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A Room with a different view: Digging through the trenches of the image war at Al Jazeera

Every conflict is a contest of competing narratives—which is why the international Arab news channel Al Jazeera is an American bête noire. As the voice of Arab nationalism, Al Jazeera spins a story line that is not necessarily ours. Can an independent fly on the wall elude the web? ■ A no-frills documentary that reports on Al Jazeera's Iraq war

reportage, Jehane Noujaim's *Control Room*—which had its local premiere as part of the New Directors/New Films series—offers a unique perspective on the military adventure officially known as Operation Iraqi Freedom. This absorbing, significant, and shamelessly entertaining movie not only goes through the looking glass but, no less significantly, turns the mirror back on us.

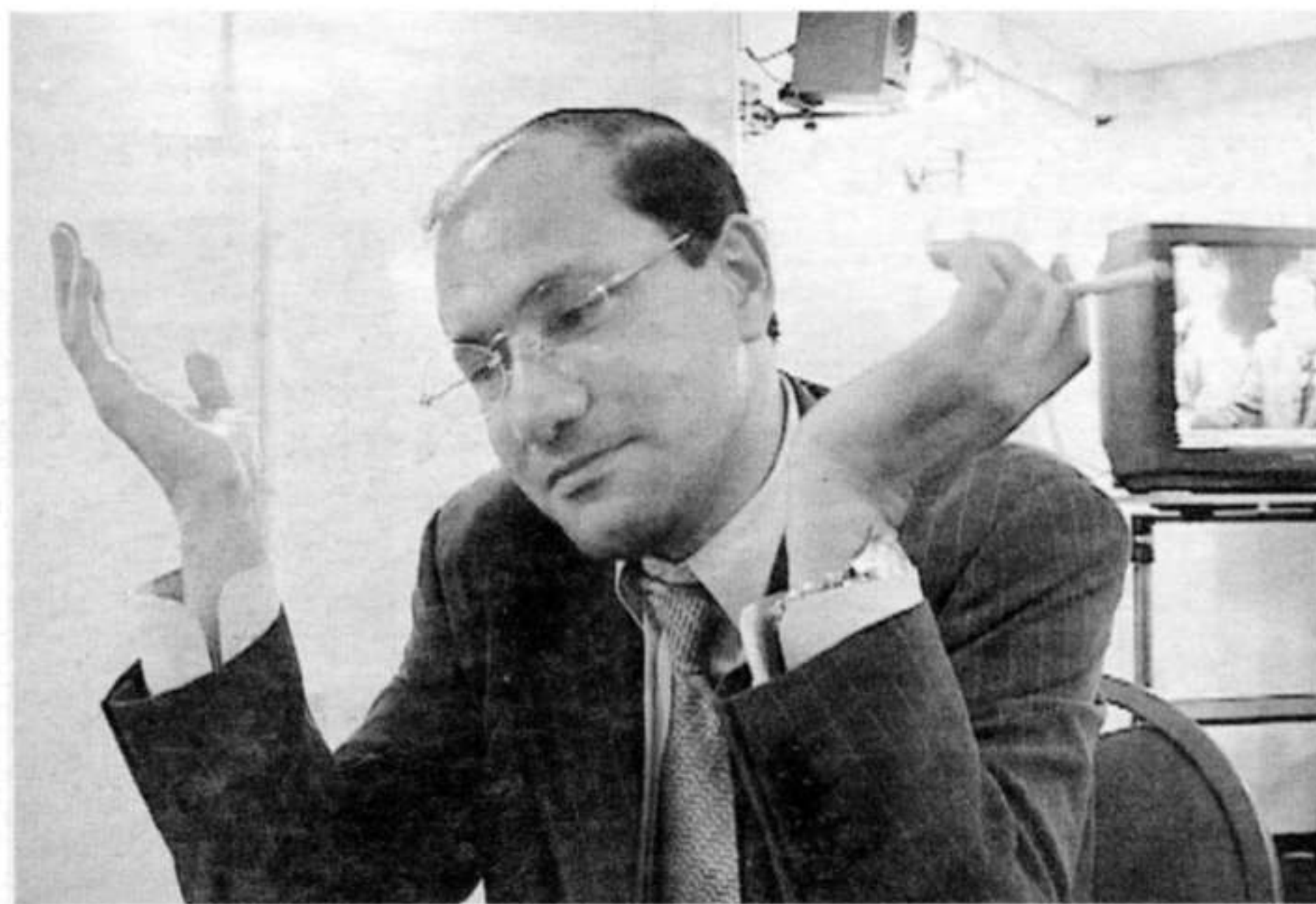
Control Room, which begins in March 2003 with the U.S. poised to invade Iraq, is set entirely in the realm of information—namely the Gulf state of Qatar, where Al Jazeera is based, along with the American military information station Centcom. The filmmakers never leave Qatar. This science fiction realm of white sand beaches, humongous satellite dishes, and frenzied media mavens is the front line of an image war that turns actual once George W. Bush appears as a televised hologram to issue his ultimatum to Saddam Hussein—and then the bombs start falling.

Noujaim, a young Egyptian American graduate of the Pennebaker-Hegedus school of cinema verité, co-directed the 2001 doc *Startup.com*. Here, having organized her entry to Al Jazeera by strategically hanging out in the station's commissary, she continues her exploration of corporate culture at the cutting edge. Noujaim doesn't ask the Al Jazeeraistas too many tough questions. But while they describe their operation as “a wake-up call” for the Arabs, their values are surprisingly western. Al Jazeera has been threatened and/or banned by a number of authoritarian Arab regimes, including Saddam Hussein's.

Control Room is a McLuhan-esque immersion populated by a varied cast of articulate types—all resembling the filmmaker in that they are realistically rife with contradiction: “Between us,” the suave and cynical

SEEING DOUBLE

BY J. HOBERMAN



Magnolia Pictures

senior producer Samir Khader says, “if I’m offered a job with Fox, I will take it [and] exchange the Arab nightmare for the American dream.” He plans to send his kids to America to be educated and hopes that they remain. The portly Sudanese journalist Hassan Ibrahim, a former bin Laden classmate, one-time Deadhead, and ex-BBC man, is another defender of American democracy. Understanding the U.S. does not, however, preclude identification with the Iraqis. Assuming a mandate to focus on the war’s “human cost,” the Al Jazeeraistas seem puzzled by the Western media’s reluctance to do the same.

Truth has long since been the first casualty of the image war. Lieutenant Josh Rushing, an earnest and slightly bewildered

CONTROL ROOM
Directed by Jehane Noujaim
Magnolia
Opens May 21, Film Forum

Rife with contradictions: Khader in *Control Room*

young American information officer (with a Hollywood background) provides the U.S. point of view; at a climactic moment in the movie, he realizes that Al Jazeera is the Arab equivalent of Fox News. Indeed, the title *Control Room* takes on a somewhat different meaning as the filmmakers observe the management of the American press. The army’s (purposeful?) failure to provide the press with decks of “most wanted” playing cards inspires a desperate petulance. The unfolding Jessica Lynch story eclipses what is going on in Baghdad. The American press greets with high-five enthusiasm the spectacle of

U.S. troops circling the statue of Saddam Hussein—indifferent to the transparently staged nature of the event.

Meanwhile, Al Jazeera—already in America’s doghouse as Al Qaeda’s communiqué venue of choice—has crossed the line with tasteless telecasts of Iraqi civilian casualties, including severely wounded children, images of dead American soldiers, and statements by disoriented American P.O.W.’s. Implying the usurpation of U.S. prerogatives, Donald Rumsfeld accuses Al Jazeera of faking evidence (“willing to lie to the world to make their case”) while “pounding the people in the region day after day.” Soon after, U.S. forces shell the Palestine hotel (with fatal results for three war correspondents), fire on the headquarters of Abu Dhabi TV, and bomb Al Jazeera’s Baghdad office, killing a cameraman.

As *Control Room* shows, this intimidation worked. The U.S. was now free to create its own TV show, culminating in Bush’s *Top Gun* “mission accomplished” visitation. “The whole war is like an American movie,” the headscarf- and jeans-wearing Syrian producer Deema Khatib notes. “You know how it will end, but you want to see how it happens.” You might think that a smart American occupying force would be listening to Al Jazeera (as well as watching it), but then as this infuriating and essential movie shows, victory creates its own narrative.