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To cite this article: Janet Walker (2020) Perpetrating and resisting fortress USA: documentary strategies of *National Bird* and *Fahrenheit 11/9*, *Continuum*, 34:2, 180-196, DOI: [10.1080/10304312.2020.1737430](https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2020.1737430)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/10304312.2020.1737430>



Published online: 05 Mar 2020.



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Perpetrating and resisting fortress USA: documentary strategies of *National Bird* and *Fahrenheit 11/9*

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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes two documentary films that figure the enmeshment of individuals and institutions in attitudes and practices of ‘fortress USA’ and studies the role of media in facilitating and resisting that process. Whereas a large share of the scholarly literature on trauma and documentary has focused for good reason on the atrocities of Hitler’s Holocaust, the Cambodian Genocide, and the Rwandan Genocide, and on the testimonies of survivors, the documentary films under study here present certain actions by the United States as *perpetrative*: that is to say, as rife with casualties and as racist, media-dependent, and insupportable from the perspective of social justice. *National Bird* features whistleblowers of the U.S. drone war. *Fahrenheit 11/9* probes Donald Trump’s deployment of mediated, divisive speech. The particular aim of this article is to demonstrate how these significant and timely works make innovative and often-times reflexive use of testimony, drone imaginaries, and ‘Border Spectacle’, thereby interrupting the lethal agendas of fortress USA.

KEYWORDS

Documentary film; perpetrator testimony; fortress USA; drone war; *National Bird*; Sonia Kennebeck; U.S.-Mexico border; *Fahrenheit 11/9*; Michael Moore

‘But I want the cameras to span the room. Go ahead fellows. Watch. They don’t turn ‘em ... Go ahead turn ‘em ... You with the blonde hair. Turn the camera. Show ‘em how many people come to these rallies’. These are the instructions of then-presidential candidate Donald J. Trump speaking at a rally in Grand Rapids, Michigan on 21 December 2015, footage of which is excerpted in the documentary film *Fahrenheit 11/9* (Moore 2018). In response, the camera zooms out to a wide shot and another shot pans the room to reveal Merry Christmas wreaths and an American flag framing Trump’s podium, and ‘Make America Great Again’ (MAGA) signs in the hands of the cheering crowd. As president since January of 2017, his efforts through all three branches of government have bent towards deregulating and dismantling offices and agencies designed to serve the public good; providing subsidies and tax breaks for wealthy individuals and extractive corporations; encouraging voter disenfranchisement efforts aimed at people of colour; stoking racist and anti-LGBTQIA sentiment and behaviour; entrenching a security state; enacting a foreign policy that kills.

MAGA ideology is animated by the conviction that America’s borders must be secured at all costs against perceived threats from abroad. Moore’s earlier film from 2004, the

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Author’s note: Many thanks to Fernando Canet for his incisive and generous editorial input, and to the anonymous reviewers for their discerning suggestions. I am grateful to Sonia Kennebeck for talking with me about her investigative filmmaking process and the ethical and aesthetic choices that resulted in the extraordinary *National Bird*.

hugely successful *Fahrenheit 9/11*, tracked President George W. Bush's instrumentalization of the 'War on Terror' after the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City. The newer film, *Fahrenheit 11/9*, reveals how – before and after that fateful November election day – Trump has consolidated power by enacting a geopolitics of insiders and outsiders. The post-Cold War formation known as 'Fortress Europe' is being mimicked in the U.S. The subject of interdisciplinary scholarship, 'Fortress Europe' signals both the concrete installations and policies of border security and the critique of this programme and of the discursive figure of exclusion (Bigo 2002; Walters 2004; Pinos 2009; Carr [2012] 2016). 'Fortress USA', 'Fortress America', or 'Fortress North America' has a similar history and resonance, and an emergent literature (Andreas and Biersteker [2003] 2014; Alboim and Aiken 2017). As Bigo writes:

Securitization of the immigrant as a risk is based on our conception of the state as a body or a container for the polity. It is anchored in the fears of politicians about losing their symbolic control over territorial boundaries (2002, 65).

President Trump has expanded the use of weaponized drone strikes on overseas targets – thus, establishing an outer ring of the fortress beyond U.S. soil – and ordered drastic measures against U.S. Southern border crossers including children in the name of national security.¹

The American effectuation of exclusion and harm is an apt subject for a special issue on documentary film and perpetration, given that the word perpetration – from the verb to perpetrate and the Latin *perpetrāre* – is defined as the carrying out, execution, or performance of harmful, illegal, or immoral acts. Many forceful realities of the U.S. drone program and of the situation at the U.S.-Mexico border remain veiled in secrecy. Yet 'Border Spectacle', as Nicholas De Genova termed it even before Trump's rise, has played a political role (2013). Some Americans might be surprised to learn that significantly more unauthorized residents overstay their visas than enter across the border, and that the number of would-be crossers has been on an overall downward trend since 2000 (Gonzales 2019). What Trump pressured the news cameras to show in 2015 was the size of the crowd and its enthusiasm for his pronouncement of 'us' and 'them' values.

This article analyzes two documentary films that figure the enmeshment of actors and institutions (above and beyond the actions of individual 'bad apples') in realizing the state as a 'container for the polity' and embodiment of 'fortress USA'. A concordant goal is to analyse how these significant and timely works make innovative and sometimes reflexive use of testimony, drone imaginaries, and 'Border Spectacle' to interrupt the lethal agendas of fortress USA. *National Bird* (Kennebeck 2016), created during the Obama administration and officially released in the U.S. two days after Trump was elected, centres on former participants in the U.S.'s semi-secret foreign drone war. *National Bird* was screened at festivals around the world and Executive Produced by documentary luminaries Wim Wenders and Errol Morris. Among other compelling elements to be discussed below, the film is highly meaningful for *bringing into being*, rather than merely documenting as pre-given, the acts of testimony and whistleblowing that its protagonists risk – and for revealing *as perpetration* the institutional constellations of U.S. drone weapon use. *Fahrenheit 11/9* is largely about Trump's political persona and strategic use of racist rhetoric. Differently but relatedly, these films illuminate post-9/11 violence against 'the other' and establish fresh strategies for documenting perpetration. *Fahrenheit 11/9*

garnered a Critic's Choice Documentary award nomination for Best Political Documentary and a Writers Guild of America nomination for Best Documentary Screenplay, as well as extending *Fahrenheit 9/11*'s critique of post-globalization U.S. nationalism.²

National Bird and *Fahrenheit 11/9* together expand the dimensions of 'the perpetrator' as an heuristic, and as an array of participants inhabiting different roles (LaCapra 1999; Morag 2013). Like most of the works we might call, for short, 'perpetrator docs', these two films are *anti*-perpetration documentary films. Given this ameliorative orientation and media's role in co-constituting the cultural and physical environments in which perpetration inheres, the repertoires of these two works for *un*making perpetration are valuable to know. This article will proceed to show how each of these documentary films uses and productively complicates the testimonial mode – key to the cultivation of video archives for truth and reconciliation initiatives around the globe (Guerin and Hallas 2007; Sarkar and Walker 2010; Morag 2013; Shenker 2015) – while also reimagining drone imagery and critiquing 'border spectacle' (De Genova 2013).

Perpetration is savagery that happens body to body, finger to button to bomb, pen to policy, media to environment, and in and through architectures of detention, imprisonment, exclusion, and extermination. While a large share of the scholarly literature on trauma and documentary film focuses for good reason on the atrocities of Hitler's Holocaust, the Cambodian Genocide, the Rwandan Genocide, and the Indonesian Mass Killings of 1965–66, and on the testimonies of survivors, this article studies two documentary films that help articulate United States policy and activities by Americans as perpetrative – that is to say, rife with casualties – and as racist, media-dependent, and insupportable from the perspective of social justice.

Enacting, entangling, and interrupting perpetrator testimony

In 'Documenting Atrocities around the World: Why Engage with the Perpetrators?', Fernando Canet makes a case for the social benefit of portraying perpetrators' perspectives, especially where they arc from 'remembrance, recognition, remorse, and redemption', and, ideally in conjunction with the voices of victims, onward to reconciliation (2019, 3). *National Bird* presents three veterans of the U.S. weaponized drone program who authenticate facts on the basis of firsthand knowledge and boosts them through this very trajectory: harkening back to acts they carried out; recognizing troubling dimensions of American policy; some racked with remorse, some moving towards reconciliation. *Fahrenheit 11/9* presents Trump in the midst of realizing his political agenda. We meet this documentary protagonist prior to any recognition or remorse on his part. But the film itself undermines his words and questions the legitimacy of his level gaze.

National Bird is extraordinary by virtue of its presentation of original sources for the film's investigation. By this I mean to emphasize that, prior to having been located and contacted by Kennebeck, U.S. military veterans Heather, Lisa, and Daniel (the film uses first names) had not spoken publicly about their former work in the line of duty helping to execute drone strikes that killed and injured identified and unidentified individuals abroad.³ Through the work of the film, which also includes whistleblower attorney Jesselyn Radack, they come to expose a wrong, establish themselves as whistleblowers, and seek an ethical course – even to the point of reconciliation in Lisa's case.

Heather Linebaugh, a former drone imagery analyst for the Air Force, describes in some detail of what her job consisted:

I was an imagery analyst and a screener. My job was to watch what's happening in the [live] video drones ... and identify everything ... You'd have the pilot of course who's flying the actual aircraft; the sensor operator who's moving the camera around. They were the ones that actually pushed the button. I do not push the button. I just identify what necessitates a button pushing.

We can't just bomb someone and fly away. We have to follow through. The bomb hit; and wait for it to cool down a little bit. And then you can see, like, the body parts. You can identify, like, that could be the lower half of his body. And that could be a leg. And then, um, sometimes you'll stick around and watch family come and get them. Or, like, pick up the parts.

Lisa Ling had a military career that lasted more than twenty years. Her final deployment was as a drone surveillance system technical sergeant on a Distributed Ground System:

As name implies, it's a distributed system, and it spans the globe, and it eats data, and it eats lots and lots and lots of data. This is global. This is getting information anywhere at any time, shooting people from anywhere at any time.

That means that the system I worked on basically identified 121,000 insurgent targets. That's a hundred and twenty-one thousand lives affected by technology. That we control. And in this case you're talking about a two-year period [7 October 2007 to 29 September 2009]. So, how many years have we been at war now? It's 12, multiply, add up some numbers, and see what's really going on.

The testimonial veracity of these whistleblower protagonists is encouraged by the film's use of strategies of direct regard and shared perspective, with ethical implications for the viewer. In this respect *National Bird* both participates in and reworks a central strategy of cinematic – as distinct from written – testimony: the presentation of the perpetrator's look into the camera lens as an opportunity for the spectator to evaluate the veracity of the person's words. In her groundbreaking article about Errol Morris's *Standard Operating Procedure* (2008) – the acclaimed documentary about the enbroilment of photographs taken by U.S. military police in prisoner abuse and torture at Abu Ghraib prison – Linda Williams reads the eye contact of convicted and discharged former officer Lynndie England (2010). 'Consider the eyes of Lyn[n]die England', Williams suggests. There follows a quotation from the portion of England's on camera account of the reaction she and others had to prisoner abuse, into which Williams has interjected bracketed descriptions of England's eye movements. Initially, England eyes looked everywhere but into the camera lens.

We thought it was unusual [here her eyes avoid contact and shift to screen left] and weird [here they shift even further to screen left ...] and ... wrong [here they shift to screen right avoiding the point in the center where they would connect ...] (2010, 39–40).

But then, when England describes how her perception of prisoner abuse went from 'weird' to 'OK', her eyes finally meet the camera's gaze. The 'microphysiognomy of England's face ... re-enacts the drama of acceptance' (2010, 40), argues Williams. 'The deadness that we see in her eyes is the deadness that comes from having accepted wrong as OK – SOP, standard operating procedure' (2010, 41). In this film and in the wider sociocultural landscape, wrong is dead wrong from the get-go, OK a morally bereft

delusion, and a look into the camera lens connotes not ‘the truth’ but an emotional truth about the inner workings of outlandish perpetration.

National Bird also presents direct regard as a complex matter; but in comparison with *Standard Operating Procedure* as differently complex. This film’s investigative pattern is not focused on revealing how people entered the path of perpetration. *National Bird* answers this question from the get-go by including Lisa’s, Heather’s, and also Daniel’s accounts of their original motivations: patriotism, naïveté, lack of options, and the like. Neither does this film present individually freakish acts, beyond the pale of normal behaviour. Rather, *National Bird* is committed to exposing the everyday behaviours and mechanisms through which, in certain contexts, American institutions and personnel harm people at a distance – including non-combatants – under the cover of patriotic self-defence and by and for fortress USA.

National Bird takes its protagonists from ‘OK’ to ‘wrong’, and wrong is staged as a valuable insight to be levelled against the U.S. chain of command during a global drone war still widely accepted as protective of our country. Here, protagonists meet the camera’s gaze in their whistleblowing guise. One particular sequence with Heather early in the film, lasting a couple of minutes and set off by the score, stands as a perfectly formed mnemonic interlude and insightful formation. First we see Heather in slow motion performing a massage – work she says she does in search of her own healing as well as that of her clients. We hear her narrating in voiceover:

I have specific memories of many of them that I know I killed. But [close up of a hand massage] it’s so messy. And, like, they don’t report it down to us who we killed [close-up of her face, blurry at first then coming into focus; eyes downcast]. Maybe we killed our objective, maybe we killed a guy who we thought was our objective [back to the percussive massage]. We don’t know. And I can say the drone program is wrong [close up of her face, neck stretched upward, eyes cast down] because I don’t know how many people I’ve killed.

[ellipsis] I mean I was, like, always shaking after we’d do strikes. ‘Cause it was an adrenaline rush. [here her eyes shift rapidly to screen right and then screen left; and then engage the camera] You’re killing someone. [eyes shift left then back the camera]

Again, we must proceed with care in discussing the truth-value of direct eye contact, with or without representational mediation. For one thing, *as a guarantee of honesty*, it is culturally specific and not applicable in all national or cultural contexts. Then, the conviction that eye movements reveal the truth of subject testimony is empirically unfounded (Welborn and Guy 1991; Blumenthal 1993). Given this situation, Kennebeck’s and her team’s confirmation of the protagonists’ statements of fact, both for reasons of journalistic responsibility and also so that they would not be vulnerable to legal prosecution for the release of classified material that could be shown to be available elsewhere with digging,⁴ stands forth as paratextual information key to the reading process.

National Bird’s use of direct regard empowers its interlocutors’ situational assessments and serves at least two other purposes as well. In concert with observational footage, it implicates or entangles spectators in a chain of responsibility. Then, as will be discussed in the next section, the film also uses direct testimony *by survivors* of drone attacks to expose the disingenuous sterility of drone imaginaries.

Writing in a psychoanalytic vein about ‘a new wave of Israeli films’ that raise ‘the topic of violent acts carried out by Israeli soldiers’, Morag (2013, 3) builds on but also shifts

Judith Lewis Herman's opening salvo of *Trauma and Recovery*. 'Folk wisdom is filled with ghosts who refuse to rest in their graves until their stories are told. Murder will out' (Herman 1992, 1). Morag proposes the perpetrator rather than the victim as 'an unwelcome ghost whose post-traumatic account stands as a profound challenge and hurdle for the society at whose behest s/he was sent' (2013, 4). Looking beyond considerations of Heather's own psychological and emotional life, we may recognize the film's depiction of both her clear-eyed 'post-traumatic account' and then too her ghostly presence as a profound social challenge.

Between the striking close-up of Heather with her eyes cast down and the close-up view of her look into the camera, there are two additional shots accompanied by voice-over testimony:

[road through car windshield] After we would do a strike and I would ask for a break and, like, go outside and smoke a cigarette and just think and like try to decompress and just try to push the ... [Heather inside a house, viewed from outside through the window] idea that I was involved in killing people out of my mind and, like, try not to think about it.

In these two shots, the spectator is invited to move between ghostly points of view. The first is through a car windshield as if seeing through Heather's eyes, the second is of Heather from outside her body. This later shot focalizes the sort of perspective – caught between detachment and voyeurism – that makes people wonder about the lives of others. The visual handling of the sequence transports the spectator as a hovering, unstill presence into the realm of perpetration. Moreover, the window serves as a frame-within-the-frame. As Kennebeck told me, the shot was designed to match and evoke the drone footage used in the film. 'We are watching the watchers', she said. We are watchers watching our counterparts whose executed duties were not passive but rather destructive. This sequence incarnates Morag's conviction that the 'ethical insight' of the perpetrator 'must be tested against society's willingness to accept responsibility, rather than its willingness to accept the perpetrator' (2013, 19). Indeed, it is the national body acting in the name of its citizens and not merely those pressed into service that we must look to – and from – fully to comprehend perpetration.

Michael Moore's perseverance on eye contact in *Fahrenheit 11/9* and our struggle as observers to read a leader's thoughts through these would-be 'windows on the soul' harkens back to *Fahrenheit 9/11*. One of the more remarkable sequences in that earlier film is the one where we see the chief of staff leaning down to whisper into the ear of President Bush – who is reading aloud to a group of Florida elementary school children – that the second World Trade Center Tower had been hit. Moore elects footage that moves from a long shot to a close-up. Bush's eyes swivel screen left and then return to centre. He is clueless, we may decide. Yet he did capitalize on the attack to sell his 'War on Terror' to Congress and the American people with the assertion that our enemies were stockpiling 'weapons of mass destruction'.

Consider the eyes of Donald Trump. *Fahrenheit 11/9* continues the cinopolitical motif of eyeline scrutiny and the fantasy of discernment. Here, as with *Fahrenheit 9/11*, what we are meant to fathom – and what the film seeks to interrupt – is a U.S. president's capacity for perpetration. The credit sequence of *11/9* treats us to an array of artificial eyeballs being prepared for a Trumpian wax figure-in-the-making before deeming us ready to meet the actual Trump's news-mediated gaze. Narrating over shots of another huge rally

Trump held prior to filing his candidacy in spring of 2015, Moore explains: ‘He had his epiphany’. We see Trump mounting the platform in front of a huge crowd. ‘Unbelievable’, we hear him crow over a digital zoom into a still image of an exuberant Trump elevated above the massed ralliers. ‘Unbelievable’, we see and hear him say from the podium as the news camera zooms in. Seconds later Trump’s eyes and nose fill the frame. ‘I’m going to be king of the world’, Moore says, ventriloquizing Trump.

The walls of Trump’s fortress are ideological, architectural, and erected by the power of the office he holds. His Executive Orders and Proclamation barring entry of ‘any aliens or any class of aliens into the United States’ where said entry ‘would be detrimental to the interests of the United States’ – known as the ‘Muslim Ban’ – were upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in Spring of 2018. The court’s conservative majority decided that ‘the president’s power to secure the country’s borders, delegated by Congress over decades of immigration lawmaking, was not undermined by Mr. Trump’s history of incendiary statements about the dangers he said Muslims pose to the United States’ (Liptak and Shear 2018). This officially sanctioned designation of enemies abroad subtends Trump’s perpetuation of the calamitous drone and border actions. Moore’s use of artificial eyeballs in a wax figure connotes Trump’s lack of human empathy and his imbrication within a complex of institutions and spheres – a wax museum of famous and historical personages – that exceeds the agency of the individual.

Surprising as it may seem for a Michael Moore film (and one that includes Hitler), *Fahrenheit 11/9* is oddly restrained in one important respect. Moore has *withheld* the bully pulpit that Trump has used to achieve and maintain power. He has done so by breaking Trump’s speeches into small snippets that do not take up all that much screen time in total, eliding key portions of his message, and replacing his words. In his amusingly autobiographic idiom, Moore narrates how he himself had previously facilitated Trump’s media celebrity. Now he seeks to dismantle it.

Moore’s presentation of Trump’s Trump Tower speech (the full version of which is forty-six minutes long) is a case in point. Moore has cut it to smithereens and backed it by a rousing horn composition. Here follows the entire text Moore chooses to include:

They sweated like dogs [cut]
 I’m really rich; I’ll share that [cut]
 They do a website; its cost me 3 dollars [cut]
 That I got from China in a war [cut]
 The sun will rise; the moon will set [cut]
 He wasn’t a cheerleader; he was the opposite [cut]
 Even our nuclear doesn’t work [cut]
 I think I’m actually a very nice person [cut]
 We have nothing [cut]
 I just sold an apartment for 15 USD million; to someone from China [cut]
 I learned so much just sitting at his feet, playing with blocks [cut]
 They’re rapists and some [cut]
 Probably from the Middle East [cut]
 And I promise I will never be in a bicycle race, that I can tell you [cut]
 We now have a gun at every table; we’re ready to start shooting [cut]
 The American Dream [cut]
 [small move to a big close-up] is dead.

In the full version, a rant about Mexican immigrants coming over the border – ascurrilous trial balloon that expanded and animated his candidacy and subsequent policy – occurs near the beginning and lasts approximately one and a half minutes. Trump portrayed border crossers as a threat to the U.S. economy and as a criminal element. He portrayed the U.S. as subject to ridicule and vulnerable along the southern flank:

It's coming from more than Mexico. It's coming from all over South and Latin America. And it's coming probably, probably from the Middle East. But we don't know. We have no protection
And it's gotta stop. It's gotta stop fast.

The incipient racism of his rhetoric was already present in this opening salvo of a speech. Having reduced Trump's lengthy speech to one and a half minutes, Moore then follows it with three brief clips that also serve to undermine Trump's standpoint, now by detailing some of his failures and withholding his false generalizations about immigrants. The first clip concerns NBC's announcement that it is cutting business ties with Donald Trump. The second informs viewers that Donald Trump has received 'a pink slip of his own'. The third indicates that Trump was fired from NBC for 'his derogatory statements calling Mexican immigrants rapists, drug dealers, and criminals'. In this latter clip, a medium shot of Trump at a podium fades out and is replaced by a long shot of a City Club of Chicago business dinner in which Trump is seen at a distance: smaller and further away. His presence and power of speech have been editorially minimized.

Drone imaginaries

The multiple types of drone imagery sedimented into *National Bird* continue its step-by-step challenge to society's unwillingness to contemplate the U.S. drone program as a massive and sustained breach of human rights (Weber 2017). 121,000 insurgents targeted in two years. People were harmed who were not 'our objective'. Whole regions and sociocultural practices – gathering out of doors, drinking tea and socializing without glancing up fearfully at the sky – have been drastically altered by the anticipation of drone strikes.⁵ The film moves the needle of our assessment of the DGS program from right, decent, and defensive to atrocious.

One type of drone representation used in the film is the Air Force recruitment video. In this incorporated footage, we soar with a Predator drone, target the arid landscape through its grid, and fly back and forth between a ground control station in the U.S. and the troops on the ground abroad. Air Force personnel in the different spots talk to each other and identify the 'enemy sniper'. A second recruitment video features testimonials (be they from actual servicemen or actors): 'It's a good feeling to know you're helping the guys on the ground'. When I researched the Predator drone so as to name its parts, I found an official U.S. Air Force site touting detailed information: 'The MQ-1B Predator', the text states, 'is an armed, multi-mission, medium-altitude, long-endurance remotely piloted aircraft that is employed primarily as an intelligence-collection asset and secondarily against dynamic execution targets' (Predator Drone Factsheet 2015). All of this kinetic energy notwithstanding, the film's sequencing of the recruitment videos adjacent to Heather's remembrance of her earlier naïveté and current expertise serves to counter their intended meaning. DGS personnel sometimes render harm instead of help; the problem is systemic.

Actual air strike videos that Kennebeck was able to obtain constitute a second type of drone representation countered by the film's own dronic imaginary.⁶ Set off against a black background, the drone's eye view is a black and white or brownish screen-within-a-screen marked by in-camera technical displays: e.g. LRD LASE DCS, date and timecode, geolocational information, scalar data, central targeting brackets. Imagery is sometimes redacted. Whereas the recruitment videos stop short of target extinguishment, these texts depict killing actions. Heather reflects on the labour of imagery analysis and screening that went into a given strike:

You were omniscient in people's lives, and you'd literally just kind of hover [fade in on a drone video] over their area. Sometimes you would watch them for days and you would have intel that this guy is a bad guy, and you wait till he walks out to the field to meet some friends for something, and you'd blow him up. Drop a Hellfire missile on him.

And, yet, expert though she is, the import of her message is that these media, like all media, elude perfect legibility. In the film's second drone strike passage, via this in-screen screen we see a group of black robed figures (women?) surrounding a white robed figure gathered at the exterior intersection of walled compounds. Then comes the third shot: a white robed figure, and perhaps another, walking along when the bomb hits. Fire and smoke fill the screen.⁷ The last shot is the aftermath. As the smoke clears and the camera reframes – someone is operating – we make out black dots that must be people. Dead or alive? Whole or in parts? Laypeople do not know how to read this imagery. Even trained experts are forced to accept a modicum of illegibility. Later in the film we will hear Heather terming politicians' statements that drones are 'precision weapons' through which 'surgical strikes' can be made 'completely ridiculous'. 'It's as flawed as it can be with people operating it from across the world'. And, indeed, she queries, if surgical strikes are really possible, why are so many civilians dying? 'Do [the politicians] not know what's going on in their own war that they're controlling?' The drone bombsight is a media interface, with attendant qualities. To wit, the meaning of images is not given; rather it must be read. The bombsight sculpts a world of targeters and targeted that it may seem only passively to register through its saccadic vision.

The interpretive proclivities of that world (view) are challenged by third type of drone imagery: re-enactment of a drone strike, clearly labelled as such. What we see re-enacted with serious attention to detail is an actual strike that killed 23 civilians and injured others. Aerial footage is preceded by interviews with survivors who travelled for three days to reach Kabul and tell their story openly for the first time. Seated on a red patterned rug that has been spread outdoors, a woman in a black robe is flanked by two children, two older women who listen, and a male human rights worker asking questions (Grinberg 2017). As the woman speaks, her son removes his prosthetic leg and rubs the stump. The woman tells that the boy lost his leg 'in the same incident in which his father died' and that her other son was killed.

Only then – having been made aware of the consequences – does the film deem us ready to see the drone strike re-enactment. Or nearly ready. First, an onscreen graphic informs us that the families were killed on 21 February 2010 by a Predator drone crew operating out of Creech Air Force Base in Nevada. Another line of text informs us, 'A radio traffic transcript documents their failures'. We now see declassified documents from the official investigation, one of which provides the geospatial information that

the strike occurred in ‘the vicinity of Shahadi Hassas, Uruzgan District, Afghanistan’. Another redacted document is an actual transcript of the back and forth dialogue among the sensor, pilot, MC, and ‘Slasher03’. We see it with the following dialogue highlighted: ‘looks like people in the back of the pick-up one, two, three at least five dudes so far’.

The re-enactment of the bombing of these families is accompanied by what the film’s context gives us to understand as an ideologically invested misreading of the imagery by the drone strike crew. What we hear are verbatim voice recreations drawn from portions of the *actual transcript*.

Sensor: That truck would make a beautiful target.

Pilot: Yeah

MC: Screener said at least one child near the SUV.

Sensor: Bullshit ... Where!?

Sensor: Send me a fucking still,

Sensor: I don’t think they have kids out at this hour,

Sensor: I know they’re shady but come on ...

Pilot: why are they so quick to call fucking kids

Pilot: but not to call a fucking rifle?

These men are well out of harm’s way, back at Creech AFB.

Sensor: Picked up a third vehicle on their train.

MC: Guilty by association [black screen]

The testimony of the survivors is once again presented, first, translated into English and added as dialogue to the black field below the re-enacted footage – thus superceding the crew’s dialogue – and, then, as filmed testimony. An injured survivor, seated on the bench at a prosthetic centre, narrates from experience:

We got out of our cars, men and women. After our prayer, we left. [cut to a close-up; he looks into the lens; he gestures and looks up as if replaying his actions at the time] That’s when we heard the sound of the plane. But we couldn’t see it.

That’s what pains me. You can see the difference between a needle and an ant, but not people? We were sitting in the pick-up truck and some even in the bed. How can you not identify us? Did you not see that there were travelers, women and children?

‘How can you not identify us?’ That is a salient question. We hear the drone crew given the information that there were adolescents, and we hear them discount it as a reason to abort the bombing: ‘Well teenagers can fight’. A few more exchanges, then:

MC: What’s the master plan, fellas?

Pilot: I don’t know.

Pilot: Hope we get to shoot the truck with all the dudes in it.

Sensor: Yeah.

Sensor: Sensor's in, let the party begin.

Eventually the drone crew realize that something is not right.

Safety Observer: Dude, this is weird.

After a bit:

Sensor: I don't know about this. This is weird.

They realize there's a baby and are unable to 'PID' any weapons. This is perpetrator speech – actual transcripts being read for the purposes of the film – from the maw of perpetration.

The sequence concludes with the survivors. A video of them returning the bodies of the dead to their village and the statement: 'When your leg is torn off and your gait slows, it also burdens your spirit. Sometimes I am so sad that my heart wants to explode'. Access to the survivors has been enabled by Lisa's trip to Afghanistan with her friend Asma who travels there for human rights work. Lisa chooses out of respect not to engage personally with the survivors, but her visit may be read as reconciliatory in relation to the process Canet has described. The last shot of the sequence is Asma seated next to the injured man whose body bends towards hers in sorrow.

In this case of killing, even the drone crew and the chain of command acknowledged that their actions strayed from OK to unconscionable. General McChrystal issued an official apology. The transcript was declassified and made publicly available. However, lest we wish this strike away as qualitatively different from standard operating procedure, the film cuts to Heather bending to read the transcript and protesting strenuously. She indicates that she trained for a year in image analysis, that the drone crews regularly disavowed her findings, and that she lacked access to talk to the crew directly. Moreover: 'Goddam, the DGS fuckin' hated Creech, because they were always trying to kill people ...' and 'all of these officers? ... it looks good on their records if they kill more people.'. 'You shouldn't have to stop your own people from killing civilians'.

Lest we imagine that respecting the highly trained image analysts would fully mitigate the problem, we may reflect on Heather's early testimony about the limits of image analysis – and what we know as media scholars about the proclivities of interpretation. As Frank Tomasulo explained in his landmark article "'I'll See It When I Believe It": Rodney King and the Prison-House of Video', the attorneys defending the Los Angeles policemen who beat King interpreted the videotaped actions one way while the prosecuting attorneys attributed different meaning to the very same physical motions. They all saw what they believed and not the other way around (Tomasulo 1996, 74-78).

On television in the United States, in an NBC newsmagazine episode entitled 'The Drone Revolution' (Engel 2016), U.S. Air Force Captain and drone pilot Will X (last name withheld by request of the military) proudly demonstrates the new, more efficient system for taking out ISIS and other insurgents without risking U.S. lives. Certainly, it is possible for audiences – and people in general – to share this official position on drone warfare. But it is a position that *National Bird* – and Lisa Ling's appearance as a panellist on this same program – strives to refute, in part by invoking the large number of foreign civilian casualties.⁸

National Bird complicates and brings into being the performance of perpetration across an overlapping range of activities, from image analysts turned whistleblowers to pilots and sensors and the military chain of command to the nation as a complicit polity. 121,000 insurgents targeted. Multiply by the years of the war in Iraq. Extend to Yemen, tribal areas of Pakistan (2001-present), The Horn of Africa (2004-present). A regime is in power in the United States that has moved the responsibility for drone operations 'outside traditional war zones to lower-level commanders' and no longer requires that targets pose a 'continuing, imminent threat' to the United States' (Rosenthal and Schulman 2018, citing *The New York Times* and other news outlets). Lisa Parks writes that 'The US Air Force now trains more pilots to fly drones than conventional aircraft, and the US spent \$5.78 billion on drone procurements in 2013' (2018, 144). As U.S. citizens, we variously enact, abide, resist, televise, hide, or preside over the drone killings that are being perpetrated in the name of fortress USA.

Border spectacle or wall imaginaries

With regard to the Southern rampart, the execution of the 1994 U.S. Border Patrol's 'Prevention through Deterrence' strategy of funnelling would-be border crossers away from traditional routes through cities and into rugged and remote areas has contributed to migrant deaths from exposure, heat, dehydration, and cold (Chambers et al. 2019; De León 2015). The Tucson based humanitarian organization *No More Deaths* (No Más Muertes) reports the recovery from borderlands of the remains of at least 7,000 people over the last two decades (2016). Then, in May 2018, the Trump administration through then Attorney General Jeff Sessions announced its own 'deterrence' policy that included and justified family separation:

If you cross this border unlawfully, then we will prosecute you ... If you smuggle illegal aliens across the border, then we will prosecute you. *If you are smuggling a child, then we will prosecute you and that child will be separated from you as required by law ...* The American people are right and just and decent to ask for this. They are right to want a safe, secure border ... Donald Trump ran for office on this idea ... He is on fire about this. (my emphasis)

Although the practice of family separation was widely condemned in the U.S. and abroad and officially terminated by executive order the next month, in 2019 the administration announced that at least another 1,712 migrant children beyond the initially reported 2,737 had been separated from their families and that the decision in many cases is *not* to reunite them.⁹ Parents have been deported without their children (Stillman 2018). Children have died in detention (Ingber 2019).

'The Wall' looms large in Trump's mediated firmament of U.S. nationalism and isolationist rhetoric. This is a theatre of separation with historical antecedents (semiotically comparable, for example, to the wall constructed by Chin dynasty emperors to protect the Middle Kingdom) and many contemporaneous counterparts.¹⁰ Throughout the world (e.g. Israel-Palestine, Cyprus, India-Pakistan, Belfast), barriers limit the movement of peoples and the lives of 'illegals',¹¹ cut people off from one another on the basis of perceived categories of difference, and serve geopolitical power through the attractive promise that a particular group will be safer and better off without the would-be interlopers.

Fahrenheit 11/9 probes how the fearsome differences that the U.S.-Mexico border wall is erected to protect against get conjured through media exposure. In a sequence near the end of the film, shots of white ralliers pushing, attacking, and ejecting people of colour in the crowd are intercut with shots of Trump pointing to people, encouraging crowd violence, leading the chant 'build that wall' 'build that wall'. 'We are going to make Americagreat again', he orates before a cut to a shot of a cinder block wall spray painted with the words 'Make America White Again' bracketing a swastika.

Although only loosely historicized, the film connects the demagoguery of Trump with that of Hitler. After several shots of the U.S. border wall under construction, the Nuremberg trials of 1946 are introduced and the film cuts to a contemporary interview with Ben Ferencz, the 'Last Surviving Nuremberg Prosecutor 99 years old', as the title reads. Ferencz describes his prosecution of a man who explained why he killed 90,000 Jews: 'Hitler knew more than I did, and he told me [presumably through speeches delivered in public and/or broadcast on the radio] the Jews were planning to attack'. 'What Trump is doing?', Moore queries. Ferencz responds affirmatively: 'We're doing something for which I hanged this man'.

Under historical footage of 1930s and 1940s Germany, we hear a sound montage linking reports of Bush's post-9/11 excoriation that 'either you're with us or you are with the terrorists', Trump's call for a 'total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the country', ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] raids, and family separations at the border. We hear recordings of children being questioned as to where they're from: 'Guatemala, El Salvador'. We hear them imploring: 'I want to go with my aunt and daddy'. And crying 'papa ... papa ...'. Fade in on and zoom to Trump at his podium, rendered silent and then invisible by the film as it fades to black.

Earlier on, but within the last third, the camera zooms in on Trump walking to meet its/our gaze, surrounded by media journalists outside the Water Treatment plant in Flint, Michigan, where there is a severe, lethal, ongoing Republican-made crisis of lead in the drinking water. We hear Michael Moore's voice narrating:

Somebody once asked Donald Trump, 'How do you handle being at the centre of all of this media attention?' The whirlwind around you. 'How do you weather the storm?' And he looked up and he said, 'I am the storm'. [cut to a closer shot, slowed down] 'I am the storm.'

Conclusion

Fortress USA is an anthropogenic storm of unremitting violence, enormity, and reach. It is being carried out across multiple scales from the personal to the national to the geopolitical – and its performance is profoundly mediated. So too needs be its unmaking. Writing alongside two remarkable anti-perpetration documentary films, this article has sought to focus attention on the strategies of the U.S. as a perpetrator state and, concomitantly, the strategies through which *National Bird* and *Fahrenheit 11/9* expose the mediations of the polity. By way of innovative and oftentimes reflexive use of testimony, drone imaginaries, and 'Border Spectacle', each of these films in its own idiom participates in and interrupts personal, public, and political involvement in the lethal agendas of fortress USA. The division of this article into sections has been for heuristic purposes. In fact, the three documentary strategies are profoundly entangled in these astute, evocative works.

However forcefully or directly delivered into the camera lens, a speaker's attestations about past and present events must be understood contextually and validated or resisted as the case may be. The journalistically meticulous *National Bird* brings into being its protagonists' whistleblowing testimony, statements that are genuinely expert and honestly conveyed at great personal risk. Heather's and Lisa's particularly pointed words assert the imbrication of drone image-making in the military institutional operations of the kill chain. But then, seeing drones through Heather's eyes – cleaving to her critique – entails as well an understanding of the abject interpretive uncertainties of drone image analysis and its vulnerability to hijacking by actors gone rogue or steam-rolled by a perpetrator state. 'How can you not identify us?' asks a survivor. 'Did you not see that there were travelers, women and children?' Yes, but ... According to *National Bird*, the bombsight is no mere window but rather an active targeting mechanism and participatory interface that the film dismantles by interspersing perpetrator and survivor testimony and locating both as casualties of the drone weapon apparatus.

Fahrenheit 11/9 differs from *National Bird* in opposing the declarations of its protagonist (one unusually powerful protagonist). The film's manifest import is to deauthenticate Trump's insular, racist, incendiary, purportedly incisive yet in large measure deceitful claims that criminal intruders who are people of colour are threatening America's borders and identity. Here the media pulpit is no mere communicative relay, but rather a media-rich device that *Fahrenheit 11/9* disarms in large part by exposing the ugly animosities and painful violence of the security spectacle at the U.S.-Mexico border. These films under analysis evince the importance of documentary strategies that reveal the frailties of discernment, the vicissitudes of mediation, and the machinations of state perpetration.

Special Issue Editor Fernando Canet charged contributors to write about documentary films of perpetration from a position 'native to the context'. As a U.S. citizen, I am appalled by the everyday turbulence and longstanding political environment and performance of perpetration that has proven fatal for hundreds of thousands of people within the United States, at our physical and figurative border zones, and around the world. But I am heartened by the stalwart and creative work of anti-perpetration documentaries such as those analysed here, and by the opportunity this dossier enacts to connect as writers and readers.

Notes

1. By 12 January 2016, 506 drone strikes on foreign targets had killed 3,040 persons America regarded as terrorists and 391 civilians ([Wars, the Full Data](#)). Then, American strikes in Afghanistan are estimated to have 'more than doubled in the first nine months of 2018 compared with the corresponding period in the previous year and killed more than 150 civilians' (The Editorial Board, *New York Times* 2019). With regard to the physical border, the number of migrant children in U.S. custody increased forty-two percent between 2018 and 2019 (Sherman, Mendoza, and Burke 2019).
2. Certain of Moore's films are top earners in the history of documentary: e.g. *Bowling for Columbine* (2002), *Sicko* (2007), and especially *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), the latter of which earned more than two hundred million dollars worldwide. While it did not approach these benchmarks, *Fahrenheit 11/9* did earn over six million dollars in theatrical release worldwide.
3. Personal communication with Sonia Kennebeck, 9 September 2019.
4. Personal communication with Sonia Kennebeck, 9 September 2019.
5. Personal communication with Sonia Kennebeck, 9 September 2019.

6. The provenance of these materials and exactly what they are (they could possibly have been taken from manned aircrafts) or show (they have been redacted) remains uncertain due to the secret, classified nature of the drone program. Kennebeck and her team made multiple FOIA requests for drone strike videos and audio, but these requests were denied by agencies citing reasons of national security or inability to locate the material. The videos used in the film were found on the Internet, having been leaked to the public or deliberately leaked by military sources, and carefully vetted by the production team. Consultations with image analysts, including Heather, confirmed that the air strike videos used closely match the drone strike videos these analysts had worked with. Screenshots of drone strike videos reproduced in declassified drone strike transcripts also served for matching purposes. The team reached its highest possible level of certainty that the actual airstrike videos used in the film are drone strike videos. Personal communication with Kennebeck, 9 September 2019.
7. There may be an additional edit here. The airstrike videos have been shortened, with care taken to preserve the original sequencing.
8. *The Act of Killing* (Oppenheimer 2012) includes an episode of an Indonesian National Television talk show featuring the film's protagonist Anwar Congo. By the cheering studio audience and for the television spectators, Anwar is celebrated for having developed during the Indonesian Mass Killings of 1965–66 'a new, more efficient system for exterminating communists [that] was more humane, less sadistic and avoided excessive violence'. Joshua Oppenheimer has remarked about his interactions with perpetrators that 'It's as though I'm in Germany 40 years after the Holocaust and the Nazis are still in power' (Stevens 2015). This TV episode exists because successors of the regime under which the massacres were perpetrated still hold power. See Rahadianto in this special issue.
9. In February of 2019, Jonathan White, who leads the United States Department of Health and Human Services' efforts to reunite migrant children with their families, was quoted in the press as saying that removing children from their 'sponsor' homes 'would present grave child welfare concerns' (Spagat 2019).
10. I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for this key point and expressive language.
11. De Genova (2013) discusses this problem as the 'obscene of inclusion'.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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