

# Pathos Signals in the Contemporary American War Film

## The Transfer of Affect

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The image of the psychologically traumatized face in war films and photographs has been described by the German film scholar Hermann Kappelhoff as a 'formula for pathos' – a contemporary variant of the images and figures that early twentieth-century art historian Aby Warburg called 'pathos formulas', aesthetic forms that originated in ancient Greece and that recur throughout the history of Western art (2012: 4). The heightened focus on the face in the war film, Kappelhoff argues, especially the 'shell-shocked face', can be seen as part of an organized discourse of affective signals designed to create mirror experiences of fear, anxiety and loss in the spectator, emotions that can be readily mapped onto larger messages about nation and sacrifice. The image of the shell-shocked face in war films and photography, he writes, arouses an intense experience of empathy or, in some cases, outrage over the fate of the young soldier, emotions that can quickly be converted into a sense of solidarity and identification, transforming the stark, frozen image of the traumatized face into an emblem of sacrifice for nation. 'In this double-faced impression, the pathos formula gives expression to the fundamental dramatic conflict that structures the poetics of the Hollywood war movie genre. This is the difference between the meaningful death of the sacrifice *for* and the meaningless death of the individual *through* the actions of the nation, the difference between sacrifice and victim' (Kappelhoff 2012: 4).

Kappelhoff's description of the role of the face in war films and photography brings into view several critical questions, beginning with his assertion that the image of the traumatized face conveys an affective and symbolic significance that supersedes all other narrative and semiotic codes. In his view, the

concentration of emotion in a single image, amid the wild cacophony and furious violence depicted in scenes of battle, triggers an array of emotions in the spectator that create an immediate crisis of meaning. The image of the shell-shocked face forces the spectator to confront a larger domain and a larger set of questions concerning war – the role of the community, the collective, the nation itself and its responsibility for war – questions that are here concentrated in an image of individual suffering. In some instances, the face can serve as an emblem of sacrifice for nation, a catalyst for a sense of shared sacrifice and communal cohesion; at the other extreme, it can be read as a symbol of the violation of a national compact, where the soldier becomes a victim of his or her own state. Far more than the celebrated imagery of the ‘band of brothers’ – the mystic brotherhood found only on the battlefield – it is the shell-shocked face that moves the spectator and brings into sharpened perspective the collective imagining of a nation that is fretted through the war film. ‘This face – the shell-shocked face – can be understood as a double emblem: on the one hand it is an imago of sacrifice, in which the terror, the agony of the soldier is formed into an evocative icon. On the other hand, it represents an accusatory document, showing nothing more than naked, physical suffering, the sheer annihilation of human life’ (Kappelhoff 2012: 4).

Kappelhoff’s provocative elucidation of the cardinal role of the face in films of war can be situated in the long-running discussion of the meanings and importance of the face in film. As Noa Steimatsky describes it, the subject of the face in film has preoccupied theorists as diverse as the sociologist Georg Simmel, the film theorist Béla Balázs, critic André Bazin, the filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, and the essayist Roland Barthes, among many others, each of whom has linked the unparalleled power of fascination in the cinema to the revelations to be found in the filmed face and to the particular sociocultural moment that the face in the films under discussion seems to capture.

For Steimatsky, the face in film is characterized both by its seeming openness, its offer of emotional access, an aperture into character subjectivity – a window – and a certain masklike impenetrability, the face as a barrier to deeper knowledge – a wall. One of Steimatsky’s principal theoretical contributions is her discussion of the ‘reticence’ of the face in film, evident in works such as *Joan of Arc* (1928), by Carl Theodore Dreyer; by Andy Warhol’s *Screen Test* series (1963–6); a reticence especially emphatic in the works of Robert Bresson, as in *Pickpocket* (1959) and *Diary of a Country Priest* (1951). Critical studies of the face in film, in Steimatsky’s perceptive assessment, confront and attempt to resolve the

elusiveness of the meaning of the face, a key signifying feature of film that seems utterly overdetermined, provoking multiple and elaborate theoretical responses, and frustrating critical explanations by an ambiguity that cannot be resolved.

Such ambiguity can be found in Kappelhoff's reading as well, as the shell-shocked face confronts the spectator with a critical dilemma, whether the face of the soldier can be taken as an emblem of sacrifice or as an accusatory document. The analysis I offer here, however, attempts to move the discourse of the face of war in film in a new direction, focusing on the traumatized face in the contemporary war film not as a singular icon of emotion, with the individual figure isolated in close-up taking centre stage, but, rather, as a complex dualism, almost like a hologram, where the roles of perpetrator and victim, agent and object, and the emotions of guilt and innocence are rapidly exchanged and combined.

The shell-shocked face of the embattled soldier, I have found, is not the only vector of pathos in films of war. It has a surprising counterpart in the face of the injured or threatened child, another frozen moment of film imagery that triggers a strong emotional response and an insistent moral questioning. An icon of the malevolence of war, the image of the wounded, traumatized or dead child is woven into the history of the genre, visible in classic works such as *Battleship Potemkin* (1925) and *Germany Year Zero* (1948), and serving an especially important role in contemporary war films such as *The Hurt Locker* (2008), *Eye in the Sky* (2015), *American Sniper* (2014) and *A Private War* (2018). The image of the wounded or traumatized child in film typically communicates an unambiguous antiwar sentiment, providing a distilled moment of concentrated emotion that sometimes stands apart from the rest of the film. Explicitly evoking a long-established visual discourse of lament for the innocent victim of war, the face of the child in war, however, unlike the face of the shell-shocked soldier, cannot readily be mapped onto a larger nationalist discourse of sacrifice for nation.

In this essay, I explore the interplay of these two powerful images of the face in war – that of the traumatized soldier and that of the wounded, dead or vulnerable child – in contemporary war cinema. In several of the films I consider in my recent book, *The New American War Film* (2023), both figures play key roles in the orchestration of pathos and emotion. The connection between them, however, is difficult to interpret. The affective signals associated with the face in war – which I perceive, with Kappelhoff, as the central medium of pathos in war cinema – is in many of the films I treat displaced from the victims of war's violence – often children who are racial and ethnic others – to the white Western

characters, the soldiers who enact that violence. In some films, the agents of war directly target the children portrayed. In films such as *Eye in the Sky*, *American Sniper* and *Restrepo* (2010), among others, the faces of the innocent victims of war serve as powerful triggers of emotion, emotions that register not so much in the faces of the victims themselves but, rather, in the faces of the Western soldiers, rendered in insistent close-up. To put it another way, the bitter violence of war in these films is depicted through the subjective experience of the agents of war rather than through the suffering of the civilian victims. As the drone pilots of *Eye in the Sky*, secure in their trailer in the Nevada desert, are faced with the certain death of a child caught in the 'kill box' of their imminent drone attack in Nairobi, or as the faces of bloodied Afghan children wounded in a US helicopter raid in *Restrepo* give way, in a later scene, to close-up renderings of the American soldiers of the battle company suffering emotional breakdowns and crying on the battlefield, or as the celebrated marksman in *American Sniper* looks through his scope at an Iraqi child whom he may have to shoot, the pathos generated by these scenes of violence comes to be centred on the agents of war rather than the child victims. The emotions of fear and shock that Kappelhoff describes as forming a direct conduit from the victim's face to the spectator are here relayed through the Western protagonists of these films, where the tragedy of war is pictured as their own experience – mirroring transfer of affect in which the signs of pathos, of visible suffering and loss, are shifted from the victims of the action to the agents. This complicated shift of affect alters the symbolic framework of the war narrative.

In this chapter, I discuss three films, *Eye in the Sky*, *Restrepo*, *American Sniper* and a video essay, *Sleeping Soldiers—single screen* (2009), that trouble the conventions of the face of war in cinema and undercut the association that Kappelhoff draws between the traumatized face in war films and photography and some larger rehearsal of the idea of nation. I argue that in these films, the moments of greatest emotion, crystallized in the fraught close-ups of the face, precisely repudiate the 'feeling of community' that Kappelhoff describes, calling into question the notion that the war film sets forth what he calls the 'front lines of community,' a concept that is most explicit, as he maintains in his work, in films set in the Second World War (Kappelhoff 2018). In each of the contemporary films I consider, scenes that dramatize and convey the pathos of war explicitly contest the cultural and historical scripts, the notions of shared and heroic sacrifice, rescue and the duty to protect, that have circulated in war cinema since its inception.

## Intimate Violence: Drone Vision in *Eye in the Sky*

I begin with *Eye in the Sky*. The film brings into crystallized view the tension between two dominant Western frameworks for representing and imagining war in the twenty-first century – the military dream of war waged at a distance with remote weaponry, emblemized in the seemingly godlike figure of the drone pilot hurling invisible thunderbolts from the sky and the reality of the close, intimate violence that drone combat entails, where the existential and visceral struggles of war return in a new form. The film brings these two antithetical conceptions of war into close connection, conveying the instrumental power of networked war – its extraordinary global, technological resources and its optical clarity – while at the same time detailing, and bringing home to the spectator, the psychological impact of close-up perspective and familiarity in the act of killing. *Eye in the Sky* sutures the audience to the perceptual and emotional perspective of the drone pilots, who watch the injury and death they unleash unfold on nearby video screens. The cliches of distanced warfare are swept away in the eyewitness experience of the drone pilots, whose acts of targeting, releasing the missiles, and visually analysing the carnage below brings the experience that the historian Yuval Noah Harari calls ‘flesh witnessing’ into a strange new contemporary war setting (Harari 2008: 7). As the journalist Mark Bowden writes, ‘flying a drone, [the pilot] sees the carnage close-up, in real time ... Often he’s been watching the people he kills for a long time before pulling the trigger’ (Bowden 2013).

Detailing the elaborate procedural and interdepartmental calculus necessary to authorize a drone strike, the film poses a contemporary, fictional enactment of the well-known thought experiment called the trolley problem, in which the subject must decide whether to willfully sacrifice one person to potentially save a larger number. At the height of the film’s escalating drama, the two young American drone pilots tasked with conducting the strike are faced with an existential decision. They have been ordered to release a missile, targeting a well-known terrorist and her crew, including two potential suicide bombers, in Nairobi, a strike that will almost certainly kill an innocent bystander – a young neighbourhood girl whose daily life we have been following throughout the film. Like the giant, real-life photo of a little girl created by an activist team in Pakistan to confront drone pilots surveilling their village, *Eye in the Sky* sets the imagined life of one girl against an immense system of technologized warfare.

The discovery that two of the terrorists are preparing for an imminent suicide attack and are being outfitted with suicide vests inside their safe house makes the decision to strike a matter of extreme urgency: once the bombers escape the target house and move out into the crowded neighbourhood or into a Nairobi mall, they will be impossible to strike and will present a grave danger to the civilian population. But the appearance of Alia – the young child of the film – in the kill box moments before the Hellfire missile is about to be released changes the calculation. The close-up intimacy the film has established with Alia gives her character a substantial human presence, an existential weight, providing a counterbalance to the strict military codes that would consider her almost certain death an acceptable cost of war, an example of what Hannah Arendt has called ‘the logic of the lesser evil’ (Weizman 2011: 6). And in the diegetic micro-drama played out here, the optical intimacy afforded by the drone – as every member of the kill chain is confronted by shots of Alia from the eye in the sky above – seems to shift the balance in the ethics of violence, temporarily halting the attack. Countermanding the direct and increasingly insistent order to execute from Colonel Powell, in charge of the military side of the mission in the United Kingdom, the drone pilot asserts his authority as commander of the aircraft and places the missile in disarmed mode, pending a new estimate of risk to the young girl.

With this scene, two antithetical scripts are superimposed on the drone pilots in *Eye in the Sky*; they are suspended between two very different moral worlds, pulled between an older narrative of war that hinges on the duty to protect the innocent civilian, and an emerging doctrine of risk transfer, where all risk is shifted away from the soldier and onto the civilian population.

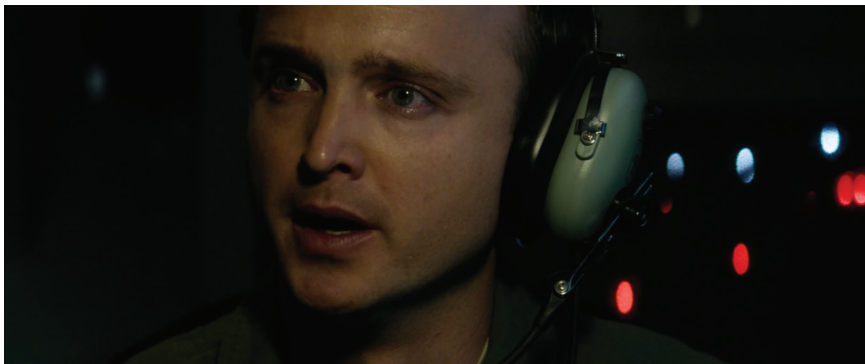
Although the film presents what has been called ‘the verticalization of power’ as a fully operational and accepted doctrine, where an aerial authority takes upon itself the power to hunt and kill wherever the target may go, the film retains, in vestigial form, the genre memory of an older order of military ethics, an ethics related to the primacy of the duty to protect the noncombatant – a residue of the past embedded in the generic DNA of the war film (Chamayou 2015: 53). As the film details the pilot’s hand on the trigger, his sweating, uncertain facial expressions, his sideways glances at his copilot, vertical ‘war at a distance’ suddenly assumes an intimate, personal character. The act of killing from afar becomes a visceral, life-defining existential event. Counterintuitively, it is the optical apparatus of the drone that awakens this older military code in the pilots,

a code that predates and supersedes the orders they are given by their military commanders.

The film's focus on the pilots' dilemma, however, also creates a reversal, as the pathos of war and sacrifice now shifts from the victims of war to its agents. Oblivious to the threat from above, unaware of the fact that her tiniest gestures are being watched on screens on three different continents and in several different locations, ignorant of the fateful decision now being made from afar, at this crucial juncture Alia is placed in the role of almost certain tragic victim. However, in a critical twist, the pathos associated with sacrifice and death in war is transferred from Alia to the pilots who are tasked with carrying out the order to strike. Rather than a singular subject of pathos, she serves mainly as a kind of lever for maximizing emotion, both in the pilots and in the audience. In a way that is similar to several other films in the study I have made, pathos is transferred from the persons who are the explicit targets and victims of war to the white soldiers who prosecute war, emotion that is rendered in dramatic close-ups of the pilots' faces (Burgoyne 2023: xiii).

Cutting between overhead views of the terror compound, with Alia sitting at her bread stand just outside it, and ground-level cameras that give us full, close-up shots of the girl, the pilot finally, after receiving a new, highly questionable collateral damage estimate from Colonel Powell in the United Kingdom, reluctantly releases the weapon (Figure 5.1).

From this point, *Eye in the Sky* portrays the effects of drone warfare in a way that pulls the mask of magic from the technology of contemporary war. Depicting in vivid close-up and full panoramic sound the death and destruction



**Figure 5.1** 'Rifle rifle rifle!' *Eye in the Sky* directed by Gavin Hood © Entertainment One 2015. All rights reserved.

caused by the drone attack, the film renders fully the gruesome effects of the Hellfire missile, in a montage sequence anchored by repeated low angle shots of Alia's wounded body. Framed through a scrim of fire and smoke in the foreground, the ground level view of Alia lying prone and moving only her hands suggests the full portfolio of embodied experiences in war, including the heat, din, and the general pandemonium of a shock attack. Violence here represents not the cleansing erasure of the terrorist threat, Susan Danford, and the suicide bombers, but the 'bare, forked existence of the violated being' (Cole 2012: 43). Far from a triumphalist outcome, the film continuously cuts back to close-up views of the drone pilots, underlining the psychic wounding, the moral injury, that drone warfare inflicts on the agents of war (Figure 5.1).

### *Restrepo: An Elegy of War*

In the film *Restrepo*, a similar transfer of affect occurs but in a somewhat different way and in a different configuration. A documentary created by Tim Hetherington and Sebastian Junger of their twelve-month embedment with US troops in Afghanistan, the film is part of a larger project, including a book of photographs titled *Infidel*, a video essay called *Sleeping Soldiers – single screen* and a short photo essay featuring Afghan men and boys. The scene from *Restrepo* that I will discuss occurs about halfway through the film, unfolding as the follow-up to a large-scale US helicopter attack on a mountain village, which the US military believed was harbouring Taliban fighters.

As several soldiers from the battle company move through the tiny village after the attack, they discover that the assault has killed five tribal Afghans and has wounded several women and children. It is unclear whether any Taliban were in the village, as the soldiers are unable to recover any direct evidence. Instead, the camera observes the wreckage of a mountain home, a demolished kitchen, a woman quietly lying on a bed surrounded by her children and then notices the covered body of an Afghan man. The film focuses at length, however, on the faces of a crying infant and two little girls, one with serious injuries, her eyes bloodied and swollen, and another with dried blood on her face. The crying infant, held closely by an Afghan man, is also spattered with blood (Figure 5.2).

The resonance of genre memory is evoked in this scene, bringing into view the full symbolic power of the image of the child in war, a silent commentary



**Figure 5.2** Wounded children. *Restrepo* directed by Tim Hetherington and Sebastian Junger © National Geographic Entertainment 2010. All rights reserved.

using one of the oldest cinematic tropes. In the scene, *Restrepo* summons this photographic and cinematic tradition, producing charged affective signals in its close-ups of wounded children, evoking the power of a long-standing pathos formula in film and photography. The indelible photograph of the young Vietnamese girl fleeing a US napalm attack is not far from view, an association underlined by multiple shots of US helicopters attacking the mountain village in the preceding scene. Explicitly evoking a visual discourse of lament and empathy for the innocent victims of war, the scene creates a powerful current of affect.

As the film unfolds, however, the image of the child in war comes to accent the portrayals of the young US soldiers themselves. Several of the soldiers are teenagers, seen in moments of high tension and vulnerability, both in live action sequences and in the post- deployment interviews interspersed throughout the film. Quietly mourning the loss of their comrades in battle, one soldier openly weeping while in the field, several needing to “take five” during the post deployment interviews, the soldiers of the battle company appear in these scenes to have little of the bravado or attitude that fiction films often associate with young men in war, a type of masculine performance that filters into even relatively recent works such as *Fury* (2014), *Lone Survivor* (2013) and *Generation Kill* (2008).

The vulnerability of the soldiers, which comes to form a kind of secondary theme of the film, emerges fully with the death of Sergeant Rougle. Occurring near the end of the work, the incident draws into a single frame the adrenalized action of combat and the pathos of the young soldier first witnessing violent death. As the company attempts to assert control over an area controlled by the Taliban, the operation, named Rock Avalanche, is fraught with difficulty. The steep terrain and the soldiers' murky understanding of the Taliban fighters' positions leads to dangerous scattering and isolation, with soldiers strung out in the forest in groups of two and three. Sergeant Rougle, one of the best soldiers in the battle company, has somehow been separated and killed. The camera discovers the body of Rougle at about the same time as do the nearby soldiers. The filmmakers keep a discreet distance from his corpse, keeping his face out of frame, concentrating instead on the reactions of the individual soldiers as they come into view and learn of his death. One young man, told by the sergeant in charge that it is Rougle, cannot contain himself, breaking into open weeping, his voice high pitched and anxious as he repeatedly exclaims that it can't be Rougle (Figure 5.3). Another soldier must be quietly assured, several times, that the



**Figure 5.3** Soldier weeps on hearing about the death of Rougle. *Restrepo* directed by Tim Hetherington and Sebastian Junger © National Geographic Entertainment 2010. All rights reserved.

sergeant died instantly. The film provides medium close-ups of their faces and large close-ups of certain details, fixing on the dead man's boots, on the blood-soaked back and pants of another soldier, on the bloodied hands of a soldier aiming a weapon.

Rendered in close-ups suffused with affect, the soldiers' faces as they experience and recount the Rock Avalanche mission are in some sense a reinscription of the close-ups of Afghan children from the earlier scene, as emotions of fear, shock and stunned grief are transferred to the US servicemen. The films' earlier concentration on the faces of the children of war is subtly reconfigured in images that underscore the youth of the soldiers themselves: the pathos of the wounded child is reabsorbed into the drama of the US soldiers confronting the loss of their comrades. The inherited discourse of masculine performance that Kirsten Whissel calls the 'rhetoric of soldiery' (2002: 158) gives way to a confessional mode of vulnerable youth, lost, as the song goes, in a wilderness of pain.

### **Sleeping Soldiers—single screen**

Hetherington's (2009) short video, *Sleeping Soldiers—single screen*, makes explicit the connection between the wounded children of the Afghanistan village and the soldiers of the battle company. A video essay made from images and acoustic material excerpted from the footage for *Restrepo*, the soldiers of the battle company appear in the video of them sleeping in their bunks as inordinately young, with none of the posturing or masculine iconography that we have become accustomed to. Hetherington remarked that 'you never see them like this,' that 'they always look so tough ... but when they're asleep they look like little boys. They look the way their mothers probably remember them ... You can see their youth and vulnerability' (Hetherington 2010: 15).

Superimposed over their faces as they sleep, however, are scenes of war and the sounds of battle – multiple layers of image and sound blend together and carry over into new shots, as one sleeping soldier gives way to another. Although the topic of sleeping soldiers is a traditional subject of photography, painting, and print making, dating to at least the 1630s, the video essay by Hetherington expands the frame of representation in a distinctive way, capturing an inner world dominated by memories of threat, insecurity and blood. The voices of soldiers in distress, the sounds of gunfire close by, the near panic caused by combat gone wrong – the haunted dream life of the soldiers is rendered as fragments of remembered experience that return to lay claim to the present.

With its extended close-ups, stylized acoustics, and dilation of certain details, the video creates an eerie, associative rhetoric of war images. Shots of blood spattered on a military uniform are followed by an extreme close-up of blood caked on a soldier's hand as he grips his rifle. The soft faces of Afghan children loom into view, superimposed on the soldiers' faces, and are joined in one shot by a memory image of a soldier weeping. In some shots, large, cumulus clouds seem to drift over the faces of the soldiers, followed by airborne helicopters as seen from the ground.

The through line of the video essay emerges in its second half. The death of Sergeant Rougle on the mountain, an incident that also forms the nexus of the film *Restrepo*, coalesces as the dominant narrative event of *Sleeping Soldiers*. In the short video, the discovery of Rougle's body unfolds in a somewhat more realistic idiom than the drifting superimpositions seen earlier; the oneiric mix of layered images and echoing sounds from the first half of the video subside. Now, themes of loss, conscience and guilt come into relief. As the soldiers huddle in the bush around the body of Rougle, the stylized audio track combines sounds of a soldier crying; the quiet reassurances of the commanding officer; an odd, electronic beeping signal; and other acoustic traces that are panned across the auditory landscape. The video closes with a return to an image of a soldier asleep, supine, stretched out full length on a top bunk, a pose distinct from that of the other soldiers portrayed in the video. Here, no dream images are superimposed, only the sound of a soldier's soft, offscreen voice saying, 'it's not your fault.' In its short four-minute duration, the video captures the penetration of war's violence into the inner fabric of psychic life.

The blurring of the radical differences in the way war is experienced between the young American soldiers and the Afghan children who have been attacked, whose faces are superimposed over the faces of the sleeping soldiers, raises several difficult questions. Rather than trying to unpack the many critical issues the video provokes, however, I would like to offer an observation that may not be obvious on a first viewing. *Sleeping Soldiers—single screen* brings important questions into view concerning the place of traumatic memory in the narrative of twenty-first-century war and the role of psychic and moral injury in the symbolic codex that has begun to take shape around the soldiers and the victims of these wars. Foregrounding themes of guilt, troubled memory, trauma and the pathos of loss, the dreamwork imagery of the video essay may be said to take on a public task. With its wide visibility on YouTube and Vimeo, *Sleeping Soldiers—Single Screen* can be read as a minor key, moving image memorial,

a place keeper for the missing memorials, the unmarked cultural space for acknowledging the suffering caused by psychic injury sustained in war – a kind of anti-memorial, opening a space of reflection rather than imposing a clarified meaning.

### American Pastoral/*American Sniper*

In the last film I discuss, *American Sniper*, images of children under threat appear throughout the narrative, recurring in several scenes set both in Iraq and in the United States, and stamping each of the film's main acts. Here, however, the child in war appears both as a victim of war and as an agent of war, a strange permutation of the pattern we have seen earlier.

In the opening sequence of the film, Chris Kyle, the sniper of the film's title, is at the start of his first assignment in Iraq, watching over a city road as a convoy of marines is about to drive through. A burqa-clad woman and a young boy walk slowly out of a doorway. Kyle is on alert – something about her way of walking seems odd. As he watches them through his sniper's scope, the woman reaches inside her robe and takes out a large, cylindrical grenade. She hands it to the boy, who begins running toward the convoy to get close enough to fling the weapon. As he lifts the grenade for the throw, the film cuts away from the action to a series of flashback scenes of Kyle's boyhood – his first hunting experience, where his father tells him he has 'a gift,' his violent rescue of his brother from a schoolyard bully, and the lesson his father imparts at the dinner table afterwards concerning the wolves, the sheep, the sheepdog who protects the sheep, and Kyle's role in this pastoral universe.

The flashback scene is extended, lasting about twenty-five minutes. We then return, suddenly, to the scene in Iraq, as Kyle pulls the trigger. As we watch through the scope, the young boy collapses, a bullet wound in the middle of his chest (Figure 5.4). The woman, perhaps his mother, then rushes to him, picks up the grenade and tries to hurl it at the convoy herself. Kyle shoots her as well, causing the grenade to fall short. His first two shots as a sniper in Iraq have thus been directed at a young boy and his mother, shots that may have saved ten marines, he is told, but that clearly exact a psychic toll.

The second time he confronts a child with a weapon, late into his third deployment, the scene carries a more personal charge. Kyle has just dispatched an Iraqi gunman wielding a large RPG. The heavy piece falls to the ground. A



**Figure 5.4** Boy with grenade. *American Sniper* directed by Clint Eastwood © Warner Bros. Pictures 2014. All rights reserved.



**Figure 5.5** Kyle watches through his scope. *American Sniper* directed by Clint Eastwood © Warner Bros. Pictures 2014. All rights reserved.

young boy approaches and tries to pick up the unwieldy weapon; it is difficult for the boy to shoulder it. As Kyle watches through his scope, his finger on the trigger, he is consumed by dread, muttering to himself, ‘don’t pick up the weapon, don’t pick it up!’ The long, agonizing scene plays out as an ordeal, expressed clearly in the face of the character, an emotional rack and screw, as Kyle is clearly at a breaking point (Figure 5.5). When the boy abandons the weapon and takes off running, Kyle cries with relief.

In these scenes, which function as dramatic crescendos, Kyle’s image of himself, the compass of his world and his position in it, is first threatened and then breaks down. The orderly, pastoral universe mapped by his father, where the sheep, the wolves and the sheepdog exist in a kind of fixed and balanced equilibrium, is thrown into disarray in the first scene of the film, where Kyle,

confronted with the necessity of killing a child and his mother – must assume the role of the wolf, as well as that of the protector of the troops. Depicting combat as a carousel of vulnerable, victimized and predatory figures, with each type repeatedly circling into view, the film propels Kyle into a series of tense scenes in which the roles and positions unexpectedly change. Even the children are revealed to be dangerous. The identities of the agents of violence and the victims of violence are not constant; the roles change as the combat situations unfold. In many ways, Kyle himself becomes a victim, plagued by the talent for killing that has earned him the nickname ‘Legend’.

The imagery of the child victim, and the twisting and shifting of symbolic roles that it generates in *American Sniper*, reaches its apotheosis in a scene near the middle of the film. A sadistic fighter for the insurgents, ‘the Butcher’ is a villain of outsized proportions, serving in the film as an enforcer for the insurgent leader al-Zarqawi. ‘The Butcher’, a fictional creation, has a reputation for severing body parts from his victims and saving them in a storeroom; he is also known for using an electric drill as a torture and execution device. Kyle, not content to simply watch over the troops, leads a team that is charged with finding and dispatching al-Zarqawi, who is hiding somewhere in the city. After breaking into a neighbourhood house, Kyle aggressively confronts the father of a family as his wife and children cower in the background. Roughly insisting that the man talk to him, Kyle extracts information about the Butcher, including his actual name. Soon after, the team of marines return to the neighbourhood, planning to pay the man for his good information. En route in a Humvee, Kyle takes a phone call from his wife, Taya, who has phoned to tell him that she has just found out that the child they are expecting is a boy.

Directly after Taya relays this information to Kyle, we see the expert enemy sniper, Mustafa, essentially, Kyle’s doppelganger, take aim and shoot the marine driver of the Humvee. The vehicle crashes, and the insurgent sniper begins picking off soldiers. As Taya listens to the battle through the cell phone, Kyle is forced to take cover, leaving his phone behind. The film cuts rapidly among the visibly pregnant Taya, standing at the entrance to the hospital, listening as the battle unfolds; Mustafa, in cool control of the battle zone at his sniper’s post; and Kyle, keeping low, barely evading Mustafa’s shots. The Butcher then appears, dragging the young son of the Iraqi informant outside into the square. As the mother and father plead with him, the Butcher applies the drill to the boy’s head, and then kills the father, saying that if the villagers talk to the soldiers, they will die with the soldiers.

The adrenalized emotion of the scene is ramped up by the near stasis of the figures. The editing ricochets from the horrifying grand guignol unfolding in the square, to the impassive face of Mustafa, sighting his targets, to the scrabbling impotence of Kyle as he tries to lift his head to get a shot, to the anguished face of Taya, listening on the phone. The melodramatic terror of the young boy's execution is projected directly into the heart of the US homeland. It is as if we are seeing the scene through the imaginative perspective of Taya, as she listens to what is happening in the battle. Once more, the pathos and tragedy of the young Iraqi boy and his family are transferred to the Western characters, in this case, to Taya, who serves as the focalizer of the scene, and whose facial and figural expressions communicate shock and fear.

What has also occurred, however, is another rotation of roles. Kyle's insistence on breaking into the neighbourhood home, his determination to extract information from the father of the family, exposes the man, leading directly to the torture and death of his son, followed by his own death. At the exact point in the narrative when Kyle is presented with the news of his own son, soon to be born, he witnesses the death of the son of the Iraqi informant, a killing that is, at some level, on his hands.

In a scene filled with melodramatic intensity, the film embeds a series of mirror structures – son who is killed and a son who is about to be born; a father who dies and a father to be; and in the character of Taya, the mirroring is made explicit: like the Iraqi mother in the scene, she is frantic, bent nearly double, suffused with fear. The heightened dramatic tension of the sequence, its Goya-like horror, to some degree conceals its most salient point, that the violence of war spreads far beyond the battlefield, to the intimate lives of everyone involved, on both sides, especially the noncombatants.

## Conclusion

The two faces of war that I have discussed in this chapter – the face of the wounded or vulnerable child and the face of the traumatized soldier – appear, at least initially, to be situated at extreme ends of a spectrum of emotional investments. One face – the traumatized face of the soldier – dramatizes the shock of revelation, of the truth of the self and of the world that, according to Yuval Noah Harai, only battlefield experience can provide. The other face – the child face of war – represents a seemingly antithetical form of war experience.

Rather than summoning a sense of what Harari calls the 'ultimate experience,' the face of the vulnerable child confronts the spectator as a kind of silent protest, what Kappelhoff describes as 'an accusatory document, showing nothing more than naked, physical suffering, the sheer annihilation of human life' (2012: 4).

What I have tried to suggest in this chapter, however, is not the conceptual distance between these two faces but, rather, the opposite. The child victim of war and the face of the traumatized soldier become essentially the same face in the films I have considered, a fusion or composite, a hybrid image literalized in the video *Sleeping Soldiers—single screen*, with images of Afghan children superimposed on the faces of the young soldiers. The two faces of war are imaginatively connected to each other in these films, almost like a hologram, in which either face can be seen depending on the angle of view.

Although it is tempting to read what I have called a transfer of affect from the victims to the agents of war as an appropriation, a siphoning off of emotional power to foster a sense of empathy with the US soldiers, I feel another reading is possible. In the fusion or alternation of these two screened faces of war, themes of loss and psychic distress come to the fore. Psychic trauma, notoriously difficult to see or to represent, is pictured here as a kind of circuit of emotion moving from victim to agent to spectator. And the soldier, in effect, becomes a spectator also, remembering or dreaming of the violence he has witnessed and caused. This oscillation of identification is one of the key devices of the films I have considered. If the pathos formulas of past war representation centred on the isolated face of the shell-shocked soldier, the contemporary war film grounds the expression of pathos in the psychic haunting of the soldier, pictured as a face that has merged with that of his target. The psychological haunting that defines the screened face of war in the four films I have discussed can be seen as part of a developing lexicon of war representations, where psychic injury has assumed an increasingly prominent role. The cultural repertory of images of war, where images remember the past, is here given a new and important accent.

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