

## **Cinematic perspectives on the ‘war on terror’: *The Road to Guantánamo* (2006) and activist cinema**

Bruce Bennett

On 14<sup>th</sup> March, 2006, *The Road to Guantánamo* (Whitecross,<sup>1</sup> Winterbottom) became the first film ever to be released simultaneously in cinemas, on broadcast television, on DVD and over the internet for streaming or downloading. This unprecedented adoption of a ‘day-date’ release schedule by the film’s British distributor is a sign that, as a consequence of shifts in film-viewing practices, the cinema screen is no longer the first choice of platform for audiences. Releasing a film in several media formats simultaneously cuts the distribution costs (reducing the number of prints that need to be struck, and reducing the advertising costs, since the film only needs to be marketed once), and makes the distribution of such low-budget films as this £1.45m production viable.

Importantly, however, simultaneous distribution allows a film like *The Road to Guantánamo* to reach a much wider audience on its immediate release than it might otherwise address if it were released only into cinemas in the first instance before being released over several months on satellite or cable, on DVD and video, and then, finally, on free-to-air broadcast TV. It can circulate in the public sphere in a significant and very particular way. On the one hand this ‘represents the emergence of

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<sup>1</sup> Although Mat Whitecross, who has been employed by Michael Winterbottom’s production company, Revolution Films, in a range of roles from runner to editor, is credited as co-director of *The Road to Guantánamo*, this article discusses the film primarily in relation to other films directed by Winterbottom. This is not to imply that Whitecross made no significant creative or authorial contribution to the film. Rather, analysing this film in relation to Winterbottom’s other work makes visible the way *The Road to Guantánamo* develops and explores the political and activist potential of popular cinema.

new business models in film that seek to capitalize on the economics of consumer demand to access content when, and where, they want it' while also pre-empting 'piracy' (Davies and Withers, 2006: 61). On the other, it exploits the technical developments that facilitate this commercial shift in order to reach large international audiences quickly.<sup>2</sup> There is, arguably, a relationship between the mode of production and distribution and the film's capacity to intervene in the transnational circulation of mediated representations of the 'war on terror'. The simultaneous dissemination of the film in different formats allows the film to contribute to debates about terror and democracy and the legitimacy of the Guantánamo prison in a particularly direct and rapid way by addressing and generating multiple, overlapping publics through these different media. In recounting or making public the experiences of three British men imprisoned at Guantánamo Bay, and perhaps provoking, or intervening in, broader debates about Britain's alliance with the US and the 'coalition of the willing', the invasion of Iraq, and 'extraordinary rendition', the film is also engaged with making *publics*, with the project of generating an active/activist audience.

### **'Double perspective'**

*The Road to Guantánamo* is a film about the 'war on terror' on which the US and its allies embarked in response to the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington DC in September 2001. Rather than attempting to offer a comprehensive overview of this historical passage, however, the film explores these events synecdochically through a narrowly focused account of the terrifying and absurd experiences of a handful of

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<sup>2</sup> While the film remains available for streaming or downloading from the Channel 4 website at a fee, a complete low-resolution copy of the film can also be freely obtained from the file-sharing site, *Google Video*, where it can be viewed online or downloaded for viewing on a portable media player, greatly extending the transnational mobility of the film.

individuals who are inadvertently swept up in the chaotic opening stages of the war. Telling the story of three British-Asian tourists who were arrested in Afghanistan and later removed to Guantánamo Bay prison where they were interrogated and tortured for months, the film offers a coolly detailed and unsensational account of the experiences of these men as they are transported across national borders and into the interstitial, heterotopic spaces of prisons and internment camps.

Thus *The Road to Guantánamo* provides a counterpoint to the accounts of reporters and camera crews ‘embedded’ with US and UK troops that have dominated coverage of the conflict in Afghanistan and the subsequent invasion of Iraq. Interviewed during the production of the film, co-director Michael Winterbottom suggested that the film adopts a ‘double perspective’ from the point of view of western spectators (Anon 2006b: 11). That is to say, we are shown events from a different angle of vision, that of marginal or excluded figures, revealing aspects of the scene that would otherwise have remained hidden from sight. In a sense, then, the film constitutes a ‘reverse shot’, returning the mediated gaze of the western spectator.

The film seems to have been conceived as an intervention in the transnational media spectacle of the ‘war on terror’ in a very precise and partial way, as a competing or contestatory narrative. Winterbottom’s comment acknowledges the limited possibilities open to (art-house) film-makers or commentators in challenging or responding critically to the homogeneous and ubiquitous representations of the war within carefully managed Western news media. At the same time, he recognizes the distance between the activist function of the film and that of news reportage which, as film theorist Bill Nichols observes, ‘urges us to look but not care, see but not act, know but not change. The news exists less to orient us toward action than to perpetuate itself as commodity, something to be fetishized and consumed’ (Nichols

1991: 194). Winterbottom's comment also acknowledges the limitations of any individual account of the war, accepting that a single film can only ever offer a provisional, questionable narrative, rather than a true and definitive account of any set of events. Winterbottom, therefore, invites us to regard *The Road to Guantánamo* not as a singular historical document, but rather as a complicating account that qualifies or puts into play other accounts of the war and that, in turn, will be read in relation to them.

The term, 'double perspective', is thus an accurate description of the film's status as it circulates around the screens of Western Europe and the US and in discourses about the 'war on terror'. It is also an accurate and suggestive description of the political/textual strategies employed by the film. The film is structured around a double perspective in its visible blending of documentary actuality with dramatized re-enactment and one of the consequences of the film's assemblage from this 'material' is that its hybrid composition and unstable textual status remains subtly visible. The double perspective is incorporated into the film, to produce multiple perspectives. Rather than a clear view of events, then, the film induces a *double vision* of the various activities grouped and legitimated under the name of 'warfare'.

A similar strategy of internal doubling (and a consciousness of context) may be found elsewhere in Winterbottom's work. In an essay on recent transnational films concerned with immigration, Yosefa Loshitsky has argued that Winterbottom's earlier film, *In This World*, employs a similar structural device of double perspectives. The film recounts the wretched journey of two young refugees from the Shamshattoo refugee camp on the Pakistan/Afghanistan border to Britain in search of a liveable life, and Loshitsky suggests that it refuses to resolve the image by privileging one perspective over the other. Instead, the film maintains a tension between the

spectator's touristic gaze, and that of the refugees, Jamal and Enayat, producing a complex 'dialectics of gazes':

The spectator's gaze (mimicking the tourist's gaze) is negated by the refugee's gaze. One contradicts the other. While one gaze is in search of pleasure (even an involuntary one), the other seeks survival [...] The spectator's gaze [...] oscillates between the two gazes, the pleasure-seeking gaze of the tourist and the refuge-seeking refugee's gaze. This oscillation between tourism and 'poorism' is used in *In This World* has a distanciation effect, resulting in a Brechtian drama of alienation (Loshitsky 2006: 753)

However, the distanciation effect of *The Road to Guantánamo* is quite different since the central figures are British and also, crucially, adults.<sup>3</sup> The result is in some respects a subtler play of perspectives. On the one hand, the pleasure-seeking touristic gaze of the spectator is frustrated since the film eschews the rich use of colour and striking images of landscape that characterize *In This World* in favour of a muted colour scheme (punctuated by the bright orange of the jumpsuits worn by the inmates at Guantánamo) and a claustrophobic emphasis on the interiors of vehicles, rooms, internment camps and prison cells. On the other hand, the film collapses an opposition between the gaze of the spectator and that of the main characters since they quite literally embody the touristic gaze. However, this alignment of gazes has the potential to produce a different sort of discomfort since, while Asif Iqbal, Ruhel Ahmed and Shafiq Rasul set out from Britain as tourists at the beginning of the film, as British-Asians their non-white bodies don't correspond to the image of a Western traveller

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<sup>3</sup> See Bennett and Tyler 2007 for a discussion of the problematic figure of the child refugee in Winterbottom's work.

and this, we can infer, is the main reason for the subsequent repeated misrecognition of them as Islamist fighters or terrorists. This incompatibility may well also be the source of an uncomfortable identificatory relationship for white viewers, interfering with a conventional tendency to identify with a (white) narrative protagonist since, although they are not ‘other’ in the same sense as the refugees in *In This World*, their hyphenated ethnic identities and bodies mark them as visibly different.

*The Road to Guantánamo* tells the true story of four British-Asian men from Tipton in the Midlands, Iqbal, Ahmed, Rasul and Monir Ali. The film opens with the four friends flying to Pakistan in September 2001 to attend Iqbal’s wedding. Once there they take the opportunity to travel around Pakistan as sight-seers and then decide to cross the border to Afghanistan after hearing an Imam in a mosque call for volunteers to go to offer help to its impoverished population. Persuaded that the country isn’t about to be attacked, with time on their hands and eager for both ‘the experience’ and the ‘big naans’ you can find there, they cross the border.

The U.S. bombing of Afghanistan begins shortly after they arrive in Kandahar in the south and they subsequently find themselves stranded in the capital, Kabul, unable to arrange passage back to Pakistan. In error, they take a minibus north to Kunduz province, which is on the frontline between Taliban forces and the anti-Taliban Northern Alliance. One of the four friends, Monir Ali, is separated (and is presumed to have been killed) during the evacuation of Kunduz and the remaining three are captured by the Northern Alliance along with foreign fighters after the truck convoy they are in is bombed by US aircraft. Narrowly avoiding execution at the hands of the Northern Alliance soldiers, they are imprisoned in Sheberghan before being handed over to US marines who detain them at Kandahar air-base. There they are interrogated and beaten both by the SAS and US soldiers.

In early 2002 they are flown from Kandahar to the makeshift detention centre, Camp X-Ray (and later moved to the purpose-built prison, Camp Delta) at the Guantánamo Bay naval base in Cuba where they are imprisoned and interrogated by inquisitors from MI5 and the US. They are abused, beaten, tortured and held in isolation cells for months before finally being returned to the UK in March 2004 over two years later and released without charges.

The film finishes, in a gesture towards conventional narrative resolution, with the three friends themselves, rather than the actors, returning to Pakistan for Asif's wedding.

Michael Winterbottom describes *The Road to Guantánamo* as 'part-road movie, part-war film, part-prison movie' and while this is a broadly accurate outline of the sequence in which events take place within the film, it is also somewhat disingenuous since Winterbottom's film has little in common with the melodrama and eroticized fascination with masculinity and homosociality that is often intrinsic to these genres (Anon. 2006b: 11). *The Road to Guantánamo* is not a film about heroic resistance and endurance, and unlike many examples of the genres Winterbottom cites, with its flat, matter-of-fact style, the film does not invite us to read it as allegory or myth. However, what Winterbottom's description of the film as an unlikely assemblage of disparate generic elements does suggest effectively is the somewhat inconsistent structure of this hybrid film that splices together interviews with the three men, dramatized reconstructions of their experiences, documentary material and archive news footage. Thus, the film has a heterogeneous form, combining and juxtaposing different orders of representational material without privileging one over another. This formal disunity or incoherence is a consistent feature of Winterbottom's

work. The prolific director has produced films in a wide range of genres such as ‘post-heritage’ costume dramas (*Jude* (1996), *The Claim* (2000)) and romantic comedies (*Go Now* (1995), *With or Without You* (1999)), a sexually explicit art-house film (*9 Songs* (2004)), a road movie (*Butterfly Kiss* (1995)), a war film (*Welcome to Sarajevo* (1997)) and a science fiction film (*Code 46* (2003)). Like *The Road to Guantánamo*, all of these films sit uneasily in any particular generic category. They are often formally complex and playful texts that foreground the signs of the film’s construction or employ metanarrative devices such as characters that comment upon the film they are part of, or the placing of real historical individuals alongside the actors who play them in the film.

The imbrication of documentary and drama is nevertheless a particularly significant and appropriate device for the exploration of some of the questions raised by *The Road to Guantánamo* with regard to visibility, representation and mediation, not least because of the ethically/ontologically/generically problematic status of the dramatized documentary. Winterbottom has stated (echoing ethnographic film-maker Jean Rouch)<sup>4</sup> that, ‘I don’t think there’s a border between fiction and reality’.<sup>5</sup> While the delineation of this boundary in cinema may be unclear or mobile, nevertheless it is certainly the case that a number of his films are preoccupied with this border, crossing and re-crossing it repeatedly to varying effects.

Film theorist Bill Nichols suggests that films that mix documentary footage with filmed reconstructions in the interests of spectatorial engagement, or in order to compensate for the absence of useable or extant material, inevitably ‘trade

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<sup>4</sup> As Rouch writes, again aligning cinema with doubled perspectives: ‘As a filmmaker and ethnographer, I see virtually no boundary between documentary film and fiction film. As the art of the double, cinema is inherently a transition from the world of the real to the world of the imagination, and ethnography, as the science of other peoples’ thought systems, is a permanent crossing over from one conceptual universe to another, a form of acrobatic gymnastics where losing one’s footing is the least of the risks one runs’ (Rouch, 1981).

<sup>5</sup> *Michael Winterbottom: Profile of a Film-Maker* (Charles 2002)



documentary authenticity for fictional identification' (Nichols 1991: 250). This practice involves film-makers in ethical and political compromises, he argues, and also risks undermining the 'credibility' of a film since the result of such a collocation of actuality and staged sequences is that:

the special indexical bond between image and historical referent is ruptured. In a re-enactment, the bond is still between the image and something that occurred in front of the camera but what occurred occurred *for* the camera (Nichols 1991: 21).

Nichols recognizes that 'historical indexicality' can never be guaranteed since 'one person's historical evidence is another person's fiction'; nevertheless, he insists that documentary and fiction are distinguished fundamentally by their referential function (161). As he explains, 'Documentary shares the properties of a text with other fictions [...] but it addresses the world in which we live rather than worlds in which we may imagine living' (112). Responding to Nichols's argument, Neil Paget argues that this apparently clear distinction is untenable in relation to the dramatized documentary, a form that provocatively posits an equivalence between documentary and fiction, and that remains directed towards lived reality:

From its 'moment of presentation' in fictional, dramatic form dramadoc/docudrama points beyond the realm of fiction to a realm of non-fiction that is always already lived. In one sense, all drama aspires to this condition, but this kind of drama, by pointing at an explicit rather than implicit

reality, 'indexes' that explicit reality in ways that are difficult to ignore even if we deny them (Paget 1998: 136).

In this respect, for Paget, an insistence upon the irreducible distinction between drama and documentary is unhelpful in its disregard for the historical realities which dramatized documentaries both represent and trouble. While stating that 'some form of truth is the always receding goal of documentary film', Linda Williams contends that the political value of such films lies not in a demystificatory capacity to lay bare to us the truth of contemporary/historical reality, but in their capacity to intervene in the mediated public sphere (Williams 1998: 393). Williams acknowledges that the specific cultural context in which films are viewed will necessarily frame their meaning and so the truths represented or embodied by a particular film are inevitably relative and partial, though not necessarily insignificant or ineffective. However, in the strategic deployment of staged scenes and reconstructions, documentary films can articulate 'contingent' truths that function to counter dangerous or destructive fictions. Thus for Williams:

The choice is not between two entirely separate regimes of truth and fiction. The choice, rather, is in strategies of fiction for the approach to relative truths. Documentary is not fiction and should not be conflated with it. But documentary can and should use all the strategies of fictional construction to get at truths. (393-4)

In other words, the truth-value of documentaries is that they can work to challenge, contradict, qualify or affirm univocal truth claims already in circulation; they are texts

that can interfere with the contexts through which they move, generating alternative or multiple perspectives. In bringing together different orders of material, *The Road to Guantánamo* constitutes a troubling intervention amid the proliferation of justificatory, belligerent or putatively ‘even-handed’, liberal representations of the Guantánamo Bay prison and the wider conduct of the ‘war on terror’.

In this film, the authenticity of those shots and scenes that appear to be unstaged gives a greater impact to those moments that are apparently dramatized, a quality that Vivian Sobchack describes as the ‘charge of the real’ (Sobchack 2004). Writing on the interplay between represented reality and irreality in fiction films that incorporate documentary elements - such as real historical figures or star couples who play fictional couples - Sobchack has argued that the distinction between these supposedly different elements of a film turns as much on the extra-textual knowledge and expectations with which films are viewed, as it does on any indexical properties or textual qualities of the film image. In a sense then, the distinction between documentary and fiction film is more a distinction between different modes of spectatorship or consciousness, than a distinction between irreducibly different sequences of film. Moreover, Sobchack observes that our mode of spectatorial engagement is mobile or distracted, so that we typically move between these different modes of consciousness in the course of viewing a film. When, for example, we watch a scene with an actor playing a fictional character on a crowded city street we may find our attention wanders to fall on the people in the surrounding crowd as we reflect on whether they know they are in a film:

As we scrutinize their faces for signs of possible awareness of the camera filming them or of what suddenly becomes not the character but the actress

acting in their midst, they no longer are generalized in status, no longer merely quasi characters necessary to the verisimilitude of the realist mise-en-scène. Rather, they become for us real people, ambiguous existential ciphers (Sobchack 2004: 275).

Many of the early scenes of *The Road to Guantánamo* seem to have been shot guerrilla-style with the actors apparently improvising as they travel around Pakistan and Afghanistan on foot and in various forms of transport, and the scenario Sobchack describes characterizes well the experience of watching many scenes in this film.<sup>6</sup> They pose the question not so much whether or not this is documentary – a question that is attendant on viewing any film or TV documentary and that is, in any case, unanswerable – but to what *degree* a particular scene may be considered to be documentary. As Sobchack suggests, this question may just as easily be posed by a fiction film since a shift of perspective, in which we recognize that what we are watching is a filmed record of a staged event, is a common experience of film-viewing. Indeed, we could ask whether this layered mode of spectatorship, a double perspective of a different order, always characterizes film-viewing. For example, the success of a star performance is dependent upon our recognition that it is, precisely, a performance, no matter how unmediated, before a camera:

For a moment, then, in the midst of a fiction, we find ourselves in a documentary. This quite common experience demonstrates that although documentary and fictional consciousness are *incommensurable*, they are *compossible* in any given film. Furthermore, it demonstrates that documentary

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<sup>6</sup> The film was shot in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Iran, and Britain.

and verisimilar fictional space are constituted from the same worldly “stuff” – the former giving existential ballast to the ‘realism’ of the latter even as its specificity is usually bracketed and put out of play and on the sidelines of our consciousness (Sobchack 2004: 275).

*The Road to Guantánamo*, more clearly, perhaps, than any of Winterbottom’s other films, is structured from this heterogeneous ‘worldly “stuff”’, in an aggregate of fiction and documentary. Rather than carefully bracketing the documentary material and pushing it safely to the margins, on the contrary Winterbottom’s films put it into play with the fictional components, and so watching *The Road to Guantánamo* it is frequently unclear whether we are watching actuality or drama. The effect of this complex ‘double perspective’ is that the dramatic reconstructions and conjectured sequences are given a ‘charge of reality’ from the documentary material (rather than being ‘exposed’ by this juxtaposition as fictional), while the distance between the documentary and reconstruction is largely maintained and made visible. At the same time, however, since the dramatized elements of the films are at times indistinguishable from documentary due to the use of improvisation, hand-held cameras, non-actors, and guerrilla-style shooting on location with hidden microphones, the reliability of the documentary sequences is, in turn, put into question.

For instance, the scene in which the four friends are shown travelling across the border into Afghanistan opens with a caption, ‘PAKISTAN-AFGHANISTAN BORDER 13 OCTOBER 2001’ superimposed on what appears to be an excerpt from a contemporaneous British TV news report or documentary as it is accompanied by

this fragmentary voice-over: 'Border trade continues unimpeded. Among those crossing are brave Afghan aid workers. The people rely on them for food and healthcare and to explain their needs to the outside world'. A montage of shots of shifting crowds of people, soldiers, motorbikes and trucks, is intercut with shots of the actors making their way across the border on foot or riding pillion on motorcycles. Shots of Asif Iqbal and Ruhel Ahmed recalling their experience of crossing into Afghanistan are also inserted into this sequence and they are also heard speaking in voice-over during the montage. The rhythmic, non-diegetic music that plays quietly throughout this sequence helps to 'smooth over' the multiple cuts, making it extremely difficult to identify the points of transition between the different elements.

This uncertainty – what Sobchack terms an 'unsettling epistemological ambiguity' and one newspaper review of the film describes as 'a kind of vertigo in the viewer, an almost philosophical confusion about the literalness of the filmed image' - is put to varying uses in Winterbottom's films and sometimes has a comic effect as in *A Cock and Bull Story* (2005), but it is not experienced as radically disruptive or unsettling by the spectator (Scott, 2006). One of the main reasons for this is that this montage of different orders of material is a very familiar formal device from television. A huge number of TV programmes, from historical documentaries, through docudramas and reality TV programmes to news broadcasts, combine dramatic reconstructions with other types of material in a casual and sometimes indifferent way. Raymond Williams' characterization of broadcast TV output as non-linear, discontinuous, heterogeneous 'flow' identifies a similar organizing principle underlying the medium at a general level (Williams 1975: 86).

*The Road to Guantánamo* draws on the expectations and cognitive aptitudes of the television viewer who is adept at making sense of and reading across different

types of material and so, for example, there is no expository voice-over commentary (except where the film incorporates excerpts from news programmes) and no captions to indicate when we are watching a reconstruction with actors or even that the film tells a 'true story'. The film's deployment of a formal model derived from television can be explained in part by the film's financing by a TV company (a feature of much recent film production in Britain), as well as by Winterbottom's background in directing TV drama and well as feature films. It could also be understood as an effect/acknowledgement of the increasing convergence of film and television – a movement that is suggested by the decision to adopt the new business model of releasing a film in several media formats simultaneously.<sup>7</sup>

However, most importantly with regard to its form and the film's strategic double perspective, the juxtaposition of documentary footage and dramatized material is a means by which the Tipton Three (as they were named by the British press) can tell their story publicly. The film allows them to speak for themselves (insofar as they are permitted to do so by the directors/editors) and so the film's hybrid form is determined, to some extent, by the ethical and political imperative to foreground these men. Thus the film is interspersed with shots of Iqbal, Ahmed and Rasul discussing their experiences. They address the camera directly (with any prompts or questions from an interviewer having been edited out) and are all shot in the same visually neutral way as if to suggest minimal mediation; they are framed in static medium close-up shots with high-key lighting against a mottled grey and beige background. What is striking about their accounts is the deadpan neutrality. They are not

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<sup>7</sup> It is also common for European 'arthouse' directors to move between media for a range of reasons, both practical and political. Alongside Winterbottom we might cite such border-crossers as Ken Loach, Jean-Luc Godard, Werner Herzog, Krzysztof Kieslowski, Lars von Trier, Ingmar Bergman and Rainer Fassbinder.

impassioned, defensive, distressed or self-justificatory as they speak, but, rather, they remain composed and seem to be variously reflective, cynical, amused and optimistic.

Indeed, although they have been through fairly similar experiences they reach quite different conclusions about them towards the end of the film. Iqbal explains that ‘It changed my life. My life’s completely different. The way I look at things, the way I look at the world. The world’s not a nice place.’ Rasul, on the other hand, reflects, ‘Looking back on it now, yeah, it was an experience, and it has changed my life for the better – for me – so I don’t really regret it.’ Ahmed then explains that, ‘I haven’t changed a great deal, just that I practise my religion more. I mean, I didn’t even practise at all before.’

And so, the film refrains from offering us a clear resolution, a closing down of the debates with which the film is intended to intervene, or a reassuring sense that their brutal treatment had had a positive or ‘redemptive’ transformative effect on their lives. The film also refrains from offering the shot that would guarantee its authenticity and incisiveness – the interviewee breaking down in tears or incoherent rage in the process of recounting and reliving his traumatic experiences. In other words, what the film foregoes is political *affect*, in its concern, perhaps, with political effects. *The Road to Guantánamo* does not move us through empathy and identification, inviting us to share the experiences of these three men as they are incarcerated and relentlessly questioned, taunted and screamed at, held in isolation, beaten, shackled to the floor. Instead, the subtle effect of the film’s neutral register is a growing sense of the distance between US president George Bush’s comment at the film’s opening during a press conference with UK prime minister Tony Blair – in which he is presumably referring to Al Qaeda or the Taliban - ‘The only thing I know



for certain is that these are bad people and I look forward to working closely with the Blair government to deal with the issue', and the *ordinariness* of these three men.

The film also foregoes explicit commentary, exposition or defence. In one sense it tells us little about the occupation of Afghanistan, and the expansion of the 'war on terror' with the subsequent invasion of Iraq, and little about the debates around extraordinary rendition, the US's rejection of international law in the treatment and renaming of prisoners of war with the complicity of the 'coalition of the willing'. It tells us little about the debates around the circumstances in which torture might be legally and ethically justified and whether information extracted under torture should be used by western governments. The narrative focus throughout the film is on Asif, Ruhel and Shafiq and their exclusion from the public sphere through their misrecognition as Al Qaeda, Al Majaroun terrorists or Taliban soldiers. Apart from the news clips, there are no scenes that don't feature at least one of the three men, whether they are addressing the camera or are being represented by actors in the dramatized sequences.

According to Winterbottom, the dramatized sequences were 'all improvised', and the improvisations based on the transcripts of interviews with Iqbal, Ahmed and Rasul by co-director Mat Whitecross (Anon. 2006b: 11). Inevitably there remains a large degree of conjecture in the dramatization of the accounts of the three men, although it seems that the function of these sequences is primarily illustrative – they show us, more or less, what happened to these men and, in doing so, offer an account of the war in Afghanistan and the management of the Guantánamo Bay prison that is unavailable from the perspective of western news and entertainment media. They make visible what is hidden from view and in this respect dramatized documentary is

simply an expedient form that enables the film-makers to show what is practically unfilmable.

In their exclusion from public spaces, from contact with friends, family (and, for much of their time in captivity, fellow inmates), and from due legal treatment through their designation as ‘enemy combatants’, they were excluded from sight. Therefore, much of the film is given over to a depiction of what took place inside the Guantánamo bay prison, but while the experience of the inmates is shown to be degrading and brutal, the film retains a certain ambivalence or detachment of tone throughout these scenes. Thus, rather than inciting either outrage or impassioned empathy with the three men, the film draws attention to the increasingly bizarre, Kafkaesque way in which they are treated during their detention. Watching the film one has the growing sense that the primary function of the prison is not practical - to hold dangerous or useful people captive before trying and/or punishing them – but that it is an unregulated, interstitial space, a Sade-ian border-zone in which one group of people has been given licence to inflict physical and psychological violence upon another group.

In this respect Camp X-ray/Camp Delta is a *heterotopia*, the counter-site that Michel Foucault argued could be found in every culture and ‘in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted’ (Foucault 1967). Heterotopic sites, Foucault suggests, are not ‘freely accessible like a public space’, but, like rest homes and psychiatric hospitals, are isolated and restrictive: ‘Either the entry is compulsory, like a barracks or a prison, or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications’ (Foucault 1967). Situated at a distance from the US mainland, on a Navy base,

putatively outside international law, the Guantánamo Bay prison is the epitome of a paradoxical heterotopic site – visible but hidden, highly regulated but unrestrained. The sequences in which the men are taunted with pornographic magazines or shackled to an iron ring in the floor, and tormented with flashing strobe lights and deafeningly loud ‘black metal’ music are an indication of the way in which this heterotopic space exists as an inversion of normative culture. Heterotopias ‘reflect and speak about’ the societies they are inversions of, Foucault suggests, and in the case of Camp X-ray, the trappings of US consumer culture become means of torture rather than gratification (Foucault 1967).

*The Road to Guantánamo* is concerned with making this obscure, partially veiled space visible from the perspective of three of its occupants. The decision to adhere to the three men’s accounts nevertheless imposes some tight formal restrictions on the film. A consequence of this restricted narrative perspective is that we learn next to nothing about the other occupants – guards or captives - of the prisons they find themselves in. As Winterbottom explains, the film-makers wanted to avoid ‘too much drama about the relations between the characters – we wanted to just tell the simple story of what happened to them. It’s more about their experiences as opposed to creating a separate drama about what’s going on in their heads’ (Anon. 2006b: 11). The film is thus unconcerned with the motivations and exculpation of Iqbal, Ahmed and Rasul. Writing on the film’s release, journalist Deborah Orr suggested that this omission constituted a ‘gaping hole’, since:

only hints were given about their lives before their trip, and the sort of young men they were. They had been in some trouble with the law, so it's reasonable to infer that they were rebellious or thrill-seeking. Perhaps they wanted to take

advantage of the chaos in Afghanistan, and felt there might be opportunities to make some money. Or maybe their support for their friend in his wish to marry a village girl from Pakistan suggests difficulties with the freedom and independence of Western women (Orr 2006).

This criticism is repeated by Ali Jaafar in stronger terms, as he suggests that, 'Winterbottom's stated desire to remain objective is less convincing in relation to *The Road to Guantánamo*, however, where he allows explanations by the Tipton Three of their presence in Afghanistan to go unchallenged' (Jaafar 2007: 25-6). The unstated implication of these speculations about the three men – that Iqbal, Ahmed and Rasul must somehow be responsible for having been arrested and tortured – is all too predictable. In their demands for the clear psychological characterization of mainstream cinema, or, effectively, for further interrogation of the three, both writers betray a desire for reassurance that the global 'war on terror' is in fact being waged with impartiality and precision. On the contrary, I would argue that a strength of the film is that it is comparatively indifferent to these three men except in so far as they are useful illustrations of a process of misrecognition.

Rather, the film is about the political and legal processes, ideologies, infrastructures and communications systems that are unable to recognize these men as anything other than dangerous people or 'enemy combatants'. Jaafar suggests that 'A major weakness of the film is that it posits the three's innocence as the major plank of its argument against them, leaving unasked the more demanding question of whether their imprisonment would have been justified even had they been guilty' (Jaafar 2007: 26). However, the question of whether or not they *are* 'guilty' is largely irrelevant given that, as the film stresses, they were liable to be recognized as 'guilty' from the

moment they were captured (and, indeed, there is no clear consistent sense of what they might have been guilty of). It is ironic and revealing that the responses of Orr and Jaafar to the film appear, however circumspectly, to repeat this (mis-)recognition.

The film's title refers to the journey taken by Iqbal, Ahmed and Rasul – the series of events that led to their imprisonment as 'enemy combatants' – but also, and more importantly, it refers to the transformations that have led to a political sea change in which, for example, Tony Blair felt able to dismiss the continuing existence of the prison and the several hundred inmates held without charge at a news conference in February 2006, as 'an anomaly' that 'sooner or later has to be dealt with' (Anon 2006a).<sup>8</sup> As Winterbottom's comment on the film's embodiment of a 'double perspective' suggests, the *Road to Guantánamo* is not a self-contained narrative but a partial and limited account of one particular sequence of events, and an account that is one element of an inter-textual, multi-media assemblage of narratives. The film assumes, in this mode of address, a knowledgeable spectator, and it assumes that it is a contribution to a context in which debates about Guantánamo are ongoing, inviting us to infer connections between this film and other texts. Rather than a failure or a sign of incompetence, the refusal to offer a closed narrative is strategic and knowing, just as its refusal to interrogate or 'excuse' the three is deliberate and consistent with an ethical decision not to speak on their behalf.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>8</sup> There is no doubt also a strategic dimension to this apparently careless comment since it also carefully implies that Guantánamo is an exceptional space, rather than a space that is representative of a general policy of the systematic abuse of prisoners and suspects that is deemed legitimate under the 'war on terror'.

Thus, *The Road to Guantánamo* engages with a specific public – an activist public, or, more accurately it aims to activate or generate an activist public, and exploits developments in media technology and consumer expectations to do this. The website set up by the film’s US distributor, Roadside Attractions, for example, includes a page titled ‘Get Active’, with links to human rights organizations and a downloadable ‘Action Guide’ that contains background information about the Guantánamo Bay prison and advice about how to protest. As well as a means of distribution of the film, the internet also provides a framing context to guide our interpretation and exhorts us to follow intertextual relays to other accounts and interventions.

The film’s low budget, small crew, rapid production schedule with its reliance upon improvisation, and the simultaneous release of the film in different media formats also facilitate the film’s address to a public, allowing the film to intervene in ongoing debates. The film is concerned with a history that is still very much present for its audience (even though the events and heterotopic locations of the film are largely invisible to most of us) and so – potentially at least – in its spectatorial immediacy the film can suggest the possibility of political action to its audience. Where a film such as George Clooney’s film about Ed Murrow, *Good Night and Good Luck*, which was released six months earlier and depicts politically scandalous events from a safe historic distance can offer us the masochistic pleasures of outrage, empathy and disapproval, *The Road to Guantánamo* refuses to allow us this comfortably disempowering historical distance or delay.<sup>9</sup> As Michael Warner has noted, the potential for texts and discourses to agitate and activate a public is directly linked to the speed of circulation of those texts and discourses:

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<sup>9</sup> Although it is an account of US TV journalism in the early 1950s, director and co-writer Clooney has suggested that *Good Night and Good Luck* is a cautionary comment upon the political function of present-day media representations: ‘I thought it was a good time to raise the idea of using fear to stifle political debate’ (Brooks, 2005).

A public can only act in the temporality of the circulation that gives it existence. The more punctual and abbreviated the circulation, and the more discourse indexes the punctuality of its own circulation, the closer a public stands to its politics. At longer rhythms or more continuous flows, action becomes harder to imagine. That is the fate of academic publics, a fact very little understood when academics claim by intention or proclamation to be doing politics. In modernity, politics takes much of its character from the temporality of the headline, not the archive' (Warner 2002: 96-7).

I would argue that the form of *The Road to Guantánamo*, the circumstances of its production and its unprecedented distribution strategy are all determined by the imperative of a rapid response. Shot and edited digitally and released in multiple formats simultaneously, the film is able to address its audience with an urgency that would be dissipated through the delays of the conventional circuits of distribution. Consequently, the film circulates within the temporality of the headline, rather than that of the archive, or the standard 'platform release' schedules of the film industry. In this respect, Winterbottom's recent observation, 'I see my role [...] as similar to that of a journalist', reflects both the changing patterns of film production, distribution and consumption, and also the sense that (some of) his films are equivalent in function, cultural status and ephemerality as media objects, to a news report (Jaafar 2007: 25).

There is an interesting coda to the story of the Tipton three that demonstrates both the way in which the film has become implicated in the history it recounts (through the speed with which it entered into circulation) and also the way in which

the public sphere in which the film circulates is so thoroughly mediated that the slippage between fiction and document extends beyond the boundaries of the film. *The Road to Guantánamo* was premiered at the Berlin Film festival in February 2006 where it won the *Silver Bear* 'Best Director' prize for Winterbottom and Whitecross. On their return to Britain, Shafiq Rasul and Ruhel Ahmed, who had attended the première screening and the accompanying press conference were held for questioning by police at Luton airport under the 2000 Terrorism act, along with the actors who played them in the film. In an episode that is both absurd and alarming, Riz Ahmed, who played Rasul, claims he was asked about his views on the Iraq war, whether he became an actor to further the cause of Islam, whether he intended to make any more 'political' films, and whether he was prepared to become a police informant (Grimmer 2006).

In conclusion, what characterizes *The Road to Guantánamo* as an exemplary model of political cinema situated at the margins of mainstream film and television is its articulation of a sophisticated 'double perspective'. The film is conceived as a text or object that circulates within a crowded multi-media context and it functions as an intervention in the interwoven circuits of news and entertainment media, a polemical and partial account. The film also incorporates a doubled perspective into its internal structural organization in several ways, including, most significantly, its blending of documentary and fiction in a self-conscious acknowledgement of the uncertain status of mediated representations. It avoids adopting a naïve 'naturalism' in its account of the removal of certain individuals – border subjects - from public spaces and from visibility. Thus, in making visible the experiences of these three men, as a text and a commodity the film engages with audiences in a highly self-conscious way both through its differentiation from other media accounts and through its simultaneous



release in different formats. In making public the story of the Tipton three, this film by Winterbottom and Whitecross attempts to activate or make *publics*, by inciting them to protest.

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