

They Shoot Pixels Don't They? Killing Pixels from *Patriot Games* to *Collateral Murder* and *Call of Duty*

Abstract This chapter uses two case studies to explore the impact of digital images in which pixelation inhibits clear viewing of the violence depicted. First, WikiLeaks release of *Collateral Murder* (2010), actual US Apache helicopter gun camera footage in Iraq in which the crew attack civilians, is compared with the fictional depiction of virtualized combat in the satellite sequence from Hollywood spy-thriller *Patriot Games* (1992). Second, videogames—including *Call of Duty* and *Spec Ops: The Line*—are examined as interactive fictional texts that function to defamiliarize audience understanding of remote warfare. The chapter argues that rather than creating a desensitized and entertaining experience of killing, the low-grade imagery of these texts has a strong impact on the audience's cognitive and ethical engagement with the material.

Keywords WikiLeaks • Military violence • Videogame violence
Defamiliarization • Mediated violence • War films

On 5 April 2010, the website WikiLeaks released a classified video of a US military helicopter attack in Iraq which had been recorded on 12 July 2007 (WikiLeaks 2010). Titled *Collateral Murder*, the video is a recording from the helicopter's target acquisition and designation sights (TADS) system and shows the main weapon's point of view as the aircraft circles an urban setting, tracking a group of approximately ten men walking near some buildings. The pilots' cockpit chatter—transcribed

and subtitled in WikiLeaks' version of the video—is audible throughout the 39-minute recording as the crew of two Apache helicopters operating under the call signs Crazyhorse 18 and Crazyhorse 19 attempt to determine whether or not the subjects are in possession of weapons. In the aftermath, it will turn out that the 'weapon' held by one of the men is in fact a telephoto lens of a Reuters' photojournalist's camera. However, according to the official report, this detail was unclear on the grainy monochrome video image and was therefore likely to be beyond the limit of the TADS operator's perception at the time (United States Central Command 2007).

Finally, the crew receive authorization to fire and begin shooting at the group. The clarity of the black-and-white digital image is almost instantly obliterated by dust as the bullets impact the victims and their surroundings. The dust causes the camera's sensor to overexpose, obscuring the view even further, but two men are clearly seen desperately running away from the group. The gun camera tracks them as one falls to the ground and is similarly obliterated from view in another cloud of bullet impacts and sprayed dust. A voice advises in an even tone, 'Keep shoot'n,' and the gunner fires at the final man who has by now collapsed on the ground (Fig. 2.1). The hollow chatter of the machine gun rattles on the soundtrack and small dark fragments blast violently into the air—rendered as vague, dark pixelated blobs by the Internet video compression—where the man's body was. It is unclear if the men have been killed; however, one of the gun crew reports 'I got 'em,' and another responds 'I'm just trying to find targets again.' The TADS viewer pans across the dead bodies and a voice is heard congratulating the gunner—'Nice.'

Crazyhorse 18 continues to circle the scene. The camera's view remains locked on the corpses until the crew notice one survivor, another Reuters' journalist, crawling slowly away from the site. For almost two minutes, the crew from both helicopters debate whether or not to shoot, 'Come on, buddy [...] All you gotta do is pick up a weapon [...] We see a weapon, we're gonna engage'. A dark van arrives, driven by local civilians who begin trying to move the journalist into the van. The crew speculate that the new people may be picking up weapons so they repeatedly request permission to fire on the van, 'Let us shoot!' Ultimately, the chain of command grants permission and the crew fire on the van. The two saviours dash away for cover behind a wall, the van explodes, and the journalist's body is thrown viciously and convulsively onto the ground. After some more shooting, there is no more movement



Fig. 2.1 *Collateral Murder* (WikiLeaks [2010](#))

from the subjects and the helicopter crews continue to circle the scene; the camera view panning from one body to another. They proceed to direct ground units to the position, who discover a wounded child in the van. Although only one child is visible in the video, reportedly there were two children, both of whom were injured in the attack (Al-Jazeera [2010](#)). On the video recording, a member of the helicopter crew can be heard saying, ‘Ah damn. Oh well.’

The video was part of over 700,000 classified documents clandestinely passed to WikiLeaks by former US military intelligence officer Chelsea Bradley Manning who has since been convicted of espionage (Isaac [2013](#)). The authenticity of the footage appears to have been corroborated by the military, although the editorialized nature of WikiLeaks’ editing, titling, and written commentary was criticized for limiting the perspective available on the events (United States Central Command [2007](#); Fishel [2010](#)). Viewing the video is a compelling and shocking experience, and for a number of viewers, it has directly provoked political commentary on the conflict in the Middle East (Thomas [2011](#); Christensen [2014](#)).

This violent military video calls to mind the still-relevant impact of a scene from pre-9/11 Hollywood notions of virtual combat—the satellite-viewed terrorist camp attack in *Patriot Games* (Phillip Noyce 1992). In that scene, a group of SAS commandos attack an IRA training camp in Africa based upon intelligence assembled by CIA analyst Jack Ryan, played by Harrison Ford. Our view of the attack is presented entirely from within the CIA control room. Mediated via thermal satellite imagery, both SAS and IRA combatants are rendered as identical pale blue silhouettes on the screen. Close inspection reveals that the first victim has his throat cut, although this is intentionally unclear on first viewing because the screen with the satellite image is framed deep in the *mise-en-scène* behind four technicians working at a variety of consoles (Fig. 2.2).

Like the calmly uttered statements such as ‘Keep shoot’n’ of *Collateral Murder*, here an unnamed man in a suit flatly states, ‘That is a kill,’ as he raises a coffee cup to his mouth and looks intently at the screen. Shot/reverse shot editing of Ryan’s glance towards the man suggests his discomfort with the cold comment, positioning the audience to view the violence from this same perspective throughout the rest of the scene (see Carroll 1996; Persson 2003). As the sequence continues, the camera pushes in dramatically on Ryan’s face whilst he watches further deaths abstracted into crude duotone blobs, thermal outlines of helicopters, and a missile exploding which overexposes the satellite’s capture



Fig. 2.2 *Patriot Games*. The first IRA victim has his throat slashed, visible as an infrared silhouette on the satellite feed in deep field

sensor. It is a remarkably quiet action sequence, paradoxically enhancing the affective impact of the killing. The dialogue consists primarily of what Michel Chion (2009, 476) would label 'emanation speech'—we hear from characters mumbling off screen, for instance, clinical comments such as 'targets have been neutralized'. The musical accompaniment is a single string instrument playing a gentle, melancholic adagio. Generally, the scene favours wide shots of the satellite relay screens, although at one point the camera is framed close enough to show the texture of the screen's pixels, drawing attention to one of the victims crawling slowly away from the attacked compound. As the attack moves to completion, the satellite feed begins to break up, the image rolling and distorting before disappearing into white noise. Ryan's lip trembles and he looks down, apparently deep in thought, before his superior sighs deeply and states coldly, 'It's over'. The moment is deliberately awkward, both characters acknowledging the tension in the simulacra of the scene's visuals. Whilst the juxtapositions inherent in the style of this scene are certainly familiar to contemporary viewers—similar visuals appear in *Blackhawk Down* (Ridley Scott 2001), *Syriana* (Stephen Gaghan 2005), and *Lions for Lambs* (Robert Redford 2007)—in its time, this scene from *Patriot Games* is likely to have had an uncomfortable effect on an audience who had recently experienced televised images of night vision attacks on Kuwait (see Mars-Jones 1992).

It can, therefore, be argued that this scene perhaps functions to further symbolize Jean Baudrillard's concern that the First Gulf War was 'A war enclosed in a glass coffin' (1995, 43). Indeed, such cinematic portrayals of deferred combat also recall Paul Virilio's announcement that the First Gulf War was the 'first total electronic war' which enabled 'confrontation with the enemy almost without touching' (Virilio 1991/2005, 35). Whilst these methods of distancing run the risk of creating viewer 'fatigue' in response to scenes of battlefield violence (Stewart 2009), it is timely to consider the way these mediated images of violence do retain strong affective power. There is a significant body of literature addressing the dangers of inurement from the digital combat image—from the philosophy of Baudrillard, Virilio, and James Der Derian (Der Derian 1990, 2000) writing during the initial transition to electronic warfare imagery, to international military ethics (Royakkers and van Est 2010; Nobuoka 2011), to media theory of cinema and game studies in the wake of contemporary strikes by unmanned air vehicles (UAVs), or as they are popularly known, 'drones' (Raley 2009;

Clarke et al. 2012). These scholars have contributed significantly to our understanding of factual images of combat violence such as the WikiLeaks video as well as fictional portrayals such as *Patriot Games*, the more recent the *Call of Duty* videogame series (Infinity Ward 2003), or cinema texts about the conflict in the Middle East. This chapter builds upon this background work and uses the poetics of cinema (Bordwell 2008) to focus on one very specific aspect of these kinds of images—the fact that they *do* have an affective impact on viewers.

Part of that affective power is of course associated with the violence depicted. However, the impact of the aesthetic appearance of these types imagery is also greatly significant. The low-quality digital image—whether from a satellite, cell phone camera, CCTV, or web video—literally lays bare its device, to use a Formalist term (Schklovski 1965; Thompson 1981). Hito Steyerl (2009) refers to these texts as ‘poor images’. To take a non-combat example, it is difficult to watch Abraham Zapruder’s footage of Kennedy’s death without being aware of the grainy, supersaturated Kodachrome 8-mm film’s texture. Certainly, there are differences between the seemingly objective omniscience of the CIA satellite in *Patriot Games* and the ‘first person shooter’ (FPS) intentionality of *Collateral Murder*’s gun camera. However, these images do share a degraded aesthetic. These surface textures contribute to the visceral impression of the violence portrayed—the pixels, the highly compressed video codecs used on the web, and the low-resolution video from an Apache helicopter gun system. At the same time, the brutality of the recorded images’ visual texture stands in for the violence not clearly depicted, at once implying the violence, whilst simultaneously making it palatable.

TRANSMISSION *VÉRITÉ*, POOR IMAGES, AND DIGITIZED DEATH

As can be seen from the examples above, the qualities of such poor images have been adopted by mainstream cinema. Mimicking the errors and artefacts associated with recording images in challenging conditions or with low-quality mediums such as cheap handycam video or surveillance cameras can offer a distinctive—and powerful—cinematic style which differs from standard kinds of Hollywood polish. Jordan Crandall has called this ‘*transmission vérité*, where the hidden substrata of the technology are reintroduced as part of the content of the image, and a raw immediacy appears to open up a direct access to the real’ (Crandall

2005, 15). Of course, cinema has a long history of presenting pseudo-documentary images such as the 'News On The March!' sequence of *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles 1941) or the so-called documentary realism of the handheld cinematography often used in modern combat scenes (see Gates 2005, 300). These fictional images may or may not resemble actual documentary footage, yet are often regarded as realistic—for instance, the shaky camerawork of contemporary combat films is routinely mistaken by audiences as documentary-like (Haggith 2002; Bender 2013). However, due to the emergence of websites such as YouTube and WikiLeaks, and the availability of small form digital video devices, today's audiences have increased access to a number of real-world referents for Hollywood's *transmission vérité* aesthetic. As Stewart (2009) argues:

Sure, you may think you've seen it all on YouTube and cable networks, and this time you'd be right, you have: seen it the way the military itself has, at both ends of a lethal stealth—aerial hits and surface ambushes alike—each recorded in the real time of pending annihilation, zoom versus pan, impersonal targeting over against the jittery focus of patrol. (48)

Technology, violence, cinema, and war are, of course, also bound up quite tightly in the notion of a military-industrial-media-entertainment network (Der Derian 2009). It is noteworthy that the earliest use of digital visual effects in a mainstream cinema production was the pixelated point of view of Yul Brynner's psychotic robot Gunslinger in *Westworld* (Seymour and Diamond 2010; Prince 2012, 19). There is a direct line from *Westworld's* pixelated poor images to the thermal vision point of view sequences in John McTiernan's *Predator* (1987) and ultimately the real-life military UAV of the same name, manufactured by General Atomics and now deployed over combat zones in the Middle East.

Taking the approach of cinema poetics (Bordwell 2008), it is clear that contemporary Hollywood tends to employ poor images in one of two general ways when presenting this kind of mediated combat killing, both of them linked to characterization.

First, they may be used to characterize a group of people as unsympathetic. For example, Harrison Ford's hero in *Patriot Games* is bolstered as sympathetic because his reaction to the satellite relay of digital death shows more concern than does the sardonic 'And that's a kill' from one of the suit-wearing CIA officers. Similarly, the sequel, *Clear and Present*

Danger (Phillip Noyce 1994), depicts a politician watching a live feed from a missile camera as it impacts into a Columbian drug cartel leader's hacienda. 'Boom,' he mutters whilst biting into a snack. His flat tone is remarkable in the way it contrasts with the excitement of the voice over from the unedited *Collateral Murder* clip—the helicopter fires a missile on a building into which insurgents have been suspected to have taken refuge, 'Patoosh!' the gunner exclaims in one of the brief moments which break their otherwise business-as-usual tone used throughout the attacks—both vocals portray the characters as unsympathetic.

The second way in which Hollywood uses these kinds of images conveys a sense of military impotence for the characters. For example, in *Blackhawk Down*, when the helicopters are hit by a rocket-propelled grenade and then begin to spin out of control, the film edits to a view of the satellite feed in the military command centre on both occasions as the commanders watch, unable to intervene or issue meaningful orders to the helicopter crew. The same technique may be used in a delayed fashion, as in *Rendition* (Gavin Hood 2007) which uses a televised broadcast to repeat the suicide bombing from the film's opening scene as recorded by a tourist's video camera. Watching the broadcast is CIA analyst Douglas Freeman, who was on the scene when the explosion occurred. His body language upon viewing the footage invokes not only impotence but also suggests the footage has been a possible trigger for his traumatic memory of the event. Often, these types of images are accompanied by a significant change in the audio mix, for instance, a high-pass filter to mimic the small speaker sound of the television screen. Like the eerie quietness of the satellite-mediated violence of *Patriot Games*, the suddenness of this change in sound often functions to create the effect of defamiliarization via its representation of the traumatic imagery (Bender and Broderick 2014). Both of these uses of the poor image technique have the artistic motivation of intensifying the drama of the film's fiction. Francesco Casetti and Antonio Somaini (2013) argue that mainstream cinema's use of this imagery functions to increase the viewers' emotional and cognitive engagement with the fiction.

HOT, COLD, AND FATAL

The perspective outlined above also draws upon Marshall McLuhan's (1964) distinction between hot and cold media. Cinema, a 'hot' medium for McLuhan, is characterized by its high level of detail which

has an anaesthetizing effect via its 'strong interpellation of the senses', whereas the 'cold' medium of television 'offers less sensorial detail' and therefore requires more perceptive and cognitive work from the viewer (Casetti and Somaini 2013, 416). Arguably, the 'cooling down' inherent in Hollywood's appropriation of the distorted qualities of found footage and surveillance cameras can be read as an attempt to 'recuperate' the popular media of our time (419–420). However, the artistic effect created by these images, once incorporated into mainstream hot media, in fact defamiliarizes the very use of these images within popular media:

Poor images force cinema to renounce 'high definition' on the level of perception, but they help cinema to gain 'high definition' on the level of cognition. The senses cool down, but thought heats up (420).

In his book *Closed Circuits* (2014), Garrett Stewart explores the way in which cinema has, since the turn of the twenty-first century, developed a 'mode' or even a 'style' of surveillance. For Stewart, this mode enables Hollywood to explore any narrative material by 'treating it at a distance, reframed, mediated, and, because often surreptitious, bringing at times a margin of unease with it into the auditorium of theatrical viewing' (190). Perhaps, this could be analysed under the term mediation aesthetics, and, given that this aesthetic is conventionally presented via some form of poor image (though not all poor images are the same), connections could be made between Stewart's surreptitious surveillance and McLuhan's hot/cool media, as well as to the terrorist camp sequence from *Patriot Games*.

Such images of pixelated military killing gain significance from their distanced appearance for two principal reasons. First, there is normally a need for the characters to view them from some location other than the battlefield, thus enhancing the importance of the violence depicted. We may assume, for instance, that the technological accoutrement for capturing, screening, and killing the pixelated enemy is necessary because of the value of the targets. Second, the characters we witness participating in the act of viewing tend to be concentrating hard on the screens, which cognitively cues the audience to also give strong attention to the image in an attempt to comprehend the details.

Returning to the *Collateral Murder* video, WikiLeaks decided to release it both in its original 39 minutes format and as an edited 17-minute version. The short version begins with a quote from Orwell's *Politics and*

the English Language, ‘Political language is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable, and to give the appearance of solidity to pure wind’ (Orwell 1946/2006). This text appears to be referring to what WikiLeaks claims is the US military’s attempt to downplay the killing of non-combatants captured in the video (WikiLeaks 2010). However, in terms of the visual power of the material, perhaps a useful counterpoint would be Winston Smith’s stream-of-consciousness journal entry describing his visit to the cinema in *Nineteen Eighty Four*:

April 4th, 1984. Last night to the flicks. All war films. One very good one of a ship full of refugees being bombed somewhere in the Mediterranean. Audience much amused by shots of a great huge fat man trying to swim away with a helicopter after him, first you saw him wallowing along in the water liker a porpoise, then you saw him through the helicopters gun-sights, then he was full of holes and the sea round him turned pink and he sank as suddenly as though the holes had let in the water, audience shouting with laughter when he sank, then you saw a lifeboat full of children with a helicopter hovering over it [...] then there was a wonderful shot of a child’s arm going up up up right up into the air a helicopter with a camera in its nose must have followed it up and there was a lot of applause from the party seats but a woman down in the prole part of the house suddenly started kicking up a fuss and shouting they didn’t oughter of showed it not in front of kids they didn’t it aint right not in front of kids. (Orwell 1949, 10–11)

Here, Winston Smith has experienced the full force of a hot medium—he is numbed and overwhelmed by the impact of the violent imagery. Yet, the cooler temperature McLuhan associates with small-screen imagery—television, cartoons—also has a complex relationship with the origin of *Collateral Murder* in terms of the ‘virtualization’ of war (Baudrillard 1995; Der Derian 1997, 2009; Virilio 1991/2005). If flight simulators, as Baudrillard (1995) suggests, were an early blurring of reality and simulation for military purposes, the electronic targeting used by the helicopter of *Collateral Murder* literally telescopes the distinction. Indeed, the quality and resolution of the footage is perhaps higher for the Internet critics of the video than it was for the operator aiming and firing the gun. As the military investigation report notes:

Details which are readily apparent when viewed on a large video monitor are not necessarily apparent to the Apache pilots during a live-fire

engagement. First of all, the pilots are viewing the scene on a much smaller screen than I had for my review. (United States Central Command 2007, 12)

Of course, any experience of the *Collateral Murder* footage is cold in the McLuhan sense, though it must be noted that the pilots' screens are even cooler than those of the military investigators or WikiLeaks viewers because their interaction involves an extreme level of participation in the activities occurring extradiegetically to the screen. That is, as Neitzel and Welzer (2012) point out in their historical-psychological assessment of the culture of killing associated with *Collateral Murder*, the pilots were highly active in the event as it took place, which is in stark contrast to Internet critics who merely observe the footage without becoming involved in the process. Heating up the Internet experience even further is the delivery and intensity of added information which branches away from the video clip, that is, the superimposed information by WikiLeaks, online discussion, Facebook comments, etc.

COLLATERAL MURDER, VIDEOGAMES, AND DEFAMILIARIZATION

Whilst for many, the 'down the gunsight' point of view of *Collateral Murder* is confronting, it is in fact quite a familiar image for some viewers, namely the FPS gaming community. This basic interactive component of videogames is often referred to in the discourse around digital means of warfare. For the present analysis, however, it will prove valuable to examine the ways in which videogames adopt the pixelated poor image to present a view of remote killing. The closest example of this occurs during the *Death From Above* episode of *Call of Duty 4: Modern Warfare* (Fig. 2.3). This episode involves the player taking control of a computer-guided weapon from a flying gunship and conducting support for a ground unit below attempting to move through enemy territory.

Whereas games are often criticized for both their unrealistic depictions of combat, and their increasing levels of graphic depictions of violence, the *Death From Above* episode attracted quite a different response. For instance, the scholarly account by Timothy Welsh comments on the kinds of character chatter that occur as the player fires off missiles and rounds at the pixelated targets:



Fig. 2.3 *Call of Duty 4* player's view in *Death From Above*

Hits are footnoted with comments such as 'Hot damn!' or 'Woah!'—suggesting awe at the explosive spectacle—or, more chillingly, understated confirmations such as 'Yup, that was right on target,' 'Roger, you got that guy. Might have been within two feet of him,' 'Yeah, good kill. I see lots of little pieces down there,' or just simply, 'Ka-boom'. (Welsh 2012, 399)

Clearly, these are similar words to those captured in the *Collateral Murder* cockpit chatter, although the excited tone of *Call of Duty*'s characters contrasts with the generally professional flat tone of the voices in the WikiLeaks video (Neitzel and Welzer 2012). Non-academic readings of *Death From Above* show similar responses of uneasiness to the episode, in fact sometimes pointing directly towards its pixelated aesthetic as a marker of realism and emotional impact. For example, upon its release, the game prompted the following review in *The New York Times*:

But there is one mission in the game that deserves to be in the pantheon of wartime storytelling, a level that chillingly, almost horrifically, reflects how modern technology has allowed both soldiers and civilians to detach from the reality of taking another human life. It is at once the most realistic scene and the mission that feels most like a videogame, but only because for some modern soldiers, war really has come to resemble a videogame. (Schiesel 2008)

Here, the reviewer reflects upon the significant affective friction between the pixelated killing episode and the standard FPS levels that typify the pure entertainment of the rest of *Call of Duty 4*. Yet, *Death From Above* appears to have continued this legacy even several years after its initial release. Consider the following retrospective review from Videogamer.com:

And it is chilling in its effectiveness at blurring not just the line between real and not, but also representing how a TV screen and reductive language change the horror of war into dispassionate busywork, in the game or otherwise [...]. Presented solely in grainy, low-fi, 'white' or 'black hot' night vision, its lack of visual polish has the seemingly counter-intuitive effect of bringing it utterly in line with the real-life footage we've all seen, of laser-guided bombs and rattling chainguns destroying targets. (Burns 2014)

The reviewer's response to the 'lack of visual polish' emphasizes how mainstream the concerns of Baudrillard and Der Derian have become since their initial criticisms of the First Gulf War. In addition, the assumption that 'we've all seen' similar real-life footage is interesting in its own right and calls to mind material from future chapters of this book. In this case, it is a clear example of the defamiliarizing effect created by the game's fictionalization of a type of combat image, an image that has become commonly accepted in stock footage of 'smart bombs' used to accompany brief television news segments on the First Gulf War.¹ As Harun Farocki (2004) argues in relation to these common views of 1990s broadcasts of targeted strikes, 'the pictures from these cameras—whether filming the missiles approaching their target or the detonation—made the war look like a computer game [as if] *war resembles child's play*' (15, my emphasis). In this instance, defamiliarization, a term derived from Russian Formalism, is used to describe the distancing effect of an artwork when it uses techniques to challenge commonly accepted representations (see Schklowski 1965; Thompson 1988; Bender 2014).

A similar response—to both the poor image aesthetic and its impact on the unsettling defamiliarization experienced when playing *Death From Above*—can be found at the Games Radar review site:

If the rest of Modern Warfare looks like a videogame, *Death From Above* looks queasily real. Or, inversely, it makes you realise that taking lives from the comfort of a cockpit and using a flickering monitor can look weirdly like playing a videogame. (Games Radar 2015)

Here again, the expected videogame representations of the remainder of the game contrast with the player's experience of the remote killing sequence, thus creating a distancing effect again. In so doing, *Death From Above* forces the player (or at least, these particular reviewers) to reconsider their expectations of digital killing. Therefore, it can be argued that the poor image aesthetic, embedded within the structure of play used in the mission, illustrates the potential for entertainment media to challenge the cultural expectations of violence in ways which stand in stark contrast to the significantly higher resolution of escapist entertaining game experiences.

A further controversial example of a combat videogame's use of the poor image aesthetic to defamiliarize the player's expectations of 'run-and-gun' gameplay is in the poorly received *Spec Ops: The Line* (2 k Games 2012). The game begins as a standard military-themed shooter with its fictional narrative set in a near future Middle Eastern combat zone. The player's character, Colonel Walker, quickly becomes a kind of Captain Willard character in his obsessive hunt for a rogue commander named Konrad—no doubt the name is meant to link the game's introspective journey to *Apocalypse Now/Heart of Darkness*. Yet, Walker's journey is more actively depraved than Willard's—the player ultimately kills civilians and friendly soldiers in the overall quest to find and stop Konrad's battalion of deserters.

For example, in its direct challenge to the conventions of military shooters, one of the central episodes of *Spec Ops* consists of the player's avatar operating a black-and-white targeting console to fire white phosphorous shells at Konrad's loyal troops blocking a security checkpoint. For Brendan Keogh (2013), the moral ambiguity and deferred enjoyment for the player here occur as a result of narrative as well as visual reasons. First, although Konrad's troops have deserted the US military to pursue their own agenda, they are still American, just like the player's Colonel Walker character, so the episode is not simply a matter of dispatching standard enemies as in other games. Second, the player is ultimately forced to walk through the carnage after destroying the targets, seeing the results of their actions in ways that *Death From Above* never does. Third, Keogh also makes explicit the broad visual similarities between the pixelated killing of Walker's console-operated mortar in *Spec Ops* and the display in *Death From Above* and *Collateral Murder*. *Spec Ops* differs in that this display is presented as a diegetic element—the player views the screen *on* their own screen, and, as the

smoke from the phosphorous shells clouds the display, the character's face becomes increasingly visible on the black-and-white screen. According to Keogh, this represents a significant challenge to a player's expectations of fun gameplay:

The slow emergence of Walker's reflection is exemplary of what the entire game attempts to do: it places the player in a situation not unlike those offered by other military shooters; it expects the player to uncritically engage in the situation as per genre conventions; then, while the player is still playing, it tears away the curtain of distance and desensitisation that virtualised war imbues to reveal the player's complicity. (Keogh 2013, 9)

In its revelation of the 'distance and desensitization' of 'virtualized war' then, *Spec Ops*' defamiliarizing effect deliberately challenges the player to reconsider that in real life, 'Deaths are reduced to stick figures on a screen [as in *Collateral Murder*], and real war becomes as inconsequential as videogame war' (7). Importantly, Keogh frames *Collateral Murder* in the following terms, 'the video shows a 2007 engagement in Iraq where US Apache helicopters gunned down civilians alongside two Reuters journalists' (7). The language here, ostensibly describing contextual reference for the material, actually betrays a politicized viewpoint by implying that the pilots *knew in advance* that they were shooting at civilians.

Regardless of the ethics of the military activities here, Keogh's account demonstrates the capacity for texts such as *Spec Ops* to elicit a self-governing response. Such capacities are built into the way audiences react to and discuss texts that deal with violence.² However, some texts may foreground this capacity to a greater degree. For film scholar Tanine Allison, the tendency in contemporary shooter games set in Iraq and Afghanistan presents 'a war of precision aiming and firing in which enemies are clearly located and there is no collateral damage—these games still reflect the fantasy of what modern war is: clean, precise, fast paced, and with quantifiable success' (Allison 2010, 192).

These two select examples from *Call of Duty 4* and *Spec Ops* indicate that it is possible for games to challenge precisely these critical assumptions, encouraging audiences to self-reflect on their own gameplay as well as on their larger attitudes towards real-world combat killing. It is significant that the primary means for doing so exists in their deployment of a degraded aesthetic.

CAPTURE AND KILL

These videogame examples point to an important aspect of the material discussed throughout this book and return the discussion to one of its central analytical themes—the pixelated images of violence. As the First Gulf War took place in the Middle East, Der Derian asked:

Should we be horrified by the thought [of military strategists being so far into the simulation that they cannot distinguish between real war and original war] Or just game on? (1990, 192)

In the two-and-half decades since these remarks, the military appears to be investing more and more heavily into remote warfare technologies. However, the everyday citizen does not necessarily simply ‘game on’. Rather, the public reactions to *Collateral Murder* and *Death From Above* illustrate that, if anything, the general familiarity with these types of images and military activities has created greater anxiety. Part of the unsettling impact of these images could be taken to be the audience’s implicit complicity in the overall apparatus behind the killing. From this view, rather than merely virtual-izing the killing capacity of a modern military, these technologies perhaps simultaneously also real-ize this capacity by *making real* the killing for audiences.

It is thus possible to read the poor image aesthetic in fictional representations of combat violence as significant for much more than merely its visually mimetic representation of the respective capture and kill media.³ Rather, the aesthetic itself is central to the affective impact of the violence. Nevertheless, the comparison between either *Collateral Murder* or *Call of Duty* is of course not one to one with *Patriot Games*. The real-world equivalent of the satellite feed viewed by Harrison Ford’s character would be regarded as a ‘phantom image’ because no human camera operator could occupy such a perspective (Farocki 2004). For Farocki, phantom images, such as the ones dealt with in this chapter, possess an unsettling style because they are ‘operative images [created as] part of an operation’ and are ‘made neither to entertain nor to inform’ (17). In *Collateral Murder*, not only is the gunner simply in an equivalent position as the camera, as the FPS, but also the camera *is* their perspective. By taking the perspective of stylistic analysis as outlined above, the deployment of pixelated killing in contemporary combat cinema can be read as an integral part of its iconography. Just as World War II combat

films are defined by the inclusion of particular uniforms, weapons, and settings (Basinger 2003), contemporary conflict cinema includes pixelated displays such as field monitors, gunsights, drones, and even night vision helmet cameras. However, these are not simply used for the sake of pure spectacle or to create a 'wow' effect, although this is arguably the case in some films. For example, Harrison Ford's troubled reactions to the satellite feed of *Patriot Games*, and as we will see in Chap. 5's discussion of drone killing in *Eye in the Sky*, demonstrate that Hollywood has seized the dramatic potential of these iconographic details by deploying the poor image aesthetic as a key poetic technique to create narrative meaning.

NOTES

1. Of course, the visual texture of early 1990s bomb cameras is quite different to *Call of Duty* (or *Collateral Murder*); however, it is likely that the general appearance of these kinds of images is associated in the public memory.
2. Keogh's account of the video is illustrative of the way critics use texts—in this case *Spec Ops*—to self-reflect on their own ethical attitudes towards issues and events; this also extends to *Collateral Murder*. For more on governmentality and war film reception, see *Film Style and the World War II Combat Genre* (Bender 2013).
3. This phrase adapts the so-called kill or capture terminology which describes the 2007 US strategy of eliminating Iranian operatives in Iraq (see Linzer 2007).

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