

“Iraq is the Rashomon of Wars”: Repetition, Circularity, and the Problem of Masculine Representation in Kathryn Bigelow’s *The Hurt Locker*

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Introduction

Where we would end a war
another might take as a beginning

Brian Turner, “A Soldier’s Arabic”

“IEDS CAUSE THE SIGNATURE WOUNDS OF THIS WAR,” a character remarks in Phil Klay’s acclaimed short story collection *Redeployment* (222). The IED is perhaps the most iconic symbol of combat during the war in Iraq. Hidden beneath the detritus of the war zone, these ad hoc explosives represent the antitheses of US military technology. Their efficacy derives from their improvised simplicity. Occupied Iraq is littered with these devices, threatening to explode at any moment and forcing explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) technicians into an endless cycle of discovery and defusal. “That’s all the Army does all day, is go out on patrols looking for IEDs,” says EOD tech Staff Sergeant Jeffrey Sarver. “This whole war is about IEDs” (Boal, “The Man in the Bomb Suit”).

“The Man in the Bomb Suit” appeared in a 2005 issue of *Playboy*. Based on writer Mark Boal’s time spent embedded with an EOD team in late 2004, the story follows Sarver through the last thirty days of his deployment in December of 2004 to his return stateside in January 2005. Alluding to Sarver’s home life, childhood, and early deployment, the story unwraps the psychology of the bomb-tech. An adrenaline-junkie obsessed with the “Morbid Thrill” of defusing bombs, Sarver would form the basis for Boal’s protagonist in his screenplay for Kathryn Bigelow’s 2008 film *The Hurt Locker* (Boal). Sarver is adapted for the screen as Staff Sergeant William James (Jeremy Renner), whose love of the “methlike surge of adrenaline” becomes the template for Boal’s attempt at an action hero of the new millennium (Boal).

This attempt is a response to a larger problem facing constructions of the American male subject at the beginning of the 21st century. While the end of the 20th century demanded that the action hero of the 1980s—from Mel Gibson as Martin Riggs in *Lethal Weapon* to Bruce Willis as John McClane in *Die Hard*—return home, the 21st century and the threat of terror required his redeployment. But global terror is a force that operates both at home and abroad, and, as this paper will demonstrate, the new millennial man is faced with a dual compulsion. He must return to his violent roots, while still maintaining the domestic paternity that developed in the 90s.

In this way, *The Hurt Locker* endeavors to represent a form of masculinity that is at once bellicose and tame. Boal’s James must be both the classic action hero—the warrior purging the world of evil—and the father—the symbol of domestic passivity that it is the warrior’s mission to protect. This understanding of masculinity, born out of the film’s historical and political milieu, confronts Boal and Bigelow with a fundamental representational problem. Faced with this novel concept of manhood, the protagonist that Bigelow and Boal set out to create is essentially a paradox. At once passive and active, James’ psychology creates a representational impossibility that confounds the narrative structure of the film. James is meant to be the action hero whose story is teleological,

progressing towards the ultimate elimination of his enemies. But James is also meant to be the father. Passive and protective, James' paternal side prevents him from seeking out the threats that his warrior drive presses him to eradicate. Caught between the aggression of the soldier and the restraint of the father, James becomes trapped in an endless loop that manifests on a narrative level.

This psychological paradox finds symbolic expression in the IED. A perfect metaphor for the impossibility of representing the schizophrenic masculinity that the 21st century demands, the trope of the IED is itself a paradox. Like James, the IED confronts the writer with an inextricable narrative problem. To move the story forward, the bomb must both explode and not explode. The threat must be real, but the danger must be defused for any narrative progress to occur. In this instability, the IED externalizes the deepest contradictions of contemporary American masculine representation, presenting a manhood wavering between violence and effeminacy.

The narrative structure produced by the IED is similar to that of the war in Iraq itself. What the IED does on the level of the film, the weapon of mass destruction (WMD) does on the level of the war. The WMD serves as the Bush administration's cause for the war. Like James with the IED, the WMD must be eradicated for the war to move forward. But the WMD is caught in the same paradox as the IED. Once the WMD is destroyed, so is the rationale for war. Using my reading of the IED in *The Hurt Locker*, I will demonstrate that the war in Iraq necessitated both the defusal and reproduction of WMDs, insurgencies, and threats to national security in order to justify its similarly perpetual circularity.

U.S. Foreign Policy and the Roots of 21st Century Masculinity

After neutralizing a particularly threatening car bomb, James is approached by a visiting colonel. "You the guy in the flaming car?" he asks. "Yes, sir." "Well that's just hot shit," the officer lights up. "You're a wild man, you know that?" Film scholar Terence McSweeney argues that this moment signals "a throwback to the hard-bodied maverick icons of the 1980s and an embodiment of the real man whose return was called for after 9/11" (70). While there is certainly a Riggs-like streak in James, the film hints at a masculinity that is far more complex. James is the "wild man" in a new sense of the term: the man who resists classification and containment. He is crazed and unhinged like Riggs, but also somehow stable and calm in the face of danger. He is a soldier but also a father, both figuratively in his relationship with his squadron and literally, as an extended scene with his son shows. His adrenaline addiction is matched by a kind of domestic placidity that makes his psychology impenetrable and contradictory.

To understand the cultural and historical roots of James' ambivalent masculinity, it is helpful first to sketch the discourse of gender and American involvement in Iraq before the 2003 invasion. In her 1993 book *Hard Bodies: Hollywood Masculinity in the Reagan Era*, Susan Jeffords traces the movement from the aggressive hard body of the 1980s to the more paternal soft body of the George H. W. Bush years. With the splintering of the Republican Party during the 1988 election, the widening "gender gap" in the conservative voter base, and the recession of 1990, Jeffords argues, "Hollywood's interest in justice had waned and been replaced by a less socially troublesome topic—commitment to the family" (141).

But as the nineties pressed on, the Right began to call for a greater assertion of U.S. military dominance. Richard Nixon's 1992 foreign policy manifesto *Seize the Moment: America's Challenge in a One-Superpower World* argues for a return to *realpolitik*. "For the first time in history," he writes:

there is a real chance to make the next century a century of peace, freedom, and progress. Today, only one nation can provide the leadership to achieve those goals. The United States is privileged to be that nation. Our moment of truth has arrived. We must seize the moment (quoted in Jeffords 178-179).

Nixon reframes his proposed return to the hardliner policy of the Cold War in idealistic terms; America must take decisive action in the name of freedom and democracy abroad. This reaffirmation of interventionism contrasts starkly with what the Right saw as the military irresolution of the Democratic Party. In a televised address to the nation on December 16, 1998—three days before the House voted to impeach him for perjury in the Monica Lewinsky scandal—President Bill Clinton announced Operation Desert Fox (ODF), a bombing campaign in response to what he called Iraq’s “clear and present danger” to the safety of the world (*Iraq War Reader* 207-208). ODF, according to Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, was not an attempt to depose Saddam Hussein. Rather, the campaign endeavored “to degrade Saddam Hussein’s weapons of mass destruction, his ability to develop and deploy weapons of mass destruction, and his ability to continue to threaten his neighbors” (Interview with Jim Lehrer, PBS NewsHour, December 17, 1998). In other words, the Clinton administration’s response to this danger was meant only to be partial, a retaliation that to some signaled military impotence. This inadequacy suggests a sexual undertone to Clinton’s policy and its relation to the Lewinsky scandal.

The attempt to “degrade” appeared to critics on the Right as deterrence verging on diversion. Detractors drew connections with the remarkably prescient film *Wag the Dog*, directed by Barry Levinson. Representative Jim Gibbons (R-NV) remarked of the bombings: “Look at the movie ‘Wag the Dog.’ I think this has all the elements of that movie” (“‘Wag the Dog’ Back in the Spotlight,” CNN All Politics, August 21, 1998). Paul Cellucci, Republican Governor of Massachusetts and self-described “movie buff” remarked: “[*Wag the Dog*] popped into my mind, but I do hope that’s not the situation, and I trust that it isn’t” (CNN All Politics). Released on December 25, 1997, less than a month before Clinton’s impeachment, *Wag the Dog* begins shortly before Election Day, when news breaks that the incumbent president has been caught making a pass at an underage girl. PR wiz Conrad Brean (Robert De Niro) is brought in to deflect attention from the scandal, deciding to manufacture a diversionary war in Albania. Brean hires Hollywood producer Stanley Motss (Dustin Hoffman) to create the war. The pair comes up with everything from an unstable veteran to a traumatized Albanian orphan, even concocting a patriotic theme song, “The American Dream.”

Wag the Dog became the perfect reference point for the perceived weakness and duplicity of the late Clinton administration. Operation Desert Fox and its *Wag the Dog* connection with the Lewinsky scandal gave new life to the discourse of sexuality and military intervention. This conflation of military insufficiency with sexual impotence appears frequently in the popular culture of the time. In its 2000 song “B.O.B.,” for instance, hip-hop duo OutKast reference the 1998 bombings:

Don’t pull the thang out unless you plan to bang
Bombs over Baghdad.
Don’t even bang unless you plan to hit something
Bombs over Baghdad.

In their blending of military impotence and marital infidelity, these lines illustrate in retrospect what *Wag the Dog* predicts. As Jean Baudrillard writes of the Gulf War, “B.O.B.” frames Desert Fox as “the bellicose equivalent to safe sex,” or in this case oral sex (*The Gulf War did not take place* 26). Both Baudrillard and “B.O.B.” cast Clinton’s refusal to finish the job, even more egregious than Bush Sr.’s in Desert Storm, as an unwillingness to perform sexual intercourse. André 3000’s sarcastic counsel to Clinton is to go all the way: “Don’t pull the thang out unless you plan to bang.” But as Secretary Albright remarked of the bombings, “we are being very honest about what our ability is,” a remark that again rings with the language of sexual inadequacy (PBS NewsHour December 17, 1998).

This anxiety about military impotence harkens back to Bush Sr., who lamented that “[t]he abortive uprising of the Shi’ites in the south and the Kurds in the north” failed to break Saddam’s hold on power (*Iraq War Reader* 101). The inability of the First Gulf War to bring about decisive victory is precisely what made it such a perfect spectacle of military strength. “Unlike earlier wars,”

Baudrillard writes of the First Gulf War, “what is at stake in this war is war itself: its status, its meaning, its future. It is beholden not to have an objective but to prove its very existence” (*The Gulf War* 32). *Wag the Dog* was released almost exactly half way between the First Gulf War and the invasion of Iraq. The film possesses acute hindsight, immediate relevance, and a remarkable foreknowledge of the wars of the 21st century. Brean’s war in Albania does not take place, as Baudrillard says of Bush Sr.’s war in Iraq. *Wag the Dog*’s fictional war is pure spectacle, a war simulated with Hollywood tricks and faux patriotism. Brean explicitly compares his work to the Gulf War: “One shot, one bomb falling through the roof, building could’ve been made of Legos.”

Wag the Dog blends the unreality of the Gulf War seamlessly with the diversion of Desert Fox. But it also looks to the future. “Act One: the war,” Motss declares. “Act Two. . .” he trails off. “It’s like those Japanese in the caves on Okinawa,” Motss’ colleague Fad King (Dennis Leary) responds: “didn’t believe the war was over.” In its extraordinary clairvoyance, the film envisions a sequel to the Gulf War. Bush Sr.’s premature termination of Desert Storm, which allowed for its successful spectacle to remain intact, necessitates a follow-up. “The build-up is unreal,” and yet it leaves “the entire world irritated as though after an unsuccessful copulation” (Baudrillard *The Gulf War* 26, 33). Bush’s failure to finish the job is voiced in sexual terms, as a half-finished act of sexual intercourse that forces the United States towards the relief of completion.

Levinson’s film configures George W. Bush’s desire to finish his father’s war as an unconscious and inevitable sequel driven by the failure of his father to bring about decisive victory. But Bush Jr. seems to have misunderstood the object of his father’s war: to prove “its very existence.” The premature “pulling out” is precisely what left the illusion of war intact, allowing American military dominance to be asserted with relatively few complications. As Bush Sr. and Brent Scowcroft write in their 1998 memoir *A World Transformed*, “[h]ad we gone the invasion route, the United States could conceivably still be an occupying power in a bitterly hostile land. It would have been a dramatically different—and perhaps barren—outcome” (quoted in *Iraq War Reader* 102). Like Clinton’s attempts to degrade but not destroy, Bush Sr.’s reticence appears as a kind of impotence, an unwillingness to finish the job. Yet this reticence is also prudence. His prediction, again in reproductive terms, of a “barren” outcome is precisely what happened following the 2003 invasion—a protracted, ineffective war that left Iraq shattered and cost the United States almost two trillion dollars.

Bush Jr.’s misreading hints at a deeper problem, one that threatens the possibility of masculine recuperation altogether. If the nineties present a movement from hard body to soft—from foreign to domestic—what then does the image of White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card interrupting George W. Bush as he reads “The Pet Goat” to a group of children on September 11, 2001 signify? As Nixon writes in *Seize the Moment*, “today foreign and domestic problems should receive equal treatment” (quoted in Jeffords 179). The seven minutes Bush took before excusing himself from the classroom represent a significant and unstable shift in the representation of manhood in the 21st century. His hesitance demonstrates masculinity precariously balanced between the domestic and foreign spheres. The hard-bodied soldier who returned home in the nineties is now called back into action by a new threat, global terror. And yet he cannot forget his paternity.



Figure 1: Andrew Card informs George W. Bush of the second plane crashing into the World Trade Center on September 11th, 2001.

The fear is that the American man has lost his violence, become soft during his respite. Somehow, the man of the new millennium must amalgamate domestic sympathy and foreign resolve. Nixon, Jeffords writes, “exhorts the nation to become ‘complete’”: in other words, to reconcile these two spheres (179). This rift between passivity and activity forms the psychological wound out of which popular masculinity of the 21st century has been constructed. Caught between foreign and domestic, masculinity becomes an essentially representational problem.

IEDs and Circular Masculinity

The Hurt Locker is a perfect example of a film that attempts to construct a male character that is, in Nixon’s words, “complete.” This frantic attempt at representational stability is summed up in James’ profession. EOD is as close to domesticity as a front-line soldier can get. Cleaning up the mess left behind by the invasion, the bomb-tech is the military equivalent of housekeeper. James and the rest of Bravo Company do not go out looking for action; they are called in when the action is brought to a halt. “They got guys just sitting out there for hours in tanks and Humvees,” says Sarver (Boal). This passivity speaks to why the film’s epilogue, James’ return home, is so uncanny. James is shown shopping, cleaning the gutters, and cooking. While soaking mushrooms in the sink, James describes a recent suicide bombing to his wife. “Some guy drove his truck into an Iraqi market” he begins. “He starts passing out free candies. All the kids come running up—he detonates. . . You know they need more bomb techs.” His wife hands him the carrots: “Will you chop these up for me?” The juxtaposition of housework and EOD is striking not because of the contrast, but rather the similarity between the two. There is a connection between defusing a bomb and household chores, and although James is not at home with his family, he is at home in Iraq. The war zone becomes a kind of unhomey domicile in which James’ divided masculinity can be played out.

This subject matter of the film, however, is not the IED. Despite being the symbol of the film and of the war in general, the IED serves as an unlikely yet apt MacGuffin: the hollow pretext that propels the plot forward. Hitchcock, whose films frequently rely on these devices, was fond of explaining the MacGuffin with a joke. Two men enter a train, one of them carrying a large parcel. The other man asks him what is in the suitcase, to which the first responds, “a MacGuffin.” “What’s a MacGuffin?” the second asks. “It’s a device for killing leopards in the Scottish highlands,” the first explains. The second man is confused: “But there are no leopards in the Scottish highlands.” “Well then that’s not a MacGuffin, is it?” (*Sublime Object* 163). The MacGuffin is the device that propels the plot forward without actually possessing any meaning or substance in and of itself. As soon as the MacGuffin is attained, or in this case defused, it is rendered meaningless. Its entire

purpose is to serve as the empty goal of the protagonist.

In this same way, the search for IEDs and the necessity of defusing them propels the film forward. But when the bomb is defused, so is its meaning and its status as James' narrative goal. The IED, like the MacGuffin, "is the purest case of what Lacan calls the *objet petit a*: a pure void which functions as the object-cause of desire," both the goal and the source of James' motivation (*Sublime Object* 163). It operates as "the leftover which embodies the fundamental, constitutive lack," the object of desire that is actually a symbolic void (53). This structure of presence/absence—the IED that must both explode and be defused for the narrative to progress—is precisely the Lacanian structure of desire. "The rush of battle is a potent and often lethal addiction," reads the film's epigraph, "for war is a drug." The IED has the narrative effect of heroin—each dose leaves James searching for more. And yet this narrative activity is always undercut by the relative passivity of EOD. The tension between activity and passivity creates a fundamental paradox in James' psychology and in the film as a whole. The IED is the surplus that is actually a lack. It is present until it is actually reached, at which point its necessary defusal shows that it was simply a hole propelling James forward, a rift in the symbolic order that produces a circular structure of desire and therefore of narrative.

Lacan's psychoanalytic perspective is particularly helpful in deciphering this circularity, as repetition and paternity are closely linked in *The Hurt Locker*. The film's penultimate scene finds James at home playing with his infant son—bouncing him up and down, playing with a mobile, and most notably entertaining him with a Jack-in-the-Box. "You know what buddy," James says, "as you get older some of the things you love might not seem so special anymore. You know? Like your Jack-in-the-Box." "By the time you get to my age," he continues, "maybe it's only one or two things. . . With me, I think it's one." The Jack-in-the-Box becomes the infantile equivalent of the IED: a repetitive act of buildup and release. The disappointment of the surprise always leaves the child yearning for another go. To James, the IED is simply the adult version of this. The endless cycle of tension and release is an addiction.

The identification of the Jack-in-the-Box with the IED is even more explicit in the 2006 first revision of the script. James' meditation on the Jack-in-the-Box is preceded by a fairy tale. He tells of "a distant kingdom" in which "there were many magic boxes." A new king takes over the realm and forces all of the people to give up the boxes. Instead of handing them over, the people "put their boxes in secret places all over the kingdom. They put them in roads. They put them in cars. They put them in buildings." The king gets "a special Knight with special armor" to find the boxes for him. The knight gathers up all the boxes, and when he is done the king is so pleased he tells the knight that he will grant him one wish. "What do you wish?" the king asks, "but the Knight didn't know what to say." "James realizes he can't finish the story," the script reads before he begins the speech that made it into the film (quoted in Deutelbaum 68-69). Struck by the uncanniness of domestic life, James becomes acutely aware of impossibility of his fulfillment. The fantasy scenario in which James attempts to imagine the satisfaction of his desire to defuse the bomb makes him realize the opposite—that his desire can never be sated. The "magic box," the IED, is the hollow object-cause of his desire, the MacGuffin that serves not only as the goal of his desire, but also the pretext that constitutes the desire in the first place. If it disappears, so does he. James' character rests on the endless replaying of this pursuit.

The scene suddenly cuts to James stepping off a plane into the hot desert sun. "Welcome to Delta Company," a soldier greets him. The camera shifts to James walking down a dusty road in his bomb suit, grin on his face, with the title "Days Left In Delta Company's Rotation: 365." The narrative reaches complete circularity, restarting even further back than it began. It is helpful, again, to look at this circularity through a psychoanalytic lens. In *The Uncanny*, Freud recounts an experience with a similar structure to *The Hurt Locker's* narrative. He recalls accidentally stumbling into the red light district of an unfamiliar town. He quickly leaves the area, only to find himself back again by a different route. This process is repeated several times before he manages to

make it back to a familiar piazza (144). *The Hurt Locker* produces a similar feeling of the uncanny, always returning to Iraq and to the IED. The “wild man” James is not at home in the effeminizing life of domesticity in consumer America. And yet he is not the active hard-body either, seeking combat and resolution. He is not even the trauma hero—the soldier who, disturbed by the horrors of war, is not at home stateside because of what he has witnessed. Specialist Eldridge, the lowest ranking member of the squad and the film’s attempt at a trauma hero, exists in stark contrast with the cool and collected James. James’ “wild man” masculinity recalls Freud’s musing that the “uncanny element is actually nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche but was estranged from it”—the Jack-in-the-Box (148). James is at home in the unhomey, the barren desert that threatens to blow up in his face.

The circularity of *The Hurt Locker*’s narrative goes beyond James himself. The film begins with Bravo Company on a mission, headed not by James but by his predecessor, Sergeant Thompson (Guy Pearce.) Thompson and Sanborn send out the robot meant to detonate the IED, but in a typical case of the failure of American military technology, the robot is incapacitated and Thompson must suit up and place the charge himself. Eldridge sees a man with a phone, but hesitates to shoot. The bomb detonates, killing Thompson instantly. After a brief scene where Sanborn returns Thompson’s dog tags to mortuary affairs, the viewer is introduced to James, listening to heavy metal and smoking a cigarette in bed. James is not just Thompson’s replacement; he is his regeneration, the reiteration of the EOD sergeant that will continue *ad infinitum*.

The regeneration or respawning of the film’s narrative recalls the structure of shooter videogames. Interestingly, Mark Boal wrote the script for one installment of the popular Call of Duty franchise—unsurprising given that the script of *The Hurt Locker* is shaped much more like a videogame than a screenplay. Two months before *The Hurt Locker* was released in the United States, Konami was set to publish the third-person shooter *Six Days in Fallujah*. The game would allow players to experience some of the most brutal urban combat of the war. Boasting the most realistic war gameplay ever produced, the developers released a trailer in which marines describe their experiences of the war. “It’s not a general’s war,” one marine says. “It’s a war that’s fought by the corporals and the sergeants and the non-commissioned officers taking charge of their fire-teams and their squads” (“Six Days in Fallujah Pitch,” *YouTube*). Like *The Hurt Locker*, *Six Days in Fallujah* was meant to present the consumer with “real” soldiers, the enlisted men and the NCOs. Only two officers appear in *The Hurt Locker*. One is the visiting colonel whose only role is to praise James’ bravery, and the other is killed in action due to his incompetence. And like *The Hurt Locker*, *Six Days in Fallujah* would allow the American consumer to experience the “rush of battle” without the danger. “I have this image of a bunch of guys sitting around laughing because they got killed or didn’t get killed or let’s start over because we can,” says Karen Meredith, mother of Lt. Kenneth Ballard who was killed in action in 2005. “My son didn’t have that choice” (Hill, “Controversial Video Game”). What is so disturbing about first-person shooter games is this compulsion to repeat: the respawning that occurs endlessly in a film like *The Hurt Locker*. The pleasure of the game and of the film is the vicarious experience of war that can be played over and over again.

It is fitting that “The Man in the Bomb Suit” first appeared in *Playboy*. The transference of the erotic thrill of defusal and the threat of explosion onto the viewer, the vaguely romantic depiction of James as the “knight,” all contribute to *The Hurt Locker* as a piece of war porn. The critical response to the film, overwhelmingly positive, tended to praise the thrill of it. As Ian Nathan of *Empire* put it, *The Hurt Locker* is “the most literally exciting film you will see this year” (Nathan, “*The Hurt Locker* Review”). The experience of watching the film is undeniably exciting. But this excitement carries a sexual undercurrent. The IED gains an erotic charge, and its discovery and defusal become the buildup and deferral of climax, allowing James’ addiction to be transferred to the viewer.

The film’s episodic structure is marked by the constant buildup of tension and its release. The threats multiply and intensify as the movie progresses. In Freud’s words, the dreamlike circularity

of the narrative “express[es] the idea of castration by duplicating or multiplying the genital symbol,” in this case the endless reproduction of IEDs (*The Uncanny* 142). What is notable, however, about *The Hurt Locker* is that the genital symbol is not the phallus but the symbolic “wound” of the IED. The Oedipal inversion here is that this moment of loss is precisely the opposite. This lack of a wound reveals manhood’s dependence on damage. “Sooner or later,” writes Freud, the child “has a view of the genital region of a little girl. . . With this the loss of his own penis becomes imaginable, and the threat of castration takes its deferred effect” (*Dissolution of the Oedipus Complex* 176). The IED inverts this structure. The glimpse of the “wound” does not produce the fear of losing the phallus but rather the perverse desire to be symbolically castrated. The IED presents the viewer with a fantasy of explosion that the film by its nature as a continuing narrative cannot satisfy. This is the inverted Oedipal structure of film—what must be reclaimed is not the phallus but its loss.

Given the thematic prevalence of castration in the film, it is interesting to note that one of the most significant wounds of the war in Iraq is genital injury. A recent article in *The Journal of Urology* found that “an unprecedented number of U.S. service members sustained genitourinary injury while deployed to Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom” (Janak et al.). Genital injury and brain trauma, both drastically heightened by the specific warfare of Iraq, make physical what a film like *The Hurt Locker* demonstrates artistically—that at the center of the war in Iraq is a representational void. To be hurt in Iraq is to be wounded cerebrally and genitally, and yet without such wounding the promise of masculine recuperation on the battlefield is impossible. Like James, to be wounded means to trade the phallus for its absence—to be effeminized and masculinized at the same time.

This inversion implies a greater paradox on the level of the war in Iraq itself. The invasion of Iraq represents a return to its own origin—the womb in which it was conceived by the father more than ten years prior. It is both a consummation and a negation of the Oedipus complex. The invasion becomes a simultaneous act of penetration and of regression: the return to the site of repressed trauma. “This will not be another Vietnam,” George H. W. Bush said of the Gulf War at a news conference in 1990, “and I pledge to you, there will not be any murky ending. . . I will never, ever agree to a halfway effort.” George W. Bush’s desire to go all the way to Baghdad, to conclude his father’s “halfway effort” in the Gulf, is more of a repetition than a completion. Bush is unable to “pull out” of Iraq, and the narrative of the war resembles that of *The Hurt Locker* in its inability either to achieve or defuse climax once and for all. The First Gulf War is the wound that the invasion tries to heal, but instead of mending, Operation Iraqi Freedom simply returns to the site of cultural trauma in an act of compulsive repetition.

This configuration, however, unveils and destabilizes a larger imperial narrative. The desolation of *The Hurt Locker*’s Iraq presents the invasion as an even deeper return to the origin of civilization. Iraq is imagined as the womb in which American masculinity can be engendered and reborn. Though Bush Sr. feared that the womb is “barren” (*Iraq War Reader* 102), it is precisely the desolation of *The Hurt Locker*’s Iraq that allows it to be the site of rebirth. Iraq is at once represented as the absent origin of civilization, the site of original trauma, and as the “sandbox”¹ in which fantasies of American virility can be played out. Both the Fertile Crescent and a kind of post-apocalyptic hellscape, Iraq holds the promise of unconstrained masculine self-definition. “We need a visible past,” writes Baudrillard, “a visible myth of origin to reassure us as to our ends, since ultimately we have never believed in them” (*Simulations* 19-20). Is there a better myth of origin for American masculinity than the Western? James most resembles “the mythical construct of the cowboy,” according to McSweeney, “with Iraq cast as his new millennial frontier” (70). The unhomey womb of Iraq is certainly the origin of James’ “wild man” masculinity. Neither civilized nor savage, James is at home only on the frontier. James’ Iraq becomes a synecdoche of the IEDs

¹Military jargon for Iraq, the term also calls to mind the “sandbox” genre of open-world videogames.

that pepper it. It is the surplus that signifies a lack—the wound in both its presence and its absence that holds the false promise of masculine rebirth.

The Big Other and Being at Home in Iraq

The radical unrepresentability of *The Hurt Locker*'s Iraq signals the impossibility of truly representing James' idealized masculinity. Like Iraq, the "wild man" depends on a wound for his completeness. James' relationship with Beckham, an Iraqi child who sells DVDs on the base, illustrates this representational impossibility. James jokes with Beckham, buying his DVDs and playing soccer with him. This is the viewer's first glimpse of James' fatherly side. Later, Bravo is sent to deal with a bomb factory. James enters a room where a body bomb lies on a table—the corpse of a child stuffed with explosives. He believes the child to be Beckham and is overcome, for the first and only time in the film, with immense pain and grief. James then goes AWOL in search of the bomb-maker, forcing the DVD merchant to drive him to Beckham's house at gunpoint. James enters the house, finding the man who lives there doing the dishes. "Beckham? I don't know," the man says: "but please, sit down. I am Professor Nabil, this is my home. You are a guest. Please, sit down." James is bewildered. "I'm a guest..." he mutters before the professor's wife drives him out of the house. A few days later, Beckham shows up on base and wants to play with James, who ignores him.

Beckham's reappearance is uncanny. It both insists on and precludes James' grief. In this way, the wound of Beckham's loss is both present and absent. While the traditional trauma narrative would have Beckham stay dead and James in agony, *The Hurt Locker*'s structure and James' masculinity make this impossible. James must both grieve and not grieve simultaneously. The only possible narrative response is repetition, circularity. Like the bomb-tech, Beckham is regenerated, restoring narrative equilibrium and maintaining James' unstable masculinity. Beckham becomes the IED, the narrative body bomb. His appearance is, to any viewer who has seen other films in the genre, a signal of James' approaching grief. The innocent Iraqi child must be killed. He is a narrative bomb waiting to explode. Then Beckham becomes the bomb itself, the actual IED that must be defused, only to be regenerated unexploded. He is present and absent, dead and alive, defused and exploded: the IED incarnate.

Even uncannier, however, is the scene in the professor's house. The figure of the professor confuses James and leaves him nearly speechless. McSweeney argues that *The Hurt Locker* "dramatises the war on terror as a momentous battle between the United States against the insidious evil forces of the world, with America portrayed as constantly under siege from a predatory (and most frequently Muslim) Other" (64). The scene in Professor Nabil's home complicates this formulation. "In the fantasy-scene," writes Žižek, "the desire is not fulfilled, 'satisfied,' but constituted... the desire structured through fantasy is a defence against the desire of the Other, against this 'pure,' trans-phallic desire (i.e. the 'death drive' in its pure form)" (*Sublime Object* 118). In other words, while James believes that what he wants is the fulfillment of his desire, the real effect of his violent fantasy is to establish this desire in the first place. The fantasy-scene here is one of revenge, namely revenge for Beckham's death. James' grief at the death of his innocent friend makes this revenge the object of his desire. But the fantasy of revenge, killing the bomb maker, is not the satisfaction of James' desire but its constitution and concealment. This fantasy of vengeance hides James' real desire, the impulse to find the source of the bombs that it is his task to eradicate. If the IED represents the little other, a crack in the symbolic order that serves both as the cause and as the object of James' compulsion, Professor Nabil represents the big Other. In his search for the object-cause of his desire—nominally Beckham's murderer but really the mythic bomb maker, the father of his unending compulsion to defuse—James finds its true source, the maternal professor who may be the mythical bomb maker himself.

Whether or not Nabil is the bomb maker, James' encounter breaks down the illusion of his fantasy and reveals its true structure, "the desire of the Other." What shatters James' revenge

fantasy is not the anti-climax of its fulfillment but the radical alterity of its true object. Nabil is not the predatory Muslim other threatening the virtuous American but the opposite, the hospitable professor. “This is my home,” he says, “you are a guest.” The uncanniness of the professor’s home exists precisely in its homeliness. Nabil is the mother—James finds Nabil doing the dishes, an activity frequently compared with EOD. He the implied bomb maker from whom James’ circular desire is produced. The father, the object of the revenge fantasy, is discovered to be the mother, the womb out of which the endless stream of IEDs is born. But Professor Nabil’s house is also the symbolic wound, the origin of his trauma as well as the IEDs, to which James returns. The scene recalls the epilogue in James’ own home, during which his wife tells him to do housework even while he discusses the war. Beckham’s home, the supposed site of paternity, is revealed to be the unhomely womb at the center of James’ subject. Nabil makes visible the real “myth of origin” meant to convince James of his fictitious ends—revenge for Beckham, final defusal of the IED—revealing that he never believed them to be ends in the first place.

This return to the original site of trauma is a common topic in psychoanalysis. Discussing the “traumatic neuroses” of veterans of the First World War, Freud unpacks the desire of the victim to return to the moment of trauma. “The patient,” he notes, “cannot remember the whole of what is repressed in him, and what he cannot remember may be precisely the essential part of it” (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 18). James’ narrative is precisely this: “He is obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience” (18). The IED serves as the object-cause of this compulsion to repeat. It is the MacGuffin that sets the film in motion. Bomb-littered Iraq, its epicenter in Nabil’s house, is the Other, the symbolic order that, in Žižek’s words,

is also *barré*, crossed-out, by a fundamental impossibility, structured around an impossible/traumatic kernel, around a central lack. . . This lack in the Other gives the subject—so to speak—a breathing space. . . by allowing him to identify himself, his own lack, with the lack in the Other (*Sublime Object* 122).

If there is a climax to *The Hurt Locker*, it is this moment in the professor’s home: James’ loss of speech. He sees momentarily in the home what the viewer sees in Iraq, the essential rift in the symbolic order that creates “a breathing space” in which James’ male subject is not constructed, as he had hoped, but deconstructed. Nabil’s hospitality reveals to James what he always feared. In his desire to get away from home, to live the unconstrained life of the wild man from IED to IED, he has failed to realize that he was home all along. It is significant that James walks in on Nabil doing the dishes: the parodic equivalent of EOD, cleaning up the mess. James identifies his desire with the desire of the Other, of Nabil and perhaps of *The Hurt Locker*’s Iraq itself. For the first and only time in the film, James sees clearly in Nabil the essential deficiency of Iraq: the uncanny womb that engenders his unstable masculine subject. Yet this is all James is, a guest. This moment of bewilderment is the closest James comes to understanding, to breaking free from the endless cycle of his desire.

But James’ moment of liberation is fleeting. “If the Name-of-the-Father functions as the agency of interpellation,” Žižek argues, “the mother’s desire. . . marks a certain limit at which every interpellation necessarily fails” (*Sublime Object* 121). James glimpses this demarcation, this limit, at which his “symbolic identification” (i.e. the wild man) ends. The narrative structure of the film, however, cannot sustain this identification. The film must regenerate Beckham to restore equilibrium and again conceal the structure of James’ desire. Directly following the scene in the professor’s house is the diversionary climax of the film, in which James’ recklessness gets Eldridge shot. Responding to an oil tanker explosion in the Green Zone, Bravo moves to the edge of the blast radius. James contemplates finding the bomber: “a really good bad guy hides out in the dark, right?” James wants

to hunt² for the “bad guy,” to play action hero. “No, man, this is bullshit,” Sanborn responds. “You got, what, three infantry platoons here whose job it is to go haji hunting? That’s not our job.” Sanborn is right. It is not their job to go hunting for bad guys. It is, however, part of James’ frantic attempt to redefine his masculinity following the incident in Nabil’s home.

Moreover, his pursuit of the attacker attempts to serve a narrative function similar to Beckham’s death. After Eldridge is wounded, James comes back to base and steps into the shower with all of his gear on, apparently showing distress at his mistake. And yet he does not seem to learn anything. As Eldridge is being airlifted for medical treatment, he screams at James: “That’s what happens when you fucking shoot someone you motherfucker!” James apologizes, but his face is empty—he feels no guilt. Eldridge is not heard from again. The climax of the film is neither the perceived loss of Beckham nor the shooting of Eldridge. Both of these are wounds to others, the first unreal and the second non-fatal. The true climax, the source of James’ moment of breakdown, is the scene in Nabil’s house, which exposes the “traumatic kernel” at the center of the symbolic order: the fundamental rift in the good versus evil ideology on which the completeness of James’ masculinity rests. But the film cannot permit this realization, creating a distracting climax that tries and fails to shoehorn James into the prototypical trauma narrative. In doing so, it diverts attention from the real danger to James’ masculinity—the impossibility of its representation.

This impossibility can be seen in the film’s attempt to reestablish James’ masculine subjectivity. “How do you do it?” Sanborn asks James, “take the risk?” “I don’t know,” he responds: “I guess I don’t think about it... Do you know why I am the way I am?” *The Hurt Locker*’s main theme plays as he says this. “The Way I Am” has the resounding twang of a Western soundtrack. In fact, its composer Marco Beltrami has been nominated for two Academy Awards, one for *The Hurt Locker* and the other for the western *3:10 to Yuma*. The film’s masculine ideology—the cowboy, wild man—attempts to reinterpellate James’ subjectivity. “Do you know why I am the way I am?” The theme answers the question for Sanborn. “I guess I don’t think about it” recalls the scene with the officer from earlier in the film. “So tell me,” the officer asks, “what’s the best way to go about disarming one of these things?” “The way you don’t die, sir.” “Spoken like a wild man,” the officer responds. James’ gruff and laconic reply mimics John Wayne and Clint Eastwood. But the intentional brevity of these responses indicates repression. James doesn’t “think about it” because the slightest thought would collapse the wild man entirely, revealing its fundamental incoherence. Not simply the man of action, he is also a bomb tech, occupying a domestic space even in Iraq.

This incoherence comes in part from the role of guns, or lack thereof, in the film. In a scene that feels completely out of place, Bravo encounters a group of English mercenaries in the desert and takes heavy fire from a sniper in a dilapidated building. The mercenaries are killed, and Bravo must operate the massive Barrett sniper rifle. However, it is not James but Sanborn who takes the gun, with James assisting him in aiming. James is again thrust into the relatively passive role, not wielding the absurdly large, phallic weapon that appears in this scene only. James’ domestication becomes even more pronounced as the scene progresses. The rifle jams, and on inspection Sanborn and James find that the bullets are covered in blood. They toss the magazine down the dune to Eldridge. “Spit and rub, man. Spit on them,” James instructs him, but the terrified Eldridge’s mouth is dry. James slides down the ridge, showing Eldridge how to use his camelback to wet the bullets. James tries to comfort him: “You’re doing good, man. You’re okay. I’m going to keep you safe.” Even in the middle of the film’s most extended gunfight, James assumes a compassionate, even motherly disposition. The film goes further, with James holding a juice box for Sanborn so he can drink without looking down from the scope. He is again caught between nurturing and violence, parent and soldier.

²In his characterization of Sarver, Boal focuses on his love of hunting since childhood that taught him self-sufficiency and strength.

The masculinity of the cowboy is not only set against the racialized backdrop of occupied Iraq, but also accentuated by the relative passivity of his Black teammate. If James is the *Lethal Weapon* Riggs of *The Hurt Locker*, there is something to be said for a reading of Sanborn as Roger Murtaugh (Danny Glover,) Riggs' family man partner. The recklessness of the wild man exists only in contrast to the reserve of his counterpart. Sanborn's main role is essentially the same as Danny Glover's in *Lethal Weapon*. James' work wife, he must attempt to contain the unbridled masculinity of his colleague. James' virility is established in contrast to Sanborn's racialized effeminacy. Sanborn always wants to play it by the book and, by the end of the film, is crushed into a Murtaugh "I'm getting too old for this shit" submission by the terrors he has seen. "I'm done," he tells James: "I want a son, Will. I want a son." The irony of the moment is that they already have one—Eldridge. This strange kind of nuclear family attempts both to accentuate and moralize James' impulsive masculinity. The attempt, however, fails. Even in Iraq, James is the family man, both father and soldier, who must at once enact his violence and protect his family and who, in the end, is incapable of either. Even his paternity is effeminized, both by the passivity of his profession and of his role in the sniper scene.

The impossibility of James' wild man masculinity is not just a symptom of *The Hurt Locker*'s representational inadequacy, but the inadequacy itself. Like the trauma narrative, the incoherence of the wild man is a representational problem. If the narrative deficiency of *The Hurt Locker* emanates from its subject matter, this subject matter is not the IED or even the war in Iraq, but rather the novel masculine subject of the 21st century. Just as Nixon imagined a nation made whole in its resolve, *The Hurt Locker* imagines and attempts to represent a man who is hard bodied and soft. James' resolve, the wild man in him, leads him from IED to IED in an endless push that always brings him home to Iraq.

WMDs, Representational Parallax, and Erotic Transference

It is helpful here to finish, as the film does, at the beginning—James' first mission with Bravo. The mission begins as most do, with an unstable shot of Bravo's Humvee creeping down a crowded street. The recurring title flashes on the screen: "Days Left in Bravo Company's Rotation: 38." The camera cuts to quivering images of Baghdad—a limping cat, the trash and debris that litter *The Hurt Locker*'s Iraq. The intensity of the scene is present even early on. Bravo is being watched from all sides. The instability of the camera that plays such an important role throughout the film creates here a frantic sense of exposure. In denying the viewer a stable view, the scene simulates the feeling of vulnerability: of actually being there, on the street. To make this even more explicit, James throws a smoke grenade behind him after he suits up, completely obscuring Sanborn and Eldridge's view of the scene.

James is walking up the street when a taxi breaks through the roadblock. He pulls out his pistol and stops the driver just in time. An intense standoff ensues, in which James fires several warning shots before pressing his gun against the driver's forehead, causing him to back up back up into the roadblock where he is handcuffed. This bizarre opening to a bomb defusal sequence speaks to the narrative frustration of the film as a whole. James' role as an EOD tech is inherently passive. It requires the repeated production of threats to be defused: "If he wasn't an insurgent he sure as hell is now," James jokes. The fact that the first threat that appears is not a bomb but an enemy allows James to brandish his weapon—the phallic symbol that his profession precludes. And yet he does not kill. The cowboy James pushes towards violent resolve, but is always marked by a passive restraint. He is like the bombs he defuses. Always ready to explode but never capable of doing so, James is a narrative impossibility.

The bustle of the avenue gives way to an empty block where the IED has been reported. And yet Bravo is still being watched. From the balconies and parapets, nervously amused children peer down at the incoming EOD squad. They are awaiting the spectacle along with the viewer. Only

they have the god's eye view, the aerial displacement that relieves part of the tension growing in the viewer's mind. "Watch your feet," says James. The IED could be anywhere, blending in perfectly with the rubble-covered street. For the viewer, the IED is there. The bomb is a constant presence, the fear of which allows the tension to swell with the dampened bass drone and muffled Arabic chant that comes and goes throughout the scene. Predictably, James has refused to use the bomb-defusal robot, opting instead to suit up and disarm the IED himself. James' debut, the scene sets the tone of his character for the entire film. He is reckless, a maverick who refuses to mirror Sanborn's military speak and obsession with protocol. "Are you within 50 meters of the IED?" Sanborn blurts out, trying to peer over the smokescreen James has put up. "Hell I don't know," James responds. "I'll tell you when I'm standing over it, cowboy." The children continue to watch, and the camera repeatedly drops to the ground where the rubble towers above the shot.

When James reaches the IED, the camera cuts to a point of view shot from inside the helmet. While the shakiness of the camera gives the film a sense of gritty realism, the brief POV gives the viewer the feeling of embodiment produced by first-person shooters. The IED is there, just as the viewer suspected, lurking beneath the dirt and wreckage. As James begins to defuse the bomb, the shots tighten up. James' movement slows, and the camera continues to quiver though his hands stay still. The camera cuts between these tight claustrophobic angles to aerial views of James, giving the viewer a feeling of overwhelming vulnerability. The shaky close-ups of James' hands always undercut the viewer's desire for omniscience. Even the aerials are brief and unstable.

The cinematic vulnerability of this scene signifies a deeper representational wound. What is meant to produce a greater realism—the hand camera mimics the warzone documentary, the tight shots James' POV—combines with the destabilization of the omniscient aerial perspective to which the viewer clings. The rapid shift between these perspectives builds intensity not by exploiting the audience's immersion but rather its lack of immersion. In other words, the camera work does not simply transfer James' excitement to its audience. Rather, Barry Ackroyd's cinematography unwittingly capitalizes on the viewer's own anxiety about the possibility of this transference. The shift in perspective in its almost heavy-handed resistance to cinematic omniscience produces a much deeper fear than simply the thrill of battle. The real dread of the scene is within the viewer—the fear of uncovering the representational wound that lies at the heart of a film like *The Hurt Locker*.

This wound is most easily seen in the relationship between the audience and the Iraqis who look on as James tries to defuse the bomb. What is so uncomfortable about the relationship is not any kind of identification but the contrast. They have the "real" point of view that Bigelow and Ackroyd's cinematic finesse can only hope to reproduce. The irony is that all of these cinematic tricks are exactly what distinguish the viewer from the in-movie spectator whose view is precisely the opposite. *The Hurt Locker's* obsessive resistance to the stable aerial view in the name of greater realism precludes the possibility of any actual realism.

The rapidly shifting perspectives and shaky camerawork of *The Hurt Locker*, the virtuosity of which won the film six Oscars including Best Picture, are precisely the aspects of the film that threaten to expose this representational instability. The tension between the film's boots on the ground feel and the distance created by its artful aesthetic techniques produces a similar parallax to its cinematography. Confronted with the virtuosity of Bigelow and Ackroyd's filmmaking, the moviegoer must acknowledge his/her status as a consumer of film and the representational remove from the actual war that such a position implies. This force of displacement reveals the representational wound to the viewer. The trembling of the camera becomes the trembling of the audience, whose effort along with the filmmakers' is devoted entirely to denying its own representational displacement. The deepest anxiety of the film emanates from within the spectator. It is the threat that the illusion of realism and its possibility of transmission will break down, revealing the void at the heart of the film's representational project.

"Alright," James sighs, "we're done." The tension is defused with the bomb, but only for a moment. The camera twitches up the side of a building, singling out the menacing presence of the

bomb maker. The scene is not over. This naïve moment of release is the film’s articulation of Bush’s “Mission Accomplished” speech delivered hardly six weeks after the beginning of the war. It is the false sense of relief, the self-deception that denies the truth of the narrative, both of the film and the war. *The Hurt Locker*, like *Iraq*, is not a narrative arc; it is a compulsion to repeat. The relief is short lived. “Uh, got a wire,” James groans. The camera repeatedly cuts to the bomb-maker, referred to in the shooting script as “the factory worker,” nervously staring down on James from his balcony. Although the viewer does not receive this information, “the factory worker” connects this early insurgent with the bomb factory in which James finds what he believes to be Beckham’s body. This bomb-maker is merely a worker—James’ first step in his search for the origin of his desire. What he does not realize, however, is that he has already found it. James reaches a nexus of seven wires, yanking up on them to reveal that he is surrounded by IEDs. The wires emanate outward from James. The IEDs have multiplied, but their origin is revealed. In the film’s most iconic still, James stands at the center of the objects of his desire.



Figure 2: James at the center of seven IEDs in *The Hurt Locker*.

The IED becomes the image of the film’s deepest anxiety. The proliferation of bombs signifies the Oedipal wound that lies at the heart of the film’s representational project. James’ desire and the viewer’s are structured unidirectionally, constantly in pursuit of the next fix. The reality of James’ desire is that it is not to defuse but to diffuse. The proliferation of enemies, thrills, and IEDs leads James and the viewer on an endless mission that always ends right where it started. The rapid shifts in perspective and shakiness of the camera both serve this same purpose of concealment. The “myth of origin” meant to assure James of his ends both conceals and destabilizes the true origin of his desire. The process of defusal and diffusion is an endless act of self-representation, an attempt to fill in a fundamental wound in James’ self and, by extension, the larger cultural configuration of American masculinity. The repeated production of MacGuffins, the ham-handed attempts at realism and immersion, are not isolated to *The Hurt Locker*. These compulsions and concealments are at the heart of the representational project of the war in Iraq itself.

“Do not the ‘Iraqi weapons of mass destruction’ fit the profile of the MacGuffin perfectly?” Žižek asks (*Borrowed Kettle* 11). The WMD is the narrative origin of the war, the fictional motive that propelled the Bush administration’s plan into action. The image, the MacGuffin that is not a MacGuffin, is of Colin Powell holding up the vial of anthrax at the UN Security Council on February 5, 2003. The vial was, of course, a prop—an empty pretext presented to the UNSC as justification for a war that was all but decided. The problem with the MacGuffin, as *The Hurt Locker* demonstrates, is that its existence is actually a hole in existence. It is a reason for invasion that is actually the lack of a reason. In other words, Powell’s vial makes tangible Rumsfeld’s famous truism, “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence” (Press Conference at NATO HQ). The simulated anthrax is simply an artificial motive that serves as the object-cause of desire. Like the IED, it is both the origin and the goal of desire. The WMD signifies the perceived injury for

which the US must take vengeance by invading Iraq as well as the object of such an invasion.



Figure 3: Secretary of State Colin Powell displaying a simulated vial of anthrax to the U.N. Security Council in New York February 5, 2003.

The problem with this narrative is the same one that appears in *The Hurt Locker*. The MacGuffin is the presence that signifies an absence. The narrative requires the endless defusal and reproduction of these empty motivations. As Žižek notes, the reasons for invasion read with the logic of a dream. The problem is not that there was no reason for the war but that there were too many (*Borrowed Kettle* 2). First, Saddam possesses weapons of mass destruction. Then, even if Iraq does not have WMDs, Saddam's regime was certainly involved in the September 11th attacks. And, finally, even if there is no link to 9/11, Saddam's Ba'athist regime is a brutal dictatorship, comparable to fascism in Europe, and warrants invasion. Reasons for war proliferate like bombs in *The Hurt Locker*, each one necessitating the production of another. By the end, the argument resembles the image of James encircled by IEDs. The endless production of reasons mirrors the endless production of political enemies, insurgencies, and threats to the nation.

Even the "real" reasons for war read with a dreamlike incoherence. These reasons, as Žižek sees them, are three—promoting democracy abroad, asserting U.S. military dominance, and gaining access to Iraqi oil reserves (*The Borrowed Kettle* 4). All three represent preemption, the Bush doctrine that anticipates threats rather than responding to them. This "cowboy diplomacy" falls into the same paradox as James' cowboy masculinity, and like *The Hurt Locker*, it is essentially circular. Caught between resolve and restraint, the preemption narrative requires the constant production of threats to be defused. Like Nixon's call for the post-Cold War nation to "seize the moment," the ambivalence of preemption is between active intervention and passive response. The multiplying reasons for invasion, whether real or fictional, are all preemptive, the circularity of which continues on and on in endless repetition.

These "true" reasons for invasion, Žižek argues, "should be treated like a 'parallax': it is not that one is the 'truth' of the others; the 'truth' is, rather, the very shift of perspective between them" (6). "Iraq," writes George Packer, "is the *Rashomon* of wars"—a war, like Kurosawa's film, told from countless conflicting perspectives and fought over innumerable competing interests (46). The production of motives begins to look a lot like the production of IEDs: an endless process of diffusion masked as defusal. In these terms, Bush's famous "axis of evil" takes on a narrative structure strikingly similar to that of *The Hurt Locker*. The illusory production of motivations for war conceals the true origin of these enemies. The United States becomes James, the axis around which these infinite threats revolve. Powell's vial of anthrax reifies the cultural fantasy of invasion—of playing the action hero and vanquishing one's enemies one at a time in order to make, as Nixon writes, "the next century a century of peace, freedom, and progress" (Jeffords 179). It is this fantasy of "peace, freedom, and progress" that Bush and James have in common. They share in the self-deception that what they are creating is narrative arc—progress—and that what they really want is defusal—peace. In reality, the illusion of progress conceals an unbridled compulsion to repeat, and the desire for freedom and peace is simply the fantasy that conceals it.

Conclusion

The parallels between the first major film to come out of the war in Iraq and the war itself stem from a common discourse of masculine recuperation. *The Hurt Locker* faces an insurmountable challenge in its project of creating a new male subject for the 21st century. Born out of the call to action brought on by the threat of global terror, Boal and Bigelow's protagonist is both a father and a soldier. He is, like George W. Bush, compelled to repeat his predecessor's quest to defuse the situation in Iraq in perpetuity. Both James and Bush are trapped in an endless cycle of defusal and diffusion, the production of IEDs—in James' case—and threats to national security—in Bush's—that precludes either completion or withdrawal, both framed in sexual terms. Each threat, each IED, presents a new erotically charged thrill that will never bring about climax. It is this unending deferral of completion that structures the narrative of *The Hurt Locker*. Even in death, the film shows, the bomb-tech is regenerated and the narrative reaches full circularity.

This narrative structure is best viewed through a psychoanalytic lens, which sheds light on the shared compulsion to repeat. The IED and the WMD become Hitchcock's MacGuffin, the hollow pretext pushing the protagonist forward but also holding him back from any actual movement. When the IED is defused, so is its purpose. It is what Žižek calls the object-cause of his desire—the goal that can never be attained but serves only to constitute the desire in the first place. This is embodied on the level of the war itself in the WMD, the reason for war that is actually a non-reason. James' "wild man" masculinity, always pushing the frontier of civilization, is continually pulled back from this boundary by the circular structure of his desire. He is necessarily restrained by the relative passivity of his military role. He cleans up the mess, defuses the bombs, but is not meant to seek out combat directly. The IED is the symbolic manifestation of James' paradoxical masculinity, suspended between the desire to defuse danger and the necessity of reproducing that danger, always seeking the next fix but never being truly satisfied.

Bigelow and Ackroyd sublimate this psychological and narrative ambivalence between passivity and activity to the level of visual representation through their cinematography. The camera work of the film constantly vacillates between a shaky, boots-on-the-ground feel and stable aerial shots, creating a parallax effect that attempts to provide the viewer with a greater realism, one that is meant to conduct the transference of the erotic thrill James experiences onto the audience. But this cinematic virtuosity serves only to remind the viewer of his/her remove from the experience of the film's characters, further destabilizing the film's idea of masculinity, this time on the level of representation itself.

The ease with which a film like *The Hurt Locker* articulates the narrative and representational structure of the war is unsurprising. Paul Virilio writes, "War consists not so much in scoring territorial, economic or other material victories as in appropriating the 'immateriality' of perceptual fields": "*the history of battle is primarily the history of radically changing fields of perception*" (10). War is and has always been cinematic. It is an exercise in framing. Success in battle is determined less by numbers and more by a general's ability to control what is and is not in the enemy's line of sight. The best tacticians understand the unstable relationship between the view from the sky with the view from the ground. In this way, the instability of representation is at the heart not only of war films, but also of war itself. The parallax displacement that both conceals and reveals *The Hurt Locker*'s artifice serves a similar purpose to that of the war in Iraq. The invasion of Iraq signifies a deep cultural anxiety masquerading as a cultural fantasy. The uncontrolled generation of motivations, perspectives, potential enemies, and real aggressors is really part of a single process—the compulsive act of masculine self-representation.

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