EXPLOSIVE STRUCTUREFRAGMENTING THE NEW MODERNIST WAR NARRATIVE IN *THE HURT LOCKER*

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Fragmentation emerges as a formal theme in art most particularly during times of conflict—a reflection, one assumes, of the ways in which body, mind, and individual/collective consciousness rupture in response to the violence of war.1 Kathryn Bigelow's 2009 film, *The Hurt Locker* (written by journalist-turned-screenwriter Mark Boal), stands as a remarkable example of this notion; its successful integration of form with a larger theme of physical, mental, and social fragmentation results, at least in part, from the very structure of the film itself, which refuses at every turn to adopt a traditional narrative arc. The story of a U.S. Army Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) team in Iraq and its dangerously reckless new leader—an adrenaline-addicted staff sergeant named Will James (Jeremy Renner)—*The Hurt Locker* builds its narrative around seven key episodes—a prologue, the activities of five disparate days during Bravo Company's tour, and what might be considered a two-part epilogue that follows James after his end-of-tour trip back to the U.S and his eventual (and voluntary) return to the war zone. Throughout the film, we see superimposed titles that announce 38 days remaining in Bravo Company's tour, then 37, 23, 16, and 2. Ostensibly, the film employs the loose structure of its central countdown as a way of marching its three protagonists toward their collective return stateside; this chronicling of time itself, however, seems far less important to the film than the fact that the each of the five days depicted deliberately offers little in the way of active narrative causality. Bombs are discovered and deactivated. Soldiers survive a desert standoff with snipers. A desperate and renegade search for a lost Iraqi boy turns out to have been unnecessary. A nighttime pursuit of Iraqi bombers ends in their capture and an associated friendly fire injury. James returns to the States but then goes back to the war zone of his own volition. These are the primary episodes of the film.

In the June 2009 review of the film for the New York Times, A.O. Scott praised *The Hurt Locker*'s episodic structure: "Ms. Bigelow, practicing a kind of hyperbolic realism, distills the psychological essence and moral complications of modern warfare into a series of brilliant, agonizing set pieces."2 While each of these set pieces contributes to a kind of minimalist causality that fuels the emotional disintegrations of the film's primary characters, the five central episodes of *The Hurt Locker* nevertheless eschew the demanding forward thrust of a classic action narrative oriented around events and resultant effects. In truth, the film seems to derive its structure and style in part from the modernist tradition so apparent in the international art-house films of the '50s and '60s. At the same time, however, *The Hurt Locker* also seems to resemble something of a cinematic collection of serialized war-correspondent dispatches, each of which resolves the most pressing problem at hand while also offering up small details of character development that contribute to a larger—if subtler—vision of psycho-emotional collapse. These two very different influences (which are nevertheless linked by their common ties to modernist aesthetics) come together most effectively in *The Hurt Locker*'s primary generic antecedent (both in terms of form and theme), Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979); like that film, *The Hurt Locker* moves forward in carefully calculated fits and starts, the deliberately uneven push of its narrative's individual episodes not even superficially marking progress toward a tangible

climax, while the true development in the film takes the powerful form of a commentary on the necessarily shattered nature of individual wartime experience.3 From its first moments, *The Hurt Locker* violently shakes its spectator's worldview. After a solemn epigraph by Chris Hedges declaring that "war is a drug," Bigelow cuts harshly to a battered video-cam's "first-person" view as the small, treaded vehicle to which it is attached rumbles over rocks, rubble, and trash on its way to a suspicious, tarp-covered bundle that may, we imagine, conceal an improvised explosive device, or IED. Even as she cuts away to shaky and terse shots of Coalition forces establishing a perimeter amidst loudspeaker orders (in Arabic) for citizens to clear the streets, Bigelow's cinematography (Barry Ackroyd), editing (Bob Mirawski and Chris Innis), and sound editing (Paul N.J. Ottoson) already reflect a feeling of overwhelming and scattered sensory overload—as if the very nature of this place (Baghdad in 2004) thwarts all attempts to keep pace with the potential threats that seem to lurk behind every angle from which the camera affords a view. Eyes watch from everywhere, their invisible lines of sight fragmenting even empty air into a disjointed, distorted grid of myriad loyalties and intentions. The most wary among these eyes—those belonging to two American soldiers, Staff Sergeant Matt Thompson (Guy Pearce) and Sergeant J.T. Sanborn (Anthony Mackie), members of Bravo Company's EOD team—are introduced to us through extreme close-up shots of their eyes. (Even the bodies of our protagonists are initially splintered by the camera into component parts, a strategy that denies spatial and situational orientation to the spectator while, at the same time, underscoring the extent to which the act of visual vigilance is central to survival in this battle zone.) The Americans regard a television console that receives the video signal from the robot examining the bundle some 300 meters away, but Thompson, the easy-going professional, will soon find himself dangerously close to the bundle, performing a task the robot could not complete on its own. In a remarkable sequence composed of 18 different shots filmed at varying speeds—both slow and natural— from some 15 separate angles, Thompson will perish as the bomb is detonated remotely. Within minutes, Bigelow has already succeeded in fragmenting spectatorial experience through her formal presentation of an unstable and unsettling opening sequence that prefigures *The Hurt Locker*'s overall disruption—even explosion—of mainstream narrative drive.

Bigelow's film, in fact, abounds with formal nods to the fragmentary experience of war. Even aside from the analogies one can draw between the fragmentation of bombs and the fragmented natures of war and its ever-weary participants, Bigelow frontloads every moment of *The Hurt Locker* with formal techniques that inevitably feed her larger theme. Her camera, for example, is in constant, jittery movement, as are her lenses, which endlessly focus and refocus on new objects or view the same objects from new angles. Her cutting is fast and impatient, rarely holding a single shot for more than a few seconds. The speed of her cutting, however, belies the inordinate length of her sequences, which consistently outlast the typical duration seen in standard Hollywood products. Her transitions between sequences are jarring, often shocking the viewer through leaps in space, time, sound, and tone (e.g., the abrupt cut from the end of the solemn desert sequence to the heavy-metal chaos of the "buddy-punching" sequence that solidifies the homosocial bond among James, Sanborn, and Eldridge). Bigelow's construction of space is also fragmentary, disorienting; she varies her camera angles and proximities from extreme close-ups to extreme long shots, all of which are juxtaposed against one another multiple times within the same sequence (a technique most remarkably on display during the bomb deactivation at the United Nations complex). Each of these formal techniques helps Bigelow to build and reinforce her theme of the fragmentary nature of warfare and its effects on the individual psyche.

None of these aesthetic tools, however, does as much work in solidifying the motif of fragmentation in *The Hurt Locker* as the explosive structure of the narrative itself. With its insistence that the film move forward on emotional rather than causal terms, the narrative sits squarely within the modernist camp. Peter Childs, Peter Conrad, and Randall Stevenson agree, in fact, that narratives such as that shown in *The Hurt Locker* have roots in a modernist impulse that emerged in response to World War I, and, more broadly, as Sara Haslam asserts, in the works of Joseph Conrad, Henry James, Ford Madox Ford, Marcel Proust, and Virginia Woolf.4 The innovative narrative trends initiated by these writers cleared a path for similar trends in cinema, appropriated first—and almost immediately—by the cinematic avant-garde, but later embraced by international feature filmmakers whose works heavily influenced Bigelow's own style and philosophy.

If the formal aspects of *The Hurt Locker* fuel its larger theme of fragmentation, both physical and psychological, then the narrative itself draws on the influence of art-house cinema to achieve these same thematic ends. Such an influence should come as no surprise given that Bigelow began her artistic career in 1971 as a painter studying at the San Francisco Art Institute and, shortly thereafter, as a scholarship student at the Whitney Museum of Art in New York City, where she studied with—among others—Susan Sontag.5 After steeping in the New York avant-garde scene for several years, Bigelow attended graduate school at Columbia, where she studied film production and theory with the likes of seminal film theorist Peter Wollen.6 "This intellectual background and training in 'high' art," argue Deborah Jermyn and Sean Redmond, "informs much of the critical reception that has met Bigelow, despite her penchant for the seemingly superficial allure of glossy action, and accounts for the ease with which she alludes to cultural theory in interview."7 Such a background may also account for the depth and nuance of her film work. Soon after graduating from Columbia, for example, Bigelow wrote and directed (with Monty Montgomery) her first feature, *The Loveless* (1982), a film about a biker gang's ultimately violent sojourn in a Florida backwater circa the mid-1950s. Jermyn and Redmond note that this film "is marked by its leisurely pacing, fragmented exposition, performances and dialogue, all of which underline its low-budget, art-house origins," and, indeed, more than any other film in Bigelow's oeuvre, the structure and style of *The Loveless* stand as probably the closest early indicators of the fractured narrative we see nearly 25 years later in *The Hurt Locker*.8 Each scene in *The Loveless* reveals a great deal about character (we learn much of Willem Dafoe's Vance, in particular, merely by watching him watch others—he's an acute student of human behavior clad in a studded leather jacket and riding boots). These same scenes play out for their own sake, however, rather than for the sake of pushing a plot forward: Vance awaits the rest of his gang at the local diner; upon their arrival, the bikers hang out at the diner and ogle the waitresses; the bikers move to a local garage to repair a broken motorcycle; Vance joyrides with, and then beds, a local teen, Telena (Marin Kanter), only to watch afterward as her father drags her away with a shotgun in tow; eventually, Telena guns down her father in full view of the bikers at the town's favorite watering hole; the bikers move on to Daytona. Rather than narrative causality, Bigelow and Montgomery dwell on visual details, atmosphere, and quirks of character and circumstance.9 "I hadn't embraced narrative at that point," Bigelow claimed of her work on *The Loveless* during a 1995 interview with Gavin Smith:

I was still completely conceptual, and narrative was antithetical to anything in the art world. That was the big juncture. When you're thinking of plastic or visual arts you're using the non-narrative part of your brain. So the thinking behind *The Loveless* was to suspend the narrative and create this visual tapestry with enough narrative to give you the illusion of a

story percolating, kind of there but not there, held by gossamer threads.10

Bigelow's metaphor for her first feature's tenuous claim on narrative proves an apt way of describing how both *The Loveless* and *The Hurt Locker* proceed; unconcerned with the demands of traditional plot, structure, and causality, the "story" of each film does prove to be wispy and fragile, like gossamer, but somehow fascinating and compelling at the same time.

One might entertain the idea that Bigelow's aesthetic of narrative fragmentation has derived, at least in part, from her theoretical tutelage under Sontag. In 1967, after all, Sontag published an essay in *Sight and Sound* entitled, "Bergman's Persona," in which she established some of her central ideas about what she called the "new narrative":

Instead of a full-blown story, [Bergman] presents something that is, in one sense, cruder and, in another, more abstract: a body of material, a subject. The function of the subject or material may be as much its opacity, its multiplicity, as the ease with which it reveals itself to being incarnated in a determinate action or plot. In a work constituted along these principles, the action would appear intermittent, porous, shot through intimations of absence, of what could not be univocally said. This doesn't mean that the narration has forfeited "sense." But it does mean that sense isn't necessarily tied to a determinate plot.11

Granted, Sontag writes here of films much more oblique in terms of linear narrative and/or plot than what Bigelow/Boal offer us in *The Hurt Locker* (e.g., Antonioni's *L'avventura* [1960], Renais' *Last Year at Marienbad* [1962], and *Persona* [1966]); she goes on to argue, in fact, that many of these "new narratives" are characterized by a "competing retrograde principle, which could take the form, say, of continual backward and cross-references"—a technique not employed in Bigelow's 2009 film.12 Still, as Sontag points out, the tenets of her "new narrative" argument hold true for more accessible (if still intellectually challenging) films such as Rossellini's Neorealist masterpiece, *Journey to Italy* (1954), which, she claims, has "a tendency to de-dramatize."13 Significantly, Sontag does not assert that Journey to Italy lacks drama; instead, she notes that Rossellini's film "proceeds by omissions," which is to say that its driving force takes place not at the levels of action, movement, or even dialogue, but rather at the levels of tone, character, and, particularly, emotion.

In his seminal 1983 book, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, David Bordwell also writes of art-house cinema's "tendency to de-dramatize," and, like Sontag (and, more specifically, Marcel Martin), he notes the influence of postwar Italian Neorealism on the art-house product that followed in the '50s, '60s, and '70s:

The contemporary cinema [Marcel Martin] claimed, follows Neorealism in seeking to depict the vagaries of real life, to "de[-]dramatize" the narrative by showing both climaxes and trivial moments and to use new techniques...not as fixed conventions but as flexible means of expression....Specific sorts of realism motivate a loosening of cause and effect, an episodic construction of the syuzhet, and an enhancement of the film's symbolic dimension through an emphasis on the fluctuations of character psychology.14

Such an understanding of the hyper-alternative approaches to narrative seen in the art-house films of Antonioni, Bergman, Godard, and Resnais helps to explain much of the similarly fragmented structure of *The Hurt Locker*, which, although ostensibly grounded in the genre conventions of the war film, nevertheless shares with its art-house predecessors a commitment to tone, character psychology, and larger thematic questionings—all of which

develop through the atypical use of standard formal elements, what Bordwell terms "flexible means of expression" (e.g., shot duration; montage; camera angle, proximity, and movement; diegetic and non-diegetic sound, etc.). As Bordwell further notes, "We have seen that the classical film focuses the spectator's expectations upon the ongoing causal chain by shaping the syuzhet's duration around explicit deadlines....By removing or minimizing deadlines, not only does the art film create unfocused gaps and less stringent hypotheses about upcoming actions; it also facilitates an open-ended approach to causality in general."15

Perhaps *The Hurt Locker*'s most stunning example of these assertions occurs during the film's protracted sequence in the Iraqi desert. The sequence occurs at a particularly tense emotional moment in the film. By this time, James has already defused several bombs as the new leader of Bravo Company's EOD team, but his methods have proven to be headstrong and prideful rather than safe and calculated, and he has often endangered Sanborn and Eldridge. As two men who simply want to do their job and return home, Sanborn and Eldridge even contemplate "fragging" James in the scene that immediately precedes the desert sequence, although James himself seems blissfully unaware of their intentions. Soon after, however, James, Sanborn, and Eldridge find themselves in a standoff against several heavily armed militants across a blurry distance of about one half mile. Over a period of 10 minutes in screen time (and what seems to be about 3-5 hours in diegetic time), both sides attempt to scope and eliminate enemy targets using high-powered sniper rifles. Sanborn mans the Coalition's rifle while James, using a monocular scope, directs aim; Eldridge covers the rear. Bigelow takes her time; through its seeming interminability alone, her bold set piece already defies conventional narrative practice; indeed, the very essence of the sequence rests on the merits of patience, or, more specifically, on the ability of the EOD team (and, indeed, the audience) to withstand the passage of time once Bigelow has, per Bordwell, "removed the deadlines". We wait for what seems an eternity between Sanborn's directed rifle shots: James asks Eldridge to retrieve ammunition and encourages him as he cleans blood from the bullets in a magazine; Sanborn takes aim and fires several well-spaced shots on the enemy holdout; James offers a juice drink to Sanborn; Eldridge spies and kills an insurgent approaching from the rear; James and Sanborn wait in the desert weeds to ensure that they have, indeed, killed the last of the enemy snipers. Finally, Bigelow cuts to an establishing shot of the setting sun to indicate the passage of hours before James wearily declares they are safe to leave. The sequence has the effect of aligning the audience's experience of time and duration with that of the characters in a way that is not unlike the kind of challenge we experience in, say, the '70s work of Chantal Ackerman (most obviously in *Jeanne Dielman, 23, Quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (1975), but, perhaps, most similarly in *Les rendez-vous d'Anna* (1978).16 Unlike in Ackerman, however, the sense of protracted time we feel in *The Hurt Locker*'s desert sequence comes not from any unusual duration in Bigelow's shots (indeed, from the time Sanborn assumes his position at the sniper rifle to James' announcement that his team is, in fact, "done". Bigelow cuts some 197 times, and no shot lasts longer than 15 seconds); rather, the sense of tense tedium arises from the length of the sequence itself. Although ostensibly an action set piece, then, Bigelow not only "removes the deadlines", but she also employs another essential convention of Sontag's "new narrative" films: the development of narrative at the level of character and emotion rather than at the level of causal action. After all, taken at face value, the sequence offers no causal contribution to a larger plot of the film; the sequence does, however, perform the very important emotional work of foregrounding the formation of a bond among the principal characters, all of whom realize implicitly they must work effectively as a team to overcome their current threat. While similar examples may be found throughout the film, the

desert sequence stands as the premier example of the ways in which *The Hurt Locker*'s fragmented narrative style derives from the modernist aesthetics pioneered in feature films by the likes of Rosselini, Bergman, Antonioni, and others.

While *The Hurt Locker* owes much to such art-house predecessors, however, it seems equally indebted to the style, structure, and sensory details of war-reportage collections such as John Steinbeck's *Once There Was a War* (1958) and Michael Herr's Dispatches (1977)—influences that mesh well with screenwriter Boal's background as a journalist and embedded reporter in Iraq.17 In many ways, such works are part and parcel of the same modernist trends that helped to form Sontag's "new-narrative" art films: fragmentation, which is to say, an emotional immediacy created from a compounding of isolated, episodic experiences; a reliance on minimalist prose to carry the burden of the work's power and meaning; and an intimate attention to character and contingency over story arc and causal logic, to name just a few examples. Perhaps the most compelling of such modernist effects is an unwavering faith in the power of the part to effectively capture the essence of the whole; indeed, the common denominator among such war-reportage collections is their effective extraction of a psycho-emotional crux that ultimately serves as the connecting thread through an otherwise disparate array of wartime experiences.18 "Instead of verifiable snapshots from the campaign," Mark Bowden writes of Steinbeck's World War II reports from the European theater, "in each of these stories [Steinbeck] reaches for some universal experience of war. Many [stories] in [Steinbeck's] collection have been massaged and stretched by a gifted storyteller....But if you want to know how it felt...there is no better source."19 Bowden's bold assertion is borne out in nearly every passage from this compilation of Steinbeck's 1943 dispatches for the *New York Herald Tribune*; each boasts a particular attention to sensory detail, to the ignored spaces between events (recall Sontag's claim that Journey to Italy "proceeds by omissions"), as shown in an excerpt from a piece entitled "Invasion," which chronicles the shaky nerves of World War II American infantrymen en route via troopship from North Africa to action in Salerno, Italy:

In the moonlight on the iron deck they look at each other strangely. Men they have known well and soldiered with are strange and every man is cut off from every other one, and in their minds they search the faces of their friends for the dead....Every man builds in his mind what it will be like, but it is never what he thought it would be. When he designs the assault in his mind he is alone and cut off from everyone. He is alone in the moonlight and the crowded men about him are strangers in this time. It will not be like this. The fire and the movement and the exertion will make him a part of these strangers sitting about him, but he does not know that now. This is a bad time, never to be repeated....The men sitting on the deck disappear into the blackness and the silence, and one man begins to whistle softly just to be sure he is there.20

Steinbeck's achievement here—his inimitable rendering of a tense, isolated moment of waiting, of moving helplessly toward a very uncertain and all-too-threatening future—relies almost exclusively on his powerful flare for imagery and his uncanny talent for articulating what all the troops feel but hesitate to verbalize. *Once There Was a War* brims with such moments, which are reported chronologically but presented as complete episodes unto themselves. Any plea for causality between the stories misses the point; they are linked and therefore united by their essence, or what Ty Hawkins might call their "Truth".21 Although Herr's book, *Dispatches*, differs vastly from Steinbeck's in terms of voice and style, Herr follows a similar narrative strategy; that is to say, like Steinbeck, he sees his war—Vietnam—as a collection of vignettes that form a larger, more integral thread through the

sum of what may at first seem like nothing more than random, disparate, and fragmented parts.

Herr, of course, stands as a unique bridge between the wartime work of Steinbeck and the more recent collected writings of war correspondents such as Dexter Filkins (author of *The Forever War*, published in 2008, which covers events in pre-invasion Afghanistan and post-invasion Iraq) because of Herr's contribution as a co-screenwriter for *Apocalypse Now* (and, later, Stanley Kubrick's 1987 film, *Full Metal Jacket*). Certainly Herr must have seemed an obvious choice for work on both films based upon the success of his collected Vietnam war-reportage memoirs, *Dispatches*. Through its spot-on deployment of junglewise G.I. gutter-talk and hard-biting, between-the-lines irony, *Dispatches* strings together myriad stories, snippets, and vignettes—all equal parts horror, solemnity, and black comedy—to form a collage of the Vietnam War that rings with an uncanny sense of phenomenological accuracy. His chapter titled "Illumination Rounds," for example, offers up a pastiche of some 19 of these vignettes—none of which connects in any narrative or linear way to the others—and each varying in length from several pages to only a few sentences. "A twenty-four-year-old Special Forces captain told me the story," Herr writes in the shortest and most economical of these pieces, and he continues by quoting the captain's tale: "I went out and killed one VC and liberated a prisoner. Next day the major called me in and told me that I'd killed fourteen VC and liberated six prisoners. You want to see the medal?"22 No further elaboration proves necessary. We understand the initial event, its manipulation, and the resultant ironies. We understand, too, that the Special Forces captain and Herr share a sardonic view of the entire episode, a view that speaks to what they see as the larger illogic of the Vietnam War itself. Set apart on its own amidst the longer vignettes from Herr's chapter, the snippet could very easily stand in for the whole of *Dispatches* itself, as could any other of the myriad vignettes from the book. Herr sharpens each piece to its most acerbic point and then positions it strategically in relation to all the others. Herr's aim, Hawkins writes, is to lay bare the essence of experience in wartime Vietnam:

...the many voices and images and sounds one encounters in *Dispatches*—all the sensory detail that leaps from Herr's pages until it threatens to and often does overwhelm readers—are but so many data streams shoveled aside. Herr excavates past these details until he uncovers the war's Truth, its signified. This Truth is at once the destructive horror and reconciliatory allure, ironically enough, of violent death.23

Like Steinbeck, Herr demonstrates an ability to encapsulate, and thereby universalize, otherwise unfathomable experiences, and the success of his efforts (again, like those of his predecessors) rests on an understanding that the "Truth" of the war in Vietnam cannot be communicated through an all-encompassing, linear causality. (Filkins' *The Forever War*, in fact, follows in much this same vein.) Such works declare that war is—and always has been—a fractured phenomenon in itself.

No wonder, then, that Herr's script for the voice-over of *Apocalypse Now* supports the fragmented nature of that film's episodic structure through a use of clipped, cynical, and economical narration designed to comment on mental and emotional disintegration.24 Drawn liberally from the pages of modernist writer Joseph Conrad's 1902 novel, *Heart of Darkness*, the film tells the story of a U.S. Army assassin in the Vietnam War, Captain Benjamin Willard (Martin Sheen), who travels with a Navy PT boat crew up the Nung River through Vietnam into Cambodia, all the while moving closer to his quarry, the renegade Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando). The Conrad source material and Kurtz's references to T.S.

Eliot's "The Hollow Men" do much to signal the film's roots in modernism, but the narrative structure itself performs the greatest part of this work.25 Willard's journey—which consists of several seemingly unrelated sojourns at various outposts of black humor, terror, and tragedy along the river—serves more as a meditation on the myriad horrors of war, colonialism, and insanity than as a series of momentum-driven events bent on delivering Willard to his final geographic destination.

Herr's narration, which hails directly from his style in *Dispatches*, works wonders in connecting the dots of Willard's emotional disintegration throughout the whole of *Apocalypse Now*. Tightlipped and reticent like a Hemingway protagonist, Sheen's Willard delivers Herr's lines like a worked-over noir anti-hero, and they convey a unifying, universalizing power that Coppola's images alone—however powerful—do not achieve.26 Mid-way through the film, for example, Willard witnesses the PT boat crew's trigger-happy slaughter of five Vietnamese civilians during a routine boarding and inspection of a sampan. A young woman on the sampan is severely wounded but still alive, and the boat's skipper, Chief, wants to transport her to a Vietnamese hospital. Willard sees no point. Much to the shock of the PT boat crew, Willard takes his sidearm and kills the woman himself. In voice-over, Willard later reflects on the incident: "It was a way we had over here of living with ourselves. We'd cut 'em in half with a machine gun and give 'em a band-aid. It was a lie. And the more I saw of them, the more I hated lies. Those boys were never gonna look at me the same way again. And I felt like I knew one or two things about Kurtz that weren't in the dossier." As with many of the episodes in Apocalypse Now, this incident is never revisited in causal terms; its impact, however, clearly haunts the characters and the remainder of the film. Herr's powerful narration works to bridge gaps in our understanding of Willard's emotional response to the event and the role the incident plays in his larger ideological/intellectual alignment with Kurtz. By removing the obligation to tell a story based on an action-driven causality—where one event necessarily brings about another until the path back to the beginning looks clearly defined when viewed from the end—the modernist narrative of Apocalypse Now succeeds in revealing how unrelated events come together in a collage to form a larger picture of psycho-emotional transformation.

Although it employs no narration, *The Hurt Locker* closely resembles *Apocalypse Now*'s use of fragmented narrative in service of a larger emotional arc. James and his EOD team move from incident to incident, and no causal thread connects these other than James' dogged determination and his comrades' concomitant anxiety. As in *Apocalypse Now*, then, the emotional toll on the men becomes increasingly palpable with each new episode. Bigelow and Boal make no attempt to attribute the long series of bomb threats to a single agent or organization, nor are they interested in tracing the patterns of the bombmakers' activities across the many episodes that feature bomb deactivations. The film is no more about the bombmakers, in fact, than it is about the wars in Iraq or Afghanistan, just as, similarly, *Apocalypse Now* is not—at its core—about Army assassins or the war in Vietnam; rather, both films set their respective psychological odysseys against convenient and contemporaneous backdrops in order to ponder the ways in which war inevitably complicates the hope of returning home (if such a place still exists) as a "whole" person, body, mind, and soul. While both Coppola and Bigelow may owe large debts to literary and cinematic modernists, then, their recompenses must also make room for the likes of Homer and Virgil.

We first meet *The Hurt Locker*'s Will James in a state of withdrawal. Alone in his dark quarters and surrounded by heavy-metal music, his hands clenching and opening repeatedly

in the psychosomatic sign language of an addict denied his fix, James seems one step away from meltdown. Like Willard in the opening sequence of *Apocalypse Now*, James is "waiting for a mission," all the while feeling as if the walls are closing in on him. Like Willard, he is unable to reconcile the demands of romance and domesticity with his life's work, but James handles this situation far differently from Willard. While *Apocalypse Now*'s would-be stoic protagonist wears his heart on his sleeve throughout the horrific journey up the river toward Kurtz (even sobbing openly at points throughout the film), James, conversely buries his troubles in the work itself; indeed, he needs the work to keep his own life from feeling fragmented like Willard's. He feels whole only in the work. James seems all too aware from the outset that his insatiable lust for a life on the edge marks him as, perhaps, the greatest single danger to his comrades ("You'll get it," he quips of his adrenaline addiction to a frustrated Sanborn); still, he soldiers forward in his quest for the next thrill, smiling amiably at each new obstacle, extolling the virtues of sunlight, and chuckling "Let's rock 'n roll!" on his way to defuse yet another bomb. By the end of *Apocalypse Now*, Willard's emotional disintegration transforms itself into an intellectual and spiritual awakening; in *The Hurt Locker*, however, James' eager return to an unidentified war zone demonstrates that nothing for him has changed, despite everything he has seen and done. He is trapped in a vicious cycle of addiction, the war that is "like a drug," and he realizes he cannot—does not want to—break free.

The true emotional arc of the film's fragmented narrative, then, must be followed through Sanborn rather than James. Sanborn, after all, is the only character in the film to change as a result of the myriad events seen in the film, while James merely reboots the entire experience. The change in Sanborn becomes most evident during the scene that immediately follows the film's final bomb sequence (in which James fails to remove a heavily locked explosives vest from a pleading Iraqi man who is desperate to be freed from the device). Sanborn, who has helplessly witnessed the event and narrowly escaped death himself, leaves the scene with James in their Humvee. Reflecting on his close scrape, Sanborn tearfully admits to the unaffected James that he does, after all, want to have a son—a direct contradiction to a definitive statement Sanborn made to James and Eldridge earlier in the film. James seems tired, distracted, unsure of how to reassure his friend, but still positive and even happy in a spookily disaffected way. When Sanborn asks James how he gets through these war experiences, how he "takes the risks" knowing that he has an infant son at home, James, still unphased from the day's (even the tour's) experiences, struggles to find an answer. "I dunno. I guess I just don't think about it....Do you know why I am the way I am?" Sanborn, both bewildered and—we might imagine—disgusted, can only reply, "No, I don't," at which point Bigelow, in a masterful match cut, moves us from the blur of angry Iraqi street boys seen through the Humvee's window to the shockingly surreal blur of plentiful American grocery store products as if seen from a rolling shopping cart. James' final days in Iraq and the journey "home" have been elided, and the shock of the now-defamiliarized capitalist marketplace stands in stark, surrealistic contrast to the drab poverty, ruins, and sand of Iraqi landscape and cityscape.

Through the sequence that follows, we come to understand just how different James is from Sanborn (and, indeed, almost anyone else); his idea of a fragmented life is depicted through Bigelow's quick cuts of James sleepwalking through a variety of domestic experiences—shopping, selecting a brand of cereal from a colorful choice of dozens, cleaning out a rain gutter, staring into space amidst the snow of television static, washing vegetables, and playing with his infant son. James has it all: a home, an adorable child, and a beautiful wife. He already possesses everything that Sanborn has learned to desire so thoroughly

throughout the painful tour in Iraq. In the end, however, James re-confirms what he has always known—he cannot fragment himself or his affections. "The older you get," he tells his infant son, "the fewer things you really love. By the time you get to my age, maybe it's only one or two things. With me, I think it's one." Hawkins' critique of Herr's *Dispatches* would seem to apply to *The Hurt Locker*, as well: "...He posits that for all of its horror, combat issues forth a degree of transcendence operative nowhere else in human experience. This transcendence entails the conjunction of creation and destruction, action and submission, will and fate, chance and pre-destination."27 As he returns to the war zone, James also returns to his state of his wholeness. The fragmented narrative of the film and its associated contributions to Bigelow's larger themes of fractured individual psyches in wartime have never, then, served as a formal of expression of James' personal subjectivity. On the contrary, we come to learn that James, rather than acting as our point of identification throughout the film, ultimately emerges as our point of contrast—the personification of wartime wholeness against which to compare the fragmented subjectivity of characters such as Sanborn and to which we've been exposed since the opening sequence. This realization accounts for the awe and (perhaps) dread we feel at the overlapping sound, and later the sight, of troop-carrier choppers once again landing in the combat zone. Bigelow's second match-cut from James' striding combat boots to his bomb suit boots, the tilt up to his satisfied smile behind his helmet's window, and the final on-screen titles announcing "Days Left in Delta Company's Rotation: 365," drive home the idea that while this fragmented narrative has acted as a formal reflection of war's necessarily splintering impact on the individual psyche, we should not assume for one moment that all psyches react to such events in the same way. Thus, while *The Hurt Locker* effectively captures the "Truth" of individual wartime experience through its modernist aesthetics, it also captures the "Truth" about the kind of personality that cannot feel whole apart from such an experience. The coexistence of these Truths stands as one of the film's most disturbing insights.

Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* uses formal techniques, particularly a fragmented narrative, as a way of commenting on the fragmented nature of warfare and its effects on the individual psyche. The use of the fragmented narrative as a way of conveying an arc of emotional detail and development is very much derived from the modernist traditions seen in the literature of the early twentieth century and manifested cinematically most notably in the art-house films of the '50s, '60s, and '70s. Just as the aesthetics of these art-house films influenced the structure and style of *The Hurt Locker*, so, too, did the episodic and self-contained natures of war-reportage dispatches such as Steinbeck's *Once There Was a War* and Michael Herr's *Dispatches* also influence the film's successful deployment of the fragmented narrative. Herr's work as a co-screenwriter on *Apocalypse Now*, in fact, seems to have laid an important structural and emotional foundation upon which *The Hurt Locker* may have built in its development of a new modernist war narrative. Perhaps most important, however, is the fact that *The Hurt Locker*'s epilogue underscores the important role played by the film's fragmented narrative, for only in seeing the film's protagonist set in opposition to that subjectivity do we fully comprehend the extent to which he, in his desires and in his personal definitions of wholeness, differs markedly from his companions. James and his addiction, in fact, inspire us to ask larger questions—not necessarily about American involvement in Iraq or Afghanistan, about which the film remains decidedly ambivalent—but rather about the nature of the modern(ist) human experience and the extent to which an American life in the 21st century both fears and craves the kind of sensory overload that only something like war can provide. In this respect, are we really, in fact, far removed from the explosive effects of a year like 1917? Does modernity have a few surprises yet in store for us? If so, perhaps a return to modernist aesthetics such as those seen in *The Hurt Locker*

may help us to survive the coming onslaught.

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Notes

1 Sara Haslam, *Fragmenting Modernism: Ford Madox Ford, the Novel, and the Great War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 6. Haslam cites Peter Conrad as particularly convinced of this argument. See Peter Conrad, *Modern Times, Modern Places: Life and Art in the Twentieth Century* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 203.
2 A.O. Scott, "Soldiers on a Live Wire between Peril and Protocol," *New York Times*, http://movies.nytimes.com/2009/06/26/movies/26hurt.html (accessed January 30, 2010).
3 Throughout this essay, my references to *Apocalypse Now* will be to the version released in 1979, which, for reasons of economy and focus, I consider superior to Coppola's expanded 2001 release, *Apocalypse Now Redux*.
4 Haslam, 3.
5 Deborah Jermyn and Sean Redmond , eds., *The Cinema of Kathryn Bigelow: Hollywood Transgressor* (London: Wallflower Press, 2003), 6.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid. 7.
8 Ibid.
9 These characteristics predate the same style we would recognize only a few years later in the films of David Lynch. Yet another painter-turned-filmmaker, Lynch offers up twisted portraits of small-town life, characters, and nostalgia would, in fact, seem to owe much to *The Loveless*. I am thinking in particular, of *Blue Velvet* (1984), *Wild at Heart* (1990), and his short-lived but masterful television series, *Twin Peaks* (1990-1991).
10 Kathryn Bigelow, interviewed by Gavin Smith, "'Momentum and Design': Interview with Kathryn Bigelow," in *The Cinema of Kathryn Bigelow: Hollywood Transgressor*, 30.
11 Susan Sontag, "Bergman's *Persona*," *Ingmar Bergman's Persona*, ed. Lloyd Michaels (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 70.
12 Ibid., 73.
13 Ibid., 72.
14 David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 206.
15 Ibid. 207. An understanding of the syuzhet requires first a definition of the fabula (both terms hail from studies of narrative). Bordwell defines the fabula as "a pattern which perceivers of narratives create through assumptions and inferences. It is the developing result of picking up narrative cues,apply schemata, framing and testing hypotheses....The syuzhet (usually translated as 'plot') is the actual arrangement and presentation of the fabula in the film. It is a more abstract construct, the patterning of the film as a blow-by-blow recounting of the film could render it." See Bordwell, 49-50.
16 Of interest here, as well, is the coincident fact that Ackerman, like Bigelow, also spent much of the early 1970s in New York City's avant-garde scene.
17 Michael Norris Pentagram, "Embedded Journalist Gives Iraq War Story Its Realism," DCMilitary.com, http://www.dcmilitary.com/stories/072309/pentagram_28242.shtml (accessed 19 April 2010).

18 Ty Hawkins, "Violent Death as Essential Truth in *Dispatches*: Re-Reading Michael Herr's 'Secret History' of the Vietnam War," *War, Literature & the Arts* 21 (2009), 132.

19 Mark Bowden, *Introduction to Once There Was a War* (New York: Penguin, 2008), xiii-xiv. My emphasis.

20 John Steinbeck, *Once There Was a War*, (New York: Penguin, 2007), 127-128.

21 Hawkins, 132.

22 Michael Herr, *Dispatches* (New York: Knopf, 2009), 161. The chapter, "Illumination Rounds," may be found from page 156 to 174. My thanks to Brandon Lingle for bringing to my attention the significance of this section of the book.

23 Hawkins, 132-133.

24 Important to note is the fact that the narration for Apocalypse Now was really a joint effort arising from several different contributors—Herr, John Milius, and Coppola himself, among others. See Peter Cowie, *The Apocalypse Now Book* (New York: De Capo Press, 2001). See also, Fax Bahr and George Hickenlooper's documentary film, *Hearts of Darkness: A Filmmaker's Apocalypse* (1998).

25 Haslam, 3.

26 For more on Apocalypse Now's noir roots, see John Hellmann, "Vietnam and the Hollywood Genre Film: Inversions of American Mythology in The Deer Hunter and Apocalypse Now," *American Quarterly* 34, no. 4 (Autumn, 1982), 418-439.

27 Hawkins, 133.