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Higher Truth or Just the Facts? *Hell and Back Again*
Epilogue

Filmmaker Danfung Dennis and Editor Fiona Otway ultimately decided to include the scene with the altered audio in *Hell and Back Again* (they adopted the title in late 2010). "Nathan [Harris] was heavily medicated in a lot of the footage we were working with, and I think we gradually realized in editing that we needed to make it very clear to our audience that he was taking painkillers, not just acting strange for no apparent reason," says Otway.[1] For some viewers, the altered audio made a resonant emotional statement, while for others it went too far, says Otway. "I am still ambivalent about whether we made the right choice with this scene."

In the end, documentary filmmaking is not journalism, says Michael Lerner, the film's producer. The scene in which Sgt. Nathan Harris' attention to the pain specialist seemed to fade in and out worked because it advanced the story of a young man ravaged by war. "It's not intended to be an accurate portrayal of what's going on in his mind at the time, but an impressionistic device to convey what he was going through," says Lerner. "This was an attempt to get closer to the truth—a subjective, highly personal truth of a physiological state," adds Dennis.

> From the very beginning, I wanted to blur the lines between documentary and narrative cinema to challenge people''s representations of war. From the technical choice to shoot at f/2.8 on a steadicam, to the distortion of audio, I wanted the viewer to be immersed into a visceral experience, in the same way when watching a Hollywood production. The suspension of disbelief heightens the emotional impact when the viewer is reminded that the footage is real.

Some audience members later asked Dennis and Otway why they had altered the audio in the pain doctor scene. Those who found it jarring said it made them question the reality of what they were seeing and hearing. Perhaps, they observed, documentaries

[1] Author's e-mail exchange with Fiona Otway on November 15, 2012.

This epilogue was written by Eric Smalley for the Case Consortium @ Columbia. Professor June Cross of the Graduate School of Journalism was the faculty sponsor. (01/2013)

simply cannot accurately convey a psychological state.[2] Questions of "reality" are always problematic in documentaries, even more so in a film that seeks to present a psychological portrait of war, says Otway.

> We've blurred the tropes of fact and fiction in this film quite intentionally and obviously. My hope is that after seeing the film, audiences are left feeling that they've just been through an intense experience of war and its consequences—while also questioning the limits of what is actually possible to understand about war from watching a movie.[3]

At least one viewer seems to have come to a better understanding of Harris' experience. "One of the most gratifying moments of sharing the film with others happened after Nathan's mother saw the film," says Otway. "She told me that for the first time she felt she now had a way to really talk with Nathan about what he had been through."

Hell and Back Again was a critical success. It received a 100% rating on the movie website Rotten Tomatoes, which indicates that film critics were unanimous in giving it positive reviews. It was nominated for Documentary Feature at the 2012 Academy Awards and won World Cinema Jury Prize Documentary and World Cinema Cinematography Award Documentary at the 2011 Sundance Film Festival.

Wesley Morris, who was a Boston Globe film critic and winner of the 2012 Pulitzer Prize in criticism, reviewed *Hell and Back Again* and praised the film for portraying a highly subjective experience. ""Dennis"s film attempts something few documentaries have: to inhabit the psyche of its subject,"" he wrote.

> This is Dennis's innovation: a documentary war flashback. Who knows whether what we're seeing is actually what's on Harris's mind in that moment. But he's given Dennis and Dennis's editor, Fiona Otway, the license to imply as much. Suddenly, ordinary deployment footage is recast as living memory. The movie doesn't purport to know exactly what thoughts are clouding Harris's head. But what you sense in the device is that these flashbacks are mutual... Dennis, a photographer who shot the film and constructed the eerie sound design, might be flashing back, too.[4]

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[2] Author's e-mail exchange with Danfung Dennis on November 14, 2012.

[3] Author's e-mail exchange with Fiona Otway on November 15, 2012.

[4] Boston Globe, January 6, 2012. See: http://www.boston.com/ae/movies/articles/2012/01/06/review_of_hell_and_back_again_a_documentary_that_presents_war_flashbacks_from_a_different_perspective/