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The Unwar Film

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Images of war have always had an irresistible allure for the camera, be it for purposes of documentary or fiction. The drama, the emotion, the action easily translates the "theater" of war into the cinema of war. One advantage documentary has over fiction is the dimension of real-life risk to "actors" and filmmakers alike. Every war since the First World War has been accompanied by some form of documentary production, whether officially produced as pro-war propaganda, filmed professionally (or unprofessionally) by journalists and civilians, sometimes made in support of, sometimes in explicit opposition to, the war effort. Jane Gaines, in her essay in this volume (Chapter 19), asserts that the war documentary, since Vietnam, "has emerged as the anti-war documentary," a contention that willfully overlooks the endless stream of expository documentary production that continues to clutter the programming schedules of the History Channel or Discovery's Military Channel, made for war buffs of all generations. But what the comment registers, I think accurately, is that the anti-war documentary, oppositional as it may be, is nonetheless still a war documentary, deeply entangled in "counter-strategies of struggle and resistance," in Elsaesser's words (see Chapter 19). Think only of the take no prisoners rhetoric of filmmakers like Emile de Antonio or the Newsreel Collective, lobbing films like they were Molotov cocktails, as if filmic counter-attack could devastate its target as surely as the machinegun fire accompanying Newsreel's logo. Consider the combative language from Newsreel collective member, Robert Kramer, as he expressed the desire for their films to "explode like grenades in people's faces" (quoted in Renov, 2004: 12). Or de Antonio's hope that his films would give viewers their history "right back in their face, like a napalm pie."[1] In the heyday of the anti-war documentary, the frame of militarism, even when cast as "anti-militarism," was pervasive.[2] This is not

A Companion to Contemporary Documentary Film, First Edition. Edited by Alexandra Juhasz and Alisa Lebow.

Figure 21.1 *The Day of the Sparrow* (Philip Scheffner, Germany, 2010, produced by ARTE, Blinker Filmproduktion, Pong, Worklights Media, and Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen).

at all to say that there is something wrong per se in pursuing these tactics, for as long as there is war and its cheerleader, the war documentary, one fiercely hopes the anti-war documentary will persist in its resistance. Certainly the militancy of the Vietnam-era anti-war films was backed by a firm political commitment and we might even be able to credit their collective effort with helping to turn the tide of public opinion, at least in the United States, against the war. But I contend nonetheless that we must not confuse anti-war documentaries with a renunciation of militarism per se, or the logic that subtends it.[3]

A new set of tendencies has arisen since the 1990s in this field of war documentary production that Gaines's essay nods towards but will be further elaborated in this essay. While the pro- and anti-war documentaries are locked in a tense stand-off, the one exuberantly priming the pump for any given war effort, the other taking the cinematic counter-offensive, two further forms have emerged: what I will call the "paramilitarist" war documentary and the "unwar" documentary. In this essay I will explore these two modes in further detail, the former as the latest addition to the militarist tradition, and the latter, which proleptically emerged earlier,[4] as a laudable antidote to this trend. The "unwar" documentary, I will argue, works to undo the very logic that subtends the entire triumvirate of militarist documentary, whether pro-, anti-, or para-, which all operate within a direct sphere of "engagement" with militarism, never entirely outside of its bellicose imperatives.[5]

Of these two emergent forms, by far the more common and familiar is the para-militarist documentary. With countless examples, the paramilitarist documentary updates the war genre by emphasizing the individual soldier above and beyond the larger conflict, utilizing the latest portable video technologies to give the viewer the impression of visceral proximity to the action. Films in this vein, *Restrepo* (Sebastian

Junger and Tim Hetherington, US, 2010), *Armadillo* (Janus Metz Pedersen, Denmark, 2010), and the earlier *Gunner Palace* (Petra Epperlein and Michael Tucker, US, 2004) and *Occupation: Dreamland* (Ian Olds and Garrett Scott, US, 2005) constitute the latest incarnation of the subdued pro-war film,[6] never fully declaring their sympathies, yet nonetheless providing tacit support to the war effort in their formal generic properties as well as their implied affinities. These ambivalent war films, neither explicitly pro- nor anti-, can be seen as contributing to the war effort the way a mercenary or unofficial force might be engaged illicitly to assist the dominant order, hence my assignation of the prefix "para."

Paramilitarist War Docs and Genre[7]

The paramilitarist war documentary excels in the "war is hell" approach, in which the politics and historical contexts for war are understood as less significant than some generic humanism that sees war as a form of the sublime, in which everyone is living more authentically in the face of death or that everyone is dehumanized and made to suffer equally. They can be distinguished by a further set of identifiable characteristics: Generic adequation with the Hollywood war film; emphasis on the individual soldier's plight; a gritty, though not unstylized, realist aesthetic heavily dependent on observational filming techniques; and an abiding, if disingenuous, political agnosticism.

As noted somewhat breathlessly by critics, there is more than a family resemblance between the fictional war film and the recent spate of paramilitarist war documentaries, such as *Restrepo* and *Armadillo*. There is some irony in this, especially in the case of the Iraq War films, not least because their fictional counterparts with

Figure 21.2 *Armadillo* (Janus Metz Pedersen, Denmark, 2010, produced by Fridthjof Film).

a very few exceptions (notably Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker*) have been deemed to be "box office poison" (Barker, 2011). Nonetheless, it may be said that this is a rare instance when documentaries have found commercial success where fiction films have failed.

The films in question are hailed not only as great documentaries, but as great war films full stop: *Time Out London* reviewer, David Jenkins coos, "Restrepo brilliantly captures the dynamics of war"; Sukhdev Sandu, of the *Telegraph* calls it "an exercise in visceral intimacy"; while *Salon.com*'s Andrew O'Hehir calls *Armadillo* "a brilliant work of cinema, a non-fiction film as intense and visceral as any drama."[8] This is no accident, since these films have been "edited and scored like a feature," as critic Mark Holcomb of the *Village Voice* astutely notes.[9] They are convincing examples of the war genre in film, perhaps all the more so because of the real-life consequences that they purport to portray.

These contemporary documentaries about the American and/or European engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan are distinct from war documentaries from previous eras. As *New York Times* film critic, A.O. Scott muses:

> Iraq and Afghanistan are hardly the first wars to be captured by documentary filmmakers, but a particular kind of documentary has arguably become the visual medium that defines those wars. The mobility enabled by the proliferation of inexpensive, lightweight digital cameras has brought the reality of combat – the noise, the tedium, the confusion – closer than ever. (Fortunes and Misfortunes of War, from a Danish Perspective, *New York Times*, April 14, 2011)

Interestingly Scott identifies the mobility enabled by technology, without remembering to indicate the distinct lack of independent mobility, proscribed specifically by the military policy requiring the "embedding" of journalists and filmmakers. I am certainly not the first to note that embedding does more than limit the freedom of movement of a filmmaker or journalist, inherently skewing the representation to the perspective from which it is captured, that of the (in this case, invading) army. Writing about journalists, but equally applicable to filmmakers, Judith Butler (2009: 64) says, "these reporters were offered access to the war only on the condition that their gaze remain restricted to the established parameters of designated action."

Films like *Restrepo* and *Armadillo* take the POV of individual soldiers platooned in foreign, unfathomable landscapes, in a geopolitical context they don't even pretend to try to understand. *Armadillo* is the more stylized of the two, using special effects such as slow motion and time lapse, and relying on a particularly emotive electronic score for the intense battle scenes. *Restrepo* has a more stripped down, almost amateur quality to it, giving the film a gritty newsreel style of realism, yet interestingly both films have been equally touted for their realistic depiction of contemporary warfare.

Heavily dependent upon observational filming techniques, these films are subject to the same weak political commitment evinced by the "vérité" films that long preceded them.[10] While observational filmmaking can powerfully convey the "presence"

of "being there," so the criticism goes, it does so generally at the expense of deeper analysis or critique. It also tends to be read as an objective account, despite the editing-intensive requirements of such an approach. This technique always seems to convey a seductive immediacy, as if the films can expose us to the unmediated "raw emotion" of the experience of war.

Whether related specifically to the observational filmic modality, genrefication, or some underlying political torpor, the lack of an articulated political position of these films has not gone entirely unnoticed, for instance by A.O. Scott in his review quoted above, when he says: "The films tend to be politically agnostic, neither condemning nor celebrating the American-led military missions in Western Asia and the Middle East, which may be an authentic reflection of public ambivalence."[11] Here we have documentary performing the role of ideological mirror, reflecting the general public sentiment rather than influencing it, as most of the Vietnam anti-war films intended to do. As Tzvetan Todorov (1990: 19) asserts, and this ties into the uses of genre within these films, "society chooses and codifies the acts that most closely correspond to its ideology." The general claim that films like *Restrepo* and *Armadillo* have refrained from politics merely indicates their discursive reproduction of the dominant ideology, not their lack of political engagement, an assessment shared by Tony Grajeda (2007) in his thoughtful essay on contemporary Iraq and Afghanistan war documentaries.

Grajeda does in part ascribe this political agnosticism to the emergence of generic elements in the films, when he states in his discussion of one of the more egregious examples of the contemporary ambivalent paramilitarist documentary, that:

> *Gunner Palace* has severed ties to the tradition of political documentaries, including *In the Year of the Pig* and *Hearts and Minds*, and instead has extended a different tradition of cinematic codes – that of the *combat subgenre of the war movie*.

He is referring to the film's focus on the individual soldier, the development of "emotional drama of embattled individual survival" in Pat Aufderheide's words (1990). However, in addition to this, there are many more elements that bind films like this one to the war film genre, including focus on the heroic (if at times confused) soldier, a build up of tension leading to high pitched battle scenes, male bonding, a Manichean – if inchoate – division of "us" and "them," and in aesthetic terms, driving music and fast-paced editing.[12] It is for all of these reasons that film critics have found it nearly impossible to talk about these films without making comparisons to fictional depictions of war.[13]

Both in the promotional material for the films and in their critical reception, the positive affiliation with the fictional war film genre serves to emphasize the films' great dramatic and representational success. To be sure there is a tacit condescension here, implying that documentaries are not usually this engaging, but I am certain that, for instance, Andrew O'Hehir writing for *Salon.com* meant *Armadillo* the greatest compliment when he called it "among the greatest war films ever made."[14] If I appear to have been overly concerned with the reception of paramilitarist war

documentaries, it has been largely in order to establish their extratextual generic codings, through which viewers were prompted to engage with these films. These reviews create a context in which the films can be viewed via well-worn habitual viewing practices of a genre film, and this is in part what makes these paramilitarist films pernicious.

Genre, in film, describes a loose set of identifiable (iconic, narrative, structural) elements, not necessarily all present in any one instance, that mark a set of films as distinct from those of another genre. Yet there is a great deal of overlap amongst filmic genres, as well as certain aspects that join them all in a commonality, including a high degree of narrative predictability. While acknowledging that not all genres share the same degree of determinism, literary critic Gary Saul Morson asserts that some genres more than others leave limited room for improvisation, unpredictability, and contingency, displaying distinct elements of pre-ordination. In his words: "Different genres define various kinds of wholes, so at times it seems that genre is destiny" (Morson, 1998: 680). The war film, in both fiction and documentary, would be one of those genres where there is a particularly high degree of determination and thus, limited independence of form or content, impinging perceptibly on what Morson refers to as narrative "freedom."

Genre films of all types depend on the deep imprint of habitual viewing. They operate effectively in the arena of the known, the familiar, the already mastered narrative, with the greatest appeal presumably being the comforting combination of the predictable outcome with the nonetheless surprising twist. Genre films would have no allure at all if there were no surprises to be had, but nor would they succeed were they to forge entirely new territory in their overarching narrative.

At their best, genre films reassure a viewer made anxious by the endless unknowability of the world, suggesting that some semblance of that same terrifying world can indeed be dominated, mastered, and known. In effect, they control and contain fear by retreading over the traumatic uncertainties of life in ever-manageable ways. War, that infernal "theater" of death and destruction that can only appear heroic in retrospect, is particularly susceptible to generic repetitions, for a few obvious reasons, most notably, the traumatic traces left on individual psyches as well as on larger collectivities (communities, nations), that are unmournable and thus subject to an eternal return. That the battlefield and its effects in these paramilitarist films is almost inevitably cast in heroic, even if ambivalent, terms only serves to reaffirm the stubborn unmournability of the events depicted, as this overly positive assertion attempts to hide, albeit in plain sight, a terrible burden of responsibility that, in order to be palatable, is masked by denial: denial of the troubled historicity of these wars, their extreme brutality and high civilian casualties, their flawed justifications, their undeclared yet undeniable ulterior motives, and thus the highly unstable moral ground upon which these invading armies stand.

Habitual viewing is hardly perceptible when the very viewing habits in question are driven by adrenaline fueled pounding musical scores and flash-fast edits. But like a recurrent tic or an obsessive twitch, the proliferation of the paramilitarist war genre

in contemporary American and European documentary can be read as a classical anxiety symptom formation, violently masking and neurotically attempting to forestall the altogether unassimilable panic, shame, and guilt induced by the very reference, via the mediated image, to war, let alone unjust war(s), waged in "our" name.

Interrupting Genre, Refusing Militarism: The Unwar Film

In order to rupture the generic spell that binds us to these palliative paramilitarist images of contemporary warfare, we need to look to films that look awry, in the Žižekian sense of looking askance or even away from the main event, as it were, to that which is happening just outside the field of frenetic action. It is in this "minor" key,[15] this sideshadowing just off-axis, that I want to turn to now in order to explore some of the representational possibilities available to us that may help to unravel the militarist frame binding these other films. I call these minor key films "unwar films," in that they position themselves neither for nor against in sectarian terms, but instead do the destabilizing work of unthreading the very fabric of the militarist paradigm.

Unwar films, by their non-generic nature, abhor predictability, and therefore no single unwar film resembles another. They do their work outside of habitual viewing states, demanding different dispositions of and various types of discerning engagement by the viewer, so that none can be said to align us into well-worn ruts of (im) perception. Nora Alter, in her impressive 1996 article on Harun Farocki's *Images of the World and Inscriptions of War*, reminds us of Althusser's suspicion not of the invisible within capitalist ideology, but of that which is seen but not perceived.

Figure 21.3 *The Day of the Sparrow* (Philip Scheffner, Germany, 2010, produced by ARTE, Blinker Filmproduktion, Pong, Worklights Media, and Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen).

Discussing a specific film by Farocki but applicable to the films I call unwar films here as well, Alter proposes that there is a need to understand and interrogate their workings by being alert to "the political imperceptible" – that which would remain dangerously imperceptible until the artist reframes so that it may find its way to perception (Alter, 1996).[16] We can read this practice through Rancière's notion of "dissensus" as well, where the political work of these films is produced through what he calls the "redistribution of the sensible" (Rancière, 2004: 62).[17] Whether the long painterly shots of bored soldiers on border patrol in Alexander Sokurov's *Spiritual Voices* (1995) or the single-frame shots of the anticipated war's end in Walid Raad's *Miraculous Beginnings*, unwar films, like the Farocki film Alter describes, engage various techniques and approaches to make the imperceptible perceptible.

To unpack this a little further, I am forging the designation "unwar" in the nexus of several intertwined theoretical influences, all of which, when taken together, work to destabilize the militarist-cinematic complex, and in their off-angle way, allow for an imaginary space that intervenes in the dominant militarist consensus. The "un" in "unwar" takes its meaning from three particular theoretical influences: the concept of "unfitting" elaborated by the literary critic Gary Saul Morson; the idea of "untimeliness" that we know from Nietzsche but which has been productively taken up by political theorist Wendy Brown; and Walter Benjamin's much contested though nonetheless provocative concept of the "optical unconscious." I will describe these influences in turn before discussing the ways in which they manifest in a specific set of unwar films.

Gary Saul Morson proffers the term "unfitting" to designate that which, in a text, does not fit neatly into narratives of causality. "What is unfitting is not seen" (1998: 673), falling outside the usual purview of that which is see-able and that which fits the demands of the dominant narrative. He gives the example of the man who searches for his lost keys, not where he lost them, but under the streetlamp where he can see. The theory of unfitting presupposes that he searches for the keys in the dark where it may be harder to see, and is thus less predictable or neat in its resolution. I will explore this notion of "unfitting" in unwar films, those films that look to the side of the action, where the spotlight does not shine, "sideshadowing" (to use another term coined by Morson) its eventness. Morson argues for a space of distraction, of digression, even if necessary, abandoning the search for the key altogether and in the process discovering something more interesting. This is useful to me here, as it is not so much the key I am looking for in these unwar films, as the clues to what might constitute a passive resistance to the narrative drumbeat of war. The unwar film creates a more complex version of war, in which the soldier's life becomes boring, understimulated, and filled with waiting, the film gazing intently *just to the side* of the main events. Unwar films look at the quotidian, the uneventful, the "something small nearby."[18] In these ways, the unwar film makes perceptible that which is otherwise repressed or simply overlooked in the galloping narratives of war, thus helping to create the conditions for an emergent "political dissensus." It does so variably either by attending to war in its mundane uneventness, the aspects of war that neither make the history books, nor factor into its interpretation as geopolitical

inevitability, or by looking outside of war's theater entirely toward its undeclared and unpredictable effects.

"Untimeliness" as a concept introduces the element of awkward or "inappropriate" temporality so central to the unwar film. Wendy Brown, in her essay "Untimeliness and Punctuality" (2005) notes that critical theorists are frequently lambasted for not attending to crises in politically efficacious ways, seeming to take positions that appear insensate to the political exigencies of the day. She argues passionately for the need to protect that space of critique even when it may appear irrelevant to, or disruptive of, the battles as they are waged on the ground. What she is defending is the space to imagine otherwise, to insist on "alternative possibilities and perspectives in a seemingly closed political and epistemological universe." If we attribute the task of the critic to the filmmaker here, we can see how the unwar film, in its refusal to treat the topical matter of war directly, and its commitment to ethical principles of pacifism at the core, creates the space of imaging "alternative possibilities," becoming, in Brown's words, a "nonviolent mode of exploding the present" (2005: 14).

The "unwar" films I have in mind, namely Walid Raad's *Miraculous Beginnings* and *I Only Wish That I Could Weep* (2001–2002), Alexander Sokurov's *Spiritual Voices* (Russia, 1993), and Philip Scheffner's *The Day of the Sparrow* (Germany, 2010), can easily be seen as too "out of step" or "missing the moment" to launch a direct blow to the war. They are not topical in the way an anti-war or even a pro-war film might be. They do not attend to individual battles or events on the news, or if they do, as Scheffner does in *The Day of the Sparrow*, they focus on, in effect, the wrong story – a dead sparrow instead of a dead soldier. Yet in that displacement, the perversity of those confused priorities is only amplified, not denied. Further, the untimeliness of these films is their most powerful tool, disrupting the otherwise seamless and inuring volley of fire coming from all other war films, even the anti-war variety. We might even think of the question of "untimeliness" here quite literally, in the exceedingly slow temporality of a film like Alexander Sokurov's *Spiritual Voices* or Walid Raad's uncannily fast-paced *Miraculous Beginnings*, either of which can be said to reverse the adrenaline-pumped pacing of the para-militarist documentary. The pace in these films is literally "out of joint" with the more familiar viewing practices that sweep the viewer along with their narrative or argument. These films are untimely precisely in that they permit a "wildness beyond the immediate in order to reset the possibilities of the immediate" (Brown, 2005: 15) or again, in Rancière's terms, create a "conflict between a sensory presentation and a way of making sense of it" (2011: 139).

The third term that helps to shape and modify the "un" of unwar films is indebted to Rosalind Krauss's revival of Walter Benjamin's concept of the "optical unconscious" – where photography and film's unique contribution is in its framing of detail, its sustained focus on the minute, microscopic, unexceptional, that can (though significantly does not always) reveal more about the dynamics of culture than that which can be seen by the naked eye. This ascription of film's "deepening apperception," its generalized ability to "see more" and reveal the undercurrents – or

unconscious – not otherwise available to vision, does not entirely bear out in film generally. But if understood as an inherent potential of film, even if rarely attained, the concept remains intriguing. Krauss notes that Benjamin, in a footnote at the end of his essay (Benjamin, 1969: 251), specifically mentions war among the mass movements for which the mechanical apparatus of the camera is particularly sensate, and where "we encounter some form of 'unconscious' that the camera could intercept" (Krauss, 1993: 179).

She goes on to differ with Benjamin, saying that even if the mass movements displayed in wartime could be analyzed in terms of an unconscious (something Freud also had in mind in his "Group Psychology" essay) it would not necessarily mean that the unconscious resided in the optics of the camera. In her words:

> If "gatherings of hundreds of thousands" are a face that the human sensorium simply cannot register, such gatherings … can indeed be thought to display a collective consciousness, leading to their analysis in terms of an unconscious. But the masses on the parade grounds at Nuremberg, though they may make patterns for the camera eye that can be organized within the optical field, are human masses, and if they have an unconscious, collective or not, it is a human unconscious, not an "optical" one. (1993: 179–180)

Krauss locates this unconscious optics not in the prosthetic mechanical camera eye but in the eye of the camera's beholder, thus giving the unconscious back its humanity, as it were. I favor Krauss's humanizing "angle" (in her words) on the optical unconscious, where the filmmaker, not the apparatus is thus imbued with the potential for a heightened unconscious (thus not intentional) optical perception. Art, or cinema, here functions much like the intermediary of the talking cure, enabling unconscious processes to enter the realm of the perceptible.

I am taken by the idea that a certain way of looking – and even looking away – from war, made possible by film, can, if analyzed attentively, reveal something like an "unconscious optics" in the same way that psychoanalysis "made analyzable things which had heretofore floated along unnoticed in the broad stream of perception," such as the slip of the tongue (Benjamin, 1969: 235). It is the films that approach the status of a "slip," ones that create an inadvertent, seemingly incidental, visual representation, films that I am calling "unwar films," that even in their inadvertence can reveal something akin to an optical unconscious of a given phenomenon, in this case: war. These unwar films go some way in this direction, exposing the unnoticed, the invisibles, the overlooked that war produces, rather than its "main attraction." It is not that the films themselves are to be seen as unconscious errors, but that they represent, in effect, a "slip" in the general narrative of war and can, upon reflection, lead to its exposure.

We now turn to some examples of the unwar film, beginning with two brief films by an artist whose work can be nominated "honorary" in the documentary field, despite its avowed fabrications.[19] The New York-based Lebanese artist, Walid Raad, in his guise as The Atlas Group, made several films and works attributed to others,

displacing authorship and highlighting questions of authenticity, while nonetheless going to the heart of the experience of war that requires no further authentication than that which strikes the viewer as *appearing to be* true. According to art critic Sarah Hotchkiss, Raad himself has apparently claimed that:

> The Atlas Group's objects and stories cannot be categorized as fiction or nonfiction; they reject this distinction entirely. This stance allows for a simultaneous critique of the subject matter and the conventions through which historical material is presented as unadulterated fact.[20]

The first film I'll discuss flits by the viewer in a blink of an eye, and the other, also accelerated in speed beyond what the eye can take in, seems somehow mired in a dream. Both films operate on the level of the unconscious.

Miraculous Beginnings attributed to the "renowned" (fictional) Lebanese historian, Dr. Fadl Fakhouri, is a film comprised of hundreds of individual frames, each one exposed at the exact moment the good doctor thought the Lebanese Civil War (or "wars" as Raad has it) was over. As the legend, taken directly from the still functional Atlas Group website, goes:

> [F]rom 1975 until 1991, Dr. Fadl Fakhouri was in the habit of carrying two 8 mm film cameras wherever he went. With one camera he exposed a frame of film every time he thought the civil wars had come to an end. With the other camera he exposed a frame of film every time he came across the sign of a doctor or dentist's office. Dr. Fakhouri titled the two rolls of film, *Miraculous Beginnings* and *No, Illness Is Neither Here Nor There*. (www.theatlasgroup.org)[21]

The endless unendurable disappointments a civilian would experience in the midst of seemingly interminable wars is conveyed literally in flashes of pathos, as mundane and arbitrary images flicker past in a blur that defies the brain's ability to process. The imperceptible becomes nonetheless comprehensible as the viewer registers the fleeting yet vain hopes that fade faster than the eye can see. It is not the specific details of the images but instead the feeling of despair that registers as the random images flit by, giving a particularly poignant sense of the optical unconscious, conveyed as effectively as the subliminal advertising experiment allegedly conducted in a cinema in Fort Lee, New Jersey, that flashed a message 3/1000 of a second every five seconds telling viewers to eat popcorn and drink Coca Cola.[22]

I Only Wish That I Could Weep (2001–2002) consists of very different imagery – eight sped-up sequences of the sun setting into the sea – yet like *Miraculous Beginnings*, it communicates the longing to be elsewhere and for things to be otherwise than they are, attributed to another fictional character, one that we, along with Raad, would like to imagine could exist. "Operator #17," who is supposed to be patrolling Beirut's Corniche for the Lebanese intelligence service, scanning the famed promenade for enemy secret service operatives in the wake of the never

Figure 21.4 *I Only Wish I Could Weep* (The Atlas Group/Walid Raad, Lebanon, 2001–2002).

convincingly ended civil war, instead of performing this infernal task, lets his camera lens linger indefinitely on impossibly picturesque Mediterranean sunsets. The camera, inexplicably recording in fast forward, captures his wayward wandering eye, taking it dreamily into the distance, away from the important security task at hand. Though Operator #17 never existed, Raad has explained that the fiction served to point up a reality of perception, where, "during and after the civil wars, people in Beirut really believed in the presence of Syrian secret agents on the Corniche" (Magagnoli, 2011: 313).

The backdrop of war's imminence, ready to re-ignite at any moment, presses everywhere outside Operator #17's frame, but is nowhere to be found within it. Raad's description of his/The Atlas Group's work as being comprised of blurred images that are "never-on-time, always to the side" (Raad, 2002: 42)[23] is particularly apt in describing this work both as untimely and unfitting, key aspects of the unwar film. In this case, Operator #17 is distracted, neither focused fully on the job at hand, nor on his daydreams. He catches the sunsets but misses the potential action, looking just to the side of what he's supposed to be watching. This distracted agent is exhausted, fed up with meaningless orders, tired out from being on red alert for too many years, weary of fearing the enemy just around the bend, enervated from always expecting – and experiencing – the worst. He expresses his dissatisfaction in the defiant act of looking away, looking at the sunset when he's supposed to be looking for danger lurking. Duty no longer calls; sublimity holds the stronger lure. This is the artist's fantasy, of course, that a soldier/operative would answer a higher call than his military supervisor's meaningless demands, but the fantasy is surely not an idle one. Operator #17, along with Raad, has his priorities straight. For this, we are told, he lost his job, but I'd like to imagine that he retained his ability to dream. The

Figure 21.5 The uneventfulness of war, from *Spiritual Voices* (Alexander Sokurov, Russia, 1993).

sunsets are precisely "unfit" as the object of this operative's gaze and "unfitting" into the narrative of war, intrigue, terror, that fills the frames of militarist war films. It is off topic and yet says so much about what is disallowed in the imagery and the imaginary of war.

Alexander Sokurov's *Spiritual Voices: From the Diaries of War*, his epic 327-minute, five-part, made-for-television documentary series[24] about the Russian-inherited Soviet war with Afghanistan, goes even further in the direction of dreaming (day dreaming and otherwise), to exemplify the unwar documentary. The first episode, which lasts 38 minutes and is comprised of just two shots (the first lasting a full 30 minutes, of a wintry landscape in a fixed frame, the second much shorter and dissolved into toward the very end, of a sleeping soldier) is a most intriguing entry into a series made for television. It boldly declares its alterity first and foremost from television as we know it, but also from the war genre. In episode 1, the wind wails, the foggy mist rolls out then in again, the sun slowly sets and darkness enshrouds the scene, all in real time. We lose our visual and temporal bearings, and with them any prior expectations of what it is we are about to see. In this majestic long take, the viewer scans the frame, notices its parameters, its vectors, its simultaneous grandeur and mundanity. Jeremy Hicks suggests that Sokurov tricks us into "inattentive viewing, only later to show us we have missed something" (2011: 18). Amidst the wind and the intermittent seagull calls, the soundtrack bears music and a minimal voice-over (performed by Sokurov himself), telling us of the troubled life of Mozart. Arguably all this has nothing to do with war, except that Sokurov posits it as the sleeping soldier's dream, thus imbuing the soldier with a rich spiritual life.[25]

While I cannot begin to describe to you the entire 327-minute film, I can suggest its general arc and point to certain telling scenes in order to convey that which makes this film a quintessential unwar film. It is not until episode 2, after the initial prologue, that we find ourselves shipping out, along with a battalion of soldiers of the Moscow Border Detachment, to the eleventh frontier post along the Tajik-Afghan border. The film's three further episodes are all filmed on the front, living in the bunkers with the soldiers and accompanying them on their border patrol detail. This unwar film skirts the closest to its paramilitarist counterpart of any of the examples cited thus far. Arguably it is even "embedded," with the skeleton film crew bivouacking with, and shooting largely from the POV of, the Russian soldiers. However, from Sokurov's perspective, there is no glory, no heroism, neither his own nor the soldiers.[26] He complains in his weary voice-over of fatigue in the climb "up and up" to the lookout posts. He imagines these young men to be desolate, wretched creatures, who "can't have had much in the way of human happiness … Perhaps some of them don't have anyone waiting for them anywhere." This strikes quite a contrast to the usual image of "boys on the front" with their proverbial sweethearts in waiting, and serves well as one of many "unfitting" narrative details.

The film's pacing runs counter to the war film, inching its way, step by dusty, exhausted step toward the inevitable battle, given to us well after most viewers would have switched the channel or walked out of the room, sometime in the middle of episode 4, roughly 200 minutes into the film. Clearly, the main event is not the battle scene. The battle is an inevitability that somehow, eventually, must be shown, but its centrality is flatly denied. Instead, what is foregrounded is the waiting, watching. In episode after episode we witness the daily routine of soldiers eating, sleeping, reading, walking the long mine-laden path to and from the lookout post, languidly smoking cigarettes, chattering mindlessly, and then, more of the same. The color palette is similarly spare and redundant, a somber dusty brown with hints of green and shades of yellow, not colorless, but almost. The time of waiting, in which nothing of note happens suggests the paralyzing quality of war, its inertia rather than its "action"; another sign of the effects of "untimeliness" in this unwar film.

In this inverted action film, "the plot of a war film is implied but not developed into an exciting staging of combat scenes" (Hänsgen, 2011: 45). Instead, time unfolds almost in the absence of narrative. Space too is defamiliarized. For instance, late in episode 3, a group of soldiers are perched on a hilltop, chatting in a medium shot that painstakingly pulls out to reveal the immensity of the setting. The sound, recorded separately from the camera, gives the impression of intimacy. We overhear their very quotidian, relaxed, conversation, interrupted at points by crashing thunder. The image reveals, slowly but surely, how isolated and insignificant these few men are in this imposing and dominating terrain, with flashes of lightning dramatically emphasizing their precariousness. It is not the men who are rugged, but their surroundings; they, in fact, are fragile and their task – to secure the immense borders – Sisyphean.

To highlight the soldiers' insignificance, Sokurov searches for metaphors, as in the brief scene where a tortoise is observed laboriously moving along a rock, crawling unsuspectingly under a propped up machinegun only to be clobbered by it with one misstep,

Figure 21.6 The precariousness of the soldier's position conveyed via framing, from *Spiritual Voices* (Alexander Sokurov, Russia, 1993).

prompting it to scurry off with uncharacteristic speed. The tortoise shell resembles nothing so much as a soldier's helmet, its stupid unwitting presence in this mine-laden terrain an easy stand-in for these simple foot soldiers, whose one misstep could cost them their lives or limbs. This unlikely analogy – and it's not the only instance of this in the film – between soldier and hapless creature completely eschews the heroic narratives demanded by the battlefield drama. The tortoise scene reveals an unconscious optics of war suggesting more about its absurdity than any dramatic battle scene ever could.

Even at the height of the "confrontation" with a full 20 minutes of out and out warfare in episode 4, the film refuses to cede to the narrative demands of the genre. The camera cowers, the shots make no attempt to "capture the action," the film pacing utterly refuses the temptation to match the rapid rate of machinegun rounds audible on the soundtrack. Sokurov's voice-over explains: "War is hideous, from the very first shot to the last. There is nothing but dust, the smell of burning, stones, hot shrapnel, blood, a hint of fear. *No room for aesthetics*" (my italics). In an interview, quoted by Sabine Hänsgen, he illuminates his position:

> In war, there are no picturesque explosions, sensational time lapses, people who grab their heads. There are no blinding flashes, no blood that slowly runs down a finger. And actually, there is no excitement either. … Long breaks between the attacks, in which there is relaxation. A great amount of vacuous activity, erratic advances, long periods of looking around. (Hänsgen, 2011: 45–46).

Hänsgen rightly identifies Sokurov's challenge to the audience, requiring of the spectators that they "change to perceive the liminal variability of the images. What we are dealing with here is an appeal to reshape the perceptual apparatus beyond the

comprehension of a narrative." Precisely an "unwar" film as I've been attempting to put forth; using the cinematic apparatus as a means to reveal some crucial aspect of the optical unconscious of war while at the same time foregrounding that which would normally be excluded from the narrative, the "unfitting" details which here become the main story, the only thing, in fact, that is fit to behold. Its untimeliness, too, marks it out clearly as an unwar film.

The final example of the unwar film that I will discuss is Philip Scheffner's *The Day of the Sparrow*. This is another film that demands scrupulously attentive viewing, as it holds indefinitely on shots of bucolic landscapes where the stillness may eventually be interrupted by something revealing, but only if we are prepared to wait patiently for it to appear. Possibly the only documentary ever to be billed as a "political wildlife film," (Wolf, 2010) it takes an exacting ornithologist's gaze on contemporary geopolitics, making unexpected yet painfully astute observations connecting the fate of a single house sparrow to the slow and steady militarization of Germany and its understated yet active participation in the war in Afghanistan. The sparrow in question caused a minor furor in the news, when it was shot dead for knocking down 23,000 dominoes just days before the small Dutch city of Leeuwarden's much celebrated annual Domino Day competition was to be broadcast across Europe and in the United States. The sparrow, we learn 30 minutes into this quietly disturbing film, was shot the same day as a German soldier was killed in a suicide attack in Kabul. The stories appeared, Scheffner tells us in his pitch-perfect narration, on the same page of a German newspaper, reported on November 15, 2005. Nothing more is said of this coincidence, upon which the entire premise of the film rests: As Europe concerns itself with the untimely death of a common house sparrow (and the event

Figure 21.7 Palimpsest over the River Mosel in Germany, from *The Day of the Sparrow* (Philip Scheffner, Germany, 2010, produced by ARTE, Blinker Filmproduktion, Pong, Worklights Media, and Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen).

became a matter of Dutch national security), it turns away from the infinitely more scandalous fact of its participation in a deadly war far from home. Scheffner brings that war home, not by showing us patriotic mothers who've lost their sons in battle, like Michael Moore, but by resolutely revealing, subtly yet inexorably, how Germany has quietly become remilitarized. He does this by filming birds, birds in their natural surroundings deep in the heartland of Germany, and always within telephoto range of some well-camouflaged local military base.

In this film that attunes us to the drift and glide of a bird of prey or the coordinated movements of a flock of geese in flight, the closest we get to the war are images of Tornado fighter jets emerging literally out of thin air, unexpectedly disturbing the peace of the otherwise tranquil German countryside. These same jets we are told by an unnamed interviewee, conduct practice runs along the winding River Mosel in Western Germany, whose valleys provide a useful testing ground for landing maneuvers in Afghanistan. The overlay of that information as we contemplate an aerial view of a most placid riverscape has the effect of an unsettling palimpsest, as if the geography of the war in Afghanistan had just settled like a transparent film over this sedate and otherwise soothing scene. This is also a question of untimeliness, again, time out of joint, as parallel narratives of wartime and peacetime are forced into the same chronotope of the shared frame. The filmmaker holds the shot well after the voice disappears, leaving only what seem to be the distinctive bird calls of the area on the audio track. Then an abrupt cut to a flock of birds fluidly moving in formation against a grey blue sky as the audio track continues insistently, unnaturally consistent, alerting us to the fact that the sound is actually electronic, a simulation of a bird call emanating from the airbase to discourage the feathered flyers from sharing the airspace of the about-to-be deployed jets.

The patiently revealing images, taken with the unerring eye of an experienced birdwatcher, never fail to disturb as they brush uncomfortably up against the submerged realities of the increasingly militarized terrain. This film, with its unfitting side narratives of birds in flight, its unconscious optics (and acoustics) where things are often not what they seem, and its untimely – out of step – pacing that requires the patience of a twitcher, has all of the hallmarks of an unwar film, forcing a new perception of the sensible. As Nicole Wolf's review suggests:

> If … in the age of constant media confrontation with conflict zones we have lost our capacity for empathy because we have no relationship to the object of attention, then the *Day of the Sparrow* is a calm, insistent example of how documentary film, at any rate a particular documentary film, is precisely what can grow beyond the description of the world as we are able to see it today. If in the act of viewing the film produces the experience of a corporeal alienation effect in relation to familiar landscapes and confuses our embedding in certain pictorial, auditory and sensual contexts, then this carries the fascinating potential of the politics of aesthetics that might be the condition of political thought and action.

What Wolf alludes to here is the need to recalibrate our sensibility to imagine that which may be. What is at stake in the unwar film is the future imaginary, beyond the

logic that binds us to militarism as a necessary condition of political thought. I share Rancière's "dream of an art that would transmit meanings in the form of a rupture with the very logic of meaningful situations" (2004: 63). And in the realm of war documentaries, it is the unwar film that shows us the dream does occasionally come to pass; "ensuring, at one and the same time the production of a double effect: the readability of a political signification and a sensible or perceptual shock caused conversely, by *the uncanny*, by that which resists signification" (Rancière, 2004: 63, my emphasis). So the final "un" in the unwar film, is the uncanny, sending a shock – also in the Benjaminian sense – through the field of the sensible, that may just, if we are attentive to the unconscious optics, and allow ourselves to be taken off course by the unfitting details and untimely interventions, help us to recast our thinking about war in our times.

The contemporary war documentary appears most frequently in the paramilitarist vein, replacing the clearly pro-war documentary with a more ambivalent sentiment that nonetheless – and sometimes even appearing to be at odds with itself – stokes the flames of war. While there are some examples of anti-war films in the recent era, those seem to have lost their passion for the fight, tending to make economistic arguments or emotional pleas, both of which have had muted effects at best. The films that are truly anti-militarist, aesthetically and ideologically, and that arguably have the ability to haunt the discourse and unsettle the war documentary's militarist paradigm, are the unlikeliest of films, the ones following the path that is the filmic equivalent of passive resistance. These are the unwar films.

Notes

1 De Antonio quoted in Joseph Morgenstern, History Right in the Face, *Newsweek*, November 10, 1969, 108–110.

2 It must be said that the use of the term "anti-militarist" here as a designation of the anti-war film, is not to be confused with anti-militarism as a political movement per se. Anti-militarism as a political movement decidedly refuses the logic of militarism using tactics such as non-payment of taxes, non-participatory sabotage, boycotting implicated companies, and of course conscientious objection. In fact as we shall see, the anti-militarist movement is closer in its affinities to what I have termed the unwar film than it is to the anti-war documentary.

3 To be very clear, I do not mean to claim here that no anti-war films have emerged in this post-9/11 period. That would be patently absurd, given the unparalleled success of films such as *Fahrenheit 9/11* (Michael Moore, US, 2004) and *Iraq for Sale* (Robert Greenwald and Kerry Candaele, US, 2006). An indicative list of anti-war documentaries of this period would also include: *Why We Fight* (Eugene Jarecki, US, 2006), *Uncovered: The Whole Truth About the Iraq War* (Robert Greenwald, US, 2004), and *Baghdad ER* (Jon Alpert and Matthew O'Neill, US, 2006). There is also Deep Dish TV's 12-episode series *Shocking and Awful* (2004–2005) among many others.

4 An early incarnation of the "unwar" film would be Harun Farocki's *Bilder der Welt und Inschrift des Krieges* / *Images of the World and the Inscription of War* (1988), discussed by Nora Alter in Chapter 20.

5 I would like to thank Sophie Mayer for helping to formulate this triumvirate of pro-, anti-, and para-militarist documentary.

6 Earlier incarnations of the paramilitarist film emerged during the time of the Vietnam War, where the most effective filmic strategy in tacit support of the war would be that of the soldier's point of view purporting to be apolitical and objective, simply showing life in the trenches, when an attack can come at any time. This includes films like *The Anderson Platoon* (Pierre Schoendoerffer, 1967) and *The Face of War* (Eugene Jones, 1968).

7 Documentary in the twenty-first century found the recipe for success by following the formulas of fictional genre films. *Man on Wire* (heist genre) won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature in 2009, *In the Shadow of the Moon* (sci-fi genre), won the Sundance Festival World Cinema Audience Award in 2007, and *Paradise Lost 3: Purgatory* (courtroom genre) was nominated for an Academy Award in 2011, to name just a few. In the war genre, we should note that *Restrepo* was nominated for an Academy Award in 2010, and *Armadillo* won the Cannes Critics' Week Grand Prize the same year.

8 *Time Out London*, 2094, October 7–13, 2010; *The Telegraph*, October 7, 2010; *Salon.com*, April 15, 2011, http://www.salon.com/2011/04/15/armadillo/, accessed August 5, 2014.

9 Mark Holcomb, *Village Voice*, April 13, 2011, http://www.villagevoice.com/2011-04-13/film/at-war-with-the-danes-and-on-the-frontline-in-armadillo/, accessed August 5, 2014.

10 Thomas Waugh (1976) claimed that, "The pseudo-objective cinema vérité of the sixties was ultimately bypassed by this cinema of open commitment, research, and analysis." In this impressive essay, Waugh lays bare the limitations of the observational mode with regard to politically committed documentary.

11 Sukhdev Sandu, *The Telegraph*, October 7, 2010, goes even further: "*Restrepo* isn't an obviously political film. The whys and wherefores of the US presence aren't discussed. The directors prefer to focus on the adrenaline and buzz of armed battle."

12 The one element usually missing in the war documentary that is ever-present in its fictional counterpart is blood and guts. Rarely is any blood shown or spilt in the contemporary documentary war film of any description (though there are, of course, exceptions, such as Olly Lambert's *Battle Hospital* (UK, 2003), or Jon Alpert's *Baghdad ER* (US, 2006). *Armadillo* does actually include a scene, quite late in the film, that depicts the consequences of a body being hit by a grenade. This subject deserves an essay unto itself.

13 In particular, references to Kathryn Bigelow's 2008 blockbuster war film, *The Hurt Locker*, abound. A few examples: David Jenkins, *Time Out London*, 2094, October 7–13, 2010, "With 'The Hurt Locker', Kathryn Bigelow claimed that war was the adrenalin junkie's prescription of choice. Tim Hetherington and Sebastian Junger's harrowing frontline doc 'Restrepo' shows how on the money Bigelow was." Andrew O'Hehir, *Salon.com*, "Junger and Hetherington take our conflicted ideas about war and its let's-make-a-man-out-of-you purpose and throw them in our faces, in a way '*Hurt Locker*' never does." Mark Dinning, *Empire Magazine*, "Powerful, terrifying and soulful, this real-life *Hurt Locker* is an intimate, often brilliant insight into combat and comradeship," http://www.empireonline.com/reviews/reviewcomplete.asp?FID=136974, accessed August 5, 2014. Sukhdev Sandu, *The Telegraph*, October 7, 2010, about *Restrepo*: "Anyone who thrilled to the rawness of Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* will get a kick out of this documentary."

14 Andrew O'Hehir, *Salon.com*, April 15, 2011.

15 I have in mind something along the lines of Deleuze and Guattari's (1986) theory of a "minor literature" that unsettles the dominant language by virtue of its deterritorial – or "outsider" – nature.

16 One could easily include several of Farocki's films under the rubric of unwar films. If I have refrained from analyzing them here, it is only because he is duly represented in this volume in Nora Alter's contribution (Chapter 20).

17 See also Rancière (2009: 25) and Rancière (2011).

18 In a 1979 interview Chantal Akerman described her method thus: "Instead of showing a 'public' event because it is so sensational, or full of lots of things, I will tell the story of *something small nearby*" (Bergstrom, 1999: 94, my emphasis).

19 Here I follow a move by Gaines, who nominates Godard's *Letter to Jane* as an honorary documentary, and she in turn follows Bill Nichols who does the same with Eisenstein's *Strike* (Gaines, 2007: 8).

20 Sarah Hotchkiss, Profile: Walid Raad, *Art Practical*, November 2, 2011, http://www.artpractical.com/column/walid_raad/, accessed August 5, 2014.

21 *Miraculous Beginnings* is viewable on this site at http://www.theatlasgroup.org/data/TypeA.html, accessed August 9, 2014.

22 Whether or not this campaign ever actually took place is a matter of some dispute, see Carrie McLaren (2004) and Philip Merikle (2000).

23 Raad was actually referring to a different project, entitled "Sweet Talk: Photographic Documents of Beirut," but the description fits these projects equally well.

24 Though Sokurov is best known for his feature filmmaking, he has made many more documentaries than fiction films. See Hicks (2011).

25 Of course we are never told this in so many words, but the technique of dissolving from the musings upon creative works of art to the image of a sleeping soldier is reproduced again in episode 3 of this series and more significantly still, the same device is used in the short film *A Soldier's Dream* (1995). That film is comprised of the very same footage of sleeping soldiers that appears in *Spiritual Voices* intercut with (among other things) the mournful painting from 1903 by Finnish Symbolist, Hugo Simberg, *The Wounded Angel*.

26 The heroism of the filmmaker who fearlessly goes into the live war zone to bring us images from the front is a frequent theme in reviews of war documentaries.

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A Companion to Contemporary Documentary Film

Edited by

Alexandra Juhasz and Alisa Lebow

WILEY Blackwell

This edition first published 2015

Registered Office
John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

Editorial Offices
350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA
9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ, UK
The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A companion to contemporary documentary film / edited by Alexandra Juhasz and Alisa Lebow.
pages cm
Includes bibliographical references and index.
ISBN 978-0-470-67164-1 (cloth)
1. Documentary films–History and criticism. I. Juhasz, Alexandra, editor.
II. Lebow, Alisa, editor.
PN1995.9.D6C543 2015
070.1′8–dc23
2014031042

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Cover image: *The Day of the Sparrow*, directed by Philip Scheffner (Germany, 2010. Produced by ARTE, Blinker Filmproduktion, Pong, Worklights Media, and Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF))

Set in 10.5/13pt Minion by SPi Publisher Services, Pondicherry, India

1 2015