The Mark of Cain

Red Production Company / Film Four, 2007
Writer: Tony Marchant
Producer: Lynn Horsford
Director: Marc Munden

Television and cinematic documentaries and dramatizations have long been important resources through which the events and morality of war may be remembered, rethought and re-fought. Manchel (1995: p84), for example, contends, with some regret, that Schindler’s List is now “the most important source of historical information affecting popular perceptions of the Holocaust”. Reviewing ‘The War Tapes’, an actualité feature shot by 10 soldiers of the New Hampshire National Guard in Iraq on camcorders, Lewis (2006) asserts that, “if it feels at times like The Wild Bunch, Paths of Glory or Full Metal Jacket, then that’s no accident. The War Tapes is .. about people who watch war movies, made by people who watch war movies”.

Four years after an end to major combat operations was declared on May 1 2003, dramatized media representations of the Iraq War are beginning to develop. Tony Marchant’s The Mark of Cain is the first of a number of fictionalised accounts planned by British broadcasters to explore the dramatic potential in the Iraq War and its aftermath. After being pulled from its scheduled transmission slot during the crisis over Iran’s seizure of 15 British marines and soldiers, The Mark of Cain was eventually shown on Channel 4 in May 2007. Whatever the actual effects of dramatizing war and violence may be, and there are good reasons why we should be sceptical of claims of deterministic effects upon the opinions and actions of audiences (Young 2003), such rescheduling makes it nonetheless clear that there is a current sensitivity among certain constituencies towards the potential effects of such representations.

Certainly, the events that inspired Marchant’s script are highly controversial. They include the incidents at Camp Bread Basket in Basra in 2003 that originally came to light when a roll of film, showing pictures of an Iraqi detainee suspended from a forklift truck and further detainees simulating sex acts, was blithely taken by Fusilier Gary Bartlam into his local film developing shop. The subsequent court martial led to the imprisonment of three junior Non-Commissioned Officers. In addition, Marchant’s script has parallels with the beating of the hotel receptionist Baha Musa in the custody of the Queen’s Lancashire Regiment, during which Musa sustained 93 separate injuries that led to his death. Despite a £20 million investigation and court martial, nobody was found responsible for Musa’s death save Corporal Donald Payne who broke rank and pleaded guilty to the inhuman treatment of prisoners. According to Judge Advocate Mr. Justice MacKinnon, it was “a more or less obvious closing of ranks”, and led to the Attorney General expressing “concerns about the capability of the investigators and also the apparent lack
of clarity about what instructions are given to our troops about how to treat detainees” (both cited in Townsend, 2007).

*The Mark of Cain* draws on such incidents and focuses upon the dilemmas experienced by two raw and terrified 18-year-old recruits, Mark Tate (Gerard Kearns) and Shane Gulliver (Matthew McNulty). After a violent insurgent attack has killed members of their fictional Northdale Rifles Regiment, they find themselves caught between feeling the need to demonstrate regimental loyalty - by joining in the torture of two Iraqi detainees wrongly assumed to have been involved in the attack - and having the individual ‘moral courage’ to resist and report such practices. When ‘trophy’ photos of the torture identifying them come to light, they are again torn over whether to shoulder the blame on their own or whether to ‘grass’. The guilt induced by their various decisions ultimately leads to the destruction of both their lives, albeit in different ways.

Marchant’s drama then points to the necessity of regimental allegiance for effectiveness and survival, but it is ostensibly about the ways in which specific social and cultural mores and procedures may suppress individual moral acts, particularly in extreme circumstances. McIntosh (2006: p5) notes that “to.. tackle evil we must understand that it is not an absence of good, but a presence – a social presence or social manifestation – in itself and moreover is a chosen action within a social setting”. Marchant’s drama similarly highlights the social production of indifference, and how this facilitates brutality. Indifference is produced through incremental linguistic slippage down the chain of command (rigorous to vigorous, tough to rough), acknowledged but ambiguous links that can be easily cut on the way back up. It is produced through systematic oversights and institutional silences that extend even to the day in military court, and legitimated in ironic individualist apologies that deny any possibility that the barrel may make the apples rotten.

However, at the very heart of Marchant’s drama is the negation of the personal ethical relationship. For Levinas (1969: 21), “it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality”, by social mores. He argues that it is what he terms the *face* of the Other that instigates a pre-

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1 In June 2007, a ruling by the Law Lords on the Musa case stated that prisoners of British Forces abroad are entitled to the full protection of the UK Human Rights Act. The High Court will now be asked to decide whether the court martial in the Musa case was sufficient to satisfy the Government’s obligation under the Act, or whether there needs to be a full public inquiry (Rozenberg 2007).

2 The title of the drama is taken from the famous eve-of-battle speech given by Colonel Tim Collins to the Royal Irish Regiment in the Iraq War, a copy of which was reportedly hung on President Bush’s Oval Office Wall: ‘*I know of men who have taken life needlessly in other conflicts, I can assure you they live with the Mark of Cain upon them .. If you harm the regiment or its history by over-enthusiasm in killing or in cowardice, know it is your family who will suffer*’. Colonel Collins was himself later accused, and exonerated, of committing war crimes (Moss 2005).
social, and non-reciprocal, ethical responsibility. The face of the Other is understood as a demand, which affects before the self can consciously reflect upon it: “The face is fundamental .. it is a notion through which man comes to me via a human act different from knowing .. it is the frailty of one who needs you, who is counting on you” (1988: 171). For Levinas, the ethical relation, granted by the face of the Other, thus precedes the imposition of ontology.

The Mark of Cain opens with the image of two already dehumanized prisoners: unnamed, their bodies supplicant, their faces hooded. When their faces are finally revealed by Mark and Shane, they are immediately regarded as figures of fun – ‘Hey, it’s lookin’ Ant and Dec!’ – and their torture narrated in terms of this broader social proclivity to capture humiliation on camera – ‘You’ve Been Framed’. The stripping of human relationships of their ethical significance, leading to further actions being progressively viewed as morally irrelevant, is referred to by Bauman (1989) as a process of ‘adiaphorization .. [which] is set in motion whenever the relationship involves less than the total person’ (p134). In Marchant’s drama, it is not just that the prisoners are understood through the conventions of Orientalist fatalism, but also their reduction to objects of ridicule that constitutes this process.

Relatedly, Sontag (2004, III) asserts of the Abu Ghraib photographs that “what is illustrated.. is as much the culture of shamelessness as the reigning admiration for unapologetic brutality”. Tester (2005) argues that the reason that the photographs of torture in Abu Ghraib were so powerful and shocking was because they provided a communicable experience, that did not need to be explained to be understood, of a war that is otherwise incommunicable. He contends further that, through the direct looks and smiles of the soldiers to the cameras and by extension the viewers, “the pictures are shocking because they suggest a shared complicity that includes everyone who identifies with the we-group” (ibid: 140). In Marchant’s drama, once embedded back in his northern community, Shane exhibits his trophy photographs to his mixed-race girlfriend who does not share this complicity.

As events unfold, Mark - distraught by the increasing apprehension that there is no universal and absolute moral code, obsessively meditating on the Mark of Cain, and haunted by vivid flashbacks of the torture he was a part of -

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3 Levinas’ philosophical concept of the face does not directly correspond to physical countenance, but rather refers to how the presentation of the other is always irreducible to any idea or representation: “The way in which the Other presents himself, exceeding the idea of the other in me, we name here face .. The face of the Other at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me .. It expresses itself” (Levinas 1969: 50-51, italics in original). As Silverstone (2007: 133) notes then, the face is not reducible to a material object, but implies its presence

4 For Tester (2005), the ‘war on terror’ escapes communicable experience because it cannot be fought to a victory, because the technologies are beyond lay understanding, and because it is couched in a new jargon. As such, the pictures of torture ‘are shocking because they destroy any pretence at moral superiority; they show that the war on terror is merely a drama of force that demolishes the moral simplicities it purports to defend’ (2005: p142).
descends into a self-destructive spiral. In a harrowing scene, he commits anomic suicide by placing a clear plastic bag over his head in the bath. The intimations of earlier acts are palpable, but this time the viewer is invited to look death in the eye as the camera gazes directly on Mark’s traumatized face through the translucent plastic.

Despite arguments that the culture and conventions of spectatorship may reduce or neutralize the moral force of representations of atrocities and suffering (see e.g. Cohen 2001, Chouliaraki, 2006, Ignatieff 1998, Sontag 1997, 2003), as particularly evidenced in contemporary discussions of ‘compassion fatigue’ (e.g. Moeller 1999), Wilkinson (2005: p155-6) explores the alternative possibility that such debates can be taken “not so much as an indication of the failure of society to attend to the reality of ‘distant suffering’, but rather as a sign of the extent to which this might animate the terms of our moral imagination”. As Dant (2005: p11-12) further argues, “the ‘mass’ media such as television need to be taken seriously as providing a key source of moral information for many in our society, regardless of their aesthetic limitations”. Furthermore he notes that present-day television often consists of narrative forms that avoid simple moral outcomes. As such, the heterogeneous consumer of contemporary media is regularly confronted with ambivalent and unresolved moral dilemmas that require complex judgement on their behalf: “The stock in trade of television programmes is the moral dilemma that is presented in a way that cannot be dealt with by reading off from a modernist code of ethics” (ibid: p8). Marchant’s unfolding narrative certainly exemplifies Dant’s claim, being powerful and compelling but far from didactic.

Of his script, Marchant (2007) states that, “I am expecting criticisms from both sides. The Army will argue that it is a serious distortion of the truth. Critics of the Army will insist that I have sought to excuse their brutality”. The Mark of Cain deliberately does not occupy the moral ground of documentary and is certainly not testimony from the victims of torture, which as Tester (2005: 143) notes, “is the first draft of critique”. However, in dramatizing the atrophy of the ethical relationship and the ethical imagination in the conduct and aftermath of contemporary war, Marchant’s work attempts to embody the dramatist’s hope that bringing such an issue to attention and raising debate may cultivate the viewer’s own moral imagination.

5 Indeed, responses have been heterogeneous. While the bulletin boards of online communities of soldiers and ex-soldiers such as Rumration and the Army Rumours Service have largely criticized the drama for being an unrepresentative portrayal of military life, Des James, the father of one of the recruits who died at Deepcut, has commended the film for dramatically explaining how ‘the characteristic of brutality and the existence of bullying are inextricably linked’ (comment posted on http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/tv_and_radio/article1645941.ece).

6 Although Marchant and co-producer Katie Jones conducted around 100 interviews with soldiers and their families in preparation for filming, the opening caption states that, ‘This film is based on extensive research but is a dramatic work of fiction’.
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References

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