

15 *Generation Kill* and the New Screen Combat

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No one could accuse the American cultural industries of giving the Iraq War the silent treatment. Between the 24-hour news cycle and fictionalized entertainment, war narratives have played a significant and evolving role in the media landscape since the declaration of war in 2003. Iraq War films, on the whole, have failed to impress audiences and critics, with notable exceptions like Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* (2008), which won the Oscar for Best Picture, and her follow-up *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), which tripled its budget in worldwide box office intake.¹ Television, however, has fared better as a vehicle for profitable, war-inspired entertainment, which is perhaps best exemplified by the nine seasons of Fox's *24* (2001–2010). Situated squarely between these two formats lies the television miniseries, combining seriality with the closed narrative of feature filmmaking to bring to the small screen—and, probably more significantly, to the DVD market—a time-limited story that cultivates a broader and deeper narrative development than a single film, yet maintains a coherent thematic and creative agenda.

As a pioneer in both the miniseries format and the more nebulous category of quality television, HBO has taken fresh approaches to representing combat as it unfolds in the twenty-first century.² These innovations build on yet also depart from the precedent set by *Band of Brothers* (2001), Steven Spielberg's WWII project that established HBO's interest in war-themed miniseries, and the subsequent companion project, *The Pacific* (2010).³ Stylistically, both *Band of Brothers* and *The Pacific* depict WWII combat in ways that recall Spielberg's blockbuster *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). Involving Spielberg and his DreamWorks studio also forges natural connections between Hollywood cinema and HBO content—which, to be fair, has always been deeply entwined with the movie business thanks to a pre-series business model built on airing feature films for subscribing TV audiences. The channel's turn to serial television with *The Sopranos* (1999–2007) marked a departure from this film-centered model, yet it remains significant that in terms of production, HBO's *Generation Kill* (hereafter *GK*) lacks the cinematic pedigree of Spielberg's WWII miniseries.

Still, co-creators David Simon and Ed Burns were no strangers to HBO when they began filming *GK*, which they started immediately after wrapping up their previous HBO series *The Wire* (2002–2008), a landmark of

recent quality TV. The success of *The Wire* helped win Simon the status of an auteur, presumed to be the most important factor in creating a show's unique vision. While in film, "auteur" refers most often to the director, television tends to treat directors as skilled craftspeople rather than creative lynchpins, reserving authorship status for the producer (which, significantly, was also Spielberg's role for *Brothers*). Simon's role as the public face of his television work directs the shows' metanarrative and separates him from his credited co-creator Burns, thereby promoting Simon alone to the realm of TV auteurship.⁴

When *GK* was released, television critics seemed eager to capitalize on the momentum that had gathered around *The Wire*'s later seasons. Positive reviews would generally mention *The Wire* and its co-creators within the first two paragraphs, including *USA Today*'s suggestion that HBO's recipe for future success would be to "let David Simon and Ed Burns do whatever they want."⁵ Indeed, most critics praised the show, noting both an unusual resistance to romanticizing warfare and a "faithful" adaptation of Evan Wright's book of the same name—although the latter point was also made by the series' most fervent detractors.⁶

However, like many Iraq War films made for the big screen, *GK* never amassed a significant audience, prompting *Variety* to reiterate its endorsement mid-run under the faintly incredulous headline: "*Generation Kill*: Folks, you're really missing out."⁷ Yet, even *Variety*'s initial review muses that *GK*'s mid-summer release indicates a lack of confidence that an Iraq War miniseries will attract a devoted audience, let alone win any industry plaudits at the distant Emmys. For his part, Simon committed to the long view, telling an interviewer in 2008 to "check back in about five, six years" to determine the real impact of *GK*.⁸ Almost on cue, in 2012 Simon told *Salon* that *GK* was selling twice the DVDs it had turned out four years earlier, crediting the power of word of mouth and, in particular, the endorsement of "guys at Camp Pendleton in the Marines for two years telling their families, their brother, whoever else, 'You've just got to see this miniseries. Because these guys got what we do.'"⁹

What the Marines do in *GK* is kick off the war in Iraq. The miniseries follows the men of First Recon Battalion from the war's first day through its third week, the same unit and time frame that Wright wrote about in his 2004 book. Wright's fictionalized counterpart in the film (Lee Tergeesen) is never named, but the soldiers call him "War Scribe" or "Reporter" on the rare occasions they engage with him. Those soldiers, poised on the front lines of a nascent conflict, are the beating heart of *GK*, with high-ranking officers largely absent from the action on screen. As many critics concede, it takes a few episodes to pick out the protagonists, but several individuals emerge as key players. Sgt. Brad Colbert (Alexander Skarsgård), known to his comrades as "Iceman," leads the vehicle charged with protecting the Scribe, and Cpl. Ray Person (James Ransone) runs communications alongside him; filling out the vehicle is Lance Cpl. James Trombley (Billy Lush), who appears

the most eager for combat regardless of its moral dilemmas. Farther up the chain of command, First Lt. Nathaniel Fick (Stark Sands) distinguishes himself as a competent leader and a voice of reason, particularly compared to the overzealous Capt. Dave “Captain America” McGraw (Eric Nenninger) and the lunkheaded Capt. Craig “Encino Man” Schwetje (Brian Patrick Wade). Even First Recon’s most visible, high-ranking commander, Lt. Col. Stephen “Godfather” Ferrando (Chance Kelly), seems more interested in gaining favor with Maj. Gen. James Mattis (Robert John Burke) than in maintaining attentive leadership on the ground. *GK* traces the battalion’s complicated political workings in part to comment on the problems inherent in military hierarchy, but also to critique the deployment of First Recon as what Iceman calls “semi-skilled labor,” used for purposes beyond (that is, beneath) their highly specific training.

Instead of promoting individuation by highlighting characters one at a time, *GK* recreates the sensation of sudden immersion, leaving viewers to “feel the movie” rather than focus on who says what.¹⁰ Unlike *Brothers*, which carefully individuates the soldiers and their experiences (see chapter 6, this volume), *GK* tends to crowd the screen by framing the protagonists alongside secondary or unnamed tertiary characters in the same shot. Just as Wright was thrown into the dynamics of a well-established unit, viewers must comprehend the soldiers’ personalities over time, through repeated exposure rather than belabored exposition. Although this approach might preclude character development (a drawback noted by several critics), it emphasizes the shared experience of war. The sheer number of people with significant screen time combines with a visual style inspired by documentary filmmaking to suggest an ethnographic sensibility, reinforcing the sense of authenticity introduced by *GK*’s source text—an eyewitness account of life on the front lines—and further supported by Simon’s background as a journalist. These aesthetics indicate a quiet refusal to bow to typical requirements for the genre and medium while underscoring Simon’s effort to immerse his characters in the historical reality of the Iraq War.

GK was neither the first nor the only foray into the Middle East for HBO, and more than most media outlets post-9/11, the channel has shown a keen awareness of how not to fall into the ideological trap of framing warfare as entertainment that supports a neoconservative agenda. Chronologically and ideologically, *GK* falls between two made-for-TV movies set during the US wars in Iraq and aired on HBO. *Live from Baghdad* (2002), based on Robert Wiener’s memoir, centers on CNN’s corporate cynicism and exposes how journalists exploited the first Gulf War. But whereas *Live from Baghdad* can be interpreted as a self-critical interrogation of media objectivity, *Taking Chance* (2009) draws on more familiar tropes of patriotic sacrifice set against a disingenuously apolitical home front. *Live from Baghdad* showcases the media’s contribution to the perception of the war, while *Taking Chance* narrates a home front drama of patriotic martyrdom. What *GK* brings to HBO is the missing element in each of these TV movies: the soldiers

on the front lines. Not coincidentally, each of these three HBO productions was “based on a true story,” with Wright himself participating in the adaptation of his reportage for *GK*.

Authenticity and the Combat Genre

As a genre rooted in history, the combat film has been subjected to pointed criticism of its accuracy and authenticity, both of which draw upon the complex notion of the “true story.” For war narratives, the notion of truth plays a significant role, and these texts connote truth in a variety of ways. Early WWII combat films incorporated documentary footage into their fictional stories (e.g., *Sands of Iwo Jima* [1949]) and often cast veterans as actors; *GK* also puts veterans on the screen, combined with a documentary-like characterization and cinematography that reflects the creators’ desire for “obsessive verisimilitude” in depicting combat.¹¹

Drawing on eyewitness accounts as source material also conveys a desire to hew closely to the truth, as Spielberg did with *Brothers* by adapting historian Stephen E. Ambrose’s interviews with WWII veterans. The elapsed time between WWII and its retelling, along with the pervasiveness of preformed war narratives in American culture, allows legitimate skepticism to qualify *Brothers*’ claim to truth. Although Holocaust scholars have questioned the reliability of memory, Cathy Caruth observes that referencing trauma in film and television aims not to eliminate history, but rather to help others understand an event by resituating it onto the screen.¹² Although much less time separates soldiers’ and journalists’ experience in Iraq from its mediated adaptation, memory scholars assert that the veracity of any eyewitness account remains inherently disputable. War reportage like Wright’s also raises the issue of reliability. Like memoirs, first-person journalism is subject to tension that “arises between factual truth and the discovered or imposed pattern of meaning.”¹³ Putting lived experience into writing involves selection, manipulation, and reorganization; the practice of adaptation then initiates the process again, with the added concern of molding the source material to fit the demands of a different medium.¹⁴

With any appeal to *truth* rendered problematic, then, the more flexible concept of *authenticity* might better serve an analysis of how war narratives on film and television try to respect the ebbs and flows of lived history. What does it mean for a film to be authentic, to lay claim to its own veracity? Textually, *GK* connotes its authenticity through its attention to historical accuracy and in its commitment to televisual verisimilitude. But, perhaps most importantly, much of *GK*’s claim to authenticity comes from adaptation and auteur discourses. Wright’s role as a reporter invokes a certain responsibility when relating the facts, and the miniseries retells his “true story” through TV adaptation. Although Wright’s book frames the author and narrator as a single figure, the miniseries complicates this unified vision by delegating these roles to a team of directors, writers, and actors who relay events they never witnessed.¹⁵ By adopting

Wright/Scribe's point of view, the "understanding of events could bring an audience closest to some emotional truth of the character's experience."¹⁶ However, film and television both have the power to carry multiple points of view, so *GK* shows conversations happening outside the Scribe's purview, e.g., between General Mattis and Godfather. Simon's claim that Wright's book was his bible bolsters this discourse of authenticity, which is reinforced by *GK*'s collaborative authorship under Simon's auteur brand.¹⁷ Presenting the miniseries any other way would have risked alienating audiences familiar with the book.

Another issue of authenticity is related to the way journalists like Wright reflected contemporary politics. As Stacy Takacs has noted, the media presented the first stages of the Iraq War in ways that echoed the government's neoconservative attitudes.¹⁸ Although many TV series complied with the Bush administration's propaganda goals, niche programming like *GK* departed from this formula by voicing doubt, making soldiers the mouthpiece for disaffected citizens who saw the Iraq War as futile and unnecessary. As Takacs argues, *GK*'s producers made an unusually strong effort to leave its viewers the work of producing their own "moral judgments about the war."¹⁹ Wright's account introduced anti-propaganda messages that added much-needed complexity to war narratives circulating in the media; as a miniseries, *GK* sought a perspective that differed from the one championed by pro-government media outlets by drawing on Wright's perceived authenticity and, as discussed below, by innovating the combat genre.

These innovations must be understood alongside films depicting earlier wars, as the combat genre evolves within its own category over time. Jeanine Basinger writes, "Genre will be stronger than truth. It will use truth, take it in, incorporate it. This is how genre stays alive."²⁰ As a TV miniseries, *GK* assumes the conventions of the combat film by embracing the *mélange* of platforms implicit in the tagline: "It's not TV. It's HBO." Framed by Basinger, the combat film has established a number of familiar conventions beyond the historical setting of war. Typically, a combat film features a male, military protagonist who interacts with a socioeconomically and ethnically diverse group of soldiers under the eye of a commentator or observer: a reporter, his own or a comrade's diary, omniscient voice-over narration, etc. Collectively, these soldiers experience interpersonal conflict within the unit, bond over their struggles, and (eventually) engage the enemy. Thematically, the combat film also celebrates the machismo of war, characterized by a precarious combination of agony and exhilaration, as well as the potential for cathartic sacrifice. The story is infused with concomitant references to military life: insignia, flags, military songs, military objectives, enemy presence, and at least one climactic, cinematic battle.²¹

Films about WWII draw on these conventions to build sympathy for Allied soldiers, even if the "good guys" are not always well intentioned or valorous. Vietnam films, however, often eschew a polarizing view of "good" and "bad," instead establishing motifs including the "feminization of the enemy, the demonization of the media and the valorization of patriarchy."²²

These differences have brought Vietnam films into dialectical tension with WWII films, because the loss of soldiers' lives in Vietnam cannot be balanced by the posthumous compensation of military victory.²³ As Robert Eberwein explains, during WWII Americans killed Nazis, while in Vietnam the Americans ended up killing each other, thereafter changing "the nature of the war film genre." Contrary to the righteousness and purpose of WWII films, Vietnam films "ripped apart the union of the combat squad, and turned within to confront the true enemy."²⁴ Films about the Iraq War push several tendencies of Vietnam War films even further: by replacing long, realistic, necessarily climactic battle scenes with shorter, intermittent violence; by portraying local populations with compassion and including their criticism of the US military operations on their soil; and by de-emphasizing the casualties and fatalities among US troops that WWII films use to heighten audiences' emotional involvement. Whereas Basinger emphasizes that the resolution of a typical WWII film involves "either ... victory or defeat, death or survival," Iraq War films such as *Redacted* (2007), *In the Valley of Elah* (2007), or even *American Sniper* (2014) question what it means to kill civilians in the name of the mission—is this defeat or victory?²⁵

While adopting some longstanding conventions, in many respects *GK* and other visual entertainment narratives of the Iraq War underscore generic developments that reflect changes in how war has been fought. In *GK*, as in WWII films, a heterogeneous mix of soldiers bond as "brothers" and fight a telegenic battle sequence in nearly every episode. As in Vietnam films, these soldiers confront a problematically othered enemy under the command of officers whose motives and competence are increasingly called into question. Departing from both the "good war" narratives of WWII films and the absurdist narratives of Vietnam War films, *GK*'s ideological framework comes from Wright and Simon's desire to showcase the soldiers' feelings about war. The miniseries also breaks with post-9/11 news media's depiction of bloodless combat, a strategy that misleadingly suggests that technology has stripped warfare of both its inherent violence and its human costs. The ethos of skepticism that *GK* builds around the US mission challenges many established conventions of the war genre: most pointedly, the dual notion of military service as patriotic sacrifice and the character-building nature of combat.

Narrating Combat: Characters and Conflicts

Echoing WWII-era combat film conventions, *GK* establishes a clear parallel between the military unit and family dynamics. Basinger describes the "father figure" in a military narrative as "the best educated" among the soldiers, and he usually dies in action.²⁶ Simon expands and explains his version of these parallels, naming Iceman as the "father," Person as the "mother," and Trombley as the "child"—even assigning the less conventional role of "weird uncle" to the reporter.²⁷ But *GK* also twists this structure by

showing multiple father figures, yet pushing none of them to make the ultimate sacrifice. In fact, these military “fathers” distinguish themselves within the narrative and within the military unit by overtly expressing doubt that this war might be worthy of such a sacrifice in the first place. Nevertheless, these leaders look out for their men, take responsibility for their behavior, and often keep their own feelings muted. One example of this is Iceman’s reaction to Trombley’s shooting of two Iraqi children early in the series. Although Iceman is stumped by Trombley’s seeming indifference to the incident, he does not join the unit in condemning Trombley for negligence; instead, Iceman reassures him that the standing order to consider all persons in the area as hostile will protect him from prosecution. Like an honorable father, Iceman assumes responsibility for the incident himself.

In the wider network of this military family, the characters also use humor to diffuse the tensions of combat, especially through Ray Person. This humor tends toward the political: The soldiers not only mock the US for bringing “freedom” to the oppressed—Espera often mentions the US’s similar “help” for Native Americans—but also criticize their own situation with jokes about the lack of food, lack of sex, lack of supplies, and an apparent lack of common sense, as when one captain requests that soldiers mark a minefield at night. Similarly, the long-running series *M*A*S*H* (CBS, 1972–1983) offers morbid and self-critical humor but tempers its bite by setting the action in Korea when the real target was clearly Vietnam.²⁸ *GK* might not mix comedy with combat drama as comfortably as *M*A*S*H*, but its humor mordantly criticizes the framing and execution of the ongoing conflict. For example, in “A Burning Dog,” Ray Person admits to suggesting that the US entered Iraq for NAMBLA (North American Man/Boy Love Association) and insinuates that the soldiers are actually clearing the way for Starbucks.

The solidarity in *GK*, however congenial and familial, is forged in an aggressive atmosphere and shaped by commanders who clearly take pleasure from the fight itself. Similarly, Basinger observes that WWII combat films convey ambivalence about battle, showing that “war is hell” and that glory is never unmitigated. A film that portrays war as thrilling to watch, she says, “denies its own message” while “a film that says war is fun, but shows too much violence and death, may not deliver [the emotional relief] it intends.”²⁹ *GK* shows combat as exhilarating, yet often reveals its purpose to be dubious or self-serving. In the series, Mattis overlooks Godfather’s mistakes and his failure to address the ineptitude and mental illness that Captain America inflicts on his men. Godfather’s misplaced priorities bring undue punishment to Lieutenant Fick, who faces sanctions after urging conduct that is more principled.

This problematic hierarchy and its flawed assessment of competence produce one of the most common conflicts in the Iraq War combat film: interpersonal friction among American comrades. *GK* sets up adversarial relationships between Godfather and Fick, between Fick and Encino Man,

and between Captain America and the unlucky men under his command. These conflicts inspire bonding when it comes to understanding the rules of engagement, standard operating procedure, and, most broadly, the execution of maneuver combat. For example, in “Screwby” Fick confronts Encino Man over calling in an airstrike that would endanger their own unit. When Encino Man misreads the grids, and Fick refrains from correcting him, the unit doctor (Jonah Lotan) grumbles that “for once, our asses get saved by sheer incompetence.” Fick’s will to speak out—or not—in order to safeguard the unit also earns Iceman’s trust. But their most intense adversaries are officers set farther up the chain; although many orders are questionable and/or irrelevant to the work of the mission—like Major Sixta’s (Neal Jones) meticulous grooming standards—the soldiers find ways to address them so as not to seed discord in the battalion. Major Sixta finally admits that his attention to the soldiers’ moustaches aims to boost morale by redirecting dissatisfaction with the higher command toward himself (“Bomb in the Garden”). When the battalion can focus on the banality of shaving after a haphazardly planned mission, he suggests, they bond over a common, internal “nemesis” instead of dwelling on each other’s mistakes.³⁰

Battlefield Contact

GK also complicates the dichotomy between the trauma and exhilaration of the combat experience in ways not seen in other combat films, because the nature of combat, redesigned for the new century, does not allow soldiers to “get some” in the same way they could in preceding conflicts. This “new” warfare started with the Gulf War (1990–1991), often labeled the first post-modern war because it blended technological progress with unprecedented media saturation in alignment with the Cold War-era concept called the Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA).³¹ In 2001, the September 11 attacks provoked further changes, shifting the boundaries between enemy and ally, between civilian and military domain. In Philip E. Agre’s view, post-9/11 nation-states at war—primarily the US—focus on damaging “enemy” infrastructure rather than on direct combat; technology, he continues, has nearly “eliminated [soldiers’] zone of professional autonomy” within the sphere of combat. By subjecting the men of First Recon to the orders of technophilic, trigger-happy superiors, *GK* tries to apprehend this postmodern warfare.³²

The RMA changed the way soldiers experienced war and how they understood the “imagined” (represented) war in which they could never participate. Men in *GK* seem well versed in military history, comparing their mistakes with those made in Vietnam or—even more tellingly—in European colonies, but their most tangible point of reference is their own experience in Afghanistan, where the RMA was also applied. Those who had tours of duty there show nostalgia for it, implicitly holding up Afghanistan as a more “legitimate” war, and certainly one *better fought*—that is, a war

with rules that were followed; a more purposeful distinction between allies and enemies; and a far more effective targeting of the latter (“Cradle of Civilization”). Beyond the critique of the Iraq War couched in these comparisons, *GK*’s characters also show frustration about their current mission, which grows deeper over the course of the series. Indeed, this ability to build the soldiers’ dissatisfaction gradually underscores one of the advantages that television offers the war narrative. An episodic structure allows time not only to develop multiple and complex points of view, but also to invite viewers to immerse themselves in the virtual world of war through week-to-week viewing or binge watching. Extended and/or repeated exposure to the characters builds viewers’ trust in their perspective, and showing these soldiers’ personal evolution invites audiences to adjust their own outlook according to the characters’ mounting disillusionment about the war, including the problems and effects of the RMA.

This creeping discontent, justified through cause and effect, builds a feeling of failure that complicates any sense of military victory. In the beginning (of both the series and the war), the Marines are stoic, yet regret lingers on their faces when they release surrendered Iraqis under orders, already silently questioning the logic of their superiors’ decisions. The sense that the Marines have abandoned those they were sent to help magnifies their disillusionment, and the gaps and contradictions in military strategy become so glaring that the soldiers begin to speak out against them. In “A Burning Dog,” First Recon is ordered to drive past piles of ordnance lying in an open field just outside the city en route to the area’s only school, which is slated for detonation because the Republican Guard “took over every classroom.” Ray Person comments on how “weird” it is that two injured servicemen convinced their superiors to “level half the town” when abandoned weaponry provokes no such extreme reaction.

Perhaps most poignantly, the final episode “Bomb in the Garden” shows the troops entering Baghdad and coming face to face with the US military’s failures. The soldiers are forbidden to provide security to local neighborhoods and cannot restore the water or electricity systems that were destroyed during the US bombing, constraints that Fick describes as “madness.” In the same episode, Iceman tries to safely detonate US bombs that have fallen, intact, into urban areas; he deals with one lodged in a garden where children would play, but Fick orders him to stop before he can detonate a second bomb. Iceman’s frustration only worsens after a BBC radio report describes kids playing on a tank who were shot by “newly arrived grunts” for “having a weapon”; in response, Iceman declares, “We keep killing civilians, we’re gonna waste this fucking victory.” Ever the professional soldier, Iceman still follows orders, but this episode delivers frank criticism from the miniseries’ most sympathetic characters, emphatically underscoring the poor planning that brings them, at best, a pyrrhic victory.

The most compelling and frequently recurring evidence of combat mistakes in *GK* comes in its portrayal of death, a burden the series shows to

be borne almost exclusively by non-combatants.³³ This marks a complete departure from connoting death as either patriotic sacrifice, a framing prevalent in WWII combat films, or as punishment for involvement, as seen in Vietnam War films. For the soldiers in *GK*, death is omnipresent yet kept at arm's length, entering their orbit when they kill Iraqis—"enemy" and civilian alike—or when they hear about Marine casualties with no attachment to First Recon. The Iraqi bodies that appear in nearly every episode highlight America's gruesome failure to "win hearts and minds," as the series focuses more intently on civilian casualties than on insurgents killed in action. This stark imbalance points to the strategic shortcomings of US policy, and the lack of fatalities in First Recon denies characters and viewers alike the catharsis that accompanies an American death in other war films. Death in *GK* aims not to convey heroism to fallen soldiers, but rather the full apprehension of the meaning of "collateral damage." Allied deaths in WWII combat films are presumed to serve the good of society, but American deaths in *GK*, which occur rarely and never among the protagonists, are treated with indignation among the troops, as they clash with their superiors over decisions that they find irrational.

The *purpose* of death in the WWII film thus marks a sharp contrast with the pointlessness that *GK* ascribes to the casualties in Iraq, whether suffered by US forces or by civilians guilty only of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. From the beginning, the soldiers of First Recon grapple with an inability to absorb these casualties into a coherent narrative, as illustrated in Iceman's comment about "wasting" the victory. The soldiers pass civilian corpses on the roads, mistakenly kill children and women, and repeatedly witness their superiors' glaring incompetence, like ordering an airstrike on empty desert. Although most of the main characters are keenly aware that US forces are inflicting unnecessary damage on the Iraqi people, *GK* shows that tensions run high for any combat situation, no matter how hastily or carelessly ordered, even though each incident further inures them to the act of killing.

The gory display of Iraqi corpses in *GK* draws attention to how American forces outmatch the insurgents in training and technology. The Allied and Axis powers in WWII had comparably trained soldiers and access to similar technologies; in Vietnam, the US had technological superiority but lacked its opponents' knowledge of the territory; in Iraq, the US had superior technology, training, and tactical information while Iraqi insurgents fought with improvised weapons and little to no training. These imbalances demonstrate the RMA's conception of battlefields that contrast First World technology with outmoded, Third World warfare. The RMA foresaw a short-operational victory, and as Takacs notes, only in these terms did it succeed; the RMA failed to create a long-term strategy to finish the conflict.³⁴ Without a plan to bring closure to the war, the drawn-out US military presence alienated and angered the Iraqis, obscuring the ultimate goal of bringing broader peace to the region.

In *GK*, the failure of the RMA to prevent collateral damage takes a heavy toll on the soldiers' morale and on the US goal to win "hearts and minds," compounding the traumatic experiences discussed above. The soldiers see tough combat in every episode, nearly all of it dogged by fatal or near-fatal mistakes: In "A Burning Dog" the Recon soldiers observe a calm Iraqi village with kids playing in the garden and women cooking then witness its annihilation after an erroneously ordered airstrike (Figure 15.1).



Figure 15.1 *Generation Kill* highlights the military's failure to prevent collateral damage in the Iraq War and its consequent wearing down of the soldiers' morale. In one example, members of First Recon witness the annihilation of an Iraqi household that they had determined harmless.

After watching the destruction, Iceman can only stutter that they cannot know what their superiors saw, but they must have found something to justify the attack. The war, pitched as necessary and preventative, thus

transforms before viewers' eyes into a war of provocation. Beyond battles with insurgents, the soldiers raid villages, homes, and schools, killing innocent civilians and transforming the war zone into a no-man's-land, open to criminals who disregard the laws of war.

The Iraqis are not the only ones under surveillance in *GK*; as Agre observes, the US soldiers have no "zone of professional autonomy," as every decision about where to move and whom to shoot is discussed beforehand with their superiors.³⁵ Unlike WWII and Vietnam films, in which soldiers have little to no contact with the officers who organize the battle, *GK* shows soldiers in Iraq as under near-constant supervision. Leaders like Godfather operate at a remove from their soldiers and engage in combat not for strategic gain but for the thrill of combat itself. For example, in "A Burning Dog" the battalion is ordered to cross a bridge where the insurgents have set up an ambush. Forced down the most dangerous road, in darkness, the soldiers continue under the lights of Cobra helicopters to drive over a booby-trapped bridge. These orders introduce a parallel between Iraqi civilians and US combat troops, both of whom are subject to the power of distant but violent others. In a war where air strikes can replace almost any direct combat situation, commanders still push their soldiers into unnecessary engagements, forcing confrontation for its own sake, regardless of its target or effects.

Media Presence in Combat

By portraying combat during an ongoing conflict, *GK* also connects to contemporary, non-fictional representations of the Iraq War, even contributing to the heated debate over the war's effectiveness that involved Americans at the home front. Unlike *GK*, *Brothers* and *Pacific* take a nostalgic perspective on the notion of WWII as a "good war" and reiterate established conventions of the WWII film. *GK*, on the other hand, takes a more ironic stance toward the combat genre by showing how its established assumptions are poorly suited to the reality of postmodern warfare. *GK* thus illustrates how the new mode of engagement has unmoored itself from the generic expectations established by combat films based on previous wars.

The role of the media in the soldiers' lives marks yet another aspect of warfare in the new century. Technology allows journalists to share images of war almost instantaneously with soldiers, civilians, and other journalists, leading to the immersion and entrapment of soldiers within images of war. Observing photographs of the World Trade Center collapse and prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib, Jean Baudrillard contends that war now takes place virtually; it is, for example, in a photo of an American soldier forcing an Iraqi to sodomize a pig that true violence exists, for these images neutralize conflict just as pornography neutralizes sex.³⁶ These photographs not only become viral, leading to one side "extinguishing" the other through such

images, but they also amass their own power to reduce the fact of the event to mere spectacle.

Baudrillard claims that it is no longer important whether these war images are false or true; rather, it is the way images are immersed in the war that measures their impact, making events synonymous with their pictures and turning them into a parody of violence, a reality show that is in fact “a desperate simulacrum of power.”³⁷ He also claims that “embedded” journalists, like Wright, are no longer necessary; the soldiers themselves can circulate their own imagery. *GK* acknowledges that soldiers now narrate their own war experience by adding a concluding scene, without precedent in Wright’s book, in which the unit gathers together to watch a video montage they created. As Baudrillard describes, while watching their own video, the soldiers observe how their virtual identities have become of a piece with the dead bodies, the explosions, the battered landscapes. In the beginning, the soldiers perceive these images as exultant and triumphant, similar to the scene in *Jarhead* (2005) when Marines cheer at an attack on a Vietnamese village in *Apocalypse Now* (1979). Anthony Swofford, ex-Marine and author of the Gulf War memoir from which Sam Mendes’ film was adapted, has discussed the perception of “anti-war” Vietnam films as exhilarating rather than appalling, emphasizing that, for a young man thirsty for combat, these films cannot avoid becoming pro-war.³⁸ In *GK*, however, the accumulation of these images shifts the Marines’ perspective, and one by one, the soldiers of First Recon stop egging on their virtual selves, then turn and walk away from the screen in silent acknowledgment of the bitterness that comes with this experience of war. By the end, the only soldier left is Trombley, for whom these images are “fucking beautiful.” As Takacs notes, Trombley’s vocal, visible approval leaves viewers with the notion that men like Trombley would most probably be responsible for the next, doomed phase of the already botched war.³⁹

In Baudrillard’s words, “those who live by the spectacle will die by the spectacle”—meaning a figurative death for most, but the relationship between soldiers and the media reveals different implications.⁴⁰ Although post-9/11 news coverage tended to assume a pro-military perspective, with time the media began to turn its back on the war. The soldiers in *GK* seem quite aware of the American media’s duplicity, treating the BBC as trustworthy—in “Get Some,” someone claims that even Godfather gets war news from the BBC—while dismissing CNN in “Cradle of Civilization” as purveyors of “drama” lacking any useful information.

Perhaps the postmodern news media—that is, media outlets invested in the simulacrum of war—will soon be disregarded when it comes to Iraq. As historian Michael Anderegg once said of Vietnam, “cinematic representations seem to have supplanted even so-called factual analyses as *the* discourse of the war, as the place where some kind of reckoning will need to be made and tested.”⁴¹ The potential for entertainment television like *GK* to assert historical knowledge is already here, reflecting a postmodern tendency to render history indistinguishable from its representations, even in

conflicts whose conclusions and repercussions have yet to play out. These events, after all, need distance to be assessed as history, so that, in Simon's words, citizens can become "more fully aware of what it means to engage in modern state-sponsored warfare."⁴² But cloaking war discourse in the guise of entertainment brings with it the risk that "the conversion of war, especially specific wars, can escape recuperation in America as long as war and militarism remain such deeply ingrained features of social life."⁴³ The Iraq War combat genre is relatively young, yet it presents the potential to avoid both romanticizing warfare and generating celebratory "war porn."

Notes

1. Financial information for *Zero Dark Thirty* from Box Office Mojo, accessed July 3, 2015: <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=binladen.htm>.
2. For an analysis of the rising esteem of television, including the designation "quality TV," see Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (New York: Routledge, 2012).
3. On *Band of Brothers*, see chapter 6, this volume.
4. This is just one theory of Simon's rise to auteur status despite repeated collaboration with Ed Burns. The focus on Simon as auteur has evidently reached the level of received wisdom; a book dedicated to *The Wire* mentions Simon on nearly every page, whereas Burns's name appears only a handful of times. Tiffany Potter and C. W. Marshall, *The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television* (New York: Continuum, 2009).
5. Blanco, Robert, "HBO scores a direct hit with *Generation Kill*," *USA Today*, July 11, 2008, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/life/television/reviews/2008-07-10-generation-kill_N.htm.
6. According to review aggregator Metacritic.com, *Generation Kill* has a better-than-respectable score of 80 out of 100. But this high grade masks how polarizing the miniseries was for critics; *The New Yorker* and *Slate* published negative reviews that countered fairly unbridled praise from *Variety*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *The Washington Post* and other venues.
7. Brian Lowry, "Review: *Generation Kill*," *Variety*, July 9, 2008, <http://variety.com/2008/scene/markets-festivals/generation-kill-1200508469/> and Stuart Levine, "*Generation Kill*: Folks, you're really missing out," *Variety*, August 13, 2008, <http://variety.com/2008/tv/news/posted-by-stuar-19768/>.
8. Richard Beck, "Beyond the Choir: An Interview with David Simon," *Film Quarterly* 62, no. 2 (2008): 44–49.
9. Willa Paskin, "David Simon: Most TV is unwatchable," *Salon*, September 23, 2012, http://www.salon.com/2012/09/23/david_simon_most_tv_is_unwatchable/.
10. Beck, "Beyond the Choir," 47.
11. Jacob Weisberg, "The Wire on Fire," *Slate*, September 13, 2006, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/the_big_idea/2006/09/the_wire_on_fire.html.
12. Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, History* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996); see also Marita Sturken, "The Remembering of Forgetting: Recovered Memory and the Question of Experience," *Social Text* 57 (1998): 103–25.
13. *Ibid.*, 292.

14. William Mooney, "Memoir and the Limits of Adaptation," in *The Literature/Film Reader: Issues of Adaptation*, ed. James M. Welsh and Peter Lev (Maryland: Scarecrow, 2007), 292.
15. *Ibid.*, 286.
16. *Ibid.*, 288.
17. Beck, "Beyond the Choir," 46.
18. Stacy Takacs, *Terrorism TV: Popular Entertainment in Post-9/11 America* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2012), 167.
19. Although she still finds that *GK* echoes neoconservative ideology in its portrayal of the invasion as "botched" but not irredeemable. *Ibid.*, 160.
20. Jeanine Basinger, *The World War II Combat Film: Anatomy of a Genre* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 170.
21. *Ibid.*, 73–75.
22. Michael Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam: The War in Film and Television* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1991), 8.
23. Robert Eberwein, *The Hollywood War Film* (West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 94.
24. *Ibid.*, 96.
25. Basinger, *Combat Film*, 75.
26. *Ibid.*, 54.
27. Beck, "Beyond the Choir," 48.
28. For more on *M*A*S*H*, see chapters 8 and 9, this volume.
29. Basinger, *Combat Film*, 95.
30. Beck, "Beyond the Choir," 48.
31. Melani McAlister, *Epic Encounters: Culture, Media, and US Interests in the Middle East Since 1945* (London: University of California Press, 2005). McAlister argues that the Gulf War was both "a major military action and a staged media event," describing coverage as intensified and dramatic, yet not very informative (239). The RMA's innovations aimed to reform the American military with a clear focus on deterrence and efforts to minimize collateral damage. According to Andrew Bacevich, until the Gulf War, the RMA tried to move war out of the industrial age and into the information age, aiming "both to render the battlefield and the enemy's order of battle transparent and to make it possible to hit and kill anything anywhere on the planet at any time." Andrew J. Bacevich, *The New American Militarism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 167–68.
32. Postmodern in the sense that the twenty-first century soldier, much like an audience glued to a screen, experiences war primarily as a simulacrum of itself. Philip E. Agre, "Imagining the Next War: Infrastructural Warfare and the Conditions of Democracy," September 15, 2001, <http://polaris.gseis.ucla.edu/pagre/war.html>.
33. For an extended conversation on casualties from opposing sides of the Iraq war, see Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London: Verso, 2004), and Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009).
34. Takacs, *Terrorism TV*, 147–48.
35. Agre, "Imagining the Next War."
36. Jean Baudrillard, "War Porn," in *The Conspiracy of Art*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer, trans. Ames Hodges (New York: Semiotext(e), 2005), 205–209.
37. *Ibid.*, 206.

38. Andrian Kreye, trans. "An Interview with Anthony Swofford, Author of the Gulf War bestseller *Jarhead*," originally published in *Das Magazin* (12/03), accessed July 2, 2015, <http://www.andriankreye.com/Swofford1.html>.
39. Takacs, *Terrorism TV*, 159.
40. Baudrillard, "War Porn," 208.
41. Anderegg, *Inventing Vietnam*, 1.
42. Beck, "Beyond the Choir," 46.
43. Takacs, *Terrorism TV*, 167.