WAR DOCUMENTARY BRINGS HOME THE DISTANT AND FORGOTTEN

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Lincoln Center is the cultural mecca of New York City. It's clear just stepping off the 66th Street subway stop, where it's not uncommon to find a musician hauling his or her cello onto the train or to see men finely dressed in tuxedos heading to or returning from a formal evening concert. The fanciful, choreographed water fountain is the heart of Lincoln Center, surrounded by iconic institutions such as the New York City Ballet, the New York Philharmonic Orchestra, and the Julliard School, among others. So it seemed to me a little out of the ordinary that my first trip there would be to see not a ballet, but a war documentary: *Restrepo*, part of the Human Rights Watch film festival at the Lincoln Center Film Society. It is a study of an American outpost in Afghanistan named after Juan Restrepo, a fallen medic in the soldiers' battle company. This is a serious documentary—not some ordinary war drama. It does not have the complex cinematic camera movements or the soaring music of *Saving Private Ryan*, or a love story such as the ones portrayed in *Pearl Harbor* and *Forrest Gump*. No, the genre of documentary does not invent such things, for the camera tells the unscripted story of real soldiers and their experiences. *Restrepo* is a powerful portrayal of war that I will never forget.

The setting of the film is the Korengal Valley. The "Korengal," as it is often referred to in the movie, lies in the border region dividing Afghanistan and Pakistan, sandwiched between the Afghan capital city of Kabul on the southwest and the Pakistani capital of Islamabad on the southeast. It is widely believed that many of the insurgents fighting the U.S. and NATO forces take refuge in this border region. As the movie opens, video footage from military helicopters takes the viewer on an aerial tour of Afghanistan's rugged terrain. We see the sharp mountains and desolate landscape. It looks so different from the busy cosmopolitan urban landscape outside the theater, and this contrast creates tension. We know what awaits us and that we cannot turn back. We are there as a roadside bomb explodes under an armored vehicle. We are there as soldiers respond to an incoming attack on their outpost. With barely enough time to throw on their armored vests and wearing only boxers and combat boots, they shoot back as bullets swirl around them. We are there for lighthearted moments of downtime too, and the painful moments when death and loss come to the soldiers.

And so this documentary is far more powerful than a long news report or a composed history lesson. It is a human drama, a human story, about real people who might otherwise be forgotten. In making this film, independent journalist Sebastian Junger visited the battle company five times between 2007 and 2008. In his accompanying book *War*, he recounts a combat scene where two soldiers, Private First

Class Timothy Vimoto and Private Tad Donoho, come under machine gun and grenade attack. Junger recounts that "Both men began returning fire, bullets kicking up dirt all around them, and at one point Donoho saw Vimoto open his mouth as if he were about to yell something. No sound came out, though; instead, his head jerked back and then tipped forward. He didn't move again" (18). The death of Vimoto is tragic and by associating a name to a death, it becomes personal for the reader like the viewer.

We see the aftermath of another U.S. soldier's death in *Restrepo*. In the scene, soldiers quickly cover his body while others come closer to inquire what happened as the chaos continues around them. One soldier lets out a wailing scream and sobs, lamenting the loss of a friend and fellow comrade-in-arms. His grief pierces the theater. I am crying and see that others around me are too. We are gripped, drawn in by this human trauma. Soldiers are typically portrayed as tough and resilient and to see this moment of pain and frailty is overwhelming. There is a moment of collective emotion in the theater; we are mourning the loss along with the soldier, and perhaps too, lamenting the absurdity of war. We are now partly connected to the soldiers from a distance; the war begins to come home.

Yes, we are partly connected, but only partly. We could see glimpses of war and hear what combat is like, but we could not smell the war, or touch it, or make it real and tangible. For as much as I took in what I saw and my emotional reaction to it, it was still not a full sensory experience. At the same time there was a huge disconnect as I sat in the air-conditioned comfort of a New York City theater. Many in the audience were likely being introduced to this war for the first time, even though it was approaching its tenth year. Why was there such a disconnect? What about everyone else who hadn't seen this film and didn't give even this short amount of time to think about what's happening in Afghanistan? I would be remiss not to give credit to the audience in the theater and all those who have seen the movie or have attempted to learn about Afghanistan by reading about the war or having a conversation with a veteran. Indeed, any of this is better than not having any consciousness of what is happening over there.

As an illustration of how disconnected some may be to the war in Afghanistan, it is useful to look at empirical evidence. In 2009, the Pew Research Center found that 38 percent of Americans who do not follow the news from Afghanistan "feel the news can be so depressing they would rather not hear about it," and "27 percent say they feel guilty for not following the news from Afghanistan more closely" ("Most Say"). To tap the pulse of Americans and their views on war, *Christian Science Monitor* reporter Michael Ollove, who labels Afghanistan an "invisible" war, visited York, Pennsylvania, and drew sharp contrasts with how the town views this war compared to World War II. He found that during the 1940s World War II was "inescapably Topic A—and probably every other letter of the alphabet as well—in York as it was in every other small town or big city in America" (Ollove). By contrast, he found that Leada Dietz, a

York resident and activist, described Afghanistan as a "forgotten" war. "It's almost as though there is no war," she said (qtd. in Ollove). Dietz's remarks expose a blind spot in the American psyche.

Ollove offers an explanation as to why Americans are not as engaged as they once were. He cites the lack of a draft, and the Bush Administration's decision to prevent the public from seeing the flag-draped coffins arriving back in the United States (Ollove). Even after the Obama Administration overturned this prohibition, the media still does not show these images on a regular basis, if at all. Ollove also lists the economic downturn and "war fatigue" as other causal factors for American ambivalence, or rather, blunt indifference.

Ollove also cites a Bush-era tax cut as evidence that even during war time Americans are not sharing any sort of financial burden. Andrew Bacevich, a professor of international relations at Boston University, a Vietnam veteran, and the father of a soldier killed in Iraq, agrees. "The policies of holding Americans harmless renders the war remote and unreal for most," he says. "Americans are not asked to participate, and only minimally experience the various effects of one of the longest wars in our history" (qtd. in Ollove). It is useful to look back at our history and remember Vietnam. Though many university students weren't even born during this era, it should be recalled that the draft was in place at this time. The future then for so many Americans was uncertain, not knowing whether they would be called up and sent to fight. Today, with an all-volunteer force, that uncertainty and immediacy has all but disappeared.

While the lack of a draft and the absence of images of the dead seem to be major causes of indifference, they are not the only ones. Some argue it is television and the dominance of pop culture that keeps Americans from paying more attention to the war. Army Reservist Craig Trebilcock says, "I don't think the average person thinks about these wars at all. They're more concerned about what's going on in 'Lost' or who's winning 'American Idol' than what the country is doing overseas" (qtd. in Ollove). It is quite possible that some Americans prefer to be preoccupied with entertainment and reality television than the reality of what's happening in Afghanistan. It is much more cheerful and uplifting to watch a drama or comedy than it is to see war footage or a video of coffins and soldiers dying. David Carr, a flim critic for *The New York Times*, makes a similar point in his review of *Restrepo*. As he says,

> for the most part public interest and understanding of what American soldiers do on our behalf remains remarkably limited in wars that go mostly untelevised and undernoticed. American men and women fight, die and kill a long ways from home, and many want it to stay that way. (Carr).

Columbia University professor Bruce Robbins, who specializes in cultural theory, helps to explain this phenomenon of humans distancing themselves from suffering in

his essay "The Sweatshop Sublime." He describes the average lay person's attitude as: "It's fine if I know it's happening, as long as it's not happening right here" (91). All are arguing essentially the same thing, that we tend to prefer to keep a space between the evils and suffering of the world and our blissful spheres of existence. Physical distance is a factor related to war indifference, as the experience of watching *Restrepo* in Lincoln Center clearly reveals. Viewers are far removed from the terrain and combat environment of Afghanistan. Yet the medium of film and the subsequent reviews of the film, exposes the public to subjects that once may have seemed distant, but now are more accessible.

While visual reminders can provoke awareness, our instinct is to shrug off that awareness. In his essay, Robbins recounts a cartoon from the *The New Yorker* in which a person examines the label on a shirt collar, something many of us may have done ourselves. Robbins writes that we may or may not think about which country it came from and consider the potentially horrible conditions under which it was created. Whether we are committed to fighting global inequality or changing our buying habits, Robbins says the outcome is the same: in that instant, "you put on the shirt and forget about it" (85). He continues:

> Yet at the same time this insight is also strangely powerless. Your sudden, heady access to the global scale is not access to a commensurate power of action on the global scale. You have a cup of tea or coffee. You get dressed. Just as suddenly, just as shockingly, you are returned to yourself in all your everyday smallness. (3)

While Robbins is examining this behavior through the lens of sweatshop labor, it can be applied to our awareness about war. While watching *Restrepo*, the viewer may get angered, emotional, vow to take action, vow to care more, but once we leave the theater or turn off the movie, we may forget about it, and, like Robbins says, return to our "everyday smallness."

Why do we stay in our "everyday smallness"? Are we afraid to allow anything uncomfortable to penetrate our bubbles, shake our foundations, erode our veils of safety and security? Stepping outside of the smallness of ourselves can be a good thing. If we fail to shrug off our indifference, we are choosing to be left in the dark. So much is at stake. We may be headed back into complacency and pre-*9/11* thinking. A seemingly foreboding article published in the journal *Foreign Affairs* in 2000 by James M. Lindsay, an expert on the domestic response to American foreign policy, noted that "Americans ignore much of what happens overseas because they see little at stake" (4).

What were Lindsay's thoughts in 2000 on how to make Americans less apathetic about what happens overseas? "A renewed threat to American security would clearly do the trick," he says. "So might a recession" (Lindsay 7). Obviously, Lindsay's predictions were realized. In his *International Politics* article "Distant Suffering and

Cosmopolitan Obligations," scholar Andrew Linklater notes how interconnected the world is today. "Globalization has made affluent societies more aware of distant suffering than ever before," he writes (24). He drives home his view that we, in developed and advanced societies, have the moral obligation to care about what is happening in other parts of the world. I agree, we do have that obligation. Do we always act on it? Linklater says no: "For many, compassion alone can produce cosmopolitan behavior. But one must ask how far efforts to promote identification with 'distant strangers' can also encourage emotions such as shame and guilt" (27). Like faraway victims of a tsunami, or refugees fleeing a civil war, it is not too far of a stretch to say that U.S. and NATO soldiers in Afghanistan are also considered "distant strangers." I find this uncomfortably perplexing. We so remove ourselves from war by distance and apathy that other Americans, young men and women fighting a war, become distant to us.

In his review of *Restrepo*, Carr implicates us all in making the soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines the "distant strangers" that Linklater discusses. Carr, a member of the mainstream media establishment, appears almost shocked and surprised at his profession's limited war coverage. The film, again, seems to make up where the news media has fallen short. The time and effort the film makers invested has paid off. Carr interviewed Sergeant Brendan C. O'Byrne, who completed a tour in Afghanistan, who explained that *Restrepo* has served as a vehicle to help others see what soldiers go through in war. "I've received all sorts of e-mails from families and wives of soldiers who say the book and the movie helps them understand why their fathers or their brothers or husbands don't like to talk about what happened over there" (qtd. in Carr). In much the same way, the film fosters reconciliation between the soldier and the film viewer.

Surely, it would be foolish to think that by watching one film all the problems of indifference will be solved. Bringing back the draft and airing nightly news video of coffins will not solve this problem either. It is hard to raise consciousness about a war without treading into divisive views on war, policy, and ethics. Everyone comes to the subject with a different perspective and set of beliefs. Some reject the idea of war entirely. So how does one account for an appropriate amount of consciousness? Perhaps asking that question is absurd in itself. There is no litmus test; one does not reach a certain level of consciousness where one is no longer indifferent. There is no level, there is no judge, and there is no right or wrong course of action. Sure, it would be great if someone was so moved as to inquire about a local veteran's organization, volunteer with the USO to send care packages to soldiers in Afghanistan, or join a local peace movement. Perhaps watching the film will motivate someone to pay more attention to the news or pick up that free copy of *The New York Times* in Columbia's student center in Lerner Hall or attend a panel discussion on Afghanistan at the School of International and Public Affairs. Even more, as uncomfortably patriotic as it may

sound to some, even walking by the American flagpole can trigger a few seconds of thought, that while you are heading to class, a war is going on and people are dying.

If these suggestions seem like a stretch or are asking too much, I understand. Being close to death and war is very uncomfortable. I maintained my own distance when I was in the military. In 2008, I was an active-duty Sailor in the United States Navy assigned to the aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln (CVN 72), where I worked as a video journalist in media and public affairs. Our ship was a floating airport, a launching pad for fighter jets that dropped bombs on Iraq and Afghanistan. This was my first taste of war after being stationed in Japan and southern California earlier in my military life. I remember our captain and commanding officer telling the entire ship about the first mission. He told us how many insurgents we killed and congratulated everyone—from the sailors who loaded the weapons onto the planes to the pilots who flew the missions—on a "job well done." We were all complicit and it was disgusting to me, but what should I have expected? Perhaps I was too caught up in my "everyday smallness" or was too naïve to believe I could be in the military and escape a deployment to a danger zone. Yet the moment had arrived. I felt a sick feeling in my stomach: war was real now, and I did not like it. It was hard to process and hard to swallow that we had just taken the lives of other human beings. I wondered who they were; did they have families? Why did they hate us? Through all my naïve notions and novice understanding of war, I was glad I was sitting in an office, even if it was miles off the coast on a warship. I was glad I did not have to drop those bombs. Was it cowardice? Did it make me less patriotic? I think not. Did I realize then a future in the military was probably not for me? Yes.

Yet, in order to prosecute a war, someone must step up, someone has to drop those bombs. Like the soldiers in *Restrepo*, someone has to be willing to risk everything, leave his life behind, go off to war, and yes, be confronted with the reality of killing and taking life and be okay with it. In "The Moral Instinct," Harvard professor Steven Pinker explores not merely what is and is not moral in society, but the process of how we determine the difference. According to Pinker, "Moralization is a psychological state that can be turned on and off like a switch, and when it is on, a distinctive mind-set commandeers our thinking. This is the mind-set that makes us deem actions immoral ('killing is wrong'), rather than merely disagreeable" (34). Pinker points out the distinctions we make between "killing is wrong" (a universal norm) and "killing in war is not wrong" (34). We vote for the leaders who send men and women to war and funnel our tax dollars to fund this war. As distanced and distracted from the implications of our actions as we may be, are we not complicit?

Afghanistan may not be entirely forgotten, but the daily deaths of American soldiers has long ceased being front page news. How can we not care to think about others who are doing our killing for us, serving in a war many of us will never see, and picking up the arms many of us refuse to touch? Linklater offers insight into why we, people who believe that killing is wrong, let others do our killing for us in war. As he

explains, "Taboos against harming others can disintegrate rapidly when individuals and communities fear for their survival" (26). The events of *9/11* and the continued threat of terrorism seem to be at the root of this fear. The mechanism that allows us to go about our daily lives without thinking about the war and soldiers dying is the same one that offers us a buffer from daily fear or concern.

I do not wish to cast moral judgment or blindly advise students to consider a career in the military, nor do I advocate an unwavering support of the war in Afghanistan. It is not my place. I am not trying to convince peace activists to change their minds, nor am I affirming that people are more or less patriotic if they have served in the armed forces. I am merely attempting to raise the public's consciousness about a war that fails to pervade our daily lives. I am trying to bring home a war and its soldiers so they won't be forgotten. And I believe that seeing *Restrepo* can be a starting point.

I remember how the movie audience reacted to a soldier's death on screen with audible sobs. They got it; this moment of collective grief was rare and seemed profoundly significant. As philosopher Judith Butler noted in a French documentary on AIDS,

> [p]ublic mourning is not something we do because we have personal needs to grieve. We do have those, I'm sure, but I think public mourning gives value to lives, brings us into a kind of heightened awareness of the precariousness of lives and the necessity to protect them and perhaps to understand that that precariousness is shared across national borders. (Butler)

Butler's implication that this "public mourning" gives validation to those lost, can be extended to give validation to all those who have served, such as those portrayed in *Restrepo*, and to those who will die in this war and in future conflicts. Perhaps we sob because on some level we understand that they fight and die in war so that we don't have to.

The time has come for full awareness of this morbid reality. As Steven Pinker says, "it's hard to imagine any aspect of public life where ignorance or delusion is better than an awareness of the truth, even an unpleasant one. . . maintaining walls of ignorance around some topic, can corrupt all of intellectual life, proliferating error far and wide" ("In Defense of Dangerous Ideas"). Like Pinker, Robbins encourages us to step out of our ignorance. As Robbins says, maybe sometimes we need "a provocation intended to shock us out of lethargy" (6). I believe the film *Restrepo* can be just that shock we require. As Sebastian Junger said during a panel discussion featured on the movie's website, "How society deals with war morally is really, really important . . . I want people to walk out of the cinemas thinking 'my god, I didn't know war was like that" ("Restrepo"). In the same discussion, the late *Restrepo* photographer Tim Hetherington said, "What they go through needs to be seen and needs to be digested by the American public" ("Restrepo"). If anything, my hope is

that you see this film and decide for yourself. Go on the adventure that is *Restrepo*. Let the soldiers into your lives for that hour, hear their stories, experience the war, and bring it home. Perhaps in time they will no longer be the distant and forgotten.

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