During a Q&A with Brian De Palma following the U.S. premiere of *Redacted* at the 2007 New York Film Festival, an audience member asked if De Palma had consulted any U.S. soldiers or Iraqi civilians in the course of making the film. It was not a hostile question, and De Palma gave a straightforward answer (“yes” on both counts), but the suggestion was clear: one reaction to the film is to question its authenticity. *Redacted*, in many ways, conditions that reaction. Along with recent Iraq War-themed films *In the Valley of Elah* (2007) and *Stop-Loss* (2008), *Redacted* exploits new media technology that puts digital video cameras in the hands of Army and National Guard soldiers. But whereas *In the Valley of Elah* and *Stop-Loss* integrate fake soldier-cam footage into a traditional third-person narrative, *Redacted* is an extended illusion much like *Cloverfield* and *Diary of the Dead* (both 2008), fantastical films restricted to the first-person digital-camera perspective. The conceit of the latter two films strains credibility: they rely on a viewer’s suspension of disbelief in the likelihood that average people in mortal danger have the wherewithal to record their experience with any sort of visual clarity for minutes on end—by the time we see the footage, the camera operator is usually dead. *Redacted* teases out a similar disbelief, while remaining grounded in verifiable modes of reenactment. Its absurdities are a reflection, not a distortion, of its Internet-based source material.

Viewers acquainted with Iraq War documentaries, soldiers’ camcorder footage, milblogs, YouTube, Al Jazeera, Sky News, and jihadis’ websites are in a position to confirm just how well *Redacted* has simulated these forms. Those unfamiliar with that material need not go far: aggregate sites such as LiveLeak, infovlad.net, and Milblogging, among countless others, collect and sort footage and writings into a semblance of order. What is missing from most of those sites, however, is critical context; there is always the sense that no matter how spectacular or passionate the on-screen images and words, they represent only a fragment of truth. *Redacted* is just as fragmented and frustrating: instead of filtering the morass of the Iraq War through the monaural voice of pure documentary, it is multi-vocal and multi-visual—the impression of truth at twenty-four points of view per second. Ironically, De Palma faces accusations of factual inaccuracy in a film that never ceases to question its own veracity.

*Redacted* has a dual purpose: to dramatize incidents of atrocity in Iraq, and to challenge the authority of mediated content at a time of war. The film’s central incident is based on a true case: the March 2006 rape and murder of a fourteen-year-old Iraqi girl and her family in Mahmoudiya by five U.S. Army soldiers, one of whom confessed to authorities several weeks later. Given the incident’s depressing similarity to a Vietnam War atrocity reported by Daniel Lang for *The New Yorker* in 1969, *Redacted* is a companion piece to *Casualties of War* (1989), De Palma’s dramatization of Lang’s account. Unlike the earlier film, which aroused personal (and national) trauma from the light sleep of collective memory, *Redacted* shows the process of traumatic memorization. Photographic technology since Vietnam and the Gulf War has evolved to the level of near-instant reproduction and distribution. Enabled by the Internet, disseminated imagery of patrols, house raids, shootouts, aerial assaults, IED and sniper attacks, car bombings, and ritualistic beheadings have become part of the visual history of the Iraq War, even as it progresses. Atrocities play out in real time, roughly contextualized: “war” is now a do-it-yourself media clip show, with fresh images uploaded daily for curious clickers and browsers.

*Redacted* replicates the fragmented forms of new media to disturbing effect, mashing clips together to force a reaction from a powerless “userbase” audience. Watching the film is a uniquely odd experience. The narrative is linear, but despite the ever-present framing devices (logos, timecodes, hyperlinks, close-ups of transcripts), the viewer has no firm grounding in time or place, especially on first viewing. Every scene
is a primary source clip, and every sequence edited by an unseen, unknown secondary source. Unable to control the digital image, the audience is locked into each scene’s selection, duration, and transition to the next scene. Knowing that each and every clip will sooner or later switch to a different source, the viewer is constantly aware of the form; there is almost no immersion.

The main primary source is “Tell Me No Lies,” the camcorder diary of PFC Salazar (Izzy Diaz), who hopes to earn himself a spot at USC film school with this tell-all documentary. Stationed in Samarra as part of a checkpoint unit—which includes SPC Lawyer McCoy (Rob Devaney), the burly SPC Rush (Daniel Stewart Sherman), wild card PFC Flake (Patrick Carroll), and bookworm PFC Blix (Kel O’Neil)—Salazar wants “the truth” on film, but the camera dictates his behavior, and that of his subjects. “You’re gonna make some Commie rendition of our mission,” Blix wonders, as Salazar trains the camera on him for a soundbite. The soldiers’ words in these initial scenes are all tailored for the camera—before speaking on the record, Master Sgt. Sweet (Ty Jones) asks Salazar, “Aren’t you supposed to say ‘Action’ or something?”—but in the backgrounds, where soldiers are not fully aware of the camera, and in the openness of their expressions and good humor, they appear to be relatively stable individuals. On video shot months later, after committing the most vicious, intimate war crimes imaginable, these same young soldiers look as if they have aged at least ten years, and lost a good portion of their humanity.

As we watch these early scenes from Salazar’s diary, hunting for any kind of truth within, our suspicion mirrors that of the soldiers on duty. In a counterinsurgency campaign, a soldier’s survival depends on disbelieving everything he sees. Accompanying the squad is a French documentary team (“Marc et François Clément”), who do not appear in Salazar’s diary, but whose own footage is part of Redacted: a mournful mini-exposé of Iraq War policy called “Barrage” (“Checkpoint” in the subtitles). A French narrator (Julie Thiery) explicates the process of manning a checkpoint, and then questions it. Are the warning signs visible to Iraqis, many of whom are illiterate? Can soldiers discern the hostility of any Iraqis in the area, even women and children, who speak a different language and could easily be recruited by the insurgency?
“Barrage” sympathizes (or appears to sympathize) with both the soldiers and the Iraqi civilians, while assuming an outsider stance of total condemnation. The layers of suspicion stack up visually: “Barrage” doubts the efficacy of the checkpoint as soldiers doubt the trustworthiness of the Iraqis surrounding them, and the viewer of Redacted, conditioned to question all that is seen, can only question “Barrage,” which is a pompous work, scored with music by Handel, indulgent in its use of time-lapse photography, and lingering over soldiers’ misbehavior, paranoia, and violence as if continually asserting its own superiority.

“Tell Me No Lies” is not just Salazar’s appeal to his camera subjects; it is also the implicit appeal of an audience to any film posing as nonfiction. Redacted makes no such promises: its title card, appearing after a disclaimer that redacts itself before our eyes, explains that Redacted “visually documents imagined events before, during and after a 2006 rape and murder in Samarra.” All we see is imagined, but documented. Each and every piece of footage is a lie that someone somewhere believes is authentic. The telling of the lie, the recording of the lie, and the reaction to the lie are three different processes. A strong example of this in Redacted is the checkpoint shooting of a car containing a pregnant woman (based on an actual May 2006 incident at a Samarra checkpoint). The driver rushes through the checkpoint without regard to the soldiers’ repeated orders to stop. The “Barrage” team records the shooting itself; an Arab TV reporter follows the victim to the hospital and interviews the driver of the car. Flake, who had done most of the shooting, is at a loss for words in front of Salazar’s camera afterwards, finally resorting to boilerplate racism, likening Iraqis to cockroaches he must exterminate. Sgt. Jim Ross (Mike Figueroa) interrupts, shouting at the camera, “He did his job!” That is the official, though callous, Army explanation, and by the recorded account of the French documentarians, it does appear that the car deliberately stormed the checkpoint’s trigger line against soldiers’ orders. But that is not the truth as the Arab TV Network (ATV) reports it: the driver claims the soldiers waved him through (using the Iraqi gesture for “welcome,” which in America means “stop”) before shooting at the car.

Here is the wonder of Redacted’s format: an Iraqi perspective on the war that we do not encounter in mainstream media. The pregnant shooting victim arrives dead at the hospital, and we register the grief and bewilderment of the Iraqi driver from the position of Iraqis watching it on their televisions. ATV (obviously modeled on Al Jazeera) has its own media filters, of course, evidenced by the red-and-white “A” logo in the upper-right corner of the screen and on the microphone that the Arab journalist thrusts into the frame to conduct her interviews, but the words of the interview subjects are broadcast to their own community, subtitled for our benefit.

The cliché of most western films about military action abroad is to have an impressionable representative of the west lending a sympathetic ear to the victimized population, translating their suffering into western terms of moral outrage. In Redacted, a western audience is in the privileged (and imaginary) position of observing a community as it sees itself, without a single western voice lamely protesting the reduction of these victims to political or media signifiers. (The “Barrage” team is only interested in the checkpoint victim as an anti-war statistic; ATV actually gives us the woman’s name.) The ATV logo is self-promotion as well as an authenticator for its Arab audience. This account of the checkpoint shooting is the only one that has currency for Iraqis, and it circulates to worldwide mass media as a minor scandal. It affects the soldiers at the checkpoint, dampening their spirits, but its effect on the local community is more significant—it provokes
deadly response. The soldiers’ suspicion of all Iraqis, women and children included, fulfills its own prophecy, as an Iraqi child plants an IED that kills Sgt. Sweet.

The planting of the IED appears in *Redacted* as night-vision camcorder footage recorded by an Al-Qaeda-affiliated insurgent and uploaded to a jihadi website. De Palma’s framing of the footage is highly unusual in popular narrative cinema: the movie screen becomes a computer screen, with no character-viewer present to react dramatically to the video’s contents. No human image is reflected, to show who is watching the clip, and nothing appears outside the borders of the web page to place the screen’s monitor in any particular viewing space. We watch,fatalistically, as the IED is planted, and the next day, when it detonates. This is a potent technique for building narrative suspense (no bomber would upload the planting of a bomb that does not go off), but also an unsettling comment on the proliferation of Internet-provided snuff videos from the Iraq War. Though we have not clicked on this video to watch it, the implication is that we need to see it to understand not only where the IED came from, but how new media expose, and perhaps encourage, these “gotcha!” forms of violence. Out of boredom, loneliness, or a deranged sense of self-importance, combatants on both sides of the Iraq War set up cameras on their helmets, vehicles, or shoulders, and set about their tasks, unfettered by standards of journalistic integrity. As a result, we are able to obtain a far greater understanding of the physical reality of modern warfare. But what cannot be resolved is the latent desire in the act of recording.

The only raw footage of the Iraq War (or any arena of large-scale combat) that attracts a wide viewership is footage of “something happening”: gunfire, bodily harm, explosions. Camera angles and live sound determine a clip’s watchability. Cinematic values are ingrained in every amateur videographer, and the results appear on YouTube and image forums where viewers can watch, rate, and comment. Salazar is consumed by a desire to capture a spectacular atrocity. Aware of the camera’s inhibiting effect on his squadmates, he pretends to turn it off for the benefit of Rush and Flake, who are full of booze and rage over their dead sergeant. Despite McCoy and Blix’s objections, they decide to raid a house they cleared earlier, for the sole purpose of raping Farah (Zahara Al Zubaidi), a fifteen-year-old girl living there with her mother, grandfather, and younger sister. Farah is Rush and Flake’s ultimate conquest, and Salazar agrees to go along for no stated reason—though he steals a glance at his hidden camera and smiles. Salazar rigs a helmet-cam with night vision “so the boys don’t get camera shy,” and through his lens the entire incident unfolds. Rush holds down Farah and assaults her while Flake rounds up the rest of her family, and Salazar objects, like a frustrated film director, insisting that Flake should take Rush’s place since it was all Flake’s idea. Rush will not take direction and orders Salazar to hold down Farah’s arm. Salazar the voyeur becomes Salazar the failed director, and finally an actor–participant. It is no small measure of *Redacted*’s moral authority that even though the entire scene is shot from the point of view of a rapist, we neither identify with Salazar nor take pleasure in Farah’s suffering.

How has this happened? The images of Sgt. Sweet’s death by IED explosion, which Salazar recorded, have been playing over and over in Salazar’s head, or so he tells an Army psychologist after the rape of Farah and the murder and immolation of her family. Flake and Rush had cooked up a cover story that the deaths were a Sunni vs. Shi’ite matter. Salazar does not betray them, but his guilt over Farah comes out in this faux-confession to the psychologist (caught on surveillance camera), as he blames Sgt. Sweet’s death—actually the video of Sgt. Sweet’s death—for his hatred of the Iraqis. The same could be said for the Iraqis with regard to the video of the pregnant woman gunned down earlier at the checkpoint, images that demanded a violent reprisal that was also recorded and broadcast on ATV and the Internet. *Redacted* conjoins the viral properties of “extreme” Internet video with the cyclical nature of bloody vengeance. On ATV, Farah’s father rejects the official U.S. investigation of her death, promising “it will not be forgotten.” Salazar is kidnapped (on video) and beheaded (on video) by Al-Qaeda operatives. The beheading video is their own handiwork, unsettling to watch, not the least because the familiar red logo of ATV (who are broadcasting it) is directly opposite the green “AK-47” logo of the Al-Qaeda group in the upper left corner of the screen. Who is branding what with those logos? The footage is an adequate simulation of execution videos provided to Arab media by Al-Qaeda post-9/11, only the actual videos are much more horribly graphic.
SIMULACRA OF ON-SCREEN OUTRAGE

it will not be forgotten.

COLLATERAL DAMAGE

Actual photographs from the Iraq War.
De Palma’s restraint here is understandable for two reasons: it secures an R rating for \textit{Redacted}, and more importantly, it avoids a reactionary extremity of response. Accompanying just about every appearance of these snuff videos online is a disingenuous apology (the rhetorical sleight-of-hand can be summarized as: “Sorry to upset you, but we must educate ourselves in the evil practices of radical Islam”) and posted viewer feedback to the effect of “This is why we must stay and fight in Iraq.” The very explicitness of the footage sparks a primitive reaction. Authenticity, it seems, can cut both ways.

Near the end of \textit{Redacted}, we see a YouTube rant delivered by an agitated teenage girl, who wants to give Farah’s surviving relatives the opportunity to beat, maim, and torture Farah’s killers, who are “monsters.” The words are from a real website (credit goes to “Wild Bill blog”), and have murderous overtones, but the medium casts doubt on her capabilities. Words are her answer to violence. Is she a violent person outside the frames of the YouTube medium? It is impossible to tell. The Internet is not just a repository of organized information; it is an outlet for uncensored expression. In \textit{Redacted}, we see how new media escalate violence, and also how they sublimate violence, or at least allow for uniquely personal condemnations of violence.

The last section of the film, a photomontage entitled “Collateral Damage,” is a series of nineteen stills purported to be “Actual photographs from the Iraq War.” We know they are actual photographs because the film’s distributor, Magnolia Pictures, obscured the faces of the dead and wounded Iraqis in the pictures with black cross-out marks, citing an “untenable legal situation” with errors and omissions insurance. Believing he had prior approval of the photos, De Palma opened up legal proceedings against Magnolia, and declared in interviews and press conferences that Magnolia’s insurance concerns were trumped up to appease the film’s financier (and owner of Magnolia) Mark Cuban, who according to De Palma had been “disturbed” by the photos. Cuban has not reacted publicly to that charge (though he remained a public defender of the film against its most virulent detractors, particularly Bill O’Reilly), and the chain of decisions leading to the photo redactions may never transpire. But even if the montage were left unredacted per De Palma’s intentions, it would not be above criticism.

The presentation of these “actual” photographs raises an ethical argument previously raised by Susan Sontag in \textit{Regarding the Pain of Others} (2003): without names, dates, or locations captioning the photos, the subjects have no identity beyond their “exotic” victimhood. The majority of the photos have no narrative purpose; their effect is visceral and overwhelmingly sad. This is the abject despair at the heart of \textit{Redacted}: not only do we have no control over the so-called “interactive” media on display, but we have no control over the mediated events themselves. The victims are “collateral damage” by nature of their non-identity. They are unintended targets—many of them infants and small children—and their suffering could be viewed as a function of chaos.

De Palma simultaneously complicates and clarifies the impact of the montage by inserting two staged photos: one of the pregnant woman shot to death at Salazar’s checkpoint, and one of Farah that closes the montage—a young female corpse lying on a blood-stained floor of her house, eyes and mouth wide open in a rictus of pain. Because the images are unredacted, they betray their own falseness, and yet the stark effectiveness of the final photo overrides any viewer confusion over what is “actual” and what is not. De Palma prolongs the exposure of the “Farah” image (shot by New York photographer Taryn Simon), and zooms in on it slowly, synchronizing it with a climactic musical underscore from Puccini’s \textit{Tosca}. (If this is pretentious, then it is faithful to the pretensions of countless other Iraq War musical photomontages on the Internet.) Like the anonymous creator of the website legofesto.blogspot.com, who rendered with Lego figures the entire rape and murder of Abeer Qassim Hamza (the actual Mahmoudiya victim), De Palma uses this final photo to illustrate a crime whose mediation was initially the exclusive property of criminals. Only they knew how she appeared as a victim, and only they had that image burned into their memories.

With \textit{Redacted}, De Palma seizes the power of mediation from those who commit atrocities, and renders those same atrocities in such a way that it condemns brutality without ever congratulating itself or its audience. This is a masterpiece of ambivalence, self-critical and unclouded.

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ABSTRACT Brian De Palma’s \textit{Redacted} borrows the forms of Internet video to dramatize incidents of atrocity in the Iraq War, and to question the limitations, and culpability, of new media at a time of war. The film’s multifaceted approach conditions the viewer to doubt the substance and nature of its images.

KEYWORDS digital video, dramatization, Internet, Iraq War, new media