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Cinema and society interact. This given becomes fascinating when socio-politically sensitive issues are adapted in films that confront spectators with the frames of reference they use to make sense of society.

This thesis studies how North-American and European films depict political torture in the context of the 'War on Terror'. It starts from the debate that was held in the political and public domain concerning the 'actual' torture of suspects of terrorist activities, and analyses political torture in film as a fictionalised, stylised form of such violence. In this way, it shows how public debates, politics, and art convene in cinema to engage with contemporary realities we, as societies, find difficult to witness and process.

The analyses focus on War on Terror films made between 2004 and 2012. All of these films share a Western, heterogeneous, yet ethnocentric perspective on the War on Terror, including the role of torture and Muslim otherness. They incorporate ethical, political, and moral questions about the use of political torture, while addressing the West's share in the geopolitics of the War on Terror.

Ultimately, contributions are made to the fields of film narratology and cultural theory, as well as to current debates about the role of cinema in society: cinema as art object, as commercial artifice, and as commentary on socio-politically sensitive issues.

SCREENING THE 'WAR ON TERROR'

Odile Bodde

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The Politics and Aesthetics of Torture in American and European Cinema

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Screening the 'War on Terror'

The Politics and Aesthetics of Torture in American and European Cinema

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- Introduction -

Screening the 'War on Terror': The Politics and Aesthetics of Torture in American and European Cinema

Zero Dark Thirty (2012) caused a stir upon its release, which gradually developed into a heated debate between reviewers and film scholars about the film's depiction of the torture of terrorism suspects. The film's plot builds on real events and centres on the ten-year manhunt for Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. Many, most notably feminist theorist Naomi Wolf (2013), accused director Kathryn Bigelow of releasing a patriotic pro-torture propaganda vehicle "à la Leni Riefenstahl", and of creating a confusing mixture of fact and fiction. Moreover, it was argued that seeing such 'torture-endorsing' feature films would lower the spectator's standards and normalise torture's use in real life (e.g. Mayer 2007; Žižek 2014 and 2015).

These are serious claims and fascinating responses. The nature of these reactions inspired my investigation into what it was about the scenes of torture and their position in *Zero Dark Thirty*'s narrative that caused this reaction. Some of this criticism can be explained by positioning the film within a cultural and political context, shaped by the events of 11 September 2001 (or '9/11'), and marked by a growing dissatisfaction with America's treatment of terrorism suspects and its interventions in the Middle East. Taking this context into account, the criticism includes the fear that such a film could further negatively compromise the image of the US in relation to extra-legal torture methods such as those used at Abu Ghraib (Mayer 2007), or endorse the continued use of these methods (Žižek 2014 and 2015).

These responses to the film also suggest a fair amount of offense on the part of the spectator for being subjected to a politically sensitive issue from the real world that is moulded into a melodramatic, action format. This response pertains to the way in which the story is told. The offense stems from being treated like someone who cannot distinguish fact from fiction, and impartiality and political bias (which underlies Wolf's argument). Yet we know that cinema's fictional world is not the

real world of daily life, and that cinema does not present referential reality, or 'the' reality, but rather 'a' reality (Houwen 51-52). Cinema offers an equivalent of 'it', or of 'that' which we refer to when we talk about reality and aspects of reality (Rancière 93; Grønstad 2011, 7; White 87), and cinema does so through different, cinematic forms of realism.[1] With regard to Hollywood cinema, the spectator is absorbed into the film's conventional seamless narration and participates in the illusion of this form of realism. The screening of a politically sensitive topic like torture, however, can disrupt this illusion after which the spectator is no longer willing to engage in a game of make-believe with the film's reality: due to the way in which this topic is framed, the film world clashes with the spectator's own moral and political beliefs as she becomes aware of the mechanisms behind the film's realism and the subjective decisions made therein.

The element of illusion ingrained in cinematic realism underlies the second motivation for feeling offense: the spectator could also blame the film for creating the impression that torture is a 'normal' procedure in the eyes of those who cannot make such distinctions between the fictional world and the real world (which underlies Žižek's and Mayer's argument). This argument assumes cinema's power in influencing public opinion.

This study departs from the debate surrounding *Zero Dark Thirty* and the assumptions about the film's rendering of torture methods as formulated above. Its central concern is to increase understanding of the ways in which North-American and European cinema has incorporated and depicted what I will call 'political torture', within the context of the War on Terror.

Cinema reflects upon, bolsters, refurbishes, and undermines normative ideologies that pervade social and political life in the time the film is made (Markert xx; Dittmar and Michaud 6). The relevance of cinema as an object of study thus resides in how it renders visible the

[1] Realism in film is established through types of realism, making use of different formal and stylistic techniques that are locally and historically dependent (Jakobson 24; Houwen 51-52; Hallam and Marshment x).

aspects of reality or of history that we find difficult to process or look at. It presents beliefs concerning and perspectives on sensitive topics from the real world, such as of the use and function of torture. Such depictions represent shifting cinematic, as well as cultural, standards and values regarding aggression, warfare, the motivations for and conditions of torture, and regarding those towards whom this violence is directed (Slocum 2000, 649-650).

At the same time, cinema is neither only a manifestation of explicit or deeply rooted cultural and political issues, nor should it just be evaluated in terms of being a poor or good reflection of such issues. Focussing on the political, aesthetical, and ethical dimensions of representations of political torture in film will provide a new understanding of the ways in which torture, as a form of screen violence, sheds light on our own beliefs about ourselves, others and the use of violence, and will also evaluate cinema's constantly evolving role in society and its function as art object, commercial production, commentary, or as all three.

Recent research has analysed depictions of torture in the context of the War on Terror and terrorism.[2] Hardly any of these studies, however, have taken up the actual representation of political torture as their pivotal focus. Moreover, although several comprehensive studies about torture have arisen in recent years (e.g. Wisnewski; Rejali 2007), only few have tackled the depiction of political torture in cinematic terms.[3] As of the time of writing, none have probed the significance of depictions of torture in feature films concerned only with the War on Terror. It is, I argue, important to study such depictions, as they contribute to our understanding of which political and aesthetical focal points come to the fore in representing political torture, both as a sensitive political issue and as a form of screen violence, and why these focal points are incorporated into the films.

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[2] This research includes Oliver (2007), Faludi, Prince (2009), Kellner, Birkenstein, Hassler-Forest (2012), and Hamad.

[3] This research includes, most notably, *Screening Torture: Media Representation of State Terror and Political Dominations*, a diverse collection of articles by Flynn and Fernandez Salek (2012).

Before I explain my methodology and choice of films, that is the case studies, it is necessary to elaborate on the broader War on Terror discourse in which to view the manifestation of political torture in real life, what characterises political torture as a form of screen violence, and the occurrence of torture in cinema previous to 9/11.[4]

Why a study on depictions of torture and why now?

There seems to be something specific as well as timeless about torture as a form of violence. Torture, inflicted for a variety of reasons, is as Jeremy J. Wisnewski notes, as old as humankind (16-19), and was depicted in films prior to 9/11 – think only of Jean-Luc Godard's *The Little Soldier* (1960). So why pursue this topic now?

From the publication of the Abu Ghraib photographs in 2003 until the publication of the Senate Committee's CIA Torture Report in 2014,[5] the question of 'to torture or not to torture' has occupied many discussions in relation to the War on Terror's strategies in finding suspected terrorists. Until the eighteenth century, the realm of torture was the public sphere, and torture was executed as a form of punishment upon the "body of the condemned" (Foucault 1995, 43-45). After 9/11, dark rooms and secret sites concealed torture, where it was inflicted under the guise of 'national security' (Wisnewski 44). Although torture was employed by dictatorships such as the Nazi and Soviet regimes, Pol Pot's genocidal regime, and the Argentinian 'dirty war' (2, 170), Wisnewski notes that during the War on Terror torture was re-

[4] Gayatri Spivak argues that the use of quotation marks when talking about the 'war on terror' or the war on 'terror', both neutralises the term and restricts it from being too political, and thus commodifies the terminology for overall use in the media and arts (2012: 376). This study uses capitals to indicate the actual wars fought in Iraq and Afghanistan and, secondly, to connote the rhetorical, discursive component of the term that was first used by President Bush days after 9/11. For an understanding of 'discourse' or 'discursive' in this thesis I rely on Michel Foucault's formulation of the term. Forms of discourse or discursive practices shape and produce knowledge and power. Discourses are constituted by and ensure the maintenance of social systems through inclusion/exclusion, organisation, selection, and control (Foucault 1981).

[5] See the Senate Committee's online torture report ("The Senate Committee's Report on the C.I.A.'s Use of Torture") on the website of *The New York Times*. 9 December 2014
< http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/12/09/world/cia-torture-report-document.html?_r=0>

appropriated and semi-institutionalised in legal terms (44-46), and, especially by countries that advocate for and tout their own democratic values (168). As such, a significant component in recent debates about the use of torture during the War on Terror comprises the mental and physical effects on those being tortured (12), and of the motivations and conditions for inflicting such violence, which, unlike dictatorial regimes, call into question the basic pillars of the legal structure of democratic nations (168).

Although torture was implemented as an interrogation strategy shortly after 9/11, the self-evidence of torture's justifiability, effectiveness, and its damaging consequences have been publically questioned in recent years. This development and questions pertaining to its use in exceptional circumstances are visible in War on Terror cinema. There is thus an urgency in understanding not only this re-appropriation and semi-institutionalisation of torture in the twenty-first century, but also what representations tell us about cinema's interaction with particular political and cultural aspects of contemporary society, such as political torture, and the incorporation thereof into fictional, stylized formats.

Brutal violence is a common trait of many popular films; one only has to think, for example, of Tarantino films, *The Godfather* trilogy, and the *Rambo* series. Two questions immediately arise: firstly, what is the difference between torture and other types of screen violence – between the Bourne series (2002-2012) which are thrillers in which a political quest prevails, on the one hand, and post-9/11 'torture porn' (Jones; Kerner) on the other? It is imperative to ask what defines the torture that is analysed.

According to Alfred W. McCoy, "while violence had long been a staple of Hollywood films, the sudden emergence of torture as a major multimedia theme was [a] distinct post-September 11 phenomenon" (2012, 126). In the series *24*, for instance, which first aired just months after 9/11, there are sixty-seven torture scenes within the first five seasons. For this reason, many have deemed the show to be the leader of, or catalyst behind, the post-9/11 'torture' trend in TV and cinema (Mayer 2007). There is thus a particular connection between the semi-

institutionalised use of torture after 9/11 and the parallel depiction of torture as a recurring motif in film and on television. This relation pertains to the increased quantity of visual representations of political torture that arose after 9/11.

In addition, the particular political nature of the torture depicted and the motivations that drive torture in War on Terror films are crucial in distinguishing torture from other forms of screen violence. One could object that torture is always political. Yet for lack of a better term, the 'political torture' meant here is, as I will argue, related to specific political reasons for torture and the 'shape' of torture (for example, as an interrogation strategy or as punishment) and to specific political situations and contexts in which such torture occurs (such as in extra-legal circumstances or as part of combat). Instead of defining political torture by referring to a dictionary prescription of what political torture entails, this study examines how cinema defines what 'political torture' entails, how it occurs, the various motivations for inflicting it, and how it can occur in tandem with other forms of screen violence.

Political torture did occur, however, and was used as a strategy during previous wars. The second question that arises is what in particular is different between depictions of torture or violence in earlier war films and that shown in recent War on Terror cinema?

What was filmic torture like before and what is different now?

In order to explain the depictions of War-on-Terror-specific torture, it is crucial to understand the general perception of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in relation to the Vietnam War (1955-1975) in particular, and the appropriation of this war in cinema. In their articles, J. David Slocum (2005) and Thomas Riegler both draw a parallel between 'violent times' and 'violent cinema', and point to the historical and cultural specificity of screen violence. As Slocum notes, movies made during the Second World War and those made before the revolutionary 1960s were tame and quaint (41). Rather than screening explicit violence, what was instead recapitulated was a civilising process concerning American values in terms of emotional and aggressive

behaviour, and indirectly, the institutionalising role of cinema in society. During the Gulf War in the 1990s, which produced only a few Gulf War films, and during the onset of the War on Terror in the early 2000s, the World War Two combat film witnessed a revival and, in addition to screening much more explicitly and gruesomely violent scenes, became a touchstone for heroic behaviour and morality for War on Terror productions (36-37).

Vietnam War films made during and after the war prove to be a different case in point. Between the patriotic *The Green Berets* (John Wayne, 1968) and the critical *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978), no films were produced that tackled the Vietnam War directly (Morag 191; Dittmar and Michaud 2). Only after the Vietnam War did cinema start to depict the war, but in a predominantly critical fashion to show the impossibility of justifying the sacrifice of so many individuals in the bigger picture of war (Gosline 89-95). While *The Green Berets* was produced at the turning point between support for and criticism of the war, the films made directly after the Vietnam War in the 1970s presented a critique of governmental failures encased as a representation of the corporal and psychological horrors of war (Slocum 2005, 36). Not until the early 80s did a shift from left-wing criticism to Republican counter-narratives occur, and the Vietnam soldier and veteran began to promote the Reagan era's reinterpretation of the war (Dittmar and Michaud 5). The torture Rambo undergoes in *First Blood* (Ted Kotcheff, 1982), for instance, can be seen in this conservative light: it radiates a new, heroic perspective on the Vietnam War and parallels the 1940s and 50s World War Two narratives that prescribed normative behavioural and emotional codes and morals. In the "grim fatalistic and hyperreal" films of the late 80s, however, the veteran was reintroduced as a victim of a political system (Devine ix), and additionally, the veteran started to explicitly address the war's imperial and racist agendas (Dittmar and Michaud 5).

While after the Vietnam War the Democratic administration of Jimmy Carter in the late 70s made way for to the Republican government of Ronald Reagan in the 80s, the opposite occurred during the War on Terror: the Republican administration of George W. Bush

was succeeded by the Democratic government of Barack Obama in 2008. Unlike the Vietnam War films, after 9/11 and during the onset of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, films were produced that directly reflected on the themes of war and terrorism (Riegler 24). At first, these War on Terror films were patriotic; American masculinity ideals and virility rhetoric undercut legitimizations of the interventions (Hannah 552). The transition from conservative and patriotic rhetoric to a democratic administration, concerned with the side effects of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, occurred in a dialectical process with shifting public opinion in 2005 (Markert 59-60). In addition to the change in political hue and the waning of patriotic sentiments, the growing discussion surrounding the treatment and legal status of detainees in Guantanamo Bay and the publication of the Abu Ghraib torture photographs in 2003 established a mood-swing to an anti-war sentiment comparable to the turning point in 1968 after the Tet Offensive in January and the Mai Lai massacre in March during the Vietnam War (Anderson 169; Louw 161).

More importantly, compared to the Vietnam War, the War on Terror has proved to be more of a rhetorical war than one of physical combat, despite troop deployment in Iraq and Afghanistan. Obama became president at a time when it had become apparent that the intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan was not as successful as the US and the Coalition of the Willing had hoped. The disintegration of Al-Qaeda's global profile into various, often more fundamentalist, offshoots and "rogue states" (Devji 2014, 436) occurred in tandem with the revolutionary movement of the Arab Spring which started in late 2010, and the disintegration of the war against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, especially after the execution of Osama bin Laden in May 2011 (432, 435). The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan ended, and while the rhetorical War on Terror similarly disintegrated, it also transformed into an on-going, weaker version of itself.

This switch in sentiment is detectable in documentaries and cinematic productions about the War on Terror released around 2007/2008 (including superhero narratives and post-9/11 apocalyptic films) that start to question America's foreign policies and that present

the political, social, and cultural implications of the War on Terror from an American perspective (Early 2014, 20, 24; Hassler-Forest 2011).[6] These narratives particularly accentuate bodily vulnerability and exposure (Burgoyne 2012a, 7, 8, 12), often starring the veteran, while simultaneously presenting "an implicit critique of the distance – moral and physical – of remote targeting and weaponry" (12).[7] As Greta Olson notes, there is thus a detectable difference between American post-9/11 texts and "post post-9/11 texts": the former are patriotic, retributive, and violence-justifying narratives. In the latter, the narratives are increasingly self-conscious and critical about the use of torture, weaponry, and surveillance (2013).

The Vietnam War films built on revolutionary social movements of the late 60s and early 70s, which was echoed in the 'American New Wave' cinema that subsequently depicted unprecedented brutal violence (Slocum 2000, 658-660). Stephen Prince notes how these films, epitomised by Sam Peckinpah's audacious *The Wild Bunch* (1969) could, partially due to the Hollywood Production Code that regulated screen content, not have surfaced before 1968/1969 (2000, 2, 6). Explicit and brutal screen violence thus began to parallel the real violence pervading America's cultural and political landscape in terms of social reform, the Vietnam War, Civil Rights, and sexual liberation.[8] Like *The Wild Bunch*, these violent films often combined graphic violence with social and war criticism (13).

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[6] These films include *Redacted* (Brian de Palma, 2007), *A Mighty Heart* (Michael Winterbottom, 2007), *Rendition* (Gavin Hood, 2007), *The Kingdom* (Peter Berg, 2007), *The Hurt Locker* (2008, Kathryn Bigelow's project prior to *Zero Dark Thirty*), and *Green Zone* (Paul Greengrass, 2010, release date initially planned for 2008).
[7] Burgoyne sees a decisive difference between these war films and films like *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979, on the Vietnam War) and *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998, on the Second World War) in the sense that most War on Terror films foreground the private (and corporeal) experience and are 'no longer defined by the ideology of total war that shaped the grand narratives of twentieth-century combat'. Veteran films include *Home of the Brave* (Irwin Winkler, 2006), *Badland* (Francesco Lucente, 2007), *In The Valley of Elah* (Paul Haggis, 2007), *Stop-Loss* (Kimberly Peirce, 2008), *The Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2008), and *The Veteran* (Matthew Hope, 2011).
[8] Consider also *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967) and *Straw Dogs* (Sam Peckinpah, 1971), and the first part of the *The Godfather* trilogy (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972).

Yet the depiction of violence in Vietnam War cinema is different from the violence depicted in War on Terror cinema. With the exception of *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978), a film that notably incited as much emotional response as did *Zero Dark Thirty* (Walsh), and the first two *Rambo* films (Ted Kotcheff, 1982 and George P. Cosmatos, 1985), Vietnam War cinema rarely depicts torture. Instead, violence is inflicted on both sides as part of warfare, the result of the increasingly brutal nature of the Vietnam War.

Although there is no such thing as a sudden transition in brutal 'screen violence' before 9/11 and 'political torture' post 9/11, the occurrence of torture as a new form of violence in War on Terror cinema is significant. Moreover, political torture returns in other films, not necessarily about the War on Terror, in which the influence of post-9/11 torture can be detected: *Rescue Dawn* (Werner Herzog, 2006), about a young pilot whose plane is shot down during the Vietnam war, depicts how actor Christian Bale is brutally tortured as a prisoner of war. Similarly, the James Bond film *Casino Royale* (Martin Campell, 2006) features a most excruciating, "alluring and potent", yet un-James-Bondian torture scene (McCoy, 130). Most remarkably, torture makes its entry in the 'torture porn' genre, including films such as *Saw* (James Wan, 2004) and its sequels that became particularly popular after 9/11 (Kerner; Jones).

In European cinema, while the War on Terror theme is not as pervasive, the depiction of torture is. Rather, European cinema has a longer tradition with terrorism and terrorist organisations, as well as with torture, but these two are not joined together in the way Hollywood has appropriated torture after 9/11. In the past decades, terrorist activities instigated by, for instance, the German Red Army Faction, the Irish IRA, and the Basque ETA, have translated to European cinematic depictions of terrorism that portray societal rupture rather than violence.[9]

However, the recent wave of "fact-based European films", as Tobias Grey notes, grappling with the particularly violent nature of

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[9] Films include Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Germany in Autumn* (1978) and *The Third Generation* (1979).

these terrorist organisations seems to be fuelled by 9/11 and the War on Terror.[10] Yet only a few European films deal with the War on Terror directly, such as *Route Irish* (Ken Loach, 2010) and *Five Years* (*Fünf Jahre Leben*, Stefan Schaller, 2013). In others the influence of 9/11 seeps through implicitly, such as in Michael Haneke's *Time of the Wolf* (*Le Temps du Loup*, 2003) and *Hidden* (*Caché*, 2005) (Bradshaw 2011b). Others, like the British production *The Mark of Cain* (Marc Munden, 2007) and the Danish *Brødre* (*Brothers*, Susanne Bier, 2004), which are analysed in this thesis, use military intervention in the Middle East as context for narratives about the personal costs of war; these two films, together with *Five Years*, also depict torture.

The depiction of torture in European cinema is featured in pre-9/11 films about war and independence, such as *Le Petit Soldat* and *The Battle of Algiers* (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966), or in other categories, such as *Salò, or The 120 Days of Sodom* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1975) and *Antichrist* (Lars von Trier, 2009). Torture also occurs in Michael Haneke's oeuvre, and in the cinema of the New French Extremity of the late 1990s and 2000s. In other words, while Hollywood saw a clearly detectible emergence of torture in War on Terror films, in Europe, this threshold of 9/11 and the theme of the War on Terror are less visible; both torture and terrorism were components of European cinema prior to the attacks, although not necessarily occurring together.

By mutually comparing both American films and European films, and by also comparing American cinema with European cinema – to the extent that one can speak of a homogenous 'American' and 'European' cinema – this study determines the films' diverging political and aesthetical focal points in depicting torture.

Methodology: The politics and aesthetics of film torture

The case studies are closely read and analysed at the intersection between film narratology and the practice of cultural analysis. In my approach of 'reading' and interpreting film scenes or shots I rely on

[10] These films include *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (Ken Loach, 2006), *Bullet in the Head* (Jaime Rosales, 2008), *Hunger* (Steve McQueen, 2008), and *The Baader Meinhof Complex* (Uli Edel, 2008).

Peter Verstraten's *Film Narratology* (2009),[11] which appropriates the post-structuralist narratological approach as formulated by Mieke Bal (1985/2009). This approach is particularly relevant for my thesis for several reasons: it provides insight into form and style and narrative structure, but also into the films' relation to the ideological, cultural-political discourse from which they originate, and how the spectator as the 'reader' of the scenes is addressed or positioned by formal means.

With the practice of cultural analysis (Bal 1999 and 2002), theoretical frames and conceptual tools are employed to inform the case studies and to subsequently position them within political and cinematic contexts. I will make use of the work of cultural (particularly post-colonial and gender) theorists and political philosophers. In addition, I will rely on film reviews and related discussions when this substantiates my analyses of the films and their position within a broader cultural and political War on Terror context.

This study neither employs the theoretical framework in the service of a philosophical and political debate about torture methods, nor does it analyse the films in normative moral terms and argue whether or not torture is legitimised or how it should or should not be represented. Rather, the premise of this thesis, how North-American and European cinema has given shape to political torture in the context of the War on Terror, requires an analysis of form and content substantiated by a theoretical frame that serves the purpose of that which is analysed: the implications of why political torture is depicted and how this is done politically and aesthetically.

What is therefore meant by 'aesthetics' are film form and style, or principles of narration and techniques of film, and the way in which torture is presented therein through *mise-en-scène*, cinematography,

[11] *Film Narratology* departs from the work of film scholars such as David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, Edward Branigan and Seymour Chatman. These approaches, however, rely too heavily on a de-personified, cognitive narrative process (Bordwell), 'nonfocalized' narration (Branigan) and an implied author (Chapman). In addition, they rely on structuralist analyses that ignore the social, political, and cultural discursive practices in which cinema is embedded.

sound, and editing (Verstraten 2009, 8-9).[12] Torture can, for instance, take place off-screen and yet be narrated by an auditive narrator. It can be stylized in graphic terms, rendered without dialogue, or occur as a character's flashback. Form and style are never neutral and these different ways of representing torture have implications for how torture scenes and plots are perceived by the spectator. It is thus crucial for an understanding of representations of political torture to scrutinise those features of narration and composition that give insight into the way torture is depicted on screen.

Yet torture shots and scenes do not stand on their own, and a distinction should be made between how torture manifests stylistically and narratively: the former concerns the composition of torture, the choices made therein, and "how it exploits the resources of the medium" (Grønstad 2008, 49). The latter concerns the way in which shots and scenes can be analysed temporally, spatially, and causally as segments in the narrative (ibid.). Analysing a scene as such a segment, as well as relevant plot elements that help interpret the torture episode, exposes the semantic role of torture in the plot.

'Politics', in turn, refers firstly and most tangibly to the diegetic, political context of the War on Terror: the extent and fashion in which real people and events in recent history are referred to, how the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and political interference in neighbouring Middle-Eastern countries are fictionalised, and other ways in which a political context is delineated. The diegetic political film world is in turn informative of the cultural, political, and social discourse from which a film originates (Grønstad 2008, 10).

Although the films draw on a War on Terror theme, the Hollywood War on Terror film generally combines several generic characteristics, such as war and active combat, terrorism, the veteran, thriller aspects, suspense and spy characteristics, ticking bomb situations, and specific 9/11 elements (Markert xxxi-xxxii). The fact that the films belong to a heterogeneous Hollywood as well as European cinematic tradition indicates that, like the Vietnam War films

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[12] What is however not meant by 'aesthetics' is the manifestation of an essential beauty or of the 'sublime' (Grønstad 2008, 48-49).

made in the post-war years, “they borrow their narrative and cinematic codes freely from other media and other films” (Dittmar and Michaud 2).

Secondly, as mentioned, ‘politics’ refers to the politics of representation: the way in which a story is told and presented by the narrator.[13] Whether classical Hollywood or art house cinema, ideologies are inevitably at play in the way in which the narrative is moulded and interpreted – and in the decision to depict torture in the first place.[14] I argue that the ideologies scrutinised in relation to the depiction of political torture against the backdrop of the War on Terror, tie in with particular, normative assumptions about warfare, the use and legitimisation of violence, and gender and ethnicity tropes.[15] Made in the US and Europe, the case studies share a Western, predominantly white and male, ethnocentric perspective on the War on Terror. Making transparent and reflecting on the gender and ethnicity of those torturing and those being tortured is significant for understanding how political torture is employed in film, and how such depictions dovetail with both the ratification and challenging of ideologies surrounding the role of torture in film.

Lastly, ‘politics’ and ‘aesthetics’ inevitably concern spectatorship. The interaction between the film and spectator positions the ‘spectator’ as an addressee, positioned by principles of narration and formal techniques (Verstraten 2009, 8). The fact that real, embodied spectators react to violence and sympathise or identify with

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[13] The politics of representation also refers to external (political or financial) constraints that influence a film’s eventual content (Markert xxiv). In the present study these constraints will not be taken into account.

[14] Ideology can be translated as “a set of ideas and representations in which people collectively make sense of the world and the society in which they live […] ideology is a characteristic of all human societies, but a given ideology is specific to a particular culture at a particular moment in history” (Dyer 1994, 2). Ideologies are discursive and inevitable, but they are always, in principle, normative.

[15] According to Grønstad, in the cinematic representations a trope can be seen as a “figurality” that constitutes the film’s discursive substance (2011, 7). One of the ways in which substance is made understandable for the spectator is by bestowing characters, as Richard Dyer argues, with aural and visual stereotypical traits that places them “quickly and economically” in order to construct an intelligible story for its viewers (Grønstad 2011, 7; Dyer 1977, 32).

characters depending on personal and socio-cultural (i.e. gender and ethnic) characteristics is only taken into account when I refer to film reviews used to substantiate my interpretations. Spectatorship tells us, in this respect, more about principles of narration and techniques of film, than about the actual spectator.

This positioning or addressing of the spectator can be considered in terms of how the spectator is invited to identify with or relate to a character's position as the subject of torture or when torturing others. This can be established by using point-of-view shots or facial expressions that offer insight into a character's perspective and state of mind (Dyer 1994, 133-136; Verstraten 2009, 90-92), by withholding crucial information from the spectator, or by allowing the spectator to have more details about a situation than the characters. The same techniques can be employed to encourage a critical, self-reflexive attitude on the part of the spectator about political themes presented, or to become affected when watching graphic torture. Analysing the role of the spectator as such shows how features of narration and composition facilitate or problematize an understanding of the political and moral decisions made by characters in the use of torture when such decisions remain opaque, and of actions undertaken as a consequence of torture.

Hence, this study analyses torture on four levels: the politics and aesthetics of torture shots and scenes, the segments' position within the narratives, the way in which the spectator is addressed or positioned, and a comparative analysis of the films in their particular cinematic as well as political, cultural, and historical contexts.

Case studies and chapter overview

As this study's aim is to provide insight into the particular aesthetics and politics of fictional representations of torture, the case studies will consist of feature films and not documentaries. Some of their representations of political torture are inspired by real events, while others are completely fictionalised. A comparative analysis consists of eight Hollywood and European films released between 2004 and 2012, which function as a cross-section of films about the War on Terror in

which torture is depicted. At the same time, these case studies by no means encompass or speak for all Hollywood or all European cinema in which political torture has been depicted after 9/11. Together however, they are firstly informative of the variety of ways in which aesthetics and politics intertwine to create a cinematic representation of torture, and secondly of how cinema can frame, re-frame, and in some cases "rewrite" violent aspects of the War on Terror (Burgoyne 2010, 1-2).

The first two chapters of this study scrutinise four Hollywood films, while the last two chapters comprise, predominantly, European films. The first two films, *Zero Dark Thirty* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2012) and *Unthinkable* (Gregor Jordan, 2010) stage the torture of Muslim detainees as part of a 'ticking bomb scenario', in which the elements of urgency, action, and suspense structure the plot. Chapter 2 analyses *Syriana* (Stephen Gaghan, 2005) and *Body of Lies* (Ridley Scott, 2008), in which the torture of CIA agents is depicted within the framework of geopolitical action films. The prevailing hypothesis of these two chapters suggests that the reversal of roles gives shape to a different 'role-play' (McKenzie 342-343) between torturer and tortured: diverging motivations and methods present the torture of Muslim detainees as justified, and the torture of CIA agents as unwarranted and more brutal. I explore the way in which these different role-plays and contexts – the 'ticking bomb scenario' on the one hand and the geopolitical action film on the other – have consequences for the way in which torture is depicted in political and aesthetical terms.

The first chapter illustrates how the debate surrounding *Zero Dark Thirty*'s depiction of torture can be explained by analysing formal means. In particular, two aspects are focused upon: the ambivalent position and function of the film's female protagonist Maya (Hasian 323) who is associated with torture, and the way in which the film creates a form of cinematic realism that suggests a documented, referential reality, or rather 'the' reality instead of 'a' cinematic reality (Houwen 51-52). *Zero Dark Thirty* will be compared to *Unthinkable*, which similarly stages torture as a method to retrieve information, but that presents to the viewer an obviously exaggerated ticking bomb scenario. This comparison will also illustrate the problematic

association of female protagonists with torture methods, and how their respective expressions of femininity influence perception of the use of torture.

Zero Dark Thirty presents contradictory messages, in terms of the characters' moral stance towards torture and in terms of torture's effectiveness. Although structured according to conventional Hollywood narration that builds on a passive acceptance of a film's plot, I probe whether these contradictory messages in *Zero Dark Thirty* invite the spectator to critically evaluate the film's politically sensitive themes.

While *Zero Dark Thirty* was the subject of critique, the geopolitical action film *Syriana* (2005) was praised as one of the first films to be unequivocally critical of America's intervention in the Middle East during the Bush administration. At the same time, the film reverses the role of CIA torturer and Muslim tortured, and seems to present the Muslim torturer as stereotypically villainous. In order to see how this dual, seemingly paradoxical, move is made, Chapter 2 close-reads *Syriana* in tandem with *Body of Lies* (2008), which stages a similar torture scene in a different plot.

In this chapter, the torture episodes are closely tied to a political critique of US interference in the Middle East. This entanglement necessitates the analysis not only of the occurrence and role of torture in the narrative, but also of related plot elements that help interpret the abusive role-play between torturer and tortured. Therefore, this chapter builds on three themes or questions: firstly, what is meant when a film is deemed to be 'critical' of American normative ideologies and politics? Secondly, the question is raised whether, and if so how, the motivations provided and the conditions under which torture takes place in the films differ from those established by CIA agents. Further, if this results in a different 'type' of torture, does this influence the way in which torture is framed and shaped on screen? This, thirdly, necessitates focus on the use of gender and ethnicity tropes as developed in the first chapter. Where in the previous chapter the role of female protagonists is analysed, in this chapter the 'post-heroic' heroism (Burgoyne 2012a, 8) of the male protagonists is analysed in

tandem with the double valence of the 'good Muslim' and the 'Muslim villain' (Mamdani 768).

The last part of this chapter will position the films discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 within their temporal context and in relation to other Hollywood films on the War on Terror, and investigate whether the different themes and nuances incorporated in the four films can be explained by the respective film's year of production.

The hypothesis of Chapter 3 is that the European films have different focal points than the Hollywood films. Rather than building on ticking bomb scenarios, intelligence gathering, and active combat, they accentuate psychological consequences of war and violence, and in particular the consequences of torturing or having been tortured. Chapter 3 moves away from the global stage of terrorist networks and geopolitics to the consequences of warfare and torture for veterans. This turn to the domestic sphere presupposes a different political undercurrent and critical evaluation of the War on Terror. *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable* built on the self-evidence of an American national trauma as experienced after 9/11 and as ingrained in American narratives and rhetoric. In the European narratives discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, national trauma is less naturally associated with the intervention in the Middle East; instead personal trauma features prominently.

Through close-readings of the British television production *The Mark of Cain* (Marc Munden, 2008), the Danish film *Brødre* (Susanne Bier, 2004) and its American adaptation *Brothers* (Jim Sheridan, 2009), Chapter 3 illustrates how the films connect torture, and more particularly, having tortured others in combat, to the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Due to the simultaneous occurrence of having tortured and also having suffered personal trauma, these three films are, for this study, an indispensible category in War on Terror cinema. Additionally, these films again focus on male protagonists, and, unlike the films discussed in the first two chapters, fuse the status of victim of torture with culprit, thereby explicitly collapsing the binary of Western 'civilised' versus Muslim 'barbarian'.

The Mark of Cain is, like *Zero Dark Thirty*, based on real events, yet where *Zero Dark Thirty* purports to depict torture in an ostensibly impartial and near-referential manner, *The Mark of Cain* does not explicitly draw on its ties to a real torture episode. The film introduces and focuses on the development and experience of trauma after being involved in torture, which results in a distorted and atemporal narrative structure. This formal construction, in which the distorted form underscores the traumatic and gruesome content, addresses the question of the un/representability of trauma. I will illustrate that the emphasis on the experience of trauma presents a potent political critique of peer pressure and issues of personal and collective culpability, and will investigate whether this emphasis reduces the actual occurrence of torture to a secondary theme.

The last part of Chapter 3 similarly investigates how the development and experience of PTSD in the protagonists, consisting of war veterans, translates in the narrative structure of *Brødre* and *Brothers*. A comparative analysis between the three films explores the degree to which the protagonists invite identification and how this is established, and whether and how the films' unconventional narration works together with an understanding of the characters' ambiguous positions.

A crucial difference between *Brødre* and *Brothers* concerns the way in which *Brothers* appropriates the political and social themes ingrained in *Brødre* and adapts them into the Hollywood mould. This reworking affects the way in which torture is depicted, as well as the political themes that are addressed. This necessitates an inquiry into whether the Danish *Brødre* is more critical of the intervention in the Middle East and of its harmful side-effects than *Brothers*, or whether these "micro-dramas" (Burgoyne 2012b, 179), with a focus on personal trauma, largely avoid contextual questions about long-term consequences of the War on Terror.

In the case studies analysed in Chapter 3 the diegetic political context and the 'role-play' of torture, which are pivotal elements in Chapters 1 and 2, seem of secondary importance in relation to conveying and elucidating the experience of personal trauma as a

consequence of torture. In Chapter 4 the focus lies on two European films, the Polish *Essential Killing* (Jerzy Skolimowski, 2010) and the French *Flanders* (Bruno Dumont, 2006). They feature modes of narration that are even less conventional than *The Mark of Cain* and *Brødre*, in which references to the War on Terror are only sporadic or even opaque. Although the opaque diegetic worlds seem to divert attention from the films' political undercurrent, the films' diegetic worlds steer perception and spur the spectator to view and review these narratives through a historically determined post-9/11, War on Terror lens.

This chapter investigates how the alienating contextual voids and unconventional narrative structures urge the viewer to actively interpret the characters and the torture scenes, while often preventing her from satisfactorily constructing meaningful coherence, and while an understanding of the characters is made difficult. This investigation builds on three interrelated pillars of inquiry: it investigates how the informational voids, few moral guidelines, and minimal emotional expression surround the framing of the torture episodes and other instances of brutal violence. It then investigates how this way of framing violence in an opaque context is subsequently processed by the spectator. As in Chapter 2, the formal and semantic ambiguities necessitate the interpretation of other plot elements and formal aspects: the use of gender and ethnicity tropes, the use of sounds and colour, the delineation of a diegetic context and character motivation, and the ways in which the films give shape to a political-ideological view on the War on Terror are discussed.

The last two chapters reveal the different angles and focal points of North-American and European film, and how these films formulate a particular vision of the occurrence of political torture in a War on Terror from a Western perspective.

The films gradually move from classic Hollywood narration with a seamless structure in the first chapter, to more complex modes of narration when concerning the European films. The case studies give shape to various forms of realism to depict torture and its function in

the plots by employing different formal structures, which affects the way in which the spectator is invited to engage with the characters and the torture they are subjected to or employ. This set-up, from conventional to less conventional modes of narration, illustrates that the principle feature of my approach will comprise an investigation into the relation between modes of narration and the films' realisation of a diegetic political context, the manner in and degree to which torture is motivated and framed, the degree to which identification with the protagonists is facilitated, and the consequences of these four interrelated features for modes of spectatorship.

This study's specific focus on depictions of political torture and the analytical and theoretical methods employed to analyse them contribute to on-going research into the aesthetics and politics of screen violence. Moreover, this study enhances our insight into the role of cinema in depicting politically sensitive issues from the real world while veering between its function as cultural art object, commercial artifice, commentary on socio-politically sensitive issues, and its role in maintaining an ideological relationship to recent history.

- Chapter 1 -

Interrogational torture and female protagonists in *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable*

Introduction

In 1991, Oliver Stone's film *JFK* received much criticism from journalists, historians, and politicians for his depiction of president John F. Kennedy's assassination. The director was accused of distorting events and fostering paranoia by suggesting that Kennedy's assassination was the result of a conspiracy that involved high-ranking officials in the US government (White 68). More importantly, the film was said to blur the distinction between fact and fiction, as Hayden White notes, by

> treating a historical event as if there were no limits on what could legitimately be said about it, and thereby bringing under question the very principle of objectivity on the basis of which one might discriminate between truth, on the one side, myth, ideology, illusion, and lie, on the other (68).

White's quote sums up the nature of the criticism that *Zero Dark Thirty* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2012) also encountered twenty years later. Like *JFK* then, reviews of *Zero Dark Thirty* voiced the fear that people might take the fictional account, based on real events, as literal truth (e.g. Wolf; Kumar). In the case of *Zero Dark Thirty*, it was not the suggestion of conspiracy in the US government which stirred up debates, but rather the film's depiction of the CIA's use of interrogational torture; it was argued that torture was ostensibly successfully employed by the CIA in their hunt on Osama bin Laden, to the extent that the film had come to endorse torture methods (e.g. Žižek 2013; Greenwald; Mayer 2014).

The discussion concerning the blurring of fact and fiction is interesting but also problematic in light of cinema's role in appropriating historical events into fiction: it easily raises the

normative question of how this can or should be done.[16] Secondly, the discussion directs our attention to cinema's position and role as form of art and entertainment in our hyper-mediated society, in which the news, film, and social media permeate our daily existence (Hassler-Forest 2015). As an audio-visual representation, cinema employs an illusory form of realism that becomes a form of reality in its own right (Elsaesser 167): although the spectator realizes that the fictional world of the film is not the real world, she engages in a game of make-believe, based on a similarity, not on mimesis, with this fictional world (Hallam and Marchment 122). The film in turn uses various techniques and strategies to present a realistic a world as possible (ibid. xv). *JFK* and *Zero Dark Thirty* uphold this game with the spectator, yet the politically sensitive topics – Kennedy's assassination in the former and of political torture in the latter – preclude a completely passive acceptance of what is shown, as the viewer takes her own political and moral frames of reference into account. A film like *JFK* or *Zero Dark Thirty* thus becomes controversial when its audience suddenly becomes or is made aware of the ideological mechanisms behind the film's realism.

This chapter starts with this controversy in mind. In order to explain how *Zero Dark Thirty* evokes the overall sense that the film is a pro-torture narrative by 'mis-presenting' reality, it will investigate the techniques used to construct the film's fictional world and the impression created that this world borders on *the* reality. The focus will be on two particular aspects: firstly, the way in which torture is depicted and presented to the viewer by close-reading the torture scenes and secondly, the scenes' position within the narrative. It will be argued that a key reason for the film's political difficulty resides in the narrative's ambivalent and often contradictory messages concerning

[16] This discussion concerning narrative formats to 'tell' or 're-present' a historical episode is not new. In particular art works, literature, and films depicting aspects of the Holocaust have often been the subject of controversy and accused of distorting historical events and betraying the memory of those who perished by using offensive narrative formats and techniques. For two of such discussions see both Gruber and Visser on Roberto Benigni's *Life is Beautiful* (*La Vita è Bella*, 1997) and Elsaesser on *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993).

the justification and effectiveness of torture, and in the characters' opaque moral agenda.

Apart from the criticism about the film's construction of realism, the debate about its endorsement of torture partially concerns the prominent position taken up by the film's protagonist Maya, a CIA agent associated with the torture carried out (Hasian; Cornell; Piotrowska). Discussed and evaluated predominantly in terms of her gender, the criticism regarding her character suggests an underlying issue with female protagonists in relation to political torture. The relations between Maya's character, position, and stance towards the use of torture will be explored through close-reading, in addition to the criticism directed towards her character.

In order to illustrate how the film's realism, an unequivocal political context, the framing of torture, and the intricate position of female characters therein are connected, comparisons will be made between *Zero Dark Thirty* and the film *Unthinkable* (Gregor Jordan, 2010), in which an exaggerated – and to the spectator, obvious – 'ticking bomb situation' is presented. Lastly, the ways in which the spectator is addressed and positioned by both films, and the extent to which the films inspire a critical spectatorship will be analysed.

1. *Zero Dark Torture* and the nature of interrogations

Zero Dark Thirty's plot centralizes the ten-year manhunt on Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden and Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, and is set two years after the attacks on the Twin Towers. The first part of the narrative depicts the interrogation and torture of detainee Ammar (Reda Kateb), a follower of Osama bin Laden, by CIA agent Dan (Jason Clarke). The scenes are witnessed by CIA agent Maya (Jessica Chastain). The torture comprises three lengthy scenes, while the remainder of the plot is dominated by Maya's search for bin Laden. The scene starts *in medias res*. Ill-informed, the spectator learns in this early stage that detainee Ammar functioned as a messenger for crucial suspects and for the 9/11 hijackers.

The first shot frames a dark room, suddenly brightly lit as metal doors open and footsteps approach. A man (Dan) enters and walks into

the barely lit space of what looks like a silo or a spacious prison compartment. The camera shifts position to show that the man walks towards detainee Ammar, who focalised this first shot. Ammar stands on a blue mat, wears filthy white clothes, and is accompanied by three men. Behind Dan another figure (Maya) approaches in dark clothes with a dark bandit hat that obscures the face entirely. Dan halts close near Ammar's face and says, "I own you Ammar. You belong to me". A close-up of Ammar's face shows that he is heavily beaten and bloodied, and his eyes are averted to the ground. Dan continues, "Look at me", and Ammar reluctantly looks up. Suddenly Dan shouts and the three men next to Ammar start kicking him. Dan continues, "You don't look at me when I talk to you, I hurt you. When you step off this mat, I hurt you. When you lie to me, I hurt you. You don't look at me, I hurt you". Signalling Maya to come with him, Dan walks away from Ammar towards the door. The three men tie Ammar's hands up to ropes that hang down from the ceiling.

Learning that Ammar will never leave his prison again, Maya decides to leave her bandit hat off. Dan and Maya re-enter and the heavy metal door behind them closes. Ammar is still tied with the ropes in the middle of the silo. Again, Dan faces Ammar who, in close-up, averts his eyes. Dan tells him, "It is you and me bro. I want you to understand that I know you. That I have been studying and following you for a very long time. I could have had you killed in Kharadji, but I didn't, I let you live, so that you and I could talk". Ammar responds that when his hands are tied, he will not talk. Dan asks him, "Did you really think that when I got you I would be a nice fucking guy?" To which Ammar angrily replies, "You are a mid-level guy, you are a garbage man in the corporation, why should I respect you?" Dan responds facing him, "You are a moneyman, a paperboy, a disgrace to humanity. You and your uncle murdered three thousand innocent people". As the camera oscillates between close-ups of Dan and Ammar, Dan tells Ammar he has his name on a money transfer to a 9/11 hijacker, and that Ammar was caught with 150 kilograms of high explosives in his house. He therefore has no right to contest Dan.

Instead, Dan explains that he holds Ammar captive because he wants to interrogate him about the Saudi group's plans and whereabouts. Ammar is framed frontally to show his facial expressions and his body tied up with the ropes, and when Dan shows him a picture its content is obscured from the spectator's sight. Then in a side shot the two men face each in profile and Dan continues, "Ammar, I know you know this dude, just give me his e-mail and I will give you a blanket and some solid food". Ammar responds, "I have told you before, I won't talk to you". Dan eyes him for a few seconds, contemplating, then proclaims, "Have it your way". While walking away from Ammar to the back of the silo, Dan starts shouting and repeating, "If you lie to me, I hurt you" again, and grabs the blue mat behind Ammar. In the next shot Ammar vigorously tries to look over his shoulder, anticipating what will come next. Dan approaches with the mat, takes a wet towel from the side of the silo, moves quickly to Ammar, and suddenly pushes him down onto the mat. In close-up Dan and the men guarding in the silo struggle to hold Ammar down, who is shouting loudly and defending himself.

A close-up of Maya shows that she holds her hand close to her eyes, to hide her aversion to the situation. Dan tells her to grab a bucket with water but she does not initially hear him. Maya walks to the other side of the silo to get the bucket, and gives it to Dan. Because Ammar refuses to speak, Dan 'waterboards' him while shouting that he wants the e-mail addresses of the Saudi group. He asks Ammar when he has last seen bin Laden, but Ammar is unable to speak because his mouth is full of water. The camera cuts quickly between shots, alternating between Dan sitting on top of Ammar, and the perspective of Maya, who is barely able to look at the scene. Dan takes away the towel and tells Ammar, "This is what defeat looks like bro. Your Jihad is over". He gets off Ammar and tells the men to get Ammar, breathing heavily, up on his feet. Dan faces Ammar in close-up again and calmly tells him, "I think it's cool that you are strong and I respect it, I do. But in the end everybody breaks, bro. It's biology". He distances himself from Ammar towards the entrance and another shot shows Maya and Dan walking out.

The third scene of Ammar's interrogation takes place some time after the first two scenes. The door of the silo opens and as Dan and Maya walk in, loud heavy metal music permeates the space. Ammar is framed from behind, and when the heavy door opens Ammar bathes in sunlight. He is tied with the ropes, a dark figure with his arms up and hanging down, bending at his knees, like a crucified martyr. Two men with their faces obscured by bandit hats stand guard again. Dan walks to the left, switches on a light and switches off the loud music. A close-up of Ammar's face reveals it is more beaten and bloodied than last time. This shows Ammar's anticipating facial expressions, which are un-witnessed by Dan and Maya. In the meantime, Dan collects two chairs and positions them opposite each other and helps Ammar into a chair. In another shot Maya, again from her peripheral place, clutches her nose, presumably because of the stench released by Ammar's flighty body. As he takes a seat opposite Ammar, Dan hands him a bottle of orange juice and a brown paper bag with food in it that Ammar devours gratefully. His hands are still tied with the loosened ropes and a tear rolls down his cheek as he clutches the bottle tightly. Maya observes Ammar from the side.

Dan starts interrogating Ammar again and Dan and Ammar face each other in alternating close-ups. This time Ammar acknowledges that he knows the man Dan mentioned previously. Dan continues by asking who else is in his Saudi group and Ammar responds that he only handed them some money in cash, he does not know who they are. Maya rolls her eyes in disbelief and Dan slowly repeats his familiar phrase, "When you lie to me, I hurt you". He puts pressure on Ammar by asking, "Do you want the water again, or something else?" Ammar starts crying and begs Dan to stop his interrogations. When Dan asks him to give a name and Ammar responds he does not know, Dan suddenly stands up and kicks Ammar's chair out from under him. A re-establishing shot oversees the silo from the back. Dan stands behind Ammar and asks whether Ammar wants him to take off his pants for his female colleague to see. Dan takes Ammar's filthy white pants down in close-up Maya, seeing that Ammar has dirtied his pants, averts her eyes in disgust. A shot from behind shows Ammar in his crucified position

again, this time naked from the waist down. Dan walks out and tells Maya to stay behind.

Ammar looks at Maya and says, "Your friend is an animal. Please help me". She approaches him from the side and coldly responds, "You can help yourself by being truthful". Dan returns with a dog collar and attaches the collar to Ammar's neck, who struggles to free himself. Dan says to Ammar, "There you go, you determine how I treat you". He unties the exhausted Ammar, who collapses against him. Barely able to walk, Ammar falls down on his knees. Dan urges him to start crawling and walks beside him as if he is taking his dog for a walk. After a couple of meters Dan makes Ammar stop and shows him a big wooden box to the right against the wall, near Maya. He makes Ammar face the box and threatens to put him inside if he does not answer Dan's question about the Saudi group's plans. Ammar responds by whispering a day of the week. Dan urges him to speak up, but Ammar then starts whispering different days of the week. Irritated, Dan violently drags Ammar into the box, assisted by the two guards in the room. Ammar struggles and keeps on mentioning different days, this time shouting them in resistance. The men manage to put Ammar, who has no energy left, in the box that is barely big enough for him to fit. Dan's face in close-up looks at Ammar. He gives Ammar another chance to give the right time and location. Ammar continues mentioning different days, now whispering again. The next shot moves from a close-up of Dan to one of Ammar: he is exhausted and can barely keep his eyes open. Dan closes the box and, as seen from Ammar's point of view, the frame turns black. After this last 'session' with Ammar, Maya tricks Ammar into thinking he has given them information. Severely sleep-deprived, he cannot remember if this is the case, and complies instead.

The 'urgency' of Dan's torture and extra-legal space

Dan's main motivation for torturing Ammar is to get insight into the future plans of the Saudi group, connected to Osama bin Laden. Ammar proves valuable as a source of information, and in order to prevent further attacks by his organisation, he is abused and gradually broken in a series of carefully orchestrated torture. While Ammar refuses to

speak, attacks and suicide bombings (based on real events) occur between the torture scenes. This way of editing implies that Ammar's refusal to speak is causally connected to these attacks. Dan thus needs to out-smart and break Ammar before the Saudi group strikes again and this leads to a trial of strength between him and Ammar.

In the opening credits the film shows a black screen with audio recordings of people inside United Airlines Flight 93. This harrowing first shot refreshes the spectator's memory and suggests that America's trauma of 9/11, together with the Saudi group's specific whereabouts and activities, provide the motivation for Ammar's interrogational torture. These features suggest that the CIA deems a few casualties or violated bodies on the side of the terrorists as morally justifiable to help prevent further attacks. Whether Dan deems torture as legally or morally justifiable, however, remains unclear, since the film starts *in medias res*. Yet precisely because torture's justifiability is not further considered or reconsidered, Dan's interrogation seems a routine job within an operation that justifies its abusive interrogations in Arendtian terms,[17] within the parameters of the 'ticking bomb situation' in which an overall sense of urgency is ingrained (Marks 3; Farrell 82).

The infliction of torture is facilitated by moving it from moral and personal considerations to an amoral and extra-legal discursive space, in which legal exceptionalism is operative. Apart from the 'urgency' of determining the Saudi group's next move, the 'black site', an undisclosed location (Hopkins), endows Dan with the sheer ability to incarcerate Ammar and 'allows' for torture: the undisclosed space of the silo somewhere in Pakistan becomes an extra-legal 'state of exception' (Agamben 2005, 23), in which the threat for terrorist attacks

[17] As Hannah Arendt contends, under some conditions, violence, inspired by a short-term goal, such as a revolution or as self-defence, or in the face of an immanent threat, can never be legitimate, but it can be justified. The use of violence can thus be justifiable (related to an end that lies in the future) in moral, not necessarily in legal terms. Her analysis illustrates what motivates people to use brutal violence, while most theories on violence and torture stress its legal and moral parameters. Although *On Violence* can and should be situated within a historical framework and violence is not the same as political torture, Arendt's lucid distinction is not paradigmatically typical and provides a potent strategy for theorizing the motivation of, conditions surrounding, and implications of the use of political torture (44-49, 52).

renders jurisdiction and Ammar's civil and human rights obsolete.[18] Dan holds Ammar literally in the dark about his status, which is further underscored by Ammar's focalisation in the first few shots. When Dan enters, the room bathes in sunlight, but before this moment Ammar's focalisation presented his perspective as incarcerated in the blinded silo, which adds to the claustrophobic nature of the place. Dan's actions are carefully orchestrated and planned and the silo is equipped exactly for the purpose of holding and disorienting Ammar (of which the ropes and the wooden box are examples). Dan creates a situation in which Ammar is put into a position of "complete vulnerability and exposure" with Dan "in one of perfect control and inscrutability" (Sussman 7).

The 'role-play' structuring Dan's torture

Due to these characteristics of planning and orchestration, space not only becomes the facilitator of Ammar's torture, but also the stage for Dan's abusive role-play. 'Role-play' sounds an improperly theatrical way to describe such torture, yet as Jon McKenzie argues, torture can be analysed as having a plot, a dramatic unfolding, and even character development, or rather, "the decomposition of character and identity" (342-343).[19] The demarcated space lends itself well for 'performing' the scene of torture that sets the abuser and abused in antagonistic positions, in which Dan has 'scripted' the role-play and has assigned agencies and constraints.[20] Ammar is given the space to respond to

[18] For Giorgio Agamben (2005), the state of exception is often not an actual state, but 'illocalizable' or a 'threshold zone' that is neither internal nor external to the juridical order. Structured through exceptional jurisdiction rather than through space, his conceptualisation of this extra-juridical space of anomie is much theorized in relation to Abu Ghraib, Guantanamo Bay, and similar spaces.

[19] Elaine Scarry has similarly argued that repeated acts of torture on display in rooms transform torture into "grotesque pieces of compensatory drama" (28). In a play, however, all parties involved know the script, yet in torture, in which the element of surprise is an important component (Rejali 2007, 360, 556), as Dan's torture also shows, the tortured does not.

[20] Although the role of the black site has been acknowledged in many studies that analyse the extra-legal aspects of torture, the function of this space as a 'stage' for torture in cinematic depictions has been somewhat overlooked. Recognising the importance of the use of space as extra-legal space as well as a stage adds to an understanding of the cinematic depiction of torture as an extra-legal, as well as an orchestrated or scripted, method.

Dan's questions and accusations and they engage in several dialogues in which they accuse each other of being the more loathsome. Ammar, however, has no chance of winning this role-play or dramatic unfolding; in order to break him, Dan conjoins and performs the characteristic roles of good cop/bad cop and rapidly switches from kindness to abuse. He gives Ammar food and water after starving him. He makes a claim to Ammar's rationality by arguing, "You determine how I treat you", and by saying, "I think it's cool that you are strong and I respect it, I do", only to exploit this dialogue and Ammar's responses in an effort to break him.

By calling Ammar a terrorist and murderer whose "Jihad is over" Ammar is positioned as inferior and the difference between Dan and Ammar is productively affirmed and repeatedly re-affirmed. Arjun Appadurai has argued that the logic of excessive violence is often motivated by the abuser's belief that the other's intrinsic inferiority has to be made visible and affirmed through torture. This suggests that those who are tortured are deemed inferior *prior* to their torture, and that, despite the motivation of interrogation, torture further ratifies this assumption (2006, 89; also see McKenzie 345). In this cinematic representation of torture Dan similarly makes Ammar's inferiority visible and consequently re-affirms his inferiority through torture, as if this makes his inferiority *more* visible to all parties present in the room. First appealing to Ammar's rationality and personality traits, these are consequently disavowed to show Ammar is not only inferior (which still implies inferior human), but subhuman: he is an animal. The torture not only proves Ammar's implied animality (he is held on a leash and attacks his food like an animal because he is being starved) but it simultaneously produces Ammar *as* an animal (a technique also used during the Abu Ghraib torture, see Olson 2014, 129). As such, affirmation of inferiority lays bare the explicit as well as implicit motivations for Ammar's torture; although interrogated for terrorist activities, Ammar's body becomes the site where signs of 'animal' are

made visible and re-affirmed, and his animality is in turn employed as a self-justifying strategy to torture.[21]

Although aimed at extracting information, Dan's interrogation thus increasingly gives rise to a punitive role-play.[22] Dan often brings his face close to Ammar to create a misleading sense of intimacy, which is stylistically established and reinforced through several medium close-ups of Dan and Ammar as they face each other in standing or sitting positions. Dan alternates this fake sense of confidentiality with circling around Ammar as he interrogates, like a predator on the verge of attacking his prey. More tangibly, Dan embarrasses Ammar when he pulls down Ammar's pants for his "female colleague" to see. By revealing Ammar's nudity to Maya, who covers her eyes in embarrassment and disgust, Dan stresses Ammar's position as a debased man by explicating the taboo to visible sexuality and nudity in Islamic culture and religion (McKenzie 344-347).

In three scenes or 'acts', Dan undoes Ammar's agency, by violently breaching his bodily integrity and by inflicting mental abuse by forcing him into confession, shame, and guilt.[23] More importantly, Dan forces Ammar to actively, yet involuntarily, cooperate in his *own* dehumanization, which is, as David Sussman has argued, a crucial element in the psychology of torture (4). The alternative use of kindness, rational dialogue and torture illustrates how he breaks Ammar with Ammar's involuntary yet active coercion.

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[21] Kelly Oliver argues that the distinction between the Western philosophical concepts of man, humanity, and inhumanity on the one hand, and animal and animality on the other, have frequently been used to justify torture (2010, 271, 274-175).

[22] As Jeremy Wisnewski argues, interrogational torture is only one type and particular kind of torture, but often overlaps with other types of torture, such as punitive torture, which Dan's torture also shows (7). In addition, Scarry has noted that information is often credited as a just motivation for torture, but that it is hardly ever the only motivation (28). These theories are not about filmic torture, but, as Dan's method fuses interrogational with punitive torture, they prove a useful angle to analyze the representation of torture with.

[23] As Wisnewski (65) and Scarry (37) have argued, the undoing of agency is a crucial component of torture. Appadurai stresses in addition that the breaching of bodily integrity is inherent in every form of bodily abuse (1998, 917). In addition to Scarry's and Wisnewski's work, Appadurai's analysis of ethnic violence is useful in approaching cinematic torture.

In the light of the Abu Ghraib torture photos, Greta Olson pointed to the gendered nature of torture: not only are male victims animalized, they are feminized through sexual abuse, which positions 'animal-like' and 'feminine' on par (2009,136-139). Ammar's animalisation can also be seen as an enforced feminization: he is made 'prey' or a 'bitch' on Dan's leash (and less than a man) and is forced to undress himself in front of Maya (implicitly making him even less than a woman), which ratifies the disparity between the powerful and the weak (Olson 2014, 136). Maya's role in this is crucial as well as ambivalent: her gender helps effectuate Ammar's debasement, but her peripheral and witnessing position give the spectator an important clue in how to read these scenes of torture. I will argue, it is precisely her perspective and interaction with Ammar that emphasizes Dan's harsh character and methods.

Performing for an audience

This detailed analysis of the performative 'role-play' between Dan and Ammar is necessary to the spectator's perspective on Ammar's interrogation. Dan's torture is performed in front of Maya as a witnessing third party and as Dan's "female colleague". Maya's position as audience reaffirms the silo as a stage on which the torture is performed. The aspect of gender again becomes interesting; not only does Dan's role-play give rise to male empowerment and subordination, but Maya's current passive position also reaffirms a normative gender division of active males and passive females.

However, although Maya seems positioned as passive onlooker, her position in these scenes actively undermines Dan's self-evident dominance and the methods he uses for interrogating Ammar. Moreover, as I will explain shortly, Maya will move from witness to interrogator herself. In these scenes with Ammar, she refrains from touching Ammar or from intervening and holds herself aloof. Dan's role-play is dovetailed with medium close-ups of Maya's facial expressions and shot/reverse shots in which she displays disgust over the abuse. She frequently closes or covers her eyes and is barely able to hide her aversion. Aligned with Maya as a focalising third party and

'reader' of this scene, the spectator witnesses the debasing performance of torture through Maya's eyes. Close-ups, point of view shots and reaction shots are seen as important indicators of the character's 'psyche' and interiority (Dyer 1994, 133-136; Verstraten 2009, 90-92). Maya's focalisation encourages the spectator to identify with her standpoint and to subsequently also find the scene of torture embarrassing. Ammar is thus first debased by Dan's method and his embarrassment is then reinforced in the eyes of Maya.

This ratification of Ammar's inferior status by means of Maya's gaze paradoxically depicts Ammar as more human than the relentless and abusive Dan, despite Ammar's proven complicity in terrorist crimes. Through Maya's gaze, Ammar's abuse becomes unnecessarily outrageous and inhumane. Yet not only does her gaze revert the obvious logic of dominance and subordination, Ammar himself reverts this logic when he notices and recognises Maya's emotional response. He appeals to her by pleading, "Your friend is an animal. Please help me". To hide her emotional turbulence, Maya coldly responds, "You can help yourself by being truthful." Ammar's claim nonetheless recasts Dan's previously established logic of superior/dominance and inferior/subordination by asking which party is actually 'the animal'. In the first half of the film, Maya and Dan are the plot's two prominent characters (after which Dan leaves and Maya takes over), and so Ammar's remark does not only pertain to Dan, but questions the CIA's moral dominance as expressed through Dan. The remark, as well as Maya's perception of the abuse as harsh, establishes that the scene suddenly becomes humiliating and uncomfortable. Although the spectator was coerced to deem the terrorists of 9/11 and their accomplices, like Ammar, as dangerous and inferior animals, Ammar's remark allows Dan's moral superiority to be destabilized by his interrogational torture in the eyes of the spectator.

In addition to Ammar's plea, he is often aesthetically accentuated when the camera is located behind him. Ammar subsequently catches the sunlight coming from the opposite side each time Dan opens the door. Although filthy, his clothes are white, which contrasts with the dark clothes of Dan, Maya, and the guards. Tied down by the ropes, his

'crucified' position becomes central in the frame. Further, he is often framed in extreme close-up that pronounces his bloodied and swollen face and his facial expressions, ranging from anger, to exhaustion, to despair. Although in a disadvantaged position, through *mise-en-scene* (his position, clothing, the use of light) and cinematography (framing, close-up, focalisation) Ammar's situation is emphasized and inspires sympathy, while Dan's actions become increasingly disturbing.

Ammar's interrogation as 'torture lite'?

Zero Dark Thirty only seems to screen a limited amount of torture sessions: although Ammar's face is bloodied and beaten, we do not *see* Dan kick or punch him. These beatings presumably occur between the scenes that are presented, which means that either there are more scenes of Ammar's abuse than those that are screened, or that Ammar's beatings are carried out by someone other than Dan. The latter option is less likely, since Dan is the main interrogator. It seems an odd decision to not show beatings, but to instead accentuate waterboarding, the dog chain, Ammar's exposure to loud metal music, and food and sleep deprivation. These activities could be regarded as psychological torture, which is no less cruel or no less torture, as Wisnewski explains (4-5), but is often represented as being so. This decision can be explained in several ways.

Dan's torture could be seen as a form of 'torture lite', framed to accentuate the CIA's mild and humane methods, by making the torture seem more bearable and tolerable. Waterboarding is then presented as less harsh than actually kicking someone, because no blood flows or visible physical damage occurs. The impression of the CIA as humane is then used to stress the idea that a few casualties or violated bodies on the side of the terrorists is morally justifiable to help prevent further attacks. In this interpretation, Dan's psychological abuse seems an attempt to displace (and dispel) the moral weight of the torture from the torturer to the victim: he holds Ammar responsible for his own situation and current condition. Moreover, the effects of torture are not lasting; Ammar is broken, not necessarily or only by torturing him but by tricking him. Maya makes him believe he has provided information

while sleep-deprived, which is still torture but presented as 'torture lite'. Afterwards, the three are seated outside. Ammar is allowed to eat and smoke because he "earned it". By mistake, he gives them several other names and the nature of his previous whereabouts. He seems in good health, as the effects of torture on him are hardly perceptible.[24]

I want to pose two very practical reasons behind the framing of this ambivalent 'torture lite': Firstly, it allows Ammar to speak and walk despite gruelling torture, and his miraculously rapid recovery has narrative purposes. Secondly, omitting excessive beatings upholds the film's entertainment and commodity value.

Despite this way of framing torture, through Maya's gaze, the spectator is compelled to grasp the nature, extent, and gravity of Dan's torture. His method exceeds the Arendtian justifiability of torture to avert the next attack in a ticking bomb situation, because it is undercut by a punitive, dehumanizing component. Although motivated by necessity, the overruling harshness neutralizes the justifiability. These scenes already show the ambivalent messages emitted concerning the motivation, process of, and justification for torture, and, as I will explain shortly, its consequences in *Zero Dark Thirty*.

Moving (along) with Maya: Interrogations

Zero Dark Thirty starts with Ammar's torture, but these scenes are only one segment in the narrative that constitutes the film's ambiguous messages in relation to the use of torture by the CIA. Maya functions as a female witness with whom the spectator's point of view is aligned and, with her, is subsequently coerced into considering Dan's torture methods as outrageous. When Dan decides to leave Pakistan to do "something normal for a change" – an abrupt decision – Maya replaces him as interrogator and role-player. Her perspective on torture becomes more ambivalent as she moves from abhorrence towards discovery that torture could be useful in finding terrorists. In short,

[24] Scarry argues that torture is language and voice destroying, during and for some time after the torture occurs (19, 33, 45-46, 50-51, 54). Taking into account the way in which Dan has tortured Ammar and the duration of his imprisonment, Ammar's rapid recovery is very unlikely.

Maya's personality and position in relation to torture becomes ambivalent, which, I will argue, mitigates the impression that she is actively involved in torture methods.

From Dan we learn that Maya "just came down the plane from Washington" and already "gets this guy" (Ammar). Initially unacquainted with the procedure of torture, Maya is forced to replace Dan as the interrogator of their CIA unit. The spectator witnesses how she grows increasingly vexed in her search for bin Laden, scrutinizing every lead she gathers. She obsessively examines film footage of hooded and cuffed detainees subjected to torture and their answers to questions posed. In addition, shots of interrogations of several individuals suggest that plenty of detainees were interrogated and abused in Maya's ten-year search for bin Laden. Affected by the death of several colleagues during the hunt for bin Laden, she consequently believes that she was "spared to finish the job".

In this way, Maya gradually transforms from someone who winces at the sight of abuse into a determined, autonomous interrogator and self-proclaimed "motherfucker" who is increasingly tempted to make the detainees speak at a certain cost. Her moral judgement seems to slide towards the conviction that torture is a necessary objective in finding bin Laden and other terrorists whom she, as she states, wants dead.

This conviction is suggested predominantly through Maya's actions, because her internal world remains largely opaque. Throughout the remainder of *Zero Dark Thirty*, Maya's shot/reverse shots become less frequent and less intense, and her internal focalisation remains limited. The medium close-ups of her facial expressions shift from revealing abhorrence during Ammar's abuse, to annoyance and hostility. Whenever her colleagues and superiors think or act too slowly, she confronts them by marking daily on a glass wall the number of days they have refrained from acting upon a lead she provided. She gradually becomes a lonely and frustrated 'sleep-deprived fanatic' (Hasian 333) who keeps her colleagues, as well as the spectator, at arm's length.

Throughout the film, Maya's personality remains underexposed. The informational void regarding her character traits, background, and personal life is predominantly the effect of the compressed representation of the decade-long hunt for bin Laden and the plot's emphasis on action and intelligence gathering. Despite the occasional tough comment (Pakistan as "fucked up" and remarks about people she would like to kill), the spectator hardly knows anything about her. With only a few tools, the spectator has to distil Maya's subjective view of the situation.

Maya's new role as interrogator marks a transformation in her function as female witness into a protagonist whose braininess and wit are emphasized above her gender. This representation of her gender is one of crucial criticisms directed towards the film; although some take issue with the film's particular rendition of torture, a substantial part of this criticism pertains to Maya's problematically feminist character. What lies behind both this *filmic* depiction of Maya, as well as the *criticism* pertaining to her character, is, as I will argue, essentially a problematic association with a female agent in relation to torture methods.

Maya's problematic gender expression

Initially positioned as Dan's female colleague during the torture scenes, during her own interrogational and research activities her intelligence, rather than her gender, is emphasized. Although Maya has a feminine 'sculpted beauty' (Burgoyne, quoted in Piotrowska 153), the aspects of her character presented to the viewer accentuate her braininess, autonomy, and dogged purposefulness. She refuses sexual relations (she has no boyfriends and denies to her only female colleague Jessica that she would ever sleep with their male co-workers), and further makes herself as indistinct a woman as possible by giving up most of her feminine traits: she wears wigs and headscarves to cover her striking ginger hair when interrogating. These props are not appropriated for religious or cultural reasons, as she often enters public space without a headscarf. Her appearance in dark suits or bland

clothes distracts attention away from her body and erases any remarkable physical, feminine traits. In addition, only once or twice does Maya show signs of emotions: after an interrogation she takes off her wig and grasps for air in the lavatory.

The accent on wit and autonomy while neutralizing features associated with femininity (emotionality and dress) has led to praise as well as criticism. Michael Moore praised the film (in a dubious way) by calling it a "21st century chick flick", arguing that *Zero Dark Thirty* "is really about how an agency of mostly men are dismissive of a woman who is on the right path to finding bin Laden". It has similarly been argued that Maya becomes "gender neutral" (Kang) – neither explicitly male nor female. Others have stressed that this expression of Maya's gender is a dubious form of feminism, as the emphasis on her brain instead of her body suggests that she cannot have both in tandem. Marouf Hasian Jr., for instance, has argued that Maya's character combines the politics of radical feminism and liberal individualism to create a 'postfeminist' protagonist (323), which, as Rosalind Gill has argued, combines feminist as well as anti-feminist themes (152-154).[25] Hasian Jr. claims that this postfeminist depiction of Maya, with the accent on her braininess, is used to create the allusion of gendered equality in the CIA and to direct attention away from the fact that structural barriers are still in play in male-dominated organisations like the CIA; *Zero Dark Thirty*'s gendered narrative is thus only superficial.

Both these arguments, seeing Maya as the epitome of feminism and as incorporating strong anti-feminist features, hold weight. She is

[25] There is little agreement about what postfeminism entails and how it precisely relates to third-wave feminism. Rosalind Gill has contributed considerably to the discussion by arguing postfeminism is a 'sensibility', as a contemporary articulation of, or cultural mood regarding, gender in the media. Her definition hinges on the following features: "the notion that femininity is a bodily property; the shift from objectification to subjectification; the emphasis upon self-surveillance, monitoring and discipline; a focus upon individualism, choice and empowerment; the dominance of a makeover paradigm; a resurgence in ideas of natural sexual difference; a marked sexualisation of culture; and an emphasis upon consumerism and the commodification of difference. These themes coexist with and are structured by stark and continuing inequalities and exclusions that relate to 'race' and ethnicity, class, age, sexuality and disability – as well as gender" (149). As such, she argues, postfeminism constructs a suture between feminist and anti-feminist ideas, effectuated through a grammar of individualism that fits perfectly with neoliberalism (162).

not necessarily feminist, as the accent on braininess and wit assumes these traits cannot or are not supposed to occur alongside the expression of physical and mental traits deemed female, such as empathy, distress, and bodily curves.[26] This assumes braininess and wit are characteristically male traits. In Hollywood terms, however, the film presents an unconventional female lead, who, for once, is not the centre of attention for her female qualities and feminine physical appearance. Operative in the CIA, Maya predominantly encounters male colleagues and male detainees (Burgoyne 2014, 249). Covering her head and body seem a survival strategy that makes her less exposed and accessible to her male colleagues and detainees, thus allowing her to focus on her job. Either way, her gender expression is reduced to bare minimum while at work, which assumes there is no place for traits deemed female.

Furthermore, part of the criticism directed towards Maya relates to how her character garners support for torture methods. It is argued that her postfeminist character directs attention away from American exceptionalist torture policies (e.g. Hasian 323; Žižek 2013). By accentuating her feminist features, the spectator might almost forget that she becomes co-responsible for the violation of several human rights along the way. This argument does not thus claim that women as such cannot be brutes or be immoral, but it claims that a depiction of an ostensibly feminist character directs attention from her immoral practices by means of her feminism. This argument, however, overlooks its own share in the debate about postfeminism, for one could wonder why Dan's character was not attacked for his masculinity and, additionally, his association with torture.

In order to see how Maya's character is problematic for many viewers, I will draw a parallel between Maya and the female protagonist of *Homeland*, a series for which resemblance to the real operations of the CIA is also constantly explored and discussed by media critics and

[26] William Brown has argued that Maya lacks empathy, the result of a form of 'war autism'. Ironically, when a man like Dan displays a similar 'lack of empathy', he would not be described as being a war autist, but as a brute. Women, on the other hand, who display a similar lack of empathy, are for mysterious reasons deemed 'autistic'. See Brown's blog, http://wjrcbrown.wordpress.com/ (accessed 12 April 2015).

reviewers (e.g. Cogan and MacGaffin). *Homeland*'s moral grey zone with regards political decisions made to catch terrorists is embodied in the character of Carrie Mathison. Praised for her unapologetic hands-on attitude (e.g. Saner), the discussions surrounding Carrie's character are not related to her association with torture, but to her emotional instability (Rosenberg; Ryan). Her bipolar disorder is emphasized, and she is presented as a promiscuous, emotional, non-compliant yet honest and clever agent, which prove to be successful characteristics in the first two seasons. Although Carrie is also associated with torture (predominantly in the first season) and deadly drone attacks (in the fourth season),[27] her expressive face and sexual relations with colleagues (and suspects) construct her as a more conventional female protagonist with recognisable traits and actions the audience can relate to.

Whereas *Homeland* revolves around Carrie's intelligence work as well as her complex character, the underexposure of Maya's background, personality traits, and internal world position her as an impervious character. This informational void concerning her character can be seen to serve a function. Accentuating the traits of wittiness and toughness acquires support for her character and makes her more attractive to a broader audience. The move away from body and towards brain, and the fusion of feminist and anti-feminist themes, confronts both the normative eroticized female lead and the unstable and emotional intelligence agent (like *Homeland*'s Carrie).[28] Maya is

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[27] In fact, torture rarely occurs in the first three seasons of *Homeland*. The CIA instigates two series of abuse; one of which is the interrogation of Nicholas Brody, the other of which is witnessed (but certainly not objected to) by Carrie on a recording. There is a series of flashbacks in which we see Nicholas Brody being tortured by Abu Nazir's men, and in the third season Brody is publically hanged by Iran's Revolutionary Guard. In comparison, *24*, with 67 torture scenes during the first 5 seasons, presents significantly more torture scenes (Mayer 2007).

[28] In her discussion of postfeminism as a sensibility, Gill notes that girls and women are addressed and regarded as the monitors of all sexual and emotional relationships, responsible for producing themselves as desirable heterosexual subjects while simultaneously defending their own sexual reputations and men's self-esteem. This tendency is the result of a resurgence of the idea of natural sexual difference (151, 158). *Homeland*'s Carrie is not as such an entirely normative female lead, but her expressive emotional and sexual life make her more recognisable as a woman adhering to the norm than does Maya.

neither a tomboy nor a GI Jane (see Ridley Scott's film by the same name, 1997), who appropriates masculine traits and physical features such as shouting, swearing, short hair, or men's clothes. If normative female characters are expressive of their emotions and are sexual and desirable objects, Maya's gender-opaque character is more attractive to a broader – female as well as male – audience. She directs the spectator's attention towards plot and action, rather than to sex and psychological baggage or depth.

Against the denunciation of Maya's feminist role as garnering support for torture, Agnieszka Piotrowska has proposed that Maya is a contemporary Antigone. Maya's "inflexibility", her "monstrous" unfeminine and "raw" stubbornness, her sense of destiny ("I was spared to do the job") in relation to her mission resemble Sophocles' heroine. Piotrowska reads Maya through Lacan's view on Antigone and contends that Maya's actions are the constituents of a Lacanian ethical act (144-145). A beautiful woman, she soon loses her civilised behaviour to 'raw' determination, motivated by the traumatic episode of 9/11 and her own personal losses (146, 148).[29] Her perseverance in finding bin Laden carry Maya's mission beyond her own limits, and both women, Piotrowska argues, see their 'task' through to the bitter end, regardless of personal costs (143).[30]

In terms of character, Maya's inflexible determination and sense of destiny, as analysed above, resemble that of Antigone. Yet in terms of her situation and the morality of her actions, Maya's involvement in torture is incomparable to Antigone's burial of her dead brother. By upholding her own principles, Antigone's actions and perseverance show how the others, in particular Creon, are unjust and cruel. Maya also keeps to her principles, but these are morally ambiguous. She is complicit in inhuman and cruel acts while simultaneously seeming to believe that these acts are justifiable.

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[29] See also Hassler-Forest for discussion of the self-evidence with which 'trauma' has been naturally associated with post-9/11 Hollywood cinema and regarded as an essential element of post-9/11 discourse (11).

[30] In Lacanian terms, this means that one does not give way to one's desires, for desire has (unlike the drive) an element of calculation. Piotrowska builds on Lacan's *Seminar VII* (1992).

Moreover, where Piotrowska solely focuses on Maya's "ethical act", she pushes aside the ambiguous role of torture in the film. More importantly, there seems to be a correlation between Maya's increased involvement with interrogations in the search for bin Laden and her transition from female witness to expressing problematic gender characteristics. Piotrowska argues that Maya's bodily fragility and beauty are opposed to her male colleagues' physical strength and ineptness (150). The confusion of beauty with the "monstrous" is what challenges the spectator in the twenty-first century, as it certainly must have done to Ancient Greek spectators of Antigone (152). Maya indeed confuses the beautiful with the monstrous, but she seems to repress her femininity while at work. When bin Laden is finally caught and killed after her years of obsessive search and astute thinking and operating, Maya is sent home on a giant airplane that is ordered just for her transition. She breaks down, which suggests she presented herself as tougher than she was. She has given everything for her search and, now the job is done, regains a recognisable and normative gender expression by conveying her troubles and fatigue. As such, she moves from a female, appalled witness during Ammar's abuse, to an obsessed agent who represses her femininity when interrogating, to a familiar female protagonist when the job is done.

This repression of her femininity, however, assumes two things: firstly, that one has a gender that can be repressed upon demand. Secondly, it assumes Maya can only be successful in her search for bin Laden when she represses or withdraws traits and physical features deemed female while at work. Rather than seeing Maya repressing features deemed female, thereby appropriating feminist and anti-feminist traits, Maya, as Piotrowska notes, can be seen to use up all her libidinal energies to find bin Laden, sublimating them into her work with no space for anything else (152). This is a psychoanalytical formulation for saying that Maya uses up all her energies to the point of nearly becoming burned-out: Maya loses herself in the job up to the point of losing a part of herself. However, what all these theories about Maya tend to push aside is the impression created that she might just be, like Dan, a harsh CIA-operative involved in the torture of suspects.

The arguments about Maya's character, position and gender all remain, ultimately, debatable and depend on the side or angle one occupies. Her ambivalent gender and her involvement in torture methods nonetheless explain the issues critics have with Maya. Interestingly however, although Maya supervises all interrogations after Dan left, she never physically touches or harms the detainees herself, an observation that has remained under-exposed so far in my analysis, as well as in debates surrounding the film's depictions of torture.

Maya's dissociation from torture

Before Dan leaves the black site, he warns Maya to be careful in governing and supervising the detainee interrogations, as she does not "want to be the last one holding a dog collar when the Oversight Committee comes". After the scenes with Ammar, torture's occurrence and harshness is predominantly suggested and mediated by the presence of hooded detainees on site and the film footage of interrogations Maya obsessively scrutinizes. Yet again, this suggests that CIA agents inflict torture as a routine method.

In the first torture scenes, it is Maya's tactic of bluffing that prompts Ammar to give information concerning important figures. Ammar finally breaks due to sleep deprivation and Dan's torture. In her position as interrogator, Maya again uses her wit and rhetoric to persuade, but lets her male colleagues inflict abuse on her behalf. Her connection to the suspects' bodies is established not through touch, but through voice and gaze, emphasized by her obsessive scrutiny of interrogation video footage. Maya's abstention from torture can be analysed in several ways.

Her refrainment from touching anyone, whether abusively or sexually, has the effect that a potential association with the female torturers at Abu Ghraib prison, despite Maya's supervision of all the interrogations, is precluded. Maya's character is a composite, based on several real female CIA operatives (Gritten 2013), but might also resonate with the female torturers in the Abu Ghraib prison (Cornell).

Her physical dissociation now complicates an association with these torturers.

Maya obviously benefits from the successful 'enhanced interrogation technique'. Refraining from engaging in physical violence herself, however, leaves her with conveniently clean hands. It is left ambiguous whether she supports the use of torture, and, in addition, abstains from carrying it out herself because physically doing it crosses her personal moral or emotional boundaries, or abstains from it because she believes others are more physically suited to the task. Not necessarily against torture as a method, as it appears to be effective somehow, Maya cannot or simply does not torture herself. In any case, by having her colleagues punch detainees for her, her own physical separation from the torture itself, coupled with her simultaneous disgust for and condescending attitude towards the detainees' poor mental and physical condition create a morally ambiguous position. She seems to realise that this type of abuse moves beyond the morally acceptable, but that, as Piotrowska argues, it is a necessary method to achieve the ethically-just capture of bin Laden.

Despite her clean hands, however, Robert Burgoyne argues that the effects of the interrogations wear on Maya's body and personality (2014, 252). The occasional grasping for air in the washroom and her hostile attitude towards everyone around her suggest that the interrogations are not carried out easily. Not only does Maya's own blind determination backfire, but so too does the violence she is co-responsible for. Dan similarly sees the detrimental effects of inflicting violence in his own body and functioning. After interrogating Ammar, Dan announces to Maya that he is leaving Pakistan. He is "tired", he says, of interrogating over a hundred detainees and "seeing them naked". His abrupt decision to leave Pakistan thus seems inspired by the effects of his own brutal interrogations, and his fatigue reinstates some of the humanness he, in the eyes of the spectator, had compromised while torturing Ammar.

Although Maya's interrogations are only screened shortly or partially, they suggest rigorous interrogations that are mentally and physically damaging for all parties involved. The effects of torture

wearing on her and Dan's bodies, and the way in which the interrogations and search burn up all her energy seem to propose that the spectator feel sorry for her and Dan, but the effects simultaneously make explicit the gruesomeness of torture inflicted during their search for bin Laden.[31]

The criticism directed towards *Zero Dark Thirty* is part of the more general concern that torturers increasingly consist of Western female and male protagonists or the 'heroes' of the narratives (David Danzig, project director at Human Rights First, quoted in Mayer 2007). At the same time, critics have particularly condemned Kathryn Bigelow for misusing her reputation as a feminist director who usually gives centre stage to empowered female protagonists (Tasker 421-422), yet who in this case presented a woman associated with the torture of Muslim men. Both Maya's ambivalent character as well as the criticism directed towards her gender suggest that the political sensitivity underlying *Zero Dark Thirty* is not only that of depicting political torture, but of dovetailing a female protagonist with political torture. This aligns with the observation that both Carrie Mathison and Maya are evaluated in various discussions in terms of their personality and gender, while, for instance, Jack Bauer from *24* (another TV-series covering similar War on Terror themes) and *Zero Dark Thirty*'s Dan are discussed not in terms of their masculinity, but in terms of specific political situations and the torture they inflict (Green; Mayer 2007).

Maya's character, position, and perspective are not the only ambivalent aspects of *Zero Dark Thirty*'s depiction of torture. Several scenes indicate a division between official statements concerning the extra-legality of torture and the individual characters' seeming endorsement, which further explains why the film might come across as supporting torture.

[31] *Zero Dark Thirty*'s title refers to military slang to describe night time, or a time after darkness has fallen (Hopkins). This 'darkness' this term refers to, can also be translated as indicating the 'darkness' of the operations carried out to find bin Laden.

Ambivalent messages concerning efficacy and justifiability

Shortly after Ammar leaves Pakistan, Dan visits a CIA superior – whom he finds on a carpet in his office praying in Arabic – to ask for more subsidies for the operation. The superior, called The Wolf, confirms they need to find Osama bin Laden soon, and that people "want to see a body". He stresses that they have to negotiate between accelerating the operation and being careful in their interrogations of detainees, especially after the pubic denunciation of the Abu Ghraib torture episode and the inhumane treatment of detainees in Guantanamo Bay. This scene illustrates that Dan and Maya torture without any governmental Oversight Committee being informed of the abuse occurring during detainee interrogations, and that the unit operates autonomously. It is suggested that all agents are aware that what is inflicted on the detainees exceeds juridical limits, although it remains ambiguous whether they personally find it morally and legally unjust.

In only one scene is the use of torture explicitly denounced. Maya and some of her colleagues watch a news broadcast in which President Barack Obama proclaims that the United States does not use torture in their interrogations of potential suspects of terrorism: "I have said repeatedly that America doesn't torture and I'm gonna make sure that we don't torture. Those are part and parcel of an effort to regain America's moral stature in the world". This contradiction between the real news footage of Obama on the one hand, and the CIA's deeds in the film on the other poses the question of whether the government is uninformed about the CIA's activities with regard to the 'detainee program', or whether this broadcast reveals the masquerade the government upholds in order to convince the world of America's justice and correctness. In either case, the contradiction reveals that practising torture is officially (discursively) and legally (constitutionally) objectionable, but inflicted nonetheless.

This divide seems to have been created to separate the juridical unjustifiability of torture as a violation of basic human rights from the protagonists' subjective perspective on the efficacy of torture. Many critics have attacked the film for precisely this: screening the harshness and brutality of the CIA's interrogation program, while nevertheless

depicting torture as a necessary and fruitful, albeit repellent, method (Evans 359). Although the characters seem to endorse extra-juridical torture (Kumar), *Zero Dark Thirty* as a film does not. As Piotrowska argues, "it is not that Bigelow condones torture. She shows us what the institutional procedures have allowed". Moreover, Bigelow shows the hypocrisy behind the official governmental message: the message that "we don't torture", as Obama proclaims on television, while the film simultaneously shows the types of activities that the CIA is suspected to have done while looking for bin Laden.[32]

The impression that the characters do not seem to morally object to torture is the result of precisely this showing and not endorsing, or, merely torturing without explicitly condemning or at least debating it (Mendelson 2013a). The film is not only confined to the perspective of one protagonist, but also excludes any comment or discussion from a supporting or lead character about the enhanced interrogation techniques. As such, the film does not make use of 'moral characters': characters that spell out particular ideas and feelings for the spectator.[33] As Scott Mendelson notes, "Bigelow and Boal didn't spoon-feed their opinions to the audience in a way that made for easy digestion" (2013b).[34] Instead the film emphasizes the complex and conflicting relationship between official legislation and moral values (torture, in principle, is bad) and personal convictions (torture is justified when the situation requires it, but gruesome to inflict).

These ambivalences are not the only reason why the film comes across as endorsing the use of torture. The last two lines of inquiry into criticism of the film's alleged pro-torture stance pertain to the

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[32] In the film *Rendition* (Gavin Hood, 2007) this denial is made explicit and staged to indicate the hypocrisy of this statement. CIA analyst Douglas (Jake Gyllenhaal) is on location to assist in his "first torture" but later when he confronts his superior and senator (Meryl Streep) who ordered the suspect's torture, she replies that "The United States does not torture."

[33] Jane Mayer claims the film has no moral context at all, with which I disagree; the separation between official statements and individual behaviour draws attention to the discrepancy between law and morality.

[34] Even *24*, much criticized for its depiction of torture, stages side characters that occasionally question the torture used by Bauer and the agency he works for, arguing that it backfires, it is often used as a last resort but does not always work, and that innocent people are also tortured.

impression that the narrative is a truthful, near-journalistic rendition of real events, and to the way the film employs editing to suggest causality.

Based on real events: *Zero Dark Thirty*'s realism

Like Oliver Stone's *JFK*, mentioned above, *Zero Dark Thirty* is constructed along the lines of classical narration that makes use of causality, plausibility, linearity, character motivation, psychological realism, and compositional unity to construct conventional cinematic realism (Hallam and Marshment 13; see also Bordwell, Thompson, and Staiger 2-3, 13).[35] In addition to the principles of cinematic realism, the film's plot is based on a real historical event – the hunt for and death of Osama bin Laden. As Asbjørn Grønstad argues, when moulding historic events into a fictive rendition films always distort these events somehow (2008, 17-19, 92). This might seem evident, but as the reactions to *Zero Dark Thirty* indicate, the 'amount' of realism the film pursues is confusing in relation to the politically sensitive issues, based on real events, that the film presents.

As Evans notes, *Zero Dark Thirty* confusingly combines classical narration to construct cinematic realism with a quasi-journalistic approach to reconstruct a topical incident based on, as the film claims, first-hand accounts (355-356). The suggestion of the journalistic approach offended many reviewers, politicians, public officials, and documentary makers, who blamed Bigelow for misusing the journalistic format for such ideological purposes (e.g. Wolf). In response to the criticism, Bigelow claimed that she used this approach to transform first-hand accounts into a first-rate viewing experience (quoted in Filkins). In addition, Bigelow admits she felt obligated to present the

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[35] There are many different forms and uses of realism in film. In film studies, classical Hollywood narration, which makes use of plausibility, causality, linearity, character motivation, psychological realism, and compositional unity, is seen as standard (Hallam and Marchment 13). Bordwell argues that in today's cinema these principles still apply, but films often make use of 'intensified continuity' with fast-paced, rapid editing (2002, 16). From classical narration many forms of realism – such as Italian neo-realism, British 'kitchen sink', estranging modernist-realist film – have deviated. What comes across as realistic is locally and historically specific and is, ultimately, as Hallam and Marshment for film, and Jakobson for literature have argued, a matter of make-believe and perception (Hallam and Marshment 122; Jakobson 24-25).

occurrence of torture during the actual search for bin Laden. Assuming that successful and unsuccessful torture did happen in the search for bin Laden she and Boal consequently rendered these methods visible (Gritten 2013).

Bigelow's statement indicates that the film does not purport to 'just' present cinematic realism to make the film probable and to draw the spectator into the illusion of realism, but that it aims for a referential reality: it purports to refer to *the* reality in the sense that video or journalistic media footage aim to, and not *a* reality (Houwen 51-52). For Bigelow, this claim seems to mean the power of cinema lies in what it can achieve as a medium, which is how it helps create a dramatic understanding of particular events, national identities, and relationships to others (Dodds 1621). For the spectator, however, the references to reality (first-hand accounts, real audio footage) give the impression that *Zero Dark Thirty*'s world comes close to the real events leading up to Osama bin Laden's capture. Bigelow's near-referential, journalistic method suggests that her film was more authentic to reality than similar films that combine fact and fiction, but that do not pretend to be journalistic attempts to show something like 'the truth' (Wolf).[36]

Hence, assuming that a journalistic approach was employed suggests that Bigelow's depiction of torture was a one-for-one referential copy of the interrogations used in real life, and that her ostensible depiction of fruitful torture was a reproduction of the fruitful torture employed by the CIA in real life. The assumption of efficacy in both cases was what most infuriated these critics about *Zero Dark Thirty*; they took issue with the *way in which* torture was portrayed, shrouded in a fake aura of journalism to depict it as a productive method, not necessarily *that it was* portrayed. In short, not only did *Zero Dark Thirty* cause offense for its protagonist's ambivalent gender expression and moral agenda, but also for the film's misleading sense of

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[36] Of course, the various standpoints and positions of those criticizing the film's distortion of events together construct various perspectives on and interests in the bin Laden situation, and so 'the truth' about 'enhanced interrogation techniques' while looking for bin Laden is not homogenous in itself.

having a close, near-referential relationship to reality, thereby assuming that torture in reality was as fruitful as in the film.[37]

Editing for causality

The problem underlying *Zero Dark Thirty*'s rendering of the hunt for bin Laden is thus that the film purports to not represent, but rather present, the search as it took place in real life. Editing plays a crucial, yet confusing role in how such realism is created. I will give two particular examples: time lapses and perspective.

On of the principles of classical narration is causality: a goal has to be achieved, and each action is performed in order to reach it. *Zero Dark Thirty* employs such causality, but, as the duration of ten years in 'real life' is compressed into 157 minutes of screen time, the plot makes use of big time-lapses. After being tricked to believe he has provided information while sleep-deprived, Ammar is cooperative and gives Dan and Maya more names, one of which is Abu Ahmed, a personal courier of bin Laden's. The next scene is part of a new chapter titled 'Abu Ahmed'. Maya is seen scrutinizing film footage of interrogations, while searching for meaningful leads in relation to Abu Ahmed. Later, she meets her colleague Jessica in the kitchen and they discuss the possible financial motivations of bin Laden's network. In the next scene Maya has travelled to a black site in Gdansk, Poland, where she further interrogates detainees about Abu Ahmed's position in the network. Nothing indicates how much time has passed between these scenes.

As the beginning of the film is set two years after 9/11 but the total amount of time it takes the CIA to find bin Laden is ten years, that means there is a time-gap of eight years between the scenes in which Ammar is tortured and the raid on bin Laden's house; although these early scenes are crucial for Maya's realisation that Abu Ahmed is high

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[37] Ironically, in *The Guardian* of 30 January 2013, readers take issue with the denunciation of *Zero Dark Thirty* as pro-torture. One of the readers feels offended by the presumption that viewers are not smart enough to see that a film is not reality, and moreover, to understand the ambivalent and complex moral questions raised by *Zero Dark Thirty*. Hayden White has similarly noted about *JFK* that the reviews assume that spectators cannot distinguish between reality (or history) and cinematic reality (69).

up in bin Laden's network, the scenes are not directly causally related to finding bin Laden's hiding place. Torture's fruitful instrumental nature is nonetheless suggested by this method of editing that presents actions and follow-ups as causally connected, although they might not necessarily be (see also Evans 359-360). In retrospect, *Zero Dark Thirty* thus seems to suggest that all the abusive interrogations were fruitful. As the film kick-starts with credits about the film's bearing on real events, after which real audio recordings of the passengers of United Airlines Flight 93 are incorporated. After this footage the torture scenes are presented, and as the film ends with bin Laden's death, this impression of fruitfulness lingers once the film has ended.

Moreover, the plot is focalised through Maya's single perspective and shows her specific research activities, not those of her colleagues. By only presenting the narrative through the perspective of one protagonist, Maya as a woman with an inflexible, narrow vision and obsession with finding bin Laden, the film's structure precludes looking at the situation from multiple sides.[38] In addition, not only is Maya not a 'moral character', she also never seems to make a mistake and her intuition is always right. Although torture as such might not provide crucial leads and information, in the end, bin Laden's compound is found thanks to Maya's years of hard work. Scott Mendelson has identified this way of editing, which in the case of *Zero Dark Thirty* pertains to the suggestion of neat causality and a single perspective, as facilitating or stimulating 'selected memory' (2013b) on the part of the spectator.[39]

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[38] See also Evans, who takes issue with the film's lack of perspectives, because, as he argues, what fiction provides is not (only) the freedom to appropriate a real event into a fictionalized account in a certain way, but perspective (261-262, 370, 377). I argue that this monolithic view is not necessarily a fault in the film's structure, but that it inspires a critical attitude on the part of the spectator.

[39] Evans notes that there is hardly any evidence of the "practical, legal, moral failures" of the CIA Detention and Interrogation Program traceable in *Zero Dark Thirty*. It is ironic that since the publication of the CIA's Detention and Interrogation Program we know that the CIA did not obtain first clues about bin Laden's couriers' identities through torture of detainees (360). For my analysis, however, this argument, which compares the actual events with the depicted ones, is beside the point.

Critical spectatorship

Taking all aspects into account – Maya's ambivalent personality, position and gender, the contradictory messages about the use and efficacy of torture, the lack of 'moral characters', the assumption of a near-referential reality, and ambivalent editing – the use of torture as an interrogation method seems to be depicted in an evasive manner. As Žižek has argued, presenting ambivalent messages concerning the use of torture while deliberately continuing to depict it serves to normalize torture's use and to lower the spectator's moral judgement in an ingenious way (2014). Seeing depictions of torture thus means gradually growing accustomed to it, while leaving the spectator unobligated to feel guilty about torture as a method (Žižek 2015).

Žižek's argument raises questions about the role of the spectator, but also about how torture, if depicted, *should* be depicted. Should it for instance always be depicted in tandem with 'moral characters', or with a specific denunciation of its use in order to elucidate the film's 'intentions'? Such a discussion veers towards a normative prescription of representing political torture, but also, as Evans has noted, towards censorship (377, note 2 and see Bigelow). It is not the intention of this chapter or of this thesis to formulate such a normative approach. My aim is to close-read the film in order to show what caused people to react to it with such "extraordinary fury" (Piotrowska 143).

I want to argue that this lack of "spoon-feeding" opinions, as Mendelson discusses, has a dual effect. On the one hand, the 'selective memory' inspired by the film's use of causality and the references to real events and people facilitates a passive viewing attitude: Maya's obsessiveness and the actions undertaken by her are easy to follow and to digest (too easily, according to the critics). *Zero Dark Thirty*'s depiction of torture thus creates the illusion of an impartial rendering while being manipulative at the same time: it refrains from providing explicit ideas about torture, but steers a perspective on torture methods through the sole character of Maya. Žižek's argument, in which he contends that the spectator's ethical standards are lowered when

watching depictions of torture, builds on the idea of such a passive recipient.

On the other hand, the ambivalences ingrained in editing and in the characters' moral agenda potentially activate a critical viewing attitude. The film inspires active making sense of and reflecting on perspective, ambiguities, and conflicting messages at play, in tandem with the spectator's own frames and ideas. As Piotrowska notes: "[Bigelow] makes us look to confront our passive acceptance of the world we live in" (149). When realising how editing is employed, it becomes easier to see that *Zero Dark Thirty* is a subjective view on a topical event in recent history, and the depiction of the CIA and torture in *Zero Dark Thirty* is not an implementation or projection of all factual information about the CIA's real activities during this period. The film thus facilitates such passivity, but also coerces the spectator to decide for herself: what does the film say about the justifiability and effectiveness of torture?

The significance of the way in which the film constructs its realism, of the female protagonist in relation to torture, the lack of various perspectives created by 'moral characters', and the way in which the spectator is addressed will further be demonstrated by juxtaposing *Zero Dark Thirty* to the film *Unthinkable*.

2. Ticking bombs and vivisectionist torture in *Unthinkable*

Unthinkable is a literal 'ticking bomb situation' and makes use of torture in order to extract the location of three nuclear bombs in three US cities: Los Angeles, New York, and Dallas. The film opens with an American Muslim man, Yusuf (Michael Sheen), who records a videotape in which he announces the existence and detonation time of the bombs. After his capture, FBI agent Helen (Carrie-Ann Moss) is brought to an abandoned school building, converted into a 'black site', where Yusuf is held and interrogated by the military in a small office in the school's gymnasium. Together with Helen, an independent and 'freelance' interrogator who calls himself 'H' (Samuel L. Jackson) is brought in to force Yusuf into confession. What becomes apparent in the first interaction between Helen, H, and the military is that H is skilled in or

trained to interrogate and to use violent measures, and therefore is protected by Helen's employer, the FBI. Helen, conversely, detests the violence used in the interrogations, which immediately heightens the tension between all parties.

Similar to Ammar's situation, Yusuf's rights are revoked, and H tells him he "no longer exists". The situation and 'exceptional space' are deemed classified and extra-legal (Agamben 2011, 46-54). When Helen protests against the presence of the military, she is told that the army has now gained special authority, also known as the 'Defense Authorization Act', in which "the president has the authority to use the armed forces to suppress any insurrection, on-lawful combination, or conspiracy" on home soil. H, however, is hired to take over Yusuf's interrogation from the military.

When H and Helen enter the gymnasium, they see Yusuf hanging from the office's ceiling with his arms up, hooded and his shirt removed. The office, lit by blue TL-lights, seems positioned and furnished specifically for interrogating Yusuf. A soldier sprays cold water onto Yusuf who does not respond to this treatment. Officially, H is not allowed to hit or strike Yusuf, but he is allowed to keep him awake, make use of intense noise, bright lights, and threats of violence – all "within operational parameters". With these parameters in mind, H enters the office, but instead of taking over from the soldier, he suddenly starts to violently beat the man. The nature of this act is illogical – he cannot beat Yusuf so starts beating the soldier – and disturbing as it suggests that H is accustomed to violence, yet has a tactic no one foresees or understands.

This is emphasized when H quickly lets go of the 'operational parameter' that prevents hitting the detainee. Willing to go as far as it takes to retrieve information, H makes Yusuf undergo brutal, vivisectionist torture. Before he starts, he asks Helen if she wants to assist him and watch Yusuf's reactions. Unsure of her function but either unwilling or incapable of refusing, Helen is positioned by H as a 'good cop' who communicates with Yusuf while H gradually breaks him. Helen asks the man who hired H about H's procedures, to which he responds, "I never know that. And the really great thing is, he doesn't

either". This suggests that bringing H in is the last resort as well as a risk: H's methods are morally and legally obscure, but the urgent situation requires decisiveness and rigorous interrogations.

H asks for his "regular equipment", enters the office and unties Yusuf from the ceiling. In the background, Helen follows his moves on a monitor. H and his assistant attach Yusuf to a chair and place his right hand on a table. When Yusuf does not respond to H's inquiries into the bombs' locations, H cuts off the tops of two of Yusuf's fingers in an explicit shot. Ignoring the 'no touch' rule, H is interrupted and removed from the office while shouting, "It is only a finger! Not even a whole finger!" Soon after, H is allowed to continue with his torture activities, because the clock ticks on and the threat of the nuclear bombs becomes urgent and precarious.

Like Dan in *Zero Dark Thirty*, H alternates torture with appealing to Yusuf's rationale, and their dialogue reveals that H holds Yusuf responsible for his own condition by stating that he "wanted" this. Not necessarily, or not only, interrogating Yusuf about the bombs, H communicates with Yusuf as a strategy to find his weak spots. Moreover, H frequently creates expectations by telling Yusuf and Helen about what he is going to do, so that all parties are informed and mentally prepared, only to refute these expectations seconds later. As such, he not only plays with the expectations of his fellow characters, but also with those of the spectator.

Unlike Dan, however, H uses brutal, often vivisectionist torture. He uses a plastic bag to cover Yusuf's head and then when he almost suffocates, punctures a whole in it. He grabs a small knife and slowly drives the knife into Yusuf's stomach. Several constitutive shots of the monitor show that H ties Yusuf with his arms to the ceiling again while he gives him electric shocks, and he once uses a drill in Yusuf's mouth. While doing so, H readily makes use of his audience, in the embodiment of Helen, the FBI, the military, and Yusuf, of his violent role-play. The black site in *Zero Dark Thirty* and the school gymnasium in *Unthinkable* are both extra-legal spaces as well as stages, with the gymnasium office functioning like a *mise-en-abyme*: another, smaller stage on which the 'play' of torture is enacted. Helen, the FBI, and military watch H and

Yusuf through the office windows or on the monitor placed in front of the office. The monitor often functions as the screen on which Helen and the spectator watch H's, mediated but no less explicit, torture. Although it is suggested that H does not script his 'role-play' in advance and acts impulsively, the prolonged sessions, H's use of tools and equipment, and the macabre overexposure of the TL-lights that are switched off when H decides to take breaks emphasize the theatrical nature of H's torture. Further, they suggest H's familiarity with similar scenes of violence.

Both Dan and H seem trained or skilled to torture and alternate a form of emotional detachment with engagement by means of dialogue. The crucial difference between *Unthinkable* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, however, is that H's methods seem inspired by covert sadism. Dan's abuse was coated in a veneer of 'decent' 'torture lite' and, we assume, prescribed by the CIA's enhanced interrogation program. It focussed on the debasing aspect, where H's torture emphasizes the experience of intense pain as a power strategy. Dan's torture was embarrassing and 'effeminizing'; it reduced Ammar to a less-than-a-woman and animal. Yusuf is not animalized and effeminized by means of a psychological game; H does not embarrass Yusuf in moral or sexual terms, and female agent Helen is not 'used' by H to incite shame in Yusuf. She is used to communicate and work Yusuf's weak spots. Rather than being dehumanized, the mutilation of Yusuf's body establishes a form of what Agamben has termed 'bare life' (1998, 8-12), devoid of his political rights, included in sovereign law through its very exclusion from it (which marks those who are 'banned' from sovereign law). Ammar's situation is similarly bereft of state-recognition, but he is also dehumanized.[40]

[40] Those who are reduced to bare life maintain their human life and humanness, yet they lose their political recognition and protection. This is not to say that those who are excluded from political rights are never dehumanized. Agamben has conceptualized the 'Muselmann', a concentration camp prisoner on the verge of perishing, as bereft of political rights as humanness (1999, 41-86). Ammar is dehumanized in the process or being tortured, yet regains his humanness when Maya tricked him into thinking he cooperated.

Three reasons for the preservation of Yusuf's humanness can be detected: firstly, Helen explicitly considers the moral responsibility the FBI and the military have towards him. She points out that although Yusuf's juridical rights are revoked, they still have a moral responsibility towards him as a human being.[41] Moreover, although he disapproves of Yusuf's actions, nothing implies that H considers Yusuf to be an inferior being. H's extreme measures and sarcasm suggest that, besides being committed to the well-being of civilization, H seems to use Yusuf as an experiment to investigate what effectively works as a strategy, and to live out a covert desire for vivisection. His torture seems designed to shock and sadism often overrules the interrogational aspect of H's torture. However, this shock and horror effect is implemented to ultimately effectuate Yusuf's breakdown and retrieve information. Although H's torture is vehemently different from Dan's approach, H's motivation for torturing Yusuf – extracting information – is essentially not. H's torture of Yusuf is not supposed to be, or look, entirely orchestrated, let alone rational, so as to retain the element of sudden, intense pain and surprise.[42]

Lastly, Yusuf himself manages to retain a firm grip on his wits and as such preserves his humanness. He accepts his fate, and is not afraid to be tortured. In perfect control of his own body and mind, he reveals absolutely nothing that might be useful to the FBI. It soon turns out that he has planned his capture and is in control of the situation much more than H and Helen assume. I will return to Yusuf's calculated game shortly.

Framing torture: Helen's perspective and 'moral characters'

The way in which H's torture is framed is crucial for comprehending the characters' various perspectives on its use. The camera constantly alternates between framing Helen, H, and Yusuf, which suggests these

[41] Essentially, Helen points out Agamben's distinction between the juridical subject and the ethical subject, to whom we maintain a responsibility and those who are recognised in social terms (2011, 52-53).

[42] Scarry points to the dual move that is made when inflicting intense pain, which is language-destroying, while interrogating a person and forcing someone into confession. Interrogation thus interacts with pain (28-29, 35-36).

characters have equal importance in the narrative. The way in which H circles around Yusuf resembles Dan's predator-like movements, and Yusuf's pivotal position is emphasized by means of overexposure, created by the TL-lights in the office, which reflect on his naked torso and his sweaty forehead.

Although all characters gain more or less equal importance as objects of focalisation, *Unthinkable*'s plot is presented to the spectator predominantly through Helen's perspective. The spectator is attached to her point of view shots and anxious, disturbed, or disgusted facial expressions, and as such the spectator becomes the witness of H's method through her eyes. Disturbed and shocked, Helen frequently leaves the scene of abuse to collect herself while Yusuf's off-screen screams of pain are heard in the background. Like Maya, she becomes a witness to torture, while, however, being forced to cooperate as 'good cop' and friendly assistant. She refuses to use violent measures and decides to convince Yusuf to provide information by talking to him. She grows more desperate as H's measures grow more extreme. As such, Helen gains a particular but crucial position as an onlooker of the scene of violence, but also as mediator between the scene and the spectator. She is explicitly profiled as H's moral antipode, and is constantly torn between desperation and horror.

Meanwhile, she addresses the problems she has with H's torture with her superior. While pointing to the extra-legal nature of the situation, she stresses torture's inefficacy, unreliability, and immorality. These objections, and the conversations between H and Yusuf, between Helen and Yusuf, and between H and Helen, turn the characters into 'moral characters'; their dialogue functions as a clear indicator of their respective stakes, positions, and ideas concerning the situation, as well as their diverging stances towards the use of torture. *Unthinkable*'s plot, however, reaches a tipping point when it becomes apparent that Yusuf has planned his captivity all along to demonstrate the FBI's moral bankruptcy by allowing extra-legal torture. This twist reverts the logic of torture as displayed so far.

Shifting perspectives: The 'unthinkable'

In order to verify that the nuclear bombs are not a hoax, Helen demands proof that the bombs are real. Yusuf first denies the bombs' existence but after some pressure gives Helen the locations of the nuclear material. One of these locations is actually a booby trap that activates a bomb in a shopping centre, killing 53 people. Infuriated by Yusuf's game with the FBI, Helen demands an explanation from Yusuf, who suddenly transforms into a cold, intimidating role-player himself. Emotional, Helen grabs a knife and threatens to stab Yusuf if he does not tell her where the other bombs are. The knife, pressured on his chest, leaves a trail of blood. H tells her to stop, but Yusuf starts shouting and encourages Helen to "Do it!" He continues,

> I love my country, you people crap on it. I love my religion, you people spit on it! … I let myself be caught, because I'm not a coward. I chose to meet my oppressors face to face. You call me a barbarian? Then what are you? What, you expect me to weep over fifty civilians? You people kill that number every day!

Yusuf continues shouting at Helen, who, shocked by his words and her own desire to use violence, withdraws the knife, looks at the object, and slowly walks out of the room with it.

This booby-trap indicates that Yusuf knew he would most likely break, but it also shows that he planned his game with the FBI from the start, tricking them into thinking they dominated the situation. A specialist in explosives and formerly active in the military's Delta Force as a bomb disposer, Yusuf has converted to Islam. It is assumed that he witnessed the FBI and military's violence on foreign soil and their use of torture to interrogate. His action thus seems inspired by his newfound religion and by retaliation. Theatrically exploiting the extra-juridical situation, he appropriates the role of martyr to make a point about the FBI's operations and torture methods.[43] Unlike Ammar's active yet

[43] Yusuf performs his self-proclaimed martyrdom not for his own followers or leaders, but for the FBI. As Andy Blunden explains, the presence of an audience is a prerequisite: religious and even secular martyrs need an audience to become martyrs,

involuntarily cooperation, Yusuf voluntarily cooperates and regains his agency and control, with which he destabilizes the FBI's interrogational approach. Yusuf responds to H's intimidation with his own form of intimidation, and with his rapid shifts between anger, laughter, and stoicism he comes to resemble the character of the Joker.[44]

Although the FBI and the military disapprove of his methods, H is asked to continue. Fearing that Yusuf "might not crack", H amplifies his torture to make him break and decides to use Yusuf's wife Jehan, also captured by the FBI, as leverage. Jehan has to convince Yusuf into revealing where the bombs are, or they will keep her detained. She is brought into the office on the premise that H will interrogate them both. With several military personnel present, H positions her on a chair right in front of Yusuf, who is partially covered with a blanket to hide his severed fingers. Jehan cries and asks H and Helen what they have done to Yusuf, while Yusuf is surprised and angry to see his wife there. H replies that this is exactly what Yusuf wanted and threatens to "cut a piece of Jehan". Helen objects and, panicking, urges him to put down the knife. H responds by shouting at Helen that "This is not about you! This is war, this is sacrifice". Helen orders the military to release Jehan and they help her get up. H then suddenly and quickly moves forward and cuts Jehan's throat with a big stroke. Yusuf panics and screams and while Helen covers her eyes in despair, H shouts to Helen, "There is no time! There is no time!" A shot on the monitor shows Jehan in black and white as she lies on the floor, eyes open and blood streaming from her throat. H is removed from the office, and in the next shot, he washes his hands and face and softly cries.

In a private conversation following Jehan's death, H and Helen, again on speaking terms, realise that Jehan's death has not produced the desired effect. H is given free space by Helen to "do what [he has] to do". He in turn tells Helen, "If you tell me to stop, I will", foreboding the

as the audience interprets the martyr's message, and assigns him the role of martyr. Blunden uses a Marxist-poststructuralist approach to illustrate that the role of the audience emphasizes that the martyr is constituted in social discourse.

[44] In the Batman series (the comic books as well as film adaptions) the Joker is Batman's opponent, best known for his painted perpetual grimace and psychopathic behaviour.

rigorous methods he is about to employ next, but also leaving the final decision in Helen's hands. The previous scene suggests that he is capable of the 'unthinkable', and killing Jehan will prove to be a strategic yet penultimate piece in H's puzzle. In a final effort, H sets out to do the unthinkable: he orders Yusuf's two young children to be brought into the office and threatens to assassinate them. H assures Helen that he will not kill the children but that Yusuf has to *believe* that he will and that he is capable of doing anything; if she believes that he will, then so will Yusuf.

H places a hooded Yusuf in front of the office in which the children appear and he switches on the bright TL-lights. He removes Yusuf's hood, and as expected, the prospect of becoming the witness to his children's murder drives Yusuf insane and he provides the locations of bombs in New York, Los Angeles, and Dallas. After Yusuf's confession, however, H is not convinced that Yusuf told the truth. His previous game with him and Helen indicated that Yusuf could be withholding information. In addition, based on the amount of nuclear material Yusuf claimed he possessed in the video recording, H suspects there are more hidden bombs. H orders the children be returned to the office to put more pressure on Yusuf, but Helen this time believes H will truly harm them and refuses to cooperate. She would rather the bombs explode than facilitate the cold-blooded killing of Yusuf's children. H concedes to her ultimate decision, as he promised he would, and unties Yusuf. Disagreeing about how to proceed, an FBI superior, fearing a nuclear explosion, draws a gun, aims it at H and forces him to continue his interrogation. The situation becomes uncontrollable when Yusuf, untied from the chair, manages to obtain the gun. He asks Helen to look after his children, and shoots himself in the head.

In a final scene, Helen takes pity with Yusuf's children and hugs them while the FBI finds the three bombs. As H expected, Yusuf, anticipating his own breakdown, had indeed set up an elaborate plan: after the three bombs have been defused, the camera slowly tilts to the right where another bomb is hidden from sight. The camera zooms in

on the bomb that is ticking down from ten seconds, and as it reaches zero the shot cuts to a black screen.[45]

The hyperbole of 'the unthinkable'

Compared to *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Unthinkable*'s structure is more straightforward and employs a "rigorous chain of cause and effect" (Bordwell, Thompson, and Staiger 16); each motivation and action causally leads to the next within a short time-span and it is clear which actions are the results of which situations and vice versa. As 'moral characters', Yusuf, H, and Helen can be seen to wear different 'masks' in agreement with their explicit views – revealed through rhetoric and actions – on morality, law, and religion.[46] The FBI and military function as an audience for which the interplay between Helen, H, and Yusuf is performed, who frequently express their own take on the situation. The strict causality and moral characters make it easy to follow each action, deliberation and the twist in plot, effectuated by Yusuf, which subverts Helen and H's initial advantage and becomes crucial to their changing perspectives and actions.

More so than in *Zero Dark Thirty*, torture is the plot's central theme; although the principal instigator of events is the ticking bomb situation, H's torture steers action, debate, and emotion. Torture is not only intensified by H after Yusuf's motivations become apparent, but stylistically exaggerated to explicate the way in which these circumstances compromise, in particular Helen's, moral standpoints. The rigorous causality, the graphic, vivisectionist torture, the lengthy moral debates carried out in tandem with torture, the plot twist illustrating Yusuf's plan to be tortured to make a statement about torture methods, and the literal ticking bombs of the ticking bomb situation make the plot hyperbolic.

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[45] This last scene is only in an extended version of the film. The regular cut omits this final scene and ends with Helen hugging the children.

[46] Agamben's use of the 'mask' is taken from classical theatre where a mask was used to make each player recognisable as a particular figure. Agamben appropriates this use to conceptualize how in modern society humans are recognised in social terms, as well as before the law (and the Geneva Convention) (2011, 46-54).

Further, unlike *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Unthinkable* does not refer to real events or people. The film's setting is not the international stage in the Middle East, but the 'stage' of the abandoned school building on home soil. Apart from mentioning the cities in which Yusuf has planted the bombs, contextual information is hardly provided. Although *Unthinkable* evokes the post-9/11 fear and threat of terrorist attacks, the spectacle of the torture scenes and the exaggerated ticking bomb situation drive the film's plot beyond probable and credible. In this case, the audience realizes that the fictional world is not the real world, but is a constructed reality, and that the fictional world could only potentially exist in the real world.

Unthinkable couples suspense over whether civilization will be secured with the anxious atmosphere evoked by the three protagonists' mutual tensions. As such, torture is partially the result of the protagonists' psychological game, and not the instigator of it, as is Dan's abuse. The intensity of the torture scenes, I argue, incites the *necessity* of accompanying dialogue and argumentation, and stands in the service of the protagonists' psychological games. Conversely, the serious debate requires a conceptualisation of torture's conditions (an actual ticking bombs scenario) and a visualisation of what torture does to its victims. In this sense, the continuous debate 'allows' such brutal torture to be explicitly framed as it occurs alongside 'moral characters'. The 'moral characters' in turn comment on the use of torture to achieve the ultimate goal of finding the bombs.

H's graphic torture is therefore not, or not only, a form of 'torture porn', as some have argued (Jones 7). Although the film depicts excessive and graphic violence and bodily ecstasy – Yusuf's body in spasms and beside himself with pain (Williams 4) – there are several reasons why his torture is not torture porn, of which the most important one pertains to the fact that H's torture has a function:[47] the

[47] There is definitely something to say for *Unthinkable*'s 'torture porn' label. Steve Jones analyses torture porn as predominantly a) belonging to the horror genre, and b) staged where the victim is imprisoned in confined spaces (and in a limited diegetic space), and subjected to psychological and physical suffering. Additionally, there is cruelty and bloodshed, and the deliberate upsetting of viewers with graphic gore and the calculated infliction of pain (15-16). Jones analyses how the torture porn genre

instrumental nature of torture to deter an attack in the near future, as analysed in Arendtian terms, is emphasized as well as debated.

The characters take desperate measures, but a bomb goes off nonetheless. This does not mean, however, that torture itself was useless. Yusuf realized he might break and had taken precautionary measures by planting at least one extra bomb. By killing himself with the gun, he prevented H from extracting the information concerning the hidden nuclear material. In addition, Yusuf's detention and interrogation were not based on suspected involvement, but were the result of Yusuf's own video messages proclaiming his intentions. Although H's torture proved fruitful to a certain degree, Yusuf's game draws attention to what he sees as the FBI's hypocritical way of thinking: they are disturbed when fifty people are killed in a shopping centre, despite the fact that 'they', or the US military, kill that many people daily in the Middle East. Lives in the Middle East are not considered important, he argues, or are not considered as inherently valuable, as are those recognisable to 'us', or Westerners.[48]

In its brutality, explicitness, and exaggeration *Unthinkable* playfully and critically reflects on the use of torture as an extra-legal method, and on torture's logic and limits as a mode of extracting information. The film is reminiscent of films like *Das Experiment* (Olivier Hirschbiegel, 2001) and its American remake *The Experiment* (Paul Scheuring, 2010), which explore human behaviour in a precarious situation and illustrate how far people are willing to go to do an unthinkable violent act. Like *Das Experiment*/*The Experiment*, *Unthinkable* is unburdened by any direct reference to a political situation, which allows the film to experiment with the aesthetics, conditions, motivations, and logic of politically motivated torture. While *Zero Dark Thirty* was criticized for depicting 'torture lite' in order to

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intersects with thrillers like *Unthinkable*. There is, however, a specific political context and a specific function underlying Yusuf's torture that exceeds the mere calculated infliction of pain and suffering. Further, in Linda Williams' analysis of horror and its pornographic violence, the victims are almost exclusively women, who are both victimized and sexualized (6). Yusuf, as analysed, is neither.

[48] Yusuf's comment is conceptually similar to Judith Butler analysis of 'frameable lives' (2004b, 19-49).

present justifiable torture methods, *Unthinkable* is, ironically, a sensitive topic in Hollywood for its graphic depiction of torture – rather than for its politically sensitive context and envisaged truthfulness to reality.

The dovetailing of graphic violence and 'moral characters' suggests a relation between an unequivocal political context and the type of torture that is screened in War on Terror films: the more referential and authentic the political context, like in *Zero Dark Thirty*, the less brutal the violence that is framed. For now, it is too early to jump to conclusions, and in the course of this study I will return to this premise.

Helen's gendered character and position

Although Helen, H, and Yusuf wear 'masks' that explicate their respective viewpoints, Yusuf's game inaugurates a change in H and Helen. Similar to Maya, Helen undergoes a transformation from witness to active and involved agent. Torn between H's uncompromising method and her anti-torture beliefs, Helen starts weighing Yusuf's wellbeing over that of millions of others. Drawn into the deadlock of the situation, she transforms from friendly interrogator to desperate, albeit reluctant, endorser of H's gruesome torture. Considering the assassination of Jehan and the children as beyond tolerable, she nonetheless encourages H to continue with his torture of Yusuf when the situation becomes critical. In the final scenes, Helen regains her role as moral compass when she refuses to cooperate in H's act with the children. When Yusuf kills himself, a shot frames Helen with his two children on either side, holding them close. She becomes a motherly figure, guarding the world from Yusuf's nuclear bombs and the children from H's torture.

Helen, however, never ceases to be a conventional female protagonist. Similar to Maya, little about Helen's character and personal background is revealed, yet Helen's explicit moral objections and her constant struggle between her own conscience and the reality of the situation nonetheless present her as a character the spectator can easily identify with. The only woman present, she is also the only one to

explicitly denounce torture, and also the only one who expresses her emotions and doubts. Neither of her male colleagues displays such turbulence, nor has a problem with torture *per se*, but rather disagrees with H's outrageous method. Although tempted to use the knife on Yusuf, Helen's own reaction frightens and shocks her, underscoring her role as moral compass.

Helen proves to be a more conventional female protagonist than *Homeland*'s Carrie. Carrie neither objects to torture, nor to collateral damage through the use of drones, and with her combination of emotional instability, harshness and shrewdness, she adopts not only unbalanced, but at times even immoral behaviour. This behaviour however, is more readily forgotten because Carrie's round and complex character makes her more relatable to the viewer. Moreover, *Homeland*, like *Unthinkable*, makes use of 'moral characters' that illustrate standpoints on both sides. These standpoints reveal the hypocrisy of the US government, and together construct a moral grey zone that is condensed in Carrie.

Where Carrie and, in the same vein, Helen allows for emotional engagement, Maya's impervious character and ambivalent position are harder to place and process. While Helen expresses her doubts about torture methods and steers the spectator into sharing a similar opinion, Maya's single perspective and obsessive behaviour underscore *Zero Dark Thirty*'s imperialist hunt for bin Laden in which torture is seemingly presented as a justified method. At the same time her opaque character leaves a moral assessment of the situation on the spectator's plate. The debates surrounding the film's depiction of torture indicate that both positions (the film as justifying torture and as problematizing its use) can be defended.

Interestingly, where Carrie (in terms of emotional complexity and unethical decisions) and Maya (in terms of her ambivalent gender and opaque morality) inspired criticism in relation to their personalities, Helen has not. This, I want to argue, is for three reasons: Helen's character, as explained, is a more normatively gendered one, which makes her classifiable. Secondly, the torture depicted is exaggerated yet substantiated with moral debates, which makes Helen's

stance regarding torture clear. Thirdly, due to the film's graphic content, *Unthinkable* was released only on DVD and therefore its circulation, and reviews, were limited.[49]

Zero Dark Thirty, *Unthinkable*, *Homeland* – and recently, the release of *Camp X-Ray* (Peter Sattler 2014), which follows on the torture controversies evoked by *24*, *Homeland* and *Zero Dark Thirty*[50] – illustrate that within the debate about depictions of torture in series and feature films, hides a more structural one concerning the place of female characters and the expression of their gender. The particular type of criticism directed towards female guards and agents depends on the connection between their association with torture, and the extent to which they clarify their position regarding its use through (emotional or rational) statements and clear facial expressions.

Why this preoccupation with the gender and feminism of these characters? John Belton (165-171) and Ralph Donald and Karen MacDonald's comprehensive study *Women in War Films: From Helpless Heroine to G.I. Jane* have pointed to the absence of female protagonists in war films. Unlike male protagonists as the instigators or subjects of brutal violence, the specific *absence* of women in war films, and in extension, in War on Terror films, makes their rare appearance in leading parts more likely to be the subject of criticism. When they do appear in Hollywood cinema and are given centre stage, women are seen as figureheads for a female audience and discussed in terms of their gender and feminism.[51] Or, when they appear as side characters,

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[49] Apparently, due to its graphic content, no distributor dared to release this film in theatres. Nonetheless, the film seems to have gained something of a cult status (Eggert). For box office details see <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0914863/business

[50] *Camp X-Ray* presents the blossoming friendship between a young guard (Kristen Stewart) and detainee Ali (Peyman Moaadi) in Guantanamo Bay's section Camp X-Ray. Although not based on real events, the film is set in a real prison, known for its extra-legal and inhuman treatment of detainees. Director Sattler, however, diminishes the role of torture to an absolute minimum and instead focuses on the daily activities of guards and detainees. The omission of torture leaves space to explore Amy's position as female guard in a male-dominated world.

[51] Gill points to a new, postfeminist sensibility in media culture, of surveillance of other women's bodies (but not of men's) and self-surveillance of one's own female body, which is also performed with comparison to other female bodies. Women's bodies are evaluated and scrutinized by women as well as men, and are always at risk of "failing" (149). This shift from an external, male, judging gaze to a narcissistic gaze

they are regarded as desirable, heterosexual objects, which makes them easy targets for criticism in terms of their gender (Berlatsky).[52] Like women, male characters react differently to witnessing or inflicting torture, but because they outnumber their female counterparts by far, these internal differences draw less attention. In the following chapters, I will explain how the predominantly male protagonists react differently to torturing and to being tortured.

H and Yusuf's 'masks'

Although *Unthinkable*'s plot is predominantly focalised through Helen's perspective, she is not, like Maya, the only identification figure. In order to convince Yusuf that he is capable of exercising extreme measures, H plays the role of an unrelenting and inhumane person. While Yusuf refrains from speaking, H gradually transforms from darkly funny into a human who reveals his emotions. His soft crying after killing Jehan and his growing desperation indicate that he seems to enjoy his job less than initially presented and his power slowly deflates. Moreover, in a private conversation with Helen he reveals that his job and his protection by the FBI render him a prisoner. He lives in a safe house with his wife, a survivor of Bosnian war crimes who lost her entire family. Once his dark humour subsides, a tragic figure becomes visible. Dressed in a sweater and reading glasses, torture has become a normal job, yet one that is all-consuming and holds him captive. It is suggested that this job will bring about his downfall, not necessarily through poor

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that both self-polices and polices the bodies of other women, Gill argues, "represents a higher or deeper form of exploitation than objectification" (151-152).

[52] This status of women as desirable objects was investigated in psychoanalytical terms by Laura Mulvey in 1975. Although Hollywood cinema has since become female-oriented, as Gill notes in her study on postfeminism, this has not necessarily occurred in a feminist manner. In the male-dominated genres such as war film or action film, women, due to the small number of female leads, can still be seen to function as identification figures (and the object of scrutiny by women), or as sexual objects. This tendency is underscored by those discussing Maya and Carrie in terms of their gender, but also by Noah Berlatsky's recent article on the superhero genre: Berlatsky specifically points to both male actors, as well as the audience, tending to evaluate (or 'slut-shame') the rare female characters in action or superhero films predominantly in terms of their gender.

judgement or error, but because Yusuf's careful preparations are beyond his control.

The spectator might associate Samuel L. Jackson's character of H with the actor's performances in Quentin Tarantino films (including *Pulp Fiction*, *True Romance*, *Jackie Brown*, *Kill Bill, Inglourious Basterds*, *Django Unchained*), and in *Die Hard with a Vengeance* and *Shaft*. Having seen – any of – Jackson's other performances affects how the spectator views his character in *Unthinkable* (see Dyer 2004, 4, 7-8).[53] Jackson fuses his infamous dark humour, wittiness, and exaggerated understatements with the role of political torturer in a ticking bomb situation, and H's gruesome and often sadistic violence, with his sarcastic remarks, incite both horror and laughter (see also Gormley 11). Jackson's other on-screen appearances and the hyperbolic nature of the ticking bomb mitigate *Unthinkable*'s political seriousness.

Where H reverts the image of the stoic and unrelenting CIA-operative Dan in *Zero Dark Thirty*, Yusuf's conversion to Islam subverts the stereotypical image of the terrorist as an Arab. The fact that Yusuf is a American-born white man, and his torturer Afro-American, debunks the trope of the 'evil Muslim terrorist' and points to the hegemony of white protagonists in similar 'ticking bomb with terrorists' scenarios like that of *Zero Dark Thirty*. Not only is Yusuf white, he manages to acquire a certain amount of sympathy for his motivations as well as disgust for his calculated psychological game. As Scott Brooks formulates in his review of *Unthinkable*, Yusuf is "a maniacal psychopath one minute, and a loving family man the next. He is a sadistic animal and yet has a human side".

More importantly, although converted to Islam, Yusuf used to be one of 'us' Westerners.[54] Where *Zero Dark Thirty* presented the torturer as 'us', *Unthinkable* shows that both the torturer and the 'terrorist' are

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[53] Carrie-Anne Moss, who had her breakthrough in *The Matrix* film series, has a less consistent screen image. Jackson has performed innumerable other roles, particularly in superhero films and the new *Star Wars* trilogy, but this body of (predominantly Tarantino) films defines the spectator's perception of his *Unthinkable* role, in which aspects of these other performances appear.

[54] Throughout this thesis, when I use the term 'Western audience' or 'Western viewer' I assume a non-Muslim, normatively white audience.

Western and that terrorism is inflicted by 'our' own people. Moreover, like Ammar, Yusuf reverts the question of who is the 'animal' by asking Helen, "You call me a barbarian. Then what are you?" With this question Yusuf recasts the connotation of the term 'barbarian' as foreigner and as wholly uncivilized (Boletsi 8-9).[55] The film thus self-reflexively confronts the spectator with 'the beast within' (Olson 2014, 139) and with our degradation to the level of the 'barbarians' we both deplore and torture.

Lastly, by stating that the FBI, Helen, H, their colleagues, and implicitly the United States, do not mourn fifty casualties in the Middle East, but find 'recognisable' casualties in their own shopping centre incomprehensible and distressing, Yusuf highlights the hypocrisy behind Americans being perceived in the West as more intelligible and grievable than non-Westerners. As such, *Unthinkable* not only, like *Zero Dark Thirty*, shows the voids in America's legal system, but also re-evaluates the connotations surrounding 'barbarian' and the self-evidence with which American narratives have appropriated a moralistic and patriotic attitude spurred by the aftermath of 9/11.

Horror and morality: The affected spectator

The debate surrounding the legality and effectiveness of torture in *Unthinkable* effectuates that the spectator is constantly lurched back and forth between the protagonists' rhetoric and violent interplay. The spectator has to decide which man is more evil: H as a seasoned, ostensibly inhuman torturer, or Yusuf who has resolved to extreme measures to make a point about the FBI's torture methods. Both acts are, in a sense, 'unthinkable'. *Unthinkable* explicates its moral messages through, especially, Helen's character and her perspective on H and Yusuf. The critical reflection by the spectator on all sides of the moral debate only lasts a short while. This critical reflection does not have many facets to it but is, in a sense, spelled out or 'spoon-fed' through

[55] Maria Boletsi inquires into the concept of barbarism and the figure of the barbarian in modern and contemporary works of literature, art, and theory. She argues that after 9/11 the term 'barbarism' was newly appropriated yet still opposed to 'civilized', but also shows how art and literature can recast the negative connotations surrounding these concepts of 'barbarian' and 'barbarism' (1-17).

Helen's decisions and actions. Moreover, the film extends its moral question – can we mutilate a person to save millions? – into a hyperbolic spectacle, which therefore makes it a hypothetical one that will most likely be forgotten by the viewer once the film has ended.

Although Helen's clear perspective on the case facilitates a judgement by the spectator, this does not mean the spectator is rendered completely passive. As Devin McKinney notes, strong violence itself works on the mind "by refusing it glib comfort and immediate resolutions" (100). More so than *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Unthinkable* appeals to and affects the spectator physically and emotionally, and incites a form of emotional charge – shock, horror, laughter, and relief – several times throughout. Watching *Unthinkable* is often an unpleasant activity; confronted with a discomforting proximity to Yusuf's violated body and H's perverse mutilations, the viewer is frequently urged to look away or close her eyes. This emotional response and Helen's moral deadlock forge an awareness by the spectator of herself as a viewing subject.[56] This position does not, however, necessarily lead to critical reflection concerning one's own moral standpoint.

H's dark humour, the moral polemic, and the film's finale help the spectator digest its excessive brutality and alleviate some of the shock response. Moreover, a feeling of relief is incited by Yusuf's death (which means no more torture) and by the defusing of the bombs, although this effect does not last when it appears more bombs are hidden. Although *Zero Dark Thirty* has a more conclusive and satisfying finale when bin Laden is caught, *Unthinkable* is a less ambivalent (but not a less gruesome) viewing experience than *Zero Dark Thirty.*

[56] Catherine Wheatley argues that Michael Haneke's *Funny Games* (1997, 2007) establishes a similar reaction: the film's unpleasant viewing experience incites both a self-reflective intellectual and an emotional response. She argues that through this combination the spectator becomes aware of herself as a scopophilic subject (87, 106). The intellectual response in *Unthinkable* is weak, however, because Helen spells out the film's moral agenda and the film, unlike *Funny Games*, makes use of classical Hollywood narration that absorbs the spectator more readily into the film.

Conclusion

This chapter departed from an inquiry into the nature of the offended and critical responses to *Zero Dark Thirty*'s depiction of torture, concerning Maya's gender and position in relation to torture, and the film's techniques that were used to construct realism.

This chapter has shown that what causes offense is not necessarily the film's depiction of such interrogation methods, but how this is done. The film seems to give a near-referential account of the hunt for bin Laden by fusing cinematic realism with journalism, or in other words, by fusing a fictional, dramatic understanding of this hunt with real footage and explicit references to real events and people. In addition, the film's torture scenes and the plot's ambivalent, often contradictory messages concerning torture's use construct an ambiguous position in relation to the justifiability and effectiveness of torture methods.

The torture scene is performed in front of Maya as a witnessing third party and "female colleague". Maya's role therein is crucial: her peripheral status of female onlooker help effectuate detainee Ammar's debasement. Yet partially watching through Maya's point of view, the spectator is similarly spurred to think the torture is harsh and debasing, and as such, Maya's position actively undermines both Dan's (and the CIA's) moral dominance and torture as an interrogation method.

Maya's position, however, grows more ambivalent and her moral standpoint becomes more opaque. Her ambivalent position, together with the expression of her gender, which unites feminist and anti-feminist features, proved to be the subject of praise as well as criticism from the film's detractors. This can be explained by seeing both aspects as mutually related: Maya moves from being staged as a female, appalled witness of Ammar's torture, to an obsessed agent who represses features deemed feminine when interrogating up to the point of becoming almost 'gender neutral', to a conventional female protagonist when the job is done.

Both positions, of regarding Maya as feminist or anti-feminist, can eventually be substantiated depending on the angle of

investigation. In addition, I have argued that, rather than seeing Maya as repressing her gender or features deemed female (whether regarded as feminist or anti-feminist), she can be considered as someone using up all her energies to find bin Laden, to the extent that she loses a substantial part of herself.

In tandem with the way in which her gender is given shape, her facial expressions, opaque personality, and her refrainment from touching the detainees herself suggest a contradiction between her dislike for torture on the one hand, and a belief that torture is necessary on the other. She therefore upholds an ambivalent moral standpoint concerning the use of torture methods. Together with the problematic expression of her gender this illustrates that Maya is an unconventional, and therefore inaccessible and difficult, female protagonist.

Thus, Maya's opaque and ambivalent character, the lack of 'moral characters', the plot's contradictory, evasive messages about the use of torture, the suggestion of rigorous causality where this is not necessarily so, and the film's construction of realism serve as a foundation for the criticism directed towards *Zero Dark Thirty.* This chapter argues that this evasive standpoint concerning torture has two effects, which can be regarded as a strategy in its own right. Firstly, Maya's dissociation from and her mixed feelings concerning torture problematize an association with the female torturers of Abu Ghraib. Secondly, the film shows the paradox between the idea that practising torture is officially (discursively) and legally (constitutionally) objected to by the US government, while inflicted nonetheless by CIA operatives.

The film's classical narration facilitates a passive viewing attitude, as the characters' roles, motivations and actions are sufficiently expounded. At the same time, the characters' moral opaqueness, the ambivalent causality, and the use of the single perspective of a woman obsessed with her job leave a moral assessment of the film on the spectator's plate. These features might, as the criticism shows, inspire her to think critically about the themes presented and to engage more actively with the often incompatible messages put forward by the film's content and structure.

Unthinkable is a literal ticking bomb scenario that similarly presents the characteristic of 'urgency' as a stimulus for retrieving information through torture. The film, however, exaggerates the ticking bomb elements to playfully and critically show the legal and moral voids surrounding the use of torture by the FBI.

One of the ways in which this is done is through 'moral characters', especially through protagonist Helen, whose moral attitude, emotions, and doubts are clearly expressed. This makes her, compared to Maya, a normative female protagonist that poses less of a challenge to spectators. The second way in which the legal and moral voids are expressed is by showing what torture does to its victims. *Unthinkable* received criticism for its alleged depiction of 'torture porn', but this chapter argues that the brutal nature and composition of torture has a function: the film presents vivisectionist torture in tandem with 'moral characters' to experiment with and critically reflect on the conditions, motivations, and logic of politically motivated torture, as well as on the aesthetic means to depict such torture.

The film's graphic content together with Helen's lucid moral objections make the spectator aware of herself as a viewing subject. Yet while *Zero Dark Thirty* opens up to the possibility of critical spectatorship, *Unthinkable*'s 'spoon-feeding' of viewpoints and the exaggerated ticking bomb situation less potently urges the spectator to critically reflect on the film's content.

Extrapolating on *Unthinkable*'s suggestion that torture and barbarism are both traits of Western civilization, in the next chapter I will analyse whether torture inflicted by Muslim terrorists is presented as more brutal and 'unfair' in films, and which political motivations and conditions are brought up in this reversal of roles. Two films, *Syriana* and *Body of Lies*, which are geopolitical action films rather than ticking bomb scenarios, seem to have a double edge: they confirm the stereotypical image of the barbaric terrorist, while simultaneously presenting criticism on US foreign policies and its share in fuelling terrorist activities. What will be explored is how these seemingly paradoxical features are dovetailed; to do this, differences between *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable* on the one hand, and *Syriana* and

Body of Lies on the other will be discussed. In addition, all films will be positioned within a contextual timeframe so as to compare them mutually, and more broadly to a corpus of War on Terror films made in the past decade.

- Chapter 2 -

Punitive torture, antiheroism and a critique of US foreign politics in *Syriana* and *Body of Lies*

Introduction

2005 can be seen to demarcate the start of a shift from conservative and patriotic rhetoric in Hollywood productions to a "growing dissatisfaction with America's course" (Markert: xvii). A burgeoning nuance and progressive hue proves to be characteristic of Hollywood cinema that follows in the years after.

Syriana (Stephen Gaghan, 2005) was hailed as provokingly liberal and as "one of the best geopolitical thrillers in a very long time" (Scott 2005). The film, whose title is a metaphor for foreign, Western intervention in the Middle East (deWaard and Tait 153), is loosely based on former CIA case officer Robert Baer's memoir *See No Evil: The True Story of a Ground Soldier in the CIA's War Against Terrorism* (2002) and connects the War on Terror theme with that of "big oil". Although acclaimed, *Syriana* was also maligned for its critical depiction of America's politics in and interference with the Middle East and accused of political bias (deWaard and Tait 155). As such, writer Stephen Gaghan and producer Steven Soderbergh initially had trouble funding the production (Kemp).

The film has multiple storylines that depict the converging fates of various protagonists (such as CIA agents, lawyers, Pakistani migrants, and Emirs), influenced by the "dark amoral world of unregulated and destructive corporate power" (Riegler: 21) [57] embodied in the oil industry and arms trade. In one of these plotlines, CIA agent Bob Barnes (George Clooney) is tortured by a mercenary, a former CIA operative (Mark Strong) now sympathizing with Hezbollah. Peter Bradshaw (*The Guardian*) denounced the film's tasteless

[57] Riegler also mentions The Bourne series (2001, 2004, and 2007), *Blood Diamond* (2006), *Shooter* (2007), *Michael Clayton* (2007) and *The International* (2009) as pertaining to this category, but I would argue that these films are less directly linked to the War on Terror than *Syriana*.

inversion of roles, that of a CIA agent tortured by a Muslim, and the film's naive simplicity in terms of 'good' and 'bad' so soon after torture incidents at Abu Ghraib (Bradshaw 2006). This inversion, he argued, suggests a covert legitimization of torturing Muslim detainees as it proves that they "do the same thing to us" (2006).

The seeming paradox, of a critique on *Syriana*'s torture scene on the one hand, and praise for the film's politics agenda on the other, provides the starting point of this chapter: firstly, it explores the inversion of roles, or 'role-play', as examined in the previous chapter, between Muslim torturer and CIA victim, in order to illustrate how this inversion gives rise to different motivations for and types of torture. Secondly, it probes what is meant when one calls a film 'critical' of a government's political activities, and particularly of normative political ideologies pertaining to the War on Terror. In other words, it asks to what extent a film such as *Syriana* can be 'critical', when its complex and multi-layered depiction of conflicted interest, clandestine affairs, and interference simultaneously stages a torture scene that uses blunt stereotypes that seem to justify this very interference? In extension, it investigates whether *Syriana* provides an oppositional view of the US intervention in the Middle East and its use of violence during the War on Terror, or whether this view functions as a legitimized political alternative within normative Hollywood discourse.

In order to explore this inversion of roles in *Syriana* and the critical questions addressed by the plot, *Body of Lies* (Ridley Scott, 2008), a film that stages a similar torture scene in an entirely different plot, is analysed in comparison. Both films were produced prior to *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable* (and *Homeland*, briefly mentioned in the previous chapter) and although this difference in time seems marginal, it is in fact significant for understanding and positioning the nature, shape, and framing of the films' torture scenes. The War on Terror theme is less prominent in *Syriana* than in *Body of Lies*, yet *Syriana* assimilates the War on Terror into a complex narrative in which oil, terrorism, torture, money, and power are interlaced. *Body of Lies*, on the other hand, was released three years later and is part of a wave of

diverse films following *Syriana* that collectively started to question American foreign policies and the ambiguous practices of the US government and the CIA in locating terrorists.

Due to the focus on global affairs and terrorist activities, torture's part in the films' plots is considerably smaller than in *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable.* Yet the occurrence of torture is tied to America's meddling in the Middle East, and as such, an inquiry into the diverging ways in which the films address or critique this meddling is important for understanding the function torture plays in both films.

This chapter thus explores the paradoxical argument underlying *Syriana* and *Body of Lies* and the significance and consequences of this seeming tension: on the one hand, the films depict the CIA as morally ambiguous and their political business in the Middle East as suspect in which the protagonists (George Clooney and Leonardo DiCaprio) are presented as duped antiheroes. On the other hand, the films portray Muslim torturers as villains who employ, to the Western spectator, 'unfair' and punitive torture. As such, a 'critical' depiction of the position of the CIA in the War on Terror and of global corporate power as the motor driving political wrongdoings is, to an extent, neutralized.

This chapter starts with a comparison between *Syriana*'s and *Body of Lies'* torture scenes, and then interprets these scenes as they occur within their respective plots. In doing so, an analysis of plot elements and narrative techniques that help interpret the torture scenes and that pose alternative or conflicting perspectives on American foreign policies during the War on Terror is required. The films will also be positioned within a contextual time frame to compare them to the films discussed in the previous chapter, and to a corpus of War on Terror films made in the past decade.

1. Torture scenes in *Syriana* and *Body of Lies*

Torture in *Syriana*

Syriana has five protagonists and four plotlines that often intersect. It will be unnecessarily mystifying to explain *Syriana*'s plot structure in detail in this section, therefore a simplified version of the relevant aspects of these plotlines will be provided to explain the events leading

up to torture and to position *Syriana*'s torture scene within the narrative. One of these protagonists is Bob Barnes (George Clooney) an "old-school" (Bradshaw 2006) and "disillusioned" (Scott 2005) CIA agent, whose primary job is to stop illegal arms trafficking. He has lived and worked in the Middle East for years and has acquainted himself with local customs. When on assignment in Tehran, he learns that one of the CIA's missiles was stolen and diverted to an Egyptian. Bob then quickly becomes absorbed into a shady world of conflicting agendas.

In another storyline, energy analyst Bryan Woodman (Matt Damon) becomes the economic advisor of Prince Nasir (Alexander Siddig), eldest son of a Persian Gulf Emir, who aims to establish a progressive and democratic government and to use his state's oil trade and profits for national and global interest. His democratic political agenda conflicts with his father's conventional and repressive government that favours a national and privatized oil trade supported by the American government. Meanwhile, Bob is sent by the CIA to kill Prince Nasir, who is identified as the financier behind the Egyptian's acquisition of the missile, in order to pave the way for Nasir's conservative younger brother to inherit the throne instead. Bob hires a mercenary named Mussawi (Mark Strong) to help him kidnap and assassinate Nasir. Mussawi, formerly known as Jimmy, now works as an Iranian agent on the side of Hezbollah. Unaware of Mussawi's double agenda, their brief conversation indicates that Bob refuses to call Jimmy "Mussawi", who, in turn, seems evasive and unwilling to assist Bob. When the latter states his demands – he wants Mussawi to drug Nasir and abduct him in a car – Mussawi refuses and leaves. Shortly after, he has Bob abducted and tortures him.

The torture scene opens with a shot in which Bob's head, centrally framed, rests on his chest. The lighting comes from a small window to the right and catches his right shoulder and his sweaty forehead. He has a cut on the bridge of his nose and breathes quickly. The visible part of his upper body is naked, and a wound is discernible on his right shoulder. The background is blurry, accentuating Bob's tense face and anxious anticipation. Mussawi enters the room in the background and asks Bob, "What do you know about the torture

methods used by the Chinese on the Falun Gong?" Mussawi proceeds to explain the steps in these torture methods while Bob listens, approaching Bob as he outlines the first step ('water dungeon'). The next shot cuts to the other side of the room and frames Bob and Mussawi centrally in the shot. Mussawi is dressed in a casual summer suit. Bob sits in an old-fashioned school chair, with his feet strapped to its legs with duct tape and his hand taped to the table in front of him. The spacious room is furnished with dirty white tiles, a metal table, and a sink, which suggest the room's former function as a kitchen. The small windows are covered with blinds.

As Mussawi turns towards Bob, he starts explaining method number two, "twisting arm and putting face in faeces". The camera cuts to a close-up of Mussawi's grave face when he sternly proclaims that he is "not interested in two". He walks towards the kitchen sink and the camera, positioned behind Bob, now shows that Bob has been strapped to his seating's support with duct tape around his waist. Mussawi picks some utensils from the kitchen in the background, while he tells Bob that he is interested in the third method, "pulling nails from fingers", and shows Bob a pincer. The camera cuts back to Bob's face as he looks up. Mussawi asks whether Bob agrees that this is a good method, while he throws the pincer into the metal sink and takes off his jacket in preparation. Bob averts his eyes to the side and starts breathing heavily. Mussawi continues that the purpose of nail extraction was to "get the monks or whatever to recant their beliefs".

Mussawi grabs the pincer and walks towards Bob. He halts before him and with a stern face he looks down at Bob, his shaved head reflecting the light, and asks, "What if I had to get you to recant? That'd be pretty difficult, right?" Mussawi continues, "Because, if you have no beliefs to recant, then what?" The camera cuts back to Mussawi's face as he lowers it close to Bob's, and says, "Then, you're fucked, is what", and pauses for a second. He grabs Bob's hand and points the pincer to his face and demands, "You're gonna give me the names of every person that's taken money from you!", and starts pulling the nail from one of Bob's fingers. This pulling comes with some effort, which is made explicit by the facial expressions of both men, Bob's face in distorted

pain and Mussawi's clenched teeth signalling struggle, and in shots of Bob's chair moving violently back and forth. The camera alternates rapidly between their faces, the chair, and the nail. The shot that frames the extraction is only displayed for a fraction of a second, but its graphic content is replaced by a close-up of Bob's pained face and groans, and the nauseating sounds of the pincer tearing the nail from Bob's flesh.

An appalled Mussawi holds up the pincer with the bloody nail in it, proclaiming, "Oh, that is disgusting". He bends over the kitchen table and shakes the nail off the pincer. Bob suddenly remarks sarcastically, while breathing heavily, "Come on Jimmy, you're not a Quran-thumper", still using Mussawi's former name. Mussawi responds as he bends closer to Bob's face, "My name is Mussawi". Offended by Bob's remark, he then places the pincer to one of Bob's other fingers – off-screen –and starts pulling for a second nail. The camera now only shows Bob's feet and the chair moving up from the floor as Bob and Mussawi struggle, with the same accompanying nail-cracking sounds.

Bob must have fainted because a subsequent shot shows Mussawi angrily throwing a bucket of water into the camera, Bob's point-of-view shot. The next shot shows that in an adjacent, darker room, three men sit around a table, smoking leisurely and watching the scene, while Mussawi shouts and curses repeatedly. The camera uncompromisingly cuts back and forth between Bob's face in close-up as he is beaten, and Bob's point of view facing an angry Mussawi who beats him and shouts "This is a war. You're a POW [prisoner of war]! Give me the names!", alternatingly cursing and beating. Bob's upper body stains with blood. A hard blow by Mussawi hurls Bob towards the floor with the chair on top of him. He lands with his beaten and bloodied head on the floor. Mussawi shouts towards the men in the adjacent room that he will cut off Bob's head. The camera cuts from framing Bob's face to his dazed and distorted point-of-view, which frames Mussawi in a skewed-angle shot approaching him with a large kitchen knife in his hand. Mussawi kneels down, his face off-screen, and repeats that he will cut off Bob's head. At that moment, voices are heard and Mussawi looks up. A shot shows Bob, face down on the tiles, slowly coming to his senses. Several turbaned men, Hezbollah, come in and

urge Mussawi to let Bob go: one of them tells Mussawi in Lebanese that "Said Hashimi is very angry with him". From Bob's point of view, Mussawi, frustrated, hurls the knife into a far corner of the kitchen. The frame then fades out.

Later, upon hearing that Mussawi wants to make their plans to kill Prince Nasir public, the CIA scapegoat and deactivate Bob. When Bob in turn learns about the source of and motivation for his being outcast, he tries to warn Prince Nasir, but both men are killed, Bob accidentally, by a CIA drone.

Torture as a punitive method

This torture scene frequently alternates between shots of Bob's facial expressions in medium close-up and his point-of-view shots when beaten. Aligned to Bob's perspective, the information provided for his abduction and torture remains limited to Mussawi's demand for the names of those Bob has worked with. Most of the time, only parts of Mussawi's body are framed, adhering to Bob's limited perspective due to his position in the chair, and his minimal knowledge of the situation. In contrast, Mussawi's betrayal to the CIA and in particular to Bob is accentuated by visually stressing Mussawi's superior position; he towers over Bob while Bob's nudity – he wears only brown pants – contrasts with Mussawi's smart summer suit. Naked from the waist up, Bob's fleshy upper body emphasizes his uncertain, corporeal vulnerability and exposure.

Like the abuse in *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable*, the torture has the structure of a theatrical role-play, with Mussawi performing his superiority for a third party in the room: the men around the table. The bare room, the kitchen utensils and the use of the chair give the scene the aura of a scripted performance, without, however, Bob's knowledge of what will happen. Mussawi's demand of the names of several people the CIA works with motivates his torture, yet his desire to kill Bob reveals that he does not care much for information or Nasir's kidnapping (this last element is not even mentioned). He does not give Bob time to respond to his question, but instead starts beating his face immediately.

His anger and frustration suggest a personal grudge and the expression of these emotions present Mussawi as a radically different torturer than Dan and H. The emphasis on Bob's lack of religion, who has, according to Mussawi, "no beliefs to recant", suggests that Mussawi's tactics of nail extraction are not only aimed at retrieving information but are instigated towards an infidel. His change from Jimmy to Mussawi and his shift from the CIA to Iranian intelligence suggest a conversion to Islam and a preference for working with those who practise similar convictions. Yet Mussawi's ethnicity is never explicated and it remains unsure whether Mussawi was Muslim while working for the CIA, or if he has since 'turned'. It is similarly unclear if he was born American, Iranian, or something else altogether. It is suggested, however, that he and Bob share a similar cultural background and that he desires to chastise Bob for being a personification of all Mussawi dislikes about the CIA.

The second motivation for torture thus ties in with diverging beliefs and seems provoked by retaliation. For Mussawi, Bob embodies American culture and politics Mussawi, for unexplained reasons, no longer associates with and has come to despise. It could even be argued that Mussawi has come to despise himself for once being a part of this culture, which explains the vigour with which he punishes Bob. Although Bob, it is assumed, has no religious beliefs, it is the particular political and cultural foundation of the US, and the Christian beliefs and ideals on with it is constituted (Dyer 1997, 15) that Mussawi punishes, and not necessarily Bob's specific beliefs or his individual, previous actions as a CIA agent. By converting, or by changing sides, Mussawi simultaneously converts Bob into an enemy. In chapter 1 I analysed, while building on Appadurai's analysis of extreme violence (2006, 89), how Dan's torture made visible and affirmed Ammar's inferiority in moral and ethnic terms. Mussawi's torture makes visible and ratifies the difference between him and Bob in terms of the latter's moral and cultural inferiority, but the explicit punitive component in Mussawi's torture further accentuates this newly established cultural difference.

In other words, torture is used as a punitive method to inflict intense pain,[58] not to interrogate, and to accentuate Bob's cultural – or 'Western' – inferiority. At the same time, the desire for retaliation is cloaked by the weak motivation of retrieving information. Yet Mussawi can barely hide the real reason for his torture, which is punishment, in which the argument of information becomes a masquerade for inflicting pain.

The temporal dimension and the rapidness of the role-play, in which Bob is hardly allowed to respond, differs from the slow, processual torture in *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable.* For Dan and H torture is part of their job. They desire to have their victim speak by dehumanizing them (Dan) or by inflicting intense pain (H), in both cases in controlled and orchestrated situations. Despite diverging motivations, Mussawi's vivisectionist violence resembles the interplay between Yusuf and H in *Unthinkable*, but Mussawi's promptness, fuelled by revenge and hatred, reveals that his torture is not aimed at a gradual psychological breakdown, but at killing Bob.

Like H, Mussawi is not committed to anyone. On the one hand, Mussawi's conversion from agent to working for Hezbollah suggests unreliability and wayward behaviour, indicating that he could easily change sides again and has hidden agendas. On the other hand, his conversion displays determination and dogged devotion towards his new faith and employers. The zeal with which he tortures Bob suggests that he has to ardently prove to himself, to Bob, to his new faith, and to his employer that he has converted, which confirms his determination which is carried out through brutality.

Mussawi's personal grudge against Bob suggests both hate towards him, and perhaps towards himself, and also that his torture is seemingly devoid of a political agenda. The political undercurrent of his torture resides, however, both in his punishment of Bob and also in his desire for moral superiority and recognition for his beliefs. Judith Butler has located the desire for recognition as a fundamental

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[58] As Scarry argues, 'pain' has its etymological home in the Latin word *poena*, which also means 'punishment', which indicates that punishment stands in close relation to that which it inflicts, which is pain (Scarry 16).

characteristic within social relations (2004a 2), in which recognition or authority is reached through gaining respect, not through force (Arendt 45). Mussawi's desire for superiority and recognition is made tangible in his insistence on Bob calling him "Mussawi" instead of Jimmy, but it takes an extreme form by resolving to torture in order to achieve this. In fact, his whole act seems to circle this desire for recognition and respect that is demanded by extreme force instead of legitimately earned. Although Mussawi considers Bob an inferior infidel, he needs Bob to acknowledge and recognise his convictions and moral superiority.

When Bob subsequently refuses to comply and pesters Mussawi instead by calling him "Jimmy", decapitating Bob becomes an act to prove Mussawi is worthy of his new name and beliefs. The presence of the three men as his audience reinforces Mussawi's superior position, yet this position is only partially accomplished due to Bob's mockery. Although Bob seems to give in to the situation without resisting, his ostensibly voluntary submission to Mussawi can be seen as a clever strategy that linked to Mussawi's desire for recognition and superiority: knowing that he will never leave the kitchen alive, Bob's last recourse is inciting more frustration in Mussawi. The three-headed audience is then used by Mussawi to establish the ritual nature of Bob's death as public scaffolding.

To the spectator, Mussawi's attempt to decapitate Bob will be reminiscent of the beheadings of American or European journalists, agents, and suspected spies by Muslim fundamentalists (Devji, 90-91, 151).[59] In his desire to become a respected Muslim however, Mussawi's brutal violence and loss of self-control deviate from these orchestrated, ritualized, and recorded decapitations. His vigour and desire to be taken seriously turn him into a stereotypical embodiment of the savage Muslim terrorist. His subsequent reprimand by Hezbollah, and his rage and failed attempt at beheading Bob then, make explicit to the spectator Mussawi's 'wannabe' aspirations. These aspirations and the execution

[59] See for an analysis of Jihadi's use of decapitation as a media strategy in the War on Terror Cook, and, in Dutch, Bahara.

thereof run counter to that of Al-Qaeda leader Al-Saleem in *Body of Lies*, who has rationally orchestrated the torture and death of a CIA agent.

Torture in Body of Lies

Body of Lies (Ridley Scott, 2008) stages a torture scene quite similar to that of *Syriana*. CIA operative Roger Ferris (Leonardo DiCaprio) operates between his superior, the untrustworthy and flippant Ed Hoffman (Russell Crowe), and the head of Jordanian Intelligence, the austere Hani Salaam (Mark Strong). His goal is to catch fictive Al-Qaeda leader Al-Saleem (Alon Abutbul) in Iraq, who is the instigator behind several fictive attacks on European and American soil. In his cat-and-mouse game with Al-Saleem, Roger becomes a puppet of Ed and Hani's conflicting beliefs and agendas, and his position resembles that of Bob. When Al-Qaeda abducts Roger's love interest and Iranian nurse Aisha (Golshifteh Farahani), Roger concedes to meeting Al-Saleem and offers himself in exchange. He is blindfolded and abducted to a secret location.

This scene opens when Roger is cuffed and hooded and violently dragged into a darkened area, presumably a cellar or a basement. A close-up frames Roger's feet tied to a chair. The camera cuts back to the long dark hallways lit by a flashlight with Al-Saleem approaching. The camera alternates between the approaching man who is accompanied by sinister extradiegetic music, and an extreme close-up of Roger's hands laying flat on a table. The metal door opens and the Al-Qaeda leader enters and walks towards Roger, who moves his head nervously and is now framed sitting behind a wooden desk. He is still hooded and wears a dark shirt. Behind him a black and golden flag is attached to the wall with text in Arab and a symbol on it. Al-Saleem, who wears a black turban, a black gown, and a white button-up shirt under his gown, sits down in front of Roger. The cellar is filled with several men, all of them turbaned, and some of the men's faces are covered in shawls. One of them has a camera on a tripod pointed towards Roger who sits in a spotlight. One of the men walks to Roger and with a sudden gesture removes the hood from his head.

Roger is greeted by Al-Saleem who returns his greeting in Arabic, and addresses him as "highness" or "sheik", but Al-Saleem

replies that he is only a servant. Roger asks him where the girl is, but is not answered. Instead, Al-Saleem tells Roger that he has been lying, which Roger denies. The camera oscillates between close-ups of Al-Saleem and Roger as they engage in a conversation about Roger's value: Roger asks him whether he has paid for him and Al-Saleem tells him, "not as much as he would have. Such a bargain for such a catch as you". Roger informs Al-Saleem that the CIA does not negotiate and that there will be no exchanges, but Al-Saleem answers that the value of the catch lies in Roger being a CIA agent. Al-Saleem proclaims that "in this world there is enough poverty and frustration and anger and passion. There will never be a shortage of martyrs." To which Roger responds, "these men are dispensable to you. They blow themselves up in the name of Allah. There is no place in the Qu'ran for the murder of innocent people". Al-Saleem then recites a passage from the Qu'ran: "Do not say that those slain in the name of God are dead. They are alive but you are not aware of them."[60] While he recites Al-Saleem looks back at his men behind him, one finger pointed in the air like a school teacher, and then back at Roger, who responds with disdain, "So you misinterpret the one book you believe in. But are you pure, or are you just as corrupt as the capitalist Westerners that you despise? To me you are slaves. You are slaves to the Saudi oil sheiks and to the Wahhabi oil money that funds you. But when that oil money runs out, my friend, you will all disappear into the ashes of history".

Realizing that Roger will refuse to read any statement and become a martyr, Al-Saleem crumples up the piece of paper with the words Roger was supposed to recite before the camera and throws it away. Al-Saleem continues, "What I need from you I already have. You know what that camera is for? It is not for this, this is just intermission. It is for what comes after this, for what comes now". Al-Saleem inquires whether Roger is comfortable and walks towards what looks like a table where, in extreme close up, a range of knives and other sinister tools are set up. He picks up a hammer and walks towards Roger while asking again, "Can I make you more comfortable?" Framed from a

[60] Qu-ran, Chapter 2 (Al-Baqara), verse 154.

location behind Roger, Al-Saleem stands immediately before him, raises the hammer, and lets it fall with force. A split second frame shows the hammer crushing Roger's left-hand pinkie finger from above before he screams, and then a close-up of Roger's face expressing his pain. He bangs his head forward on the table, and another close-up of his hands frames the bloodied little finger. Roger manages to proclaim to Al-Saleem that "he is in the light", indicating that the CIA keeps an eye on him and knows his whereabouts. Al-Saleem responds by showing Roger that he is being recorded, after which Roger spits in his face. Al-Saleem wipes it off and continues, "What do you think is happening here Mr Ferris? Do you think the cavalry is coming for you? No one is coming for you". He lowers his face to look Roger in the eyes and proclaims, "Welcome to Guantanamo". A close-up of Roger shows him as he breathes heavily and looks up at Al-Saleem, who then suddenly lets the hammer drop again with great force. Another shot from above shows for a second how his left-hand ring finger is also smashed before the camera turns to Roger's face as he again screams in pain.

Al-Saleem then walks away from Roger and throws the hammer onto the floor. He gives orders in Arabic and disappears down the long hall, accompanied by some of his men carrying a flashlight. Back in the cellar, Roger, who lies with his head on the table, is violently pulled up by his hair. His eyes are closed, he continues moaning, and his assailant in turn spits in his face. He is beaten. Several men cut him loose and, after another close-up of his bloodied hand, lay him down onto the table, face up. Roger violently resists and the struggle he engages in pulls up his shirt and leaves his waist naked. As Roger is put down on the table, the camera on the tripod records him. Shots then alternate between Roger's face and a close-up of the man who spat in his face, who recites, "In the name of God, the gracious, the merciful, fight the infidels. They have no beliefs. This is the punishment for the non-believer. I would advise you to pray. There is no need to resist".

During this recitation, Roger has a flashback to the scene in which he was present in a holding cell and the witness of the torture and death of a Muslim prisoner. As Roger lies there, he remembers this

moment and realizes he will similarly be tortured to death.[61] When Roger's head is about to be cut off by the recanting man, a loud explosion sounds and the 'cavalry' arrives after all. Several helmed soldiers storm in and shoot at the Al-Qaeda followers. Parallel editing indicates that Al-Saleem is also caught outside. Then Hani Salaam, the head of Jordanian Intelligence, enters the cellar, looks at Roger in earnestly and switches off the camera.

Star potential: The recording of torture

Bob's disadvantaged position was emphasized by the camera's position near the floor, filming him from below. Unlike Bob, Roger's position is frequently made pivotal in the frame, and with Al-Saleem seated on a chair he and Roger are placed at the same height. By alternating between close-ups of Roger and close-ups of Al-Saleem, the men are positioned on equal terms and an overview of the room is provided. Where Bob positions himself as submissive and has no time to respond, Roger refuses to cooperate and betray himself, and resists his capturers until the last moment. Additionally, the dialogue between Roger and Al-Saleem, in which Roger spits in his face and accuses Al-Saleem of being evil and a murderer, suggests that Roger has more agency than Bob. Ultimately, this agency to respond is temporarily provided to him by Al-Saleem, who remains in control of himself and of the situation.

Bob's point-of-view shots and his limited perspective make tangible his precarious and uncomfortable situation, and his perspective aligns the spectator to his position. This scene in *Body of Lies*, however, apart from the flashbacks does not present Roger's internal focalisation, but predominantly frames him as the object of focalisation. Although the close-ups of Roger's tormented face indicate his intense pain, the dialogue between him and Al-Saleem, in which verbal rhetoric is intertwined with violent acts, is more lucid in

[61] During the torture scene Roger has another flashback, which is less relevant for understanding this scene and therefore not emphasised here. This flashback illustrates that Roger recognises someone in the room whom he had previously met and who works with Hani Salaam. Roger assumes this man has betrayed Hani Salaam and in order to regain his advantage and buy time, he points this out to Al-Saleem, who ignores this piece of information.

expressing his ideas and frustration. In addition, *Body of Lies*' torture scene exposes new information in the plot in which Roger's experience of the situation is made secondary.

Roger as the object of focalisation rather than as focaliser is accentuated by the shots in which he is recorded and mediated through Al-Saleem's camera on a tripod. As in *Unthinkable*, the video footage of Roger accentuates the situation as a scripted role-play that is performed for an audience, Al-Saleem's men. The furnished room with Roger in the spotlight, the décor with the flag on the wall behind him, the 'torture tools', and the chairs opposite one other again turn the dark chamber into a stage. Unlike Yusuf, however, this video mediation transforms Roger as both a victim and a 'star' of the scene, which is underscored by the time he is given to respond to Al-Saleem.

Recording Roger seems intended to demoralize the CIA, as well as to archive and distribute the evidence of his enemy's physical and mental humiliation. The suggestion that the spectacle is more important than Roger's death is confirmed by Al-Saleem's departure from the scene before Roger is murdered. He crushes Roger's fingers, but lets his men do the 'dirty work' that remains. His early departure, however, indicates that Al-Saleem does not derive pleasure from watching (and re-watching on screen) Roger's planned decapitation.[62] By not only beheading but by *recording* Roger's torture and decapitation on video, seasoned Al-Saleem moves beyond Mussawi's zeal, which is spurred by personal grudges and a desire for recognition. The intended beheading is also reminiscent of the orchestrated and ritualized beheadings of kidnapped agents or journalists by Al-Qaeda, but the element of recording is employed to inspire and impress followers (Devji 2005, 90-91; Cook).

Secondly, by using the camera Al-Saleem transmits a firm message pertaining to his powerful position. The camera becomes a crucial aspect in Al-Saleem's punitive torture, which is similar to

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[62] Susan Sontag (2005) and Slavoj Žižek (2008b, 171-177) have pointed to use of the camera in Abu Ghraib as a means of increasing the 'fun' of torture for the assailants, as well as to increase distance between torturer and tortured. Al-Saleem's recording, however, is motivated for political rather than directly personal purposes.

Mussawi's; it is inflicted as a form of punishment for crimes, not intended to force the characters to *confess* crimes. Al-Saleem does not desire a political or economic exchange of some sort, and the motivation of "information" is not introduced, not even as a masquerade for pain and punishment. Similar to Bob's torture, Roger's torture is presented as "punishment for the non-believer," as one of Al-Saleem's followers proclaims, as retaliation for CIA's presence in the Middle East and for the CIA's inhumane and extra-legal treatment of detainees in Guantanamo Bay. Al-Saleem's remark, "Welcome to Guantanamo", only briefly refers to the detainment centre, but it acutely addresses the brutality of the US in its detainee program and is significant in light of Roger's capture as CIA agent.

In addition to the predominantly punitive nature of torture and Al-Saleem's remark about Guantanamo, a crucial difference between the situation of torture in these two films as compared to the situations presented by *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable* pertains to the extra-legal nature of Ammar and Yusuf's torture. Dan and H stand above the law and can torture their victims with impunity, yet Mussawi and Al-Saleem, who also torture their victims, are punished for their actions by Hezbollah and by the Jordanian Intelligence Service. The intrusion of these two parties indicates that the spaces in which Bob and Roger are tortured are not extra-legal, as is the case in *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable.* Ironically, Mussawi refers to Bob's status of Prisoner of War (POW), calling upon the protection such prisoners are guaranteed under the Geneva Convention.[63] His use of the term assumes an actual war, whereas the War on Terror is evoked in a predominantly rhetorical manner by *Syriana*, which does not stage active combat. Mussawi thus reflects on this twofold conception of the War on Terror and the extra-legal status under which suspects of terrorism are interrogated, who, like Ammar and Yusuf, "no longer exist".

Al-Saleem's use of the camera has a third function; it is not only employed to inspire and impress followers, but also to shock the Western public and to make the CIA witness their agent's death in a

[63] For the requirements a POW must meet in order to be considered such, see the entry "prisoner of war (POW)" in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2015.

media spectacle. The recordings are so a product of what Jon McKenzie has termed (resonating Foucault and Guy Debord) "a global society of the spectacle of the scaffold" (McKenzie 340). This term evokes the spectacular media and film images that pervade daily life, as well as the use of the scaffold to punish criminals in public spaces. This merging of a media-saturated society and public scaffolding, McKenzie argues, is actualized in Al-Qaeda's footage of performing and publicising assassinations (340-341).[64] Further, this mediated scaffolding is readily reproduced in cinematic productions like *Body of Lies* that appropriate and reference real decapitations.[65]

In this sense, Al-Saleem's role-play is not personal, nor a singular event, but marks an on-going violent 'dialogue' with the West. Yet using the camera as a political statement also makes the spectator aware of the underlying politics of Roger's torture. Disciplined and trained for their work as CIA agents, both Roger and Bob's principle crime is ultimately their ambivalent position: on the one hand, as agents of a Western capitalist regime deemed malicious, and on the other hand, as infiltrators who attempt to blend in with Muslim society, culture, and values for undercover operations. Although considered inferior by their torturers, Bob and Roger are not dehumanized or animalized in a series of abusive acts, but they are punished (with the aim of execution) for their secular and immoral 'Western' lifestyle and their efforts to infiltrate. In addition to this personal punishment, they are used by their captors to make a political statement.

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[64] McKenzie stresses that the global, technological, and mediated component of the public scaffold (or "media shock") is not an absolute break with any historical precedent, but that the incorporation of the historical connotation with the scaffold implies and suggests continuity and anachronicity. Devji argues that the particular practice of beheadings and spectacular attacks is novel, however, and has spread like a fashion by means of the use of media (2005, 90-91).

[65] The use of beheadings as a tactic in real life is an important element for creating the image of a savage Muslim culture in cinema. A beheading occurs in *A Mighty Heart* (about the assassination of Daniel Pearl, Michael Winterbottom, 2007) and a near-beheading in *The Kingdom* (Peter Berg, 2007). In *A Mighty Heart* beheading is used by villains to make political statements, but the spectator never sees the actual tape and is relieved from having to see the abuse directly.

Double standards: 'Justified' and 'unfair' torture

Although Mussawi and Al-Saleem believe in the justness of their torture and give explanatory cues for their punishment, for the Western spectator Bob and Roger's torture will not seem justified.[66] Instead, Mussawi and Al-Saleem are portrayed in two distinct ways as Muslim villains: Al-Saleem as a stereotypical fundamentalist Al-Qaeda leader, who, due to his position, has his victim tortured for him, and Mussawi as a new convert who aims to become a genuine fundamentalist, but overcompensates for his desire for recognition with rage, thereby re-inscribing the stereotype of the brutal fundamentalist.

The features used to construct such a stereotypical image pertain to props, such as clothing and lighting, used to portray the 'non-white' villains such as Mussawi and Al-Saleem as darker than the protagonists. As such, the emphasis is placed on the Muslims' ethnic otherness, while visually inscribing 'evil' into their character (Dyer 1997, 45-70, 84-102).[67] Al-Saleem and his men wear dark outfits and black turbans (remember that Ammar in *Zero Dark Thirty* was, on the contrary, aesthetically accentuated with his white shirt). While Al-Saleem's stature however demands a certain respect, Mussawi conversely becomes a caricature of villainy.

Ironically, Mussawi is played by British actor Mark Strong, who also stars as Hani Salaam in *Body of Lies*, and as a CIA executive in *Zero Dark Thirty*. Strong's Italian heritage allows him to easily pass for an undefined Arab, and because his character Mussawi could still be mistaken as CIA, he is not depicted as a stereotypical Muslim villain in terms of physical appearance; rather, this is made explicit through his behaviour. His 'evilness' is accentuated by his impulsive and brutal violence, and also by his towering over Bob, which stresses his betrayal of the CIA and his ideas about Western infidels.

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[66] Again, when I use the terms "Western audience" or "Western viewer" I assume a non-Muslim, normatively white audience.

[67] Dyer uses the term "non-white" to express the category of those people against whom white people are positioned. He traces the significance of "whiteness" and the significance of the hue and colour white used in visual culture (by for instance use of lighting and over-exposure) to indicate which protagonists are morally superior or more civilized than others. As such, any racially organized iconography provided allows the spectator to quickly determine good and evil (1997,11, 44).

In addition to physical appearance, Mussawi's and Al-Saleem's torture methods underscore their barbarism. Unmotivated by an imminent threat, attacks, or a ticking bomb but rather by personal conviction and punishment, Al-Saleem and Mussawi's torture is depicted as the 'unfair' and "sadistic torture" (Mayer 2007; Wisnewski 8) of fundamentalist brutes that is devoid of the 'urgency' or justification that characterizes torture by CIA agents.[68] Not only does the different motivation in a superficial reading justify torture in *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable* but not in *Syriana* and *Body of Lies*, but it expresses itself in different types of torture: interrogational torture – an ostensibly less atrocious form of abuse – versus mutilation as a form of punishment.

As Edward Said argued as early as 1983, Arabs have been frequently portrayed as stereotypical figures in history, yet not always or necessarily as dangerous. This way of depicting Muslims fits into a longer tradition of stereotyping, but has gained a specific character after 9/11 as part of War on Terror rhetoric, in which Muslims have been conceptualized as terrorists and barbarians (Boletsi 1-2; Nickels et al.). In cinematic depictions of the years following 9/11 these stereotypes are similarly perceptible. Mussawi and Al-Saleem's barbarian disposition and their 'unfair', savage violence can be explained as a consequence – the logical outcome – of their inherently barbarous culture. This is, as Mahmood Mamdani has argued, a manifestation of "culture talk" that assumes Western – American and European – countries are capable of creating and transforming their culture, while Muslim culture is deemed petrified and museumized, and their preference for 'unfair' torture to 'justified' torture stems from this background (766-767).[69] The cinematic depiction of two types of culture – Western progressive and Eastern museumized – in films with

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[68] Portraying the figure of the villain as practicing unfair violence in Hollywood film, as Jane Mayer indicates, is not a new phenomenon, but the ethnicity of the villain has varied over time (2007).

[69] Mamdani explains that, although this conception of a culture's 'essence' became dominant in the late 80s- early 90s, the Western ethnocentric view on culture returns in a different form after 9/11. Further, as Maria Boletsi notes, the culturalization of the post-9/11 political conflict goes hand-in-hand with a moralization of the global conflicts that resulted from 9/11 (Boletsi 2).

a Western perspective on Muslim culture and religion explains the difference in motivation for the torture used by CIA and of Muslim terrorists, and the way in which the latter category is stereotyped.

This is not to say that CIA agents prefer non-violent dialogue, or that they do not secretly enjoy inflicting torture (such as H), or feel they are not responsible for the consequences of torture methods (such as Dan).[70] In *Unthinkable*, H's torture is as gruesome and vivisectionist as the nail extracting, finger-crushing scenes in which Bob and Roger are on the verge of being butchered. Although *Zero Dark Thirty*'s torture is not vivisectionist and ostensibly portrayed as more justifiable and acceptable – and predominantly off-screen – it is no less morally questionable as the less aesthetically appealing torture inflicted by Al-Saleem and Mussawi. Additionally, while Dan and H's need for information was credited as the only motivation, upon closer inspection in both cases their torture was fuelled by punitive elements, as Dan's abusive role-play and H's vivisectionist torture showed.[71]

Moreover, despite personal motivations, a potent political agenda underlies Mussawi's and Al-Saleem torture: retaliation for CIA/US crimes. With his remark, "Welcome to Guantanamo" Al-Saleem points out inhumane treatment of suspected terrorists by Americans, while at the same time lowering himself to the same level as the American torturers at Guantanamo. Al-Saleem's remark nonetheless indicates a political 'necessity' for torture on his part. Mussawi's rage similarly suggests a true and founded disappointment in his former employer. On the one hand, he is staged as a caricature savage terrorist to resemble that which he thinks pertains to the punishment of infidels. His eagerness, however, stems from his previous embeddedness in

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[70] Žižek argues that a certain comfort, or *jouissance*, can be derived from "doing one's job" in a smoothly functioning bureaucratic system, which absolves one of personal responsibility, even when the actions one has to undertake are gruesome and violent. Žižek mentions the Nazi system and Adolf Eichmann in particular as examples (2008a, 69-70).

[71] Grønstad has raised awareness of the 'aesthetic fallacy': violence that is portrayed artfully, tastefully, or predominantly off-screen could sanction ticking bomb scenarios of questionable morality, while scenarios that are *as* morally questionable yet that depict aesthetically less-appealing violence are automatically rejected (2008, 39-40). My analysis shows that this is not the case for the case studies depicting torture.

Western culture and politics, and his desire for recognition and dominance is interwoven with an opposition to perceived Western moral dominance based on experience.

When comparing the formal means and narrative structure of the four films' torture scenes, three major differences strike the eye: firstly, the difference between the motivations of gaining information and inflicting punishment. Secondly, this difference structures the 'shape' of torture ('justified' and 'unfair'). Upon closer look, however, both 'types' of torture analysed disintegrate the binary distinction between justified and necessary on the one hand, and unfair and punitive on the other. Thirdly, although Mussawi and Al-Saleem substantiate their use of torture with a political motivation, H's and Dan's torture is likely to be perceived as more justifiable by the Western viewer. Although their torture is substantiated with and motivated by political criticism, the torturers in *Syriana* and *Body of Lies* are depicted as more barbaric than those in *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable*, which suggests that Muslims are brutal and prefer punitive, ritualized violence to debate.

The torture scenes do not stand on their own, and when considered as a segment in the narrative their function in the plot changes our perspective of the films' political agendas, as well as of the use of torture therein. In *Syriana*, the seeming binary between torturer and tortured is problematized. In addition, not only is the trope of the barbarian Muslim terrorist is questioned, but also that of the white, masculine, and morally superior hero. In chapter 1 I analysed the intricate position of female intelligence agents associated with torture. In the next sections I will explore the way in which *Syriana* and *Body of Lies* cast their protagonists Bob and Roger as antiheroes and will briefly discuss the reception of their roles as antiheroes subjected to torture. This analysis allows me to further investigate the extent to which *Syriana* can be regarded as a 'critical' film that plays with normative gender and ethnicity tropes associated with torture, and that poses a self-reflexive critique on US political and economic interference in the Middle East.

2. The scenes' locations and functions in the plot

In *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable*, torture becomes a red threat; Ammar's abuse in *Zero Dark Thirty* is an embedded scene that particularly marks Maya's initiation into advanced interrogation practices, and also positions Ammar, the terrorist, as a side character. Yusuf's torture, and hence the interaction between Yusuf, H, and Helen, is presented as the plot's pivotal theme. In *Body of Lies*, Roger's torture by Al-Saleem is accentuated and framed as a climax in the plot; it seems only a matter of time before Roger is caught and tortured by Al-Saleem, whom he has been looking for the entire film. Further, since the scene is one of the final ones in the film, Roger's subsequent release is anticipated and does not come as a surprise. The interplay between Roger and Al-Saleem is deferred for the sake of plot development and conclusiveness; the scene in which Roger is tortured is a culmination of events and needs a dialogue to express conflicting beliefs concerning religion and politics. As such, their dialogue, rather than rage or betrayal, becomes a pivotal component.

Not only does 'unfair' torture occur in the film, however, but so too does 'justified' torture. When tortured, Roger has a flashback in which, in the film's first few scenes which introduce him as an agent operative in the Middle East, he is present during the beating of an apparently Muslim man in Sammara, Iraq. A medium close-up of Roger's face reveals his discomfort when witnessing the man's torture. His unease suggests he has issues with the use of torture – a sign of his moral disposition, or his incapability of doing anything about it. These shots of Roger's face alternate rapidly with shots of the man, cuffed and blindfolded, being beaten with a baseball bat. The scene is short and the man soon succumbs, but it derives its significance from the previous scene that frames a suicide attack in Manchester. Although the tortured man is not interrogated, the viewer can assume the man has a connection to the terrorist network responsible for the attack and is therefore tortured. The film thus starts with a torture scene and, in an elliptical fashion, ends with a torture scene. The discrepancy between the man's beating and death and Roger's torture and rescue is blunt, as

it suggests that Roger, as American CIA agent, does not 'deserve' this torture but the assumed terrorist in the first scene does.

Unlike *Body of Lies*, *Zero Dark Thirty*, and *Unthinkable*, *Syriana* does not revolve around a paranoid, accelerated 'ticking bomb' scenario in which terrorists have to be captured and neutralized. In this sense, *Syriana*'s focus on the consequences of global illegitimate politics and economics is more prominent, and although arms trafficking – by the US as much as by the Middle East – can be regarded as a form of terrorism, the War on Terror is less significant a theme than in *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Unthinkable*, and *Body of Lies*. The focus on global politics rather than on fighting terrorism translates to the position of the torture scene in *Syriana* as mid-narrative instead of as a climactic finale. Bob's torture proves to be a catalyst for crucial plot developments and his rivalry with Mussawi is of secondary importance. As a result, the scene is abrupt and relatively short (around four minutes).

The torture scenes of *Syriana* and *Body of Lies* both potently reflect as well as determine Bob and Roger's position as protagonists. In the next section I will illustrate how both films stage their protagonists as antiheroes in a manner that determines how the viewer is to perceive the films' political agenda.

The negotiation of white moral superiority

The torture scene in *Syriana* stresses Bob's subservient position as a disillusioned agent caught in the grand scheme of foreign affairs, and in particular as one positioned between the CIA and Middle Eastern parties in the investigation of the stolen missile. Where Bob passively undergoes his torture, Roger's status as star of the scenes is reinforced by his resistance, the video camera, the 'cavalry', as Al-Salaam notes, that comes to rescue him, his 'undeserved' torture, and especially by his ability to recover from the abuse. Despite the finger crushing torture, Roger manages to continue conversing with Al-Saleem, and the excruciating pain that his face betrays does not prevent him from maintaining his consciousness and rationality. When the next scene shows Roger hospitalized and talking with Hani Salaam, he is both energetic and angry. Like Ammar's quick recovery in *Zero Dark Thirty*,

for the sake of narrative and plot development the torture has to remain an interesting viewing experience; allowing the victims to speak and walk despite gruelling torture has narrative purposes, for the torture would take up too much time in the plot otherwise.[72]

Similarly, Bob quickly regains his wits, as shortly after "he's striding through customs with a couple of plasters round his fingertips" (Bradshaw 2006). Despite their gruesome content and suggestive sounds, the finger crushing and nail extraction scenes are visualised just enough, so that unlike *Unthinkable*'s excruciating scenes, the alternating rapid shots between the men's grimacing faces and their fingers only suggest the pain Bob and Roger must suffer, and allows the plot to continue (*Syriana*) or end (*Body of Lies*). Bob's subservience is, however, far less heroic and his mockery of Mussawi and their previous working relationship designates a complicated entanglement between the two men that is less antagonistic than between Roger and Al-Saleem. This entanglement between characters returns throughout *Syriana* and the film can be seen to incorporate a moral grey zone that is not visible in *Body of Lies*.

Despite their extraordinary recovery from torture, Roger and Bob are not presented as heroes, but as antiheroes (Brustein 31), a term that has gained a new meaning after 9/11 in "post-heroic" narratives (Burgoyne 2012a, 8). These narratives, which emerge around 2007/2008, reflect a growing awareness of the side effects of the War on Terror and are increasingly self-conscious and critical about the use of violence and weaponry.

Two branches characterize this shift from patriotic to post-heroic narratives: one category paves the way for narratives that depict American torturers, as presented in the first chapter of this thesis. This category addresses the legal and moral parameters of torture, but it also includes films that 'outsource' their torture activities and have

[72] Other good examples of miraculous recoveries can be found in *First Blood II* and *Casino Royale*, in which Rambo and James Bond are subjected to torture (Rejali 2012, 222).

Muslims conveniently tortured by their 'own' people to avoid the suggestion that 'we', Westerners, are the torturers.[73]

The films in the second branch accentuate the side effects of war and violence for the vulnerable, exposed body, which as Robert Burgoyne argues, assembles many War on Terror films into a particular "body genre" (2012a, 12). At the same time, these films present "an implicit critique of the distance – moral and physical – of remote targeting and weaponry" (ibid.).[74] Some of these War on Terror films are inevitably more about war and warfare, while others are more about ticking bombs and torture. Yet both branches depict mutual bodily exposure and vulnerability on both sides of the conflict. *Syriana* and *Body of Lies* fall into this last category, but they combine this accent on bodily vulnerability with torturing Muslims. However, the trope of the Muslim villain and the theme of CIA agents subjected to 'unfair' torture becomes rare after 2008: portraying the Muslim as stereotypically 'evil' is one thing, but dovetailing this depiction with 'unfair' torture, as is the case in *Body of Lies*, is another.[75]

[73] Such as *The War Within* (2005), *Rendition* (2007), *The Kingdom* (2007), and the recent *Rosewater* (2014).

[74] There are many cinematic forms that, as Burgoyne notes (2012a 7), can be described as a 'body genre'. A particular conception of the term is coined by Linda Williams (1991) in her study on horror, melodrama, and pornography. In relation to the War on Terror body genre, Burgoyne sees a decisive difference between films like *Apocalypse Now* (on the Vietnam War) and *Saving Private Ryan* (on World War Two) and War on Terror films in the sense that most War on Terror films foreground the private and corporeal experience and are "no longer defined by the ideology of total war that shaped the grand narratives of twentieth-century combat" (2012a 8). It can be argued, however, that the rhetorical War on Terror, that kick-started days after 9/11, presupposed a similar ideology of total, global war. This new grand narrative was characterized by President G.W. Bush's statement "Either you're with us or against us" (Bush 30), suggesting that every country on Earth should be involved. The War on Terror films referred to by Burgoyne see a waning of this grand narrative rhetoric.

[75] Around the same time, James Bond's *Casino Royale* (Martin Campbell, 2006), which depicts the torture of James Bond, and *Rescue Dawn* (Werner Herzog, 2006), which depicts the torture of a POW during the Vietnam War, make use of the 'American being tortured by the villain' trope. In recent productions, the trope of the Muslim terrorist seems (at least temporarily) exhausted, and the terrorist is paramilitary or pertaining to a corrupt government (*White House Down* [2013] and *24*), from another ethnicity (*Olympus Has Fallen* [2013], *Quantum of Solace* [2008], and *Skyfall* [2012]), or white American (*Unthinkable*, *Homeland*).

The figure of the antihero is part of the post-heroic narrative that accentuates the body at risk and the antiheroic qualities of its protagonists.[76] Bob and Roger's positions as the pawns of uncompromising, egocentric organisations makes them manipulated dupes of parties and forces beyond their control, and they no longer fully belong to any organization or group. The way in which they are forced to compromise their masculinity, and their precarious positions as outsiders breaks with the depiction of the masculine antihero as successfully operating autonomously. The cowboy in the classic Western thanks his valour and antiheroism precisely by moving between parties, while representing the best of both worlds: 'going native' (Native American) as well as restoring colonial law and justice by operating outside of it (Verstraten 2009, 175). In a contemporary format, the Vietnam veteran action antihero of the 80s and 90s "patriot narratives," (Jeffords 331), and of the hero in patriotic narratives released shortly after 9/11 (Markert 32, 314) also function autonomously and outside the law to successfully fight threats and injustice (Jeffords 333-335).

Bob and Roger, however, neither embody this conventional masculine valour, nor do they operate succesfully outside of law or organizations.[77] In *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable*, the CIA and FBI agents also function outside of law to catch terrorists, but are respected by their organization and are succesful in their jobs. Bob's long career, conversely, has left him disillusioned and morose. With his inability to practice political discretion he agitates his superiors, and his assignment to kill prince Nasir in the Persian Gulf is an attempt to keep him away from headquarters. After Mussawi's betrayal of the CIA, they

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[76] Robert Brustein witnessed the rise of the antihero in the late 50s. The antihero would, however, temporarily be replaced by the reinstatement of the masculine hero in the Reagan Era and again shortly enjoy revival after 9/11. Burgoyne argues that the Hollywood War on Terror 'body genre' connects the vulnerable and exposed body to new questions about antiheroism. Dan Hassler-Forest (2011), Slavoj Žižek (2012a) and Todd McGowan (2012, 127) notice a similar antihero movement in post-9/11 superhero narratives, but explain the status of antiheroism, its cause, and its implications differently.

[77] The antihero of the post-heroic, post-9/11 narrative can best be compared to the antiheroic Vietnam War veteran of the 70s, who was traumatized by war and felt duped by the American government (Gosline 94-95).

have Bob, who is recovering from torture, investigated and scapegoat him to pacify those involved. While fighting to make his way back into the CIA, the man responsible for his removal tells him, "Your entire career you've been used, and you've probably never even known what for".

Although staged as a 'star' of his own torture scene, Roger has to negotiate his autonomy as an intelligence agent in favour of Ed and Hani's conflicting agendas. He clashes with his boss Ed, a Texan conservative, who does not hide his low esteem of other ethnicities and cultural diversity. Hani, by contrast, presents himself as a kind gentleman but uses Roger as live bait to find Al-Saleem. Roger defies orders and operates autonomously in an effort to safeguard political stability, but realizes that the man he has come to trust most uses his torture as bait to catch the big Al-Qaeda fish. However, while Roger's rescue by Hani Salaam indicates his protection by Salaam's intelligence agency, Bob's antiheroism exceeds that of Roger: he does not have similar guarantees as he is banned and excluded from political protection, and operates autonomously against his will. His status comes close to that of Ammar and Yusuf's status of "bare life", the extra-legal status of he who "no longer exists". As a banned subject, Bob is included in the system by his very exclusion from law and its protection (Agamben 1998, 8-12).

The difference between how *Syriana* and *Body of Lies* construct their antiheroic protagonist, I argue, is a crucial one: their antiheroic image comprises both Bob and Roger's intricate positions as pawns, and also their respective physical appearances. Together, I argue, these two become significant indicators of how the spectator is to perceive the diverging political agendas of these two films: while Bob's antiheroic character poses an explicit critique of the US interference in other countries' political and economic policies, which result in violent practices, torture, and death, *Body of Lies* uses a veneer of antiheroism to justify the hunt for terrorists in the Middle East.

Apart from their positions as pawns and outsiders, another way in which Bob and Roger's masculine heroism is negotiated is by means of their looks. George Clooney in his role of Bob, a grizzled veteran with

a pudgy waistline "has been giving his handsome lessons a miss" (Bradshaw 2006).[78] He has grown a 'Muslim' beard and speaks Farsi, but he is also a fast-food-consuming, sombre man. His long stay in the Middle East as an undercover agent has estranged him from Western social codes of conduct and office conventions. Roger similarly speaks Arabic, wears long, local gowns, and has a unkempt beard, but unlike Bob, does so in order to capture terrorists without raising too much suspicion. He prefers working in the Middle East to working in the United States, and this preference is emphasized throughout. While his boss Ed grows an obsession with killing 'bad guys', Roger falls in love with an Iranian nurse and invests time and energy into becoming part of her world, an endeavour that is often sabotaged by the strict regulations and etiquette between men and unmarried women. When Hani Salaam – whom Roger confides in and respects tremendously – compliments him by saying he is secretly an Arab because he speaks the language and respects his elders, the compliment is readily accepted.

Through Bob and Roger's appropriation of these traits connoting Arab ethnicity the films' consciously rearticulate the cultural binaries as presented in the scenes of torture, and undermine the trope of the white American male hero as opposed to the Muslim villain. Like a contemporary 'Lawrence of Arabia', Roger and Bob each borrow and practice aspects of Arab culture according to their needs at particular moments. At the same time, they are reminded through the use of torture that accentuates their otherness and reminds them of their American background, that they could never blend in with the cultural and moral codes of Muslim society.

Apart from illustrating how Bob and Roger prefer aspects of Middle Eastern culture to that of the US, the appropriation of these ethnic traits are important for another reason. This reason concerns the way in which a perception of George Clooney as Bob and Leonardo DiCaprio as Roger in the narratives works in tandem with the way in

[78] Brustein sees "puffy-faced and tending to fat" as physical characteristics of the antihero and antiheroine (29). Richard Dyer has pointed to the relation between masculine, powerfully-built bodies and mental and social superiority (2007, 310-311). Bob and Roger's unkempt physical appearance, which occasionally seems to suggest Arab dress is slovenly, accentuates their statuses as antiheroes.

which these actors thwart their image as handsome film stars outside the narrative. A star image, according to Richard Dyer, consists of what we refer to as his or her 'image', made up of screen roles and stage-managed public appearances, yet also, he argues, "of images of the manufacture of that 'image' and of the real person who is the site or occasion of it (2004, 7-8)".[79] Reading stars as images thus includes interpreting features of a particular performance onscreen with other 'texts' that relate to the star and that construct his or her public image. Similar to the way Samuel L. Jackson's role in *Unthinkable* was partially determined and interpreted by his other screen roles, in the cases of George Clooney (Bob) and Leonardo DiCaprio (Roger), audience foreknowledge of previous screen roles as well as public appearances together construct the image of these stars (Dyer 1994, 2, 121 and 2004, 4), which proves to be a crucial factor in interpreting the films' political undercurrents.

Where Samuel L. Jackson's other screen roles were characterized by dark humour, wittiness, and understatements, Clooney and DiCaprio have performed a fair number of roles that were, at least initially, defined by their good looks.[80] After these roles, both pursued ridding themselves of the 'heartthrob' label by playing more serious parts.[81] DiCaprio's real-life appearances as an environmental and animal activist and a UN climate change ambassador (D'Zurilla 2014), reaffirmed by appearances in politically-engaged films like *Blood Diamond* (Edward Zwick, 2006) add to his image as a seasoned actor to be taken seriously.

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[79] Dyer uses an intertextual approach to determine stars as phenomena of production and consumption, as star images that are made, read, and consumed. The star is such an effect or product of the cinema system and of his or her own stage-managed public appearances, that the spectator will take both aspects into account in tandem.

[80] DiCaprio achieved fame for playing the part of Romeo in Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), subsequently for his role in the epic and romantic *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997), and for wandering the screen in swimming trunks in *The Beach* (Danny Boyle, 2000).

[81] DiCaprio has associated himself with Christopher Nolan and Quentin Tarantino, and was most notably engaged in a series of productions with director Martin Scorsese: *Gangs of New York* (2002), *The Aviator* (2004), *The Departed* (2006), *Shutter Island* (2010), and *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013).

Like DiCaprio, George Clooney has carefully rid himself of his Dr Ross ('ER') image by combining his appearance as a smart gentleman with serious performances (e.g. *Michael Clayton* [Tony Gilroy, 2007]), and his roles as a producer with an extensive background of humanitarian work and political activism (Flock 2012). Although starring in satirical war films like *Three Kings* (David O. Russell, 1999), [82] which simultaneously rearticulate American foreign interventions and mock Clooney's fame, *Syriana* is the first role in which Clooney has deliberately made himself 'unattractive'. Notably, as a signifier of Clooney's stardom, all reviews of *Syriana* mention Clooney's physical transformation in praise or in mockery,[83] and all translate this appearance as an indication of the film's expression of serious political messages. Similarly, DiCaprio's transformation into "the acceptable face of CIA black ops complete with a bum-fluff beard (signifying wisdom) and pensive frown (suggestive of Growing Doubts)" (Brooks 2008), is mocked as well as considered contrived, but reviews express this as a sign of the film's serious political undertone.[84]

Clooney and DiCaprio thus underwent both a transformation from heartthrobs to serious and political personas in their stage-managed public appearances, and also in their screen roles. Although, as stars, they do not have access to real political power, they can have, as Dyer notes, political or reactionary significance (1994, 7). Particularly in *Syriana* and *Body of Lies*, their current 'image' bestows on the films an aura of authenticity (Dyer 2004, 11) as Clooney and DiCaprio's looks and roles become more credulous and relatable. By accentuating their disadvantageous positions – Davids against the

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[82] Some have argued that satirical war films like *Three Kings* would no longer be possible after 9/11, but *The Men Who Stare at Goats* (Grant Heslov, 2009) and films like the British production *Four Lions* (Chris Morris, 2010) prove otherwise. These films were made, however, during the Obama administration, when films about the War on Terror became more nuanced and self-reflexive.

[83] Peter Travers (2005), Jeremiah Kipp (2005), and Peter Bradshaw (2006) interpret Clooney's effort to make himself less attractive for a political plot as a paradoxical form of 'macho pride'.

[84] Brooks' review of *Body of Lies* resonates with reviewers Philip French and A.O. Scott, who mock Leonardo DiCaprio, Russell Crowe (as Ed Hoffman), and director Ridley Scott. (Dutch newspapers, I noticed, were considerably less preoccupied with the actors' physical transformation in both films).

Goliath of world politics and Al-Qaeda – rather than their looks, Clooney and DiCaprio become vulnerable and genuine characters. Apart from suggesting that the spectator should take these films with genuine actors and its political themes seriously, Clooney and DiCaprio's 'commonness' diminishes the line between the political reality of the spectator and the antihero in politically sensitive plots (deWaard and Tait 154; Brustein 28).[85]

As the figures of the cowboy and soldier or veteran indicate, heroes are conventionally men, yet this conceptualization of Clooney and DiCaprio sheds yet more light on the role of Maya (Jessica Chastain) in *Zero Dark Thirty*. Her role raises the question of whether female protagonists can be, and by extension can be perceived as, heroic and antiheroic. In terms of this specific screen performance, Maya could be seen as the female embodiment of the antihero: she uses up all her energy to find bin Laden. This draws attention to the film's political tone, as the repression of traits deemed feminine while at work suggests that the film's political themes are more important than the relationships between protagonists. Maya is, however, integrated into and protected by her organisation. She works in a unit, gives orders, and her extra-legal operations which lead to bin Laden's hiding place eventually make her heroic. Yet there is, as discussed, a catch to her gender expression: Maya's transformation from gender-defying obsessed agent at work to normative female character after bin Laden's capture suggests heroes can be female. This transformation also makes the expression of Maya's gender while pursuing bin Laden problematic by assuming that, when the moment of heroic bravura and action has passed, heroism fades into female emotionality when the hero is a woman.

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[85] Although a familiar star is recognisable and easily 'placeable', his stardom together with his transformation into a 'common' character allows for easy identification. At the same time, the fact that the star suddenly appropriates a new or different part – a rupture with previous performances – could also mean that this new character 'type' makes identification more problematic. As Richard Dyer argues, "the truth' about a character's personality and the feelings which it evokes may be determined by what the reader takes to be the truth about the person of the star playing the part" (1994, 141).

In terms of Chastain's previous screen roles and public appearances, *Zero Dark Thirty* followed shortly on her breakthrough role in Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* (2011), in which she plays Grace, a tender-hearted mother in 1950's Texas. Due to her recent debut, she does not have a similar performance record to Clooney and DiCaprio and her public appearances are less frequent, less outspoken, and less consistent. This means that when watching these three War on Terror films a reverse movement occurs; in the cases of Clooney and DiCaprio, one first takes into account the actors and their previous films and public images, and then connects these to their onscreen roles. With Chastain's role as Maya, one first sees her character, a female agent operating in a male-dominated world while looking for an infamous terrorist, after which her burgeoning star image appears.[86] The other 'textual' extradiegetic features are thus less potent in Chastain's case, in comparison to Clooney and DiCaprio's stage-managed, humanitarian work.

Having analysed Bob and Roger's star image as such, the question arises of whether or not this image of antiheroic, yet authentic and genuine characters, operating between the uncompromising CIA and terrorist villains, implicitly endorses political and economic interventions in the Middle East and extra-legal activities initiated by the US. In other words, are tortured antiheroes staged in tandem with Muslim torturers, not to create a critical view on America's or the CIA's violent and intrusive foreign affairs, but as covert sustenance for the moral superiority of the US and of the CIA's very presence there?

In *Body of Lies* this proves to be the case, yet not in *Syriana*. In both films, the CIA performs a morally dubious role when it uses its agents as bait. By unscrupulously positioning Bob and Roger in precarious roles as pawns and victims of a political system, it is

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[86] Of course, these star images are locally and historically dependent, for if one has never before seen a film with George Clooney or Leonardo DiCaprio, or if one is unfamiliar with their public appearances, these intertextual features will not be taken into account when watching *Syriana* and *Body of Lies*. In that case, the two protagonists will be perceived in a similar way as Maya and judged only for this particular performance. Likewise, *Zero Dark Thirty* will be viewed differently in twenty years' time, when Jessica Chastain's star image is more developed.

suggested that the CIA maintains a problematic relationship with its employees, while mingling with and disrupting foreign governments and their economies. While portraying Muslim terrorists as practising unfair and punitive torture, by positioning the CIA as a morally dubious organisation that folds Bob and Roger into their webs ('bodies') of lies, and by emphasizing the side-effects of war and the vulnerable and exposed body on both sides, the films abandon the heroism and self-evident moral superiority displayed in earlier patriotic films and subvert the trope of the action hero fighting terrorists (Markert vii, 32, 314).

Body of Lies, however, implicitly reinforces Roger's bravery,[87] thereby staging him as a heroic antihero. Whereas Bob's depressed state manifests when tortured, Roger actively resists and engages in conversation with Al-Saleem about the evilness of the latter's beliefs. This dialogue expresses and justifies Roger's work as an intelligence agent in the Middle East. Although used as bait, his antiheroism is overthrown when it turns out his work, and indirectly that of the CIA and of the Jordanian Intelligence, was fruitful in finding Al-Saleem, and as such underscores Roger's character as superior in terms of strength as well as morality. Roger's antiheroism thus implicitly reinforces his heroic courage and he becomes the moral voice of the CIA.

Clooney's role as Bob, however, is not a veneer for the heroic patriotism *Body of Lies* upholds. His character, which underscores the political message of the narrative, exposes the reactionary potential of his star image, an image that includes intertextual references to other 'texts' in which Clooney appears, and that now stands in favour of the film's political message. This political message, accentuated by the star Clooney as Bob Barnes, pertains to the immorality and corrupt activities of CIA. The CIA's plan to deactivate Bob after being tortured first fails, but is then achieved by accidently assassinating him in the drone strike. Bob's submissive pessimism and his position as outcast

[87] As mentioned, *Body of Lies* fits into the War on Terror body genre as noted by Burgoyne. Other films that reinforce the bravery of its protagonists include *A Mighty Heart* (2007), *Rendition* (2007), *The Kingdom* (2007), *The Hurt Locker* (2008), and *Zero Dark Thirty*.

reinforce his function as opposition to underhand practices, yet also accentuate his tragic character. Thus, in *Body of Lies*, Roger's heroic antiheroism neutralizes a critical depiction of the CIA as a morally ambiguous organization interfering in Middle Eastern politics, and Roger's figure is staged alongside a portrayal of Muslim torturers as evil villains using 'unfair' measures. In *Syriana* both parties operate within a moral grey area: the CIA, it is suggested, has duped Bob as well as Mussawi.

In addition to Bob, *Syriana* presents the character of Prince Nasir, who counters the depiction of the villainous Muslim torturer. In the sections below I will probe his role and argue that his character's purpose is twofold: together with Bob he embodies a critique of America's sabotaging of foreign economic affairs and of the CIA's moral ambivalence, neither of which is detectable in *Body of Lies*. Secondly, his character provides an Arab perspective that moves beyond a stereotypical appearance of a 'good Muslim,' but that is no less problematic than that of the evil Muslim villain. The character of Nasir is thus important to reflect upon, as it will substantiate my analysis of the entanglement between the film's use of torture, ethnic tropes, and a critique of American political and economic interference in the Middle East.

The 'good Muslim' as a critique of US interference

Despite the portrayal of terrorists as evil and sadistic, *Syriana* and *Body of Lies* do not portray *all* Muslims as evil or terrorists. Various appearances of what we can call the 'good Muslim' or 'good Arab' characters[88] are a 'benevolent' yet problematic attempt to nuance the idea that all Arabs are terrorists. These good Muslim characters consist of Prince Nasir in *Syriana*, and Roger's love interest Aisha, his associate Bassam (who is killed early in the film), and the head of Jordanian Intelligence Hani Salaam in *Body of Lies*.

[88] The phrase 'good Arab' or 'good Muslim' has become a common trope in cultural expressions, but Mamdani and Shehabuddin are particularly helpful in illustrating what this cultural figure means and how it is adapted in film.

Both the evil Muslim villain, such as Al-Saleem, and the good Muslim can be seen as a form of "culture talk" (Mamdani 766), which, as a Western invention (Shehabuddin 103) self-evidently assumes that fundamentalist Islam prevents a genuine and moderate Islam from flourishing. It assumes good Muslims are keen on resembling Western standards and norms and that this assimilation will increase their chances of being accepted.[89] In film, their characters are constructed through visual and behavioural traits, such as a having a benevolent and responsive attitude, education (often in the West), a progressive political stance, being well mannered and well dressed, and speaking eloquent English. Moreover, good Muslims are far lighter skinned and wear lighter clothes than evil Muslim villains like Al-Saleem.[90] Hani Salaam and Prince Nasir wear current Western suits – as does Mussawi, the former CIA agent – and white thawbs, which are important signs of power, prestige, and status (Dyer 1997, 299).

These good Muslims are also usually undeveloped side characters that conveniently reinforce Western protagonists' actions and opinions. Bassam is brutally killed by his 'own people', Muslim radicals, in *Body of Lies,* and Aisha serves only to underscore Roger's preference for the Middle East. Some Muslim characters combine traits of both tropes, that of the good and evil Muslim. Of all subplots in *Syriana*, least attention is invested in Wasim's storyline and character. Aiming to make progress by working for an American oil company, Wasim is duped by the merging of Connex-Killen, with oil rights obtained through bribery. As a result, the young Pakistani man loses his job, food, and shelter, and radicalizes under the influence of the charismatic Egyptian man who stole the CIA's missile. Finally, he carries out a suicide attack on an oil tanker of his former employer with the device. Although he becomes the victim of underhand oil politics, the

[89] Alain Badiou has neatly summarized contemporary Western ethics regarding ethnic otherness, to which culture talk' belongs, in the phrase "become like me and I will respect your difference" (25).
[90] The use of lighting and props to make some white and non-white characters lighter or whiter skinned than others is not specifically used to connote goodness and evil only in War on Terror films, but has, as Dyer notes, a longer tradition in photographic media and film (1997 11, 94-110, 135-142).

narrative does not sufficiently show why Wasim opts for his radical move. Although depicted sympathetically, his character implicitly reinforces the idea that Muslims are susceptible to indoctrination. Peter Bradshaw's argument that *Syriana* only stages Muslim extremists and suicide bombers and that "moderate Islam does not exist" (2006) seems founded on the characters of Mussawi and Wasim.

In *Body of Lies*, Hani Salaam gains, like Wasim, an ambivalent position that borders on 'bad Muslim-ness'. He is a well-mannered gentleman, intelligent and educated, but is by no means responsive and loyal to the Western cause. Instead of mimicking Western codes of conduct and dress with the aim to assimilate, he mocks Western characters.[91] He respects Roger for his efforts to integrate, who in turn, craving Hani's recognition, readily accepts his compliments. Hani loathes the uncompromising US foreign policies embodied by the self-centred character of CIA boss Ed Hoffman, a Texan patriot and "a ruthless, xenophobic bully" (French). As head of Jordanian Intelligence, Hani's method of using Roger as bait, of playing Roger and Ed off against each other, and of retrieving information through torture reveal his dubious morality and uncompromising approach. His violent game with Roger, however, not only mocks Westerners, but also suggests his deep roots in Muslim culture. As such, he bolsters the image of Islamic inclination to brutal violence.

Like Hani Salaam, Prince Nasir gains more substance than his fellow good Muslims and becomes, together with Bob, the focal point of *Syriana*'s critique of political and economic interference in the Middle East. Peter Bradshaw's statement that "moderate Islam does not exist" (2006) in *Syriana* is undermined through the character of Nasir: he is autonomous, in the sense that he is not positioned against an American character, he undergoes a transformation, has his own storyline and occasionally focalises parts of this subplot, which disrupts the

[91] On a diegetic level, his character can be seen to simultaneously resemble and mock the West's behavioural and physical norms in a form of "mimicry" (Bhabha 85-86). This simultaneous resembling and mocking of characters lays bare the artificiality of Western norms, self-evidently appropriated by Hollywood films, as well as of the (cinematic) stereotype of the good Muslim.

ethnocentric perspective provided by white Western protagonists. Educated in Oxford, he wears suits as well as traditional Saudi thawbs, a symbol of his dual interest and position. He favours a healthy global economy that includes different business partners, and as the oldest son, Nasir is a likely candidate to succeed his father to the throne. Torn between his brother and father's conservative and oppressive regime on the one hand, and the shady oil politics and economics of the US on the other, Nasir aims to "I want to create a parliament, I want to give women the right to vote, I want an independent judiciary, start a petroleum exchange in the Middle East", and rebuild his country.

When his energy analyst Bryan Woodman (Matt Damon) enthusiastically endorses Nasir's plans and prospects, Nasir replies by mocking Woodman's naivety, arguing "except that your president rings my father and says I have unemployment, in Texas, Kansas, Washington State. One phone call later, we're stealing out of our social programs in order to buy overpriced airlines". With these words Nasir confronts the self-interest of the US that will eventually ruin his country. Woodman, however, believes Nasir "might be able to revolutionize not only his country but the whole region [...] he could be like [Mohammed] Mossadegh in 1952 in Iran". His hope of having Nasir establish a healthy and progressive economy is shattered when Nasir's conservative father, inspired by current US support, favours his younger son to accede the throne by side-lining Nasir. Due to Nasir's trading with various non-American parties, including the Chinese, the CIA believes Nasir is responsible for the missing missile and is the financer behind the Egyptian's acquisition of the weapon. Deemed a threat to the US, suddenly Nasir's opportunities to reform are drastically diminished when both his father and the CIA cease to support him.

His conversation with Woodman indicates a tipping point in Nasir's mood, and he changes from an optimistic and reform-minded man into a defeated one. He reminds Woodman of the pressing conflicting interests and the fraudulent political situation by saying, "I accepted a Chinese bid, the highest bid, and suddenly I'm a terrorist. A godless communist". By connecting "terrorist" to "communist" in one

sentence, Nasir mocks Hollywood's desire for categorizing bad guys as America's current political enemy, whether communist (in the 90s) or terrorist (in the 2000s). Secondly, Nasir attacks the US government's destructive interest in oil and international politics that traces back to the Cold War.

The historical precedent of the War on Terror and its relation to previous conflicts is made explicit by Woodman's comment about Nasir being like the Iranian democratic politician Mossadegh. Woodman's remark links the current status of contemporary politics to decades of shifting political and economic interest and deals, and emphasizes that leaders, like Mossadegh and Nasir, can be replaced by those who favour and endorse America's vision. With the character of Nasir, *Syriana* diverges from other War on Terror films like *Body of Lies*, *Unthinkable*, and *Zero Dark Thirty*, which seem to present their particular post-9/11 War on Terror context as separate from pre-9/11 relations between the US and the Middle East. As such, a contemporary Mossadegh, Nasir not only reinforces the negative image of the CIA created in *Syriana*, but his character also makes political parallels explicit. Whereas good Muslims like Aisha reinforce Western actions and opinions, Nasir becomes a tragic figure who is destroyed by the CIA, an organization more corrupt and immoral than himself. Nasir's good Muslim character therefore combines a critique of Hollywood politics and its use of tropes with a critique of America's meddling in the Middle East that spans decades.

After Bob's torture, the CIA deactivates Bob and decides to assassinate Nasir with a drone. In doing so, the US not only facilitates Nasir's younger brother's accession to the throne, but also guarantees American access to oilfields, rendering Nasir's democratic and progressive agenda obsolete. When Bob learns of these plans, he hastens through the desert towards Prince Nasir's convoy. Before Bob is able to warn Nasir the drone hits them, killing Bob, Nasir and the prince's family. At the same time, the camera alternates between shots of the annual 'Oil Industry Man of the Year' party that awards a Connex-Killen CEO, while praising the company's 'strategic partner', Prince Nasir's younger brother. *Syriana*'s narrative then culminates in Wasim's suicide attack on an oil tanker. This last shot is a blank one, suggesting

the missile attack's major impact and explosion. This final scene is edited directly after the alternating scene of the drone strike and the Oil Award party. The joint death of the two outcasts, Bob and Nasir, silences them while the oil merger triumphs. The death of Wasim shortly after underscores the vicious politics, circle of violence, and counter attacks co-initiated by the CIA. These three deaths thus become a judgment of American foreign policies that do not consider them "bodies worthy of protection" (Lurie 177) and favours politics over people.

Bradshaw has argued that in *Syriana* the American antagonists remain faceless, while the Middle Eastern villains are clearly identified (of personified) as the Egyptian, Nasir's father and brother, and the suicide bomber, Wasim. Bradshaw argues that this move shows that the film's director Gaghan is "fearful of unsophistication or anti-Americanism or [of] just taking a clear position" (2006). The scene of the Oil Industry Man of the Year Award, however, gives a face to those pulling the strings in Washington and Langley (CIA). In addition, it reveals the hypocrisy of scapegoating and blaming terrorists while trying to hide behind a façade of faceless governmental organisations.

The 'connectedness of everything'

The way in which *Syriana* presents the CIA as wreaking havoc in the Middle East and the film's depiction of the Middle East as a swamp of conflicting global political and financial interests departs from the way in which *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Body of Lies* stage the Middle East. The latter films do so by presenting the area as a dangerous territory and the site of barbarians whose fundamentalism will spread like a virus if not contained. Its spatial vastness, wasteland, and indefinability not only abolish boundaries and borders, but also fuse social life with threat and danger, law with anomie, and backwardness with terrorism. This danger is accentuated by attacks, both suicide and orchestrated, that are based on real events in *Zero Dark Thirty*, and fictional incidents in

Syriana, Body of Lies, and related War on Terror films,[92] which are instigated and retaliated against. These attacks add to the impression of perpetual bodily exposure, but they also undercut the necessity of military or political action. By appropriating terrorist attacks from real life, the films tap into the fear of violent fundamentalism that trespasses national and international boundaries. As such, this depiction of the Middle East as dangerous and backward justifies the torture of suspects of terrorism (*Zero Dark Thirty*) and the hunt for torturing Muslim terrorists to safeguard stability in the US (*Body of Lies*).

Syriana, on the other hand, does not necessarily, nor only, attribute anomie and danger to fundamentalism, as do *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Body of Lies*, but also associates the danger in and of the Gulf States with the legal, political, and social side effects of oil industry corruption, misuse of technology, and arms trafficking by the Gulf States' governments as well as the CIA. This deviation from a conventional cinematic conceptualization of the Middle East and the focus on the historical and global interconnectedness of people and countries provides a final critical element in *Syriana*'s narrative.

Although *Syriana*'s torture scene reinstates the idea that Muslims (Mussawi and Wasim) are more susceptible to excessive violence, it also suggests that the torture of CIA agents is a consequence of US interference in the Middle East, which subsequently places people in complex positions, facilitates moral corruption, and inspires revenge. The depiction of torture is integrated into the plot as one of many elements that together constitute a view of American amorality and "murderous *realpolitik*" (Hamid 55). With its tag line "everything is connected", *Syriana* thus uses the "connectedness" of everything and everyone as a way to address America's imperialism, as well as its patriotism and its status as a victim of terrorist attacks shortly after 9/11. The film conveys that this connectedness is not "as random or disparate as we might be led to think" (Hamid 53), but precedes 9/11

[92] Deemed critical for their portrayal of the counter-productivity of violence (*The Kingdom*, 2007) and depiction of torture as ineffective (*Rendition*, 2007) both narratives present a backward and dangerous Middle East by means of unnamed locations and the foreign city as a dangerous maze.

(as recognised by Woodman's reference to Mossadegh), and includes the existence and rise of terrorist networks in reaction to decades of shifting political and economic interests and deals.

This is not to say that the film presents global corporate interest as a motor behind or as an excuse for terrorism or torture, but since "everything is connected", only a few manage to keep their hands clean. For every evil Muslim, there is a good one, and for every evil American, there is a good one, and so the ideology inherent to 'culture talk' is productively reversed. That is, when Arab culture is internally divided along the lines of conservative/progressive and fundamentally religious/moderately religious, *Syriana* shows that 'the West' (the US) has a similar divide, symbolized by the joint deaths of Bob and Nasir. Together, they embody the "rhizomatic" (deWaard and Tait 158-159) intricate connectedness of the characters on a micro-level, as well as that of macrocosmic global affairs. Although the reversion of 'culture talk' is still a binary way of approaching matters of ethnicity and torture, *Syriana* shows a sliding scale of morality and immorality, responsibility and complicity, in which the occurrence of torture is only one component.

In *Body of Lies*, the criticism of American imperialism seems to be a half-hearted attempt to counter the film's underlying message of the necessity of American intelligence agents working in the Middle East. The film's plot feeds on the fear of a global network of terrorism that rejects borders and entangles the West in its giant web (a situation Judith Butler has termed the "spectral infinity of the enemy" [2004b 34]). Most of the terrorists' spectrality and spatial omnipresence is communicated by means of the video recording of the near-execution of Roger, and also by shots of Roger that frame him in the video displays of a drone, governed and watched by the CIA. In turn, technology proves useful in tracking down terrorists (which lends the film its spy characteristics of speed and secrecy, as well as its pace).[93] As such, the Middle East is depicted as a dangerous region, where barbarian

[93] See Paul Virilio's work on the link between technology and speed in logistical and actual war, and the role of technology used *to* film and as used *in* film.

terrorists behead CIA agents and where CIA agents need to be monitored 24/7.

Whereas in *Syriana* the CIA is depicted as a shady and uncompromising organization, "keen to bump off a good man they see as a threat to their interests" (Segal 2006), in *Body of Lies* Roger is the CIA's moral voice and his boss Ed Hoffman its 'rotten apple', responsible for racist statements and violent excess. This 'rotten apple' motif returns in many films that criticize US foreign policies and violent measures,[94] and provides a clever way of criticizing a morally ambiguous institution or governmental body without presenting this morally ambiguous character as metonymically standing in for his employer.

Having thus analysed the occurrence of torture in relation to *Syriana* and *Body of Lies*' rendering of American political interference and economic interests in the Middle East, it is, finally, important to illustrate how the films' diverging styles evoke different forms of spectatorship. *Body of Lies*' seamless, conventional narrative and *Syriana*'s formal and semantic complexity position the spectator as a compliant viewer and as a critical viewer respectively. This, I argue, has consequences for the way in which the spectator is invited to identify with Bob and Roger and for how the torture scenes are eventually perceived. I will first explore the ways in which *Syriana*'s composite character problematizes identification with any individual protagonist and then argue how its torture scene, on the contrary, diminishes the distance between spectator and protagonist.

Identification: The composite character

Syriana's five protagonists, Bob, Wasim, Prince Nasir, Bennett Holiday and Bryan Woodman, as A.O. Scott rightly notes, "add up to a sort of

[94] Examples are particularly found in Vietnam War films from the 70s, which similarly tend to objectify rather than individualize 'those to blame' and depict their soldiers as victims of a political system (a depiction that became more prominent during the Reagan Era in the 80s) (Devine 199). Unlike these objectified government institutions, the 'rotten apple' motif, by giving particular individuals a face, becomes a recurrent theme in War on Terror films and series (such as *Rendition*, *Homeland*, *24*, and also *The Mark of Cain* – see Chapter 3).

composite hero, though their heroism, collective and individual, is highly ambiguous" (2005). This quote reveals three things: the first is the lack of female protagonists in *Syriana*; the second relates to the moral ambiguity of the film's composite hero; and the third, more covertly, suggests that none of these characters separately evokes the spectator's sympathy.

Apart from America's international politics, another principal – psychological – motif in *Syriana* is "the mutual disappointments of fathers and sons" (Scott 2005) and, by extension, disappointment with ideals of masculinity and fatherhood briefly inspired by 9/11 (Hamad 48). This disappointment is expressed in Prince Nasir's conflict with his conservative father, Bob's conflict with the CIA figuring as a dominant and controlling father figure and in his own role as a father to his adolescent son, the drowning of Bryan Woodman's young boy, and Wasim's separation from his father before his suicide attack. Apart from Julie Woodman (Amanda Peet), energy analyst Bryan Woodman's wife, *Syriana* does not stage a single significant female role. Julie's stock character gains some significance when their son drowns in the Emir's swimming pool and the parents cannot find one another in their diverging expressions of grief. In *Body of Lies*, alongside the problematic relationship between Roger and his boss Ed, and that between Roger and Hani, Aisha's character is presented to construct a "class and race barrier defying romance" (McGowan 2011, 114) to substantiate Roger's benevolence towards the Middle East. In both films female characters are thus reduced to having a particular function as 'women of'.

Both Aisha's and Julie Woodman's positions accentuate the marginalization of women in War on Terror narratives. As analysed in Chapter 1, the absence of women in War on Terror films specifically makes their rare appearance in leading parts more likely to be the subject of criticism. In leading parts, women are seen as figureheads or, as side characters, as desirable objects. If gender distribution and equality is an element that co-constitutes a film's progressive undercurrent, then *Body of Lies*' and *Syriana*'s scenarios are conservative. Male characters of colour (and Muslim characters for

obvious reasons) are significantly better represented in leading or supporting roles or as side characters in War on Terror films.[95]

The second characteristic of Scott's quote about *Syriana*'s composite character is that all characters are antiheroes who not only remain ambiguous in the sense of their morality and interest, but also in the identification they elicit. Unlike films with one or two protagonists who attach the spectator to their perspectives and positions, as in *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Unthinkable*, and *Body of Lies*, *Syriana*'s composite character problematizes a similar engagement with any of the protagonists' individually. The film gives all characters, and thus sides, a voice (Bradshaw 2006), but as perspectives constantly shift, the spectator is moved around between different positions and stakes. The three characters who inspire some identification, because their respective parts in the story are slightly larger or more developed, are Bob, Bryan Woodman, and Nasir (Bennett Holiday is a cardboard, impenetrable character in the most complex storyline and Wasim, as discussed, is assigned even fewer character traits and less screen time). Bryan Woodman's character functions as a counter-character to Nasir in their plot line, but takes on a morally dubious position when Nasir financially compensates him and his family for the loss of their son, after which he and his wife become estranged. Nasir's explicit views on the political and economic policies of his father and of the US present him as an accusatory 'moral character', easy to follow and sympathize with. Yet he and Bob are tragic figures that become the victims of higher powers.

Bob's subservience and passivity attest to a world-weariness, of which the most potent (and painful) example is a shot in which he silently eats fast food alone on a deserted café terrace. After being

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[95] Dittmar and Michaud note that most Vietnam War films similarly stage women and non-whites as stock characters, despite their large presence in combat (9). These films are about active combat, whereas in War on Terror films this is not necessarily the case. Examples of non-white actors in War on Terror films are Samuel L. Jackson in *Unthinkable*, Jeffrey Wright in *Syriana*, Jamie Foxx in The *Kingdom*, Don Cheadle in *Traitor* (2008), Alexander Siddig in *Syriana*, and protagonists and crucial supporting actors of various ethnic backgrounds in *24* and *Homeland. Zero Dark Thirty* has surprisingly few non-white characters. Additionally, these actors are all male.

tortured and scapegoated his character changes and seems to deepen.[96] While desperately attempting to find out who is responsible for his scapegoating, his sudden desperation and anger inspire sympathy. Nonetheless, the difficulty in attaching to Bob's character is created by his morose facial expressions, and by the many alternations between his character and the remaining characters and plot lines. The torture scene, however, in which Bob focalises large parts, marks a break with the difficulty to align to Bob.

Disruptive torture: *Syriana*'s realism and critical reflection

Having analysed Bob and Nasir's function and Bob's part as a component of the composite character, it appears that *Syriana*'s torture scene is the only moment in which the spectator perceives the situation through Bob's eyes. In point-of-view shots the spectator sees Mussawi through Bob's eyes, facing him in a skewed angle shot from his position on the floor. Mussawi throws water in his face and soon after, states his intention to behead Bob, who, too beaten down to get up, sees Mussawi coming toward him. Moreover, the claustrophobic nature of the event is established through Bob's limited perspective, which translates in close-ups of Bob's face and shots that frame only body parts or a blurry background. This perspective of Bob's torture disrupts the impossibility of identifying with characters throughout Syriana's plot and with Bob in particular.

The torture scene is the only truly violent scene in *Syriana*; the drone attack shows the scene of explosion but no bodies, and a white screen suggests the missile attack's impact. Although the torture scene is not nearly as graphic as that of *Unthinkable*, the suggestive nail cracking sounds and the spectator's proximity to Bob's body and perspective create a stylistic rupture with the film's 'clean' style. However, both the torture scenes of *Syriana* and *Unthinkable* are disturbing, yet in different ways: the graphic content of *Unthinkable* presents disturbing images, while *Syriana* – as well as *Body of Lies* and

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[96] None of the characters in *Syriana* is truly round due to the composite character. See Richard Dyer's analysis of round characters and the traits that they should have (1994, 104-108).

Zero Dark Thirty – presents images that disturb (see Grønstad for this difference 2011, 6). The unsettlement created by being attached to Bob's skin and viewpoint in *Syriana* is, moreover, different from that of *Body of Lies* in the sense that in *Syriana*'s torture scene we watch through Bob's eyes while he is tortured. Similarly, in *Zero Dark Thirty* Ammar's point-of-view shots, and shots suggesting his point of view, inspire the spectator to feel sympathy for him.

After the torture scene, *Syriana* again disconnects the spectator from Bob's perspective and he changes from a vulnerable and exposed man to a man who regains his composure as well as his moodiness. At the same time, there is something paradoxical about this torture scene. Opposed to the sterility of the violence portrayed throughout the narrative, the point-of-view shots and the implied, largely offscreen nail extractions absorb the spectator into the scene. Disturbed by the gruesomeness of the shots, the spectator is made aware of the act of watching torture (Grønstad 2008, 13), yet is confronted with watching this torture through Bob's eyes.

Apart from the torture scene, the viewer is likely to assess the film's overall complex structure on a predominantly intellectual level. *Syriana*'s often mystifying plot structure with multiple layers transforms it into a 'brainy' film; because the structure is not seamless and the plot lines occur simultaneously, the film urges the viewer to be highly attentive, while dissecting conflicting interests and agendas that are presented through moving perspectives. This complexity that aims for rational rather than emotional engagement, together with the use of the composite character, suggest that *Syriana*, more so than *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Unthinkable*, and *Body of Lies*, was made with an intellectual (or even elitist) audience in mind who can draw on cultural and political knowledge and memory.

At the same time, as with *Zero Dark Thirty*'s incorporation of real footage, *Syriana* is loosely based on former CIA case officer Robert Baer's memoir, with Baer forming the model for Clooney's character

(deWaard and Tait 153).[97] The references to Mossadegh, and Clooney's 'serious' and 'genuine' character, give the impression that the film presents a highly realistic account of the geopolitical state of affairs. The film's integration of subjective experience into a fictional adaptation transforms it into what DeWaard and Tait have called a "docudrama" (154). This drama recreates documented events and may involve real footage, yet needs dramatization to make it palatable and as such deliberately constitutes a grey area between fact and fiction (ibid.). Taking these elements into account, *Zero Dark Thirty* can also be seen to be such a docudrama. Unlike *Syriana*, however, *Zero Dark Thirty*'s narration is constructed along the principles of cinematic realism (causality, plausibility, linearity, character motivation, psychological realism, and compositional unity), and it fuses geopolitical spy characteristics with ticking bomb features that build on suspense and a climactic finale. *Syriana*, however, builds on social verisimilitude and stylistic and semantic complexity that evokes a documentary style of filming, rather than on seamless cinematic realism (Neale 34).[98]

Syriana's complex depiction of social and political relations and the distance established between spectator and screen inspire a critical evaluation of the spectator's own moral position within the intricate entanglement of foreign affairs and corporate globalism with the rise of corruption, violence, and terrorism.[99] The torture scene, however, inspires an affective engagement. As a whole, *Syriana* is thus not a

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[97] The information for Baer's memoir is listed in the credits, and every review makes note of the adaptation (deWaard and Tait 154).

[98] deWaard and Tait call this docudrama style pertaining to producer Steven Soderbergh "very Soderberghian": it pulls the viewer into its 'raw' and seemingly uncut style, while alienating through artifice. They add that although concentrating on facts to avoid opinionated bias, the impartial depiction aimed for by the 'docudrama' is rarely, if ever, achieved (2013,154, 155).

[99] Ethical spectatorship is a self-investigation into moral themes and positions and into presupposed ideas and beliefs, and needs to be distinguished from moral or immoral themes present in the film's content (Koopman 235; Wheatley, 38-39). Catherine Wheatley argues that critical awareness is a necessary condition of ethical awareness. (Counter-)cinema's use of estranging techniques and cinematic reflexivity (that negate the illusion seamless narration provides) allow the viewer to become critically aware of the medium's working. This is a first step towards becoming ethically aware (38-39, 54-55).

provocatively violent film, but the short moment of repellence when witnessing torture creates an insular moment of self-reflection as well as affective engagement.

The seamless narrative structure of *Body of Lies* absorbs the spectator into the plot. Unlike *Syriana*, Roger is the only real protagonist of the film, which facilitates an engagement with his character. His character is delineated against the 'bad guys' (Ed Hoffman and Al-Saleem), and the film makes use of a bombastic finale which establishes a feeling of relief. The film's end, the result of Roger's 'unfair' punishment by Al-Saleem and subsequent rescue, underscores the normative political ideology of the film: the Middle East is a dangerous 'dark continent', occupied by a pervasive terrorist network that brutally punishes Roger for making an effort at integrating, as well as for working for an organization co-responsible for Guantanamo Bay.

The differences between the two films and the analysis of *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable* in the first chapter suggest that the critical engagement inspired by *Syriana* occurs in tandem with a more active viewing attitude, effectuated by the distance between spectator and screen. The other three films draw on affective engagement and passive spectatorship, with the option of becoming more critical.

The different viewing experiences tie in with *Syriana*'s complex form, which resembles European art cinema more than Hollywood cinema; its complicated and unconventional narrative structure with many mystifying plotlines transgresses generic conventions of the Hollywood geopolitical spy thriller with War on Terror elements. The lack of emotional engagement with the characters, the film's lack of speed, and its overt criticism of American international politics make the film a Hollywood oddity. Its playfulness and complexity do not mean, however, that *Syriana*'s message concerning the "connectedness of everything" is not at times an ideologically manipulative one, nor does the film's detached construction rule out an active evaluation of

these ideological messages without ultimately becoming an affected agent (except momentarily during the torture scene).[100]

Although initially meeting difficulty in financing the production, George Clooney's reputation as an actor who combines serious screen roles with humanitarian work, and Steven Soderbergh's reputation as an innovative and maverick political producer (deWaard and Tait 155) align the film with an acceptably democratic and liberal agenda recognisable to (educated) viewers. *Syriana*'s 'progressiveness' and 'critical' message thus operate within the parameters of criticism of the politics in and of Hollywood.[101]

Conclusion

I began this chapter with the assumption that the inversion of torture roles, or of abusive 'role-play' as conceptualized in the previous chapter, leads to a depiction of Muslim torturers as more brutal than their Western counterparts. Secondly, I investigated what we mean when we say a film is 'critical' of US foreign affairs and interventions in the Middle East.

In *Syriana* and *Body of Lies*, Muslim torturers present political motivations as a necessity for retaliation against CIA practices in the Middle East. Their torture, however, is portrayed as punitive, unfair, and brutal. The American agents in *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable* were presented as reverting to torture as a last resort to prevent more terrorist activities, and in comparison to *Syriana* and *Body of Lies*, this motivation presents the torture in the former two films as more 'just'. At the same time, the motivation of retrieving information was questioned when it became apparent that in both films interrogational torture is infused with punitive elements.

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[100] There is another quite harrowing scene in *Syriana* in which Amanda Peet, as Bryan Woodman's wife, holds her drowned little boy in her arms and starts wailing uncontrollably. These scenes invite an emotional engagement with the mother's pain.
[101] *Syriana*'s form resembles the equally complex and schematic 'docudrama' *Traffic* (2002), directed by Stephen Soderbergh with a screenplay by Stephen Gaghan. Gaghan/Soderbergh productions are explicitly political and stylistically unconventional by Hollywood standards.

In *Body of Lies*, Roger's torture in the final scenes eventually justifies the CIA's interference in the Middle East and their hunt for barbarian terrorists. The critical note directed against Guantanamo Bay, presented by fictive Al-Qaeda leader Al-Saleem, is overruled by the impression evoked that terrorist networks are pervasive, brutal, and dangerous. Bob's torture in *Syriana* by Mussawi, a disillusioned former CIA operative turned extremist Muslim, proves less antagonistic, as both men are presented as outcasts and are, as the spectator is led to assume, wronged by the CIA. Bob and Mussawi's ambivalent positions, as well as the punishment underlying Dan and H's torture, disintegrate the binary between justified and necessary interrogational torture and unjustified and unfair punitive torture as initially assumed.

In both films, the occurrence of torture is tightly connected to ethnic tropes, as well as to the way in which the films critically address the CIA's activities in the Middle East post-9/11. In *Body of Lies* Roger is an 'antiheroic hero' who operates between immoral organisations and who becomes the moral voice of the CIA. His boss, on the other hand, is framed as a 'rotten apple' whose unscrupulous actions do not stand in for the CIA as a whole. This duality inherent in the CIA, personified by Roger and his boss, and the stereotypical depiction of the fictive Al-Qaeda leader thus neutralize the critique addressed to the CIA and the US government.

In *Syriana* the tragic characters of 'good Muslim' Prince Nasir and antihero Bob together present an explicit critique of American (consisting of the CIA, businessmen, and politicians) political and economic interference in the Middle East that precedes 9/11, but also of the politics of normative Hollywood ethnic tropes. While *Body of Lies* depicts the Middle East as the dangerous space of barbarian fundamentalists, in *Syriana*, it functions as a swamp of the conflicting global political and financial interests of both sides. In particular, the CIA's unscrupulous activities transform into the lethal fusion of technology, weaponry (missiles and drones), harmful social side effects, and counter-violence, including the torture of CIA agents.

Whereas *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Unthinkable*, and *Body of Lies* provide an American perspective on Muslims and terrorism and as such

construct an image of Muslim characters, *Syriana* disrupts the Western ethnocentric perspective, established by predominantly white male protagonists, through the character of Nasir. At the same time, in *Syriana* as well as in *Body of Lies*, Muslim characters whether 'good' or 'bad', and female characters are generally positioned as backdrops. The emphasis remains on the struggle of the Western male protagonists and both films provide a patriarchal perspective on the War on Terror.

Body of Lies encloses the spectator within a seamless narrative in which emotional engagement with Roger is facilitated. With the exception of the torture scene that functions as an insular moment of affective engagement, *Syriana*'s multiple complex storylines create an emotional distance between the spectator and the film's protagonists. This engagement positions the spectator in Bob's shoes when tortured, while the distance created by film's formal structure activates a critical reflection on the political themes presented, which makes the emotionally-engaged yet passive spectatorship effectuated by *Body of Lies* difficult. Drawing on the spectator's political engagement, *Syriana* seems to want to inspire a critical rethinking of one's own moral position within global "interconnectedness" when watching.

In its play with form, *Syriana* resembles European art house cinema, yet the film remains 'Hollywood' in the sense that its criticism operates within a Hollywood discourse. Furthermore, only few European films have taken up the theme of the global War on Terror and its consequences as pivotal. In the next chapter I will concentrate on two European films and one American adaptation that explicitly accentuate the consequences of torture in a War on Terror context, in particular, the consequences of being forced to torture, which becomes a form of torture in its own right. These consequences of having tortured translate into the development of post-traumatic stress disorder. As such, these films simultaneously show the vulnerability of bodies in warfare while depicting the mental consequences of engaging in violence.

- Chapter 3 -

The veteran as culprit, and PTSD in *The Mark of Cain* and *Brødre/Brothers*

Introduction

In *Zero Dark Thirty* and in *Unthinkable*, the protagonists were in some way complicit in interrogational torture as part of a ticking bomb situation. The interrogated and tortured victims were Muslim detainees, and the experience of torture was limited in that the role-play between torturer and tortured had to effectuate the latter's eventual breakdown. In the second chapter the *experience* of being tortured is investigated by analysing films in which the roles of CIA agent and Muslim are reversed; in *Syriana* and *Body of Lies*, the torture inflicted by Islamic fundamentalists occurred within a broader, geopolitical context in which torture is used as a punitive method for Western political and economic interventions.

The films in this chapter, the British production *The Mark of Cain* (Marc Munden, script Tony Marchant, 2008), the Danish film *Brødre* (*Brothers*, Susanne Bier, 2004)[102] and its American adaptation *Brothers* (Jim Sheridan, 2009), move away from the geopolitical stage to domestic spheres. In these films, the occurrence as well as the experience of being tortured is made secondary to torture's aftermath and to personal trauma. In these three narratives the protagonists are, to various degrees, forced to torture during warfare – which becomes a form of torture in its own right – and experience the consequences of their actions through post-traumatic stress as veterans.

In recent years, film and cultural studies have begun to research the representation of the war veteran in film and the consequences of the intervention in the Middle East for soldiers, as well as for Western and Middle-Eastern societies. The appearance of War on Terror veteran

[102] Since *Brødre* translates to 'brothers', the original title will be used when discussing the Danish version to avoid confusion with the American adaptation.

films roughly coincided with the withdrawal of troops from Iraq in 2007/2008. Unlike the considerable number of films about war veterans that came out soon after the end of the Vietnam War,[103] recent War on Terror war veteran films[104] are not nearly as popular as those made about Vietnam War veterans made at the time.[105]

The difference in how the two wars are represented can be explained by the long timespan of the Vietnam War, for which public support radically toppled after the My Lai Massacre in 1968, which officially ended only after the fall of Saigon in 1975. Shortly after, films began to critically evaluate the war and to illustrate the damaging effects for the soldiers' mental stability (Klein 26). The official integration of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a clinical pathological mental disorder into the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) in 1980 might have reinforced the realization of warfare's side effects (Lockhurst 59-76). The War on Terror has similarly led to films accentuating, as Robert Burgoyne argues, the eerie "haunting of the present by the past", in which veterans try to cope with the traumatic experience of the War on Terror (2010, 165). At the same time, the War on Terror signifies not only an actual or material war but also a rhetorical and conceptual one. The revolutionary movement that became known as the Arab Spring in late 2010 and early 2011, and its after effects that continue today, does not exclude possible interventions in the Middle East and has not entirely exorcized the 'War on Terror' spectre. Emmett Early argues that the audience does not seem "ready" for themes pertaining to the veteran that point out the negative long-term consequences of war, as the debate about military interventions is a continuous one (2014, 20, 24). At the same time, the unpopularity of most of these veteran films could also be due to the great number of War on Terror films released within

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[103] Vietnam War films include *Coming Home* (Hal Ashby, 1978), *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1979), *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979), and *Taxi Driver* (Martin Scorsese, 1976).

[104] War on Terror veteran films include *Home of the Brave* (Irwin Winkler, 2006), *Badland* (Francesco Lucente, 2007), *In The Valley of Elah* (Paul Haggis, 2007), *Stop-Loss* (Kimberly Peirce, 2008), *The Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2008), and *The Veteran* (Matthew Hope, 2011).

[105] For the financial success of all films mentioned here, see Markert (212).

the last several years and their varying quality.[106] This, however, remains speculative.

Jeanie Elenor Gosline attributes another cause to the current unpopularity of War on Terror veteran films, which she relates to the parallel that lurks between War on Terror and Vietnam veterans. About the latter category, Gosline writes that the portrayal of veteran soldiers as vulnerable and traumatised was prominent after the Vietnam War and these films were infused with both hopelessness as well as anger towards the war and the military. Soldiers were presented as "liable to commit acts of horror and cowardliness and also acts of bravery and compassion. Sometimes the same character would act in both ways in the same movie" (94). An analogy with this negative image – the morally and emotionally unstable veteran and disillusioned patriots whose representations are "trapped in clichés" (95) – suggests that the particular unpopularity for similar Iraq veteran films could stem from public fear that the well-known trauma experienced by Vietnam veterans is currently being repeated in the current generation of soldiers (94-95).

Although many films have tackled the figure of the Iraq/Afghanistan war veteran and the consequences of active combat, few films have depicted the manifestation of PTSD in relation to torture.[107] What makes *The Mark of Cain* and *Brødre*/*Brothers* important for this study is that they also depict the consequences to bodies and minds after *having performed* torture. The films can be seen as a subcategory of War on Terror veteran cinema; their combination of the manifestation of

[106] In the 60s and 70s American Vietnam War films were released approximately once a year, increasing to several a year in the late 80s and early 90s. To compare, in 2007/2008 alone over a dozen War on Terror films were released, yet this number decreased in the years following. Moviegoers could be suffering from a "Iraq overdose" (Robert Greenwald quoted in Gosline 89), not only because of the number of feature films, but because of the unprecedented use of social, and other, media outlets.

[107] Notably two films, the small productions *The War Within* (Joseph Castelo, 2005) and *Five Years* (*Fünf Jahre Leben*, Stefan Schaller, 2013) depict the consequences of having *been* tortured during the War on Terror, which is a rare theme.

trauma and having tortured muddies the categories of perpetrator and victim.

With the analysis of *The Mark of Cain*, *Brødre*¸ and *Brothers* a different focus comes into view; the films do not revolve around global or national political interests and terrorism, but around the personal costs and psychological consequences of warfare for veterans and their families. The ways in which the films tackle the relation of PTSD to torture reveals the complex political and individual implications of issues of culpability and responsibility during warfare, but also concerning post-service integration and social safety nets. In *The Mark of Cain*, which is based on real events, a British military unit tortures Iraqi detainees in Basra. The two youngest members of the unit, Mark and Shane, are scapegoated to save their superiors' skin. In *Brødre*/*Brothers*, a soldier is forced to beat his fellow soldier to death during his captivity by the Taliban. In all films, the protagonists suffer greatly from their actions after they have returned home.

This chapter investigates what this shift in focus means for the way in which torture is brought onto the screen and incorporated into the plot. In particular, it analyses the films' accent on the politically sensitive topics of social pressure and individual versus collective culpability for torture inflicted during active combat. By extension of this line of inquiry, the ways in which these films present a critique of the War on Terror through their depictions of warfare and the use of torture will be investigated. By accentuating the personal psychological turbulence, it is assumed, the films give shape to another form of political criticism.

Secondly, this chapter explores the extent to which the protagonists' actions and their trauma invite the spectator to identify with them, although they fuse the positions of culprit and victim. Further, I investigate whether identification with the protagonists facilitates an understanding of the moral decisions made and actions undertaken as a consequence of torture, and, in turn, whether the way in which moral decisions are presented allows identification with the protagonists. This line of investigation relates to the way in which PTSD is portrayed by the three narratives. Therefore, whether and how

trauma is presented differently in each film, how trauma is represented by narrative techniques and formal means, and thereby the un/representability of trauma, is examined.

Firstly, I explain how the protagonists in *The Mark of Cain* are brought to torture others, and how this torture scene is framed stylistically and narratively as part of the plot.

1. Peer-pressure and torture in *The Mark of Cain*

The plot of *The Mark of Cain* hinges on two protagonists, eighteen-year-olds Mark Tate and Shane Gulliver, who grew up in the same English village. They are stationed in Basra (Iraq) in 2003 as part of an operation during the War on Terror. The unit is stationed as a peacekeeping unit that has come, as one of their Colonels tells them, "with respect for the civilians. Anyone who needlessly kills or violates an Iraqi, will have the mark of Cain upon them". Despite the mission's peacekeeping nature, the men end up participating in the torture of Iraqi men suspected of carrying out a guerrilla attack on the soldiers' unit. While the detainees are held captive and tortured, several photographs are taken by Shane and later made public by his girlfriend. Mark and Shane are the only two who are tried, and are essentially sacrificed to save their superiors' job and rank. The course of events proves to be destructive to the young men's careers, and moreover, the guilt of being complicit in acts of torture causes Mark to commit suicide.

The depiction of torture is cut into two coherent fragments which take up less than ten minutes of the film's screen time, as well as through fragmented shots interspersed throughout the story. Unlike, for instance, *Zero Dark Thirty*'s torture of Ammar as a delineated plot segment, the scenes of torture in *The Mark of Cain* become a red thread and obtain a crucial position throughout the duration of the film's actual screen time as well as the film's semantic, narrative time. The first fragment takes place between Mark, Shane, a third unnamed soldier, and two detainees in a small prison cell. This scene ends abruptly and is unfinished until the final scenes of the film when Shane provides details of the torture episode as part of an official courtroom account and allows the spectator to reconstruct events. In order to

produce a chronologically-coherent reconstruction of the torture scenes and to locate their function in the plot I will first scrutinise them and explain how they are presented to the viewer.

Setting the stage

The first scene of abuse is simultaneous to the short opening scene of the film, which commences with a shot of a run-down, badly-lit prison cell with blue-grey concrete walls and floor. This light casts strong shadows in the room that foretell the troubling events to come. Five dark silhouettes walk into the frame from behind the camera and become the focus of attention. Three soldiers, Mark, Shane, and another unnamed soldier, drag two handcuffed detainees with bags over their heads into the room. The camera moves in a tracking shot as the soldiers position the detainees and themselves in the cell. The detainees are forced to sit on the floor, opposite each other, with their backs against the right and left walls. Only the accelerated and irregular breathing of the detainees and the shuffling of feet and bodies are heard. The next shot frames Mark in close-up profile as he catches the light from above. When the shot cuts to his front his face in close-up reveals anxiety or anticipation as he looks down at the detainees first, then up to his right, where Shane is positioned. In the background, the unnamed soldier grins and walks away. A re-establishing shot from the entrance of the cell frames the two soldiers from behind: they have sweaty bare arms and wear dark tank tops and look down at the detainees on the ground, who wear white tank tops and white plastic sandbags over their heads.

Shane then looks at Mark and asks him to, "Bring them on, right?" and in one movement pulls the two bags from the detainees' heads with both hands. He starts laughing at the detainees, who look around puzzled, and addresses Mark and the detainees by joking "Hey! It's Ant and Dec!"[108]. The camera frames the left detainee in close-up and pans to the right detainee, as they sit with their heads bowed behind the two soldiers. Within the same shot Shane quickly lowers

[108] Shane here refers to Anthony McPartlin and Declan Donnelly, a British comedy and presenting duo known as Ant & Dec.

himself down to the detainee on the right and suddenly shouts in his face, “Cunts!” The camera cuts to a shot of the empty hall, where Shane’s voice loudly echoes. In total, this scene is less than a minute long.

The way in which this scene is arranged implies an external narrator who frames the situation. However, the external narrator seems to adjust or conform him or herself to the view of the protagonists by giving a hectic, fragmented account while emphasizing Mark’s inner turbulence. The alternation of a shot of the back of Mark’s head with a close-up of his anxious facial expressions suggests that the external narrator expresses Mark’s experience; although these shot are not Mark’s subjective shots, they match his interpretation of the scene.[109]

The scene that follows the scene in the cell marks a jump in time and space. In the next shot Shane, flanked by two soldiers, approaches the camera while marching in a courtyard. These shots alternate with several shots in which a military official proclaims that “this was an appalling and revolting episode which completely contravenes the very high standards of the British army”. This shot cuts back to the three marching men, which is now infused with former Prime Minister Tony Blair’s off-screen voice, and then alternated with a shot of Blair on television stating the case will be investigated, that this was only a minority and that the overwhelming majority of British soldiers is doing an excellent job. The military official in another shot then continues, “I think and hope that the people of Iraq will appreciate that in bringing about this prosecution, that we will never tolerate this kind of action in any form or shape. But hopefully, lessons have been learned, the guilty have been punished, and a line can now be drawn”. The parallel editing of these scenes suggests that the official statements relate to Shane, who is guarded by two soldiers. Since the shots of Shane marching follow the scene in the prison cell it is also suggested that Blair’s statements provide a judgement of the previous scene.

[109] See Verstraten on the discrepancy between external focalisation and internal focalisation, or external focalisation communicating a character’s subjective perception or vision (2009, 109-111).

Moreover, by incorporating the footage in which Tony Blair appears on the news and makes a statement, the film suggests that the scene in the prison cell is based on real events. More importantly, showing Blair so early in the plot implies that it is *important* that the spectator realizes the film makes a reference to a real situation. Within the first five minutes, the film thus provides a frame for how to perceive the scenes in the cell (ostensibly 'through' Mark, and with the condemnation of the former prime minister), without providing contextual information about the situation.

Few cues concerning Mark and Shane's positions and states of mind during the opening scene are provided, but are sufficient enough to determine a sense of anxiety and anticipation in Mark. His glance towards Shane fixes Mark's participation in the events, and simultaneously suggests Mark's concern and uncertainty. Mark waits for Shane, who presents himself as more confident and dominant than Mark, to take the lead. Although the prison scene ends abruptly, the spectator is led to guess the nature of the "appalling and revolting episode" and to assume that it will feature prominently in the plot. The formation that is missing concerning this scene is only filled in near the end of the narrative in the form of Shane's official statement before the military tribunal. The story develops between these scenes, but before I return to the second part of this scene, it is necessary to touch upon these developments in order to grasp the significance of the final part of the scene.

Establishing the motivations for torture

During a regular patrol the unit is ambushed by civilian insurgents. While trying to save a private their captain is killed by a projectile. Upon receiving information about the insurgent's whereabouts shortly after, the men's new superior, Corporal Gant, gives the command to search a village and 'detain' potential suspects 'vigorously'. In a subsequent panning shot that frames several cells next to one another, six Iraqi men on their knees with bags over their heads are held prisoner. While waiting for further orders, the soldiers become vexed. In his anger over the death of their captain and his frustration of having

to wait, their colonel begins to wonder why Saddam Hussein assassinated 200 men within 15 hours in the Abu Ghraib prison, and why they are not allowed to question six men that are suspected for killing Americans. This line of reasoning, fuelled by anger and pent-up frustration, motivates him to 'question' the detainees while stimulating his soldiers to join.

Instead of following the men, Mark tells Shane that he does not see the point. Shane responds, "You can't just walk away from it. […] Walking away from those who did it is like… as if you don't care". When Mark answers, "This isn't compulsory", Shane replies by pressuring Mark into participating: "It's what's expected of you", and continues, "These are insurgents, terrorists. If you don't go back there, and put yourself in it, then no one's gonna trust you again. If you walk away from this, it will be the same as deserting". After weighing the consequences of his refusal, Mark reluctantly follows Shane inside. At the entrance of the building they ask their corporal if they "can have a go". He responds by sarcastically asking, "What am I, the Red Cross? Get in".

Instead of showing Mark and Shane going in, the next shot frames the empty, barely-lit hall, where off-screen shouts are faintly heard. The shot cuts to the following scene, in which Shane, Mark, and their corporal carry a beaten and unconscious man with a swollen and blood-stained face outside into the first light of day. As Mark and Shane entered the building in the dark, this cut suggests a jump in time. With stern faces, they put the detainee in the back of a truck, while their corporal pats them on the back and tells them they are "good lads".

This void in events is only temporarily, but before the spectator is provided with all cues to fill in the narrative gaps, the soldiers return home. Shane proudly shows some pictures taken in Iraq to his girlfriend Shelley, but they are not shown to the spectator. Shelly becomes increasingly ambivalent about what she sees, and the nature of the photos' content is suggested through Shelley's surprised comments, "Why does that one have a shoe in his mouth?". During one of the soldiers' welcome home parties shortly after, Shane and his girlfriend have a fight, after which Shane takes another girl home instead. When

Shelley finds out about this affair, she takes revenge by calling the police about the existence of Shane's photographs. When Mark and Shane appear to be the only ones identifiable on the photos (which the spectator has still not seen) they are court-martialled. The missing information concerning the nature of the events is then presented through Shane's account in court.

The court case: Filling in the gaps

The second part of the opening scene in the prison cell starts with a shot of the abandoned and badly-lit hall with which the first part of the scene ended. The dark blue-green colour filter used for the shots of the hall and cell provides a formal unity between the fragments of the prison cell and ratifies the disturbing atmosphere of the space. The colour pattern returns systematically in shots of the military and their base camp. The grimness established by the colours and the use of light in the torture scenes contrasts with the brighter colours used to shoot scenes in the UK and locations in Iraq outside the military camp.

Whereas the first part of the scene ended with Shane's shout ("Cunts!") resounding in the hall, this first shot of the second part of the scene is exactly the same but without the shout. This second part precedes the events in the cell, and the shot of the hall functions as an ellipsis by continuing the scene where the first part ended. The opening scene is reconstructed but with minor alterations, predominantly using different angles to frame Mark, Shane, and the detainees. A close-up of Mark presents him centrally and from behind, a repetition of the shot in the previous part of the scene. This time Mark folds his arms behind his head. The new part of the scene continues where the first part of the film ended – with Shane cursing in the detainees' faces ("Cunts!").

Shane then moves towards the right detainee on the floor, and unzips his pants. He looks to his right and in a point-of-view shot the third soldier on watch, who helped bring in the detainees, is seen laughing, averting his eyes and cursing. The next shot presents a close-up of the detainee, which is partly obstructed by Shane standing in front of him. Shane starts peeing on the detainee while repeatedly singing, "Who are you?", with all soldiers laughing. The frame tilts down to

display the detainee's lap and cuffed hands where Shane urinates. The next shots alternate between a cut in which Mark is shown copying Shane's action and similarly urinates on 'his' detainee on the left, and the laughing third soldier again.

The camera cuts and shows how Shane leans close to the detainees' faces, while he asks them, "Not so rebellious now?" and "Terror? I'll show you terror". He suddenly punches a detainee in the face off-screen. A close-up shows the third laughing soldier who further encourages Shane, and in the next shot Shane continues beating the detainee's off-screen face. In the following scenes the blows and punches are mostly implied through the sounds of beating rather than visually framed. Shane and the third soldier encourage Mark to 'do his' too and in a sequence of shots Mark is encouraged and starts hitting the detainee, who is similarly obscured from sight as he collects the punches. In these shots Mark is made central by alternatingly framing him from behind while punching, and in close-up when finished.

The next shot presents the back of Mark's head, and again, it is slightly different from the previous shots. Mark now folds his arms behind his head, which, when his facial expressions are revealed in a reverse shot, becomes a motion expressing anticipation and anxiety. Shane's off-screen voice, suddenly invading the frame, demands that the detainees "now kiss each other". The camera tilts down while Shane pulls the head coverings off the two detainees at the same time and forces them to "snog" each other. The camera cuts to the third soldier and back to a frontal close-up of Mark, both now laughing. Meanwhile, faint shouts in adjacent areas are perceptible. Shane stands up, laughs, looks around, approaches the two detainees, and in a re-establishing shot of the cell Shane pulls the left detainee towards the right detainee, who is made to stand up. His lip is slightly bloodied because of the beating. Shane pulls the detainee against the legs of the right detainee while demanding he reveal the other detainee's genitals. The camera cuts again to the laughing third soldier, then back to Shane pulling down the pants of the right detainee, thereby exposing the man's genitals. Mark, disturbed, shakes his head in disagreement. Shane does not understand Mark's hesitancy, and asks him, "Because it's against

their religion? That's why we should do it, man." In the background the right detainee is made to stand against the wall, looks up shaking, and softly mumbles what seems to be a prayer. Shane pulls the left detainee's head towards the other's exposed genitals to have them simulate sex acts. The cell's light source reflects on the right detainee and Mark's back and accentuates their presence in the room.

Shane urges Mark to hold the detainee's head, but Mark, framed frontally, is disgusted: he no longer wants to cooperate and states that they are going too far. The third soldier, in close-up, suggests that he will do it, if Mark is too much of a "pussy". In a reverse shot Shane says to Mark, "He's not too pussy, are you Mark?" Mark looks at both soldiers hesitantly, capitulates, and moves towards the detainees, saying "Let's go on with it". A re-establishing shot positions Mark on the right as he holds the left detainee's head down and pushes his face towards the other detainee's genitals. Mark looks right, towards Shane, and in the shots that quickly succeed each other, a point-of-view shot frames Shane taking a picture of Mark, the third soldier watching them, and Mark as he pushes the left detainee's face into the right detainee's genitals, which are now obscured by the right detainee's legs. This quick cutting sequence repeats itself, so that Mark, posing, Shane, taking pictures, and the laughing third soldier are presented as mutually complicit in the event. A close-up of the right detainee accentuates his blank eyes while in front Mark and Shane look at the pictures that were taken. Their heads are out of focus, which keeps the spectator's attention on the shocked detainee in the background. At this point, Shane's narrating voice returns, and in the next cut Shane stands in front of the military tribunal, in another time and space, as he describes the events in the cell. Although Shane's account does not finish here, I will use this cut to reflect on the scene just described before moving to the final episode and the implications of the soldiers' acts.

The nature of torture

Although the spectator now knows that the scene recounted by Shane is a continuation of the first scene of the film, his story has neither

accounted for the unconscious and blood-stained detainee who is carried outside and put into a truck, nor for the four remaining detainees with bags over their heads who were framed previously (together with the two abused by Mark and Shane this makes six detainees in total). What is presented in these brief scenes, however, is the motivation for the detainees' imprisonment and the nature of the torture inflicted on them. The discussion between Mark and Shane about Mark's reluctance to 'question' the detainees in the courtyard precedes the scene in the prison cell. Weighing the two options – deserting or abusing – Mark opts for the latter and goes inside, which accounts for the anxiety and aversion Mark seems to feel in the prison cells. Obviously, refusing is not the same as deserting, but Shane's pressure on Mark suggests Shane's dominance and upper hand in their friendship.

The spectator has come to realize that the detainees were not 'questioned' by Mark and Shane, but abused. Further, Mark and Shane's acts are spurred by their corporal's frustration and pressure into participating. Instead of handing them over to the Military Police, the unit's casualties become an excuse for torture, and vice versa, the torture becomes a justification for the unit's casualties.

As in *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable*, the prison blocks (although not necessarily designed as prisons), become an 'exceptional' and extra-legal space (Agamben 2005, 23), in which the detainees' legal rights are discarded. The space's 'exceptionality' is not fuelled by the emergency of a ticking bomb situation or by interrogations. By putting bags over their heads, the detainees are disoriented and not only treated like inferior humans, but also produced as inferior. Additionally, the prison cell becomes a stage for 'performing' a role-play that sets the soldiers and detainees in antagonistic positions (McKenzie 342-343). With less screen time than in *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable*, the soldiers' role-play – in terms of a development in 'plot' and 'character' – is confined to only a few minutes.

Mark and Shane's torture is not covered up by a covert motivation of retrieving information, but is carried out for sheer pleasure and opportunity. Instead of using and abusing the detainees'

emotions and rationality to break them, the soldiers do not dialogue with or interrogate the detainees. Shane becomes the instigator and 'director' of the role-play, in which he exploits the liberty to enhance his dominance by degrading the detainees. Not only do the soldiers not converse with the detainees, they remain blind to their facial expressions of shock and horror. By ignoring their faces, as Judith Butler contends, the detainees' precariousness and defencelessness is ignored as is the ethical demand made by and stemming from their faces. In their turn, the detainees do not actively appeal or talk to Mark and Shane or resist in any way.[110] Yet with this deliberate blindness, which ignores the detainees' expressiveness, the soldiers ignore the detainees' subjectivity. In this sense, the role-play consists of one-way communication, with Mark and Shane positioning the detainees like puppets.

Shane believes that the detainees are 'insurgents' and 'terrorists', thereby implying that the soldiers have the right to molest them. Mark, however, is not fully persuaded, not necessarily because he is not convinced of the detainees' status as terrorists, but because he is not convinced this gives the soldiers the right to molest them. Whereas Shane refuses to see these men as humans, Mark's initial refusal to participate implies that he thinks otherwise. By cooperating, Mark seems to temporarily dismiss their traces of humanity, but his hesitancy when asked to participate in sexual abuse indicates that Mark never ceases to see the detainees as human. This impossibility of reducing them to inferiors will be, as I will explain later, crucial for Mark's development of PTSD. In what is assumed to be one of Mark's involuntary flashbacks later in the film, a close-up of the face of the

[110] Butler appropriates Levinas' analysis of the face of the Other. Although the face cannot speak like the mouth, it nonetheless always formulates an address and 'we'/'I' are ethically required to respond. Butler views this ethical relationship in light of the unrepresentability (and consequently the dehumanization) of detainees and proclaimed terrorists in the media, such as the detainees at Guantanamo Bay. This notion relates to feature film too: in *Zero Dark Thirty* Osama bin Laden' face was only framed for Maya when she identifies him. Reducing some people as unable to be conceptualized (as humans as well as in terms of representations) facilitates committing crimes against them. In *Unthinkable*, Yusuf pointed to this conceptualization or (un)frameability of lives. (2002, 40, 55-56 and 2009, 1-32).

detainee who was beaten into a coma reappears. This flashback presents the shot the spectator saw during the sexual simulations but was previously ignored by Mark and Shane, which suggests that Mark did see the shock and horror on the faces of the detainees. This shot is, again, external narration translating Mark's subjective vision to the spectator; through editing we know Mark did not consciously 'see' these faces before, but this fragment asserts that he did in fact see them.

Although ignored by Shane, and to an extent, by Mark, the spectator cannot ignore the detainees' faces. By framing and accentuating the detainees' faces in close-up and by making Mark and Shane's positions secondary by blurring them, the viewer is forced to contemplate the detainees' horror and humanness. Apart from framing the detainees (in close-ups), like Ammar in *Zero Dark Thirty*, they stand out through the use of light that reflects on their faces and white tank tops. Like Ammar's accentuated and central position in the torture scenes in *Zero Dark Thirty*, the aesthetic highlighting of the Iraqi detainees' incarcerated position contests their position of assumed inferior human being. Unlike Ammar's detention, the detainees are not suspected of a specific crime, but their potential co-operation with Iraqi terrorists is an argument for their imprisonment. The uncertainty concerning their crimes makes their 'claim' for intelligibility in the eyes of the viewer a legitimate one and further enhances their humanness. The soldiers' actions, rather than emphasizing their superiority, stress their self-righteousness and immaturity.

Shaming through sexual simulations

The false intimacy between Dan and Ammar, established through the breaching of Ammar's bodily integrity, is an inherent component to bodily abuse, as Appadurai notes (1998, 917). This forced intimacy becomes explicit in *The Mark of Cain*. In *Zero Dark Thirty* it is significant that Dan 'only' forces Ammar to undress himself in front of his female colleague as a tool to break Ammar. He did not force him into (or into the simulation of) sex acts, as do the soldiers in *The Mark of Cain*. The bare and sweaty arms of the detainees and soldiers underscore their corporeality and their shared 'erotic' simulation. The motivation for the

abuse is, however, not sexual in nature, but is revealed in Shane's argument that "It is against their religion, which is precisely why we should do it". This statement suggests that Shane considers the simulation of sex acts between men to be *even more* embarrassing and abusive in Muslim culture, in which manifestations of homosexual desire are taboo (McKenzie 344-347).

Shane's comment stresses that the sexual abuse inflicted affirms the conceptual distance between the soldiers and the detainees in terms of ethnicity and beliefs. As in *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable*, the detainees are punished and embarrassed for their inferior ethnic background. Penalizing them for this very background is used as a justification for torture, while the violence in turn reaffirms the detainees' diverging ethnicity. In *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable*, however, the infliction of pain is a component of retrieving intelligence, and in *Syriana* and *Body of Lies* pain is inflicted as a form of punishment (also for Bob and Roger's ethnicity), occurring in tandem with a political game between torturer and tortured. In *The Mark of* Cain, the abuse is inflicted to punish and shame the detainee's for their Iraqi background, rather than their terrorist activities, for which the infliction of pain is secondary. Additionally, the detainees are "made responsible" (Sussman 4, 7) for their own abuse by their involuntary cooperation.

Although the simulation is between the detainees, the soldiers set up the simulations and photograph the detainees, an act reminiscent of the Abu Ghraib torture and photographs. In the light of Abu Ghraib, Susan Sontag has argued that torture is especially attractive to inflict when there is a sexual component in which the detainees are embarrassed (2004, Part III). She accentuates that the confluence of torture and pornography often encourages the use of photography so the torturers can watch and re-watch the pornography – not for its erotica but for the shameful position in which the victims are placed (ibid.; Olson 2014, 136). Interestingly though, Mark and Shane do not use the camera to necessarily intensify the detainees' shame, but to increase a sense of pleasure they derive from the assault (at least on the part of Shane), in which the images function as trophies. In the previous

chapter it was argued that the use of a recording device in *Body of Lies* had a specific political component. Shane, however, records for personal use.

The sense of pleasure evoked by the torture and photographs is crucial. Chapter 2 explained that torture inflicted by CIA agents is often legitimized by a sense of 'urgency'; although the torturers might secretly enjoy inflicting torture, the violence is presented as necessary within a bureaucratic system: it 'has' to be executed (Žižek 2008a, 106). Although the Iraqis are detained for suspected complicity in the attack, Shane's pleasure, derived from the torture, enhances the "theatricality" (McKenzie 347, 352) of the soldiers' performance and overrules the political motivations underlying their detainment. To Mark and Shane, the abuse is a game in which sexual simulations are used to make fun of the detainees. The element of 'game' or 'play' is underscored by Shane's defence in court: when the judge remarks that Shane's confession is a rather "curious defence against the accusation of sexual assault", Shane seems genuinely appalled and replies that "it had nothing to do with sex", but that they were just "taking the piss". Shane's reply to the judge suggests that he is not primarily appalled by the claim of sexual assault, but by the insinuation of homosexuality, as if, Shane argues, he has done a "gay thing".[111] The theatricality of the simulations and of the photographs reveals both a mocking of Arab culture and of homosexuality.

Instead of pressing on and impressing their victims to make them talk, Mark and Shane use the detainees to impress each other. As such, the torture is not only a role-play between the two tortured and between torturer and tortured, but also between the two torturers. Strikingly, no female agents or soldiers are present in *The Mark of Cain*. Their absence seems to suggests that male soldiers experience a form of peer pressure to perform and cooperate, and that their behaviour – in particular Mark's – is influenced by the presence of solely men, who are

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[111] In the response to the Abu Ghraib torture photographs, Judith Butler distinguishes between seeing the sexual abuse as homosexual acts and as physical and sexual torture. She notes that both were deemed equally "disgusting" by President Bush at the time (2007, 961).

older and of higher rank. The infliction of sexual assault in the prison cell seems to be inspired by a desire for recognition from their fellow soldiers, as well as from their superiors.[112]

Of the two soldiers, Shane takes the lead. The scene in the courtyard, preceding the soldiers' entrance into the cells, illustrates Shane's pressure on Mark and the latter's constant duality: the refusal to cooperate on the one hand and the desire for recognition on the other. Although Mark is clear about his unwillingness to cooperate, Shane, seemingly inspired to help Mark survive in the military, does not recognise this. At the same time, Mark's desire for recognition and belonging overrules his reluctance, and as such he cooperates nonetheless. When Mark refuses to participate in the sexual abuse, he is called a "pussy" by the third soldier on guard. Shane encourages Mark by disagreeing with this insult, thereby foreclosing the possibility for Mark to refuse once more. Again, Mark's facial expressions indicate unease, and his frequent glances towards Shane are an appeal towards his friend. Shane, however, ignores Mark's appeal and his unease and thereby not only ignores the detainees' faces, but also Mark's. In his turn, although ignored, Mark does not want to 'lose face'. For him, participating in the sexual abuse becomes an effort to uphold his status in front of Shane, and he uses the detainees to achieve this. Shane, in contrast with Mark, uses the photographs as material trophies to achieve a dominant position. Rather than having to convince Mark of his superiority, he uses the images as proof of his participation and uses them again later to acquire the respect of his superiors and his girlfriend. As such, these scenes are set up to stress the soldiers' problematic friendship, in which the torture becomes the stage for visualizing their internal tensions.

Mark deems the acts wrong from the start, while Shane is initially convinced of the innocence behind the sexual abuse, but later comes to realize the nature and implications of their deeds. I will argue that by first showing the torture episode and by then stressing its consequences for detainees as well as soldiers, the film presents a

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[112] See again Butler's analysis of vulnerability and the desire for recognition as a basis for ethical responsibility as referred to in Chapter 2 (2002, 33-37).

critique of the effects of peer pressure in the military and 'rites of passage' the young men are pressured into.

Rites of passage

The internal tension and hierarchy is not only present between Mark and Shane, but also particularly strong between the young soldiers and their superiors. Influenced by the military's normative codes of masculinity and morality, Mark struggles to live up to the idea of what it means to personify a 'soldier'. As an 18-year old, the recognition Mark needs from his superiors is to be taken seriously, to be valued, heard, and seen. As the most insecure and vulnerable, however, Mark is continuously bullied. He is given the nickname 'Treacle' for buttering up and sticking to other people. When their lance corporal nearly chokes Mark with a T-shirt to make fun of him, their corporal watches, laughs, and does not intervene.

Prior to the torture scenes, Mark refuses to participate in the public beating of a Kuwaiti who tries to smuggle petrol from Basra to Kuwait. Civilian insurgents demand justice by having the man punished. Fearing riots, Corporal Gant decides to publically punish the Kuwaiti in the form of beating. The man is thrown into the back of a truck and the soldiers are allowed to 'do' the man one by one, to appease the agitated crowd. Mark is made fun of and called a "pussy" by his lance corporal when he and Shane object that "he didn't do anything wrong". Afterwards, Mark tells Shane he did not punch the man when it was his turn, but gave him some water instead. Prior to the torture of the Iraqi detainees, Mark already discovers the deadlock of the impossibility of refusal due to his lack of persuasive power and dominance, and of the social humiliation ("pussy") that accompanies this refusal.

Throughout *The Mark of Cain*, the soldiers perpetually and frequently stress their heterosexuality through various power games and normative codes of machismo, and suppress any manifestation of weakness. Shane's shocked response to the judge's remark about 'sexual assault' reveals his embeddedness in a "homophobic institution" that acts "against a population that is both constructed and targeted for its own shame about homosexuality" (Butler on Abu Ghraib, 2008, 17).

The homophobia paradoxically returns in the abusive simulation of sex acts, which reveals the military's obsession with the detainees' Islamic background as well as sexuality.

The pressure on young, vulnerable men in the army is further visualised through the rite of passage new recruits – "fresh blood" – must undergo. One young soldier is tied to a hook in the changing rooms with a piece of cloth in his mouth. When Mark and Shane see him hanging on the hook, they leave him there to test his perseverance. With the detainees' imprisonment, Mark and Shane's sudden possession of power over others can be located in the need to canalize their frustration of being underdogs in the military, and by turning the detainees into underdogs instead. Although Mark's superiors continuously pressure him, it is Shane who eventually pulls him over the threshold. Although the recognition Mark seeks should be obtained by mutual respect, it is now demanded by force and abuse (Arendt 45). Unlike Mussawi's demand for Bob's respect in *Syriana*, in this scene Mark does not require the detainees' respect necessarily, but Shane's. The scene in the prison cell gives Mark a chance to show Shane, and implicitly his superiors, that he is a worthy soldier who is seen and valued.

Instead, the scene shows the force of peer pressure, but also the young soldiers' ability to be influenced, and their desire to belong to the group. This desire inaugurates a traumatic backlash when firstly, the torture evolves into atrocious violence that exceeds anything they have participated in thus far, and secondly, when peer pressure takes on lethal proportions.

From pleasure to shock

After his interruption in court, Shane continues his report of the torture in the prison cell. While looking at the photographs together, Mark, Shane, and the third soldier are accompanied by a fourth soldier who enters the room and is curious to see what they are looking at. A re-establishing shot at the entrance of the cell frames Mark and Shane showing the new soldier a picture on the camera. In the middle, behind the soldiers, the right detainee still stands against the wall with blank

eyes. The soldiers do not pay attention to him but show the fourth soldier the pictures. The new soldier informs Mark and Shane about events in adjacent cells, from which noises and shouts are now clearly audible.

The soldiers take the detainees to the end of the corridor, into a big room. There, Shane recounts, “Lance Corporal Quealy and other soldiers are taking pictures, while holding four more detainees captive.” The first shot of this large, ill-lit space is obstructed from sight by the dark shadows of Mark, Shane, and the two remaining soldiers pulling the handcuffed detainees in, who are again made to wear the sandbags over their heads. A close-up of Shane’s face, and a subsequent close-up of Mark then displays their astonishment at what they see inside as they look around, while behind them one of the soldiers takes pictures. The camera turns and with three quick consecutive shots, in which a small group of tank-topped soldiers looks at the floor and take pictures of what is there, the situation in the room slowly starts to unravel, while still predominantly obscured from the spectator’s sight. One of the soldiers picks up the limp arm, covered in blood, of someone on the floor. One of the others laughs and the arm is dropped again. The rest of this body is off-screen and remains invisible as the camera cuts back to the soldiers. Shouts and noise are heard from all around the room and soft extra-diegetic music accompanies the horror displayed by Mark and Shane.

The camera then moves back in a reverse shot to a close-up of Mark’s face as he curses, and an eye-line match shows Shane looking back at Mark in equal amazement: “Mad”. Shane’s gaze attends to the cell again and the camera cuts to his point-of-view shot of several soldiers holding down a detainee while trying to shove a shoe into his mouth. In a reverse shot we see Shane taking a picture of this scene, the aluminium camera accentuated in the frame. During that time, one of the detainees is positioned on Shane’s right. Due to overexposure, the detainee, although completely forgotten by Shane, is difficult to ignore for the viewer.

While Shane takes pictures, the camera repeats his point-of-view shot of the detainee with a shoe in his mouth with a concurring flash.

The camera cuts and several subsequent shots then show different soldiers in dark red t-shirts holding a detainee on the floor, where several soldiers in sequence jump on his stomach. The detainee's face and his expression are obscured from sight behind the hands of the soldier holding him down, yet his moans are heard. The camera then quickly cuts to another location within the room, showing a soldier holding a detainee down onto his knees while another soldier, by and large off-screen, forces several large scorpions towards him. In a close-up of the scorpions the off-screen voice of Lance Corporal Quealy is heard demanding that the detainee kiss them. A next reverse shot shows a close-up of Mark's face, as he looks around at the scene in utter astonishment, which indicates that Mark and Shane share the same points of view and facial expression.

In this same shot figuring Mark's astonished face, the camera suddenly pans to the left, revealing Lance Corporal Quealy's presence next to Mark, who urges Mark and Shane to remove the sandbags from the detainees' heads "so they can see". After the bags are removed, a close-up of one of the detainee's horrified face registers him adjusting to what he witnesses. Where the previous shots followed up on one another in rapid succession, the detainee's view gives a long point-of-view shot of the whole room, panning from left to right, where the different events now come together. In the forefront, Shane's shaded figure still avidly takes pictures, while the detainee's subjective shot moves through the room, and lingers on the blood-stained and naked body of a detainee who lies curled up on the floor. Several flashes illuminate the scene to indicate that pictures are now constantly and rapidly taken while another reverse shot shows the astonished face of the detainee.

Shane's omniscient narrating voice returns to the shot, then the camera cuts to the court room and a close-up of Shane's face as he recounts that there were ten more soldiers in the room, including Lance Corporal Quealy. The next shot goes back to the large cell where Mark is seen from the side looking into the room, while Shane stands next to him still taking pictures. A subsequent close-up of the two witnessing detainees behind the soldiers illustrates that the soldiers have forgotten

all about the detainees. One of them suddenly decides to escape through the hall. Mark and Shane immediately notice and run after him. The camera cuts to outside and shows the detainee, still handcuffed, heading towards the camera with Mark and Shane chasing him. The detainee soon falls down onto the sandy ground. Two lights at the entrance of the building illuminate the dark courtyard. From the left, Major Gilchrist walks into the frame, and from the right, Corporal Gant, who apparently ran after Mark and Shane. Closed in by their superiors, their Major asks, "Escaped detainee? Well, get him back in there then", and leaves. From their positions in the courtyard, the soldiers' shouts from inside the cells are clearly audible. This shot with the corporal and major, as part of Shane's account, reveals that all superiors were aware of the abuse in the prison cells.

Still within this shot Corporal Gant, angry for being reprimanded by the major for his lack of control, grabs the detainee by the neck and drags him away. Yet instead of taking him inside, he drops him and angrily starts pummelling the detainee in the stomach with his knee. Mark and Shane stand on both sides of Gant, with their backs towards the camera. The detainee moans and falls to the ground. In the close-up that follows, Gant, naked from the waist up, looks down to the detainee on the ground and says to him, "You make it look as if I can't command?", while a subsequent shot shows Mark and Shane exchanging glances and looking at Gant in anxious anticipation. He starts kicking the detainee as he lies on the ground, whose body is omitted from sight. Only the detainee's groans are heard each time he is kicked. Gant looks at Mark and Shane furiously and tells them, "I'm in command". The camera then uses alternating cuts between a close-up of Gant, and Mark and Shane looking back at him in a shot-reverse-shot. While Gant repeatedly shouts, increasingly louder, "I'm in command!", he kicks the detainee while Mark and Shane watch motionless.

Turning point: From perpetrator to witness

In the previous scene Mark and Shane were the perpetrators, but in this scene they view, like Maya in *Zero Dark Thirty*, the scene of torture as distant witnesses overlooking the prison cell. This scene, and Mark and

Shane's position in it, proves to be a turning point in the narrative for several reasons. Instead of deriving pleasure from the scene of abuse, this time Mark and Shane are appalled. The spectator focalises alternatingly from the soldiers' point of view (through their eyes and through Shane's camera), and from the detainees' point of view. In the previous torture scenes external narration focalised the abuse and translated some of Mark's perspective. In this scene internal focalisation – the soldiers' facial expressions and perspective – are strong indicators of the soldiers' interiority and provide an explicit interpretation of what is presented to them (Dyer 1994, 133-136; Verstraten 2009, 90-92). Although the spectator was inspired at first to deem Mark and Shane's torture and now this scene as equally horrific, the soldiers' internal focalisation, strong reactions, and peripheral position now steer the spectator towards taking their side.

Moreover, the detainees' internal focalisation positions the spectator on a par with the detainees, who are further 'humanized' in this scene. The previous scenes already communicated their horror to the viewer (yet not to Mark and Shane), and this scene translates their state of mind even more potently. What this scene establishes, by means of the alternation between Mark and Shane's internal focalisation and the detainees' focalisation, is the suggestion of Mark and Shane's relative innocence; the soldiers and detainees are equally appalled and positioned as witnesses to horrific torture.

Similar to the torture scene with Mark and Shane, the shots are edited in such a vein that, again, the atrocities are partially hidden from the viewer's sight. Although shocking because they suggest torture, the scenes are not graphic and, for that reason, not unwatchable (Grønstad 2011, 6). By presenting only fragments of objects and body parts, which functions as a synecdoche for the whole violated body that the spectator never or rarely sees, the soldiers' fierce violence is potently presented: the force with which the shoe is shoved into a man's throat, the soldiers jumping onto another man's stomach, and in particular the point-of-view shot of the blood-covered and curled up man on the floor. The only body visible is that of the curled-up man, which is presented to the viewer only briefly. Due to the briefness and uniqueness of this

shot, which functions as a rupture with the shots that only show parts, the sudden image of the bloodied and unmoving man, whose face remains hidden, becomes a powerful one.[113]

Although in the previous scene Mark and Shane, and their fellow soldiers in this scene, all inflict a form of punitive torture, the torture in this last part is presented as more brutal. *The Mark of Cain* – at least ostensibly – relies on the same assumption that the spectator might deem the necessary 'torture lite' of Ammar's interrogational torture as less atrocious than the bodily molestation and 'unfair' torture analysed in Chapter 2. Although sexual abuse is regarded as a form of torture (Wisnewski, 46, 14 72-73, 91), compared to Mark and Shane's torture in the previous scene, the torture in this cell and Corporal Gant's beating of the detainee outside is introduced as *more* atrocious, because there is more physical harm and more blood. In addition, the violence in this scene is presented as more dangerous: the shoe in the man's mouth nearly makes him choke, the large scorpions could lethally sting, and Gant nearly beats the Iraqi to death. Although Shane and Mark punch the detainees several times before inflicting sexual abuse, little blood is visible. This, together with their shocked responses and the element of 'play' in their own sexual simulations, presents Mark and Shane as less reprehensible and reinforces the image of two young and insecure men acting on the desire to be accepted. The implications of this difference – that Mark and Shane as less culpable – tie in with the second turning point in this scene, which resides in the consequences of the torture and the young men's unfair treatment.

2. Trauma and fate: "They will have the mark of Cain upon them"

After Mark and Shane return home, the film shifts from depicting cohesion (or forced cohesion) in the military unit in Iraq to a focus on the approaching court case and mounting tensions. Shane shows the photos taken of the detainees to his girlfriend Shelley. When she

[113] This is not a shocking, graphic, and unwatchable image, but a powerful image because it suddenly presents the whole body. As Grønstad would argue, it is not directed *at* the spectator in order to shock but *for* the spectator, and it is not an image that affectively disturbs the spectator but it is a disturbing image; the body parts now belong to a man, lying on the floor (2011, 2, 6.)

discovers Shane is cheating on her, she reports him to the police. Mark and Shane's loyalty to the collective of the military is put under pressure when their superiors learn that they are unidentifiable in the pictures. While trying to save their own skin by giving a different testimony about their whereabouts, they pressure Mark and Shane into silence about their involvement.

To this point, Mark's experience and understanding of the situation are constituted through the interaction he had with his superiors and with Shane. Initially, he experienced the torture of the detainees as a ghastly yet necessary initiation ritual into the military's moral codes and behaviour, and the torture as "taking the piss". When abandoned, Mark begins to realize that he is not taken seriously by anyone but Shane. His pursuit to be accepted has failed, which transforms his desire for recognition into an all-consuming sense of guilt and a comprehension of the wrongness and magnitude of the events.

Crucial to this transformation is the presence of the superiors in the second scene of torture yet their absence in terms of responsibility. Their presence should have relieved some of Mark and Shane's liability, but their refusal to accept blame puts all the responsibility for the torture on the young men's shoulders. Instead of protecting their privates when the situation turns bad, the superiors save their own skin by intimidating and humiliating, which reveals the limits of their sense of responsibility and concern.[114] The superiors neither feel responsible, nor guilty, nor even embarrassed, because they blame Shane for taking and showing the photos, which facilitates scapegoating him and Mark.

This opposition between Mark's growing personal responsibility and the lack of institutional culpability constitutes a paradox: the soldiers' pressure to be loyal demands Mark to behave morally (a

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[114] From a psychoanalytical perspective, Kelly Oliver argues how contemporary, regulative, and disciplinary law such as that of the military no longer gives meaning to emotional life and moral sensibilities. The military prohibits but does not aid in shaping meaningful bodily experience and sensations, leading to excesses such as the Abu Ghraib episode (2010, 64-65). The military law in *The Mark of Cain* fails to provide possibilities for making sense of the soldiers' experiences, and instead uses abusive humiliation techniques against their own soldiers prior and after the torture of detainees.

demand Mark answers to because he desires recognition), but Mark's forced separation from the military body increases a personal freedom (to choose and take responsibility) he did not ask for, which establishes a moral imprisonment. Realising such paradoxical fidelity was expected of him, he tells his mother:

> You have to obey. I could have refused. But I did not have the moral courage. To have the moral courage, you have to be disloyal. […] In the army, in the regiment, it is better to be loyal than to have moral courage. That's how we work.

Trained as a collective, the "we" here indicates that Mark still thinks collectively, yet the moral courage he talks about is *his personal* moral imprisonment. On the one hand, individual moral courage to refuse is made difficult. On the other hand, he is forced to take personal responsibility when he decided to follow orders after all. While Shane becomes infuriated and rebels against his unfair treatment by fighting back, Mark moves towards an ethical act: he understands that the violence done to him does not justify the violence he has done in return, and that he should take full responsibility for his own deeds.[115] Yet the lack of responsibility in others weighs on him heavily, and torn between collective loyalty and personal moral courage, Mark feels he is now marked by "the mark of Cain".

During the first days in Iraq the unit was told they were on a peacekeeping mission, and that everyone who needlessly killed or violated an Iraqi would evoke the Biblical curse.[116] The Book of Genesis teaches that, after Cain killed his brother Abel, God cursed Cain and he became a condemned fugitive. Cain then expressed a profound fear of being killed and, taking pity, God put a mark on Cain, which made him

[115] Judith Butler argues that it is easy to find a justification for violence under the guise of self-defence or retaliation, but that self-defence or retaliation never justify more violence (2002, 58). Mark seems aware of such an ethical premise, which is why he has his doubts about violence as punishment in the case of the Kuwaiti man, as well as in the case of the detainees.

[116] For those unacquainted with the Biblical story of Cain and Abel, the film does not explain what this ambiguous mark of Cain signifies and what it means for those who violate others.

recognisable as a brother murderer (and outcast), but it also prevented anyone from killing Cain (which forced him to live with his sin) (Melinkoff xii, 1-2). In her extensive historical and exegetical study about the origins and many interpretations of the expression "the mark of Cain", Ruth Melinkoff explains that the Bible itself is ambiguous in the precise nature of this statement; the sign can be both a warning sign as well as a protective device (xii, 2).

Mark might not fully understand the profundity of this statement, but he does understand – or rather experiences – that he is 'marked' both in terms of being scapegoated and in terms of his own conscience manifesting itself (one can see Mark as carrying this first name in the film *because* he carries the mark of Cain). When he is publically forced to accept blame, Mark not only experiences guilt but also starts to believe he is cursed, as he tells Shane. The ambiguous Biblical sign put on Cain, as Larry Ray argues, functions as a warning for those who want to kill Cain, and also as a marker of more violence to come: the killer of Cain will in turn unleash retaliations (297). Whereas Shane believes in his essential moral innocence and thinks the situation will resolve well, Mark feels trapped. To the spectator, however, Mark is presented as both guilty and innocent: he could – and should – have declined Shane's appeal. As the victim of pressure and pranks, the viewer is ushered towards forgiveness of him, while Shane's position of naive initiator tips towards guilty.

Unreliability and post-traumatic stress disorder

Mark's tortured conscience manifests the morning after the abuse. His sense of confusion is stressed when he learns that his officials lied to the family of the detainee who was beaten into a coma about the cause, nature, and seriousness of their son's condition. Back in England, Mark becomes increasingly unstable and is haunted by memories that, as the spectator is led to assume, return as involuntary flashbacks; several almost identical shots return as motifs throughout *The Mark of Cain*, and seem to translate Mark's experience of the episode and his state of mind. One of these motifs is the recurring image of the hall and prison cell. Sometimes it recurs as a single shot, sometimes as a scene in which

the camera moves to a different cell, and sometimes as a shot in which the soldiers drag the detainees towards the cell. The recurring shots of the abandoned hall and those of the detainees waiting in the cell function as prefiguration of the torture that is to be revealed later.

It is suggested that these shots and scenes function as Mark's internal focalisation and occur in the shape of a retrospective, nightmares, or as involuntary flashbacks. Sometimes they seem to function as a presage for the unfolding torture incident. Presented even before the actual torture scene, the fragments – whether voluntary or involuntary – defy a forward-moving chronology and often work confusingly; in hindsight the spectator is led to assume the short presage shots from the opening scene are also Mark's flashbacks. Again, since Mark appears in some of these shots and scenes they could be presented by an external focaliser, although he could arguably appear in his own dreams, delusions, or memories, which would make the fragments unmistakable cases of internal focalisation. The possibility that they are narrated by another character, such as the third soldier or someone else all together, is unlikely: the strong focus on Mark in these segments implies that these segments are the content of Mark's mind. So again, either an external narrator seems to translate Mark's subjective perspective, or he stars in his own internally-narrated flashbacks.[117] Additionally, right before his suicide, a close-up of one of the detainees' faces is positioned between two shots of Mark as he prepares himself for suicide. This way of editing again suggests that this particular segment is his flashback.

As such, the 'single' event of torture as a stylistically varying yet pervasive episode is interspersed within the story. The precise status and origin (in terms of narration) of the fragments, however, remains opaque, which leads to a sense of confusion on the part of the spectator.

Apart from these incoherent shots, the previously discussed scenes of torture are cut into several fragments. Since the scenes' last parts are recounted by Shane in court, it is likely that these torture

[117] See Verstraten on external focalisation translating internal perspective, even when the protagonist whose perspective is visualised is present in the frame (2009, 105-111).

scenes represent Shane's memory. Although the act and nature of abuse remains the same, for Shane, these events manifest only on a rational and conscious level. The slight variation of the same event suggests their diverging impact on Mark and Shane respectively; Mark suffers greatly from the events and the motifs seem to be his flashbacks. Shane's chronological account is then interlaced with Mark's involuntary and atemporal flashbacks, with Shane eventually standing in for Mark in court and narrating the second part of the torture episode, which – we cannot be sure – might deviate from Mark's experience of the torture episode. Shane's account, however, reinforces the idea that Mark needs others to talk for him.

A third recurring motif is the shot of the back of Mark's head while present in the prison cell with Shane and the detainees. The strongest and most developed shot of his back is presented as a sequence of two shots in two different locations: in close-up, with the parents of the comatose Iraqi detainee blurry in the background. This shot of Mark cuts to the second one in which the camera again frames the back of Mark's head in the prison cell with the detainees. This time he figures centrally in the frame, while breathing heavily and folding his hands around his head in what appears to be despair. Again, an external narrator seems to mediate his subjective state of mind.

This shot in the cell is different from the first shot in the first scene, when Mark's head functions as object of focalisation while not revealing any cues for his state of mind. The anxiety and anticipation in the first scene is visualised when the camera cuts to a reverse shot of Mark's face, displaying distress. Mark's assumed flashbacks and the slight internal alterations connect the detainees' and Mark's situation: they suggest that Mark often thinks back to the detainees. Secondly, these shots of the detainees remind Mark, and subsequently the viewer, of the detainees' situation, thereby dovetailing Mark's position as 'victim' of peer pressure and the detainees' position as victims of abuse. This reinforces the impression created that Mark is the dupe of machismo rather than an immoral abuser.

The discrepancies between what is visualised and who visualises it is alienating, and plays with the spectator's desire for allocating the segments to a specific narrator.

The alienation created by the uncertainty about the nature, status, and origin (Mark or Shane or someone else entirely) of recurrent fragments is reinforced by the occurrence of delusions on the part of Mark. These delusions provide another reason to assume the motifs presented throughout the film are Mark's involuntary flashbacks. The delusions are translated by means of – yet another – motif that consists of the recurring shot of Mark persistently feeling the sand of Basra between his fingers, even after his return to England. *The Mark of Cain*'s opening credits and score are accompanied with a close-up of fingers with sand sliding through. The fingers are blurry and the image is distorted, and only later does the spectator recognise this as one of Mark's delusions.

Apart from creating the impression that the recurring fragments and shots are Mark's memories, the delusions also indicate that Mark suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Although questioning the torture immediately, only belatedly does Mark experience the full force of the torture; he is haunted by involuntary memories, has intrusive delusions, and becomes emotionally inflexible and sensitive to loud noises and lights.[118] In *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, Cathy Caruth stresses the haunting power of PTSD, a specific occurrence of the more general notion of 'trauma', and its disruptive quality based on a distortion of events. The event is not significantly experienced or assimilated fully at the time but only belatedly, when it comes to haunt the traumatised subject (1995, 4-5). Caruth stresses the literality of the event that returns; the haunting traumatic experience cannot be ontologically distinguished from the event in the past; there

[118] The most recent edition (Edition 5, 2013) of the DSM, or the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, gives these experiential criteria for suffering from PTSD: 'exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence' and requires the presence of symptoms from each of four symptom clusters: 'intrusion symptoms (previously known as re-experiencing), persistent avoidance of stimuli associated with the traumatic event, negative alterations in cognitions and mood associated with the traumatic event, marked alterations in arousal and reactivity associated with the traumatic event, and impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning.' Article 309.81 (F43.10).

is just one event that keeps on returning. The traumatic memories as such are not knowable in the sense that they can be grasped and processed, which is why they come to possess the subject. This explains the atemporal dimension of the traumatic event: the re-living of the past in the present, the haunting of the present by the past, and the impossibility of recognising one's own present in terms of present and past events. This is what makes the re-living so overwhelming and immediate (ibid.).

The involuntary memories and intrusive delusions depress and shame Mark rather than infuriate or make him aggressive. Many traumatised subjects experience an impossibility of expressing themselves (Caruth 1995, 17; Scarry 19), or experience language as a discursively insufficient means to do so (Van Alphen 2004, 109-110). Mark, who is technically not a victim but a perpetrator, is desperate to talk about the traumatic episode in the prison in Basra and to relieve himself of his guilty conscience. Frustrated when the military doctor he visits attributes Mark's visit as a way to potentially mitigate his sentence in court, Mark starts drinking heavily. When finally assigned sick leave, he attempts to tell his mother about what he went through. A close-up of the back of Mark's head with his mother blurry in the background strongly resembles the frame of Mark's head in the Basra prison cell. It seems to foretell Mark's confession to his mother about his cooperation in torture. He starts, however, with, "I cannot tell you what happened in the cells, Mum", and so the close-up from behind signifies his inability to narrate.

As such, *The Mark of Cain*'s atemporal and distorted narrative with aporia and "psycho-pathological [narrative] techniques" (White 82) resembles the distorted experience of suffering from PTSD. The recurring segments that infuse the plot from beginning to end resemble the haunting quality of post-traumatic stress. More importantly, the converging of form and content draws attention to the question of the (un)representability of trauma.

Many, amongst whom notably Caruth, have regarded trauma (in relation to the Holocaust) as the limit of representation, in which

language and images are regarded as aporetic and defy referentiality.[119] Although this is not the space to explore the modes and limits of representing trauma in cinema (as others, including Elsaesser and Kaplan and Wang, have already effectively done so) it is significant to note that *The Mark of Cain* plays with the very question of the (un)representability of trauma: its structure implies that in Mark's case, the episode was too traumatic to handle and narrate. As such, his perspective remains incoherent and muddled with blurry and distorted recurring shots that are, for the spectator, often difficult to make sense of. Although the film's structure collapses form and content and reveals how Mark might have experienced the episode, this structure simultaneously suggests that in order to represent his trauma, this representation can only be similarly fragmented and distorted.

In Shane's case, his ability to give an account in court suggests that the episode as such was not as traumatic for him, or not experienced as traumatic, and indirectly that he has less empathy than Mark. The episode's aftermath is more troubling for him personally. In addition, Shane's account implies that the film could be one big flashback (in which his rational and relatively coherent account takes over from or finishes Mark's incoherent fragments). This would explain the atemporal structure of the film.[120] However, the impossibility of

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[119] See Caruth (1995, 151-156 and 1996, 115). For Van Alphen, trauma is the result of the discursive nature of experiencing and the forms of representation available (2004, 109-110). Similarly, Kaplan and Wang, in the footsteps of Dominick LaCapra and Thomas Elsaesser, examine the representability of trauma and the forms such representations and narrating positions might take (4, 8-15). These theorists write about the Holocaust, however. Our current knowledge about 9/11 and the PTSD of contemporary War on Terror veterans is still developing, which is why I build on these theorists. Although I do not mean to argue that the trauma of 9/11 and PTSD of war veterans can be put on par with the trauma of the Holocaust, these theorists have conceptualized trauma in relation to representation in more general terms and their work on trauma provides a fruitful foundation.

[120] In addition to Caruth, Van Alphen argues that trauma is a "failed experience", which means that trauma arises as the result of unsuccessfully experiencing (and memorising) the event. This translates into symptoms (trauma) of the unsuccessfully assimilated experience. This reading would explain the fragments, which return as symptoms of an experience that has not come about and that returns as a failed attempt at discursively processing (2004, 108-110). This would also explain why for Shane, who either fully experienced the episode at the time, or who has found the discursive semiotic means to narrate, is not traumatised.

attributing the recurring motifs to a specific narrator, and additionally, this narrator's doubtful credibility, suggests general unreliability; we had assumed thus far that the motifs were Mark's subjective perspective translated by an external narrator, yet we only *assume* this is how it went. The details of the torture episode come to us through Shane's account. Shane's final testimony lays bare that everything the spectator has seen could be the fruit of his subjective yet distorted and perhaps untrue memory. The characters as such are not necessarily unreliable (Shane might believe it happened that way), yet the way in which the plot is presented to the viewer is.

The film's recurring segments and the fragmented torture scenes are pieces of a puzzle that are only put together in the final scenes of the plot, and even then pieces of meaning remain missing. This converging of content and form evokes the paradoxical response of wanting to infer meaning, yet not being able to satisfactorily do so, which (as when watching *Syriana*) evokes a critical evaluation of the themes presented, but not necessarily an affective engagement (Grønstad 2008, 6, 13).

The Mark of Cain's unconventional, distorted narrative structure creates a distance between spectator and character, but the spectator moves from distant witness of Mark and Shane's abuse in the early scenes of the film towards more sympathy for Mark's turbulence later on. The fragmented nature of the plot, however, prevents the spectator from fully understanding Mark's feelings and perspective and from identifying with him. As such, fragmented or distorted, moderately estranging narratives like that of *The Mark of Cain* can, while foreclosing affective engagement, provide insight into the traumatic experience of its characters (White 66-86) and can establish an ethical viewing position (McGowan 2011, 9, 10, 17; Wheatley 38-39, 54-55). Yet this affective engagement is not strictly necessary or required for upholding an ethical position or developing moral insights in relation to what is presented.[121]

[121] Todd McGowan connects atemporal narrative structures to traumatic events and to particular ethical positions. He argues that atemporal cinema is circular like the psychoanalytic 'drive'. The temporal confusion when watching atemporal films makes

Like the sand of Basra, the film's narrative structure slips through our fingers and the desire for linearity, causality, and certainty is constantly played with. The film ultimately steers towards an acceptance of this confusing condition, and suggests that this impasse is precisely what trauma looks like when one attempts to screen it.

Unreliability and a political critique

Although their corporal, who incited and enabled the torture of the detainees, is only fined, Mark and Shane are court-martialled. This indicates that, like the Muslim torturers in the previous chapter, the soldiers do not operate above the law, as the CIA agents *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable* do, but are officially punished for their war crimes.

Instead of rectifying the unfair treatment by giving testimony in court, Mark takes responsibility – or, more precisely, escapes from having to take it – by committing suicide. This prevents him from experiencing shame and trauma, but also by betraying others by putting the blame them. He kills himself by putting a bag over his head, which becomes "a gruesome nod to the Iraqi captives" (Wollastan 2007). Shane is pressured to conceal from the court the exact nature of his superiors' participation in the beatings. After Mark's suicide, however, Shane takes responsibility for his own participation, as well as for Mark's death, by telling the court what has happened, revealing for the first time the nature of the abuse.

By testifying in court, Shane redeems himself and establishes three things: firstly, he becomes a 'moral character' who presents to the court and the spectator his subjective view on the episode of abuse. He makes explicit what the spectator has already seen: his own involvement, as well as the presence and complicity of their superiors in the prison cells and with the escaped detainee outside the prison

the subject become aware of her subject position and induces another way of experiencing existence which moves beyond the desire for conclusiveness.

block. Shane realizes his statement jeopardizes his superiors' rank and functioning within the military, but also his own career.[122]

The second thing Shane establishes by testifying is the re-humanization of the detainees. Shane recounts that Mark, before his suicide, traced the identities of the two men held captive and abused in their cell. By subsequently providing their names in court – Said Ahmed and Abdullah Omah, or, "the people we did it to" – Shane, in the name of Mark, responds to the detainees' after all; he addresses them as humans and makes them intelligible for others by returning to them their identities (Butler 2009, 5-8).

Thirdly, his account indicates that the acts of abuse are not, as the UK government and the involved military seniors want to present it, the work of a few, but rather that the abuse seeps through all layers of the military unit. While evidence is gathered, it appears that Corporal Gant was recognisable in one of the pictures. Consequently, a group of military officials discuss whether they should have "a few rotten apples" take the blame, or whether they "cannot tolerate this type of barbarism" from the unit. This debate reveals the men's fear that torture is increasingly inflicted "by our own people", a fear discussed in Chapter 1. By having one of the characters explicitly point to the unit's "barbarism", the film problematizes the self-evident notion of 'barbarism' by showing that the barbarians are not 'them', or Iraqi insurgents, but 'us', the British military. The negative "semantic stagnation" that surrounds the term 'barbarian' (Boletsi 3) is first mobilized in *The Mark of Cain* and consequently debunked.

Initially, the film presents the soldiers' concerted behaviour and group pressure as a justification for inflicting abuse. Along the way, the film begins to problematize the cohesion of the soldiers as a collective

[122] Kelly Oliver argues how Lynndie England saw herself as being both guilty and innocent: she was just having fun, but soon realized that what she had done was wrong. Pleading guilty while harbouring a sense of moral innocence, the result of the breach between regulative law and meaningful experience problematizes, Oliver argues, the notions of guilt and innocence (2009, 64, 72-73). Shane seems to do something similar: he pleads guilty and understands the consequences of doing so, while retaining his own sense of moral innocence. He still feels on the one hand, that he was pressured into cooperating, while, on the other hand, what he did was just "taking the piss".

body operating against the same enemy. Although the soldiers are highly disciplined, the scenes of abuse suggest that regulative and disciplinary forces can paradoxically lead to individual excesses and a weakening of self-control against prohibited forms of behaviour, such as torture (Bourke). *The Mark of Cain* illustrates the steps taken prior to the final occurrence of individual excess (by Mark and Shane) and collective excess and as such formulates not only a critique of torture methods, but also of the strict military moral codes of honour, and of the mechanism of blaming 'rotten apples'. Although some superiors were identifiable on the photographs, the film accentuates the ease and convenience with which the 'rotten apples' can be pushed forward and blamed, while the military hides behind these scapegoats.

The film's mode of narration – its atemporal structure with fragmented motifs on the one hand, and Shane's quasi-coherent account on the other – works in tandem, I argue, with a direct political critique made by the film, in which the narrator's unreliability and the lack of conclusiveness become a strategy in itself. On the level of the characters, the film undermines the image of the military as rightful and moral. Where in the previous chapter the image of the antihero became a rhetorical strategy to question (*Body of Lies*) and criticize (*Syriana*) American foreign policies, *The Mark of Cain* intensifies the image of the post-heroic antihero and posits Mark as an unstable, vulnerable victim of the military institution who takes his own life because group pressure has become too strong. Secondly, on the level of the plot it posits narration in more general terms as unreliable: Shane's account, which suggests the plot as it is presented to the viewer, is one big flashback, and cannot be certified as truthful. In the end, the spectator is left to wonder what actually happened and how it happened. This sense of confusion forces a deadlock: the spectator favours conclusiveness and straightforward moral positions, yet this desire is neither granted nor rewarded. As such, atemporality and unreliability play with the spectator's desire for conventional, psychologically coherent Hollywood melodrama (Elsaesser, 153, 163, 172).

Additionally, the sense of confusion is reinforced by the film's powerful last scene, in which Shane, after having photographed the

detainees, is ‘captured’ in an image and becomes the object of focalisation himself. After his confession he is first severely beaten by their lance corporal and other soldiers and then imprisoned. When the steel door closes, the spectator sees Shane through the door’s peephole, as he slowly undresses his beaten body. Suddenly, he looks straight into the camera and faces the spectator directly. This stylistic rupture assigns the viewer the position of a guard looking into his cell and imposes a sense of voyeurism. By looking straight into the camera, Shane could be admitting his guilt, yet he also seems to cast the intricate question of culpability back to the spectator. The deadlock of Mark and Shane’s situation has turned Shane from a naive and immature perpetrator into the subject of his colleagues’ bullying and beating shortly before and after the court case. This shot through the peephole, in which he has become a prisoner himself, again reminds the viewer of his previous inhuman treatment of the Iraqi’s detainees. Nonetheless, the film constantly muddies the categories of perpetrator and victim, and although both viewing positions (that of voyeur and of guard) inspire a judgemental component, moral judgment is constantly postponed.

***The Mark of Cain*’s realism and ideology: Camp Breadbasket**

The film’s atemporal narrative structure seems artificial, as it draws attention to its form. Like *Zero Dark Thirty*, however, *The Mark of Cain* is based on real events, and in particular, on a torture scandal in the British military which occurred at Camp Breadbasket in Basra, “the UK’s Abu Ghraib” (Cobain).

Made by independent producer Red for television, *The Mark of Cain* was generally well-reviewed, and scriptwriter Tony Marchant’s extensive research into the Breadbasket episode in order to portray it accurately was acclaimed (Thompson).

As in the case of *Zero Dark Thirty*, reviews made reference to the actual episode in Basra and the film’s depiction of this episode; the army in particular attacked this, in their eyes, negative depiction (Wollaston). Some reviews explicitly considered the merging of fact and fiction – calling it a “factionalised” war (Flett) – and found this fusion

problematic (Conlan). While some found fault with the forced and constructed plot structure (Weissberg), others praised the film's authentic rendering of subjective experiences in the military, partially established by the fragmented narrative structure and the occasional use of a hand-held camera (Thompson).

Technically, *The Mark of Cain* does not hinge on any particular incident and the film does not refer directly to Camp Breadbasket, other than by means of the media footage of Tony Blair (the DVD does not have a disclaimer, but the television broadcast was apparently preceded with a disclaimer about the fusion of fact and fiction [Conlan]). As such, the film does not pretend to represent *the* reality (as did *Zero Dark Thirty*, see again Houwen 52), or to do otherwise than appropriate real events into a fictionalized account. In terms of narrative structure, *The Mark of Cain* resembles *Syriana*'s formal complexity that formulates a form of social verisimilitude, in which the content is only 'based on' real events. Due to its fragmented and atemporal structure, however, which suggests internal focalisation and personal turbulence, unlike *Syriana*, *The Mark of Cain* is not a "docudrama" (see again DeWaard and Tait 154), which aims for a seemingly impartial rendering of facts.

The issue behind the criticism directed towards the film's portrayal of the military and its fusion of fact and fiction pertains, I argue, to the film's uncovering of the ideology behind 'moral courage'. *The Mark of Cain* suggests that the double standard inherent to moral courage was the incentive of wide-scale abuse: on the one hand the impossibility of refusing, and on the other the taboo on "grassing" on, as Mark argues, the ranks above them. The film does not only show how one is forced into the deadlock of moral courage, but also reveals the mechanism behind moral courage, or the cover-up of institutional culpability and the blaming of 'rotten apples'. This mechanism includes the knowledge that since Abu Ghraib 'we' – government and military officials but also the public – know these violent excesses occur. This is not necessarily a political problem as long as these excesses are hidden from sight or remain undisclosed. When, conversely, photographs or other visual evidence is circulated, a dignitary is forced to confess these

secrets are true and the embarrassing secrets are then subjected to verification.

This explains why Mark and Shane are forced into precarious positions and greeted with hostility; although praised for their courage, Mark and Shane's characters *in* the film and *The Mark of Cain as* film reveal the mechanisms of ideology to which we have conformed. Like the photos taken at Abu Ghraib, Shane's photographs are seen to "tarnish the image" of the British military (Davis),[123] and so their publication is worse for the nation than for the actual victims of torture. Mark and Shane are not only punished for their involvement in torture, but also indirectly for tarnishing the image of the military as presented in the film. This is their true crime; the shock and disgust pertains to their taking of photographs and to their publication, not to what they depict.[124] Similarly to how *Zero Dark Thirty* reminded its audience of what institutional procedures have allowed, *The Mark of Cain* reminds the military of their image, tarnished by the torture episode in Basra,[125] and this message is more explicitly formulated than in *Zero Dark Thirty*.

3. Torture in *Brødre/Brothers* and the consequences of PTSD for relatives

In *The Mark of Cain* the focus rests on the military body's internal and forced coherence, but *Brothers* (Jim Sheridan, 2009) depicts the consequences of torture for veterans' relatives. During his captivity by the Taliban, Captain Sam Cahill is forced to torture and kill a subordinate. After his release, he begins expressing symptoms of PTSD. The film is an adaptation of the Danish film *Brødre* (Susanne Bier,

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[123] The power of the photographs taken by Shane resides in their impact. See also Sontag (2008) about the ambiguities of photos as evidence, their affective power, their power to shock and reveal, and how they manipulate our understanding of reality.
[124] See Sontag (2004) for the ambivalent responses to the Abu Ghraib photographs, which reveal that people considered the existence of the photographs worse than what they depict.
[125] Ironically, *The Mark of Cain* was initially delayed just hours before its television broadcast on 5 April 2007 because of the on-going crisis over Iran's seizure of 15 British sailors and marines. Although it was not actually *believed* that broadcasting the film would cause considerable danger to the negotiations, due to its negative depiction of the army the film was screened at a later date as a precaution (BBC News, 3 April 2007).

2004), and is almost identical in structure: Officer Michael/Captain Sam is a successful military official, husband, and father of two little girls. Michael/Sam's brother Jannik/Tommy is released from jail after imprisonment for an armed bank robbery, shortly before Michael/Sam embarks on a tour of duty in Afghanistan. While searching for a missing soldier from a helicopter, the small unit is shot from the sky and Michael/Sam is imprisoned by the Taliban. His family, however, is told he is dead. The family's black sheep Jannik/Tommy feels the need to redeem himself for his criminal past and takes responsibility by caring for his brothers' family. Jannik/Tommy grows increasingly fond of his brother's wife Sarah/Grace, and in their mutual grief they share a passionate kiss. When Michael/Sam suddenly returns from Afghanistan all seems well again, until he begins to exhibit signs of post-traumatic stress disorder and becomes convinced his brother and wife are having an affair. Due to his violent temper, mental instability, and inability to explain what happened during his captivity, he soon becomes an unwanted guest in his own house.

The films' plot diverges with respect to Michael and Sam's captivity and the development of their trauma. Hollywood adaptation *Brothers* has appropriated *Brødre*'s themes for a more traditional American climate. In the remainder of this chapter I will position *Brothers* in relation to its Danish equivalent, then analyse both films in relation to *The Mark of Cain*, and subsequently locate and reflect on the films' overt and implicit political messages. I begin by scrutinising the nature of torture in *Brothers*/*Brødre* and the internal differences between the two versions, but refrain from describing the scenes of torture in as much detail as previously done for *The Mark of Cain*: in order to come to an analysis of the politically sensitive depiction of having tortured and posttraumatic stress, it will suffice to focus on and single out the differences between the 'Brothers' films and the implications of these differences.

Held captive and forced to kill

After the helicopter has been shot down in *Brødre*, Michael is found by the Taliban, barely alive, on an embankment and brought to a house where the missing soldier the unit was looking for, a young technician, is also imprisoned. Together, they are held captive in a small hut for what seems to be a long time, occasionally engaging in conversations about their families and current situation. One day, an interpreter for the Taliban leader asks the young technician to show them how to arm a missile. The young technician, frightened and with a gun against his head, admits he does not know how. Michael does know and shows them. He asks his captors to leave the young technician alone and to give them both some water. Back in the hut, they indulge in the sparse food and water provided to them and Michael assures the technician they will be fine. After Michael's demonstration of his skills with the missile however, the Taliban consider the young technician to be of no further use. Both soldiers are taken outside and thrown onto their knees on the sandy ground and told, "To live you must be of use. He is of no use", referring to the technician. A metal bar or pipe is thrown in front of Michael and he is told to kill the young man.

Michael, uncertain of what to do, stays on his knees, unmoving and staring into space. The technician meanwhile clasps his arm and begs him desperately – "Michael!"– to ignore this request. The technician is kicked back onto the ground, while two Taliban members grab Michael's head, drag him up and tell him, "Kill him or you will both die". The Taliban leader looks at him and asks, "Do you want to live?" Michael reluctantly nods. He is kicked in the back, dragged up again by his hair, and the metal bar is pushed into his hands. The technician is held down onto the ground and keeps calling Michael's name. Resisting, Michael lets the bar drop to the ground, but the leader puts a gun against his head. Realizing he has no choice, Michael starts howling and screaming in frustration, while encouraged by the Taliban to "do it!" The bar is shoved into his hands again, and in the next shot he turns to the technician, still howling and with his eyes wide open. He hesitates but when kicked again, driven by adrenaline and fear, Michael starts beating the technician's arm with the bar. The young man falls down

and starts moaning and wailing, but Michael reluctantly continues. Michael is framed beating the technician's body and face while the technician is largely off-screen, only his moans and the strikes are heard. Michael groans with every hit and he starts crying, but seems possessed and cannot stop hitting the young man, even after the technician has stopped moving. The Taliban force him to stop, and Michael is thrown into his prison again, where he breathes heavily, curls up in a corner, and vomits. He becomes quiet and looks out of the little window with a blank face. The scene ends with an extreme close-up of his blue, emotionless eyes.

In the American adaptation *Brothers* Captain Sam and a young private, saved by Sam when the helicopter was shot down, are taken captive by the Taliban. They are thrown into a hole in the ground and locked up, but are soon sold to other Taliban members. They are moved to a cave that functions as their prison but from which they witness the execution of an Afghan man. This man is a relative of the Taliban leader, but is killed for jeopardizing the Taliban's location. Sam and the private are ordered to recite the message that the "US has nothing to do in Afghanistan", while being video recorded. They refuse, and Sam is tied to a pole where he must stay overnight. Unlike the technician in *Brødre*, the Taliban tortures the private in *Brothers* by poking him with a hot metal stick in order to extract information about, apparently, the position and strategies of the US military. Sam has to watch from his prison, appalled and in shock, while he orders the private to stay strong and to not reveal any information. The torture is predominantly presented to the viewer through the private's off-screen screams of pain and panic and by means of Sam's appalled facial expression after which a reverse shot of the torture is withheld. In a subsequent scene, the private is filmed as he reads a message, stating that he realizes "Afghanistan belongs to its people and the Americans have no business being in Afghanistan". The video is later shown to Sam in his prison. Yet another scene indicates that the private is again tortured with the hot metal stick, screaming for his captain, while Sam must watch. This time, however, Sam seems to have grown used to it.

Some time after, Sam is taken outside. The private sits on the sandy ground, with wounds on his face, holding his left arm. He is shivering. Several men point their guns at them. The Taliban chief gives a metal bar to a young boy, and urges the boy to give the bar to Sam. Sam looks at the boy in horror, affected by the boy's young age and the understanding of what is asked of him. Sam is told by the interpreter that the private has no more value to them and that Sam must kill him. He throws the bar onto the ground while being video recorded by a Taliban fighter. The interpreter walks towards Sam and orders him to pick up the bar while pointing a gun at him. Sam picks it up and is told, "You or him, kill him or I will kill you", and "Kill him or I will cut his head off!" Sam remains on his spot, his eyes wide with terror, but he is urged, through shouting from all sides, to kill the private. He looks to his side, to the private, who first looks up at him in despair, but then covers his face with his hands and bends over on his knees. This seems to pull Sam over the threshold and he starts beating the young man, while howling and screaming like an animal with every stroke. The private remains largely off-screen, while video images of the scene indicate everything is recorded. Sam throws the bar down and screams, "There!" while he looks around him in anger and with large eyes. Back in the cave, he curls up in a corner and stares with blank eyes to a spot in front of him.

The interaction between the two imprisoned soldiers in the American adaptation is different from that in *Brødre*. Michael and the young technician engage in dialogue more than do Sam and the private. As his superior, Michael feels a responsibility towards the young technician, and continually tries to keep morale up. Sam, played by Tobey Maguire, is younger than the Danish Michael, played by Ulrich Thomsen, and closer in age to the young private than Michael is to the technician. Because of their ages, there is less hierarchy between Sam and the private, despite Sam's rank of captain. The interaction between Michael and the technician, however, becomes like a father-son relationship, in which Michael feels responsible for the young man's well-being. Although Sam first rescues the private from the water and is later forced to kill him, this deed of self-preservation is presented as

less grave than the elder Michael being forced to kill the much younger technician, whose was taken hostage by the Taliban before him. Further, the father-son relationship and the kindness of the young technician contrast with that of the young private, who scolds Sam for saving him from the helicopter crash and who wishes to be dead rather than held captive.

Apart from the age difference, the Taliban's use of the camera is a new trait in *Brothers*; the private's political video message is recorded and Sam is filmed when he is forced to kill the private. This is not done as part of the pleasure of watching and re-watching torture, which motivates Shane's photographs in *The Mark of Cain.* Like the recording of Roger in *Body of Lies*, the Taliban aims to distribute the anti-US message spoken by Sam to Western media and to show their own disciples a firm statement about the Western intervention in the Middle East. When US soldiers later raid the Taliban compound, the footage is lost and the private and Sam are saved from humiliation. As in *Body of Lies*, the element of recording in *Brothers* seems embedded in America's recent history with and Hollywood's subsequent representations of – and preoccupation with – film footage of kidnapped and beheaded journalists made by Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, as discussed in Chapter 2.

Together with the execution of the Taliban leader's own relative, the appearance of the young Taliban boy, and the torture of the private with a hot metal stick, these recordings present the Taliban as more cruel than they are in *Brødre*. The threat of decapitation ("I will cut your head off") as a form of execution when Sam keeps refusing presents the Taliban as barbaric assassins who record their beheadings. This depiction of the Taliban in *Brothers* can be seen as a form of 'culture talk', as discussed in the previous chapter, in which the Taliban's culture and nature are deemed essentially backward and evil (Mamdani 766). This depiction suggests that in *Brothers* the political aspects pertaining to the presence, identity, and actions of the Taliban are more important than in *Brødre*.

Presenting the Taliban as such stresses the need for action against them, whereas in *Brødre* this urgency is not formulated. At the

same time, the Taliban's recording of soldiers in *Brothers* makes a statement about American operations in Afghanistan, and provides a critical note addressed to the American military. It also reveals the Taliban's explicit motivation for captivity and torture, which is 'Afghanistan is not US business'. As will be explained below, this message is more covert and ambivalent in *Brødre*. Before I move to the political implications of the differences between the two films, the nature of the torture inflicted on and by Michael/Sam is first analysed.

The nature of torture

About *Brothers* Emmett Early writes that "after enduring torture and the death of his fellow POW, Sam is rescued and returns home" (2014, 131). This is an ambiguous sentence and gives a somewhat distorted view of Sam's captivity. Sam and Michael not only endure torture, but are also forced to harm and kill, which converges their subjection to torture and infliction of torture. Additionally, in writing "torture in captivity has caused the veteran to inhibit his ability to relate to his family" (22) Early could again mean two things: having tortured or having been tortured. In *Brothers*, it is suggested that Sam is tied to a pole for the night after refusing to record an anti-American message. Although he is forced to watch the torture of the private from his cell, he is not himself tortured with a hot metal bar or poked to extract information from him. In *Brødre*, Michael is not abused to this degree, which reinforces the image that the Taliban is more cruel in *Brothers*. Both Michael and Sam are deprived of food and water and imprisoned, but Sam's captivity is presented as more 'torturous' than Michael's.

Early's quote could also indicate that Sam has endured *having* tortured in captivity. In my discussion of *The Mark of Cain* and of the previous films I asserted that torture is presented in film as a method to extract information or to punish; while in all cases the component of shaming and dehumanization is prominent or even sought, it is not always achieved. In the *Brothers* films, Michael/Sam is forced to assassinate a subordinate, which is presented as a form of punishment. In *Brothers* Sam is punished for his American background and for his refusal to cooperate and record an anti-US message. In *Brødre*,

however, the spectator can only guess at the Taliban's motivations and assume these relate to Michael's (Western-)European background and the presence of the Danish military in Afghanistan.

The forced execution proves to be torturous for both men: the impossibility of refusing forces Michael/Sam to collude against himself and to participate in a dehumanizing act not only directed towards his subordinate but also towards himself (Sussman 4). In *The Mark of Cain*, Mark was semi-pressured into torturing and could have refused. Although he became a victim of the military institution, in the torture scenes he was the perpetrator. In *Brødre/Brothers*, the element of pressure blurs the line between torturing and being tortured. Early is thus right to assert that Sam is being tortured, but he keeps the nature of torture opaque: Sam is forced to dehumanize himself (or torture himself) by brutally killing another human being as a form of punishment.

Here, another slight difference between the films presents itself; in *Brødre*, Michael's choice is between killing another or being killed himself, which is essentially a choice between refusing to act (which means both men die) or living and killing (which means life but life in shame). In *Brothers*, Sam too has the option of staying alive by killing his subordinate, yet the choice is between refusing to kill and dying by decapitation, being forced to watch the Taliban cut off your subordinate's head (and likely facing the same fate thereafter), or staying alive but living in shame. This alternative of decapitation (and having it recorded) is presented as more barbaric than the choice offered to Michael, in which both men will die but not necessarily through decapitation. Despite the method, however, in both films the urge for survival predominates, and choosing one's own life over another in an act of self-preservation is the cause of trauma in both cases. Although deprived of food and water, Michael and Sam stay optimistic when incarcerated. Only when they are forced to kill do they break and their faces become emotionless.

The consequences: PTSD and domestic violence

The last and major difference between the two films pertains to the way Sam and Michael's post-traumatic stress disorder consequently develops. When reunited with his family, Michael/Sam has difficulty adapting to his home situation, and becomes unable to express himself about his experiences. Growing confused about habitual, ordinary things, he loses his sense of humour, suffers from insomnia, and seems emotionally alienated. Seemingly repressing the violent episode to the far corners of his mind, Michael/Sam grows silent, tense, increasingly emotional instable, and develops paranoia, which are all traits of PTSD.[126]

Both films give no indication of intrusive memories, as in *The Mark of Cain*, but do depict the intrusion of hallucinations. Although not entirely unfounded, even before his wife tells him about the kiss which "meant nothing", Michael/Sam starts suspecting his wife and brother of adultery. In *Brødre*, the blossoming affection between his wife and brother establishes a tension between all parties involved, and the spectator is given reason to believe there are indeed more feelings between his brother and wife than they admit (or is screened). In *Brothers*, set in a conservative American climate, Sam's high school sweetheart Grace clearly (and visibly) does not allow such feelings to seep through. In both cases, Michael/Sam's incomprehension and exaggerated violent reaction towards his family illustrates his symptoms of post-traumatic stress. He starts suffering from insomnia, drinking heavily, and destroys the kitchen his brother helped build during his absence. While growing increasingly hostile, his daughters add fuel to the fire by disclosing their preference for their uncle. In the films' climactic finale, Michael/Sam's and his brother fight, while the latter, anticipating Michael/Sam's uncontrolled and unstable mind, has already called the police. Upon their arrival, Michael/Sam becomes homicidal and suicidal, first pointing a gun towards the police, and then

[126] We cannot be sure if in *Brothers* Sam's PTSD is not instead Acute Stress Disorder (ASD), which typically begins immediately after trauma and can gradually transform into PTSD (Caruth 4; DSM-5 online, article 309.81 (F43.10)). This is, however, inconsequential to the depiction of Michael/Sam's behaviour.

threatening to take his own life. He is overpowered and brought to a psychiatric hospital.

Although *Brothers* is faithful to *Brødre*, with almost identical scenes and dialogues, Michael's behaviour and attitude towards his family is decidedly more violent and menacing. Michael's mental and physical struggles draw a raw portrait of the traumatic effects of torture and warfare. In the domestic violence scenes some of the torture he experienced seeps through and is transferred into his relationship with his family. This constructs Michael's ambiguous status as victim: although affected by PTSD, *Brødre* accentuates the convergence of victim with perpetrator. Although a war victim, he now becomes an offender in his own home.

Like Grace's repression of her feelings for Tommy, Sam's repressed physical violence in *Brothers* is characteristic of a film that is polished and appropriated for an American audience.[127] Despite his outbursts of anger, Sam is only physically violent towards his brother and to the policemen. As such, his destructive behaviour, not directed towards women and children, is mitigated for the viewer and deemed less 'offensive'. This impression of Sam's upheld morality in times of crisis is reinforced when one of the policemen tells Sam, right before he is overpowered, that he is a "war hero, sir". Although voiced to calm Sam down when waving a gun, it is emphasized that Sam is a hero who survived Taliban captivity. Yet it also makes painfully explicit that which Sam himself does not want to hear: that he is a hero and not a killer.

Brødre's unpolished rawness is derived through form and plot: the frequent use of a hand-held camera creates an oppressive atmosphere in relation to domestic violence and the suggestion of adultery. The Hollywood adaptation looks for a similar edge with its

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[127] *Brødre* has been seen in the light of Susanne Bier's earlier Dogme film *Elsker dig for evigt* (*Open Hearts*, 2002). In addition, Ulrich Thomsen's role as Michael has been linked to his role in Thomas Vinterberg's *Festen* (1998), made in a Dogme 95 style that uses naturalistic, intense emotions, and a hand-held camera. The American *Brothers* appropriates the themes presented in *Brødre* and polishes them into a Hollywood adaptation, which stresses conventional ideals regarding heroism, marriage, and adultery. See also Markert's emphasis on this difference between the two films (250-252).

depiction of “a US marine committing atrocities while imprisoned, even under torture and duress” (Bradshaw 2010). Furthermore, Sam’s character, a traumatised war veteran going ballistic, is not “an obvious product of the Hollywood machine” (ibid.). However, the film’s “glossy veneer, carefully composed shots and superstar cast” (Lawrence), in which the taboo of adultery remains nicely under the radar, detract from the film’s potentially potent critique of the self-evident heroic status of American soldiers on the one hand, and on the thin line between victim and culprit in warfare on the other. As such, *Brothers* is not “post-heroic” (Burgoyne 2012a, 8) in the sense that *The Mark of Cain*, *Brødre*, and *Syriana* are. The latter three display a self-conscious reflection on patriotism and the use of torture (*The Mark of Cain),* and (domestic) violence and weaponry (*Brødre*), and explicitly present the side-effects of warfare. *Brothers*, like *Body of Lies*, seems less determined to let go of American heroism and patriotism and underlines the need for action against dangerous regimes.

Brødre/Brothers in relation to *The Mark of Cain*

Michael/Sam is taken to a psychiatric hospital where his wife visits him. After she pressures him into confessing what happened during his capture, indicating that she will leave him if he refuses to talk about his experiences, the films end with Michael/Sam uttering a sentence that points to a first attempt at verbalizing his traumatic experiences. In *The Mark of Cain*, Mark is willing to talk about the events, despite his guilt, yet when on sick leave he cannot verbalize to his mother what happened in the cells. In all films, having tortured seems to produce the effect of disintegration of the ‘self’ and of that which expresses the ‘self’ (Scarry 19): in both cases their trauma leads to unnarratability,[128] and suicide or suicidal tendencies. However, where *Brødre/Brothers* hints at a sign of recovery, in *The Mark of Cain*, no such optimism is possible as Mark commits suicide, Shane goes to prison, and the other involved soldiers remain unpunished.

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[128] See again for trauma and narrating or representation: Scarry, Felman and Laub, Van Alphen (2004), and more recently on trauma in film, Kaplan and Wang.

In the *Brothers* films and in *The Mark of Cain*, the themes of torture and PTSD are intertwined and occupy a prominent part of the plot. The main question addressed in all three films is how loyal one stays to oneself after being involved in the torture of others, and how to subsequently deal with one's respective decisions afterwards. Greatly impairing their social lives, the PTSD that develops manifests differently in *The Mark of Cain* than in *Brødre/Brothers*, which results from the nature and circumstances surrounding the torture the protagonists are involved in. Mark was not forced to torture to the degree Michael and Sam were, and although seemingly unable to refuse participation, not Mark's life but rather his honour depends on the refusal to cooperate. Less aggressive than Michael/Sam, he is instead consumed by embarrassment at his institutional exclusion, by guilt over his own lack of backbone, and by anger over the military's lack of responsibility. In *Brothers*, Michael/Sam's life depends on the refusal, but not necessarily his honour. He could have been courageous by sacrificing his own life for that of his subordinate, but the technician/private would most likely have been killed nonetheless. Mark might initially *feel* he has no choice, but Michael and Sam really do not have one.

The Mark of Cain's power resides in its fragmented atemporal narrative structure, which translates some of Mark's gradual mental deterioration, while leaving the status of narration opaque and unreliable. Similarly, the *Brothers* films mould war trauma and torture into a private "micro-drama" (Burgoyne 2012b, 179), reflected by the films' titles, that particularly accentuate the impact of PTSD on families. Unlike the ticking bomb scenarios and geopolitical thrillers already described in this study, the *Brothers* films, like *Syriana*, are characterized by the consequences of torture and on the developmental nature of relationships and domestic life, rather than by action and suspense.

Brødre and *Brothers* invite the viewer to feel sympathy alternatingly for the traumatised Michael/Sam and for his wife and brother, but *Brødre* does this more convincingly than its adaptation. Due to the frequent use of a hand-held camera, *Brødre* attaches the

spectator to the characters' skin and absorbs the spectator into the family's household, in which the camera creates a sense of claustrophobia that adds to the mounting tensions. Whereas in *Brothers* emotions are expressed but violence is withheld, in *Brødre* the viewer is included in the characters' looming emotions as well as of Michael's violent outbursts. In addition, like *The Mark of Cain*, *Brødre*'s style of filming draws attention to the unrepresentability of trauma; the unsteady hand-held camera does not translate Michael's trauma as such, but evokes the working of Michael's unstable mind and simmering unexpressed feelings. In the film's formal style a parallel is thus drawn with the film's content to express Michael's mental instability. This again implies that trauma can only be suggested in a similarly fragmentary, distorted, and restrained manner.

These factors establish that *Brødre* manages to convey internal constraints, Michael's turbulence, and the troubled intimacy between characters more potently. The adaptation, on the contrary, schematically positions the characters and their intense, pent-up emotions elicited by *Brødre*'s naturalistic film style. Sam's overacted emotional outbursts seem to express the idea of PTSD rather than evoke its structure or 'psychology' (Scott 2009; Van der Burg). Additionally, whereas Michael and his brother Jannik are initially staged as the 'good' and 'bad' son, or the son who fights for his country and has a loving family and the son who has robbed a bank, this moral binary begins to dissolve when Michael becomes violent and threatens his family and Jannik starts looking after Michael's wife and children. This dissolving boundary provides an extra layer to Michael character that is not present in the 'war hero' Sam.

Both *The Mark of Cain* and *Brothers* fail to convey an attachment between spectator and protagonists due to the fragmented structure of the narrative and the confusion elicited concerning the status of focalisation and the reliability of narration. In *The Mark of Cain* the spectator knows less than the characters, which leaves her to grope in the dark until Shane's story unravels, and the plot remains confusing even then. In *Brødre* the spectator knows more than the characters. The film's cast is presented to the viewer differently, and together the

characters become constituents of a 'moral character' that presents their subjective view on the situation. As all characters are separately considered, this creates sympathy for their respective positions and aligns the spectator to the characters individually.

On the contrary, very little information about Shane's character and internal world is provided, which sustains a distance between the viewer and his character and the ambiguous nature of his testimony. The spectator is inclined to attach to Mark, as his internal world is presumably presented through external focalisation, and as he proves to greatly suffer first from the pressure to participate in torture, and later from being scapegoated for it.

The differences in how identification is elicited are neither good nor bad traits of the films (although *Brothers*' schematic approach comes across as a missed opportunity, but only in relation to the original version *Brødre*) but they do show how formal means invite the spectator to become either a more active or passive viewer.[129] *The Mark of Cain*'s fragmentary nature, ambiguous focalisation, and the presentation of the plot as a possibly true, yet unreliable, flashback hinder acceptance of what is presented, and instead incite a state of enduring confusion. The lack of affective engagement and the atemporal structure compel the spectator to take a self-reflexive, ethical position. *Brødre*'s narrative structure, the use of the hand-held camera, the spectator's omniscient knowledge, and the spectator's engagement with the various perspectives of Michael and his family, attach the spectator more potently to the characters in *Brødre* than in *The Mark of Cain*. *Brødre*, however, spells out the characters' various stakes and perspectives of the situation, which allows the spectator to more easily process the plot.

[129] This is the dilemma of using between different media formats, genre formats, and stylistic formats to represent traumatic events, in which the subsequent question of which is favourable becomes a moral and judgemental one. See also Elsaesser's work (1996).

The political implications of PTSD in *Brøde/ Brothers*

Brothers and *Brødre* on the one hand, and *The Mark of Cain* on the other hand formulate different political critiques. *The Mark of Cain* does not necessarily raise the question of military intervention in the Middle East but does addresses military immorality and injustice. It is suggested that patriarchal oppression and bullying is transmitted from superior to subordinate and between privates: those who were bullied as new recruits will in turn bully or abuse others. This raises questions about the moral integrity of the military, rather than about political interventions.

Brothers/*Brødre* addresses the presence of the US/Danish military in Afghanistan, but *Brothers* does so more explicitly. The difference between engagement with Michael's disturbed mind and violent outbursts in *Brødre*, and *Brothers*' schematic depiction of PTSD can be explained by the remake's focus, not only on the development of PTSD, but also on the political implications of the intervention in Afghanistan, and the Taliban's response. Released in 2009, *Brothers* follows on the cluster of 'body genre' films produced and released around 2007/2008, as defined by Burgoyne (2012a, 12), in which the heroism and patriotism of the War on Terror are overshadowed by a delineation of the war's side effects on vulnerable and violated bodies. In *Brothers* the Taliban's motivation for captivity and torture is made explicit through the recordings, yet in *Brødre* the spectator can only guess the Taliban's motivations and is led to assume similar anti-Western sentiments. Although Michael's forced killing of his subordinate and his PTSD sound like a recipe for an anti-war film, the focus does not lie on the operations in the Middle East. Instead, the consequences of Michael's decision to act in self-preservation, as a form of primal instinct, is made tangible through PTSD. In this sense, the nature of the situation in which torture takes place is of secondary relevance in *Brødre*; the effect of torture, not the deed itself, proves pivotal, and the occurrence of torture is almost interchangeable with any other gruesome and traumatic event. In *Brothers*, however, the development of Sam's PTSD is staged in tandem with the ongoing intervention in Afghanistan and the Taliban's use of torture to make a

point about US foreign affairs. Therefore the action – torture in captivity – is as important as its effect on Sam. Despite the Taliban's anti-American messages, *Brothers* does not necessarily oppose intervening in the Middle East. Instead, it suggests that the operations are not damaging as such, but captivity and torture by the Taliban are. The fact that the Taliban threatens to decapitate the soldiers in the film only stresses the necessity of military interventions in such a 'barbaric' culture.

In *Brothers*, Sam is not the only one suffering from PTSD. It is suggested that his father, a Vietnam War veteran, suffers or has suffered from traumatic war experiences. Whereas in *Brødre* the difficult relationship between Michael's brother Jannik and their father is due to the latter's disappointment by Jannik's criminal record and unemployment, in *Brother*s the tension between Sam's brother Tommy and their father is due to the latter's latent aggression, depression, and alcoholism caused by untreated PTSD. The manifestation of PTSD in Sam and Tommy's father suggests that Sam might have been affected by their dad's oppressive behaviour before his mission in Afghanistan (Lawrence), whereas Michael is 'only' affected by his own trauma (Early 2014, 59).[130] The theme of undiagnosed and repressed PTSD in *Brothers* seems to formulate a more general critique of the business of war after all; it is not only damaging for those involved, but also for the next generation. The occurrence of PTSD however does not overrule the necessity of military interventions; the message is that it is *untreated* PTSD in particular that is damaging.

Brødre, released in 2004, provides a raw portrayal of war cruelties but neither shares *Brothers*' explicit political undercurrent nor frames an explicit critique on military functioning and the effects of peer pressure, as does *The Mark of Cain* (which, also based on real

[130] Early argues that intergenerational transmission of PTSD can occur through abuse or neglect of the child, or indirectly through the child's close association with the traumatised parent (2003: 59). Interestingly, early in *Brødre* it is suggested that Michael resembles his father in the latter's rigidness and in the detached manner in which he expresses his affection for his family. His PTSD, however, magnifies these character traits. While in *Brødre* Michael only resembles his dad's aloofness, it is suggested that in *Brothers* Sam is affected by his dad's undiagnosed PTSD.

events, formulates its political messages more explicitly than *Zero Dark Thirty*, which does not pose such a critique). Similar European films that explore the consequences of being exposed to the War on Terror's violence – such as killings in *Route Irish* (Ken Loach, 2010) and torture in *Five Years* (Stefan Schaller, *Fünf Jahre Leben*, 2013) – are also more political than *Brødre*, because they accentuate governmental corruption, misdeeds, or lawlessness. *Brødre* examines the personal cost of the traumatised war veteran through post-traumatic stress and domestic violence, *without* the explicit political message or critique of similar war veteran films.[131] This means that European film does not necessarily present the War on Terror in more critical terms than Hollywood cinema, but that the focus lies on the personal costs of warfare and violence, rather than on making political justifications for or critiques of the War on Terror.

Conclusion

I began this chapter by exploring three different yet interlaced features: whether the figure of the war veteran, his association with torture, a focus on personal and group responsibility, and resulting psychological turbulence shapes another form of political critique of War on Terror operations. Secondly, I investigated whether the identification created for the protagonists, both victims and culprits, facilitated an understanding of the moral decisions made and actions undertaken as a consequence of torture, and whether these moral decision helped in creating sympathy for the protagonists. This last aspect of inquiry is tied to the way in which PTSD is represented by the film's content and formal structure.

In *The Mark of Cain*, the occurrence of torture is the result of the military's machismo and oppressive nature, but is never justified on those terms. Rather, the torture of Iraqi detainees seems secondary to the alarming lack of responsibility taken by the military superiors and

[131] Such as *Home of the Brave* (Irwin Winkler, 2006), *Flags of Our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima* (Clint Eastwood, 2006), *Badland* (Francesco Lucente, 2007), *Stop-Loss* (Kimberly Peirce, 2008), *The Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2008), and *The Veteran* (Matthew Hope, 2011).

to the consequences of Mark and Shane's subsequent exclusion from the military body.

By simultaneously depicting the 'barbarism' of the military, by maintaining the detainees' humanness for the spectator, and by re-humanizing them later through Mark and Shane's testimony, *The Mark of Cain* moves beyond the binary of civilization versus barbarism, and the 'with-us-or-against-us' rhetoric (Sontag 2004, Part IV; Boletsi 1) that began to be questioned after Abu Ghraib. More than *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable*, the film explicitly critiques the use of torture, the peer pressure within the military that leads to torture, and the deadlock of moral courage. More importantly, the film unambiguously shows the ideology behind the mechanism of moral courage and culpability: the open secret of violent excesses, yet the desire to keep these behind closed doors and to conform to a false public ignorance.

Unlike Mark, Michael/Sam in the *Brothers* films are forced to kill as punishment for Western presence in Afghanistan and have no choice. The Taliban's political motivation and the intra-generational effects of PTSD are made explicit in *Brothers* but not in *Brødre*, which largely avoids contextual and political questions about military intervention in Afghanistan and about warfare in more general terms. This proves to be the most explicit difference between the two films.

In these three films, torture is depicted in less graphic terms than in *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Syriana*, and *Body of Lies*. This can, firstly, be explained by seeing the function of torture as secondary to the effects of torture on the protagonists. Only in *Brothers* is torture firmly tied to questions about the legitimacy of the War on Terror. In *The Mark of Cain* and *Brødre*, the torture episodes are gruesome occasions that set the stage for the consequences of participating in such violence for the film's protagonists.

The second explanation for the films' less overt way of framing torture is that torture here is not motivated by information gathering, but by the desire to humiliate: Mark and Shane's humiliation of the Iraqi detainees, and the Taliban's humiliation of Sam/Michael respectively. Furthermore, as the narratives concentrate on the situations leading up to torture and the consequences of the humiliating episodes, the

interaction or role-play between torturer and tortured is not expounded.

This focus on the humiliating nature of torture and its aftermath has formal consequences. In all cases, the torture episode proves devastating – to Sam/Michael in *Brothers/Brødre* and to the detainees as well as Mark in *The Mark of Cain*. In *The Mark of Cain*, Mark's trauma and disintegrating mind are suggested by the film's atemporal and distorted narrative structure, in which the 'single' event of torture is cut into fragments and shots that return as motifs and are as such interspersed with the story. At the same time, the precise status of the fragments and the identity of its narrator remain opaque. As such, the film's structure firstly plays with the (un)representability of trauma: the spectator's desire for conclusiveness is constantly thwarted, and aporia, confusion, and emotional distance with regards to the characters are instead established. The film intends that precisely this impasse confronts the spectator with the limits of representability. Secondly, the unreliable or ambiguous focalisation functions as a strategy to muddy the categories of perpetrator and victim, in which the spectator's moral judgment is constantly postponed. This strategy compels the spectator to take a self-reflexive, ethical position.

Brødre's naturalistic, raw style formally resembles *The Mark of Cain* more than *Brothers*; its use of the unsteady hand-held camera evokes the working of Michael's unstable mind and unexpressed trauma. While *The Mark of Cain*'s lack of engagement between spectator and character and its distorted narration compel the spectator into a self-reflexive, ethical position, *Brødre* spells out the characters' various stakes and perspectives on the situation and absorbs the spectator into the claustrophobic domestic atmosphere and personal relationships. In *Brothers*, the experience and development of PTSD as evoked by *The Mark of Cain* and *Brødre*'s formal structures is polished and schematically applied through more conventional camerawork.

The films' depictions of the war veteran prompts further contemplation; the protagonists' vulnerability and instability upon their return to normal society provokes a rethinking of the moral decisions these men were forced to make within the military apparatus or in

combat, and, more broadly, the social and political status of the war veteran in the context of the War on Terror.

- Chapter 4 -

Essential Killing and *Flanders*' fusion of styles and brutal violence

Introduction

Although as a film, *The Mark of Cain* is not experienced as incomprehensible or opaque by the spectator, the urge to fill in the plot's voids and establish the 'identity' of the narrator of the fragments is partially satisfied by Shane's official, yet unverifiable and possibly even inaccurate account. The two films analysed in this chapter, the Polish *Essential Killing* (Jerzy Skolimowski, 2010) and French *Flanders* (*Flandres*, Bruno Dumont, 2006), neither present a conclusive plot, nor satisfy the spectator's desire for comprehension. In *Essential Killing* a (seemingly Arab) man named Mohammed[132] is captured, detained, and tortured by US agents, and then taken to an undisclosed location. Before their arrival the man escapes, after which he is forced to survive in the snowy woods while being hunted, where he eventually perishes. In *Flanders*, young farmers are summoned to war, yet the context and location of this war is never revealed. Both cruel and ill-prepared for warfare, the men kill civilians and rape a young woman, after which they are brutally tortured and killed. Only one of the soldiers, Demester, survives and returns home to his girlfriend Barbe.

Whereas the films discussed in the previous chapter made explicit references to the War on Terror and had a definable political context, *Essential Killing* and *Flanders* only draw this parallel implicitly. This has consequences for the way in which torture occurs in both films. The refusal to provide contextual information establishes that some traits, motifs, or scenes can be read allegorically and understood to underscore human brutality, perseverance, and survival in more general terms. At the same time, specific situations and political references, which usually inspire an intertextual reading, prevent such

[132] He is never named in the film, but to be able to describe the scenes I have taken his name from the credits.

a reading here. Due to the lack of contextual information, the films harbour an apparent contradiction: on the one hand, they provide little contextual information or their own emotional expression and moral tools, thereby urging the spectator to bring contemporary political parallels and moral registers into the narrative. On the other hand, it is impossible to watch and understand these films and their depictions of torture and violence without taking the War on Terror into account; the films' diegetic worlds steer perception and spur the spectator to view and review these narratives through a post-9/11 lens that is historically determined.

This confusing viewing experience resides in the films' aesthetics. *Essential Killing*'s fragmented and atemporal structure, like that of *The Mark of Cain*, comes across as artificial, as it accentuates the film's form. At the same time this structure might be perceived as highly realistic: the hand-held camera, fragmented structure, and close-ups of his tormented face translate Mohammed's depraved state and unstable mind, without, however, revealing much about his character. Together with the scarcity in contextual information this claustrophobic way of filming establishes an eerie atmosphere.

Flanders fuses two styles that seem contradictory at first sight; Dumont employs the sparse formal means, editing, and deadpan acting of what Paul Schrader has called "transcendental style". Additionally, he employs the contemporary French 'harsh' style of the *cinéma du corps.* This so-called transcendental style is neither intrinsically transcendental nor religious, but approaches and expresses the Transcendent, or that which is beyond normal sense experience (Schrader 3, 5).[133] This style seeks to maximize the mystery of existence by eschewing all conventional (i.e. realism, psychologism, naturalism, impressionism, expressionism, rationalism) interpretations of reality. In doing so it stylizes reality through austere visual and linguistic means, by eliminating nearly all elements that are primarily expressive

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[133] Schrader sees the cinema of Yasujiro Ozu, Robert Bresson, and Carl Dreyer as "transcendental". These directors incorporate visual cues reminiscent of spiritual or religious imagery and iconography (Zen, Byzantine, and Gothic) into their films.

and by withholding psychology-motivated behaviour and emotion (ibid. 10-11).[134] As such, the transcendental style is very much a filmic form or technique that, instead of facilitating engagement with the situation and with characters, is employed to “elevate the mind” and the spectator’s intellectual experience (ibid. 154).

Although ‘transcendental’ does not necessarily relate to the expression of religious themes or imagery (ibid. 4-7), Dumont, although an atheist, himself has admitted a desire for or fascination with spirituality (Brooke; Verstraten 2011, 28). Rather than considering this ‘mysticism’ a religious experience, Dumont, a former philosophy teacher, has argued that he regards spirituality in terms of cinematography and that “‘mysticism is essentially cinematographic”’ (Smith 2010).[135] Regarding cinematography as such explains some of the confusion that arises when watching *Flanders*. Conventional popular cinema, such as in *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Unthinkable*, *Body of Lies*, and *Brothers*, abundantly use formal aspects including acting, camerawork, editing, and music to express content and emotions (Verstraten 2011, 40). In *Flanders*, however, the austere, static, and “‘nonexpressive”’ (Schrader 11) methods and acting draw attention to what is not shown and has to be actively supplied by the spectator.

Whereas in *Flanders* these austere formal aspects create the film’s transcendental style, *Essential Killing* combines ascetic formal means (such as the hand-held camera) with visual allurement and abundance through colour motifs, sound, and close-ups of intense emotions. The editing techniques used to express Mohammed’s state of mind in *Essential Killing* attach the spectator to his position, while *Flanders*’ static filming creates a distance between character and spectator. In both films, however, acting, camerawork, and the lack of

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[134] As Susan Sontag regarding Bresson’s style, and Verstraten (2011, 33) for Dumont’s note, style and content cannot be seen separately; the characters’ inexpression is translated by austerity in visual and linguistic means that further underscore that which is unexpressed.
[135] His conceptualization of mysticism as cinematographic can be regarded as a particular philosophy of film (Smith 2010).

dialogue are puzzling rather than clarifying. Instead of spelling out for the viewer what to see and how to see it, *Flanders* and *Essential Killing* create minimal causality and a sense of slowness, withhold information, and evoke enigmatic ambiguity, which coerces the viewer to actively construct coherence.

Flanders, however, fuses an enigmatic transcendental style with the harsh style of the contemporary French *cinéma du corps*. This 'cinema of the body' accentuates physical features, vulnerable and violated bodies and – often unsimulated – sex in an explicit or graphic fashion.[136] This tension between two styles – one that favours the mystery of everyday life and invites an intellectual response, and the other that accentuates the banal by depicting common or 'fleshy' bodies and causes discomfort or even shock – creates an alienating viewing experience. Additionally, the few moral directives provided for the spectator to hold on to when watching brutal and graphic violence reinforce this tension.

With the exception of *Unthinkable*, discussed in Chapter 1, torture in the films discussed thus far is framed predominantly off-screen or within the parameters of the 'watchable'. In *Essential Killing* and *Flanders*, violence is visceral, brutal, and in the case of *Flanders*, graphic. Although the Polish *Essential Killing* does not technically (and geographically) fit into this category, the accent on vulnerable, violated bodies, close-ups of faces, and the harshness of actions and violence make *Essential Killing* resemble the French *cinéma du corps*. At the same time, the film's visually arresting beauty deviates from the anti-aesthetics of *Flanders*' 'common' characters, bodies, and graphic violence.

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[136] Tim Parker describes *cinéma du corps*, with directors Claire Denis, Bruno Dumont, and Gaspar Noé as leading figures, as consisting of "arthouse drama and thrillers with deliberately discomforting features; dispassionate physical encounters involving filmed sex that is sometimes unsimulated; physical desire embodied by the performances of actors or nonprofessionals as harshly insular; intimacy itself depicted as fundamentally aggressive, devoid of romance, lacking a nurturing instinct or empathy of any kind; and social relationships that disintegrate in the face of such violent compulsions" (99).

Taking this elaboration about the films' fusion of generic traits and styles into account, this chapter will begin with an analysis of the torture scenes in *Essential Killing* and illustrate how this episode, when positioned into the plot, is further shrouded in opaqueness. The second part argues that *Flanders* extends the sense of confusion provoked in the spectator by presenting even fewer tools to decipher the situations and characters. The characters' expressionless and immoral actions play with viewing expectations and leave the spectator disturbed.

1. *Essential Killing*: Torture, deprivation and survival

In *Essential Killing*, Mohammed (Vincent Gallo) hides in a cave in an undefined desert in, presumably, a Middle Eastern country. On the verge of being discovered by American soldiers, he is forced to kill three of them. He escapes but a helicopter locates him and fires a torpedo. The assault nearly kills him. In a point-of-view shot Mohammed is surrounded by several soldiers who look down at him while the loud ringing of tinnitus is heard, the result of his ear damage. In the next shot Mohammed's point of view indicates that he has been blindfolded and is only able to see from under the folds of his hood. He sees several other hooded and cuffed detainees with him in a moving van. The men are brought in a long line into the TL-lit hall of a detention centre, while the loud ringing in Mohammed's ear continues. American soldiers and barking dogs guide them towards cells. Mohammed and his fellow captives are framed as they are put into prisons, made of large cages where other prisoners are already locked up.

Some time seems to have passed when the hood is removed from Mohammed's head in the next shot. He is seated at a table and four men are present: one holds a gun, one holds a dog on a leash, an Arab-looking man in regular clothes is seated, and a US military official. The official, who sits behind the table repeatedly asks Mohammed whether he speaks or understands English, but Mohammed neither looks up nor responds. His interrogator asks the interpreter, the man in regular clothes, to translate. Mohammed is shown a photo, obscured from the spectator, in which, it is told, he is present in a group of people, and is asked about his activities. Still, Mohammed does not respond. His

interrogator starts shouting and cursing at him. Mohammed's point-of-view shot, in which the angry interrogator is seen to silently shout at him, reveals that Mohammed is still suffering from temporary hearing loss.

In the next scenes his long hair is cut of and his beard is shaved. A close up of his tied hands shows a ring on Mohammed's little finger. He and fellow prisoners are made to wear orange jumpsuits. Again, he is hooded with a piece of cloth, cuffed, and brought into a cell by several soldiers where he is put on a bench. When they untie his hands, he resists, but is violently dragged up on the bench with his head down and feet up and tied. In the next shot a soldier waterboards Mohammed: a tube slowly drips water into the piece of cloth covering his mouth, drowning him. Mohammed groans and resists. An overview shot of the cell shows a military doctor sitting in the corner. He gets up and checks Mohammed's condition.

Next, Mohammed is back on his feet again, but kicked in the stomach by a soldier, who is framed from the waist down. Still hooded and cuffed, Mohammed veers against the cell's wall. Through his hood, blood spills onto the floor, and he collapses. After this scene, Mohammed and other prisoners are flown to another undisclosed location where he manages to escape.

The captivity and torture scenes are opaque from start to end. Found in a cave in a desert where American soldiers are patrolling, Mohammed's hideout suggests a location in Iraq or Afghanistan, and his dark beard, complexion, and the clothes he wears when caught suggest an Arab background. These assumptions, however, are the result of the spectator's desire to trace back or reduce these scenes to a recognisable War on Terror context.[137] The scenes in which Mohammed is subjected to torture and wears an orange jumpsuit are, on the other hand, potent references to the War on Terror and reminiscent of the detainees and

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[137] *Sight & Sound*'s Tony Rayns (2011) for instance just assumes Mohammed is a Jihadi fighter caught in Afghanistan. According to John Belton, to a certain extent, "every film that depicts or refers to war, as well as every film made during a war, functions as a war film" (203). Some films, however, are obviously more 'war films' than others. His comment, nonetheless, partially explains how the spectator will watch these two films through a historically-specific lens

their treatment in Guantanamo Bay.[138] To further underline this association, his jumpsuit is prominently depicted in the cover image of *Essential Killing*, a captivating still that immediately connotes the figure of a Guantanamo Bay detainee: a man with a dark beard and orange jumpsuit runs through the white snow, stained by blood and chased by men with guns and German shepherds. With his arms up in fright and a tormented face he barely escapes their shooting.

At the same time, the viewer is given few cues as to why and where Mohammed is imprisoned. Mohammed's 'crimes' remain vague, and the photograph is not illuminating as evidence or as an indication of previous activities. It remains equally obscure why Mohammed hid in a cave, or if the American soldiers were searching for him in particular. His torture only lasts for a short while and it remains uncertain how long he was held. The jumps between shots indicate lapses in time and an altogether longer period of interrogation. The spectator can assume Mohammed stays in the detention centre for several months, because upon his escape shortly after, his hair and beard have fully grown back.

The result of his interrogation, whether successful or not, is never revealed. During Mohammed's torture no one speaks a word, and the military does not seem particularly keen on retrieving information. The variety of soldiers and their orchestrated actions suggest a routine operation. Various soldiers assist Mohammed into his cell, another soldier waterboards him, and the soldier in the second scene is only framed from the waist down when he knees Mohammed in the stomach. He is tortured without the 'zeal' that characterised the torture discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 and in *The Mark of Cain*, and his abuse seems a standard procedure in a soulless detainee system. The lack of 'zealousness' indicates the abuse is unmotivated by a personal grudge based on religious and political discord. At the same time, we can assume he is tortured for political reasons, but this assumption is solely based on the War on Terror frame through which the spectator is invited to watch these torture scenes. Due to the absence of speech and

[138] The films *Five Years* (*Fünf Jahre Leben*, Stefan Schaller, 2013) and *Camp X-Ray* (Peter Sattler, 2014), which are set in Guantanamo Bay, present a similar image of abuse and detainees. The orange jumpsuits in both films are prominent.

interrogation, none of the theatrical, psychological, and abusive role-play, 'scripted' in order to extract information and break the victim mentally and physically (that characterised the torture in the previous chapters) prevails.

Mohammed's time in the US detention centre is not elaborated upon or explicated and is given little screen time. Reducing the torture scenes to a short segment that renders the operation of torturing routine accentuates the procedure's ruthlessness. At the same time, the short, fragmentary episodes suggest that Mohammed's captivity and torture are predominantly inserted to introduce his subsequent escape and struggle to survive in the woods during winter. A cat and mouse game between him and the military then commences, and Mohammed's all-consuming desire for survival, which forces him to perpetrate 'essential' killings, becomes a pivotal theme. By instead positioning these scenes of torture only at the onset of the plot, the stage is further created for Mohammed's predicament in the remaining three-quarters of the film.

Mohammed's escape and 'essential' killings

After being transported to a new location by plane, the prisoners are put into vans. A caravan drives during the night and the roads are covered in snow and ice. Before they arrive, one of the vans deviates while trying to bypass a group of wild pigs, skids, and slides off the road down a hill. The doors are not fastened well enough and Mohammed falls out of the van. Although tied at his feet and hands, he manages to crawl to the outskirts of the woods without being seen.

After Mohammed is propelled out of the vehicle, his unsteady point-of-view shots and medium close-ups of his frightened face again align the spectator, who knows as little as Mohammed, to his perspective. He stumbles away from the van and into the woods, but it is dark and the snow chills him; he can hardly stand and falls down, clutching his bare feet. His distinct orange jumpsuit and his dark, bearded face contrast with the thick pack of white snow and stillness of his surroundings. In the next shot he is up on his feet again, breathing heavily, seemingly contemplating his situation. Realising there is no

place for him to go, he decides to go back and turn himself in. In a following shot he approaches the overturned van slowly on his frozen feet and with his hands up. He walks up the hill to the road, where the van is abandoned: they have all left.

Being left behind activates Mohammed's survival mode. Without proper clothing and food, he will likely perish if he does not act upon it. He spots another van on the road, out of which blares loud metal music.[139] A man gets out of the car to make a phone call and Mohammed silently approaches him. The man speaks English, but his words are muffled because of the music. Approaching slowly, Mohammed draws the gun from the man's belt and shoots him in the back. He opens the door of the car, shoots the man behind the wheel, and drags him out onto the white snow that becomes red with blood. Mohammed takes some weapons, a knife, and some of the men's clothes including a wool hat, gloves, a jumper, socks, and a pair of shoes, so that his appearance attracts less attention. Desperate, he gets into the car, but is unable to switch off the loud music. For some time he is able to drive down the road until an approaching helicopter forces him to leave the car and run into the woods. A bird's-eye shot of Mohammed trudging heavily in the thick snow towards the setting sun suggests only a brief moment of peace; apparently they have noticed his disappearance and are searching for him.

In a subsequent bird's-eye shot, helicopters and several men in camouflaging white snowsuits with barking German shepherds chase him. He is somewhat ahead of them, but during his flight steps in an animal trap: he must take off his boot, and because his sock is drenched in blood it drips down onto the white snow. He manages to divert the hunters' attention by leaving a false trail behind, but one of the dogs finds him nonetheless. Running away, Mohammed slips and falls down a steep hill into an ice-cold river. The dog falls too and drags its owner with him. Just as Mohammed hauls himself out of the water, the dog attacks and in a close-up, Mohammed kills the dog with several stabs from his knife. The killing is framed off-screen and the camera instead

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[139] This music is by the Polish 'mathcore' (technical metal music) band Moja Adrenalina.

focuses on Mohammed's distorted face, his eyes wide in shock and pain. Nondiegetic, atonal, and chilling music accompanies this scene. Finally, he comes to his senses, breathing heavily and shivering. In a following shot he runs away in a white camouflage snowsuit. This cut and change of clothes, those of his hunter, indicate a time lapse during which what happened to the man holding the dog is not made explicit.

The circumstances thus compel him to perpetrate 'essential' murders in self-defence. He also steals from a fisherman and runs off with a fish to nourish himself. When he sees a peasant woman nursing her hungry baby, he points a gun at her and starved, uncovers her other breast and starts taking her milk. His third and last killing is prompted when he stumbles upon a group of loggers sawing down trees for wood. The men speak Polish to each other. He climbs on one of the trucks, which takes him to the processing site. As he climbs off and hides in the forest, one of the trees falls on top of him, but it conveniently hides him. The change from moonlight to daylight suggests he has fallen asleep. One of the loggers has returned and wants to cut the tree that covers Mohammed into pieces. Quickly Mohammed crawls out of his hideout and they fight. Soon Mohammed is able to tackle the man, grab the saw, and kill the logger with it. Although the logger remains off-screen, the sounds of the saw tearing the logger's body open, his blood that covers Mohammed's white snowsuit, and a close-up of Mohammed's tormented face translate the intensity of this murder. The sounds of the other saws in the distance camouflage the screams. Mohammed runs away through the woods while the helicopter pursues its hunt for him, but it remains unable to capture him because the men inside are not allowed to shoot.

***Essential Killing*'s realism**

Through camerawork the spectator is made to understand what Mohammed feels in the forest: imprisoned and desperate. There is "something compellingly real" (Bradshaw 2011a) in how the hand-held camera frames Mohammed's shaky point of view. When Mohammed is framed as the object of focalisation by the unsteady camera, as in *The Mark of Cain* and *Brødre*, an external narrator expresses Mohammed's

internal focalisation: his experience of the situation, and his actions based on primal instinct, lapses in time, disorientation, and deprivation. In addition to the hand-held camera, static – often photographic – close-ups of Mohammed's tormented or confused face, and bird's-eye views of the vast woods in which he is seen to tread through the snow, underscore Mohammed's exhaustion and deprived state, and express a general sense of claustrophobia and imprisonment. As such, formal means are used to underscore Mohammed's situation and draw a realistic portrait of his state of mind.

Additionally composer Paweł Mykietyn's diegetic metal music and nondiegetic, discordant, chilling music accompanies each killing. It pierces the scenes, and these moments receive their charge and power partially through sound. These sounds could perhaps be interpreted as internal diegetic sound in Mohammed's own head, the result of food deprivation, indicating that he is starting to 'lose it'. Further, loud music or noise is often used during torture sessions (Rejali 2007, 360-386). In *Zero Dark Thirty*, when Dan enters the silo he switches off similar metal music to further question a sleep-deprived Ammar.[140] Unable to switch off the loud noise, the metal music in the van serves to underscore Mohammed's ordeal that lasts beyond the detention centre and explicates his state of nervousness and shock. As such, diegetic music and auditory or sound focalisation work in tandem with the hand-held camera to express Mohammed's mental state and hardship.[141]

Although camerawork and music potently translate Mohammed's perspective and state of mind, *Essential Killing*'s form is neither constructed through conventional realist, seamless narrative techniques (Bordwell, Thompson, and Staiger 2-3, 13), nor does it

[140] As in *Zero Dark Thirty*, in the film *Five Years* (*Fünf Jahre Leben*, Stefan Schaller, 2013) loud metal music is used as a form of torture.

[141] For a distinction between internal and external diegetic sound – or the difference between sounds heard inside Mohammed's mind and the sound of the saw that has a physical source in the scene – see Bordwell and Thompson (2004, 368). Furthermore, see Verstraten's distinction between visual and auditory narration, both as part of filmic internal or external narration, and for the specific use of sound that underlines or contradicts visual narration (2009, Chapter 7). Where Bordwell and Thompson pursue a neo-formalist approach, Verstraten reworks the theory of narratology offered by literary scholar Mieke Bal to analyse film narratives and distinguish different modes of narration.

purport to be realistic, in the sense that the film produces the illusion of near-referential reality (Houwen 51-52). In the first chapter, in relation to *Zero Dark Thirty*, I discussed how audio-visual media tends to meet the audience's "obsession with realism" (Verstraten 2011, 40) by establishing an illusionary reality effect that distracts from the constructed nature of realism. Films like *Zero Dark Thirty* are not more realistic than *Essential Killing*, but the latter draws attention to its formal construction through its unsteady camerawork and fragmentary style. *Essential Killing*'s way of filming, however, realistically translates experience and perception, which, as Christopher Sharrett notes, is not an attempt to *document* reality, but to present the *experience* of reality (Part I).

Essential Killing's play with classical realist conventions is further underscored by the scarcity of contextual and geographical information. Where conventional narration provides the spectator with tools to interpret the scenes, *Essential Killing*, despite Mohammed's orange jumpsuit, never explicitly alludes to specific situations, locations, or contemporary politics. Mohammed is flown to a cold country where the inhabitants speak Polish to each other. Part of the 'Coalition of the Willing', Poland managed a black site on its soil where high-level terrorists from Iraq and Afghanistan were detained (Traynor; Gritten 2011). Polish *Essential Killing* director Jerzy Skolimowski indicates that he saw US military planes land near his home, where the CIA were bringing prisoners from the Middle East to a secret military site. In these sinister sequences of military flights he saw the seed for a film about escape and survival (Cineuropa).

This piece of contextual information regarding Poland's share in the War on Terror, however, assumes knowledge on the part of the spectator and is only suggested, but never made explicit. The spectator is left in the dark about duration and geographical specificities, such as how long Mohammed spent in the forest and its location. In extension of this opaqueness, the wintery landscape can be seen as imbued with meaning beyond itself. David Melbye contends that the function of landscape in film can move beyond that of backdrop and become an

antagonistic force in its own right (3, 6-7, 111-113).[142] As nothing grows due to the snow, Mohammed is compelled to eat ants and tree bark. Starving, he often sinks to his knees or has to hold on to a tree to prevent from collapsing. Apart from the people he meets, the forest works antagonistically, making it impossible for Mohammed to endure, and it subsequently 'consumes' him. Moreover, the cold and bare forest can be translated as allegorically connoting Mohammed's deteriorating physical and mental state (16, 112-113):[143] it signifies his newly found freedom as much as his confinement and decay. He moves from being incarcerated by the US military to incarceration and subjection by nature.

The politics of colour motifs and Mohammed's 'Arab' background

Not only do landscape, the shaky hand-held camera, and sound translate Mohammed's experiences and physical and psychological degeneration, but so does the recurring use of white and red, which function as motifs with a narrative function.[144] As such, the film combines static shots and sparse formal means with visually arresting images created by the colour motifs and compositions. The images of red blood on white snow and of red blood on Mohammed's white snowsuit can be viewed as underscoring violence and as foreboding

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[142] Melbye defines cinematic allegory as follows: "an assembled narrative mode, wherein the principal characters move beyond their normal/antagonistic functions and into a symbolic dimension of meaning." Additionally, he argues that landscape gains an antagonistic function that is similar to that of the character. Landscape can thus become an agent.

[143] Paul de Man makes a similar observation and argues how in Romanticism an analogy between mind and nature is often made. He sees this analogy in allegorical terms (194), as does Melbye. In *Essential Killing,* however, this connection connotes the destructive quality of nature and the protagonist's disintegrating mind. In Vietnam War films such as *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978), *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979), *The Thin Red Line* (Terrence Malick, 1998), *Platoon* (Oliver Stone, 1986), and *Full Metal Jacket* (Stanley Kubrick, 1987) the protagonists are similarly 'consumed' by nature or perish, either through enemy violence or by mental and physical destabilization resulting in murder or suicide.

[144] The simplicity of the colour scheme and the recurring motif of the colours red and white organize several scenes into stunning photographic shots. Kieslowski seems inspired by fellow Polish director Krzysztof Kieslowski's *Three Colors Trilogy* (*Trois Couleurs: Bleu, Blanc, Rouge,* 1993-1994), in which one colour in each film gains a narrative function and become a constitutive element in the film's plot.

more death. The white snow is not a camouflaging blanket that connotes quietude and peace:[145] it is distinctly juxtaposed to Mohammed's dark complexion and functions like a white screen or canvas on which his actions take shape and are delineated. His trail of blood presages his demise: unable to use the snow as a cover-up for his killings, the red blood that soaks his snowsuit makes him easily traceable. The colour red returns in the form of berries that, after being consumed, seem to make him hallucinate. They may be poisonous and made him delirious, or these hallucinations may be due to his starved state and forebode his approaching death. Either way, the red berries accentuate Mohammed's near decay.

In the final scenes, again, the colours white and red return. Mohammed finally stumbles upon a small cottage in the woods. He approaches and collapses against the front door. The woman inside (Emmanuelle Seigner), although initially frightened, drags Mohammed in when he appears semi-conscious and unable to move. She is warming him by the fire when two policemen arrive and interrogate her, but she signals she is mute. After she apparently refuses to reveal Mohammed's presence, the men leave. Meanwhile, Mohammed has regained consciousness and the woman manages to drag him to her bed. In his point-of-view shot her face is blurry as she leans over him and strokes his head. He sleeps while she takes care of his wounds, she feeds him, and the next morning helps him dress. Then she silently signals him to leave, and he departs on a snow-white horse. In the last shots, Mohammed slightly leans over on his horse, as if he is fainting. As he enters the woods, he clutches his stomach, and red blood spurts out of his mouth and drips onto the white horse: he is dying. He nearly falls off, barely able to keep his balance. The last shot frames just the white horse with Mohammed's red blood staining its coat, resembling Mohammed's own bloodstained white snowsuit. The horse grazes from

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[145] This function of snow is reminiscent of James Joyce's much interpreted 'The Dead', in which a thick pack of snow falls upon "all the living and the dead" (220). Death and snow function as tropes and permeate the story. According to John V. Kelleher, in 'The Dead' snow eerily connotes death and the dead, present and past, "mundane reality and myth", and "a whole country swooning deathwards under the falling snow" (418, 431-432).

the early branches of green that peak through the white snow. Mohammed must have fallen off unconscious or dead at some point.

The meaning of the film's final anti-climactic scenes is not easily pinpointed. The colour motifs again become a pervasive, contrasting, and alarming motif and connote the impossibility of Mohammed's survival. Although the landscape previously seemed, according to Melbye, inhospitable and antagonistic (111-113), the compassionate mute woman takes Mohammed into her house for an insular moment of comfort. Yet while the white horse usually makes its appearance in fairy tales (or in caricatures of fairy tales), now the animal seems to epitomize Mohammed's inevitable and approaching death. Despite his torment, the image of the grazing horse and the first leaves of green suggest that Mohammed has finally regained peace in death. Together with the contextual opaqueness, the function of landscape and the colour motifs make explicit and play with the spectator's need for conventional realist principles and guidelines for interpretation.

These ambiguous final scenes pose a stark contrast with Mohammed's torture in a Guantanamo Bay-like detention centre earlier in the film. The accent on Mohammed's precarious situation and survival instinct in the second half of the film can be seen to signify human suffering and perseverance under extreme circumstances in more general terms. Although the orange 'Guantanamo Bay' jumpsuit is prominent in the first scenes, Mohammed manages to discard his distinct clothing relatively early in the plot, after killing the two men in the van. Perhaps this change of garb is exactly what it looks like: a change of clothes to attract less attention. Yet by putting on a camouflaging white suit that fuses Mohammed with his snow-white surroundings, the discarding of the orange jumpsuit suggests the neutralization of the political connotations implied in the first scenes; the colour orange becomes secondary to the colour motifs of white and red and thwarts the anticipation of a War on Terror-themed film created by the jumpsuit (and its prominent place on the film's poster), which is relinquished when the accent comes to lie on primal instinct.

The final scenes reinforce the downgrading of these political edges. The intimate yet non-erotic scenes with the two women, in

which 'nursing' is in one case violently demanded by taking milk and in the other voluntarily given, seem to make Mohammed regress from man to child. This regression accentuates Mohammed's permanent state of helplessness and neediness. The mute woman feels responsible for him but sends him away knowing he will most likely die, and becomes a mediator between life and death, between the inhospitable and hospitable.[146] As such, Mohammed rapidly moves through a disordered cycle of life: from man, to nurtured infant, and then to death.

At the same time, the change from an orange to a white outfit seems to 'whitewash' the politics of the colour orange, which is a political strategy in its own right and raises explicit questions about the film's use of aesthetics in translating a political undercurrent.[147] The move from orange to white signifies a move away from the politically-specific association with War on Terror suspects to an identity more 'recognisable' and appealing to the viewer. Although he is called Mohammed (by the credits), the actor playing Mohammed, Vincent Gallo, suggests that Mohammed's 'Arabness' is by no means overt. Skilomowski's choice of Gallo, who has created somewhat of a cult status around his "star image" (Dyer 2004, 7-8), is an interesting one.

[146] This act reminds me of Judith Butler's analysis of mutual vulnerability as the core element for ethical responsibility: "we are in our skins, given over, in each other's hands, at each other's mercy. This is a situation we do not choose. It forms the horizon of choice, and it grounds our responsibility. In this sense, we are not responsible for it, but it is that for which we are nevertheless responsible" (2002, 58). The mute woman assumes responsibility for Mohammed's deprived state. She did not actively choose this responsibility, yet she acts from a position of responsibility. Although she is not responsible for him she is nonetheless responsible. This act of providing hospitality and then letting him go might be the most ethical act carried out in *Essential Killing*, because it includes the element of choice. It provides a contrast with Mohammed's killings, which are 'essential', primal, intuitive, and carried out without the space and time to think or decide.

[147] It is arguable that apart from the shift from orange to white, Skolimowski appropriates Kieslowski's dual use of the colours white and red. Kieslowksi has denied any political intent with his colour trilogy, and the colours can be seen to signify the mood or state of mind these colours stand for: sadness, peace, and love. However, as a Polish/French production the colours undeniably also refer to the French flag and the colours' reference to *liberté*, *egalité*, and *fraternité* (Coates 206-212). In *Essential Killing* these colours are both a move away from political association ('orange') with the War on Terror, and at the same time invested with an explicit political reference to death and violence in relation to the War on Terror. More specifically, they refer to the white and red that constitutes the Polish flag, and the way in which Poland has shared in the detainment of suspects.

Known for his screen performances in low-budget films, his creative work (as painter, singer, dancer, model, actor, and film-maker), and his radical behaviour and sexually explicit or insulting public statements about other actors and artists have created a fair amount of notoriety (Smith 2001; Mottram). When watching Mohammed, one sees an actor with a notorious star image personifying a character whose name and captivity suggest an Arab background. This suggestion of Arabness could mean Mohammed is American-born and that he might have converted to Islam, or that his captivity by the US could be a case of mistaken identity. In any case, Mohammed's background is deliberately left equivocal.

Mohammed's murders and 'barbaric' actions are both alienating and understandable; it is implied that this is what a starved person would do. His impulsive killings are incited by self-preservation and self-defense, and so become 'essential' and, in Arendtian terms, justifiable to the viewer. At the same time, his actions remain unanticipated and unexplained, which predominantly results from a lack of dialogue in *Essential Killing*: Mohammed does not utter a single word during the whole film, yet it remains unclear why. The consequent look of desperation and anxiety on Mohammed's face give the most important clues as to how to read his state of mind and interpret his physical condition. A great deal of the suspense elicited by the plot is constructed precisely through the lack of speech and the impossibility of anticipating what will happen next, while simultaneously explaining sufficiently why Mohammed acts how he does: although Mohammed's fragmented and limited perspective might evoke our sympathy (yet not necessarily emotional engagement), the spectator is nonetheless glued to his skin and knows as little as, or less than, Mohammed.

The absence of speech and 'speaking' through fragments

One possibility that would explain the absence of voice and language is that this is the result of severe shock and trauma. As analysed in Chapter 3, many traumatised subjects, like Mark and Michael/Sam, experience an impossibility of expressing themselves and avoid talking

about their traumatising events (Scarry 35).[148] Reduced to a state of permanent pain and deprivation, the animal-like sounds, cries and groans Mohammed instead produces sound like "the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (Scarry 4). Trauma does not fully explain, however, why Mohammed does not speak at all. Being reduced to a child-like state or affected by trauma and shock does not necessarily make him *lose* his voice: rather, he does not 'have' language or make use of it to begin with. Although Mohammed's screams signify subjection to extreme violence, his non-speaking is not necessarily a consequence of violence or of resulting muteness. Instead, the absence of speech seems to pertain to the film's form, and serves a narrative function. This assumption is underscored by the character of the woman who shelters him and who is, actually, mute.

Each time, however, that Mohammed sleeps or has fallen unconscious, editing suggests he has dreams that contain memories, flashbacks, and also flash-forwards. In *The Mark of Cain* these fragments present or re-present the torture episode in a fragmented way. Similarly, in *Essential Killing* Mohammed's previous experiences in the detention centre are again presented, but the fragments also (and predominantly) present new material. More importantly, they contain prayers recited in Arabic. This reinforces the suggestion that Mohammed has an Arab background, yet again this does not necessarily have to be so. Instead of aiding the spectator's comprehension of Mohammed's current and previous situation, the fragments are riddled with possible meanings.

The first fragment is presented when Mohammed has fallen unconscious after being abused in the detention centre. In the scene, a woman in a bright blue niqab walks towards a mosque in the desert, her face obscured. Then Mohammed is seen listening to a sermon sung in Arab, his anxious face in close-up and his eyes dilated. An unknown

[148] See again DSM-5, and Scarry, Felman and Laub, Van Alphen (2004), and Kaplan and Wang.

and off-screen man, probably an Imam, sings, “It is not ye who slew them; it was Allah”.[149]

The second fragment is inserted after he kills the dog with a knife and falls asleep in a haystack, a feeder for animals. Mohammed’s frightened face is again seen in close-up as he listens to the prayer, fragments from the Qur’an, that continue, “I put my trust in Allah, my Lord and your Lord! There is no living creature, but He holds it by its forelock; surely my Lord is on the right path”.[150]

In the next shot white pigeons fly from a white rooftop. The tower of a mosque with speakers that emanate the sound of the prayer is seen, as well as a market scene on the street, a white goat on a leash, and again the woman in a bright blue niqab who purchases groceries in the market. Pigeons fly up and a passer-by leads a camel on a leash. These fragmented shots follow upon one another rapidly. The woman opens a door, her face indeterminable, and she walks towards a house. In the house she enters and takes off her niqab, revealing her face and a baby in a bundle tied to her back. In another shot she laughs at the baby and cradles him. The scene fades and is disrupted by another shot showing the bright full moon under which Mohammed went to sleep.

While these first two scenes were peaceful, in the third scene Mohammed’s stay in the detention centre recurs. Mohammed’s point of view shows his interrogator shouting in his face. A next shots shows him hiding in the cave and pointing a gun towards three American soldiers. Then he lies on the bench where he was waterboarded. Again, a prayer is heard throughout: “Warfare is ordained for you, though it is hateful unto you; but it may happen that ye hate a thing which is good for you, and it may happen that ye love a thing which is bad for you. Allah knoweth, ye knoweth not”.[151]

The shots follow upon one another rapidly: Mohammed is seen to shoot the man behind the wheel in the van, as well as the barking

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[149] Qur’an, Chapter 8 (Al-Anfal), Verse 17. See the website of the University of Leeds for several English translations: http://www.comp.leeds.ac.uk/nora/html/8-17.html
[150] Qur’an, Chapter 11 (Hud), Verse 56. http://www.comp.leeds.ac.uk/nora/html/11-56.html
[151] Qur’an, Chapter 2 (Al-Baqara), Verse 216. http://www.comp.leeds.ac.uk/nora/html/2-216.html

German shepherd he kills. The next shot flashes forward to situations that have not yet taken place. Although he has not killed the logger yet, a close-up of Mohammed's face is shown as he kills the man with the saw. This takes effort and blood spatters on his white snowsuit. In the next shot he holds the leash of a horse in his hand and the horse is heard whinnying, again a foresight, this time to his death. The last shot of the scene shows Mohammed clean and relaxed, eating red fruit with a blue and sunny sky in the background. The red juice drips down his hands. Then the scenes end and the next shot again shows the moon under which Mohammed has fallen asleep.

After he has fled from the nursing mother and her baby, it turns dark and through Mohammed's point of view we see how he shines a flashlight around him in the woods. The next shot is ostensibly framed through his point of view, but this time he is inside a home. In the fragment, he shines a flashlight around the dark house: photographs of him and the woman in the blue niqab hang on the wall. The flashlight moves further and lights the interior of a small house. In their beds, the woman and the baby are asleep. Meanwhile, the prayer continues: "Let those fight in the cause of Allah, who sell the life of this world for the hereafter. And whoever fights in the cause of Allah, whether he is slain or gets victory, soon shall we grant him a mighty reward".[152] Then Mohammed himself appears in the house. This confusing change of perspective could mean that an external narrator focalises this scene or that another unidentified character watches him and his family and trespasses into their home. It could also mean that Mohammed appears in his own dream and through his point of view looks at himself. Then, another flash-forward presents Mohammed in his white and blood-stained snowsuit sitting on the horse, a presage to his death. In the next shot he is asleep and covered in snow and a barking dog awakes him.

These four short intermezzos are a collage that seems to present and represent the past, both recent and earlier, as well the future, and as such they reject a chronological narration, coherence, and realism. The rapid alternation between shots, in which time and space oscillate,

[152] Qur'an, Chapter 4 (An-Nisa), Verse 74. http://www.comp.leeds.ac.uk/nora/html/4-74.html

resembles the shape of memories, dreams, or of sub-consciousness. It is suggested that they present information about Mohammed's situation and family life previous to his capture. Caught in a desert before being brought to a detention centre, the images of the desert could indicate his homesickness. At the same time, if Mohammed is an American converted to Islam, the desert is not his homeland but could be a place of desire, or a place where he operated as a Jihadi fighter prior to his captivity. This would explain why the American soldiers were looking for his hideout and why he was in the photograph his interrogator presents to him in the detention centre. In that case he was tortured for a suggested tie with the Taliban or Al-Qaeda.

The role of the Arabic prayer therein is cryptic: Mohammed listens intently to the prayer and seemingly understands it, so the prayer could indicate Mohammed's mother tongue, or is in the language he learned after converting to Islam. Moreover, the prayer seems to provide the justification to fight and kill in the name of Allah ("for the cause of Allah" and "it was not ye who slew them, it was Allah"). These recitations from the Qu'ran indicate that Mohammed is assured – or assures himself – the right and motive for killing. According to the verse, he will afterwards be redeemed and rewarded.[153]

Mohammed does not, however, pursue a "warfare [that] is ordained", neither does he obviously fight for Allah. He does not know whom he kills, and does not kill out of religious conviction, but out of self-defence. His dreams about an Imam reciting this prayer could work to placate his own feelings of guilt and justify his killings, but the signs of religion in his dreams are absent when Mohammed is awake. Nowhere in the film does Mohammed pray or show any other sign of devotion, so religion is not necessarily presented as a justification for his killings. The prayer's divine message falls out of synch with Mohammed's new context of survival, in which he is the hunted instead of the hunter. Although the prayer and his detainment suggest a Jihadi trajectory or conversion, these interpretations are only assumptions

[153] In *The War Within* (Joseph Castelo, 2005) a part of this verse is recited by protagonist Hassan to legitimize his actions as a suicide bomber and blowing up New York's Central Station.

generated by a War on Terror frame (established by the orange jumpsuit and his torture) that are not fully substantiated. The message of the prayer could just be a linguistic embodiment of the attachment to his belief, or express a desire for his family.

This impression of longing for his family is reinforced with the appearance of the woman in the blue niqab in the forest, the result of Mohammed's hallucination, with which the colour blue becomes another motif: he sees her cloth floating down a river and shortly after the woman in the niqab makes her appearance in his food-deprived reality. While eating freshly-picked berries he looks up. The camera makes a tracking movement and in an eye-line match the woman stands before Mohammed. The niqab hides everything but her eyes and her whole appearance appears eerily ghost-like. The result of deprivation or of the red berries, it suggests that Mohammed is hallucinating. The moment he starts walking in her direction in an effort to come closer to her, the camera tracks back to film his perspective again. The woman has vanished and this time Mohammed is severely distressed and starts looking for her in vain. As such, the spectator is spurred to see the distorted fragments, in which the woman also makes her appearance, not only as a longing for his family, but also as the product of Mohammed's instability and unreliable focalisation.

The role of the fragments in *Essential Killing* is fundamentally different from that of the fragments in *The Mark of Cain.* In the latter, the content of the fragments forms the axis around which the plot is constructed. They incite the desire to reconstruct the events as initiated, experienced, and re-experienced by Mark and Shane, yet the 'identity' of the focalisor of the fragments is perpetually left unidentified. This means that the events cannot be reconstructed satisfactorily. In *Essential Killing*, however, not only the focalisor but also the nature or content of the fragments is difficult to establish: they presumably contain previous experiences but also ambiguous flash-forwards, and they function as harbingers of murder and death. Additionally, if Mohammed is their focalisor (in which case he appears in his own dream-like memories or memory-like dreams), their reliability is doubtful. The viewer cannot be sure if these fragments are

internal focalisation (in the shape of memories, desires, dreams, or all three) or external narration, and whether Mohammed experiences the fragments as presented to the spectator, or his subconscious already tells him what will happen, or this precursor to his imminent death is just presented to the spectator but not to him. Where in *The Mark of Cain* the fragments function as crucial carriers of information despite the fact that their focalisor cannot be established, in *Essential Killing* the content of the intermezzos is less pivotal and their function less motivated; they remain as indeterminate as the rest of the plot.

In *The Mark of Cain* the narrator's unreliability gains an explicit political connotation as it undermines the image of the soldier, and by extension, of the military body as rightful, moral, and stable. Further, the development of trauma suggested by this unreliability not only addresses questions about the harmful effects of individual and group culpability, but also about the representability of trauma. In the case of Mohammed, the political undercurrent of unreliability pertains to Mohammed's equivocal ethnic background. Slavoj Žižek has stressed the unconditional and essential violence in language itself and argues that humanity's capacity for violence (and racism) partially stems from their capacity to speak: language is a great divider, and violence can infect linguistic discourse (2008b, 61-62, 66). When one sees language as defining or 'betraying' a culture or nationality, and as infected with violence, Mohammed's absence of speech defies discursive categories pertaining to identity and ethnicity. Instead of presenting him as a clearly definable character in ethnic terms, Mohammed's Muslim background and potentially radical activities are only alluded to in favour of ambiguity and plurality, which makes him 'recognisable' for a broader audience, and favours a focus on survival and primary instinct.

In terms of genre and style, *Essential Killing* is thus difficult to categorize, and perhaps one should not try to categorize this film. Primitive techniques and sparse formal means, such as the hand-held camera, long bird's-eye shots, and close-ups of Mohammed's eyes and anxious face evoke an eerie atmosphere, in which the constant alternation between compellingly real scenes that accentuate

Mohammed's deterioration on the one hand, and thematic and formal aspects that play with realist conventions on the other hand, works confusingly.

Essential Killing's scenes in the woods are largely 'denationalized' and potentially readable in allegorical terms.[154] They are infused with an amalgam of motifs and aesthetic elements that invite reading the film intertextually, in relation to other genres and to, for instance, Krzysztof Kieslowski's colour motifs, James Joyce's writings, Vincent Gallo's previous performances, and Skolimowski's other films, in which social and political themes are more prominent. This makes the film complex and difficult to position categorically.

The film's aesthetics seem to distract from, or to downplay, the film's political undercurrent. However, *Essential Killing*'s fragmented narrative and often distorted structure, ambiguous narration, and visual allurement work in tandem with – and often translate references to – a political War on Terror context and Poland's role therein. These references to the War on Terror and the American torture program make Mohammed's character and torture decidedly political, and underscore the intricate relationship between aesthetics and politics. At the same time, although Mohammed's ordeal and eventual death could be interpreted as an implicit critique on the socio-political Western order as embodied by the shouting, brutal, and torturing US military,[155] *Essential Killing* is not simply a War on Terror film.[156]

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[154] The film incorporates and plays with characteristics of a post-9/11 apocalyptic narrative like the film adaption of *The Road* (John Hillcoat, 2009). Walliss and Aston argue that there has been a significant increase in post-9/11 apocalyptic imagery and themes across a variety of popular media, and in particular commercial and 'spectacular' Hollywood sci-fi film. These narratives deal with contemporary events allegorically rather than directly, in which the apocalypse tends to stand in for a contemporary war or potential future threat. *Essential Killing* is, however, neither a spectacle, nor an explicit political critique, and neither apocalyptic, nor simply allegorical.

[155] The films *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (Mira Nair, 2012) and *The War Within* (Joseph Castelo, 2005) similarly have a Muslim protagonist focalise, through which position Western attitudes towards Muslims after 9/11 and the subsequent alienation between the West and its Muslim citizens is critiqued. Yet again, *Essential Killing*'s Mohammed's Arabness is not at all obvious.

[156] Peter Bradshaw has argued that, apart from the War on Terror references, the scenes in the snowy woods with Mohammed's exhausted and deprived figure look like

It is, precisely the film's ambiguity, in terms of Mohammed's undetermined identity, the opaque motivations for his captivity, and the undetermined geographical locations, that compels the spectator to postpone predetermined judgments in an effort to unite contemporary political elements with those that defy a specific political frame of reference. Although these scenes provide an unflattering depiction of the callous activities of the US guards and interrogators, *Essential Killing* neither presents an explicit political critique nor spurs a moral debate concerning political and racist practices in more general terms, nor the use of torture in European and US-controlled detention centres specifically, as War on Terror narratives such as *Five Years* (*Fünf Jahre Leben*, Stefan Schaller, 2013) or *The Mark of Cain* do.

The tension between human behaviour driven by primal instinct and a previously detained – 'terrorist' – man adhering to Islam, and the tension between a general context providing the arena of survival and specific political references to the War on Terror alternatively present and problematize the cultural, moral, and political implications surrounding the figure of Mohammed.[157] *Essential Killing* leads the spectator to project a broad array of personal beliefs and normative ideas pertaining to terrorism, torture, survival, and self-defence onto the canvas of Mohammed's cryptic character, yet his character consequently plays with our existing ideas, beliefs, and presuppositions.

2. *Flanders*: Brutality and minimal expressionism

Unlike *Essential Killing*, in *Flanders*, torture occurs later in the plot, is inflicted as a form of punishment, and its depiction is graphic. At the same time, contextual information is shrouded in mystery, which together with the brutal scenes establishes a disturbing viewing

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"a forgotten chapter from the end of the second world war" (2011a). Yet Mohammed's ambiguous background, the Arabic prayer, the scenes in the detainment centre, and the orange jumpsuit do not accord with this image.

[157] In this respect, *Essential Killing* is reminiscent of Atiq Rahimi's visually arresting *Earth and Ashes* (2004), in which the nature of the political situation – the Russian invasion of Afghanistan during the first Gulf War – is secondary to the accent on war's devastating force, and the perseverance and survival of those afflicted with the limited means available.

experience. As in *Essential Killing*, the occurrence of torture in *Flanders* is less obviously motivated and therefore less unequivocal in comparison to the films discussed in previous chapters. In order to sufficiently interpret the function of torture in *Flanders*, it will be essential to take into account other plot elements, such as the function of the three protagonists and their relationships to one another, the nature of events leading up to the torture scene, and how these events are presented.

The film opens with a long shot of scenes of the countryside. The young and taciturn Demester (Samuel Boidin) and his idle girlfriend Barbe (Adélaïde Leroux) pass the time on their farms and in the fields. No background information about their lives, their families, the village's location, or their work is provided.[158] The friendship between Demester and Barbe is interlaced with moments of casual and passionless sex outside under the trees. During one evening in a bar, Demester denies in front of their friends that Barbe is his girlfriend. Hurt, Barbe picks up a stranger, Blondel (Henry Cretel), and leaves the bar. Barbe and Blondel start a relationship, and although Demester displays some traces of jealousy, the men tolerate each other's presence.

Shortly after, Demester and Blondel receive letters and are summoned to war, together with several other young men from the village. Barbe becomes emotional when their departure draws near, but the men appear indifferent to the situation. Sent to foreign territory, they have no knowledge of the specificities surrounding the war, its location, which enemy they fight, or for what reason. Upon receiving information about the position of their 'enemy' the unit departs their base camp in a small group on horseback. When they arrive in a ruined and deserted village the men are immediately under severe attack. Their lieutenant dies when a torpedo is fired at him and the soldiers look for cover. The attack lasts for some time, and pressed to the ground they try to abide. A helicopter comes to take their lieutenant's body away.

[158] Some reviews argue that the village's location is somewhere in Flanders, where Dumont grew up, while others argue it is in the Northern part of France in Bailleul, which borders on Flanders, where Dumont subsequently lived.

From this point on the men lose control over the situation as the roles of hunter and hunted are reversed. Where the enemy remained invisible before, the soldiers – Demester, Blondel, and three others, Leclercq, Mordacq, and Briche – are suddenly under attack by local fighters, or civilian insurgents. Exposed, vulnerable, and ill-prepared, the men have no sense of where they are going or what they will encounter.

The remaining soldiers are able to use the helicopter as a cover to move away from their position and enter the house from where the shooting came. They open a door and without looking they shoot two little boys, one of whom dies immediately. Distressed by the boys' young age, Blondel starts cursing and kicking their bodies angrily. While Briche pulls him back, Demester looks at the scene calmly. The young boy who is still alive wails loudly as he clutches his bloodied stomach. Mordacq draws a knife and puts it against the boy's throat. Demester tells Mordacq to stop and walks up to the little boy who is bleeding heavily from his stomach. He announces that the boy is dying anyway and they decide to leave the boy to perish on the floor. The next shots frame the static faces of Blondel, Demester, and Leclercq in close-up. The men have hardly spoken at all. Shortly after, they encounter an old man on a donkey. Underneath his stack of hay the man carries a rifle; Briche makes the old man run away and then shoots him in the back coldheartedly and unnecessarily. In a similar, earlier scene, a mentally disabled man runs beside them and their horses. He seems to be asking for food but is violently shoved away. The other men watch with expressionless faces.

When watching these scenes, several things attract attention; firstly, one notices the lack of contextual information provided by the narrative, and secondly the lack of expression, motivation, and reflection in the soldiers when confronted with or perpetrating brutal violence. The film alternates between long close-ups of deadpan faces in "coldly framed images to withhold psychologically motivated expressions of emotions" (Verstraten 2011, 41-42) and sudden outbursts of brutal and graphic violence that occur without reason and remain unconsidered.

In the next paragraph, I will analyse the effects of the sparse contextual information provided and the absence of emotions and morality, particularly in relation to the torture scene.

The meaning of landscape (1): Processing multiple images

Although Flanders itself is a geographical place, the location of the war zone is never made explicit. Unlike the 'dark continents' of the Middle East as described in Chapter 2, the desert in *Flanders* is not only unlocalizable in terms of law and anomie, but also in terms of its spatial characteristics.[159] Where the rural countryside suggests boundlessness, established through stunning overview shots, the war scenes, despite the vastness of the desert, seem confined and shot as if taking place within a small theatre or set. By framing this area so 'claustrophobically', the borders of the war zone remain unclear and the confined atmosphere underscores the soldiers' ineptness and violence.

Although the war zone is unlocalizable and denationalized, it is imbued with signs and images that incline the spectator to watch *Flanders* through a post-9/11 War on Terror lens.[160] The desert is reminiscent of Iraq or Afghanistan, and the enemy is rather stereotypically depicted as dark-skinned and turbaned civilian insurgents who seem to have an Arab background. The omnipresent threat of potential attacks is tangible and the whereabouts of the enemy is difficult to determine, which recalls the "spectral infinity" (Butler 2004b, 34) of Al-Qaeda or the Taliban. At the same time, the soldiers' opponent is not easily pinpointed and remains ambiguous. Nowhere are the civilians positioned as 'terrorists' who threaten their own people or other nations. They operate on a local level and merely defend their country against the soldiers' invasion. This suggests that the civilians' specific ethnicity is relatively unimportant. The

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[159] As Stephen Holden (2007) writes in his review of *Flanders*, "international laws notwithstanding, [the men] assume they have license to commit casual atrocities". I argue, however, that there is no visible form of 'international law' (or Geneva Convention) present, as anything like regulation or law is carefully removed from the diegetic context.

[160] It is argued that this film is Dumont's most political film, and reviewers have discussed it in terms of a 'post-9/11' context. See, for example, Sharrett (Part 2), Bradshaw (2007), and Holden.

definability of their opponent, in terms of its ethnicity and nationality, so becomes less decisive and crucial than in the (predominantly Hollywood) films discussed in previous chapters.

Mohammed's figure in *Essential Killing*, trudging through the snow, starved and on the verge of perishing, epitomized an image of basic human survival instinct. His orange jumpsuit and his torture, however, specifically recalled the Guantanamo Bay detainee program during the War on Terror. The war fought in *Flanders* is reminiscent of multiple historical episodes, such as France's colonial past and its roles in Algeria's bloody independence battle and in the Indochina Wars (Sharrett Part 2). The green oases (the war scenes were shot in Tunisia), the use of horses, trenches, lack of technology, and bare desert together give the war and landscape a historically indefinable character, and unite France's recent role as participant in the Coalition of the Willing with previous conflicts.

Focalising rape

Another aspect that characterizes these scenes of warfare is the alternation of fierce violence with serene, motionless, and long close-ups of the protagonists' deadpan faces. As analysed in previous chapters, facial expressions are crucial in determining how to 'read' the violent scenes. In *Flanders*, minimal conversation is employed and the close-ups of the men's inexpressive faces (or static 'masks') pose a crude contradiction to Mohammed's intense facial expressions after each murder in *Essential Killing*.

Demester's point-of-view shots, in which he registers events but neither expresses emotion nor intervenes, will become crucial in creating a sense of confusion on the part of the spectator. The most striking example in which brutal violence is paired with emotionlessness is when the men gang-rape a young woman. Dressed as a man, they drag her out of the house to discover that she is a woman. They promptly lay her on the ground and undress her completely. As the woman protests and struggles with all her power, two of the soldiers hold her down while first Blondel, then another soldier, go down on their knees and brutally rape her. Demester and

Leclercq look at this scene from a distance, with frowns bordering on indifference on their faces. The woman screams and struggles violently, after which she is left on the ground naked and shivering. In a final shot, a close-up shows the woman's trembling hand, as she clutches it tight, with the soldiers' semen in it. This image is sinister and unequivocal – the hand standing in metonymically for the raped body.

The majority of this scene is registered through Demester's point of view. His gaze both ratifies the young woman's 'thingness', or her objectification as a sexualized being, and the impression of the soldiers as unsympathetic, impulsive, and heartless. His physical remoteness from the actual scene of rape establishes a rupture between him and his fellow soldiers, and as our focalisor, between the spectator and the other soldiers. Slightly older than the other men, he is the patriarch of the unit, but does not intervene or reprimand.

At the same time, due to his distance from the rape, the passive Demester becomes a stand-in for the audience, "the one figure with whom the spectator is forced to 'identify'" (Shaviro171-172), but fails to identify with. This "forced" in Shaviro's quote about the character of Seblon in Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Querelle* (1982), seems more commanding than in the case of Demester, yet Demester's point of view attaches him to the cruelty and impels the spectator to watch through his eyes, unless one closes one's own. His unaffectedness posits him as a cruel and heartless figure; the spectator neither knows why Demester does not intervene, nor what he thinks. In fact, his point of view and his passive unaffectedness initiate for the spectator a desire to intervene and frustration when he remains motionless. Demester's passive observation is thus a crucial element in establishing the paradox of being attached to his perspective while he stays e/motionless. The simplicity of expressionism and absence of moral deliberation forces the spectator to draw not only her own moral conclusions, but to also fill in the characters' moral lacuna.

The rape of the young woman is merciless, not in the least because any psychological explanation or motivation is refused. As Stephen Holden argues in his review of *Flanders*, "They know what they are doing is wrong, but they do it anyway. Far from negating their

humanity, their consciousness of good and evil is what makes the human condition so agonizing". No indications are provided, however, that these young men rationally 'know' what is wrong but simply negate this instinct, as there is no indication of a "consciousness of good and evil". It is precisely this absence that is disturbing; they are not simply bad or wrong, they are oblivious. Without rationally considering consequences, and without calculating or putting into operation any form of strategy, their reactions are steered by their unpreparedness for war, as well as by impulse and ignorance. When the men do display confusion, fear, or anxiety, it is not necessarily a moment of clarity or self-reflection, but rather a primal reaction to a situation of threat.

The men 'simply' violate this woman and leave her there as a used item. As Greta Olson contends, rape is often employed as a form of disempowerment in the case of torture (2014, 137), or in warfare, as Appadurai explains, to shame the other through ethnocidal rape (1998, 819, 922). Further, in her reading of Biblical texts, Mieke Bal argues that rape is predominantly motivated by a hatred of the object of rape (2006, 354). The soldiers' rape of the young woman, however, is neither politically motivated, nor motivated by hatred, nor an attempt to shame. The men neither aim to deliberately undermine their opponent's superiority, nor to explore and devastate the enemy's body in order to humiliate her. The previous scenes in the countryside indicated that the village is predominantly inhabited by young and sexually frustrated men, and it is implied that the soldiers rape to release their frustrations. The triviality of their act gives the rape its haunting quality.[161] This is not to say that rape without motivation is worse than rape engendered by hatred or to cause shame. The men's general lack of expressed morality and reflection makes these scenes especially disturbing, particularly in the case of an act as gruesome as rape.

The excuse of sexual frustration and release is later underscored when Leclercq, who like Demester remained aloof, cautiously asks

[161] Dumont's *Twentynine Palms* (2003) also has a brutal rape scene near the end of the film that comes out of the blue. The absurdness and simultaneous triviality of this act make the scene particularly haunting.

Mordac if it would have been different if the woman had been a soldier. Mordac responds, "It's not different, a hole is a hole", implying that she was raped because she was a woman, not with another aim in mind. Briche, however, feels attacked and asks Leclercq if he is "queer", as he 'proved this' by not participating in the rape. As such, the infliction of rape is conflated with proof of normative heterosexuality and with a 'normal' degree of sexual desire.

The men's fragile homosocial bond, quickly established by the sexual exchange, does not "solidify their ties to one another", as is usually the case in conventional war films (Belton 200), and Leclercq's question reveals internal tensions. The lack of cohesion is emphasized by a close-up of Demester's blank face and his subsequent point-of-view shot of the discussion. Again, he does not interfere but simply assesses. The film does not, however, try to make a point about military machismo and peer pressure, as did *The Mark of Cain*, where the soldiers' previously solidified ties are shattered when some soldiers are scapegoated. The subsequent internal dispute over Leclercq's 'queerness' particularly emphasizes the triviality and randomness of the rape.

When the raped young woman and her fellow fighters catch the men shortly after, her revenge reaches brutal proportions. Demester's point of view becomes disturbing when, even under the most extreme circumstances, he refrains from revealing a hint of emotion, thereby preventing the viewer from understanding him and his impassivity.

Brutal punishment and (im)passivity

During their dispute, the soldiers hear a strange sound and split up to investigate. Blondel and Mordac leave, but never return. When the remaining three go looking for them, they are suddenly surrounded by fighters who begin to shoot at them. The men are lined up, but Briche is shot in the head instantly. The other two, Demester and Leclercq, look at the scene seemingly emotionless. They are taken to a cottage where Blondel is held captive. He is tied down and on his knees. He tells Demester that Mordac is also dead. Demester and Leclercq are likewise tied and forced onto their knees. The young woman they raped comes

out of the house, wearing a camouflage outfit. She kneels down in front of them, and intensely looks at all three in point-of-view shots. Uncertain of her rapist, she picks out Leclercq by mistake. He is taken into the small house by one of the men. His piercing screams coming from inside are paired with close-ups of the faces of the woman, Blondel, and Demester. Shortly after, Leclercq comes running out of the house, his pants down, clutching between his legs. His hands barely cover his bloody wound and blood streams down his legs: he appears to have been castrated. While Demester looks at the scene undisturbed and then drops his head, Blondel begins to yell and asks the woman to end the torture. She stands up, gets her gun, and shoots Leclercq, who has in the meantime fallen down. An explicit and gruesome shot shows the dead Leclercq on the ground, facing the camera, his hands still covering his genitals. The fighters tie him by his feet and haul him away, his arms dragging sideways and his front now visible. The stoic, unrelenting young woman is framed through Demester's blank eyes. When helicopters arrive shortly after, Demester and Blondel try to escape, but Blondel is shot and left behind by Demester, who makes it home unscathed.

The torture scene is difficult to process for various reasons and evokes many associations. With his arms dangling down while being dragged away, Leclerq is reminiscent of Christ's post-crucifixion pose (such as in the mid fifteenth-century Pietà of Villeneuve-lès-Avignon). Leclerq's torture could be read as the ultimate punishment for his fellow soldiers, and perhaps other people's, sins.[162] This impression is reinforced by an intertextual reading with Dumont's other works, in which he more explicitly incorporates Christian themes and imagery, and which bear titles such as *The Life of Jesus* (*La Vie de Jesus*, 1997), *Humanité* (*L'humanité*, 1999), *Hadewijch* (2009), and *Outside Satan* (*Hors Satan*, 2011).[163] By extension of this Christian iconography,

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[162] Bresson and Dreyer similarly adapted Byzantine and Gothic art and iconography and reworked these in shots or scenes, thereby creating a tension between the secular and the deific (Schrader 98-105, 138-147).

[163] In Chapter 1 I argued that the way Ammar was framed with his arms up and tied to ropes made him look crucified. The reason why the scene in *Flanders* is more reminiscent of Christian iconography than the scene in *Zero Dark Thirty* is because of

Christopher Sharrett has argued that Leclercq's punishment can be read allegorically as a more general punishment for sexual oppression constituted by patriarchal authority and a range of imperial activities undertaken by France towards its Arab colonies (Part 2).[164] This reading, however, is built on a specific historical-cultural frame of reference and seems to be inspired by a desire for conclusiveness, and for reading significance into the brutal rape and murder beyond the physical actions. The feminist rape-revenge subplot,[165] however, reminds the viewer of the men's specific crimes. Moreover, Leclercq's character, although innocent, is hardly comparable to Christ, as he is anything but ready to sacrifice himself for his friends' crimes.

Additionally, the castration scene overturns the woman's previous position of rape victim, as a thing or property, and as objectified through the male (Demester's) gaze. Although the guerrilla woman lets others torture for her (like Maya in *Zero Dark Thirty*), the torture she impels is brutal, vivisectionist, and purely punitive. She becomes an agent and 'performs' this punishment for Blondel and Demester, who are tied and forced to become her audience. Tied to their perspective, the castration scene is also 'performed' for the spectator. Leclercq is first taken inside and his piercing screams provoke a sense of anticipation in the soldiers, but also in the spectator. When Leclercq is released, Demester refrains from showing any emotional disturbance, while this sudden visibility of Leclercq running in circles in intense pain for what seems an eternity will most likely have a shocking effect on the viewer.

The scene is graphic and leaves little to the imagination, but the most alarming aspect of the extreme violence is, again, Demester's

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Ammar's Muslim background. This is also due to an intertextual reading proffered by Dumont's other films, which incorporate explicit references to Christian themes or iconography.

[164] Melbye characterizes the function of Hollywood indigenous landscapes and their inhabitants as a form of punishment for the characters' imperialist impulse. Melbye does not see a contradiction between an allegorical function of landscape with a specification of historical or geographical characteristics (112).

[165] See Alexandra Heller-Nicholas for a lucid and comprehensive study of rape-revenge narratives and their political and ethical implications. She builds on the work of, amongst others, Carol Clover, Sarah Projansky, Jacinda Read, and Rikke Schubert on representations of rape.

absolute lack of response.[166] His face is not shocked, contemplative, or deliberate, but plainly expressionless. Again, the discrepancy between Demester's stoic reaction, as he does not respond according to the spectator's expectations, and the shocking content of the almost unwatchable scenes becomes an ordeal. Where in previous chapters the focus in torture scenes was placed on the interaction between torturer and tortured (with the exception of Maya and Helen's initial roles as witnesses), in *Flanders* both the presence and position of 'witness' are foregrounded and become crucial. When pressured to watch the scene in which Leclercq runs around in circles in pain, he registers and then eventually drops his head. By obscuring his face, the spectator is once again prevented from interpreting his state of mind. At the same time, the act of dropping his head in itself suggests that the castration might be too much for Demester to watch and that he capitulates to the situation.

The confusion aroused in the spectator is due to the films' fusion of the harsh realism of the *cinéma du corps* and the austere and minimalistic transcendental style. The former has a focus on the body, sex, and violence. *Essential Killing*'s Mohammed was played by Vincent Gallo, a professional (and notorious) actor. *Flanders*' stars, however, are nonprofessional actors, most only appearing in this one film, with unpolished bodies and faces, and as such, they are 'decommodified' (Grønstad on bodies in *cinéma du corps* 2011, 62).[167] It is noteworthy that the film's appropriation of the transcendental style particularly resides in the use of filming techniques: the characters' deadpan acting, and the minimal, static camerawork including long overview shots and close-ups of the characters' faces that function as projection screens for the spectator's own frame of reference. It does not, however, pertain to the violent content and its effect; while inducing tranquillity or contemplation in the spectator when screening the countryside scenes,

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[166] Grønstad argues that it is not necessarily aggressive violence that upsets contemporary audiences, but the absence of action, lethargy, or indolence (2012, 66). In this particular situation in *Flanders* the alternation between graphic violence and lethargy is certainly upsetting.
[167] Christopher Sharrett has noted the importance of French Realism to Dumont's work (Part 2).

realised by minimal formal means, the scenes in the warzone are graphic, sudden, brutal, and unmotivated and, as such, framed to incite shock.

The contradiction between transcendental style and *cinéma du corps* is only an ostensible one, as minimal, static camerawork, instead of abundant means, is an unusual method to express graphic content (Verstraten 2011, 40). The transcendental style evokes the experience of slowness and banal everyday life with 'common people', whose boredom is underscored by camerawork (Schrader 61-63). This type of realism is further underscored by *cinéma du corps*' obsession with naked, unpolished bodies, sex acts, and violence (Parker 99), which, because they occur so abruptly and are so explicit and brutal, disrupt the sense of tranquillity created, and might even seem absurd. The Transcendent or inexpressible thus seems closely related to the trivial: sex and death (Guillen; Sharrett Part 1).

The disturbance experienced when watching the scenes of rape and torture is established by thwarting the spectator's anticipation; on the one hand, there is a discrepancy between Demester's and the spectator's reaction, and on the other, there is torture's suddenness, gruesomeness, and duration, or its "on/scenity" (Linda Williams quoted in Grønstad 2011, 62). Chapter 1 analysed why H's torture of Yusuf in *Unthinkable* was not a form of 'torture porn'. The rape and castration scenes in *Flanders* are not examples of torture porn either, for the reasons that the rape is shown predominantly from a distance (through Demester's eyes), and that the castration itself takes place offscreen instead of being meticulously framed. Although Leclercq's castration is not visualised as one would expect in a torture porn film, the (no less) shocking result is.[168]

In *Essential Killing*, the murders are performed rapidly, emphasizing Mohammed's facial expressions rather than the deed itself.

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[168] Interestingly, reviews discussing *Unthinkable* either noted the film's graphic images, bordering on 'torture porn', or the film's critical potential due to the incorporation of a moral debate. *Flanders*, however, won the Grand Prix at Cannes and was acclaimed for its aesthetics and for its unsettling depiction of human cruelty, even though or precisely while motivations and morality are absent. See Bradshaw (2007) and Ebert (2007).

The film makes use of long overview shots and long bird's-eye views, yet Mohammed's constant drift through the woods keeps some pace for the film. The acts' tangibility is established by refraining from fully screening them, but the implied killings become palpable and haunting. Conversely, the rape and torture scenes in *Flanders* are shot in long takes and seem to endure, whereas the events between them are either hardly documented, or are also shot in long takes but hardly contextualised. As such, the spectator has to process the graphic and shocking images together with the void in context: where are the soldiers, who are the guerrilla fighters, what do I see, and why does Demester not respond?

The meaning of landscape (2): The soldiers' deterioration

In addition to the opaque geographical characteristics, after Demester's return home as the sole survivor the viewer is spurred to regard the bare and hot wasteland as connoting the soldiers' physical demise (Melbye 99, 109, 112). In *Essential Killing* landscape functioned as an active opponent, but in *Flanders*, the civilians are active opponents responsible for the protagonists' fate. The claustrophobic landscape becomes the stage on which the characters' fates unfold (Grøndstad 2011, 75), and the emphasis comes to lie on the internal group dynamic and the men's struggle for survival.[169] Similarly to *Essential Killing*, the struggle depicted is neither between delineated cultures or ethnicities, nor centres on dismantling terrorist networks, but accentuates the protagonists' vulnerability and demise.[170] Rather than being antiheroes (as the protagonists in *Syriana*, *Body of Lies*, *The Mark of Cain*, and *Brødre/Brothers*), the soldiers are non-heroes that do not compromise their masculinity for the sake of moral decisions, or sacrifice fortitude as pawns of an unjust system. Drawn into a war for which they are obviously ill prepared, they are both cruel and tragic. Like *Essential*

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[169] Grønstad argues that Dumont's work is "new-landscape film" which 'frees landscape of its conventional and narratively subordinate role as setting to foreground its function as [a] key feature in the diegetic world of the film [...] and that gives precedence to the language of the body".

[170] Dumont has argued that the war is a collage of multiple wars and landscape signifies the characters' mental states (Stout).

Killing, *Flanders* does not raise or address critical, political, or moral questions concerning violence and war, but inspire the spectator to do so.

To emphasize the soldiers' precarity and demise, two types of landscape are juxtaposed: the cold, wintery countryside of Flanders, and the hot desert of the war zone. The meadows are shown in long shots and resemble photographic or painted images.[171] Covered in puddles and frost, the countryside denotes moroseness and boredom. Where in *Essential Killing* the frost signified Mohammed's death, in *Flanders* the grey-blue colour filters of the peaceful winter landscape run counter to the hot yellow sand of foreign territory. The grimness and vastness of the sandy landscape with ruined and devastated villages become "an emblem of waste and catastrophe" (Sharrett Part 1), and dovetails the soldiers' cruelty with their own fates. The green oasis, through which Demester is seen to run away, could be translated as signifying his survival. Similar to the colour motifs in *Essential Killing*, colour motifs and filters in *Flanders* thus "colour our perception" (Bal 2002, 102) of the two alternating spaces and situations.

The use of natural sound and the lack of (diegetic and non-diegetic) music in *Flanders*, another characteristic of transcendental style (Schrader 69), create a silence and stillness that matches the characters' obtuseness and, later, their demise. The frequent alternation between the violent war zone with noise and gunshots and the rustic sounds of birds and rustling trees in the countryside is blunt. Again, music – or rather, the lack thereof – gains a particular narrative function, but where in *Essential Killing* it particularly emphasizes Mohammed's mental condition, in *Flanders* it underscores the different atmospheres and situations the landscapes evoke.

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[171] Dumont notes how he became inspired by the crude landscapes painted by Jeffrey Blondes, and in particular by Georges Braque shortly before making his debut film (5-10). See also Caruana for the resemblance of Dumont's film shots to paintings (113-114). Sharrett has noted the influence of painter Pharaon de Winter on *Humanité*, in which one of the characters bears his name (Part 1).

Barbe's body speech

Barbe, the young woman who remains behind in the countryside, proves to be the most cryptic character and embodies all ambiguities present in *Flanders*. It is implied that she maintains a sensory connection with the soldiers at war, whose brutalities resonate in her body and mind, and her growing emotional instability parallels the soldiers' increasingly precarious situation. Her character is equally opaque yet more expressive and her unexplained sensory insights draw attention to the ways in which her focalisation differs from that of Demester. Due to this connection between Barbe, the soldiers, and, as I argue, the guerrilla woman, it is crucial to further expound Barbe's character and her function in the plot.

Barbe rarely speaks, and instead predominantly communicates through her body. Barbe's bodily speech is realised firstly through aesthetics. Although always outside in all seasons, Barbe looks pale and withdrawn. In summer she has bare legs, wears walking shoes and a jean skirt, and in winter just adds stockings. The use of over-exposure makes her body catch and reflect the sunlight, which produces realistic images of her bare, 'fleshy' body parts. As such, Barbe's body is emphasized through lighting, nakedness, and close-ups of her face. She never smiles, and her face is stern, anxious, or even sad.

Moreover, positioned in a male-dominated rural existence where emotions remain unarticulated and speech is scarce, Barbe's body becomes the method through which she expresses herself to other characters: her sexual encounters with various men establish a primary interaction with fellow locals. These encounters are quick, passionless and banal; Barbe's sexual encounters with Demester bring to mind the mating of stock, an association that arises due to the characters' agrarian environment. The familiarity and naturalness with which they meet under the trees suggests that Barbe and Demester frequently engage in this way.

Shortly after Demester rebuffs Barbe in front of their friends, she picks up Blondel. When they are both at war Barbe instigates meetings with other men. Lying on her back or facing a wall, bending over, she lets the men have sex with her. Each time a close-up of her blank face

shows her staring at the sky or looking into space. Although she does not seem to derive much physical or emotional pleasure from these meetings, they do seem to provide some comfort, not because they satisfy her, but because something has 'happened'. As such, it is suggested that her "beastly mating" (Holden) fills up a social void: Barbe's social circle is very limited and the quiet rural village is the apotheosis of peace for the men at war, but of boredom for Barbe. In this light, these sexual acts can be seen as "performative bodily speech acts", as conceptualized by Judith Butler (2011, xii-xiv, xxiii, 37-38), with which Barbe, in pursuit of connection, recognition, and expression, establishes an elementary form of intelligibility and communication.[172]

As bearers of information, however, Barbe's physical signals are neither picked up by her friends and father, nor reciprocated: they "misfire" (Felman 15) and become meaningless. Her friend France tells her that rumours circulate in which Barbe is depicted as the town slut. At the same time, Barbe discovers she is pregnant. Although she sends Blondel a letter, the real father's identity remains uncertain, and she decides to have an abortion without informing him. Soon after Barbe starts displaying signs of depression, a doctor comes to check on her and recommends that her father commit her to a psychiatric hospital. Her father only sighs, "first the mother, now the daughter". He neither questions the causes of Barbe's condition, nor engages in any form of conversation with his daughter about her troubles. The whereabouts and condition of Barbe's mother are not further touched upon. Her father's reaction spurs the spectator to think Barbe's condition might be the result of a genetic impairment. The previous scenes in the village, however, presented poor social conditions and boredom ingrained in the villagers habitat.[173]

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[172] Mieke Bal notes that in Shoshana Felman's (2003) re-appropriation of J.L. Austin's speech acts, not the vow but rather seduction is considered a prominent *bodily* speech act. Although Barbe initiates, she does not seduce. She just 'does' and the act itself is more important than its outcome (2006, 342).

[173] Bal's analysis of "daughterly speech acts" is interesting in the light of Barbe. Bal analyses the position and speech acts of several women in the Book of Judges. She argues how the daughter's body is acknowledged as a commodity or an economic exchange. The father compensates for his daughter *as* a body by giving the body away (2006, 351-352). Instead of becoming chattel in a forced economic exchange however,

Barbe's sensory intuition

While Barbe uses her body to relate to people, parallel editing suggests that through her mind she is connected to the men at war, whom she 'feels' and 'sees'.[174] Neither her own sexual conduct nor the village's social structure is the catalyst for Barbe's increasing instability, but rather the soldiers' precarious situation and brutal acts. When the men rape the guerrilla woman and are consequently punished for it, the next scenes show Barbe growing progressively emotionally unstable and depressed. This method of crosscutting between the scenes of Barbe's burgeoning moroseness and the increasingly violent and precarious position of the soldiers implies that Barbe's depression is related to the soldiers' grim fate. When admitted to the psychiatric hospital, Barbe is taken to a small room by a young medic. Meanwhile, Demester and Blondel, the two survivors, run for their lives while Barbe suddenly has a nervous breakdown. While making wild gestures with her arms and showing a distorted face, she screams and curses violently "bastard!" While screaming and cursing at the medic, she suddenly attacks him: "I'll fuck you!" Although Barbe curses the medic, it is uncertain whom exactly she addresses, but parallel editing suggests she directs herself towards Demester and Blondel. Incarcerated and sedated in the psychiatric ward, an epitome of Foucaultian discipline and control (1995), Barbe is also subjected to the soldiers' violent acts.

The medic calls for help and Barbe is forced onto the floor by three assistants who tie her arms back and sedate her while she violently struggles to free herself. The next shots show the medic clutching his head in pain and Barbe, who has calmed down and lies on her bed, staring into space with wet eyes and cheeks. As if her crying were a premonition, in the next shot Blondel is shot while trying to escape and left by Demester, who realises he can only save himself.

Barbe initiates her own sexual conduct. Her father, who does not know the nature of her mischief, indirectly punishes her by sending her away.

[174] In F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) a similar connection is suggested between Ellen and Count Orlok: while sleepwalking, Ellen seems to 'see' and 'hear' Orlok and to know what danger awaits her husband who stays with Orlok in his estate. See Verstraten (2009, 101).

The link between Barbe and the soldiers also suggests that Barbe and the raped young woman share a link, or that they even might be the same person (Sharrett Part 2). The two dominant motifs of sex and violence are thus first staged independently, then in tandem, and then intertwined in parallel scenes in which the girl's rape occurs simultaneously with Barbe's breakdown. This connection between the women – and their shared yet inversed bodily act in which one uses sex to communicate and the other is forced into sex – implies an involuntary component to Barbe's previous initiations with the local men: not in the sense that someone else forces her, but that she feels forced to engage with others this way. Additionally, having decided upon an abortion, it is implied that her unwanted pregnancy is the salient negative effect of not only her own sexual interactions that resonate negatively in her body, but also the men's sexual conduct. Barbe does not give reasons for having her pregnancy terminated, and the spectator can only guess.

The fusion of contemplative insights and banal corporeality

The guerrilla woman's revenge is exemplary of Barbe's transformation from morose, to anxiety, to calmness. The castration scene occurs only shortly before Barbe is mysteriously 'healed' again and released from hospital, as if the men's torture, castration, and death undo her own unhealthy condition. In her turn, the guerrilla woman redeems herself by having Leclercq tortured and killed, and proves to be the most unscrupulous fighter.

Rather than seeing Barbe's role of depressed and hysterical woman as traditionally feminine (or as currently fashionable as is Carrie Mathison's character in *Homeland*), and as opposed to male, and medical, rationality (e.g. Tasca et al., 110–119), she becomes a knot of unexplained experiences and unexpressed emotions that result in anxiety. Where the soldiers' blank faces (in particular Demester) are expressionless, Barbe's face, which displays repressed emotions, is contemplative and angelic. She frequently looks up at the sky and reflects daylight, which then shows her points of view of the sunny and cloudy skies. As Darren Hughes argues, these shots seem to embody,

visually and emotionally, Barbe's search for meaning (2002), or they might be, as is argued by Caruana, the result of an existential void (110-111). As such, in the case of Barbe, content and style work together to create a transcendental style: Barbe's eerie sensory intuition is combined with the film's sparse visual and linguistic means that withhold psychologically motivated expressions (Verstraten 2011, 33).

Like the soldiers, the accent on Barbe's fleshy and 'common' body and her sudden explosive anxiety are expressive. The contrast between close-ups of Barbe's radiating face and the emphasis placed on (parts of her) bare body are blunt, and this seems a paradox. Her body, however, reacts to her senses, and poses a crude contrast to the soldiers' banal and brutal violence. Barbe not only underscores the devastating psychological and physical effects of war and violence, but her 'insights' accentuate the empathy the men lack completely. What is left opaque is whether these insights and her bodily reaction are linked to and the result of the men's actions at war, or whether she previously possessed these sensory qualities.

The suggestion of Barbe's sensory insights is again reaffirmed when Barbe forces Demester to talk about his war experiences. When he refuses to speak, she tells him, "I know what you did, I was there". He breaks down, confirms he left Blondel behind and tells Barbe he loves her. Although she does not mention the rape, Barbe's comment indicates she witnessed everything. She confirms she loves him too and strokes his head. Barbe's hysteria and the men's punishment is followed by 'stasis'; the film's elliptical narrative structure again frames Demester and Barbe, yet this time Barbe has a new purpose. Instead of engaging in their usual 'love-making', the embrace becomes an act of motherly affection and forgiveness. Demester's return and declaration of love make her previous sexual acts superfluous.[175]

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[175] One of the crucial characteristics pertaining to the transcendental style is 'stasis', which follows on a decisive action ('disparity') taken by the characters. Stasis is a frozen, quiescent scene that follows on disparity and closes the film. This stasis is not the same stable situation that preceded disparity, but harbours a transformation or change established by the decisive action. The new stasis makes the viewer suddenly see emotional depth and meaning in the characters' behaviour (which is still coupled with inexpressive faces and opaque motives) that was not there before (Schrader 82-

Despite the eerie entanglement between Barbe and the soldiers, their respective fates diverge. Although patriarchy and sexual oppression are initially intertwined and reinforced,[176] this association soon falls apart when the soldiers are caught, and one of the men is literally castrated by war. Christopher Sharrett has pointed to the feminism inherent to Dumont's films (Part 1);[177] the men's actions prove destructive, but Barbe's unexplained intuition makes her insightful and emotionally superior. This reversal of gender roles suggests that female intuition as a form of knowledge, and contemplation as a form of self-investigation, are beneficial for one's well-being (Caruana 113). Ultimately punished through torture and death, the men rather than the women are victimized, first by castration, then by nurturing (Demester). This element of nurturing in *Essential Killing* is also present in *Flanders*, yet where in *Essential Killing* the mute woman's care precedes Mohammed's death, Demester finds peace when consoled by Barbe.[178]

Like Mohammed's dream-like memories or memory-like dreams, Barbe's sensory perception is not substantiated enough to

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86). This elliptical scene, in which Demester and Barbe are framed again, is such a stasis. Something has changed for the viewer, but this change is also evident in Demester and Barbe who react more emotionally towards each other. The disparity on which it follows is Barbe's hysteria and the men's punishment, although these scenes are too brutal and expressive to fulfil the role of disparity as defined by Schrader, and mark instead the film's adherence to *cinéma du corps.*

[176] This connection is not only established through the rape and Demester's initial indifference to Barbe, but also by the feminization of the enemy. When first under attack in the village, one of the soldiers shouts, "The cunts aren't finished!" while shooting back (Sharrett Part 2).

[177] Sharrett relates this feminism in particular to the reversal of gender roles as described by Christian narratives and imagery. He compares the painting 'Expulsion' by Massacio (d. 1425), depicting the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, with Dumont's depiction of couples, nudity, and gender.

[178] The specific triangle of sex, violence, and feminism in *Flanders* is reinforced by the image on the front cover of the DVD which is a motif throughout the narrative: it pictures Barbe lying on her back in the grass with Demester on top of her. His head is shaven and Barbe's piercing light blue eyes look straight into the camera. This peaceful scene is framed within the shape of a helmet that together with Demester's shaven head evoke war, while Barbe's stern and contemplating face is accentuated. In comparison to the DVD cover images from *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Unthinkable*, *Syriana*, *Body of Lies*, *The Mark of Cain*, *Brødre/Brothers*, and *Essential Killing*, in which symbols of war, geopolitics, and the War on Terror are prominently displayed, Barbe's embrace and her piercing eyes on the cover of *Flanders* are decidedly different.

make firm statements about it. Although it is implied that she has some sort of spiritual insight, this as such remains unarticulated, and it is left to the spectator to contemplate and decide upon the potential meanings of Barbe's sensory knowledge. Her insights are juxtaposed to a political frame of rape and, as is suggested, imperial oppression. *Flanders* builds on war films in which male superiority and heterosexuality is affirmed, but the film subverts these expectations when the characters' internal lack of cohesion, awkward ineptness, and sexual frustration backfires in a grotesque way. The role of Barbe as the female protagonist and the role of the guerrilla woman draw attention to the scarcity of female protagonists in War on Terror films, the role of women as identification figures when they are present, and the intricate relationship between sex, femininity, and torture as discussed in Chapter 1. Barbe as a female character is not, however, easily definable within any particular film genre, and by Hollywood terms, she is an unconventional character. At the same time, all characters in *Flanders* (and, for that matter, in *Essential Killing*) whether male of female are democratically unconventional and impervious. The film is both fascinating and puzzling precisely because the spectator is left to contemplate the extent to which the castration's resemblance to Christian iconography is implemented seriously or ironically,[179] and the extent to which Barbe's insights function as a comment on patriarchal oppression and warfare.

Identification: Scenes that disturb and disturbing scenes

A significant difference between *Essential Killing* and *Flanders* pertains to their pursued affective impact; while *Essential Killing* incites confusion and contemplation, in *Flanders*, the response of shock, established by narrative techniques of visibility and duration, seems explicitly aimed for. This difference can be traced back to a distinction between scenes that disturb and disturbing scenes (Grønstad 2011, 4,

[179] As an "atheist haunted by religion", as Caruana describes Dumont (101), evoking religious imagery is not a trope but, as Van Alphen notes, an anti-trope: it subverts conventional, static meanings and is broadened for multiple interpretations (2001, 14).

6), as briefly addressed in Chapter 2. *Essential Killing* frames brutal but not graphic violence, and it presents images that disturb, but not necessarily disturbing images. *Flanders*, on the other hand, depicts disturbing, brutal, as well as graphic violence that has a disturbing effect. The torture scene's shock value not only stems from the sudden graphic scenes, but also from the discrepancy between character and spectatorial reaction – Demester's emotionlessness and ostensible moral lacuna – when watching brutal and graphic scenes. When it becomes impossible to watch the violent scenes the spectator is impelled to close her eyes or look away.

After shock has waned, disturbance lingers on as the spectator continues to ruminate on the cumulative effect of *Flanders*' graphic shots, its dovetailing of stillness with outbursts of violence, the characters' stoicism, the unexplained elements in the plot, and the film's anti-climactic, static ending.[180] After watching *Unthinkable*, which is equally graphic and brutal, the moral questions raised do not linger because all aspects of the moral dilemma are spelled out and chewed upon by the characters. In *Essential Killing,* a sense of relief is evoked when it is suggested that Mohammed has found peace in death and his ordeal is over, although the ending remains cryptic. Despite Barbe's consolation of Demester, little relief or sense of pleasure is evoked when watching *Flanders*, which makes *Flanders* an intense viewing experience.

The difference in affective impact between *Essential Killing* and *Flanders* also translates in the sympathy evoked for the protagonists. Where *Essential Killing* aligns the spectator to Mohammed's state of deprivation, rendered by the unstable camera and intense close-ups of his face, *Flanders* creates a distance between spectator and screen. Mohammed's actions are justifiable, and therefore also understandable and possibly recognisable, and so the spectator might feel concern for

[180] As Grønstad notes, the 'unwatchable' character of a film resides in the film's ability to "trounce visual pleasure and shake the spectators into a deeper awareness" of that which is seen in political, ethical, and cultural terms (2012, 10-11). *Flanders* not only aims for shock effect, but also for a sense of unsettlement that lingers and leads to critical deliberation and a moral judgement of the soldiers' actions.

his fate. *Flanders*' characters, even Barbe, are too taciturn and opaque to identify with.[181]

Conclusion

This chapter has probed the relationship between an opaque political context and disturbing images of brutal or graphic violence, and their consequences for interpreting the films' plots. Political references to the War on Terror are left implicit in *Essential Killing* and *Flanders*, and therefore a realistic depiction of a real political context is less important than in the films analysed previously. A reading of the films as War on Terror films is partially inspired by a historically dependent post-9/11 frame, yet the narratives are often highly ambiguous and invite multiple, sometimes contradictory interpretations established by acting, camerawork, colour motifs, music, and speech.

In *Essential Killing*, references to the War on Terror, unexplained situations and fragments, alluring aesthetics, and camerawork that expresses Mohammed's state of mind establish an eerie atmosphere. *Flanders* fuses *cinéma du corps* – which focuses on the body, sexual intercourse, and violence – 'decommodified' actors, and a transcendental style, developed through techniques that employ minimal, static, and inexpressive formal means. This way of filming aims for contemplation as well as shock.

Rather than being easily categorizable into genres or styles, *Essential Killing* and *Flanders* play with the spectator's urge for the illusion of cinematic realism, intelligibility and coherence, and formal and stylistic expectations. In *Flanders* geographical locations and the ethnicity of the soldiers' opponents are ambiguous or even indeterminable. Torture is inflicted as a form of punishment for, in particular, rape and murder, and perhaps more generally, patriarchal oppression and imperialism. Similarly, although references to America's detainee treatment in prisons such as Guantanamo Bay are suggested in

[181] Paul Schrader has argued that "the two things Bresson eschews are action and empathy". Sontag similarly notes that for Bresson's films identification with characters is impossible and imagined (1967, 181). One could argue the same for Dumont's films (Brooke).

Essential Killing, geographical specificities and political references are further omitted, and torture proves to be the catalyst of a narrative about survival and deprivation.

In addition to the lack of contextual information and speech, Mohammed's ethnic background is cryptic in *Essential Killing*. On the one hand, the film plays with discursive 'Arab terrorist' or 'Arab barbarian' tropes by naming him 'Mohammed'. On the other, Italian-American actor Vincent Gallo's personification of 'Mohammed' make his supposedly 'Arab background' by no means evident. In any case, Mohammed's murders committed in self-defence are justified and understandable to the spectator, who is closely attached to Mohammed's point of view.

In *Flanders*, however, the soldiers' lack of obvious motivations, self-reflexivity, and responsibility, and the impulsive nature of their violence make their acts outrageous and incomprehensible. The viewer's distance from the soldiers is further reinforced through Demester's ambivalent, stoic gaze. In *Essential Killing* the figure of Mohammed plays with the concepts of 'terrorist' and 'barbarian', while in *Flanders* the presumably French soldiers are 'barbarian' but also tragic.

The decidedly political aspect of the films' depiction of torture resides in the ways in which the War on Terror is evoked but not made explicit, and also in the ways in which the spectator, spurred to fill in the political and moral voids, is expected to project a broad array of personal beliefs, presuppositions, and normative ideas onto the films' plot and characters. While in *Essential Killing* Mohammed's intense emotional expressions present guidelines for making some sense of his internal world, *Flanders* neither proposes moral nor psychologically motivated clues. The lack of context and motivation and the characters' blank facial expressions are, to an extent, mediated by the bodily responses of Barbe, who maintains a sensory connection to the soldiers' brutal acts and the guerrilla woman's gruesome revenge. Although Barbe's character underscores the devastating psychological and physical effects of war, rape, and torture, her unexplained sensory

insights are only suggested through editing and take on meaning through the spectator's engagement with the film.

Both films experiment with representations of harrowing, visceral, or even graphic violence and torture by providing little contextual information and by playing with viewing expectations, after which the spectator leaves the cinema unsettled (*Essential Killing*) and disturbed (*Flanders*).

Conclusion

In this study I have analysed how North-American and European films have depicted post-9/11 political torture. Exploring this particular theme has illustrated various ways in which cinema and societal issues interact in hyper-mediated Western culture. This study demonstrates the research relevance of political torture as a contentious issue both in real life and as a fictionalized, stylized form of screen violence, and also examines how culture, politics, and art convene in cinema to engage with and shape aspects of contemporary or historical realities we find difficult to witness and process.

I examined War on Terror films made between 2004 and 2012. All of these films share a Western heterogeneous yet still ethnocentric perspective on the War on Terror and Muslim otherness, which means they incorporate ethical, political, and moral questions about the use of political torture (conditions surrounding, motivations for, and consequences of), while also broadly addressing the West's share in the geopolitics of the War on Terror. I conceptualized the logic of filmic political torture as a perverse and violent 'role-play' between characters – torturer and tortured – that is scripted and performed for a diegetic audience in the film as well as a spectator of the film. This concept of role-play demonstrates each film's particular perspective on the use of torture and the relevance of analysing the use of ethnic and gender tropes in relation to those who torture and those who are tortured on screen.

Significant differences can, however, be identified between the aesthetic and political focal points of the American and European films studied, particularly concerning how they formulate perspectives on political torture, both as a topical political issue and as a particular form of screen violence. In European film the diegetic political context of the War on Terror is less delineated and less prominent than in American films. Further, European cinema did not experience the same post-9/11

upsurge of productions depicting torture that characterized American cinema. This means that the themes of 'fighting terrorism' and torture occur in European films from this period, but not necessarily in tandem. This is the result of the European films' focus on the personal, psychological effects of those involved in torture and war, rather than on action or fighting terrorism. Due to this focus, political situations or issues, such as the motivations for war and torture and the opponent's ethnicity, are made secondary.

In contrast, American films released around 2007/2008, responding to the Abu Ghraib abuses and anti-war public sentiment, began to question the rhetorical War on Terror, as well as the actual combat wars in the Middle East. The patriotism, embodied by the white male hero, that prospered in American cinema shortly after 9/11 is hesitantly negotiated by starring female protagonists and the figure of the antihero. While accentuating bodily vulnerability, risk, and exposure on both sides, these films question America's part in a perpetual cycle of violence and retaliation, without necessarily adjusting the image of the barbarian Muslim villain. The Muslim characters in *Syriana* (2005), *Body of Lies* (2008), and *Brothers* (2009) ostensibly inflict unjust and cruel torture as a punitive method, motivated by revenge. On the one hand, this motivation accentuates the vicious cycle of violence, instigated by terrorists as well as the US; on the other hand, terrorists' use of torture introduces Muslim culture as homogeneously backward and essentially evil. While self-reflexively questioning American interference in the Middle East, the depiction of Muslims as barbarian thus eventually legitimizes and necessitates military action to safeguard peace and stability in the films.

Although an American film, *Syriana*'s multifocal and multi-ethnic perspective formulates a critique of America's imperialist activities that provides a meta-view on the War on Terror. The film positions the rise of terrorism and the occurrence of torture as partially indebted to decades of shifting political and economic interests and backdoor deals made by both the US and Middle Eastern countries. The acknowledgement of the roots of the War on Terror in previous,

historical conflicts distinguishes *Syriana* from the other films in this study that do not provide such historical context for the War on Terror.

Unthinkable and *Zero Dark Thirty*, made in 2010 and 2012, are ticking bomb scenarios that depict the torture of Muslims as interrogational and as a necessary objective. Although encouraged by the urgency to prevent the next attack and framed within the national trauma of 9/11, upon closer look *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable*'s torture scenes are brutal and infused with punitive elements that stress not only the detainees' barbarism, but also that of the torturer. In different ways, *Unthinkable* and *Zero Dark Thirty* reveal the logic behind extra-legal torture, yet this plays out differently in each film: *Unthinkable* proposes a self-reflexive critique of the FBI's use of torture in interrogations. It stages graphic, vivisectionist violence that shows the physical damage caused by torture, while simultaneously subverting normative ethnic tropes pertaining to torturer and tortured. *Zero Dark Thirty*'s 'torture-lite' reveals the particularly dehumanizing nature of torture while it maintains the binary between Muslim terrorist and morally superior, predominantly white, CIA.

Whereas in *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable* interrogation is introduced as the only motivation for torture while punishment is a covert incentive, the geopolitical action films *Syriana* and *Body of Lies* touch on interrogations, but instead focus on the damaging effects of American political interference. Torture occurs as a side effect of such interference, in which the punitive elements underlying torture are made explicit and intertwined with a political critique formulated by the Muslim torturer. The different centre of attention in these two films has formal consequences for the way in which the torture scenes are shaped: the scenes in *Syriana* and *Body of Lies* are single short scenes, while in *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable* a great amount of screen time and plot are assigned to depicting torture.

The first two chapters of this thesis illustrate that, although the torture perpetrated by American CIA agents is ostensibly depicted as less harsh and more justified than the torture inflicted by Muslim terrorists, this is not entirely the case: in their own manner, the four films draw attention to the use of torture as a self-justifying strategy to

punish and thereby affirm and reaffirm the inherent, mutual difference between American agents and Muslim fundamentalists.

The main question addressed in *The Mark of Cain* and *Brødre/ Brothers* in Chapter 3 is how loyal one can stay to oneself after being involved in the torture of others as a soldier, and the subsequent struggle to return to society as a veteran. The turn away from the geopolitical stage to the personal experience of the War on Terror in Chapter 3 reveals the different thematic accents within American and European cinema: that on action surrounding and motivation for torture in the former, and on consequences of torture in the latter.

In *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable* information gathering was crucial to the plot, while in *The Mark of Cain* (2007) torture inflicted by UK soldiers is not cloaked as a necessary objective to gather information, but explicitly aims to humiliate Iraqi detainees. Additionally, the use of torture and the role-play between torturer and tortured are secondary to the situation preceding torture, the conditions facilitating it, and torture's aftermath. While in *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable* torture is given emphasis and significant screen time, in *The Mark of Cain* the torture scenes are short, fragmented, and interspersed throughout the plot. This way of editing illustrates that the accent does not lie on the torture itself but on its traumatic consequences for those involved.

A comparison between *Brødre* (2004) and its American adaptation *Brothers* (2009) underscores the diverging focal points of European War on Terror films. The soldiers' semi-forced (*The Mark of Cain*) and forced (*Brødre* and *Brothers*) participation in torture fuses the status of victim of torture with culprit. *Brothers*, however, halts between a critique of warfare and a heroic conception of warfare, and between a specific critique of America's meddling in Afghanistan and a depiction of the Taliban as barbaric and evil torturers. As in the American productions *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Unthinkable*, and *Body of Lies*, *Brothers* is built on action, a characteristic of its genre, and on expression and motivation, aspects of *mise-en-scène* that attach the spectator to the characters and the decisions made by them.

Brødre, on the contrary, withholds the explicit political and moral undercurrent visible in *Brothers* and, as does *The Mark of Cain*, downplays the importance of the enemy's identity. More importantly, in *Brødre* torture, as a plot element, is reduced to such a function that it, as a traumatising episode, could be replaced with any other horrible event.

The use of torture as instigator of a traumatic episode in Chapters 3 and 4 illustrates that the American films tend to address political themes more directly and explicitly, without necessarily weighing them in critical terms. The discursive War on Terror rhetoric is more potently framed in American politics and, consequently, in Hollywood film, than in European politics and cinema. Interrogational torture, for example, a characteristic of the ticking bomb scenario, is a staple of the American films while the European films, such as *The Mark of Cain*, illustrate that the incentive to torture for interrogational purposes is less powerful. Instead, the European films feature human cruelty, moral weakness, and the unstable mind. Their narratives are thus neither a more nor less critical evaluation of the War on Terror and the use of torture, but share a preference for depicting the human, interpersonal side of the combat and rhetorical Wars. Further, in *Essential Killing* (2010) and *Flanders* (2006) the diegetic political context, or the way in which political and social verisimilitude is constructed, and the protagonists' and their opponents' ethnicity are even downgraded into barely definable geographical, political, and cultural parameters, despite the fact that war, violence, and torture are prominent features of the plot.

The analysis of the last two films in Chapter 4 allows me to claim that, despite the diverging thematic accents between these American and European films, punishment, by inflicting pain or embarrassment or both, is the pivotal (covert or obvious) motivation for inflicting torture in all case studies, regardless of the situation in which torture occurs. Torture as punishment is inflicted in *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Unthinkable*, and *The Mark of Cain* for Muslim ethnicity and terrorist activities; in *Syriana*, *Body of Lies*, *Brødre/Brothers*, and presumably also *Essential Killing* for having a Western cultural background and for

Western political intervention; and in *Flanders* for the soldiers' previous war crimes.

This focus on moral decisions and personal costs in European film translates into different narrative structures and modes of spectatorship, in which the American films generally and predominantly build on a passive viewing attitude, while the European films exploit a distance between spectator and screen to invite the viewer to develop a critical, self-reflexive attitude.

Zero Dark Thirty, *Unthinkable, Body of Lies*, and *Brothers* make use of classic causality narration, in which coherent action and expression and clear internal relationships stimulate an acceptance of that which is presented to the viewer, while leaving open the possibility of critical reflexivity. Unlike the seamless narration of *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Unthinkable*, and *Body of Lies*, *Syriana*'s complex form and composite character create a distance between spectator and screen. It inspires the viewer to develop a critical, potentially ethical awareness of conflicting geopolitical interests and the related use of weapons, violence, and torture, using an unconventional narrative structure and approach – or even strategy – in Hollywood.

The Mark of Cain and *Brødre* employ narrative fragmentation to suggest that an account of trauma is necessarily as incoherent as the manifestation and experience of trauma itself. *The Mark of Cain* makes use of atemporal and distorted narration and *Brødre* creates a feeling of intimacy bordering on claustrophobia, naturalistically expressed through editing and camerawork, to suggest the events' traumatic nature. In *The Mark of Cain*, the duality that arises between sufficient comprehension of the protagonist's emotional turbulence and the plot's unsatisfactory conclusion due to ambivalent focalisation coerces the viewer to consider the questions raised by the film about personal and collective violent excesses and culpability. In this respect, the American *Syriana* and British *The Mark of Cain* create a similar viewing position through different narrative structures and for different reasons.

Even more than *The Mark of Cain*, the European art-house films *Essential Killing* and *Flanders* use unconventional narrative structure to

play with the spectator's urge for causality, internal relations, intelligibility, and genre expectations, which compels the viewer to actively interpret while the ability to invest coherence and meaning is often withheld. Apart from the opaque political and geographical information, both films refrain from incorporating moral imperatives, which are to be actively supplied by the spectator's own frames of reference. Yet while in *Essential Killing* intense facial expressions provide clues about the protagonist's internal world, *Flanders* withholds psychologically-motivated behaviour and emotional expression. Additionally, rape, murder, and torture are not only sudden but also often unmotivated and therefore staged to incite shock. The lack of expressed morality, motivation, and emotion together with the brutal violence make *Flanders* the most unsettling viewing experience of the films discussed in this study.

The unmotivated violence in *Flanders* shows that when watching depictions of torture, facial expressions and moral characters are crucial for 'reading' or interpreting the torture scenes in political and moral terms. Even when characters are not moral characters that explicate their agenda to the viewer, facial expressions prove to be crucial clues, particularly when narratives become less causally motivated and the characters more opaque.

The importance of moral imperatives, motivation, and expression explain some of the issues *Zero Dark Thirty*'s critics had with the film's torture scenes. Protagonist Maya plays a crucial role in processing these scenes: as a witnessing bystander, her point-of-view shots and the reverse shots of her facial expressions first urge the spectator to deem the role-play embarrassing and cruel. When she takes over the role of interrogator herself this transition occurs in tandem with the increasing opacity of her internal world and moral viewpoint. All the spectator sees are the actions she undertakes and growing purposefulness in finding bin Laden, while her stance concerning the justifiability and efficacy of torture remains vague. A duality therefore arises in which it is implied that torture is a humiliating yet necessary means to an end in finding Osama bin Laden.

This screening of torture as both disgusting and necessary without providing the moral tools in which to frame it is undercut by the plot's long time lapses that suggest causality where this is not necessarily true. The film's ambivalence, I argue, in terms of Maya's character, moral agenda, and the film's use of causality, evade the question of the justifiability and effectiveness of torture altogether. Maya thus comes to function as a convenient projection screen for the spectator's various emotions, ideas, and political and moral beliefs, and both positions, for or against torture, could eventually be endorsed by both spectator and film depending on subjective interpretation.

When films are based on real events, like *Zero Dark Thirty* and *The Mark of Cain*, this makes them liable to criticism concerning how they retell these events, by suggesting causality as part of a realistic diegetic discourse in the way *Zero Dark Thirty* does, or simply because they mould politically sensitive events into melodramatic or action formats. Although *The Mark of Cain* does not aspire to present a truthful account of the real torture case which inspired it, the film's rendering of the British military was nonetheless greeted with hostility and the plot was subjected to the 'reality' test. *Zero Dark Thirty*, on the contrary, does not only employ suggestive causality to create cinematic realism, but also purports to present a seemingly near-referential account of the hunt for bin Laden while posing as more truthful to reality than it really is. The criticism this claim – of being more accurate and truthful than other fictional forms – inspired does not, I argue, reside in the spectators' incapability of distinguishing the fictional world from the real world, but in being no longer willing to engage in a game of make-believe with this film.

Zero Dark Thirty constructs a socially and politically probable diegetic world, leaves moral and political judgements of torture aside, and plays with causality conventions in a way that diverges from how popular films usually employ classic, rigorous causality to spoon-feed internal relationships and viewpoints to the viewer. As the audience expects internal relationships in *Zero Dark Thirty* where they are not, the fuss about *Zero Dark Thirty* is informative of how narrative structures and techniques and formal conventions both steer and

disrupt viewing expectations: these means determine how the spectator is likely to process the use of torture and to perceive the political situation surrounding its use.

The case of *Zero Dark Thirty* provides an explicit example, but in broader terms, the various ways in which the films in this study tell their stories and depict political torture lead the spectator to question normative ideas, beliefs, and presuppositions concerning the use of torture, as well as the ways in which torture is 'told' by particular narrative formats.

Analysis of the variety of means employed by the films to depict political torture leads me back to a question posed in the first chapter. What is the relationship between context, content, and form, or more precisely, between the specificities and verisimilitude of the diegetic political context and how, or to what degree, torture is framed in War on Terror films? I argued that the more referential and authentic to real life the political context, as in *Zero Dark Thirty*, the less graphic (but not necessarily less brutal) the violence that is framed. *Unthinkable*'s graphic torture and moral characters suggest that such a depiction needs the company of a moral debate to prevent the torture from becoming 'torture porn'. In reverse, such a debate requires the simultaneous depiction of graphic torture to underscore the need for a debate about the use of torture. *Syriana* and *Body of Lies*' geopolitical contexts were explicated and crucial features of the narrative, while torture was presented within the parameters of the 'watchable'. In Chapter 3, *The Mark of Cain*'s reference to an actual torture episode made the framing of the torture of suspected Iraqi detainees a delicate issue, while in *Brødre*/*Brothers* the accent was placed on the traumatic consequences of warfare and of punitive torture, and again the torture itself took place predominantly off-screen. In *Essential Killing* and *Flanders* the political nature of torture is principally invested by the spectator's own frames of reference. Although *Unthinkable*, which presents crude violence, also reduces the political context to secondary importance, the 'decontextualization' in *Essential Killing* and *Flanders*' offers greater freedom to portray graphic and unrelenting depictions of

torture. In *Flanders* this opportunity is in fact taken but is not in *Essential Killing*, although it does, however, suggest the brutality of its violence precisely by keeping it predominantly off-screen.

Comparison shows that, apart from *Unthinkable* and *Flanders*, all films only suggestively visualise torture. This, firstly, indicates that the spectacle of torture, in the sense of detailed and explicit visibility and the gore that characterizes the genre of 'torture porn', is not a prevailing element of War on Terror films, whether American or European.

Furthermore, the American case studies prove that such a connection between authenticity and aesthetics – the more referential the political context, the less graphic the violence that is framed – can be substantiated. This characteristic can be attributed not only to the specificities of the diegetic political framework in which these torture episodes take place on screen, but also to particular political and financial interests and constraints that influence a Hollywood film's eventual content; the fact that *Unthinkable* was banned from theatres underscores this premise. This argument cannot be fully substantiated here however, as it requires more research into how Hollywood's commercial industry regulates graphic screen violence as part of a probable or even referential diegetic political context.

Although not graphic, torture in American film is not depicted as less brutal. All depictions of torture in this study are either disturbing, due to their content, or disturb because they emotionally affect the spectator or inspire her to reflect on moral, cultural, and political issues forwarded by the narratives. Such internal relationships between a diegetic political context and framing torture do not, however, occur in European cinema, which instead makes use of different aesthetic, political, and commercial benchmarks. Rather, this cinema navigates between providing a social and political commentary on the consequences of war and terrorism, and experimenting with conventional forms of narration that depict graphic violence and translate subjective experience.

The depictions of political torture in a War on Terror context in American and European cinema seem to have waned in recent films, yet only in another decade will we be able to gauge the full impact of the ways in which American and European cinema have featured the use of political torture during the War on Terror, and how these films have addressed its political, moral, and cultural implications. Additionally, future studies must provide more insight into how these cinemas address recent developments in the Middle East, such as the aftermath of the Arab Spring and the current war in Syria, and how they shape and refurbish ideologies pertaining to topical forms of weaponry and adversaries. For now, this study contributes to ongoing debates about the relationship between violent times and violent cinema, and about the aesthetics and politics of screen violence.

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- **Samenvatting** -

De 'War on Terror' verbeeld: het gebruik van martelmethodes in Amerikaanse en Europese cinema

De 'zaak *Zero Dark Thirty*' en de opzet van deze studie

Aan het begin van het vorige decennium werden in de Abu Ghraib-gevangenis in Irak Irakese gevangen gemarteld en misbruikt door Amerikaanse soldaten. Vanaf de publicatie van de foto's van deze daden in 2003 ontstond er een debat in het publieke domein over de legitimering en effectiviteit van martelen tijdens de zogenaamde 'War on Terror'. Dit debat laaide nog eens hevig op na de publicatie van het rapport van de Amerikaanse Senaat eind 2014 over de martelmethodes van de CIA. Parallel werd er discussie gevoerd over de interventie van Amerika en de 'Coalition of the Willing' in Irak en Afghanistan.

Ook documentaires en fictiefilms begonnen na 9/11 aandacht te besteden aan martelpraktijken en beeldden deze af als onderdeel van verhalen over de War on Terror. De aandacht hiervoor leek zelfs een bredere trend te zijn: ook verhalen die niet direct over de War on Terror gingen verwerkten in die periode regelmatig marteling in hun plot. Denk maar aan de horrorfilm *Saw* (James Wan, 2004) en de vele delen die daarop volgden; films die vallen binnen de commerciële tak van de zogenaamde 'torture-porn', letterlijk vertaald 'martelpornografie'. Het afbeelden van marteling roept de vraag op of er een relatie bestaat tussen een specifieke periode waarin meer en een bepaald type geweld voorkomt en gewelddadige cinema dat daarop volgt, waarin dit geweld wordt verbeeld en al dan niet sociaal en politiek kritisch wordt besproken. De analyses in dit proefschrift suggereren dat deze relatie tussen martelmethodes die gebruikt zijn tijdens de War on Terror en martelmethodes in films gemaakt tijdens of vlak na de War on Terror, inderdaad bestaat. Het biedt daarmee een specifieke visie op 'screen violence', oftewel 'geweld op het witte doek', en vergroot het inzicht in de intrigerende interactie tussen film en maatschappij.

In het verlengde van deze suggestie onderzoekt dit proefschrift hoe Europese en Amerikaanse fictiefilms over de War on Terror martelmethodes verbeelden, en welke verschillen, politiek en esthetisch, er te ontdekken zijn tussen Europese en Amerikaanse cinema. Dit roept de vraag op: waarom is het *nu* zo urgent om een hele studie te wijden aan hoe fictiefilms martelpraktijken weergeven, terwijl marteling al eerder tijdens oorlogen is ingezet en wreed geweld ook al decennialang een veel voorkomend thema in films is?

Het onderwerp van dit proefschrift is geworteld in wat ik nu voor het gemak 'de zaak *Zero Dark Thirty*' noem. Deze film, die de gefictionaliseerde versie van de zoektocht van de CIA naar Osama bin Laden vertelt, kreeg veel kritiek vanwege de marteling van verdachten van terroristische activiteiten en handlangers van bin Laden. De film zou een te duidelijk standpunt vóór martelpraktijken hebben ingenomen en om die reden propagandistisch zijn. Deze zaak leidde tot een verhitte, maandenlange discussie tussen filmcritici, politici en academici. De twee belangrijkste kritiekpunten hadden betrekking op de manier waarop een dergelijk verhaal, gebaseerd op echte gebeurtenissen en personen, wordt weergegeven als een actiefilm, waarbij het spektakel van de actiefilm pretendeert de realiteit sterk te benaderen. Het tweede kritiekpunt had betrekking op de manier waarop de film marteling als een normale procedure zou afbeelden en daarmee de toeschouwers zou sturen in hun morele overtuiging dat marteling noodzakelijk is.

De kritiek die *Zero Dark Thirty* ontketende, kreeg snel een morele ondertoon waarin ter discussie werd gesteld hoe een politiek gevoelig onderwerp in film afgebeeld *zou moeten* worden. Daarmee werden zowel vragen gesteld over de rol van marteling tijdens de War on Terror als over de rol en status van film als kunstobject, als commercieel product en als politiek commentaar. Hoewel de discussie rondom deze film de start is voor dit proefschrift, richten de gepresenteerde analyses zich minder op het maatschappelijk debat en meer op hoe de films zelf martelen *verwerken*, en hoe ze het daarmee *politiek en esthetisch definiëren*. De vraag in dit proefschrift is dus hoe

films marteling in beeld brengen, en niet of en op welke wijze martelen politiek en maatschappelijk te verantwoorden valt.

Deze studie analyseert Amerikaanse en Europese fictiefilms die gemaakt zijn tussen 2004 en 2012 en richt zich specifiek op acht casussen. Deels gaat het hierbij om films gebaseerd op waargebeurde verhalen en deels om films waarin alle gebeurtenissen verzonnen zijn. Gezien de tijd waarin ze gemaakt zijn en spelen, kunnen ze echter alle acht bekeken worden als reflectie op onze werkelijkheid in die periode. Voor de analyses is gebruik gemaakt van een cultuurtheoretische benadering en een filmnarratologisch instrumentarium.

Met behulp van filmnaratologie wordt de zogenaamde 'tekst' van de films onderworpen aan een 'close reading', waarbij via grondige analyse zoveel mogelijk informatie uit een shot, een scène of uit de plot wordt gehaald. Om iets te kunnen zeggen over hoe marteling esthetisch en politiek wordt geïntegreerd en gepresenteerd in film is het noodzakelijk de formele middelen te analyseren die zijn gebruikt om marteling in beeld te brengen, zoals editing, kleur, of geluid. Wordt het geweld expliciet of alleen suggestief in beeld gebracht, is het onderdeel van een flashback, zijn het korte of juist lange en uitgebreide fragmenten? Daarnaast analyseert deze studie waarom marteling wordt verbeeld en wie er wordt gemarteld door wie. Met andere woorden: welke motivaties worden er vanuit de personages en het verhaal geboden voor martelpraktijken en welke rol heeft marteling in de plot? Denk daarbij zowel aan martelpraktijken die zijn toegepast op verdachten van terrorisme (die bijvoorbeeld gevangen zitten in Guantanamo Bay) en op 'prisoners of war', krijgsgevangen zoals die in Abu Graib. Hierbij rijst de vraag wat het verschil is tussen deze twee situaties, tussen verdachte van terrorisme en 'prisoner of war', en of er een verschil is in de manier waarop er in beide gevallen wordt gemarteld.

Deze studie heeft het dan ook niet zomaar over 'martelen', zoals dat ook voorkomt in *Saw*, maar over 'politiek martelen'. Dit houdt in dat er sprake is van een specifieke politieke context waarbinnen martelen plaatsvindt, waarbij er specifieke politieke motivaties worden geboden

voor martelen die binnen de context van de War on Terror vallen. Naast de 'close readings' wordt er gekeken naar de wisselwerking tussen de thema's die de film integreert en onderwerpen die er spelen in de maatschappij ten tijde van het produceren en verschijnen van de film. Via een cultuurtheoretisch kader wordt er geanalyseerd hoe de films het product zijn van zowel hun cinematografische traditie als van de sociale en politieke context waarbinnen ze worden gemaakt, circuleren en betekenis krijgen.

Deze studie doet geen empirisch receptie-onderzoek (zoals het ondervragen van kijkers), maar richt zich volledig op tekstuele analyse, of objectanalyse: er wordt gekeken naar de manier waarop een hypothetische kijker wordt aangesproken door de thema's van de film en gestuurd wordt door formele technieken en vertelmethodes. Wel worden er ook filmrecensies betrokken in de analyse, maar uiteindelijk vertellen de conclusies ons meer over filmtechnieken dan over de kijker van vlees en bloed.

Amerikaanse cinema

Een belangrijke conclusie die getrokken kan worden is dat de veronderstelde relatie tussen martelmethodes die gebruikt zijn tijdens de War on Terror en martelmethodes in films gemaakt tijdens of vlak na de War on Terror alleen lijkt te bestaan in Amerikaanse producties. Europese films kennen een andere geschiedenis en dynamiek, met eveneens verwerking van terrorisme, wreed geweld en marteling in films, maar deze hebben in mindere mate het War-on-Terror-sausje of -etiket dan Amerikaanse producties van na 9/11.

Daarnaast zwakken de Europese films de politieke context van de War on Terror af ten faveure van een accent op de persoonlijke consequenties van oorlog en van marteling in de vorm van schuld en trauma. Waar in de Amerikaanse films de politieke context duidelijk gepresenteerd en afgebakend wordt, zijn details rondom bijvoorbeeld de oorlogen in het Midden-Oosten in Europese films minder prominent aanwezig. Waar de Amerikaanse producties meer gebruik maken van genre-karakteristieken zoals actie, achtervolgingen en explosies, krijgen deze aspecten in de Europese films beduidend minder nadruk of

zijn zelfs afwezig. Dit zorgt ervoor dat de omstandigheden waarin de martelscènes zijn ingebed niet zozeer aan actie gekoppeld zijn maar aan emotie.

De Amerikaanse en Europese films verschillen niet alleen 'als geheel' van elkaar maar ook onderling. Om deze verschillen goed uit de verf te laten komen begint dit proefschrift in de eerste twee hoofstukken met een analyse van Amerikaanse films. In de laatste twee worden overwegend Europese films behandeld. In hoofdstuk 1 worden er in *Zero Dark Thirty* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2012) en *Unthinkable* (Gregor Jordan, 2010) moslims verdacht van terroristische activiteiten en gemarteld door de CIA en FBI. In hoofdstuk 2 is dit omgedraaid: in *Syriana* (Stephen Gaghan, 2005) en *Body of Lies* (Ridley Scott, 2008) worden CIA-agenten gemarteld door moslims. De aanname die ten grondslag ligt aan de hoofdstukken is dat deze verschillende rollen leiden tot een verschillende interactie tussen folteraar en gemartelde: er worden verschillende motivaties, condities en methodes door de plot en de scènes zelf naar voren gebracht, waarbij de martelmethodes van moslims als wreder en tegelijkertijd minder gerechtvaardigd worden gepresenteerd.

In hoofdstuk 1 zijn beide films gebaseerd op wat bekend is geworden als het 'tikkende-bom-scenario'. De moslims worden gemarteld vanuit het idee dat er informatie verstrekt moet worden die de volgende terroristische aanval kan tegenhouden. *Syriana* en *Body of Lies* zijn daarentegen geopolitieke films waarbij de nadruk ligt op de kwalijke gevolgen van de politieke en economische bemoeienis van Amerika in het Midden-Oosten. Deze andere focus zorgt ervoor dat in de eerste twee films de martelscènes een rode draad en een terugkerend element zijn in de plot; immers, van het verkrijgen van informatie hangt alles af. In de laatste twee films zijn de martelscènes korter en een onderdeel van het grotere verhaal over machtspolitiek.

Enkele belangrijke conclusies kunnen uit deze eerste twee hoofdstukken worden getrokken. In *Zero Dark Thirty* en *Unthinkable* lijkt de marteling van verdachten van terrorisme door CIA-agenten in eerste instantie meer gerechtvaardigd dan de marteling door moslims.

Echter, in beide films zijn de martelaars minder heldhaftig en minder moreel juist dan op het eerste gezicht lijkt, aangezien niet alleen de barbaarsheid van de gemartelde maar ook die van de folteraar wordt getoond.

Daarnaast laat dit hoofdstuk zien dat de kritiek jegens *Zero Dark Thirty* voornamelijk verklaard kan worden vanuit twee factoren: de ambivalente positie van de vrouwelijke hoofdrolspelers en haar relatie tot de martelpraktijken, en de manier waarop er een vorm van cinematografisch realisme wordt geconstrueerd om de zoektocht naar Osama bin Laden sterker uit de verf te laten komen. Er wordt beargumenteerd dat critici moeite hadden met *Zero Dark Thirty* vanwege de manier waarop het vrouwelijke hoofdpersonage feministische en anti-feministische eigenschappen combineert en uitdraagt. Daarnaast blijven haar positie en morele opvattingen in relatie tot martelmethodes ambivalent. Op de manier waarop er in de film cinematografisch realisme wordt geconstrueerd kom ik als laatste terug.

Zero Dark Thirty werd niet bekritiseerd *omdat* de film martelscènes presenteert maar om de manier *waarop* hij dat doet. *Syriana* uit hoofdstuk 2, daarentegen, werd gelauwerd als progressieve film die kritisch is op de Amerikaanse interventies en Amerika's manier van politiek en economisch zakendoen in het Midden-Oosten. Het kritische aspect van *Syriana*'s narratief, zo wordt beargumenteerd, zit hem in het feit dat de film expliciet de Amerikaanse politieke en economische bemoeienis in het Midden-Oosten aankaart.

De film is relatief vroeg met dergelijke kritiek: de 'War on Terror' was een term die voor het eerst werd gebruikt door president George W. Bush enkele dagen na 11 September 2001. De term staat zowel voor politieke retoriek als voor de daadwerkelijke oorlogen in Afghanistan en Irak die Amerika's antwoord waren op de aanslagen van 9/11. Pas vanaf 2007/2008, rond de tijd van Obama's kandidatuur, begonnen Amerikaanse films vragen te stellen bij de politieke retoriek achter de War on Terror en de oorlogen in Irak en Afghanistan en die in perspectief te zetten. Het patriotisme dat vlak na 9/11 overheerste in

de Amerikaanse publieke en politieke sfeer nam af ten faveure van een meer gematigde toon.

In cinema komt deze scepsis terug in de belichaming van de antiheld en van een accent op lichamelijke kwetsbaarheid, risico en geweld, aan zowel de kant van Amerika als van het Midden-Oosten. De films die gemaakt zijn vanaf 2007/2008 benadrukken de oneindige cirkel van vergelding en vergeldingsdrang. De 'post-heroïsche' antiheld, in de belichaming van de blanke, mannelijke CIA-agent, speelt een hoofdrol. Zijn ambivalente positie wordt benadrukt, terwijl het stereotype beeld van de 'barbaarse' moslimfundamentalist in stand wordt gehouden. Voor vrouwelijke personages is, behalve in bijrollen, weinig plek weggelegd.

Dit betekent dat waar in *Syriana* en in *Body of Lies* de troop van de barbaarse moslim in stand wordt gehouden, de troop van de blanke, Westerse held wordt aangepast en in kritischer licht gezet. Deze paradoxale constructie zorgt ervoor dat in *Body of Lies*, en op een vergelijkbare manier ook *Zero Dark Thirty*, impliciet de noodzaak tot militaire interventies en spionage door de CIA in het Midden-Oosten worden gerechtvaardigd. *Syriana* laat echter zien dat martelmethodes en fundamentalistisch terrorisme onderdeel zijn van decennialange politieke en economische verschuivingen tussen Amerika en het Midden-Oosten en dito louche deals. Marteling wordt hierbij ingezet als een kritiek vanuit de islamitische folteraar op de Amerikaanse militaire, economische en politieke bemoeienissen, waaronder die in de oliehandel. Deze film is daarmee de enige film van alle geanalyseerde of aangehaalde films in deze studie die de plot in een dergelijk historisch perspectief zet.

Deze eerste vier films laten zien dat marteling in verschillende gradaties wordt gemotiveerd als noodzakelijk, maar dat het in alle gevallen de facto wordt ingezet als een zelf-legitimerende strategie om de ander te straffen voor zijn etniciteit. Uit de hoofdstukken blijkt dat straf zo in alle tot dusver besproken films het motief is voor marteling, al is dit motief soms meer en soms minder expliciet.

Daarnaast blijkt dat er bij de Amerikaanse films een relatie valt te ontdekken tussen de context, vorm en inhoud van een film. In een

volledig van een politiek-maatschappelijke context losgezongen film als *Saw* kan er op los worden geëxperimenteerd met het in beeld brengen van marteling. Daartegenover staat dat hoe meer de politieke situatie in een film gebaseerd is op waargebeurde situaties, zoals in *Zero Dark Thirty*, hoe minder expliciet marteling in beeld wordt gebracht. Dit neemt niet weg dat de martelscènes niet minder wreed zijn dan wel als wreed of als zeer verontrustend worden ervaren door de kijker. Het geweld is vaak suggestiever of deels buiten beeld. Ook in *Syriana*, *Body of Lies*, *Brødre*, *Brothers* en *The Mark of Cain*, zijn de martelscènes relatief 'kijkbaar'.

Wanneer er wel expliciete marteling in beeld is, zoals bij het Amerikaanse *Unthinkable*, wordt er een morele dialoog tussen de personages gepresenteerd waardoor de film niet verwordt tot 'torture-porn', of gewelddadig-pornografisch. Tegelijkertijd is een dergelijk expliciete weergave van marteling in de film noodzakelijk om vervolgens het morele debat tussen de personages te laten ontstaan over martelmethodes. In deze film is de politieke context een stuk minder prominent dan bij *Zero Dark Thirty*.

Europese cinema

In hoofdstuk 3 worden er drie films geanalyseerd waarbij het accent ligt op de persoonlijke beleving van oorlog en geweld en het ontstaan van posttraumatische stress (PTSS). De impliciete vraag die door *The Mark of Cain* (Marc Munden, 2008), de Deense film *Brødre* (Susanne Bier, 2004) en de Amerikaanse remake *Brothers* (Jim Sheridan, 2009) gesteld wordt, is hoe iemand loyaal aan zichzelf kan blijven wanneer hij betrokken is bij de marteling van anderen. In *The Mark of Cain* wordt een jonge Britse soldaat semi-gedwongen om Iraakse gevangen te helpen folteren. Het onttrekken van informatie wordt, in tegenstelling tot *Zero Dark Thirty*, niet gepresenteerd als iets noodzakelijks, maar de foltering staat in tegendeel geheel in dienst van het vernederen van de Iraakse gevangenen. De martelscènes nemen een prominente plek in, maar staan in dienst van een uitweiding over de omstandigheden die ervoor zorgen dat zulke mensonterende situaties zich kunnen

voordoen. Daarnaast leggen de scènes nadruk op de gevolgen van zulke wreedheden.

De beweging van tikkende bommen en het geopolitieke toneel naar de interactie tussen personages en persoonlijk leed geeft de verschillende thematische accenten binnen de Amerikaanse en Europese films weer: die op actie in de eerste en op consequenties en reflectie in de laatste. In *The Mark of Cain* en in *Brødre*, waarin een soldaat in krijgsgevangenschap door de Taliban gedwongen wordt een medesoldaat dood te slaan, vloeit de positie van dader en slachtoffer, en van Westers 'beschaafd' en moslim 'barbaars' in elkaar over. De hoofdpersonages krijgen vervolgens te maken met een schuldgevoel dat hun leven gaat beheersen.

De Amerikaanse remake van *Brødre*, bekend onder de titel *Brothers*, laveert echter tussen een kritisch perspectief op de Amerikaanse interventie in Afghanistan, een conventionele visie op de Taliban als barbaars en op een heroïsche opvatting van de soldaat. Deze constructie zorgt ervoor dat, net als in *Body of Lies* en *Zero Dark Thirty*, de oorlog in het Midden-Oosten impliciet wordt gelegitimeerd, ondanks de kritische ondertoon van *Brothers*. Zowel *The Mark of Cain* als *Brødre* maken de identiteit van de tegenstander en de morele en politieke kant van *Brothers* minder belangrijk voor de plot. Deze studie stelt dat de Amerikaanse films de politieke thematiek van de War on Terror explicieter aansnijden zonder daar noodzakelijkerwijs moreel-kritisch op te reflecteren. De Europese films laten morele zwakheid, menselijke – dat wil zeggen mannelijke – wreedheid en de onstabiele geest zien en reduceren het politieke toneel tot de tweede plek of, zoals in hoofdstuk 4, zelfs tot een nauwelijks gedefinieerde context.

De manier waarop politieke en sociale waarschijnlijkheid wordt geconstrueerd in *Essential Killing* (Jerzy Skolimowski, 2010) en *Flanders* (Bruno Dumont, 2006) en de identiteit van zowel protagonist als tegenstander zijn volledig secundair aan het vooropstellen van menselijke wreedheid. Tegelijkertijd zijn oorlog, marteling en geweld volop aanwezig in de plot en wordt de kijker haast gedwongen de films te bezien door een War on Terror-lens. Net als in de voorafgaande hoofdstukken wordt er gemarteld, nu vanuit een detentiecentrum voor

verdachten van terrorisme en vanuit een oorlogssituatie. Wederom is het primaire doel om te vernederen, een motivatie die als een rode draad terugkeert in alle in deze studie besproken films.

Waar Amerikaanse films over het algemeen afhankelijk zijn van specifieke financiële en politieke instanties, navigeren de Europese films – vaker onafhankelijke producties – tussen het geven van een sociaal en politieke commentaar en het experimenteren met vertelvorm. De specifieke relatie tussen de politieke situatie in de film en de manier waarop marteling in beeld is gebracht gaat dan ook alleen op voor de Amerikaanse films en niet voor de Europese. In *Essential Killing* en *Flanders* moet de politieke context door de kijker worden aangevuld. Deze 'decontextualisatie' biedt een grotere vrijheid om naast wreed ook expliciet geweld te tonen. Alleen in *Flanders* wordt deze mogelijkheid benut, waarbij de martelingen samen met het morele vacuüm een ware uitdaging worden voor de kijker. In *Essential Killing* wordt de wreedheid van marteling en ander geweld juist gesuggereerd door de focus op intense kleur en geluid, de afwezigheid van dialoog en op de primaire reacties van de personages.

Ondanks de expliciete beelden in *Unthinkable* en in *Flanders* kan er toch worden gesteld dat het *spektakel* van marteling, onderdeel van het 'torture porn' genre, niet deel uitmaakt van War on Terror cinema. De fysieke en mentale pijn die de personages ondergaan door marteling wordt eerder expliciet gemaakt door de suggestie te wekken van wreedheid dan door de marteling expliciet in beeld te brengen.

De kijker

Het brute geweld, de schaarse informatie en morele handvatten die de plots van *Essential Killing* en *Flanders* bieden, en de minimale emotionele expressie vanuit de personages, dwingen de kijker ertoe deze informatie zelf in te vullen. De analyses van hoofdstuk 3 en 4 laten zien dat het accent op morele keuzes en persoonlijk leed in de Europese films zich vertaalt naar de manier waarop deze films worden gepresenteerd aan de kijker: de Amerikaanse films zijn gebaseerd op een klassieke causale vertelstructuur die de kijker hecht aan duidelijke plotontwikkelingen, perspectief en emoties. Alleen *Syriana* in hoofdstuk

2 creëert een complexe, voor Hollywood onconventionele vertelstructuur, waarbij de kijker wordt gedwongen een zelf-reflexieve en kritische houding aan te nemen ten opzichte van de politieke thema's die worden gepresenteerd.

In hoofdstuk 3 zetten *The Mark of Cain* en *Brødre* een incoherente vertelwijze in om te suggereren dat een verhaal over trauma noodzakelijkerwijs net zo incoherent is als de manifestatie en beleving van trauma zelf. Via atemporele en vervormde vertelling (*The Mark of Cain*) en via claustrofobische close-ups (*Brødre*) wordt de kijker meegenomen in de mentale toestand van de personages, zonder daarbij altijd goed te weten wat er gebeurt en welke situaties daadwerkelijk hebben plaatsgevonden. Deze situatie dwingt de kijker na te denken over morele keuzes en over persoonlijke en collectieve medeplichtigheid bij gewelddadige situaties.

Essential Killing en *Flanders* uit hoofdstuk 4 zijn nog veel onconventioneler in hun verstelstructuur en laten informatieve gaten vallen die de kijker dikwijls op het verkeerde been zetten. Dit heeft het resultaat dat de toeschouwer geconfronteerd wordt met bruut geweld, zoals marteling en verkrachting, zonder dat daarbij altijd duidelijk is waarom deze acties plaatsvinden of wat de personages beweegt. Op deze manier spelen de films met de behoefte van de kijker aan interne coherentie, causaliteit en genre-specifieke eigenschappen.

Vooral in *Flanders* zorgt het achterwege laten van morele handvatten en basale emotionele expressie in de hoofdpersonages, een groep mannelijke soldaten, ervoor dat de kijkervaring een zeer verontrustende wordt. Deze film, zo wordt gesteld, benadrukt dan ook de noodzaak voor emotionele expressie en morele personages wanneer men als filmkijker geconfronteerd wordt met zoiets als marteling. Deze twee aspecten zijn nodig om de scènes te kunnen 'lezen' en te kunnen begrijpen, zeker wanneer de verhaallijn onconventioneel en minder causaal gemotiveerd wordt.

Besluit

Als de onderlinge verschillen tussen de Amerikaanse en Europese films op een rijtje gezet zijn, en hun relatie tot de martelpraktijken van de

War on Terror in kaart zijn gebracht, komt deze studie terug op de 'zaak *Zero Dark Thirty*'. Met de analyse van de films in het achterhoofd laat de discussie rondom *Zero Dark Thirty* zien hoe verteltechnieken en formele conventies van film onze kijkersverwachtingen sturen en verstoren. De film speelt op een onconventionele manier met ondubbelzinnige, moreel gefundeerde handelingen en dito emotionele expressie van de personages bij de representatie van wreed geweld. Al lijkt ze marteling in eerste instantie wreed te vinden, hoofdrolspeler Maya's morele standpunt en haar positie ten opzichte van marteling worden gaandeweg minder duidelijk. Het is voor de kijker lastiger om grip te krijgen op Maya's gedachtewereld wanneer ze zelf wordt ingezet bij martelingen, waarbij ze ondervraagt maar niet zelf martelt. Tegelijkertijd groeit haar volharding in het vinden van Bin Laden, waarmee wordt geïmpliceerd dat martelmethoden weliswaar wreed maar vooral noodzakelijk zijn.

Daarnaast maakt de film als zodanig minder gebruik van rigide causaliteit zoals populaire films die doorgaans inzetten. Er worden grote sprongen gemaakt in de plot en situaties volgen niet per se causaal op elkaar, waardoor onduidelijk blijft of de marteling effectief is. Tegelijkertijd suggereert de film een realistische weergave te zijn van de echte zoektocht naar bin Laden. Wanneer films zoals *Zero Dark Thirty* en *The Mark of Cain* gebaseerd zijn op echte gebeurtenissen krijgen ze sneller kritiek te verduren; soms door de manier waarop ze deze gebeurtenissen presenteren, soms alleen al omdat ze die gebeurtenissen gieten in het fictieve format van de bioscoopfilm. De manier waarop ze deze gebeurtenissen afbeelden en het waarheidsgehalte worden op de weegschaal gelegd en door de kijker gewogen. Waar *The Mark of Cain* de gebeurtenissen waarop de film zich baseert verdraait, lijkt *Zero Dark Thirty* kort gezegd realistischer te zijn dan zij daadwerkelijk is.

Deze drie punten van de film, de onduidelijkheid wat betreft interne causaliteit, realisme en de morele standpunten van de personages, zorgden voor een onduidelijke gebruiksaanwijzing tijdens het kijken. Deze studie betoogt dat de film juist via deze onduidelijkheid een moreel en politieke standpunt ten aanzien van marteling in het

midden lijkt te willen laten. Het resultaat is dat de kijker zelf wordt aangespoord een oordeel te vellen, zowel over wat er precies gebeurt in de film als over de morele en politieke rechtvaardiging van marteling. Dit heeft het effect dat de kijker in de situatie wordt gebracht waarin hij of zij zelf een kritische houding aan *moet* nemen, waarbij eigen morele en politieke afwegingen meegenomen dienen te worden. Dit verklaart de storm van kritiek die volgde: vele critici pakten de uitnodiging op die impliciet in de film ligt besloten.

De 'zaak *Zero Dark Thirty*' laat daarmee zien hoe cinema speelt met onze kijkersverwachtingen en hoe cinema laveert tussen een rol als cultureel kunstobject, commercieel product, en politiek en sociaal commentaar op huidige en historische gebeurtenissen. Cinema werkt niet als een autonome leidraad voor ons denken, maar eerder als een spiegel voor de maatschappelijke en politieke opvattingen die we mee dragen – en zoals bij alle spiegels kan een blik hierin soms confronterend zijn.

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Curriculum Vitae

Odile Bodde (1985, Utrecht) graduated from the Christelijk Gymnasium Utrecht in 2003. She studied Literary Studies at the University of Amsterdam, obtained a minor in History and a bachelor in English Literature and Culture, and finished the research master Cultural Analysis in 2010 (*cum laude*). She worked for Stichting Literaire Activiteiten Amsterdam (SLAA) and for Uitgeverij Prometheus before she took up a PhD position at the Leiden Centre for the Arts in Society (LUCAS). Her PhD research was part of the NWO Horizon-programme 'What can the Humanities contribute to our practical self-understanding?', led by prof. dr. Marcus Düwell (supervisors Anthonya Visser and Peter Verstraten). She joined the organizing committee of the international LUCAS Graduate Conference in 2013 and became an editor and co-editor-in-chief of the Journal of the LUCAS Graduate Conference. While working as a researcher she taught at the department of Literature and Film Studies of Leiden University and spent a semester at the Film Studies Department at King's College London (KCL).

After finishing her PhD her focus moved entirely to teaching. She currently works as a primary school teacher, specialized in Dutch and English language skills and reading. Her current job is part of a dual teaching/learning trajectory.

Cinema and society interact. This given becomes fascinating when socio-politically sensitive issues are adapted in films that confront spectators with the frames of reference they use to make sense of society.

This thesis studies how North-American and European films depict political torture in the context of the 'War on Terror'. It starts from the debate that was held in the political and public domain concerning the 'actual' torture of suspects of terrorist activities, and analyses political torture in film as a fictionalised, stylised form of such violence. In this way, it shows how public debates, politics, and art convene in cinema to engage with contemporary realities we, as societies, find difficult to witness and process.

The analyses focus on War on Terror films made between 2004 and 2012. All of these films share a Western, heterogeneous, yet ethnocentric perspective on the War on Terror, including the role of torture and Muslim otherness. They incorporate ethical, political, and moral questions about the use of political torture, while addressing the West's share in the geopolitics of the War on Terror.

Ultimately, contributions are made to the fields of film narratology and cultural theory, as well as to current debates about the role of cinema in society: cinema as art object, as commercial artifice, and as commentary on socio-politically sensitive issues.

SCREENING THE 'WAR ON TERROR'

Odile Bodde

SCREENING THE 'WAR ON TERROR'

The Politics and Aesthetics of Torture in American and European Cinema

Odile Bodde