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Abstract

This is a review of *The Oath* (2010).

Laura Poitras aptly characterizes her new documentary, *The Oath* (2010), as a psychological portrait of the main character, Abu Jandal, but also as a kind of “psychological thriller.” By this designation, Poitras points to what makes the most recent installment in her trilogy on post-9/11 America, which garnered the best documentary cinematography award at this year’s Sundance festival, such riveting cinema. Abu Jandal, Osama bin Laden’s chief bodyguard until 2000, is a highly complex, conflicted and charismatic man. The element of suspense in watching this unusual “thriller” comes from the fact that the viewer never reaches the point where one truly knows what makes Abu Jandal “tick,” never knows what he will say or do next. There is Abu Jandal the affectionate father of a young boy, Abu Jandal the guilt-ridden brother-in-law of Salim Hamdan, Guantanamo detainee, and Abu Jandal the man who still firmly believes in the original vision of al-Qaeda, despite having turned his back on that organization, breaking the oath of obedience he swore when he joined it. *The Oath* paints a decidedly more nuanced portrait of a religiously motivated terrorist than we are accustomed to seeing in western media.

Poitras takes us remarkably close to Abu Jandal, letting us witness his sense of humor, his sociability, his mania and his piety. The latter comes through most disarmingly in two intimate scenes, one in which we watch Abu Jandal teach his son how to perform the morning prayer (fajr) and another where we watch him help young Habib to memorize the Throne verse (al-Baqara2:255). This piety and

sociability is also on display in his discussions with young men who come to him as aspiring jihadis, in which he urges them to take up the “pen instead of the sword,” and to cultivate the art of persuasion (more specifically, we may assume, *ofda'wa*).

Better known than Abu Jandal is his brother-in-law, Salim Hamdan, who had been recruited by Abu Jandal to work for al-Qaeda. He became bin Laden’s personal driver and was detained at Guantanamo Bay on the grounds that he provided “material support” to al-Qaeda and that, more seriously, he was a conspirator in the 9/11 attacks. A groundbreaking Supreme Court case (*Hamdan v. Rumsfeld*) struck down the legality of these charges. In the film, we never see Salim, who since his release has not spoken to the media, but we hear the words of his letters to Abu Jandal in voiceover. As Poitras has explained, her film’s title refers to the oath Abu Jandal swore to al-Qaeda, but it also signals the film’s broader concerns with loyalty and betrayal, for example the relationship between Hamdan and Abu Jandal.

These concerns extend to the ethics of the relationship between a filmmaker and her subjects in one of the film’s most memorable moments. When asked one day whether he would have participated in the attacks on the World Trade Center, Abu Jandal replies that no, as an individual, he would not do so. He prefers that jihad take the form of hand-to-hand combat, so as not to endanger the lives of civilians. The following day, for reasons we never learn, Poitras’ subject requests

that the footage in which he expressed this conviction be deleted. Viewers see very clearly both the request being made and the director's decision not to honor her interviewee's request: we are left to consider the ethics of this decision for ourselves.

Without giving any indication of sympathy for his militant aims, Poitras gives viewers a complex and ambiguous portrait of Abu Jandal through the presentation of his piety and sociability, whether in the seclusion of his home or as a taxi driver navigating his way through the streets of Sana'a. Yet this documentary is as much a film about nation-states as it is about individuals. We might trace Abu Jandal's "reform," his change of heart regarding the al-Qaeda understanding of jihad, to his participation in the Dialogue Committee program, conducted from 2002-2005 under the auspices of the Yemeni state, in which imprisoned Islamists took part in discussions meant to convert them from a radicalized understanding of the Islamic tradition to a more "moderate" one, defined by the state. One cannot help wishing that the film explored in greater detail this crucial angle of Abu Jandal's by now well-known narrative. More important to Poitras than religion-state relations in Yemen are the deplorable conditions under which the U.S. detained Salim Hamdan at Guantanamo Bay. When seen in the context of her larger project, one senses that *The Oath* is at heart a film about America and specifically

about a period in America's history that later generations, Poitras wagers, will not judge favorably.