Alumni

Paradigm Lost

Anthony Lappé and his colleagues at the Guerrilla News Network find that even they’re surprised when they just let the tape roll.

By
Beth Kwon
|
Spring 2005

There was something about the man sitting next to Anthony Lappé that caught his eye. “He was smiley, and he looked so excited,” says Lappé ’94JRN, a journalist who was flying from JFK to Jordan on his way to Iraq. So Lappé and his colleague Stephen Marshall started talking to the man, Farhan “Frank” Al-Bayati, who told them he was a Shiite from Iraq, returning to his native country for the first time in 12 years. “We slowly got out the cameras and said to him, ‘Do you mind if we start rolling?’” says Lappé. Al-Bayati told them his story: In 1991 he was 16 and had joined the Shiite insurgency to fight Saddam Hussein. He was taken prisoner, tortured, and dumped on the roadside outside Nasiriya, southeast of Baghdad. Later, U.S. troops found him and took him to safety in Kuwait. Al-Bayati eventually made it to New Jersey, where he got married and started a family.

Lappé and Marshall had intended to get footage for a short video on depleted uranium weapons, but after they heard Al-Bayati’s story they switched gears and ended up making a feature-length documentary, Battleground: 21 Days on the Empire’s Edge. Al-Bayati, a major figure in the film, let them trail him around Iraq for three weeks in 2003 as he tracked lost relatives. The film premiered at the Mill Valley Film Festival and won the silver Hugo Award at the Chicago International Film Festival, both last fall, and airs on Showtime in May. It was produced by the Guerrilla News Network (www.gnn.tv), an alternative news, multimedia production house, and blogger community, where Lappé is executive editor. He handles most of GNN’s day-to-day operations, contributes stories, vets and edits submissions, and polices the bulletin boards. GNN also produced the rap musician Eminem’s radical Mosh video,

an assault on the Bush administration’s handling of the war that was released shortly before the presidential election. Last year Lappé and Marshall published True Lies (Plume, 2004), a book of original investigative reports on issues such as the military’s anthrax vaccine and the story behind “maverick congresswoman” Cynthia McKinney’s downfall. This Revolution, GNN’s semidocumentary filmed during the 2004 Republican National Convention and starring Rosario Dawson as a war widow and protester, premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in January. The movie blurs lines between reality and fiction so much that during filming Dawson was arrested by the New York Police Department. (The case was dismissed in March 2005.)

Lappé doesn’t try to hide his leftward leanings. “I’m not going to pretend I’m something I’m not,” he says. “With the British media, if you read the Guardian you know where it’s coming from. They’re not trying to pretend, like CNN or any of those other news sources, that they’re objective.” (It’s no coincidence that GNN rhymes with the network Lappé scorns.) Still, the name needs explaining. “When we say ‘guerrilla,’ we don’t mean we support guerrilla warfare. We’re not talking about armed insurgencies. We’re talking about it as a small band that amplifies its voice by using all the tools of the oppressor.” To Lappé, the oppressor is “big corporate media.” “Fox News is the official news source of the American military now,” he says. “It’s like a hermetically sealed environment, a self-feeding loop.”

GNN seems radical in name and appearance (its home page is minimalist and bare, with an austere white background and black blocks of text, not an inviting site for those accustomed to colorful flash animation and easy-on-the-eyes palettes) but relies on the same journalistic methods used by the mainstream media. “We’re trying to go beyond the Pacifica model,” Lappé says, referring to the ultra-left-wing radio network. “Pacifica doesn’t seek to bring in people who may not agree with them.”

“Anthony’s not trying to do what Michael Moore does,” says David Klatell, vice dean of the Graduate School of Journalism and Lappé’s adviser when he was a student. “He’s not a provocateur documentarian. He’s trying to tell true stories through careful reporting. He’s outside the mainstream, but he still applies rigorous journalistic standards to everything he does.”

Speaking For Themselves

In making Battleground Lappé and Marshall let the tape run, allowing the subjects to speak for themselves. Al-Bayati's moving family reunions with relatives are contrasted with interviews with May Ying Welsh, a former Al-Jazeera reporter who describes the magnitude of the initial attacks on Iraq. Welsh's skepticism of the U.S.'s ability to win over Iraq is in turn reinforced by scenes with the cocky Lt. Col. Nate Sassaman, a handsome former West Point quarterback and army poster boy. In one instance, Sassaman tries to placate a group of angry sheiks protesting Sassaman's troops' use of force on raids, and he flashes a winning smile as he tells his translator not to "promise too much."

"I think that, overall, Battleground comes off as anti-American," says Lappé, but even so, in initial screenings some left-wing viewers objected to the presence of Al-Bayati, who was excited about Saddam Hussein's defeat. Unlike Fahrenheit 9/11, Battleground isn't polemical. Even when the reporting bears out GNN's initial biases, Lappé lets the source dig his own hole. "It's not our fault that we ran into Nate Sassaman. Nate Sassaman is Nate Sassaman. You can't really dress him up and put lipstick on him."

In December 2003, two months after Lappé and Marshall finished shooting the documentary, Sassaman was quoted in the New York Times saying, "With a heavy dose of fear and violence, and a lot of money for projects, I think we can convince these people that we are here to help them." And earlier this year a sergeant in Sassaman's unit was convicted of assault after ordering his soldiers to throw Iraqi prisoners into the Tigris River. One of the prisoners is believed dead, and Sassaman allegedly encouraged subordinates to cover up the incident. Sassaman wasn't charged, but was named a coconspirator in the case and received administrative punishment. Like Al-Bayati, Sassaman was a lucky find. Lappé and Marshall discovered him through a Belgian war correspondent they met in the lobby of their hotel.

Boy Wonder

Lappé, 33, is well manicured and has a boyish appeal. Klatell describes him as "Michael Moore's incredibly good-looking cousin." He studied politics at NYU, attended Oxford for a year, and concentrated in broadcast news when he was at Columbia. His first job out of school was at Video News International, which is now

New York Times Television. He moved on to a variety of media jobs, including gigs producing documentaries for MTV and Fuse, an MTV knockoff. He built up a portfolio of freelance pieces in the New York Times, including a story on computer hackers, which was later optioned by MTV, and one on a Cuban fugitive for the New York Times Magazine. In 2000, his friends Stephen Marshall and Josh Shore, who met at MTV, came up with the concept of a video-driven alternative news site, and Lappé and Ian Inaba, another friend, soon joined them. Marshall and Shore had already caught the eye of musician Peter Gabriel, who commissioned them to produce The Diamond Life, a short documentary of the brutality in Sierra Leone's diamond trade. The film was accompanied by Gabriel's music and was partially funded by Gabriel's nonprofit human rights organization, Witness.

Lappé grew up on the left. In 1971, the year he was born, his mother, Frances Moore Lappé, published Diet for a Small Planet, a seminal book that introduced Americans to issues such as the global food shortage and the need for sustainable resources. Lappé is close to his sister, Anna, who is two years younger than he is and carries on much of her mother's work. (See sidebar.) Lappé also draws inspiration from his father, Marc, a toxicologist and the head of the Northern California–based Center for Ethics and Toxics who was a key expert witness in the case against Dow Corning concerning silicone breast implants.

Lappé demonstrated sensitivity to injustice early on, says his mother. When he was five, she took him and his sister to Antigua, Guatemala. "We would hike up this hill into the town, and you could see all of the poor people everywhere," she says. When Anthony saw the huge coffee plantations, he was perplexed. "He said, 'Mommy, how can this be, that there is all of this land, and people have nowhere to live?' Here he was, grasping what our planet is up against in terms of the profound inequalities."

Ambitious Future

Despite Klatell's admiration of GNN, he doesn't think Lappé's future is in film and video production. "Most independent companies, through no fault of their own, are short-lived," he says. "My bet is in five years Anthony will be writing books on a regular basis. He's ambitious and smart, and he cares enough about these complex stories. Having the long form of a book to express these ideas appeals to him."

Lappé draws no salary from GNN. He makes money writing freelance articles. “None of us is getting rich through GNN,” he says. “Since True Lies and the film have come out, we have a lot more of a voice, but is it a successful business model? No.” The site retains its independence by refusing advertisements and keeps itself afloat with grants and free labor. It has 6,000 registered users and Lappé hopes to broaden its reach by making it more appealing to people of different political views, a change GNN’s partners have had to adjust to. “I tried to create a more radical element to GNN,” says founder and creative director Marshall. “Anthony wants it to be an authentic journalistic view. We butt heads, but an organization needs dynamic forces.”

“It’s powerful when you allow people to speak for themselves,” says Lappé. In conversation he frequently refers to a popular definition of high intelligence: the ability to hold two completely opposite ideas in your head at the same time. When Al-Bayati crossed the Jordanian border into Iraq, he kissed the ground and the border guards and lifted his shirt to show them a scar from a 12-year-old bullet wound on his back — a souvenir of Saddam’s regime. It was then that Lappé had an epiphany.

“The reality is, the Iraq war was an absolute disaster. But getting rid of Saddam Hussein was a great thing for us to do. And a lot of people on the left don’t want to acknowledge the second part. But they’re both equally true. Al-Bayati was able to come back. And we witnessed it. When I was watching him at the Jordanian border, I thought, ‘Holy shit, this is just cracking our paradigm in half.’ And that’s when you know you’re doing good journalism.”

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