Ketlyn Mara Rosa

THE CONTOURS OF AN EXPLODING TERRITORY: LANDSCAPE AND TECHNOLOGY IN CONTEMPORARY WAR FILMS

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Orientadora: Prof.ª Dr.ª Anelise Reich Corseuil
Co-Orientador: Prof. Dr. Robert James Burgoyne

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Esta Tese foi julgada adequada para obtenção do Título de "Doutora em Inglês: Estudos Linguísticos e Literários", na área de concentração Estudos Literários e Culturais e aprovada em sua forma final pelo Programa de Pós-Graduação em Inglês: Estudos Linguísticos e Literários da Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina.

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_____
Prof. Celso Henrique Soufen Tumolo, Dr.
Coordenador do Curso

_____
Prof.ª Anelise Reich Corseuil, Dr.ª
Orientadora
Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina

Banca Examinadora:

_____
Prof. Robert James Burgoyne, Dr.
Co-Orientador
University of St. Andrews
(via interação virtual)

Prof.ª Maria Lúcia Milléo Martins, Dr.ª
Presidente
Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina

Prof.ª Alessandra Soares Brandão, Dr.ª
Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina

Prof.ª Cláudia Junqueira de Lima Costa, Dr.ª
Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina

Prof.ª Jonna Kayne Eagle, Dr.ª
University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa
(via interação virtual)

Prof.ª Beatriz Kopschitz Xavier Bastos, Dr.ª
Universidade Federal de Santa Catarina

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

There is a table in my study room, a wooden table where I've worked on my laptop for the past six years of my graduate journey. I just now realize that I can hardly see the texture of the tabletop because of all the objects covering it. On my left, there are stacks of books that vary from film theory, war testimonies, history, war film analysis, and war poetry. On my right, notebooks and several bits of paper are thrown together with pencils and pens of assorted colors. I share this table with my sister Janaina, so right in front of me I can see a similarly chaotic mixture of books, notebooks and stationary items, but this time they are all about Shakespeare, especially *Hamlet*. Really, *Hamlet* is everywhere I look. I still see some traces of *Othello*, the focus of her MA thesis, here and there, just as I still see my MA books on World War II and violence in between those on Afghanistan and Iraq wars. This table tells a story. A story about growth, cooperation, hardships, excitement, and laughs. Every object triggers a memory to a different time and place, but what these experiences have in common is that I lived them to the fullest, surrounded by the amazing company of so many family members, friends, university staff, and professors.

My family has supported me throughout these years in every way they can. My mom and dad have always inspired me to be kind and patient, to do my best and never be disheartened by the difficulties along the way. These are values that can be applied in both my personal and academic life, and that is what I have been trying to do. I am also thankful for the encouragement from my brother, sister-in-law, and niece, always cheering for me. I feel very lucky to have such a special support system at home.

Six years in the graduate program is enough to have collected a good number of friends, some who are still completing their studies, others who have graduated and are already successfully trailing their path. Classes, conferences, talks, presentations, these were all spaces where we shared meaningful moments and encouraged one another to do well. Coffee breaks, lunch, and dinners were occasions to unwind and laugh at our own mistakes and talk about plans for the future. Some of the students from my Teaching Assistant experiences became my friends as did the staff from the PPGI coordination who have always assisted me with patience and diligence.

I could not be happier to look back on the classes I had and the professors who taught them. Poems, plays, short-stories, and films, I had contact with them all because of the diverse cultural range of the

professors at the program. It was a pleasure to spend the afternoons discussing Shakespeare, Jane Bennet, Maya Deren, Yusef Komunyakaa, Clarice Lispector, Sean O'Casey, and others. These are all wonderful memories of experiences that have showed me the beauty of teaching with passion and excitement. I also want to express my gratitude to the professors who kindly accepted the invitation to be part of my defense committee: Professor Jonna Eagle, whose academic work I find fascinating and inspiring; Professor Cláudia de Lima Costa, who taught a class on post-humanism that made me step out of my comfort zone and see the world differently; Professor Alessandra Brandão, an amazing scholar with a welcoming attitude and a kind way of sharing her knowledge; and Professor Beatriz Kopschitz, whose friendship I deeply cherish. She was responsible for teaching incredible classes on Irish theater and including me in the organization of events that, I must say, are among the highlights of my graduate years.

In 2017 I had the pleasure of spending four months doing research at the University of St Andrews, Scotland, and this trip would not have been possible without the support of my co-advisor, Professor Robert Burgoyne. We met back in 2014 when he came to Florianópolis to teach a course at PPGI and ever since he has been part of my graduate journey, first as an external reader for my MA committee and then as an advisor for my PhD dissertation. As we worked together in our drafts, I could perceive the unmistakable excellence of his work while he patiently guided me through the hardships of writing and revising, always with a word of encouragement. Our informal contacts both in Floripa and St Andrews made me realize his warm and caring personality and that is why I treasure our friendship and hope we can continue collaborating and sharing memories.

I am forever grateful to my advisor, Professor Anelise Corseuil, for believing in my potential since my undergraduate years. Her full support has been indispensable in every aspect of my academic experience. It was with Anelise that I learned the basics of film studies and built confidence to go further into my research. It was beside her that I taught my first literature class as a Teaching Assistant and received positive feedback that allowed me to feel more inspired to continue teaching. It was in her office that we discussed topics that ranged from film theory and movies related to my research, details of my trip to St Andrews, classes we would teach together, plans for the future, and even best places to eat seafood. Her resilience when facing problems in her personal life has encouraged me to work harder and not give up easily. She is an example of courage and perseverance, a true fighter.

There were many times during my graduate journey that I felt happy because of a job well done or discouraged in the face of obstacles. In both situations, and those in between, I knew I could count on someone beside me who would either dance along with me in celebration or firmly look me in the eyes and say "of course you can do it." My partner in crime, my sister, part-time wannabe Broadway singer, Janaina. We started together and came all the way revising each other's work. Our future is bright and prosperous, and we will continue supporting one another all the way through. I hope we can share many other tables and cover them with books, thoughts, laughs, and beautiful memories.

I also want to thank CAPES for the financial support given to me in these past four years of PhD scholarship, especially during my research abroad. This funding has allowed me to dedicate myself exclusively to the graduate program and my research. Today I can say I have fulfilled my lifetime dream of finishing my PhD knowing that it has been an amazing journey of growth and learning.

ABSTRACT

The present research analyzes landscape as a complex cinematic element that is directly linked to the representation of corporeality, conquest, and dominance in films and miniseries that portray contemporary warfare in the twenty-first century. More specifically, I analyze the role of landscape in relation to violence and technology in films that portray the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts. The five films chosen for this purpose are *Lone Survivor* (Berg 2013), the documentaries *Restrepo* (Hetherington and Junger 2010) and *Korengal* (Junger 2014), the miniseries *Generation Kill* (Simon prod. 2008), and *The Wall* (Liman 2017). In each of the films, my analysis foregrounds the way that landscape frames and highlights issues of conquest, ethnic intolerance, and history that are embedded in the war film genre. I argue that the imagery and narrative patterning of these films rehearses long standing themes of dominance, power, and discovery that have found expression in American film genres such as the Western and the road movie, and that have framed the American iconography of landscape around motifs of wilderness, the frontier, the homeland, and the Other. Landscape and technology determine the sensory environment of the soldiers during combat in the films, immersing them in a world that confronts their notions of mastery. The intractability of the territory and the unfamiliarity of its people and their combat skills contribute to the deconstruction of the ethos of invulnerability that is connected to the hyper-male microcosm of the soldiers. These challenges can be read in the films as a criticism of US imperialism and the ideas of control and occupation. The mountains of Hindu Kush in Afghanistan and the deserts in Iraq are portrayed in a way that constructs landscape with an agency of its own. Through their harshness, a sense of hostility is developed which goes against the imposed domination itself, representing the surroundings as an active element in the narratives.

Keywords: War cinema. Contemporary war. Landscape.

RESUMO

Esta pesquisa tem como objetivo analisar a paisagem, referida no trabalho como *landscape*, levando em consideração a construção de seus complexos elementos fílmicos que estão diretamente conectados com a representação de corporealidade, conquista e dominação nos filmes e minisséries que retratam a guerra contemporânea no século vinte e um. Mais especificamente, estarei analisando o papel da *landscape* em relação à violência e tecnologia em filmes que representam os conflitos no Afeganistão e Iraque. As cinco obras visuais escolhidas foram *Lone Survivor* (Berg 2013), os documentários *Restrepo* (Hetherington and Junger 2010) e *Korengal* (Junger 2014), a minissérie *Generation Kill* (Simon prod. 2008), e *The Wall* (Liman 2017). Em cada filme, minha análise ressalta as formas em que a *landscape* enquadra e realça as questões de conquista, intolerância étnica, e história que fazem parte do gênero do cinema de guerra. Eu argumento que a seleção de imagens e padrões de narrativa destes filmes trazem à tona temas de longa data relacionados à dominação, poder, e descoberta que podem ser encontrados em gêneros cinemáticos americanos como o faroeste e filmes de viagem. Estes assuntos tem um impacto também na iconografia da paisagem americana em relação aos temas da imersão em locais ermos, a fronteira, a memória da terra natal, e o Outro. *Landscape* e tecnologia determinam o ambiente sensorial dos soldados durante o combate nos filmes, demonstrando a imersão dos mesmos em um mundo que confronta suas noções de controle e superioridade. A intratabilidade do território e a falta de familiaridade com a população e suas habilidades de combate contribuem para a desconstrução da característica de invulnerabilidade dentro do microcosmo masculino dos soldados. Estes desafios podem ser entendidos nos filmes como uma crítica ao imperialismo norte-americano e as ideias de controle e ocupação. As montanhas de Hindu Kush no Afeganistão e os desertos no Iraque são representadas de tal forma que atribuem agência à paisagem. Através de seus terrenos de difícil navegação, a noção de hostilidade é desenvolvida, um fator que se opõe ao próprio contexto de dominação, retratando o ambiente como um elemento ativo nas narrativas.

Palavras-chave: Cinema de guerra. Guerra contemporânea. Paisagem.

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INTRODUCTION

> "[War] was fought in such axle-breaking, helicopter crashing, spirit-killing, mind-bending terrain that few military plans survive intact for even an hour."
>
> (Sebastian Junger)[1]

Landscape has long served as a defining feature of the war film, shaping narrative interactions, determining sensory experiences, creating a distinct set of challenges for soldiers in combat, and providing a pictorial symbolism for the extreme conditions of war. Yet the critical analysis of war films has usually treated landscape as a mere backdrop to the action, a setting or location that can be pinpointed on a map, but that is void of an active role in the film. An exception is the brief analysis of the portrayal of landscape in war in the work of Fredric Jameson. The author describes landscape mainly as an antagonistic force in war, almost as a malignant power. According to him, it is the "landscape, geography, the folds of the earth that determine military campaigns by introducing contingency or the main chance" (1537). His discussion, however, mostly deals with war novels, although he observes that such a narrative variant of war representation can also be applied to films. The critical geographer Derek Gregory also describes landscape as a pivotal component of war as he considers that nature is "intrinsic to the execution of military and paramilitary violence" ("Natures of War" 2). In his essay, Gregory describes the ways in which the soldiers' immersion into the battle space leads to a sensorial interaction with the landscape. The space of war becomes a source of potentially lethal impediments: as the militarized forms blend with the natural features of the terrain, landscape takes on a cyborg nature. "Burned-out vehicles and bombed-out buildings, barbed wire and exploded munitions, discarded weapons and abandoned supplies, toxic residues and body parts" are all entangled with nature, producing an environment where technology, humans, animals, and natural elements create battlespaces composed of "deadly matter" (4). As does Jameson, Gregory draws his references mostly from biographies, diaries, and novels. Neither author writes about the war film.

Landscape is thus not merely the background to the events of war; it can assume a kind of malign narrative agency, shaping outcomes. The

[1] This quotation was taken from Sebastian Junger's book *War* (47-48) about the Afghanistan War.

vivid personification of landscape and setting as a form of agency can be perceived in Jameson's examples: "Bombs falling out of the sky . . ., the lunar landscape of trench warfare; the silence of deserted villages is a narrative player in such tales, along with the menace of empty windows and the complicity of nature in ambush or pursuit" (1537). Landscape is a pivotal element of the narratives I discuss, a dynamic aspect of the films I consider in this work. Moreover, as I will show, landscape in the contemporary American war film carries a particular legacy and a complex set of historical meanings, a legacy that imbues key genres in American cinema and has helped shape the American national imaginary.

Regarding the significance of landscape in film, Graeme Harper and Jonathan Rayner observe that:

> the cinema's power in the depiction of the landscape, be it rural, metropolitan, industrial, urban or suburban, has driven or led filmmakers of every nationality and political viewpoint, has fed and fed upon definitions of national identity and been read by cinema audiences as one of the most conspicuous and eloquent elements in the idiom of the film culture from which it emanates (24).

This idea can be applied to the war film genre, and particularly to the films and miniseries in this research, which presents portrayals of landscape that demonstrate a historical awareness of contemporary contexts. Harper and Rayner also observe the potential that cinematic landscapes have in connecting images of the present and the past as they "can recall both our own and a general condition prior to their representations" (18). According to the authors, filmic landscapes are "considered conduits to memories, and a form of time, that transcends the cinema itself" (19). The landscapes of war films can be seen as expressive features of the genre in the representation of past and present conflicts.

My main objective in this research is to analyze landscape as a complex cinematic element that is directly linked to the representation of corporeality, conquest, and dominance in the films and miniseries. More specifically, I will be analyzing the role of landscape in relation to violence and technology in films that portray the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts. I chose five films for this purpose: *Lone Survivor* (Berg 2013), the documentaries *Restrepo* (Hetherington and Junger 2010) and *Korengal* (Junger 2014), the miniseries *Generation Kill* (Simon prod. 2008), and *The Wall* (Liman 2017). In each of the films, my analysis will

focus on the way that landscape frames and highlights issues of conquest, ethnic intolerance, and history that are embedded in the war film genre.

i. The "Other" Landscapes

The representation of landscapes in the war films in this research and the sign systems created by such constructions can be compared to Edward Said's ideas in *Orientalism*. According to the author, "Orientalism" can be understood as a man-made construction of a divisive geography that goes beyond physical limits, and a cultural stereotype that enters the global collective imaginary, resulting in the creation of the Other, a passive, silent, and unfamiliar figure (3). Said explains that Orientalism is "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (3). The boundaries between "our" territory and "their" territory are arbitrary. As Gregory explains, the idea of imaginative geographies is based on "constructions that fold distance into difference through a series of spatializations" (*Colonial* 17), emphasizing a type of unfamiliarity that goes beyond territorial boundaries and encompasses cultural terms. Gregory observes that they function "by multiplying partitions and enclosures that serve to demarcate 'the same' from 'the other,' at once constructing and calibrating a gap between the two" (*Colonial* 17). By separating cultures, for instance the East from the West, or singling out the Muslim community as dangerous, the creation of the "other" results in prejudice and miscomprehension, which can have a fatal result in the political and military scenario. This discussion is important to my research since the preconceived and reinforced ideas of otherness in the mindset of the Western characters in relation to the local inhabitants impacts their level of involvement, empathy, and understanding of the war they are inserted in, the people they interact with, and eventually the environment that surrounds their everyday life.

The landscapes of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars are portrayed in the films of this research as unfamiliar, "other" spaces that remain a challenge for visual and narrative representation. The war zones depicted in the films are experienced as foreign, hostile sites that present a combination of intricate and unknown elements, both geographically and culturally. The response of the filmmakers to the challenge of representing these unfamiliar spaces—in the absence of a meta-narrative of war that could frame today's conflicts in terms of recognizable patterns of agency, cause, and teleological organization—is to employ familiar American genres of landscape, such as the Western, the narrative of conquest, and the road movie. While highlighting these great American

mythologies of space, landscape, discovery, and violent conquest, the films also work to repudiate these myths by representing them as pathological constructions. Such constructions situate the current wars in the Middle East in a longstanding tradition of domination and subordination expressed through spatial conquest and control, offering portrayals of ethnic intolerance as well as an obsession with violence and dominance.

The war films in this research rely on elements of familiar American genres to develop their narratives in the context of the unfamiliar spaces of Afghanistan and Iraq. The films that take place in Afghanistan depict landscape through the intractability of natural elements, as in the maze-like Hindu Kush mountains that supply endless geographical and sensorial labyrinths. In *Lone Survivor*, this environment brings to the foreground the codes of masculinity and endurance that are often found in the American war film genre, as the intensive training of the highly skilled and proficient soldiers who make up the Navy SEALs is set forth in the beginning of the narrative. Kristen Whissel comments on the representational heritage of the military male body, starting at the end of the nineteenth century, arguing that "overseas imperialism demanded a martial masculinity that could master simultaneously the physical demands of 'frontier life' and new military technology" (144). These requirements were crystallized in the idealized masculine figure of twentieth century war, who is capable of extremely high levels of physical performance along with the ability to operate technological equipment. In *Lone Survivor*, although the soldiers−Navy SEALs−are fully trained and equipped in terms of military weaponry and technology, the unfamiliarity and hostility of both the landscape and the opposing forces frustrate their performance, revealing the soldiers' vulnerability. Paragons of the athletic, imperial masculine ideal described by Whissel, the Navy SEALs of *Lone Survivor* are compromised by their inability to master the drastic otherness of the Hindu Kush.

The documentaries *Restrepo* and *Korengal* make use of paradigms from the Western to illuminate the experience of the soldiers in the mountains. Mythologies associated with the wilderness, conquest, and the frontier are present in the perception of the soldiers regarding the "other" landscape of Afghanistan and the locals. Landscape is represented in the documentaries as a space of antagonism as well as a natural retreat that oftentimes resembles the soldiers' home. The legacy of the Western genre and the frontier is evident in the documentaries as the mountains are compared to what Jim Kitses calls a "Garden" and "Desert" paradigm, which he describes as "the cornerstone of the Western . . . in issues of

American identity at both individual and national levels" (13). By depicting the landscape as simultaneously a pristine place of natural wonder and uncivilized hostility, these films bring to the surface the interconnection of mythologies of natural space and the historical reality of violence and dominance.

The landscape of Iraq is portrayed as the American soldiers travel across the territory composed of far-reaching deserts and optical illusions, isolated villages, and busy city centers. In *Generation Kill*, the narrative references the codes of the road movie in a series of encounters between the American soldiers and the local population. These interactions reveal the soldiers' journey into the unfamiliar and, as a consequence, the process of discovery. Emotional bonding and military rebellion play significant parts in the mobile experience while also demonstrating the characters' state of social and cultural intolerance. In the seven-part miniseries, the journey is associated with conquest and territorial dominance. As Steven Cohan and Ina Hark observe, the iconography of the road in American culture "goes back to the nation's frontier ethos," while displaying the results of technological transformations and the automobile industry in the twentieth century (1). The kinetic ability of the American soldiers in traversing the country allied with their firepower uncover an inherent pathological behavior in the process of occupation. The obsession with violence, weapons, and a disregard for the ethnic particularities of Iraq constitute the journey across the country as an examination of military sovereignty in motion.

The Wall is set in the deserts of Iraq, a seeming wasteland with only a decrepit oil pipeline to mark a drastic historical change, the de-evolution of Iraq from functioning sovereign state to a site of degradation and dissolution. It depicts the deserts of Iraq as a space of hostility. The landscape where the American soldiers are inserted includes a partially destroyed wall in the middle of the desert that provides cover for a wounded American soldier who has been targeted by an expert Iraqi sniper. In the course of his extended confrontation with the Iraqi sniper, the American soldier discovers that the wall is all that remains of a former school. The marks of occupation haunt the environment, as the soldiers engage in a verbal duel. The figure of the sniper serves as a witness to the past violence inflicted on the country and its people: his voice dominates the narrative. Michel Chion argues that a voice without source in film, called an "*acousmêtre*," can possess a striking sense of power in "the situation in which we don't see the person we hear" (9). In the film, the traditional notion of indestructibility of the American soldier-hero is

subverted by the intellectual and tactical expertise of the *acousmêtre*, but most importantly, by the soldier's own behavioral pathologies.

Drawing on Edward Said, Ella Shohat in *Israeli Cinema* highlights that in practice, Orientalism divides races and ethnicities into polar opposites: "one pole of the East/West dichotomy is produced and reproduced as rational, developed, superior, and human, and the other as aberrant, underdeveloped, and inferior" (2). The filmic representations of the interaction between the figure of the soldier and the local inhabitant, who might be characterized as the "other," reveal a relationship defined by ethnic prejudice. In the representation of opposing forces in Western films of war, Holger Pötzsch comments on the lack of attention given to "the enemy" in the flow of the narrative. The author observes that in the context of Israeli war films, for example, the depiction of the enemy as an elusive and invisible character leads to the omission of the Palestinian perspective. It eliminates the representation of "their competing rationale and frames of meaning that might explain and provide certain legitimacy into their actions and thereby undermine a hegemonic Israeli war discourse that is based on the constitutive exclusion of a confined or caricatured enemy-other" ("Ubiquitous" 325). This scenario can be applied to other war films. The political dimension that reverberates from such portrayals is of interest in this research since, as Pötzsch argues, "in reducing the other to a mere threat and preventing access to the grievances and rational considerations underlying this enemy's performances, a politics of polarity and exclusion is implicitly enabled and facilitated" ("Ubiquitous" 326-7). The political performances of self and other in war film representations hint at a deep-rooted hegemonic culture of war.

Shohat and Robert Stam offer a perspective on Eurocentrism that serves as a useful tool for the analysis of the representation of the diverse bodies who interact with the landscape and technology in the films of my study. According to them, Eurocentrism relates to the way "residual traces of centuries of axiomatic European domination inform the general culture, the everyday language, and the media, engendering a fictitious sense of the innate superiority of European-derived cultures and peoples" (1). This implicit way of positioning oneself concerning different aspects of life permeates artistic works and can be perceived, for instance, in the portrayal of ethnic stereotypes and cultural whitewashing. The authors comment how an Eurocentric view tends to separate the world into a geographical imaginary of the "West and the Rest," systematizing the global order to benefit European characteristics such as "*our* 'nations,' *their* 'tribes'; *our* 'religions,' *their* 'superstitions'; *our* 'culture,' *their*

'folklore'; *our* 'art,' *their* 'artifacts'; *our* 'demonstrations,' *their* 'riots'; *our* 'defense,' *their* 'terrorism'" (2).

Following Said, they claim that the gap constructed by this binary imagination leads to the emergence of the figure of the "other" as the savage who is perceived as an entity capable of "commit[ing] unimaginable atrocities, such as rape, massacre or torture" (Shohat and Stam 128). By constructing the opposing force as a malevolent figure, the possibility of enacting violence upon such individuals becomes more plausible to the public. Gregory highlights that in a post-9/11 world, the former U.S. president George W. Bush's rhetoric foregrounded a "geography of evil" (*Colonial* 49). In this imaginary mapping, the perpetrators of the 9/11 attacks were considered of a pure evil nature which led to the idea that "American troops were no longer fighting enemies; they were casting out demons" (*Colonial* 49). One of the aims of my research is to interrogate the contemporary war films in relation to ethnic prejudice. Such depictions can illuminate ways of subverting traditional and heroic representations of combat in the war film genre. Also, the level of engagement between technology and the body is taken into consideration. My study investigates the significance of technology in the lives of the military characters and in the narratives in general, and whether the lack or surplus of such communication equipment and weaponry transform the identity of the soldiers involved in the battle zone.

ii. Space and Corpography

In order to comprehend the role of space and setting in the films that will be analyzed in this study, it is necessary to envision space not as a merely static and lifeless stage in which events are enacted, but as a shaping force in the construction of social life, everyday interactions, and intercommunication of bodies and experiences. Henri Lefebvre explains that space is not an inert independent material reality but that "(social) space is a (social) product" (26). Space cannot be comprehended without its social, practical and contextual facets, the interactions of daily life, their complications and intricacies whether political, economical or cultural. The understanding of social space does not only take into consideration the material element, but also the experiential factor in the exchange between inhabitants and surroundings. In *Lone Survivor*, for instance, as the soldiers traverse the Afghan mountains, their first interaction with locals is permeated by antagonistic and preconceived ideas, constructing the space around them as hostile. When the main

character encounters villagers and both parts maintain a positive communication, another facet of the surroundings is unveiled, one that establishes space as a collaborative environment.

The perception of space and the understanding of the connection between human experience and architectural environments are significant issues to the analysis of the films in this research. Gaston Bachelard's phenomenological approach to the construction of meaning based on the relationship with the surroundings serves as a useful notion. He explains that once a space "has been seized upon by the imagination [it] cannot remain indifferent space subject to the measures and estimates of the surveyor" (xxxvi). Bachelard insists that if the space has been lived in with intensity, imagination seizes its shape and takes into consideration the events that happened there. Our memories of houses and rooms, for instance, are intertwined with our very essence since the house images in our memories "are in us as we are in them" (xxxvii). The intimacy between people and places becomes a relevant point in the attempt to comprehend the experiences of, for instance, the soldiers in the films of this research who struggle to make sense of their new dwelling for the time of the deployment. In *Restrepo*, for example, soldiers often compare the landscape of Afghanistan with familiar vistas in their own hometowns, juxtaposing their preconceptions of what a living place should be and what they find overseas, contributing to a sense of frustration and prejudice. It leads to a portrayal of violent behavior towards the surroundings and local inhabitants as well as the unveiling of pathological behaviors regarding notions of conquest and ethnic prejudice.

Being able to connect oneself with the surroundings in a sensorial way is also an aspect perceived by Yi-Fu Tuan who foregrounds the notion of topophilia as he observes that there is a significance in exploring "the way human beings respond to their physical setting−their perception of it and the value they put on it" (*Topophilia* 2). For Tuan, topophilia is "the affective bond between people and place or setting" (*Topophilia* 4) in which there is an emphasis on the sensorial response. For example, there is a sequence in *Restrepo* that shows soldiers lifting weights outdoors in a rhythmic counterpoint to the sounds of construction tools and dance music that demonstrates their acclimatization to the Afghan environment by adapting unfamiliar surroundings to their own habits and routine. Tuan explains that the five senses are seen as vital tools for grasping the physicality of the environment but also making emotional connection with space. Touch, for instance, is "the direct experience of the world as a system of resistances and pressures that persuade us of the

existence of a reality independent of our imaginings" (*Topophilia* 8) whereas smell can "evoke vivid, emotionally-charged memories of past events and scenes" (10). Similarly to Bachelard, Tuan deals with the relationship that people have with the environment in which they live not only as a physical structure but a source of attachment and emotional connection. However, Tuan does not necessarily explore in his work the negative links between people and places, focusing more on the processes of beneficial connection. In this research, both aspects of positive connection with and repulsion towards their surroundings will be taken into consideration. Such portrayals carry cultural implications and messages about what it means for the soldiers to be at war in an unknown land. The embodied experience of battle in the war films can be linked to Tuan's focus on the sensorial interaction with the surroundings and how the responses generated by the senses to the material setting shape the perception of a place.

The connection between the sensorial body and its surroundings in the context of war is emphasized by Gregory, who links the idea of the senses with battlefield experiences in his notion of corpography. His term corpography is related to "the way of apprehending the battle space through the body as an acutely physical field in which the senses of sound, smell and touch were increasingly privileged in the construction of a profoundly haptic or somatic geography" ("Corpographies" 32). He claims that "contemporary warfare [is commonly seen] as optical war hypostatised: a war fought on screens and through digital images, in which full motion video feeds from Predators and Reapers allow for an unprecedented degree of remoteness from the killing fields" ("Gabriel's Map" 34). In contrast, Gregory explains that although nowadays wars can be seen as "surgical" or "body-less," they still have the corpographic participation of soldiers on the ground who re-map their senses in order to survive. He observes that "these are wars without fronts, whose complex geometries have required new investments in cartography and satellite imagery" and that the characteristics of the terrains still shape the behavior and decisions on the battlefield ("Gabriel's Map" 34). The practical and sensory knowledge apprehended by the war participants through the intense experience in the territories still stands as an element of survival.

In contemporary war films, the relationship of the characters with the landscape, that is, the way they interact with the physical geography of the war zone through their senses and bodily reactions, can be understood as a starting point. Kenneth MacLeish observes the relevance of the "ability to take in the sensory indications of danger and act on them

without having to think too hard about it first. When you hear a shot, is it passing close by? Is it accurate or random? Is it of sufficient caliber to penetrate your vest, the window of your Humvee or the side of your tank?" (11). In this case there is a re-mapping of the environment through corpography in which senses "had to be heightened in order to apprehend and navigate the field of battle" (Gregory "Gabriel's Map" 26). There is an appreciation that wars involve people on the ground and that, most importantly, the sensations are felt on the flesh rather than on a screen or a map. The way that the surrounding landscape shapes the corpographic elements in the war films of this research can be directly linked to the perceptions of the characters to particular battle spaces. By corporeally immersing themselves in the combat environment in a constant sensorial adaptation to unfamiliar situations and terrains, the soldiers in the films present reactions that are a combination of embodied and cultural readjustments.

I also analyze the corporeal presence of those involved in ground conflicts in relation to the technological means of fighting the wars and apprehending the surroundings. The mediated perception of landscape through distinct technologies such as cartography, surveillance, the grid, heat sensors, night vision goggles, coordinates, and remote targeting provides a perspective of overall control of space that is challenged as the soldiers struggle with their immersion in the land. The asymmetrical condition of today's warfare in terms of technology represented in the films foregrounds a political position concerning the construction of space. Opposing groups have uneven access to military force, both in number of soldiers and technological equipment, which leads to distinct ways of asserting their claim over the territory. Guerilla-style forces tend to dominate the surroundings on a ground level, for instance, while more resourceful military forces rely on long-distance weaponry in order to reach further into the territory.

This analysis also addresses the issue of embodied and bodyless war by emphasizing the touchscape of modern war and human presence on the battlefields represented in the films. While the focus of the films in this research is on the representation of the Western body, the political dimension of the films can also be grasped in the portrayal of the local inhabitants, whether they are substantially present or fleetingly depicted. Films such as *Lone Survivor* and *The Wall* include local characters who do not fit the stereotyped representation of the enemy while *Restrepo* portrays the deaths of the Afghans as a brief event in the narrative.

iii. Technology and Contemporary Warfare

The contemporary conflicts that are depicted in war films heavily rely on the use of technology as a means of navigating the landscape and confronting the opposing forces. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri state that in the present day "military control and organization is exercised primarily through communications and information technologies" (40) which have shaped and reinvented war conflicts. Christopher Coker in *The Future of War* points out that since the use of aerial photographs in the First World War, people's vision of war has been "increasingly mediated through technology" (87). The technological mediation of warfare can be accomplished through, for instance, the use of maps and coordinates, heat sensors, night vision apparel, and remote targeting.

Kevin McSorley explains that there was a change in the understanding of warfare in the 1990s due to the exponential growth of technological capacity. The RMA, Revolution in Military Affairs, was "a technological determined revolution where the power of sophisticated information, communications and surveillance technology, the flexibility of network-centric approaches, and the accuracy of ever more advanced weaponry" (5) would revitalize the face of war after the chaotic experience of Vietnam. These technological developments are seen in the films of this research, and are depicted in an unvarnished way as instruments of violence through far-reaching communication devices and heavily armed soldiers. The Gulf War of 1991 brought "smart bombing technology" (6) closer to the media as television broadcast the footage from the pilots' screens and constructed a portrayal of a corpseless war in which casualties could not be discerned in the images. As McSorley criticizes, "wounding and killing seemed hardly to exist in this abstract virtual register where targeting grids and nebulous pixelated forms flared and vanished on pilots' monitors and viewers' television screens alike" (6). This "virtuous war," as James Der Derian calls it (xxxi), whitewashes the horrific events exactly because the distant view tends to stop one from making the connection between marks on screens and the fleshy status of human beings. In the films of this dissertation, the representation of violent acts enacted from a distance can be read as a critique of the disregard for lives and the excess of power generated by remote weapons, emphasized by the graphic consequences on the human body portrayed in the films. For example, the miniseries *Generation Kill* depicts the damage done by American airstrikes as seen in the smoking corpses in the desert.

Although war has become an increasingly technological interaction, what Coker calls a "post-human condition" in which "the

interface between man and machine" (84) has escalated into a more sophisticated state, it is still a human conflict that presents flesh and blood reverberations. Coker observes that since "war has very real consequences for the human body . . . we will still continue to see it as a *human* activity" (95). Gregory follows this idea by remarking that although there is an increasing reliance on technological warfare, "military violence continues to be registered on the frail, fleshy human body" ("Moving Targets" 1). In other ways too, the body is foregrounded as an active agent in contemporary war, for example, through the phenomenon of martyrdom or suicide bombing. What could be seen from one perspective as a bodyless warfare of computers, drones, and distance targeting, from another perspective is more than ever a corporeal clash in which the bodies of the participants constantly engage in violent circumstances and environments.

The issue of decorporealized and embodied warfare is also discussed by Hardt and Negri who observe that these two characteristics of modern war are contradictory and fundamentally problematic. Although wars can be fought from a distance, the authors point out the "continuing high level of 'collateral damage'" and deaths by "friendly fire" which put into question the efficacity of virtual and bodyless war (45). The figure of the suicide bomber, they write, brings to the forefront the idea that "just when the body seemed to have disappeared from the battlefield, . . . it comes back in all its gruesome, tragic reality" (45). By focusing on the technological and remote way of fighting wars, there is less visual validation of violence and consequently less encouragement to end such conflicts. The films of my research put this issue into question by representing the technological power of distance weaponry and its embodied consequences. Contemporary war films deal with the interconnections of the terrains in which conflicts are fought, the technologies that are put into use in military operations, and the people who are involved in these struggles. The acts of violence perpetrated in the battlefields during wartime, either mediated through advanced technological tools such as a remote "surgical strike" (Gregory "Moving targets" 36) or through an active presence on the ground, are still shaped by the "multiple, acutely material environments through which they are fought" (Gregory "Gabriel's Map" 34) and represent a complex phenomenon to be comprehended.

In the twenty-first century, the world has seen an increasingly large number of armed conflicts that have had a global effect in economic and political areas while leading to destructive consequences to human life and surroundings. Hardt and Negri have written that "the world is at war

again, but things are different this time" (3). According to the authors, the current conflicts such as the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars are no longer restricted by space and time. On the contrary, in the current scenario of armed conflicts "war is becoming a general phenomenon, global and interminable" (3). The most heavily covered event of this century, the attacks of September 11, should be seen as a watershed event not in terms of its superior importance concerning other mass tragedies, but because its magnitude and localization somehow force people to acknowledge the generality of the war phenomenon and the lack of boundaries of violence. It functions as a wake-up call for the global situation of interconnected warfare that has been brewing and ranging across the continents over a considerable time. Hardt and Negri observe that the 9/11 events caused the opening of a new era for war in which "there may be a cessation of hostilities at times and in certain places, but lethal violence is present as a constant potentiality, ready always and everywhere to erupt" (4). The erosion of the seeming boundary between a state of war and a state of peace leads to the authors' remark that the world currently lives in a "perpetual and indeterminate state of war" in which the exceptionality of war has turned into the rule as "the state of exception has become permanent and general" (7). The atmosphere of all-around threat seeps into the narratives of the films in this research, at times creating a state of paranoia and leading to preemptive violent outbursts. The lack of distinction between combatants and non-combatants among the local population and the difficulty in distinguishing the level of threat of unfamiliar locations create a sense of suspicion in the soldiers. They transfer this mistrust even to inanimate objects, finding danger in mirage-like figures of weapons and menacing enemies.

The interaction between foreign military forces and local inhabitants touches on the status of humanity in warfare, a significant issue regarding the relationship between foreign and local characters in the films to be analyzed. Judith Butler in *Frames of War* offers a thoughtful argument concerning which lives matter in times of war:

> We might think of war as dividing populations into those who are grievable and those who are not. An ungrievable life is one that cannot be mourned because it has never lived, that is, it has never counted as a life at all. We can see the division of the globe into grievable and ungrievable lives from the perspective of those who wage war in order to defend the lives of certain communities,

> and to defend them against the lives of others−even if it means taking those latter lives. (38)

Her analysis of which lives are mourned and which are left aside in the circumstance of war demonstrates that the allocation of humanity depends on political context, that is, the mindset from which one is speaking in relation to the significance of living beings in different nations and cultures. The films of this research represent several instances of interaction between the American soldiers and the local inhabitants that illustrate Butler's point. For example, in *Restrepo*, the dead bodies of the Afghans remain anonymous and are quickly and unceremoniously shown on stretchers covered with white sheets while soldiers hurriedly walk by. In contrast, the death of one American soldier receives close attention in an atmosphere of reverence and grief, taking into consideration his life story and legacy.

Robert Burgoyne remarks that in war films "the body of the soldier conveys in visceral form a vision of history produced from intensive sensual impressions" ("Embodiment" 8). Although technology has been a great part of the history of war, from the early modern wars until nowadays, it is the body of the participant that carries the weight and symbolizes destruction in a more intense manner. Burgoyne observes that "the body in war film expresses in a singular way our immersion in history, framing the past in a way that foregrounds corporeal experience" ("Embodiment" 8). The embodied representation of soldiers in war cinema, especially as their fragility is revealed, is as a vehicle for critical discussions in the genre concerning history and identity.

iv. The War Film Genre

War films that represent conflicts waged in the twenty-first century are the subject of this study, especially those that deal with the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars. Contemporary war films are still struggling to solidify their characteristics and main viewpoints of the armed conflicts that they represent. The historical moments are close enough in time to be freshly remembered, with their destructive remnants still felt by the populations in the war zone. Garrett Stewart comments on the differences between traditional war films and the ones that portray contemporary conflicts by saying that "gone are the choreographed and panoramic staples of the combat genre, beachheads to be won, fortresses held. We get instead random checkpoint suicides, grenade and mortar ambushes in blind alleys, frantic house searches, impromptu firefights" (45). His

disappointment with the seemingly disappearance of many classic traits of the war film genre demonstrates the different face of contemporary war in which standardized military procedures of the last century are no longer applicable to the features of current warfare. The surroundings in which wars are contemporarily fought, as well as the political context of today's guerilla warfare, are relevant elements for the transformation of the war film genre. Films such as *Lone Survivor* and the documentaries *Restrepo* and *Korengal* portray war in distant and isolated mountainous regions while the miniseries *Generation Kill* and the film *The Wall* focus on the intractability of deserts. These films demonstrate that the asymmetrical nature of war is highlighted especially through the different understandings of landscape by foreign and local forces in which a political dimension can be fleshed out from such portrayals. Similar to Stewart's ideas, instead of combat taking place in larger scales, as traditionally seen in the war film genre, contemporary films of this research depict combat in a landscape where guerilla tactics are applied to a disproportional extent in terms of weaponry and troops.

The war film is part of a greater genre tradition of historical films that, as Burgoyne explains, have "consistently provoked controversy and widespread public debate about the meaning of the past, about the limits of dramatic interpretation, and about the power of film to influence popular understanding and to promote particular national myths" (*Hollywood* 22). The subject of war has been of general interest since the panoramas of the mid to late 19th century, to the earliest era of filmmaking and through the decades until our contemporary period. In the first third of the twentieth century, films such as the First World War narrative *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Milestone 1930) represented "the senseless horror of trench warfare on the western front" (Chambers II 13). According to Langford, "the dominant iconography of the First World War that emerged from *All Quiet* . . . is of trenches, the moonscape of No Man's Land, mud, decay, squalor, and (physical and moral) confusion" (110). Concerning the representation of landscape in this film, the surroundings become active contributors to the soldiers' misery and slaughter as opposed to a passive tableau on which they enact combat scenes, similarly to the films and focus of this research. Also, as Burgoyne observes, *All Quiet on the Western Front* "posed serious questions about the consequences of nationalism and patriotism, and stressed the dehumanizing effects of war" that would later become subjects of subsequent war films (*Hollywood* 31).

Another landmark in the war film genre is the film *The Longest Day* (Zanuck prod. 1962) which received acclaim for its verisimilitude

and "inaugurated a trend toward combat spectaculars in the historical film genre, a trend that extends to the present" (Burgoyne *Hollywood* 31). In the late 1970s and 1980s the wave of Vietnam War films foregrounded the "war as a pathological endeavor that suggested the ruin of a generation of young Americans" (Burgoyne *Hollywood* 32) with films such as *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola 1979) and *Platoon* (Stone 1986). As Guy Westwell observes, the "codes and conventions of the war movie genre were found inadequate to the task of describing the experience of losing a war" (57), therefore causing a disruption in the conventional sense of warfare. The traditional codes of war concerning heroic sacrifice and fraternal bonding were reignited in the late 90s with *Saving Private Ryan* (Spielberg 1998), "register[ing] a shift in the cultural imagination of war" (Westwell 84). The notions of commemoration and nostalgia are strong in the film which "combines the traditions of the war film−stressing the importance of the individual soldier and the success of the collective endeavor mounted on his behalf−with advanced visual and acoustic techniques that give it a powerful claim to authenticity" (Burgoyne *Hollywood* 33). The staging of the battle sequences relies on an immersive cinematic approach, especially in the initial landing scene, in which the bodies of the American soldiers are under intense fire. The landscape of the Omaha beach is constructed as a lethal space, from the drowning potential of the ocean to the vulnerability caused by the bare terrain of the shoreline, representing the surroundings in ways that can be connected to the films and focus of my dissertation.

In the context of contemporary warfare, with its lack of spatial restrictions and unending timeframe, the peculiarity of the terrains and the substantial presence of war technology remain as foundational elements of the war films discussed in the following chapters. In past wars, territory and technology have shaped the outcome of conflicts, but present-day warfare entails a surplus of technological reliance and violent encounters that at first seem to be fought locally in terms of space, but are part of a much larger geographical and ideological ramification, one that is not necessarily restricted to a certain nationality. The insertion of armed troops in the secluded mountain regions, remote deserts, and populated cities gives rise to experiences that foreground issues of dominance and conquest. Fantasies of power and violent behavior are enacted in the war space in collaboration with technological means in a display of problematic facets of American culture, particularly regarding national identity beliefs connected to the supremacy of soldiers and the construction of the figure of the locals as the other.

v. Chapter Summaries

The first chapter of this dissertation explores the notion of masculinity and the construction of the super soldier in *Lone Survivor*, an all-around figure who is capable of mastering all facets of warfare through the use of body and mind to survive in battle. Technological malfunction, physical impairments, cultural unawareness−and above all, an unfamiliar landscape−lead to the stripping away of the codes of warrior masculinity, requiring the soldiers to navigate the mountainous landscape in a space of vulnerability as opposed to a position of corporeal prowess and dominance. The intractable forces of nature of the Hindu Kush mountains overwhelm the physical and technological superiority of the American soldiers.

The somatic engagement of the soldiers with the local landscape challenges the initial portrayal of hyper masculinity in the film while also confronting the representational codes of military corporeality. Whissel argues, in the context of the Spanish American war, that "the (highly mythologized) space of imperial warfare emerged as the territory on which American masculinity could reassert authority and control over technology, industry, and the racial/ethnic other and thrive" (150). By blending technological mastery with a singular command of physical skills, the soldiers in *Lone Survivor* at first inhabit a space of corporeal and mental invulnerability. As they encounter a peculiar kind of resistance−the unfamiliar landscape and harsh environment of the Afghan mountains−the elements that formed their warrior-like identity are no longer accessible. The embodiment of ideal masculinity based on a white, powerful, technologically advanced soldier turns into an exhausted and punctured body that requires external help to survive.

The documentaries *Restrepo* and *Korengal* are the focus of the second chapter. Specific themes that are traditionally associated with the Western genre, such as the mythology of the wilderness, the dualism of Garden and Desert, and the portrayal of the indigenous fighter as intimate with nature but still carrying the stigma of otherness, are found in the symbolic construction of landscape in these two war documentaries. Imaginary constructions of otherness are crystalized in the landscape portrayed as an intimidating site of physical hardships and cultural contestation. The corporeality of the soldiers' immersion in the land, particularly during patrol, emphasizes their unfamiliarity with the mountainous terrain, leading to a heightened sense of mistrust towards the unknown space and people.

The contrast between the precarious conditions and abilities of the American soldiers and the swiftness of the locals emphasizes the contrast between the two groups. Although the mountains are at times characterized by their stunning beauty, they function in the documentaries as lethal sites of entrapment. While the local guerrilla fighters possess the advantages of mobility without any heavy weaponry to slow them down, the scenario inhabited by the American military is the opposite. Sebastian Junger, in his book about the experiences of the soldiers stationed in the Korengal Valley in Afghanistan, describes their conditions before a major confrontation: "The men of Battle Company will be on unfamiliar terrain with enormous loads on their backs chasing a fluid and agile enemy, and almost every advantage enjoyed by a modern army will be negated on the steep, heavily timbered slopes of the Abas Ghar" (*War* 93). Such discrepancy in terms of how to approach navigation in the territory crystalizes the animosity regarding not only the space but also its local people, constructing an atmosphere of unfamiliarity and otherness that becomes a trigger for violent behavior.

The third chapter focuses on the analysis of the miniseries *Generation Kill* as a new kind of war film, one that blends the characteristics of the war film genre with the road movie. As the American soldiers navigate the roads of the Iraqi landscape, themes of domination and ethnic intolerance spring from their interaction with the local populace and the surroundings. Elements of the road movie genre, such as the journey into an unknown territory, the passage from innocence to experience, and the vehicle as an idealized extension of the body, are present in the miniseries. The mobile immersion into the hostile, unknown territory unveils certain pathological tendencies. The encounters on the roads bring to the foreground material destruction, displacement, and the loss of local lives that occupation entails.

The motif, and ultimately, the theme of the mirage permeates the narrative of the miniseries, presenting situations which at first are understood in one way, but on closer view demonstrate a different meaning of the event. While on the road, the soldiers are constantly mistaking natural elements or discarded materials for threats: a shiny object seems like a weapon, for example, or a group of young children with camels appear to be a menacing risk. These optical illusions can be read as a deeper critique of the purpose of the occupying effort by the American military in the territory. The initial description of the Iraq War−mentioned by the Marines as the act of removing a dictator−ignites the process of invasion and dominance by the American forces. The journey through the deserts and roads of Iraq is described by the character

Evan Wright, who accompanied the soldiers as an embedded journalist, while he factors in the extreme conditions of the land: "as the heat and fatigue delirium sets in, the undertaking sometimes feels like a family road trip" where soldiers embody the roles of mother, father, and children (88). In a dazed condition, similar to an optical illusion, the soldiers in the military vehicles cross the Iraqi highways and enact the roles of a family on a road trip, but a more complete interpretation of the experience exposes the pathological need for territorial dominance and technological sovereignty.

The fourth chapter demonstrates how the film *The Wall*, set in the deserts of Iraq, contrasts the embodiment of the American soldier and the disembodied voice of the Iraqi character to portray the changing face of contemporary war. On the one hand, the Iraqi voice becomes a symbolic mechanism for the all-around threat of today's warfare while also signifying a war fought from a distance. On the other hand, the American soldier's experience is connected to the intense corporeality of combat and the use of senses to navigate the battle zone. The paradigms of heroism and invulnerability are subverted in the film through the verbal exchanges on the radio between the characters, who also discuss ideas related to invasion and power abuse. The navigation of landscape through the sensuous experiences, particularly through the sense of hearing, becomes a vital survival mechanism mediated by the technology of radio communication.

The experience of an intimate aural relationship between the American soldier and the Iraqi sniper in *The Wall* foregrounds connections regarding corporeality and the environment of war. J. Martin Daughtry observes that "listening is an intentional act, involving the near-simultaneous activation of our skin, our ears, and our brains in reaction to sounds that vibrate through us and the surroundings we share with others; it is mental, physical, *and* social" (190). By exchanging ideas through the radio, the characters involve their entire bodies in a sensorial manner as the sounds vibrate in the landscape in echoes and wave format. These same sounds are implicated in the formation of thoughts and impressions about issues such as terrorism, occupation, and power abuse. The act of listening activates not only sensuous responses, but also psychological reactions localized in the particular environment of the deteriorated wall. Space and sound articulate a complex relationship of power struggle between the characters who present different viewpoints about the experience and meaning of war, especially regarding the position of occupier and occupied.

The concluding chapter of my study takes into consideration the theoretical background and the specific film analyses to draw final comments regarding the research's arguments. It also offers summary comments about the dissertation's main topics and observations for future research in the area.

CHAPTER 1

"Talk to the mountain, sir"[2]: *Lone Survivor* and the Sensorial Contours of the Hindu Kush Mountain Range

> "The day's colors slowly dissolved into gray, and the distant mountain peaks became opaque silhouettes of crouching giants."
>
> (Khaled Hosseini)[3]

Landscape and technology are intertwined elements that impact the outcome of the narrative events in *Lone Survivor* (Berg 2013), as the SEAL soldiers, characterized as all-around military figures capable of mastering both their bodies and minds, face the intractable natural forces of the Hindu Kush Mountains. Marcus Luttrell, the author of the homonymous book and the only surviving soldier in the story, describes in his autobiography the nature of the Afghan mountains as a nightmarish space, one that is capable of exposing the soldiers' fragilities and shortcomings. He observes that by navigating an unknown terrain, the operation "turned out to be as bad as or worse than anyone had ever dreamed" (225) with instances in which they felt "trapped in nature's spotlight with nowhere to hide" (222). The once seemingly invulnerable figures of the soldiers undergo a transformation regarding the elements that symbolize their masculinity. Their physical strength and skillfulness with the technological equipment are gradually stripped away from their survival inventory while they are immersed in the mountainous landscape. In this chapter, I analyze the specific interactions among landscape, technology, and the somatic engagement of the soldier in the film *Lone Survivor*, arguing that landscape articulates a complex set of messages about violence, masculinity, and concepts of "otherness" in war. Moreover, landscape, with its intimate connection to the American national imaginary, provides a kind of symbolic testing ground where fantasies of military prowess, domination of the other, and the power of technology in war are confronted by the intractable and incomprehensible forces of nature. The history of violent conquest embedded in the genre codes of the war film, I maintain, is rehearsed with particular vividness in

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[2] Line spoken by Danny Dietz in the film *Lone Survivor* (00:36:49).

[3] This quotation was taken from the book *And the Mountains Echoed* (26) by the Afghan writer Khaled Hosseini and it refers to the Hindu Kush Mountains.

films set in Afghanistan and Iraq, in which the "otherness" of the landscape−the Hindu Kush, the deserts of Iraq−is a decisive factor.

Lone Survivor, based on the 2007 homonymous nonfiction book by Marcus Luttrell and Patrick Robinson, tells the story of the four-man SEAL team in the 2005 counterinsurgent Operation Red Wings into the Hindu Kush Mountains during the Afghanistan War. The initial part of this operation was a reconnaissance patrol that aimed at assessing the location of the Taliban leader Ahmad Shah in a village near the mountains. When implementing the mission, however, the American team is exposed and three of the four members are killed. The soldiers' entanglement with the local life of the mountains, their lack of cultural and geographic knowledge as well as their inability to make use of technological support are springboards for my discussion of landscape and codes of masculine violence in American war cinema−the confrontation with the enemy-other, the body at its limits, and the possibility of humane interaction during wartime.

Lone Survivor depicts soldiers, Navy SEALs, who initially seem to exhibit an almost invulnerable corporeal status. Sequences early in the film portraying their demanding training process and their pursuit of superhuman powers of endurance demonstrate the attempt to achieve physical and mental excellence, an effort that produces a heightened physical prowess−a quality of will power and strength−that would seem to confer dominance and power. When entering a landscape that is not their own with a great number of unpredictable variables, however, the environment exposes the vulnerability of their bodies. Luttrell (Mark Wahlberg), the "lone survivor" of the title, is confronted with his physical limitations and his cultural ignorance in the course of the film. The unknown elements of the Afghan social culture and physical environment become what Brian Castner calls in his online essay "a tabula rasa," a situation in which soldiers who have little cultural and social knowledge of Afghanistan end up imprinting their own patterns on unfamiliar settings. Castner comments that when most soldiers arrived in the country, they saw "a grand vista of deserts and rivers and mountains that stretched to the Himalaya," but "they didn't see a civilization they recognized or had even read about". Roy-Bhattacharya explains the attitude generated by the incompatibility of knowledge by saying that when "you don't have a cultural sense of where you are, you apply your own."[4] The act of applying one's own standards to another culture,

[4] Roy-Bhattacharya's quotation was taken from Brian Castner's "Afghanistan: A Stage without a Play."

without being sensitive to the differences of each cultural context, can raise problematic issues such as the notion of otherness and dehumanization during warfare.

In this chapter I will analyze specific sequences from the film *Lone Survivor* in order to explore the shaping influence of landscape in representations of contemporary war. The depiction of landscape, I argue, provides a frame for larger questions of masculinity, corporeality, and technology in contemporary war representation, and illuminates the political dimension of seemingly neutral representations of space.

In *Lone Survivor*, technology initially enters the film as a reliable source of information and protection, but soon the technological apparatus is decreased in effectiveness as the characters are immersed in the rugged mountain environment. Military life in war films is generally associated with an intense amount of technological interaction, including the use of a myriad of weapons and communication devices. Contemporary Western warfare has magnified the military's dependence on technology, with remote targeting, surveillance, and drone technology taking a preeminent position as weapons of war. Films such as *Good Kill* (Niccol 2014) and *Eye in the Sky* (Hood 2015) portray military missions initiated from desks and booths thousands of kilometers away from where the violence takes place. *Lone Survivor*'s focus on landscape, however, places a new emphasis on the body of the soldier and underlines the limitations of technological support used during the missions.

The relationship between the body of the soldiers and the technology that surrounds them has been a frequent point of discussion in representations of war. Kristen Whissel observes that Thomas Edison's actualities regarding the Spanish-American War in 1989 constructed an "image of the white male body harnessed to technology [which] became a signifier for a newly forged national-imperial identity" (141). According to her, Edison's war actualities "brought into focus a type of American masculinity based on conceptions of discipline, control, whiteness, and power" as opposed to the debilitated and effeminized male body shaped by the pressures of modernity (142). These war actualities depicted male bodies in movement and surrounded by war machinery, in active postures that emphasized soldiers' strength and dynamism. This was a "type of masculinity that mastered technological modernity" (150) for military purposes in representations that focused on the kinetic nature of the soldiers' everyday routine. Whissel points out that "war actualities displayed a high-tech, complex, hierarchical formation in which physically developed bodies and powerful machines worked efficiently

to extend the nation's political and commercial power around the globe" (159).

In *Lone Survivor*, the technological enhancement brought about by the extensive use of state-of-the-art communication devices, night vision goggles, weapons, and helicopters can be considered as a way to assert the masculinity of the American soldiers. The idealized SEAL is constructed as a white, disciplined, and athletic male soldier who is trained to survive even under the hardest conditions, as demonstrated in the initial scenes of the film in which the prospective soldiers endure inhuman conditions to become part of the team. Their mastery of military technology demonstrates the portrayal of their all-around figures who are capable of using both their bodies and minds to navigate the war zone. This new view of soldiers can be perceived as a reinvention or a repurposing of the codes of masculinity for the war films of the 21st century, rehearsing older codes described by Whissel, as opposed to, for instance, the figure of the Vietnam War soldier who is generally depicted as disillusioned, disoriented or with murderous intent. The harshness of the mountain landscape in which the SEALs conduct their mission, however, prevents them from making use of technology, reducing the soldiers' effectiveness. The military equipment which consisted in radios, satellite phones, laptops, cameras, helmets, bulletproof vests, grenades, ammunition, and rifles are lost on the mountain, leaving the soldiers' body exposed to the natural setting.

1.1 The Flat Base and the Outline of the Mountain

From the opening shots of *Lone Survivor*, the Afghan territory is portrayed as a vast and flat territory surrounded by towering mountains, as the initial image in an extreme long shot exemplifies (see fig. 1). The static shot features a mesmerizing blend of land, mountains, and sky. The arid ground stretches itself in all directions giving an impression of enormity complemented by the mountains majestically set in the background. The tempestuous sky offers varied shades of gray though its cloudiness lets a beam of sunlight shine upon the dusty land. Nature seems to overwhelm the incoming helicopter seen as a small black particle that approaches the screen. The territory's sheer size and complexity engulf the technological apparatus, a visual foreshadowing of the upcoming events of the film in which the soldiers will struggle with the natural elements of the mountain.

Fig. 1. The Afghan landscape

The following shot demonstrates how the film starkly cuts from an image depicting the wide space to a barely conscious soldier, Luttrell, an ellipsis that takes us to the closing scenes of the film, providing an intimate representation of the violated body with a medium close-up (see fig. 2). The move from a daunting establishing shot of the unknown landscape, which is introduced here for the first time in the film, to the inside of the helicopter featuring a space belonging to the American soldier already indicates the difference between exposed and safe areas in the film. The construction of the outside environment as an unfamiliar and dangerous zone from the perspective of the SEALs will be juxtaposed with their indoor spaces of safety, conveying the idea that the film will focus on the viewpoint of the Western soldier who primarily sees Afghanistan as an alien place. In this medium close-up shot, Luttrell's body is a testament of the consequences concerning the painful experiences on the mountain, the fieldwork of war, the boots on the ground. He is one example among many individuals, including the coalition members, opposing forces, and the Afghan population, who bears the damage of ground conflict in a relentless exchange of violent acts during the Afghanistan War. Luttrell is, however, singular in his favorable circumstance of receiving medical aid by being evacuated in a helicopter and treated in a proper medical facility, a little to non-existent prospect in the lives of the Afghan people living miles from the base. Leading such a different existence though living in close proximity is an issue that becomes clearer when the American base is more carefully depicted.

Fig. 2. Luttrell in the helicopter

As the narrative progresses, the film flashes back to three days earlier when the soldiers are making arrangements to go on to the mission in the mountains. During this period of preparation, the Bagram Air Base becomes the focus of spatial depiction in the film, for instance, with an extreme long shot that establishes the base's reach across the Afghan landscape (see fig. 3). The camera here is no longer static as it pans to take in a number of compounds with air conditioners, tanks, helicopters, and airplanes. The once sandy ground, with its folds and hollows, has become a flat and leveled surface covered by cement. Nature has been suppressed in order to control the environment and turn it into a more similar condition for the usual military practice. In comparison with the initial shot of the Afghan landscape, the Bagram depiction diminishes the presence of the mountain cluster which modestly features in the background. Still, a recurrent visual element is introduced in this image: the interference of sunlight in the ability to clearly see details. Even if the military attempts to live in an urbanized fashion while inhabiting a predominantly arid and mountainous environment, it is possible to perceive the presence of nature as the sun glares behind the mountains. In "The Natures of War" Gregory mentions that the "militarisation of nature[5] that was supposed to establish dominion" in fact can present "new vulnerabilities" (72). In the case of the soldiers in *Lone Survivor*, the stark contrast between their well-established, isolated lives in the base and the extreme experiences on the mountains resonates in their poor planning and lack of sufficient knowledge of local specificities.

Fig. 3. An extreme long shot of the Bagram Air Base

Later on in the narrative, the soldiers' interaction with the outdoors from within the geographical delimitations of the base is foregrounded in a sequence that displays Michael Murphy (Taylor Kitsch) and Danny Dietz (Emile Hirsch) racing around Bagram. The first image of this

[5] By "militarisation of nature" (72) Gregory refers to the imprint of military resources on nature, such as the leveling of forests and paving of natural surfaces in order to supposedly control the environment.

sequence is an extreme long shot of the wide terrain of the base in which more than half of the screen is filled by the dark and white swirling clouds that resemble a painting, accompanied by the ethereal presence of the mountains in the background (see fig. 4). The meditative shot remains unoccupied for a moment until the two characters breach the natural stillness from the left, running across the screen. The next image incorporates a blend of natural and military characteristics in a more distinctive way by portraying the two soldiers running alongside a barbed-wire fence (see fig. 5). The mixture of an urbanized element with the natural features of the dusty ground and the mountain chains in the back gives an idea of containment and domestication of nature. The soldiers in the base are sensorially and emotionally enclosed and separated from the outdoor environment even if they physically seem to be on the outside of the barracks.

Fig. 4. The soldiers run across the base

Fig. 5. The race continues by the fence

The difference between stepping on the arid ground and cement becomes a focal point of movement and expresses a greater meaning about the soldiers' attachment to the place. As they stand closer to nature, the close-up that depicts their feet touching the sandy ground is done through a static camera that captures their steps coming each second closer (see fig. 6). The dust that lifts from their footsteps hints at the friction caused by the type of terrain and the shot itself does not elicit a great kinetic feeling. However, when the soldiers enter a fully militarized and cemented area, their performance is friction-free and the sideways camera accompanies their fast running, giving a much more energetic pace for the shot (see fig. 7). Their corporeal connection to the natural environment is already depicted as possibly less effective.

Fig. 6. Running on the dusty ground

Fig. 7. The cemented ground

The sense of alienation shown by the characters in the base regarding the outside environment of Afghanistan is a clear statement that topophilia, as Yi-Fu Tuan proposes, is denied; that is, it is dismissed by a more comfortable homely worldview. No deeper attention is initially given to the surroundings beyond the base except for the moments of preparation for the mission in which landscape and the Taliban are taken into consideration. In the book *The Mountains of Majeed*, photographer Edmund Clark captures this sense of disconnection by visually examining the life of the military personnel inside Bagram Air Base. His pictures feature a cement, technological base from which it is possible to see the Hindu Kush Mountains in the far background while the inside of the base features murals with the same mountains painted by a local artist called Majeed (see fig. 8). The soldiers are surrounded by these images but at the same time are distant from a deeper engagement and understanding of their relevance. Clark comments in an interview for the online edition of *The Guardian* that:

> In every war of occupation and resistance, you tend to have this huge gulf of division and ignorance between the two sides . . . but here it is singularly extreme. If you sit in a dining hall, the murals seem almost surreal. Here you are in this huge base full of the technology and machinery of modern warfare – not just drones and missiles, but the entire infrastructure of food, water, sewage, electricity and the vast secondary army of operatives that maintain it – and outside is this vastness where villagers maintain a simple, almost unchanged way of life that will continue when the Americans are long gone. The paintings seem to be some kind of reminder of that way of life and its power to endure. But it is the mountains themselves that symbolise it more than anything else.

Even though the characters in *Lone Survivor* are physically stationed in the territory, the soldiers are still sensorially disconnected. Tuan explains that "to experience in the active sense requires that one venture forth into the unfamiliar and experiment with the elusive and the uncertain" (*Space* 9). In the film, there is no element of attachment between the soldiers and the local landscape although they are geographically located only a few miles outside the city of Bagram. While at Bagram Air Base, the soldiers are portrayed as immersed into their own culture and environment. The Afghan territory becomes what Sven Larson calls "the landscape of others," that is, "only a tactical landscape that belongs to others" (477), in this case to the local opposing forces. At the base, the soldiers in *Lone Survivor* have conversations that revolve around their personal lives, physical accomplishments, and military procedures while observations about the Afghan territory or people are limited to brief remarks regarding the elevation degree of the region and type of terrain as well as pictures and names of the Taliban members.

Fig. 8. Clark's photographs of the Bagram Air Base

In the scene that portrays the mission debriefing, Afghanistan is seen as a map, a territory to be tactically approached through a combination of communication devices and SEAL skills. The construction of masculinity joins the physical prowess display of the aforementioned running sequence with the portrayal of exquisitely prepared and confident soldiers in terms of tactics, a depiction that seems to empower the male characters to harness not only technology but the challenges of the Afghan space.

1.2 Corporeal Navigation and Technology

As soon as the soldiers are inserted in the mountains, *Lone Survivor* concentrates on the SEALs' navigation of the remote landscape

initially with the help of technology and subsequently with a corporeal emphasis. The harsh contours of the terrain highlight the exposed situation in which the soldiers find themselves and, as a consequence, foreground the fragility of the bodies earlier in the film regarded as unbreakable. The SEALs training and camaraderie as well as the technological props that have aided in the production of an idealized male body will progressively be stripped away, as the soldiers increasingly lose a sense of mastery, control, and discipline. Whissel comments in her analysis of Edison's war actualities that "the production of this body relied on a military mise-en-scène" (151). Similarly, as the soldiers of *Lone Survivor* are placed in an unfamiliar setting in the mountains they gradually lose their technological empowerment and become vulnerable to external forces.

The sense of powerlessness caused by the lack of advanced telecommunications equipment is displayed as disconcerting to the team from the first technological breakdown−the early radio malfunction. The fact that they cannot work efficiently without their technological support because of the natural features of Afghanistan diminishes their all-around SEAL aura and eventually reveals an attitude of antagonism with the local space, constructing it as a menacing environment, a place of otherness.

Prior to the mission, the theoretical dimension of their tactics is demonstrated through a sequence depicting the explanation of the reconnaissance mission followed by the practical immersion into the mountains. While still on the base, the SEALs make use of topographic maps, miniature helicopters, and pictures of the Afghan targets to detail the operation. The calm and composed account given by Matt Axe (Ben Foster) about the geographical features of the mission area is in stark contrast to the actual experiences the soldiers will go through in the upcoming scenes. With the aid of topographical maps, he confidently observes: "we're gonna be moving up the backside of this mountain here, which is gonna offer great concealment from the village. I'm estimating that it's gonna take us between three and four hours, depending upon the gradient of the terrain which is that crappy shale." What seems so straightforward in theory is actually going to be much more complex in practice. The uncertainty in relation to the degree of inclination of the mountain already hints at possible setbacks in the future.

When analyzing the particularities of the Vietnam War, Gregory comments that there was a complex relationship between the operations seen from the air and the ground. He highlights that the "planar view of an optical war that continued to be projected from the pages of field manuals and planned on maps" ("Natures" 45) was contradicted by those

who had to endure the practical side of the tactical missions. The flatness of the maps did not translate the corporeality of the war conflict and was "divorced from the corpographies inculcated by the soldiers whose bodies had to move through what they came to construe as a desperately hostile nature" (46-47). In *Lone Survivor*, the theoretical safety brought by maps and tactics regarding the mission is quickly debunked by the tactile immersion into the mountain, a disruption in the previously contained environment of the base.

The mediated perception of the landscape and the violence enacted on the battlefield through technological means is set forth in *Lone Survivor* as a limiting rather than an enabling perspective. Ever since screens and computers have moderated the human vision of the battlefield, reality is interpreted in a synthetic way as a perpetual struggle for information through imagery. However, such a fact does not lead to the conclusion that technology alone dominates the warfare scenario, especially in a setting such as Afghanistan, since, as the film suggests, the human component still plays a relevant role in decision-making. Christopher Coker observes that in the war circumstance "computers can indeed see for us, but they cannot work out the significance of what they see. A computer can scan the battle space and even recognize what its program asks it to look for, but it cannot understand what an enemy's deployment of forces might mean, or second guess its intentions, or intuit its battle plan" (93). Technology plays a significant role in war. As the film illustrates, the human factor−the corporeal engagement in the actual setting−remains as an intrinsically intertwined element.

In *Lone Survivor*, as technology is gradually removed from the soldiers, their capacity to remain alive diminishes exponentially. Their training as SEALs in tactical awareness and endurance of pain are the only remaining tools for survival. However, the same physicality that made it possible for them to be a dominant force is also damaged, compromised by battle wounds and injury, and the limitations of their bodies come to the surface as their deaths are depicted in the film. Luttrell survives, not because he can perfectly master technology and nature at the same time, but because he receives assistance from a local force. The once thoroughly skilled soldier is carried in the arms and saved by the ones who were labeled as suspicious and threatening.

One of the technological forms of mediation displayed in *Lone Survivor* is the use of night vision goggles to navigate the landscape. As the four soldiers are dropped off by the helicopter on the mountain, they make use of their night vision goggles to move around the territory. Initially, the film shows the soldiers scanning the area with their goggles

on, carefully panning their heads in search of any threat, mapping the environment. Then, the spectator is given access to their vision through a point-of-view shot in which technology offers an enhanced level of scopic accuracy, the electronic eyes that replace the insufficient human night-time vision. The eerie green glow of the night vision view, accompanied by static over the radio, lend an otherworldly atmosphere to the landscape. Through these lenses, the local vegetation and the foreign soldiers are given a ghostly contour (see fig. 9).

Fig. 9. The view with the night vision goggles

Since this is the initial touchdown of the four teammates on the mountain, they immediately adopt a "switch on" posture. John Hockey explains that this expression "invokes the embodied world particular to infantry and its paramount concerns in operational contexts, one within which troops invoke all their sensory skills so as to become thoroughly attuned . . . to perilous environments" (102). Their hunched body posture, persistent watchful attitude and weapon readiness demonstrate their preparedness to violently engage in combat, as part of a raid in which the definite positions of attacker and attacked will soon be blurred.

The construction of an ever-watchful disposition and choreography of movements can be seen as reinforcing the performative masculinity of the SEAL soldier. Whissel comments that to pair up the active male bodies in motion with technological apparel, such as the depictions of soldiers in Edison's war actualities, is to tap into the "type of masculinity based on physical discipline and power" (151). As the soldiers are initially inserted in the mountain, their active and watchful posture reaffirms an idealized masculinity complemented by their synchronized movement and use of technology. As they begin to struggle in the harsh landscape, however, their masculine props of precision and fitness are removed, and their performance takes a different turn. When Luttrell is wounded and alone, his posture is far from the idealized conduct of a SEAL as he drags himself around the forest, bumping into tree trunks and branches. Without the aid of technology for communication and defense or the support system provided by the

camaraderie of his teammates, Luttrell's performance devolves from the codes of idealized masculinity set forth in the warrior ethos of the SEALs, particularly when he is helped by the villagers. The fragility of his body and his dependence on the Afghan people are set against his sense of physical and cultural superiority.

The sensorial connection with nature experienced by the soldiers in the film is first exemplified in the scenes that feature the men concealed by vegetation. In an effort to blend in with nature, they hide under tree branches and bushes, as the shots demonstrate only a few exposed body parts (see fig. 10). In that state of concealment, their actions turn to a personal sphere as they maintain relaxed, banal conversations about civilian subjects such as Murphy's wedding. Under the safety of natural cover, in positions that they assume to be risk-free, the soldiers close their eyes and sleep away from the comfort of the base. The first sign of danger is not a visual clue but an aural detail. Dietz hears the rustling of leaves and the goats' bells and interprets those sounds as menacing. He navigates the battlespace looking for any sensorial confirmation of danger and soon enough the soldiers have visual validation of the sounds: a group of herders and goats come into their direction. The tactile contact with one of the herders, who stumbles upon Luttrell's concealed foot, is the beginning of their direct corporeal interaction.

Fig. 10. SEALs blend in with nature

One particular sequence from *Lone Survivor* brings the issue of cultural estrangement to the forefront and demonstrates how the American characters are portrayed as being enclosed in their own preconceived world views regarding the place and people. As the SEALs detain the three sheep herders, a conversation takes place regarding the fate of the locals. The atmosphere is charged with tension as there is hardly any physical contact between both sides, only an exchange of suspicious glances. The Afghans do not have many lines and when they do speak, there are no subtitles to translate their words. The American soldiers talk about the possibility of letting the herders go or tying them to the trees. The third option consists of executing the three men, Axe's

preferred choice, as the soldier describes the threat that the herders represent to the American military and the SEALs individually. A quick exchange of words takes place between Luttrell and Axe:

> LUTTRELL: What are we gonna do? We gonna kill them? . . . They get found and then what?
> AXE: Then what?
> LUTTRELL: What do you mean, then what?
> AXE: And then what?
> LUTTRELL: You know then what . . . It's gonna be out there for the whole fucking world. CNN, ok? 'SEALs kill kids' . . . Got guys in Leavenworth doing twenty for taking home trophy guns. What do you think they're gonna do for fucking two kids and an old fucking man?

This conversation can be seen as a relevant point of discussion since their debate does not mention at any moment the significance of the herders' lives. The locals are treated as disposable beings since they apparently have ties with the Taliban due to the presence of the radio. Initially Luttrell seems to be leaning towards sparing the lives of the locals, but as it can be perceived in the aforementioned conversation, his real concern lies in the possibility of him being publicly humiliated and taken to the correctional facility in Fort Leavenworth after committing crimes of war. Axe's reaction to the act of killing is even more chilling as he shrugs his shoulders while saying "and then what?". What could be seen as a morally superior act of letting the herders go at the end of this sequence still remains as a self-centered attitude, one based on the compliance with the Rules of Engagement (ROE), which dictates the conditions and manners of use of military force, and focuses on the avoidance of further criminal punishment. It strays from an act grounded on empathy and humanity that would signify a turning point in the way the foreign military forces interact with the local inhabitants.

Due to the unexpected encounter with the local herders, the SEAL team needs to reorganize their plans and use their sensory and corporeal skills to re-map the geography of the landscape in order to survive, since the terrain is practically unknown to them. As Gregory explains, corpographies can be understood as improvisational, "instinctive, jarring, visceral responses to military violence" ("Corpographies" 33). The polishing of the senses as a whole, including hearing and touching in the atmosphere of the battlespace is represented in *Lone Survivor* as a

survival mechanism. This scenario can be compared to Alex Volmar's comments about sensorial restructuring during the First World War:

> In place of day-to-day auditory perception, which tended to be passive and unconscious, active listening techniques came to the fore: practices of sound analysis, which might be described as an 'auscultation' of the acoustic warscape . . .. In these processes, the question was no longer how the noises as such were structured (i.e. what they sounded like), but rather what they *meant*, and what consequences they would bring with them for the listeners. (230-31)

Regarding contemporary war, Kenneth MacLeish provides an explanation of battlespace awareness in the Iraq War: "in the combat zone there is a balance to be struck, a cultivated operational knowledge, that comes in large part from first-hand experience about what can hurt you and what can't" (76). Contemporary war films, such as *Lone Survivor* and others from this research, portray the soldiers' sensorial fine-tuning when they are in the combat zone surrounded by an avalanche of aural input.

A specific sequence in the film demonstrates this reorganization of the senses as the four soldiers silently hunch down in the forest in surveillance mode. The performance of the soldiers' bodies in this case can be connected to the way the film depicts the mythological figure of the SEAL as a highly trained and skilled warrior, capable of adapting to the most extreme situations. The portrayal of the soldiers in an instinctive posture, attuned to the surrounding by using every sense available in their bodies, adds to the construction of a super soldier, or as Whissel describes, "the powerful militarized male body-in-motion" (151), whose identity is based on the display of control, strength, and discipline.

In *Lone Survivor*, the soldiers' long-range vision is impaired by the trees that stand between them and the opposing forces. This is the moment in which a corpographic approach to the battlespace is adopted through the reliance on other instincts and sensory perceptions for survival. By counting on the extensive military training as well as the mental and physical attentive posture, the SEALs consolidate the sense of hearing as a major source of information. Unlike spatial navigation in civilian life, warzone orientation in instances of risk "demands a complex synthesis of practical knowledge, emotional discipline, and bodily disposition" (MacLeish 77). In the film, Axe turns his attention to one specific direction as he hears conversation in an attempt to acquire acoustic

knowledge for survival. The point-of-view shot depicts a few blurred branches in the foreground across the image and the escalating complexity of the layered wall of dry tree trunks in the back (see fig. 11). The leaves bring green and yellow hues to the still scenario of disorientation. For the American soldier, the trees act as deceiving natural elements that could conceal a menacing presence whereas for the Afghans hidden behind the trunks, nature offers a confusing distraction used for their benefit. Here, the dominant male figure struggles with the otherness of the natural environment, gradually diminishing his control of the situation.

Fig. 11. Axe's point-of-view shot

Lone Survivor makes use of another technological tool to mediate vision in a more personal and visceral way through the portrayal of the soldiers' gunsight. It physically becomes an extension of their own visual ability, not only as a means of aiming accurately at a long distance but also as a mechanism of obtaining meticulous images of the surroundings. In order to put the gunsight into practice, the soldiers keep the rifles extremely close to their faces in a very intimate corporeal contact of the metal with their skin. The zoom afforded by the gun is seen as a reliable instrument and a somatic device that fuses the enhancement of technology with the pulsing physical contact in the warscape. The point-of-view shots provided by the gunsight are cinematically specific since they appear in a clearly zoomed in perspective along with a cross demarcation that divides the screen in four sections. As the SEAL team faces the Afghan forces, they continually make use of their gunsights in the exchange of shots.

One sequence in particular represents the portrayal of the relationship between the distance that technology allows from the violent act and the corporeal consequence. After Luttrell aims at one specific man hidden behind a tree, he pulls the trigger and the depiction of the Afghan death through the gunsight is solidly graphic in relation to the impact of the bullets in his body. Theoretically, by using the gunsight the shooter remains considerably removed from the recipient in geographical terms. However, the point-of-view shot of the death demonstrates a chilling

intimacy with the act since it is possible to perceive in detail the clothes of the Afghan soldier, his facial features, and loss of consciousness as bullets penetrate his body and blood spills out (see fig. 12). The high definition of the gunsight image shortens the distance of the violent act. The shooter might be several meters away from the recipient, but the gunsight image demonstrates the damage inflicted on the latter's body and underlines the status of flesh in the battlefield. The mastery of technology demonstrated by the SEAL soldiers is a pivotal element of their masculine performativity in the war zone, evoking a sense of empowerment over the lives of the people under the gunsights. The reassertion of authority derives from the use of lethal technology that constructs the male athletic body as an extension of the weapon, signaling an idealized identity based on precision and power.

Fig. 12. The deadly shot through the gunsight

Although technological equipment such as night vision goggles and the gunsight work for the benefit of the American team, they are only small pieces in the war puzzle which is actually centered around communication. The ability to communicate and exchange information is a vital part of the war dynamics in the film and the war context in general. Steven Metz singles out intelligence as one the main requirements in the battlefield by quoting from the *Army After Next Annual Report*[6]: "knowledge is paramount . . . the unprecedented level of battlespace awareness that is expected to be available will significantly reduce both fog and friction. Knowledge will shape the battlespace . . . . It will permit . . . distributed, decentralized, noncontiguous operations" (qtd in Metz 32). In contemporary wars, information is mostly distributed through technological devices, such as telephones, radios, and internet, which hints at the fact that without access to any of these tools, the military flow is interrupted.

[6] The *Army After Next Annual Report* is a written document that details the advances made in the studies conducted by the United States Army regarding the development of future warfare.

The pivotal element of technological malfunction in *Lone Survivor* is the radio failure. Since they cannot communicate with base to request extraction, they are stranded in the mountain without proper knowledge of their whereabouts. They are also vastly outnumbered. Murphy asks Dietz if his radio is working and as the latter gives a negative reply, the former answers in an upset manner: "so now I'm going to be that guy calling on an unsecure sat line because your shit ain't functioning." Dietz's comeback demonstrates that nature is to be blamed for the interference, as he says: "talk to the mountain, sir." The Hindu Kush receives the blame for the lack of signal and such a positioning only increases the level of hostility towards the environment. The soldiers vigorously curse at the malfunction of the radio and satellite phone. Their dependence on and attachment to technology actually poses a direct threat: Dietz loses parts of his fingers when attempting to use the radio in the firefight, and Murphy dies as he exposes himself to try to use the satellite phone. In this case, being without access to information exchange means to be vulnerable in a circumstance where the unprotected and violated body of the American soldier is stretched to the limit.

Although landscape entails sensorial and ideological complications, such as physical difficulties in moving in the terrain, nature has a complex and dual role in the battlefield lives of the four soldiers. For most of the film, the representation of nature can be compared to Fredric Jameson's remarks on the role of landscape in war narratives in which the surroundings possess "a force of enmity" (1553) capable of shaping the destiny of characters with their menacing, life-threatening characteristics. However, in a few specific instances, nature provides respite from violence. *Lone Survivor* depicts moments in which the soldiers rely on nature to offer relief. When Dietz is shot in the leg, for example, Luttrell applies a mixture of dirt and moss on the bullet wound to help with the bleeding. Another character, Murphy, wounded in the gut, also makes use of this technique though his scene has a much more elevated level of haptic connection. He burrows his hand into the ground in order to collect some dirt and smears it on his abdominal wound, mixing blood and dirt over his skin (see fig. 13). This moment of corporeal interaction with the mountain is broken when Murphy sarcastically acknowledges that he loves Afghanistan, toying with the general idea of repulsion to the place, the war, and the people. The toughness of the super soldier resurfaces in the moment of pain, obscuring the fragility and powerlessness when facing the limitations of his own body. This display of strength, partly physical in withstanding the pain and partly connected to the presence of mind to formulate a sarcastic

comment, suggests a search for the dominant masculine figures constructed since the beginning of the film that are gradually obscured by their own lack of capacity to successfully interact with the surroundings.

Fig. 13. Murphy applies dirt on his abdominal wound

The theme of the soldier's relationship with the earth can be traced to early war narratives and provides instances of both benign and unfriendly inclinations. Erich Remarque in *All Quiet on the Western Front* observes the intimacy between the soldier and nature when he says: "to no man does the earth mean so much as to the soldier. When he presses himself down upon her, long and powerfully, when he buries his face and his limbs deep in her from the fear of death by shell-fire, then she is his only friend, his brother, his mother; he stifles his terror and his cries in her silence and her security" (43). A different view of the landscape, however, can be seen in Derek Gregory's analysis of the mud in the First World War trenches. He observes that the military presence allied with earth and water created a "mud mixed with barbed wire, shells and iron scraps, and with organic wastes, dead animals and decomposing bodies" ("Gabriel's Map" 25). In this case, the battle space does not afford any security from the surrounding violence, but reinforces the idea of nature as a generator of unpredictable threats during war.

The Afghanistan War offers a setting in which isolation becomes a major element in the soldiers' combat experience. As Marcus Luttrell acknowledges in his book, Afghanistan seems to be "one of the loneliest places on earth" (4). As the soldiers enter the depths of the forest, they are engulfed by an environment that denies them contact with the base and forces them to rely on survival skills. On the one hand, the SEALs are constructed as fully skilled and superbly prepared following the ideology of the super soldier, a dominant masculine figure capable of adapting to a variety of situations. On the other hand, their lack of in-depth interaction with the local environment and inhabitants alongside their arrogance prevents them from stepping outside their own restricted worldview in order to succeed in the mission.

1.3 Harness the Pain

Layers of technology and physical strength are peeled away from the SEALs as the film progresses. What takes their place is a concentrated attention to the phenomenology of pain. Elaine Scarry comments on the hardships of representing pain since corporeal affliction happens at a very internal level of the human being. According to her, "when one hears about another person's physical pain, the events happening within the interior of that person's body may seem to have the remote character of some deep subterranean fact, belonging to an invisible geography that, however portentous, has no reality because it has not yet manifested itself on the visible surface of the earth" (*Body* 3). The impossibility of the material realization of pain for others to visualize or sense is one of the impairments of its expressibility. For the person who is experiencing pain, "it is 'effortlessly' grasped," it could even be said inevitability grasped, while for the outsider, the onlooker of the pain episode, "what is 'effortless' is *not* grasping it" (*Body* 4). To illustrate Scarry's notion of pain, one can imagine the war scenario in which a person is wounded. For that individual, pain is inescapable, even if they attempt to deny it. For those around the injured person, that is, the observer, pain is noticeable by a potential combination of the visual validation of the physical damage on the body and the wounded person's verbal and bodily reaction of agony. It is possible to identify oneself with a person's pain, for instance, by using past experiences of painful circumstances to try to comprehend the feelings, but it is a complex task to fully grasp someone else's corporeal predicaments. War films have extensively made use of cinematic tools to represent pain on the screen, combined with narrative devices that explore not only painful physical instances but individual and collective emotional reverberations as well.

Lone Survivor plunges into the challenging area of attempting to represent physical pain by depicting the tumbling and shattering of the soldiers' bodies. The initial sequence of the film is a montage of footage and photographs from SEAL training that shows the body of the soldiers being pushed to the limit. In these scenes, the soldiers appear under a high level of physical stress and verbal harassment as they shiver, fall, lose consciousness, and nearly drown. At one point the instructor advises on sensorial and corporeal control by saying "all this shaking and all this cold. Harness it. Turn it into aggression." The drilling becomes a process of desensitization of the body and mind, a devastating creation of a human being who is encouraged to cross the limits of acceptable pain.

Still in this sequence, the instructor confidently presents the following conclusion: "you just proved to your bodies, through your mind, that you can push yourself further than you thought possible." There is a certain fetishisizing of the idea of pain in combat and training. The mythology of the SEAL figure as a super soldier is highlighted in this sequence. The allure of pushing one's body to the limit constructs a discourse of cultural identity based on physical and psychological excellence. Perhaps Coker's predictions about the future of warfare, with the military use of devices and performance-enhancement drugs to diminish soldiers' sensorial relationship with pain and increase endurance, need to be taken into account. He poses a critical question: "in the absence of pain, will warriors find in themselves the same degree of sympathy, compassion or strength of character they were able to find in the past?" (107).

The philosophy of soldiers who refuse to react or succumb to the pressure of pain is carried throughout *Lone Survivor* as the four SEALs are grievously injured. They get shot in several parts of their bodies, such as legs, arms, hands, shoulders, feet, and in critical areas like the abdomen, and still carry on with their movements. Some of the scenes that have most impact concern the physical injuries they sustain when they decide to fall off certain parts of the mountain. The decision to fall comes at a moment in the narrative in which they are out of tactical options to oppose the Taliban forces that have been encircling them. To go up the mountain is not a possible alternative due to the heavy Taliban firepower in that direction, so the only viable way to escape is to go downhill. As a consequence, they roll down the mountain, turn upside down, bounce off of rocks, and land hard on the ground in an uncontrolled display of anatomical torture. The editing of these sequences is relentless, putting together one painful impact of their bodies with the rocks, trees, and ground after another. A catalogue of ways in which the body can be smashed against a surface and contorted into atypical positions is demonstrated in these scenes which emphasize the sounds of their corporeal friction with obstacles and their verbal interjections of pain.

Their bodies become canvasses of punctured and torn flesh taken to the limit. Two of the characters, Dietz and Axe, undergo a psychological transformation as the wounds become critical. Dietz's initial wound is, as previously mentioned, the partial loss of his fingers which causes a massive bleeding on his hand. In one scene, the four soldiers are leaning against a rock wall and assessing their conditions. Dietz starts acting "unSEAL-like" as he raises his voice while undercover, moaning, and wildly staring at his wound (see fig. 14). While

the others whisper amongst themselves, he loudly asks “Mikey, how’d they get us so fast?” His eyes widen and his mind flows to his personal thoughts by saying “I just don’t understand how fucking fast they were, man. . . . Faster than we are?”, “I was fucking talking to my mom. She didn’t fucking say nothing about,” and as he looks at his wounded hand he exclaims “Such vivid reds!” The pain and progressive malfunction of the body cause Dietz’s perception to be unfit for the battlefield. His most basic senses are no longer attuned to the firefight which, in the circumstance of war, becomes a liability to himself and the team. The moment of his death highlights the sensorial dysfunction and high level of pain as his eyes barely open and his heavy wheezing can be heard. A point-of-view shot from Dietz focuses on the natural environment as the sun glares through the image and the top of the trees can be seen in the background (see fig. 15). He no longer concentrates in the Afghan forces or hears the firefight. An extreme close-up of Dietz’s right eye and injured face seals his passing as a contemplative moment (see fig. 16). Dietz’s passive posture in the time of his death seems to construct an opposite portrayal from the idealized performance of the SEALs which focuses on agility and dominance. In this case, violence is not the propeller of masculinity but the element that removes the super soldier from his invincible status and places him in the average position of war casualty.

Fig. 14. Dietz stares at his wound

Fig. 15. His POV shot

Fig. 16. The moment of his passing

Axe’s death is also linked to the decrease of his sensorial abilities which can be seen as he is the one who suffers more facial injuries, especially in his right eye. The loss of the sense of depth, with his right eye being closed, along with the other wounds become the precipitator of his physical and mental deterioration. In his final sequence, Axe is shown

alone, on his knees, reloading his sidearm and unable to execute such a commonplace task: to put the gun back in the holster. Axe crawls on the ground, wheezing, and pointing his gun in random directions as his senses of hearing and sight can no longer be trusted. A slow-motion shot captures his disorientation, and as he shoots in different directions, the sounds of the shots are muffled. These cinematic tools highlight his sensorial restrictions. His death, similarly to Dietz's, conveys a contemplative tone as he rests his back against a tree trunk. After shooting all the bullets from his gun, Axe stays motionless in a struggle to breathe. In one close-up, the sun pierces through the tree leaves and touches certain parts of his face, highlighting his wounds before he is fatally shot (see fig. 17). The rustling branches in the blurred background contrast with the violent circumstance. In a medium long shot and tilted angle (see fig. 18), his motionless and lifeless body becomes another feature in the natural environment, along with the trees, rocks, and dusty ground.

Fig. 17. The sunlight on Axe's face

Fig. 18. Axe's motionless body

On the one hand, the film's emphasis on corporeal disruption could be interpreted as an insistence on the heroic side of soldiering−the willingness to sacrifice the self. But on the other hand, it depicts a military system that puts its soldiers through torturing situations, numbing them, and calling it heroism. In my view, one significant aspect about the SEAL soldiers in *Lone Survivor* is not how they are portrayed as having superb strength and resolve to defeat the opposing forces, but the manner in which they have become conditioned in behavior that moves away from the humane and tips over into the realm of mechanical attitudes. The film gradually demonstrates that for the SEALs pain is an element that pulls them back in the direction of becoming human again. Their interaction with the landscape reveals the fragility of their bodies in contrast to the invincible status of previous military training, and Luttrell's later immersion with the locals places him at the heart of human and cultural exchange.

1.4 Super Soldier Gone

The connection of the body and the landscape of the mountain reaches its peak when Luttrell inserts himself inside a rocky crevasse for protection. After the deaths of his teammates, Luttrell seeks refuge in the depths of the mountain. He blends in with nature for the purpose of survival, improvising a refuge for his body, reorganizing his maneuvers by physically melding with the mountain. The exhausted body, a depiction far from the physically fit and healthy idealized figure of the SEAL, turns to the Afghan landscape for survival. The once unfamiliar and inhospitable environment turns into the decisive element in a life or death situation. Once again, by the cover of a relative sense of protection, he falls asleep and when he wakes up, a point-of-view shot demonstrates his sensorial disorganization. A hazy image portrays the trees initially blurred which slowly come to definition as tall, swinging branches that cannot completely block the sun (see fig. 19). If this image were to be removed from the context of the film, it could be seen as a peaceful, windy view, appropriate for contemplation. The muffled audio of the rustling leaves mixed with Luttrell's breathing is an aural reminder of the circumstance. The next shot solidifies his connection with the mountain as the camera is close to the ground, showing him in the horizontal position (see fig. 20). His upper body is visible but natural elements such as branches, leaves and rocks, cover the rest of his body. Nature has afforded Luttrell a safe haven and a sense of intimacy when confronting a circumstance of survival. No technological instruments, such as weapons, satellite imagery or helicopters, have provided refuge for him in the same manner than the embracing geographical features of the mountain. This will be a turning point for Luttrell in the film regarding the way he interacts with the Afghan space and people. As he is gradually stripped away from the features of a perfect soldier, a cultural scenario beyond his own worldview surfaces in which the generalized belief in the menacing essence of Afghanistan is questioned by the protection provided by both the mountain and the villagers.

Fig. 19. Luttrell's POV shot

Fig. 20. Luttrell blending with the mountain

Towards the end of the film, as Luttrell goes further down the mountain and closer to the village, an interaction between the American soldier and the Afghan locals takes place when Luttrell meets the villager called Gulab (Ali Suliman). Their first interaction happens on screen in *Lone Survivor* as Gulab finds Luttrell in the water and offers to harbor him from the Taliban. It is portrayed through an over the shoulder shot that displays Gulab's viewpoint of a vulnerable and exposed Luttrell in the water while the former's blurred hand can be seen in the foreground as a gesture of non-violence (see fig. 21). This moment demonstrates the beginning of Gulab's active participation in the events concerning the violent clash with the Taliban and Luttrell's predicaments. Gulab harbors Luttrell in his community since the former chooses to follow the Pashtunwali, which consists of "a nonwritten law, or honor code, of the rural Pashtun people" (Carlisle 53). More specifically, Pashtunwali "is a moral code that outlines how people should live in social groups and how they should behave personally and to each other. The defense of honor is an obligation, even if it requires sacrifice of one's own life" (Carlisle 53).

Fig. 21. Gulab's point-of-view shot

Gulab is introduced early in the film during a sequence that depicts the execution of one of the villagers by the Taliban, accused of aiding the American forces. This insight into the daily violent intimidation of the villagers by the Taliban helps to solidify the film's view of Gulab as a character who feels the oppression of the Taliban within his everyday life. The gruesome sequence rapidly cuts from the image of the villager's head being decapitated to Gulab's reaction shot of silent defiance, as a man who bears witness to an atrocity and displays an emotional engagement with the act (see fig. 22). Towards the end, the film finally gives access to Gulab's verbal expression for a few seconds through two simple but nonetheless powerful sentences spoken as the Taliban is about to execute Luttrell: "This is my guest. Leave our village." In a point-of-view shot of the Taliban member, it is possible to see Gulab in the background with his weapon in hand and pointed at the group about to kill Luttrell (see fig.

23). His active posture of engagement is a step beyond his aforementioned restrained aversion for the brutalities in the village. The lines spoken by Gulab are not solely linked to the Pashtunwali code and the promise of safeguarding the American soldier, but they signify the spirit of rebellion against the murderous institution of the Taliban, which has historically, and also as demonstrated in the film through the beheading, terrorized and submitted countless individuals to their restrictive and ruthless laws.

Fig. 22. The execution and Gulab's reaction

Fig. 23. Gulab's active posture

Gulab functions as a mediator of the violent conflict since he bears witness to the effects on Luttrell's ravaged body. When Gulab takes Luttrell inside his own house, feeds him, cleans his wounds and changes his clothes, it is possible to perceive a somatic display of humanity. In a close-up shot Luttrell removes a small piece of shrapnel from inside his skin with a knife, an image that is followed by a medium close-up of Gulab looking down and sideways, in which only a part of his face can be seen (see fig. 24). The dark background and the light that comes from behind him remove the Afghan villager from the context of his house and place him in an undetermined geographical position in which the flinching of his eyes becomes the focal point. Gulab's reaction to Luttrell's pain, his sensorial and emotional connection to the corporeal feelings of the American soldier is similar to the type of affective connection that such painful scene can possibly elicit in the audience. An attachment is established between the characters and the audience which communicates a sense of empathy−of bearing witness to someone else's pain. Luttrell's body becomes absolutely exposed as the wounds debilitate his physical strength. The two men do not necessarily understand each other in terms of language, but Gulab's act of kindness

in providing shelter to Luttrell, and consequently saving his life, is enough to establish a vital connection between them in the war scenario.

Fig. 24. Gulab's reaction shot to Luttrell's pain

Unlike the situation with the SEALs and the herders, Gulab has a humane attitude towards the soldier's life and risks his own safety and the fate of his village to follow the moral code. Differently from the Rules of Engagement, which must be followed by the troops, Pashtunwali is a commitment chosen by the tribes to harbor whoever they determine. It is not compulsory but based on group assessment and moral decisions. As a consequence, *Lone Survivor* does not break the pattern of disregard of foreign troops for local inhabitants through the actions of the American forces. It does, however, plant the possibility of humane interaction between both sides through the attitude of the local Afghans.

Lone Survivor demonstrates that the body of the participants still actively remains as the center of war conflicts, whether they are at times directly or indirectly involved in active combat. Most significantly, the way the body moves, senses, acts and reacts to the natural features of the environment, technological predicaments, and violent situations should be seen as a starting point to the understanding of today's warfare. By depicting the Afghanistan War in a natural setting, the film highlights that the relationship between the foreign troops and the surroundings is a complex phenomenon. Whether by seeking refuge in its mountainous interiors or despising the difficulties of its intricate contours, the soldiers are depicted as corporeally immersed in an environment that is perceived as hostile due to the lack of geographical orientation and technological malfunction. The unpredictability of the opposing forces, in the form of insurgency in this case, the limited acquaintance with the specificities of the local culture and language, allied with the preconceptions about the Afghan land and people that have been crystallized throughout the years, lead to a torturous and unsuccessful military experience that drags the civilians of Gulab's village into a massacre.

From the opening scenes, the film constructs the ideology of the Navy SEALs as super soldiers with a high level of physical dexterity and

tactical expertise. They are initially portrayed as all dominant masculine figures, but their cultural isolation and tendency to gravitate towards their own world and knowledge result in a lack of social tools and cultural awareness. Once their vital props of masculinity are taken away, for example, they cannot communicate with the base for extraction and their own athletic bodies become ravaged with bullet holes. The SEALs are positioned in a place beyond with their former identity of dominance shattered, they find themselves in an unknown space of fragility. In Luttrell's case, even his uniform is stripped away. It is only then that he witnesses the social generosity, grace, and character of the Afghan people in contrast to the soldiers' generalizing negative preconceptions associated to Afghanistan and its population.

The Afghanistan War has been considered by Castner as "a stage without a play" due to the absence of representation of this particular conflict, and its limited visibility in contemporary culture. He also describes it as the "Ignored War" or even the "Undescribed War," a stark contrast to conflicts such as the Second World War, which was referred to as the "Good War," or the Vietnam War as the "Bad War." And the Iraq War, he writes, might be considered the "new Bad War." The remoteness of Afghanistan and its unfamiliar mountainous terrain, in contrast to the wide cultural visibility of the campaign in Iraq, has hindered our recognition of what is distinctive about the Afghan war. However, the isolation, the wilderness, the alien tribal system, which is depicted as local but at the same time connected to a much larger territorial network, gives the Afghanistan War a unique set of characteristics, marked by the drift between local violence and global terrorism. Kevin Maurer comments that "Afghanistan is far more riveting than Iraq because it's a whole different world. Baghdad is a Middle Eastern city, but it is a modern city. In Afghanistan that barely exists."[7] Maurer also observes that the remoteness of the landscape can cause disorientation as he states that "you can go get lost in Afghanistan, you can be on some hill on some outpost. In Iraq you were never that far out."[8] The gunfights take place in the hills surrounded by trees in a hunt for one specific target, a mission that is interconnected to a much greater structure in a war against an ideology, the so-called "war on terror," which does not recognize geographical, religious or cultural boundaries.

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[7] Kevin Maurer's quotation was taken from Brian Castner's "Afghanistan: A Stage without a Play."
[8] Ibid.

At one point in the film, Luttrell replies to Axe's comments that the operation feels cursed: "it's not a cursed op. There's no curses. It's just Afghanistan. That's all." By affirming this idea, Luttrell solidifies the unfavorable view generically attributed to the country and, in everyday practice, to its people and territory. Unfortunately, the inhospitable and antagonistic feelings experienced by the American military in the film are not entirely surpassed by Gulab's benevolent act. Similarly to Luttrell himself who acknowledges that a part of him died on the mountain, so countless other individuals have succumbed but remain nameless and faceless in the contours of the Hindu Kush Mountain. Landscape becomes a critical medium through which the characteristics of contemporary war and the warrior ethos are perceived. Historically, landscape has been a key frame for the American geographic and national imaginary in which conquest and dominance are foregrounded. In *Lone Survivor*, landscape becomes the undoing of that imaginary.

CHAPTER 2

"I was like fish in a barrel"[9]: The Embodied War Experience in the Korengal Valley in *Restrepo* and *Korengal*

> "Once in a while a man in the village looks in our direction and then looks away. It's inconceivable that he could see us−dirty, unmoving faces in a chaos of rocks and foliage."
>
> (Sebastian Junger)[10]

Sebastian Junger has described the landscape of the Hindu Kush Mountains in Afghanistan, after his experience as an embedded journalist with a U.S. Army platoon, in language that reveals the complex symbolism attached to landscape in war: "I was in the Korengal Valley, six miles long, in very steep mountains. It looks like Colorado there, big huge cedar trees on the upper ridges, rushing rivers at the bottom of the valley. Absolutely beautiful."[11] He later says, "it soon became clear that if I were to get killed over the course of the next year, Restrepo was almost certainly the place it would happen . . ., a place where the unimaginable had to be considered in detail [since] it might be the last place you'll ever see" (*War* 71). Junger's description of the dazzling natural features of Afghanistan in terms of a personally recognizable landscape that is both a place of beauty and of mortal threat already indicates the complexities that can be perceived in the documentaries, *Restrepo* (Hetherington and Junger 2010) and *Korengal* (Junger 2014). As his words suggest, perceptions of landscape in American war journalism, and by extension, the American war film, are shaped by cultural stereotypes linked to mythologies of conquest, wilderness, and frontier. In this chapter, I consider the interplay of landscape, history, and myths of nation in the films *Restrepo* and *Korengal*, arguing that the dialogue, shot patterning, and narrative design of the films evoke themes of the American Western, with its legacy of conquest, its dualism of landscape as Garden and Desert, and its construction of the Native American as a figure who is

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[9] Sentence spoken by Captain Dan Kearney in the documentary *Restrepo* (00:07:05).

[10] This quotation was taken from the book *War* (207) by Sebastian Junger.

[11] This description is from a talk given by Sebastian Junger in June 1, 2011. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wn0zEBhvwXY>

both at one with the land and an embodiment of alterity[12]. In both documentaries space will be analyzed in terms of Edward Said's idea of imagined geographies, understood as imaginary geopolitical boundaries created to separate "us" from "them" based on cultural stereotypes of otherness. These imaginary constructions of space are projected, I argue, onto the setting of Afghanistan, which in Western eyes serves as a kind of blank canvas, an "empty stage" for the working out of a new imperial paradigm.

In this chapter, I investigate how landscape is constructed in *Restrepo* and *Korengal* as an environment of war, centering on the corporeality of patrol missions in the rough terrain of the valley, and on the American soldiers' interaction with the local villagers−a series of delicate and volatile negotiations. I provide a textual analysis of four sequences from the documentaries that convey a range of contradictory messages concerning landscape: the soldiers' first impressions of the Korengal Valley, the hardships of climbing the mountain, the interaction of the soldiers and the valley elders in the Shura councils, and the visual portrayal of the aftereffects of bombing a village. In these sequences I foreground the role of landscape as a decisive element in these narratives, arguing that landscape functions not as a neutral backdrop but rather as a space that depicts the emergence of a violent conflict between cultures, the self and the other. The depiction of the soldiers' attempt to apply their own beliefs and principles to the remote and rural communities of the Korengal Valley highlights the extreme cultural disruption, both for the military and for the tribal communities, that the doctrine of counterinsurgency entails, which becomes a convoluted journey through the apparently primitive Afghan way of life.

Restrepo and *Korengal* portray the daily life of the U.S. Army 2nd Platoon of Battle Company on a 15-month deployment in the Korengal Valley in eastern Afghanistan. They both use footage shot during the deployment and interviews conducted with some of the soldiers after their tour in the valley. In a film review from the *Independent Online*, Jonathan

[12] The paradigm of the Garden and Desert is discussed by Jim Kitses as he explains that there is a "profound ambivalence that dominates America's history and character" and two questions are central to the understanding of national memory of the conquest of the West: "was the West a Garden threatened by a corrupt and emasculating East? Or was it a Desert, a savage land needful of civilising and uplift?" (13). This binary opposition can be found in the Western film genre as mythological and historical tensions surface in depictions of the frontier and territorial expansion.

Owen and Matthew Bell call *Restrepo* "a haunting depiction of life−and death−on the front line" achieved by a thorough access to the American soldiers both during the deployment and after. Critics such as Roger Ebert and A. O. Scott have called the documentary nonpolitical due to the lack of a strong critical position of the U.S. presence in the Afghanistan War. However, the choices of images included in the documentary and their positioning in the editing, in addition to what is omitted from the narrative can reveal how the contemporary war experience is constructed in the documentary. That includes the importance given to the natural setting in which the soldiers fight on a daily basis, the way they are exposed to threatening situations, and the interaction they establish with the local populace. A. O. Scott in *The New York Times Online* observes that although *Restrepo* seemingly avoids political debates, it provides footage that can evoke critical discussions, especially concerning what he calls "one of the irreducible, grim absurdities of this war, which is the disjunction between its lofty strategic and ideological imperatives and the dusty, frustrating reality on the ground." The concept of winning "hearts and minds," for instance, is contested and called into question in both documentaries as contradictory to the military goal−the control and domination of an intractable landscape filled with committed irregular fighters who are indistinguishable from the peaceful villagers with whom the military attempt to negotiate.

In the book *War*, which deals with Junger's experiences in the Korengal Valley, the author explains that "wars are fought on physical terrain−deserts, mountains, etc.−as well as on what [the U.S. military] call 'human terrain'" (*War* 43). This explanation takes into consideration the significance of a geographic knowledge of the landscape in which "maps of the physical terrain are rendered from satellite data and show vegetation, population centers, and elevation contours" (43), all essential elements for the navigation of the area. Human terrain in its turn has to do with "genealogical data and flowcharts of economic activity and maps of tribal or clan affiliation" (44), that is, an attempt to fight wars by focusing on alliances and agreements instead of the use of massive weaponry. However, this shift in focus in the type of terrain on which war is fought still remains substantially problematic. According to Junger, human terrain "is essentially the social aspect of war, in all its messy and contradictory forms" that provides "better intelligence, better bomb-targeting data, and access to what is essentially a public relations campaign for the allegiance of the populace" (*War* 43). The concern with human terrain is not necessarily linked to an obligation of protection

regarding the local population but is usually understood as a way of negotiating with villagers to gather support for future military operations.

In this chapter, I consider landscape in the two films as a key device that crystallizes both the physical hardships of the Afghan war as well as its symbolic value as a site of contestation and encounter. My analysis takes into consideration the American mythology of landscape, the organizing framework of one of the great genres of American cinema−the Western−which, I argue, serves as a template for narratives of conquest in the American imaginary. The cultural projections that are articulated in the Western, for example, in the Garden and Desert antinomy and in the representation of the frontier, can be seen in the two documentaries as prominent thematic motifs. I also explore the corporeality of traversing the terrain during patrol missions, with an emphasis on the use of the senses to navigate the space. Finally, I address the portrayal of the local populace and the intricate web of disagreements and misconceptions that characterize their relationship with the American military.

2.1 Just Like Home, Only Different: First Impressions

Both films dedicate their initial minutes to the visual introduction of the natural features of Afghanistan and the first impressions narrated by the soldiers. The first panoramic view of the Korengal Valley in *Restrepo* is shown through the window of a Humvee as the handheld camera shakes, capturing the irregularities of the unpaved road (see fig. 25). The layered shot depicts immense mountains that cover the foreground with their green vegetation and stretch all the way to the background with their snowy peaks. As the camera lowers, a dirt path is discernible in the valley, a visual initiation to the elements that constitute the environment in which the soldiers will be immersed for the rest of the documentary. At this point in the narrative Afghanistan does not seem like a war zone, but a secluded and natural spot where the grandeur of the landscape features stands out. Then, the Humvee suffers an IED attack and the film shows the soldiers in a heated firefight as they struggle to simultaneously protect themselves and attack the hidden enemy force during the ambush. These two opposing aspects of the environment, both its natural magnetism and its menacing characteristics, will be present in the imagery and the statements of the soldiers. Landscape is simultaneously constructed as a mesmerizing feature of the country and the soldiers' worst enemy.

Fig. 25. The Korengal Valley

The soldiers' initial impressions of the Korengal Valley focus on the geographical features of the landscape and the captivating scenery. Their perceptions of the environment partly construct Afghanistan as a Garden, a place where lush nature envelops their senses and memories, creating an atmosphere of appreciation. First Sergeant Lamonta Caldwell talks about his early sensations regarding the valley in *Restrepo*: "They're all mountains, you know, high elevation. And as you go in elevation, it starts to get a little bit colder. And then you go into the Korengal Valley." In *Korengal*, he complements his description by saying that "it's just a valley, . . . if you look from high above, it looks like a quiet valley." The first aerial images from the helicopters in *Restrepo* reinforce this idea as the folds of the mountains contrast with the green natural carpet while the flat portion of the landscape is depicted from a high-angle shot showing a series of watery veins that open into brown lakes covering the surface (see fig. 26). From that altitude, the houses seem uninhabited, and as they are clustered at the bottom of the mountain, and due to their color and material, they seem to be an extension of the rocks, carved from the mountain itself (see fig. 27).

Fig. 26. Aerial images of the landscape

Fig. 27. The houses in the mountain

The space is given a different interpretation as *Korengal* inserts in its first minutes a news report from NBC which narrates a description of the valley while showing images of the landscape and soldiers. The choices of editing along with the voice over construct the image of a chaotic and dangerous place. The narration is heard as the following: "For the last four and a half years, the Korengal has been known as Afghanistan's valley of death." The sound of bullets being fired from a machine gun is heard after the word "death," spoken with a dramatic intonation, and followed by images of soldiers under attack as well as the sound of explosions. The narration continues: "the valley was just too remote, too difficult to resupply, and too dangerous, like the isolated outpost called Restrepo." The image that follows this description is of a soldier preparing for detonation as he screams "fire in the hole" and the footage cuts to a massive explosion (see fig. 28). This news report quickly paints a picture of disaster and unfamiliarity concerning the Afghan environment through the use of negative adjectives in its narration and the juxtaposition of key words such as "death" and "dangerous" with aggressive sounds and images.

Fig. 28. The explosion in the valley

Jane Tompkins explains that in the Western film genre, landscape is generally "defined by absence: of trees, of greenery, of houses, of the signs of civilization, above all, absence of water and shade" (71). As she

observes, the land speaks for itself as it signals the hardships to be suffered in "an environment inimical to human beings, where a person is exposed, the sun beats down, and there is no place to hide" (71). Whether landscape is in the format of a desert in a Western film or a mountainous valley in a war documentary, nature's dualism can be represented to suit the discursive needs of the narrative. In the documentaries, the juxtaposition of images and narration constructs a rhetoric of space that begins by highlighting the natural features of the valley only to be contrasted by a visual and narrative rhetoric of otherness and danger. The duality in the portrayal of the Korengal Valley is a theme that is continually reiterated in the interviews with the soldiers.

In *Korengal*, Specialist Kyle Steiner describes his initial sensation of the valley. He explains: "If you went a little north of us, it looked just like Colorado Springs, like Denver. It was gorgeous. But the minute I got there, the minute I got off the helicopter I got shot at. I saw it from a distance, it was beautiful. Bullets came in, fuck this place, I want to go home." Once again, the images support the dual construction as majestic portrayals of the mountains accompany the beginning of his narration while the word "bullets" is followed by the sound of shooting and a chaotic handheld image of soldiers running is depicted.

As can be observed from Steiner's words, aesthetic appreciation is a detached state in which the viewer, from a distance, is able to make connections to familiar places by comparing the type of terrain and vegetation. Once the experience rises to a more tactile level, the landscape is perceived not as an abstract quality but rather as a power that physically intervenes in the well-being of the person. The geographer Yi-Fu Tuan gives the example of farm laborers and their relationship with the soil, explaining that in the contact with nature "muscles and scars bear witness to the physical intimacy of the contact" (*Topophilia* 97). For laborers, the in-depth contact with earth's natural elements can be transformed into a "love-hate bond" as the farmers feel pleasure in tending to the land but also discontent in facing problems like drought and storms (*Topophilia* 97). For the soldiers depicted in *Restrepo* and *Korengal*, this love-hate bond is highly connected to the way they associate the landscape with their own hometowns, such as Steiner's "Colorado Springs or Denver," but dread the environment for the violence that it may inflict upon themselves and their company.

Both documentaries employ narrative strategies to construct a space that highlights how issues of cultural identity and personal memory are intertwined with experiences of war. The first scene of *Korengal*, for

example, depicts Specialist Misha Pemble-Berkin narrating his own attachment to the mountains:

> I grew up in Oregon. I was always . . . snowboarding and skiing. And when I was in Afghanistan, whenever I looked out at the mountains I didn't think, like, Afghanistan, oh there's Taliban roaming up there, like, going into their little caves and they're about to shoot at me. Whenever I looked up there, for the most part, tried to think of back home, something peaceful, you know, something nice.

His attempt to associate a pleasant environment with the space of war also comes from having moments of introspection during the tours, as opposed to the oftentimes misleading idea that soldiers during war live in an intense environment of combat during their entire deployment. Free time to reflect on numerous aspects of life, and boredom, are key issues in the daily experience of soldiers. The postcard image that accompanies Pemble's narration is of a snow-covered mountain peak that evokes recreational and homely feelings (see fig. 29). As the camera zooms out, the snowy mountains stay in the far background as attention is drawn to greener hills and the military huts in the foreground (see fig. 30). This scene inserts the military into the natural landscape, disclosing that the initially recreational notions of landscape are transgressed by the American presence which transforms the meaning and the actual physical contours of the terrain.

Fig. 29. Snow-covered mountain

Fig. 30. Military huts in the landscape

In the ensuing scenes, the landscape of the valley is represented as a materialization of a menacing space through a combination of testimonies and images. The majority of first impressions of the Korengal Valley portrayed in both documentaries is of deep animosity. In *Restrepo*, Sergeant Aron Hijar's testimony can be seen as an example: "I remember

looking out the little bubble windows on the side, kind of just like this, because I was just next to the window. And I could see when the Chinook had made a hard right turn into the valley. I was like, holy shit. We're not ready for this." Such a remote and inhospitable landscape entailed difficulties in navigation and a propensity for exposure. Specialist Miguel Cortez and Pemble also voice their initial concerns as the former states that his mindset is "I'm going to die here" while the latter foregrounds that "this is in the middle of nowhere right now, you're away from everything."

Among the first impressions of the valley, and especially of the outpost Restrepo, Captain Dan Kearney's interviews stand out as a disillusioned military account. As one of the officers in charge of the operations, Kearney explains his high hopes prior to the deployment of stopping the Taliban offensive in the area with a series of military plans. In *Restrepo*, a medium long shot depicts him during the interview (see fig. 31) as he observes that "everybody's like, oh, you're going to the Korengal? And they feel sorry for you and everything like that. I'm like dude, it can't be that bad, you know?" This image cuts to a close-up of his face (see fig. 32) and he discloses the reality of daily life in the valley by saying:

> I show up there and you're burning your own feces, you know, you're living in a tent. I literally lived in a bunker, you know, about that high, I couldn't even stand up in. See bullet holes all rattled into the Hescos[13] and when you look up, it's like, I don't even know why I have Hescos here because they're not going to stop the bullets that are coming down from the mountains. So I felt I was like fish in a barrel.

The movement from a wider shot in which he talks about the confidence of completing the task in the valley to a tighter frame that describes the harsh living conditions can be linked to the way the military plans were devised from a distance and how the contours and context of the Afghan space modified such designs. Cinematography and editing are seen as narrative devices to highlight the construction of landscape as an unknown and intimidating space, supporting an ideology of otherness. Here Junger's words about the distinction between war in textbooks and

[13] Hescos are containers filled with earth used in military fortifications, among other purposes.

the experience of the actual Afghan conflict can be recalled as he observes that "few military plans survive intact for even an hour" (*War* 48). The shot that follows Kearney's interview is composed of a shaky handheld camera that zooms in on three soldiers hiding behind Hescos (see fig. 33). The association between Kearney's comments on how Hescos did not provide security and the image of the soldiers trustingly relying on the cover of Hescos leads to the idea that the shape and the contour of the land grant few positions of safety to the soldiers' bodies, although they are surrounded by sophisticated technology and long-range weaponry.

Fig. 31. Medium long shot

Fig. 32. Kearney's close-up

Fig. 33. Soldiers and Hescos

As the film unfolds, the earlier attempts by the soldiers to make sense of the landscape in Afghanistan and find points of connection with their own personal memories, gives way to a sense of profound detachment from the land, even a hatred due to the exposure of their lives. The representation of landscape stands as an element that materializes the cultural gap between the soldier and the other. Issues of cultural identity and nationalism surface as the antagonism seeps through the juxtaposition of images of the valley and the narration of the soldiers in testimonies that highlight the enmity of the surroundings. In *War*, Junger describes a soldier named Hunter who coined the expression "Damn the Valley" which stood for the soldiers' "understanding of what [the Afghanistan war] was doing to them: killing their friends and making them jolt awake in the middle of the night in panic . . .. Their third decade on the planet and a good chunk of it was going to be spent in a valley six miles long

and six miles wide that they might not leave alive" (38). The bodies of the soldiers are further emphasized when the documentaries focus on the corporeal immersion in the terrain through the patrol missions, which is the topic of the next section in this chapter.

2.2 A Nightmarish Stroll in the Mountains

After the documentaries introduce the initial impressions of the soldiers in the valley, their immersive ordeal in the mountains becomes the focal point. The experience of traversing the terrain in the Korengal Valley is depicted in both documentaries as a hardship that surpasses what the soldiers were trained for prior to the deployment. In *Korengal*, Sergeant First Class Mark Patterson comments on the unfamiliarity of the mountains as he says "I have never fought in that rough terrain before in my life. Walking up a mountain with a combat load with the loose shale?" The images that precede and accompany his narration exemplify the corporeal exhaustion of the soldiers as they climb a rocky path in the mountain with heavy backpacks and weapons in hand (see fig. 34). The subsequent shot from a high angle depicts the soldiers climbing a steep part of the mountain, a natural ladder made of shale, a rock surface that is notoriously unstable, continuously giving way beneath their feet (see fig. 35). Their slow movements, due to the full gear and challenging terrain, allow their bodies to be exposed for longer and diminishes their reaction reflexes.

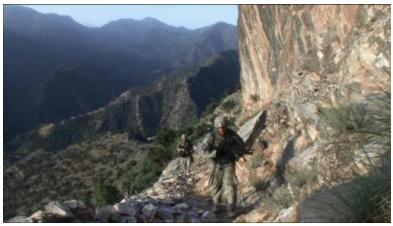

Fig. 34. Climbing up the mountain

Fig. 35. Steep uphill climb

In *War*, Junger describes the geological features of Afghanistan as a hostile element, reinforcing the points made by the American soldiers. He observes that:

> The mountains are sedimentary rock that was compressed into schist hundreds of millions of years ago and then thrust upward. Intrusions of

> hard white granite run through the schist like the ribs of an animal carcass. Even the trees are hard: knotted holly oaks with spiny leaves and branches that snag your clothing and won't let go. Holly forests extend up to around eight thousand feet and then give over to cedar trees that are so enormous, the mind compensates for their size by imagining them to be much closer than they are. A hilltop that looks a few hundred yards away can be a mile or more. (48)

In his description, Junger highlights the violent process in which Afghan nature as a merciless entity has transformed itself and interfered with human beings, leaving scars, and causing optical deceptions. His choice of words, such as "compressed," "thrust," "intrusions," "animal carcass," and "spiny," carries a heavy connotation of enmity and pushes away any possibility of finding beauty or a positive emotional connection with the land. The idea of getting lost in the enormity and maze-like landscape of the valley is discussed in *Korengal* as Staff Sergeant Kevin Rice comments, "you think you're getting to the top of a ridge or to the top of a mountain . . . and you look up and it just doesn't seem to end."

The contrast between the skills of the American soldiers and the Afghans is highlighted in *Korengal* as images of the infantry are juxtaposed with footage of the Taliban. Specialist Sterling Jones talks about the inability of the American forces to deal with the mountainous landscape: "we were in good shape, like, we could run all day. We could, you know, pushups, sit-ups, all that stuff, but walking in that environment, straight up mountains, there was no preparing for that." The confirmation that these maneuvers are beyond the abilities of the U.S. military is reinforced by Kearney's statement about the relationship between the Taliban and the landscape: "that terrain, it almost affords these guys a ghost-like ability to move. They know it, we're playing in their backyard." Kearney's comparison of the movement of the Taliban forces with a spectral nature makes sense in a contemporary war context in which the soldiers find themselves surrounded by a mysterious threat, a 360-degree menacing entity that is at times indistinguishable from the population or hidden in natural features of the landscape.

The Taliban footage demonstrates the light walking rhythm and dexterity of the forces on foot. The first shot of this sequence is a medium long shot that depicts a group of men climbing up the mountain with weapons and small backpacks (see fig. 36). They carry very little gear and are able to move with considerable agility. The subsequent shot is a long

shot of another group of men walking on the terrain of the mountain (see fig. 37). The singularity of this shot is that the people are barely discernible due to the distance and definition of the shot, but also because one could easily mistake the natural features of the mountain, such as tree trunks and rocks, for the men, demonstrating how integrated they seem to be with the terrain. Also, Kearney's words "ghost-like ability" are spoken just as this shot appears, highlighting the locals' spectral characteristic.

Fig. 36. Taliban in the mountains

Fig. 37. "Ghost-like" ability

The ability to be organically integrated with nature can be linked to the depiction of Native Americans in the Western genre in which their way of living is portrayed as highly incorporated into the landscape. In the imagery of the Western, the hardships of the hostile environment are overcome by the Native Americans who, very similarly to the documentaries' depiction of the Taliban, travel lightly and speedily, traversing the terrain in an environment that Tompkins has described as "requir[ing] endurance more than anything else" (13).

When the American troops are depicted in this sequence, the use of slow motion is noticeable as a way to portray the disadvantage of the soldiers. The first image depicts the soldiers in a slightly high-angle shot immersed in a dry vegetation with gear that visibly impairs their movement, including backpacks, helmets, and weapons (see fig. 38). The following shot is a low angle of the soldiers climbing up the mountain still in slow motion (see fig. 39). Their motion is represented as inadequate and time-consuming in an environment that relies on agility of the body and senses for survival. This shot is followed by Taliban footage once again, depicting a man on a rope skillfully moving from one tree to another (see fig. 40). This can be seen as an additional ability that highlights their "ghost-like" characteristics, that is, avoiding movement through paths on the ground and taking an aerial shortcut by relying on trees. In *War*, Junger foregrounds the disparity between the soldiers and the locals as, in one particular trail in the mountains, "the Americans

could make the climb in forty-five minutes, combat-light, and the Afghans could make it in half that" (10).

Fig. 38. Soldiers' heavy equipment

Fig. 39. Slow climb

Fig. 40. Air movement

The act of patrolling the mountains is a theme present in both documentaries and highlights the immersion of the soldiers' bodies into the natural environment, foregrounding their use of corporeal skills for survival. When discussing the issue of patrolling, John Hockey debates the significance of examining "the embodied phenomenology of infantry patrolling" as well as "the skillful sensory activity troops manifest as they carry out this dangerous occupational practice" (93). The somatic activity of moving around a terrain during patrol requires what Hockey calls a "mode of attention that infantry inhabit, possess and express" (94) with a particular emphasis on the senses developed for the combat context. The author explains that "the individual's mind and body are combined via intensive training to produce a particular kind of corporeal engagement with the world," and one of the examples of this relationship is given through the phrase "switch on." To "switch on" means to be sensorially connected to the environment in order to protect oneself and others from any possible danger. The training for the patrol includes "patterns of patrol interaction which require a high degree of embodied cooperation" (95) when moving around the landscape as a simultaneous and synchronized body. Kevin McSorley observes that during patrol "the shared rhythms of bodily movement and the collective grammars of bodily spacing and formation are foregrounded as the means through

which territory in Afghanistan is apprehended and occupied" (53). When commenting on the footage recorded by the soldiers' helmet cameras during patrol, he highlights the bodily and sensorial dimensions of such images especially the rapid change from a monotonous situation to a chaotic event and vice versa: "heightened watchfulness and an intense escalation in tension accompany this shift from bodily movement to exposed stillness, from regular attentive calm to a taut and jittery affective intensity" (53). To go on patrol means to be integrated with the surroundings and the team of soldiers, and *Restrepo* and *Korengal* demonstrate the performativity and masculinity associated with the switch on mode of attention during patrol, representing a physical posture of concentration and aggression.

One of the senses that is developed during patrol in a switch on posture is the sense of hearing. According to Tuan, sound affects people in a more striking way due to the fact that "we cannot close our ears as we can our eyes" (*Topophilia* 8). Sounds are inevitably heard in the warscape and aid in the task of deciphering what cannot be seen. Hockey observes that during patrol, soldiers are "able to identify weapons from their sound and rate of fire," (98-9) a "sensory intelligence that provides vital information in the provision of an armed response" (99). This sensorial ability has been documented in earlier wars, such as in A. M. Burrage's account of the First World War: "we know when to ignore machine-gun and rifle bullets and when to take an interest in them. A steady phew-phew-phew means that they are not dangerously near. When on the other hand we get a sensation of whips being slashed in our ears we know it's time to seek the embrace of Mother Earth" (79). The perception of distance and danger acquired by the sense of hearing, and not seeing as would be more usual, is an example of the soldier's adaptation to the space of war and survival.

In *Korengal*, the soldiers explain their relationship with the sounds that surround their daily lives in the outpost by describing what it is like in sensorial terms to be ambushed and shot at. Pemble comments that "the first thing you hear when you get ambushed or you get in a firefight, or whatever it is, the first thing you hear is just a loud crack." In a civilian context, the initial sound that triggers the soldiers into a more intense switch on posture would not be regarded as threatening, but in the combat environment a simple sound like a crack described by Pemble has a deeper implication. Caldwell continues describing a sensorial reaction based on their training as he says, "one of the things that we learn about is that you may not see it, but you can hear it. And that's our tactical awareness. We're able to pick up the different sounds." The use of their

senses through what Derek Gregory calls “corpographies” can also be seen as “a way of resisting at least some [of the warscape’s] impositions” (“Corpographies” 35) and taking control over how their bodies interact with the landscape.

The sensorial element of vision is given a far more complex tone since seeing during warfare is most times mediated in technological ways. Harun Faroki observes that through military technology what is produced can be called “operative images,” that is, “images that do not represent an object, but rather are part of an operation” (17). To be able to see space through a gunsight or a screen is not merely a representation of objects, but as Grégoire Chamayou explains, it is a form of “act[ing] upon them, to target them.” (114). In *Restrepo*, the soldiers use a bulky instrument, similar to a powerful long-range binocular, in the outpost to enhance their vision of the valley and targets. In one sequence, the soldiers are attempting to shoot at a person down in the valley which means that there must be a synchronization between the soldier who handles the optical instrument and the one who operates the weapon (see fig. 41). As the shooter opens fire, directions are given to him, such as “low right” and at the end “he’s done.” The documentary does not show images of the valley or the consequences of the relentless shooting, only the aftermath comments of the soldier who is in charge of the optical instrument: “it was him running and then him blasting into pieces.” The general cheer of the surrounding soldiers adds a tone of desensitization and ruthlessness facilitated by the physical distance between the soldiers and the casualty.

Fig. 41. Optical instrument and the weapon

In this sequence, the soldiers’ interaction with the Afghan space is highly mediated by technology at a distance, momentarily overcoming the issue of territorial impenetrability in the valley. In this optical war, to establish domain over a territory, that is, to expand one’s geographical power control does not necessarily require a physical presence in the space. As the soldiers are able to employ violent pressure from a distance

through the use of long-range weaponry, such territory becomes part of their reach and the conquering boundaries are expanded. The shots in this sequence portray the soldiers with weapons in the foreground and the vibrant green of the majestic and far-reaching mountains in the background, highlighting an issue present in the myth of the Western: the pristine landscape that is accessible for the taking by a conquering power. When commenting on the western genre, Robert Burgoyne remarks that "panoramic shots emphasizing the scale and the emptiness of western landscapes are important signifiers of national mythology, for they suggest not only grandeur of nature but also a kind of open potentiality" (*Film Nation* 50). The position of dominance over the land is conveyed in *Restrepo* by the high position of the camera that captures the top of the mountains and the deadly force of the weapons capable of pulverizing the locals in the hills. As in the legacy of conquest in the American Western that foregrounds the possession of the supposedly empty land, *Restrepo* brings to the forefront the imperialistic view being perpetuated by the American soldiers in which they erase the human status of the local inhabitants, for instance, in their comments of the Afghan's exploding body, and establish their spatial dominance with the use of violence. Landscape is portrayed as a site for cultural and political conflict in which the use of Afghanistan's panoramic vistas translates into an arena for the conquerors and their far-reaching weapons.

2.3 The Juice Packet, the Cow, the Hearts and Minds

Although landscape is depicted in *Restrepo* and *Korengal* in a way that recalls territorial conquest through the portrayal of the sweeping reach of the mountain chains and its seeming emptiness, the documentaries also focus on the intimate immersion of daily life in order to establish a picture of the interaction between the ones who are entering the land and those who have been there for generations. Both *Restrepo* and *Korengal* focalize their narratives through the point of view of the American soldiers and their corporeal experiences in the rugged landscape of Afghanistan. In both films the ideological gap between the foreign soldiers and the locals is highlighted, particularly through the narration of the soldiers' unfavorable feelings regarding the Afghan people and the depiction of their troublesome encounters during Shura councils and village raids[14].

[14] Shura councils are meetings in which decisions are taken regarding the local community. The elders of the villages are generally present in these gatherings.

In 2003, Edward Said wrote a new preface to the latest edition of *Orientalism* in which he shares his ideas about the construction of global and generalized enemy in a post 9/11 context. He observes that "today, bookstores in the US are filled with shabby screeds bearing screaming headlines about Islam and terror, Islam exposed, the Arab threat and the Muslim menace, all of them written by political polemicists . . . who have supposedly penetrated to the heart of these strange Oriental peoples over there who have been such a terrible thorn in 'our' flesh" (xv). Said also acknowledges today's existence of "reductive conflicts that herd people under falsely unifying rubrics like 'America,' 'The West' or 'Islam' and invent collective identities for large numbers of individuals who are actually quite diverse" (xxii). *Restrepo* and *Korengal* represent the American experience in Afghanistan as a personal journey for the soldiers who are saturated with ideas about the threatening presence of the unseen enemy and lack the linguistic and cultural comprehension of the environment of the tribal areas, especially in the scenes that depict their interaction with the villagers.

The ways in which moments of direct contact between the American troops and the local villagers are portrayed establish a particular film language linked to enmity and deceit. The choice of dialogue, the way the images are framed, and the editing of the shots convey a powerful sense of the Afghan elders as unknowable, as other. Moreover, as Ella Shohat points out, the choices of "what is excluded by the image" (6) also provide material for critical interpretation.

Both films portray moments in which the U.S. military gathers with the village elders to discuss issues concerning the future of the valley. The first Shura is depicted in *Restrepo* early in the narrative. It is one of the first visual portrayals of the locals in the film, and starts with the image of both U.S. soldiers and villagers sitting on the floor in a circle while tea is poured in the middle (see fig. 42). Kearney's voice off is an explanation of the promises that the military is making to the locals in exchange for alliances: "five, ten years from now, the Korengal Valley is going to have a road going through it that's paved." The film then cuts to a medium close-up of Kearney as he faces left, directing his words to the elders (see fig. 43). Another cut portrays six elders on the other side facing right, listening to Kearney's words (see fig. 44). The contrast of spatial positions, the framing of the two parties in visual opposition, conveys a deeper cultural divide that is summarized in a few lines of dialogue, and in a few powerful visual details. Kearney's words during these shots resemble political speeches filled with impressive promises that not always become reality: "and we can make more money, make you guys

richer, make you guys more powerful. What I need though, is I need you to join with the government, you know, provide us with that security or help us provide you guys with that security. And I'll flood this whole place with money and with projects and with healthcare and with everything."

Fig. 42. Sitting in a circle

Fig. 43. Kearney faces left

Fig. 44. The villagers at the Shura

The promises made to improve the living conditions for the Afghan people can be linked to the mythology of the American West. In the meeting with the elders, the films juxtapose two fundamentally different concepts of nature, history, similar to the Western powwow, emphasizing the rudimentary conditions in which the local villagers live and how progress brought by the American military, such as paved roads and jobs, would improve people's lives in the valley[15]. As the duality of

[15] The Shura councils portrayed in the documentaries can be linked to a common element of the Western film, the powwow, a meeting of the tribe members to discuss relevant matters. In relation to the Native American tribes, Ann M. Axtmann explains that a powwow can consist of "an intimate tribal gathering" regarding the discussion amongst the representatives of the Indian tribe of important topics or a communal celebration. One of the main visual representations of the powwow iconography in Western films is the meeting of tribe members on the floor in a circle in order to debate significant events that affect the community. Examples can be found in westerns such as *The Searchers* (Ford 1956) and *Dances with Wolves* (Costner 1990). These powwows are about communication, decisions, and contact with unfamiliar cultures, similar points of

Garden/Desert is applied to the tribal areas of Afghanistan, the underlying paradigm of American historical mythology regarding territorial possession can be sensed.

One remarkable image depicted while Kearney explains his ideas is a lingering shot on a particular elder who fumbles around with a juice packet (see fig. 45). He holds the packet and searches for a place to insert the straw. When he finally locates the designated area for the straw, he presses it on the packet but fails to achieve the goal. The relevance of this scene might be interpreted in different ways, for instance, as a moment that highlights the unfamiliarity of the locals with Western ways, the difficulty of handling a regular juice packet. Also, it could be seen as a moment designed to elicit sympathetic feelings towards the locals who demonstrate their simple manners when faced with an obstacle. However, the choice of including this image as Kearney's voice off explains matters of government support and security might be understood as a parallel of the colonizer who brings gifts to entertain the colonized. The distracting juice packet here stands for the mirrors and shiny objects brought by the Europeans in the first encounters with the Native peoples in the Americas. The Afghan elder is portrayed as lacking resourcefulness, a less evolved figure to be persuaded to cooperate with the military plans.

Fig. 45. The villager struggles with the juice packet

connection with the Afghan Shura between the elders and the American soldiers. As the villagers gather close to one another in small spaces, sitting on the floor alongside the Americans, listening to the ideas being proposed, and discussing among themselves the fate of their community, the iconography of a Native American powwow comes to the forefront. The reassuring sense of the tribe coming together to defend its needs is palpable in the Shura councils, but it is inevitable to establish a bridge between the fate of the Native Americans throughout history after the encounter with the American forces and the loss of lives in Afghanistan after the American invasion and its violent campaign.

The Shura continues as the documentary gives space for the Afghan voice to be heard, complemented by subtitles. A voice speaking in the local dialect can be heard while the documentary shows two elders listening to it, and then cuts to the Afghan semicircle from which the voice is coming (see fig. 46). Although no specific elder is attached to this voice, the content of the message is of extreme importance: "you kill the enemy, that's ok, but our concern is that you're shooting ordinary people on their land." The powerful message that this voice carries is not hindered by its disembodiment since it echoes as a community cry for the real and violent situation the tribe is facing. The slaughter of the civilian in the Afghan villages is a palpable reality during the American intervention in the valley, and stands as a point that deserves attention and acknowledgement from the U.S. military. However, Kearney's answer, in an impatient and patronizing tone, is that these deaths belong to a previous commander and must be kept in the past. He says, "remember last week when we said that everything that happened in the past when Captain McKnight was here, we're kind of like wiping the slate clean. Captain Kearney's got a new slate. . . . Let's put it behind us, and let's get on with what we gotta do now." The insensitive tone adopted in this conversation demonstrates the desire to silence the locals, but still count on their support for future alliances. This can be connected to Said's remarks about the interaction between cultures when he observes that "there is, after all, a profound difference between the will to understand for purposes of co-existence and humanistic enlargement of horizons, and the will to dominate for the purposes of control and external domination" (xiv). Kearney's slate will prove to be rapidly tarnished by aerial attacks later in the narrative.

Fig. 46. The powerful Afghan voice

In *Korengal*, the scene portraying the Shura is inserted halfway through the narrative at a point where we have acquired a certain familiarity and intimacy with the viewpoint of the American soldiers.

This time the Shura is depicted in a tighter space, a room in which the American soldiers and Afghan elders are much closer to one another, but still in separate sides (see fig. 47). Kearney explains that they will be talking about future plans for the valley as the camera shows the faces of the locals. Kearney's voice over narration, which was separately recorded in a studio, exposes his inner feelings regarding his relationship with the elders as he says, "do I respect them? I don't respect the Korengalis. Like, when you gather them all up, no. They're a bunch of liars, and they didn't want us, they didn't want our help." As he speaks these sentences, the image depicted in the documentary is a very populated shot that includes several elders sitting close to each other in the foreground and background of the image (see fig. 48). This shot combined with Kearney's words instigate a sense of hateful generalization by the American soldiers and constructs the locals, who here stand for the Afghan people, as deceitful and treacherous people in the soldiers' experience.

Fig. 47. A tighter space

Fig. 48. The elders

The appearance of the elders is also an aspect that leads to a certain level of complexity in terms of cultural recognition. For the military Western eye, the striking look of the elders, with their dyed beards and hair, eye makeup, turbans, and peculiar hats carries an intricate visual iconography, also connoting a certain gender ambiguity. These characteristics construct images that are challenging for a Westerner to understand, especially in a military context that does not foster cultural awareness as one of its main goals, and as a consequence, the figure of the Afghan becomes a threat in many ways because it is unknown. Their physical appearance and language, their deep-rooted connection to the land, the complicated tribal system itself, create a striking sense of otherness that is emphasized in the documentaries.

In the documentaries, one particular incident during the deployment demonstrates the frailness of the relationship between the American troops and the villagers. In *Restrepo*, as patrolling is more frequently portrayed in the film and the interaction with the villagers

increases in the narrative, a group of locals arrive at the outpost to have a conversation with the soldiers. The reason for this visit is to enquire after a cow that belongs to one of the villagers and that has been killed by the American soldiers. The documentary depicts the elders speaking to one of the American soldiers, Sergeant Patterson, outdoors, a conversation that is mediated by a young translator (see fig. 49). Patterson explains that they have killed the cow because it was tangled in their barbed wire fence and they had to put it down so it would not suffer. The elders ask for money to compensate for the cow, but the U.S. military only offers to give supplies worth the weight of the cow. In *Infidel*, the photography book by Tim Hetherington about this same deployment in the Korengal Valley, a section contains paragraphs taken from interviews with the soldiers. In the book, O'Byrne tells the story about the cow in detail:

> Sergeant Al and Hoyt had this crazy idea: "Hey, let's kill a fucking cow." There were cows walking through our shit, so Hoyt made a spear and him and Lackley and a few other guys go up there and they pin this one cow in the corner and they killed it. We didn't shoot it, because then we would have got caught . . . so Hoyt made a spear out of a tent pole and a Rambo knife. He taped the Rambo knife to the end of the pole, and he gouged it, stabbed it a few times, and that was how the cow went down. We had rudimentary tool to decapitate this cow. We used a Christmas tree saw, so that got pretty gory, and then after we got the head off, everyone was so proud, and we're like, "All right, now how do we gut the thing?" (189)

Apparently, the cow did not get tangled in the barbed wire but it was killed on purpose by the soldiers. Not only did the Americans deceive the elders but they enacted a most gruesome and barbaric spectacle in decapitating the cow and later removing its organs. There is no sense of acknowledgment or regret in this action as O'Byrne finishes his story by saying, "[the Afghans] got all pissed off at us, but that was the best steak I ever had" (189). In an environment that should foster an atmosphere of trust between the American soldiers and the Afghan villagers, both documentaries highlight the fragility of this relationship by showing episodes that emphasize a sense of disbelief and miscommunication between the two parties. By piecing together the information from the documentaries and the book about the cow episode, it is noticeable that

the attitude of the American forces is brought to the surface by the filmmakers in a critique of such behavior.

Fig. 49. The conversation about the cow

In *Restrepo*, this unsympathetic treatment of the locals by the American soldiers is reinforced and taken to an alarmingly grim level as two soldiers have a conversation on the radio that starts with the subject of family and ends by evoking the concept of hearts and minds. Sergeant Michael Cunningham is portrayed adjusting a long-range gun (see fig. 50) while another soldier talks to him over the radio:

> SOLDIER: Your family owns a ranch?
> CUNNINGHAM: Of course.
> SOLDIER: Like cows and pigs and chickens and horses ranch?
> CUNNINGHAM: No.
> SOLDIER: What kind of ranch, then?
> CUNNINGHAM: It's like a ranch just with like land, you know, with gates and stuff and trucks and whatnot. Some guns, some wildlife, you know, that you shoot at.
> SOLDIER: Ok, so it's just a whole bunch of land that they kill stuff on.
> CUNNINGHAM: Yeah, kind of like this.
> SOLDIER: Yeah, but we're not hunting animals, we're hunting people.
> CUNNINGHAM: Hearts and minds.
> SOLDIER: Yeah, we'll take their hearts and we'll take their minds.

Their conversation suffers a transformation from an exchange of information about Cunningham's lifestyle and family back home to the extreme way in which he compares the act of hunting animals in the land

with their military goal in Afghanistan. The problematic issue is emphasized due to the fact that in the image he is manning a heavy gun that oversees a great part of the valley with the power to kill or maim people from a distance. As the other soldier says that they are not hunting animals but people, Cunningham laughs as if his comparison was already part of an ingrained state of mind about the Afghans that is open for humorous comments. He then snaps into military mode by reciting the hearts and mind motto only to be explained what this actually means in practical and ruthless terms by the soldier on the radio. Holger Pötzsch comments that in contemporary war films, "the other has to be constructed as less than human−as ungrievable life−to render the killing of it humanly possible and acceptable" ("Borders" 78). The stereotypical way that a number of soldiers in the documentaries acknowledge the Afghans as either extremists and dangerous or silent and inept demonstrates the military construction of the "enemy" as a dispensable life.

Fig. 50. Hearts and minds conversation

2.4 The Aftermath of a Bomb Vs a Bullet

After portraying the interaction of the soldiers with the villagers through Shura meetings and the incident with the cow, *Restrepo* focuses on showing the aftermath of an aerial attack in one of the villages as an instance in which the Afghan villagers are depicted in their suffering. This scene is followed by the death of an American soldier in the battlefield. The two scenes can be seen as exemplary, forming a powerful, distinctive contrast in the way deadly events are represented. The Afghan village sequence begins with a shot of a jet releasing bombs in the valley while a radio transmission guides the pilots (see fig. 51). From a distance the damage cannot be seen, only the smoke from the explosions and the loud noises. On the ground, the soldiers patrol the site where the bombing

happened. The houses look like they are fused with the mountain itself and as they enter, the destruction is palpable as beams, bricks, sand, and rocks are scattered in a confusion of debris (see fig. 52). The editing cuts to a room of the house where there is still furniture, but the table, plates, pillows, mattresses, and rugs are covered in dirt (see fig. 53). This room belongs to a home that no longer has the elements of safety and comfort but is now a space composed of crushed cement and holes in the ceiling.

Fig. 51. The aerial attack

Fig. 52. The aftermath

Fig. 53. Inside a room

The following shots depict the inhabitants of the village on the porch, a woman and three children with their eyes wide open, silent and observant of the movement of the American soldiers (see fig. 54). The sound of the wailing of a child can be heard. The sequence focuses, in a quiet and understated way, on the corporeal destruction of the Afghans. Another shot depicts a little girl lying on a mattress with her face covered in dirt and her eyes closed (see fig. 55). The editing cuts to a male villager standing still with a baby in his arms. He remains motionless and silent as the soldiers pass by him, his eyes accompanying the movement of the Americans (see fig. 56). The sequence then depicts one Afghan villager talking to an American soldier and the translator: “he said that there is five guys already dead and ten of the females and kids already, they are injured, you know. Show me which of them is the Taliban. There is no Taliban.” One of the images that accompanies the translator’s dialogue is a body of a dead villager on a stretcher covered by a white sheet just as an American soldier passes by (see fig. 57). The injured and dead bodies

of the Afghans are shown without any particular emotional accent, they are simply catalogued by the handheld camera as part of a collection of images. Although the devastation of the village is foregrounded in the film through these images, the level of emotional immersion and personal connection is minimal, almost non-existent. The language of the film is reserved, unempathic, and without the overt cues to emotion that we have come to expect from scenes of death and destruction in war.

Fig. 54. The children watch the soldiers

Fig. 55. A child lies on the floor

Fig. 56. A villager holds a baby

Fig. 57. An Afghan casualty

In contrast to this depiction of local death, the following scene in the film portrays the very different way in which the death of an American soldier, Staff Sergeant Larry Rougle, is depicted. The mission in which Rougle dies is seen by the soldiers as the low point of their deployment. Operation Rock Avalanche is a large-scale enterprise by the U.S. military in which the objective is to send the soldiers to "some of the most dangerous places in the valley looking for weapons caches and infiltration routes" (Junger *War* 91). During this one-week operation, Rougle is killed and his death reverberates on an emotional level for the soldiers. As the documentary depicts the ambush and Rougle's death, the editing is limited to crosscutting between various soldiers' close-ups. No actual combat footage is initially shown to match the corporeally violent events that are narrated, contrary to the matching format adopted by the documentary in previous instances. It is after the acknowledgments that Cortez and Hijar have seen Rougle's body lying inert on the ground that

the film cuts to combat footage. The portrayal of the dead body of the American soldier is gradually introduced first by narration and later visual representation.

The emotional impact of Rougle's death on the company enhances the status of a grievable life as we see soldiers crying, mourning, and losing control. Rougle's body is portrayed from a distance and through dried vegetation which conceals the image (see fig. 58). As this shot appears, the exclamation "oh my God!" can be heard, increasing the sense of urgency. The next shot depicts one soldier in particular who reacts emotionally to the news that Rougle has been killed and has difficulties believing in it. The medium shot shows a frantic soldier being comforted as he yells "move, man, move" in the direction of Rougle's body (see fig. 59). The following image portrays the soldier sitting down and crying as he continues in denial: "that ain't Sergeant Rougle. You're lying, right, man?" (see fig. 60). The last shot of the dead body is a close-up of his foot in the middle of the dry vegetation (see fig. 61). The reaction shots of the soldiers around him create an environment in which Rougle's life has weight and is appreciated. This depiction stands in opposition to the fleeting way in which the Afghans' suffering is represented in the documentaries.

Fig. 58. Rougle's body

Fig. 59. Being comforted

Fig. 60. An emotional reaction

Fig. 61. The close-up of the boot

Restrepo and *Korengal* construct a level of empathy towards the American soldiers both through the images but also the interviews and

narrations done by the soldiers. As *Restrepo* depicts Rougle's death, Rice speaks about him in an interview and says, "there's different levels to quality of fighters. He was one of the best, if not the best." This eulogy accompanies the environment of grieving for his death in the battlefield, highlighting his heroic side. A stark contrast to this description is the opinion given by the American soldiers in relation to the Afghan population in general. In *Korengal*, Steiner comments that:

> This whole going there and act like their friend thing doesn't work, especially when you got, you know, the Afghani that we caught trying to put the roadside bomb in, the IED, just spitting on us, calling us, you know, infidel and stuff. . . . Hearts and minds goes out the window when you see the guy shooting at you, and then he puts his wife and kids in front of him, knowing full well that we won't shot.

Restrepo and *Korengal* portray the American soldiers during their deployment in a constant state of uneasiness regarding their purpose in the country, living conditions, exposure during patrol missions, and skeptical attitude towards the Afghans. The love-hate relationship that they develop with the place can be foregrounded through the observation of Pemble's words regarding the valley. At the end of *Restrepo*, which depicts the final moments of their deployment and departure home, Pemble repeatedly says "I'm never coming back, never coming back" and smiles. In the beginning of *Korengal*, Pemble is interviewed some time after the deployment and comments, "I'd rather be there than here. I'd go back right now if I could. I'd go back to the Korengal right now." Here again the paradigm of the Garden/Desert surfaces as the binary construction of the valley is constructed through Pemble's words. The feeling of attraction to the valley derives from living in a space in which masculinity, violence, and the immersion into an isolated natural surrounding are combined creating a small-scale society of its own. The mountains of Afghanistan are seen as the Garden that provides beauty and space for life among the men to develop. Reassuring feelings of comradery and belonging emerge from this natural environment. The photograph "Man Eden" from *Infidel* (see fig. 62) exemplifies this scenario by highlighting a politics of masculinity and togetherness inserted in the organic setting of the mountain and valley, in which the display of manual labor and survival skills constructs the landscape as a

symbolic space for communion. On the other hand, the disconnection and desire to leave the war space can be linked to the sense of continuous danger and mistrust experienced by the soldiers in the Korengal Valley. The resonance of the element of the Desert is highlighted as territorial navigation is undermined and the rustic environment frustrates a sense of belonging. The rhetoric of space displayed in the documentaries brings to the surface the deep-rooted mystique of Afghanistan, both its landscape and people, unveiling mythological paradigms of the conquest of the West in the narrative flow while foregrounding the status of otherness in relation to issues of cultural identity. As Brian Castner observes, the portrayal of the Afghan war is significantly associated with the imagery and symbolism attached to the American frontier, a place to test the "limits of endurance and human understanding." Both documentaries offer examples that delineate the war experience according to the country's harsh geographical contours and entangled cultural interchanges, representing the cycles of violence in a way that projects landscape and human interaction to the foreground of the conflict.

Fig. 62. Man Eden

CHAPTER 3

"Hey Sergeant, are we there yet?"[16]: Moving through the Iraqi Landscape in *Generation Kill*

> "Flames and smoke pour out of holes blasted through walls of homes and apartment blocks by the Marines' heavy weapons. Bullets, bricks, chunks of buildings, pieces of blown-up light poles and shattered donkey carts splash into the flooded road ahead"
>
> (Evan Wright)[17]

A recurring image in all seven episodes of *Generation Kill* (Simon prod. 2008), a miniseries that portrays the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the American armed forces, is the long and neatly aligned columns of military vehicles traveling on the Iraqi roads as the soldiers move from one town to the next. Close-ups of rubber tires in contact with either the sandy and rocky terrain of the deserts and countryside of Iraq or the paved highways that interconnect the country highlight the movement of the American forces across the land. The emphasis on images of movement, on the traversal of seemingly open space, and on the idea of the road as a space of discovery provides a set of genre cues that depart from the codes and conventions of the war film. What is signaled in *Generation Kill* is a new kind of war film, the war film as road movie, a genre mutation that blends the themes of conquest and encounter, domination and awakening, in a radical new way. Unlike a regular road trip movie, however, the vehicles are packed with weapons, ordinary conversations are constantly interrupted by threats, and sightseeing is reduced to an obsessive scanning for enemy activity. In place of the road movie's picturesque or charming encounters with members of the local population, *Generation Kill* features the characters encountering charred vehicles and bodies by the side of the roads. Nevertheless, through the movement of the American troops and their involvement in the Iraqi social fabric, *Generation Kill* constructs its narrative in ways that recall the conventions and tropes of the road movie.

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[16] Line spoken by Corporal James Trombley in episode 1 of *Generation Kill* (00:34:35).

[17] This quotation was taken from the book *Generation Kill* (13) by the American writer Evan Wright.

In the films set in Afghanistan that were discussed in the previous chapters, their imagery and symbolism of an intractable wilderness is enhanced by the inexistence of roads. The mountainous terrain hinders movement and is constructed as a place of enmity due to its intricate contours and unknown characteristics. *Generation Kill* contrasts with this landscape in the sense that the space of war becomes mobile and marked by highways that interconnect the territory. The natural environment of the desert is traversed by vehicles, offering its own type of difficulties in the form of intense heat and disorientation. The journey on the roads offers experiences that establish the rural and urban spaces as sites of devastation.

The road film genre's intrinsic connection to modernity brings to the surface the notion of freedom through movement while also pointing out the social and cultural underbelly of the American way of life. Nadia Lie acknowledges that "the modernist and experimental aesthetics which . . . foregrounds the centrality of looking and seeing" by using travelling and aerial shots "conveys to the viewer the impression of moving freely through space and being in control" (18-19). The idea of experiencing horizons of possibility that are interconnected by roads is frequently depicted in a state of conflict with a darker side of the road film, the encounter with the pathology of American culture. Lie observes that the connection between the road movie and modernity "also refers to the experience of life as marked by instability and uncertainty, which yields sensations of fragmentation and uprootedness" (19). The road film genre at times emphasizes a facet of American culture that Steve Cohan and Ina Rae Hark describe as "a utopian fantasy of homogeneity and national coherence" only to shatter the illusions of the characters through the interaction with a scenario populated by somber cultural and social elements, "a dystopic nightmare of social difference and reactionary politics" (3).

The theme of the pathology of American culture is a pivotal aspect of the road film genre and can be linked to the Iraq War movie. In *Generation Kill*, the journey through the Iraqi landscape demonstrates not only the idea of mobility and technology in action, but of violence displayed by some of the characters. The rupture of the illusory state of coherence experienced by the soldiers generates devastating consequences. In terms of the road film genre, *Easy Rider* (Hopper 1969), for instance, demonstrates how the main characters' violent encounter with people representing the extremity of conservative values and prejudice of American society leads to their death on the road. Cohan and Hark comment on the irony of the ad campaign for the film, "A man went

looking for America and couldn't find it anywhere," by observing that the two travelers do find America, "even if it is not the one they initially set out in search of" (3). The authors point out that "what prevents these easy riders from achieving their counter-culture version of the American dream is the redneck Southern culture that they have to pass through on their quest for freedom" (4). The deep-rooted prejudice of some of the locals regarding the alternative lifestyle of the protagonists manifests itself in a violent scene of murder. Both the road film and the Iraq War film display the journey through the landscape as an experience that is punctuated by the pathologies that are intrinsic to American culture and society. In *Easy Rider*, and other road movies, it is the American society outside the space of knowledge and understanding of the protagonists that is violent and harmful whereas *Generation Kill* depicts the protagonists of the road, the soldiers in the vehicles, as the agents of violence.

In this chapter, I connect the imagery of mobility that defines the TV series *Generation Kill* to the road movie in terms of the genre's emphasis on social critique. As Conn Holohan observes, the road movie is "a genre in which the relationship between subject and space is clearly of central importance" (22). The significance of the geography and the road, the vehicles as means of protection and mobility, the interaction among the road travelers, and the foregrounding of the plunge into the unknown during the journey are some of the components of the road movie genre that I take into consideration.

Generation Kill is a seven-part HBO miniseries, based on the homonymous book written by Evan Wright chronicling the early days of the American invasion of Iraq in 2003, portraying a group of U.S. Marines who traverse the country in open-top Humvees[18] and interact in various ways with the local populace. In this chapter, I focus on the first three episodes of the miniseries, presenting a textual analysis of scenes that depict landscape seen through motion, whether in an isolated and arid environment or in populated cities. These sequences portray the Iraq invasion as initially a lifetime adventure, that once set into motion becomes a complex journey that mixes elements of conquest and grim portrayals of the effects of war on the population. The destruction of the natural landscape, houses, buildings, and vehicles by the military forces illustrates the violence of the military campaign.

[18] Humvees are high mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles, military light trucks used in the Iraq War.

3.1 About Mirages, Pajamas, and Geneva

The first episode of the miniseries, entitled "Get Some," deals with the preparation of the American Marines at Camp Mathilda in Kuwait days before they set out for the Iraq invasion, while also encompassing the soldiers' departure and initial interactions with Iraqis. The desert landscape is introduced early in the episode. The first image that appears on screen is a sandy, grainy terrain with washed out colors, bisected by the vivid blue skies that horizontally separate the screen in half. Five Humvees, blurry in the heat, are seen in the far distance (see fig. 63). Evan Wright comments that "the desert here is covered in fine, powdery sand almost like talcum powder. By day it presents an endless vista of off-white tones, both dull and blinding in the harsh sun" (29). The difficulty in making out the shape of the vehicles recalls the optical illusion that often occurs in a desert, the mirage, scientifically defined as an optical phenomenon "caused by atmospheric conditions, especially . . . the refraction of light from the sky by heated air"[19]. The symbolic meaning of the desert mirage, however, its significance as an aspect of the mythology and lore of desert narratives, is what I am interested in here. The themes of inaccuracy and uncertainty that are expressed in the mirage can be understood as an emblem of the series as a whole. In *Generation Kill*, the "fog of war"−a metaphor for the confusion and misapprehension that characterizes wartime−is replaced by the blur of the desert mirage, as even combat itself becomes defined as a public relations production rather than an encounter with enemy fire. The actual moments of conflict that are portrayed, in turn, are distorted by the soldiers' narrow views of the cultural, social, and economic scenario in which the mission unfolds.

Fig. 63. The mirage in the desert

[19] This definition was taken from the online Oxford Dictionary.

Jack Sargeant and Stephanie Watson observe that deserts are portrayed in road movies in a way that produces "a void in which long-established meanings vanish, the insane heat drives images to haze and nothing is as it once seemed" (13-14). The mirage effect that characterizes our view of the five Humvees in the desert will be articulated throughout the miniseries in its plot situations, narrative exchanges, and above all in the nuanced emphasis on point of view that distinguishes the series, demonstrating the existence of different perspectives amongst the soldiers in the military context, varying from culturally aware viewpoints to psychotic behaviors.

Soon the five Humvees merge into a single file and become a solo vehicle in the hazy image. The synchronicity of the squad is depicted here and enhanced in the following shots. The long shot of the Humvees abruptly gives way to the inside of one of the vehicles with a series of extreme close-ups depicting varied objects, including weapons, radio, and camouflage nets (see fig. 64). Without any geographical orientation or narrational purpose, a full-scale action sequence takes place. The soldiers fire their weapons in the direction of what we assume are targets, tensely communicating over the radio, and watch as a helicopter fires a missile that creates a massive explosion in the plain desert. The soldiers are warned through the radio that one of the Humvees has sustained a casualty. All the vehicles halt to provide medical assistance to the soldier, and that is when the "dead" soldier wakes up and it becomes clear that the mission is actually part of their training, a narrative "optical illusion." *Generation Kill* evokes the heritage and action style of handheld camera and fast editing of war films, in thrilling and explosive shots, only to point out that it is a mock sequence with no real enemies and no actual danger. The visual pleasure of action and explosions will not be necessarily portrayed in the miniseries in the same adrenalin-filled way that is so traditionally associated with combat films. Like a mirage, the Iraq invasion might just be a hazy episode where the outdated concept of fighting a nation of bad guys does not apply anymore.

Fig. 64. Close-ups inside the Humvee

The following scene foregrounds landscape as a major part of the narrative by acknowledging the past and historical background of the territory where the soldiers are stationed. According to Holohan, "within Hollywood road movies, the construction of space frequently tends towards the mythic, with the landscape operating as a canvas against which the subject can achieve some form of self-realization" (22). In contrast to the idea of landscape as mere a backdrop, *Generation Kill* elevates the heritage of the territory and complicates the relationship of the land and the soldiers by depicting a character who appears to be delivering a heartfelt, meaningful message, but acts in a disrespectful manner toward the memory of the country. In this scene, while the soldiers are still stationed in Kuwait, Sergeant Antonio "Poke" Espera (Jon Huertas) and Corpsman "Doc" Bryan (Jonah Lotan) are staring out into the desert, nearby a blown-up tank and truck as well as scraps of metal (see fig. 65). The desert here is not portrayed as representing "a glimpse of ecstatic freedom" through movement (Sargeant and Watson 14), but composed of broken down vehicles that can be linked to stagnation, depredation, and violence. As the two characters start a conversation, Doc expresses his astonishment regarding the presence of the vehicles in the desert and references the Gulf War: "These people still haven't picked up the trash from the last war." Espera then starts urinating on the desert sand as he delivers his words acknowledging the heritage of the land where they stand and the people who have been involved in wars. He begins by saying, "People have been fighting over this bitch since ancient times, dawg." He continues by asking a question that relates to the level of violence enacted in that same landscape, "How many graves

we standing on?" However meaningful this question may be, the image that accompanies such interrogation is of his urine accumulating on the sand of the historical territory being referred to (see fig. 66). Doc's reaction sets the tone for the scene: instead of agreeing or being amused by the absurd combination of recognizing the historicity of the country and urinating on the sand, he skeptically continues listening to Espera, demonstrating a serious take on the subject being discussed. Since its beginning, the miniseries' depiction of events foregrounds the individual viewpoints of the soldiers and the multiplicity of opinions about war, avoiding the establishment of a group mentality.

Fig. 65. The remnants of the war

Fig. 66. Espera urinates on the sand

The scene continues as Espera delivers the rest of his words endorsing the historical past of Kuwait: "Think about all the wisdom and science and money and civilization it took to build these machines, and the courage of all the men who came here, and the love of their wives and children that was in their hearts. And all that hate, dawg, all the hate it took to blow these motherfuckers away." Here landscape functions as a trigger to the memory of the past and a reminder of the violence, almost as a foreshadowing of the upcoming war. Espera's attitude towards the past is ambiguous since he acknowledges the respect that must be given to those who have fought and lost their lives on that desert, but at the same time, his actions disrupt such recognition. What initially seems like an appreciation of local history becomes a puzzling combination of gracious words and images of urination, an optical illusion that culminates in his last words: "It's destiny, dawg. White man's gotta rule the world." The way war is seen by the soldiers, from the beginning of the first episode, is marked by ambiguity and ambivalence. Straightforward statements about racial superiority alternate with a seemingly sincere attempt to understand and appreciate the local and historical culture.

As the soldiers are given a green light for the Iraq invasion, the atmosphere is of excitement and preparation. The Marines pass one another with smiles on their faces accompanied by background shouts of

"Let's roll" and "Let's go, boys". One soldier passionately says "I feel like it's fucking Christmas!" while walking towards his Humvee. While they wait for the battalion translator, the soldiers are portrayed for the first time in the interior of the vehicles. The lead Humvee, one of the main vehicles portrayed in the miniseries, has a crew of five people: Sergeant Brad Colbert (Alexander Skarsgård), Corporal Ray Person (James Ransone), Lance Corporal James Trombley (Billy Lush), Corporal Gabriel Garza (Rey Valentin) who is later replaced by Corporal Walt Hasser (Pawel Szajda), and the Rolling Stone reporter Evan Wright (Lee Tergesen). Their first interaction in the Humvee is a disagreement over a banal subject, hinting at their close relationship and the tendency of *Generation Kill* to portray the characters in the most mundane situations that do not always construct a flattering depiction of the soldiers. Director Susanna White observes in the DVD audio commentary of this episode that there is an effort to create a family dynamic among the characters in the lead Humvee, with Colbert as the father, Person as the mother, and Trombley as the son. In a tone that resembles a couple arguing, Person and Colbert argue over the fact that the former spits out the window:

> COLBERT: Don't spit on my Humvee, Ray.
> PERSON: I didn't.
> COLBERT: Ray, when you spit with your lips, you always get it on the side of my Humvee. I heard you spit with your lips. Spit with your teeth, Ray.

Although they are about to start the invasion of a country, the subject they talk about is getting the side of Humvee dirty in a bickering exchange of lines and looks. This discussion is an example of how an intimate world is being constructed inside the Humvee, a safe zone of comfort where their minds can eventually switch to familiar subjects and concerns. The Humvee enables them to navigate the landscapes of battle but also at times escape the hectic environment of war by isolating themselves inside the vehicle. David Laderman points out that in road movies, "the interior space of a car makes for more dramatic possibilities of character interaction" (13). This attribute applies directly to *Generation Kill*, as war is experienced inside the Humvees as both dull and chaotic, with arguments among the crew that vary from banal subjects to the reasons why they are invading Iraq.

The first image of movement as the Humvees leave Camp Mathilda and head towards Iraq is not a long shot that demonstrates the scale of the invasion but a close-up of one of the Humvee's tires (see fig.

67). This sequence emphasizes the iconography of the road and the prospect of entering unknown territory from the perspective of the soldiers. As the tire moves closer to the screen, the large scale of the vehicle is emphasized alongside the sound of the sand being crushed underneath the tire. The Humvee is not only a means of transportation, it is a forceful tool capable of trampling its way into Iraq. Laderman observes that the human-machine relationship in road movies "suggests that the vehicle itself is a character in the film, through special close-ups of the car's machinery" (18). In *Generation Kill*, technology associated with the Humvees is important−the crew repairs and invests personal money in the enhancement of the vehicles. It is through the Humvees that the American Marines stamp their presence in the territory and impose their status as a dominant force, since each Humvee contains a machine gun on top and soldiers with weapons by the windows of each side.

Fig. 67. The Humvee tire

In a wider shot, the line of Humvees and military trucks goes through the gates of Camp Mathilda, raising a cloud of dust. The camera moves to the left, in the opposite direction from the vehicles to display the magnitude of the camp (see fig. 68). A great number of large tents cover a massive stretch of arid territory, indicating the scale of the American force in the campaign. The road that leads to Iraq now becomes the focus of the episode. In a long shot, the parade of Humvees moves from the bottom to the top of the screen, not on an asphalt road but a delineated sandy road in the direction of the horizon (see fig. 69). This vast stretch of arid ground can be associated with the image of a highway.

Fig. 68. Leaving Camp Mathilda

Fig. 69. The road to Iraq

Regarding this iconographical image of road movies, Laderman comments that "highways symbolize the potential of venturing beyond the familiarity of home" and that to cross borders "is to leave the familiar behind, to venture into the new and unknown" (14). For the Marines, to leave Camp Mathilda and head towards Iraq conveys open possibilities, a departure from their well-known micro-society in tents and an immersion into a country where they are unfamiliar with the language, customs, religion, and culture. Mikhail Bakhtin's "chronotope of the road" can be applied in relation to the encounters that occur in road movies and also initially in *Generation Kill*. Bakhtin observes that:

> on the road, . . . the spatial and temporal paths of the most varied people—representatives of all social classes, estates, religions, nationalities, ages—intersect at one spatial and temporal point. People who are normally kept separate by social and spatial distance can accidentally meet; any contrast may crop up, the most varied fates may collide and interweave with one another (243).

While the experience of heading out to war can initially be connected to Bakhtin's chronotope of the road, *Generation Kill* actually inverts its original meaning as the narrative unfolds. In Bakhtin, the chronotope of the road is the key space-time framework for the narrative of emergence, the creation of new experiences. In the miniseries, the chronotope is upended as the invasion produces the opposite effect, shutting down the possibilities of discovery. The immersion into the landscape and social fabric of the country reveals not only the military aftereffects of the invasion, but exposes the social and cultural patterns of conflict within American culture through the representation of the problematic behavior and aspirations of the soldiers. As the Marines leave the gates of the camp, a certain "sense of conquest through traveling, of asserting one's self by

venturing elsewhere" (Laderman 22) is highlighted when Espera shouts "white man won't be denied" under the sound of crushing sand.

The road trip towards their first city in Iraq, Safwan, is marked by the soldiers' early excitement and their introduction into a landscape of destruction, caused by previous aerial strikes. As they move along the territory, a sequence at dawn introduces elements of combat imagery and soundscape that will be faced by the Marines. The Humvees drive through a torn fence that was bombed and no longer separates one territory from another. The horizon in the background shows fire burning, black smoke, flashes of light, and helicopters flying in that direction (see fig. 70). The sounds of shots and explosions fill the air alongside the sounds of the engines of the vehicles and the blades of the helicopters. The wasteland aspect of the space is complemented by the next shot that shows the Humvees going down a path towards the camera, surrounded by debris (see fig. 71). The vehicles do not swerve from the obstacles. They roll over the unidentifiable burned objects and continue on their way. Corporal Jason Lilley (Kellan Lutz) excitedly asks a favor to another Marine: "get some of this on videotape for me, brah. This is us invading a country right here." As Lilley attempts to compile images in an amateur home video, the images that he captures are far from a casual and cheerful product of a road trip. The enthusiastic atmosphere among the soldiers is undercut by the first image of corporeal devastation. As Corporal Nathan Christopher (Stefan Otto) points the camera towards the side of the Humvee, his face demonstrates a seriousness that does not match the earlier adventurous tone (see fig. 72). In a point of view traveling shot, the camera records a petrified arm sticking out from the ground as if the person had sunk in quicksand and the only protruding body part is an arm and a hand with the fingers positioned mid-motion as if trying to reach for help (see fig. 73).

Fig. 70. Going through the torn fences

Fig. 71. The road and the debris

Fig. 72. Christenson's reaction

Fig. 73. The arm in the "quicksand"

The imagery of the hand caught in the middle of the action by a violent force visually resembles the pair of hands clutching the barbed wire fence in *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Milestone 1930) (see fig. 74). This First World War classic film highlights "the war's senseless human waste" (Chambers 198) and the effects of modern industrial warfare. The catastrophic loss of lives amidst the intense barrages in no man's land is foregrounded in the iconic image of the detached hands holding the barbed wire after an explosion. Similarly to the Iraqi protruding arm in *Generation Kill*, the image of the dismantled body part depicts the transformation of the human form into a lifeless and fragmented proof of the violent attacks. No longer a wholesome human being, the body is stripped of its identity and cultural uniqueness, being remembered as a gruesome death in a sea of casualties. Unlike the reaction of the main protagonist of *All Quiet*, Paul Bäumer (Lew Ayres), who looks away as he witnesses the maiming and shows his revolt regarding the situation, Christenson, in *Generation Kill*, turns his body sideways to compensate for the movement of the Humvee, in an attempt to fully capture the image with his camera. There is no effort to avert the eyes but an insistence on witnessing the grim moment and placing it in a larger system of war memories by recording the horror.

Fig. 74. The hands clutching the barbed wire in *All Quiet*

The journey into Iraq has barely begun at this point in the episode but *Generation Kill* already hints at the fact that to portray the American experience in Iraq by only depicting combat situations and moments of camaraderie is an illusory view of the Iraq War. The ethical awakening displayed by some of the soldiers after witnessing scenes of devastation resembles the type of personal change, similar to a coming-of-age story that can be found in the road movie genre. Timothy Corrigan observes that road film characters "embark on a learning experience that becomes most historically determined in bildungsroman tradition: the familiar is left behind or transformed through the protagonist's movement through space and time" (144). The representation of corporeal destruction and the change in mood as the soldiers witness such devastation is typical of the miniseries, which avoids representations of patriotism and heroism, opting instead for a display of the consequences of violence to Iraqi lives and surroundings.

The first phase of the American Marines' journey into the unfamiliar in cultural terms is their encounter with the grim aftermath of combat on a physical level, as discussed in the previous paragraphs. The second phase begins as they are faced with the human costs regarding the survivors when the soldiers confront Iraqi civilians on the side of the road. While the Humvees are in constant motion, they pass along an isolated village and briefly interact with the locals. From the vehicle in movement Garza exclaims that he waved at an Iraqi and that the man returned the gesture. Colbert's response retains an air of conquest as he says: "Good, Garza. Be magnanimous. . . . Lofty and kinglike." His imperialistic choice of vocabulary positions the Marines clearly as invaders in relation to the local Iraqis. While driving the Humvee, Person shouts to a man on the side of the road: "Hey buddy, it's ten in the morning. Don't you think you oughta change out of your pajamas?" Person's sarcasm in comparing the traditional tunic worn by Iraqis with pajamas can be superficially interpreted as a humorous comment or a first step towards what J. Martin Daughtry calls "a general process of denigration [and] dehumanization of the enemy" (60). Sarcastic remarks such as Person's might not lead to violence at that particular moment, but it encourages the construction of an atmosphere in which violence becomes feasible since the locals possess a different cultural and social status from the Marines. *Generation Kill* depicts a group of soldiers with military skills and technological means but not equipped with knowledge of the social workings and languages. The acts of mockery demonstrate the enlargement of the cultural gap where the disregard for cultural differences and notions of superiority are brought to the forefront.

Music is a significant part of war films, serving as a platform for expression, similar to the road movies' integration of pop and rock songs in their narratives, creating links between music and high-speed movement, rebellion, and political awareness. An example in *Generation Kill* is the scene in which the soldiers in the Humvee solidify their relationship while singing and making reference to the pop culture of the early twenty-first century. Since the miniseries does not have music as soundtrack for any of the episodes, the only exception being the last scene of the final episode, the characters are frequently observed singing. In this sequence, Person and Colbert sing "Loving you" by Minnie Riperton, a song released in 1974. At first, this song might not be included as part of the pop scenario of the early 2000s. However, it gained renewed popularity as it was featured in a *South Park* episode in 1997, and in two commercials, one for Burger King in 1998 and another for Visa in 2001. As the two Marines sing a high-pitched, clumsy version of the song, the act of singing together a recognizable tune that brings memories of home and familiarity can be interpreted as creating what Daughtry calls "a kind of aural armor, a protection against the taxing onus of war" (246). By singing in the battlefield, the soldiers construct a spatial and auditory zone of safety where they can navigate in cultural and social confidence.

The portrayal of soldiers singing in war films is understood by Todd Decker as "an act of soldierly agency" (82) that serves multiple purposes. The author gives the example of Private Mellish (Adam Goldberg) in *Saving Private Ryan* (Spielberg 1998) who sings the Duke Ellington song "Solitude" while crossing a flower field during their mission. Decker explains that this moment in the film pinpoints a quick escape from the environment of war, allowing the soldiers to take their minds away from the reality of violence and focus, even if for only a few seconds, on a more familiar facet of their lives (82). This is indeed one effect of Mellish's singing, but the scene offers a more complex layer due to the way the song is delivered and its lyrics. Singing here is almost a lament, a whispered confession of troublesome feelings: "By memories / of the days gone by / in my solitude / you taunt me / with memories that never die / I sit in my chair / filled with despair / there's no one / could be so sad / with gloom everywhere / I sit and I stare." Such a melancholic song does not only connect to the issues of escape and familiarity, but also to the inward journey of sorrow and frustration after navigating the warscape of the Normandy landing and its aftermath. Although the last line "I sit and I stare" is delivered while the soldiers are in motion through the field, it indicates the culmination of an emotional paralysis fueled by traumatic memories.

The depiction of soldiers singing in war films demonstrates that, among its varied purposes, there is the opportunity to take one's mind outside the war by returning to a comfortable and safer emotional zone or even retreat to a private state of mind. Throughout the episodes, *Generation Kill* at times opts to evoke the feeling of an acoustic bubble where familiarity predominates over the harshness of the outside environment while also using the songs to voice feelings of discontent in relation to the soldiers' experiences.

The first episode makes use of some road movie genre markings, such as the depiction of the journey into an unknown territory, the close relationship of the characters and vehicles, and the witnessing of striking sights while on the road. The road itself also becomes a significant platform for the discussion of matters related to dominance and corporeal destruction. These elements function as instances of social critique that make use of the aforementioned recognizable characteristics of the road film genre and adapt them to the war film context in order to highlight issues of conquest and otherness regarding the landscape as well as the local populace.

The last sequence in the episode features a close interaction between soldiers and Iraqis who are trying to surrender, demonstrating a lack of humanitarian care in favor of rigid adherence to military tactics. One of the first images of this sequence takes place alongside the train tracks as several Iraqi soldiers walk towards the location of the American soldiers in order to surrender to the Marines (see fig. 75). A thorough individual search for weapons takes place in a tense atmosphere. As an Iraqi speaks in Arabic, Meesh (Nabil Elouahabi), the battalion translator, informs the American soldiers: "He says 30 kilometers east of here on a bridge by the canal there are Iraqi military death squads that are executing Iraqi soldiers who flee." Surrender in this case becomes a matter of survival for the locals.

Fig. 75. Iraqis surrendering to the Marines

Meanwhile, the interaction between Marines and Iraqis depicts a verbal scenario of abuse. As one Iraqi offers gum to the Americans, Corporal James Chaffin (Eric Ladin) refuses it by saying: "I ain't touching no filthy Haji gum that's been touched by them filthy brown Haji fingers." The expression "Haji" is regularly used by the Marines to refer to an "Iraqi or Arab or Muslim of any ethnicity" in an aggressive manner. This word is a transformation in meaning of "the Arabic 'Haji', which is the honorific term for anyone who has made the trip to Mecca, the Hajj."[20] The derogatory term is a direct form of disrespect and incites further prejudice against the Iraqi population. In the DVD audio commentary of this episode, director, writer and producer David Simon, who is also the creator of TV series such as *The Wire* (2002-2008) and *Treme* (2010-2013) in which there is a focus on the local use of languages, observes that the racial prejudice demonstrated by the use of derogatory terms, such as "spics," "coons," "brown friend," and "wetbacks," in conversations amongst Marines does not necessarily point to a deep rooted racial issue in the group. According to him, it depicts a constant verbal tug of war for dominance in the hyper-male military microcosm. In my view, such behavior cannot be taken for granted since it constructs an atmosphere of prejudice that can escalate to a desensitization regarding life threatening decisions. This intensification from verbal abuse to corporeal violence and disregard concerning the Iraqis will be observed in subsequent episodes as the American soldiers do not hesitate to take the locals' lives. Although Chaffin refuses the gum offered by the Iraqi, Lilley responds to his prejudiced opinion by saying: "Brah, these are people." *Generation Kill* represents the duality of the Marines by giving voice to opposing opinions about the status of the enemy combatant as either a dehumanized figure or a human being who deserves to be treated with respect. The soldiers here have an encounter with the unfamiliar, one of the key elements of the road movie. Moreover, the ethnic intolerance displayed by some of the soldiers suggests another point of connection with the road movie: the encounter with the underlying scenario of ethnic prejudice, this time not in the surroundings but within their own military micro-society, that is a recurrent and troublesome aspect of American culture.

The turning point of the surrender incident happens as Lieutenant Colonel "Godfather" Ferrando (Chance Kelly) arrives with the news that they must "unsurrender" the Iraqis. Following orders from above, the Marines are to send those people back the way they came without

[20] These definitions were taken from the *Generation Kill* DVD booklet (10).

escorting them to a safe location as prisoners of war. Doc is the first soldier to protest the absurdity of the situation: "Send them back where? What, the fucking death squads? Sir, under Articles 13 and 20 of the Geneva Convention, we're obligated to take care and protect any fuckers who surrender to us." Indeed, Article 20 of the Geneva Convention points out that "The Detaining Power shall supply prisoners of war who are being evacuated with sufficient food and potable water, and with the necessary clothing and medical attention. The Detaining Power shall take all suitable precautions to ensure their safety during evacuation" (89). By "unsurrendering" the Iraqis and following a better tactical plan from the American perspective, the Marines put the locals in the exact path of the death squads, endangering their lives. Doc emphasizes his point by saying, "The Iraqi's first contact with Americans. And we fuck them." *Generation Kill* visually demonstrates the act of witnessing humanitarian disregard concerning the Iraqis in a traveling shot, not of the landscape, but in the facial reaction of those in the lead Humvee as they silently watch the Iraqis heading back the way they came (see figs. 76 and 77). Heartless orders such as this one are carried out by the soldiers in an environment of obedience inside a chain of command that continuously neglects humanitarian care. By depicting the encounter with the Iraqis and the later disregard for their lives, *Generation Kill* critiques the mismanagement of surrendering combatants in the early stages of the war. The last shot of the episode sums up the situation: as the American vehicles drive from right to left over the train tracks in the foreground of the screen, the procession of tired Iraqis walks towards the horizon, following the path of the train track, as if sentenced to death (see fig. 78). The Iraqi's slow movement by foot, in a defenseless manner, with no proper transportation, and with terrifying prospects ahead is a stark contrast to the American soldiers' passage through the landscape, equipped with technological means and supplies, capable of defending themselves.

Fig. 76. The Marines witness the Iraqis

Fig. 77. On their way back

Fig. 78. Moving in different directions

The first episode ends in a shot that portrays movement in different directions, symbolizing the disruption caused by the American presence and reckless decision-making that will generate further attrition in the following episodes and years of the Iraq War. Landscape is depicted as a historically charged environment with its desert mirages demonstrating how the interpretation of events depends on one's viewpoint. By relying less on action style sequences and more on the relationship among soldiers, local people, and surroundings, the episode delves into issues of racial dominance and violent consequences of military acts. The encounter with pathologies ingrained in American social and cultural framework, such as ethnic and cultural intolerance, links directly to the portrayal of a darker side of the journey, a trait that is shared with the road movie genre, except that the pathology is not in the exterior surroundings but in the social microcosm established among the protagonists.

3.2 Bombing the Cradle of Civilization

In this section, I will focus my analysis on the second episode of *Generation Kill*, entitled "The Cradle of Civilization," in which the Marines move across the country and reach urban centers. The roads that link each location assigned to the soldiers are spaces for personal interaction and cultural awareness. The miniseries brings forth what Laderman points out as a fundamental characteristic of road movies, "an embrace of the journey as a means of cultural critique" providing moments that navigate "beyond the borders of cultural familiarity, seeking the unfamiliar for revelation" (1-2). The war experience is represented as a journey through a country emphasizing the kinetic ability of the Americans to move while at the same time portraying the stagnation and annihilation of the Iraqi people. The behavior of the soldiers, in particular of Trombley, is transparently constructed as a pathological

phenomenon that mirrors a social and cultural state of conflict within the American identity.

Both the road film and war film genres deal with particular issues regarding national identity and meaning. As Cohan and Hark observe, "a road movie provides a ready space for exploration of the tensions and crises of the historical moment during which it is produced" (2). Questions of social fragmentation, cultural dominance, capitalism, and utopian versus dystopian spaces, among others, can be found in road film stories. Cohan and Hark exemplify some road movies based on key moments in history and their reevaluation of national unity, as follows:

> The *film noir* aftermath of the [Second World] war (*Detour*, *They Live by Night*); the late 1960s challenge to the corporate conformism and anti-Communism of the Eisenhower era and the deepening involvement in Vietnam throughout the subsequent decade (*Bonnie and Clyde*, *Easy Rider*); and … in the early 1990s … the masculinist heroics of the Gulf War gave way to closer scrutiny (*My Own Private Idaho*, *Thelma and Louise*, *Natural Born Killers*) (2).

The war film can similarly project contemporary critical interests onto its narrative by showing "how a real or narrativized past becomes a way of commenting on the present" (Eberwein 12). Issues such as memorialization, sacrifice, collectivity, and historical representation underlie the war film genre and bring to the forefront its relevance in terms of shaping the cultural imagination of conflicts. Each genre deals with particular issues based on their narrative focus, but both have the potential to vividly represent a critical viewpoint of society.

The context in which *Generation Kill* is produced in the year of 2008 can be connected to a critical historical moment in the Iraq War. The relevance of this period comes from the atmosphere of public discontent caused by the already protracted war of five years, and also the troop surge announced by President George W. Bush in 2007, with more than 20,000 additional soldiers being sent to Iraq[21]. The general atmosphere of disillusionment and frustration that permeated the public opinion of that time is translated in the miniseries into the cynical and often skeptical

[21] Bush made this announcement on January 23, 2007 during his State of the Union address that can be found on https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3k1nEb8XIzA.

mindset expressed by some of the soldiers about the development of the war.

As *Generation Kill* emphasizes the soldiers' movement on the Iraqi roads, technology becomes fundamental to the narrative. Reliance on technology is significant in the road movie as well as the war film genre. Neil Archer points out that the "road movies come from the post-war booming of American industries and economies. The mass-produced car paved the way for the road movie's celebration of motorised individuality and freedom" (13). The advances in automobile technology and the popularity of the road film can be connected to what Corrigan calls "a mechanized extension of the body" where the cars and motorcycles enable the characters in the narratives to move faster and farther than never before (146). In the road movie *Two-Lane Blacktop* (Hellman 1971), for instance, the significance of the technological particularities of the cars is brought to the forefront in the narrative as the identities of the characters are intrinsically linked to the capability of their cars in terms of speed and endurance. As technology supports the ideas of movement and possibility in the road movie, it also brings prospect of power and dominance to the war film. The development of military technology in terms of weapons and modes of transportation have accompanied the war film genre since its inception. From the display of modern warfare in the early twentieth century with movies such as *All Quiet on the Western Front* and *The Longest Day* (Zanuck 1962) to the contemporary portrayal of drone warfare in *Eye in the Sky* (Hood 2015), technology has shaped the way combat and destruction are represented in war films and crystallized in the nation's imaginary.

The portrayal of the road can be seen as a point of connection for the two genres in which mobility becomes an essential element. As Archer discusses, "the road in the road movie is never just a background: it is typically both the motivation for the narrative to happen, and also the place that allows things to occur" (3). The road enables the constant state of drifting in *Easy Rider* and *Two-Lane Blacktop*, for example. Although the road seems to go on forever, offering a new immersive experience at each stop, it does not necessarily mean that the road instigates a specific destination in the road movies. Even as the off-road path gives way to a cliff in *Thelma & Louise* (Scott 1991), the main characters prefer to plunge forward into the unknown as opposed to return to the conformities of society. More than just a transitory location to get from one place to another, the road in both genres can signify the journey of transformation, the movement out of the comfort zone into the cultural and geographical unexplored territory. The relevance of the road is also observed by Cohan

and Hark: "the ongoing popularity of the road for motion picture audiences in the United States owes much to its obvious potential for romanticizing alienation as well as for problematizing the uniform identity of the nation's culture" (1). To be on the road means to be susceptible to challenges and reinterpretations of long-established notions of cultural constructions of nation. In *Generation Kill*, from the moment the Marines leave Camp Mathilda, their journey on Iraqi roads is marked by experiences in which the soldiers either witness or practice violent acts, constructing the road not only as a kinetic site but a place that offers opportunities to display of the soldiers' inherent values that constitute the complexity of national identity.

As the episode unfolds, the Marines are tasked with going through the city of Nasiriyah after it has been bombarded by the Air Force. This is the first time in the miniseries that the soldiers have entered an urban area with their Humvees. The view from the bridge that leads to the city already exposes its state of destruction with black smoke rising from the buildings on the horizon, reaching the cloudy sky in a graduated loss of consistency before blending with the white vastness (see fig. 79). As Susan Sontag points out, "war tears, rends. War rips open, eviscerates. War scorches. War dismembers. War *ruins*" (8). This summary of the effects of war, not only regarding material properties but also corporeal destruction, will be demonstrated in *Generation Kill* as the soldiers move through the cities. When the Marines enter Nasiriyah, Hasser's anxious look is matched with his point-of-view shot, which shows the Humvee crew in a confined, urban space, a very different configuration from the openness of the deserts and isolated villages (see fig. 80). The constrained view of the cityscape evokes the idea of the urban landscape as a threatening site, one capable of hiding danger in its shadowy corners. Captain Nathaniel Fick[22] in his memoir of combat, *One Bullet Away*, describes the claustrophobic feeling of entering an Iraqi town: "the buildings were concrete and seemed to tower above the road on both sides, trapping us in an urban canyon" (214). His expression "urban canyon" evokes a mixture of cityscape and natural environment that encapsulates their experience in Iraq. The soldiers alternate between both

[22] The soldier and author of *One Bullet Away*, Nathaniel Fick, is represented as a character in the miniseries *Generation Kill*. Since the events depicted in the series, Nathaniel Fick has been promoted to Captain, therefore when making reference to his character in the miniseries who is still a Lieutenant, I will address him as Fick whereas in references concerning the actual soldier and author, I will address him as Capt. Fick.

settings but with one element in common: the 360-degree feeling of danger. Capt. Fick registers the obsession with the potential of natural elements or urban features to hide a threat by saying in multiple occasions throughout his memoir, “In my mind, every tree, rooftop, and berm hid a fighter with an RPG, and that RPG was surely going to hit me square in the chest” (226) and “every palm grove hid Iraqi armor, every field an artillery battery, and every alley an antiaircraft gun” (289). As a result of these paranoid perceptions, the miniseries features several instances in which the Marines seem to have spotted an enemy threat that turns out to be a commonplace object, such as when a pipe seems to be a rocket tube (Episode 1) or a village in the distance is mistaken for the lights of Iraqi vehicles (Episode 4). This mirage effect ranges from a minor mistake as in the former example to a larger scale situation, such as the latter, in which the soldiers hurriedly decide that the seeming incoming threat of the Iraqi convoy warrants a maximum alert. They proceed to massively bombard the area, but due to an error in calculating the distance, they end up barraging a flat and empty desert surface. The Marines are both uncertain about the threat and inaccurate in their range finding, a product of being enveloped in paranoid supposition.

Fig. 79. The bombarded city

Fig. 80. Hasser’s anxiety and his POV shot

While entering Nasiriyah, the next shot unveils the ground devastation in the alley, as walls are partially bombed and debris is

scattered everywhere, followed by another image even closer to the ground. This shot focuses on objects that will feature in many scenes in the miniseries: burnt-out vehicles. In this particular case, an exploded car is seen on the sidewalk partially buried by the ruins of previous bombing (see fig. 81). By displaying immobile modes of transportation, *Generation Kill* highlights the contrast between the mobility of the Marines and the consequences of such violent movement across the towns. The Marines find Nasiriyah as a ghost town, or as a frame-within-a-frame shot demonstrates, a dead town (see fig. 82). The following image shows the silent viewpoint of a scorched Iraqi body from inside an exploded car as the Humvees drive by, a brief but effective depiction of the aftermath of the American bombing.

Fig. 81. The destroyed city of Nasiriyah

Fig. 82. From inside the exploded car

As the Marines pass through Nasiriyah, they confront the corporeal and material ruins in the city, and Trombley's reaction reinforces the idea of his obsession with violence. Ken Hewitt acknowledges that there is "a direct reciprocity between war and cities . . .. The latter are the more thoroughgoing construct of collective life, containing the definitive human places. War is the most thoroughgoing or consciously prosecuted occasion of collective violence that destroys places" (258). The act of being present in the city turned into a battlefield is foregrounded in the sequence that highlights the close-up shot of Trombley's eyes as he

witnesses the violent aftermath on American bodies. A traveling shot depicts an immobilized U.S. tank and soldiers' bodies on the ground and on top of debris (see fig. 83). The editing cuts to a close-up of Trombley's dazed eyes as he takes in the violence through the Humvee window (see fig. 84). Trombley is depicted as a character who constantly lusts after the act of shooting and killing Iraqis. Person refers to him repeatedly as a "total psycho" while Hassler calls him a "cold-on deadeye killer," constructing Trombley as a soldier whose keenness to engage in a violent act is criticized in the miniseries. The unhinged craving for violence can also be seen as Trombley speaks to his weapon and sorrowfully regrets not shooting even one round. Just as in *Easy Rider*, where the bigotry displayed by the locals and the protagonists' flawed worldview in "their desire to pull away, to remain deaf, dumb, and blind [are] held up for scrutiny" (Orgeron 108), *Generation Kill* exposes Trombley's psychotic personality and the destructive disequilibrium caused by his unbalanced perspective in the context of war.

Fig. 83. American tanks and bodies

Fig. 84. Close-up of Trombley's eyes

Trombley's fascination with violence makes this a complex scene in terms of interpretation since he is ordinarily drawn to the sight of carnage. Later in the episode, Trombley kills a man during a firefight and excitedly exclaims, "I saw his knee explode!". To observe the corporeal devastation of the American soldier, however, causes him to be silent and undercuts the thrill of the war spectacle for him. This sight plants the seed that such an injury does not only happen to the Iraqis and that the firepower possessed by the Marines does not make the Americans indestructible. Trombley's contemplative and stunned behavior can be seen as the initial acknowledgment of the vulnerability that encircles everyone in the war, including the American soldiers.

A home video sequence reappears in this scene as Christenson records a helicopter bombing a large structure in the middle of the city. The witnessing of material destruction by the road travelers is a recurring sight that can be seen as a point of connection with the road movie genre.

In *Easy Rider*, Wyatt's (Peter Fonda) motorcycle is shot down in a brutal gesture by intolerant locals and explodes by the side of the road. *Thelma & Louise* features the two protagonists shooting a truck that belongs to an abusive driver causing the vehicle to explode in the middle of the desert, while in *Duel* (Spielberg 1971), the menacing truck ends up falling down a cliff as the protagonist watches the event. In these films, there is a sense of elation at the sight of destruction. In *Generation Kill*, the amateur footage taken from the Humvee in movement tracks the path of the missile from the helicopter to the building, showing the blast and the material damage (see fig. 85). Lilley, the camera owner, cheers at the sight of the explosion and excitedly asks: "You got that, right? CNN would definitely pay for drama like that, brah. That shit was extreme." *Generation Kill* contrasts his pathological delight at the sight of destruction and possible profit with Espera's reaction as the latter shakes his head. The sense of thrill activated by the portrayal of destruction scenes−so commonplace in action and war movies−is undercut by a clearly negative reaction of one of the characters, demonstrating the diverse opinions among the Marines regarding an incident on the road. Sontag comments that "to be sure, a cityscape is not made of flesh. Still, sheared-off buildings are almost as eloquent as bodies in the street" (8). The ruins of city devastated by war, she writes, speaks to human sorrows and losses. The destroyed urban landscape becomes more than a backdrop featuring the aftermath of explosions but a potent symbol. This scene depicts how the possibility of the American military being able to annihilate structures is already embedded in the imaginary of the soldiers as a kind of proxy for combat with an actual enemy.

Fig. 85. The material destruction in Nasiriyah

After passing through Nasiriyah, the Marines are set loose on a straight highway in the direction of their new goal: the town of Al Gharraf. Once again the road is given a peculiar significance since this sequence starts with the camera facing downwards focusing on the

highway pavement as it tracks in front of the Humvees (see fig. 86). Soon it moves to a straight-on angle to portray the movement of the vehicles on the road (see fig. 87). On the highway, the soldiers sing a version of a 2001 song called "Bodies" by the American rock band Drowning Pool. Their version consists of replacing the original chorus "Let the bodies hit the floor" by "Let the Hajis hit the floor." The reference to a pop song that has undergone a transformation to fit the context of the Iraq War can be connected to what Daughtry calls "acoustic vandalism," a type of "symbolic violence [that] serves to render corporeal violence both thinkable and desirable" (60). The author gives as an example a parody invented by the American soldiers in Iraq of the Muslim call to prayer that is daily broadcast from the mosque: "Allah, somebodygotitoo, allah, aloo, . . . Hola, como esta, IdonotknowwhatIamsaying, bee-bap" (60). This caricature can be seen as partially originating from not understanding the local language but also as a process of denigration and mockery of Iraqi culture. War films in general apply a type of acoustic vandalism in the way the soldiers refer to the enemy forces by including ethnic insults in their daily speech. Second World War films and miniseries such as *Saving Private Ryan* and *Band of Brothers* supply examples of soldiers addressing Germans as *kraut* which derives from the German word *sauerkraut* (Rottman 70). The nickname originates from a transformation of a commonly used word in the German language accompanied by hostile intent. In the case of *Generation Kill*, the modified song fantasizes a scenario in which the Iraqis themselves suffer violence through musical vandalism of their image. By singing a song of control and aggression, the Marines create a protective area for themselves within the context of a journey defined by speed, weaponry, and the struggle for dominance.

Fig. 86. The highway

Fig. 87. The Humvees in movement

Traveling on the highway, the Marines soon reach their new A-O (Area of Operations): Mesopotamia. First Lieutenant Nathaniel Fick (Stark Sands) informs the soldiers that it is "the land between the Euphrates, the Tigris, cradle of civilization." An emphasis on the

historicity of the territory is given through the acknowledgment of its ancient past in the characters' conversation, and especially in the reference to its heritage in the title of the episode. Mesopotamia has been called the cradle of civilization because it "first saw the emergence of many of the developments that transformed the world into the urban society of today. Intensive agriculture, industrial production, state-controlled religion, complex stratified society" (McIntosh 4). *Generation Kill* sharply sets this discussion of cultural and social heritage against the display of what is being done to the ancient territory. As Espera points to a dead Iraqi next to their Humvee, he comments that "The Marines ahead of us sure civilized these motherfuckers." The shot from behind the dead body, parallel to the ground, foregrounds the man's bloodied clothes and head wound (see fig. 88).

Fig. 88. Cradle of civilization

While still on the road, the Marines encounter a series of burnt-out cars and charred corpses that function as the antithesis of sightseeing on a road trip. Laderman points out, "the road represents the unknown" (2) and provides an opportunity for revelation. For the soldiers, the side of the road bears witness to the consequences of their acts. Firstly, a traveling shot from the point of view of the soldiers in the Humvee depicts a blown-up truck, a Soviet truck mounted with a rocket launcher, which is considered by the soldiers as a legitimate target, that is, a target that has a clear potential of danger (see fig. 89). Trombley's response paves the way to the next horrific image as he says, "It's like a Halloween funhouse." His chilling comment is followed by a shot of an exploded car with several burnt bodies inside (see fig. 90). The scorched exterior of the car, the broken windows, and the lifeless bodies elicit a macabre reaction by Trombley who giggles as the Humvee passes the car. Several other bodies, female and male, as well as broken down vehicles are depicted alongside the road, but one particular image of a little girl's body evokes a stronger reaction in the Marines. There is no verbal introduction here,

only a silent traveling shot that depicts a little girl with both legs maimed, lying in a puddle of blood (see fig. 91). The film cuts to a mute and perplexed reaction by the reporter in a close-up of his face, and then rapidly switches to Colbert's cold response as he says "She's dead. Nothing we can do." The reporter's shock can be seen as a direct contrast to Trombley's prior reaction as once again *Generation Kill* displays more than one viewpoint amongst the Humvee travelers. The complexity of what going to war means to the soldiers is enhanced in this sequence that reinforces Trombley's psychotic behavior.

Fig. 89. A "legit" target

Fig. 90. The scorched car

Fig. 91. The little girl's body

The little girl's image is again observed by the soldiers as the next Humvee comes across the body. Lilley eagerly asks Christenson, who is holding the video camera, to film the body of a man on the side the road. Christenson replies that the body does not belong to a man and Lilley's smile gradually fades out as the latter comes closer to the sight of the little girl. Once again, the atmosphere of mirage returns as a soldier believes to see something that turns out to be something else. The home-made video footage captures the facial expression of the girl lying on the ground and Lilley ashamedly asks Christenson to turn the camera off (see fig. 92).

Fig. 92. The little girl in the home video

In *Generation Kill*, by showing graphic corporeal violation, especially of a child, this scene functions as a way to portray the consequences of the invasion for the Iraqi civilians and the contradiction between the promises of a war of liberation and the trail of casualties left by the military. If the iconography of the road movie genre includes a "vast, open landscape bordered by seductive horizons" (Laderman 14), this scene demonstrates that war shrinks such horizons and turns them into an open graveyard. The ideal of the "promising horizon" in the road movie becomes a nightmare of grotesque and horrific conclusions in war cinema.

The focus of the second episode on the experiences of the Marines on the highways and their immersion in urban environments highlights the imagery of movement as well as destructive violence, to both people and place, shifting the focus of the series to themes of power and dominance. Some of the road movie genre conventions that are evoked in the episode, such as the sensual power of mobility, the presence and importance of music, and the visual appeal of sightseeing are subverted for particular critical purposes. As the American forces move past the cities of Iraq, a trail of immobility and destruction is left behind represented by the burned vehicles, and the sights seen through the Humvee windows are recorded in video. The road movie motif of music as a form of agency is also subverted by the re-purposing of popular songs to express cultural and ethnic dominance.

3.3 "They keep making the same mistakes": Rebellion Against Shooting in Error

Episode 3, entitled "Screwby," further portrays the issue of how the mirage of war and its deceptive perceptions in the landscape of combat can lead to disastrous consequences and fabricated results. As the soldiers continue to pass through Iraqi cities, they heavily rely on the use of

technology in their daily lives, not only with the Humvees and weapons, but also the radio communication among the vehicles. *Generation Kill* foregrounds radio transmissions as a significant element of contemporary warfare by portraying the soldiers constantly exchanging information through the radio as well as recordings of radio conversations that are played in the opening and closing credits of each episode. Daughtry comments that during the Iraq War, "as a technology of combat, service members valued their communication links almost as much as they did their weapons" (50). Radio communications "enabled listening to serve as a surrogate for sight and distance as a simulacrum of presence" (Daughtry 50) since the soldiers are able to talk to commanders, get authorizations, understand situations that are happening outside their visual field, and exchange tactical information. However well-equipped the Marines in *Generation Kill* are regarding means of communication, their effectiveness in terms of exchanging valuable information that impacts the lives of the Iraqi civilians is questioned in an early scene of the third episode.

The soldiers' passage through Iraq is conducted both on the back roads that connect the isolated areas of the country as well as on the main highways. As the Marines are stationed near a small village in a rural neighborhood, they make use of the natural features of the surroundings to blend in and observe the behavior of the local population. In a medium shot, Colbert and Sergeant Eric Kocher (Owain Yeoman) hide behind tall vegetation and watch the residents of a hamlet with gun scopes and binoculars (see fig. 93). Their point-of-view shot depicts women working their daily tasks alongside children (see fig. 94). Through a radio communication, Fick informs the soldiers: "Eyes on the village confirm no enemy presence." In this case, the intermeshing between their immersion in the local nature and the technological means to spread valuable information works seamlessly. Closer to the location, Private John Christenson (Daniel Fox) and Corporal Evan Stafford (Wilson Bethel) are also observing the hamlet and drawing pictures of the houses, evoking a basic structure that can be found in any residence regardless of location: doors, windows, entrances, and exits (see fig. 95). Stafford's drawing registers what will later become a visual memory of the hamlet and a reminder of its function as a home.

Fig. 93. Watching the hamlet

Fig. 94. POV shot

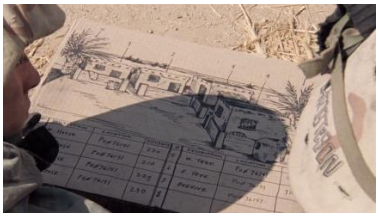

Fig. 95. The drawing of the hamlet

While Colbert and Kocher have a casual conversation, the sound of vehicles and a helicopter can be heard. They recognize the soldiers who arrive as part of another team, RCT One (Regimental Combat Team) also in the First Marine Division. These soldiers position themselves in front of Colbert and Kocher and open fire in the hamlet. Technological communication fails to prevent a massacre since the two units do not have radio contact between them. Colbert helplessly yells "cease fire" but the sounds of the bullets drown his voice. He then uses his radio to warn all the platoons that he can reach, "We've been observing this hamlet. It's only women and children. Do not engage." Their own company commander, Captain Craig Schwetje (Brian Wade), who is able to receive Colbert's message, fires grenades in the direction of the village. Once again, Colbert powerlessly shouts to him, "Sir, they're shooting that hamlet in error. Sir, we don't have any comms with RCT One and they're shooting that hamlet in error." Not only is communicational malfunction responsible for this disastrous event, but poor leadership as well, as the captain throws the radio handset inside the Humvee to better aim his weapon, thus missing the transmission from Colbert.

The total destruction of the hamlet is achieved when a helicopter fires a missile that explodes the entire structure of houses. The aftermath of the explosion is depicted as Colbert gloomily looks at the hamlet and a panning shot surveys the damage done to the structure (see fig. 96). The ruins of the village show bombed walls, fire, and smoke, but no sign of life. The once active environment registered by Stafford in his drawing

has turned into an unrecognizable alien space, with no resemblance to its former self, now only a ghostly memory in the path of the invasion.

Fig. 96. Colbert watches the aftermath of the bombing

This incident reverberates as Colbert meets with the team leaders to assess their upcoming missions. While discussing the next towns they will go through, Colbert abruptly changes the topic by saying to Fick, "Sir, in that last hamlet, all it took was one shot. That was just an undisciplined grunt from RCT One. Everybody opened up and schwacked it over nothing. . . . I know you all saw our own C.O. try to fire off a 203 round in the middle of all that."[23] The seeds of rebellion against higher authority have been present throughout the episodes when soldiers ridicule the actions of their superiors, but this particular incident underlines the consequences of poor leadership in the warfare scenario since it demonstrates the deadly reach of military decisions. The Marines are portrayed as part of a system that functions on hierarchy and automatic acceptance of orders. However, although this is the environment they inhabit, *Generation Kill* often depicts the soldiers questioning their assignments. The Marines do not rebel to the point of mutiny, although they do challenge and criticize their superiors.

Within the war film genre, an example of rebellious behavior can be observed in *Saving Private Ryan* when the soldiers, physically and mentally tired of the fruitless search for Ryan, challenge their mission by balancing the significance of their lives and the missing soldier. Such lack of trust in the military decisions of a higher command is also present in Capt. Fick's written observations about orders that endanger soldiers' lives. In his memoir, he points out that the "cracks in my trust were getting wider, growing into chasms, filling with fear and rage, sorrow and regret" (240). By the end of his memoir, he confesses, "I had so completely lost faith in my commander that I couldn't follow his orders" (304).

[23] C.O. stands for Commanding Officer, in this case, Captain Schwetje. A 203 round comes from a grenade launcher.

The misuse of authority in order to receive recognition from higher officers becomes the focus of a following sequence in the episode as Colonel Ferrando insists on attacking an Iraqi airfield without any reconnaissance of the opposing forces. He hurriedly dispatches the Marines in Humvees to fight against an enemy force that is ostensibly protected by tanks in order to arrive ahead of British troops who are also deploying to the airfield. This sequence highlights the power of the vehicles in motion and evokes the iconography of action and combat films. One of the first images is a traveling shot accompanying the Humvees speeding through the dry vegetation (see fig. 97) that highlights the aggressiveness of motion and the soldiers' readiness for combat at an accelerated pace. Such a depiction "convey[s] a visceral sense of traveling at a hyperhuman, modernized speed" (Laderman 15). The roaring engines, the close-up of fast-moving tires, the shaky camera, and the quick editing construct this scene as a tense build-up for the confrontation in the airfield. As the Humvees go up a small hill, the vehicles struggle and skid, but eventually overcome the obstacle. Determination to attack and movement in unity are foregrounded as the Humvees align to enter the paved area of the airfield (see fig. 98). Until this moment, only the American vehicles are portrayed, creating a sense of suspense regarding what waits for them in the airfield.

Fig. 97. Humvees in dry vegetation

Fig. 98. Vehicles aligning

Due to its military importance, the airfield has frequently appeared in war cinema as a platform for heightened wartime experiences. In *Band of Brothers*, the airfield in England becomes the gateway from which the American airplanes leave for D-Day, the official start of the paratroopers' engagement with the war. *The Pacific* (Spielberg, Hanks, and Goetzman prods. 2011), another miniseries that deals with the Second World War, focusing on the Pacific theater, foregrounds the airfield as a slaughtering ground by portraying the bloody assault on Peleliu Airfield against the Japanese, an initiation to violence for some of the recently arrived soldiers. The improvised airfield in *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola 1979) is

the starting point for the senseless aerial attack on a village accompanied by the soundtrack of Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries." War cinema presents the location of the airfield as a space of anticipation, a site of adrenalized excitement surrounded by the technology and weapons of war.

In *Generation Kill*, the soldiers start firing the moment they enter the airfield, but soon a radio communication informs the Marines that the tanks "appear to be stationary. No personnel. . . . I have an unmanned ZPU-57 tac-2, appears to be abandoned."[24] The vehicles halt in the deserted airfield in a shot that foregrounds the illusion of the assault (see fig. 99). Similarly to the first sequence in episode 1, in which they train in the desert, the action style in terms of shots and camera movements is employed here only to reveal the fact that the Iraqi threat is illusory, a tactical mirage. The airfield is not a threating space but a static zone. *Generation Kill* makes use of iconic framings of action scenes that build the anticipation of imminent combat spectacle, employing a kinetic visual style that would typically culminate in explosions and heroic action. Ironically, the scene leads instead to the display of a cynical, deceptive manipulation on the part of the C.O., as Ferrando communicates his territorial dominance to the higher command over the radio, "We have seized the enemy airfield. Early reports are we've captured several enemy tanks and self-propelled triple-A batteries. It appears that we've overrun the entire 255th mechanized regiment who have fled. And, sir, we've sustained zero casualties." His version of the story seems to indicate a heroic victory while nothing actually happened. The attack on the airfield is portrayed as a mirage constructed to win glory and appreciation from the superiors, highlighting the distortion of military reports of conquests in contrast to what truly takes place on the battlefield.

Fig. 99. The ghost airfield

[24] ZPU-57 tac-2 is an anti-aircraft machine gun.

After the assault on the airfield, the Marines are stationed nearby waiting for the moment to leave for the next town. While they stay put, a group of locals comes looking for help. This sequence happens toward the end of this episode and crystalizes the portrayal of the consequences of the Marines' actions on the Iraqi civilians and the spirit of rebellion that surrounds the soldiers. It is through the camouflage nets that Doc sees the locals dragging something toward the American encampment (see fig. 100). In an over-the-shoulder shot showing Doc's perspective as he approaches the Iraqis, the arid ground becomes a focal point due to the vastness of the territory in which they find themselves, but also the sound of sand being crushed as the two women pull something very heavy, a wounded boy (see fig. 101). Soon, another group of locals arrive carrying another boy and the Americans rush to provide medical support. After examining the boy's injuries, Doc concludes that he has been shot by a weapon fired by a Marine. The translator Meesh casually observes, "These mistakes are unavoidable in war," only to be met with opposition by Doc's angry comments, "Bullshit, we're fucking Recon Marines. Whole fucking job is to observe, and not make these kinds of mistakes. And we don't fucking shoot unarmed kids." The soldier who shot the two kids and their camels is Trombley, an incident that happened during their way to the airfield assault. As Doc is informed of the person responsible for the shooting, he asks Colbert, "Why don't we bring Trombley here to see what he's done?" By avoiding clichés of heroism and patriotism, the miniseries centers on the effects on the Iraqi civilians as a way to measure the impact of the American presence in the country.

Fig. 100. Through the camo nets

Fig. 101. Dragging the boy's body

Following the first medical assessment, Doc requests that the boy be evacuated to a medical station for proper care, without which he will not survive. Ferrando, however, does not authorize his evacuation. In an attempt to change Ferrando's mind, they take the injured boy to the front of the colonel's tent. A medium long shot depicts four soldiers, Doc, Colbert, Fick, and Lieutenant Alex Aubin (Andrew Spicer), the battalion

surgeon, standing outside Ferrando's tent (see fig. 102). This sequence represents rebellion against military orders that ignore human suffering, and that in fact violate the Rules of Engagement, which state that the Marines have to provide care for any civilian wounded by the American military until the person dies.

Fig. 102. Marines in rebellion

The spirit of revolt against the norms of a micro-society like the military environment, which has its own private set of rules, can be compared to the road movie's core element of rebellion against society. Holohan comments that in the genre, "hitting the road is depicted as a rejection of the mores and hypocrisies of society and an assertion of a radically different . . . vision of how to live in the world" (22). In the miniseries, instead of using movement to protest, the soldiers act in the opposite way, they stand still. This sequence can be linked to what Lie calls a "counter-road movie" element in the narrative (15). In this alternative to the traditional idea of the road film, the counter-road movie provides "a more acute form of hampered movement" and raises a reflection on mobility "through its opposite: stasis" (15). Instead of the display of speed and motion, there is a focus on a petrification of movements and stagnation. The stasis of the Marines emerges from a rebellion against the indifference of their own military system, or as Devin Orgeron points out in relation to road movie genre, a revolt "against the corrosion of the substantial and buoying myths that once sustained [the protagonists]" (7). By making this demonstration, the Marines are voicing their resistance against the military's inhumane decision of letting the boy perish. This scene functions as a reminder that while the soldiers are winning campaign ribbons for taking out ghost airfields, the people who live in the territory suffer the consequences of the invasive and the threatening presence of the military.

One of the last scenes of this episode features a conversation that makes clear the acknowledgment of the Iraqi civilians, not only as

potential threats, but as human beings. Fick and Gunnery Sergeant Mike Wynn (Marc Menchaca) gather Colbert, Person, and Trombley to talk about the incident with the little boy. The focus of the conversation becomes Trombley's violent behavior enacted in motion from the Humvee, a sequence that recalls the sense of intolerance and eagerness for brutality in the drive-by portrayed in *Easy Rider* where the two protagonists are shot down by redneck drivers. The Marines evaluate the actions of the day while standing at night by the Humvee in a circle. Wynn explains the situation by saying:

> Look, guys, we're Americans. We must make sure when we take a shot that we are threatened. You gotta see that these people are just like you. You gotta see past the huts, the camels, the different clothes they wear. These are people in this fucking country. This family here might lose a son. We shot their camels too. One camel could be a year's income to them. We're not here to destroy their way of life.

Wynn's speech about equality and respect can be seen as a significant moment in *Generation Kill* since it brings to the foreground a critical perspective that is opposed to the dehumanization of the Iraqis. By pointing out something that should be obvious, the fact that the Iraqis are also people and deserve to be treated with consideration, the miniseries momentarily shifts the focus from the emotional and physical experiences of the American soldiers to the local inhabitants in what could be seen as an attempt to bridge the gap of distinction between the two sides. Trombley's act of violence, a consequence of his constant lust for blood, is held up for evaluation

In *Generation Kill*, Wynn's words demonstrate a desire to focus on the similarities and an attempt to install a state of equality that seems to be far from the reality of the context, as highlighted in Trombley's behavior. Although the miniseries continually depicts the mistreatment of the Iraqis by the military and the disastrous consequences of violence to the social fabric of the cities, Wynn's speech offers a sensible view of what the relationship between soldiers and locals should be, a lesson that is lamentably not followed in the remaining episodes. In direct contrast to Wynn's words, Trombley's response is aloof and without any evidence of remorse, strengthening the idea of him being a "total psycho." Instead of providing sorrowful comments, Trombley redirects the responsibility

of shooting the boys from himself to the military hierarchy by saying that he was only following Colbert's orders to fire the weapon. This situation in the miniseries also provides an example of how the same war event can be seen through multiple lenses according to the soldiers' necessities and motivations. Wynn's words seem to bring a much-needed appreciation of cultural and social understanding, but Trombley's extreme obsession with violence portrays the problematic scenario in which the pathologies of American culture are highlighted.

3.4. "When the Man Comes Around"

In its remaining episodes, *Generation Kill* provides many other instances of road interaction between soldiers and locals in the Iraqi landscapes, continually bringing to the surface issues related to racial dominance, destruction of villages and cities, displacement, and poor leadership. These depictions slowly delineate the process of occupation that would historically take place in the subsequent years of the invasion. The Marines steadily question themselves about their role in the conflict and the consequences of their acts. In episode 6, "Stay Frosty," Espera wonders about the moral repercussion of their conduct: "Do you realize the shit that we've done here, the people we've killed? Back in the civilian world, dawg, if we did this, we could go to prison." In the same conversation, Colbert answers: "You're thinking like a Mexican again. Think like a white man. Over there, they'll be laying on the medals for what we did." Once again, the interpretation of war seems to be relegated to the perspective of the viewer, what appears to be true to one person is an illusory impression for someone else. Although the miniseries offers these two ways to understand the actions of the American soldiers in the Iraq War, the last sequence of the final episode seems to sway its critique towards Espera's opinion.

In episode 7, "Bomb in the Garden," the footage from Lilley's homemade movies is edited into a film and screened on his laptop for all the Marines who are eagerly assembled (see fig. 103). The images that appear in the beginning show them in moments of relaxation and camaraderie (see fig. 104). The soldiers cheer as the film presents weapons being fired and buildings exploding. It is when the images of slaughter begin to be alternated with comical scenes that the soldiers begin to leave one by one. The film shows the bodies of the dead Iraqis alongside the road and in exploded cars, as they appeared in the miniseries. There is a point in which not all images are recognizable from the episodes since some of the scenes are from real footage (see fig. 105).

Explosions, burning vehicles, dead bodies, they all construct an unpleasant display of the consequences of the war. The visual legacy left by the Marines in the Iraq War is composed in this film-inside-a-miniseries as a problematic heritage in the national imaginary, one that invites reflection by witnessing the effects not only of fictional footage but images taken directly from the war zone.

Fig. 103. Marines are assembled

Fig. 104. Displays of camaraderie

Fig. 105. Real footage

This is the only scene in the entire miniseries that features a recorded song by an artist as opposed to being sung by the Marines themselves. Johnny Cash's "The Man Comes Around" plays as the soldiers watch the film. The song is filled with biblical references and refers to the issue of final judgment. In contrast to the popular songs played throughout the miniseries, Cash's lyrics bring a maturity to the final moment of the episode in which there is a sense of critical recollection of one's actions during life. His words "There's a man going around taking names / And he decides who to free and who to blame" indicate a call for life assessment. In the context of *Generation Kill*, the song urges a necessary moment for remembrance of the Iraq War and the examination of the legacy that will be left of this moment in history. The scenes in Lilley's film call attention to the vast visual archive that accompanies today's warfare and that a nation's memory of an armed conflict is very much impacted by the images that it produces.

Generation Kill depicts the American experience in the Iraq War by focusing on the consequences of a violent movement through the

country's landscape. The cultural and social experiences registered in the far-reaching deserts, secluded villages, and populated urban centers are intrinsically connected to the multiple ways that war can be experienced by its participants. The war film as a road film focuses on how the journey through the Iraqi territory might be seen as an exciting undertaking, a gruesome moment of devastation for the local inhabitants, or the staging of deep social and cultural pathologies. Some other road movie genre markings, such as the role of the road itself and the symbiosis of the travelers with the technology found in the vehicles, appear in the miniseries as platforms for discussion of issues of conquest, as the soldiers invade Iraq one village after another, and dominance in both cultural terms and destructive power. The act of bombarding a building can stimulate a thrilling response from the Marines because of its visual spectacle or a resentful criticism due to the brutality of the act. One of the road movie genre cues, the act of rebellion, is also present in the miniseries as it portrays the Marines' skeptical behavior towards superior orders and their subsequent denial to follow them. While depicting such mutinous behavior, the episodes offer a social critique through the foregrounding of military mistakes and the questioning of the soldiers' own journey in the territory. By recording such motion in the land, as well as providing an internal visual archive with Lilley's film, *Generation Kill* emphasizes the act of remembering multiple perspectives of the historical event without focusing solely on patriotic viewpoints, but allowing ideas of racial prejudice, pathological behaviors, territorial dominance, and technological sovereignty to be depicted and memorialized as one of the legacies of the Iraq War.

CHAPTER 4

"Camouflage yourself in me"[25]: The Senses and Soundscape of the Iraqi Desert in *The Wall*

> "If a body is what you want,
> then here is bone and gristle and flesh.
> . . . Because here, Bullet,
> here is where I complete the word you bring
> hissing through the air, here is where I moan
> the barrel's cold esophagus, triggering
> my tongue's explosives for the rifling I have
> inside of me, each twist of the round
> spun deeper, because here, Bullet,
> here is where the world ends, every time."
> (Brian Turner)[26]

In the immensity of the Iraqi deserts, *The Wall* (Liman 2017) contains its events within the confines of a deteriorated wall not far from a gigantic trash pile. These two sites, surrounded by long stretches of sandy terrain, become the modern-day version of a trench or foxhole for the two main characters of the film. Each one located on an opposite side, they are protected by either piled rocks or assorted discarded materials and establish an acoustic bridge of communication through the radio. As the Iraqi character remains a hidden figure throughout the film, his disembodied voice becomes a symbolic mechanism for the all-around threat so generally associated with contemporary warfare. In the scene analysis of this chapter, I use Michel Chion's definition of the *acousmêtre* to further analyze the representation of power in the Iraqi voice without a body and its unknown and menacing presence to the American military.

The sensuous experience of hearing is foregrounded in the film by depicting its blending of corporeal sensations and mediation through technological equipment, in this case, the radio. Also, the wall itself is depicted as offering a dualistic architectural meaning, at times providing a sense of protection while signifying a site of major material and cultural destruction. The experience of warfare is constructed in a unique manner since the classical ideology associated with the heroic and indestructible figure of the American soldier is subverted in the film. The focus on the

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[25] Line spoken by Sergeant Allen Isaac in *The Wall* (01:16:49).

[26] This poem is written by the American soldier-poet Brian Turner and is part of his book *Here, Bullet* which deals with his experiences in the Iraq War.

protagonist's tormented interior life and sense of guilt along with the unconventional ending do not provide a sense of final redemption for the soldier but offer a critique that highlights the endless cycle of violence in contemporary war.

The Wall takes place during the Iraq War in the last months of 2007, after five years of protracted combat in the country. The narrative begins as a reconnaissance mission to figure out who is responsible for killing all the contractors that were working in a pipeline construction site. It later concentrates on the verbal interaction through the radio between the American soldier Sergeant Allen Isaac (Aaron Taylor-Johnson) and the voice of the Iraqi sniper called Juba (Laith Nakli). *The Wall* immerses Isaac in the Iraqi desert with its blinding sandstorms and burning heat, but unlike the traditional combat film, grounds him to one location for the majority of the narrative. There is a claustrophobic sense of being attached to one position in the middle of an open desert. The film lacks explosions and heroic sacrifices and focuses on vocal details of the soundscape generated by their conversation and the themes that are approached in their verbal confrontation. Isaac's body and Juba's disembodiment become sensorial reference points in the discussion of issues such as survival, the meaning and aftermath of war, and power dominance.

4.1 A Ghost in the Desert

Senses have an active role in constructing perceptions of space and structuring a sense of a world based on previous experiences and expectations. Derek Gregory's notion of corpography emphasizes how soldiers rely on the senses "in order to apprehend and navigate the field of battle" ("The Natures of War" 14). Sight, hearing, smell, and touch become tools to intimately apprehend the combat zone and adapt to its geographical and tactical particularities. Of all the five senses, two of them stand out as being critical for tactics and survival in *The Wall*: sight and hearing. Through these two senses, the characters immerse themselves and navigate the space of war with the aid of technology, whether by the use of gunsights, scopes or radios. Paul Rodaway explains that "the sensuous−the experience of the senses−is the ground base on which a wider geographical understanding can be constructed" (3). He observes that perception through senses is done based on the sense organs of the body in active connection with "mental preconceptions (individual training, cultural conditioning)" (11). To interact in an environment by using one's senses is more than just an experience of activating the

physical abilities of, for instance, seeing and hearing, but a process of bringing forth cultural perceptions that leads to conclusions about the surroundings. As Rodaway points out, "we see, hear, smell, taste and touch the world through mediation, the filter or lens, of our social milieu, the context within which we have become socialised, educated and familiarised" (23). This will prove itself true as the characters in the film filter the information gathered by the senses through their own cultural and social background.

The experience on the battlefield is the focus of Gregory's work as he explains that the disorientation of the senses during the First World War caused soldiers to experience mud, one of the iconic elements of the Great War, as "possessing a diabolical agency" ("The Natures of War" 12) that both confused the senses and took lives altogether. Soldiers during the Vietnam War contemplated the notion that "their intimate, intensely corporeal violation by the jungle itself" ("The Natures of War" 61) was one of the greatest opposing forces that clouded their senses and understanding of the surroundings. The sensorial immersion into an intense natural environment prompts the formation of the body into a unique instrument in combat. In *The Wall*, the heat of the Iraqi desert, its dry atmosphere and sheer remoteness are often causes of physical weariness and psychological disorientation, constructing nature as a space of sensorial malfunction.

The first image of *The Wall* foregrounds sight as one of the major senses to be explored in the film. The point-of-view (POV) shot through the gunsight calmly lingers on an object in the distance, and remains steady for approximately twenty seconds, as if watching it with commitment (see fig. 106). The image in the crosshairs shows a partially destroyed wall, in which there seems to be a doorway, but no further dimension of the structure is visible. In the beginning of the film, the sight of the wall carries no other meaning but a shattered rock facade in the middle of the desert. Silence floods the screen until a subtle sigh and the words "nothing, hit and run" introduce a character's voice but not his physical image. The disembodied voice soon receives its visual reference in the following shot. Hidden in the middle of the dry vegetation, Staff Sergeant Shane Matthews (John Cena) is immobile behind his rifle (see fig. 107). Isaac, on the other hand, is introduced in the opposite way, his silent figure pops up from the vegetation, near a dry bush on the left side of the screen, and his voice is only heard after a few seconds (see fig. 108). By alternately concealing and disclosing sights and sounds in the initial part of the narrative, *The Wall* introduces a perception of the environment through a sensorial navigation of the space of war.

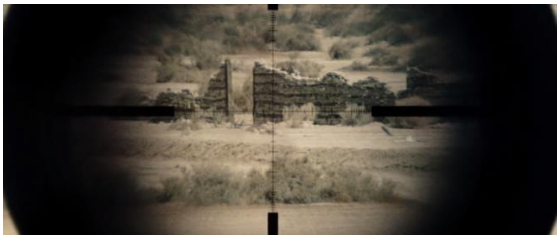

Fig. 106. Watching the wall from a distance

Fig. 107. Matthews is camouflaged

Fig. 108. Isaac hides behind a bush

As Matthews and Isaac watch through their scopes the pipeline construction site in which the bodies of the dead contractors are scattered, the film depicts both their intimate connection with the equipment in close-ups and their POV shots (see figs. 109 and 110). The constant editing between the act of looking through the scopes and the detailed viewpoint image demonstrates that technology is not only an additional tool in the film but a vital element. Similarly to *Lone Survivor*, in *The Wall*, technology is essential to survival. Due to the remoteness of their location, long-distance radio communications are necessary. Throughout the film, their intimacy with technological equipment plays an important role, and malfunction or loss of such tools correspond to life threatening situations. Like the isolated mountains of the Hindu Kush, the Iraqi deserts are associated with a menacing environment. In the close-up shots, the expressions on the faces of the characters convey fatigue and their battered skin illustrates the effects of long exposure to sun and dust in the desert. The unforgiving hot weather weighs in the tactical and survival decisions.

Fig. 109. Isaac looking through his scope

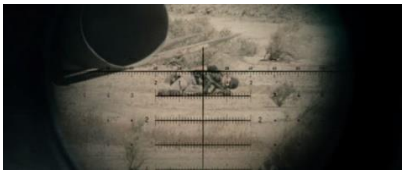

Fig. 110. Isaac's POV shot

It is during their conversation that the construction of the character Juba takes shape as a powerful figure. Due to the swiftness with which the construction workers are killed at the site, most of them with headshots, the two soldiers wonder whether the sniper responsible for the deaths is a professional. Matthews asks Isaac, "We're dealing with Juba now?", making reference to the sniper who became famous in the Iraq War for his expertise and elusiveness. Rory Carroll in the online edition of *The Guardian* describes the legendary figure: "Juba is the nickname given by American forces to an insurgent sniper operating in southern Baghdad. They do not know his appearance, nationality or real name, but they know and fear his skill." Carroll's article mentions that when talking about Juba, American soldiers describe him with phrases such as "he's good," "he's a serious threat to us," and "he's very well trained and very patient." Juba is not necessarily one person, but a concept. He represents the ultimate threat for the American soldiers as a source of uneasiness since his professional skill set resembles that of a soldier in the Special Forces in terms of abilities, strength, and swiftness.

The mysterious figure of the sniper Juba is introduced in the film alongside other equally enigmatic elements, such as the wall as a cursed site and the possession of the scope as a sign of bad luck. In *The Wall*, the sensual geography that Gregory describes is extended to a kind of extrasensory perception as another way to navigate the combat zone. Through intuition, Isaac confesses, "I'm just saying, that wall's cursed. . . . I'm scared of what's behind it." As if in a foretelling of his own fate, Isaac ascribes a sense of doom to the site of the wall although he does not see or hear anything coming from that direction. This is the beginning of the construction of the wall as a place of sorrow, not only for the soldier, but for the past history of that location as the narrative further reveals that it used to be a school. Another instance of supernatural attribution to an object is when Matthews comments on Isaac's use of his deceased teammate's scope during the mission: "Bad juju carrying around a dead man's scope." By acknowledging the possibility of an object being haunted by a bad aura, *The Wall* transcends the use of the five senses during wartime and adds a layer of intuition to the perception of the soldiers. Other war films that depict the Iraq War also rely on the representation of superstitions and a sixth sense among the soldiers. The Marines in the miniseries *Generation Kill* (Simon prod. 2008) find it a sign of extreme bad luck to eat "Charms," a candy that comes in the MREs (Meal, Ready to Eat) provided by the military. They throw the candy away with the conviction that it is cursed and the cause of misfortunes. In *Thank You for Your Service* (Hall 2017), the sixth sense is foregrounded

in the job of looking for bombs on the Iraqi roads as Sergeant Adam Schumann (Miles Teller) claims in a voice over, "You don't see the bomb unless they want you to. You sense it. You just know." When driving on a narrow street in Baghdad, he stops the vehicle and without any visual or aural cue, senses the risk while one of his teammates observes, "[He] don't see it. He feels it." The Iraq War is then portrayed in the aforementioned films as a conflict governed by tactical rules, but also unseen forces that highlight the atmosphere of all-around threat attributed to contemporary war. As in Gregory's notion of corpography, the soldiers re-map the geographical experience of the combat zone in a series of "improvisational, learned accommodations to military violence" ("Corpographies" 33), making use of what sensorial ability more appropriately guides them in each particular situation.

Until this moment in the narrative of *The Wall*, Juba inhabits a hypothetical realm, with no voice or body to verify his existence. Even though he does not appear through auditory or visual means, his haunting presence can be felt in the choice of shots depicting the landscape of the construction site and the soldiers. Initially, as Matthews decides to go down to the construction site, two shots represent a static point of view that silently watches the soldier arrive. In a military state of mind that considers danger coming from all directions, every object and corner may conceal a threat. The first image is an extreme long shot from the top of a pipe structure that stretches towards the horizon on the left side of the screen (see fig. 111). Matthews, a small figure on the right side, walks in the direction of the location. The vastness of the desert landscape combined with the eerie absence of local sound can be connected to the remoteness of the location and the vulnerability of the soldiers. The second image echoes this feeling, but now from under the pipeline as Matthews slowly walks toward the site enveloped in dust (see fig. 112). The shots highlight the corporeal vulnerability of the Marines while constructing a sense of an unknown and intimidating presence that patiently observes their movements, as if waiting for the soldiers to leave their safe position of camouflage up the hill and disclose themselves in open air.

Fig. 111. Shot from the top of the pipeline

Fig. 112. From under the pipes

In opposition to the static shots and steady camera movements used to portray Matthews' arrival in the construction site, the camera style becomes more erratic and unsteady as soon as the soldier realizes that all the deadly wounds are unquestionably headshots. This fact had already been established by Isaac up in the hill, but Matthews' immersion in the eerie space seems to stir up a greater feeling of uneasiness. The construction site that once used to be active is now relinquished to the function of a cemetery ground, with all the scattered bodies creating a somber environment. The handheld camera gets closer to Matthews and while keeping him in a close-up, encircles his figure in a 360-degree movement (see fig. 113). A menacing presence is much more prominent in this sequence, as the tense atmosphere of being watched is translated by the circular motion of the camera. Matthews nervously exclaims "something's not right" and looks around in a clear depiction of his spatial disorientation. When Isaac asks him through the radio if he can tell where the shots came from, Matthews freezes, unable to figure out the direction. Matthews then gets shot and lies on the sand in a position similar to one of the bodies that he had previously encountered on the site (see figs. 114 and 115). The surrounding space of the wall as a place of sorrow echoes not only through the already dead bodies of the contractors, but in the similar fate of the two Marines at the mercy of an unfamiliar deadly force that so far has been bodyless and voiceless.

Fig. 113. The camera encircles Matthews


Fig. 114. A contractor's body on the site


Fig. 115. Matthews' similar position

The battlefield in *The Wall* can be perceived as an uncanny space, a site where the strangeness of combat is highlighted. The term "Battlefield Gothic," coined by Samuel Hynes, encompasses this eerie atmosphere that relies on sensory perception of grotesque sights during war (26). According to Hynes, "the presence of death and the ways it is present" in soldiers' testimonies of combat possess an element of strangeness that blends the physicality of the devastating sights and the perception of horror (19). In the film, Juba's menacing and hidden presence associated with a vast terrain punctuated with dead bodies construct a general feeling of strangeness. Both American soldiers are arrested by the strange environment and consequently struggle to navigate the warspace. Their attempts of "seeing and smelling and feeling war" (Hynes 27) demonstrate a sensorial immersion into the eerie atmosphere that perfuses their experience during the film.

4.2 "You got an accent. Not American": The *Acousmêtre* Speaks

As Isaac goes down the hill to help his teammate, he is shot at several times from an unknown source. Two of them hit the equipment on Isaac's back and another one wounds his leg, around the knee area. In pain and disoriented, Isaac manages to limp his way to the wall and throw himself over it, where he remains cornered for the majority of the film. That is when the communication with Juba starts through the radio. From this moment on in the narrative, sounds become essential to the interaction and the smallest detail in such an exchange makes the difference in building a perception of the situation. Rodaway uses the term "auditory geographies" to refer to "the sensuous experience of sounds in the environment and the acoustic properties of that environment through the employment of the auditory perceptual system" (84). In *The Wall*, the stillness of the desert causes the radio communication to be centered on understanding space through hearing. Therefore, sound and space are foregrounded as elements that not only provide means for tactical communication but enable the characters to involve one another

in a battle of cultural and social viewpoints regarding issues of domination, superiority, and violence.

The initial contact between Isaac and Juba is portrayed in the film through the use of the radio earpiece. As Isaac is passed out, leaning against the wall, a voice that "wander[s] the surface of the screen" (Chion 4) can be heard coming from his earpiece. The voice is distant and has a military radio sound effect. Its source and identity are unknown, but it already demonstrates its power by waking Isaac up. A close-up shot depicts the moment in which the voice reaches Isaac, as the earpiece is featured in the foreground while Isaac opens his eyes in the background, awaken by the voice (see fig. 116). Sound coming from the radio symbolizes hope, the construction of an unseen bridge that can possibly lead to survival. It is when Isaac properly puts the earpiece on, in order to better hear the communication, that Juba's voice floods the screen.

Fig. 116. Isaac's earpiece

The presence of Juba's disembodied voice in the film can be linked to what Michel Chion calls the *acousmêtre*. According to Chion, an acousmatic sound is one that can be heard but its source cannot be identified, therefore "when the acousmatic presence is a voice, and especially when this voice has not yet been visualized−that is, when we cannot yet connect it to a face−we get a special being, a kind of talking and acting shadow to which we attach the name *acousmêtre*" (21). The presence of the *acousmêtre* is surrounded by a mysterious atmosphere since "he must haunt the borderlands that are neither the interior of the filmic stage nor the proscenium−a place that has no name" (24). Chion explains that one of the main characteristics of such disembodied voice that has no fixed spatial position in the film is to bring unbalance and strain to the narrative, creating situations where the characters are faced with personal dilemmas and intense feelings (24). In *The Wall*, Juba fits the necessary properties of an *acousmêtre*, a voice who has the power to orchestrate the characters' fates and direct the narrative towards the desire to witness the revelation of his existence.

The beginning of their conversation has a very different tone from the rest of the film since at first Isaac believes that the voice in his radio is from an American soldier. As Isaac requests extraction, he trusts the disembodied voice with tactical information. His preconceptions surrounding the unseen figure on the other end of the radio transmission are connected to a sense of reliability, an assurance in the faithfulness of the military system. His relief in securing help is visually presented when he sighs and assures Matthews that they will go home. In this moment, Isaac's point of view is a panning shot that depicts a barren and dusty desert landscape in the background while the foreground shows piles of stones that faintly resemble the structure of a house (see fig. 117). This shot is a reminder of his isolation and an emphasis on the urgency of radio communication.

Fig. 117. The desert landscape

The *acousmêtre*'s power to obtain privileged knowledge is already demonstrated while Juba is still under the cover of an American accent. As Chion remarks, one of the powers attributed to the *acousmêtre* is omniscience, a capacity to know it all (27). When Isaac becomes suspicious for the first time of the identity of the voice, Juba replies by giving a detailed description of the mission to be carried out by Isaac and Matthews. The voice's knowledge of such specific information, that only military level personnel could have access to, is enough to convince Isaac of his authenticity. Once again, the trust in the military system reassures the soldier that the situation in under control although he cannot visually confirm the identity of the voice.

A combination of military protocol breach and a glitch in Juba's accent are the causes for the disclosure of the true identity of the *acousmêtre*. In an attempt to spot Isaac's exact location, the voice asks him to stand and fire his gun into the air. The soldier scoffs at the untoward order and exclaims that it is not protocol. By stepping outside the military set of rules, Juba creates an environment of distrust, a breach

in soldierly conduct. When Juba pronounces the word "sergeant," particularly the sound of the letter "r," Isaac notices that the voice's accent is not necessarily American, enhancing the atmosphere of suspicion. *The Wall* focuses on fine sonic details to construct the narrative in the space of the desert through the medium of the radio. According to R. Murray Schafer, the remote sonic environment of the desert can be seen as a "hi-fi soundscape" where "discrete sounds can be heard clearly because of the low ambient noise level" (43). In the film, sonic specificities in the conversation between the characters, such as accent, intonation, time of response, and background noises are significant in the construction of the unseen figure on each end of the radio transmission.

Another power that Chion associates with the *acousmêtre* is the ability to see everything or, as he calls it, panopticism. The author explains that "the one who is not in the visual field is in the best position to see everything that is happening. The one you don't see is in the best position to see you−at least this is the power you attribute to him" (24). When Juba speaks in his own Arabic accent, "you have seen through my camouflage. . . . I'm talking about hiding behind words. Like you are hiding behind that wall," his power to have a full vision of the surroundings becomes evident to Isaac since the soldier had not mentioned the existence of the wall in the radio communication. Juba camouflages his voice by reproducing an American accent, similar, in some ways to camouflage adopted by Isaac and Matthews in the beginning of the film, with tree branches and leaves attached to their uniform. Trying to blend in with the surroundings by either merging with nature or impersonating someone represents warfare as a game in which the ability to transform and adapt are essential tools for survival.

In order to better determine Juba's position, Isaac uses a sniper technique called "crack-bang" that combines sound, space, and time. According to John L. Plaster,

> high-power rifle bullets travel supersonically, creating a sonic boom, which causes a loud (and unforgettable) 'crack!' if it passes anywhere near you. A second or two later you'll hear the distant 'bang!' from the rifle muzzle. Since the muzzle report sound travels at a measurable speed−1,100 feet, or roughly 300 yards per second−you can approximate [the sniper's] distance by timing the gap between the crack and the bang (463).

By paying attention to the different sounds coming from Juba's rifle, Isaac is capable of roughly estimating the sniper's location. The sense of hearing, applied together with a military technique, provides a tool that enhances the soldiers' chance of survival in the narrative. To put crack-bang into practice, Isaac sits with his legs spread apart and uses the sand on the ground as a makeshift board for his calculations (see fig. 118). As he erases his markings, the contours of the floor of the destroyed house begin to appear (see fig. 119). The hexagon stone tiles that were once covered by the ruins' dust now begin to appear as if summoned by the idea of intellectual work. By bearing in mind that the structure used to be a school, there is a ghostly reminder of the act of learning when Isaac works on his mathematical sums. It is a bittersweet memory of a place that had as its essence the dissemination of education, but that no longer exists for such purpose.

Fig. 118. Isaac works on crack-bang

Fig. 119. The school's floor tiles

Although Isaac manages to calculate a probable distance between himself and Juba, giving him a tactical advantage, the voice still claims a better knowledge of the soldier's situation. Juba's omniscience comes across in his conversation as he stuns Isaac by saying, "[Matthews] is your second loss. First Dean, now Matthews." When Juba mentions Dean, a deceased teammate, Isaac reacts as if the voice became "invested with magical powers" (Chion 23). In a state of astonishment, he asks how Juba knows about Dean's existence and the voice answers with further information, "you carry his scope around. What was it your sergeant said? 'A dead man's scope'." This information reveals that the source of his omniscient power is actually the technological ability to hear the local radio transmissions between the American soldiers and the intelligence to interpret what he hears. Technology, both in terms of radio range and long-distance sight through scopes, enables Juba to have the upper hand in most situations. For instance, Isaac carefully inserts Dean's scope inside the wall by removing a few stones in order to see what is on the other side of the wall (see fig. 120). Juba is able to spot the scope in the wall, although he is thousands of meters away, ruining Isaac's surprise tactical advantage.

Fig. 120. Dean's scope in the wall

The peak of Isaac's discomfort at Juba's overwhelming knowledge is when the voice combines with his omniscient powers, military abilities, and predictions about the soldier's physical state. Firstly, Juba says, "You're dehydrated, I know that. That's why I aimed at your water bottle. . . . And your antenna." Isaac's answer is of distrust since no person could be that accurate from such a distance. What Isaac cannot dismiss is Juba's explanation of the reasons why he shot the soldier in the knee, "I know the popliteal vein in your leg carries enough blood that, no matter what kind of bandaging you have, you will still be sitting in a puddle of plasma. You're feeling fatigued, lightheaded. And you will bleed out before nightfall." While Juba details Isaac's physical condition in a very medical way, an over-the-shoulder shot confirms the description, showing his bandaged right knee standing in a pool of blood (see fig. 121). Juba's almost super-human powers, combined with his precision as a sniper, his detailed knowledge of the human body, and his tactical awareness frighten Isaac. The voice's omniscience is particularly evident in his last two sentences when he predicts how Isaac feels, displaying a kind of knowledge that, as Chion notes, "has been assimilated into the capacity to see internally" (27). Isaac's automatic reaction is to load and hold his gun. His eyes are wide open, searching for a target (see fig. 122). Juba is not only physically frustrating Isaac's movements, but also psychologically upsetting the soldier. In a paranoid reaction to the voice's silence over the radio, Isaac asks Juba if he is trying to circle around the wall. In the soldier's perception, Juba also possesses another power associated with the *acousmêtre*: ubiquity or "the ability to be everywhere" (24). Since the "voice comes from an immaterial and non-localized body, and it seems that no obstacle can stop it" (24), Isaac cannot control Juba's power to move around the landscape. In this new way of constructing the landscape, it becomes a form of agency, a psychologically unnerving hostile force. In *The Wall*, the opposing force to the American soldier possesses a characteristic that is very much connected to contemporary

warfare: the elusive all-around threat of insurgency, that can appear from all sides at any time.

Fig. 121. Isaac's wounded knee

Fig. 122. Isaac's reaction to Juba's powers

The sound texture of the *acousmêtre*'s voice is portrayed in different ways in the film, indicating varied distances in terms of levels of intimacy among the voice, Isaac, and the audience. The most intimate depiction of the distance between Juba's voice and Isaac's body is during close-up shots of the earpiece inserted in the soldier's ear (see fig. 123). These are moments in which Juba's voice is farthest from the audience since the audio sounds as if the viewer was listening from outside the earpiece. The voice still has a military radio effect, but it seems like it ceases to float so freely in the filmic space and finds a more grounded place in Isaac's body. Juba's voice resonates inside the soldier's ear cavity and the vibrations become part of his sensorial structure. There is a very strong impression of an intimate interweaving of thoughts and sensations between the two, particularly when Juba says, "so, now let's be real. It's just you and me out here." Their technological link is transformed into a physical and personal connection though the two characters are far apart.

Fig. 123. Isaac and his earpiece

The intermediate level of intimacy between Juba's voice and Isaac is featured predominantly throughout the film. By seeing Isaac from a distance with his earpiece on, the audience shares the same audio that is coming from the local radio, that is, Juba's voice with a military radio effect (see fig. 124). This is when the *acousmêtre* seems to be in its prime

in terms of a display of powerful abilities and knowledge. Chion observes that when the voice comes through a technological device, such as a phone or in this case the radio, "it tends to suffuse the whole filmic space, and to take on terrifying powers" (63). The most meaningful conversations are done in this mode, and although it does not have the same effect of the earpiece close-ups, there is a strong level of intimacy attached to this arrangement. Isaac is still receiving the voice directly in his ear, "bring[ing] to the acousmatic situation a vocal intimacy that is rarely encountered in social life" (63).

Fig. 124. Intermediate level of intimacy

The third intimacy level is between the audience and the voice when a point-of-view shot of Juba's gunsight is portrayed in the film. Instances of his POV shots are scattered throughout the narrative, but only a few times does Juba speak while his viewpoint is being depicted. In these moments, his voice is not mediated by the radio thus having an effect of being closer to the audience. It is as if the viewer was physically near Juba and his natural and raspy voice is a direct vibration that is perceived by their sense of hearing. He is no longer simply one of the sides of a radio transmission, but a more fully formed figure in the narrative since now the film gives access to his unmediated voice, similarly to how Isaac's voice is generally portrayed. For instance, one of Juba's POV shots demonstrates the source of his omniscient power, that is, how he can clearly see Matthews' position on the ground (see fig. 125). Juba locks the soldier in the middle of his crosshairs and cruelly says, "I'm looking at him right now. It would be so easy to tear his face off." By presenting these two sentences with the audio of Juba's natural voice, there is an emphasis on constructing his figure as an omnipotent being, one whose visual source and technological tools allow him to decide the future of the characters according to his will.

Fig. 125. Juba's POV shot

4.3 Conversations about the "soul-and-body scars"

The structure of the wall gains a fully symbolic level from the moment that Isaac appropriates the space as his own by saying "my wall." It triggers a discussion with Juba about the previous cultural and social meaning of the site in contrast with the current use of the remaining ruins. A long shot highlights the deteriorated condition of the wall, with its fragmented piles of stones and loose material scattered all over the sandy floor (see fig. 126). On the other hand, the shot also evokes the historical past by depicting the intricacies of such construction, and the results of the careful labor and effort of matching similar shapes of the stacked rocks. The shot lingers for more than half a minute, allowing the eye to wander the surroundings, looking for details. Meanwhile, Juba exposes his point of view about the situation, "you say 'my wall.' The very wall your country came here to knock down you now try desperately to keep from falling. . . . You should know, the wall that you're hiding behind was actually part of a school. . . . You're hiding in the shadow of Islam." In this case, the *acousmêtre* functions as a witness, the one who stays behind to remember the original purpose of the ruins. The significance of Juba specifically telling Isaac about the previous function of the wall that now gives him protection is to make sure that history is not forgotten and a reminder that actions have consequences. In 2007, the wall is being used by an American soldier to shelter himself from danger in the remote desert, but the primary essence of the wall survives in the memory of the Iraqis alongside a feeling of resentment for such devastation. The wall is both the material proof of the destruction caused by the military and Isaac's sanctuary since it protects his body from direct exposure regarding the threat posed by Juba.

Fig. 126. The partially destroyed wall

Isaac reacts in an indifferent manner to the information that the site used to be a school, creating a pattern of similarly disinterested responses from him in the remaining instances when Juba speaks of more serious issues regarding the American intervention in Iraq. The soldier's involvement with topics of terrorism, military dominance, loss of Iraqi lives, and destruction of local constructions is characterized by indifference, with occasional displays of interest caused by ulterior motives of distracting Juba in order to perform some tactical move. For instance, when Juba talks about the space of the wall being previously used as a school, Isaac replies, "Yeah, well, I'll piss on it. That's what I think about your fucking wall." His detachment in such conversations denotes a deep lack of critical engagement regarding the reasons and consequences of invading Iraq, leading to an absence of appreciation for the local history and culture. Although he does not acknowledge the background of the site as a significant element, the essence of the school seeps into his own actions while behind the wall. Once again, Isaac uses part of the wall to emulate a chalkboard in order to organize his mathematical calculations. In a high-angle shot, he uses a piece of rock as chalk to write on a partially destroyed part of the wall the number of shots fired by Juba (see fig. 127). The ghosts of the past are undeniably present in the space of the wall whether Isaac regards them or not.

Fig. 127. The improvised chalkboard

The location of the trash pile is given prominence in the film when Isaac figures out Juba's position through sonic cues in the radio transmission. Sight and sound are combined to disclose the point of origin of the *acousmêtre*. As Juba speaks in the radio, pausing between the words, the background noise of where he is located can he heard: a repetitive metal rattling. This detail, almost inaudible at first, catches Isaac's attention. The quiet environment of the desert provides the suitable conditions for such specific sonic detail to be heard, and as Schafer observes "in the quiet ambiance of the hi-fi soundscape even the slightest disturbance can communicate vital or interesting information" (43). The transition between sound and sight happens visually in the film as a close-up of Isaac's left eye is seen while he pays attention to the background noise of Juba's location. He immediately looks through the scope in the wall, looking for a place that can fit that pattern of sound. As Juba continues to speak, Isaac scans the surrounding structures and eventually focuses on the trash pile. In a POV shot from Isaac's scope, a sheet of metal waves and crashes into the trash causing the background noise alongside the cawing of the encircling crows (see fig. 128). Technology has allowed Isaac to hear important details and see from a far distance, but the use of his senses is vital for the perception of the fine elements that compose his surroundings.

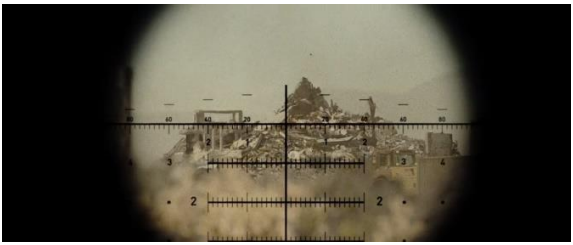

Fig. 128. Isaac's POV shot of the trash pile

Even though the discovery of Juba's location is a major element in the narrative, this scene is also significant because of the issues that Juba raises in his conversation. While enticing the voice to speak for a longer time so that the background noise can be heard more clearly, Isaac superficially listens to Juba's thoughts on the different angles of perception during warfare. The soldier's focus is directed to his newfound geographical awareness as Juba explains his viewpoint:

> JUBA: You Americans, you think you know it all. You think it's simple. That I am your enemy, but we are not so different, you and I.
> ISAAC: Yeah, except that I ain't a fucking terrorist.
> JUBA: And you think I am? You are the one who has come to another man's country. Camouflaged yourself in his land, in his soil. From where I'm sitting, you look very much like the terrorist.

The fact that it is through Juba's voice that subjects such as the complexities of war, the act of invasion, power abuse, and the multiple faces of terrorism are brought to the surface, adds a layer of agency to the portrayal of the Iraqi character. Juba criticizes the act of American invasion and possible links to economic profits as he mentions the instance of camouflaging in the country's soil, a reference to the pipeline construction site and oil extraction. The *acousmêtre* raises the issue of what it means to be a terrorist and what type of acts are considered terrorism during war. These are valuable questions when it comes to leaving behind the old-fashioned notion of warfare based on broad categories of good versus evil and focusing on the fine details of armed confrontation.

As Isaac starts facing his feelings about his own war experience, the inner heroic wall of the traditional fit and courageous soldier starts to crack. Physically debilitated and mentally exhausted, Isaac finally talks about Dean and his personal life to Juba. The two soldiers lived in the same neighborhood and knew each other's families. In an unguarded manner, Isaac rambles almost incoherently about his problems readjusting to civilian life by saying, "I can't go back to that. Fucking day in, day out shit. And them looking at me. And they would. They'd look at me and they'd see me." His inability to live in civilian society prompts him to go on tours time and again to Iraq. In what can be seen as a possible result of post-traumatic stress disorder, Isaac still holds back the full disclosure of the reasons why he carries Dean's scope and continually rejoins the tours to Iraq, escaping life back home. While lying on the sandy ground and covering his face with a scarf, Isaac moans and speaks with an exhausted voice, "you got to mess with my fucking head too." The way in which Isaac's body is lying, with his torso in a hole, his knee bent upwards, and his face covered with a scarf, almost in a fetal position, shows he is defenseless, at the mercy of the voice that seems to have the power to guide his fate (see fig. 129). Chion questions himself regarding

the reasons why the *acousmêtre* encapsulates the powers of seeing and knowing all while also being everywhere. His answer is that "maybe because this *voice without a place* that belongs to the acousmêtre takes us back to an archaic, original state: of the first months of life or even before birth, during which the voice was everything and it was everywhere" (27). Isaac's covered face leads to the loss of visual input and complete immersion into the sensorial realm of hearing. This is when Juba's voice takes over the screen and predicts the soldier's future in a sadistic way, "Isaac, when this is over, the skin will be cut from your face. Your eyes will be gouged. . . . Your lying tongue will be stapled to your chest. . . . But I will let them find your body." Juba's cruel description heavily relies on the prospect of mutilating the body parts that are directly connected to the senses through the haptic element of the skin, sight, and taste. Unlike the corporeal damage that he can inflict from afar with his bullets, such injuries are done in a very intimate corporeal entanglement, one that displays complete power over the body of the soldier.

Fig. 129. Isaac is on the ground with his face covered with a scarf

The space behind the wall is not the only location depicted at this point in the film. For the first time, the trash pile is portrayed not through Isaac's scope view, but in a tracking shot that slowly approaches the place. Gusts of wind carry the sand that swirls up in the air almost as if the space was surrounded by a mysterious fog. The long shot encapsulates the immensity of the trash pile and the close distance allows the viewer to notice details of its constitution (see fig. 130). Resembling a Frankenstein of wrecked parts, the pile is an assembly of collapsed constructions, with discarded material of all sorts forming its pyramid-like shape. On the left side, some beams still stand, but no walls are present which shows how only the skeleton of a building has survived the destruction. With its past unknown to the newcomer, the trash pile has an atmosphere of a living organism. Crows circle the top of the pile and their cawing contributes to the creation of an eerie environment complemented

by the continual noise of a metal sheet crashing on a surface. The ruins are alive, especially because of Juba's presence there, but also in terms of being a palpable proof of the historical context that caused such devastation, the war that still triggers acts of material and corporeal violence.

Fig. 130. The trash pile

The wall that hides Isaac suffers transformations on a material level as Juba knocks parts of it down. As a retribution for Isaac's attempt to reach for a radio belonging to one of the dead contractors, Juba shoots the extremities of the wall, causing it to partially tumble down, diminishing the soldier's shelter space (see fig. 131). However, it is not only the physical wall that starts to collapse. In a previous scene, disillusioned by the overall hardship and frustrating conversations with Juba, Isaac contemplates suicide by putting his handgun on his forehead and then mouth. He quits the idea, buries his face in his arms, and cries (see fig. 132). The soldier's vulnerability is highlighted in this sequence and shows that Isaac's posture of a brave and relentless soldier is damaged by his psychological collapse. His facade is gradually transforming into a different profile, one that is only fully revealed in further conversations with Juba.

Fig. 131. Part of the wall collapses

Fig. 132. Isaac's psychological collapse

From this moment on, their conversation is punctuated by literary references that disclose the *acousmêtre*'s knowledge of American culture as well as his critical stance in relation to the context of war. In the scene, due to Isaac's physical effort to retrieve the radio outside the wall, the earpiece falls from his ear and Juba's voice floats in the air. Unwilling to put the device back on, Isaac listens to the semi-distant grainy voice coming from the earpiece (see fig. 133). Their only link of communication is through the use of the radio technology, which means that certain small details, such as silence from the other end, have significant meanings. Isaac's lack of response prompts Juba to say, "the radio you risked your life for, it's dead. Are you dead, too?" When the soldier answers him on the radio, they engage in a literary conversation:

> JUBA: He speaks! Tear up the planks. Here, here. It is the beating of his hideous heart.
> ISAAC: What's that, one of your gay-ass Hajji poems?
> JUBA: American. "Tell-Tale Heart." Edgar Allan Poe.

Juba's reference to Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Tell-Tale Heart" brings to the surface possible points of connection between the story and *The Wall*. Poe's story heavily relies on sensorial perception, especially sight and hearing, for instance, the threat of the "Evil Eye" that creates an authoritative atmosphere of surveillance, and several examples of sounds, such as "the groan of mortal terror" (93), "a low, dull, quick sound . . .. It was the beating of the old man's heart" (94), and "a ringing in my ears" (95). All these detailed sounds are very revealing of their power to stun and enclose the narrator in a sonic environment that seems to be physically and psychologically draining. This is a point in common with Isaac in *The Wall* who is gradually enveloped by the sonic power of the *acousmêtre* and his ability to be an all-around threat to the soldier.

Fig. 133. Isaac is reluctant to put the earpiece back

Juba's choice of quote is very revealing of his personal objectives regarding the situation with Isaac and the wall. In Poe's story, the narrator describes killing an old man with an Evil Eye who used to live in the same house, dismembering him and hiding the body parts under the planks in one of the rooms. The source of the sound of the old man's beating heart reveals the location of the dead body to the police. According to Gita Rajan, through the killing, the narrator "step[s] into the old man's position of unchallenged power. The act of murder reveals the condensed expression of his desire to usurp the old man's place and authority" (45). The narrator's "effort to possess ultimate power" (Rajan 45) can be compared to Juba's attempt to categorically overpower Isaac in every possible sphere of interaction. For example, in terms of tactical and technological advantage, Juba possesses weapons and a working long-distance radio and is able to have a clear view of the space, which allows him to take the lives of those in the construction site. Also, he emotionally manipulates and tortures Isaac with scenarios and predictions of pain and death. As Juba quotes from Poe's story, he compares himself to the narrator who craves power and Isaac's voice to the beating of the old man's heart as a reminder of the need to eliminate the soldier's oppressive presence in the country. Hynes' idea of the "Battlefield Gothic" (26) can be perceived here since there is an emphasis on the atmosphere of strangeness and psychological disruption evoked by the short story. Poe's work alludes to sensorial perceptions and grotesque acts of dismembering, constructing an environment that singles out Juba and Isaac's battlefield interaction as an uncanny experience.

Isaac's reply concerning the source of the quote as one of Juba's "gay-ass Hajji poems" is an opportunity for the *acousmêtre* to initiate a cascade of excerpts from American literature. Besides the fact that Isaac's derogatory comment contains traces of disrespect towards sexual diversity and ethnic identity, his lack of literary knowledge becomes an opening for Juba to demonstrate his power regarding the soldier's own

culture. The *acousmêtre* recites parts of Poe's "The Raven," especially containing references to the bird's sounds, such as "tapping" and "rapping" at the door. The figure of the raven has often been associated with supernatural qualities and "otherworldly influences" (Fisher 43-44), much like the myth of Juba, or as Isaac refers to him in the film, "the ghost." The *acousmêtre* then delivers a poem by Robert Frost entitled "A question":

> A voice said, Look me in the stars
> And tell me truly, men of earth,
> If all the soul-and-body scars
> Were not too much to pay for birth.

One of the significant points in the poem is the presence of a powerful voice who has almost a divine reach over humankind and interrogates the idea of suffering during life. If applied to the context of the Iraq War in *The Wall*, the "soul-and-body scars" can possibly relate to the hardships imposed on a population who has been immersed in a five-year conflict. By reciting this poem, Juba questions the price that is being paid for an invasion that does not seem to be very justifiable to the Iraqi people. In an earlier scene, Isaac accuses Juba of killing the contractors who are building the pipelines to strengthen the Iraqi economy. Juba's answer is, "Pipelines? For *our* economy?" The *acousmêtre*'s political stance comes across very strongly in his opinions and choices of literary quotes, highlighting his sense of revolt for the military intervention in the country.

While the film's audio features Juba's voice, the visual displays a different panorama in which the two soldiers are not focused on the content of the *acousmêtre*'s message. Matthews awakes and by repeatedly clicking on the radio button, calls Isaac's attention causing Juba's transmission to be briefly interrupted. Once again, sound in the narrative becomes a mode of communication, this time not through words but regular interruptions in the radio transmission. Unable to use the local radio, otherwise Juba will hear their conversation, Isaac shouts from behind the wall words of support to Matthews who is lying on the sand, encouraging him to take a shot at the trash pile (see fig. 134). Juba's and Isaac's voice overlap, the former through the radio and the latter in an unmediated form. Isaac hears Juba's display of literary knowledge, and even recognizes the *acousmêtre*'s expertise, but the soldier does not exactly listen to what is being said by the voice. This becomes particularly noticeable as Juba shares very personal details that unearth a past of sorrow caused by the war: "I studied English. . . . I was a teacher in

Baghdad, but a bomb hit my school. I got shrapnel in my left elbow. Still hurts. It reminds me of the students I lost." Juba's motivations are foregrounded in this conversation, but Isaac's attention is elsewhere. Although the *acousmêtre* is speaking about significant issues that compose the complex cyclical structure of war where violence generates more violence, Isaac is not truly listening to the content of the message. He superficially hears the words and instigates conversation in order to distract Juba from seeing Matthews reaching out for his weapon. One of Isaac's questions demonstrates his lack of attention to the issues brought forth by Juba, "How does an educated person like you become a fucking terrorist?" Isaac is not necessarily internalizing the information he hears from Juba in a way that takes into consideration the social and economic context in which the Iraqi population is inserted during war. To suffer a loss, such as one that Juba has shared, is already an indication of a complicated background that must be accounted for in order to critically understand the motivations for those immersed in a situation of great misfortune and hopelessness.

Fig. 134. Isaac communicates with Matthews over the wall

4.4 The Hero's Wall Tumbles Down

Even though Isaac and Matthews appear to be in disadvantage in relation to the *acousmêtre*, both in tactical terms and physical conditions, there is a heroic surge in the soldiers' behavior as they see the possibility of shooting Juba as a real scenario. Chion observes that the phenomenon that reveals the figure of the *acousmêtre* is called de-acousmatization, that is, "the unveiling of an image and at the same time a *place*, the human and mortal body where the voice will henceforth be lodged" (28). In *The Wall*, to kill Juba by correctly pinpointing his location is to disempower the mysterious figure and deconstruct the idea of a being with supreme knowledge of the situation. Juba's de-acousmatization would demonstrate his vulnerability by attaching a body made of flesh and blood to the omniscient and ubiquitous presence, one that can be located and harmed. No longer a floating voice and a threat, Juba would be silenced

and neutralized. In this moment of possibility, Isaac firmly believes in the idea that he will be saved in the end, a concept that stems from his trust in the military system, even if Juba painstakingly describes the situation, "You're fading, Isaac. . . . You are not fantastic. You have no water. You're dehydrated. The sun is baking you. You're bleeding to death." The *acousmêtre*'s knowledge of Isaac's physical situation does not stop the soldier from praising his commander and believing in his power to help them, "Captain Albright. . . . A legend. Trained me, trained Dean, too. He's coming for us." The element of rescue, and therefore a traditional happy ending for Isaac, is reinforced in this scene only to be slowly dismantled in the upcoming events.

Isaac's past reemerges in two instances, one in a display of his camouflaged story about the circumstances of Dean's death, and the other in a confession of the actual details concerning Dean's death. These two contrasting accounts are very revealing of Isaac's conduct and his overall representation as a military member in the Iraq War, a figure who falls short of the heroic paradigm traditionally associated to soldiers. Isaac shares the first version in order to distract Juba from realizing that Matthews is preparing himself to shoot in the direction of the trash pile. In a desperate manner, Isaac says "I carry around the scope because it reminds me why I can't hold a rifle again. You listening to me? Dean dropped it, the scope, in the line of duty. He fell over trying to pick it up and I missed him, I missed the sniper, ok? . . . I didn't see him. That's how he got hit. It was my fault." In this version, although Isaac takes the blame for the situation, Dean's mistake is what triggers the disastrous event. Isaac demonstrates a sense of responsibility regarding his lack of skills to find the sniper which characterizes his failure as based on a passive behavior. He did not act in time therefore there were lethal consequences.

The events that connect both versions of Dean's death are Matthews' attempt to shoot Juba followed by the soldier's death. Here technology once again plays a vital role, both in regards to communication and the use of weaponry, but in this case, with unsuccessful results. It is through the misuse of the radio and the rifle that Juba realizes that something unusual is going on. Firstly, due to the fact that Isaac is distracted between talking on the radio and shouting instructions to Matthews, at one point Isaac makes a mistake and presses the radio button while talking to the sergeant. Only one word is said, "slower," but because of the uniqueness of the radio communication context, such word becomes very significant. It clashes with the content of the conversation between Juba and Isaac and the former immediately

finds it suspicious. Matthews aims his rifle in the direction of the trash pile and shoots multiple times, but it only results in clearly warning Juba of their attempt to take him out. Juba, in his turn, shoots Matthews in the arm. The cyclical pattern of death in the construction site shows itself as Matthews receives a headshot while crawling towards the wall. In this sequence, the wall is represented as a safe haven, a place of concealment for the soldiers (see fig. 135). Matthews, on the other hand, lies in the threatening open space. An over-the-shoulder shot from Isaac's perspective depicts Matthews' inert body subject to the sandy wind gusts, an echo of how the two soldiers found the contractors' bodies early in the film (see fig. 136). *The Wall* brings to the forefront the portrayal of an endless cycle of war, as if the restricted space of the construction site could symbolize the warfare mechanism that takes place in a much larger territory.

Fig. 135. The wall as a safe haven

Fig. 136. An over-the-shoulder shot

The second and unmasked account of the story is prompted by the recurring image of death and feeling of guilt experienced by Isaac in the war. It is also encouraged by Juba's insistence in understanding Isaac's underlying motives for multiple redeployments. In a way, the voice's interest demonstrates a different perspective on how to interact with the opposing forces through a mindset that is curious to listen to the intentions, but at the same time probes for delicate spots and uses such conversations to trouble the soldier's emotional state. This psychological warfare debilitates Isaac's decision-making abilities. In a medium close-up, leaning against the wall and in a sort of a daze of memories (see fig. 137), Isaac confesses, "I killed him. I did. He went to go confirm a kill. Enemy sniper. The guy was playing possum. Started shooting at Dean. I tried shooting back, but the bullet went right through Dean." In a crying outburst, Isaac continues his confession while Juba remains silent. The soldier says, "Oh man, I lied. I fucking lied so much. Trying to keep the story straight. I lied to everybody. I lied to every single person, except you, a fucking Hajji." The hero's wall and the image of a loyal and truthful soldier come crashing down in this confession, highlighting a

disguised facet of Isaac's personality and a problematic personification of a soldier. By fabricating a different version of the story and concealing his level of involvement and responsibility in Dean's death, Isaac distances himself from the status of honor and bravery that are traditionally associated with the military. His guilty conscience does not allow him to go back home and face the scrutiny of relatives who know him well, as he has previously affirmed "they'd look at me and see me," hence the answer to Juba's incessant questions to understand the reasons behind the multiple redeployments.

Fig. 137. Isaac's confession

The significance of the bullet as the culmination of the disquieting act of friendly fire is foregrounded in this scene as Isaac's voice almost disappears when he says "the bullet went right through Dean." The focus on the invasive act of the bullet in Dean's body can be compared to the role of the projectile in Brian Turner's poem "Here, Bullet" featured in this chapter's epigraph. The sensorial connection between the material object of the bullet and the body that is about to receive its impact highlights the corporeal fragility of the recipient, and the inescapability that comes from the effects of the collision of metal and flesh. Turner uses the senses to portray a battle of perceptions between the bullet and the soldier, for instance, in the focus on the sensorial ability of hearing the projectile's path in the phrase "hissing through the air", and the haptic foregrounding of the effect of the bullet in the body, "each twist of the round spun deeper." In *The Wall*, the only real material connection that is formed between Isaac and Juba is through the bullet in the soldier's knee. This is the only time that the *acousmêtre* "touches" Isaac, through the rifle's technological extension of the arm. Coming straight from Juba's rifle barrel and ending in the exact point of impact on Isaac's knee, the bullet is not meant to kill at once, but to inflict gradual pain in a slow dismantling of the soldier's capabilities of survival.

Isaac's confession is the last instance in the film in which the two characters engage in a conversation, although the radio is still used by Isaac and Juba, but this time in a long-range mode capable of reaching other military units located far away from the construction site. Isaac combines parts from his own radio with another one he collected from the contractors and successfully picks up the frequency to communicate with Captain Albright, his commander. The soldier joyfully reacts to hearing the voice on the radio and the familiar military codenames (see fig. 138). The initial communication with the disembodied voice of the captain signifies hope, a chance of rescue. However, when the captain asks for a name and rank confirmation, both Isaac's and Juba's voice overlap. They answer the question at the same time, providing Isaac's full name and rank. Juba's transmission overpowers Isaac's voice and takes over the radio interaction. The *acousmêtre* possesses the soldier's power of expression and identity, personifying his accent and way of speaking. Juba emulates the expressions in English that he learned from his conversation with Isaac, for example, "chilling like villains" and "getting baked." In order to sound authentic, the voice even uses the derogatory term "hajji", which is applied by the American military in relation to the local Iraqis. The source of the *acousmetre*'s vast knowledge of the situation lies in Juba's ability to acquire new information and go through a sonic mutation to reach his specific goals. The disposition of the bodies on the construction site indicates that it is not the first time that a situation similar to Isaac's has happened. The constant repetition of this scenario allows Juba to intensely interact and learn from the person on the other end of the radio. It reveals a portrayal of an Iraqi character who is cruel, but also resourceful and resilient. His power does not rely only on the technological impact of his instruments and weaponry, but in the combination of these tools with a perceptive state of mind capable of formulating a strategy that outsmarts the opposing forces.

Fig. 138. Isaac talks to Captain Albright

As Isaac realizes Juba's tactical plan to once again call for a new team to rescue the one in the construction site, he expresses his frustration by saying, "camouflage yourself in me." The traditional notion of camouflage relies on people or objects in disguise to make them blend in with the surroundings. A very familiar idea in the military context, camouflage can be found in the paint used by soldiers who go into combat or in the nets that hide vehicles and weapons. These are all examples of a visual type of camouflage that conceals personnel and objects from being seen. Although Juba also disguises his figure by blending in with the trash pile, his camouflage is extremely effective in sonic terms. The *acousmêtre* momentarily sets aside his Iraqi identity and accent to become another persona, one that constantly acquires new information about American culture, but does not fully let go of his origins since the entire strategy departs from a sense of revenge for his own past experiences. His tactics work partly because of the prevailing idea in the military that an Iraqi would not be as ingenious as he is or capable of such discipline in terms of patience and accuracy. This is foregrounded in the beginning of the film after Matthews and Isaac have been watching the construction site for over twenty hours with no sign of movement. As Isaac mentions the possibility that one Iraqi might have killed all the contractors, Matthews answers with a condescending tone, "a Hajji?". *The Wall* depicts the soldiers' discredit of an Iraqi as the skillful shooter while simultaneously contrasting Juba's swift overpowering of their lives.

The unique landscape of the desert is portrayed while Isaac waits for the extraction helicopters to arrive, foregrounding the particular way in which sound travels in the airwaves. Through Isaac's point-of-view, an extreme long shot depicts the vastness of the area, an arid territory that stretches all the way to the horizon (see fig. 139). This flat space is either covered by dry vegetation or sand, and the wind picks up the dust and carries it around. The sound of the wind, with its intermittent gusts, becomes the only noise in the silent landscape. Soon, something else is audible in the scene. The noise of the helicopter blades irregularly reaches Isaac according to the wind direction. There is no visual confirmation of the helicopters, only a palpable vibration that travels in the air. The noise intensifies, its sonic presence grows as time goes by and Isaac finally has visual contact with the aircrafts. From the soldier's perspective, they are initially seen as two small black particles in the skies, serenely flying towards his direction above the empty landscape (see fig. 140). The remoteness of the location is highlighted in this scene considering that the helicopters take a substantial amount of time since their appearance on the horizon until they reach the wall site. It reinforces the idea that

extraction is not an easily accessible option which intensifies the portrayal of the location as a distant and dangerous space from the military perspective.

Fig. 139. The desert landscape

Fig. 140. Two helicopters on the horizon

The wall that during the film kept Isaac from getting killed, providing him protection, is knocked over by the very same soldier in an attempt to have a clear view and neutralize Juba's action (see fig. 141). It leaves Isaac completely vulnerable, but also temporarily empowers him to have a chance to counterattack Juba. However, it is not only Isaac who is exposed in this scene. Two point-of-view shots of both characters' gunsights are accompanied by their respective unmediated heavy breathing (see fig. 142). Isaac's emotions have been thoroughly captured in the film, but for the first time in *The Wall*, Juba's uncontrolled emotions are depicted as the sound of his breathing demonstrates a high level of apprehension for the unexpected events unfolding in the site. The *acousmêtre* shows his vulnerability in a POV shot in which the sound is only heard by the audience, creating an intimate atmosphere that depicts Juba more as a human than an all-powerful being.

Fig. 141. Isaac knocks down the wall

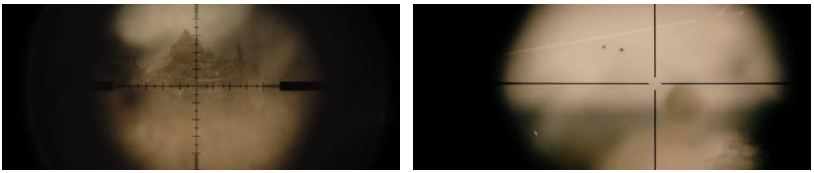

Fig. 142. Isaac's and Juba's POV shots

The efforts to figure out Juba's location occupy the final scenes of the film, in an attempt by Isaac to stop the cyclical tactics employed by the voice. As Chion observes, "everything can boil down to a quest to bring the acousmêtre into the light" (23-24). From this moment on, the soldier's actions are mostly linked to the intent of either killing Juba or exposing his location to the helicopter crew. When Isaac knocks down the wall, Juba shoots directly at him which prompts the soldier to shoot back. The Iraqi sniper then becomes inactive and silent, no bullets or radio transmission come from his direction, not even as Isaac stands up waiting to be shot so the soldiers in the helicopter can recognize the source of danger (see fig. 143). In this moment, the noise of the helicopter blades becomes the sonic focus as they land in order to evacuate Isaac and Matthews. The familiarity of the helicopter sound accompanied by the appearance and voices of fellow soldiers from the extraction team portray a scenario of safety. This group unity is represented through the sonic and material presence of two helicopters that momentarily take charge of the wall site, several soldiers carrying weapons in the traditionally associated posture of combat readiness, and the employment of proper medical arrangements regarding Isaac's situation (see fig. 144). The determined and organized fashion in which the soldiers engage in their actions is a reassurance to Isaac of the recognizable set of military protocols.

Fig. 143. Isaac stands up

Fig. 144. Group unity

Even though silence and inactivity might be understood as signs of safety, which means that the threat posed by Juba has been neutralized, in

the context of *The Wall*, these elements can carry a distinct message. Throughout the film, the *acousmêtre* has made use of periods of silence on the radio to implement parts of his plan and has refrained from shooting in order to patiently wait for an opportunity in which his shot causes greater physical or emotional damage. As Isaac is being carried away on a stretcher, a medium close-up shows his physical fatigue as well as his attempt to indicate Juba's position (see fig. 145). His hoarse voice puts together a barely audible sentence, "he's in the trash," information that is not picked up by the other soldiers. Isaac does not use the past tense as he refers to Juba, an indication that the *acousmêtre*'s presence still haunts a scenario of possibilities in the soldier's mind.

Fig. 145. Isaac can barely speak

The aerial view of the construction site territory is the focus as the soldiers take off in the helicopters, and the engine sound becomes a critical element for the creation of the upcoming atmosphere of disaster. From inside one of the helicopters, a high angle shot of the wall area demonstrates the structural format of the place as a traditional configuration of a house, in this particular case, a school (see fig. 146). Soldiers with rifles are on the right and left sides of the screen, as a frame for the destruction seen below. The front wall that used to hide Isaac is now completely dismantled, an evidence that adds one more event to the territory's catalogue of wreckage. Still inside the helicopter, Isaac receives medical attention while flying over the site. His body is on the helicopter floor and the ground below is visible through the open door (see fig. 147). It is when they circle the trash pile that Juba's signature shot reappears (see fig. 148). One of the medics receives a headshot, an act that is immediately recognized by Isaac who desperately tries to warn the remaining soldiers that the shooter is in the trash. In a very claustrophobic scene from inside the aircraft, the soldiers continue receiving fire which causes the helicopter to increasingly lose balance. The engine sound changes from a stable noise of the blades to a chaotic

malfunction sound alongside the blasting of an alarm. The sonic turbulence is accompanied by an unsteady medium shot from inside the helicopter that shows Isaac lying down while the ground below spins around (see fig. 149). The soldiers shout "mayday" and "brace," and Isaac puts his hands on his head in a desperate act as he realizes the materialization of a nightmare. The critical sound of the helicopter malfunction accentuates the impending fate of the passengers.

Fig. 146. Aerial view of the wall site

Fig. 147. Inside the helicopter

Fig. 148. The trash pile below

Fig. 149. The helicopter spins

Image gives way to sound as the screen turns black and only the noise of the crash can be heard. The sonic details of the helicopter impact on the ground, the blades rotating out of control, and the sounds of shattering glass and metal being contorted dominate the screen. For a few seconds, sound completely dictates the narrative. By avoiding the graphic particularities of the characters' deaths, *The Wall* offers a sonic experience that focuses on a personal and sensorial connection of the audience with the events that now belong to the individual imagination. Isaac's body disappears from the screen and is reconstructed in the mind of the spectator who carries a filmic and real-life inventory of lifeless bodies belonging to soldiers. The next shot is a silent image of the sun, the mark of a new cycle of tactics in the desert (see fig. 150). A female voice on the radio inquires after the whereabouts of the two helicopters, "Helo Bulldog 1-7. Helo Bulldog 3-5. This is Baghdad command. How copy?". The voice is accompanied by the image of the flat surface of the desert and the blinding sun on top (see fig. 151). The remoteness of the space enables communication loopholes, where precise information about the soldiers' status is hard to acquire, which leads to the unawareness demonstrated by the military command. The last sound that can be heard

in the film is the *acousmêtre* confidently answering the radio, "This is Bulldog 1-7. Reading you, Lima Charlie. Over." The image that is shown alongside his voice is one of the helicopters turned upside down, a POV shot of his gunsight (see fig. 152). Juba's cyclical operation of camouflage has a new beginning as the film closes its narrative, highlighting the endless series of violent events.

Fig. 150. The blinding sun

Fig. 151. The flat desert and the new cycle

Fig. 152. The overturned helicopter

The unconventional ending of *The Wall* relies on the avoidance of a predictable successful fate for Isaac, one that would focus on him being rescued by the extraction team after killing Juba. The fact that Juba survives and once again outsmarts the military consolidates his status as an all-around threat, a character who embodies the qualities of an elusive enemy responsible for the death of American soldiers. He represents the element of mind games during warfare while also portraying the contemporary aspect of war fought with long-range weaponry and technology. In addition, Juba is an unusual depiction of an Iraqi character in war films. His voice commands the events in the narrative and his expertise surpasses the ones displayed by the American soldiers. He is a powerful and intelligent figure who possesses knowledge and means to put it into tactical practice. Juba is a witness, an echoing voice of the country's mournful past and present. His entanglement in a cycle of brutality demonstrates the complexity of the impact of warfare in the personality and life goals of the Iraqi population.

Although the majority of the scenes in the film focus on Isaac's reactions and emotions, he is a character who lacks agency in the claustrophobic world of the construction site. Territorially stranded, Isaac struggles to take control of his life and overcome the powerful grip of Juba's provocative voice. All his attempts to break free from the *acousmêtre*'s scheme are unsuccessful at some point, for instance, when he initially tries to discover Juba's location by lifting the rifle with his jacket and helmet over the wall, luring the sniper to shoot, but the helmet falls down, prompting the voice to laugh. Most of the times when Isaac attempts to distract Juba by having a more personal conversation are ineffective. The pivotal effort to stand up and reveal the voice's position at the end of the film also falls short as Juba survives and manages to shoot the helicopters down afterwards. Isaac does not have a moment of success and bravery in the film in order to redeem himself from the past events that characterize him as a flawed soldier. By the end of the narrative, he is not an example of a contemporary super soldier whose physical fitness, brotherhood bonds, and moral compass ideally follow the military rules of conduct. *The Wall* features a military figure in what at first seems like a portrayal of an average soldier in an inconsequential mission, but eventually unfolds into an exploration of the motives, personality, and moral choices made during the strained context of warfare.

The film's use of Juba as the *acousmêtre* adds a larger dimension to how warfare can be understood in films since the offscreen space is also a space of war. The events that are not seen on screen are as important in contextual terms as the ones that are featured in the scenes. The *Wall* subtly brings the past and present dimensions of Iraqi history into the portrayal of a landscape that might seem remote and threatening to the military but has a social significance to the locals that only the material ruins and the memory of the witnesses can recall. As Juba's mysterious figure remains hidden through a floating voice on the screen, his powers range from having knowledge that seems impossible to obtain, to being everywhere and seeing everything. The unseen forces at work mystify Isaac to the point in which both his physical and psychological states are shaken. The location of the wall is framed as a place of agony not only for the soldier who attempts to resist the voice's overpowering reach, but also regarding the memory of the original purpose of the ruins as a school. Landscape is constructed in a new way that displays agency as a psychologically disconcerting and antagonistic force.

The technological communication through the radio enables Isaac and Juba to be involved in conversations that bring to the surface social

and political issues as well as personal and emotional matters that are part of the way both characters construct their worldview. Juba's opinions on the American invasion in Iraq, the distinct understandings of the definition of terrorism, and economical gains in warfare demonstrate some of his critical views on significant subjects that contrast with Isaac's inattentive state of mind. The *acousmêtre*'s quest to have complete power over the soldier's body and mind is noticeable in the voice's flaunting display of literary knowledge that once again skillfully demonstrates his viewpoints and personal history. Isaac's confession of Dean's death helps reveal some of his dysfunctional characteristics and subverts the traditional portrayal of the American soldier. Juba's camouflage is depicted in a recurring manner as his voice becomes the vehicle through which a different persona can be created and tactically used for destructive purposes. The auditory geography of *The Wall* constructs the experience of war as an acutely sensorial space where hearing and sight are highlighted through technological means, but also demonstrates how the embodied sensations of each character allied with their cultural perceptions remain central elements to the navigation in the physical and psychological details of warfare.

CONCLUSION

"Tomorrow the war will have a picnic:
Store water, bread, and air.
Because the war gets hungry now and then,
Our childish pranks, our innocence, our dreams–
It will be compelled to eat the buildings,
Bodies sleeping in graves,
Books, streets and biscuits.
It will be forced to eat unshakable mountains,
Statues and stones–
Anything to feed its body of smoke,
Bullets and shrapnel."

(Abdul Razaq Al-Rubaiee)[27]

In the films I analyze in this work, the war landscapes of Iraq and Afghanistan serve as means for a new exploration of themes and motifs that have shaped the U.S. national imaginary from its beginnings. I argue that the imagery and narrative patterning of these films rehearses long standing themes of conquest, power, and discovery that have found expression in American film genres such as the Western and the road movie, and that have framed the American iconography of landscape around motifs of wilderness, the frontier, the homeland, and the Other. Landscape and technology determine the sensory environment of the soldiers during combat in the films, immersing them into a world that confronts their notions of mastery. The intractability of the territory and the unfamiliarity of its people and their combat skills contribute to the deconstruction of the ethos of invulnerability that is connected to the hyper-male microcosm of the soldiers. These challenges can be read in the films as a criticism of US imperialism and the ideas of domination and occupation. The mountains of Hindu Kush in Afghanistan and the deserts in Iraq are portrayed in a way that constructs landscape with an agency of its own. Through their harshness, a sense of hostility is developed which goes against the imposed domination itself, representing the surroundings as an active element in the narratives.

In order to investigate the nature of the soldiers' combat experience, the films reflect on the perception that local elements, including nature, architecture, and the population are somehow

[27] This poem was written by the Iraqi author Abdul Razaq Al-Rubaiee in the eve of the 2003 American invasion in Iraq. It is part of an anthology called *Flowers of Flame: Unheard Voices of Iraq* (18).

intrinsically threatening. The idea of ethnic intolerance pervades the actions of the soldiers, who at times describe such hostility as a reflex of survival. This ominous perception seeps into their interactions and life-or-death decisions in combat, causing the local space and its inhabitants to be regarded as an overall enemy, stripped of its nuances and particularities, as one single organism in the all-around threatening contemporary warfare context. From the soldiers' viewpoint, the locals' unfamiliar living conditions and appearance, their distinct cultural customs and religious beliefs comprise a set of figures whose otherness is perceived as a challenge. This condition is highlighted in the films of my research, which depict the soldiers engulfed in a world of their own beliefs. The few characters who are culturally aware of the richness and ethnic diversity of the countries they are stationed in are the exceptions.

The landscape of Afghanistan, with its lush mountain chains and rugged terrain, is represented in *Lone Survivor* as a space that is far from neutral. Brian Castner in his online essay, observes that the landscape of Afghanistan "challenges us for a new treatment" of war with its intrinsically unfamiliar nature and unexpected battle codes, as opposed to the war in Iraq which most prominently featured an urban scenario. By portraying the natural land as a confrontational element, the film explores the identity of the SEALs as super soldiers capable of prodigious levels of endurance, and equipped with high grade weapons, night vision goggles, powerful radios, and rituals of teamwork and camaraderie. Once removed from their comfort zone, in personal, geographical and technological terms, the SEALs are established as vulnerable, at the mercy of the locals. Instead of heroically dominating the opposing forces, the film critically focuses on their shortcomings in terms of physical readiness and technological mastery. Through their unfamiliarity with the land and its inhabitants, a sense of threatening otherness is generated that reaches beyond the immediate combat situation−a state generated by both a set of generalizing preconceptions and a closed worldview. Although the feeling of alterity is challenged by the Afghan villagers who choose to harbor and protect Luttrell, the main character in the film, the attitude of antagonism towards the population and the landscape constructs the local space and its inhabitants as a site of otherness.

The Hindu Kush Mountains of Afghanistan are also featured in the documentaries *Restrepo* and *Korengal* as a place that has both connotations of beauty and danger, a parallel to one of the key elements of the American Western−the notion of Garden and Desert. The author Sebastian Junger describes the Korengal Valley as one of "the most beautiful and rugged terrain[s] in Afghanistan" (*War* 42) while also

characterizing it as an "extraordinarily violent slit in the foothills of the Hindu Kush mountains" (*War* 9), a place "too remote to conquer, too poor to intimidate, too autonomous to buy off" (*War* 16). The legacy of conquest lingers in the dualistic portrayal of the valley as both a place with magnificent natural vistas and a land in need of civilizing. Landscape provides a materialization of the cultural gap between the American soldiers and the local populace as the latter demonstrates a deep-rooted integration with the environment that becomes vital in the process of survival. The depiction of the elders in the Shuras points to a characterization of the locals as unknowable figures whose values, customs and looks are not easily recognizable by the soldiers. The interaction between the soldiers and the elders represents the search for what Junger calls the "human terrain" (*War* 43), a complex interplay of ideas and negotiations leading to allegiances that facilitate the movement of the American troops in the valley. The conversations accentuate the need for local support by the American military, but also allow the Afghan voices to articulate their concerns and needs. The documentaries reveal imaginary constructions of otherness that are projected onto the landscape in combination with the soldiers' constant interaction with the technology of far-reaching weapons that offer images of violent empowerment.

In the television miniseries *Generation Kill*, the landscape of Iraq is portrayed as the American soldiers drive through territory that ranges from arid deserts and remote villages to populated cityscapes. The journey is punctuated by moments of verbal and corporeal brutality that unveil attitudes of racial prejudice and territorial dominance. The war miniseries as a road movie represents issues of ethnic intolerance and, in the case of one or two characters, a craving for violence accompanied by the constant movement of the soldiers on the Iraqi roads. The highway becomes a space through which their encounters with the local inhabitants and the violent aftereffects of military intervention disclose pathologies that rehearse earlier narratives of conquest as well as depicting an ethical awakening. Evan Wright, one of the characters in the miniseries and also the author of the book *Generation Kill*, describes a typical encounter: "We pass dead bodies in the road again, men with RPG tubes by their sides, then more than a dozen trucks and cars burned and smoking. You find most torched vehicles have charred corpses nearby, occupants who crawled out and made it a few meters before expiring, with their grasping hands still smoldering" (196). The notion of experiencing horizons of possibility, one of the road movie tropes, is substituted in the war miniseries by a bleak depiction of corporeal and environmental

devastation. At the same time, such moments stir up the recognition of moral principles and human values in some of the American soldiers.

In the film *The Wall*, the Iraqi desert becomes one of the main features of the narrative, as the remote and demolished battle zone requires an extreme adjustment to sensorial navigation. The surroundings are experienced through an interconnection between the corporeal and sensorial perception of the American soldier and the communication on the radio, foregrounding technology as a mediator of warfare. The film highlights the disembodied malevolence of the Iraqi character and constructs him as an all-around threat who is intellectually and tactically superior to Isaac, the American soldier. The voice of the Iraqi sniper, transmitted through the soldier's radio, can be compared to Michel Chion's category of the *acousmêtre*, with its ability to see and know everything. The *acousmêtre*, who is called Juba in the film, gradually gains substantial power over Isaac's life. The wall behind which the American soldier hides is a symbolic structure in the landscape. The site was formerly a school, and serves as an emblem of warfare's demolition of culture, memory and the country's historicity. Both characters are unusually portrayed in the film, since the U.S. soldier Isaac's representation departs from the traditional heroic depiction of a soldier, and the Iraqi fighter Juba embodies a narrative power and overall expertise that challenges the expressionless profile of locals in war films. The use of the senses of sight and hearing in Isaac's navigation of the battlefield indicates the immersive corporeality of today's warfare, while Juba's dissociation from the spatial zone of combat and intensive use of long-distance weaponry foregrounds another facet of contemporary war, one that is based on a remote but violent interaction.

Overall, I have argued that landscape, technology, and the human factor of warfare convey a sense of a genre that is adapting into a new form. War participants, whether combatants or non-combatants, stand as a pivotal element of the films of this research. The complex symbolism attached to the construction of landscape creates an atmosphere of otherness regarding the territory as well as its inhabitants. Issues of conquest, dominance, ethnic prejudice, and technological superiority are present in the films in distinct narrative and thematic explorations of cultural identity and nationalism. Genre mutations, such as the war film in comparison to the American Western or the road movie genre, are meaningful markers of the flexibility of the contemporary war film genre regarding the ever-changing face of today's warfare. David LaRocca points out that:

> The nature of war has been transformed and reformed in contemporary life−by terrorism and the politics of fighting stateless adversaries . . . by surveillance, drone technology, and the radical diversification of instruments of visual observation; . . . by the presence of mainstream media as "embeds" and "witnesses" to the prosecution of tactical initiatives and their aftereffects (both on civilian noncombatants and the troops who fight and return home) (13-14).

The significant engagement of the war films with political and social issues is observed by LaRocca: "the genre itself has become a remarkable site of critical and imaginative encounter with the meaning of war and its near-perpetual presence or fragmented manifestations" (14). As demonstrated in this research, war films, documentaries, and miniseries have "hybridized, found variants and versions" (LaRocca 14) borrowing elements from other genres to compose a more layered representation of the experience of war on the ground. This depiction addresses soldierly interactions with the land and its people by foregrounding the emergence of violent cultural conflicts based on imaginary constructions of otherness and fantasies of dominance and technological prowess.

The landscape of war and the technology used during combat are elements that foreground the presence and fragility of the human body engulfed in constant and violent waves of psychological, sensorial and physical turbulence. Elaine Scarry explains that the main purpose of war is to injure, that is, "to alter (to burn, to blast, to shell, to cut) human tissue, as well as to alter the surface, shape, and deep entirety of the objects that human beings recognize as extensions of themselves" ("Injury" 1). In the films analyzed in this dissertation, the disfiguration and scarring of both human bodies and material possessions, including houses, buildings, cars or personal belongings, is intrinsically connected to the objectives of warfare. Scarry also suggests that the perpetuation of war takes place due to the act of refusing to acknowledge such injuries. She observes that war carries within itself a "structure of physical and perceptual events: it requires both the reciprocal infliction of massive injury and the eventual disowning of the injury so that its attributes can be transferred elsewhere, as they cannot if they are permitted to cling to the original site of the wound, the human body" ("Injury" 1). By omitting details of the corporeal damage in the representation of war conflicts or redescribing the events by using language that is euphemistic, such as collateral

damage and the act of neutralizing or liquidating instead of bombing, dismembering and killing, the act of injuring gradually fades from focus.

Scarry points out that "though injury may be disowned in endless ways, it may also be reowned, both by looking directly at a war and by looking at the echo of words of those who have looked, moral philosopher, foot soldier, poet, strategist, general, painter" ("Injury" 18). The films of this research look directly at the position in which the human body is placed in the space of war and the myriad technologies used in its navigation, but also significantly, they portray the destroyed body, insisting on the flesh-and-blood status of the characters. The visual language of the films enables the focus on corporeal and psychological damage not only as a depiction of the injured body at war, but as a means for a critical discussion of the conflicts, a conduit to a larger debate about the meaning of representing the self and the other in the context of worldwide warfare.

By depicting battlefield interactions with its grim encounters and often controversial elements, war films are able to generate crucial discussions about the multiple facets of warfare and its desolating details, whether regarding political, economic, cultural or social scenarios. In a collection of poems written from the front during the First World War, editor Paul O'Prey sensibly observes that "perhaps the first, rather paradoxical, thing to say about war poetry, is that no matter how much we might admire it, or how deeply it might affect us, we must surely wish it had not been written" (13). The same can be said about war films, and particularly in this research about films portraying the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars. The bleakness of the loss of lives and suffering depicted in the films makes us long for a different reality. However, the constant presence of war in today's global scenario pressingly invites cinematic depictions that explore the particularities of the people involved in the conflicts. The representation of lust for violence and weapons, ethnic disregard and prejudice, crippling notions of heroism and patriotism, and a deep state of animosity between peoples are vital to understanding war films as historical outlets of urgent past and contemporary matters.

I hope my study can contribute to the questioning that must be made regarding the complex structure of war representation in film. The interplay of the natural landscape, soldiers, locals, and technology stands as a valuable issue for discussion since we are immersed in a context of endless and far-reaching warfare. Whether wars take place in remote mountainous areas, deserts or populated cities, whether they are fought in intimate settings or at a distance, further research in the area must acknowledge as many elements as possible, including the political and

economic context, specific conditions of the terrain, technological means, and most importantly, the people involved in the conflict. The presence or absence of the local population in the occupied territories should also be a focal point as a way of sustaining a more thorough conversation about the intricacies of the phenomenon of contemporary war.

The narrative and symbolic importance of landscape and technology in contemporary war films lies in the way they shape experiences and impact the sensorial world of the soldiers whose identity is redefined by the unfamiliarity of the terrains and local combat skills. The soldiers' sense of mastery over the environment is challenged, pointing to a critical representation regarding the ideology of American dominance and control. The films analyzed in this research bring to light the complexity related to the cultural heritage of the masculine soldierly ethos by portraying technology as a part of military characterization and landscape as a form of agency that impacts the performance and identity of the soldiers in the battlefields of contemporary war. The imagery of Afghan mountains and Iraqi deserts analyzed in this work stand as active spaces of interaction embedded in a historical and cultural flow of representation.

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