

*September Dawn*. Dir. by Christopher Cain. Prod. by Christopher Cain and Scott Duthie. September Dawn/Voice Pictures, 2007. 110 mins. (Sony Home Entertainment, <http://www.sonypictures.com/>)

The western is back. Maybe. After a long dry spell interrupted only by *Brokeback Mountain* (2005), the fall of 2007 saw the release of three westerns in quick succession, marking a revival of sorts. *September Dawn* offers a retelling of the 1857 Mountain Meadows massacre, which, together with *No Country for Old Men* (2007) and a remake of the classic *3:10 to Yuma* (2007), have ratcheted up the genre's violence to new levels of computer-enhanced intensity.

*September Dawn* tackles an important chapter in American history that would seem a natural for compelling cinematic treatment. An overland party of emigrants traveling from Arkansas to California under the command of Alexander Fancher encamped near Parowan, Utah, in September 1857. At the same time, federal troops were on their way to Salt Lake City to quell perceived treason; tensions throughout Utah were running high. A local band comprised of Mormon militia and Paiute allies attacked the Fancher camp on September 7, touching off a siege that ended on September 11, when the militia first offered a flag of truce and lured the unarmed party out of camp. The militia then murdered 120 of the emigrants, leaving only seventeen young children alive. Maj. John D. Lee of the Fort Harmony militia was eventually tried and executed for the crime; the rest of the perpetrators went unnamed and unpunished. The episode has been a subject of controversy and debate ever since, especially concerning the territorial governor and Mormon prophet Brigham Young's knowledge of or complicity in the attack.

The story is complicated and deserves careful telling. Instead, *September Dawn* is an over-the-top caricature of good and evil, a parable of religious fundamentalism in which the Mormons, not coincidentally, look and sound like modern-day suicide terrorists. Christopher Cain would have us believe that Utah was a nineteenth-century training camp for bloodthirsty Mormon vigilantes just waiting to take their revenge on the nation that expelled them

and that they seized the opportunity the moment the Fancher party—depicted as comprised of pious Protestant pilgrims—stumbled into Cedar City (played by Alberta, Canada). Not only does the film linger far too long on fictional elements that have been introduced, including a West Side Story subplot involving the horse-whispering son of a venal polygamous bishop and a young unattached woman in the camp, but it suffers from poor editing, distracting camera work, and a heavy-handed vendetta against Mormonism. Far from illuminating the climate of brutality and the local contexts of the massacre, *September Dawn* settles for the simplistic explanation that all Mormons were pure evil. The film is so one-sided on this point that it becomes hard to take the rest of its claims seriously. The result is a disappointing film and history. It is a shame that it took so long for a serious film about this episode to be released. It is still more of a shame that the first attempt is so awful that few will bother to slog through it.

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*Alive Day Memories: Home from Iraq*. Dir. John Alpert and Ellen Goosenberg Kent. Prod. by HBO Documentary Films in association with Attaboy Films, 2007. 57 mins. (HBO Documentary Films, <http://www.hbo.com/aliveday/>)

Early in 2007, the actor James Gandolfini of *The Sopranos* fame brought ten severely wounded Iraq War veterans to an empty sound stage. He sat them down one at a time in front of the cameras and asked them to recall their “alive days”—that is, the days they were wounded in Iraq. He and the HBO documentary team then interspersed their testimonies with combat videos made by Iraqi insurgents and embedded American journalists; and footage of the soldiers themselves, before and after their wounding, at home and among their friends. The result is a deeply affecting—and highly constrained—portrait of the casualties of war.

The stories the veterans tell are horrific. Their tales typically begin with an account of



Thirty-year-old Marine Corps S. Sgt. John Jones, of San Antonio, Texas, lost both legs below the knee and suffered other injuries in Al Qaim, Iraq, on January 3, 2005. Jones is one of ten Iraq War veterans who recalls his “alive day” (the day he was wounded) in *Alive Day Memories*. Photo by Timothy Greenfield-Sanders. Courtesy HBO.

their wounding, supplemented with footage of a similar attack. They recall their injuries in great detail, summoning up the reactions of their comrades and their own surprise at finding their limbs twisted and their flesh cut away. As they describe days in induced comas and multiple operations, they invite Gandolfini and the audience to linger over their scars and their prostheses.

At times, their physical wounds pale beside their psychological suffering. The army private Dexter Pitts, for instance, describes how his friends say how the war has changed him. Before the war, he thought of himself as a happy-go-lucky guy, a “teddy bear.” But in Iraq, he suggests that he did what he “had to do to survive” and perhaps injured children in the process. Now he returns to the battlefield every night in his dreams.

Such stories will be familiar to historians of other wars, particularly the Vietnam War. On the one hand, *Alive Day Memories* brings to the screen a kind of suffering that the George W. Bush administration has worked hard to make

invisible and that has rarely been seen in the midst of other recent wars. On the other hand, though, the film speaks with a therapeutic idiom developed in the wake of the Vietnam War. The documentary focuses almost exclusively on the sufferings of individual Americans. Iraqis are largely invisible, appearing principally as faceless voices in insurgent videos or as blasted corpses in post-attack snapshots. The film never asks how or why America came to Iraq in the first place, or why U.S. troops remain there. Instead, the film, like the servicemen themselves, depicts combat as individual, even private, experience.

The proper response to such experience, Gandolfini implies, is not political but emotional. He and his crew clearly hope that we too will “support the troops.” When veterans thank him as they leave the stage, Gandolfini universally replies, “Thank *you*,” in a tone that suggests he is thanking them for far more than their interviews. That said, though, by dwelling on the sufferings of these veterans, even in ways that tend to transform the war from a

misbegotten adventure into a personal struggle for healing, the producers of *Alive Day Memories* have brought a faraway war much, much closer to home. And for that, we should thank them.

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*In the Shadow of the Moon*. Dir. by David Singleton. Prod. by Duncan Copp. Discovery Films and Channel Four, 2007. 100 mins. (Discovery Films, <http://www.discoverychannelstore.com/>)

Between July 1969 and December 1972, six Apollo spacecraft built by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) landed on the moon, allowing twelve astronauts to explore the lunar surface. NASA is planning to send more humans to the moon by 2020; but, in the meantime, those twelve men remain the only “people to have seen the Earth from an alien world,” in the words of this remarkable documentary film.

*In the Shadow of the Moon* was released in late 2007, a year when NASA’s reputation was crashing. The astronaut Lisa Nowak’s drive from Texas to Florida, while wearing one of NASA’s maximum absorbency garments, inspired mocking headlines such as “Dark Side of the Moon” and “Lust in Space.” Shortly thereafter, unnamed astronauts were accused of drinking before flying, and persistent reports that NASA had suppressed data on climate change and air safety further damaged the agency’s credibility.

Although the filmmakers had NASA’s cooperation in obtaining historic footage from the agency’s film archive, their primary goal presumably was not to polish NASA’s reputation. But it is hard to watch this film and not admire the efforts of the scientists, engineers, and astronauts who made it all happen only eight years after President John F. Kennedy declared that the United States would put a man on the moon by the end of the 1960s—and return him safely to Earth.

Of the twelve astronauts who made it to the moon and back, three have since died, and one more—Neil Armstrong, the first human

to set foot on another planetary body—declined to be interviewed. That left eight moonwalkers to share their experiences on camera (Buzz Aldrin, Alan Bean, Gene Cernan, Charlie Duke, Edgar Mitchell, Harrison Schmitt, Dave Scott, and John Young), as well as two others who came very close: Michael Collins, who remained in Apollo 11’s command module orbiting the moon while Armstrong and Aldrin were below; and Jim Lovell, who commanded Apollo 13’s abortive mission to the moon.

As those ten white males are talking on camera, it is sometimes difficult to tell them apart. All are roughly the same age—born between 1928 and 1935—and look as if they have not lost any of “the right stuff.” All are filmed in close-up with dramatic shadows on their faces, sitting in front of a blurred backdrop of what appears to be a gray lunar surface. And they all gaze directly into the camera, giving their vivid testimony a sense of both intimacy and authenticity.

Moreover, theirs are the only voices we hear in the film—aside from the voices on archival footage, such as Walter Cronkite’s enthusiastic and empathetic reporting, or the clipped tones of Houston’s Mission Control Center. As a result, the viewer gets to know the astronauts as a group, and can enjoy their humor, their *sangfroid*, and their thoughtful reflections on the experience. Collins, for instance, marvels at the response to Apollo 11: how people around the world proclaimed, “we did it, we humankind, we the human race,” and not just the Americans. “That was a wonderful thing,” Collins concludes. “Ephemeral, but wonderful.”

Equally wonderful are the film’s visuals: the brilliant orange glow of the Saturn V rocket lifting off in slow motion; the first steps on the moon; and footage taken by the astronauts of matters both mundane (eating and shaving) and out of this world (watching the Earth rise above the moon’s horizon).

Some viewers will wonder what has since happened to the wonderment of it all. Why haven’t any humans left the Earth’s orbit in the past thirty-five years? *In the Shadow of the Moon* provides no answers to those questions, but one suspects that the ten astronauts in the