The Ill-Health of the State

Tom Jennings

That "war is the health of the State" has proved an enduring motif in critiques of Western government policy. It was originally proposed by Randolph Bourne, an editor at the progressive *New Republic* journal, in the 1918 essay 'The State' in response to the acrimonious split among American intellectuals over US involvement in World War I – especially to erstwhile liberals such as his former Columbia University mentor, the educationalist John Dewey, whose justification argued that military intervention could foster democracy abroad. Carefully distinguishing between the institutions and mechanisms of the State and the circumscribed powers of elected representatives, Bourne contrasted the methods, measures and rationalisations employed by particular administrations with the relatively secret and unaccountable actions of the executive in deploying the State's monopoly over legitimate coercion; in gathering intelligence about and conducting diplomacy with foreign actors and embarking on and running wars.

Addressing the apparent success of patriotic fervour in mobilising active support for war and silencing dissent, Bourne's analysis shows how otherwise routine distinctions made in people's lives between State and government, nation, society and community blur or even disappear in wartime. This allows the country's resources to be smoothly channelled in the service of the military campaign by a population largely conforming to unite in the common effort. This situation is almost unthinkable in peacetime, with so many conflicting private and sectional agendas, interests and struggles being served, when the sanctification of the State is restricted to relatively archaic rituals and festivities. Thus Bourne saw the conditions of being at war as the 'State-ideal'; an expression of the group in its aggressive, competitive form. Claims to the pursuit of democracy, justice or any other positive good were just window-dressing in the panoply of propaganda, to be flouted in practice with impunity irrespective of the party-political complexion of particular regimes.

These insights resonate throughout twentieth-century history, extending older philosophies of power such as those of Hobbes, Machiavelli or Von Clausewitz into modern problematics of the acquiescence of the governed to decisions made supposedly on their behalf. Despite their historical specificity and fatal flaws in his then fashionable treatment of collective behaviour as reflecting 'herd instincts', with political agency restricted to upper-middle-class intellectuals and economics understood as external to politics, Bourne's ideas have influenced generations of dissidents facing condescensions of nationalism and moral superiority in times of international crisis. From World War II-era pacifism to the Cold War, and the Vietnam debacle to contemporary global Wars on Drugs or Terror, governments claim noble motives in justifying and organising themselves with military metaphors and modus operandi, so that 'war is the health of the State' seems as apposite now as ever. Mainstream current affairs coverage, meanwhile, still generally accepts at face value the protestations of power, taking seriously only minor policy differences among the 'loyal opposition'. Fictional representations, however, have more latitude – even in the mass media – and this survey of cinema and television narratives related to the Iraq War assesses their performance in communicating and negotiating the present health of the State in operations at home and abroad.

Internal Examinations

The March 2003 invasion of Iraq was preceded by massive mobilisations in opposition, including the largest demonstrations in history on February 15th with many millions on the streets across the world. But while Parliament and press focused on legalistic quibbling over United Nations resolutions, the US and UK governments pressed ahead with military force despite limited domestic enthusiasm and anti-war campaigns with unprecedented support among all sections of society. With existing news reportage conventions unsuited to exploring an apparently irreconcilable gulf between affairs of State and the popular will, new strategies in documentary film-making stepped up instead. Building on traditional techniques of narrative structuring and editing to organise material into approximations of 'real life', these were often pioneered by politically-motivated practitioners frustrated with normal formats, engaging viewers with variously explicit and eclectic artifice. After the 2004 commercial success of *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s demolition of George W. Bush and the obvious tragedy of Iraq, most of the films considered here thus base themselves – however loosely – on creative reconstructions of recorded events, characters and situations.

The first high-profile UK dramatisation of circumstances surrounding Iraq was Peter Kosminsky's *The Government Inspector*, which limited itself to imagining the personal background, dilemmas and attitudes of weapons-inspector Dr David Kelly and otherwise adhered to the Hutton Report findings into his suicide amid the scandal over dodgy data concerning Saddam's Weapons of Mass Destruction. So although the possibilities of 'docudrama' already seem somewhat stale in this rather pedestrian sentimental effort, with a cast of caricatures borrowed from political satirists elsewhere, it does capture the duplicity, incompetence and arrogance at higher levels of the government, civil service and media – spoiling their eagerness to draw lines in the sand and reinforcing suspicions that executive decision-making mechanisms are rotten to the core. This impression is enjoyably bolstered by Armando Iannucci's *In The Loop* (2009) – a riotous farce of hapless aides and media liaison officers transmitting conflicting messages between spin-dictators and politician pawns in both Whitehall and Washington – whose primary genius translates the banality of modern managerialism earlier nailed by *The Office*. Both films, however, readily assimilate to attacks on Blair and New Labour, excusing the State as well as remaining safely remote from ordinary folk.

Not so *The Road to Guantanamo*. Co-directed by Michael Winterbottom and Mat Whitecross, this quasi-documentary speaks for itself as the testimony of the 'Tipton Three' – a bunch of Brummie scallies who travelled to Pakistan in 2001 for Asif Iqbal's wedding. After taking an ill-judged detour to Afghanistan, they lost one of their number (Munir Ali, presumed dead) as the war there intensified, and were hoovered up for three years of abuse, humiliation and torture as 'enemy combatants' by the US-funded Northern Alliance and subsequently in Camp Delta, Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, before release without charge in 2004. Dubbed by Dubya as among "the worst of the worst" of global terrorists, the Three come over as completely apolitical, scarcely religious, even clueless fools (to start with), who emerged stronger and wiser thanks to steadfast friendship and the inspirational integrity of fellow Muslim prisoners.

As in other Winterbottom films the visual design, cinematography and editing mesh seamlessly in narrating the characters' point of view. The juxtaposition of contemporaneous news footage with to-camera commentary by the Three and staged reconstructions of their experiences effectively demonstrates the arrogance, stupidity and dishonesty of the 'War on Terror', as well as highlighting the media poodles' parroting of government propaganda. So despite videotape 'evidence' purporting to show them training with Osama bin Laden in 2000, Shafiq Rasul was working in Currys in Birmingham all that year and Rhuhel Ahmed also had cast-iron alibis. Lawyers privy to the evidence against them confirm that the 'intelligence' agencies had nothing to dent their story – as with hundreds of other anonymous detainees eventually released from Guantanamo with no media attention.

British nationality led Jack Straw to request the release of these likely lads from the global gulag. Ironically, 'Britishness' may have contributed to their ordeal, in the form of that particular postcolonial complacency about blundering into other people's misery (whether for solidarity, charity and/or mundane tourism). Family links with the Subcontinent obviously occasioned this journey, but the narrative tone is equally suggestive of stereotypical Brits abroad – and once the intense anxiety in Karachi for the Afghan people aroused their sympathy, macho overconfidence prompted the pointless jaunt even further out of their depth into the war zone. But in the present intensifying politicisation of space, the wrong body in the wrong place is presumed guilty. At home or abroad, the new world order hysterically redefines the transgression of borders (more generally, failing to fit official requirements) as criminal. And making waves in media space is suspect too – returning from the Berlin Film Festival, Rasul and Ahmed, along with the actors playing them, were detained at Luton Airport and questioned about their politics.

Rendition, directed by Gavin Hood (2007), recounts a broadly similar tale – innocent citizen caught in the tentacles of out-of-control State – but this time with everything but the bare bones of the true story source invented to shoehorn in sentimental family melodrama. Here a naturalised US scientist is spirited away for torture in Egypt

because of a hawkish intelligence chief's contempt for human rights. His desperate, heavily-pregnant wife quickly exhausts official brick-walls trying to discover what's happened to him, but fortunately the CIA flunkey hastily drafted to 'assist' interrogation not only suffers pangs of conscience, but personally arranges safe passage home. So, although along the way the false confessions elicited indicate the self-defeating nature of these brutal methods, the question of their potential effectiveness with the guilty is comprehensively ducked by over-egging the victim's squeaky-clean, loving-father-and-husband, all-American middle-class respectability – if not the neocon's carboard-cutout character[1].

Andrew Gaghan's conspiracy thriller *Syriana* (2005) also highlights a disillusioned Middle-East theatre spook, sick and tired of bungling controllers and corrupt careerist agendas. Parallel satellite narratives then fatefully converge, contrasting a naïve young diplomat drawn into Stateside branches of the same corporate, political, bureaucratic and Arab-government intrigues with a pathetic, patronising balancing-act of Pakistani guest-workers seduced into jihad by a sinister Saudi aristocrat. An equally interesting attempt to interweave full-spectrum perspectives – above-ground, in public chattering-class opinion – is Robert Redford's *Lions For Lambs* (2007) ensemble of respectable smugness, as a high-liberal academic, bitterly cynical journalist and reptilian war-cabinet Republican lock horns over the ethical, philosophical and political high-ground in the War on Terror. To his chagrin, the professor's students either shun politics or idealistically enlist to play decent active roles in Afghanistan – but the latter perish due to the stupidity of the senator's pet strategy. The film's awkward strength implies that mainstream views don't compute, mirroring each other's deficiencies but not transcending resulting impasses – echoing Randolph Bourne's lack of economic and class analysis in privileging individualist rationalism. But whatever the material or moral determinants of flawed aims, tactics and practices, the catastrophic consequences for those carrying out the dirty work of war overseas do come clearly into focus.

Signs and Symptoms

If lingering post-WWII hangovers concerning the inhuman insanities and human frailties of war were recuperated in mildly farcical televisual nostalgia like *Sergeant Bilko* and *Dad's Army*, the existential chaos, venality, culpable atrocity and horror attending misbegotten military adventures were brought decisively home in 1970 in Mike Nichols' adaptation of Joseph Heller's novel Catch-22, set among the USAF in Italy, and Robert Altman's *MASH*, based on surgeon Richard Hooker's stories about army medics in Korea and spawning the most successful TV series of all time. When Hollywood belatedly joined the Vietnam conflict, a generation of countercultural alumni temporarily institutionalised war-is-hell/SNAFU ('situation normal, all fucked-up') principles in vivid, hysterically overblown blockbuster laments whose 1980s innovations drowned out the gung-ho triumphalism of *The Green Berets* (John Wayne, 1968). Overall, failure to faithfully reflect the party-line convinced US rulers to strictly discipline the future mediation of foreign meddling.

Despite their notable paucity, cinema treatments of the 1991 Gulf War continued to focus on the traumatisation inherent to the logic of armed conflict conducted by the State's war machine and inevitably visited upon enemy populations and 'our boys' alike. Twelve years on, though very different and dissonant in tone and technique, the same can be said for Iraq – where the forensic film cataloguing of mistakes, misdemeanours and mayhem borrows extensively from real events at least minimally publicised elsewhere. The provenance from Vietnam is clearest in Brian De Palma's *Redacted* (2008), which replays the problematics of a sexualised murder spree by the vengeful American thugs of his *Casualties of War* (1989)[2] – complete with subsequent suffering consciences and bathetic redemption. Ironically, the director's omnipotent portentousness shortcircuits the new version's motif of cover-up and censorship wrecked by the plenitude of alternative contemporary means of communication – all meticulously faked in the film – particularly those employed by the perpetrators (video diaries, webcasts, cameraphones) as well as CCTV, Al-Jazeera bulletins, jihadist propaganda, and mainstream reportage and documentaries inadvertently eluding official editing/nobbling.

Battle For Haditha (Nick Broomfield, 2007) tackles a comparably disgusting incident in a far more careful, thoughtful manner. Exceptionally, it pays more than lip-service to both civilian and insurgent local perspectives. Its emotionally-cauterised Marines massacring the eponymous town's inhabitants, after a roadside bomb attack, demonstrate zero knowledge, understanding or interest in Iraqis – mirroring their commanders' diffidence, lazy 'intelligence' and arbitrarily overzealous responses to nebulously defined 'threats'. The foreign Al Qaeda operatives are equally callously indifferent to the interests of a host community which Broomfield represents with considerable sympathetic texture as they are abandoned by all authority, including their indigenous own, to the random madness resulting from hardcore military training, self-seeking ranks, and utterly mendacious rules of engagement. Meanwhile Army PR damage-limitation hastens to decorate the chief culprits ahead of a wounded child's video of the heinous acts seeping into the public domain, whereupon they're instead readied for scapegoating.

Two further significant examples, based on verité accounts by 'embedded' correspondents, stress everyday routine in the conflict rather than blatant cock-ups. Yet, via substantially different approaches, both succeed in questioning its rhyme and reason. In doing so they give the military management handlers who arranged their assignments rather more than the flag-waving morale-boosterism they bargained for. So Kathryn Bigelow's viscerally scintillating *The Hurt Locker* (2008) subtly stylises the dire personal and interpersonal corollaries even of a wartime task which seems most humanistic – and her Improvised Explosive Device-disposal squad are at once ordinary and heroic. But their necessary recklessness endangering everyone in the vicinity yields an alienated incapacity to appreciate any other kind of social project, and a hankering for intensity of experience that can only be interpreted as death-wish – practically guaranteeing that the heights of their specialist training, as well as its failures, produces monsters liable to explode at any moment.

David Simon and Ed Burns' miniseries *Kill* (2008) achieves equivalent depths of emotional realism following elite First Recon Marines up the Euphrates to Baghdad, doing justice to the almost insurmountable difficulties of doing their duty well. However, while capturing how *esprit de corps* negotiates the claustrophobic conditions, the richly convincing warts-and-all ensemble characterisations bear out the platoon's understanding of both the self-obsessed incompetence of many officers and the impossibly wrong-headed orders. The dawning awareness of the duplicitous overall situation and their collusion, patchily takes to heart managerial bullshit about regard for Iraqi civilians. Whereas, contemptuously arbitrary airstrikes leave no doubt about the real agenda, simultaneously reanimating xenophobic amnesia of their own issues. But trying to do the right thing invariably causes trouble, just as proclaimed liberation inexorably achieves its deathly opposite while its bearers wish-fulfillingly celebrate the professionalism which their superiors casually and capriciously waste. But this cannot possibly offer meaningful solutions to the world's problems in such stupidly opaque instrumental and institutional contexts – begging the question of the wider significance for all concerned of the misfortunes and maliciousness in evidence.

Interlude: Standard Operating Procedures

Thousands of fleeing civilians, and similar numbers rounded up on extremely tenuous suspicion of involvement in the growing insurgency, cower at the latter's 2003 epicentre in Abu Ghraib prison. Located between Baghdad and Fallujah, it is under constant mortar attack and with guards outnumbered hundreds to one. Ranking Guantanamo veterans and military, CIA and privately-contracted interrogators parachute in to extract information by any means, backed by the Commander-in-Chief and his White House cronies with policies trashing the Geneva Convention. A contingent of young army grunts fresh to this hellhole witness the routine humiliation, torture and murder of detainees. Some complain, but are told it's their professional and moral duty as warriors for liberty, and with varying degrees of diligence and enthusiasm comply with orders to 'soften up' prisoners by using 'standard operating procedures' devised by superiors. Still partially disbelieving, many shoot cameraphone stills and videos of the planned and sanctioned insanity. Many of these 'leak' into the public domain via the internet, resulting in a scandal saturating the world's media which director Errol Morris proceeds to dissect in his latest cinema documentary.

Standard Operating Procedure centres around spoken testimony from five of the seven low-ranking 'bad apples' vilified by subsequent inquiries. Sergeant Charles Graner and Ivan Frederick – ringleaders choreographing the sexualised humiliation rituals – were still in jail, but Javal Davis, Sabrina Harman (notoriously smiling thumbs-up over a dead 'ghost' detainee unlisted in prison records[3]), Lynndie England (with hooded prisoner on leash), Megan Ambuhl (now married to Graner; supervising with Harman and England the 'human pyramid' of naked Iraqis) and Roman Krol feature, with several other former military police and their Brigadier-General Janis Karpinski (now demoted to colonel) and the Criminal Investigation Division's Brent Pack (who assisted the prosecutors)[4]. The interviews and the giganticised iconic snapshots and video clips (some never seen before in mainstream media) are supplemented by staged 'illustrations' of the events described, with ominously-lit widescreen cinematography and melodramatic score reconfiguring Abu Ghraib's bedlam as sinister gothic other world.

The film's rendering of human beings in an inhuman situation, rather than emblems of evildoing, erodes stereotypes of underclass psychopaths relishing malevolence; despite rationalisations of unconscionable cruelty characterised by ambivalence, alienation and disgust at themselves, colleagues, and military and government hierarchies as well as towards purported enemies. Facing uncertain prospects for physical and career survival, the pathetic patriotic training-camp pep-talk of 'noble causes' couldn't completely erase their intelligence and sensitivity, or fully underwrite the twisted sadism required of them. And certainly neither could it equip them to comprehend their later demonisation without hefty doses of the bitter fatalistic cynicism and resentful detachment radiating from them now. So letters home from Sabrina Harman to her partner support her assertion that, whereas she saw no option but to follow orders, the photographs were intended as proof of what occurred. Naturally she didn't imagine them scuppering an otherwise successful cover-up orchestrated by her top-brass –

explicitly commanding all relevant visual evidence destroyed once the shit hit the fan – or that she would end up in the dock when those who actually tortured, maimed and killed detainees were never even considered targets of justice. In that sense, then, the whitewash worked.

Thus far *Standard Operating Procedure* may have sufficed as your bog-standard crusading investigator exposing the stitch-up of relatively defenceless underlings as primary villains of the piece – their bosses all the way to the top wriggling and squirming behind pseudo-legalistic sophistry while pinning medals on each other. But ex-private eye Morris always digs deeper to deconstruct the framing of images (as well as of people) and their deployment in media and informational management to advance institutional interests – *The Thin Blue Line* (1988) famously saving the life of a prisoner on Death Row, and the Oscar-winning *The Fog Of War* (2003) laying bare the delusional arrogance of the powerful in the person of Robert McNamara (one of the US government architects of the Vietnam War). Here the material leads in many fascinating directions – most only hinted at, such as the much-vaunted prominence of women in the US armed forces unravelling into archetypal virgins (e.g. Jessica Lynch subjected to faked 'rescue' by US Special Forces), witches (Karpinski as 'bad mother') and whores (Harman *et al* fucking with Iraqi men's heads); yet all, of course, puppet-mastered by patriarchs large and/or small-minded.

Morris emphasises that 'The Photographs Actually Hide Things From Us' and a rare achievement of his film is showing this awareness emerging organically among the MP patsies, irrespective of philosophical ruminations on virtual hyper reality and spectacle. To Ambuhl, "The pictures only show you a fraction of a second. You don't see forward, you don't see behind, you don't see outside the frame"; Harman concludes: "The military is nothing but lies. I took these photos to show what the military's really really like"; and England shrugs, "It's drama, it's life" – cementing the theme of fictionalisation at all levels. The questioning thus extends beyond why these particular images arose, survived and proliferated, to not only their editing and incorporation into discourses concerning the war but, crucially, what focusing on them as the 'truth' of the matter therefore facilitated being excluded from consideration. More conventionally worthy efforts sometimes illuminate such complexity[5]. But the visceral impact of *Standard Operating Procedure* undermines any simplistic or transparent relationship between information and scientific 'reality', exposing the manner of its manipulation in wider structures of contemporary power. In addition to its revealing 'worm's eye view' of the Abu Ghraib scandal, then, the film's telling tales of torture also operate as a more general fable of contemporary governance[6].

Diagnostic Confusions

If the warriors can never really win – being damned for acts solicited and cultivated by others and condemned for either the inability to stomach them or the psychopathy to benefit – depictions of the social fallout trump the acrimony among former buddies forced asunder by implacable institutional clout. Tony Marchant's *The Mark of Cain* (Channel 4, May 2007) shows British soldiers encouraged to abuse Iraqi detainees despite it representing betrayal of the uniform according to pep-talk rhetoric. Troubled ambivalence among the boys and uncomprehending folks back home culminates in 'happy-slapping' cameraphone mementos spitefully leaked to authorities only concerned to insulate hierarchies and careers. Tracking the contortions of disloyalty and whitewash, the film effectively renders the impossibility of ethical conduct when public discourse is so corrupt – with the lesser-guilty chewed up in grinding gears of injustice and the greater- only redeemed by honourable masochistic purgatory.

In The Valley Of Elah (directed by Paul Haggis, 2007) also hinges on cellphone torture photos

shattering respectable complacency, as a former military policeman sleuths his hitherto upstanding AWOL son – dubbed 'Doc' by colleagues thanks to his over-enthusiastic interrogations. Official denials and jurisdictional disavowals accumulate, but it transpires that existential cracks opened during the soldiers' Iraq experience were scarcely papered-over. Repressed horrors immediately returned with a vengeance in the platoon's Georgia strip club touchdown, and an escalating bar fight ended with them dumping Doc's multiply-stabbed corpse disguised by burning and dismembering. The broader resonance from a satisfyingly interwoven mess of metaphors of conventionality's underbellies is, however, undermined by superfluous anchoring to a single theme as the shell-shocked father finally fixes his star-spangled banner upside-down. Such blunders afflict *Grace Is Gone* (2007) too, whose staid sales clerk goes to bizarre lengths to avoid telling their kids his army wife has died in Iraq – fatally fudging the issue with unbelievably crass stereotypes of social conservatives and blue-collar countercultural conspiracy-theorising slackers alike.

Maybe the postmodern fragmentation of society justifies such solipsistic attempts to come to terms with and assimilate the extreme emotional and cognitive dissonances arising from the violence of Iraq. Harder to come by are portrayals of traumatised soldiers actually striving to improve their conditions materially afterwards, rather than merely agonising over emotional or secular redemption. The latter, for example, dominated an interesting strand of Jimmy McGovern's Mancunian *Naked City* portmanteau, *The Street* (BBC, 2009), in which a damaged and disfigured Helmand returnee receives unconvincingly unanimous unshakeable devotion from his nearest-and-dearest. A notable exception to the 'coming-to-terms' trend, however, is Kimberly Peirce's *Stop-Loss* (2008), whose Texan vet goes AWOL after receiving an involuntary extension to his service contract (the title's meaning). Subsequent relations with variously physically and psychically injured colleagues are suitably pugnaciously poignant but, here too, friends and family – as well as sundry official and unofficial functionaries encountered during the plot's convolutions – are too conveniently supine, easily convinced or readily assembled in his cause. And again, anything more than skin-deep collective solidarity among the soldierly suffering themselves remains off-radar[7].

A final fictional case study takes a longer view, somewhat alleviating the preference for moral over pragmatic dilemmas preoccupying survivors and thus facilitating displacement of psychic suppression into repetition compulsion and dysfunction. The three-part *Occupation* (2009) was the BBC's first dramatic foray into Iraq[8], following an army trio who witness incompetent Basra collateral damage then fuelling sectarian breakdown, leaving them scarred misfits at home. Returning as private contractors to rebuild infrastructure, they are superficially motivated by greed, love and idealism respectively – but accompanied by no understanding; just like the war itself even in sympathetic assessments. To producer Derek Wax, "The country was turned into a free-fraud zone and oversight and control evaporated" and, though he adds that the series has no "political stance"[9], unmistakeable echoes of our present domestic political-economic disarray should leave no doubt that the constitutional violence and obscenity externalised in Iraq are intimately related to our internal State. Hopefully *Green Zone* (2010) will faithfully reflect its source to fill representational gaps about the clueless governance and dizzying corruption of Iraq's postwar military-industrial complex. But anyway, the combined upshot of this survey surely attributes the War on Terror's post-traumatic stress orders and disorders conclusively to institutional dynamics, rather than the frailties of individuals who miserably but intelligibly can't cope. How could they? The treatment is worse than the disease and, moreover, those in charge knew this, or didn't care, or are unfit to govern (or all of the above...).

Prognosis Deferred

All the different angles covered so far – from the characters of the soldiers and officers and their conduct, to military command and rules of engagement, media strategies and believability, political control and bureaucratic processes – converge in agreement that the continuing tragedy of Iraq conclusively demonstrates things going very wrong. Yet no-one is shown conceptualising or articulating a general framework for what is wrong. Each of the films concentrates on the ambivalent fortunes of troubled individuals trying to find their own ways forward in full knowledge of the fundamental failure of institutions but unable to broaden the analysis beyond apathy, cynicism, or self-interest. Likewise, despite being accepted with resignation in many quarters as arguably still necessary or even unavoidable, the practice of contemporary war-is-hell is also generally intuited as symptomatic of some mortal affliction of the State. There is a sense of a glaring gap where traditional nobly vacuous rationalisations used to sit, which now appear to have lost their powers of legitimation except as faint backward-looking reminders of previous, more successfully engineered consensuses concerning societal purpose and victory over adversity.

And the visual fictions considered here do scrupulously avoid assessments of the war's greater significance, for the US, UK or globally, or in connection with the world's many other potential or actual conflict zones. The Iraq war cinema thus far "zooms in so closely on personal stories that it misses any overview. None of it deals with the underlying objectives of the American invasion ... or investigates allegations of financial mismanagement, profiteering and corruption"[10] – let alone the rather obvious hypothesis that these issues could be intimately linked. Even mainstream retrospections that Vietnam was a tragic, if well-meaning (in a Cold War sense) mistake – which Noam Chomsky and others spent years deconstructing against tidal

waves of bitter social-democratic, liberal and conservative denunciation, as well as much of the supposedly provocative cinema of the time – would scarcely satisfy anyone not desperately keen to be convinced if applied to Iraq. Who would really believe Bush and Blair and their apologists even if they did publicly accept either part of that judgement?

Although the participants represented in these films – assuming their lives and belief systems haven't completely collapsed – retreat to personal justifications revolving around carrying out their individual or collective jobs (occasionally bolstered with vague nationalistic sentiment), the specifics of their experiences observably contradict any broader universalising aims which their work might reasonably be interpreted as serving. In effect, the components of Randolph Bourne's State as "the country acting as a political unit, ... repository of force, determiner of law, arbiter of justice" now float free, disaggregated, failing to coalesce in motivational uniformity. Whereas, government enthusiasm for the 'War on Terror' notwithstanding, reactionary impulses in response to 9/11 or 7/7 instead emerge "obliquely through ... violent revenge fantasies such as the torture-porn *Saw* and *Hostel* series and the shoot-'em-up, slice-'em-up adventures of *Shooter*, *Hitman*, *300* and *Transformers*"[11]. Paul Haggis claims that the latter film, fully supported by the US Air Force and Defense Department, implicitly acknowledges that while "we can't win the war over there, then at least we can win at home on our screens"[12] – a rearguard action by the State to bolster its mystique which incidentally signals a more Orwellian trajectory in domestic entrenchment.

So it's scant consolation that, a century on, we can reverse Randolph Bourne's dictum into 'war is the sickness of the State' – because Afghanistan's abject quagmire continues, and tangible (as opposed to theoretically conceivable) benefits to ordinary Iraqis are hard to fathom. 'Our' fallen are still treated with pomp and circumstance, even if jingoistic accompaniments sound hollower than ever, both to the grief-stricken rehearsing them and audiences listening to spiritual and political ministers parroting along. Meanwhile, global government perpetually reshuffles the pack of 'rogue' and 'failed' States to set their sights on next – yet, strangely, dismantling their own morbidly miserable specimens is never contemplated. Instead militarising campaigns intensify within the body politic in blatant Newspeak charades against drugs, terrorism, protest and dissent, anti-social behaviour and, at base, all community health (i.e. 'welfare' and 'spending'). In the new war of all against all, money can still be made from the biopolitical differentiation and disciplining of citizens – the better to surgically dehumanise undesirables and nonentities, as Mohammed Idrees Ahmad comprehensively details in 'Fortress Britain'[13].

And, after all, "The State ... is eternally at war", as Bourne presciently put it. Owen Logan may well correctly interpret the present conjuncture as 'The Progress of Creeping Fascism'[14], what with blind corporatism, idiot managerialism, rigid top-down control and unreflexive communication gradually strangling all public functions, such that James Heartfield could artfully revision oligarchic profitability as rather the handmaiden of national State power[15]. Whereas many of Bourne's favoured public intellectuals offer nothing but helpless reiterations of their own philosophical taste for domination – like Slavoj Žižek and Alain Badiou lionising long-dead Leninism, or Hollywood dinosaur Oliver Stone sanctifying neo-Stalinism in his new film *South of the Border*. But magisterial quack remedies and patent nostrums in thrall to the clinical majesty of central authority no longer convince – just as rabid neoliberalism is grasped as poisonous pandemic rather than panacea, reflected now in the pusillanimous unanimity of party-political posturing over service cuts as mass-hysterical placebos for poverty. No, it's time to relinquish omnipotence of all opinionated strains – starting, for example, with James C. Scott's shamefully under appreciated *Seeing Like A State*[16], with its deconstruction of monolithic power at its apparently most beneficent thoroughly anchored from below. Then the significance of so many more-or-less fleeting autonomous experiments – in communal Mexico, Argentinian factory *twocc-ing*, humble social centres across Europe, South Korean suicide-strikes, bossnapping in France, Greek insurrections, the destitute decency of South African shanty dwellers, and countless other inspirationally collective grassroots resistances of these times – may begin to coalesce in productive plans and projects to finally purge aristocratic disdain for our herd instincts.

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Notes

1. The real-life case was the first publicised example of US extraordinary rendition. Maher Arar, a Canadian engineer, was born in Syria, where he was tortured for months before release without charge in 2003 – no thanks to any altruism on the part of CIA staff. Gavin Hood's personal investment in the story arose from the disappearances of friends after arrest in apartheid-era South Africa.
2. *Redacted* fictionalised the 2006 gang-rape and killing by a US patrol unit of a teenage Iraqi after shooting her family in Al-Mahmudiyah; *Casualties of War* a 1966 case where four American soldiers abused a girl abducted from An Khe, Vietnam, for several days before disposing of her body.
3. Mr Manadel al-Jamadi, who had died during CIA torture.
4. The book version, *Standard Operating Procedure: A War Story* by Philip Gourevitch & Errol Morris (Picador, 2008), integrates the participant accounts of the conduct of Abu Ghraib's torture regime gathered in research for the film.
5. Such as the 2008 Tate Modern media art exhibition *9 Scripts from a Nation At War* which presented the thoughts of various protagonists and observers with different positions, perspectives and prevailing understandings of the Iraq conflict – see Imogen O'Rorke's review, 'Flipping the Script', at www.metamute.org.
6. In 'On the Night Shift: From Lynndie England to Copper Green' (*Variant*, 21, Winter 2004), Mike Small identifies the sickness of State executive control as the underlying issue: "...the US has exempted itself from international war crimes, and acts as a rogue state ... But judgment day comes – whether it's from a generation politicised by lying politicians who preach morality as they send soldiers to do their dirty work and preach scripture as they sanction torture – or from the MPs who have announced plans to have Blair impeached for 'high crimes and misdemeanours' in taking Britain to war against Iraq. Good luck to them, but the real test has to be to change the way the state works towards war like a cancer seeking healthy cells". Critic and educationalist Henry Giroux's *Against the New Authoritarianism: Politics After Abu Ghraib* (Arbeiter Ring, 2005; reviewed by Benjamin Franks in 'Who Are You to Tell Me to Question Authority? Radical Education in a "Proto-fascist" Era', *Variant*, 29, Summer 2007) interprets the Abu Ghraib photos in terms of the increasingly peremptory, privatised and unaccountable control-oriented institutional network in the US.
7. Peirce's fierce partisanship of the marginalised (familiar from *Boys Don't Cry,* 1999) was triggered here by friends of her brother – who enlisted after 9/11 – being repeatedly stop-lossed, like more than 100,000 others, to bandage the human resources crisis. Surprisingly, this film also received no UK cinema distribution. Meanwhile, alongside the unknown scale of individual resistance, only a few instances of organised rebellion in the US military in Iraq have been reported, particularly over inadequate kit and supplies (cf. *Generation Kill*); for example, see Echanges et Mouvement, 'Mutinies in the American Army, 2004-2005', *Echanges*, No. 111, Winter 2004-2005 (translated at http://libcom.org/library/2004-2005-mutinies-american-army-echanges-111). In wars fought with conscript forces, the situation may be very different. David Duncan's *Mutiny in the RAF: The Air Force Strikes of 1946* (Socialist History Society Occasional Papers Series, No 8, 1998, available at http://libcom.org/library/mutiny-raf-air-force-strikes-1946-david-duncan) documents action across much of the world in the post-WWII British military; for an account by a participant, see Albert Meltzer, 'On "Active" Service; the Marquis and the Maquis; the Cairo Mutiny; Bounty on the Mutiny', Ch. 5 in: *I Couldn't Paint Golden Angels: Sixty Years of Commonplace Life and Anarchist Agitation*, AK Press, 1996 (at: www.spunk.org/texts/writers/meltzer/sp001591/angeltoc.html). Colonel Robert D. Heinl Jr.'s 'Vietnam: The Collapse of the Armed Forces' (*Armed Forces Journal*, June, 1971; posted at http://libcom.org/history/vietnam-collapse-armed-forces) describes the development of mass insubordination, desertion, rebellion and the GI resistance movement in the US army.
8. ... or not, given Andrew Gilligan's exposé of his own questionable journalism in the WMD spin fiasco – misquoting and betraying sources and precipitating his Controller's downfall (meta-glossed in *The Government Inspector*). The Beeb's subsequent silence presumably reflects the media self-censorship stressed by Noam Chomsky – on film in *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media* (directed by Mark Achbar and Peter Wintonick, 1992) and *Power and Terror: Noam Chomsky In Our Times* (John Junkerman, 2002) – and, sure enough, neither Nick Murphy (*Occupation*'s director) or Peter Bowker (writer) are known for remotely political acuity and could be judged relatively safe hands. The six-hour trilogy aired primetime on consecutive nights on BBC 1, June 16th-18th 2009.
9. Cited by Benji Wilson in the *Sunday Times*, 14th June 2009.
10. Ali Jaafar, 'Casualties of War', *Sight & Sound*, February 2008, p.22.
11. Jaafar, note 29, p.20. *Transformers* was directed by knucklehead action maestro Michael Bay (2007).
12. Quoted in Jaafar, p.20.
13. In *Variant*, 32, Summer 2008 – characterising it as a "dangerous confluence of interests ... as much a consequence of ill-conceived alliances as it is a response to the neoliberal order's need for distraction from its inherent contradictions ... [by scaring] the hell out of the population" (p.35). In the same issue of *Variant*, see also my 'Craven New World', about recent film fictions projecting these trends into the near UK future.
14. *Variant*, 35, Summer 2009; the progress of which "is being helped along by the opportunism of those who would like to call themselves democrats, and the insincerity of nationalists who have no commitment to realising the sovereignty of the people" (p.6).
15. James Heartfield, 'State Capitalism in Britain', *Mute*, June 2009 (www.metamute.org/content/state_capitalism_in_britain).
16. James C. Scott, *Seeing Like A State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, Yale University Press, 1998.

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