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2. BOOTS ON THE GROUND: THE NEW MILLENNIAL COMBAT FILM AS CULTURAL ARTEFACT

Lurking beneath the surface of every society, including ours, is the passionate yearning for a nationalist cause that exalts us, the kind that war alone is able to deliver. It reduces and at times erases the anxiety of individual consciousness. We abandon individual responsibility for a shared, unquestioned communal enterprise, however morally dubious.

Chris Hedges, *War is a Force that Gives Us Meaning*

After the attacks on 11 September 2001 the Bush administration quickly arranged extensive meetings with top Hollywood executives, some even at the White House itself, in a concerted effort to help market the war on terror through the medium of film, just as President Franklin D. Roosevelt had sought to mobilise Hollywood during World War Two through the Office of War Information (OWI). Many promptly got onboard; Bryce Zabel, the chair of the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences, declared, 'We are willing to volunteer to become advocates for the American message' (cited in Cooper (2001)). From the very beginning George W. Bush sought to define the American response to 9/11, as the administration's mantra became, 'You are either with us or you are with the terrorists' (Bush 2001) with little room for nuance or historical awareness. The war on terror was not only to be a military one, it was also to be a war of 'hearts and minds', with not just Iraqis and Afghanistans as the target, but American citizens as well. This chapter explores combat films made in the war on terror era and asks how the first American wars of the new millennium have been represented on-screen when compared to films made about

World War Two and the Vietnam War. While films about the Vietnam War did not emerge (with one or two notable exceptions) until after the conclusion of the conflict in 1975, a substantial number of films about the conflict in Iraq and Afghanistan were released *while* the war was being fought, even as early as 2005 with the release of Sidney J. Furie's *American Soldiers: A Day in Iraq*. Prior to the new millennium, the Vietnam War had been a national point of crisis which filmmakers had periodically returned to in an attempt reconcile it to the national imaginary. However, after 9/11 Vietnam effectively disappeared from the cinema screens, to be replaced by films about Iraq and Afghanistan, a new symbolic rupture in discourse about national identity. Yet the Vietnam War continued to cast a shadow over not just the Iraq War but cinematic representations of it. Despite the Bush administration's concerted effort to symbolically connect the war on terror to the 'Total War' of World War Two, leapfrogging the more contentious Vietnam War in the process, as the conflict progressed, it was more Vietnam to which the media and the public compared the war in Iraq. Senator Ted Kennedy was one of many to call the conflict 'George Bush's Vietnam' (cited in Phillips 2007), and General Tony Zinni stated, 'I have seen this movie. It was called Vietnam' (cited in Brigham 2006: 50). Paul Haggis, the writer and director of *In the Valley of Elah*, saw the Iraq War film as heavily influenced by films about Vietnam. He stated, 'There's a freedom I think that we got from the folks who made the films about Vietnam. We started learning from that, and we're standing on their shoulders.' He continued, 'I think if the nightly news was doing its job, we wouldn't have to do some of these films. Because we aren't getting the news of what's truly happening to our men and women' (cited in Anonymous 2007).

Indeed films about the Vietnam War function as an effective template for the war on terror era combat film. In his article 'The articulation of memory and desire: From Vietnam to the war in the Persian Gulf', John Storey provides a sustained analysis of the tropes of Vietnam War cinema that offer striking parallels to modern combat films. He argues that films depicting the Vietnam War are characterised by the following: a) their sustained disconnection from a political or historical understanding of the conflict being fought, b) a committed disavowal of the extent of the US military advantage over the Vietnamese, c) an absence of anti-war sentiment to the extent it was present at the time, d) a predisposition towards forgetting Vietnamese casualties or an almost exclusive focus on American casualties, e) Americanisation of narratives including the pronounced exclusion of Vietnamese who are constructed as an unambiguous Other, f) atrocities committed *are* portrayed (which gives the appearance of the films being more challenging than they are) but they are presented as isolated acts of madness often brought about by the intense pressure that soldiers are placed under, and g) the victimisation of the US soldier and by extension the US as a whole (2003: 105–7). Thus, while the public at large understood films like

Platoon, *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) and *Apocalypse Now* to be critical of the Vietnam War, the primary ideological function of these films was actually to 'address and alleviate this trauma in order to restore American self-belief and credibility' (Westwell 2006: 57). It is quite clear to see that the majority of the films made about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan fit into this paradigm, often with the simple substitution of Iraq or Afghanistan for Vietnam. Thus, films about both Vietnam and Iraq attempt to construct (or, in rare examples, deconstruct) a Foucauldian 'regime of truth' in the creation of meanings connected to the war (see Foucault 1970).

By 2006 and 2007 there was a veritable wave of films about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, most of which proved commercially underwhelming despite the presence of big name stars like Matt Damon, Tobey Maguire and Channing Tatum. This lack of success saw the Iraq War cycle of films labelled as 'box office poison' or even 'a toxic genre'.¹

- Paul Haggis's *In the Valley of Elah* begins with the discovery of the dismembered body of a young American soldier, Mike Deerfield, on leave in the United States after completing a tour of duty in Iraq. Mike's father, Hank Deerfield (Tommy Lee Jones), a former soldier himself, embarks on his own investigation into his son's death after becoming dissatisfied with the official one. Hank is an old-fashioned patriot who initially shows unquestioning support for the war. Near the start of the film when he sees a Salvadorian janitor inadvertently hanging the American flag upside down he helps him change it, explaining to him that an inverted flag is a traditional signal of distress. The film slowly reveals that Mike was actually murdered by his own squad mates after a violent altercation at a strip club. So desensitised to violence have the young men become, that they turn on one another with shocking brutality, and then attempt to cover up the crime by callously disposing of Mike's body. Hank is forced to confront the fact that Mike is not the bright young boy he remembers; in fact, his squad mates referred to him as 'Doc' because of his predilection for abusing Iraqi prisoners. In many studies that emerged from Iraq this proved to be a disturbingly frequent practice: two-thirds of marines and one half of regular soldiers said that they would not report a team member for abuse and 10 per cent said that they had participated in such acts themselves (see Ricks 2009: 7–8). Hank realises that his government has not been honest with its people, and the film concludes with him deliberately hanging his own US flag upside down, a clumsy but potent metaphor for an America in crisis.
- A similar impact is felt in Jim Sheridan's *Brothers*, which shows how the war affects a single family and spreads through the surrounding

community. When US Marine Captain Sam Cahill (Tobey Maguire) is reported killed in Afghanistan, he leaves behind a wife, Grace (Natalie Portman), two young daughters and two grieving parents. Into this void steps Sam's underachieving brother Tommy (Jake Gyllenhaal), a good-natured ex-con who hesitantly takes on a larger role in their family dynamic – becoming a reluctant father figure to the girls. Tommy had found it hard to live in his brother's imposing shadow, especially because of his unforgiving father, an alcoholic Vietnam veteran and strict disciplinarian. However, unbeknownst to them, Sam is not dead, but has been held captive, tortured by insurgents and even forced to kill fellow American soldiers to survive. When he returns home he is a changed man: where once he was open and good-humoured, now he is disengaged and prone to violent mood swings that lead to him being institutionalised for the sake of his own family's safety.

- Kimberly Pierce's *Stop-Loss* features three traumatised Iraq war veterans, who return to a heroes' welcome in their home town of Brazos County, Texas. When one of their number commits suicide, their intensely patriotic squad commander, Brandon (Ryan Phillippe), feels responsible. Having served his country honourably and completed his tour of duty, Brandon expects to be discharged and begins to make plans for his future outside of the army, but he is shocked to hear that he has been stop-lossed, that is, involuntarily ordered to extend his commission. Brandon believes that what the army is asking of him is unlawful and refuses, preferring instead to go AWOL. His reasons for originally joining up are echoed by many soldiers portrayed in post-9/11 films about Iraq: 'I signed up thinking I was gonna go over there and protect my country, my family. We wanted payback for 9/11, and when you get there, and you realise the war wasn't even about any of that. The enemy isn't out in the desert. They're in the hallways and rooftops, living rooms and kitchens. Everybody's got a weapon. Everybody. Nobody knows who's who.' However, wrestling with his own post-traumatic stress disorder, Brandon finds that it is impossible to live as a fugitive, which sees him labelled as unpatriotic and a coward, and so he reluctantly returns to the army.

The cumulative effect of these portrayals is the depiction of the American soldier as the principal victim of the war on terror, not, as one might expect, the Iraqis and Afghans who died and were wounded in their hundreds and thousands. Those soldiers who do survive their tours of duty often go home injured or traumatised, returning to a country that cannot (or does not want) to understand or acknowledge them; as Sergeant Will Foster in *The Messenger* (2009) suggests, 'It's like coming home to a different planet.' Despite their rela-

tive failure at the box office, these films have played a substantial role in how the conflict has been viewed in the West, reaffirming the power of film to define concepts of national identity. Taken together they form a compelling tapestry of how the war on terror became a central part of American consciousness in the first decade of the new millennium. Films about a nation's wars are important in a variety of ways; they crystallise an image of the conflict that remains influential at the time of their release and for generations to come: World War Two for many is now embodied in films like *The Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949) and more recently *Saving Private Ryan*, just as the Vietnam War has become encapsulated within *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon* and *The Deer Hunter*. In this way contemporary films about current conflicts provide a battleground for interpretations of a war, how it is viewed now and how it will be seen in the future.

THE HEROIC MYTHOLOGY OF A NEW 'GOOD WAR' IN *ACT OF VALOUR* AND
THE HURT LOCKER

Remember, you have warrior's blood in your veins. The code that made your father who he was is the same code that'll make you a man he would admire, respect. Put your pain in a box. Lock it down. Like those people in the paintings your father liked, we are men made up of boxes, chambers of loss and triumph. Of hurt and hope and love. No one is stronger or more dangerous than a man who can harness his emotions, his past.

Chief Dave, *Act of Valour*

Act of Valour portrays a team of US Navy SEALs charged with tracking a group of ferocious Islamic terrorists around the globe in order to prevent them striking the United States in a series of attacks that would make '9/11 look like a walk in the park'. Co-directed by Mike McCoy and Kurt Waugh, the film presents a very particular vision of the war on terror, which can be read as a close approximation of how the conflict was viewed by the Bush administration, a fact that may explain the significant input and assistance that the film received from the Pentagon.² David L. Robb's *Operation Hollywood: How the Pentagon Shapes and Censors the Movies* (2004) describes a similar process to that which we observed with *Zero Dark Thirty* and the CIA in the previous chapter in his analysis of how films that offer favourable depictions of the military are given extensive support (see *Top Gun* (1986), *Independence Day* and *Black Hawk Down* (2001)) and those that depict the military in a negative light are denied access to materials and personnel (see *The Last Detail* (1973), *Apocalypse Now*, *Born on the Fourth of the July* (1989) and *Thirteen Days* (2000)).

McCoy and Waugh went to extraordinary lengths to emphasise the realism of their film even presenting screenings with an on-camera prologue that saw the directors themselves explaining how they used authentic weaponry, tactics and

operational SEALs instead of actors. Yet the film is so simplistic in its re-creation of complicated geo-political affairs, that it emerges as something akin to a video game, a live action version of the long-running *Call of Duty* franchise (Activision, 2003–) right down to its cardboard-cut-out Islamic terrorist villains, prominent use of point-of-view (POV) shots (a style that video games call the First Person Shooter) and its narrative, which progresses almost as if from level to level via an intensely ludic world map, an approximation of what Garrett Stewart regarded as the 'instantaneous videography' of twenty-first century warfare (2009: 48). The film's quasi-eroticisation of war and technology combined with its jingoistic nationalism and portrayals of a dehumanised Other make it one of the most striking examples of cinematic 'War porn' in recent years.

The film dramatises the war on terror as a momentous battle between the virtuous United States against the insidious evil forces of the world, with America portrayed as constantly under siege from a predatory (and most frequently Muslim) Other. The antagonists are crudely drawn and illogical stereotypes: like the Chechen jihadist, Abu Shabal, who is privately funded by his millionaire best friend, the Jewish playboy Christo, or the Mexican drug cartel gangs who join forces with Islamic jihadists. Once again the motives of these characters are absent, superficially defined or reduced to them only being seen as 'enemies of freedom'. The film proceeds to combine many fears of American political conservatives into one amorphous threat: from Muslim terrorists and illegal immigrants to disparate America haters all over the globe, all of whom conspire against a righteous America for no reason other than it being the 'brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world' (Bush 2001). To show how truly evil Shabal is, the film has him target an ice-cream truck in Manila in the Philippines. As the explosion fills the background, killing dozens of children, the camera moves to a tight close-up of his darkly penetrating eyes. It is revealed that Shabal has devised a cunning plan to smuggle terrorists into the United States over the Mexican border wearing high-tech suicide bomber vests that will not show up on X-ray screens; once they are on US soil they intend to target Las Vegas in order to create another 9/11.

The SEALs themselves are portrayed as all-American heroes with conspicuously large and adoring families. They are men who regard themselves as 'watchmen standing guard while the world sleeps'. The film is narrated by one of their number, Dave (for national security reasons no names of the real-life soldiers are given, even further emphasising the film's quasi-mythic approach to the military), as he writes a letter to the unborn son of his best friend and fellow SEAL, Rorke, who will later die in their mission.³ Dave suggests, 'You don't expect your family to understand what you are doing; you hope they understand that you are doing it for them.' *Act of Valour* reveals that virtues like honour and justice are uniquely American preserves not to be found elsewhere around the globe (see Figure 10). Their first mission is to Costa Rica to rescue a female CIA



Figure 10 *Act of Valour* (2012) reduces complicated geo-political issues to a shooting gallery reminiscent of a video game. In doing so it becomes the closest approximation the war on terror era had of John Wayne's jingoistic *The Green Berets* (1968).

officer who has been tortured by terrorists in order to force her to reveal classified information; she is beaten, her hands are drilled and the threat of sexual violence is ever present if not shown. While the film lingers on her abuse, it is framed with a very different perspective to that of the torture portrayed in *Zero Dark Thirty*. Even though both sets of torturers are attempting to secure the same thing from their victims, *Act of Valour* is able to hypocritically suggest that *this* torture (that which is committed against Americans) is a heinous act perpetrated by an inhuman enemy with a lack of morality, whereas the *other* type of torture (that which is committed by Americans) is moral, legal and justifiable.

Dave and his team finally prevent the terrorists entering American soil through Rorke's noble sacrifice for his SEAL brothers and his country when he throws himself on top of a live grenade.⁴ This scene is one of many that makes a concerted effort to connect the war on terror to the 'Good War' of World War Two by suggesting that the values for which the modern-day SEALs are fighting are shared with those of the 'Greatest Generation'. Peter Ehrenhaus asserted that Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* performed a similar act by attempting to erase the Vietnam War from American collective memory. He stated:

Here we see the consequences of leapfrogging back over Vietnam to the Second World War. Our inheritance in the present becomes a reconstituted national identity grounded in uncontested and incontestable moral clarity and commitment, an identity whose stature is measured in by the enormity of the horror it sought to end. We can only wonder whether a reinvigorated national identity such as this carries with it the germ of another Vietnam. (2001: 335)

This process is vividly dramatised throughout *Act of Valour* and its portrayal of the war on terror as a just and necessary war. Rorke's sacrifice is directly equated to that of his grandfather, a pilot in World War Two, who managed to keep his burning bomber plane aloft just long enough to save his comrades, but in the process lost his own life. By connecting Rorke's heroic death with that of his grandfather, the film self-consciously erases this father's war, the more politically troubling Vietnam War, from the narrative.

This notion of quasi-christomimetic self-sacrifice recurs so frequently in American cinema that it has become one of its foundational tropes. In American film to give one's life for one's country is the very pinnacle of masculinity and patriotism. Yet its valorisation – while the very same sacrifices of those of the Other are declared to be monstrous and inhuman – is certainly problematic. In *Welcome to the Desert of the Real*, Žižek reminds us of the young American girl who was reluctantly willing to sacrifice her father for her country after 9/11 by allowing him to go and serve in the Armed Forces, something that was 'perceived as a "normal" outburst of American patriotism' (2012: 54). Žižek then proposes a thought experiment; 'imagine an Arab Muslim girl pathetically reciting into the camera the same words about her father fighting for the Taliban' (ibid.). Such relativism would be preposterous and grotesque for Americans and is symptomatic of a lack of moral equivalency demonstrated by American cinema and society at large.⁵

The film ends with a dedication to all those who have died fighting 'fear and tyranny, and those who will be called on in the future', appealing not just to this generation but those in succeeding generations, like Rorke's unborn son, who may be called to fight and die for the United States in its never-ending war on terror. Reaction was divided on the film's release, but both sides of the political spectrum compared the film to John Wayne's Vietnam War film *The Green Berets* (1968). From the left it was 'an Xbox *Green Berets* for the New American Reich' (Fairclough 2012). But the right read it as a 'tribute to our troops. It is indeed the most positive flick out of Hollywood about our military since *The Green Berets*' (Russo 2012). Like *The Green Berets* and its rewriting of the war in Vietnam, *Act of Valour* turns a decidedly complicated conflict into a simplistic battle between good and evil, drawing more from the tropes of Hollywood cinema by evoking films about World War Two (and even the Wild West) rather than establishing any authentic connection to a political or historical reality. As Gary Wills wrote about *The Green Berets*:

People who did not want to know about the actual Vietnam War could feel that the national unity and resolve of World War II might turn around this strange new conflict in the far-off jungles of the East. Wayne was fighting World War II again, the only way he ever did, in make-believe;

and that make-believe was a memory of American greatness that many still wanted to live by. (Wills 1997: 233)

Act of Valour fulfils a very similar function: it attempts to erase the ruptures and tensions caused by 9/11, by assuring Americans of both their military and moral superiority, by fashioning a link between the war on terror and the mythology surrounding World War Two.

On the surface *The Hurt Locker* appears far removed from the jingoistic patriotism of *Act of Valour*. Directed by Kathryn Bigelow and written by Mark Boal, the director/writer team behind *Zero Dark Thirty*, explored in Chapter 1, the film is certainly the most acclaimed war film of the era and it won several Academy Awards, including Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Original Screenplay. Many critics widely praised the veracity of its tale of a year in the life of a United States Army explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) unit and its apparent lack of a moral agenda: one wrote, 'It's a nonpolitical film about Iraq. Many films about the Iraq war have fallen into a trap of appearing preachy or at least having a strong point of view' (Anonymous 2010a). It was even held up as an example of an anti-war film precisely because it does not contain the overt histrionics that define *Act of Valour*. *The Hurt Locker* is certainly a visceral portrait of war, frequently filmed in tight, atmospheric close-ups with a striking multilayered aural soundscape. Barry Ackroyd's impressive cinematography once again places the spectator within restricted and subjective spaces, as he had done so effectively with his work on *United 93*. The utilisation of numerous close-ups with the intermittent use of POV shots is a powerful and immersive cinematic technique, but this intimacy comes in the form of a shared burden of victimisation and the suturing of spectator and protagonist experience. Beneath its detailed and intimate narrative is a rather reactionary treatise that emphasises the humanitarian role of the American military in Iraq and detaches itself from any sense of political and historical context. Therefore, while the film may not be 'preachy', it offers a particularly ideological approach to the war that is not as far removed from *Act of Valour* as it first appears.

The film begins with a quotation from Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Chris Hedges – 'The rush of battle is a potent and often lethal addiction, for war is a drug' – and proceeds to acknowledge the simple fact that despite its manifest horrors, there are a certain breed of men who thrive on the intensity of war.⁶ The narrative is comprised of episodic vignettes, their loosely connected nature evocative of the fragmented lives of the deployed soldiers themselves. A. O. Scott suggested that this structure produced a kind of 'hyperbolic realism, [which] distils the psychological essence and moral complications of modern warfare into a series of brilliant, agonizing set pieces'. At its centre is the reckless, yet charismatic and heroic Sergeant First Class James (Jeremy Renner) who replaces Staff Sergeant Matthew Thompson (Guy Pearce), surprisingly

killed off in the film's intense prologue. By disposing of the film's biggest star in its opening scene the audience is assured that celebrity is no guarantee of safety in the world of *The Hurt Locker*.

The location of the narrative in a bomb disposal team allows the film to disconnect itself from the day-to-day realities of combat and portray a war in which the United States are not combatants but peacekeepers, committed to saving Iraqi lives rather than taking them, the popular impression that many Americans had about the war. By concentrating on the profound pressure of their daily life, the film narrows 'the war to the existential confrontation of man and deadly threat' and the audience is free to enjoy the destruction 'without ambivalence and guilt' (Denby 2009). In doing this, *The Hurt Locker* presents a very conservative ideological approach to the conflict, as the American mission in Iraq is framed as a distinctly humanitarian, even altruistic, one, as James is charged with preventing insurgents from killing Iraqi civilians and destroying Iraqi buildings. The target of the bombs is rarely shown as being the Americans themselves, which, of course, was the overwhelming reality on the ground. This transformation of a contentious political narrative into a more personal one initially seems to be a retreat from ideology, but it is in the perceived absence of a political perspective that Žižek finds that *The Hurt Locker* contains 'ideology at its purest'; he asserts that 'the focus on the perpetrator's traumatic experience enables us to obliterate the entire ethico-political background of the conflict' (Žižek 2010). If we briefly return to John Storey's categorisations of the Vietnam War film charted at the beginning of this chapter, we see a remarkable correlation and a film that participates in the creation of its very own 'regime of truth' about the Iraq War. The danger that James and his team faces is a constant one; the camera jerks between one threatening Iraqi face to another, each a potential terrorist and the latest in a long line of dehumanised Others.

The closest that the film comes to an overt criticism of the war is through the neurotic, yet sympathetic Eldridge and his rather muted, even comical comments about the army's poor strategic planning: on the presence of tanks in the desert he says, 'Yeah, but they don't do anything. I mean, anyone comes alongside a Humvee, we're dead. Anybody even looks at you funny, we're dead. Pretty much the bottom line is: if you're in Iraq, you're dead!' There is no mention of the purpose of the war, or why the Americans may be meeting such vociferous contempt and aggression from the locals, and no Iraqi is allowed to speak of their own experience. Once again the mighty behemoth of the US Army is depicted as a plucky underdog cautiously making its way through the dangerous streets of Iraq. In the world of *The Hurt Locker* the victims are predominantly American in great contrast to the reality of the war that saw in the region of 100,000 to 200,000 Iraqis dead as opposed to approximately 5,000 Americans (Rogers 2012).⁷ Furthermore, when Iraqis are killed, it is mostly other Iraqis who perpetrate the crimes and rarely Americans. For Mamoon Alabassi, this

disconnection from any context or sense of reality disqualifies *The Hurt Locker* from being considered as an Iraq War film at all: 'It would be more accurate to say that *The Hurt Locker* is an action movie that uses Iraq as a background than to brand it as an "Iraq War movie", and less so as the "Iraq War drama".'

James strikes up a relationship with a young boy called Beckham who is the closest the film comes to having an Iraqi characterisation, and their interactions produce the film's most intimate, but also its most disturbing, moments. When James comes across an insurgent bomb factory, he finds the dead body of a young boy, who he believes to be Beckham, seemingly murdered by insurgents who have filled his corpse with explosives intending to use him as an improvised explosive device (IED). The fact that there is no recorded evidence of such a scheme ever being used reveals more about the film's desire to imagine monstrosities that continue to demonise Iraqi insurgents while at the same time glorifying James's singular humanity and heroism. Beckham's 'death' becomes a symbol of the need for American intervention and, perhaps, the 'most extreme example of the trope of the dead child, innocence destroyed by the chaos of war that will linger in the consciousness of the soldiers sent to fight it' (Peebles 2011: 168). After the incident James goes AWOL from the base, looking to enact revenge on those who killed the boy; but on his return the next day somehow Beckham is there again and in the film's most ambiguous moment James refuses to recognise him. What is this act of misrecognition and what can it mean for the film's representation of an Iraqi Other? Robert Kolker rather generously reads the boy reappearing as a 'gesture of the futility of passion in this horrendous war' (2011: 301). However, the African-American Sergeant J.T. Sanborn's earlier comment that 'they all look the same' lingers. It is in this scene of misrecognition that the ideological contradictions and ruptures of the film's depiction of a 'Good War' force their way to the surface. To misrecognise the Other is to deny his/her humanity, and for James to acknowledge that Beckham is alive and that the dead boy was someone else would be to concede that his judgement is flawed and that 'they all look the same' for him. The former soldier Stan Goff wrote,

When I was in Vietnam, we were taught to refer to the Vietnamese as gooks. This name calling is always part of any military aggression because soldiers have to be brought along in their dehumanization of those they are obliged by conditions and ignorance to abuse, dominate, and kill. Social psychologists tell us that we are overcoming 'cognitive dissonance' when we do that. (Goff 2004: 147)

James is confronted with a superlative example of his own cognitive dissonance but it is too difficult for him to process; his only reaction is to refuse to acknowledge it and to turn his head the other way.

The Hurt Locker is one of many Iraq War films in which the true victim of the war is shown to be the American soldier: if he kills (*Brothers*, *In the Valley of Elah* and *Stop-Loss*) or even if he does not (*Jarhead* and *The Messenger*). Despite his recklessness James is framed as a distinctly masculine hero, an archetypal maverick movie construction who takes down the protective boards from his hut, removes his protective blast suit in moments of great danger and refuses to use the bomb disposal robot that disconnects him from the immediacy of his highly dangerous job. He is called a 'wild man' by a visiting colonel, and while Sanborn and Eldridge challenge his behaviour and even consider 'fragging' him, he is the film's hero: a throwback to the hard-bodied maverick icons of the 1980s and an embodiment of the real man whose return was called for after 9/11 (see Chapter 3). However, it is the mythic construct of the cowboy figure that he most resembles, a 'rugged "he-man," strong, resilient, resourceful, capable of coping with overwhelming odds' (Balswick and Peek 1976: 55), with Iraq cast as his new millennial frontier. James's instinctive manly approach (much like Michael played by Robert De Niro in *The Deer Hunter*) is contrasted with the likes of the sensitive 'new man' figures of 'Doc' Cambridge and Eldridge who prove unable to cope with the war, which is portrayed as something of a challenge to their masculinity, devoid of a political landscape and bled of ethical considerations. In James's portrayal we witness a reaffirmation of military power, framed from a righteous and ethical perspective. He may be unorthodox and break the rules, but he saves lives and gets the job done. The final bomb sequence of the film, in which James is tasked with removing an explosive device locked on to the unwilling body of an innocent Iraqi civilian functions as a telling metaphor for Bigelow's vision of the American role in Iraq. James desperately tries to save the man – he even puts himself in great danger, but he simply cannot do it, as the man's fate has already been decided by the internecine fighting between Iraqis, who, as the film suggests, put such little value on human life compared to 'us' in the West.

When his tour of duty is finished, James returns home to his loving wife and infant son, but he soon realises that the pleasures of domesticity can never be enough for him. How can changing nappies and shopping for soap powder compare to the adrenaline rush of bomb disposal? In a clumsy but potent image of the emasculating potential of modern consumerist society James is framed among the long aisles of a supermarket confronted with literally hundreds of different varieties of cereal: he is paralysed by the surfeit of choice and looks more disoriented and ill at ease than we have ever seen him in the war zone (see Figure 11). Shortly after he recounts a story about Iraq to his wife that evokes both his recent trip to the supermarket and the film's portrayal of Beckham: 'Some guy drove this truck to the middle of an Iraqi market. He starts passing out free candies, all the kids come running up, the families and stuff. He detonates . . . You know they need more bomb techs . . .' Once



Figure 11 Sergeant James in *The Hurt Locker* returns home to be confronted with the stultifying and emasculating effects of modern consumer capitalism.

again violent acts are perpetrated by Iraqis on Iraqis, especially children, with Americans cast as the unambiguous saviours and the only barrier between Iraq and chaos. James cannot articulate this hunger to his wife and he volunteers for another tour of duty in Iraq, as many characters in the war on terror films do (see, for example, *Stop-Loss* and *The Lucky Ones* (2008)). Thus, the call that he answers is a call to a just war, which is as uncritical an approach to the conflict and as devoid of historical or political context as the transgenerational call for war that concluded *Act of Valour*.

‘WHAT DO YOU WANNA KNOW?’: DISCURSIVE MODES OF REALITY IN
BATTLE FOR HADITHA AND REDACTED

It is not history, because both the war in Iraq and the court case are still going on. It is not fiction, because it actually happened. But it is not documentary, either. It is a blend of all three, for an age that does not pause for judgment.

David Hearst, on *Battle for Haditha*

The two films discussed in this section offer very different perspectives on the combat film in comparison to *Act of Valour* and *The Hurt Locker*. Both *Battle for Haditha* (2007) and *Redacted* were severely criticised by some in the mainstream media for their pronounced anti-war sentiments, and both found themselves accused of being anti-American. In an ironically titled review,

'One-sided battle', *Battle for Haditha* was described by Kyle Smith (2008) as 'an exposé only of a filmmaker's senseless contempt for the military'. *Redacted* was on the receiving end of similar criticisms and was even called 'an awful aberration' by Joel Morgerstern (2007). One may suggest that the primary reason for these criticisms, for the most part, is not the quality of the films, but actually their political perspectives, as they both deviate considerably from the conventional stylistic and ideological template of the combat film. Both are loosely based on contentious real-life incidents. Nick Broomfield's *Battle for Haditha* is a fictionalised exploration of the 'Haditha killings' that took place in Iraq in November 2004, when twenty-four unarmed Iraqi men, women and children were allegedly killed by a unit of United States Marines in an incident described in the media as 'Bush's My Lai' (see Parry 2006). Brian De Palma's *Redacted* is a fictional account of the 'Mahmudiya killings' of March 2006, also in Iraq, when a small group of American soldiers allegedly proceeded to rape a fourteen year-old girl and then murder her and several members of her family in order to hide evidence of the crime. In both events the military appeared initially reluctant to investigate the crimes or they issued inaccurate accounts of what had happened until prompted to undertake further investigations by the media. In the case of the Haditha killings an initial report published by the military suggested that fifteen Iraqis had been killed by a bomb blast and eight had been shot by the marines in a protracted gun battle. It was only after an investigation by *Time* magazine reporter Tim McGirk exposed inaccuracies in the report that the army started a formal investigation into the incident. Similarly the Mahmudiya killings were originally reported by the authorities as being perpetrated not by American soldiers, but by Sunni insurgents. A more accurate version of the events only came out when one of the soldiers admitted to the crime during psychological counselling.

Like many contemporary war films *Battle for Haditha* begins with a series of intimate confessionals to camera. It's very first lines are offered as a conspicuous challenge to the spectator: 'What do you wanna know?' The question is asked by Corporal Elliot Ramirez (Elliot Ruiz), already on his third tour of duty in Iraq, even though he is only twenty years of age. From the opening scenes it is immediately apparent that *Haditha* is distinctly influenced by Broomfield's prior work as a documentarian, and his use of a documentary-style aesthetic is reminiscent of the footage of embedded journalists filmed during the war. The film's use of non-professional actors, many of whom are either ex-marines or Iraqi refugees, gives it a sense of verisimilitude not seen in many larger budgeted Iraq War films. Yet, as we observed in the discussion of *United 93*, these cinematic devices can only give the appearance of realism rather than any objective sense of reality. However, unlike *Act of Valour* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, which seem to embody a concerted need to convince the audience of their authenticity, *Haditha* and *Redacted* repeatedly acknowledge

their own construction – and this awareness of the highly subjective nature of ‘reality’ becomes a key thematic and stylistic motif in both films. They offer no coherent totalising view of the conflict and they become defined by their attempts to transcend the traditional hegemonic perspectives of the American war film.

Haditha proceeds to show the huge pressures on the marines and the unrelenting dangers they are exposed to on a day-to-day basis. Ramirez is certainly shown, even before the central event of the film, to be suffering from some form of post-traumatic stress disorder, but he is informed by his commanding officer that he cannot seek counselling until after his tour of duty is complete. Ramirez is a professional soldier, but he is conflicted and has doubts about why his unit is stationed in Iraq. He sees his allegiance as primarily to his squad mates rather than his country, and provides quite a different vision of the contemporary American soldier when compared to the rugged machismo of James in *The Hurt Locker* and the patriotic Rorke from *Act of Valour*.

In a conventional war film Ramirez and his unit would have been at the centre of the narrative, but instead *Haditha* offers three parallel and intersecting narrative strands of which Ramirez’s perspective is only one. The second follows two insurgents, Ahmed and Jafar, who are paid to place an IED on a road in order to target an American military vehicle. In *Haditha* the target of Iraqi insurgents is not other Iraqis, as shown in *The Hurt Locker*, but the American military. The third narrative perspective is of an Iraqi family, including a young woman called Hiba and her fiancé Walied, who happen to live near the road where the IED is placed. These three narrative strands intertwine when it is revealed that the unit that is targeted by Ahmed and Jafar is Ramirez’s and as Hiba and Walied’s family become caught in the ensuing chaos.

In providing three contrasting perspectives of the occupation of Iraq, *Haditha* becomes a rare example of an American film that breaks free of an America-centric view of the war and in doing so destabilises the habitual privileging of American subjectivity and authority. The insurgent named Ahmed is a complicated figure, not a stereotypical jihadist seeking only blood and revenge or a shallow caricature designed to evoke the ‘empty empathy’ described by Kaplan. The film reveals that he has joined the insurgency as much out of economic necessity than as a result of nationalism or religious beliefs. A veteran of the disbanded Iraqi Army, he reluctantly turns to the insurgency as a way to provide financial support for his family. He is certainly antagonistic towards the Americans, but he also regards the leaders of the insurgency themselves with deep suspicion and is fearful of what the future holds for his country. Likewise, the family who become caught between the Americans and the insurgents are similarly humanised. Broomfield moves his camera into the Muslim domestic sphere, revealing the essential humanity of its occupants and also the precarious conditions under which they live. Hiba and Walied are not

the shrieking and faceless victims of a conventional Iraq War film; they offer a sharp contrast to stereotypical depictions of Muslim couples, as Broomfield portrays them as loving and even sexual partners. When Hiba sees the IED being planted on the roadside near their house, she is not sure what she should do. It seems they are as afraid of the local al-Qaeda (whom they call terrorists), as they are of the Americans. The family goes to their sheikh, the local authority figure, and reveals their predicament: 'If we tell the Americans, the terrorists will kill us; if we keep quiet, the Americans will say we're cooperating with the insurgents. What should we do?' The sheikh's answer is a simple one, but it is unsatisfactory for them: 'Pray to God, he will help us.' By endeavouring to show the perspectives of the insurgents and the Iraqi families caught in the conflict, the film reverse focalises the traditional approach to combat films by giving a voice to the Other that has been habitually marginalised or even erased from the genre.

The incident that sparks the reprisal killings is prompted by one of Ramirez's marines being killed in the IED explosion set up by Ahmed. Ramirez is then assigned the difficult task of finding those responsible in the form of a vague order from his commanding officer back at the base to 'take whatever action is necessary'. The marines become progressively more and more frustrated and vent their anger on the nearby buildings that contain the innocent families of Hiba and Walied, who, Ramirez believes, surely *must* know who planted the IED. After an altercation with a group of young men who the marines shoot and kill, they enter the Iraqi homes – that they class as being filled with enemy combatants – and in the ensuing chaos proceed to kill twenty-four people including women and children. Yet even in their barbarous act the marines retain a sense of humanity and the film even suggests that shots *were* fired from the Iraqi houses before the slaughter. Yet unbeknownst to Ramirez they came from an elderly Iraqi shooting an antique weapon, distraught and furious at having seen the deaths of the young men who were completely unconnected to the IED bombing. While the marines are shown committing the atrocity in some detail, within the context of the event and what has led to it, it becomes understandable why such a tragic incident might have taken place.

After the incident, Ramirez is physically sick on the street, but he pulls himself together when a commanding officer arrives who tells him, 'You handled yourself like a true professional out there. I'm gonna promote you to sergeant and recommend you for the bronze star.' However, when the details of the incident come out, Ramirez is quickly scapegoated and punished by the very same commanding officer who had ordered the actions. These officers are shown to be disconnected from the war on the ground, ordering operations from the safety of their headquarters miles behind the front line and only viewing the conflict through the satellites that hover above the cities. In one sequence an officer orders a drone strike to kill an unarmed Iraqi man walking

through the street carrying a shovel. To the Americans he looks as if he has just planted (or is going to plant) an IED, but we have seen him plant nothing more dangerous than an olive tree. The sequence not only evokes the WikiLeaks' 'Collateral Murder' attack video, but the allegation that American soldiers routinely placed 'drop shovels' on innocent Iraqis victims in order to make them look like enemy combatants (see Washburn 2008: 22).

The end of the film shows al-Qaeda (including the sheikh to whom the family went to for advice) positively welcome such brutal retaliations from American soldiers, which act as fuel for the fire of resentment felt by the general population towards their occupiers and leads to increasing numbers of people joining the insurgency. In a scene that even brings the veracity of *Time* magazine report into the discourse, the only survivors of the Haditha incident are told to recall the traumatic event on videotape, especially a little girl, Safa, who is pressured into recounting how the Americans struck her: 'Say the Americans hit you over the head!' In doing so, *Haditha* interrogates the prevailing narrative of the killings from a variety of perspectives: offering a direct challenge to spectator complicity in the events and the war at large. An American TV news headline 'Ramirez: Hero or Bad Guy?' reveals how the American media quickly simplifies complicated issues in order to make them more accessible to the public. Yet the film has deliberately attempted to do the opposite of this and thus offers a counter-hegemonic narrative to the traditional representations of the war in Iraq, not because it portrays the contentious incident (here we see an echo of Kathryn Bigelow's earlier disingenuous comments that portrayal is not endorsement) but because of *how* it is depicted. *Haditha* is a rare film that portrays Iraqis as human beings, not as the lifeless enemies of a video game, and by reinstating the humanity of the Other, it calls into dispute the very reasons that the war was fought for and derails the prevailing 'us versus them' narrative that was so pervasive in the post-9/11 years.

Battle for Haditha saves its most remarkable moments for its final scene, an epilogue in which Ramirez recalls the event itself. The sequence lasts for a minute and a half and is ambiguously presented: shot in a crepuscular light, with a static camera and no audible dialogue, its oneiric nature is striking in a film that has endeavoured to create a sense of naturalism throughout. It shows Ramirez taking the small girl, Safa, out of the bathroom where she had been hiding when the marines stormed her family home. Whether it is a memory, a dream, a vision of what actually happened or what Ramirez wished had happened is never entirely clear. Is it another return to the trope of the symbolic child as cultural battleground like Beckham in *The Hurt Locker*? Yet, none of these interpretations are prioritised, and it is only in this final scene that the meaning of the film's title becomes clear: the *Battle for Haditha* is not the blood shed in Iraq on 19 November 2005, but the battle for meanings that still continues to resonate in films produced about the war in Iraq today.

These issues of representation, subjectivity and culpability are also at the centre of Brian De Palma's *Redacted*, which confronts the complicated relationship between spectator and screen in a much more explicit fashion than other texts about the Iraq War, even *Battle for Haditha*. The film deviates from the long-established naturalistic aesthetic of the combat film in favour of a bricolage of contrasting styles that alternate between a POV video diary, a soldiers' wives' website, psychological evaluation camera footage, an insurgent website, an Arabic news channel, a Skype-style videoconference, closed-circuit television (CCTV) cameras and even a pretentious French documentary called *Checkpoint* replete with classical music and pretentious symbolism. This fragmented approach destabilises and ruptures the subjective spectatorial position that films like *Act of Valour* and *The Hurt Locker* work so diligently to reinforce. De Palma insisted, 'The movie attempts to bring the reality of what happened in Iraq to the American people' (cited in Jaafar 2008: 16) and he finds this sense of 'reality' not in the quasi-documentary style of films like *United 93* and *The Hurt Locker*, but in a deconstruction of their reliance upon the codes and conventions that create the appearance of realism and authenticity, while at the same time perpetuating highly politicised ideologies. This is not to say that *Redacted* itself offers any approximation of an objective sense of reality; Joel Morgerstern (2007) may have been correct to suggest that it is 'a work of propaganda in its turn'. However, its deviation from mytho-poetic accounts of combat, that have been regarded as the norm for portraying war on-screen, prove a compelling antidote to such uncritical discourses on the Iraq War that dominated the media. While *Redacted* centres on the events of the Mahmudiya killings, it is actually more concerned with how they are mediated and received by audiences at home. In this way the process of redaction becomes the film's central thematic motif and metaphor. Needless to say, this highly critical perspective on the war caused concern among mainstream critics. Conservative host and political pundit Bill O'Reilly, to whom we will return more than once in the course of this book, said that the film was so irresponsible that it 'endangered the lives of American servicemen' (cited in Fellerath 2007).

The film follows a unit of US soldiers stationed at Camp Carolina near Samarra in Iraq. The soldiers themselves are largely stereotypical characters, the likes of which have populated the combat film for decades: the good-natured everyman (McCoy), the bookish nerd (Blix), the cocky and self-confident joker (Salazar), the brash redneck who only joined up in order to escape jail (Flake) and even the grizzled veteran sergeant (Sweet). Unlike James in *The Hurt Locker*, the soldiers have all become jaded by their service for their country, rather than energised by it, and they are disillusioned with the conflict and the reasons for which it is being fought. Anyone who tries to talk about politics is silenced by the loud boos and hisses of his squad mates. The audience is initially provided with a surrogate in Salazar, who is making an amateur film he calls *Tell*

Me No Lies about his tour of duty, which he hopes will get him into film school on his return to America. He claims it will be a truthful account of the war and warns his squad and the audience, 'Don't be expecting no Hollywood action flick; there's not gonna be any smash cuts, no adrenalin-pumping soundtrack, no logical narrative to help make sense of it. Basically here shit happens.' De Palma quickly shows that Salazar's assertion that 'the camera never lies' is a fallacy by revealing the power of the image to alter one's perspective on any given event just by the way it is presented. In these early scenes in which Salazar is filming himself, he comes across as impetuous and shallow, but when he is returned to in the French documentary *Checkpoint*, he is transformed into a consummate soldier and professional, his stature enhanced by the choice of mise en scène, camera angle and Handel's 'Sarabande' on the soundtrack. Similarly, as the film moves between aesthetic styles audience perspectives are continually challenged as they are forced to come to terms with the highly mediated nature of the images on the screen they have long taken for granted.

The racism that remained in the liminal spaces of *The Hurt Locker* and *Act of Valour* (or perhaps was redacted) is placed in the foreground of De Palma's film, where soldiers refer to the Iraqis by a wide range of racist epithets from 'midget Ali Babas', 'ragheads' and 'mother-fucking haji' to 'sand niggers' and 'johnny jihads'. After an Iraqi car fails to stop at the intersection manned by the recidivist Flake, he follows the prescribed 'Rules of Engagement' and shoots to kill, only to later discover that the driver and his pregnant wife thought that they were being waved through rather than being asked to stop. Flake is congratulated by his commanding officers and De Palma shows how he expresses no remorse at his actions, describing killing Iraqis as just like 'gutting catfish'. The film reveals how the troops have become progressively dehumanised by the conflict and how this is deliberately fostered by the military with a conspicuous lack of awareness as to what it may lead to. After their long promised leave is cancelled and their mentor Sergeant Sweet is killed by an IED the protagonists become progressively more resentful of the Iraqi civilians that they are charged to protect. Like many other Iraq films the war is presented as a sustained challenge to the masculinity of the soldiers (see *Jarhead*, *Stop-Loss* and *The Hurt Locker*) and the target of their frustrations becomes a young Iraqi girl who Flake and Brush inform the rest of the unit is to be regarded as a 'spoil of war'. When Blix tries to dissuade them from going AWOL from the base and sexually assaulting the girl he is labelled as 'gay' and a 'pussy' for not wanting to go along. McCoy too tries to prevent them from carrying out the crime, but when they threaten him with violence he can only stand outside the house where the young girl lives, powerless to do anything about it. Throughout all this, Salazar keeps his camera running (now mounted on his helmet), insisting that he is only a dispassionate observer and a 'fly on the wall'; but McCoy calls him nothing more than a 'jackal'. Yet Salazar, too,

becomes overwhelmed by his proximity to the crime and even joins in the sexual attack on the girl. Through Salazar's actions De Palma challenges our own voyeuristic appetite for such images and asks how we can so readily disconnect ourselves from personal responsibility for a war fought in our name.⁸

After the girl is raped and murdered, her family are killed and their house burned down in order to destroy the evidence of the crime. Flake and Brush blame the destruction on the internecine fighting in the area between Sunnis and Shiites and their story is unquestionably accepted by the authorities who either do not want to know the truth or have little awareness of the realities on the ground. However, the Iraqi community know exactly what happened and the truth is broadcast on local TV news, but these reports are summarily dismissed by the army and the US media in a compelling metaphor of how Iraqi perspectives on the war have been largely disregarded. Later, Brush offers a moral equivalence rarely explicitly stated in the Iraq War film: 'What – bombing and killing them's OK but fucking them isn't?' Flake adds, 'You prosecute guys like us – you're just aiding the terrorists.' The heinous crime escalates rising tensions in the area and as an act of reprisal Salazar is kidnapped and then beheaded by members of the Mujahideen Shura Council and al-Qaeda, an act that is shown on-screen via a videotape filmed by the perpetrators and then broadcast on an insurgent website. It is a shockingly brutal scene, filmed in an almost exact replication of the beheadings of American journalists Daniel Pearl and Nick Berg.

Redacted presents a protracted challenge to not only the films about the war in Iraq, but the combat film in general, as it questions how texts like *Black Hawk Down* and even *Saving Private Ryan* are valorised for their realism but are in actual fact highly mediated faux-realist texts, which continue to legitimate violence and promote a distinct hierarchy of the value of human life. In one striking scene in *Redacted* a young woman known only as 'Internet girl' verbalises this discourse in her online diatribe about Flake, after the truth about the incident has come to light. 'This is the same monster that is immortalised in every fucking movie about Vietnam . . . That doesn't stop them making another movie about 9/11 because in America an American life is worth so much more than a Vietnamese, a Palestinian, a Lebanese or an Iraqi life.' While *Redacted* lacks the multiple perspectives of *Haditha* and there are no Iraqi characterisations, it is a film that deconstructs the pervasive myth of American altruism and moral certainty in its international conflicts. Jim Frederick, author of *Black Hearts: One Platoon's Descent into Madness in Iraq's Triangle of Death* (2010), a non-fiction account of the Mahmudiyah killings and their aftermath, wrote: 'Rape and murder have been by-products of warfare since the beginnings of time. Soldiers today, however, suffer mightily under the burden of "the Greatest Generation" mythos and the sanitization of Hollywood depictions of World War II' (xx). Yet the estimated 14,000

rapes committed by US soldiers in the European Theatre from 1942 to 1945 have been redacted from our memory in favour of sixty years of mythic-poetic accounts of a 'Good War'. Like *Haditha*, *Redacted* rejects the mythology of the 'Good War' and attempts to deconstruct the language of the combat film.

Brian De Palma had told a similar story before in his Vietnam War film *Casualties of War* (1989) about the abduction and rape of a young Vietnamese girl in 1966 (also a fictionalised account of a real-life incident). The parallels between it and *Redacted* are deliberate and sustained; even the tagline of *Redacted* drew a self-conscious connection between the two: 'Truth is the first casualty of war'. Yet the differences between the two films are telling. Despite its brutality, *Casualties of War* adopts the conventional form and aesthetic of a traditional combat film (replete with an operatic Morricone soundtrack), and being made fourteen years after the end of the war in Vietnam, it is able to provide its protagonist Max (who has a similar experience to McCoy) with a sense of closure and the opportunity to finally move on from his traumatic past. *Redacted* is a more formally experimental reproduction of the fragmentary narratives of the Internet age and, given that it was made *during* the Iraq War, it cannot offer such a reconciliation for its characters or for the audience. It ends with McCoy's return to America after his tour of duty and with the homecoming party that has been thrown for him by his wife and friends. They ask him for a war story, anticipating a tale of courage under fire, much like the narratives of *Act of Valour* and *The Hurt Locker*, but McCoy's experience of war is not one of heroism or daring battles in which he proves himself against ruthless enemies. The tale he recounts to his friends is about the rape and murder of a fourteen year-old Iraqi girl, but it is one that proves impossible for them to process, so far is it disconnected from their reality and their understanding of the war. After an awkward silence they quickly change the subject and turn their heads away from him, just as James turned his head away from Beckham in *The Hurt Locker*.

Redacted concludes with a series of real-life still photographs of dead Iraqis in a sequence called 'Collateral Damage', images that were denied to the American public in the drive to mythologise the war and the reasons why it was being fought. In one final irony these images were themselves redacted by the producers of the film consequent of fears of legal culpability. De Palma sought to present them in full, but perhaps this closing act of censorship, whatever its reason, suits the themes of the film in an entirely apposite way. In a similar fashion to how McCoy's story was rejected by his friends, *Redacted* was ignored by American audiences when it was released in only fifteen cinemas in the United States, even though it won the prestigious Silver Lion for Best Direction at the Venice Film Festival. Its domestic box office earnings were only \$25,628 on a weekend when escapist fantasies like *Beowulf*, *Bee Movie* (2007) and *Fred Claus* (2007) rode high in the charts. One year later in 2008,

Battle for Haditha failed to even achieve this; released in two cinemas it earned just \$1,982 in its opening weekend, when it debuted in 112th position.

NOTES

1. Ann Thompson (2008) used the phrase 'a toxic genre' and Bill Everhart (2009) used the phrase 'box office poison'.
2. Kurt Waugh also contributed to the script of *300*, which is discussed in Chapter 7.
3. In a move that is symbolic of American cultural cherry-picking of colonial histories, Rorke's name evokes the 1879 battle of Rorke's Drift in the Anglo-Zulu War when approximately 150 British troops mounted a spirited defence against more than 3,000 Zulu warriors. The film ironically culminates with the famous poem from the leader of the Shawnee, Tecumseh, who was killed opposing US imperialism at the Battle of the Thames in 1813.
4. Rorke's act mirrors the death of US Navy SEAL Michael Monsoor who received the Medal of Honour for doing the same in Iraq on 29 September 2006. Monsoor was killed but saved many members of his platoon from death and injury.
5. Peter Berg's *Lone Survivor* performed a similar feat for another group of US Navy SEALs in a film based on the novel of the same name by Marcus Luttrell. While the film was praised by the majority of reviewers, some challenged the film's ideological perspective and its historical accuracy. The veracity of one scene in particular caused concern in which the mission is compromised by local civilians and the SEAL team debate about whether to let them go or terminate them. When they elect to set them free, the fleeing civilians inform the local Taliban of their location and a firefight ensues that kills all but one of the SEALs. Keith Uhlich (2013), writing for *Time Out New York*, called it 'war porn of the highest order' and Amy Nicholson at *The Village Voice* described it as a 'jingoistic snuff film'. The film joins Berg's other films *The Kingdom* and *Battleship* (2012) in its uncritical valorisation of American moral superiority and humanity while marginalising or demonising America's enemies. The film mythologises the SEALs and finds victory even in their defeat. One of the soldiers laments, 'I'm sorry that we didn't kill more of these motherfuckers.' It even concludes with a four-minute montage of real-life photographs of the SEALs over which a thoroughly ill-conceived, mournful cover version of David Bowie's "Heroes" performed by Peter Gabriel can be heard.
6. Bigelow conveniently ends her quotation of Hedges here, but it continues as follows: '... one I ingested for many years. It is peddled by myth-makers – historians, war correspondents, filmmakers, novelists and the state – all of whom endow it with qualities it often does possess: excitement, exoticism, power, chance to rise above our small stations in life, and a bizarre and fantastic universe that has a grotesque and dark beauty. It dominates culture, distorts memory, corrupts language and infects everything around it' (Bigelow 2013: 3). In an episode of Al Jazeera's *Empire* Hedges himself commented that he was disappointed with *The Hurt Locker*, arguing that it had little to say about the war and that the reason it was given the Academy Award was that it was the first notable film about the Iraq war not to be critical of the conflict. See Jazeera (2010).
7. Some recent sources have suggested that the death toll may have been as high as 500,000 (Vergano 2013).
8. In a tragic footnote that attests to the film's power, in March 2011 a man killed two servicemen at an army base in Germany after having seen a clip from the film on the Internet and believing that what he saw was real.