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Richard's Story:
The Present Referent in “*In The Valley of Elah*”

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Abstract

In the Valley of Elah offers a model by which we might begin to articulate the humanity of the caricatured agents of war by blurring the line between hero and villain. This film offers a case study in how discourse might humanize strategically with a goal of peace building in mind, making the case for war more difficult and promoting greater tolerance for humanity. Specifically, in *Elah*, the form of the “present referent” serves as a visual technique which functions to reveal the “humanity” of a specific character, in this case the “warrior hero.” In this way, these “referents” are re-attached to the main character of the film, presenting a referent of family, history, and narrative. Just as the “absent referent” keeps something from being seen as having been someone, *Elah* asks its audience to view this “other” not as an abstract object, but as an individual human character.

Keywords: Rehumanization, dehumanization, *In the Valley of Elah*, Iraq War films, absent referent

“When one faces an enemy who is thoroughly evil, it is all too easy to imagine that one is thoroughly righteous and fundamentally innocent.”

— Richard Hughes, *Myths Americans Live By*

“Wouldn’t it be funny if the devil looked just like you?”

— Private Robert Ortiz, *In the Valley of Elah*

Five years into the invasion of Iraq, hundreds of U.S. veterans were being convicted of homicide or abuse in courtrooms throughout America. According to the *New York Times*, there were 121 cases in which veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan were charged with a killing in the U.S. after their return from war. In many of those cases, combat trauma and the stress of deployment (along with alcohol abuse, family discord and other attendant problems) played a large role (Sontag & Alvarez, 2008). Three-quarters of these veterans were still in the military at the time of the killing, more than half the killings involved guns, and the rest involved stabbings, beatings, strangulations and bathtub drownings. About one third of the victims were spouses, girlfriends, children or other relatives, among them children such as two-year-old Krisiauna Calaira Lewis, whose twenty-year-old father slammed her against a wall while recuperating in Texas from a bombing in Fallujah that blew off his foot and left him with a traumatic brain injury (Sontag & Alvarez, 2008).

The troubles of the returning war veteran are so common that they have served as a recurring artistic theme throughout history. Jonathan Shay, a psychiatrist for the Department of Veterans Affairs, argues that “the connection between war and crime is unfortunately very ancient. . . .The first thing that Odysseus did after he left Troy was to launch a pirate raid on Ismarus. Ending up in trouble with the law has always been a final common pathway for some portion of psychologically injured veterans” (cited in Sontag & Alvarez, 2008, p. 1). From Homer’s *Odyssey* to *All Quiet on the Western*

Front (1930); from the post-Vietnam-era movie *The Deer Hunter* (1978) to the 2007 film *In the Valley of Elah*, trauma during and after wartime is a timeless theme.

The victims of these crimes are often active service members, including Specialist Richard Davis of the Army, who was stabbed repeatedly and then set ablaze—his body hidden in the woods by fellow soldiers one day after they returned from Iraq. The events surrounding Richard Davis's gruesome death inspired not only a three-page article in *Playboy Magazine* in 2004 and a CBS *48 Hours Mystery* in 2006, but also the film *In the Valley of Elah*, which was released in September of 2007. *Elah*, though fictional, follows the story of Richard's father Lanny Davis's experiences investigating the disappearance and murder of his son, as well as his attempt to make sense of the brutal killing. It is his story and its dramatic retelling in *Elah* that I focus on here. *Elah* touches upon some of the most troubling and complex issues to arise from the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, including the consequences of endless tours of duty and the unrelenting stress of day-to-day combat. *Elah* challenges key cultural premises including issues of gender, built into the logic of war by presenting the military and soldiers in a way that blurs distinctions between the divine hero and the savage enemy through the rehumanization of the main character of the film, and through the overall demythologizing of America as an innocent nation.

The story of Richard Davis

According to the *Belfast Telegraph*, U.S. Army Specialist Richard Davis has had two funerals in Sunset Hills Memorial Park in Los Angeles, California. The first, in December 2003, followed the discovery of an incomplete set of his remains scarred with the numerous stab marks from the blade that killed him. The second took place earlier this year in 2008 after more parts of his body were released by Georgia prosecutors. Richard's mother, Remy, plans on holding a third funeral once she obtains the last missing piece of Richard—one of his ribs (*Collateral Damage*, 2008).

Richard was an average, young United States soldier. In 1998, he enlisted at only 19 years of age. A year later he was sent on a peacekeeping mission to Bosnia, and in

2002 he was stationed on the Iraq-Kuwait border where he spent five months patrolling the Kuwaiti desert (Boal, 2004). Upon returning from Iraq, Davis went missing from his unit and was declared AWOL (Absent Without Leave). After an entire month passed without any word from their son, Richard's father, retired U.S. Army Staff Sergeant Lanny Davis, decided to find Richard himself. Because Richard was declared AWOL, the military would not investigate his absence as a missing person or enter his name into a national database that distributes information to police departments across the country. On September 8, 2002 Lanny called his congressman who contacted the office of Donald Rumsfeld, demanding that the Department of Defense investigate the disappearance of his son. By September 16, the Army launched an official inquiry, and detectives began interviewing the men in Davis's platoon. Finally, a single soldier came forward claiming he had heard that four of Davis's fellow soldiers had left Davis lying in the woods near the military base. At last, Richard's remains were found: body burnt, head separated from his torso, face battered and completely desecrated. Eventually, Richard's killers were brought to justice, but one of them is now free, and the others are appealing against their imprisonment.¹

Stories like Richard Davis's are not ones we usually think of when imagining American heroes during wartime. We see the hero as warrior, as lover, as world redeemer, and as saint (Campbell, 1972). We see the hero as an abstract icon—one devoid of humanity and humility. Consider the use of the "Marlboro Man" featured on the front page of the *New York Post*, which became the icon of the assault on Fallujah. The cover featured the headline "SMOKIN," and below, "Marlboro men kick butt in Fallujah," which framed a close up shot of a soldier, his face covered in dirt smoking a cigarette. Robin Andersen argues that the classic shot of the helmeted fighter bore striking resemblance to depictions reminiscent of World War II—an image of the good American soldier conquering an evil enemy. The text of the piece read: "The thugs were quickly overwhelmed by superior American firepower as unmanned aircraft tracked the movements of the rebel bands" (Andersen, 2006, pp. 272-273). Nowhere in the story did it mention the thousands of Iraqis killed or the effects of the phosphorous bombs

used in civilian areas, not to mention the psychological trauma experienced by American soldiers engaged in that battle.

As Eric Alterman (2004) argues, the public needs to educate itself about international politics to expel the “nation’s caricatured notion of itself as an innocent and benevolent force throughout the world” (p. 24). This caricature is perpetuated through myth’s ability to transform the meaning of history, and as Roland Barthes (1972) argued, “myth deprives the object of which it speaks of all history . . . It is a kind of ideal servant: it prepares things, brings them, lays them out, the master arrives, it silently disappears: all that is left for one to do is to enjoy this beautiful object without wondering where it comes from” (p. 151). Throughout history, myths about American innocence and benevolence combined with the archetype of the divine warrior hero have driven the cultural psyche. As Robert Ivie and Oscar Giner (2005) argue, “By branding others as evil . . . we position ourselves as good, leaving our evil spirit ‘free to catch a Greyhound bus and ride.’ Because we are good, we believe ourselves justified in Abu Ghraib, in Guantanamo, in violating the rights of American citizens and disregarding the constitution. Also . . . we are left free to deny that these events occur, that they are wrong . . . and that we are complicitous in them” (p. 595). This is why, now more than ever, finding correctives to these narratives is vital. American film culture often reflects war and the national atmosphere created by it, but it is up to critics to highlight the rhetorical processes by which both soldiers and civilians can be made human again.

American myths and the archetype of the warrior hero

Our reality is quintessentially narrative and mythic and it is our narrational identities that give us a sense of direction and orient us with respect to a system of values. Ivie and Giner (2005) claim that the “recognition of the mythic forces that inform American politics is crucial to an understanding of governance in an age of imperial warfare” (p. 581). Overall, myth serves a crucial social function in maintaining the given social order, and dominant myths are perpetuated by propaganda, celebrated in film, ritual and print, and can be manifested as “non-specific images perpetuated through time” (O’Shaughnessy, 2004, p. 89). Myths are intimately bound up with a society’s identity.

They work because they are structured as stories. O'Shaughnessy (2004) argues that some of America's key cultural myths include: the Horatio Alger story, the frontier myth, the damaged male (Bogart in *Casablanca* [1942] or Rambo), Americans as "benevolent," Americans as "victors," (see *Revolution* [1985] or *The Patriot* [2000]), and countless others.

One of the most common archetypal forms within the myth of Americans as "benevolent" or Americans as "victors" is that of the divine warrior or warrior hero. The warrior hero is typically defined as independent, disciplined, strong, sexually potent, and above all masculine (Prividera & Howard III, 2006, p. 31). This American cultural archetype stems from a long line of warrior heroes, but does not contain all of the qualities these heroes possess. Debra Hawhee (2004) argues that in Ancient Greece, the warrior hero became an icon equated to god-like status due to his athletic skill. Greatness of athletic skill was equated with greatness of character, and the warrior hero was always perceived as having extra-human like qualities and characteristics.

This warrior hero is much less like the ideal form we tend to conjure when thinking about American soldiers and their characteristics and behavior. In the American cultural archetype of the warrior hero, the warrior hero is strong physically and mentally—to the point of being almost superhuman—but not endowed with any of the abnormal traits prescribed to other super heroes.² American heroes rather have strength of moral character, courage, and virtues we attach to America as a nation itself. Karen Rasmussen and Sharon Downey (1991) claim that warrior heroes serve "as models of bravery and courage . . . [who are] responsible for new life through blood sacrifice. The successful soldier is the courageous fighting man—the killer who must not only die gallantly . . . [but] must kill devastatingly" (p. 179). They note that the archetype of the warrior hero depicts soldiers as also possessing a moral goodness and overall superiority which transfers outside of the battlefield.

Throughout much of Western art history and even today, white, muscled physical bodies have been used as iconic caricatures which communicate physical or national strength, specifically in the United States. Christine Jarvis (2004) notes that during the

time of the Great Depression and World War II, images of hypermasculinized male bodies were commonly used to reflect the rising status of the United States as a world power (p. 5). She observes that “the Great Depression not only provided an important context and impetus for rebuilding the body politic during World War II but also ushered in important cultural and artistic programs and mass-production techniques that helped transform Americans’ relationships with public images . . . and that many of the images of courageous workers depicted in New Deal artworks helped establish figurative ideals that were later used in wartime representations of servicemen and other heroes” (p. 15). In a nation crippled by the Depression where national identity was symbolized by images of unemployed men filled with despair, and where there were severe challenges to men’s status as breadwinners, the image of the military serviceman/warrior hero was used to replace the worker as a key symbol of masculinity and American strength.

During World War II, the image of the iconic American male body was also placed against the male body of the Nazi German and the ideals of Nazi Germany. While Germany used images of hardened male physiques to inscribe certain racial hygiene theories, American images often paired whites and African American soldiers together to reflect the racially diverse military, but both relied on caricatures to define their national messages. While German images turned to classical Greek sculpture, American representations generally relied on comic book images that stemmed from the perfected ideal of the superhero. Many of these American images presented men with exaggerated upper bodies, chests, and chiseled arms. Jarvis (2004) notes that “the end result was that wartime imagery primarily constructed the United States as a powerful, virile country as it embraced the serviceman as the key image of both masculinity and national identity” (p. 55). A powerful figure during World War II and after, the national icon of the white male soldier as “warrior hero” or the superman image as a symbol of American national strength and identity—of good over evil—has not gone away, and continues to dehumanize (through abstract caricaturizations) those who actually *do* serve in war.

The image of the warrior hero functions as an exaggeration of actual human strength and human qualities by remaining attached to the narrative of good over evil, resulting

in an overall dehumanization of the actual American soldier. The icon of the warrior hero functions in large part due to what Carol Adams (2000) refers to as the “absent referent”.³ Adams provides a case for linking feminist and vegetarian theory, dealing with a way to explain the oppression of both women and non-human animals by locating this within the concept of the absent referent. She argues:

Once the existence of meat is disconnected from the existence of an animal who was killed to become that ‘meat,’ meat becomes unanchored by its original referent (the animal), becoming instead a free-floating image, used often to reflect women’s status as well as animals. Animals are often the absent referent in the act of meat eating; they also become the absent referent in images of women being butchered, fragmented, and consumable (p. 14-15).

She argues, for instance, that behind every meal of meat is an absence: the death of the animal whose place the meat takes, and that the “absent referent” is that which separates the meat eater from the animal and the animal from the end product. The function of the absent referent is to keep our “meat” separated from any idea that it was once an animal. Applied to human beings in the context of warfare, this kind of rhetorical absence keeps *something* from being seen as having been *someone*. Many forms of dehumanization function in the same way by allowing us only to see the icon or caricature as *something* versus *someone*.

This idea of abstraction is a key rhetorical factor to the process of dehumanization. As Martha Solomon (1985) suggests in her analysis of the rhetoric of dehumanization in the Tuskegee syphilis project, the project was able to continue due to the ways in which the patients were described as “scene” and “agency,” thus detached from their human and personal qualities. The audience reading these medical journals was given no referent by which to see these patients, thus allowing them to remain detached. She argues that scientific language used in the study and in general tends to encourage this type of detachment which further serves to view the patients in the study not as “people” with homes, lives, and faces, but rather merely as “scenes” in and through which the disease acted or as “agency” in the sense of a “means to an end” (pp. 233-47).

As Adams is concerned with how *someone* becomes *something*, I am interested in how *something* can become *someone* once again. Dehumanization rests on detachment, discontinuity, and the absence of a referent while *rehumanization* works structurally in opposition to these processes through identification. Dehumanization works because the process is invisible, and its invisibility occurs because it corresponds to the dominant cultural view of what is good and what is evil. As Adams (2003) argues, “We do not realize that the act of *viewing* another as an object and the act of *believing* that another is an object are actually different acts because our culture has collapsed them into one” (p. 14).

The icon of the warrior hero rests on detachment because it remains an icon—a caricature—devoid of narrative and absent of a referent to any human qualities. This icon remains a national symbol of good, of strength, and of America’s identity as “thoroughly righteous and fundamentally innocent” so long as it remains abstract and stripped of narrative texture. So to begin to see the “humanity” of a specific character, in this case the “warrior hero,” we must begin to see his or her vulnerable moments as well as his or her most despicable acts. We must see how these “referents” are re-attached to the soldier so that there is a “present referent” versus an “absent” one. *Viewing* another as an object leads to *believing* that another is an object, and both of these processes can be resisted by making them more complicated.

By depicting the warrior hero as something other than a caricatured icon, *Elah* asks its audience to view this “other” *not* as an abstract object, but as an individual human character. By viewing differently, *Elah* also attempts to persuade viewers to *believe* differently in terms of how they understand simple representations of good and evil. In *Elah*, not only is the icon of the warrior hero disrupted, but also the myth of American innocence by implication (since the soldier ultimately stands in for the role of defending the innocent nation against its evil counterparts, and functions as its national symbol of good over evil). Therefore, by humanizing the film’s main character, we begin to see America’s innocence unravel and a new narrative about soldiers and war emerging.

The coming of *Elah*

In the Valley of Elah was released to audiences on September 28, 2007. The war in Iraq at this point in its fifth year had killed 3,777 Americans, wounded more than 27,000 and killed tens of thousands of Iraqis (Harper, 2007, p. AA01). Just a week before its release, the Senate began testimony by the U.S.'s top military and diplomatic officials in Iraq. According to the *Christian Science Monitor*, the long-anticipated mid-September stock-taking on Iraq spawned a multi-front campaign of pro-and anti-war forces which intensified as the date approached (Feldmann, 2007, p. 1). Conservative and liberal interest groups ramped up multimillion-dollar media campaigns to influence public opinion as Congress prepared to debate the future of President Bush's troop buildup in Iraq. Linda Feldmann (2007) notes that "the president asserted that 'this enemy will be defeated' in Iraq, and that an early withdrawal would be 'devastating,' making a historical analogy to the aftermath of the Vietnam War. Bush's additional comparison of the war on terror to the Vietnam War—particularly his assertion that both wars are similar as 'ideological struggles'—ignited a passionate debate over whether the president was drawing the correct historical lessons" (p. 1).

Not only did the Democratic opposition critique what seemed like an "open-ended" war, but never during the course of the war had Bush faced such a skeptical public (Harper, 2007, p. AA01). The highest percentage ever of Americans—62 percent—believed the war was a mistake, while 59 percent believed it was not worth the cost of so many U.S. lives (Anti-War Protesters, 2007, p. 15). On September 15, 2007 tens of thousands of protestors marched to the capital led by 50 veterans who served in Iraq (Boorstein, Dion Haynes, & Klein, 2007, p. A08).

Hollywood filmmakers were among the many who spoke out against the war at this time. Historically, anti-war films have not gained general release until years after the conflict was resolved. For example, though the Vietnam War spawned a series of classic films such as *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *The Deer Hunter* (1978), and *Platoon* (1986), they did not appear in cinemas until years after the conflict, which ended in 1975. However, the war in Iraq demonstrated that filmmakers were no longer prepared

to wait. *In the Valley of Elah* began the onslaught of Iraq War films, one of several that tested the willingness of audiences to embrace dramas about sensitive subjects such as post-September 11 security and the continuing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan (Woollard, 2007, p. 95). Other films on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and on broader issues of security included Robert Redford's *Lions for Lambs* (2007), starring Tom Cruise and Meryl Streep, Brian De Palma's *Redacted* (2007) and Gavin Hood's *Rendition* (2007). Darrell West (cited in AFP, 2007, August 19) argues that these films reflect the Iraq war's widespread unpopularity, and that anti-war movies were able to be released because public opinion crystallized against the war. He claims, "It's safe for Hollywood to make these kinds of movies without risking much of a backlash. There's always a risk when you make an anti-war movie in the middle of the war . . . But now, with two-thirds of Americans thinking the war in Iraq was a mistake, it's the perfect time to release these kinds of movies . . . In 2004, Bush was re-elected based on the war on terrorism. Now the administration is seen as having mangled foreign policy and put the country into a mess."

For the most part, film reviewers gave *Elah* positive marks, making it among the favorites for awards at the 2007 Venice Film Festival. Roger Ebert gave the film four stars claiming, "Paul Haggis is making good films these days He and his casting directors assembled an ideal ensemble for this film, which does not sensationalize but just digs and digs into our apprehensions" (Ebert, 2007). And A.O. Scott (2007) claimed, "Underneath its deceptively quiet surface is a raw, angry, earnest attempt to grasp the moral consequences of the war in Iraq, and to stare without blinking into the chasm that divides those who are fighting it from their families, their fellow citizens and one another" (p.1). Many of these reviews positively commented on *Elah's* refusal to romanticize war and soldier heroes, and its ability rather to present a narrative which reveals the complexities of war and of those who are caught in its crossfire. For example, *Entertainment Weekly* commented that "the film is actually a Stateside murder mystery . . . with most of the bogus genre conventions scraped away . . . Hank's tightly etched control—the demeanor of a lifelong military man—serves the movie's ideological purpose: It puts us on the side of a patriot who is not in any way questioning "the troops"

—who, in fact, would not have it in him to do so (Gleiberman, 2007). *The Guardian* notes, “Thus far, almost every single mainstream Hollywood movie about politics or the war on terror, however notionally critical or satirical, has been defanged and auto-castrated at the outset by its own terror of being thought unpatriotic . . . Haggis’s movie, in its denouement, gestures at the idea of an insidious corruption and spiritual debasement that the war has engendered in soldiers who might in other circumstances be entirely decent” (Bradshaw, 2008).

Yet despite good reviews and an Oscar nominated cast, American viewers overwhelmingly avoided the movie, or were not receptive to the film’s message. This may be due to the fact that, as Scott argues, the message of the film focuses on how the War in Iraq has damaged this country in ways we have only begun to grasp—and that we’d rather not confront. As Frank Rich notes, “Most Americans do not want to hear, see or feel anything about Iraq, whether they support the war or oppose it. They want to look away, period, and have been doing so for some time” (Rich, 2008, p. 2). This may also be due to the way in which the film demythologizes the warrior hero and American innocence through processes of rehumanization to create a sort of cognitive dissonance in the minds of viewers.

The rehumanization of Mike Deerfield/Richard Davis

While many films function metaphorically and mythically to provide emotional catharsis and psychological reinforcement, some, because of the way they complicate cultural myths, present an image that is not so easily digestible. Rasmussen and Downey argue that films like *Elah* create “uncertainty and ambiguity because the form destroys the myth’s principles and values, questions its foundations, and provides no substitution for its ruin,” thus fracturing the myth from within (Rasmussen & Downey, 1991, p. 180). Though *Elah* does not go so far as to “destroy” the myth of the warrior hero and by extension the myth of American innocence and benevolence, it does offer a corrective to those dominant modes of expression by presenting a rehumanization of the iconic warrior hero. In addition, the “rehumanizing” process manages to attempt to

reconstruct/revision gender not only as masculine, but as an acceptably or paradoxically 'feminine masculinity.'

In *Elah*, two characters emerge as essential in representing the American cultural psyche. Hank Deerfield (played by Tommy Lee Jones) stands in for all that is good and right about America and signifies America's collective unconscious.⁴ Hank carries around an innate sense of right and wrong, and as Scott (2007) claims, "Mr. Jones's creased face, at once kindly and severe, is a manifest sign of his old-school temperament" (p. 1). Hank is a retired military police officer who served in the Vietnam War, and a man who expresses his military values as he ritually shines his shoes every night, says grace before each meal, and makes his motel-room bed according to military standards.⁵ Though he is disgusted at the incompetence of the local police, he does respect authority—especially that of the U.S. military, as he himself served for twenty years. He is not only a loving father, but a hardened military hero with a deep respect for America, so much so that on the way to his son's military base, he actually stops at an elementary school to instruct the janitor on the proper way to raise an American flag. He clearly represents all of what America claims it values: goodness and strength over evil; as well as who we believe we are: righteous and innocent of wrongdoing against others.

His son, Mike, by comparison, represents all that has gone wrong in this war—all that is wrong with the U.S. military, our government, and our inadequate treatment of soldiers as they return home from the battlefield. Whereas historically, the warrior hero was/is a symbol of American strength and national identity, Mike complicates this role by representing only the true brutality of war—the horrors, the atrocities, and the ultimate trauma that does not remain on the battlefield. Thus, as Hank finally accepts responsibility for his son's actions toward the end of the film, he rejects the myth of American innocence and that of the soldier as warrior hero. The goal of the film is for the American audience to do the same. However, accepting responsibility and acknowledging our part in the destruction of human beings is very difficult to do.

Elah first complicates the myth of the warrior hero through its own presentation of the “heroic journey.” In this film, there are no victories, no battles; the hero does not even die in a battlefield; he dies by the hands of his fellow soldiers. As Martha Solomon (1979) suggests in her examination of the formal archetypal structure of the “romantic quest,” or heroic journey, the mythoi of this narrative always includes a “hero who undertakes a quest involving a perilous journey, a crucial struggle with a foe, and an ultimate triumph” (p. 263). The military base serves as a container for our hero archetypes, yet their placement in these ordinary establishments functions to diminish their divine or heroic status. We see images of soldiers in strip clubs, fried chicken fast-food eateries, cheap hotel rooms, or domestic settings. Save for the scenes shot in the military barracks, these men are very much removed from their military personas, many at times even wearing civilian clothes instead of their uniforms. They are depicted as average American civilians who *happen* also to serve in the U.S. military, thus putting their civilian status before that of the hero-soldier.

There is no tangible foe to speak of, unless you count the tortured Iraqi prisoners, or the Iraqi children who pose absolutely no threat to the American soldiers in this film (save for stealing a football from Mike in one of the first scenes). During the scenes in which we see the American soldiers in Iraq, they are only engaged in battle against Iraqis once; we hear gunfire, but mostly we see the American soldiers with dead bodies, or with Iraqi prisoners. If the Iraqis are ever in a scene with an American soldier, it is the American soldier who is engaging in less than virtuous activities, either torturing or harming the Iraqis in some way without seeming provocation. And, there is no “ultimate triumph.” Overall, the setting plays a large role in humanizing and normalizing Mike and the other soldiers, taking them from their divine status by placing them in a context of human limitations and flaws.

The myth of the iconic warrior hero (and by extension the myth of American innocence and benevolence) is also disrupted as Mike is painted in a more disjointed and troubling way. It is in the first scene that we are introduced to Mike Deerfield. Through what looks to be a scrambled digital picture, we see an image of Iraqi children sitting on a

curb in the road. We hear only the voice of one soldier speaking to another as the image scrambles and fades to black. We hear:

Voice: What are you doing? Get back in the f***ing vehicle, Mike!
Mike! Get back in the f***ing vehicle! Let's go, Mike! Now!
(Black Screen) *In the Valley of Elah*
Voice of Mike: (Whisper) Dad? Dad?

The shot then cuts to Mike's father getting the news of his son's disappearance. We see a close-up shot of Hank's face speaking into the phone.

Hank Deerfield: I can hardly hear you.
Military Personnel: I said your son has gone AWOL.
(Screen fades:) *November 1, 2004*
Hank Deerfield: My son is in Iraq.
Military Personnel: Your son was in Iraq, sir. His unit arrived stateside four days ago.

The shot cuts to a medium shot of Hank sitting on the bed framed by the door frame.

Hank Deerfield: Soldier, if my son was back I'd sure as hell know it.
(Screen fades:) *Munro, Tennessee*
Military Personnel: Sir your son has until Sunday to get back to base or he'll be listed as absent. I'm sorry, I have another call.

The shot cuts to an overhead shot looking down on Hank's head as he sits on the bed. Hank then hangs up the phone. In this first sequence, we are introduced to Hank and see him from multiple angles, first from a low-angle shot signaling power and strength of the subject, followed by a medium shot, and finally a high-angle shot as the subject is diminished physically and seems small and vulnerable (Sobchack & Sobchack, 1987). Right away, we as an audience see Hank taken from strength to vulnerability, a pattern

that emerges throughout the film as Hank discovers more and more about his son's death and traumatic experiences in Iraq. In each scene as well, Hank is tightly framed in close shots suggesting a sense of entrapment or psychological distress. In this first scene, he is also surrounded and imbued in natural light, but as he mentally digresses with each bit of information learned about his son, Hank literally and figuratively fades into and finally out of darkness.

In this opening sequence, this is also the first but not the last time we see a reference to, or image of, Mike in direct relation to his father, Hank. We learn later that the image from the first scene is a video fragment from Mike's cell phone, and throughout the film the audience and Hank are able to view Mike's experiences in Iraq via these blurred clips. Slowly, the mystery of Mike's death is unraveled as we uncover the string of events that led up to his fatal end. What is important about each of the scenes is how Mike is framed. Every image of Mike is placed directly beside a close-up of Hank's face. As Thomas Sobchack and Vivian C. Sobchack note, extreme close-up shots work to disorient the audience by dislocating the viewer from an environment, thus removing the face from its context and asking the audience to focus just on the psyche of the main character. By placing Mike in constant connection to Hank's psyche and by using only point-of-view shots through Hank's eyes to display Mike's actions to the audience, we are asked to identify not only with Hank, but with Mike as well—to take the good with evil, and to see Mike as an extension of Hank, not as an abstract villain or faceless hero.

This montage of images between Mike and his father remind us always that Mike is a son first, soldier second. Though we rarely get to see Mike's face through the blurred images from his video recorder, we are always reminded of Mike's story, his family, his grieving mother, and his dead brother, all through the reference to Hank. This framing adds history, narrative, and the human reminders of family to the abstract image of the American soldier, thus complicating mythic depictions of the divine warrior hero.

We see Mike's humanity not only through his reference to his family and father, but through his not so "heroic" or divine actions throughout the film. Through the

investigation into Mike's death, Hank learns of Mike getting kicked out of a strip club for yelling obscenities, of desecrating dead bodies, and of torturing Iraqi prisoners. In one of the first clips Hank views, we see Mike and the rest of his unit under fire. We see Hank dimly lit in his hotel room viewing the clips on his computer.

A building explodes, then the shot cuts to Mike and the rest of his unit entering the burned out building. Through the scrambled pieces of the video, we see charred dead bodies on the floor, and Mike and his unit stepping over them as they search the building. Their flashlights shine on the dead, black, charred faces. We then hear Mike as if he's narrating this video for us:

Mike: See how the clothes aren't burnt? (the video captures an image of what looks like a little girl, face burnt off, but clothes still in tact.) It's really weird, Dad.

The camera pans back to Hank's face looking confused, shocked, and saddened as he continues to watch the video on his computer. The shot then cuts to Mike's hand putting a bright red-flamed smiley faced sticker (a sticker from an American skateboard manufacturer) on top of the dead girl's head, as if leaving his mark. Mike shows absolutely no emotion toward the loss of life he has just witnessed as if more intrigued than disgusted or shocked. The video stops with that image. Again the scene cuts back to Hank's face, this time even more distraught. He looks up and breathes deeply, as if not knowing what to think about what he's just witnessed.

It's an ugly display, and if we had just seen Mike's actions alone, the audience would have difficulty identifying with him. However, pairing the disturbing images with a close-up of Hank's face reminds us that Mike is not just an evil, villainous soldier with no respect for human life; rather he is a son whose trauma has deeply affected him and his actions. We are able to see Mike's humanity based on his relationship to his father, and the later explanation of Mike's actions combined with the referent of father and family allow us to see Mike as human vs. abstract icon. Throughout the film, this framing

serves to show the ugly side of the U.S. soldier without fully demonizing him because his brutal actions are balanced by putting him under the humanizing light of familial relations. In this case, Mike is never an abstraction or depicted as fragmented or detached from a personal history. Through this framing, his narrative is constantly at the forefront of every scene.

Towards the end of the film, as Hank feels no closer to solving his son's murder, the sense of hopelessness and despair is ever growing. Again we see Hank in his hotel room opening another of Mike's files on his computer. This time, Hank is surrounded by darkness. The camera zooms in toward a shot of Mike on the computer screen. The video clip begins with a clearer image of Mike this time, yelling and laughing in the back of a military truck. A wounded man lies in the bed of the truck with a white hood over his head. As Hank watches the clip, the image of Mike is literally projected on his face as we see traces of light bouncing off of his forehead. We hear Mike say:

Mike: It's Ok, we're going to help you. (the wounded man screams in pain, as we see Mike laughing and sticking his fingers in the man's open sores.) You Ok? You alright (laughing)? Now where does it hurt, huh? There? (man screaming) There? (man screaming).

The shot cuts to Hank's face, hand over his mouth, obviously shocked by what he is seeing. The camera cuts back to the video image and we see Mike again laughing with a sort of maniacal grin on his face. The video clip stops with a blurred devil-like image of Mike on the screen, complete with a red haze over his face, and the crazed grin captured in the still image. This scene presents Mike engaging in despicable acts; yet Mike's linkage to Hank through the film's editing prevents Mike from being merely demonized or villainized. In this sequence, both Mike and Hank are shot at eye level—Mike in the clip, and Hank in the film image. Because the composition of both shots is similar, the shots are linked together by the viewer and an even stronger relationship emerges between father and son.

The next image we see is Hank lying in bed in the hotel room, late at night, as a glaringly bright light shines right overhead. He is staring directly at the ceiling as if he has been unable to sleep at all. He is shot completely from above at an extreme high-angle presenting Hank as particularly weak and vulnerable. His world has been turned upside down. However, the quiet, low tones in the background signal a sort of movement toward resolution and acceptance of what has become of Hank's son. As Hank literally and metaphorically emerges from darkness with each passing scene, he learns more and more about his son's traumatic experiences and his despicable and confusing behavior. Although Hank is distraught, he is moving closer toward a new realization of America at war, a deeper understanding of the military's responsibility in this tragedy, and disillusionment with the myth of American innocence.

Even after Hank finds out who has murdered his son, the confessions of Mike's killers bring no closure. The confessions only reveal that Mike was killed at the hands of his fellow soldiers in a drunken fight outside the strip club. Due to the stress and trauma of their experiences in Iraq, and the fact that the men were so used to resorting to the use of force in conflict situations, a simple altercation between Mike and another soldier resulted in Mike being stabbed hundreds of times. The soldiers then burned the body, admitting to Hank and the investigator that they were all very hungry and were in a hurry to dispose of it. It is here in the film that we realize the full extent of the psychological trauma experienced by these soldiers, and where we discover the string of events that directly led to Mike's and the rest of the soldiers' mental unraveling. We learn that in Iraq, Mike and his men accidentally but deliberately ran over an Iraqi child with their Humvee (the accident which is depicted in the first scene of the film). In one of the final scenes of the film, Hank gets in his truck and we see him picturing the images from that day in Iraq. This is the first time we see Mike not through the blurred video clips of the cell phone, but as the events actually occurred. Hank and Mike are no longer separated by the mediation of the cell phone image; now the two lives become one. We see Mike riding in a truck with another soldier. They are fighting and not paying attention to the road. We see the horror in their faces as a child runs into the middle of the road. Mike, not knowing what to do, listens to his orders as he is told NOT to stop for any reason.

We see a close-up shot of Hank's face, then back to a point-of-view shot through the window of the truck as we see Mike about to hit the Iraqi child.

Mike: What do I do?

Soldier: Speed up! Speed up!

We see Mike's face, scared, blank, as he hits the child in the road. The shot cuts back to Hank's face. He closes his eyes in sadness. We then see Mike as he reaches for his cell phone. Here, we are brought back to the first scene in the film, only this time, we are able to see what is going on.

Soldier: What are you doing? Get back in the f***ing vehicle, Mike! Mike!
Get back in the f***ing vehicle! Let's go, Mike! Now!

Mike: (at the same time the soldier is yelling at Mike, we hear Mike's
voice overlapping in a different conversation) Daddy? Daddy?

Mike walks toward the dead body and takes a picture with his cell phone.

Mike: Daddy?

The camera shoots back to Hank's face which is saddened, and again trying to make sense of it all. The screen fades to black.

Mike: Are you there Dad?

We see a flashback as Hank picks up the phone and turns on the light in his bedroom back in Munro, Tennessee to talk to Mike.

Hank: I can hardly hear you.

Hank is framed at a low-angle shot signaling power and strength, which makes sense since this conversation happened before Hank lost all sense of power and control. Mike, on the other hand is blanketed in a shadow—his face cut so that we only see his eyes.

Mike: You gotta get me outta here (crying).
Hank: That's just nerves talking.
Mike: Somethin' happened, Dad . . . (crying).
Hank: (breathes, rolls his eyes.) For Christ's sake, is anybody there with
 you?
Mike: No, I'm alone.
Hank: That's good.
Mike: Ok, Dad, I gotta go. (wiping his tears, trying to sound strong.)
Hank: You be safe, son. Stay safe.
Mike: Yeah, you too. (sniffs, hangs up phone.)

We are brought back to the present as we see Hank back in his truck contemplating that phone call. He does not say a word. It is after this tragic accident that Mike—as a soldier turned child—most needed his father to calm him, to love him, to be there for him. Hank's face suggests tremendous guilt at the realization of it all, knowing that he did not comfort his son during his most vulnerable moment. This close-up shot again works to remove the face from its context asking the audience to focus on the psyche of the main character as we experience Hank's overwhelming guilt and sadness.

This last scene is pivotal in that it provides not only context and explanation for how Mike turned from young adult to sociopath, but it again reminds us of how truly fragile Mike was, counter to how we normally view soldier-heroes. He is almost childlike, reminding us of how young most of these soldiers are, and again resisting the common notion of the strong, powerful, invincible hero. Also, here, the open gendered (feminine) display of crying, which is typically associated with women, not men, serves a crucial function in the portrayal of the rehumanization process of father and son.

Instead of the hypermasculinized warrior hero caricature, we are presented with a complex, vulnerable character.

This scene also relates to the film's title—a reference to David fighting Goliath in the Valley of Elah—how a young child was sent to battle alone and unprepared. This scene reminds us that most of these soldiers are still just young boys, completely unprepared for the horrors and atrocities of war who come back physically and emotionally scarred—forever damaged by their experiences. It is through Hank's awakening in this final scene where not only do we get our strongest vision of Mike's rehumanization, but also a corrective to the myth of American innocence, which calls into question all of the values and beliefs that go along with said myth.

Conclusion

As Robert Terrill (1993) argues, “Rather than merely identifying with a character in the story and thereby projecting themselves into the film, the audience members may experience the film as a projection of themselves (p. 320).⁶

The film asks us to identify with the psyche of a grieving father, and through him, and the way they are positioned together, asks us to identify with Mike as well. However, if American audiences take on Hank's persona/psyche as their own, this would mean an admittance of responsibility in their part in this war. In a war where relatively few Americans have sacrificed anything, where many see no personal stake in this war's outcome, we as Americans have difficulty in acknowledging any part in this war or in war culture in general. If, as Terrill (1993) argues, a film's popularity and reception often “stems from the projection onto the screen of the psyche of the audience,” then it makes perfect sense as to why this film was so heavily resisted and ignored (p. 320). Due to the embedded myth of American innocence, Americans, for the most part, have a difficult time accepting responsibility for our part in the devastation not only of an entire nation of Iraqi people, but of our own American soldiers as well.

It is extremely difficult for audiences to come to any sort of admission or resolution of guilt like Hank does in his final act of defiance as he raises the American flag upside-

down (the final scene in *Elah*). Thus we, as Terrill (1993) argues, “happily and indefinitely continue to build our personas, repress our shadows and avoid the hard work that psychic maturity demands...[and] comfortably drift into an empty dreamless sleep” (p. 335). What *Elah* does so well, then, as unnerving and uncomfortable as it is, is to offer the American viewer a chance to confront his or her own responsibility in America’s atrocities against Iraqis and American soldiers through not only a demythologizing of the warrior hero, but also of American innocence itself. The warrior hero is supposed to stand in for American innocence—of good over evil, of benevolence and justice; yet Mike’s character complicates this. Through the visual techniques of positioning and framing in editing sequences, we see Mike and Hank together, presenting a referent of family, history, and narrative, and because of this, Mike becomes a fragile human far removed from the iconic warrior hero. The similarity in composition between shots of Mike and shots of Hank work to create identification between the two, and thus ask the audience to not only identify with Hank, but Mike as well—a familial bond that humanizes the despicable side of the American soldier that the film reveals to viewers, leaving in place a tension that cannot be reduced simply to an image of good versus evil. By placing Mike in constant connection to Hank’s psyche through the use of close-up shots, we are asked to see Mike as an extension of Hank, not as an abstract villain or faceless hero. Finally, the use of high-angle shots of Hank which indicate his vulnerability and deterioration also work to create a persona/psyche that questions the validity of war, and many of the virtues America claims to stand for.

In asking us to see Mike as human and imperfect, *Elah* chips away at America’s innocent and benevolent status. Overall, *Elah* develops characters that are more complicated than simplistic caricatures of good and evil while at the same time suggesting a corrective to the idea of America as innocent nation through the use of Hank and Mike as a representation of America’s cultural psyche, thus doing the rhetorical work so necessary to resist the military aesthetic of the prevailing war culture in post-9/11 America.

Endnotes

¹ See Schorn, D. (2006, December 23); and Collateral damage: The murder of Richard Davis (2008, January 8). The four soldiers who were last with Davis—Jacob Burgoyne, Alberto Martinez, Mario Navarrete and Douglas Woodcoff—were charged with Davis’s murder. Martinez and Navarrete were convicted and sentenced to life in prison. Burgoyne plead guilty to charges of voluntary manslaughter and was sentenced to 20 years. Mario Navarrete’s motion for a new trial was denied and Alberto Martinez is appealing his conviction claiming that he suffered from post traumatic stress and that his lawyers never presented that during the trial. Woodcoff’s lawyers said he simply “caught a ride” with the men in question and as of January 8, 2008, he is currently on probation and is now a student in Texas.

² Mircea Eliade (1978) notes for example:

[the heroes] are distinguished by their strength and beauty but also by monstrous characteristics ([gigantic] stature—Heracles, Achilles, Orestes, Pelops—but also stature [much shorter] than average); or they are [theriomorphic] (Lycaon, the “wolf”) or able to change themselves into animals. They are androgynous (Cecrops), or change their sex (Teiresias), or dress like women (Heracles). In addition, the heroes are characterized by numerous anomalies (acephaly or polycephaly; Heracles has three rows of teeth); they are apt to be lame, one-eyed or blind. Heroes often fall victim to insanity (Orestes, Bellerophon, even the exceptional Heracles when he slaughtered his sons by Megara). As for their sexual behavior, it is excessive or aberrant: Heracles impregnates the fifty daughters of Thespius in one night; Theseus is famous for his numerous rapes (Helen, Ariadne, etc.); Achilles ravishes Stratonice. The heroes commit incest with their daughters or their mothers and indulge in massacres from envy or anger or often for no reason at all; they even slaughter their fathers and mothers or their relatives.

³ See Adams (2000). Here Adams is drawing on Margaret Homan (1986) *Bearing the word: Language and female experience in nineteenth-century women's writing* where she first stumbled upon the concept of the "absent referent." See also an extended version of this conversation in Adams (2003). *The pornography of meat*.

⁴ In *Elah's* fictional representation of the story of Lanny Davis and Richard Davis, the director changed Lanny and Richard's names to Hank and Mike Deerfield.

⁵ *Elah* changes Lanny's occupation from Staff Sergeant to Military Police Officer.

⁶ See Terrill (1993). In his analysis of the 1989 version of Batman, Terrill claims that the audience is disposed to experience Gotham's inhabitants as manifestations of their own psyche, and it is my argument that *Elah* asks us to do the same.

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