

The Cultural Impact of UNSC Resolution 1325: Fictional Representations of Wartime Sexual Violence

Ana Romão

Doutoranda no Programa Internacional em Estudos Comparatistas (PhD COMP), na Faculdade de Letras, Universidade de Lisboa (FLUL), e bolsista da Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (FCT). Mestre em Estudos Ingleses e Americanos pela FLUL (2015). É investigadora no Projeto Cidade e (In)segurança na Literatura e nos Media (CILM), no Centro de Estudos Comparatistas (CEC/FLUL) desde 2013. Investigadora no projeto europeu financiado em 2020 pelo ERASMUS+: Military Gender Studies (MGS), um projeto encabeçado pela Academia Militar (AM), e em colaboração com instituições militares em Itália, Bulgária e Romênia. Os seus interesses de investigação incidem na intersecção das áreas de Cultura Visual, Estudos de Género, e Estudos Militares. A sua tese de Doutoramento foca-se nas representações da mulher militar na cultura visual da época da 'Guerra ao Terror' (2001).

Abstract

The UNSCR 1325, advocating for gender mainstreaming in peacebuilding operations, acknowledged the disproportionately high impact of armed conflicts on women and children. Even though UNSCR 1325 encompassed different ways in which women and children can be affected by war (e.g. displacement, etc.), this article focuses on one of the topics it addresses: sexual violence against women and girls in warzones.

Through the analysis of two case studies, the article will provide an overview of depictions of conflict-related sexual violence in mainstream war cinema. It intends to demonstrate how popular fictional representations of sexual violence in warzones have contributed to shape Western societies' collective perspectives on the subject. The article will explore the progression, and future challenges, of fictional portrayals of wartime sexual violence in order to assess how Western cultural productions have accompanied UNSCR 1325 throughout the two decades of its existence.

Keywords: Wartime Sexual Violence; UNSCR 1325; Popular Visual Culture; War Cinema.

Artigo recebido: 29.09.2020

Aprovado: 10.11.2020

<https://doi.org/10.47906/ND2021.158.02>

Resumo

O Impacto Cultural da Resolução CSNU 1325: Representações Ficcionalis de Violência Sexual em Tempos de Guerra

A RCSNU 1325, que defende a integração de género em operações de consolidação de paz, reconhece o elevado impacto dos conflitos armados em mulheres e crianças. Embora a RCSNU 1325 inclua as diferentes formas de guerra afetando mulheres e crianças, este artigo incide no tópico da violência sexual contra mulheres e crianças em zonas de conflitos militares.

Através da análise de dois estudos de caso, o artigo oferece uma visão global das representações de violência sexual no cinema mainstream de guerra. O artigo pretende demonstrar como as representações ficcionais de violência sexual em contextos de guerra têm contribuído para a construção de uma perspetiva Ocidental acerca deste assunto. Este artigo irá explorar a progressão, e desafios futuros, das representações ficcionais de violência sexual em contexto de guerra de forma a verificar de que forma as produções culturais Ocidentais têm acompanhado a RCSNU 1325.

Palavras-chave: Violência Sexual em Contexto de Guerra, RCSNU 1325; Cultura Visual Popular; Cinema de Guerra.

The gender-specific nature of armed conflicts was not an issue regarded as a matter of international security for a long time. The way women and girls were specifically targeted during warfare was thus perceived as an unavoidable characteristic of armed conflicts. This targeting, derived from the gender-based violence women also endure during peacetime, reflects the lack of rights and autonomy that women face in different measures worldwide. A report by the *United Nations Development Fund for Women* (UNIFEM) revealed that violence against women had reached epidemic proportions by the start of the 21st century, while international organizations took a long time to address this pressing issue. This report even stated that “Women’s bodies have become a battleground over which opposing forces struggle” (Rehn, Sirleaf, 2002, p. 178).

A few important changes to this socio-political paradigm happened at the end of the 1970’s, namely, when the 1979 international treaty *Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women* (CEDAW), known as the ‘women’s bill of rights’, recognized that armed conflict situations tend to favor the increase of prostitution, trafficking women, and the sexual assault of women. Another landmark came during the 1990’s, when the sexual abuses reported during the war in former Yugoslavia led to the awareness of sexual violence against women during armed conflicts to be considered a serious issue in need of attention from the international community.

Based on such advancements,¹ as well as on a human rights framework, on October 31, 2000, the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted the *United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325* (UNSCR 1325) on women, peace, and security. The UNSCR 1325 acknowledged the high impact of armed conflicts on women and girls, and promoted the adoption of a gender perspective in order to minimize this negative impact, not only during conflict, but also considering cases of repatriation, resettlement, rehabilitation, reintegration, and post-conflict reconstruction. The resolution declared the “need to implement fully international humanitarian and human rights law that protects the rights of women and girls during and after conflicts” (S/RES/1325 [2000]). The UNSCR 1325 was an important achievement for women’s rights, as it was the first formal and legal document from the UN that stated the importance of the participation of women in peace negotiations and post-conflict reconstructions. Furthermore, it notably asserted the importance of protecting women and girls from wartime sexual violence:

1 e.g., through academic work in the fields of anthropology, sociology, women’s studies, etc.; through the work of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs); and recalling UN resolutions 1261 (1999), 1265 (1999), 1296 (2000), and 1314 (2000).

“10. Calls on all parties to armed conflict to take special measures to protect women and girls from gender-based violence, particularly rape and other forms of sexual abuse, and all other forms of violence in situations of armed conflict” (S/RES/1325 [2000]).

The occurrence of sexual violence in warzones is a well-recognized phenomenon, spanning decades, and overall accompanying armed conflicts in the course of History. While it is important to recognize that men can also be victims of sexual violence during wartimes, it is crucial to understand that women (and girls) are subjected to a higher degree of subjugation than men. For instance, the threat of pregnancy, social shunning, and the threat of damage to the reproductive system often caused by sexual violence make women (and girls) more vulnerable. As the UNIFEM report states, women in warzones have been documented to have been trafficked into sexual slavery, which sees the abducted women being forced into domestic labor (at military camp sites), as well as into prostitution (Rehn, Sirleaf, 2002, pp. 9-10).

The existence of militarized prostitution can be perceived as common practice, part of a long tradition, as prominent feminist theorist Cynthia Enloe contends (2000, p. 108). The rape of local women by military men, although seen as shocking behavior, “loses its distinctiveness” according to Enloe (2000, p. 108). This is due to the lack of reporting on the abuses, as causes the rapists to stay unknown, and the women to also remain anonymous, contributing to an amalgamation of wartime damages that Enloe calls “lootpillagelandrape” (2000, p. 108).

It is therefore important to increase the visibility of sexual aggression towards local women (and girls) in warzones. One way this can be done, is through the fictionalization of events, which can find platforms for dissemination that reach a large amount of the general population. For instance, by telling stories of military sexual violence in mainstream films, that reality is introduced to a high percentage of civilians who were not previously aware of it. The analysis of filmic narratives concerning military sexual violence can provide a window into the cultural opinions on warfare politics. Through the examination of specific films we can ascertain how cultural productions have perceived the socio-political changes implemented by UNSCR 1325. In this article, I will present two films by the same director, one from 1989 and another from 2007. With this comparison I hope to demonstrate how the issue of sexual violence exerted by soldiers on women (and girls) in warzones has been perceived before and after the establishment of UNSCR 1325.

The rape of local women by invading military groups has been considered a strategy to exert power over the population, making rape a weapon of war. The moral conflicts in sexually abusing captured women was shown to be a concern of popular culture, notably in the film *Casualties of War* (1989) by US director Brian

de Palma. This film was based on an article written by Daniel Lang in 1969 for *The New Yorker*, and on a subsequent book by Lang written in the same year. In his publications, Lang details the abuse of a Vietnamese woman by a squad of US soldiers during the Vietnam War in 1966. De Palma transposed these real events to film, showing a woman being kidnapped from her Vietnamese village, as well as her subsequent rape and murder. *Casualties of War* presents a non-fictional situation to provoke the viewers to consider the 'lootpillagelandrape' mentality that Enloe wrote about. The very title of the film remits to kidnap, rape, physical abuse, and murder as being collateral damage, an accepted casualty of armed conflicts.

Casualties of War engages with other cinematic war texts regarding the portrayal of empowered male sexuality, for instance, *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), directed by Stanley Kubrick. In an iconic scene in *Full Metal Jacket*, the recruits chant in unison: "This is my rifle, this is my gun; this is for fighting, this is for fun". As the recruits hold their weapons for 'rifle', and their genitals for 'gun', readings of the connections between military weaponry and male sexuality have become commonplace in discussions of war cinema (academic or otherwise).² However, *Casualties of War* subverts this well-known chant, intending to further complicate the implications of the chant. As the main antagonist prepares to rape the Vietnamese woman the squad has kidnapped on his command, he holds his genitals and proclaims "this is a weapon", and about his rifle he says 'this is a gun', as he repeats the gestures he claims "this is for fighting [his penis], and this is for fun [his weapon]". This reworking of the popular chant is effective in presenting this character's convictions that his (and by extension, male) sexuality can/should be used as a weapon of war, and that he believes that taking the lives of the 'enemies' is fun. In her reading of the original chant, feminist author Adrienne Rich called for "a recognition of the fact that when you strike the chord of sexuality in the patriarchal psyche, the chord of violence is likely to vibrate in response, and vice versa" (1991, p. 115). We can thus draw on Rich's argument to recognize that, however striking the reversal of the popular chant may have appeared in *Casualties of War*, in fact, the associations between male sexuality/weaponry and fighting/fun are so fluid that it any kind of correlation can be made without much change to its implications.

Placed at the center of *Casualties of War*, are the characters of Sergeant Meserve (played by Sean Penn) and Private Max Eriksson (played by Michael J. Fox). Meserve is placed in the antagonist category, as he is the senior officer (despite being a young man) who orders the kidnapping, rape, and murder of the young woman. On the other hand, Eriksson assumes the role of the 'hero' who morally opposes

2 e.g., Burke, C., 1989. Marching to Vietnam. *Journal of American Folklore* 102.406 (October-December), p. 427.

the actions of the group (propelled by Meserve), and who (poorly) attempts to help the abused woman. Sarah Projansky, influential scholar of film theory and gender studies, sees the heroic characterization of Eriksson as “particularly problematic” (2001, p. 112). Projansky argues that “*Casualties of War* represents the rape as a vehicle for understanding men” (2001, p. 113). According to the scholar, this anti-war film portrays the Vietnamese woman as a semiotic representation of ‘Vietnam’, being abused by the US military (Projansky, 2001, p. 113).³ This choice in representation frees the narrative to focus on male response to the ‘incidents’. This perspective is apparent, for instance, in analyses like the one expressed by prominent military historian, Lawrence H. Suid: “*Casualties of War* uses a historical event to make its comment about man in war” (2002, p. 541). For Suid, the plot is plainly about the struggles of being a (male) soldier in Vietnam, and how war can lead you to commit rape. Suid thus perceives the stresses of war to be the only justification for Meserve’s conduct (2002, p. 542). The disregard for a toxic hypermasculine military environment,⁴ coupled with the sociological concept of ‘rape culture’ prevalent in the US,⁵ make Suid’s reading of *Casualties of War* a shallow one, in conformity with Projansky’s critique that rape is presented in war films as a narrative tool for male character development.

Furthermore, Projansky defends that *Casualties of War* conveys the message that witnessing rape and later accusing the rapists (securing a moral high ground) is enough to consider someone a hero in this narrative (2001, p. 117). This is also advocated by Suid in his analysis, when he states that: “to a significant degree, *Casualties of War* contained a balanced portrayal. Four of the soldiers took part in an abominable atrocity, but the fifth acted responsibly in an impossible situation” (2002, p. 543). Suid thus considers the presence of four rapists and murderers to be ‘balanced out’ in the narrative by Erikson’s ‘moral stance’, despite his inaction during the kidnapping, repeated rape, and murder of a Vietnamese young woman.

Ultimately, Projansky concludes that *Casualties of War* (among other examples) bypasses the opportunity to offer a sophisticated critique of a real issue, the rape of women (and children) in warzones, opting to provide more “comfortable positions

3 The “rape trope”, or “rape as metaphor” displaces the violent, and traumatic, act of rape, averting the focus from the victim and onto the subliminal meaning of the metaphor.

4 Of which the sexual harassment and rape of military women inside military institutions is an especially important issue. e.g. The Tailhook sexual abuse scandal in 1991 (US Navy), the Aberdeen sexual abuse scandal in 1996 (US Army), etc.. For a comprehensive approach on the subject of the sexual harassment and rape of military women, see the award-winning documentary *Invisible War* (2012), directed by Kirby Dick.

5 For a close analysis of the portrayals of masculine stereotypes in war films see Donald, R. and MacDonald, K., 2011. *Reel Men at War: Masculinity and the American War Film*. Lanham: The Scarecrow Press, INC.

for viewing rape” (2001, p. 118). By labeling these representations as ‘comfortable’, Projansky identifies a cohesion in representations of rape in Western visual culture, which render the raped woman to the backdrop of the plot, and the rape as an uncomfortable, yet unavoidable, war incident.

A clear example that shows how the abused woman is pushed into the background concerns the amount of communication she is allowed. The male characters in *Casualties of War* are given space, and voice, to express to the viewers their moral positionings. As Meserve is openly aggressive and misogynistic, stating his intents without concern for reprisals, and Eriksson repeatedly conveys his concerns and opinions, the two often engage in altercations. The rest of the soldiers in the squad, while not so vocal as the two main characters, are nonetheless clear on their moral stance, and are allowed by the narrative to contribute to the discussions. On the other hand, the woman, who goes unnamed for the majority of the film, is never allowed a voice beyond hopeless screaming. Her interactions with the soldiers, mainly with Erikson, are seen as ‘foreign’, as the soldiers (and presumably, the majority of Western audiences) do not understand her language, she then becomes a *non-person*. This is evident when Meserve tells the squad that: “We’re going to requisition a girl for a little portable R. & R.” (1989). Meserve speaks of the woman whose name is later revealed to be Than Thi Oanh, as if she were an object mean for usage and subsequent disposal. Furthermore, in the only attempt of communication between a soldier (Erikson) and the woman, she is treated as an animal in distress, whom he pities and (hesitantly) attempts to feed and free.

The fact that the abduction, rape, and murder of a Vietnamese woman by US soldiers was contested by one of their own, provides the sole drive for the film’s narrative, which is not about the people onto whom the atrocities are committed, but is about the moral fiber of US soldiers. In his analysis of *Casualties of War*, renowned film scholar John Belton sees the films as a veiled portrayal of homosexuality, as he writes that it “[...] provides a more brutal example of the rather complex way in which the male relationships in war films are bound up with notions of homosexual desire” (Belton, 2012, p. 200). Belton declared that “[...] the rape victim serves as a means of sexual exchange among men – a bond that they all share and that solidifies their ties to one another” (2012, p. 200). This reading validates the status of the woman as an object to be passed around by male soldiers. It furthermore corroborates Projansky’s critique that men are the center of the narrative, and women are used as plot devices. Belton concludes that Erikson’s opposition to the abuse of the Vietnamese woman, and his consequent exposure of the incident, figuratively represent his discontent with the Vietnam war itself.

This anti-war stance was prevalent in US cultural productions of the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, like Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979), or Oliver Stone’s *Platoon* (1986). As these films carried a critical message about the US

military establishment, non-Vietnam films of the same era strived to ‘humanize’ the military. Films like *Private Benjamin* (1980) directed by Howard Zieff, or *Stripes* (1981) directed by Ivan Reitman, brought comedy (and women) to the boot camp, and contributed to the improvement of the post-Vietnam view of US military. Other films that were instrumental in shifting public perceptions of the military were *An Officer and a Gentleman* (1982) directed by Taylor Hackford, and *Top Gun* (1986) directed by Tony Scott. In *An Officer and a Gentleman* a handsome naval officer carries a poor working girl on his arms, swaying audiences to embrace US military after the Vietnam War through the appeal of a romantic plot.⁶ *Top Gun*, on the other hand, called by Belton “the cinematic equivalent of a Navy recruitment poster” (2012, p. 389), contributed enormously to spike the US Navy Aviators enlistment numbers at the time of its release.⁷

As the Vietnam War did not produce a favorable outcome for the US, the national production companies in the following decades have, for the most part, abandoned blockbusters set against the backdrop of this war. However, films about the World War II continue to resurface with mainstream appreciation.⁸ This nostalgic admiration of World War II derives from a collective image of that conflict as an astounding US victory. Thus, films like *Top Gun* or *Dunkirk*, aimed at re-shaping cultural understandings of patriotism, national identity, soldiers’ behavior, and US military moral fiber, ultimately seeking to validate US militarization.

The US government, through the relationships between the US Department of Defense and production companies, have thus, throughout decades, been shaping militarized patriotism through cinematic narratives, and through the deliberate construction of the ideal ‘soldier’. Therefore, the issues of the abuse and murder of women in warzones raised in *Casualties of War* were trampled by mainstream attempts to revive the military’s image at the close of the 20th century.

With the new millennium came the 2001 terrorist attacks on the US, a collective incident marked by the destruction of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, and popularly referred to as 9/11 (September 11). The attacks lead former President George W. Bush to declare a ‘Global War on Terrorism’, commonly known as ‘War

6 As Garofolo wrote about how *An Officer and a Gentleman* helped change the view of the military in a post-Vietnam America: “The romantic notion of a naval officer as a chivalrous knight, sweeping down in his white uniform, literally carrying the poor working girl off her feet”. See Garofolo, J.. 2016. War Films in an Age of War and Cinema. *A Companion to the War Film*. Douglas A Cunningham (ed.). New York: John Wiley & Sons, p. 46.

7 For a comprehension of the US government involvement in military films (including *Top Gun*), see: Robb, D.L., 2004. *Operation Hollywood: How the Pentagon Shapes and Censors the Movies*. New York: Prometheus Books.

8 e.g., *Dunkirk* (2017) directed by Christopher Nolan, and *Jojo Rabbit* (2019) directed by Taika Waititi.

on Terror' (September 16, 2011). One of the armed conflicts that began shortly after that declaration was the Iraq War (2003-2011), or the occupation of Iraq by US troops. In the midst of this war, director of *Casualties of War*, Brian de Palma, revisited the themes explored in that film, adapted to the Iraq War. *Redacted* (2007), directed by de Palma is also based on a true story, the rape and murder of Abeer Qasim Hamza al-Janabi, a fifteen-year-old Iraqi girl, and the murder of her father, mother, and six-year-old sister, by US soldiers. The plot is presented through multiple (fictional) digital formats: videos made by US soldiers stationed in Iraq, surveillance cameras, *YouTube* videos, blog posts, Skype calls, etc. It is through the soldiers' camcorder that we see the rape and murder of Farah (the fictional Abeer), as well as the murder of her family, by the squad.

In a scene from *Redacted*, a Corporal states that the very first casualty of war is the truth (de Palma, 2007). This statement is indicative of the fact that *Redacted* was intended to be a companion piece to *Casualties of War*, where the manipulation of the 'truth' was also a topic explored. In fact, much of the action in *Redacted* mirrors the events in *Casualties of War*. What differs is the visual style, which in *Redacted* reflects the crescent access to digital technologies that permits the recording or photographing of any event. It furthermore transforms the viewing experience, subjecting the viewer to a quasi-voyeuristic experience, by presenting it in such a 'realistic' manner, this approach deliberately removes the 'entertainment' aspect of moviegoing. The use of cellphones to record atrocities comments on how recording materials became so readily available in the 21st century, offering new possibilities for transparency.⁹ Perhaps the best example of this is the 2004 Abu Ghraib scandal, where a large number of photographs of US soldiers (both men and women) torturing Iraqi detainees in a US controlled prison in Iraq was leaked to the press.

Regardless of the medium chosen to present the narrative, the plot of *Redacted* still centers on the rape and murder of a female in a warzone, and it still focus its problematic around the way male soldiers choose to react to it. Much like *Casualties of War*, *Redacted* fictionalizes a war that finds sexual violence towards women and girls to be considered collateral damage. Belton argues that a war crime is presented in *Redacted* as "the consequence of the stress placed on American occupying forces by the insurgency and ongoing conflict in Iraq" (2012, p. 240). Again, the woman/girl is depicted as a stress-relief sexual object, meant to be discarded after use, referred to by the soldiers as a 'spoil of war' (de Palma, 2007). De Palma conveys through this film that the suffering of the war victims is 'redacted' (i.e.

9 For a comprehensive analysis of the impact of 'eyewitness images' in Western society, see Mortensen, M., 2015. *Journalism and Eyewitness Images: Digital Media, Participation, and Conflict*. New York: Routledge.

erased, censored, adjusted) not only by the mainstream news media, but also by major cinema production companies. This message is made apparent at the ending of *Redacted*, where even though one of the soldiers confesses to his family and friends back in the US to have participated in the rape and murder of an Iraqi girl, and the murder of her family, he is still perceived as a 'hero'. A photograph of this (fictional) soldier and his wife, both smiling, is then followed by a number of (real) photographs of severely injured (or dead) war victims in Iraq, with their faces 'redacted', to prevent identification, but also suggesting a critique to the news media sanitization of war images through the redaction/transforming/editing of photographs of war atrocities.

The group of images is preceded by the title card: 'Collateral Damage'. The very last photograph, however, was not real, as it was created by photographer Taryn Simon for the purpose of appearing in the last frame of the film. The photograph, entitled *Zarah/Farah* (Taryn Simon, 2007),¹⁰ features the Iraqi actress that played Farah, Zahra Zubaidi. The image is quite graphic as it depicts the maimed and burned body of the girl abused by US soldiers. It is interesting that this last fabricated image is presented with the rest of the real photographs of the war in Iraq, with no allusion to its true provenance. We are therefore led to believe that this might be a real photograph of the girl the film was inspired by (Abeer), since the facial features of the girl in the picture are not so clear as to immediately recognize the actress in *Redacted*. De Palma thus purposely blurs the line between facts and fiction, to further expose not only the way the news media can easily manipulate images, but also exposing our gullibility as an audience.¹¹

According to an interview in *Artforum* with Brian de Palma and Taryn Simon, Zahra Zubaidi became a pariah in the Muslim world, even receiving threats from her own family members, who considered her participation in *Redacted* a dishonor on the family (Artforum, 2012). Moreover, the international exhibition of the photograph *Zarah/Farah* in art shows further aggravated Zahra's situation, leading her to seek political asylum in the US, which was granted in 2011. This "fictionalized rendering of a real even" as Simon called it (Artforum, 2012), triggered the endangerment of a young Iraqi actress, leading to questions about the involvement of US cultural

10 Taryn Simon. *Zahra/Farah* (2008/2009/2011). Framed archival inkjet print and Letraset on wall. 61 1/2 x 79 inches (156.2 x 200.7 cm). [online] Available at: <tarynsimon.com/works/zahra/#1> [Accessed 24 August 2020].

11 This sentiment is transmitted through one of the soldiers in *Redacted*, who states: "You won't see the truth about Mỹ Lai in movies because that fascist orgy was even too much for fucking liberal Hollywood" (de Palma, 2007). The soldier is referring to the Mỹ Lai massacre, which saw the rape, mutilation, and murder of between 347 and 504 South Vietnamese people (men, women, and children) by US soldiers during the Vietnam War (March 16, 1968).

productions in political narratives, and their impact on already tense situations. In the interview, Director Brian de Palma thus addressed the question of the predominance of Western cinema throughout the world:

“TS: [...] why is Western cinema so present throughout the world, then? If there are all of these intransigent cultural differences, why does an American aesthetic still seem to dominate global popular culture?

BDP: Because it’s the devil’s candy” (Artforum, 2012).

Arguably, it was this understanding of Western cinema as being ‘the devil’s candy’ that led de Palma to create movies that he believed would be sought out and consumed regardless of any horrid content. In the interview, de Palma and Simon discuss cultural boundaries and anesthetized audiences. De Palma states his belief that, as a director, his films should not know boundaries, as nothing he can put on screen could ever compare to real violence against real people. Important as it may be to bring to the attention of the general population the abuse of women and girls in warzones, it is also imperative to signal that the breaking of the ‘boundaries’ de Palma spoke of, may also come with negative aspects. For instance, both *Casualties of War* and *Redacted* add to a current of popular culture that has persistently exploited the rape of native women (and girls) for entertainment purposes.¹² If, as Projansky explained, rape is a plot device to drive the male hero on his narrative journey, the degrees of exposure in the rape scenes offer multiple levels of exploitation. Regarding the two case studies, there is room to consider if by fictionalizing the stories of real war victims, de Palma effectively exploited the suffering of these two young women.

However, regarding the adaptation of those cases, it can be argued that de Palma heavily blurs the line between facts and fiction,¹³ to the point of creating what could be considered a ‘fictionalized documentary’ on real wartime atrocities, or what scholar Tatiana Prorokova called ‘docu-fictions of war’ (2019). Prorokova analyzed films that fictionalize real events that took place in war contexts, and concluded that these ‘docu-fictions’, while striving to depict real conflicts and real actions, likewise attest to the importance of fictionalizing war narratives, since the ‘reality’ of warfare is so far removed from common human perception (2019, p. 70). Prorokova argues that films like *Redacted*, Kathryn Bigelow’s *The Hurt Locker* (2008), or Clint Eastwood’s *American Sniper* (2014), among others, intertwine political, historical,

12 A recent case in point would be the critically acclaimed series *Game of Thrones* (2011-2019), which frequently showed scenes featuring rape, torture, slavery, and overall abuse and subjugation of ‘local’ women.

13 Further complicated by his stylistic choice of presenting the film as if it was a collection of actual digital media files.

and moral aspects of the Iraq War in a way that conveys some 'truth' about the conflict (2019, p. 232) to larger audiences.

Despite being the subject of many films, the Iraq War has not spawned a largely positive reception by US moviegoers. The overall commercial failure of films depicting this war was analyzed by Martin Barker in A *'Toxic Genre': The Iraq War Films* (2011). It is Barker's assessment that the unresponsiveness of the general public to films about the Iraq War testifies to a disillusionment with US policies throughout the 'War on Terror'. In fact, films like *Redacted* deal with distressing and uncomfortable realities, evoking disturbing thought and assuming the uncomfortable role of enforcer of 'social accountability'. Therefore, *Redacted* was not only highly berated by movie critics,¹⁴ but it was also a commercial failure.¹⁵

Another reason for the movie's unsuccessfulness at the box office is the rape scene, an issue pinpointed by John Markert, who wrote that "rape is all too dispiritingly familiar. [...] [It is] a subject that is rarely treated in popular film, and yet another off-putting reason the movie did not succeed" (2011, p. 232). In fact, the rape of women in warzones has been featured in films like Gottfried Reinhardt's *Town Without Pity* (1961), or Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979). However, the issue of rape was not at the forefront of the narratives, as it is perceived as a common, albeit unpleasant, consequence of warfare. Both the disillusionment with the Iraq War and the aversion to rape scenes were reasons given for the critical bashing of *Casualties of War*, further linking these two films in intent and results.

The comparison provided in this article between *Casualties of War* and *Redacted*, showed two narratives that falls in line with the popular culture tendency of turning male characters into villains or heroes according to their behavior towards a helpless woman. In either case, the women are deprived of voice, and their suffering is not recognized by the narrative, as they stand as a metaphor for something else (e.g. their countries). Since both films derive from real accounts of sexual abuse of women and girls in warzones by soldiers in two separate wars (Vietnam and Iraq), this analysis shows that the UNSCR 1325 has not radically changed the conditions that accommodate this type of violent behavior. This is further corroborated by the recurrent high percentage of sexual violence in warzones, recorded during UN operations,¹⁶ and also by the need to complement

14 e.g., Horwitz, S., 2007. Acting 'Redacted'. *Back Stage East* 48, no. 47 (22 November): 32-33.

15 According to its IMDB page, *Redacted* (2007), directed by Brian de Palma made \$65,388 (nationally) and \$784,604 (internationally), which for a budget of \$5,000,000 can be characterized as a box office failure. [online] Available at: <<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0937237/>> [accessed 27 August 2020].

16 For statistic data see United Nations, 2019. *Conflict Related Sexual Violence: Report of the United Nation Secretary-General. S/2019/280*.

UNSCR 1325 by implementing other resolutions.¹⁷ Furthermore, the two case studies in this article are examples of how popular visual culture frames the issue of sexual violence against women and girls in warzones, and how unaffected by the measures of UNSCR 1325 (and the adjacent resolutions) a 2007 war film shows to be. Nonetheless, it is evident that while these two films may be pertinent to the subject, they alone do not represent a considerable sample from which to draw conclusions on the entirety of the war genre. On contrary, they present singular opportunities to discuss the fictional representation of the rape and murder of local women in two distinct warzones over a large interval of time (more than three decades). From this comparison we can find instances that point to the pervasiveness of sexual violence directed exclusively towards women and girls. However, it should be referenced that both the case studies were helmed by the same person, a male director from the US.

One aspect that could provide more insight into the fictionalizations of the sexual violence against women and girls in warzones, could be the inclusion of more women in the production of these narratives. Returning to Projansky's argument that *Casualties of War* is a film meant to be centered on the experiences of men (this can also be applied to *Redacted*), we can surmise that it might be due to the overwhelmingly male presence in the production of the movie(s).¹⁸ This predominantly male approach in storytelling is thus marked by the 'male gaze', a concept best explained by feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey in her seminal article "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (first published in 1975). Mulvey addresses cinema's particular ability to categorize women as sex objects, not just through dialogue, but also by visually exposing them for the male characters (and by extension, for male audiences). Through the use of psychoanalysis, Mulvey denounces the social structures and codes that are embedded in cinematic productions. According to Mulvey, Western mainstream cinema is a reflection of a patriarchic society shaping its characters and plots according to it. In her article, Mulvey discusses male 'ways of looking', which relegate women to be a passive object of deliberate 'male gaze', while offering men the omnipotent power of looking, or, as she simply puts it: "Woman as image, man as bearer of the look" (1975, p. 837).

17 UNSC Resolutions numbers: 1820 (2008), 1888 (2009), 1889 (2009), 1960 (2010), 2106 (2013) [34], 2122 (2013) [35], 2242 (2015), 2467 (2019), 2493 (2019).

18 Both Brian de Palma films are examples of the lack of female access to positions of power in the entertainment industry. In *Casualties of War* (1989) all of the most important positions in production were fulfilled by men (director, screenwriters, producers, etc.). The production of *Redacted* (2007) counted with four women as producers, but nonetheless had seven male producers, and male screenwriter, and director.

The works of Mulvey and Projansky shed a light onto the need of diversifying the voices in mainstream storytelling. As was addressed by UNSCR 1325, the inclusion of women in peace talks and other important political debates is crucial to the improvement of international security. This is also true when discussing the inclusion of women in fictional storytelling, as the participation of women from different backgrounds could only improve the message conveyed by the narratives. A consequence of effectively addressing the problematic of sexual violence against women and girls in warzones would also, according to Cynthia Enloe, positively impact the issue of sexual violence against military (and civilian) women. Halting the idea that women are male property in war contexts could impact toxic masculine atmospheres even outside Western military institutions (Enloe, 2014, p. 156). The analysis of popular visual culture products like *Casualties of War* and *Redacted* is thus important to observe the cultural effect of international politics. Through the examination of cinematic texts like this article's two case studies we can observe not only the political paradigm that created them, but also the public's reaction to them, which allows for a greater understanding of the long path still ahead of us regarding women's rights.

Bibliography

- Artforum. 2012. *Blow-Up: Taryn Simon and Brian de Palma in Conversation*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.artforum.com/print/201206/taryn-simon-and-brian-de-palma-in-conversation-31096>> [Accessed 28 August 2020].
- Barker, M., 2011. *A 'Toxic Genre': The Iraq War*. London: Pluto Press.
- Belton, J., 2012. *American Cinema/American Culture*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Enloe, C., 2000. *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives*. Oakland: University of California Press.
- Enloe, C., 2014. *Bananas, Beaches and Bases: Making Feminist Sense of International Politics*. 2nd ed. Berkeley: University of California.
- Markert, J., 2011. *Post-9/11 Cinema: Through a Lens Darkly*. Plymouth: Scarecrow Press.
- Mulvey, L., 1999. Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema. *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*. Eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, 833-44. New York: Oxford UP.
- Projansky, S., 2001. *Watching Rape: Film and Television in Postfeminist Culture*. New York: New York University Press.
- Prorokova, T., 2019. *Docu-Fictions of War: U.S. Interventionism in Film and Literature*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Prose 1966–1978. New York: Norton.

Rehn, E., Sirleaf, E.J. 2002. *Progress of the World's Women 2002: Women, War, Peace*. Volume 1. Executive Summary. UNIFEM.

Rich, A., 1991. Caryatid: Two Columns. *On Lies, Secrets, and Silence: Selected*.

Suid, L. H., 2002. *Guts and Glory: The Making of the American Military Image in Film*. Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky.

Tasker, Y., 2011. *Soldier's Stories: Military Women in Cinema and Television Since World War II*. Durham: Duke University Press.

UN Security Council, Security Council resolution 1325 (2000) [on women and peace and security], 31 October 2000, S/RES/1325 (2000), [online] Available at: <<https://www.ref-world.org/docid/3b00f4672e.html>> [Accessed 4 August 2020].

Movies

Casualties of War, 1989. [film] Directed by Brian de Palma, USA: Columbia Pictures.

Redacted, 2007. [film] Directed by Brian de Palma, USA: Magnolia Pictures.