

# ***The Search for the Afghan Girl* as Response to 9/11: Critical Analysis of Implicit Content in Documentary Production**

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“After September 11th, we scrambled to decide what kind of program we were going to put together to respond to the events that happened in New York and Washington.”

Lawrence Cumbo, Producer of *The Search for the Afghan Girl* (Sight & Sound<sup>1</sup>).

An examination of what is included and excluded in a documentary invites readings of the producer’s ideology and what values comprise their intended audience. What if a production company in Germany produced a documentary in Poland in the late 1930’s and made no mention of the German invasion? What if an American company made a documentary in Vietnam in the 1960’s and made no mention of American involvement? These examples would be indicative of questionable content since many people know of the socio-historical context. The sociohistorical context frames the relevancy of the story for an audience through a common denominator or shared experience. Establishing sociohistorical context provides a framework for discourses to flow. One of the means to examine the sociohistorical context of a film is to analyze its implicit content.

Implicit content is a communicated message implied through excluded or inarticulate information and for a recipient to infer a shared meaning. In the close textual analysis of a film, an examination of the text as separate from its sociohistorical or cultural context draw inferences from what is included as well as what is excluded. The purpose of this method is to establish what prior knowledge is required of the audience to carry the story sequentially. This in turn situates an audience for the discourses. Furthermore, implied content invites readings of the producer’s ideology in framing the subject.

The National Geographic Society is a prominent producer of documentary content of the foreign

world<sup>234</sup>. Founded in 1888, National Geographic is one of the world’s largest scientific and education nonprofit institutions. A part of National Geographic’s missions is documenting the natural world we live in through written, photograph, video, and interactive text. Employable as an education source, National Geographic is a common sight in most schools whether through its prominent magazine or other resources such as maps, books, and videos. Therefore, National Geographic productions are a prime source to examine their role in shaping a world-view.

National Geographic produced a documentary of their search for the anonymous *Afghan Girl* as a response to the events of September 11th, 2001<sup>5</sup>. However, this documentary is dependent on viewers’ familiarity with sociohistoric events as it makes allusions to American involvement in Afghanistan. This essay argues that the *Search for the Afghan Girl* (2002)<sup>6</sup> is reliant on its audience’s knowledge of sociohistorical context to engage in a reading of the documentary as a response to 9/11. The importance of such an argument establishes groundwork for further research on ethics in documentary productions.

In the following, I argue that National Geographic’s 2002 documentary *Search for the Afghan Girl* invites a reading of a response to the events of 9/11 through the implicit content. The excluded information consists of the connection of Afghanistan to the events of 9/11, the American response to Afghanistan, and the change in public policy to include the liberation of oppressed women as part of the fight against terrorism. To better understand the role of the *Search for the Afghan Girl* as a discursive response I examine the representation of the events of 9/11 and Afghanistan, the use of the documentary to showcase new technology, and scenes that construct direct engagement with the Afghan Other.

## 9/11 and Afghanistan

The documentary *Search for the Afghan Girl* implies that there is a connection between the events of 9/11 and the ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan. The story of the *Search for the Afghan Girl* opens with the event of 9/11 and bridges the event with the ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan. Steve McCurry functions as a bridge to connect the two rather than address the fact that American forces invaded Afghanistan following the events of 9/11. Furthermore, throughout the documentary there is a striking lack of acknowledgement of any American engagement in Afghanistan. The opening scene addresses the events of 9/11 explicitly and never readdresses again except through inference.

Following the exposition and the credit-titling sequence, the film's story opens with the events of 9/11 when a group of men attacked in Washington, D.C. and New York City on September 11, 2001. Hijacking commercial passenger jets, these men flew the jets as missiles targeting notable structures. The opening scene only addresses the attacks on New York City and images of the World Trade Center (WTC) towers. Although still and video images of the attacks exist, the opening sequence uses video of the aftermath cut from the various vantage points near the tower area to across the river.

The variety of vantage points in the *Search* constructs a unity of experience. Therefore, this unity of experience is symbolic for all Americans. Images of New York City, a metropolitan area with over 21 million inhabitants<sup>7</sup>, provides an opportune variety of captured images that construct the event unfolding through different vantage points. Each of these shots, from a ground level, is tied together is cross-cut with an ominous grey cloud focal source. The shaky hand-held camcorders contrast with the film's mise-en-scene of grey clouds against a clear day sky. One shot shows a grey wall of dust erupting down a city street as another camera-operator is running to escape the fast approaching cloud. The film cuts to a different vantage-point as the same grey clouds bellow-out from the midst of high-rise buildings. The shot frames the image with the clear and sunny sky in the background. Following this shot is a different vantage-point; this time we are across the river via an establishing shot of the city engulfed in this enveloping grey cloud. Over the commentary of the narrator's voice we see the source of the grey cloud: one of the WTC towers collapses in a long-shot perspective as the camera tracks the downward motion of the building's fall. As the narrator states, this is "the most devastating terrorist attack on

American soil."<sup>8</sup> Different vantage points thereby construct a context of multiple exposures to a single event, consolidating a narrative reading through unification of similar experiences to establish actuality.

The *Search* draws on the variety of perspectives to document the event, the narrator acknowledges Steve McCurry as a key figure who covered 9/11. Recreated scenes of McCurry in a grainy retarded-motion with high-contrast and over-exposed footage aid the scene's dream-like quality of establishing a past memory. The camera pans to frame him in close-up as he moves into position to capture a shot with his camera. After securing a light earth-toned New York Yankees baseball hat onto his head, McCurry is poised with his camera in what looks like a rooftop venue. Once again, contrasting the previous video shots from ground-based angles with McCurry's vantage to look horizontally or down at the day's event.

The recreated scene of McCurry looking through his camera is cross-cut with video stock footage and his own still images. We then see a video of the still standing WTC twin towers with smoke billowing out cut to a recreated shot of McCurry's profile in close-up poised looking through a camera's view-finder. Punctuating this recreation is a still image of the same video of the twin towers in brilliant color. This establishes the difference that the muted color of the recreation shots occurred after events, but more importantly the stark color of the still images are the same or better than the video footage thus establishing not only his presence but his perspective.

The *Search* situates McCurry as a significant authoritative source for the documented events because he is a renowned photojournalist covering many of the world's conflicts for over two decades and now engaging in similar events in his home town of New York City. The opening scene also establishes his "credibility" as a source and sets us up to assume his perspective as the investigator. Furthermore, the somber voice of actress Sigourney Weaver narrates, "many experienced that terrible day in New York ... few share Steve's intimate knowledge of a country that was suddenly on the minds of many; Afghanistan"<sup>9</sup>. This is the first attempt in the film to construct an association of 9/11 to Afghanistan without prior set-up. Why would Afghanistan be "suddenly on the minds of many?" Without further assessment or explanation, the film continues to associate 9/11 and Afghanistan through its cinematography, editing, and narrative.

Simultaneously, the *Search* parallels McCurry's coverage of 9/11 to the ongoing conflicts of Afghanistan through cross-cuts. Video and still images of Afghan conflict and 9/11 are interwoven. The film cuts from still-images of firefighters working in the aftermath of 9/11 to stock video of a mobile multi-rocket-launcher firing rocket after rocket into the air. Interrupting this shot is a still image of a person with his arms up-stretched and an upward gaze with a limited light source shining down illuminating the person's hands and face as well as the surrounding rock enclosure, constructing the image in an act of supplication as the footage of the rocket-launchers resume. The juxtaposition of the supplicant and the firefighter's image contrasts with the action of rockets firing in rapid succession situates McCurry as having a vantage of documenting those affected by conflict. Similar video stock footage of tanks and other weapons or people engaged in a close-quarter combat in streets continues under the narrator's depiction of McCurry and the importance of his work. Following each segment of video are still-images of people affected by the conflict such as a boy missing a leg and a portrait of a man with blood dripping down his face. The *Search* establishes through the montage of video and still-image of McCurry not only as an authoritative source documenting the conflict, but as an advocate for those impacted by the conflict.

Capturing many images of people affected by violent conflict, McCurry's most renowned is his photograph of an anonymous Afghan girl living in a refugee camp in Pakistan during the Soviet-Afghan War of the 1980's. Perhaps the most significant aspect of this image is the young girl's sea-green eyes "that reflect the anguish of refugees world-wide."<sup>10</sup> She looks directly at the viewer. To emphasize the narrator's statement regarding "anguish", cross-cutting the still image with three separate close-ups. The sequence concludes with an extreme close-up of one of the eyes then dissolved into slow-motion video of a child and others walking and waving at the viewer. The film establishes this image, officially titled *The Afghan Girl*<sup>11</sup>, as an icon of refugees or the victims of violent conflicts. However, many of the following video shots are of the image used in commercial or popular design; from postcards to posters with emphasis placed on the exotic-nature of the image with striking eyes rather than the subjective background story of a refugee.

Following the events of 9/11 and post-9/11, public interest in the *Afghan Girl* increased as did media exposure of the image. Popular interviewer's Larry King and Oprah Winfrey interview McCurry

because of his *Afghan Girl* image. The sensationalism of Afghanistan as a choice topic following 9/11 situates the image of the *Afghan Girl* as current and refreshed. Thus, the *Search* continues an implicit connection the country Afghanistan to the image of the *Afghan Girl*.

The *Search* presents McCurry reconstructing the context of how he captured the image and its significance. Interjecting the video stock footage of a tent-city representing refugee camps are still shots of McCurry's images from the June 1985 National Geographic magazine article, *Along Afghanistan's War-torn Frontier (1985)*<sup>12</sup>. He retells the tale of the *Afghan Girl* as was told to him by her school teacher. Emphasizing her harrowing tale of escape and evasion from Soviet bombardment are recreation shots and stock-footage of Soviet gunships patrolling a mountain-range. Slow-moving footage of explosions to close-ups of feet walking through snow further this emphasis of hardship that this young girl and her family endured prior to arriving in a makeshift-school that McCurry was visiting. Although the *Afghan Girl* image was only the cover of National Geographic's June 1985 issue, the *Search* also presents other images of the same model from the same session in a different take, this time with her gaze averted. McCurry reflects on that event and its meaning as the camera frames him in an intimate close-up: "there are certain photographs which have struck a cord in people. I was very happy that several people have told me that they actually volunteered to go work in Pakistan refugee camps based on [*The Afghan Girl*] picture."<sup>13</sup> The *Afghan Girl* image has become iconic in the U.S. to the plight of refugees. Therefore, the *Search* establishes the significance of the *Afghan Girl* image as something more than just a photograph.

Although the *Afghan Girl* image accompanies a story situating the tribulations of the Afghan people in the path of Soviet-American Cold War, the *Search* fails to articulate America's involvement in Afghanistan. In one scene, a group of Afghan men agree to travel from Peshawar, Pakistan into the Tora Bora region of Afghanistan to follow up on a possible lead to the *Afghan Girl's* identity. As the narrator states, "the mission is not without its risks", the men pile into a bright-red compact car and the scene is cut to a long-shot of an explosion rocking a mountain-side. "War still rages in the area," the Narrator continues. "The region was one of Osama bin Laden's strongholds." Close-up shots of cave entrances and scattered munitions emphasize the fortification as well as grainy video stock footage of gunships flying across a mountain pass, to represent

the ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan. However, this stock video only references conflict from the Soviet invasion or Afghan civil-war. The *Search* never mentions or indicates any current or previous American involvement in Afghanistan.

The *Search* makes reference to Osama bin Laden only twice. This is significant because his connection to the events of 9/11 and Afghanistan are arguably the reason why Americans are in Afghanistan in the first place. The references allude to his fortitude whereas a prior scene refers to his allusiveness. McCurry's arrival in Peshawar begins with a meeting with the lead investigator of the documentary, Rahimullah Yousafzai, a journalist for Time Magazine and "one of the few men to ever interview Osama bin Laden."<sup>14</sup> Who is Osama bin Laden and what is his association with Afghanistan? Why reference Bin Laden out of context? Some may argue that the name and association with Afghanistan is well established in sociohistorical context with the 9/11 attacks. This may be especially relevant since the F.B.I. lists him as their most wanted fugitive.<sup>15</sup> However, the lack of association establishes that there is a general assumption on the producer's part that the audience already knows whom Osama bin Laden is and that the U.S. government is actively pursuing him. Therefore, because an assumption of prior knowledge of the context of Osama bin Laden is established, the mystery of the *Afghan Girl's* identity mirrors the mystery of Bin Laden's whereabouts and the two narratives merge.

The *Search* is a response to the events of 9/11 as omission of the producer Lawrence Cumbo on the National Geographic Society's website. The *Search* draws on a sociohistorical context and assumes the viewer's knowledge of this context. The narratives of 9/11, the search for Osama bin Laden, and the ongoing conflicts in Afghanistan provide sociohistorical context for an American audience to establish the relevancy and obstacles in finding the *Afghan Girl*. The lack of any mention in the video of American involvement, engagement, and intervention in Afghanistan is suspect. This lack of transparency on the part of an American production coupled with the assumptions of an audience to have knowledge of Osama bin Laden and the Afghan connection to the 9/11 attacks establishes the intended audience for the documentary as American. Furthermore, the use of 9/11 to introduce the topic frames the larger narrative of the search by situating McCurry as a privileged perspective for an American audience rather than situating Yousafzai who is the actual investigator in the documentary.

## Engaging the Afghan Other

The documentary frames the *Search for the Afghan Girl* as a means for National Geographic as well as their privileged audience to engage Afghan culture as a spectacle to scrutinize. As the narrator establishes the purpose of the documentary we see video shots of commercial posters utilizing the *Afghan Girl* image. One poster in particular has bright yellow text, "UNDERSTANDING OTHER CULTURES," (Cumbo, 2002) beneath the *Afghan Girl* image. Over the din of motor traffic passing by the poster, the narrator states, "Steve wants to share with her the hope that she has inspired in others. He wants to discover the story behind those eyes. What's happened to her? Is she still alive?"<sup>16</sup> It is here that we can associate the image of the *Afghan Girl* as an icon of the West's need to connect with other cultures. Yet, we are invited to read this connection as a homogenized representation. It is through National Geographic that the means to 'understanding other cultures' for Western spectators, in particular American spectators, is provided.

Various scenes in the *Search* establish McCurry, as figurative representative of National Geographic, engaging with Afghan or Other culture by negotiating the similarities and contrasts with American values. Two scenes in particular are most revealing of McCurry engaging the Afghan Other. The first scene shows McCurry following a promising lead to a woman known as Alim Bibi, yet he is not allowed to see her without her husband's consent due to cultural constraints. The second scene features McCurry wandering the streets of Peshawar, Pakistan and his interaction in a store selling copies of his *Afghan Girl* image. These scenes are significant in depicting cultural engagement because one of the ways we can understand other cultures is to look for representations of similarities and contrast.

Terms like "clue" or "mystery" in the *Search* support the notion that we are following McCurry's model and are asked to assume the position of "explorer" or "discoverer" of other cultures, a very Westernized experience of the gaze. "A clue emerges," states the narrator after a young girl recognizes the photo of the Afghan Girl as a former classmate. The young girl guides McCurry and his team to a home where a relative of the *Afghan Girl* resides. The relative appears cautious of the crowd looking for her till she is shown a picture of the *Afghan Girl* and she recognizes the girl in the picture. The film cuts to interior shot in a minivan framing the relative in a *hajib* and McCurry sitting in the row

behind her leaning onto her head-rest. McCurry addresses the camera as the woman averts her gaze.

This woman we met in the camp is saying the girl in the picture is her daughter. We've gotten four different names today and four different leads, but I think this is the best one. Her daughter's name, she's saying, is Alim Bibi. It means 'girl of the world.' It couldn't be a more perfect name for this girl who has represented the plight of the Afghan people for the past twenty-years.

McCurry gestures with his finger at the woman seated as he expresses his excitement of this current lead. Although he addresses the fact that they have other names and leads, none of the other leads are in the video.

The *Search* presents Alim Bibi as the best lead and makes it major foci. Although she is not the actual woman in the *Afghan Girl* image which we learn later, she serves as a plot device or red-herring for the mystery narrative in the *Search*. However, the Alim Bibi scene also serves to support a critique of how the producer's engage the Afghan Other. The Alim Bibi scene continues with the van as the camera trucks away from the mother as she and the school teacher exit the van's side-door. Their exit shot cuts directly to Yousafzai who walks over to a small boy and shows him a photograph of the *Afghan Girl*. The camera frames Yousafzai leaning over the boy as other children gather around and he asks, in a non-English dialect, the boy if he knows who the person in the picture is. The boy, who looks about five years old, produces a wide smile as he looks at the picture and responds. Yousafzai translates what he asked the boy and replies, "He says it's his mother."<sup>17</sup> Yousafzai gestures with the photograph and tells the boy to take it and show his mother. Trailing the other children, the boy scampers through a wooden gateway and the door closes behind them. The camera frames McCurry and Yousafzai in a medium-shot as they look off to the side in the direction of the gate door. Yousafzai states that they must now wait and McCurry points out that there was a small space in the door that he was able to catch a glimpse of a woman in the courtyard. "I actually saw her through the door," McCurry states as a profile shot of McCurry intently leaning forward cuts to a direct shot of the door. "If that's not her, it would be some kind of miracle. Through the door I saw ... her." Twice, McCurry makes reference to some act of providence in this lead, either it being advantageous that the woman's name translates to a phrase that befits a Westernized reading of the *Afghan Girl* or

that an act of divine intervention would alter their chance encounter with the *Afghan Girl*.

The *Search* reiterates the difficulty or obstacles of locating and identifying the *Afghan Girl* because of the cultural restrictions that American's may not be accustomed to. A close-up of Yousafzai informs McCurry that "her husband is at work and without his permission; no man may see her unless he's family." McCurry is visibly uncomfortable with this situation. A medium-shot frames him as he chuckles uncomfortably into his hands, "Oh this is unbelievable. Man. Ah, we have to wait until tomorrow, huh? He-he, jeez." Yousafzai addresses McCurry's discomfort, and their dialogue represents their need to respect the cultural protocols and mumble assurances of understanding.

YOUSAFZAI: I know you want to do it today.

MCCURRY: (chuckling)

YOUSAFZAI: Just now and there is, ah, so near and yet so far.

MCCURRY: Yeah, I know.

YOUSAFZAI: But, ah, unfortunately, you are not allowed.

MCCURRY: Yeah, right.

YOUSAFZAI: There are cultural constraints.

MCCURRY: Yeah, okay. Well, let's, ah...

YOUSAFZAI: You know... we have to work...

MCCURRY: Yeah, with what we... you know...

YOUSAFZAI: ...through the system.

MCCURRY: ...through the culture...

MCCURRY: We don't want to... spoil...

YOUSAFZAI: Yes...

MCCURRY: Yes, Lets be back here sharp at nine o'clock.

YOUSAFZAI: Yes. I-I... I'm really hopeful now.

MCCURRY: Yeah...

YOUSAFZAI: Steve, don't be impatient. Just wait for one just more night. You've waited for seventeen years. Tomorrow morning, God willing, your wish will come true.

This exchange highlights one of the more unexamined challenges the investigation faces: cultural obstacles of female subjugation.

The narrator addresses most of the obstacles of locating and identifying the *Afghan Girl* in the opening scene of the *Search*. This includes the cultural obstacle of searching for a woman in a population that imposes the wearing of a burkha to obscure exposure thus hindering identification. However, the idea that a person would self-impose isolation until granted permission may seem alien to

an American audience as much as it appears to be a difficult concept for McCurry to grasp in this scene. This concept invites readings of the *Search* assuming its audience will identify with McCurry and not with the Afghan people as depicted. Furthermore, this exchange between Yousafzai and McCurry provides the needed contrast to establish McCurry as the obvious foreigner whose perspective the viewer is to assume. Whereas, the *Search* positions McCurry as an authoritative perspective, this exchange invites readings of him as a natural perspective or his viewer audience to adopt.

Various scenes depict McCurry engaging locals does nothing to support the theme of the investigation of the *Afghan Girl's* identity other than to establish him as an authority perspective of the Afghan Other. However, much of his interaction appears more on par with a tourist visiting an area on a subsequent visit. The following scene reflects McCurry's interaction in Peshawar nightlife as he waits for tomorrow's meeting with Alim Bibi. Using a montage-effect of B-roll footage to situate McCurry in a foreign and more specifically, Muslim, area, the documentary constructs an alien world for McCurry to navigate. This depiction in the *Search* continues to support a position for the audience to uncritically assume McCurry's gaze.

Various shots in the *Search* focus on visual and auditory cues to indicate the region as uniquely Middle Eastern and more important, Islamic. Opening with the a voice over a loudspeaker calling people to prayer, images of a mosque and a skeletal-tower structure hosting the loudspeakers, the scene is framed as taking place in a Muslim region. Video of McCurry walking through a crowd is cross-cut to B-roll snippets of various people wandering and vendors working the narrow streets. Nondiegetic music using traditional Middle Eastern instruments accompanies these shots and ties them together. McCurry greets a man in front of a store-front with the customary Muslim salutation, Salaam Alaikum, and enters the brightly lit store. "I always like to get a shave when I come to Peshawar," McCurry says as the camera frames him in a close up as a boy of about thirteen applies shaving cream with a shaving brush. "Because they .... after the shave they will give you a wonderful head massage." Nondiegetic music, with synthetic beats and upbeat electric tune similar to pre-recorded stock-music used for commercial purposes, plays as the young boy is shaving McCurry and the room is full of men inside this shop watching the exchange. When the boy starts giving McCurry a head-massage his motions match the musical beat and sound effects that almost belies its nondiegetic

source. The use of synthetic up-beat stock music for the interior of the barbershop contrasts with the somber traditional sounds of an Oriental flare. These shots are explicit in positioning McCurry being a foreigner in a foreign albeit Muslim landscape.

The *Search* includes scenes of McCurry negotiating the cultural practices as a professional caught in a moment where another subjugates his property. McCurry leaves the barbershop and continues his walkabout through the Peshawar nightlife. As the narrator points out as McCurry walks by a souvenir shop display, "Despite the head massage, Steve is still anxious. He can not escape the image of the *Afghan Girl*." In the shop window is a painting of the *Afghan Girl*. Once inside the shop, he starts pulling different versions of the *Afghan Girl* image together such as some as posters and some as pencil drawings. He lines them standing up on a display counter and asks the shop clerk, "Can you give me a special price on that"? The shop clerk, appearing distinctly Western and different than the variety of locals that are portrayed in the documentary, with his clean shaven face, jean jacket, tucked in button-down shirt, and accented English. The clerk appears amused with the camera focusing on their exchange as he chuckles and tells McCurry that the price of the poster is fifty rupees. McCurry points out to the clerk and tells him why he wants a special price is because he is the photographer. The camera frames a close-up of McCurry's name at the bottom of the poster. Now the clerk is no longer chuckling and explains that the cost is a "local price" but for his find . . . eighty rupees." McCurry starts to laugh and tells the clerk, "Eighty rupees?!? Hoho-haha, you're gonna give me twenty rupees . . . discount because this is . . . that is very kind of you . . . very generous." Why include this exchange? What need would McCurry have with acquiring a souvenir poster of the *Afghan Girl* and to spend the time in lining up the variety of works for sale that incorporate his copy-written image? Speculation aside, he did line up the works together in a comparative collection and did take the time to point out to the clerk that he is the owner of the image. For much of the film, McCurry talks about how iconic the *Afghan Girl* image is for many people throughout the world and that it transcends boundaries. However, this exchange invites readings of his reassertion of ownership to the image.

Due to his extensive work in the regions of Afghanistan and Pakistan, the *Search* positions McCurry as an authority perspective of the Central Asia region. More importantly is his perspective in negotiating the cultures for the audience to set up a

hierarchical spectatorial relationship. Perhaps the audience can assume a position to ignore the fact that McCurry does not speak any of the foreign dialect he encounters in the *Search*. Albeit he appears aloof to the cultural constraints and local mores, his position may aid the viewer as a cultural guide. As evident in his determination to identify the *Afghan Girl*, he expresses his dismay and frustration of the cultural restrictions obstructing immediate access. The *Search* invites the viewer to share in the frustration. Furthermore, his interactions with various locals seems more akin to a bumbling tourist than a seasoned journalist with knowledge of the area that does not inspire confidence in his ability to engage with the Afghan Other. Much of the exchanges of McCurry with Afghan and Pakistani locals invite readings of constructing McCurry as a lead perspective for audience to relate to whereas Rahimullah Yousafzai is the lead investigator actually conducting the search. Therefore, the *Search for the Afghan Girl* is more about McCurry's relationship with the conflicts in Afghanistan and his iconic image, the *Afghan Girl*. The novelty of discovering her identity seems to be secondary to telling McCurry's story as well as inviting American viewers to gaze into a perspective of a region that their country is currently engaging with.

National Geographic takes the opportunity of the events of 9/11 to frame the sociohistorical context of the story of the *Afghan Girl* to an American audience. However, the *Search* never establishes a connection of Afghanistan and 9/11 beyond the common denominator of Steve McCurry's photojournalist work. Furthermore, the *Search* establishes Steve McCurry as an authoritative perspective for those suffering as collateral damage in times of conflict; American's during 9/11 and Afghan's during the Soviet-Afghan War and Afghan Civil War. Thus, the *Search* presents McCurry's image of *The Afghan Girl* as a reliable metonym connecting American interest in Afghanistan to the American experience of conflict survival.

*The Search for the Afghan Girl* is problematic due to the lack of transparency of its producers omitting or ignoring their privileged position in producing this story. Furthermore, their choice of medium belies a creative endeavor, yet constitutes a journalist production that escapes journalistic scrutiny and ethical practices. The medium of documentary film has played a part in shaping public perception of events in history since its first development in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Documentary is a socially constructed format used to distinguish media as based on nonfiction as opposed to a

fictional craft. Filmmaker and educator, John Grierson, coined the term documentary in the 1930's and defined it as the "creative treatment of actuality". Although the definition distinguishes a style of filmmaking, it is applicable to the larger field of documentary or narrative journalism that encompasses other media such as writing, photography, and radio. It is through the social construct of representation and mass dissemination which invites credibility in documentary craft similar to other journalistic endeavors and warrants reference as an educational source. However, documentary video/film productions do not follow the same ethical practices of professional journalism such as transparency. The feature format of documentary films tends to mirror the narrative "creative" treatment applied to fictional films as opposed to more controlled broadcast media like television and radio and thus avoiding scrutiny. Therefore, documentary as a source document re-presenting events or actualities becomes problematic due to editorial decisions of what to include and what to exclude.

<sup>1</sup> NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC. 2008. Sight & sound.

<sup>2</sup> ABRAMSON, H.S. 1987. *National Geographic: Behind America's lens on the world*. NY: Crown.

<sup>3</sup> STEET, L. 2000. *Veils and daggers: A century of National Geographic's representation of the Arab world*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

<sup>4</sup> LUTZ, C., & COLLINS, J. L. 1993. *Reading National Geographic*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

<sup>5</sup> NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC. 2008. Sight & sound.

<sup>6</sup> CUMBO JR., L. (Writer) 2002. *The search for the Afghan girl* [VHS]. In L. Cumbo Jr. (Producer). USA: National Geographic Television.

<sup>7</sup> U.S. CENSUS. 2000. Population Change and 2000 Share for the Largest Metropolitan Areas: 1990 to 2000, Table 3. Retrieved Online:

<http://www.census.gov/prod/2001pubs/c2kbr01-2.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> CUMBO

<sup>9</sup> CUMBO

<sup>10</sup> CUMBO

<sup>11</sup> MCCURRY, S. (Artist). 1985. *Afghan girl*. [Photograph].

<sup>12</sup> NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC. 1985. *Along Afghanistan's War-torn Frontier*. National Geographic.

<sup>13</sup> CUMBO

<sup>14</sup> CUMBO

<sup>15</sup> FEDERAL BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION. <http://www.fbi.gov/wanted/topten/fugitives/laden.htm>

<sup>16</sup> CUMBO

<sup>17</sup> CUMBO