

AFGHANISTAN

AGNIESZKA SOLTYSIK MONNET

***Lions for Lambs* (2007): Ambivalent Memorialization and Melodrama**

Lions for Lambs (2007) is a film about the importance of historical memory. Through three interwoven stories told in real time (90 minutes), the film suggests that the wars in the Middle East (the film's combat scene takes place in Afghanistan) are repeating many of the mistakes of the Vietnam War. Memory and memorialization are thus central to the film's concerns, through a dual agenda of reminding viewers of the lessons of the Vietnam era as well as commemorating the soldiers who are being once more exposed to danger for murky political goals. Just as the word "memorialize" has two meanings which sometimes pull in opposite directions (to preserve the memory of and to commemorate, which can be understood in either a neutral or a more celebratory sense), so do the film's objectives end up pulling in opposite directions. On the one hand, the film wishes to offer a critical perspective on the war in Afghanistan, arguing that the military approach alone will never accomplish its stated objectives and can only lead to the deaths of more young soldiers such as the protagonists of

the movie, Ernest (Michael Pena) and Arian (Derek Luke), two college students, a Mexican American and an African American. On the other hand, the film wants to honor the service and sacrifice of these soldiers, in keeping with the current climate of reverence to military personnel,¹ and therefore presents their deaths in a highly melodramatic and quasi-religious aesthetic frame which sits uneasily with the critical and questioning thrust of the film. In other words, historical memory and memorialization work at odds with each other in this attempt on the part of Hollywood to engage with what has now become America's longest war.²

Although the film is directed by Robert Redford, who has been associated with independent cinema since founding the Sundance Film Festival in 1981, it was produced by Tom Cruise's Cruise/Wagner Productions and was the first film made by the company after joining with United Artists.³ Heavy in star power – including performances by Redford and Cruise as well as Meryl Streep – the film awkwardly straddles the fence separating Hollywood and independent film-making. Although Redford strays from the usual Hollywood fare of what we could call “patriotic gore” (to borrow Edmund Wilson's term for Civil War literature) to a significant extent, especially in the formally experimental and dialogical format, the film remains well within the orbit of Hollywood war film conventions, especially regarding heroism and self-sacrifice. *Lions for Lambs* unfolds three parallel situations unfolding simultaneously and which are interconnected in subtle ways, two of which are essentially long conversations. One concerns a young senator, Jasper Irving (Tom Cruise), and a much older journalist, Janine Roth (Meryl Streep), whom he has invited to his

¹ See James Fallows' article in *The Atlantic Monthly* on how empty reverence for the military has replaced a real respect for it, “The Tragedy of the American Military” (Jan.-Feb. 2015).

² The war in Afghanistan began with an invasion in October of 2001, in response to the terrorist attacks on 9/11, and continues to the present (2018 at the time of printing), adding up to 17 years, far longer than the Vietnam War, which previously was considered the longest, with troops on the ground from 1964 to 1973,

³ Although the Sundance Film Festival is ostensibly about independent cinema, earning Redford a reputation as an advocate for American indie film-making, it has nevertheless been “dominated for years by studio producers, studio-owned distributors, and agents with strong ties to the studios” (See Jonathan Rosenbaum, *Movie Wars*, p. 39).

office to offer an exclusive story about a new operation in Afghanistan. Another concerns a university professor, Dr. Malley (Robert Redford), and a disaffected student named Todd (Andrew Garfield), and a third concerns the two young soldiers mentioned earlier, executing in “real time” the operation that the senator is trying to sell to the skeptical journalist. The Redford character directly links the second and third stories, since the two soldiers are former students of his, but the first narrative arc, with the senator and journalist, are linked to the other two mainly through a news broadcast watched by the student. All three stories mirror each other in their staging of a relationship between a younger and an older figure, the latter representing historical memory and experience, and all three require some decision to be made within the time of the film or shortly after.

In light of the foregoing, it is fair to say that the film’s treatment of time, memory, and temporality is among its most unique and interesting features. By making the three situations, and their respective decisions, take place simultaneously, the film attempts to lend a sense of urgency to a war that has now become America’s longest and most intransigent – the closest to the “quagmire” situation of Vietnam. In this respect the film tries to restore a sense of future to a situation that has for all intents and purposes assumed a sense of timeless present – a forever war.⁴ At the same time the film performs a powerful though perhaps inadvertent act of memorialization and legitimation by comparing the current conflict to many others. For instance, the title refers to a quotation by German generals about the British high command and its incompetent leadership of otherwise brave young infantrymen in WWI.⁵ The narrative device of simultaneous plots within a limited time-frame recalls the

⁴ The term “forever war” comes from Vietnam veteran Joe Haldeman’s science fiction novel, which allegorizes the Vietnam War as an intergalactic conflict that lasts millennia. It has been associated with the war in Afghanistan in many articles and a book by Dexter Filkins published in 2009 (see Haldeman, *The Forever War*, and Filkins, *The Forever War*).

⁵ In an article for *The Times*, Brian DiMuccio and Dino Vindeni observe that “most experts agree it [the phrase “nowhere have I seen such lions led by such lambs”] was written during the Battle of the Somme” though there is uncertainty about whether the source was an anonymous infantryman or General Max von Gallwitz of the German forces (DiMuccio and Vindeni, “What’s the Significance”). Robert Redford’s character attributes the

WWII classic *The Longest Day* (1962), which involved multiple story-lines unfolding simultaneously over 24 hours. Also like *The Longest Day*, which featured over a dozen celebrities including John Wayne and Robert Mitchum in starring roles, *Lions for Lambs* is strongly marked by its famous faces, many of whom also can be said to represent, recall and memorialize other wars (or at least, other war films). For instance, Robert Redford has made two WWII films (*Situation Hopeless, But Not Serious* and *A Bridge Too Far*) and a Korean War movie (*War Hunt*). Even more evocative is the presence of Meryl Streep (strongly associated with the Vietnam War since her leading role in *The Deer Hunter*) and Tom Cruise (who played Ron Kovic in Oliver Stone's *Born on the 4th of July*). A more recent film reference that lingers in the background to this work is *Black Hawk Down* (2001), comparable in its story of a mission going spectacularly wrong, leaving American servicemen stranded in a hostile war-zone. The effect of these multiple allusions and references is, as with all war films, a palimpsest of previous wars – a multilayered memorialization that references earlier wars while erecting an analogous cinematic monument to the current one – which ends up lending an impression of historical legitimacy precisely by its familiarity.

When American military interventions in the Middle East began in the 1980s and erupted in 1991 with the Persian Gulf War, Hollywood was relatively slow to enter the fray. The first films to engage with the war were *Courage Under Fire* (1996) and *Three Kings* (1999), and both only indirectly. *Courage Under Fire* explores the new dynamic of women in combat and its effect on military masculinity, while *Three Kings* is a comedy-adventure that satirizes the war. With *Jarhead* (2005), based on Anthony Swofford's memoir of his experience as a soldier during Operation Desert Storm, a trickle of films about the Middle East began to emerge, including *Home of the Brave* (2006), *In the Valley of Elah* (2007), *Redacted* (2007), *The Battle for Haditha* (2007), *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and *Stop-Loss*

phrase to a "German general" during WWI, in Scene 16.

(2008). Many of these were relatively critical of the war and most, with the exception of Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* (the least overtly political), had little box office success.¹⁰ *Lions For Lambs* (2007), which dates from this period, also struggled at the box office and was accused by some critics of being too preachy.

Nevertheless, one can argue that the trend towards more thoughtful and potentially critical films about the ongoing wars in the Middle East began to collapse in 2013 when Peter Berg's ultra-violent *Lone Survivor* came out and made a great deal of money. Then Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper* (2014), breaking all box office records for war movies, drove a fistful of nails into the coffin of the critical Middle Eastern war film.¹¹ Eastwood's big hit is sadly instructive regarding as to what "works" to make a hugely successful war movie: a cartoonishly simplistic dichotomy between very good guys (U.S. military personnel) and very bad guys (any Iraqi that appears on screen), an ultra-masculine hero who is both a good family man and a big, burly and stoic adventurer harkening back to the lone gun-slingers of the American Western, and a thin veneer of PTSD symptoms to make us pity as well as admire the hero (though they quickly dissipate before the end). *American Sniper* follows the heroic protagonist from his Midwestern childhood of church-going and deer-hunting to his tragic end at the hands of a troubled fellow vet, and deploys nearly every cliché and war film convention in between (the grueling training, the best friend who dies, the duel between elite warriors, the regenerative pleasures of male bonding, the indigenous ally who turns out to be a traitor, the unnaturally cruel and savage enemy, and so on). To the disappointment of many people who appreciated Eastwood's even-handedness in his WWII diptych, *Flags of Our Fathers* (2006) and *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006), *American Sniper* is resolutely one-sided, politically crude, and takes place in the timeless present of a first-person-shooter version of

¹⁰ However, Martin Barker, author of *A Toxic Genre*, questions the criteria by which films are dubbed "failures" or "successes," and argues that the alleged failure of the Iraq War film cycle has been greatly exaggerated. See Barker, *"A Toxic Genre": The Iraq War Films*, London: Pluto Press, 2011.

¹¹ According to Wikipedia, *American Sniper* is the "highest-grossing war film of all time adjusted for inflation." See https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Sniper (accessed Sept. 10, 2017).

the Middle East as urban war zone: all crumbling buildings, dusty streets, bullet-marked walls and sniper nests.

In sharp contrast to *American Sniper*, *Lions for Lambs* is about historical memory and time more generally. First of all, it unfolds three different stories, involving six main characters, all taking place simultaneously in the same 90 minutes, and embedded in three temporalities: past, present and future. Yet the dominant mood and theme of the film is that of memorialization – remembering both the past (mainly Vietnam) and the present (which seems oddly easy to forget) – as well as honoring the sacrifice of past and present martyrs. Although the goal of the film is to recall the errors of the Vietnam War in order to point out that they are being repeated in Afghanistan, and the death of the two young soldiers is meant to thrust this point home, I argue that the *way* that their deaths are narrated as a heroic “last stand” and the undercurrent of reverence for servicemen muddies the message that the film wants to convey.

PART 1 – The Senator and the Reporter

SCENE 1: “The Drive to the Senator’s Office” (1:31 to 1:50)

SCENE 2: “A New Plan” (2:25 to 5:10)

SCENE 3: “Why Now?” (12:20 to 16:20)

SCENE 4: “Do You Remember How Petrified We Were?” (25:54 to 31:10)

SCENE 5: “We’re Both on the Same Team” (38:10 to 41:30)

SCENE 6: “Irving’s Memorial Wall” (41:30 to 42:50)

SCENE 7: The Bad-News Call (57:40 to 1:00:35)

SCENE 8: Infrared and Gun Camera Images (1:01:50 to 1:03:50)

SCENE 9: “Janine Drives Home from the Office” (1:21:19 to 1:22:10)

This narrative is the most explicit about historical memory as a theme. It features an experienced journalist, Janine Roth, who started her career at the height of the Vietnam War in 1968, and a young Republican senator and presidential hopeful Jasper Irving. Although Roth is known as a liberal reporter, Irving has invited her to hear about a new plan for winning Afghanistan as a reward for an article she had written about him years earlier, calling him “the future of his party.” Irving sees his sharing with her of his plan as a potential scoop, while she sees it as an attempt to get media coverage on what is essentially a self-serving and ineffective strategy by an opportunistic presidential hopeful. Their conversation consists of Irving attempting to sell her on the plan which he has already put into action, and which involves dropping several soldiers on a mountaintop in order to capture the high ground. This operation is being carried out by the two college students (now soldiers) that we learn about in the two other parallel narratives (to be discussed in Part Two: The Teacher and Student, and Part Three: The Two Soldiers). Janine is skeptical from the start and consistently counters his optimistic bluster with cautionary parallels from the past. Moreover, Janine is the main focalizer of this narrative, the camera follows her before and after the meeting, and stays with her in the room when Jasper steps out. She is the bearer of historical memory and the character who literally writes history, as she happens to be working on a larger project of assembling a timeline of the “War on Terror.”

In the very first scene that we see Janine, she is riding in a taxi in Washington. We do not know yet where she is going, but she passes the Lincoln Memorial, which establishes for the viewer that larger issues of American national identity and values will be at stake. The memorial is shot from the sky and from the back, with morning light radiating around it, emphasizing its monumental and quasi-religious aspect. Lincoln is an important figure for discussions of war in America, having presided over the greatest shedding of American blood

in the history of the country, and at the hands of other Americans, a dark reminder of the deadly forces contained by the rule of law. Lincoln is also an iconic figure of American national martyrdom, having been assassinated by a Confederate fanatic, thus a final victim of the war he had waged, and on Good Friday, ineluctably invoking poignant comparisons with Christ. As Roth passes the memorial, she is holding a notepad in her hand, ready to write the news and to memorialize the present.

In Scene 2, Jasper begins his sales pitch about “a new plan” that he wants to share with the media, and specifically with her. Yet, ironically, his description of his new plan immediately undermines its credibility as “new” by using very dated and timeworn language. Jasper calls it “a new plan that will win both the war, and, as cliché as this might sound, the hearts and minds of the people,” thus recalling with some self-consciousness but no self-irony the phrase that became a term of derision for the blindness of American policy in the Vietnam War (based on a failure to grasp that bombing villages and displacing villagers was not going to win support for the US or its client government in South Vietnam). Jasper seems aware that the phrase is a “cliché” but totally ignorant of why and what it signifies. In short, he betrays his total lack of historical memory of America’s recent and most relevant past. To drive this point home, the film has Jasper explicitly tell her that he wants to “change the conversation from the past to the future” and invites her to write a story “about what is going on *now*” (the character’s emphasis on this word). Yet as he unfolds some particulars of the plan – especially in Scene Two – Janine (and many older spectators) cannot help but recognize elements from the Vietnam War – both in the rhetoric and the tactics (such as the insertion of dangerously small teams of soldiers into enemy-controlled territory).

In Scene 3, allusions to the history, and especially military history, abound. When Jasper describes the plan to “kill the enemy” before proceeding to nation-building, Janine counters by saying, “So it’s basically: kill people to help people,” which is a slightly

reformulated version of the famous quote by an unnamed US officer in Vietnam reported in 1968 by correspondent Peter Arnett: “It became necessary to destroy the town to save it.” Again, like “hearts and minds,” the phrase has come to be associated with the worst excesses and absurdities of American military policy at the time. Next, Janine reminds Jasper that in 2002, he had said that “the Taliban’s back is broken,” to which Jasper adds, “Mission Accomplished,” quoting the notoriously premature claim to victory in Iraq by George W. Bush on the USS Abraham Lincoln in 2003. Although Jasper concedes that these claims were “mistakes,” his easy conflation of the two invasions – in Afghanistan and in Iraq – reveals his generally lackadaisical attitude towards the particulars of history. In contrast, Janine keeps explicitly bringing up the issue of history as a heuristic. When Jasper mentions fighting on two fronts at once, Janine chimes in: “And history does tend to punish that kind of hubris.” This scene ends with Janine asking when the plan will go into effect, and Jasper answering theatrically, “Ten minutes ago,” as the film cuts to the two young soldiers about to parachute out of their plane onto a mountain top. Jasper had earlier explained that the new plan involved taking as much high ground as possible. However, in this scene – which I will come back to in the part on the two soldiers – we see the mission begin to go terribly wrong. The landing zone turns out to be “hot,” and the plane draws fire, injuring one of the parachutists and making Ernest fall out. As Arian jumps out after him into the night, the film then cuts to the third narrative, with the teacher and student.

With the fourth and fifth scenes between Janine and Jasper, we already know that the mission has gone awry, and a subtle irony begins to emerge as Janine and Jasper continue to debate. First, Jasper describes the core of the new strategy as the establishment of “forward operating points,” which Janine immediately recognizes as a yet smaller version of the failed Vietnamese War strategy of creating “forward operating bases.” As she explicitly points out, these terms are “Pentagonese” jargon for “bait,” that is, drawing the elusive insurgents out of

hiding by provocatively entering their territory in small enough numbers to lure them into engaging, while counting on the greater firepower of the outnumbered soldiers' weapons. This was a failed strategy in Vietnam which led to many American deaths and a bitter feeling of having been betrayed and put in harm's way knowingly, and the film attempts to reinforce Janine's point by making Jasper say something that is directly refuted by the other simultaneous plotline. He soothingly tells Janine, "It's not like we're putting one or two guys on a mountain here," while the spectator knows that this is precisely what has happened to the operation, i.e. two men have been stranded defenseless on a mountaintop as insurgents move in. Janine continues to insist, ever more explicitly, on the need to use historical memory as a resource: "I don't understand how you can not want to look at the past and see how it's critical." To which question Jasper responds by denying the importance of memory and insisting upon the importance of action in the present: "What is critical, what is relevant is the implementation of a new strategy that will win the war."

Although Janine is the main focus of the scene and the bearer of historical memory, and arguably possesses a moral authority based on that experience, the film unfortunately allows Tom Cruise to dominate the conversation and generally to eclipse Meryl Streep's character. The senator also explicitly evokes the issue of memory and memorialization when he admits that the United States has made mistakes in pursuing its military goals in recent years: "We made mistakes, colossal mistakes, that should never be forgotten." Most confusingly, Jasper is allowed to make an earnest and moving speech about 9/11 that seems to justify his motives and intentions. Near the end of Scene 4, he asks Janine if she remembers how "petrified we were" on the day of the Trade Center attacks. The film deploys all the conventional techniques of signaling an important speech, worthy of attention and emotional engagement, by having the camera move in on Cruise's face and playing somber orchestra music in the background, cuing the spectator's affective response, which is further

reinforced by Janine nodding in agreement to Jasper's points, which culminate in the question, posed dramatically and movingly, as a question that "keeps him up at night," namely, "what do we do now?" In this way, Jasper is allowed to a great extent to sidestep Janine's warnings about how the US appears to be repeating the mistakes made in Vietnam, and in the fifth scene they have together he is allowed to score yet another point off her – namely, by bringing up the media's complicity in selling the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He tells her that, ultimately, they are both "on the same team," and she needs to help him "sell the solution."

When Irving gets a call and must step out for a moment, Janine walks around his office looking at the photos and clippings (Scene 6). The senator's office is a veritable shrine of memorabilia, entirely about himself, with photos of him posing with Senator John McCain and Colin Powell, George W. Bush, and Condoleezza Rice, as well as his Harvard University diploma, and West Point graduation photo with the American flag as the background. There is also a photo of the Lincoln Memorial, on which the camera lingers, echoing the opening of the film, and aligning the senator with this most respected and noble of American war presidents, and there is a quotation from Theodore Roosevelt, stating that, if given a choice between peace and righteousness, he would choose the latter. In other words, American historical figures are invoked in a strongly pro-military light. A final image from the senator's wall is Janine's own article about Jasper Irving, a decade earlier, titled aptly "Capitol Young Guns" (also possibly an allusion to Cruise's successful role as "top gun" in the movie by that title) and comparing him to John F. Kennedy. The cumulative effect of the wall material, as well as Jasper's charm and good humor, and the respect the film gives his speeches, is to lend him an authority and moral earnestness that threatens to overpower the reporter's justified skepticism.

Although we know that Jasper is a presidential hopeful who is looking to improve his chances by appearing strong on military policy, and so that there is something essentially opportunistic about his scheme, the credibility of the plan that Jasper is trying to sell to Janine is undermined less by her pointed questions and comparisons with Vietnam than by the plot unfolding in parallel, which shows the botched operation having left the two young soldiers wounded and exposed on a cold Afghan mountaintop as enemy fighters close in. During the seventh scene with Janine, Irving receives a call which informs him of the failure of the operation, but he pointedly does not tell Janine, withholding thereby confirmation of her clearly reasonable doubts about the merits of the plan. Instead, he is given one more powerful speech, this time in full melodrama mode, with tears in his eyes, claiming that he “knows in his gut” that only a military solution can defeat the “evil” and “medieval” enemy, and that he knows he can tell families of the fallen – with “absolute conviction” – that the deaths of their loved ones were “about something.” This final all-out appeal to the epistemology of the heart and the gut, the strength of faith, and the visible display of emotion, all give Irving a strong counterbalancing weight to Janine’s skepticism. As she leaves his office, we know she must decide whether to write the story from Jasper’s optimistic point of view, or her own skeptical one. On her drive across Washington D.C. later, after speaking to her editor (Scene 9), the camera lingers on the Lincoln Memorial once more as well as the rows of crosses in Arlington Cemetery. This visual reminder of the cost of war since the Civil War buttresses Janine’s reluctance to write the piece without a critical stance. Yet, when her editor refuses to print Janine’s version, the neutral and more positive version of the story is what ultimately the newspaper chooses to print, as we see in a news headline on television later that morning.¹³

¹³ The film is ambiguous about whether Janine works for a print newspaper or a broadcast network, as there are references to “writing” an article even though finally the senator’s story

In this manner, the film explores and exposes the flaws of contemporary media as an institution of public information and collective memory. Janine confesses in Scene 8 that her newspaper has gone from being a “news organization preoccupied with gathering news” to a “business unit preoccupied with ad revenue and ratings... a windsuck.” The headline at the end of the film is actually merely a news ticker running under a program about celebrity gossip, suggesting that hard news takes a back seat to entertainment in a corporate-sponsored news source.

PART 2 – The Teacher and the Student

SCENE 10: “Todd Watches the News” (00:10 to 00:42)

SCENE 11: “Rome is Burning” (1:06:10 to 1:09:22)

SCENE 12: “Todd Watches TV and Sees the News of New Afghan Offensive” (1:22:15 to 1:23:45)

The other principal bearer of historical memory is the college professor Dr. Mallay who has called Todd, a disaffected young student, into his office. This subplot is also entirely a conversation, filmed in several scenes, during which the teacher attempts to motivate the student to get involved in his class and consider a career in politics, in the hope of thwarting the student’s drift into apathy and cynicism. Todd had started the semester well, taking an active and passionate role in discussions, and then had stopped participating and let his grades drop. Here the institution at stake is the university and its role in producing students who take an active interest in their society, including by running for office, as opposed to slipping into self-interested individualism. The teacher represents the republican ideal of

appears on on television. Presumably her employer has both print and broadcast media at its disposal.

civic duty and public commitment, while the student has adopted a position of liberal self-interest. The two opposed poles of American political tradition are thus allegorized. The film actually begins with the young student, Todd, as well as ending with him, thereby suggesting that the decisions of the youngest generation are finally what will matter the most in the longterm. The film begins (Scene 10) with him watching a television news story about a fatal roadside bombing of American soldiers in Bagdad and mentions the number of soldiers killed up to that moment, making the question of how America's future leaders (such as the privileged Todd) will react to that that statistic – 3,555 lives sacrificed to a distant war – as the defining matter of the film. The question is posed in stark terms: will they remember the lessons of the past and end the politically opportunistic slaughter or will they let amnesia and apathy continue to claim American lives.¹⁴

This part of the film is the most future-oriented of the story, hinging on the question of how Todd will decide to react to his teacher's appeal to get involved and what he will do with his life. "Rome is burning, son!" Professor Malley tells Todd in Scene 11, in an effort to make him see the urgency and importance of getting politically engaged. Part of Malley's pitch to Todd is the story of Arian and Ernest, two recent students who represent the polar opposite of Todd's privileged background. Arian comes from Compton, and Ernest is from South-Central Los Angeles, two of the poorest neighborhoods in Los Angeles, and both are sports scholarship students who were inspired by Malley's class to get involved in the way that has become a common default route for many people from poor communities, by enlisting in the military. Malley explains to Todd, and we see it in flashbacks, that he was dismayed by their decision, precisely because of his Vietnam War background. But he is impressed by their reasoning and determination, which rests on the hope that a military

¹⁴ As in all American war films, the question of victimization is focused exclusively on American lives – the matter of Afghan or Iraqi lives, including civilians, is simply not on the radar of any U.S. debates about military intervention abroad.

background will not only finance their studies but give them a political voice and cultural capital when they return as combat veterans. The film highlights the ironic contrast between the disadvantaged but civic minded students who risk their lives in order to acquire a political voice, and the entitled Todd, who has all the advantages, and is wasting his gifts and time on fraternity parties and cynicism.

Like Janine, Todd leaves his meeting with a decision to make. Unlike the other plot, we are left not knowing what he will choose, though it is clear he has been moved by the professor's arguments and appeals. In the final shot of the film (Scene 12), Todd watches television at his fraternity once more, visibly distracted and pensive this time, and then sees the news ticker announcing a "major military operation underway" in Afghanistan, with U.S. military "seizing high grounds in surprise offensive." The upbeat story runs across the television screen during an "Entertainment News" program about a celebrity's divorce filing and serves as background to a conversation between Todd and a room-mate who asks him what grade he's going to get, bringing us back to the choice the teacher has given Todd, that is, to take a B and never come again, or get motivated and work for an A. Todd's decision is left open and unclear, and the misleading news story can be read as an endorsement of his disaffection, since we know that it is a falsely positive take on a failed mission. But it could also be read as a call to action, since the political system and the media are so obviously flawed that it remains to the next generation of students to change things. The film leaves Todd undecided, distractedly mulling over the choice he has been challenged to make, possibly in an appeal to the viewer's own conscience and willingness to get involved.

PART 3 – The Two Soldiers

SCENE 13: “The Hot LZ” (memories of *Black Hawk Down*)(16:30 to 18:50)

SCENE 14: “Two Men on the Mountaintop” (23:05 to 25:25)

SCENE 15: “The Infrared Screen” (31:36 to 31:48)

SCENE 16: “The Class Presentation & Restaurant” (48:09 to 56:00)

SCENE 17: “The Last Stand” (1:18:12 to 1:21:10)

This is the most present-focused narrative of the three, and one which throws into ironic relief the discussions taking place safely back in Washington D.C. and California. It is also chronotopically the most complex story, beginning in a military planning room in Afghanistan, then moving to a military plane and finally the snowy mountain top, after which it loops back in flashbacks to Arian and Ernest in class and at a restaurant with Professor Malley. This plotline is also the most poignant, since we come to understand that they are probably doomed from the beginning of the film, after they have been stranded alone in enemy territory. Although Ernest is thrown out of the plane in Scene 13, Arian jumps out on purpose to join his friend, thus effectively sacrificing himself for friendship. He also refuses to flee and instead stays with Ernest to the end. These two soldiers are portrayed in a heavy-handed way as the “lions” being sacrificed by the “lambs,” themselves becoming transformed in the process into sacrificial lambs, martyr-like. Their self-sacrifice throws Todd’s selfish disaffection into an ugly light, as does their plight bely the optimistic sales pitch of the grasping young senator. Their decision to enlist having already taken place in the past of the film-world, we are allowed to see their reasoning, which is interestingly linked to memorialization. Just as Janine compares the Middle East to Vietnam, so do Arian and Ernest argue that Iraq and Afghanistan are the “defining moments” for their generation, as Vietnam was for Professor Malley’s. In this view, the present is being rapidly memorialized and

transformed into historical memory and cultural capital, which they wish to earn for themselves.

Since memorialization is often linked to notions and narratives of collective or national identity, Ernest and Arian's story is particularly charged with meaning. As members of racial minorities as well as from poor neighborhoods, the two young men are arguably disenfranchised from full citizenship, and they have chosen military service as a form of overcoming of this handicap since service is traditionally seen as a point of entry into political and civic life. As mentioned earlier, they see the wars in the Middle East as the defining moments of their generation, and they believe that military service will give them cultural authority: "A black and Mexican combat vet ... they gotta listen to us ... we can change things!" (Scene 16). The teacher raises the unmentionable aspect of their gambit by saying only the word "If," implying "If ... they return." The possibility of injury or death is always the open secret of military service, and here the injuries and vulnerability of the two young men are made into the solvent that dissolves the certainties and complacencies of the other narratives. In fact, victimage is explicitly evoked by the film in the mouths of these two characters as the catalyst for social cohesion and collective engagement. During their oral presentation in class (also Scene 16), when challenged by a fellow student about how "a house with high walls" (in other words, individual prosperity) is the American Dream as opposed to civic engagement, they counter with a series of dates on which the common good supposedly mattered more than individual self-interest: July 5, 1776; June 8, 1941; and September 12, 2001. All these dates represent the day after a declaration of war or an attack on the United States, and all the events they are linked to are commemorated as among the most sacred national memories.

This reverential fascination with victimage pulls the film in an inexorable undercurrent away from the thoughtful and dialogical mode of the other two plots, which

question blind faith in military solutions and the public apathy that allows them to continue to be cynically applied despite repeated failure. This vector of the story is structured in the classical melodramatic mode: two virtuous under-dog heroes are placed in a situation of danger and suffering. Their altruistic care for each other and male stoicism in the face of mortal danger define them as both heroic and *good*. In short, both their virtue and their victimization are made explicit and visible. Although the purpose of this plot-line, and of their deaths, is to remind audiences of the real cost of war behind the political and philosophical discussions, the aesthetic choices around the representation and narration of these deaths incline towards melodrama in a way that codes them as tragically noble and therefore potentially appealing.¹⁵

Let us take a closer look at this death scene (Scene 17), which is the dramaturgical climax of the film, occurring at roughly 80 minutes of 90 minute long film. On an aesthetic level, the scene represents two different vectors of the term “memorialize”: record and revere. It is filmed in both regular film stock and as a satellite image showing the characters as black spots on a coarsely pixelated green screen . The use of satellite visuals testifies to the film’s desire to commemorate the specificity of the current wars and their heavy reliance on information technology and digital surveillance techniques. We are shown their deaths in both media, that is, as flashes on the satellite monitor which leave them motionless in the center of the screen and as realistic figures on the conventional film stock which shows their last moments through image and dialogue and soundtrack. If the satellite image is minimalistic and sober, the conventional film footage presents these deaths in the classical mode of the war film as patriotic melodrama. The wounded Ernest insists on standing up as the enemy closes in, so as not to be killed “lying down,” and the comrade who could run

¹⁵ Philippa Gates argues in a 2005 article that the trend for war films of the twenty-first century is towards an appearance of verisimilitude in the combat scenes while returning to highly moralistic and conservative messages in the overall narrative (“Fighting the Good Fight” 298). Although *Lions for Lambs* appears to resist this paradigm through its explicitly critical approach to the war in Afghanistan, its combat scenes correspond closely to these terms.

away and save himself insists on staying by the side of his wounded friend. They die in a hail of bullets, almost execution style, outnumbered but defiant and resigned, willing sacrifices, noble and heroic. The sounds of the bullets are muted, however, and what we hear instead are unintelligible shouts in Arabic and the swelling sounds of orchestral music featuring strings and horns in the elegiac and reverential tone that has become unavoidable since Steven Spielberg inaugurated the sacralized war memory machine with *Band of Brothers* in 2001. A rescue helicopter illuminates their crumpled bodies moments after their deaths, emphasizing the wrenching irony of help arriving just a few irreversible seconds *too late*, a key device in the temporal choreography of melodrama.¹⁶ The camera cuts to the face of the army officer watching the satellite monitor which registers the grief that the audience is invited to feel for the soldiers, and Janine Roth's tearful face as she passes Arlington Cemetery, though she is unaware of the failure of this specific mission, generalizes the affective work of grief to all soldiers who die in failed missions like this.

Although the film uses this death scene to advance its argument that the continued prosecution of military solutions to the so-called War on Terror is misguided, the aesthetic representation of combat death as heroically tragic and noble, recognized as such both by the individuals involved in the mission (the officer at the command center) and the media (as personified by the reporter), potentially works to endow such death with meaningfulness and allure in ways that undercut the film's apparent anti-war stance. As Steven Spielberg showed us in *Saving Private Ryan*, even the most horrific bloodshed and mass death can be packaged into a pro-military film, as long as the dying is given meaning, recognition and reverence. The narrative and its coherence-attributing logic is one means of giving meaning to death. Another is the display of symbols and images linked to American Civil Religion, including the American flag, military cemeteries, references to Abraham Lincoln and the acting

¹⁶ See Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, p. 30.

president – all of these lending a sense of redemption to the act of dying for one’s country. *Lions for Lambs* is not immune to the seductive appeal of these semi-sacred American icons, and it is no coincidence that the Lincoln Memorial appears three times in the film (at the beginning, on the senator’s wall, and at the end, as Janine drives back to her office). The Lincoln Memorial is one of the most potent icons of American Civil Religion, with Lincoln probably the most affectively charged figure in the American pantheon. He is also the author of the Gettysburg Address, the most explicit American articulation of the potency and sacredness of self-sacrifice in the service of the nation. In short, if the plot about Ernest and Arian is meant to signal the futility of their deaths in Afghanistan, the visual and verbal rhetoric about self-sacrifice, the shots of Arlington Cemetery, the allusions to Lincoln, and the orchestral music on the soundtrack all work to revitalize their deaths as meaningful and regenerative for the cause they died for: brotherhood and America.¹⁷

Conclusion

Nevertheless, two elements – one narrative and one visual – of the last moments of the film function to counterbalance this positive valence of the memorializing effects of the film. The first is the way the film ends with Todd watching a television report (Scene 12) that is clearly the result of Janine’s interview with the senator, but only of Irving’s account of the operation and without any acknowledgement of the failure of the mission involving Arian and Ernest. In other words, the media is shown as a flawed institution of memorialization: it records but not accurately. Janine’s skepticism (which we know to be corroborated by the mission’s failure) has been over-ridden by her news network’s craving for positive and exciting war news. The film shows that the news media have become corporate-sponsored

¹⁷ For a discussion of the regenerative power of blood sacrifice in U.S. culture and history, see Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag*, Cambridge: CUP, 1999.

political tools and therefore cannot be trusted to create a reliable archive of historical memory, a potentially tragic development dooming the country to repeat its mistakes indefinitely. This failure of the media is illustrated in the film when Janine eagerly accepts an offer of images from the infrared and gun cameras in lieu of more critical forms of verification. By saying that these sorts of images are the “most popular downloads” on their website, Janine acknowledges that ratings and highly mediated and abstract images of combat zones from drones, satellites and guns are finally what appeals most to her readership. This moment in the film might be interpreted as another criticism of the eagerness of the news media to feed the hunger for vicarious war, especially with images that resemble first-person-shooter video games, themselves modeled on military surveillance equipment, yet the film itself relies heavily on infrared images of Ernest and Arian being encircled by enemy fighters, two black dots in the middle of a shrinking ring of black dots. Much has been written about virtual war and the effect of screens in contemporary military experience (Der Derian, Virilio), but the very least that can be said about such images, as they are used in this film, is that they offer both a spurious sense of authenticity and a comforting distance from the human experience being translated into pixels and heat-generated colors.

The other critical element is the somber credit sequence at the very end, which consists of a series of black and gray silhouetted images, a row of saluting soldiers, a row of marching soldiers, a father and son at breakfast, a graduation ceremony, a classroom, a journalist and interviewee, with figures disappearing from the image: several soldiers, the father, several students, the journalist. The implication is that wars like the one being persecuted in Afghanistan will continue to claim victims like Arian and Ernest. The disappearance of the figures from the screen foretells of their disappearance from memory in the politicized news landscape the film has revealed. If the Vietnam War is being forgotten

by willfully ignorant political actors like the senator, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan will not even be accurately recorded and available for historical memory at all. The stark gray tone of the images along with the elegiac strings accompanying the sequence ends the film on a pessimistic note that is offset only slightly by the final image of several voting buttons saying “VOTE” in what appears as a not-so-subliminal command.

The result is a well-intentioned film that short-circuits its own critical force with emotional effects that pull in the opposite direction. This ambivalence lies at the heart of the memorializing impulse in general when applied to war cinema as well as at the heart of Hollywood film-making, which often attempts to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. It is nearly impossible for a commercial film to take full measure of the tragic wastefulness of military conflicts, either on a political level or on strictly individual level. The sense-making logic of narrative and the temptation to drape military death in melodramatic and quasi-religious patriotic iconography are too seductive for most films to forego. In general, Hollywood war films inevitably employ these facile but effective strategies of containment of the potentially toxic effects of death and mutilation in the cause of protecting American oil interests and prestige abroad. *Lions for Lambs* tries hard to be different but cannot help giving respectful screen time to the hawkish senator played by the film’s own producer, Tom Cruise, and cloaking the soldiers’ senseless deaths in the rhetorical flag of patriotic memorialization, draining these deaths of their critical antiwar potential and helping to bury them with the forgotten and futile dead of the Vietnam and Korean wars.

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