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The YouTube War

By ANA MARIE COX

The National Guardsman in the frame looks grim. His bunkmates are cutting up a bit, clowning for the camera. The cameraman tries to coax some action out the unwilling documentary subject, who refuses: "I'm not supposed to talk to the media," he says. You can hear the insult's sting in the cameraman's shouted protest: "I'm not the media! I'm not the media!" The sharp denial reflects a key collateral campaign in the Iraq war: to keep soldiers strictly on message.

But there's no question that the soldier behind the camera in "The War Tapes" is part of this war's media. Just as Vietnam had been America's first "living-room war," spilling carnage in dinnertime news broadcasts, so is the Iraq conflict emerging as the first YouTube war. Growing up in a world where they can swap MP3s as well as intimate details about their lives via MySpace or Facebook, American soldiers are swapping their Iraq experience as well. There's a byte-enabled intimacy to "The War Tapes," the film that bills itself as the first documentary about the war filmed by those fighting it. Critics of the mainstream media's war coverage might hope that the soldier's unmediated view would be a more positive one. Vice President Cheney complained last March that the public's dwindling support for the war was due to the "perception that what's newsworthy is the car bomb in Baghdad," rather than what success has been had "in terms of making progress towards rebuilding Iraq." Talk show host Laura Ingraham encouraged those covering Iraq to "talk to those soldiers on the ground" in order to get a sense of all the good things happening there that should be "celebrated." By that logic, putting cameras in the hands of those soldiers on the ground should provide enough celebration for an "Up with Iraq" musical.

There's music in a lot of the soldiers' videos, but precious little uplift. In "The War Tapes," one soldier/auteur complains frequently about the risks he and his comrades take to protect the property of the Halliburton subsidiary subcontracted to feed the troops: "Why the f--- am I sitting out here guarding a truck full of cheesecake?" he laments. After another guardsman supplies a Bush Administration-approved justification for their presence (freedom and democracy for the Iraqi people, stability in the Middle East), the cameraman asks, "tell me how you really feel." Deadpan, he continues: "After that happens, maybe we can buy everybody in the world a puppy."

Videos uploaded to the Internet by soldiers themselves depict, if anything, an even grimmer reality. Earlier this summer, the Council on American-Islamic Relations stoked a minor controversy over the video "Hadji Girl," which featured a uniformed Marine singing about falling in love with an Iraqi girl only to be ambushed by her family, after which he "hid behind the TV/ And I locked and loaded my M-16/ And I blew those little f____ers to eternity." Many

defended "Hadji Girl" as gallows humor, but on the web there is no shortage of just plain gallows, either. A search for "Iraq" and "combat" at Ogrish.com or YouTube.com will field dozens of semi-pro snuff films of varying degrees of gore. Many are set to music — power ballads, speed metal, and in one case, an ironic lounge-act crooner.

Raised on Nintendo and Arnold Schwarzenegger movies, the troops fighting this war want to experience the kind of battle promised to them by *Splinter Cell* and *Total Recall*. The videos they make are an attempt to salvage a war whose coherence crumbled soon after Saddam's statue fell. However, while they offer the credibility of an unvarnished image, they lack any meaningful context of what came before and after the clip, or what's happening outside the frame. One veteran described them to the *Wall Street Journal* as "kind of like the ESPN highlight reels — the music is pumping and everyone was running around." Another soldier told the *Los Angeles Times*, "If I had a copy of it, and MTV called, I'd sell it." He may yet get a chance. MTV is airing a special — "Iraq Uploaded" — about these homemade documentaries July 21.

The special closes a loop in pop culture, since these clips are essentially music videos. Traditionally, historians have explained soldiers' documentary efforts — letters home, snapshots — as an attempt to force a narrative onto a situation that's out of control. But these videos don't even try to tell a story. They don't need a plot. Highlight reels at least give it a point: Blow stuff up.

If these dispatches lack a coherent explanation for why the bombs are going off, recall that the Bush Administration has been rather cagey about that, too. They have their own highlight reel, after all: A montage of 9/11, Colin Powell holding up a vial of anthrax, Zarqawi's death mask presented in a gilt frame on a curtained stage. There's some flashes of mortar fire, but this edit contains no footage of dead soldiers or even coffins, no images of the abuse of detainees.

However, video is not the only medium, or the only way we remember. In "Combat Diary," a returning Marine talks about having to drink himself into a stupor every night in order to sleep. Making a music video out of the horror of war won't keep the images from haunting your dreams.

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