Over My Dead Body: The Ideological Use of Dead Bodies in Network News Coverage of Vietnam

Bernie Cook

During the years of U.S. military involvement in Vietnam, television network news broadcasts carefully handled the representation of dead and dying bodies. Technical constraints and ideological investments limited the depiction of casualties on the evening news, with only twenty-four percent of all television reports from Southeast Asia before 1968 showing images of dead or wounded bodies (Hallin, 129). Though popular memory of television’s coverage of the war recalls Vietnam as the “living room war,” in which brutal violence was transmitted into American homes, analysis of network news during the years 1965 through 1971 reveals that representations of actual violence were carefully structured to privilege American bodies at the expense of (North) Vietnamese bodies. This essay argues that network news’ representational strategies supported the continued exercise of the war; contrary to conservative accounts blaming “liberal” television news media for eroding consensus for the war, this study contends that network coverage of dead bodies supported the war by devaluing Vietnamese bodies.

American television coverage of the Vietnam War largely concealed the representation of wounding, with most segments consisting of “no more than a brief shot of a wounded soldier being lifted into a helicopter” (Hallin, 129). Nevertheless, one broadcast has become emblematic of both the war’s brutality and television’s coverage, despite being uncharacteristically graphic: NBC’s February 2, 1968, report in which South Vietnamese Chief of Police Nguyen Ngoc Loan shoots a captured NLF officer in the head from point blank range. According to popular discourse on television’s role in the war, such images brought the Vietnam Conflict into the domestic space of the American home, changing how Americans understood warfare and its consequences. Recent film studies scholarship on violence has suggested that television’s coverage of the Vietnam war affected viewer response to fictional film violence as well, both during the war and in its aftermath. Scholars

Bernie Cook is Adjunct Assistant Professor of English at Georgetown University. He received his doctorate in Critical Studies in Film and Television from UCLA. He has written on film censorship, television violence, and film reception, and his current research examines audience response to the rise of “ultraviolence” in American films of the 1960s and 1970s.
such as Tom Mullin and Stephen Prince have argued that television news coverage of the war established a new standard for the “reality” of mediated violence, demanding that fictional violence become more graphic in order to be commensurate with documentary representations. Indeed, the lasting fascination with the footage of General Loan’s shooting the prisoner can be explained by the clip’s seeming lack of mediation. In its documentary gaze at the moment of death, this report promised to deliver the “reality” of war to the American home. However, just as the home as space of reception is produced and structured by discourses and power relations, television coverage presented not the war itself but its construction by network news. Television news did not reveal the “reality” of war, and did not provide a model for “realistic” representation of violence in feature film, but constructed versions of the war which supported and extended particular interests, including the interrelated interests of government, military, and broadcast networks.

NBC’s report on General Loan’s shooting is especially interesting for the absences it structures: no American bodies are featured in this representation of Vietnamese killing Vietnamese. Instead, the American presence is conveyed through reporter Howard Tuckner’s voice-over. Tuckner narrates the event with dispassion, seemingly controlling the camera at times (when he mentions “pistol,” the camera tracks down to show the weapon), but offering no warning, and taking no responsibility, for the violent death represented by the footage. Tuckner’s disembodied enunciation produces a fiction of power and control typical of network news coverage of death in the Vietnam war. This footage is representative of news coverage of Vietnam not so much in its brutality as in its structure. Especially during the years of heaviest combat (1967–1969), television news coverage treated American and Vietnamese bodies differently, often using North Vietnamese dead in representational structures which sought to manufacture consent for the U.S. war effort.

The final image of the NBC report serves as a metaphor for the discursive project of network coverage of casualties. As the camera zooms in for a close-up, a South Vietnamese soldier stoops to place a card, bearing the combination of letters and numbers “X-B27,” on the body. Though the meaning of the card is unclear, the gesture is telling. The gesture is an attempt to write on the body of the dead, to use the body to signify the meanings of the body’s enemies. As Katherine Verdery has argued in the context of ethnic conflict in Eastern Europe, the dead body is available as symbol for political and economic investment. Though Verdery concentrates on the actual exhuming and physical movement of corpses, “dead-body politics” also apply to the index of the dead body: its celluloid and electronic representation. As signs of the dead which are easily manipulable and reproducible, filmed images of bodies broadcast electronically bear the investments of their institutional and national production and reception contexts. Like the South Vietnamese soldier with the card in the NBC news report, the American television networks sought to appropriate the dead bodies of the North Vietnamese in order to reinvest them with new meanings, including the power and rightness of the American cause in Vietnam.

Elaine Scarry has argued that warfare requires a reorientation toward bodies: both your own and those of your opponent. To kill another human being, a soldier must unlearn a series of relations that govern contact between bodies in society (Scarry, 122; Grossman, 251). This wartime reorientation requires a rejection of
civilized impulses toward other bodies. In order to accomplish this radical deconstruction of bodily relations, one’s opponent must be demonized, constructed as a negative other, unlike the self, or reified, turned into an object, which can be destroyed. To destroy another body, one must see it as radically different from one’s own. Vital to warfare, this reorientation toward bodies requires cultural and ideological support. In a psychological study of the processes by which soldier learn to kill, Lt. Colonel Dave Grossman has described this “violent ideation” as producing soldiers capable of “thinking the unthinkable” toward other bodies (250). Network news provided the cultural and ideological support necessary for the destruction of “other” bodies through its coverage of dead and dying North Vietnamese. To watch the killing of another human being, the viewer must unlearn a series of relations that govern the reception of bodies represented in film and television. In the case of Vietnam, this unlearning was specifically connected to the racialization of bodies. American television news coverage trained viewers to see Vietnamese bodies as different, less valuable, and thus not deserving of the same heightened ethical concern as the representation of American casualties. Just as military training produced troops capable of killing, network news produced viewers capable of understanding killing as acceptable, even desirable. Television news representations of Vietnamese bodies produced the “unthinkable” as acceptable.

Thus far, I have described network practices without differentiation. I do not wish to elide significant differences in production, practice and personnel among the network’s news divisions. For example ABC did not expand its newscast to a half-hour until January 1967, four years after news leaders CBS and NBC. Although television news remained a loss leader for the networks during the 1960s, CBS’s and NBC’s nightly news received significantly higher ratings than ABC’s program. According to Drew Hallin, ABC’s broadcasts were considered the most “hawkish,” while CBS’s were occasionally critical of the management of the war (for example, Morley Safer’s August 1965 report on American soldiers burning down the village of Cam Ne) (Hallin, 111). Yet, although significant differences existed amongst the three networks, television news consistently employed a common set of representational practices to depict American and Vietnamese casualties. These joint strategies can be explained in part by the common interests each network shared with their military and governmental sources. Despite differences in newsgathering and perspective, each network depended on the same military sources and the same access to soldiers in the field, and this dependence resulted in a certain standardization to the film footage produced in Vietnam. Moreover, as Edward J. Epstein has demonstrated, network news produced constructed stories from events according to a limited and predetermined set of conventions and investments. Television news routinely imposed narrative structure on events, for example, consistently casting combat in Vietnam as a struggle between good (Americans and their South Vietnamese allies) and evil (the North Vietnamese and National Liberation Front guerrillas). The ideological values invested in news stories determined the strategies for depicting bodies. The standard for coverage of dying bodies and corpses was to treat American casualties with care while treating the North Vietnamese dead roughly.

Partisan differences in the representation of casualties might be expected in wartime, but network coverage was not merely chauvinistic. Rather, newscasts
insisted on difference as a structuring principle, repeatedly refusing to represent the mortal sameness of dead Vietnamese and American bodies. Network policies dictated procedures for filming dead Americans, which did not apply to Vietnamese. The networks avoided showing the faces of American dead or revealing personal information out of concern for the families of the deceased (Epstein, 178; Hallin, 130). Dead Americans were powerful symbols, potentially destabilizing belief in the potency of the American war machine and the rightness of the American cause. The average age of the combat soldier in Vietnam was nineteen years old, and Gwynne Dyer has emphasized that teenagers were desirable conscripts because of their economic dispensability (they usually lack dependents and can be “replaced” socially by their younger brothers and sisters), with blacks, Latinos, and low class whites considered the most dispensable (cited in Grossman, 264). Explicit footage of dead and dying Americans would have raised questions regarding the class, racial, and generational composition of the U.S. forces, questions repressed by official accounts. Complicit with this repression, newscasts largely avoided the depiction of dead Americans. When shown, American casualties were carefully framed and filmed. For example, in a CBS news report broadcast on November 7, 1966, two dead Americans were shown. Each was individuated by his own framing, and the first body was shown in a self-consciously aesthetic composition with his face obscured by branches, which seemed to crown his head. NBC employed an alternate strategy on February 14, 1968, as four bodies were quickly carried past the camera on stretchers. No blood, wounds, or faces were visible.

In contrast, Vietnamese bodies regularly were shown bleeding, wounded, and dead. NBC’s footage of General Loan’s execution of the NLF officer is only the most extreme example of practices, which routinely subjected Vietnamese bodies to intense scrutiny. In a discussion of the dispersion of the Vietnam war across American culture, Cynthia Fuchs has argued that to represent the body is to violate it, suggesting that the act of filming the body implants values upon it (48). American news crews captured images of Vietnamese bodies, tearing them from their contexts and placing them within ideological systems supporting the war. News reports rarely reflected the goals, attitudes, or beliefs of either the North or South Vietnamese. Thus, in a representational system prioritizing American experiences while denying Vietnamese perspectives, American television frequently used dead Vietnamese bodies precisely because these mute bodies were unable to speak of their own historical contexts and were not legible by most American viewers apart from the narratives provided by the reports.

Television news further violated Vietnamese bodies by subjecting them to the camera’s direct scrutiny. Vivian Sobchack has argued that documentary images of death challenge viewer reception and raise ethical concerns not activated by feature film violence, which is most often coded as stylized or unreal (283). Network coverage of Vietnamese bodies employed a look, which Sobchack has characterized as morally ambiguous: the “fixed gaze” that refuses ethical engagement with the event of death it represents (295). Where news cameras look away from American bodies, or veil their vision, these same cameras look squarely at dead Vietnamese without blinking. For example, ABC’s April 8, 1971 coverage of a failed North Vietnamese attack on Tan Canh slowly pans over five dead North Vietnamese
sprawled before the American fortifications. The camera singles out one body, moving into a medium shot. Though also demonstrating qualities of what Sobchack calls the "professional gaze," which attempts objectivity in the face of a moral challenge to respond, network news footage lingers too long on the bodies, showing more interest than necessitated by professionalism (298). Footage of dead North Vietnamese served ideological as well as journalistic purposes. As Thomas Doherty has argued in his study of remarkably similar images of dead Japanese bodies in American WWII documentaries such as *Fury in the Pacific* (1945), such representations of the dead are charged with racism and nationalism (262). Doherty describes the documentary camera as employing the same fixed look at the bodies of dead Japanese soldiers as the networks used to represent dead Vietnamese: "a montage of diagonal ‘wipes’ sweeps down across the screen over a scene of contorted Japanese corpses that bleed into one another, the enemy doubly wiped out" (262). The similarities between these wartime military documentaries and American network television coverage of Vietnam suggest that the representational strategy of using audio-visual images of the dead bodies of one's enemies is an ideological and discursive practice with a history stretching back at least to World War II. The ostensibly independent, if not oppositional, television networks were in fact continuing ideological and propagandistic practices long in use by the U.S. military.

Another significant difference in the representation of American and Vietnamese bodies is the degree of agency granted to bodies by the camera and the soundtrack. News reports most often represented American soldiers in action: talking, moving, killing. American bodies were given voice in these reports, either their own or the masculine American voice-over of reporter or anchor speaking for them. As noted, American television coverage largely ignored Vietnamese historical, cultural, and political contexts. While South Vietnamese soldiers and politicians were shown in various activities, their perspectives were not represented in the same way. When represented at all, the North Vietnamese were shown dead, wounded or captured, victims of the violence required to make them available for American representation. Thus the Vietnamese were an "absent presence" in American reporting on the war (Vlastos, 54). David Desser has argued that American feature films, which look back at Vietnam similarly, structure the Vietnamese as an absent perspective. From *Coming Home* (1978) to *Platoon* (1986), these films figure the war in American terms, as an American mistake or an American loss. Importantly, Desser connects this cultural myopia to the motivations, which led the United States into war in Southeast Asia in the first place. Similarly, network news coverage extended beliefs that culturally supported the killing of millions of Vietnamese and the ecological destruction of their country. While Vietnamese issues and history were allowed no voice, their dead bodies were multiplied and deployed.

For example, a CBS news report broadcast on February 12, 1968 carefully reserved agency for a wounded American body, while denying it to a dead Vietnamese body. In a broadcast from the Cholon section of Saigon, newsman Jeff Grelnick describes the results of street fighting between an NLF insurgent and a group of American soldiers. The image and sound tracks combine to construct the American soldier as alive, powerful, and to signify the Vietnamese guerrilla as dead and defeated. Visually, the segment begins with a long shot of uniformed
American male bodies gathered around a figure on the ground. As the camera
shoulders into the group, it takes a place among the American soldiers and represents
their perspective in a high angle hand-held shot. The camera looks down on the
body of an NLF guerrilla killed by American soldiers. The act of killing was not
shown; instead the camera focuses on the body, revealing a young man wearing
black shorts, a short sleeved shirt, and no shoes. An American soldier reaches
down into the frame, grabs the body by his right shoulder, and roughly turns him
over onto his stomach. As this soldier points at the body, the camera frames the
Americans so that only their legs and torsos are seen, emphasizing a generalized
sense of masculine American strength, similar to the effect produced by World
War II combat film montages of soldiers training, such as the scene in The Sands of
Iwo Jima (1949) in which a series of shots focus on the legs and arms of a group of
soldiers rather than their faces, emphasizing the potency of the group molded into
a masculine fighting machine. In contrast to the solidity of the American soldiers,
emphasized visually by their drab pants and their dark boots, the CBS report
shows the dead Vietnamese to be slight, shoeless, his legs bare. The camera feminizes
the dead figure, inscribing a favored American cultural opposition in which Viet-
namese are seen as weak, small, and primitive (with all of the attendant racist
notations) and in which Americans are figured as mighty, strong, and technolo-
gically superior. As Susan Jeffords has pointed out, the American loss in Vietnam
has been particularly troubling to American ideologies, which could not conceive
of the feminized North Vietnam defeating the masculinized Western superpower
(Jeffords, 118). Like the American soldier, the camera handles the Vietnamese
body roughly, devaluing and objectifying it, attempting to locate in its materiality
the ideological connotations of weakness and femininity.

The camera’s view of the American soldier “wounded” by the dead Vietnamese
offers a striking contrast to its representation of the Vietnamese body. The camera
frames the American from a straight-on position, beginning in a medium shot,
before moving into a close-up. An on-screen title identifies the soldier by name, as
Staff Sergeant Harry Stewart. Though described by Greulich’s voice-over as an
American “casualty,” Stewart is not visibly injured. During the interview, Stewart
refers to a “nick” on the elbow, which remains unshown, outside the frame.
Instead, in contrast to the broken and inanimate body of the NLF guerrilla, Stewart’s
body is whole and full of life and intention. This contrast suggests Elaine Scarry’s
insight about a fundamental structural component of both torture and war: that
the unmaking of another’s world makes the world of the torturer/killer (36). The
Vietnamese body, pawed over and left as refuse in the street, visually guarantees
the illusion of wholeness and potency to the image of the masculine American
body.

This structural opposition between bodies also occurs on the soundtrack. Only
one body is granted the power of speech. The reporter describes the fate of the
Vietnamese body in voice-over, briefly narrating his death and its meaning. In
contrast, most of the report consists of an interview with the “wounded” American.
Yet, during the interview, the close framing on the sergeant excludes the reporter
from the image, and Stewart seems to tell his own story directly to the camera.
His telling suggests the dynamics of testimony, but robbed of the transformative
and oppositional dimension associated with witnessing, here reinscribed into
dominant discourse and supporting war's exercise. Not only does Stewart
describe his own wounding, but he also recounts the killing of the Vietnamese
man, appropriating and silencing his story. The American body has the power to
tell its own story and that of the mute Vietnamese. On both the verbal and visual
levels, this news report reserves signification for American bodies.

Another CBS report, from January 25, 1968, constructs a contrast between dead
Vietnamese bodies and damaged American equipment. The report was one of a
series of stories on the U.S. Marine garrison at Khe Sanh, which was under siege
by North Vietnamese troops for seventy-seven days in early 1968. In this story,
CBS anchor Walter Cronkite narrates over footage of the results of a nighttime
attack on the base. The footage consists of three distinct segments: images of damaged
American helicopters; images of five dead NVA soldiers; and images of U.S.
Marines posing with weapons captured from the Vietnamese.

The juxtaposed segments create an association between Vietnamese bodies and the
tools of war. While things are used to stand in for American bodies (the helicopters
for U.S. soldiers), the report structures Vietnamese bodies as things (corpses,
inanimate matter), attempting to fix their meanings in their mortality. Only
whole, living American bodies are shown, and Cronkite's voice-over ensures that
an American narrative is imposed on the Vietnamese bodies. Cronkite describes
the damaged equipment as casualties: "American losses included these helicopters."
A long shot shows the body of one grounded helicopter and the tail of another,
both full of holes and broken glass. Another shot frames a broken propeller, tracking
down the snapped blade to reveal a hole in the side of the helicopter. These
images of grounded, "crippled" aircraft suggest a loss to America's "military capa-
ibility," but importantly they shield viewers from the sight of damaged and dead
American bodies, a much more destabilizing sign.

The shots of downed helicopters are paired visually with three shots of dead
North Vietnamese bodies. The first image shows three Vietnamese bodies lying
in a crater, each bent over at the waist, as if wounded in the stomach. The second
shot centers a single body in the frame from a medium distance. The third
medium shot shows a North Vietnamese soldier, possibly a woman, face down in
high grass. The report employs the same rhythm of editing as in the helicopter
segment to further suggest a connection between these bodies and things.

The third segment reinstates the whole, living presence of American bodies
after representing dead Vietnamese, just as the interview with Sergeant Stewart
replaced the dead guerrilla with the audible American. A series of shots show
American Marines posing with weapons captured from the North Vietnamese. If
the helicopters stood for American losses, then these weapons serve as a synecdoche
for the Vietnamese dead. Elaine Scarry has made a connection between "arms"
and bodies, describing a phenomenological inversion in wartime discourse,
which figures bodies as extensions of weapons (67). This association of the body
with weapons, rather than weapons with the body, allows for a discourse in
which warfare is described as "disarming," concealing the destruction of human
bodies necessary to achieve the disabling of weapons.

In addition to structuring the dead North Vietnamese as things, the display of
weapons suggests ideological arguments supporting U.S. intervention in Southeast
Asia. Cronkite's voice-over links the weapons to China and the Soviet Union,
suggesting a Cold War discourse in which Vietnam is understood as merely a “domino” in a global struggle between communism and democracy. At the time of CBS’s report, John Wayne’s Vietnam war film *The Green Berets* (1968) was being prepared for release. The only major studio film released during the war to attempt to represent the conflict, *The Green Berets* unequivocally supported the American military effort. The film used characters rhetorically to make arguments for the war: an initially skeptical print journalist (David Janssen) is introduced so that he can be converted into a hawk. At the outset of the film, in answer to the journalist’s public challenge that American participation in a “civil war” was unnecessary, a green beret (Aldo Ray) dumps a cache of captured weaponry on the reporter’s desk. Towering above the seated journalist, as he drops guns and ammunition into the frame, the green beret announces each weapon’s country of origin, connecting Vietnam to a larger, global struggle against an expansionist communist “menace.” The CBS report on Tan Cahn poses a similar argument in less hyperbolic terms. It uses dead Vietnamese bodies and their symbolic representation as weapons to produce an ideological argument in support of further killing.

Thus, like the avowedly conservative, pro-war feature film *The Green Berets*, network news broadcasts used the Cold War to contextualize and justify the American military campaign in Vietnam. These shared ideological perspectives suggest that the television networks were not strongly opposed to the U.S. war effort, as has been argued in prominent conservative histories of the war. Richard Nixon’s *No More Vietnams*, Gunter Lewie’s *America in Vietnam*, and the documentary *Television’s Vietnam* each blame television for contributing to America’s defeat. Instead of turning against the war after Tet, when Walter Cronkite went on CBS to express his reservations about the United States’ ability to win the war, network news continued to broadcast reports which supported the American military effort. For example, on January 31, 1969, one year after the Tet Offensive, during a period in which television news coverage was supposedly helping to erode the consensus supporting the war effort, ABC news broadcast a report on hunter/killer helicopters, which celebrated American technologies of destruction. Two years later, on April 8, 1971, CBS broadcast an almost identical report on U.S. helicopter missions over Cambodia. The ABC story demonstrates the regular use of news reports focused on American technology to construct American potency and devalue Vietnamese bodies (with the bodies figured as signs of North Vietnamese military capability). Peter Davis’s documentary *Hearts and Minds* reveals the ideological importance of such representations through interviews with American airmen. Both Lieutenant George Coker and Captain Daniel Floyd emphasized the importance of the distance at which they flew their bombing runs. From the remove of the cockpit of a jet fighter thousands of feet above the ground, these soldiers were able to avoid conceiving of their targets as human beings. Instead the discourse of military missions (targets, objectives, hits, etc.), coupled with the representational technology of flight instruments and bomb sights which converted landscape and architecture into signs on screens, rendered the bodies on the ground invisible from the plane’s distanced view. For Coker, the result was a sensation of power free from responsibility for his actions. Similarly, the scale and the representational technologies allowed Floyd to avoid the ethical implications of his actions. Indeed, in *Hearts and Minds*, Floyd admitted that his initial response
to the results of his bombing was aesthetic; like Mussolini, he found the bomb blasts to be beautiful from a distance. Television contributed to the production of the belief in American superiority and morality, a belief dependent on the elision of the bodies of American “targets.” This construction of an ideology of American superiority depended on the distance created by technologies such as helicopters, cameras, and television itself.

The effects of television as medium involve the illusion of presence obscuring an actual absence of the protelevisual, and thus television is itself a technology which produces the distance which enables annihilation. Paul Virilio has argued that as perception and destruction became coterminous in the Twentieth Century, war and cinema became complexly imbricated (6). With the introduction of intercontinental satellite transmission coverage of “live” events, first employed during the 1967 Winter Olympic telecast, television staked a claim for immediacy, simultaneity, and ubiquity, fulfilling Virilio’s conditions more effectively than cinema. Virilio argued that “there is no war without representation,” and the American television networks sought to make Vietnam the first war represented as it happened, the first “television war”: “TVietnam.”

While television coverage of Vietnam introduced an unprecedented stream of images of war into homes and public spaces, television’s apparatus reduced and diminished the impact of these images. As Rick Altman has argued, consuming television in domestic space demands that viewers negotiate between television’s flow and household flow (44). According to Altman, television is only partly attended to by an audience busy with other activities (42). Even when the viewer devotes attention to television, broadcast technology produces distance because of reduced screen size and image quality. As Michael Arlen has argued, television combat broadcasts reduced soldiers to figures several inches tall firing weapons into the indeterminate distance (8). Moreover, combat reports were interspersed with domestic, national, and international news segments as well as entertainment pieces and commercials. Raymond Williams described television’s repetitions, lack of clear textual boundaries, and illusion of continuous presence as “flow” (84). Television’s “flow” distanced viewers from the reality of the Vietnam war by embedding television’s constructed and invested news reports into larger structures which homogenized and normalized representations of violence and death.

For example, ABC’s October 28, 1967, news report on “Con Thien, Ten Days in Hell,” was interrupted by an advertisement for the network’s new World War II-era action show Rat Patrol, part of the network’s prime time schedule, featuring gunfire, explosions, Nazi antagonists, and charismatic male heroes. Though at first the commercial construction of violence as fun seems to contradict the tone of the news report which described a protracted pre-Tet Offensive siege in which sixty-five Americans and more than two thousand NVA soldiers were killed, the fictional program neatly summarized the ideology which enabled Americans to accept their country’s involvement in Vietnam: the American military is morally superior to its adversaries; America’s enemies are evil, inferior, and easy to defeat; and military violence is one directional—only the despised enemy suffers. The melodramatic subtitle of the report, “Ten Days in Hell,” recalls Audie Murphy’s World War II biopic To Hell and Back (1955), suggesting that the news report and the dramatic series shared strategies for representing American military violence as heroic, sacrificial,
and ultimately triumphant. *Rat Patrol* works with the news report, rather than against it, to provide justification and support for the American war effort. This link between generic fantasy and ostensible “reality” suggests the distance structured by television’s apparatus, a distance that contributed to Americans’ lack of implication with the consequences of the war. Like the fighter and helicopter pilots delivering “death from above,” television viewers enjoyed the distance necessary for appreciation rather than implication. Television itself supported the war’s exercise by producing distance from the war’s real effects.

The technologies of distance displayed in ABC’s January 31, 1969, report on hunter/killer helicopters privileged American perspectives. In a voice-over which seems to hover over the footage, ABC reporter Ken Gale narrates the pilot’s point of view: “he hopes to see the enemy before the enemy sees him.” Yet the viewer sees only what the helicopter sees. Denied a look up from the ground, viewers cannot see from the Vietnamese perspective. Thus, the aerial footage creates the fantasy of unlimited sight: these helicopters are all powerful because, like the camera, they control vision and visibility. Through this linkage of helicopter and news camera, the camera becomes an extension of U.S. military power, an extension of the hunter, straining to see, and is implicated in the killing, which results from the power of sight.

When killing is represented in the helicopter report, violent agency is reserved for Americans. The report does not represent the Vietnamese attack on the helicopter, which Gale describes in voice-over, only the result: the American attack helicopter destroying a burning “hooch.” ABC’s camera approximates the gunners point of view, as bullets and rockets streak out of the bottom of the frame toward the structure on the ground. The human targets are hidden at this distance. Similar to representations of the Persian Gulf war in which electronic image of “targets” replaced bodies for both pilots and television viewers, the “hooch” stands in for the Vietnamese being attacked. Finally, the camera zooms in on two dead Vietnamese bodies lying in a field. The report does not identify the bodies nor explain how they were killed. These two small bodies do not seem to be an adequate result of the technologies of destruction unleashed for the camera and reveal the limits of the fantasy of unlimited sight.

Elaine Scarry has argued that power is based on distance from the human body, and the footage of the helicopter attack employs distancing techniques to build a sense of American power (46). The helicopter footage enacts what Scarry has described as a fantasy of one-directional power. In analyzing the structure of torture, Scarry identified “torturer’s dream of non-reciprocity,” a practice which supports the exercise of violence against another body: “the dream that one will be oneself exempt from the condition of being embodied while one’s opponent will be kept in a state of radical embodiment by its awareness that it is at any moment woundable” (80). The aerial footage of the helicopter report is only the most literal enactment of this ideological vision. American network news coverage of the war repeatedly constructed the North Vietnamese as “radically embodied” through a montage of dead bodies. By linking the North Vietnamese to their dead bodies, news coverage was able to build a dream of disembodied, invulnerable, and omnipotent American soldiers. As Virilio has suggested, modern warfare involves the strategic manipulation of perspective (1). American network news coverage involved a logic of
perception that reduced and othered Vietnamese bodies in order to construct fantasies of disembodied power that promoted an imaginary American nationalism. As Patricia Zimmerman has suggested, official representations of war in the twentieth century have abjured the ground in favor of the skies, the better to “etherealize” war, hiding its consequences to lived bodies, and promoting a mobile nationalism which gains power and reach from its dispersion (88). ABC’s report suggests the close ideological ties between network television and the state.

Moreover, the ties between television and the state were emphasized by production circumstances; television news coverage of the war depended on government and military sources and access. The networks were beholden to the government and military for “knowledge capital,” inside information about the war. Unable to film at night, and always searching for dramatic footage to attract viewers, network camera crews depended on the military for transportation throughout Vietnam. When desperate for footage, news crews could depend on soldiers to stage violence, firing guns specifically for the cameras (Epstein, 158). Television’s need for footage and information ensured that government and military interests would be reflected in news broadcasts. The government and military also needed the television networks to produce public consent for U.S. policies and practices. Additionally, as an industry, television has had close ties to the military since its origins in radio technology. Following Virilio, Marita Sturken has argued that the technologies of media and war are inseparable. Sturken notes that television technology developed in part from military research, and that the parent companies of television networks have been heavily involved in defense contracting (Sturken, 130). Thus network news coverage of Vietnam demonstrated a concordance of media and governmental interests. Any opposition to the war on the part of television news divisions was in tension with the close technological, economic, and political ties between the networks and the American government and military. Far from opposing the war, television news broadcasts produced assent for military aims.

The representation of dead Vietnamese bodies by television news served hegemonic ends. As Elaine Scarry has argued, war violently uses “the incontestable reality of the human body” to legitimize ideologies (Scarry, 62). Network news coverage of the Vietnam war appropriated images of dead Vietnamese bodies in ways that stripped them of their identities, histories, and values. American television news then used the corpses to signify the vitality of American bodies, the power of the American war machine, and the rightness of the American cause.

This strategy for representing the bodies of America’s military opponents as available for signification and valuation has continued to evolve. As numerous critics have noted, during the Persian Gulf war the U.S. military sought to elide the human body entirely from representations of the war. The recent bombing of Kosovo was accomplished without any American combat deaths and without significant representation of the Kosovar, Albanian, and Serbian bodies destroyed by American bombs. Indeed, news reports on March 24, 1999, the day after NATO’s “Operation Allied Force” bombing campaign began, showed no bodies other than those of journalists and “talking head” military experts. The ABC nightly news followed a commercial for the film Pleasantville (1999), a satire on the porous divisions between television’s constructions and reality, with its report on the “Kosovo Crisis,” signified by a computer generated logo. The actual attacks
on Serbia and Kosovo were represented through the repeated use of a extreme long shot of a burning building, identified by anchor Peter Jennings as an airplane factory in Belgrade, which zoomed into a medium long shot in which the scale was indistinct and bodies invisible. Echoing the “hunter killer” reports of the Vietnam era, both CBS and ABC employed canned footage of a variety of U.S. aircraft taking off and executing non-combat maneuvers. Nearly twenty-five years after Vietnam, American television networks continued familiar strategies for representing warfare to the American people: generalized air power was emphasized while bodies and consequences were concealed. Contemporary strategies that produce consent for the killing of unseen, unspoken bodies extend at least back to television coverage of the Vietnam war and to the ostensibly independent and oppositional media which covered the war.

The delivery systems of American television have ensured the widespread circulation of ideologically invested representations of the bodies of war, but these strategies have not achieved complete hegemony. Fissures have been visible hinting at revelations about bodies in pain repressed by the discourse. For example, an NBC news report broadcast on February 9, 1968, revealed that the powerful coherence suggested by the television reporter’s body was a carefully constructed fiction. Representative of the Vietnam War era phenomenon of the journalist as star, this report features Howard Tuckner narrating his own wounding by mortar fire. Tuckner’s wound continually threatens his projection of mastery. Crouching low in the frame, his wounded left leg extended, Tucker speaks directly to the camera, expressing surprise at this own wound: “I’m... I’m hit.” His pain defies television’s powers of representation.

While Tuckner attempts to master pain through language, “It feels kind of wet,” the camera moves in for a close-up on his face, not his leg. Like the frame which excluded Sgt. Stewart’s wounded elbow, seeking to visually reassert his wholeness, this frame de-emphasizes Tuckner’s wound in favor of his handsome face. However, even the close-up cannot deny bodily trauma; Tuckner face become pale and drawn as he grimaces in pain. His loss of control is most apparent in his use of mild profanity, violating television’s conventional discipline over language. In an attempt to reassert his mastery in the face of world destroying pain, Tuckner states “Anyone who tells you that they don’t think of these things is a damned liar.” But Tuckner’s own discourse has sought to produce “these things” as unthinkable. American television news coverage of Vietnam has constructed American bodies as powerful and unassailable, and the success of this project is revealed by the shock produced at the sight of a wounded American reporter.

Tuckner provided the voice-over for NBC’s footage of General Loan’s execution of the National Liberation Front suspect, and in that report his voice reasserted control over the disruptive image of on-camera death. The voice-over violently signified on the act, denying the threat to meaning posed by the documentary representation of death. Vivian Sobchack has argued that documentary representations of human mortality threaten the very possibility of signification: “death is a sign that ends all signs” (286). Thus, Tuckner’s narration had to reassert the possibility of specifically American meanings. His voice asserted that the meaning of Vietnamese killing Vietnamese was American superiority, control and restraint. His own wounding opened a hole in his discourse, suggesting that the
control he signified was an elaborate construct. Tuckner’s wounding ruptures the illusion of power located in the American body, laying bare the ideological structures and power dynamics dependent on this representational construction. Thus, though approaching the hegemonic, network news discourse also contains the seeds of its own deconstruction. If network representational strategies provided cultural support for the destruction of bodies, then cultural analysis of these strategies promises to yield understandings that may eventually save lives.

Moreover, though overwhelmed by the dominance of network images, other representations of the war existed, representations that handled bodies in different ways, advancing other meanings. In her study of insurgent documentary practice, Patricia Zimmerman has called for an oppositional documentary filmmaking located on the ground, at the level of lived bodies, in contrast to the official documentary representations of the war which manipulated bodies, seeking to become ethereal. Zimmerman identifies Vietnam veteran filmmaker Daniel Reeves’s Smothering Dreams (1981) as an exemplary “ambush” attack on the dominant representations of the war in television and film (82). Staging, reworking, and critiquing images of the war, Reeves argues that connections between boyhood, masculinity, violence, and nationalism led to the American actions in Vietnam. Thus, within the United States, filmmakers contributed different images of bodies to the counter-discourse opposing the ideological supports that enabled bombing and killing. Their perspectives denied by American accounts, the Vietnamese also employed alternate strategies of representation of bodies.

North Vietnam regularly used filmmaking as a tool of war, to convey information and generate support among the North Vietnamese, but also to represent themselves and their struggles to the world. North Vietnamese film challenged American television’s organization of dead bodies, by showing images of living and intentional Vietnamese bodies working in concert to defeat a foreign superpower. These films reveal not only the agency of bodies that had been reduced and controlled by American representations, but also the values involved in American television’s depiction of bodies. These counter-representations were made available to western filmmakers via the North Vietnamese film office in Prague. Emile de Antonio’s In The Year of the Pig (1969) and Peter Davis’s Hearts and Minds (1974) used North Vietnamese footage to politically challenge the representations of bodies which culturally supported the war effort.

An example of counter-representation even found its way onto an American television news broadcast. On February 18, 1968, CBS broadcast “captured Communist footage,” taken during the siege of the Citadel in the fight for Hue. This footage showed North Vietnamese soldiers during military preparation as well as during moments of relaxation. Despite the attempts to reinscribe American meanings through voice-over and editing (the report described the footage as “propaganda”), this film hinted at other perspectives and objectives, destabilizing the representational logic of American television news.

The stakes remain extremely high: nine years after the end of the Persian Gulf War, American planes continue to bomb military and civilian ground targets in Iraq, enforcing Western dictated “no-fly zones” intended to limit Saddam Hussein’s military capability (Cody A1). In 2000, American bombs are killing hundreds of Iraqi civilians in a continuation of hostilities unremarked on by American network
television. Because coverage of the Persian Gulf War drew on the representational practices of network news coverage of Vietnam, the only casualties who counted were American soldiers. Missing from representation were the approximately one hundred thousand Iraqis killed. Since no American’s have been shot down, and no American bodies have been injured, the current air strikes against Iraq do not merit representation by network television. In an age taken with the disembodied discourse of virtual possibility, it is more important than ever to examine the practices by which the dominant media represent the bodies of war.

WORKS CITED


