

Virtuous Wars and Virtual Enemies -

The Construction of Self, Other, and Conflict in *Black Hawk Down* and Other Mass Media Representations.

Master's Thesis in Peace and Conflict Transformation, Centre for Peace Studies,
Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Tromsø.

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Abstract.

The present thesis looks at the relationship between cultures, mass media representations, war, and peace. The main research question is how self, other, and conflict are presented in artefacts of contemporary US popular culture - war and action movies in particular - and what impact such representations have on the attitudes, conceptualisations, and, ultimately, the behaviour of individuals and collectives during conflicts.

Preliminarily, the necessary terminology and theoretical concepts are introduced. Culture is defined, and its relation to mass media communication conceptualised, before attention is directed to processes of meaning generation on the basis of cultural artefacts. Theories of conflict, violence, and peace serve to assess the possible impact of representations on behaviour in conflicts, while the concept of cultural memory helps to assess the influence of historical imagery on collective identity. It will be argued that mass media representations matter, that they have the capacity to naturalise particular ideological subtexts and, thereby, influence interpretative communities. The norms, values, and premises, which are implicitly conveyed (re)produce a pattern of support and restraint, which systematically promotes some, while suppressing other options for individual and collective action. Consequently, mass media representations which convey a bellicose subtext (re)produce violence. They form the cultural pretext for justifications of war.

Secondly, the empirical material is introduced. Focus is directed on the *Black Hawk Down* media complex, a conglomeration of mass media representations concerning the events in the Somali capital Mogadishu in 1993. I look at which ideological content is implicitly conveyed, and how this is achieved. Subsequently, attention will be directed to visualised representations, primarily a movie. It is assessed how self, other, and conflict are represented. The findings are conceptualised as *Alien Aesthetics*, a combination of particular narrative elements and cinematic techniques applied in mainstream war and action movies to determine audience connotations. It will be argued that representations adhering to the concept give rise to a myth, which implicitly (re)produces a violent discourse of conflict and impacts the paradigm of alternatives available for individuals and collectives during struggles.

As a third step, the findings are contextualised. I ask the question of who might have an interest in the perpetuated (re)production of a violent discourse of conflict by means of the mass media. This section assesses connections between the production side of the *Black Hawk Down* media complex and its belligerent subtext on the one side, and military institutions and interests on the other.

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I. Introduction.

“Myths, or commonly held beliefs, are important, not necessarily for their scientific truth, but for their meaning and implication for the individuals and society who believe in them. Beliefs are linked to attitudes and ultimately to behaviour. (...) Myths about war can perpetuate warfare and as such merit our special attention.”

Ofer Zur¹.

“The justification of war and the justification of the conduct of aggregates of individuals in war are essentially inseparable from matters of ideological conviction.”

Joseph Margolis².

These two quotations effectively establish the scope of this thesis. It focuses on justifications of violence; in particular of massive, organised, direct violence, or *war*. Zur’s assertion that “all wars in the last century have been *perceived* by all participants as defensive against an external hostile offensive enemy”³ makes an analysis of a possible a priori legitimacy of wars seem futile. Consequently, the premise of the existence of independent cognitive grounds for normative assertions concerning wars as per se just or unjust is rejected; wars are not just, or unjust, they are just wars, all justifiable, all, in one way or another, justified. The respective justifications of war are done on the basis of an inter-subjectively accepted ideological framework, the socially constructed world, and do not happen due to an essential quality objectively discernable in them.

What, then, is war? Is it an inherent feature of human existence, the human condition? Or is war the result of rational planning; merely a tool for reaching particular objectives? Is it a timeless necessity, or a relic of barbaric ages? The answer to these questions has significant impact on the legitimate basis for warfare. If accepted as an unchangeable part of reality, wars, and preparations for them, do not have to be legitimised; they just come and go like natural disasters. If, however, conceptualised as rationally planned and socially approved, as the result of conscious human activity, wars and the planning for them become questionable and subject to debate. This thesis adopts Zur’s approach to war as “a cultural phenomenon that depends on a number of complex sociological and psychological factors to exist”⁴. The isolation of some of these factors, and the ways of their perpetuated reproduction by the means of cultural artefacts is the immediate objective of this enquiry.

¹ Zur (1987:125-6).

² Margolis (1974:265).

³ Zur (1987:130); emphasis by the author.

⁴ Ibid., 127.

The present thesis undertakes an exploration of the possible impact of mass media representations on cultures. It works under the assumption that such representations matter, that they “not only give shape to psychological dispositions”, but also “play an important role in determining how social reality will be constructed”⁵. Focussing on artefacts of popular culture, in particular contemporary US war and action movies, the present thesis will scrutinise how the presentation of self, other, and conflict, naturalises particular premises, norms, and values, thus affecting the attitudes, conceptualisations and, ultimately, the behaviour of a culture’s constitutive individuals. It will be argued that popular war and action movies implicitly legitimise violence as the only viable way to resolve conflicts. As such, they become important tools for a general preparation of cognitive grounds for attempts to justify wars. It is the intention of this thesis to reveal the narrative elements and technical means through which this particular ideological subtext is conveyed. In doing so I hope to raise awareness for this mode of operation of mass media representations, thus providing audiences with the tools necessary to contest and deconstruct such bellicose messages.

My enquiry follows a threefold path. Firstly, a theoretical part introduces relevant concepts and terminology. The term *culture* is defined, and its modes of (re)production conceptualised, before a connection to mass media communication is established in order to assess the importance of artefacts of popular culture for such processes. Then, attention is turned to visual representations, their particular ways of generating meaning, and the impact of such meanings on interpretative communities. As a next step, attitudes, conceptualisations, and behaviour are connected with theories of violence, conflict, and peace to show their mutual dependence. Bellicose discourses shape bellicose attitudes and lead to violent behaviour. Therefore, the representations of friend, foe, and conflict in the virtual realm of the mass media matter for issues of war and peace in the real world. Finally, the theory of cultural memory is introduced to be able to grasp the impact of mass media representations of historical events on collective identity.

Secondly, leaving the half-lit and twisted tunnels of theory behind, my exploration enters the treacherous labyrinths of mass media representations. This empirical part of the thesis introduces the *Black Hawk Down* media complex, a conglomeration of media representations dealing with the events in the Somali capital Mogadishu in 1993. Providing critical readings of author Mark Bowden’s best-selling novel *Black Hawk Down*, director Ridley Scott’s blockbuster movie by the same title, a documentary, and a video game, this study will assess what

⁵ Ryan/Kellner (1990:13).

particular ideological subtext concerning self, other, and conflict is implicitly conveyed and naturalised, and through which narrative and technical means this is achieved. The main focus will be directed towards the visual representations, and in particular the movie.

It will be argued that the complex is more than a re-enactment of past events. In addition, it serves to (re)produce a bellicose discourse of conflict by glorifying soldiery, demonising opponents, and instituting war as an eternal feature of human existence. This message is conveyed through the combination of particular cinematic means with a particular narrative structure, which effectively determine processes of meaning generation; *Alien Aesthetics*. It will be shown that *Alien Aesthetics* is a recurrent phenomenon, to be found in a majority of contemporary war and action movies and, therefore, originates a myth; the *cinematic myth of self and other*, which serves to naturalise the underlying belligerent premises, norms, and values, thus influencing audience attitudes, conceptualisations, and behaviour. Furthermore, the claim to be an accurate re-enactment of an actual event institutionalises this subtext in the cultural memory of the receiving interpretative community, thus determining its reproduction. The representations forming the *Black Hawk Down* media complex serve as such not only the objectification of one particular perspective on an actual event, but in addition the (re)production of violent discourses of conflict in general. Their popularity does not only “reflect (...) deep layers of collective mentality”⁶, but in addition serves to *construct* them. Their message is an effective instrument for the preparation of cognitive grounds for justifications of war.

Thirdly, the question of whom the perpetuated (re)production of violent discourses of conflict might serve, leads our exploration to the electrified fences of institutionalised interests. The *Black Hawk Down* media complex will be connected to an emerging cooperation between US military, high-technology companies, and media and entertainment networks (MIME-NET), which attempts to determine representations of wars; to conceal their devastating consequences, and to glorify their objectives. Such virtual images of war prepare the grounds for justifications of warfare as legitimate and viable ways to solve conflicts. They serve to re-institute the myth of war as virtuous. As such, *they merit our special attention*.

⁶ Kracauer (1974:6); my emphasis.

II. Theory.

“War is beautiful...”

Emilio Marinetti⁷.

“Representations can kill.”

James Der Derian⁸.

1. A textual approach to culture(s).

The two quotations seem strangely reversed. Do not wars kill? And do not representations, in particular mass media ones, tend to be beautiful? This section will elaborate the theoretical framework necessary for an assessment of the impact of mass media representations on cultures. In doing so, it prepares the conceptual grounds for a combination of the two statements. Do representations kill, by making wars appear beautiful?

The present discussion is about violence and war as cultural phenomena. Their justifications depend on the ideological framework within which they emerge. They differ from culture to culture. Preliminarily, we have to explore what *culture* is, and how it operates.

Following Bachmann-Medick, *culture* is seen as text, as an inter-subjectively established *web of meaning*⁹. On the basis of this assumption, I define culture as *an interpretative community of individuals who are connected through distinct decoding conventions and institutions, which organise the collective generation of meaning out of a host of texts which are inter-subjectively accepted as foundational, thereby determining individual as well as collective performances including its own reproduction*. As it is often the case, at first glance this definition seems to pose more questions than it answers. What is meant by *decoding convention* or *institution*? What is *meaning*? How is it generated, and how does it affect performances? And, last but not least, what is a *text*? As such, the terminology used in this definition merits closer scrutiny.

Text is the most central element of the definition, as all the other terms are directed towards it. Texts are organised by institutions, they are decoded and entail meaning. They are the very material out of which cultures are (re)generated and (re)generate themselves. Texts are the glue, that makes interpretative communities stick together. What, then, *is* a text? Texts are systems of signs, which are encoded and decoded according to established conventions,

⁷ Quoted in Benjamin (1968:241).

⁸ DerDerian (2001:39).

⁹ Bachmann-Medick takes the term from Clifford Geertz. Bachmann-Medick (1996:22).

and carry connotations, in addition to the denotation of a given object alone¹⁰. As such, they are bearers of meaning, not just signification; they depend on interpretation, not just understanding, they entail a symbolic dimension beyond a merely indexical relationship to the world. Consequently, every artefact, be it a written document, a monument, a ritual, a song, a movie, a machine; any utterance, any construction, any performance, any combination of signs with a symbolic interpretative relationship to the world is seen as a text.

Of course, there are important texts and less important ones. There are texts which (re)produce authoritative meanings, determining the interpretative community as a whole and, consequently, its constituent individuals, and there are texts with a limited scope without significant impact on a collective. The former will here be termed *foundational*, the latter *particular* texts. Foundational texts can be turned into particular ones, reducing their impact, while particular texts can be turned into foundational ones, entailing an increasing importance for the formation of cultures. Foundational and particular texts represent extremes on a scale, where actual texts correspond to either side only to a certain degree.

Texts are dependent on *institutions* for their organisation. The relationship between texts and institutions is reciprocal. Institutions produce texts, they are generated out of texts, and are, at the same time, assigned the task of organising texts. Institutions are thus manifestations of inter-subjectively accepted meanings regulating the activities of and within interpretative communities. They are assigned the power to organise the perpetuated (re)production of a particular pre-established order. Institutions have three distinct functions; they serve to store, distribute and control the texts of a culture. As such I will term them *archives*, *media* and *force*. The three functions of institutions closely interact and often blur and blend within the same institution. Access to a culture's archives are controlled by force; their content is dependent on media to be conveyed. Still all functions depend on the meaning generated for them out of the archived texts of a culture. Let us consider the institution of school as an example to illustrate this relationship. The function of the school to control and convey texts makes it a hybrid institution between force and media. Yet these functions, and the way they are to be conducted, are assigned to it as a law, which is dependent on interpretation. The meaning assigned to the school law determines the institutions activity; it establishes a paradigm of actions perceived of as possible for staff and pupils. As such institutions crystallise meaning into actions. At the same time, by teaching about for example the school

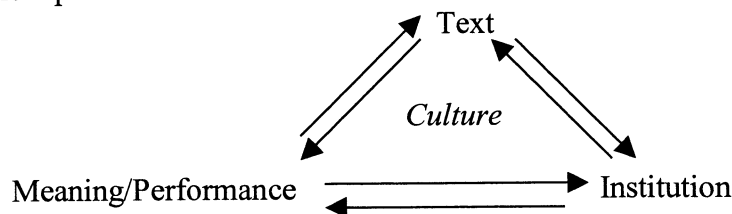
¹⁰ For the terms denotation and connotation see Barthes (1999:pp.170), (1978:pp.20 and pp.32), and (1996:pp.129). See also chapter II.3 of this thesis.

law, the institution school reproduces this very law and a particular reading of it, thus determining its own reproduction.

The next element of the definition to focus on is *meaning*. Meaning is generated out of texts by means of decoding, or reading. Every reading conveys an ideological subtext, which implicitly naturalises particular norms, values, premises, and power relations. As such, meanings are both descriptive and prescriptive. They engender an accepted representation of an established state of affairs, as well as the active construction and perpetuated reconstruction of it. Meanings affect performances. They significantly impact the variety of possible actions available to collectives or individuals. They can be compared to patterns of supports and constraints, which systematically promote some, while discouraging other options for action.

As we have seen the three elements text, meaning/performance, and institution, are mutually constitutive. They determine and reproduce each other. Through their interactions they shape interpretative communities; *cultures*.

Graphic A: The reproduction of culture.



Consider the following example. A mountain can be seen as a text. It can entail a symbolic dimension which points beyond the mere geological formation. It can be read; it entails meaning. Read as a powerful ‘goddess’ which has to be treated by certain persons in a certain way, the text ‘mountain’ entails institutions, such as a Shaman, for its organisation. The institution Shaman organises the meaning generation out of the text and is, at the same time, (re)produced by these very readings. The reading ‘goddess’ entails that the tribe needs the Shaman to keep her powers at bay. Meanings and institutions establish a system of support and restraint, which promotes some, while it represses other performances. As such the meaning goddess and the institution Shaman induce particular behaviour, such as sacrifice, worshipping, or the acceptance of power and status of particular individuals or groups. Read by a geologist the text mountain entails different meanings, supporting different institutions and leading to different performances; it serves to (re)produce a different culture.

Cultures are dependent on cohesive sets of meanings, which define the overarching institutional and conceptual limits for meaning generation. They depend on *discourses*.

Without a cosmology resting on a belief in gods and spirits, the reading of a mountain as goddess would be unsustainable. Discourses naturalise particular norms, values, and premises, which (re)produce particular meanings, institutions, and performances, and entail particular power relations. As such discourses can be seen to set the “bias of the system”¹¹, they define the extremes within the confinements of which any reading, any option for action conceivable as an alternative must be situated. As such discourses have according to Lincoln, the capacity of “transforming simple power into ‘legitimate’ authority”¹².

The formation of meanings and discourses is not unambiguous. Texts, including foundational ones, are inherently *multivocal*¹³. Each of them allows for different and often competing decodings, or readings. As such the geologist’s reading of mountain as dead, but possibly exploitable rock would challenge the Shaman’s discourse entailing the reading as goddess, and with it the institution issuing it, and the performances it legitimises. Different decodings of multivocal texts generate different meanings, which again are combined into discourses, which either reinforce or challenge the institutions and performances of and within a culture. To conceptualise the potential impacts of meaning generation on a surrounding framework, we will now turn our attention to different forms of reading. Kellner introduces the useful distinction between *dominant*, *negotiated*, and *oppositional* readings¹⁴, while Maybin directs attention to *centripetal* and *centrifugal* effects of meaning generation¹⁵.

Dominant readings generate meanings, which support and reinforce a pre-established order and thus (re)produce a dominant discourse. *Oppositional readings*, on the other hand, challenge a pre-existing sense of real, attempting to change an existing discourse, or establish a new one. They de-naturalise a formerly accepted state of affairs, and attempt to naturalise their own particular ideological subtext. *Negotiated readings* are attempts to mediate between mutually exclusive meanings assignable to a particular text. Such arbitration processes can take place over the borders of different discourses or within the confinements of one discourse. The objective is to change and not necessarily to replace an established discourse.

Closely related to these forms of reading are the concepts introduced by Maybin. *Centripetal meanings* are meanings which support and reinforce an existing order by reproducing its implicit ideological subtext, while *centrifugal meanings* denaturalise particular norms, values and premises, thus challenging it. Dominant readings generate

¹¹ Bateson (1972:471).

¹² Lincoln (1989:4-5).

¹³ Bachmann-Medick introduces Bakhtin’s “Konzept der Vielstimmigkeit”, which I will translate as multivocality. See Bachmann-Medick (1996:26).

¹⁴ See Kellner (2003: pp37). He takes the terms from Stuart Hall.

¹⁵ The terms *centripetal* and *centrifugal* refer to Bakhtin and are taken from Maybin (2001:65).

centripetal meanings, while oppositional readings engender centrifugal ones. Negotiated readings remain ambivalent and have the capacity for both; a disruptive and a reinforcing effect on a pre-constituted discourse and culture. The generation of centripetal meaning, reinforcing a dominant discourse, is organised by a culture's dominant institutions; its archives, media and forces.

On the other hand, *subcultures* and *counter cultures* can be discerned within the wider framework of a particular interpretative community. Subcultures adhere to distinct decoding conventions and texts within the wider framework of an encompassing culture, while counter cultures challenge dominant discourses and institutions with the objective to change or replace them. I will direct focus to challenges from within, referred to by Babcock as *symbolic inversion*¹⁶, which attempt to change pre-established discourses. This activity is conducted along three lines; *status change*, *access change* and *re-reading*.

The status-change approach implies attempts to increase the status of particular texts seen as important, with the objective of turning them into foundational ones, thus increasing their impact, or to decrease the status of foundational texts to reduce their influence. Access change attempts to include formerly marginalized texts, stored in a counter archive, into the dominant archive, increasing its availability, or it attempts to exclude and subsequently marginalize formerly archived texts, rendering them unavailable. Re-reading means to conduct oppositional readings of dominant foundational texts, making them the source of centrifugal instead of centripetal meanings. By these means, counter cultures attempt to either change a dominant discourse or replace it completely by a counter-discourse, thus impacting a culture's institutions and performances. The main objective is the de-naturalisation of the pre-established order and a change in existing power relations. Still, a competing ideological subtext, serving different interests, is implicitly installed in the new, or changed discourse, which again generates resistance in the form of new counter cultures.

What do these considerations hold for the justification of violence by the means of mass media? According to Kellner/Ryan, mass media representations shape "a commonly held sense of what the world is and ought to be"¹⁷. They have, in other words, decisive influence on discourses and shape the conditions under which meaning is generated. They define the conceptual limits and normative borders within which any justification of violence has to take place. They influence institutions, and impact individual and collective performances. As

¹⁶ Babcock (1978:14).

¹⁷ Ryan/Kellner (1990:14).

such, the ways peace and violence, friend and foe are represented in the mass media becomes an important object of scrutiny.

2. Theorising the relationship between mass media communication and cultures.

Having theorised culture and its reproduction, focus will in the subsequent section be directed towards the conditions under which an interpretative community's constitutive elements interact. Generation of meaning is today increasingly carried out on the basis of texts conveyed by the mass media. Therefore, mass media representations become important for the formation and reproduction of discourses, including those dealing with issues of war and peace. Consequently, as a next step attention will be given to processes of mass media communication.

Communication is about sending and receiving messages. On the background of this statement a simple linear model can be established. We speak about communication when a sender issues a message, which is obtained by a receiver. If the message comes through and is understood, the communication process was successful¹⁸. In relation to the conceptualisation of culture elaborated above, the sender could be termed text, the message meaning inducing particular performances, and the receiver interpretative community, or culture. This gives us the following simple model.

Graphic B: Linear model for communication.

sender → message → receiver.

text → meaning/performance → culture

Nevertheless, as has been indicated above, cultures constantly reproduce themselves; their texts, performances, meanings, and institutions are mutually constitutive, their relationship is reciprocal. Under the given circumstances, the linear communication model proves a harsh simplification of a complicated set of interrelationships. It excludes the contexts in which both encoding and decoding processes take place, and fails to conceptualise the feedback of decodings from receiver back to sender. Nevertheless, the linear communication model serves one meaningful purpose. By dividing an entangled process into basic components it facilitates attempts to conceptualise what is going on.

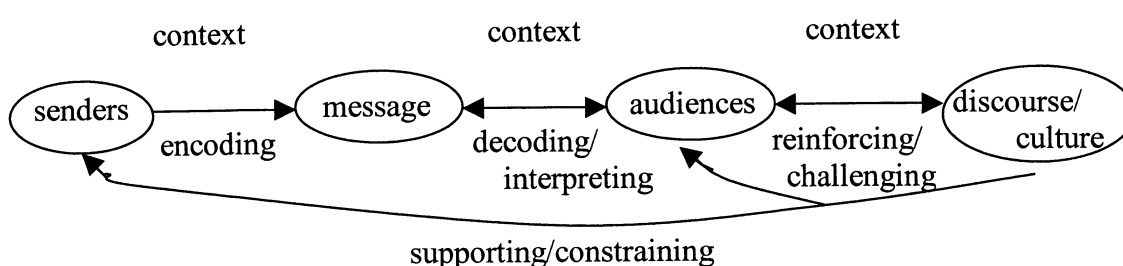
Mass media communication will in the present thesis be treated as one possible way to convey archived texts in attempts to reproduce meanings constitutive for particular

¹⁸ For approaches to communication see: Lotman (1990:pp.11).

discourses, and thus impact cultures as a whole. *Sender*, *message*, and *receiver* will be treated as the main components. They are, however, seen as ambiguous and will be given closer attention. The sender-side, for instance, is constituted of a variety of often competing actors and institutions, struggling to have their particular perspectives included in the message to be issued. The receiver-side cannot be treated as a single-minded entity either. The different audiences constituting the receiving end of the model are seen as actively engaging in the (re)construction of meaning on the basis of the texts provided to them. Different groups apply different readings to the material, thus reinforcing different discourses. Consequently, this thesis will apply the plural form when referring to the producer and audience sides; it will refer to producers, senders, audiences and receivers.

Shaped by a multitude of interests and perspectives, and decoded in different individual and collective contexts, the message cannot be treated as unambiguous either. As a text, the message is multi-vocal. It depends on interpretation and is, therefore, open for diverse and often mutually exclusive readings, engendering different discourses, which naturalise different norms and values. They provide legitimacy to different options for action. Struggles about encoding and decoding of foundational texts on the producer and reception side lead Kellner to term media culture as *contested terrain*¹⁹. Implying that cultures both produce, and are (re)produced by, messages in the form of texts, this view gives rise to a reciprocal model of mass media communication.

Graphic C: Mass media communication and cultures as contested terrain.



Media culture as contested terrain implies that “control over the production of cultural representation is (...) crucial to the maintenance of social power, but (...) is also essential to progressive movements for social change”²⁰. Messages and readings are issued to either reinforce, or challenge a pre-existing order. In the present discussion attention will, however, be directed to mass media representations’ inherent capacity to (re)produce, or challenge,

¹⁹ Kellner (2003:5).

²⁰ Ryan/Kellner (1990:13).

violent discourses of conflict, thus either serving the justification or the contestation of war as a viable means to resolve conflicts, and either inducing peaceful or violent performances.

3. Image and meaning.

This thesis is about cultural justifications of war. Treating culture as a product of collective meaning generation increasingly carried out on the basis of texts conveyed by the mass media, the question of how mass media representations operate becomes crucial. Taking the modus of operation of images as an example, this section provides the terminology for an assessment of how visualised mass media representations naturalise particular norms, values, and premises into discourses, thus determining acts of meaning generation.

An interpretative textual approach to the impact of mass media representations on cultures presupposes a semiotic model which treats messages as more than mere “technical packaging”²¹ for unambiguous facts. Movies are messages composed of audio-visual signs. They are, however, not unambiguous signifiers unmistakably referring to one particular signified, but convey more. They require not only understanding, but interpretation. To conceptualise the ways through which movie images naturalise particular norms, values, and premises I introduce Barthes’ distinction between *denotation*, *connotation*, and *myth*²².

According to Barthes messages are carriers of different layers of signification. As signs, movie images are more than mere reflections of a depicted object. Dependent on the context in which the images are perceived they convey additional meanings. In Barthes’ terms, besides the denotation of the actual object in question, they connote additional meanings, which are entirely dependent on the context within which they are perceived, and which implicitly attach particular norms and values to the denoted object. On this additional layer of meaning generation, the denotative sign becomes a new signifier, which through connotations points towards a signified of a higher order, a *myth*. Myths naturalise a particular ideological subtext, they are the link which connects readings of images or movies into discourses.

Unlike the denotations and connotations upon which they rest, myths claim not only to be representations or interpretations of preceding material but, wield, in addition, *normative* and *formative powers*²³ which shape discourses and therefore determine future decoding processes. Myths thus determine the customary premises, which delimit the generation of meaning. They represent the way by which particular ideological subtexts are naturalised and

²¹ Lotman (1990:12).

²² See: Barthes (1999:pp.170), (1978:pp20 and pp32), and (1996:pp.129).

²³ „Normative Ansprüche ... und formative Kraft”. Terms taken from J.Assmann (2002:76); my translation.

institutionalised into discourses, which again establish a pattern of support and constraint for individual actions, which again reproduce a given order. As such, myths connect media representations to a perpetuated reproduction of discourses and culture²⁴.

As an example, consider the image of an eagle. Besides denoting the actual predator bird, it is carrying a host of additional, connotative meanings. When depicted in a World War II movie situated in Europe it would probably connote Nazi-allegiances, while in a Fantasy movie connotations would doubtlessly be more positive. In addition, connotations connected to an eagle differ when perceived by a hunter, and by an animal rights activist. The denotative signifier eagle carries connotations with the potential to originate different myths connected to it. These myths de/naturalise the norms or values connected to the connotations, and are institutionalised into discourses which impact cultures by determining the paradigm for possible actions.

4. A cultural approach to conflict, violence, and peace.

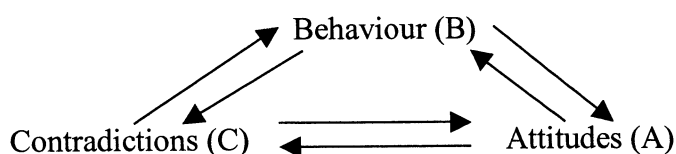
How do cultures justify wars? How is direct violence naturalised as a viable solution? To approach these questions we have to establish what is meant by conflict, violence and peace.

Galtung conceptualises conflicts in the form of a triangle²⁵. This triangle consists of a manifest, empirically observable level, and a latent, subconscious level. The manifest level consists of the opponents' actual *behaviour*, the latent level of the *contradictions* at stake between them, and their mutual *attitudes*. This leads to the following simple model:

Graphic D: Conflict triangle.

manifest level:

latent level:



Behaviour encompasses the performances of collectives or individuals in conflicts, for example acts of killing, torture, abuse, corporal suppression, or the lack thereof. *Contradictions*²⁶ are seen to encompass both the material and ideological issues at stake in a

²⁴ The capacity of myths to generalise and naturalise a particular ideological content implicitly conveyed through cultural representations referred to by Barthes corresponds to Ryan/Kellner's concept of ideology as "a metaphoric way of representing the world that is linked to a particular way of constructing social reality" (Ryan/Kellner, 1990: 15). I chose Barthes' approach due to its focus on different layers of meaning generation in addition to the effect of representations on interpretative communities.

²⁵ Concerning the conflict triangle, see Galtung (1975:pp.81) and Galtung (1996:pp.70).

²⁶ I will in the following replace Galtung's term *contradictions* by the term *conceptualisations*. This is done to direct attention to the fact that the 'c' corner encompasses the adversaries' understandings of the nature of the

conflict, and their conceptualisation, while *attitudes* refer to the adversaries' assumptions about each other, each other's intentions and the legitimacy of own or opponent conduct. The corners of the triangle are closely interrelated. Particular behaviour reinforces particular attitudes, or contradictions, and vice versa. By these feedback loops escalations of conflicts can be conceptualised.

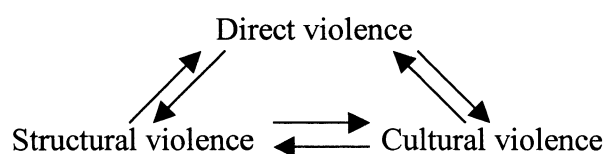
As elaborated above, a particular culture's dominant discourse to a high degree determines the paradigm of actions perceived as possible alternatives by an interpretative community's constitutive individuals. In relation to the conflict triangle, this means that a discourse of conflict affects collective and individual attitudes, thus pre-conditioning possible conceptualisations of the nature of a conflict, of possible partners and adversaries and of their intentions. As such, a discourse naturalises particular material interests and ideological pre-assumptions, thus providing some options for actions with legitimacy, while de-legitimising others. This pattern of support and restraint systematically promotes actions, which lead to a material reproduction of a culture's dominating discourse in relation to the conflict in question. Discourses impact all three corners of the conflict triangle and their nature pre-determines a conflict's perpetuated re-production. Consequently, it now becomes important to scrutinise how particular discourses of conflict relate to the promotion of peace or violence.

Closely related to the conflict model is Galtung's conceptualisation of violence. Roughly following the conflict triangle, a violence triangle can be established. This triangle is composed of manifest *direct violence* and latent *structural* and *cultural violence*²⁷.

Graphic E: Violence triangle.

manifest level :

latent level:



Direct violence refers to acts where one opponent is bodily harmed by another with the intention to enforce submission. At a group level, threatened or actual warfare or terrorist acts can serve as examples, while torture, killing, or sexual abuse can be referred to on an individual scale. The term *structural violence* encompasses systemic inequalities, which significantly advantage one opponent in attempts to reach a particular objective. Examples are

conflict as a whole. As such, conceptualisation is not confined to the opponents' immediate interests, but in addition contains ideas about conflicts and options for their solution in general.

²⁷ Concerning direct and structural violence, see Galtung (1975:pp.110) and Galtung (1996:pp.29). Concerning cultural violence, see Galtung (1996:pp.196).

unequal access to vital resources, to the media, or to important decision-makers. *Cultural violence* is seen as a system of legitimisation of acts of direct violence and conditions of structural violence rendering them acceptable to societies. Religious honouring of warriors dying in battle, or discriminating ideologies can here serve as examples. Also in this triangle the corners are interconnected and reinforce each other.

Within this framework, conflicts are not necessarily characterized by direct violence. A conflict can have existed a long time before manifesting itself in form of directly violent behaviour. On the other hand, violence might continue on a latent level long after manifest hostilities in a conflict have ceased. In addition, even though both direct hostilities stopped and contradictions between the opponents have been resolved, a conflict still might continue to exist on a violent level in the form of mutually hostile attitudes, which surface in times of crisis and legitimate renewed escalation. Non-violent *conflict resolution*, in other words, claims more than mere ceasefires. It demands, in addition, answers to the disagreements underlying the conflict, and a dissolution of the system of thought legitimising and reinforcing hostilities. It claims viable solutions in all three corners of the conflict triangle, effectively containing all three forms of violence. It claims a holistic approach, tackling a violent discourse of conflict as a whole, attempting to change it into, or replace it by, a peaceful one.

As long as resolved peacefully, conflicts are not negative. Conflicts are a natural part of human existence. They engender both progress and change. *Peace* can, consequently, not be equalled with a total absence of conflicts, but merely with viable, non-violent ways of resolving them. Different views on conflict and violence originate different notions of peace.

Loosely following Galtung, this thesis works on the assumption of two different states of peace; *negative* and *positive peace*²⁸. Targeting behaviour, *negative peace* solely requires the absence of direct violence. As soon as killing stops this particular state of peace is achieved. Negative peace is, in other words, achievable within the conceptual and institutional framework of a dominant violent discourse of conflict. *Positive peace*, on the other hand, focuses also on conceptualisations and attitudes. Consequently, it has an absence of structural and cultural violence as additional requirements. It claims the establishment of a dominant peaceful discourse of conflict. Positive peace does not imply the absence of conflicts. It only implies that existing conflicts are resolved under conditions of equality without present or future resort to force. Discourses of conflict can either be peaceful, or violent, they can engender the legitimisation of both violent and non-violent attempts of conflict resolution.

²⁸ For the terms see Galtung (1996:pp.31). I borrow the terms from Galtung, but define them differently.

Positive peace depends on the establishment and constant reproduction of a dominant peaceful discourse of conflict, effectively de-legitimising all forms of violence, thus impacting behaviour, conceptualisations and attitudes of an interpretative community; it depends on and fosters a culture of peace.

How do mass media representations relate to such issues of conflict and violence? Through their inherent capacities to naturalise particular norms, values, premises and power relations, cultural representations become an important object for scrutiny of processes of justifications of war. How do for example popular movies lead audience connotations in regard to friend and enemy? How are conflicts and viable solutions (re)presented? What characteristics are assigned to a hero, inducing imitation? Can mass media representations issuing a valorising image of war and soldiery determine processes of meaning generation and, as a consequence, lead to violent discourses of conflict, (re)producing patterns of support and constraint which promote violent performances?

5. A cultural approach to memory.

According to Jan Assmann, every society rests upon two connective structures²⁹: a *synchronic connective structure*, consisting of shared values, norms and institutions, and a *diachronic connective structure*, consisting of broadly accepted images of a common past and particular values attached to them. Both structures impact the performances of and within a society. Jan and Aleida Assmann's main focus is directed towards a society's diachronic connective structure, its commonly accepted image of a shared past, which impacts options for collective and individual action. Within the terminology elaborated in this study so far, Assmann's diachronic connective structure is seen as the result of dominant readings of foundational historical texts; as a dominant historical discourse, stored and conveyed as *cultural memory*.

Cultural memory is the institutionalised "external dimension"³⁰ of human memory, which determines processes of collective identity formation³¹. To approach cultural memory Aleida and Jan Assmann distinguish between two concepts; *communicative memory* and *cultural memory*. *Communicative memory* is individual memory. It is maintained and reproduced through everyday interactions and direct communication with persons who have been

²⁹ "Konnektive Struktur" in J.Assmann (2002:pp16); my translation.

³⁰ „Außendimension menschlichen Gedächtnisses“; J.Assmann (2002:19); my translation.

³¹ It can here be pointed out that cultures are not treated as organisms. The authors explicitly point out that "collectives do not have memories" but, rather, "determine the memory of their constitutive parts" (J.Assmann (2002:36)); my translation.

personally involved in what is to be memorized³². *Cultural memory*, on the other hand, is institutionalised and memorized over a *floating time gap*³³, without access to direct witnesses. It issues an explicit claim to represent a collective's past, thereby impacting its identity. Communicative memory is generated out of particular texts and induces particular historical discourses. It is the memory of subcultures and counter-cultures, which is often non-institutionalised and dependent on direct communication for its reproduction. Cultural memory, on the other hand, is institutionalised and inherently foundational; its foundational texts carry prescriptive meanings, which form a dominant historical discourse, and naturalise an implicit ideological subtext. Consequently, it impacts the range of actions perceived as legitimate or possible for an interpretative community.

Consider, for instance, the conflict on the Balkans. As Duizings³⁴ convincingly points out, history, its representations and myths, played a major role in the construction of mutually exclusive ethnicities out of multi-layered individual identities in the former Yugoslavia. Activated and reinforced in times of violent conflict, he views historically founded ethnic distinctions not as the cause, but as a consequence of the erupting violence. In this case, historical representations assigned particular norms and values to self and other. By establishing a pattern of support and constraint, which systematically promoted some, while it restrained other options, it served to induce directly violent behaviours towards certain groups and individuals. Cultural memory was effectively turned into a medium for the (re)production of a culture of violence.

It seems beyond need of explanation that cultural memory, its content, its construction, and its reproduction, opens for studies of power relations embraced within the concept. A "politics of memorizing and forgetting"³⁵ develops, where producers and audiences struggle to sustain some readings of texts concerning a shared past and suppress others. These processes of interpretation and re-interpretation take place between a culture's centripetal forces supporting a pre-established order, and its centrifugal forces challenging it. Dominant readings convey widely accepted connotations of the past, reproducing given identities, by reinforcing established myths. Oppositional readings of foundational texts, however, attempt to assign competing connotations to past events, challenging the status-quo by originating new myth. They are, therefore, often marginalized or neglected; they disappear or become

³² The term communicative memory can be treated as synonymous with Halbwach's term collective memory. Only the notion of institutionalised cultural memory goes beyond Halbwach's thought. See: Halbwachs (1992:pp.37).

³³ J. Assmann (2002:48).

³⁴ See Dujzings (2000:pp.1-27).

³⁵ J. Assmann (2002:15).

part of a counter-archive. As Aleida Assmann points out, “acknowledging memory and tradition as symbolic constructs (...) does not prevent them from critical verification”³⁶. Historical and ideological critique can be seen as prominent interpretative tools for centrifugal meaning generation through oppositional readings of foundational historical texts.

Together with texts, de-limited from the archives, oppositional readings form what Aleida Assmann terms *rubbish*³⁷. Far from neglecting the importance of non-archive memory she asserts that the border between rubbish and archive is movable³⁸, and that rubbish is structurally equally important for the archive as forgetting is for memorizing. Nevertheless, this thesis maintains the term *counter-archive*, thereby explicitly acknowledging the fact that it is the historical-political context, the respective dominant historical discourse, which determines the borderline between archive and counter-archive, not values inherent in the material framed as foundational or ‘thrown away’.

A culture’s diachronic connective structure consists of its cultural memory, which is the external storage and reproduction of particular meanings assigned to historical events. Cultural memory determines collective identity, collective identity systematically legitimates particular conduct of a culture’s constitutive individuals. As such, the concept becomes important for the study of peace and violence. According to the ideological subtext implicitly conveyed as cultural memory, either violent or peaceful discourses of conflict are (re)produced and reinforced. These discourses determine individual and collective attitudes, conceptualisations and behaviour in conflicts. What a culture remembers of its past, and how it re-constructs it, decisively influences the actions creating its future.

6. Conclusion.

This thesis is about cultural pre-texts for war. It intends to assess how mass media representations naturalise violent discourses of conflict for interpretative communities, and that way implicitly provide legitimacy to violent approaches to conflict resolution.

The previous sections introduced the theoretical and conceptual basis on which the further enquiry rests. The present discussion works on the assumption that mass media representations matter; that they have the capacity to naturalise particular ideological subtexts into discourses, thus influencing a culture’s historical image, its institutions, performances, and further processes of meaning generation. The way these representations handle friend and

³⁶ A.Assmann (2002:30).

³⁷ A. Assmann (2003:22)

³⁸ Ibid. (22-3).

foe, war and peace has an impact on the patterns of support and restraint, which to a significant degree determine individual and collective action. Der Derian asserts that “how we represent the world helps to construct – as well as deconstruct – it”³⁹. Representations give rise to discourses of conflict which affect the attitudes, conceptualisations, and, ultimately, the behaviour of individuals and collectives in conflicts. Glorifications of soldiers give legitimacy to their role, depictions of war as the exclusive way of handling conflicts makes this solution appear viable and justified. This thesis is an attempt to deconstruct bellicose mass media representations, by providing a critical reading of their text, countering the ideological subtext implicitly (re)produced and reinforced through them. It is an attempt to counter a violent discourse of conflict.

III. *Media complexes, Alien Aesthetics and the Cinematic Myth of Self and Other.*

“Virtue without limits becomes terror.”
Jean Bethke Elshtain⁴⁰.

“I’m running out of demons. I’m down to Kim Il-sung
and Castro.”
Collin Powell, then Chairman of Joint Chiefs of Staff, 1999⁴¹.

1. Introducing the *Black Hawk Down* media complex.

Every endeavour to maintain a culture’s willingness to wage war consists of at least two basic cognitive components; the establishment of a picture of the self as righteous and acting for a good cause, and the depiction of the opponent as an inherent threat and in pursuit of evil objectives. Processes leading up to such conceptualisations will be referred to as *enemising*⁴². Enemising engenders the legitimisation of direct violence as viable means of conflict resolution; it naturalises existing conditions of structural violence, and reproduces the patterns of cultural violence from which it initially emerged. This section will assess the presence of such cognitive pre-texts for violence in a particular complex of mass media representations.

A *media complex* is a conglomeration of media representations, concerning a particular issue area, which all rest on the same authoritative source, proliferating one particular perspective on the subject in question. Media complexes obtain powerful positions in limiting

³⁹ Der Derian (2001:77).

⁴⁰ Quoted in Der Derian (2001:202).

⁴¹ Quoted in Der Derian (2001:98).

⁴² Term taken from Zur (1987:131).

the material considered viable for particular discourses. They define to a considerable degree what can be known about a certain subject, and from which perspective it is perceived. As such, besides their factual contents, also their ideological contents are of interest.

Media complexes are genre inconsistent; they consist of artefacts adhering to different decoding conventions. They encompass dramatised fiction, documentaries, and new media representations or simulations. By oscillating between documentary, drama, and simulation, media complexes target all sides of the receiving audience. Feelings, intellectual capacities and direct experience are all informed by the material forming the factual basis of the content. The claims issued by some are confirmed by other media, creating the impression of an all-encompassing presence of the framed perspectives, effectively setting aside competing versions, and veiling the fact that they all rest on the same factual basis. As such, media complexes create a fake pluralism of ideas and views on a certain subject.

This section will introduce the *Black Hawk Down media complex*, which represents the events in Somalia's capital Mogadishu in 1993. US soldiers and Somali fighters were caught up in an 18 hours fire fight, which left 18 Americans and roughly 1000 Somalis dead. The *Black Hawk Down* media complex lays claim to an accurate representation of the actual events. It is composed of a newspaper serial, two best selling novels, a block buster Hollywood movie, TV documentaries, and a video game. All these representations are based on the same authoritative source; a series of interviews carried out by the journalist Mark Bowden among US servicemen who took part in the events, and material provided to him by the US military. This material subsequently spread and proliferated throughout a considerable number of media, providing it with a unique position to define the limits of public discourse concerning the event, and to determine the ways in which both self and other and the conflict between them are perceived. Taken this impact of the material compiled by Bowden into account, an analysis of the specific norms and values underlying the representations and of the techniques by which this particular ideological subtext is naturalised becomes a crucial task.

2. The birth of the complex. Mark Bowden's *Black Hawk Down*.

2.1 The book.

The book *Black Hawk Down* by journalist and author Bowden⁴³ was published in 1999 after having been premiered as a series of articles in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*⁴⁴. Bowden's intention was to give an accurate account of the battle taking place between US troops and

⁴³ Bowden (2000).

⁴⁴ The series is available electronically on <http://inquirer.philly.com/packages/somalia/sitemap.asp> (14.2.05).

Somali fighters in Mogadishu in October 1993. In an attempt to arrest two high-ranking officers of Mohamed Farrah Aidid, a warlord who was held responsible for attacks on UN peace-keeping forces in the country, two US Black Hawk helicopters were shot down. During attempts to secure the crash sites US Ranger and Delta Force Units were captured in a battle in the middle of densely populated areas, which lasted for 18 hours and killed 18 US soldiers plus a still unknown number of Somali fighters and civilians, before UN troops escorted the special forces out of the conflict zone. The outcome of “the battle of the Black Sea”⁴⁵ was perceived as a major defeat for the US and led to a retreat from Somalia and a significant change in Washington’s willingness to offer troops for humanitarian interventions during the years to come⁴⁶.

In his own words, Bowden tried to “re-create the experience of combat through the eyes of those involved”⁴⁷ and “combine the authority of a historical narrative with the emotion of the memoir”⁴⁸. To reach that aim the author conducted a series of interviews with soldiers who had taken part in the actual battle. In addition, he employed tape recordings and transcripts of radio communication carried out during combat and got access to live video footage taken from Army surveillance helicopters. Bowden uses this material to reconstruct the events of the battle minute by minute. Yet, besides an accurate representation of external events, the book also conveys a set of particular values, norms and premises. This ideological subtext is proliferated by means of other media representations resting on its factual foundations; most prominently the block buster movie by the same title by Ridley Scott. Some of the stories told by involved Rangers were published in form of a novel in 2004⁴⁹.

Because of the great impact of Bowden’s material, as the factual foundation for widespread mass media representations concerning the event, the following section takes a closer look at the book’s ideological content.

2.2 Issues of methodology.

Claiming to be an accurate representation of an actual event, Bowden’s book forms the factual core of the *Black Hawk Down* media complex. As such, the methodology applied to gather the material becomes of prominent interest for a critical analysis.

⁴⁵ Bowden (2000:481).

⁴⁶ Quoting an anonymous State Department official Bowden refers to a “watershed” in US foreign policy (Bowden (2000:486)).

⁴⁷ Ibid. (:505).

⁴⁸ Ibid. (:482).

⁴⁹ See Eversmann/Schilling (2004).

Initially, focus will be directed towards the conditions under which the interviews with US servicemen were carried out. It will be argued that the way the author conducted the interviews casts significant doubt over the reliability of the acquired material.

Even though his book contains a list with full names of all interviewees in its appendix Bowden remains ambiguous about important features of the settings under which the interviews were carried out⁵⁰. In the epilogue, he states that he had carried out twelve interviews with soldiers of involved Ranger units during “three days at Fort Benning”⁵¹, without giving a clearer account of the conditions under which those interviews were conducted. However, Fort Benning is a military installation which makes it reasonable to assume that interviewees may not have experienced the arena as neutral, possibly expressing less critical and more affirmative views than under a setting perceived of as uncontrolled. Consequently, the possibility that his informants didn’t trust Bowden enough to tell stories deviant from the accepted main stream views circulating among military units must be seen as present, thus decisively limiting the variety of related perspectives.

Furthermore, Bowden points out that the second unit involved in the fighting in Mogadishu besides the Army Rangers, the Delta Force, is a unit operating in secrecy, which makes information about their operations difficult to obtain⁵². He refers to their “policy and tradition as silent professionalism”⁵³, presumably indicating his inability to collect reliable information from members of this unit. Later he refers to one Delta soldier by name and asserts that he had “obtained official permission” to contact the author, even though he risked “the opprobrium of his former colleagues”⁵⁴. At another point Bowden refers to “written accounts of Delta operators”⁵⁵ as the source of his information. One must question if written documents provided by members of a secretly operating unit of the US military necessarily do give access to all sides of the story in question. Written documents are open to censorship and it seems at this point difficult to verify the accuracy of the provided information. Such methodological inaccuracies and the reliance on material provided for him by military authorities make it seem necessary to question the strict accuracy of Bowden’s report beyond a realist depiction of the cruelty of war and a mere reconstruction of unit movements, troop deployments and fighting sequences. It seems reasonable to assert that important elements of his account lack methodologically reliable sources.

⁵⁰ For his methodology see Bowden (2000:pp.482 and pp. 499).

⁵¹ Ibid. (500).

⁵² Ibid. (483).

⁵³ Ibid. (506).

⁵⁴ Ibid. (506).

⁵⁵ Ibid. (501).

Bowden's book also includes voices of involved Somalis from Mogadishu. In 1997 the author spent "seven days in the city (...) long enough to walk the streets where the battle had taken place and to interview some of the men who had fought against American soldiers that day"⁵⁶. In a footnote referring to one account given by a Somali fighter Bowden states that many Somalis "were clearly making up stories"⁵⁷. He asserts that "thanks to the detailed accounts I'd gotten from American soldiers it was pretty easy to sort fact from fiction"⁵⁸. The author clearly treats the accounts of Somalis as subordinate to those of US soldiers, when he employs the latter to verify the former. This conduct establishes the view represented by US soldiers as the norm against which all deviating accounts have to be measured. This together with the short time span during which he had to conduct his interviews in an environment completely foreign to him, throw significant doubts over the methodological basis on which his assessment of the Somali view rests.

The problems referred to above show that Bowden's account navigates in a methodological grey-zone. Claiming historical accuracy and rigidity he remains unclear in relation to decisive questions important for an assessment of the validity of his account. Still his work represents a claim to definitional power over the event. By proliferating through the media complex, it, to a significant degree, determines what is memorized of Mogadishu 1993 in a Western interpretative community and what is forgotten.

2.3. Issues of narrative techniques.

The questionable methodology leads to a bias in the ideological content underlying the representation of the events. This ideological content is naturalized for the audience by a particular narrative technique which blurs the distinction between narrator's voice and interviewee, between witness account and comment.

Bowden's book lacks a comprehensive system for quotations, which makes it difficult to assess when the author issues his own understanding of the events or the world, when he relates information obtained by an informant, and when he freely summarises what he had heard or read elsewhere. In addition to a methodological grey-zone in relation to interview-techniques referred to above, another grey-zone concerning the narrator's voice becomes apparent, blurring the distinction between Bowden's comments and the stories related to him

⁵⁶ Bowden (2000:500).

⁵⁷ Ibid. (516).

⁵⁸ Ibid.

by his informants. In the following some of the ideological contents conveyed by means of the narration will briefly be sketched out.

Together with eyewitness accounts relating actual events, Bowden's book also reproduces an ideology obviously prevalent among US military special-forces. The understandings and values of a particular group, US military elite soldiers, who obtained permission and were willing to be interviewed, are presented as the norm against which deviant views have to be measured to assess their validity. During the book their view of the world remains unquestioned and uncontested. Their accounts are treated as the accurate reflection of the world as it really is. They are naturalised.

The novel opens with an epitaph quoting Cormac McCarthy⁵⁹. This epitaph establishes war as an unquestionable timeless feature of reality, thereby limiting the discourse. Any peaceful alternatives to violent conflict resolution are successfully de-legitimised. The notion of war as "ugly and evil, (...) but (...) still the way things got done on most of the planet"⁶⁰ represents the conceptual basis on which the story unfolds.

Throughout the book the two US military units involved in Somalia, Army Rangers and Delta Force, are glorified. Soldiers are presented as "achingly earnest, patriotic, and idealistic"⁶¹. A "genuine balls-out firefight" is referred to as "what they wanted. All of them!"⁶². However, in stating these wishes, the author remains ambiguous as to whose meaning he relates, how the information was acquired, and if there had been deviant views.

Bowden repeatedly depicts the pride of the soldiers to belong to an elite, and states, referring to Rangers, that they "were the cream, the most highly motivated young soldiers of their generation, selected to fit the army's ideal – they were all male and, *revealingly*, almost all white"⁶³. Also this section is told in third person without signs indicating a quotation. Taken this into consideration it has to be interrogated, what the almost-all-whiteness of the elite force is seen to *reveal*. The question arises if Bowden, in the role of a commentator, wanted to criticise an inherently racist military establishment allowing almost only whites into the ranks of elite units, or if it, in his opinion, reveals the superiority of the white race, making it succeed where others fail.

⁵⁹ The epitaph: "... War endures. As well ask men what they think of stone. War was always here. Before man was, war waited for him..." (Bowden (2000:11)).

⁶⁰ Ibid. (58).

⁶¹ Ibid. (23).

⁶² Ibid. (24).

⁶³ Ibid. (23); my emphasis.

Members of the second unit involved, Delta Force, are referred to as “hale, secret supersoldiers”⁶⁴, as “noble, silent, and invisible, (...) modern knights and true”, who “melted back into the shadows” after accomplishing “America’s most important work”. According to Bowden, Delta Force “made it happen”, the force “allowed the politicians to have it both ways”, thus making the “good-hearted ideals of humankind” prevail. Besides terming the secret assassinations of adversaries by a secret military unit far beyond the control of democratic institutions as *America’s most important work*, non-violent forms of interventions and support for those in need is depicted as a useless, vain activity unless supported by the barrel of a gun. These quotes clearly reveal the anti-democratic and militarist content reproduced through Bowden’s work. Here, as throughout the rest of the book, Bowden remains ambivalent about whose voice he relates as a commentator.

Describing the features of a Delta operator, Bowden reveals open admiration. “Spotting them [Delta operators] down at Fort Bragg wasn’t hard. You’d meet this guy hanging out at bar around Bragg, deeply tanned, biceps rippling, neck wide as a fireplug, with a giant Casio watch and a plug of chaw under his lip”⁶⁵. This description uncritically reproduces a macho-male role model composed of symbols of physical and economic power and dominance, which are directly related to members of the military.

Also the depiction of the commanding general Garrison stereotypes a right-wing macho-militarist discourse. The general is referred to as “the picture of American military machismo”, a “bemused cynic” with a “low threshold for bullshit”, who had “run covert operations all over the world”, amongst those the “infamously brutal Phoenix⁶⁶ program”, which alone was “enough to iron the idealism out of anybody”⁶⁷. Garrison is depicted as a “blunt realist”, who accepts the ugliness of the world and dares to act accordingly: “Some people needed to die. It was how the real world worked”⁶⁸. Here, excessively brutal, covert, military operations, beyond the control of democratic institutions are legitimised as necessary and important, and associated with a person depicted in positive terms. In a brief sketch of the general’s career, Bowden further relates how Garrison once “defended the unit [Delta Force]” during a “scandal [that] could have brought the unit down” making sure “only the worst abusers” were punished, a deed “the men hadn’t forgotten”⁶⁹. Under the pretence of

⁶⁴ All quotes Bowden (2000:23).

⁶⁵ Ibid. (59).

⁶⁶ This programme was initiated during the Vietnam war and had the covert executions of Vietcong leaders as main objective.

⁶⁷ All quotes ibid. (44-5).

⁶⁸ Ibid. (45).

⁶⁹ All quotes ibid. (46).

introducing the biography of a central character, here, values and norms are perpetuated which legitimise an elite military force with a close group identity and strong allegiances only to each other, where individual soldiers rightfully cover each other's crimes; an elite military force far beyond democratic control and practically acting above the law.

The last issue of ideology veiled in Bowden's account to be touched upon at this point is the conceptualisation of humanitarian interventions as a struggle between Western civilisation and evil Non-Western barbarism. Somalia is referred to as "pure Indian country"⁷⁰ associating the intervention with US history and the alleged civilisation of its indigenous populations. Reference is repeatedly made to a "civilized world" which had decided "to lower the hammer" and set out to "restore sanity and civilisation"⁷¹ by stopping "evil warlords". Quoting an unnamed State Department official it is further stated that, "people in these countries [countries torn by civil war](...) don't want peace. They want victory. They want power. Men, women, old and young. Somalia was the experience that told us that people in these places bear much of the responsibility for things being the way they are. The hatred and killing continues because they want it to"⁷². Not touching the question about the empirical basis of the assessment made by this official, the quote taken from the book's epilogue further strengthens the civilised, good, Western versus barbarian, evil, Non-Western distinction, however, expanding it to encompass not only the leaders, but the entire populations of the respective countries.

2.4 Issues of memory.

Bowden states that his work is an accurate representation of an actual event, as it relies upon the memories of directly involved personnel. Within the theoretical framework of Jan and Aleida Assmann concerning cultural memory referred to above, it becomes apparent that Bowden's account can be analysed as an attempt to translate the communicative memory of a small group of US army veterans - their particular discourse - into an externalised cultural memory - a foundational discourse - with impact on the identity formation of a larger interpretative community. In this case, however, the translation process from communicative to cultural memory is not achieved over a *floating time gap*⁷³, but must be seen to take place over a *floating institutional and spatial gap*. Communicative memory is dependent on direct contact with involved persons. In the case of memories concerning the events in Mogadishu

⁷⁰ Ibid. (19).

⁷¹ All quotes ibid. (25-6).

⁷² Ibid. (487).

⁷³ J.Assmann (2002:48).

1993 it is not the inevitable dying of age of the involved personnel, but their inaccessibility because of institutional barriers (secret US army units) and spatial distance (inhabitants of Mogadishu), which makes direct communication impossible. In allegedly bridging these institutional and spatial gaps Bowden succeeds in constructing a meta-narrative about the events using the communicative memories of involved individuals as his main source. In the form of a novel, this meta-narrative makes a claim to definitional power over the event, privileging the accounts of a choice of US army servicemen. During this process the norms, values, and understandings of this particular societal group are implicitly installed in the cultural memory of US society. Subsequently, this ideological subtext proliferates into other mass media representations, thus increasing its impact.

An obvious objection to this ideological critique of Bowden's work would be the claim, that the author never intended to defend or acknowledge the values and norms inherent in his work, but that he only retold the stories and views related to him by his interviewees for the sake of the realism of his account. The obvious ideological bias would then not be the author's intention but an inherent feature of his empirical data, which, for the sake of the freedom of the word, should not be oppressed. This argument nevertheless requires, firstly, a scientifically valid and verifiable methodology in relation to the empirical material forming the basis of the account, and, secondly, an unambiguous narrative structure, which makes it clear when the author directly quotes from a source, when he summarises previously acquired material, and when he inserts his own comments. The previous two sections made an argument for the claim that such pre-conditions are not present in Bowden's case. The empirical material gathered by him is inaccessible for critical analysis and his narrating style repeatedly creates the impression of deliberately blurring the distinction between quote, summary, and author's comments.

2.5 Conclusion.

This section has discussed some of the ideological pretexts inherent in Bowden's attempt to represent an actual historical event. Bowden's methodology, even though unclear at second sight, takes part in constructing an impression of accuracy, and a blurred narrative strategy complicates a distinction between informants' and narrator's voice, making it difficult to assess the author's view. Still, Bowden's material must be seen to have a prominent position in today's Western discourse concerning the events in Mogadishu in 1993. Providing the foundation for a cinematic representation carried out by Ridley Scott, and featuring in both

novels, TV documentaries, and newsgroup forums on the internet, it forms the factual core of the *Black Hawk Down* media complex.

3. Proliferation. Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down*.

Consider a movie exclusively introducing members of a particular African tribe as objects for audience identification and empathy, providing them with identities and personal histories. Let us consider then, that in this fictitious movie, these peaceful tribesmen are suddenly threatened by a vicious horde of evil looking US soldiers, who wickedly attack them and leave them no other option, but to fight for their survival under the application of all means available. Consider the musical accompaniment valorising the killing of the intruding soldiers, think of quick cuts veiling their plight, while slow motion enhances audience commitments to the entrapped tribesmen. A revolting example for anti-American propaganda, which wouldn't be taken seriously, at any rate? A movie so unconvincing that it is unconceivable as a box-office success? This section intends to show that such movies are indeed popular; at least as long as the roles of victim and perpetrator are reversed.

I will now direct focus onto the main element of the *Black Hawk Down* media complex; Ridley Scott's movie by the same title. With the release of the movie, author Mark Bowden's material on the events in Somalia in 1993 proliferated throughout the mass media of Western culture, and with it a particular ideological subtext concerning self, other, and conflict. The movie tells a story which resembles the one introduced above. The only difference is that the US soldiers are the good guys, and the tribesmen evil. In spite of this fact it became a major box-office success and still maintains a position where it manages to determine public perception of the events, and, together with other movies following a similar scheme, the perception of self, other, and conflict in general.

This section will follow Ryan/Kellner's approach and distinguish between thematic and formal representational conventions in film⁷⁴. Consequently, the movie's narration and the techniques of their cinematic representation will be treated separately. Firstly, attention will be given to the movie's thematic representational convention, its narration. What story is told, and from which perspective? Which premises are established to limit the discourse? How are self and other, and the conflict between them presented? And which norms and values are implicitly naturalised during the attempt? Having assessed its narrative content and its implicit ideological subtext, a second step is to analyse the movie's formal representational

⁷⁴ See Ryan/Kellner (1990:pp.1).

conventions, and the cinematic means it applies. By which technical means is the narration presented? How are particular connotations generated? And, by which cinematic means are audience identification and empathy determined? The findings are conceptualised as *Alien Aesthetics*, a combination of particular narrative and technical elements which effectively determine audience perceptions of self, other, and their conflict. As a final step, this section widens its scope and looks beyond the confinements of the *Black Hawk Down* media complex with the intention to show that *Alien Aesthetics* is a recurrent phenomenon in popular war and action movies. As such, generated on the level of connotations and present in a wide range of movies and other media representations, *Alien Aesthetics* originates a myth; the *cinematic myth of self and other* implicitly naturalising its ideological subtext as a violent discourse of conflict.

3.1 The movie.

a) Content.

Based on Mark Bowden's book, also Ridley Scott's movie *Black Hawk Down* (USA, 2001) intends to tell in great detail the story of the operation carried out by US special-forces in the Somali capitol Mogadishu in 1993. It attempts to realistically re-enact the events. The perspective proves, however, even more limited than in Bowden's work. While Bowden, however methodologically questionable and dependent on assessments made by US servicemen, also introduces a Somali perspective, this indigenous view lacks in Scott's adaptation. The movie relates the events exclusively from the perspective of US soldiers⁷⁵.

Scott's work claims to accurately represent what happened. Still, it dramatises the events, shows character developments and employs particular cinematic techniques when relating self to other. As such the movie must be seen as a genre hybrid. It bears traces of both documentary and fictitious drama. As a genre mixture it opens for different decoding conventions in relation to the material presented. According to audience expectation it can be decoded as either documentary or drama. Still, both options are intertwined. Even when treated as purely dramatic, it leaves the audience with the impression to have acquainted reliable information about an actual event.

⁷⁵ It should at this point be mentioned that neither Bowden's book, nor Scott's movie mentions the casualties of, or role played by Malayan and Pakistani UN forces, who extracted the entrapped US force in the end. When shown in Scott's movie they are presented negatively, slow in their reactions and only unwillingly supportive.

b) Reception.

Ridley Scott's movie depicts extreme violence and cruelty in its battle scenes and shows unveiled immense human sufferings, but also heroic acts of mastery by young US soldiers. It was released in the aftermath of the September 11th attacks and seems to have hit a nerve of the time. Scott's work quickly turned into a major box-office success in both the US and Europe. With a budget of roughly 90 million dollars it made 108 million US dollars between December 28th 2001 and April 18th 2002 in the US alone. Worldwide the amount totalled 179 million US dollars in the same period⁷⁶. After the release the battlegrounds of Mogadishu became virtually accessible for players with the introduction of a first-person-shooter video game based on the film. The success of Scott's movie shows the extent to which the audience embraced the material provided. Its tremendous reach makes it the core of the *Black Hawk Down* media complex.

In the press the film was widely acknowledged for this realism and was greeted as "one of the most convincing, realistic combat movies (...) ever seen"⁷⁷. However, *Black Hawk Down* was not only noticed for its alleged realism. Also its ideological content became subject of debate. On the one hand the movie's "searing salute to the spirit of the best Americans"⁷⁸ attracted even Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld to attend the Washington premiere, while, on the other hand, allegations of racism were made against Ridley Scott's work, which was seen as depicting predominantly white soldiers killing black Somalis for a just cause⁷⁹. The latter allegations were solemnly discharged, usually under the precedent that they are "based solely on a superficial viewing of the film"⁸⁰. Nevertheless, I will support the argument that *Black Hawk Down* is racist. This racism, however, is not about white soldiers killing black Somalis, but reveals itself on a deeper level. It is the constitution of the self as inherently good and righteous in the form of US soldiers, and their juxtaposition to an inherently evil and incomprehensible other, which forms the racist subtext conveyed and (re)produced by *Black Hawk Down*, as well as by many other war and action movies.

⁷⁶ Source: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0265086/business> (9.2.05).

⁷⁷ Phillip French, *Meet the Professionals*, The Observer, January 20th 2002.

⁷⁸ J.Larsen (2002:53).

⁷⁹ For this accusation see for example

<http://groups.google.no/groups?q=Black+Hawk+Down&start=10&hl=no&lr=&selm=3cb2978.0201251914.75ff93e5%40posting.google.com&rnum=12> (7.5.05).

⁸⁰ Mark Bowden, quoted in Arnold (2002:32).

c) Structure.

The film opens with an *epitaph*, and is divided into a *prologue*, an *exposition*, the *main theme*, a *conclusion*, and an *epilogue*⁸¹. The narrated time covered is approximately 48 hours. Over 90 of the total of 136 minutes narration time are dedicated to the 18 hours gunfight, which represents the major part of the movie. The *epitaph* defines the limits of the discourse touched upon in the movie, while *prologue* and *epilogue*, in predominantly written form, serve to sketch out the historical-political context of the narration, hence determining audience perception of the event. *Exposition*, *main theme* and *conclusion* form the main part of the narration and serve to dramatise the established facts and personify the particular sets of values assigned to self and other. The *exposition* chapter introduces main characters. The self, in the form of US soldiers, is individualised for audience identification, thus enhancing empathy and compassion, while the presentation of the enemy merely serves to personify negative values assigned to the other as a whole. During the *main theme* the audience follows the characters of young US soldiers through an external crisis, during which they have to assert themselves against an enemy depicted as inherently cruel, vicious and merciless. The premises established previously are dramatised to enhance their effect. The *concluding* chapter reveals the results of the processes of individual maturation.

3.2 Issues of narration.

In the following, the narrative elements of Ridley Scott's movie will be closer scrutinised. It will be assessed which conceptual and historic-political context is established and how this serves to limit possible discourses. Then, attention is directed to the narrative constitution of self and other, and their juxtaposition as role model and object for audience identification on the one, and sole personification of evil on the other hand. In doing so, this section sketches out the implicit ideological content of the movie, which reinforces subconscious processes of enemising, and thus serves the (re)production of a system of cultural violence.

3.2.1 Establishing the borders of the discourse. War as timeless necessity.

Ridley Scott's movie opens with an epitaph, stating that it is "based on an actual event"⁸², thereby issuing a claim to representational realism. A second line of text inserts a particular normative element into the claim. The Greek philosopher Plato is quoted with the words:

⁸¹ In *Black Hawk Down* (BHD from now on): Epitaph 0:00:05-0:00:18, prologue 0:00:18-0:04:35, exposition chapter 0:04:35-0:36:00, main theme 0:36:00-2:02:00, conclusion 2:02:00-2:09:20, and epilogue 2:09:20-2:10:30.

⁸² BHD, 0:00:08.

“Only the dead have seen the end of war”⁸³. By referring to a historical-philosophical authority the notion of war as a timeless necessity, as the human condition, is substantiated. The allegedly realistic cinematic presentation, subsequently serves to dramatise, and thereby illustrate, the validity of the statement.

The epitaph establishes clear premises effectively determining the range of possible readings. The two lines effectively *anchor*⁸⁴ the images of the movie. With reference to eternal war as *the* state-of-affairs, alternative non-violent forms of conflict resolution are effectively de-legitimised. Consequently, the role soldier is provided with timeless legitimacy. Depicted as captured in a chapter of the endless tale of violence, the young men have no choice. They have to kill and destroy, or perish. As a result, the movie can depict the cruelty of war in all its ugliness, yet still reproduce a belligerent ideology.

The epitaph establishes the discursive borders within which the construction of meaning is forced to take place, by means of anchoring the provided images to a particular range of possible interpretations. Attitudes which are critical towards military thinking are effectively de-legitimised by reference to war as *the* historical and political reality. The movie, therefore, becomes more than a mere re-presentation of what happened in Somalia in 1993. The variety of its possible meanings is limited by its claim to representational realism, yet, at the same time, symbolically extended to encompass a description of the human condition per se.

3.2.2 Establishing a historical-political context. Good versus evil.

Ridley Scott’s movie begins with a prologue⁸⁵, which in predominantly written form, enlightens the audience about the historical-political context of the story. As such, it prepares the stage and the background for the story to unfold.

The prologue starts by establishing time and place as “Somalia, East Africa, 1992”⁸⁶. It is briefly described how years of clan warfare had caused “famine on a biblical scale” with “300.000 civilians” dying of starvation. Responsibility for the atrocities is placed on Mohammed Farrah Aidid, a powerful warlord, ruling in the capital Mogadishu, who “seizes international food shipments” and “uses hunger as his weapon”. It is the deployment of 20.000 US Marines that makes sure that “food is delivered and order is restored”. The written

⁸³ BHD, 0:00:16. The reference to Plato is doubtful. The web-site <http://plato-dialogues.org/faq/faq008.htm> (14.2.05) claims that Plato never wrote these words, but that the expression was mistakenly attributed to him by General Douglas MacArthur during a farewell address to cadets at West Point in 1962. The same site states that the quote can, again referring to Plato, be found on the wall of the Imperial War Museum in London, also there without more accurate reference to any particular work of the Greek philosopher.

⁸⁴ Term taken from Barthes (1978:38).

⁸⁵ Prologue in BHD, 0:00:16 – 0:04:35.

⁸⁶ Quotes in this paragraph see BHD, 0:00:55 – 0:03:10.

reference, “April 1993”, witnesses of a jump in the narrated time. It is then related to the audience that “Aidid waits until the Marines withdraw, and (...) declares war on the remaining UN peace keepers”. After listing further crimes it is stated that Aidid’s militia begins “targeting American personnel”, which, again, leads to the deployment of “America’s elite soldiers (...) to remove Aidid and restore order”.

This written part of the prologue is accompanied by sad African music. The camera eye moves slowly over scenes of death and destruction, capturing intense human sufferings in plain monochrome images, creating an impression of realism. Repeated lines of text concretise the setting and underline the claim to documentary accuracy. This introduction of basic facts anchors the movie to one particular perspective on a concrete political-historical event. Responsibility for the situation is placed on one man, Aidid, who is described as a cynical murderer, targeting civilians, UN peace-keepers, and as even using hunger as a weapon to curb his own people. His actions, and the negative values assigned to him, are juxtaposed to an international community, responding under US leadership with the objective to deliver badly needed humanitarian aid and restore order.

In a second part of the prologue, the movie moves on to dramatise the established facts. A cut leads the audience to an aerial shot of a dusty plain outside an African city. A text line concretises time and place: “Saturday, October 2nd 1993. Red Cross Food Distribution Center.”⁸⁷ The camera perspective reveals itself to be the view of young American soldiers surveying the distribution of food from a helicopter. Desperate masses throng around a truck loaded with bags of rice. Another cut relocates the perspective to the ground. A shift in the musical accompaniment towards gloomy Arab guitar rhythms anticipates a looming threat, which is identified as heavily armed militia by the soldiers in the chopper. Suddenly shots are randomly fired into the group of people gathering around the truck, immediately dispersing them. The soldiers, equally shocked as the audience, request permission to engage via intercom. A cut back to their faces reveals their incomprehension and resignation, when they are told that UN-jurisdictions prevent them from intervening. One further cut effectively contrasts these young soldiers, ready to risk their lives in an attempt to help others, with the sinister looking figure of a cynical Somali, who, responsible for the shooting, now claims the food-aid for general Aidid. His dark figure, standing under the flag of the Red Cross, then points a megaphone towards the helicopter and pretends to shoot it down.

⁸⁷ In the following see BHD, 0:03:10 – 0:04:35

This dramatised part of the prologue effectively sets the scene. The main adversaries are introduced and personified. The tall man, all dressed in black, is one of the few Somali figures recurring throughout the movie. Still, he is introduced as entirely cruel and evil, a cynical murderer. This image is effectively contrasted with the young, blue-eyed soldiers and, later on, with their grey-haired responsible general Garrison. This dramatisation of the Manichean struggle personifies both threat and redeemer. Consequently, it establishes a clear distinction between self and other, thus determining audience identification and empathy.

By means of the prologue, a struggle between a cynical, cold-blooded Somali criminal and a civilised international community under US leadership with humanitarian intentions, is installed as the core of the historical event, in the cultural memory of Western society. This strategy legitimises the doubtlessly well-meaning US approach in its entirety, thus preventing a necessary closer scrutiny of what happened, and why things went wrong. Responsibility for the unfolding violence is placed solemnly in the hands of Somalis, their malice being the sole reason for the outside involvement and the severe countermeasures taken by the soldiers⁸⁸.

The epilogue⁸⁹ towards the end of the movie, rounds up the story in form of a written summary of factual results. Every fallen US soldier is listed with full name and rank, receptions of US medals of honour are mentioned and the further story of Aidid (killed in 1996) and general Garrison (retired after the death of his adversary) are told. The Somali deaths remain nameless and are numbered with “over 1000”, while the role and casualties of the mainly Malayan and Pakistani UN forces who extracted the encircled US soldiers are not even mentioned. Also the epilogue represents the conflict as a struggle between an inherently good, personified self and a face- and nameless, undistinguishable mass of adversaries, in this way reinforcing subconscious processes of enemising.

3.2.3 Shaping self and other.

Which particular norms and values are assigned to self and other in the course of Ridley Scott’s cinematic narration? It will be argued, that the self is glorified as an obedient, courageous fighter and, as such, established as role model, while the other is demonised and de-humanised as a ruthless, vicious killer. This implicit ideological content in Scott’s work

⁸⁸ For a competing, more balanced approach, see Duffey (2000:pp.142). Of particular interest is her focus on traditional Somali institutions for conflict resolution, which place the warlords, so prominent in mainstream top-down approaches, on the sideline. With her arguments in mind, the question might be asked if the warlords in their powerful position must be seen as more a result of, than the reason for an international involvement. At this point it has to be pointed out, that this thesis does not set out to be a historical study which attempts to critically assess the validity of the perspective framed through the movie. Rather, the aim is to analyse the ideological subtext conveyed between the lines of a particular perspective on an actual event.

⁸⁹ Epilogue in BHD, 2:09:20 – 2:10:30.

serves to (re)produce conceptualisations of conflicts as inevitable, as Manichean struggles between an inherently good *we* and an entirely evil *them*. Instead of reconstituting the other as possible partner for future joint attempts to resolve conflicts, it is demonised and prevented from empathy, while the self is glorified solely for its willingness and ability to fight. By such means Scott's narration naturalises norms, values, and premises which serve the (re)production of a culture of violence, systematically promoting violent options for action while constraining peaceful ones.

a) Personifying the self. US soldiers as role models.

aa) Of boys and men. The Ranger/Delta distinction.

An important element of both the literary and the cinematic narration is the distinction between the two involved US Army units - the Army Rangers and Delta Force – which is elaborated during the exposition chapter of the movie. As mentioned above, Bowden repeatedly draws the reader's attention to the admiration young Rangers allegedly feel towards members of the secret elite Delta Force. Throughout the movie, Delta operators are depicted individually as calm and matured personalities, and effectively contrasted to a wild bunch of young, eager, and exalted Rangers looking up to them⁹⁰. Delta operators are depicted as older, usually wearing a designer stubble, controlled in their movements and judgements. They are presented as self-sustained adults with no real need for orders, yet willing to share their experience. Their hobbies bear witness of adult civilian lives, with repeated references to wives and children. Rangers, on the other hand, are presented as immature and overexcited, quick in their judgements and plain in their humour. Family references are usually made to parents. Rangers are young men mocking their general, yet they are eager and willing to show what their worth. They expose a sense of boyish invincibility, a lust for action to prove themselves, which is effectually underlined by a scene in which private Blackburn joins his unit and eagerly asks about the fighting, telling the officer he came “to kick some ass”. The scene closes with the officer filling “age 18” into the form, underscoring his youth .

Between the lines, to be like a Delta operator is promoted as an ultimate goal of individual development for the young men. Consequently, acceptance by the older soldiers is equalled with a successful maturation. The crisis during the main theme provides the necessary challenge during which the young men can assert themselves, gathering experience and

⁹⁰ In the following see the exposition chapter of *Black Hawk Down* and in particular BHD, 0:14:30-.

approaching their idols. The characters of two Rangers, Sergeant Eversmann and Private Grimes exemplify this point by their development throughout the movie.

The exposition introduces the young Ranger Grimes⁹¹. Since he has the ability to typewrite he is usually assigned to office work and coffee making. In the introduction scene he laments to have “believed the be-all-you-can-be-commercials” just to be left behind whenever the Rangers are called to duty. As such he complains about having “made coffee through Desert Storm, and (...) Panama”. Grimes is then told that he, because of an accident, will be able to go out today. The first reaction of the young soldier to the news opens critical potential. Grimes reacts ambiguously. He seems insecure. On the investigating question if this “wasn’t what he wanted”, Grimes only manages to respond undetermined. It seems as if he didn’t really expect to be sent out, and now, facing the possibility, would rather like to back out. Still, this critical potential remains unrealised. During the preparations to the assault Grimes is occasionally mocked by his comrades, while they back him up with advice and motivating words. During the fighting he is assigned to a Delta Force unit⁹², where he obtains useful counsel by an experienced fighter. When Grimes courageously risks his life in a critical situation he gains the appreciation of his mentor⁹³, who, from then on, shows an interest in him by for example asking for his story during a brief halt in the fighting⁹⁴. In the concluding chapter Grimes is distinguished when the Delta operator provides him with a cup of tea, obviously remembering him and his story, now treating him as equal⁹⁵. The critical potential, at this point, appears dissolved and turned into its opposite. Instead of taking on the difficult task to portray individual failure in confrontation with an extreme situation and provide legitimacy to it, the movie depicts legitimate fear as an obstacle which has to be overcome to be able to join in as part of a larger whole. As such, to fulfil one’s duty, and adhere to given orders in spite of fears and doubts is presented as the way through which young soldiers gain experiences and recognition, thus maturing to become men.

The case of Grimes is not a singularity, but represents an essential feature of the movie’s narrative structure. Ranger Sergeant Eversmann and a Delta operator provide another example for the young/inexperienced versus mature/experienced distinction. Also Eversmann’s character can be seen to contain critical potential, since he is depicted as “an idealist”, who even “likes the skinnies[Somalis]”. Eversmann believes in the mission carried out by US

⁹¹ In the following see BHD, 0:24:45 - .

⁹² BHD, 1:12:45.

⁹³ BHD, 1:19:30.

⁹⁴ BHD, 1:44:25.

⁹⁵ BHD, 2:04:30.

troops in Somalia. He thinks in political terms, stating that “we could either help, (...) or watch the country destroy itself on CNN”⁹⁶. Eversmann has critical thoughts, which surface clearly when one of his troops dies later on in the movie, because immediate medical support had to be refused by his superiors⁹⁷. Also this potential for a critical investigation of military structures and authorities, possibly providing legitimacy to a certain amount of distrust is successfully countered by juxtaposing Eversmann with a mature Delta operator who has the narrative task to help the young Ranger - and the audience identifying with him - to conceptualise the situation and find his proper role.

During the exposition Eversmann is put in charge of his platoon of Rangers. Insecure because of the responsibility placed upon him he seeks support from a Delta operator, Hoot, before the mission. Lazily leaning towards a wall in the sun and obviously relaxed, he tells Eversmann, that one’s own thoughts don’t matter, and that, “once that first bullet goes past your head, politics and all that shit goes right out of the window”. His task as fresh platoon leader is to “watch your corner and get all your men back alive”⁹⁸. After the death of one of Eversmann’s soldiers, Hoot appears again. The Delta operator replies to the mounting critique of a lack of supporting troops, by defending the decisions made by their superiors as reasonable, once more telling Eversmann to stop thinking. Hoot comforts Eversmann by telling him he had done right today, and that he now has to begin thinking about getting his men out of there. This last sentence is accompanied by erupting gunfire close by. Hoot takes a close look at the young Ranger and asks anticipantly: Well, shall we!?”⁹⁹. In the subsequent battle Eversmann turns into a courageous leader under the eyes of his mentor, by marking enemy positions with an infrared strobe under heavy fire to guide air support¹⁰⁰. After escaping the hostile area Eversmann and Hoot meet once more in the UN compound. While rearming for an immediate return into the hostile area and accompanied by a heroic bell-tolling tune, the Delta operator tells the Ranger, that when coming home it is no point in trying to explain their actions to anyone, “cause *they* won’t understand, why *we* are doing it”¹⁰¹. Besides de-legitimizing any critique of military conduct by non-military institutions as solely due to lack of information and understanding of *the* reality on the ground, Hoot’s words also clearly reveal the successful initiation of Eversmann into a greater whole, a ‘we’, consisting of a group of men connected through the experience of war and with allegiances

⁹⁶ All quotes, see BHD, 0:16:55 -.

⁹⁷ See BHD, 1:49:10 -.

⁹⁸ BHD, 0:30:10 -.

⁹⁹ For this Hoot-Eversmann conversation see BHD, 1:51:05 -.

¹⁰⁰ BHD, 1:53:40 -.

¹⁰¹ For this conversation see BHD, 2:06:15 -; my emphasis.

mainly towards each other, or as Hoot puts it: “It’s about the man next to you. And that’s it. That’s all it is”.

ab) Of fear and doubt. The de-legitimisation of critique.

Another important feature of the theme of individual maturation through war is the fact that all characters presented during the cinematic narration overcome their fears or doubts and succeed in the tasks assigned to them. Not one case of failure or legitimate critique of military authorities is depicted throughout the film. Doubts and fears are presented as obstacles to individual development, and have to be surmounted. This narrative feature constructs a notion of self for audience identification which is one-sided and ideologically biased. Characters adhering to the given, militarily defined order are depicted as examples for successful individual development. Throughout the movie the framework of authoritative structures and war is not further questioned, but treated as a pre-condition defining the basis in relation to which individual conduct has to be evaluated.

Heading back to the base with one convoy, Ranger Thomas Anderson witnesses the death of his comrade Pilla on close hold¹⁰². After reaching the base he is startled and obviously affected by the horrible drive under constant heavy fire. When receiving orders to rearm and get back into the city to secure the crash site of the second helicopter which has been shot down, the young Ranger doubts the meaningfulness of the order by stating that it isn’t sure that anyone is still alive there. Directly addressed by his superior, Anderson says that he “can’t go back out there”¹⁰³. Repeated cross-clippings between Anderson, a helicopter circling over crash site two, and the crash-site itself, serve to de-legitimate the Ranger’s doubts and to give examples for proper conduct. The scenes depicting the second crash site¹⁰⁴ clearly relate to the audience that at least the pilot there is, in fact, still alive, thus proving Anderson’s initial assertion wrong. Anderson’s behaviour is juxtaposed to the proper conduct of two Delta snipers, Shuggart and Gordon, who volunteer to secure the site alone, even though their chances of survival are minimal, since the ground convoy won’t make it in time¹⁰⁵. Through long close-ups on Anderson’s face the young Ranger is established as object for audience identification. His fear seems completely reasonable and legitimate. At the same time his position is bereaved of its factual basis, and examples as to how he should behave are given.

¹⁰² BHD, 0:48:00.

¹⁰³ BHD, 1:13:55.

¹⁰⁴ BHD, 1:13:20 and 1:13:50.

¹⁰⁵ BHD, 1:13:30. Both Delta operators are later killed in the attempt. The epilogue honours them by stating that they were the first to receive a Medal of Honour posthumously since the Vietnam war.

To underscore this, the camera-eye, accompanied by a sad tune featuring tolling bells, slowly circles around the young Ranger depicting feverish re-arming activity and other preparations going on around him, clearly isolating him. He witnesses how other soldiers readily return into the combat zone¹⁰⁶ even though wounded¹⁰⁷, or obviously not used to fighting¹⁰⁸. When the refitted convoy begins to move, his superior catches Anderson's sight in the mirror of his vehicle. At this point the young man takes a deep breath out of his asthma inhaler and joins in, re-entering the community and fulfilling his duty.

b) Juxtaposing self and other. Good versus evil.

Scott's cinematic narration directly juxtaposes the values assigned to self and other, by assigning them to particular characters and setting these up against each other.

The character of General Garrison represents the norms and values assigned to US military leadership. He is depicted as an experienced, grey haired, calm and controlled man, who deeply cares about his men¹⁰⁹, obviously used to follow orders and get things done even under difficult circumstances. During the exposition chapter the general is directly juxtaposed to Attoo, Aidid's financial minister, who represents the norms and values assigned to the Somali leadership. This pair is representative for two narrative themes in Ridley Scott's work: the conceptualisation of the US intervention in Somalia as a struggle between an inherently good, civilised West and an inherently evil, cynical and chaotic Somali warlord, and the depiction of the US military leadership as responsible, effective and capable.

During the interrogation of the arrested Attoo by general Garrison the Somali and US leadership are directly juxtaposed¹¹⁰. During this scene the audience is presented with a cynical, ruthless, and greedy African businessman, with no interest in the well-being of the Somali people. Attoo is depicted in close-ups, his dark puffy features face only partly lighted up and repeatedly hidden behind the smoke of a large cigar, creating the impression of a sinister and hardly visible man behind the scenes. His cigar and lavish golden chains and bracelets connote the extensive wealth of a nouveau riche criminal. The general, on the contrary, is filmed in totals. His short grey hair, his thin body, and the simple military clothing all bear witness of a modest life of duty without excess. During the conversation Attoo does not directly deny general Garrison's assertion that he pays for, and sells guns to, Aidid's

¹⁰⁶ A Delta operator, stating they are "wasting their time here": BHD, 1:14:05.

¹⁰⁷ Represented by a Ranger demanding to go in with a broken arm: BHD, 1:14:15.

¹⁰⁸ Represented by a Ranger with thick glasses, obviously more used to office work than combat: BHD, 1:15:40.

¹⁰⁹ In one scene he, for example, desperately tries to wash away the blood of his soldiers from the hospital floor: BHD, 2:05:00.

¹¹⁰ In the following see BHD, 0:06:15 – 0:08:15.

militia, stating he is a businessman who just tries “to make a living”. This lack of direct denial leaves the audience with the clear impression that both Garrison and Attoo know that the general’s words are true. All of Attoo’s attacks on the presence of the US military in Somalia are, in reality, directed against the US political leadership. This becomes clear when Attoo with reference to Clinton states, that this war is “simply about shaping tomorrow. A tomorrow without Arkansas white boys’ ideas”. Garrison answers by stating he wouldn’t know, since he is from Texas, thus de-limiting the military from the political sphere. Their conversation culminates in Attoo’s words that the US “shouldn’t have come here. This is civil war. It’s our war. Not yours.” A righteously aroused General Garrison replies sharply, that “300.000 dead and counting”, does not qualify the situation as war, but as “genocide”. Here the historical-political background, as a struggle between defenders of civilised values and irresponsible despots and dictators is concretised and personalised.

c) Personifying the other. The manifestation of evil.

The few Somalis shown more than once during the movie serve as personifications of evil. Besides Attoo, one other Somali recurs throughout the narration. He is introduced as a militia leader within Aidid’s organisation. Even though individualised for the spectator, audience identification is made impossible by the way in which he is presented. He remains name- and speechless and is associated merely with cruel actions and brutality. Featuring for the first time during the epilogue, he orders the random shooting of civilians at the Red Cross food distribution centre, claiming the food aid for general Aidid¹¹¹. The next time the audience meets him his massive body, dressed all in black, is shown resting in a small room¹¹². When warned of the imminent US attack he gets up with slow, but smooth and agile movements, like a reptile awakening from a doze in the afternoon sun. The following sequence shows him in the middle of a dirty, steaming, and crowded market surrounded by equally vicious-looking militia, gesticulating and arming for combat. His figure is then directly brought in connection with the downing of both Black Hawk helicopters¹¹³. After having sneak-attacked defensive and weakened US units who just finished field surgery of a severely wounded comrade, with heavy guns and grenades, he finally meets his fate when blown to pieces by a Delta assault team coming to the support of the encircled unit¹¹⁴.

¹¹¹ BHD, 0:00:20 -.

¹¹² BHD, 0:35:40 -.

¹¹³ BHD, 0:48:50 and 1:09:40.

¹¹⁴ BHD, 1:44:30, 1:45:15, and 1:46:45.

The few Somalis who reappear and are recognised by the audience are, in other words, depicted as pure evil, as ruthless sadists without restraint or conscience. The presentation of these characters individualises and personifies the central theme of the movie's narration: a total enemy forcing the self to fight by all means available and whose death is made appear deserved and righteous.

d) De-subjectifying the other.

In Ridley Scott's movie the other is represented as a total enemy, who remains faceless and void of identity. Consequently, no Somali character is introduced during the exposition chapter. All male Somalis are reduced to their role as fighters, leaving no room for competing identities as fathers, sons, husbands, friends, or, comrades. As such they do not become available as objects for audience identification or empathy. The vast majority of the Somalis featured during the movie is presented as a seemingly endless stream of indistinguishable black shapes with clear and extremely hostile intentions, leaving their opponents no room for negotiations, or surrender. These vicious hordes only allow for fighting to the last bullet. Unlike US soldiers, Somalis are hardly ever wounded, and usually disappear without a trace after being hit. No one notices their deaths. They are neither mourned, nor given comfort, and no last words come over their lips in the moment of death. Somali fighters are simply not constructed to attract audience empathy. On the contrary, the killing takes place in a setting which makes it seem deserved and righteous. US soldiers kill faceless vicious beings in perpetuated self-defence encouraging the acclaim and support of the audience identifying with the characters of young men, unwillingly trapped in an extremely hostile environment.

A particularly well-suited example is the case of Pilla's death¹¹⁵: the news of the first US casualty leaves a strong impression on the remaining soldiers, when broadcasted via intercom. Brief close-ups show disbelief and sorrow on young handsome faces. The music plays a slow lamenting tune. When another soldier replaces Pilla behind his 50mm cannon, the tune becomes more valorising, increasing in speed and volume. The next scenes show a determined and angry face behind the cannon and rows of black shapes being blown from windows, roof-tops, or hidden entrances, clearly indicating rightful revenge for the death of a valued individual, and this way providing legitimacy to the slaughter.

On the few occasions that Somali deaths are depicted in greater detail, the suffering only becomes important because observed by a US soldier leaving a mark on his consciousness.

¹¹⁵ In the following see BHD, 0:47:55 -.

Here the scene of one Ranger witnessing a child shooting an adult Somali, probably his father, in an attempt to kill the soldier in an ambush can serve as an example¹¹⁶. The audience is made to suffer, but not with the child, which wielded a huge gun and tried to kill the soldier in a particularly wicked way, but with the young man, who is forced to witness such devastating scenes while fighting a desperate battle to survive in this hellish madness and chaos.

The case of an aged Somali man carrying a dead, or wounded, child over the street in front of a US army vehicle¹¹⁷ serves as another telling illustration. The scene is filmed in slow motion to enhance its effect, still the camera perspective is from inside the vehicle, thus again, depicting Somali suffering only through the eyes of involuntarily witnessing soldiers.

3.2.4 Conclusion.

Scott's cinematic adaptation, to a greater extent than Bowden's book, limits the perspectives on the event to solely encompass the point of view of US soldiers. However reduced, the written account still features Somali voices and makes their perspective accessible. This diversity is not carried over into the movie. Like the book, also the movie (re)produces the image of war as an ugly, but unquestionable feature of reality, effectively delimiting competing conceptualisations of the human condition. Throughout the cinematic narration self, other, and the conflict between them are loaded with particular values. The object for audience identification, the narrative self, is solely presented in the shape of US soldiers and a particular set of values is assigned to them. They are framed as handsome, friendly and intelligent young men, who care about each other. They are courageous fighters overcoming both fear and despair during a violent challenge, and adhere to orders from their responsible leaders without questioning. The role soldier is established in a way to induce both admiration for, and imitation of their conduct, enhancing public support for military endeavours and, possibly, increasing recruitment. The presentation the soldier-self as maturing to manhood in the heat of battle is a well known feature of war and action movies. It is referred to by Der Derian as "metaplot for Hollywood"¹¹⁸. The opponent, on the other hand, is framed as an incomprehensible threat; a total enemy. Excluding audience identification, this enemy-other is becomes a ruthless, brutal, merciless and alone responsible for the depicted violence. It acts in disregard of basic rules of humanity, and triggers a righteous outside

¹¹⁶ See BHD, 0:59:10 -.

¹¹⁷ See BHD, 2:00:15.

¹¹⁸ Der Derian (2001:167).

intervention. By viciously attacking a defensive self, leaving it no chance to retreat or surrender, it implicitly legitimises all measures taken against it.

The particular underlying premises, norms and values are issued in connection with the claim to accurately represent an actual event. They are implicitly installed in the cultural memory of the receiving interpretative community and become part of an inter-subjectively accepted historical image concerning the events in Mogadishu in 1993; they form a historical discourse. Consequently, they influence the ways in which legitimate or illegitimate action, friend or foe, are conceptualised; they impact the interpretative community's diachronic connective structure. Formerly hardly present in a collective consciousness, the conflict in Somalia is re-semiotised¹¹⁹, it becomes relevant memory, loaded with meaning¹²⁰.

However, the ideological subtext conveyed by Scott's narration cannot be reduced to the events in Mogadishu. In particular the presentation of self and other as good and evil, and as caught up in a timeless Manichean struggle point over the singular event the movie claims to be based on and opens for a wider picture. The ways in which friend and foe are presented serve processes of enemising. They help to reinforce mutually exclusive attitudes, thus diminishing the grounds on which a reconstitution of the enemy as a future partner might take place. The narration of *Black Hawk Down* thus naturalises a violent discourse of conflict. It is part of a system of cultural violence implicitly serving the legitimisation of war as viable instrument to resolve conflicts. It is this characteristic of Scott's narration, which is of prominent interest for my further enquiry.

3.3 Cinematic means.

How are the images of fighter-self and enemy-other constituted in Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down*? Which technical means are applied to pre-condition processes of meaning generation, to determine audience connotations to the denoted persons, objects, and events? Which cinematic means lead to an implicit naturalisation of a belligerent ideological subtext inherent in the representation? Focus will now be directed towards the techniques through which Ridley Scott's movie anchors processes of meaning generation by determining audience connotations to depicted material.

¹¹⁹ The events had a great presence in the mass media right after the events occurred in 1993. First Bowden's work and, in particular Scott's movie revived public interest.

¹²⁰ See Assmann's idea that only significant past is memorised, and that only memorized past becomes significant; "Nur bedeutsame Vergangenheit wird erinnert, nur erinnerte Vergangenheit wird bedeutsam." J.Assmann (2002:77); my translation.

a) Close-ups.

Close-ups showing faces of actors in detail are employed to individualise protagonists. As such, they facilitate processes of audience identification and determine available connotations to particular persons. In solely applying close-ups to introduce members of the US force, the soldiers are turned into the mirror image of the self in the movie. As a result, empathy and compassion are directed towards them alone. Close-ups are repeatedly employed during Scott's movie; in the exposition chapter to individualise protagonists, during the main theme to depict the heroic deeds and sufferings of soldier in greater detail, and in the conclusion to assign a learning process to a particular individual.

Close-ups are rarely used to depict faces of Somalis. When employed they serve to present the character in question negatively. Shots on half-lit faces, partly covered behind cigar smoke, evoke connotations to distrust and dishonesty, while depictions of perpetuated facial expressions of anger induce associations to danger and aggression. Close-ups of the other in Scott's work personify the negative values assigned to the other as whole. These personifications of evil are effectively juxtaposed to the individualised and glorified soldiers.

b) Angle.

In *Black Hawk Down* most of the filming is done from the point of view of US soldiers. Predominantly their fate and their actions are depicted. This is partly achieved by application of a particular camera angle, which puts the audience in the place of the soldiers by depicting a view from the street slightly upwards, peeping cautiously through holes in walls, around corners, or providing the view from inside a driving vehicle. The camera eye repeatedly represents a view of the world as seen through the eyes of a US soldier. This particular camera angle is never applied to denote a Somali view. As a result, the perspective of the US soldiers is objectified for the spectator, excluding and neglecting competing accounts of the events.

c) Slow-motion.

Slow motion freezes important sequences and gives room to depict particular events in more detail, increasing their importance. This particular way of filming provides the audience with the time necessary to grasp the full scale of what happens in a scene. Slow motion is, an effective tool to determine what spectators remember of a movie. It intensifies the effects of the presented images and carries the potential to enhance audience compassion and identification.

In *Black Hawk Down*, scenes showing the suffering of US soldiers, or particular heroic and dangerous acts carried out by them, are prolonged in this manner, increasing their impact. The audience is given a break in the course of action, thus enabling compassion with the heroic, or suffering self. Somali actions, deaths, and hardships are not depicted in the same manner. Slow-motion as a cinematic technique is reserved for the enhancement of feelings assigned to the self. The other disappears in quick shots and quivering camera movements leaving the spectator without the time necessary to grasp the full extent of its fate.

d) Music and sound.

The music is, possibly, the most obvious marker of good and evil characteristics employed throughout the movie. It decisively limits the connotations available to an audience in relation to particular sequences. As such, music proves a powerful tool for the determination of possible readings of the presented material.

Familiar Western rock tunes and valorising or sorrowful melodies serve to accompany scenes featuring the soldier-self. Rock themes are applied to back sequences depicting life at the US base. Their task is to familiarise the situation for predominantly Western audiences enhancing processes of identification with the depicted individuals. Particular songs are employed to directly induce readings. Ridley Scott employs *Welcome to the Jungle*¹²¹ to accompany the US soldiers' preparations for battle, indicating a venture into dangerous environments. Sad, or valorising tunes, which repeatedly feature tolling bells, are used to back scenes showing members of the US military. A valorising tune, slowly gaining speed and volume makes the killing of Somalis appear as deserved acts of righteous vengeance, while tolling bells induce a feeling of inevitable fate, and effectively underline the bravery of the hero-self enduring severe hardships. Sad and slow tunes bring out compassion and empathy with wounded, or dying US soldiers, while Somali deaths and sufferings disappear in the action-ridden sounds of battle¹²².

Arabic musical themes and instruments, on the other hand, are used to accompany scenes featuring the other. These tunes are surrounded by street noise and repeatedly interrupted by occasional shooting or harsh Arab voices. They have the task to de-naturalise the depicted scenery for Western audiences. The environment is made to appear strange, disordered and potentially threatening. An incomprehensible and repelling atmosphere is thus underscored by

¹²¹ By Guns N' Roses. See BHD, 0:26:20-.

¹²² For a combination of sad and valorising tunes inducing empathy with US soldiers see for example BHD, 0:48:00-.

the means of music. Aidid's militia has its own audio signifier to distinguish its members from other Somalis. Their appearance is clearly marked by a change in the accompanying music. The background theme composed of Arabic instruments and disturbing noises is abruptly interrupted by vicious guitar riffs, which connote threat, brutality, and ruthlessness. The dominance of the militia is underlined by the fact that the guitar theme mutes all competing music¹²³. By the means of music the audience is mentally prepared for the appearance of evil. Competing interpretations of the message are ruled out.

e) *Mise-en-scene*.

The scenery, where the story unfolds, serves to induce connotations, which underscore the civilised/chaotic-self/other distinction (re)produced by the movie.

The US army camp is depicted as a place of order, sanity, and civilisation. The base is placed near the open sea. A constant breeze makes the air seem fresh and appealing, waves of clear, blue water crash on beaches, where good looking and healthy young men follow their activities. The scenery creates associations to boy-scout camps or holiday beach resorts¹²⁴. Military briefings take place in large open tents¹²⁵. Relaxed men sit together along a large table in front of the general who explains the plan on a simple whiteboard. Hardly any distinction of rank is possible. The group is depicted as a well organised whole, consisting of self-sustaining parts. The US leadership's headquarter, the JOC, is presented as a well organised high-tech command centre¹²⁶. Dark blue light, muffled sounds, and rows of screens and instruments create an atmosphere of technological confidence and order. The streets of Mogadishu are reduced to small representations on air surveillance screens, making them seem remote and controllable.

The Somali side, on the other hand, is depicted as living in an endless row of labyrinth-like hallways and small narrow streets. Fumes arise everywhere and crowds of people and scrappy vehicles are in constant hectic motion¹²⁷. The atmosphere is one of a damp growing jungle, where dangers are imminent and chaos has replaced any ordering principle.

¹²³ As an example for tunes of the other see BHD, 0:03:10-.

¹²⁴ See in particular BHD, 0:12:10-.

¹²⁵ See for example BHD, 0:20:30- and 0:32:00-.

¹²⁶ See for example BHD, 0:28:55-.

¹²⁷ See for example BHD, 0:04:40-.

f) Montage.

Ridley Scott repeatedly employs cross-cuttings to emphasise particular connotations conveyed by the movie's images. This associative and intellectual montage¹²⁸ is employed to combine issues not necessarily conceived of as connected by audiences in the first place. In this way, the director manages to lead the recipients' associations into a particular direction, hence determining the range of possible readings.

By cross-cutting close-ups on faces of young soldiers with the figure of a vicious looking Somali leader, Scott personifies and subsequently juxtaposes the norms and values assigned to each side. This montage serves to establish an unambiguous struggle between a good self and an evil other as the core of the narration. Repeated cross-cuttings of throngs of Somalis in menacing advance, and the faces of US soldiers, visually reinforce the distinction between an individualised self as object for audience empathy, and an anonymous vicious other. Cuttings back and forth between different US army units and their command centre (JOC) connect these and depict the self as a unified, ordered whole. This kind of editing presents them as individuals who care about each other and take part in each other's fate. Particular ways of combining sequences through editing serve also to provide the audience with an overview of the situation, which is inaccessible for the movie's protagonists. As shown by the Anderson example earlier on, this superior perspective leads to an implicit de-legitimisation of particular points of view, while it is supporting others¹²⁹.

3.4 The genesis of the *cinematic myth of self and other* out of *Alien Aesthetics*.

3.4.1 Introduction.

The following section will combine the narrative and technical elements focused on above. How can the particular narrative framework of *Black Hawk Down* and the cinematic means applied throughout the movie be conceptualised? Can they be seen to form a pattern for the (re)presentation of self and other which points beyond this singular movie? Are there parallels in the narrative and aesthetic presentation of friend and foe, of good and evil, which prove viable for the whole genre of contemporary US war and action movies?

In spite of their repeated claims to be true representations of actual events, war movies apply the same cinematic means, within a similar narrative framework, when (re)presenting self, other, and violent struggles as do fully fictitious action movies. This particular combination of cinematic techniques and narrative content will here be conceptualised as

¹²⁸ Terms taken from Eisenstein (1979:pp.113 and pp.117).

¹²⁹ For Anderson example see BHD, 1:13:20-.

Alien Aesthetics. Within the theoretical framework provided by Barthes, mass media representations adhering to *Alien Aesthetics* are seen as implicitly naturalising a particular ideological subtext. By determining audience connotations they originate a myth; the *cinematic myth of self and other*, which limits the range of possible readings, and thus the generation of meaning.

I will here initially provide a parallel reading of the movies *Black Hawk Down* and *Aliens*¹³⁰, to exemplify the distinguishing characteristics of *Alien Aesthetics*. Subsequently, the presence of the concept's defining narrative and technical elements in contemporary US war and action movies will be assessed.

3.4.2 Juxtaposing *Aliens* and *Black Hawk Down*.

a) James Cameron's *Aliens*.

Aliens is a Science Fiction action movie. Produced at a cost of 18.5 million US dollar in 1986 it turned into a major box-office success playing in a total of 82 million dollar in the US alone¹³¹. Reviewers appreciated it as “a fairly straightforward action/adventure picture”¹³² of the new coming director James Cameron.

The movie tells the story of a group of ‘colonial Marines’, which is sent to a remote planet to find out why the contact with the colony there suddenly broke up. The overconfident elite soldiers do not pay attention to warnings concerning an alien life-form and just mock the mission to rescue the colonists as “another bug hunt”¹³³. After being deployed they manage to secure the colony compound, but fail to find its inhabitants. When searching, they enter a more and more de-naturalised environment, suddenly facing hundreds of vicious insect-like predators swarming all over the place. This completely incomprehensible and evil other shows no other intentions but to kill and devour the soldiers. After the crash of their deployment vessel, the Marines become entrapped in this strange environment inhabited by hordes of hostile creatures advancing from everywhere. Consequently, a vicious battle for survival erupts, in the course of which a majority of the soldiers and hundreds of insect-like alien life-forms are killed, before a small group of human survivors manages to escape.

¹³⁰ *Aliens* (USA, 1986), directed by James Cameron.

¹³¹ Source: <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0090605/business> (3.11.04)

¹³² James Berardinelli: „Aliens“, in: <http://movie-reviews.colossus.net/movies/a/aliens.html> (4.11.04).

¹³³ *Aliens*, 0:32:05.

b) Juxtaposing narrative elements.

It becomes apparent that structurally, both *Aliens* and *Black Hawk Down* tell the same story. Both movies relate the tale of a neo-colonialist encounter. A group of soldiers is sent on a mission to a remote location with the noble task to restore order¹³⁴. Because of an accident - in both movies a deployment vessel crashes- the unit is entrapped, and unintentionally awakes a fierce and incomprehensible enemy¹³⁵. The nature of both the erupting conflict and the enemy encountered, does not allow for negotiations or surrender. The soldiers are left with no other option but to fight by all means available or perish. After a heroic battle of defence, some of the deployed troops manage to escape. Both movies present the deployed soldiers as working for a good cause, when venturing into a remote and estranged environment. They are introduced as sole objects for audience identification, inducing empathy and compassion¹³⁶. Trapped because of an unintended accident, the responsibility for the erupting severe violence is entirely assigned to the opponents, which threaten the lives of the soldiers without an apparent reason. Consequently, the violence wielded by the self appears legitimate.

c) Juxtaposing cinematic means.

Besides a narrative proximity between *Black Hawk Down* and *Aliens*, also an aesthetic proximity can be discerned. Both movies apply similar cinematic means to frame their stories. Like Ridley Scott's movie, also *Aliens* applies close-ups, a particular camera angle, slow-motion, music, scenery, and montage to effectively determine audience connotations to the denoted persons, objects, and events. By these means the soldiers are turned into a mirror-image of the self, inducing empathy and identification, while the other is de-humanised and de-subjectified. Both movies objectify the perspective of the self and confine the opponent to the role of combatants, keeping their plight invisible. In the following, the parallels in the application of cinematic means in *Black Hawk Down* and *Aliens* will be exemplified with reference to scenery and the presentation of battle.

To underline the established self/other order/chaos distinction, both movies employ particular settings when presenting the soldiers and their enemies. An atmosphere of filth and decay is conveyed when the enemy stronghold is depicted. The scenery de-familiarises the setting for audiences and induces connotations to chaos and imminent danger. As such, the strange system of slimy tunnels forming the huge steam-filled subterranean dungeon of the

¹³⁴ Examples see BHD, 0:20:30-

¹³⁵ See especially the two scenes depicting the awakening beast BHD, 0:35:40 and *Aliens*, 1:10:05. These two scenes in particular underline the aesthetic proximity of the movies, when depicting the enemy.

¹³⁶ Introduction of characters see *Aliens*, 0:27:00-.

aliens, structurally corresponds to the chaotic backyards and the multitude of small dusty streets and smoke-filled hallways of the Mogadishu Bakhara Market area, which, revealingly, has been referred to by General Garrison as a “hornet’s nest”¹³⁷. The self is depicted as venturing into a completely alien environment, with invisible dangers and deadly threats lurking behind every corner. On the contrary, the self is located in an area, which connotes order, sanity, technological confidence, and control¹³⁸.

Battle scenes are particularly well suited to illustrate the cinematic means applied to juxtapose a vicious de-humanised enemy other with an individualised glorified soldier self. The sequence in *Black Hawk Down* depicting the attempt of two Delta operators to secure the second helicopter crash site serves as an example¹³⁹. A brief scene in the JOC sums up the situation for the audience and an aerial view of the crash site reveals large numbers of Somalis in menacing approach. Repeated close-ups on the handsome faces of the two Delta snipers individualise them for the audience. The dialogue reveals the fact, that those two will voluntarily attempt to secure the site alone, even though hopelessly outnumbered and without a sustainable chance to survive, since the supporting convoy won’t make it through in time. Once deployed they arrive just in time to save the wounded pilot, engaged in heroic defence. Repeated cross-clippings between aerial shots depicting more and more advancing masses of Somalis, close-ups and mid-shots of the three soldiers, and quivering long-shots of the surrounding, and occasionally advancing, aggressive mob, structure the sequence. In the style of a first person shooter video game, the audience adopts the perspective of the heroic fighting Delta soldiers, who shoot shadowy black beings which suddenly advance into their field of vision, and disappear traceless after being hit. Slow motion and a sad musical theme accompany the long death of the last Delta operator, who is shot several times, before a crowd of raging shapes virtually floods the wreck and tears the remains of the US personnel to pieces. When discovered, the last remaining survivor, Durant, is severely beaten. His captors are depicted as an undistinguishable mass of black faces in raging madness, tearing, beating and hitting him in incomprehensible hatred, while Durant desperately clings to a photograph of his family. Also here slow motion and a sad tune enhance the effect of the depicted events on the audience. The Somali victims of the battle remain completely invisible.

A corresponding scene in *Aliens* shows similar characteristics. After having barricaded a part of the colony compound, the remaining members of the deployed marine force await the

¹³⁷ BHD, 1:28:00.

¹³⁸ See BHD, 0:28:55-, *Aliens*, 1:30:30.

¹³⁹ In the following, see BHD, 1:18:40-1:30:20.

onslaught of the enemy¹⁴⁰. Movement trackers reveal the approaching other, and shouts, such as “They’re coming!” mirror the advance of “crowds in their hundreds” registered from the air surveillance helicopter in *Black Hawk Down*. Repeated close-ups and mid-shots of individual soldiers reveal their terror in face of the approaching vicious enemy. During the fighting, and the subsequent retreat, these shots are interrupted by brief flashing long and mid shots of an advancing throng of enemies. Moments of soldiers’ deaths are prolonged by short breaks in the action ridden sequence, giving room for last words, or the shouting of a name. Also in *Aliens* both plight and corpses of the enemy remain unseen.

Even though the parallels between the two movies are obvious, there are also differences. These mainly concern the presentation of self. Unlike *Black Hawk Down*, *Aliens* does not show character development. In addition, James Cameron’s movie is far more critical towards the soldier role which is, in part de-legitimised and even ridiculed. One main point of Cameron’s narration seems to be to show the dissolution of an overly confident army unit, when facing a superior enemy. Individual soldiers are depicted as losing their nerves, despairing, and without a plan. The civilian advisor is the only one to stay calm and find solutions. Consequently, she is the only member of the operation who escapes unharmed¹⁴¹.

3.4.3 *Alien Aesthetics* and the *cinematic myth of self and other*.

As shown above, *Alien Aesthetics* consist of a combination of certain narrative and aesthetic elements, which are employed to construct a particular image of self and other, and the nature of the conflict between them. By means of its cinematic techniques, *Alien Aesthetics* effectively determine audience connotations to denoted objects, persons and events, while the narrative elements of the concept delimit the discursive borders within which the social construction of meaning has to take place. Is *Alien Aesthetics*, as such a singular feature of *Black Hawk Down* and *Aliens*? Or, is the concept a common element to be found in a majority of contemporary US war and action movies? To answer these questions, the presence of the concept’s defining features in other movies has to be assessed.

Cultural representations adhering to *Alien Aesthetics* convey the following ideological subtext in relation to self, other, and conflict; an *aggressive and de-humanised enemy-other*, an *obedient and glorified fighter-self* and a *violent conflict* between them. The conflict is presented as initiated by the enemy-other, thus legitimating the violent response of the soldier-self. The following table provides an overview over the presence of these motifs in

¹⁴⁰ In the following see *Aliens*, 1:50:50-.

¹⁴¹ See in particular *Aliens*, 1:19:00- and 1:23:30-.

contemporary Western war and action movies. A plus indicates adherence to the respective feature of the concept, while a minus indicates a break with it. A non-presence of the motifs is shown as 'nil'. The table clearly reveals *Alien Aesthetics* as a recurrent way of determining the perception of self, other, and conflict in contemporary US war and action movies.

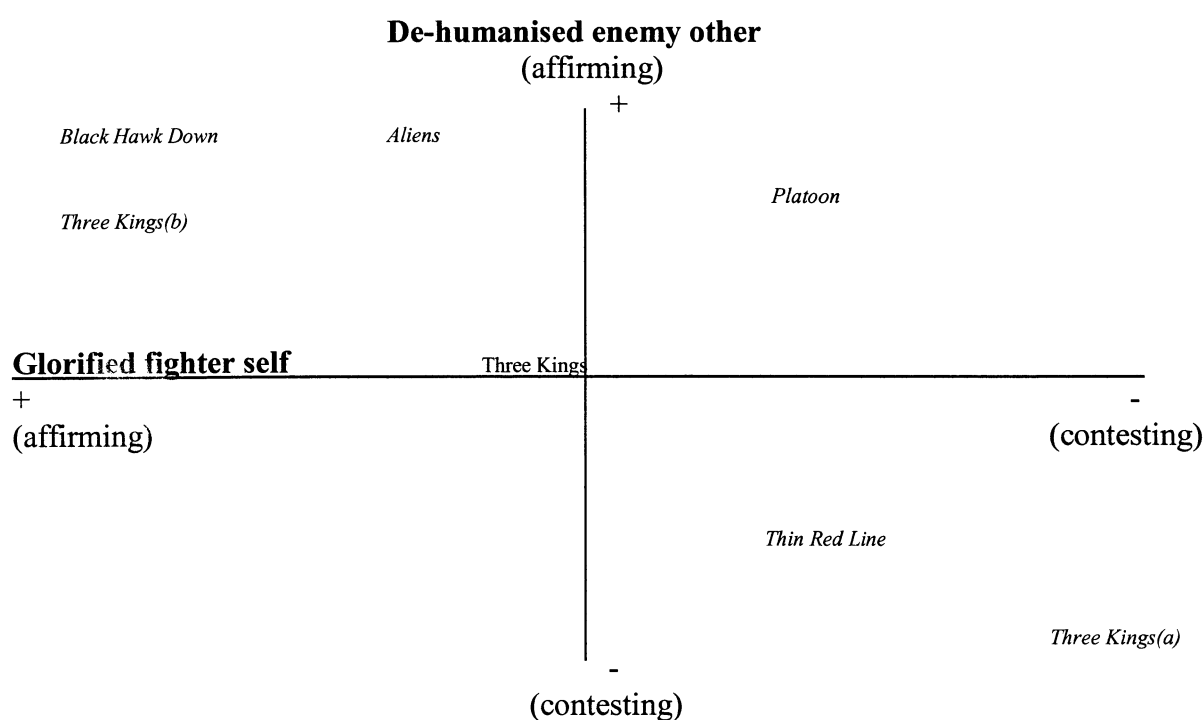
Table1: Self, other, and conflict in contemporary Western war and action movies.

Title	aggressive dehumanised enemy other	obedient glorified fighter self	legitimate killing of enemy other
War movies:			
<i>Black Hawk Down</i>	+	+	+
<i>We Were Soldiers</i>	+	+	+
<i>Tears of the Sun</i>	+	+	+
<i>Saving Private Ryan</i>	+	+	+
<i>Behind Enemy Lines</i>	+	+	+
<i>Rambo I-III</i>	+	+	+
<i>The Deer Hunter</i>	+	-	+
<i>Platoon</i>	+	-	-
<i>Three Kings</i>	+/-	+/-	+/-
<i>Thin Red Line</i>	-	-	-
<i>Apocalypse Now</i>	nil	-	nil
<i>Full Metal Jacket</i>	-/nil	-	-/nil
<i>Born on the 4th of July</i>	nil	-	nil
Action movies:			
<i>Aliens</i>	+	+/-	+
<i>Predator</i>	+	+	+
<i>Starship Troopers</i>	+	+	+
<i>Star Wars I-VI</i>	+	+	+
<i>Lord of the Rings I-III</i>	+	+	+
<i>Matrix I-III</i>	+	+	+
<i>Pitch Black</i>	+	+/-	+
<i>The Gladiator</i>	+	+	+
<i>Independence Day</i>	+	+	+
<i>Mars Attacks!</i>	+	+	+

The table clearly indicates that *Alien Aesthetics* serve to determine audience perceptions of self, other, and conflict in a majority of US war and action movies. The ideological subtext, which is implicitly generated and (re)produced is naturalised. It is turned into a myth; the *cinematic myth of self and other*. This myth impacts the attitudes, conceptualisations, and ultimately the behaviour of, and within interpretative communities; it prepares the grounds for violent discourses in relation to enemy and friend, to war and peace. It establishes the ideological pretext necessary for attempts to justify war.

The movies treated so far can be placed into a grid, showing the degree to which the particular representations adhere to *Alien Aesthetics*, thus affirming or contesting the *cinematic myth of self and other*¹⁴². The plus/plus corner indicates full adherence to the myth, while a location in the minus/minus corner suggests a critical potential inherent in the representation. Centrality, plus/minus and minus/plus locations point to ambiguity, or multi-vocality of the artefact, affirming some while contesting other, or remaining ambivalent towards, elements of the myth.

Grid: Artefacts, affirming and contesting elements of the myth of self and other.



¹⁴² In order to improve the clarity of the presentation, the grid will direct focus on only two of the three variables of the myth;

I will now exemplify table and grid with reference to two US war movies; Oliver Stone's *Platoon*¹⁴³ and David O. Russell's *Three Kings*¹⁴⁴.

Platoon tells the story of a young US volunteer during the war in Vietnam. Effectively deconstructing the picture of a glorified fighter-self, by openly presenting war crimes conducted by US soldiers against Vietnamese civilians, and depicting a setting, which induces more cowardice, unconstrained brutality and sadism, than bravery and brotherhood from the side of the US troops, Stone's movie challenges one crucial element of the myth; the notion of a glorified fighter-self. In spite of this fact, *Platoon* adheres to another crucial element; the depicting of the opponents as de-humanised enemy-other. During scenes of battle, the Vietnamese are presented under the application of *Alien Aesthetics*, reducing them to faceless threats and effectively insulating the audience against their plight¹⁴⁵. As Kellner points out, the Vietnamese are not presented as "autonomous subjects"¹⁴⁶ during the movie; they are confined to the role as either innocent victims or enemy combatants. US troops are framed as the only objects for audience identification. The atrocities committed by them are due to a struggle between good and evil US soldiers. This leads to the re-constitution of an evil enemy-other within the ranks of the soldier-self. Negative values and evil deeds are solely assigned to, and thus exclusively personified by, a particular group of US soldiers under the leadership of Sgt. Barnes. He, and his group are juxtaposed to the righteous self in form of Sgt. Elias and his men¹⁴⁷. By this moral division and by the continued de-subjectification of the Vietnamese, Stone's movie, in spite of its intentions, re-produces the *cinematic myth of self and other*. As such, *Platoon* is placed in a central position of a plus/minus corner of the grid. The movie criticises the fighter-self, but assigns responsibility for criminal acts solely to an unambiguously evil part of it, thus containing them. It prevents audience identification with the opponents, and reduces them to one-dimensional roles as either victim or combatant. As a result, the movie only partly contests the *myth of self and other*.

Three Kings goes further in the contestation of the myth. The movie can be divided into two distinct parts. The first sixty minutes or so strongly contest each of the myth's defining elements, while the remaining roughly thirty minutes witness a fallback to *Alien Aesthetics*. To indicate this, the movie is marked with an 'a' and a 'b' on the grid.

¹⁴³ USA, 1986.

¹⁴⁴ USA, 1999.

¹⁴⁵ See especially the battle scenes towards the end of the movie *Platoon*, 1:33:15-.

¹⁴⁶ Kellner (2003:119).

¹⁴⁷ For the juxtaposition of good and evil representatives of the soldier self see in particular *Platoon*, 0:51:30-.

Russell's film is set right after the first Gulf war in 1991 and tells the story of three US servicemen, who decide to illegally enter Iraq from liberated Kuwait to steal gold from a secret bunker. During the attempt they are entangled in the Iraqi civil war and end up escorting a group of civilians opposing Saddam Hussein into the safety of Iran.

The first part of the movie *Three Kings (a)*, contests the *cinematic myth of self and other*. Far from glorifying the soldiers, this part presents US servicemen as immature, mindless young men, who transform the experience of war into a giant beach party¹⁴⁸. They are depicted as routinely humiliating Iraqi prisoners, more due to a lack of sophistication, than due to sadism¹⁴⁹, and show no interests in, or knowledge of, the plight of the region. The individual soldiers, which are established as objects for audience identification, are fortune hunters with no other mission but to work for own gain. The movie's first part emphasises acts of shooting by extreme slow motion and explains in detail to the audience the effects of a bullet penetrating a human organism¹⁵⁰. According to the director, this scene is intended to enhance the sensitivity of spectators to the horrible effects of direct violence¹⁵¹. By these means Russell's movie challenges the representational techniques conceptualised as *Alien Aesthetics*. *Three Kings (a)*, in addition, individualises one of the Iraqi opponents, assigning positive values and identities beyond the combatant-victim division to him. He is established as an object for audience identification. One scene in particular serves to contest the *myth of self and other* in its entirety¹⁵². The individualised Iraqi soldier tortures one of the US servicemen, a sequence, where usually audience empathy is made solely to rest with the victim, legitimating a later vicious response. In this scene, however, the torturer is explaining his position and makes his victim, and the audience with him, understand his point of view. A brief cut lets the US soldier conceive of his own family being killed by a smart bomb smashing his home. The plight of the opponent is thus depicted in the shape of the self. In addition, during the interrogation the Iraqi soldier is allowed to determine the conceptual limits of the discourse concerning the Gulf war in 1991. He establishes oil as the reason for the presence of US forces in the region and explains, that he was educated to torture in the United States. Even though the sequence induces empathy with the suffering victim, the Iraqi is not de-humanised, but, on the contrary, is presented in a way, which evokes understanding, rather than to provide legitimacy to subsequent acts of vengeance. The audience is forced to

¹⁴⁸ See in particular *Three Kings*, 0:02:00-.

¹⁴⁹ See, for example *Three Kings*, 0:06:05-.

¹⁵⁰ For explanation see *Three Kings*, 0:18:00-. For emphasis on shooting see for example: *Three Kings*, 0:39:40-.

¹⁵¹ See *Three Kings* (director's comment), 0:18:00-.

¹⁵² In the following see *Three Kings*, 1:01:15-1:05:55 and 1:13:05-1:14:45.

perceive the other's position and question their own. So far, Russell's movie contests all defining elements of the *myth of self and other*, thus contradicting its ideological subtext.

However, during the remaining roughly thirty minutes, *Three Kings (b)* features a return to *Alien Aesthetics* and with it to the distinction between righteous fighter-self and dehumanised enemy-other. Shooting and killing is again depicted in a well-known style and on a usual scale, rendering the director's initial intentions to induce awareness futile. The US soldiers return to liberate their imprisoned companion and lend their support and firepower to the Iraqi opposition, which is fighting a righteous struggle for survival against an evil enemy¹⁵³. Overcoming all obstacles, the fighter-self escorts the Iraqis to the Iranian border and into safety, thus accomplishing a moral mission, while leaving their treasures behind¹⁵⁴. This turn of events effectively counters readings, which might interpret the three soldiers' quest for the gold as symbolically corresponding to the hidden agenda behind the US mission to liberate Kuwait. As such, *Three Kings* both contests and reproduces the *myth of self and other*. Nevertheless, the part adhering to *Alien Aesthetics* and affirming the myth and its ideological subtext, is put into the position to determine the outcome of the events. It must, therefore, be seen as prominent when assessing the impact of the movie.

3.5 Conclusion.

The discussion above has shown that a particular ideological subtext, inherent in Mark Bowden's material, is implicitly reproduced by Ridley Scott's cinematic adaptation, thus tremendously increasing its reach.

As a first step the narrative content of Scott's movie has been assessed. Excluding competing perspectives, the movie shows the events in Mogadishu in 1993 solely from the point of view of the involved US soldiers and objectifies this perspective. US soldiers are established as role models, as sole objects for audience identification, naturalising their particular norms and values. As such the unquestioned adherence to orders, the courage to fight for a just cause, and the will to selfless sacrifice for a higher ideal are implicitly promoted. Weakness, fear, and doubt are presented negatively and effectively de-legitimised. The opponents' plights during the fighting remain largely invisible. The other is confined to the role of enemy combatant, who viciously attacks the self and forces it into a battle for survival, thus implicitly providing legitimacy to the violence committed against it. It is de-subjectified. The other remains incomprehensible and is only individualised for the audience

¹⁵³ See for example *Three Kings*, 1:19:00-.

¹⁵⁴ For the border scene concluding the movie see *Three Kings*, 1:36:00-.

to personify particular negative values assigned to the adversaries as a whole. At the same time narrow premises for a discourse concerning means of conflict resolution are established. By reproducing the book's initial assertions of war as a natural, unquestionable feature of human existence, also the movie rules out alternative, non-violent ways of handling the situation. By juxtaposing righteous US soldiers with aggressive and remorseless Somali criminals, a timeless struggle between a righteous and good self and an aggressive and evil other is established as the narrative core of the cinematic representation.

Secondly, the cinematic techniques by which the particular ideological content of the movie is generated and reproduced have been closer scrutinised. Particular ways of filming, editing and peculiar musical accompaniments and settings all serve to determine audience connotations to denoted persons, objects, or events. These cinematic means effectively anchor and determine the generation of meaning, by systematically promoting particular readings of the provided text.

Subsequently, the elaborated narrative and technical elements have been combined into the concept of *Alien Aesthetics*. This conglomeration of cinematic techniques and narrative structure is a recurrent phenomenon in contemporary US war and action movies and implicitly conveys a particular ideological subtext. *Alien Aesthetics* give, as such, rise to a cinematic myth of self and other, which serves to naturalise the particular norms, values and premises for an interpretative community, thus impacting options for individual and collective action. The myth reinforces processes of enemising and serves the reproduction of a violent discourse of conflict. As such, it represents a cognitive pretext for justifications of war.

4. Documentaries and new media.

This section returns to the *Black Hawk Down* media complex and introduces other mass media representations, other than the novel and the movie, through which the material connected to Mogadishu 1993 is further proliferated. Focus will be directed to a documentary and a video game, which both heavily rely on Bowden's work and proliferate his material into new genres. It will be shown that both representations adhere to the concept of *Alien Aesthetics* and implicitly (re)produce *the cinematic myth of self and other*.

4.1 Documentary. *The True Story of Black Hawk Down*.

This section will scrutinise the documentary *The True Story of Black Hawk Down*, which was produced for *The History Channel*¹⁵⁵. It will be argued, that the documentary shows a factual proximity to Bowden's book and a visual proximity to Scott's movie thus further proliferating the material forming the basis of the *Black Hawk Down* media complex.

Like Mark Bowden's book version of the events in Mogadishu 1993, this film of fact heavily relies on interviews, carried out with involved individuals; both US soldiers and, to a lesser extent, Somali citizens. As such, also this representation of the events can be analysed as a translation process of communicative memory into foundational cultural memory, as a transformation of a particular text into a foundational one.

Interviews with author Mark Bowden are employed to guide the audience throughout the film. This clearly indicates the factual proximity between documentary and book. Bowden's expertise is employed to cover a wide range of subjects and areas, ranging from US foreign policy, via military structures, to internal Somali affairs. His comments effectively anchor the documentary's message, by supporting particular audience connotations and suppressing others. As such, they serve to reproduce the same ideological subtext issued by means of the book. In the documentary the author asserts, for example, that the average Somali does not watch CNN, or read the New York Times. Consequently, they are easy prey for a demagogue like Aidid¹⁵⁶. He further states, that "they [the Somalis] are *all* willing to die, if necessary in large numbers, to kill an American"¹⁵⁷. In relation to the US troops his comments create a heroic image of the soldiers¹⁵⁸. Interviews with soldiers reproduce the image of an all encompassing enemy. One soldier asserts during an interview that "Somalis live to fight" and explicitly includes women and children in his statement¹⁵⁹. Neither the documentary mentions the role played by the Malayan and Pakistani UN forces.

As a competing visual representation, *The True Story of Black Hawk Down* works complementary to Ridley Scott's fully dramatised version. Deriving from the same factual basis, but rooted in a different genre, it confirms the claims made by the movie from the position of its respective decoding conventions as a documentary. As such, it affects the audience differently. Instead of creating empathy, identification and compassion by the means of a drama it targets the spectators' intellectual capacities. As a consequence, it entails a

¹⁵⁵ USA, 2002.

¹⁵⁶ *True Story*, 1:13:18-.

¹⁵⁷ *True Story*, 0:35:45; my emphasis.

¹⁵⁸ Bowden speaks, for example, of the "immense courage and nobility" of the men fighting (*True Story*, 1:30:00) or relates that "even the cooks" went out to rescue their entrapped comrades (*True Story*, 0:50:50).

¹⁵⁹ *True Story*, 0:18:46.

clearer claim to factual truth of its representation. A visual proximity between the two films is apparent. The documentary repeatedly employs blurred scenes from the movie¹⁶⁰, or the video game *Delta Force Black Hawk Down*¹⁶¹ to support its account. In addition, both of the visual representations use similar cinematic means to present their story. Like Ridley Scott's drama, also the documentary leads audience connotations by means such as music or montage. Violent tunes accompany images of Farrah Aidid, while catchy Western rock music accompanies the preparations of the US assault force. Also in the documentary parallel cuttings between Somali and US war preparations serve to dramatise the events.

It has to be stated that the documentary, like Bowden's book, also includes short interviews with Somali citizens, which give access to their perspective. Of particular interest are the words of a doctor at the local hospital, who among other things states that at the day of the assault he had to treat so many victims that he thought "all Mogadishu had died"¹⁶². Yet, his words are placed in the context of other Somali voices legitimising the US intervention with reference to warlords' atrocities. As such, responsibility for the severe violence is implicitly placed on the shoulders of the Somalis themselves.

4.2 New media. The video game *Delta Force Black Hawk Down*.

The video game *Delta Force Black Hawk Down* was produced by *NovaLogic*. It was released as a pc version in 2003 and has since then become available for all major computer systems. The story conveyed by the video game is based on the same factual material proliferated by the media complex so far. Both external reviews¹⁶³ and the official home page of the producer *NovaLogic*¹⁶⁴, emphasise the game's proximity to the actual events in Mogadishu, and its realistic depiction of both equipment, scenery and personnel. As such, the graphics forming the background where the actions take place, are designed to represent a dusty African city. The player can choose to play as an army Ranger or as a Delta Force operator, depicted in real life combat gear and employing realistic weapons, vehicles and other equipment. The missions' objectives are based on real operations, carried out by US forces in Somalia between 1992-93. As such, the video game widens the focus of the media complex to encompass also missions, prior to the fateful events on October 3rd. The final

¹⁶⁰ As examples can here serve the scene of Ranger Pilla's death (BHD, 0:48:00 and *True Story*, 0:33:25), or the scene of the convoy returning to base (BHD, 1:00:40 and *True Story*, 0:57:45).

¹⁶¹ The scene depicting the crash of pilot Durant's helicopter is taken from the video game (*True Story*, 0:47:15).

¹⁶² *True Story*, 1:03:15-

¹⁶³ See among others <http://www.computergames.ro/site/p/articles/o/review/lng/ro/artid/196/a.html> and <http://archive.gamespy.com/reviews/april03/bhdpc/> (5.4.05).

¹⁶⁴ <http://www.novalogic.com/games/DFBHD/features.html> (5.4.05).

assignment of the game, after completion of all prior tasks, even extends the scope of the video game representation into a fictitious future by making the killing of general Aidid its objective.

Delta Force Black Hawk Down is a first person shooter simulation, which means that the perspective of the player exactly resembles the visual angle from the eyes of the involved soldier. Thus, the combat is experienced from a first person standpoint, equalling the soldier's view with the view of the player. By moving the computer mouse the player controls the movements and actions of the simulated person. Since the player is not given the opportunity to choose a Somali fighter as virtual alter ego, the events become accessible solely from the point of view of US soldiers. Somalis are entirely controlled by the computer, and run purposelessly up and down the roads. Still, every of these black figures is a potentially deadly threat for the involved players, which has to be eliminated by means of raw force if the mission is to become a success and the self is to survive. A multi-player function allows combining individual players into teams, which cooperate to reach their objectives. This real-time interaction can give rise to particular communicative group memories of a simulated event without roots in a preceding reality.

Within Assmann's theoretical framework the video game *Delta Force Black Hawk Down* can be conceptualised as a *virtual memory location*¹⁶⁵, a simulation of a place, which is a carrier of foundational memory for a particular subculture. A geographical archive for cultural memory is thus extended into the virtual space of computer representations and simulations. As a consequence, the nexus between foundational memory and a preceding historical reality is weakened. By making the events in Mogadishu accessible for direct first-person experiences of 'visiting' spectators the distinction between producer and receiver of the historical message implicit in the representation is blurred. Directly involved in what is happening as an actor, the spectator turns into the narrator, partly determining the content and outcome of the story told. Yet, this is bound to happen within narrow pre-established discursive borders. The setting of the game is unchangeable. However the spectator/narrator twists and turns, she is pre-determined to perceive the world from the perspective of a US soldier. Competing angles on the events are effectively delimited. Furthermore, the choice to re-enact the events in Mogadishu with necessity implies the choice of a mission to be carried out against a Somali threat. As such, also the video game reproduces the narrative core of the *Black Hawk Down* media complex, as a distinction between a righteous soldier-self and a

¹⁶⁵ „Virtueller Gedächtnisort“, Assmann (2003:21); my translation.

threatening, de-humanised and incomprehensible other which has to be eliminated. This is achieved under the application of the representational techniques, which have been conceptualised as *Alien Aesthetics*. As such, also the video game reproduces the *cinematic the myth of self and other* and extends its reach into a realm of simulated events, originating real memories.

4.3 Conclusion.

Both the documentary and the video game serve to proliferate into new genres the material on which the *Black Hawk Down* media complex rests and the particular techniques through which it is conveyed. The complex is turned into an inter-genre complex, adhering to, and functioning within, the respective decoding conventions of both drama, entertainment and film of fact, which mutually confirm the framed perspective on the events. This significantly increases the impact of the material on a receiving audience. Employing *Alien Aesthetics*, both documentary and in particular the video game, proliferate the *cinematic myth of self and other* into new genres and new media.

The documentary underlines the complex' claim to fact, targeting the intellectual capacities of the audience rather than their feelings, thus confirming the perspective on the events from the standpoint of the decoding conventions adhering to films of fact, significantly increasing its weight in the historical discourse concerning the event¹⁶⁶. Still, as has been shown, the documentary reproduces the same set of pre-assumptions and implicit ideological content as pre-ceding representations and employs some of the same cinematic means during the attempt.

The video game re-constitutes the role of the spectator. An audience, generating meaning on the basis of a pre-established narration, is transformed into a producer/narrator, who interactively constructs the course of events. The simulation makes it possible to experience the material as a participant, thus inducing audience identification in a new way. Still, this process takes place within the narrow limits of the framework provided by the programmer, and is determined by a narrow paradigm of possible roles to choose from. These limits adhere to *Alien Aesthetics* and must, therefore, be seen to convey ideological pre-assumptions inherent in the *myth of self and other*. This way the game engages the audience in an active reproduction of narrations within the narrow limits set by the myth.

¹⁶⁶ This statement must also be seen as valid for Bowden's book version of the events. Still, the documentary re-inserts the material visually into the discourse, reaching new audiences.

5. The *Black Hawk Down* media complex revisited.

The *Black Hawk Down* media complex impacts both the diachronic and the synchronic connective structure of a Western interpretative community. By translating the particular texts of communicative group memory into the foundational texts of institutionalised cultural memory, the complex makes its ideological subtexts a natural part of the receiving interpretative communities' collective historical image. The norms, values, and premises implicitly conveyed, pre-condition individual actions by promoting some while delegitimising and discouraging other alternatives.

Even though based on material initially and continuously conveyed through the print media, the main impact of the complex on interpretative communities is due to visualised representations. It is in form of movies, documentaries, and new media, that the material originally issued by author Mark Bowden in form of a novel, significantly extended its reach through the mass media. The message of the complex is largely conveyed visually under application of *Alien Aesthetics*, a combination of particular narrative elements and cinematic techniques, which determines audience connotations and thus generates the *cinematic myth of self and other*. As Assmann asserts, myths wield *normative and formative powers*¹⁶⁷. They naturalise particular premises, norms, and values into discourses, thus impacting attitudes, conceptualisations, and, ultimately, individual and collective behaviour. As such, the bellicose ideological content conveyed by media representations adhering to the myth originates a violent discourse of conflict. This discourse impacts processes of meaning generation within a culture, its institutions and options for performances. It naturalises war as a viable means of conflict resolution, it glorifies the military and establishes soldiers as sole role models, it delegitimises critique of military structures and conduct, while it de-humanises the enemy, and therefore justifies the severe violence committed against it.

At this point, the media complex becomes conceivable in a larger perspective. *Black Hawk Down*, in all its versions and representations, is not only about Somalia in 1993, or about humanitarian interventions, or African civil wars¹⁶⁸. What becomes discernable in the light of *Alien Aesthetics* and the *cinematic myth of self and other* is a particular *logistics of perception*¹⁶⁹, which, reproduced by visual mass media representations, determines what interpretative communities perceive as their potential, real, or hyper-real opponents and how

¹⁶⁷ J. Assmann (2002:76).

¹⁶⁸ In Barthes' terms, the theme of *Black Hawk Down* on the level of denotative *object language* is the US-Somali struggle, while it at the level of connotative *meta-language* (the level of operation of myths) the theme is the relation between self and other. See Barthes (1999:181); my translation.

¹⁶⁹ Term taken from Virilio. Quoted in Der Derian (2001: 85).

they conceptualise their mutual relations and options for action. As such, the belligerent content of the myth and its recurrence in artefacts of popular culture dealing with conflict and violence pose reasons for concern. Naturalised as parts of discourses of conflict, this particular way of seeing the other solely as an enemy, and as an incomprehensible threat, might significantly lower the threshold for violence. The induced behaviour might then turn invented into real enemies.

The *Black Hawk Down* media complex reproduces a system of cultural violence. It effectively readjusts *the bias of the system*¹⁷⁰ towards violent alternatives by (re)producing myths of war. These myths have the inherent capacity to perpetuate and initiate warfare. As such they merited my special attention.

IV. Context.

“The conjunction of an immense military establishment and a large arms industry is new in the American experience. The total influence – economic, political, even spiritual – is felt in every city, every statehouse, every office of the federal government ... In the councils of government we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex.”

President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s Farewell Address 1961¹⁷¹.

“How we prepare for future enemies might just help to invent them.”

James Der Derian¹⁷².

1. Introduction.

Are our enemies inventions? And if so, who invents them for us, and why? President Eisenhower’s quote might point out the direction in which the answers to these questions can be found. This section will contextualise the *Black Hawk Down* media complex. It will scrutinise the nexus between its ideological subtext and particular political interests. Who might have an interest in the distribution and perpetuated reproduction of the *myth of self and other*, and the implicit naturalisation of a belligerent discourse of conflict with it? Can the military-industrial complex of Eisenhower’s time be seen to have proliferated into the realm of mass media and entertainment industries with the objective to shape an all encompassing system for the justification, representation, and reproduction of war and its institutions?

¹⁷⁰ Bateson (1972:471).

¹⁷¹ Quoted in Der Derian (2001:viii).

¹⁷² Der Derian (2001:108).

To approach this row of questions I will initially follow Der Derian on his “travels into virtuality”, where he maps “a new virtual alliance, the *military-industrial-media-entertainment network*”¹⁷³, or MIME-NET, before I leave him behind and set off on a separate excursion into a side-wing of the MIME-NET originating a media complex, where individual soldiers’ tales are transformed into a normative and formative myth to reproduce a culture of war.

2. Travelling the MIME-NET. Der Derian’s excursion into the virtual world of virtuous wars.

Der Derian¹⁷⁴ attempts to unearth the developing close cooperation between military training and research facilities, high-technology companies, and media and entertainment networks. During his research, he visits training centres, simulators, military exercises, research institutions, and scientific conferences. He interviews soldiers as well as generals, politicians as well as scholars. Drawing on theoreticians such as Walter Benjamin, Jean Baudrillard, or Paul Virilio, he discerns “a new amalgam of brass, silicon, and silicone”¹⁷⁵, the military-industrial-media-entertainment network, stretching from the Pentagon to Hollywood and beyond; the MIME-NET, which wields “the power (...) to seamlessly merge the production, representation, and execution of war”¹⁷⁶.

According to Der Derian, the activities of the MIME-NET circle around the introduction of *network-centric warfare*¹⁷⁷ as the core of a *Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA)*¹⁷⁸ initiated in the Pentagon Office for Net Assessment. Applied during real-time simulation-exercises, network-centric warfare interconnects deployed troops and remote command positions. It enables a *global vision*¹⁷⁹ via satellite-connections, or unmanned drones, and improves target assessments and significantly reduces reaction times. Network-centric warfare turns battles into “electro-optical confrontations”¹⁸⁰. This all encompassing visibility of the adversary, this capacity to anticipate enemy moves and intentions entails a revolution in the military logistics of perception; war becomes network-centric *infowar*¹⁸¹.

¹⁷³ Der Derian (2001:xi).

¹⁷⁴ In the following see Der Derian (2001).

¹⁷⁵ Der Derian (2001:154).

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. (xx).

¹⁷⁷ Term see *ibid.* (pp.136).

¹⁷⁸ Term see *ibid.* (pp.28).

¹⁷⁹ Virilio (1989:1).

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁸¹ For terms *infowar* and *cyberwar*, see Der Derian (2001:pp.117).

However, in Der Derian's understanding, infowar not only entails the increased visibility of the enemy, but also the concealing of the victims of warfare, both soldiers and civilians, as well as the presentation of the enemy as a threat to life or crucial ideals. This second element proves of growing importance in *post-militarist* democratic societies¹⁸², where the emergence of *subpolitics*¹⁸³ which counter traditional military discourses, claims new approaches to the justification of war. Also here, at the home front, infowar plays a crucial role. In Der Derian's terms; "with the virtualisation of violence comes the disappearance of war as we have known it"¹⁸⁴.

Such considerations bring us close to Der Derian's *virtual theory*¹⁸⁵. In his words, "virtual theory repudiates the philosophical realism and positivism underlying most social science theory". *The virtual* has the potential to "make meaning *and* produce presence, to create the actual through a theatrical differentiation and technical vision"¹⁸⁶. As such, *the virtual* wields a "constitutive capacity of its own, creative of rather than dependent on the actual"¹⁸⁷. The capacity of the MIME-NET to virtualise war, in effect means the ability to actualise particular wars as virtuous by determining the representations made available of them, their virtual images. It is this capacity which triggered military interests to support the entertainment industry.

Wars are entering the realm of virtuality; they are (re)presented as virtuous in intentions and execution, while virtual in their consequences for civilians. Prepared in real-time interactive simulations, executed via remote control on the basis of digitised information, represented in the form of surgical air strikes, or greenish-blurred night-vision of distant shadows on news-networks, and re-enacted as *militainment*¹⁸⁸ in block-buster movies and TV serials, wars are turned into just another attraction in a multi-media theme park. Digitised and electronically presented and represented, their real consequences are concealed and their objectives glorified. As such, MIME-NET representations "clean up the political discourses as well as the battlefield", they provide "a vision of bloodless, humanitarian, hygienic wars"¹⁸⁹, digestible for mass media audiences in civilianised democratic societies.

¹⁸² For a thorough elaboration of the importance of the humanisation of warfare in face of Western deliberation see Coker (2002). Term see Coker (2002:93).

¹⁸³ Beck, quoted in *ibid.*, 79.

¹⁸⁴ Der Derian (2001:120).

¹⁸⁵ See Der Derian (2001:pp205).

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.* (211).

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.* (212).

¹⁸⁸ Term taken from Kleine-Brockhoff: „Schauspiel ohne Grenzen“ (*Die Zeit* 12/2002).

¹⁸⁹ Der Derian (2001:xv).

Promoting virtual wars as virtuous means of conflict resolution on prime-time TV, and as spare time activity, the MIME-NET proves a powerful actor, who issues messages, which reproduce violent discourses of conflict. This decisively limits the alternatives available to an interpretative community facing an opponent. MIME-NET simulations claim the ability to cut through the fog of war. They brush over Clausewitz and renew the myth of warfare as an inherently controllable, rational activity to reach political objectives. The catastrophic consequences of massive violent conduct are cut out of the picture and are confined to the margins, to an ever growing counter-archive of human plights and sufferings. As such, by influencing important decision makers, and by determining the representations made available concerning particular conflicts, the MIME-NET not only anticipates, but helps to construct the future, according to its predictions.

In sum, the MIME-NET serves the justification of war as viable means of conflict resolution for Western democratic media societies. It glorifies the objectives of warfare and conceals its devastating consequences. As such, MIME-NET representations reproduce a system of cultural violence, legitimising both conditions of structural violence and acts of direct violence. They attempt to determine individuals' attitudes towards actual or potential opponents, influence their conceptualisations of conflicts and of options for their resolution, thus decisively impacting the paradigm of actions conceived of as possible. They objectify a military perspective on both past, present, and future events. Consequently, they correspond to the implicit message issued by the *Black Hawk Down* media complex. Therefore, the institutions influencing the production of the complex become an interesting object for enquiry.

3. Production/Reception/Reproduction.

According to Der Derian, "more than a rational calculation of interests takes us to war. People go to war because of how they see, perceive, picture, imagine and speak of others; that is, how they construct the difference of others as well as the sameness of themselves through representation"¹⁹⁰. Control over the means of representation of self and other, of both past, present, and future conflicts, becomes a crucial issue in attempts to justify warfare.

¹⁹⁰ Der Derian, in Booth/Dunne (2002:110).

3.1 Virtuous war according to *Black Hawk Down*.

As has been shown previously, the activities carried out by institutions linked to the MIME-NET deal with the planning of, and preparations for, a new form of humane network-centric warfare. This encompasses actual interventions and threatened coercive measures, as well as control over the way self, other, and conflict are represented in the mass media, thus determining public perceptions of the events on behalf of military interests. The *Black Hawk Down* media complex conveys a message, which reproduces the image of virtuous war. It provides legitimacy to warfare by presenting it as an unquestionable feature of human existence. War is presented as painstakingly ugly, but unfortunately necessary activity, carried out as cautiously as possible in the name of some unquestionable greater good. As such, the ideological subtext of the complex resembles a general preparation of collective cognitive grounds with the objective to enhance susceptibility for justifications of future military endeavours as *virtuous* in kind, and as inflicting *virtually* no undeserved damage. It is a claim to control over the means of (re)presentation of war which proves crucial for the generation and maintenance of public support for military operations carried out by, and on behalf of, democratic societies. Thus, the *Black Hawk Down* media complex implicitly follows the agenda of MIME-NET.

However, at this point it can be argued that Ridley Scott's movie openly presents human sufferings in war. Can it, as such, still be seen to virtualise the image of warfare? The movie repeatedly prolongs and enforces the plight of US soldiers by cinematic means such as slow-motion, musical accompaniment, or close-ups. It depicts members of the US force as wounded, or dying, in great detail, making the audience suffer with their objects of identification.

In spite of, this open presentation of an ugliness of war Scott's movie does not really challenge the image of war as both virtual and virtuous. The violence depicted in detail is exclusively the violence committed by the other, the opponent. The killings carried out by US soldiers remain largely invisible, they are virtualised in the style of a first person shooter video game. Enemy fighters disappear traceless after being hit and endure no visible sufferings. The plight of the US soldiers, on the other hand, is merely due to remorseless villains, who indiscriminately kill civilians and combatants alike. As such, their brutal acts are not a feature of war, but are presented as criminal acts, which triggered the US involvement in the first place¹⁹¹. The violence openly shown in the movie is of the kind which enforces

¹⁹¹ See here in particular the prologue of BHD.

outside engagement; it is presented as the *reason for*, not the *consequence of* war. “The civilised world decided to lower the hammer”, as Bowden puts it¹⁹².

During the battles, the self is depicted as fighting under the restraint of narrow rules of engagement to protect non-combatants. This is repeatedly illustrated throughout the movie, by reference to UN jurisdictions¹⁹³, or through soldiers questioning in the heat of the battle if and when they are allowed to shoot back¹⁹⁴. The violence employed by the soldier-self serves to re-install the rules and institutions of civilisation. In other words, in spite of an unveiled depiction of US soldiers’ sufferings in war, Ridley Scott’s movie still reproduces an image of war as both virtual and virtuous, thus, like the media complex as a whole, corresponding to the interests of MIME-NET.

3.2 The *Black Hawk Down* side wing of MIME-NET.

Which connections between the producers of the *Black Hawk Down* media complex and military institutions become discernable? Did support from the military took part in determining the message issued by the complex? Does the *Black Hawk Down* media complex provide an illustrating example for the mode of operation of MIME-NET?

The authoritative main source of the complex’s factual content is Mark Bowden’s best-selling novel. Bowden acquired his material almost exclusively through interviews with US army servicemen. In addition he relied upon official documents provided to him by military institutions. When he employed material from competing sources he applied the soldiers’ reports to verify the competing accounts¹⁹⁵. The factual core of the complex has, in other words, a bias towards an official military view on the events. Willingly or not, it reproduces the particular norms and values prevalent among members of US military elite forces, which remain uncontested. Mark Bowden’s book transforms the communicative group memory of involved soldiers into a meta-narrative, implicitly objectifying their perspective and naturalising their norms and values. Their particular version of the events becomes institutionalised as cultural memory. This fact brought the book on reading lists recommended by the army and made its author a favoured guest lecturer for military training courses¹⁹⁶.

¹⁹² Bowden (2000:25).

¹⁹³ For example BHD, 0:04:10.

¹⁹⁴ BHD, 0:40:55-, or 0:42:20-.

¹⁹⁵ Reference can be made to Bowden’s own epilogue in Bowden (2000:pp.481) and his foreword in Eversmann/Schilling (2004:pp.vii).

¹⁹⁶ See, for example <http://www.lejeune.usmc.mil/2dmardiv/26/two.html>, <http://www.dix.army.mil/PAO/postarchive00/features/july/speakers.htm>, and http://www.pentagon.mil/news/Aug2000/n08152000_20008145.html (all 3.5.2005).

The production of Ridley Scott's movie features a deliberate attempt from the side of the military to influence the content of the presented narration. As Suid points out, "the Pentagon saw [the movie] *Black Hawk Down* as a tactical victory"¹⁹⁷. Producer Jerry Bruckheimer had assured Pentagon brass that he intended to make a movie that "the Army will be proud of"¹⁹⁸. Consequently, the military was given the opportunity to exert influence on the production process, according to the rules and guidelines established in the US Army's Office of the Chief of Public Affairs¹⁹⁹. After negotiating changes in the script, deleting the severe rivalries and disagreements between the two involved army units, the movie received significant support in form of helicopters and soldiers²⁰⁰. In addition, the character of Ranger John Stebbin's was given the new identity of John Grimes, with the intention to veil the fact that the coffee-maker who turned a hero in virtual Somalia now is a convicted child molester in the real United States²⁰¹. After the movie's release, Secretary of Defence Donald Rumsfeld's assertion that it represented a "searing salute to the spirit of the best Americans"²⁰², was mirror-imaged by a memorandum issued by his department, which hailed the picture as depicting "the distinctive valor of our soldiers"²⁰³. On official military websites the movie was quickly enlisted in the war on terror after the September 11th attacks. Referring to the tag-line of *Black Hawk Down*, 'Leave No Man Behind', an army public affairs statement claims the movie "reflects the values of valor and self-sacrifice that we have been seeing in our soldiers (...) as we combat terrorists and terrorism"²⁰⁴. "After September 11th", claims Suid, "cinematic images (...) had the power to reinforce the patriotism that swept the United States"²⁰⁵. A quality, obviously appreciated by the US military, which lend its support to a row of patriotic war movies in the first years of the new Millennium²⁰⁶.

Also in the area of new media the impact of MIME-NET activity can be discerned. Under the leadership of retired Air Force General Bob Springer, *NovaLogic*, the production company of the video game *Delta Force Black Hawk Down*, is heavily involved in a 45 Million US

¹⁹⁷ Suid (2002:670).

¹⁹⁸ See http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Jan2002/n01162002_200201161.html (3.5.2005).

¹⁹⁹ For the rules and guidelines see <http://www4.army.mil/ocpa/community/makingmovies/guide.html> (3.5.2005). It is interesting to notice that the listed requirements for the allocation of support includes the requirement of support to "the Armed Forces recruiting and retention programs".

²⁰⁰ See Suid (2002: 670).

²⁰¹ See <http://www.eonline.com/News/Items/0,1,9281,00.html> (3.5.2005).

²⁰² J.Larsen (2002:53).

²⁰³ Public Affairs Guidance for DOD Assistance to Motion Picture *Black Hawk Down*, April 1st, 2001. Quoted in Suid (2002:670).

²⁰⁴ http://www4.army.mil/ocpa/read.php?story_id_key=1152 (3.5.2005).

²⁰⁵ Suid (2002:673).

²⁰⁶ Among others can be mentioned here *We Were Soldiers*, *Behind Enemy Lines*, *Tears of the Sun*, or the TV-serial *Band of Brothers*. Notably all these representations of wars adhere to *Alien Aesthetics* and thus reproduce the *Myth of Self and Other*.

Dollar cooperation to establish the Institute for Creative Technologies (ICT), with the objective to “leverage the US national defense and the enormous talent and creativity of the entertainment industry and their tremendous investment in cutting-edge applications of new technology”²⁰⁷. It seems hardly surprising that the mentioned video game features in a 2004 naval post graduate school PhD-proposal with the objective to assess the practicability of “multi-player commercial ‘off the shelf’ first person shooter games as low resource, high impact small unit training tool for (...) infantry squad and platoon”²⁰⁸. The proposal explicitly commends the “accurately modeled weapons” and the “multi-player environment” as useful for the conduct of exercises. Also here a clear correspondence between interests of the MIME-NET and the production side of the *Black Hawk Down* media complex become discernable.

Hailing the unprecedented opportunities of simulated environments for military training, *NovaLogic*'s Bob Springer asserts that the “young men and women joining the military have been brought up on the computer and the Internet”, and are, as such, “readily adaptable to the technology of simulation”²⁰⁹. As Der Derian points out, commercial video games become applicable “to test the intellectual aptitude and psychological attitudes of potential recruits” and could help “kids at risk to explore potential career paths”²¹⁰. In an unprecedented attempt to increase recruitment, the US army made a high-end first-person perspective combat simulator developed by the ICT, *America's Army*, available as a free download on the internet²¹¹. According to its website the game is part of the army's “communication strategy”²¹². Its objective is to provide young adults with insight into “what the army is like”²¹³, and is “designed to substitute virtual experiences for vicarious insights”²¹⁴.

Initially, players are guided through basic training which familiarises them with both military structures, equipment, and modes of operation, before they are released into a virtual training environment to reach particular objectives in real-time interaction as teams. Internet connections enable players to see each others' movements on the battlefield and voice-links enable direct verbal communication; network-centric warfare in the children's room, virtual war literally coming home. By these means recruiters can easily link into gaming

²⁰⁷ Der Derian (2001:163). For the role of *NovaLogic* see *ibid.* (162-3). For an overview over the activities and projects carried out by the ICT, see <http://www.ict.usc.edu/disp.php> (4.5.2005).

²⁰⁸ Proposal see <http://www.nps.navy.mil/moves/docs/ThesisProposals/NolanJones.pdf> (3.5.2005).

²⁰⁹ Springer, quoted in Der Derian (2001:162).

²¹⁰ Der Derian (2001:177).

²¹¹ See: <http://www.americasarmy.com/> (3.5.2005).

²¹² http://www.americasarmy.com/support/faq_win.php#faq2 (3.5.2005).

²¹³ *Ibid.*

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

communities, following up individuals from early on and socialising them into an environment, which has the capacity to impact the personal development of young adults *readily adaptable to simulations*. This can decisively influence individual preferences, and attract young players to *explore potential career paths* when the time is right. The internet-based game *America's Army* is a cheap and efficient tool to enhance recruitment in times of instability with growing demand for operative army personnel. As soon as virtual bullets ending digitised lives as represented deaths in repeatable 'game overs' are replaced by the real thing, attempts to restart will be in vain.

Such areas of applications of new media representations underline the potential power of producers, MIME-NET among them, over audiences. Der Derian asserts, that "in simulated preparations and virtual executions of war, there is a high risk that one learns how to kill but not take responsibility for it. One experiences 'death' but not the tragic consequences of it"²¹⁵. As such, simulations, such as *Delta Force Black Hawk Down*, or *America's Army*, wield the power to impact individual preferences and actions. They render inexperienced readers of their texts powerless by immersing them in the story as virtual narrators, but on the basis of a narrow pre-established framework with a limited paradigm of roles and identities to choose from. Observed and analysed by professional recruiters over a significant period of time and socialised into a particular environment, young consumers of *America's Army* are easily motivated for a career in the military. By these means powerful societal actors gain access to private spheres and are placed in a position which allows them to construct subjectivities according to their interests. Simulations for entertainment are turned into tools for the (re)production of a culture of war.

4. Conclusion.

This section has sketched out the connections between the production side of the *Black Hawk Down* media complex and military institutions and interests. It has been shown that the complex implicitly serves the interests of MIME-NET, an emerging cooperation between military, media, entertainment, and high-technology companies with the objective to determine the representation and public perception of the military and its activities. The *Black Hawk Down* media complex implicitly (re)produces the image of war as virtuous. Wars are presented as the only option to stop atrocities and crimes, while their unintended consequences for individuals and collectives are kept invisible. At the same time the selfless

²¹⁵ Der Derian (2001:xvi).

and obedient soldier is glorified and presented as a role model, while opponents are de-humanised.

The US military rules and guidelines for support of the production of movies and other cultural artefacts explicitly states that the product supported should enhance recruitment and increase understanding for military activities²¹⁶. Based on material provided by the military, the complex proliferates an ideological subtext which clearly corresponds to these claims. Consequently, its production acquired significant support from military institutions. The production of the video game, in addition, points beyond the complex, and witnesses of unprecedented ways of using new interactive simulation technologies to enhance recruitment and the general acceptance for military activities and solutions.

The *Black Hawk Down* media complex implicitly promotes processes of *enemising*²¹⁷, the juxtaposing of an inherently good and righteous self with an evil and dangerous other. It underscores the distinction between *bare life*, which can legitimately be killed, and *politically qualified life*, which cannot²¹⁸. Under application of particular audio-visual and narrative means, its representations shape mutually exclusive attitudes, as well as belligerent conceptualisations of conflicts. Therefore, they establish a system of support and constraint, which promotes directly violent behaviour. This makes the *Black Hawk Down* media complex an instrument for the (re)production and maintenance of a system of cultural violence. Its representations serve to (re)produce institutions for war and induce violent performances. It serves the virtualisation and, therefore, justification of wars, both past, present, and future. As a consequence it corresponds to the interests of those who make a living out of preparations for, and executions of war. It corresponds to the interests of MIME-NET.

²¹⁶ For the rules and guidelines, see <http://www4.army.mil/ocpa/community/makingmovies/guide.html> (9.5.05).

²¹⁷ Term taken from Zur (1987:131).

²¹⁸ Shapiro (2004:181).

V. Challenging the complex. Conclusion.

“Andrea: (aloud): Unlucky the country without heroes.”

(...)

“Galilei: No. Unlucky the country in need of heroes.”

Bertold Brecht, *Leben des Galilei*²¹⁹.

“What passing-bells for those who die as cattle?”

Wilfred Owen, *Anthem for Doomed Youth*²²⁰.

What do these findings hold for a wider picture on mass media communication and culture? Are audiences powerless victims to representational seductions changing their preferences and identities, thus determining their actions? Or do they engage actively in an independent (re)production of meanings? Does the producer determine the text and therefore the reader, or do the readers have the power to resist and impose their own meanings on a particular text? Do producers, text, and audiences interact in mutually constitutive processes of a perpetuated (re)production of the framework pre-determining both processes of production and reception? To approach answers to these questions we have to turn back to the relationship between texts, institutions, and readers; we have to revisit processes of the (re)production of culture.

Cultural artefacts representing war oscillate between glorification and condemnation, between justification and delegitimation of their object of enquiry. They have the inherent capacity to both reproduce and challenge the habit of warfare and the structures from which it emerges. As such, an anti-war novel like Remarque's *Nothing New on the Western Front* opposes Jünger's autobiographical apology of soldiery in *African Games* and Picasso's *Guernica* stands in harsh opposition to Futurist hailing of a technological beauty of battles. In film, a movie like *The Thin Red Line*, which attempts to bridge the gap between self and other, and to raise awareness for institutionalised processes of enemising, stands against the narrative and cinematic techniques employed in *Black Hawk Down* to (re)produce and maintain those very distinctions.

Cultural representations can either (re)produce, or challenge cultures of violence. They have the capacities to naturalise, or de-naturalise ideologies of war, they are instruments which can either serve the justification of war, or the (re)constitution of peace. What representations naturalise, depends on the interests behind their production. As such, *The Thin Red Line* can be seen to challenge the ideological content of the *Black Hawk Down* media

²¹⁹ Brecht (1991:113-4); my translation.

²²⁰ Owen (2000:2066).

complex on the production side, by issuing a message contesting its subtext. But how can resistance from the reception side be conceptualised?

Once the message is issued the producers lose their immediate power over it. From then on it is up to the audiences receiving the message to generate meaning on the basis of the material provided to them. The producers, in other words, determine the starting point of the process and a general direction, but not its outcome. They do not determine the audiences, but solely restrain their activities by defining what material is conveyed and how. The message becomes the object of a renewed struggle on the reception side, between different audiences, who attempt to determine the meaning generated out of it, according to their own interests and influence the respective text's status and accessibility accordingly. By means of their readings audiences attempt to affect discourses and cultures, naturalising attitudes and conceptualisations, inducing behaviour favourable to them. Some cultural artefacts convey messages, which are openly multi-vocal, or ambiguous, inducing both dominant and oppositional readings. Others define narrow limits within the framework of which meaning has to be generated, or lead audience connotations into particular directions by means of intricate representational techniques, clearly promoting one dominant reading.

The *Black Hawk Down* media complex is of the latter kind. Its representations pre-condition processes of meaning generation in various ways and leave audiences with little power to contest their message. The complex targets competing cognitive capacities of the spectator. As a drama it affects feelings, as a documentary and in the form of a historical novel it affects intellectual capacities. Ultimately, by immersing the reader in the narration through simulation technologies it even targets direct individual experiences. The complex creates a fake pluralism. It disguises the fact that its factual content entirely rests on one authoritative source. In addition, it establishes narrow discursive borders within the framework of which the generation of meaning has to take place, and effectively determines audience connotations to denoted material through the application of particular narrative and cinematic techniques. The complex objectifies one particular perspective, marginalising others, and inserts a bellicose ideological subtext in relation to self, other and conflict into public discourse. It leaves, in other words, hardly any grounds on the basis of which oppositional readings could be conducted.

As a consequence, a re-reading of the material provided by the complex is no viable alternative to challenge its content. This leaves us with two modes of 'receptive' resistance; access-change and status-change. Access change is equally difficult to achieve. The complex is popular. Mark Bowden's novel is a bestseller, Ridley Scott's movie a box-office success,

and the video game is now available for all major computer systems and game consoles. Its representations are exciting, their aesthetics attract audiences, and the subtexts implicitly conveyed obviously “satisfy existing mass desires”²²¹. By affecting attitudes and conceptualisations it might even serve to generate the very desires it implicitly (re)produces. Its attractiveness increases the complex’ reach tremendously and improves its impact on public discourse. Even though demonstrations against the movie and its racist subtext might help to raise public awareness for the peculiarities inherent in its representations, attempts to achieve access-change and exclude, for example, the movie from public screenings, television, or video-stores, and the novel from the bookshelves seem hardly a plausible alternative. As long as it sells it will be made available anyway. On the other hand, the question of who shall decide which representation is to be excluded from public discourse, and which not, is if at all, difficult to answer.

This leaves us with the third alternative to resist the media complex’ ideological subtext; status-change. Status-change can be achieved through critique. By revealing the underlying norms, values, and premises, and their connection to particular socio-economical or political interests, public awareness for the impact of the *Black Hawk Down* media complex can be raised. By making its implicit message conscious, the status of the complex can be decreased, thereby reducing its effect on audiences and, subsequently, its impact on public discourse.

To provide audiences with the conceptual tools to deconstruct mass media messages and reveal their ideological subtexts, thus dis-empowering their producers, has been one of the immediate objective of this thesis. It hopes to increase audiences’ awareness for the modes of operation of cultural representations, to induce, in Kellner’s words, *critical media literacy*²²². It aims at empowering the spectator to resist intricate media messages, which attempt to seduce the receiver into an implicit acceptance of particular norms, values, and premises underlying the representation. I do not intend to provide techniques for better, more peaceful ways of presenting self and other, war and peace in cultural artefacts. Rather, I understand this study as a tool, an instrument for the dismantling of pre-existing belligerent logics of perception, (re)produced by media representations. As a contribution to peace, I intended to challenge ideological pretexts for war.

²²¹ Kracauer (1974:5). Kracauer believes that the reason for the popularity of particular movies lies in the fact that they reflect psychological dispositions already present in the public. See Kracauer (1974:pp.1).

²²² See Kellner (2003:pp.331).

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