

Atrocities at the Door: Peter Brook's *Tell Me Lies*, Images of Terror and Brechtian Aesthetics

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As we cannot invite the audience to fling itself in to the story as if it were a river and let itself be carried vaguely hither and thither, the individual episodes have to be knotted together in such a way that the knots are easily noticed. The episodes must not succeed one another indistinguishably but must give us a chance to interpose our judgement. — Bertolt Brecht¹

If, as Paul Virilio contends, the technologies of warfare and the cinema are intrinsically tied in their development of new régimes of sight, one must then question the ways in which the cinema has been mobilized in its representations of war. Indeed, one must also examine how filmmakers have analysed the cinema's deployment both as a tool of war-mongering propaganda, and as a means to denaturalise these very representations. Given the present-day contexts of wars on 'terror' and 'axis of evil'—wars against concepts more so than geographically-defined nation-states—a reconsideration of the ways wars come to have meaning through the mediation of moving image technologies is central to any understanding of the Western epistemology of war.² The present-day ubiquity of images of warfare foregrounds the need to historicise the means by which filmmakers have questioned the production of meaning through cinematic technology. The recent history of warfare—from the Gulf War to Bosnia and Kosovo, from Afghanistan to Iraq—foregrounds the incremental ways in which wars are fought through visual representations to an ever-increasing degree.³ One does not have to follow Jean Baudrillard's postulation that the Gulf War did not take place to recognise that a contemporary understanding of warfare is intrinsically tied to its mediation through moving images. With the plethora of semi-documentary 'images-of-war' in circulation, the need for a means of deconstructing these images becomes crucial, and in recent years this practice has re-emerged both in Hollywood, with films such as *Redacted* (Brian DePalma, US, 2007) and the avant-garde with works such as *14.3 Seconds* (John Greyson, Canada, 2008).

While Brechtian models of distancing and self-reflexivity have taken on a central importance in these recent works, the denaturalisation of mediated, semi-documentary images of wars through the deployment of cinematic self-reflexivity does not constitute a new critical practice. One can trace this aesthetic development back to Alain Resnais' two films about World War II, memory and representation: *Night and Fog* (Nuit et brouillard, France, 1955) and *Hiroshima mon amour* (France, 1959), if not to the films of Chaplin, Gance and Eisenstein. Nevertheless, Resnais' films are the central texts that come to terms with the dislocated history and memory of war in post-World War II Europe. To this end, the opening scene of *Hiroshima mon amour* ably demonstrates the tension that lies at the heart of cinematic representations of war and atrocities. Whilst the spectator sees documentary images and reconstructions of the devastation wrought on Hiroshima by the dropping of the Atomic bomb, a Japanese man and a French woman discuss the tenuous relationship between sight and knowledge:

He: You saw nothing at Hiroshima. Nothing. She: I saw the newsreels. On the second day, History tells, I'm not making it up, on the second day certain species of animals rose again from the depths of the earth and the ashes. Dogs were photographed. For all eternity. I saw them. I saw the newsreels. One the first day. On the second day. On the third day. He (interrupting her): You saw nothing. Nothing.⁴

Writing on the relationship between Brecht, the theatre and the cinema, Peter Brook argued in 1960 that while, in his view, Brecht is of limited use in theatre, Brechtian aesthetics are of paramount importance to the cinema, especially in relation to new forms of documentary images. He argues that the advent of television has a great deal to do with the changing nature of spectatorship, and offers Resnais' film as a prime example of this shift:

I believe that the new cinema unconsciously exploits the new independence of the viewer that television has brought about. It is catering to an audience that is capable of judging an image—I'd quote *Hiroshima mon amour* as a supreme example of this. The camera is no

longer an eye; it does not track us into the geographical reality of Hiroshima....The camera in Hiroshima presents us with a succession of documents which bring us face to face with the whole vast historical, human and emotional reality of Hiroshima in a form that is only moving to us through the use of our own, objective judgement. We go into it as it were with our eyes open.⁵

While Brook's position on the use-value of Brecht in the theatre is certainly open to question (Brook ran hot and cold on Brecht throughout his career), his reading of *Hiroshima mon amour* points to the epistemological tension between sight and knowledge that lies behind documentary cinema's claims to represent the 'real' and to the kinds of questions surrounding the representation of atrocities that Brook's own semi-documentary film *Tell Me Lies* (UK, 1968) raises a mere eight years later. This epistemological tension is even more pronounced today than at the height of the Cold War, when *Hiroshima mon amour* was released. In a time where images of warfare have taken on the appearance of virtual reality and a concurrent cynicism about the ability of these very images to communicate anything that approximates the 'real' has permeated many aspects of culture (the debates in both the Western and Arab world over *Al-Jazeera* foregrounds the fact that this is not solely an Anglo-European issue), one must reconsider the ways in which the self-reflexive analysis of the cinematic image can be deployed beyond the realms of post-modernist irony and pastiche which Thomas Elsaesser notes lies at the centre of contemporary representational strategies:

Thus what we see today is the devaluation of once radical techniques and stances, such as distanciation or self-reflexivity. Not only have the media become vertiginously self-reflexive in the recycling of their own histories; their incessant self-parodies and intertextuality have made self-reflexiveness the sign of a closed, self-referential system, the very opposite of Brecht's 'open form' or of his concept of realism as contradiction.⁶

The depoliticisation of this once oppositional tradition that crystallised in the 1960s now calls out for re-evaluation. While documentary self-reflexive aesthetics have become a decontextualised formal strategy far more so than a political tool of self-critical agitation in contemporary fin de siècle culture—though some of the works of Michael Moore and, to a lesser degree, Morgan Spurlock are exceptions to the rule—their initial political imperative still has some distant reverberations today. For instance, a major turning point in the representation of cinematic warfare can be traced to the Viet Nam war and the shifting role played by visual media in that conflict. Here, hand-held cameras came together with the radical politics of the era to charge a given historical moment in such a way as to challenge the supposed transparency of the moving image. Yet, as radical politics and a certain cynicism about mainstream representations of the war came to the forefront in the United States and Britain, a series of questions arose: if one cannot trust the documentary image on the screen, how does one develop a viable, politically engaged way of responding to the images coming out of Viet Nam?

The Genesis of *US* It is this quite paradoxical question that Peter Brook and the Royal Shakespeare Company attempted to address in the stage-play *US* and in its cinematic adaptation *Tell Me Lies*, a neo-Brechtian analysis of the role played by propagandistic images of violence and atrocities with regards to the conflict in Viet Nam and a concurrent analysis of how one might intervene through the theatre and cinema. In both cases, Brook and the RSC demonstrate an acute knowledge of medium-specificity: while *US* reconfigures the relationship between performer, script, stage and audience, *Tell Me Lies* self-reflexively

analyses the nature of documentary and fictional cinematic representation, spectatorship and voyeurism.

US began as a workshop at the RSC to find a means by which to address the question of how to properly or effectively protest US actions in Viet Nam in the context of living in London. Brook explained the thought process behind the production to the actors and theatre workers at the RSC in the following manner: “The theatre ought to be able to speak about a subject as central as the Viet Nam war; no play existed that was in any way adequate; in working together we should try and create the circumstances in which such a play could be written.”⁷ Over the course of three months, the actors, writers, lyricists and Brook engaged in various dramatic exercises and scenes that, through the workshop process were modified, challenged and at times discarded. For a ten-day period the Polish director Jerzy Grotowski, best known for his theory and practice of ‘poor theatre’, worked with the group in order to sharpen the material and the actors’ approaches to it.⁸ However, no record was kept of this workshop, in order to protect the privacy of the actors as they went through their exercises, delving deeply into their own responses to the war. Everyone who was part of the group was asked to contribute material, but it was left to the writers to finalise the play’s script. Scriptwriting was made problematic by the fact that in the first instance scriptwriter Charles Wood was supposed to turn the material arising from the rehearsals into a proper script. Wood, however, left in order to work on Richard Lester’s *How I Won the War* (UK, 1967) in Germany, featuring John Lennon. This left Brook without a proper scriptwriter, and improvisation dominated the process all the more. Eventually, Denis Cannan—who co-wrote the screenplay to *The Beggar’s Opera* (UK, 1953) with Brook—joined the team, leading to some schisms: coming from a slightly earlier generation, Cannan and Brook were disdainful of popular culture, while poet Adrian Mitchell and many of the actors wished to incorporate aspects of popular music and culture into the performance.⁹

Eventually, the material that was deemed usable was divided into two acts: the first act dramatised the effect that the conflict had on the characters’ everyday lives; the second act presented the internal thought processes of the players and the politics of Viet Nam. Once this structure was formulated, State censorship became an issue once the script was sent to the Lord Chamberlain’s office (from 1737 to 1968, under the ‘Licensing Act 1737’ and the ‘Theatre Act 1843’, the Lord Chamberlain was responsible for censoring plays in London, the City of Westminster). When the Lord Chamberlain read the script, he called the head of the RSC, Peter Hall, to tell him the play was “bestial, anti-American and Communist.”¹⁰ The Lord Chamberlain then argued that he should do whatever in his power to make sure that the play is not produced. Only when Hall threatened to pull the season at Stratford-Upon-Avon, did the Lord Chamberlain relent, but promised that cuts would be made. Negotiations went on for quite a while. The backdrop of this negotiation was fraught: on the one hand, the Wilson government was considering abolishing the Lord Chamberlain’s oversight of the theatre, and so the outright banning of the play would seem incongruous. On the other hand, the Lord Chamberlain was concerned enough about the play to contact the British Foreign Office, worrying that US would hurt Britain’s ‘special relationship’ with the U.S.¹¹

With the imminent demise of State censorship on the horizon, the play opened at the Aldwych (one of the two RSC theatres) on October 13, 1967, ran for fifty performances, mostly to a full house, and was greeted with a wide variety of responses, both positive and negative (including a positive analysis by Jean-Paul Sartre, even though he never saw the performance).¹² After the play’s run concluded, Brook and the RSC decided to produce a film version of the work. Yet *Tell Me Lies* is not an adaptation in the traditional sense of the

term; it is far more like a re-imagining of the theatrical production into a semi-documentary cinematic form.

Tell Me Lies: Missing in Action While many films fall through the cracks of cinema history, not many truly controversial ones do. This is one of the many reasons that *Tell Me Lies* is an anomaly. While Brook's other cinematic works such as *Lord of the Flies* (UK, 1963), *Marat/Sade* (UK, 1966) and *King Lear* (UK, 1971) are often quite rightly recognised as seminal texts of 1960s cinema, *Tell Me Lies* is left by the wayside in a seemingly arbitrary manner. The reason *Tell Me Lies* is elided has a great deal to do with the fact that it was one of the first English-language films to be critical of America's presence in Viet Nam. In a similar manner—however inconceivable given the current political and cultural context—a British film critical of the United States' actions in Iraq would have been marginalised in 2003. Indeed, the film was unable to obtain traditional sources of funding, and so seventy individuals from the United States financed it. As Michael Billington noted in 2003 in regards to the play *US*, on which *Tell Me Lies* is based: "Could it, or something like it, happen now? As we sleepwalk towards a possible war with Iraq, can you imagine the Royal Shakespeare Company or the National being cleared for a specially created show that put the conflict in context?"¹³ No plays were forthcoming, but, as if by way of response, Adrian Mitchell, whose poem "To whom it may concern" is set to music as the opening song of *Tell Me Lies*, and from which the film draws its title, restaged his reading of the poem (made famous by his performance of it in 1965, on a bill with Allen Ginsberg at the Royal Albert Hall) by slightly re-writing the lines to the poem, which originally concluded:

You put your bombers in, you put your conscience out,
You take the human being and you twist it all
about So scrub my skin with women
Chain my tongue with whisky Stuff my nose
with garlic Coat my eyes with butter
Fill my ears with silver Stick my legs in plaster
Tell me lies about Viet Nam¹⁴

Mitchell revisited the poem as the second Gulf War loomed and began performing it again. He first did this at an anti-war demonstration in Trafalgar Square on October 13, 2001, then on November 14, 2003 at an anti-war poetry performance at the Bloomsbury Theatre in London, and finally at a Stop Bush rally again in Trafalgar Square on November 23, 2003. The new, revised poem now had a new addendum:

Tell me lies about the war Tell me lies about Afghanistan
Tell me lies about Palestine Tell me lies about Cuba
Tell me lies O tell me pretty little lies Tell me lies about Iraq!

Mitchell himself was quite prescient about Vietnam, and Britain's role in it and future wars. He remarked in a 1968 interview: "[...] I don't think they'll [British youth] have to fight in Vietnam. But they're going to have to fight a white man's war, which is what this whole thing is—what this war is. And it's leading up to a global white man's war, eventually, maybe twenty, thirty years away if we're lucky."¹⁵ Certainly, this is an apt description of Bush and Blair's 'war on terror' and the global implications of the current white man's war against radical Islam. It goes without saying, by "if we're lucky," Mitchell means that thirty years is better than twenty, but the war is nevertheless inevitable.

Agitprop poetry, Brechtian distancing and the anti-war movement were not the only influences on Brook's work. On an aesthetic level, *Tell Me Lies* fits quite comfortably beside contemporaneous works such as Jean-Luc Godard's *La Chinoise* (France, 1967) and the French omnibus film co-ordinated by Chris Marker, *Loin du Vietnam* (France, 1967). For

instance, in Godard's contribution to *Loin du Vietnam*, "Caméra-oeil", the filmmaker sits by a Mitchell camera, and ruminates on wanting to make a film about the war and then realising the limits of representation of the events in Viet Nam, stating: "I wanted to show everything, defoliation, etc. [...] But we are far away, so the best we can do is make films—let Vietnam invade us—come in to our everyday lives, instead of invading Vietnam with our own sensibilities. Instead of our invading them with a generosity we impose, we should let them invade us and see what happens."¹⁶ In many ways, this is also the philosophy that lies behind Brook's work.

Tell Me Lies also goes far beyond the Brechtian strategies found in the other key self-reflexive film of 1960s British cinema: Lindsey Anderson's *If...* (UK, 1968). Yet, with its subject matter and its Brechtian aesthetic challenging some of the dominant paradigms of 1960s British cinema—most notably those of the social realism of the 'kitchen sink' films—*Tell Me Lies* is a film largely forgotten today, never discussed within the canon of British cinema, and rarely examined as an early Viet Nam film, the conflict to which it is an impassioned response. The only other British filmmaker of note engaging in a similar political form of cinematic self-reflexivity at the time was Peter Watkins, whose film *The War Game* (UK, 1967) was banned by the BBC upon its completion. It is also of note that *Tell Me Lies* is not solely elided in British film historiographies: while journals such as *Screen* and *New Left Review* were championing the radical possibilities of Brechtian aesthetics in the early 1970s, *Tell Me Lies* was left out of the pantheon of celebrated Brechtian films in this newly formed canon.¹⁷

For a film now cloaked in utter obscurity, it is all the more remarkable that *Tell Me Lies* includes appearances by Glenda Jackson, Peggy Ashcroft and Paul Scofield, alongside the likes of former 'angry young man' Kingsley Amis, SNCC and Black Panther activist Stokely Carmichael (who predicts the imminent demise of the White race), Beat poet Allen Ginsburg, British MPs Reginald Paget and Tom Driberg and Evening Standard editor Peregrine Worthington. The film is part fiction, part documentary, and follows the lives of a group of Londoners trying to come to terms with Viet Nam and how to properly protest the war in such a way that goes beyond the mere symbols of protest. The film postulates a series of questions through the use of different modes of address. Mark (Mark Jones), a young leftist radical, tries to imagine how a Buddhist monk could immolate himself in protest against Viet Nam. He asks his partner Pauline (Pauline Munro): "Is there anything we care about so much that we'd be willing to burn ourselves?" Glenda (Glenda Jackson), a Maoist, gives lectures and appears as an almost unconscious voice for Mark and Pauline, reading quotes from Mao's little red book of quotations between them as they sleep, such as: "A revolution is not a tea party, or writing an essay, or painting a picture or doing embroidery; it cannot be so refined, so leisurely and gentle, so temperate, kind, courteous, restrained and magnanimous. A revolution is an insurrection, an act of violence by which one class overthrows another."¹⁸ The political trajectory of these characters is intercut with songs, skits and restagings of protests, demonstrations and acts of resistance undertaken against the United States' presence in South East Asia. For instance, the story of Norman Morrison is recreated in black and white, cinéma vérité style, with the American Embassy in Grosvenor Square standing in for the Pentagon (Morrison, a Quaker, immolated himself on the steps of the Pentagon in protest against the war—this event is also examined in *Loin de Vietnam*). Found footage of a Buddhist Monk immolating himself in front of an Exxon station in Viet Nam is shown silently, while the Londoners wonder if such an act would be of political value in Britain. Songs—remarkably, a soundtrack album was released on the Gre-Gar label—include the story of Barry Bondhus, who dumped two buckets of human shit into the

files at his draft board as an act of protest. Along with the fictional elements, *Tell Me Lies* includes debates between some of the main characters and real-life figures such as Amis and Carmichael (which is perhaps one of the most bizarre juxtapositions in British film history) while attending a semi-documentary party; the two interviews are split by a musical number called “Zapping the Cong,” a song and dance number about Americans torturing and killing the Viet Cong. *Tell Me Lies* can therefore be seen as a catalogue of ways in which to protest, questioning both film form and modes of political action in the process. But despite this catalogue, the film does not have an answer as to how to bring an end to the conflict, or how to represent it without “telling lies.”

Tell Me Lies is sub-titled *A Film About London*—the film is about the British capital in a similar way that Godard’s *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d’elle* (France, 1966) is about Paris—and it is the actions and activities in London, not Viet Nam, that are the film’s true subject. As such, the film approaches the question of Viet Nam from a number of different points of view, reflecting the diverse responses that Londoners had to the war. *Tell Me Lies* follows the characters as they struggle through the representations of Viet Nam that surround them and try to make sense of the quandaries posed by mass-mediated images of carnage and destruction. Furthermore, they attempt to discuss the ‘proper’ way for a Londoner to engage in political action.

As the saturated media coverage of Viet Nam turned the conflict into the first mass-mediated war, *Tell Me Lies* raised the question of how one responds to the images of death and atrocity. Are images of burnt children simply responding to an unspoken voyeuristic pleasure? Can other, more gruesome images be invoked in order to counteract both the pleasure and distanciation one feels when viewing these images? Writing on the film in 1970, Peter Ohlin, one of the few who paid any serious critical attention to the film, noted:

Tell Me Lies [...] distrusts itself to the nth degree. The title seems to refer to the conflicting claims on the individual made by the need for truth and the simultaneous need for victory in a just cause (which might justify lies to obtain the end result desired). Throughout the film two characters keep staring at the audience as if it were the film projected and wondering if this is a semi-documentary fiction film or a semi-fictional documentary. [...] *Tell Me Lies* finds itself caught in the trap between on the one hand its conviction of the destructive distortions of all communications media, and on the other, the necessity to act and to use distortive techniques to understand this need for action.¹⁹

Brook’s film doesn’t solve these quandaries as much as attempt to address the dubious information provided by mediated images themselves. He does this by deploying a number of different aesthetic strategies, combining the musical, found footage, pseudo-cinéma vérité, interviews, restagings, archival footage and Brechtian devices. At the same time, the film considers whether the use of more brutal and propagandistic images than those emerging from the dominant media are needed in order to mobilise people against the war. To this extent, *Tell Me Lies* sets up an opposition that cannot be resolved within the film itself. These same questions permeate debates about objectivity and the media, on both the left and the right, today. The ethics, for instance, of showing photographs of dead American soldiers or abused Iraqi men at Abu Graib prison, raise similar issues.

Tell Me Lies cannot only be seen as an anti-American rant (as it was received at the time of its release) but also as a self-reflexive examination of the hypocrisies and contradictions of the emerging leftist middle-class. Yet this critique is in some ways limiting, as all protest in

the UK is reduced to middle-class piety. As the review in the *Monthly Film Bulletin* notes: “[*Tell Me Lies*] denounces the middle-class, garden party atmosphere of British protest yet it limits its scrutiny to middle-class protesters in N.W.3, making no mention of, for instance, trade union attitudes to the Vietnam war.”²⁰ Perhaps Brook confines his critique to the middle-class of London, as this is both where his actors and his audience come from. As Nicolas De Jongh notes, the audience for the RSC were not “[...] sinister left-wingers, protesting hippies and peaceniks [...]. In fact the people attending RSC performances tended to be liberal, young and middle-class.”²¹ This caveat aside, *Tell Me Lies* questions almost all attempts at political engagement. However, the film does not dismiss them out of hand; instead *Tell Me Lies* foregrounds the tensions that lie at the heart of middle-class rebellion. Despite this critique not of only the U.S., but also of Britain, *Tell Me Lies*’ reception in the United States was incredibly hostile—The *Christian Science Monitor* labelled the film “bad taste amounting to obscenity”²² and the film was savagely reviewed by *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Variety* and *The New York Times*—even though other films emerging from the continent and from the US itself were lauded for many of the same aesthetic choices, albeit without the scathing indictment of the War which laid at the heart of Brook’s film (the British trade journals *Kiné-Weekly* and *Monthly Film Bulletin* were critical but more supportive).²³ Yet, despite the self-conscious critique of the impotence of aspects of the New Left, it is the attacks on the United States that lead to the film’s problems: the film was labelled anti-American and pro-Viet Nam. Yet, as Brook’s noted as he toured the U.S. with the film, it is important to analyse what the label anti-American means in this context: “[critics] call the film anti-Viet Nam, and at first this surprised me until I realised that anti-Viet Nam is a telescoped form of ‘anti-the-war-in-Viet Nam’. Anti-Viet Nam in fact means pro-Viet Nam. It is the same as anti-American—it is a telescoped phrase that should read ‘anti-the-wanton-destruction-of-the-American-ideal’. It means pro-America.”²⁴ One only needs to look at the ‘War on Terror’, the United States’ ‘you’re with us or against us’ stance towards the UN and European Union in 2003, George W. Bush’s Patriot Act, the 2004 and 2008 election campaigns, Sarah Palin’s ‘real America’ comments and the utter absurdity of ‘Freedom Fries’ to see the similarities between media coverage of Viet Nam and the present day.²⁵

In a similar manner to the rightist critique launched against Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), the question of ‘objectivity’ plagued the American release of *Tell Me Lies*. Brook’s film was criticised because it did not conform to the ‘rules of television news’—it was not ‘objective’—and this was substantiated by claims that as it did not show the ‘atrocities of the Viet Cong’. Therefore, the film was dismissed as one-sided (conveniently forgetting the kind of outrage provoked by any sympathetic portrayal of the Viet Cong in mainstream, ‘objective’ American media—the on-going attacks on ‘Hanoi’ Jane Fonda almost forty years later being the most salient example of this kind of backlash). The fury raised by Brook’s aesthetic choices elided some of the other voices in the film. Along with the aforementioned presence of Amis, a British actor playing a representative from the American Embassy puts forth the American, anti-Communist point of view across quite forcefully:

I want you to understand very clearly just what it is you are protesting about when you demonstrate outside our embassy. Most of your protests are based on a misunderstanding of what this war is about. It’s really very simple. Vietnam is, at this moment, the focal point of a great power struggle. We think our way of life is better than that of the communists. Believing this, we cannot allow the communists to take over South Vietnam. It is possible to make a moral protest against our activities. You may say that it’s wrong for two great powers to be killing innocent people. But if you say that, you are, in effect, condemning everything on which civilised societies have been based for the past two thousand years. History is the

story of power struggles. Those engaged in those struggles have always believed they were right. The only morality lies in gaining your ends while inflicting as little suffering as possible. America is the most powerful nation in the history of the world. We think that we're using our overwhelming power with more restraint than any other nation in the history of the world. This is the essence of our moral case.²⁶

Tell Me Lies, however, is not simply an anti-war film. Brook's film argues for pacifism, for class struggle and revolution, and for more Viet Nams, here implicitly following the argument put forth by Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* and Mao's *Quotations*, among others at the forefront of third world liberation. Furthermore, while Amis's rant does represent the view that the Viet Cong are savage Communists, other points of view—and the radical Brechtian aesthetics deployed by Brook—undercut this. It is this undercutting to which the American reviewers often objected.

Along these lines, it is interesting to see what was kept out of the film. In the play, Glenda Jackson makes an impassioned plea for revolution and war (its inclusion was contested by many partaking in the play), which is edited substantially and put into the mouth of a middle-aged man in *Tell Me Lies*. The first part of her diatribe in the play, which is excised from the film, reads as follows, and is eerily prescient:

So you end the war in Vietnam. Where's the next one? Thailand, Chile, Alabama? The things that will be needed are all ready in some carefully camouflaged quartermaster's store. The wire, the rope, the gas, the cardboard boxes they use for coffins in emergencies. I WANT IT TO GET WORSE! I want it to come HERE! I want to see it in an English house, among the floral chintzes and the school blazers and the dog leads hanging in the hall. I would like us to be tested. I would like a fugitive to run to our doors and say hide me—and know if we hid him we might get shot and if we turned him away we would have to remember that forever. I would like to know which of my nice well-meaning acquaintances would collaborate, which would betray, which would talk first under torture—and which would become a torturer. I would like to smell the running bowels of fear, over the English Sunday morning smell of gin and the roasting joint, and hyacinth. I would like to see an English dog playing on an English lawn with part of a burned hand. I would like to see a gas grenade go off at an English flower show, and nice English ladies crawling in each others' sick. And all this I would like to be photographed and filmed so that someone a long way off, safe in his chair, could watch us in our indignity!

Here, Brook uses violent imagery to cut to the heart of the question of voyeurism and complicity. It is easy to condemn violence seen at a distance; one can easily adopt a stance of moral superiority to actions taken against 'others'. And yet, the response to violence and violent actions changes dramatically when the acts are no longer mediated through images; the American response to September 11, 2001 a little over thirty years later, speaks to these differences and offers answers to some of the questions posed in the monologue above. Images of dancing, celebrating Palestinians offended American viewers after the Twin Towers attack; Americans could not comprehend such a callous, 'barbarous' act. Yet most did not see that the West's fascination with the bombing of Bagdad during Gulf War Mach I amounted to the same kind of distanced spectatorship, which disregarded death in a celebration of military power. The following monologue is then put in the mouth of a middle-aged man in *Tell Me Lies* as Jackson watches on (although this is part of her speech as the Maoist character in the play itself):

Everyone who doesn't care what goes on—so long as it's out of sight—wants it to go on; because if it's being done to someone else, they think it won't be done to them; and if someone else is doing it, that's better than doing it yourself. Every man whose spirit is dying, wants it to go on, because that sort of dying is better if everyone else dies with you. Everyone longing for the day of judgement—wants it to go on. Everyone who wants it to be changed, and can't change—wants it to go on. It doesn't matter that the world will be ash—if your life is ash, you'll want it to go on. And that is why it goes on. And why it will get worse. And why the catastrophe will come. I want it. You want it. They want it. Like lust, it goes on because we want it. And as with lust, we suspect most of all those who shout loudest, "No!"²⁷

Of interest here is the relationship between voyeurism, political commitment and imagination. The speech foregrounds the mostly unspoken pleasure that the spectator has watching images of mass destruction. As Michael Ignatieff writes about war (in this case, the war in Kosovo, but applicable across the board in terms of contemporary warfare although, quite egregiously, he himself went on to support the Iraq war): "War affords the pleasure of the spectacle, with the added thrill that it is real for someone, but not, happily, for the spectator."²⁸ Viet Nam can be seen as the beginning of this technological distancing, paradoxically taking place at the same time when television images of the war in South East Asia seemed their most 'real'. Along these lines, Thomas Elsaesser notes that: "Even the war in Viet Nam seems in retrospect to have been on both sides a battle for the control of enemy territory only in order to produce for the world at large images of such horror and fascination as might transgress the limits of imagination itself."²⁹ Perhaps this is why silence, and the imagination not of the filmmakers but the audience, plays such an important role at the conclusion of both US—where the actors stop and stare at the audience for minutes on end, after realising a box full of butterflies, then immolating one (one that is, unbeknownst to the audience, made of paper)—and *Tell Me Lies*—where Mark shows his friend Bob (Robert Langdon Lloyd) an image of an unspecified atrocity and asks how long he could stare at the image without losing interest, and how long it would take if 'it' walked through the door and the audience stares at the door until the film fades to white—infuriated audiences who were not provided with closure or answers. In the end, *Tell Me Lies* raises far more questions than it answers, but in doing so asks why more questions are not typically asked about the representations that surround and bombard us. As a forgotten, neglected film, it nevertheless clearly resonates with our present condition.

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Notes¹ Bertolt Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theatre", *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964): 201.2 The 'War on a Concept' is not a totally new idea, as it can easily be traced back to the 'War on Drugs'. It's perhaps needless to say that the 'War on Drugs' was about as successful as the current 'War on Terror'.³ Along with Virilio's seminal book *War and Cinema* (London: Verso, 1989), the literature on this topic is quite vast. Recent books of interest include Jean Baudrillard, *The Spirit of Terrorism* (London: Verso, 2002); Baudrillard, *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); Michael Ignatieff, *Virtual War* (London: Penguin, 2000), Hugh Miles, *Al-Jazeera* (New York: Grove Press, 2005) and Michael Moore, ed. *The Official Fahrenheit 9/11 Reader* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004).⁴ Marguerite Duras, *Hiroshima mon*

amour (New York, Grove Press, 1961): 18.5 Peter Brook, "The Beck Connection" in Brook, *The Shifting Point: Forty Years of Theatrical Exploration* (London: Methuen, 1987): 27.6 Thomas Elsaesser, "From Anti-Illusionism to Hyper-Realism: Bertolt Brecht and Contemporary Film" in Pia Kleber and Colin Visser, eds., *Re-Interpreting Brecht: His Influence on Contemporary Drama and Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990): 179. In many ways, Brecht's concept of distanciation, his notion of the 'gesture' and of acting as quotation are best kept alive in the cinema in the practices of found footage filmmakers.⁷ Michael Kustow, Geoffrey Reeves and Albert Hunt, eds., *Tell Me Lies* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968): 13.8 See Jerzy Grotowski, "Towards a Poor Theatre" in Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre* (London: Methuen, 1968): 15-25.9 Albert Hunt and Geoffrey Reeves, "Zapping the Conscience: US" in Hunt and Reeves, *Peter Brook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 98-99.10 Cited in Albert Hunt and Geoffrey Reeves, "Zapping the Conscience: US" in Hunt and Reeves, *Peter Brook* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995): 104.11 For a full account of the trials of the RSC to get US approved—and for a detailed account of the role of the Lord Chamberlain more generally in the 20th century—see Nicolas De Jongh, *Politics, Prudery and Perversions: The Censoring of the English Stage 1901-1968* (London: Methuen, 2000): 148-155.12 Jean-Paul Sartre, "Myth and Reality in the Theatre" in Michel Contat and Michael Rybalka, eds., *Sartre on Theatre* (London: Quartet Books, 1976): 135-137.13 Michael Billington, "Goodbye to All That", *Guardian* 9 January 2003.14 Adrian Mitchell, "To Whom It May Concern (Tell Me Lies About Viet Nam)" in Mitchell, *Heart on the Left: Poems 1953-1984* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Bloodaxe Books, 1997): 292-293.15 Cited in Laurence Coupe, "'Tell Me Lies About Vietnam': English Poetry and the American War" in Alf Louvre and Jeffrey Walsh, eds., *Tell Me Lies About Vietnam: Cultural Battles for the Meaning of War* (Milton Keynes, Open University Press: 1992): 172.16 Cited in James Monaco, *The New Wave* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976): 197-17 The major studies of British cinema also ignore the film. See, for instance, Charles Barr, ed., *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema* (London: BFI, 1986); Justine Ashby and Andrew Higson, eds., *British Cinema: Past and Present* (London: Routledge, 2000) and Robert Murphy, ed. *The British Cinema Book*, 2nd ed. (London: BFI, 2001). This absence is particularly telling as the trajectory of British national film studies over the last ten years has been based on recuperating a plethora of previously ignored films, many of dubious quality.¹⁸ Mao Tse-Tung, *Quotations from Chairman Mao Tse-Tung* (New York: Praeger, 1968): 6-7.19 Peter Ohlin, *Colours/Dreams/Shadows: The Narrative Crisis in Self-Reflexive Film, 1960-1970* (Montréal: n.p., 1970): 114.20 "Tell Me Lies," *Monthly Film Bulletin* 35.411 (1968): 6321 Nicolas De Jongh, *Politics, Prudery and Perversions: The Censoring of the English Stage 1901-1968* (London: Methuen, 2000): 151-152.22 Cited in Peter Brook, "Vietnam Film Rouses American Anger—And Fantasy" in Michael Kustow, Geoffrey Reeves and Albert Hunt, eds., *Tell Me Lies* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968): 212.23 See "Tell Me Lies," *Kiné-Weekly* 3150.24 (1968): 12 and "Tell Me Lies," *Monthly Film Bulletin* 35.411 (1968): 63.24 In a contemporary context, both Michael Moore and Noam Chomsky make similar points about the way in which their criticism of the United States is received in a post-September 11 context. See Chomsky, *9-11* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2001).²⁵ The serious ethical and political problems with this stand are outlined in Stanley Fish, "Can Postmodernism Condemn Terror?" *The Responsive Community* 12.3 (2002): 27-31. On a more frivolous note, French Fries originate in Belgium, making the 'Freedom' Fries protest all the more inane.²⁶ Michael Kustow, Geoffrey Reeves and Albert Hunt, eds., *Tell Me Lies* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968): 182.27 Michael Kustow, Geoffrey Reeves and Albert Hunt, eds., *Tell Me Lies* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968): 183.28 Michael Ignatieff, *Virtual War* (London, Penguin, 2000): 191.29 Thomas Elsaesser, "From Anti-Illusionism to

Hyper-Realism: Bertolt Brecht and Contemporary Film” in Pia Kleber and Colin Visser, eds., *Re-Interpreting Brecht: His Influence on Contemporary Drama and Film*.