Strategic Ambiguity in the Production and Reception of War Dramas

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Chapter 1: Introduction and Definitions

How should we politically categorize war movies? Do war films provide us with any definitive moral stance on the conflicts they portray? Moreover, how do we account for the genre's popularity among both pro- *and* anti-war spectators? Most film and media scholars have concluded that, even among purportedly "anti-war" features, most war movies promote militaristic values. Meanwhile, those in cultural studies interpret the genre as polysemic, allowing disparate viewers to draw different interpretations due to the fundamentally fluid features of all texts, or the resistive tendency of specific readers.

My project emerges from a conviction that much of the current scholarship on war films has inadequately accounted for how political messages are actually disseminated and consumed in specific cultural conditions. As a lower-middle class white male for whom military enlistment has never been a serious career option, and whose pacifist beliefs have been cultivated through mediated war narratives on film and television, I have personally experienced how Hollywood films can reinforce an anti-war belief system. However, while acknowledging the variety of cultural and interpersonal factors that conditioned me for any one viewing experience, I never felt that my "anti-war" interpretations of many Hollywood films were resistive readings to texts that were fundamentally pro-war by nature. It was then I wondered, What if these films are open to multiple political interpretations by design?

Appropriating a term discussed by Leah Ceccarelli (1998), this thesis explores how understanding certain war dramas as "strategically ambiguous" may guide an analysis of their production and reception. My general thesis is that many U.S. war dramas released since 2001 about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq purposefully

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ambiguate their positions on the wars in order to be more easily sold to both supporters and opponents of the conflicts. My hope is to outline a means of examining politics in popular texts that occupies a middle ground between the textual determinism of much of film studies, the structural determinism of political economy, and the polysemic resistance of cultural studies, all the while incorporating considerations of text, industry, and reception that other approaches and methods sometimes ignore.

I divide my analysis into three chapters. In the introduction, I summarize existing scholarship on war films, reception, and polysemy, and subsequently define strategic ambiguity as a concept addressing some of their explanatory gaps. In the second chapter, I examine industrial and historical forces around the production of these films, specifically the 2006 homefront war drama *Grace Is Gone*, illustrating how public controversy over U.S. foreign policy created conditions for ambiguating films' political content as a viable economic strategy. In the third chapter, I use qualitative and quantitative research methods to analyze the reception of *Grace Is Gone* and specifically investigate the question of how viewers' preexisting political orientations affect their interpretation of the film's content. In the conclusion, I will relate the findings of my audience survey in chapter three to my industry research from chapter two, and conclude whether the analysis yields any useful insights for understanding how Hollywood's politics are encoded and received.

This project proceeds with three general methodological and ethical presumptions. First, following Edward Schiappa (2008), I hold that scholars who make claims about viewer effects should include some form of audience research to

substantiate their arguments, and that considering reception almost always leads to a more well-rounded understanding of how media operate. At the same time, spectatorship never occurs in a vacuum. Just as texts imply receivers, audiences can only be understood in relation to the historical, contextual, and economic forces under which they understand, watch, read, use, or play with texts. In this project, I have attempted to balance both the micro and the macro, triangulating each analysis of industry, text, or audience against my understandings of the other two members of the triad. Thus, for example, my conclusions about encoding were structured by what I found about decoding, and vice versa.

Second, this project proceeded with a healthy spirit of intellectual contingency. Rather than defending absolute claims about the nature of truth, sign systems, or society, I am more interested in considering how *particular* forces may operate around *particular* texts or phenomena at a *particular* historical moment. My analysis treats strategic ambiguity as one potential tool for understanding certain war films, not as a universal key for unlocking insights into *every* war film, or even necessarily *every* film made about the War on Terror. Accordingly, I strive to incorporate multidisciplinary voices into my argument, drawing from a variety of work done on war and reception within film studies, rhetorical theory, cognitive psychology, cultural studies, political science, and narrative theory. Not only do I find this approach more methodologically defensible—if the humanities teach us anything, it is that every rule has exceptions—but it is also more honest. This study examines the ways in which movies are made and consumed, a process that is often as routine for their creators as their audiences. In the banal routines

of making and watching films, individual cases are always potentially contradictory and divergent, even as they fit within general trends that are more predictable. In other words, I both recognize and embrace the potential for any of the industry personnel or film audiences I analyze in this project to disagree with the processes underlying recent war dramas as I outline them. By offering for the reader the data on these films as I have interpreted them, I can only hope that my case is persuasive.

Finally, this project proceeded from a pacifist-progressive position that war is an undesirable and destructive human endeavor, that mass media have a responsibility to minimize its occurrence and encourage alternative means of resolving disputes, and that war films should be evaluated according to their ability to encourage viewers to condemn all wars as unnecessary and unproductive. This is a highly pragmatic position. Although a media system wired to unequivocally oppose warfare may be an impossible ideal, I treat any text encouraging audiences to think critically about war's destructiveness as a potentially positive cultural contribution. No text can be representationally perfect, but their intentions and abilities to resonate in society at large are still up for evaluation.

Conceptual Framework

Ambiguity has been a key term in debates surrounding the meaning and reception of texts. Films often signify different things to different audiences, though the implications and mechanisms of this plurality vary widely across scholarly accounts. It does not help that the definition of ambiguity shifts with each scholar who uses it, leaving a seemingly disconnected trail of terms and perspectives circling around two fundamental questions: why are some texts able to convey multiple, sometimes contradictory

meanings, and what does this mean for the power relationship between senders and receivers? This chapter will not pretend to definitively answer these mysteries, but by defining "strategic ambiguity" as one perspective, I do hope to outline the rhetorical use value that ambiguity can serve in certain contexts.

I begin by summarizing existing academic approaches to understanding how texts (specifically war-themed texts) impart political messages, noting where each locates the abilities of senders and receivers to create meaning. After arguing the limitations of these perspectives, I propose "strategic ambiguity" as an alternative for analyzing the production and consumption of certain films. The second section of the chapter establishes the parameters of strategic ambiguity as it applies to filmmaking, and suggests how it relates to historical and textual norms in how Hollywood has ambiguated divisive content in its products.

Politics and the War Film

Critical analyses of war film politics generally fall into one of three categories. The first takes a political economy approach, examining how Hollywood's corporate interests structure the types of war-related materials it is willing to present. The military-industrial investments of the "Big 5" media conglomerates (Der Derian 2009) have led commentators to group movies with a slew of other cultural fixtures aiming to instill "the values and the aesthetic of militarization" into the general population (Giroux 2010, 191). As David Robb (2004) documents, the Department of Defense routinely grants budgetary and technical support for Hollywood productions, provided the films in question portray military life "accurately" and in line with recruitment goals. Rather than encouraging

critical thought on the destructiveness of conflict, Hollywood has thus propagandized us "to conceive war as a positive and necessary part of human experience" (Westwell 2006, 114). In this way, political economy approaches tend to take the underlying structures of media ownership and partnerships as either predetermining the political slant of most cinema, or making the nuances about the content of specific films essentially unimportant.

A second approach emphasizes textual analysis over macro economic structures. These scholars typically treat texts as embodying or demonstrating certain ideological tendencies or patterns, which the critic then "reveals" through the work of analysis. These analyses can be done for their own sake, but most often imply hidden or suggested meanings that audiences must either recognize or misinterpret. Oftentimes, these studies arrive at very similar conclusions as those working in the political economy tradition; that is, they suggest that an underlying militarism structures most war cinema. A common subgenre entails the analyst taking purportedly antiwar films and revealing how they actually reinforce American hegemony or glorify combat as spectacle (Isenberg 1975; Klien 2005; Springer 1988; Wetta and Novelli 2003). Other scholars read contradictions or oppositions within the text as indications of society's ambivalence toward the particular war represented (Rasmussen and Downey 1991; Tomasulo 1990).

If the first two groups emphasize industry and text, the third, which I will generally label as the reader response perspective, focuses on audiences. Rather than attaching definite meanings to films, these scholars break down textual processes into "encoding," where producers create their preferred meanings, and "decoding," where

viewers understand the work in potentially resistant ways (Hall 2001, 175-176). The text's creators may intend a specific meaning, but audiences still produce different readings, some of which may run counter to the original message. In the field of reception, texts are often *polysemic*, or open to multiple interpretations. John Fiske (1989, 57), for instance, examined how Australian Aboriginal groups oppositionally read Rambo as a "representative of the Third World" combating "white, postcolonial paternalism." Though not reception studies per say, Anthony Swofford's (2003, 5-7) recollections of his and other Marines' consumption of antiwar films as battle primers, and John Chambers's (2006, 48) observation that many 1930 spectators appreciated *All Quiet on the Western Front* as an "exciting action movie" also suggest that viewers are able to poach meanings from texts that their creators may not have intended. Ultimately, the viewer is capable of producing meanings "*from* the text, not *by* it" (Fiske 1989, 57), compiling readings of interest to themselves rather than receiving an imposed message wholesale (1986, 392).

Despite important differences, these three approaches display some problematic commonalities. Scholars generally assume that war films harbor specific political stances in the first place, whether audiences accept, misinterpret, or resist them. This is especially the case in political economy and textual analysis approaches, which, as many critics have noted, can be "alarmingly presumptuous" about the meanings contained within the texts without necessarily considering how other viewers have received them (Lewis 1991, 34). Insofar as films *do* or *mean* anything, they must do so in relation to audiences, and incorporating the perspective of these audiences is crucial (Gray and Lotz 2012, 57).

Reader response analyses are typically much better at considering these perspectives, but the encoding/decoding paradigm adopted by many reception scholars carries a similarly premature conclusion about how texts mean. For analyses of either hegemonic narratives or resistant readers to make sense, there is the presumption that texts indeed contain coherent "preferred meanings" which their Ideal Audience would take "full and straight," without detours or divergences (Hall 2001, 174). In other words, regardless of their theoretical paradigm, many media scholars take for granted the idea that media producers want to encode very precise meanings into their products. This assumption works well with some media texts, but it does leave out the more complex ways in which certain films are made for certain audiences in certain eras. Creators are not always invested in selling singularized messages to the public.

To the contrary, a producer's financial incentive is better served by opening movies to multiple points of access than by limiting them (Klinger 1989, 10). David Bordwell (2008) understands this as the tendency for filmmakers to push "a lot of our buttons without worrying whether what comes out is a coherent intellectual position." From an industry standpoint, the buck travels to the same pocket, regardless of what specific meanings audiences may find. In the ever-capricious world of the pleasure economy, producers are just as happy to know why their tickets sell for *particular* reasons, as they are to actually have their tickets sell for *whatever* reason. Provided that their image is not substantially or publically damaged, most companies are willing to open their products to the widest field of consumption possible. Such policies are less the result of "compromises" between dominant and marginal groups (Fiske 1987, 66), and

more the industry's understanding of audience taste as fickle and difficult to foresee.

What is needed is a means of analyzing war film politics that acknowledges deep intertwinements between cultural producers and their consumers without necessarily assuming the ideological strength of one side or the other (Streeter 1989, 89). Furthermore, it is important to account for Hollywood's heterogeneity. Not every war movie is the same. Different films employ varying strategies, depending on a period's social norms, the particular conflict depicted, precedents set by successful films of a similar vein, and the idiosyncrasy of the producers, directors, or screenwriters who worked on them. The modern Hollywood war machine is less a bloc of jingoistic recruiting posters than a diverse set of narratives able to accommodate many viewpoints about war and conflict, whether taken singularly or as a collected body of products.

Strategic Ambiguity Defined

Examining the political appeals of any film or group of films requires understanding the rhetorical strategies taken in creating them. In a 1998 article, rhetorician Leah Ceccarelli identifies "strategic ambiguity" as one way of understanding the polysemic interactions between producers and viewers. Ceccarelli defines strategic ambiguity as an author's insertion of multiple meanings into a text in order to attract otherwise conflicting groups of audiences. The work allows two or more otherwise conflicting audiences to unite in praise of the text, in belief that it uniquely corresponds with their worldviews or interests (Ceccarelli 1998, 404). Most importantly, the author largely premeditates this plurality of interpretations, and reaps the economic rewards of an expanded audience base. Ceccarelli writes, "with a single polysemous text, a rhetor

can gain celebrity by effectively appealing to two or more otherwise conflicting groups, each of which has its own reasons for favorably receiving the text" (ibid., 405). In other words, the text is able to skillfully present content to please opposing groups, while still remaining open enough that a single intended or "preferred" message is difficult to pin down. The text itself is promiscuous, but gives the appearance of monogamy to whoever read its.

This receptive approachability aligns strategic ambiguity quite comfortably with Hollywood's dominant styles of filmmaking. As Edward Branigan argues of classical Hollywood narratives:

> …the text sustains a reading which is generally compatible with whatever we *first* believe and does not usually demand a unique or counterintuitive explication. Normally, the classical narrative does not give the appearance of ambiguity, nor does it encourage multiple interpretations, but rather, like the chameleon, it is adaptable, resilient and accommodating. It will try to be what the spectator believes it to be. (1992, 97-8)

The strategically ambiguous text similarly combines elasticity with "excessive obviousness" (Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson 1985), distinguishing it from texts that are merely ambiguous. Ceccarelli (1998, 408) carefully differentiates strategic ambiguity from "hermeneutic depth," or texts that use their "multiplicity of meanings" to indicate complexity or aesthetic depth (a mode of filmmaking often associated with art cinema or "puzzle films"). Strategically ambiguous texts encourage a variety of viewer responses, but toward the goal of pleasing disparate groups around contentious topics. It is a thoroughly *economic* strategy. In contrast, texts of hermeneutic depth will highlight narrative gaps and discrepancies for the viewer in order to encourage arcane interpretation or "deeper" exploration of the themes presented (Bacon 2011, 39). It is a

more self-consciously *aesthetic* strategy (indeed, films of this type are less likely to be mainstream box office successes, due to their aura of being challenging). This distinction is not absolute. Some viewers may interpret a strategically ambiguous film as a complexly textured work, just as some hermeneutically deep films may profit financially from their openness. The takeaway is to recognize that strategic ambiguity functions less as an indicator of textual depth and more as a mechanism for attracting wider patronage.

This ability to bring diverse audiences together has made ambiguity important for representing controversial subjects. Hollywood is always, at its core, an industry governed by extreme economic paranoia. In the game of high-stakes investments and risk management, it is never certain how profitable a project will be (De Vany 2004, 4). Although today's corporations are often able to recoup costs through licensing and subsidiary sales (Epstein 2005), producers remain queasy about greenlighting controversial projects for wider release (McChesney 1999, 21). However, running parallel to the industry's economic conservatism is an equally expedient need to remain relevant to viewers. As Stephen Prince (2009, 286) argues, filmmakers are often eager to absorb what they perceive as the cultural *zeitgeist* into their narratives in order to increase their social timeliness. For filmmakers wishing to address a headliner controversy, strategic ambiguity allows them to do so without closing off specific groups. It is a win-win proposition from a producerly standpoint: audiences may interpret the work as politically important, while producers retain plausible deniability over whatever the text "actually" says. Further, this strategy is not one of removing politics from the text, as many critics have accused Hollywood of doing through its focus on interpersonal

narratives over larger controversies (Giglio 2005, 30), but rather a means of incorporating controversial sensibilities in order to attract different sides of the aisle.

Ambiguity's persuasive functions are a frequent topic for researchers studying strategic communication (Eisenberg 2007; Jarzabkowski, Sillince, and Shaw 2010; Wilson 1971), political rhetoric (Duncan 2011; Foss 1986), and advertising (Kates and Goh 2003; Puntoni, Vanhamme, and Visscher 2011). Less work has been done in film and media studies, with several exceptions (Comiskey 2011; Maltby 1996; Rockler 2001; Smith, Atkin, and Roznowski 2006). Some media scholars have discussed how some films, particularly blockbuster and market-saturated ones, become stretched across so many disparate platforms and cultural terrains that almost any viewer can see the text as mirroring their experiences and self-image (Austin 2002, 28; Campbell 2008; Sandvoss 2005, 126-127). However, despite the volumes published on cinema's multi-interpretive qualities, most critics remain curiously hush about how mainstream movies may be strategically ambiguous by design. Some cultural studies scholars have acknowledged that a text's polysemy expands its audience base (Fiske 1989, 104; Lewis 1991, 1994), but they often treat this as an inevitable part of the text's semiotic structure rather than a purposeful strategy of its creators.

The rhetorical strength of this strategy lies in the ability for texts to shift levels of meaning and valuation, conveying a sense of controversy while also supporting multiple perspectives on that controversy. According to David Bordwell (1989, 8-9), viewers are always able to view films along *explicit* meanings indicating denotative understandings of characters, story, and narrative events (literally, what happens), as well as *implicit*

meanings sticking these explicit cues onto larger semantic fields (what these happenings mean or represent). Critics like Celeste Condit (1989) have drawn from this split, arguing that audiences usually agree about most texts' explicit and implicit meanings, and simply vary in their positive or negative evaluation of them. The majority of texts are therefore *polyvalent*, as opposed to truly polysemic.

Rather than taking an absolute stance in this debate about explicitness or implicitness, I will treat strategic ambiguity as a mode of textuality that can slide across several registers of meaning, understanding, and ambiguity. It is worth pausing here to clarify. When watching a film, viewers may distinguish between the belief systems of individual characters and what messages the text as a whole is trying to communicate. For example, a character may overtly express pro-war sentiments, but a viewer could still interpret the overall film as antiwar depending on how s/he perceives the narrative's treatment of and attitude toward that character. Given this, a strategically ambiguous text could conceivably operate along *either* this micro-level of character *or* a macro understanding of the full narrative. In the first instance, audiences may understand the explicit actions of a character, but diverge about what ideology she or he represents (different viewers could, for instance, disagree about whether a character is actually pro- or antiwar). This would be an example of strategic ambiguity operating polysemically. In the second instance, disagreement may arise not about the motivations or beliefs of the characters (e.g. everyone could agree that the figure is pro-war), but rather about the larger attitudes of the text (e.g. whether the film supports or condemns these sentiments). This would be strategic ambiguity operating polyvalently.

Accordingly, an analysis of strategic ambiguity must maintain a careful balance between the processes of production and the different layers through which viewers ultimately read the text. The following two chapters examine how ambiguity has structured cinematic depictions of America's post-9/11 military excursions in the Middle East. I argue that the risks of representing the wars led filmmakers to attach discourses of apoliticality and neutrality to their works in order to leave them politically open. These discourses are observable in the production and promotion of these films, as well as the ways the texts themselves frame moral questions about war. By answering how and why filmmakers made these creative choices, I illustrate the utility that ambiguity serves, and provide a framework for understanding the ways in which viewers react to them.

Chapter 2: Encoding the War Drama

Like any genre, war films have adapted to changing cultural and industrial conditions over time. The routines of producing war movies have evolved markedly over the past several decades, consistent with the shifting role of the genre in Hollywood's annual catalog, as well as the public's general perceptions about war and conflict. As Barry Langford (2005, 107-108) notes, the types of representations the industry is willing to make on any particular war depend on that conflict's shifting cultural status (e.g. World War II pictures tend to highlight honor and purposeful sacrifice, while those around World War I or Vietnam emphasize futility or brutality). This chapter has two interlocking pieces. First, relying on trade reports and interviews, I argue that socioeconomic conditions around the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan from 2003 to 2009 made strategic ambiguity a viable tactic for cinematically representing the politics of the conflicts. Second, I examine how this production strategy helped to structure the presentation of politics on a textual level, drawing from the 2007 film *Grace Is Gone* as a case study.

Constraints and Conditions

Showcasing Iraq or Afghanistan on the silver screen has proven risky to filmmakers for three primary reasons: (1) heuristic reading tendencies, (2) unstable polling, and (3) mass distribution. First, the presentation of war (especially specific ones) invites potentially strong reactions from spectators holding strong stances on the topic. When mentally processing their opinions on various issues, voters (and by extension,

viewers) tend to rely on small sets of attitudinal predispositions that can efficiently sort

out what their "proper" reaction should be. Paul Goren has suggested that Americans use

their opinions on the military as a prominent heuristic for determining overall political

orientations. In this way, citizens can evaluate specific situations in ways consistent with

larger predispositions and, crucially, can do so "automatically upon exposure" rather than

after prolonged thought (Goren 2012, 8). Thus, when someone views a depiction of a

war, they will likely judge its morality according to their existing attitudes toward that

war, or toward war in general (Sniderman, Brody, and Tetlock 1991).

In addition to maintaining relatively stable viewpoints on war, heuristic

tendencies also guide most subjects toward attitude-consistent messages. Subjects not

only prefer messages that reinforce existing viewpoints, but tend to actively avoid

sources they suspect as counter-attitudinal (Knobloch-Westerwick and Meng 2011;

Stroud 2008). In economic terms, a text with explicit judgments about a controversial

issue will likely narrow its potential audience market. Depending on the producer's

targeting goals, this may not be financially negative; but no matter how it is sliced,

unambiguous political alignments around prickly topics are very risky. For texts aiming

to appeal to wider swaths of the population, they are also particularly ill-advised.

A second difficulty involves fluctuating popular support regarding Iraq and

Afghanistan. The controversy surrounding the conflicts proved slippery to measure from

2003 through 2009. According to the Pew Research Center (2008), U.S. public support

for the war in Iraq fell from nearly 72 percent before the 2003 invasion to only 43 percent

by 2007, with the most volatile fluctuations between support and opposition occurring

from 2005 and early 2007. Polling on the conflict in Afghanistan has also shown a steady

downward decline in approval. Given the years it may take to develop a single film

project, there was little guarantee that public consensus on the conflicts would be the

same at release as it was when greenlit. Combined with viewers' heuristic tendencies,

these polls suggest that, although viewers were likely to have concrete personal reactions

to war representations, it was difficult to predict precisely where most of these reactions

would align (Corliss 2006).

A third roadblock to war-related content becomes apparent when examining the

industry's distribution networks, both domestic and worldwide. Since the 1980s,

expansion and conglomeration of Hollywood's distribution companies have dramatically

broadened the industry's hold over markets overseas. The major media corporations

increasingly rely on international audiences to fill their coffers, reaping between 50 to 60

percent of profits from them by the late 1990s (McChesney 1999, 80) and nearly 70

percent by 2011 (McClintock 2012). Although scholars have historically conceptualized

Hollywood as an American institution, it is evident that, as Frederick Wasser argues, "on

a per capita basis the American viewer is of no more importance than any other member

of the global audience" (1995, 424). The majors must therefore be attuned to how to sell

their stories beyond U.S. public opinion, including those about American excursions in

the Middle East that have been opposed internationally (BBC World Service 2007).

The picture of distribution remains complex even if we concentrate on trends

stateside. The contemporary film industry rests on a handful of expensive tentpoles

amenable to franchising and cross-platform expansions. However, the industry's yearly

output is primarily filled by smaller titles made either in-house through subsidiary companies or purchased from independent production labels. Media scholars have cogently argued that these new norms are splintering the mass audience of yore into niches of similarly-minded consumers (see e.g. Turow 1997). While many films are now more micro-targeted than ever before, it remains important to consider how newer strategies coexist alongside older ones. Even if a film reaches a narrower section of the population, this does not necessarily suggest uniformity in that audience's belief and value systems. Furthermore, the proliferation of home viewing platforms, from which Hollywood now generates most of its profits, has maintained semblances of the earlier mass audience. Even niche pictures can have surprisingly robust appeal on home video, attracting varieties of viewers who would otherwise share little in common (Wasser 2001, 14). In short, "Hollywood" is less a monolithic economic force than a variegated alliance of productions, strategies, and trends. Some big films are made to go big, some small films are made to go small, and some small films may become big, if they are lucky.

Given these three conditions—heuristic reading, unstable polling, and mass distribution—it is unsurprising that major studios have approached the subjects of Iraq and Afghanistan cautiously. Hollywood was similarly reticent about initially depicting the Vietnam War onscreen, waiting until years after the conflict's completion when public controversy was more settled (Barker 2011, 70; Jaafar 2008). Recent filmmakers have been slightly more direct in their coverage of the wars, but the confluence of economic and social demands has affected what kinds of stories most of them are willing to tell. From 2003 to 2009, the cultural prominence of Iraq and Afghanistan arguably

served contradictory dual purposes, compelling filmmakers to narratively address the conflicts while simultaneously shaping the types of representations that could be made of them.

Framing the Wars

The so-called War on Terror has made generally oblique or passing appearances in American film over the past decade. Themes of terrorism and surveillance have surfaced in countless productions since the September 11 attacks, spanning everything from superhero movies (*The Dark Knight* [2008]), to rightwing comedies (*Delta Farce* [2007], *An American Carol* [2008]), to romances (*Dear John* [2010]).[1] As Stephen Prince argues, filmmakers are often eager to absorb what they perceive as pieces of the cultural *zeitgeist* into their narratives as a way of increasing their relevance (2009, 286). Despite this thematic prevalence, comparatively fewer have directly dealt with the Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts, their politics, and their devastation.

Among the more prominent exceptions has been a series of left-leaning political documentaries questioning the legality of U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East (e.g. *Control Room* [2004], *Fahrenheit 9/11* [2004], *Why We Fight* [2005], *No End in Sight* [2007]*, Taxi to the Dark Side* [2007], *Standard Operating Procedure* [2008]). Most of these films were produced independently, marketed directly to antiwar audiences, and distributed in limited release through one of the majors' subsidiary arms before achieving successful lives in the home market (*Fahrenheit 9/11*, which reached a wide release of over 2,000 theaters, is a notable exception).[2] Narrative features about the wars have been fewer and farther between. There have been several wide releases set in "ground-level"

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combat zones (e.g. *The Kingdom* [2007], *Body of Lies* [2008], *The Hurt Locker* [2008], *Green Zone* [2010]). These titles tend to veer toward the action/thriller format, with high-octane chase or shootouts serving as narrative centerpieces, though some of them briefly address the morality of retributive justice.

The overwhelming majority of narrative films, however, fall more comfortably into what we may call the "homefront" war drama. Given their prominence, I shall confine the remainder of my analysis to these features, though many of their traits are arguably on display in other films as well. This somber and brooding subgenre focuses almost exclusively on the domestic consequences inflicted by combat. Most of the narratives focus on the struggles of veterans returning home and readjusting to civilian life, or their families struggling to cope with life without them. The list of titles includes wider releases such as *In the Valley of Elah* (2007), *Stop-Loss* (2008), *Brothers* (2009), and *The Lucky One* (2012); limited releases like *Home of the Brave* (2006), *Grace Is Gone* (2007), *The Lucky Ones* (2008), and *The Messenger* (2009); independently-released and direct-to-DVD fare like *Badland* (2007), *Homeland* (2009), *The Dry Land* (2010), and *Return* (2011); and made-for-TV movies like *Taking Chance* (2009) and the horror satire *Homecoming* (2005).

I would not categorize all of these films as strategically ambiguous, but their textual and extra-textual commonalities do imply a general cautiousness in how U.S. filmmakers have approached the war. Moviemakers directly dealing with Iraq or Afghanistan have faced contradictory industrial pressures guiding the appropriateness and boundaries of their representation of politics. The cultural prominence of the wars

makes them at once topics best left avoided and subjects that must somehow be
addressed.

Operating on relatively small budgets, many of these films asked for and received
support from the Department of Defense. *Grace Is Gone*, *The Lucky Ones, The
Messenger, The Dry Land,* and *Taking Chance* all thank the Department of Defense or
U.S. military in their ending credits for assistance with locations or for hardware loans.[3]
It is difficult to determine why the Pentagon assisted any particular film or if revisions
were made to the production as a result, though press releases for *The Dry Land* claimed
the military saw the movie as a public service call for veterans with post-traumatic stress
disorder (PTSD) to seek help (Debruge 2009, 30). At the very least, the Pentagon's
support suggests that some officials saw the films as serving military interests in some
way.

The majority of homefront dramas were filmed under independent production
houses before being bought and distributed by the larger studios. Encouraged by the
success of politically-minded features like *Syriana* (2005) and *An Inconvenient Truth*
(2005), distributors were curious about the initial slew of war-themed films for sale in
2006 and 2007 (Thompson 2008, 8). *Home of the Brave*, one of the earliest homefront
films bought by a major studio, is case in point. Unable to secure financing from major
U.S. studios, the film was jointly produced by the smaller Millennium Films and
Emmett/Furla Films. MGM ultimately bought rights to the movie, but only after a forty
minute preview was screened for executives at the Cannes Film Festival, where the studio
was trying to measure global interest in "hot-button pics." Director Irwin Winkler

commented that MGM wanted to see "what the film looked like" before purchasing (LaPorte 2006). In what would become a recurring line in the trade presses, executives openly voiced interest in screening content of political import, so long as such films were "entertaining, not just well intentioned" (Garrett 2007b, 38).

This concern with selling political material as "entertaining" certainly informed the marketing strategies deployed by most distributors and filmmakers. Surprisingly, the directors of many of the earliest war dramas were rather forthright in interviews throughout 2006 and 2007 about their critical views of the Bush administration. Irwin Winkler (2006) implied in one interview that only antiwar viewers would truly understand the predicaments of his veteran characters. *In the Valley of Elah* and *Redacted* (2007) directors Paul Haggis (2008) and Brian De Palma (2007) were even more open, condemning U.S. foreign policy outright in multiple public appearances and even positioning their films as counterpoints to Hollywood's "rightwing" production machine.

This directorial openness began to fade by late 2007 as box office numbers began to roll in. Disappointing opening returns for war-themed films like *The Kingdom, In the Valley of Elah*, and *Home of the Brave* prompted producers and filmmakers to take noticeably evasive positions regarding their work's political positions (Garrett 2007a). Apparently recognizing that there was not a satisfyingly robust niche for fictional war dramas, the industry devised new promotional tactics to emphasize aspects of the films that might resonate with wider audiences. With 2008's *Stop-Loss*, the story of a soldier whose tour of duty is involuntarily extended following his return home, studios began to downplay the war in their marketing campaigns, focusing instead on the film's MTV

production label and appealing young cast members. One marketer commented, "Any movie that deals with the war has to find another way in [to consumers]. So we're in this weird situation [where] the more a movie like this is about contemporary issues, the less you can talk about them in your marketing" (Zeitchik 2008, 3).

Directors, producers, and stars also grew more assiduous in their promotional comments. Taking care to not prime potential viewers into associating the films with concrete political persuasions, production members attempted to weave discourses of neutrality or apoliticality around their work. Their concerns, they contended, were with honestly depicting the real struggles of homecoming soldiers instead of contributing to any partisan banter. *Brothers* director Jim Sheridan (2010b) summarized this best in one online interview: "Everybody is afraid of the politics and afraid of saying the wrong thing because the boys are at war and we don't want to stab in them in the back." For Sheridan and many others, honoring the troops ran part and parcel with "keeping politics out" of both the films and discussions around them (Sheridan 2010a). *The Dry Land* director Ryan Piers Williams (2010) argued that his work had no "political agenda." Oren Moverman of *The Messenger* asserted that, despite his film's assistance from the military, it was not "propaganda" because its focus was on "real" stories rather than political appeals (2010b, 54-55). "There are no politics in this movie," Moverman claimed in a separate interview, "No right wing patriotism or left wing patriotism. It's a movie that takes an 'in war' perspective, not anti-war or pro-war" (Moverman 2010a).

Microscaling the focus away from broader commentary also held a timely appeal. Liza Johnson, whose film *Return* never mentions whether its veteran protagonist served

in Iraq or Afghanistan, defended her work's lack of political specificity by citing its increase in historical "relevancy":

> In some ways we didn't say where she had been deployed just because I had been working on that film for years, you know what I mean? I think I wrote it in 2008 and when I wrote it people were very interested in Iraq, but not Afghanistan. When we shot it people were very interested in Afghanistan and not so much interested in Iraq. And I guess in some ways that literal thing about not naming the place was more like an effort to just make the film felt and relevant even though we didn't know what kind of historical context it would emerge into. (Johnson 2012)

Realizing the shifting nature of public opinion on the wars, Johnson was careful to avoid "policy questions" about any particular conflict. By focusing too intensely on judgments surrounding one of the wars, *Return* would run the risk of alienating potential viewers if its positions seemed too "outdated" by the time of release.

When not asserting that their films were void of politics, cast and crew typically framed their claims of bipartisanship through arguments about textual openness. Rather than compelling the viewer to adopt a defined set of viewpoints, homefront dramas were interested in posing questions, opening debates, or stirring pots without ever prompting viewers to settle on definite solutions. Promoting his Afghanistan-themed drama *Lions for Lambs* (2007), director Robert Redford repeatedly emphasized that he "just wanted the audience to think about" the wars, and not give "them any answers other than 'what did you feel about this?'" (Redford 2007). Liza Johnson and star Linda Cardellini held similar hopes for *Return*, stating that their goal was to "open up discourse" about veterans rather than telling audiences what to believe (Johnson and Cardellini 2012). Combined with the parallel discourses of apoliticality and neutrality, nearly all filmmakers labored to frame their works as less overtly political than "those other [i.e. less successful] films"

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made about the conflict (Peirce 2008).

It is tempting to take these promotional frames at face value, reading the (individual or industrial) intentionality behind the films as politically innocuous. Numerous critics and academics have done precisely that, accusing these filmmakers and their features of political cowardice for emphasizing human interest stories over the larger sociopolitical context of the wars (Anderson 2006; Burris 2010, 12; Cronin 2010; Gosline 2008; Scott 2010). Relying primarily on statements by cast and crew, Violaine Roussel argues that under the "voluntarily a-partisan" strategy concocted by filmmakers, "the political—and even the civic—intention of the film ends up being 'neutralized,' highly euphemized, if not denied" (2010, 144). Several commentators have gone even further, suggesting that the focus around returning veterans and their interpersonal dramas functions as backhanded war apologia (Blackmore 2012a, 2012b). By confining public attention to the stories of U.S. soldiers, homefront films contribute to larger yellow ribbon discourses preaching supporting the troops as a means of rallying mass enthusiasm for the military (see Kellner 1992, 244-245; Stahl 2010, 29-31).

Rather than accepting production personnel's statements as direct portals into their films' intentions, we should concentrate on the greater rhetorical functions that such statements serve. As John Caldwell argues,

> interviews with and statements by producers and craftspeople in film can be conceptually rich, theoretically suggestive, and culturally revealing, yet we should never lose sight of the fact that such statements are almost always offered from some perspective of self interest, promotion, and spin. (2008, 14)

For many homefront dramas, a convergence of industrial and social factors, from the pressure for wider audience markets to the fluctuations in public polling on the War on

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Terror, produced an environment where neutrality and apoliticality were seen as promotionally necessary. However, the ubiquity of this cautious discourse suggests that filmmakers realized their works dealt with potentially *very* political content. As one *Variety* writer noted, *any* movie released during an unpopular war "is bound to be tinged by politics" (Thompson 2008, 8). It is less that these films were actually apolitical and more that producers had to be strategic about not priming potential viewers into thinking their films carried "biased" messages. By dodging issues of partisanship for claims about realism or textual openness, they permitted audiences to more easily fit the narratives into their own political frameworks.

Even the films' imbrications with yellow ribbon discourses do not limit their potential ambiguity. Although critics have (quite rightly) problematized the ways in which "support the troops" rhetoric frames debate about U.S. military excursions, it does not necessarily homogenize or "infantilize" public opinion around them (Kellner 1992, 244). In fact, yellow ribbons can accommodate an array of both pro- and antiwar sentiments, as evidenced by the popular protest slogan "Support the Troops: Bring Them Home." As Stephen Klien (2005) has argued, recent pro-soldier discourses have coincided with the rise of popular consensus that war is generally deplorable, brutal, and hellish. Klien criticizes these discourses as continuing dominant values about the military, but it is important to recognize that they permit certain permutations of opposition nevertheless (see Herbst 1995, 37).

In short, it is not that homefront dramas are apolitical so much as they represent politics in particular ways resulting from their wider distribution goals. Rather than

depicting combat or battlefronts as war films have often done for World War I through Vietnam, homefront dramas frame their representations around interpersonal dramas involving soldiers and their families. Compare this against films like *Redacted* and *Battle for Haditha* (2007), all of which received their primary funding and distribution outside the major studios, and which graphically feature U.S. soldiers committing atrocities against Iraqi civilians. Similarly, homefront drama *Badland* was financed and distributed through European companies, and depicts an Iraq veteran murdering his wife during a PTSD-induced rage; director Francesco Lucente stated that he chose this financial route because he "wanted to be true" to his film's explicit antiwar message (Grove 2007). For most homefront dramas, however, achieving wider exposure entailed particular strategies of representation—not politically void, but politically pleasing for different demographics.

These strategies are not only implied by the films' industrial histories, but also suggested within each text's narrative construction. Due to space constraints, the next section examines one homefront drama, *Grace Is Gone*, as a case study. I selected *Grace Is Gone* because its production history and textual strategies are representative of many of these movies. By combining industry research with close textual analysis, I illustrate how the film encoded its politics in a strategically ambiguous way for positive cross-ideological reception.

Grace Is Gone

Grace Is Gone tells the story of Stanley (John Cusack), an introverted middle-class father living in Minnesota. Upon learning of his wife Grace's death during her tour

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of duty in Iraq, Stanley struggles to inform his two young daughters Heidi (Shélan O'Keefe) and Dawn (Gracie Bednarczyk) that their mother is not coming home. Unable to break the news, he takes them on an impromptu road trip to Enchanted Gardens, a Florida amusement park. He and Heidi bond over the journey, discussing adulthood, hope, and the uncertainties of wartime, all the while Stanley struggles to protect his girls from the realities of the war and their mother's death. By the penultimate scene, Stanley finally summons the courage to tell his daughters the truth. The family grieves and the film ends as father and daughters prepare to move forward with their lives.

The film's production was typical for an independent feature. Writer-director James Strouse developed the screenplay in early 2005 and circulated it through Plum Pictures. The project picked up steam when John Cusack, eager for a story "about the human cost of war," expressed interest in the lead role and agreed to also serve as producer. Cusack's name helped secure financing from investors in Kentucky and Arkansas, and overall production costs ultimately totaled a relatively meager $3 million (Goldstein 2007). The film debuted at the 2007 Sundance Film Festival where, by all accounts, it was a tremendous success, winning an audience award for best drama (Markert 2011, 270) and sparking a fierce bidding war between the Weinstein Company, Fox Searchlight, Sony Pictures Classics, and others for international distribution rights. Amidst early excitement in 2007 about the potential for "timely" war-themed product, the Weinstein Co. purchased the film for $4 million with the hope of building an awards season campaign around Cusack's performance (Goldstein 2007).

The distribution and marketing of *Grace Is Gone* involved contradictory political

sentiments. John Cusack, a very vocal antiwar advocate, expressed hope that the film would "have a great role in helping the national debate" about Iraq, but the specifics of this role remained murky (ibid). When asked by one interviewer if the filming of *Grace* was a political act, Cusack voiced conflicting stances: "I don't think it's a political film. But I think everything has some politics to it. It's just whether or not it admits to it. Politics is weird. I don't even know what that means any more." However, pressed further by the interviewer whether the film presented "pro-war and anti-war viewpoints so it would be accessible to both sides," Cusack answered in the affirmative. In portraying the conservative Stanley, he wished to respectfully present "different points of view" from his own (Cusack 2007).

Harvey Weinstein justified his distribution deal for the picture in similar terms. An outspoken Iraq War critic himself, Weinstein toggled between statements that the film transcended any partisan agenda (Goldstein 2007) and a belief that it would "work better as an antiwar film if we leave politics" out of the marketing campaign (Zeitchik and McClintock 2007). The company's advertising strategy followed suit, emphasizing the movie's social import while distinguishing it from more openly "politicized" features about the war. Said one marketing executive at the Weinstein Co.,

> Fortunately, 'Grace Is Gone' is not a typical Iraq movie…It's a movie about family. Its setting against Iraq makes it timely, relevant and, sure, somewhat controversial. But because the main theme, while serious, is ultimately emotional and uplifting, it should easily be able to separate itself from the heavier and medicinal Iraq/war on terror fare that the marketplace has seen recently. (Schiller 2007, 2)

Director Strouse was perhaps the most agnostic about his film's politics, arguing on several occasions that the film's primary strength was its "nonjudgmental" take on the

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war. "I didn't want any one character to feel like they had the truth," he said to the

Hollywood Reporter. "I hope *everyone* feels troubled and moved and connected

emotionally" (Goldstein 2007, emphasis mine). In addition to making the film more

inclusive, Strouse also felt that his film's polyvocality served its claims to realism. "I

would never make Stanley a mouthpiece for a dramatic idea or to criticize the

administration because it didn't feel true...You get away from the truth when you start

politicizing the story" (Strouse 2008).

  Grace Is Gone achieved mixed results financially. Its domestic theatrical release

was not as successful as the Weinsteins had initially hoped, accumulating only $50,000

from a total of seven theaters. These numbers do not actually suggest much about

audience engagement, given the film's low theatrical distribution and the surprisingly

small ad campaign that the Weinsteins ended up approving for it.[4] Relative to its stateside

performance, the film did perform better overseas, achieving relatively wide distribution

in 23 countries from 2007 to 2010 (see e.g. De Pablo 2007) and earning $1 million in

international receipts (95.2% of its total theatrical box office). Its home market life ended

up being much more lucrative. As of 2011, *Grace* has generated $10 million in DVD

sales and an additional $35 million in worldwide rentals (Markert 2011, 270). Given the

movie's cheap production and marketing costs, it is not a stretch to label it an overall

financial success.

  Between its international distribution and revenue, cautious promotion, and

homefront setting, it is clear that *Grace Is Gone* was created inclusively for a

heterogeneous audience. This goal ultimately informed the representational choices taken

in depicting Stanley and his daughters' morose cross-country trip. Examining these choices, most academics writing on *Grace* have pigeonholed it as a conservative work. Douglas Kellner argues that Stanley's lack of self-reflection throughout the film reflects the film's own inability to "see its limitations and complicity in a failed war" (2010, 226). John Markert describes the film as "unequivocally prowar" because it suggests that Grace died serving her country proudly (2011, 299). Tim Blackmore contends that *Grace* and its cinematic kin so de-contextualize the politics of the war that no criticism of its underlying policies or legality is possible (2012a, 300).

Contrary to these critics, the industrial and creative climate around *Grace Is Gone* did not produce a text that is unequivocally liberal or conservative, so much as it created an equivocal text neither simply left nor simply right. This point bears repeating. The politics of *Grace Is Gone* are ambiguous in such a way that viewers of either liberal or conservative persuasion can find material of favor to them. The narrative of the film strategically establishes what we may call "floating moral polarities" between characters, allowing figures of competing political orientations to voice their stances on the wars, but without directly resolving who is right or who is wrong. Furthermore, the narrative is open enough that its textual cues can support any viewer's disagreement or agreement with any particular character.

These textual process should be observable within the film itself, though the particular aspects in which they arise are open for debate. In order to discuss specific scenes of *Grace Is Gone* that are strategically ambiguous, I turned to a group of 98 undergraduates who participated in an audience survey around the film (detailed in the

next chapter). All of the survey participants viewed the film and answered several short answer prompts, one of which asked which, if any, scenes stood out as particularly "political." I tallied the number of mentions for each scene in order to form a list of the movie's most political moments by consensus. One particular scene appeared in more than half of the survey responses, far more than any other (coincidentally, it was also the one I found most openly political upon first viewing). In what follows, I provide a brief textual analysis of that scene to provide a representative sense of how the film handles politics on the whole.

Twenty-five minutes into *Grace Is Gone*, conservative Stanley and his two daughters visit his left-leaning brother John (Alessandro Nivola), a Generation X-er still living with his and Stanley's mother. Sitting over the dinner table, John expresses his opinion that Iraq looks like a "fucking mess." Stanley, who has not yet revealed his wife's combat death to anyone in the room, warns John about his inappropriate language in front of the children and quietly suggests that "you don't know what you're talking about anyway." The two continue back and forth, disagreeing on the necessity of supporting the Bush administration, before John turns and asks the girls for their opinions. Cutting off his eldest daughter before she begins to speak, Stanley interjects that "they think it's easy to criticize the situation when you're sitting in your mom's living room" and that John's opinions are "a freedom that their mother fights for daily" on his behalf. John gets in the last word, sarcastically responding, "Well, it's good to see that you let [your daughters] think for themselves."

Throughout the scene, John and Stanley are framed in single shots as they deliver

their respective lines, but the view switches intermittently to a wider shot of Stanley's daughters looking sullen on the opposite end of the table. Since the viewer does not become privy to their thoughts about Iraq, they sit as uncomfortable observers to their father and uncle's conversation, which remains unresolved. Their presence helps orient the film's own stated position on the war—watching but not participating, understanding but not judging. In the end, it leaves the judging to the audiences by opening two equally plausible narrative pathways—one in which John is correct and the war is wrong, and one in which Stanley is correct and the war is necessary. Viewers in the former pathway can point toward Stanley's stubborn denial of his wife's death as an indication that John is right about the war's destructiveness. Viewers in the latter pathway, however, could take John's ignorance of Grace's death, as well as his waffling about a decision to go to graduate school earlier in the scene, as evidence that he indeed "doesn't know what he is talking about." The scene is at once "obvious" *and* elastic, able to accommodate several narrative and political schemas without much difficulty. Without a firm anchor for the film's overall political stances, a hypothetical viewer could fashion a compelling argument for why either Stanley or John's position represent the politics of the scene.

Of course, textual and industrial factors only partially account for what is seen onscreen. The rest of the picture is completed by the seer her or himself, interpreting and understanding the text's materials in alignment with her or his predispositions. Filmmakers around the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan may have approached their content in expediently open ways, but they did so only because they feared the consequences of not incorporating a potentially diverse audience base into their work. Without considering

what the audience does with this content, any examination of strategic ambiguity's operation can only be speculative. The next chapter attempts to address this gap, suggesting ways in which the ambiguity of the text may translate into the response of the reader.

Chapter 3: Reception and *Grace Is Gone*

Although strategic ambiguity acts as a producer-driven rhetorical tactic, it is only by situating it within a wider receptive field that one can argue how this tactic operates. Accordingly, this chapter further contextualizes the political content of homefront war dramas by considering how audiences may receive them. Using *Grace Is Gone* as a case study, I examine the various interpretations made about the film's position toward the Iraq War across online message boards and my own written survey. By comparing viewers' reactions against their prior political sympathies, we may make conclusions about not only how audience positionality affects perceptions of political content, but also the ways in which the text accommodates and flatters these perceptions. Specifically, I ask, What do audiences read these elements as conveying? Do they see the films as being consciously ambiguous, or do they "fill in" their own interpretations in ways that seem *un*ambiguous? Do viewers' existing political orientations affect how they read and evaluate the films? Do audiences of differing political backgrounds actually see the films as overtly "political?"

An important disclaimer before continuing. Consistent with a spirit of scholastic contingency, my goal in this section is not to provide objective data about *Grace Is Gone*'s political sympathies, nor is it to approach anything resembling a comprehensive sample of every possible viewer or reading. It is also not my intention to have my conclusions stand as perfect reconstructions of spectators' thought processes as they actually watched the film. Spectatorship and interpretation are fluid, ephemeral processes that cannot be entirely retraced or circumscribed within clean categories. Viewers often

respond to texts in unexpected ways, and any number of factors can impact their reactions. Some may even respond favorably to content contrary to their personal convictions. Given these uncertainties, studies in reception will, to an extent, always be exercises in contingency—"fragmentary and revisable," though no less useful for it (Crafton 1996, 478). Audience research is a powerful complement to our textual and production analyses, helping us to situate texts within larger cultural patterns and substantiate arguments about their overall meanings (Stromer-Galley and Schiappa 1998; Schiappa 2008). By charting some of the regularities in how viewers have responded to *Grace Is Gone*, this chapter hopes to do precisely that.

Online Message Boards

I initially examined reactions to *Grace Is Gone* posted online through message boards and consumer review sites. I pooled hundreds of comments written by visitors to Amazon, Netflix, Rotten Tomatoes (a movie review aggregator site), and the Internet Movie Database (IMDb). Given this large and diverse sample, I considered only those reactions whose writers offered an explicit interpretation about the political position of the text or used the perceived politics as grounds for praising or deriding it. Accordingly, comments pertaining to character motivation, the realism of the story, actor performances, or technical details such as music or cinematography were not considered, unless the writer explicitly tied such remarks to a discussion of the movie's political ideology.

By and large, online commenters received the film positively, whether they perceived it as liberal, conservative, or neither. The majority of writers who brought up

politics did so to praise *Grace Is Gone* for lacking a concrete position on the Iraq war. To many viewers, the movie tastefully avoided any partisan agenda. "The film is not political," said one IMDb reviewer, "It is purely personal. In every war, just or otherwise, there are human casualties. This film is about one such casualty, it takes no political sides [sic]." Another writer at Rotten Tomatoes similarly admired the film for focusing on "universal" experiences of grief and loss rather than "politicizing Stan's experiences."

This should not be taken to mean that all of these viewers necessarily read *Grace* as entirely depoliticized. It is striking how many commentators held that the film featured contrasting political positions, but remained "fair and balanced" in presenting them. One Netflix review contended that the film gives "points on both sides of the political stand without be[ing] one sided," while another on Rotten Tomatoes states that, regarding Iraq, "there are parts [of the movie] that seem one way, and others the opposite." Other posters vouch for the ability to please all constituencies, vouching that neither pro- nor antiwar viewers have anything to fear from the film's message. One IMDb writer goes so far as to claim that the movie "has no intentional commentary about the military" at all: "If you think it's defending the military, that only tells us how YOU feel…it says nothing about the movie." Here, the poster attempts to distinguish the "objective" qualities of the film from any "political agenda" it could be put toward, ultimately praising the movie for its perceived neutrality.

Nevertheless, many other reviewers did take the film as voicing a concretely antiwar position. Several posters (presumably opposed to the war) bestowed high ratings on the film for highlighting the war's devastating impact on military families back home.

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For example, an IMDb poster writes, "It is a very powerful pacifist statement against any

war because of the human cost and the conflicting human reactions to war." Another

writer argued on Amazon, "the movie really drives home the point that it's people such as

these families who really got screwed over." In these instances, the viewers took the grief

of Stanley and his daughters as indicating the film's opposition to the war. One Amazon

reviewer even interpreted Stanley's somber disposition throughout the movie as his

expression of guilt for supporting the "Republican policies" that led to the conflict that

killed his wife. Other observers used extratextual knowledge about actor John Cusack's

real-life opposition to the war as a signal of the film's "true" antiwar intentions.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, some commentators positively interpreted

the same elements as supporting a pro-war platform. Generally, these reviewers

applauded *Grace Is Gone* for its patriotic portrayal of ordinary Americans bonding

together under difficult circumstances. Oftentimes, they counterposed the film's

"respectful" attitude against what they saw as the military-bashing norm of the "liberal

media." For instance, one IMDb commenter contends, "it was such a breath of fresh air to

see the independent film industry actually defending the military." Another poster,

responding to a comment on IMDb about John Cusack's political slant, keenly points out

that conservative Clint Eastwood composed the film's soundtrack.

Of course, not all reactions to the film were positive. Some viewers read the

film's politics as contrary to their own and consequently derided it as either war apologia

or "liberal crap." Others indicated irritation that the film did not address the theme of war

with adequate depth. Stated dislike of the film on these grounds was relatively rare,

however, and those commentators who criticized *Grace Is Gone* for a perceived political slant often met sharp disagreement from the other members of the sites.

Using this content to support a larger analysis is not without its problems. Given the anonymity of responses, it was difficult to correlate them against the posters' prior political orientations. Further, those who bothered to post their opinions were more likely to have reacted to the film strongly, making the spectrum of available comments skew toward the highly positive and highly negative. The process of selection also became problematic. Given the virtually bottomless pool of materials available online, any analysis is bound to feature a fair amount of cherry-picking to support the desired hypotheses. While no completely objective arrangement of audience data is possible, and the interpretations of a useful few will almost always be used to index the many (Crafton 1996, 460), examining a more contained pool of spectators allows my conclusions to be more methodologically defensible. In the following section, I examine such a defined set using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods through a survey of undergraduate viewers.

Survey

Participants

I recruited participants from an introductory communications course at the University of Minnesota. Students were offered extra credit for their involvement. A total of 122 students began the study, with 98 completing it in full. Seventy-two percent were between 18 and 21 years old, 20% were between 22 and 25, and 8% between 26 and 51, with a mean age of 22. The group comprised 64% women, 35% men and 1% identifying

as transgender. Nearly 76% identified as White/Caucasian, 17% as Asian/Pacific Islander, 5% as Black or African American, 1% as American Indian, and 1% as Other/mixed ethnicity. A majority of participants (58%) did not have a close friend or family member in the U.S. military, though a surprisingly high number (42%) did know somebody currently serving or who had served within the previous 10 years.

Survey Instrument and Construction

The study included two parts, both completed confidentially. In the first, participants answered a pre-survey measuring basic political affiliation and demographic information (Appendix 1). The survey began with 9 statements on controversial issues ranging from climate change to gay marriage, with 4 dealing directly or indirectly with the military, Iraq War, and War on Terror: "George W. Bush was a terrible U.S. president," "The War on Terror has made the U.S. much safer from a possible terrorist attack," "The United States should make significant cuts to its military budget," and "The U.S. never should have started the 2003 war in Iraq." Participants were asked to indicate their agreement with the statements on a 7-point Likert scale: 1 = Strongly agree; 2 = Agree; 3 = Somewhat agree; 4 = No opinion; 5 = Somewhat disagree; 6 = Disagree; 7 = Strongly disagree. Cronbach's alpha for these four questions was ultimately calculated at 0.8, implying that they all measured roughly the same political construct. In addition, the pre-survey asked several other questions potentially relevant to *Grace Is Gone*'s thematic content, including family or friends' involvements in the military, recent experiences with death, relationship status, and number of children.

Upon returning the pre-survey, participants received a DVD copy of *Grace Is*

Gone and an envelope containing the post-survey, with instructions to open and complete after viewing the movie (Appendix 2). The survey was primarily composed of 5 qualitative short-answer questions intended to gage the viewers' interpretations of the film's themes and politics:

- Q1 = "Had you seen *Grace Is Gone* prior to this study?"

- Q2 = "Did you like *Grace Is Gone* overall? Why or why not?

- Q3 = "What do you think is the basic 'message' of *Grace Is Gone*?

- Q4 = "Do you agree with the film's political stance on the 2003 war in Iraq? Why or why not?

- Q5 = "Was there a specific scene (or scenes) that stood out to you as especially political? Why or why not?"

The post-survey concluded with a reprint of the four war- and military-themed Likert questions from the pre-survey to determine any significant shifts in responses following the viewing.

Results

In order to organize responses categorically, I calculated a "poli-score" for each participant by adding their Likert scores from the four pre-survey war-themed questions. I also reversed certain questions' scores as appropriate, so that ultimately all questions were on the same scale of lower scores indicating more left-oriented responses and higher scores indicating more right-oriented responses. With a 7-point scale for each question, this meant that poli-scores could theoretically range from "4" (indicating strongest possible liberal response to every question) to "28" (indicating strongest possible

conservative response to every question).

Respondents' poli-scores ultimately ranged from 4 to 26, with a mean of 14.63. Standard deviation from the mean was calculated at 5.16. To separate respondents into groupings, I treated the 68% of scores within one standard deviation from the mean as more politically "center." Thus, scores lower than 10 were categorized as the most "left" and scores above 20 were considered the most "right." These separations resulted in 15 respondents in the "left" (L) group, 14 in the "right" (R), and the remaining 69 in the "center" (C).

In order to categorize qualitative responses to the post-survey, I devised a system of keyword sorting. As I read each response, I looked for commonalities in how the respondents framed their interpretations and used the themes that emerged to group similar surveys together. For example, if I noted that one respondent favorably interpreted *Grace Is Gone* as anti-war, I would create a new category under which other favorable anti-war readings could be sorted. Despite the difficulty of assigning some responses to defined category (I placed some responses in multiple categories, while especially idiosyncratic readings were left on their own), my system did allow me to recognize several qualitative themes in how viewers were discussing the film. Also, by devising the categories as I actually read the surveys, I tried to let the responses "speak for themselves" (if such a thing is possible), rather than coding each respondent into neater categories I had already created beforehand.

Likert responses on the 4 war-themed questions did not shift substantially between the two surveys. Paired t-tests were run on pre- and post-survey responses for

each question, with the following results:

- For the statement "George W. Bush was a terrible U.S. president," there was no significant difference between pre-test ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 1.79$) and post-test responses ($M = 3.64$, $SD = 1.70$); $t(97) = 0.65$, $p = 0.52$.

- For the statement "The War on Terror has made the U.S. much safer from a possible terrorist attack," there was no significant difference between pre-test ($M = 3.71$, $SD = 1.53$) and post-test responses ($M = 3.76$, $SD = 1.51$); $t(97) = 0.33$, $p = 0.74$.

- For the statement "The United States should make significant cuts to its military budget," there was no significant difference between pre-test ($M = 3.88$, $SD = 1.59$) and post-test responses ($M = 3.81$, $SD = 1.67$); $t(97) = 0.62$, $p = 0.53$.

- For the statement, "The U.S. never should have started the 2003 war in Iraq," there was no significant difference between pre-test ($M = 3.34$, $SD = 1.65$) and post-test responses ($M = 3.26$, $SD = 1.67$); $t(97) = 0.82$, $p = 0.42$.

In short, responses remained statistically consistent between surveys. However viewers reacted to *Grace Is Gone*, any evolutions in their overall political orientations toward Iraq and the military were minimal to none. This suggests that respondents either (a) read the film as corroborating their existing position, (b) were not persuaded by a perception of the film's opposing position, or (c) did not see any relevance between their position and the film's content.

None of the respondents had seen *Grace Is Gone* prior to the study, but most received it favorably.[5] In response to Q2 (about how much they "liked" the film), a solid

majority (62%, n = 61) of all respondents wrote that they enjoyed the movie, citing its story, performances, and emotional impact. Most viewers who liked the film explicitly associated it with a naturalistic aesthetic, with words such as "relatable," "true," "honest," "natural," and "real" peppering many responses. Viewers particularly applauded the film's focus on a grieving military family. "It was interesting to watch what a typical family has to deal with when they have a family member serving our country," one respondent wrote, and many others voiced similar sentiments that the story was "eye-opening." "It was just so realistic," wrote one respondent in C-group. "It…actually happened in normal military families during the Iraq Wars. [The film] also gave us a better understanding of how politics really affects a normal citizen's life."

Twenty-one percent of respondents (n = 21) wrote that they did not enjoy the film. Reasons expressed ranged from dissatisfaction with the film's pacing and length to feelings that the overall story was "pointless." One of the more common rationales for dislike, comprising about 38% of the total (n = 8), continued the film's aura of authenticity. Several viewers were troubled by the movie's subject matter, claiming that it was "too sad" or reminded them of the experiences of their own loved ones in the armed forces. A final 16% of respondents (n = 16) enjoyed the movie with qualifications, arguing that "I generally stay away from these emotional war/political related films, but I thought the movie was okay." Whether enthusiastic, negative, or ambivalent, the vast majority of responders treated the movie as a window to reality, illuminating or reminding them of issues encountered by military families on the homefront.

This focus on families continued in responses to Q3 ("What is the basic message

of *Grace Is Gone*?"). Answers to this question were significantly more varied, but most coalesced around some reading of the film's emphasis on familial bonds. Roughly 25% (n = 25) saw the film as primarily portraying the reality and hardships of war families, while another 33% (n = 32) read it as embodying more universal themes about family, loss, grief, or appreciating one's loved ones. These readings boasted a relatively even spread between L-, C-, and R-groups. A surprising number (roughly 17%, n = 17) of respondents directly extended their interpretations of the film's familial themes into a broader perception of an anti- or prowar message. One member of C-group wrote that "the message was to end the war in Iraq by showing the death and pain brought to American families." Others similarly responded that the film demonstrated how "the war is hurting American families" or aimed to prove how "joining the military has detrimental effects" on the homefront. This line of interpretation suggests that many respondents not only recognized potentially political themes in *Grace Is Gone*, but thought the film took a firm enough stance for them to act as its primary message.

Although most respondents seemed to read the film's message with little hesitancy, several others expressed conflicting feelings or confusion about what the movie was trying to convey. Some saw it was a simple story with "no big messages" at all. Others detected that the film was "commenting on the Iraq War," but ultimately concluded that the final message was "more about loss." A handful of viewers felt the film's political messages were multidirectional, combining criticisms of the Iraq conflict with smaller-scale understanding of the pain and sacrifices undergone by veterans and military families. As one respondent wrote:

I felt the movie was against the war, but pro-soldier in respect to supporting the reasons that Grace went to war. The movie really showed the reality of the families at home who were coping with the deaths of soldiers.

As with responses to Q2, most participants saw the family as the front and center of the film's concerns. However, this focus on the homefront was still capable of anchoring different viewpoints about the politics of war.

The particular ways in which respondents related their own political sympathies to their readings of the film were suggested by answers to Q4 and Q5 (asking about their level of agreement with the film's politics and which, if any, scenes stood out as especially political). About 36% of respondents (n = 35) indicated that they agreed with the film's perceived political position, versus 17% who disagreed (n = 17). Put differently, of the respondents who believed the film harbored a concrete political message (n = 52), nearly two-thirds thought it aligned with their own, while one-third read it as contrary. How viewers specifically read these politics revealed some of the most pronounced differences by political orientation of any question on the post-survey. Ten percent of respondents (including 20% of those in R-group) found the film appropriately pro-military or pro-war (n = 9). Twenty-four percent (including 53% of L-group) read the film as sufficiently critical of war in general or Iraq in particular (n = 24). Of the 17% who wrote that they disagreed with the film (n= 17), 29% (n = 5) thought it was too anti-war and 71% (n= 12) believed it was too pro-war.

Whether in support or opposition to the film, nearly all respondents believing the film harbored concrete political sympathies made their case through one of two means. The first, which I call the "family heuristic," involved the respondent using the film's

homefront focus as self-evident proof for its position for or against the military.

Conservative-leaning viewers read the struggle of Stanley and his daughters as proof of

the resilience of military families. By centering on the family's efforts to move on, *Grace*

illustrated how, as one respondent phrased it, "fighting is necessary, even though

hardships result." More liberal-minded respondents, while not disavowing the idea of

purposeful sacrifice, viewed Stanley's family as revealing the devastating "human cost"

of U.S. foreign policy. These viewers positioned Grace's death and her family's grief as

avoidable tragedies, and used them as springboards for criticizing the Bush

administration's deceptions leading up to the war. As one respondent argued, "the war

has been extremely negative for the country. The movie demonstrates how it affects

families and the hurt they go through."

A second heuristic consisted of "character citation": respondents selectively using

characters as mouthpieces for the film's general political positions. Drawing from a

larger spectatorial tendency to map semantic fields onto character actions or dialogue

(Bordwell 1989, 154), participants used particular characters to metonymically stand in

for political sentiments of favor to them. Many conservative viewers reacted positively to

John Cusack's portrayal of Stanley, reading his lack of anger over "the war or the

president" as signs of model patriotism. One commenter expressed particular enthusiasm

for one scene that reveals how myopic Stanley tried to enlist in the military by cheating

on an eye exam: "What a humbling moment knowing that there are people out there who

want to serve so bad. Breathtaking!" At the same time, many liberal respondents were

just as quick to read Stanley's internal pain over his wife's death as signs of his "true"

frustration toward the war. "Stanley obviously had strong feelings about [the pain leveled by the war]," wrote one member of L-group. "I agree with his negative feelings."

Most of the remaining respondents were reluctant or unable to attribute a single position to the film, instead perceiving degrees of neutrality, apoliticality, or multivalence. Five percent (n = 5) indicated they were "neutral" about their agreement with the film. Although they seemed to accept that the film demonstrated definite positions on war, they were personally unwilling to discuss their level of conformity with them. Seven percent of respondents (n = 7) did not detect any political message in the film at all, writing that it "wasn't prominent enough" or admitting, "I didn't really catch what stance it was trying to make." A further 14% (n = 14) viewed the film as holding multiple or contradictory political sentiments. While these respondents read certain characters as embodying concrete viewpoints, they were unable to extend these diegetic character actions into any extra-diegetic commentary of the film itself. Instead, these viewers, consistent with their perceptions of the film as "realistic," saw *Grace* as impartially allowing "both sides of the argument their own chance to be represented."

"Fair and balanced" as this seems, it did not prevent many of the respondents from articulating which characters they preferred, especially in the scene of Stanley and his brother John arguing at the dinner table (discussed in Chapter 2). One member of C-group wrote, "I agree with the father's stance on the soldiers and national pride. But [John's] views on soldiers and the war are things I disagree with because soldiers fight for us and our freedom/rights." Another, more liberal-minded commenter noted that she saw both perspectives of the film's argument, but "I agree more w/ Stanley's brother."

Ultimately, respondents' proclivities for choosing their own sides allowed the film's tone toward certain characters' politics to shift as necessary. Uncle John's antiwar expressions at the dinner table, for instance, could be an example of an "extreme" position for one viewer and an honest encapsulation of "how a lot of America felt" for another.

Survey Discussion

As discussed in Chapter 1, a strategically ambiguous text is understood as one that frames controversial subject matter such that audiences of opposing ideologies believe that it supports their own worldviews (Ceccarelli 1998, 404). Befitting this definition, an audience study of a strategically ambiguous film would need to demonstrate at least three criteria. First, there would have to be a plurality of interpretations about the text's content and significance. Second, to differentiate it from a merely apolitical text, audiences would need to actively view the film as controversial, provocative, or politically vocal. Third, pluralities in interpretation would need to correspond to political affiliation, such that ideologically opposed audiences perceive the text as favoring their side. The following section briefly considers the survey results against these three criteria, and examines how the comparisons either confirm or challenge this article's suppositions about textual ambiguity.

C1: Plurality of Interpretation

Perhaps not surprisingly given the insights of cultural studies and audience research over the past decades, *Grace Is Gone*'s viewers read it in an array of different ways. The explicit meanings of the film were never in dispute by any of the respondents.

All responses seemed to understand the basic narrative of the film and a general consensus appeared to exist about the motivations and beliefs of each character (e.g. most viewers saw Stanley as grief-stricken, loyal, and conservative, John as leftwing, etc.). It was only in the film's implicit meanings—i.e. attempts to place the basic story within a larger semantic or evaluative framework—that differences became apparent. Respondents varied in determining whether the text agreed or disagreed with its own characters, with some arguing that Stanley's worldview was privileged, others arguing John's, and some feeling the film was neutral or ambivalent to the opinions of any one figure.

Given these findings, it appears that *Grace Is Gone* operates more on a polyvalent level of ambiguity than a polysemic one. That is, most viewers agreed about the explicit positionality of individual characters, but diverged in their perceptions of how the narrative implicitly judged them. This polyvalence does not, however, appear to follow Condit's (1989) research, where readers agreed about all the core meanings of the text but simply disagreed about whether it was good or bad. Furthermore, these findings are not consistent with Hall (2001) or Fiske's (1989b) taxonomies of dominant, negotiated, and resistant readings. My respondents gleaned numerous political readings from *Grace*'s content, but it is not clear that any of them were consistent with or opposite to any stable ideology the text had in the first place. Rather, with its controlled ambiguity in representing the Iraq War, the film was able to invite a plurality of responses, all of which it could plausibly support within its system.

C2: Recognition of Political Content

By and large, respondents treated *Grace Is Gone* as a political work, or at least a text dealing with politically sensitive (in industry lingo, "hot button") material. There were, however, several respondents who viewed it as entirely apolitical. For Q4, only 7% (n = 7) of participants explicitly stated that they did not detect any political message at all. Similarly, 15% of responses to Q5 (n = 15)—asking about the film's "most political scenes"—disagreed with the premises of the question and did not view any scene as political at all. "I did not view the film as a particularly political exploration," claimed one respondent. "You get more politics in a single episode of *West Wing* or *All in the Family*." Many other participants indicated that the film had a "neutral" or "unbiased" position on the war, but these responses imply that the writers realized the potentially controversial nature of the film's subject matter.

The majority of respondents, however, answered questions about politics relatively unequivocally. For Q4, 52% percent of viewers (n = 52) were able to identify a concrete political position with the film, not counting the 14% of other respondents (n = 14) who identified conflicting political positions and 11% who ambiguously discussed their own positions on Iraq with little to no direct reference to the film (n = 11). Furthermore, answers to Q5 identified no fewer than eleven scenes which respondents felt touched on the war in some direct fashion, with five respondents even arguing that the "whole movie was political because it was about the military." One could respond that the wording of Q4 and Q5 primed respondents to look for politics where they otherwise would not have seen any. However, 17% of respondents (n = 17) also answered Q3, which only asked for the primary "message" of the film, with interpretations of its

political ambitions. Whether primed or not (and to be clear, no study can avoid directing its participants' attentions in some way), my respondents seemed willing and able to place the film's content within a potentially divisive political conversation.

C3: Differences by Political Affiliation

The third criterion is, in some ways, the most difficult to measure, considering the fluidity and variability of categorizing people by political group. Nevertheless, the poli-score system I devised for this study did detect several trends in how birds of different colors received *Grace Is Gone*'s politics. Consistent with the definition of strategic ambiguity, I hypothesized that the film would have a mirror effect for most audiences, essentially reflecting back the political sentiments that the viewer wished to see. As such, I expected most conservative viewers to read the film as pro-military, most liberal viewers to read it as antiwar, and moderates to applaud it as politically neutral.

My results provided somewhat different results. Within the L-group, a majority of 60% (n = 9) read the film as explicitly antiwar. For the more conservative R-group, however, there was a greater spread in sentiments. Only 21% of the R-group (n = 3) positively read *Grace* as sufficiently pro-war, with a greater number (42%, n = 6) reading the film as having either no or multiple positions on the conflict. Among C-group comments, the spread was even more varied, as 9% (n = 6) positively identified the film as pro-war, 20% (n = 14) positively viewed it as antiwar, 6% (n = 4) were neutral, 6% (n = 4) did not perceive any political message, and 16% (n = 11) saw multiple positions on display. Overall, political affiliation did not appear to be an especially strong indicator for predicting political readings in the R- or C-groups, although the R-group did,

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unsurprisingly, feature the largest percentage of respondents positively interpreting *Grace* as pro-war.

Regardless of respondents' specific shades of political agreement with the text, every group responded very favorably to the film overall, with only 27% in L-group (n = 4), 29% in R-group (n = 4), and 13% in C-group (n = 9) directly disagreeing with the movie on political grounds. For most viewers, the film's aesthetic proved flexible enough to accommodate whatever judgments about the war the viewer held. None of the respondents who agreed with the film implied that it had changed or challenged their perspectives on the war in any substantial way. As one antiwar viewer admitted, his survey reaction was exactly "how I felt prior to viewing the movie." Given the relative elasticity of the text, most respondents were able to reflect on their viewing with a positive sense, even if only vague, that their personal preferences had not been challenged. One member of L-group perhaps summarized this best when answering whether he agreed with the film's politics: "Yes, I think I did. However, I cannot exactly remember the stance."

Thus far, I have argued that *Grace Is Gone* and other homefront dramas present political messages in a strategically ambiguous manner. I examined the industrial context that shaped the presentation of these messages and suggested how viewers have read them. Having now defined strategic ambiguity and illustrated the contours of its deployment and reception, the conclusion considers the wider social and economic ramifications that such a rhetorical strategy implies.

Conclusion

The survey methods I used for this study do carry several limitations. As a means of gauging reactions to *Grace Is Gone*, my survey helped to construct the political orientations of its subjects even as it tried to measure them. None of the subjects in my "left," "center," and "right" groups were entirely alike in their responses. Although the aggregate suggested commonalities between viewers of certain political persuasions, it is likely that some would disagree with the categories in which I placed them. Furthermore, the structure and wording of my surveys inevitably primed respondents to view the film in ways they may not have in other contexts. While it is fanciful to imagine some "pure" viewing situation—any context will guide a viewer to notice different sorts of textual elements—this does temper my ability to make absolute conclusions about *Grace*'s political content. In many ways, these limitations speak to longer-standing debates in reception studies about how to write about and measure audiences, and need not cripple every attempt to try to use such research (see Radway 1988; Wolf 1992). Future studies, perhaps drawing from a larger bank of interview methods, may substantiate or refute my conclusions about strategic ambiguity in *Grace Is Gone* or the other homefront war dramas I have discussed.

With this in mind, what do my findings ultimately conclude? For one, they suggest that ambiguity can be a powerful rhetorical force in shaping readings of a text. While no film can fully anticipate the chaotic field of public reception, it appears that *Grace Is Gone* managed to frame the Iraq War in ways largely palatable to hawk and dove alike. Thanks to its naturalistic aesthetic and floating moral polarities, viewers were

able to incorporate the film into the political schema of their preference, be it liberal, conservative, both, or neither. Furthermore, they often did so with full realization of the film's political prickliness. Readings did not neatly correspond to the viewer's political preferences in every instance, but the filmmakers were clearly successful in crafting a film whose content was at once perceived as socially expedient and politically flattering.

The larger ramifications of this ambiguity appear (appropriately enough) ambivalent. Clearly, many viewers took *Grace Is Gone* (and potentially other films like it) as catalysts for discussing the morality of the Iraq War, with significant percentages even using it to voice antiwar positions. This finding runs contrary to existing criticisms of homefront dramas, which tend to pigeonhole them as depoliticized at best or underhandedly pro-war at worst. The films may not frame the war in precisely the ways that critics would hope (both my encoding and decoding analyses largely indicated that *Grace* articulates high reverence for U.S. fighting forces), but this does not mean that they cannot be used toward antiwar ends. My study also challenges accusations that political and rhetorical ambiguities necessarily serve clean-cut conservative interests. Michael Morgan argues that the "mainstreaming" tendencies of media texts not only narrow political differences, but also prompt its viewers to significantly "tilt in a conservative direction" (1989, 248). I disagree. This may be true for many political texts, but others may actively encourage a plurality of responses rather than constricting them. If nothing else, this study cautions film and media scholars about making generalizations about the interests of producers and consumers and how those interests interrelate.

At the same time, many respondents clearly used *Grace* to reinforce their

allegiances to the Iraq War or its larger military infrastructure. It would be misguided to argue that any of these spectators are more correct than the others, reliant as they are on the equivocal and multidirectional information the text seems to provide about the conflict. This troubling finding suggests that, whatever "positive" work they may do for some audiences, strategically ambiguous texts are hardly immune to criticism. The goal of this project is not to shield recent homefront dramas from critique, but to encourage new vantage points from which critique is possible. As Geoffrey Nowell-Smith advised a decade ago, film studies is best served by moving from questions of "what films mean" to rhetorical considerations about "how they mean." This step allows for more pointed analyses about the problematic role that homefront dramas serve—not as pure propaganda or innocuous entertainment, but as chameleons reflecting back the viewer's preferences rather than actively trying to convince all audiences that war is wrong.

In early 2007, producer Mike Ryan wrote a scathing attack on *Grace Is Gone* and the trend of politically safe films on the "War on Terror." I quote it at length because it perfectly summarizes, from an industry insider, the connections between Hollywood, political correctness, and war:

> The filmmakers have said they want to reach the biggest audience possible; they feel the subject of their film is nonpartisan. Truth is, though, there is nothing nonpartisan about the war: you either support it or feel that it was a tragic mistake…The 'nonpartisan' excuse is really just a cover-up for the fact that the goal of the film is to make as much money as possible. Profit drives its aesthetics, just like profit has driven this war…Like war profiteers Rumsfeld, Cheney, Rice, and Bush, the filmmakers proceeded ahead without truly and fully thinking out their strategy and understanding the consequences of their choices. (quoted in Macauly 2007)

In the end, this is the sociopolitical framework in which strategic ambiguity operates,

above and beyond its place as a filmmaking tactic. As corporations retain plausible deniability over the messages audiences take from their films, they are also able to deny their larger military-industrial complicities. When media function ambiguously to confirm or mobilize our preset political thoughts, politics (like war) are seen in terms of maximizing profit rather than in shades of right and wrong. Frank Tomasulo notes that, rather than celebrating "open" texts supporting multiple interpretations, our advocacy should be for more *closed* texts willing to take unambiguous, persuasive stands against war for larger audiences (1990, 157). Ambiguity, as it turns out, can only go so far.

NOTES

[1] For more on how the War on Terror has thematically influenced American filmmakers, see Birkenstein, Froula, and Randall 2010.

[2] Unless otherwise noted, all data about box office receipts and theatrical distribution were gathered from www.boxofficemojo.com.

[3] Both *The Hurt Locker* and *Home of the Brave* sought Defense department assistance, but were denied because Pentagon liaisons determined aspects of their scripts too "unrealistic" ("Are the Pentagon and Hollywood" 2011).

[4] *Grace Is Gone* received a modest $700,000 advertising push ($1 million is average). I have been unable to locate any explanations or trade press for why the Weinstein Co. decided to market the film on this budget (Markert 2011, 300n2).

[5] In all quotations, I have preserved respondents' original syntax and spelling, including errors, unless modifications were necessary to preserve what I understood as the intended meaning.

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Non-disclosure policy

Thank you for taking part in this research study. All of your responses to the following survey will remain **confidential** and will be used solely for research purposes for the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Minnesota. Should the results of this study be published, your data will remain anonymous.

You may decide to discontinue the study at any time without consequence. You will receive partial extra credit upon completion of this pre-survey, and full credit upon completion of the post-survey. All extra credit offered is at the discretion of the course instructor.

Last 4 digits of your cell phone number _____

This information is being gathered solely to match up the pre-survey with the post-survey and will **not** be used for any identification purposes.

Please complete the following survey as completely and accurately as possible. Circle the number that you feel best corresponds to your own opinion (with "1" indicating that you strongly agree and "7" indicating that you strongly disagree).

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	No Opinion	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
The smaller the government, the freer the people.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Global warming poses a serious threat to the future of the U.S.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
George W. Bush was a terrible U.S. President.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The war on terror has made the U.S. much safer from a possible terrorist attack.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The government should guarantee healthcare for every citizen.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The United States should make significant cuts to its military budget.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Gay marriage should be legalized in the state of Minnesota.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The U.S. never should have started the 2003 war in Iraq.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Creationism should be taught in public schools as an alternative to the theory of evolution.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

(continued from front page)

Please complete the following questions by circling the option that best describes you.

1. What is your current age? _____

2. Do you have a very close friend or family member currently serving in the U.S. military?

      Yes   No   No, but they have served in the past 10 years

3. Do you have a friend or relative who has died in the last year?

      Yes   No

      If yes, what was the deceased's relation to you?   _____

      When did the deceased pass away?   _____

4. How many children do you currently have?

      0   1   2   More than 2

5. Have you ever lived in a country outside of the United States for longer than 6 months?

      Yes   No

6. Do you have any siblings?

      Yes   No

      If yes, how many siblings do you have?   _____

7. Which of the following best describes your <u>current</u> relationship status?

Single   In a relationship   Engaged   Married   Separated or Divorced

8. How would you identify your gender?

      Male   Female   Transgender   Prefer not to say

9. Which of the following categories best describes your race/ethnicity?

White/Caucasian	American Indian/Alaskan Native	Asian
Black/African American	Middle Eastern	Other
Hispanic/Latino	Pacific Islander	Prefer not to say

Please fill out the following survey only **after** you have watched the DVD you were assigned.

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Last 4 digits of your cell phone number _____

This information is being gathered solely to match up the pre-survey with the post-survey and will **not** be used for any identification purposes. MAKE SURE THAT THIS IS THE SAME NUMBER YOU WROTE ON THE FIRST SURVEY.

Part 1

Respond to the following questions. For written responses, please PRINT *and write as legibly as you can*.

Q1. Had you seen the film *Grace Is Gone* prior to this study?   Yes   No

Q2. Did you like *Grace Is Gone* overall? Why or why not?

Q3. What do you think is the basic "message" of *Grace Is Gone*?

Q4. Do you agree with the film's political stance on the 2003 war in Iraq? Why or why not?

Q5. Was there a specific scene (or scenes) that stood out to you as especially political? Why or why not?

Part 2

Please complete the following survey as completely and accurately as possible. Circle the number that you feel best corresponds to your own opinion (with "1" indicating that you strongly agree and "7" indicating that you strongly disagree).

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat Agree	No Opinion	Somewhat Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
George W. Bush was a terrible U.S. President.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The war on terror has made the U.S. much safer from a possible terrorist attack.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The United States should make significant cuts to its military budget.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
The U.S. never should have started the 2003 war in Iraq.	1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Thank you for your participation in this study. Please return this form in class on the designated collection day.