War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death. Written and directed by Loretta Alper and Jeremy Earp. Produced by Loretta Alper. Based on the book by Norman Solomon. Narrated by Sean Penn. Media Education Foundation, 2007, 73 min.

Since 1991 the Media Education Foundation (MEF) has produced a series of films and supporting materials which have become widely used in media studies and other college courses. *Dreamworlds: Desire, Sex and Power in Music Video* (now in its third edition, 2007) and *Tough Guise: Violence, Media and the Crisis in Masculinity* (1999) are among the best known, but other notable recent titles include *Hijacking Catastrophe: 9/11, Fear, and the Selling of American Empire* (2004) and *Class Dismissed: How TV Frames the Working Class* (2007). Founded by Sut Jhally at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, the organization has grown in size and sophistication, and its catalog (www.mediaed.org/) now includes a wide variety of films on media and gender, health, diversity, commercialism, war, peace and other topics. Although some MEF films are mostly (very effective) illustrated lectures, the quality, organization and production values of its films are

steadily improving.

A good example is one of MEF's most recent films, *War Made Easy: How Presidents and Pundits Keep Spinning Us to Death* (2007). Based on syndicated columnist Norman Solomon's book of the same title published in 2005, this 73-minute film analyzes the striking parallels in how Presidents, the Pentagon and the U.S. news media have repeatedly sold wars to Americans since the beginning of the Cold War more than fifty years ago. Focusing primarily on the spurious rationales for the Vietnam War and the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, but including many other instances of selective history, and some outright lies, from Presidents Johnson, Nixon, Reagan, Clinton and both Bushes, the film documents, with scores of well-organized television and film clips, a consistent pattern with repeated components. First, presidents and others beat the drums of war, preparing public opinion by "withholding information about the actual reasons and potential costs of military action, again and again choosing to present an easier version of war's reality....A steady and remarkably consistent storyline designed not to inform but to generate and maintain support and enthusiasm for war." Appeals based on fear buttress this selective view of reality, and the U.S. is presented as acting from only the most virtuous of motives. The "rhetoric of democracy" repeats endlessly, until "bombing other people comes to seem like an act of kindness, of altruism." This war propaganda blends into the conventional wisdom of commercial media coverage, and not just by Fox and other obviously right-wing sources. The dominant media become "team players" with the government leaders they are supposed to be covering, a role which Norman Solomon notes pointedly is "directly counter to the idea of an independent press." During the run-up to the invasion of Iraq, the false claims about Saddam Hussein's weapons of mass destruction in Secretary of State Colin Powell's UN speech were greeted with skepticism by much of the European press, but the U.S. press was overwhelmingly uncritical, continuing their usual role as stenographers to power, mostly just writing down and passing on the administration line. Now, after U.S. public opinion has turned against the war, we get the muted admissions from some journalists that "we should have been more skeptical," while they continue to insist that "the system worked." But it's too late; too much damage has been done, the problem is structural, and it only awaits another presidential propaganda initiative for the whole cycle to start all over again.

In the process of analyzing this institutionalized compulsion to repeated, unnecessary and immoral military actions, the film destroys several cherished myths about U.S. wars and war reporting over the last half-century. Many Americans believe that support for the Vietnam war eroded because reporting on that war was so tough, because we got tired of watching brutality on television. But Solomon notes, and the film demonstrates, how exceptional was the tough reporting: Walter Cronkite's new public skepticism about official claims of the war's successes in early 1968, for example, showed Lyndon Johnson that he was losing the struggle for U.S. public opinion, but the film shows Cronkite and other journalists repeatedly fawning over U.S. weaponry and firepower. And while grotesquely expensive high-tech weapons are continually fetishized, very little of the violence done by American soldiers was or is shown.

The related notion of "the Vietnam syndrome" also comes under critical scru-

tiny here. Supposedly Americans become skittish if a war goes on too long, and the first President Bush imagined we had "kicked" this mythical problem with the Gulf War. But a comparative graph of public support for wars over time shows clearly that support for World War Two always remained high, while support for the Vietnam and Iraq wars steadily declined because they couldn't be won quickly and were based on deception. Most Americans aren't as ignorant or distracted as our myths or our leaders often purport. Thus a key component of the repeated storyline: military withdrawal must be made unacceptable. Don't "cut and run." "Stay the course."

This film is not just a talking-head adaptation of Norman Solomon's book, repeating his message in a different medium. It is a distinctive work of its own, creatively developing Solomon's very important work in new ways and with different kinds of evidence. It uses a wide variety of specifically cinematic (and rhetorical) devices to construct a well-supported argument which is also concrete, vivid and carefully paced. In particular, writer-directors Loretta Alper and Jeremy Earp have learned from recent developments in contemporary documentary films on political and social issues. Documentary filmmakers have been constructing so-called "compilation films" since at least the thirties, when the development of large-scale international photograph, sound and film archives made possible the compilation of previously-recorded material into new nonfiction and propaganda works which changed the meanings of the earlier images and sounds by recontextualizing them. More recently the archives of television news at Vanderbilt University and elsewhere give contemporary documentarists access to vast new databases of public, visible evidence, and the doctrine of "fair use" provides legal protection for educational and other work that incorporates this evidence into new discursive and political frameworks. And relatively inexpensive and speedy digital editing decks make it possible to organize and manipulate all this material much more easily. Gradually nonfiction filmmakers, especially independent left political filmmakers, have learned to use these tools to construct critiques of the commercial media using the images and sounds of those same media. They comb through digital archives, finding ideological patterns hidden by the priorities of dominant media; over time, they have learned to condense through editing these found materials into fluid, complex, even graceful structures of argument, counter-argument, illustration and evidence. In the recent explosion of political and other documentaries, many a film editor has learned how to construct a damning and often hilarious montage sequence that shows multiple news anchors and pundits speaking with virtually one voice, or contradicting themselves, or repeating now-discredited wisdom. Michael Moore, Robert Greenwald and others have popularized this as a quasi-Brechtian practice, and variations show up regularly on *YouTube* and *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart.

War Made Easy uses these now-familiar montage sequences with an ethical precision and facility at the service of serious, even devastating arguments. One president after another not only says virtually the same things, but also uses similar gestures in similar backdrops. Sometimes split screens emphasize these patterns; sometimes slow-motion helps defamiliarize the powerful images and sounds of parades and patriotism to reveal their ritualistic functions. This is structuralism for

beginners, demonstrating through close and intricate visual/sound parallels a relatively unchanging structure within apparent historical change. A montage of Bush administration officials repeating lies about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction receives its echo a few minutes later in a montage of media channels repeating lies about Iraq's weapons of mass destruction. The rhythm of voice-over exposition by Sean Penn and Norman Solomon carefully slows, then accelerates in coordination with evidentiary images. And the film wisely saves for silent intertitles, fading in and out slowly one by one, one of its most memorable points. The percentage of casualties who are civilians: World War One: 10%. World War Two: 50%. Vietnam: 70%. Iraq: 90%.

War Made Easy is an impressive and accomplished work which should spark lots of informed discussion in and out of classrooms and elsewhere.

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