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Media, poetics, and the narrativization of war

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Media, poetics and the narrativization of war

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Mass media and television in particular have altered the ways in which we look at our world and the ways in which politics, wars, and history are projected and reconstructed. The media presents seemingly 'objective' narratives of war. 'This is the way it is' say the slightly breathless correspondents out in the field. The anchors at home intone and repeat the idea that these reporters are conveying the immediacy of war. 'It's a minute by minute existence' says Nic Robertson, CNN correspondent in Kandahar. The warfront is brought home to millions of viewers snugly ensconced in the global village. From Vietnam to Afghanistan the media has grown in sophistication and influence. By 'the media', for the purposes of this paper, I refer primarily to CNN International beamed to India since their veracity and authority is greater than Doordarshan or STAR NEWS (two local channels available in India). I will concentrate on the language of war, as well as the ways in which the media determines the parameters of the debate regarding a given conflict. Since I am not a media specialist I will introduce a few poems on the Vietnam War, a war that I have studied in depth. I propose to begin, however, with a propaganda model developed by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky in *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*.

One of the dichotomies sustained during the cold war was that of the free and democratic West and the despotic and totalitarian communist bloc. One of the signs of that 'freedom' was the mass media, the fact that editors and anchors could critique the government of the time. Dissent was permitted in the West unlike the plight of dissidents such as Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Andrei Sakharov. There are nuances within this monolithic position that I cannot examine in detail. I mention this because the Manichaen logic of 'us' versus 'them' helped to sustain both sides in the cold war. The media in the West, however, was and is neither totally 'free' nor 'objective'. 'The mass media serve', in the words of Herman and Chomsky, 'as a system for communicating messages and

symbols to the general populace. It is their function to amuse, entertain, and inform, and to inculcate individuals with the values, beliefs, and codes of behavior that will integrate them into the institutional structures of the larger society.’¹ In other words, the media is a powerfully hegemonic entity that creates and reinforces desirable opinions and values. Herman and Chomsky analyze the ways in which news is filtered before it is presented. These filters include the ownership and profit orientation of TV channels, the reliance of media on information provided by the government, business, and ‘experts’ funded by state authorities, and ‘anticommunism’ as a national religion during the cold war (now it might be said to be antiterrorism). ‘These elements interact with and reinforce one another.’ The filters operate so effectively that well-intentioned media people actually believe they are providing objective and fair coverage. The model is not, of course, a sealed one and dissenting views are occasionally aired or printed. ‘Occasionally’ is the operative word here because dissent is very effectively marginalized in the mass media. In the CNN coverage of the Afghanistan War available in India, we saw or heard very little about the scale and extent of antiwar protests in the US and Europe, but speeches by George W. Bush or Tony Blair were given prime time coverage.

Vietnam was America’s first television war bringing home a sense of the carnage to millions of American homes. The media has been blamed by Congress, some veterans, and other responsible people in power of actually losing the war for the US. The logic is that images of war turned people off and they didn’t want to see napalmed villages while eating their TV dinners. Hence they turned against the war and persuaded President Nixon to start the withdrawal of US troops. Even as astute a critic of war as Paul Fussell asserts that the media during the Vietnam conflict was a moral agent, as opposed to its role during the Second World War:

[...] in unbombed America especially, the meaning of the war seemed inaccessible. As experience, thus, the suffering was wasted. The same tricks of publicity and advertising might have succeeded in sweetening the actualities of Vietnam if television and a vigorous uncensored moral journalism hadn’t been brought to bear.²

This is further from the truth than it might seem. As Herman and Chomsky point out: ‘It is a highly significant fact that neither then [i.e. 1965 when US Marines landed in Danang in south Vietnam], nor before, was there any detectable questioning of the righteousness of the American cause in Vietnam, or of the necessity to proceed to full scale

intervention. By that time of course, only questions of tactics and costs remained open, and further discussion in the mainstream media was largely limited to these narrow issues.’³ Mainstream media seldom, if ever, questioned the basic tenets of the war, i.e. the US was in Vietnam to protect and foster democracy. Facts inconvenient to these tenets were ignored or suppressed. Jack Lawrence, correspondent for CBS, has pointed out in his memoir, *The Cat from Hue*, that there was a significant degree of self censorship in the mass media, and that some scenes of war were actually enacted before the camera for consumption at home. *TIME-LIFE* magazine did not publish Ron Ridenhour’s photographs of the My Lai massacre for more than a year after the event. Print media and TV created and echoed a language that dehumanized the enemy. The death of civilians was ‘collateral damage’, Free Fire Zones implied areas where any Vietnamese person could be killed irrespective of his/her political affiliation or status as civilian, and acronyms such as DMZ contributed to the process of dehumanization. In sharp contrast to the media, it is in poetry that we find a resistance to this debasing of language and humanity.

At an obvious but important level Robert Bly’s long poem *The Teeth Mother Naked at Last*, published in 1970, deals with the issue of disinformation - and its conceptual matrix, rationalizing, justifying - in an idiom of force and insistence. The agenda is not one of unearthing ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ information, it is one of highlighting the proliferation of the war, and the polyphony of that spread. The poem counterpoints brutal destruction with clinical military jargon:

This is what it’s like for a rich country to make war
 this is what it’s like to bomb huts (afterwards described as
 “structures”)
 this is what it’s like to kill marginal farmers (afterwards
 described as “Communists”).⁴

The appropriation of language and its manipulation for projecting doctored versions of reality is obvious and sinister. ‘Huts’ become ‘structures’, and ‘farmers’ are demonized into ‘Communists’. It is a process of naming at which the political establishment was adept. The fact that some ‘farmers’ may have been ‘Communists’ is not as important as all farmers being classified as such. From the perspective of the National

Liberation Front (the Vietcong), or the north Vietnamese, with a long anti-imperialist history, the farmers can never actually have been ‘marginal’.⁵ ‘Marginal’ is itself a naive epithet employed from a metropolitan, abstract standpoint, and this is Bly’s position as well, especially in his more didactic outbursts. The naive generalizations are indicative of a lack of comprehension of the ‘other’, who is objectified and dehumanized by the politicians and the military. The military establishment in Vietnam generated its own argot (just as the soldier developed a very different slang to describe the war): MACV, I Corps, II Corps, DMZ, ‘body count’, pacification, Strategic Hamlet Program. These helped to create an easily definable and therefore confinable reality, and served to depersonalize and dehumanize the enemy. Bly highlights ‘the horrors of abstraction - [...] the cartographic work of reinscribing Vietnam as a military arena’.⁶ Once the process of reinscription, reinforced by the politicians, was entrenched, the war could safely be consigned to an event happening in a distant part of the world. While the distance was a literal fact, the war had everything to do with the way America perceived itself and its role in the world. A large majority accepted the basic myths justifying US involvement and the images of war beamed daily co-existed placidly with the American way of life. Bly does not wish this placid response to continue, and collapses the distance between the war ‘out there’ and the war ‘within’ America - its collective psyche and national ethos as manifested in Vietnam, the civil rights movement, and the general atmosphere of strife. Bly refuses to distance the war:

If one of those children came toward me with both hands
 in the air, fire rising along both elbows,
 I would suddenly go back to my animal brain,
 I would drop on all fours screaming,
 my vocal chords would turn blue, so would yours,
 It would be two days before I could play with my
 own children again.

[*Teeth Mother*, 19]

Regressing to the ‘animal brain’ is essential in Bly’s opinion to comprehend the problems represented by Vietnam. The poem is a psychological analysis of American history based on the myth of the Teeth Mother, which posits an opposition between the Good Mother and the Death (or Teeth) Mother. This may be compared to Ezra Pound’s

‘Hugh Selwyn Mauberly’, where the poet characterizes his own generation as being tainted by war and its lies:

Died some, pro patria,
 non ‘dulce’ non ‘et decor’...
 walked eye-deep in hell
 believing in old men’s lies, then unbelieving
 came home, home to a lie,
 home to many deceits,
 home to old lies and new infamy;
 usury age-old and age-thick
 and liars in public places.⁷

The most direct echo occurs a little later in the poem:

There died a myriad,
 And of the best, among them,
 For an old bitch gone in the teeth,
 For a botched civilization[.]

[‘Hugh Selwyn Mauberly’, 191]

Pound’s evocation of a rottenness at the heart of civilization reinforces the idea of a terrible cyclicality, almost the inevitability of war fought in every generation for spurious ideals. In Bly’s vision of America, *The Teeth Mother* ‘suggest[s] the end of psychic life, the dismembering of the psyche’.⁸ It is this dismembering of a personal and collective psyche that he presents. Normal, personal relationships seem like a weird aberration, and the prospect of playing with one’s children is as incongruous as the nonchalance with which the two pilots seek to ‘take out as many structures as possible’.

The *Teeth Mother* motif, in so far as Bly uses it to analyze American society, leads to further aesthetic insights regarding political poetry. He posits a core of impulses and ideas that must be tapped to rejuvenate the polity and poetry:

It’s clear that many of the events that create our foreign relations and our domestic relations come from more or less hidden impulses in the American psyche. It’s also clear I think that some sort of husk has grown around that psyche, so that in the fifties we could not look into it or did not. The Negroes and the Vietnam War have worn the husk thin in a couple of places now. But if that is so, then the poet’s main job is to penetrate the husk around the American psyche, and since that psyche

is inside *him* too, the writing of political poetry is like the writing of personal poetry, a sudden drive by the poet inward.⁹

The darkness-at-the-heart-of-America kind of psycho-poetic analysis is valuable in its awareness of historical and collective memory, in its perceptions of the connections between the war and the civil rights movement, and the need for the poet to introspect and internalize the collective, psychic tremors surrounding him. The acknowledgement of the poet's complicity - 'since that psyche is inside *him* too' - is essential and ironic, particularly for poets such as Bly, who often forget this and take on the stance of the neutral prophet. The formulation is thus suspect in its attempt to search for the essential causes or flaws that have led to Vietnam. Implicit in this statement is the idea that the poet has the answer/s to the dilemmas facing the country. Such an analysis is couched in absolute and prophetic terms, and substitutes one set of certainties (the rhetoric surrounding the war) with another (the evil at the heart of America), obliterating the complex histories of the past in the very process of recovery.

In Bly's poetics and representation of Vietnam there is a calculated attempt to establish the extent to which brutalization within American society is responsible for its actions in that country. He does not see the war as an aberration in America's pristine history, but rather as an extension of earlier histories of conquest, and these histories constitute a collective repressed memory, the psyche that must be probed by the poet:

I think the Vietnam war has something to do with the fact that we murdered the Indians. We're the only modern nation that ever stole its land from another people. [...] What you do first when you commit a crime is you forget it and then you repeat it. So therefore in my opinion what we're doing is repeating the crime with the Indians. The Vietnamese are our Indians.¹⁰

The comfortable lobotomy of Vietnam from US historical memory, traditions, and values, practised not only by ordinary Americans and politicians, but by Hollywood over the past thirty years, is something that Bly will not perform. Passages in *Teeth Mother* refer to the connections between seemingly disparate imperial encounters:

The ministers lie, the professors lie, the television lies,
the priests lie [...]

These lies mean that the country wants to die.
 Lie after lie starts out into the prairie grass,
 like enormous trains of Conestoga wagons. [Teeth Mother, 10]

There is a rhetorical assertiveness and shrillness in these lines that project the poet as truth teller. Concurrently, however, the awareness of a historical legacy and climate of 'lies' enables Bly to interpret various connections in US history that are often suppressed.

'Watching Television' is a vision of America as a society convulsed by violence:

Sounds are heard too high for ears,
 From the body cells there is an answering bay;
 Soon the inner streets fill with a chorus of barks.

We see the landing craft coming in,
 The black car sliding to a stop,
 The Puritan killer loosening his guns.

Wild dogs tear off noses and eyes
 And run off with them down the street -
 The body tears off its own arms and throws them into the air.
 [...]
 The filaments of the soul slowly separate:
 The spirit breaks, a puff of dust floats up,
 Like a house in Nebraska that suddenly explodes.¹¹

As a phantasmagoric representation of and meditation on historic, psychic, and societal violence, this poem is unexceptionable. Themes adumbrated in *The Teeth Mother* recur here: the violence within the heart and mind of America, the combination of the crusader-killer ('The Puritan killer loosening his guns') and guilt-ridden reformer individual ('The filaments of the soul slowly separate'). The fundamental contradiction between the millennial hopes and brutal actualities to fulfil that vision comes to a head in a society at war with itself. The individual seems to have lost control and violence takes on a life of its own: 'The body tears off its own arms and throws them into the air.' This dislocated violence mirrors the act of watching the Vietnam War on television which further alienated the war by never showing wounded or dead US soldiers, and where actual violence was almost never televised. Television allowed the viewer to spectate without responsibility, to maintain a comfortable distance from the war. Writing at the time of the

Falkland/Malvinas Islands conflict Raymond Williams referred to this distancing, the ‘latent culture of alienation, within which men and women are reduced to models, figures and the quick cry in the throat’.¹² Williams’s statement on the Falklands War is applicable to Vietnam where no responsible citizen could totally dissociate her/himself from the war. The fact that a majority of citizens treated Vietnam as being ‘outside’ their domain and their lives was indicative of dislocated violence; treating the violence committed by their compatriots as if it was being done by anonymous ‘others’. These ‘others’ could be the politicians or the soldiers, but the fact that they constituted an integral part of the nation was often overlooked. While particular groups were held responsible for the war, national myths and ideologies were seldom questioned. The passivity that the great majority displayed during the war is the object of Bly’s criticism. Vietnam, as pointed out earlier, was the first war brought directly into the homes of every television owner in the US. Individual citizens watched American power destroy another nation and this is Bly’s central point: that by not protesting the war, they silently participated in the dismemberment of the nation’s spirit: ‘The spirit breaks, a puff of dust floats up’. There is a disturbing involution that occurs in the act of watching this war on television: a society watching itself destroy itself in its desire to fulfil noble ideals. It is a society inured to violence, unable or unwilling to acknowledge the depth of violence within the country that manifests itself in Vietnam.

In his poem ‘The Language of the Tribe’, Howard Nemerov reproduces the discourse of official doublespeak to indicate the inadequacy of a representational mode that presumes a monopoly on ‘truth’:

The Secretary spoke of the “facilities.”
Under his bald dome the mouth opened and spoke.

The raids, he said, were protection reaction responses
Against the enemy’s anti-aircraft facilities.

That were harassing our unarmed reconnaissance
Surveillance over their facilities.

But might the bombs have damaged other targets?
Under his bald dome the mouth opened and spoke.

Possibly, he said, the bombs might have
Deprived the enemy's facilities

Of access to logistic and supply
Facilities in close proximity

To primary targets; by which he meant, I think:
"The bastards kept the bullets near the guns."¹³

The poem is a striking example of what Hugh Kenner defines as the 'phosphorescent quotation': 'It was long supposed that a politician was best mocked by parody; by isolating traits and exaggerating them. But in the mid 1950s satirists discovered that to mock Dwight Eisenhower it was sufficient to quote him verbatim.'¹⁴ The formal tone of the poem is deliberately foregrounded so that it can be undercut by the intervention of an alternative 'personal' voice and idiom. There is no single referent for Vietnam, no precise definition that can locate, isolate, and categorize the war, and this poem highlights the hierarchy of discourse operative in representations of the war. The 'centre', the 'truth' is constituted and articulated by particular administrations, and policy and military planners. At a press conference, which is an arena for the dissemination of this 'truth', the poet is 'marginal' by virtue of expressing an alternative and less acceptable 'truth'. However, the poetic statement is 'central' to any representation of the war (and this is even more apparent in poetry by veterans) since it locates Vietnam in a non-absolutist matrix. The centre-margin paradigm requires the poet to constantly negotiate the problematic and often invisible boundaries between authority and dissent, the absolute and the relativistic.

The question of location (the poet and politician vis-à-vis the war) and proliferation of the war is a central concern in the poem 'Continuous Performances': 'The war went on till everything was it' [*Sentences*, 19]. The protean nature of Vietnam complicates the position of the anti-war protestor and poet. The anti-war poet can easily be assimilated into the larger framework of democratic pluralism (for instance, the way in which Ginsberg was perceived 'as a figure of patience, charm, and conciliation' even in the Sixties, and is now included in university syllabi in the US), and a polity that can absorb and tolerate protest can parade its democratic credentials.¹⁵ Of course, plurality does not necessarily imply

actual debate, it involves the manufacture of consensus through the media and films, among other means:

the growing war
 Already sponsoring movies about itself
 To let the children know what it was like. [Sentences, 19]

The influence of films harks back to the Second World War because it was the exploits of John Wayne and Audie Murphy that inspired many Americans to go to Vietnam.¹⁶ The process of selective remembrance and re-presentation is evident in films about the Vietnam War, and Nemerov is anxious about its effects on collective national memory. Hollywood is not the only agent participating in the rewriting of the war. The documentary *Hearts and Minds* analyses the immense power and resilience of mainstream nationalism. In the film, Lt. George Coker, a POW, lectures on patriotism and the American way of principled survival to schoolchildren and mothers. He is welcomed back as a national hero. The film analyzes how the POW myth helped to create an acceptable heroism, in a war devoid of heroes, within the military-nationalist framework. While *Hearts and Minds* critically analyzes some issues, another documentary titled *Vietnam Memorial* is essentially a healing, reconciliatory film. While there can be no objection to the desire for healing the wounds of the war, it becomes problematic when that healing is at the expense of historical accuracy and memory. In this film, Vietnam is included in the pantheon of glorious sacrifices and history is revised: ‘We didn’t lose the war. The politicians did’ says a veteran in the film. The veteran is rehabilitated as a hero and absolved of all responsibility of trying to understand the war and its causes; so is the nation. The statement quoted is part of the extremely select remembrance that the Vietnam Memorial as monument and document contributes to, and that Hollywood films advance. A continual reappraisal and redescription of given realities is necessary if the poet is to resist the sort of convenient simplifications available in mainstream culture.

In dominant American political myths as well as in popular culture representation, particularly film (*First Blood*, *Platoon*, *Forrest Gump*), Vietnam has been rewritten as a just and noble cause. Here are just two examples. Robert McNamara acknowledges errors

and his sense of unease at the way the war was conducted, but he concludes his memoir with a reiteration of basic goals:

Let me be simple and direct - I want to be clearly understood: the United States of America fought in Vietnam for eight years for what it believed to be good and honest reasons. By such action, administrations of both parties sought to protect our security, prevent the spread of totalitarian Communism, and promote individual freedom and political democracy.¹⁷

George P. Schultz, Secretary of State in the Reagan administration, was equally forthright. In an address at the Department of State, on 25 April 1985, he said:

We carry the banner of liberty, democracy, the dignity of the individual, tolerance, the rule of law. Throughout our history, including the period of Vietnam, we have been the champion of freedom, a haven of opportunity, and a beacon of hope to oppressed peoples everywhere.¹⁸

In a post-Vietnam world these assertions are ironic, reflecting a lack of historical consciousness, and reinstating of dominant 'establishment' positions. The emphasis in the political and military sphere has been on learning the 'lessons' of Vietnam. These lessons relate specifically to two factors that have determined American involvement in subsequent conflicts. One, no US ground forces must be involved, or if they are it must be for the shortest possible duration. Two, the media must be more effectively managed so that even the occasional voices of dissent are suppressed. Media management during the Gulf War, the Kosovo conflict, and the war in Afghanistan in particular exemplify the lessons of Vietnam. Note that none of the moral, ethical, ideological, and political debates that raged during the 60s are mentioned amongst the lessons learned, for if they were it would amount to interrogating some of the basic tenets of US democracy, freedom, and its status as a global power.

The Vietnam War was televised primarily for an American audience. It was the Gulf War that introduced war to a global television audience and made CNN and its reporter, Peter Arnett famous. Arnett's line, 'the skies are illuminated over Baghdad', projected war as spectacle, the transformation of death and destruction into a laser show, computer game, or film. There was no mention on CNN (or any other news channel) of incinerated Iraqi soldiers who were retreating and bombed during the retreat. Photographs of the infamous 'highway of death' surfaced later in selected print media. The increasing technologization of war allows for pride in the mechanics of destruction, which obscures the primary site of war, the human body. As Jean Baudrillard points out, 'The real object is

wiped out by news – not merely alienated, but abolished. All that remains of it are traces on a monitoring screen.’¹⁹ TV wars accompanied by military experts pontificating on the virtues of a Stealth Bomber or a cluster bomb, further anaestheticize the horror of war. There were only passing references to the thousands of Iraqi children who have died or are malnourished due to UN sanctions. This lack of coverage is because they constitute what Herman and Chomsky call ‘unworthy victims’, i.e. their deaths are not worth mentioning because they happen to belong to countries that are undemocratic and/or out of favour with the West. Herman and Chomsky’s model of ‘worthy’ and ‘unworthy victims’ is useful in analyzing some aspects of the media narratives of the conflict in Afghanistan.

The media coverage of the Afghanistan War was subtler in terms of presenting a seeming plurality of voices. For instance, there were reports on the humanitarian crisis and conditions in refugee camps (although not on the extent or their direct relation to the US bombing). What were excluded were the hundreds of dead civilians from this and other related conflicts. There were no televised candlelit vigils or services for the Palestinian dead, for example. The ‘worthy-unworthy victim’ dichotomy is neatly sustained even in the midst of media pluralities.

My analysis of these narratives and representations will perforce be impressionistic and tentative since the crisis is still unfolding before us, despite the overt sense of closure provided by the recent elections in Afghanistan. Focus has shifted to Iraq and the seemingly endless insurrection there, and crises roll on rather than come to an abrupt end. Also at this point I want to make an obvious statement about the fact of the September 11 attacks. Nothing can mitigate the evil of the premeditated actions or the loss of innocent lives and trauma of survivors on that day. It was an act of absolute terror and just as innocent Iraqi children or Afghans ought not to suffer for the sins of their leaders, so too American citizens cannot be held responsible for all acts of US foreign policy. There can be little doubt, as Robert Fisk, John Pilger, and Martin Amis, among others have pointed out, that US policy in Palestine, Iraq, and the Middle East has been reprehensible and overtly biased toward Israel. This policy might *explain* the hatred that sections of the Islamic world feel toward the US, but it does not *justify* acts of terror against civilians. A State Department official stated in an American studies conference I attended in Kathmandu in September 2001 that it made his blood boil to hear people make connections

between US policy vis-à-vis Palestine and September 11. My position is not so extreme or dehistoricized, but I do believe that in the process of presenting a critique of the media coverage of the conflict we need to keep in mind the utter desolation of the human tragedy visited on New York and Washington.

The War on Terror is a war without frontiers although some obvious geographical entities are being pummelled daily. It is also against an elusive and media savvy enemy and that makes the coverage even more complex and contentious. From a cynical point of view September 11 presented an ideal media opportunity: 24-hour news channels competing for viewer attention couldn't have asked for anything better. As Ben, a war photographer in Pat Barker's novel *Double Vision*, puts it, 9/11 fulfilled in a horrible way our 'appetite for spectacle'. In this context it is interesting to notice the ways in which CNN calibrated the coverage through dominant headlines, starting with ATTACK ON AMERICA, then WAR ON TERROR, and finally STRIKE AGAINST TERROR. The saturation coverage in the initial aftermath (without advertisements, which is unprecedented) presented a repeated juxtaposition of live and still pictures. The live pictures of the planes dashing into the twin towers were of course spectacular, but they were bolstered by stills during the breaks. Breaks are an integral part of news programmes because infotainment requires advertising revenue and also competes with increasingly short viewer attention spans. The stills, with appropriate background music, created an ambience of collective grief, outrage, consolidation, and resolve. The rubble of the twin towers, architectural absence as powerful presence of loss and devastation, were the focus during the first week. The stills also displayed a smiling Bush with Sikhs, and then turned to aircraft carriers and other signatures of war. Many experts on terrorism, international policy, counter-terrorism aired their views but there was a surprising homogeneity of these viewpoints. There has been little or no analysis of why the events of September 11 happened, the emphasis is on the who (the FBI whodunit, punctuated by press briefings of a grim John Ashcroft the Attorney General, camouflaging a monumental intelligence failure) and the how. There were information capsules outlining the hierarchy of Al-Qaida (as if it were a modern day multinational), or profiles of Osama bin-Laden, Colin Powell, and other personalities involved in the conflict. This limited focus served to define the parameters of the debate whether it relates to US domestic or foreign policy. For example,

in terms of domestic policy the attacks on Sikhs and Muslims was mentioned, but not given too much coverage. President Bush visited a mosque, posed with Sikh community leaders, and then the problem dropped off the screens. CNN did not, for instance, mention the continuing harassment of Sikhs at airports or the fact that about 900 people of Arab and Asian origin have been under arrest since the attacks. Instead CNN echoed the political ideology of the multiculturalism of the US as an unproblematic entity which must not be questioned or analyzed. It seems to me too much of a coincidence that so many of the news anchors on CNN International (not on CNN USA) since September 11 were hyphenated Americans: Anand Naidoo, Monita Rajpal, Zain Verjee, and Shihab Ritansi, to name a few. If they can read news on CNN surely American freedom and democracy are alive and well.

In terms of foreign policy coverage there was reflection of the newfound bonhomie with Pakistan and the demonization of the Taliban. There was, however, neither any sense of history or of irony in this presentation. For instance, the CIA role in the arming of the Taliban and the close symbiosis between the CIA and the Pakistani Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) was never mentioned. Inconvenient facts disappeared and the dehistoricizing of the past is a crucial mode of creating the television history of the future. Television histories can be vital: there is a ten-part PBS history of the Vietnam War and it has been extremely influential in recreating the story of Vietnam.

The media projection of President Bush combined some of the domestic and international compulsions. He was projected as a consolidator of US resolve and identity, even in patently non-profound statements such as 'I can hear you' when he visited the Trade Center rubble for the first time. More importantly he was represented as the decisive leader of the 'civilized world.' Thus while President Bush and other western leaders reiterated that this was not a war against Islam, there were implicit dichotomies created and sustained between civilization and non-civilization, Christianity and Islam, 'us' and 'them'. The stereotypes remained: Islamic radicals (protestors in Peshawar, Quetta, and Karachi) got plenty of coverage, but there was barely any mention of liberal opinion in Pakistan or anywhere in the Muslim world, implying that perhaps there is no such thing as liberal Muslim opinion. It is through this kind of reportage that Muslims are homogenised as a jihadi and radically 'other' community. The media subtly maintained Samuel

Huntington's thesis of a clash of civilizations. Sometimes the rhetoric was not so subtle. Aameena Saeed, in an article in *The Times of India*, quotes Bill O'Reilly of Fox Television, who first advocated the bombing of Afghanistan to rubble and then went on to target Libya's Moammar Gaddafi. If Gaddafi does not relinquish power then 'we bomb his oil facilities, all of them. And we mine the harbor in Tripoli... We also destroy all the airports in Libya. Let them eat sand.'²⁰ This rhetoric is not very dissimilar from that of the overt terrorists.

For a President who had never travelled beyond Mexico and whose administration prior to September 11 was characterized by brash unilateralism, building a coalition against terror has been difficult. The media helped by covering the convergence of world leaders at the White House in a show of civilized solidarity. That sense of solidarity further heightened the 'us versus them' syndrome. However, that solidarity occasionally collapsed as when Ariel Sharon compared the so-called appeasement of the Arabs with the appeasement of Hitler. That the closest ally of the US was saying out loud what many might think privately proved to be a diplomatic and political embarrassment.

It is when embarrassing or inconvenient statements were made that media management was at its best. Another example was Bush's 'Wanted Dead or Alive' pronouncement. The declaration harks back to the West and the myths of the American frontier when men were men and not overly troubled by questions of human rights and international law. While the statement made good copy it was diplomatically embarrassing and hence phased out quickly. Another inconvenient phrase altered in the course of the Afghanistan campaign was the change from 'Infinite Justice' to 'Enduring Freedom'. The former was not inclusive enough and reflected more accurately the prejudices of US policy makers. The diplomatically acceptable face is that of Colin Powell, a former general, Vietnam veteran, chief of staff during the Gulf War, black, and good for media projection of the reasonableness of American policy. In both the print and television media there were hints of differences between the so-called Powell doctrine and Donald Rumsfeld, the cold war hawk from the Reagan administration. It is significant that Bush's politically correct cabinet has quite a few figures from the cold war. Of course, there is no real dissent but the projection of a divide furthers the idea that this is a democratic government where

decisions are made after reasoned debate. That the parameters of the debate are strictly controlled is never mentioned.

Press briefings are the second mode of dissemination of information and control and fit in directly with Herman and Chomsky's propaganda model whereby the press depends on the perpetrators of violence for facts about those actions. In the Afghanistan conflict Ari Fleischer was the point man of the government. The briefings were characterized by a sense of bonhomie (Ari seemed to know many journalists by name and they address him as Ari) and no uncomfortable questions were asked. If inconvenient questions were asked they were not answered. Howard Nemerov's poem relating to Vietnam era briefings (popularly known as the Five O'clock Follies) is as relevant now as it was then.

The third and most overt mode of management was the conference that media owners had with Condoleeza Rice who advised the American media to air 'abridged' versions of any future taped statements from Osama bin Laden. She also said that 'inflammatory' language used by the Al Qaida must be removed.²¹ White House spokesman Ari Fleischer went further and warned that American media 'need to watch what they say'.²² The symbiosis between government and media is a commonplace, but what was astonishing is the extent to which the media acceded to the request. Ameena Saeed quotes Rupert Murdoch, News Corp CEO who said, 'We'll do whatever is our patriotic duty.'²³ CNN in an official statement declared 'In deciding what to air, CNN will consider guidance from appropriate authorities.'²⁴ CNN chief Walter Isaacson added, 'After hearing Dr Rice [Dr Rice was Provost of Stanford University prior to her appointment] we're not going to step on the landmines she was talking about.'²⁵

These statements give the lie to the myth of press freedom, media objectivity, and liberal press bias. They are, in this instance, prompted by the threat of Al Jazeera. This is the first television conflict where the enemy is media savvy. The Vietnamese, for instance, did not have access to or use television to present their point of view. Al Jazeera disrupts the cosy solidarity of the US media and speaks to an audience that the US media ignores. Hence bin Laden's use of the media was termed as 'propaganda' and squeezed out of prime time US television. Of course, bin Laden and Al Qaida realize the importance of the

media and are adept at using it in a way that previous enemies were not. The problem with Al Jazeera is that it speaks to a constituency that feels disenfranchised, has a tremendous sense of resentment towards the US, and therefore cannot be dismissed out of hand. The importance of Al Jazeera is evident in the statements made to control access to its footage and the paradoxical fact that Western leaders such as Tony Blair have appeared for interviews on the channel. There seems to be a sudden realization that the 'other' has grievances and a powerful voice to air them.

The media narratives of this and earlier wars are presentations and perpetuations of western, particularly US, hegemony. Al Jazeera is only a blip on the horizon because it has little access to the US market. The solidarity displayed by media barons in the light of administrative advice and the Jazeera threat is perfectly natural within this hegemonic system. Mass media is a global syndicate and big business and therefore unlikely to seriously question the paymasters and power brokers of its time. For example, Rupert Murdoch owns television stations in, or beams news to every continent. He owns STAR NEWS, FOX NEWS, SKY NEWS and so on. It is hardly surprising that STAR NEWS (as well as print media in India) largely parrots US concerns and anxieties. Media ventriloquism is inevitable in a global system with common business interests and therefore common political agendas. These agendas and their narratives are not transparent but a careful analysis reveals certain biases and desires embedded in these highly influential texts and what is not reported is often as significant as what is. Enduring Freedom rolled on while we remained glued to our televisions. Before long we had, and continue to have, the next media spectacle, Gulf War II. As the anchors say: 'Don't go away.'

Endnotes

- ¹ Edward S. Herman & Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (London: Viking, 1994), 1.
- ² Paul Fussell, *Wartime: Understanding and Behavior in the Second World War* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 268.
- ³ Herman & Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent*, 172.
- ⁴ Robert Bly, *The Teeth Mother Naked at Last* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1970), 13. Subsequent references are indicated as *Teeth Mother* after the quotation.
- ⁵ The term 'marginal' could also refer to the status of the farmers who were largely subsistence farmers.
- ⁶ Frank Lentricchia, 'In Place of an Afterword - Someone Reading,' in Frank Lentricchia and Thomas McLaughlin, eds., *Critical Terms for Literary Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 336.
- ⁷ Ezra Pound, 'Hugh Selwyn Mauberly,' *Personae: The Collected Poems of Ezra Pound* (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1926), 190. Subsequent references are indicated after the quotation.
- ⁸ Robert Bly, *Sleepers Joining Hands* (New York, London, Evanston, San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, 1973), 42. Bly writes about the revelation that the war has brought about: 'the Vietnam war has helped everyone to see how much of the Teeth Mother there is in the United States. The culture of affluence opens the psyche to the Teeth Mother and the Death Mother in ways that no one understands' (43).
- ⁹ Robert Bly, 'Leaping Up Into Political Poetry,' in *Talking All Morning* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1980), 98.
- ¹⁰ Robert Bly quoted in James F. Mersmann, *Out of the Vietnam Vortex: A Study of Poets and Poetry Against the War* (Lawrence/Manhattan/Wichita: The University Press of Kansas, 1974), 123.
- ¹¹ Robert Bly, 'Watching Television,' *The Light Around the Body* (New York, Evanston, and London: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1967), 6.
- ¹² Cited in Keith Tester, *Compassion, Morality and the Media* (Buckingham, PA.: Open University Press, 2001), vii.
- ¹³ Howard Nemerov, 'The Language of the Tribe,' *Sentences* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980), 8. Subsequent references are indicated after the quotation.
- ¹⁴ Hugh Kenner, *The Counterfeiters* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), ix. Michael Herr, in an interview with Salman Rushdie recalls 'a US military spokesman describing a bombing raid "north of the Dee Em Zee as having obtained 100% mortality response"'. Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-1991* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1991), 333.
- ¹⁵ Morris Dickstein, *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties* (New York: Basic Books, 1977), 261.
- ¹⁶ There was a resurgence of Hollywood films about the Second World War in the 1990s. Commenting on the influence and ideological orientation of the first crop of Second World War films, Stephen Amidon writes: 'In the first wave of second world war films to hit the beach, Hollywood served as a sort of adjunct to the allied imagination, churning out stories that cemented the public's moral certitude about the justice of the conflict, while paying homage to those who served. These ranged from overtly propagandist vehicles cranked out in the heady final days of the war to the more artistically accomplished efforts appearing somewhat later, such as Clark Gable's *Command Decision* (1948), Gregory Peck's *Twelve o' Clock High* (1949) and John Wayne's prototypical *Sands of Iwo Jima* (1949). In nearly all of these films, unflinching patriotism, selfless camaraderie and stoic bravery (even among those who stayed at home) were posited as the absolute values whose possible existence in the enemy was never really entertained.' Stephen Amidon, 'Back to the Front,' *The Sunday Times*, Section 11, 18 May 1997: 2-3.

¹⁷ Robert S. McNamara, *In Retrospect: The Tragedy and Lessons of Vietnam*, with Brian Van De Mark (New York: Times Books, 1995), 333.

¹⁸ Cited in Robert Emmet Long, ed., *Vietnam Ten Years After* (New York: The H.W. Wilson Company, 1986), 155.

¹⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *The Illusion of the End*, trans. Chris Turner (Stanford, CA.: Stanford University of Press, 1994), 56.

²⁰ Ameena Saeed, 'A Distorted Picture: Media as a Partisan Messenger,' *The Times of India*, 24 October 2001.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ameena Saeed, 'A Distorted Picture,' citing *Reuters*, October 11, 2001.

²⁴ Ibid., citing *Associated Press*, October 10, 2001.

²⁵ Ibid., citing *New York Times*, October 11, 2001.

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