Bodies of Evidence

New Documentaries on Iraq War Veterans

by Susan L. Carruthers

He's a villain or a hero; spat upon or spitting. He's an accessory to war crimes; an antiwar crusader. He's a tic-ridden time bomb; a paraplegic demon lover. He's a Vietnam veteran—of Hollywood's imagination. And now he's joined by a new generation of homecoming soldiers back from Iraq and burdened with many of the same afflictions. Skirting the war zone in favor of domestic drama, films like Irwin Winkler's *Home of the Brave,* Paul Haggis's *In the Valley of Elah,* and Kimberley Peirce's *Stop-Loss* have pitted damaged returnees against an indifferent citizenry that doesn't know how to handle them and a rapacious military all too eager to channel them back to the front. Along the way, they've brought us an amputee Jennifer Biel, a homicidal 50 Cent, and a traumatized Ryan Phillippe.

These narrative features have been supplemented by a profusion of documentaries that present viewers not with actors whose surgically perfected bodies have been artfully prostheticized but with unglamorous young bodies, less perfect and less plastic in every way. Real people, in real pain. Documentaries of this kind aren't a new addition to the Iraq war canon. Early exemplars, like Jon Alpert and Matthew O'Neill's *Baghdad ER* and Patricia Foulkrod's *The Ground Truth* (both released in 2006), followed hard on the heels of combat-focused documentaries that began to appear in 2004. Over the past year, however, their number has mounted steadily: the wounded soldier now an obsessive focus of filmmaking about (or around) the war.

Of the recent additions to this genre, Meg McLagan and Daria Sommers's *Lioness* proves the most compelling in sensibility and subject matter, introducing a hitherto unknown character: the female U.S. combat veteran. Since women are formally debarred from fighting, their deployment in frontline roles necessarily can't be, and isn't, officially acknowledged. Nor has it been tackled by documentary filmmakers, a point *Lioness* underscores when it shows its five female protagonists watching a History Channel special about the battle for Ramadi in which several of them fought. Nowhere visible in this guts-and-glory production, they respond with indignant disbelief to an excision from the historical record that feels entirely deliberate.

Retrieving these women from the Pentagon's memory hole is central to McLagan and Sommers's project. Male Army officers explain how they initially looked to female soldiers for a less "culturally insensitive" way to body search Iraqi women and to soften the affront of house-to-house raids. In its imagined form, women's service in these capacities would be "a neat thing to do"—a badge of distinction that merited a distinctive mantle. Having "joked around" with the idea of calling them "shield maidens" or "amazons," the architects of this policy hit on the appellation "lioness." The idea was not, they stress, to put women into combat. "But did battle come to them on occasion?," one officer rhetorically asks. "Yes, it did."

Documentary filmmakers gauge the human factor as emotionally and physically shattered veterans return from combat while others courageously resist deployment to Iraq.

Exposing the not so neat consequences of this stretching of congressional strictures, *Lioness* will doubtless galvanize both sides in the should they/shouldn't they debate about women in the military. But for McLagan and Sommers such wrangling is rather beside the point. Since women are already in combat, the immediate issues are much more practical ones about inadequate prior training and insufficient aftercare from a Veterans Administration caught off guard by the appearance of an unexpected species of claimant. As such, the film is less an argument about women in combat than an affecting portrait of women *after* combat. More meditative than didactic, it focuses on the exhausting battles of daily life with the traumatized veteran as both recipient and provider of care, mothering young children and ailing parents alike.

The opening sequence establishes a mood of uneasy pastoralism—tranquil turbulence. On a country lane in Arkansas a fawn falters to a standstill before scampering away from the camera's opaque attention. Cut to a lake where a turtle swims, oblivious to a sturdy blonde taking aim at him with a rifle a few feet away. With one shot, he's done for—ready to be scraped out and transformed into a plant pot, suggests one of the young woman's companions, reaching to put the bourbon back on ice. Thereafter, *Lioness* works to redeem its central protagonist, Specialist Shannon Morgan, from the hard-living redneck stereotype with which she's initially encumbered.

With her lumbering big girl's gait, fresh tattoo, and choppy, bleached hair, Shannon turns out to be as true of heart as she is of aim. Shown in close-up, her face wavers with uncertain emotion. Eyes thickly rimmed with dark pencil glitter with what might be merriment or the blink of unshed tears. It takes a moment to recognize this young woman, in the grips of full-blown PTSD, as an adult version of the shyly smiling girl seen in home video sitting at the piano and bouncing on a trampoline—a child abandoned by parents who didn't want her and adopted by grandparents whose love Shannon reciprocates with a quality of awed reverence. Anxious lest she add to their store of worry, she's incapable of doing otherwise. Even at a safe spectatorial remove, it's impossible to watch her take to the hills, loaded gun in hand, without shuddering. "I think she'll be alright in time," her mom remarks with weathered stoicism. "She's a strong girl."

Films Reviewed in This Article

Lioness
Directed by Meg McLagan and Daria Sommers. DVD, color, 82 mins., 2008. Distributed by Room 11 Productions, 455 Central Park West, #3B, New York, New York 10025, phone (646) 734-3374, email info@lionessthefilm.com.

Body of War: The True Story of an Anti-Hero
Produced and directed by Ellen Spiro and Phil Donahue. DVD, color, 87 mins., 2008. Distributed by Docurama, www.docurama.com.

Breaking Ranks
Produced by Trish Dolman, Leah Mallen and Tracey Friesen; directed by Michelle Mason. DVD, color, 56 mins., 2006. Distributed by the National Film Board of Canada, www.nfb.ca.

Fighting for Life
Directed by Terry Sanders. DVD, color, 89 mins., 2007. Distributed by Truly Indie, www.trulyindie.com.

Meeting Resistance
Directed by Steve Connors and Molly Bingham. DVD, color, 84 mins., 2007. Distributed by First Run Features, www.firstrunfeatures.com.

A "Lioness Team" of women soldiers in Meg McLagan and Daria Sommers' feature documentary, *Lioness*.

No doubt. But Shannon's strength nevertheless buckles under the weight of what's happened to her and what she herself has done: her own implication in the loss of part of herself. Other lionesses reckon with their role in violating Iraqi homes. "I felt like the Gestapo," Anastasia Breslow confides to her diary. But Shannon, having found herself in a firefight alongside Marines who first left her exposed and then left her behind, carries a weightier burden: the certain knowledge of having killed an uncertain number of Iraqis—one of whom she subsequently dragged on her poncho to the side of the road for disposal. Not very much humanity in that, she notes. And though she rehearses the familiar soldier's formula of kill or be killed, still she struggles to find moral conviction in this necessitarian logic. "I don't want to go to hell," Shannon muses, and killing a human isn't the same as taking aim at a turtle, a squirrel, a bird—the targets that have made her a crack shot. Faced with another human, the finger hesitates on the trigger; conscience circles the corpse. "I know God forgives everything you do," she ventures towards the end of the film. But absolving herself is another matter.

Adrift in a broken community where, as her mother points out, there's nothing much for a woman to do but waitress, Shannon hovers in aimless limbo, hunting and shooting the breeze with her uncle Glenn, a Vietnam vet who counsels against introspection. "Our freedoms" weren't won by men asking questions, he insists, without elucidating which freedoms or which men he has in mind. Instead, the trick is to distract the mind by busying the hands; his preferred busyness being the production of hand-carved and painted Christmas ornaments that transform the trailer park into a place of delight: a magical illumination that gestures towards a kind of transcendence.

Iraq combat veteran Shannon Morgan copes with posttraumatic stress disorder in *Lioness*.

As mediating figures, Vietnam veterans also make an appearance in Phil Donahue and Ellen Spiro's *Body of War* and Michelle Mason's *Breaking Ranks*, about U.S. military personnel seeking asylum in Canada to avoid deployment, or redeployment, in Iraq. Focusing on four of the more prominently reported conscientious objectors (Jeremy Hinzman, Brandon Hughey, Joshua Key, and Kyle Snyder), this advocacy documentary enquires how they came to enlist; how they came to reconsider; how they came to Canada—and whether they'll be permitted to stay. Their case is pressed by Jeffry House, a human rights lawyer who fled the draft some thirty years earlier. But the Canadian legal system proves unreceptive to his argument that, since the war violates international law, the men he represents are political refugees who risk long prison sentences, or even the death penalty, should they be deported to the U.S. Made two years ago, Mason's film ends with the initial rejection of Hinzman and Hughey's cases. (Since then, higher Canadian courts have also rejected Hinzman's appeals, though a deportation order for September 23, 2008 was stayed on September 22.)

Through its four protagonists and their lawyer, *Breaking Ranks* articulates a moral case against the war based on both the illegality of the resort to force and the day-to-

day illegalities it entails. Seeking to raise anti-war consciousness, *Body of War* adopts a less cerebral approach, preferring to tug ferociously on the heartstrings. The angriest documentary the war has yet produced, it uses a twenty-five-year-old paraplegic veteran, Tomas Young, as the vessel for its rage: a soldier caught in the shoulder by an AK-47 round five days into his tour and left paralyzed from the chest down. That Tomas himself chooses to turn his wheelchair-bound body into a projectile aimed squarely at the Bush Administration doesn't alleviate nagging concerns about the manipulativeness of this relentlessly corporeal polemic.

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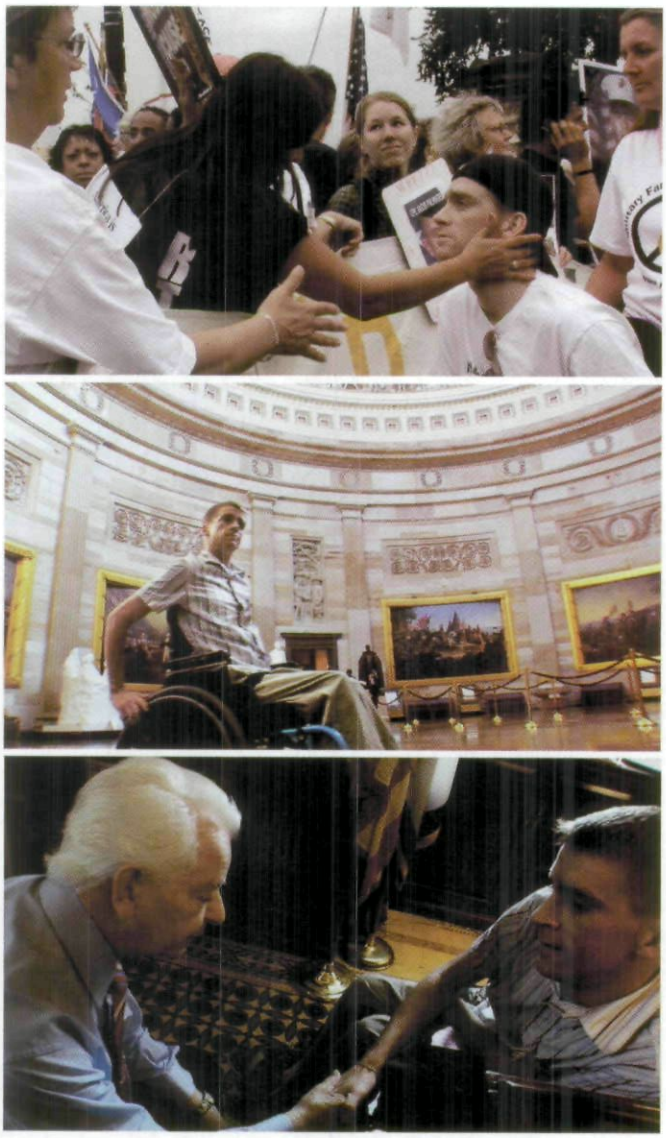
Body of War takes pains to familiarize viewers with the workings, and refusals to work, of Tomas's body. A spinal cord injury, as he points out and as we plainly observe, doesn't just mean confinement to a wheelchair, but constant pain, dizziness, nausea, and an inability to regulate body temperature and bodily functions. All this is documented without euphemism or averted gaze. We see Tomas's mother catheterizing him: "Not the first time I've had your pee on my hand," she reminds him when things go awry. Meanwhile, his girlfriend (then wife) cleans out his "puke pan," and goes online to seek advice about how accidental bowel movements might be avoided on their wedding day. With marriage looming, Tomas's penis—and its inability to rise to the occasion—preoccupies *Body of War*'s naming of the parts. Far removed from the coy avoidance of Forties homecoming melodramas, Spiro and Donahue's documentary explicitly tutors its audience in what Tomas wryly terms "the great big erection sidebar to this story." Counsel is sought and offered from many sources. Bobby Muller, a Vietnam veteran, recommends Viagra and a Caverject injection, predicting that this combination will turn Tomas into "an ace." Giggling hysterically, he predicts, "They'll have to knock your dick down with a sledgehammer!"—a prophecy the couple register with doubtful alarm.

Unlike Homer's wedding to Wilma in *The Best Years of Our Lives,* Tomas and Brie's marriage occurs early in *Body of War,* delivering neither the reassurance of a ring perfectly pincered into place nor the promise of a connubial happy-ever-after. Instead, Brie's voluminous gown catches in the wheelchair after the vows are exchanged. "Damn your big dress," Tomas mutters, not quite playfully, as he yanks white satin from the wheel—a portent of things to come. By the end of the film, ten months later, the couple has separated. While Brie seems as embittered by Tomas's reluctance to engage emotionally as his incapacity to do so sexually, he greets bachelorhood bullishly. With the marriage shrugged off as an infantilizing deferral of independence, he consigns a wedding portrait to the closet along with his purple heart ("What they give you for getting shot")—two equally distasteful mementos, martial and marital.

Offering this as a moment of catharsis, Donahue and Spiro nevertheless strive for a more redemptive ending—something to leave us simultaneously shaken and stirred. Uplift is necessary, and it's discovered at the scene of the crime to which *Body of War* repeatedly returns: Capitol Hill. Throughout the film, episodes from a year in Tomas's life as antiwar activist are cross-cut with C-SPAN footage of the October 2002 Senate debate on H.J. Resolution 114, authorizing war in Iraq. To an ominous drumbeat, names of the seventy-seven aye voters are checked off; the war's spurious legitimations subjected to withering scorn. But amid the villains, Donahue and Spiro identify a few good apples, none rosier than Senator Robert Byrd, whose impassioned refusal to grant the President war-making powers provides a counterpoint to the roll call of dishonor.

It's only fitting, then, that *Body of War* should conclude by bringing its two heroes face to face, with Tomas carried up the Capitol steps by fellow antiwar veterans to meet Senator Byrd. Frail of body but stout of ego, the elder statesman appears less interested in Tomas's experiences than in lauding his own valor in opposing the war. Unable to read the names of the "immortal twenty-three," Byrd asks Tomas to help him recite the roster of those who voted against the Iraq War resolution. In the final sequence, he abandons one of his two canes to lean on Tomas's shoulder as they progress down the corridor. "I guess we both have mobility issues," the young man gently quips before offering condolences on Byrd's recent bereavement. "Yes, my darling's an angel now," the Senator sighs. And there, on a swelling tide of sentimentality, it ends.

The credits roll to the defiant strains of Eddie Vedder's "No More"—a song specially written for *Body of War.* But while the full-throated refrain, "With his body he's saying/No more war" channels the film's mood, this chorus imperfectly captures its politics. Spiro and Donahue give pacifism a wide berth in favor of a more limited critique of what's wrong with this particular war: that it harms American bodies; claims American lives; costs American dollars; damages American democracy; corrodes American prestige—and does so without any credible evidence of Iraqi culpability. Moreover, this wrong-



Iraq War veteran Tomas Young at an antiwar demonstration (top) and in Washington to meet with Senator Robert Byrd in *Body of War.*

headed war distracts attention and resources from the *right* war against America's *real* enemies: the battle Tomas says he enlisted to fight in a surge of patriotic fervor on September 13, 2001. Namely, the war in Afghanistan.

Only once, when Tomas's mother consults icasualties.org to check that another son serving in Iraq isn't among the day's fatalities, does *Body of War* register that Iraq—"a country that had nothing to do with 9/11"—is also a site of suffering. (The figure cited, 31,000 civilian fatalities, now stands at between 88,733 and 96,466 according to the organization Iraq Body Count.) But this fleeting acknowledgement isn't pursued. That's not, after all, the story Spiro and Donahue set out to tell. And since their objective is so calculatedly to kindle Americans' outrage one appreciates why, in strategic terms, they choose to focus exclusively on Tomas. Not only is he an engaging spokesman of the antiwar movement but (as Eddie Vedder's lyric implies) his body itself serves as an unanswerable interrogative: So, the war was worth *this?*

Confronted with one young man's pain, resilience, and candor—it really pisses Tomas off that his body's so useless; that other people can walk and he can't—it may seem callous to insist that other suffering demands attention. And yet. To use the wounded veteran as *Body of War* does is also to disarm broader criticism of the war: to attenuate consideration of it as, above all, a body blow to Iraq. Instead, Spiro and Donahue present us with a purely American tragedy, but a tragedy in which they discern seeds of patriotic promise below the topsoil of perfidy. By valorizing the heroism of the Senate's "immortal 23," they gesture towards national regeneration: a republican faith that America can, and will, be "good again" just liked it used to be. In this way, the war is mystified as an abomination that's essentially an aberration—a detour from an otherwise illustrious national past.

If the injured veteran serves as recruiting sergeant for the antiwar movement in *Body of War,* Terry Sanders's documentary, *Fighting for Life,* mobilizes the same figure to reverse effect: as a renewable resource for martial endeavor. Here we track the progress of a fresh cohort of students through their first year at the Uniformed Services University medical school, while concurrently observing USU alumni at military hospitals in Bilad, central Iraq, and Ramstein, Germany. Made with support from the American Film Foundation, corporate sponsors including Johnson & Johnson, and the Friends of USU, it plays like an extended promotional ad for the beleaguered West Point of combat medicine. As such, it makes an insistent case that we—like the physicians and nurses whose work it documents—bracket off the politics of the war as a needless distraction. On the "life-saving end of things" one simply gets on with tending the wounded. Whether one cares for the president or not, there are gravely injured men and women to be cared for, and that's all that counts.

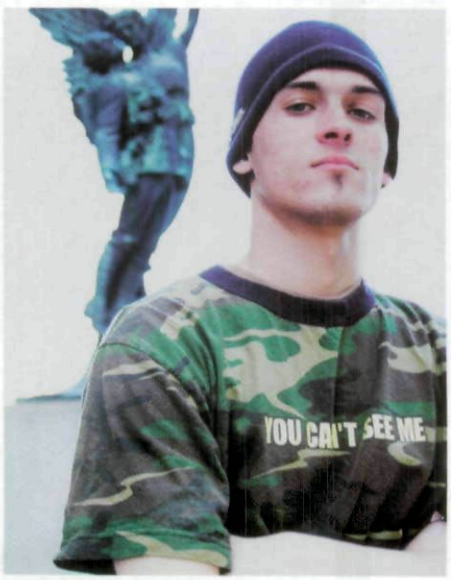
"You don't really get a lot of feedback," one doctor notes. "But when you do get some, it's almost always an uplifting story"—which is exactly what this documentary offers. Where both *Body of War* and *Lioness* depict the pursuit of proper medical attention as a war of attrition waged by veterans and their families, *Fighting for Life* underscores the dedication, expertise, and compassion of military physicians, showcasing the state-of-the-art technological wizardry at their disposal. And it is indeed remarkable to observe how a plastic cranium can be implanted; a hand painstakingly refashioned; skin and flesh transposed from one area to another; how bodies—people—may be reassembled. When the camera alights on a sign over the entrance to Walter Reed Medical Center—"We Provide Warrior Care"—Sanders clearly intends no irony. It's impossible to imagine this could be the same place reprimanded in 2007 for its unsanitary conditions, neglect, and mismanagement.

Unerringly upbeat, *Fighting for Life* strives to have us feel good about all this suffering. Despite its unflinching depiction of injured bodies, rarely does Sanders countenance despair as a permissible—or inevitable—response to catastrophic harm. One surgeon briefly queries whether, on coming round, a triple amputee will necessarily thank him for the gift of life without both legs and one arm. Strikingly, the only patient shown uttering such a sentiment is an Iraqi soldier, Captain Furat: "A soldier's soldier, a warrior" a medic points out, lest skeptics question his entitlement to care. "I don't like my life. Please kill me," he begs, having just been told that his legs "probably won't ever work again." The doctor duly assures him that many people love him and "they don't care whether you can walk again." But what, if any, comfort he derives from such assurances we never learn. Captain Furat makes no further appearance in *Fighting for Life.*

Loathe to accentuate the negative, Sanders foregrounds the more inspiring case of Specialist Crystal Davis, a young woman from Texas whose right leg has been amputated below the knee and who simultaneously faces the potential loss of her left foot. A fighter, she responds to her situation with gutsy bravado and a new tattoo of her machine-gun-toting hero, Tigger—a lifelong friend, "because he always bounces right back." As for her injuries, she regards them as "battle wounds" that she intends to wear with pride. Just once, "for about five seconds," did she succumb to "why did this happen to me?" self-pity, her dad avers. To strains of Springsteen, Sanders's film closes with father and daughter heading home to

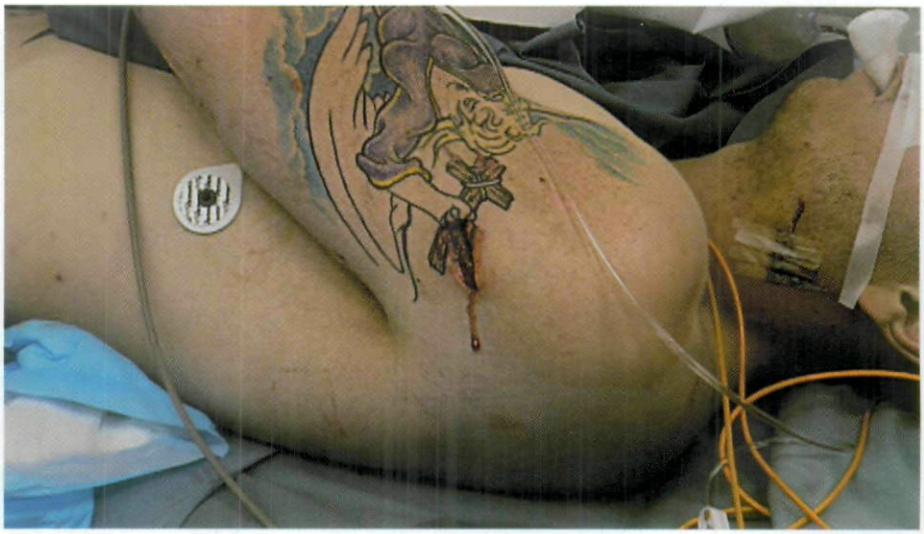
Iraq War veteran Joshua Key has sought asylum in Canada in *Breaking Ranks.*

Brandon Hughey has refused deployment to Iraq in *Breaking Ranks.*



Kyle Snyder remains AWOL from the U.S. Army in *Breaking Ranks.*

Crystal Davis, who lost her leg below the knee, in *Fighting for Life.*



An injured soldier is treated for his wounds in *Fighting for Life.*

Texas, Crystal propelling herself with the aid of two sticks; dad depositing a now-superfluous wheelchair in the back of his truck.

Such portraits of courage are undeniably powerful stuff. Again, it seems unfeeling—if not more brutal—to demur. But for all its scrupulous avoidance of politics, *Fighting for Life* makes just as calculated use of its injured soldiers as does *Body of War*. Here, however, the objective is to resuscitate what John Huston termed the "warrior myth." Decrying the War Department's suppression of his 1946 documentary about blind veterans, *Let There Be Light*, he identified this myth as the delusion "that our American soldiers went to war and came back all the stronger for the experience." Of course some do "bounce back," as *Fighting for Life* graphically attests. But others don't. And then there are those Other others whose pain, losses, and grief have proven almost invisible to American documentary filmmakers, a handful of notable exceptions aside.

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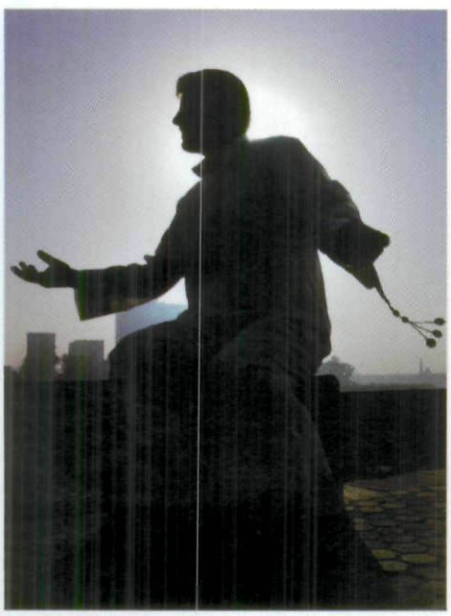
This refusal to engage the war as nothing but an American story—or tragedy—has become more pronounced with time as conditions in Iraq deteriorated in 2005, then apparently improved in 2008 only to drop precipitously from the electoral radar. With almost no one currently caring to mention the war—the surge's "success" now a matter of bipartisan consensus—just one recent documentary feature, Steve Connors and Molly Bingham's *Meeting Resistance*, has appeared to supplement earlier films that brought Iraqi lives into focus, such as Andrew Berends's *The Blood of My Brother*, James Longley's *Iraq in Fragments*,



A member of the Iraqi insurgency is interviewed in *Meeting Resistance.*

Graffiti expresses a popular sentiment in *Meeting Resistance.*

and Laura Poitras's *My Country, My Country* (all released in 2006). Probing the motivations of Iraqi resistors, Connors and Bingham interview several men and women intent on expelling the occupation forces. Their testimony is interspersed with the analysis of a Baghdad political science professor who enunciates what we take to be the filmmakers' own conclusions: that violent resistance primarily flows from nationalist outrage at Iraq's desecration; that it's inflected by Islam but free from sectarianism; that it attracts foreign *fedayeen* without being externally directed, and that it is not primarily comprised of Ba'athist "dead-enders."

Registering these voices, *Meeting Resistance* gives sympathetic substance to those either altogether absent from fictionalized depictions of the war or fleetingly glimpsed specters—figures in keffiyahs lurking at the edge of the frame. That this documentary now seems the artifact of a time past, too eager to discount the possibility of sectarian strife, shouldn't negate its value as a counternarrative. Asking documentary film to plug gaps in day-to-day interpretation left by more immediate forms of journalism is hardly a reasonable demand. And if the Iraq of 2003 that Connors and Bingham conjure is now a foreign country twice over, they do at least remind us that its inhabitants have a real, palpable existence with a different set of stories to tell and wounds to expose.

This should, of course, go without saying—except that so many filmmakers, including those most vociferously opposed to the war, seem determined not to go there. With the veteran as optic, Iraq appears as traumatic flashback: a serrated shard of memory from a war neither comfortably past nor wholly present. ■

This is the third in a series of articles on documentaries on the Iraq War by Susan Carruthers, including "Say Cheese: Operation Iraqi Freedom on Film" *(Cineaste,* Vol. XXXII, No. 1) and "Question Time: The Iraq War Revisited" *(Cineaste,* Vol. XXXII, No. 4). Copies of these back numbers may be ordered using the order form on page 87 or online at www.cineaste.com.