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# ***Act of Valor: Celebrating and Denying the Brutalities of an Endless and Global U.S. War***

**Robin Andersen**

*This paper analyzes Act of Valor (2012) as a Hollywood film and Pentagon PR vehicle produced by a vast and expanding U.S. military-industrial-media-entertainment-complex. As a synergistic coproduction between the Bandito Brothers, a Hollywood film production company, and the U.S. Navy SEALs, a significant arm of the U.S. Department of Defense (DOD), the film presents mythic depictions of the changing public face of U.S. military policy, personnel and practice in the post-9/11 context of the endless global “war on terror.” A close reading of the film’s textual content, including the visual and audio strategies, reveals highly constructed imaginings of war and conflict, including a new militainment trope of soldier-as-superhero. Understood to be a “militainment” product and a significant moment in the development of the Hollywood-Pentagon complex, themes in Act of Valor’s are compared and contrasted to Hollywood’s cycle of critical war films, particularly the Vietnam War era classic, Apocalypse Now. The final section interrogates Act of Valor’s reality and authenticity claims via a systematic critique of the ways the film misrepresents the “reality” of U.S. military policy (Dirty Wars), personnel (elite special ops soldiers) and practice (terror, torture, clandestine killing and more). Particularly, it focuses on the way the film’s representation/aestheticization of war sanitizes and celebrates significant yet contentious transformations in U.S. foreign policy, denies the human, moral and political consequences of these transformations and supports the growth and maintenance of a war society.*

**Keywords:** Hollywood-Pentagon complex, War on Terror, war films, popular culture

## **Introduction: *Act of Valor’s* Conception**

**T**hough *Act of Valor* is a feature film theatrically released to a national audience, it was not born in Hollywood. It was conceived in the comfortable, well-funded surroundings of the massive Public Relations wing of the Pentagon. As a movie, it assumes the outward appearance of a form of entertainment with a long genealogy: the action-war thriller. But because of the film’s parentage and hybrid makeup it exists not primarily to entertain. Instead, when the Navy’s Special Warfare Command courted Hollywood’s Bandito Brothers, they tasked the production team with assembling a powerful tool to attract new recruits to the Navy SEALs.<sup>1</sup> Thus, as a promotional war vehicle masquerading as something it is not, *Act of Valor* offers an opportunity to explore the nature of the offspring of the military-industrial-media-entertainment complex. Though military media minders claim not to interfere with film content, they openly demand that their largess results in certain identifiable war depictions and that those they deem undesirable be eliminated.

Though some would argue that the action war genre is not one of the more creative or

independent media artifacts, it is not the most stilted either. Over the long historical trajectory of actual wars of the twentieth and now twenty-first centuries, the form has undergone notable transformations as it has helped shape, and been shaped by multiple social responses to war. The imagery and narratives of war and conflict reveal considerable variation, whether referencing historic conflict or present battles, which include depictions of the military, soldiers, the enemy, and the explanations for conflict and violence, among others. Such variations are frequently tied to the practices and outcomes of actual war, its consequences, and the toll it takes on human life. Historical interpretations of any war shift with social and political context, and by extension the changing tropes of war are also tied to larger cultural shifts.

After the ignominy of the War in South East Asia<sup>2</sup> and the resulting fall from favor of war in general, popular film narratives were mired in tales of futility and inhumanity.<sup>3</sup> Films such as *Platoon* (1986) *Apocalypse Now* (1979) *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) were harshly critical of the military, the justifications for war, the brutality experienced by civilians, and even the actions of U.S. soldiers. Ironically, despite strong claims to realism, *Act of Valor* and other action war films of the current era seem strangely detached from the wars they depict and the public attitudes toward them. As we will see with *Act of Valor*, enthusiasm for the thrills, skills and excitement of military operations celebrated in the theater bare little resemblance to public attitudes held toward global theaters of conflict and wars, which are largely unfavorable. A majority of the US public now believes the military failed in Iraq and Afghanistan,<sup>4</sup> yet the active duty Navy SEALs featured in *Act of Valor* succeed with their missions on two different fronts. The disjuncture between the current elevated public status of the military<sup>5</sup> and the opinions held about current war attest to the power of the military-industrial-media-entertainment complex.

As a film originally conceived of as an advertisement for the armed forces, *Act of Valor* allows us to recognize the characteristics of military interference in media culture and the persuasive strategies of war's promotion. *Act of Valor* is not the outcome of a social expression motivated to tell a story of war from distinct points of view. The words that flash at the end of the film's trailer define its value to the military: Courage, Loyalty, Honor. Exploring these themes, and the counter narratives they obscure, reveal the nature of contemporary war propaganda, and its role in helping shape the new culture of militarism. This analysis also offers a cite from which to explore war's weaknesses and necessities, an enterprise now heavily reliant on media entertainment forms and honed messaging for its very existence.

This thrilling story of action and glory began amid the mundane surroundings of bureaucratic reports and paperwork.<sup>6</sup> The Pentagon's Quadrennial Defense Review Report of 2006 identified weaknesses in military policy at the time and laid out new directions for the Department of Defense.<sup>7</sup> Three years after the disastrous occupation of Iraq, the future of war would depend on moving the battles into the shadows. Military operations would transition from open invasion and ground forces to new territory dominated by elite forces.<sup>8</sup> When the QDR report detailed the strain that the burgeoning Shadow Wars would place on the U.S. Special Forces it set off alarms within the military hierarchy. This new direction demanded a major expansion of personnel. Special Forces would need to increase enlistment by 15

percent. “That got the Navy and Special Operations Command thinking about how to both boost recruitment and sell enlisted troops on the spec-ops community.”<sup>9</sup> The SEALs understood that they needed to enhance their “public persona.” After years of operating in relative anonymity, recruiting became more important than secrecy. The Navy called upon military-friendly media producers, the Bandito Brothers, with an established record of promoting the armed forces, to carry out the campaign.

The words of former stuntman Scott Waugh (one-half of the Bandito Brothers), indicate his willingness to be a Pentagon agent, one eager to fulfill the public relations needs of the Navy. “Early on, we were pretty honored and humbled to be asked to take a look at potentially telling [the SEALs] story.”<sup>10</sup> Waugh and co-producer (motocross champion) Mike (who calls himself Mouse) McCoy, had already worked on a number of commercials with other offices in the Army and Navy. After accepting the assignment the Bandito Brothers deployed to the Naval base in Coronado, California where they reportedly spent 6 months to develop their new feature-length promotional production. After their “boot camp” experience, the Bandito Brothers came up with the idea to use active duty Navy SEALs. “The brass loved the idea, though the SEALs themselves were initially resistant to the idea of acting,” Waugh said.<sup>11</sup> The way the producers characterized their project as distinct from other feature war films is telling. They asserted that using SEALs would be part of an “authentic,” unadulterated story of Special Forces “not some hokey, cheesed-out Hollywood version of their community.”<sup>12</sup> McCoy confirmed “It had become our mantra to make sure everything does service to who they are,” he said. “We realized that actors could misrepresent the U.S. Navy SEALs, as they have before in film.”<sup>13</sup>

The producers of *Act of Valor* hold the same views about war narratives frequently articulated by the Pentagon and Presidents who want to continue to initiate global conflict and belligerencies. All disdain the “cheesed-out Hollywood versions of war,” by which they refer in large part, to critical depictions that include emotional trauma, characteristic of Vietnam War counter narratives. As Waugh reveals, this version of authentic is distinctly ideological, “I’d like to see the legacy of Vietnam put to bed. Vietnam was 40 years ago, and I think arts and entertainment is still suffering from that hangover,” he said. “It was a really bad time in American history, absolutely, but it’s time to sort of forget that and forget those sensibilities...”<sup>14</sup>

The ideological project to forget the “Vietnam Syndrome” depends on forgetting history. As Roland Barthes understood so long ago, myth is created through the elimination of historic context.<sup>15</sup> Ignoring the long history of war’s failures<sup>16</sup> is essential for creating war mythology. Without context and historical realities producers have the freedom to construct imagery and invent filmic heroism. Featuring active duty Navy SEALs takes this production to increased levels of persuasive content. Thus unconstrained, *Act of Valor* is able to weave its fearful terrorism narrative around mythic soldiers who are larger than life—almost super-human in physical prowess. One of the members of SEAL TEAM 7 is introduced as being “made of granite.” They succeed in every battle though dramatically outnumbered, and they never seem to miss a shot. One team member is hit with about 30 bullets and survives.

## **Soldiers as Superheroes**

As Gerry Canavan points out in his article about *Battle LA* (included in this volume), the soldier as superhero has become an important trope in the new culture of war. The qualities of the superheroes are mirrored in the identities forged of the “warriors” depicted in this film, and these identity myths sell young men on the military. Like superheroes in contemporary films, warriors are more powerful and admirable when they work as a team.

## **Elite Soldiers as a Warrior Caste**

A sense of group identity and belonging are passed down the genealogical line of the warrior. Throughout the film a non-diegetic spoken narration is frequently inserted over of the imagery, which punctuates the action sequences. Though only made clear at the end of the film, the voice is reading a letter written by one of the SEALs, Chief Dave, to Lt. Engelson, and comprises much of the film’s content. This otherworldly sound track seems omnipresent, and serves to pass on the wisdoms, codes and special insights that are inherited from fathers and grandfathers then forwarded to the next generation of sons. Early on the voice says “Your father’s grandfather gave up his life flying a B-24 in World War 2. He kept the Liberator aloft just long enough for everyone to jump and then he went down with the plane. That’s the blood coursing in your veins.” The warrior’s code and “caste” are also illustrated using symbolic icons of patriotism and war, which are presented as totems of belonging. One SEAL carries a US flag in his pocket and tells his buddy, “My grandfather’s flag, my pop gave it to me and I’m going to give it to my son.” The other one has a 9/11 badge sewn on his uniform depicting the FDNY, Never Forgotten. They refer to this emblem as the “family crest.”

## **Visual Language and the Threatening World of Terrorists**

The enhanced perception of the dangers in a freighting world filled with threats is a characteristic of the warrior caste, and those special skills and knowledge come from the father. Just before the main terrorist enters the film, the words warn, “Look harder, your father would say. There’s threats everywhere in a world that’s draped in camouflage.” The terrorist Christo (Alex Veadov) appears in the next frame in a scene where children at a clinic in Cost Rica jump into him arms and kiss and hug him. By virtue of their genealogy, the warriors recognize him as a threat when the children do not. The narration, together with slow motion and reverse editing and framing, help focus the viewer’s interpretation of the scene. These techniques are identified by Noel Carroll as “critical perfocusing,” and define the way film language evokes emotive responses that lead viewers to certain conclusions and feelings.<sup>17</sup> This sequence is not intended to humanize the terrorist, but to show the wisdom

of the SEALs, as only they can detect the evil that hides under the appearance of a humanitarian project. More stereotypic, conventional visual coding also identifies Christo as deviant with his long, oily hair and scraggly beard. Nothing is left open to interpretation in this closed, simply constructed world without nuance.

### **This is a Man's World.**

Before they deploy, the team gets together with their families on the beach and at times the voice narrates over the scene, introducing each member of the team. The narration tells us, "There was a brotherhood between us and we depended on each other more than a family," and the next shot shows the face of the wives sitting on the beach smiling. The voice, "An individual twig will break but a bundle is strong." Though the SEALs who have wives and children are portrayed as good husbands and fathers, these scenes make it clear that the relationships between the warriors are deeper and more important than the bonds between husband and wife. Indeed, this is reinforced as Rorke leaves for the battle. After kissing his pregnant wife goodbye he turns and walks away as his non-diegetic voice intones, "If you're not willing to give up everything, you've already lost." He is indeed ready to give up his life with his wife and newborn. He would rather jump into battle with his "bundle of twigs" than stay and help raise his child. The camera cuts to a picture of his worried, crying, pregnant wife. The not-to-subtle foreboding tells us this man will die. We will return to the significance of that death shortly.

At the beach, when the men stand in the surf, Dave's daughter runs to him and asks for a surfing lesson. He puts her off saying "later," and tells the little girl to go back and help her mother. The wives and mothers remain so deeply in the background of this film that one could be forgiven for assuming their main purpose is to supply the next generation of sons for the battlefield.

### **The Narrative Construction of a Hyper-Threatening Globe**

In the briefing room SEALs learn that a Ukrainian importer and a Russian are connected to a Chechen, Muslim terrorist, Abu Shabal. A CIA operative investigating Christo has been abducted. After the SEALs dramatic, successful rescue of the agent, Lisa Morales (Roselyn Sanchez) they learn that attacks are planned on major US cities that will make 9/11 "look like a walk in the park." The convoluted plot includes narco-traffickers who help the terrorists enter the US through tunnels from Mexicali. The Filipino suicide bombers look surprisingly like illegal Mexican immigrants, and they are willing to kill thousands of Americans. To summarize the unlikely plot: Filipinos transported through Mexico will don suicide vests with ceramic ball bearings made in Ukraine, sold by Russians, directed by a Costa Rican based terrorist with a yacht in the waters off of Africa. Virtually every corner the globe is

covered in this plot with the unmistakable message that the world is a very scary place for Americans.

The team watches video of a terrorist talking about the US occupation of Muslim countries. Part of his political statement warns, “You will never be safe until safety becomes a reality for us.” Spoken by a terrorist, charges against American foreign policy are easily, and deliberately discounted.

When the terrorist Christo is apprehended, his proclamations are somewhat surprising until it becomes clear that his values are set in contrast to the warriors. That he is not loyal to his criminal friends is a recognizable trait of the “bad guy”, but his next sentence is not easily understood without realizing it as a counterpoint to the SEALs’ singular loyalty to their fellow warriors. Christo says, “The only people I answer to is [sic] my family, to my wife and to my child, and nobody else.” Interestingly, here the needs of the recruiting message become so extreme that having a family instead of joining the elite warriors appears deviant.

Together the SEAL team is stoic and powerful, wielding the weapons of war for the protections of Americans and all that is good on the globe. Their operations are noble and just and without them viewers would be in peril. The producers work hard to lionize these heroes, and by extension the military they are part of, and to promise public gratitude to those who would step into their boots. The narrative is constructed to elicit the admiration of a grateful nation for the protection the warriors provide. Waugh is clear that public appreciation of a powerful and effective military is a central goal of his production. We shouldn’t “associate our troops and our men and women to [the Vietnam] conflict anymore.” It’s “time to really open our eyes to say, What’s going on in this world? What are our men and women in uniform really doing right now for us?”<sup>18</sup>

As we will see below, there are devastating consequences to the men and women in uniform when they are turned into superheroes, which is always a form of objectification. Such cardboard portrayals demand that “warriors” be drained of complex human emotions such as suffering, grief, trauma and guilt. Such stereotyping is openly articulated at the end of the movie when as we shall see, the very definition of superhero/warrior is the denial of emotion and humanity.

Because the military/media partnership is united in purpose to erase the memory of the Vietnam War, it is useful to make some comparisons between *Apocalypse Now* and *Act of Valor*. The Bandito Brothers have set their recruitment vehicle in contrast to one of the most critical films of the era, and illuminating the filmic references will tell us much about the cultural construction of forgetting.

### **Aestheticizing the Violence of War**

One of the most significant sequences in *Apocalypse Now* (1979) is the bombing raid on a Vietnamese village set to the music of Wagner’s “Ride of the Valkyries.” Heller describes

this scene in which Vietnamese huts explode in spectacular fireballs as a deliberate theatrical display of total devastation.<sup>19</sup> He also notes that the atmosphere of excitement enhances “the scene’s aestheticization of violence.” The same could be said about the spectacular aestheticization of violence in the of battle scenes in *Act of Valor*. During the rescue of the CIA agent, the cinematography is equally spectacular, and similar. Aerial shots feature fiery explosions that light up lush, green landscapes. At one point in *Valor* after the team rescues the CIA agent, the shooting is horizontal. Instead of helicopters, massive fire-power flashes from amphibious vehicles on the river and completely out-gun the attackers at waters edge. The editing tempo is quicker and the action even more exhilarating than *Apocalypse*, but the way the human targets scramble to avoid the rain of bullets that never let up features in both scenes. Though clear filmic references can be drawn to connect these two sequences, the treatment, context and meaning of the fiery conflicts could not be more dissimilar.

Differences in the cinematography of the two films position viewers from distinct perspectives. In *Valor*, cameras film from the helmets of the SEALs, and viewers are frequently watching the action from the empowering perspective of wielding the weaponry. For this reason the film plays like a video game. Under attack with no distance from the operation, viewers sense the thrills, danger and excitement of war as entertainment. Camerawork in the scene from *Apocalypse* on the other hand, positions the viewer to look *at* the soldiers, not through their eyes. As Heller points out, viewers see “the bloodlust and battlefield ecstasy of the American soldiers who are experiencing a high of god-like power. Coppola further emphasizes the explosive emotional intensity of this moment through close ups on the faces of the American soldiers and their discharging weaponry.”<sup>20</sup> We watch the killing by American soldiers spiral out of control in a frenzy of bloodlust, urged on by the music of Wagner. When bodies fly in the air after being bombed, Killgore cries, “Outstanding,” and later, “Well Done.”

Coppola’s treatment is highly critical of the destructive power of the weaponry. The helicopters are “angels of death” that rain down violence by a military machine completely out of control. The scene is viewed as an exaggeration, and therefore as meta-commentary on the excesses of war. As Heller<sup>21</sup> argues, “The attack plays like a scene from a bombastic propaganda film in which the excessive and disturbingly gleeful slaughter is fashioned into an act of twisted patriotism. However, the sequence is so over-the-top in its glorification and aestheticization of violence that it enters the realm of the absurd and becomes satirical and darkly comedic.”

Though the battle scenes are equally excessive in *Act of Valor*, it is a distinctly non-reflexive film presented at face value, proclaimed to be utterly authentic, even though it is widely understood to be a recruitment film. We might say that *Act of Valor* is indeed, a “bombastic propaganda film,” in which the action is twisted into “patriotism,” but how is this accomplished? Though some critics note that the plot is far fetched, it serves the purpose of providing the exact context needed to justify, and even cheer on the battle violence. The men are under attack, their rescue mission is noble, and the weapons convey a type of moral authority and superiority utterly appropriate to protect against the brutality of foreign enemies evil enough to carry out a terrorist plot on American soil, and torture a woman.



Within this narrative context, the battle sequences can be lauded and billed as hyper entertaining (even when the acting of the SEALs is panned as cardboard.) Many give an appreciative nod to the spectacular violence. USA Today's Claudia Puig said *Act of Valor* has "amazing action" and described the daring exploits as "breathtaking."<sup>22</sup> Even Roger Ebert characterized battle depictions as "hard-hitting combat footage, relentless and effective."

### Authenticity and Claiming the Real

One promotional site states: "The characters they play are not real but the weapons and tactics they use are real." Media comments on battle sequences are continually validated by virtue of their "authenticity." After all, these operations are "based on" the ones real SEALs have carried out, and real SEALs choreographed the operations depicted in the film. Entertainment Weekly was breathless, "take a look at the second trailer for this unique movie-making experience. It's not a documentary, but this is the real deal. Inspired by actual events, the Navy's elite warriors — who took down Osama Bin Laden — rescue a CIA operative and uncover a terrifying terrorist plot against America."<sup>23</sup> Indeed, they used real bullets during filming.

Belying such claims to "reality" is the fact that the filming was done during training exercises, so in essence these are filmed "war games." And in interviews speaking about the hostage rescue scene, co-producer Waugh admits, "there were a few situations where authenticity lost out to filmmaking necessity."<sup>24</sup> Entering the house "to extract the package" (rescue the CIA agent) would have taken about "like, five seconds, which would have been a very boring action sequence, says Waugh." In reality then, since this is a major part of the movie and its action sequences, *Act of Valor* has very little to do with "real" operations or the way Special Forces operate. Lengthening the sequence also allowed producers to insert additional ideological content. Numerous views of the tortured woman's mutilated face and her bruised and bleeding body remind viewers that the violence they are enjoying is completely appropriate. The gallantry of the SEALs is also emphasized by inserting a shot that shows a soldier covering the agent's underwear-clad brutalized body.

In *Apocalypse Now*, the brutal destruction of the Vietnamese town is far from heroic. In this heart of war's darkness, the reason Kilgore calls for the attack is anything but noble. It is motivated by his desire to surf the high peaks that roll onto the beach in front of the village. *Apocalypse Now* epitomizes the essence of the Vietnam counter narrative of war, a view of war so loathed by the military/entertainment partnership that no amount of excessive glorification of war can ever be enough to counter it. Harrison Heller summarizes this counter narrative:

The central theme of *Apocalypse Now* is military power gone mad. Coppola uses these scenes of theatrical and violent spectacle to epitomize the excessive application of military force that has broken free of the cold logic of strategic necessity and taken on a life of its own. This violence is wielded

by a directionless and dysfunctional military machine addicted to the god-like powers derived from its arbitrary use of its devastating weaponry.<sup>25</sup>

In our current state of endless war, drones routinely kill civilians and Islamic fundamentalists are presently marching on the major cities in Iraq. Before the war on terror and the illegal invasion of Iraq, it was a stable country with a secular government that had no connection to terrorist attacks. In light of this situation, might these same criticisms be brought to bear on the current era of US militarism and military excesses? Before we consider these questions, and detail the types of operations SEAL actually carry out in the Shadow Wars, let's consider one more contrasting point between *Act of Valor* and *Apocalypse Now*, particularly in light of the producers' commitment to erase the memory of the Vietnam War.

### Rewriting Film History: Surfing as an Act of Forgetting

The anti-war message of an excessive military machine unmoored from logic, and the disillusionment evoked by the senseless and inhumane brutality depicted in *Apocalypse Now* is dependent upon Kilgore's willingness to destroy a village and its people just so he can go surfing. In *Act of Valor*, it is not enough to simply rewrite the narrative of war, supplying a noble cause that allows the celebration of violence. The filmmakers actively seek out another point at which to break the association of surfing with war's corruption forged so long ago by Coppola. They rehabilitate the image and association between US soldiers and the sport of riding the waves. Rorke and Dave have one of their many masculine heart to heart dialogues on the beach before paddling out to surf the swells. It is significant they hold long boards under their arms, not the more contemporary short boards with greater maneuverability. The "look" of the scene is a filmic reference to *Apocalypse Now*, transformed so that the sign value now registers nobility and humanity thereby denying the power of memory. It comes as no surprise that these real SEALs, though standing on the beach in southern California, never actually go surfing.

We can summarize the thematic content of *Act of Valor* and its exclusion of Vietnam War counter narratives in the following columns:

What is Depicted	What is Not
Mythic War	The Absence of War's Realities
Mission-driven story line	No corrupt officers
Explosive war violence	No damaged heroes
Powerful Weaponry	Intact military hierarchy
Soldier point of view, enemy always evil	No doubts about the mission
Familiar visual tropes, slow-motion action	Conflict always virtuous
Pseudo-documentary style, testimonials	No Emotional toll or PTSD

As we have learned from the long history of war propaganda (and propaganda environments) what is not said in media narratives speaks as loudly as what is. Persuasion depends on censoring the noise of alternatives and variant interpretations. Examining the shadows that dance on the edges of this film yet remain off camera, reveals as much about the persuasion as does the film's deconstruction. The unpleasant realities of the present global war on terror are cloaked behind the film's insistent claim that this product of militainment is real.

### Shadow War as Dirty War

Investigative reporter Jeremy Scahill has documented Special Forces operations and strikes all over the world by the so-called Ghost Militias, comprised of Army Rangers, SEALs, Delta Forces, and the most sophisticated equipment operators in the military—the kind featured in *Act of Valor*.<sup>26</sup> They are the well-funded, Joint Special Operations Command JSOC, specializing in assassinations; they hunt down and kill enemy targets wherever they are identified. As we have seen above, the plan to use Special Forces to carry out strikes all over the world was well in place when President Obama came to power in 2008. The new president embraced the policies. Obama empowered and enhanced the secret wars in operation more than anytime in US history. Historically as today, Spec Ops enjoy very little congressional oversight, have no public budget, and their actions go unreported because independent journalists do not embed with these units. However, documentary and investigative reports have detailed some of their operations, and much information is now available to the public. The extrajudicial killings, night raids, interrogations, and other procedures that have been revealed, mostly in the alternative press, are far from the actions and attitudes displayed by the SEAL stars in *Act of Valor*.

Reviewing the film *Dirty Wars* that features Scahill, Steve Boone writes, “The basic idea is that our elected officials are now committed to a high-tech version of terrorism, using drone strikes, home invasions, abductions and torture worldwide, ostensibly to keep America safe, but resulting in a surge of new, passionate terrorists with each civilian death.”<sup>27</sup> These assertions are illustrated in *Dirty Wars* with video footage documentation and interviews by Scahill. He tracks the activities of JSOC before this same team assassinated Bin Laden and became famous in *Zero Dark Thirty*. They were an unnamed and unnumbered secret force that “swooped down on homes in the middle of the night and slaughtered “suspected terrorists”—often along with women and children who happened to live with them.”<sup>28</sup> In one sequence *Dirty Wars* offers compelling evidence that the relatives killed by U.S. forces had no connection to Taliban or Al Qaeda: The family patriarch, who was gunned down at his doorstep along with three female relatives, “was an Afghan police chief who'd worked alongside the Americans.”<sup>29</sup> Minutes earlier, the film shows cell phone video of the victim dancing in a living room crowded with clapping loved ones.

The documentation by Scahill, human rights organizations, and other journalists, of current military strategies and operations that entail ruthless assassinations, civil-

ian death, and criminal abductions bear no resemblance to the “real” operations portrayed in *Act of Valor*. The film works overtime to imbue the SEAL team with humanity, in addition to its role in stopping terrorism. Toward the end of the movie, in the final raid on the terrorists in Mexicali only minutes before an attack on the US is set in motion, screen shots are careful to show the team sparing all the females that literally come into their rifle sights. A woman with a baby screams and another one runs away, clearly endangering the operations, yet they are not killed.

When the mastermind of the terrorist plot Christo, is apprehended, not assassinated, he is told that he will be treated “properly, humanly.” In addition, Christo tells “Senior” the interrogator, that he can’t stop the attacks. His words are accepted and that is the last we see of him. There is an argument to be made that viewers should be grateful that extended torture scenes like the ones in *Zero Dark Thirty* would not compel young men to join the military. Nor is the false assertion made in this film that torture can prevent terrorist attacks. But in this case the scene illustrates one the problems of a militarized culture in which recruitment is woven into cultural narratives—the profound denial of the brutality of current American military policy. Intermittent press and congressional reports continue to expose torture, even in the face of ongoing attempts to hide those activities from the public. Without the possibility of public discussion, the military can continue to create what Robert Jay Lifton calls “atrocious producing situations.”<sup>30</sup> *Act of Valor* serves to suppress public awareness of atrocity by denying its existence even before the truth is allowed to be uttered.

Interrogation is one of the key definitions of “Shadow War.” SEALs have been implicated in deaths at Abu Ghraib. A long investigative report by *Rolling Stone* implicates Special Forces in the torture and murder of Afghans in a village just west of Kabul.<sup>31</sup> Over 10 bodies were found just outside the unit’s compound. Creating mythologies about US Dirty War operations, and the celebration of war and violence in general, has led to what many have identified as a culture of cruelty, and the social acceptance of torture. Rebecca Gordon says that in these conditions, one individual is not responsible for the single act of torture, as torture is a product of the society that condones and perpetuates the conditions that allow it.<sup>32</sup> By extension, this film expresses the moral habits fostered by society as a whole in an age of militarism.

### **Dirty Wars and Foreign Policy**

The Dirty Wars of the twenty-first century are taking place outside of the stated democratic traditions and values of American democracy, and certainly without a democratic dialogue. As Scahill told *The Economist*, “We don’t know who we’re killing.”<sup>33</sup> There is no actual evidence that the targets of assassination have been involved in a crime. Special Forces intervene in sovereign nation with no authority and outside the bounds of international law. With these strategies, the US loses moral and legal credibility.

Scahill provides an alternative scenario for apprehending suspected terrorists, using the example of US citizen turned jihadist, Anwar al-Awlaki, the radical cleric who lived in Yemen before he and his son were assassinated.<sup>34</sup> The US should have used the evidence to bring charges against him for treason, then request that the government of Yemen extradite him. The US would then have stood on firm ground within international law. Such a demilitarized response to terrorism, he argues, would be more in sync with American moral traditions. Equally important to those in the military should be the issues of American safety and security. Many understand that illegal killings of civilians inspires the desire for revenge, giving more people reason to want to attack Americans.

This era of militarized foreign policy and seemingly endless global conflicts, which never seem to result in the successful cessation of violence, together with the lack of broad political agreement about the causes and needs for war, limit the narratives that can be enlisted in war's promotion. *Act of Valor* is a notable marker on an advanced trajectory of war as entertainment, and battle as thrilling fiction. But as America's Dirty Wars continue to be prosecuted, the dark underlying realities seems to reside just below the surface of this fun ride. In *Act of Valor*, the propaganda has taken a truly dark and disturbing turn, harking back to a most bleak historical period.

### **The Aestheticization of Sacrifice and the Cult of Death**

Only one member of the SEAL Team is killed in action during *Act of Valor*, and not from an enemy bullet, and certainly not by friendly fire. Lt Rorke's death was prefigured in the beginning of the film when he says goodbye to his wife. It is clear then that he is willing to lose everything to win the battle, including his life. This happens in the final battle sequences as the team stops the terrorists from crossing into the US. As they move into what looks like a concrete bunker, one of the terrorists throws a grenade onto the floor. There is no time or means to exit, and in a slow motion sequence that draws out the scene, Rorke throws his body onto the grenade. Special effects, lighting and slow motion create a highly aestheticized image of his body levitating a few feet off the floor as the impact tears into him, and he then bounces back down onto the ground. His eyes remain open as blood seeps from under him. He does not die immediately. After more shots of the battle, the camera moves back to his body and we see his eyes open and close.

There are disturbing parallels in the ideas conveyed by this film as it builds up to this moment of sacrificial death. Looking back at the imagery created by German propagandists in the 1940s, Terrell observed that, "Acts of sacrifice and sacrificial death became a marker of German identity under National Socialism."<sup>35</sup> He argues that a romanticized notion of dying for the cause was an important component of Nazi ideology, which promoted the view that "to die on the rubble of one's dreams immortalized the dream itself. Men die but ideas live on."<sup>36</sup> The narrative voice in *Act of Valor* dominates the film and underscores the film's message: that the knowledge and ideas of the fallen warrior live on in the next generation of warriors. The idea that sacrificial death helps secure the victory of the living is a

sentiment identical to that expressed by the propagandists of the German military. A letter written to a German woman informing her of her husband's heroic death on the Eastern Front reads, "like all the other fallen, [he] remains amidst our company forever. And when the company is down to the last man, all the wounded and dead are with him and he shall secure victory."<sup>37</sup> It was published in a German magazine in 1942 to bolster public moral. The narrative voice of the fallen warrior father is present throughout *Act of Valor*, motivating the SEAL team on to victory and reinforcing the warrior's code and their willingness to fight to the death. In the face of such parallels, we are left with the unmistakable realization that the film is promoting the iconography of sacrificial death in an image culture devoted to the perpetuation of continuing violent global conflict.

### Special Forces "Made of Granite" and PTSD

The drawn-out ending of this film depicts Rorke's funeral, a tear-jerking military ritual in which the pregnant wife receives the honors for her husband's sacrifice. Here the genealogical wisdom of the warrior caste is again activated in a scene that ties up the main themes, bringing home the iron-clad logic of the film. The treads of superhero, patriarchy, endless war and the cult of death are folded into a payload that is wrapped tightly around the flag presented to the grieving widow. Nowhere is this film more irresponsible and unethical, indeed immoral, than in this treatment of the "men and women in uniform," the very warriors they claim to honor.

The final impact of the film is achieved through the voice-over sound track, spoken by Dave though he is present at the funeral, who reads the letter his fallen buddy has written to his unborn son. The disembodied voice addresses the son. "Growing up without a father is going to be hard, it will hurt. Warrior's blood is in your veins. Put your pain in a box. Lock it down. We are men made up of boxes, chambers of loss and of hurt.... No one is stronger than a man who can harness his emotions, his past." These final film sequences enjoin soldiers to deny their own emotional responses to loss, offering a dehumanized superhero as a role model, forever abandoning hope of psychic well-being. This exaggerated portrayal of a robotic, unquestioning superhero of the US Dirty Wars has real world consequences to soldiers persuaded to follow these role models into global combat. The end the film reinforces the most deadly aspect of the cultural of militarism to US soldiers.

Reuter's reports that suicides among U.S. special operations forces, including elite Navy SEALs and Army Rangers, are at record levels, the effects of more than a decade of "hard combat."<sup>38</sup> The article quotes Admiral William McRaven, who leads the Special Operations Command based in Tampa that oversees elite commandos operating in 84 countries. The number of special operations forces committing suicide has held at record highs for the past two years. Another source who assists the survivors of military members who commit suicide, said members of the closely knit special operations community often fear that disclosing their symptoms will end their careers. It's interesting that the reporter mentions that

“Special operations forces have been lionized in popular culture in recent years, in movies such as *Zero Dark Thirty*...and *Act of Valor*” but draws no connections, either to the irony of the film’s message, or soldiers’ reluctance to seek help for fear not living up to media images.

A front page article on June 5, 2014 in *The New York Times* detailed the story of the suicide of Army Special Forces Sgt. First Class Michael Lube, who after his fourth combat tour to Afghanistan that ended in 2011 “came home alienated and angry” and after more than 2 years of struggle (and a year after *Act of Valor* was released) committed suicide in the summer of 2013 a few days before his 36<sup>th</sup> birthday. “Once a rock-solid sergeant and devoted husband, he became sullen, took to drinking, got in trouble with his commanders and started beating his wife.” He reportedly told his wife: “You know, baby, this is a lot harder to do than it looks like on TV.”<sup>39</sup>

Susan Ullman said it was as if Sgt. Lube, her husband, was wearing a mask, “behind it was a shattered version of the man I knew.” He refused to get help because he was afraid to lose his security clearance and feared he would be “thrown out” of the service. When Ullman reached out to his superior officers, she was told: “Keep it in the family. Deal with it.” Seeking help from her husband’s superiors, “I phoned. I sent emails. I sent text messages,” she recalled. “I never had anybody say, ‘Let us help you find counseling.’” They paid cash for a private psychiatrist who diagnosed post-traumatic stress, but Sgt. Lube refused therapy and medications, “fearing the military would find out or the treatments would dull his edge.”<sup>40</sup> Finally, as of March 2014, after a 12-page internal research document on PTSD was disseminated, Special Forces Commander McRaven created a task force to design new procedures and training and suicide prevention.

## Conclusion

*Act of Valor*’s provenance, its conception and development and the discussions that surround it help us define the parameters of militarism now so deeply embedded in media structures. Though some reviewers acknowledge the military’s involvement in *Act of Valor* was problematic, most never draw out what the consequences might be. Apart from criticizing the lack of acting skills and stereotypic plot, a critical assessment of the persuasive strategies is not forthcoming, much less a deeper critique of the culture of militarism. Some actually foreclose any real criticism by openly affirming the entertainment value of war and mocking those who would point to cultural and social ramifications, “Really, you could argue that the very notion of portraying war as “entertainment” is fundamentally immoral, if you wanted to be a fun-killing hippie about everything.” He goes on, “but there’s something undeniably compelling about seeing genuine men of war re-enacting strikes, instead of actors who went to a five-day vacation boot camp. Watch the trailer and ponder the greater political implications.”<sup>41</sup> It is surely time for a public discussion about the greater political implications of today’s war propaganda, produced by the ever-expanding military/media/

entertainment complex. The dance of “reality” and “authenticity” claims that surround *Act of Valor* could be easily brushed aside, but even cursory deconstruction of the consequences of the film's celebration to war policy, personnel and practice are denied.

The lack of a critical voice is a constituent part of a new era becoming more deeply ingrained in the current cultural order. With so many films being produced under the guidance of the Pentagon, and with more films made about US Spec Ops, we can identify trends emerging in a new militainment genre with pernicious cultural ramifications. Killing “bad guys” with hyper-tech weapons as action-packed pleasure are core values, and indeed the meaning of valor. The trope of the mythic soldier as superhero created for recruitment denies the emotional costs of war with real consequences for understanding the medical needs of returning veterans. The symbols of patriotism become essential to the genre—the SEALs carry icons of patriotism into battle and are motivated by a profound sense of love of America—yet this does not mean commitment to American democracy. Being overwhelmed emotionally by the National Anthem and flag are quite distinct from “a commitment to tangible democratic principles, such as civilian oversight of the military.”<sup>42</sup> Any queasy doubts about war do not emerge, and democratic debates are assiduously avoided in the new military genre. These militarized versions of masculinity and patriotism including the cult of death and violence, eschew the historical movement toward cultures based in peace, democracy and equality, and thus their media embrace is as pernicious to the culture that produces them as it is to the war policies they promote.

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