

The Narration and Visualization of Rape and the Inadvertent Subversion of the Anti-War Message in Brian De Palma's *Redacted* and *Casualties of War*

Brian De Palma's *Redacted* (2007) takes as its subject matter the rape and murder of an Iraqi girl by US soldiers in Mahmudiyah, south of Baghdad, in 2006. This is not De Palma's first attempt at a cinematic dramatization of an actual event; *Redacted* is a variation on *Casualties of War* (1989), based on the real-life incident portrayed in Daniel Lang's "Reporter at Large: Casualties of War" published in *The New Yorker* in 1969. *Casualties of War* and *Redacted* are emblems of anti-war cinema, yet their importance lies elsewhere. They are evidence of how ineffective is the appropriation of rape in a medium that by its very nature fictionalizes history for the indivisible purposes of politics and entertainment. They are also evidence of how cultural representations of wartime rape (in documentaries, histories, literature and film) belittle the trauma of female victims by shifting the meaning of rape from a criminal sexual assault to a metaphor of the violence and dehumanization instigated by war. This is, in truth, nothing else but a rationalization of rapes committed by soldiers in the allegedly exceptional circumstances of military conflict.

Casualties of War is the more conventional of the two films and it is precisely the orthodoxy of its Aristotelian pattern comprising an overt beginning (introduction of the characters and the launching of the action), development (the kidnapping, rape and murder of the Vietnamese girl), and end (Eriksson's quest for justice) that is

morally unsettling. How can human suffering be subordinated to a simple narrative pattern? How can one allow the irrevocability of a girl's death to be subsumed by a conclusion that offers an ethical and emotional catharsis? The paradox of the film is that, on the one hand, its structure is too contrived to be convincing as fact, but, on the other hand, there is too much adherence to factual details to persuade the viewers to see the behavior of these soldiers as typical of the overall conduct of American GIs in Vietnam. Furthermore, the choice of recognizable faces for the leading roles (Sean Penn as Sergeant Meserve and Michael J. Fox as Private Eriksson) creates an unintended theatrical effect, i.e. the actor is "visible" in the character, which shatters the meticulously constructed illusion of the "real."

Redacted deconstructs its intended moral meaning and undoes the possibility of empathic involvement by different methods. It begins with the following information "typed" on the screen: "This film is entirely fiction, inspired by an incident widely reported to have occurred in Iraq. While some of the events depicted here may resemble those of the reported incident, the characters are entirely fictional, and their words and actions should not be confused with those of real persons." One by one, words are crossed out from this introduction; but the first words that are obliterated are "fiction" and "fictional," thus changing the initial message of the introduction and deliberately confusing the viewer as to whether this will be a fictive or documentary reconstruction of events. The film proposes an intentionally fractured structure of narration comprising separate visual segments: the video journal of PFC Angel Salazar; a French film by Marc et François Clément entitled "Barrage" with extremely conspicuous background opera music; ATV breaking news on the wounding of a pregnant Iraqi woman; images from security cameras at the US military base camp; short films on YouTube; a blog site "Just a Soldier's Wife"; the psychological evaluation of PFC. Angel Salazar; an ATV interview with the father of the raped girl; the ATV coverage of the kidnapping of an American soldier; a video film of the execution of Salazar; video depositions of the soldiers accused in the rape and murder; and a series of actual photographs from the Iraq War entitled "Collateral Damage." Moral outrage can be effectively counteracted by the cinematic medium when the viewer is allowed insight into its techniques and strategies. This creates grounds for an affective and ethical dissociation; in the words of Jean Baudrillard: "we have neither need nor taste for real drama or real war. What we require is the aphrodisiac spice of the multiplication of fakes and the hallucination of violence, [which] is also the pleasure in our indifference and our irresponsibility" (75).

It is unfathomable why a film that purportedly wants to show the “truth” of Iraq by taking on the disguise of existing forms of visual documentation would concomitantly lay bare its devices and expose itself to be a cinematic experiment. It is not clear whether *Redacted* is about war or about the representation of atrocity in the media. The most controversial decision, however, was the inclusion of an image of a partly burnt body of a girl at the very end of the film. This is not the actual photograph of the victim but a staged scene shot by Taryn Simon. The fake image can only work one way—it draws attention to the artifice of the visual image and unveils the in-authenticity of the entire project; it unclothes the film from the illusory visage of the document. One does not shed tears or feel indignation over a body that is not real. One of the most important lessons of the Holocaust that De Palma seems to be totally unaware of is that there is no atrocity without authenticity.

Despite all its more or less successful attempts at formal experimentation, *Redacted* possesses a straightforward and conventional narrative formula. *Casualties of War* and *Redacted* have the same cause and effect logic. Rape is the outcome of what may be called instigating events: had the men been allowed to leave the base, had the men been relieved, and had they not witnessed the deaths of their comrades—they would not have committed these acts. Significantly, there were no such instigating events in the actual rape cases. According to “Sven Eriksson” in interview with Daniel Lang, a reconnaissance patrol was selected and, during their first briefing, the men were informed by their sergeant that they would kidnap a girl (65-66). In the case of the Iraqi girl, “several soldiers allegedly planned the attack over drinks after noticing the woman near the traffic checkpoint they manned in Mahmudiyah, according to a criminal complaint filed in U.S. District Court for the Western District of Kentucky” (White). De Palma is effectively rewriting the actual events into a historically and internationally recognizable narrative blueprint—the so-called descent into the beast theme popularized after the Great War. The novel entitled *Return of the Brute* by Irish author Liam O’Flaherty, published in 1929, traces the gradual degeneration of one soldier who ends up murdering his corporal. The novel entitled *The German Prisoner* by Canadian author James Hanley, published in 1931, tells about two soldiers, English and Irish, deprived by war to such a point that when they come across a young German in No Man’s Land, they rape him with a bayonet and kill him. The message that war destroys all human instincts in man may be well conveyed without exploiting the torment of raped women.

In *Casualties of War*, Private Hatcher exalts over the kidnapping of a Vietnamese girl: “what we are doing is fantastic; why hadn’t we thought of it before, this is what armies do.” In *Redacted*, Reno Flake justifies his plan of raping an Iraqi teenager by calling her “spoils of war.” The act of rape is thus embedded in an assumed unique social and psychological “culture” of war, i.e. a system of values and behavioral patterns brought about and sanctioned by the exceptional circumstances of military conflict. De Palma’s characters voice their “right” to rape. How can we be appalled by such remarks if in the *Book of Deuteronomy* we read: “When the Lord of God delivers [the city] in your hand, put to the sword all the men in it. As for the women, the children, the livestock and everything else in the city, you may take these as plunder for yourselves. And you may use the plunder the Lord of God gives you from the enemies” [20:13-14]? It is this “culture” of war that De Palma should be attacking and not the politics behind the American invasion of Iraq. The supposition that “rape always occurs in wartime” and, what is more, that “widespread rape whether during or after battle(s) is... not without rules and social purposes” (Lilly 26) diminishes the culpability of the male perpetrator by projecting the cause for rape upon war itself.

In *Casualties of War*, the opening scenes show the soldiers under heavy mortar fire; in *Redacted* the main problem of the soldiers is boredom. Otherwise, the plots have a similar format. Soldiers enter a seemingly peaceful Vietnamese village; soldiers are positioned at a seemingly peaceful part of an Iraqi town. Vietnamese children pester the soldiers; Iraqi children pester the soldiers; the soldiers are warned not to trust them and under no circumstances are they to take food from them—it may be poisoned. The tranquility is deceptive; Brown is hit when the soldiers are unexpectedly attacked by an invisible enemy; Master Sergeant Sweet is killed when an undetected bomb explodes (coincidentally or not, both casualties are African Americans). The reactions are predictable. In *Casualties of War*: “I hate this fucking place. They ought to blow it up. These fucking gooks are shit. They’re lowlifes. Every man, woman and child knew about those mortars and snipers and they let them zap Brown. They’re slugs, roaches. Total destruction is the only way to deal with them.” In *Redacted*: “This shithole is a death trap. Vaporize every sand nigger”; “You don’t see the Iraqis stepping on IEDs because they know exactly where they are.” We witness in both films the “emotional withdrawal” of the soldiers (Erich Fromm qtd. in Grossmann 160) which accounts for their dehumanization. One should add, however, that it is a state of mind that turns men into effective soldiers: “If your propaganda machine can convince your soldiers that their opponents are not really human but are ‘inferior forms of life,’ then their natural resistance to

killing their own species will be reduced. Often the enemy's humanity is denied by referring him as a 'gook,' 'Kraut,' or 'Nip'" (Grossman 161). Discursive violence is "justified" by the preceding events and becomes transformed into physical acts of violence which are "rationalized" by the depicted psychological processes.

According to Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, the level of aggression in wartime is determined by four psychological mechanisms. The first is "cultural distance, such as racial and ethnic differences, which permit the killer to dehumanize the victim." The second is "moral distance, which takes into consideration the kind of intense belief in moral superiority and vengeful/vigilant actions [.]" The third is "social distance, which considers the impact of a lifetime of practice in thinking a particular class as less than human in a socially stratified environment." The fourth is "mechanical distance, which includes the sterile Nintendo-game unreality of killing through a TV screen, a thermal sight, a sniper sight, or some kind of mechanical buffer that permits the killer to deny the humanity of his victim" (160). These mechanisms of affective dissociation strike me as perfectly apt in defining the potential effect of De Palma's films upon the viewer. Film—by the nature its medium—creates the "mechanical distance." The other types of distance are created through characterization and plot. Empathy is the strongest when the viewer can identify with the victim. The Vietnamese girl in *Casualties of War* and the Iraqi girl in *Redacted* have no backgrounds, they speak in a language incomprehensible for the viewer, and they are distinctively exotic. Their appearance and behavior discloses their "otherness," whereas all effort should have been made to familiarize them for the purposes of empathic involvement. What is more, they are not the protagonists of the plot but secondary characters, a status which augments their moral and structural "insignificance." They are evidence of the destructive impact of war on the male psyche; and, structurally, they are the effects of other events. Let us take the counter- example of the Australian TV series entitled *Vietnam* (dir. John Duigan and Chris Noonan, 1987). The rape of a Vietnamese girl by Americans invokes empathy and moral indignation because she is given the status of a protagonist of the plot. She is familiarized by two simple strategies—she is courted by an Australian soldier, a fact which allows her to be symbolically integrated into western culture and, furthermore, she speaks English which allows her to be understandable for viewers.

Redacted is about the impossibility of familiarization of Arabic culture, as much as *Casualties of War* was about the impossibility of familiarization of Asian culture. Both films adopt a restrictive gendered (male), national (American), and cultural (occidental) gaze. De Palma's films are (inadvertently) perfect examples

of the appropriation of the ideology and rhetoric of colonialism. War is a military form of colonization where two variants are possible: first, the invader wishes to annex the conquered territories; second: the invader wishes to impose his way of life (political, social, and cultural) upon the invaded and transform the conquered into a mirror image of the conqueror. In Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Africa is metaphorically gang-raped and the consequences are dire—the soul of the white man is destroyed. Chinua Achebe was uncompromising in his criticism of Conrad's work: "Africa as a metaphysical battlefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which the wandering European enters at his peril. Can nobody see the preposterous and perverse arrogance in thus reducing Africa to the role of props for the break-up of one petty mind?" (9). If we read "Vietnam" or "Iraq" instead of "Africa," and we replace the "European" with the "American," we achieve an adequate summary of De Palma's cinematic narratives where the rape and murder of a Vietnamese girl was just an excuse to show the American soldiers as the eponymous casualty of war and where the rape and murder of an Iraqi girl was, to quote the directors own words, "to stir U.S. public debate about the conduct of American soldiers" (Kearney). The narcissism of De Palma's films is more than obvious.

Eriksson's famous speech in *Casualties of War* is worth quoting here: "Just because each of us every second might be blown away, everybody's acting like we can do anything.... But I think it's the other way round.... Because we might be dead in the next split second, maybe we've got to be extra careful what we do. Because maybe it matters more." This is a war version of Marlow's message in *Heart of Darkness* that the only way to safeguard oneself against the destructive impact of colonization is restraint which, in the case of Kurtz, is defined in overtly sexual terms. The same peril awaited the soldiers who entered Iraq. Rush's comments about the planned night raid ("my fuck stick needs some pussy, like right now; this fuck baby is hurting; there is nothing like a sweet Hajji ass to get this into line") signify the lack of restraint that will determine his ultimate moral downfall, i.e. trial and conviction. The sphere of convergence between *Heart of Darkness* and De Palma's films is basically the foregrounding of the perpetrator at the expense of the victim who is important insofar as she is evidence of the overall threat posed by colonization/war to the integrity of the allegedly "civilized" man.

Brian De Palma said in an interview that "You could do Haditha, you could do Abu Ghraib, but it clicked with me because I did a similar story with Vietnam, and, of course, you do, in fact, rape the country. It's a big metaphor. You destroy the country: burned, dead, ravished" (Kaufman). This is an ideologically treacherous standpoint to take. The rape of the woman as symbolical rape of nation is

conventionally the victim's myth. The Rape of Berlin in 1945 is a German narrative, let it suffice to cite the examples of the documentary *BeFreier und Befreite/Liberators Take Liberties* (dir. Helke Sander, 1992) and *Anonyma: Eine Frau in Berlin/A Woman in Berlin*, (dir. Max Fäberbröck, 2008). The Rape of Nanking is a Chinese narrative, the subject of two films: *Nanjing 1937/1937: Don't Cry Nanking* (dir. Ziniu Wu, 1995) and *Nanjing! Nanjing! /City of Life and Death* (dir. Chuan Lu, 2009). Sexual subjugation (rape) is the prerogative of the victorious army in war. The victim's myth is constructed in the aftermath of the atrocities to break a silence that is destructive for national identity because it signifies an impossible acceptance of the status of a "feminized" nation, i.e. inferior, humiliated, passive, defeated etc. In rape-of-nation narratives, national dignity is regained by reinstating dignified and un-traumatized womanhood. The emphasis is shifted from victims to survivors who are able to tell their stories or, alternatively, we have a centralization of women-protagonists who command their own fate (the so-called sacrificial victim).

In *Redacted*, the rape takes place inside the home of an Iraqi family in the absence of the father: "in such instances, rape [is] the most extreme violation of the domestic interior" (Horne and Kramer 198). It is insignificant that an American soldier is subsequently kidnapped and beheaded. There remains the basic inequality between the two acts because "rape is... a weapon to penetrate the innermost sphere of the national body, its home and traditions and to desecrate the values that women, as gender and social product, symbolically represent" (Kosta 221) whereas the killing of one soldier does not diminish the military strength of an army nor does it threaten American national integrity. When De Palma chooses to culminate his narrative with the (faked) image of the raped girl he reaffirms "the invader's absolute power to violate the body" (Horne and Kramer 199). The rape of the Iraqi girl in the absence of her father (arrested earlier by Americans) projects intertwined meanings of domination and victory:

While rape is used to defile and denigrate a nation, by extension, it also serves to strip a man who belongs to that nation of his honour, his masculinity, and what is seen as his exclusive right to a woman as his sole property. Women thus become a vehicle by which male soldiers defeat the group with which they are in conflict. Not only is the female body as property violated and transgressed, but the male is emasculated and allegedly confronted with his own sexual inadequacy and his failure as protector. (Kosta 221)

Rather than exposing the dehumanization of the American GIs, De Palma is effectively endorsing the hyper-masculine supremacy of the USA. It is also hard to decipher the intended meaning of the YouTube film-scene where the woman representing “The Get Out of Iraq Campaign” behaves like a raving lunatic. Her views that the American soldier is a “racist Nazi fuck” may strike one as extreme, yet what she says perfectly pinpoints that rape is the effect of a primitive ideological preconditioning that inflates the ego and boosts up the primal sexual drive.

In *Casualties of War*, we have the court-martial of the soldiers implicated in the crime where the family of the murdered girl is present yet barely noticeable. The focus is on accused, and the threat they pose to their accuser. In *Redacted*, we have the Criminal Investigation of Corporal McCoy and the Video Depositions of PFC. B.B. Rush and PFC Reno Flake, and thus the Iraqis disappear altogether from the picture. The way the father of the victim is presented in the film must also raise objections. Interviewed by a reporter, the father says about the investigations conducted by the US army: “Lies, lies, lies. We do not recognize their court. This is a crime. It will not be forgotten.” If we add to this the fate of Salazar, we are given an image of Iraqis utterly incompatible with our western values, and one is tempted to add—our “civilized” values and therefore we are unlikely to treat such form of revenge with understanding. The rape and murder of the girl is subsumed by the violence—breeds-violence theme, though this message strikes one as hollow. Though the rape lead to the kidnapping and beheading of an American soldier, this is too incidental to become typical for the war in Iraq, incomparable to the scale of the reciprocal atrocities of the Second World War: “The German-Russian conflict during World War II is an excellent example of a vicious cycle in which both sides became totally invested in atrocity and rape. This reached the point at which... Soviet soldiers attacking Germany were told... that personal property and German women were theirs by right” (Grossman 211).

In choosing to base his movies on actual cases, De Palma allowed the women to be raped once again, transforming their real suffering into an eroticized spectacle for the masses. War films do not belong to some autonomous realm but they are part and parcel of a visual culture that includes also hardcore pornography, sex-exploitation movies, and the rape-revenge narrative format. According to Derek Robinson: “[an] admirably achieved, admirably intentioned film could be hot stuff for an audience with the wrong preconditioning” (16), and this comment, that was originally made in response to the decision to allow British neo-fascists to voice their personal views as characters in the British film *It Happened Here* (1965), perfectly underscores the problem posed by the rape scenes in *Casualties of War*

and *Redacted*. The reception of such rape scenes could well be voyeuristic pleasure. In the German-Lithuanian co-production entitled *Ghetto* (dir. Audrius Juzenas, 2006), the camera shows at one point a naked Jewish woman held down by one SS soldier and raped by another. The scene is unwatchable because of the intense erotic impact of the violence: the camera shows us—too explicitly—the spread out naked body of the victim and there is an unnecessary prolonged focus on the act of rape itself. De Palma refrains from displaying full female nudity, choosing instead to relocate the eroticism of the rape scenes to the domain of language and show the act itself strictly as sadistic subjugation of the “other.” We thus have a rape within rape structure: the physical act is embedded within the frames of discursive violence. The combined eroticization of language and the prolonged rape scene create, however, a similar effect as in *Ghetto*, and both films approach the thin line separating documentary realism and pornographic exhibitionism.

If, according to Brian de Palma, American presence in Vietnam was wrong because a girl was raped, and American presence in Iraq was wrong because a girl was raped, then, by the same token, the American soldiers should not station on Okinawa because in 1995 three US soldiers kidnapped and raped a 12-year old Japanese girl. One can go further and say that, by the very same token, the American presence as an occupying force in Germany after 1945 was wrong because in 1960 four American soldiers gang-raped a teenage German girl, an allegedly true story that became the basis for the novel by Manfred Gregor, and later adapted into film under the same title. *Town Without Pity* (dir. Gottfried Reinhardt, 1961) is classic courtroom drama which shows rape as a criminal act and not a case of Americans victimizing the conquered Germans. It’s impossible not to notice that *Redacted* is labeled by the wrong genre: it is more a crime narrative than it is a war story, comparable to “In the Sight of the Lord” (2004), an episode in the BBC series *Waking the Dead* about a Cold Case crime squad. A crime in the present leads us to the Second World War and through flashbacks into the forties we are shown the conduct of a group of British soldiers: during the African campaign they forced a German POW to strip naked and castrated him; on return to England they tortured newly arrived recruits, and—the reason why they were murdered—they raped an English girl during a dance. This is not a film about the British Army during the Second World War, and it is not a film against war. These men were criminals and the war context is less significant than their psychological profiling.

De Palma’s protagonist characterization weakens the anti-war message. B.B. Rush and Reno Flake want only “to fuck and to fight” in the war. Rush is “dumber than shit but loyal” and Flake is a guy “in touch with his primal self.”

Rush corresponds to Private Hatcher in *Casualties of War*, both are exceptionally dense and primitive. They are the natural rapists. Flake combines the characters of Sergeant Meserve and Corporal Clark: they are the type of soldier defined as the born killer. One may well wonder whether such psychopathic characters as Hatcher/Rush or Meserve/Clark/Flake needed war to rape and murder. Eriksson (*Casualties of War*) and McCoy (*Redacted*) represent the men of honor. Thus we have a clear distinction between the bad guys and the good guys but what purpose does that serve, one is inclined to ask. The American army is not comprised solely of psychopaths because, if rape is committed, there will be an Eriksson or McCoy to make it public and justice will be served to the rapists. War is hell but not all soldiers are affected equally by it—after all, how many soldiers raped women in Vietnam and Iraq and how many did not? Are the statistics sufficient to qualify these wars as the “Rape of Vietnam” or the “Rape of Iraq”?

If one wishes to use rape as an anti-war message, one has to go all the way. If war is rape then all soldiers are rapists and, therefore, they should be nationally ostracized. We should dismantle memorials and refuse to erect new ones. There can be no honoring of fallen soldiers because that sanctions war and, therefore, it sanctions rape. If that sounds too extreme, allow me to quote a series of incidents that took place in Australia and are discussed by K. S. Inglis in his book on *Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape*:

Two generations after World War I, [dissenting] women were creating a counter tradition of rape in warfare to set against the masculine pieties of Anzac. The words ‘Dead Men Don’t Rape’ were sprayed on a wall near the Cenotaph for Anzac Day 1983.... Next year the demonstrations at the central memorials were more widespread. Militant and ingenious: ...in Sidney the Unknown Victim of Rape carried by her sisters to the Anzac Memorial; in Perth wreaths were laid with posters saying ‘Remember Women Raped in War’... in Canberra, wreaths on the Stone of Remembrance outside the Australian War Memorial and a song declaring: ‘For every hero in his grave/ there’s a woman raped living with her pain’ and ending ‘though I came to lay this wreath/ I spit on your stone.’ (466)

There are no war memorials that commemorate rape victims of military conflicts, though, in the words of Lt. Col. Dave Grossman, women are “the greatest single group of victims” in wartime (210). War films are equivalents to memorials and

monuments in the realm of popular culture because they impose upon the viewer patterns of “remembering” past and present wars. These patterns conventionally foreground the soldier at the expense of the victim. In the case of *Casualties of War* and *Redacted*, horrendous crimes are monumentalized. Rapists do not deserve our memory. Yet, all in all, the visualization and narration of rape in Brian De Palma’s films does not come as a shock because in cinematic war narratives “women are depersonalized to the point of becoming a signifier in the power struggle between men so that wartime rape essentially targets male identity” (Kosta 221).

Filmography

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Redacted. Dir. Brian De Palma. Prod. The Film Farm and HDNet Films, 2007. DVD.

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