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The New American War Film, by Robert Burgoyne. University of Minnesota Press, 2023, 151 pp.

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The New American War Film by Robert Burgoyne provides an in-depth analysis of the recent paradigm shift from the traditional American war narrative to a new style of war film. As Burgoyne notes, images of war and military bravado have always consumed the American psyche. He references Jacques Rancière, the French philosopher, who has described the phenomenon as the "dominant fiction" (ix). The American war film, according to Burgoyne, frequently taps into this phenomenon often painting a "heightened" portrayal of the American experience (x). Furthermore, he notes that concepts like "heroic sacrifice," "mystic brotherhood," and "citizen-soldier" appear to have changed in the new American war film (x–xi). Indeed, the symbolic meaning of violence also appears different. Burgoyne presents three hypotheses that account for the significant changes seen in the new war film: the effects of 9/11; the relationship between the war zone and the home front; and finally, the concepts in traditional war films which have not stood up to the events of history. The book is divided into six chapters. Each chapter focuses on a particular theme, while analysing one notable film. Chapter Five is the exception: titled *Four Elegies of War*, it looks at one feature documentary film, two photo essays, and one video essay.

Chapter One, "Entitlement and Pathos in the War Film", examines *The Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2008). In the film, Sergeant William James (Jeremy Renner) heads a bomb disposal squad. He is engaged in highly specialised and improvised operations which he must perform alone. In one memorable scene, Sergeant James comes face to face with a suicide bomber. Burgoyne draws a parallel between this scene and a scene in the film *All Quiet on The Western Front* (Lewis Milestone, 1930), in which a German soldier has just stabbed a French soldier. In both scenes, the two protagonists suddenly contemplate the futility of war, inducing an anti-war feeling in the audience. The *Hurt Locker* offers both familiar and new war combat scenes. There are hardly any battles scenes; rather, as Burgoyne notes, the memories and symbols of war remain, but they are quickly eviscerated with the potential of extreme violence, as Sergeant James works diligently to detonate bombs or IEDs.

Chapter Two, titled "Waiting for Terror", examines the film *Zero Dark Thirty* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2012). In the film, Maya (Jessica Chastain), a CIA operative, is hired to find Osama Bin Laden. She battles with the chain of command, intense interrogations, and the "unknown" character of terrorism. Indeed, as the author notes, the "unknown" of terrorism has created an epistemological crisis for the US military. Burgoyne describes Maya's role as a kind of surrogate, taking the audience through the difficult pathways of witnessing intense interrogations. Burgoyne

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notes the shift in nuance as regards the female protagonist role: whereas films like *Courage under Fire* (Edward Zwick, 1996) and *G. I. Jane* (by Ridley Scott, 1997) emphasise gender, Maya looks beyond gender identity and remains steadfast in her mission to capture Bin Laden.

Chapter Three, titled "Intimate Violence", presents an analysis of *Eye in the Sky* (Gavin Hood, 2015). In the film, a multi-national security operation has uncovered a high-level meeting with Al-Shabaab terrorists in Nairobi, Kenya. A Kenyan operative provides surveillance, with a potential terrorist attack suspected. The members of the security operation's "kill chain" weigh up their options. A drone controller in a "kill box" in the US in the middle of the Nevada desert refuses to launch a missile until the collateral damage is properly assessed. Finally, two missiles are fired. Alia (Aisha Takow), a young girl, is killed. General Benson justifies the military operation, saying they had a choice and opted for the "lesser evil" (58). *Eye in the Sky* reflects a new kind of war operation. The aptly titled chapter section "The Verticalization of Power" describes the complexities of the "kill chain" (51), and the moral issues with "combat as hunting" or delegating power along the chain (47). The "Apparatus" includes numerous decision makers from top generals to drone controllers, something which has not been seen in previous American war films.

Chapter Four, titled "War as Revelation" examines *A Private War* (Matthew Heineman, 2018). The film portrays the life of Marie Colvin (Rosamund Pike), a war correspondent who wrote for *The Sunday Times*. The film covers part of her career from her work covering the civil war in Sri Lanka in 2001 to her death in Syria in 2012. The story intermingles war atrocities and personal crises. She is willing to play her part to get the story: "I see it so that you don't have to" (63)." One notable scene depicts Colvin coming across one of Saddam Hussein's mass graves in Iraq. Witnessing this war atrocity becomes a personal experience for Colvin. Colvin is not in the military, and so "war as truth" derives from her role as a journalist (63). Burgoyne notes the complexities in traditional war films of bearing witness to atrocities, including the mass-murder of civilians. *A Private War* differs from other films discussed insofar as it uses individual witnessing as the filter to convey the story. Colvin's ideas about the war reflect "war in its current state" (77). In Homs, Syria, Colvin becomes aware of Bashar al-Assad's terror campaign. Colvin meets a young woman holding her baby:

> "Let me tell your story, I want people to know your story."
> "I don't want my words to be ink on paper. I want the world to know my story and that children are dying. A generation is dying […] that's what I want the world to know." (73)

Colvin subsequently gives an interview on BBC Four and CNN, with Anderson Cooper, in which she is seen as being a voice for the deceased.

Chapter Five, *Four Elegies of War*, examines numerous multimedia works. Each of the works raises questions about the politics of embedding journalists, a practice which has been subsequently banned in the American military. *Restrepo* (2010) directed by Tim Hetherington and Sebastian Junger is a full-length documentary that covers a combat operation between 2007 and 2009 by Second Platoon, Battle Company in Restrepo Outpost in Afghanistan. The film depicts numerous war operations. Some of the most powerful images include Afghan elders dealing with US soldiers. In one scene, after attacking a mountain village, US soldiers walk through the destroyed village. The images of the injured and crying children act as an anti-war commentary.

Infidel (2010) is a book of photography shot by Tim Hetherington at the same time as *Restrepo* was created. Burgoyne notes two photos in particular: "Man Eden" and "Soldier, Specialist Brandon Olson". The author describes the "changing meaning" of the two pictures (93). One picture represents brotherhood in the military while the other represents the solitary soldier. The author references other famous pictures such as Don McCullin's photograph *Shell-shocked US Marine, The Battle of Hue* taken in Vietnam (1968), and even Picasso's *Guernica* (1937). Burgoyne then turns to *Into the Korengal* (2011), another photo essay by Hetherington, which focuses on the "dynamics of occupation" (94). The pictures juxtapose older Afghan males, middle-aged Afghan men and Afghan children. Some of the pictures include US soldiers whose seemingly smug demeanour contrasts sharply with the Afghan men, offering a counterpoint to Western stereotypes of the Afghan male. Finally, *Sleeping Soldiers* (2009) is a video essay by Hetherington depicting US soldiers asleep, with images of war superimposed on their faces. The essay triggers ideas about the "rhetoric of war" (95). Burgoyne notes that the video essay depicts a "social ethos" of US soldiers in their barracks (97). This in turn becomes a point of contention, as some critics have raised questions about the politics of embedded coverage. That is, the intimacy of the soldier lives remains blocked off to the mainstream press. Burgoyne notes *Restrepo* has been seen as a "paramilitary film" (82). Moreover, he cites Erina Duganne's critique of *Sleeping Soldiers* in which she notes the passive acceptance of embedment, which creates an "inevitable sense of identification with the soldiers" (82). Consequently, Burgoyne recognises the need to locate the "constraints" of embedment and its "critical voice" (83). Indeed, Burgoyne identifies the old genre of narrative resurfacing, and rather than accept the new change, he focuses instead on the "counter-hegemonic" (83), which offers a critical perspective. Each of the works offers a counterpoint to the traditional war-film narrative. Given the different perspectives in the various works, from the elderly Afghan male, to "Man Eden", to a sleeping soldier, a debate emerges about the politics of being embedded, and the emergence of an anti-war critique.

Chapter Six, titled *American Pastoral*, examines the bio-pic war film *American Sniper* (Clint Eastwood, 2014). In the film, Bradley Cooper portrays Chris Kyle, a sharpshooter in the US military who has completed four tours of Iraq and is the deadliest marksman in US military history. Clint Eastwood's film addresses the collision between the home front and the "feral violence of war" (103) The opening scene shows Kyle on his first tour in Iraq. He is set up on a rooftop, looking through his scope. He notices a woman giving a young boy a grenade. Next, we flashback to Texas, and learn of the events surrounding Kyle's choice to enlist. Back in Iraq, Kyle kills the woman and child. The film focuses on the overlap between the home front and the battlefield, which Kyle has difficulty navigating. Burgoyne notes the use of home front burial scenes. The first burial depicts Kyle returning home with a fallen soldier. He attends the funeral and then decides to return for another tour of duty. He does not return to Iraq out of patriotism, but rather to revenge the death of his fallen brother. Back in Iraq, an Iraqi sniper, Mustafa, creates havoc for the US Navy SEALs. Kyle is ordered not to shoot him, as it will give up the US location, and trigger a suicide bomb. Burgoyne notes the critique of the film critic Roger Stahl, who argues that the sequence and the film overall consistently fuse the spectator's gaze with the viewfinder of the weapon, be it the drone or the sniper scope (114). Burgoyne argues against Stahl's position, suggesting Stahl overlooks the counterpoint of how the scene unfolds. Kyle disobeys orders, and takes out Mustafa, which triggers an Iraqi missile attack against a US helicopter. The Iraqi counterattack works to dispel the "weaponized gaze" argument (114). In the final scene, Kyle and a colleague are in the driveway of his house. Vicky, Kyle's wife, looks on with foreboding as Kyle and his friend, who suffers from

PTSD, leave for the day. The man will later shoot Kyle dead at the driving range. The film cuts to the second funeral scene. Eastwood uses real footage and photography stills during the procession into Cowboy stadium. Kyle was killed on the home front and yet he is still presented as a fallen soldier. On the one hand, the soldier is applauded for his dedication and bravery. As a counterpoint, the film depicts the torment which war plays on the solitary figure, for example, how the guilt of wounding and killing innocent children lingers in the mind.

The new American war film is a changing field. The memories of traditional war film remain part of the new American war film, but its use is limited. A company of soldiers marching is displaced with advanced technology and weaponry. From *The Hurt Locker* to *American Sniper*, we see the isolated soldier engaged in intricate work away from his company of soldiers. We see a shifting sensibility around the symbolism of violence. For example, in *Zero Dark Thirty*, Maya has taken on the journey to discover the "unknown" in the war on terrorism; Colvin, in *A Private War*, who witnesses Hussein's mass graves, internalises all of the pain, and she shares *her* story with her readers. Burgoyne offers the reader greater insight into the new American war film. His analysis identifies the soldier as a warrior, but increasingly the victory is not on the battlefield. The heroic soldier is a much more complicated individual, who has turned the war experience into an existential experience, breathing new life and struggles into the home front. In the process, Burgoyne has upheld the three hypotheses which he states in the introduction, namely, the events of 9/11 have altered the look and feel of the new American war film; the home front plays a vital role in the soldier's narrative; and, finally, modern weaponry and the existential crisis facing the American soldier have diminished our memory of the traditional war film.

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