

Viewing guide for *Baghdad ER*

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Baghdad ER – Pre-viewing guide

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1. Overview / introduction

The documentary *Baghdad ER* (Alpert and O'Neill, 2006) mixes the senses of fear, sympathy, and disgust to create a challenging documentary and a persistent view of the Iraq War. *Baghdad ER* follows the medical professionals around the ER centered in Baghdad. The documentary tries to catch the day to day activities of the medical personnel as they overcome new trials and tribulations. It just so happens that the obstacles these medical professionals face are extraordinarily gruesome and grisly.

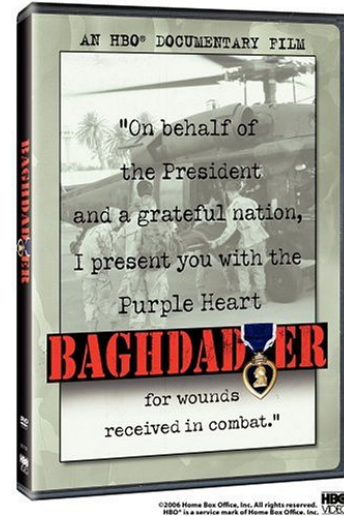
Baghdad ER was not meant for all viewers, especially those who have weak stomachs. In fact, *Baghdad ER* is sickening. This documentary is not appalling because of its message or values. The footage shown in *Baghdad ER* depicts graphic scenes of medical procedures. Most people think that they can handle the gore because they have seen a surgery show on television; however, this is real. The blood is real and the patients are real people.

Baghdad ER works hard to get the viewer to feel the pain and stress of the soldiers and medical professionals. This quest for pathos reaches the viewers on some of the most basic levels like pain, fear and disgust. Some people tend to glamorize war and war zones. However, after watching *Baghdad ER*, the glamour is gone. Even though the ER is located in a green zone, the constant barrage of bombs and gun fire forever instills a fear in those people in the ER. The feeling of disgust hits the viewer early on in the movie when a limb of a human is carried into a large bag. It is difficult to make out exactly what the object is at first, but it is hard to forget once recognized.

People watch surgery dramas with preconceived notions about what they are going to see. Viewers expect certain things from that genre of television show. While *Baghdad ER* does take place in the E.R., certain qualities from television just do not apply to this documentary. Most television watchers are familiar with the show *ER* (Michael Crichton, 1994- present) and some may think that they will get the same effect from *Baghdad ER*. This is a dangerous notion. While some “happy endings” do exist in *Baghdad ER* the drama is real. Just incase any of the viewers forget that America is in a war right now, Alpert and O'Neill make sure to include scenes of bombings, and a trip down Route Irish, the most dangerous road in the world. Unlike the show *ER* family does not rush to the injured person's bedside, there are no funny one-liners to lighten the mood, and there are no dramatic last words.

2. Questions to keep in mind before watching the movie

- How do Alpert and O'Neill use the basic feeling of revulsion to control the viewer's emotions during the documentary?



- Why did Lieutenant General Kevin Kiley issue a warning about the possible psychological side-effects of the documentary?
- How much is too much when it comes to showing graphic images in documentaries?
- Do the blood and gore have the wanted affect on the viewers?

3. Where to obtain copies of this film

- The [OCLC World Catalogue](#) identifies 100 libraries worldwide that contain this item.
- New and used copies at [Amazon.com](#).
- New and used copies at [eBay](#).
- Rental listings at [Netflix](#) and [Blockbuster](#).

Baghdad ER – Post-viewing guide

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1. Overview

This post-viewing guide on *Baghdad ER* (Alpert and O’Neill, 2006) is meant to enhance critical thinking and perspective on the documentary *Baghdad ER*. Like most documentaries, *Baghdad ER* can be viewed on a number of levels. On the most basic level, it is a graphic documentary about the heroism of medical professionals. This is not to say the medical personnel are selfishly doing their jobs. That would be a misconception. Due to the nature of the medical profession these professionals must keep humanity while distancing themselves from the patients at the same time. On a more technical level, *Baghdad ER* uses emotions to change perceptions of the film. While both of these interpretations are valid, this paper caters more those who choose to look into the filmmaker’s manipulation of emotions for a better reception of the documentary.

The intended audience for the guide is those who wish to delve into a deeper understanding of this documentary. This post-viewing guide may also be useful to those trying to conduct a scholarly study on *Baghdad ER*. This is for the students who need a topic for a research paper on *Baghdad ER* or for those who are searching for some additional research on their paper. Post-viewing guides, including this one, can also be used by those who are interested in documentaries especially those interested documentaries about medicine or war. This is also for those of future generations when maybe the Iraq War is over who are curious what the war was like after watching this documentary. There will be some information on the war in Iraq, but it is very difficult to find unbiased information. The reader needs to keep in mind some of the possible biases of the references presented in this post-viewing guide and even in the documentary.

This post-viewing guide might be used in a personal or a classroom setting. While this documentary is probably not appropriate for all students because of its graphic nature, scenes of the documentary may be shown with minimal gore to older students. This film would also be appropriate for students in a university setting with some forewarnings of graphic scenes. Since this post-viewing guide was created for the public, it is also available to those in a non-formal educational setting. In other words, this post-viewing guide can also be used by those who are just curious.

2. Useful resources

a. Related resources about the Iraq War

AntiWar.com (<http://www.antiwar.com/>)

AntiWar.com is run The Randolph Bourne Institute and is “devoted to the cause of non-interventionism and is read by libertarians, pacifists, leftists, "greens," and independents alike, as well as many on the Right who agree with our opposition to imperialism.” This site has a strong bias against the war.

U.S-Iraq pro con (<http://www.usiraqprocon.org/>)

This site is a relatively unbiased look at the pros and cons of issues brought up by the Iraq War. The site claims to be “promoting informed citizenship by presenting controversial issues in a simple, non-partisan pro/con format”

BBC News- Special Reports- Conflict with Iraq
(http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/in_depth/middle_east/2002/conflict_with_iraq/default.stm)

The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) presents breaking news on the Iraq War. This British news website includes features, views, and analysis of issues pertaining to the Iraq War.

c. Glossaries of useful film terms

A Glossary of Film Terms
(http://homepage.newschool.edu/~schlemoj/film_courses/glossary_of_film_terms/glossary.html)

This page, written and designed for internet use by Joel Schlemowitz, contains many of the basic film terms and definitions needed to understand some of the technical aspects of documentaries.

IMDB Glossary of Film Terms
(<http://www.imdb.com/Glossary/>)

This page kept up by the Internet Movie Database is quite extensive and helpful to those advanced viewers of film and novices just getting introduced to the subject. This glossary doesn't just include film terms it also includes acting and cinema-going terms.

A Film-making Glossary and Dictionary
(<http://www.filmsite.org/filmterms.html>)

Not only does this glossary/dictionary contain many phrases that could be useful to those who watch and study documentaries, it also has pictures. These aren't just pictures for the purpose of having fewer words, these pictures actually help the understanding of the term

d. Film Reviews

New York Times TV Review – Baghdad ER
(<http://nymag.com/arts/tv/reviews/16986/>)

The article written by John Leonard explains the documentary focusing on the medical professionals in the emergency room. It compares the tape of the beating of Rodney King to *Baghdad ER*.

DVD Talk
(<http://www.dvdtalk.com/reviews/read.php?id=23451>)

This review contains “parting views” which makes it easy to get the general idea of the review without reading the entire review. The review states the documentary is “honest” and “not easy to sit through”.

Washington Post

(<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/05/19/AR2006051901984.html>)

This review asserts that it would be a travesty to read political motives into the documentary. It also states that *Baghdad ER* “brings the war home more painfully than perhaps any other film has done.”

e. Scholarly treatments of the film

Natalie Minchillo, “*Baghdad ER*: A closer look at the human costs of war,” 2006 (<http://www.trinity.edu/adelwich/documentary/n.minchillo.2006.baghdad.er.pdf>)

This scholarly paper deals with the use of gore in *Baghdad ER* and the human cost of the Iraq War.

Asaas, Saeed and Ghosh, Aparism “A Day in the Life of *Baghdad ER*” Time Vol 165.Issue 20 (2005, May): p30-34.

Ghosh and Asaad focus on the life in one of the emergency rooms in Baghdad called Yarmouk hospital. It contains personal accounts as well as figures of the hospital in terms of wounded.

Shute, Nancy., “A Surgeon on the Front Line,” U.S. News & World Report Vol. 140 Issue 19. (2006, May): p19.

This article deals with Army Major Merritt Pember, one of the professionals filmed in *Baghdad ER*. It contains an interview discussing the number of amputations performed.

3. Video Analysis

a. Explanation and set-up

First, it is important for all viewers to know this clip contains some bloody images and may not be appropriate for everyone. A man is “called” in this video meaning he is pronounced dead. This is an extremely emotional clip from *Baghdad ER* and may bring back unwanted emotions or memories from anyone with any sort of connection with the Iraq War. This clip also includes a Christian prayer. The clip was retrieved from the website www.youtube.com.

b. Link to the video clip



<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pa49E87QjVY>

c. Analysis

The clip begins with one of the few instances politics is mentioned. Even when medical professional brings up his political views, it is done in good taste. The professional also says he has no remorse for working as a medical professional in a war he thinks is “the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever seen.” The dedication of the doctors comes across very clearly in this clip. The humanity of those involved becomes visible as a prayer is being said in a morgue. The solemn moment exposes the humanity and mortality of those in the room. While the professionals at the emergency room in Baghdad have emotions, they have to keep themselves separated from their work. Which explains the seemingly cold answers the filmmakers get after the prayer is said.

Even in this chaotic environment, the medical professionals remain calm. This sense of calm is a contradiction to the usual ER scenes portrayed in the media. Usually when viewers are exposed to scenes in an emergency room, the atmosphere degrades into chaos and drama.

The medical professionals at the hospital are not the only ones who show unbelievable dedication. Later in the clip, a soldier is taken into the hospital with a foreign body inside his eyeball. This man makes it clear to everyone he does not want to leave his fellow soldiers. Regardless of political opinions, this complete dedication to his comrades is an admirable trait. The soldier is clearly distressed to hear that he must go back to the United States for surgery.

This clip accurately captures what *Baghdad ER* is meant to be. *Baghdad ER* was created to show the world the humanity and mortality of those in the emergency room in Baghdad.

4. Discussion Questions

- In the documentary, some of the medical professionals respond to the filmmakers with their opinion of the war. Do the political views of the medical professionals affect the way they perform their jobs in any way?

- If the documentary is not meant to be political, why do the filmmakers include the political views of the medical professionals?
- The carnage in this film is graphic and frequent, but is it necessary to accurately document the events inside the emergency room?
- In a documentary named *Baghdad ER*, why does the cameraman follow some soldiers on patrol?

5. Closing Thoughts

The documentary *Baghdad ER* might not be suitable for all audiences, yet it is important for those who feel they are able to view the documentary to watch. Depending on the viewer's opinions, this film may be a political piece, but the documentary shows the viewer so much more than an average political film could. It displays the courage and dedication of the medical professionals and the mortality and humanity of the soldiers who fight the war. After seeing so many deaths, the viewer may begin to question their own mortality and their own personal reasoning for or against the war. After seeing so much carnage, death, and destruction, one cannot help but be affected by this documentary. It is not one that will be easily forgotten.

6. About the author of this guide

a. Short biography

Natalie Minchillo is a student at Trinity University. She is majoring in Communications with a Film Studies minor. Natalie has written reviews of independent rock albums and is published in many e-zines. Natalie works as a DJ at Trinity University's radio station and hopes to work in the radio business after graduation.

b. Contact information

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c. A note to teachers, students, and anyone who uses this material in a group setting

Thank you for choosing this pre-viewing and post-viewing guide to direct your discussion. This guide was a product of Trinity University's communications class focusing on documentaries and taught by Dr. Aaron Delwiche. I hope this guide encourages you to think critically about everything you see especially in a documentary. Thank you again for choosing to read this guide.