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Of Monsters and Men: Forms of Evil in War Films

The present chapter engages with the formal framing of friend and foe in the war genre. Asserting the significance of film for cultural forms of memory and a politics of the past, I sketch out the generic conventions through which particular notions of self and other are inscribed, before I conduct an analysis of Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper* (2014) to flesh out what I term a cosmologic form of evil at play in the genre. Secondly, a reading of Nick Broomfield's *Battle for Haditha* (2006) introduces an understanding of evil as a systemic property of war independent of individual intentions. Finally, I suggest an inherent banality of systemic evil that becomes conceivable as embedded in mundane everyday routines rather than bound towards the exceptional.

1 War, Film, and History

Film, including fiction film, has emerged as an important medium for historical thinking and practice, and has attracted corresponding scholarly attention. From Rosenstone's (2006) inquiry into the medium-specific characteristics of film as a conveyer of historical knowledge, via Erll's (2010) and Landsberg's (2002) notions of movies as memory-making media and origins of prosthetic memories respectively, to Adkins and Castle's (2013) experimentally backed assertion of movies' ability to influence and change political attitudes, the moving image has acquired growing salience for studies of the interrelation between cultural expressions, history, collective identity, and cultural memory. Films about history, it seems, matter for politics of the past and as such merit "careful examination" (McCrisken and Pepper 2005: 8).

In his inquiry into the forms and functions of the historical Hollywood film, Burgoyne (2008:6) has argued for the genre's polysemic nature that enables both inscription and negotiation of various possible pasts in the light of the present. Drawing upon the thought of Mikhail Bakhtin, Burgoyne (2008:14) applies the concept of "genre memory" to assert a wider socio-political significance of formal aspects of Hollywood cinema. Rosenstone (2006) provides a similar argument when he states that historical films, in spite of their dramatic structure and ambiguous relation to historical research, "have an effect on the way we

see the past" (5). The present chapter builds on these advances and investigates a specific subset of the genre of the historical film – the war film.

Due to the significant sufferings inflicted by wars on both civilians and combatants, the need arises to retrospectively assign value to the devastations caused and to re-frame apparently arbitrary deaths and destruction as meaningful sacrifices suffered in the name of a collective greater good. Such acts of legitimizing wars, however, are not only retrospectively bound. As scholars such as Zur (1987) or Der Derian (2009) point out, culturally produced biased perceptions and attitudes are important ingredients in the planning and waging of wars, as well as in the retrospective inscription of value. Mainstream visual culture, argues Kozol (2014), is contested terrain where regimes of visibility and disappearance are inscribed, negotiated, and potentially subverted.

The generic war film plays an important role in the formation and challenging of a hegemonic visuality in relation to violent conflict. Westwell (2006), for instance, has argued that, "for all their protestations to the contrary, Hollywood movies tend to show war as necessary, if not essential, and present the armed forces as efficient, egalitarian and heroic institutions" (3). Eberwein (2010) adopts a more balanced position when he asserts that the Hollywood war genre functions like a myth that provides a way for a culture to productively "deal with the contradictions it experiences" and to "understand and negotiate current experiences" (7). Both authors, however, connect war films to the formation of particular worldviews and therefore treat them as important media of cultural memory.

How can the potential effects of war films be analyzed? Erll (2010) has introduced the valuable distinction between intra-, inter-, and pluri-medial levels of analysis to address possible memory-making potentials of films. The intra- and inter-medial levels invite for formal interrogation of the technical means and narrative tropes applied to cue a particular form of engagement with the past. While the intra-medial register focuses on how particular films predispose engagement with key characters, establish a particular structure of sympathy, or cue certain emotional and affective responses, an inter-medial analysis investigates how connections to preceding historical events are drawn and how issues of verisimilitude and authenticity are negotiated.

In historical films, the intra- and inter-medial levels create memory-making potentials by inviting audiences to perceive of the depicted persons and events as if they were realistic reflections of the past, and by emotionally and ideologically charging the presented historical narrative. However, as Erll (2010) suggests, only a third level of analysis – the pluri-medial dimension – can provide insights into whether, and if yes how, these potentials for memory-making are realized in specific individual or collective contexts of reception. Reviews, box

office numbers, educational packages, as well as empirical audience research, or studies of social media responses all fall within the purview of this contextual level as they allow for a cautious assessment of actual patterns of distribution, reception, and further dissemination. In the present chapter, I will limit my analysis to an assessment of the memory-making potentials motivated at the intra- and inter-medial levels of war films.

Erll's (2010) approach is indebted to a neo-formalist strain within contemporary film theory. Building her argument on Russian formalism, Thompson (1988) has argued that cultural expressions, film among them, have the inherent capacity to either reinforce or question received ways of seeing, thinking, and acting. According to her, one characteristic of artworks is that they can de-familiarize habitualized cognitive and perceptual schemata and force spectators to re-think and re-assess largely automated response patterns. On the other hand, however, mainstream works often acquire popularity by responding to, and thus strengthening, pre-established expectations and frames. I will here argue that popular war films adhere to conventionalized depictions of friend and foe and in this way not only ensure popularity, but also play into and reinforce received cultural and political frames of war.

2 The Genre of the War Film

What constitutes the genre of the war film? Tudor (1974) identifies one key problem regarding the concept of genre. The author argues that studies of film genres face an "empiricist dilemma" in that they are "caught in a circle that first requires that the films be isolated, for which purpose a criterion is necessary, but the criterion is, in turn, meant to emerge from the empirically established common characteristics of the films" (138). As a pragmatic solution Tudor suggests to "lean on a common cultural consensus as to what constitutes a particular genre and then go on to analyze it in detail" (138). In this reading, film genres emerge as contingent cultural conventions that constantly evolve in and through social practice, and that shape audience expectations. Regardless of the weaknesses of Tudor's (1974) framework, which for instance Neale (2000) pinpoints as a set of unanswered questions regarding how a common cultural consensus can be established or, what role the industry or other societal interests can be seen to play in the process, Tudor's pragmatic framework constitutes an applicable approach.

As such, the question of what constitutes a war film seems to entail an intuitive answer possibly reflecting a common cultural consensus: a war film is a film that deals with war, that is, with organized military endeavors of a certain

magnitude that involve the use of direct violence on a massive scale. Such a pragmatic definition seems applicable enough, but would refer to a wide set of films including historical dramas and reenactments, action flicks, science fiction and fantasy movies, as well as homecoming movies and movies about the home front.

For the purpose of the present chapter, I will follow Eberwein (2010), who provides a more limited definition that asserts a productive middle ground between excessively wide and extremely focused positions, and that gestures towards a common cultural consensus suggested by Tudor (1974). Eberwein (2010: 45) argues that the war genre includes films that either 1) focus directly on war and combat, 2) that follow soldiers' activities off the battlefields, or 3) that address the effects of war on civilians and human relationships. Eberwein connects the war film to preceding historical events and argues that their claims to verisimilitude entail certain potentials for socio-political impact. Similar considerations lead Burgoyne (2008) to treat the war film as a subgenre of the historical film.

As historical representations, many war movies are based on autobiographical accounts by soldiers and privilege their particular point of view on incidents of great collective significance. Often these partial perspectives are left unchallenged and are therefore implicitly objectified. This generic structure has two related discursive implications; firstly, it implicitly assigns secondary status to the experiences and competing points of view of non-combatants and enemies, and secondly, it translates the living and dynamic "communicative memory" (Assmann 2010) of a particular group of people who were directly involved in the represented events – in this case groups of soldiers – into a static and implicitly prescriptive cultural memory with implied relevance for an entire collective. In most generic war films such filters transform contingent and often contradictory war stories recounted by variously situated subjects into an objectified account of the war as it allegedly took place. This streamlining of messy and contradictory historical recollections into implicitly objectified, quasi-authoritative accounts has direct implications for the presentation of the friend and foe in these films.

3 Biased Structures of Engagement: Enemies in the War Genre

War films are "genre hybrids" (Pötzsch 2012: 158). They present what is framed as authentic reenactments of actual past wars, yet at the same time signal their own fictionality. This peculiar in-between position is negotiated at an inter-medial

level during opening sequences that connect the story-universe of the film to pre-ceding historical events and that provide normative and ideological orientation to viewers.

Pötzsch (2012) has introduced three rhetorical modes of memory-making in the war film: 1) an objectifying rhetoric that raises the impression of presenting a historical incident as it actually happened, thus tacitly excluding competing or problematizing positions, 2) a subjective rhetoric that presents past events as ex-perienced through a particular diegetic character, however without giving pre-tense of this being the only possible version of the events, and 3) a reflexive rhet-oric that invites an active form of reception and critical questioning of the medial frames of the presentation. According to Pötzsch (2012), mainstream war films usually cue an objectifying rhetoric that enables a clear distinction between friend and foe and allows for a disambiguating normative structure.

While the inter-medial level predominantly targets audiences' intellectual faculties and negotiates the relation between the diegetic universe of the film and an extra-diegetic historical-political reality, the intra-medial level employs a series of generic formal devices to enable an emotional and affective engage-ment of the audience with particular diegetic characters and events. In general, generic war films exhibit a biased structure of sympathy that enables access to and involvement with only one side of the depicted conflicts (Pötzsch 2011, 2013). A biased distribution of such means as slow motion, dwelling close-ups, sad or valorizing music, and certain narrative tropes, and figures such as the main adversary or the evil deed invite perceptions of only one side as human and worthy of empathy, while the respective opponents emerge as "ubiq-uitously absent" (Pötzsch 2013: 136) – invisible, inaccessible, and incomprehen-sible, yet at the same time potentially omnipresent as a deadly threat that can actualize anywhere at any minute.

In sum, the formal properties of the genre draw an "epistemological barrier" (Pötzsch 2011: 77) that veils the various subjectivities and the rationality of the other and that preclude affective engagement and empathy with this group. This rhetoric of othering invites for the perception of the respective enemies of the various soldier-selves populating mainstream war films as less than human – as "ungrievable life" in the sense of Butler (2009: 22) that can be killed or harmed without remorse or sanctions.

By such means, the generic Hollywood war film predominantly cues what Erll (2010) terms antagonistic and mythical memory-creating modes that invite for monolithic conceptualizations of historical wars as embedded in timeless Manichean struggles between mutually exclusive normative positions. Specific conflicts are thus re-articulated within cosmologic and religious frames that veil their concrete socio-economic and political contexts, while the respective en-

emies of the various soldier-selves are framed as motivated by an absolute form of evil that disables any form of interaction between self and other except massive violence deployed with the rightful objective of eradicating an unambiguous and immediate deadly threat.

Through its widespread adoption in war and action cinema, this particular biased representational frame plays into and potentially reinforces established cultural schemata and paradigm scenarios that aid and structure the conceptualization of new enemies and threats in real life and politics. Anker (2005) and Pötzsch (2011, 2013, 2014), for instance, have shown that the mythical-antagonistic rhetoric of generic film spills over into political discourse by habitualizing ultimately ideological positions and providing implicit plausibility to bellicose articulations by political actors.

The next section will conduct an analysis of Clint Eastwood's Iraq war movie *American Sniper* (2014). I will argue that the film predominantly reiterates generic conventions and transcodes the ambiguous politics and economics of the invasion into a cosmologic struggle between good and evil; however, I shall also suggest an alternative reading based on a re-interpretation of some of the cues and indices presented in the film.

4 The Good, the Bad, and the Helpless: Cosmologic Evil in Fallujah

Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper* tells the story of highly decorated US Navy SEALS operative Christopher Scott ('Chris') Kyle, who gained notoriety for being the most lethal sniper in US military history. Kyle served four tours of service in Iraq in the period 2003 to 2008 and allegedly killed approximately 160 enemies. He was highly decorated and was honorably discharged in 2009. Kyle was shot dead by a fellow veteran in 2013. Eastwood's film is based on Kyle's autobiography (Kyle, McEwen, and DeFelice 2012) and focuses mostly on combat sequences connected to his tours of service in Iraq, but interrupts these with sequences set in the Unites States that show his growing estrangement from family and civilian life.

In his earlier war films, *Flags of our Fathers* (2006) and *Letters from Iwo Jima* (2006), Eastwood thoughtfully addresses the various ambiguities and contradictions inherent in an apparently morally clear-cut struggle such as the Pacific theatre of World War II and carefully balances US and Japanese perspectives in a unique double-take on the events. In *American Sniper*, on the other hand, the director sets a quite different and far more assertive tone that transforms the var-

ious ambivalences and contradictions of contemporary urban counter-insurgency operations into a monolithic battle between good and evil. While *Flags of our Fathers* critically interrogates the power-laden processes of translating the memories and traumas of individual soldiers into cultural forms of memory that serve particular socio-political and economic purposes (Pötzsch 2013b), Eastwood's recent take on the Iraq War objectifies the individual experiences of a US special forces operative and transforms it into a metaphorical stand-in for the Iraq war and the global war on terror as such.

American Sniper cues a dichotomous moral universe that draws clear and unambiguous distinctions between friend and foe, good and evil, us and them. The film opens with a black screen and a distant voice chanting 'Allahu akbar,' thus indicating a Middle Eastern setting. As the churning sound of tank tracks blends with the voice, the image fades in and reveals a US armored vehicle advancing through an Arab cityscape. The opening scene then cuts to a rooftop where it adopts the perspective of a US sniper, Chris Kyle, surveying the slow advance of the US column. As he witnesses a young woman handing a grenade to an adolescent boy who starts running toward the US unit, Kyle is left with the difficult decision to trust his perception and shoot, or to risk the lives of his fellow soldiers.

The intense scene employs eyeline matches to focalize the situation through Kyle and thus align audiences to his perspective. This way, spectators are confined to the same set of information as the protagonist to evaluate what happens. As a result, a moral dilemma is created that makes audiences oscillate between two possible readings regarding the memory-making rhetoric of the film. Either, the film will deliver indices that Kyle's perception can be trusted, thus implicitly objectifying his gaze, or it will insert doubts framing his point of view as subjective and undermining the authority of his vantage point. A series of subsequent flashbacks that bring the viewer back to the time before Kyle's deployment on the roof remove such ambiguities and anchor the evolving narrative to a clearly normative moral and ethical frame. The repeatedly invoked trope of evil plays a key role in this process last but not least in preventing audience allegiance with the Iraqi enemy-other.

The first time evil becomes an issue is during a scene set in Kyle's childhood home, where an adamant and authoritative father-figure preaches a simple moral universe consisting of sheep, wolves, and sheep dogs. He claims that "there are people who believe that evil does not exist and if it moves over their doorstep, they wouldn't know how to protect themselves," before he explains that theirs is a family of sheep dogs containing evil and fighting on behalf of the weak. This simplifying triad is then extended to serve as a moral template

for the evaluation of Kyle's pending decision on the rooftop and of US counter-insurgency operations in occupied Iraq in general.

The connection of childhood morals to global politics is achieved during a scene showing Kyle's initial deployment to Iraq immediately prior to the scene on the roof. While the camera follows US soldiers approaching an urban battle space, a speech by the commanding officer anchors the ensuing narrative histor-ically, geographically, politically, and morally. The man states, "Welcome to Fall-ujah. The new wild west of the old Middle East," thus invoking the mythical-ideological frame of an expanding frontier of civilization familiar from the West-ern genre, before he moves on to morally disambiguate the situation. Among other things he determines that the city of Fallujah has been evacuated and that those left "are here to kill you," before he restates the immediate objective of US snipers to protect and safely bring home Marines. As such, the scene reit-erates the simple cosmology of sheep, wolves, and sheep dogs introduced through the figure of Kyle's father, and redeploys it as a frame to evaluate US military conduct in Iraq.

Implied in this particular disambiguation of both battlefield and war dis-course is an epistemological grand claim, namely the unquestioned ability of key actors – personified through sniper Kyle – to clearly distinguish between sheep, wolves, and sheep dogs at any given time and place. The story thus cir-cumvents the truly difficult issue of a contingent nature of perception that would make someone's sheep dog another person's wolf and avoids the trou-bling possibility of misapprehension. Instead, a specific, religiously inspired moral-ideological cosmology developed in the context of a 1970s patriarchic nu-clear family in rural Texas is extrapolated to frame ethical decisions on the bat-tlefield and to predispose understandings of issues pertaining to international relations and military interventions in general.

The subsequent decision by Kyle to kill first the advancing boy and then the mother running after him and picking up the grenade is thus disambiguated and implicitly justified. Conveniently, the grenade carried by the boy actually ex-plodes in safe distance from the advancing Marines, leaving the audience in no doubt regarding the accuracy of Kyle's perception and the ethical viability of his decision. In addition, during a verbal exchange with another soldier after the incident, Kyle's only reaction to his deed is that "this is evil like I've never seen before," thereby effectively deflecting such pressing and challenging questions as to what severe grievances and despair might bring a young woman to do something like sending a little boy to death in this manner. As usual, the invocation of a cosmologic and absolute category of evil effectively confines crit-ical thinking, disables conscious deliberation, and precludes any form of empa-thy with opponents who are narrowly framed as monstrously threatening subhu-

mans. By these means, *American Sniper* cues a deeply antagonistic mode of memory-making in the sense of Erll (2010) and establishes unambiguous normative poles that structure and predispose audience evaluation of the depicted characters and events.

From this initial kill-scene onward, Eastwood's film follows a predictable generic script that puts the unchallenged hero Chris Kyle up against a comic book-like motley crew of evil "main adversaries" (Pötzsch 2013a) such as the militant Zarqawi, who is "financed by Bin Laden, trained by Bin Laden, loyal to Bin Laden," his enforcer 'the butcher' with the unpleasant habit of (among other things) slowly killing children with an electric drill, the supposedly superior enemy sniper Mustafa with the ability to hit US soldiers across vast distances, and the inevitable rows of faceless opponents in menacing advance toward US held positions. These characters not only brush over the manifold subjectivities and complex socio-political interests of the Iraqi resistance, they also create the (wrongful) impression of a symmetrical struggle between equally equipped, trained, and motivated groups of combatants.

The rhetoric of enemizing deployed in *American Sniper* becomes palpable in several later scenes, as well. One example is the encounter with Sheik Al-Obeidi, who after an intense argument agrees to help the US soldiers locate their main adversary Al-Zarqawi. In the scene, the Sheik's acting reveals an almost metaphysical fear, not of the US soldiers, but of Al-Zarqawi's deputy. With eyes wide open and heavily gesticulating, Al-Obeidi employs religiously inspired terms when referring to 'the butcher' for instance as "the despaired one" or as "son of the devil." This way, the figure of an Iraqi spiritual and cultural authority, a sheikh, is employed not only to frame the enemy as a monstrous band of subhumans of mythical qualities, but also to present Iraqi society and traditions as incapable of efficiently resisting the evil growing in their midst, thereby reiterating the implied need for a band of sheep dogs to enter the scene and re-establish order.

A second illustrative scene merits mentioning in this context. Later on in the movie, Kyle and his men advance into 'the butcher's' stronghold – a small urban shop. Through the choice of setting, lighting, and deployed props this scene blurs the boundary between the war film and the horror genre. Upon entering the narrow and darkened rooms of what appears more like a subterranean den than an urban building, the US soldiers encounter among other things the tortured remains of a man hanging in heavy chains from the ceiling and long

rows of severed human heads and limbs that are neatly stapled on shelves.[1] To-
gether with the sequence where 'the butcher' takes revenge on the cooperating
sheikh, Al-Obeidi, by slowly drilling the latter's teenage son to death, the
scene in the shop most clearly reframes the complex socio-political, economic,
and cultural antagonisms and interests behind the Iraqi insurgency as a simple
Manichean struggle between timeless and mythical forces of good and evil.
Through these "evil deeds" (Pötzsch 2013a:130 – 131), a normative frame is put
into place that effectively disables any approach to conflict resolution except
the total annihilation of either the one side or the other, thereby implicitly jus-
tifying the massive violence deployed by the protagonist as ultimately benevo-
lent, necessary, and without an alternative.

Both Burgoyne (2008) and Eberwein (2010) have used Bakhtin's concepts to
assert an inherently polysemic and multi-vocal nature of cultural expressions
that, regardless of their possible dominant rhetoric, always leave spaces for ne-
gotiated or oppositional readings (Hall 1977). This observation retains its validity
in relation to the ways through which generic films predispose understandings of
shared pasts, including the framing of the Iraq war in *American Sniper*. As I will
argue below, in spite of the dominant rhetoric of othering that has been outlined
above, Eastwood's movie also opens certain potentials for contradictory experi-
ences and critical rearticulations that invite for a more reflective treatment of
Kyle's life story and the US invasion of the country.

American Sniper predominantly focalizes the diegetic universe through Chris
Kyle and does little to challenge, problematize, or de-naturalize his particular
outlook. This way, the protagonist's individual vantage point is implicitly objec-
tified and left standing as the only valid account of what actually happened. As
has been argued above, this rhetorical choice also confines the other to the one-
dimensional roles of either evil adversary or helpless victim. There are, however,
a few scenes in particular in the second part of the film that invite a more reflec-
tive stance by presenting counter-perspectives without immediately undermining
these with reference to Kyle's hegemonic worldview. I will briefly describe three
such scenes that invite a questioning of the hegemonic regime of visuality out-
lined above – including the way the Iraqi other is framed.

During a mission briefing at the beginning of Kyle's second tour to Iraq, one
soldier compares war to an electric wire "that makes it difficult to hold on to any-
thing else" and asks the question "what are we doing here [in Iraq]?" The pro-
tagonist immediately tackles the mounting doubt in a familiar, assertive manner,

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1 Of course, after the ensuing shoot-out, 'the butcher' finally succumbs to Kyle's righteously de-
ployed firepower.

once again invoking evil as the paramount justification of a US (and his own) presence in the country: "There is evil here. We have seen it!" This time, however, the articulation of Kyle's hegemonic outlook on the world is not left unchallenged. Instead, the soldier sarcastically responds that "there is evil everywhere" and only reluctantly follows Kyle's prompt to commence the next mission. The whole scene inserts a notion of hollowness into Kyle' discourse and introduces an inert, gnawing opposition that, however, remains unacknowledged by the protagonist.

A second scene that raises doubts regarding the ultimate validity of Kyle's perspective on things is set during the funeral of one of the soldiers who died under his command. The mother of the deceased asks in tears the by now more than rhetorical question of "when does glory fade away and become a wrongful crusade, or an unjustified means that consumes one completely?" This speech can be seen as counter articulation directly aimed at both the religiously inspired main supporting narrative of the war on terror and the objectified self-understanding of Chris Kyle. In presenting this fundamental challenge from the elevated enunciatory position of the grieving mother of a US soldier who had died in service of his country charges it with significant memory-making potential. More importantly, however, this time the words remain standing without any opposition while Kyle, who himself had been identified with a crusader's cross on insurgent leaflets, is filmed standing stiff and apparently incapable of processing the mother's words. A similar counter-perspective is launched in a later scene by a soldier who lost his eyesight under Kyle's command and who responds to the protagonist's assertion that "the bad guys will pay for what they did [to you]" with a bitter "Hooray! Legend!" Again, this challenge remains without objections from Kyle.

Finally, after Kyle's third tour of duty the homecoming episode ends with another brawl between him and his wife in the course of which Taya once again demands of him to become "human again." The scene hints at the fact that throughout his tours of service, Kyle's multiple identities as father, husband, lover, and more might have been reduced to a one-dimensional militarized subjectivity not entirely unlike his various evil opponents. As such, the religiously inspired discourse of violence, de-humanisation, and evil apparently has come full circle, devouring its hero in the process.

All the sequences described above serve to undermine the reliability of the protagonist and thus invite a possible transition from an objectifying to a subjective memory-making rhetoric that opens for other than one dominant vantage point on the presented events. The scenes not only cast doubt on Kyle's role as an unquestionable hero and efficient sheep dog in a dichotomous narrative of good and evil, but also enable a re-reading of the sequences caricaturing

and demonizing the Iraqi other. In light of the now undermined position of Kyle, the exaggerated scenes demonizing his enemies emerge not as providing access to the true nature of the other, but as a mere reflection of Kyle's ultimately idiosyncratic view of the world. What *American Sniper* thus makes accessible are the protagonist's various filters put into place to sustain his sanity and self-esteem in face of his own growing de-humanisation, and which make it possible for him to continue functioning under increasingly unbearable pressure.

When presenting Kyle's final tour of duty, however, Eastwood's film does much to brush over such potentials for ambiguity and contingency. The protagonist overcomes significant obstacles and without losing any more men kills his second main adversary, the sniper Mustafa. This deed finally enables him to come home, indicating that not war as a system has estranged him from civilian life, but the continued threat to his fellow soldiers posed by the mythical insurgent sniper. This apologetic frame is further supported in a conversation between Kyle and a psychiatrist, where the former states that what haunts him are not the people he killed, but the US soldiers he could not save, thus again framing Iraqi lives as ungrievable (Butler 2009) and effectively preparing the protagonist for his post-service career as supporter of veterans struggling with civilian life. This scene in particular makes Barker's (2011) criticism of Katheryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* (2008) applicable to *American Sniper* as well. Barker (2011: 157) writes that "what this film [*The Hurt Locker*] celebrates, is a character who is *the living embodiment of post-traumatic stress disorder*, but who is treated by the film as not disordered at all" (original emphasis). As such, paraphrasing Barker, it can be argued that both Bigelow's William James and Eastwood's Chris Kyle function as "poster-boy[s] of the Iraq war generation" (157).

I will now turn to Nick Broomfield's *Battle for Haditha* and show how the technique of multi-focalization makes accessible the various subjectivities and complex interests of the enemy. By these means, the film enables a transition from a cosmologic to a systemic notion of evil in war.

5 Refocalizing Friend and Foe: Systemic Evil in Haditha

Nick Broomfield's *Battle for Haditha* (2007) is a fictionalized re-enactment of an incident in the Iraqi town of Haditha on 19 November 2005, when US soldiers killed 24 civilians during a protracted raid to apprehend insurgents responsible for an IED attack. In his film, Broomfield largely refrained from shooting on a set and predominantly relied on non-professional actors – US veterans formerly sta-

tioned in Iraq and Iraqi refugees who had fled the country. This led to a peculiar authenticity of the presentation and entailed some stunning accomplishments by the cast. As Broomfield explains on the commentary track of the DVD edition, he often simply let the camera run to capture performances that quickly developed their own unintended dynamics.

From the beginning, *Battle for Haditha* cues a reflexive engagement with the past. The film opens with a sequence of mid shots showing the faces of individual US soldiers speaking directly into the camera as if in a documentary. The men present their idiosyncratic views on the Iraq War and voice a nihilistic outlook, void of national pathos. They exhibit a profound inability to express any vital reasons for or positive consequences of a US presence in the country, but at the same time de-humanize the Iraqi opponents. This doubleness indicates at once critical distance to, and total immersion in, a discourse of war. The next scene, showing the same men in Humvees driving full speed through the desert reiterates this ambivalence. While use of language and performances exhibit a hegemonic form of militarized masculinity, the song the soldiers listen to – *Lies, Lies, Lies* by the industrial metal band *Ministry* – clearly articulates a damning critique of the instrumentalization of the events of 9/11 for the sake of constructing US national unity and justifying wars and foreign interventions.

In stylistically oscillating between conventions of documentary and drama and in deferring audience allegiance through the double-framing of diegetic characters, Broomfield's film cues a reflexive memory-making mode that invites for critical distance from the events presented on screen. As such, *Battle for Haditha* motivates active audience engagement with representational frames and with the film's various possible relations to political and historical context. This critical focus extends to the presentation of US soldiers, Iraqi civilians, and insurgents at an intra-medial level.

Broomfield's film employs a form of triple focalization to develop its narrative. The camera consistently invites viewers to engage and ally with three different groups involved in the depicted conflict. Formal devices such as shot/reverse-shot sequences, eyeline matches, dwelling shots, or close-ups are used to carefully introduce and enable empathy and understanding with US soldiers, Iraqi civilians, and Iraqi insurgents alike. The viewer is provided with an inside perspective on the rational considerations, varying objectives, constraining factors, and contextual limitations that mould each group's behaviour in the evolving escalation, thus precluding the emergence of a simple dichotomous narrative.

Battle for Haditha carefully explains reasons and context behind the specific conduct of each party. The film shows that the US soldiers are forced to operate under severe pressure, with lack of sleep and support increasingly causing psy-

chological problems and hampering their ability to make responsible decisions. When one US soldier asks for medical assistance, the film reminds him (and the audience) of Marine Corps policy that only allows for visiting a psychiatrist in Iraq after the respective tour of duty is over, meaning the soldier would have to stay in the country for an additional period of time to receive treatment. The presentation of such facts effectively undermines a hegemonic discourse of war framing military units as brotherhoods of equals guided by compassionate and responsible leaders, while at the same time providing the necessary context to absolve the ground forces of the ultimate responsibility for the subsequent escalation.

The Iraqi insurgency is similarly presented as composed of various different factions and identities – religious fanatics, cynical politicians, and individuals who were deprived of social status and economic means of sustenance – and their performances are carefully contextualized. The main insurgent character, for instance, despises both Bush and al-Qaeda as he attempts to manoeuvre through the complex terrain of post-invasion Iraq with the single objective of sustaining himself and his family. In particular the scenes where he, after the successful attack on US forces, returns home and meets his little daughter strongly invite for audience allegiance with this character. His subsequent dialogue with the local Sheikh (and military and spiritual leader of the insurgency) reveals the former's contempt for the means adopted by his superiors, who remorselessly sacrifice local families to unite the factions of the city behind their cause against US forces, and exploit his own economic hardships for the same purpose. Here, war becomes conceivable as a complex political economy that develops its own unintended dynamics and increasingly predisposes the performances of all involved actors.

Battle for Haditha also focalizes through Iraqi civilians and in this way refrains from framing them as helpless victims. When the Iraqi family central to the narrative observes the deployment of an IED on the road bordering their property, Broomfield films their discussions and debates concerning the issue. This allows for a detailed presentation of the various pressures predisposing the family's response and provides sound explanation to the apparently hostile decision not to warn US troops. The Iraqi civilians are presented as making conscious and informed decisions promising the least damaging outcome in a messy and confusing political situation. Also, in contrast to a generic presentation of Middle Eastern settings, the family's deliberations include men and women at an equal footing, thus effectively precluding the emergence of a gendered stereotype regarding Iraqi civilian life.

During the scenes of violent escalation in Broomfield's film, the camera repeatedly jumps back and forth between the subjective perspectives of all three

involved parties, allowing constant access to the considerations, motivations, doubts, and fears of characters belonging to each faction, and illustrating the quickly narrowing paradigm of available actions. Long dwelling shots, sorrowful music, and short sequences showing mutual care are distributed equally among the three groups, humanizing each side and facilitating emotional involvement with each involved character.

In formally inviting for distribution of audience loyalties and emotional attachment between three opposing groups, Broomfield motivates critical reflection and enables an analytic distance to the drama presented on screen. As a result of the employed multi-focalisation, the audience is overdetermined by three competing and, indeed, mutually exclusive normative frames. *Battle for Haditha* constantly defers the formation of an ultimate audience allegiance and reinserts a notion of contingency into mediated accounts of history that preclude the formation of an overarching hegemonic perspective. History with a capital 'H' is thus dispersed into a multitude of competing idiosyncratic histories.

In doing this, the film also enables the emergence of a new perspective on evil in war as independent of the malicious intentions of individual perpetrators. Rather, evil emerges as the result of complex patterns of support and restraint that systematically reduce the paradigm of available options for all involved groups and individuals until only wrongful decisions can be made. In a manner comparable to Philip Haas' *The Situation* (2006), Broomfield's *Battle for Haditha* remorselessly exposes how war as a system fosters violence, frustrates even the best intentions, and therefore inevitably leads to disaster. Raising awareness of this peculiar logic is a precondition for a fundamental challenge of war's peculiar hegemonic visuality emanating from mainstream representations.

Battle for Haditha assigns ultimate responsibility for the depicted atrocities to the socio-political and cultural entities preparing and overseeing war. In the film, both US and insurgent leaderships are depicted as coldly assessing the unfolding events from a distance – the elevated positions of drone footage and a minaret respectively. This remote access brings forth a new epistemological barrier as characteristic of war – a barrier not between good soldiers and evil insurgents, but between abstracted and abstracting US *and* insurgent authorities attempting to control, and gain advantages from, the tragic situation on the one hand, and concretely situated individuals enmeshed in, and directly affected by, the escalation on the other.

Broomfield's film highlights the ultimate necessity of an abstracting, remote perspective for the justification of violence and profoundly challenges the ethical and epistemological basis of military leadership on both sides. Even though individual soldiers and insurgents effectuated the killings, the film assigns ultimate responsibility to the positions of power that motivate and predispose

each individual subject's destructive performances. As such, rather than following the examples of Stone or de Palma, who in *Platoon* (1986) and *Redacted* (2006) launch a pseudo-criticism of war by safely confining the depicted atrocities to the malicious intentions of a few evil men among US forces, Broomfield humanizes the perpetrators and presents US soldiers as equally exploited and caught up in the destructive logics of war as their Iraqi counterparts, thus sensitizing audiences for the self-perpetuating nature of all forms of violence.

Through the technique of multi-focalization, *Battle for Haditha* brings forth the individuality and humanity of *all* sides in war and undercuts simplifying dichotomizations that legitimize massive violence as necessitated by a timeless and incomprehensible, cosmologic form of evil. As such, the film enables the emergence of the ethical requirements posed by encounters with the unique face of the other in the sense of Levinas (1999) – the face that makes "the invisible death of the other […] 'my business'" (24), and facilitates an "ambivalent witnessing" in the sense of Kozol (2014) that loosens the representation of suffering from a sentimental gaze as the legitimizing frame for liberal interventionism. Thus, the film constitutes a profound challenge to the rhetoric of demonization characteristic of the Hollywood war film.

6 Forms of Evil in War: From Cosmology to Banality

The present chapter has presented two possible readings of Clint Eastwood's Iraq war movie *American Sniper*. A dominant reading draws upon generic cues that invite for an objectification of protagonist Chris Kyle's subjective, idiosyncratic perspective on the war that is transcoded into a deeply antagonistic, religious-mythical understanding of US military endeavors as directed against unambiguously evil, threatening adversaries. An oppositional approach, on the other hand, homes in on the, arguably few, scenes that allow for a gradual undermining of the reliability of the protagonist's vantage point, and that therefore enable a cautious critique of received discourses of self and other at war. Each reading is structured by a different notion of evil in war – either cosmologic and dwelling in particular malicious individuals, or systemic and the result of extra-individual pressures and frames.

This second understanding of evil in war – evil as a result of systemic patterns of supports and constraints – is the theme of the second film discussed in the present contribution – Nick Broomfield's *Battle for Haditha*. Here, external socio-political and economic frames emerge as the ultimate source of evil acts

in war. Broomfield's film highlights how war recontextualizes the well-meaning intentions and daily practices of situated individuals, transforming them into apparently evil acts. As such, war as a system becomes conceivable as fostering the very performances and subjectivities it retrospectively claims to be directed against. War becomes conceivable as a self-enforcing, vicious circle – the result of dynamic interplays between biased representations, false justifications, and misguided performances.

In such a systemic understanding, evil in war acquires yet another quality – it can be seen as banal in the sense of Arendt (2006). In her report from the 1963 trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem, she consistently denies the Nazi leader and prime organizer of the Nazi concentration camps the status of arch-villain in a mythical-religious sense. Rather, Arendt points to the non-spectacular nature and inherent mundaneness of Eichmann's acts and highlights the plain bureaucratic routines and rationality behind the atrocious system of death developed in the Nazi state. According to Arendt (2006), Eichmann's deeds did not require any form of evil genius or hate, but only "remoteness from reality, [...] thoughtlessness" (288) and an "extraordinary diligence in looking out for [one's] personal advancement" (287) within a system that was entirely taken for granted and not questioned.

In this manner, then, evil requires a form of selective blindness that disregards the humanity and singularity of particular human beings and enables their processing as an abstracted, anonymous mass through culturally and politically sanctioned mundane routines. This understanding of evil acts as the result of structural misrepresentation and systematic misperception merits a truly troubling question to Eastwood's *American Sniper*. On the basis of what has been said so far, do not Chris Kyle's celebrated killings resemble precisely banal acts of evil? Do his self-aggrandizing actions, justified through caricatured constructions of the other as comic-book like villains, not ultimately serve his own career more than the people of Iraq or the security of the United States? Is the mindset of alleged heroes such as Chris Kyle – and of those sanctioning his deployment both politically and culturally – really as distinct from Eichmann's as we would like to believe?

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