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## Watching the War

Documentaries make the case

By Molly Templeton

Three of this year's five Oscar-nominated documentaries were about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. (The other two were about the American health care system and Ugandan refugee children. Cheery stuff all 'round). Last year, two of the docs ventured into Iraq — will next year's nominees cover just the one topic? Over the course of 2007, plenty of fiction films also came out that focused on the Middle East, though they were generally less well received; it seems people are more interested in actual happenings than interpretations, at least at the moment. But it'll be interesting to see how *Boys Don't Cry* director Kimberly Peirce's *Stop-Loss* fares when it's released. Until then, this quartet of films might give anyone plenty to think about.

**IRAQ IN FRAGMENTS:** An Oscar-nominated film from 2006, *Fragments* depicts the lives of ordinary Iraqis. In three parts, the film focuses on an 11-year-old auto mechanic, looks at the specifics of local politics and the Moqtada Sadr movement, and explores the lives of Iraqi Kurds seeking independence. In the *Los Angeles Times*, Kenneth Turan wrote that "this one demands to be seen."

**NO END IN SIGHT:** First-time filmmaker Charles Ferguson creates a searing timeline of the mistakes made on the ground in Iraq and in the Bush administration in Washington. Ferguson lays out his evidence, piece by piece, until the resulting indictment is utterly impossible to ignore. Critics said the movie didn't show them anything new, but it's not a film in search of something new; it's a film to remind us just how and why things went wrong.

**MY COUNTRY, MY COUNTRY:** Like *Iraq in Fragments*, *My Country, My Country* is concerned with the lives of "ordinary" Iraqis and their lives under U.S. occupation. Director Laura Poitras focuses on Dr. Riyadh, who is a critic of the occupation and a passionate supporter of democracy for his country.

### OPERATION HOMECOMING: WRITING THE WARTIME

**EXPERIENCE:** Richard E. Robbins' film is connected to a book of the same title, a collection put together by the National Endowment for the Arts. The NEA's "Operation Homecoming" initiative collects the writings of soldiers in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars — and that of their families. Actors including Aaron Eckhart and Robert Duvall read the soldiers' writings, while writers and former soldiers such as Tobias Wolff speak about their experiences in earlier wars.

**TAXI TO THE DARK SIDE:** The film that won this year's Best Documentary Feature Oscar explores abuse in connection with the detainment and interrogation of political prisoners. A *New York Times* reporter's investigation of the death of an Afghan taxi driver — a death the military claims was from natural causes — is at the film's heart. "Alex Gibney's *Taxi to the Dark Side* is the documentary that many of us have prayed for, the one that could break through even to people who relish the torture set pieces on *24* and will hear no evil about the War on Terror," wrote *New York* magazine's David Edelstein.

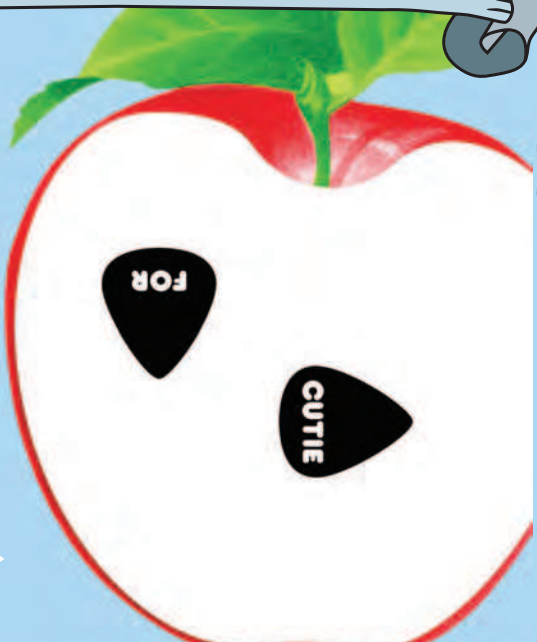
All these films are available on DVD except *Taxi to the Dark Side*, which should come to the Bijou soon.

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