

Favourite Moments of Film Sound

Senseless Violence

By Aden Evens

What renders the scene truly terrifying, magnifying its moral weight, is the lack of sound. One sees the bodies startle then fall still onto the invisible sand of the desert, but there are no gunshots and no explosive concussions when the guided missiles from nearby helicopters make sure the job is properly finished. Harrison Ford as Jack Ryan in *Patriot Games* (1992) stands in silence, ashamed and impotent, watching from some control room at The Pentagon as wall monitors depict an event taking place halfway around the world: the surreptitious elimination of a terrorist training camp. Two brief and rather dim establishing shots — low flying helicopters, and commando troops moving through the desert — are the only views we get “from the ground,” while the remainder of the scene is presented to us (and to Ryan) from the perspective of a spy satellite. Infrared registration and computer enhancement offer a bird’s-eye view, the pure motion of blurry white figures entering the camp at night, killing everyone there in a matter of seconds. Standing and running figures crumple, others crawl half way out of bed before they are aborted. From the eye in the sky, it seems all too surreal, as the only visible forms are person-shaped blobs whose fuzzy motion

leaves ghostly traces across the low-resolution, grayscale image. (Bush, Sr.'s war hovers clearly in the background.)

The tension in the scene derives from its moral ambiguity, itself produced by pervasive visual ambiguity. Jack Ryan only suspects, but cannot be sure, that this terrorist camp is where the “bad guys” are hiding out; the satellite images that would confirm their presence are not high enough in resolution to do so. Ryan attempts to ascertain the identity of the terrorists by playing a computer version of Antonioni’s *Blow-Up* game (which finds Ford reprising a scene he had famously played ten years earlier in *Blade Runner*). But he can do no better than to isolate the image of a t-shirt apparently filled out with “tits,” as he exclaims on seeing a computer-enhanced image of the desert camp in a previous scene. The presence of these tits (one of the bad guys is a woman) and a few other corroborating factors are enough to persuade Ryan’s superiors to green-light the operation. Ryan ends up looking on at the distant silent murders in bewilderment and shame, having withheld judgment only to be overridden by rasher minds.

Vision’s inadequacy is emphasized many times over: the satellite initially offers no information at all about the occupants of the camp, who hide whenever it passes over. The spy cameras therefore must be “re-tasked” at great expense to allow an oblique view of the camp when the occupants are not aware of being watched. The killing scene itself interjects ASCII computer terminals flashing “Live Feed,” highlighting the mediation between the event and its display (the

remoteness of the killers at The Pentagon) and signaling with heavy-handed irony that this “live” shot is all about dead people.

Without sound, the scene horrifies, for the distance at which the killing is being carried out becomes morally infinite. Spectators at The Pentagon do not recognize themselves as occupying the same world as the one where the killings are happening, for no human cry crosses that chasm. The surveillance at a distance is certainly ominous on its own, but only the absence of sound finally severs the phenomenal embrace that would tie the murderers to their actions. Ryan’s own silence is powerfully set off by the smug remark of a nearby bureaucrat, who apparently lacks Ryan’s moral qualms: “That ... is a kill.” Ryan responds with a look of fear and pain, a tiny version of that lopsided smirk that Ford uses whenever a scene calls for a mixed emotion. In *Totality and Infinity*, Lévinas says that the face of the other imposes upon us our ethical obligation to that person. *Patriot Games* shows that in this age of mediated vision, it is rather the *voice* of the other that calls to our humanity, so that we must tread carefully when that voice cannot be heard. As it turns out, the intended targets of the killing are not in the camp at the time of the attack.

Bio:

Aden Evens is Assistant Professor of English at Dartmouth College, specializing in new media. His current research explores the creative possibilities and limitations of digital technologies, starting from a theory of digital ontology. His first book, *Sound Ideas* (University of Minnesota Press 2005), is a phenomenological study of the effects of technology on the aesthetics of music and sound. Under the project name, "re:," Aden has released two records of electroacoustic music on the Constellation label based in Montréal.