Filmmakers break down hidden images of the war in Iraq

By Louise Kennedy, Globe Staff | October 22, 2004

Some of the images are familiar from the nightly news: George Bush in a cowboy hat, the burning towers of Sept. 11, soldiers firing missiles in a green haze. Others do not show up much in US news reports, but it's part of this film's contention that they should: When you see horrific pictures of wounded Iraqi children and their grieving mothers, those jauntily iconic shots of cowboys with guns lose their tough-guy mystique.

"What we're really trying to do is deconstruct the images," says Sut Jhally, a professor of communication at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and the executive director of Northampton's Media Education Foundation. With his colleague, MEF producer and UMass doctoral candidate Jeremy Earp, Jhally was on the phone to talk about their new documentary, "Hijacking Catastrophe: 9/11, Fear and the Selling of American Empire."

Deconstructing images is what the foundation has been doing for 13 years, in educational videos designed to show students how the mass media -- particularly TV and advertising -- use images to manipulate our ideas about everything from gender roles to drinking to pop music. But "Hijacking Catastrophe," which plays this weekend at the Coolidge Corner Theater in Brookline, is "the first time we've done something that dealt with this urgent an issue," Jhally says.

For at its core, "Hijacking Catastrophe" deals with the most urgent of issues: Why are we in Iraq? The film amasses a strong body of evidence, buttressed by interviews with military sources as well as more predictable critics of the administration, showing that the war grew out of a longstanding neoconservative drive to establish US dominance in the world. The attacks of Sept. 11 provided an opportunity, the film argues, to scare the American people into signing on to an agenda born more than a decade before.

The evidence of this agenda, Jhally says, is "on the Web. What we wanted to do was to take this stuff that is out there in a fragmented way but tell it in a way that has a very strong narrative."

That they have done, clearly and soberly linking documents with quotations from such key administration figures as Vice President Dick Cheney, Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld, and deputy secretary Paul Wolfowitz, as well as the occasional chart. (They've also created a website, hijackingcatastrophe.org, and a book that gather a lot of this information into accessible form.) The result may be less zany than Michael Moore's "Fahrenheit 9/11," but it's no less compelling. And it also, as Jhally and Earp readily admit, owes something to that film -- if not in content, then in the ability to reach a larger audience. "Michael Moore identified a market for information," Jhally says. "One of the great things is that he kind of kicked the door open for a lot of this stuff."

The MEF has distributed 10,000 copies of "Hijacking Catastrophe" on DVD. It has been shown on cable access channels as far away as Montana, and it has been screened in about 50 theaters. But Jhally and Earp hope to find ways of distributing this and other documentaries outside usual channels.

"We have to take back the media," Jhally says, because corporate control of mainstream outlets limits what will be shown -- and therefore limits discussion to the terms the administration has set. That, Earp argues, is why real discussion of the underlying reasons for the war has not made it onto the nightly news.

"I think the administration has been very good at preempting this kind of information," Earp says. "Look at the discourse around intelligence: It's been cast as a 'failure' of intelligence, when there was a report by Sy Hersh in The New Yorker, a fairly mainstream source, documenting the ways in which it's really a manipulation of intelligence, not a failure. They've been very good at deflecting information and then
fragmenting it. . . . And they make it work partly because of the complicity of the mainstream media."

Earp and Jhally see their work as a way to fight that combination of manipulation and acquiescence. By showing that the images we see over and over again on TV -- Bush as a tough guy, war as a kind of high-stakes video game -- are constructed for a particular purpose, not plucked at random from reality, they hope to get people talking about the ideas behind the images.

"What people need to do is they need to become informed; they need to take an active part in the world," Jhally says. "The world is always created by someone, and you can either be a spectator in that or you can take an active part in that. Our job is to get people to see the world clearly. I'm confident that once people can do that, they'll make their own choices."

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“Hijacking Catastrophe: 9/11, Fear and the Selling of American Empire” screens at the Coolidge Corner Theater, Brookline, today and tomorrow at 4 p.m. and Sunday at noon and 4 p.m. ■