Abstract : "There Are No Rules": The War on Terror and Contemporary Film
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This paper takes up the question of cinematic representation with relation to the "end of grand narratives" and the emphasis on representing reality "as it really is" – an imperative which, I argue, can be just as progressive as it usually is reactionary. While films such as Black Hawk Down, Saving Private Ryan and United 93, to name a few, strip away the mediating elements of "grand" narrative and detached perspective only to more directly interpellate the viewer and reinforce a politics of fear based on the illusion of a direct threat to the body, more recent films like Rendition, in the tradition of earlier anti-Vietnam films, use the same device (the stripping away of the mediating distances/narratives) in order to reveal the sheer absurdity of a world in which "there are no rules," in which representation and reality do not, ultimately, coincide. The appearance of a film like Redacted some six years into the War on Terror shows evidence, in fact, of a new strain of "Vietnam Syndrome," a cultural malaise ostensibly "kicked" by the glorious whirlwind of Gulf War I, returned now to destabilize the ostensible moral certitude invoked to legitimate the "just war" waged in 2001.

It was the narratologist Peter Brooks, in *Reading for the Plot*, who first referred to Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* as "the detective story gone modernist."[1] According to Brooks, the detective story, reaching its peak alongside that of British imperialism and of a Western faith in linear narrative more generally as the principal means of comprehending mankind's origin, present, and destiny, presents us with a crime *in absentia* – that is, having occurred prior to the narrative – which our hero must then meticulously retrace *in praesentia*, following the original criminal's footsteps and in doing so, as Tzvetan Todorov famously said, laying bare more than any other literary form the basic structure of narrative: selection, combination, sense-making and resolution. Crime and inquest here run parallel to the structuralist paradigm of story (the events themselves) and plot (the "common thread upon which [such events] might all hang");[2] seemingly disparate elements, in other words, are brought together by the detective in such a way as to reinforce an unerring faith in the power of the scientific method and deductive logic to explain the world. It was a fitting narrative form for what Brooks calls "the great nineteenth-century narrative tradition that, in history, philosophy, and a host of other fields as well as literature, conceived certain kinds of knowledge and truth to be inherently narrative, understandable (and expoundable) only by way of sequence, in a temporal unfolding," marking an era in which "authors and their public apparently [shared] the conviction that plots were a viable and necessary way of organizing and interpreting the world, and that in working out and working through plots,

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[1] Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot* (Boston: Harvard UP, 1984), p. 238.
[2] A.C. Doyle, "The Adventure of the Musgrave Ritual," Classic Literature Library (Online), <http://sherlock-holmes.classic-literature.co.uk/the-musgrave-ritual/ebook-page-06.asp> [accessed 13 May 2008].

[…] they were engaged in a prime, irreducible act of understanding how human life acquires meaning."[3]

Yet *Heart of Darkness*, according to Brooks, is in effect a detective story that brings all of this to an end. Written at the cusp of the Modernist era, with European imperialism still in full swing, it selects and combines aspects of Conrad's experience of King Leopold's Congo – a notoriously criminal enterprise in itself – to present us with a framed narrative in which Marlow, our "detective," retraces the footsteps of the "exceptional" Kurtz – "a prodigy, […] an emissary of pity, and science, and progress, gifted with a "higher intelligence, wide sympathies, [and] a singleness of purpose"[4] – a man revered for his intellect, his supposed altruism, and his imperial triumphs, who has suddenly and unaccountably decided to return to the jungle, renouncing in the process what is known as "civilization." It is Marlow's job to locate Kurtz in the wilds of Africa and bring him home, and as our "detective" he is drawn increasingly and inexorably towards a man who inhabits this "heart of darkness," whose aura of mystery appears to Marlow ever more intriguing and compelling, looming ahead as the anticipated culmination of the narrative, the ending that ought to confer meaning onto the beginning and the middle. The crime – *in absaentia* – is Kurtz's "turning his back" on European civilization, "setting his face towards the depths of the wilderness";[5] the narrative, told within a frame, is the selection and combination of events that make up Marlow's journey, related – "*redacted*," as I will discuss below – in a desperate attempt to force meaning upon that which appears, disconcertingly, to possess none at all. Kurtz's famed dying words – "the horror, the horror" – and the frenzied, inarticulate and thoroughly unsatisfying babble that precedes it – fails to indulge the reader's craving for resolution, even if Marlow's desperation for it would seem to suggest otherwise: "He had summed up," Marlow insists, to the readers (and his listeners') doubts; "he had judged."[6]

Whether this is true for the reader becomes clearer with a century's hindsight. In 1979, Francis Ford Coppola undertook a critique of the Vietnam War with *Apolcaypse Now*, a retelling of Marlow's story in which, although Kurtz's closing discourse is perhaps more satisfactory to the viewer than it was in the novel that inspired it, the capacity of narrative to articulate the horrors of imperialistic warfare – in this case as in the previous, the product of an imperialism striving towards hegemony – is once again brought into question. Like the "heart of darkness," the "apocalypse" is always already unspeakable; the closest we come to such "darkness" in the film consists in Kurtz's retelling of his experience in the Special Forces, during which, on one occasion, the Viet Cong had come into a village and "hacked off every inoculated arm" of some children just vaccinated: "If I had just ten legions of those men," Kurtz concludes, "our troubles here would be over very quickly."[7] Perhaps because of the contractual demands of the cinematic medium, the

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[3] Brooks, xi-xii.
[4] Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* [1899] (London: Penguin Classics, 2007), pp. 26-30.
[5] Conrad, p. 39.
[6] Conrad, p. 88.
[7] *Apocalypse Now*. Dir. Francis Ford Coppola. 1979. Paramount Pictures, 2006 [On DVD-ROM].

consumer is awarded a little more insight – however unsettling – into why our "criminal," Kurtz, chose to turn his back on "civilization"; but the film, like the novel that preceded it, gives us nonetheless a hint of its aesthetics, of the way in which it is meant to be "read," that point to the artificiality of such constructs and resolutions. The blurring of boundaries between audience and spectacle via the soundtrack in the epic *Valkyries* scene, the absurdities uttered and ordered by commanding officers, the startling presence of the international media actively *directing* the soldiers as they storm a beach (foregrounding again the ambiguity between cinematic and newsreel direction) all bring into question the frameworks in which we once had so much confidence – those of mediation, rational selection and combination, linear narrative, questions raised and satisfactorily answered, resolution as a whole.

The French cultural theorists, as is so often the case, were already ahead of the game. It was indeed in the same year that Jean-François Lyotard famously declared the "end of grand narratives"[8]. The American Marxist critic Fredric Jameson described this "condition" some years later as the mark of an "age that has forgotten to think historically,"[9] an age characterized by a "new depthlessness" in aesthetics as well as a "weakening of history, both in our relationship to public History and in the new forms of our private temporality,"[10] and by a "mutation in space" for which we lack the "perceptual equipment" required to "map [our] position in a mappable external world."[11] If narrative had the effect of *mediating* – of selecting, combining, and re-presenting disparate events so as to give them an overall organic or aesthetic coherence – then the "end" of grand narrative removes this "mediating" element in the subject-object relationship, leaving Lyotard with a critical and ominous question: "Where, after the metanarratives, can legitimacy reside?"[12] It is this, among other things, to which the question of the "aesthetics of hegemony" can be quite fruitfully applied, and I will examine it from two perspectives: that of the dominant ideology – what might, in some ways, be considered the "hegemony of (a dominant) aesthetics" – and that of the ideology of resistance as seen in anti-Vietnam War films and as we are now seeing, I will argue, in similar films questioning America's business in Iraq.

Indeed, in Terry Eagleton's words, "Western civilization" has become "disabled at the very moment when it needs to affirm its universal authority," having "embarked on a more ambitiously aggressive foreign policy" than ever before, and it "needs some spiritual legitimation for this project at just the time when it is threatening to come apart at the cultural seams."[13] It seems then a no-brainer that the narrative of the Bush

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[8] Jean-Francois Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1999), p. xxiv.
[9] Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke, 1991), p.ix.
[10] Jameson, p. 6.
[11] Jameson, p. 44.
[12] Lyotard, pp. xxiv-xv.
[13] Eagleton, *Idea of Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), pp. 66-67.

administration's "War on Terror" – beginning, aptly if ironically, at the so-called "Ground Zero" of the World Trade Center site – should function as an attempt to restore a sense of narrative coherence and significance to the world that Lyotard and Jameson, along with other theorists of postmodernity, describe. In fact it was these very theorists that came under fire following the attacks of 11 September for failing to recognize first principles and metaphysics in the face of such unmitigated evil. Indeed Philip Hammond makes a similar observation about the administration's new narrative in his book *Media, War & Postmodernity*, seeing war since 1991 as "driven by attempts on the part of Western leaders to recapture a sense of purpose and meaning, both for themselves and their societies."[14] The idea of "uprooting" terrorism wherever it lurks, thereby to eliminate Evil for all time, is intended to provide precisely the sort of legitimation the West requires for its neo-imperial hegemony; it furnishes the metaphysical, narrative grounds of crime, resolution and punishment that epitomized an earlier, more optimistic global outlook, one that not only put its wholehearted faith in the explanatory power of narrative but that also posited a teleology, a utopian goal that would herald the pinnacle of Progress. Less has changed, then, between the late 19th century and the early 21st than one might assume. "Freedom" and "free trade," now more commonly the "free market," are still used interchangeably in the grand narrative of Western neo-imperialism, and the promise, as we are informed to no end, is one of a world in which "our children and our children's children"[15] will know a degree of security and prosperity unimaginable to us now.

What differs, however, is the aesthetics associated with this narrative, updated and adjusted as it may well have been to reflect current geopolitical conditions and the increased threats apparently posed to the "West" by the so-called "rest," to borrow a particularly succinct paradigm from Samuel Huntington's infamous "remaking of world order."[16] The basic structure of the narrative under revival may well remain the same, but its mediating forms and functions have shifted, indeed in many cases to the point at which there would seem to be no mediation at all. Yet such an aesthetics, I argue, provides us with a double-edged sword. While the ostensible absence of a mediating narrative can on the one hand, as we will see, be deployed to perpetuate a politics of fear, it can equally be used to reveal the hopeless inadequacy of our "grand narrative" frameworks; and this, I would argue, is what has been happening in recent years with the resurgence of anti-war films such as *Rendition*[17] and *Redacted*,[18] which resonate ideologically with the critical angle of films like *Apocalypse Now* and *Full Metal Jacket*[19] but to even more striking effect.

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[14] Philip Hammond, *Media, War & Postmodernity* (London: Routledge, 2007), p. 11
[15] George W. Bush, "Remarks on Arrival in Daytona Beach Florida" [transcript] (4 February 2002), Bnet (Online), <http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m2889/is_5_38/ai_83762163>
[16] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Touchstone, 1996).
[17] Dir. Gavin Hood. 2007. New Line Home Entertainment, 2008.
[18] *Redacted*. Dir. Brian de Palma. 2007. Magnolia Home Entertainment, 2008.
[19] *Full Metal Jacket*. Dir. Stanley Kubrick. 1987. Warner Home Video, 2007 [On DVD].

It is necessary, of course, to examine the case from both sides, as the hegemonic imperative is most certainly not without its aesthetic corollary, and an extremely powerful one at that. In the wake of 9/11, one film that was pushed forward in its release was *Black Hawk Down*,[20] which, like *Saving Private Ryan*,[21] *The Thin Red Line*,[22] and the tastefully delayed *United 93*,[23] plunges the viewer into the midst of the action, presenting, without the "buffer zone" of a mediating narrative, the terror and helplessness to which the real-life participants, or victims, were subjected. Postmodernism being far more a question of aesthetic representation than of actual events, such an aesthetic approach lends itself readily to what increasingly stands in for the lack of spiritual legitimation for the Western hegemonic project – namely, the "politics of fear," a politics which hardly merits the name, since it constitutes less of a politics than of the absence of one: it comprises more or less the legitimation of the status quo, and of its preservation by all necessary means, over and against the supposedly perennial possibility of its own destruction. That is to say, where socio-political "Progress" in the modern, Enlightement sense is seen to have "ended," we are faced ever more with the perpetual threat of annihilation than with a utopian future.

Aesthetically speaking – and I refer here specifically to the relation between representation and sensory or perceptual input – this corresponds to a threat directed not only at "Western civilization" or "values" as a whole but to the individual body itself, and it is this, minus both the "mediating" narrative and the "objective" camera that might stand in for it, that constitutes most powerfully the politics of fear in the films referred to above, all of which reinforce the "aesthetics of hegemony" in favour of the "dominant" ideology. All of these films do away with the overarching or "grand" narrative, reducing politics proper to what Althusser would call a direct "interpellation" of the viewer by aesthetic means, a well-nigh irresistible involvement that places the viewer "in the line of fire," as it were, as vulnerable to destruction as the "American way of life" we are currently dying to defend. This particular aesthetics in fact seems to mediate between the universal and the particular, inscribing the putative threat to America into the individual body itself. *Black Hawk Down*, for instance, plunders a real-life historical event (an American defeat in the Somali war of 1992-93) in order partly to portray the cultural "other" as chaotic, insidious, viral, and utterly immune to rational analysis while subjecting the viewer directly to the terror that such an entity enjoins. The Somalis as portrayed in the film come across as little more than a swarming, barbaric mass posing a direct threat, via cinematic perspective, to the viewer, deprived of linguistic expression (a criticism, incidentally, made of *Heart of Darkness* by Nigerian author Chinua Achebe in

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[20] *Black Hawk Down*. Dir. Ridley Scott. Revolution Studios, Jerry Bruckheimer Films, Scott Free Productions (2002) [On DVD].
[21] *Saving Private Ryan*. Dir. Steven Spielberg. Dreamworks Video. 1999 [On DVD].
[22] *The Thin Red Line*. Dir. Terrence Malik. 1998. 20th Century Fox Home Entertainment. 2001 [On DVD].
[23] *United 93*. Dir. Paul Greengrass. 2006. Universal Pictures [On DVD].

1977)[24] and filmed in disorienting, ground-level shots that present them as attacking from every angle, placing the viewer into a threatening situation to which the only solution can be violent self-defense. The same can be said of *United 93*, which in its most terrifying moments puts the viewer in the position of a passenger aboard the fated plane; and both directors, curiously enough – Ridley Scott and Paul Greengrass respectively – claimed to have approached their projects, in Scott's words, "without politics,"[25] suggesting a desire to put across an unbiased or neutral perspective, and promoting their works on those very grounds. The hand-held realism of such films, in other words, was intended to convey a certain degree of *immediacy*, in the sense of both *non-mediation* and a certain self-identity between representation and referent, a greater fidelity to reality.

For certain critics, the transition in film from patriotic, celebratory "grand narratives" to "exploding bullet holes, ragged amputations, vivid decapitations, and other varied traumas," as effected in films like *Black Hawk Down* and *The Thin Red Line*, constitutes evidence of a new "maturity" and "honesty" among filmmakers.[26] It does not for them "revive patriotism so much as [turn] it inside out so that the private motivations and goals of the individual soldiers superscede [*sic*] any stated or understood national or public rationales for whatever war is being fought."[27] Certainly, as they remark, these films are "about the experience of combat at its most elemental and personal level";[28] but while this indicates for them an undermining of official ideological strategies, I would argue that this shift fits into a more "postmodern" and only *ostensibly* post-ideological aesthetic that is far less progressive than they seem to think. The absence of any decisive victory or celebration of heroism is not necessarily indicative of a new "maturity" at work. The idea that in warfare "politics and all that shit goes out the window," as one of the characters in *Black Hawk Down* unambiguously states, instead abstracts the experience of imperialistic warfare from its wider political context and presents it as a thoroughly personal and "authentic" experience, reinforcing all the more effectively a new concept of "America in the World" that implicitly – by bringing the viewer, as noted, directly "into the line of fire" – demands a renewed militarism. Such films convey, through viewer identification on a level that is all the more insidious for being purely and immediately individual, a new "reality" of American vulnerability in a globalized world. Further, to remove any overt ideological or narrative premise from such films, and to involve the viewer aesthetically in the action presented as immediate, is also a way of naturalizing conflict as inevitable. An ideological or narrative premise, even of the most conservative sort, can at

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[24] Chinua Achebe, "An Image of Africa: Racism in *Heart of Darkness*," *Massachusetts Review* 18 (1977), 782-94.
[25] Cited in George Monbiot, "Both Saviour and Victim," *The Guardian*, Reprinted on Guardian Unlimited (January 29, 2002), <http://www.guardian.co.uk/Archive/Article/0,4273,4344998.00html> [accessed 07 March 2006].
[26] Frank J. Wetta and Martin A. Novelli, "Now a Major Motion Picture: War Films and Hollywood's New Patriotism," *The Journal of Military History*, 67 (2003), 861-882 (pp. 864-865).
[27] Wetta and Novelli, p. 861.
[28] Wetta and Novelli, p. 865.

least be said to present something to engage with intellectually; but absent this, there is nothing but the conflict itself, and the viewer's personal experience of that conflict as dictated by his or her positioning in relation to the shots. Postmodernism's "end of grand narratives" and its aesthetic corollary may to this extent be little more, finally, than the displacement of these narratives onto disablingly individualistic terms, entailing yet a greater individual internalization of the interpretive framework (in this case, a "politics" of fear) being promoted. Such films, in other words, enjoin an individualized identification with the wider portrayal of America's role in the world that they put across, emphasizing in this case that nation's perpetual vulnerability to outside threats. The main character Eversmann, in *Black Hawk Down*, becomes "Everyman" in a displacement which is all the more insidious for its ostensible rejection of the illusions of national and social harmony projected by more conventional militaristic films, or even by the news coverage of the first Gulf War and the early days of the attack on Afghanistan. The self is "sutured" to a collectivity constituted defensively, that is, against a nebulous entity that threatens to destroy it.

This is my interpretation of the phrase "aesthetics of hegemony" – a gritty, hand-held realism that brings to the perspective of the individual viewer the so-called "reality" of a vulnerable West that must defend itself by military force while imposing its free-market agenda far and wide, ostensibly in the interests of all humanity. The concrete particular is united with abstract ideology by means of this aesthetic, from which it is nearly impossible for the casual viewer to escape. However, an aesthetics so rendered is by no means monolithic; where conviction takes place by such means, there are also cracks in the looking-glass that can refract the aesthetics towards a more progressive end. This, I believe, is the function of such films as Sam Mendes' *Jarhead*,[29] Brian de Palma's *Redacted*, Gavin Hood's *Rendition* and the upcoming *Standard Operating Procedure*,[30] a documentary produced by *Fog of War*[31] director Errol Morris. That *Black Hawk Down* dealt with the Somalia conflict and *Jarhead* with Gulf War I is largely irrelevant here; it is the aesthetics of each that counts, and *Redacted* in particular, which *does* address a post-9/11 world and a seemingly hopeless war abroad, speaks precisely to how such an aesthetics can be turned to progressive advantage.

If "Ground Zero" – the scene of the crime – gave us a starting point for a new crime-and-punishment narrative, with Bin Laden representing the rogue outlaw "wanted dead or alive" and a carefully constructed media-detective narrative of rental vehicles abandoned at airports containing copies of the Qu'ran, security camera footage from airports, passenger lists, mug shots, culprits and masterminds – echoing the Victorian master-narrative of the detective story with its faith in the power of the Law to retrace and resolve – then what *Redacted* does is to invert this familiar scenario, highlighting the increasingly obvious failure and absurdity of the war in Iraq while giving us the crime fully *in presentia* – a crime committed by supposed representatives of the Law itself.

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[29] *Jarhead*. Dir. Sam Mendes. 2005. Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2005.
[30] *Standard Operating Procedure.* Dir. Errol Morris. Sony Pictures Classics and Participant Productions, 2008.
[31] *The Fog of War*. Dir. Errol Morris. Sony Pictures Classics, 2003.

Rendition does the same, if within a more conventional Hollywood aesthetic, while pointing up the disconnect between rhetorical framework or representation and reality – "The United States does not torture," declares a commanding Meryl Streep just as we are exposed to scenes of precisely this activity, observed and abetted by U.S. agents – and its "surprise" ending reveals to us that we have not been watching what we thought we were watching all along. But *Redacted* takes on the hand-held aesthetic of a film like *Black Hawk Down* to give us a "rendition," so to speak, of the crime itself; it is the detective story not only "gone modernist" but flipped completely inside out. Just as "the Law" in *Heart of Darkness* and its cinematic successor *Apolcaypse Now* ends up "going native" (and I use the expression self-consciously) – the young soldiers in de Palma's Iraq undertake an unmotivated, pointless and viciously destructive excursion into the "jungle" of Baghdad within the context of an equally pointless and destructive war. The origins, plotting, and execution of the crime are all painstakingly documented, as is the crime itself, by means of a hidden night-vision camera worn by Angel Salazar, a young recruit hoping to save up money for film school. Although our cameraman – bent on producing a film on Iraq called "Tell Me No Lies," unadorned by spectacle, soundtrack or narrative logic – is then brutally murdered in retaliation, we are nonetheless left with a Marlow at the end of the film: asked, in a bar back home, to tell a "real war story," the character Lawyer McCoy, who refused to take part in the atrocities, does precisely this: like Marlow to his listeners, McCoy presents "the truth." It is the truth of a war the first casualty of which, we are told early on, will be precisely that; moreover, prior to McCoy's revelation, he is told by his father that "we don't need another Abu Ghraib," and the familiar rhetoric of "supporting the troops" over "aiding the terrorists" is further shown to be so ingrained in the military mindset that it is cynically thrown back at military interrogators by the perpetrators of the crime itself, while McCoy – trying to bring the culprits to justice – is verbally battered into impotent silence. That McCoy is told "we don't need another Abu Ghraib" suggests, as Susan Sontag remarked in *The Guardian* in 2004, that it is ultimately not *what happens* in Iraq but what can be legitimately *told* about it that matters above all else. Indeed, as she notes, "the focus of regret" upon the release of those images "seemed the damage to America's claim to moral superiority, to its hegemonic goal of bringing 'freedom and democracy' to the benighted Middle East […] Where once photographing war was the province of photojournalists, now soldiers themselves are all photographers – recording their war, their fun, […] their atrocities, and emailing them around the globe."[32]

This in itself captures another key aspect of the aesthetics of hegemony – the very image of "the globe," the idea of total technological control and the power to exert complete domination over time and space, located, as Paul Smith notes, at the "historical epicenter of the dream of capitalist development"[33] in Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*. The obsession with technology, and more specifically with its alleged conquest of time and

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[32] Susan Sontag, "What have we done?" *The Guardian*, 24 May 2004; reprinted at CommonDreams.org, <http://www.commondreams.org/views04/0524-09.htm> [accessed 10 December 2007].

[33] Paul Smith, *Millennial Dreams*: *Contemporary Culture and Capital in the North* (London: Verso, 1997), p. 10.

space, is essentially the site at which the 'end of history' (or grand narratives) in the neo-conservative sense and the same phenomenon in the postmodernist sense converge. The image of "the globe" itself is not without its hegemonic implications, both in terms of what Smith refers to as "immaterial money that flashes around the globe many times a minute"[34] and in terms of military dominance and surveillance capabilities, not to mention the fusion of power and knowledge within the discourses of a global media that can be present any time and at any place. This, too, translates *aesthetically* – that is, in the realm of sensory experience – into what Marxist critic Raymond Williams would have called a "structure of feeling" that is hegemonic in nature; yet, as the images from Abu Ghraib and the film *Redacted* demonstrate, this is by no means a one-way street. The "im-mediacy" of instant mediation can work against the hegemonic imperative quite as effectively as it can work for it, and it is indeed at the level of the image transmitted instantaneously, recorded, retained, and re-broadcast, as well as used for artistic purposes, that the latest imperial war has encountered one of its greatest challenges. The "authenticity" that is part of the aesthetics of hegemony is equally part of the aesthetics that counters it; and while in a film like *Black Hawk Down* it *is* indeed a one-way street, a film like *Redacted* – concluding, as it does, with censored (redacted) yet harrowing images from the actual conflict – presents us with the undeniable reality that the absence of mediation, of a consistent, monolithic metanarrative, alongside the capacity of the "enemy" to avail themselves of the same technologies, can only undercut that illusion of dominance at the moment when the ruling powers need it the most. The same technologies that enable surveillance of "insurgents," real or imagined, enables a corresponding counter-surveillance; the same that keep our squad members in contact with their wives and families at home are used by actual insurgents to promote their agenda; the same that are enlisted to reinforce our "grand narrative," now by means of "embedded" reporting, turn against that narrative, both in the fictional French documentary with which Salazar's amateur filmmaking is interspersed, and on the Arab television network that reports on the casualties of war, minus the same restrictions to which the American broadcast media are subject. The retaliatory beheading of Salazar – a scene quite nearly as harrowing as that of the rape and murder, and of the sort prohibited by North American networks, so as not to give "the enemy" any power over a "captive" American audience – shows, along with other images in *Redacted*, the double-edged nature of what we have been calling the "aesethetics of hegemony" – the way in which they counteract our muddled "grand narrative" while those supposedly "in power" scramble ever less convincingly to keep that narrative intact. The photographs, Sontag insists in the same article, "are us"; they are taken "in order to be collected, stored in albums, displayed."

"Redaction," a not altogether common word, refers to the "reduction to literary form," to "revision, rearrangement" and to "the result of such a process."[35] More commonly, of course, it refers to official censorship, to the infamous "black-markering" of documents

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[34] Smith, p. 13.

[35] *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, Oxford UP 2008 <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/display/50199865/keytype=ref&ijkey=3oGeF/scuItWQ> [accessed 13 May 2008].

"declassified" by the CIA and other government organizations. Artistically this is indicated within the film by de Palma's use of the CIA's ubiquitous black marker – not only over words but over eyes, faces, mouths; and yet it was the explicit goal of the original main character Salazar to provide an *unedited* – a *truthful* – rendition of the military experience in Iraq, right down to the atrocities committed against innocent civilians by American troops driven to murderous insanity, in part by the senseless situation in which they are placed. What Sontag calls a "culture of shamelessness" is disseminated among the storm troopers of an imperialistic war, and Salazar catches their harrowing crimes on tape, only to be brutally killed in revenge for his part in the scandal. That said, it is these very images – some of which have emerged from the war, and which de Palma offers us at the end –that sweep the rug from underneath the fragile narratives of crime (Ground Zero), punishment (Afghanistan), pre-emption (Iraq) and Progress (Iraq and "the rest"), that the administration wishes to protect. In *Redacted*, the crime is American, the crime is *narrated* (redacted), and the crime is at the centre of the story. There are no detectives present to retrace and retell it, to solve it, to give it coherence and meaning; there is only "the horror", as Kurtz so cryptically informed Conrad's readers: the horror of the checkpoints, the horror of the rape and murders, the horror of the beheading, the breakdown of our surviving Marlow, whose "real war story," narrated at the end, is met first with silence, and then with applause – the uncertain applause of an audience for whom the "real war story" is simply irreconcilable with their idea of "our heroes" in Iraq. If Conrad brought narrative into question in *Heart of Darkness*, it is narrative itself that is now the very subject of films like *Redacted* and *Rendition*, which announce themselves in their very titles as constructed narratives and which invert the classical paradigms by which endings confer meaning on beginnings, middles, and traditional narrative complications. The crime itself is now central to the narrative, the resolution delayed, denied, or outright jettisoned, as it is in both of these films. What remains is the "misty halo" that Conrad's narrator claims comprises the elusive meanings of Marlow's narratives – one that coincides with a profoundly unsettling sense of a lack of leadership, of moral certitude, of even the merest of worthwhile social goals.

It was on 17 September 2001, six days after the crime of the "official" master narrative – 9/11 – that Bush declared to reporters at the Pentagon, "there [are] no rules."[36] He was referring to the actions of the 9/11 terrorists: "It's barbaric behavior. They slit throats of women on airplanes in order to achieve an objective that is beyond comprehension. And they like to hit and then they like to hide out […] And we're adjusting our thinking to the new type of enemy. These are terrorists that have no borders." No borders, no mediation, no distance: the enemy is already within. And as films like *Redacted*, and images from Abu Ghraib, clearly demonstrate, the enemy *is* already within. It was Lyotard who insisted that "when there are no rules, there is no game;" and when there is no game, there is no narrative. What *Heart of Darkness* would seem to tell us is that there never *was* a game, that beneath the veneer of one – what Marlow calls the "idea" behind "the conquest of the earth, which is not a pretty thing when you look into it too much" – lurks

[36] George W. Bush, "Bush: There's no rules" [transcript], CNN.com (17 September 2001), <http://archives.cnn.com/2001/US/09/17/gen.bush.transcript/> [accessed 13 May 2008].

a darkness that, in Bush's words, is fully "beyond comprehension" and even verbalization; whether we've had to "adjust our thinking to the new type of enemy" or whether we harboured it all along is what we ask ourselves as Salazar himself "breaks the rules" by recording a harrowing war crime, committed against the most helpless of innocents in a moral, ideological and literal desert. If such an aesthetics cannot in itself prevent further brutality, on either side of the conflict, or even dissuade America from undertaking further (and presumably equally pointless) imperialistic endeavours, it can nonetheless destabilize the ostensible moral certitude invoked to justify such projects, bringing about a "Vietnam Syndrome" appropriate to our age – a malaise allegedly "kicked" by Gulf War I, in the words of Bush Sr. – and undermining in the process our official justificatory strategies (currently those of liberation and self-defense). Conrad's Kurtz may have offered little more than a glimpse of "the horror," but it is one that remains and that demands directors like de Palma to remind us of its persistence even behind the most ostensibly altruistic of motives.

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