

“The Real Nasty Side of War”: Exploring the Embodied Experience of American Soldiers on the Frontline in Iraq through Their YouTube Videos

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Abstract

This article examines four amateur videos shot by American troops in Iraq. Posted on YouTube, they depict the bombing of installations by military close air support. This article relies on a careful examination of these videos, observing its detail and describing as fully as possible the content of the footage as well as the visible marks of the video apparatus. It explores the complexity of the role of infantrymen facing their removal from actual combat on the Iraq war counterinsurgency battlefield. It looks at these productions by the yardstick of the CNN footage of the bombardment of Baghdad on the first day of the “Shock and Awe” campaign. Using this comparison, this study stresses the strong influence of traditional representations of war on the soldiers’ videos. The videos of installation bombings reproduce the official war imagery conveying a spectacular and highly aestheticised version of the war. This article further demonstrates the similarities between the television viewer of the bombardments and the soldiers witnessing the bombings. By analysing the war watcher’s participation in the military’s exercise of power, this article addresses the contribution of the soldiers, as spectators, to this demonstration of force that takes place without their direct involvement. It shows the different ways in which the soldiers use their practice of filming to assert their supremacy over their enemy. Yet this study also explores the limits of such power, since the soldiers’ representations are marked by the absence of the enemy on the counterinsurgency battlefield.

Keywords: Iraq War, Shock and Awe, counterinsurgency battlefield, soldiers’ amateur videos, trophy-pictures, pornography, CNN

I loved to just sit in the ditch and watch people die. As bad as that sounds, I just liked to watch no matter what happened, sitting back with my homemade cup of hot chocolate. It was like a big movie. (Anonymous soldier¹)

Introduction

This article examines four amateur videos shot by American troops in Iraq, posted on YouTube and showing the destruction of infrastructures by military close air support. It focuses on the video *US Army Destroys Iraqi Mosque*, filmed by unknown servicemen witnessing the bombardment of a mosque at a close distance. By comparing the soldiers' video with three similar amateur productions – *Close Air Support in Iraq*,² *Dec 25th 2007 JDAM in Mosul Iraq* (BlueCoconuts 2008), and *Iraq Combat Footage Extremely Close Air Support* (DailyMilitary (2013) – with CNN footage of the destruction of Baghdad (CNN 2003; Ytykg 2013), this analysis explores the complexity of the role of infantrymen as they deal with their removal from actual combat on the Iraq war counterinsurgency battlefield. It examines the way the soldier participates as a combatant in missions conducted against insurgents, while relying largely on airpower technology to kill, thereby replacing him and the arsenal he carries.

The amateur productions reproduce an iconography of war promoting the conflict's spectacular and entertaining character. These news media images of the bombardments are also intended to provoke the war watcher's participation, astonishment and seduction by the demonstration of overwhelming power deployed by the military. By analysing the television viewer's participation in the military's exercise of power, this article will examine the contribution of the soldiers, as spectators, to this demonstration of force that takes place without their direct involvement. In the case of *US Army destroys Iraqi Mosque*, our study analyses the way in which the soldiers film the different stages of the bombardments – the explosion of the main building and that of the minaret – to emphasise the military supremacy of the US military over the enemy. By capturing the destruction of the building, manipulating the image through editing and insulting his undifferentiated adversary, the camera holder marks his cultural and racial supremacy over the enemy, identified, in the context of both the War on Terror and a racialised clash of civilisations, with his religion.

In order to understand the nature of their participation in these installation bombings, this article examines the sense of pleasure experienced by the soldiers witnessing the explosions. It relates this experience with the satisfaction of the spectator watching the unfolding of Shock and Awe on television and cheering the bombardments of Baghdad. Drawing on porn studies, we will understand the visible as an "extension of the physical body" (Melendez 2004: 403) to explore the active involvement of the war watcher and the soldiers in the military's exercise of power. In the case of the soldiers' productions, this satisfaction will be analysed as the mark of the soldiers' engagement with the image and against the enemy. Considering the invisibility of the insurgency on the guerrilla warfare battlefield, we will address the different strategies deployed by the soldiers to overcome the absence of his adversary and confront him through the use of images. Yet, by questioning the soldiers' videos through debates focusing on war trophy images, we will see how the absence of the insurgent's body limits the significance of these productions in asserting their power over their adversary, who is invisible yet omnipresent on the guerrilla warfare battlefield.

¹ Cited in Joanna Bourke (1999: 15).

² Video removed from YouTube.

Methodology

This article was partly inspired by the comments made by an Iraq and Afghanistan war veteran in interviews conducted in New York and Philadelphia.³ During a screening of amateur videos of installation bombings, the infantryman noted the strong relationship between the satisfaction expressed by the soldiers watching the mosque being bombed and the pleasure experienced by the porn viewer. This testimonial, at an early stage of my research, helped me in elaborating knowledge on the experience of soldiers coping with airpower-oriented strategy on the guerrilla warfare battlefield.

This study is primarily a documentary study of images. It combines a cross-examination of four soldiers' productions depicting installation bombings and images from CNN news reports at the beginning of Shock and Awe with bibliographical research. In the soldiers' videos, I find elements revealing the complexity of the soldiers' role on the battlefield as they witness airpower operations. This analysis examines the soldier's vision of a particular situation on the modern mediated battlefield, in which he shares, to a certain extent, the position of a spectator attending a live show. It also attempts to unveil the manifestation of this vision in the soldiers' videos. This involves taking into consideration the strong influence of the official imagery of the Iraq War, especially the spectacular and exhilarated television reports of Baghdad under the bombardment. It also analyses the soldiers' comments, which stress their complex relation to the enemy on the guerrilla warfare battlefield.

The selection of the soldiers' videos was thus not guided by the popularity of the soldiers' videos, their number of hits or the comments they have received. The productions were not chosen for their spectacular or violent nature, or because they were posted or produced by specific users. The decisions related to my interest in understanding the soldier's role on the frontline. To explore accurately the soldiers' experience of war during these particular missions, twenty videos were initially chosen. They all captured one specific event, and used as little editing and post-production as possible. In this sense, documentaries, music videos, photomontages of war images overlaid by music or videos shot by off-duty soldiers were dismissed (Christensen 2009; Andén-Papadopoulos 2009). This continuity is fundamental in maintaining the unities of time, place and the actions of the soldier's battlefield. It spontaneously and immediately conveys the soldier's movements and voice and his reaction to the battlefield, with no mediation other than his camera. The films all conveyed, to different extents, the actions, reactions and behaviours of soldiers confronting the technological and virtual counterinsurgency battlefield. For the most part, and when they could be traced,⁴ the videos presented were shot between 2006 and 2009, during the counterinsurgency phase of the war in Iraq. From this first selection, videos emphasising the spectacular nature of explosions were privileged, this allowing the author to examine the strong imprint of the official reports of Baghdad bombardments on the soldiers' videos. In this article, the four videos convey thus a clear contrast between the rough and direct statements of the soldiers' role and conduct as they film close support operations, and the influence of television representations of the bombardments during the first week of the Iraq war.

Furthermore, in order to understand the way soldiers cope with airpower operations on the counterinsurgency battlefield, this article undertakes an in-depth analysis of one particular video, *US Army Destroys Iraqi Mosque*. This video was chosen because it combines and enlightens four essential features of the soldiers' videos focusing on close air support missions:

³ Interviews conducted between May and June 2009, in New York and Philadelphia.

⁴ The dates of the videos are unclear since the productions have often been posted and reposted several times.

(1) the soldiers focus essentially on the destructive power of the bombardment and emphasise its spectacular nature; (2) the point of view of the camera and the exhilarated voices of the out-of-frame soldiers, placing them in the safe position of spectators watching a war show; (3) the soldiers' emphasis on the destructive force of the explosion, underlining the absence of the enemy, the latter systematically invisible in all the productions; and (4) they participate in the military operation by filming it and directly addressing the adversary, who is often racialised and confused with Islam.

In this context, this research differs from earlier debates focusing on amateur videos or photographs taken by servicemen from the coalition in Iraq or Afghanistan. Indeed, I do not analyse the soldiers' productions in order to illustrate specific aspects of official media or reconsider the role of amateur imagery in the transformation of news media. I do not wish, for instance, to analyse these productions' impact on US propaganda in light of the online media age (Christensen 2008), the role of their violent representation in threatening "the frames of media and military elites" (Andén-Papadopoulou, 2009), or the influence of soldiers' productions on the democratic debate on war (Mortensen 2009). Neither do I explore the new practice of mediating the war through innovative camera technologies or reflect on the soldiers' use of YouTube as a "dematerialized" memorial, a place to "mark their place in history" (Christensen 2009: 214). In other words, this study does not *use* the videos to illustrate or explain phenomenon beyond them, but finds, *within* the videos, traces of their ways of seeing, experimenting, or showing the frontline.

Instead this research examines the soldier's production, observing its detail and describing as fully as possible the content of the footage as well as the visible marks of the video apparatus, including the framing, sound, camera movements and editing. These salient elements within the images are viewed as clues relating to a deeper knowledge of the modern mediated battlefield. The interpretation of *US Army destroys Iraqi Mosque* is linked to an analysis of repetitive motives, patterns, figures and themes that reappear in other soldiers' similar productions and in the CNN reports of the bombardments of Baghdad. Debates focusing on the orchestration of the war by the military and the media during Shock and Awe, on Abu Ghraib pictures or on porn spectatorship ultimately put these elements in perspective. They stress the different ways in which the soldiers participate to these military operations. This includes their satisfaction as spectator of the explosions. It also includes their practice of filming the destruction of these building, which will be understood as a belligerent act conducted against his enemy. This multi-layered analysis introduces a new dimension to the soldiers' representations. By placing the soldiers' videos in dialog with other representations or texts, the article aims to go beyond their apparently entertaining and spectacular character to reveal the soldiers' paradoxical powerlessness against an invisible foe and the failure of airpower to efficiently combat the insurgent.

The Military-Entertainment Complex Orchestration of the War in Iraq: Sanitising the Battlefield

The victorious, rapid, bloodless and clean version of war in Iraq broadcasted at the beginning of the conflict by traditional and 24-hour news channels could be understood as the result of the chain of transformation in official war representations, beginning in the aftermath of the Vietnam War.

The Vietnam era underlines the disastrous effect of the disruption between official discourses minimising casualties (Page 1996: 97), the power of the guerrilla in destabilising the military,

and the media's brutal images of death and injury, civilian despair and soldiers' disorientation. The images of civilians massacred at Mai Lai by American soldiers, the iconic photograph of the young Phan Thi Kim Phue heavily burned by a napalm bomb dropped by the South-Vietnamese Army shattered the imagery inherited from the "good wars" of World Wars One and Two presented as a "democratic power crusade against evil enemies" (Chattarji 2001: 65) and produced by the media in complete accordance with established military and political positions (Hallin 1986; Freedman 2004). In these conditions, the Vietnam War became the first "postmodern conflict" by increasing the structural discrepancy between the language used to describe war and its disturbing visual reality (Kellner 1999: 199).

Heavily restricted by the military, the First Gulf War coverage constitutes a major attempt to channel conflict-related information. Generalising the use of censorship, limiting access to the frontline (Andersen 2006: 56) and encouraging journalists to rely exclusively on military sources, the Department of Defence used the press and television as conduits for its discourse on military operations. With the compliance of the media, the military used the latest technologies and media innovations, such as advertising techniques, CNN's 24-hour channel format, and public relation strategies (Kellner 2004: 141; Andersen 2006: 169) to calibrate the war for television. The thrilling vision of night pictures of the aerial bombing of Baghdad underlined the superiority of smart, long distance weapons as well "as the near nonappearance of the 'enemy'" (Daney 2006). These versions became the frame of reference for the representation of the war, and guided the elaboration, ten years later, of Shock and Awe news coverage. Yet, locked down by the military and the media, television "could show *only* images which, as it is clear today, *were already part of the victory*" (Daney 2006). Reduced to a "passing advertorial", the coverage did not ultimately satisfy the advertisers financing media corporations as it failed "to establish a suitable epic story at the heart of total television" (Engelhardt 1992).

From this perspective, the military-entertainment complex in the Iraq War attempted to restore such a narrative and produce enough images to create a hyper-visible war. To control and orient information gathered largely from an insider perspective, the military used embedded journalists as the vehicle for an "information operation in the public domain, [...] both as an operational platform and as an instrument of war" (Rid 2007: 195). Yet, far from hijacking the media, in 2003 the military-entertainment complex strongly involved them in the production of this clean and "friendly information" from the very beginning of war's preparation (Calabrese 2005). As for the first Gulf war, military communication strategists attempted to convey a spectacular vision of the conflict. They designed a thrilling battle, which was intended to be short and antiseptic enough to encourage patriotism and support.

Reporting side by side with the troops deploying on the ground, the journalists provided live pictures of the invasion of Iraq and conveyed the exhilarating character of the triumphant "blitzkrieg" through Iraq. Not only were media corporations co-opted into the military-entertainment apparatus, presenters and reporters relied mainly on the intelligence services (Keeble 2004: 44) and military and government sources (Calabrese 2005: 166), without questioning their information. According to Stuart Allen and Barbie Zelizer, for "rolling news" in particular, their "incessant drive to be the first to break the story [...] sacrificed 'due care' and accuracy in the heat of the moment" (Allan & Zelizer 2004: 8).

Hours prior to and during the intense bombardments of the principal Iraqi cities, reporters, analysts and presenters on 24-hour news channels such as CNN reminded viewers constantly of the military's technological undisputed power against the enemy in terms of their lethal

power and precision. Beyond the embedding system and as the war unfolded, representations staged by the military and the media helped to construct “canonical” representations, reflecting “deeper cultural needs for symbolic catharsis [as well as] more immediate needs of the propagandist” (Aday, Cluverius & Livingston 2005: 318), thus providing a synthetic image of the conflict. For instance, the CNN and Fox News coverage of the fall of the statue of Saddam Hussein was designed to convey “a seminal moment in a nation’s history” (2005: 321), recalling the fall of the Berlin Wall. Aired every five minutes on Fox News and eight minutes on CNN, its fall provided the visible symbol for the end of the war, since “this is the image that sums up the day and in many ways the war itself” (321). This event, along with George W. Bush’s performance on the U.S.S. Lincoln aircraft carrier three weeks into Shock and Awe campaign, were intended to pronounce the end of the war. These events occurred, paradoxically, at the same moment an insurgency was emerging. The news media for the most part thus conformed to the official storytelling of the Iraq invasion by building a narrative that was adapted to the television format and, similar to the First Gulf war, was intended to satisfy the audience’s desire for closure.

The military-entertainment complex thus attempted to establish undisputed authority over the representation of war. In the case of television news coverage, this representation pervades the actual battlefield and, as we will see in our analysis, is indivisible from the soldiers’ direct experience of warfare. The official images of war, while imbued with ideology, are naturalised and “de-politicized” by the strength of the dominant modes of representation of the war in Iraq. The representation of the conflict, as displayed in the CNN news coverage of Shock and Awe, is deprived of the political, ethical, cultural, geostrategic and economic contingencies of war. The military-entertainment complex orchestration of the war thus impoverished its signification, reducing it to a technophilic, bloodless and highly aestheticised spectacle. This sanitised version of the war not only removed the vision of dead and injured bodies from the battlefield; it also dehumanised the enemy, invoking the “clash of civilisations” (Kellner 2004: 145) model as an explanation for the war. Journalists, for the most part, reproduced George’s Bush’s “binary dualism between Islamic terrorism and civilisation” while conflating Saddam Hussein and terrorism (Carpentier 2007: 105). These features constituted the architecture of the hegemonic definition and vision of war, dismissing alternative perceptions of the conflict through hyper-visibility and image overflow. This spectacle, stripped of war’s negative aspects, engages the participation of the spectator. It invites them to contribute to combat from home, whether they witness highly seductive images of the technologically overwhelming power of the military arsenal, or they follow the troops from the point of view of embedded journalists. The orchestration of the war by the military and the media is thus intended to shape not only the spectator’s beliefs, but also his understanding and conceptualisation of the war. The next section exposes, by this token, the fundamental power of these representations in constructing the soldiers’ own visions of war.

Videos of Installations under Bombardment and War Porn: Participating in Combat at a Distance by Filming It

Before the Explosion: Raising the Suspense

The video *US Army destroys Iraqi Mosque* video begins with a wide static shot of a mosque, taken from a camera fixed on the ammunition box of a Humvee situated next to an asphalt road. This premise is common to many other videos conveying similar operations: voluntarily placing their camera in front of the building, the soldiers clearly show their intention to focus on the explosion, and invite the spectator to do the same. By zooming in, the camera holder in *Dec 25th 2007 JDAM in Mosul Iraq* (BlueCoconut 2008) even ensures that he films the right house

and that it is in the centre of the frame. His colleagues evoke the explosion about to happen. They sarcastically comment on the smell of the explosion preceding their filming: “Smells like burning” – “Burning what? –... marshmallows... all of the above.” Straight to the point, the camera holder in *Iraq Combat Footage Extremely Close Air Support* exposes the aim of their presence and the reason for filming: “Yeah, I’m recording... Let’s watch this place get fucked up!” (2008).

The camera, fixed on the military vehicle in *US Army Destroys Iraqi Mosque*, also offers a vision which does not directly reflect the point of view of the soldier, but that of the machine. As a result, no camera movement betrays the presence of the soldier filming, a presence which could divert us from the imminent demolition. Nothing in the video apparatus prevents us from identifying with the spectator attending the event live. The static shot, in this sense, provides complete space to its spectacular, shocking impact.

The video apparatus recalls the stage-managed representations of cities being heavily bombed, including frontal and stable shots of destruction. As CNN’s footage of the bombing of Baghdad in March 2003 demonstrates, these shots bare no mark of the camera holder’s experience under fire. In doing so, they prevent the spectator from connecting with the deadly consequences of the bombing and, by extension, empathising with those civilians enduring the attack. Here the nature of the act of identification with the image differs from the footage taken from smart bombs broadcasted during the First Gulf War. The military, to prove the precision of smart bombs, placed cameras on missiles to capture – and broadcast – their trajectory as they homed in on their target. Sharing the dehumanised point of view of the bomb, the spectator could watch a target about to be destroyed. A second before the bomb exploded, the camera would shut down.

By inviting the television spectator to identify with the nose of the missile in motion, the military hoped to convey an entertaining representation of the conflict, encouraging the viewer to “‘enjoy’ (at a safe distance) immense destructive power”. Yet the military could not foresee the inevitable negative impact of his identification with what was happening within the frame. The viewer, while watching, was simultaneously “being led symbolically to imagine itself blown to smithereens” (Stam 1992: 104). Keeping this in mind, the military-entertainment complex abandoned “filming-bomb” images during the Second Gulf War (Farocki 2004: 21). In the case of news media representations of the bombardment, then, the viewer only identifies with a point-of-view situated outside of the action; he shares with the cameraman the secure position of a spectator attending a live show at a distance.

The static framing in *US Army destroys Iraqi Mosque* thus conveys, like the CNN images, a disembodied representation of the ensuing destruction. It reflects the soldiers’ lack of physical involvement on the battlefield. Yet, their decision to film the explosions just to capture the destruction differs fundamentally from the story told by traditional media. US news reports, especially traditional television and 24-hour news channels, aimed to propagate the myth of heroic, spectacular warfare to create support for the war and dismiss the bombardment’s lethal impact. By focusing on the impact of the bombing, the soldiers claim their participation in the destruction.

The exhilaration of the soldiers anticipating the explosion in this sense contrasts with the discourses of CNN reporters prior to the bombardments. The soldiers here lay bare what the media attempt to keep out of frame: the blunt demonstration of technological power deployed for its own sake. On the other hand, minutes before the beginning of the bombardments,

reporters from CNN rationalised the upcoming destruction and emptied it of its lethal consequences.⁵ Over a split screen made up of different shots of different places in Iraq – including images from Arab broadcast networks – the reporters and the anchorman announced the “unfolding” of Shock and Awe, using their discourse to stress the operation’s legitimacy. The lack of relationship between the images – frontal shots of urban zones and night visions of places that are barely distinguishable – and the voices commenting on the upcoming operations, help to anchor and increase the power of the discourse sanitising the military operations. Through the reporters’ live stories of soldiers’ victories and their comments on the overwhelming power of the military, the bombing becomes a large-scale interdiction campaign, conducted with such precision that the word “killing” is never used while death is minimised. The countdown, conveyed by all the reporters throughout the programme, raises the suspense before the upcoming attack, while emptying it of any anxiety-provoking facts: “What you didn’t see was major buildings that had been damaged. No homes or any signs of collateral damage...clearly that may have happened but there was no overwhelming indication of that” (2008). The headlines, repeating comments made by the Iraqi Minister of the Interior calling George W. Bush “the president of the International Gang of Bastards”, completes the legitimization of the war and prepares the spectator for an enjoyable, exciting and fully-justified manhunt.

“The Five Seconds out of Every Day That I Actually Enjoy Being in the Army”: Exulting While Watching the Explosion

In its live report, CNN relayed more than seven minutes of uninterrupted, undisturbed images of the bombardment of Baghdad. These images, echoing the soldiers’ representations, are decontextualised. The demand of the programme anchor was “I want our viewers to listen to it”, and indeed the reporters stop commenting on the war and the bombardment, leaving the sound of the bombing to pervade the frame. The succession of shots emanating from television channels other than CNN – including Arab networks – focus on different parts of the city under attack that are never precisely identified. CNN segment alternates explosions in different parts of the city and conveys different colours – green, pink, yellow – according to the nature of the missiles or bombs used, with only one soundtrack, that derived from CNN’s footage. Coverage focuses on the explosions that hit and destroy entire buildings, shown at different distances to increase the astonishing character of the military operation. From afar, Baghdad can be seen burning, the flames illuminating a city otherwise obscured. The producers of the segment edited the images in order to capture every explosion within seconds, airing certain locations several times to film them being destroyed. Highly aestheticised, the spectacle of the bombardment reduces the representation of war to a flow of decontextualised colourful visions. The absence of comments from the reporters and the hypnotic succession of explosions – over seven minutes in total – convey a representation of power produced via a highly seductive vision of war. Staged as the climax of the war’s orchestration by the military and the media, the representations of the bombardment of Iraqi cities were produced to cultivate the enthusiasm of the television spectator. These images were meant to provoke the amazement of the viewer cheering each explosion (Mirzoeff 2005: 8) while involving, as a consequence, their participation as television spectators in the destruction of Baghdad.

In *US Army Destroys Iraqi Mosque*, as in the CNN footage, the static shot of the bomb falling from the top left of the frame does not allow us to see (nor does it follow) the bomb’s descent. The fixity of the camera, by preventing the spectator from visualising the position of the plane and situating the action locks the frame and therefore excludes the out-of-frame from the

⁵ See for instance the first forty minutes of CNN live news program.

diégèse. This decontextualisation increases the surprise effect of the bomb hitting the mosque, as well as its intensity: the explosion appears as an overwhelming demonstration of technological power, which can hardly be countered. The implacable and de-humanised character of the bombing recalls the words of a Taliban fighter, acknowledging the supernatural power of drone-delivered bombs, namely that they “cannot fight” them (Bearak 2001).

As the dust completely covers the mosque in the YouTube video, victory shouts celebrate the explosion. This manifestation of joy and victory echoes the other soldiers’ representations, in which they share their amazement at the destructive power of the bomb and express the intense pleasure provoked by the event. As the deflagration and dust begins to cover the whole frame, the camera holder of the *Close Air Support in Iraq* video shouts over the sound of the explosion and the laughter of his colleagues: “This is... this is fucking beautiful!” “Goddam!”. The reaction of one of the soldiers witnessing the event in *Dec 25th 2007 JDAM* ultimately summarises the intense satisfaction experienced by the soldiers in all the videos. He states: “That would make the five seconds out of every day that I actually enjoy being in the army”. One could understand this joy regarding the explosion as a response to the general frustration endured by soldiers confronted with an invisible, elusive enemy. The bombings, from this perspective, appear as a reward, a proof of the soldiers’ supremacy over the enemy.

What, then, differentiates the joy expressed by millions of spectators reproducing the “exercise of power” (Mirzoeff 2005: 8-9) conducted by the military while watching the unfolding of “Shock and Awe” from the exhilarated reactions of the soldiers on YouTube, especially since their representations follow the same process? The television viewers’ “exulting triumph” (8-9) in front of such representations can be related to the soldiers’ joyous exclamations during the explosion. A US veteran,⁶ discussing these videos of bombardment, related the shouts of the soldiers witnessing these explosions to the pleasure felt by people watching pornography. “This guy”, he insisted, “does the ‘porn yeah’... what I mean by the ‘porn yeah’ is the ‘yeah’ of satisfaction” (2009). The pleasure of the soldiers here recalls the pleasure of the television spectator watching the war. If we consider the television spectator in a more general sense, this pleasure invokes the “twin pleasure of looking (scopholilia) and hearing (Lacan’s *pulsion invocante*), [yet] without being seen [and] without being heard”. This condition as a “protected witness” triggers in the viewer a “fictitious sense of superiority” (Stam 1992: 107). This sense of superiority could easily be attributed to the soldiers, who can watch and enjoy the explosion from a safe position.

In pornography, this omnipotence comes alongside the fulfilment of the spectator’s desire for “panoramic vision” (Mirzoeff 2005: 113). Linda Williams, commenting on the Iraq war, has claimed that the war coverage resembles porn as it “attempted to show the viewer everything that happened, in the manner of hard-core pornography” (Mirzoeff 2005: 80). Both soldiers and television spectators, while located in radically different environments, enjoy the “frenzy of the visible”, which Williams has identified as at the heart of pornography’s production (Williams 1989). Pornography, as a genre, is indeed concerned by the imperative “to make visible, document, and bare witness to bodily pleasures, body parts, and sexual acts”. The frenzy of the visible, in this sense, is concerned with representational conventions such as “meat shots” (shots of the penis entering the partner’s body), “money/cum shots” (ejaculation on the partner’s body), or “creampies” (shots of ejaculate in a vulva or an anus) (Paasonen 2011: 77). In this sense, one can understand better the satisfaction expressed by the soldiers who manage to capture on camera the momentum of the explosion. In all four videos, soldiers ask their

⁶ Interview with a US veteran, Philadelphia, 23 June 2009.

colleague wielding the camera if he “filmed that”, to be answered proudly that they “got all of it”,⁷ “every second of this shit”.⁸

The contentment of the television spectator and the soldiers can be understood further as a form of active participation in these events. Pornography, as an “art rooted in bodily effect” (Dyer 2002: 140) helps us to envision the ways in which the soldier and the television spectator’s bodies are invested and affected by the explosions. The soldiers’ shouts and the television spectator’s cheers could thus refer to a “carnal density of vision” (Crary 1992) that defines the visible, as in the case of pornography, as an “extension of the physical body”. This is interactive inasmuch as the “viewer experiences video pornography as a *mediated* image of undeniable *immediacy*” (Melendez 2004: 403). In these conditions,

the viewer alternates between the two types of pleasure derived from occupying a particular position in a viewing structure; the act of viewing vacillates between the active pleasure of possessing (consuming) the image as object/commodity (the viewer as gazing subject), and the passive pleasure of being moved by the image (the viewer as object). (Melendez 2004: 414)

Alternating between disembodied and embodied models of visibility means that pleasure, therefore, unfolds “like a pulse in this interaction between embodied observer and mediated image” (Melendez 2004: 414). Through their bodily engagement, the soldiers filming the explosions shatter the distance separating them from the actual frontline. Their camera in *US Army Destroys Iraqi Mosque* may (unlike other amateur productions) be fixed on an ammunition box, the pleasure they express underlines their involvement in the event happening before them. They are thus far from passive. Their desire to “possess” the image and literally capture through their filming the destruction of the buildings is a participatory action and even appropriation of the explosion. Like the spectator watching and celebrating the bombing of Baghdad on television, the soldiers’ productions can be seen as an exercise of power against the enemy by taking into account their reactions of blunt joy.

Yet, while one could relate the image of the explosions to “money shots”, thus proving the ability of the media to show everything happening on the battlefield, these representations of bombings only make more acute the absence of visual accounts of “war’s ultimate transgression of the taboo: death” (Mirzoeff 2005: 113). As evoked above, the media, in accordance with the military, bases the success of its representation of war on the careful avoidance of gruesome images of bombardments’ results. Throughout the CNN broadcast bombardment sequence, the rolling news and headlines only give general information on the war. Including, amongst other items, the position of the troops in Iraq, the evolving hunt for Saddam Hussein, the declaration of the Iraqi Minister of the Interior, or the presence of Weapons of Mass Destruction, these elements carefully avoid relating the images with more contextual knowledge. They prevent the spectator from understanding precisely what is unfolding before his eyes. The headlines, in the same way, only refer to a very general extent to the situation displayed on television, for instance stating that the “northern war seems to have started”. The program, ultimately, juxtaposes vague facts with images linked to de-contextualised explosions and deflagrations. The text here encourages the spectator to connect what he sees with a general narrative of the war’s rationale and the tale of the victorious campaign conducted by the military. This lack of contextualised information and the “sheer relentless persistence of explosions” (Mirzoeff 2005:

⁷ In DEC 25th 2007 *JDAM in Mosul Iraq*, the soldiers’ joy increases as they learn that the camera holder captured the debris flying on camera: “Tell me you got that s...” – “Oh yeah, I got it! I got every second of it.”

⁸ *Close Air Support in Iraq*: “I got all of it too... I got all of this shit”.

104) leaves space for the images' seductive power, while ensuring that the perception of the bombardment remains bearable and even positive.

Herein lies the difference between CNN's images of the bombardment and the soldiers' amateur productions: the soldiers, in their videos, refer directly to the targets of the bombing. The camera holder, in *US Army Destroys Iraqi Mosque*, exposes the bombings' results while sarcastically apologising to potential victims and adds, as if to underline the impact of the deflagration: "What mosque?". The soldiers filming in *Close Air Support in Iraq* and *Dec 25th 2007 JDAM in Mosul Iraq* also capture and celebrate the explosion. By recording the slowly disappearing smoke, they stress the damage caused by the bombardment and its lethal intent, beyond the politically correct descriptions of an "interdiction campaign" targeting the enemy's capacity.

However, the soldiers' productions reproduce television news media iconic images of the bombardment, as if these money shots constituted for them the ultimate expression of war. By claiming, for instance, that the strikes mark the best moments of his time in the army, the camera holder who filmed *Dec 25th 2007 JDAM in Mosul Iraq* underlines the absence of the enemy and the lack of confrontation between both parties in the context of the counterinsurgency, a key element of all of the productions studied here. The soldiers filming participate to the military operation through the act of filming and by commenting on the explosion. Both actions are used to attack the enemy identified with the buildings under bombardment. The soldiers, in doing so, go beyond the enemy's physical absence to wage war against him through images.

Waging War with Images

In the different YouTube videos' final moments, the camera holders keep insulting the explosions' imaginary targets, simultaneously celebrating the power of the military arsenal. The words of the soldier filming the demolished mosque, "Did you see that, turkey?" echoes the camera holder's remark in *Close Air Support in Iraq*: "It sucks to be your ass you fucking 'muj' motherfucker!" Then, a bit later, "See you in fucking hell dog, see you in fucking hell." The uncut footage in *US Army Destroys Iraqi Mosque* exposes furthermore the power and violence of the explosion. The comments, in this particular video, stress the aggressive nature of the soldiers' discourse towards an enemy, who is generalised and racialised. Through their words, the soldiers conduct an attack on the very existence of their religion, reducing the complexity of the war in Iraq to a clash of civilisations.

This clash, in the context of the War Against Terror, is "not the product of particular historical circumstances that can change" but relates instead to "the essence of Islam as a religion [considered] antipathetic to the fundamental core values of the West" (Qureshi & Sells 2003: 2). The soldiers thus convey "Bush's rhetoric", which simplifies the multi-dimensional conflict by "moving from Al Qaeda to the Iraqi regime" thereby arguing that "mad terrorists and tyrants are equally undeterrable" while talking of the alleged links between these "shadowy networks" and "rogue states" such as Iraq (Cole 2005: 145). Through their words, the soldiers reproduce official discourses produced after 9/11, which reduce international mujahidin fighters, Iraqi Shi'a and Sunni combatants, tribal powerholders or regime loyalists to "a transnational threat" (Thussu & Freedman 2003: 2). They repeat the binary opposition between the West and these groups, the latter being "'simply anti-American', envious of the US's affluence and power and opposed to its core democratic ideals" (Downey & Murdock 2003: 81). Hence, they embody the discourse of television channels such as Fox News that disseminated, from the beginning of the Iraq war, a "hostile, even insulting portrayal of their opponents" described as "rats", "terror goons", and "psycho Arabs" (Thussu 2003: 127).

To a general extent, this archetypal vision of the “muj” prevents the soldiers from acknowledging and understanding the complex nature of the enemy. The soldiers’ comments here reflect the failure of the US military strategy in Iraq, especially in the first years of the conflict. While the insurgent attacks increased right after the collapse of the Iraqi state army, the military kept encouraging an enemy-centric, technological force, thus undermining the need to better understand the nature, the intentions and the *modus operandi* of their opponents.⁹ The soldiers’ words, then, mirror the military’s inability to control the battlefield and overcome the insurgency, despite the technologies of intelligence and surveillance deployed at the end of the twentieth century through the Revolution in Military Affairs.

From this perspective, one can understand the soldiers’ use of the camera in the different YouTube videos as an attempt to overcome their powerlessness against the insurgency taking place on the battlefield. Filming the explosion while directly calling out at the enemy – “Oh sorry...did you see that, turkey?” – the soldier in *US Army Destroys Iraqi Mosque* uses the camera to capture the humiliation inflicted on the insurgent, whether he watches the video or is the victim of the explosion. From this perspective, one can consider the soldiers’ four productions as a form of image-trophy recalling the “aberrant form of collecting” of the mutilated body parts of the enemy collected for trophies (Harrison 2012: 3). This practice is intended to produce the “souvenir of a collective action whose participants felt perfectly justified in what they had done” (Sontag 2004; Steuter & Philips 2008). Trophy-taking can relate to the soldiers’ video practices, inasmuch as this act is a “specifically racialized form of violence” (Harrison 2012: 5) against adversaries almost exclusively represented “as belonging to ‘races’ other than their own” (5). However, their practice differs from the classical understanding of the military trophy. Susan Sontag’s reflexion on the photographs of torture inflicted on detainees taken by servicemen investigates this distinction. While trophy pictures were by convention “collected, stored in albums, displayed”, the case of Abu Ghraib marked “a shift in the use made of pictures – less objects to be saved than messages to be disseminated” (Sontag 2004). The soldiers’ videos seem to follow the same process. Although the Abu Ghraib photographs were originally meant to circulate within the army, their purpose was, like the videos of the destruction of the building and particularly in *US Army Destroys Iraqi Mosque*, intended to annihilate and exterminate the other symbolically (Baudrillard 2004).

Inserted for a few seconds, a still shot of the mosque before its destruction stresses the damage done to the building. Through this manipulation of the footage, the soldiers in *US Army Destroys Iraqi Mosque* not only express the supremacy of the military in destroying entirely the infrastructure. They also mark their ability to play with the representation of the mosque, which can appear or disappears at their convenience, through their use of editing. Disrupting the real-time unfolding of the event, the shot of the untouched building destroys the mosque a second time, multiplying the effect of technological military power. The soldiers elaborate here a narrative of power, claiming “American global dominance punishing the inferior Oriental enemy” (Steuter & Wills 2008: 91; see also Tétreault 2006). This weaponized image shares the same objective of deterrence with the official representations of the bombardments of Baghdad during the First and the Second Gulf Wars. As formulated by General Norman Schwarzkopf (1992) during the First Gulf War, these spectacular images were intended to ensure that Saddam Hussein “got that message” (400). In both wars, the spectacular visions of the destruction of Baghdad aimed “to overwhelm any response” from the enemy, while any opposing viewer would be annihilated by these “weapon images” (Mirzoeff 2005: 104–105).

⁹ See David Kilcullen (2010): “Fields operators realized clearly and early that they were in a counterinsurgency fight, but for political reasons [...] and through institutional inertia, the Defense Department refused to recognize this. Senior commanders would not even use the words ‘insurgency’ or ‘counterinsurgency’” (p.19).

Notwithstanding this, the pictures of Abu Ghraib were powerful and disturbing precisely because their producers “heighten[ed] their sense of reality by videoing themselves in the act” (Harkin, 2006). When they confessed their stories involving trophy taking, soldiers from the Second World War and Vietnam have invoked the need to desecrate the body of the enemy to “prove that a man had seen active combat and thus had proved himself on the field of battle” (Bourke 1999: 26). The soldiers’ videos, on the contrary, lay bare the absence of the insurgent’s body. The soldiers may wage war through their productions, yet the absence of the enemy, dead or injured, reduces to a certain extent the impact of their power over him.

Their productions, in this sense, do not transgress the taboo of the representation of death imposed by military doctrines and official war communication. The Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) and Network Centric Warfare (NCW) doctrines, elaborated and applied between the 1990s and the beginning of the 21st century, designed a dehumanized and hygienicised battlefield, involving smart and long-distance weapons destroying targeted infrastructures. Enemies in this context are conceived as “targeted human subjects”, converted into digital data coded as a “‘pattern of life’ [...] that can effectively be liquidated into a ‘pattern of death’ with the swivel of a joystick” (cited in Gregory (2014: 13). Traditional news media reproduces the technological dominance of the military, while removing blood, death and injury from televised images. As we saw with the CNN footage of Shock and Awe’s beginning, these representations, especially in the early phase the war, dismissed visual accounts of enemy casualties. The soldiers’ videos, in this sense, underline the limits of the military and media orchestration of war in asserting the supremacy of the US military. The soldiers may wage war through their videos, yet the first images of corpses that were broadcasted on television were of US infantrymen killed by the insurgency. These images, released by Al-Jazeera at the very beginning of the war, provoked huge controversy (Mirzoeff 2005: 114). They marked the power of the insurgency in attacking the soldier’s body, as well as its capacity to thwart the strategies of communication established by the military-entertainment complex, intended to assert the technological supremacy of the US arsenal.

Just as the second bomb destroys the minaret entirely, the last words of the camera holder – “And the guys still want to fuck with us!” – come to undermine its destructive power and the joy expressed by the soldiers. his sentence, directed at himself and his team as well as to a potential enemy viewer, affirms the overwhelming and lethal power of technology in destroying the mosque. It shares a similar purpose with the Abu Ghraib pictures since the fundamental role of these images is to “abolish the enemy” (Baudrillard 2004) symbolically through the negation of his identity and culture. On the other hand, his words express his incomprehension in light of the powerlessness of these technologies to overcome the insurgency. Viewed as a confession, ultimately, of the failure of the image to deceive the foe, this last sentence marks the irreducible limits of the power of the image and, as a corollary, the strategies of deceptions deployed by the military-entertainment complex on the guerrilla warfare battlefield.

Conclusion

In the four videos presented, the soldiers exploit the performative nature of the images they film, thereby overcoming their distance from the frontline, engaging with the enemy and, to a certain extent, confronting him. By exploring the CNN representations of the “Shock and Awe” campaign against Baghdad, we explored the complex position of the spectator, who contributes to the exercise of power designed by the military and the media. The comparison between the television footage and *US Army Destroys Iraqi Mosque* shows that the soldiers and the television viewer both engage with the image. They participate, to different extents, in the

bombings they are witnessing. By exulting in front of the explosion and manipulating the video in the post-production phase, the soldiers furthermore film the explosion as an act of war.

However, the irreducible absence of their adversary – dead or alive – in these productions ultimately reveals their struggle to make sense of combat. The soldiers' attempt to construct, through images, their relation to the foe, is hampered by both technology and the very nature of insurgency strategy, privileging the "skirmish and the ambush" over conventional battles and face-to-face combat. In their productions, the deflagrations and acts of destruction replace killing, thus avenging the random attacks the soldiers' experience daily. In these conditions, the enemy is reduced to an archetypal representation of Islam.

And yet, this recognition of the enemy is fundamental for the soldier. Joanna Bourke recalls in her analysis of military trophy-taking the "search for souvenirs [that] enabled men to link death of the 'other', the enemy, with love of themselves". Leaving souvenirs "such as photographs of themselves, on top of the corpses or cards representing their unit in lifeless hands" reflected the reciprocity of peril faced by both participants, "a universal condition" ultimately diminishing the "terror of death" (Bourke 1999: 29) experienced on the insurgency battlefield. In the soldiers' production, the visions of explosions reveal the absence of "pathogenic life forms" (Gregory 2011) on the battlefield, aside from them filming. The soldiers' dehumanization of the enemy in the four videos presented here echoes the US military project to "sanitize the battlefield" (Gregory 2014: 11). However, the voices of the soldiers addressing an unknown, generalised enemy expose the failure of such project. Meant to make up for the absence of the enemy, these images of destruction paradoxically stress his pervasive, omnipresent nature on the counterinsurgency battlefield, and the soldiers' failure to overwhelm him.

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