Cultural Hauntings: Narrating Trauma in Contemporary Films about the Iraq War

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Abstract

Societies come to terms with the "unfinished business" of past wars through obsessive retellings of their traumatic histories (Bronfen 2012). Combat films therefore are a powerful cultural arena wherein collective memories are negotiated. While movies about twentieth-century wars have received much public attention as meaning-making cultural artefacts, Western academia has to date largely neglected films about a defining conflict of the twenty-first century: the Iraq War (2003-2011). This paper addresses how American and Iraqi films contribute to debates on war memory by depicting 'Operation Iraqi Freedom' as a harrowing and inconclusive conflict. Specifically, the article examines how Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and Mohamed Al-Daradji's *Son of Babylon* (*Syn Babilonu,* 2009) incorporate the rhythms of traumatic memory into their narrative fabric. Drawing on Derrida's concept of hauntology, I argue that the central structuring device of repetition compulsion creates complex trauma palimpsests which present war as a never-ending and ever-returning experience. Ultimately, this study's examination of the interdependencies between film narrative, trauma, human precariousness and empathy sheds a new light on Iraq's and America's intricately intertwined histories of violence.

Keywords: war film; Iraq War; trauma narrative; memory studies; empathy.

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Introduction: The Iraq War as Unfinished Business

According to literary scholar Elisabeth Bronfen, war always remains "unfinished business" (5). Societies compulsively return to previous conflicts in the hope of coming to terms with their traumatic past. On a cultural level, the sheer mass of stories about war indicates a failure to comprehend war-time experiences as they occur. Narrative, then, has the vital social function of retrospectively assigning meaning to otherwise meaningless slaughter. But why choose film as a vehicle to express such traumatic content? Films dealing with trauma have a considerable advantage in facing the unspeakable: they *show* rather than *tell* horrors (LaRocca 53). In addition, film is a cultural arena wherein popular discourses are negotiated. Additionally, film reaches large numbers of people and therefore has a great impact on the collective memory of historical events (Hickethier 358). Thus, cinema can provide closure by incorporating conflicts into national identity. Paradoxically, it can also have the opposite effect: since war films re-tell past traumas, their cultural haunting ensures that old wounds stay open (Bronfen 5). The Iraq War (2003-2011) is a prime example of this phenomenon. As a defining conflict of the early

twenty-first century, it caused immense suffering and also spawned a large number of Iraqi and American[1] film productions – many of which contain traces of traumatic experience. It is surprising, however, how little attention—academic and otherwise—these films have received. To date, most anthologies covering American war film usually include Iraq as a side note while focusing on twentieth century conflicts. Some scholarly articles[2] were published, but monographs like Martin Barker's *A Toxic Genre* (2010) or Rasmus Greiner's *Die Neuen Kriege im Film* (2012) remain notable exceptions. More crucially, Western academic writing about Iraqi movies dealing with the conflict is virtually non-existent.

This paper seeks to remedy that oversight by examining how the Iraq War is depicted in Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and Mohamed Al-Daradji's *Son of Babylon* (2009). A special focus lies on the question of how these movies incorporate the rhythms of traumatic memory into their narrative fabric. The interdisciplinary field of trauma studies provides an excellent theoretical framework for my analysis. Located at the intersection of psychology, cultural studies, historiography, literary studies and sociology, trauma studies stress the importance of contextualization and careful analysis. An additional methodological approach is provided by Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology, which is concerned with present absences of (traumatic) specters that charge texts with meaning. Specifically, this paper combines aspects of hauntology with film analysis to explore how aesthetics as well as filmic constructions of space, time and the body contribute to portray the Iraq War as unfinished business.

1. Narrating Trauma

In order to grasp how these films operate, it is essential to understand more about trauma. Deriving from the Greek word for wound, trauma as a psychological category entered Western medical discourses in the late nineteenth century. Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer defined it as:

> [S]omething that enters the psyche that is so unprecedented or overwhelming that it cannot be processed or assimilated by usual mental processes. We have … nowhere to put it and so it falls out of our conscious memory, yet it is still present in the mind like an intruder or a ghost. (qtd. in Ganteau and Onega 10)

Freud's influential definition suggests an iterative structure. The inability to comprehend a horrific event leads to repetition compulsion and intrusive recollections. For a long time, it was assumed that traumatic experience causes a state of dissociation—that is, of unconscious repression. For instance, Van der Kolk and Fisler argue that the human mind compartmentalizes traumatic experience so that it cannot be remembered or narrated (510). Poststructuralists like

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[1] Iraqi film productions include *Turtles Can Fly* (2004), *Crossing the Dust* (2006), *Ahlaam* (2006), *Son of Babylon* (2009), *Qarantina* (2009) and *Leaving Baghdad* (2010). Among American feature films about the Iraq War are *Home of the Brave* (2005), *Battle for Haditha* (2007), *In the Valley of Elah (*2007), *Stop-Loss* (2008), *Redacted* (2008), *Green Zone* (2010), *American Sniper* (2014), *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2016) and *The Wall* (2017).
[2] See: Carruthers, Gosline, Koch, Peebles, Stewart and Westwell.

Cathy Caruth, whose anthology *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* (1995) was decisive in creating the field of cultural trauma studies, were quick to latch on to the idea of trauma as an "impossible history" (5). However, "unspeakable" trauma, though still widely propagated, is a contended notion. Psychologist Richard J. McNally argues that dissociation is "a piece of psychiatric folklore devoid of convincing empirical support" (275). He suggests that survivors rarely forget traumatic experiences unless they received physical brain damage, thus offering an alternative understanding of trauma that opens possibilities for recovery.

Moreover, cultural and literary critics stress that trauma must not be understood as an apolitical biological condition but as a cultural construct that cannot be separated from social discourses and power relations (Luckhurst 14). According to psychologist Jeffrey Alexander, trauma should therefore be regarded as a social process: "Events are not inherently traumatic. Trauma is a socially mediated attribution" (8). His analysis, however, mainly focuses on the communal process of "cultural trauma" that operates on a collective rather than a personal level. Alexander argues that cultural trauma undergoes a "signification spiral" that starts with an affected social group claiming a violation (15). Once defined, the trauma enters discursive formations and raises questions of guilt, complicity and responsibility, thus evoking a collective identity crisis. In a final stage, social agents accept moral responsibility. This is important as it creates empathy for the victims and provokes a change in collective identity. By acknowledging the pain of others, societies incorporate the rupture of their social fabric into collective narratives. In its aftermath, cultural trauma is frequently revisited and continues to haunt public discourses (Smelser 54).

But what happens if trauma does not enter this cycle? Since "psychological trauma is an affliction of the powerless," psychologist Judith Herman argues that the silencing of collective trauma is indeed more common than its recognition (33). In many cases, marginalized survivors of atrocities are excluded from public platforms. Talking about trauma, therefore, is a political act that has the potential to empower the oppressed, as the battle for recognition is always a battle of representation (Eyerman 13). The issue of representation is also brought forward by postcolonial critics who expose Western trauma studies' tendencies towards cultural imperialism. Stef Craps, for example, warns that the narrow event-based definition of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)[3] excludes mental harm caused by structural violence (54). He proposes Laura Brown's concept of "insidious trauma" as an inclusive alternative: insidious trauma recognizes that social factors like long-term oppression can be psychologically harmful to marginalized groups (Craps and Buelens 3). Overall, then, cultural trauma studies emphasize the necessity of viewing trauma as not just a medical condition, but as a political and socio-cultural process.

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[3] According to the American Psychiatric Association, trauma must be caused by a stressful trigger event outside the normal range of experience, i.e. a life-threatening situation, serious injury, sexual violence (*DSM-V* 271). Such events can cause flashbacks, hyperarousal, aggression and emotional numbing (Gleitman et al. 649). If these symptoms persist longer than one month, psychologists speak of a Posttraumatic Stress Disorder.

Trauma not only gained vital importance in its psychological dimension, but also shaped cultural narratives of many Western countries. However, there is much debate as to how trauma can be retold. At the core lies a fundamental paradox: if trauma is unspeakable, how can it be narrated? Yet if trauma cannot be represented, why is popular culture saturated with works about traumatic experiences? A tentative answer must be that trauma might not be unrepresentable at all. If, as contemporary trauma research suggests, trauma does not lead to dissociation, it is bound to leave traces in peoples' memories—and in narrative texts.[4] Literary scholar Laurie Vickroy remarks that nuanced trauma narratives "incorporate the rhythms, processes, and uncertainties of traumatic experience within their underlying sensibilities and structures" (3). Some critics, however, are concerned that the act of narration might normalize trauma's harrowing nature (Tal 6). While this notion is highly controversial in trauma studies, the question remains if neutralization is necessarily harmful. If narration allows survivors to obtain agency and thus overcome their powerlessness, narrative can become an invaluable tool for recovery (Kansteiner and Weilnböck 237). At this point it is important to note, though, that narrative's healing qualities have limits. Whilst re-telling can empower survivors, narrative alone can never resolve trauma entirely because additional factors (i.e. support networks) are just as important. A possibility of narrative, however, is to evoke empathy – thus enabling critical engagement with personal trauma in the public sphere. This ethical dimension of trauma is emphasized by historian Dominick LaCapra. He introduces the concept of "empathic unsettlement," the act of responding empathically to the trauma of others without appropriating their pain (41). Similarly, Vickroy points out that trauma fiction is a way of "witnessing or testifying for the history and experience of historically marginalized people" (221) because it illustrates suffering in a way that creates emotional proximity to survivors. Hence, trauma narratives fulfil an important social function because they add an ethical dimension to discussions about silencing processes.

Since traumatic traces can be hidden within narrative layers of a (filmic) text, it takes a keen eye to spot them. In this regard, it is helpful to look at Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology. In *Specters of Marx,* Derrida develops the conceptual metaphor of the specter, a ghostly being that defies the basic parameters of ontology because it is "neither living nor dead, present nor absent" (63). It overcomes the binary opposition of being and non-being by offering a third option: liminality. The specter's unbidden return is marked by disruptive temporality. Much like trauma's intrusive recollections, the revenant's chaotic force interrupts the flow of the present with violent reminders of the past. On a more abstract level, spectrality can serve to challenge historical silencing processes. When applied to trauma narratives, hauntology sensitizes for the absent-present traces of traumatic histories within a text.

2. Fighting a Losing Battle: Personal Trauma in *The Hurt Locker*

The Hurt Locker (2008), directed by Kathryn Bigelow and written by Mark Boal, accompanies the routines of an Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) unit in Baghdad. Bravo

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[4] See: McHugh and Treisman, McNally, Rosen and Lilienfeld and Spitzer et al.

Company consists of maverick Sergeant First Class William James (Jeremy Renner), an experienced yet emotionally unstable veteran with a track record of 873 successful disposals; Sergeant J. T. Sanborn (Anthony Mackie), the caring heart and soul of the company; and rookie Specialist Owen Eldridge (Brian Geraghty) who easily cracks under pressure. The episodic film narrative follows the team for seven improvised explosive device (IED) disposals that are connected only by the constant threat to the soldiers' lives: during the first mission, previous Staff Sergeant Matthew Thompson (Guy Pearce) is killed in an explosion. Even though James nearly meets the same end during the film's final disposal, the sergeant decides to return to Iraq after a brief home leave that shows him to be unfit for civilian life.

Hurt Locker's aesthetics play a vital role in conveying the movie's traumatic content. It was filmed by four camera teams operating steadicams on a 360 degree set, putting the audience "in the middle of a fully three-dimensional theater of war" (Taubin). The camera's proximity to the characters captures their experiences at ground warfare with great immediacy. For audiences, the 'guerilla' camerawork combined with shaky movements and violent swish pans creates a sense of disorientation. Disruptive editing choices enhance this chaos with jump cuts and fast-cut montages, leading to almost stroboscopic image rates. The camera also assumes various perspectives (characters' viewpoints, rifle telescopes and binoculars) that disjoint the narrative. Overall, Bigelow expertly manipulates her film's aesthetics to cause sensory overload. The violence of Iraq's war theater is transferred onto screen where it assaults the viewers' senses.

Throughout most of this pandemonium, Sgt. James puts on an air of reckless bravado. Yet this is merely a studied act; under his cool façade he is damaged. The protagonist experiences mood swings, drinks excessively and suffers from insomnia which he can only alleviate by putting on his bomb suit. Throughout the film, he displays increased arousal that finds outlets in bouts of violence. At other times, he is completely apathetic. His inertia is an indicator of emotional numbing, a classic PTSD symptom that becomes apparent on home leave when not even interactions with his family can elicit a reaction from James. Worn down emotionally by the continual strain of his profession, James is unfit for civilian life; simple tasks like choosing breakfast cereal overwhelm him. His adrenaline addiction seems like a desperate attempt to overcome numbness. To him, happiness is a tricky IED disposal. Yet his self-destructive tendencies drive James to push the limits further with each disposal. Hidden under his bed he keeps a box with bomb parts, a perverse museum of "stuff that almost killed [him]" (*Hurt Locker*, 01:09:55). While these fetishized trophies enable him to feel power over death, they also indicate the compulsive nature of his behavior (Koch 144).

It is therefore emblematic that objects signifying traumatic loss are repeatedly locked into boxes—small 'hurt lockers.' In shutting away his bomb parts and memorabilia from home, James physically re-enacts behavioral patterns of suppression. In fact, he tries to seal off all unpleasant feelings into an emotional 'hurt locker.' He refuses grief work and creates a psychological armor of stoicism, living in constant denial of his negative feelings (Koch 144*).* Not surprisingly, James's emotional armor cracks at some point. After he causes Eldridge to be wounded, James suffers a nervous breakdown. He steps into the shower in full fighting gear and

slinks onto the floor, sobbing uncontrollably. This reaction emphasizes how a series of detrimental experiences slowly wears James down, indicating that *Hurt Locker* does not have a clearly demarcated traumatic scene but rather a host of diffuse traumatizations. It is the mounting pressure of each disposal, the entirety of overwhelming war experiences that shape the psyches of the squad. While this breakdown can be seen as an overdue reaction to chronic trauma, it also highlights the latency and belatedness of traumatic experience (147). Moreover, it evokes empathy among the audience. Yet the exact source of James's backstory wound[5] resists narration. A trail of subtle hints suggests a hidden narrative beneath the surface of the film's more straightforward storyline: occasional references to a past deployment in Afghanistan and shrapnel wounds on James's abdomen constitute absent-present traces of a traumatic past. Yet Bigelow's elliptical film-making does not show these incidents directly. Rather, violent histories are captured in metaphors like IEDs or scars which inscribe themselves into the narrative fabric. Over time, the film's characters accumulate layers of trauma that create a complex trauma palimpsest.[6]

2.1. Repetition Compulsion as Narrative Structure

As a result, the movie's narrative is organized by the principle of repetition compulsion. Since war cannot be presented in its entirety, Bigelow chooses to show loosely connected "repetitive sequences of the work of war" (Bronfen 235). All seven bomb disposals follow a similar structure: a threat is detected, the EOD squad arrives and attempts to defuse the charge. The movie derives much of its suspense from repeated ticking bomb scenarios, for the outcome of each assignment is uncertain. Further circularity enters the narrative through extensive mirroring of certain scenes, characters and images. Thompson's failed disposal at the beginning is repeated near the end when James is almost killed by the blast of a suicide bomber. Even though the outcome is different, the scenes are nonetheless similar with regard to their structural and aesthetic composition. In addition, James becomes Thompson's revenant, retracing his steps in the same bomb suit. By having James walk in the shoes of his predecessor, Bigelow foreshadows that he is bound to end up like Thompson eventually. Thompson's fate is also mirrored in his doppelganger Colonel Cambridge who dies of an IED blast. Finally, the film's opening—a frame showing a caption of the company's 38 remaining days—is repeated at the end. Only this time, rotation continues for another 365 days. In other words, the narrative comes full circle, ending (almost) where it began. Congruent with Joshua Clover's argument that *Hurt Locker* "emulates the aimlessness of the invasion and occupation," this article suggests that the movie's repetitive structure serves as a comment not only on the nature of trauma but also on the Iraq War itself (qtd. in Westwell 23). The American soldiers' deadlock in Iraq can never be fully resolved because each successful disposal seems like a victory, but it is actually just a

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[5] Anna Martinez describes the backstory wound as a character's hidden traumatic past that is revealed as the narrative progresses, thus disrupting the linear flow of the filmic time (59).

[6] Palimpsests are ancient manuscripts whose existing text is scratched out to re-use the scroll. However, the previous writing leaves indelible traces in the material so that both texts co-exist with each other (Dillon 4).

momentary deferral of inevitable death. Ultimately, not even the end of the soldiers' rotation can offer closure: James has become a misfit in civilian life who, rather than facing his grief and PTSD, prefers returning to battle. Hence, the film can have no resolution because its traumatic core forbids it. Its circular structure implies the eternal recurrence[7] of traumatic violence. Therefore, the ending—an abrupt hard cut—serves as a final statement on war's nature. Just as anti-hero James compulsively reverts to his routine of seeking war-zone thrills, the Iraq War is doomed to continue its unfinished business indefinitely (Greiner 332).

2.2. Distortions of Time and Space as Expressions of Trauma: *The Hurt Locker*

The film's repetition compulsions suggest that time is an essential factor in the narrative construction of trauma. IEDs serve as central metaphors for the structure of traumatic experience, as their delayed detonation mirrors belated psychological after-effects. Their time lag makes both IEDs and traumatic memories completely unpredictable. Leading a latent existence, they remain in a dormant state until suddenly activated. So even though James diffuses one bomb after another, he fights a losing battle in a job that "never finishes" (*HL*, 00:51:26). As a result, the soldiers' temporal perception is distorted. Even though squad members count down their days in Iraq, their routines are marked by an odd timelessness. Suspended into a permanent limbo of violent non-war, the soldiers wait for the end of their deployment and hope not to die. For James, everyday life passes by in a blur and only the intense experience peaks of disposals seem to possess temporal significance. The passing of time is never more apparent than in the real-time disposal sequences that are always a race against the clock. The film's kinetic style expertly captures James's hyper-awareness of this "existential present" (Taubin): the editing pace slows down and time thickens, creating unbearable suspense in a fast-moving action feature (Denby). Bigelow's manipulations of time culminate in the sublimely beautiful slow motion shots of exploding IEDs that distort temporal integrity completely. The world stops for a moment and time becomes meaningless—only to plunge back into post-blast frenzy. Consequently, the movie's approach to time is schizophrenic, as time either moves excruciatingly slow or seems to be running out.

Spatial representations are equally split: they are divided into safe and unsafe space. Interior areas like the barracks are considered safe because their confined nature allows tight military control. As an insurgent-free sphere, Camp Victory offers recreation from the soldiers' stressful job. Yet like the army's Humvees, the camp is confined as well as confining, offering both protection and constriction. What is more, these safe spaces are increasingly contaminated by the war zone's virulent violence. As Bravo Company oscillates between indoor safety and outdoor threat, they blur the boundaries. Aggression pervades their existence to such an extent that it can no longer be contained and spills out in fights. By extension, even the U.S. homeland is

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[7] Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of eternal recurrence suggests that history revolves in one big circular motion and not in a linear progression towards a better future (Nietzsche 250). This concept represents "modernity's spectre" (sic) because it counters teleological longings for purpose and linearity with chaotic circularity (Mirzoeff 25).

contaminated: James brings the war home with him because his mind remains in Iraq. It is impossible for him to re-settle in civilian life because of his prolonged exposure to Iraq's unsafe space. After all, being outdoors is equated with being under threat. As Koch suggests, Iraqi territory has become a toxic space of ubiquitous violence (127). Baghdad appears as an obscure maze of alleyways teeming with insurgents and restrictive spaces that leave the U.S. soldiers with a claustrophobic sense of being trapped. Violence is never released in cathartic battles but occurs in stealth attacks, causing Eldridge to state succinctly that "if you're in Iraq, you're dead" (*HL*, 00:11:24). Worst of all, the Americans are always exposed to the hostile gaze of an invisible enemy. Their position as objects of an unidentifiable Other's gaze creates intense feelings of helplessness and agoraphobia (Koch 130). Aesthetically, the film captures this paranoia with interlaced shots of distant watching Iraqis, shifting perspectives from off-screen locations and odd angles.

2.3. Bodies as Battlefields

Eventually, the continual threats to physical integrity not only change perceptions of space but also of subjectivity, since they cause heightened body awareness. Bigelow's focus on the somatic realm—camera positions from character's viewpoints, a soundtrack of labored breathing and heartbeats, close-ups of faces covered in blood, sweat and tears—emphasizes the crucial role bodies play in modern warfare. The film's kinetic dimension of action is essential to create proximity. Bodies are always seen in their relation to space, particularly during bomb disposals where the smallest change of position can be deadly. A focus on the physical dimension also counteracts the sanitization of war images prevalent in U.S. media (Robertson 72). Violence is shown graphically: Thompson's blood splatters on his helmet visor, a dead Iraqi boy is turned into a body bomb and Eldridge is shot in the leg. Consequently, *Hurt Locker* stresses the precariousness of bodies that are constantly challenged in the new wars.[8] Violence is inscribed into James's body with shrapnel scars and he wears a bomb suit that can also be read as a metaphor for his emotional shell (Koch 131). However, all armor proves utterly ineffective. More an emotional sedative than real protection, the suits cannot prevent Thompson's or Cambridge's deaths. Moreover, bodies are not just protected, they are also (ab)used as weapons. The suicide bomber and body bomb demonstrate how flesh and blood can be turned into deathly "detonatorgs" (Morag 56)—cancerous outgrowths of war that destroy the corporeal integrity of others (Greiner 325).

Bigelow's body focus results in a portrayal of trauma as strictly personal. The few instances where James's emotional armor cracks cause a strong empathic audience response. Hence, Americans are presented as the conflict's victims and focal points of the movie; the EOD unit's 'good guys' risk their lives to help others. Their chronic trauma is caused not by a single

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[8] As political scientist Herfried Münkler observes, the Cold War model of inter-state conflicts between two clearly defined combatants is increasingly replaced by "new wars", i.e. decentralized guerilla-style conflicts marked by "*asymmetry*," "*de-statization*" and "*autonomization* of […] violence" (3, emphasis in original). The new wars' dissolution of temporal and spatial boundaries often leads to staggering casualty rates among civilians.

shocking event but by continual exposure to extreme stress. Yet this portrayal of war is not without its dangers. For one thing, the strict focus on personal trauma shifts the focus away from larger issues. Iraqis, for instance, are reduced to walking 'Oriental' stereotypes. The phantom menace of an invisible enemy Other is not differentiated into terrorist and civilian because the film never attempts to understand the background of the conflict (Carruthers 491). Moreover, the portrayal of suffering soldiers runs the risk of reversing power structures by victimizing the perpetrator (Westwell 27). That is not to say that the soldiers' combat-related stress is not real. Rather, it is a question of balance: even though films like *The Hurt Locker* tend to highlight victim positions, soldiers in their double role of victim-perpetrator experience *and* inflict pain (Tal 10). Despite the EOD unit's relatively peaceful mission, they, too, carry guns as part of the occupying force. Thus, film as a medium of collective memory runs the risk of distorting reality.

3. Ghosts of the Past: *Son of Babylon*'s Collective Trauma

Son of Babylon (*Syn Babilonu,* 2009) was written, directed and produced by Iraqi filmmaker Mohamed Al-Daradji. The film's plot follows twelve-year-old Kurd Ahmed (Yasser Taleeb) and his grandmother Um-Ibrahim (Shehzad Hussein Mohammed) as they travel through war-torn Iraq shortly after Saddam Hussein's overthrow. They search for the boy's missing father Ibrahim, who disappeared during the Kuwait War of 1991. Their quest for answers leads the pair into a dark chapter of Iraq's history: the 1988 *Anfal*[9] genocide. Along the way, Ahmed and his grief-stricken grandmother encounter various people similarly affected by their country's violent history. Their most prominent companion is Musa (Bashir Al-Majid), a former Iraqi Republican Guard. For some time, he acts as a surrogate father, but he has his own motives for doing so. As a young man he was forced to participate in *Anfal*, which is why he sees his encounter with Ahmed as a chance for atonement. Despite Musa's help in the visit of two mass graves and a former prison, Ibrahim's fate is never solved. In all likelihood he is dead, making him another example of a lost Kurdish generation. Overwhelmed by grief, Um-Ibrahim dies on the road, which leaves Ahmed to travel on alone.

The film's aesthetics capture much of the ambivalence of life in Iraq. Al-Daradji, who also doubled as cinematographer with Duraid Munajim, chose to film with Aaton 35-III cameras on 35 mm wide screen format typically used in epic classical Hollywood productions. The resulting high-contrast images give the film a polished look that is combined with rather static camera work. The film's generally moderate editing pace and frequent long takes create an elegiac tone that often stands in stark contrast with the harrowing content that is portrayed. This tension serves as a comment on Iraq's paradoxical situation as a country that hopes for a better future but simultaneously struggles with its past. Similarly, the compositional focus alternates between

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[9] *Al-Anfal*, meaning "spoils of war," was a military campaign of Hussein's *Ba'ath* Party in 1988 that ordered the extinction of Kurds in Iraq. Within a few months, up to 100,000 Kurds were killed with phosphorous bombings, air strikes, poison gas attacks and mass shootings, while many more were abducted to prison camps (Human Rights Watch xiv). The campaign's genocidal intentions are well-documented and prove one thing: "Anfal was a 'final solution,' […] intended to make the Kurds of Iraqi Kurdistan and their rural way of life disappear forever" (7).

extreme long shots that depict forlorn individuals as minor parts of a bigger picture and reaction shots that emphasize feelings. By depicting even minor characters in close-ups, Al-Daradji portrays the collective suffering of "human Iraq" and creates a deep empathy (Stocker).

3.1. Politicizing Trauma through Counter-Narratives

In *Son*, the real conflict's spectral presence crosses the line between fact and fiction. Since the film was entirely shot during wartime on location in Iraq, every frame is necessarily informed by war's realities. The crew suffered from poor infrastructure, the risk of attacks and the lack of basic necessities like food, shelter or petrol (Stocker). In addition, the amateur actors brought their own traumatic histories to the project. Shehzad Hussein had lost her husband during *Anfal* and even testified against Saddam Hussein, whilst Yasser Taleeb experienced war on a daily basis in his village (Conolly). Al-Daradji suggests that his topic choice and the casting of amateurs who experienced the horrors of war add a "healing aspect" to his film (Tarzi), making it a highly political project. The images serve as evidence of a silenced chapter in Iraqi history, establishing a counter-narrative. Furthermore, the country saw no film production between 1991 and 2003, so to merely complete a project of this scale is a statement about Iraqis reclaiming their future. Indeed, the movie—which is "[d]edicated to all those needing answers and to the children of Iraq" (*Son,* 01:27:51)—had palpable real-life consequences. Al-Daradji and his team initiated the Iraqi Missing Campaign, a project which investigates mass graves in order to account for the one million Iraqis that disappeared during Hussein's reign. This blending of fact and fiction, past and present is emblematic of life in a war-torn country. As Al-Daradji's own mother explained to him, "our life is fiction. That's how we live in Iraq" (Ritman).

3.2. The *Anfal* Campaign's Absent-Present Traces in *Son of Babylon*

The spectral presence of Iraqi trauma[10] is most apparent in the film's narrative structure. As a road movie, *Son* presents loosely connected episodes rather than a climactic plot. A strong sense of haunting pervades the film's elliptic narration: even though the causes of trauma (Ibrahim's disappearance, the death of Ahmed's mother, Musa's atrocities) are hinted at, they are never shown. Rather, the narrative circles around these instances and places hints throughout that point towards these old wounds. Ibrahim, the film's central absence, exerts his spectral presence through a number of "stranded objects" (Santner 151). Um-Ibrahim keeps a letter of his; Ibrahim's flute and his army jacket are artifacts that preserve his memory and serve as physical proof that he existed. These two stranded objects are highly symbolic of Ibrahim's life: even though he wanted to be a musician, he was forced to become a soldier. In a cruel twist of fate, he was drafted into the same army that killed countless Kurds just a few years earlier. Ibrahim's present absence also motivates his mother's quest. After twelve years, his loss still affects her to

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[10] This article does not aim at applying Eurocentric trauma concepts on Iraq as a whole. Rather, it is concerned with concrete representations in a specific movie. *Son of Babylon* prominently features traumatic experiences on its plot level, and these events affect the characters and narrative. Interviews with director Mohamed Al-Daradji warrant that he is well aware of Western trauma debates and consciously included them in his film.

such an extent that she lives a half-life devoted to his memory. Her death during the film's final moments suggests that Iraq's older generations are too deeply affected by grief to ever let go of the past.

Ahmed, by contrast, has a very different outlook. He is young enough to not even know what *Anfal* is. But even though he speaks Arabic and strikes up inter-ethnic friendships, he is still affected by Ibrahim's missing generation. In a highly symbolic moment at Nasiriyah prison, the boy stands behind the bars of a cell and screams for his father, thus suggesting that memories of loss have trapped him. Indeed, it never becomes clear what exactly happened to Ibrahim. While several foreshadowing instances mention mass graves and visits to excavation sites hint at his probable death, his relatives can never be sure. It is this uncertainty coupled with the realization of traumatic Kurdish history that causes Ahmed to mature before his time during the journey. Initially, his grandmother carries the bundle which contains Ibrahim's memorabilia. As Ahmed learns about responsibility, however, he takes on the bundle—that is, the burden of traumatic knowledge. In an act of intergenerational memory transference, *Anfal* is acknowledged as a crucial part of his Kurdish identity. Ahmed thus begins to grasp its personal *and* collective impact. Incidents like these emphasize the eternal recurrence of events that is also inherent in the film's circular narrative structure. Wounds of the past are re-opened as the current conflict repeats past violence. Again, a doppelganger motif is employed to address the politics of loss. Musa, who was forced to fight for the *Ba'athists* in *Anfal,* mirrors Ibrahim who was also drafted against his will. Moreover, the former Republican Guard adopts the father role for some time, thus literally taking Ibrahim's place. Ultimately, Ahmed himself becomes his own father's revenant as the head of his family. The first and last scenes, therefore, are highly relevant because they reflect the boy's development. While Ahmed initially rejected his father's flute, he plays it during the film's closing sequence, thereby embracing adulthood and Ibrahim's pacifism. And yet, *Son*'s ending does not offer resolution but a dismal future that is obstructed by a traumatic past. Ahmed is back where he began at the film's outset, on the road traveling toward an uncertain future.

3.3. Perpetrator Trauma, Forgiveness and Ethical Responsibility

Because of its complex narrative, *Son* opens the debate about perpetrator trauma.[11] This concept does not equate perpetrators with their victims; rather, it is concerned with ethical responsibility. Film scholar Raya Morag stresses the pivotal importance of the perpetrator's relationship with society, arguing that perpetrators' post-traumatic reactions are caused by "fissures of their own integrity" (16-17) that originate in an inhibition of mourning. If veterans cannot perform the mourning process, they become trapped in guilty repetition compulsions or develop PTSD. To escape the trauma circle, grief must be witnessed by a solidary community

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[11] Perpetrator trauma is contested by some critics who find the idea of such a category offensive (Assmann 243). However, this critique neglects the complexity of soldiers' victim-perpetrator positions: while they inhabit a position of power, they also struggle with loss and threats to their physical integrity.

(Santner 28). Yet society's complicity complicates this kind of grief work because a community must accept responsibility if an atrocious act is officially recognized. To avoid this, atrocities are denied, belittled as 'collateral damage' or legitimized by the rhetoric of ungrievability.[12] According to Morag, the perpetrator's only way out is to make an uncathartic confession that does not appeal for compassion but forces public recognition, thus addressing his/her guilt as well as society's "indirect complicitous guilt" (215). By acknowledging their agency in dehumanizing others, perpetrators can begin to accept their impaired sense of self, commence the mourning process and, most importantly, being to empathize with their victims and accept moral responsibility.

Son offers a relatively balanced portrayal of victims and perpetrators. At first sight, the Kurdish survivors seem to inhabit a clear victim position. Ibrahim being a soldier in the Kuwait War, however, complicates matters. Even though he was forced to fight and possibly killed for draft-dodging, he nonetheless adopted the powerful position of an invader. Inversely, former Republican Guard Musa clearly appears to be a perpetrator, but he, too, was coerced to kill. He tries to atone for past atrocities, thus introducing the subject of forgiveness. Initially, Um-Ibrahim is everything but forgiving when she learns of Musa's past: she accuses the Iraqi of murdering her son and tries to chase him away. Yet Musa's uncathartic confession of his crimes is an act of accepting ethic responsibility. He has realized that the dehumanization of his victims has impaired his own integrity. At length, after he has shown that he truly regrets his deeds and proved a compassionate witness to Um-Ibrahim's grief, she begins to soften towards him. When the trio leaves the Hillah mass grave site and Musa parts ways, the old woman chooses tender words of farewell: "Musa my dear. My son was forced to join the army. This is what happened to him (…) I forgive you" (*Son,* 01:10:50). Her forgiveness affects Musa, but it also has crucial consequences for herself. As psychological studies suggest, "forgiveness for the perpetrator may serve as a choice by traumatized individuals that enables a sense of personal control over uncontrollable events" (Wusik et al. 390). Ultimately, forgiveness offers a faint hope of escaping repetition compulsion. Al-Daradji's film therefore is an important contribution to the discourses on *Anfal*. The film's emotional proximity to its characters allows for empathic unsettlement. Indeed, the entire film is an act of empathy urging Iraqis to acknowledge their ambivalent status as victims *and* perpetrators of Hussein's regime. On a personal psychological level, the characters' traumas are far from fully integrated, yet on an ethical level their trauma can—if not worked through—at least be addressed in a collective process of cultural trauma.

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[12] In *Frames of War*, Judith Butler defines ungrievable lives as lives "that cannot be lost, and cannot be destroyed, because they already inhabit a lost and destroyed zone; they are, ontologically, and from the start, already lost and destroyed, which means that when they are destroyed in war, nothing is destroyed" (xix).

3.4 Histories of Violence, Inscribed into Space

Son's time structure reflects to what extent Iraq is still tied up in its violent history. The film's circular structure creates temporal simultaneity, demonstrating that the past is indeed never past. Al-Daradji explains that "the only way we can deal with the present is by dealing with the past, and our job is to keep this alive in the people's memory" (Conolly). On several occasions, past and present seem to catch up with each other on the plot level. The excavation of mass murder victims, for example, presents a collision of both time lines. On the one hand, this narrative pattern illustrates trauma's belated nature: events that happened twenty years ago still trap people in repetition compulsions. On the other hand, *Anfal*'s ghostly presence creates a filmic trauma palimpsest onto which new instances of traumatic loss (e.g. Um-Ibrahim's death) are inscribed. For characters caught in a constant state of temporal in-betweenness, the future seems irrelevant. Especially for Um-Ibrahim, whose life stopped twelve years ago with the disappearance of her son, the passing of time during her travels does not seem to matter. For her, the geographical movement south is also a movement back in time. Ahmed, by contrast, starts out making plans for his future, but their realization becomes doubtful as his journey progresses. He is increasingly bowed down by the knowledge of Iraq's traumatic past and precarious present.

The filmic composition of space is marked by similar contrasts. Iraq appears extremely diverse, ranging from Kurdistan's desolate hillsides and Baghdad's cityscape to Nasiriyah's ghost prison and Hillah's mass graves. As Al-Daradji mixes scenic beauty with war-time destruction, he attempts to show another Iraq, one that has not been "damaged by the lens of the camera" (Conolly). In his layered portrayal, Iraq emerges as a conflicted country full of hardly reconcilble contradictions—particularly because most spaces are charged with traumatic memories. Baghdad, for example, is engulfed in war-time chaos. Choking with smoke of burning detritus, the city's distress is emphasized by a soundtrack of helicopters and ambulance sirens. Next to the destroyed town gate a blackened welcome sign greets visitors to the ruins of a once beautiful city. Nevertheless, Baghdad looks nothing like the ghost town of American films. The streets teem with people because life goes on despite massive destruction. It might be difficult to maitain normality in a war zone, but city dwellers like Quasim, a boy who helps Ahmed on his jouney, display great resilience. The portrayal of Nasiriyah, by contrast, demonstrates how precarious Iraqi lives are. The city saw massive destruction during the invasion, a fact that is emphasized by bombed out police stations, road blocks and detonated cars. While Um-Ibrahim and Ahmed try to find their way among the rubble, separatists dump a dead body. Nasiriyah, then, hints at what Baghdad might become. Moreover, Nasiriyah prison's forbidding yet geometrical architecture visually epitomizes the regime's bureaucratic organization of genocide while its emptiness adds a surreal quality. Mourning women haunt the place like lamenting ghosts. Tied up as it is with memories, the prison becomes what Pierre Nora terms a *lieu de mémoire*: a symbolic location which creates collective identity (Erll 25). In an Iraqi context, many *lieux de mémoire* are negatively charged because they are inevitably connected to traumatic loss. Yet Al-Daradji also includes traces of another Iraq, as significant plot

developments take place at historic sites of ancient Babylonian civilization. Symbolically charged with Iraq's mythic past, Ahmed's quest thus becomes an allegory of a country struggling for a better future.

As a result, Al-Daradji's portrayal of physicality differs greatly from *The Hurt Locker*. Instead of inscribing the memory of trauma into the characters' bodies with scars, the director focuses mostly on the psychological impact of trauma. Though physically unscathed, the characters nonetheless suffer because bodily remains of the dead return, bringing with them memories that trap the living in perpetual repetition compulsions. Furthermore, close-ups portray how grief affects the protagonists; their tears evoke empathic unsettlement among viewers. Through composition, the director also stresses the physical precariousness of his characters. They are frequently framed in long shots that show them as fragile little beings faced with overwhelming forces of nature and war. The old woman and the child represent particularly vulnerable parts of society who stand in for the collective suffering of civilians in a never-ending Iraqi civil war. By contrast, the few Americans that appear in the film are no fully-fledged characters but a distant menace. Consequently, the Iraq War in *Son of Babylon* seems to be more about a country's interior struggles than the presence of foreign invaders.

Conclusion

The Hurt Locker and *Son of Babylon* demonstrate that trauma is not an apolitical psychological category but a tool to recognize silenced histories of marginalization, oppression, and genocide. The American film focuses on the soldiers' perspective, stressing their helplessness in combat. Deeply informed by Western traditions of individualism, *Hurt Locker* stays visually and narratively close to U.S. soldiers, thus conveying the emotional impact of their personal and often chronic combat trauma as well as the struggles of PTSD-disabled veterans to re-integrate into society. *Son*, by contrast, mainly focalizes through Kurdish survivors' perspectives. It uses the 2003 invasion as a foil to address the collective trauma of *Anfal*. While the rather static U.S. film conveys a strong sense of entrapment, its Iraqi counterpart stresses movement in a country that faces colossal changes. As a road movie about Kurdish displacement, the film focuses on long-term repercussions of insidious trauma while also highlighting the importance of moral responsibility and transgenerational forgiveness. Trauma, therefore, is not just addressed on a psychological level but also in broader ethical terms that add a political dimension. In both films, indvidual histories of pain stand in for the suffering of society as a whole.

The movies have a circular structure that depicts war and its resulting trauma as never-ending and ever-returning. Far from being climactic narratives with happy endings, these circular narratives more or less finish where they started, thus denying closure to their characters. Yet upon closer inspection, the circular narratives reveal themselves to be more of a spiral, as each added experience slightly alters the characters. They are never truly the same as in the beginning, for their accumulated pain inevitably changes them. What does not change, however, are the chaotic circumstances of war-torn Iraq: the entire country appears to be caught up in a cycle of

violence that breeds further traumatic suffering. This pessimistic view on the war's never-ending nature offers no catharsis whatsoever. On the contrary, it exposes the intractability of a conflict that creates existences doomed to perpetual repetition compulsion. Even as the protagonists attempt to move on, specters of their past keep dragging them back, thus inextricably yoking together the past, present and future.

As the films' histories of violence supersede and re-inscribe themselves into one another, they form intricate trauma palimpsests on which past and present constantly overlap each other through present absences. The eternal return of harrowing events addresses the issues of latency and belatedness, two central features of traumatic memory. These memories become palpable as specters: specters of past wars, of traumatic experiences, of dead and disappeared characters. The complexity of the palimpsests' layers shows that working through chronic or insidious trauma in the course of a single movie is impossible. All that film can do is offer a contribution to larger discourses about trauma politics. Both films' public recognition of injustice presents a first step to re-negotiate collective identities. The movies' most powerful achievement, therefore, is their ability to make the abstract issue of war trauma relatable on a personal level. Through filmic configurations of time, space and physicality they create a strong sense of bodily precariousness. Audiences witness how war affects the fragile bodies and minds of characters to which they grow emotionally attached through their suffering. Ultimately, this trauma focus emphasizes that the Iraq War is bound to remain unfinished business—like so many other wars before it.

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