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The Waging of Fear: Sam Mendes' 1917 and War on Terror Films: (or: All's Fair in Love and the Military-Entertainment Complex)

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The Waging of Fear: Sam Mendes' *1917* and War on Terror Films (or: All's Fair in Love and the Military-Entertainment Complex)

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Introduction.

Upon exiting the cinema after watching *1917* (2019), I was struck by how unengaged the film was, both politically and historically, for a piece of media set in the First World War. The film – which follows two privates, Schofield and Blake trying to stop a rogue colonel from attacking the German front – chose instead to focus upon creating an immersive and thrilling experience, rather than give any insight into the war. While of course most people are familiar with the First World War, this is unusual for these films which, at least in its native Europe, has a huge cultural legacy as a pointless conflict where working-class boys were sent to die for no reason. This is the war described in books and films such as *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), *How Many Miles to Babylon* (1982), or *Joyeux Noel* (2005).

1917 is ultimately a pro-war film, which is incredibly unusual for a piece of First World War media. While it does have nominal ‘war is hell’ sentiments in it, the film makes no statements about why this war happened, who the combatants are or what they are fighting for. The closest the film gets to a thesis on the war is Col. McKenzie’s statement that the only way it will end is “last man standing”.

I believe this shift in representations of war leads back to how American cinema responded to 9/11 and the subsequent War on Terror which shifted Hollywood’s attitudes towards what was shown in war films. Adam Nayman describes the “clear-cut morality of... World War II movies produced in the 1940s and 1950s”, whose “default mode” was one of “patriotic excitement laced with manful regrets” of the violence¹. However, he contrasts this with Vietnam war-era films, which “felt gnarled and twisted against themselves ideologically” given the negative perception of the conflict, although never to “the exclusion of stylishness: If there’s an aesthetic thread running through [them]... it’s one of shock and awe.”²

But American War Cinema has changed again since September 11th, 2001. What it morphed into is something Patrick Deer has named an ‘embedded view of warfare’ – changing from a broader and clearer view of warfare into something more localised, and further individualised. Moreover, with this smaller scope comes a lack of political engagement, with both the enemy and the nature of the conflict as a whole. Of course, given its nature, war is an inherently political thing, and thus one cannot have a film about war that does not make a political statement, either intentionally or not. As I will show, War on Terror films marginalise the political nature of the conflict, barely engaging with criticism, and instead naturalising the idea of a never-ending and spatialised war. In this paper I will argue that *1917* is itself one of these War on Terror (WoT) films.

The current view of warfare in these film serves the US military-entertainment complex, which seeks to pacify criticism of their wars and insurgent actions abroad – notably in the recently-ended wars in Iraq and Afghanistan – as well as generally maintain a good reputation. As such, modern war films are hugely influenced by the US military who provide funding and logistical support in return for having a say in the final script³. For example, Brent Steele explains how *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) is “a visual

¹ Adam Nayman. 2020. “‘1917’ and the Trouble With War Movies - The Ringer”, n.d. Accessed January 30, 2022. <https://www.theringer.com/movies/2020/1/29/21112768/war-movies-1917-dunkirk-saving-private-ryan-apocalypse-now>

² Nayman.. “‘1917’ and the Trouble With War Movies” – The Ringer.

³ “Turns out the U.S. military gives many movies a major helping hand, from providing access to bases and ships to actually recruiting troops to serve as background actors. But first, scripts have to get vetted to make sure they're in line with the DoD's core values. In this episode, we'll talk to Glen Roberts, the Pentagon's liaison to Hollywood, who reads those scripts and works with studios to make military-themed productions as realistic as possible.” - H. Seck. 2020. Why the Military Helps Hollywood Make Movies. [online] Military.com. Available

narrative” written and produced by the CIA to influence public opinion on torture and cement the public view that “it was the CIA and their organizational processes that got the accurate information that led to the ‘justice’ of Bin Laden’s killing”⁴.

One of the ways this view of war is achieved is by aping the view of embedded journalists. Deer describes the US military’s policy during the Iraq war, embedding “700 journalists within military units”, definitively changing the relationship between the US media and its military, meaning that “news production during the Iraq War be governed by military rationale, support for operational objectives, and empathy with the troops”, even at the expense of a more macro view of the conflict.⁵

This embedded view has very limited horizons, and by placing the main view of the conflict with a select view of the military this limits the ability to portray a macro view of the conflict – and avoids questions like ‘what are we doing here’ in favour for ‘what is happening right now’. Furthermore, as these “accounts of the wars from embedded journalists and military historians”, they foster a dependence “on close ties to the military and to the official perspective on the conflicts”⁶. The view of warfare – both literal and more broadly cultural – is dictated by the military and thus focuses even more closely upon the soldiers and military structure themselves, with non-American soldiers reduced to little more than flimsy, Othered silhouettes.

This thesis argues that *1917* is chiefly a War on Terror film, with really only a thin veneer of an historically accurate First World War setting. To argue this, I will be comparing the movie to Kathryn Bigelow’s 2008 film *The Hurt Locker*, as I believe it is a classic War on Terror film that will allow me to demonstrate the hallmarks of this genre. Finally, I will show how the differences between *1917* and *The Hurt Locker* demonstrate the development of the War on Terror genre staples since 2008 – particularly in the use of mediating technology – creating a shift towards videogame-inspired interactive setting to be explored by sensorial avatar-protagonists.

1917 and *the Hurt Locker* make a good comparison as both films have much in common – both feature a small squad of quasi-elite soldiers having episodic experiences throughout the film that highlight different aspects of the war. Furthermore, both films have similar attitudes to Othering, as well as similar approaches to visually, their attempt to create a sensorial view of their wars. While analysing *1917*, I will be referring mostly to Mendes, but also to Roger Deakins’ camerawork, and how this impacted the film. However, for *The Hurt Locker*’s Ben Ackroyd (or indeed any other war film mentioned) I will not be affording the cinematographer the same status. This is due to the significant role the one-take nature of *1917* has, with Adam Nayman describing how “for a lot of viewers... the cinematography in this case is the direction, as the line dividing [Deakins’] camera calisthenics... and Mendes’s aspirations to realism is as thin as all the digital edits made by... Lee Smith, which suture together multiple takes into one seamless-seeming whole”.⁷

at: <https://www.military.com/podcasts/left-of-boom/2020/09/17/why-military-helps-hollywood-make-movies.html>

⁴ Brent J Steele. *Organizational Processes and Ontological (in) Security: Torture, the CIA and the United States*. (Cooperation and Conflict 52, no. 1 2017)

⁵ Patrick Deer. “*The Iraq War*”. (The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma, First Edition, 2020), 423

⁶ PATRICK DEER. “*MAPPING CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN WAR CULTURE*.” (College Literature 43, no. 1 2016), 50

⁷ Nayman. “‘1917’ and the Trouble With War Movies” – The Ringer.

I will primarily be using Deer's two articles 'Mapping Contemporary American War Culture', and his second within *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Trauma*, however unlike Deer I will focus more upon the sensorial individualising nature of War on Terror (WoT) films – something I believe is portrayed in *1917*. As well as this, I will also be investigating Deer's concept of the 'embedded sublime' through a lens of László Munteán and Sarah Arnold's idea of 'ruin-porn'.

The films I am looking at in this paper will be called 'War on Terror' films, but in reality should be named 'War on Terror' War films, given the broader, more normalised warlike aspects within the War on Terror paradigm. For example, Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* is another WoT classic, but I would consider it a WoT thriller, or spy film, rather than a war film. Furthermore, there are WoT political thrillers (*W.*, 2008), courtroom dramas (*Official Secrets*, 2019), comedies (*War Dogs*, 2016) etc.

These boundaries are, by the very nature of the War on Terror, blurry. For an example of this current paradigm, a sort of late-stage War on Terror militarism if you will, is what Lauren Gould and Joelle Demmers describe as 'Liquid Warfare'. They describe how waging traditional, open warfare is unpopular; both due to the bad optics of brutalising developing, postcolonial countries, but also (likely more importantly) because of the emotional response of Americans returned home in body bags. Rather, the West has turned "to remote forms of military intervention", most recently deployed in the Middle East and Africa.⁸ They describe this as "resulting from risk aversion (avoidance of ground combat), materiality ('the force of matter') or the adoption of a networked operational logic by major military powers".⁹

The way around this is best seen in Africa. The US military has a command centre in every major region on earth – EUROCOM, ASIACOM etc... from which they can project their military might.¹⁰ However, in Africa the US only has a single, relatively small base in Djibouti. The idea is to have relatively little in the way of US boots on the ground, but instead to offer a logistical and financial role: hiring local militias, arming them, and giving them logistical or drone support and having them operate in other countries rather than the US. The 2015's war thriller *Eye in the Sky* shows this particularly well: with the film simultaneously taking place in three locations: a British command centre in London commands an American drone pilot in Nevada who himself liaises with a Kenyan operative in Nairobi on whether to bomb a house.

This indirect warfare means the US military receives no criticism for risking American lives while still maintaining its monopoly of power over these developing nations. The only US ground troops present are the elite Special Forces – although the way they are sold to the American public is different, as I will discuss later. Liquid warfare is "the new military interventionism is prompted by a more fundamental transformation, grounded in the spatial and temporal reconfiguration of war."¹¹ Indeed, this spatial reconfiguration is something particularly present in WoT cinema, which I will discuss in my chapter on the 'ruined sublime'.

'Liquid warfare' is a military interventionism which "shuns direct control... focusing instead on 'shaping' the international security environment through remote technology, flexible operations and military-to-military partnerships."¹² This too is reflected in broader military culture, which seeks "the

⁸ Jolle Demmers and Lauren Gould. An Assemblage Approach to Liquid Warfare: AFRICOM and the 'Hunt' for Joseph Kony. (Security Dialogue 49, no. 5 2018), 364

⁹ Demmers and Gould. *Liquid Warfare: AFRICOM and the 'Hunt' for Joseph Kony.*, 364

¹⁰ "Combatant Commands", n.d. Accessed January 30, 2022. <https://www.defense.gov/About/combatant-commands/>.

¹¹ Demmers and Gould. *Liquid Warfare: AFRICOM and the 'Hunt' for Joseph Kony.*, 364

¹² Demmers and Gould. *Liquid Warfare: AFRICOM and the 'Hunt' for Joseph Kony.*, 364

fragmentation and lack of a coherent historical narrative”, in order to limit coherent criticism¹³. This remote-yet-high-tech seeing, coupled with Deer’s concept of fragmentation, play a major role in the visual style of these films.

This war culture is “an expansive "consolidation of authority", serving as both “the waging of war and the legitimization of violence against distant "others.”¹⁴ Deer continues, describes how this War Culture “reflects both the plural and uneven social processes of militarization” that works “to disorganize, divide, and compartmentalize society and economy, and the distanced and limited nature of the” War on Terror, keeping our view of the conflict fragmented and overwhelming.¹⁵

This paper is divided into two chapters: the first will look at how the physical space where war is waged is reconstructed and de-peopled both in *1917* and *The Hurt Locker*. This chapter is split into two subsections: Othering, and the Ruined/Embedded Sublime. The former is to show how War on Terror enemies are dehumanised using Orientalism, something that is at odds with the presentation of the Germans in *1917*. The latter looks at how the battlefield is turned into an interactable area of beauty, naturalising war by spatialising it.

Chapter 2 will look at the role of the avatar-protagonist and is split into four sections. Firstly, by looking at how WoT protagonists have individualised non-structural militarism and hyper-physicality. Then by looking at what I have called the Sensorial Protagonist; a lightly characterised main character who mostly serves as the audience’s uncritical point-of-view for the war, reducing the view of the conflict into an uncritical emotive spectacle he must navigate. Likewise, I will discuss the War on Terror portrayal of trauma and the trauma-hero, how Schofield’s silent, passive shock mirrors the idea of ‘Combat-Gnosticism’, that serves to separate and deify the military’s trauma from that of the civilian population. Finally, I will look at how this fragmented sensorial filmmaking is presented visually and that, although Deakins’ visuals differ from that of *The Hurt Locker*, both further fragment and individualise the view of warfare while focusing upon sensorial details.

¹³ DEER. “MAPPING CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN WAR CULTURE.” 70

¹⁴ DEER. “AMERICAN WAR CULTURE.” 70

¹⁵ DEER. “AMERICAN WAR CULTURE.” 70

Chapter 1. The Warzone.

Part 1. Abstraction of enemies

Both *1917* and *The Hurt Locker* have very flattened, Othered enemies even by the standards of war films. Of course, Othered enemies are a staple of war films – from the incomprehensible savages of 1964's *Zulu* to the uptight and Aryan Nazis of classic war cinema.¹⁶ However, the degree to which the enemy is flattened and reduced to little more than a foreboding cardboard cut-out is what makes post-9/11 War on Terror films unique. Building upon a basis of colonial Near-Eastern Orientalism, these films depict enemies abstractly – appearing more as silhouettes or shadowy background actors, often out of focus or in the distance: barely seen as human. We cannot forget the “racial dimension of... the Global War on Terror” and how it intersects with what Deer describes as the “history of white supremacy or the colonial frontier myth of “regeneration through violence,” which has so often targeted communities of colour.”¹⁷ However, given the focus upon *1917* – a war between Europeans, I will be focusing more upon the abstract side of Othering, rather than the racial dimension. *The Hurt Locker* is a perfect example of the modern form of Othering that War on Terror cinema has, Bigelow explores the concept seemingly both critically and unconsciously, leading to a mixed portrayal of the Iraqis for whom there is sympathy but ultimately disdain.

The reason for this Othered depiction is likely due to the nature of modern warfare. Unlike the wars of the 20th century, the enemy is not a state but rather some kind of non-state actor. Al-Qaeda and ISIS are of course the first to come to mind, but there is also the same discourse around the Taliban – generally portrayed as a terrorist group or militia rather than a rebel group vying for state power (or government now), their image is ununiformed and associated with terrorist attacks on civilians. ISIS is similar of course, given the organisation attempted to create the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (later the Levant, and now just ‘Islamic State’) and it too had a standing army plus ambitions of statehood, yet Western Media still portrays them as abstract and unclear in their aims. Of course, there was a multitude of different insurgents fighting the US for the majority of both the Iraq and Afghan wars – upon invading Iraq and dissolving their army, the enemy combatants became non-state actors, from Ba’athist Loyalists to different Sunni and Shi’a insurgents.

As Patrick Deer remarks, “the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have frequently been represented through the familiar tropes of militarized high technology, which both distance the war zones and turn their civilian populations into targets.”¹⁸ Indeed, abstraction through distance – both metaphorical and literal – is the approach towards the enemy in the War on Terror. A common thread in these films is that the enemy is rarely seen up close, and so they are obscured and abstracted, with any sudden glimpses of their humanity being treated as a shock or twist, rather than a fact¹⁹.

The War the West is engaged with is ‘On Terror’ rather than on a national or state body. Regardless of the reasons for its initial involvement in the Middle East twenty years ago, the cultural framework used by the West for justifying it has a particular means of dehumanising the enemy. They are not bound by state borders, they do not wear a uniform, they can strike at any moment and usually do so

¹⁶ The final Nazi in *Kelly's Heroes* is a good example, with this absurdly stiff mannerisms and shock of bright blonde hair.

¹⁷ DEER. “AMERICAN WAR CULTURE.” 56

¹⁸ DEER. “AMERICAN WAR CULTURE.” 56

¹⁹ *American Sniper* (2014) features this, as does *Jarhead* (2001). Although not a War on Terror film, the no man's land fight in *The King's Man* (2021) also has a classic example of this.

with 'cowardly' tactics – bombs on the roadside, on civilian targets, as snipers (in the case of *The Hurt Locker*).

This type of combat is directly juxtaposed with the soldiers in *The Hurt Locker*, who are as harshly visible in the desert sun as the insurgents they fight are invisible. I will mostly be referring to the enemy as 'insurgents' rather than terrorists or Al-Qaeda as this is a more appropriate name for combatants in warfare, especially as we never get given a name for who the US is fighting in *The Hurt Locker*²⁰. They are referred to using mostly military jargon or as 'the enemy', which further abstracts them.

In the film the insurgents are usually seen from far away – for example during the sniper shootout scene they are purposely obscured as means to create tension. Even when they kidnap Eldridge we only see them from behind before they are shot dead. The work of the enemy in the film is mostly felt by the bombs that James must defuse, these are also oddly enough, the closest thing we see to personality for the insurgents. When James is showing off his collection of triggers to his co-workers, he gives each of them a personality and comments upon the supposed intelligence of the bombmakers – giving them a less abstract intelligence, comparing them to craftsmen. We also see this in a more malicious way when James searches for the bomb's trigger; in the film he remarks when something is too easy, or when there is a secondary trap waiting for them. By Bigelow purposely refusing to give James a bombmaker as an enemy however, these are fragmentary glimpses of personalities – reflecting the US' perception of the war as fragmentary itself.

1. The Hurt Locker

1.a Bigelow's Criticism.

The few Iraqis who Bigelow deigns to give a personality are stock types – Suhail Aldabbach's Black Suit Man is more akin to a frenzied horse in his unintelligible panic over having a bomb strapped to his chest. Indeed, the character exists for ratcheting up the tension for James as he struggles to remove the bomb vest, only humanised enough to have an element of tragedy to him upon James' failure. Likewise, Beckham is meant to represent the actual living people in Iraq as he hawks bootleg DVDs to the American troops, until James mistakes another dead Iraqi for him, leading to an illegal jaunt into Baghdad to find out what happened to him. Beckham's character is used quite intelligently to show the disconnect between US troops and the civilians they are meant to be liberating, as James cannot tell two children apart and his sense of injustice leads him to threaten to execute two different Iraqi men, all due to their inability to communicate. However, the two men – the merchant and the academic – are both so flatly stereotyped that this does not entirely work as these men are barely shown to be real people. This is especially the case of the professor who Bigelow proves to be 'worthy' by showing his intelligence (in an academic Western sense), dressed relatively secularly and being well-spoken in English. This is likely unintentional commentary that the 'good' Iraqis must follow Western principles to be seen as worthy and is certainly contrasting with the violent and alien enemy peering down from rooftops or stealing men in the night.

James' potential rampage is seen as violent and unsettling but ultimately as coming from the right place and – upon his realisation of his crimes – his subsequent run back home in shame is undercut by the need to show the dangerous unfamiliarity he has with the city around him. The goal of the portrayal of the Iraqis in this film was likely to show the inability of the US to communicate with the Iraqi populace. The fact that no American can speak Arabic is an essential part of the film: the

²⁰ Williams, Phil. "CRIMINALS, INSURGENTS, TERRORISTS, AND MILITIAS." CRIMINALS, MILITIAS, AND INSURGENTS: ORGANIZED CRIME IN IRAQ. Strategic Studies Institute, US Army War College, 2009. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep11977.11>.

characters are unable, and usually unwilling, to engage with the populace in any meaningful way.²¹ The film is likely trying to criticise and highlight the limits of the military's ability to do statecraft, as the soldiers are only really shown as accomplished in warfare, and are decidedly uncomfortable when confronted with elements of normal Iraqi life. Ultimately though, these 'Good Iraqis' are used entirely to further the story of the soldiers, as Joshua Clover notes, this "attachment to a local boy known as Beckham—proves a blind alley. The seeming murder and misuse of the boy provokes James... into an adrenalin-soaked commando raid on a local family, which ends disastrously. But this is enough for James; when he later encounters Beckham alive and well, he registers nothing. The boy has served his purpose, a mute justification for another visit to the firefight."²²

There is a willingness to show glimpses of humanity to Iraqis that we see in modern American war media. Usually, right before the moment of death the enemy is revealed to be a person – for example their face is revealed, or they blurt out something in English in an attempt to make a connection. However, this is usually employed for a final bitter stab of tragedy, reminding us that these are human beings being murdered by each other. Compare this to the portrayal of the enemy in a classic war film such as *Kelly's Heroes*, or *Where Eagles Dare* (1968): the Nazis being human is not even a question, their faces are shown, and their responses are treated as human. These films still have moments of enemy combatants recognising each other – see the end of *Kelly's Heroes* – but these are treated as less of a revelation.

We see this in *1917*, when Schofield has to kill the private (or Soldat) Baumer, there is a moment where the two connect and we see Baumer's face while Schofield tries to show him mercy. However, this fails and he is forced to kill Baumer, all while Baumer's drunken captain stumbles behind his obscured silhouette. This sympathetic but morbid portrayal of victims of war is what Deer describes as "the war machine position[ing] its enemies in another, backward historical reality."²³ He paraphrases Elaine Scarry's concept of linguistically redescribing Iraqis (or in this case Germans) "into targets and collateral damage", morbidly repositioning them into types of dead person²⁴.

There is also a patronising element to this theme: the moment that the villain – or Other in general – can engage with the Western protagonist on an equal footing is when he 'presents Western' in some manner, rather than the protagonist engaging with them in their local culture. There is a particularly unpleasant edge to this when the US are the invaders, as is the case in modern war settings. This is what Johannes Fabian describes as "coeval status", and which Deer elaborates upon, how "too often the trauma of Iraqi citizens... is represented as the object of a war machine or the object of humanitarian pity, as they are denied their agency as human subjects."²⁵ James is unphased by threatening many Iraqis who do not speak English – with the film portraying them as panicked, bleating, and jumpy – but suddenly feels remorseful when pointing a gun at the Western-presenting anglophone academic. Ultimately, unlike the Americans in these films who are familiar and sympathetic to the audience, Bigelow's Iraqis must earn their humanity – either through presenting 'Western' or by dying.

²¹ The psychologist can speak Arabic, but this is barely in the film and is not shown as useful communication.

²² Joshua Clover. "Allegory Bomb." *Film Quarterly* 63, no. 2 (2009): 9

²³ Patrick Deer. "*The Iraq War*", 423

²⁴ Patrick Deer. "*The Iraq War*", 423

²⁵ Patrick Deer. "*The Iraq War*", 423

1.b. Criticism of Bigelow

The Iraqis are also portrayed as intense, unsettling, and dangerous, as Clover puts it: “menace and threat also proliferate in *The Hurt Locker*.”²⁶ This was probably to show how any one of them could be an insurgent, as well as – again – highlight communication difficulties. The Iraqis however are generally portrayed in a shadowy, fragmented manner similar to the Vietcong in *Apocalypse Now*, however this time for the entire populace rather than the insurgents. They are often seen on rooftops, watching the bomb-defusing process in silence as silhouettes, or as rabble, or wailing in despair, or watching the US soldiers in mute rapt attention. In general, they are characterised as being a multitude rather than a single actor.

The psychologist being portrayed as weak and foolish for trusting Iraqis muddies this further. The intent was likely to show that ‘good nature has no place in somewhere so violent as this’ or something of the sort, perhaps to add tragedy given the film’s preoccupation with lack of communication – the one man who was trying was killed. But this approach backfires, with the Iraqis’ brief moment of (collective) humanisation shown to be fatal, and reinforcing the moral righteousness of the choices that James and company make. The film shows they are not worth engaging with as equals. The fact that James’ notions are almost always right, undercuts the uncertainty and the sympathy that we are meant to have with the Iraqis, as the US military still must be portrayed as ultimately right and morally upstanding.

The scene where Sergeant James, while walking to defuse a bomb, is interrupted by an Iraqi driver and draws a gun on him forcing him to get back. The blunt attitudes of the US military are portrayed as harsh, yet ultimately morally righteous – there is a bomb there, James successfully saves the man’s life by forcing him to reverse the car. James snarky comment “if he wasn’t an insurgent he sure as hell is now” shows Bigelow intended criticism of the military’s policy in Iraq. However, there is little actual substance to it, and it is mired in sympathy for the Americans and the military as trying the best they can, leaving any meaningful characterisation of the Iraqis on the wayside.

While discussing *American Sniper (2014)* Deer describes how “the trauma of the Other... appears only as external physical wounding”, when an Iraqi child is brutally murdered by Al Qaeda the film cannot explore this as anything other than how it would impact American soldiers. The film

cannot explore what would drive a woman and child into a suicidal attack on US Marines in the opening sequence, or a small boy to pick up an RPG rocket launcher and point it at an American Humvee immediately after seeing the killing of an insurgent attacker. What seemingly cannot be represented in narratives like *American Sniper* is the suffering of the Iraqi citizens of Fallujah.²⁷

Furthermore, James firing around the car to force the Iraqi man into retreating is meant to show a sort of tough-love mercy that he has – using the threat of violence as a means of immediate communication despite the language barrier. His use of the gun to silence the involuntary suicide bomber is meant to be provocative, and perhaps even damning, of the character and his methods but given how the moral ambiguity is portrayed as him simply trying to silence the man and save him. The Iraqis are therefore presented as not knowing what’s good for them, given the general ugliness of their home, the destructive nature of it on Sanborn, and the righteousness of the Americans. Rather

²⁶ Caetlin Benson-Allott. *Undoing Violence: Politics, Genre, and Duration in Kathryn Bigelow’s Cinema* (Film Quarterly 64, no. 2 2010): 41

²⁷ Patrick Deer. “*The Iraq War*”, 422

than merely being different, Bigelow ends up depicting the Iraqis as stupid, perhaps even unworthy of American help.

Portraying Iraqis as fundamentally different is problematic – even though the debate on the imperialist nature of Western (particularly US) pro-democracy support and intervention is a worthy thing to engage with, especially given why the US started the Iraq war. Furthermore, this approach can have far more respect for local custom and culture, with its incompatibility being due to its own equal yet different nature. However, this generally portrays the culture in question as unequal and the question that always hangs over these depictions – something very common especially in US wars: ‘why are we risking our lives helping these people?’.

1.C. 1917.

Like *The Hurt Locker*, the Germans in *1917* are unquestionably villainous and are therefore abstracted. Like the Iraqis in WoT media, they are flattened and dehumanised in a particularly abstract manner – in the film there are only two Germans with visible faces, the rest are reduced to silhouettes or are wearing masks. More often than not they are felt rather than seen, always potentially lurking somewhere trying to kill the protagonist – as is the case with the German tripwire in their abandoned trenches. Like the Iraqis, they are a hostile multitude lurking offscreen but always watching, rather than individual soldiers. Even the German soldiers Schofield does encounter are likely deserters who are looting the French countryside, are still an incoherent faceless mass.

This portrayal of distance is more similar to that of WoT films where the enemy lurks unseen and ready to deal death at any moment, rather than the typical presentation of war – especially the First World War – of uniformed armies clashing clearly and openly. In fact, until the plane crashes into the barn, all we see of the Germans is their deadliness and capacity to kill the protagonist: from the sly tripwire that almost kills Blake and Schofield to their huge, abandoned guns surrounded by spent shells, and their overall plan to lure the British into a trap. Upon entering the abandoned farm, we are told they cut down the beautiful cherry trees – a further act of pointless barbarism to cement their uncivilised evil.

When the Germans in *1917* are not flattened in silhouettes, they take on a role similar to the fanatical and terrifying Iraqi insurgents in their unreasoning fanaticism. Of the two Germans we see – the pilot and Soldat Baumer – both are people the protagonist confronts non-violently yet they respond with fanatical violence. Upon selflessly rescuing the pilot from his crashed plane, the pilot – babbling intensely in German – stabs Blake for seemingly no reason, only to be shot by Schofield. Likewise, even when Baumer is begged not to alert anyone, and just let Schofield go – he refuses, and again forces Schofield to kill him, all the while his Captain – a drunkenly rambling silhouette – looms threateningly in the background. Like the Iraqis of *The Hurt Locker*, they are fanatical when approached diplomatically and rationally, working against the protagonist and often exploding into violence which leads to them having to be ‘put down’ with the protagonist learning that it is not worth approaching these people with reason. This is odd as there was very little ideological – or indeed racial – difference between the British or Germans at this time, so the German zealotry being so foreign makes little sense. This is likely some of the inherent racial Orientalism from WoT films coming through into WWI: Germans are not an ‘Eastern Cultural Other’ the same way the Middle East is, with its fanaticism typically blamed upon ‘barbarous Islam’ that made it a fundamentally foreign place (in addition to the

ethnic racism of course). Even when more ideologically distant from the US, like when they were Nazis, portrayals of Germans in film tend to be more human than in *1917*.

1917's flat portrayal of the Germans is very odd for another reason, given WWI's rich artistic heritage in empathising with the victims of the war. WWI's cultural legacy in Europe – and indeed the world – is of a pointless, fruitless war where working-class boys with more in common with each other killed each other for a war that never budged. The lack of class consciousness is certainly a modern influence, as this has diminished in war films since Vietnam.

It is odd to see in this abstraction these films, as the Germans are a recognisable state-backed armed force who fight wars in the traditional way, and thanks to WWII films have a 'classical' type of Othering as brutish and Nazi-like. But in this film, they are treated like existential villains. This is an interesting shift which is also present in *Dunkirk* – Christopher Nolan's 2017 sensorial time-based WWII film. This film also has the Germans act unseen, slowly crushing the British forces and morale, before only appearing in one of the final shots as out-of-focus silhouettes to arrest Tom Hardy.

The portrayal of Germans in these films has such quasi-Orientalised Otherness – departing from both the classic sympathetic WWI mould, or the negative Nazi-inspiration – that it is clearly based upon the faceless Iraqi insurgents of War on Terror films, reducing the enemies to an almost-racialised abstract mass. This racialised carryover from WoT films sits at odds with non-racial nature of the First World War: making the Germans alien and incomprehensible yet lacking the Orientalism necessary for it to make sense.

2. Entrenched and embedded: The Ruined/Embedded Sublime.

The Embedded Sublime is a term coined by Patrick Deer that describes how Western war media portrays the Middle East's landscape – mixing together 'ruin porn', WWI-era sublime war poetry, and an Orientalist erasure of living bodies in the landscape. He explains how:

Embedded reportage emerged early in the occupation of Iraq as a dominant genre, elbowing aside... poets as traditional witnesses to war while actively presenting a poeticized and aestheticized spectacle of war, which gave their readers an experience of what I have called elsewhere "the embedded sublime."²⁸

The two main components I will discuss are the aesthetics of conflict zones, best seen in battle-scenes, and the aesthetics post-conflict zones, usually more influenced by 'ruin porn'.

Anna Froula describes how "Hollywood's tendency to depict war as something that happens to the United States and its military" is primarily interested in making "the war legible primarily as a traumatic experience for American soldiers."²⁹ This in turn "leaves Iraqi or Afghan citizens "invariably erased... portrayed as foreign, incomprehensible, and little more than scenery additions."³⁰

The particular setting these soldiers find themselves in is hugely influenced by 'ruin porn', something Sarah Arnold describes as a type of photography that aestheticizes post-industrial collapse (and often poverty), originally coined through the "recent fetishization of Detroit's decaying architecture."³¹ This same 'de-peopled' and often tone-deaf approach is a huge influence on the modern view of warzones, particularly immediately post-conflict, as László Munteán notes in his analysis of post-war Jobar, it "exemplifies the thematization of urban warfare along pre-existing codes of the Romantic sublime."³² He claims this creates "the aesthetics of computer games", and indeed one only has to think of any multiplayer maps in *Call of Duty* (or similar games), which are based upon real places, yet completely lack life apart from the players.³³ This is certainly a huge influence on WoT media, especially in how it makes these conflict zones into natural areas to interact with rather than living areas destroyed by an unnatural state (war). In my paper '*Screenshooters: Video Game War Culture in a post 9/11 world*', I explain this co-opting of real-life ruin into set-dressing for entertainment³⁴. Conflict zones become a "post-9/11 military stereotype of 'ruin porn' and the idea of an 'embedded sublime' these usually feature "a frozen [and morbidly beautiful] moment of horror", such as Fig 1 below in Section 2a³⁵. This visual style originated in "post-war Kuwait, when photographers went... to document the leftovers – destroyed tanks, bodies, scarred desert and burning oil fields. Their images often had a post-traumatic

²⁸ Patrick Deer. "The Iraq War, 424

²⁹ Anna Froula, *What Keeps Me Up at Night*, 115

³⁰ Anna Froula, *What Keeps Me Up at Night*, 115

³¹ Sarah Arnold. *Urban Decay Photography and Film: Fetishism and the Apocalyptic Imagination*. (Journal of Urban History 41, no. 2, March 2015), 326

³² László Munteán. *Droning Syria: The Aerial View and the New Aesthetics of Urban Ruination*. (In *Visualizing the Street: New Practices of Documenting, Navigating and Imagining the City*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019), 84

³³ László Munteán. *Droning Syria*: 84

³⁴ Conal Gilliland. "Screenshooters: Video Game War Culture in a post 9/11 world". (n.p. Leiden University, 2021).

³⁵ Oxford University. 2020. "America's War Culture Since 9/11". Podcast. War And Representation. <https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/americas-war-culture-911>.

disposition, and a mournful paralysis"³⁶... often with a morbid focus upon the bodies of people of colour."³⁷ In the 30 years since, this visual style has evolved somewhat, separating into a more impressionistic portrayal of action³⁸, and a more serene, spatialised view of post-conflict zones. Interestingly, the morbid focus upon the bodies of Iraqis is still present, but there is also a tendency to entirely de-people warzones both to focus upon the American soldiers, but also to increase the aesthetic value of these cities.

This marks a shift away from the conception of spatialised war as merely 'the battlefield' – a place where war is currently happening and where you go to fight. Of course, traditional wars have been much less static than the forever wars, and far more goal oriented. These wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are not static the same ways as the First World War with its fixed and literally entrenched front, but rather due to the nature of the insurgencies and their asymmetrical warfare, the front is changed to entire static regions where everyone inside is (potentially) a combatant. Rather than treat this like police action, the nature of engagement with these huge static fronts is to naturalise them spatially, even while the army traverse the region, somewhat aimlessly. Compare this to the Second World War, or the Napoleonic War, or indeed the Vietnam war; all of which are based far more upon the movement of armies whose goals are to push the enemy out, or conquer a country, or drive Hitler/Napoleon back to Berlin/Paris. For these conflicts, the war is a series of battlefields with a clear goal in mind, even the First World War had clear end goals, hence the idea of significant battles within it. There is no 'Battle of Hamburger Hill' in Iraq or Afghanistan as battles imply a degree of progression, rather than the embedded territorial nature of the WoT. Of course, we see this forever war concept in other regions – the 'frozen conflicts' along Russia's borders have a similar nature. The Embedded Sublime is the development of the spatial nature of warfare, now expanding from battlefield (emphasis on 'fields') to encompass entire regions where combat could potentially take place. This itself reflects the general nature of the War on Terror being both everywhere and nowhere, allowing for military action anywhere.

The Hurt Locker

2.a. Sublime aesthetics of warfare.

The Hurt Locker's explosions are perfect examples of this – shown twice when the two different bomb technicians run in slow motion from an explosion. Bigelow is more interested showing the impact of the bomb – how it warps metal and spits up dust and rocks – than how it affects those killed by it. Even Staff Sergeant Thompson's death is simply shown with his visor turning red. The explosion is shot in slow motion – suddenly moving away from the juddering documentarian-style camerawork to a more saturated, underexposed look while the sound cuts out except for Thompson's breathing and the slow rumble of the explosion. Caetlin Benson-Allott describes how the "first explosion deploys slow-motion HDV close-ups of road gravel and car rust rising from the force of the explosion to remove the viewer from the human scale of the blast and suggest the extensiveness of its destructive power"

³⁶ D Campany. "Safety in numbness: some remarks on problems of 'late photography'." (Maidstone, Kent Photoworks. 2003), 131

³⁷ Oxford University. "America's War Culture Since 9/11". Podcast.

³⁸ See my section on Visual Style.

allowing for “a few moments of grace and beauty at the centre of this scene of the death of Staff Sergeant Thompson.”³⁹

Rather than the fast concussive fatal nature of the bomb, Bigelow lingers on the explosion as the final part of the scene, rather than the aftermath. Benson-Alott continues: “the unearthly pace of the shot suggests a perspective outside of time, outside of all embodied, partisan positions. This is *The Hurt Locker*, the temporal and physical space of peril and pain that the film understands as beyond any sectarian frame. The scene’s mournful, displaced lyricism defamiliarizes and depoliticizes its subject—there are no (living) voices, eyes, or subjective perspectives inside *The Hurt Locker*, only and always death.”⁴⁰ Benson-Alott (who praises the film)’s description of the non-partisan nature of the imagery is unusual given the invisibility of Iraq or Iraqis, with only Thompsons heroically doomed figure running from it.

Benson-Alott continues, claiming the “deliberate distance actually forces the spectator to slow down and think about the horror of military violence.”⁴¹ This ‘realistic’ approach to violence “interrogates genre conventions, specifically the way many war films distance or sanitize” it, however this again *WoT* films focus entirely upon the active, violent part of warfare and, given the description, entirely focused upon the Americans⁴².



Figure 1. *The Hurt Locker*.

³⁹ Caetlin Benson-Alott. *Undoing Violence: Politics, Genre, and Duration in Kathryn Bigelow’s Cinema* (Film Quarterly 64, no. 2 2010), 42

⁴⁰ Ibid. It must be noted that Alott’s view of the film is far less critical than mine – liking it for much the same reason I do not.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Benson-Alott. *Undoing Violence*: 41



Figure 2. Schofield's final run in 1917.

This image is also a centrepiece of *The Hurt Locker's* marketing and highlight the view that – as mentioned – these towns are successfully 'de-peopled' in a way to solely focus upon the physical space as a place for soldiers to work, in a mercenary fashion. As László Munteán describes it, the goal of this type of imagery is to "capture the immense scale of destruction wrought upon a place in purely physical terms"⁴³. His article '*Droning Syria*' looks at the fascination with exploring the ruined Middle East as scenery, "portray[ing] the street's bullet riddled façades as though flying amidst the jagged edges of an urban canyon", recontextualising warzones in a physical, almost geographical, manner rather than as a temporary, unnatural state⁴⁴.

As well as their explosions, bombs themselves are a source of beauty – the shot of James uncovering the multitude of IEDs strung together is one of the more iconic of the film (another marketing centrepiece). Iraq is very much the same sort of playground as 1917's France – however, unlike 1917 where the ruins are the main bit of 'interactability' for our protagonist to run and climb over, the bombs are the most tangible and real piece of the landscape in *The Hurt Locker's* Iraq (again, portraying warzones as natural). As such they are portrayed with the most attention and even beauty. This of course includes the explosions in the context of bombs, as James manages to defuse all of them until the climax, the narrative builds tension with each successive defusing that the explosion will be that much more climactic. Bigelow is "so effective at generating the root ambivalence of cinematic violence, wherein we lust for the next luxuriously filmed detonation just as we flinch at the possibility, that there is no possibility of relief. That too is an argument about men and war, as much as about cinema⁴⁵." And indeed, the destruction is wrought beautifully in its rich, underexposed slow-motion with any actual deaths of Iraqis rendered irrelevant. Even when the two are fused, in the case of the unwilling suicide bomber in the film's climax, the focus is entirely upon what is strapped to his chest, with the real person only serving to add tragedy as well as ratchet up tension – his incessant begging is shown to be a source of annoyance for James, with his occasional moments of human connection, again, used to add tragedy to James' failure to save the day.

⁴³ László Munteán. *Droning Syria*: 87

⁴⁴ László Munteán. *Droning Syria*, 87

⁴⁵ Clover. "Allegory Bomb." 9

2.b. Redefining Iraq and the Embedded Warzone.

Iraq's landscape itself is not afforded the luxury of beauty like Coppola's Vietnamese jungle or Mendes' France. Instead, it is portrayed as urban and ugly, despite Bigelow's Western influences being present (i.e. James walking down the street in bomb disposal gear as if to duel). The reason for this is its quasi-documentarian style, with Bigelow giving everything a 'rough and ready' aesthetic. Of the films analysed this is one where the landscape plays the least role – even in the sniper shootout focuses entirely upon the individuals, and minimises the landscape, only using it to denote distance, and therefore show the difficulty of spotting and shooting the phantasmal Iraqi snipers.

Similarly to *1917*, Iraq is barely referred to by name in the film, and never as a living thing. The closest we get to seeing living Iraqi culture is the confusing, overwhelming streets that are emphasised as 'beyond the compound'. While James is clearly shown to not belong here, and his reckless actions are portrayed in a critical light, the chaotic streets are ultimately portrayed as a piece of 'enemy territory', with potentially hostile eyes everywhere, something contrasted with the safety of the US' home base.

There is no focus upon Iraq as an old place – often sarcastically remarked in these films as the 'Cradle of Civilisation'⁴⁶ – instead focusing upon its contemporary concrete structure and modern ruins. However, Munteán argues that one of the main differences of this new type of embedded sublime is that the ruins are new. Unlike classic ruins which are "temporally removed from the present... thus lending itself to be perceived as the remains of a bygone, great civilization" lending a sublime nature from their great age, these new ruins gain sublime characteristics from the immense destruction wrought upon them⁴⁷. This type of sublime has a more unsettling edge to it, as while these places "are also imbued with the lingering memory of pain and violence, this does not prevent it from being viewed with a peculiar kind of pleasure by audiences who do not partake in that memory and pain."⁴⁸

The other major acknowledgement of Iraq is in Sanborn's final breakdown at the end of the film where he admits he "hates this place", and the film agrees with him. Iraq is portrayed as ugly and ruined, but unlike *1917*, it is not a liminal space or a site of meditation on the nature of war for these soldiers, merely a place for them to experience war, and the trauma that comes with it.

Rather, Iraq it is something to survive and move through both literally and metaphorically. Unlike *1917* where the front is a collection of set-pieces joined together by the film's one-take, or *Apocalypse Now's* continuity via the river, the Iraq present in *The Hurt Locker* is far more disjointed and fragmented, with the three protagonists wandering from scene to scene without the landscape holding them together. This Iraq is, as Deer describes, fragmented.

This Iraq from the War on Terror is completely aesthetically reconfigured by the War on Terror. There is little acknowledgement of it as an existing place – it has been stripped of its people, its history, and its landscape – rather it has become a place entirely devoted to the American conflict there and is portrayed as little more than 'The Front' to the American people.

⁴⁶ The best example is probably: *Susanna White. "The Cradle of Civilisation". Generation Kill. Season 1, episode 2, HBO, 2008'*

⁴⁷ László Munteán. *Droning Syria*: 84

⁴⁸ László Munteán. *Droning Syria*: 87

2.C. 1917

“More than any other movie released this Oscars cycle, 1917 wears its technical complexity on its sleeve.”⁴⁹

This interactable nature of landscape in War on Terror media has certainly been crystallised by videogames. Something I argued in *Screenshooters* but best said by S. Payne: “the military shooter is not only the quintessential post-9/11 video game genre, but [it is also] the apotheosis of contemporary militainment.”⁵⁰ Given the popularity of the military shooter (particularly the *Call of Duty* franchise), which was a huge influence on shaping how we see the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, it also redefined how we treat battlefield – transforming them into a state of play and of interaction. Deer’s concept of the embedded sublime makes little reference to WoT video games, which is odd given their particular closeness to what he describes. However, I believe they are one of the main focuses, and add another haptic dimension to his concept, plus the general idea of ruin porn which I have dubbed ‘interactability’. This adds another haptic element and further focuses the idea that these spaces can be exploited via exploration.

It was this interactive element in particular that partially inspired *1917*. Mendes has discussed how he was influenced from “watching his children play the Western-themed game “Red Dead Redemption.” The intimately cropped third-person presentation of many games allows the participant — or, in this case, the viewer — to more easily graft an emotional connection with the protagonist.”⁵¹ Indeed, as Adam Nayman describes, “comparisons between sitting through *1917* and watching somebody else’s video game livestream are apt, not only because of the overcranked action and the thinness of the characterization and dialogue—or the way that the cameos by famous British actors serve as veritable “save points” in the story—but because Mendes’s mandate of “immersion” results in a frustratingly passive viewing experience.”⁵² This passivity is a key feature of War on Terror cinema, with Schofield acting as less of a character and more as the audience’s means to witness the front

The First World War is particularly susceptible to the portrayal of war as a natural, geographic feature given its long, stationary nature and focus upon the physical space of the battlefield in the form of trenches. *1917* follows the idea of the embedded sublime closely – although with a less Orientalist dimension and perhaps takes it further. There is a greater focus upon death, as well as post-conflict ruin, unlike *The Hurt Locker* which – due to its bomb-disposal plot – focused more upon active destruction. This is also of course due to the difference between the wars with WWI being far more local and lethal.

And indeed, there are artfully strewn bodies everywhere in the film: the corpses of soldiers and horses feature throughout the first scene when Schofield and Blake go over the top. Likewise, when Schofield floats downriver amongst the petals he is accompanied by corpses. The entire film is mostly focused upon “scenes that are evacuated of human presence but affected by human action”, especially regarding the artfully destroyed French countryside⁵³. Like how films about the First Gulf War came to be major aesthetic influences on WoT cinema, the initial embedded post-conflict view arose from Kuwait when “photographers went... to document the leftovers – destroyed tanks, bodies, scarred

⁴⁹ Nayman. “‘1917’ and the Trouble With War Movies - The Ringer”

⁵⁰ Froula, *What Keeps Me Up at Night*, 116

⁵¹ Todd. Martens, 2020. “‘Parasite’ and ‘1917’ Show How Video Games Influence Prestige Movies”, <https://www.latimes.com/entertainment-arts/story/2020-02-11/oscars-1917-parasite-video-games-movies>.

⁵² Nayman. “‘1917’ and the Trouble With War Movies - The Ringer”

⁵³ D Company. “*Safety in numbness.*”, 5

desert and burning oil fields. Their images often had a post-traumatic disposition, and a mournful paralysis.”⁵⁴ This sort of aftermath portrayal draws on a “Hemingwayesque approach to war writing has its roots in First World War writing”, and the romantic poetry before it⁵⁵. The bodies tend to be that of soldiers, with the only notable French (living or dead) being a young woman looking after a baby. Any harm upon the French is more denoted by the ruined countryside and buildings, which are treated more as obstacles by Mendes than real places – the only places that still seems like habitable at all is the farmhouse, which in turn is partially destroyed for a set-piece.

Given *1917*, and general war culture, draw heavy inspiration from video games, one can see how *1917* integrates ruin as means for adventure – the collapsed bridge that Schofield has to traverse is presented as another obstacle rather than as the site of a war, or indeed a once-living place. This is especially noticeable in the run through the French village – there are no citizens, no real sign of life bar a single girl and a child – the setting feels like it was created for Schofield and the audience to run through. Indeed, the scene is portrayed beautifully, with flares illuminating the path and a dreamy music contrasted with Schofield running for his life.

Roger Deakins’ camerawork, billed as a major part of the film, also feeds into the ‘high-tech’ modern view of warfare. As Deer writes, “one of the dominant tropes is... the imaginary of high-tech warfare”, although this is chiefly portrayed in a much more militant manner, particularly “through US air power: the “shock and awe” bombing of Baghdad... camera footage from helicopter gunships; drones assassinating enemy combatants with Hellfire missiles; satellite imagery of distant battle zones.”⁵⁶ However, the goal of this imagery is to give the audience a “mediatized spectacle of helicopter and warplane gun camera footage”, or rather, an omniscient first-person perspective that gives an overview of the conflict.⁵⁷ Given the inspiration from video games, the interactive-yet-mediatised nature of the camerawork makes the perfect cocktail of modern WoT viewpoints: it is removed yet sensorial, depersonalised yet individual, and interactive yet curated. The viewer sees and explores the terribly sublime WWI trenches in first-person detail, and have a staggering view of their physical space, yet for most the film the battlefield behaves more like a level of a videogame for the protagonist to run through and around, rather than a real, lived-in place.

This is to help naturalise the war further – particularly the physical dimensions, (the Warzone if you will). Deer discusses the idea of keeping the Iraq and Afghan wars purposefully distant through embedded reporters to give a localised view of the conflict, rather than a total view of the war. By distancing it, the war seemed incoherent, large, and mostly importantly naturalised as a physical space. The camerawork and focus upon aesthetic in *1917* likewise distance us from the realities of warfare, even while Mendes tries to give us the ‘most realistic’ view of the war, he instead creates another physical Warzone that acts almost as a country.

This is the same as how the Hurt Locker’s Iraq is reduced to an area where Americans go to engage in warfare. The country has even become a shorthand in America for warfare – the term Chi-Raq, used most notably in Spike Lee’s 2015 film, which refers to the violence in certain areas of the American city of Chicago, and how it is ‘like a warzone’. When the term was popularised, the *Chicago Tribune* interviewed its citizens, many of whom claimed “the term stirs shame. “I really want Chicago to be better”, with others leaping to the city’s defence, to argue against the claim that it was the murder

⁵⁴ Company. “*Safety in numbness:*”, 131

⁵⁵ Deer. “*The Iraq War*”, 422

⁵⁶ DEER. “*AMERICAN WAR CULTURE.*”, 57

⁵⁷ DEER. “*AMERICAN WAR CULTURE.*”, 57

capital.⁵⁸ Iraq to Americans is just a warzone, or a place where violence happens, spatialised and, given the long nature of the 'Forever Wars', temporalized to feel like a permanent American fixture. As this dominant spatialised framework of war is retroactively applied to previous warzones, there are few wars more perfect for it than the First World War: entrenched is just a synonym for embedded after all.

⁵⁸ Bowean, Lolly. 2013. The Chicago Tribune. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/business/chi-chicago-chiraq-20130714-story.html>.

3. Conclusion: *I Can't Believe It's Not Modern Warfare*

This chapter shows the reconfiguration of Iraq, or indeed any other region the War on Terror is waged, into a warzone. As well as aestheticizing the battlefield what the military-entertainment complex particularly tries to do is de-people it. This is achieved both by literally removing the Iraqis from their home (and the French from theirs in *1917*) but also by Othering them to the point of dehumanisation so that when they do appear, they are little more than part of the environment. Like Bigelow's Iraq, *1917*'s France shows a single French woman and her child as inhabitants of the country he is fighting in, which itself is reduced to little more than interactable spectacle with Germans lurking in every corner. The Germans suffer the most from the realignment of an old war towards modern War on Terror values, ending up a very strange racialised portrait of a non-racialised Western people. But, like the Iraqis in *The Hurt Locker* they are obscured, fanatical silhouettes who explode into violence. They have no clear goals or strategy beyond killing the British yet have an abstract intelligence to them – their wiring of bombs and cunning withdrawals are like the Iraqi bombers James admires, even when they are humanised it is only through the prism of warfare.



The reason for this reconfiguration of Iraq and France is to transform them into states of play for audiences. The appeal of the ruined sublime, as well as the interactable nature of both embedded war culture and popular military videogames shows that these warzones are to be experienced as much as witnessed. *1917* in particular plays with both the videogame visuals and the beautiful aesthetics of ruin – one only has to think of the scene in the bombed-out town where Schofield has to run and dodge the Germans shooting at him. Even the poster (as seen above) shows the beautiful and thrilling nature of this frozen moment of conflict. The Warzone becomes stripped of both place and people to allow an unproblematic and uncritical enjoyment of the aesthetics of modern warfare, all while naturalising it as a geographic space.

Chapter 2. The Military

1. Portrayal of Soldiers

The everyman soldier is one of the true staples of classic war films. For example, every American World War II film has a squad with a smorgasbord of American diversity: there's usually an Italian American from Brooklyn, a Southerner (often called Tex), a Midwesterner, and possibly even a black soldier. One can see this present in WWII films especially such as *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), or *Kelly's Heroes*⁵⁹. This cross-section of American life is due to the draft: with conscription the range of men being signed up was greater but also due to the involuntary nature of the calling, plus the narrative of 'serving your country', there was greater interest in the 'everyman soldier' and his on the ground view of the war. This idea continued until the Vietnam war whereupon the draft ended in 1973⁶⁰. The same approach applied to British war films -especially in the First World War which was infamous for 'Pals Battalions' – where an entire town or neighbourhoods of men would fight together in the trenches which, given the nature of WWI, led to entire areas losing a generation of men, for example the Ulster Presbyterians lost in the battle of the Somme, or Ypres, or Gallipoli.

However, there is a noted shift in War on Terror films regarding how they portray the collective military, particularly the lower ranks, in that there is far less focus upon it, especially as a group (the term 'grunts' is hardly used except by the protagonist to look down upon them). Modern war films in general are far less interested in looking at large groups during the war and tend to have a single avatar-protagonist, focusing more upon their individual actions when compared to pre-WoT films such as *Saving Private Ryan*, *Kelly's Heroes*, *Thin Red Line* (1998), or *Platoon* (1986). These protagonists tend to be part of a much smaller team, if not alone, and give a very physical, embedded view of the conflict – I have called them 'Sensorial Protagonists', both *1917's* Schofield, and *Hurt Locker's* Sergeant James would qualify.

However, there is another type of protagonist in War on Terror films separate from them, the 'Jingoistic Shooter'. While not directly related to the protagonists in either *1917* or *the Hurt Locker*, it is still worth discussing as it helps illuminate the broader War on Terror cinematic culture and its influence upon *1917's* use of its protagonist, particularly in its focus upon individualisation⁶¹.

⁵⁹ *Kelly's Heroes* has a diverse squad – Oddball's Californian, Savalas' Big Joe is a New Yorker, Harry Dean Stanton's Willard is Southern. *Kelly's Heroes*. 1970.

⁶⁰ Selective Service System. n.d. History and Records | Selective Service System. [online] Available at: <https://www.sss.gov/history-and-records/#:~:text=From%201948%20until%201973%2C%20during,be%20filled%20through%20voluntary%20means.>

⁶¹ There is third type of protagonist, the 'impotence protagonist'. These films exist to undercut the hypermacho jingoistic soldier and American's unrealistic standards of warfare. The typical story involves a soldier who wants to go and kill for his country. He is raised on the military-entertainment complex and is seen as immature and upon his first contact with the enemy, in the case of *Jarhead* (2005), is completely underprepared for it. These films tend to stress the unpleasant nature of the US military; the bullying of the training camps, to the endless boredom of waiting around in combat zones. These films still have very little to say about the war itself, why they are here, or any grander statement that how unpleasant the US military is.

2. Jingoistic Shooter

The representations of special forces and elite paramilitary warfare [are] as the dominant human and physical embodiment of US military power...in the post-Vietnam rise of paramilitary popular culture, the US special forces emerged into the public eye during the media spectacle of the rescue of Jessica Lynch on April 1, 2003. Their reputation and popularity as a paramilitary elite... has remained a consistent source of patriotic pride and media attention despite the travails of the US military during the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan⁶²

The 'Jingoistic Shooter' is a more nationalistic, and perceived as less realistic, film that focuses upon Special Forces. Examples of these films would be *13 Hours (2016)*, *12 Strong (2018)*, *Act of Valour (2012)* etc. Given the absence of a compulsory draft since Vietnam, those who signed up for the war did so willingly which, coupled with a pro-war zeitgeist (explicitly in 2003, and more implicitly since), the focus of these war stories was no longer on the everyman soldier who represented the US, thrust into combat for reasons of nationhood. As Andrea Lane describes, they are the pinnacle of American exceptionalism, "special forces are given more honour, more resources, and more attention, having been constructed as an elite "warrior class"⁶³ These films best demonstrate the modern view of a soldier as an aesthetically-mercenary job, but ultimately as a higher calling; "Americans take pride in their respect, even veneration for Iraq War veterans."⁶⁴ As well as films, it is worth noting that this subgenre of War on Terror media is even more popular in videogames: the *Call of Duty* franchise that typifies our view of the War on Terror is one of the best-selling franchises of all time, and employs invincible hyper-physical avatars for the audience to play through.⁶⁵

This protagonist in these films is portrayed as a mixture of a professional soldier, and as uncomplicated nationalism – choosing to join rather than being forced to. As Deer puts it "the crucial difference between the Iraq War and previous conflicts like the Second World War, Korea or the war in Vietnam, was that it was fought by an all-volunteer military, who often experienced multiple deployments across the war zone."⁶⁶ Because of this, if one is forced to join a war by one's country, media of said war is often preoccupied with asking 'why are we here⁶⁷' – as in the case of Vietnam, or World War I. However, these questions do not exist in this type of film. The soldier knows why he is here, now we get to see what he does, and what he is good at. And indeed, 'what He is good at' (and it is always He) is the focus of these films – one can think of many different Michael Bay films featuring nationalistic military-competency-porn: even *Transformers (2007)* – "Rather than focus on the cartoon's conflict between two warring groups of robots, the film features the American military working with the heroic robots."⁶⁸

While traditionally there is always a tension between the soldier and the individual in these films – if a soldier is the state's coercive capacity embodied there is a tension between this and the individual who does the soldiering. Typically, in these films basic training is the means the state uses to 'flatten out' individual and train their recruits into a collective fighting unit. Basic training is a staple of classic

⁶² DEER. "AMERICAN WAR CULTURE." 59

⁶³ Andrea Lane. *Special Men: The Gendered Militarization of the Canadian Armed Forces*. (International Journal 72, no. 4 2017), 475

⁶⁴ Deer. "The Iraq War", 429

⁶⁵ Gilliland. "Screenshooters". Leiden University, 2021.

⁶⁶ Deer. "The Iraq War", 419

⁶⁷ One can see this in *Apocalypse Now*, and *All Quiet on the Western Front* respectively, but also in Kubrick's *Paths of Glory*, and Cimino's *The Deer Hunter*.

⁶⁸ Brett Parly. "The Militarization of Marvel's Avengers." (Studies in Popular Culture 42, no. 1 2019).

war films (most notably *Stripes*, and *Full Metal Jacket*) where camaraderie is forged, and the men learn to move as a single unit: marching in step, all trained to the same level of fitness, and trained how to work together. As well as its collective nature, there is also a strong hierarchical element to the portrayal of soldiers in classic war films; as the soldier is the coercive capacity of a state, it is therefore deeply attached to the chain of command – this often becoming a source of tension for the soldier in these films: tying back again to the ‘why are we here’ question that lingers in many war films.

The Jingoistic Shooter however, has none of this. Rather than soldiers, the fascination with Special Forces changes these protagonists into ‘warriors’: a people who are individual actors of war personally in combat with the country and its populace. This is a more fascistic approach, reducing war down to just the act of killing, while deifying and magnifying it through nationalistic rhetoric. Each murder is in defence of the country, or for the country’s (morally righteous) benefit, the enemies are Othered to the extreme: simultaneously abstracted into evil, and also not human enough to feel any emotion when they are killed. Lane dubs this “Warrior Creep”. Linking it to her analysis of military masculinity in Canada, she writes how “militarization of Canadian civil society since 9/11 are linked, and that the expansion of special forces within the CAF ought to be thought of as a process of remilitarization and remasculinization⁶⁹.” This, “within the military, where the production of violence is already a goal... means the increase of attention and resources devoted to the production of a particular form of hyper-masculine warrior violence.”⁷⁰

Their outfits also change massively from ‘uniform’ uniforms – these are huge, hypermasculine rugged men with sunglasses, beards and full-sleeve tattoos fighting in civilian clothes with bulletproof vests over them. As each member of the Special Forces is a fully realised warrior, they are all different in their style, befitting their individual actions. They resemble PMCs (private military contractors) more than actual soldiers, the only thing keeping them tangentially associated with the military is their nationalistic convictions. Their ‘elite’ nature is key to their portrayal, Deer describes “the representations of Navy Seal operators or special forces soldiers in films... present the US military as an elite, hypermasculine cadre with unrivalled expertise: fast, precise, self-effacing, self-sacrificing, laconic, likeable, typically Southern and blue collar, and ever ready to project lethal violence anywhere in the world in a matter of moments.”⁷¹ As they are Special Forces, their relationship with command is more significant yet more informal, and allows for more freedom for the characters to behave as they see fit. Their informality is also a common thread in these depictions, both in relation to command and in their personalities, furthering their warrior nature.

These films are, of course, far more closely tied to the post-9/11 bloodletting than any actual policies: like how the US justified its invasion of Iraq by muddying the waters of who the enemy was, allowing them to expand it to whomever they disliked (namely Saddam Hussein’s Iraq), the enemies in these films are simply Muslim terrorists who ‘hate our way of life’ and must be killed. Any criticism or unpleasant parts of war are presented through the lens of American martyrdom – these soldiers are out there doing the terrible things necessary to keep the Western world spinning in blissful ignorance. The torture in *Zero Dark Thirty* probably encapsulates this best. Bigelow’s other WoT film was written with the help of the CIA and is seen by Steele as “a visual narrative for the CIA to influence public opinion on torture: the scenes are brutal, they are ‘that bad’, but instead the frame of narration is that torture works, and it was the CIA and their organizational processes that got the accurate information

⁶⁹ Lane. *Special Men*, 482 & 465

⁷⁰ Lane. *Special Men*, 465

⁷¹ DEER. “AMERICAN WAR CULTURE.”, 60

that led to the ‘justice’ of Bin Laden’s killing.”⁷² Of course, this is not actually true – Osama Bin Laden was found via surveillance and torture is known not to work⁷³. However, “this causal narrative still attends to the ‘integrity’ of the organization, and in fact justifies its brutal treatment of detainees for the greater, moral good of saving lives.”⁷⁴ There is always the American ideological component of ‘fighting for freedom’ in these films, with ‘fighting’ being the operative word clearly. If these soldiers are injured or suffer, it is still folded into “this celebration of hypermasculinity, albeit in the guise of the “trauma-hero,” which Deer sees as “a continuation of the powerful logic of remasculinization that followed the US defeat in Vietnam.”⁷⁵ This framework has been used to justify American military aggression, and by expanding it to ‘fighting for the free world’ has an additional unselfish component in its justification. As Lane describes their “violent hyper-masculinity, however unpalatable, is now needed.”⁷⁶

2.a. Relation to the *Hurt Locker*, and 1917

The aspects of modern War on Terror cinema the Jingoistic Shooter demonstrates most clearly is the reconfiguration of war films into more physicalised action films that are disconnected from military hierarchy through individualisation, while also having an omnipresent militarisation in all visible aspects of the culture.

The Hurt Locker

We see these WoT themes used less outrageously in *The Hurt Locker*: how it focuses upon the squad of three, shrinking the view of the war to just what they see. The audience is presented with a local view of the conflict through ‘everymen’ (at least relative to Jingoistic Shooters) but of course, the trio are all still elite: a bomb disposal squad essential to the war effort. The film still lacks the general jingoism of these war films – the most American scene in the film is James overwhelmed by the selection of cereal in Walmart, compared to the simple and streamlined life of a soldier in Iraq. Likewise, the protagonists are not particularly hypermasculine or jingoistic; but yet they are shown to be inhumanly effective soldiers when it comes to defusing bombs or killing insurgents.

In fact, even more importantly than their efficacy – which is shown to be high, but not so high they can wade through bodies like Jingoistic Shooters – is that James’ instincts are always right. The film explores James as the ultimate modern soldier but also as a renegade or a “wild man” as one sergeant describes. This tension between soldier and reckless cowboy remains mostly unexamined in the film. The tension around James’ cavalier attitude is not really that he’s going to get himself killed or fail – he’s too good for that – but more that he is not a team player. Even in his failures, such as James’ excursion in search of Beckham is incredibly competent in method, but a mistake borne out of empathy. Indeed, Eldridge and Sanborn are portrayed as somewhere between being rightfully annoyed at James and as holding him back from his self-actualisation.

The other element of Jingoistic Shooter present in general WoT media is the general militarism of all aspects of the character’s lives. Militarism in *The Hurt Locker* is hardly seen as negative, in fact it’s so

⁷² Steele. (in) *Security: Torture, the CIA and the United States*.

⁷³ Zach Beauchamp. 2014. “The Senate Report Proves Once and for All That Torture didn’t Lead Us to Bin Laden”. <https://www.vox.com/2014/12/9/7361091/cia-torture-bin-laden>.

⁷⁴ Steele. (in) *Security: Torture, the CIA and the United States*.

⁷⁵ DEER. “AMERICAN WAR CULTURE.”, 60

⁷⁶ Lane. *Special Men*, 475

omnipresent that it is barely noticeable. The military, and their war, simply is. Iraq as a warzone is completely naturalised. The military too, are portrayed as competent and effective, if they die – in the case of Colonel Cambridge – it is because they are too empathetic and morally upstanding for barbarous Iraq (which doubles as justification to being more aggressive). This view of the military allows for characters to express anti-war sentiment, or for the military to make mistakes, as it is incorporated into the military framework – even James’ rampage through Baghdad is ultimately a sympathetic and victimless crime of passion. Froula describes this de-escalation of criticism as how “while still being ‘realistic’ in these depictions of war”, the military-entertainment complex also deescalates them, reducing them to “proceduralist tropes that render otherwise inflammatory” anti-war criticism “dry, analytical, and detached.”⁷⁷ Even Sanborn’s character arc in the film is him learning to “hate this place”, Iraq. Not hate the war because the war is not present, nor hate the military because that’s the only structure in the Bigelow’s Iraq, and the one he signed up for. Eldridge too leaves the war bitter against James for overreaching, but not anti-war, or anti-military, he is just relieved he survived Iraq.

2.b. 1917

Militarism

The key element from Jingoistic Shooters present in *1917* is its odd anachronistic militarism. Upon watching the film, the first time, the thing that struck me was how uncritical the movie was for a war film set in WWI. Frank McGuinness’ play *Observe the Sons of Ulster Marching Towards the Somme* is one of many pieces of art that discusses the war and the impact it had upon the place, *How Many Miles to Babylon* also touches upon this⁷⁸. And this is not exclusively a Northern Irish sentiment either, the shared European cultural heritage of the First World War is largely focused upon the brutal and meaningless nature of the conflict: where working-class boys with more in common with each other were sent to die in a hellish warzone by old, disconnected aristocratic men who told them to walk into machine-gun fire⁷⁹. One only has to think of *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930), or *Joyeux Noel* (2005), or *They Shall Not Grow Old* (2018), all of which reflect on the pointlessness of the war and its shared working-class heritage⁸⁰.

Indeed, Schofield and Blake are clearly separate from, and even put above the other ‘grunts’ both by the film’s focus entirely upon them, as well as by the nature of the plot. While not the super soldiers of the Jingoistic shooters, or even the specialists of the *Hurt Locker*, they are still the ‘Only Ones For The Job’ – with Schofield’s pre-existing experience going over the top remarked upon often as vital experience. Even his focus as an action protagonist echoes some elements of the Jingoistic Shooters – as he is separate from the military command structure, he does not act as a leader or have any typically military struggles with command, but rather encounters the war with the same focus entirely upon his physicality that these shooters do. Indeed, his hyper-physicality as an action hero, climbing

⁷⁷ Froula. *What Keeps Me Up at Night*, 117

⁷⁸ “Frank McGuinness. *Observe the sons of Ulster marching towards the Somme*. (London: Faber and Faber 1986)” & *How Many Miles to Babylon?* 1982.

⁷⁹ Catriona Pennell. “*Learning Lessons from War? Inclusions and Exclusions in Teaching First World War History in English Secondary Schools*.” (History and Memory 28, no. 1 2016). & Nicolas de Warren. “THE FIRST WORLD WAR, PHILOSOPHY, AND EUROPE.” (Tijdschrift Voor Filosofie 76, no. 4 2014). (Also see media such as *Blackadder Goes Forth*, or *Dulce Decorum Este*)

⁸⁰ *All Quiet on the Western Front*. 1930, or *Joyeux Noel*. 2005, or *They Shall Not Grow Old*. 2018

over fallen bridges, and running through shelled towns, is the window through which the war is viewed.

Apart from a brief sentence by Benedict Cumberbatch's character at the end of 1917, classic anti-war sentiment typically seen First World War media is entirely absent. That the WoT military-entertainment complex is seemingly unconsciously using the same "proceduralist tropes" to render the 'inflammatory' discourse of a century of First World War anti-war sentiment "dry, analytical, and detached" is as ironic as it is unsettling.⁸¹ If a similar film was made about Vietnam – a beautiful one-take story of a private sneaking across the jungle, sadly murdering incomprehensible and fanatical Vietnamese soldiers, it would be (rightly) branded as racist and going against how the US views the Vietnamese war.

Individualisation

As there is no typical First World War cultural consciousness, so too is there no working-class view of the war, even the scenes in the trenches lack the traditional view of solidarity between the soldiers, most of whom would have all been from the same town or region⁸². These Pals Battalions are a common element in WWI media as they highlight the pointlessness of the conflict, as entire generations of towns were killed due to this. However, there is very little idea of solidarity or ever any particular relationship seen between the soldiers on the front, clearly Mendes has no interest in doing so.

In fact, there is no perception of life outside of the front – no reference to the soldiers returning home upon the end of their time there, or indeed barely any reference to life away from the warzone at all. The First World War is also characterised by the degeneration of Europe – particularly the Western Front – into a horrific zone of death. Indeed, in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, there are many scenes back home in Germany to contrast the unnatural violent nature of the war with their normal peacetime lives at home.

Americanisms.

The film is also oddly American in its style, although perhaps it is more accurate to say it is not particularly British for such a war film. The 'carry-on' stiff-upper-lip spirit that is present in much British national cinema, especially the wars, is not present. This decidedly-unamerican and understated character present in *Bridge over the River Kwai*, or *Where Eagles Dare*, or indeed even James Bond is not present in the film which instead opts for a view of the First World War with less of a distinct voice. Unlike *The Hurt Locker*, WWI was very much a war of between nations, so making the film only nominally British is an odd choice. Even Schofield's strange dislocation from the conflict – which allows him to travel through and witness the entire front – adds to this.

It is worth noting that *1917* is made to appeal to international markets outside of Europe, and as such, perhaps it lacks the same bite or even desire to engage with the war, that a more European film would. The film is funded by a mixture of Spanish, Indian, British, and American producers, but only one of these countries was massively culturally involved in the war (the US only entered in 1917 and it has a far smaller influence on their culture)⁸³. Despite the British director (Mendes) and the

⁸¹ Froula. *What Keeps Me Up at Night: Media Studies Fifteen Years after 9/11*, 117

⁸² By 1917 this was less common, and the regiments were more mixed. However, they are a common trope, and representative of the general view of solidarity in warfare.

⁸³ Dreamworks Pictures (American), Reliance Entertainment (Indian), New Republic Pictures (American), Neal Street Productions (British), Mogambo (Spanish), Amblin Partners (American).

cinematographer (Roger Deakins, whose work was a key part of the film), the movie has no desire to really engage with any British WWI heritage beyond the aesthetic. As it is international, it seems to have defaulted to being rather American – a country with little First World War heritage due to their late arrival⁸⁴. One wonders if the only reason the film is British is because the director was, and because the non-Anglophone combatants would be seen as too foreign for international or American audiences. Instead, *1917* treats the setting as just that: a setting, for Roger Deakins' beautiful camera trickery to take us through while we look on in fascination.

Ultimately *1917* lacks the jingoism of this subgenre yet still follows many of its conventions. Compared to other war films about WWI such as *Paths of Glory* or shows like *Blackadder Goes Forth* *1917's* WWI is entirely concerned with action. Likewise, it has no interest in the military hierarchy and operates with complete approval from command yet is still entirely militarised. This is a further fragmentation of presentations of warfare, as the battlefield is everywhere, so too is the ever-effective military, with its soldier's fighting outside the bounds of 'constraining bureaucracy'. *1917's* lack of distinct national voice and dissentingly modern stylings further emphasise the influence these War on Terror films have upon the modern war genre.

⁸⁴ Chris, Capozzola Andrew Huebner, Julia Irwin, Jennifer D. Keene, Ross Kennedy, Michael Neiberg, Stephen R. Ortiz, Chad Williams, and Jay Winter. "Interchange: World War I." (The Journal of American History 102, no. 2 2015)

3. Sensorial Protagonist

What I have coined 'The Sensorial Protagonist' is best embodied by Schofield in *1917* – he is an audience surrogate, light on characterisation and contemporary attitudes, who is thrust into the film's conflict and must survive. Unlike classic war protagonists who typically are fighting a war because they believe in it and have some sort of goal (defeat the Nazis/get to Berlin), Sensorial Protagonists have very little motivation or even personal stakes in the war aside from their own survival and the survival of their friend (or squad). These protagonists are thinly characterised even by the standard of classic war protagonists, who typically are depicted with some kind of a home to get back to, or at least the film will show their hometown, either as motivation to defend, or merely as contrast with the realities of war. Even, for a more subtle example, the squad in *Kelly's Heroes*, or in *Apocalypse Now* are all solidly grounded in regional American identities – Chef is from Louisiana, and Lance from California. Schofield, however, is different in that he is only nominally English, and we learn little else about him: even Blake mentions how little he actually knows about him. In fact, apart from the final scene where we see he is married with a son – adding context to his actions towards the French woman – Schofield essentially exists as the audience surrogate, physically guiding us through the warzone with little personalities beyond reacting. We never have an impression of what he is fighting for beyond his own survival, but even this is never so strong a character trait that to influence the story.

At the start of the film when Schofield and Blake walk through the trenches after being given their mission Schofield argues to stop and "talk about this" and is accused by Blake of cowardice, Schofield promptly ceasing complaining and continues with Blake over the top, with only nominal qualms. Even in his need to survive as his major motivation it never impacts the plot majorly – Schofield is not portrayed as a coward, nor is he prioritising his survival above being a soldier – he follows his task exceptionally without asking questions. Furthermore, Schofield has no hidden motivation we are not privy to, rather he is driven by the story rather than the other way around. Unlike Paul in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, Schofield shows no particular doubt towards the war, nor a desire for it to end. Even his desire to go home is ultimately subsumed by the war; "I hated going home... When I knew I couldn't stay."⁸⁵

The plot facilitates this by giving the character a very simple motivation – to deliver a message. While the aestheticization of images of war is responsible for the emptying of warzones, it is the hyper-physical protagonist that cements the videogame 'interactability' as a key element in WoT cinema. These types of characters are vehicles for the audience to see the war, acting both as a witness to its sublime horrors, but also with enough personal stakes and physical danger to make the experience thrilling. We see *1917's* videogame inspiration in particular in its approach to this sort of protagonist, who more resembles a videogame third-person avatar (like from *Red Dead Redemption 2*), but also in the particularly interactable nature of the ruins, and of course its focus entirely upon the experiential side of war.

As Deer puts it "unlike the panoramic visions projected by the "total war" cultures of World War II and the Cold War era," contemporary WoT war culture "resembles a holding operation designed to habituate citizens and consumers to war waged at a distance from the majority of Americans by a volunteer military."⁸⁶ This depoliticised, aesthetic view of warfare which Graham MacPhee calls a "logic of banality...can reinforce a sense of "atomized subjectivity under the disintegration of social texture," which as Hannah Arendt warned prevents everyday "thinking and ethical critique."⁸⁷ WWI

⁸⁵ *1917* (2019).

⁸⁶ DEER. "AMERICAN WAR CULTURE.", 49

⁸⁷ DEER. "AMERICAN WAR CULTURE.", 49

or war in general with *1917*, just as there's none in *The Hurt Locker*. The films are based upon the visuals conjured up by the one-take, which Mendes called "hypnotic... and as he relayed to the *Financial Times*, "We experience life as one continuous shot."⁸⁸ The war is reduced to setting for the film rather than its focus, again portraying war as a natural state rather than something to condemn or even discuss.

The Hurt Locker of course, also follows this type, but not quite as well as *1917*. Rather, the lack of characterisation of the protagonist is not quite so intense due to the films frequent bouts of downtime, as well as its focus on the dialogue. Likewise, Bigelow's choice to hold back on what James, Eldridge or Sanborn's lives back in America are like is used to create contrast between their 'normal' lives and the thrilling nature of the combat. However, *The Hurt Locker* still uses these three characters to explore the war, these three really have no stake in the conflict – far less than *1917* even, given Schofield and Blake are at least trying to deliver a message and save a family member. The trio in *The Hurt Locker* are just trying to survive Iraq, and their journeys through the country are Bigelow's attempt to show the audience the 'realities of war'. This view of the war does sustain "the illusion of a panoramic spectacle" as Deer describes, discussing how the film emulates the invasion of Iraq's embedded reportage but these are "limited points of view, which news editors and military called looking at battle "through a soda-straw"⁸⁹.

This view of war suggests warfare as fact, at worst the view of war is as a sort of gleeful and spectacular misery, while at best having a superficial 'war is bad' statement at the end – as is the case with *1917*. However, the films hardly ever ask 'why are we here' or make any statements on the topic, except for the characters wondering why they chose to come to such an unpleasant place. Deer summarises this entire viewpoint as the "framing of the media representations of war within a military perspective" – with soldiers now being professionalised the military has become a job, so these characters are not challenged and do not challenge the militarism within which they exist, or the war as a whole⁹⁰. Even the messy and choppy visual style that Bigelow uses – emulating embedded reportage – is itself still far more embedded within the military structure and as such "further consolidate[s] the US homeland's distanced and aestheticizing relationship to representations of the suffering of Iraqi and Afghan civilians."⁹¹

To look at the pre-WoT view, on the surface this type of protagonist what is used in *Apocalypse Now*: Willard too is a closed-off character, and "is almost entirely inactive until he kills Kurtz at the end" yet serves as the audience viewpoint while they move episodically through different aspects of the war.⁹² However, the difference is in Willard's introductory scene. In the scene we see Sheen play Willard as a man already broken and fundamentally changed the conflict – his decision to reenlist is because he has rejected the United States (in the French plantation scene he even claims he will never return) as represented by his divorce and arrival in Saigon. He is listless and falling apart before he is given his instructions, at which point he pulls himself together. Willard is a nasty and broken man – as shown best by the riverboat scene – held together by his need to meet Kurtz. It is this need, plus the stronger characterisation, that separates him from James or Schofield – they are thrust into the war without motivation and remain so. Willard is an instigator of the plot and engages constantly with the war in

⁸⁸ Martens. "'Parasite' and '1917' Show How Video Games Influence Prestige Movies"

⁸⁹ Deer. "*The Iraq War*". 424

⁹⁰ Ibid, 424

⁹¹ Ibid, 424

⁹² Walter Murch, and Michael Ondaatje. *Apocalypse Then and Now*. (Film Comment 37, no. 3 2001), 44

both his actions – commandeering a riverboat or getting Kilgore to bomb a village – and his narration which constantly criticised command and praises ‘Charlie’.

While Schofield or James just want to survive the war but do not really exist outside of it, Willard spends the entire film rejecting the outside world, all while trying moving upriver to look for answers or that Kurtz will have answers about why the Vietnam war is so mad. However, through his amorality and numbness there is commentary on the morality of the conflict, as Louis K. Greiff notes, “Willard offers little improvement over Kurtz as potential moral centre of the film.... In truth, throughout the entire film Willard accomplishes just one thing which can be regarded as unambiguously decent. This is to rescue Lance, a member of the PBR crew, from a feral merger with the Cambodian tribe.”⁹³

His comments and actions shed light on Vietnam, but so do his silences. Indeed, the fact he does not react surprised, or at all, to many of the horrors that we see throughout his journey shows the psychological impact the conflict has upon its soldiers. Willard, like Kurtz, is a product of the Vietnam War. While Willard leads us through the conflict, like a Sensorial Protagonist, and even narrates to us, the fact that we are never privy to his inner thoughts distances us. For Sensorial Protagonists though, their silence and lack of characterisation is to help the audience inhabit the character, all while also minimising any personal conflicts the characters may have with the war itself.

Schofield is the epitome of the Sensorial Protagonist, an embedded witness to the horrors of war with little to no agency of his own. Like James and other War on Terror characters, he is entirely defined by his relationship to the conflict and does not exist without it. Unlike classic war protagonists for whom war happens to them, for Sensorial Protagonists war is their natural state of being. It always is, and always will be.

⁹³ Louis K. Greiff, *Soldier, Sailor, Surfer, Chef: Conrad's Ethics and the Margins of 'Apocalypse Now'*. (Literature/Film Quarterly 20, no. 3 1992): 190

4. Trauma and the Trauma-hero

Alongside the disturbing and shameful normalization of torture, the war years also saw the emergence of a seemingly more salutary... attitude towards veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan. The sacralization - and isolation - of the figure of the veteran is clearly at the core of the militarization of American culture... trauma has become the dominant vocabulary for representing the inner life of men and women in uniform and the psychological effects of war.⁹⁴

To look at the shifting in trauma discourse it is best to continue looking at *Apocalypse Now*, a film saturated with commentary on how the US military has traumatised everyone in its continuation of the war. *Apocalypse Now* has a much more macro view of the war and with it a more macro view of trauma, it focuses upon the disturbing nature of the conflict and its effect not just on the American soldiers, but on the environment itself. Furthermore, although Willard does share (to an extent) this unconcerned-with-war status as James and Schofield, this is not the voice of the film. The movie is saturated with anti-Vietnam war sentiment, with the setting being warped to fit this. The existence of the US army in this film is absurd and inflicts violence with its existence.

War on Terror films however focus much more upon individual trauma, especially given the acceptance of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in mainstream society. Deer describes how “the invasion and occupation [of Iraq] intensified the appropriation of trauma discourse in contemporary war culture, representing citizens as participants in a collective trauma that followed the 9/ 11 terrorist attacks and positioning veterans as heroic victims of combat trauma.”⁹⁵ This approach to trauma has an element of martyrdom to it, which Deer calls the ‘Trauma Hero’, which helps to “reinforce this idealized and abstract representation of veterans on the home front.”⁹⁶ The idealised view presented via trauma is the “the persistent Hemingwayesque myth of what James Campbell has called “combat Gnosticism,” described as “a construction that gives us war experience as a kind of gnosis, a secret knowledge which only an initiated elite knows.”⁹⁷ This co-option by the military-entertainment complex celebrates this trauma it as a representation of how “the extremity of combat as giv[es] access to a higher form of typically hypermasculine knowledge” while also separating it entirely from civilians.⁹⁸

This idea of a unique and special trauma for soldiers, especially American soldiers going abroad to wage its wars, is unsettling if not surprising. As mentioned above, the distinction between ‘civilian’ and ‘soldiers’ trauma is particularly strange as in warfare trauma has as much a collective role as an individual, given the collective state-level nature of warfare. Deer comments upon this, describing how despite the “commonality provided by the diagnostic category of PTSD, contemporary US culture has tended to compartmentalize and disconnect civilians and veterans along the lines of a seemingly insurmountable “civilian–military divide.”⁹⁹ This also means that America’s post-9/11 trauma is excluded from playing a major role in the War on Terror, an absurd statement, but any discussions about this modern cultural trauma is entirely framed along military lines, and individualised thusly.

⁹⁴ DEER. “AMERICAN WAR CULTURE.”, 62

⁹⁵ Deer. “*The Iraq War*”. 420

⁹⁶ DEER. “AMERICAN WAR CULTURE.”, 63

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Deer. “*The Iraq War*”. 420

The characters in *1917* and *the Hurt Locker* suffer from this heroic and individualised trauma although both slightly differently. WoT cinema trauma seems to fall into two types, that each film exemplifies.

The first operates as a sort of desensitisation, with the soldier feeling numbness due to his role in the war. This approach tends to further the passive and non-judgmental nature of the protagonist, with the character being so desensitised that all things, bad or good wash off him in equal measure. This is Schofield in *1917*, a man who has been traumatised into not reacting to the horrific nature of the conflict around him. This approach tends to further the audience viewpoint type of protagonist, where the war is clearly portrayed as negative and the protagonist is there to bear witness for the audience to see its horrors and – usually – feel numbness from it. Deer argues that this “emergence and... normalization of images of bodily torture, often used, I would argue, for their shock value and to distract from lower intensity and more pervasive forms of violence.”¹⁰⁰ He continues that, “like embedded reporting, which blurs the boundaries between the military’s framing of the conflict and the reporter’s perspective, the embedding of trauma is both seductive and potentially confusing, often producing an ethical hesitation in readers and audiences” who are presented with an overwhelmingly grim view of the conflict, cynically appropriating criticism¹⁰¹. This view argues that yes, war is terrible and incoherent, but it is so overwhelming it becomes pacifying.

The other approach is to present a final emotional breakdown of character – i.e. Sanborn in *The Hurt Locker*. This is usually portrayed as cathartic, albeit sad, where the character finally breaks after enduring severe trauma. These breakdowns also have the added thematic benefit of undercutting the machismo of the US military – something *The Hurt Locker* plays with – reminding the audience that these men are barely out of their teens, if even. Furthermore, it shows the eroding nature of the war on even the strongest people – using James as the exception to prove the rule, only someone unsuited for normal life can function here. However, this has a very individualising approach to trauma – focusing entirely on how ‘war’ as a nebulous, non-political concept or spectre, eliminates the people who it affects. This view treats war as an inevitability and a fact of life and, unlike *Apocalypse Now*, this type of trauma casts no judgement. The war is “filtered through a version of the war’s official narrative. The occupier is a victim trapped in a foreign landscape, fighting a war in an incomprehensible place” naturalising the conflict and presenting the soldier as a martyr for taking this pain onto himself¹⁰². There is no view on how it affects the civilians caught in it, no look at how it destroys the general soldiery either, it is minimised to a single person and treated as either an illness they can overcome, or as a lifelong condition they must live with, rather than as a by-product of unnatural conflict or something that can be inflicted. *1917* does toy with this idea, with the final image of Schofield sitting exhausted and distraught by the tree as he falls asleep. Given his desensitised nature, plus his hyper-physicality as a protagonist who has just ran along the British front, his falling-asleep provides catharsis enough for the audience.

¹⁰⁰ DEER. “AMERICAN WAR CULTURE.”, 62

¹⁰¹ Deer. “*The Iraq War*”. 424

¹⁰² Deer. “*The Iraq War*”. 425

5. Sensorial visuals

This section is more of a second part to the Sensorial Protagonist in many ways focusing more upon the visual style used to describe the war rather than the protagonist themselves. However, both are complementary to one another: as the protagonist serves as an audience surrogate for the story, the visual storytelling emphasises the sensorial nature, although both *1917* and *The Hurt Locker* achieve this in different ways. Although, unlike the ruined sublime, these visuals are focused upon sensorial details to allow the audience to inhabit the protagonist.

5.a. Chaotic visuals.

In WoT cinema, post-conflict is individualised rather than collectivised along national, or even institutional lines (i.e. the military), so too is this the case during violence. As conflict is presented through an embedded, individualised view, there is a tendency in War on Terror cinema to portray the protagonist as overwhelmed, usually employing sensorial details to do so. These overwhelming sensorial details almost take the form of a Tony Scott film, becoming a montage of firing weapons, loud noise, and explosions, all with frequent shots of the protagonist's face.



Figure 2. *Generation Kill* episode 2. Chaotic Visuals.

For a classic example of this we can look at the first encounter with conflict in the HBO miniseries *Generation Kill* (2008), a show based upon the writings of Evan Wright who was embedded with the 1st Reconnaissance Battalion during the invasion of Iraq. The show mostly deals with the boredom and frustration of US military bureaucracy, with the battalion spending most of the first two episodes desperately hoping ‘for action’ and being refused. However, when it finally happens near the end of the second episode ‘*The Cradle of Civilisation*’, the visual style shifts. To build up the scene the shots mix between rapid unclear images of insurgents moving, to long and uncomfortable point-of-view shots of the marines, however when action commences the shots become incredibly fast, shaky, and more abstract. Like *The Hurt Locker*, these depictions “include low-resolution and high-speed digital

video to represent soldiers' fractured experiences of high-tech warfare."¹⁰³ The overall effect is to show the messiness of war and its fragmented nature literally within these images. As Deer claims "recent war culture differs markedly from earlier moments of imperial vision: paradoxically, its power is based not on grand narratives but on much more partial, fragmented, and incoherent representations of wartime."¹⁰⁴



Figure 3. Chaotic visuals in 1917's IMAX poster.

This term has been dubbed by Matthias Stork as "chaos cinema," This cinema, he suggested, deploys rapid editing and shaky camera movements to "overwhelm" and "overpower" audiences, and in doing so "trades visual intelligibility for sensory overload."¹⁰⁵ As seen in Fig. 2, bullets hit the car, the driver swerves the wheel, we see the marines grimacing, they fire back, a power line explodes (although why is unclear). Who is shooting at them is also unclear, both in a general Othered Orientalist way – the insurgents' faces are obscured by headscarves, and they are all wearing similar irregular 'non-uniform uniforms' – but the number of them, and their location is unclear. But that is not the point of action in these films, unlike traditional actions scenes where geography would typically be essential, action is meant to show the disorienting real-life experience of being in a battleground, especially given much of the US' enemy in Iraq was ununiformed. This chaotic visual style is meant to ape documentarian

¹⁰³ Allott. *Politics, Genre, and Duration in Kathryn Bigelow's Cinema*, 41

¹⁰⁴ DEER. "AMERICAN WAR CULTURE.", 51

¹⁰⁵ Lisa Purse. *Affective Trajectories: Locating Diegetic Velocity in the Cinema Experience*. (Cinema Journal 55, no. 2 2016), 152

footage, which was considered in the 2000s to be a more realistic and immersive way of portraying action.¹⁰⁶

We see something similar, although much less impressionistic in 1917. The camerawork further emphasises Schofield's role as a hyper-physical protagonist; the one-take nature of the film places huge emphasis on Schofield's movement as every shot is a tracking shot that speeds up or slows down depending on his movement, but rarely ever stops entirely. Even the more static moments – such as the death of Blake – the camera remains handheld, still moving around Schofield even while he sits still, to emphasise how he needs to continue on his mission.

5.b. Visualising through technology

As Stacey Peebles has compellingly argued, literary representations of both the Gulf War and the Iraq war continue to be powerfully shaped by writers' immersion in "the digital battlefield."¹⁰⁷ What is interesting in comparing *The Hurt Locker* and *1917*, and the how the subsequent shift in digital battlefield towards further high-tech spectacle has influenced their visual styles.

The original visual language of WoT action emerged before 9/11 but became the primary style for portraying the conflict. Interestingly, and perhaps obviously, many of the key influences come from films about the First Gulf War – *Jarhead* and particularly David O. Russell's *Three Kings* (1999)¹⁰⁸. These films however had a different approach, as Deer writes, "perhaps appropriately, given its limited duration, the most powerful responses to the mediatized version of the 1991 Gulf War were satirical... these representations of the 1991 Gulf War frequently emphasize the newness, shock, and discontinuity of that conflict in order to contest claims that it provided a hygienic, precise mode of postmodern warfare that had finally (as President George H. W. Bush declared to US troops in March 1991) exorcized the ghosts of Vietnam."¹⁰⁹ However, 2001's *Black Hawk Down* cemented an uglier, and rawer aesthetic for wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. As well as using more frenetic camerawork, the film also established a far less beautiful 'Third World' for America to wage its wars in. Gone was the experimental, almost Wong Kar-Wai-esque slow-motion of *Three Kings*, or Roger Deakins' beautiful portrayal of the desert. Instead, WoT cinema focuses upon the ugly, modern concrete Iraq for US soldiers to interact with, often with pithy remarks about its important ancient past contrasted with its current state. There is a degree of unworthiness almost to this portrayal, similar to how Victorian Orientalism of Egypt would depict its ancient, European-related past as white, while its contemporary colonial state as ugly and Arabic.

However, we see elements of the same frenetic, sensorial style that WoT cinema uses in *1917*. The most obvious (and closest to *The Hurt Locker*) would be the explosion in the bunker in *1917*. While the camerawork is more traditional before the explosion, showing the scene's geography and the individual's place in it. After the bomb explodes in *1917*, the scene shrinks and focuses upon Blake, his breath, and the sounds of the mine collapsing. Likewise, the violent escalation and de-escalation when Schofield fights the German sniper has a similar focus upon Schofield's breathing, his movements, and the creaking of him going up the stairs. Ultimately, *1917*'s final set-piece utilises the one-take to show

¹⁰⁶ Purse. "Affective Trajectories."

¹⁰⁷ DEER. "MAPPING CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN WAR CULTURE.", 59

¹⁰⁸ *Jarhead*. 2005. & *Three Kings*. 1999.

¹⁰⁹ DEER. "MAPPING CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN WAR CULTURE.", 59

Schofield's complete exhaustion as it tracks him doggedly running to deliver the message, although the sensorial elements are subsumed by a more aestheticized view of the soldiers running into battle.

While *The Hurt Locker* uses the documentarian style for a more choppy and exhilarating approach to warfare, *1917* does something very different to let the audience inhabit the scene, creating a similar first-person immersion via Roger Deakins' one-take. Deer writes how "these dominant images for wars that have seized the collective imagination continue to offer the traditional satisfactions of modern war culture: they claim to give citizens at home intimate knowledge of the warzones, projecting a commanding perspective of the conflict in which we can share. Yet unlike the panoramic vision of Churchill's speeches or of World War II propaganda, these are delivered as strategic fantasies: as spectacle mediated through our superior technologies of violence and surveillance and the stable, omnipotent tactical perspective of paramilitary special forces."¹¹⁰ Deakin's camerawork is intimate and certainly stable, and commanding in its singular unbroken nature, but as the camera stays at eye-level with the soldiers in *The Hurt Locker* so too does Deakins. We rarely see anything the characters do not interact with in some way – if the camera is placed on top of a building (such as in *The Hurt Locker*) it is to demonstrate the characters mood such as, for instance, that they feel exposed, rather than show us something they cannot see.

While both views of war are as means for the audience to inhabit, *1917*'s shift from shaky-cam towards smooth third-person perspective shows how videogames have supplanted embedded documentarian footage as our main representation of this localised view of war.

This high-tech nature of Deakins' camerawork is seen as the dominant reason why this view of the war is so intimate – the film "wears its technical complexity on its sleeve" after all.¹¹¹ The view of conflict is mediated through the camera literally, as we are constantly aware of Deakins hand behind the machine and the technically-impressive nature of the one-take, transforming the act of looking at the spectacular conflict into spectacle itself. Our intimate view of the conflict is entirely technical, even our view of the trenches in *1917* are exhaustive in what they looked like rather than describing how soldiers felt, or what they were even doing there.

There is further technologization of the view of conflict as this embedded view takes on video game characteristics. While documentarian footage is at least grounded in some sort of reality – impressionistically aping the footage of people in the warzone – now this videogame-inspired view has become the new mediator of Americans looking at war. This shift in visuals signifies how this liquid, late-stage war culture has shifted. Moving away from emulating realism through a chaotic and dirty view, War media has kept the sensorial view of the conflict and married with a highly technologized means of seeing, as smooth as a first-person shooter, or done photography, or indeed a drone pilot. War has managed to become thrilling and interactive, yet still ultimately pacifying.

Accepting that *1917* is a War on Terror film, we can see how the genre has shifted in its late, embedded stage. Both it and *the Hurt Locker* use the same chaotic and sensorial action visuals, the mediating technology used between American audiences and the War on Terror has changed from embedded documentaries to spatialised videogames. We see a shift from chaos cinema towards *1917*'s clearer and panoramic view of conflict that more resembles a First-Person Shooter. This shows how military videogames have become the dominant framework for popular cultural discourse on the War on Terror which, given First-Person Shooters are shooters, shows the ever-present militarisation of this discourse.

¹¹⁰ DEER. "AMERICAN WAR CULTURE.", 60

¹¹¹ Nayman. "'1917' and the Trouble With War Movies - The Ringer"

Conclusion: *That's Militainment.*

In *1917*, upon being confronted with the evidence that his attack was a folly, Colonel McKenzie states “there is only one way this war ends. Last man standing.” McKenzie, who up until now we are led to believe is rogue and bloodthirsty ala Colonel Kurtz, relents and ceases the attack when presented with his new orders. He sighs and claims they will likely be sent on a similar suicide mission soon and states his thesis of the war. This is treated in the film as decisive, that McKenzie’s combat-gnostic views have taught him this, and so the film shifts the final confrontation from something that railed against out-of-touch elites, or the mad bloodthirstiness of uncontrolled militarism to two men accepting that the war will continue, and that the best they can do is survive. There is no discussion of the war ending through any means other than waging yet more war, nor any discussion on why they are fighting. As *1917* is a War on Terror film so it has the same pro-war message; that the Battle of the Somme is mentioned in *1917*¹¹² not as a complete military failure where men were sent to die by walking into machine gunfire but instead as simply the way you wage war in this time, and as something you must survive. Walking over the top into German gunfire is only a waste when the Germans have laid a trap.

1917 is a War on Terror film. By comparing it to *The Hurt Locker*, I have shown how the First World War is reconstructed into a War on Terror film in two ways: by spatially making it an uncritical Warzone, and by making the audience’s point of view that of an uncritical action protagonist. There is also a constant attempt to present Deer’s fragmented view of warfare throughout; “representations from the war zones are fragmented and partial, boundaries between civilian and military are blurred, and a coherent historical narrative for the wars has yet to emerge.”¹¹³

As shown, the Warzone is created by de-peopling and aestheticizing the battlefield, best exemplified with Bigelow’s *Iraq* which relies upon Orientalism and distance to obscure the Iraqi insurgents, ultimately dehumanising them. These Iraqis (both insurgents and civilians) are abstracted and inhuman, with foreign sounds, strange reactions, and sudden explosions into violence. This is true too for *1917* where the Germans are likewise fragmentary creatures, strange and Othered in their presentation, although this presentation of them is very odd – not just because of the film’s ignoring of the rich and familiar crop of German stereotypes in war films, but also because of the strange racialised connotations that do not quite fit with Germany, given it is a fellow white European colonialist nation. Likewise, the space of the Warzone is reconceived through ‘ruin porn’ and embedded aesthetics into an object of terrible beauty. Violence in these films is presented spectacularly; with beautiful slow-motion explosions, or with the gorgeous set-design of the French village as it gets shelled. Deer’s sublime concept is further developed by the influence of interactable videogame aesthetics – these ruins are stripped of any sign of human life and become something for the protagonist (and the audience with him) to climb through and explore uncritically. The collapsed bridge in *1917* that Schofield must climb through while being sniped is not a real place where people lived, but rather a thrilling set-piece for the audience to enjoy.

Even more than James, who himself is an uncritical view of wartime Iraq, Schofield embodies the avatar-protagonist. He has the same militarism of the Jingoistic Shooter, albeit without the nationalism – in fact with so little nationalism the film feels oddly disconnected from the British army that it represents. Schofield is also literally disconnected from the military hierarchy in his quasi-special-forces status, giving him a direct line to the General and independence from everyone else;

¹¹² Schofield is a survivor of it.

¹¹³ DEER. “*AMERICAN WAR CULTURE.*”, 51

he, like James and his squad, is individualised yet remains deeply militarised as there is no other apparent structure in the warzone.

For these films, War as a permanent 'world' rather than as an unnatural state, and by contrasting the overwhelming mundanity of life back in the US with James' thrilling if traumatising life there, ends up creating the same effect, albeit framing it uncritically against American life. War is a natural state in the War on Terror, and Deer's idea of embedded war culture supports this: even though the boundaries are incredibly vague, there is always an 'over there' to fight in, although not to fight 'for'. The people who live there are hardly people – they are defined by conflict, and as such only exist down the barrel of a gun. This doesn't just refer to the Orientalised either; in *1917*, Blake's brother, who he dies trying to reach, is a fellow soldier and therefore is engaged with the war. The brother only really asks Schofield how he died, and they converse about his life as a soldier. Compare this to Matt Damon's monologue in *Saving Private Ryan*, which has a similar structure and plot but instead the defining characteristic of the brothers together is defined by their lives in peacetime, and how war has tragically cut this short.

For War on Terror cinema, war is the only reality that matters, again bypassing the 'whys' and 'how's' of warfare, and instead present just the physical reality. War is spatialised while de-temporalized with no end-goal, much like the lack of purpose in the Forever Wars upon initial victory. Unlike *Saving Private Ryan's* driving the Germans back to Germany, or *Apocalypse Now's* anticipation for the Americans to leave Vietnam. For War on Terror Cinema, much like the nebulous, ever-changing, and never-ending term 'War on Terror', there is no end goal.

Chapter 2.

Schofield also embodies the War on Terror type of protagonist, which departs from classic war films. These films have a fresh-faced protagonist light on characterisation to act as an audience stand-in. Like War on Terror protagonists, they are acting, to an extent, as witnesses to the horrors of warfare, however, WoT protagonists aim for a more active and sensory experience – lacking any sort of characterisation outside of the war. In War on Terror films, this is less of a priority.

How *1917's* Schofield embodies the Sensorial Protagonist is shown by James *The Hurt Locker*. James is shown to be the perfect soldier, a "bomb-squad savant", fully-realised as something "Nietzschean... far beyond morals, unconstrained by such mewling matters as fear of death."¹¹⁴ James would rather uncomplicatedly and uncritically inhabit the 'Forever Wars' than live a normal, boring life in America. He is like the black soldiers in Do Lung Bridge in *Apocalypse Now*, a soldier disconnected from the realities of both the wider war, and the situation back home, simply existing to kill the enemy. However, James' endless battle is presented as a self-actualisation – unlike the Sisyphean efforts of the black soldiers conscripted – he is a perfect product of the American military-industrial complex. Schofield is similarly uncomplicated and lacking in personal motivation – he follows the General's orders, and later Blake's request to find his brother, with any extra characterisation, i.e. the reveal he has a family, treated as a twist.

In fact, *1917* takes this further and, when coupled with his physicality, Schofield's purpose is reduced to uncritical eyes from which the audience sees the war. His purpose in the conflict is entirely disconnected from the 'why's of WWI that the film's feelings of the war is merely a series of uncritical emotive responses. Likewise, *1917* has the War on Terror style of presenting trauma; now a representation as PTSD that ultimately serves to fragment and distance views of trauma from each

¹¹⁴ Clover. "Allegory Bomb." 9

other. Schofield is clearly traumatised from the Somme and the subsequent events of the film, but this is presented as a desensitisation towards conflict and furthering his role as the mute, point-of-view for the audience, with even his literal trauma from war making him more accepting and less judgemental of the conflict.

War on Terror films are uninterested in showing trauma. They rarely actually show any sort of thoughtful approach to the pain that has been inflicted upon the Middle East, or even a focus on why this matters to them. Rather there is an uncomfortable focus upon the infliction of trauma: of buildings being destroyed and enemies tortured, all from a distant, omniscient, aestheticized view. Schofield and James' Combat-Gnosticism portrayed is ultimately another means of this fragmented perception of the war; separating the special and heroic trauma of veterans from everyone else affected by conflict. All while further deifying the military; incorporating and redefining the literal mental manifestation of the evils of war into merely a tragic yet natural symptom these heroes experience.

This fragmented view on war that defines the War on Terror is further shown in the visual style *1917* and *The Hurt Locker* share. War is spatialised into a filmic playground – a military-industrial multiplex – interactable via 'realistic' visuals: be they Bigelow's faux-documentarian camera-shake, or Deakins' smooth first-person tours. The result is the same; intending to allow the audience to inhabit the scene – focusing on sensorial details and Schofield's role as an action protagonist – reinterpreting the war along action lines. To return to the Janis Metz's interview, when he is asked about how films such as *The Hurt Locker* are shot like a documentary:

To gain authenticity, narrative fiction borrows tools from documentary filmmaking to give it that feeling of authenticity, that feeling of being on the scene. The use of handheld cameras and grainy footage that we have come to associate with documentary filmmaking since lightweight cameras were invented in the 1960s, make you aware of the presence of the photographer, the guy holding the camera.¹¹⁵

This 'authenticity' is merely the extension of the "fetishization of militarized forms of technology", created to "reinforces the aestheticization of violence," and engage "in a linguistic redescription of killing and wounding"¹¹⁶. Unlike *Apocalypse Now*, with its visual style "strongly marked by superimpositions and cross dissolves" that creates a multi-layered nature of experience and "strongly suggests that all footage in this film is filtered through a subjective consciousness", these visuals portray themselves as an objective viewer, even while using a subjective, personal view.¹¹⁷

This shows the desire to represent the War on Terror via 'realistic' visual mediums, with this realism being measured in technical detail – how much it was move like a human when following the protagonist, how good the resolution can be. This is the realism that War on Terror media is interested in showing, enough to allow the audience to inhabit the protagonist and his adventures, while still keeping the warzone incoherent beyond individual action set-pieces.

The differences between *1917* and *the Hurt Locker* also show us how the American view on conflict has shifted as the dominant technological medium in which war is experienced has moved from video to videogames. In fact, upon invading Iraq there are many accounts of soldiers remarking that fighting 'felt like a video game'¹¹⁸. As war has become spatialised and naturalised through WoT media: *1917's*

¹¹⁵ Gerald Sim. *A Gray Zone between Documentary and Fiction: Interview with Janus Metz*. (*Film Quarterly* 65, no. 1 2011), 24

¹¹⁶ DEER. "AMERICAN WAR CULTURE.", 60

¹¹⁷ Marsha Kinder. *The Power of Adaptation in 'Apocalypse Now.'* (*Film Quarterly* 33, no. 2 1979): 14

¹¹⁸ Margie Serrato. "Virtual Technology Keeps Soldiers Closer to Home." (*Anthropology Now* 6, no. 3 2014)

change from choppy shaky-cam towards a smooth one-take shows this shift. While there is a desire to inhabit these worlds 'realistically', videogames show there is a greater distance from the warzone than ever. These avatar-protagonists, bound to the audience through hyper-physical, sensorial to experience the warzone and this de-peopled nature of conflict. As drone pilots use familiar video game controllers to engage with warfare, so too do the audience in their interactions with the current American Front. This is further fragmentation from, and of, war all while naturalising it further.

This imagery "of high-tech "power projection" leaves out the vast territories of what Deer calls "the human experience of war... the day-to-day monotony of military occupation into which the unpredictable violence of combat can suddenly erupt"¹¹⁹. He continues, describing how this view "misdirects our attention onto particular sites of militarism", and filters them through "virtual sites of digital media."¹²⁰ Ultimately creating a fragmentary nature of the War on Terror is both overwhelming and separates civilians entirely both from the military, their newly created warzone, and the soldiers who fight in it.

This fragmentation is manifest in America today, with its veteran-loving, industriously technical, and highly militarised culture that was not conscious that it was at war for eighteen years and remains the major military power in the world. This distance between the everyday American and the Forever Wars that were (and are) waged prevents the country from engaging with any of its conflicts in a meaningful non-military way.

We are in what could perhaps be called a 'late stage' of the War on Terror paradigm. While the term has been slowly phased out since the beginning of the 2010s, the realities and policies that marked it – namely counterterrorism and surveillance – still remain. Likewise, the Western involvement against ISIS during the last decade has used much of the same cultural attitudes. Even though US troops left Iraq in 2011, the US military was still present, and re-entered in 2014 due to ISIS, before finally announcing their full withdrawal in 2021. According to David Vine, professor of political anthropology at the American University in Washington, DC, the US had around 750 bases in at least 80 countries as of July 2021.¹²¹

As I finish this thesis Russia has just invaded Ukraine. This may become a 'frozen conflict' – and remain defined on Russian terms –, or it could signal another shift in how war is perceived in America and the West as a whole. Especially now with the Americans have left Afghanistan, perhaps the Middle Eastern aesthetic has become passe.

It could be that, given the abundance of handheld shaky phone footage flooding the internet, we will see a return to the faux-documentarian embedded visual style. Perhaps we shall also see the return of the familiar non-racialised Russian stereotypes a classic American enemy, and Ukrainians allies who, while still Othered, lack the Orientalist dimension that defines all the inhabitants of our current

¹¹⁹ DEER. "AMERICAN WAR CULTURE.", 61

¹²⁰ DEER. "AMERICAN WAR CULTURE.", 61

¹²¹ M. Haddad and M. Hussein, 2022. Infographic: History of US interventions in the past 70 years.

Aljazeera.com. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/10/infographic-us-military-presence-around-the-world-interactive>

Warzones. Of course, Eastern European theatres of war are a classic staple of the First-Person Shooter, so the region has already been spatialised and transformed into a de-peopled place of play before.¹²²

Perhaps, most likely of all, Ukraine will feature in next year's *Call of Duty* as a battlefield – allowing players to 'realistically experience' the Battle of Kyiv or Chernobyl or a similar warzone, now reconfigured into a new Western front. If this does come to pass, it will surely be followed by some thrilling and uncomplicated American war film that shows what it was 'really like' for the Americans who also happened to be there.

¹²² *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* famously features a Chernobyl map.

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