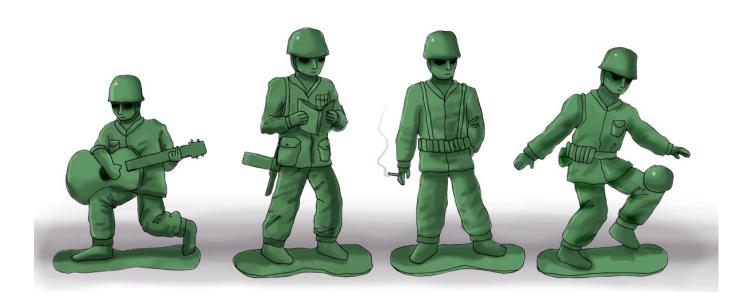# War Films Without War:
The Gulf War at the Movies

Brenda Cromb

It has become a cliché to say that war has changed since the end of the Cold War; but have war movies changed? Though Slavoj Žižek does not explicitly mention the Persian Gulf War of 1991 as an example of what he calls "war without war," Jean Baudrillard's ruminations on the stage-managed conflict make it clear that it can be seen as an example of modern warfare, where technology decreases the risk of deaths (on "the right side"). Žižek states that "the public expects a guarantee that there will be no casualties," and that the news media's coverage of a modern conflict tends to undermine deaths on both sides (2000, 33). Baudrillard notes that CNN's coverage had such tendencies in the Gulf War, complaining that "[i]t is a masquerade of information: branded faces delivered over to the prostitution of the image, the image of unintelligible distress. No images of the field of battle, but images of masks, of blind, defeated faces, images of falsification" (40). Žižek writes that:

this tendency to erase death itself from war should not seduce us into endorsing the standard notion that war is made less traumatic if it is no longer experienced by soldiers (or presented) as an actual encounter with another human being to be killed, but as an abstract activity in front of a screen or behind a gun far from the explosion […] While such a procedure makes the soldier less *guilty,* it is open to question if it effectively causes less *anxiety…*(33).

That the technological screen distances soldiers from their enemy – like the American (and coalition) soldiers who fought in the Gulf War and who largely avoided close contact with the Iraqis – may not actually protect them explains much of the obfuscation and misdirection engaged in by movies dealing with the Gulf War. Žižek goes on to ask the question that seems to be at the heart of Gulf War cinema:

what if the truly traumatic feature is NOT the awareness that I am killing another human being (to be obliterated through the 'dehumanization' and 'objectification' of war into a technical procedure), but on the contrary, this very 'objectification,' which then generates the need to supplement it by the fantasies of a authentic personal encounters with the enemy? (2000 33-34)

"Remarkably few feature films have been made that portray the events of the Gulf War onscreen, especially given the popularity of Vietnam and World War II films."

In the few films that actually do deal directly with the Gulf War, we can see attempts by the filmmakers to resolve the anxieties around the enemy and the "realness" of a war experience that Žižek sees this "warfare without warfare" (2002, 11) producing.

Žižek spends a small portion of *The Art of the Ridiculous Sublime* discussing the depiction of brutality in war films. Using Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998) as an example, Žižek explains that in the depiction of war, the brutality of hand-to-hand combat may *seem* like the horrifying Real, but is in fact the fantasy. He contrasts the privileged face-to-face encounter to the realities of modern, technology-driven, push-button warfare, in which there is little to no contact with the enemy. Žižek contends that what is often presented as "harsh realism" in Hollywood movies is, in Lacanian terms, anything but. This formulation provides a way to get past the "politically correct" reading of an "important" film that purports to show the "real horror" of any human tragedy. As Žižek puts it:

the images of utter catastrophe, far from giving access to the Real, can function as a protective shield AGAINST the Real. In sex as well as in politics, we take refuge in catastrophic scenarios in order to avoid the actual deadlock (of the impossibility of sexual relationship, of social antagonism) (34).

These suppressions of deadlock are one reason we turn to Hollywood; they are especially common in films that deal with real-life catastrophic events, like war films.

Of course, the first sequence in *Saving Private Ryan* is balanced by the remainder of the film's highly conventional, conservative narrative, as Krin Gabbard notes (135). Gabbard goes on to question the ideological purpose of a film that valorizes soldiers in traditional warfare in a time when war no longer means invasion and hand-to-hand combat. "As an apparatus of the state, *Saving Private Ryan* does what it has to do: it re-creates a fascination and a reverence for war so that, someday in the not too distant future, the state can put this fascination and reverence to use once again," Gabbard writes (rather presciently in 2001, just before the dawn of the ongoing "war on terror") (138). In the same anthology, Frank P. Tomasulo echoes these concerns: "Although set in the past, Spielberg's 'antiwar' film has ideological ramifications that affect spectators now and in the future, and provide the self-perpetuating jingoistic justifications for future unilateral military invasions, incursions and interventions" (127). Though made after the Gulf War, *Saving Private Ryan* clearly still presents an image of war as "a necessary and life-defining experience" (138); it is under this type of narrative that films about the Gulf War are operating. The Gulf War's failures as a "war" in the Spielbergian sense are likely responsible for how rarely the War has made it to the screen, and how it is generally not fodder for more traditional "war films."

Remarkably few feature films have been made that portray the events of the Gulf War onscreen, especially

given the popularity of Vietnam and World War II films. It appears that the desire to weave the Gulf War into the symbolic narrative, to create a cinematic "Gulf War" – the way Vietnam films have done for the Vietnam War, or World War II films have done for World War II – is simply not present. One explanation is that, as Baudrillard titled his controversial essay: "[t]he gulf war did not take place." While something definitely *did* take place, it was so radically different than our traditional understanding of war that we may not even be able to call it 'war' anymore. Žižek describes this as well:

It is already a journalistic cliché that a new form of war is now emerging: a high-tech war in which precision bombing, and so on, does the job, without any direct intervention by ground forces […]. Old notions of face-to-face conflict, courage and so on, are becoming obsolete (2002, 35).

Because of this conflict between what war is symbolically supposed to mean and what the Gulf War actually was, filmmakers have sidestepped the war itself or otherwise distanced the war-time events from it, often depending on older films or other narratives as shorthand, as opposed to showing the purported "real catastrophes" of war. These issues may be less pressing now than the were before the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and their attendant violence, but the legacy of the first Gulf War is still well worth teasing out.

In one of the *Jarhead'*s (Sam Mendes, 2005) most intriguing sequences, the men are assembled in a movie theatre, watching *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979). The men all sing along loudly with "The Ride of the Valkyries" as, in the film, the helicopters prepare to attack a small Vietnamese town. The theatre is full of cheers and Anthony Swofford, our hero, clutches his face ecstatically as women and children are showing fleeing the hail of bullets dramatically unleashed by Robert Duvall and his men. There is a clear irony intended in the scene. Though *Apocalypse Now* is known as a quintessential *anti-war* film and that scene in particular is famous for its portrayal of the "real" horror of war, for all the jarheads, it is thrilling.

In a 2005 *Harper's Magazine* article, Lawrence Weschler discussed this sequence at length in light of Anthony Swofford's claim in his memoir (of which *Jarhead* is an adaptation) that "Vietnam films are all pro-war" (quoted on Weschler

In both Edward Zwick's *Courage Under Fire* (1996) and Jonathan Demme's *The Manchurian Candidate* (2004), Denzel Washington plays a Gulf War veteran investigating

"That may be true, but the pop cultural recycling that dominates the film makes it much more a film about films than a film about war."

65). Weschler describes how Walter Murch, editor of the original Valkyrie sequence, was the one had to "harrow the distinctly unsettling task of revisiting and revisioning a scene he labored over for months almost thirty years ago [...] this time, alas, in an entirely new and even more disturbing light" (66). Weschler posits that the Valkyrie scene's implication of the audience in war pornography "somehow magically [serves] to inoculate the film against any form of eventual co-optation," and suggests that *Jarhead* represents "the unlikely achievement of a war film that might in fact never be susceptible to military pornographic co-optation" (76). That may be true, but the pop cultural recycling that dominates the film makes it much more a film about films than a film about war. *Jarhead* – and the other Gulf War films I will discuss – reflect a problem removed from the actual human death in warfare: the (always failing) measure of experience against representation, to the point that representations overwhelm experience. Postmodernism is a well-worn trope, but it is one that fits here: the eliding of "real" wartime catastrophes to place the war into comprehensible narrative tropes, the avoidance of consideration for the people on the other side of the buttons that were pushed (because that would require them to have existed).

an incident that took place during the war, only to learn that soldiers he had assumed were killed by the Iraqis were actually the victims of "friendly fire," the real life leading cause of death during the war. In the former, he plays Lieutenant Colonel Nathaniel Serling, charged with investigating the possibility of giving a posthumous Medal of Honor to Captain Karen Walden (Meg Ryan). The film follows Serling on his interviews of the men who were with Walden on her last mission. Though the men's stories do not match, but there is pressure from the army and from the White House to close the investigation and award Captain Walden the medal, as it would make her the first woman to receive the Medal of Honor for combat duty. The bluntly stated desire of the government, a big Other[1] if there ever was one, to create a traditional story of heroism about the war is emphasized with an underlying sense that "what really happened" will never match the official, more traditional story.

The film is heavy-handed about Serling's negotiation of traditional ideas of heroism and courage in his investigation; it becomes more than his job, it becomes a quest to find a 'true' story of uncomplicated heroism. This is meant to be motivated by Serling's inability to cope with his own wartime experience, in which

he gave the order to fire on a friend's tank, assuming it to be an enemy vehicle. He tells a reporter: "I just want to get something clear this time, just want somebody to be a hero." A rare unmotivated flashback – one that is not driven by a story being told by one of the soldiers Serling interviews – shows Walden singing "Angel from Montgomery," including the line "just give me one thing that I can hold onto," implying that she, like Serling, longs for a something simpler and more clear-cut than her own experience of war. However, though the film constantly alludes to the failures of official narratives of war, it does resolve with what the viewer is meant to take as "the truth": it turns out that one of Captain Walden's men shot her after disobeying an order of hers. When help arrives for the group, whose helicopter crashed in a dangerous area, Walden sends her men ahead to save a more severely injured man. She tells them to come back for her. Instead, when they have boarded the rescue helicopter, Staff Sergeant Monfriez (Lou Diamond Phillips) tells the pilot that Captain Walden is dead, paving the way for the planes that came with their rescue to firebomb the area. Her death was caused not by an Iraqi soldier, but indirectly by her own men and directly by the American bombing. Though the Iraqi enemies presumably were the ones who shot down Walden's helicopter, the real enemy turns out to be within the army itself. The shooting that another group just above them heard as they were being rescued is revealed to have been Karen, fighting right up until the end. In other words, the official story put forth by the big Other turns out to be true. *Courage Under Fire* – through Denzel Washington's character – asks the viewer to distrust the authority of the army and the simplicity of the "official story," but in the end, this authority is reaffirmed. They are right to honour Walden: she *is* a hero, clear and simple. And so is Serling: the opening sequence of the film shows the first part of a tank battle. Incidentally (and notably), all the Iraqi combatants

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[1] In Lacanian theory, the big Other is the illusion of an outside subject that orders the world: God, for instance, is a big Other. "The Army" is also a big Other.

are seen through the technological distortion of night vision goggles. In the chaos, one of his men mistakes a tank from their squadron as belonging to the enemy and Serling gives the order to fire. The scene ends abruptly as he realizes that the tank he has

literally tell Serling that he should learn to forgive himself. It turns out that the President can put that medal on Walden's pretty little girl just as the White House aide had hoped, in a sequence that is edited in parallel to Serling's visit to his dead friend's

the (corporate-owned) media. The traditional narrative of heroism that we see being told over and over on television reports on the film's faux-CNN – in the exact same "talking points" – about Vice-Presidential candidate Raymond Shaw's single-

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"It is almost as though the story was produced in order to justify the deaths and work them into a comprehensible Hollywood narrative, so unfathomable is it that the men could have been killed by the invisible Iraqi enemy."

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hit was that of his friend; his actions throughout the film, including his drinking problem, are presented as stemming from his guilt surrounding this battle. Toward the end of the film, Serling allows a reporter to listen to an audio-tape of the proceedings of that night. The other half of the opening battle sequence is revealed: after the incident, Serling orders all tanks to turn on their lights, which, as his commanding officer asserts, prevents the loss of countless more lives (but notably because they would have killed each other, not because the Iraqis would have killed them). The problem is not that Serling is not a hero, it is that he cannot see himself that way.

The effect of the broken up battle scene is similar to that of the initial mismatches in the men's stories. The latter occurs *not* because everyone perceives events differently and there can be no uncomplicated "truth," but because the men are consciously lying to conceal the "objective" truth. Serling is presented throughout the film as a failure, an image of the American soldier robbed of his heroism, but then the film rehabilitates him. The sin for which he is punishing himself – through his drinking, his self-imposed exile from his family, his willingness to ruin his career in the army, the only thing he has ever wanted to do – is proven to be eminently forgivable, both by the viewer, who learns that Serling saved more men than he harmed, and by the dead man's parents, who

parents. It is as if *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, 1941) were remade, only Kane's friends *do* have all the answers, and instead of being burned, Rosebud is placed in a museum.

In *The Manchurian Candidate*, the battles that American soldiers fight are not with themselves and each other, but they are still pointedly not with Iraqis. It turns out that the battle that Ben Marco (Washington) and his comrades remember – one for which Raymond Shaw was a decorated hero – was in fact a false memory, implanted by corporate America. The film never shows us any parts of the war that *actually happened* in the diegesis. The events that the soldiers falsely remember are rendered in a computer-generated, cartoon-like format. Unlike in *Courage Under Fire,* which begins with a montage of real news footage (as if to establish that the Gulf War really *did* take place), *The Manchurian Candidate* makes sure that everything the viewer actually sees of the war (besides a long sequence at the beginning of the film that shows the soldiers playing poker and listening to rap music at the front) turns to be actually false: for Ben Marco, his frightening discovery is that the Gulf War – at least, the Gulf War he remembers – did *not* take place.

It would be easy (and perhaps, partially correct) to read the film as simply an allegory for the manner in which the war was sold through

handed heroism in battle turns out to be nothing more than a manufactured story to jumpstart Shaw's career, just as much as a simulacrum as Baudrillard's vision of the Gulf War as media puppet show. At one point, corporate-sponsored political candidate Shaw tells Ben: "I am the enemy," effectively erasing the threat of any external enemy. This is especially compelling given the film was made while the United States was again engaged in a controversial war in Iraq.

However, the question that is never asked about the invented battle and the time Shaw and Marco spend time under hypnosis is this: why did the two young men who were murdered – by a hypnotized Marco and Shaw, respectively – need to be killed? Why could they have not been brainwashed as well? Their deaths seemed to feel natural because they needed to fulfill genre requirements. Though *The Manchurian Candidate* is not a war film, it is a conspiracy film. It would not have been a very good conspiracy without the discovery that the men had been killed by their own leaders. There is a circular logic to the deaths: they are part of a plot to use the war in order to make Shaw into a hero, but the only sensible explanation for their deaths is that they were really at war. It is almost as though the story was produced in order to justify the deaths and work them into a comprehensible Hollywood narrative, so unfathomable is it that the men could have been killed

by the invisible Iraqi enemy. This filmic representation of "friendly fire" involves a much more complex chain of reasoning than the earlier *Courage Under Fire*, which was produced more recently after the war and perhaps reflected a desire to redeem or at least make sense of all the actual friendly

experience – one in which the mythic face-to-face encounter with the enemy is replaced by night-vision goggles and fire-bombing – as a way for Americans to kill each other and prove themselves, the Gulf War becomes a comprehensible experience.

Oedipal drama. The film makes this an inescapable conclusion. Shaw bluntly describes their relationship in dialogue, at one point blaming his mother for breaking up his relationship with the only woman he has ever cared for. In a later scene, Eleanor is shown

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"Any political statement about the growing influence of corporate money on American politics is mowed over by the family drama: the war is narrativized into politics, which are then narrativized into an Oedipal drama."

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fire deaths which occurred. By 2004 when *The Manchurian Candidate* came out, the wounds were not as fresh.

In both cases the films deal with the erasure of the enemy by redirecting the enmity to an enemy within – either to other people in the army or to corporate and political power brokers. Essentially, we can take this as evidence that the Iraqis are *Homo sacer*, a concept that Žižek borrows from Giorgio Agamben. Agamben uses the term – *sacer* meaning a mix of the sacred and profane, referring to a member of a society who is banished and separate from the rules – in terms of "the radical transformation of politics into the realm of bare life" (120). Žižek deploys it to discuss the way war is now presented, with the enemy treated as an entity separate from humanity. If the enemy is outside the bounds of humanity, it is impossible to conceive of meeting him face-to-face on the battlefield, as in traditional warfare. In having the slain soldiers turn out to have been killed by other Americans – and at least in part by American corporate capitalism in *The Manchurian Candidate* – the filmmakers create an enemy that can be faced and comprehended. In re-casting the disconnected war

"Fuck Politics": The Erasure of the Political

It would be difficult to argue that a film about a US presidential election erases politics, but *The Manchurian Candidate's* politics are notably non-partisan: the television news coverage that dominates the film is notable in its careful refusal to name a political party or stance, where the real CNN always includes an (R) or (D) after a politician's name. The avoidance of party labels is only the tip of the iceberg: it soon becomes clear that "politics" are just a backdrop for other intrigues. It becomes clear that the official motivation for the brainwashing scheme – a bid to further the political influence of Manchurian Global, a fictional corporation with a name retrofitted to the title of the film's forbearer – is not the only issue at play. The formidable Senator Eleanor Shaw (Meryl Streep) betrays her co-conspirators to increase her own power and that of her family, as well as to keep her adult son close to her. Any political statement about the growing influence of corporate money on American politics is mowed over by the family drama: the war is narrativized into politics, which are then narrativized into an

caressing Raymond's bare chest and kissing her hypnotized son on the lips. This utterly literal take on the Oedipal drama – and the figure of the overbearing mother of the 1960s film transformed into a senator (who could presumably could be a presidential candidate herself) – implies a kind of desperation to frame the Gulf War as a familiar conspiracy theory. In both *The Manchurian Candidate* and *Courage Under Fire* the catastrophe of war is scaled down to a catastrophe of individual psychology: the catastrophe is that the war was not a war. This allows the characters to avoid the impossibility of the sexual (or really, any human) relation, the Lacanian idea that true intersubjectivity remains impossible due to the barrier of language, an incomplete system of signification. In *Courage Under Fire,* Serling's guilt allows him to avoid his wife and family; in *The Manchurian Candidate* Ben's being haunted by his hypnosis is a convenient way for him to explain the emptiness of his current life and as for Shaw – he can just blame his mother. For a war against Iraq and protecting Kuwait, the Gulf War seems to have very little to do with Iraqis or with Kuwaitis.

Of course, *The Manchurian Candidate* is not a story that originates

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[2] Both films are also based on a novel by Richard Condon. However, the 2004 film also lists George Axelrod's 1962 screenplay as a source and Tina Sinatra, whose father starred in the 1962 film. is a producer. Both of these would indicate to me that the 2004 remake is a clear attempt to capitalize on the success of the earlier film.

with the Gulf War – it is a remake of John Frankenheimer's 1962 film of the same name.[2] The remake updates the source of the brainwashing (and rewriting of battlefield events) from the Communist threat to corporate capitalism. In bringing the Gulf War into a familiar framework (instead of creating a somehow Gulf War-specific

Iraqis as, he intimates, they would be right to do.

For all these Marines, their only prior impression of war is through war movies. In the aforementioned *Apocalypse Now* scene, it becomes clear that any action is good action. For the Marines in the film, war is no longer about courage or protecting

When the group has been convinced to leave the room out of respect to the traumatized man, Swofford remains, demanding to watch the homemade pornography again, because, he tells Troy: "I want to see what it's like to watch somebody else fuck your girlfriend." The implication is that Swofford cannot understand anything unless he sees it on a screen – and it furthers his obsession with the idea that his girlfriend is cheating on him. Here, one catastrophe replaces another. When all the men are having a party after the cease-fire has been called, Swofford realizes that he has never fired his gun, so he shoots it into the air. His comrades follow; Staff Sergeant Sykes (Foxx) fires his machine gun one-handed, while smoking a cigar, perhaps thinking of *Scarface* (Brian De Palma, 1983). War is not about two countries fighting each other for principled reasons, it is about getting to act like you are in the movies.

"Film references recur continuously in *Jarhead*: it is as though the characters would not know what to do without the movies..."

story), Demme is pushing the viewer to see the Gulf War as interchangeable with earlier wars. In short, in allowing the Gulf War to be tied to other narratives, instead of treating it as a new kind of war, the film disguises many of the anxieties that might arise from the disappearance of the "face-to-face" encounter as the essentially "real" experience of war.

Jarhead follows a Marine sniper squadron through their training and deployment in the run-up to the Gulf War. As the men are being trucked through the desert, one of them voices familiar objections to the war, noting that they are just protecting Kuwait because of its oil reserves and pointing out that the United States trained Saddam Hussein's army and provided them with weapons when they were at war with Iran. "Fuck politics," Troy says, "We're here. All the rest is bullshit." All the men nod in agreement and this is the end of any acknowledgement by the men that they are in the desert for any reason other than to "get some action." When the Marines arrive in "the desert," as the film vaguely describes it, they are greeted by their commanding officer, who proceeds to give a crowd-pleasing speech that equates loud enthusiasm with sexual arousal. He shows the troops a picture of one of "Saddams's victims," a small child injured through chemical warfare. He does this only to tell them that while their mission is currently to protect the Saudi oilfields until the politicians catch up with events and allow them to go kill some

one's country or discerning right from wrong: it is merely about being part of a story, of getting in on the action. More than something to focus on to avoid the deadlock of social antagonism, the catastrophic becomes the whole point. Film references recur continuously in *Jarhead*: it is as though the characters would not know what to do without the movies, and Mendes uses them as cinematic shorthand. As they do, they ironically re-enact scenes that were originally known for showing the brutality of man, but these imitations are stripped of their original horror. The scene in which the bored men pit scorpions against each other is a version of the opening scene of Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969), but it is clearly taken lightly by all the men. The early training sequence trades on ironic music tracks (like playing "Don't Worry, Be Happy" as recruits are verbally and physically abused) and the viewer's pop cultural knowledge of the stereotypically cruel drill sergeant (like in *Full Metal Jacket* [Stanley Kubrick, 1987]). The difference is that in the Kubrick film, the drill sergeant's cruelty had devastating consequences; in *Jarhead*, the man's abuse means nothing at all – it is brushed aside with a snappy voiceover. In another scene, the Marines, while on a break from the front, gather to watch a tape of *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978) that someone's wife has sent. They cheer until they realize that the film has been taped over with the man's wife having sex with her neighbour.

The glossing over of the political in war films is hardly new: one hardly expects real political engagement from Hollywood. What does distinguish *The Manchurian Candidate* and *Jarhead* is that they acknowledge a political dimension and only *then* dismiss it bluntly. They refuse to search for answers or to offer up any historical or political explanations for the perceived "meaninglessness" of the war, engaging instead in reproducing old stories in new settings. In couching the story in terms of the men's experiences of generic Cold War-era narratives, *Jarhead* is making interesting implications about how Hollywood shapes even our most extreme experiences. However, it ultimately does not provide any resolution to the anxiety that arises upon the realization that the modern version of warfare can never match up to the stories we try to tell about it, or even to what the word "war" is supposed to mean.

"Getting Action"

Perhaps the emphasis on traditional narratives of war, which elevate the experience of a face-to-face meeting with the enemy, explains why Swofford and his colleagues have so much difficulty dealing with the "new warfare" in *Jarhead*. The scene in which a bored and stir-crazy Swofford

threatens to kill fellow marine Fergus over a petty argument is shot intimately, with medium close-ups in shot-reverse shot formation. The scene emphasizes how *close* Swofford is to Fergus, showing the gun he is holding in Fergus's face in the frame in both set-ups. Contrast this with the tower scene, in which Swofford and Troy finally get the opportunity to kill an enemy, but are ultimately not needed, as air support arrives in time. It emphasizes the men's distance from their Iraqi target: the audience only ever sees the doomed man through the crosshairs of Swofford and Troy's rifle sights.

The latter scene emphasizes the trauma of the "new warfare" for the men who fight it. The "system" is still prepared for "old war," in which snipers are important, so Troy and Swofford feel cheated that they were essentially flown to the front to see people die and clean out toilets. The film narrates clearly the difference between the "real" terror of the scorched bodies the men find on the "Highway of Death" and the Real truth that war can be executed technologically, through air support. The positioning of this scene in the film is important. It suggests that the real trouble with war is not the sheer number of Iraqis killed, but that these strong American men are being primed up to fight the enemy – their training tells them that "without their guns, they are nothing" – and that ultimately they will never be able to live up to these expectations. The face-to-face encounter that Žižek mentions as being essential to the experience of warfare is denied by the presence of 'air support.' If the traditional soldier is becoming obsolete, how are we to conceive of any narrative of warfare? *Jarhead* dramatizes this problem, but it does not offer an answer. For all its cynicism in the training sequence, *Jarhead* asks the viewer to sympathize with the military man, who, like Lt. Col. Serling in *Courage Under Fire,* so identifies himself with his symbolic mandate that he is not able to conceive of life outside his role. As Swofford's voiceover explains, the Marines demand this kind of institutional association: "A flashlight was a moonbeam. A pen was an ink stick. My mouth was a cum receptacle. A bed was a rack. A wall was a bulkhead. A

shirt was a blouse." The organization re-establishes the symbolic to the point of having its own language, striving to control every aspect of the recruit's life, eventually even winning over Swofford, who spent his first few days at the base taking laxatives and reading Camus. The film ends with Swofford's voice over explaining that no matter what else a Marine does, part of him is always at war; as he looks out a window – which is transformed into a blurry shot of camouflaged figures trudging along with their guns. "We are still in the desert," Swofford's narration intones. What seems to haunt Swofford even more than his war experience is his *non-war* experience: the emphasis in the film is on the long time spent waiting for the war to start, waiting for his skills to be needed, waiting for his rite of passage, for his face-to-face encounter. The messiness and pointlessness of Swofford's experience in the Gulf – at one point he runs through incoming fire, some of it from American planes, to bring someone a dead battery – seems to be *why* Swofford feels stuck in the desert. Wartime experience will never match up with the official narrative.

The "Media War"

All four films being discussed here acknowledge the role played by the press in creating the publicly consumed version of the Gulf War: *Courage Under Fire* and *Three Kings* (David O. Russell, 1999) both feature reporters as key characters; *The Manchurian Candidate* is constantly underscored by a running cable news broadcast, which appears in various characters' apartments and even in the street; and *Jarhead* actually shows the squadron being told what they can and cannot say in speaking to a reporter, emphasizing the role of the military in shaping public opinion by controlling media access to stories. At the beginning of *Three Kings,* Conrad exclaims "The only action we've seen is on CNN" – the war is a media war even to the people *in* the war. The measure to which, as far as anyone was concerned, news coverage *was* the war, calls to mind the surreal real-life situation described by Paul Patton in his introduction to Baudrillard:

Occasionally, the absurdity of the media's self-representation as purveyor of reality and immediacy broke through, in moments such as those when the CNN cameras crossed live to a group of reporters assembled somewhere in the Gulf, only to have them confess that they were also sitting around watching CNN in order to find out what was happening (2).

Baudrillard's discussion of the war's "not taking place" – published while the bombing was ongoing – emphasizes the extent to which the Gulf War was seen as a product of media bombast.

This is most clearly emphasized in *Three Kings*, in which Major Gates' (George Clooney) *job* is to handle a reporter. The film closes with an ironic series of subtitles explaining what happened to the characters at the end of the film, indicating that the three men – who had broken a ceasefire and gotten one of their own killed in an attempt to steal Kuwaiti gold from 'Saddam' – were given honorable discharges thanks to reporter Adriana's coverage of their heroism in helping the Iraqi refugees across the border to Iran. Clooney's character asks Adriana to cover the story because he knows that the army would not discharge them if they are shown as heroes on CNN, for fear of bad press. The film's cynicism about the press lends it an air of authenticity, implying that the viewer is seeing what 'really happened.' However, the film itself is trading in its own fantasmatic version of the war – and of Iraq – as will be discussed later.

In *Courage Under Fire*, reporter Tom Gardner is represented at first as a villain, harassing Serling about the events to the point of calling him at home and following him around, but in the end turns out to be a sympathetic figure. He is the one who tells Serling that he is a hero; there could be no heroes without the press to tell us they are heroes. The events at the front, however feature no news crews, which – after the montage of CNN footage that opens the film – indicates that the viewer is seeing the parts of the war that they were not told about on television. But does acknowledging the role of the media really prove that the filmmakers are giving the viewer the 'inside story' that the press did not want to tell them? Of course Baudrillard would say no, claiming that the images generated by the press

are simulacra of a war, and that film images that trade in authenticity are no more 'real.' Given the way in which *Courage Under Fire* actually upholds the "official" narrative, and the value of having an official narrative, it becomes clear that the acknowledgement of media construction is nothing more than lip service.

Iraq Without Iraqis: The Enemy Disembodied

Even more than the erasure of any Iraqi responsibility for US deaths, Iraq war films are reluctant to show Iraqis. In *Courage Under Fire*, the Iraqis are seen through night-vision goggles and as shadowy figures. Baudrillard observes in discussing the historical Gulf War that "[t]he isolation of the enemy by all kinds of electronic interference creates a sort of barricade behind which he becomes invisible" (40). It is not surprising that technology (especially the dull green of night-vision goggles) plays a large role in most of these films, emphasizing the distant and almost fantasmatic nature of the enemy. The constantly suggested presence is analogous to Žižek's "stain," which is "not a signifier but rather an object resisting symbolization, a surplus, a material leftover circulating among the subjects and staining its momentary possessor" (2001, 8). The utter suppression of the Iraqis in three of the four films suggest that the sense of the invisible enemy that was created in the coverage of the war has carried through, reducing the Iraqis (and Arabs in general) to stains upon the desert landscape. Žižek further describes the stain thusly:

in what I see, in what is open in my view, there is always a point where "I see nothing," a point which "makes no sense," i.e. which functions as the picture's stain – this is the point from which the very picture returns the gaze, looks back at me (15).

The sight of "the stain" is a traumatic experience, just as is any encounter with Iraqi humanity in three of our four films. Because of the erasure of the Iraqi people, the war becomes almost meaningless, as if the characters are at war for the sake of war. Because there is no way to make sense of the Iraqis without the realization of the war's technological horrors, they are simply erased from their own homeland.

Although the bulk of *Jarhead* takes place in the desert near the Iraqi border, the viewer sees only three

encounters with Iraqi or other Middle Eastern people. In the first, scenario, the squadron encounters a group of men who have apparently had one of their camels die and so are wandering the desert on foot. When Swofford goes to speak to them, the camera does not follow him, as it usually does. Nor is there a voiceover allowing the viewer privileged access to Swofford's thoughts, as there sometimes is. Instead, it stays with the anxious squadron, building suspense; Swofford and the man he is talking to are shown, stain-like, in a hazy long shot. It is as though in going to talk to an Arab man face-to-face is analogous to entering another world. Shrouded in mist, absent of voiceover, the encounter with the other cannot be symbolized, and is never further explained in the film.

The next encounter, such as it is, is with the charred bodies the men run across on the bombed "highway of death." Though we can see the bodies their features are blackened by charring and further obscured by darkness. Also, the men are disturbed by their lifelikeness: it is not the fact that there are dead Iraqis that seems to bother Swofford, it is the fact that they were trying to run. These blackened bodies that are not human (according to the *Homo sacer* doctrine to which the men ascribe) are disturbing in their insistence that they *are* human. They are poorly lit and quickly passed over by the camera, as if looking at their charred and all too human flesh is impossible.

Even when Troy and Swofford *do* get close enough to see their enemy, it is still mediated by technology: Swofford (and the viewer) sees the man through the crosshairs of his gunsight as Troy says "That's what they look like, huh?" The way the film is 'supposed' to end – according to a narrative that prizes the face-to-face encounter with the enemy – is with Troy and Swofford successfully killing the man and learning what it truly *means* to be at war. But the stain of the Iraqi enemy resists being brought into this narrative: the "target" resists his convenient symbolization and cannot be made a comprehensible part of the picture. As Baudrillard puts it: "The Americans inflict a particular insult by not making war on the other, but simply eliminating him" (40).

This elimination is what Žižek discusses in terms of *Homo sacer* in *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*. In film, the stain, which resists symbolization, and the *Homo sacer* can in this case be conceived as overlapping. *Jarhead* appears to indict the dehumanization of the Iraqi enemy – consider the disgust with which the Marine who christens a corpse "Ahab the A-rab" is treated. However, it is telling that even in the film, the Iraqi people (and the civilians who died as result of the war) are still visualized as stains: this is not othering, it is elimination. Perhaps this is one of the ways that anxiety about redefinition of war is played out: rather than force the audience to accept the Iraqis as people on equal footing with the American soldiers, the filmmakers treat them as outside the symbolic order. However, they cannot be completely erased – in *Jarhead,* their absence is all too present. This underlines what we can see as the true Real: the cold, distanced methods that ensure fewer casualties – at least on 'our' side.

Three Kings: Love Thy Iraqi?

At first glance, *Three Kings* appears to correct the absence of the enemy that has been present in so many filmic versions of the Gulf War. The film opens with Troy (Mark Wahlberg) shooting a visible Iraqi in the neck. His friend Conrad (Spike Jonze) exclaims "I didn't think I'd actually get to see anyone shot in this war." The scene continues as he and several army colleagues go out into the desert on a mission to steal gold that Saddam Hussein supposedly stole from Kuwait, after pulling a map out

of a prisoner's rectum. Troy uses racial slurs like "towel head" and "camel jockey" to refer to the Iraqi enemy – he clearly has been led to see the Iraqis as *Homo sacer*. When the group drives into the Iraqi town where the bunker full of gold is supposed to be, they are accosted by the locals who think they have come to save them from Saddam, but they are scared of the Iraqis. At one point, Troy places a gun to the head of a woman who comes to him begging for milk for her baby, as if he is scared that she might come closer. Then, he is captured and tortured by a member of Saddam's army (a young father who joined the army for money, just as Troy himself did). Shortly after Troy's release he – his humanity and commitment to beating Saddam presumably awakened – approaches an Iraqi freedom fighter with a gun, but then, upon realizing that he had seen the man's wife shot earlier, gives him a bear hug and asks what he can do to help him. The switch from gun to hug marks a direct reversal of the earlier scene: Troy has learned to love his Iraqi neighbour.

Those two scenes sum up the journey of the soldiers in the film. The four men start out selfishly, planning to rob Saddam's bunkers "without firing a shot" – much like the "bloodless war" they have just finished not fighting – out only to get what they can from the war for themselves. By the film's end, they have come to understand the Iraqi resistance. The film also addresses political specificity more or less head-on, with Gates ruefully explaining that the Iraqi villagers are all expecting the Americans to come help them rise up against Saddam, despite the fact that Bush's call for them to rise up was, in his eyes, an abdication of responsibility. To prove their change of heart, they give up the gold to help a group of them cross the border into Iran. Russell was obviously trying to make a film that humanized Iraqis and protest the United States' unwillingness to risk casualties to help the Iraqi people overthrow Saddam.

However, it must be asked: are the Iraqi resistance fighters really believable as Iraqis? When Archie and Chief are walking with the group of refugees, Amir, the man who has just seen his wife murdered by Saddam's soldiers, explains that all his friend wants to be is a barber. He does not care whether he cuts Sunni or Shiite hair, he just wants to run his business. It is no doubt made easier for Troy Barlow and his friends to embrace these Iraqis as they appear to only want the capitalist American dream. They are in Iraq without being Iraqi: not only are they cheerful small businessmen, they are not even slightly sectarian, and they seem to actually *like* the American army. It seems awfully easy to love one's Iraqi neighbour, as Žižek would put it, when he turns out to be simply an American in funny clothes. Imagine a film in which George Clooney helped a vocally sectarian Muslim who advocated jihad and was virulently anti-American: it is doubtful that it would earn the same critical acclaim. This is not to say that there are not Iraqis like Amir and his friends, but rather that Troy Barlow and friends were not really forced to confront any Iraqis who are appreciably *different*. *Three Kings*, with its grainy film stock, cynicism about the role of the media in the war, and shots that actually show bullets penetrating internal organs, is most assuredly purporting to show "what really happened." But instead the fantasmatic nature of the film's story of American-Iraqi friendship ultimately underscores the final impossibility of an American *truly* embracing an Iraqi. Žižek's deadlock comes into play here: the film creates a fantasmatic relationship between Iraqi and American by erasing the difference between them.

Films dealing with the Gulf War may seem quaint in a decade, as the current conflict between Iraq and the U.S.-led coalition rages on. However, many of the ideas that Žižek proposes about the new state of warfare and its psychological meaning are revelatory in terms of the films that have dealt with the conflict. Žižek's use of Agamben's *Homo sacer* in terms of United States-Arab relations – and the importance of loving one's neighbour, even though they are truly *other* – is instructive in the way "the enemy" has been conceived in the post-Cold War world. Žižek's insistence that "in fact, that is the difficult test for Israelis today: 'Love thy neighbour!' means 'Love thy Palestinian' (who is the neighbour *par excellence*) or it means nothing at all" (2002, 116) can be just as easily applied to Americans dealing with the Arab other. Though "Saddam"

was deposed following an American invasion and was recently executed, the Gulf War – perhaps the only war that can truly be seen as a "war without war," in the Žižekian sense of "war without risk" – still has a great deal to tell us. The**se** films all have their own ways of resolving the tensions surrounding the unwarlike nature of the Gulf War. It is unsurprising that the common problem in all the films was the redefinition of the enemy, so absent were the Iraqi people from the 'official story' that the filmmakers could not conceive of symbolizing them at all. *Three Kings*, the only film to give an Iraqi a speaking part, makes a generous gesture, but ultimately erases any difference between Iraqis and Americans, effectively erasing their Iraqiness. And without the mythic "face-to-face" encounter that allows the soldier to prove himself, war becomes an empty experience. Gulf War cinema all seems to transparently attempt to give the war meaning for Americans. And the people who lived in the war zone? They are lucky to be extras.

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