“What Makes for a Grievable Life?”
The “Question of the Human” in Contemporary American War Films

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Drawing on Judith Butler’s work in *Precarious Life* (2004) and *Frames of War* (2009), this paper discusses the way that contemporary American war films, such as *Hurt Locker* (2008), *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), and *American Sniper* (2014), carry the torch that traditional news media outlets lit during the War on Terror. Butler contends, “[t]o the extent that journalists have accepted the charge to be part of the war effort itself, reporting itself has become a speech act in the service of the military operations” (2004, 36). And traditional media—the major existing news outlets up to 2004—have participated in this war effort by occluding various images and narratives from public consumption. American war films and New Media outlets such as Humans of New York, however, challenge this occlusion by bringing into view that which other media has refused to display: the landscape, the damage, and the faces of war. I argue that film and New Media have, in the post-9/11 era, combatted the complicity of traditional news media by offering Americans the chance to recognize and grieve the lives of those impacted by America’s War on Terror. They are, in this way, more reliable and even more ethical sources of information on the reality of war in the 21st Century than traditional news media outlets.

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The 1990s presented an exhilarating end to the Cold War. There were moments—the Velvet Revolution, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the end of the Soviet Union—that seemed to offer prototypical glimpses of the better (or at least less tense, and more “free”) world that could be. Borders, once thought to be permanent, changed, and new maps were drawn. In his 1996 book *Modernity at Large*, Arjun Appadurai wrote of the exciting global moment of the 90s, one that anticipated the advent of a post-national order. And perhaps, at that moment, a post-national world really did seem possible. But what Appadurai could not know was that in five short years on September 11, 2001, nineteen terrorists would hijack four planes and kill 2,996 people in a single day (Statistics Brain 2016).

The Persian Gulf War from 1990-1991, which foreshadowed the turmoil that would come to the Middle East a decade later, was misleading. After the decades-long Cold War, a seven-month war seemed almost simple, easy. In 2000, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri wrote in *Empire* of a post-national utopia that in retrospect is heartbreaking in its hopefulness and naiveté. Like Appadurai, they could not predict 9/11, and once that fateful day occurred, even Hardt and Negri knew that it had changed everything—they set to work writing their next book, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*.

Unlike *Modernity at Large* and *Empire*, Judith Butler’s 2004 book *Precarious Life* has a post-9/11 vantage. In light of 9/11, violence, mourning, and politics are inextricably bound, particularly in the individual and political psyches of the U.S. Butler explains that “[n]ations are not the same as individual psyches, but both can be described as ‘subjects,’ albeit of different order. When the United States acts, it establishes a conception of what it means to act as an American, establishes a norm by which that subject might be known” (2004, 41).

But just as the United States’ actions might “establish a conception of what it means to act as an American,” so might the way the United States grieves establish a conception of what it means to grieve as an American. On September 21, 2001—just ten days after 9/11—President George W. Bush announced, “we have finished grieving and... now it is time for resolute action to take the place of grief” (Butler 2004, 29). In this statement, as President of the United States, George Bush speaks on behalf of the American people and of the nation; consequently, “we” is both “we the people” and “we the nation”—there is no distinction here. “When grieving is something to be feared,” writes Butler, “our fears can give rise to the impulse to resolve it quickly, to banish it in the name of an action invested with the power to restore the loss or return the world to a former order” (2004, 29-30). But what happens when we fail to “[maintain] grief as part of the framework within which we think our international ties” is that we also fail to “critically evaluate and oppose the conditions under which certain human lives are more vulnerable than others, and thus certain lives are more grievable than others” (Butler, 2004, 30).

Under conditions of war (writing in 2004, with a war in both Afghanistan and Iraq), Butler begins “with the question of the human” (20). She asks, “Who counts as human? Whose lives count as lives? And, finally, what makes for a grievable life?” (2004, 20). This paper is also concerned with the question of the human and the conditions of a grievable life in the aftermath of 9/11. I will argue that since 9/11, film and certain
social media outlets have treated war at the level of the human in a way that traditional news reporting either cannot or will not. In doing so, these media have invited an American audience to consider the essential question of what is human life.

In *Frames of War* (2009) Butler develops certain terms that prove useful in a critical consideration of various media in wartimes. She distinguishes between the Hegelian terms “recognition” and “apprehension.” “Recognition,” she writes, “is the stronger term […] ‘Apprehension’ is less precise, since it can imply marking, registering, acknowledging without full cognition. If it is a form of knowing, it is bound up with sensing and perceiving, but in ways that are not always—or not yet—conceptual forms of knowledge” (Butler 2009, 5). A figure “can be apprehended as ‘living,’” then, but not necessarily “recognized as a life” (8). What is more, lives that are not recognizable are also not *grievable*: “[t]hey cannot be mourned because they are always already lost or, rather, never ‘were’” (Butler 2009, 33).

After 9/11 in particular, the “Arab,” or “Muslim,” (both Orientalist terms for Middle Easterners used nearly interchangeably within American culture) became the figure that we in the West, and especially America, could apprehend, in the sense that Butler describes, as living but were unable to recognize as having *life*. Furthermore, as the individual and political psyches of the U.S. seemed to converge, we assumed the same of our enemies. Osama bin Laden represented Al Qaeda, who surely represented all Afghans. Saddam Hussein represented state-sponsored terror, along with all Iraqis. These were men whose beliefs we could not understand, and their convictions—and their actions—convinced us they must be killed. Perhaps the Obama administration’s stricture on torture, or “enhanced interrogation techniques,” in an effort to “regain America’s moral stature in the world” did something to ameliorate America’s disregard, or at least the appearance of America’s disregard, for the Iraqi/Afghani life after 9/11 (Shakir 2008).

Since that time, film, and in some cases New Media, has most directly shouldered Butler’s charge to ask and attempt to answer these hard questions. With this in mind, this paper analyzes three post-9/11 Hollywood feature war films, *Hurt Locker* (2008), *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), and *American Sniper* (2014), in comparison and contrast to a pre-9/11 Hollywood war film, *Three Kings* (1999). These films help to illuminate Hollywood’s attitude toward American foreign policy, toward “the media” (defined below), and toward the decidedly precarious lives of Iraqis and Afghans and (slightly less precarious) lives of American soldiers in the last decade and a half. But perhaps most importantly, these films reveal the different function of the traditional news media and of Hollywood war films during contemporary wartimes.

To speak of “the media” as a catch-all phrase for all things news-related is dangerous; “the media” is such a diverse and heterogeneous entity (or set of many entities) that to make generalizations about it is generally unwise. However, Butler, as well as the film *Three Kings*, refer to “the media” quite often. Noting the problematic use of this term, I will commence using it as both Butler and the film *Three Kings* use it: as a general term for the major news networks mostly responsible for reporting to the masses, namely the American masses, before the major emergence of social media, and other forms of new media, in news reporting. In 2004, before the full force advent of New Media, these were major television networks (i.e., CNN and Fox), major print
publications (i.e., *The New York Times*), and perhaps to a lesser extent radio networks that were not related to either television or print (i.e., NPR).

The failures of the news media after 9/11 are now widely acknowledged. We know that news media failed to judiciously inform the public about the government’s motives and military’s involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan for some time after 9/11. In the words of scholar and journalist John Arnaldi, “[e]vidence from 9/11 forward suggests that in most cases the mainstream press and media were influenced more often by nationalism (and other interests) than by professionalism: they have provided virtually unlimited coverage of administration views, while alternative views have been rarely featured.” Journalists reporting on the war systematically betrayed the widely adopted code of journalistic ethics—“Seek truth and report it. Minimize harm. Act independently. Be accountable” (Arnaldi 2011, 154). The news media’s dictatorial addresses to the American public constitute what Butler calls a “speech act in the service of military operations,” and a *violent* speech act in Levinasian terms (2004, 36). For Butler and Levinas, apprehending the Other triggers a natural desire: to kill the *Other*. Describing the news media’s address as a violent speech act aligns it with other violent acts, namely an illegal invasion of Iraq that resulted in many civilian deaths; illegal detainment and torture of Iraqis in CIA black sites, and prisons like Abu Ghraib; and, eventually, a regime of drone strikes that left between 2,640 and 3,474 civilians dead in Pakistan alone (Chamayou 2013, 13).

Though it seems clear that the media has indeed “accepted the charge to be part of the war effort” when they broadcast images “marshaled in the service of war” certain limitations arise. News media covers either global news and local news or, in many cases, both. In particular, daily news outlets are limited in the attention they can devote to a given cause or story on a given day. Films, however, can commit over two hours to telling a story, and devote months—sometimes years—to developing stories and carefully considering how to portray them. Though films like *Hurt Locker*, *Zero Dark Thirty*, and *American Sniper* often focus on a particular character’s life or a specific aspect of some event, they are able to carry themes and sub-themes, foreshadowing and irony; they are able to tell stories in a longer, more nuanced form than the news. So a story that is ostensibly about four American soldiers attempting to steal gold from Saddam Hussein in the aftermath of the Gulf War (*Three Kings*) is also about—or even mostly about—the terrible price of war; about the contradiction and hypocrisy of a crusade purported to liberate Kuwait but that leaves Iraqi “rebels” to fend for themselves against Saddam once the crusaders are sure their oil interests are protected in Saudi Arabia. American films have been able to treat with the conditions of war in a way that traditional, mainstream media has been unable to. For the purposes of this paper, it is useful to focus on the way these films develop a discourse about the value and *grievability* of life in wartimes.

*Three Kings* opens with white text over a black screen: “March 1991. The war just ended” (Russell 1999). The text fades and the image of a soldier jogging over cracked desert terrain emerges. The soldier stops upon seeing a man on a hilltop some distance away, waving an arm over his head (with what appears to be a colored rag in his hand). The soldier yells over his shoulder, “Are we shooting?” But his colleagues are not paying attention. The first soldier yells, “I think this guy has a weapon! Yeah, he does!” And after a moment’s pause, he takes aim...
and shoots the person on the hill, dropping him to the ground. As the soldier draws closer to his “aggressor,” he sees that he has dealt a fatal blow to the man, an Iraqi: he has shot him in the neck. The Gulf War is over when Troy Barlow shoots this man, whom we later learn likely posed no threat to American soldiers. As Major Gates, George Clooney’s character, says, “What is the most important thing in life? Necessity...People do what is most necessary to them in any given moment.” He explains that the most important thing to Saddam and his troops now that a ceasefire has been signed with the U.S. is to suppress the civilian uprising: “We can do whatever we want and they won’t touch us” (Russell 1999). And until the “golddiggers” interfere with the Iraqi army’s harassment of the rebels, he is right; they don’t care what the Americans do. Saddam’s men even assist the Americans as they steal Saddam’s gold.

Barlow’s relatively easy decision to shoot an Iraqi, and the non-existent consequences for doing so (even though he shot him after a ceasefire has been reached), contrasts sharply with the intense pressure applied to the decision to shoot in post-9/11 films. In *Hurt Locker* (2008), Eldridge, a nervous young soldier, is constantly wracked with indecision—and later guilt—when faced with the decision to shoot. In the film’s opening sequence, Eldridge notices a suspicious man with a cell phone and immediately alerts his teammates to the potential threat. Eldridge has the guy in his sights, but when he begins to run toward him, the man moves; Eldridge “can’t get a shot” (Bigelow 2008). He hesitates to shoot the man with the cell phone, and because he hesitates, his team leader, Thompson, dies; the man uses his cell to detonate the bomb Thompson is working to defuse. It is not strange that Eldridge is wracked with guilt about his indecision; but what is notable is that he hesitated so much in the first place. This presents a stark contrast to the depictions of soldiers (i.e., Barlow) in pre-9/11 war films who shoot so easily and with so little consequence.

In the aftermath of Thompson’s death, we see Eldridge meeting with the camp’s psychiatrist, a Colonel whom he calls “Doc.” Doc asks, “Right now, what are you thinking about?” Eldridge responds, “This is what I’m thinking about, Doc. [grabs his unloaded gun] Here’s Thompson, ok. He’s dead. [pulls trigger] He’s alive. He’s dead. [click] He’s alive” (Bigelow 2008). Eldridge is obsessing over his failure to shoot. But a few days later, Eldridge is faced with the decision to shoot again. This time, he pulls the trigger. He asks his new team leader, Will, “Should I fire?” Will replies, “It’s your call buddy.” And Eldridge makes the right call this time—or at least the one that protects his team. Shooting this man, this enemy, seems to be a redemptive act for Eldridge; he has protected his men from danger, most likely saving their lives, when he had failed to do so before.

The immediate stakes are higher in *Hurt Locker* (in an imagined second-invasion Iraq): these are life and death situations, as the opening sequence illustrates. In contrast to the Barlow’s contemplation in the opening scene of *Three Kings*, Eldridge takes the decision to shoot so much more seriously, he recognizes that he will have to answer for his decision – that even death that comes as an act of war presents the guilt that comes from killing. This complex decision to shoot or not to shoot teased out as a central theme in *Hurt Locker* reflects the different—and more complex—consideration of life after 9/11.

Why is it that *Three Kings* and *Hurt Locker* depict the decision to kill so differently?
One answer is that these films are created in drastically different geopolitical contexts (The First Iraq Invasion and the Second happen in very different historical moments). *Three Kings* actually offers another compelling explanation, despite its unawareness of the second invasion to come:

> **Major Gates**: “What was that?”
> **Conrad**: “A rigged football of C-4, sir.”
> **Major Gates**: “Why would you do that?”
> **Barlow**: “You said we could fire off some rounds when we were far enough from camp.”
> **Major Gates**: “I said you could fire a few rounds.”
> **Conrad**: “We didn’t get to see any action.”
> **Major Gates**: You want to see some action.”
> **Conrad**: “Yeah, I do, sir... The only action we’ve seen is on CNN, except for that guy Troy shot.”

These soldiers, mostly Army reserve guys, want to see “action,” or combat, precisely because they have not seen any. In contrast, the soldiers depicted in post-9/11 films have seen too much action, which is made clear by the psychological trauma many of them suffer. The decision to shoot is intensified, not made more casual, because they have to do it more often. The disparate realities of these two wars, and of the decision to shoot, are clear in the way they are depicted in film. David O. Russell can open his film—a fictional one, not insignificantly—with a casual, illegal murder, and make light of it, though ultimately in order to make a critical point, as the film is decidedly anti-war. But after the events of 9/11 and wars in both Afghanistan and Iraq, a scene like this one would inappropriate. The opening scene of *American Sniper*, which depicts Chris Kyle’s first kill, makes this clear. Kyle has a woman and a young boy in his sights; it appears that the woman is carrying something—an explosive device, perhaps—under her robes. Kyle says, “She just pulled a grenade. An RKG Russian grenade. I think she gave it to the kid.” The commanding officer on site does not have eyes on the scene, so he tells Kyle, “Your call.” Kyle’s aid, Goat, says, “They fry you if you’re wrong. Send your ass to Leavenworth”1 (Eastwood 2014).

The decision to shoot or not shoot in these films does have compelling implications for a conversation about the value of life, and particularly enemy life. But perhaps the most compelling discourse about the value of life occurs in *Zero Dark Thirty* (2011), in which one of the major themes is torture. Specifically, this film depicts the dehumanization of captives through torture. Dan, who plays the “lead interrogator” in the film, regularly de-humanizes his detainees by treating them like animals. For instance, he and his assistants put Omar, a key detainee, in a dog collar and force him into a small box. The C.I.A. interrogators also deprive him of food and then offer it to him strategically at times when Omar is so desperate that this “kindness”—of being offered food by the same person who has deprived him of it for so long—is immensely productive, in the sense that it induces Omar to volunteer useful information. We learn about the value (or the lack of value rather) that Dan, who seems to serve as a stand in for the parties he represents (other interrogators, the CIA, the American government), assigns to Iraqi/Afghani lives. After we witness Dan’s manipulation of Omar through the use of extending and rescinding food, we see another scene that

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1 Leavenworth is what soldiers commonly call the United States Disciplinary Barracks.
deepens our comprehension of the lack of regard Dan and those he represents possess for the subjects he tortures. At a CIA compound, we see Dan standing next to a small cage eating ice cream. There are monkeys in the cage, and Dan is cooing at them. He licks his ice cream cone and then extends it to the monkeys, gladly sharing his food (and a true luxury food in the desert) with mere (non-human) animals. In the background, there are human prisoners in orange jumpsuits also in cages (Bigelow 2011). This scene represents a clear contrast between the kindness this character extends to animals and the brutality he inflicts on human detainees.

Soon after this scene, Dan confesses to Maya, the film’s female protagonist, that he is planning to quit his job, or at least go back to the U.S. and work for the CIA behind a desk. He gives her several reasons for leaving, which sound pretty hollow: “I’ve seen too many guys naked. It’s got to be over a fucking hundred now. I need to go and do something normal for a while... Go to Washington. Do the dance, see how that environment works.” But then he gives her what seems to be the real reason for his melancholic burn-out: “They killed my monkeys. Some bullshit about escaping. Can you believe that?” (Bigelow 2011) Dan seems more devastated about the loss of his monkeys, with whom he happily and freely shared his own food, than over men he has “seen naked” or tortured.

The theme of dehumanization in Zero Dark Thirty extends also to depictions of the devaluation of American soldiers. For example, Maya describes an attempted raid of a compound housing bin Laden saying: “Quite frankly I didn’t even want to use you guys...I wanted to drop a bomb. But people didn’t believe in this lead enough to drop a bomb. So they’re using you guys as canaries, in the theory that if bin Laden isn’t there, you can sneak away, and no one will be the wiser” (Bigelow 2011). Although it is explained that Navy SEALs are sent in for this type of work because they are quick and quiet, and most likely to go undetected or at least unnoticed, Maya’s description of them as canaries complicates this explanation. You do not send canaries into a mine because they can get in and get out quietly; you send them in because if they die, you know that a human should not go in.

The theme of dehumanization also appears in American Sniper, in which the first kill of the main character, Chris Kyle, is a young boy. His teammate justifies or affirms Kyle’s decision, saying, “He could have killed 10 marines” (Eastwood 2014). Here, the delineation between the value of Middle Eastern lives and American soldier lives is clear: the “sacrifice” of one Iraqi boy is worth the preservation of ten American men. Similarly, after Kyle has returned home after his last tour in Iraq, he goes to see a doctor, presumably because he is suffering from PTSD. The scene opens with the doctor prompting him, “Maybe you saw things, or did some things over there that you wish you hadn’t—” Chris cuts him off: “That’s not me,” he says. “I was just protecting my guys. They were trying to kill our soldiers, and I’m willing to stand before my creator and answer for every shot I took. The thing that haunts me are all the guys I couldn’t save” (Eastwood 2014). The guys he regrets he could not save are, of course, other American soldiers. American lives, in this context of war, are more important and valuable than Iraqi lives, even civilian Iraqi lives.

These examples demonstrate the contribution these films make to a complicated conversation about grief in wartimes. Which lives are grievable? Why
are those lives grievable and not others? How do we grieve these lost lives? We see plenty of traditional grieving in these films. In *American Sniper*, Chris Kyle is haunted by all the soldiers he was not able to save and begins seeing a doctor because of this trauma. In *Hurt Locker*, Eldridge cries and rages when Doc (and earlier Thompson) dies; Will’s grief is clearly written on his face upon discovering a “body bomb” who he thinks is his young friend Beckham. In *Zero Dark Thirty* we view conventional grieving as well, such as Maya crying in a corner of her office when her friend and several other CIA personnel are killed in a car bomb. What is recognizable to us about this grieving, though, is not so much how these people grieve; it is that they are grieving for people for whom we expect them to grieve: friends, mentors, children. What *Zero Dark Thirty* does, then, that is so different, is to depict Maya—a white female CIA analyst who has devoted a decade of her life to finding and killing Osama bin Laden—grieving when bin Laden is finally killed. The last scene of *Zero Dark Thirty* depicts Maya climbing into a plane that will take her away from Pakistan, away from bin Laden and Al Qaeda, away from the life she has known for a decade, after she has identified bin Laden’s dead body. She is crying. She looks sad, empty, and aimless.

Why would Maya grieve for someone whose death she had longed for throughout the film? Butler explains in *Precarious Life* that “one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly forever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say submitting to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance” (2004, 21). Surely Maya did not recognize bin Laden’s life as grievable while he still lived. In other words, surely she did not intend or expect to grieve for him. But what she experiences when he dies is certainly a loss: a loss of purpose, of mission, and of a defining relationship. “What grief displays,” writes Butler, “is the thrill in which our relations with others hold us, in ways that we cannot always recount or explain, in ways that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide” (23). Once again, the question here is that of the human. And yet, the answer is not simple. Maya’s relationship with bin Laden is a complex one; he is a man whom Maya has never met and who has no idea she exists, but whom she knows intimately enough to identify his dead body. What is the nature of war that it nurtures relationships like this one? And how does war complicate the politics of the body, and the value we do or do not assign to a particular body, when it becomes the driving force behind global movements? What are the politics of one single body—of bin Laden’s body—which, though it represents a social group, is separate from retribution to that social group (one murder versus one war). Al Qaeda orchestrated and carried out an attack that killed 2,996 Americans, and, consequently, we waged a war; but arguably this war was about one body: bin Laden’s. We go to war to replace our grief for 2,996 bodies with our joy in destroying one body. So which life mattered more? Which life did we value more? These are the questions that film forces us to consider and that the media never could.

Although these war films attempt to fill in what the media omits, and in that sense seem to feel more beholden to the ethical injunction which reporting is supposed to have to present events and responses to them fairly, couldn’t a film still be considered as perpetrating violence against its viewers? Still, war films do seem to subscribe to a particular ethic; they adopt an ethical imperative to make visual that which the
media has chosen not to. Butler asks, “Can we think of the history of violence here without exonerating those who engage it against the United States in the present? Can we provide a knowledgeable explanation of events that is not confused with a moral exoneration of violence?” (2004, 42). I think that post-9/11 Hollywood war films do just that: they provide “a knowledgeable explanation of events” that does not morally exonerate violence—though nor do these films always condemn violence, either. Rather, they seem to do what media should, or at least what Butler thinks it should; they quite nearly present events as they happened (as in Zero Dark Thirty and American Sniper, both based on true events) or they attempt to reconstruct as accurately as possible the landscape of war (as in Hurt Locker, and in Three Kings in a different kind of way).

Butler describes the media’s crime as “discourse [that] itself effects violence through omission.” She incriminates both television and print media:

*If 20,000 Iraqi children were killed during the Gulf War and its aftermath, do we have an image, a frame for any of those lives, singly or collectively? Is there a story we might find about those deaths in the media? Are there names attached to those children? There are no obituaries for the war casualties that the United States inflicts, and there cannot be. If there were to be an obituary, there would have had to have been a life, a life worth noting, a life worth valuing and preserving, a life that qualified for recognition (Butler 2004, 34).*

Butler calls the omission of obituaries “[t]he silence of the newspaper,” and the omission of violent images an effort not to degrade the war effort (36). “The violence that we inflict on others is only—and always—selectively brought into public view,” she continues (39). The media’s complicity with the war effort here contrasts sharply with media during, say, the Vietnam War. Then, it was pictures of “children burning and dying from napalm that brought the US public to a sense of shock, outrage, remorse, and grief. These were precisely pictures we were not supposed to see” (150). And indeed, in Three Kings, the commanding officers of the army unit in Iraq are thoroughly concerned with controlling how the journalists on site will depict them and their efforts in Kuwait in the media. “You don’t want another Vietnam, do you?” a commanding officer asks Major Gates in the beginning, reprimanding him for not taking better care of the journalist assigned to him. “You’re supposed to make her feel good about the stories we want, not push the stories that we don’t want.” And in the beginning, the unit apparently does a pretty good job; Adriana Cruz, played by Nora Dunn, interviews a soldier and says, “They say you exorcised the ghost of Vietnam with a clear moral imperative” (Russell 1999).

But in the second Iraq invasion, which is the setting for the post-9/11 films I have discussed, the crucial difference is that the media are not being “controlled” by the military, or by the government. Instead, journalists have willingly joined the war effort (Butler 2004, 36). Butler illustrates news media’s complicity:

*[T]he graphic photos of US soldiers dead and decapitated in Iraq, and then the photos of children maimed and killed by US bombs, were both refused by the mainstream media, supplanted with footage that always took the aerial view, an aerial view whose perspective is established and maintained by state power. And yet, the moment the bodies executed by the Hussein regime were*
uncovered, they made it to the front page of The New York Times, since those bodies must be grieved. The outrage over their deaths motivates the war effort (149).

Displaying photographs of the “children maimed and killed by US bombs” would, just like the photos of burning children from Vietnam, “[disrupt] the visual field and the entire sense of public identity that was built upon that field. The images furnished a reality, but they also showed a reality that disrupted the hegemonic field of representation itself” (150). We have seen that films combat the complicity of contemporary American news media by making visual that which news stations and newspapers have opted not to. They visualize American war crimes, imagine lives for Iraqi militants and civilians, and depict complicated grieving. But films are not alone in this endeavor; New Media has taken up this charge also.

Humans of New York (HONY), the photo blog turned story photo blog, which in five short years has gained over sixteen million followers on Facebook, recently began a series of photographs and interviews with Syrian refugees currently living in Turkey. The format of these posts—which now appear on Instagram as well—are single snapshots accompanied by captions, which are direct quotes from the person who is the subject of the photograph. Usually, these photographs are simply of the subject’s face as he or she looks directly at the camera, though subsequent posts featuring the same subject will often include photographs of the subject’s family members as well. HONY is doing something that is part and parcel of what film is doing, and what traditional, mainstream media is not doing; it is displaying faces of people whose lives the U.S. has chosen not to preserve—whose lives the U.S. has determined too vulnerable, and therefore not grievable—and is making them real to us. News media, on the other hand, almost exclusively privileges photographs of Middle Eastern terrorists. HONY, however, offers its viewers the chance to recognize and grieve the lives of Syrian refugees by forcing us to look at them, and to read their words in the captions.

These photos and stories are doing something else to combat traditional media’s coverage of war. Where traditional media rejects footage of bombing damage on the ground, opting instead for “aerial view[s] whose perspective is established and maintained by state power,” HONY offers firsthand accounts from the ground, and from the civilians whose lives are touched and often destroyed by American bombs (Butler 2004, 149). One caption of a young Iraqi woman (who was forced from Iraq during the Second Iraq Invasion and fled to Syria, which she was forced to abandon several years later due to civil war) reads in part:

*Bombs started falling all around us. We lived very near one of Saddam’s castles. My mother told us: ‘It will be very loud, but nothing bad will happen to us. We will all be here together.’ Many houses in our neighborhood were destroyed, but I’d close my ears and sing songs whenever the bombs came close….Then one day I heard a big sound and I saw that my best friend Miriam’s house had been destroyed. We walked to school together every day. I went to see if she was OK and I saw Miriam on the ground. She didn’t have any legs and she was screaming and I can still hear that sound now. They pulled me away but I saw everything. I don’t think it was good for a child to see this (Stanton 2015).*

Even though we do not see a photograph of Miriam lying on the ground bleeding.
and screaming and dying, we envision her through this photograph and through this caption. We witness—even if our witnessing is mediated—the collateral damage of American bombs in Iraq.

Of course, all social media is not always inherently more ethical than traditional, mainstream media. When Facebook instituted the French flag filter after the Paris attacks, but not the Lebanese flag after the Beirut attacks, many criticized the organization for its Western blindness. However, the nature of the interactive, dialogic medium of Facebook—and social media in general—is such that this blatant disregard for the value of Lebanese lives induced many Facebook users to cry foul on this distasteful favoritism of Western lives and Western tragedy. In this way, even when social media’s actions seem less than ethical, they often produce increased ethical consciousness in users. In a way, this is precisely what America war films of the past two decades seek to do by drawing viewers into a longer, more nuanced treatise of war and its consequences.
References


