.

17. He commends the journalist he knew for being a “balls-out, former marine” who helped the soldiers, in a Virilio-like twist, by allowing them to benefit from the longer range his camera had (thus actually becoming a warrior who “scoped” for them). Fundamentally, the Marine adviser commends him for being pro-US, even if he presents this as lack of bias: “He wasn’t just there trying to report and get some American killing an innocent Iraqi. He was actually there helping them and bringing footage for History... But some of the reporters had an agenda I didn’t agree with... waiting for something to happen that they could send back home and make us all look bad”. (Extra features interview, 33:00)

18. Takacs, *op.cit.*, p. 148.

19. War film encompasses so many different genres that James Chapman proposes his own grouping into loose forms of representation such as “War as Spectacle”, “War as Adventure”, and “War as Tragedy” while immediately warning that overlap constantly occurs. The opening of *Saving Private Ryan*, for instance, can be theorized as mainly spectacle (for the first 23 minutes) but is also about war as tragedy. See John Chapman, *War and Film*, London, Reaktion Books, 2008, p. 10-16.

20. Steve Bochco, Interview, *Generation Kill* Extra Features, 75:00.

21. Ironically, *Over There* was shot in California, whereas most Iraq war films were shot in Morocco, and *Generation Kill* was filmed in Namibia, Mozambique and South Africa; hence the fact that many extras look African, rather than Arabic. While the makeup artist on *Generation Kill* admits this was a problem, that such filming was possible implies that most viewers will not distinguish a light-skinned Namibian from a dark-skinned Iraqi, which suggests that "otherness" conditions the reception of such fiction (and that it is always seen from a neo-colonial standpoint, with no actual "seeing" of the populations shown, who remain "invisible", in the white gaze, except as allegorical presences).

22. Takacs, *op.cit.*, p. 149.

23. For instance in Sgt. Colbert's response to his buddy who cannot believe that "guys in pajamas" have stopped two Marine regiments: "You know, Poke, guys in black pajamas did all right in Vietnam too. You gotta respect the pajamas". (1.2)

24. See Jack Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies A People*, Northampton (Mass.), Olive Press, (2001), 2009 and *GUILTY: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs After 9/11*, Northampton (Mass.), Olive Press, 2008. For recent and more sophisticated developments, see Evelyn Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation after 9/11*, New York, New York University Press, 2012.

25. A title which of course inspired the Dalton Trumbo antiwar masterpiece *Johnny Got His Gun* (1971). The lyrics go: "Johnny, get your gun, get your gun, get your gun / Take it on the run, on the run, on the run / Hear them calling you and me, every Son of Liberty ! / Hurry right away, no delay, go today. [...] Over there, over there, / Send the word, send the word over there / That the Yanks are coming, the Yanks are coming / The drums rum-tumming everywhere ! / So prepare, say a prayer, / Send the word, send the word to beware - / We'll be over, we're coming over, / And we won't come back till it's over, over there".

26. The chorus, for instance, goes: "Trains are filling up with boys/ They've left behind their favorite toys / They're going over there/ And someone has to die over there / And ours is not to reason why." Besides, unless boys' "favorite toys" are construed to be the "dolls" (spouses and children) they have left behind, this song is an absolute contradiction, since boys' favorite toys have everything to do with war - the military-industrial sector shapes the toy industry, as it does the entertainment industry, for war to be normative within the construction of masculinity. See the chapter "Toying with Militainment", Stahl, *op.cit.*, 113-138.

27. See Roger Stahl's documentary *Militainment, Inc.* (2007) for the militarized entertainment provided by singers such as Darryl Worley, Toby Keith and others, with active support from the Pentagon for the production of these singers' music videos and the promotion of their songs.

28. "Let the Hajis hit the floor!" sings Ray (1.2, 30:30). The song is also referenced in *Fahrenheit 9/11*. See Jonathan Pieslak, *Sound Targets: American Soldiers and Music in the Iraq War*, Bloomington (Indiana), Indiana University Press, 2009, p. 16-46 on the musical soundtrack to the Iraq War.

29. Cynthia Fuchs, "Generation Kill", *PopMatters*, July 11, 2008. <http://www.popmatters.com/review/generation-kill/> URL last accessed April 14, 2016.

30. Matthew Gilbert, "In for the Kill", *The Boston Globe*, July 11, 2008. http://www.boston.com/ae/tv/articles/2008/07/11/in_for_the_kill/?page=full URL last accessed April 14, 2016.

Numerous critics have remarked that the actor, James Ransone, brings to this part intertextual echoes of Ziggy, a similarly wired working-class character in Season 2 of *The Wire*.

31. Troy Patterson, "Band of Lunkeads: The Aggro Marines of *Generation Kill*", *Slate.com*, July 11, 2008. http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/television/2008/07/band_of_lunkeads.html URL last accessed April 14, 2016.

32. See Laura Shepherd *op.cit.*, p. 54.

33. The high prevalence of rape within the military forces made the headlines over and over in 2013 with Kirby Dick's documentary *The Invisible War* (2012), which was screened including at the White House, within a push to change legislation. Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY)'s bill taking prosecution of sex crimes outside of the chain of command was, sadly, defeated.

34. Homophobic putdowns of patriotic posturing, like Brad's critique of the song "Where stars and stripes and eagles fly" – "That song is straight homosexual country-music Special Olympic gay". (1.2, 01:45) – quickly leach into similar putdowns between the men (Colbert being alpha dog to Brad) as he makes clear time and again, for instance in a discussion of the proper consistency of their stools. When Ray says "It should feel a little acid", Brad immediately retorts "maybe to your little bitch asshole, Ray, from all the cock that's been stuffed up it" (1.2, 05:30). Another Marine highlights the subtext of such exchanges: "Man, we Marines are so homoerotic. It's all we talk about. You ever realize how homoerotic this whole thing is?" (05:50).
35. Richard Blanco, "HBO Scores a Direct Hit with *Generation Kill*", *USA Today*, July 11, 2008. http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/television/reviews/2008-07-10-generation-kill_N.htm last accessed April 14, 2016.
36. Jonathan Finer, "*Generation Kill* Captures War's Lulls and Horrors", *The Washington Post*, July 12, 2008. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/07/11/AR2008071103372.html> URL last accessed April 14, 2016.
37. Alessandra Stanley, "Comrades in Chaos, Invading Iraq", *The New York Times*, July 11, 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/07/11/arts/television/11kill.html>. URL last accessed April 14, 2016.
38. See Stacy Takacs, *op.cit.*, 146-148 and Andrew Bacevich, *The New American Militarism: How Americans Are Seduced by War*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2005.
39. The allusion is to a 1992 comedy of that name about a caveman brought back to life in Encino, California.
40. Which one critic saw as the "thematic score" of the series: "The odyssey of these men from training tents in Kuwait to occupied Baghdad is laid out with brutal candor and without the aid of maudlin cinematography or emotive music. The closest thing to a thematic score is the starched, staccato clatter of radio traffic: 'Roger that' and 'This is Hit Man II, over.'" (Alessandra Stanley, *op.cit.*). Laura Shepherd reads being "on comms" as a "discursive mechanism to delimit in-groups and out-groups among the Marines, in a play on 'communications' and 'community' (Shepherd *op.cit.*, p. 44).
41. In the commentary of the pilot episode on the DVD's extra features, Simon rails against Comcast's "lightening" of the dark imagery to make it "daylight bright" when he had worked hard for it to be somber and difficult to view.
42. Maureen Ryan, "The Unflinching and Affecting *Generation Kill*: Not Your Father's War Movie", *The Watcher Blog*, *The Chicago Tribune*, July 10, 2008. http://featuresblogs.chicagotribune.com/entertainment_tv/2008/07/the-unflinching.html last accessed April 14, 2016.
43. The fact that Brad pulls out a secret stash of canned civilian food and a porn magazine and offers a 'beefarooni' as a special treat to Poke, who replies, "The last time the white man gave my people something, it was blankets, laced with typhoid", highlights the Mexican/ Native-American's rejection of an American 'white man' identity. But in a deliberate reference to *Mars Attacks*, to depoliticize the conversation and remind him that camaraderie is the basis of their survival, Brad replies "Poke, can't we all just... *get along*?" (1.6, 38:00) and throws a can into his hand. In the script of *Generation Kill*, any critique of imperialism (generally by Poke, like his putdown of *Pocahontas*) is always turned into a form of entertainment, mocked in turn.
44. Richard Beck, "Beyond the Choir: An Interview with David Simon", *Film Quarterly*, vol. 62, No. 2 (Winter 2008), p. 47.
45. Jonathan Finer, *op.cit.*, p. 2.
46. Gunnery Sgt. Wynn, one of the most humane NCOs, also tries to lecture the soldiers on empathy for Iraqi civilians: "We're Americans. You've got to see that these people are just like you. You've got to see past the huts, the camels, the different clothes they wear. These are people in this fucking country. These people here might lose a son. We shot their camels too. One camel could be a year's income to them. We're not here to destroy their way of life" (1.3, 55:00). This

sequence is also notable for not downplaying the importance of livestock, in sharp contrast to how the soldiers in the documentary *Restrepo* minimize shooting an old Afghan man's cow. In that documentary, no one points out the immense value of any milk-producing animal, in one of the poorest countries of the world, where the majority of children suffer from malnutrition. One also notices, however, that "Gunny" Wynn, like Captain Bryan Patterson, who is also a mature, humane officer, are both marginalized in the storylines.

47. Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York, Picador, 2003.

48. On these issues see W.J.T. Mitchell, *Cloning Terror: The War of Images, 9/11 to the Present*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2010.

49. The constant emphasis on defecation, throughout the miniseries, can be seen as part of the "unheroic" and naturalistic depiction of war.

50. Nancy Franklin, "The Road to Baghdad: David Simon's *Generation Kill*", *The New Yorker*, July 21, 2008.

51. In a similar scene of occupation – a house is being night-raided by the US military in Tucker and Epperlein's *Gunner Palace* (2004) – a woman blurts all the English words she knows, including "Thank you" and "I love you" to the soldiers, simply out of terror and hope they will understand her not to be hostile.

52. Fick: "It's a long list. Unexploded munitions, lack of electricity, no running water, broken phone lines, ransacked hospitals and bandits coming through at night, robbing homes. Oh, and they want jobs." / Brad: "Is that all?" / Fick: "For now." (20 :00). But even this exchange can seem more to mock the Iraqis for hoping that the US forces will provide them with this ("Is that all?"), than to indict the devastation wrought by war. More generally, the overt critique of war by the Iraqis is put down by a soldier – for instance the Iraqi woman who sarcastically thanks Colbert for allowing her to walk the roads of her own country is mocked and portrayed as "shrill".

53. While grandiose heroism flies out the window, alpha dog strength is exalted time and again. While in Wright's embedded account he explains that one out of four soldiers experiences a loss of bodily control during combat, soiling himself, when in the series the reporter asks why the soldiers need adult diapers he does not get a clear answer (1.1, 27:50); and it would be out of the question for either Iceman, Fick or Ray to soil themselves so.

54. Similarly, Ray rails against soldiers who put patriotic slogans – "Get Some", "Don't Tread on Me", "Let's Roll" – on their vehicles, deeming this "moto bullshit", despite the fact that he and the other Marines exclaim "Get Some!" each time a missile is fired.

55. The soldiers are fooled by "autokinesis", shown through Brad's scope and explained as the involuntary muscle movements of the observing soldier's eye producing the illusion of the lights of the town a few miles away moving towards them, as if it were an army on the move. This is also a twist, if one is on the alert for Shakespearean allusions in *Generation Kill*, on the forest in *Macbeth*.

56. As Wright wrote in his embedded account: "There is an undeniable Peter Pan quality to the military. A Marine psychiatrist attached to the First Division says, 'The whole structure of the military is designed to mature young men to function responsibly while at the same time preserving their adolescent sense of invulnerability'" (Wright *op.cit.*, p. 44).

57. In this clash between being "good" (a moral person) and being good at one's job as a soldier, i.e., obeying orders that kill civilians, the series also echoes such documentaries as *Gunner Palace*, *Occupation: Dreamland*, or *The War Tapes*.

58. At the same time, as Stacy Takacs highlights, Billy Lush, who plays Trombley, had previously played a very different soldier – a triple amputee who asks for euthanasia in the HBO series *Six Feet Under* (2001-2005). This very different embodiment by Lush of the destructiveness of war creates an interesting intertext for viewers of both HBO series. See Takacs, *op. cit.*, p. 232-233.

59. Since Lilley's film is a composite of real images provided by some of the Marines and the shots shown through Lilley's inset "recording" video-camera throughout the story.
60. Sergeant Major Sixta, who is an obvious screaming throwback to the drill sergeant in *Full Metal Jacket*, is ironically belatedly revealed to be consciously playing that role: he explains that his insisting on grooming standards is a ploy to create cohesion (as the rank and file bond against him) and keep morale up.
61. In the promotional paratext of the commentaries on DVD, this is reinforced, when the actor (Billy Lush) who plays Trombley gushes: "[It was] like cops and robbers, but on the grandest scale, it was like Marines and Hajjis. It was awesome". (06:30).
62. "Yet no matter how flat or diffuse its affect, *Generation Kill* is at its best a tale of battle-forged camaraderie, a *Band of Brothers* set not at Agincourt or Normandy, but Iraq in 2003" (Stanley, *op.cit.*)
63. Richard Lloyd, "Generation Kill is a Straight Shooter", *L.A. Times*, July 11, 2008. <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/jul/11/entertainment/et-generationkill11> last accessed April 14, 2016.
64. In 2008, the critique of the invasion of Iraq through such cues as "You've taken the country apart. You're not putting it back together. [...] All this [civilian desperation at the American occupation] is a bomb. If it explodes, it will be bigger than the war". (1.7, 23:30), or "This place was fucked before we got here and it's fucked now. I personally don't believe we liberated the Iraqis. Only time will tell" (1.7, 56 :50) was not as daring as it would have been in 2004. This has, however, gained new topicality in 2014 with the Sunni uprising (predicted as early as 2004).
65. Franklin, *op.cit.*
66. Julian Sancton, "TiVo This: *Generation Kill*", *Vanity Fair*, July 11, 2008. <http://www.vanityfair.com/online/daily/2008/07/tivo-this-generation-kill> last accessed April 14, 2016.
67. Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard, and Tom Pollard, *The Hollywood War Machine: U.S. Militarism and Popular Culture*, Boulder, Colorado, Paradigm Publishers, 2007.

ABSTRACTS

This article examines *Generation Kill*'s deliberately ambiguous discourse on war, as the series stages, in a *mise en abyme*, armed invasion and the *spectacle* of war as somewhere between orgasmic excitement and boredom – between "sensory overload" (as one Marine calls it in the last minutes of story) and radical alienation. In its self-reflexive references to famous war films, its recycling of stereotypes and/or archetypes, the series seems to deliberately contradict itself, over and over, as to whether or not war is a desirable all-male adventure or if it is born of training men to be "pit bulls" (1.1) who must obey the chain of command and disregard their conscience when killing civilians. Between the opening sequence and the final one, when the soldiers gather around to watch the war as their buddy has filmed it on videocam, in a mash-up that "recaps" what the series has immersed us in all along, one might see a progression towards a radical critique of war: when images of carnage replace those of war-as-adventure, the soldiers, one by one, desert the "(re-)viewing", until the set is left bare. But is this truly an ethical and political "turning away" from the horrors of war, or is it merely an aesthetic gesture, that reflexively "dismantles" the set and the series? What, in particular, is one to make of the voice-over by an allegorical Marine that concludes the series' audio track and thus gives the gung-ho Marine the last word?

Cet article examine la manière délibérément ambiguë dont *Generation Kill* représente la guerre, dans une mise en abyme qui oscille entre mise en scène de l'ennui et spectacle de la guerre, entre « surcharge sensorielle » de nature orgasmique et distanciation radicale. Dans sa mobilisation d'allusions à des films de guerre célèbres, et dans son recyclage de stéréotypes et d'archétypes, la série de David Simon semble se contredire sans cesse : la guerre est-elle l'expérience de l'aventure masculine désirable entre toutes, ou l'expérience de l'aliénation, les soldats devant obéir aux ordres au mépris de leur conscience, y compris lorsqu'il s'agit de tuer, à répétition, des civils ? Certains spectateurs et critiques voient dans l'arc que trace le récit un discours éthique, qui nous propose de rejeter la guerre comme spectacle en la dévoilant comme carnage. Mais est-il certain que la dernière scène, dans laquelle les soldats quittent un à un le plateau, à mesure que la vidéo filmée par leur camarade révèle, sous la guerre-comme-aventure, la guerre-comme-boucherie, soit sans ambiguïté ? Ne s'agit-il pas plutôt d'un dispositif *esthétique* cher à Simon, qui concluait déjà nombre de saisons de *The Wire* sur ces formes de « démantèlement » réflexif du plateau – d'autant que cette scène « finale » est suivie du discours bravache en *voix off* d'un Marine qui a ainsi le dernier mot.

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