

## Being at War: Cognitive Approaches to Observational War Documentaries

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*Ib Bondebjerg at the ZDOK documentary conference in Zurich, March 30, 2017*

**Abstract.** In this article I primarily analyse observational war documentaries in order to deal with how this particular form of documentary contributes to our understanding of how it is to be at war as a soldier or as a civilian in a war zone. I analyse two very different observational war documentaries: Janus Metz's Danish *ARMADILLO* (2010) following a group of soldiers to Afghanistan, and Andreas Dalgaard and Obiada Zytoon's Danish-Syrian *THE WAR SHOW* (2016) following a group of young Syrians during the Syrian spring to the civil war and beyond. Based on theories of cognition and emotion and evolutionary biology the article argues for the importance of this type of documentaries in developing and understanding of what war really is. The article also puts the films in the broader context of both fictional and documentary war genres trying to map how the different genres address different parts of our cognition and emotion.

War is the ultimate form of human destruction, and development has increased the technology of destruction to such a level that it threatens not just civilians in war zones, but also our very civilisation. Historically we have to admit that wars can be the last resort, in a situation where all other means and politics have failed. But far too often wars are started based on defence of humanity and democracy, when in fact many other motives are behind. Far too often invasions of foreign countries end up as humanitarian and democratic disasters, un-

leashing forces very difficult to control. There may have been noble causes and rational reasons for the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Syria, and our intervention in other conflicts in the Middle East. But whatever the causes may have been, and no matter how each of us view them, the human costs have been beyond belief, and the political results extremely negative. Civil war and terrorism has spread across the whole region and into Europe, and they have sent millions of refugees on a dangerous voyage towards Europe.

Seen in a long evolutionary perspective some form of warfare has always been around, and so have stories of war. In pre-historic times man lived in hunter-gather societies, and group formations and territorial boundaries were not as complex and central as they are in modern industrialised and global societies. Furthermore, the technology of warfare was much more primitive and fight among tribes and individuals were much more direct and physical. Nevertheless, the basic emotions and social and psychological mechanisms behind acts of war have remained the same, although the interplay between basic instincts and emotions and higher order emotions and social mechanisms has changed. As pointed out by neuroscientists (Panksepp 1998, Panksepp and Bliven 2012, and Swaab 2014) or by an evolutionary historian like Harari (2011) there are very strong links between basic care instincts and social group bonding and similar basic emotions like panic and fear. When the small group, tribe or community in earlier epochs ended up fighting for resources or land, this was a consequence of the same kind of emotions we see in modern times.

Hunter-gatherer societies may have had some very rudimentary structures of hero-narratives: the praise for the big hunter or the big warrior. But the later historical development of large-scale social structures, nations or empires transformed those basic social structures and the emotions connected with them. So did the war narratives in fiction and documentary film and the day-to-day news reporting on war and conflict. Our modern, global reality has changed the forms of war and conflict, and the increasing mediatisation of our reality (Hjarvard 2013) has made war narratives much more differentiated. At the same time the development of nations in modern time has clearly developed our basic tribal feelings, the forms of social bonding in groups to more complex levels.

When modern man goes to war, it is only partly based on the strong national feelings that arise from what Benedict Anderson has called 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1983). It is also to a large degree based on new forms of territorial conflicts in a more and more global world.

In Harari's SAPIENS. A BRIEF HISTORY OF HUMANKIND (2011) he describes pre-modern societies as societies with strong family and community structures but with weaker individuals and also a more fragmented state and market. Modern societies on the other hand have weakened family and community and set the individual free from the strong ties of family and community. However, strong national and transnational structures and markets have come in stead. Families and communities of course still play a central role, but where they can

be described as very concrete, emotional realities for most people, the development has also created a need for emotional, social and cultural bonds between people on a national or even transnational level. Harari refers to Benedict Anderson's concept of imagined community as a community of people who really don't know each other, but imagine that they do. Such forms of imagination can be quite strong and real to people, as historical examples of religious movements and nationalism show (Harari 2010: 405). Harari mentions the transnational imagined community of Islam, which has been a strong imagined community since the Middle Ages, but also describes nationalism in the following way:

*(...) Nationalism work extra hours to make us imagine that millions of strangers belong to the same community as ourselves, that we all have a common past, common interests and a common future. This isn't a lie. It's imagination. (...) The nation does its best to hide its imagined character. Most nations argue that they are a natural and eternal entity, created in some primordial epoch by mixing the soil of the motherland with the blood of the people (Harari 2011: 406-07)*

## War narratives, emotions and morality

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Modern wars are determined by politics and economic interests, and in some instances also by noble intentions of avoiding catastrophes, civil war or authoritarian rule. In those cases wars are actually initiated by transnational institutions like for instance UN, transnational institutions that are political but also represent forms of imagined, transnational communities based on what is considered to be universal human rights. But wars are most certainly also fuelled by strong feelings connected to emotional structures imbedded in national imagined communities. So on a basic level war is still very much emotionally linked to a defence of and protection of 'our way of life' the communities we live in. However, wars can also very often play on conflicts in our moral system and opposing emotional structures. As argued by Jonathan Haidt in *THE RIGHTEOUS MIND. WHY GOOD PEOPLE ARE DIVIDED BY POLITICS AND RELIGION* (2012), the decision to go to war and the experience of war can easily draw on several basic emotions, which are also sometimes contradictory. You can go to war because you want to protect your nation and people from harm, or to protect people in other countries to be harmed – this was for instance the case with the Western invasion of Afghanistan or the intervention in the former Yugoslavia. Wars like these, or WWII had such a joint emotional and moral dimension: it was about protecting our societies and civilisation, and at the same time a moral need to defend liberty and democracy, to fight authoritarian oppression. But wars are also always based on the moral dimensions Haidt calls loyalty and authority, you have to back up nations and leaders when war is imminent. As George W. Bush said in 2001 before the invasion of Iraq: "You are either with us or against us in

our fight against terror” (<http://edition.cnn.com/2001/US/11/06/gen.attack.on.terror/>). However, even though both fictional war films and documentaries can give us an insight into war realities and raise all sorts of feelings, they also often question the realities and politics behind war.

As pointed out by cognitive film theory (Grodal 1997 and 2009) genres are trans-media prototypes and they are based on certain combinations of our most basic emotions and narrative structures that go far back in time. Film genres are continuations of literary genres but films have a specific stronger ability to make the viewer feel immersed in a fictional or documentary world.

Visual dimensions of narrative constructions and the more direct forms of character identification makes cinema in all its forms a real emotional machine. But since emotion and other elements of cognition and thought work together (Damasio 1994, Bondebjerg 2014a), this also means that cinema is a powerful tool in creating parallel worlds that make us think about the reality we live in.

### Fictional war genres: narratives of emotions and morality

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War films come with many variations and they call upon different kinds of emotions. Almost all war films have elements of action and adventure, of aggression and fight, and most of them will play on some of the most fundamental emotions. Humans share such fundamental emotions with certain animals: for instance anger and fear and search for causes for this fear in order to eliminate it. But war narratives certainly also build on other forms of emotions, higher order emotions of morality, human sacrifice, bravery and social bonding and community. A film like Steven Spielberg’s *SAVING PRIVATE RYAN* (1998) is a classical heroic war movie about one of the most spectacular operations, D-day and the invasion of Normandy during WWII. The heroic emotions, the celebration of social bonding and keeping together in the utmost danger is central to the film. We can easily identify with this group of soldiers who fight together to save our generation from authoritarian rule. But the individual is also put in focus by the film, since the search for one missing soldier is also given high priority underlining the importance of solidarity and sacrifice beyond all normal limits. The film also has a strong representation of the harsh realities of war. The first 20 minutes of the film literally place the viewer in the middle of the war it is like being there, like being shot at.

But just as many fictional war films show us the absurdity of war, losses that were in vain, like in *THE BRIDGE ON THE RIVER KWAI* (1957, David Lean) or *A BRIDGE TOO FAR* (1977, Richard Attenborough). Where the first film deals with a group of British prisoners of war forced to build a bridge for the Japanese, the second film is about a disastrous attempt to take a bridge in the Netherlands to get behind enemy lines. So war films are far from just celebrating war and heroic deeds, and films like Michael Cimino’s *THE DEER HUNTER* (1978) and Francis Ford Coppola’s *APOCALYPSE NOW* (1979) are in fact anti-war films, because we

follow the complete break down of social and individual lives during the Vietnam War. Other war narratives, like the Wolfgang Petersen's German film *DAS BOOT* (1981), brings us into the social dimension and everyday life of soldiers at war and focus on the community dimension of war. Fictional war films can also focus more on the political dimension of war, for instance Robert Redford's *LIONS FOR LAMBS* (2007), a film that moves between the realities of war and the soldier's world and the highly intricate political intrigues. As a film it makes the viewer navigate between moral conflicts of on the one side an imagined community dimension of social solidarity and moral values of liberal democracies and on the other immoral, political motives and actions. A nation or a coalition of nations sending their soldiers into a war on dubious grounds will create a moral and emotional reaction in film audiences.

Many war films, documentaries as well as fiction films take us behind the front-lines and let us experience the effect of war on civilians, families, and children. Such films let us experience on film all the activities and emotions linked to communities and everyday life, but they also create powerful moral and political effects because such films show us the deeper effects of war on civil society. This is also the case for the kind of fiction films about war, where war is only the distant frame around a story dealing with more universal emotional and moral issues. In the French-German film *FRANTZ* (2016) directed by the French director Francois Ozon, WWI is graphically and metaphorically expressed in a killing in the trenches of France, where a young Frenchman (Adrien Rivoire) shoots a young German (Frantz Hoffmeier). The national, transnational and more anonymous forces of war here take a personal and direct form, and Adrien is afterwards haunted by guilt. He goes back to visit Frantz' grave in Germany and to excuse his deed to Frantz' family. A long, strange and unfulfilled love story between Adrian and Frantz' fiancée to be (Anna) follows, but at the same time Adrien's personal experience of the hostility and nationalist sentiments in Frantz' home town and Anna's subsequent experience of the same in France, give the spectator of the film an emotional tour de force into the universality of community emotions and the hostility towards out-groups. The emotions tied to family, community and nation are just the same on both sides of the border, nationalism in this film is seen as a basic problem for humanity. The family and community story and the transnational love story may tell us more about war than many traditional war narratives. War is political and social, but it lives in emotions and feelings in human beings on both sides of a conflict. The human and emotional dimension, the dimension of everyday life is just as important for our understanding of the forces behind wars as other more strategic and political dimensions.

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### Documentary war films: reality, narrative and imagination

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Just as fictional war films documentary war films come in many forms and appeal to different emotional and moral dimensions in our mind. War reporting and even dramatic reconstructions of battles go back to WWI and during and

after WWII there has been a tremendous and continued increasing of the number of documentary war films. It is no surprise for instance that the number of war documentaries, and indeed also feature films, about wars in the Middle East region, have been on a steady rise since 9.11 2001. Even though Harari (2011: 410 f) a bit ironically talks about peace in our time, and sees the development after 1945 as one of the most peaceful times in the history of mankind, it is probably not the feeling of the average Western citizen. The wars and instability of the Middle East and Africa, the spreading of terror from the same regions create fear, and the number of films dealing with war and terror after 2001 is a sign of this.

War documentaries have always been a strong genre in its many forms. We can find war documentaries following the basic aesthetic, narrative and rhetorical structures and prototypes of documentaries (see fig. 1). One very big main genre is the *authoritative and critical* documentaries, which have looked at the whole question of the political-military-industrial complex behind war and in the period after 2001 especially the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. This is for instance the case in Eugene Jarecki's powerful WHY WE FIGHT (2005), where he draws a long historical line for his argument (see Bondebjerg 2014: 86-88 and Prince 2009: 184F). The film cites historical and contemporary figures, but also uses strong human case stories, bringing us close to the psychological and emotional impact of war in our everyday life, in this case the life of Americans and the politics and emotions around the Iraq war in the American public.

The title of the film is somewhat ironic, as it was also the title of the series of war propaganda films made during WWII by many famous Hollywood directors to gain support for the US intervention in the war. Jarecki is not questioning this war, but the Iraq war, and the film quotes many experts, journalists and politicians from all sides of the spectrum to illustrate his scepticism and critique. He goes all the way back to Eisenhower's famous presidential farewell address to the nation in 1961 where he warns against the development of the military-industrial-political as a form of cancer in our democracy. The film illustrates the efficiency of this kind of well-argued authoritative documentary building on a massive use of facts and opinions from different sources. But even Jarecki is aware of the dimension of everyday life, of emotions and human stories. One of his key witnesses is a retired NYPD officer who lost his son in the bombing of the World Trade Centre on 9/11, a stern republican and patriot who managed to get his son's name on one of the bombs used in Iraq. But at the end of the film he is a disillusioned man, who has realized that the reason to go to war in Iraq was fabricated: "The government used my patriotic feelings to do something that was not right."

As an authoritative, critical documentary WHY WE FIGHT is not least getting its persuasive power from a deep, historical perspective, a use of many different voices with a broad political and institutional background and a number of human case stories from both ordinary Iraqis and Americans on how the war has affected their life. This is also the case in Charles Ferguson's more investigative, journalistic PBS Frontline documentary NO END IN SIGHT (2008), which step by

step unravels what the film sees as the incredible stupidity behind the decision to go to war in Iraq.

Films like these are important war documentaries since they question the official versions of war politics and go beyond the day-to-day agenda the news media can create (Bondebjerg 2014: 79f). However, they do not really tell us what it is to be at war, they cannot give us the human stories, or the soldier's stories. They miss the feeling of being there, of watching reality unfold as a narrative and visual reality. They cannot create those forms of concrete identifications with characters that give us a more emotional and imaginative sense of the reality of war.

Authoritative	Observational	Dramatised	Poetic-reflexive
Epistemic authority	Epistemic openness	Epistemic-hypothetical	Epistemic-aesthetic
Explanation-analysis	Observation-identification	Dramatization of factual reality	Reality seen through aesthetic form
Linearity, causality, rhetorical structure	Episodic, mosaic structure, everyday life	Reconstruction, narration, staging (drama-doc, doc-drama, mockumentary)	Symbolic montage, meta-levels, expressive, subjective form
Q & A, interview, witnesses, experts, Authoritative VO	Actor driven, human-institutional life world	Testing borders between reality and fiction	Form driven reality experience, the poetics of reality, framing reality
Information, critique, propaganda	Documentation of lived reality, social ethnology	Narrative drive, reality driven narrative. Media-reflexivity	Challenging reality concepts and traditional doc-forms

Fig. 1. Basic prototypes of documentary

This is where the *observational* war documentaries are strong, whereas they are weaker in framing reality in a more explanatory and informative way (Bondebjerg 2014: 51f), and the same could be said about *dramatized documentaries*. Dramatized war documentaries are not as common as authoritative and observational, but some observational documentaries may use reconstructed and dramatized sequences. One example of a dramatized documentary is Nick Broomfield's *BATTLE FOR HADITHA* (2007), a meticulous reconstruction of the Hadditha incident in which 24 civilians were killed, allegedly by US marines. The film follows a US marine core, an Iraqi family and a group of insurgents planting a roadside bomb. The reconstruction thus tries to make us see the whole incident from three different viewpoints. This is a film, which unlike observational documentaries, relies on reconstructing something, which has already happened, it is a film that tries to visualize events that were not filmed on location. However, if based on factual knowledge of the events such films can help us understand what has happened, by actually putting us directly in that past reality.

Observational war documentaries on the other hand are filmed on location and try to capture realities of war as they unfold. In observational war documentaries we are in a more open-ended space of everyday life, we are confronted with often rather fragmented and chaotic parts of reality, such as everyday life in a warzone

often is. The plot is on the one hand a very familiar one of opposite or multiple forces in opposition and combat, on the other hand it takes us into everyday character based realities. Where the authoritative documentary frames our cognitive understanding of these opposing forces, the observational documentary dives into this live reality, and by choosing a character driven narrative, the film aligns us with the social, psychological and emotional dimension of people. Modern cognitive film theory tells us, that such dimensions of our mind, this kind of narrative is very universal, it fits emotional structures, narrative scripts and image schemas in the way we all experience reality – live or mediated (Tomasello 1999: 201f, Bruner 2002 and Gottschall 2012). Emotions and narrative structures are very basic to humans, more basic than rhetoric schemas, and they also strongly enforce our more rational and moral understanding of reality. Getting a narrative and visual feeling of being in war realities in this way simply gives us a better background for developing our larger factual knowledge of this reality.

The rise and strength of such observational war documentaries can be explained by the need to enhance our understanding of others in a more global world. We follow one or more characters in their everyday war life, and it is through this direct experience, through the social and psychological world of these people, we develop and understanding of the war reality. This does not mean that observational war documentaries present us with a raw and unedited version of reality. There is no such thing as an unedited, raw and objective reality in documentary.

Let me illustrate this with a short comparative analysis of the narrative structure and visual perspective in my two main analytical examples, to which we will return shortly. Danish director Janus Metz' observational war documentary ARMADILLO (2010) and Danish and Syrian directors Andreas Dalsgaard and Obaidah Zytoon's THE WAR SHOW (2016) deal with different wars, the war in Afghanistan and in Syria, and they also show the war from two different perspectives: ARMADILLO is basically the *soldier's story* whereas THE WAR SHOW is basically the *civilian story*. But even though the basic narrative and visual focal point of the two films are like that, they also share similarities in the use of multiple observational perspectives. ARMADILLO is basically shot on professional cameras by a professional film crew, which was embedded with a group of soldiers for more than six months. However part of the film footage is also shot through mobile helmet cameras and furthermore the film uses satellite shots from airplanes or night vision weapons when striking targets from above or at a distance. Such images have become standard in war reporting since the first Gulf War, but here they are used in a different context.

In Contrast to this THE WAR SHOW is basically shot by a group of civilians involved in the protests against the Syrian regime. Multiple cameras represent different individuals who contribute to their collective story. The Syrian co-director is the voice over narrator of the film and also the main photographer, so the line between who is being filmed and who films is blurred. The members of the group and Obaidah Zytoon in particular are both activists and participants, observers, photographers and in some cases also directors and narrators speaking

directly to the camera. Where the object-subject perspective, the question of who controls the filming of this particular reality is pretty clear in *ARMADILLO*, it is not so clear in *THE WAR SHOW*, where roles and viewpoints are more complex. But both Metz and Dalsgaard & Zytoon have built their films on very specific aesthetic and narrative strategies, in order to get the story out there as strong as possible.

Observational, ethnographic documentaries of everyday life behind the headlines of major wars and conflicts are of immense importance for the creation of inter-cultural global dialogue and for our ability to overcome stereotypes of the other or superficial images of parts of the world in mainstream new reporting. The aesthetic and narrative form of such documentaries should remind us of the fact that human beings are narrative and imaginative creatures. Narrative is not just a construction in novels, films and documentaries, it is a basic way of experiencing the world, something that we use all the time in our everyday life. The same goes for imagination. If we cannot imagine things, people situations, even when we are not directly experiencing them, our mind would be badly restricted. Modern cognitive approaches to film, documentaries, language, social interaction and communication have defined our mind as embodied. The way we think is not just a rational process, it is directly connected to emotions and feelings. New cognitive approaches to film and documentary have therefore also defined our way of communicating about and experiencing the world as metaphoric and as heavily connected to narrative and emotion.

It is perhaps timely here to refer to what the master of direct cinema, Frederic Wiseman, said about his own form of observational documentary, namely that it was 'reality fictions'. He did in fact use huge footage of institutional and everyday life, observed over a long period to create stories. The spaces and institutions he observed was seen as a kind of microcosm of American life in general, and he had a particular interest in the gap between formal structures and rules and how life really unfolded on a daily basis. The kind of construction of this particular reality we find in Wiseman's work has been characterized in Benson & Anderson's book *Reality Fictions. The Films of Frederick Wiseman* (2.ed. 2002), in which they describe *HIGH SCHOOL* (1968):

*HIGH SCHOOL invites viewers to experience the structural relations of the themes of power and sexuality, and the subordinate manifestations of these themes in distorted interpersonal communication, twisted language, confused identities, militarism, regimentation, anti-intellectualism and boredom (...) Wiseman takes advantage of the conventions of cinema vérité to create a sense that we are observing social reality (...) the whole film feels open and observational (...) the film is carefully constructed (...) to imply sequence, causation and point of view' (Benson & Anderson 2002: 141)*

## Global others and mediated forms of intercultural dialogue

Let me illustrate the point about narrative and imagination as an embodied part of our experience of reality and also films and images in general. When we deal with documentaries about war in far away places of the world for most people, we are faced with two problems: *first of all* war in itself, the real consequences of living in a war zone is really hard to fully understand and image for outsiders living in a safe part of the world; *secondly*, to imagine distant others, is always more difficult than to imagine you next door neighbour or those that you know from your local community. We may intellectually understand war, but really understanding the full implications of it on a human scale, or really experiencing that those others out there are human beings like us, can be a bit harder. We all have stereotypes of others, we hide behind a particular kind of understanding, or we simply try to negate what we know, because it is too painful to confront yourself with the full and uncensored reality of war and its many consequences.



Photo: Nilüfer Demir. Dogan New Agency

Fig. 2. Body of Syrian 3 year old Alan Kurdi, drowned on Bodrum beach (2015).

In 2015 the photo of the dead 3-year-old Syrian boy, Alan Kurdi on Bodrum Beach hit most of the front pages of the world press. The photo was taken by the Turkish photographer Nilüfer Demir, but it was first after Peter Bouckaert of Human Rights Watch shared it on social media it went viral on the net and on front pages of the world press. It immediately created a surge of emotional responses and demands for action to cease the refugee crisis created by the wars in the Middle East. But why was it an image like this that created this response? The terrible situation for Syrian refugees had been

reported in detail by all news media for months and years, and people must have seen the horrifying pictures of people trying to cross over to Europe drowning in huge numbers.

Sometimes a single image can create a whole story, or rather can suddenly create an emotional focus on a story we rationally already know about, but cannot really grasp. Confronted with this photo we immediately create a narrative and we immediately identify and feel empathy. Suddenly we can imagine exactly how the life of this dead boy has been, what it must have taken for his family to embark on this escape from a deadly war. When reality crystallises into a narrative, when visual proof becomes so tangible that we can feel it from a distance, when emotions and imagination merge with our rational knowledge, then it is like being there, then the distant becomes a more integrated part of our own mind and everyday reality. Emotions and empathy are important for guiding our social and political understanding and actions, so it is not just feelings and psychology, it is central to our reasoning and understanding of reality.

We can see this in a more general perspective, if we look at a more general and simplified model (see fig. 3) of social imagination and social cognition in a strongly mediated and global world. Proximity still means a lot in our everyday



Fig. 3. Social imagination and mediated interaction.

life, even though media provide us with more and more global images of distant parts of our global reality. We do have something in common as humans, there are many universal similarities. But our biological and genetic similarity is not always in contact with our social and cultural imagination: we tend to see distant others as strangers and more different from us than they really are. The importance of being there through documentary films that can make especially the imagined distant other more concrete has to do with the fact that more developed narrative formats, in both fiction and documentary, makes us experience reality with all emotions and senses

more open. News reporting speaks to other parts of our mind, just as authoritative documentaries do. Such formats are all very important, but human stories take us to another level of emotional alignment with distant people and places.

As Stephen Prince has pointed out in his book *Firestorm. American Film in the Age of Terrorism* (2009: 202F) a film like Robert Greenwald's very political and critical analysis of the military-industrial complex and economic interests behind the war in *THE WAR PROFITEERS* (2006) is a real eye opener since it proves beyond doubt that huge private corporations like Blackwater, Haliburton and DynCorp International profited hugely by the war. These companies were used by the military and the US government, although they did at the same time undermine the Iraqi system in such a way that the post-war situation was seriously damaging the rebuilding of Iraq. Officially the war was about democracy but in reality it was about oil and US profits. But it is just as important to see this critical dimension of the war through the soldiers and their families that carried the burden of a failed war strategy, of the gap between official ideology and reality.

Films like for instance *OFF TO WAR* (2006) lets us experience the war through the elite groups of the Army National Guard in the small community of Clarksville, Arkansas of only 7000 people. A portrait of a variety of the soldiers gives us a very diverse picture of their experience of the war before and after being deployed. But just as important is the portrait of families and communities.

As Prince writes: "A major focus of the series (...) is on the emotional and economic struggle of families who have lost a father, a husband, or a son to a tour in Iraq, and the filmmakers alternate between scenes with the men in Iraq and with the families back home" (Prince 2009: 203). What the film shows is, that even in this patriotic community with a long military tradition going back to the Vietnam War and WW2, the experience of the Iraq war corrupts their deepest emotions and moral views. The sharp, analytical and critical analysis of the first film is supplemented with the inside human story of how community feelings and strong emotional experiences at war and at home.

We sometimes hear arguments about how documentaries should represent and describe reality only through rational arguments and more or less objective

statements. It is part of our philosophical and historical heritage that emotions, feelings, and narratives are not as important for our understanding of the world as rationality, arguments and logic. However, modern cognitive theory tells another story, as it is for instance the case in Antonio Damasio's book *Descartes Error: Emotion, Reasoning and the Human Brain* (1994), which in many ways is an underlining of what most documentary filmmakers already know, a filmmakers gut feeling so to say:

*Certain aspects of the process of emotion and feelings are indispensable for rationality. At their best, feelings point us in the proper direction, takes us to the appropriate place in a decision-making space, where we may put the instrument of logic to good use (...) Feelings along with the emotions they come from, are no luxury. They serve as internal guides, and they help us communicate to others, signals that can also guide tem. And feelings are neither intangible nor elusive. Contrary to traditional scientific opinion, feelings are just as cognitive as other precepts (Damasio 1994: xiii - xv).*

Observational war documentaries like the ones I am talking about here, are based on this cognitive understanding of what makes us understand distant others better. The character driven narratives, the display of human everyday life, the emotional, psychological way of bringing us into everyday life makes us understand this reality much better, and it opens up for the recognition of the universality in human life, for seeing distant others like us and not so different and distant after all.

### The Syrian revolution and war: a human inside story

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There are many human tragedies in the Middle East, and we shall look at two of them through documentary films: *THE WAR SHOW* gives us the civilian story of a group of young revolutionary Syrian dreaming of a new, democratic Syria, but gradually caught up by the descent into chaos, hell on earth and death; *ARMADILLO* gives us a feeling of being at war with a group of Danish soldiers in the Afghan Helmand province. Both films have won prestigious national and international prizes and they have a wide international distribution story, so they have already made an impact on world opinion through their observational stories from and behind the frontlines. They also both illustrate why narrative, emotions and aesthetics matter, if you want to not just capture reality but also make it tangible for a wide audience.

*THE WAR SHOW* was made by a Danish and Syrian director and was co-produced and co-financed by Syrian and Scandinavian partners. We have all followed the Syrian disaster on the news, and cities like Damaskus, Homs and Aleppo have

become places in a nightmare for the civilians and the rebels fighting. But in this film we follow a young group of Syrians actively involved in the short Syrian spring from 2011 and till the bitter end where some of them are killed and others have to flee the country. The co-director Obaidah Zytoon is the narrator of the film, which has the form of her personal account of what happened. It is a narrative of dreams of a new life turned into death and chaos. The group members shot the basic footage of the film in Syria. One Danish photographer (Lars Skree, also main photographer on ARMADILLO) was also involved, and the original footage was supplemented with footage from Syrians credited anonymously and some footage from TV. In an interview with me in 2016, Andreas Dalsgaard reflected on the making of the film in the following way:

*We had around 300 hours of film, most of it original (...) I made a matrix of all scenes and coloured them after importance (...) the basic film material was very fragmented, it was important to create a clear frame, inside which we could tell the story and allow for digressions. According to my co-director, it should be like the seven days of Genesis, therefore we created seven chapters. We invented a structure of narrative chapters, they should be like separate structures allowing space for narrative variation, both elements driving the story forward and character driven sequences. A narrative structure was necessary to create a kind of order in the chaos and destruction, which the film is about and shows. When you create a narrative structure, and use the concept of an opening scene, seven main chapters and an epilogue, you create something, which cannot just be changed, but which forces itself into the structure and experience of the film. The chapter structure of the film was an alternative to a classical narrative structure. (Dalsgaard 2016)*

The overall narrative structure of the film, seven chapters and an opening and epilogue, is made visible for the viewer through screen texts: Opening scene, Revolution, Oppression, Resistance, Occupation, Memories, Front lines, Extremism and Epilogue. The chapters follow a certain timeline, a chronological story, but with leaps in time and with digressions. The main dimension behind the film's amazing ability to give us this feeling of being there, of being part of a revolution and the descent into war, is however the strong possibility of character identification we are offered.

We are not just witnessing a random selection of scenes representing the Syrian revolution and war, – although this is part of the film's realism – we are seeing with and through the eyes and minds of the young group of people. The camera represents their collective and individual view on the world and each other, we enter not just their social and public domain, but also their private domain, we experience what they think and feel. The aesthetic language of the film, the photography, the music and sound design all combine in giving this feeling of both an outer and inner reality.

There are many sequences with gritty realism of war, demonstrations, killings, pain and despair, but there is also this emotional vitality of characters and the way they are presented. In cognitive theory (Damasio 2010: 21) there is a distinction between *the individual, conscious mind*, which of course only the individual subject has an access to, and on the other hand *the behavioural perspective* on others, from which we may reason about what goes on in their mind. Films, and in particular documentary films, have a possibility of giving us a privileged access to not just the behaviour and action of others, but also their subjective mind. Especially the co-director, Obaidah Zytoon, is central here, as she combines the role of narrator, photographer and character in the narrative. But many of the character driven scenes are also giving us access to not just visual but also aural information about what the characters think and feel, how they interact with each other and the world around them. We are so to speak, like Goffmann would say (Goffmann 1959) on the stages of everyday life: the public and the private stages. Besides its other qualities, the film is also a phenomenological study of everyday life under the extreme pressure of a war zone. The characters are not just showing us how it is being there, they are actually performing and reflecting on a stage they have partly defined themselves.

Let me illustrate these narrative, emotional and imaginative dimension in the way the film is constructed. I will look at to specific sequences, one from the beginning of the film and one from the epilogue. In the first clip, we enter an anti-Assad demonstration during the early Syrian Spring Revolution in 2011. As viewers we are situated in the middle of the demonstration, mostly filmed by Zytoon, capturing some of the anonymous protesters, but also her personal friends. As the demonstration draws to an end we begin a visual and narrative



Fig. 4. Montage of framegraps from *THE WAR ZONE*

presentation of the group members, something that continues later in the film, by the use of close up, dialogue and freeze frame photo effects. It is as if we are included in a family photo space. This more private and social space of the group is developed further in the film and gives the viewer an almost inside the mind presence in the story, as though we were part of the group. This is obviously the narrative point of identification that gives the film a strong emotional impact. As we imagine being part of this group we also witness and feel the decline into chaos, death or escape.

The epilogue of course has a very emotional character, because it is shot from the Turkish exile of Zytoon after the collapse of everything and the death of several of the group members. It is underlined by the dramatic pictures of a country in ruins, of dead children and men, streets crowded with refugees. For once the film uses footage not taken by the group members to create a more bird's eyes view of what the war has done to the country and it's people. The

pictures are shown without comments in the beginning, as they speak very much for themselves. But gradually Obaida Zytoon takes over and her voice over narration and images from her exile take us through the last, tragic bit of the group's story. We hear about those still alive, in exile or gone undercover in Syria, but the images of all the dead and mutilated Syrians we see are also, once again brought closer to us through the story of Hisham's death and the locating of his murdered and mutilated body.

Here the film is taken to a highly emotional and reflexive level filled with sorrow, loss and lack of hope. It is clearly underlined by the music. The whole sequence illustrates a dimension one might also call *imaginative realism*, since it uses a particular aesthetic to create an emotional and philosophical reflection on the presented everyday reality in the film. Hisham's death is an individual story reflecting the whole fate of the Syrian people. The narrative strategy behind this is again that we can better grasp and relate to the greater tragedy by seeing it through a group of people a series of concrete human stories. The only glimpse of hope is in the film's revival of Hisham after we have seen him dead: sequences from the happy days on the beach when the revolution was still a hope bring him back to us alive, ending with a freeze frame of him happy and alive. In that sense reality becomes an emotional piece of memory, something to live on, just like documentary films document lived life and reality.

### Being at war: the soldier's perspective

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Embedded journalism became a term during the first Gulf War in 1991 (see Carruthers 2011: 135f), indicating new strategies from military forces in combat allowing journalists to actually be there with them and witnessing war from a military front seat. It was also around that time and the following period CNN and other global news broadcasters took advantage of a digital visual technology, which allowed television stations to use footage from airplanes and missiles as they approached and hit their targets. Being there however in this case meant being there at a very safe distance, a very sanitized, dehumanized image of war. As Carruthers states: "Sanitized beyond all recognition, it didn't seem to be a war at all. Pentagon video footage merged seamlessly with computer-generated simulations, each appearing as real, unreal or 'hyperreal' as the other (Carruthers 2011: 137). And of course to a large degree all material had to be cleared and approved by the military. Other research of war documentaries have even talked about the Iraq war coverage as a major example of a new type of high-concept war narrative, which for the news genre involves a degree of construction that may turn out to be problematic for our understanding of war (Jaramillo 2009).

News is of course also edited reality, but following rules and norms different from an observational war documentary. When Janus Metz in 2009 set out to make ARMADILLO he was very aware of getting a deal with the Danish military that gave him complete control over the filming and editing. He was on his toes because another Danish documentary filmmaker, Christoffer Gulbrandsen, in

2006 was literally at war with the military and political establishment over his film *THE SECRET WAR*, accusing the army for hiding incidents of Danish soldier's involved in actions leading to torture of Afghan prisoners of war. Metz got his deal, with the exception that the military could intervene if sensitive military strategies or incidents were shown. This clause in the contract was however never used, although conflicts did arise (Bondebjerg 2014: 247). Metz' motivation for making the film was very different from a classical news story:

*The trailer we used when pitching ARMADILLO really challenged the norms of traditional TV journalism (...) The aim was to put Afghanistan back on the agenda because the sense was that the general public didn't really know what was going on, or worse still didn't really care. Although the war marks a dramatic shift in Danish politics – inasmuch as we've become a nation that is actively engaged in warfare, with soldiers being returned to us in coffins – the issue just isn't taken up in the media. The idea was that storytellers from the world of film make the films, rather than journalists. The narratives were to be character driven, so as to facilitate a lot of emotional involvement and identification. (Metz in Bondebjerg, et. al. (2014: 253-54).*

The film therefore from the start took the direction of a concrete and mental journey into the psychology and mentality of a group of professional Danish soldiers that have volunteered to go to one of the most dangerous places in Afghanistan, the Helmand province. What the film reveals is that it had a lot to do with community, the feeling of being boys together again, the adrenalin in going to a far way place and living out your action genes. On the surface of course it also had to do with doing the right thing, making a difference for your country and a dimension of heroism. What is striking at the end of the film, after tough times and killed comrades, is that the majority plan to return. The film quickly focus on two main characters in the group: Daniel the action man, drawn to what Metz calls the "dangerous and dark sides of the war and tends to want to test limits"; and Mads the more timid and reluctant type of soldier, who seems to be there primarily out of duty, and at the same time openly sceptical about the military and the whole mission (Metz 2014: 259). By not just painting a bigger pic-



Fig. 5. Framegrab from *ARMADILLO*

ture of several characters that we follow, but going especially close to two different types of soldiers and personalities, the film allows us to enter a deep emotional and psychological space of war, but also to see the war reality from different points of view, views that are probably very general and universal.

The film is on the surface a classical, documentary journey: home – abroad – home again following this group of soldiers for a period of six months. But

behind this journey narrative is a much deeper and complex one. The film takes us very deep into the everyday life of the soldiers, the boring camp life between patrols and actual combat, the relation and communication with the civilian Afghans, and the graphic moments where life and death is at stake. The journey is on the one hand a journey in real life and close to real time in a condensed form, on the other hand a journey into a soldier's mind and psychology, and finally it is also a mental story of the transformation of war narratives in our national imagination. As Metz has said himself, the whole narrative and aesthetic construction of the film goes beyond mere reality reporting:

*One's conception of reality, as well as the cinematic style than one produces, do of course end up influencing the sound design, the selection of scenes, the editing, the visual language and the general dramaturgical structure of the film. After all, a documentary film is not supposed to be an extended news report, and Armadillo is a film that tries to grapple with some deep psychological issues, and to deal with some aspects of reality that just can't be captured by traditional journalistic means. Even in those moments when the film seems to be most intensely engaged with the brutal reality that it depicts, there are other far more universal psychological dimensions at work- At the same time, there are just so many mediatized images of war, and they're also at work in the film and undoubtedly influence our experience of the films reality – so documentary filmmakers are also influenced by fiction films (Metz in Hjort, Bondebjerg and Redvall (2014: 260-61).*

The film clearly puts us inside four different social and psychological spaces, it creates a set of interconnected narrative frames, from which the viewers get a sense of being there, because we recognize something we can identify with, as I have described it earlier (Bondebjerg 2014: 113):

- **The space of home and family** which dominates the opening and the closing parts of the films, but which also pops up in phone, mail and video contact between soldiers and their family at home.
- **The base camp space** which takes up most of the time in the film and represents both a collective and (seldom) private part of the soldier life; a place for male bonding for waiting and boredom, where they play war games on the computer, watch porn movies, or cool down or let steam come out; but it is also a strategic military space for briefings and debriefings, for combat preparation.
- **The space of the Local Afghan community:** which both align and contrast the home and family space of the soldiers. It is a quite important space in the film, as it let's the viewer experience directly

*how the war affects the ordinary Afghans, and how the military presence of the soldiers is not exactly seen as a path to democracy and a better life.*

- ***The Space of War and Combat*** of course takes up a lot of space qualitatively because it is dramatic and occasionally very violent, for the Taliban enemy, for civilians and for the soldiers. But seen in a more quantitative perspective, the combat situations are smaller incidents in an everyday life filled with waiting and preparation. Being at war also means being, confined to a very small world.

## Conclusion: Observational war documentaries and our global reality

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*And what is the ultimate gift of consciousness to humanity? Perhaps the ability to navigate the future in the seas of our imagination, guiding the self craft into a safe and productive harbour. The greatest of all gifts depends once again, on the intersection of the self and memory. Memory, tempered by personal feeling, is what allows humans to imagine both individual well-being and the well-being of a whole society (Damasio 2010: 296-97).*

This is Damasio's perhaps somewhat poetic way of defining the role of memory and imagination, and he does so by referring specifically to the power and role of art. Art is an evolutionary development of basic forms of communication, which gradually became a privileged means of transaction of factual and emotional information between groups of people and whole societies.

Imagination became a way of exploring the individual mind and the mind of others, it became something that influenced both our deeper emotional layers and our ability to express and communicate feelings. Our way of understanding the world from a cognitive and emotional point of view is very much based on scripts and schemas based on our experiences in real life and in mediated forms, and those scripts and schemas are activated when we watch feature films and documentaries. Our sense and understanding of the world is embodied, and films must speak to those embodied dimensions of our mind.

If war is the negation of all that humanity stands for, the ultimate act of destruction and inhumanity, war documentaries are important means of telling us through narratives and emotional structures what it is to be at war – in the hope that we will prevent or diminish wars in the future. Narratives like that are in a sense a way of understanding those global others we have now involved in our technological warfare. War is a highly political affair, it is about the often aggressive dimensions of globalisation, and such stories of war must be told to make us understand the deeper roots of war in our national and transnational societies.

But war is made by humans and often humans not directly involved in action suffer heavily, just as those professionals going to war often come back with scars on their personality, that cripple them for life. So narratives of war are also very much about everyday life in war zones, about human life before and after war, and about why we go to war. The more we get behind the politics of war and the human and emotional dimensions of war the more we have a chance to understand and maybe avoid war. It is just as important to understand the concrete historical, social, political and cultural dimensions of specific wars as it is to understand war as a phenomenon with deep evolutionary roots in the history of mankind. So since war has been part of human life and societies since the beginning of time, it is not likely that war in some form, will always exist.

Humans tend to feel, think and socially interact in groups and communities, and the emotional bonds between members of smaller and closer communities are always stronger than those between such communities and more distant ones. But so much more important is it to make the distant, the world of others, the world of those we go to war against feel closer, to keep developing narratives of these others and everyday life in other parts of the world.

We are our brains, says the neurologist Dick Swaab (2014: 4), everything we do and think is based in the brain. But our biological brain is embodied, and the interaction between the body and brain produces the mind and all the basic emotions we need and rely on to survive. Just as our body, brain and our emotions are a result of a long evolution, we are also a product of culture, society and the context we live in. So as another neurologist, Michael Tomasello points out in a chapter on cultural cognition (Tomasello 1999: 216f) genes are clearly a very strong part of who we are, how we think and feel, but humans also live in "a world of language, mathematics, money, government, education, science, and religion – cultural institutions composed of cultural conventions." We need to include biology and genes in our understanding of culture and media, and in this case war and how we tell stories about war. But ever since Darwin we have known that the dynamic between biology, society and culture is very dynamic.

What observational war documentaries show us about war and humans in general is in fact that we often go to war out of fear and lack of knowledge of other cultures and societies. They also clearly show that we are not at all very different, we are basically all alike, with important and culturally interesting variations. We often have the same dreams, the same kind of emotions, the same kind of social and cultural interaction between people – and we do understand the same kind of narratives, even though we tell them a little different. In a world where we have long gone left the pre-modern forms of small group society, and where we face a complex, globalized and highly mediatized world, stories about the human and emotional dimension of wars and differences between them and us are just as important as those that tell stories about the bigger social and political context.

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