Glorified Victims: Trauma, spectatorship and masochism in *Redacted* (2007)

Mark Straw

Department of American and Canadian Studies
University of Birmingham, UK

The narrative of *Redacted* is initially focalised through the character of a Private named Salazar who incessantly films army life in Iraq with his digital video camera. He explicitly and self-consciously declares that he is making a “war film” with “no logical narrative”. These comments have to be sited within the context of *Redacted* as a work of (partial) fiction, and the product of a Hollywood director, and also as engaging with the cultural linkages between trauma and cinema. The mode of cinema referred to as ‘trauma cinema’ has been explored to some extent by E. Ann Kaplan who wrote that it consists of cut-up narration, emphasis on circularity, paralysis, repetition, and that it therefore literalises some aspects of non-representable trauma. Crucially, Kaplan also declares that in trauma cinema, ‘the struggle to figure trauma’s effects cinematically leads to means other than linearity or story’ and so therefore the self-proclaimed eschewal of logical narrative show the film’s intended collision between trauma and textual practice.

Salazar’s comments serve to blatantly signal Brian De Palma’s intent and so therefore, embody a distinct authorial voice in the film. Since Salazar is marked out as ‘the film-maker’ we have a screened body onto which we can project our emotional and spectatorial investment the film image. Ultimately, however, we shall see how Salazar’s position of ‘film-maker’ is ultimately ruinous and in turn implicates the passive and inert nature of spectatorship in the wake of the atrocities of the Iraq war in sustaining and reinforcing US hegemony. In a way, this inactive watching and passive
spectatorship is implicated as securing US strategic aims and legitimising the occupation and exploitation of Iraq.

The whole film pivots around a central disturbing and traumatic episode in which a bunch a soldiers from Salazar’s unit drunkenly and in a fit of vengeful thrill seeking, rape and kill a 15 year old Iraqi girl, kill her family, and burn them all. This is a fictional take on a factual event, namely, the Al-Mahmudiyah killings of 12 March 2006. In real life, this involved the gang rape and murder of a young Iraqi girl named Abeer Qasim Hamza al-Janabi, and the subsequent murder of her parents and sister. Five US Army soldiers from the 502nd Infantry Regiment were charged over this brutal incident.

In the film, a brutal and harrowing rape scene is played out in night vision courtesy of Salazar’s video camera. There are four soldiers in attendance including Salazar, and another character I shall discuss later, McCoy, who is presented as the ‘moral conscience’ of the scene. McCoy, who is superior in rank to the other soldiers, objects in strong terms to the harrowing events occurring, but McCoy has a gun put to his head and he, along with Salazar, is bullied and threatened into leaving the house under the pretence of going on ‘faggot watch’ outside. The manner in which they are bullied and threatened is by questioning where their ‘balls’ are. Male sexuality, pleasure and domination become conflated, and a lack of adherence to this aggressive sadistic regime is equated to homosexuality. ‘Watching’ seems not only to be analogous to inaction, but also to deprival of normative hegemonic masculinity. Once outside, McCoy explodes with rage at Salazar, staring directly into the camera, his rage
intensified by the night vision colouring, the pupils of his eyes burning a brilliant white, transforming his face into an alien, predatory snarl. He spills his invective in an undeviating fashion, proclaiming Salazar to be no better than ‘a fucking jackal ripping pieces of meat off a fucking carcass’ for not trying to interfere and object. It is at this moment we have an explicit condemnation emerging from the film’s discourse of a regime of passive, inactive spectatorship witnessing atrocities, and spectatorship is likened to corporeal dissolution and an explicitly ‘homosexual’ position.

We shall stay with the character of Salazar now, since he is the one vehemently identified with this inactive spectatorship. One of the film’s scenes is a video recording of Salazar’s psych evaluation. It shows him grappling with some of the outward and inward signs of post-traumatic stress disorder. He has developed certain nervous tics and he describes vividly his recurring nightmares involving ‘her burnt body’, which he swiftly corrects to ‘his.’ It is clear from this moment that what has traumatised him is his inactive involvement in filming the rape and the brutal violence meted out to the girl and her family. However, Salazar claims that what is really troubling him (no one has disclosed the military brutality at this point) is the dramatic and sudden death of his duty Sergeant, who we see getting blown to smithereens by an IED quite early on in the film. We therefore witness a sudden transformation in the character of Salazar; he goes from being the possessor of an assaultive, almost sadistic gaze, in the form of his prying ‘documentary’ video camera, to a position where he is forced to identify with the rape victim, through being impelled into a site of victimhood courtesy of his PTSD. He fiercely proclaims at one point that he is deeply troubled by the concept of ‘people watching and doing fuck all’, an intense self-criticism, but like McCoy’s ‘jackal’ comment, seemingly levelled at the audience in
order to include us within the film’s economy of guilt and implication. The question of one’s ethical engagement with images and ‘watching’ them is highlighted by the fact this sequence is supposedly filmed from a remote video camera and therefore there is no interjecting subjectivity governing the framing or movement of the camera image. The lack of direct control over the video images of Salazar’s grief and pain gives us raw, unmediated access to what is supposedly ‘real’; there is no one calling the shots, and so therefore the only ones ‘watching and doing fuck all’ are us, the audience.

Let us now specifically examine the character of McCoy: He is depicted in the final scene of the film, back home, in a bar, with a jacket and open neck shirt, in the company of his wife, family, and friends. The scene is captured by his father filming his homecoming party on a video camera. In response to a request that he tells some ‘war stories’, he breaks down and visibly upset and shaken he laments straight into the lens of the camera that ‘I have these snapshots in my brain that are burnt in there forever, and I don’t know what I am gonna do about them.’ This stands in marked contrast to what Marita Sturken has described as the ‘irretrievability’ of historical images. In McCoy’s case it is indelibility, perpetuity, and helplessness which mark his traumatic memory. He is the ultimate victim, unable to control his punishment and pain, and yet the forced and unbearably emotionally constipated veneer of ‘celebration’ which is lent to the proceedings in the bar by his father’s insistence on a round of applause and cheers for his son, seems to lend a masquerade of pleasure to the scenario.

Sturken, Tangled Memories, 23
Despite this proximity of emotional pain and false bonhomie, the film leaves us with characters left in melancholic, unresolved states. We are left in the margins, suffering and miserable; Salazar is dead in the wake of his PTSD, McCoy is left crying and staring blankly into the video camera, the perpetrators of the rape left facing investigation by the military police. The film refuses closure and healing; we have no idea regarding the fates of many of the characters, and no attempt is made to ‘explain’ or ‘work through’ the affect of US militarism. There is no reconstruction of male subjectivity either; the emotional masochism and damage depicted in the film through the courtesy of Salazar’s PTSD and McCoy’s melancholic state in the wake of the rape is not healed by simply ‘talking’.

This refusal of closure and healing is a deliberate attempt on De Palma’s part which is signalled by a brief, but significant scene towards the end of the film. Via a pastiche of a ‘YouTube’ style website, we see a video clip of a female teenager ranting directly into the camera.2 She is the female voice of protest in this film and articulates a violent revenge on the patriarchal abuses of power embodied and popularised in Hollywood war films. She mocks and blames Vietnam movies in particular for mythologizing loose cannon violence (‘let’s torch the whole fuckin’ village!’ she sarcastically proclaims in a faux grunt snarl) and for perpetuating the notion that ‘We are the über-race! Sieg Heil, motherfucker!’ This is De Palma acknowledging his own role in constructing these mythologies and providing ‘closure’ and ‘healing’ through his Hollywood Vietnam war effort, Casualties of War (1989). This self-reflexive process is significant since it sees De Palma shifting his authorial subjectivity onto the

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2 She is one of the few female voices in the film, which in itself speaks of an interesting perpetuation of a significant marginalisation within popular war films. The only other female characters who are given significant speaking roles are the ATV journalist and McCoy’s wife, who imparts her story via her video blog entitled, ‘Just A Soldier’s Wife’. The self-definition purely in terms of the ‘other’ of her soldiering husband and the marginal simplicity in the deployment of the word ‘Just’ speaks volumes.
body of this protesting woman, and with her nose ring, tattoo, and poster of Che Guevara, it implies De Palma’s correlation with the iconography of contemporary counter-culture. If this is the case, then De Palma is carefully acknowledging his film as a ‘rant’ and a riposte to the glamorisation and valorisation of American exceptionalism and the physical horror of combat. Marita Sturken has commented that the problem with *Casualties of War* is that its ‘real focus is the rift in morality among the Americans and their own victimization.’ It could also be argued that this same problem pervades *Redacted*. There is a rift in the unit and a rift in the film’s aesthetics and narrative due to the numerous enunciative subject positions adopted. Also, the victim status of the soldiers is emphasised by the final scene being that of McCoy’s emotional breakdown, and our emotional attachment to Salazar and his subsequent mental and corporeal ruination. Scenes where we ‘see the bombs from below’, i.e. witness Iraqi victimhood, are sometimes refracted through the subjectivity of US militarism; the rape scene being conveyed through Salazar’s passive video gaze and McCoy seemingly more concerned with Salazar’s inactivity rather than the rape itself.

And so a familiar discourse emerges in which mainstream hegemonic and mostly white masculinity gets to act as victim, and in doing so reinforces the idea that it is trying to muscle in on identity politics through claiming itself to be ‘in crisis.’ So although *Redacted* is an admirable attempt to atone for Hollywood’s sins of the past, it still concerns a privileged perspective, in which US hegemonic masculinity holds centre stage, as embattled or traumatically ruined it may be. So are there any critical tools we may use with which to resist or reconfigure this privilege and hogging of the limelight?

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1 Sturken, *Tangled Memories*, 106
Well arguably, the prevalence of the traumatised male soldier in contemporary cinema merely means that a new radical corporeality of US militarism is established. Steven Shaviro in his discussion of masochism, the body and cinema states that ‘the agitated body (a term which seems to suit the cinematic soldier and the cinematic spectator) multiplies its affects and excitation to the point of sensory overload, pushing itself to the limits.’ So, in the context of contemporary war films, we see this desire for the body to push itself to traumatic limits and the spectator’s willingness to endure these chaotic masochistic narratives and aesthetics.

According to Shaviro in his radical model of cinematic spectatorship, self-abandonment and ‘humiliating weakness’ are key. So the normative mainstream masculinity which seeks fixity and stability is merely a reactive and attempting to hysterically defend itself against the fragmentary and blurred nature of the masochistic bodies associated with war cinema. The hysteria and trauma of the soldiers are symptomatic of this urge to assert a normative privileged masculinity, one which is ironically a fiction or a fantasy. As Marita Sturken has suggested, war films simply provide recuperation and healing in order to ‘make way for the next war.’ So stability and fixity are part of this conservative and reactionary process by which the radical potential of trauma and incoherence is nullified. Sturken seems to suggest that in allowing wounds to close, a sense of erasure or forgetting is evoked and that healing and stability, rather than easing personal pain, activates a cultural amnesia which permits the perpetuation of aggressive foreign policies. In this sense, healing seems to be figured as something conservative which reinforces a certain non-verbalised hegemony – that war is necessary. Cinema provides the rehabilitation so
that the public trauma of the war is eradicated. This position intriguingly suggests that trauma, violence, and suffering is a radical alternative position opposed to this silent hegemony which surreptitiously carouses the spectator into accepting and ‘moving on’ when it comes to war. The implication here is that to encourage the persistence of trauma, violence and suffering is to discourage healing, and hence discourage the perpetuation of the normative discourse which figures ‘war as necessary’.

However, we can see that there is potential within the quite conservative format of the war film for subversive radical pleasures which renounce fixity and stability. War cinema is arguably and ironically not conducive to a sense of fixity and normalising power since it is one of the most fragmentary of cinematic forms. The confusion of battle scenes, disintegrating body parts, chaotic cinematography, friendly fire, trauma, madness, the transition in subjectivity enacted in boot camps and battlefield experiences all show that war films seem to resist ideas of fixed identities and draw their ideological power from notions of dissolution, fragmentation and self-abandonment. Therefore, Hollywood war film attempts to provide a reactive, defensive position against the fragmentary self-abandonment of masochistic pleasure, but in the process offers up cinematic pleasures which are rooted in this unfixed and radical state. Crucially, however, the radical potential of these pleasures is masked from the spectator. In projecting the US soldier, nation, or military as victim, US normalising cultural authority and diplomacy is hijacking this radical representative practice and spectator position in order to divest the masochistic position of its radical psycho-sexual politics and establish it as the standard logic of conformist power in the US.