

# Knowing War: Moving Images and the Politics of Erasure in the Post 9/11 World

Written by Christina Hellmich and Lisa Purse

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CHRISTINA HELLMICH AND LISA PURSE, SEP 30 2016

*Increasingly the world is comprehended and acted upon not through speech-acts but world pictures  
(Der Derian 2010: 183).*

How do we – scholars and residents in Western countries – know the wars that have been and continue to be fought in the name of the ‘war on terror’ in different corners of the world?

Following events from a safe distance, war becomes a mediated phenomenon, increasingly observed and experienced through images online, on our phones, computers, televisions and cinema screens. Indeed, at no other point in time have distant locations and peoples seemed so instantly accessible, via the click of a button. From the live reporting of embedded reporters in Iraq to the live tweeting of the Arab Spring, front line experiences are delivered to audiences in Europe, the United States and beyond with apparently unfettered immediacy. Echoing the above cited words of James Der Derian, in this highly interconnected environment, images rather than words drive both ‘knowledge’ and response. A single picture of Aylan Kurdi washed up on a Turkish beach had the power to drive home the humanitarian tragedy of the Syrian refugee crisis. Conversely, the absence of photographic evidence depicting Osama bin Laden’s body fuelled a number of competing theories over the nature and circumstances of his death.

What constitutes knowledge about war is often an accumulation of visual impressions from news media, social media, television and cinema, impressions that are selective, shaped by cultural, ideological and economic factors, and which speak to cultural prejudices and normative expectations. While seemingly projecting an objective reality, every image or sound that is accessed and viewed has been produced, framed or selected, and edited by someone, presenting but a partial view that leaves something out of sight, and that may also distort or misrepresent. As Derek Gregory pertinently observes, ‘spaces of constructed visibility are always also spaces of constructed invisibility’ (2004: 199). This, in turn, raises important questions about what is missing from the images that circulate in the highly mediated experience of the war on terror. What are the intentional and unintentional processes of erasure that characterize this mediation? And what are the consequences of these erasures for cultural understanding? An investigation into these questions yields a number of sobering insights that emphasize the need for critical reflection on how we know war in the post 9/11 world.

### **(Knowing) War at a Distance**

One of the defining features of the relationship between those Western populations initiating military interventions – and at the same time attempting to understand their nature and effects – and those living in the territories affected, is geographical distance. Distance, in one sense, is an empirically measurable thing, but it can also, as Edward Said observed, become imbued with an ideologically freighted ‘imaginative geography and history’ of difference and distance (2003 [1978]: 55). Indeed, at a time when the accelerations in media technologisation seem to provide unprecedented and immediate forms of access to distant locations, conflicts, and affected communities in places such as Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, the result of such access is not necessarily a more objective, better informed audience. Rather, Said’s notion of imagined histories and geographies has experienced a renaissance: Orientalist

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imaginings, far from disappearing, persist, albeit not in the form of weighty reports written by the likes of Gertrude Bell (1907), but in new, readily available audio-visual manifestations on television, cinema and mobile screens; featuring not sandcastles and exotic harems, but veiled women and inscrutable men stepping out of the shadows of dilapidated buildings in war-torn towns, potentially plotting suicide missions. Modern technology not only provides these neo-orientalist manifestations with an unprecedented presence in everyday lives in the Western world, but it is deeply intertwined with the all too familiar 'us vs. them', 'clash of civilisations' rhetoric of the war on terror, both reflecting and reinforcing a reality borne of shock and fear when the New York twin towers collapsed (Hellmich 2012). Much in the way that the political rhetoric left no room for the ordinary others between 'us' and 'them', cultural representations of the war on terror frequently erase the ordinary Arab, the ordinary Muslim man, woman or child and their quotidian ways of living.

While such processes of selection and mediation characterise those forms that seem to offer the most immediate access to war and its consequences – news reporting and social media – it is an equally pressing concern in the documentaries and fiction films that have sought to offer their own perspectives and histories of the war on terror. Films are a significant site of enquiry in this regard not just because cinema is a mass medium with the capacity to engage large numbers of people, but because film form permits rhetorical strategies of framing, selection, narrativisation, immersion and erasure to work on the viewer over longer durations. In this cinematic world of compelling stories and compelling verisimilitudes, from *Standard Operating Procedure* (Errol Morris, 2008) to *Dirty Wars* (Rick Rowley, 2013), from *Redacted* (Brian de Palma, 2007) to *Eye in the Sky* (Gavin Hood, 2015), and from *World Trade Center* (Oliver Stone, 2006) to *American Sniper* (Clint Eastwood, 2014), critical reflection on the partial or partisan nature of a depiction can be challenging. Yet the failure of critical reflection can result in the reinforcement of wider cultural entrenchments, debate replaced by audiovisually compelling 'shorthands' that shape some of the ways Western audiences conceptualise the war on terror and its consequences. Some of the most popular war films, for example, such as *American Sniper* and *The Hurt Locker*, and the series of Iraq-focused fiction films of which they are a part (including *Stop-Loss*, *The Messenger*, and *In the Valley of Elah* among others), allow the viewer little room to recall a pre-war Iraq where people once enjoyed high standards of life with a GDP comparable to Western European countries, and where the presence of fully veiled and impoverished women and children was more of an exception rather than the norm. Nor are they representative of inter-war Iraq where, in the words of Ash Rossiter, Iraq-based consultant with the US Army Corps of Engineers' reconstruction effort between 2009-2011, 'engineering professors still taught their full course loads at the University of Baghdad even at the height of the violence; where hundreds of book shops were doing a steady trade on Baghdad's historic Mutanabi Street; where Christians put out huge blow-up Santa Clauses in their town squares in Northern Iraq to celebrate Christmas' (personal communication, 8 September 2016).

In the re-imagined civilian spaces of Iraq, ordinary people have been replaced with prospective militants, an air of potential danger overshadowing even the most everyday scenes. At the same time, no explanation is offered as to why these once ordinary people have been radicalised – they just *are*. The complex, painful reality of loss and suffering in long years of sanctions and war experienced by ordinary Iraqis (Simons 1998) – circumstances that would understandably position them as legitimate defenders of their homes – are not shown or explained. In this imagined Iraq collateral damage, regrettable as it may be, does not necessarily befall ordinary people, but instead targets militants, rendering both them and the ordinary people their presence elides, 'ungrievable lives,' to use Judith Butler's fittingly pointed phrase (2009). The very notion of innocent civilian casualties – for which accurate numbers still do not exist – quietly disappears.

Indeed, these visualisations of the alleged reality of war combined with politicians and military media representatives' ongoing talk of active management of collateral damage may go some way to explaining why so many Americans and Britons dramatically under-estimate how many Iraqis have died as a result of their former governments' war of choice. John Glaser notes, 'while even the most conservative estimates of mortality in Iraq, Al Jazeera America reports, have reached six figures, polling in the U.S. and the U.K. have shown public perception to be that the civilian death toll from the war is in the neighborhood of 10,000 (Glaser 2013).' Although no consensus exists to date, official estimates of civilian deaths directly resulting from post-9/11 military action present a different picture: At the more conservative end, Spring 2015 estimates by the Watson Institute of International & Public Affairs at Brown University put these deaths in Afghanistan at 26,000, in Iraq at 165,000, and in Pakistan at 21,500. The authors of

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the 'Body Count' report published by Physicians for Social Responsibility in the same year believe the numbers to be much higher, around 1 million people in Iraq, 200,000 in Afghanistan and 80,000 in Pakistan, arguing that more conservative estimates do not include deaths 'from indirect fallouts of the war, such as lack of basic health care, hunger or contaminated drinking water,' which tend to 'exceed the number of those directly killed' (Guilliard 2015: 16).

Despite the very real impact of the military-industrial-media-entertainment network in recent years (Der Derian 2010), the erasure of the victims of war in cultural representation is not a phenomenon of the new millennium. Rather, as Cora Goldstein (2017) demonstrates, the practise of erasing the victims of war has been a hallmark of US war films since the early 1940s, with the violence and killing of non-traditional combatants and the devastation of towns, cities and their residents – the collective damage that could have turned locals into fierce (and morally justified) defenders of their homes – limited to a backdrop of rubble and trash. What these past and present depictions of war casualties have in common, is that in all cases, the suffering, dying and death of civilians remains out of sight and their voices unheard, while the legitimacy of the national war discourse remains unquestioned.

Notably, a particular feature of the contemporary moment is a focus on the experience, trauma and loss of US soldiers. Indeed, the privileging of the experiences of US and allied soldiers, at the expense of other dead, stands out as a perennial feature of contemporary US film and other cultural productions. The staggering success of *American Sniper* and its defence as allegedly 'anti-war' and 'intentionally un-political' by director Clint Eastwood and other supporters exemplifies this point (Jilani 2015). This has led several analysts to conclude that this lays greater responsibility on both analysts and filmmakers to develop an explicitly ethical approach. But public criticism of the national discourse, especially of fallen heroes in uniform, remains a difficult line to cross. Indeed the extent to which this is possible in popular media production is questionable, given the institutional pressures and market forces that shape film and media production (Harris forthcoming). Moreover, outspoken critics of *American Sniper* have received a torrent of insults and even death threats (Jilani 2015). Even subtly-conveyed criticism and ambivalence are easily lost in the heated cultural and political discourses of 'right' and 'wrong' that swirl around the war on terror and its geopolitical and human consequences (Purse 2017, Piotrowska 2017).

## Knowing War – Knowing Ourselves

At a time when much of the debate in the field of war studies is dedicated to the changing nature of war, providing arguments both in favor of war's disappearance (Goldstein 2011, Pinker 2011), and of its increasing presence in previously civilian spaces (Dillon and Reid 2009, Jabri 2011, Sylvester 2013), a focus on erasures adds an important dimension to the discussion. As this period is marked by an unprecedented level of technologisation and visual mediation, the concept of erasure brings into focus the fragmentary and often one-sided evidence upon which our knowledge of contemporary war is based. It reminds us to ask not only *what* we know about war, but *how* we know it. Although exceptions certainly exist, the mainstream fiction films and media reporting of the last 15 years document a collective failure: one of adequately engaging with the lived reality of war in the post-9/11 world that largely excludes the perspectives and experiences of those directly affected. What emerges is the cultural production of war at a distance, cultural production that ultimately has little to say about these distant places and people. Instead, these moving images provide important insights into the West itself, and the processes by which audiences removed from the actual sites of war and conflict make sense of the world 'out there'. While little is learned about the other, then, close examination of moving images like these offer us the opportunity to learn about ourselves and to critically reflect on the normative approaches of our respective disciplines. It is timely to return to the words of Steve Smith, former President of the International Studies Association (ISA), who only three years after 9/11 was pressing for war studies disciplines to actively reflect on the contexts in which we work:

All of us in the discipline need to reflect on the possibility that both the ways in which we have constructed theories about world politics, and the content of those theories, have supported specific social forces and have essentially, if quietly and innocently, taken sides on major ethical and political questions. In that light I need to ask about the extent to which IR has been one voice in singing into existence the world that made 9/11 possible (Smith, 2004: 500).

Indeed, it might be useful to continue Smith's line of thought by reflecting upon the extent to which more recent film

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and media production as well as research and related scholarly activity have played a role in creating and perpetuating the post 9/11 world and its imaging in the media – to identify challenges, constraints and erasures, and to identify ways of moving beyond them.

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## About the author:

**Christina Hellmich** is Associate Professor in IR & Middle East Studies at the University of Reading, UK. She is the author of *Al-Qaeda: From Global Network to Local Franchise* (2011) and co-editor of *The Epistemology of Terrorism: Knowing al-Qaeda* (2012).

**Lisa Purse** is Associate Professor of Film in the Department of Film, Theatre & Television at the University of Reading. She is the author of *Digital Imaging in Popular Cinema* (Edinburgh University Press, 2013) and *Contemporary Action Cinema* (Edinburgh University Press, 2011).