Framing Canadians (II)

The Extraordinary Politics of Rendition

“The rendition program has been the single most effective counter-terrorism operation ever conducted by the United States Government.”
Michael Scheur

Introduction: Rendering Fictions

Imagine the following scenario. An Egyptian-born American engineer traveling home to Chicago from a business trip in South Africa is detained by American officials on a stopover at Washington’s Dulles airport, assumed through flimsy evidence to be a terrorist, is whisked away to a North African country where he is imprisoned and tortured into signing a false confession while his wife, once she finds out what happened to him, takes on top-level government bureaucrats at home to secure his release. Or this scenario. A Syrian-born Canadian engineer traveling home from a vacation in Tunisia is detained by American officials on a stopover at New York’s JFK Airport, assumed through faulty evidence (supplied by Canadian officials) to be a terrorist, is whisked away to a Syrian prison where he is tortured into signing a false confession while his wife, once she finds out what happened to him, takes on top-level bureaucrats of three governments to secure his release.

For most Canadians, and no doubt many people worldwide, the second scenario is immediately recognizable as the ordeal of Ottawa computer engineer Maher Arar whereas the first scenario describes the basic plot of Gavin Hood’s 2007 feature film Rendition. Indeed, any Canadian seeing the film may have experienced an acute sense of déjà vu. Although both narratives have striking similarities, there are

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notable differences as I shall discuss below. First, however, it is necessary to acknowledge that the film raises serious questions around the consequences of post-9/11 targeting of Muslim men, the denial of fundamental human rights of those accused of terrorism (and the often reckless manufacture of those charges), and the practice of rendition for torture in particular. Film and television programmes, as Mike Featherstone points out, are a necessary component in nation building “especially in their capacity to bridge the public and private.”^2 The war film in particular holds especial significance as narratives of nation are inseparable from narratives of war. Stephen Spielberg’s 1999 film *Saving Private Ryan*, for example, scored heavily both with critics and at the box office, not to mention US Department of Defense that awarded him a Medal for Distinguished Service for helping to “reconnect the American public with its military men and women, while rekindling a deep sense of gratitude for the daily sacrifices they make on the front lines of our Nation’s defenses.”^3 Not surprisingly, the ABC television network began broadcasting the film annually on Veteran’s Day beginning in 2001—just two months following 9/11. Even prior to 9/11, any doubts about the efficacy of the war movie to the American sense of self would most likely have been dispelled with former joint chief of staff Colin Powell introducing *Saving Private Ryan*, and Terrence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line*, at the 1999 Academy Awards, dressed in full uniform, just days before NATO launched its attack on Yugoslavia.

War, not peace, has long been the stuff of which movies are made. Indeed, for Anita Loos, World War I was the very reason for Hollywood itself.^^4 Wed as they are in the blissful triumph of visual spectacle, war is as unthinkable with cinema as cinema is without war. As Paul Virilio writes, war can never break free from spectacle “because its very purpose is to *produce* that spectacle: to fell the enemy is not so much to capture as to ‘captivate’ him, to instil the fear of death before he actually dies.”^5 There can be no war, therefore, without representation, and no weaponry without psychological mystification. Weapons are much tools of *perception* as destruction, affecting sensory and neurological processes and patterns of identification and differentiation, producing surprise and shock as much as death.^^6 Indeed, for Virilio “the history of battle is primarily the history of radically changing fields of perception.”^7 For the warrior, therefore, the function of the weapon is the function of the eye.^^8 Virilio notes that at the turn of the twentieth century, developments in cinema and aviation were in concert to the effect that by 1914 aviation had ceased to be strictly a means of flying and breaking records