

Redacted: Outraged but schematic

By Sandy English
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Written and directed by Brian De Palma

Redacted, the new film by Brian De Palma, is a step forward in how artists portray the almost five-year American occupation of Iraq. “Redacted” means edited, or, by implication, censored. De Palma (*Dressed to Kill*, *Scarface*, *The Untouchables*) has used the word to indicate that the official media, in collaboration with the government, have sanitized and falsified nearly every piece of information about the American occupation of Iraq, especially the lives (and deaths) of American soldiers and Iraqi civilians.

Everyone knows this, but the newspapers, television programs, Democrats and Republicans all stubbornly maintain the lies. While a number of documentaries have gained large audiences by honestly depicting the war, often focusing on American soldiers, or, less often, the Iraqis, it is an important development when a major Hollywood filmmaker makes his starting point the wholesale falsification of events by the US media and political establishment.

Redacted is not entirely successful, but its premises are important. For its subject matter it reworks a brutal event: the rape of a 15-year-old girl, her murder, and the murder of her family by American soldiers in the Iraqi town of Mahmoudiya in March 2006.

Most of the film purports to be made up of a soldier’s videotapes. Other fictional segments come from French documentary news clips, videos made by embedded reporters, web sites operated by the Iraqi resistance and an American military wife. This is in keeping with the notion that regular American news outlets are heavily redacted.

A squad of American soldiers is stationed near the ancient Abbasid capital of Samara. One soldier, Angel Salazar (Izzy Diaz), habitually videotapes his platoon members. He is hoping to get into the University of Southern California film school on the strength of his videotaping and the fact that he is combat veteran. He is generally friendly and good-natured.

Salazar’s videos gradually introduce us to the central characters: the professional Master Sergeant Sweet (Ty Jones), who warns his men not to fraternize with Iraqi children because they are the eyes and ears of the

insurgency; and members of the squad, including the bigoted Reno Flake (Patrick Carroll) and fat and libidinous B. B. Rush (Daniel Stewart Sherman), Lawyer McCoy (Rob Devaney), who has a college education, and Gabe Blix (Kel O’Neill), a reader of novels.

A documentary made by a French news agency shows us the boredom and tension of the soldiers manning a roadblock. The degrading treatment of the Iraqis is affecting: the soldiers grab them and shove them and yell at them. We feel complex emotions.

In another scene, when a car comes speeding through the roadblock, the soldiers yell for it to stop. Flake fires on the car with an automatic weapon. The wounded, bloody occupants, a pregnant woman and her driver, are loaded on to a truck and taken to a hospital where they die. This is filmed by an Arab news agency. Its reporters interview the disconsolate relatives and the grim doctor. This is what the American population is never shown.

But the weaknesses of the film begin to appear when Salazar interviews Flake after the incident. He and Rush defend the shooting unreservedly. It was not only Standard Operating Procedure, but the woman and her husband deserved their fate because they were Iraqis. McCoy asks Flake if he feels no remorse. The squad becomes divided schematically and simplistically between those who can feel sympathy for the Iraqis and those who can’t.

Other videos of the soldiers are not much more insightful. In one, Blix is reading John O’Hara’s remarkable novel, *Appointment in Samara*, whose connection to the film seems tenuous at best. There is a reference to the retelling in a play by W. Somerset Maugham of the traditional story about ancient Samara, which speaks of an unavoidable rendezvous with death in that city.

O’Hara’s novel, published in 1934, concerns a pillar of an American community who destroys himself on a drunken impulse. If there is a resonance with the events of the film here, De Palma has not brought it out. It is one of the many missed opportunities of the film.

The moral division in the unit later becomes sharper when a US soldier is killed. In the course of a drunken evening, Rush and Flake decide to rape a young girl, Farrah, who

lives in the house they raided earlier. Rush has already sexually molested the girl at the checkpoint. A ferocious argument follows, but McCoy and Salazar go along out of loyalty to their unit, and perhaps to stop the others from actually committing the crime. Blix refuses to participate.

De Palma depicts the atrocities vividly, but not pornographically. Afterwards, Flake and Rush bully the others into silence.

De Palma does show us the immediate conditions that these men live under. The stress, their own dehumanization as they dehumanize others and the interminable waiting to go home are all convincing, but they do not really seem to play a role in developing the personalities of the soldiers or in leading them to commit war crimes.

Just as the soldiers' lives in Iraq do not ring convincingly as a catalyst for their behavior, neither do their earlier lives in America. Flake and Rush merely seem predisposed to racism, violence and sexual abuse, while McCoy and Blix do not.

When insurgents kidnap a soldier in revenge, the good/bad split in the unit intensifies. The filmmaker attempts to offer an explanation for Flake's depravity in his family history, but it falls flat.

For a moment Flake appears to feel something for his lost comrade, "He was a generous spic," but ultimately there is no evidence that he or anyone else experiences any inner turmoil, with the possible exception of McCoy. Each soldier more or less represents one pole in a rather abstract moral struggle the filmmaker wants to show. These are not reproductions of living individuals torn by social and psychological antagonisms.

It is also telling that officers are almost completely absent from the daily lives of the soldiers. One might expect them to be more present. They are, after all, the primary medium in the military through which American colonial policy is put into effect and through which the subsequent cover-up of the massacre happens. There does seem to be a cover-up, but it is treated hazily. An investigating officer asks McCoy about the rape and murder of Farrah: "Wasn't she an insurgent resisting arrest?" But there is not much more.

There are other problems. At a number of points, the soldiers debate the causes of the war, but no one gets much beyond the official propaganda. By 2006, when the film takes place, surely someone would mention Iraq's natural resources as a possible cause for the American occupation.

Overall, there is an absence of insight into the psychology of the soldiers. This is indicative of larger problems in American culture. The majority of filmmakers and other artists are distant from the thoughts and feelings of masses of ordinary people because they do not see them as the product of a lawful and highly contradictory historical

development.

A writer during an earlier war could say about a soldier's feelings for the victim of an atrocity that they were a "wash of many transient subtle emotions," and "Deep inside him, there was a trace of sympathy ... but he smothered it." [1] This was possible, in part, because the sentiments of the majority of the population deeply concerned many artists in the first part of the twentieth century.

For over a generation, there has been an absence of this sort of creative investigation of popular life and emotions, and it has, by and large, left artists unprepared for treating the conflicted sentiments and emotions of ordinary people in the most volatile situations.

This confusion is shown when the film presents a young woman, obviously intended to be a leftist of some sort, shrieking her pure anger at the massacre on an anti-war website. She demands that the perpetrators of the crime be tortured. What is De Palma's intention here? Is this the level at which more than two thirds of the American population operates when it opposes the war?

Overall, the film means and reveals less than it might. De Palma successfully grabs viewers on a visual level. He provides some hope that the media he uses in the film, especially homemade video and the Internet, can break the monopoly of disinformation exercised by the conglomerates and the government.

Redacted does not succeed in the larger human arena—as an image of living people entwined in complex historical circumstances. This requires a serious understanding of the processes that produced the war: How has it come to this? How was this monstrous crime prepared and made possible?

Nonetheless, De Palma has made a sincere effort aimed exactly where it should be: at the media-government conspiracy to misinform the American people about a barbarous colonial war. The film ends with images of the "collateral damage," the killing and maiming of Iraqi civilians by the occupation—images that are kept from the American public. De Palma communicates his outrage, and this itself perhaps is a blow against this criminal war.

Note:

[1] Norman Mailer, *The Naked and the Dead*, 1948.

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