



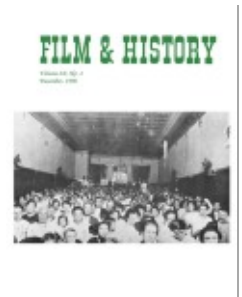
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Inside Iraq (review)

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FILM REVIEW

Inside Iraq (February 15, 1991). Running time: 10:05. Produced and directed by Jon Alpert. Edited by Maryann DeLeo. Distributed by Downtown Community Television Center. 87 Lafayette Street, New York, NY 10013.

Inside Iraq by the television journalist and documentary video maker Jon Alpert is a compilation of on-the-scene video reports made by Alpert during the Persian Gulf War. These reports were recorded during the height of the aerial bombardment and were to be broadcast by N.B.C. News. In a highly controversial decision, N.B.C. decided three hours before air not to broadcast the tape.

Traveling through Iraq, Alpert had an unusual degree of freedom and access to many areas outside of Baghdad, including sections of Basrah leveled by air raids. The reports tell the uncensored story of life in Iraq during wartime. Alpert's probing questions and narration add his trademark of intimacy and sensitivity to the stunning visual evidence of death and destruction.

Alpert's working style demands a mastery of technical proficiency as well as a reporter's skill of asking the right questions at the right time. He pioneered the use of the one person ENG crew and still does his own camera work. His previous documentary work for H.B.O. could be termed interactive cinema verite. This method allows him to participate and interact more in the gathering of material than traditional documentary methods. Although Alpert considers himself an electronic news journalist, he does not produce typical nightly network news fare. In *One Year in the Life of Crime* (1989), the interactive nature of his investigative process seems to skate the edge of objectivity and brings into question the relationship between the observer and the observed in reporting and documentary.

In *Inside Iraq*, the lightweight, portable equipment allows Jon Alpert to easily enter the world beyond his lens. As he travels by car and speaks to Iraqi citizens, Alpert's lens and microphone brings the viewer uncomfortably close to the subjects of his analysis. Close ups of devastated towns, coffins, fearful faces and scarred bodies impart a sense of intimacy and have an immediate impact, which in the past earned recognition for Alpert's work. Alpert admits that he "probes more. We do participate with our subjects. We try not to alter what would naturally occur. But when something occurs that we have a question about, we ask it." (All statements by Alpert taken from interviews conducted by the author, Summer-Fall, 1991.) Ironically these qualities, praised in other video reports and abundant in *Inside Iraq*, probably resulted in Alpert being fired from

N.B.C., and his footage not allowed on the network. This approach raises questions about the nature of Alpert's film evidence.

Although the Iraq reports have a verite look, Alpert admits it is not a documentary or a definitive analysis of the war. He has commented that, "All we were trying to do was to capture as best as we could what was occurring inside the country to show to the American people on T.V." Alpert also claims that *Inside Iraq* "wasn't intended to be a documentary; [it] was intended to be a news report. Certainly it's different from the normal news reports you would see, but it's not a documentary by any means." But the fact that all cinematic objects are systematic propagations of artistic, social, political and ethnographic doctrines is the revelation of the 1990s. With this in mind, we can better understand the lack of interest in classical verite documentaries by independents, artists, networks and the public. When Alpert sent his verite-like Iraq footage to N.B.C. network officials, they did not see video verite or film truth; they saw a political message that conflicted with their own and opted for censorship. Perhaps in politically conflicted times, filmmakers, artists, and independents understand they cannot afford the luxury of observational cinema.

Inside Iraq was intended to be seen and understood in the flow of network news stories. N.B.C.'s decision removed the film from this context; consequently, *Inside Iraq* for some historians takes on special importance. Alpert has expressed a sense of uneasiness that his Iraq news reports now have an historical dimension he never intended or anticipated. Alpert brought a specific function to the Iraq stories, consistent with his journalistic goals for television: "In the past decade we have been making our programs for a mainstream American audience -- farmers in Kansas." This is precisely what the other networks were doing with their coverage. But the fact that Alpert's stories were in effect censored and banned from network television makes *Inside Iraq* an extremely important tape when considering the historical role of media reporting and corporate broadcast institutions during wartime.

Jon Alpert's career includes numerous achievements and awards in video journalism and video documentary. *One Year in the Life of Crime* received a CINE Golden Eagle in 1989. Between 1974 and 1979 Alpert and his wife Keiko Tsuno produced five one-hour documentaries for PBS including the award winning programs *Cuba: The People* (1974), *Vietnam: Picking Up the Pieces* (1978), *Chinatown: Immigrants in America* (1976), and *Third Avenue: Only the Strong Survive* (1980). He was one of the few journalists to provide footage from the

Iranian Embassy during the 1983 hostage crisis, and offered the earliest coverage of the Russian invasion of Afganistan.

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