



DIARY OF A SOLDIER UNDER ATTACK: VOICE-OVER NARRATION IN BAND OF BROTHERS

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RESUMO: O objetivo deste artigo é analisar as características e funções da narração no episódio sete da minissérie de Segunda Guerra Mundial *Band of Brothers* (2001) e sua importância na construção da relação entre a voz e o telespectador. O narrador deste episódio é o Sargento Lipton, e seus comentários na narração ajudam a construir uma representação mais detalhada do ambiente de guerra, partindo do ponto de vista subjetivo do soldado no campo de batalha. A narração aborda assuntos relacionados às dificuldades emocionais e físicas como o corpo e a dor, medo em combate, camaradagem e violência durante os tempos de guerra.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Segunda Guerra Mundial; Narração; Violência; Minissérie de televisão.

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ABSTRACT: The aim of this article is to analyze the characteristics and functions of voice-over narration in episode seven of the Second World War miniseries *Band of Brothers* (2001), and its importance in the construction of a relationship between the voice and the viewer. The narrator of this episode is Sergeant Lipton, and his voice-over comments help build a more detailed representation of the war environment from the subjective point of view of a soldier in the battlefield. The voice-over approaches issues related to emotional and physical hardships such as bodily pain, fear in combat, comradeship, and violence during war times.

KEYWORDS: Second World War; Voice-over; Violence; Television miniseries.

Although the conflict of the Second World War has been portrayed in many different ways and through distinct media, it is a very challenging task to convey an authentic environment of battlefield experience. Even more intricate is the job of accomplishing this portrayal by giving the audience credible access to the world of thoughts and perceptions of someone in the conflict. One of the possible devices that can aid in the representation of such a traumatic moment in a soldier's life is the use of voice-over narration. The objective of this article is to analyze the characteristics and functions of voice-over narration in episode seven of the war miniseries *Band of Brothers* (SPIELBERG; HANKS, 2001), and its importance in the construction of a relationship between the voice and the viewer.

According to Sarah Kozloff (1988) in *Invisible storytellers*, every movie has a sense of a narrating voice that carries out the events and governs the narrative, and in some instances this voice becomes audible through a person's speech (KOZLOFF, 1988, p. 1). Movies have the power to guide people's attention and point to the most valuable facts in the narrative through images and sound effects. Undoubtedly, voice-over narration can be perceived as one very effective way to explicitly tell a story on the screen, and create a relationship with the audience that might be vital in shaping the understanding of the film.

Thus, in order to better comprehend the effect of voice-over narration in films and miniseries, it is necessary to define this concept. Kozloff defines it as "oral statements, conveying any portion of a narrative, spoken by an unseen speaker situated in a space and time other than that simultaneously being presented by the images on the screen" (KOZLOFF, 1988, p. 5). The critic then separates the voice-over narration roughly into two major categories with specific traits. There is the first-person narrator or also called character narrator, and the other category is named third-person or authorial narrators (KOZLOFF, 1988, p. 6). The debate over the existence of one or more separate types of narrators is an ongoing discussion. Brian Henderson (1999) in "Tense, mood, and voice in film" points out that Gérard Genette does not accept the difference between first and third person narrators, therefore defining as all narrations being done in the first person (HENDERSON, 1999, p. 71).

Being widely used in the literary world, voice-over narration was also incorporated in the cinematic realm with a variety of functions. Since this article will be dealing with an example of first-person narrator from one of the episodes of *Band of Brothers*, the discussion will be around its characteristics. As stated by Kozloff (1988), such narration functions in "conveying expositional information, and aiding in the presentation of complex chronologies" (KOZLOFF, 1988, p. 41). Most importantly, this kind of narration can cause an impact on the viewer's experience of the film or miniseries by "increasing identification with the characters, by prompting nostalgia, and by stressing the individuality and subjectivity of perception and storytelling" (KOZLOFF, 1988, p. 41). More than assisting in the understanding of the narrative, voice-over narration is a powerful device

to access deeper layers of meaning comprehension through the process of recognition between the audience and the narrator.

Moreover, *Band of Brothers*, a ten-episode miniseries which presents the daily lives of a group of soldiers, makes use of voice-over narration in certain episodes to show the events in a very intimate and personalized way. Set during World War II, *Band of Brothers* follows the group of paratroopers from Easy Company during the varied battles throughout Europe. The gritty portrayal of the soldiers is made by following them into the zones of combat and explicitly displaying wounds and war savagery. The episodes that make use of voice-over narration are focused on showing the perspective of one of the soldiers in relation to the events and people around them. For instance, episode seven, "The Breaking Point", is narrated by Sergeant Carwood Lipton (Donnie Wahlberg), whereas episode eight, "The Last Patrol", has as narrator Private David Webster (Eion Bailey).

Besides that, it is possible to notice the use of interviews in order to personalize and portray the events in a closer way. Before the beginning of the fictional representation of the conflicts, each episode starts with interviews with the veterans and their personal views on the battles and survival experiences. Thomas Schatz (2002) comments on the effect of the interviews on the narrative by saying that it "is quite striking, at once personalizing the narrative and injecting a sense of documentary realism, while efficiently outlining both the dramatic stakes and the thematic subtext of the series segment" (SCHATZ, 2002, p. 77). This element adds up to the atmosphere of sharing experiences and memories from soldiers who were in the line of fire.

In episode seven, called "The Breaking Point", Easy Company is stationed in the Ardennes forest in Belgium, in January 1945, and engage in the conflict that would be called the Battle of the Bulge. According to H. P. Willmott, Robin Cross, and Charles Messenger (2009) in *World War II*, this was a major German offensive that took the Allies by surprise (WILLMOTT; CROSS; MESSENGER, 2009, p. 234). The plan was to infiltrate the weak lines the Americans were holding in the Ardennes forest. Due to poor aerial reconnaissance, the Allies were not well equipped or staffed for such severe weather conditions and overpowering German military strength. Thick fog and heavy snow prevented Allied airplanes from dropping supplies and aiding the soldiers with firepower (WILLMOTT; CROSS; MESSENGER, 2009, p. 235). The American lines were in great danger if it were not for the improvement in the weather, which meant aerial support, and the endurance of the soldiers in effectively holding the defensive lines.

The experience of going through the Battle of the Bulge in the city of Bastogne was one of the most deadly and difficult moments of Easy Company during the European campaign. Stephen E. Ambrose (2001), who collected the stories of the Easy Company veterans in the book *Band of Brothers*, comments that:

Beyond the wounded and killed, every man at Bastogne suffered. Men unhit by shrapnel or bullets were nevertheless casualties. There were no unwounded men at Bastogne. As Winters put it, 'I'm not sure that anybody who lived through that one hasn't carried with him, in some hidden ways, the scars. Perhaps that is the factor that helps keep Easy men bonded so unusually close together' (AMBROSE, 2001, p. 220-221).

The hardships during the Battle of the Bulge were so extreme that the physically and emotionally scarred soldiers carried these memories that would not leave them completely. Ambrose (2001) mentions that Bastogne was a location to be long remembered and "that name—and the experience it represented—would stay with them forever. Whenever thereafter a man from Easy experienced cold or hunger or sleep deprivation, he would remind himself of Bastogne and recall that he had been through much worse" (AMBROSE, 2001, p. 220).

The narrator of this particular episode is Sergeant Lipton, a character who by the seventh segment is already recognizable as hard working and courageous. Richard Goldstein (2001) comments in the online edition of *The New York Times* that Lipton "is portrayed in the series in a low-key, dependable member of the company who emerges as a strong leader while a first sergeant in the Battle of the Bulge" (GOLDSTEIN, 2001). The transformation of the character is visible during the episode as the audience has access to his thoughts and wishes. One of the major factors that contributed in his ascension to leadership is the lack of courage and participation of the commanding officer of Easy Company in that episode. First Lieutenant Norman Dike (Peter O'Meara) is portrayed as a lazy and absent company leader who escapes responsibility whenever he has the chance. It is up to the soldier who is next-in-command, in this case Sgt. Lipton, to bring the remaining men together and keep their spirits up during the tough attacks in the Ardennes forest in Bastogne. In the episode, Easy Company is attacked by constant fire from the Germans stationed in the nearby town of Foy in a series of barrages, that is, heavy artillery fire. It is possible to perceive Lipton standing out as a sergeant who keeps his men as confident and calm as they can be under the circumstances through his actions, and his resilience can be observed through his words in the voice-over narration.

Regarding space and time in voice-over, Henderson mentions in his article that a narrator must be temporarily situated but not spatially (HENDERSON, 1999, p. 70). In episode seven, after the opening credits of the series, the image remains black but the sound of Lipton's voice-over echoes by itself for two seconds before something appears on screen. As Henderson also points out, the narrator is usually shown during the film (HENDERSON, 1999, p. 70), in this case, the episode. The next image that can be seen is a medium close-up of Lipton himself centered in the frame surrounded by other soldiers who are studying a map in order to be acquainted with their position (see fig. 1). His location during the voice-over is unknown but his speech in the past tense denotes that he, as a narrator, has already been through that situation and is sharing some of his memories

with the audience: “After holding the line in Bastogne, Easy Company was once again called on to help push the Germans back through the Bulge”.¹ The voice-over narration immediately gives way to synchronous dialogue as his voice in the conversation with the soldiers becomes audible: “We were here this morning and then we came this way.” This is an important feature since it informs the audience who the narrator is, in case his voice had not been recognized yet.



Fig. 1. Lipton is the main narrator of the episode

In the initial voice-over narration, Lipton is not only sharing his recollections but also situating the audience in relation to the whereabouts and actions of Easy Company. This is a particular feature of the voice-over narration in *Band of Brothers* that helps in the comprehension of the great amount of geographical and military information that must be grasped in order to better understand the movements of the company. The voice-over is used to aid in terms of time frame and geographical location: “On the afternoon of January third, most of E-Company headed back to our old position in the woods overlooking Foy.” Besides voice-over narration, this kind of explanation is also given through character conversation, in which soldiers talk about the military operations and locations, and through the images of maps used by the soldiers themselves when discussing the missions.

As the episode continues, the instances of voice-over narration are more connected to the relationship with other characters. Lipton comments in his narration about Lieutenant Buck Compton (Neal McDonough) and his change in behavior: “But to be honest, Buck wasn’t the same soldier he’d been before he got shot in Holland. He was more serious somehow.” This narration is visually accompanied by a crane shot initially showing from a distance the soldiers making arrangements for their foxholes as it travels to the right. The camera then starts lowering and finally shows Buck talking to other soldiers in a foxhole (see figs. 2-3). In his voice-over, Lipton gives his personal view on Buck’s emotional state, calling the audience’s attention to the unstable behavior that will be exemplified during Buck’s conversation. The lieutenant goes from foxhole to foxhole

¹ All the voice-over excerpts in this article are taken from the miniseries *Band of Brothers*, episode seven, “The Breaking Point”.

telling his fellow soldiers not to do anything unadvisable and showing an excessive and strange concern for their well-being, particularly toward one of his friends, Sergeant Joseph Guarnere (Frank John Hughes). The soldiers notice Buck's odd behavior describing him as "wound up like a spring", validating Lipton's voice-over and opinion.



Fig. 2. Crane shot

Fig. 3. Buck talks to soldiers in the foxhole

In his voice-over narration, Lipton individually mentions his view on some soldiers that will interact among themselves in critical situations later on in the episode. Another soldier remembered by Lipton is Joe Toye (Kirk Acevedo) who is returning from the infirmary: "Joe Toye had been at the aid station for three days and everybody was glad to have him back. Especially Bill Guarnere." The three soldiers previously mentioned, Buck, Toye, and Guarnere are going to be involved in one of the most explicitly violent and emotional moments of the episode. Lipton's narration and focus on these characters enhances the emotional connection of these soldiers, and therefore giving more impact to the graphic violence that is about to be depicted.

In terms of graphic portrayal of violence, *Band of Brothers* is recognized by its shocking and straightforward representation of the battlefield. Nicholas J. Cull (2002) comments that in the miniseries "the full consequences of violence are shown: death, mutilation, and mental strain" (CULL, 2002, p. 992). The emphasis on the corporeal effects of violent acts echoes throughout the episodes, and remains as a constant presence whether in moments of peace or danger. The type of violence that is mostly enacted in *Band of Brothers* brings the idea of explicitness and gruesomeness to the soldier's body that calls attention to its graphic nature. Graphic violence for James Kendrick (2009) in *Hollywood bloodshed* "refers to unmistakable on-screen representations of the damage to the human body that result from violent acts" (KENDRICK, 2009, p. 6). He explains that in this kind of approach to violence, the artists creating either the film or television show attempt to draw the audience's attention to the details of bodily damage thus following the process of body violation to its possibly utmost particularities. Stephen Prince (2000) in *Screening violence* proposes the term ultraviolence as images that can be graphic and bloody in its portrayals of beheading and dismemberment (PRINCE, 2000, p. 2). Prince (2003) also observes that this

type of violence is "an essential component of cinema: part of its deep formal structure, something that many filmmakers have been inherently drawn toward and something that cinema does supremely well" (PRINCE, 2003, p.3). In *Band of Brothers*, the violent images stand as important and impacting elements that can be viscerally connected to the narrative logic of the miniseries in order to represent issues of bodily pain, fear in the battlefield, comradeship, and wastefulness of lives during war times, demonstrating that they can go beyond the purely graphic content of the violent image.

During one of the barrages, Buck, Toye, and Guarnere have a moment of great personal importance. Toye is hit by a bomb and loses half of his right leg. This image is shown without any visual constraints. It is possible to see in detail the maiming and physical destruction of his leg (see fig. 4). A few minutes later, Guarnere listens to his friend's plea for help and comes to him. Guarnere tries to drag Toye to a foxhole where Buck is calling them. Before reaching a safe location, both Toye and Guarnere are hit by a bomb with Buck as a desperate witness. After the debris fall, it is possible to see a high angle shot of their bodies entangled and wounded (see fig. 5). Buck stares at the sight without being able to react. As help arrives, both soldiers are alive but Guarnere also loses part of his right leg. The voice-over narration comes in together with a medium close-up of Lipton trying to talk to Buck (see fig. 6), who is clearly traumatized by the previous event: "I know something happened to him when he saw Toye and Guarnere on the ground." When Buck is removed from the field, the images that accompany Lipton's voice over depict the poor emotional state that Buck finds himself after he is sent to the aid station. Lipton's narration gives the audience access to military files and internal information, but also summarizes the consequences of the event to Buck:

Some say Buck changed after he was shot in Holland. I know something happened to him when he saw Toye and Guarnere on the ground. On the report it said Compton was being taken off the line because of a bad case of trench foot. Didn't say anything about him losing his friends. [...] He took everything the Krauts could throw at him time and again. I guess he just couldn't take seeing his friends Toye and Guarnere torn up like that. No one ever thought any less of him for it.



Fig. 4. The maiming of Toye's leg



Fig. 5. High angle shot of entangled bodies



Fig. 6. Lipton tries to talk to Buck

A very common feature of Lipton's voice-over is the analysis of the internal feelings of his fellow soldiers in traumatic conditions. By living collectively with the men from Easy Company for a significant amount of time, he is not just giving the audience a wild guess but speaking from the experience of interaction with them. When two soldiers are killed in a foxhole, Lipton turns his attention to Sergeant Donald Malarkey (Scott Grimes): "Muck and Penkala were good men. Their death hit Malarkey hardest. Malarkey's best friends in the company had been Compton, Muck, and Penkala. In less than a week he'd seen two of them die." The voice-over shows how Lipton cares for the people around him and denotes his awareness of the devastating effect of violence and death in the battlefield, and its emotional toll in the soldiers. The narration is complemented by a follow-up scene of Lipton making conversation with Malarkey and trying to arrange a way for him to be off the line for a while, an option that he refuses. Clearly, the offering of a break and the caring provided by Lipton provided Malarkey with a sense of support and comfort.

Another example of Lipton's concern for the welfare of his company's soldiers is when he encounters a soldier digging a foxhole with his bare hands (see fig. 7). The whole incident is narrated by Lipton and the audience simultaneously sees the encounter: "He didn't notice that he had torn off all his fingernails. I got him out of there quickly. Not for his sake but for ours. Fear is poison in combat. Something we all felt but just didn't show. You can't. It's destructive, and it's contagious." Lipton constantly expresses his fear for the low morale of his fellow soldiers and the dangerous effects of it. Little by little he assumes the position of a leader by going from soldier to soldier, and trying to keep their minds off fear and anxiety. He makes conversation, jokes, and maintains a calm attitude that relaxes the soldiers around him.



Fig. 7. A soldier desperately digs a foxhole

In the miniseries, the military code of behavior can become extremely restrictive when it comes to complaints about officers and orders. Soldiers are aware that commanding officers must be given respect and obeyed at any time. Therefore, soldiers cannot always say openly what they think about officers and missions. The feature of voice-over allows Lipton to express himself freely about his worries and complaints in relation to his commanding officer, Lt. Dike. Other soldiers, normally privates, have conversations among themselves and criticize some decisions made by higher hierarchy, but they do not share this opinion with officers. Along the episode, Lipton says through voice-over: “Dike wasn’t a bad leader because he made bad decisions. He was a bad leader because he made no decisions”, and “We were stuck with Dike and he was off taking a walk.” His freedom of speech during narration is extremely distinct from what he can say out loud to the officers. In one instance, when he subtly points out to Captain Richard Winters (Damian Lewis) that Dike would cause the death of many men by leading the incoming assault on the town of Foy, he expresses his anguish in voice-over: “The night before the attack, I did something as first sergeant I would never have imagined myself doing.” By stating his criticism in relation to Dike to his superiors, Lipton feels that he is stepping out of line and being disrespectful, an impression he does not have when he is privately sharing his overall reflections about Lt. Dike on voice-over.

According to Henderson, one of the main characteristics about narrators in classical cinema is the fact that they “are actually silent for most of the film” (HENDERSON, 1983, p. 72), and he gives as an example the film *How Green Was My Valley* (1941), directed by John Ford. The voice-over comes back eventually to mediate the ellipsis of time or present some plot summary. This characteristic does not match the narration in *Band of Brothers*. Lipton is a very active narrator who is constantly introducing the characters' mood and life stories, sharing his personal views on the events, giving geographical locations, and previewing what will militarily happen to Easy Company. The episode alternates between the voice-over and synchronous dialogue in a regular basis. The only large stretch of time that Lipton is silent from his voice-over narration is during the attack on Foy that lasts seven minutes, in which the audience sees an intense battlefield sequence. This part

visually exemplifies Lipton's negative view of Lt. Dike who has an emotional breakdown and is unable to lead the men, being later relieved by another officer who commands the attack.

Furthermore, Kozloff (1988) mentions the importance of the act of communication for the narrator. She points out that "the voice-over narrator is always speaking to someone, whether that someone is the theater audience, a dramatized narratee, or just himself, and that his act of telling a story out loud couches the filmic story as a deliberate, conscious communication" (KOZLOFF, 1988, p. 51). In the case of Lipton, his diary-like narrations, sometimes even mentioning dates, can be understood as an outlet for the pain and hardships endured during war conflicts. The psychological conditions were extremely rough for the soldiers, and Lipton vents his sufferings and anguish through his words, and at the same time constructs an intense connection with the viewer, allowing them to have contact with a world that is so unlike regular life. He narrates instances like: "I was glad to be out of my foxhole and moving, even if only to get warm", "For some reason at that moment, in that half-finished foxhole all I could think about was the fourth of July", "What I saw that day was the most awesome and terrifying display of fire power I'd ever seen in my life", "I knew the terror of those shellings and the unrelenting pressure we'd been under since we got to Bastogne could take their toll on other ways", and "I was beginning to wonder if any of us was going to make it through at all." These small and personal details build a relationship of communication between the narrator and the viewer, creating a bond of sympathy that will increase as the situations get more dangerous.

In conclusion, voice-over narration in episode seven of *Band of Brothers* manages to fulfill several relevant characteristics to the war narrative. Lipton guides the audience through the roads and snowy forests of Belgium, informing the dates and keeping the viewer posted on any military changes suffered by Easy Company. Additionally, he manages to express his view and opinion concerning his fellow soldiers, and mentions vital moments that shape their lives and also the destiny of the company. Not only Lipton gives the audience access to the details of a military operation, but also to highly personal information from the perspective of someone who experienced it all. Through the voice-over narration of Lipton, the miniseries is able to mention and delve into very significant subjects when it comes to war survival: their emotional and physical destruction and its consequences, giving a subjective perspective to the war. The veteran Second Lieutenant Carwood Lipton passed away on December 16th, 2001, only a few months after the premiere of the miniseries. Goldstein (2001) illustrates that in the interview for the online edition of *The New York Times*, a month before Lipton's passing, the veteran comments: "I have trouble remembering what happened three weeks ago, but I can recall World War II almost day by day" (GOLDSTEIN, 2001). The power and vividness of these battle experiences can be seen in *Band of*

Brothers through the recollections shared by Lipton, who invites the audience to be less like a bystander and more like a confidante and companion in his journey.

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