THE LANGUAGE OF WAR

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To my amazing wife Stephanie who always believes there is a story to tell.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Language of War

by

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Master of Arts in Television, Film, and New Media Production
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As the military operations in Iraq became increasingly more complex, native Arabic speakers were recruited to translate for U.S and coalition forces. For their assistance these translators were often promised U.S. citizenship and protection from retaliation from within their communities. The Language of War centers on a small number of Iraqi translators and their experiences working directly with the military. This film documents the successes and disappointments experienced on a daily basis as these individuals struggle to fulfill their commitments. The presentation is organized in such a way to allow the audience to experience the courage of these individuals, both on and off the battlefield. As of this writing, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan continue half a world away, and, as this film demonstrates, the casualties of war are not always what they seem.

At its core, the documentary deals with issues of sacrifice, commitment and loyalty that reach across borders and beyond battlefields. It gives voice to its subjects by allowing them to convey their personal memories in their own words. These testimonials enhance the story by lending it authenticity while the filmmaker strove to maintain a distinctive manner of narrative presentation. The documentary is designed so that as the audience listens to these firsthand accounts, they will become further invested in the story, expanding their attention and concern for the subjects of the film.

The formal construction of this documentary can be described in its most basic terms as traditional interview material buttressed by photographs and videos supplied by the subjects of the film. These elements, however, are organized to reinforce an intimacy shared by the storyteller and the viewer. With visual reinforcements placing the subjects in a hostile war zone, the audience is afforded a deeper understanding of the extreme pressures under which these individuals were forced to operate. Each interview segment is lit, framed, and staged in a manner designed to augment the inherent drama of these subjects and their plights.

A final element employed in this film is combat footage acquired directly from the military. The aggregate of these materials and strategies aims to convey a chaotic dimension while simultaneously bolstering the film’s authenticity. Ultimately, the goal is to offer a glimpse into the essence of the human spirit, the terrors of war, and the amazing individuals who can be found within its startling confines.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

As the conflict in Iraq became increasingly complicated, native Arabic speakers were recruited to translate for U.S and coalition forces. For their assistance, these translators were often promised U.S. citizenship and protection from retaliation from within their communities. The Language of War centers on a group of Iraqi combat translators and the costs associated with their involvement with foreign military forces. This film documents the successes and disappointments experienced on a daily basis as these individuals struggled to survive. This film allows the audience to experience the courage of these individuals both on and off the battlefield. While the war in Iraq continues half a world away, this film will demonstrate that the casualties of war are not always what they seem. At its core, it aims to address issues of sacrifice, commitment, and loyalty that reach across borders and beyond battlefields. It attempts to give a voice to its subjects by allowing them to convey their personal memories in their own words. These testimonials enrich the story by lending it authenticity while the filmmaker strives to maintain a distinctive manner of narrative presentation. The documentary is designed to focus the audience on these firsthand accounts, which will enable them to become further invested in the story, expanding their attention and concern for the subjects of the film.

The formal construction of this documentary can be described in its most basic terms as traditional interview material enhanced by photographs and videos supplied by the subjects of the film. These elements, however, are organized to reinforce a critical intimacy shared by the storyteller and the viewer. With visual reinforcements placing the subjects in a hostile war zone, the audience is afforded a deeper understanding of the extreme pressures under which these individuals had to operate. Each interview segment is presented in a manner designed to augment the inherent drama of these subjects and their plights.

A final element employed in this film is combat footage provided by the military. The aggregate of these materials and strategies aims to convey a chaotic dimension while
simultaneously bolstering its authenticity. Ultimately, the goal is to offer a glimpse into the essence of the human spirit, the terrors of war, and the amazing individuals who can be found within its startling confines.

**STATEMENT OF THE SUB PROBLEMS**

This project posed a variety of potential problems, beginning with the preproduction process. Of paramount importance was to secure the cooperation of the central subjects of the film. Beyond that, these individuals had to be comfortable sharing their stories on camera. This implied potential problems relating to the safety and security of these translators and their families abroad. As translators are often persecuted in their homeland for aiding the U.S., it is not uncommon for them, along with their families, to be threatened or even killed if their identity is revealed. With this in mind, honoring any requests to conceal identity was given the utmost respect.

Locating and acquiring adequate supporting video material also become problematic as production began. Accessing this material and securing the necessary permissions for its use presented significant time and monetary commitments. As this project ties in heavily with the U.S. military, their cooperation in some capacity was crucial. Without the support of the military to some degree, this project would have been far more difficult to complete.

As with any film project, production costs exhausted much of the budget and because a significant amount of travel was involved those costs seemed to climb quickly. An emphasis on capturing all the necessary material during the initial interviews was crucial as reshooting any portion would have been extremely expensive. If the necessary material was not captured and required stock footage to be used in its place, this too would have become a significant issue.

**GOALS AND OBJECTIVES**

The primary goal of this film is to highlight the crucial role translators play in a combat zone and highlight examples of how their skills helped save countless military and civilian lives. Without some type of awareness, the public will never fully realize the importance of language and cultural understanding as it relates to military operations.
Additionally, this film aspired to share the story of one translator struggling to obtain citizenship, in an attempt to highlight the examples of individuals overcoming insurmountable odds while risking everything. Finally, I believed I owed it to myself as well as the translators I interviewed to complete this project in the most professional and comprehensive manner possible. Creating a film that exceeded their expectations was of paramount importance.

Conversations about war often lack elements of humanity and thus lead to further misunderstanding and confusion, and ultimately, more conflict. This film seeks to draw attention to instances of love, commitment, and friendship during times of war. Too often these stories are overlooked by the media when in fact they should be highlighted rather than hidden.

**DEFINITION OF TERMS**

**Expository Mode:** Considered by many to be the classic form of documentary, films in this mode resemble news reporting. These films speak directly to the viewer, often employing the use of voiceover narration.

**Ethnographic Filmmaking:** A style of filmmaking that illuminates the intercultural dynamics between two differing societies.

**Image Animation:** A digital effect utilized in post-production which adds motion and scale modifications to a still image. This technique is used in an attempt to highlight a specific element within the image.

**Multi National Force:** A military command, led by the United States, which was responsible for Operation Iraqi Freedom.

**Mise en scene:** The arrangement of actors, lighting and scenery in a film or play. This specific arrangement is used to elicit an emotional response from the audience.

**Mood Lighting:** Specific lighting technique used to illuminate space to achieve a particular look and feel. Light is intentionally utilized to highlight or conceal specific elements within the frame.

**Stock/News Reel Footage:** Footage captured by new organizations or independent journalists which can be used to visually establish a location without having to send a crew to that location.

**Talking Head:** A subject who speaks directly to the camera and usually appears on the screen with only the head and upper part of the body visible.

**The Checkpoint One Foundation:** The Checkpoint One Foundation is a not-for-profit organization which helps Iraqi and Afghan translators establish citizenship in the United States.
**Translator:** An individual who has been contracted or recruited to work for the United States in exchange for monetary compensation and protection from outside threats.

**VISA:** An official authorization appended to a passport, permitting entry into and travel within a particular country or region.

**DELIMITATIONS**

While the majority of this film centers on individuals who were in some way involved with the conflict in Iraq, its primary goal is neither to justify nor condemn the war. However, as the narrative of this story takes place during the war in Iraq, the war cannot be totally void from the film. Additionally, failing to provide context or sufficient back story would prove detrimental to the storyline of the film. Basic information regarding the conflict in Iraq is essential to establish the story, but this film is not intended to be an editorial piece on why the United States should or should not be involved. While this film includes multiple perspectives, it does not attempt to resolve any conflicts or discrepancies regarding opinions or viewpoints surrounding this subject.

The goal of the film is to highlight the struggles of a translator who has risked everything and is now living with the results of their decision. Therefore, the film offers testimony regarding the programs put in place by the United States, programs that have placed the subjects of the film in the discouraging situation in which they find themselves.

This film will not simply serve as an informative commentary on the Iraqi translator program nor will it act strictly as a factual piece. Rather the “real-life” testimonials cast an in-depth look at specific individuals rather than examine the translator program in its entirety. In an effort to provide supplemental information on the translator program, this film offers a brief explanation using voiceover, graphics or a combination of traditional cinematic elements.

As the topic and subjects of this film have not directly affected my life, I do not want this film to appear as if these situations have impacted me directly. While as director/producer I aspire to be as objective as possible, I recognize that pure objectivity in documentary is illusory. By providing solely factual information and allowing individuals to speak freely regarding their experiences and feelings, I indicate my desire for objectivity. As I realize the editing choices I have made create both deliberate and, at times, inadvertent
meaning beyond what is specifically detailed by the subjects, I fully acknowledge that there will be some degree of subjectivity within the film.

As this film is an expositional documentary highlighting a very specific topic, it was important for the subjects to answer detailed questions regarding their experiences. The execution of this film involved interviews and personal testimony from these individuals and this interaction distinguishes the film from a strictly observational documentary.

Additionally, I made a conscious effort to ensure my approach would not be viewed as political in nature. Rather, the focus of this film remains centered upon the human spirit and the relationships established between the individuals who participated in the filmmaking process. Over politicizing this film essentially conflicts with my main intention, which is to create a film that centers on the human drive to overcome nearly impossible odds.

The war in Iraq is certainly an event that has directly affected the subjects of the film and therefore the conflict as a whole cannot be entirely ignored. In addition, these events have also shaped the way many viewers perceive stories involving the military. In an attempt to address these issues, messages involving the current military involvement in Iraq are communicated in a factual and focused manner. This approach allows the viewer to obtain background information as it relates to the subject matter while establishing relationships with the subjects of this film.

**Significance of Project**

My choice to approach this topic grew partly out of my previous documentary film, which focuses upon the fall of Saigon in 1975 and the end of American involvement in Vietnam. That film included detailed testimonies from the people who lived through the event, and producing the film proved to be very rewarding on a number of levels.

Highlighting very specific stories from the vast subject of the Vietnam War has driven my desire to document similar instances within the current conflict in Iraq. *The Language of War* does not involve me personally nor has the film’s topic directly affected any member of my family or any of my friends. The personal significance of this film stems from my desire to reveal stories that expose the strength of the human spirit and our inherent nature to serve a greater good. I believe there is an innate social and educational value in recounting these stories.
Upon seeing this film, I anticipate the audience will be thinking two things. The first: “Why were the subjects of the film placed in this situation?” The second: “What would I do if I were in the same position?” I believe these two questions will offer viewers the opportunity to consider their relationships with those they care about as well as raise awareness in regards to human interactions during times of war. This film will thus contribute to the cultural conversation as it deals with a variety of cultural elements, mainly the issue of language and the fundamental need for effective communication. As translators are assigned to a variety of combat units, the level of cultural significance is heightened due to the military operations currently taking place.

The film also deals with issues regarding U.S. soldiers and their personal relationships with the Iraqi translators they worked with on a daily basis. The conflicts in both Iraq and Afghanistan have a significant place in this film as these conflicts have led to language barriers between natives and the Multi National Force currently operating in these regions.

Finally, I believe that by foregrounding the strength of the human spirit, this film affirms that not every incident on the battlefield has to be filled with hatred and distain. Cultural understanding and sufficient language tools must be utilized during any military operation and *The Language of War* highlights this need by providing compelling first hand testimony.
CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF LITERATURE AND FILMS

LITERATURE ON PROJECT TOPIC

This film presents a unique story of survival under some of the most unimaginable circumstances. Centering on themes of cultural understanding, communication, and human relationships, this documentary hopes to provide the audience an unusually wide range of human emotion. It raises questions surrounding policies put into place during times of war that have not yet been fully implemented, and as a result thousands of brave individuals have been adversely affected. The documentary imparts its message by means of placing the viewer in the position of the film’s main characters.

While America’s involvement in Iraq seems to continue with no clear end in sight, the level of soldier/civilian interaction between our nations continues to intensify. These engagements have created an obligatory relationship between the troops on the ground and the civilians living in the combat zones. Without the integration of native Arabic speaking translators, the combat forces on the ground in Iraq would have no effective means of communicating with civilians, political leaders, and suspected insurgents.

It might be argued that our media, and perhaps our complacency as a society, encourage a simplistic, black and white assessment of the complex conflicts abroad. If this is the case, it is easy to imagine how stories such as the ones presented in *The Language of War* are so often overlooked. It is my belief, however, that these stories offer a sobering barometer by which we can, and should, judge our collective actions.

Social Justice

As a society we hold ourselves to certain standards when it comes to fulfilling promises and ultimately doing what is right. *The Language of War* depicts the inherent dangers associated with working as a combat translator while highlighting the contributions of those brave enough to work in a war zone. In a world where death and destruction often make the headlines, Sharon Cohen of the Associated Press wrote a moving article in *USA*
Today which explored the friendship between an Iraqi translator and an American soldier who worked together while conducting combat missions in Iraq. This article foregrounds the magnanimity of the human spirit and our willingness to take great risks for those we care about. The article also details the struggles translators face to obtain US citizenship, which was often promised to them by the US government, and the battle one soldier fought to help bring his translator to the United States.

**Communication**

While any wartime environment creates chaos and confusion on numerous levels, military conflicts that involve the occupation of a foreign country and the challenge of language barriers prove to be especially complicated. In an attempt to grasp the important role combat translators occupy, it is imperative to understand their contributions throughout history and across cultural boundaries. Richard Kearney, in the introduction to Paul Ricoeur’s book, *Thinking in Action on Translation*, highlights the role of translation through history, stating “There is no doubt that some of the great translations of biblical and classical texts played formative roles in the development of both national and cultural identities” (Kearney xiv). This statement reminds us that the Bible, the Torah, the Koran, and the works of the greatest philosophers are often only read in translation. This reading also highlights significant differences between native speakers and those individuals who have learned languages through formal training. The nuances and subtleties hidden in every language are virtually impossible to study without significant cultural immersion. Ricoeur states,

Thus we rediscover, within our own linguistic community, the same enigma of the same, of meaning itself, the identical meaning which cannot be found, and which is supposed to make the two versions of the same intention equivalent; this is why, as we say, we do not get out of it; and very often we make the misunderstanding worse with our explanations (Ricoeur 25).

Ricoeur’s theory can be useful in understanding the necessity for a native speaker when working in exceedingly dangerous combat situations. These interactions require an effective means of communication be established while concurrently the intentions of both parties must be clearly presented.

As many of the native Arabic speakers recruited by the military in Iraq received little formal training using conventional texts on translation, it becomes important to identify the
role of the native translator as an integral part of the exposition of intercultural relations and the transmission of knowledge. As Douglas Robinson details in *Becoming a Translator*, “The demands placed on the translator by the attempt to be reliable from the user’s point of view are sometimes impossible; sometimes disruptive to the translator’s private life; sometimes morally repugnant; often physically and mentally exhausting” (Robinson 24). While this statement is undoubtedly relevant to translators across the board, these emotions and pressures are magnified as the working conditions faced by combat translators are often high pressure situations where lives often hang in the balance.

Larry Siems, in his article “Friends in Need in Iraq,” focuses on how the citizens of Iraq viewed the United States as the war began. The article goes on to detail how their faith in the United States has deteriorated and highlights that their willingness to work as translators has cost them dearly. Themes of abandonment and betrayal are found in this reading with the core argument being that choosing to work as a combat translator often has the same impact as a traditional casualty of war.

In the March 2010 issue of *USA Today*, an article, “Is Iraq Ready to be Left Behind?” by Don Teague, focuses on the relationship between the author, a reporter for NBC, and Rafraf Barrak, and Iraqi translator. It details their working relationship in Iraq and how Rafaf’s companions from NBC worked to bring her to the United States when she was forced to flee after being threatened by insurgents for working with the United States. This article highlights deeper themes of communication as it details the intimate relationships established between translators and the groups with whom they work closely.

These specific instances allow the establishment of a broad view of the roles translators play in combat environments. These writings also detail their treatment in a variety of situations while working with American organizations. Each provides a much greater understanding as to the important role translators serve in foreign environments. Many of these translators operate in a wide variety of roles, serving both military and news outlets. These accounts also depict a group of Iraqi translators who truly believe they are helping their country by aiding the U.S. military operation. These documented occurrences contain all of the narrative elements necessary to tell a compelling story and justifies the necessity for clear lines of communication.
Human Relationships

As human beings our ability to overcome unimaginable circumstances are often associated with incredible stories of survival. While this story contains elements of abandonment, desperation, and betrayal, it also contains stories of hope, love, and freedom. In the book, *An Uncommon Friendship: From Opposite Sides of the Holocaust*, authors Bernat Rosner and Frederic C. Tubach detail their personal accounts while growing up in Nazi Germany. As one boy survived several concentration camps, the other attended pre-Hitler youth meetings. In the end it was the Allies who liberated each of them from their fates in Europe. The two would eventually move to the United States and become friends only to find out a decade later that they grew up on opposite sides of Nazi Germany. The book establishes a deeper connection with its characters by providing photos and personal documents that not only depict their journey through life but also establish a foundation of ocular authenticity. Themes of survival, forgiveness and reflection echo through this book while proving intimate testimonials. Now in Iraq, translators who aide the United States are frequently harassed, threatened, or killed for their “betrayal.” The issues of insecurity within one’s home country falls in line with themes from An Uncommon Friendship as the Jewish citizens were forced from their homes, businesses, and eventually their native cities. While this thesis project centers on individuals who for one reason or another placed themselves in harm’s way, the themes from *An Uncommon Friendship* still resonate through the narrative of *The Language of War*. Understanding these specific areas of study focuses my production on comparable topics that encompass the overall thematic direction of my film.

**LITERATURE ON PROJECT STYLE**

This film incorporates areas of study and critical analysis which have informed my production topic. An understanding of these specific areas allows my film to focus upon subjects which encompass the overarching theme of the film. Each of these areas of critical analysis encompasses a variety of issues from which this film draws information and creative direction.
THE EXPOSITORY DOCUMENTARY

The stylistic approach to my film incorporates elements of the expository mode of documentary filmmaking. The use of an omniscient voiceover, for example, throughout the film, as well as conventional interviews, acknowledge the presence of the filmmaker, situating this film both in the expository and the reflexive mode. As it is the purpose of this film is to serve as an accurate account of actual events, the expository mode of documentary will allow the utilization of voiceover and traditional interview techniques in an attempt to present these events in the most authentic way possible.

Expository documentaries are often associated with presenting an evolution away from the poetic mode of documentary filmmaking. Historical documentaries in this mode deliver an unproblematic and objective account as they offer an interpretation of past events. Where documentaries in the poetic mode thrive on a filmmaker’s aesthetic and subjective visual interpretation of a subject, the expositional mode collects footage that functions to strengthen the spoken narrative. This shift in visual strategy gives rise to what Bill Nichols refers to as “evidentiary editing,” a practice in which expositional images “…illustrate, illuminate, evoke, or act in counterpoint to what is said…[we] take our cue from the commentary and understand the images as evidence or demonstration…” (Nichols, Introduction to Documentary 201).

While the expository documentary often provides information in the most authentic manner, the qualified viewer knows that filmmakers can utilize this method of filmmaking and exploit its characteristics to intentionally mislead or deceive its audience. While the expository mode carries the risk of allowing the filmmaker to traffic in these deceptive practices, The Language of War focuses upon the traditional objective presentation of events with the aim of preserving maximum objectivity and honesty. Nichols’ book not only outlines the expository mode of documentary filmmaking but it also lists examples that can be compared and contrasted to The Language of War. The examples presented by Nichols afford a rich archive of related thematic elements, editing techniques, and narrative construction.
FILMS AND GENRES THAT RELATE THEMATICALLY AND STYLISTICALLY

These films share my aesthetic vision and they serve as examples that inform the viewer visually. They represent the manner in which I define my film’s stylistic/design approach.

Fog of War

The unique visuals used in Fog of War, 2003, directed by Errol Morris often serve as a representation of visuals specifically relating to what the subject is speaking about. This style not only allows the filmmaker to directly affect what the audience sees, but the demonstrative use of visuals also allows the opportunity to influence how the viewer reacts to what is being said. Often these symbolic representations or images are manipulated to evoke a particular emotion. The expository mode of documentary filmmaking represents perhaps the most conventional approach to the historical documentary. “The expository mode addresses the viewer directly with titles or voices that propose a perspective, advance and argument or recount history” (Nichols, Representing Reality 105). However, this film also relies on the participatory mode of documentary filmmaking as the subject of the film as well as the archival footage provides the narration and drives the story. In a similar fashion, my film draws inspiration from these techniques and incorporates similar representative imagery when traditional supplemental material (“B-roll”) is unavailable.

Jarhead

Jarhead, 2005, directed by Sam Mendes depicts the deployment of a group of Marines during Operation Desert Shield. The images in this film create a stark contrast between the footage on the ground in Iraq and the images from the United States. While Iraq is depicted using washed out colors, scenes from the United States present a colorful, saturated environment. As with Jarhead, my film creates a contrasting feel between two different worlds. It is important to establish a stark contrast between the chaos experienced in Iraq and the calm environments detailed by translators and their American counterparts after returning to the United States.

This film also explores the expectations of war by those who occupied the front lines. The Marines on the ground do not find the glamour and glory of war they were expecting.
Rather the leisurely pace and monotonous activities they experienced altered their view on what war has to offer. It is my intention to highlight the expectations placed upon combat translators as well as roles they eventually found themselves serving during combat operations.

**The Boy in the Striped Pyjamas**

This film from director Mark Herman, 2008, centers on the relationship between a young Jewish boy and a young German boy who develop a strong friendship despite the fact that the young Jewish boy is being held in a concentration camp. The intent of this film is to demonstrate that at the core of the human spirit we are capable of overlooking any cultural differences. My film also highlights this type of relationship as two opposing groups of people are placed in a position beyond their control and they form meaningful relationships as a result. It also demonstrates that cultural communication and understanding is a pivotal tool often accentuated by situations that demand cooperation and empathy.

**The Thin Blue Line**

This 1988 Errol Morris film tells the story of a Texas Sheriff who is murdered while conducting a routine traffic stop and the story is told from multiple points of view by the individuals involved with the case. Morris interviews everyone, from those accused of the crime to members of the legal teams defending them. The filmmaker effectively weaves these stories together to paint a picture which ultimately frees an innocent man from prison as a result. *The Language of War* also seeks to tell a story by combining multiple points of view in an effort to shed light on events that may have gone unnoticed otherwise. The film tells its story from multiple points of view while using representative recreations to depict events. As is the case with *The Thin Blue Line, The Language of War* is constructed not only from multiple perspectives, but also through memory. During the production process I strongly encouraged each of the individuals to tell their stories exactly the way they remembered them. While at times this proved to be difficult due to the subject matter being shared, the most gripping testimony shared in this manner.
**Babel**

While this 2006 Alejandro González Iñárritu film deals with language barriers on many levels throughout, the primary example I drew upon was the couple visiting Morocco. After Susan Jones, played by Cate Blanchett, is accidentally struck in the neck by a haphazard bullet, her battle to survive in a foreign land begins. While she fights for her life her husband is forced to communicate with the local population without having a grasp on their language. This life or death situation is similar to the stakes faced by the combat translators featured in *The Language of War*. While Iraqi translators spoke English, they were repeatedly placed in situations that made communication with both sides extremely complicated. As lives hung in the balance these individuals were tasked with providing communication to both sides of every situation.
CHAPTER 3

GENERAL PRAGMATIC AND CREATIVE APPROACH

LIGHTING AND MOOD

With the subject and themes found within this documentary at the forefront of each creative decision, it was of the utmost importance that the style, colors, and composition of each interview contain elements expressive of each individual. This dynamic feel is accentuated by the incorporation of newsreel footage, the quality of which varies from source to source. Providing as many unique locations, setups, and visual changes as possible becomes extremely important when attempting to capture a story with so many dramatic elements imbedded within the narrative.

As the film details events from locales both familiar and foreign to most viewers, it is imperative that the images used to support these stories do not distract the viewer. The dramatic testimony must be effectively supported by material that has commensurate on-screen impact. These images establish the mood as the narrative progresses and the journey reaches its conclusion. In conjunction with dramatic visuals, mainly newsreel footage, close up framing during dramatic interview testimony underscores themes of loss, courage and triumph.

While the lighting and shot composition found in the footage acquired from outside sources were beyond my control, every attempt was made to give the interviews a distinct style. For example, each was conducted in a location that is unique to the individual, and subjects were evenly lit, with the background falling off to draw the viewer’s eye to the subject. This thematic composition can be seen in each interview.

During each interview session, the frame was constantly adjusted to provide the maximum variety possible in each setup. This allowed me to use close-ups during moments of increased tension or when highly emotional memories were being shared with the audience. Lens selection also played an important role in the interviews. Long lenses forced
the focus of attention the subject while separating him form the background. Long lenses also focused the viewer on the subject, establishing a more intimate subject-viewer connection.

**SHOT SELECTION AND EDITING STRATEGY**

While the substance of each interview is vitally important to the narrative thread of this film, the style in which it is presented makes the editing process paramount. A proper balance between “talking head” footage, news reels, and personal material supplied by the subjects had to be established in order to present the story effectively. As a wide variety of interview footage and b-roll material was accumulated, it became extremely important to select moments within each interview that not only drove the story but also included dramatic pauses and passionate delivery.

While these visual elements served as the main focus from an audience perspective, the music track was also designed to further engage the audience. In addition, the tempo of the music also serves as motivation for visual changes. During chaotic newsreel footage, for example, a quick-tempo music bed complements the images on screen; and as somber memories are recounted, a slower tempo music bed accentuates slow fades to black and highlights emotional changes. Music also augments the title sequence and other additional graphic elements used within the film such including statistics and geographical information crucial to the story.

**CASTING AND PERFORMANCE**

Selecting the main subjects for this film proved to be the most important decision made during the production of this project. The ideal candidate had to be an individual who was at one time enlisted as a translator with a branch of the United States military. This individual had to be in the living in the United States and have a willingness to be interviewed. Personal material from Iraq would also have to be used to show this individual in a foreign setting, visually establishing the danger faced each day. This individual had to be articulate and capable of recounting details most people would rather forget.

Ideally, any U.S. service member interviewed for this film would be someone who worked directly with one of our subject-translators during a deployment in Iraq. We were, in
fact, fortunate enough to find such a person in Marine Captain John Jacobs. It was essential that his interview establish the bravery and sacrifice displayed by translators operating in extremely dangerous conditions. It was also essential that this individual had the capacity to convey dramatic stories clearly while providing as much detail as possible. From the outset, I considered it my duty as a director to elicit as much emotion and detail as possible from the interview sessions. The most fundamental requirement for this interviewee, therefore, was simply that he be passionate about sharing his story. Allowing myself time to interact with these individuals before conducting the interview significantly bolstered our comfort level with one another, allowing our interactions to become more intimate and genuine. On more than one occasion the subject material covered in each interview became difficult to talk about, requiring a variety of interview techniques.
CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

From the preliminary stages of this project I knew that the relationships formed between myself and the subjects of this film would be paramount to its success. The quality of the content of each interview would be contingent upon my ability to create a comfortable environment for the individuals participating in the film. It was only during and after the interview process that I was able to truly appreciate how pivotal these interactions would be in lending weight and credibility to *The Language of War*. This film highlights a unique group of individuals who have experienced war from both sides. Regardless of their reasons, they have risked their lives and in doing so they have saved the lives of countless others. Knowing this, I felt a tremendous obligation to those who agreed to participate.

The fact that many of the individuals interviewed for this film wished to protect their identities presented a concern on a variety of levels. Honoring this request offered a unique set of challenges that I was able to meet by employing pseudonyms and standard video techniques to conceal ocular identity. Moreover, I regarded it as a moral and ethical imperative not to reveal any specific aspects of their lives or their involvement in Iraq. I assiduously avoided pressing anyone to recount anything that might have made them uncomfortable or put them or their families in subsequent danger. Some individuals were more hesitant to answer specific questions regarding their involvement, while others simply avoided any specifics about their lives outside of working as a translator. While at times this restriction proved to be an obstacle, the supplemental questions I had prepared for them ahead of time allowed me to assess their comfort levels before actually conducting the interview. I believe had I not established this line of communication in advance or had I provided a less specific description of the project, these individuals would have been significantly more anxious, which most certainly would have negatively influenced their contributions to the project.

Choosing to shoot with a small HD digital video camera was certainly one of the best decisions made during the production process. Given the amount of travel associated with
this film, it would have been cost prohibitive to fly with a large camera package, lights, and grip gear. With a smaller set up, I was able to fit the camera, audio gear, and tripod into my carry-on luggage. The small camera arrangement also provided a less intimidating interview environment. As I was meeting these individuals for the first time, I did not want to intimidate or overwhelm them with imposing “professional” gear. I am convinced that my use of small but high quality digital camera equipment put the individuals in the film at ease without significantly compromising image quality or production value. While the camera certainly had its limitations, I did not feel as if a larger camera or even a multi camera set up would have produced dramatically better results; on the contrary, this may have produced inferior results in terms of intimacy, verisimilitude and honesty.

While my intention was to travel with as little gear as possible in an effort to curb costs and elicit the best interview material possible, I believe my biggest mistake stems from my desire to shoot all of the interviews myself. As production began, I knew it would be impossible to pay a qualified director of photography to travel with me and operate the camera. This issue was compounded once I learned that the majority of interviews would be conducted out of state. Without a doubt, the overall look of the interviews suffered as a result of this decision. As I was both operating the camera and conducting the interviews, I must also assume that the quality of the interviews suffered as a direct result. Focus issues and poor framing were problems that occurred as my attention was never one hundred percent focused on one task or the other. While I made it a point to explain to the individuals I interviewed that I would be asking the questions as well as operating the camera, but each time I would reframe the shot it still proved to be a distraction. As I conducted each interview, I was also adjusting focus, exposure, and framing; and while this provided greater shot variety during the editing process, at times, it also distracted the individual being interviewed.

Traveling to meet with the subjects of this film also proved to be exceedingly costly and time consuming. Producing a project in which the subjects all reside in a specific area of the country or agree to travel to a central location would have saved a great deal of time, money, and effort. However, with each interview I felt it was of the utmost importance to conduct it in a manner and in a location that would provide the greatest level of comfort to the interviewee. In many cases I was contacting them without having any previous
relationship or even mutual acquaintances, and because I was asking questions about their involvement with the U.S. military operation in Iraq, they were justifiably suspicious. Therefore, asking them to travel seemed out of the question, and I worked diligently to ensure they understood my intentions from our initial conversations.

Having completed what I believe is a film that distinguishes itself from my previous work, I can clearly identify techniques, strategies, and practices that not only helped me finish the film, but prepared me for future documentary work. While the final cut of this film does vary in some ways from my original film treatment, as detailed in the Appendix, I can directly associate these alterations with elements that surpassed initial expectations. This film is a watershed for any subsequent projects, and I look forward to applying the lessons I learned while producing *The Language of War* to elevate the caliber of my future work. It is my hope that this film will be sought out and viewed in the future as a representation and exploration of this very specific topic. Ultimately, I feel this film successfully explores an important part of world history while providing a glimpse into a world known and experienced by only a few.
REFERENCES


Jarhead. Dir. Sam Mendes. MCA Home Video, 2006. DVD.


APPENDIX

ORIGINAL FILM TREATMENT FOR

THE LANGUAGE OF WAR
SETUP

1. Dramatic news footage of a Marine platoon accompanied by their translator raiding a suspected insurgent hideout. While they conduct interviews and collect weapons the audience observes the translator in action.
2. Introduction of translator
   a. Brief introduction – Name, age and short personal history
3. Briefly establish the number of translators who have volunteered in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan

INTERVIEWS

1. Translators currently living in the United States
   a. Reasons for volunteering
   b. Specific memories while on patrol
   c. Current immigration status as well as the status of loved ones still in Iraq
   d. Steps being taken to gain citizenship
   e. Plans if citizenship is not granted

2. United States soldiers who worked with translators in combat situations
   a. Reasons for enlisting
   b. Specific memories while on patrol where a translator played a key role
   c. Feeling regarding the role of the translator in combat
   d. Thoughts on the difficult process of securing citizenship for the translators

3. Checkpoint One Foundation Executive Director and Founder Jason Faler
   a. Personal history as a soldier during Operation Iraqi Freedom
   b. His motivation for creating the foundation
   c. Information regarding the number of translators currently living in the United States
   d. Information on the services the foundation offers translators
   e. Successful stories as well unsuccessful accounts

IMMIGRATION PROCESS INFORMATION

1. What was promised to then by the U.S. government when the translators signed up?
2. Have those promises been delivered?
3. Present immigration status

CONCLUSION
I. Final interview with translator after crowing moment
   a. Discuss their future plans
   b. Document the end of their journey

PREMISE

In 2006 the United States established a program allowing translators who worked for American forces in Iraq and Afghanistan for at least 12 months to relocate to the United States along with their families after their completion of service. However, only a fraction of those who applied have actually received what they were promised. While working as a translator offered an opportunity to make an excellent living, at least 200 individuals translating for U.S. troops have been killed in Iraq alone. Many of these translators lead dual lives, concealing their identities and addresses while working for the “enemy”. During this time they also developed close relationships with the men and women of the U.S. military with whom they were assigned to work alongside.

This documentary centers around a translator assigned to work with the United States military during tours of duty in Iraq. In this film the viewer will hear from a translator now living in the United States while attempting to secure citizenship. Their experiences and perspectives will be captured in an effort to understand their motives for accepting this dangerous job as well as better appreciate their current situation as a result of their choices. The viewer will learn about the effects volunteering for this position has had upon their family and friends along with the relationships they maintained or discontinued with the individuals they met in the U.S. armed forces.

This film will document the successes and disappointments experienced on a seemingly daily basis. It will allow the audience to witness the courage of these individuals both on and off the battlefield. While the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan continue half a world
away, this film will demonstrate that the casualties of war are not always what they seem.

**APPROACH**

This documentary will employ the expository style of documentary filmmaking to create a portrait piece which will capture the past and present struggles of Iraqi translators.

1. The film will offer insight into the vital roles translators have played in unique combat environments such as the tribal regions and urban combat environments.
2. The film will allow selected individuals to establish how and why they decided to enlist as a translator. They will describe the dangers involved as well as the risks to their families and friends.
3. The film will follow existing hardships as these individuals as they struggle to become U.S. citizens.

**TREATMENT**

The film opens as a small Marine unit silently approaches the front door of an unknown house on a dark street in central Bagdad. They crowd around the front door, using only hand signals to communicate. Flashlights mounted on their M16’s provide the only light along the dimly lit street. Chaos ensues as they break through the door and rush into the home shouting for everyone to put their hands up. Shouting in both English and Arabic makes it hard to comprehend the situation. As the Marines gather everyone into one room the shouting dies down and the translator begins to work as the only line of communication between the Marines and this group of suspected insurgents.
The subject of this film will be an individual who volunteered to work as a translator in Iraq and this scene will establish the extremely dangerous and hectic environments translators face as they work alongside military personnel the front lines. While some individuals enlist for the money others view this as an opportunity to help their country. Regardless of their reasoning, these individuals place themselves in a situation where they are risking their lives on a daily basis. If the individual patrols were not dangerous enough, threats also stem from insurgent groups and are often focused toward their family and friends.

As we meet the subject of the film for the first time they will provide a brief personal history. This information will not only focus upon their time spent as a translator but details regarding their childhood, family life, and additional personal stories. This in turn will allow the viewer to establish a deeper connection with the subject of the film.

Following their introductions the subject of this film will detail their experience as a translator. Sharing their memories, both good and bad, as well as describe which emotions they experienced while on patrols in hostile environments. This powerful testimony will secure the attention of the audience while driving the narrative thread.

As the film progresses, the focus will begin to shift to more personal subject matter regarding their present situation. Specifics detailing how they made it to the United States and the status of their citizenship will establish a struggle of a different kind.

The next portion of the film will detail the involvement of organizations, such as The Checkpoint One Foundation, who work with translators as they fight to gain citizenship. This segment of the film will establish the growing number of translators and their families
who have never received what was promised to them. This portion of the film will also present an opportunity to share statistics surround this issue.

As the film begins to draw to a close, so too will the journey of the subject of the documentary. As the final immigration papers are completed the translator will either be granted citizenship or be forced to return to hostile world they thought they were leaving behind forever.

For the films conclusion I will focus upon a crowning moment in the translators struggle to gain citizenship. This could come in any number of dramatic fashions. In one scenario they are granted citizenship or they are able to bring their families over to the United States to begin a new life. On the opposite end of the spectrum, they are denied the citizenship and they are forced to board a plane back to an uncertain future. Regardless of the outcome, the film will find its power in the journey of this individual.

BACKGROUND

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have not only forced the United States to alter their military strategies but they have also required the use of thousands of native speaking translators in an effort to effectively operate in these hostile regions. Counter insurgency is of the utmost importance and the key to bridging the gap between U.S. forces on the ground and the local population is through the use of translators. In an effort to recruit these native speakers many translators were promised citizenship and refuge in the United States. While the number of translators in Iraq alone totaled over 10,000 at one point, only a very small percentage of these individuals have even been allowed the opportunity to begin the application process. In some instances these individuals are only able to secure their visas
with help from high ranking military officials for whom they served. While there are bills being proposed which would allow more translators into the United States, the wheels turn slowly in Washington and time is a luxury these individuals cannot afford.

**INTERVIEWS**

1) **Subject 1** – This individual will be an Iraqi native who is currently living in the United States while working to establish permanent residence. I will follow this individual as they struggle with the tremendous amount of paperwork and red tape related with their application. I will also document the additional stresses associated with worrying about friends and family members who have yet to make it out of Iraq.

2) **Subject 2** – This individual will be a United States service member who established a close working relationship with a translator while deployed Iraq. I will use this interview subject to provide information regarding the additional risks translators take while on patrols. This interview will also provide a closer look at the relationships established on the battlefield and underline the importance of loyalty during combat situations.

3) **Subject 3** – This subject will be Jason Faler, the founding member of the Checkpoint One Foundation. While serving during Operation Iraqi Freedom he witnessed firsthand both the tremendous value of these determined Iraqis. As they served their nation alongside U.S. Armed Forces, he witnessed the acts of these courageous individuals on a daily basis. Now Jason, along with The Checkpoint One Foundation, raises money and provides assistance for Iraqi translators fighting to gain citizenship and refuge in the United States.
NARRATION

I will use the voice(s) of the individuals from this documentary when narration specific to their story is necessary. This will allow the audience to further connect with these characters and heighten the level of intimacy between subject and audience.

REINACTMENTS

I will use footage captured from national and international news organizations along with personal photos provided by the subjects of the film. No reenactments will be used in this documentary.

MUSIC

I will use a variety of music to accompany the variety of feelings displayed in the film. Chaotic scenes will be reinforced by loud tracks with an industrial/experimental feel. Moments of sadness and grief will be augmented by slow tempos tracks which will work to heighten these dramatic moments. During moments of success and triumph uplifting tracks will be incorporated to invite the audience share in the achievements of the individuals on screen.