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Loving the Lens: ‘American Sniper’ as Movie and Event

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***American Sniper*, directed by Clint Eastwood. USA, 2014.**

There is a lull at the moment in the clamor around Clint Eastwood’s controversial film *American Sniper*, as award season ends and the movie’s powerful box office stamina pushes the DVD release into the summer. This moment perhaps offers an opportunity to consider what—if anything—might or should be said about it as a piece of cinema.

Sniper, starring Bradley Cooper in the title role, has to have been the most written about movie in the United States over the winter months, scoring the hat-trick with its critical success, box office wallop (the first American film about the invasion of Iraq to achieve such success), and political controversy. There is an obvious and important feature of it as a film, however, that no writer has chosen to dwell upon to date: *American Sniper* may be the most *scopophilic* feature film ever produced.

“Scopophilia” is a term borrowed from Freud and applied to golden age cinema in a groundbreaking essay written by Laura Mulvey in 1975. Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” is famous as the essay that first introduced that now widely recognized analytical category of the “male gaze.” But the essay also explains how scopophilia, or pleasure in looking, takes on a special significance in classical Hollywood aesthetics. The camera’s ability to create from the composite parts of the female body an object that the viewer can vicariously master is a foundation stone of this cinema’s appeal. Through this process, commercial cinema reinforces woman’s position as “bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning.”[1] Mulvey’s examples include films by Hitchcock and other important directors from the 1930s, 40s, and 50s, but *American Sniper* is a contemporary work that seems to go far beyond these older examples in its open willingness to fetishize the gaze. For over two hours, the camera repeatedly switches from shots of Cooper looking through a scope, to shots of what he sees through that lens. Usually what he sees are working and middle class Iraqis who—for the purposes of the film—have no voice and no existence outside his crosshairs.

In the film’s opening scene, Cooper is looking through a scope on his weapon from a rooftop in Iraq. He has detected a woman and her young son walking out of a residence showing evidence of readiness to carry out a suicide mission against American soldiers. The child is carrying an explosive, but only the American sniper has noticed. Soon, we will learn that in this moment of crisis, the sniper acts decisively, killing not only the boy, but also the mother, just before their clandestine weapon explodes. But the climax of this scene comes

only later in the film. At the beginning, the scene cuts to a flashback of a young Chris Kyle hunting with his father in west Texas. This flashback includes a direct quotation of the first important and broadly successful American film about the Vietnam war: Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978). Like so many of the important movies about American involvement in Vietnam, *American Sniper* subsequently makes the home front and the American point of view—the American lens, if you will—its foundation for treating the material. The narrative cuts back and forth repeatedly from life at home in the US with its big screen televisions, cases of Lone Star, romances, and family environments, to the dusty, bullet-ridden streets of Iraqi cities, ruled masterfully by a masculine tribe of American military comrades in arms.

Within the frame of these two incommensurable settings, the plot that evolves is Kyle's odyssey, from a directionless rodeo cowboy to a legendary war hero, a transformation that he only makes through a series of steps toward his own growth. First, he commits to a military life after watching live television footage of the Nairobi and 9/11 bombings, then makes a challenging love affair with a beautiful, good-hearted woman work as a military marriage, and finally finds meaning in life through devoting time to supporting fellow veterans when not in country.

The scenes in Iraq also manage to generate their own story lines. There is the competition between Iraqi insurgents and American forces to see who can kill the other group's most prized combatant. Kyle comes to learn there is an Iraqi bounty on his head, even as he throws himself into more and more dogged pursuit of his Arab counterpart, a sniper named Mustafa, who is said to have medaled at the Olympics in sharp shooting. Finally, there is one other through line that the plot traces: the smoldering that unsettles the American sniper as he wracks up more and more kills. Although he doggedly refuses to voice any second thoughts about his actions, ultraverbal cues plant in the viewer the idea of a psychological cost to this lethal profession.

On this final point, reviewers have praised Bradley Cooper's intensity in his role as Kyle, marveling at the way he manages to suggest both internal complexity and outward certainty. The lens plays a crucial role here, as the viewer is allowed to look at him in every scene and see what he sees over and over again—a strategy that centers the drama and allows meaning to be created almost exclusively through this one individual. Cooper's performance is certainly in contrast to the almost goofy exuberance of his star turns in the recent films *Silver Linings Playbook* and *American Hustle*.

An answer to the question of how this particular film about the US invasion managed to attract viewers where no others have might be found in the way it keeps it simple and stupid. Rather than innovating or attempting auteur touches, the film falls back on classic, commercial aesthetic strategies. Not only does it borrow from some of the more successful Vietnam films, it also creates a hero who belongs in the middle of a Hollywood golden era piece. In other words, the lead performance is as much Gary Cooper as Bradley Cooper. Bradley here has transformed himself by channeling the storied American male hero tradition. The guy who says little, expressing emotion through a cocked eyebrow or a smirk, but acts decisively. In the golden age, this was Gary Cooper, Humphrey Bogart, and Alan Ladd (who also blows away a rival gunman wearing a black hat at the end of 1951's *Shane*). Clint Eastwood, the film's director, channeled this masculinist Hollywood tradition in his youth to create the man with no name in the Sergio Leone westerns—and that other ballistically righteous enforcer, Dirty Harry. To drive home the connection between this lineage of hero types, Bradley Cooper has said in interviews that he used Eastwood as a

model for his character, since he only met Kyle once before the latter was killed as filming started.

Of course, it is difficult to sustain an entire essay about *American Sniper*, the film, and never mention the phenomenon that was the film's reception. The film both drew at the box office and polarized critics and commentators. By the end of this frenzy, the most common article about *American Sniper* was neither a patriotic celebration, nor a challenging critique. Increasingly, the consensus of the award season comments and reviews boiled down to a third response that could be summarized as: "I was against the war, but liked the movie," a superior stance voiced repeatedly in US liberal elite media, including National Public Radio and the *New York Times*. Part of what makes this disturbing and arrogant position possible is the film's scopophilia.

To illustrate, in a late scene that tries to capture Kyle's evolution, he finds himself yet again looking through his lens at a young Iraqi boy who has picked up a rocket propelled grenade launcher left in the street by a fallen insurgent. As with the opening, the American sniper again finds himself having to weigh the morality of blowing away a young Arab boy carrying a weapon. But this time, he does not pull the trigger, and the boy drops the weapon and runs off, neither firing the shot, nor realizing how close he has come to being executed by Kyle. The moment leaves Kyle breathless, and not long afterwards, he retires from the military.

Such instances telescope all other realities associated with the invasion: there are no trumped up accusations of WMDs and al-Qaeda connections, no diverse communities within Iraq, no disastrous aftermath of the war. There is only a taciturn and heroic American on a rooftop struggling with himself. Still, in this moment, the scope's frame can barely contain its narrative structure, with the result that some viewers will surely wonder what sorts of indignities and hopelessness this young boy has been through that might make him feel the urge to randomly lift and aim an abandoned weapon he finds in the street. One might think of the Haditha incident or the scopophilically documented torture of Iraqi prisoners by American guards at Abu Ghraib prison. More broadly, the American invasion ushered in power outages, lawlessness, kidnappings, outbreaks of illness, and sectarianism. An Iraqi boy might not have had the perspective to see all of these developments, but could have easily felt himself in a changed society the moment non-Arabic speaking foreigners with guns entered his hometown.

In *Sniper*, however, the lens is complicit with the filmmaker in blocking out such considerations—at least for many viewers. In fact, even a simple narrative of marriage, family, and child rearing is denied to those Iraqis who pass across the lens. The specific question of what experiences the boy has endured outside the frame is blocked completely, or at least relegated to the category of the speculation. To answer it might be complicating, and so it is pushed outside of the frame in just the way such complicating factors were pushed to the side in the run up to the actual invasion, even by some of the most discriminating of establishment opinion makers. The phenomenon of the film instills the fear that something like the Iraq invasion could happen again as long as opinion makers are willing to stay tightly squeezed inside the scope.

NOTES

[1] Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University

Press, 1985): 804.

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