

In 2007, the fog of Iraq war was painted in muted tones

by James Hebert

Art is an endless quest for the sublime. In 2007, what it mostly achieved was sublimation.

With the war in Iraq grinding through a fifth year, the illegal-immigration debate raging and the presidential election season already in full swing (and the candidates coming out swinging) there has been no shortage of inspiration for creative works dealing with politics.

THE STATE OF SOCIETY - In the documentary *“No End in Sight,”* L. Paul Bremer (left) arrives in Baghdad in May 2003. Audiences have stayed away from war-themed movies, but *“Grace Is Gone”* (with John Cusack), which opens mid-January, aims to reverse the trend by making the political personal. CNS Photo courtesy of Magnolia Pictures. And yet a strange thing happened in 2007. While the year had its share of films, books, pop songs and plays that grappled overtly with war, terrorism and other politically charged topics, the flood tide of rage and pain that had lifted the arts world to fresh levels of engagement over the past few years seemed to recede.

In its place came more muted, indirect, personal responses to the state of society.

Visual art turned in on itself, reverting to a "cool" stance; plays that dealt straight-on with politics had a hard time getting staged at all; a few big names in music threw their work behind causes related to the war and topics such as global warming, but found it harder to get people to listen.

And in film, there was a strong sense of pulling back. While movies such as "Redacted," "Lions for Lambs" and "In the Valley of Elah" hardly shied from facing politics head-on, they struggled to find an audience, stiffing at the box office.

When the lineup was announced for January's Sundance Film Festival, an early barometer for what's on the

minds of moviemakers, fest director Geoff Gilmore noted (in *Variety*) that the field was decidedly "not as political- or issue-oriented as last year.

"There's more personal expression about the daily aspects of lives, about people's state of mind. ... You sense a need for an escape from the exhausting pressures of reality."

That sensibility finds an expression in "Grace Is Gone." Although the Iraq war is at its center, the film addresses the subject obliquely. It follows a father (John Cusack) who drives cross-country with his daughters, trying all the while to find a way to tell them their mom has died in combat overseas.

In a way, he represents the struggle of those in the arts community yearning to make their voices heard on political matters, but no longer sure just how to go about it.

The landscape is a huge contrast to that of just three years ago, when Michael Moore's sharply partisan "Fahrenheit 9/11" became the highest-grossing documentary of all time, and such politics-driven entertainment phenomena as the all-star Vote for Change concert tour captured public attention.

It's hard to pinpoint exactly what's behind this shift, but a few words come up again and again: burnout; depression; discouragement; fatigue.

There's a sense that while artists who had criticized the conduct of the war and the administration were in tune with the mood of the public (keep in mind those rock-bottom approval ratings for the war and the president), those efforts seemed to do little to initiate change.

"I think fatigue and frustration would be an apt description of both American politics and film," says

Catherine Zimmer, director of film and screen studies at Pace University in New York City.

Zimmer says it should be no surprise that the arts world has seemed stymied by how to deal with political issues, since in a way both are forms of organizing our feelings and beliefs about the world, and so share an inextricable bond on some level.

"I don't consider (politics and entertainment) particularly separate realms," she says. "At a certain point, the fictions we create are narratives in the same way we're told political narratives. 'What is the state of the country? What is it we desire? What are our fears and anxieties?'"

Of all the ways creative types sought to channel political tensions and emotions - consciously or not - maybe the most surprising is a genre of film Zimmer has spent quite a bit of time studying.

"If rage is leading to fatigue," as she puts it, "the place where rage is still active is in the incredible success and resurgence of horror."

She points to zombie movies like the sequel "28 Weeks Later," with its graphic treatment of mass death and its viral plague as a metaphor for loss of personal control and freedom. (The new Will Smith movie "I Am Legend," which also has a zombie element, invokes the specter of terrorism directly with its references to a "ground zero" of viral spread.)

Zimmer also points to the "Saw" franchise, which centers on torture and surveillance. And the latest "Hostel" movie, which is "this incredibly projective fantasy of people going abroad and being tortured," she argues.

"I think they're addressing the major anxieties that people are feeling, because the violence - even though

we're not experiencing it directly - is quite palpable."

And if there's not much sublime about these showcases for blood and brutality, in their dubious way the movies did something that proved a little rare in 2007: They made a statement.

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