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American Identity, Threat Perception, and Film

Empowering the Productive Visualities of American Foreign Policy

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I. Introduction

There is no such thing as America: it is a state imagined, according to Campbell (1992: 91), "the imagined community par excellence." However, there exists in America a long-prized notion of the United States as an exceptional nation – the "city upon a hill" – carried to great heights by unbounded optimism and the ceaseless pursuit of success (Bayles, 2014: 9). This is just one imagination of America. Depending on whom you ask, "America" may be a liberator or an oppressor, honorable or corrupt, heaven or hell (*American Dreamers*, 1996). Or it may be none of these. Or it may be all of them at once. No matter, there remains a resilient belief in American societal discourse that – despite the varied and disparate conceptions of *America/American* – such identities *do* exist, and they are distinct from those in the rest of the world (*American Dreamers*, 1996).

Identity shapes the way we act and interact, so it is especially important for International Relations (IR) scholars. Critical and constructivist research has shed light on the construction of individual and state identities, and how they constitute both the way states conduct international politics and the way theorists think about IR (Reus-Smit, 2005: 193). Specifically, a focus on the link between social norms – their conditions of emergence and continued (re)performance – and the state Self reveals the imagined nature of identity and rebuffs deterministic conceptions of international order (Reus-Smit, 2005: 200). Thus, by breaking away from IR's conventional approaches and disciplinary constraints – by approaching thought that Ranciére (2010) terms "indisciplinary" – theorists can problematize the understanding of "reality-as-it-is" (Bleiker, 2001: 524), and locate power and space for change in places once considered insignificant or immutable by mainstream thinkers.

Lately, some scholars have turned to *aesthetics* – images and visual culture – to uncover the (re)productive power of identity (cf. Baudrillard, 1991; Campbell, 2007; Hansen, 2011; Shapiro, 2008; Weber, 2006; Žižek, 2002). Further, with many of these studies focused on photographs and news media, a call for more research on the geopolitical implications of *contemporary* films has emerged (cf. Bleiker and Kay, 2007; Campbell, 2003; Campbell, 2007; Erickson, 2007; Weber, 2006; Williams, 2003). It is this pivotal nexus of geopolitics and aesthetics – specifically contemporary Hollywood "war" films – that my dissertation explores. Sparked by Campbell's (1992) comment that America is "the imagined community par excellence," my dissertation will explore *how exactly* America imagines itself and its "enemies" through film and the geopolitical implications of such imaginations.

My paper examines three films: *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), *Lone Survivor* (2013), and *American Sniper* (2014). These particular films were selected for four reasons. First, there exists no rigorous study of these films (or any war films since 2011) and their relationship with American identity and foreign policy. Second, each was produced after President Barack Obama assumed office. Accordingly, the films, and more importantly the Americans watching the films, have a sort of "reference point" from which to think.[1] How and to what degree do these films reify or obscure the conception of American identity put forward by President Obama, particularly in contrast to that put forward by his predecessor, George W. Bush? What do the films tell Americans about themselves – who they were, who they are, and who they should be (Weber, 2006)? Third, these films were the most popular contemporary war films in their respective years: each played in over 2,900 theatres in the U.S., featured world-famous actors, contended for (and, in the case of *Zero Dark Thirty* and *American Sniper*, won) Academy Awards, and factored into a societal discourse that extended far beyond a discussion of "film."

[1] According to Frampton (2006: 319-20), filmic "thoughts" come in the form of aesthetic and sonic qualities.

The movies provoked wider debates about America's past, present, and future, especially on America's "role" in international affairs (McCoy, 2015), the ethics of the use of torture (Freedman, 2013), and the portrayal of Americans and Arabs in the media (Green, 2015). In line with how Callahan (2012) frames his argument, these films are not important because of their direct impact on official Foreign Policy. Instead, they are important because they are popular and affect the "foreign policy" (Campbell, 1992) of how Americans define themselves, interact with Others in "social, educational, and commercial spaces," and (re)produce boundaries (Callahan, 2012: 40). Last, these films depict America at "war" in the Middle East. Consequently, they are the most overt representations of the men and women chosen by and in service of the U.S. government: Navy SEALs, CIA officers, and diplomats. The Americans encountered in these films, then, come to represent more than just characters. They represent *America*, both in the "reality" of the films – as emissaries, soldiers, and family members – and in the larger, more opaque space that is societal discourse – as ideal types and legends, referents and myths.

This dissertation, then, is a response to the call for more research on how "The West" – particularly the U.S. – and "Islam" or "Arabs" have been constituted "as radically different transnational communities" (Reus-Smit, 2005: 211). My study springs from Cynthia Weber's *Imagining America at War* (2006), arguably the most comprehensive treatment of the geopolitical implications of film to date. Weber, in her examination of war films released between 2001 and 2004, noted that the imagination of American identity had departed from the World War II conception of a morally certain America, full of "white, happy, heterosexual nuclear [families]" (Weber, 2006: 151). She concluded that the "new" American identity in the post-9/11 world was "complex, fragmented," and morally uncertain (Weber, 2006: 9), rendered ambiguous due to the post-9/11 discourse of "no clear enemies, no clear home fronts, no clear

families… [and] no clear boundaries between any two terms" (Weber, 2006: 151). I will employ an aesthetic analysis of contemporary war films since 2012 to show how the imagination of the American "Self" has begun to shift away from the post-9/11 conception Weber identified, and back towards the more traditional, World War II identity of clear-cut enemies and moral certainty.

The next section delineates and justifies the rigorous theoretical base and aesthetic method upon which I will build my argument. Section III establishes the past and current notions of American identity to contextualize the epoch within which these films were created and released. Then, in Section IV, I analyze American identity through *Zero Dark Thirty, Lone Survivor*, and *American Sniper*. In the last section, I conclude my arguments.

II. Theory – Imagination and Re-Production of Power

To treat the study of international politics as if it is an impartial, scientific undertaking – as many rationalist and positivist mainstream scholars do – is to fall into what Shapiro (2010) calls the discipline's pre-Kantian "epistemological slumber." By not exploring the roots of our knowledge, Shapiro argues, we fail to recognize "unofficial" sites of power and the ways in which our world is "politically partitioned" (Shapiro, 2010). One mode of political partitioning arises through the imagination and performance of state identity.

Imagination and Identity

Campbell (1992: 91) posits that all states are "imagined communities" with no "ontological being apart from the many practices that constitute their reality." He groups these state-producing practices under two categories: (1) *Foreign Policy*, or the official, state-initiated discourses, and (2) *foreign policy*, or the social construction of difference, of rendering something or someone *foreign*, "which provides a discursive economy upon which conventional Foreign Policy operates" (Power and Crampton, 2005: 198). While both Foreign Policy and foreign policy allow the state to solidify its boundaries (physically and psychologically) and identify friends and foes, it is Foreign Policy that has received most of the research within the IR discipline. However, equally important in identifying the locus of state imagination are the unofficial sites of foreign policy. Some of these sites – like the news media, poetry, and film – can oftentimes go unrecognized as power (re)producers, as they come dressed as entertainment and popular culture. Yet they embody much more: these are sites where the state is imagined, where "its foundational myths and national exceptionalist lore" is substantiated (Ó Tuathail and Dalby, 1998: 3).

Imagination, then, when viewed through a critical prism, becomes vital to state formation and re-formation. Since no nation has one singular identity, but has, in fact, many diverse and competing identities, geopolitical imaginations permit a state and its citizens to conceive of a cohesive, distinct national identity and "nation-space" (Ó Tuathail and Dalby, 1998: 3). In other words, the imaginations – the "boundary-producing political performance[s]" – make possible the very ideas of the state, the domestic, and the foreign (Ashley, 1987: 51). They empower what Campbell (1992: 137) labels "discourses of danger," boundary-producing distinctions like civilized/barbaric and good/evil that privilege the first term in each binary to the Self and relegate the second to the Other, securing self-certainty in the process.[2] Therefore, while Self identity is important, equally so is the constitution of an Other – as Connolly (1991: 64) writes, identity "requires difference in order to be." A more complete understanding of the modes of state imagination of Self and Other, then, crucially advances both the project of International Relations (the discipline), as well as our grasp on how specific states (re)produce state identity and, in turn, state power.

The Aesthetic Turn

Roland Barthes (1972: 109) contends that language – which takes many forms including music, fashion, and film – serves as a critical vehicle through which society "understands" itself and creates meanings, identities, and power differentials (Turner, 2009: 66). It is with this understanding of art as discourse that social scientists have begun to analyze the *aesthetic* – which includes all "images, narratives, and sounds" (Bleiker, 2001: 510) – to understand the (re)production, fragmentation, and/or destruction of state power and identity (cf. Campbell, 1992; Rose, 2001; Weber, 2006). Though aesthetic analyses can take many forms – and I will

[2] As Laffey (2000: 431) points out, there need not be a "doer behind the deed." The boundary-producing performances are not so much intentional practices by state officials or society as they are "repeats and mimes" of socially-understood "realities."

clarify my method in the following subsection – their underlying philosophies have tremendous overlap.

Aesthetic analyses, like many critical approaches, emphasize that "the real is always a matter of construction" (Rancière, 2010: 148) and, in so doing, allow us to "reassess the realities of world politics" and power relations (Bleiker, 2001: 524). Make no mistake: art forms, being the boundary-producing performances that Rancière (2010) and others argue them to be, do not intentionally (or even necessarily) generate a political response or impulse. Instead, art trickles into societal discourse – including, as explored in this paper, foreign policy – and allows for "a new landscape of the visible, the sayable, and the doable" (Rancière, 2010: 149). By taking note of the power of the visual, an aesthetic analysis exposes the "subjective origins and values" of how we see what we see (Bleiker, 2001: 515).

My work assesses movies because they have a unique capacity to viscerally bring "realities" (but not the Reality) that most people will never experience or verify to the local movie theater and into our imaginations (Benjamin, 1968: 238). In particular, I examine wartime films made after 2011 that deal with the United States' conflicts in the Middle East. The films – simply due to their subject matter, setting, and discursive emergence – enable the viewer to not only imagine the "reality" in the Middle East without ever travelling to the region, but to also "[construct] the notion of 'home' in the process" (Campbell, 2007: 358).

According to Eisenstein (1988: 159), films are consequential because they "convey on the screen in tangible sensual form the pure, dialectical essence of our ideological debates." As such, the object of my study will not be to examine the degree to which the "reality" of each film aligns with Reality, nor will I account for the *auteur*. Instead, I will focus solely on how each film's aesthetic – the cinematography and associated sounds – enables the viewer to (re)circulate

or discard certain conceptions of the American *Self*, as well as the Arab Muslim *Other*, and how these identities influence foreign policy. The next section explicates the precise aesthetic method that will allow me to explore these discursive formations.

Reading Film

My method engages the same two-part, interpretive aesthetic approach followed by a number of post-structural theorists (Campbell, 2007; Campbell and Power, 2010; MacDonald, Hughes, and Dodds, 2010; Shapiro, 2008; Weber, 2006), labeled *Discourse Analysis I* by Gillian Rose (2001: 135). Discourse Analysis I, first, reads recurring signs and themes within the film by using what Rose (2001: 33) calls *compositional interpretation*. To do so, the "reader" must choose *stills* from the movie indicative of these recurring themes, and record each image's key aesthetic devices like content, color, framing, focus, and sound.[3] The reader then has a typological canon – a set of visual indicators – with which to determine the image's "cultural charge" (Turner, 2009: 68) and recognize discursive formations (Rose, 2001: 137). These discursive formations are identified primarily through patterns of repeating "[orders], correlations, positions, and functionings" within the film (Rose, 2001: 137).

While *Discourse Analysis I* will be my approach to film analysis, it is certainly not the only one. Rose (2001) identifies some of the alternatives – content analysis, psychoanalysis, and semiology being the most common – but they fall short because they do not readily allow for a broader reading of the visual as it relates to discourse and society, specifically geopolitical identities. For example, even a rigorous content analysis, as Robert Weber (1990: 72) suggests, lacks an understanding of those subjects left *out of* the frame of the camera, and so becomes less effective in understanding the image's social implications. A psychoanalytic approach (see

[3] Much of the vocabulary used in my analysis is self-evident or will be defined in-text. But, for an in depth summary of terms and methods, refer to Rose (2001).

Žižek, 2002), too, foregoes a thorough realization of cultural and geopolitical effects by focusing more on an individual's subconscious associations, which manifest as both dubious and highly technical unless expertly wrought. Semiology, while perhaps closest in nature to Discourse Analysis I, exists in such a theoretically complex space that its use in this dissertation would overwhelm any potential discursive, geopolitical analysis. Further, these three alternatives only account for the image itself, whereas Discourse Analysis I accounts for the visual as well as its complementary dialogue and sound. This point is critical, for movies are a "synthesis of all the arts," a blend of photography, theatre, music, writing, and fashion (Metz, 1982: 43). To ignore any part of a film, including the soundtrack and dialogue, would be to ignore potential sites of power.

Essentially, Discourse Analysis I searches the film for what Metz (1982) terms *scopic regimes*. Scopic regimes are visualities that structure the image in a way that permits "certain objects to be seen in determinate ways" (Campbell and Power, 2010: 168), and are therefore potent discursive formations. Specifically, as Michel Foucault suggests, by influencing the contours of discourse, scopic regimes have the power to subtly discipline the viewer's sense of Self and Other (Rose, 2001: 137). Thus, as past scholars have done, I will flag and challenge any apparent hegemonic scopic regimes, as those can be particularly powerful in (re)producing or diffusing visualities that are otherwise taken for granted as objective. By using Discourse Analysis I to analyze *Zero Dark Thirty, Lone Survivor*, and *American Sniper*, I will explore the ways in which America and its "enemies" are imagined.

Though scopic regimes may be interpreted as stand-alone image affects within singular films, they are in fact part of a much larger *visual economy* (Poole, 1997: 8). By understanding scopic regimes within a visual economy – not simply a component of the "image space," but a

member of an organization of "materials, technologies, institutions, markets, social spaces, [and] affects" (Campbell, 2007: 361) – we bolster our analysis of their discursive emergence, especially within the realm of foreign policy. It becomes clear that these visualities not only make possible certain discursive formations, but they are also *made* possible by discursive formations. So, just as images produce power relations, power relations produce images (Campbell, 2007: 361). On that account, before any aesthetic analysis can be performed, one must take stock of the broader cultural and political context within which films interact and compete.

Above I have shown that recent developments within the IR discipline warrant more research on film's intersection with geopolitics, specifically as it relates to the reproduction and dissolution of identities and power. Furthermore, I have justified the use of an aesthetic approach and outlined the methodology I will use to evaluate my films. In the next section, I contextualize the social, cultural, and geopolitical conditions under which the films were produced and released.

III. Contextualizing the *Structure of Feeling*

Cynthia Weber's *Imagining America at War* (2006) is the most recent, comprehensive treatment of film's effect on American identity performance and international relations. Weber illustrates how post-9/11 war films imagine American identity in starkly different ways than films in the pre-9/11 period. She contrasts the discursive formations that emerge in post-9/11 films – ones that portray an uncertain America with "no clear boundaries between any two terms" – with a post-WWII discourse of a morally certain America (Weber, 2006: 151).

To Weber, post-WWII America was supremely confident in its liberal diplomatic agenda of humanitarianism and felt unambiguously responsible for all the world (Weber, 2006: 152-3). This traditional American identity was upended by 9/11: the very idea of "America" became threatened, insecure, and vague (Weber, 2006: 117). To Weber, the post-9/11 films are important because, by exploring fears of *unseen* Others, they enabled Americans to think about vigilance and pre-emptive justice during a time when American troops were surging into countries that had not yet attacked, or even directly threatened, the United States (Weber, 2006: 130). Additionally, many of her films locate the Other *within* the Self, further complicating the reductive, morally charged dichotomies emphasized by Edward Said (1978) of good/evil, inside/outside, civilized/barbaric, and West/East. Ultimately, Weber concludes (from her films) that America's greatest enemy is not an external threat but an internal one: "America," the imagined identity. In aspiring to an identity of an exceptionally moral America – proved to be an impossibility both on the level of "being an identity" as well as that of "being absolutely good" – America's foreign policy foresight becomes blinded by ambition (Weber, 2006: 167).

The discursive formations Weber finds in her films – "America" as its own enemy, ambition-induced blindness – comprise a similar *structure of feeling*[4] (Williams, 1977) to the one that emerged during Bush's (43) presidency. Most notable was the disappointment felt by many Americans in their country's international conduct, and the blunders due to America's own missteps (Newport, 2008). While the U.S.'s offensive in Afghanistan swiftly derailed the Taliban and flushed al-Qaeda from its breeding ground, U.S. forces were soon met with a strong counter-insurgency, protracting the occupation long past its anticipated end date. The ensuing operation in Iraq, though supported initially by the U.S. Congress (VandeHei and Eilperin, 2002), became a symbol of disillusionment after it turned out that the Pentagon had "lied and manipulated intelligence to further its agenda of removing Saddam [Hussein]" (MacKay, 2003). Bush's "War on Terror" received added censure in 2004 when photos emerged depicting the torture of prisoners by U.S. military personnel in the Abu Ghraib prison facility (Hersh, 2004). In 2005, similar accusations of human rights violations were levied against the U.S. detention camp in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba (Harris, 2005). By April 2008, Bush's overall approval rating was one of the lowest ever recorded at 28%, a far cry from his record-setting 90% rating following 9/11 (Newport, 2008). Many Americans were disappointed with a president whose moral clarity was wrung thin by overextension and an ambition to play "world police."

Part of what typified Bush's foreign policy doctrine was the boundary-producing rhetoric of *Us versus Them.* Just after the 9/11 attacks, Bush addressed "every nation" in stating, "Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists" (Bush, 2001). Bush reaffirmed his discursive construction in the 2002 State of the Union address, when he branded the states that harbored terrorists as the "Axis of Evil" and proclaimed them at war against "us" (Bush, 2002). It was

[4] Williams (1977: 128-135) defines *structure of feeling* as "the distilled residue of the organization of the lived experience of a community over and above the institutional and ideological organization of the society."

through this vein of divisive rhetoric that citizens, intellectuals, and politicians asked, "Why do they hate us?" (Said, 2001). Some began to find purchase in seemingly "visionary" works like Lewis' *The Roots of Muslim Rage* (1990) and Huntington's *Clash of Civilizations* (1993), both academically censured works that pitted Islamic civilization against "the West" (Said, 2001).

This rhetorical tone changed drastically, however, when Obama won the presidency in 2008. Considered a victory of "national catharsis," Obama's presidency offered "Hope" and "Change" in a time seemingly defined by misstep after misstep (Nagourney, 2008). Obama shifted the foreign policy rhetoric by decreeing a "new era of responsibility" necessary, notably a "new era of peace" with the Muslim world "based on mutual interest and mutual respect" (Obama, 2009a). He vowed to remove all troops and end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan (Rosenberg and Shear, 2015), pledged to close Guantanamo (Bruck, 2016), and even prohibited the phrase "War on Terror" within his administration (Wilson and Kamen, 2009). Perhaps most telling was Obama's "New Beginning" speech, given at Cairo University, in which he asserted that "America does not presume to know what is best for everyone." He then reiterated his promise to reduce U.S. military and diplomatic intrusion in the Arab world (Obama, 2009b). Obama's rhetorically "new" America seemed to stand opposite Bush's reality: Obama's was measured, humble, and inclusive, while Bush's was impulsive, manipulative, and polarized.

Today, near the end of Obama's presidency, though troop levels are down in the Middle East, American forces still occupy parts of Iraq and Afghanistan. Guantanamo, too, remains open, another self-described sore spot for the Obama administration (Bruck, 2016). Moreover, just months after the President equated al-Qaeda off-shoots in Iraq with members of a "jayvee team"[5] (Remnick, 2014), ISIS (an al-Qaeda off-shoot in Iraq) declared a caliphate in June 2014,

[5] In the U.S., a jayvee (JV, Junior Varsity) sports team consists of those players deemed inadequate for placement on a top-level high school or college team.

began to conquer territory in the Middle East, and has since become the world's preeminent terrorist threat (Pew, 2016). In light of these and other "threats," the percentage of Americans who support increased defense spending has reached its highest level since October 2001, less than a month after 9/11 (Pew, 2016). Just as Americans were when Weber (2006) conducted her study, today they are apprehensive and uncertain about who they are and the role they ought to play in the world (Pew, 2016).

Such is the atmosphere in which the films analyzed in this dissertation – *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), *Lone Survivor* (2013), and *American Sniper* (2014) – were and are viewed. This context is instrumental to a discourse analysis, as it illuminates America's structure of feeling: supportive of a president who represented a "new" America, who promised to revive the nation from its international embarrassments, who expounded a discourse of mutual understanding and benefit, rather than *Us versus Them*. Still, it is an America that, at the end of the Obama era, feels more uncertain about its identity than it has since 9/11. The next section of my dissertation evaluates the above films for their geopolitical implications, noting how each allows the viewer to imagine America, and how these imaginations interact with past and present structures of feeling. Throughout the analysis, I locate and unpack hegemonic scopic regimes, patterns of filmic and sonic associations, and visualities that (re)produce boundaries, empower discursive formations, and carry geopolitical implications that extend beyond the films themselves.

IV. Imagining America Through Film

Before I begin my analysis, it is imperative that I acknowledge my method's caveats. First, my analysis in no way suggests that these three films *determine* American identity or in some way influence all Americans. Likewise, I do not claim that my interpretations are the only ones, or even the "right" ones. Films allow for a host of possible readings. Ergo, these films are important not because they establish a singular, indisputable American identity, but because they provide added contours for such an imagination. Further, without an abundance of reference points with which to evaluate the conflict in the Middle East apart from official statements and news media, these films provide truths, though not the Truth (Callahan, 2012: 44), in which viewers are immersed in the lives of American men and women who, too, evaluate the contours of what it means to be a good, ethical "American" in the midst of the Middle East conflicts.

Second, I do not evaluate the Truth – the authenticity, the real-ness – of these films, as this detracts from a full understanding of the discursive and geopolitical impact of the films. What I am exploring in this dissertation is how repeated visualizations of *Self* and *Other* through hegemonic scopic regimes allow (re)productive, discursive space for American identity to solidify. Additionally, I do not address the auteurs of each film. While their identities and intentions may have influenced their films, these connections are tenuous and play a minimal role in connecting a viewer with the aesthetic. What matters is on the screen, not behind the camera.

Third, throughout my analysis, I use the uppercase forms of *Us* and *Them* (and their variants) to refer to the American Self and foreign Other, respectively. The terms are not to be understood in the literal sense, but instead as discursive formations. They are, therefore,

illustrative of constructions of belonging and difference, as may be perceived by Americans watching the films. Further, they are not indicative of the author's disposition.

Finally, I choose to evaluate contemporary war films – all allegedly based on true events – because they deal with the direct past and explicitly associate with the United States. In choosing this genre, I do not argue that it is the only one that imagines America and its enemies. One could equally locate geopolitically charged discourses of American identity, as Erickson (2007) has, in the sci-fi, superhero, or animated genres. While these and other genres do matter, affording them a comprehensive analysis falls outside the scope of this dissertation. Therefore, I focus on films that are most unequivocal in their American-ness, most eager to acknowledge their truthfulness, and most immediate in their relevance: *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Lone Survivor*, and *American Sniper*.

Zero Dark Thirty – *2012*

Zero Dark Thirty follows a defiant, young CIA agent, Maya (Jessica Chastain), through various Middle Eastern countries in her decade-long hunt for Osama bin Laden, and culminates with a successful operation in which Navy SEALs kill bin Laden. Nominated for five Academy Awards including Best Picture, the film was the highest grossing contemporary war film released in 2012. It pulled in nearly $96 million at the U.S. box office and ran for 103 days in 2,946 theatres (IMDb, 2016a).[6] The film's popularity was due largely to its subject matter: marketed as the story of "The Greatest Manhunt in History" (Moviefone, 2012), *Zero Dark Thirty*'s release came the year after Americans celebrated bin Laden's demise (Carey, 2011). So, the film warrants analysis because of its popularity in the U.S. and its depiction of heroic Americans doing exceptional things.

[6] The average "wide-release" movie runs for 28 days in around 2,000 theatres (Fahey, 2015).

The film opens with over a minute of audio clips of emergency calls made on September 11th by victims – *American* victims – inside the World Trade Center towers and the hijacked airplanes. Accompanied by a black screen, these calls are affective in a way that the endlessly looped videos of the falling Towers have long ceased to be. They "show us through sound what we couldn't see with our eyes" (*9/11: Phone Calls from the Towers*, 2009): the helplessness and terror of individual Americans, just like Us. In the very next scene, this pain is juxtaposed with the pain of torture. However, in a neat act of subversion, it is no longer Them making Us suffer, but the other way around. The scene – and the many torture scenes that follow it – is cruel, vivid, and ugly. Through the contrast in these first two scenes, *Zero Dark Thirty* (*ZDT* hereafter) paradoxically both justifies and condemns torture, as revenge for 9/11 on the one hand and as morally deplorable on the other.

To understand how *ZDT* imagines America's use of torture – especially in the wake of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo – we turn to the protagonist, Maya. She, like most Americans watching the film, is a newcomer: the first torture scene we see is the first torture scene she sees. During the scene, in which Maya's partner Dan (Jason Clarke) interrogates suspected terrorist Ammar al-Baluchi, Maya stands withdrawn, cloaked in just enough light to be complicit, but far enough away to absolve herself of wrongdoing (Fig. 1). Signaling discomfort, she closes her body by crossing her arms and even covers her eyes, unable to watch the trauma. The camera, being the viewer's lens onto the torture, mirrors Maya's perspective: whenever she looks away, steps back, or crouches down, we (through the camera) do the same. In identifying Maya with us, the viewers, *ZDT* enables us to see the use of torture not as a necessity, but as cruel and unusual, an outmoded practice. Maya's reactions fall in line with the "new" American identity that emerged after the failures of the Bush administration and gained traction in Obama's run for the

White House: fervent for justice, yes, but exercising responsible, measured, and ethical conduct while seeking it.

Fig. 1. Maya watches Dan torture al-Baluchi (*Zero Dark Thirty*, 2012)

The next two torture scenes take greater steps towards imagining a new, unifying America by visually portraying Maya (the American *Self*) and al-Baluchi (the Arab Muslim *Other*) on the same level, and us with them. When al-Baluchi stands, Maya stands. When al-Baluchi goes to the ground, Maya drops, too. When he sits, so does Maya. When Dan kicks al-Baluchi's seat out from under him, Maya – in the very same moment – jumps from her seat in shock. Perhaps most telling is the dehumanizing sequence in which Dan wrangles a naked al-Baluchi with a dog collar and drags him on all fours around the room, before stuffing the suspect into a small, hot, wooden box. Throughout the scene, the camera compares al-Baluchi's fear with Maya's, one shot after another. As al-Baluchi comes closer and closer to being stuffed inside the dark box, Maya backs up, step-by-step, deeper into a dark corner. By the time Dan seals the box

shut – removing al-Baluchi from our view, sending him into complete darkness – Maya has retreated so far into the corner that she, too, is imperceptible (Fig. 2). So, because *ZDT* begins by aligning Maya with the American viewers, the film, through Maya's subsequent association with al-Baluchi, transitively allows Americans to imagine a connection with the Arab Muslim Other – as sympathetic Americans seeking a mutual understanding.

Fig. 2. Maya deep in the corner (*Zero Dark Thirty*, 2012)

It is important to note, too, that Dan extracts no information from al-Baluchi through torture. Once Maya takes charge, though, and speaks eye-to-eye with al-Baluchi over an al fresco lunch, the prisoner begins to talk. This scene reinforces the imagining of a "new" American who seeks common ground with the Other. Unlike the torture scenes, the aesthetic of this scene signals a relatively even power differential. The light is natural and uniform, rather than a harsh contrast of light and dark. Maya respects al-Baluchi by donning a head covering and allowing

him to eat, drink, and smoke. Maya, too, visually upstages Dan, indicating the superiority of her "new," sympathetic method over his "old," violent one (Fig. 3). Her portrayal affords American viewers a visual example of the "new" American: one who aligns with America *and* the world.

Through the remainder of the film, the simultaneous alignment of Maya with the American *Self* and the Arab *Other* recurs so often that it must be labeled a hegemonic scopic regime. As the movie progresses, Maya increasingly blends the boundaries between Us and Them. At one point, while watching Arabic-language TV, she wears a full burqa (Fig. 4), popularly known in America to be worn in conservative Islamic states, and increasingly associated with Islamic extremism (Haddad, 2007: 255). At first, she is unrecognizable. But a close-up on her face and eyes, followed by a close up of her shoes – distinctly American, black Converse Chuck Taylor All-Stars – reveals Maya, the American CIA agent. The direction of the shot subverts our expectations. The very symbol that Americans might associate with conservative Islam – with the Other, with the Axis of Evil – turns out to be worn by a patriot, an American hero. Maya is not the "red-blooded" American hero featured in the war movies and American westerns of yore. She is a new type of hero, a Self who does not just understand the Other, but who disregards the Self/Other distinction altogether.

Fig. 3. Maya's "interrogation" of al-Baluchi (*Zero Dark Thirty,* 2012)

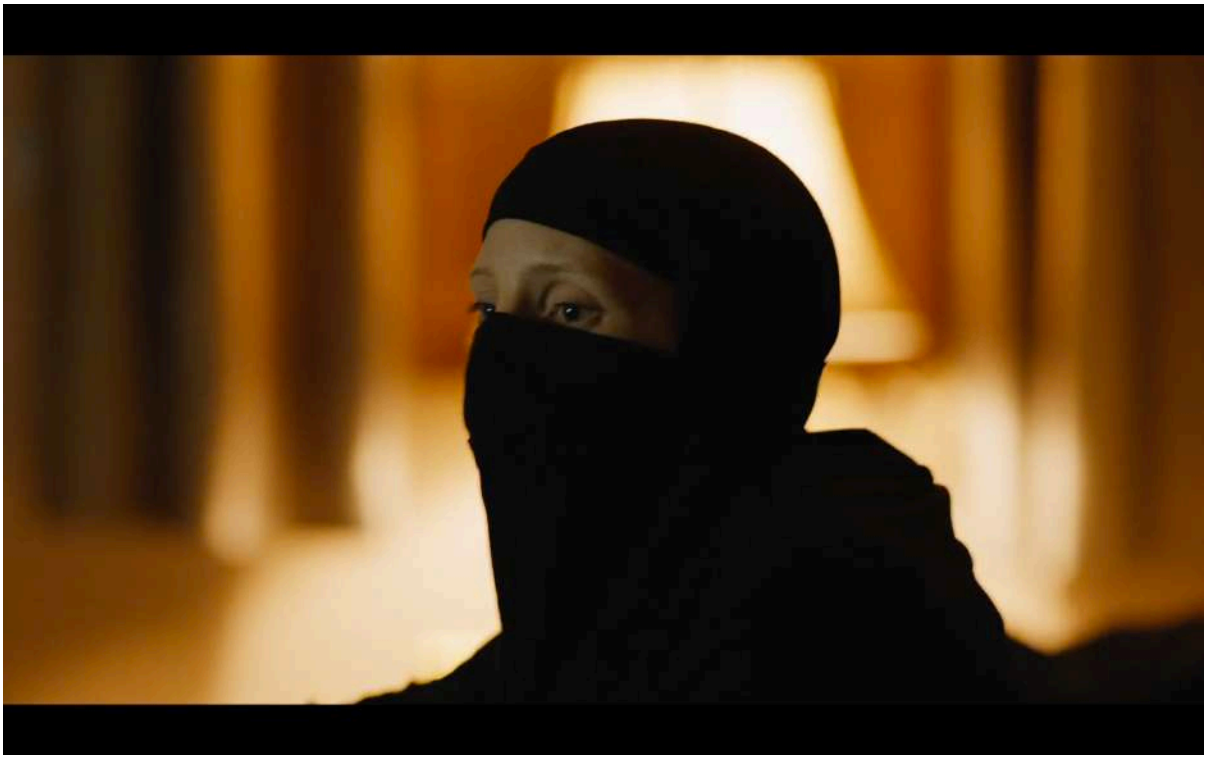

Fig. 4. Maya in a burqa (*Zero Dark Thirty,* 2012)

That said, while *ZDT* does imagine a new, responsible, and tolerant Self through Maya's sympathetic scopic regime, the way in which the film frames the Other*,* on the whole, is remarkably crude. Arab Muslims – suspected terrorists or otherwise – are consistently dehumanized and rendered suspicious. Even when Arab Muslims are not in a torture chamber, across the interrogation table, or carrying out a suicide attack, *ZDT* sights them by looking down on them from above, observing them through windows and screens, or watching them on surveillance video. These scopic regimes are apparent during the search for bin Laden's messenger in Peshwar. As undercover CIA agents circle a crowded Peshwar market in a van, we view mobs of Pakistanis from above and from inside the van. Both visualities are problematic. The bird's-eye view privileges the observer over the observed, giving the American viewer power over the Other below. The van shots further incriminate the Other, for, as Amoore (2010) states, the act of "vigilant watching" through windows draws a clear separation "between self and other, homeland and strangeland, safe and unsafe, ordinary and suspicious" (MacDonald, Hughes, and Dodds, 2010: 248). When we do see individual Pakistanis – instead of mobs – they appear just as suspicious: one shot frames two Pakistani men watching the marketplace through blinded windows (Fig. 5). The blinds obscure everything but their eyes – just as a burqa would – a confronting visuality because it makes it "impossible to see the face of the Other, while in no way impeding 'their' looking at 'us'" (MacDonald, Hughes, and Dodds, 2010: 6). These repeated visualities from above and through windows perpetuate the boundary-producing discourse of Self/Other, and allow Americans to suspect every Other as a threat – as associated with bin Laden – no matter their innocence.

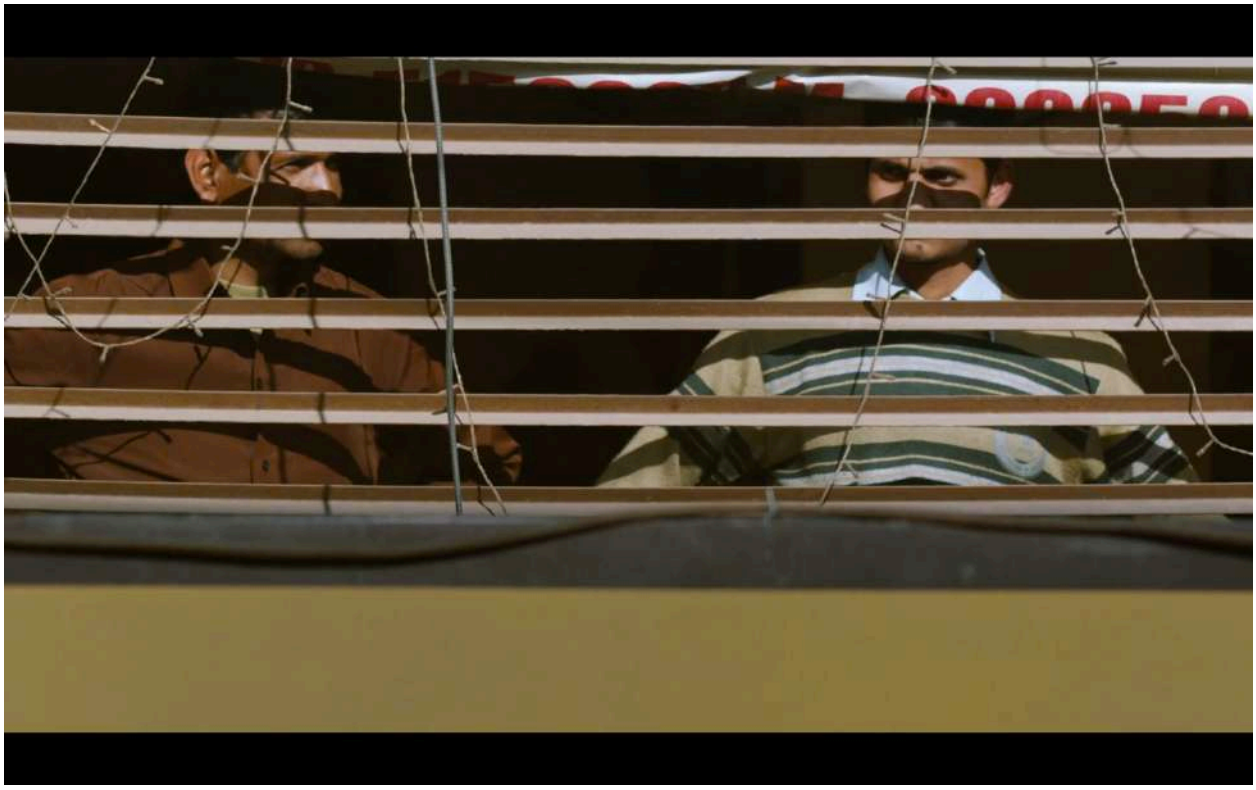

Fig. 5. Pakistani men in Peshawar (*Zero Dark Thirty*, 2012)

By casting all Arab Muslims as threats, *ZDT* justifies their treatment as animals. One series of shots at a CIA black site starts with an overhead shot of caged suspects wearing orange jumpsuits, followed directly by a shot of caged monkeys on the same black site, followed by a third, wider shot where Dan watches the caged monkeys as guards watch the caged suspects. The scopic regime in this montage is important for two reasons. On a fundamental level, this scopic regime allows the viewer reinforce the subjective visuality that all Arabs are or ought to be associated with animals. On a deeper level, though, the regime questions the very visuality it seems to reinforce: Are Arab Muslims – terrorists included – *so* different from Us? Are they *really* like the monkeys in Dan's cage? Or are they like Us, like Maya, like Americans? By explicitly, almost ironically, equating the caged suspects with the caged monkeys, *ZDT* simultaneously upends and revives the antiquated Self/Other, Man/Animal boundary.

The two scopic regimes identified in *ZDT* seem to contradict each other. Through one, Americans can imagine a "new" Self as progressive, ethical, and embracing Islam. Through the other, they view the Islamic Other with suspicion, as a threat to be caged, reinforcing the boundary-producing binary of Us versus Them. Contradictory though the regimes may seem, they are not. *ZDT* broadens the contours of what Americans can imagine to be "American" in the post-Iraq and Afghanistan period: while *We* have changed for the better – We understand and respect Islam and Arab culture – *They* have not. They continue to plot against Us, to hate Us. Yet in spite of this, *ZDT* argues that Americans ought to maintain their moral fortitude and not sink to Their level. The new American, then, while seeking mutual respect with the Other, remains distinctly American. Maya is one of Us, not one of Them. This duality is significant as it imagines an American Self more exceptional – and an Other more dangerous – than post-9/11 films did (Weber, 2006), marking a shift back to a morally certain American identity.

The film explicitly relays Maya's American identity just before the bin Laden raid, as Maya talks with a group of SEALs. It is one of the few times she is entirely cast in sunlight – smiling big, wearing new gold-rimmed aviator sunglasses (Fig. 6). Perhaps more notable, though, is what she *is not* wearing: a head covering. It is clear: those were temporary, a means to an end. Powerful, too, is the reference the film makes by framing her as it does. Shot straight on – as an equal, as an American – and flooded in light, Maya, her smile, and her aviators pay homage to another American hero: Maverick (Tom Cruise) in *Top Gun* (1986). *Top Gun* is a film soaked in American-ness, ingrained in patriotic pop culture, so much so that it was selected for the Library of Congress' National Film Registry for being "culturally, historically [and] aesthetically" noteworthy (Barnes, 2015). It presents, though Maverick, the "American hero" in the classic, post-World War II fashion as Weber (2006) conceived of it. Maya's comportment, in

this moment, parallels Maverick's in *Top Gun* (Fig. 7) – confidence high, smiling, face framed by gold-rimmed aviators. She is, as he is, distinctly and resolutely American. Maya doesn't just *look* like Maverick; Maya *is* Maverick. The new American hero is not so "new" after all.

Fig. 6. Maya before the bin Laden raid (*Zero Dark Thirty*, 2012)

Fig. 7. Tom Cruise as Maverick in *Top Gun* (1986)

Lone Survivor – *2013*

Lone Survivor tells the true story of a Navy SEAL team's unsuccessful mission to take out a Taliban leader in Afghanistan, Ahmad Shah. Reinforced by a star-studded cast – Mark Wahlberg, Taylor Kitsch, and Emile Hirsch – and two Academy Award nominations, the film was the top performing contemporary war film released in 2013. Due to its popular success – it grossed over $125 million in the U.S. and ran for 107 days in 3,285 theatres (IMDb, 2016b) – and its visceral representation of America at war, the film merits evaluation for its imaginations of American identity.

When we first meet the four protagonists – Murphy (Kitsch), Luttrell (Wahlberg), Axe (Ben Foster), and Dietz (Hirsh) – they are asleep on Bagram Airbase in Afghanistan, cloaked in warm morning light. This visuality humanizes the heroes. Then, the camera pans through each room and we see photos of families, friends, and home pinned to the walls. Hardly a frame passes without subtly including a symbol of America– whether it's a miniature American flag pinned up next to the photos, a flag held *in* a photo, or even a photo of Ron Burgundy (Will Ferrell), the main character of the popular American comedy *Anchorman* (2004). American viewers, then, can identify with the soldiers both as humans and fellow Americans: they live in similar homes, enjoy the same sports, and watch the same movies. These American referents serve as "un-waved" flags (Billig, 1995), patriotic symbols that have a tendency to go undetected. They "live" in the background (Fig. 8), but nevertheless allow Americans to subconsciously (re)produce their American identities, to bolster their "sense of belonging in a banal, unnoticed manner" (Phillips, 2012: 29-30). The entire film, in fact, can be read as one large un-waved flag: unless we, as scholars, are conscious of the film's scopic regimes that allow

"certain objects to be seen in determinate ways" (Campbell and Power, 2010: 168), we will remain ignorant of their reproductive power.

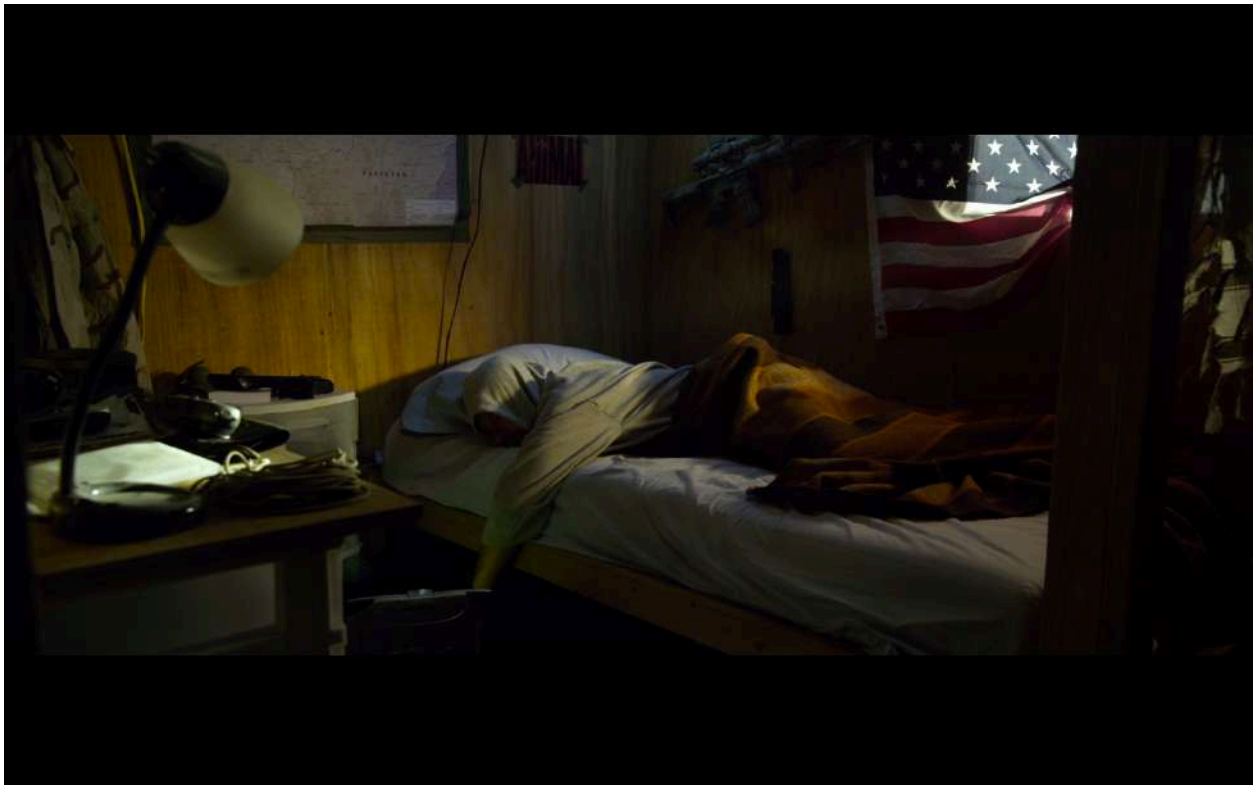

Fig. 8. Axe sleeps beneath an un-waved flag (*Lone Survivor*, 2013)

In contrast with *ZDT*, *Lone Survivor*'s scopic regimes are consistent and explicit in differentiating the American *Self* from the Arab Muslim *Other.* The *Frogman's Ballad* scene, set just before the SEALs depart on their mission, illustrates how exactly the film imagines American identity. As a rite of passage, Petty Officer Patton must recite the *Frogman's Ballad*[7] in front of all the SEALs at Bagram. The scene is intimate, quiet, and as Patton speaks, we watch from the couches, through the eyes of the other SEALs. We are with them. We *are* them. We are all family. The film hammers in the family theme as it cuts to a scene of the SEALs prepping for their mission. We watch as the soldiers talk, laugh, and pass gear and weapons around the table.

[7] *Frogman* is slang for a Navy SEAL.

With the mood loose and the light warm, the scene is reminiscent of the American family holiday Thanksgiving. In fact, one shot from the head of the table (Fig. 9) replicates the structure of Norman Rockwell's *Freedom From Want* (1943) painting (Fig. 10), which was inspired by President Franklin D. Roosevelt's *Four Freedoms* speech, and later used by the U.S. government to communicate America's ideals and WWII goals to the American public (Perry, 2009). Both compositions, through their imagery and discursive associations, equate *America* with *family*, and reinforce the pre-9/11 American identity of clear home fronts, clear families, and moral certainty (Weber, 2006: 151). In positioning the camera at the head of the table, *Lone Survivor* includes the viewer in that family.

Further, the ballad hammers at SEAL ideals like adventure, excess, and success. As such, it could very well serve as a mantra for the American Dream, which Samuel (2012: 8) defines as the headstrong belief that "anything is possible" and the desire to "beat the odds by making full use of [one's] God-given talents." Or, hyperbolically put by Patton, the conviction that "there ain't nothin' I can't do – no sky too high, no sea too rough, no muff too tough." In reciting the *Frogman's Ballad*, Patton establishes not what he *is*, but how he imagines himself, how all SEALs should imagine themselves, and how all Americans should, too: brave and exceptional, lovers and fighters. His imaginations, then, are similar to how Roland Barthes conceives of myths: "stories we tell ourselves about ourselves" (Barthes, 1972: 129), that produce truths "in an interpretive logic that figures situations, problems, and solutions in particular ways" (Callahan, 2012: 44). The logic of the ballad allows Patton to figure that he can do anything *because* he's a Navy SEAL, not the other way around. The same logic allows American viewers to imagine that they, too, can do anything, simply because they are American.

Fig. 9. Soldiers prepare for their mission (*Lone Survivor*, 2013)

Fig. 10. Norman Rockwell, *Freedom From Want* (1943) illustration © SEPS. Courtesy of Curtis Licensing.

Lone Survivor consistently visualizes American identity as moral, sympathetic, and humane, compared to the barbaric, often inhumane nature of the Taliban. It does not, however, implicate all Afghanis, all Others, as threats to be contained. On the contrary, the SEALs show a tremendous amount of faith in everyday Afghanis in one of the movie's most pivotal scenes. While the SEALs hide out in hills of the Hindu Kush, they encounter three Afghani goat-herders. The SEALs take the herders hostage, worried about their Taliban ties. The camera repeatedly frames one teenage herder as sinister – through close-ups we see his angry eyes, his snarl, his furrowed brow (Fig. 11). Axe even says: "Look at him. That's not a kid, that's a [Taliban] soldier. That's death. … That's a warrior. Shwack him." However, the SEALs do not act on Axe's impulse. They choose not to kill the herders, not because the herders are trustworthy, but because *Americans don't do that.* That is, the ideal American acts responsibly, not impulsively, and therefore follows a moral compass. He does not violate the rules of engagement and mistreat prisoners, no matter how threatening they are. Here, the imagined American identity is one informed by the moral failures of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo. It aligns with the discourse of a "new" America that emerged during Obama's presidency, and follows a theme that emerged in our analysis of *ZDT*: We respect Them, even if They *disrespect* Us. And disrespect the Americans They do. Moments after the SEALs release the herders, the angry teenager bounds down the mountain and alerts the Taliban.

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Fig. 11. A young Afghani goat-herder (*Lone Survivor*, 2013)

The respect the SEALs show the herders is emblematic of a larger theme in American discourse: American optimism. The SEALs release the herders because they have faith in humanity and believe that, as Murphy says, "good things happen to good people." This sentiment is realized at the climax of the movie, when an Afghani villager saves Luttrell from the Taliban. In a scopic regime that subverts the conventional portrayal of the Other, we look up at the Afghani villager saturated in sunlight, the sun's rays forming a near-halo around his head, as he extends his hand to help Luttrell (Fig. 12). American optimism pays off. In fact, these SEALs, time and time again, show that it pays to be *recklessly* optimistic. Near the end of the firefight with the Taliban, with Murphy and Dietz dead, Luttrell and Axe take cover behind a small rock, their bodies battered and bones broken, with blood and bullets all around them. They're surrounded. Axe asks, "Are we dead?" "Negative," replies Luttrell. "We're good, right?" says Axe. Luttrell thinks, then responds with a defiant, "Fuck yeah. We're solid." Optimism is an integral component to Luttrell's identity, and so, too, America's.

In this light, the film imagines a response to the controversies created by America's War on Terror – the lies from the Pentagon about Saddam's weapons of mass destruction, the human rights violations of Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo – as well as the financial adversity created by 9/11 and the 2008 crisis. Because of these costly wars and recessions, as well as China's rise, the international community repeatedly predicted (and continues to predict) the end of America's global hegemony (Shambaugh, 2013: 19). So, how should Americans respond to adversity like this? According to *Lone Survivor*'s logic: remain recklessly optimistic, no matter how much They continue to hate Us. As Luttrell says in his final voiceover: "No matter how much it hurts, how dark it gets, or how far you fall – you are *never* out of the fight." For Americans feeling scarred from 9/11, embarrassed by foreign policy blunders, and offended by predictions of international demise, *Lone Survivor* allows them to answer the question, "We're good, right?" with a confident, resolute, "Fuck yeah. We're solid."

Fig. 12. The Afghani who saves Luttrell (*Lone Survivor,* 2013)

American Sniper – *2014*

American Sniper details the story of Chris Kyle (Bradley Cooper), the most lethal Navy SEAL sniper in history, during his four tours of active duty in the Iraq war. Nominated for six Academy Awards including Best Picture, the film was not just the highest grossing contemporary war film released in 2014, it was the highest grossing film overall. It raked in $350 million in the U.S. market – the 3rd highest gross all-time for an R-rated film – and played for 183 days in 3,885 theatres, the widest R-rated release ever (IMDb, 2016c). The film's booming reception can be attributed to its star power – Cooper starred in the lead role and Clint Eastwood directed – as well as the press generated by Chris Kyle's 2012 bestselling autobiography *American Sniper*, his murder in 2013, and subsequent funeral which featured a 200-mile procession through Texas and a memorial service at Cowboys Stadium (capacity 105,000) (Fernandez, 2013). Due to the movie's popularity, we should consider how it allows Americans to imagine their identities.

Of the three films analyzed in this dissertation, *American Sniper* is the most polarizing and unambiguous in its imagination of the American Self and the enemy Other. The movie starts by establishing the Other: before we see anything, we hear a call to prayer accompanied by an portentous, low hum. The call to prayer, specifically the phrase *Allahu Akbar*, is important because to some Americans it is *not* symbolic of Islam the religion, but rather recognized as an ominous pretext to extremist violence (Kindervatter-Clark, 2016). Therefore, from the outset, *American Sniper* labels Islam, not terrorism, as the enemy.

Just as the film identifies the Other straightaway, it also locates the Self: the film begins in a sniper perch with Kyle. Kyle protects American soldiers and tanks as they pass through an abandoned Iraqi city. When Kyle scans the streets for threats, the viewer adopts his perspective

and peers through his sniper scope. Accordingly, *American Sniper* aligns the viewer with Kyle. Whenever we look through his scope, we must – just as he does – decide whether the Others we see are threats or not. For what it's worth, of the Others caught in crosshairs during American Sniper – by my count at least 117 of them,[8] all Arab Muslims – only 14 turn out to be "innocent," and all but four of the "innocents" are women. So, on the low end, about 96% of Arab Muslim males in American Sniper are actively trying to kill Americans. This number is still less than the number given by Kyle's superior during a briefing, in which he says, "*any* military-age male who is still here is here to kill you." In other words, he's telling Kyle, and Us, that if you see an Arab Muslim man, shoot to kill.

Such is the scopic regime through which American viewers exclusively see the Arab Muslim Other in *American Sniper.* By consistently locating Arabs through the scope of a rifle, often shot from above, they become animals to be hunted, enemies until proven otherwise (Fig. 13). Even Arabs who are not *explicit* threats – i.e. carrying a weapon – become implicit threats, guilty by association, simply because they are Arab Muslims. For example, while Kyle watches over a war-torn street one night, actively searching for threats below, he spots two voracious, stray dogs, scavenging for food amidst the rubble. In the background, we hear both an ominous, pulsing baseline and a reverberating call to prayer ringing out over the city. In the very next shot we see two women dressed in burqas scurry through the shadows, across the rubble. Not only do the parallel shots equate the Muslim women with animals, but they also indict the women in a way they could never indict the dogs. No matter how menacing they might seem, the dogs are just dogs. They lack the awareness to avoid a war-zone at night. The women do not. Both the dogs and the women are out of place, but the women's presence is sinister. We look down on them as they move in and out of the shadows. The burqas conceal their appearance. And we sight

[8] The final battle scene frames swaths of insurgents at once in the crosshairs, so my numbers are admittedly low.

them in the crosshairs of Kyle's scope. The film, in capturing this moment, allows American viewers to think that these women are up to no good, to view even "innocent" Arab Muslims as threats.

Fig. 13. Sighting the Other through Chris Kyle's sniper scope (*American Sniper*, 2014)

While the depiction of Arab insurgents and citizens provides Americans with a distinct Other against which to secure an American identity, more telling is the contrast between Kyle – the legendary American sniper – and Mustafa – the legendary enemy sniper. Both are snipers at war and both assume a mythological status, but their cinematic representations stand in stark contrast to one another. Kyle becomes widely known to U.S. soldiers as simply "Legend," while those same soldiers compare Mustafa with the fictional, ruthless legend from *The Usual Suspects* (1995), Keyser Söze. Kyle represents Us, Mustafa Them.

Semantically, Kyle *belongs*; Mustafa does not. Chris Kyle has a last name; he is part of a family. But he is a member of larger families as well. He regards his fellow soldiers as brothers.

He considers himself a child of West Texas, and a Texas state flag hangs over his bed. When asked to justify his sniper kills, he says he kills to protect his country from evil. Mustafa, however, is simply "Mustafa," an individual without a last name. If he has a family, we never see it. Unlike Kyle, he does not fight for anyone – he works alone and never speaks. He wears no uniform, just dark clothing. His home is spare and dark, walls bare except for a picture of himself at the Olympics and a reward poster offering 180,000 dollars to kill Kyle. So, while Kyle fights to protect his family, Mustafa fights for personal gain, for money, for himself. Kyle is selfless, Mustafa selfish. Kyle is America's hero. Mustafa is Theirs.

Their movements contrast with each other, as well. When Mustafa moves, he scales walls, blends in with the crumbling buildings, and lurks in the shadows. His movements are primal, savage, while Kyle's are dignified and human. Kyle lays still and takes his time. When he does move, his movements are deliberate and confident. His face is almost always soaked in light – even in the night sequences – and often shown close-up, so we can read his eyes and emotions (Fig. 14). He is humanized by the camera. Conversely, Mustafa's full face isn't shown until over an hour into the movie. He is commonly shown from behind, with his face shrouded in darkness, or with his rifle pointing directly at us (Fig. 15). In one scene, while Mustafa hunts for Kyle, a shot of Mustafa pointing his rifle at Kyle (and, by association, the American viewers) is followed by a shot of a chained dog trying to attack Kyle. Once again, the Other is dehumanized, equated with a savage animal.

Fig. 14. Chris Kyle (*American Sniper*, 2014)

Fig. 15. Mustafa (*American Sniper,* 2014)

If the boundary-producing power of the film's scopic regimes is clear, it is made even clearer through Kyle's dialogue. He justifies his repeated tours of duty in Iraq by telling his wife that "they're fucking savages" who ought to be killed. Kyle doesn't specify who "they" are, but throughout the movie he uses the word savages to describe anything from terrorists and insurgents to Iraqis and Muslims. When one of Kyle's fellow soldiers tells him that he bought his wife a wedding ring in Iraq, Kyle laughs and says, "You bought it from savages?"

American Sniper, then, unapologetically allows Americans to draw a bold, unequivocal distinction between the civilized American Self and the savage, threatening Other. These Others, the "savages," are not just the insurgents, either: they are any and all Arab Muslims. Thus, the danger of *American Sniper* is not simply that it establishes a hegemonic scopic regime through which to view all Arab Muslims, but rather that this is the *only* regime the film affords the American viewer. As a result, it is "significant in establishing [or not establishing] the conditions of possibility for an ethical response" to past and future events (Campbell and Power, 2010: 169). The film endorses the very binaries that Said labeled so dangerous in *Orientalism* (1978): Us/Them, good/evil, and civilized/barbaric. It reifies a reductive discursive construction that emerged full-scale after 9/11, one that ushered in two of the longest, most-costly military operations in American history in Iraq and Afghanistan (Pew, 2016). At a time when the rhetorical trend is to seek a "mutual understanding," *American Sniper* pushes back and enables America to imagine itself as a can-do-no-wrong liberator who must fight against an evil, savage oppressor.

V. Conclusion

The American imagination of Self and Other carries vital implications in the international sphere. War films – which transport viewers to "real" worlds they would otherwise not experience – are particularly powerful because they are "true," show viewers exceptional feats of national resolve, and therefore inform viewers about who they are and who they should aspire to be. Further, war films portray an enemy, and in so doing establish an Other against which viewers can measure their own national identity (Connolly, 1991: xiv). Films, specifically the depiction of Self and Other within them, must be accounted for in International Relations because they add contours to official and unofficial discourses of identity. They then have the power to reify or weaken hegemonic conceptions of Self/Other, which not only shape the way people, cultures, and nations act and interact, but also structure the discipline itself.

Each of the three war films analyzed in this paper adds a different contour to the imagination of American identity. *Zero Dark Thirty* conceives of a "new" American hero, one who respects and often aligns with the supposed enemy, yet maintains a distinctly classical American air. In *Lone Survivor,* we watch a group of Americans who, while respecting the Other's human rights, never align with them. The film envisions America as primed for success because of its self-confidence and optimism. Finally, *American Sniper* imagines an American identity that is so markedly distant from the "savage" Arab Muslim that it allows for neither respect nor alignment with the Other. *American Sniper* thematically echoes Weber's (2006) conception of post-WWII war films, which reinforce divisive, good/evil binaries. Despite the films' differences, they all imagine – through repeated, hegemonic scopic regimes – American identity as exceptional and superior to the Other. To different degrees, each film visually looks down on Arab Muslims, dehumanizes them, and incriminates them. The films, then, contribute

not only to an exceptionally good and moral imagination of America, but also to the constitution of Arab Muslims as threats.

The productive and reproductive power of these ways of seeing must not be understated. Americans gain their national identity through means like official speeches, schooling, and popular culture (DeFleur and DeFleur, 2003: 15). The same goes for learning about cultures like Islam. Only about 30% of Americans have passports; by inference, most have never travelled to a predominantly Islamic country (Avon, 2011). Moreover, about 99% of Americans are *not* Muslim and, as of 2014, only around 2,000 mosques existed in the U.S. (Grossman, 2012). Contrasted with the number of U.S. movie theatres that showed *American Sniper* – 3,885 – it becomes clear that Americans are much more likely to see a movie theatre than they are a mosque, to see "real Muslims" *in* the movies than *at* the movies. When the most popular films visualize Americans as supremely exceptional and Arab Muslim Others as threats, boundaries are reproduced and efforts to work towards a new era of mutual peace and respect are undermined.

So, these films do not just entertain, they *educate*. They institute hegemonic scopic regimes that tailor the eye into seeing a Self and an Other in certain, sometimes divisive, ways. In doing so, the three films analyzed in this paper contribute to debates about war, diplomacy, justice, and human rights. Most importantly, though, they become referents in the imagination of an American identity and "structure our encounters" with others (Campbell, 2007: 361): at UN conferences, in business meetings, as tourists, and in the classroom. To ignore film, then, is to ignore a crucial site of identity (re)production and, in turn, a significant player in geopolitics. So, as I have done, IR scholars should take more seriously the implications of film, and, by so doing, further extend the epistemic boundaries of the discipline.

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