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Reel History is Real History:

An Analysis of Hollywood War on Terror Films Produced in the
Second Decade Post 9/11

Abstract

The terrorist attacks on 9/11 caused an urgent state of crisis to which America immediately responded by facilitating mythological narratives of masculine heroism. Such portrayals were not only evident in news broadcasts and political discourse, but in popular culture as well – a field in which scholars such as Susan Faludi, Thomas Ærvold Bjerre, and Terence McSweeney have contributed greatly. After the initial decade post 9/11, an abundance of films depicting the attacks and the ensuing war on terror had been produced. Such texts have had a profound influence in reshaping memories of the events. This process of how popular culture reconstructs the history of 9/11 and the war on terror is one which proceeds as long as works depicting it continue to be produced. This paper examines, analyzes, and discusses three war on terror films from the second decade post 9/11 and their belated response to the 9/11 attacks and the war on terror: *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), *American Sniper* (2014), and *12 Strong* (2018). Theorists such as Robert Rosenstone, Quentin Skinner and Nils Arne Sørensen guide the analysis of each film. Despite their belated response, these films continue in the same vein as the heroic and victimizing narratives seen in previous years. As a collective force they contribute to a reimagining of the war by presenting it in simplistic protagonist-antagonist structure as well as by omitting or reducing several controversial topics of the conflicts in the Middle East.

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Introduction

The terrorist attacks on 9/11 plunged the United States into an urgent state of crisis. Shortly after, President George W. Bush declared unequivocal war on al-Qaeda and vowed to catch those responsible for the devastation that had occurred on American soil. The subsequent war on terror would come to outlast more than three presidential periods and would have a profound impact on American national imaginary (Dodds 1626). Foreign Affairs policy, post 9/11 political rhetoric, as well as the terrorism discourse found in the abundance of literature and television material produced in the subsequent years after 9/11 can be attributed this impact. McSweeney states ""a substantial number of the films that emerged from the United States in the decade after 9/11 can be quite clearly seen as a reaction to the "cultural trauma" of 9/11 and the war on terror"" (2017 p. 9). The film medium has a profound effect on reshaping public perceptions of past events, and the ones depicting the war on terror are of no exception (McSweeney 2014 p. 15). Through their images and narratives, films possess a participatory power, through which they can take part in, discuss, promote, or critique contextual perceptions of the things they depict. This paper investigates how such works influence public perceptions of the 9/11 tragedy and the subsequent conflicts in the Middle East. One of the leading scholars in this field, Terence McSweeney, has produced useful works for such an investigation, including *The War on Terror and American Film: 9/11 Frames Per Second* (2014), and *American Cinema in the Shadow of 9/11* (2017). Similar works include Schopp and Hill's *The War on Terror and American Popular Culture September 11 and Beyond* (2009), and Prince's *Firestorm: American Film in the Age of Terrorism* (2009). These works indicate the abundance of research which has already been done on post 9/11, war on terror films. However, the amount of literature which contributes to how newer emerging portrayals of these events impact perceptions of these conflicts is less abundant. In *American Cinema in the Shadow of 9/11* (2017) McSweeney states

> The films produced by the American film industry in the years following 9/11 provide a valuable insight into the era; they are simultaneously a product of their times and frequently present us with an articulate commentary on them. If nothing else, they prove that the shadow of 9/11 still looms over American film and society and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future (17)

Earlier depictions of the war (elaborated later), such as Bigalow's *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and Stone's *World Trade Center* (2006), have had unique, telling, resonant, and *different* functions in projecting images that have shaped perceptions of the war on terror and the nations cultural image. This paper, placed within this "foreseeable future", considers the notion of a lingering shadow looming over American cinema, and delves further into war on terror depictions produced after the initial decade post 9/11. This paper investigates such films' depictions of the war on terror, and how these portrayals are shaped by, and participate in, their contexts – and, ultimately, how each film functions in relation to shaping perceptions of the depicted events. This leads on to the problem formulation:

How do Hollywood war on terror films produced in the second decade post 9/11 depict the war on terror? How do these depictions function as participatory elements in their context, and how do they impact public perceptions of the war on terror?

The films chosen for this analysis include Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper* (2014), and Nicolai Fuglsig's *12 Strong* (2018). To provide an appropriate, in-depth analysis of these films this project will initially establish a relevant practical, theoretical, and methodological framework. Firstly, an introduction to 9/11 and the subsequent events will be included, as well as how these initial attacks and the war on terror made their mark on popular culture. Hereafter, a brief overview of Hollywood's relationship with war, and with the war on terror will be established – along with a brief outline on the already existing research within this field. Establishing such sections allows the analysis to place the films in question in relation to the real-life events they depict, to the previously produced war on terror films, as well as to the already established research on the topic. Hereafter, a case for the "history film" is made, followed by a theoretical framework which involves establishing how to analyze the filmic depictions, how to contextualize these depictions, as well as how to investigate their performativity. Following these sections, the analysis of each of the three chosen films will commence. The analysis of this paper focusses on one film at a time, which allows an emphasis on each film's individual depictions, contexts, and functions. Hereafter, a comparative section will "zoom out" from this individuality and discuss their collective agency. Finally, a conclusion will summarize this study's main findings.

Rationale and Limitations

While films such as the ones in question can be analyzed in a multitude of ways, this paper emphasizes a socio-historical approach by examining them in relation to their contexts to investigate why and how they come to shape public memories of the past. An important limitation to note here, is that the combination of film and history is categorized as a sub-field that belongs to a broader, multi-medium approach which inspects how all sources of historical discourse work alongside one another in shaping and reconstructing memories of the past.

This investigation also solely focuses on narrative films. Despite the abundance of documentaries produced about the war on terror, these are excluded to provide consistency in the analytical approaches throughout. Despite this exclusion, one key aspect to note is that all three of the selected films proclaim to be based – in some way, shape, or form – on actual events, presenting themselves as accurate accounts of past events. Schopp and Hill argue that twentieth century Western society has acquired a "passion for the real" (21). This Western appeal for "realistic/authentic" filmic depictions stands as reason for the selection of the films included in this study. Each of them portrays the war on terror in its own authentic way: *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) depicts the decade long hunt for Osama bin Laden and the people involved, *American Sniper* (2014) is based on the autobiography of Chris Kyle's combative experiences in the Middle East, and *12 Strong* (2018) tells the story of the first Special Forces team deployed in Afghanistan post 9/11. The historical overtness of these films is part of the reason for their inclusion in this paper. Such films will more likely convince audiences that their portrayals are truthful, and thereby firmly be placed in the conscious memory of the war on terror. Whether these realistic depictions offer confrontation of truths, or act as a "stratagem to avoid confronting the real" will be investigated (Schopp and Hill 21).

Other arguments, besides their realistic nature, can be made for the inclusion of the films in question. The contribution argument validifies the inclusion of the first two, *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) and *American Sniper* (2014). These films have been included as the main focal point in many articles and chapters, including in the mentioned works by McSweeney. This paper thus seeks to add to this literature by interpreting these films in relation to their contexts as well as in relation to each other. The latter analyzed film, *12 Strong* (2018), has not been included as the subject matter in many of such works which is why the lacuna argument seems more fitting here. As this paper analyzes this newer addition to the war on terror narratives, it thus fills out a certain gap in the overall literature that deals with how

films have represented these past events. A comparative argument can be made for the inclusion of all three films, since they all were produced in different years, have different overall themes, and ultimately represent the war on terror in different ways. The six years between *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) and *12 Strong* (2018) also invites an investigation of how representations of the war on terror have changed throughout this period.

The narratives included in this study all pertain to the long-lasting war on terror conflicts in the Middle East – and do not include depictions of previous U.S. engagements in Muslim dominant areas. As mentioned, this study also solely investigates films that have been released after the initial decade following 9/11. McSweeney states "Trauma theorists (…) have long suggested that a certain amount of time is required between when traumatic events occur and when those traumatized by those events can begin to come to terms with their experiences" (2014 p. 16). Considering this belatedness – the amount of time between the release of these films and the 9/11 attacks makes it interesting to research how such newer depictions may/not deviate from war on terror portrayals produced in earlier years. As memory fades, media portrayals gain significance in transmitting cultural trauma from one generation to the next. The selected films play a part in this process of "media and memory" transforming one another (McSweeney 2014 p. 24). Herein McSweeney highlights that in the immediate period following traumatic events, media representations rely heavily on public experiences and recollections – however, as time passes, media sources are left to depict the events with faded public memories, leaving behind newer, contextual images and discourses that ultimately replace initial experiences and recollections.

Another limitation to this study pertains to the exclusion of non-Hollywood cinema. Depictions of the 9/11 attacks and the subsequent war on terror have been produced by several countries worldwide – including Britain's *Eye in the Sky* (2015) or the Kurdish *Turtles Can Fly* (2004). These depictions certainly also have an impact on creating perceptions of the conflicts. However, this study focuses on American culture and perspectives, therefore, focusing exclusively on American cinema will ensure consistency with the investigations generic and ideological approaches to the films in question. Even with these selections in place, the selected films only represent a small sample of a much larger corpus. As will be argued later, the history film offers certain elements to those who seek a better understanding of the past. However, these films must be approached as a single piece to the puzzle. Pictures, news, documentaries, Hollywood productions, and docu-dramas are

just some of the mediums that add to a historical visual discourse that, together with written and oral forms, work in concert to shape historical consciousness.

War on Terror

On September 11, 2001, terrorists hijacked four American planes and crashed them into the pentagon and World Trade Center. The tragedy took the lives of 2977 people and plunged America into a conflict that would have a profound impact on the nations involved as well as their imaginary. Just 9 days after the attack, President George W. Bush announced an inauguration of a war against al-Qaeda, to which he used the phrase "war on terrorism" (Holloway 5). This henceforth became known as the unofficial title for the government's initiatives to prevent such terrorist organizations from launching any further attacks against America. In October, with the assistance of NATO participants, the United States invaded Afghanistan with the intention of capturing al-Qaeda leader, Osama bin Laden, who was believed to be hiding with the help of the Taliban government (Holloway 5). While starting as a hunt for the people responsible for 9/11, congress had granted Bush the right to use war powers to fight any and all state-sponsored terrorist organizations across the world. This initiated a "working with willing and able states, enabling weak states, persuading reluctant states, and compelling unwilling states" to join the American anti-terrorism effort (Botja 3). Over the course of 2002, the Bush administration had proclaimed that Saddam Hussein was involved with the 9/11 attacks, as well as he possessed weapons of mass destruction, and was therefore an immediate threat to the nation's national security. However, these claims were based on falsity, and when on February 15, 2003, the United States had announced an invasion of Iraq on these pretenses, millions of people across the globe took to the streets in protest – marking the "largest protest event in human history" (Tarrow 13).

In later years, when no weapons of mass destruction were discovered, support for the war on terror faded and the Bush administration became even more susceptible to scrutiny. The most detrimental contention was that the presidential administration had lied to the American people about Iraq's 9/11 involvement and their possession of nuclear weapons to justify "a war that many contemporaries described as an exercise in imperialism" (Holloway 6). The war in Iraq continued until December 2011, where the U.S. formally withdrew soldiers under the Obama administration. Obama also refrained from using the phrase "war on terror" during his presidency, as did President Trump, despite facilitating

foreign policies that directly addressed many of the same objectives established by Bush (Landler 1).

The first decade of the war on terror became a sort of oscillation between support and critique – between wanting to rid the world of terrorism and realizing the effort to accomplish this may become too exhausting, between safety and humanitarianism, and ultimately between right and wrong. These conflicting ideas and opinions regarding the aftermath of 9/11 came to be reverberated through mass media and popular culture. Holloway states, "From the very beginning, '9/11' and the 'war on terror' were so appropriated by storytelling and mythmaking that the events themselves became more or less indivisible from their representations" (5). The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq came to dominate media coverage in 9/11's subsequent decade, providing images and stories that served as source material for contemporary war on terror films.

Media's spread

Immediately after the first plane hit the World Trade Center, TV networks ceased their scheduled programming and instead showcased reports and images of the urgent crisis. Commercial free coverage continued for four days straight – providing the images and reports that came to serve as foundation for the bulk of representational narratives that would follow in the ensuing years (Chermak 53). On the 25th of September, President Bush stated "Make no mistake about it: This is good versus evil. These are evildoers. They have no justifications for their actions. There's no religious justification, there's no political justification. The only motivation is evil" (Schopp and Hill 18). In the immediate period following the 9/11 attacks, these words, along with many others of the like, expressed by politicians, reporters, pundits and journalists, facilitated a discourse that came to define concepts of "good" and "evil" in absolute terms – whereas "the enemy" was stripped of any moral complexities and came to stand as "the antithesis to all that Americans and their friends hold dear" (Schopp and Hill 16). The crisis was a blow to the national imaginary, and in attempt to heal, the Bush administration and media took part in a kind of mythmaking process. It did not take long for American culture to seize upon this tragedy and restructure and commodify it – as seen by the multiple films, texts, and tv-programs released in the ensuing years. Bjerre argues these narratives emphasized the familiar myth of American triumphalism (2012 p. 242). Schopp and Hill also state that the 9/11 attacks ""exposed our national and cultural vulnerability to which we responded by asserting our "U.S. leadership", which seeks to affirm power and supremacy"" (15). This reaction, which Schopp and Hill

highlight, is exactly what Bjerre has identified in the cultural representations of 9/11 in the immediate years following the tragedy.

The attacks on 9/11 and the subsequent war on terror had an enormous influence on popular culture. Not just within the film medium which this paper seeks to explore, but within literature, television, and music as well. The book industry saw an increase in popularity as people crowded bookstores in search of terrorism literature. Just one year after the tragedy, hundreds of works inspired by the attacks had been published – several of them best-sellers (Quay & Damico 13). The ensuing decade would see a "steady stream of literature about the attacks and the aftermath to such an extent that we now talk of a subgenre 9/11 literature" (Bjerre 2012 p. 140). Birgit Däwes, the author of *Ground Zero Fiction: History, Memory, and Representation in the American 9/11 Novel,* attests to the influence of such literature, and that the "sheer number" of works significantly contributes to the "cultural memory of 9/11" (Däwes 141). Popular texts such as John Updike's *Terrorist* (2006), for instance*,* contributes to a post 9/11 discussion by inflaming readers' differences in opinion and endorsing stereotypical perceptions of the Other (Bjerre 2012 p. 142). Television productions that depicted terrorism in various forms also saw an increase in popularity in the post 9/11 period. Stephen Prince, the author of *Firestorm: American film in the Age of Terrorism*, covers this medium extensively, and identifies multiple types of terrorism TV productions post 9/11. Prince's work testifies to the fact that the Tv medium, through its diverse sources of representation – whether it be tv-programs, serials, or "made-for-television-movies" – similarly contributes to a post 9/11 discourse that can be analyzed, contextualized, and discussed. The same can be said of Hollywood produced films about terrorism – which have also seen their fair share of narratives. However, before delving into this particular terrorism genre, it would be appropriate to elaborate on Hollywood's long-lasting tradition of representing war.

Hollywood and War

In 2001, Hollywood had already established a tendency of representing war. American foreign policies, such as the Roosevelt Corollary and the Monroe Doctrine, facilitated America's participation in numerous international conflicts over the past several decades, prompting several Hollywood narratives that portray war from an American perspective. Bjerre states, "The American war film hails back to the beginning of cinema. As a genre it has been instrumental in shaping Americans' ideas about their nation's history and their role

in it" (2011 p. 223). At the dawn of Hollywood, just prior to U.S. involvement in World War 1, films produced entailed a clear pro-isolationist narrative that coincided with the general mood towards the war at the time. Films such as *Be Neutral* (1914) and *War Brides or Civilization* (1916) reflect these anti-war sentiments. However, after the German sinking of Lusitania, a British ship carrying 128 Americans, films produced depicting the war took a sharp turn from the previous "neutrality" films. These films, which include *The Fall of a Nation* (1916) and *Bullets and Brown Eyes* (1916), depict Germans as killers and rapists and thus showcases a shift in mentality towards possible American involvement in the war (Westwell 77).

Before, during, and after World War 2, an extensive body of films had been – and continues to be – produced. The majority of these pictures reinforce ideas of "the greatest generation" and "a just war" – pertaining to the World War 2 generation of American heroes who justifiably intervened in the war to save Europe from the evil and devastation of Naziism. During the conflict, more than 250 films were released (Koppes 10), including works such as *Why We Fight* (1942-1945) which, according to an analysis in *Visual History*, clearly aimed at motivating support and participation in the ongoing conflict (Magnussen 227). World War 2 has become, in part thanks to Hollywood, "a rich vein of past moral certainties that the United States mines at moments of its greatest moral uncertainty" (Weber 29). Perhaps the greatest example of such film would be Spielberg's much praised *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), which wholeheartedly takes up the American perspective in a triumphalist narrative that serves to recollect and honor this "greatest generation" by transforming the American soldier to a victim-hero (Tanine 51). The continuation of Hollywood produced World War 2 depictions, which are still generated for contemporary audiences – exemplified by works such as Gibson's *Hacksaw Ridge* (2016) – continues in this vein which testifies to Weber's point.

The Vietnam War was, similarly, not one that was excluded by Hollywood. However, John Wayne's *The Green Berets* (1968) was among the only few that were produced during the conflict. This film sought to act in similar fashion to *Why We Fight*, and inspire patriotic, pro-war sentiments with the polarized American population (Carvalho 955). Several waves of Hollywood productions on the Vietnam War were shortly to follow after the final American troops had been pulled out. Works such as *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Apocalypse Now* (1979) showcased the jungle as chaotic, surreal, and traumatizing. These depictions partook in contextual discussions revolving PTSD and the reception of returning

veterans – many of whom were labelled as "babykillers" ensuing the exposure of the Mai Lai massacre. In "War Hurts: Vietnam Movies and the Memory of a Lost War", Benjamin de Carvalho argues that the Vietnam War film had a remarkable impact on reshaping the collective recollection of the war, where the returning veteran was no longer perceived as a "pariah, a baby killer, but as the hero of a war that had been lost" (952). In later years, during the "Reaganism" era, new depictions of the Vietnam War emerged – such as *Rambo: Part 2* (1985) and *Missing in Action* (1985), this time acting as complete reworkings of the war which presented not just opportunity for victory in Vietnam, but also for a remasculinization of America (954).

When discussing the history of the Hollywood war film, it becomes clear that each work is not only reflective of contextual cultures, politics, and attitudes, but can also take an active stance in the discussions of the complexities inherently embedded in the act of war. The history of the war film also presents relevant field of study for this project, because, as Bjerre argues, war on terror films also borrow from previously established war film conventions and narratives (2011 p. 223). McSweeney quotes director Oliver Stone's words "There's a freedom, I think, that we got from the folks who made the films about Vietnam. We started learning from that, and we're standing on their shoulders" (2017 p. 6). While Vietnam films continue to be produced, the initial wave of war films set in Vietnam have had a considerable impact on combat films set in Afghanistan and Iraq (McSweeney 2017 p. 9). There is a distinction to be made here, as Bjerre mentions, – one between historical memory and genre memory, where "The authenticity of the one generates an ontological authority for the other" (2011 p. 225). Depictions of war on-screen become authentic because the vast majority of the audience has no knowledge or experience with war besides what they get through cinema – where most cinematic takes on war follow certain war-genre conventions to achieve this authenticity. When historic wars are depicted, this authenticity transcends into the realm of history and grants historic authority to the films depicting the wars. Through film, audiences have learned what wars are supposed to look like, therefore, when they see a historic war depicted in film – if it follows the conventional elements – they grant it historical authority. Ultimately 9/11 and the war on terror is a "representation of events, a rhetorical construction, a series of stories about 9/11 and about America's place in the world" (Holloway 5). This project adds to the war on terror cinema literature by analyzing films produced in the second decade post 9/11. This paper examines whether these already established genre conventions from previous wars are still prevalent in more modern

depictions of the war on terror, and investigates which discussions they partake, as well as which functions they carry, in a global society that may still be struggling to come to terms with the conflicts in the Middle East.

Hollywood and the War on Terror: Love at Second Sight

Washington has historically been convinced of Hollywood's ability to mold public opinion. Therefore, as early as November of 2001, Karl Rove, advisor to the Bush administration, held a summit for Hollywood representatives to discuss how the film industry could contribute to – or market – the war on terror to the American public (Dodds 1621). Even though the literature and television mediums had been quick to capitalize on the national disaster, and despite a longstanding tradition of depicting war, Hollywood cinema remained somewhat silent in the immediate years following 9/11. According to Dixon, this silence could be interpreted as a "patriotic supportive response" (3). Most of the first feature films which depicted the event, such as *World Trade Center* (2006) and *United 93* (2006), "did not dare interrogate it", but focused instead on the tragedy itself rather than on its aftermath (Schopp and Hill 13). Schopp and Hill explain, that immediately following the tragedy, the nation adopted the position that any examination of the attack, or any questioning of the terrorists' motivations for it (that may involve America's own potential in facilitating this motivation), was ultimately deemed as unpatriotic or even un-American (13).

A common refrain, McSweeney states, "by those who witnessed the events, whether first-hand or through the television screen, was, "it's like a movie"" (2017 p. 6). This, he argues, is because destruction of iconic monuments had been a staple in popular cinema long before 9/11. Now, twenty years after the crisis, an abundance of films concerning 9/11 and the subsequent war on terror have been produced – including, but not limited to, several categories such as: mainstream dramas, combat films, documentaries, docu-dramas, and biopics. McSweeney states within only a handful of years after 9/11, American cinema had "seized upon terrorism as a kind of godsend" and had "subsumed one of the greatest traumatic events in the history of the United States into its narratives, re-packaged it and used it in order to sell movie tickets" (2014 p. 21-22). A first wave of war on terror films commenced in 2005, with the release of *American Soldiers: A Day in Iraq*. From 2005 onwards, the film industry had a firm grip on 9/11 and were releasing several films that were steeped in fear, paranoia, and patriotism (McSweeney 2017 p. 12).

Films such as *Syriana* (2005), which tells the story of the CIA's plans to assassinate an Arab prince and financier of an Egyptian terrorist organization, *The Kingdom* (2007), involving American government agents sent to Saudi Arabia to investigate a bombing, and *Body of Lies* (2008) which also revolves around CIA agents trying to catch a terrorist in the Middle East, were released and succeeded in fulfilling America's needs by providing narratives that granted the public their male heroes in entertaining, just-in-time fashion. Robert Redford's *Lions for Lambs* (2007) depicts the lives of two young Army rangers behind enemy lines in Afghanistan and follows suit with these patriotic representations of the war on terror – the same can be said of Haggis' *In the Valley of Elah* (2007). All of these mentioned films, besides *In the Valley of Elah,* which takes on the "returned veteran" tropes, present a move away from earlier, domestic narratives, such as *World Trade Center* (2006) and *United 93* (2006), which focused solely on the tragedy of 9/11. Instead, the espionage/combat films from 2007 to 2008 took on a "fight them over there" narrative. A type of "crusader image" is prevalent in many of these pictures – acting as participation in socio-political discussions regarding the contextual political dimensions of the war on terror (Jones 5).

As the war on terror went on, so did Hollywood keep on producing films that portrayed it. Other films, such as *Redacted (2007), Battle for Haditha (2007),* and *The Hurt Locker (2008)* were also released during a time when major combat operations were still ongoing in the Middle East (McSweeney 2017 p. 6). These films took on a more battlefield-exploring narrative which, similarly to *Apocalypse Now* and *Platoon*, depicted a chaotic, and dirty conflict in foreign lands. For instance, *The Hurt Locker* explores the psychological burdens of a routine anti-explosives team in Iraq. While the vast majority of war on terror films from the late 2000's entailed heroic, patriotic, and victimizing narratives from an American perspective, their inclusion of the consequences of war – such as family/relationship issues, PTSD, mutilation and death, and the struggles with coping with civilian life – lend the wave of films, as a whole, a more ambiguous interpretation of the war on terror. *Redacted* and *Battle for Haditha*, for instance, even center on atrocities committed by American soldiers in the Middle East – furthering this ambiguity.

Depicting an ongoing war poses certain challenges – as it can be subject to critique from both left- and right-wing viewers. For such a narrative to be financially successful, it would need to appeal to both pro- and anti-war sentiments. Bjerre mentions that ""making a film about a current, controversial, and unpopular war is an exercise in navigating

troubled waters (…) but, if the film offers no political agender other than the always safe "support the troops" discourse, then it can stay clear of political attacks from both sides"" (2011 p. 228). However, as more time passes since the 9/11 tragedy, moviemakers may gain more courage to take a more active political stance when depicting the war on terror. Whether war on terror portrayals in the second subsequent decade after 9/11 follow an apolitical, "support the troops" theme, or whether they serve as reconstructions of the events will be part of this paper's investigation.

A Field of Research: History, Representation, and Perception

In his book, *The Hollywood War Film*, Robert Eberwein articulates the words that have since been reverberated through countless editorials, "The history of war is to a great extent the history of its representation" (3). Therefore, when a new war emerges it enters two distinct systems – the history of war, and the history of war films (Eberwein 5). The latter becomes part of the discourse used to address the former, and as Robert Rosenstone argues, "We need to focus less on the past itself than on the language we use for speaking about the past" (142). George Gerbner's cultivation theory has long been established as a valid concept for investigating how people's perceptions of reality are formed and altered by mediated versions of the same. What people witness through the screen is part of the experiences that shape their worldviews. This holds true for the mediated versions of people, places, cultures, things – and certainly also for portrayals of history and war. McSweeney states "Popular film is not a shallow frivolity but rather an expressive socio-political artefact and a very influential part of the way meanings are generated by society at large" (2017 p. 2). In his book, *The War on Terror and American Film: 9/11 Frames Per Second,* he argues that cinema is the most potent cultural artefact – and that nowhere else can be found a more meaningful and convincing cultural "barometer" (9). How society comes to understand war is not only expressed by, but also shaped by Hollywood productions. It is the historian's challenge to comprehend these artefacts and develop ways to make these pictures enhance the collective memory (Rosenstone, Rodnitzky & Francaviglia 1).

        Tholas argues that "Younger generations learn about war entirely via mass media and are seldom taught the skills to analyze those sources critically, leading to distorted views of combat and the realities of war" (1). For the vast majority of people, the film medium becomes the only way in which they can experience war. The war on terror has had an atmosphere of censorship, which has resulted in several directors explicitly stating their

films should be seen as spurs of truth (Bjerre 2011 p. 226). While many deem film as inadequate in regard to their usefulness for interpreting the past, McSweeney states they are "far from disposable" and that the medium has emerged as "the locus for America's negotiation of September 11 and its aftermath" (2017 p. 5). As established previously, World War 2 and the Vietnam War have been shaped by the films produced about them. This also holds true for the depictions of the conflicts in the Middle East – which became a "war of representation" in the new millennium (McSweeney 2017 p. 8). Therefore, the film medium is placed firmly in the historian's arsenal for investigating how perceptions of 9/11 and the subsequent war on terror have been shaped, as well as how – now twenty years later – these events have come to be remembered (McSweeney 2017 p. 8).

   The film industry has long established an oversimplified, easy-to-digest archetype concerning warfare – one that facilitates binary oppositions of right-wrong, good-evil. In his other essential contribution to the field, *American Cinema in the Shadow of 9/11*, McSweeney defines the post 9/11 film to be one that reverberates with the decade (2014 p. 132). This wide definition is validated through his analyses, which include a plethora of film genres including combat films, superhero films, historical films, alien films, zombie films and other apocalyptic depictions. The notion of allegory dominates McSweeney's approach to 9/11 and war on terror filmic depictions, "allegorical texts have often had more freedom to engage politically with the eras in which they were made" (2017 p. 6). McSweeney also focuses mostly on films made in the subsequent decade after 9/11, which may explain why he chooses to emphasize such "allegory-lite" narratives – as it was not before *World Trade Center* (2006) that Hollywood chose to directly treat the 9/11 attacks and the war on terror (Holloway 86). McSweeney recognizes this "failure of American cinema to adequately confront the war on terror", but also addresses that this displacement into allegory "proves able to function as a site of sustained and interrogative discourse" (2014 p. 20). This paper deviates from this displacement into allegory and argues that, in later years, Hollywood has been able to approach the controversial topics of the war on terror trough explicit depictions. It also argues that audience perceptions of war are more likely impacted by experiencing depictions that avoid forcing viewers to "work contemporary political parallels" into such films (Dodds 1625). McSweeney does not diverge completely from more overt depictions of the war on terror, however, as he states that a "master narrative" emerged as the years progressed – one where both explicit and allegorical depictions of the war on terror facilitated a hegemonic narrative despite appearing to be ideologically neutral dramatizations:

> Whether they portray a family worrying about the fate of their loved ones at ground zero, a young boy grieving over the loss of his father or an American soldier just trying to do his job and make a difference to the people of Iraq, they reproduce an uncritical and unreflective narrative of American victimization, a pronounced disconnection from the complexities of the geopolitical arena, and, in some cases, even an elaborate erasure of political and historical context (2017 p. 11)

Subjective narratives of victimization and quasi-mythological approaches have dictated the majority of war on terror films, and American cinema has thus constructed a post 9/11 fantasy "dominated by conservative political paradigms" (29), which works to "reaffirm the power and moral authority of the United States in the national imaginary" (206). McSweeney investigates this problematic relationship between trauma and cinema and argues that films either erase the 9/11 imagery (but allude to it) through vague or fanciful depictions – or return to it overtly to re-enshrine its iconography for political or ideological gains or for the purpose of justifying the ongoing war on terror (Wright 609).

Thomas Ærvold Bjerre agrees with most of the arguments McSweeney makes through his contributions. He argues that the overshadowing narrative – both in the immediate period following 9/11 and in much later years – is the heroic one, which emphasizes patriotism and self-sacrifice by placing an American, male hero at its center (Bjerre 2012 p. 9). According to Susan Faludi, this myth-making process expediated a reversion to the 1950's extreme conservatism, complete with household women and men shaped by the heroic image of John Wayne (Bjerre 2012 p. 10). After the collapse of the World Trade Center, an immediate search for heroes commenced: President Bush was labelled as "the lone ranger" by Time Magazine and as "the dragon slayer" by Newsweek – and even compared to Superman in the Wall Street Journal (Bjerre 2012 p. 12). New York mayor, Rudolf Giuliana, was named "Person of the Year" by Time Magazine, and the flight 93 passengers and firefighters at Ground Zero were similarly praised as heroic (Faludi 47). Thus, as Bjerre states, "masculinity was back in vogue in the aftermath of 9/11. The male hero was again a prevailing cultural icon" (2012 p. 242). It didn't take long for this mediated triumphant, masculine narrative to spread into the realm of popular culture. Schopp and Hill state that ""Film emerged as a medium in which "commonsense" ideas about global politics and history are (re)-produced and where stories about what is acceptable behavior from states and individuals are naturalized and legitimated"" (2). Popular culture can function to reaffirm certain "fixed ideas" that bolster the national imaginary. This paper investigates whether

these newer films mimic the reactionary, heroic and patriotic responses of the ones produced in the first decade following 9/11 – or whether they are able to provide a basis for reconceiving American culture and its responses to crisis (Schopp and Hill 16).

Bjerre also argues, however, that "while many artistic reactions of 9/11 have facilitated over-simplified, patriotic depictions which lack complexities, a few authors and Hollywood films have tackled the subject in more explorative and critical ways" (2012 p. 10). In his work, "Authenticity and war junkies: Making the Iraq War real in films and TV series"*,* he makes a different kind of argument. Herein he asserts that some filmic depictions of the war in Iraq deviate from the kind of mythic Hollywood stories that have dominated the World War 2 narrative, as well as from the disillusioned images seen in Vietnam pictures. Instead, "authentic" films about the war in Iraq in the years following 9/11 frequently presented American soldiers as "war junkies" (Bjerre 2011 p. 223). These portrayals, Bjerre argues, serve as deconstructions of the previously established saint-like image of the American soldier (2011 p. 229). While such films do not provide any answers to the complexities surrounding the war on terror, their depictions represent a refusal to accept the normative, over-simplified, male-hero narratives (Bjerre 2012 p. 14). Similar observations can be made in certain post 9/11 literature. In "Post-9/11 Literary Masculinities in Kalfus, DeLillo, and Hamid"*,* Bjerre asserts that these three novelists debunk the romanticized male hero "by presenting male protagonists who constantly fail to live up to the impossible standards expected by a wounded society that has retreated into the safety of a nostalgic past" (2012 p. 241). He stresses, however, that the majority of narratives post 9/11, in both film and literature, exhibit a simplistic and jingoistic patriotism which attempts to reinvent notions of masculinity in response to the de-masculinization of American – which has been symbolically interpreted in accordance with the collapse of the World Trade Center (Bjerre 2012 p. 242). Whether mythologizing the iconic male hero, or deconstructing him, one observation is certain – it is the male perspectives that have been on the agenda in the post 9/11 period. Whether such established tendencies pervade in more recent filmic depictions becomes a key determinant within this papers analysis. Do the selected films on the war on terror contribute to a victimization, or a masculine mythologization? Or do they act as counter-narratives, where men are seen as incapable of living up to their heroic standards?

A Case for the History Film

Throughout the last 30 years, Robert Rosenstone has been a frontrunner for the field of study dedicated to investigating the relationship between history and cinema. He argues that the history film is one that attempts to "recreate the past" and states, "to leave history films out of the discussion of the meaning of the past is to ignore a major means of understanding historical events" (2017 p. 1). While the past may be comprised of fixed events, people, and things, our conception of it is subject to change through various forms of historical representation – such as history films. This is not to exclude written history by any means, but rather an attempt to see the film medium as an *alternative* – or simply a different kind of language which, in its own way, may also make the past meaningful to us in the present (Rosenstone 2004 p. 149). Film simply "adds to the language in which the past can speak" (2017 p. 5). Nils Arne Sørensen highlights that this medium plays a much more important role in conveying history to non-historians (322). Both scholars highlight in their works, that if history is to be represented on screen, it must unquestionably surrender to the conventions of the medium. Rosenstone argues against the critics who would have film leave the past alone: "rather than assuming that the world on film should somehow adhere to the standards of written history, why not let it create its own standards, appropriate to possibilities and practices of the medium" (2017 p. 27). He also asserts that the history film, just like words on the page, must go through processes of selection and rule adherence when being produced. Both filmmakers and authors must make artistic decisions that involve: casting characters into stories that take place during certain eras; which incidents are to be examined thoroughly and which are not; and which inventions should take place to evoke historical "truths" (Rosenstone, Rodnitzky, & Francaviglia 6). Films act not as mirrors reflecting past realities, but as constructions that adhere to a different set of rules for producing history. Therefore, it is paramount that these two mediums be judged by different criteria:

> The point is that if film does history, it does it in a far different way from that in which we historians work. The codes, the conventions, the practices of representation are (obviously) far different from that of the written text. A film is not a book, folks, but it can still carry a great deal of historical consciousness, meaning, and argument (Rosenstone 2017 p. 7)

Herein lies Rosenstone's specificity argument – films must not be assessed as inadequate substitutes for written history, but as a potent form of historical representation "in its own

right" (Rosenstone 2007 p. 5). These arguments shed light on the validity of analyzing film as means for seeking a better understanding of the past.

The film medium possesses certain strengths that are absent from written history – as it takes up the task of adding movement, sound, color, and emotion to the past (Rosenstone 2017 p. 33). Understanding the past means more than just being able to recollect facts or data – it means being able to use these traces to convey meaning in the present. Narrative, Rosenstone affirms, is "the most common device for doing so" (2017 p. 138). Through storytelling, certain elements, besides just traces of facts and data, arise that give greater meaning to the past – which is exactly what the history film seeks to do. According to Rosenstone, the strength of the history film lies within its narrative – as it possesses the capability of telling audiences who they are, where they have been and where they may be going. The narrative thrills, inspires, consoles, and excites – invites self-reflection, connection to others, and offers glimpses into the world and our own lives through a multitude of perspectives (Rosenstone 2017 p. 162). With so much to offer, the film medium should motivate historians to accept different ways in which historic experiences are conveyed and discussed. The next section delves further into these conventions and how one may add the history film to their arsenal of historical sources.

Conventions, Inventions, and Truth

While the history film may contribute, through different means, to an understanding of the past, it is important that these sources are approached appropriately. It is vital to establish a distinction between truth and authenticity. A dramatic film will never be accurate, no matter the time, effort, or money dedicated to making it so. Analysts should be weary, therefore, of succumbing too much to the reality conveyed in film, as the medium does not show, but rather "speculates on how the past was experienced" (Rosenstone 2017 p. 23). A history film should not be deemed as an authentic representation of the past, but rather as an interpretation of past events. However real a history film may seem, it "is no more than an evocation of the past and a commentary on the topic evoked" (2017 p. 60). Therefore, historians should see these texts in the overall sense of the past they suggest – and the images they provide as invitations to ponder the past.

In similar vein to written history, the film medium cannot provide literal truths – but it can provide metaphoric truths that function as "commentary on, and challenge to, traditional historical discourse" (Rosenstone 2004 p. 7). The images and dialogues that

comprise films and their narratives may not be authentic, but they have the capability to evoke thought, even emotions, that invite historical reflection. These different perspectives on truth allude to the fact that films always indulge in construction and fabrication – a necessary and valuable aspect of the medium (Rosenstone 2017 p. 25). Time constraints and the camera's attention to detail give cause to these inventions – inventions which can indicate how filmmakers chose to interpret the past they are conveying.

   Strategies for making history fit the medium include such things as condensation, where multiple events and/or characters are forged together; displacements, where events are moved around in time; alterations, where characters act or express certain things that are attributed other historical figures (or no one); and dialogue, which enables an understanding of characters' motivations, conditions, and relationships (Rosenstone 2017 p. 35). Even the characters themselves become inventions, as their movements and gestures are part of impersonations. Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012) is a useful text for demonstrating these strategies. The film depicts the CIA's 10-year search for bin Laden and utilizes a great deal of condensation to fit an entire decade into a 2-hour film. While the film seeks to stay true to an original timeline, and therefore avoids any major displacements, the protagonist, Maya, is also a condensation of the several CIA members who worked tirelessly through several year to find bin Laden. Maya is thus an invention, and through her dialogue audiences are granted insight into her motivations for finding the villain behind the 9/11 attacks: "Many of my friends have died for this" (Bigelow). While this motivation may not be historically authentic (since Maya is an invention), it can still function as a truthful metaphoric depiction of America's attitudes towards finding bin Laden.

   Rosenstone argues that these inventions are not weaknesses of the history film, "but a major part of its strength" (2017 p. 34). They are an inherent part of the conventions of the genre and come to play an important part in how depicted events come to be remembered. As Classen states, "historical authentication is not necessary in order to create evidence (…) As a medium able to explain the world, cinema ideally delivers the images for the mythical narratives that give present meaning to the past" (101). This "evidence" is created and recreated in a dynamic process of conveying different truths. All human truths are partial and provisional – therefore, stories can emerge as sensible propositions of our past. The films analyzed in this paper are thus not approached as accurate depictions of the war on terror, but rather as contextual interpretations – interpretations that act as commentary and take part in discussions regarding the topics they evoke.

The Text: Depictions and Categorizations

Rosenstone outlines a relevant taxonomy for analyzing historical films. While also distinguishing between historic film genres (such as the Hollywood drama, the biopic, the documentary) and the conventional elements these usually entail, his most important distinction is that between the mainstream/standard fiction film and the oppositional/innovative film (Rosenstone 2017 p. 40). The mainstream drama focuses on fictional or documented (or both) individuals at the center of a historical process. The depicted history is thus granted flesh and blood and is experienced by audiences through their relationship with these few characters who come to represent a much larger process. This emphasizes that the war on terror, although involving millions of people, spanning more than twenty years, may come to be represented by only a few characters. The mainstream drama is also defined as having a beginning, middle, and end, which leaves audiences with "a moral message and (usually) a feeling of uplift. A tale embedded in a larger view of history that is almost always progressive" (Rosenstone 2017 p. 41). The mainstream history film offers a story that conveys the past as closed and completed – where no alternatives to what is seen on screen are given consideration. This type of film also prioritizes personalized, dramatized, and emotional stories that subdue any kind of objective analysis. All the technological elements of the medium work in tandem to create this emotional experience.

The mainstream historical drama also exhibits a "look of the past" (Rosenstone 2017 p. 42). By this, Rosenstone refers to the immense amount of detail they provide in presenting audiences with everything from buildings and landscapes to clothing, and tools of the past. This profound amount of detail is what revitalizes the past through the medium, and what also, in some cases, makes it more valuable than the words on the page. War on terror films are, however, not just interpretations of an American past, but also of the Middle East. Therefore, these "details", whether they be landscape, costumes, or weapons, also play an important role in facilitating an orientalist discourse. This topic, and how each film in this paper's corpus contributes to such discourse, will be elaborated during the oral exam.

The oppositional history film takes on a more loose-fitting category. While we may designate the mainstream film as "Hollywood", the oppositional seeks to counter the images, messages, codes, conventions, and procedures expressed by the mainstream. They are "consciously created to contest the seamless stories of heroes and victims that make up the mainstream feature" (Rosenstone 2017 p. 45). Filmmakers who create such works are often characterized as "leftist" who find the stories and practice of Hollywood productions to

be infused with individualist, capitalist ideals. However, as Rosenstone mentions, they are also a part of a "search for new vocabulary in which to render the past on screen" (2017 p. 17). While Rosenstone discusses other categorizations, the mainstream and oppositional are the most valuable for this study. This study examines the selected films in relation to these established categorizations and interprets how the genre conventions imposed by each category influences how depictions of the war on terror are constructed. While these categorizations are useful for analyzing history films, they are not quite adequate for this study.

In a book review of *History on Film/Film on History*, Westwell argues that Rosenstone tends to disregard certain determining factors, such as the influence that different contexts (cultural, conventional, or societal) have on giving shape to the films (587). For at study which seeks to place the selected war on terror depictions in their respective contexts to provide insight to their individual functions/performativity, Rosenstone's provided methodology alone proves somewhat limiting. Therefore, other scholars who provide other methodological considerations are also included. Rosenstone verifies the validity of utilizing history films for historic research and provides a useful taxonomy that allows the analyst to navigate between such works. He also establishes common tendencies within the mainstream drama, as well as considers different strategies filmmakers employ to mold history to fit the film medium. This allows the analyst to not only inspect which historical truths come to light, but also how these versions of the past are shaped through the medium's conventions.

The Context: Discursive and Sociohistorical

Other scholars, such as Quentin Skinner, place stronger emphasis on the contextual aspects of the examined texts. In his work, *Meaning and Context*: *Quentin Skinner & his Critics*, Tully presents Skinner's critique of the orthodoxy approaches to textual analysis. These approaches include 1) a close reading of the text, where all historical answers can be found, implicitly or explicitly, within the text itself, and 2) a contextual investigation of the work, where assumptions are that current cultural, social, or political environments come to shape the text in focus (31). Skinner states

> (…) neither approach seems a sufficient or even appropriate means of achieving a proper understanding of any given literary or philosophical work. Both methodologies, it can be shown, commit philosophical mistakes in the assumptions they make about the conditions necessary for the understanding of utterances (31)

If the analyst only addresses the text, s/he "runs the risk of losing sight of the cultural landscape that the text in question exists within, and one would therefore not be able to identify the full range of the text's communicative potential" (Jensen 24). In relation to this study, this argument suggests that to unearth their historical identity, the analyzed films must be investigated through an examination of what they were doing at the time of their release. McSweeney supports this kind of methodological approach, and states "national cinemas are frequently able to function as a materialization of ideological currents and are particularly revealing of the political and social climate in which the films are made" (2014 p. 14). While McSweeney mentions the political and social climate, there are other contextual perspectives which may prove beneficial. In his article, "Textual Agency: Quentin Skinner and Popular Media", Jensen emphasizes several of these perspectives – two of which are relevant for this study – the discursive and the sociohistorical (25).

The discursive context involves placing the text in focus in relation to other texts that deal with the same topics. Rosenstone also states "it is difficult to evaluate a historical film unless you understand the larger discourse out of which it arises" (2017 p. 119). This would entail placing each war on terror film in relation to other of such films produced in the same period. This way, the analyst can discover how a text engages with the representations seen in other texts – utilizing its depictions as means to express agreement or critique of current discourse related to the topic. While the literary genre includes a plethora of works that deal with 9/11 and its aftermath, this study solely places the analyzed films in relation to other texts of the same medium. This is a limitation of the study – but one that is necessary since textual works would have to be approached differently than films, as Rosenstone so emphatically argues. However, war on terror films are, less specifically, also war films. Therefore, genre conventions of such films are also brought into play so the selected texts can be analyzed in accordance with these. As previously mentioned, scholars have hinted at war on terror films exhibiting previously established war film conventions as inspired by World War 2 and Vietnam War films. This genre approach, however, "has shown that generic conventions evolve over time as the preoccupations of filmmakers and audiences change" (Rosenstone, Rodnitzky, & Francaviglia 4). In this light, it becomes relevant to examine whether the selected war on terror films exhibit previously established war film conventions, or if they present new ones which may impact audience perceptions of America's conflicts in the Middle East.

The sociohistorical context involves placing each text within their respective social and historical circumstances. Since texts, such as the films in question, are capable of partaking in contextual discussions – an awareness of said discussions becomes vital. Whether taking a political stance, expressing attitudes towards relevant societal issues, or engaging in cultural discussions, the selected war on terror films must be placed within this social context to discover their individual and/or collective performativity. The "Skinnerian" method argues that texts carry certain functions – they *do* – and the only way to excavate such functions is by examining contextual components that can be construed as questions, to which the texts provide answers (Jensen 24). What characterizes the contextual society and how do the selected films support or critique these societal, political, or cultural debates? How does each film's agency contribute to historical perceptions of 9/11 and the war on terror? Historians who work with texts that have philosophical and/or ideological value should always be aware of the text itself and its relationship with its context. Skinner's critique asserts that both a close reading and a contextual analysis are crucial for fulfilling this task.

Performativity: Dialogue and Agency

The methods outlined by Skinner's critique prevents that reductionist approach that would recognize texts as "passive" in our culture (Jensen 22). The word *performativity* facilitates the more active and engaged role of texts – and this study approaches them as such. McSweeney coincides "films do much more than reflect the cultures in which they are made; they instigate a dialogical relationship with them and even influence the public's perception of the events they portray" (2014 p. 22). This dialogical relationship is what the texts *do*. "Intention" becomes a key term when trying to decipher what the moviemakers have wished to accomplish with their films. Skinner states "the essential question which we therefore confront, in studying a given text, is what its author, in writing at the time he did write for the audience he intended to address, could in practice have been intending to communicate by the utterance of this given utterance" (Meaning & Context 63). An analysis of intention is a difficult one to carry out. Not only is there, usually, a lack of sources that can allude to these intentions – but the images displayed on screen also represent the result of a process that has involved a multitude of different people and different interests (Sørensen 328). There is also the consideration that different viewers of these films will inevitably read and interpret their messages in different ways. Skinner's approach, however, distinguishes between an intention

that is inaccessible to us, and one that can be found through a decoding and inspection of the text itself in relation to its context.

Forgetting is also an action that can be done by texts such as the films in question. Sometimes historians can get preoccupied with what the texts include – and forget what they may leave out. McSweeney reminds us, "just as significant as those events and perspectives that are selected for cultural memorialization are those that are ignored and even erased from the framework of collective memories" (2014 p. 26). This is a relevant point for this study, since the depictions of the war on terror may participate in and take stance in relation to contextual discussions by choosing to omit certain aspects of the war in their portrayals. In what way does American cinema, in the war on terror period, contribute to historical dismemberment and thereby, perhaps facilitate certain mythologies?

Nils Arne Sørensen distinguishes between certain, although not exclusive, functions that the history film may embody. Traces of such functions are not just found in the narratives depicted, but also in the implicit elements of the texts. Herein, Sørensen states, can the cautious historian "gather knowledge concerning behavior, norms and mentalities" (325). This, then, encourages an examination of non-narrative elements contained within the selected texts, as they may provide further information that can identify the socio-cultural discussion these texts reflect and partake in. One of these functions pertains to the history film as a history-conveyer. When a film functions as such it invites interventions and discussions revolving around the accuracy and authenticity of the portrayals. For this, historians get to do what they have done for at least 60 years – to establish their roles as experts who can compare these depictions to "what really happened" (339). This type of function is, however, less relevant for a study which seeks to interpret which contextual discussions war on terror narratives partake in, and how these shape the collective memories of the war. A film may also function as a contextual report. In this regard, the historian does not inspect the historical images conveyed, but rather the film itself as a mirror that reflects contextual cultural, social, or political components or even dominant conventions of the genre (342).

When a film seeks to influence or create history, it can be construed as a historical agent (Sørensen 337). An overt example of such film could be the previously mentioned *The Green Berets* (1968), where John Wayne sought to establish a patriotic sentiment with the American public that was to affirm their intervention in Vietnam, increase

overall support for the war, and even influence its outcome (329). This text represents a film that attempts to affect history itself. Other such examples include the mentioned *Why We Fight* (1942-45), and even Michael Moor's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), a controversial documentary which depicted 9/11 and the possible reasons for it in an attempt to persuade the American public not to vote for the reelection of President Bush in his 2004 presidential campaign against democrat John Kerry (Rosenstone, Rodnitzky, & Francaviglia 5). These examples demonstrate historical agentic films with clear-cut ambitions. Films can, however, also be agentic in more covert ways. The film medium has, in a host of different ways, helped shape everyday lives and attitudes of contemporary people. In relation to this study, agency also pertains to the films' conscious or unconscious effort to reconstruct the past. Portrayals of the war on terror embody agency since they attempt to promote distinguishable versions of history. As Rosenstone asserts, the term "history film" relates to films that possess this agency – and try to "re-create the past" (2017 p. 2). The films in question are not just an assortment of right and wrong historical claims, but dynamic cultural artefacts which argue and interpret the history they describe.

While a history film may embody all functions, it is important to note, that each function requires a different set of analytical approaches. In relation to this study, film as historical agent and as contextual report become the predominant areas of investigation. There is, however, also a great deal of overlap between these functions. While the primary goal is to interpret the selected films' agentic nature, or their performativity, a contextual report is also necessary to establish what the texts act on at the time of their production. The partaking in contextual socio-cultural discussions is part of the text's agency, and a contextual report is necessary to comprehend the "questions that seemed pressing at the time" (Jensen 23). Recent films about the war on terror generate meaning in relation to the ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan – as well as to the global battle against terrorism. The narratives analyzed in this study may provide answers to contextual discussion in relation to: whether American interventions in foreign countries is justified; perceptions of the American soldier; perceptions of Middle Eastern culture; perceptions of war and which side we should take; is America still grieving long after the 9/11 tragedy; are these grievances reflected in complex ways or through simplistic mythologies? If one does not know the contextual questions, one can not hope to fathom the answers within the texts. From a historical standpoint, this means "we must situate it within the larger discourse of history, that ongoing and huge body of data and debates about the causes, course, and consequences" (Rosenstone

2017 p. 47). Each analyzed war on terror film relates to, reflects, comments upon, critiques and debates the already existing arguments and historical conceptions of the war on terror and the topics it evokes (Rosenstone 2017 p. 35). McSweeney finalizes "whether they are reifications of the ideological myths underpinning the identity of the United States or deconstructions of them, each, without a doubt, are the bearers of ideology and our political unconscious, (…) whether their writers and directors intended them to be or not" (2014 p. 22). The films in question all possess ideological value and/or perspective, but which, and how these are demonstrated through the films' individual depictions is excavated in the following analyses. The following outline will detail the structure of said analyses.

Outline

Now that a relevant theoretical and methodological framework has been established, a practical outline can be constructed for the ensuing analytical sections. As mentioned, three films depicting the war on terror from after the first decade post 9/11 will be analyzed individually. These analytical sections entail different segments as guided by the framework elaborated above. Firstly, an "Expression" section will delve into the images, sounds, dialogues, and other elements of the history film in focus to comprehend the narratives and messages within. Secondly, a "Context" section will explore the discursive and sociohistorical contexts of the produced films. This entails an investigation of the war film genre conventions as well as what other war on terror films produced in/around the same period have depicted. This section also establishes certain societal, political and/or cultural contextual elements that evoke discussions on certain ideological themes, issues, and complexities that shape the circumstantial background of each film. Lastly, a "Performativity" section will place the established depictions within these respective contexts and, thereby, come to terms with the agentic functions each film embodies – involving which discussions they participate in, and which attitudes they reflect on these discussions. It is important to emphasize that while dividing the analysis into these different sections carries with it certain practical advantages, some aspects will inevitably overlap – therefore, each section should not be read rigidly according to the particular focus. Rather, the different sections provide a guide for the reader – allowing for easier navigation through the analytical sections. The analyzed films follow a chronological order, which means the first to be placed beneath the magnifying glass will be Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012).

Zero Dark Thirty (2012)

Expression

Kathryn Bigelow, director of the previously mentioned, Oscar-winning *The Hurt Locker* (2008), directed and produced the five-times Oscar nominee *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012). The film was released by Columbia Pictures in December of 2012, and stars Jessica Chastain as Maya, the ruthless and obsessive CIA agent dedicated to locating Osama bin Laden post 9/11. The film utilizes a great deal of compression to squeeze the decade long hunt for bin Laden into this two-and-a-half-hour thrill ride. The film begins with a black screen and the disturbing telephone voices of the real-life victims trapped inside the twin towers during the terrorist attack – and ends with a depiction of the US Navy SEALS team operation to capture and kill bin Laden in Abbottabad, Pakistan in 2011. By following this storyline, the narrative is granted a beginning, middle, and end – and thus presents the mission for justice post 9/11 as part of a completed past – even though the war on terror was still ongoing in 2012. While the film features characters based on real-life people, and portrays several real-life events throughout the decade, such as the 2005 terrorist bombings in London and the bombing of the Marriot Hotel in Islamabad in 2008, it follows the conventions of both the docudrama as well as the action-thriller (Schlag 178). Schlag states

> So-called docudramas set historical and political events "in scene" and reassemble first-hand accounts of real events with fictional elements. Like a typical Hollywood genre film, ZDT draws on news headlines and actual events between 2001 and 2012. Although it is a fictional thriller with composite characters and invented storylines, there might be no clear-cut line between fact and fiction for viewers (178)

Herein, Schlag pinpoints these dual-genre elements that may make the film troubling to categorize for viewers. Shortly after audiences experience the horror of the authentic telephone voices in the beginning of the film, the black screen is supplemented with the words, "The following motion picture is based on first-hand accounts of actual events" (Bigelow). These elements lend the film a "pseudo-documentary quality" which evoked critique of the film's narrative being presented as truth rather than interpretation (Gilmore 287). Critics claimed that Bigelow and Boal (co-writer) were seeking to claim the power of fact and liberty of fiction simultaneously (Gauthier 88). As researchers of the film are most likely aware of, Bigelow and Boal established a collaboration with the CIA who would, in turn for divulging classified documents for the film, have an influence on some of its depictions. Shaw argues that the CIA most likely agreed to this cooperation because most of

the negative images of the CIA in the film – pertaining to torture and ineffectiveness of the bureau – was already on journalistic record, and this way, the agency could positively shape some of the images (also, finding bin Laden was a huge victory for the CIA) (93). Released just a year after the shooting of bin Laden, the film also gained an air of truth through its narrative singularity – being one of the first attempts at depicting the decade-long search and its result (Gauthier 89).

It is easy, from a historian's perspective, to criticize such a film for its false sense of accuracy. However, when recollecting Rosenstone's chief distinctions of the history film – the mainstream and the innovative – he emphasizes that there aren't major differences between the documentary and the fictional drama. Despite *ZD30*'s attempts to convey its historical authenticity, the film follows a traditional Hollywood storyline and can, therefore, be classified as a mainstream drama per Rosenstone's taxonomy. Gauthier supports this argument and highlights some of the film's main aspects:

> Zero Dark Thirty is about as mainstream as it gets: It is a Columbia/SONY Pictures film made for a budget of forty million dollars, featuring Hollywood stars and an Academy Award-winning director fresh off her historic win. Its narrative is linear, the editing and cinematography are traditional, and it employs a familiar genre, the war film (98)

Despite *ZD30*'s complex relationship with truth, all these elements work in tandem to shape a traditional Hollywood blockbuster. As Rosenstone pinpoints, the mainstream drama prioritizes personalized, dramatized, and emotional stories (15) – and *ZD30* presents such a narrative through its character-driven nature, close following of Maya, and its simplistic, Hollywood-typical protagonist/antagonist structure. Schlag validifies and states that this storyline "reduces the complexities of the GWOT to a simple narrative structure of protagonist/antagonist" (178). This reduction, in which Maya embodies the good-guy protagonist and Ammar/bin Laden represent the antagonist, facilitates unambiguous memories of a war which included several controversial and unclear elements.

Maya comes to represent America's dedication, persistency, and emotional attachment to finding bin Laden in the decade after 9/11. Despite losing friends to Al Qaida hostilities throughout the story (such as her close friend and colleague, Jessica, who dies at the hands of a suicide bomber), coming close to death herself, and suffering major investigatory setbacks, Maya persistently continues her pursuit of justice. As a subordinate CIA agent in a hierarchical, male-dominated agency, Maya is also frequently at odds with her

superiors – presenting another obstacle for her mission. These internal hurdles also represent part of the film's dramatization of the search for bin Laden. While the CIA agency is frequently depicted as being plagued by disagreements and ineffectiveness, Maya is portrayed as the sticking-to-her-guns, beaming and confident light that leads the agency to victory. The loner detective going against the institution is a traditional Hollywood trope and plays well into Rosenstone's assessment of the history film – as audiences do not experience history through the representation of the organizations, but through the depicted characters. As spectators are invited along Maya's journey, multiple close-up shots of her facial expressions ensure that audiences identify with her emotions and passion for finding bin Laden. Despite her own involvement in Enhanced Interrogation Techniques, the film seeks to establish her rightfulness (Gazit 483). Maya's stubbornness and commitment to the task, Hasian states, is a condensation of several men and women "who were involved with the use of EITs between 2002 and 2008, and in many ways her dedication to her job become emblematic of exceptional American willpower and abilities" (2014 p. 472). This condensation exemplifies how the history depicted has been tailored to fit the conventions of the medium (Rosenstone 2017 p. 35).

The use of EITs is most vivid in the initial hour of the film, where Ammar, the captured Al Qaida leader, is being held at an undisclosed "black site" where he is beaten, waterboarded, crammed in a tiny box, and sexually humiliated. Due to the brutality of this interrogation method, and the inclusion of its practice during the war on terror, this paper will henceforth refer to the act as torture. This linguistic choice is made for two reasons: firstly, to remain critical of such acts, and secondly, to remain critical of the heroization of the characters who practice it. Throughout the film, particular aesthetic elements are used to try and convince audiences of the narrative's authenticity – such as, for instance, the use of

handheld cameras and close-ups. The torture scenes contain several of such elements. Herein, the cinematography entails a camera angle which focuses on the tortured Ammar from Dan's (the torturer) perspective – facilitating a participatory element for the viewer. The camera angles and mise-en-scene work in tandem to frame Dan's

Figure 1: Still from Zero Dark Thirty, Bigelow (00:05:08)

upright, masculine body, and violence in contrast with Ammar's discipline, passivity, and brokenness. If audiences ever start to feel sympathy for Ammar, Dan's words serve as reminder to Ammar's maliciousness and participation in the 9/11 attacks: "Your jihad is over" (Bigelow).

Maya refuses an offer to "watch through the monitor" (Bigelow) and thus walks into the torture room, dragging "the spectator right into the action as a passive accessory" (Schlag 181). Through Maya's acceptance of these actions – through her refusal to watch through the monitors, she, and the audience, is made complicit (Höglund 295). As Maya silently condones – and accepts the necessity of these actions, the narrative invites audiences along in doing the same. It is when witnessing this torture that the distinction between fact and fiction is most obscured (Schlag 181). In divulging such images, a main question becomes whether Bigelow was making a statement against torture or justifying its practices "in service of tracking down an enemy of the USA" (Gauthier 93). While claims exist in favor of both interpretations, McSweeney highlights: it includes no characters who are explicitly against the torture of detainees, no evidence of moral reflections on these actions, no mention of the detainees who were killed during such interrogation, no alluding to the torturing of detainees who did not possess any useful information to be extracted (2017 p. 41). These observations support the later interpretation. Schlag mentions, in similar argument, that the film also excludes any signs of psychological consequences of torture for both the performer and receiver. These observations indicate a sweeping-under-the-carpet treatment of real-life consequences of such actions.

Context

Discursive

ZD30's economic success represents a shift in the assumptions about the financial capabilities of war on terror films, as critics had labelled previous portrayals of the conflicts in the Middle East as "box office poison" (McSweeney 2017 p. 61). While *World Trade Center* (2006) and *United 93* (2006) similarly took on a victim role for Americans by only depicting the tragedy of the 9/11 attacks, later films such as *Argo* (2012) and *Act of Valour* (2012) took on a rescue-mission narrative. While these films all take on a more defensive and "protect our own" plot which renders the Americans as victims of terrorist hostilities – *ZD30* takes on a more offensive and "catch the bad guy" narrative. The excessive depictions of torture in the film drive this point home – the Americans are not mere victims, but ruthless agents who are willing to carry out violence to catch the villains. While torture is a controversial subject,

ZD30 is not the first film to include it. Films like *Rendition* (2007), *Traitor* (2008), and *Body of Lies* (2008) are all examples of terrorist narratives that include the act. However, while *ZD30* avoids depicting any kind of PTSD symptoms from it, the torturers in these films all deal with its psychological burdens (McSweeney 2014 p. 41). Höglund mentions that films such as *Rendition* "condemned the practice of torture and the disregard of human and civil rights", while other narratives, such as *Olympus Has Fallen* (2013), justified the practice of corporal discipline committed by western agents simply because it was depicted as a necessary act for saving thousands of lives in ticking-time-bomb scenarios (292). *ZD30* seems to be placed firmly in the middle between these two poles. Höglund furthers, "It is possible that it was once envisaged as a film unambiguously critical of torture" (292). However, the lack of remorse by the agents who partake in the act, and the lack of any psychological consequences for torturing, makes its depictions of torture more complicated than those seen in previous terrorism films.

As mentioned, war on terror filmmakers have learned from previously established war film conventions. Especially successful Vietnam War films, such as *The Deer Hunter* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and *Platoon* (1986), which depicted the American soldiers as victims of chaotic, traumatizing, and surreal war environments – as vividly demonstrated by their evident struggle with PTSD. McSweeney states that the primary function of such films was to "address and alleviate this trauma in order to restore American self-belief and credibility" (2017 p. 61). Films made about the war on terror, such as the ones mentioned, attempted to place themselves within this paradigm of trauma alleviation (ibid.). Arguably, war on terror filmmakers sought to quickly take advantage of these established war film tropes and thus presented the same kind of victimizing narratives – as seen in *Rendition*, *Body of Lies*, *The Hurt Locker* and others. Other depictions, however, such as Brian De Palma's *Redacted* (2007) depicts the devastating rape and murder of a 15-year-old Iraqi girl by American soldiers in Samarra in 2006. This film thus takes on a more self-reflexive, and self-critical approach to the war on terror – much in the same vein as multiple tv-reports and documentaries exposed the American atrocities committed in Mai Lai during the Vietnam War. *Redacted,* however, also failed to find an audience interested in its violent denunciation of these American-committed atrocities. The financial success of *ZD30* (grossed 130 million) in comparison to these other narratives from the 2000's attests to the fact that the American public has been less interested in depictions of war ambiguities, traumas, and self-reflective

films, and more interested in triumphalist narratives – where any deviation from moral exceptionality is credited as necessary for achieving victory.

Sociohistorical

The September attacks in 2001 were deemed as an act of war by the Bush administration – but the same administration would later classify terrorists as "unlawful combatants", which had the effect of placing them outside the protection of the Geneva Convention (Schlag 175). Without any legal procedure, people of multiple nationalities and cultures, who were suspected of abetting terrorist organizations, were placed within this category which served to deny them any legal protection (Gazit 478). Torture as an interrogation method was later authorized by the US government and became a popular procedure in the war on terror. As Schlag puts it, "the CAT (United Nations Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, signed in 1984) may be the first casualty of the GWOT" (175). While the use of this method in the initial stages of the war on terror had mostly escaped public knowledge – such unawareness came to an abrupt cessation with the fallout of the Abu Ghraib photographs in 2004. These photos showed Iraqi prisoners undergoing different states of mental torture and corporal degradation at the hands of American soldiers:

> Handcuffed, hands and feet bound, the detainees are shown with putrid sacs on their heads, faces covered, stacked one on top of the other in a pyramid of flesh, dirt-smeared skin flattened against the filthy floor, testicles bulbously protruding from between clenched thighs—degradation in pixelated chroma (Greer 1)

These pictures contrasted the Iraqi mistreated bodies with the smiling faces of the American GI's. They represent the most extreme violation of morality which questioned American ethics and self-image. Such despicable acts have long fueled public debates within political and academic circles – and it is precisely within these debates which Bigelow's film places itself. Schlag refers to a 2012 poll by the International Committee of the Red Cross, to which 46 percent of respondents in the US answered "yes" to whether torture should be permitted to attain vital information (185). *ZD30* places itself between these polarized statistics and within the "discourse surrounding the ethics of torture and the fallout from the Guantanamo Bay photos" (Gauthier 92). In the period following 9/11, the CIA had also often been criticized for their lackluster results in preventing further terrorist attacks, their illegal kidnaping of terrorist suspects to "black sites", and overall abuse of prisoners of war (Shaw 112). The

agency had also been scrutinized for its imprecise drone attacks, which had led to a "substantial number of civilian deaths and casualties" (Shaw 113). *ZD30* also places itself within this context of CIA depiction by justifying the use of torture, as well as depicting an unparalleled pressure on the agency to find and "bring terrorist enemies to justice" (Shaw 113). This is particularly evident in a scene where Joseph Bradley, superior operative in the CIA, has a meeting with his team and scolds them for their lack of results (Bigelow).

When hearing the news of bin Ladens death, which had taken place on May 2., 2011, former president George W. Bush called it a "victory for America" (Jeffords 238). Similar sentiments within political circles were expressed in the ensuing weeks. Jeffords mentions that during this time, America had gone from a state of celebration to one of ambiguity and emptiness:

> Upon the initial reporting of his death, indeed there were crowds cheering in the street and proclamations that at long last the victims of terrorism had been avenged and the survivors could sleep easier. But then, the next morning, bin Laden was gone but the rest was still here. The war was still here, the torture and Geneva Convention were still here, and the sense that there was never going to be a definitive end to any of it was still here (238)

This quote demonstrates the contextual feelings towards the death of bin Laden. All the sorrow, aggression, warfare, use of torture, and civilian casualties that the war on terror had brought on was supposed to lead to a sense of fulfilment – or resolution – at the demise of the chief orchestrator of the 9/11 attacks. *ZD30* also places itself within this context and offers an interpretation of these post bin Laden death ambiguities.

Performativity

In certain ways, being released just 18 months after bin Laden's death, the film mirrors the contextual celebratory and ambiguous moods – as seen by the cinematographic emphasis on Maya's tears running down her face during the final sequence of the film after bin Laden has been confirmed dead. In this scene, a pilot asks Maya, who is sitting alone in the back of a large military aircraft, "Where do you want to go?", to which she has no answer (Bigelow). While these images certainly are not historically authentic, they are – as Rosenstone underscores – capable of evoking thoughts and emotions which invite historical reflection (2017 p. 23). In this scene, Maya acts as a surrogate for the American audience, who are also stuck between the celebration of victory, and the ambiguity of "what comes next?". Whether interpreted as joyous or ambiguous tears – Maya's expression in the last scene, as well as the

film in general, offers closure to the manhunt that had engrossed the nation for more than a decade. As Rosenstone has stated, the conventions of the history film prescribe that the past be presented in completed fashion – which is exactly what *ZD30* does, despite the war on terror notably outlasting bin Laden. While ambivalent at times, the overall narrative presents a simplicity through the depiction of the catching and killing of the villain. According to Gauthier, this narrative clarity contributes to a closure that paves "the way for a process of collective healing" (96). When viewed in such a way, the film functions as part of a remedial treatment of national trauma post 9/11.

Heated debates revolving the ethical and political challenges of the war on terror arose after the publication of details concerning the torture and sexual abuse of prisoners by US personnel at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo, US drone attacks in Pakistan, Afghanistan and elsewhere which lead to civilian casualties, and the revenge killings of civilians by American soldiers (Gazit 478). These debates were fueled further by the depiction of such events in popular texts such as *ZD30* – which assisted in the production of torture's public image (Schlag 174). Greer refers to the film as concerned with America's global image and as an attempt to salvage the country's reputation after the publication of the Abu Ghraib pictures (10). In contrast to the photographs, where American soldiers are seen smiling next to the tortured detainees, neither Maya nor Dan seem to be taking pleasure in the act of torture. The use of cut-aways (from unseemly images) and close-ups (Maya's unpleasant reactions) in the film "proposes a polite depiction of torture that aims to fix, however slightly, the breach of etiquette displayed in the Abu Ghraib photos" (9). *ZD30* thus performs a kind of polite apology by referring to torture as an unethical, unenjoyable, but necessary act (12).

Other discussions about *ZD30* centered on the question of whether the film presented torture as an efficient method and whether the narrative was authentic. Foster states "talk about the film has becomes intertwined with talk about the events the film represents" (19). Since the public does not have access to facts about America's use of torture, films such as *ZD30* can enter as sources of credible information. While many politicians denied the use of torture as necessary to the discovery of bin Laden, the film implies otherwise. Even though the torture scenes in the film were stomach-turning, scholars such as Powers state that its greatest controversy was its "glorification of EIT's" (304). The lack of blowback for the characters who commit these acts also argues in favor of the use of torture – "as a necessary yet violent practice that lacks moral (self-) reflection or legal prosecution" (Schlag 185).

Kennedy comments on this nonaccountability in the film, and states that if we accept the "worldview" in the film, "we are complicit in the normalization of torture, drone strikes and other dark arts" (978). When viewed in such a way, the film serves as invitation to question US war policies and the necessity of such tactics. Giving Maya a "pass" for her partaking in torture parallels giving technocratic presidents a pass in continually condoning such policies (Kennedy 978).

Perhaps the most famous critique of the film came from US senators Diane Feinstein, Carl Levin, and John McCain, who wrote an open letter to Sony Pictures Entertainment, stating that the film is "grossly inaccurate and misleading in its suggestion that torture resulted in information that led to the location of Osama bin Laden" (Schlag 180). Hollywood films, which are protected by the First Amendment, are not usually denounced by government officials (Gilmore 281). Schlag comments on this critique, and states that such sentiments might be more appropriately directed at those who instituted/ordered these policies – instead of a film "that brings the story to the screen" (180). When asked about their intentions with the film, Bigelow and Boal explicitly stated that they did not wish to take sides in the torture debate, but rather wanted to engage viewers in the conversation (Powers 304). As this paper has argued, however, such intentions are quickly washed out by the lack of remorse as well as personal and/or legal punishment for the characters who practice torture in the film. Engage viewers in conversation they certainly did, however, as the film's representation of the act greatly contributed to already-existing public debates. Gilmore even argues, that in stirring such public disputes, the film "calls for governmental transparency" in relation to disclosing classified documents that can help audiences make sense of what really happened (288). As it fueled (and fuels) debates about torture, it also contributed to creating the societal discussions which shape public memories of the war on terror. As time passes, such narratives contribute to the recollection of the war on terror as a time in US history where the nation had to resort to unethical (but according to *ZD30*, necessary) methods to achieve retribution.

Torture's "pretended efficiency" – as seen in *ZD30* – may grant the use of such methods more support in the future (Schlag 186). The importance in discrediting such depictions is paramount, as Schalg states, if Hollywood films "become sources of 'information' that support the belief that torture is sometimes permissible" (186). The frequent depiction of terrorist devastation further justifies the use of torture in the film. Thus, *ZD30* facilitates a new consensus regarding the circumstances which necessitate the use of

torture. Schlag backs this point, "the myth of torture's necessity and efficiency is re-imagined by the film. Torture might not be legal but is excusable under specific circumstances" (185). By referring to the innocent Americans whose lives were lost on 9/11 in the beginning of the film, *ZD30* renegotiates the anti-torture norm in the context of national trauma (Schlag 180). Torture is not represented as a cruel, inhumane act, but as a reaction to an atrocious crime. This is particularly evident as audiences witness the torturing of Ammar, who we are constantly reminded – through Dan's words – is guilty. Similarly, the depiction of the London subway bombings, the bombing of the Marriot Hotel in Islamabad, and the suicide bomber attack at Camp Chapman, serve as reminders of the malevolent capabilities of the terrorists. Such depictions function as justification for why the CIA had to go to such extreme lengths to try and prevent attacks in the future – bolstering their reputation (Shaw 99). The film thus also participates in discussions revolving the CIA's credibility, as it "increases understanding for the agency, instills pride in its employees, provides a favorable impression of the organization, and suggests a reasonable expectation that the film will generate interest in the CIA, even enhance recruitment" (Shaw 99). This strengthening of the CIA's reputation also serves as part of the film's performativity.

    ZD30 also functions as gendered discourse. Gazit states that female characters such as Maya, who can do violence as soldiers, investigators etc. – and are able to influence the collective future "is a deviation from gender conventions that feminist writers see as indicative of a crisis" (477). Opinions on Maya vary, however, with her portrayal characterized as feminist, post-feminist, anti-feminist as well as gender neutral (Gazit 480). As previously discussed, Bjerre and Faludi have theorized that the trauma of 9/11 had caused a reversion to old gender roles in various media outlets – complete with male heroes and domestic females. At first glance, Maya seems to represent a shift in these post 9/11 tendencies. However, her assertiveness, persistency, courage, passion, heroism, and victory, allude to the notion that the film still evidently displays a masculine patriotism disguised in a female body. Gauthier furthers upon this and argues that Maya's exceptionality – as a female hero, as a CIA agent, and as an American – underscores the films triumphalist masculinity (101). Hasian also argues against the film's on-the-surface gender progressiveness:

> How can her movies promote gender equality when they honor the most destructive characteristics of American patriarchy? The glorification of war, imperialism, empire, torture, and hatred of brown people are themes of some of America's most popular films.

> The only thing Zero Dark Thirty does differently is it puts a female on the face of
> imperialism (2013 p. 335)

Here, he directly accuses the film of facilitating the same, stereotypical, and patriarchal narrative – despite featuring a female protagonist. The film thus operates as a part of a system that explains feminism as no more than a few select women joining the ranks of powerful men while poorer women and/or women of color are left unseen. Maya – who to some is the embodiment of feminism – still represents the same masculine narrative through her chauvinistic ability to hate, seek vengeance, and commit war crimes against "scores of brown people" (Hasian 2013 p. 338).

During the final hour of the film, Maya speaks to the SEALS team before they commence the raid on bin Ladens compound: "A lot of my friends have died trying to do this. I believe I was spared so I could finish the job" (Bigelow). This line refers to the righteous exceptionalism of Maya, framing her as having been chosen by God for a holy task (Gauthier 104). This exceptional divinity is combined with her symbolic representation of the American nation. This is particularly evident during a scene where the CIA is briefing a White House executive on the possibility of bin Laden hiding in a compound in Abbottabad (where Maya is the only female in the room).

The executive asks, "who's she?", to which she assertively responds, "I'm the motherfucker who found this place" (Bigelow). During this sequence, the mise-en-scene has conveniently placed Maya in front of an American flag, symbolizing

Figure 2: Still from Zero Dark Thirty, Bigelow (01:39:05)

her loyalty and patriotism. Despite being female, the protagonist possesses masculine traits and asserts herself as the non-passive, gun-slinging, and courageous agent – whose characteristics are essential for the climactic discovery of bin Laden. *ZD30* is thus not a feminization of state power, but a "production of a tension that reifies the masculinism" within it (Deylami 774). Maya is female, but the characteristics typically associated with femininity – such as feelings of sentiment, family ties, care, and love interests – are abandoned for the good of the state (Deylami 774). In fact, Maya's characteristics contrast those of her male superiors – who remain largely passive – as seen in the sequence of the film where Maya constantly reminds her boss, Joseph, who sits idly by in his office, of the number

of days that have gone by without them having done something proactive to find bin Laden (Bigelow).

Maya's success in finding bin Laden is attributed her ability (which her bosses lack) to consider the motives behind the suspects behaviors. Her unorthodox approaches, including her willingness to rely on insufficient evidence, ultimately leads to the discovery of bin Laden's compound (Gazit 482). Gauthier states, "Maya's moral stance begins to resemble the familiar swagger of the Western hero" (104). Maya's masculine characteristics mimic those put forth by the male heroes of the old western films – in particular, John Wayne. He too, was willing to consider the motives of his enemy, and relied not only on his cultural understanding of them, but also on his instincts. As mentioned in the theory section of this paper, earlier war/investigator narratives had a profound influence in shaping the conventions of modern films. As demonstrated by *ZD30*, this impact has not just been limited to the influence of the Vietnam War or World War 2 films – but the western too, has had an ability to shape modern narratives. McSweeney states

> While the western genre is long gone as a cultural force, traces of its DNA remain embodies in many contemporary American films. (…) Zero Dark Thirty demonstrates the efficacy of the cinematic medium to embody cultural understandings of the war on terror era at the same time as they evoke the tropes of the American frontier narrative, despite being set very firmly in the contemporary Middle East (2017 p. 10)

ZD30 thus serves as a film which keeps the western tropes (and its masculine discourse) alive in contemporary popular culture. These tropes were also reflected in the reactions post 9/11 – as demonstrated by President Bush in a speech a few weeks after the attack, "I want justice. And there's an old poster out west, that I recall, that said, Wanted, Dead or Alive" (Höglund 290). Maya represents the traditional western loner – or cowboy protagonist – who seems to know better than everyone else, follows her gut, succeeds in her mission, and rides off into the sunset (Schlag 180).

The fact that Maya, as a female agent, challenges the gender conventions of the war on terror film genre also makes her all the more exceptional. Maya represents a deviation from conventional gender roles in such films, where women are typically cast as nurses or doctors and "serve as sexual prizes for the survivors" (Gazit 473). *ZD30* thus "works to appease those who might find problematic the chauvinistic and violent practices of state protection" (Deylami 774). Those among the audience who might find the usual violent-

male-hero narrative distasteful can thus find momentary solace in *ZD30*. Maya's femaleness thus also functions as justification for the use of torture in the film. By giving these acts a "woman's blessing", or consent, they become more acceptable. Deylami states, the violence facilitated by Maya in *ZD30* works as a kind of "cathartic form of vengeance that ultimately reaffirms the masculinism of the security state" (771). Through the construction of Maya, the security feminist, the violence committed by American agents becomes "meaningful rather than self-serving" and thus less ethically disagreeable for the viewers (771). Bigelow thus utilizes "girl power" tropes to reimagine the war on terror narrative while simultaneously keeping the post 9/11 masculinity intact (Gauthier 105). The film thus falls into the category of "Hollywood law enforcement and military films celebrating an extraordinary accomplishment by an American government agency" (Powers 303). Through *ZD30*, audiences can relive triumphalist depictions of moments associated with bin Laden's death (Hasian 2014 p. 466) – and in doing so, recollect the 20-year conflicts in the Middle East in a manner which reduces its many complexities and controversies to a simple narrative where Americans catch the bad guys and carry out justice for the good of mankind.

American Sniper (2014)

Expression

Clint Eastwood's six-time Oscar nominee, *American Sniper* (2014), was released in theatres in December 2014. Distributed by Warner Brothers, the film ended up as one of the most commercially successful films to ever be produced – grossing more than 547 million globally (Mitchell 1). The film depicts the real-life story of the now deceased Chris Kyle (played by Bradley Cooper), a Navy SEALS sniper, who went on several tours throughout the war on terror period. Famously called "the legend" by his peers for his 160 confirmed kills, the character of Chris possesses top-of-the-line marksman skills, as well as an emphatic need for protecting his comrades in the field. As Rosenstone states, condensation is often used to make the history conveyed fit the film medium – and *American Sniper* utilizes such strategies to fit Kyle's four tours (2003 to 2008) into a narrative which lasts 130 minutes.

The film starts by plunging audiences into immediate moral conflict – by

Figure 3: Still from American Sniper, Eastwood (00:03:18)

showcasing Kyle pointing his sniper at a young Iraqi boy, who is jogging towards an American convoy wielding a grenade. During this scene, the camera angle oscillates between a focus on Kyle's concentrated face, and his point of view as seen through the sniper scope, lending a sense of authentic feel by placing audiences firmly in Kyle's own shoes. The sound effects avoid any suspenseful music and opt instead for the even more intensifying sounds of Kyle's steady breathing. As a shot is fired, the screen goes black and cuts to images of Chris as a young boy himself, who successfully shoots a deer on a hunting trip with his father. After utilizing flashbacks to depict parts of Chris' childhood, the narrative structure proceeds by oscillating between Kyle's life as a soldier stationed in Iraq, and his life at home in Texas with his wife and children. These two arenas are portrayed as two completely different worlds – and the narrative emphasizes Kyle's attempts to cope with the challenges that arise in both arenas. In Iraq, Kyle becomes famous for his legendary skills as a sniper, but is challenged by antagonists such as Mustafa, the Olympic gold-medal winning, Syrian sniper who is fighting for the Taliban. On the home-front, however, Kyle also increasingly deals with PTSD, as well as the stress he gets from not being in Iraq to protect his fellow American soldiers. After Kyle's tours have ended, he figures out how to cope in civilian life, and finds solace in aiding fellow war veterans. The film ends with a happy Chris saying goodbye to his family as he leaves the house to do just that – and then text appears on screen "Chris Kyle was killed that day by a veteran he was trying to help" (Eastwood).

The narrative structure, which entails details of Chris Kyle's life from childhood to death, solely follows the character's life in a mixture between biography and drama. The fact that the film was based on Kyle's own autobiography makes it more difficult to categorize for viewers. Soltysik states that the films "gritty hand-held camera aesthetics and dutiful depiction of Kyle's brief bout with symptoms of PTSD lend the film an appearance of realism and possibly critical intent" (1379). These cinematographic aspects grant the film an aura of authenticity. Soltysik also emphasizes that this "realism" may act as critique of the war on terror and the lasting consequences it has had for many of its

participants (ibid.). While the film includes non-fiction elements, the narrative is a mainstream drama per Rosenstone's taxonomy – as supported by the films 59-million-dollar budget, star spangled cast (Sienna Miller as Kyle's wife), and classic protagonist/antagonist structure (Mitchell 1). The film presents the war on terror through Kyle's singular perspective – from before his first tour until after his last – thus prioritizing personalized and emotional stories of this character and presenting the war on terror, through Kyle, as closed and completed (Rosenstone 2017 p. 41). The flashbacks to his childhood are attempts to grant his character more depth and explanation which further alludes to the character-driven nature of the film. The complex apparatus of the war on terror is encapsulated into Kyle's own life story – thus reducing the real-world complications of the war to the experiences of one man (Pomarède 54).

During a childhood scene, where Chris sits at the dinner table with his brother and parents, his father gives them a lesson: "There are 3 types of people in this world, sheep, wolves, and sheepdogs" (Eastwood). The mise-en-scene herein includes several aspects that pertain to a conservative, Texan household, as the shots include images of a football, a bible, a cross on the wall, and places the father at the end of the dinner table with his wife on one side and his sons on the other. He then goes on to explain that the sheep need protection, the wolves prey on the weak, and the sheepdogs protect the sheep from the wolves. This scene demonstrates Rosenstone's contention that dialogue functions as insight to characters' conditions, motivations, and relationships. Chris is consistently framed as a sheepdog throughout the narrative – and he carries with him a genuine need to protect others throughout his tours in Iraq. As the dinner table scene ends, the films cuts to an image of Chris as a grownup, wearing denim clothes and a cowboy hat, walking out from a

Figure 4: Still from American Sniper, Eastwood (00:05:55)

barn. Rancourt comments on this shot and mentions "there can be no mistaking the fact that Kyle is framed as a cowboy complete with the masculine swagger and the toughness to protect the sheep" (228). The film thus carries a western mythology and does not show any attempt to hide its cowboy iconography. The binary oppositions of America and Iraq – and the people who live in these places – further drive this point home, as they are depicted as

two opposite worlds: one foreign and hostile, and the other familiar and warm. As Kyle arrives to Fallujah for his second tour, a soldier welcomes him, "Welcome to Fallujah: The new Wild West in the old Middle East" (Eastwood), clarifying the represented similarities between the Middle East and the frontier narrative.

These oppositional depictions between the Middle East and the Americans are furthered by the films Hollywood-typical, good-guy bad-guy structure. Mustafa, the Syrian rival sniper, embodies the role of the main antagonist, and represents Kyle's other. Mustafa has also acquired an equally "legendary" status amongst his peers and shoots down several of Kyle's comrades. While Kyle carries with him a bible, Mustafa carries a Koran – while Kyle "is a spitting image of hegemonic masculinity, boasting a muscular body, a big beard, a macho attitude" Mustafa possesses more effeminate features (Soberon 11). Mustafa does not utter a single word in the film, and we are never allowed insight to his thoughts or motivations – which contributes to his foreign and dangerous depiction. While most characters in the film are based on real people Chris wrote about in his autobiography, Mustafa is entirely fictional. As Rosenstone hightlights, such inventions are a valuable part of the medium's conventions (2017 p. 25). The intention of this character's creation was to enhance the films western tropes – including a Manichean struggle between East and West (Soberon 11). This becomes particularly evident as these characters face off towards the end of the film in western-like fashion, as the film depicts a modern take on the classic duel – this time separated by several hundred yards.

In February 2013, Chris Kyle was shot by war on terror veteran Eddie Ray Roth at a shooting range in Texas. Rancourt states that "The choice not to include scenes of his death suggests that the American hero must be depicted as the dispenser of violent justice, never the victim of senseless violence. It simply would not have fit in the film" (233). Herein lies part of the power of the history film. It can, if it so choses, diverge from portraying certain aspects of history to make the story fit within the overall themes and messages the narrative wishes to convey. In this case, the words on the screen replace vivid images of Kyle's death and thus highlight the (patriotic) contention that Chris was a hero who is worth mourning and celebrating in a manner that makes sure audiences are not distracted by a violent, detailed depiction of how such a hero died. As the credits roll at the end of the film, archival footage of Kyle's funeral is displayed. These real-life images have an emotional effect on the narrative and represents the equivalent of a cowboy riding off into the sunset

one final time (Soberon 15). These images also bolster the representation of Kyle as a true American hero – one we are, according to the film, fortunate to have learned about.

Context

Discursive

As elaborated in the introduction of this paper, immediately post-9/11 President George W. Bush made several statements and speeches that conflated the war on terror with the "good war". Such rhetoric was reverberated through several media outlets in the ensuing years. However, the middle-to-late 2000's saw a number of newly produced films that challenged this rhetorical merging of the war on terror with honorable, patriotic memories of WW2 (Tanguay 297). Such films included the already mentioned *Redacted* (2007), *The Hurt Locker* (2008), *Rendition* (2007) – but also Nick Broomfield's *Battle for Haditha* (2007), which revolves around an investigation of the massacre of 24 Iraqis (men, women, children) committed by U.S. Marines. Similarly, Peirce's *Stop Loss* (2008) challenged the easy dualisms, resolutions and proclaimed self-evidence of a "good war" by depicting the turmoil of a war on terror veteran. Despite their critical appraisal, this this wave of films saw relatively low box-office returns – leading scholars such as McSweeney to label the war on terror theme in these years as "box-office poison" (McSweeney 2017 p. 61). Tanguay states about this wave of films, "they revealed both the war and its legitimation as intrinsically constructed, redacted and selective" (297). These films thus played an interrogative role – and questioned not only the rationale behind the war on terror, but also the ontological assertions of story-making and the creation of legitimacy.

According to Tanguay, after a few years of producing such interrogative narratives concerning the war on terror, the "good war" was back in theaters (297). The film industry returned to "a winning formula" – sidestepping chaotic, disorienting, and undetermined war-themes in favor of simple and familiar Manichean oppositions, easy resolutions, and triumphalist tropes "infused with the mythic charge of the frontier narrative" (Tanguay 297). In his article, "The 'Good War' on Terror: Rewriting Empire from George W. Bush to American Sniper", Tanguay identifies *American Sniper* (as well as *ZD30*) as part of this new take, or wave, of war on terror films that brought back the tropes of the "good war" – seeking to confer American legitimacy and necessity for the war itself. These films impose "good war" tropes of patriotism, sacrifice, and victory against the contextual ambiguousness of the war on terror. As Rosenstone clarifies, the history film serves as interpretation of history (2017 p. 60) – and while other war on terror films have provided

inquisitive readings, *American Sniper* presents a clear-cut interpretation of the war on terror and makes it about remembering the courage and sacrifice of the American soldiers who participated in a fight against evil (Rancourt 233).

The previously established interrogative wave reflects a certain atmosphere of political uncertainty over the war which represents a state of crisis with American masculinity (Rancourt 225). Rancourt highlights Sergeant James in *The Hurt Locker* (2008), who possesses a hard-muscled body that is riddled with scars. While the strength of his body represents a hypermasculinity, the scars reflect his ineffectiveness, ultimately providing contradicting interpretations of the American masculinity during the war on terror (Rancourt 225). This kind of depiction of the American soldier was particularly common among Vietnam war films released in the late 70's and 80's – wherein the vulnerability of the American veterans/soldiers in Vietnam invoked a sense of failure (Rancourt 225). It is likely that such depictions served as inspiration for the portrayal of the vulnerable war on terror soldier in the 2000's. The 80's, however, also saw a hypermasculine reaction to such portrayals, seeing such works as *Rambo: First Blood 2* (1984), and *Predator* (1987), featuring the muscled-up Stallone and Schwarzenegger in leading roles as they battle hostilities in jungle environments. *American Sniper* acts on similar, popular perceptions of the tough-guy Navy SEAL, atop the military hierarchy, and presents Chris Kyle as masculine response to previous depicted vulnerable American soldiers in war on terror films.

A key feature for many Vietnam war films was their resemblance to the earlier frontier narratives. Soltysik states that in American literature and cinema, "a common setting for adventure continues to be some version of the Wild West—the western frontier of the United States as it was pushed toward the Pacific" (1387). During the Vietnam War, Vietnam was often represented as a frontier – both in terms of being a political border, as well as in the sense of a repetition of the Wild West. This is particularly clear in John Wayne's *The Green Berets* (1968), where an American garrison in Vietnam has a sign saying "Dodge City" – the name of a renowned frontier town (1387). The scene in *American Sniper*, where Chris' comrade welcomes him to Falluja (the new wild west) mimics these western tropes incorporated into Vietnam War films. *American Sniper* also depicts the mental burdens of war, as Chris (and other veterans around him) are seen dealing with PTSD. Soltysik states that if a war film wants to be taken seriously as an authentic depiction "it needs to acknowledge the costs of war. Since the Vietnam era, this has meant at least a nod toward the problem of PTSD among veterans" (1383). Chris dealing with PTSD mimics the tropes

established by pervious Vietnam War films, but, rather than serving as critique or interrogation of the war, these elements are included to grant the narrative authenticity.

Sociohistorical

When looking at the socio-historical context of Eastwood's 2014 blockbuster, several elements can be found that contribute to the representational aspects of the film. Soltysik states that "the larger context for these questions of how war is represented includes the ongoing American military intervention in the Middle East, which seems likely to continue into the future" (1379). Herein, Soltysik suggests that the war – and its likely continuation at the time – had a large impact on how it came to be represented. While the Obama administration started "gradually withdrawing boots on the ground" from 2011 and onwards, the war on terror continued by "compounding the world's dismay with drone strikes that kill civilians and targeted killings that often find the wrong target" (McSweeney 2014 p. 41). Such incidents were part of what shaped newer perceptions of the war on terror, and *American Sniper* places itself within this context of ongoing conflicts in the Middle East, filled with American failures. Cohler also highlights, that even though the war in Iraq was declared officially over in 2011, conflicts in Afghanistan (as well as many other places in the world) were still current – and American soldiers were continually deployed into combat (92). *American Sniper* thus partakes in debates and discussions revolving the support and critique of these conflicts by depicting Kyle's experiences in the Middle East. Opinions on the war on terror in the United States started changing significantly away from support and more towards critique even by the end of 2003 – but the recognition of the war as complete failure only started prevailing following the last withdrawals of troops from Iraq (Rancourt 223). A newly emerging critical discourse marked a stark contrast to that of the Bush administration immediately post 9/11, where the war had been described as the "hero's journey". Soberon backs this notion and states that "Traces of the American monomyth are not only to be found in narratives, but also appear in political discourse, especially in the aftermath of 9/11" (5). While an emerging distaste for the war arose in later years following 9/11, the character of Kyle in *American Sniper* reverberates the Bush administration's religious rhetoric by reducing the war to a clash between righteous and wicked (Rancourt 231).

Performativity

As mentioned in the theory section of this paper, Rosenstone states that the history film functions as commentary on the topic(s) evoked (2017 p. 60). This commentary serves as part

of the film's ability to contribute to contextual discussions – which *American Sniper* certainly did. Its messages and overall reception caused, what Bolt labels, "a cultural divide" (52). He states that the film's controversy, and susceptibility to multiple interpretations, has caused quite a storm and that "one cannot merely like or dislike the film without being labelled part of a larger group, of either bloodthirsty warmongers or spineless hippies" (53). While the left sees the film as a symbol for American bellicoseness across seas, the right sees it as representation of heroism and strength.

It has been a tendency for war films to either show the nobility of soldiers going through tough circumstances (such as *Saving Private Ryan*) – or to focus on the darkness and pointlessness of war (*Apocalypse Now, Platoon*). However, the nobility of Kyle's intentions to protect his friends, his "legendary" status as an effective killer, and his struggle with PTSD all combine to give audiences a less distinguishable representation of the war on terror. The creative team behind the film have stated, on multiple occasions, that the film does not hold a political message, and Eastwood himself has mentioned that he considers himself, and the film, to be anti-war because it takes a closer look at what war does to family life and for the returning veteran (Soberon 2). The left, however, seems to disagree with these statements as they often "hate and distrust the idea of the war hero, believing it smacks of backwardness and jingoism" (Rancourt 227). Soltysik highlights an important aspect for the film, and states that it entails a "strategic ambiguity" – allowing multiple viewers to discover indications of their own worldviews in a text that has deliberately been made "polysemic" through its array of ideological tones (1883). In the context of these different interpretations of the film, its performativity seems to be susceptible to change according to who the audience is. For the right, the film functions as a positive, patriotic, and troop-supportive response to the aftermath of the war in Iraq, and the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. For the left, however, the film functions as a symbol for America's pointless, bellicose intervention in these regions, thus validating already-existing anti-war sentiments. The ambiguity of the film should not be confused with neutrality, however.

American Sniper, while ambiguous to some, is heavily dominated by the adventure formula which involves a hero traveling to a liminal place, discovering his talent (killing, in this instance), and returns home a better and stronger character. The film possesses a deliberate, choreographed syntax which bolsters the narrative as heroic – rendering the character of Chris Kyle not as a victim of the pointlessness of war – but as an American icon (Soltysik 1384). This is not an atypical feat of Hollywood which has

encouraged militarism for decades through making war look appealing by utilizing this formula (Soltysik 1377). While the film acknowledges that killing – and watching friends being killed – takes its toll on the soldier, *American Sniper* portrays combat as worth it, and even as a necessity for gaining greater maturity (Soltysik 1378). This is done through the depiction of Kyle's good-guy characteristics (compassion for Americans), and his "legendary" status. Upon seeing the devastation of terrorism occur on American soil, Kyle displays zero hesitation when deciding whether he should fight back. His courage, leadership, willingness to sacrifice for his fellow countrymen, and his overall country-boy likeability contributes to the film's masculine and patriotic interpretation on the war on terror.

Soltysik also highlights that Eastwood took it upon himself to add the complexity of PTSD to the character of Kyle – not just to make him seem more realistic, but also to make him more likeable and acceptable as a character. He states ""Without any hint of PTSD, a sniper who has become a "legend" for killing over one hundred and sixty people, and who professes no doubt or remorse over any of them, could potentially be seen as simply a killer, or worse, as a sociopath"" (1391). McSweeney highlights several points in Kyle's autobiography that may also have made the character in the film less likeable for audiences, as he pinpoints that Kyle wrote "I loved killing bad guys" and "I don't shoot people with Korans – I'd like to, but I don't" (2014 p. 30). Such statements would no doubt leave less doubt in audience's minds regarding Kyle's character. But such insensitive remarks are left out of the film's characterization (McSweeney 2014 p. 32). By omitting such details that would make Kyle seem like a xenophobic crusader, Eastwood gains the artistic freedom to shape an American hero on his own terms. This reflects Rosenstone's assessment of the history film – despite centering on a real-life person, the conventions of the medium dictate certain alterations and inventions (2017 p. 35). McSweeney states that the film gave America "something it has lacked since the start of the war – a war hero on a truly national and cultural scale" (2014 p. 23). Chris not only overcomes but thrives after his tours and battles with PTSD. Through the traumas brought on by war, Chris becomes an admirable father, adored husband, and selfless friend who volunteers in helping other war veterans (Soltysik 1391). In this regard, the character of Chris fulfills the classical adventure model paradigm by transforming into something much greater than what he was at the beginning of the narrative – promoting not just a conservative interpretation on the war in Iraq, but also war itself as something that can be harvested by young boys seeking to become men.

The adventure story formula is customarily a masculine mode – usually featuring a male hero who becomes friends with other men through training and battle scenarios (Soltysik 1391). This is certainly also the case for *American Sniper*, as the film not only prioritizes the life of Kyle and the bonds forged with his comrades, but also leaves out any depiction of female soldiers. McSweeney pinpoints the fact that it is a woman in the film who makes Kyle join the army by insulting his "manhood" (2014 p. 34). This emasculation mimics the crisis of masculinity caused by the 9/11 attacks, and Kyle's response was to reassert his manliness by becoming a "confident, skilled, Navy SEAL badass" (Rancourt 233). By lionizing Kyle, the film presents opportunity to reassert American masculinity and thus reconsider how the war in Iraq should be remembered. The men shooting their guns in the name of violence in the film thus function as catalyst for a masculine identity of America, as well as psychic healing for the trauma of 9/11 (Soltysik 1392). The masculine nature of the narrative is also greatly attributed the story's cowboy tropes. As mentioned in the Expression section, the film embraces a hegemonic concept of the hero by framing the story, and Kyle, through the mythological conventions of the western. Rancourt states that the "cowboy represents the genderization of protection" – and it is exactly this protection which Kyle embodies (Rancourt 228).

Presenting war on terror narratives in ways audiences associate with WW2 stories ultimately represents an attempt to legitimize, romanticize, and glorify a war in which America was the invader – in contrast to their role as protector in in Second World War. This is particularly evident in Chris' emphatic need to protect those around him. Soberon states that the ""mythic recuperation of the 2003 Iraq invasion as part of a "just" war is partially enabled through a belief in the righteous and redemptive force of violence"" (15). Chris' violent actions are seen as "righteous and redemptive", therefore, any guilt for killing Iraqis, whether men, women, or children, is subdued. Chris only feels guilt when he considers himself inadequate in protecting Americans in the field, which translates to a "failing to fulfill his mission as a sheepdog" (Rancourt 231). Kyle's unquestionable assertion that he does not feel remorse for his violent actions in Iraq acts as a kind of rehabilitation of the memory of the war for the viewing public. Kyle does not feel guilty – so neither should any American soldier or politician who partook. Through the film's dialogue and framing, the only guilt, in fact, should be felt by those who do not adequately honor the nobility of the heroic and patriotic Navy SEAL (Rancourt 232).

While the earlier Vietnam War films "stripped the American male of its allegiance to masculine codes", *American Sniper* functions as a reassertion of these codes through its masculine and protecting portrayal of the American soldier (Rancourt 228). Rancourt supports this notion and mentions that the film acts as a counter to "the messiness of the post-Vietnam war film and allies instead with the likes of *Zero Dark Thirty*'s vision of a capable, heroic, professional Navy SEAL team efficiently executing its mission" (228). Herein, Rancourt highlights that the heroic narratives seen in these films mark a distinction, not just from the previous – more ambiguous – war on terror films, but also from the post-Vietnam films where masculine patriotism was nowhere to be found. While Rancourt mentions that such tropes returned briefly through Speilberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, this paper argues that films such as the conservative, "Reaganistic" *Rambo: First Blood Part 2*, mimics the same tropes and responds to the ambiguous and messy Vietnam War films by asserting unquestionable masculinity through western tropes in similar fashion to how *American Sniper* responded to the ambiguous war on terror films from the 2000's. *American Sniper*'s use of such tropes facilitates a symbolic discourse which acts as metaphor for the justification of America's expansionist policies and foreign interventions (Soberon 4). This has been a common tendency throughout the twentieth century, where the western has functioned as aid in molding political ideals and rationalizing "central aspects of American domestic and foreign policies" (ibid.). Such films provided the west with encouraging depictions of cowboy heroes who came to represent idealized versions of the American spirit. It is exactly this function *American Sniper* uptakes. Soberon states

> Be it rival gunslingers, banditos or Native American war-tribes, this outside force disrupts the stability of the community and can only be eliminated by the cowboy-hero. American Sniper adopts this element of Western syntax, but transfigures it to the 2003 Iraq invasion, metaphorizing America as the cowboy-hero, and the Muslim world as the outside threat (10)

By facilitating the mythological framework of the frontier narrative, the film offers a positive and heroic reading of Kyle's (and America's) military actions in the context of the war in Iraq (Soberon 15). *American Sniper* thus reaffirms a discourse of national excellency and functions as a remasculinization of America post-9/11 and post war on terror controversies, as well as a patriotic counter to some of the previously released war on terror films from the late 2000's.

The film's simple narrative conflict between the good American and the evil insurgent presents an appreciated story by a more conservative audience. *American Sniper* rehabilitates public memory and pleases those who long for a more pro-American interpretation of history – and acts as a small step in the direction of "making large fronts in the war on terror palatable again" (Rancourt 234). While such military actions seem unlikely today, the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East in 2014, when the film was released, presents a more probable context for such operations. The film also appeases those who are "nostalgic for Bush's post 9/11 rhetoric" (ibid.). In her work, *The Terror Dream*, Faludi attests to how the western genre has operated as a discursive weapon in the war on terror – as seen by Bush's post 9/11 "cowboy rhetoric" (159). In terms of shaping the memories of the war, there is a discrepancy between remembering Bush's statements as "Texas swagger arrogance embodied in foreign policy" and recollecting "Kyle's Texas swagger as worthy of admiration" (Rancourt 234). This discrepancy between judgments of the past represents a battle between remembering the war in Iraq as a disgraceful blunder as opposed to remembering it as an essential effort in safeguarding democracy. In this light, the film, and its frontier heroism, do not just function as mythic trope – but also as promotion of military policy (Soberon 5). In a polarized America, where audiences either belong to a group who recall the war in Iraq as an imperialist and immoral invasion – or a necessity to "protect our own" (Eastwood), *American Sniper* represents the latter discursive treatment of the war. Soberon agrees and states "Through this process of mythic configuration, the film reinforces the US administration's dominant views of the Iraq War as a just and necessary execution in the light of 9/11" (2). By depicting the war on terror as a Manichean fight between civilization and barbarism, the film acts as pro-war discourse which supports the pre-emptive necessity and essentiality of the war in Iraq.

       American Sniper frames the war on terror through masculine, heroic, and mythological mechanisms while simultaneously claiming legitimacy through its depiction of a "real" soldier. In such a regard, the film's depictions act as advocate for the 2003 Iraq invasion and the military decisions made in that context. Tanguay back this notion and states that the film "refuses to problematize the soundly discredited connection between 9/11 and Iraq, both insisting, in outright defiance of these readily available facts, that the vicious means portrayed are justified in light of their ends" (300). The film avoids any confrontation of the false claims made by the Bush administration that sought to justify the war in Iraq. Similarly, the film makes no comment on the war in Afghanistan, general strategies used to

fight Al Qaeda, or any of the prison policies in Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo. Pomarède alludes to part of the film's performativity, and states that by "modestly" pretending to depict the realities of war, and by omitting certain ambiguous aspects of the conflict, it "encourages (…) the continuity of western interventions" (67). McSweeney further backs this notion and mentions that the film lacks any reflection on Kyle's part that this might be a "wrongful crusade" (2014 p. 35). While his wife, Taya, critiques the legitimacy of the war, her assessment comes across as selfish because she seems to only wish for her husband to be back home with her. Through such a depiction, audiences feel even more sympathy for Kyle, as he doesn't just have to deal with the trauma of combat, but also with having a wife who, at times, doesn't seem to understand his motivations. Similarly, one of Kyle's comrades, Marc Alen Lee, wrote a letter shortly before being killed in action. Marc's mother read this letter aloud at his funeral, "When does glory fade away, and become a wrongful crusade? Or an unjustified means which consumes one completely?" (Eastwood). These words echo a critique of the American invasion of Iraq – however, Chris sees such reflections as the reason for Marc's demise, "It was that letter that killed him" (Eastwood). This dialogue both invites audiences inside the thoughts and motivations of Kyle, furthering an emotional attachment to the character (which Rosenstone highlights as a chief distinction of the mainstream history film) – as well as they serve as a dismissal of a more disapproving interpretation of the war on terror. In the context of the war in Iraq, such self-reflection is evidently read as self-doubt – and to be an American hero in this context involves never doubting the rightfulness of the war. In this light, the film acts as not only a promotion of American legitimacy and heroism, but also as a forgetting of aspects of the war in Iraq which tainted America's iconography. Through such a narrative, audiences may come to remember the war as a time when American heroes fought and died bravely for a country which, to this day, remains exceptional. By presenting the heroic nobility and skill of Chris Kyle, the film acts as discourse which argues the justness and necessity of the invasion – "transcoding a jingoist" view of the war in Iraq as well as the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East at the time of its release (Soberon 2).

12 Strong (2018)

Expression

In 2018, Nicolai Fuglsig's five-years-in-the-making *12 strong* was released. The film depicts the real-life events of an American Special Forces team deployed in Afghanistan shortly after the 9/11 attacks. As the team arrives in Afghanistan, they join forces with general Dostum

and the Northern Alliance and begin combat operations against the Taliban government – calling in air raids throughout the country to both liberate the Afghans under Taliban yoke as well as avenge the terrorist attacks that had occurred on American soil. The team is led by captain Mitch Nelson, played by Chris Hemsworth, and must learn to navigate the landscape by learning to ride horses – which presents even further obstacle for the team's already challenging mission of dispersing al Qaeda on their way to the city of Mazar-i Sharif. The film was based on Doug Stanton's book, *12 Strong: The Declassified True Story of the Horse Soldiers*, which was published in 2009. The title of this book entails two words that allude to the seemingly authentic vision of the narrative: "declassified", and "true".

In the film's opening sequence, the words "Based on a True Story" (Fuglsig) appear, leaving no doubt in audiences' minds that what they are about to see is not an invented narrative, but one consisting of depictions of actual people, places, and events. As per Rosenstone's outlined conventional strategies of the history film, *12 Strong* utilizes a great deal of condensation to fit Task Force Dagger's 3-week operation into the film's 130 minutes. Condensation is also particularly evident in the initial 90 seconds of the film, where authentic media images of terrorist attacks are shown – from the bombing of the World Trade Center in 1993, to the 2001 assassination of Ahmad Shah Massoud, leader of the Northern Alliance. Several attacks against America are shown throughout this montage – including the bombings of US embassies in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam in 1998, and the suicide bombing of the USS Cole in 2000. The authentic images of terrorist bombings and devastation establish an aura of reality at the very beginning of the narrative. The images set the scene for the ensuing storyline by firmly solidifying who the antagonists are, as the words uttered by news anchors supplement the images and repeat "bin Laden's terrorist network was responsible", and "hidden in the mountains of Afghanistan, bin Laden planned these attacks" (Fuglsig). The real images of dead bodies and destroyed buildings are sharply contrasted by the warm and comforting images of the protagonist's home and family in the following scene. This contrast is no doubt deliberate, as it showcases the devastation of terrorism pitted against the idealist American home-life, for which Nelson must fight later in the narrative.

By proving his worth as a caring father and loving husband in the initial stages of the film, Nelson only yet needs to prove his courage and fighting skill to become an all-American hero. The contrast between the idealist family-life and terrorism is again made explicit, as family-time gets interrupted when Nelson's daughter turns on the television and

innocently says "Daddy, look." (Fuglsig). The haunting images of the burning twin towers is displayed, and the facial expressions made by Nelson, and his wife, Jean, mimic the ones made by thousands, if not millions of people who witnessed the

Figure 5: Still from 12 Strong, Fuglsig (00:02:27)

devastation unfold in 2001. As Rosenstone highlights, history films are capable of evoking historical reflection. When remembering this notion, a key question becomes – which reflections might be made when witnessing these authentic images of terrorist devastation? By including these images in the beginning of the film, the narrative not only sets the stage for a justified and necessary military operation carried out successfully by Nelson and his team – it also asks audiences to recall the tragedy of 9/11 and the motivations behind the ensuing war on terror.

The authentic images utilized in the film are not the only aspects which contribute to its realistic portrayal of events – "the action is fast paced and frantic", making it feel as though the team gets caught in convincing firefights (Gleiberman 1). Lt. Gen. John F. Mulholland is quoted stating "There's some Hollywood stuff, I mean you're going to see SF guys on horseback with their Uzbek counterparts charging tanks, and that's not something I'd recommend that we do. It's a dramatic effect but the thread of everything that happens in that movie is everything that happened to that team" (Prine 1). Herein, Mulholland alludes to the fact that the film is "Hollywood" and includes inventions for the sake of dramatic effect. As Rosenstone has mentioned, no Hollywood produced film will be completely authentic – no matter how much money and effort is spent on trying to make it so. Another point to make is that while the film was based on a declassified story, the declassification happened long before – and the film took five years to produce, giving plenty of time to construct inventions that add to this war-drama narrative (Thompson 1). Other aspects, such as the film's 35-million-dollar budget, and its star-spangled cast – including not just Hemsworth, but Michael

Shannon, Michael Peña and William Fichtner, indicate that the film is about as mainstream as it gets.

This Hollywood-produced film also entails a classic good-guy, bad-guy structure and pins the Special Task Force American soldiers against the villainous Taliban – "reminding us that sometimes in war, the lines are clearly defined on who the good guys and bad guys are" (Ide 2). The most noteworthy antagonist in the film is the Taliban leader, Mullah Razzan, who is said to have murdered Dostum's entire family. Razzan is also witnessed mercilessly executing a mother in front of her three children for trying to teach them to read. This scene is shot through alternating close-ups of the victims' facial expressions, so that audiences will grasp their anguish. Gleiberman mentions this scene in his review for Variety and states "that's not an exaggeration of Taliban cruelty, but the way the film uses this brute to personify evil is at once reductive and uninteresting" (1). The "uninteresting" thing about Razzan here, is that the character is not granted any ambiguity or insight – he is plain, obvious evil. The narrative thus utilizes such a character to express a clearly defined line between the heroes and the antagonists – which are in the film defined as those who "hate America and suppress women" (Nikolajsen 1).

The reductive approach to villainizing an obvious enemy is contrasted with the in-depth characterization and insight into the protagonist's thoughts and emotions – which is, according to Rosenstone, a key element in how audiences experience the history that is conveyed in such films. The film follows the classic adventure structure of home-away-home which allows for audiences to witness the soldiers in their homes with their families before they depart for Afghanistan. This facilitates a greater emotional attachment to these characters and contributes to an inclination "to like the team due to their loyalty to fighting for America, their friends and family and each other" (Ide 2). Nelson thus comes to represent a much larger scope on the war on terror. By depicting his leadership, skill, likeability, and victory, the film expedites the perception of the war on terror as a conflict dominated by clearly defined lines, and the American soldiers as heroes who fought against an unquestionable evil.

Context

Discursive

As this paper has now made clear, the track record for war on terror films as been somewhat inconsistent throughout the first decade-and-a-half post 9/11. Ranging from self-reflective

films such as *Battle for Haditha* and *Redacted,* to more ambiguous films such as *The Hurt Locker,* to less ambivalent narratives such as *Zero Dark Thirty* and *American Sniper*. All these films seem to have veered from too sentimental and self-reflective to too macho and patriotic. Linehan mentions

> As far as Hollywood is concerned, there are two versions of the War on Terror. One is a hopeless quagmire that has left an entire generation of military veterans psychologically traumatized. The other is a gallant romp fought by elite commandos. Moviegoers much prefer the latter. In terms of box office success, *Zero Dark Thirty*, *American Sniper*, and *Lone Survivor* — all heavily dramatized films exalting the awesomeness of Navy SEALs — top the list of movies about the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan by a very wide margin (1)

Herein, Linehan alludes to the different takes on war on terror depictions, and that the latter portrayals of America's "awesome" soldiers has commercially had more success. Released in 2013, *Lone Survivor* depicts the true story of Marcus Luttrell and his team of SEALS as they set out on a mission to capture or kill Taliban leader Ahmed Shah in 2005. This film, contrarily to a hazy inclusion of PTSD and/or torture, provides a more straightforward, thrilling narrative. Rizov states that this film serves as link to the old "hard bodies" of the 80's action films, such as the mentioned *Rambo: First Blood Part 2,* by depicting the resilient SEALS live through tough circumstances such as unfriendly terrain, gunshot wounds, and explosions. While *Rambo 2* provided a kind of symbolic win in Vietnam for American audiences, *Lone Survivor* did the same in Afghanistan (Rizov 78). *12 Strong* can be situated firmly in such a regressive vein, as the film's combat scenes are interspersed with major explosions and the politics of national vigour are made explicit (Rizov 78). In the opening conversation sequence in *Rambo 2*, just after John Rambo has accepted a recon mission for POWs in Vietnam, he asks his commander, "Sir, do we get to win this time?", proposing a new opportunity for American success in Vietnam. In similar fashion, Nelson tells his comrade at the end of *12 Strong*, "Feels good huh? We finally saw one through", suggesting that the war on terror not be remembered for its controversial aspects, such as torture, PTSD, or civilian casualties, but for the victories gained by America. In such light, Rizov states that the film is an "unabashedly triumphalist exercise" (78).

As McSweeney has argued, war on terror films follow the models of the WW2 combat films to package the American invasions in the Middle East as virtuous and

righteous. *12 Strong* does just that. By depicting the brotherhood between the SEALS team, their teamwork, their exceptional morals, and their family-oriented-ness, the film mimics WW2 narrative tropes. Morgenstern highlights the scene were the SEALS all say goodbye to their partners and families before being deployed as "ritual moments that could have been lifted from countless World War II dramas" (1). Utilizing such WW2 conventions in war on terror films acts as attempts to "erase the ruptures and tensions caused by 9/11 by assuring Americans of both their military and moral superiority" (MCSweeney 2014 p. 25). This alludes to part of the film's performativity, which will be divulged further in the following section.

Although based on true events, the symbolic nature of the horses also comes to represent the film's integration of western tropes. Wearing SEALS uniforms instead of cowboy hats and boots, and equipped with assault rifles instead of revolvers, Nelson and his team are frequently seen charging their enemies on horseback – "echoing heroic western" (Dargis 1). In similar style to John Wayne's *The Green Berets*, *12 Strong* also presents the conflict in a foreign country in frontier-narrative fashion. In this light, the film arguably mimics the mentioned masculine, "cowboy rhetoric" expressed by the Bush administration in the immediate period following the 9/11 attacks.

Sociohistorical

In seeking to establish the socio-historical context of the 2018 film, there are certain aspects to consider. While *12 Strong* doesn't include war on terror controversies such as torture or PTSD, it does facilitate an American triumphalist narrative 17 years after 9/11. Morgenstern highlights this belatedness and states "The question that keeps posing itself in *12 Strong* is why now? Why, almost two decades later, are we watching a by-the-numbers war drama about a U.S. Special Forces covert mission in Afghanistan during the weeks following 9/11?" (1). While one could claim that there is never a bad time for a story about admirable courage set in harsh conditions, the relevance of *12 Strong* is questionable. However, while the Obama administration started withdrawing troops in 2011, the perpetuity of the war on terror stands as argument towards *12 Strong* being a film that was released while tensions were still ongoing in the Middle East.

Linehan pinpoints this perpetuity of the war on terror, and its coherent dullness, "Aside from a handful of scandals and a few exhilarating moments that seemed pivotal at the time, but ultimately did little or nothing to move the ball forward, the War on Terror has been

a bit of a snoozefest" (1). Herein, he alludes to part of the socio-historical context which the film responds to. The narrative presents an exciting story, cherry picked from the time when the war on terror was entirely new and relevant – and asserts it within a time when most viewing audiences were less inclined to know what was going on in the Middle East. Seventeen years after the 9/11 attacks, all the resources poured into the war on terror still hadn't paid off the way it was envisioned, "there's been no raising the flag on Iwo Jima moment", and Iraq is still not a shining example of democracy (Linehan 1). By presenting depictions of the initial American victories in Afghanistan, *12 Strong* deviates from the tedious indefiniteness of the war in 2018 and invites audiences to recollect a military operation – a time – when America seemed to be on its way to ending the Taliban threat forever.

The continuity of the ISIS threat also serves as backdrop for the depictions seen in *12 Strong*. Brechenmacher states ""Sixteen years into the United States' "global war on terror," terrorist groups continue to proliferate in states that are either unwilling or incapable of defeating them. Not only has the threat of terrorism persisted, but it is escalating and intensifying in dangerous ways"" (58). In 2018, the Taliban had not jumped ship – in fact, the whole matter of what America had accomplished in Afghanistan was hazy – as demonstrated by a large contextual consensus that the US had merely forced the enemy to relocate (Gleiberman 1). The clear-cut, unambiguous narrative in *12 Strong* contrasts this contextual murkiness of the war on terror.

In similar vein, President Trump's inauguration in 2017 may also serve as part of the backdrop to which the film responds. In contrast to the previous Obama Administration, which had taken a more "light-footprint" approach to the war on terror, Trump had repeatedly stated he would "bomb the hell out of ISIS" (Brechenmacher 58). Throughout the first year of his term, he had continuously endorsed an escalation in air strikes – and had facilitated greater military operations in Yemen, Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria (59). These counterterrorism efforts were indicative of the president's inclination for strong military retorts – as well as his commitment to reducing emphasis on civilian protection protocols to enable swifter military results (ibid.). By bringing a story to light which involved a speedy and successful military operation in the initial weeks of the war on terror, *12 Strong* situates itself within the contextual military rhetoric and policies of President Trump.

Performativity

For those who prefer more masculine narratives, "12 Strong is Grade A catnip" (Dargis 1).
Lt. Colonel Bowers comments, "Nice kill", after having witnessed Nelson knock over his
desk in pure frustration at the thought of possibly not being able to lead his men in
Afghanistan – prematurely solidifying the violence, private grief, and desire for heroism that
pervades in the entire narrative. Hemsworth, who is most famous for his role as Thor in
Marvel films, is perhaps cast as Nelson intentionally to provide such associations with
heroism. The film fully commits to the traditional, masculine trope of men saying goodbye to
their wives before leaving for war. In this regard, despite its 17-year belatedness, *12 Strong*
can be seen as a continuation of the mediated reversion to old gender norms caused by the
crisis of 9/11 – as theorized by Faludi. By presenting heroic, courageous, masculine,
American soldiers, the film tardily responds to the crisis of 9/11 by asserting American
iconography which works to suture the nation and its emasculated reputation post 9/11. In
similar fashion, Trump's violent rhetoric regarding his intentions for handling ISIS also acts
as a masculine response to not only the crisis, but to the passiveness of a war which seemed
to be in slow-motion. *12 Strong* not only transports audiences to a time when the war was
much more fast-paced, but also supplements Trump's war rhetoric with images of America
"bombing the hell out of them".

        The film exhibits a Manichean portrayal of the war on terror. Such a
representation has caused Thompson to write that "Afghanistan has become an expensive and
essentially permanent exercise in nation-building" (1). Herein, Thompson highlights that
several big-budgeted films are set in Afghanistan and portray the war on terror in such a way
that enforces a patriotic (and xenophobic) ideology. Several film critics agreed with this, as
Sacks wrote that "there is more red, white and blue than shades of gray" in the film (1), and
Nikolajsen, who wrote that the film has "self-written a place in the American-patriotic film
cannon" (1). As Rosenstone underscores, no alternatives to the history conveyed on screen
are given considerations – which in this case means that any questioning of the virtuousness
of the American soldiers, or of the legitimacy of the invasions – are left out of the historic
expressions. This highlights that the film's performativity does not just pertain to what it does
– but also to what it actively chooses not to do. McSweeney states that "many aspects of the
topic are left untouched in these dramatic features" (2014 p. 135). While not discussing *12
Strong* directly, he does highlight certain tendencies that are also applicable for the film.
Writing for Variety, Ide stated that *12 Strong* misleads history "by selective omission" (1).

By depicting the initial 3-week operation post 9/11, the film gets to leave out several aspects of the ensuing war on terror which led to a more uncertain interpretation of the conflict. The fact that the battle for Afghanistan "descended into a counter-insurgency slog that's dragged on for 17 years" is never touched in the film – nor is the fact that the Taliban reasserted control over vast amounts of the country after America started withdrawing troops in 2011 (Prine 1).

In 2018, the conflict in the Middle East could be summarized as a "violent holding pattern, or a stalemate we're still mired in" (Gleiberman 1). However, Fuglsig and Bruckheimer counteract this dullness by portraying a decisive victory "of the kick-ass American spirit" that "make you feel good about the invincibility of American power" (ibid.). The film thus enters discussions on the validity and controversies of the war on terror and sides with the unabashed opinions of those who deem the war as just and necessary by conveying a now outdated argument that if the Taliban can be defeated – the world will never again witness the terrorist devastation seen on September 11th, 2001. In such a way, part of *12 Strong*'s performativity pertains to its provision of a virtuous purpose to a conflict that was, in 2018, "still in search of one" (Gleiberman 1). There is no ambivalence, no haziness, no doubt – the mission is crystal clear, and the American soldiers' motivation to carry it out is unquestionable. In this light, the exclusion of PTSD and torture are not apolitical elements – and the film thus functions as an unquestionable, satisfactory victory for those who were looking for one in the context of a perpetual war on terror in 2018. The exclusion of ambiguous elements in *12 Strong* acts as a tool for memory dismemberment and – in similar vein to Faludi's criticism of narratives which "refused to confront the troubling realities of 9/11" – indicates a tendency towards producing narratives which justify America's "revenge, retribution, and moral superiority" (McSweeney 2014 p. 28).

Perhaps most explicitly showcased by the depiction of horseback riding, *12 Strong* also mimics tropes of the western frontier narrative. While such tropes for were, according to Faludi, most evident during the years after 9/11, she "never claims that this frontier myth ever really died, arguing instead that it has endured and evolved over time, renewing and transforming itself during times of cultural trauma and crisis" (Schopp & Hill 14). *12 Strong* thus operates as an evolved version of the frontier narrative, as the film presents the American soldiers as a renewed breed of cowboys (Morgenstern 1). Ide makes a similar assessment, and highlights that the film borrows from western (and war film) tropes

Figure 6: Still from 12 Strong, Fuglsig (01:42:21)

and displays Task Force Dagger as "heavily armed cowboys" who are "dodging missiles rather than arrows" (1). During the final combat scene, as Nelson is riding unwaveringly against the Taliban, the camera angels oscillate between filming up at him from slightly below his level, and filming at parallel height – mixing his heroic stature with an element of participation for the viewer. This combat scene also utilizes slow-motion, allowing audiences to keep up with the frantic, fast-paced action that has engulfed them – contrasting the "snoozefest" of the actual ongoing conflicts in the Middle East. A distinction can be made between the initial national trauma of 9/11, and the crisis of the perpetuity and ambiguity of these ongoing conflicts. Perhaps it is more so the latter crisis to which *12 Strong* responds. Schopp and Hill state

> We might need times of crisis to reify our most valued cultural narratives, which can explain why and how quickly we collectively embraced the set of fixed ideas about America's power and preeminence, and fixed ideas that, again, cannot be questioned, since doing so could make one appear to be in collusion with the enemy (14)

This crisis of perpetuity in 2018 stands as reason for *12 Strong*'s depictions. By presenting an American victory during the tail-end of an ambiguous war, the film reifies traditional ideals of American supremacy. The triumph of the horse soldiers is ultimately a triumph for America and similarly to *Zero Dark Thirty*, *12 Strong* functions as a transportation device which moves audiences to a "reality in which America got its revenge" (Linehan 1).

As mentioned in the other analysis sections, the 2000's saw a fair share of more ambiguous war on terror films – presenting the war in a more complicated and controversial way. Sacks writes

> The previous wave of movies about the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq took a very different take on the decisions that put American troops at risk. *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and *Stop-Loss* (2008) certainly were waving red flags, not the Stars and Stripes. Those dramas spoke to a large segment of the population struggling to come to terms with an unpopular war (1)

The red flags he mentions here, refer to the film's highlighting the war's toll on the American soldiers and the nation. While the later released *Zero Dark Thirty* and *American Sniper* did

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entail elements that pertain to the war's controversies – they still managed to facilitate a much more clear, American-triumphalist version on the war on terror. *12 Strong* presents a step further in the "right" direction. The overall lack of torture, PTSD, civilian and American soldier casualties, and the complete neglect for showing any bad characteristics for the Americans – as well as for granting any insight to the enemies' motivations or thoughts, support this argument. Berlatsky states "The story is presented as a straightforward morality play. It is an unquestionable truth, from the film's perspective, that the war is necessary to prevent further terrorist attacks on the American homeland" (1). Here, he alludes to the film's incontrovertible standpoint – that the initial invasion in Afghanistan (and perhaps also Iraq) was necessary and justified. The film thus functions as a reminder of the 9/11 attacks and the initial American successes during the war on terror by showcasing Dagger's 3-week operation in Afghanistan and selectively omitting the war's ensuing ambivalence. In doing so, the film operates as discourse which serves to justify the initial invasions in the Middle East, as well as bolster support for America's ongoing conflicts in 2018 when ISIS was thriving.

In the film, Dostum makes several remarks that are worthy of interpretation. As him and Nelson are discussing America's part in the conflict, he states "You will be cowards if you leave, and enemies if you stay" (Fuglsig). Through this line, Dostum helps audiences realize the peculiarity of America's situation in the Middle East – that they should be branded negatively regardless of their actions. Deemed as power-obsessive imperialists if they should stay to evoke their own justice in foreign lands, or as weaklings if they chose to not use their power to aid countries who are suppressed by hostile regimes – Dostum's line serves to excuse America for its poor handling of the war in the Middle East. Rizov also comments on this line and states, in similar vein, that it represents a "handy way to evade responsibility by eliding even the most basic discussion of disastrous US policy, past and present, and its long-term fallout" (78). Herein, he mentions that Dostum's quote serves as means to avoid any confrontation of America's questionable actions throughout the war on terror period by essentially victimizing them by reducing their possible role in the Middle East to either "enemy" or "coward".

The film also functions as patriotic discourse which serves to commemorate the horse soldiers and all Americans who fought in the Middle East. As the film draws to a close, the screen cuts black, and displays the following text:

> Against overwhelming odds, all twelve members of the U.S. Army Special Forces ODA
> 595 survived their mission. The capture of Mazar-i Sharif by the Horse Soldiers and their
> counterparts is one of the US Military's most stunning achievements. Military planners
> predicted it would take two years. Task Force Dagger did it in three weeks. Al Qaeda
> considers this to be their worst defeat. Because their mission was classified, the men of
> Special Forces ODA 595 returned home to their everyday lives with no fanfare or public
> acknowledgement of the near impossible mission they completed (Fuglsig)

These words are supplemented by an iconic, heroic score and allude to the intentions of Fuglsig's work – to celebrate and honor the achievements of this group of American soldiers, who, for a while, were not recognized deservedly so as heroes of the war on terror. Rizov highlights that "The idea of supporting the troops even if you hate the war is an old trope" (78). Plenty of Americans were against the war in the Middle East in 2018, but in depicting the heroic story of the horse soldiers, the film asks audiences – despite their opinions on the war itself – to recollect and honor the American soldiers who fought bravely and successfully in the initial weeks post 9/11.

The differences between Afghan and American culture in the film serves as yet another obstacle for which the Americans can prove themselves as capable of overcoming. This they certainly do, as seen most explicitly by their mastering of riding horseback through treacherous terrain. This thriving in an "oriental" environment – as also seen through the team's ability to "speak various languages and dialects, to engage in on-the-ground diplomacy, to work with civilian populations, to travel lightly, and use the tools available to fight in enemy territory" (Thompson 1), ultimately serves as a hegemonic portrayal of the Americans, and thus operates as a validation of the country's right to pose themselves in countries that are in such a need for western intervention. While Task Force Dagger members keep their composure and follow protocol throughout the film, Dostum and his men refuse to listen to them and charge mindlessly into battle against the Taliban (Mattos 2). Depicting the Northern Alliance in such a way serves as placing them in a much less civilized light in comparison to the Americans, who not only have to rescue them from the Taliban – but also from themselves. Thus, *12 Strong* facilitates a type of rescue narrative, which – along with its legitimizing glorification of revenge post 9/11 – serves as yet another narrative which seeks to justify America's interventions in the Middle East.

Discussion

Blurred Lines and Metaphoric Expressions

As elaborated in the theory section of this paper, McSweeney states about popular film that they are not a mere "shallow frivolity but rather an expressive socio-political artefact and a very influential part of the way meanings are generated by society at large" (2017 p. 2). Viewed in such a way, *ZD30, American Sniper and 12 Strong* represent such artifacts which possess the capabilities of shaping how society at large comes to perceive the war on terror as well as war itself. Through the conventions of the medium, these works function as "prosthetic memories" and thus rework popular recollections of the events they portray (McSweeney 2017 p. 11). While the war on terror was controversial, ambiguous, and long-lasting, each film brought their own condensed, altered, and simplified versions to the big-screen, facilitating easy-to-digest interpretations of the conflicts in the Middle East. *ZD30* offers triumphant memories of the search and capture of bin Laden through its narrative structure which begins with the 9/11 attacks and ends with the death of the villain responsible. Audiences get to experience a major American accomplishment through Maya's personification of the diligent pursuit and capture of bin Laden. *American Sniper* invites audiences to recollect Chris Kyle and his courageous actions – and thus facilitates a patriotic discourse which represents the war on terror as a conflict fought primarily by virtuous, heroic American soldiers – pitted against an unquestionable evil. *12 Strong* mimics such representations and offers war on terror recollections of heroic deeds carried out by American soldiers in the immediate weeks following the 9/11 attacks. Through its underdog narrative and close following of Nelson and his team members, this film invites audiences in remembering the initial American successes in the war on terror – and in forgetting the perpetuity and ambiguity of the long war which followed.

While many historians may dismiss such depictions for their falsity or inaccuracy – we must remember Sørensens arguments, that such films play an increasingly important role in conveying history to non-historians (322). Rosenstone elaborates on this point by exemplifying Buddhist priests from the sixth and seventh centuries. He states that these priests realized the majority of the population could not read or fathom the sacred Sanskrit texts, therefore, they decided to create visual works that – while not being able to express every complex detail of the texts – were able to instill the ideas of Buddhism in the general population (2017 p. 137). Films such as the ones analyzed in this paper act in similar vein as those visual descriptions of the Sanskrit texts – as simplified, but accessible, visual

images which convey some (although far from all) of the meaning, feeling, or spirit, of the war on terror.

While the medium cannot provide literal truths – it can provide metaphoric expressions which differ from traditional historical discourse. *ZD30, American Sniper* and *12 Strong* straddle "the line between what happened and what might have happened, creating a metaphoric expression of past events" (Rosenstone 2017 p. 143). *ZD30*, for instance, depicts the torture of the detainee, Ammar, as a necessary act which led to the discovery of bin Laden. While it is inconceivable that these exact events took place (even if they did, the actors and settings seen on-screen are inventions), the inclusion of these acts in the film metaphorically reflect the CIA's incorporation of such interrogation methods in the years following 9/11. Similarly, the inclusion of the villainous Butcher in *American Sniper*, who kills a young Iraqi boy by applying an electric drill to his head, is not a depiction of an actual person. Instead, this villain also metaphorically represents an interpretation of a "not exaggerated" Taliban cruelty (Gleiberman 1). While not based on facts, audiences are left to ponder whether such acts took place in reality. Could it have happened? Technically. Did it? Probably not. The same can be said of the Task Force Dagger team members seen charging the war fields on horseback. While audiences may be familiar with the story of the "horse soldiers", how much, and when these men were riding horses is impossible to determine exactly. However, the conventions of the medium dictate – to create a story which inspires and excites (Rosenstone 2017 p. 162) – that the men be placed on horses during combat scenes, which metaphorically represents the noteworthy skill of the soldiers who had to ride horses through Afghan terrain. History thus becomes blurred, and audiences become susceptible to including their experiences of these metaphoric expressions of past events into their memories of the war on terror. The diligent pursuit and discovery of bin Laden, the malevolence of the Taliban, and the perseverance of the American soldiers are – through these films – placed firmly in the audiences' repertoire of war on terror memories. The fact that all these films carry docudrama elements and pose as authentic depictions of real events contributes to their "greater rhetorical force" when functioning as historical commentary or interpretation (Bennet 209). It can be argued that the boundaries between fiction and "what really happened" are left unclear intentionally so that the viewer is undistracted by the discrepancy between what s/he understands or presumes regarding a historical moment – and the filmic representation of it (Bennett 222).

While closure and retaliation are certainly part of what *ZD30, American Sniper* and *12 Strong* bring to the table, they are all narratives which embody American perspectives and provide persevering and heroic interpretations of the war on terror. As the analysis has covered, this heroism is hegemonic and gendered. However, perhaps it still manages to convey some (although a very small part) of a symbolic truth. Although not accurate depictions, can we still say that the 9/11 attacks and the ensuing war on terror included instances of American bravery and determination? Can we deny the notion that some soldiers and CIA agents put their lives on the line for others or in the pursuit of bin Laden? Although it may just be a small portion of truth – a truth which certainly also involves non-American heroism, and a more nuanced and controversial outlook on America's role in the Middle East – these films manage to convey a sense of the – perhaps more conservative – American spirit in the represented years. When taken together, however, their collectivity indicates that the war on terror was unquestionably righteous, justified, and necessary – which presents, with no other counter-narratives present, a limited perspective and over-simplified version of metaphoric expression. What these films tell us the most about is the truth regarding how American cinema has belatedly responded to the crisis of 9/11 and handled the war on terror in the second decade after the attacks – which does not seem to differ much from the rhetoric expressed by the Bush administration in the weeks following the crisis.

Collectivity

While each film brings on its own individual metaphoric interpretations of the war on terror, their collective performativity also plays a part in facilitating memories of the war. Rosenstone attests to the relevance of this collectivity, "To what extent will those films, taken together, relate to, comment upon, and add to the larger discourse" (2017 p. 119). For decades, theorists and pundits have debated whether Hollywood, and any well-earning film it produces, are inherently conservative – or if the industry acts as a left-wing system which constantly seeks to challenge core American beliefs and values (McSweeney 2014 p. 24). However, in recalling McSweeney's notion of the "master narrative", which involved hegemonic narratives of victimization and quasi-mythological approaches to the war, 9/11 and war on terror films have been dominated by the former. This holds true for allegorical depictions of the war as well as for the overt depictions seen in *ZD30*, *American Sniper* and *12 Strong*. These realistic portrayals, and their emphasis on American heroism, work in unison to create a synergetic effect which facilitates memories of the war on terror as a triumphalist fantasy by operating through these quasi-mythological mechanisms to "reaffirm

the power and moral authority of the United States in the national imaginary" (McSweeney 2014 p. 206).

Whether through Maya's courage and perseverance, Kyle's skill and emphatic need to protect, or Nelson's leadership and loyalty, audiences are granted their much-needed war on terror heroes. These protagonists grant this triumphalist "master narrative" flesh and blood and come to represent not just each of their individual stories, but the entirety of the war on terror, reducing – at times even omitting – its controversies and complexities. Whether being through Maya's lonesome quest to deliver justice, Kyle's overt resemblances to John Wayne, or Nelson's ability to navigate in foreign lands on horseback – all these war on terror narratives mimic the heroism of the westerns. These films prove that the western tropes are still very much alive in contemporary Hollywood productions and even have an influence in shaping audience's perceptions of historic periods and events. The already existing genre conventions of the western thus lend shape to war on terror depictions and contribute to how audience's come to perceive the conflicts in the Middle East. Faludi refers to the "immediate cultural responses that looked to film-westerns and their mythic depictions of the male hero as models for how to react" (Schopp & Hill 13). These cultural responses were evident in the ensuing period after the 9/11 attacks, as seen through Bush's "cowboy rhetoric", but as this paper has discovered, the same discourse can also be found in filmic depictions of the war on terror in the second decade post 9/11. The film industry has long established an oversimplified, easy-to-digest archetype which facilitates binary oppositions of good and evil – and the films analyzed in this paper support the notion that such archetypes have lingered on in Hollywood and continue to have an influence in shaping perceptions of history and war.

Tropes of victimization have been heavily influenced by the wave of Vietnam War movies from the 70's and 80's. Such elements are also evident in the analyzed war on terror films which embody victimization in different ways. Maya suffers the loss of friends and investigatory setbacks, Kyle also suffers the loss of friends as well as from PTSD, and Nelson's team suffers in the sense that they are greatly outnumbered and ultimately sent in to do a mission with a high mortality probability. As mentioned, while *ZD30* included torture as a valid interrogation method, the lack of blowback for the characters carrying it out attests to the film's brazen approach to the topic. PTSD can also be argued as an anti-war trope, however, Kyle's quick recovery from it makes this element take a backseat to the overall heroism of the narrative. This representation of a mental stress disorder also provides a false

perception of the seriousness of such disabilities. The PTSD is included just enough so that Kyle may become victimized – but not so much as to make it an anti-war film. McSweeney supports the similarities between the Vietnam War films and the war on terror films, and states that "It is arguably part of a conscious effort to reframe the events of the Iraq war and reclaim the conflict in the national imaginary in a very similar way to the process in which Hollywood engaged with the Vietnam War in films like The Deer Hunter and Platoon" (2017 p. 11).

A denial of the notion that American soldiers, in any way, had an advantage is also a common trope of the Vietnam War films which can be traced in the analyzed war on terror depictions. These have all adopted an underdog archetype which pits the brave few American soldiers against the legions of terrorist enemies without any allusion to military-technological or strategic advantages. While *12 Strong* presents a rewriting of the war to portray America as an underdog fighting and winning a war against all odds, *American Sniper* presents the American soldiers as victims both during and after their tours. Similarly, in all three films, the terrorist attacks on 9/11 are entirely unprovoked – further facilitating this victimization. Jones states that "repetition of genres is essential to mythmaking" (26) – and it is this exact repetition which these analyzed films accomplish in their collectivity. Even Maya, who is not a soldier herself, must overcome hostile run-ins, murder attempts and a reluctant CIA agency. These tendencies play into the overall narrative of victimization – where, even though Americans are seen torturing and killing several Afghans and Iraqis, they are still constructed as the sufferers of the war, "not, as one might expect, the Vietnamese, Iraqis, and Afghans who died and were wounded in their hundreds and thousands, if not millions" (McSweeney 2017 p. 9).

By victimizing the American protagonists, and thus generating sympathy for them, the films analyzed in this paper contribute to a remaking of the war on terror where America can now be construed not as a revenge-seeking imperialists, but as sufferers of foreign hostilities. As mentioned, all three of the analyzed films include explicit references to the 9/11 attacks. By repeatedly displaying these attacks, the films jointly solidify this victimization. American cinema, and war on terror films from the second decade post 9/11 thus "reproduce an uncritical and unreflective narrative of American victimization", and in doing so, also disconnects from the "complexities of the geopolitical arena" (McSweeney 2017 p. 11). Part of this disconnection entails the films' exclusion of any allusion to the fact that America had intervened in foreign countries prior to these attacks – which facilitates the

myth that the U.S. was "forced to enter into the geopolitical world against its will" (McSweeney 2014 p. 21). In this sense, through this victimization, all three films contribute to a justification of America's intervention in the Middle East and their 20-year mediation in these regions.

While each film presents the conflicts as necessary and justifiable, their collectivity attests to the lack of different interpretations of the war in the second decade post 9/11. This may be less problematic for the historian, who spends time researching various sources and interpretations – both written and visual – in an effort to comprehend the transpired events. However, for the non-historian, who may be much less inclined to research such topics, the mono-idealistic interpretation of America's role in the Middle East seen in these films may be granted more credibility through such repetition. Schlag states that *American Sniper* "falls into a larger recent trend of more positive portrayals of war and more specifically of a highly nationalistic and essentialist view of the conflict in the Middle East" (1378). While only addressing *American Sniper* here, what Schalg highlights also holds true for *ZD30* and *12 Strong*. These films, too, are part of a wave of films in the second decade post 9/11 which took on a much more patriotic and absolute view on the war on terror – one which differs from a more ambiguous wave of film from previous years. While many of the war on terror films from the 00's facilitated a similar patriotic portrayal of the conflicts in the Middle East, many of them also emphasized certain anti-war elements. Films such as *Redacted* and *Battle for Haditha*, for instance, depicted American atrocities which makes the wave of films more ambiguous. These films also include several depictions of the American soldiers as "war junkies", as Bjerre states "In this way, Haditha, and the other Iraq War films break new ground in their constructed authenticity and objective depiction of a controversial and unpopular war – a war fought by young men guided not by their moral compass but drawn to the addictive rush of adrenaline" (2011 p. 232). The protagonists in the analyzed films are far from these "war-junkies" seen in earlier depictions.

This paper argues that such conservative reconstructions are part of traditional and reactionary Hollywood behavior, and function as attempts to achieve mastery over the crisis of 9/11 and the perpetuity and uncontrollability of the war on terror. While the analyzed films were all based on true events, those events have been hand-plucked in a long-lasting, murky war in the Middle East which has entailed several controversial (or downright atrocious) elements that do not bode well for America's reputation if brought further into public light. It can be argued that the American accomplishments depicted in the analyzed

films – such as the discovery of bin Laden, and the story of the horse soldiers – are exceptions to the rule. However, through their representation of these events (and the lack of counter-narratives) these films convey that the war on terror was, in fact, dominated by moments of American victory. When viewed unitedly, *ZD30, American Sniper* and *12 Strong* tend to say more about what kind of story/history Hollywood wishes to convey, rather than what actually happened throughout those years of conflict.

The collective omissions of the analyzed films also further the wave's conservative interpretation of the war on terror. While *12 Strong* and *American Sniper* avoided the topic of torture altogether, *ZD30* similarly contributes to a forgetting of the many tortured detainees who did, in fact, not have any information to be obtained. In similar fashion, none of the films entail depictions of the many Middle Easterners innocents who were abducted by the American government and sent to black sites, or prisons such as Guantanamo Bay or Abu Ghraib, in the weeks and months ensuing the 9/11 attacks – without any kind of trial or prosecution. The films also omit the lies given to the public by the Bush administration concerning Hussain's involvement in the 9/11 attacks and Iraq's possession of weapons of mass destruction which laid the foundation for the invasion of Iraq in 2003. While the story of the horse soldiers took place before this invasion, *ZD30* and *American Sniper* do nothing to shed light on the controversial legitimacy of the incursion. This correlates to Rosenstone's assessment, as he highlights that the character-driven nature of the history film contributes to a disconnection between the audience and the conveyed history. Overall, the depictions in the analyzed films also contribute to a forgetting of the war's perpetuity and its lack of American success. While the war on terror was long and costly and has been labelled as (much like the Vietnam War) a stain on American national identity, these films present narratives that combat these notions. By cherry-picking events that allude to American success in the war and presenting them on the big-screen as part of a larger war on terror discourse, the films contribute to a historical dismemberment – and thus invite audiences to remember the conflicts in the Middle East as necessary, justified, and successful.

In returning to Schopp and Hill's assessment question of whether the depictions in focus offer confrontation of truth or act as "stratagem to avoid confronting the real" – *ZD30, American Sniper* and *12 Strong* fit the bill for the latter description. Their representation of the war on terror functions as a ruse that permits an avoidance of confronting the controversial, and complicated reality of the war on terrorism. Jones states that even though war on terror films vary in genre and themes, "the ideological structures

remain consistent: the United States is presented as a force of good combating a foreign force of evil, and even though war requires sacrifice, the moral rightness of the nation and its fight against terrorism makes sacrifice worthwhile" (175). This is certainly the case for the analyzed films in this paper as they present their protagonists enduring self-sacrifice for the good of the nation.

The 9/11 attacks exposed a national and cultural vulnerability and the U.S. responded by assertively placing male heroes at the forefront, as Bjerre and Faludi have discovered. Dodds states "The 9/11 attacks denied the opportunity for a showdown and henceforth Americans would have to restore their dignity and virility in different arenas" (1629). However, popular films that dealt overtly with the attacks or the following war on terror in the immediate ensuing years after 9/11 seemed to focus on a clear narrative of victimization. While this paper argues that elements of victimization have continued throughout Hollywood produced war on terror narratives, the analyzed films in this paper contrast these initial films by presenting triumphalist narratives infused with elements of victimization. Whether it be expressed by the triumph of discovering and killing bin Laden, Kyle's heroism and skill, or Task Force Daggers incredible success in the Middle East, the overshadowing element in second decade post-9/11 war on terror films is the celebration of American accomplishment.

Conclusion

The terrorist attacks on 9/11 plunged America into an urgent state of crisis. The ensuing war on terror, which started as a search for the criminals responsible, dragged on for more than twenty years and contained several controversial elements. These events have been expropriated for storytelling and thus left their mark on the real om popular culture, as seen by the vast amounts of terrorism literature, television serials, and Hollywood produced films. Such texts often portrayed the terrorist attack and the ensuing war as a Manichean struggle between good and evil – mimicking the rhetoric expedited by the Bush administration in the early 2000's. While an abundance of films concerning the 9/11 attacks and the war on terror were produced in the initial decade after the attacks, several more were also released in the second decade after. This paper has analyzed three of such works: Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), Eastwood's *American Sniper* (2014), and Fuglsig's *12 Strong* (2018). In attempts to investigate and answer how these films depict, and impact public perceptions of the war on terror, this paper has utilized theories and methodologies that relate to the

expression, context, and performativity of the texts. Such framework has been provided by scholars such as Rosenstone, Sørensen, Skinner, McSweeney, and others.

The mainstream film *Zero Dark Thirty* depicts the war on terror through the protagonist, Maya, the relentless and obsessive CIA agent dedicated to locating Osama bin Laden post 9/11. Maya functions as a manifestation of America's dedication and emotional attachment to finding this villain in the decade following the 9/11 attacks. Even though the war was still ongoing at the time of the film's release, it presents the war as past and completed through its narrative structure which ends with the killing of bin Laden – granting audiences some much-needed closure. The simplicity of its protagonist/antagonist structure reduces the complexities of the GWOT and thus facilitates much less ambiguous recollections of it. This simplicity of the narrative contributes to a remedial treatment of national trauma post 9/11. Complexities of the war on terror included the government's authorization of torture – which the film did depict. However, by omitting any signs of physical or mental consequences for the act, as well as excluding any moral reflections, and/or any characters who are explicitly against it, the film functions as a renegotiation of the anti-torture norm. As Maya condones and accepts the necessity of torture, the film invites audiences along in doing the same. In contrast to the Abu Ghraib photographs, where American GIs are seen smiling next to the tortured detainees, Maya – although accepting the necessity of the acts – does not take pleasure in watching them take place. Despite featuring a female protagonist, Maya's assertiveness, persistency, courage, heroism, and victory (which resembles the heroes of the old westerns) allude to the film's masculine patriotism which mimics the Bush administration's rhetorical reactions immediately post 9/11. *ZD30* thus facilitates recollections of the 20-year GWOT that are reduced to a triumphalist narrative where the Americans catch the bad guy and carry out justice for the good of mankind.

American Sniper presents another mainstream drama which depicts the war on terror through the perspective of a single character – Navy SEALS sniper, Chris Kyle – and his experiences in Iraq. Based on Kyle's autobiography, the film prioritizes his perspective and thus reduces the real-world complexities of the war to the experiences of one man. The film presents the war on terror through a western mythology by consistently framing Kyle as a John Wayne-type character. Kyle's constant longing to protect his comrades in the field further facilitates a portrayal that aligns with cowboy behavior in classic frontier narratives. Through such established western tropes, the film also presents the war on terror as yet another Manichean fight between good and evil, righteous and wicked, West and East. Just

like *ZD30*, *American Sniper* countered the previous wave of more ambiguous war on terror films by asserting a narrative dominated by American triumphalism. Chris Kyle thus acts as a masculine response to these previous, more vulnerable American soldiers. In this light, the film also functions as a remasculinization and healing of a demasculinized, post-9/11 America. The text also exhibits tropes of the "good war" – where the displayed patriotism, self-sacrifice, and victory stood as contrast to the contextual murkiness of the war on terror. The film glorifies protection, and highlights the courage, heroism, and skill of Chris Kyle, and in doing so, seeks to justify and necessitate the invasion – "transcoding a jingoist" view of the war in Iraq as well as the ongoing conflicts in the Middle East at the time of its release. While the film includes PTSD, a typical anti-war trope, Kyle gets over it rather quickly. This, along with the film's omissions of the use of torture, civilian casualties, American atrocities, and other aspects of the war which tainted America's iconography, contributes to a war on terror memory dismemberment. By also omitting certain xenophobic characteristics of Kylepresent in his autobiography, Eastwood gains the artistic freedom to create a character that grants America what it has been looking for since the war began – a war hero on a national scale. Through lionizing Kyle, *American Sniper* presents a patriotic and conservative interpretation of the war on terror which contributes to a reimagining of a war that has been labelled as a practice of imperialism.

12 Strong is a step further to the "right". Fuglsig's 2018 mainstream blockbuster depicts the real-life events of the Special Forces team that was deployed in Afghanistan shortly after the 9/11 attacks. This film also depicts the war on terror as a Manichean fight through its good-guy, bad-guy structure. By utilizing authentic images of devastation (including the 9/11 attacks) in the beginning of the film, the narrative solidifies this structure and invites audiences in recollecting the trauma caused by terrorists throughout the years – justifying America's intervention in the Middle East. The film facilitates heroic and triumphalist perceptions of the war through its depiction of Nelson and his team and their leadership, courage, skill, likability, and success against overwhelming odds. The film thus also mimics WW2 film tropes to package the invasions in the Middle East as virtuous and righteous. These tropes act as attempts to erase the stains on American iconography by presenting its soldiers as morally superior. The hegemonic portrayal of the American soldiers operates as validation for the country's right to pose themselves in places that "need" western intervention. By only depicting the successful, initial 3-week operation post 9/11, *12 Strong* excuses itself from omitting ambivalent elements that would lead to perceptions of the war as

an American failure – such as the fact that the conflict dragged on for twenty years, and that the Taliban reasserted control over vast amounts of territory after the US started withdrawing troops in 2011. In this context, the film functions as a conservative-satisfying narrative which justifies America's intervention in the Middle East, invites commemoration, as well as bolsters support for the ongoing conflicts in 2018, when ISIS was thriving. By presenting an American victory during the tail-end of an ambiguous war, the film reifies traditional ideals of American supremacy. The triumph of the horse soldiers is ultimately a triumph for America and similarly to *Zero Dark Thirty*, *12 Strong* functions as a transportation device which moves audiences to a reality in which the US got payback.

Repetition is essential to mythmaking – and these three war on terror films from the second decade post 9/11 do just that. By repeating a triumphalist narrative, infused with elements of victimization, they reconstruct memories of a war that has been much more ambiguous than its Hollywood representation. Through their rhetorical force as "authentic" depictions, these films synergize with one another and reimagine the war on terror. The lack of counter narratives in this corpus further lends to the films' make-believe credibility as accurate depictions of the war. While all films were based on true events, the events they portray – the catching and killing of bin Laden, Kyle's unique skill, or Dagger's 3-week operation – all represent cherry-picked instances of American success in a perpetual war filled with atrocities, ambivalences, and failures. The analyzed films follow suit with McSweeney's "master narrative" and thus prove that the belatedness of the depictions has not made a difference in the way they represent the war. In fact, they seem to have stepped further in the "right" direction, posing more triumphalist, patriotic, and conservative depictions of the war than those seen in the initial decade post 9/11.

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