

***The Messenger* (Oren Moverman 2009)**

Michael Oppermann

The war in Iraq is history. But its effects are still to be felt. Nobody knows exactly how many civilians were killed. The figures and numbers are more precise when it comes down to American casualties. Until today 4.400 soldiers lost their lives. Others returned home as cripples and emotional derelicts suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Their fate is widely ignored by the media. In a similar way, we learn very little about the enormous suffering of the widows, the fathers and mothers who have to come to terms with the loss of their beloved.

Classical war movies in “good old John Wayne style” have always had a tendency to glorify the so-called “death in action.” On the other hand, there have always been films that focussed on the darker sides of war; on the experience of being traumatized and the inability of coping with life after the soldier’s return to his home country. Not regarding Lewis Milestone’s unforgotten classic *All Quiet on the Western Front* (USA 1930), the “artistically inclined war movie” (if I may call it so) has always had a tendency to focus primarily on grief and psychological devastation. It takes a look inside the human soul and the agony it has gone through rather than focussing on action. Classical examples of this kind of film are Michael Cimino’s *The Deer Hunter* (USA 1978) in which Christopher Walken, years after the end of the Vietnam war, ends up in a time loop that forces him to revert to Russian Roulette as an existential form of existence; Walter Hill’s *Southern Comfort* (USA 1981) which transports or shifts the Vietnam war into the swamps of Louisiana, thus turning it into an eternal landscape of terror; or Hal Ashby’s *Coming Home* (USA 1977). Recently a number of American films have tried to focus on aspects of war that have been deliberately marginalized by the media. Kathryn Bigelow’s fairly unusual *The Hurt Locker* (USA 2008), for example, focuses on the everyday life of an anti-bomb squad in Baghdad. Her film reveals the extreme danger of the soldiers’ job; it also lays bare the changes in the soldiers’ psychology by unravelling a process of addiction. Bigelow’s “embedded” soldiers who experience the presence of war in a daily nerve-breaking struggle against an invisible enemy gradually turn into junkies who cannot survive without their daily dose of adrenalin. Paul Haggis’s *In the*

Valley of Elah (USA 2007) presents us with the (authentic) case of a war veteran who, after his return to America, becomes a murderer due to PTSD.

Oren Moverman's film *The Messenger* (USA 2009) also belongs to this list. It is a war film without any war scenes or any kind of action. Instead the film engages in a technique of *aussparung* or evasion that is based on the assumption that the horrors of war are rendered most effectively when they are not being shown directly. Israeli director Moverman, who co-wrote the script for Todd Haynes's postmodern Bob Dylan fantasia *I'm Not There* (USA 2007), has created a war movie of the most unusual kind. His film concentrates on two messengers of death: Captain Tony Stone (Woody Harrelson) and Sergeant Will Montgomery (Ben Foster) who was severely wounded in the Iraq War and, for that reason, flown back to America. The doctors can barely save his life. Since Montgomery has a few months of service left, he is assigned to a special "commando"—the US Army's "Casualty Notification Service"—led by Captain Scott. The task of this unit is very simple: It has to inform the relatives of deceased soldiers about the fact that their sons or husbands are no longer there. The messengers of death are subject to strict rules and regulations. They have to be faster than the media, "faster than Fox News." They are not allowed to park their car in front of the houses of the families they visit in order to avoid any public attention. They have to dress up in uniform to underline their official status. They should never ring the doorbell because, as Captain Stone explains to his new colleague, some of the sounds might not be appropriate. Most important, however, is a distant appearance that avoids any signs of empathy and refrains from gestures of emotional support.

These rules are very clear, at least theoretically. In practice, however, Montgomery's and Stone's visits always take unexpected turns. The notified never respond in a manner that can be anticipated. A father (Steve Buscemi) insults Montgomery and hits him for having shied away from combat. A widow, on the other hand, shows signs of cheerfulness (while hanging her new lover's clothes on the line). Another widow (Samantha Norton) is so distressed that Montgomery crosses the line and hugs her. This is the beginning of a "love story of sorts" which, until the end of the film, always remains an unfulfilled promise. At the climax of the movie, Norton and Foster struggle with their emotions. She has not forgotten her deceased husband yet while he remains torn apart between his emotions and the code of conduct associated with his role as an official. So their lips touch and shy away again. He puts his arm around her while she suggests making some coffee. Then she comes back to him. Their lips

come close again but they do not touch anymore. It is a great, uncut sequence that turns the inner turmoil of the characters into a visual entity.

Some critics have uttered negative feelings about the conventional element of a love story in the movie. I cannot share this criticism because the way the relationship between Morton and Montgomery evolves is very much in keeping with the film's entire aesthetic approach; it is a film that shows the effects of war indirectly, by the way people respond to it. For me it is the "buddy story," the story of a developing friendship between Montgomery and Foster, who team up for a weekend "on the road" in the company of women and alcohol, that is less interesting. We never really understand why Montgomery, a reformed alcoholic, turns to drinking again. His one-night-stands illustrate a certain inability to form lasting relationships but, all in all, his character is a bit predictable. Foster, on the other hand, who suffers from PTSD and kills his nightmares by tormenting his neighbours with loud music, is a much more interesting and profound character. The story of the developing friendship between the two men who, initially, seemed to share so little, is a bit loosely constructed. Although some critics heard some faint echoes of Hal Ashby's famous *The Last Detail* (USA 1973), the buddy story remains an unfulfilled promise. Its only moment of revelation comes when Montgomery confesses that he has never been involved in direct combat and that he has always suffered from that fact. At this moment the carefully maintained image of the self-assured and sovereign army captain (perfect with tattoos, moustache and bald hair) gets tarnished.

The Messenger is a combat film in times of peace. It reveals the horrors of war not by concentrating on some kind of pornographic violence but by focussing on the grief of those who have survived. In that manner, the camera captures the frozen faces of children who have to come to terms with the fact that their fathers have gone forever. It shows the very moment of shock just as the microphone records the cries of despair.

At one point Montgomery plays some gentle notes on the piano. Then his playing turns into some devilish kind of staccato which points to the element of horror that has been stored in his mind, to the moment of recollection when the memories of war start to haunt him again. Thus the performance turns into a musical manifestation of a traumatized soul that, at the time being, is far away from any moment of redemption.

In Moverman's film death does not carry any kind of meaning. It is not the necessary ingredient to some kind of patriot game. It is, on the contrary,

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an existential factor of distress for those who have survived, a dark cloud that engulfs virtually all areas of human interaction. *The Messenger* was awarded a *Silver Bear* at the Berlin Film Festival in 2009.