

# Borders, Barriers and Grievable Lives

## *The Discursive Production of Self and Other in Film and Other Audio-Visual Media*

Holger Pötzsch

### **Abstract**

Based on a close reading of Ridley Scott's war film *Black Hawk Down* (USA 2001; BHD), the present article investigates the formal properties through which a certain strain of war and action movies discursively constitutes the other – the enemy – as less than human. I develop the argument that the emergent relation between friend and foe in these films can be read through the concept of the border as an epistemological barrier that keeps the other incomprehensible, inaccessible, and ultimately ungrievable. Having demonstrated how BHD sets up such epistemological barriers, I widen my focus and show that similar formal properties can be found in other audio-visual media, such as video games or news items.

I then proceed to investigate how the societal impacts of this audio-visual rhetoric might be conceptualized. Do the mass media constitute a logistics that organizes audiences' perceptions of war, violence, and the other? Does the barring of the face of the enemy from the public sphere of appearance render particular lives ungrievable and therefore unprotectable?

The main theoretical frame of the paper consists of an application of the discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe to an analysis of audio-visual media, and of the approaches of Judith Butler, James Der Derian, and Paul Virilio to conceptualizing impacts of media representations on political discourse and practice in times of war.

**Keywords:** media, war, film, games, militainment, *Black Hawk Down*

[N]ormative frameworks establish in advance what kind of life will be a life worth living, what life will be a life worth preserving, and what life will become worthy of being mourned. Such views of lives pervade and implicitly justify contemporary war.  
Judith Butler (2009: 53)

[E]very politicization of life (...) necessarily implies a new decision concerning the threshold beyond which life ceases to be politically relevant, (...) and can as such be eliminated without punishment. Every society sets this limit.  
Giorgio Agamben (1998: 139)

### **Introduction**

The image below (image 1), from Zack Snyder's movie *300* (USA 2006), is illustrative of the theme of the present paper. I am after a set of formal properties through which a particular strain of contemporary war and action movies constitutes the other – the

enemy – as less than human. With main reference to Ridley Scott's movie *Black Hawk Down* (USA 2001; abbreviated BHD), I develop the argument that, in these movies, the relation between friend and foe emerges as an epistemological barrier that keeps the other invisible, inaccessible, incomprehensible. The deployment of a particular audio-visual rhetoric thus de-subjectifies and de-humanizes the enemy and renders the killing of it unproblematic. Having shown how BHD sets up such epistemological barriers, I widen the focus and ask whether similar formal properties can be found in other war/action movies and other representations of war, and how the societal impacts of such an audio-visual war culture might be conceptualized.

**Image 1.** *Self and Other in Audio-visual War Culture (image from Snyder's 300)*



## **Mind the Gap**

First of all, however, some remarks on a theoretical framework for this enquiry are necessary. The artwork 'Shibboleth' by the Colombian artist Doris Salcedo was exhibited in the Tate Modern and consisted of a massive crack through the whole floor of the famous London gallery. The crack of various depths and breadths stretches seemingly aimlessly through fundamental parts of the massive modernist industrial building. In my view, Salcedo's crevice stands for a gap that is constitutive of Western modernity – it stands in for the assumed dichotomy between representation and represented or between signifier and signified underlying processes of communication and meaning production. I believe this gap is important, as it points to the inherent instability of any form of order be it semiotic, conceptual or political. What Salcedo's work reveals is that this gap constitutes a space of its own – a liminal space of cultural enunciation in the sense of Homi Bhabha (1994) – that is inherently productive and potentially subversive. From such a space, new meanings and alternative discourses might emerge. In reconceptualizing a constitutive division as the locus of alternative potentialities, this gap reveals alleged objectivity as merely temporary and precarious attempts at objectification. In Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) terms, acknowledgement of this crevice enables a conceptualization of the social as radically contingent. In other words, acknowledgment of this crevice constitutes the very condition for making democratic politics possible.

I assume that the gap between representation and represented is constitutive for processes of meaning production. Representations – including in purportedly transparent media such as photography – do not merely reflect objects, but take part in their constant discursive constitution and negotiation. All representation is inherently aesthetic (Bleiker 2001: 511-515) and any attempt to represent constitutes an intentional act – an articulation – that inserts an additional dimension, applies a certain frame, adopts a particular perspective. As such, the gap between representation and represented becomes the locus of inherently political struggles over meaning on the “contested terrains” (Kellner 1995: 5) of contemporary media culture.

Here, I put particular focus on the gap dividing “grievable and ungrievable lives” (Butler 2009: 38). Representing the other means not only reflecting, but also (re)creating it in a certain manner – constituting it as either valuable and worthy of grief, or as threatening, evil, and ultimately ungrievable. It is my argument that epistemological barriers brought forth in, and through, audio-visual war culture constitute “social structures of perception” (51), which direct audience affects away from certain segments of a global populace, hence playing into discursive logics that render certain lives politically less relevant than others.

From here emerge the four key theses of the present paper. I introduce and comment on them in turn. First, the relation between self and other emergent in popular war and action movies can be read through the concept of the border as an epistemological barrier drawn around the subject position of the soldier-self. I follow here the notion of subject-position as it is framed by Laclau and Mouffe (2001). They make clear that “[w]hen we use the category of ‘subject’ (...), we will do so in the sense of ‘subject position’ within a discursive structure” (115). However, in their line of thought the subject is not entirely determined by a dominant ideological discursive apparatus, but emerges as overdetermined – as subjected to constant positionings through various and often competing or even mutually exclusive discursive frames. It is precisely through this form of overdetermination that the positioned, fragmented subject retains some form of agency under a sedimented structure that might engender change.

When viewing a film, the fragmented spectator-subject is positioned by various diegetic and extra-diegetic (textual and extra-textual) discourses at the same time. It oscillates between different versions of reality, which it constantly negotiates. The formal properties of a movie (camera movements, close-ups, slow motion, music and sound, and so forth) constitute a textual frame that provides indices and reading instructions to audiences. In positioning the spectator within the discourse of a movie, these technical and narrative features reduce the paradigm for possible articulations and thus push reception in a particular direction. As such, formal properties determine the degree of closure of a work. No work – no discourse – however, can ever be entirely closed. Every order, even a hegemonic one, is merely temporary and inherently precarious; it can be subverted. As such, the notion of an active reader can be maintained: “The spectator is constructed, and him or herself constructs, in a form of constrained or situated freedom”, as Robert Stam puts it (2000: 244), before he continues: “In a Bakhtinian perspective the reader/spectator exercises agency, but always within the force-fields of contradictions characteristic of both the social field and the individual psyche” (244-245). In Laclau and Mouffe’s terms, Stam’s force-fields of contradictions become conceivable as multiple discourses variously positioning subjects. I term the dominant diegetic subject position constructed through the formal properties of certain contemporary war and action movies the soldier-self.

Second, the epistemological barrier keeps the other ubiquitously absent – hidden, inaccessible, incomprehensible yet potentially omnipresent as a deadly threat – and thereby provides meaning to the soldier-self. Through the deployment of certain formal properties, many war and action films consistently prevent the (potentially subversive) discourse of the other from emerging. The soldier-self becomes the unchallenged subject-position within the dominant discursive frames set up in these movies. Epistemological barriers keep the other at bay and therefore render stable a dominant discourse of the self.

Third, as a result of this ubiquitous absence, the other is de-humanized and de-subjectified, and the killing of it is implicitly justified. Epistemological barriers in film and other audio-visual media as such emerge as a precondition for the diegetic justification of war and violence. The other has to be constructed as less than human – as ungrivable life – to render the killing of it humanly possible and acceptable. The confinement of the other severs what Levinas (2002) refers to as the “ethical relation, the face to face” (521), thus enabling a “total negation (...) murder” (516).

Fourth, epistemological barriers in the world of the text have an impact on political discourse and practice. Here, the textual study of war and action movies gains relevance for political discourse and reproductive performances. Epistemological barriers as produced in, and through, a certain strain of war and action movies resurface in other genres and media. These barriers keep the other per se invisible and prime audiences through the establishment of backgrounds of meaning that impact the degree of plausibility attached to certain political rhetoric and practice.

The present paper deals with the discursive impacts of popular culture and draws upon several studies that have addressed such effects. Kracauer’s (1974 [1947]) by now classic notion of popular film as reflective of collective psychological dispositions can be seen as a suitable starting point. Recently, the impact of popular culture on collective memory and processes of collective identity formation have been critically investigated (Erl/ Nünning 2008; Erl/Wodianka 2005, McCrisken/Pepper 2005, Weber 2006). Popular culture has been read as providing discursive “backgrounds of meaning” (Weldes 2003: 7) or as playing a constitutive role in politics (Nexon/Neumann 2006). Also the importance of militainment for the justification of violent interventionism has been addressed (DerDerian 2001, Andersen 2006, Stahl 2010). All these studies provide important insights into the discursive impacts of popular culture. However, only a few of them address the actual technical means through which, for instance, movies achieve these effects. The present paper is an attempt to tie discursive impacts to the formal properties of audio-visual representations. By these means, I hope to provide a sound analytical base for an assertion of the discursive effects of epistemological barriers drawn between self and other in and through popular culture. I will now turn to a close reading of Ridley Scott’s movie *Black Hawk Down* (USA 2001) to exemplify some of the technical and narrative means through which epistemological barriers and ungrivable lives are brought forth in audio-visual media.

### **Black Hawk Down and Beyond: Epistemological Barriers in Film and Other Audio-Visual Media**

*Black Hawk Down* is more than the popular blockbuster movie directed by Ridley Scott and produced by Jerry Bruckheimer (released in 2001). The movie merely constitutes

the heart of a constellation of medial representations – the BHD complex – remediating a core narrative told by US army personnel involved in the US intervention in Somalia in 1992-1993.

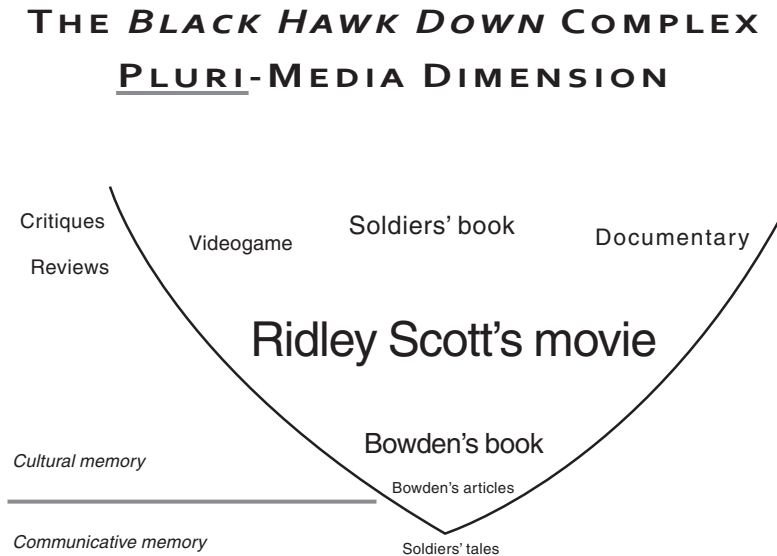
In the middle of the 1990s, journalist and author Mark Bowden began interviewing US soldiers, who had been involved in heavy street fighting in the Somali capital that culminated in shocking CNN images of the tortured bodies of US servicemen being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu. What in the West previously had been predominantly perceived as a humanitarian intervention suddenly acquired the characteristics of bloody urban warfare claiming the lives of 18 US servicemen and, as was revealed later, more than 1000 Somali citizens. Mark Bowden collected the stories of involved US soldiers and published them as a newspaper series in the *Philadelphia Enquirer* in 1997. After acquiring additional archived material from US military sources, he subsequently published the interviews as the historical novel *Black Hawk Down* in 1999. The material was acquired by Bruckheimer and Scott, who made the blockbuster movie *Black Hawk Down*, which was released in 2001. The tremendously popular movie was followed by the TV documentary *The True Story of Black Hawk Down* in 2002 and the first-person-shooter computer game *Delta Force Black Hawk Down* in 2003. In 2004, the soldiers themselves republished their stories in an edited volume *The Battle of Mogadishu*.

What connects all these remediations is a certain bias in perspective vested in the initial choice of material. Bowden predominantly employs qualitative data he has gathered from US military sources. As I have outlined previously (Pötzsch 2009), the author almost exclusively relies on material provided to him by the US military, or that he acquired from members of clandestine army units under circumstances rubber-stamped by US military authorities. For instance, Bowden (1999) explicitly states that “Somalis were clearly making up stories”, but that “thanks to the detailed accounts I’d gotten from American soldiers it was pretty easy to sort fact from fiction” (516). This conduct establishes a privileged perspective of US soldiers against which deviating accounts have to be measured. As such, already in the written account an epistemological barrier is drawn that hampers the emergence of competing perspectives and alternative discourses. This initial bias subsequently translates into the audio-visual remediations. While some Somali voices still surface in Bowden’s book, almost any trace of a Somali point of view is erased in Scott’s movie through the deployment of a particular set of cinematic techniques and narrative topoi.

Taken together, the BHD complex constitutes what Astrid Erll (2008) terms a pluri-medial constellation that ensures a continuous impact of the depicted material on the political discourse and practice. According to Erll, such constellations first successfully transform a work about history into a memory-making work that has an impact on the historical discourse and politics. In the case of BHD, Bowden’s intervention transformed the communicative group memory of involved US army personnel into institutionalized, widely remediated and canonized cultural memory. The continued availability of the depicted material in pluri-medial constellations entails the perpetuated impact of Bowden’s material on the historico-political discourse. The epistemological barrier drawn around the privileged perspective of US soldiers translates across media and genre and becomes determinant of this discursive effect.

Already throughout the opening sequence, the movie BHD limits a possible discourse pertaining to the events in Somalia. Plato is quoted with the words: “Only the dead

Figure 1. The Black Hawk Down Complex



have seen the end of war.”<sup>1</sup> The implied authority of a well-known Greek philosopher is employed here to fix a discursive nodal point and imply an understanding of war as a timeless necessity – a natural phenomenon rather than the intended consequence of consciously planned and socially approved political performances – as a frame for the narrative told. As a consequence, in spite of the intense human sufferings shown in BHD, military conduct and soldiery remain uncontested: the violence depicted emerges as imposed by the threatening other; the only means to withstand the sinister forces of evil and chaos. The sequence following Plato’s statement then provides a brief background story to the events reenacted in the movie. It consists of written accounts providing a row of alleged facts explaining the reasons for the presence of US soldiers in Somalia with reference to the ruthless brutality of the warlord Aidid and the deteriorating humanitarian conditions on the ground. Competing perspectives explaining the multidimensional nature of the Somali civil war, which might provide access to the rationalities underlying Aidid’s actions, are omitted. According to Andersen (2006: 219) the movie “rewrite[s] the history of the Somali affair”, while Nellis (2004: 18) asserts that Scott creates a “diversion from the historical and political dimension of the situation”.<sup>2</sup>

The initial bias in perspective also extends into remediations crossing the boundary between a (semi-)fictitious and (allegedly) factual account. The 2002 History Channel documentary *The True Story of Black Hawk Down* partly uses visual material from Scott’s movie to illustrate its version of the events in Somalia. The documentary relies heavily on the expertise of Mark Bowden to frame its account, and the vast majority of interviews conducted in the documentary feature either him or US soldiers. The few interviews with Somalis are narrowly framed through the application of images, or background material, that create the impression that the sufferings of this day are the sole responsibility of Somali militia and warlords. The edited volume published by involved US soldiers, *The Battle of Mogadishu* (Eversmann/Schilling 2004), is framed by an introductory chapter by Bowden and once more remediates an account vested in the perspective of only one



involved party. The first-person shooter computer game *Delta Force Black Hawk Down* (NovaLogic 2003) makes the events in Somalia available on a virtual memory location. The game is framed by newsreel footage that provides a historical background story “to explicitly legitimate the war” (Machin/van Leeuwen 2005: 127). Throughout the game, the players “participate vicariously in the war” (ibid.: 131) on the side of the US military, against an anonymous and deadly dangerous Somali threat.

I now return to the main subject of the present paper. With reference to Scott’s BHD, I intend to sketch out a set of technical and narrative means through which a particular strain of contemporary war and action movies sets up epistemological barriers dividing the diegetic subject-position of soldier-self from the enemy-other. It is my argument that these sets of formal and narrative properties are a recurrent – yet not determinant – feature of the war and action genre.<sup>3</sup>

Epistemological barriers in film are brought to emerge through the unequal deployment of particular cinematic techniques. In Scott’s BHD, as in many other war and action movies, audiences are consistently invited to identify<sup>4</sup> with only one side in the ensuing conflict – the soldier-self. Only this soldier-self is presented in some detail throughout exposition chapters and he can acquire a variety of social roles and identities (as father, son, husband, lover, friend, and so forth). This effect is achieved through repeated recourse to dwelling close-ups or mid-shots on individuals, through voice-over thoughts and dialogues, or the deployment of familiar cultural icons, names, or habits. The other is largely excluded from the picture and figures in the background as either an anonymous group of helpless victims to be secured, or as faceless villains posing a deadly threat (image 2).

**Image 2.** *Self and Other in War and Action Movies (BHD & Aliens)*



in the conflict is focalization – the establishment of an authority through which the events of the story world become discernible. At the beginning of BHD, for instance, an aerial establishing shot featuring masses of Somalis gathering at a Red Cross food distribution

site sets the scene. This shot provides an overview to audiences and therefore implies an omniscient narrator-focalizer. Throughout the following sequences, however, the deployment of eyeline matches causes the perspective of this omniscient narrator-focalizer to conflate with the perspective of US soldiers circling the scene in a helicopter. By these means, the events become accessible to audiences through the eyes of US soldiers. At the same time, the subjective point of view of the US soldiers is effectively objectified through the conflation with objectifying aerial shots (image 3).

**Image 3.** *Focalization through Eyeline Matches in BHD*



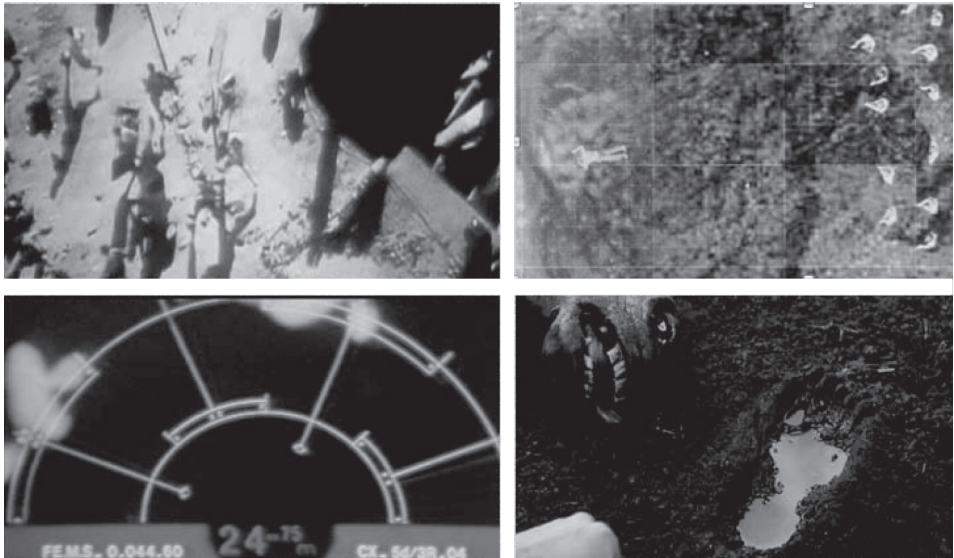
BHD never focalizes through Somalis, whose point of view, therefore, remains largely unavailable within the movie's diegetic frames. Somali victims are consistently presented through subjective shots implying the perspective of US soldiers witnessing their tragedy. When individualized, the Somali other is stereotyped and caricatured (aggressive gestures, facial expressions of perpetuated anger, or filmed while committing severe crimes). This recognizable other emerges as the figure of the main adversary, who serves as a projection screen for the negative characteristics assigned to the other as a whole, and whose death signifies the ultimate confinement of the threat. Even in scenes where the Somali other gains a voice, its accounts are narrowly framed. An arrested Somali businessman's claim that the Somali war is a civil war, for instance, is countered by the morally superior position of a US general, who claims that the militia financed by the Somali man is committing genocide and that the conflict therefore ceases to be an interior Somali affair. The general's account is here supported by the opening scenes of the movie, where Somali militiamen are depicted shooting civilians. Through this form of intellectual montage, the position of the Somali man appears undermined from the outset. He is discursively constructed as a cold-blooded cynic, rather than the bearer of an alternative understanding regarding the situation in the country, who could provide access to the various rationalities behind Somali actions. As Monbiot observes, "[t]he Somalis in *Black Hawk Down* speak only to condemn themselves".<sup>5</sup>

In many war and action movies, epistemological barriers are maintained even in situations where self and other directly meet on the battlefield. The other can as such be shot at close range or even be punched to death without ever becoming accessible as a



human being. Audience empathy and compassion are consistently directed toward what emerges as the soldier-self. In BHD, dwelling close-ups, slow motion, or sudden breaks in the course of action artificially prolong the deeds and sufferings of US soldiers and leave the spectator with the time necessary to individualize protagonists and to grasp the full extent of what is happening. Dying soldiers are named and given the time to utter last words to comrades or loved ones, while sad or valorizing music replaces the action-ridden sounds of battle to enhance spectators' emotional involvement. In contrast, the fate and deeds of the enemy-other remain veiled. The enemy is hidden behind smoke, fumes, or explosions, and audience empathy is discouraged through rapid cutting, or the ready deployment of extreme long-shots or a quivering hand-held camera. An indirect presentation on surveillance screens, through blurred night-vision or through traces, reduces the enemy to anonymous dots slowly encroaching on an embattled self (image 4). As Lacy (2003) asserts, Scott operates "within a hegemonic moral geography" that lets us "achieve proximity only to the death of Americans" (620).

**Image 4.** *Internally Framed: Ubiquitously absent Enemies in BHD, Behind Enemy Lines, Aliens, and 300*



To underscore the notion of an invisible, yet threatening, enemy-other, many war and action movies employ certain narrative topoi: first and foremost the evil deed. The evil deed is some great atrocity committed by the enemy-other and witnessed by the soldier-self that once and for all establishes the former's completely remorseless and inhumane nature. In BHD, unarmed civilians are brutally slaughtered at a Red Cross food distribution site, while the main adversary towers over the scene and cynically claims humanitarian aid for the warlord Aidid. The narrative topos of evil deed is deployed in similar ways in a series of war and action movies (image 5). Its function is to confirm audience hypotheses regarding the threatening, remorseless, and evil nature of the diegetic enemy. Negotiations, or even surrender, are thus made to appear impossible. At the same time, all violence committed by the soldier-self is implicitly legitimized as

vested in doubtless necessity. Massive, direct violence emerges as the only way for an endangered self to sustain itself in hostile environments.

**Image 5.** *Evil Deed in We Were Soldiers, Behind Enemy Lines, 300, and Aliens*



To sum up, in BHD and in many other war and action movies, two audio-visual strategies of defacing effectively conflate. The one produces “a symbolic identification of the face [of the other] with the inhuman” marking it as incomprehensible evil, while the other engenders a “radical effacement” (Butler 2004: 147) veiling the other-as-victim and bearer of alternative values. Both strategies together frame the enemy as ubiquitously absent – invisible, inaccessible, incomprehensible yet potentially omnipresent as a deadly threat – and turn the act of killing into inflicting deserved deaths upon ungrivable adversaries. As Lacy (2003: 621) asserts, “instead of giving us moral proximity to distant suffering, *Black Hawk Down* is a technology of moral indifference, of abstractification”.

Active audiences can of course resist interpellation of a movie’s dominant discursive frame and identify with protagonists or figures only briefly exposed on screen. This form of identification, however, is dependent on extra-diegetic (extra-textual) discourses positioning spectators in a way that makes alternative points of view available from the outset. In movies relying on the representational conventions sketched out above, such alternative positions are not available. The formal properties effectively close the works and consistently push reception into identification with what is brought to emerge as the soldier-self securely positioned behind epistemological barriers isolating it from the potentially subversive other. In Smith’s (1995) terms, while the soldier-self is presented through technical means inviting not only recognition, but also alignment and allegiance, the enemy-other is rendered ubiquitously absent, thus discouraging audience investment beyond recognition.

The formal properties sketched out above are a recurrent, yet not determinant, feature of the war and action genre. Dwelling close-ups focused on individuals opposed

to quivering long shots of anonymous masses, slow motion opposed to rapid cutting, valorizing tunes opposed to battle noises, focalization through protagonists opposed to internal framing, or elements such as the evil deed or the main adversary are common techniques and topoi in movies from *Aliens* to *BHD*, from *Hamburger Hill* (USA 1987) to *300*, and from *Saving Private Ryan* (USA 1998) to the children's movie *Valiant* (UK 2005). Even acclaimed anti-war movies showing war's devastating consequences for the soldier-self such as Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (USA 1978), Stone's *Platoon* (USA 1986), or Bigelow's recent Oscar winning *The Hurt Locker* (USA 2009), tend to position audiences behind epistemological barriers that render the opponent inaccessible. As Griffin (2010: 23) remarks in relation to Hollywood Vietnam movies: "The imagined protagonist, the gaze, is always American".

Even though I indicate that many war and action movies follow the representational strategy outlined above, my findings should not be taken to imply that every such movie functions in this way. As I elaborated in a previous paper (Pötzsch 2010), for instance Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (USA 1998) deploys shared, liminal space and border-crossing liminal beings to dissolve epistemological barriers and subvert mutually exclusive discourses of self and other. Similar statements could be made about the way, for instance, Russell's *Three Kings* (USA 1999) consciously plays with the trope of the evil deed to reverse its narrative impact, or how Broomfield's *Battle for Haditha* (UK 2008) employs a form of multi-focalization to provide audiences with equal access to the discourses of US soldiers, Iraqi civilians and Iraqi insurgents, effectively overdetermining the spectator-subject from within the movie's diegetic frames.

I will now turn my attention to other audio-visual representations of war. Recently, the impact of war games on audience perception of war and the enemy has become the subject of growing scholarly interest. As Stahl (2010) points out, "games have become part and parcel of information-age warfare, merging the home front and the battlefield through various channels. (...) [T]hey represent a nexus of the militarization of cultural space" (92). In this respect, it is interesting to observe that the formal properties and narrative topoi bringing forth epistemological barriers in film reemerge in the audio-visual strategies applied in war and action games such as *Delta Force Black Hawk Down*, *America's Army* or *Call of Duty*.

In the case of these games, epistemological barriers are erected and kept in place through personalization and individualization of player characters in the initial stages of the game and through the deployment of constant point-of-view shots, where the player-spectator, upon entering the diegetic universe of the game, is made to adopt the perspective of a soldier behind a rifle (image 6). While the soldier-self is individuated by the player as a distinct character – the US army sponsored game and recruitment tool *America's Army* even provides "real heroes" from present campaigns as ready made alter egos (image 7) – the enemy remains without a name, face, or gaze of its own – an incomprehensible and deadly threat that has to be confined under the application of all means available.

Playing a game and watching a movie arguably activate distinct modes of reception. Unlike watching a movie, playing a game requires the active participation of spectators, whose choices affect the diegetic universe in which players operate. Ryan (2001: 9) merges the terms reader and writer into wreader to conceptualize this impact of the spectator on the textual base of game narratives. In games, "[t]he player enacts rather

**Image 6.** Focalization in First-person Shooter Games



**Image 7.** “Real Heroes” in America’s Army 3



than ‘receives’ the discourse”, as Machin/van Leeuwen (2005: 136) put it. The choices made by player-spectators, however, are bound to take place within the confines of narrow discursive frames determined by the settings and formal properties of the game. As such, once players enter the diegetic universe, they are positioned behind epistemological barriers and cannot avoid taking part in the violent confinement of ubiquitously absent,



dangerous enemy-others if they want to succeed in the game.

There has been some speculation concerning the potential impact of violent computer games on audiences. Ottosen (2009) for instance warns with reference to the newest war game applications that “[t]he long-term impact of millions of users playing within the narrative of war propaganda is unclear” (48). Arguing in a similar direction, Andersen and Kutri (2009) point towards a desensitizing impact of war games, which according to them serve to tune “perceptions to the needs of war” (7), while Der Derian (2001) points out 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” (xvi). The lives taken in games remain faceless and ultimately ungrivable – the act of killing bears no visible consequences. These desensitizing potentials of war games add an interesting micro-perspective on the potential discursive impacts of epistemological barriers.

I do not argue for a causal relationship between for instance violent games and anti-social or violent behavior. One does not turn soldier – or mass murderer for that matter – simply by playing America’s Army or Grand Theft Auto.<sup>6</sup> As in the case of movies, the impact of war games has to be conceived of in discursive terms as seduction of the spectator rather than as enforcement of particular performances originally unintended by the player. In positioning the player in a particular manner, these games – and audio-visual war culture more generally – make some performances appear slightly more attractive, slightly more beneficial than others. Distributed through a variety of media channels and genres, over time this tacit system of support and restraint interferes with audiences’ generalized expectations concerning enemies in the real world, thereby rendering plausibility to a political rhetoric vested in the – by then familiar – notion of ubiquitously absent and evil enemy-others.

Machin/van Leeuwen (2005: 119-120) write: “Today’s most important and influential political discourses are found (...) not in newspapers (...) and political speeches, but in Hollywood movies and computer games”. In their social actor analysis of how protagonists are visually and linguistically framed in audio-visual representations of war, they note a tension between collectivization and individualization in the presentation of characters that structure audience identification and involvement. They relate the individuation of hero characters to such means as subjective shots, close-ups on faces, and the deployment of names and multi-faceted identities, while they connect the emergence of an anonymous, de-personalized mass of adversaries to distant and brief exposures on screen. By way of conclusion, they assert that this representational strategy “underlies both film and game of Black Hawk Down – and (...) many other movies and games, as well as accounts in other genres, e.g., news and current affairs” (136).

The present paper makes an argument along a similar line. Like popular movies and games, many news narratives also employ techniques and narrative topoi that position spectators behind epistemological barriers, thus keeping the subjectivities, the humanity, and the rationality of the enemy out of sight. Regarding style and content, news and entertainment increasingly conflate: Andersen (2006) attests to the US news media’s particular “video-game feel and look” (244), while Stahl (2010) argues that “[w]artime news looks like a video game; video games restage wartime news” (109), and Köhler (2005)<sup>7</sup> asserts a “narrativizing tendency” (321) of war coverage. He claims that representations of war become stylized as a sports event – a “sportification” (326) that aims





visual war culture. Machin/van Leeuwen (2005) state that the media-fueled discourse of an embattled US self surrounded by a “monolithic and ruthless conspiracy” composed of various “enemies of freedom” increasingly acquires the status of a “second nature of American political thinking” (124), while Debrix (2008) observes the emergence of a “tabloid geopolitics [as] (...) the result of mediatized discursive formations that take advantage of contemporary fears, anxieties, and insecurities to produce certain political and cultural realities (...) as commonsensical popular truths about the present condition” (5).

A series of recent studies (Thussu/Freedman 2003, Andersen 2006, Schubart et.al. 2009, Price 2010, Stahl 2010) support such assertions concerning the increasing conflation between fiction and fact – between popular culture and news/documentaries – in relation to contemporary representations of war. Most of these studies focus on tacit or overt involvement of government agencies to achieve favorable media coverage of particular wars or other military endeavors in both factual and fictitious media formats. Terms such as infowar, military-entertainment-complex, or militainment have acquired growing currency to describe such tendencies in today’s media culture.

Even though the direct involvement of the US military in the production of, for instance, Scott’s BHD, the game Delta Force Black Hawk Down, or other audio-visual representations of war can hardly be denied (Suid 2002, Robb 2004, Machin/van Leeuwen 2005), I do not assume that the ubiquity of epistemological barriers in audio-visual representations of war beyond BHD is the result of deliberate political interventions. Even though the emergent barriers doubtlessly play into discourses implicitly legitimizing warfare, the audio-visual rhetoric giving rise to them must be seen as a product of the very tacit schemes of interpretation this rhetoric implicitly serves to reproduce and reinforce. Epistemological barriers in audio-visual war culture are not merely a consequence of conscious wartime propaganda. Rather, their emergence and impact are an intrinsic feature of war itself. Butler (2009) writes: “War sustains its practices through acting on the senses, crafting them to apprehend the world selectively, deadening affect in response to certain images and sounds, and enlivening affective responses to others” (51-52). Audio-visual war culture here emerges as an intrinsic feature of war as a discursive formation – reducing the paradigm for possible articulations of both producers and receivers of mass mediated messages.

All social agents act under the same discursive supports and restraints. As such, the effects of audio-visual war culture can be conceived of as an active reduction of possibilities – a discursive form of power without center, which according to Foucault (2000: 341) “incites, (...) induces, (...) seduces, (...) makes easier or more difficult”. In other words, subjects are not slavishly bound by an omnipotent mass media in a hierarchical operation of power emanating from an ominous center and serving sinister particular interests. Rather, both producers and receivers of mass mediated messages are limited in their possible performances through the same temporarily sedimented discursive frames. Audio-visual war culture functions as a “background of meaning” (Weldes 2003: 7) that implicitly renders plausibility and legitimacy to certain cultural and political articulations and practices. As such, in times of crisis (such as 9/11), certain segments of populations primed and positioned by cultural representations framing the enemy-as-such as irrational, incomprehensible, and ultimately ungrivable, may more easily adapt to a political rhetoric that places ‘us’ in a mutually exclusive and necessarily violent relationship with an ‘axis of evil’.

Within this discursive horizon of expectation, the ethical facing of the other as claimed by Levinas (2002) becomes difficult. As Der Derian (2009: 229) asserts, after 9/11 “[b]inary narratives displaced any complex or critical analysis”. As a matter of fact, the question of why the September 11 attacks occurred was seldom asked on major US news networks in a way that expected an adversary to answer.<sup>8</sup> For the most part, the question was not addressed to a second person: Why do you hate us? Rather, it was posed as a question about a third person – an object – and directed to ourselves: Why do they hate us? In posing the question in this latter manner, potentially disruptive competing discourses were prevented from emerging. The enemy-other remains silent and invisible – securely confined behind an epistemological barrier, which at this point becomes conceivable as sustaining the internal coherence of a dominant discourse of the self. Only by posing the question in the former manner – by enabling a partner to answer, and by facing the potential disturbance of established frames of meaning this answer might imply – can ubiquitously absent, evil enemy-others again obtain a face and be transformed into potential partners for peace.<sup>9</sup> Through these means, a constitutive barrier, the gap dividing self from other, can be turned into a connective threshold, a liminal space, enabling (potentially disruptive) alternatives to surface.

According to James Der Derian (2002), “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” (110). Epistemological barriers in political discourse have precisely this effect. They veil or distort the other and place it in a violent, mutually exclusive relation to the self. The “tacit interpretative scheme” (Butler 2009: 51) that defaces the other and reduces it to de-humanized and de-subjectified, legitimate targets or helpless civilians in need of military assistance causes war itself to turn virtuous (Der Derian 2001) – it lets the idea of bloodless, surgical, clinical wars fought for humanitarian purposes become the dominant frame for debate concerning the use of military might for political purposes.

### **Frames of War: A New Logistics of Perception?**

Epistemological barriers drawn in and through popular war culture take part in shaping the public sphere of appearance in Western media societies, which determine the grievability of life. As Judith Butler (2004: xx-xxi) asserts,

the public sphere is in part constituted by what can appear, and the regulation of the sphere of appearance is one way to establish what will count as reality, and what will not. It is also a way of establishing whose lives can be marked as lives, and whose deaths will count as deaths.

In regulating the public sphere of appearance in a particular way, epistemological barriers set up “conditions of responsiveness” to the other (Butler 2009: 52). These conditions again constitute the distinction between lives that count and lives that don’t. In other words, epistemological barriers function as the determinate frame for the discursive (re) production of a constitutive gap between grievable and un-grievable lives.

As Reinhold Görling explains in a recent lecture,<sup>10</sup> underlying the idea of un-grievable life – the life of the other as void of value or a mere threat to the self – is an implicit

denial of the inherent relationality of human beings. As we attempt to protect our vulnerable bodies by setting up borders and boundaries, we tend to forget that every protective barrier is drawn on the basis of an antecedent relation with the other. An acceptance of this relationality, of “a generalized condition of precariousness” (Butler 2009: 48), leads to an understanding of our lives as inherently vulnerable – as ultimately connected to and dependent on the other. As such, it provides an impetus for a non-violent approach to conflicts.

Epistemological barriers in film and other media constitute a discursive relation of exclusion. They set up and maintain a constitutive outside, where life can be taken without becoming visible as homicide. This outside resembles a sphere of disappearance – a zone of the exception in the sense of Agamben (1998) – where life becomes invisible and ceases to be protected by established laws and legal procedures. Epistemological barriers, as such, serve the discursive production of Homo Sacer – the doubly excluded being that according to Agamben lies at the heart of biopolitical power.<sup>11</sup>

Taking such potential discursive effects of epistemological barriers in audio-visual representations of war into consideration, the question might arise as to whether or not this popular war culture can be seen as a new logistics of perception. The term logistics of perception was originally conceived by Virilio (1989) to conceptualize the co-evolution of a “war machine” and a “watching machine” that effectively turn warfare into “optical, or electro-optical confrontations” (3), where “[a] war of pictures and sounds is replacing the war of objects (projectiles and missiles)” (4). According to Virilio, the supply of images of the enemy is of equal importance to a successful military campaign as the supply of ammunition or fuel. In the context of the present enquiry, however, Virilio’s term acquires a different meaning. It can be argued that today a military logistics of perception is no longer solely about deploying technologies to make visible the enemy as a target on and beyond the battlefield, but increasingly about facilitating the construction of the enemy-other as doubly excluded, ungrievable life, and about rendering invisible the victims of, and non-violent alternatives to, warfare.

According to Butler (2009), war is itself a discursive formation tacitly reducing the paradigm of possible performances by subjects. As such, the audio-visual techniques and narrative strategies employed to bring forth a ubiquitous absent enemy-other are not consciously deployed as deliberate war propaganda. Rather, as a “tacit interpretative scheme” (Butler 2009: 52) these logistics emerge as both the result of, and the precondition for, perpetuated discursive reproductions of war. As an integral part of an audio-visual war culture, these logistics take part in organizing both producers’ and audiences’ perceptions of war and the enemy, thus reducing options for individual performances accordingly. In discursively barring the face of the other – the inherent humanity, the alternative discourse and the rationalities of the enemy – the audio-visual war culture abets the construction of the soldier-self as a glorified bearer of true values threatened by incomprehensible evil. The antecedent ethical relation to the face of the other is replaced by the violent maintenance of protective barriers dividing us from what is brought to emerge as merely an enemy.

As 9/11 becomes conceivable as just another evil deed, as Saddam Hussein and Bin Laden assume the role of main adversaries, and as the multiple identities and rationalities of the other are drowned in mainstream media white-noise concerning an invisible, yet imminent, evil terrorist threat, potential common grounds and a first- to second-person

discourse are increasingly deprived of legitimacy. With the gap between us and them perceived as a necessary protective barrier rather than an inherently connective and productive liminal space, war is brought to emerge as the only viable option to sustain a fragile self in hostile environments. Once the dying and suffering other is reduced to blurred representations of buildings and bunkers hit by ‘smart’ weapons, the ghastly realities of war recede and turn into just “one more attraction at the Virtual Theme Park of War and Peace” (Der Derian 2001: xix).

## Notes

1. It is in fact a disputed issue whether Plato actually wrote these words. See, for instance, the following website: <http://plato-dialogues.org/faq/faq008.htm> (accessed Dec. 18, 2009), where the claim is made that the statement was wrongly attributed to Plato by General Douglas MacArthur.
2. For a brief summary of the US involvement in Somalia, see Machin/van Leeuwen (2005:120-123).
3. For a detailed account of the technical and narrative means through which, for instance, the action movies 300 and Aliens position the spectator behind epistemological barriers, see Pötzsch (2010).
4. Here, I employ a wide understanding of the term identification inspired by Smith’s (1995) notion of engaging protagonists. Spectators seldom identify totally with characters. Usually they align merely to certain traits made accessible through a film’s formal properties (such as subjective shots, dialogues, close-ups, and so on).
5. George Monbiot’s text is available here: <http://www.monbiot.com/archives/2002/01/29/both-saviour-and-victim/> (29.07.2010).
6. Also, the degree of persuasiveness of video games is an interesting issue. See Heide Smith/Nørholm Just (2009), who introduce the concepts of autonomy, integration, and goal as an analytical apparatus for assessment of a game’s rhetorical potentials. Even though their approach definitely yields important insights, here I will stick to the discursive approach and compare the formal properties through which games and films position audiences.
7. My translation. German original reads: “Narrativisierungstendenzen” (321) and “Sportifikation” (326).
8. I owe the following considerations to a comment on a draft of this paper made by Mieke Bal during the Framing War in the Cultural Field workshop at Oslo University College in November 2009.
9. Even though it may arguably prove difficult to transform Al-Qaeda fanatics into partners for peace simply by inviting them to a first- to second-person discourse, an ethical facing of the enemy at the cost of abandoning one’s own sedimented positions could entail considerable potentials for defusing violent situations and commencing upon a path of de-escalation.
10. Given at Tromsø University February 8th 2010. The lecture is available online: <http://webtv.uit.no/mediasite/SilverlightPlayer/Default.aspx?peid=c99ec0f0fd834d8bba37d8e266a926c8> (accessed Feb. 10, 2010).
11. Agamben (1998) derives the figure of Homo Sacer from ancient Roman law. The Homo Sacer was excluded from both the religious and profane orders – he could be killed without committing homicide, yet not sacrificed. Hence the relation of double exclusion.

## Works Cited

- Agamben, Giorgio (1998) *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. Stanford: Stanford UP.
- Andersen, Robin (2006) *A Century of Media – A Century of War*. New York: Peter Lang.
- Andersen, Robin and Kurti, Marin (2009) ‘From America’s Army to Call of Duty: Doing Battle with the Military Entertainment Complex’, *Democratic Communiqué* Vol. 23(1): 1-21.
- Bhabha, Homi K. (1994) *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Bleiker, Roland (2001) ‘The Aesthetic Turn in International Political Theory’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* Vol. 30: 509-533.

---

## Acknowledgement

I would like to thank an anonymous reviewer at Nordicom Review, the participants of the Framing War in the Cultural Field workshop at Oslo University College, and my colleagues at the Border Poetics research group (UiT) for their valuable comments and feedback.



- Bowden, Mark (1999) *Black Hawk Down*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Butler, Judith (2004) *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso.
- Butler, Judith (2009) *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* London: Verso.
- Debrix, Francois (2008) *Tabloid Terror: War, Culture, and Geopolitics*. London: Routledge.
- Der Derian, James (2001) *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network*. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Der Derian, James (2002) 'In Terrorem: Before and After 9/11', in Booth, K. and Dunne, T. (eds.) *Worlds in Collision. Terror and the Future of Global Order*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Der Derian, James (2009) *Virtuous War: Mapping the Military-Industrial-Media-Entertainment Network*. Second Edition. London: Routledge.
- Erll, Astrid and Nünning, Ansgar (eds.) (2008) *Cultural Memory Studies: An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Erll, Astrid and Wodianska, Stephanie (eds.) (2008) *Film und kulturelle Erinnerung: Plurimediale Konstellationen*. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter.
- Eversmann, Matt and Schilling, Dan (2004) *The Battle of Mogadishu*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Foucault, Michel (2000) 'The Subject and Power', in Faubion, J.D. (ed.) *Power: Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984. Vol. 3*. London: Penguin Books.
- Griffin, Michael (2010) 'Media Images of War', *Media, War & Conflict* Vol. 3(1): 7-41.
- Heide Smith, Jonas and Nørholm Just, Stine (2009) 'Playful Persuasion. The Rhetorical Potential of Advergames', *Nordicom Review* Vol. 30(2): 53-68.
- Kellner, Douglas (1995) *Media Culture. Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics between the Modern and the Postmodern*. London: Routledge.
- Köhler, Sebastian (2005) 'Story and History. Eine Kritik der narrativistischen Tendenz fernseh-aktueller Krisen- und Kriegsvermittlung', in Knieper T. and Müller, M. (eds.) *War Visions. Bildkommunikation und Krieg*. Köln: Herbert von Halem Verlag.
- Kracauer, Siegfried (1974) *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film*. Princeton: Princeton UP.
- Laclau, Ernesto and Mouffe, Chantal (2001) *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*. London: Verso.
- Lacy, Mark (2003) 'War, Cinema, and Moral Anxiety', *Alternatives* Vol. 28(5), 611-636.
- Levinas, Emmanuel (2002) 'Totality and Infinity', in Moran, D. and Mooney, T. (eds.) *The Phenomenology Reader*. London: Routledge.
- Machin, David and van Leeuwen, Theo (2005) 'Computer Games as Political Discourse. The Case of 'Black Hawk Down'', *Journal of Language and Politics* Vol. 4(1): 119-141.
- McCracken, Trevor and Pepper, Andrew (2005) *American History and Contemporary Hollywood*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP.
- Nellis, Robert (2004) "'Black Hawk Down' and the Silences of Ridley Scott's 'Realism'", *The Journal of Social Theory and Art Education*, Vol. 24, 8-27.
- Nexon, Daniel H. and Neumann, Iver B. (2006) 'Introduction: Harry Potter and the Study of World Politics', in Nexon, D.H. and Neumann, I.B. (eds.) *Harry Potter and International Relations*. New York: Rowman&Littlefield.
- Ottosen, Rune (2009) 'Targeting the Player: Computer Games as Propaganda for the Military-Industrial Complex', *Nordicom Review* Vol. 30(2), 35-51.
- Pötzsch, Holger (2009) "'Black Hawk Down': Film zwischen Reflektion und Konstruktion gesellschaftlicher Wirklichkeit', *International Review of Education* 55: 269-284.
- Pötzsch, Holger (2010) 'Challenging the Border as Barrier: Liminality in Terrence Malick's 'The Thin Red Line'', *Journal of Borderlands Studies* 25(1): 67-80.
- Price, Stuart (2010) *Brute Reality. Power, Discourse, and the Mediation of War*. London: Pluto Press.
- Robb, David L. (2004) *Operation Hollywood. How the Pentagon Shapes and Censors the Movies*. Amherst: Prometheus Books.
- Ryan, Marie-Laure (2001) *Narrative as Virtual Reality. Immersion and Interactivity in Literature and Electronic Media*. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP.
- Schubart, Rikke and Fabian Virchow, Debra White-Stanley, Tanja Thomas (eds.) (2009) *War Isn't Hell, it's Entertainment. Essays on Visual Media and the Representation of Conflict*. Jefferson: McFarland.
- Smith, Murray (1995) *Engaging Characters: Fiction, Emotion, and the Cinema*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Stahl, Roger (2010) *Militainment, Inc. War, Media, and Popular Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Stam, Robert (2000) *Film Theory: An Introduction*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- Suid, Lawrence H. (2002) *Guts and Glory. The Making of American Military Image in Film*. Lexington: The University of Kentucky Press.
- Thussu, Daya Kishan and Freedman, Des (eds.) (2003) *War and the Media*. London: Sage.
- Virilio, Paul (1989) *War and Cinema. The Logistics of Perception*. London: Verso.

Weber, Cynthia (2006) *Imagining America at War*. London: Sage.

Weldes, Jutta (eds.) (2003) *To Seek Out New Worlds: Exploring Links Between Science Fiction and World Politics*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.