

## Between Constitutive Absence and Subversive Presence

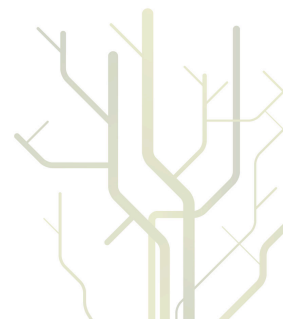
Self and Other in the Contemporary War Film



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BETWEEN CONSTITUTIVE ABSENCE AND SUBVERSIVE  
PRESENCE: SELF AND OTHER IN THE CONTEMPORARY WAR  
FILM

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	4
PREFACE .....	5
THE POWER OF NIGHTMARES? AN INTRODUCTION.....	8
Chapter 1: BORDERS, BARRIERS, AND CATEGORISATION .....	11
Chapter 2: CONFLICT, WAR, AND POPULAR CULTURE.....	14
Chapter 3: DISCOURSE THEORY, MEDIA IMPACT, AND THE CINEMATIC TEXT .....	18
1. Articulating Post-Marxism .....	18
2. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s Theory of Discourse .....	20
3. Discourse Theory and Post-Foundationalism .....	23
4. Criticism .....	26
5. The Contingency of Research.....	30
6. Discourse Theory and Media Impact.....	31
Chapter 4: SPECTATOR, CHARACTER, AND SUBJECT-POSITION: MODES OF IDENTIFICATION IN FILM .....	35
Chapter 5: CONFINING THE OTHER: EPISTEMOLOGICAL BARRIERS IN THE WAR GENRE .....	43
1. The War Film.....	43
2. Syntagmatic Structure.....	45
3. Technical Devices.....	50
4. Illustrations .....	58
5. Readings.....	66
<i>Platoon</i> .....	67
<i>The Hurt Locker</i> .....	73
<i>I Am Legend</i> (officially released version) .....	81
Chapter 6: PERMEATING EPISTEMOLOGICAL BARRIERS: LIMINAL LOCATIONS AND LIMINAL PROTAGONISTS .....	86
1. The Concept of Liminality.....	86
2. Liminality in the War Film.....	90
<i>Body of Lies</i> .....	91
<i>Avatar</i> .....	97
<i>The Situation</i> .....	100
<i>Green Zone</i> .....	108
<i>Battle for Haditha</i> .....	119
<i>I Am Legend</i> (director’s cut) .....	123
The Grid.....	129
Chapter 7: THEORETICAL REASSESSMENTS.....	131
1. Diversifying Soldier-Self and Enemy-Other .....	131
2. Diversifying Epistemological Barriers and Liminality .....	147
Chapter 8: CROSSING MEDIAL BOUNDARIES: THE CASE OF WAR GAMES.....	156
Chapter 9: CONCEPTUALIZING DISCURSIVE IMPACTS.....	164

1. Framing the Subject: Interpretative Schemata, Myths, and Discourse .....	164
2. War/Memory: Negotiating Constitutive Pasts.....	169
LIMINAL POLITICS? A CONCLUSION.....	174
REFERENCES.....	177
Appendix: ARTICLES .....	186
Article 1: “Challenging the Border as Barrier: Liminality in Terrence Malick’s ‘The Thin Red Line’” .....	186
Article 2: “Liminale Räume in Srdjan Dragojevićs ‚Lepa Sela, Lepa Gore’ und Danis Tanovićs ‚Ničija Zemlja’“ .....	187
Article 3: “Borders, Barriers, and Grievable Lives: The Discursive Production of Self and Other in Film and Other Audio-Visual Media” .....	188
Article 4: “Framing Narratives: Opening Sequences in Contemporary American and British War Films” .....	189

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## PREFACE

The present dissertation consists of a main body of text and an appendix that contains four articles. The articles reiterate and at times refine key concepts and theoretical frames and deploy them to new empirical material. Furthermore, the last two extend the analytical and theoretical focus of the present inquiry, and highlight potentials for future research in such fields as transmedial narratology and cultural memory studies. The main essay and the articles are self contained and can be read independently of one another. The reader might, however, find it useful to read the main body of text first and then proceed to what can be perceived as additional in-depth studies that at times point beyond the frame of the present essay. I will now briefly outline structure and content of the main body of text and the attached papers.

The main purpose of the present essay is to present the theoretical framework and the analytical tools deployed in this dissertation in a comprehensive and detailed manner, and to provide and systematize a wide empirical basis for the developed conclusions. During the process of writing, I experienced word and page limits as some of the most challenging aspects of the article format. The need to constantly weight empirical analysis up against theoretical explanations proved difficult, and at times seemed to preclude an in-depth presentation of the deployed theoretical, analytical, or methodological frames. The present essay sets out to remedy such shortcomings.

The attached articles provide additional in-depth studies on the basis of the developed methodological and theoretical framework, and enable a perspective on potential areas for further research. All the articles have been published, or are forthcoming, in international scholarly journals and scientific anthologies. They have been peer reviewed and presented at international conferences or symposia.

The first article, *Challenging the Border as Barrier: Liminality in Terrence Malick's 'The Thin Red Line'*, appeared in 2010 in the *Journal of Borderlands Studies*. Draft versions have been presented at the Association for Borderlands Studies' annual conference *Cultural Production and Negotiation of Borders* in Kirkenes, Norway (September 2008) and at the Nomadikon workshop *Pluralizing Visual Culture* in Bergen, Norway (February 2009). In a parallel reading of Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down*, James Cameron's *Aliens* (USA 1986), Zack Snyder's *300* (USA 2006), and Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line* (USA 1998), the article critically deploys the present dissertation's main concepts and themes. It provides a close reading of the four movies and applies

key terms such as epistemological barrier, liminality, soldier-self, enemy-other, or ubiquitous absence. The article attempts to theoretically position itself in a post-Lacanian psychoanalytical terrain, a direction that has subsequently been replaced with a discourse-theoretical and cognitive approach to film and its potential effects.

The second article, *Liminale Räume in Srdjan Dragojevićs 'Lepa Sela, Lepa Gore' und Danis Tanovićs 'Ničija Zemlja'* has appeared in the anthology *Kulturanalyse im zentraleuropäischen Kontext* at Francke Verlag, Tübingen. A draft has been presented at the international conference *Kulturanalyse im zentraleuropäischen Kontext* at Vienna University (September 2009). I here further refine the key concept of liminality and test its application to European cinema, more precisely a Bosnian and a Serbian war film. I also apply Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory to an analysis of film.

The third article, *Borders, Barriers, and Grievable Lives: The Discursive Production of Self and Other in Film and Other Audio-Visual Media* has been published in the scholarly journal *Nordicom Review* in autumn/winter 2011. It has been presented in form of a keynote lecture at the *Framing War in the Cultural Field* workshop at Oslo University College (November 2009), and as a paper at the *Global Media and the War on Terror*-conference at Westminster University, London (September 2010). This article further develops a discourse-theoretical approach to film reception and, adopting a perspective beyond the medial boundaries of film, suggests the applicability of key concepts such as epistemological barriers, soldier-self, or ubiquitous absence to an analysis of computer war games, war documentaries, or television war news. The analytical focus on different genres and medial forms serves as an outlook that indicates directions for possible future research in line with an interdisciplinary, intermedial, and transgeneric approach suggested among others by Nünning and Nünning (2002).

A revised second draft of the fourth article, *Framing Narratives: Opening Sequences in Contemporary British and American War Films*, has been accepted for publication in the journal *Media, War, and Conflict*. In this case, I widen the analytical frame and address the discursive function of particular syntagmatic elements of the war film that are only briefly introduced in the present main essay. I provide a close reading of the opening sequences of a series of war films and argue for their inherently liminal character interconnecting the world of the film with the actual world and effectuating a discursive repositioning of the spectator from within diegetic frames. I outline and systematize the potential diegetic and extra-diegetic framing functions of opening



sequences. The reference to theories of cultural memory enables a second approach to the conceptualization of the potential discursive impacts of the war genre, and points to important areas for possible future research, for instance regarding the development of a transgeneric and intermedial memory-making aesthetic.

## THE POWER OF NIGHTMARES? AN INTRODUCTION

With the shocking events of 9/11, and with the massive military responses they triggered, it became increasingly apparent that, after decades of cold war and an intermingling short period of “interwar” (Der Derian 2001:28), Western democratic nations again attained the will to engage actively and openly in protracted hot war. The time of war without war seems over for now, and a renewed open engagement in the killing and maiming of others again necessitates a demonization of opponents in a violent discourse of conflict.

In the aftermath of 9/11, “the power of nightmares”<sup>1</sup> increasingly materialized throughout Western mediascapes and evil again became a determinate concept guiding crucial domestic and foreign policy decisions in the most powerful nations on Earth. At the same time, a politics of fear together with a sweeping patriotism established discursive frames that silenced critical voices and reinforced a unitary dominant discourse positioning ‘us’ in a mutually exclusive and with necessity violent relationship to a threatening ‘them’ that triggered massive escalations of violence on a global scale. Even though initially proclaimed imminent threats such as the sinister workings of an axis of evil, or the unknown and, indeed unknowable, Iraqi weapons of mass destruction operable within 45 minutes, have been somewhat attenuated recently, the human and material costs of these discursive moves to the societies at the receiving end of the deployed violence remain catastrophic.

This dissertation is an attempt to assess the discursive backgrounds that render implicit plausibility to political articulations vested in the ultimately mythological and religious idea of evil enemies and epic battles against faceless forces of darkness. It constitutes an attempt to approach and understand the tacit contributions of popular culture to the formation of a social optics, a network of interpretative schemata, that makes the public susceptible to a political rhetoric calling for a perpetual war against enemies that increasingly appear as chimeras – inaccessible and unseen yet threatening ‘us’ from virtually everywhere.

Underlying this world view is an epistemological barrier that renders the other ubiquitously absent; invisible and incomprehensible, yet potentially omnipresent as a deadly threat the evil nature of which implicitly legitimizes even massively violent measures such as war to contain it. By these means a discursive chain of equivalence is drawn that effectively subsumes every perceived

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<sup>1</sup> For more on this issue see for instance Adam Curtis’ documentary series *The Power of Nightmares. The Rise of the Politics of Fear* (BBC 2002).

other - regardless apparent differentiations along such lines as national belonging, class, ethnicity, religious denomination, gender, age, cultural preferences, or political standpoint - under one hegemonic discursive identity; the evil enemy-other that has to be dealt with in one way or another to remove an immediate violent threat to the well-being and, indeed survival, of the self.

I believe that the immediate historical and political context of this dissertation bears witness to the actuality and societal relevance of the present study. I address ways through which popular cultural expressions - here contemporary war films - draw upon, constantly reinforce, and occasionally challenge a background of meaning that does not determine the public or directly cause violent and anti-social behaviour, but that puts into place and reinforces a systemic pattern of supports and restraints - a discursive frame - that tacitly influences the paradigm of possible public responses to the other. In increasing our understanding of the cultural and medial mechanisms and processes that contribute to a tacit demonization and de-humanisation of the enemy per se, this dissertation intends to critically address cultural pretexts for war, and to provide viable tools for an analysis of the discursive frames that predispose violent approaches to the other in general. This way, I hope to facilitate an inclusive alternative to a politics positing self and other in relations of mutual exclusivity.

Such an alternative politics is inherently liminal and based on the idea of contingency - the understanding that whatever we take for granted here and now can, and will be, perceived otherwise by other people, at other times, or under different circumstances. This awareness of contingency enables a first to second person encounter with what one superficially might perceive as merely an enemy - an encounter that reconstitutes epistemological barriers as inherently connective zones of contact and negotiation, and that addresses the other with the intention and willingness to hear a reply that actually matters. Liminal politics implies that, in engaging the other, one accepts the legitimate potential subversion of the hegemonic frames that position self and other in a relation of seeming mutual exclusivity. Only in engaging the other on liminal grounds can nonviolent alternatives to conflict resolution be conceived of and actualized. The alternative is a further descent into violence, and a retreat to hegemonic subject-positions that appear maintainable only through the violent containment of a ubiquitously absent and threatening, yet implicitly constitutive, enemy-other.

Throughout the following chapters, I will firstly lay out the theoretical apparatus this dissertation is based on. Chapter 1 introduces the concept of bordering as a way to establish and

reproduce discursively relevant differences. In chapter 2, I turn to a brief overview over recent studies pertaining to the potential impact of popular culture on politics, before chapter 3 directs attention to the discourse-theoretical framework of Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. In this chapter, the concept of discourse is introduced and brought into connection with post-foundationalist political thought, before I take a closer look at how media impact can be conceptualized within this framework. Subsequently, chapter 4 connects a discourse-theoretical framework to the issue of audience identification in film. Then, I turn to my empirical material; contemporary war films. Chapter 5 lays out and systematizes the key variables that guide the subsequent illustrations and close readings. Chapter 6 introduces the concept of liminality and shows through additional close readings how it relates to the previously identified generic features, before chapter 7 reassesses key theoretical and analytical tools. Chapter 8 extends the scope of the present inquiry across medial boundaries and applies the developed framework to an analysis of computer war games, before chapter 9 refines a discourse-theoretical approach to media impact with reference to theories of myth, interpretative schemata, and cultural memory. Finally, a conclusion connects the present dissertation back to the issue of politics and lines out a liminal alternative to a politics of polarity and exclusion.

## Chapter 1: BORDERS, BARRIERS, AND CATEGORISATION

Borders are virtually everywhere. On a scale from the skin delimiting our very bodies, to garden fences distinguishing our territory from that of the neighbour, to political borders ordering an international arena, to the invisible categorical lines dividing collectives and producing spaces, borders intersect constantly with our daily lives, restricting some practices while enabling and reinforcing others. The border, as such, emerges as more than a political line. It acquires an inherently discursive nature that orders and stabilizes the conceptual as well as socio-political spheres from which it initially emerged.

The concept of the border has undergone significant changes during the last decades. After the somewhat premature attempted discard of political borders in the early 1990s in a paradigm suggesting a 'borderless', globalized world, newer approaches solemnly acknowledge the continued relevance of borders for politics and everyday life. However, research interests increasingly shifted from an initial focus on territorial dividing lines and political institutions to socio-cultural and discursive practices of *bordering* (Newman 2006). As a consequence, border research developed from being a subdiscipline of political science and international relations into an interdisciplinary field combining expertise from political science, geopolitics, human and cultural geography, discourse analysis as well as cultural, literary and media studies.

Today borders are increasingly perceived as de-territorialized (van Houtum/Kramsch/Zierhofer 2005). Bordering practices become more and more detached from concrete sites and locations and are to a growing extent perceived of as discursive processes ordering social life in its entirety. Borders are no longer treated as stable lines unequivocally dividing two distinct entities, but more and more resemble zones enabling contact as well as division, constituting stabilizing frames as well as potentially subversive shared spaces or contested territories. As such, scholarly attention is increasingly directed to the cultural and discursive processes through which an inside, an outside, and the border dividing those entities are constituted, negotiated, performed, as well as subverted or changed.

What, then, *is* a border? This question seems both easy and tremendously elaborate to answer. Easy because it appears obvious that borders are material demarcations dividing distinct territories. Almost everyone has been at a border post and seen and experienced the direct impact of political borders restricting movements of people and goods. On the other hand, as mentioned

above borders are far more than material demarcations of territories. They exist on multiple dimensions, or “planes” (Schimanski/Wolfe 2006:15) and comprise conceptual boundaries, boundaries in time, or borders of cultures and discourses. Borders emerge as dynamic and subjected to constant change – the ultimately contingent and temporary results of perpetuated processes of negotiation and renegotiation of relevant differences.

As Simmel (1967:476; my translation) notes, the border “is not a spatial fact with sociological effects, but a sociological fact that forms itself spatially”. Pointing towards the constructed nature of borders as social institutions, this short and concise notion provides a viable basis for a more elaborate definition of the concept. However, there is still significant emphasis put on static categories such as sociological *fact* or spatial *form*.

In this dissertation, I follow Simmel and treat borders as fluid and dynamic social constructs. However, I see borders as resembling zones, rather than lines, and as depending on negotiation, communication and complex figurations for their socio-cultural functioning. What emerges is the notion of a deterritorialised border, an often merely conceptual limit, a meaning producing practice, often situated and performed in, yet not confined to, certain territories or locations. This notion of the border as the contingent and temporary result of constant processes of *bordering* points beyond the limited definition proposed by Simmel.

Borders emerge within, through, and ultimately as, discourse. In other words, what is here seen as the crucial focus of border research is the notion of a constant reproduction of relevant differences in and through discursive processes that establish contingent orders precisely through the drawing and constant negotiation of borders – a process van Houtum/van Naerssen (2002:125) refer to as “(b)ordering”. Particular discursive border regimes that establish and constantly reinforce relevant differences on contingent grounds, are effectuated in and through interpretive schemata that consistently invite political subjects to perceive, categorise, and perform social, political, cultural, or other topographies in a particular manner.

In the words of Brambilla (2011), borders are “power-laden differentiators of socially constructed mindscapes and meaning”. (B)ordering resembles a process of often implicit categorization. It delimits an inside from an outside, attaches values to either side, and works to arrest the constant floating of signification. Once a border is drawn, a contingent order is established and stabilized. This order is discursive in nature. It functions as a discursive pattern of support and restraint that does not directly cause certain behaviour or attitudes, but that changes

the bias of the system in that it remoulds the tacit schemata and regimes that motivate particular articulations and performances while they discourage others. Political subjects who are positioned by such discursive frames will as such not be forced into originally unintended conduct. Rather, certain alternatives for action or certain understandings will appear more viable, more beneficial, or less disadvantageous than others. Subjects can resist these frames and even break through them. Such subversive performances or articulation will, however, entail certain forms of disciplinary retribution, and in the most severe cases the exclusion, or eradication of the subversive agent.

Today, the media - and in particular audio-visual media - play an increasingly important role in such processes last but not least in naturalizing particular interpretative schemata and discursive backgrounds of meaning that render plausibility to particular instances of (b)ordering and to the discursive regimes these engender. In this dissertation, I will investigate the ways through which the contemporary war film genre contributes to such processes.

## Chapter 2: CONFLICT, WAR, AND POPULAR CULTURE

In recent years lots of scholarly work has been dedicated to the various interferences between popular culture and politics (Der Derian 2001, Suid 2002, Weber 2003, Robb 2004, McCrisken/Pepper 2005, Anderson 2006, Nexon/Neumann 2006, Shaheen 2009, Stahl 2010, Barker 2011). Approaches range from the by now classical notion of Kracauer (1974) who argues that popular film reflects existing mass desires and psychological dispositions, to frameworks that posit a constructive relationship in which cultural expressions are not seen as merely reflecting existing attitudes and conceptualisations, but are perceived to entail a constitutive impact on society and politics.

McCrisken/Pepper (2005), for instance, direct attention to the mediation of history and war in popular culture and assert the importance of contemporary Hollywood film for the constant (re)construction of a nation's historical self-image, while Weber (2006) addresses the question of how American war films impact an American national identity through the formation of "various US *we's*" (5; emphasis in original). Representing another strain of research that provides a historical account of the US media's role in the justification of war and warfare, Andersen (2006) detects an increasing conflation of fact and fiction in relation to mass media coverage of war. According to her, US television news increasingly resembles a form of "militainment" (:xxvi) that uncritically disseminates military thinking and attitudes within the seductive format of entertainment. Der Derian (2001) investigates the increased cooperation between military, economic and media interests - the military-industrial-media-entertainment network (MIME-net) - that, according to him, "seamlessly merge[s] the production, representation, and execution of war" (xxxvi), while Robb (2004) provides a detailed account of the various ways through which the Pentagon influences the form and content of Hollywood films.<sup>2</sup> Two recent edited volumes deal with the mutually constitutive relations between popular culture and (international) politics. Nexon/Neumann (2006) assess the various discursive impacts of the Harry Potter narratives on the perception and practice of global politics, while Weldes (2003:7) points towards popular science fiction as the source of a "background of meaning" that might critically interrogate, or render plausibility to, official representations of foreign policy.

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<sup>2</sup> For some interesting insights into the interconnections between film productions and the CIA see for instance Jenkins (2009).



All these studies provide important insights into possible discursive impacts of popular cultural expressions on common and naturalized understandings of self, other, and the nature of their conflicts. However, they often direct little attention to the technical and narrative devices through which these audio-visual representations achieve their effects. This lack of attention to a textual dimension often leads to an exclusion of the textual frames that position the reader (or the receiver of the mass mediated message) from the analysis. My approach complements such studies through an explicit attention to how the formal properties of audio-visual texts frame audience engagement, and thereby create potentials for particular discursive impacts. Such a formal textual analysis will also complement empirical audience research. Focus on implicit instead of empirical audiences enables important additional insights as it provides data regarding potentials for reception that empirical audience research and other approaches can correlate against.

In contrast to some of the studies referred to above, my interest does not lie with the way film constructs a particular notion of a US self, or through which it shapes a particular view on a particular historical event. My approach lies closer to the works of Shaheen (2009) or Barker (2011) in that these direct attention to the ways through which film frames perceptions and evaluations of self and other. However, while Shaheen focuses on the vilification of a concrete group (Arabs) in and through mainstream Hollywood film, I intend to trace the technical and narrative means through which movies demonize the other per se in all its potential forms. Barker (2011) on the other hand directs attention to how the genre of contemporary Iraq war films frames the perception of this particular war and the involved parties. He discerns the characteristic features of an Iraq war movie genre along nine different variables ranging from how these films frame the war itself to the way they present US soldiers as moral heroes. However, while he is interested in the fictionalised presentation of the actual war in Iraq, my interest regarding his corpus of films is in the technical means through which these frame not the Iraqi opponents in the specific Iraq theatre, but an abstracted and decontextualised enemy as such – a referential empty slot, or floating signifier, that can be articulated differently in different historical or political contexts.

In contrast to for instance Staiger (2000), I do not aim at sketching out the various discursive environments within which films are received and which tacitly predispose certain readings and the reproduction of particular meanings (for such an approach see for instance Pötzsch 2012a). In the main body of this dissertation, I proceed from the other direction and analyze how formal textual structures systematically predispose particular readings without however

determining the spectator in the last instance. These readings do not entail fixed political or socio-cultural effects, but reposition the spectator as political subject from within the frames of the movie. However, as I will explain in the next chapter with reference to the theoretical framework by Laclau and Mouffe (2001), spectators are overdetermined, i.e. they are always positioned by various and often competing - filmic or extra-filmic - discursive frames at the same time. This form of overdetermination enables a conceptualisation of agency under determinate structure and makes it possible to conceive of an active audience consciously engaging and potentially subverting proposed dominant frames.

While Staiger focuses on the socio-political impacts of an interaction between a cinematic text and a spectator who is overdetermined by extra-textual discourses, I direct attention to the ways through which a formal textual structure positions the political subject from within the frames of a filmic discourse. In doing this I do not deny the importance of psychological and sociological contexts guiding reception, but merely reassert the significance of textual structures to frame such processes. This means I do not argue for an “immanent meaning in the text” that for instance Staiger (2000:162) explicitly denies, but suggest that formally structured generic texts exhibit a dominant tendency of meaning that can be subverted, but nevertheless accounts for a particular interpretative trajectory that entails certain discursive effects - a dominant tendency of meaning.

In this dissertation, I will argue that the floating signifier ‘enemy-other’ is the result of formal technical and narrative devices that constitute the core of a rhetoric that deploys epistemological barriers to render the enemy in all its potential forms ubiquitously absent - invisible, inaccessible, inhumane, yet potentially omnipresent as a deadly threat. Through the constant reinforcement of a core myth, this rhetoric naturalizes interpretative schemata that function as backgrounds of meaning that predispose, yet not determine, the perception and evaluation of political articulations and performances.

Although being aware of the fact that military and other societal forces exert significant influence on the production process of mainstream popular culture to convey a positive image of their constituents (Der Derian 2001, Suid 2002, Robb 2004, Davis 2004, Anderson 2006, Stahl 2010, Alford 2010), I do not assume that the audio-visual rhetoric deployed to negatively frame the enemy-other per se is the result of deliberate propagandistic interventions alone. Rather, mainstream film and other popular cultural expressions are shaped in correspondence with dominant audience expectation, which are both generative of, and reproduced by, hegemonic

discursive frames. As such, both producers and receivers of mass mediated messages operate under the same discursive patterns of support and restraint that shape messages on an underlying level. A film does not say this or that, it does not unanimously align to this or that political project, but is shaped and read within a web of discourses and discursive subject-positions variously contextualising production and reception (Staiger 2000). All these processes, however, are constrained by the material givens of the respective cinematic or other text once it has been released. Therefore, close textual analysis can provide viable knowledge regarding tendencies of meaning vested in these texts.

To be able to provide a precise terminology that allows for a conceptualisation of how the filmic text positions political subjects, at this point an introduction of the discourse-theoretical framework by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe (2001) becomes necessary.

## Chapter 3: DISCOURSE THEORY, MEDIA IMPACT, AND THE CINEMATIC TEXT

### 1. Articulating Post-Marxism

In their work *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (2001; first edition published in 1985), Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe frame their understanding of discourse in a “post-Marxist terrain” (2001:4). They take classical Marxism as a point of departure, and rearticulate and recontextualise key concepts applied within the tradition. This leads them to a fundamental critique of the theoretical foundations of this school of thought. They state for instance that “it is our conviction that in the transition from Marxism to post-Marxism, the change is not only ontic but also ontological” (2001:x). In the view of Laclau and Mouffe, the new historical context not only provides new empirical data which have to be incorporated into existing theory, thereby potentially enforcing a readjustment of key concepts or theoretical frames, but also that these changes claim a fundamental rethinking of the very philosophical grounds established frameworks are built upon. This leads the two thinkers to a comprehensive reappraisal of historical materialism in the undecidable terrain of a post-structuralist theoretical paradigm.

Laclau and Mouffe (2001) start their endeavour with a rereading of the work of Antonio Gramsci and Louis Althusser. With the concepts of hegemony and historic bloc, they argue, Gramsci dislodged the ultimately essentialist notion of a universal working class and “finally” enabled a conception of “politics ... as articulation” (Laclau/Mouffe 2001:85). Althusser’s early use of the concept of overdetermination, on the other hand, undermined the idea of a determination in the last instance by the economy, and opened for an understanding of the social “as a symbolic order ... [that] lack[s] an ultimate literality” (Laclau/Mouffe 2001:97-98). Consequently, both thinkers play a crucial role in the development of Laclau and Mouffe’s own post-Marxist understanding of society and politics.

Laclau and Mouffe draw heavily on the thought of Gramsci when they conceptualize the political as a constrained form of articulatory practice within discursive frames. They commend the “profound and radical complexity” (85) introduced into the theoretisation of the social through Gramsci’s concepts of hegemony and historical bloc, but maintain that “even for Gramsci, the ultimate core of the hegemonic subject’s identity is constituted at a point external to the space it

articulates: the logic of hegemony does not unfold all of its deconstructive effects” (2001:85). In spite of his theoretical advances, it appears, Gramsci continues to posit a subject ultimately determined by objectifiable structures. Laclau and Mouffe (2001:76) write:

Whether the working class is considered as the political leader in a class alliance (Lenin) or as the articulatory core of a historical bloc (Gramsci), its fundamental identity is constituted in a terrain different from that in which the hegemonic practices operate. Thus, there is a threshold which none of the strategic-hegemonic conceptions manages to cross.

This condition of exteriority of articulatory practices is challenged by Laclau and Mouffe through their concept of discourse. Adopting a post-essentialist position in accordance with the evolving paradigm of post-structuralism, they proceed to collapse the base-superstructure distinction in its totality and replace it by a model of radical contingency of subjectivities, group formations, and discursive frames. This, of course, also implies a challenge to the privileged position of the researcher or analyst who addresses such processes. I will return to this issue in a later section of this chapter.

Laclau and Mouffe (2001) replace a determinate struggle between universal classes with contingent social antagonism in a political terrain that is characterized by “structural undecidability” (2011:xii). In this perspective, individual and collective identities or interests are not a priori given and ideologically veiled, but constantly formed in and through political articulations that aim at establishing a naturalized hegemonic order. To understand the ways through which the political subject and social groups are shaped and framed, Laclau and Mouffe draw upon and develop Althusser’s concept of overdetermination.

Laclau and Mouffe (2001) argue that Althusser’s concept of overdetermination “was unable to produce the totality of its deconstructive effects within Marxist discourse” (98). According to them, the reason for this was a theoretical insistence on the ultimately incommensurable notion of determination in the last instance by the economy. In challenging these essentialist frames, Laclau and Mouffe develop the concept of overdetermination to launch a “critique of every type of fixity” and affirm “the incomplete, open and politically negotiable character of every identity” (104). Overdetermination enables an understanding of the ways through which constitutively incomplete subjects of discourse can articulate counter-hegemonic positions and effectuate discursive change.

According to Laclau and Mouffe (2001), a hegemonic order implies the formation and stabilization of a hegemonic subjectivity, where “a certain particularity assumes the representation of a universality entirely incommensurable with it”(xii). The hegemonic relation as such emerges as

a “contaminated universality” (xiii) that is constitutively incomplete and characterized by irresolvable internal tensions entailing a constant potential subversion of established and naturalized frames. Contaminated universality in Laclau/Mouffe is inherently political as it exchanges a notion of objective interests with a processual understanding of the constant formation and negotiation of these interests among subjects positioned within contingent frames. On the basis of this, Laclau and Mouffe can assert a privilege of the political. They write that they “conceive of the political not as a superstructure but as having the status of an ontology of the social” (xiv). Any frame, structure, or identity is always only temporary and precarious - constantly negotiated in and through struggles between contingent social groups and formations. Such processes of perpetuated (b)ordering of contingent socio-political and conceptual space can be conceptualized under recourse to Laclau and Mouffe’s concept of discourse to which I will now turn.

## **2. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe’s Theory of Discourse<sup>8</sup>**

Laclau and Mouffe assert the “impossibility of the object ‘society’” (99). What they mean is not the impossibility of actual societies, but the impossibility of a final fixation, of a total suture of the social in an objectively discernable order. Targeting the essentialist remnants in Gramsci’s and Althusser’s thinking, they argue that “[s]ociety and social agents lack any essence, and their regularities merely consist of the *relative and precarious forms of fixation* which accompany the establishment of a certain order” (Laclau/Mouffe 2001:98; emphasis in original). This “certain order”, which is originated through “relative and precarious forms of fixation” is what Laclau and Mouffe refer to as discourse.

Laclau and Mouffe extend the notion of discourse to encompass the social in its entirety. They deny the distinction between discursive and non-discursive practices and claim that “every object is constituted as an object of discourse” (107). This does, however, not imply a denial of the material world. What is denied is merely the assertion that objects can be constituted outside discourse. Once an object is looked at, used, conceptualized, understood, or approached in one or another manner, it becomes discursively articulated. This articulation, again, is framed by preexisting discursive frames that predispose, yet not determine in the last instance, the object’s possible discursive identities.

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<sup>8</sup> For concise introductions to discourse theory see for instance: Torfing (1999), Howarth (2000), and Phillips/Jørgensen (2006).

According to Laclau and Mouffe, “any discourse is constituted as an attempt to dominate the field of discursivity, to arrest the flow of differences, to construct a centre” (Laclau/Mouffe 2001:112). They proceed by terming the “privileged discursive points of this partial fixation *nodal points*” (ibid; emphasis in original). Around nodal points occurs a temporary and partial crystallisation of meaning. The perpetuated sliding of signifying practices is brought to a temporary halt and an intelligible, yet contingent, order is established.

As a consequence, the authors deny objectivity and replace it by a notion of “partial and precarious *objectification*” (Laclau/Mouffe 2001:125; emphasis in original). Hegemonic discursive practice aims at naturalising a contingent configuration of elements as objective. Any hegemonic formation is, however, always ultimately precarious and becomes constantly challenged by political and other practices that articulate new elements from the field of discursivity. As a result, politics acquire what Torfing (1999) in his presentation of Laclau and Mouffe terms “a constitutive and a subversive dimension” (69). It takes the form of constructions and constant reconstructions of discursive positions and identities. Society emerges as ‘impossible’. It is replaced by perpetuated and contingent processes of *societing*, as one could argue.

The notions of politics and discursive practices of change pose the question of agency. Laclau/Mouffe (2001:115) 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”. Laclau and Mouffe (2001) reject the notion of an autonomous subject as the locus of individual experience and as productive of social relations. The subject emerges as determined by preestablished structures – in the case of Laclau and Mouffe discourse. However, in contrast to Althusser who maintained the subject’s determination in the last instance by an objectified economic base, Laclau and Mouffe treat the subject as fragmented and decentred; it is not positioned (or interpellated) by an ultimately determinant discourse that can be made visible behind layers of ideological veils, but is continuously subjected to such positionings through different, and often mutually exclusive, discursive frames. Consequently, the subject as well as the social emerge as overdetermined – as an always precarious, contingent, and merely temporary discursive position. As we shall see, this notion of overdetermination enables a conceptualization of agency under determinant structure.

Individual and group identities can never ultimately be established, but are always undermined by articulations changing the configuration of elements defining them: “The category of subject is penetrated by the same ambiguous, incomplete and polysemical character which

overdetermination assigns to every discursive identity” (Laclau/Mouffe 2001:121). This ambiguity, this lack of wholeness, this impossibility of being finally positioned by only one discursive order opens a space for agency. The subject retains the limited ability to oscillate between different and often competing versions of social identity that it actively negotiates within the confinements of given frames. Through this practice the different frames become challengeable and possible to subvert. “The subject is (...) the place of *lack*, an empty place that various attempts at identification try to fill”, as Laclau (1993:436; emphasis in original) puts it with reference to Žižek’s thought. As I will argue in a later chapter, one way of filling this empty place is through the deployment of textual frames that systematically invite identification with a particular diegetic subject-position.

Within this framework the subject emerges as constitutively incomplete. Individual as well as group identities are merely temporarily stabilised through “the opposed logics of equivalence and difference” (Laclau/Mouffe 2001:129). These processes through which social space is differentiated or disambiguated and through which opposing groups are constantly formed and related to one another in social antagonisms, emerge as the core of politics: “The constitution of the very identities which will have to confront each other antagonistically, becomes now *the first of political problems*” (Laclau/Mouffe 2001:134; emphasis in original). Drawing chains of equivalence and difference entails the assigning of contingent values and identities to certain individuals or groups – a process of bordering that orders social and conceptual space and defines the limits of what can be conceived as valuable, important, realistic, or other.

Chains of equivalence reduce the polysemical character of identification by discursively establishing analogies. The effect is disambiguation and leads to a simplification of politico-discursive formations. In their work on Laclau/Mouffe, Phillips/Jørgensen (2006:44) provide the example of all non-white people in Britain discursively subsumed under the category ‘black’ to illustrate this particular logic. Chains of difference, on the other hand, follow an opposite logic as they disrupt analogies and enforce differentiation. Following the example of Phillips/Jørgensen further, the category ‘black’ can be criss-crossed by categories such as class, gender, religion, or ethnicity, hence fragmenting social space and identity. In a later chapter of this dissertation, I will direct focus on the technical and narrative devices through which film draws such chains and subsumes various diegetic identities in the hegemonic subject-position of soldier-self and enemy-other, and frames their antagonism as necessarily violent and mutually exclusive struggle for survival.



Sedimented and stabilised chains of equivalence, which interconnect nodal points and, therefore, assume the representation of a contingent structure as a naturalised totality are termed myths (Laclau 1990:61). Laclau states that “the effectiveness of myth is essentially hegemonic: it involves forming a new objectivity”, thereby temporarily arresting the flow of differences, precluding political re-articulations and establishing a naturalised discursive order. Particular subject-positions and structures are, then, perceived as necessary, not contingent. A particular social order is successfully objectified around nodal points constituting a centre, as alternatives become unconceivable and even the positions apparently opposing the prevalent order become “defined by the internal parameters of the formation itself” (Laclau/Mouffe 2001:139), thus apparently appeasing constitutive social antagonisms. The sliding of signifiers is brought to a temporal arrest, and the partial and contingent character of any discursive order is effectively veiled.

Torfing (1999:129) argues with reference to Laclau’s thought that “myths and social imageries aim to reconcile the social in the face of structural dislocation”. Audio-visual media have an important role to play in such processes. The constitutive absence of the other in the universe of the war film, for instance, draws upon and constantly reproduces the core myth that stabilizes the dominant identities of a naturalized hegemonic discourse of war.

### **3. Discourse Theory and Post-Foundationalism**

According to Laclau and Mouffe (2001) discourses are temporary, partial and relative fixations of meaning around certain privileged signs, or nodal points, that predispose or frame reproductive performances. As has been argued above, in Laclau and Mouffe’s framework, discourses are not reducible to language or other sign systems, but encompass the social and material world in its entirety. As such, Laclau and Mouffe (1987) argue in a debate with Geras (1987), their project “consists in showing the historical, contingent and constructed character of the *being* of objects” (Laclau/Mouffe 1987:91; emphasis in original), and not in denying this object’s existence outside discourse. Their concept of discourse implies that for any object to acquire meaning it has to be discursively articulated. These articulations, again, can be stratified in a limited way with regard to their performability in relation to social or material givens. This makes discourses temporary, changeable and inherently unstable, yet not arbitrary orders.

When perceived in this light, discourses emerge as contingent – their orders are not the necessary result of an unequivocal, universal, and timeless truth, but are not entirely coincidental either. Rather, discursive orders emerge as only one version of reality among many possible others.

An apolitical objectivity is thus replaced by constant, intersubjective processes of contingent objectification, which emerge as the very condition of possibility for a democratic politics (Mouffe 2005, Marchart 2007 & 2010).

As temporarily sedimented structures of meaning, discourses frame individual and collective performances, and thus constantly reproduce the conditions for their own perpetuation. A discourse that signifies itself as timeless and necessary – “a totalizing horizon” (Laclau and Mouffe 2001:144) – and that veils the antagonisms constituting and potentially subverting its order has become hegemonic. As a consequence of this hegemony, struggles for objectification are seemingly suspended and a determinate objectivity is put into place affording a temporary stabilization. No discourse, however, can be ultimately fixed, and subversive articulations can bring into motion again the crystallized hegemonic structures. These articulations emanate from competing discursive positions and are effected by subjects, the agency of which is vested in their *overdetermination* through various, competing discursive frames.

How can the notion of subject as subject-position in discourse account for agency? How is change possible under determinate discursive structure? As explained in the previous section, Laclau and Mouffe (2001) perceive of the subject as “overdetermined” (111) – as always positioned by a variety of different and often competing, or even mutually exclusive, discourses at the same time. The constitutive incompleteness of discursive identities imbues subjects with a limited form of agency as they are enabled to oscillate under restraint between various different interpellative frames potentially subverting one with reference to the other. In a study that argues for a return of the subject after Foucault, Kögler (2003:78) terms this condition of constrained agency a “situated autonomy” (my translation) that is enabled by agents’ hermeneutical competence of understanding themselves differently in different contexts. In Laclau and Mouffe’s thought, such different contexts are effectuated in and through the logic of overdetermination. By these means individual agency and change can be conceptualized without succumbing to the theoretically problematic assumption of an autonomous subject as the transcendental core of experience and performances.

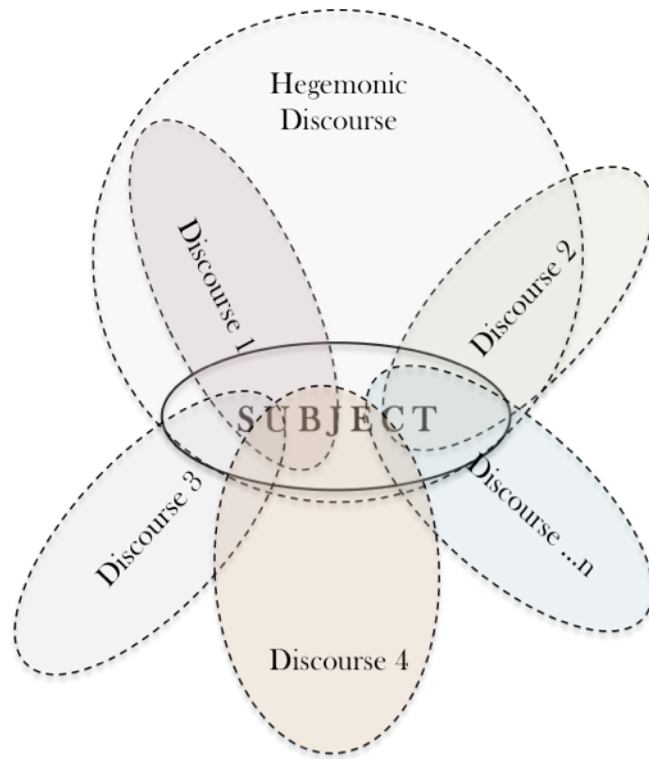


Figure 1: The subject overdetermined by competing discursive frames.

Marchart (2007 & 2010) argues that discourse theory represents a strain of *post-foundational* rather than anti-foundational thought. This means that this approach does not deny the necessity of grounds for the formation of social entities, but merely asserts that these grounds are temporary and contingent. Any given order could always also have been otherwise. Does this lead to a disabling relativism?

According to Marchart (2007) post-foundationalism is characterized by a distinction between *politics* and *the political* – between an ontic dimension of actually instituted grounds as necessary ordering principles for concretely existing societies and social practices on the one hand, and the ontological dimension of ultimate contingency of these orders on the other hand. This distinction implies “a double-folded movement” (8) between a “plurality of partial grounds” asserted by way of politics, and the ultimate absence of final grounds inherent in the notion of the political.

Marchart employs the ultimate absence of a final ground as the grounding principle of a post-foundational philosophy of the political. Rather than simply stating there are no grounds, he asserts that the absence of any ultimate ground is precisely what constitutes a grounding principle. Quoting Heidegger, Marchart (2010) asserts that “*der Ab-Grund ist Ab-Grund*” (69; emphasis in

original) meaning that the *lack-of-ground* is, precisely, a *lack-of-ground*. This entails that *politics* - i.e. perpetuated processes of contingent grounding - are, in fact, grounded in the constitutive lack of an objectifiable last or final ground. However, according to Marchart (2010:72-73), this lack of a final ground can always only be encountered through the frames of existing, contingently grounded political arrangements. An awareness of the political as the ultimate unfixability of an objective order is conditioned by temporary fixations of precisely such (with necessity partial and precarious) grounds in the realm of politics. This thinking enables a shift of focus from descriptions of allegedly objective static states to an understanding of the processual nature of social life.

According to Marchart (2010) what makes contingency political is the experience that things can always also be otherwise. He states that crisis and conflicts “where social forces collide” (80; my translation) enhance an awareness of contingency and allow for the dislodging of hegemonic discursive frames. Addressing the other implies a willingness to critically redress taken for granted values, norms, and other predispositions - it entails an overdetermination of constitutive subjects through alternative, and potentially subversive, discursive frames. It is precisely this awareness of the ultimate contingency of taken for granted orders that is suppressed through the deployment of what I term epistemological barriers - discursive frames that render the other invisible, yet potentially omnipresent as a deadly threat. This way, these barriers veil the alternative frames that inhere the potential to reposition subjects and to reinstitute the political as a constant negotiation of precarious, partial, and temporary grounds. Only liminality - spaces or subjects that enable encounters between competing discursive positions and identities - reasserts the ultimate contingency of both opposing frameworks, thereby preparing the grounds for inclusive and nonviolent alternatives to mutually constitutive discursive logics that is actualized as a politics of polarity, violence, and exclusion.

#### 4. Criticism

Obviously, a post-structuralist, discourse-theoretical reappraisal of Marxist thought in post-foundational terrain generates significant criticism. As such, many scholars have launched critiques against the framework proposed by Laclau and Mouffe.<sup>4</sup> Without claiming to provide anything like a comprehensive account of these criticisms, I briefly approach four areas of apparent major discontent; 1) the question of exteriority posed by their theoretical position, 2) the claim that Laclau

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<sup>4</sup> See for instance Geras (1987), Howarth (2000:115-124), Boucher (2008), or Carpentier/De Cleen (2007:270-273). For a concise repudiation of several strains of Marxist criticism see for instance: Laclau/Mouffe (1987).

and Mouffe deny the existence of a material world, 3) the assertion that their thought is inherently anti-humanist, and 4) the charge of a relativist tendency in their thought.

The first strain of criticism of Laclau and Mouffe's theoretical framework asks how discourse theorists can make viable assertions about the processes positioning them in and through various discursive frames. Does such a meta-perspective not presuppose a position "in a terrain different from that in which the hegemonic practices operate" (Laclau/Mouffe 2001:76)? Does the criticism Laclau and Mouffe levelled against Gramsci not revert and undermine their own position?

A response can be approached with reference to Marchart's (2007&2010) post-foundational theoretical frame. Within this perspective, meta-theoretical assertions are grounded in an ontology that posits the ultimate absence of a final ground as a grounding principle. Discourse theory sets out to address the processes of constant formation and subversion of various precarious, partial, and temporary frames that are united in an through their common constitutive incompleteness. The ultimate contingency of any articulation includes the ones emanating from various discourse theorists positioned in and through their respective discursive frames. As a result, the presupposition of an ultimate undecidability of the social implies the contingency of discourse theory as well. Also discourse theorists are overdetermined by, and themselves overdetermine, competing discursive frames in and through articulations of competing elements from the field of discursivity, that is, the ultimately undecidable outside constitutive of all identities and frames. Also scientific endeavours emerge as contingent attempts of objectification and, therefore, inherently political.

Explanations become possible only on the basis of contingent foundations. Society is dispersed into fluid and undecidable frames, that are constantly constituted and subverted in and through dynamic processes that shape and reshape partial, precarious, and temporary discursive identities. Discourse theory enables an understanding of such processes and frames, but always only from within other frames that ultimately prove equally contingent and subvertible. The object of study is dispersed into various competing articulations of this object that struggle for hegemony. As objectivity is replaced by constant and precarious objectification, an understanding of static states becomes a productive understanding of change and constant flow that itself is in constant flux. The ultimate constitutive absence of essential grounds entails an ontology of process, of constant emergence, actualization, and expiration under the condition of contingency. As the alleged essence of objects evaporates into various articulations of these objects that emanate from

subjects positioned by various frames, the negotiation of these articulations becomes the primary problem that is addressed by discourse theory from a contingent vantage point in undecidable terrain.

This leads over to the second strain of criticism positing that discourse theory is in denial of the material world. Also this charge can be countered with reference to Marchart's (2007 & 2010) post-foundational approach. To claim that every object is constituted in discourse does not imply that these objects do not exist, or that they are merely semiotic or cognitive. It merely states an ultimate undecidability of this object, a foundational absence that various contingent arrangements endow with precarious and temporary meanings and identities. The material world is articulated differently by different social agents who actively negotiate their overdetermination through various discursive frames. None of these articulations, however, follow necessarily from these objects' mere existence. Objects matter once they have been articulated within discourse. However, the material world still predisposes possible articulations and engagements.

I provide a brief example to illustrate this assertion. We discursively articulate objects not only through representation, but also through practical performances. A sharp knife for instance inheres the potentials to be discursively articulated, among others, as a weapon or a tool. This can happen either through linguistic, textual, or other forms of representation or through actual use. The way the knife is formed facilitates certain articulations (as the two mentioned above) and constrains others. One could argue that the knife-maker put into place particular formal properties that predispose subjects' engagements with the object. At the same time, the forming activities and the subsequent engagements of the object are framed by received discursive identities of both the object and the subjects engaging it. None of these assertions, however, denies the actual materiality of the object knife.

My argument in this dissertation is that watching a movie is similar to being exposed to a knife. The formal properties of a film position the spectator within particular contingent discursive frames. These frames are actively negotiated and potentially subverted by overdetermined audiences. As such, in setting up a discursive pattern of supports and restraints, devices such as camera movement, focus, montage, music and sound, slow motion, or others function as a material inertia that invites particular articulations of the cinematic text and discourages others. As I will explain below this leads to the reproduction of a particular tendency of meaning vested in the

audio-visual text, however without determining the spectator with reference to any form of immanent textual meaning.

Thirdly, the charge of an anti-humanism seems to stem from the idea that to be humanist means to posit an autonomous individual as the essential core of experience and agency, and that to ‘reduce’ human beings to subject-positions implies a form of othering that effectively sets up an epistemological barrier that veils for instance the ethical imperative posed by the face of the other in the sense of Levinas (2002). In my opinion this is not the case. On the contrary, to posit that individual and collective identities are inherently unstable and constituted in and through discourse allows for an analysis of the precise conditions of possibility for the emergence of these identities and the articulations their discursive positions enable. As such, discourse theory provides a framework that makes it possible to understand when and how the face of the other can emerge and assert its ethical imperative, or what possibly prevents the other from becoming (a potentially subversive) part of the discourse of the self. Through its focus on epistemological barriers and liminality, the present dissertation aims precisely at assessing such conditions of possibility for the emergence of the subversive other in and through popular mainstream film to reassert the fundamental humanity of this other and the ultimate contingency of hegemonic frames this acknowledged humanity entails.

The fourth charge, relativism, is arguably most difficult to tackle since, in the sense of Marchart’s (2007 & 2010) post-foundationalist framework, the ultimate absence of ontological grounds emerges as the only common ground interconnecting the various contingent frames that constantly position and reposition the subject. How, given these conditions, can statements be weighted against one another? The answer, I argue here, lies partly in the materiality of Laclau and Mouffe’s concept of discourse and partly in the processual and contingent nature of discursive identities.

The charge of relativism enables a perspective on the processual nature of discourse theory. Rather than attempting to provide a model that comprehensively represents or explains a given state of affairs, the framework of Laclau and Mouffe makes it possible to conceptualize perpetuated processes of change, adaptation, subversion, or negotiation. In this perspective it is precisely the acknowledgement of an ultimate contingency of discursive frames and identities that enables an ethical engagement with the other who becomes in the words of Mouffe (2005:102) a “legitimate enemy”. Only in accepting the constitutive incompleteness of own normative and evaluative frames

and identities can a first to second person interaction be effectuated – a form of exchange that assumes the rightfulness of the position of the other and that perceives of communication as more than the successful transmission of own articulations to a subordinated partner positioned within one’s own totalizing frames.<sup>5</sup> The constant processes of identification and reidentification framed by the embodied performability of the adopted discursive positions enables an ethical engagement that does not imply the other’s position of inferiority with reference to allegedly timeless and necessary frames. Such a productive exchange is enabled through shared, liminal locations or border-crossing liminal subjects that effectively reassert the ultimate contingency of naturalized frames, and enable a nonviolent and inclusive relation to the constitutive other.

## **5. The Contingency of Research**

What do these assertions hold in practice for my own position as researcher? The present dissertation is a compilation of results achieved throughout the past four years of research and scholarly development. However, perceived in the light of the theoretical framework introduced above, what is presented here emerges as nothing more, and indeed nothing less, than an articulation in discourse – a series of contingent statements emanating from a subject that is positioned and overdetermined by various competing discursive frames. Once published, this dissertation will be read and received by subjects who assess its value in relation to the respective discursive frames positioning them potentially subverting its intended content, yet at the same time being repositioned by the deployed textual structures and frames.

Meaning is never absolute or timeless, but always precarious – the constantly evolving temporary result of negotiations carried out among overdetermined subjects on preestablished, yet contingent discursive grounds. Accordingly, this study does not resemble a linear process of accumulation of ever more accurate statements about its empirical object, since this object is itself in constant, and indeed constitutive, change. Nevertheless, the arguments presented here hopefully become accessible as a dominant tendency of meaning vested in the formal structure of the present text.

I retain the awareness that the moment I describe an object, or read a particular film, I articulate and thereby change the frames predisposing my own and other’s perception of it. In other words, one can never step into the same river twice, and neither can one watch the same

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<sup>5</sup> For a critique of various theoretical approaches to communication from this particular vantage point see for instance Pinchevski (2005; in particular chapter 1).



movie twice. My readings, therefore, resemble a contingent process of objectification and should be subjected to the same critical analysis that I attempted to deploy to the contingent meaning bearing structures of my empirical material.

My readings do certainly not provide access to the truth about certain films, neither do they reveal the ultimate intention of a particular director, screenwriter, or producer. Rather, the analytical frame deployed here facilitates access to a particular dominant tendency of meaning, or tendencies of meaning, that are vested in the formal properties of the respective audio-visual texts, and that are actively engaged by the viewer. This dissertation is the result of such active engagements with the various cues and indices constituting the material basis of the films under critical scrutiny here.

Throughout the research leading up to this dissertation, I have been constantly positioned, repositioned, and overdetermined by various textual and extra-textual discursive frames regarding the issue of war, peace, friend, and foe. Watching a movie often challenged my preestablished frames of understanding, and enforced a subsequent rereading of previously analyzed material that again fed back into the understanding of the material initiating the initial repositioning; an inherently endless process, in other words, that can only be brought to a halt through the ultimately arbitrary decision stating that 'enough is enough'. The precarious result of such a decision is the present dissertation.

My analysis presupposes close reading as an immediate context of reception. Watching for instance *Body of Lies* or *Green Zone* on television might lead to an entirely different experience of the cinematic text, than a close viewing and subsequent critical analysis. I articulate the films presented in this dissertation from a contingent vantage point. The various discourses positioning me colour these readings. Nevertheless, in tying my arguments about the films to the formal properties these exhibit, I anchor my articulation in textual structures and devices. By these means, I achieve certainly not objectivity, but at least some degree of verifiability.

## **6. Discourse Theory and Media Impact**

In the present dissertation, I argue that discourse theory provides a terminology that allows one to address the various interrelations between media's formal properties, audiences as active constituents of meaning, and processes of cultural and discursive reproduction and change.

Movies are products of discourse. They are articulations of overdetermined producers that can aim at reinforcing or subverting established discursive frames. Once released, various

audiences actively engage and rearticulate the filmic text on the basis of the formal properties that frame reception. With reference to discourse theory, these processes can be analyzed as an active engagement of subject-positions that are constituted in and through filmic discourse(s).

Films give rise to filmic universes that are populated by characters the viewer can identify with. This identification is framed through the deployment of particular technical and narrative devices, and implies the discursive positioning of the spectator within textual frames. Through their formal properties - camera, editing, music, speech, sound, and so on - films establish nodal points and draw chains of equivalence and difference that achieve a temporary stabilization of signifying practices and enable the emergence of filmic universes. The spectator is invited to perceive the film world in a particular manner, and to engage in particular characters. As I will show in the next chapter, this predominantly happens through identification with key protagonists and entails the vicarious adoption of their subject-positions within filmic frames.

Being positioned by a film does not imply that the audience is slavishly bound to the proposed dominant filmic discourse(s). As subjects, viewers are overdetermined, i.e. they are always positioned by various and often competing filmic and/or extra-filmic frames at the same time. Overdetermined subjects can actively engage and subvert the proposed dominant framework of e.g. a film with reference to subject-positions framed by competing discourses. On the other hand, overdetermination through a filmic discourse can dislodge established extra-textual subject-positions and bring into motion again sedimented processes of objectification. With reference to this terminology, centrifugal and centripetal impacts of expressions of popular culture (Bakhtin 1981), as well as dominant, negotiated and oppositional forms of reading (Hall 1992) can be reconciled with the idea of a textual configuration that conveys (among others) a dominant tendency of meaning. At the same time, the idea of media culture as “contested terrains” where various audiences constantly struggle over the meanings of key foundational texts (Kellner 1995:5) can be combined with an analysis of the means through which textual structures predispose such processes. As such the emergence and constant reproduction of, as well as possible challenges to, the discursive frames that tacitly predispose spectators’ context dependent top-down processing of audio-visual data in the sense of Branigan (1992:37) can be brought into view.

The formal properties of films set up discursive frames for audience engagement. The result is not a determination of processes of meaning production through the illusionary might of a cinematic apparatus, but a pattern of support and restraint inducing a tendency of meaning rather

than entailing a fixed cognitive effect. To maintain that a passive audience will more easily follow a proposed dominant narrative and adopt a hegemonic subject-position, does not mean that one asserts the passivity of all spectators at all times and in all contexts of reception. Discursive impacts are a matter of tendency rather than unequivocal property.

Not all cultural expressions convey dominant textual discourses that unequivocally position audiences. Some works emerge as closed while others more openly rely on an active involvement of the receiver in the production of various possible meanings. This open, or in Barthes's (1974:6) terms, "multivalent" text overdetermines the spectator from within filmic frames and, this way, enable the adoption of various different and often competing subject-positions. In this dissertation I am after means of closure - the technical and narrative devices that are deployed to narrow down the paradigm of possible readings and induce a dominant tendency of meaning in relation to the presentation of self, other, and the nature of their conflict. This closure can be conceptualized as the positioning of the audience in and through hegemonic textual frames.

Dominant, textually induced subject-positions can account for the potential impact of cultural expressions on politics. Medial forms such as novels, films, or games function as discursive articulations. This means that the dominant tendencies of meaning put forward in and through the textual frames promote particular identities or suggest certain interpretative frames, which again entail an either subversive or reinforcing effect on the discursive environments within which they function. A discourse-theoretical approach to media impact can, as such, account for the significance of formal textual structures, for an active audience consciously engaging these structures in varying contexts of reception, and for the potential socio-political effects of such engagements.

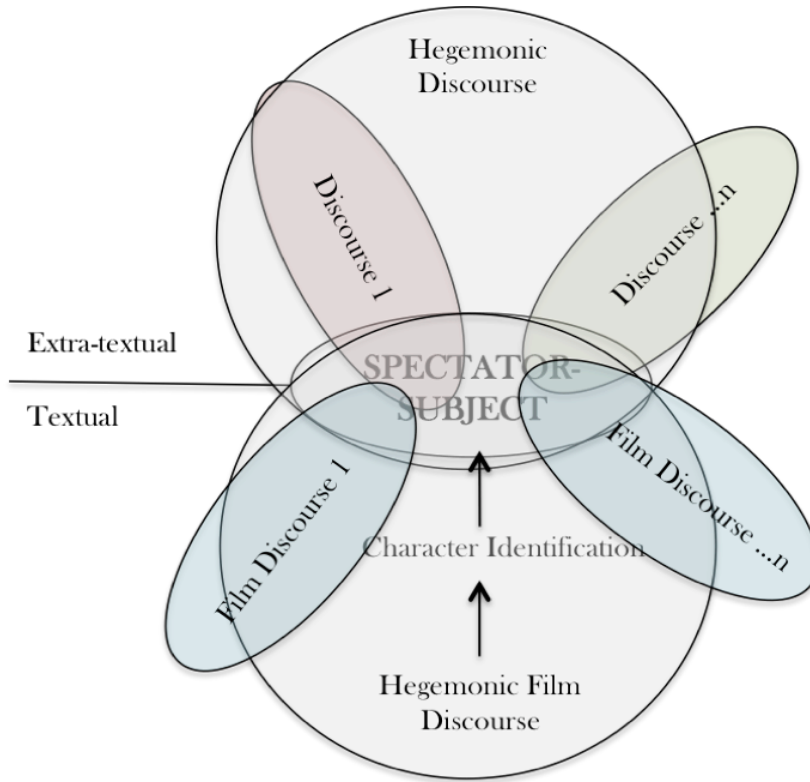


Figure 2: Overdetermination through textual and extra-textual discursive frames.

In the following I will direct attention to the technical and narrative devices - the means of closure - through which contemporary war movies create the textual potential for particular dominant tendencies of meaning. I read these tendencies of meaning through the concept of the border as an *epistemological barrier* that divides the hegemonic subject-position of the soldier-self from an excluded, *ubiquitously absent* enemy-other. In this relation, the hegemonic discourse necessitates the ultimate exclusion, transformation, or eradication of the potentially subversive other to sustain its own, ultimately precarious stability.

I will argue that a consistent deployment of certain technical and narrative devices to bring forth a mutually exclusive and with necessity violent relation between self and other in the contemporary war genre, both draws upon, and continuously reinforces, tacit interpretative schemata, or myths, that frame audiences' engagements not only with fictitious, but also with concrete real world opponents and enemies. Epistemological barriers deny the other their inherent humanity and thus enable acts of killing framed as necessary reactions to a faceless, yet imminent, threat. As the core of a tacit interpretative frame, these barriers emerge as a necessary condition for the practice of warfare.

## Chapter 4: SPECTATOR, CHARACTER, AND SUBJECT-POSITION: MODES OF IDENTIFICATION IN FILM

As for instance Sobchack (2004) has shown, watching a movie is an inherently embodied experience. Certain images or sounds make us react affectively eliciting immediate bodily reactions such as an accelerated heart rate, increased level of adrenaline, nausea, sexual arousal, or the shedding of tears. Sobchack argues that the recipients' emotional responses to the other on screen are based in the experience of own embodiment that emerges as a precondition for identification with protagonists. Similarly, Williams (1991) states that *body genres* such as the horror film, pornography, and the melodrama entail affective responses that narrative, psychoanalytical, or cognitive approaches to film cannot sufficiently account for. The two approaches signal a shift from an understanding of reception as a distanced (and inherently rationalized) gaze to direct embodied experience, and extend a purely intellectual or psychological focus with a bodily component that can account for the affective reactions elicited through the filmic experience.

Even though Sobchack's and Williams' frameworks doubtlessly provide important insights and crucially sophisticate an understanding of the various ways films impact on audiences, I will here follow Smith (1995) who applies a combination of narrative and cognitive approaches to cinema. The reasons for this are the restraints on theoretical frameworks posed by analytical rigour and research interest. Acknowledging that many war movies employ technical devices familiar from the horror genre (for instance *Platoon*, *Kokoda: 39<sup>th</sup> Battalion*, *Tears of the Sun*, or *The Objective*), and regardless of the fact that the unveiled presentation of blood and guts in a war movie absolutely are inclined to cause immediate bodily reactions such as nausea or tears, my interest lies predominantly in the narrative framing of these affective responses, and the impacts these entail on a structure of sympathy that unequivocally divides the opposing parties in good and evil. Why and how are our bodies led to shed tears only due to the death or suffering of one of the depicted conflict parties? And what does such a biased structure of affective sympathy imply? It appears that the affective images and sounds have to be narratively contextualized to gain an understanding for how audience engagement with self and other in the evoked discourse of the film are framed.

Although the present dissertation applies a discourse-theoretical framework, also Bordwell's (1985) and Branigan's (1992) cognitive approaches to film are important inspirations

for this study. Cognitive theory conceptualizes the processes through which audiences actively and constructively engage textually delivered cues and indices to constantly form and revise hypothesis concerning diegetic universes. When combining cognitive approaches with discourse theory, it becomes possible to conceive of diegetic discourses as the result of audio-visual data processing effectuated by overdetermined spectator-subjects. Their positioning in and through various competing discursive frames allows audiences to shift between different interpretative schemata when producing meaning on the basis of the cinematic text. As such, also cognitive theory constitutes an important conceptual background of the present approach, not least through the influence that school had on Smith (1995)'s understanding of identification in film to which I will turn now.

In his approach to the issue of audience identification in film, Smith (1995) asserts a "saliency of character" (17). In arguing that even though characters are textually produced they acquire their function through analogy to real people, he positions himself between a Humanist and a structuralist tradition - "between those who see characters as real people and those who see them as elements of texts" (35). Smith then proceeds to disentangle the different levels of narrative engagement of audiences with characters.

According to Smith audience identification in film is not due to an inherently illusionary nature of cinema, but the result of complicated interactions between the filmic presentation of characters and an active engagement of these characters by spectators in various contexts of reception. I choose to conceptualize these contexts in discursive terms as the overdetermination of the spectator in and through various textual and extra-textual, discursive frames that enable the activation of different interpretative schemata.

Smith asserts that identification with characters is the result of sets of cues - "collections of inert, textually described traits" (Smith 1995:82) - which form analogies to actual persons.<sup>6</sup> This means, the effects of narrative on the spectator are not due to an illusory belief of becoming a character, nor is it exclusively due to an "emotional simulation" or "affective mimicry" (103) of the depicted character's feelings and/or physical condition. Rather, involuntary affective responses are "subordinate to [an] overarching structure of sympathy in that initial simulations and mimickings of the emotional states of characters are constantly filled out, modified, sometimes overturned by our

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<sup>6</sup> For a comparable approach to understanding visual images see for instance Currie's (1995) idea of images triggering object recognition capacities in the audience (80).

cognitive construction of the narrative” (103). Our subsequent understanding of the narrative context might lead to a retrospective reassessment of initial emotional responses caused by affective images. This narrative context can be described as a diegetic discourse vicariously positioning the spectator through identification with key characters.

According to Smith (1995), the cognitive construction of narrative proceeds along three different levels of engagement that form an overarching “structure of sympathy” (102) predisposing emotional and intellectual responses; *recognition*, *alignment*, and *allegiance*. While recognition and alignment provide spectators with an understanding that certain traits and mental states depicted on screen “make up a character” (85), allegiance comprises an evaluation of, and emotional as well as intellectual response to, these characters and their actions in the context of a narrative situation. As such, first allegiance to a character enables identification and vicariously positions the spectator within the discursive frames of a movie.

In line with Bordwell’s (1985) approach, Smith’s thought is directed against the dominant strain of psychoanalytically inspired film theory. While I agree with both scholars regarding allegations of a lack of theoretical rigour concerning the issue of agency, and the comparably speculative nature of many psychoanalytically inflected approaches to the issue of audience effect, I nevertheless want to argue that their dismissal of subject-position theory could be more sophisticated since it does not account for the complicated issue of overdetermination and, therefore, potential subversion of hegemonic discursive frames by audiences who actively engage the sets of cues forming the basis of diegetic discourses.

When asking “are spectators *simply* ‘positioned’, or do they respond to texts in a more flexible way?” (41; my emphasis), Smith rightly criticises a widespread application of subject-position theory in film analysis to conjure up an axiom allowing for the quick induction of *the* ideological or interpellative effects of certain films on an amorphous mass of passively consuming audiences. Bordwell (1985) argues in a similar direction when claiming that diegetic approaches and subject-position theory assume the perceiver to be “the victim or dupe of narrational illusion-making” (29). However, as my reference to Laclau and Mouffe’s (2001) discourse-theoretical framework suggests, narrative and subject-position theory can be more sophisticated than that. In introducing the notion of overdetermination – the fact that subjects are always positioned by several different and often mutually exclusive discursive frames at the same time and actively negotiate these in a form of “constrained or situated freedom” (Stam 2000:244) – Laclau and

Mouffe enable the conceptualisation of agency under determinate structure. Subjects can *simply* subvert one discursive frame with reference to another, however not with reference to the ontological ground of an extra-discursive, autonomous self.

Smith's (and Bordwell's) approach can be reconciled with a post-foundationalist theoretical framework based on the idea of overdetermined subject-positions as it surfaces in the thought of Laclau and Mouffe. In relation to audience identification a combination of Smith's thought with a discourse-theoretical approach entails that spectators who engage characters engage subjects positioned by textually produced discursive frame(s). Through this engagement the spectator vicariously takes part in these characters' various re/positionings enforcing a constant play of hypothesis and revision on the basis of textually delivered cues or keys. These textually acquired subject-positions are actively negotiated against preestablished extra-textual discursive frames and identities.

For Bordwell (1985:31-40), "narrative comprehension" refers to the cognitive processes through which audiences constantly form and revise hypothesis concerning a diegetic universe that emerges through the contingent combination of various textual cues or indices in different contexts of reception. This view can be accommodated with theories positing a subject constituted in and through discourse(s). Identification in film emerges as the result of top-down processing of audio-visual data by active audiences in various contexts of reception. These contexts become conceivable as extra-discursive frames that overdetermine spectators who actively engage the frames set by the text and constantly create and dismiss hypothetical structures and identities that position them through identification with key characters.

Furthermore, however, a combination of a discourse-theoretical with a cognitive approach enables a comprehensive understanding of the potential socio-political impacts and possible discursive feedback loops of narrative that often remain unaccounted for in strictly cognitive approaches. In combining both frameworks productively (instead of drawing epistemological barriers to confine the potentially subversive scholarly other) it becomes possible to trace how the subject is constituted and constantly reconstituted in and through various media ecologies, and how these discursive positions feed back into the constitutive frames through the activation and naturalization of particular interpretative schemata (see chapter 9 and the attached article *Borders, Barriers, and Grievable Lives*).



When perceived in this light, it becomes apparent that a combination of cognitive approaches and discourse theory can account for the process of reception in a comprehensive manner. As for instance Staiger (2000:3) asserts, “[r]eception occurs to an individual as both a psychological and a sociological experience”. Both these levels of experience can be understood as the overdetermination of the spectator-subject through textual and extra-textual discursive frames that are actively negotiated. As such, even though the present dissertation approaches the issue of reception from the vantage point of textual structures that systematically propose particular forms of engagements in that they establish diegetic subject-positions the viewer is invited to identify with, the same theoretical framework can take extra-textual discourses as point of departure and scrutinize how certain individual, societal, or political contexts motivate the application of particular interpretative schemata predisposing the production of certain tendencies meanings.

A discourse-theoretically and cognitively inflected approach to reception provides a framework that combines advances in context-oriented theories with close attention to formal textual properties. As such, various, competing engagements with individual characters can be accounted for. It is obvious that for instance the character of a German soldier in a World War II movie opens for different forms of audience engagement dependent on whether the film is watched by an American or a German, by a war veteran or a civilian, by a man or a woman. The various recipients are positioned by different extra-textual discursive frames that comprise among other things their personal experiences and memories. Such individual and sociological contexts predispose possible identification with characters and colour the emergent readings. However, to be able to gain access to the fact that a soldier is depicted, that he is German, and that he acts in a particular way, all these different spectators have to combine and interpret the same series of textually delivered indices and cues on the basis of naturalized interpretative schemata. How a character, here the German soldier, is textually framed predisposes audience engagement. The process of reception is not only influenced by extra-textual discursive contexts, but also by textual discourse(s) that frame identification with characters.

I argue here that the formal properties of the war movie genre systematically facilitate the allegiance of the spectator to only one of the depicted conflicting parties. The deployment of particular technical and narrative devices frames both the psychological and the sociological dimension of reception. This framing can be conceptualized as the drawing of epistemological barriers that preclude access to the subjectivity, rationality, and humanity of the respective

opponent. By means of certain cues, the construction of a biased structure of sympathy is motivated that unilaterally aligns and allies the spectator with one side, while it discourages engagement with the enemy beyond that of mere recognition.

In excluding the individual other, epistemological barriers also preclude access to competing articulations, different practices, and alternative systems of norms and values. As such, in excluding one side's protagonists the respective discourse of this faction is equally confined. This encourages monolithic hypothesis concerning the nature of the conflict and possible means of resolution. The claims and logic of one side are made readily available, while the opponents are reduced to ubiquitously absent, incomprehensible threats the performances of which appear to be driven by irrational evil. This demonization of the other renders implicit legitimacy to the often severely violent performances of the self that serve to stabilize and reproduce the framework as a whole. When reified in and through various articulations that cross medial and generic boundaries, the established relational logic that bars the other in diegetic universes also emerges as an interpretative schema that tacitly predisposes subjects' engagements with actual or potential opponents in other contexts. This process can account for the discursive feedback of medial representations framing self and other in this particular manner (see chapter 9 and the attached article *Borders, Barriers, and Grievable Lives*).

Epistemological barriers establish boundaries toward a constitutive outside. Through the exclusion of the potentially subversive discourse of the other, the inherent contingency of every possible order is veiled and a hegemonic discourse of conflict is put into place and stabilized. In confining the potentially subversive alternative represented by the other, epistemological barriers stabilize the contingent identity of the self. As such, the other acquires the status of an absence that becomes constitutive of hegemonic war identities.

In a similar way, epistemological barriers frame the identity of main protagonist in the war film. In rendering the enemy-other inaccessible, the discursive position of the soldier-self is stabilized within narrow, textually produced frames. In predisposing allegiance with characters positioned by a hegemonic diegetic discourse of war, the deployed textual cues invite spectators to identify not only with particular protagonists, but also with their respective discursive identities - their subject positions. The dominant tendency of meaning vested in the formal structure of the generic cinematic text can be described as such a form of positioning in and through hegemonic textual frames.

The technical and narrative devices that bring forth epistemological barriers become conceivable as means of closure in the sense of Barthes (1974) in that they predispose audience engagements in a particular dominant direction. In the theoretical context of the present dissertation, Barthes' multivalent text can be conceived of as a formal textual structure that gives rise to various competing diegetic discourses which overdetermine the reader/spectator from within the textual frame. The result is an enforced negotiation of various and often competing textually produced subject-positions that invite different readings. The *univocal* tendency, on the other hand, refers to a text that sets up a hegemonic diegetic discourse to predispose audience engagements and narrow down the paradigm of possible readings through the invocation of a hegemonic subject-position. Epistemological barriers are a feature of such a univocal tendency in the war film.

Some works exhibiting a univocal tendency function as articulations that support powerful socio-political institutions. In these cases, the dominant subject-position of a univocal novel or film plays into and reinforces an extra-textual hegemonic discourse and its naturalized arrangements of power, interest, and enunciatory capacities. Such a mutually enforcing relationship between textual and extra-textual discourses – where the one constantly reinforces and reproduces the ideological basis and interpretative frames of the other in a reciprocal relationship – might account for instance for the close relationship between popular audio-visual representations of war and a dominant militarized war culture asserted by for instance Der Derian (2001), Robb (2004), Andersen (2006), Stahl (2010), or Alford (2010).

To analyse a univocal tendency predisposed at the level of the formal representational means of generic war movies does not imply that every of these films positions the audience to support the idea of simply evil enemies and of war as the only viable solution to intergroup conflict. There are war movies that openly oppose bellicose norm systems, or that even though supportive of the framework as such, invite for critical readings against the grain. What it does mean, however, is that *a dominant tendency of meaning* in certain genres can be observed. Not every film will support the hegemonic frames from which it emerges in all respects. However, it can be argued that the deployed structure of a majority of these movies frames a dominant diegetic subject-position that significantly reduces potentially subversive engagements, and that often even structures the narrative of films that posit themselves to be overtly anti-war or anti-military.

The technical and narrative means setting up epistemological barriers achieve a high degree of closure in genre-typical war movies and war discourse in general. In reducing the paradigm of possible readings they cue a particular dominant engagement by the audience and by these means induce a relationship where the formal textual structures position the spectator from within a hegemonic diegetic frame. I will now take a close look at these technical and narrative devices.

## Chapter 5: CONFINING THE OTHER: EPISTEMOLOGICAL BARRIERS IN THE WAR GENRE

### 1. The War Film

War films often provide a complex picture of a social or historical situation, and vary in focus from mere combat movies that mainly present battle sequences and the various woes and potentials for heroism these might entail, to homecoming movies that often deal with the consequences of war and warfare for the individuals or societies directly or indirectly affected by this practice. In the present dissertation, I define the genre of the war film as a body of works that addresses real or imagined, violent conflicts – past, present, or future – between at least two opponents with at least one of them operating collectively, or vicariously standing in for a collective (as does the main character and elite military scientist in *I Am Legend*), and deploying massive, organized violence as a means to achieve certain objectives. This wide definition includes not only films that set out to realistically reenact past or present wars, but also encompasses science fiction films and fantasy movies dealing with the issue of massive intergroup violence.<sup>7</sup>

My corpus of films is limited to the post-Vietnam area – a time frame that I somewhat vaguely define as contemporary. The end of the Vietnam war is often seen as ushering in a new phase in the way Western mainstream media represented warfare. A new counter-hegemonic discourse of war was partly reflected, but mostly actively countered in and through, mainstream popular culture. Westwell (2006) for instance writes in his study of the ways through which powerful societal interests shape “the cultural imagination of war” (1), that the Vietnam experience entailed “first a traumatic disruption of a particular embedded sense of war” that was then followed by “a recuperation and rescripting of this sense of war” (57) in and through popular Hollywood film. I agree with Westwell and argue that popular post-Vietnam war movies, in spite of their often critical thrust, generally play into and reinforce a hegemonic discourse of war. This happens through the imposition of a biased structure of sympathy that motivates audience identification with only one of the opposed parties and that frames a generic adversary as evil, inhumane, and irreconcilable threat.

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<sup>7</sup> Note here that due to its focus on the rhetoric that frames the commemoration of past or present, actual wars the definition of the war genre developed in the attached article *Framing Narratives* excludes science fiction and fantasy movies.

With reference to a large corpus of contemporary war films that were predominantly produced in Western industrialized countries, I show how the deployed technical and narrative devices systematically invite the formation of epistemological barriers that cue audience identification toward the hegemonic subject-position of the soldier-self isolated from a potentially subversive enemy-other. The two entities are presented as opposed in a conflict that is framed as Manichean, where successful resolution implies the death or dismantling of either the one or the other.

Reducing actual characters in film to discursive positions such as soldier-self or enemy-other seems to align to a structuralist understanding of narrative. However, in line with Smith (1995), I intend to occupy a middle ground. I investigate the means through which war movies guide audience engagements with diegetic characters along the axes *recognition*, *alignment*, and *allegiance*, and argue that the uneven deployment of these technical and narrative means significantly hampers two forms of engagement with one of the sides involved in the various depicted conflicts. The deployed rhetoric presents only one of the depicted parties in a way that encourages audience allegiance (or enables affective reactions from the side of the spectator), while the other is confined to an uncanny and threatening, yet constitutive beyond.

In Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down* (USA 2001), for instance, camera, speech, and setting invite the spectator to identify with main protagonist Sgt. Eversmann's discursive identity implying the adoption of a set of temporarily objectified norms, values, and standards of evaluation. The discursive subject-position of Eversmann in *Black Hawk Down*, again, is structurally alike the one of for instance Cpl. Hicks in David Cameron's *Aliens* (USA 1986), or that of Robert Neville in the officially released version of Francis Lawrence's *I Am Legend* (USA 2007). In all cases, a hegemonic discourse frames a dominant subject-position; the soldier-self that is constituted through the exclusion of an invisible, yet threatening and inaccessible opponent - the ubiquitously absent enemy-other. The constitutive absence of the other stabilizes the dominant diegetic discourse of generic war movies, and predisposes audience allegiance toward a particular individual or group involved in the conflict. By these means the spectator is positioned within diegetic discursive frames and an interpretative schema is constantly actualized that frames the opponent per se as an irrational, incomprehensible, and ultimately inhuman threat. Interpretative schemata such as this constitute the nexus between textual subject-positions and extra-textual political evaluations, articulations, and performances. As Misek (2008:123) puts it: "Films, like *Saving Private Ryan*,

which restrict themselves to one point-of-view, propagate the unnatural divisions that cause war in the first place”.



Image 1-4: Audio-visual frames: Soldier-self and enemy-other in *300* and *Black Hawk Down*.

The formal properties of the respective texts systematically invite audiences to align to, and morally or ethically ally themselves with, particular protagonists. The structural similarities of the discursive positions of the above mentioned characters imply a generic tendency of meaning that feeds into violent discourses of conflict. As I will show in a later chapter, only a liminal presentation inviting a sincere engagement with characters positioned by the different and often mutually exclusive discourse of the enemy might successfully reassert the contingency of established interpretative schemata, and lead to an inclusive reconceptualisation of diegetic as well as extra-diegetic conflicts enabling peaceful negotiation and compromise as viable means of resolution. Initially, however, I will turn to the cinematic devices through which epistemological barriers are drawn and maintained, and through which the discursive positions of soldier-self and enemy-other are put into place.

## 2. Syntagmatic Structure

Generic war movies follow particular conventions when establishing a narrative structure. Their syntagma can be categorised as *prologue*, *exposition*, *main plot*, *conclusion*, and *epilogue*.<sup>8</sup> Each of

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<sup>8</sup> For a different approach to the narrative schema of film see for instance Branigan (1992:17-18).

the syntagmatic components can be subdivided into minor elements crucial for the formation of genre-typical war and conflict narratives. Typical war movies contain the following syntagmatic components:

**Prologue:**

- limitation of discourse
- establishing of historical-political context
- activation of particular memory-making rhetoric

**Exposition:**

- introduction of conflict and major stakes
- introduction of characters for audience identification (soldier-self)
- dehumanisation of enemy (other)
- personification of evil (main adversary)
- implicit legitimisation of anticipated violence committed by self (evil deed and unexpected event)

**Main plot:**

- violent challenge to soldier-self
- ordeal endured by soldier-self
- acts of heroic mastery by soldier-self
- legitimate killing of main adversary

**Conclusion:**

- acquisition of prize
- effects on soldier-self

**Epilogue:**

- historical-political outcome

The syntagmatic components introduced above are not strictly sequential. Their order can vary from film to film and not all of them are necessary for the formation of genre typical war narratives. Nevertheless, each major part has an important role for the formation of dominant subject-positions implicating audiences on one side of the conflict via identification with key characters.

The prologue interconnects the world of the spectator with the world of the film. This inherently liminal syntagmatic element establishes discursive frames for the formation of a diegetic universe. Privileged signifiers such as 'war', 'enemy', or 'peace' are tied to particular meanings implying the temporary stabilization of diegetic discourses. In for instance discursively framing war as a timeless necessity or the enemy as inhumane or barbaric, a pattern of support and restraint is put into place that entails a tendency of meaning supportive of violent and military responses to the depicted threats. In addition, in films authenticating their diegetic content with reference to an



external reality, the prologue serves as the location where a historico-political context is put into place, and where a certain memory-making rhetoric is activated that frames potential impacts on historical discourse and memory politics (for a detailed account of the various functions of opening sequences in the war film see the attached article *Framing Narratives*).

During exposition chapters, the main protagonists, adversaries, and the stakes of the ensuing conflict are introduced. An uneven distribution of certain technical and narrative means consistently invites audience alignment and allegiance to one of the conflicting parties. Here, the generic rhetoric of war movies tacitly guides audience engagement with diegetic characters towards a particular group as it refrains from making characters belonging to the opposing party accessible in a similar manner. Dialogue, close-ups on faces, flashbacks indicating memories, dream sequences, voice-over thoughts, names, or familiar cultural icons are often deployed for this purpose of individualizing and familiarizing only one of the opposing factions.

Usually just one representative of the emergent anonymous mass of enemies is introduced in some detail allowing for audience engagement beyond recognition. This main adversary, however, is negatively framed and rather serves the purpose of concretizing and individuating an evil and inherently inhumane threat than providing access to an alternative point of view that could reassert the ultimate contingency of the proposed dominant diegetic discourse. The other remains positioned by the hegemonic discourse constitutive of the soldier-self. Accordingly, the subsequent explicit eradication of the main adversary throughout the main plot, has the function of symbolically containing the threat posed by the anonymous other.



Image 5-6: The main adversary in *Black Hawk Down* and *Valiant*.

The transition between exposition chapter and main plot is often marked by the deployment of the *unexpected event* and the *evil deed*. These tropes establish a narrow narrative context cuing audience allegiance to particular characters with reference to a certain background of events. The *evil deed* is a major and entirely abominable atrocity committed by the enemy-other

and witnessed by the characters the spectator is invited to align to and ally with. Often the main adversary is explicitly connected to this deed. Needless humiliation or torture (*Rambo First Blood: Part II, The Deer Hunter*), the remorseless, unmotivated, or sadistic killing of civilians (*Tears of the Sun, Black Hawk Down, Behind Enemy Lines, The Kingdom*), the maltreatment of prisoners of war (*Platoon, Kokoda 39<sup>th</sup> Battalion, We Were Soldiers*), or the deliberate eradication of whole communities (*Aliens, Avatar, 300, War of the Worlds, Battle Los Angeles*) often serve this function. The narrative effect is an exclusion of any form of engagement with the enemy-other except through violence. The thus introduced narrative frame does not leave any other option but to kill or retreat. Negotiations, compromise or even surrender as potential alternative forms of conflict resolution are excluded with implicit reference to the barbaric and completely inhumane nature of the opponent. To exclude retreat as a last, nonviolent option, war movies often resort to the narrative trope of *unexpected event* that pins down the soldier-self in immediate proximity with an aggressive opponent – accidents, sudden breakdowns of logistics or communications, wounded comrades slowing down a possible retreat, traps, or other topoi usually serve this purpose.

By such tropes as the evil deed and the unexpected event, the narrative framework excludes all alternatives but to kill or be killed, implicitly justifying any act of violence committed by the soldier-self throughout the ensuing main plot. This implicit legitimacy basis is crucial for generic war movies as it allows the spectator to morally and ethically ally to characters engaged in the massive killing of others. In discursively priming audiences for an acceptance of a political rhetoric vested in the implied necessity to kill the other as the only way to sustain oneself in an inherently hostile environment, this narrative frame also constitutes the ideological core connecting generic war narratives to violent discourses of conflict and a dominant militarist culture of war.



Image 7-10: Predisposing allegiance: The evil deed in *Aliens*, *300*, *We Were Soldiers*, and *Black Hawk Down*.

Once the main plot commences, the paradigm of available subject-positions has been significantly limited. In genre typical war films the audience is led to align to and ally with characters which position the spectator within the frames of a dominant violent discourse of conflict. Throughout the inevitable scenes of suffering and battle, the deployed technical means maintain this structure of sympathy in line with the established frames. While for instance close-ups, slow motion, and sad or valorising music enhance audience involvement in the ordeals and acts of mastery of one of the involved parties, such devices as extreme long-shots, rapid camera movements, or action-ridden sounds of battle tend to veil the fate of the opponents.

After the acts of mastery and suffering that constitute the main plot, a conclusion promotes audience identification with characters now repositioned within a dominant discursive frame. The successful overcoming of the threats and challenges often leads to the acquisition of a prize - not unlikely a beautiful, yet largely passive, woman (*Pearl Harbour*, *Valiant*, *Body of Lies*, *Centurion*, *Avatar*), and entails an increased weight of the characters and their discursive positions. The lessons learned acquire relevance beyond the diegetic universe as they also reposition the spectator who allies with the main characters. In war movies, a subsequent epilogue often asserts a historico-political outcome and by these means retrospectively confirms the performances by main protagonists as justified with reference to a preceding historical reality.

### 3. Technical Devices

During all stages of the developing stories, the war movie genre deploys sets of technical and narrative means that frame and predispose audience engagement with depicted characters. While recognition of, and to a somewhat lesser extent alignment with, all parties is encouraged, allegiance is usually predisposed towards only one of the involved groups. The audience is tacitly induced to ally with one particular faction and through identification with key characters becomes positioned by a dominant diegetic discursive frame. The following technical and narrative devices will be important for the subsequent readings;

- Flashback/dream sequence
- Eyeline match and point-of-view shot
- Slow motion
- Rapid cutting
- Close-up
- Long-distance shot
- Music
- Sound
- Speech
- Scenery and apparel
- Montage
- Evil deed
- Unexpected event
- Main adversary

Character recognition is achieved through close-ups, mid-shots, or long-shots on protagonists. To be shown as a distinct body marks protagonists as potential objects for audience identification and is the precondition for an emergence of character. Also the deployment of names and speech, even when unintelligible, serves this purpose.

Audience alignment to characters is usually, yet not exclusively, achieved by focalizing events through the eyes, ears, or minds of key protagonists. Audio-visual alignment is facilitated through such means as point-of-view shots, eyeline matches, shot/reverse-shot sequences, as well as diegetic sound, while close-ups on faces combined with flashback or dream sequences, dialogue, or voice-

over thoughts and comments open for a conceptual alignment with a certain character as they provide access to the subjective point of view and inner life of key protagonists.

Smith (1995) terms the widespread assumption that, in adopting a character's subjective perspective, the camera leads the spectator to ally with a particular protagonist "the fallacy of POV" (156). I agree with his argument. A movie can almost entirely be filmed from certain characters' point of view and still deploy a narrative frame that delegitimizes and vilifies their words and actions entirely. However, in the war film, successful audio-visual or conceptual alignment often emerges as an important precondition for the development of allegiance to certain protagonists.<sup>9</sup>

The facilitation of audience allegiance with certain characters requires a complex interplay of narrative and technical devices. A close-up on the disgusted face of a protagonist that is followed by a mid-shot showing an evil deed might for instance serve the purpose of allying the spectator to this character. The mid-shot provides access to what the protagonist sees implying a sharing of information between character and spectator, while the facial expression of disgust enables sympathy for someone being affected in a similar manner as oneself, or in manner corresponding to an implied ideal. Had the facial expression been one of cheerfulness that alienates the implied spectator, mere alignment might serve to introduce the figure of the main adversary. Another example is the deployment of slow motion to stretch narration time. This device serves to increase the effects of depictions of heroic acts or sufferings, while sad or valorising music provides reading instructions that enhance sympathy for suffering characters and predispose audiences for the acceptance of a subsequent violent response.

Often allegiance is dependent on a preestablished perceived proximity between character and spectator. To achieve such a proximity familiar cultural icons are deployed or emotionally charged contextual settings are constructed. An audience might more easily ally with a character who is presented in recognizable social settings (worker, father, husband, comrade, ...) or as a bearer of similar cultural competencies and preferences (idiom, hobbies, dress code, ...). Such common cultural or social backgrounds are made available through flashbacks, voice-over, dialogues, close-ups, or a particular *mise-en-scène*. The fact that a character who the spectator is led to ally with, is engaged in the massive killing of others might significantly decrease the emotional appeal of the protagonist. This is usually alleviated through the narrative devices of evil deed and unexpected event that make these killings appear justified and indeed inevitable to ensure own survival.

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<sup>9</sup> For a typology of different point-of-view shots see for instance Branigan (1984).

The uneven distribution of the technical and narrative devices that were introduced above, cues audience engagement with diegetic characters to bring forth a dominant structure of sympathy that is predominantly directed to one of the involved parties. The *soldier-self* emerges as the privileged object for audience alignment and allegiance. Through processes of identification the spectator is discursively positioned within the evolving dominant or hegemonic frame of the movie. The soldier-self becomes the dominant diegetic identity.

Table 1: Predisposing the Spectator: Structure of Sympathy in the War Film

Structure of Sympathy in the War Film		
Recognition	Alignment	Allegiance
All conflict parties	One or more conflict parties	Usually one conflict party
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Visual presentation as distinct body and/or agent</li> <li>- Audible presentation as distinct agent</li> </ul>	<p>Visual:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Point of view shot</li> <li>- Eyeline match</li> <li>- Shot/reverse-shot-sequence</li> </ul> <p>Audible:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Diegetic sound combined with close-up on face</li> </ul> <p>Conceptual:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Flashback sequences</li> <li>- Dream sequences</li> <li>- Voice-over thought or monologue</li> <li>- Dialogue</li> </ul>	<p>Technical means to frame audience engagement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Slow motion emphasizing suffering or heroic deeds</li> <li>- Music and sound facilitating particular emotional responses</li> </ul> <p>Narrative means to frame audience engagement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Shared values and norms</li> <li>- Familiar references</li> <li>- Recognizable social roles</li> <li>- Evil deed</li> <li>- Unexpected event</li> <li>- Juxtaposition to main adversary</li> </ul>

In contrast to the individualized and familiarized soldier-self, the enemy-other remains faceless and anonymous. The enemy is presented indirectly, often through traces, as the elusive object of the main characters' fears and anxieties – a ubiquitously absent deadly threat. The other is objectified. It is talked about, condemned, analyzed, but only as anonymous menace, or as passive

victim and object for own inherently humanitarian conduct. In battle scenes, the enemies' plights are deemphasized through extreme long-shots, internal framing, rapid cutting, or the ready deployment of smoke or explosions. Through these technical means the other is limited to the role

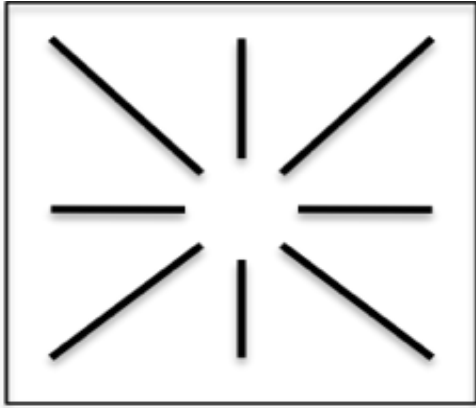


Figure 3: The implicit circle (Branigan 1992:90).

of aggressive and remorseless fighter who suddenly appears in the field of vision, is shot at, and disappears without being mourned or taken care of in any manner. The other remains faceless, nameless, and ultimately “ungrievable” in the sense of Butler (2009), and emerges as a constitutive absence in the universe of the war film that becomes crucial for the formation of a hegemonic discourse of war. The constitutive impact of the absent other can be understood with reference to Branigan’s (1992:90) image of the “implicit circle” that

is brought forth in the mind of the spectator only through the blank spots between the lines forming it.

Epistemological barriers deprive the other of a voice, a face, and a subjectivity of its own. This way, the reasons and rationalities behind enemy conduct remain unaccounted for and audiences’ intellectual or emotional involvement in the fate of the other is systematically discouraged. Any competing and potentially subversive discourse thus remains confined behind an epistemological barrier that renders alternative subject-positions entailing a possible overdetermination of the spectator unavailable within the discursive frames of the movie. At the same time, the other serves as a constitutive outside that through its threatening nature renders implicit legitimacy to a war prone discourse of the self.



Image 11-14: Faceless enemies: Traces of ubiquitously absent threats in *300*, *Aliens*, *Behind Enemy Lines*, and *Black Hawk Down*.

The technical and narrative means that were listed above do not with necessity entail the success of the deployed rhetoric with each and every audience and in each and every context of reception. As among others the example of Somali audiences applauding the downing of US helicopters in *Black Hawk Down* shows, the framework presented so far only suggests a dominant tendency of meaning emanating from these textual frames that is weighted, assessed, played with, or subverted by active overdetermined audiences.<sup>10</sup> As already stated in an earlier chapter, to assert that a passive audience might more easily adopt a proposed hegemonic discursive frame and reproduce the dominant tendencies of meaning vested in the formal properties of the audio-visual text, does not imply that one asserts the passivity of all audiences in all possible contexts of reception. It only means to address the deployed textual structures and the potentials for meaning and discursive impacts these entail.

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<sup>10</sup> “Somalis cheer at ‘Black Hawk Down’ screening”, *CNN World* January 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2002. Available at: [http://articles.cnn.com/2002-01-23/world/blackhawk.screen\\_1\\_somalis-mogadishu-audience?\\_s=PM:WORLD](http://articles.cnn.com/2002-01-23/world/blackhawk.screen_1_somalis-mogadishu-audience?_s=PM:WORLD) (accessed 01.09.2011).





Image 15-18: (B)ordering discourses and identities: Constitutive barriers in *Black Hawk Down*, *300*, *Behind Enemy Lines*, and *Aliens*.

To approach possible socio-political effects of the described rhetoric, it can be argued that epistemological barriers constitute the core of a generic cinematic schema that tacitly predisposes audience engagements not only with (semi-) fictitious enemies, but also with concrete real world opponents. Conveyed through a vast array of audio-visual media, the naturalized interpretative schemata establish (b)orders - ordering boundaries that discursively pattern the political articulations and performances that constantly shape, and reshape, reality in a particular manner (for a more thorough conceptualization of this interconnection see chapter 9 and the attached article *Borders, Barriers, and Grievable Lives*).

The table below systematizes the ways through which war movies adhere to an audio-visual rhetoric that predisposes audience engagement with the soldier-self. The table contains the number of (major) parties to, and the type of, the depicted conflict that appears as either mutually exclusive and with necessity violent (Manichean), or as due to complex grievances on all sides and as entailing potentials for non-violent resolution (graduated). The table also contains the type of focalisation, the number of parties the spectator is invited to recognize, align to, and/or ally with, as well as the deployment of evil deeds, unexpected events, and main adversaries. These technical and narrative devices can subsequently be mapped onto the presence of epistemological barriers shaping ubiquitously absent enemies, and the deployment of liminal locations or liminal characters subverting the described generic structure of sympathy.

The category of liminality will be introduced in detail in chapter 6 (for this concept see also the attached articles *Challenging the Border as Barrier* and *Liminale Räume*).

Table 2: Framing Audience Engagement in the War Film

	# Parties	Conflict Type	Focalization	Recognition	Alignment	Allegiance	Evil Deed	Unexp. Event	Main Adversary	Liminality	Epist. Barrier
<i>300</i> (USA 2006)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	Two Parties	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
<i>Aliens</i> (USA 1986)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
<i>American Soldiers: A Day in Iraq</i> (USA 2005)	3	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	No	Yes	No	Character/no	Yes
<i>Apocalypse Now Redux</i> (USA 1979)	4	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	Three Parties	Two Parties	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
<i>Avatar</i> (USA 2010)	3	Manichean/Graduated	Uni	All Parties	Two Parties	Two Parties	Yes	Yes	Yes	Character/no	Yes
<i>Battle for Haditha</i> (UK 2007)	5	Graduated	Triple	All Parties	Three Parties	Three Parties	No	No	No	No/Reception	Yes
<i>Battle: Los Angeles</i> (USA 2011)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
<i>Behind Enemy Lines</i> (USA 2002)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	Two Parties	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
<i>Black Hawk Down</i> (USA 2001)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
<i>Body of Lies</i> (USA 2008)	3	Graduated/Manichean	Double	All Parties	Two Parties	Two Parties	Yes	No	Yes	Character/no	No/Yes
<i>Bravo Two Zero</i> (UK 1999)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
<i>Centurion</i> (USA 2010)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	Two Parties	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
<i>District 9</i> (SA/NZ 2009)	3	Manichean	Double	All Parties	Two Parties	Two Parties	Yes	Yes	Yes	Character/no	Yes
<i>Enemy at the Gates</i> (USA 2001)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
<i>Flags of our Fathers</i> (USA 2006)	3	Manichean/Graduated	Uni	All Parties	Two Parties	One Party	Yes	No	No	No	Yes
<i>Full Metal Jacket</i> (USA 1987)	3	Manichean/Graduated	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	No	No	No/location	Yes/no
<i>Good Morning Vietnam</i> (USA 1987)	3	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	No	No	No	No	Yes
<i>Green Zone</i> (USA 2010)	4	Graduated	Uni	All Parties	All Parties	Two Parties	No	Yes	Yes	Character/No	No/Yes
<i>Hamburger Hill</i> (USA 1987)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	No	No	No	No	Yes
<i>I am Legend</i> (USA 2007)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
<i>I am Legend: Director's Cut</i> (USA 2007)	2	Graduated	Uni	All Parties	One Party	Two Parties	Yes	Yes	No	Location	No
<i>Kandahar Break</i> (UK 2009)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
<i>Kingdom of Heaven</i> (USA 2005)	3	Graduated/Manichean	Double	All Parties	Two Parties	Two Parties	Yes	Yes	Yes	Character/no	No/Yes

	# Parties	Conflict Type	Focalization	Recognition	Alignment	Allegiance	Evil Deed	Unexp. Event	Main Adversary	Liminality	Epist. Barrier
<i>Kokoda: 39<sup>th</sup> Battalion</i> (Australia 2006)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
<i>Letters from Iwo Jima</i> (USA 2006)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	No	No	No	No	Yes
<i>Lord of the Rings-series</i> (USA 2001-2003)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
<i>Miracle at St. Anna</i> (USA 2008)	3	Graduated/Manichean	Double	Three Parties	Two Parties	One Party	No	Yes	No	No	Yes
<i>No Man's Land</i> (Bosnia 2001)	4	Graduated/Manichean	Multiple	All Parties	Three Parties	Three Parties	Yes	Yes	No	Location/reception	No
<i>Pearl Harbor</i> (USA 2001)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	Two Parties	One Party	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
<i>Platoon</i> (USA 1986)	3	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	Two Parties	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
<i>Predator</i> (USA 1987)	3	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
<i>Pretty Village, Pretty Flame</i> (Serbia 1996)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
<i>Rambo First Blood</i> (USA 1982)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
<i>Rambo First Blood Part 2</i> (USA 1985)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
<i>Rambo III</i> (USA 1988)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
<i>Recue Dawn</i> (USA 2006)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
<i>Redacted</i> (USA 2007)	3	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
<i>Route Irish</i> (UK 2010)	3	Graduated	Uni	All Parties	Two Parties	Two Parties	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
<i>Saving Private Ryan</i> (USA 1998)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No
<i>Starship Troopers</i> (USA 1997)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	No/Character	Yes
<i>Star Wars-series</i> (USA 1977-2005)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
<i>Stop Loss</i> (USA 2008)	3	Manichean/Graduated	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	No	No	No	No	Yes
<i>Tears of the Sun</i> (USA 2003)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
<i>The Deer Hunter</i> (USA 1978)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
<i>The Downfall of Berlin</i> (Germany 2008)	2	Graduated	Double	All Parties	All Parties	All Parties	No	No	No	Location	No
<i>The Hurt Locker</i> (USA 2008)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
<i>The Kingdom</i> (USA 2007)	3 (4)	Manichean/graduated	Uni	All Parties	Three Parties	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
<i>The Mark of Cain</i> (UK 2007)	3	Graduated	Uni	All Parties	Two Parties	One Party	No	No	Yes	No	Yes

	# Parties	Conflict Type	Focalization	Recognition	Alignment	Allegiance	Evil Deed	Unexp. Event	Main Adversary	Liminality	Epist. Barrier
<i>The Objective</i> (USA 2008)	3	Manichean	Uni	2 of 3 Parties	One Party	One Party	No	No	No	No	Yes
<i>The Situation</i> (USA 2006)	Multiple	Graduated	Multiple	All Parties	All Parties	Multiple Parties	No	No	No	Characters/reception	Yes
<i>The Thin Red Line</i> (USA 1998)	2	Manichean/Graduated	Uni/double	All Parties	Two Parties	One Party	Yes	Yes	No	Character & Location	Yes
<i>Three Kings</i> (USA 1999)	3	Graduated/Manichean	Uni/double	All Parties	Two Parties	Two Parties	No	No	Yes	Character	No/yes
<i>Tigerland</i> (USA 2000)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	Two Parties	One Party	No	No	Yes	No	Yes
<i>Transformers I-III</i> (USA 2007, 2009 & 2011)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes
<i>Tunnel Rats</i> (USA 2007)	2	Manichean	Double	All Parties	Two Parties	Two Parties	No	Yes	No	Location	Yes
<i>Valiant</i> (UK/USA 2005)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
<i>War of the Worlds</i> (USA 2005)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes
<i>We Were Soldiers</i> (USA 2002)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	Two Parties	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

#### 4. Illustrations

Using the table, I will now move on to a selection of films to illustrate and further elaborate the suggested analytical devices. The narratives of the movies discussed are structured in correspondence with the basic syntagma outlined earlier. A prologue and an exposition chapter introduce main characters and crucial oppositions, and establish discursive frames and a politico-historical background. The exposition is followed by a main plot, in the course of which the underlying conflict is actualized. A climax puts the main protagonists to the test in positing them in violent opposition to an aggressive enemy. Once all obstacles are overcome, a concluding chapter and epilogue recount historico-political results and personal consequences for the involved individuals.

At first sight, the films analyzed here seem to have little in common. However, even though they seem different from the outset regarding their contexts of production, plots, or historical settings, I intend to show that they draw upon similar representational conventions - a shared aesthetic - when depicting self, other, and the nature of their conflict. As such, it can be argued that, at a meta-level and with some variations, all of them retell the same core narrative feeding into the same myth structured in, and through, a particular discursive logic: the story of a righteous and individualized soldier-self unwillingly caught up in a vicious battle of self-defence against an

aggressive, de-humanized, incomprehensible, and illusive, yet potentially omnipresent, evil enemy-other.

### Illustrations

What do the various variables of the table imply? The *number of conflicting parties* indicates how many groups or individuals representing distinct interests are involved in the depicted conflict. Following Smith's (1995:197) distinction between two moral structures in film, I distinguish between two *types of conflict*; Manichean and graduated. The first refers to a relation of mutual exclusivity where the success or survival of one group normally necessitates the failure or death of the other, while the second type indicates a multidimensional approach that opens for mutual dependencies among the opponents and takes heed of the complex grievances underlying the behaviour, conceptualizations, and the attitudes of all opposing parties. As I will show in a later chapter, a graduated presentation of conflicts opens for forms of liminality and entails the possibility of nonviolent resolution.

*Focalization* indicates the number of conflicting parties the film visually, audibly, and conceptually aligns the spectator with. Unifocalization does however not imply that the camera never adopts the perspective of others than the dominant group or individual, but merely indicates that the film's formal properties predominantly predispose spectators' alignment with one particular character's or group's point of view. Again, the term sketches out a tendency rather than an unequivocal property.

The next three columns refer to Smith's (1995) conceptualization of modes of audience engagement with characters in film. *Recognition* refers to the audio-visual or narrative construction of the other as a distinct, yet not necessarily rational, agent. This form of engagement is achieved through the visual or audible presentation of a character as a distinct body or entity that becomes recognizable as an acting unit for the audience.

*Alignment* covers ways through which the spectator is led to adopt the audio-visual or conceptual perspective of a certain character or group. Visual alignment is achieved through point of view shots, eyeline matches, or shot/reverse-shot sequences indicating a character's subjective perspective, while auditive affiliation is enabled through a combination of diegetic speech, sound, or noise with shots on a reactive character. Conceptual alignment is effectuated through dialogues, voice-over monologues or comments, flashbacks, dream sequences, or the depiction of particular

traits, hobbies, or social and cultural contexts. These provide a more profound access to the inner life and preferences, the ideas, memories, plans, fears, and hopes of central characters or the group they belong to. Even though many war movies regularly adopt the visual perspective of various opposed groups, conceptual alignment in the genre is usually limited to one dominant group or character. Successful visual and conceptual affiliation often emerges as the precondition for the third mode of engagement - allegiance.

*Allegiance* does not only provide access to the visual, moral, or ideological perspective of key protagonists, but also implies a sharing of specific convictions, moral evaluations, cultural preferences, and/or political objectives between characters and the spectator. This form of audience engagement is often dependent on successful alignment that is contextualized with reference to particular discursive frames and thus predisposes further processes of identification. In the war movie genre such devices as the *evil deed*, the *unexpected event*, or the *main adversary* establish a structure of sympathy that invites audience allegiance with only one of the conflicting parties while other groups or individuals are demonized or entirely cut out of the picture. I conceptualize the formal basis for such a selective engagement as an *epistemological barrier* that is drawn around the subject-position of the soldier-self and confines competing discursive frames or alternative perspectives to a constitutive outside effectively suppressing any emergent awareness of contingency in the process. As I will show in the next chapter, through such narrative devices as shared liminal locations or border-crossing liminal protagonists, the discursive effects of the above described rhetoric can be successfully challenged and dislodged.

How can particular films be read under recourse to the variables introduced above? I will now move on to a series of brief examples to illustrate and explain the various columns of the table, before I continue with more detailed readings of particularly interesting cases.

### *Behind Enemy Lines* and *Bravo Two Zero*

John Moore's *Behind Enemy Lines* (USA 2001) and Tom Clegg's *Bravo Two Zero* (UK 1999) are straightforward combat movies depicting a Manichean conflict between two parties, and exhibiting an unambiguous binary structure of sympathy unilaterally aligning and allying the spectator with the character and subject-position of one involved party. *Behind Enemy Lines* follows the struggle of a US pilot - Chris Burnett - who has been shot down over Serbian territory while documenting the covering of mass graves by enemy militia. During an exposition chapter the pilot is introduced as

the main protagonist. Dialogues, voice-over intercom communication, dwelling close-ups, subjective shots, and the deployment of names and familiar habits establish him as main object of audience identification. Alignment and allegiance to the enemy are systematically discouraged through the application of extreme long-shots on anonymous groups of people, the covering of faces with scarves, helmets or other gear, and the deployment of an evil deed and an unexpected event. The two Serbian main adversaries - an efficient and remorseless killer and a cynical leader who works silently to undermine the peace process in Yugoslavia - are introduced in some detail through such means as close-ups, shot/reverse-shot sequences, and brief dialogues or exchanges of orders. Both are brought into direct connection to the film's two evil deeds - the mass murder of Bosnian civilians and the cold-blooded execution of Burnett's co-pilot and best friend that is witnessed by the main protagonist. The unexpected event of the plane crash forces Burnett to remain in immediate proximity to a dangerous enemy, while the nature of the main adversaries revealed through the evil deeds precludes surrender as a viable alternative. As such, the established structure of sympathy implicitly justifies the severely violent measures taken by the soldier-self throughout the ensuing narrative. The violence committed by the main protagonist is visually deemphasized and discursively framed as enforced by the aggressive and evil nature of the enemy. This renders it pleasurable and enables allegiance to a character engaged in the massive killing of others. In the course of the main plot, both main adversaries are killed, symbolically confining the other per se, before an ad hoc US intervention force brings the narrative to a close in rescuing both the pilot and the photographs documenting the mass graves.



Image 19: Main adversary committing an evil deed in *Behind Enemy Lines*.

Tom Clegg's *Bravo Two Zero* tells the story of a British special forces team deployed in the beginning of the first Iraq war in 1991. The movie exhibits a similarly unequivocal structure of sympathy as does *Behind Enemy Lines*. Main protagonist Andy McNab and his team are captured behind enemy lines in Iraq. The unexpected event of a breakdown in communication and the extreme hostility and aggressiveness of the enemy enforce, and justify, violent attempts to fight their way through Northern Iraq to the Turkish border. After being taken prisoner the British men are severely mistreated before they are returned to Britain. Throughout the movie audience alignment and allegiance is fully directed towards the members of the British team. The camera predominantly focalizes through them and conjures up an epistemological condition where the main protagonists are constantly threatened by a remorseless and anonymous enemy. This audiovisual regime successfully deprives the other of discursive identities other than the one of enemy combatant or sadistic torturer and systematically discourages audience engagement beyond simple recognition.

### *Full Metal Jacket*

Stanley Kubrick's *Full Metal Jacket* (USA 1987) - a movie about the training and war experience of American youths during the Vietnam war - exhibits a more complex structure. The film depicts two conflicts that remain independent of one another; firstly, the conflict between young recruits



and their brutal drill instructor, and secondly, the violent opposition to a Vietnamese enemy. While deploying subjective shots, close-ups, dialogues, and voice-over commentaries to focalize through, and invite audience alignment and allegiance with, the American recruits, Kubrick's film sets up an epistemological barrier towards the character of the drill instructor whose incentives and motivations largely remain inaccessible to the spectator. When this barrier is breached the established discursive logic implies the death of this main adversary who is killed by one of the soldier-subjects that were constituted in and through his training.



Image 20: The ubiquitously absent sniper acquires a face in *Full Metal Jacket*.

In *Full Metal Jacket* also the Vietnamese enemy remains largely unrepresented. This apparent second epistemological barrier, however, is undermined in the end of the movie when the US soldiers have to fight a Vietnamese sniper who deliberately injures their comrades and cold bloodedly kills anyone attempting to come to the rescue of the wounded

who scream in agony. This evil act emotionally charges the audience against the sniper. However, when the US soldiers finally discover their apparently ruthless counterpart she reveals herself as a girl who after being wounded begs to be shot dead; a wish the main protagonist reluctantly fulfils. This final scene on a liminal space of victory/defeat undermines the dominant discourse of war vested in the implied exclusion of an anonymous, threatening other. As the enemy-other is reconstituted as a suffering human being through long close-ups on her face, audience empathy is encouraged and a dominant discourse implying the necessity of the death of a dehumanized other is effectively dislodged.

### *Flags of our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima*

Clint Eastwood's *Flags of our Fathers* (USA 2006) tells the story about the World War II battle on the Japanese island Iwo Jima. Also this film presents more than one conflict. Firstly, the film follows three decorated veterans of the battle on a promotion tour through the US that aims at using their status as heroes to increase the sale of war bonds. The sequences chronicle the

exploitation of three soldiers' war experiences for political and economic purposes and align viewers to, and ally them with, these characters. The presented conflict appears graduated as multiple interests and necessities are put up against each other explaining, and to a certain degree justifying, the choices of all involved sides.

Secondly, combat sequences situated on the island of Iwo Jima put an individualized soldier-self up against ubiquitously absent enemy-others. Subjective shots, dialogues, close-ups, or flashbacks are consistently deployed to individualize and familiarize the American soldiers, while slow motion, dwelling shots, and sad music enhance emotional involvement in their fate. These devices facilitate audience alignment and allegiance with the American characters. In contrast, the Japanese remain largely unrepresented. When present, quivering long-shots, quick cutting, or smoke and darkness reduce them to anonymous shadows suddenly appearing from nowhere and vanishing without leaving a trace after being hit. The other is also brought into connection to an evil deed; before the battle a US soldier passes around images that prove the sadistic torturing and killing of prisoners of war by the Japanese effectively precluding the option of surrender as a viable alternative to violence. The resulting structure of sympathy is based on an epistemological barrier consistently denying access to the subjectivity, humanity, and alternative perspective of the other. This however changes with the release of Eastwood's second film about the battle on Iwo Jima - *Letters from Iwo Jima*.

*Letters from Iwo Jima* (USA 2006) that was shot immediately after *Flags of our Fathers* presents two conflicting parties in a Manichean struggle where the survival of the one seems to imply the death of the other. This time, however the deployed technical and narrative devices thoroughly align and ally the spectator with Japanese characters providing access to their individual stories, perspectives, and inner lives, while they render the American soldiers an anonymous and ubiquitously absent threat. As such, both films taken together draw attention to the role of epistemological barriers in the discourse of war and war movies. In deliberately playing with the camera's and microphone's selective perceptions, an awareness for the ultimate contingency of taken for granted orders is enabled that might challenge a war discourse vested in the implied necessity to kill the other to ensure own survival. As I will show in a later chapter, both films taken together activate the movie theatre as a potentially disruptive liminal zone of reception enabling an overdetermination of the spectator by two competing diegetic frames.

### *Battle Los Angeles*

Jonathan Liebesman's *Battle Los Angeles* (USA 2011) is a science fiction/action/war movie. On the day of his planned retirement Sgt. Michael Nantz is forced to lead his squad of young Marines into a battle to defend Los Angeles against an invasion from outer space. The depicted struggle is Manichean and posits two opponents in an extremely violent relation of mutual exclusivity. The enemy is a remorseless attacker who indiscriminately kills civilians and soldiers alike to gain access to Earth's primary resource - water. The extremely violent and ruthless military attack constitutes the evil deed that predisposes the audience for the severely violent counter measures executed by the main characters later on. The nature of the enemy and their doubtlessly genocidal intentions effectively preclude both negotiation and surrender, while the unforeseen strength and technological capabilities of the enemy constitute an unexpected event trapping the US soldiers and their civilian protégées in direct proximity with the viciously attacking enemy.

Liebesman's film unilaterally aligns and allies the spectator to Sgt. Nantz, his team of soldiers, and the group of civilians they defend and attempt to guide to safety. During the exposition chapter, for instance, brief dialogues inform the viewer that Nantz looks forward to his retirement and that some members of his squad blame him for the loss of several of Marines during a recent mission. Long close-ups, repeated shot/reverse-shot sequences, and the ready deployment of names and personal backgrounds individualize protagonists and invite for perceptual as well as conceptual alignment by the viewer. During the main plot, close-ups on the frightened faces of a character, or the quick turn of a subjective camera combined with sudden diegetic sounds for instance indicating movement close by, are often cross cut with short glimpses of dark areas, a suddenly disappearing shadow, or a sudden gunshot aimed at the bearer of the gaze. These techniques draw the viewer into the events and consistently invite for an adoption of the soldiers' subjective perspective. Slow motion and long close-ups or mid-shots on wounded protagonists accompanied by sad music provide clear reading instructions and predispose audiences' emotional involvement toward the struggling soldiers.



Image 21: Opponents out of focus: Soldier-self and ubiquitously absent enemies in *Battle Los Angeles*.

Initially, the enemy remains entirely invisible. It becomes recognizable merely indirectly through the trails of woe and destruction its determined actions leave on individuals and their surroundings. During the main plot, however, the other acquires a bodily form and the film unravels some of the technological devices and organisational logics behind their performances. The camera never adopts the subjective point of view of the enemy, though, and focalization exclusively happens through the human side of the depicted conflict. The other remains estranged, de-humanized, and incomprehensible – a ubiquitously absent deadly threat the main protagonists have to deal with under the application of all means available to sustain themselves. The narrow narrative frame composed of the destruction of Los Angeles (evil deed) and the unexpected trapping of the main protagonists behind enemy lines (unexpected event), together with the technological devices forming the film's perceptual regime set up an epistemological barrier that unequivocally predisposes audience alignment and allegiance to one side.

## 5. Readings

Having briefly demonstrated the suggested analytical devices through the examples above, I will now proceed with a detailed analysis of three case studies to show how the proposed framework can be applied to a close reading of war films. I will conduct readings of *Platoon* (USA 1987), *The Hurt Locker* (USA 2008), and the officially released version of *I Am Legend* (USA 2007). In providing analysis of a classic Vietnam movie from the 1980s, a recent Oscar winning feature about a still ongoing war, and a science-fiction/horror/war movie I hope to be able to cover some of the

breadth implied by the wide definition of the genre introduced above (for detailed readings of *Aliens* (USA 1986), *Black Hawk Down* (USA 2001), and *300* (USA 2006) see the attached article *Challenging the Border as Barrier*).

### *Platoon*

*Platoon* (USA 1987) was written and directed by Oliver Stone. The film is set during the Vietnam war and tells the story of Chris Taylor, a young man who had volunteered for military service in the country. Stone's film was widely greeted as an anti-war movie that realistically represents the horrors of war. However, when investigating the technical and narrative means behind the representation of the different involved parties, it becomes apparent that the movie draws a distinct epistemological barrier dividing the subject-position of the soldier-self from both the Vietnamese other and a group of US evildoers in uniform. The horrors of war as such emerge as predominantly an issue concerning a white, male soldier-self.

In *Platoon* three distinct parties stand in mutual opposition; a group of American soldiers around Sgt. Elias, a group of US soldiers around Sgt. Barnes, and a Vietnamese opponent. Main protagonist Chris Taylor belongs to the first group. The presented struggle is Manichean as the survival of the one implies the death of the other. Stone's film makes all three groups recognizable as intentional, human actors. Visual and conceptual alignment, however, are reserved for US soldiers, while a narrow narrative frame allows for allegiance with only the faction around Sgt. Elias and Chris Taylor.

During the exposition chapter, the main characters are introduced and established as privileged objects for audience identification. Long close-ups on faces, voice-over thoughts, and dialogues serve to individualize Chris Taylor and some of his comrades, and provide the viewer with background knowledge regarding their social status, personal history, and preferences. When Taylor almost faints from exhaustion in the field a first normative distinction is introduced between Barnes who appears a cynical professional who does not care about newcomers, and Elias who is presented in an including, compassionate manner. No Vietnamese appear throughout the exposition chapter. They constitute a merely implied presence that becomes accessible indirectly reflected in the behaviour and speech of the American soldiers.

The main plot of *Platoon* is composed of a series of patrolling marches through the jungle blended with battle sequences and scenes showing the life in various US camps. Significant climaxes are the destruction of a Vietnamese village by the US soldiers, the killing of Sgt. Elias, and

the final Vietnamese assault on a US base. During the whole film the camera readily aligns to the perspective of Chris Taylor who emerges as the main focalizer of the events. The letters he writes to his grandmother are read as a voice-over and serve to constantly comment on the situation. This way the viewer gets access to Taylor's subjective perspective making it easier to understand his decisions in difficult situations and providing an important basis for the evolving allegiance to his position.

Throughout the main plot, the camera repeatedly adopts the perspective of other US soldiers, most notably Sgt. Elias and Sgt. Barnes. The initial hypothesis regarding the characters of these two men are confirmed throughout the narrative. Barnes is consistently presented in a derogatory manner for instance with his face disfigured by scars, while Elias is usually shown in calm postures with a relaxed and open smile. The former appears surrounded by lickspits and cowards. In contrast, the latter is brought to emerge as the core of a group of mutually caring comrades. While Barnes makes necessary military decisions in cold blood and with conscious disregard of life, Elias carefully weighs various alternatives to protect the weak and ensure military success. Both Barnes and Elias are depicted as seasoned servicemen with experience that puts them somewhat aloof their fellow soldiers. Both are presented as succeeding where others fail, a fact that surrounds them with an aura of heroic mysticism.

Throughout the movie the Vietnamese appear as a ubiquitously absent threat. They are not represented directly but assert a merely implied presence that becomes accessible through the frightened and defensive reactions of US soldiers - a technique that according to Christopher (1994:63) makes "the audience feel like they are in a horror film, rather than a war film". In battle scenes the Vietnamese opponents are depicted under recourse to extreme long-shots or quivering mid-shots with quick cutting, bad light conditions, thick jungle, or mists impeding visual access to their fate and actions. Vietnamese civilians are largely deprived of agency and appear in steady mid-shots as objectified and largely passive, helpless victims. Christopher (1994) observes that the peculiar blend of distanced mid-shots on the victims and close-ups on the agitated faces of American soldiers creates the impression that it is first and foremost American soldiers who suffer and not their victims. The lack of visual access to Vietnamese soldiers and the narrow framing of civilians severely hampers audience engagement with this conflicting party beyond the level of mere recognition.



Image 22-25: The jungle coming to life. Virally spreading enemies in *Platoon*.

The main plot of *Platoon* features three evil deeds. These are committed against a US soldier, against Vietnamese villagers, and against Sgt. Elias. In all cases these deeds serve to provide legitimacy to severely violent reactive measures carried out by the soldier-self. When Barnes' platoon finds one of their comrades tortured to death (evil deed 1), they attack and destroy a Vietnamese village and kill civilians and engage in attempted gang rape in the process (evil deed 2). Barnes is directly involved in motivating the atrocity in the village. First the wholehearted intervention by Sgt. Elias stops the massacre. Elias's explicit intention to expose the atrocity to army command directly motivates the third evil deed - the killing of Elias by Barnes.

The evil deeds establish a complex narrative structure that predisposes audience allegiance towards particular protagonists. The tortured US soldier serves to create a psychological structure of motivation for the second evil deed - the massacre in the village. In presenting the crimes as the direct result of immediate traumatic experiences, *Platoon* assigns ultimate responsibility for the atrocity to an unrepresented enemy-other and maintains the established structure of sympathy towards main protagonists even though these are presented as severely harassing Vietnamese villagers. Not only did the sadistic killing of a US prisoner of war implicitly motivate the atrocity that takes the form of an extreme and exaggerated counter measure, but in addition huge stock-piles of supplies and weapons and several hiding places are found in the village effectively marking it as a (probably involuntary) base for enemy forces. By these means, even though US soldiers are shown

committing the crimes, the massacre is framed as, at least to some degree, the responsibility of a ubiquitously absent enemy-other.

At the same time, the events serve to fix the discursive identities of Taylor, Barnes, and Elias. Barnes is presented as the initiator of the war crime. Due to his authority this eases the moral pressure on the other soldiers somewhat. He fires for instance the first shot, while Taylor's voice-over comments that "Barnes was at the centre of our storm" and severely escalates the situation later on by killing a woman without apparent reason who had been complaining about the soldiers' behaviour. When he is about to shoot the village leader's daughter - a child - he is stopped by Elias who threatens to bring the events to the attention of military authorities.



Image 26-27: Good versus evil in uniform: Barnes and Elias in *Platoon*.

Also main protagonist Taylor is presented as engaged in severe harassments of civilians - in this case a one-legged man. The disturbing nature of this incident is however somewhat alleviated by the fact that he had found his tortured comrade earlier, that Barnes's actions had already made an example, and that he had discovered the Vietnamese man in a secret hiding place throwing some suspicion on this character. The sequence also puts significant emphasis on the traumatic nature of the experience showing a suffering Taylor - through repeated close-ups on his face - who comes to his wits eventually and leaves the man alone. First then another US soldier, the by now infamous Bunny, who had cheered to Taylor's actions, takes over and beats the man to death. Taylor is presented as a witness to the massacre without the authority to step in and make an end to it. However, after having experienced Elias's determined intervention, he redeems himself in stopping the attempted rape of Vietnamese girls. This scene is witnessed by Elias and effectively establishes a chain of equivalence between the two characters' discursive identities. It is also crucial for the maintenance of an unambiguous structure of sympathy towards main protagonist Taylor. The fate and discursive identities of the girls or other victims of the massacre remain inaccessible.



The presentation of the massacre in the village plays into a discourse that reduces the inherent inhumanity and brutality of war to the actions of certain rotten apples. The way the incident is visually and narratively framed establishes two epistemological barriers in the universe of the movie; one is visual and conceptual as it reduces the complex nature of the Vietnamese enemy to a ubiquitously absent threat, the abominable actions of which prepare the ground for further atrocities. The other epistemological barrier is moral in that it draws a line between US soldiers swept along with a traumatic tidal wave of terror (among others main protagonist Taylor), and those who actively escalate the situation and obviously take pleasure in the massacre, as exemplified by Barnes and Bunny whose actions seem dictated by a sadism and rage that remains largely incomprehensible to audiences. The event establishes Barnes as the main adversary in the diegetic universe of *Platoon*.



Image 28: Main adversary Barnes in *Platoon*.

The third evil deed in Stone's movie is the cowardly murder of Elias executed by Barnes to avoid a court martial. Both men fight behind enemy lines when Elias suddenly catches a glimpse of Barnes. He turns around and as a mid-shot shows a relieved smile spreading on Elias's face, he is shot in cold blood and left behind. Barnes later tells that he had found Elias dead. This lie is however exposed when a wounded Elias is observed by Taylor and the others from helicopters as he tries to escape from pursuing Vietnamese forces.

This scene visually emphasises the epistemological barrier towards the Vietnamese enemy-other, while it at same time narratively reinforces the moral barrier towards main adversary Barnes. Aerial long-shots indicating the perspective from helicopters are cross-clipped with mid-shots and close-ups on the fleeing Elias. While the several Vietnamese fighters who are mowed down with machine guns from the air are reduced to small anonymous figures that simply fall over and disappear, every new hit on Elias's body is emphasized through the deployment of close-ups, slow motion and sorrowful music. The emerging structure of sympathy invites alignment and allegiance with only the fleeing Elias and with his comrades who are forced to watch his slow death without being able to intervene and rescue him.

The killing of Elias establishes an unambiguous moral structure that necessitates the death of Barnes. Knowing that Barnes will come after him to prevent him from witnessing about the incident, Taylor is left with no other option but to kill or be killed by his opponent. This provides implied legitimacy to Taylor's actions when he shoots a wounded Barnes after the final battle, symbolically overcoming the enemy within through the successful confinement of the main adversary.

This meticulous discursive construction of an implied legitimacy of Taylor's *murder in war* is interesting in comparison to the way Vietnamese deaths inflicted by the main protagonist are framed. Here, we hardly perceive human beings being shot and killed at all. The Vietnamese suddenly emerge from darkness or thick jungle, attack ferociously, and kill even wounded US soldiers with unmatched sadism. When shot they disappear without leaving a trace. While US soldiers' deaths are prolonged by the use of slow motion and audience engagement is enhanced through the use of sorrowful music, the fate of the enemy-other remains hidden through the application of rapid cutting and the repeated use of long-shots into dark woods. The sudden glimpses of the attacking other are cross-cut with close-ups on individual US soldiers whose faces reflect anxiety, sorrow, and, despair, but also courage and mutual care.

The final Vietnamese assault affords narrative closure to the film. In the course of the attack, the US base is overrun by anonymous attackers who appear out of nowhere, avoid the perimeters and spread through the camp like insects. In the end the base is bombed by the US air force to virtually cleanse the area of virally spreading Vietnamese attackers. Again, the deeds and deaths of the Vietnamese remain invisible, while almost every US death is emphasised to some degree for the sake of narrative closure telling the audience who of the protagonists made it and

who didn't. The last sequence shows a wounded main character Taylor being flown to safety while waving to his comrades engaged in the rebuilding of the base effectively connoting a successful defence and the physical as well as moral survival of the main protagonist.

The way through which *Platoon* frames the Vietnamese enemy leads Christopher (1994) to assert the generic hybridity of the movie. In a parallel reading of Stone's movie with Cameron's *Aliens* (USA 1986) he asserts the proximity of *Platoon* to the horror genre and shows in detail how the Vietnamese threat is presented in similar ways as the extraterrestrial threat in Cameron's science fiction-horror film.<sup>11</sup> He states that the Vietnamese in Scott's movie exhibit generic qualities as they do not predominantly point to a specific geopolitical enemy, but become the source of "an unlimited supply of evil" (57).<sup>12</sup> Such generic qualities resemble precisely what I term ubiquitously absent enemies - a background of meaning composed of empty slots that political rhetoric can fill with various concretizations in relation to actual or invented real world enemies.

### *The Hurt Locker*

*The Hurt Locker* (USA 2008) is based on *Rolling Stone* journalist Mark Boal's experiences as an embedded journalist with US forces in Iraq. It depicts a conflict between two parties; US soldiers and a ubiquitously absent Iraqi other. The film has been acclaimed for its unadorned realism, and even though it initially shared the sobering fate of other Iraq war movies at the box office, it won among others the Academy Award for Best Motion Picture of the Year in 2010.

Bigelow's film follows the work of three US soldiers forming a bomb disposal unit in the contemporary Iraq theatre. The main protagonists are Sgt. William James, Sgt. J.T. Sandborn, and Spec. Owen Eldridge. They are introduced throughout the exposition chapter and made available as potential objects for audience alignment and allegiance through the deployment of close-ups, eyeline matches, background information, dialogue and voice-over monologue. No Iraqi characters are introduced in this manner and the film also refrains from narratively building up the figure of a main adversary.

*The Hurt Locker* begins with Sgt. William James replacing his predecessor, who had been killed while attempting to defuse an Improvised Explosive Device (IED), as leader of the team. James quickly introduces a hazardous working style consciously disregarding safety regulations and

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<sup>11</sup> For a similar parallel reading of Ridley Scott's *Black Hawk Down* (USA 2001) with *Aliens* see for instance the attached article *Challenging the Border as Barrier*.

<sup>12</sup> Christopher quotes Jim Naureckas (1986).

putting at risk both his own and the lives of his comrades. The narrative unfolds through various missions the three men are sent to accomplish. These mainly consist of defusing IEDs planted by anonymous insurgents or of gathering and destroying enemy weapons. Only at two occasions are actual combat activities depicted; firstly, when the three men assist a group of British contractors and engage enemy snipers in the desert, and, secondly, when hunting a group of insurgents who attempted to take Eldridge as hostage. In both cases, the battle sequences are entirely filmed from the perspective of the US soldiers reducing the enemy to small figures seen through a scope, or to shadows quickly disappearing in the dark. Enemy deaths are deemphasized through rapid cuts or the deployment of extreme long-distance-shots.

Throughout the main plot of *The Hurt Locker* a peculiar visual regime is conjured up through uses of camera and montage. This establishes an unambiguous structure of sympathy that unilaterally aligns and allies the spectator to the three main characters. Again and again eyeline matches combine close-ups or mid-shots on James, Sandborn, and Eldridge with mid or long distance shots on surrounding areas. Repeatedly these shots are made through the windows of military vehicles moving quickly through the streets. This technique aligns viewers to the perspective of the American soldiers and implicates them in a common epistemological condition that renders the Iraqi-other a ubiquitously absent, yet at the same time threatening, amorphous entity. When working to defuse IEDs, the main protagonists are under constant observation from balconies, hallways, or windows. A quivering hand-held camera peeps upwards and quickly moves over groups of indistinguishable Iraqi individuals gathering in groups watching. At other occasions, shots through the scope of a rifle briefly capture anonymous faces monitoring the soldiers from virtually everywhere. Often only the movement of a curtain or a shadowy figure quickly receding into the background tacitly imply the presence of an observing other and potential menace.



Image 29-32: Preying onlookers: The audio-visual regime of *The Hurt Locker*.

Music and speech are employed to frame the ubiquitous absence of the other as inherently dangerous. An eerie musical theme accompanies shots on seemingly empty streets and buildings that are cross-cut with close-ups on the main protagonists' tense faces and quick, quivering glimpses of ominous figures disappearing in hallways or side streets. When on guard Sandborn and Eldridge repeatedly point out with increasingly agitated voices that "we have a lot of eyes on us" and that "we have to get out of here". Music and words articulate an atmosphere of constant threat posed by invisible enemies possibly hiding in apparently empty, yet confusing spaces or blending into the anonymous mass of prying onlookers.

Conceding that Bigelow's film consciously evokes the perspective of American soldiers working under difficult conditions in a foreign country, the reduction of virtually all Iraqis to extras and passive objects of a US gaze determining their roles, intentions, and indeed subjectivities is a striking and scarcely discussed feature of this Oscar winning movie. Generally the actions of individual Iraqis are presented from the point of view of American soldiers and are made to appear irrational, chaotic, and largely purposeless, as the example of a taxi driver illustrates who breaks through a US checkpoint without apparent reason. The car is stopped by James and the driver is depicted in a long mid-shot. He does not move, does not do anything. He silently stares into nothing and doesn't react at all to the soldier who points a gun and shouts at him. At no point does

he make any attempt to explain his actions, take the initiative, or follow the explicit orders. Only shots fired through his windshield make him react and turn around to face arrest.

In Bigelow's film, the camera hardly ever adopts the perspective of Iraqis, and when it does the subjective shots or eyeline matches merely serve to concretize and actualize an imminent threat, for instance when briefly adopting the point of view of a man observing James from the window of a flat. The Iraqi is presented as responsible for the planting of an exceptionally hideous IED that James is about to defuse, yet no reasons for his action are made available. It is only James' professionalism that prevents him from cowardly triggering the device from a distance.

Throughout *The Hurt Locker* Iraqis consistently remain without a voice. Their speech is not subtitled and becomes part of an ambient background sound that is composed of street noises, occasional gunfire, and people shouting and talking indistinctly. The only Iraqi protagonists who actually speak, do this in broken English, such as for instance a boy attempting to sell the soldiers DVDs in the manner of a busy entrepreneur creatively employing his cross-cultural competence to improve bleak future prospects through hard work, or an aged professor calming down James after the latter had broken into his house explaining to him that he was pleased with US presence in his home before the man's wife chases James out. It can again be argued that this realistically reflects the actual experience of US soldiers stationed in the country without the necessary cultural or linguistic competencies. This however would claim a more critical stance towards the actual problems this epistemological barrier implies for an occupying force. Instead, Bigelow's film follows the familiar trajectory of glorifying US intentions (defusing IEDs, trying to do good) and mystifying and demonizing the actions taken by the opponents.

There is no prominent evil deed in *The Hurt Locker*. However, the defusing of various IEDs throughout the narrative can be read as a constant struggle to counter various evil deeds deployed in civilian areas without any apparent strategic or tactical considerations. In particular one of these devices found by James in the dead body of a child he believes to be the Iraqi boy selling him DVDs at the camp falls into this category as it underlines the complete recklessness and inhumanness of the enemy-other. James's compassionate reaction provides the basis for an increased allegiance of the audience with his character. It is also interesting to note that the one time a US soldier attempts to politely engage Iraqi civilians in explaining calmly and carefully that the location is unsafe and that they will have to leave costs him his life as he falls victim to an IED placed at the location while the conversation was going on. This deed presents apparently innocent

bystanders as potential facilitators of treacherous attacks, and frames the humane treatment of the other as ultimately incongruous with the practice of warfare determined by the irreconcilable nature of the enemy.

The audio-visual rhetoric and narrative logic of *The Hurt Locker* deprives the spectator of any form of access to the competing point of view, the subjectivity, rationality, and inherent humanity of the other. This consistently discourages audience engagement beyond mere recognition and unilaterally aligns and allies the viewer with main protagonists James, Sandborn, and to a lesser degree Eldridge. Thereby, the spectator is positioned within a hegemonic discourse framing the other as ungrievable and inherently threatening, and effectively marginalises and suppresses alternative discursive identities. Thereby, any attempts to gain a more profound understanding of the complex grievances that lay at the bottom of an Iraqi insurgency against US occupation are effectively undermined.

The narrative of *The Hurt Locker* is however not only structured around an epistemological barrier dividing the soldier-self from a ubiquitously absent enemy-other. Bigelow's film presents home and civilian life as a second absence that proves constitutive of the discursive identity of the soldier-self. This second epistemological barrier is for instance illustrated in a scene where William James, back home, attempts to do shopping with his wife, Connie. He is depicted standing with an empty shopping trolley in front of what appears like a massive wall made of different packs of cereal. James remains paralyzed, apparently unable to deal with the situation he is confronted with. In the end, he simply picks one pack and leaves. The subsequent question by Connie whether he had gotten the cereals obtains an uncanny multitude of potentially subversive meanings.

Generally, the conversations and interactions between James and his wife reveal a complete lack of understanding for the situation of the other. Indeed, their factual non-communication exposes two mutually exclusive and incommensurable discourses positioning two subjects in each their dominant framework. In line with Laclau and Mouffe's thought, these incommensurable discursive positionings are not only articulated through speech (or a lack thereof), but are performed as social roles, and indeed, embodied by the protagonists. Even though he returned home, William James brought the epistemological barrier stabilizing his subject-position as soldier-self with him. As a result, even though physically present, he remains socially, culturally, and personally absent.

Jeremy Renner enacts James's overdetermination by a potentially subversive civilian discourse as a numb restlessness and incapacity to interrelate meaningfully with what surrounds him. James mechanically, and at a growing extent helplessly, tries to fill former social roles as for instance father or husband. It becomes increasingly clear that his physical return home was not enough to subvert the epistemological barrier stabilizing his subject-position as soldier-self now challenged by the material and social realities of civilian life. However, James does not succumb and adopt the civilian subjectivity of psychologically deranged veteran in need of assistance. He physically returns to a discursive frame allowing him to maintain the subject-position of soldier-self leaving both epistemological barriers untouched.

Throughout the film, the spectator has consistently been invited to identify with William James, to align to and ally with his character. Therefore, James's discourse becomes the dominant one within the diegesis of the movie and positions not only the main protagonist, but also the audience. The viewer is predisposed to understand him and evaluate his decisions positively thus undermining the diegetic discursive position articulated through William's wife Connie. In contrast to for instance Kimberly Peirce's *Stop-Loss* (USA 2008), formally *The Hurt Locker* does little to align and ally the spectator with characters positioned by a civilian discourse. Consequently, within the diegetic frames of the movie, the viewer remains confined behind the same epistemological barriers that render stability to the subject-position of William James. Only overdetermination by extra-diegetic civilian discourses enables a potential subversion of the dominant tendency of meaning vested in the formal properties of the cinematic text.

*The Hurt Locker* shows that subjectivities shaped in and through military training and war are incommensurable with identities constituted in and through civilian life. At the same time, the film denies to pathologize the identity of a soldier-self unanimously positioned by a hegemonic discursive frame of war. To simply state in a prologue that "war is a drug", does not with necessity imply a negative evaluation of the junkie, or the subversion of the discourse positioning him. James remains the main protagonist and hero of the movie, or as Barker (2011) puts it, "James displays the full canon of symptoms by which PTSD [post-traumatic stress disorder] is defined. He has just forgotten how to be its victim, and thus becomes a poster-boy of the Iraq war generation" (157). This example illustrates a fundamental change in the role of the home front in war discourse - and in the discourse of war movies.



Many war films have taken up the devastating consequences of war for soldiers returning home. From John Wayne's *Sands of Iwo Jima* (USA 1949) via *The Deer Hunter* (USA 1978), *Born on the Fourth of July* (USA 1989), or *The Mark of Cain* (UK 2007) to *Badland* (USA 2007), a multitude of films have focused on the fate of veterans from various historical and social vantage points. Very often these movies engage the story of damaged individuals who attempt to again function normally in society and then chronicle the success or failure of these endeavours. Within the theoretical terminology developed so far, it can be argued that the narratives of these films posit the discourse of civilian life as hegemonic, while they present war discourses as temporary derogations that 'misposition' characters and have to be subverted. The discursive identity soldier-self is framed as a misfit and has to be replaced by subjectivities constituted in and through hegemonic civilian frames to enable the normal functioning of the individual.

In many war films the implied hegemony of the home-discourse not only serves the purpose of establishing an implied norm and scale to measure the success of veterans' successful resocialisation, but also provides implied legitimacy to the violent performances of the soldier-self that facilitates audience allegiance to soldier-characters. In a majority of war films civilian life is what protagonists are fighting for or what they long back to. In both cases the discursive identity soldier-self emerges as a merely temporary anomaly necessitated by the peculiar logic of war to secure a civilian discourse that remains an implied norm. The soldier-self is necessitated by the ubiquitous absence of an evil enemy-other threatening the home front. In this context, civilian discourse stabilizes the discursive identity of soldier-self deployed to a threatening outside to counter various menaces emanating from an inaccessible beyond. In this narrative frame, discursive war identities are treated as sad necessity and potential problem to be dealt with upon return. New wars on the other hand do not necessitate return at all.

The narrative logic concerning the home front changes in several films that present the experiences of contemporary professional military forces stationed abroad or engaged in foreign interventions. Here, the discursive identity soldier-self and the discursive identity civilian become interpellative frames that compete on equal footing. As a result, the home front no longer exclusively functions as the safe haven the protagonists defend or aim at getting back to. Rather, it also emerges as an imminent threat to the stability and proper functioning of identities constituted in and through the experience of overseas deployment and war - a threat that has to be confined through the drawing of a stabilizing epistemological barrier. This logic surfaces in the repeated

mantra of a series of recent war movies that those back home won't understand, that what you fight for is not the security of those at home, but "the man next to you", and the explicit wish to return to the battlefield as soon as possible. This discourse does not only structure the narrative of fiction films such as *Black Hawk Down*, *Behind Enemy Lines*, *We Were Soldiers*, or *American Soldiers: A Day in Iraq*, but also uncannily resurfaces in the statements of several Western soldiers made in a series of recent documentaries about their war experiences where many of the interviewees, in spite of their often horrible experiences, indicate their sincere wish to return to the battlefield as soon as possible (*Severe Clear/This is War* (USA 2009), *Armadillo* (Denmark 2010), *Restrepo* (USA 2010)).

As argued above, neither in *The Hurt Locker* does civilian discourse emerge as an implied norm. As a result, James does not become a 'mispositioned' identity within a hegemonic civilian frame, but his overdetermination necessitates an unequivocal repositioning and choice of one among two incommensurable discursive identities. As James returns to Iraq and adopts the subjectivity of soldier-self, his family and civilian life in general turn into a potentially subversive outside that threatens the stability and proper functioning of this soldier-self.

The last scene of *The Hurt Locker* illustrates this. James is depicted in a bomb suit walking through a deserted Baghdad street away from the camera. The shot is accompanied by slightly estranged, yet action-ridden, rock music while a title indicates "365 days left in Delta company rotation" indicating that he had volunteered for a new tour of duty in the country. James does, however, not only return to the topographical location Iraq, but also to the unanimous subject-position of the professional career military – the soldier-self framed by a now hegemonic discourse of war that is stabilized by epistemological barriers towards the inherently subversive alternative discourses of the enemy-other, and towards civilian life back home. The spectator who has been consistently invited to align to and ally with the discursive position of James is led to follow suit. In the immediate historical context of professional armies being deployed overseas on a regular basis as instruments of foreign and economic policy, I can only agree with Barker (2011) who states that it is in "James' role model (...) that the real politics of the film [*The Hurt Locker*] lie" (157).



Image 33: Deflecting overdetermination: Returning to the unambiguous identity of soldier-self in *The Hurt Locker*.

*I Am Legend* (officially released version)

*I Am Legend* (USA 2007) is a science-fiction/horror/war movie that follows elite military scientist Robert Neville, the presumably last human survivor on Earth, in his struggle to find a cure against a virus that has transformed virtually all of mankind into sinister vampires preying upon living flesh during night time. Lawrence's movie is the last in a series of remediations of Richard Matheson's 1954 novel *I Am Legend* and has been greeted as a straightforward genre movie fulfilling the related expectations.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, the movie has been officially released in a version that entails some severe narrative inconsistencies. I will here discuss the official version and will juxtapose it to the director's cut in the chapter on liminality later on.

In *I Am Legend* two parties are opposed in a Manichean struggle evoked through an audio-visual rhetoric that posits a mutual exclusivity between the main protagonist and a ubiquitously absent, aggressive and dangerous enemy-other. The story is entirely focalized through the main character Robert Neville whose subjective point of view the camera readily makes available to audiences through the deployment of for instance eyeline matches or POV-shots. Flashbacks, monologues or voice-over thoughts provide access to his memories and grievances, and expose his

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<sup>13</sup> The novel has been adapted to screen twice before Lawrence made his movie; Ubaldo Ragona's *The Last Man on Earth* (Italy/USA 1964) and Boris Sagal's *The Omega Man* (USA 1971). In addition, the graphic novel *I Am Legend* (1991) adapted by Steve Niles and Elman Brown can be mentioned.

hopes, doubts, fears, and increasing despair. Together with such devices as dwelling shots, close-ups, slow motion, and music and sound these establish a structure of sympathy that significantly enhances the emotional, intellectual, and moral engagement of the audience with the main character.

While alignment and allegiance to the character of Robert Neville are systematically encouraged, the evoked audio-visual regime veils or narrowly frames the other. In Lawrence's movie the opponents appear as either incomprehensible, extremely aggressive, violent threat, or as objectified material for the scientific experiments and research carried out by the main protagonist. In both cases the deployed technical and narrative means significantly hamper audience engagements with the enemy beyond mere recognition.

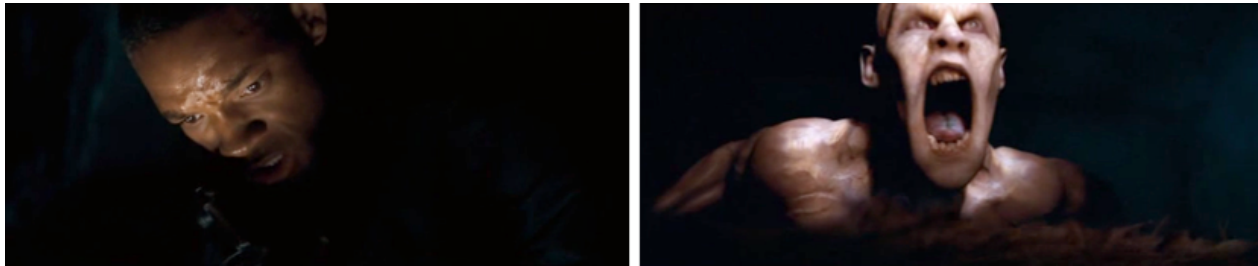


Image 34-35: Soldier-self and enemy-other in *I Am Legend*.

The framing of the enemy as a ubiquitously absent threat is achieved through the deployment of such devices as eerie musical themes that accompany shots into impenetrable darkness, quick cuts briefly revealing short glimpses of an as yet hidden adversary, or close-ups on the face of the main protagonist exhibiting fear, anxiety, or despair. When visualized, the other is depicted as an anonymous mass in menacing advance. Their language is reduced to aggressive grunting. Quivering long-shots, quick cuts, and action-ridden musical tunes serve to veil the fate and achievements of the enemy, while such means as slow motion, dwelling shots, or sad musical themes enhance audience's engagement in the struggle of the main character. In the narrative of *I Am Legend* a logic of mutual exclusivity is predominant. When the enemy appears it poses an immediate, inhumane and deadly threat that has to be disposed of under the application of all means available rendering implied legitimacy to the severely violent measures taken by the main protagonist.

When framed as object for Neville's scientific experiments, the other is reduced to the status of sterile, clinical exhibit. The scenes are set in a clean and neatly organized high-tech laboratory in the basement of Neville's stronghold. The other is depicted as tied to a stretcher and

connected to various instruments monitoring its biological (mal)functions. The specimen do not have names, but are distinguished by the code for the experimental serum they are exposed to. Rather than constituting an alternative subjectivity the movie's hegemonic discourse frames the other as the dangerous symptom of a terrible disease. Neville's activities in the laboratory are presented as the determined and well organized endeavours of a professional scientist working for an unquestionably good cause. This cause and the clinical atmosphere of calm professionalism discourages possible sympathy with the suffering and dying other.



Image 36: The other as scientific exhibit in *I Am Legend*.

The officially released version of Lawrence's film maintains this form of de-humanisation and de-subjectification of a ubiquitously absent, or consistently objectified, enemy-other even at the cost of obvious narrative inconsistencies. For instance, this version leaves the apparent development of the enemy's intellectual capacities and organizational skills throughout the narrative unexplained, and as such refrains from further inquiring into the sudden ability of the enemy to implement coordinated attacks or to construct a sophisticated trap to capture Neville.

Throughout the main plot Neville meets Anna and Ethan, a woman and a boy exhibiting the same immunity to the deadly virus as he does himself. The two rescue Neville when he attempts to commit suicide in openly confronting scores of his enemies during night time. As they cautiously start to communicate, a fundamental disagreement emerges between them. While Neville puts his trust into science and almost manically works on developing a cure, the woman claims to be following the voice of God leading her to a colony of survivors.

The end of *I Am Legend* in its official version depicts Neville, Anna, and Ethan trapped in the laboratory. Only a wall made of security glass divides them from the enemy's massive

onslaught. Sequences of mid and long-shots on the anonymous mass of aggressively attacking vampires are juxtaposed to close-ups on the slowly cracking protective barrier, and on the faces of the three survivors. When the enemy is about to break through, Neville gives the cure – a serum he had just extracted from one of his objects of experimentation – to Anna, and hides her and the boy in a small safe room attached to the laboratory. During a last conversation Neville says he is doing what he is doing because he “started listening”. In the officially released version this implies that he was convinced by Anna and started to follow the voice of God supposedly speaking through her. In addition, Neville states that “they won’t stop” reiterating once more the complete impossibility of any solution to the conflict except a total annihilation of either self or other. After looking one last time at a photograph of his dead wife and child, Neville uses a hand grenade and blows all the enemies to pieces heroically sacrificing his own life in the process.

The last sequence of Lawrence’s movie shows the woman and the boy arriving at an uninfected safe haven. A massive steel portal slowly swings open and the camera catches a white wooden church, an American flag, and armed men in US uniforms. As the woman and the boy enter the village a voice-over recounts Neville’s heroic deed stating that he became legend because he successfully developed a cure and saved their lives while sacrificing his own.



Image 37: Wall, church, flag, and soldier-self. Connoting safety in *I Am Legend*.

The connections between this obviously religiously inspired film narrative and the political narrative framing the war on terror as an epic battle between good and evil seem apparent. The icons of American patriotism deployed in the end to connote safety and a new start, the idea of following the implied will of God, and the way the main protagonist sacrifices his life combating a completely dehumanized, aggressive threat that has threatened to destroy the American nation, all

resonate with a populist rhetoric positing a predominantly US self against evil opponents threatening their lives and freedom without apparent reason. The technical and narrative devices that position the main protagonist - and the spectator identifying with him - behind epistemological barriers that render the other a ubiquitously absent threat are crucial for the constitution and reproduction of a hegemonic diegetic discourse of war and conflict.

In contrast, the director's cut of Lawrence's movie sticks far closer to the original narrative of the novel the film is based on. Accordingly, this 'unofficial' version does not only provide answers to the unresolved questions concerning the sudden intellectual and organisational capabilities of the enemy, but in the end also fundamentally redistributes the roles of good and evil. This happens through the successful activation of the subversive potentials vested in the shared, liminal space of the laboratory during the final sequence of *I Am Legend*. As I will show in the next chapter, this alternative ending counters the dominant tendency of meaning of the officially released version entirely and makes the film resonate strongly with an oppositional discourse critical of populist framings of the war on terror as a struggle against an axis of evil. To understand the way the film achieves this, the concept of liminality, which I will turn to now, will become crucial.

## Chapter 6: PERMEATING EPISTEMOLOGICAL BARRIERS: LIMINAL LOCATIONS AND LIMINAL PROTAGONISTS

### 1. The Concept of Liminality

Popular war films function within particular discursive frames that provide the basis for a complex interplay between the audio-visual texts and their audiences. The success of a particular presentation is often due to the meticulous balancing between meeting pre-established genre expectations and cautious renewal. In the following, I will introduce the concept of *liminality* to grasp one way through which some films subtly challenge genre boundaries and discursive processes of bordering and exclusion connected to them.

The term liminality is originally derived from the Latin term *limen* - threshold (Saunders 2010:55). This etymology suggests a reconceptualisation of the border concept inherent in the term. A threshold is both a marker of difference and a connective zone that invites crossing and contact. As such, in contrast to a barrier, the limen enforces an awareness of what lies beyond and precludes the constitutive confinement of the other. Precisely this implied dependence on the other makes the concept interesting for the present inquiry.

According to van Gennep (1961) and Turner (1977) who developed the term in their anthropological studies of rites of passage between childhood and adolescence in various cultures, liminality refers to a temporary state of exclusion - a carnevalesque period of transition - in the course of which a subject matures and subsequently becomes reinitiated as a fully blown member of society. Within this context, a possible application of the concept to the war genre could perceive of the violent challenge of the main plot as a liminal sphere of ritual exclusion. In living up to the task posed during the violent climax of genre consistent war narratives, the hero who had been temporarily confined to remote and challenging locations would return matured and become reinitiated as a fully developed member of society. While such an application fits well to an analysis of the narratives of individual growth and maturation through the experience of war underlying many movies of the genre (*Black Hawk Down*, *Behind Enemy Lines*, *Valiant*, *Platoon*, and many more), this dissertation focuses on liminality in its discursive and deconstructive context introduced by for instance Aguirre, Quance and Sutton (2000), and Homi Bhabha (1990 and 1994).

In their studies, Aguirre, Quance, and Sutton (2000) deploy the term liminality on two different levels of analysis. Focusing on post-colonial literature they, on the one hand, employ



liminal to designate texts which are “generated between two or more discourses (...) which share in two or more poetics” (9). Besides this categorization of liminal as opposed to canonical texts, they also deploy the term liminality to address representations that are thematically “centred around the notion of the threshold, or (...) the idea of a crossover, a transgression or an entry into the Other” (ibid.). It is this second understanding I align to in this study. I focus on the ways through which liminality subtly challenges the underlying binary logic of audio-visual war culture. This happens through the narrative deployment of particular border-crossing characters and shared locations.

Aguirre, Quance, and Sutton (2000) contrast liminality to the term marginality, and assert that unlike marginality which always implies an inaccessible outside, “liminality invites or requires the postulation of an open, plural system the constituents of which include a known area A and, at least, a poorly understood area B, plus a recognition of a threshold separating but also relating A and B, the threshold itself having a variable breadth” (8-9). The liminal zone not only separates, but also connects divided entities. As such, liminality acquires a subversive potential in that it enables the overdetermination of subjects by two competing discursive frames. This leads us over to the way Bhabha (in Rutherford 1990, 1994) uses the term.

Bhabha (in Rutherford 1990:210-11) states that cultures have no essence, that they “are only constituted in relation to (...) otherness internal to their own symbol-forming activity which makes them decentred structures”. In other words, cultures do not define, but are defined by their borders. Creating a “third space”, liminality enables, or even enforces, “cultural translation” which denies essentialism, “displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives”. As an in-between state liminality emerges as potentially disruptive and productive precisely in that it reasserts the ultimate contingency of established frames by providing access to the alternative discourse of the other previously confined to an inaccessible outside.

Bhabha (1994) conceptualizes cultural and political identities as based on exclusion – as inherently defined by a constitutive outside. Once articulated – for instance in form of postcolonial literature – this outside asserts itself as a potentially disruptive alternative vested in the lived and embodied experience of in-between: “counter narratives of the nation continually evoke and erase its [the nation’s] totalizing boundaries (...) through which ‘imagined communities’ are given essentialist identities” (213). As such, Bhabha (in Rutherford 1990) claims “liminality opens up the possibility of articulating different, even incommensurable cultural practices and priorities” (210-

211). Liminality reasserts the contingency of established orders and enables an overdetermination of the reader/spectator and, therefore, the political subject.

Perceived in the light of a discourse-theoretical approach sketched out in previous chapters, it becomes apparent that both the thematic aspect of liminality introduced by Aguirre et. al. (2000) and the cultural aspect surfacing in Bhabha (in Rutherford 1990 & 1994) become relevant for the present inquiry. Liminality makes the enemy accessible as something other than a de-faced and incomprehensible threat, or a de-subjectified victim. It reasserts the contingency of established frames of meaning and enables an overdetermination of discursive identities. As such, while the term hybridity can be seen to imply a merging of an essentialist category A with an essentialist category B forming an equally essentialist combined category C, liminality reasserts the ultimate contingency of both A and B. The liminal zone of contact as such dislodges both objectified categorical orders and brings into motion again previously arrested processes of negotiation and renegotiation without succumbing to an equally essentialist alternative objectivity.

In the war film liminality is realized in form of such narrative tropes as border-crossing subject or shared location. The term *liminal characters* refers to diegetic border-crossers of all kind, the audience is invited to ally with. These protagonists have the ability to move into, and within, all the divided camps and, as a result, have the inherent capacity of making the understandings, the fears, the rationality and the inherent humanity of the other intelligible. These movements across dividing thresholds can be topographical or conceptual in kind. This means liminal characters can either cross concrete territorial borders in a spatial movement, or they can cross conceptual or discursive boundaries through thought or speech.

Liminal characters, such as refugees, negotiators, prisoners, envoys, scouts, or those captured between the lines, have the capability to counter narratives of mutual exclusivity and hostility. They facilitate the reconstitution of the border as a zone of contact, and of the other as a potential partner for negotiation. They become a productive and potentially disruptive category in-between that dislodges the binary and dichotomous structures that constitute both self and other. The capacity of liminal characters for cultural translation across borders entails a deconstructive effect on fear-based discourses categorising the other as an incomprehensible ever-looming threat potentially striking anywhere at any moment.

*Liminal locations* are the diegetic spaces, which enforce contact between mutually opposing sides. Those shared or “third spaces” (Bhabha in Rutherford 1990) equally belong to the formerly

opposed camps of the divided entities. They enable the emergence of the respective other in the discourse of the self as more than a de-humanised and de-subjectified threat, or objectified victim. The sudden manifestation of the other in shared localities draws into question the discourse of the border and the division it entails. Fields of victory/defeat, no man's lands, hospitals, or prisoner of war camps comprise such a potential narrative effect and might challenge and question established discourses of mutual exclusivity, protective barriers, and the necessity of self-defensive violence.



Image 38: Shared spaces: Dislodging mutually exclusive oppositions in *The Thin Red Line*.

Liminality reconstitutes protective epistemological barriers as inherently disruptive zones of contact and negotiation between a known *area A* and a largely unknown yet acknowledged *area B*. By these means liminality reasserts the contingency of established frames of meaning, undermines relations of mutually constitutive exclusivity, and enables an overdetermination of discursive identities. In repositioning characters the spectator aligns with and allies to, liminality also undermines socio-political (b)ordering processes in that it subverts epistemological barriers - the tacit interpretative schemata that render the enemy in all its potential forms “ungrievable”, “bare” life in the sense of Butler (2009) and Agamben (1998).<sup>14</sup>

Border-crossing liminal characters and shared liminal locations, as such, enable “performative encounters” with the other in the sense of Rosello (2005). Such encounters entail “the creation of new subject-positions rather than treating preexisting (preimagined) identities as the

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<sup>14</sup> I provide a more detailed account of Judith Butler’s and Giorgio Agamben’s approaches in chapter 9 and in the attached article *Border, Barriers, and Grievable Lives*.

reason for, and justification of, the protocol of encounter” (1). In this context, liminality can be seen to question and subvert established interpretative schemata that predispose engagements with the other. This enables the surfacing of dislodging articulations of the other, even though these might disrupt or undermine the established hegemonic frames of the self.

This way liminal characters and liminal locations bring into view communication-as-interruption in the understanding of Pinchevski (2005) who, from the vantage point of Levinasian ethics, posits that “interruption” refers to “a point of exposure and vulnerability upon which the relation with the Other may undergo profound transformation” (68). This form of disruptive communication leads to “a closeness that reifies difference” (79) instead of violently subsuming the other under the hegemonic framework of the self. The constitutive absence of a final ground that entails the ultimate contingency of all discursive identities also implies the ultimate relationality, and therefore vulnerability, of these identities. According to Pinchevski, this constitutive vulnerability and mutual dependence lies at the core of an ethical imperative posed by the other in the sense of Levinas – an imperative that surfaces on shared locations and becomes articulated by border-crossing protagonists.

## 2. Liminality in the War Film

Misek (2008:116) writes in his study of point-of-view in Terrence Malick’s *The Thin Red Line*:

“The ability of a soldier to fight is contingent on his ability to de-individuate the enemy. Analogously, the ability of the viewer to gain ‘adrenal stimulation’ from a combat sequence [in film] is contingent upon the de-individuation of one side, creating a dialectical ‘us’ versus ‘them’ structure of identification. By re-individuating the (...) ‘enemy’ it is possible to undermine this pleasure.”

Liminality is a concept that sets out to conceptualize the ways through which such a “re-individuation” of the enemy can be achieved in film.

In recent years, a series of war movies has appeared that seem to subvert simple generic ‘us’ versus ‘them’ narratives. In this section, I intend to show with reference to Ridley Scott’s *Body of Lies* (USA 2008) and James Cameron’s *Avatar* (USA 2009) that even though these movies address issues of liminality, they nevertheless on an underlying level continue to play into a discursive logic of mutual exclusivity that ultimately undermines potentially subversive impacts and reinstates epistemological barriers along different lines. I then proceed to an analysis of Philip Haas’ *The Situation* (USA 2006), Paul Greengrass’ *Green Zone* (USA 2010), Nick Broomfield’s *Battle for Haditha* (UK 2007), and the director’s cut of Francis Lawrence’s *I am Legend* (USA 2007) to

illustrate how border-crossing individuals and shared liminal spaces can enable inclusive alternatives that, in re-individuating the previously confined enemy, challenge both discursive orders stabilized through relations of mutually constitutive exclusivity.

The attached article *Challenging the Border as Barrier* provides an analysis of the role liminal characters and liminal locations play in Terrence Malick's *The Thin Red Line*, while the attached paper *Liminale Räume* investigates the liminal potentials of shared spaces in two films that cover the civil war in the former Yugoslavia.

### *Body of Lies*

Ridley Scott's *Body of Lies* tells the story of Roger Ferris, a CIA agent stationed in the Middle East, who with the help of the Chief of Jordanian intelligence, Hani, hunts for Al-Saleem, the leader of a new Al-Qaeda offshoot responsible for a series of atrocious bomb attacks in Europe. The film presents a conflict with three main parties; the CIA, Jordanian intelligence, and the jihadist group of Al-Saleem. While the conflict between the first two is graduated and realizes liminal potentials in that main protagonist Ferris changes sides, an epistemological barrier is drawn and maintained between the CIA and Jordanian intelligence on the one, and Al-Saleem's group on the other side. This barrier frames the opponent as a ubiquitously absent threat and constructs the conflict as a Manichean struggle against incomprehensible evil.

Scott's film begins with an evil deed. The camera slowly zooms in on a TV screen showing the face of what later emerges as main adversary Al-Saleem, who claims responsibility for a bomb attack on a bus in Sheffield and warns that his group now is ready to carry out further attacks. As the camera moves throughout the surrounding room it briefly captures three young male adults with Arabic features who obviously prepare a new bomb attack. As British anti-terror police attempts to move in they trigger an explosive device that kills the majority of the advancing officers and reduces a whole building in a Manchester street to rubble.

After having negatively framed Al-Saleem as the main adversary, *Body of Lies* introduces main protagonist Ferris. An aerial establishing shot sets the scene in Samarra, Iraq. As a close-up moves along the body of a man finally capturing his face and identifying him as the main protagonist, a voice-over is heard that provides access to his thoughts concerning the present situation in Iraq. While this voice-over is heard the camera moves on to another man who sits tied to a chair and is brutally beaten. The dog tags worn by his tormentors make them identifiable as members of the US military. The depiction of the main protagonist as witnessing the death under

torture of a man poses a challenge to the evolving structure of sympathy. Therefore, the voice-over becomes important. It creates a distance between the character and the acts he appears forced to witness in connection with his work as a CIA agent. The voice-over allows Ferris to state his disagreement with what he frames as desperate and ultimately counterproductive measures against a continuously evolving enemy. As the victim dies, Ferris contemplates the ultimate impotence of the deployed means to achieve political and military progress. In presenting his main protagonist as a distanced critic of the way the war is conducted, and as an insider trying to improve things, Scott enables audience allegiance with Ferris in spite of the brutality of the opening scene.



Image 39-42: Straining allegiance to the main protagonist: Deflecting the performance of torture through voice-over thoughts in *Body of Lies*.

The following sequences introduce the character of Ed Hoffmann, Ferris's CIA station chief in the US. Through the introduction of this protagonist Scott also establishes a hegemonic enunciatory position for the articulation of the discursive identities of the opposed factions. The scenes depict Hoffmann while briefing US government officials on the threat posed by Al-Saleem's new terrorist group. It consists of cross clippings between mid-shots and close-ups on Hoffmann who approaches the camera and brief cuts to scenes illustrating what is said. Together the deployed technical and narrative devices establish a narrow discursive frame that draws an epistemological barrier between a defensive and righteous soldier-self and an enemy-other that appears inaccessible, incomprehensibly aggressive and dangerous – a ubiquitously absent threat.

Hoffmann's briefing takes the form of a longer monologue directed at US officials who are only depicted briefly. Hoffmann is initially filmed in a dwelling mid-shot walking back and forth

while talking, before he turns and approaches the camera until a close-up of his head looking straight into the camera fills the screen. By these means Hoffmann's speech is not only directed at an invisible diegetic recipient (the US officials), but also at the implied spectator watching the scene. By these means the audience is directly interpellated by the film's hegemonic discourse that is articulated by one of the main protagonists. Even though Hoffmann's character is increasingly undermined throughout the narrative, his articulation regarding the nature and intentions of the main adversary remain an unchallenged and unchanged discursive frame for the evolving narrative.

During the first part of his speech, Hoffmann moves towards the camera and in the end faces the implied listener directly. A low, bass-dominated musical tune that connotes an atmosphere of looming, imminent threat accompanies his words from the beginning. Certain phrases Hoffmann uses are visually emphasized to create a particular rhetoric effect. As such, his assertions concerning the low tech means of communication are illustrated through brief quivering mid-shots that depict Muslim male immigrants in the streets of European cities. When he describes the enemy's communication patterns, the words "hand to hand" are emphasized in depicting bearded men shaking hands, while the words "face to face" are accompanied by a mid-shot on two Arab men facing each other and talking in a café. The visual style is that of hand-held digital footage made from inside a passing vehicle or a person in movement that create the impression that the material has been assembled by someone filming in secrecy to unveil sinister networks operating at the hearts of Western cities. This associative montage serves a clear rhetorical purpose. It draws a discursive chain of equivalence interconnecting immigrants from Arab countries with fanatic Jihadist extremists. Thereby the sequence visually reinforces a xenophobic discourse that blames immigration as the reason for an allegedly imminent terrorist threat.

However, Scott's film does not stop there. It also asserts the irreconcilable and non-negotiable nature of the elusive enemy's intentions, and its global interests. Hoffmann continues his briefing stating that "in a situation like this your friends dress just like your enemies and your enemies just like your friends". Then, looking directly into the camera and emphasised by a slight climax in the ambient low bass tune, he claims with a calm, yet assertive voice: "You have to fully understand that these people will not negotiate. (pause) Not at all!", before a cut shows scenes of insurgent attacks on US soldiers illustrating his subsequent words: "And they want every infidel converted (pause) or dead." Hoffmann ends his briefing warning in a suggestive voice that "if we

take our foot from the throat of this enemy for one minute, our world will change completely.” He then gets up and leaves swiftly as action-ridden tunes initiate the main plot of the movie.

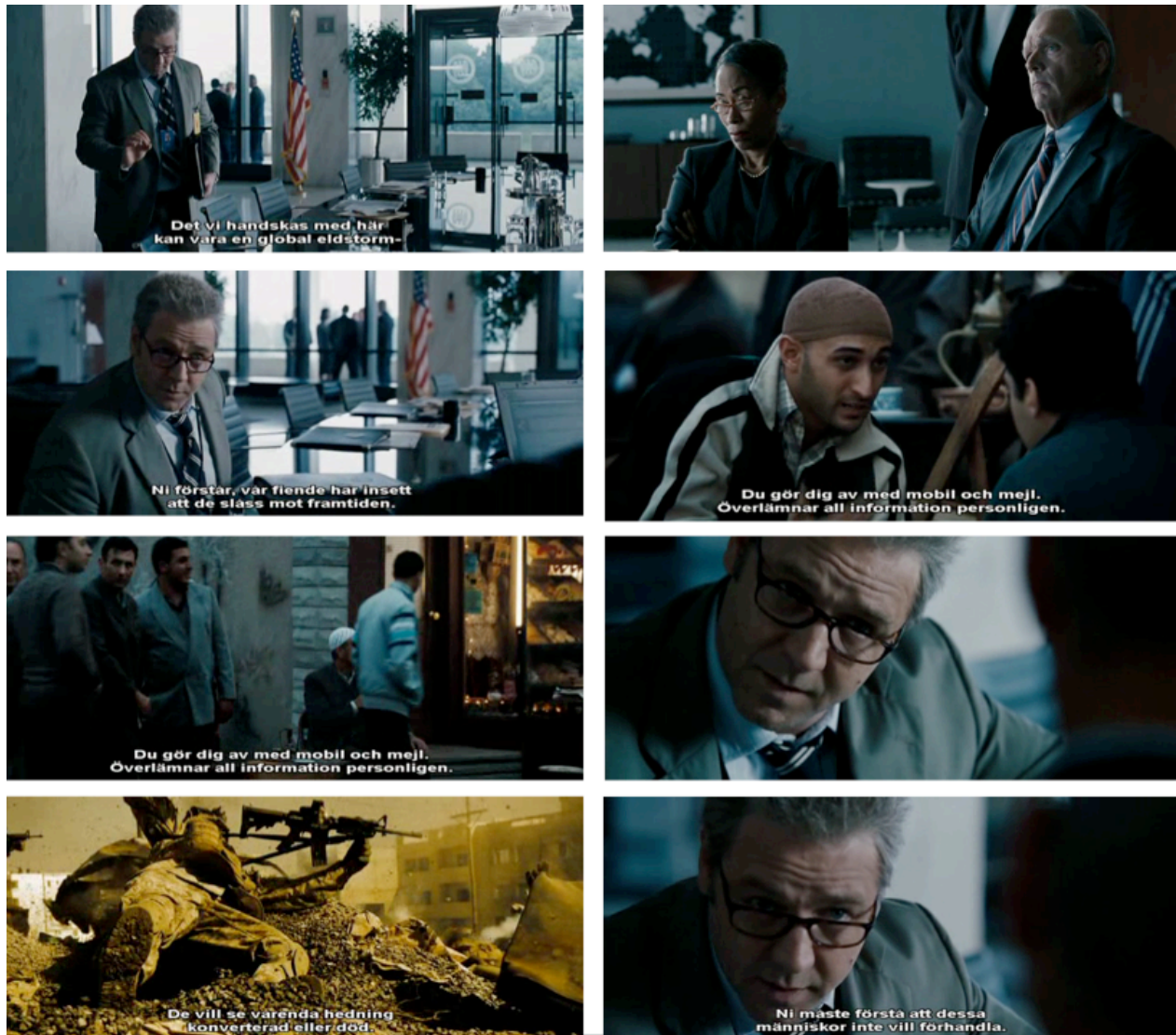


Image 43-50: ‘Hand to hand ... and face to face’: Associative montage and an audio-visual rhetoric of othering in *Body of Lies*.

In this second part of his speech, Hoffmann reiterates the picture of a ubiquitously absent enemy potentially hiding anywhere who will remorselessly commit abominable atrocious acts to realize their doubtlessly evil intentions. The only viable means to stop this monstrous adversary is through violence. With this speech the discursive frames for the ensuing narrative are set. An unambiguously evil, elusive enemy-other has been put into place and provided with a face in the form of the main adversary. The aggressive and irreconcilable nature of this enemy-other provides implied legitimacy to the severe acts of violence deemed necessary by the main protagonist, and



this way enables audience allegiance to this character in spite of his brutal conduct. The audiovisual and narrative framing of Hoffmann's speech successfully draws an epistemological barrier that renders stability to the hegemonic subject-position of the soldier-self that becomes determinate of the main characters performances and articulations.

The established structure of sympathy that systematically invites audience allegiance with the soldier-self, while discouraging identification with the other, is maintained throughout the remaining narrative. In the end, the main adversary is caught while torturing the captured Ferris. In consistency with the narrative frames established throughout the exposition chapter, the enemy-other remains confined behind epistemological barriers until the end. The position of the soldier-self, however, is somewhat accentuated throughout the developing narrative and last but not least exhibits liminal potentials through the character of Ferris.

In pursuit of the main adversary, Ferris consciously sacrifices an innocent Syrian architect when he fakes a terrorist organisation to draw Al-Saleem from his hiding place. Various other incidents of lying and deceit threaten to undermine allegiance to the main protagonist. This process of subversion, however, never seriously threatens the discursive identity of the soldier-self. It only challenges the specifically American way of dealing with the threat and juxtaposes it to a far more efficient 'indigenous' one represented through the conduct of Syrian intelligence chief Hani and his organisation. This way, even though he changes sides throughout the narrative, the main protagonist remains securely within the frames of the hegemonic discourse of war.



Image 51-52: Confined behind epistemological barriers: Main adversary Al-Saleem in *Body of Lies*.

What about the narrative's liminal elements then? The potentials for a reconstitution of epistemological barriers as zones for contact and negotiation enabling an inclusive and nonviolent approach to conflict resolution are thoroughly suppressed in relation to the enemy constitutive of the main conflict of the film; the Manichean struggle between a soldier-self and an extremist enemy-other. However, in relation to the secondary conflict between US and Jordanian intelligence communities, Ferris emerges as a liminal character crossing a dividing threshold and providing

access and legitimacy to the position of what is initially framed as a potential competitor. Both competing discourses that are brought into contact through the character of Ferris are however constituted in and through the same hegemonic frames; the conflict between a righteous soldier-self and evil enemy-other led by main adversary Al-Saleem. As such, despite all disagreements both opposed groups of the secondary conflict consist of subjects positioned by a discourse of war that frames and patterns their performances and articulations.

Even though he decides to leave the CIA and stay in Jordan the liminal potential of Ferris's character emerges as ultimately undermined. Instead of opening the view onto an inherently connective in-between enabling a reconstitution of both opposing sides, Ferris is repositioned by a new hegemonic frame effectuated in and through Hani. The overdetermination of his subject-position by two competing discourses does, as such, not lead to an awareness for the ultimate contingency of all discursive identities. In addition, the ubiquitous absence of the enemy-other remains a constitutive hegemonic frame positioning both Hani and the CIA in relation to an evil opponent. Even though the means of conflict resolution appear more sophisticated under Hani, the nature of main adversary and primary conflict remain unchallenged and unchanged.



Image 53-56: Crossing without subversion: Leaving Ferris 'on his own' in Jordan in *Body of Lies*.

In systematically inviting alignment and allegiance with the character of Ferris who in the end changes sides, *Body of Lies* repositions the spectator within Hani's hegemonic discourse of conflict. In doing so, however, Scott's movie does not activate liminal potentials to challenge the predominant frames of war. *Body of Lies* does not discard the American approach because it is inherently immoral (consciously sacrificing innocent Arabs for their cause, deceiving the public,

betraying potential informants, ...), but because it proves ultimately inefficient and counterproductive to a struggle with a given ubiquitously absent enemy. Hani's position appears superior because it performs better in a given discourse of war. As such, Scott can criticize an American approach for technicalities without challenging the underlying patriarchal, anti-democratic, militarist, and elitist discursive frames constituting the subject-position of the main characters.

### *Avatar*

James Cameron's *Avatar* is a science-fiction war movie that present a conflict between two factions. The film posits the indigenous alien population and a group of benevolent soldiers and scientists against a genocidal colonial enterprise carried out by a large mining company and their military contractors. The film exhibits clear liminal potentials; it features a main characters who is repositioned by the previously obscured discourse of the alleged enemy-other. The new discursive identity is embodied to the degree that the main protagonist deliberately and bodily transform into an alien. However, not unlike the discursive logic in *Body of Lies*, this embodied repositioning within the hegemonic frames of the other does not subvert the overarching discourse of war.

The liminal character in *Avatar* crosses the epistemological barrier and becomes the other. As a result the perspectives and subjectivities of the previously confined enemy become accessible. This embodied crossing, however, does not subvert the hegemonic discourse of war, and nor does it reconstitute the epistemological barrier as a zone of contact and negotiation enabling nonviolent alternatives to conflict resolution. The discursive positions of soldier-self and enemy-other are simply reversed and an equally biased structure of sympathy is reintroduced along different lines that leaves the overarching discursive logic of war unchallenged. In for instance denying audio-visual or conceptual access to the new enemy-other that would allow for allegiance to their position, or in constructing a plot that makes the violent actions of the new soldier-self appear without an alternative, the epistemological barrier is left intact. Exchanging the roles of good and evil does not in itself challenge or question mutually exclusive binary categories and the barrier dividing them.

*Avatar* follows main protagonist Jake Sully, a paraplegic former Marine, on an undercover mission to infiltrate the natives on the planet Pandora. Scientists have genetically engineered avatars of the local populations. These creatures look like the inhabitants of Pandora, but are remote controlled by the mind of humans. After joining a group of natives, it dawns upon Sully that the objectives of his employers are incommensurable with the survival of the indigenous population he

quickly learned to respect and love. Forced to choose between narrow economic interests and the survival and well-being of the natives, he changes sides and fights off the assault of the new enemy—other in form of his former employees. In the end, he deliberately transforms into an alien and marries the native princess. However, even though the main protagonist crosses the epistemological barrier and makes accessible the discourse of the previously excluded other, he does so only to unequivocally leave his former identity behind. His crossing is narrowly framed with reference to an evil deed committed by his former employers who destroyed the natives' village. His repositioning does not entail liminal potential, as it does not effectuate an overdetermination by competing discursive frames that might enable a subversion of hegemonic war identities vested in the mutually exclusive and with necessity violent relation to an aggressive enemy-other. His crossing merely exchanges the faces of friend and foe and leaves the underlying logic and inherent dynamics of war untouched. The evil deed and the nature of the enemy lead to a massively violent showdown in the course of which the side that has been framed as unequivocally evil is virtually wiped out.



Image 57: Border-crossing without subversion: Confronting the new main adversary in *Avatar*.

*Avatar* has been read as a timely allegory referring to such inherently neo-colonial endeavours as the war in Iraq, or as an unpleasant reminder of the genocidal colonisation of the American continent by Europeans (Monbiot 2010, Der Derian 2010). In spite of such readings, I here argue for an inherently war prone dominant tendency of meaning conveyed in and through

the formal properties of this cinematic articulation. War and violence are framed as the only viable means to resolve conflicts and a biased structure of sympathy is put into place that systematically invites audience allegiance with only one of the conflicting sides effectively creating the impression that the unambiguously evil intentions of an incomprehensibly aggressive and dangerous enemy-other necessitates the use of excessively violent means. As such, in spite of its critical allegories and border crossing potentials, *Avatar* ultimately plays upon and reinforces a discourse of war and the hegemonic subject-position of the soldier-self.

Žižek (2010) provides a comparable argument. According to him, the narrative of *Avatar* addresses two levels of reality - “the ordinary world of imperialist colonialism” and “a fantasy world populated by aborigines who live in an incestuous link with nature”. In his view, *Avatar* enables a critical challenge of the first, while it at the same time disseminates a thoroughly conservative, racist, and sexist subtext through the second. As such, when Jake Sully changes his embodied discursive identity, he in fact chooses the merciful bliss of the fantasy world and thereby avoids any concrete engagement with the ordinary reality of inherently imperialist, colonialist, and chauvinist global politics. In Žižek’s words, “beneath this [James Cameron’s] sympathy for the poor lies a reactionary myth”. This myth effectively dislodges the film’s critical potentials and ultimately serves to reinforce established hegemonic frames of war.



Image 58: Embodied border-crossing: Choosing the fantasy in *Avatar*.

Having addressed films that open up liminal potentials, but ultimately fall back into a logic of war that posits a mutually exclusive and with necessity violent relation between soldier-self and enemy-other, I will now turn to examples of war movies that activate the inherently subversive potentials vested in the deployment of shared liminal locations or border-crossing liminal characters.

### *The Situation*

Written by journalist Wendell Steavenson who has worked as a journalist in Iraq, *The Situation* provides a complex picture of the ongoing occupation of the country. The film is set in 2004 and follows US journalist Anna Molyneux who attempts to disentangle the circumstances behind the death of a local Samarran boy and, later, behind the killing of her main local informant. Haas' movie, however, doesn't stop there. It also provides at times detailed accounts of the various alliances and enmities that constitute local power configurations, and looks behind the scenes of US intelligence assessments and military conduct.

*The Situation* depicts a graduated conflict with a multitude of involved parties, crossing and rapidly shifting allegiances, and a constantly evolving structure of sympathy. Throughout the film the audience is invited to conceptually and visually align to several groups; US soldiers, US intelligence personnel, a group of journalists composed of both Iraqis and Americans, Iraqi civilians in Samarra, local Samarra authorities, and local Samarra insurgents. Each of these groups is again distinguished into individuals who attempt to secure their varying and often competing interests. Through the ready deployment of dialogues the audience gains access to the rationalities, underlying interests, or historical grievances guiding each major faction's performances. By means of identification with various key characters, the spectator is overdetermined by several, and often mutually exclusive diegetic discursive frames.

Haas' film repeatedly builds up a particular character as main focalizer and preferred object of audience allegiance and subsequently deconstructs this character's discursive position with reference to alternative frames. This way, a notion of truth as a dynamic and constantly refracting and changing measurement is instituted, while the audience is constantly forced to reconsider temporary hypothesis leading to a reassessment of earlier deployed filmic cues and indices.

The repeated subversion of discursive identities starts from the very beginning of the movie and prevents the emergence of a stable structure of sympathy. An early scene for instance, shows Iraqi police officers arguing about democracy and their responsibility for the security of Samarra, when they witness the harassment of two local boys by a US patrol surveying the curfew in the city.

The soldiers throw the boys off the bridge drowning one of them before they pass the Iraqi officers. In the next scene Anna Molyneux appears in Samarra with her translator to check rumours regarding the incident with local sources. Her main informant, former Iraqi officer Rafeeq, gains her access to the funeral of the boys where she speaks with the surviving witness and hears the truth about the event.<sup>15</sup> By now the movie seems to suggest a narrative frame positing American evildoers against local Iraqis supported by a Western journalist in their demand for justice. The proposed structure of sympathy invites the viewer to align to, and ally with, the characters of Anna Molyneux and her informer Rafeeq. However, as the story progresses *The Situation* draws a far more complex picture of the occupation of Iraq.



Image 59-60: Epistemological barriers: The Green Zone and ‘the rest of Iraq’ in *The Situation*.

Already during the Samarran boy’s funeral the camera repeatedly adopts the subjective perspective of various local players. Shot/reverse-shot sequences emphasize several conversations among Samarran men that reveal a dense network of competing interest groups the local authorities have to accommodate. Subsequently this perspective is juxtaposed with an inside view of the American part trying to make sense of ‘the situation’ in Samarra. A cut provides access to a meeting between American intelligence officers and the local US military exposing some of the competing interests and conceptualizations precluding the emergence of a unitary image of this particular faction.

By now three main diegetic discourses can be discerned; a local Samarran civilian discourse that is mainly focalized through the characters of Anna Molyneux and her informer Rafeeq, a discourse that positions the Samarran authorities mainly presented through the character of the mayor and local Sheik, and a US military discourse perceived through the character of intelligence officer Dan Murphy. This emergent triple focalisation, however, is further diversified throughout the film. Haas complicates the situation in establishing logics of difference that further differentiate

<sup>15</sup> According to Hoberman (2007a), this scene is based on an actual incident in Samarra in 2004.

the groups introduced so far. Various conversations among important protagonists, for instance reveal underlying discords and internally divide all involved factions. In addition the film builds up several characters with the inherent liminal potential to access different sides and bring into contact the competing discursive frames. As a result a muddled picture of the situation on the ground emerges that leaves the overdetermined spectator in the dark and partly undermines previously suggested allegiances to key characters.

Rafeeq's position, for example, is presented as a rapidly shrinking middle ground between the local Sheik and his corrupt police force on the one, and a local insurgent group led by a former member of Iraq's Republican guard on the other. Rafeeq's association with journalist Anna Molyneux further complicates his position. The Sheik and local mayor, on the other hand, is forced to deal with increasingly demanding police thugs and has to balance a close friend's wish to retain a position as ambassador by closely cooperating with the Americans. Anna Molyneux's position is refined through the introduction of her colleague, an Iraqi photographer who provides a second inside perspective on Iraqi civilians, and through her private involvement with intelligence officer Dan Murphy for whom she had delivered secret notes to Rafeeq potentially incriminating him. At the same time, the US side is presented as divided between short term military tactics aimed at an increasingly elusive enemy, and the reconstruction effort by Dan Murphy that is driven by long term strategic considerations and necessitates cooperation with local assets who had been branded as insurgents by competing intelligence assessments. By now, the case of the drowned boy is seemingly pushed into the background, and attention is only occasionally retained through brief remarks concerning due interviews or imminent legal procedures.

The most complex characters so far are journalist Anna Molyneux, intelligence officer Dan Murphy, and local resident Rafeeq. The established structure of sympathy invites for allegiance with these protagonists. However, all three characters are positioned by different and at times mutually exclusive diegetic discourses. Thereby the spectator is overdetermined and the emergence of an unambiguous structure of sympathy and a hegemonic diegetic discourse is precluded. At the same time, the three main protagonists entail liminal potentials as their articulations raise awareness for the complexity of the situation and their audio-visual and conceptual perspective promises access to the confined discourse of the respective enemy-others. These liminal positions, however, prove unsustainable in the long term.



Given his involvement with the local authorities under the Sheik, with Anna Molyneux, with US intelligence, and also with local insurgents, the violent death of Rafeeq comes at no surprise to the viewer. Intelligence officer Dan Murphy had supported and protected Rafeeq from US forces who wanted to detain him for his contacts to the insurgency. Sensing his liminal potentials, Murphy had suggested to assign Rafeeq an official position in Samarra, but this suggestion only provoked the intense dismay of his superiors, and served to unveil the counterproductive logic of epistemological barriers preventing a detailed perspective on the various factions and competing interests that constitute the Iraqi other. Rafeeq's murder also reflects the increasing constraints put on the performances and articulations of local subjects in a war zone. The growing pressure to unequivocally take sides seems to increasingly foreclose a liminal potential for negotiation and mutual understanding.

Intelligence officer Dan Murphy's contacts to Rafeeq and his general stance of attempting to understand the local situation and motivate local assets to work for the US instead of alienating them and branding them as terrorists also makes his character a potential liminal figure that might enable access to a ubiquitously absent enemy. In particular one monologue powerfully articulates this discursive position and, given the subject matter of this dissertation, is worth quoting at length. Dan Murphy lectures his colleague, a young and ambitious neo-conservative who divides the Middle East in good and evil forces, about the nature of intelligence. While speaking he slowly approaches the camera, and his way, addresses not only his colleague, but also an implied spectator. Murphy states that

there is no truth. It's not about locking up all the bad guys. (...) There are no bad guys, as there are no good guys. It's not gray, either. The truth shifts according to each person you talk to. And as the truth shifts it gets obscured (...). Intelligence is about seeing accurately at any moment why someone is doing something. On either side of that moment, or under different circumstances you might not be able to interpret what you see. But if you have a chance at it, just once, you have a chance of interpellation.<sup>16</sup> (...) There is no truth because it was lost in the fourth dimension of time. And just when you think you understand it, it's passed. The game is a kaleidoscope.

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<sup>16</sup> Dan Murphy uses the term 'interpellation' in its legal context referring to the act of extracting or obtaining information on behalf of state agencies. This use should not be confused with Althusser's understanding of ideological interpellation by state apparatuses. The present dissertation uses the term synonymously with 'discursive positioning'.



Image 61-64: Articulating contingency: Dan Murphy addresses his colleague and the audience in *The Situation*.

The liminal potentials of this character who articulates the contingency of different positions and argues for the necessity of understanding, or at least acknowledging, the alternative discourse of the other are obvious. However, Haas' movie remorselessly exposes how the embodied and performed discursive subject-position of Dan Murphy as a US intelligence officer stationed in the Green Zone in Baghdad undermines these potentials for a reconstitution of an epistemological barrier as an inherently connective zone of contact and negotiation. Even though Dan's perspective provides potential access to the discourse of the enemy, his discursive identity is never overdetermined by this competing frame. Throughout the whole movie Dan remains positioned by the hegemonic discourse of war. This becomes particularly clear during a conversation he has with journalist Anna Molyneux.

When dining in a Chinese restaurant in the Green Zone Anna confronts Dan with her anguish of being responsible for the death of Rafeeq because of the notes she had been passing on to him. The scene consists of a series of shot/reverse-shot sequences shifting between the perspectives of both protagonists, and several mid-shots on the couple facing each other. Dan is filmed bent over his meal and eating with great appetite barely looking up, while Anna leans back and smokes a cigarette without eating anything and watches him with growing discontent as the

conversation unfolds. This setting visually supports a developing structure of sympathy that increasingly allies the spectators with the character of Anna Molyneux.



Image 65-66: Embodied discourses: Anna Molyneux challenges Dan Murphy's position in *The Situation*.

When hearing Anna's concerns, Dan bluntly denies any possible connection and simply asserts that probably the 'AIF' was responsible and that they had been killing people in Samarra for months. Anna reacts with dismay to what she, supported by her local knowledge, perceives as a gross simplification. "Anti-Iraqi-Forces?" she replies sarcastically implying a necessity to specify. As a response Dan draws a chain of equivalence that discursively subsumes various groups, interests, and individuals under a common denominator - "terrorists, insurgents, whatever". This articulation meshes together the multitude of competing subjectivities and interests that constitute the local Samarra Iraqi other that Anna is aware of, and reiterates the simplifying assessment of the situation Dan had supposedly been critical of before. At the same time Dan's response further allies the spectator with Anna's position. The viewer shares much of her knowledge of the situation in Samarra and has already been aligned to and allied with Rafeeq's character rendering him accessible as more than an anonymous Iraqi civilian. Consequently, his death matters to the audience. The diegetic discourse positioning the spectator through identification with Anna Molyneux frames him as grievable life in the sense of Butler (2009).

Throughout the conversation Dan's liminal position is more and more undermined. When he asks Anna to stay in the Green Zone because he doesn't want her "out there alone", Anna is infuriated. She replies harshly "Out where, Dan? The red zone? The rest of Iraq? When is the last time you went outside the wall?" The conversation successfully unveils Dan's discursive position as equally limited as that of his colleague he had scolded off earlier on. Living and working in the Green Zone, he is protected by the topographical barrier limiting access to this part of Baghdad. The walls and fences, however, also serve as an epistemological barrier that not only confines the bodies of the potentially threatening other, but also its subjectivity, humanity, and individuality. In

confining the potentially subversive alternative discourses of the various Iraqi others, the barrier stabilizes the hegemonic identity of the soldier-self that positions Dan. As such, Dan's approach to an understanding of the other lacks a crucial ingredient to be able to unfold a subversive liminal potential; genuine compassion with human beings that are perceived as more than strategic assets, and the will to critically reassess own sedimented positions this compassion for the other would entail. Dan has rightly discovered the kaleidoscopic nature of 'the situation' in Iraq. However, he continues to perceive it as a "game", where he enjoys the naturalized right to move what he perceives as merely pawns. As such, the war discourse positioning him undermines the emergence of a liminal perspective that might dislodge the mutually exclusive logic of war.

This unveiling and subsequent undermining of Dan's seemingly liminal position aiming at cooperating with, and ultimately exploiting, the other for the sake of a more efficiently functioning occupational regime, brings *The Situation* beyond the scope of for instance *Body of Lies*. In Scott's film the performative efficiency of an 'indigenous' approach against an unambiguously evil enemy-other makes the main character change sides without challenging the overarching violent frames of war. Haas' film on the other hand exposes the pseudo-liminality of Dan's position, and reveals the consistency of an underlying hegemonic discourse of war that frames his performances and articulations, and ultimately reinforces a patriarchal, undemocratic, corrupt, and elitist norm system.

This leaves us with Anna Molyneux as a last character that might unfold liminal potentials. She returns to Samarra with the intention of unveiling the circumstances of Rafeeq's death, but is met with a wall of silence. A close friend of Rafeeq promises to explain everything to her and presents himself as the leader of the local insurgency that fights the Americans because they support the Sheik who has created a corrupt and oppressive local regime using a police force constituted of criminals and murderers to kill competitors and those who challenge his authority. The man also reveals the circumstances behind Rafeeq's death. He had been killed because he had gone against the marriage of his daughter with a local police officer and relative to the Sheik. In the end, in Haas' *The Situation* local interests seem to trump geopolitical ones.

In the end, Haas' film successfully reveals how local Samarran groups and interests successfully employ outside forces for their own interests. This discursive position of agency raises awareness for the epistemological barrier that in rendering the enemy ubiquitously absent, stabilizes the discursive identity of the soldier-self, yet at the same time limits access to vital information

regarding local conditions and potential partners. With the intention of rescuing the supposedly kidnapped Anna, the US army destroys the insurgent stronghold that had been pointed out to them by one of the Sheik's close associates. This significantly weakens the resistance to the undemocratic and corrupt regime implemented by the Sheik who successfully played 'the American card' against his local competitors. This presents outside involvements in the region as framed by local interests that actively engage the occupying forces and other Western constituents such as Anna to serve their own goals and objectives. The only outcome that slightly unsettles the local authorities' power play is the arrest of the commanding officer responsible for the drowning of the local boy. Here, a successful internal military investigations led to the incidental removal of one of the Sheik's important assets.

What about Anna's liminal position? In the end she remains the main object for audience identification. The structure of sympathy consistently invites allegiance with her character, and through her to Iraqi civilians trying to make a living in the chaos of post-invasion Iraq. Her view provides a multi-dimensional perspective on the occupation of the country, and the various configurations of power and interest forming in the aftermath of the invasion. However, also her position appears undermined in the end as she leaves the country without having achieved anything. Even though she gained access to the various Iraqi others, her knowledge does never challenge the prevailing mutually exclusive logics of an embodied and performed discourse of war. The framework of meaning that proves determinate of 'the situation' in Iraq remains in the hands of local groups and interests.



Image 67-68: Traversing constitutive barriers: Anna Molyneux's liminal character in *The Situation*.

In the final scene, Anna looks at the last pictures taken by her photographer before he died of the injuries he had sustained during the US attack on the Samarra insurgent stronghold. Perceiving her own body and increasingly blurred face on the tiny screen of the camera, she seems to become aware of the fact that, ultimately, also her performances had been framed and patterned

by the powers that be. As such, all discursive positions appear undermined with reference to the respective others' frames, while the spectators are left with the task to actively negotiate the various incommensurable discourses positioning them from within the diegetic universe. The situation, it seems, indeed changes in correspondence with the eye that sees, the voice that tells, and the ear that hears the story.



Image 69-72: Contingent frames and blurring identities: Anna Molyneux watches the last pictures taken by the dying photographer in *The Situation*.

### *Green Zone*

Set four weeks after the invasion of Iraq in 2003, Paul Greengrass' *Green Zone* follows the work of Roy Miller, a US soldier charged with checking the various sites where Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) are believed to be hidden. After repeatedly being sent to areas that have apparently been abandoned for years, he starts to question the value of the intelligence the soldiers base their raids upon. When his critical questions are overheard by a CIA officer, Miller is hired by the agency to find out the truth about the missing evidence. As the story progresses Miller uncovers a conspiracy to forge evidence to gain a case for war that reaches into the highest levels of US government and includes secret contacts to Saddam's former generals.

In *Green Zone* five parties are involved in a complex graduated conflict; the CIA, the US provisional administration in Iraq, a journalist, former high-ranking Iraqi officers, and Iraqi civilians. The structure of sympathy in the movie predominantly invites for allegiance with Roy

Miller and the CIA, but increasingly balances this discursive position with reference to Freddy, an Iraqi civilian hired by Miller to serve as a translator.

Greengrass' film begins with a black screen. An ambient background mix of US news programmes reporting on the shock-and-awe attack initiating the invasion of Iraq is heard and repeatedly interrupted by massive explosions. When the image fades in, the camera captures an Iraqi general, Al Rawi, who abandons his residency and flees to a safe house together with his family and closest associates. This initial presentation provides an unexpected insight into the nature of shock and awe warfare at the receiving end of the deployed violence. At the same time, in providing access to the point of view and the experiences of the enemy, the opening sequence prepares the grounds for a development of divided loyalties by the audience, and an ambiguous presentation of the conflict in Iraq.

The initial adoption of an Iraqi point of view is quickly exchanged for a US perspective, once main protagonist Roy Miller enters the stage. The film meticulously follows him and his team as they operate in the chaotic and confusing environment of post-invasion Iraq. A quivering, often hand-held camera provides brief glimpses of streets crowded with looters. The adopted perspective often indicates a position inside a US vehicle and allows for only fragmented access of what is happening around the soldiers. Quick cutting and a quivering movement of the camera, together with an ambient background sound that is composed of traffic noise, indistinguishable Iraqi voices, and repeated shooting create an incomprehensible and potentially threatening atmosphere.



Image 73-76: Penetrating into chaos: The hegemonic gaze of main protagonist Miller in *Green Zone*.

Voice-over intercom communication and short dialogues supported through shot/reverse-shot sequences introduce the main characters and reveal that Roy Miller and his men are heading for a site where, according to their information, Iraqi WMDs are stored. Upon arrival the soldiers engage in a fire fight with a ubiquitously absent Iraqi sniper. Now, the camera quickly moves between the members of Miller's team constructing them as a well-functioning, professional unit seemingly unaffected by the chaotic situation surrounding them. When engaging the sniper, the camera adopts the subjective perspective of US soldiers implicating the viewer in their position. The lens repeatedly peeps around corners, briefly captures an empty street, quickly sweeps across the empty windows of abandoned buildings apparently searching for the hidden source of enemy fire, or suddenly retreats behind a wall after a gunshot is heard. An almost entirely diegetic sound track is composed of panting breaths, short orders, and sudden gunfire that causes an immediate reaction of either camera or depicted protagonist and this way further aligns the spectator to the subjective position of the soldier-self. Repeatedly, eyeline matches focalize the events through Roy Miller who emerges as the predominant focalizer and main object for audience identification. Brief glimpses of bystanding Iraqis reduce these to mere background features - indistinguishable masses of wildly gesticulating and noisy, yet voiceless, potentially threatening figures.

Throughout the sequences described above, *Green Zone* apparently evokes a similar epistemological condition as does *The Hurt Locker*. The soldier-self is depicted as operating behind protective epistemological and topographical barriers that confine an inherently hostile, dangerous and inaccessible enemy-other. Audience alignment and allegiance is unequivocally directed towards a soldier-self embodied in the character of Roy Miller. However, while Bigelow's film maintains this condition throughout the whole narrative, *Green Zone* to a growing extent introduces the Iraqi adversaries, and deploys a liminal character to reconstitute the barrier and overdetermine the discursive identity of main protagonist Roy Miller.





Image 77-82: Audio-visually aligning the spectator: Soldier-self and the ubiquitously absent sniper in *Green Zone*.

As the story progresses the epistemological barrier constituting the soldier-self in form of Miller and his men becomes increasingly fragile. When for instance stuck in a traffic jam, the US team is surrounded by angry and wildly gesticulating Iraqi men. During the scene the soldier-self is forced to acknowledge the grievances underlying the other's increasing rage. Even though the audio-visual regime still exclusively aligns and allies the spectator to the US soldiers, the indistinguishable mix of angry faces and incomprehensible Arab voices is suddenly pin-pointed by Miller in stating the reasons for the outrage of the crowd surrounding them; the inability of the occupation forces to provide such basic goods as water, fuel, and order. This, together with Miller's explicit challenge during a press briefing of official US intelligence assessments that again and again lead his team to obviously fake WMD sites, presents the foot soldier as slowly gaining access to realities on the ground that remain foreclosed to the political and military leadership working behind the secure topographical and epistemological barrier that protects the Green Zone.

As such, the embodied and performed experience of the war in the streets of Iraq starts to overdetermine a subject-position that is constituted in and through a hegemonic discourse of war.

In this respect Miller's discursive position resembles the one of Ferris in *Body of Lies*. However, in contrast to Scott's film, *Green Zone* does not only reposition the main protagonist within a refined hegemonic position of the soldier-self, but increasingly enforces a choice between two competing hegemonic frames overdetermining the main character.

Greengrass' movie continues with a sequence that is focalized through Iraqis. Firstly, an Iraqi civilian observing the arrival of general Al Rawi at a safe house, and secondly, the discussions between Al Rawi and a group of former army officers. Here, the rationalities and subjectivities of the dawning insurgency become accessible to the audience. A discursive logic of difference is established that reconstitutes the monolithic other as consisting of various competing groups and interests that seek a role in the "new Iraq". The fact that these army officers plan to start an armed uprising in case their needs are not met does further undermine official US policies developed behind the constitutive barriers protecting the Green Zone from the rest of the country.

Even though his identity as soldier-self is increasingly challenged by what he sees, the character of Roy Miller is not yet overdetermined by a competing Iraqi discourse. This first happens when he is approached by the Iraqi civilian who had observed Al Rawi's arrival. Assuming the Americans won't be able to properly pronounce his real name, the Iraqi man simply introduces himself as Freddy. He quickly emerges as a liminal character who establishes a potentially subversive middle ground that increasingly challenges the opposing, yet mutually constitutive, logics of the conflict between a US occupation and an evolving insurgency led by former Iraqi military. Freddy's articulations, and later performances, reposition Miller within an alternative frame and increasingly overdetermine his discursive identity. This overdetermination extends to the audience who is invited to align and ally with Miller's character.

The first meeting between Freddy and Roy Miller enhance the latter's dawning awareness of contingency and illustrates a gradual repositioning within alternative frames. Miller's team digs up a road in the middle of a densely populated square in Baghdad since intelligence indicates an underground WMD storage facility. Miller is called to the border of the established perimeter that constitutes the secured discursive space of the soldier-self, because "a local Hadji" wanted to talk to him. In this scene Freddy lies on the ground and is held down by a US soldier who obviously expected nothing but hostile intentions. The language the US soldiers use to represent the Iraqi other is derogatory and ignorant.

When finally able to get up, Freddy asks angrily why the US soldiers put him to the ground with his face in the dust, and inquires agitatedly whether Miller would like to be treated like that. In continuation of his speech he exposes the severe restraints protective epistemological barriers pose for the ability of the soldier-self to sufficiently understand the environment they are forced to work in. Freddy informs the soldiers about the secret meetings of Baathist officials nearby. When Miller asks why he should believe Freddy, the latter exposes Miller's blindness for the situation they are working under. He questions whether Miller believes it to be easy to approach US troops with all the surrounding people watching, and that he had intended to speak to them quietly when he was put to the ground. Then, he asks with an unbelieving voice why the Americans are digging in the ground and informs them that people are laughing at them saying how could anyone put anything in the ground in the middle of this square without them noticing. "You have to ask the people", he exclaims.

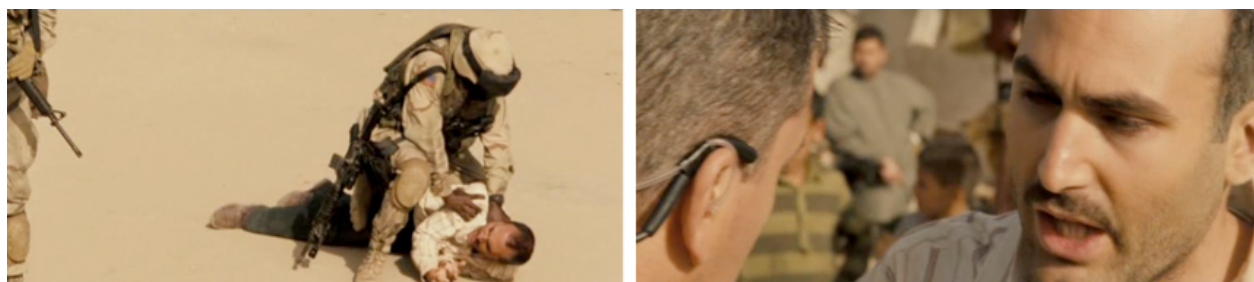


Image 83-84: 'Why are you digging in the ground?' The liminal border-crosser 'Freddy' in *Green Zone*.

Freddy's eloquence and the apparent righteousness of his complaints invite audience allegiance to his character. His emerging competing position is audio-visually supported through for instance the repeated use of eyeline matches to indicate Freddy's point of view or a balanced distribution of shot/reverse-shot sequences between the Iraqi character and Miller when indicating a dialogue between the two. Freddy provides a face and a voice to the Iraqi civilian other, and articulates a discourse that had previously been confined by the epistemological barriers rendering stability to a hegemonic discourse of war.

The sequences described above diversify and make ambiguous the generic structure of sympathy established throughout the exposition chapter of Greengrass' film. The deployed technical devices increasingly facilitate shifting allegiances by the audience. Freddy's articulations overdetermine the discursive identity of the soldier-self, potentially making new forms of agency available to the main character. Miller's deviation from the hegemonic pattern of behaviour is illustrated through an ensuing violent confrontation with US special forces.

Thanks to Freddy's information an important target is apprehended by Miller's team. Throughout the following sequences, however, US special forces intervene and abduct the high-value prisoners, spoiling Miller's plan to capture Iraqi general Al Rawi. The leader of the special forces team becomes recognizable to the audience. As the narrative progresses, he increasingly acquires the function of a main adversary who stands in for an otherwise incomprehensible, evil enemy-other within the US military and political leadership. Later on he is for instance depicted while torturing Miller's high-value prisoner and while executing extrajudicial killings. He reappears in the final showdown where he is killed. This way, and similar to *Body of Lies* or *Avatar*, Greengrass' film constructs an unequivocal enemy-other within the ranks of the soldier-self that ultimately serves to stabilize the main protagonist's hegemonic discursive identity.



Image 85: The main adversary in *Green Zone*.

Miller's gradual repositioning within alternative frames, however, continues after the confrontation with the emerging new enemy-other. When challenged by Freddy for his constant suspicion, Miller is forced to perceive his actions in a new light. When promising Freddy a reward for his information, Miller is met with disbelief: "You think I did this for money? (...) You don't think I did this for me? For my future? For my country? For all these things? Whatever you want here, I want more." This articulation effectively establishes the discourse constitutive of Freddy's identity as hegemonic in the material and performed context of post-invasion Iraq. Freddy emerges here as more than the token Iraqi repositioned by a refined discourse of war and articulates a clear alternative. Freddy knows more, wants more, and can cooperate with the soldier-self, but he is ultimately engaged in his own struggle that goes deeper and beyond the perceptual and conceptual

limits of an occupying force that confines itself behind epistemological barriers, however refined these might become. At this point, *Green Zone* points beyond the discursive logic of some of the films mentioned earlier in this chapter. In contrast to *Body of Lies* or *Avatar*, in Greengrass' film the encounter with the formerly confined other does not simply reposition the soldier-self within the frames of a merely refined hegemonic discourse of war. The character of Freddy resists interpellation and continues to articulate, and at a crucial moment also performs, an alternative discursive position that challenges and threatens to dislodge established hegemonic frames of war.

As the narrative of *Green Zone* progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that Freddy's role as translator far exceeds the issue of language and conversation. Freddy becomes a native informant who articulates the various discursive identities of the Iraqi-other, and provides insights into the supports and restraint that frame their apparently hostile performances. As such, he does not only facilitate the operations carried out by the soldier-self, but serves as a liminal character who exposes unintended consequences and undermines established subject-positions with reference to alternative frames of meaning.

Greengrass' film emphasises the increasing overdetermination of hegemonic frames through the deployment of a new audio-visual regime that increasingly competes with the one focalized through main character Miller. As the film progresses, eyeline matches repeatedly indicate the point of view of Freddy who, working as Miller's translator, represents a different gaze on the conditions surrounding the two characters. This becomes particularly evident when he and Miller visit a US-run prison camp. While Miller, apparently out of habit, looks through the torture, suffering, and engrained racism enacted by his fellow soldiers, Freddy's face mirrors disbelief, increasing disgust, and mounting fear. Also the formerly incomprehensible voices of Iraqi background figures suddenly become meaning bearing expressions. When waiting in a cell, Freddy listens to what an apparently mistreated prisoner tells him and asks Miller whether he knows why the man was brought here. Freddy's voice and facial expression clearly indicate that he just had heard an outrageous story. Miller, however, is not interested in hearing the story at all and simply turns away reiterating that the man had been brought here "because he is Republican Guard, Freddy!"



Image 86-89: Competing focalization: Freddy's liminal gaze in *Green Zone*.

Through Freddy's articulations, Miller's character is positioned by two mutually exclusive discursive frames. This form of overdetermination cannot be negotiated but necessitates an active choice. What is exposed to Miller (and the audience) through the eyes and ears of Freddy makes it, if acknowledged, impossible to maintain the identity as soldier-self. And Miller chooses. He mechanically continues to perform the identity of the soldier-self blocking off the intrusive gaze and voice of Freddy. As such, he refuses to listen to what Freddy has to say about the talk of the incidental prisoner and mechanically repeats the phrase he had heard before apparently unwilling to accept yet another articulation challenging his discursive identity.

Miller automatically and schematically performs the embodied subject-position of soldier-self, while Freddy actively articulates a competing discourse emanating from the social and material environment the two characters operate in. In relation to the audience, Freddy's character here develops from a native informant facilitating the development of a refined war performance to a witness recording and disseminating the 'true' nature of his supposedly beneficial liberators. The sequences set in the prison also expose a structural violence of racism and prejudice as constitutive of the identity of the soldier-self, and extend the atrocities committed in Iraq beyond the sphere of private contractors and occasional rotten apples in the US military effectively pointing to their systemic nature.

Miller's resistance to the continuous interpellations from a hegemonic civilian frame that are emanating from Freddy increasingly challenges audience allegiance to his character. To be able

to maintain a structure of sympathy that invites for identification with Miller, *Green Zone* repositions the main protagonist within refined discursive frames of war. In this process the constitutive barrier toward a new enemy-other within the US military, and the main character's developing cooperation with the CIA become crucial. However, in contrast to the *Body of Lies* and *Avatar*, in the discursive universe of *Green Zone* this refined discursive identity of Miller never reasserts a hegemonic position.

The inclusion of Miller into the CIA opens for a subject-position that continues to function as the soldier-self, yet at the same time works to expose and contain the rotten apples within the military and intelligence communities that become scapegoats for the violence and suffering in the country exposed by Freddy and enacted by the soldiers on the ground. This way, the character of Miller can seemingly accommodate Freddy's articulations without subverting his own subject-position. The competing discourse of the other is framed as leading to discursive change and not subversion. One crucial performance by Freddy, however, spoils this evolving narrative closure.

Similar to *Platoon*, Greengrass' *Green Zone* draws an epistemological barrier that divides an unequivocally good soldier-self from an evil one and assigns the horrible consequences of war to the misguided or evil intentions of individuals. As a consequence, the way the war is fought can be criticized without extending that criticism to the average US soldier. Greengrass' film, as such, successfully deflects possible charges marking it as anti-soldier or anti-military, thus significantly increasing its expected range of address. Above all, however, this move seems to enable Miller to maintain his discursive identity of soldier-self and deflect the subversive articulations emanating from Freddy.

Through his work for the CIA Miller finds out that the Iraqi general Al Rawi in secret meetings before the war had told US officials that Iraq had dismantled its WMD programme. The US administration had, however, falsified the reports to gain a case for war. To keep this secret, the special forces unit is sent out to silence the former informant, General Al Rawi. The evolving race to get hold of the secret source, however, holds a surprising outcome.

When preparing to cut a deal with Al Rawi, Miller is confronted by an increasingly agitated Freddy who asks him whether he has any idea of what men such as Al Rawi have done to Iraq. Miller responds that he tries to stop an insurgency and expose the truth about alleged Iraqi WMDs, and that these good intentions override his concerns. Miller at this point clearly articulates the subject-position of soldier-self framed by a refined hegemonic discourse of war. Freddy's warns

Miller that he should “look at what is happening”, implying a need to check his emerging position with reference to the material and socio-political environment of Iraq. This articulation is deflected by Miller who enunciates from a discursive position of power that Freddy should “do his job” effectively positioning him within his own refined hegemonic frames.

Miller finally captures Al Rawi after a protracted chase through night-time Baghdad that also sees the death of the main adversary carrying out the extra-judicial killings for the US administration. Being in possession of the man who holds the secret about alleged Iraqi WMDs, Miller now seems in the position to dismantle a conspiracy that leads into the highest echelons of government. At this moment, however, Al Rawi is suddenly executed by Freddy. When Miller asks him what he is doing, Freddy simply replies: “It is not for you to decide what happens here [in Iraq]”. Miller then tells his former translator to leave before US forces arrive implicitly acknowledging the legitimacy of his action.



Image 90: ‘It is not for you to decide what happens here!’ Performing a civilian hegemonic identity in *Green Zone*.

Through the defiant killing of Miller’s prime witness Freddy’s character reinstates a civilian Iraqi discourse as hegemonic and reasserts the Iraqi people as active agents determining their own future against the direct interests not only of an evil enemy-other in US uniform, but even against the refined subject-position of the soldier-self working for a benevolent cause. The death of Al Rawi also confines the patriarchal, undemocratic, and militarist ‘indigenous’ discourse of war that gained a hegemonic position through the character of Hani in *Body of Lies*. In precluding Miller’s ploy, Freddy precludes the happy ending of the cinematic narrative and makes one point clear; this



is not about US interior politics or geopolitical interests. This is about Iraq. An Iraq with many competing faces, rationalities, vested interests, fears, hopes, and grievances. Here liminality reveals its subversive potentials and deconstructs a hegemonic generic discourse in positing a civilian other in a location of agency, self-sustainability, and indeed superiority.

Even though he attempted to reveal the truth about the cause for war, and in spite of the fact that he was overdetermined by a competing Iraqi discourse, Miller appears in the end repositioned within a refined hegemonic frame of war. The last scene shows him setting out on a new patrol as a US soldier continuing to perform the occupation of Iraq on behalf of the powers that be. This way, even though challenging and partly dislodging this hegemonic subject-position, the discursive identity of the soldier-self is sustained. However, in contrast to the above mentioned films *Body of Lies* and *Avatar*, audience allegiance remains divided between two competing subject-positions which interpellate the spectator in competing discursive frames. By these means the film extends its scope of address. The hegemonic and mutually exclusive logic of war can be effectively deconstructed by an audience that at the same time is enabled to maintain allegiance to American soldiers dying abroad. The liminal character of Freddy affords this form of overdetermination enabling an ambiguous perspective on the occupation of Iraq.

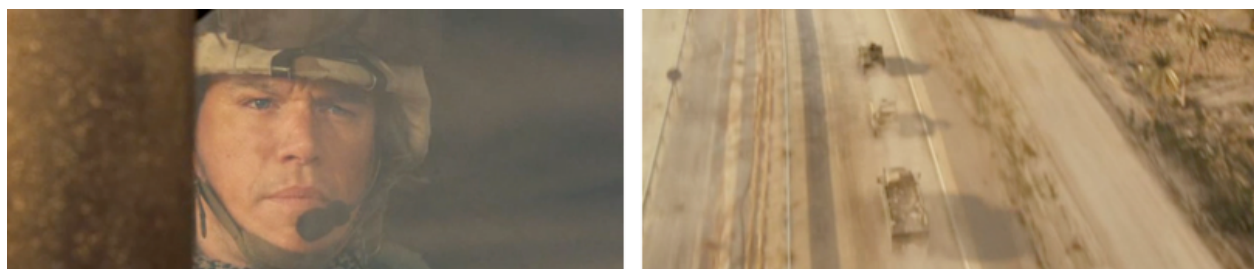


Image 91-92: Maintaining allegiance to the soldier-self: Main protagonist Miller returns to active service in the end of *Green Zone*.

### *Battle for Haditha*

Nick Broomfield's *Battle for Haditha* (UK 2007) is a fictionalized reenactment of an incident in the Iraqi town of Haditha in 2005 where US soldiers killed 24 civilians during a protracted raid to apprehend insurgents responsible for an IED attack. Broomfield largely refrained from filming on a set and predominantly relied on non-professional actors – US veterans formerly stationed in Iraq and Iraqi refugees who had fled the country. This led to a peculiar authenticity of the presentation and entailed some stunning accomplishments by the cast. As Broomfield explains on the commentary track of the DVD edition he often simply let the camera run to capture performances that quickly developed their own unintended dynamics.

*Battle for Haditha* presents a graduated conflict between five distinct groups; US ground troops, US military leadership, Iraqi civilians, Iraqi insurgents, and Iraqi insurgent leadership. The structure of sympathy evoked through the biased deployment of particular technical and narrative devices systematically proposes alignment and allegiance to three of these groups; US ground troops, Iraqi civilians, and Iraqi insurgents. In spite of the fact that each group remains confined behind epistemological barriers that render the respective other inaccessible, the spectator is invited to identify with all of them. As a consequence, the spectator-subject is overdetermined by three apparently mutually exclusive diegetic discursive frames that appear equally legitimate. This happens on an extra-diegetic liminal space of reception.

As a result of this overdetermination by three competing diegetic discourses that are equally legitimate, yet mutually exclusive, the atrocities and suffering of war are framed not as due to individual evil intentions that can be confined by the death of a main adversary, but as inherently systemic in nature. The hegemonic, and inherently material discourse of war overdetermines all characters and systematically reduces the paradigm of possible performances up to the virtual enforcement of violent and morally contestable actions. Consequently, in bringing to light the severe restraints and multiple pressures the US soldiers, Iraqi civilians, and Iraqi insurgents are forced to act under, responsibility for the massacre is assigned at the highest possible level - the military and insurgent leaderships whose decisions are presented as guided by tactical and strategic considerations that consciously disregard the lives of innocent bystanders and soldiers alike to accommodate a narrow military approach to the resolution of a complex and multidimensional conflict. The severe violence deployed by protagonists remains unjustified, and therefore unenjoyable. Nevertheless, the film invites for allegiance with the perpetrators in openly presenting the discursive frames facilitating and, indeed enforcing, their atrocious actions even against their own better judgement.

Broomfield's film employs a form of triple focalization that visually and conceptually aligns the viewer to the perspective of three different parties. Shot/reverse-shot sequences for instance visually accompany dialogues between US soldiers or between the members of a Haditha family providing a complex picture of their situation and the various pressures limiting their performances, while long sequences carefully introduce the character of an Iraqi insurgent in the roles of loving father, husband, and secular citizen, who is forced to plant IEDs for money since he was demobilized from the Iraqi army and left without the necessary support to sustain his family.

The film carefully explains the reasons behind the specific conduct of each party. The US soldiers are forced to operate under severe pressures and suffer from lack of sleep and support that increasingly cause psychological problems for the main protagonist. Even though he specifically asks for medical assistance, he is reminded of Marine Corps policy that only allows for visiting a doctor after the respective tour of duty is over. The presentation of such facts is an effective means to undermine a hegemonic discourse of war framing military units as brotherhoods of equals guided by compassionate and responsible leaders, while it at the same time absolves the ground forces from the ultimate responsibility for the atrocious escalation of the conflict.



Image 93-95: Overdetermining the spectator: triple focalization in *Battle for Haditha*.

The Iraqi insurgency is presented as composed of various different factions – religious fanatics, cynical politicians, and individuals who were deprived of social status and economic means of sustenance. The main insurgent protagonist despises both Bush and Al-Qaeda as he attempts to manoeuvre through the difficult terrain of post-invasion Iraq with the single intention of making a living for himself and his family. In particular the scenes where he, after the successful attack, returns home and meets his little daughter strongly invites for audience allegiance with his discursive position as father. Also, a dialogue with the local imam and military and spiritual leader of the insurgency reveals his contempt for the means adopted by his superiors who remorselessly sacrifice local families to unite the factions of the city behind their cause, and exploit his economic hardships for that purpose.

*Battle for Haditha* does not frame the Iraqi civilians as helpless victims of the powers that be. After the Iraqi family observes the deployment of an IED on the road bordering their property, Broomfield films their discussions and debates concerning the issue. This allows for a detailed presentation of the various pressures predisposing the family's response and explains the apparently hostile decision not to warn US troops with the strong Al-Qaeda presence in the city posing a significant threat to anyone suspicious of cooperating with the Americans. The Iraqi civilians are presented as making conscious and informed decisions promising the least damaging outcome, and includes both men and women in the process effectively precluding the emergence of a gendered stereotype regarding Iraqi civilian life.

In dividing the loyalties of the audience between three opposing groups positioned by each their respective discourse Broomfield overdetermines the spectator from within the frames of the movie. The constant preclusion of an ultimate allegiance to one particular faction raises awareness for the epistemological barriers dividing, and at the same time constituting, these groups' discursive identities. As all characters are repositioned by a hegemonic discourse of war, powerful chains of difference are drawn positing the groups in a relation of inherently violent mutual exclusivity that systematically predisposes their performances in a way that inevitably leads to disaster. This awareness for the discursive effects of such barriers is a precondition for the challenge of such barriers by spectator-subjects overdetermined by the movie's various discursive frames.

During the scenes of violent escalation the camera repeatedly jumps back and forth between the subjective perspectives of the three directly involved parties allowing constant access to the considerations, motivations, doubts, and fears of characters belonging to the three factions, and illustrating the quickly narrowing paradigm of available actions. Long dwelling shots, sorrowful music, and short sequences showing mutual care are distributed equally among the three groups and serve to humanize each side and facilitate the emotional involvement of the audience on behalf of all those involved.

The US and insurgent leaderships, on the other hand, are depicted as observing the scenes through binoculars on a minaret, and through footage provided by aerial surveillance cameras. This remote access draws a second epistemological barrier - this time between US military and insurgent leaders on the one side, and the groups suffering on the ground on the other. This way the film effectively illustrates the necessity of epistemological barriers for the justification of violence imposed on fellow human beings for strategic purposes, and at the same time utterly delegitimizes

military authority and leadership as vested in mainly theoretical assumptions regarding the nature of the enemy and the necessity of violent conduct. Even though individual soldiers and insurgents effectuate the killings, ultimate responsibility is assigned to the discursive positions of power motivating and predisposing the individual subjects' destructive performances.

The last scenes of Broomfield's film underline these distinctions, and serve to re-enable allegiance with protagonists who had been presented as killing an innocent Iraqi family. Initially honoured with medals for their outstanding work, the Marines executing the operation are charged with various counts of murder for their actions, according to their superior, with the intention of saving the reputation of the corps. The camera then zooms in on the face of the main protagonist, Sgt. Ruiz, before a cut provides access to his inner world, showing the counterfactual event of him entering the Iraqi house and saving a little girl from flames and destruction. The scene illustrates Ruiz's remorse, but also his inability to psychologically tackle his traumatic experience. As such, instead of following Stone's or de Palma's example who in *Platoon* and *Redacted* (USA 2006) simply draw an epistemological barrier toward the soldier-perpetrators rendering the reasons for their actions, and the traumatic consequences of their experiences inaccessible, Broomfield humanizes them and presents them as exploited and severely damaged individuals ultimately victimized by the discursive logic of war. This, together with Broomfield's consistent triple-focalization enables considerable liminal potentials that overdetermine the spectator on an extra-diegetic liminal space of reception.

#### *I Am Legend* (director's cut)

As has been argued in the previous chapter, the officially released version of Lawrence's *I Am Legend* entails some severe narrative inconsistencies. As such, the sudden development of the vampires' cognitive capacities and organisational skills remain without explanation. In this official version an ending is afforded that reinforces a hegemonic discourse of war that reduces the enemy-other to a symptom of a deadly virus that has to be either destroyed or cured. An unequivocal structure of sympathy systematically facilitates alignment and allegiance with the main protagonist and positions the spectator within the frames of a hegemonic diegetic discourse of war without enabling a challenge or subversion from within the diegetic frames. All this changes in the director's cut. In adding a new ending and a few extra scenes, this alternative version effectively punctuates the discursive logic of polarisation that remains constitutive of the official release. This is achieved on the shared liminal location of Neville's laboratory that has been turned into a field of battle.

Throughout the narrative of *I Am Legend* several cues are deployed that tacitly imply a possible evolution of the other. When Neville for instance captures a “female specimen” for his experiments, a male appears in the door and exposes himself to the light of the sun that is deadly for vampires before retreating with a scream. Neville is unable to interpret this behaviour as caused by possible care for the captured individual, but merely records this event as due to a complete breakdown of human capacities for reasoning, effectively reducing the enemy to the status of animal life. Later on, the main protagonist is caught in a sophisticated trap that the enemy-other has put into place by copying the mechanism Neville himself used to get hold of specimen for his experiments. The stunning fact that the other has developed the skills to construct such a device, and to ensnare its victim by distributing shop window dummies in the area, remains unacknowledged by the main character.

Neville remains positioned by an embodied hegemonic discourse of war that makes the other inconceivable as anything but a dehumanized deadly threat, or an objectified symptom of disease. The epistemological barrier constitutive of Neville’s subject-position continues to confine the other and effectively prevents the emergence of articulations that might challenge or subvert the preconceived discursive identities of self and other entangled in a deadly struggle for survival. However, in the director’s cut this barrier starts to crack after the arrival of the human survivors Anna and Ethan, and during a final showdown in the laboratory it dissolves entirely.

One scene is crucial for the denaturalisation of Neville’s discursive position. When he shows Anna his laboratory she catches sight of the female vampire Neville had newly caught. Neville calms her down saying “It’s heavily sedated. Don’t worry it’s safe.” Anna doesn’t react to what he says. She approaches the other tied to a stretcher and a close-up on her face reveals that she watches the creature intensely, saying “I have never seen them so still...” She then continues to ask: “Will that [the test serum] cure her?” Neville replies with a matter of fact voice that “no, this will almost certainly kill it”. When Anna turns away the camera follows her movement filming over her shoulder to indicate her point of view. It finally catches sight of hundreds of black and white photographs covering the whole back wall of the laboratory. All the images have the same format and style. All show the face of a vampire and are marked with various information written in tiny letters under each image. Anna stands paralyzed for a few second before she asks: “Did all of them die?” Neville answers without looking up with a brief and simple ‘yes’, whereupon Anna utters an exasperated “My God...”



Image 96: “Did all of them die?” Rehumanizing the objectified other in *I Am Legend* (director’s cut).

This sequence clearly shows the degree of dehumanisation of the other the hegemonic discourse positioning the main protagonist is based on and implies. Anna articulates an alternative framework that is for instance represented in her use of the personal pronouns ‘he’ or ‘she’ as opposed to Neville’s ‘it’ when referring to the vampires. These articulations are visually supported by a different gaze that enables an individualisation and rehumanisation of the enemy-other, and does not only challenge Neville’s hegemonic point of view, but also brings the epistemological barrier that constitutes his discursive identity to the sudden awareness of the audience effectively inviting for the adoption of a different diegetic subject-position. Similar to the character of Miller in *Green Zone*, however, Neville remains insensitive to this potential repositioning. He is unable to accept Anna’s articulation for what it really is; a rearticulation of the enemy-other as a fellow human being. Therefore, Neville snaps back into his scientific mindset by targeting the element of God in Anna’s speech, effectively circumventing an engagement with the subversive potentials emanating from her new perspective on the constitutive enemy-other. Neville simply states that “God didn’t do this, Anna. We did”, implying a repetition of his mantra ‘I can still fix this’.

During a later conversation Anna explicitly bases her discursive identity in a belief in God and challenges Neville’s scientific discourse of war from this particular subject-position. In contrast to the officially released version, however, the ensuing events do not prove Anna’s religious discourse right, but bring into motion again both the discursive identity of the soldier-self represented by Neville, and a religious subject-position represented by Anna.

In the following night Neville’s stronghold is attacked by a raving mass of extremely aggressive vampires. During these scenes, the other is filmed in quivering, long and extreme long-

shots. It is depicted in constant menacing advance and remains entirely unidentifiable and anonymous. Only the main adversary becomes recognizable to the audience as an individual; the male who had exposed himself to the sunlight before and who now directs the evil hordes from a distance. During the struggle Neville, Anna, and Ethan are forced to retreat into the laboratory. In the end only the transparent security glass of a quarantine section where also the female specimen is located, protects them from the ravaging enemies.

While the officially released version defuses this potential liminal situation in annihilating both Neville and all his opponents in the blast of an explosive device triggered by the main protagonist to save Anna and Ethan, the director's cut presents a surprising turn of events. The following scenes where the main adversary again and again throws himself against the security glass that slowly starts to crack under his vicious onslaught are filmed as series of shot/reverse-shot sequences indicating once the point of view of Neville who wields a pistol and exclaims that he can save everybody because his serum works, and the main adversary reacting with apparent outrage. Then a series of close-ups shows the two opponents facing each other, before the enemy-other suddenly smears what appears to be a butterfly on the protecting glass wall and retreats. Neville's face, filmed in a close-up, reveals his dawning understanding when he slowly turns around the body of the female he had been experimenting with and reveals the tattoo of a butterfly on her arm. The shock this sudden discovery of the enemy-other's humanity and subjectivity entails is clearly reflected on the main protagonist's face.

Neville slowly puts the gun down, carefully removes the tabs and tubes that insert the serum in the woman's body and tells Anna to open the door. When she asks what he is doing, Neville answers: "I start listening." In this case, however, this does not imply that Neville starts to listen to the voice of God implying a successful repositioning within Anna's hegemonic religious discourse, but that he now engages in a first to second person dialogue with the enemy. Neville has started listening to the previously confined voice of the other. This evolving communication with the enemy is enabled on the shared liminal location of the battlefield that had been blown to pieces - and thereby deprived of its subversive potentials - in the officially released version of the film.





Image 97-99: Dislodging mutually exclusive identities of war: liminal grounds in *I Am Legend* (director's cut).

Neville then leaves the quarantine section with the female vampire lying on a stretcher and is eagerly awaited by his adversaries outside. Dwelling close-ups and mid-shots on the main adversary and the woman that are supported by low music reveal anxiety for the other, mutual affection, care, and love, and strongly invite audience allegiance with their evolving characters. Once the main adversary carries the woman outside all the vampires follow him leaving Neville, Anna, and Ethan behind without harming them. A last eyeline match that indicates Neville's perspective focuses once again on the hundreds of black and white photographs covering the laboratory wall. This time, Neville's face clearly expresses that he perceives the depicted faces as

individuals, and indeed his victims, effectively indicating his adoption of a different gaze, and the successful dislodging of the hegemonic identity of the soldier-self.

Throughout the sequences in the laboratory, the enemy-other has been rehumanized and resubjectified. The other emerges not only as an alternative discursive identity, but as a morally and ethically superior agent who refrains from avenging the terrible sufferings Neville had been subjecting their species to during his experiments. The iconography of the laboratory with the meticulously recorded mass murder committed for a presumably good cause against victims that had been discursively reduced to mere vegetative life uncannily reminds the viewer of imageries connected to ‘scientific’ experiments carried out in Nazi concentration camps during World War II. This choice of style draws a chain of equivalence between the main protagonist and focalizer of the narrative through whom the audience is discursively positioned, and the physicians experimenting in the death camps. It as such effectively underlines the extreme consequences the discursive construction of the other as less than human might imply.

In the director’s cut of *I Am Legend* the liminal field of battle enables dialogue and reconstitutes an epistemological and topographical barrier as an inherently connective zone of contact and negotiation. In making possible a first to second person discourse where the voice and gaze of the other matters and is acknowledged even at the cost of subverting own hegemonic identities, liminality reasserts the ultimate contingency of sedimented discursive frames and facilitates nonviolent conflict resolution. By these means discursive identities that are stabilized through the constitutive confinement of the other to an inaccessible beyond are successfully undermined.

In the last scene of the film, the breaking up of formerly sedimented subject-positions is visually emphasized through the spatial movement of the main protagonists who leave the (crushed) topographical barriers of Neville’s home behind and head into an unascertained beyond. The movement of their car across a bridge into the unknown illustrates a dislodging of Neville’s and Anna’s discursive identities. As such, in the end both scientific and religious hegemonic frames are effectively unsettled through the “performative encounter” (Rosello 2005) with the allegedly evil and deadly dangerous other. The contrast to the officially released version that reinstates an inherently patriotic and religious discourse as a hegemonic diegetic frame that necessitates the total annihilation of the other could hardly be more striking.

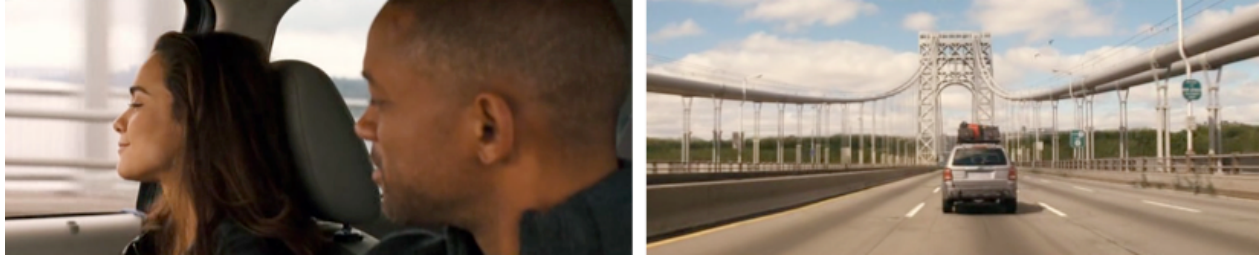


Image 100-101: Liminal (dis)locations: Dislodged subject-positions in *I Am Legend* (director's cut).

This closure brings the director's cut into close proximity to the narrative outcome of Matheson's 1954 novel, on which the film is based, where the main protagonist's final exclamation "I am legend" serves to indicate his sudden understanding that while having lived in the profound belief of having fought evil, in reality he himself had acted like the legendary monster killing transformed, yet still human, beings in their sleep. Published in the US at the height of McCarthyian cold war paranoia, it can be argued that Matheson's novel represents a comparably subversive comment on the predominant hegemonic discourse of its time, as Lawrence's director's cut constitutes in relation to the still raging global war on terror and its various strategies of populist othering. Arguing in a similar direction, Walliss and Aston (2011) state that "[t]he decision to release a more straightforward, unambiguous version [of *I Am Legend*] that resituated Manichean concepts of good and evil represents the contestation and difficulty in addressing such themes in a post-9/11 world where socio-political turbulence, military conflict and the War on Terror engendered a divisive terrain of meaning and representation" (62).

### The Grid

The movies discussed in this and the previous chapters can be placed into a grid that visualises the interrelation between certain variables. Below for instance an illustration of how liminality interrelates with structures of sympathy that invite allegiance with one or more conflict parties.

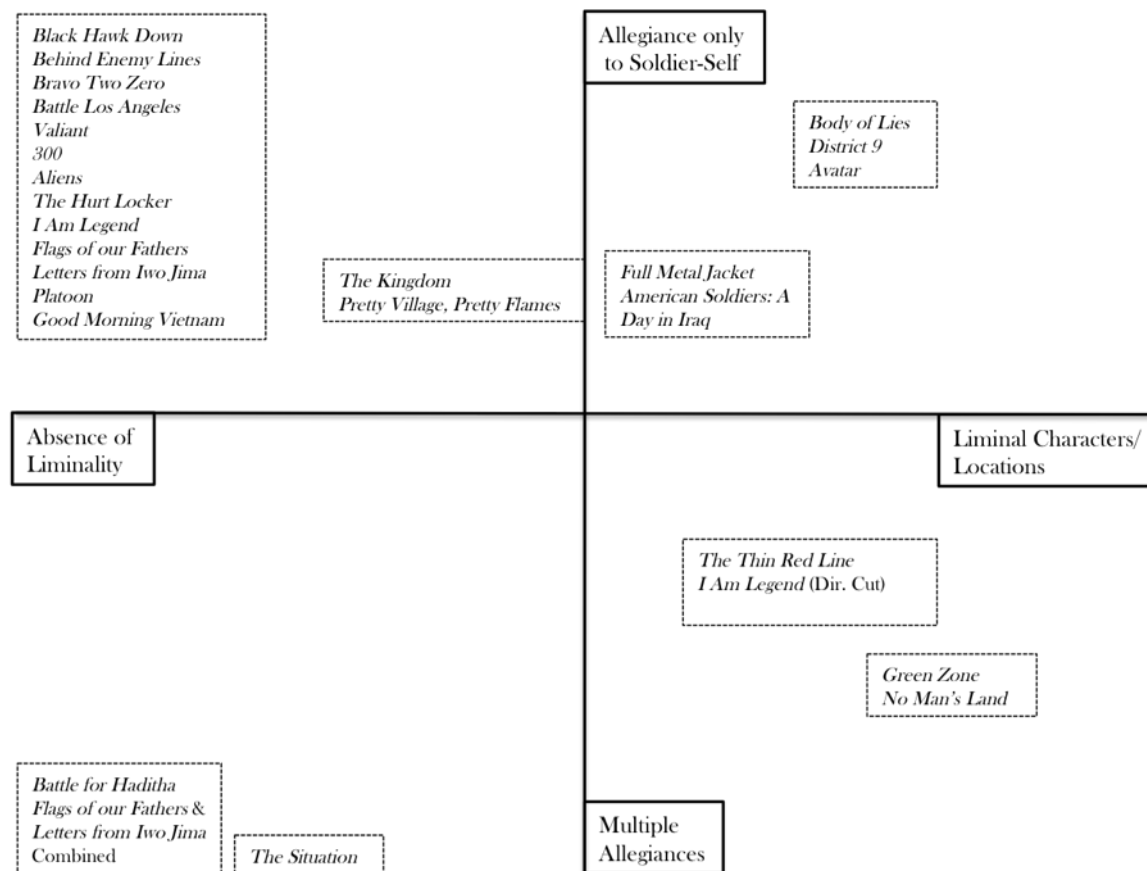


Figure 4: Liminalities and allegiances in the war genre.

Trough the grid several interconnections between the two variables become apparent; firstly, there seems to be a close connection between an absence of liminality and an allegiance to only one involved party. Secondly, in several works the deployment of liminal characters and liminal locations appears to entail structures of sympathy that invite for multiple allegiances. As it has been argued that liminality unsettles hegemonic discursive identities precisely in enabling access to a previously confined other thereby reasserting the ultimate contingency of naturalized structures and frames, these two interrelations are hardly surprising. Thirdly, however, the grid also reveals a body of works that combines the presence of liminal characters and/or liminal locations with allegiance to only one side, and fourthly, points to a series of movies that is characterized by an absence of liminality, yet at the same time invites for multiple allegiances. These two last categories point to a necessary diversification of several of the deployed concepts.

## Chapter 7: THEORETICAL REASSESSMENTS

Several of the detailed readings carried out above point to the necessity to further diversify the concepts and variables deployed so far. In this chapter I will refine the concepts of soldier-self, enemy-other, epistemological barrier, and liminality.

### 1. Diversifying Soldier-Self and Enemy-Other

#### Diversifying the Soldier-Self

The readings carried out so far have focused on the role epistemological barriers play in the constitution of the soldier-self. These barriers exclude a ubiquitously absent, yet threatening, outside and through this exclusion provide stability to a hegemonic subject-position. This dominant discursive identity, however, is not only formed in and through a mutually exclusive relation to an enemy-other, but also through the confinement of potentially subversive internal divisions. I will now direct attention to a selection of such internal divisions; race, class, politics, and gender.

#### Race, Class, and Politics

The analytical framework proposed so far aimed at assessing the technical and narrative means through which generic war movies constitute hegemonic identities. The identity of the soldier-self is shaped and stabilized through epistemological barriers that suppress an awareness of contingency in confining the alternative frameworks of meaning of the enemy-other to an inaccessible, yet implicitly constitutive outside. I have argued that, in systematically predisposing processes of identification with key characters, the emergent hegemonic film discourse positions the spectator within the same diegetic frames potentially overdetermining extra-diegetic subject-positions. To assert the existence of a hegemonic diegetic subject-position - the soldier-self - does however not imply that this discursive identity cannot be further diversified along various socio-political, cultural, or other axes. It only implies that none of these diversified identities is positioned to challenge the overarching structure of sympathy constituted through epistemological barriers toward ubiquitously absent enemy-others. All the diversified identities remain positioned by an overarching hegemonic frame of war, or are confined in particular narrative figures that deprive them of their subversive potentials. A few examples might help to explain this.

As has been shown in the reading above, *Platoon* stabilizes the subject-position of the soldier-self in confining both a Vietnamese, and an evil American enemy-other to an inaccessible

outside. At the same time, however, Stone's movie somewhat diversifies the emergent hegemonic discursive identity of the soldier-self in cautiously addressing issues of class and race. This happens for instance in brief dialogues between main protagonist Taylor and his fellow soldiers when the latter assert that in war always the poor people die, or when they complain about overt racism. Regardless such internal divisions, however, an overarching violent discourse of conflict positions all these characters within the same hegemonic frames, that patterns their performances toward a ubiquitously absent enemy-other in a violent manner. As such, even though some of the depicted characters verbally articulate critical positions the performative inertia of their discursive identity predisposes their actions in a direction that constantly enacts and reinforces the hegemonic frames.

A similar logic applies to John Irving's *Hamburger Hill* (USA 1987) - a straightforward Vietnam combat movie about the costly efforts of American soldiers to secure a strategically rather unimportant hill. Framed as a Manichean struggle against a ubiquitously absent enemy-other that excludes such options as retreat or surrender, the hegemonic discursive identity of soldier-self is also here constituted through clear epistemological barriers. However, in long sequences featuring the life in various US camps the emergent hegemonic identity of the soldier-self is diversified along the axis of race exposing a rather engrained racism of soldiers and military authorities. When fighting the enemy, however, all these divisions and contradictions are overdetermined by the constitutive conflict with the absent other that frames the movies hegemonic discursive identities.

Spike Lee's *Miracle at St Anna* (USA/Italy 2008) provides another example for the logic of race criss-crossing the hegemonic identity of soldier-self. The film tells the story of a group of four 'Buffalo soldiers' who are trapped behind enemy lines in Italy in 1944 and openly addresses the issue of engrained racial prejudice in the US armed forces during World War II. This becomes



Image 102: The soldier-self in *Miracle at St. Anna*.

especially clear when the white officer brings down an artillery attack on his own soldiers because he disbelieves the territorial advances these had reported. This attack forces them to hide behind enemy lines, where they rescue a small boy (the sole survivor of a

massacre carried out by the SS in a nearby village) make contact to partisans, and capture a

German deserter. During the film, the audience is consistently invited to align to and ally with the four black men, as their motivations, points-of-view, fears, and hopes are made available in detail. This way, Lee's movie constructs the hegemonic subject-position of soldier-self after all. This time, however, this identity is that of black soldiers constituted through an epistemological barrier toward an inherently racist US military as well as toward a ubiquitously absent German adversary.

*American Soldiers: A Day in Iraq*, a film about a US patrol in the contemporary Iraq theatre, brings into view political divisions that enable a diversification of the soldier-self. However, also in this film a hegemonic discourse of war deploys a chain of equivalence that bridges emerging contradictions. Here, the experiences of warfare and abuse, and the deployment of a captured insurgent as liminal character who articulates the complex grievances underlying the enemy-other's violent behaviour, lead the main characters to voice an at times severe criticism against their deployment in the country, and their role in the Iraq war. Through this criticism severe internal



Image 103: Predisposing reproductive performances: Epistemological barriers in *American Soldiers: A Day in Iraq*.

divisions, for instance between US soldiers and private contractors, become discernable. The permanent threat posed by the violent actions of ubiquitously absent enemies, however, establishes a narrow frame that predisposes the soldiers' actual performances in a way diametrically opposed to these critical, mostly linguistic articulations. In *American*

*Soldiers*, the embodied and performed nature of war discourse enforces the constant enactment of criticized discursive position. This continued interpellation through a hegemonic discourse of war might explain the assertion of Barker (2011) who states that in spite of the biting criticism they articulate against the ways the war in Iraq is conducted, the depicted American soldiers still represent "a military man's wet dream" (77). Emerging internal divisions remain overdetermined by the inertia of a sedimented discourse of war that suppresses liminal potentials and continues to position the characters within the hegemonic frames constitutive of the soldier-self.

Often potential subversive effects of class or race divisions are contained in particular stereotypical protagonists. The well educated and apparently upper class character of Col. John

Cambridge in *The Hurt Locker*, for instance, is framed as naïve and inexperienced. His attempts to communicate politely with Baghdad locals constitute an implicit challenge to the established conduct of the other US soldiers. The performance of a competing discursive position, however, costs him his life in that the very individuals he approached, leave a bomb that kills him, thereby containing the subversive potentials of his articulations and performances.

## Gender

In the contemporary war film, also gender divisions are overdetermined by a hegemonic frame of war. As such, neither internal divisions that diversify the soldier-self along the lines of various competing masculinities or femininities entail the reassertion of an ultimate contingency of discursive identities. Not unlike the issue of race discussed above, the subversive potentials of gender divisions are either overdetermined by a hegemonic discourse of war, or contained in particular stereotypical protagonists.<sup>17</sup>

Roles that narratively confine female characters' subversive potentials include the following; fighter/soldier, representative of feminized civilian life (prize, helpless victim, ideal to be defended, impotent challenge to war discourse), and betrayer/traitor. When presented in these roles, the respective protagonists do not constitute identities that potentially overdetermine the viewer by motivating irreconcilable allegiances, but remain positioned within the dominant hegemonic discourse of the genre. Comparable to the issue of race, in most movies neither this diversification of the soldier-self unfolds liminal potentials that would entail a destabilization of generic discursive frames, but reiterates the chain of equivalence that frames the soldier-self as an all inclusive hegemonic identity of war.

A similar logic applies to male characters. In most war movies, the initiation into the subject-position of the soldier-self entails the adoption of a hegemonic masculinity. Also male characters who exhibit a masculinity that differs from, or challenges, the hegemonic form of masculinity realized in and through the soldier-self are discursively confined. Popular figures are the ridiculed clown (Major Dickerson in *Good Morning Vietnam*, Damon Schmidt in *The Kingdom*), the coward who attempts to abandon the soldier-self in a difficult situation (Burke in *Aliens*, Junior in *Platoon*, Thax in *Centurion*), the traitor who changes sides (Elphiates and Theron

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<sup>17</sup> For femininities and masculinities in the war film see for instance Walsh (2004) and Eberwein (2007).



in *300*), or the idealist posing an impotent challenge to the discourse of war (Cambridge in *The Hurt Locker*, Damon Schmidt in *The Kingdom*, Anderson in *Black Hawk Down*).

The transition of characters into a hegemonic framework is often achieved throughout exposition chapters or the violent challenge posed during the main plot. In exposition chapters for instance military training or an evil deed assign and stabilize particular discursive identities (*Full Metal Jacket*, *Jarhead*, *G.I. Jane*, *Valiant*, *We Were Soldiers*, *300*). Or, the violent challenges of the main plot narrow down the frames for individual characters' articulations and performances (*Black Hawk Down*, *Behind Enemy Lines*, *Transformers I-III*, *Centurion*, *Aliens*).

A few examples might serve to illustrate some of the assertions made above. Ridley Scott's *G.I. Jane* (USA 1997), for instance, follows the successful attempts of military intelligence analyst Jordan O'Neill to become the first female elite Navy Seals operator and illustrates how the process of becoming the soldier-self implies the adoption, and indeed embodiment, of a hegemonic masculinity. This embodied war identity is efficiently articulated by main protagonist O'Neill when she, after a brutal beating, defiantly exclaims "Suck my dick!". Even though the technical and narrative devices deployed in *G.I. Jane* systematically invite the spectator to align to and ally with a female character, her gender-based discursive position is overdetermined by interpellations emanating from a hegemonic discourse of war. Her embodied, biological sex is performed within the confinements set by this hegemonic discursive identity positioning her as the soldier-self, and imposes a heavily gendered pattern on her behaviour and performances. Even though she is a woman, her discursive identity strongly discourages an articulation of these embodied traits. This leads Walsh (2004:204) to conclude that "Scott's film [*G.I. Jane*] unintentionally defeats its own ostensibly feminist thesis."

In adopting the discursive identity of soldier-self, Jordan O'Neill also adopts a hegemonic masculinity as subject-position. This discursive logic not only applies to the main character in Scott's *G.I. Jane*, but also to the identities of a series of war heroes and heroines that have populated the screens without challenging a hegemonic masculinity, or articulating potentially subversive alternative discursive positions: Neytiri in *Avatar*, Sam Witwicky in the *Transformers*-series, Janet Mayes in *The Kingdom*, Owen Eldridge in *The Hurt Locker*, or Eversmann and Grimes in *Black Hawk Down*.



Image 104: 'Suck my dick!' Embodying hegemonic masculinity in *G.I. Jane*.

A prominent female figure to contain the potentially destabilizing impacts of alternative femininities challenging hegemonic discursive identities in the war genre is that of an asset, victimized ideal, prize, or threat that has to be administered, protected, obtained, or confined by male characters. In these cases, audience allegiance with these figures is discouraged, even though audio-visual alignment often serves as a means to raise tensions or invite for emotional engagement. Generally, these female figures acquire a static role as background features or objects of male affection or concern, and remain dependent on the gaze and agency of these characters. As such, even though these female figures inhere the potentials to articulate various and often competing subjectivities, they usually remain without a voice or gaze that could challenge the overarching audio-visual regime of the movie. As such, all of them remain narrowly framed by a hegemonic discourse of war, or are unequivocally assigned to the enemy-other and excluded to an inaccessible beyond.

Besides containing the subversive potentials of alternative discursive positions, the various female assets of the war genre also facilitate the emergence and discursive stabilization of the soldier-self as bearer of a hegemonic masculinity. In implicitly naturalizing a norm and value system that posits women as passive receivers of attention and support, and that purports a male agent and the use of force as necessary means to achieve pleasurable narrative closure, the audio-visual rhetoric of the war genre perpetuates a hegemonic masculinity that narrowly frames the identities, articulations, and performances of male as well as female characters. Consequently, also alternative masculinities are confined to particular roles containing their subversive potentials. Male characters

that break with or challenge the hegemonic discourse of war are often framed as cowards, weaklings, naïve idealists, or traitors. Throughout generic war narratives these characters mature and change, die, or are unequivocally assigned to the side of the enemy-other. Again, a few examples might serve to illustrate these discursive logics.

The way *Valiant*, an animated movie about a young bird doing ‘his bit’ during the second world war, constructs the character of the female nurse Victoria and narrowly frames the performances and identities of various female characters provides a good example. Nurse Victoria represents the role of prize. She is predominantly focalized through the character of the young hero Valiant and emerges as little more than his object of affection that he acquires after having proven his worth in confronting the challenges posed by the evil enemy-other throughout the main plot. Valiant’s mother on the other hand is framed as ridiculously overprotective. Her character represents an impotent and delegitimized challenge to a hegemonic discourse of war and the performative patterns it entails. To Valiant’s unadorned disgust she even retches up a worm to provide breakfast before he leaves for war. The discourse of *Valiant* narrowly frames possible articulations and performances of both female and male characters. During military training, for instance, Valiant’s friend Buggy goes through a successful transformation from idle loafer to soldier, and becomes positioned by a hegemonic discourse of war that implies the adoption of a hegemonic masculinity that remains unchallenged and unchanged throughout the movie.



Image 105-106: ‘You were such a cute little egg.’ Ridiculing a feminized discourse of home in *Valiant*.

In *Good Morning Vietnam* the roles as object of affection, helpless victim, and ideal to be defended are effectively combined in the character of a Vietnamese girl, Trinh. Trinh is presented as a shy and devout girl from the countryside who eagerly learns English and slowly gains trust in her benefactor, US military radio host and main protagonist Cronauer. During this process her identity is overdetermined by a discourse that is constitutive of Cronauer’s subject-position. Even though a visit to her village opens potentials for an articulation of alternative frames of

understanding vested for instance in a potentially subversive femininity, the film never focalizes through Trinh or enables her character to voice an alternative perspective that might challenge the discursive identity of the soldier-self. In the end, the main protagonist has to leave the country. When saying farewell Trinh reveals her affection to Cronauer but a true relation is now rendered impossible. By these means, even though ironically challenging a caricatured military mindset, the narrative of *Good Morning Vietnam* combines a sexist with an inherently patriarchal and racist frame that draws a chain of equivalence between the young and apparently virgin women, Trinh, and the country of Vietnam in need of protection by a soldier-self in form of US military forces. At the same time, Trinh's final affection reflects the successful acquisition of a prize by Cronauer and reinforces the hegemonic masculinity implied in his discursive position that is also stabilized through an epistemological barrier toward a superior officer who is framed as an impotent bureaucrat "in dire need of a blow job" (Cronauer).



Image 107-110: 'Dragon lady at 11 o'clock!' The gaze of a hegemonic masculinity in *Good Morning Vietnam*.

Aisha who becomes the object of affection and protection by main protagonist Ferris in *Body of Lies* represents another useful example. As a well educated nurse with Palestinian background working in Jordan, she appears charged with the potential to dislodge the mutually exclusive discourse of war that is embodied and performed by the male protagonists - CIA agent Ferris and Chief of Jordanian Intelligence Hani - and that is stabilized through the ubiquitous

absence of main adversary Al Saleem and his terrorist network. However, rather than overdetermining the character of Ferris in for instance articulating the severe grievances underlying the ubiquitously absent other's violent performances, or in revealing the unintended and often counterproductive consequences of Ferris's conduct, Aisha is audio-visually and conceptually reduced to Ferris's object of affection.

The film only occasionally focalizes through her character and she voices or enacts no challenge whatsoever to the main protagonist. Her performances are dependent on, or reactive to, the hegemonic diegetic discourse of war. When her sister confronts Ferris regarding his position on the war in Iraq, Aisha waves a napkin as a white flag to end the discussion. Later on she undermines this discursive challenge by telling Ferris that her sister wanted to live in the USA. After being abducted and subsequently exchanged for Ferris in a scheme developed by the chief of Jordanian intelligence to capture the main adversary, Aisha appears only once perceived from afar by Ferris before he commences on the final acquisition of his prize that had been granted by Hani in a patriarchal gesture of benevolence. When visiting Ferris in hospital Hani explains his scheme and in the end refers to Aisha. "If you had died", the Jordanian explains to Ferris, "I had told her [Aisha] what you did for her and she would have loved you forever. Now you have to earn that right." The identity of Aisha is narrowly predisposed by a hegemonic masculinity that is enacted by Ferris and framed by Hani and that increasingly deprives her of agency or the ability to articulate not only her own, but any alternative position that might initiate processes of discursive change.



Image 111: 'Peace!' Aisha deflects a challenge to the soldier-self in *Body of Lies*.

On several occasions stereotypical female characters obtain the role of betrayer or evil seductress. The narrative role of these figures is to reassert the importance of a supportive home front in showing the devastating consequences of adultery committed against soldiers serving abroad. Since the performance of adultery represents a severe challenge against the hegemonic masculinity of the discursive position of the soldier-self, an epistemological barrier is drawn that veils the reasons for, or grievances underlying, the conduct of these female characters, and frames them as morally weak, traitors, or ignorant of the sacrifices made by their boyfriends or husbands at war. The established structure of sympathy transforms them into an enemy-other and a symbol for the ultimate victimization of the struggling and suffering soldier-self. Pvt. Bell's wife Marty in *The Thin Red Line* and Swofford's girlfriend Kristina or Brian Dettman's wife in *Jarhead* can serve as examples for this particular role.



Image 112: Undermining the hegemonic masculinity of the soldier-self: The 'wall of shame' in *Jarhead*.

Rather than containing potentially subversive femininities in narrative figures such as those briefly described above, some war movies construct a hegemonic femininity that is positioned by a hegemonic discourse of war. By these means the reach of war discourse is extended into a civilian sphere and becomes constitutive of the identity of a civilian soldier-self positioned at the home front. In these cases, female key characters perform and articulate a hegemonic femininity that is audio-visually and narratively aligned to the hegemonic masculinity of the soldier-self fighting abroad.

*We Were Soldiers*, a film about a group of US soldiers deployed in Vietnam and their families at home, serves as a suitable example for this discursive logic of gendered hegemonic war identities. For instance, a sequence of cross-cut scenes underlines how the discourse positioning the soldiers fighting abroad mirrors the hegemonic identities framed by a discourse of the home front. In this case, the soldier-self become the hegemonic masculinity in the universe of the movie, while the hegemonic identity of the home front becomes discernable as a dominant femininity. Both discursive identities position spectators through identification with key protagonists - Lt. Col. Hal Moore on the one and his wife Julie on the other side. Through their performances and articulations both characters draw chains of equivalence that discursively unite not only the various partial identities constituted in and through such performative markers as religion or class, or through the embodied traces of racial signifiers, but also include competing masculinities and femininities into an overarching military war identity constituted within the frames of a hegemonic discourse of war.

In a speech to his men, main protagonist Hal Moore asserts the inclusive nature of military identity. His articulation, enunciated from the influential discursive position of a military leader giving a farewell address prior to their deployment to Vietnam, draws a chain of equivalence that unites various civilian subject-positions marked through class, race, religion, political preferences or other with reference to an all inclusive hegemonic military identity - the soldier-self. His wife makes a similar articulation when gathering the soldiers' spouses in her home to prepare for the difficult time at the home front. The hegemonic discourse articulated by both characters remains uncontested and subsequently patterns the performances of both soldiers abroad and civilians at home. As Weber (2006:31-42) convincingly argues, *We Were Soldiers* "substitut[es] a United States marked by racial, religious, and gender inequality in earthly time (...) with an eternally tolerant United States" (38). According to her, in *We Were Soldiers* this transformation is framed as enabled by the US army. In doing this, she continues, Wallace's film "forecloses on the possibility of critically reconsidering patriarchy" (38) and its role in war and warfare. In establishing both a hegemonic masculinity and femininity as elements of a dominant war discourse, and in leaving these discursive positions unchallenged, *We Were Soldiers* not only draws a chain of equivalence uniting various antagonistic identities within an all inclusive discourse of war, but also establishes the home front as part of this war identity rather than an implied normality the soldier-self has to be repositioned by upon return home. A similar logic as the one in *We Were Soldiers*

applies for instance to the character of Queen Gorgo in Zack Snyder's *300* who also successfully overdetermines the home front in articulating and performing an all inclusive discourse of war.

Occasionally, war films depict civilian characters that invite for audience alignment and allegiance without containing them in narrowly framed roles or stereotypical characters. In these cases, the deployed characters challenge the hegemonic masculinity of the soldier-self in reasserting the contingency of ultimately precarious and temporary subject-positions thus overdetermining the spectator and potentially facilitating processes of discursive change.

Kimberly Peirce's *Stop-Loss* graphically illustrates how a civilian discourse that becomes articulated by predominantly female characters can overdetermine the embodied hegemonic masculinity of the subject-position of soldier-self. Upon the return of a group of US soldiers from a tour of duty in Iraq to a Texan small town, the young men are welcomed and celebrated as heroes. During the festivities, however, a gap soon emerges between the men's subject-position and the various interpellations emanating from the now hegemonic, civilian discourse. This gap is repeatedly illustrated by the estranged reactions of several secondary female characters to the naturalized violent and sexist talk, or the excessive behaviour of their boyfriends and husbands. Soon the mutually exclusive subject-positions force the group of veterans into retreat to the countryside where they again can perform their discursive war identities without being overdetermined by competing civilian discourses.



Image 113-114: Precarious identities: The soldier-self as hegemonic masculinity in *Stop-Loss*.

As the narrative progresses, however, the men are left with fewer and fewer options. In being repositioned by a now hegemonic civilian discourse their embodied war identities become increasingly pathologized. This process of reframing transforms their subject-position from celebrated war heroes and bearers of a hegemonic masculinity to mentally disturbed liabilities leading to the break-up of several marriages and love relations, and to one suicide. The female protagonists' reactions, however, are not framed as stereotyped betrayal, but as caused by the



obvious pathological behaviour of the soldier-self and a dominant masculinity that proves incommensurable with these women's lives and well-being. The embodiment of the discursive identity of soldier-self has created traumatized individuals that do not longer bear much resemblance to the men these women knew before they were shipped out.



Image 115-118: 'I'll drop a 500 pounder on one of their cities each time they hit us': Overdetermination of the hegemonic soldier-self by a performed civilian discourse of home in *Stop-Loss*.

In *Stop-Loss* female protagonists are not only presented as legitimately retreating from dysfunctional individuals, but also as attempting to actively facilitate a performative repositioning of the veterans. The character of Michelle who was supposed to marry one of the returning soldiers, for instance, actively engages established frames of war and the identities these produce. She supports and actively facilitates the decision of her former boy-friend's best mate to go absent without leave to avoid redeployment to Iraq. This way she undermines the institutionalized discursive logic of war that reproduces itself through the systemic reduction of options available to the soldier-self, and renders legitimacy and credibility to this soldier-self's attempted performative repositioning as a civilian subject. In consistently aligning the spectator to her point of view and in providing a narrative frame that invites for allegiance to her position, her performances and articulations also reposition the spectator. In the end however, the material inertia and institutional frames of the hegemonic war discourse prove too powerful. Posed with the alternative of leaving the US and never returning or accepting redeployment, the main protagonist is depicted sitting in a

bus leaving for a renewed tour of duty in Iraq. This outcome, however, does not undermine a civilian discourse. In contrast to *The Hurt Locker*, the structure of sympathy in *Stop-Loss* aligns and allies the viewer with characters positioned by dominant civilian frames and undermine the discursive position of the soldier-self as inherently pathological.



Image 119-120: Shrinking barriers: Pathologizing hegemonic masculinity in *Stop-Loss*.

In a similar manner, in *Marc of Cain* mainly the reactions of civilian characters to discursive articulations emanating from the war zone lead to a repositioning of the main protagonists, and to a difficult negotiation of various mutually exclusive subject-positions. The articulations are images the soldiers took of Iraqi prisoners they mistreated. Within the discourse of war that constitutes the identities of the soldiers, these images were not perceived as offensive. Only the reaction of civilians, and above all female characters, reasserts an awareness of contingency and enforces an active renegotiation of various overdetermined subject-positions. This leads to the break up of the group of soldiers into a majority that remains within a discourse of war, while two soldiers resist interpellation of this dominant frame. While one commits suicide, the other defies the material and performative power of the institutions upholding the discursive identity of soldier-self and chooses to witness against his unit in court exposing the torture scandal to the public.

Generally, it has to be conceded that almost no war movie examined here actually touches upon the impact the practice of warfare entails for various femininities. The distinctly female experiences of war and the various challenges a combat zone poses for specifically female gendered discursive identities appears to be a something of a constitutive lack of the genre. A German movie, Max Färberböck's *The Downfall of Berlin* (*Anonyma. Eine Frau in Berlin*, Germany 2008), constitutes a notable exception to this rule. Based on the diary of an anonymous German woman who survived the occupation of Berlin by Soviet forces during the spring of 1945 (Anonyma 2003), the film tells a shattering story of humiliation, repeated rape, and death. However, instead of objectifying the victims, voyeuristically indulging in their suffering, or simply demonizing the

perpetrators, Färberböck manages to provide a balanced account of a graduated conflict that invites for alignment and allegiance with all the parties encountering each other on the inherently liminal grounds of occupied Berlin. This is achieved last but not least through the consistent invitation to align to and ally with various female characters who are framed as conscious agents actively extending the severely limited paradigm of available performances to a maximum to be able to ensure their own survival and the well being of those in their care. *The Downfall of Berlin* shows how a discourse of war is embodied by female civilians, who have to adapt their thinking, their norms and value systems, their performances, and indeed their physical bodies to a discursive logic that renders them “ungrievable” (Butler 2009), or “bare life” (Agamben 1998) in the eyes of the victors, yet does not deprive them of agency, and an alternative, potentially subversive subject-position.

The movie interconnects the fates of traumatized subjects trapped in an impossible situation characterized by an extreme imbalance of power and an almost complete absence of rules regulating mutual conduct. Thereby, *The Downfall of Berlin* challenges and subverts discursive war identities and directs attention to the systemic rather than individual nature of



Image 121: Agency and determination: Embodied war discourse in *The Downfall of Berlin*.

evil in war. The film provides long wanting access to a distinctly female dimension of violent conflict and explicitly challenges naturalized understandings and hegemonic discourses of war that imply the necessity to de-humanize and kill the other to ensure own survival.

### Diversifying the Enemy-Other

In many war films, also the opposing side is diversified, without however challenging the constitutive absence of this enemy-other. Even though the faction of the adversary can often be further distinguished along such lines as race, class, institutional or ethnic background, the

deployment of epistemological barriers strongly discourages audience alignment and in particular allegiance to these evolving positions. Through chains of equivalence bridging the gaps, various adversaries are subsumed under the dominant discursive identity of evil, ubiquitously absent enemy-fighter that narrowly frames the possible narrative functions of individual protagonists belonging to this faction.

To provide an example, in *Avatar* the evil enemy-other consists of both businessmen and military personnel. However, epistemological barriers render the reasons underlying the performances of both these groups equally unavailable and delegitimize their conduct. Audience allegiance is strongly discouraged through the established narrative frames, and this way prevents an overdetermination of hegemonic subject-positions with reference to alternative frameworks of meaning. In a similar manner, even though the Somali enemies in *Black Hawk Down* are presented as armed militia, cynical businessmen, and hostile civilians, the deployment of particular technical and narrative devices sets up an epistemological barrier that reduces all these potential identities to the constitutively excluded ubiquitously absent, and inaccessible enemy-other framing audience engagement accordingly.



Image 122-123: Civilian and military enemy-other in *Avatar*.

The subject-position of desubjectified and dehumanized enemy-other is not confined to the role of enemy-fighter alone. In almost all war movies, the other also appears as passive and objectified victim the suffering of whom is predominantly caused by the enemy-fighters remorselessly risking, or deliberately threatening, the lives of civilians to achieve their sinister goals (*Tears of the Sun*, *Behind Enemy Lines*, *Black Hawk Down*, and many more). In some movies, the other can be educated or won over to the right side (Saudi security forces in *The Kingdom*), while they occasionally can appear in the role of betrayer disguised as helper (Etain in *Centurion*, Tuan in *Good Morning Vietnam*). In all these cases however, the other does not represent a different point of view or articulate an alternative subjectivity that might challenge or dislodge the

dominant discursive identity of the soldier-self. It is unequivocally assigned to either the side of the soldier-self, or the enemy-other and does not entail the subversive potentials of an alternative subjectivity pointing beyond the mutually exclusive, violent division.

## 2. Diversifying Epistemological Barriers and Liminality

### Diversifying Epistemological Barriers

The diversification of the role of the home front and the confinement of alternative subject-positions emanating from a civilian sphere identified throughout the examples provided in the section on gender above, point to the apparent presence of a second epistemological barrier that confines access to a potentially subversive civilian-other in the universe of war movies. To sustain the hegemonic identity of the soldier-self, the war genre not only confines the enemy-other, but also the competing identities constituted in and through an alternative civilian discourse of home. To understand how this is achieved, the concept of epistemological barrier has to be diversified.

As the reading of for instance *The Hurt Locker* in an earlier chapter has indicated, the subject-position of soldier-self is not only stabilized through the constitutive exclusion of an enemy-other, but also through the suppression of potentially subversive internal alternatives posed by a civilian discourse of home. As such, a barrier that entails the constitutive confinement of alternative discursive identities that threaten to overdetermine and destabilize the soldier-self from within becomes discernable. The second epistemological barrier in the war film confines the subversive potentials of home that becomes available through characters positioned by alternative discursive frames.



Image 124-125: Diversifying constitutive barriers in *The Hurt Locker*.

When perceived in this light, both the enemy-other and a civilian-other emerge as constitutive absences in the diegetic universe of war movies. The generic rhetoric described above renders both ubiquitously absent – invisible and inaccessible, but at the same time retained as on

the one side potentially omnipresent and aggressive threat, and on the other as precious and supportive ideal to be acquired and/or protected, or as a betraying threat from the inside that has to be controlled and held in check. Therefore, when the enemy or civilian-other appear, they are confined to figures that entail particular narrative roles such as main adversary, betrayer, helper, passive victim, ideal, supporter, or prize.

The generic rhetoric of war movies technically and narratively confines potential alternatives that might reassert the contingency of hegemonic diegetic discursive frames. Epistemological barriers stabilize a militarized war discourse that is constitutive of the soldier-self, and makes it appear as a naturalized, totalizing horizon. This hegemonic discourse entails a structure of sympathy that predisposes possible engagements with key characters and suggests a dominant tendency of meaning that excludes the distinct world views and mindsets of both an enemy and a civilian other. As Hoot, one of the US Special Forces soldiers in *Black Hawk Down* puts it: “ At home they won’t understand”.

#### Diversifying Liminality

The grid presented at the end of the previous chapter indicates a close relation between an absence of liminality and a structure of sympathy that invites for allegiance to only one conflicting party. Since liminality challenges the hegemonic subject-position of the soldier-self this connection is hardly surprising. Interestingly, however there is a body of films that apparently combines multiple allegiances with an absence of liminality. This apparent contradiction necessitates a diversification of the concept of liminality deployed, so far.

Normally, liminality implies an ambiguous structure of sympathy, while an absence of liminal characters and liminal locations leads to an unequivocal allegiance with only one involved party. However, as readings of such films as *Battle for Haditha* or *The Situation* indicate, multiple allegiances are also possible in films that maintain epistemological barriers positing the presented groups in a mutually exclusive and inherently violent opposition. This points to the implicit presence of two different forms of liminality in this dissertation – one that dislodges key characters’ hegemonic identities and overdetermines the spectator through identification with these characters’ changed positions, and another that leaves the different diegetic identities of main protagonists untouched, yet provides equal access to, and invites for allegiance with, various mutually exclusive

diegetic discursive positions that have to be negotiated by an overdetermined audience. I term the first form diegetic and the second extra-diegetic liminality.

Diegetic liminality reconstitutes epistemological barriers as zones of contact and negotiation. In the process, established discursive frames and identities are challenged, and subsequently dislodged, by previously inaccessible alternative subject-positions. This is achieved from within the films' diegesis, meaning that elements of the film world, such as liminal locations that are shared by self and other and enable performative encounters between them, or barrier-transgressing characters who, in bringing various opposing diegetic discourses into contact, reassert the contingency of key protagonists' discursive positions. Examples of this form of liminality are for instance the performative dynamics enabled on the field of victory/defeat in Malick's *The Thin Red Line*. Here, a diegetic locality enabled the resubjectification of a previously confined enemy, and successfully dislodged the discursive identity of the soldier-self that had been stabilized precisely through the exclusion and violent confinement of the potentially subversive Japanese other (for a close reading see attached article *Challenging the Border as Barrier*). Similarly, in the director's cut of *I Am Legend* the shared space of the battlefield enables a surfacing of the voice and gaze of the ubiquitously threatening other effectively dislodging the hegemonic identity of the main protagonist and opening a diegetic trajectory of reconciliation and peace as a viable alternative to attempted mutual annihilation. In both cases, diegetic liminality overdetermines spectators through their identification with discursively repositioned main protagonists.

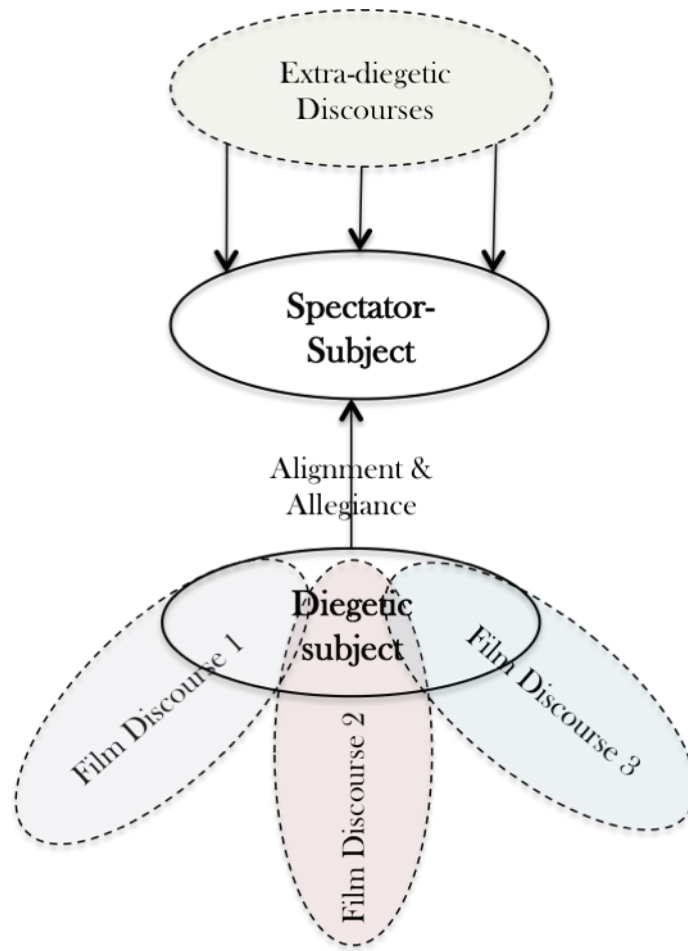


Figure 5: Overdetermination of the spectator through diegetic liminality.

Extra-diegetic liminality, on the other hand, repositions the spectator in providing equal access to various competing, and often mutually exclusive diegetic discourses. An ambiguous structure of sympathy invites for alignment and allegiance with different opposing groups and individuals. At the same time, the epistemological barriers that are constitutive of the various opposing discursive identities remain unchallenged and uncrossed. Each diegetic identity appears hegemonic within its particular frame. However, in providing equal access to the varying sides, the formal properties of the filmic text overdetermine the viewer in denying, or at least problemizing, an unequivocal narrative closure that would frame one identity as hegemonic and marginalize the others. The way for instance *Battle for Haditha* focalizes through three opposing groups and consistently invites for allegiance to all of them, without bringing these mutually exclusive frames into subversive contact moves overdetermination into the extra-diegetic space of reception. In being invited to identify with mutually exclusive diegetic subject-positions, audiences are forced to



negotiate the various different hegemonic frames that overdetermine them. A similar effect is achieved in Philip Haas' *The Situation*.

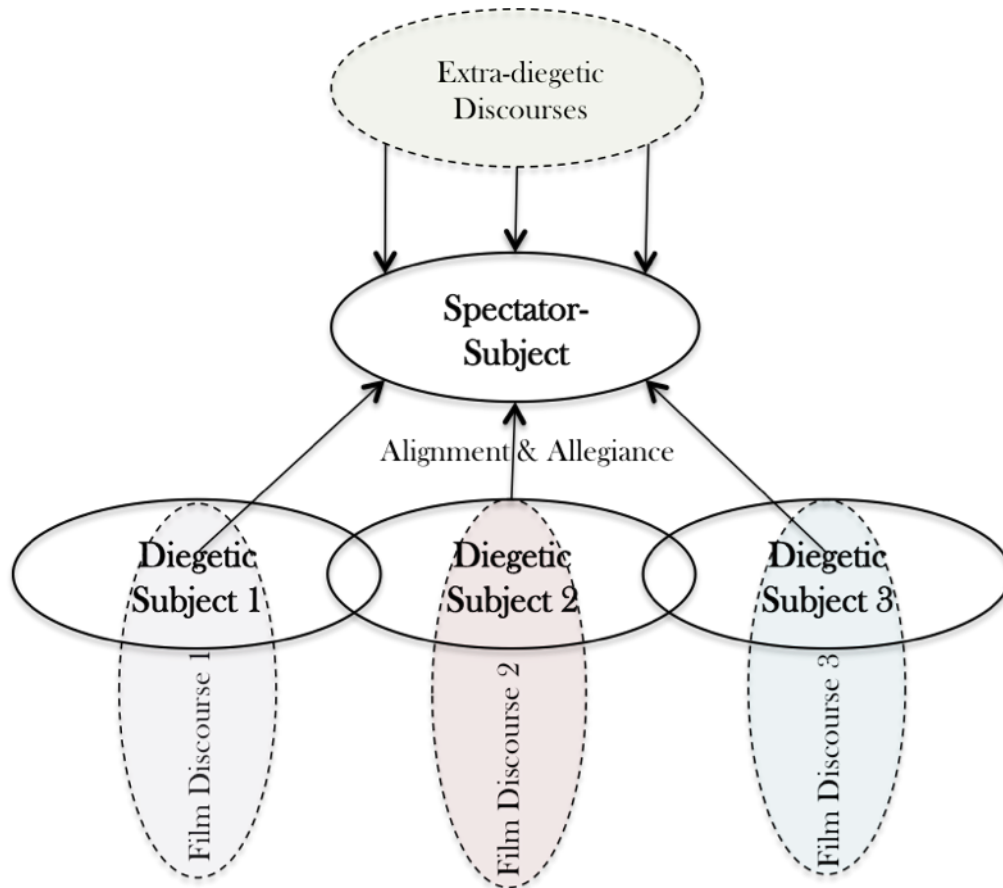


Figure 6: Overdetermination on an extra-diegetic liminal space of reception.

In a similar way also Clint Eastwood's double take on the World War II battle on the Japanese island of Iwo Jima necessitates an extra-diegetic liminal space of reception to unfold its subversive potentials. In deliberately presenting the same battle from two different perspectives in two closely connected, yet independent films that were produced in quick succession - *Flags of our Fathers* and *Letters from Iwo Jima* (both USA 2006) - Eastwood activates the movie theatre as a potential extra-diegetic liminal zone of reception. When screened in succession the viewer is overdetermined by two hegemonic discourses of war that are constitutive of the mutually exclusive subject-positions of a US and a Japanese soldier-self stabilized by an epistemological barrier dividing them. This barrier confines each film's constitutive outside and remains unchallenged within the respective story universes of the two movies. However, when watching both works in for instance the context of a double feature screening, the viewers are invited to align to and ally with

both opposing parties. This active engagement with mutually exclusive subject-positions entails a subversive potential that might undermine the violent relation to ubiquitously absent enemies that is maintained and constantly reinforced by both hegemonic frames.

### Containing Liminal Potentials

Besides the issue of diegetic and extra-diegetic liminality, a second interesting problem concerns the apparent ubiquity of potentially liminal characters and locations in the war film. Almost all war movies feature battlefields and prisoner-of-war camps, or present characters who cross protective barriers and enter the realm of the other. However, in most cases these narrative tropes do not entail a structure of sympathy that invites audience alignment and allegiance with more than one of the opposing parties. Accordingly, the mutually exclusive relation between the soldier-self and ubiquitously absent enemies remains unchallenged.

Attempts to conjoin border-crossing characters and shared locations with an unequivocal structure of sympathy necessitates the active suppression of the inherently subversive liminal potentials posed by these narrative figures and elements. Consequently, locations where characters can be discursively overdetermined through the embodied or conceptual presence of the other, or protagonists that enable a perspective beyond constitutive epistemological barriers, are often excluded or narrowly framed to retain the stability of an overarching hegemonic discourse of war.

One diegetic location with considerable liminal potentials is the battlefield. Here, soldier-self and enemy-other often oppose each other face-to-face and engage in direct physical interaction. Nevertheless, the subjectivity and humanity of one party usually remains inaccessible to the audience. This is achieved through, firstly, an audio-visual regime that consistently directs audience alignment and allegiance to only one involved party while the opposing group is rendered invisible and inaudible, and secondly, through the deployment of narrow narrative frames where for instance an evil deed already from the outset undermines the legitimacy and potential humanity of one opponent.

Within these frames battles often results in the total annihilation of either the soldier-self (*300*, *The Objective*, *Letters from Iwo Jima*), the enemy-other (*Aliens*, *Platoon*, *Behind Enemy Lines*, *Tears of the Sun*, *War of the Worlds*, *Valiant*, *Flags of our Fathers*), or both (*No Man's Land*, *Tunnel Rats*), or leads to the retreat or rescue of one involved party (*Aliens*, *Saving Private*

*Ryan, Black Hawk Down, Behind Enemy Lines, Miracle at St Anna, Kandahar Break*).<sup>18</sup> In all these cases access to a competing subjectivity potentially challenging established hegemonic frames is prevented.



Image 126-127: Deflecting liminal potentials: Abandoning shared spaces in *Behind Enemy Lines* and *Aliens*.

Usually neither prison of war camps provide access to the opposing side, but merely constitute the location where for instance sadistic main adversaries can carry out evil deeds that legitimate the subsequent violent responses by the soldier-self (*The Deer Hunter, Rambo: First Blood Part II, Bravo Two Zero*). Also in *Centurion* the liminal potentials entailed in the capture of the main protagonist by his enemies remains unactualized. Even though Roman centurion Quintus Dias is exposed to the grievances underlying the opposing Picts' atrocious actions, a narrative frame presenting them as sadistic and remorseless discourages audience allegiance to their position.

A notable exception from the rule of confining the subversive potentials of POW-camps is for instance David O. Russell's *Three Kings* (USA 1999) – a film about the first Gulf War in 1991 that tells the story of four US soldiers who illegally enter Iraq to steal Kuwaiti gold. In this case, the main protagonist is captured by the previously ubiquitously absent enemy and subjected to torture. However, instead of narrowly framing the movie's structure of sympathy and preparing the grounds for subsequent violent countermeasures by the soldier-self, *Three Kings* activates the liminal potentials of the shared space of the torture chamber to dislodge the narrative function of the evil deed. During the torture, the Iraqi adversary gains a voice and a personal history and is put into the position to define the conceptual limits of the ongoing war. His position is visually supported by Russell's montage techniques. When the Iraqi for instance explains that an American smart bomb had hit his home, crippled his wife, and killed his three year old son, the scene is rendered available to the audience as a counterfactual dream sequence focalized through the American main

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<sup>18</sup> Note that in *Aliens* and *Behind Enemy Lines* the battlefield is abandoned before the enemy-other is annihilated from the air.

protagonist who perceives his own house being bombed, and his wife and daughter being killed. This way the fate of the other becomes conceivable in the shape of the self and an unequivocal structure of sympathy is problematized and effectively dislodged, without however providing legitimacy to the depicted acts of torture.



Image 128-131: “How does it feel inside your heart if I bomb your daughter?” “Worse than death.” Rehumanizing the enemy-other and dislodging the evil deed in *Three Kings*.

Besides liminal locations, also liminal protagonists are usually deprived of their subversive potentials. Characters that transgress the boundary toward a constitutive outside and enable access to the previously confined other are often unequivocally assigned to one or the other group to maintain an unambiguous structure of sympathy that directs alignment and allegiance to the hegemonic discursive identity of the soldier-self. Zack Snyder’s *300* for instance unanimously assigns the character of Elphiates to only one of the two opposing groups he has access to. As such, instead of focusing on his possible role as mediator or arbitrator enabling a nonviolent alternative to the mutually exclusive logics of war, he is narratively framed as a traitor who facilitates the victory of the enemy-other and the total destruction of the soldier-self. Similarly, in *Good Morning Vietnam* the Vietnamese boy, Tuan, who befriended the main protagonist reveals himself to be a Vietcong who abused the developing relation to, and apparent naïveté of, the US soldier to implement his attacks thereby turning the liminal potential of the narrative into its opposite. The narratively confined embodied border-crossing of main protagonist Jake Sully in *Avatar* can serve as another example to illustrate this logic.



Image 132: Containing liminal potentials: The border-crosser as traitor in *300*.

Generally, characters showing an interest in the enemy-other do so either to enable a more effective threat containment (Bishop in *Aliens*, General Kuribayashi in *Letters from Iwo Jima*, Quintus Dias in *Centurion*, Robert Neville in *I Am Legend*), or to be caught by surprise by their true, evil nature (US soldier releasing a German prisoner in *Saving Private Ryan*, Richard Lee in *Kandahar Break*). Malick's *The Thin Red Line* constitutes an exception in deploying a liminal character the voice-over of whom constantly questions established assumptions about the nature of war and the enemy, and this way effectively prevents the sedimentation of discursive identities into a mutually exclusive, violent opposition between soldier-self and enemy-other (see attached article *Challenging the Border as Barrier*).

## Chapter 8: CROSSING MEDIAL BOUNDARIES: THE CASE OF WAR GAMES

Are the formal properties that privilege identification with the subject-position of the soldier-self a feature of the war movie genre alone? Or can constitutive epistemological barriers that reduce the other to a ubiquitously absent threat also be encountered in other medial representations of war and conflict? Do they form a transmedial and transgeneric rhetoric that (b)orders socio-political and discursive space and implicitly provides plausibility to political articulations that position subjects in a mutually exclusive and with necessity violent relation to a generic enemy-other? In the present chapter, I cross one medial boundary and deploy the conceptual framework developed earlier on to an analysis of first person shooter (FPS) war games such as *America's Army*, the *Call of Duty*- and *Medal of Honor*-franchises, or the *Fallout*-, and *Crysis*-series, and show that the technical and narrative devices that audio-visually frame the enemy are not confined to a particular genre or medium. This way this section indicates a theoretical trajectory for future research that might aim at developing an intermedial and transgeneric approach in line with the framework proposed by for instance Nünning/Nünning (2002).

Arguably, not least due to the embodied nature of game play and the, however limited, ability to influence the course of events through one's own decisions, audiences experience films and games differently.<sup>19</sup> In computer games, state for instance Machin/Van Leeuwen (2005:136), "the player enacts rather than 'receives' the discourse". However, as for instance Lankoski (2011) argues some similarities pertaining to processes of identification through key characters can nevertheless be discerned. He employs Smith's (1995) concepts of recognition, alignment, and allegiance to modify approaches to the interaction between players and games and distinguishes two modes of engagements; "goal-related" and "emphatic" (294). Lankoski argues that identification with player characters (PC) connects these two forms of engagement.

Taking Lankoski's approach as a point of departure, a constitutive epistemological barrier that precludes identification with what emerges as merely an enemy can be discerned in the universe of FPS games. The peculiar audio-visual regime of these games, where players exclusively

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<sup>19</sup> For a multidimensional approach to game experience based on various forms of incorporation across a macro and micro level see for instance Calleja (2007), for a focus on emotion and affect in game play see Shinkle (2008), and for an overview over various approaches to computer war games see Huntemann and Payne (2010).

perceive their surroundings through the eyes and ears of the PCs, enables alignment to only one side. However, as for instance Branigan (1992:157-160) argues, POV-shots alone are insufficient for audience identification as they in fact “limit what the spectator can easily know about a character” (157). Therefore, the exposition chapter of FPS games becomes a crucial component for the framing of audience engagements with PCs. Throughout these initial phases of the game, players are usually first introduced to a historical and political background, before they are allowed to create or individuate PCs and get acquainted with the basic settings and narrative frames of the game. Through the ability to define, or get introduced to, the individual characteristics and background stories of PCs, while potential and actual opponents remain invisible and unaccounted for, a biased structure of sympathy is put into place that invites for allegiance with only one involved party or even individual – the soldier-self in form of the PC. This allegiance to only one side is further enhanced by the interactivity of game play where PCs are reactive to the decisions made by players. This way the main protagonists constantly adapt to the individual preferences of various audiences. These adaptations are however narrowly framed by the settings of the game and usually exclude for instance a nonviolent engagement with the other.



Image 133-134: Aligning the player: The audio-visual regime of FPS games (*America's Army 3* and *Modern Warfare 2*).

Most FPS games are structured around missions that are usually introduced through brief cut scenes that show the further development of the story dependent on the choices of the player. While the empathic engagement is directed towards the PC and remains the same throughout the whole game, goal related engagements might shift in connection with different missions. Usually, however, every mission is narrowly framed and can only be successfully accomplished through violent means directed against an anonymous and ubiquitously absent, threatening enemy-other. Even though the main PC should be forced to change sides throughout the narrative, this happens in the same way as in for instance Cameron's *Avatar*. The PC might cross the epistemological

barrier and ally with the previously opposing side. The barrier itself, however, is not challenged or subverted in the process, and the biased structure of sympathy is accordingly left in place and continues to stabilize the discursive identity of the soldier-self. I will provide a brief reading of two games - *Call of Duty: Black Ops* (Treyarch 2010) and *Fallout New Vegas* (Bethesda Softworks 2010) to illustrate these assertions.

*Call of Duty: Black Ops* is, so far, the latest addition to the *Call of Duty*-franchise that is composed of 7 games that allow players to control soldiers from various historical wars from World War II to fictitious conflicts set in a near future. *Black Ops* plays out during the cold war and is set in various locations from Cuba to the Soviet Union and the USA. The player takes control of a special forces soldier, Alex Mason, and perceives the game universe through his eyes. The game can be played in a multiplayer mode that does not follow any narrative and puts two teams of players up against each other in a decontextualized environment. In campaign mode that is played alone, however, a narrative develops in the course of which players are forced to fight their way through various missions - including an assassination of Fidel Castro - before confronting a Russian main adversary who initially tortured the main character and is responsible for an evil deed that frames the narrative as a whole - the development of deadly nerve gas that he intends to use in an attack on the USA.



Image 135-136: Torturing the player character to frame allegiance: The evil deed in *Call of Duty: Black Ops*.

The game universe in *Black Ops* is narrowly framed and does not leave players much leeway for free exploration. The structure of sympathy is extremely biased. Audio-visual and conceptual alignment are reserved to the main PC, Mason, who is the narrative's only focalizer and through whose eyes and ears players experience the evolving story. Since communication with opposing non-player characters (NPCs) is rendered impossible through the settings of the game, the violent disposal of an anonymized and ubiquitously absent enemy-other is the only alternative to reach a



successful closure of the various missions and the game as a whole. A reward system further motivates violence-based approaches to the problems posed throughout the game. Through empathic and goal based engagements with the main PC, *Black Ops* unequivocally positions players within the narrow frames of a hegemonic discourse of war. The soldier-self emerges as the hegemonic discursive identity of the diegetic universe that is vicariously enacted by players who are forced to adapt to the proposed interpretative and performative schemata or quit the game.

*Fallout New Vegas* is, so far, the latest game of the *Fallout* series – a group of open world FPS games that play out in a dystopic, retro-futuristic, and post-apocalyptic USA that has been divided into several tribal areas. Open world game means that players have the ability to choose whether to follow a campaign trail and solve various missions afforded by NPCs or to freely explore a vast virtual world. As in most FPS games, also *Fallout New Vegas* exhibits a biased structure of sympathy that aligns and allies players with only one character, the PC, through whom the virtual world is focalized, and through whom the player is discursively positioned. The diegetic environment is directly influenced through the choices made the player. These choices are, however, limited by the settings of the game that support some and deny other performances.

After a cut scene providing the background scenario of the game, the PC is individuated and designed by the player. Then the individual background of the PC is rendered available in form of a second cut scene, before a tutorial familiarizes the player with the controls and settings of the game. Throughout the game narrative, players can choose between three main campaign trails, each of which unequivocally allies them with one of three opposing major factions - the New Californian Republic, the aggressive and openly fascist Cesar's Legion, or an elitist Mister House ruling the prosperous city of New Vegas. Each of these trails entails a different narrative closure and positions the player within different discursive frames. All of them, however, necessitate the violent eradication of all opponents including main adversaries. As such, the various discursive positions within the game universe are framed by an overarching hegemonic discourse of war that discourages nonviolent alternatives, and interpellates the player in the subject-position of the soldier-self. In addition, killing is encouraged through the game's system of gratification that in particular rewards the violent eradication of enemies with additional skills, money, or precious equipment.

Besides the major factions, the universe of *Fallout New Vegas* consists of a variety of other groups the player can ally with or become hostile against. Some groups are always hostile and

necessitate retreat or violence. In addition to the major campaigns a huge number of independent missions can be accomplished. Several of these necessitate the killing of unequivocally evil or threatening, ubiquitously absent enemies. However, several others can be resolved through speech skills or other means of nonviolent persuasion and afford at times significant rewards.

While *Fallout New Vegas* invites for an unequivocal emphatic and goal dependent engagement, the game complicates the issue of moral allegiance. Through cautious game play that avoids the overt hostility of the main factions as long as possible, players can engage in conversations with the leaders of each major group and gain some access to the rationalities and philosophical or political considerations behind their actions. These dialogues are realized through a system that allows players to choose between various pre-fabricated replies to statements or questions by the NPCs. By these means, the responses can be brought into some concurrence with the preferred political, moral, or ethical position of the player. Again, however this is bound to happen within the narrow frames set by the game and this way leaves the overarching diegetic discourse of war and violence unchallenged and unchanged.

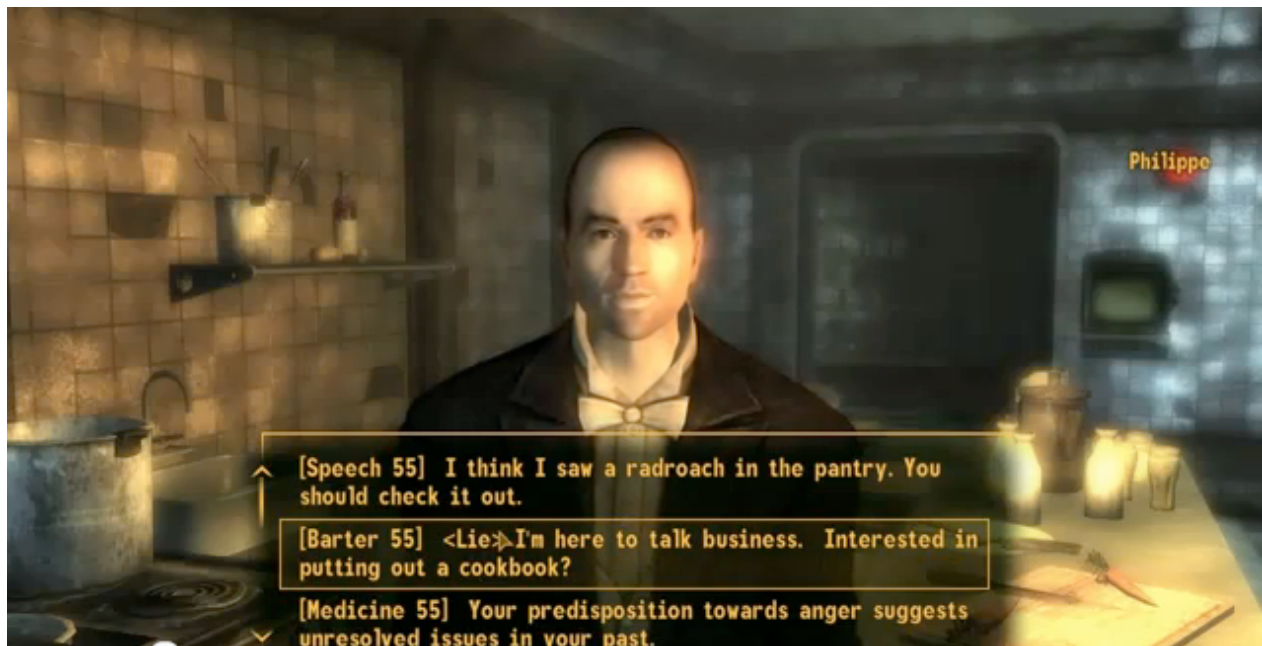


Image 137: Engaging frames: Dialogue options in *Fallout New Vegas*.

Also the generic structures and devices of FPS war games can be systematized in form a table comparable to the one deployed to the war movie genre. Significant differences in the framing of character engagement in games compared to film are in particular the unequivocal audio-visual alignment of the player to the PC, the strong dominance of Manichean conflicts, and a complete

absence of liminality in the narrative universe of war games. A potential reason for these differences might be the comparably simple narratives constitutive of game universes.

Table 3: Framing audience engagement in computer war games.

	# Parties	Conflict Type	Char. Individuation	Game Modes	Dialogue Options	Recognition	Alignment	Allegiance	Evil Deed	Main Adversary	Liminality	Epist. Barrier
<i>America's Army 3</i> (US Army 2009)	2	Manichean	No	Multiplayer	Players	All	PC	PC	No	No	No	Yes
<i>Assassin's Creed: Brotherhood</i> (Ubisoft 2010)	2	Manichean	No	Campaign/Multiplayer	Players & NPCs	All	PC	PC	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
<i>Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 2</i> (Activision 2009)	2	Manichean	No	Campaign/Multiplayer	Players	All	PCs	PC	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
<i>Call of Duty: Black Ops</i> (Activision 2010)	2	Manichean	No	Campaign/Multiplayer	Players	All	PC	PC	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
<i>Crysis 2</i> (Electronic Arts 2011)	3	Manichean	No	Campaign/Multiplayer	Players	All	PC	PC	Yes	No	No	Yes
<i>Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion</i> (Bethesda 2006)	2/several	Manichean	Yes	Campaign	NPCs	All	PC	PC	Yes	No	No	Yes
<i>Fallout New Vegas</i> (Bethesda 2010)	3/several	Manichean	Yes	Campaign	NPCs	All	PC	PC	No	Yes	No	Yes
<i>Medal of Honour: Tier 1</i> (Electronic Arts 2010)	2	Manichean	No	Campaign/Multiplayer	Players	All	PC	PC	No	No	No	Yes

In the next chapter, I will turn to a conceptualization of potential impacts of the discerned audio-visual rhetoric of the war film and computer war games. A brief focus on the “official US army game” *America's Army* and some of the considerations behind its production will facilitate this transition.

*America's Army* is an advanced multiplayer tactical FPS game that was developed by the US army and made available as a free download on the internet. It serves as a recruitment tool and public relations initiative. According to a US army report (Davis 2004:1), the game proved a “groundbreaking tool for strategic communication”. The report states that, in the first year after its appearance in 2002, the game had 2.4 Million registered users who had played 16 Million hours online (Davis 2004:2), an amount that, according to the initiator of the Army Games Project, Col. Casey Wardynski, had risen to respectively 11 Million players and dizzying 260 Million hours of game play by 2010. Wardynski also claims that this “virtual test drive of Soldiering [sic]” proved a cheap and efficient recruitment tool in that players proved “26% more likely to include military

service in their goals than non-players”.<sup>20</sup> In his contribution to Davis’ volume, Wardynski (2004) explains that the idea behind *America’s Army* was to inform popular culture since decisions whether to join the military or not, today are formed through films and games rather than direct contact with veterans or recruiters. Later the author states the success of the project claiming that “the game [America’s Army] engendered positive awareness of Soldiering [sic] among twenty-nine percent of young Americans age 16 to 24” (7).

These assertions point to important issues concerning the potential impacts of game play in online communities on the subjectivities of in particular young audiences. This dissertation, however, is not concerned with the ways through which films or games create a positive impression of the military, but how these expressions of popular culture frame possible understandings of the other. When perceived from this vantage point, it becomes interesting that *America’s Army 3* follow established genre conventions. Also this game is characterized by a form of unifocalization where players exclusively perceive the diegetic universe from a first-person perspective through the eyes and ears of a PC. After a tutorial that introduces basic military routines, norms and values, weapon types, skills, and the organizational structure of the US army, players are released into various decontextualized environments where they fight ubiquitously absent enemies in teams the members of which are interconnected online. In the various missions the violent removal of the other emerges as the only way to resolve the presented conflicts. The reasons behind the conduct of the enemies or their fate during or after the battles remain inaccessible – confined beyond an epistemological barrier that stabilizes the discursive identity of the soldier-self, and repositions the player within the frames of a hegemonic discourse of war. What are the possible discursive impacts of this audio-visual rhetoric of war?

In his study of *America’s Army 3*, Allen (2011) suggests that a form of “enemy abstraction [is] evident in war gaming practices” (39). He argues that war games in general, and *America’s Army* in particular, posit an “unreal enemy” (39) that is historically, geographically, ethnically, and socially decontextualized and therefore becomes a means through which the real enemy can be discursively constructed. Employing Baudrillard’s (1994) thoughts, Allen (2011) asserts a “‘precession of simulacra,’ in which the unreal enemy precedes, and perhaps aids the realization and creation of, the real enemy” (47). According to him this process is not confined to *America’s Army*, or the war

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<sup>20</sup> Unconfirmed numbers and quotes available here: <http://www.linkedin.com/in/wardynski> (11.08.2011).

game genre alone, but is rather effectuated “within a process of cultural production that is much broader than any game” and that “prefigures a corporeal enemy” (47).

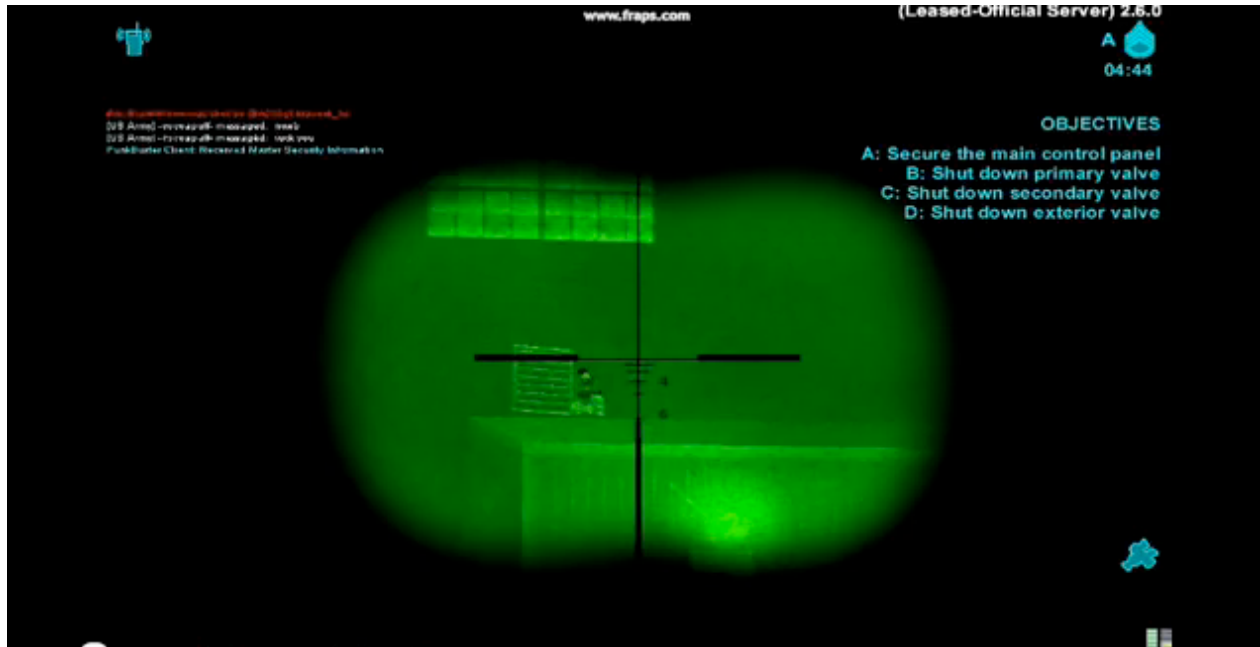


Image 138: Abstract enemies in *America's Army 3*.

As I will show in the following chapter, the ubiquitously absent, “abstract” enemy plays into and reinforces a core myth that naturalizes interpretative schemata predisposing possible engagements with real world opponents. This way potential impacts of the discerned audio-visual rhetoric of war can be conceptualized.

## Chapter 9: CONCEPTUALIZING DISCURSIVE IMPACTS

In this chapter, I turn to the issue of the potential impacts of an audio-visual rhetoric of war described above. How can the effects of epistemological barriers on audiences be conceptualized? I suggest two ways of understanding media impact within the frames of discourse theory; firstly, the formation and reproduction of myths that function as interpretative schemata predisposing attitudes, conceptualizations, and performances of political subjects, and secondly, the formation of discursive identities with reference to a shared past that is disseminated in and through cultural forms of memory. I approach the first issue also in the attached article *Borders, Barriers, and Grievable Lives*, and the second in the attached paper *Framing Narratives* and in Pötzsch (2012a).

### 1. Framing the Subject: Interpretative Schemata, Myths, and Discourse

In a press briefing in 2002,<sup>21</sup> then US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld made his by now notorious remarks regarding different categories of knowledge. He distinguished between the *known-knowns* (the things we know that we know), the *known-unknowns* (the things we know that we do not know), and the *unknown-unknowns* (the things we do not even know that we do not know). With implied reference to alleged Iraqi WMDs, and without a due sense of irony, he claimed that the latter category - the unknown-unknowns - would be the most important one to tackle for war planners. However, as Žižek (2004:9-10) points out, there is a fourth category that was evaded by Rumsfeld and that can be seen as even more crucial for war preparation - the *unknown-knowns*, the knowledges we do not know we have, the interpretative schemata that tacitly guide and predispose individual and collective attitudes, conceptualizations, and behaviour.<sup>22</sup>

I argue that the audio-visual rhetoric described throughout the previous chapters is not only a feature of the war film or of war games, but emerges as a constitutive element of various medial representations that together form what Westwell (2006:5) terms a “cultural imagination of war (...) that provide[s] the common ground upon which a collective, shared sense of war is worked out, articulated and sometimes contested”. Deployed across medial and generic boundaries, epistemological barriers naturalize particular interpretative frames in form of a powerful myth - the

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<sup>21</sup> February 12th, 2002. Transcript available at:

<http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2002/02/mil-020212-usia01.htm> (accessed: 07.06.11)

<sup>22</sup> Of course, there are other ways of providing meaning to a fourth category. Daase/Kessler (2007), for instance, refer to the unknown-knowns as „ignored or repressed“ (413) knowledge „we don’t want to know“ (412) thereby directing focus to conscious neglect.

myth of self and other at war. This mythical frame stabilizes identities and “reconcile[s] the social in the face of structural dislocation” (Torfing 1999: 129). Here, the constitutive absence of the enemy-other acquires the function of an unknown-known in the sense of Žižek. An empty slot, the constitutive frames of which pattern possible engagements with past, present, and potential future enemies.

The “unreal enemy” identified by Allen (2011), points to such a discursive blank spot – an unknown-known – not only in the universe of FPS games, but in the realm of popular culture more generally. Epistemological barriers, it seems, increasingly permeate the boundaries of entertainment and popular culture and to a growing extent frame the enemy in public political discourse, too. Militainment, the increased blending and blurring of entertainment formats with information and news within narrow military frames identified by for instance Der Derian (2001), Andersen (2006), Alford (2010), or Stahl (2010), draws upon similar representational strategies as do the war film and war games. This audio-visual rhetoric of war facilitates the deployment of interpretative schemata encountered in popular cultural expressions to an understanding and conceptualisation of concrete adversaries, their intentions, and available options for conflict resolution.

The epistemological barriers deployed across a wide array of media formats and genres function as a tacit interpretative schema – a “background of meaning” (Weldes 2003:7) – that takes part in regulating the “public sphere of appearance” (Butler 2004:xx) and, often implicitly, renders certain forms of life “ungrievable” (Butler 2009). This way societies constantly draw and redraw the categorical boundaries beyond which “life ceases to be politically relevant” (Agamben 1998:139) and accordingly can be terminated without committing homicide. In our media-saturated times, massively consumed popular cultural expressions play a crucial role in naturalizing such boundaries. This naturalization of ultimately contingent discursive frames is effectuated through the deployment and constant reinforcement of a powerful myth that emerges as the core of an audio-visual culture of war.

According to Lincoln (2002), a myth “packages a specific contingent system of discrimination in a particularly attractive and memorable form, and (...) naturalizes and legitimates it” (216). To make the proposed contingent taxonomy effective, Lincoln (1989) argues, three key factors have to be in place: Firstly, the ordering myth has to “gain a hearing” (8). This implies that it has to be disseminated by an agent with a powerful enunciatory position. Secondly, it has to be “persuasive”

(8), meaning the myth has to be coherent, logically structured, and not in overt disagreement with established hegemonic discursive frames. Thirdly, the myth has to “elicit (...) sentiments”, since the formation of discursive frames operates not only “along rational (or pseudo-rational) and moral (or pseudo-moral) lines” (8), but also entails an affective dimension of prerational emotions. I argue that the war movie genre, as well as the other medial forms discussed above, meet all three criteria; war films, games, and militainment are widely disseminated and consumed by large audiences, they are formally structured and coherent, and they are rationally as well as emotionally engaging. This indicates a socio-political impact of the contingent system of discrimination deployed in a majority of these audio-visual representations that unequivocally divides a soldier-self from various ubiquitously absent threats.

Lincoln (1989) states that it is mainly through the evocation of feelings of “affinity and estrangement” towards a constitutive other that contingent “social borders are constructed” (9) and temporary discursive stability is provided to an inside. However, the myth disseminated through the rhetoric of audio-visual war culture does not abate the social construction of a border towards a clearly defined category of other such as Muslim, African, Russian, Chinese, Communist or other, but sets up an estranging epistemological barrier towards an enemy per se – an enemy that remains ubiquitously absent, faceless, inaccessible, incomprehensible, yet potentially omnipresent as a deadly threat. As such, this rhetoric leaves a discursive blank spot in a mythical frame – a floating signifier or an unknown-known – that political articulations can discursively fix and concretize with reference to real world enemies for the purpose of promoting particular interests. In other words, the audio-visual war rhetoric described above establishes generalized categorical boundaries that predispose potential assessments of enemies that populate not only diegetic universes, but also the real world.

When perceived in the light of a discourse-theoretical approach, the effects of an audio-visual rhetoric of war can be conceptualized as playing into and reinforcing patterns of support and restraint that systematically frame the performances of discursively positioned subjects. These patterns resemble interpretative and performative schemata that predispose individual and collective conceptualisations, attitudes, articulations, and behaviour in enabling a contingent (b)ordering of conceptual and topographic space. The (b)ordering function of ultimately contingent schemata is stabilized in form of constitutive myths that entail the naturalization of inherently temporary and precarious frames as the totalizing horizon of a hegemonic order. Discursive change



that challenges core myths and puts into place alternative schemata patterning individual and collective performances in a different manner is enabled through the overdetermination of constitutive subjects through competing discursive frames. These alternative frames become available in and through for instance liminal locations and characters that reassert the ultimate contingency of allegedly timeless discursive (b)orders and bring into motion again sedimented structures of meaning and understanding.

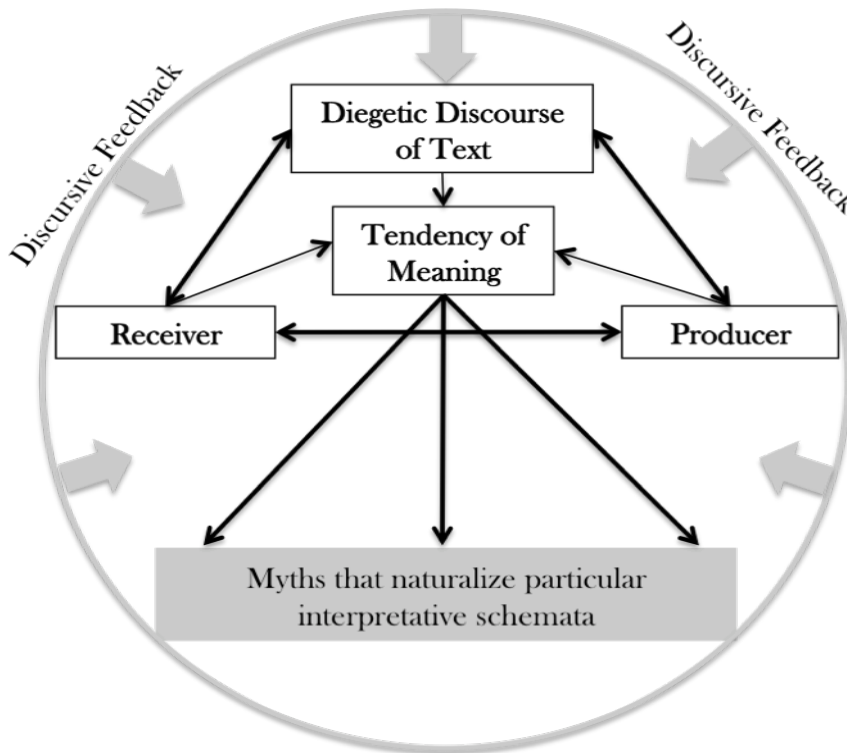


Figure 7: Communication, Myths, and Discursive Frames.

Within this discursive model of mass communication, hegemonic interpretative schemata that are naturalized in and through core myths are constantly reproduced through feedback loops that pattern the performances and conceptualization of producers as well as receivers. This way the constraining nature of genre can be conceptualized as a set of implicit expectations framed by a particular hegemonic subject-position, while the notion of a constant and constitutive overdetermination can explain the processes of cautious renewal of established conventions that challenge key expectations in a constant interplay of reinforcement and change. The relationship between producers, receivers, discursive frames, and the cinematic text is reciprocal and mutually constitutive.

Perceived in a discourse-theoretical perspective, all social agents act under discursive supports and restraints. As such, the effects of discourses can be conceived of as an active reduction of possibilities - a dispersed form of power without centre, 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 centre 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 of a hegemonic discourse of war.

Audio-visual war culture at once constitutes, reinforces, and is reproduced by, a myth that discursively stabilizes the ultimately contingent identities of self and other as well as the nature of their conflict. The mythical frame naturalizes chains of equivalence and difference that become sedimented in form of interpretative schemata predisposing engagements with a generalized notion of the other, without however fixing the identity of this other in a particular objectified configuration. Instead, the emergent patterns predispose attitudes, conceptualizations, articulations, and performances toward an as yet unidentified enemy, that nevertheless appears already framed as an at once invisible and omnipresent, evil, and incomprehensible, deadly threat that has to be engaged through massive violence to ensure own survival. As a result, whatever contingent face the other acquires in the various global theatres of war and conflict, its potential discursive identities, and possible ways of approaching it, are significantly limited from the outset. This way audio-visual war culture readjusts the bias of the system into a violent and irreconcilable direction and entails a significant framing impact on politics.

Of course, these frames do not determine a public that actively engages the proposed patterns from various different discursive contexts. What they do, however, is to make certain alternatives for action appear more viable, more realistic, and more beneficial than others. They implicitly present nonviolent approaches to conflict resolution as naïve, unrealistic, and in disconnect with established discursive frames, precisely in constantly reiterating the contingent interpretative schemata that are naturalized in form of an audio-visual myth of self and other at war. To critically engage this myth with the objective of making the implicit explicit thereby denaturalizing it, means to challenge and possibly subvert hegemonic frames of war that reproduce violent conduct as the only way of conflict resolution on a global scale. Only the facilitation of “performative encounters” on liminal grounds that open for and accept “new subject-positions”

(Rosello 2005:1) can enable an ethical facing of the enemy in the sense of Levinas (2002) – a facing that emerges as a viable alternative to a discursive logic that systematically frames violence as the only possible way to approach the other.

## **2. War/Memory: Negotiating Constitutive Pasts**

This section introduces the analytical framework of cultural memory studies to provide a second approach to the potential discursive impacts of popular cultural expressions dealing with the issue of war, violence, and the other. In contrast to the cognitively inspired framework sketched out in the section above that allows for the conceptualization of the ways through which interpretative schemata and core myths render the other per se ungrivable in the sense of Butler (2009), cultural memory studies focus on the medial representation of concrete incidents and how these articulate particular contingent historical events into a multi-discursive context. Besides introducing an additional theoretical perspective this section also opens a field for promising further research in particular by inviting a combination of the discourse-theoretical and cognitive advances presented earlier on with the cultural memory approach sketched out below. Parts of this section are based on forthcoming articles that are not part of this dissertation (Pöttsch 2012a&b).

It is a defining feature of war stories that issues of memory and history intersect. War stories are often the stories of individual soldiers. However, due to the peculiar nature of their content relating to major collective endeavours, suffering and sacrifice, these stories quickly adopt major significance for the self-perception and self-legitimation of collectives. As such also the explicit content of war films, and the ways these are framed, become an important object of investigation.

Initially published as memoirs, or historical novels where persons directly involved in the events articulate their experience and position, many of war stories are subsequently adapted to screen. As movies ‘based on true stories’, they potentially reach wide audiences and become important instruments for the social construction of any given collectives’ commonly accepted imaginaries of shared pasts. Individual histories of war are thus transformed into inherently prescriptive war history, “a collective sense of war [that] becomes a pattern of thought, a hard-wired set of expectations and desires that constrain the very ways we think about war,” as Guy Westwell (2006: 5) puts it.

What – to use Astrid Erll’s (2008) terminology – turns a film about war memories into a *memory-making film* with relevance for individual and collective historical self-perception and reproductive political practice? How are individual war memories transposed into what Jan

Assmann (1992) terms *cultural memory*? And what role does historical truth play when eruptive and erratic traumatic memories meet memory politics? Such questions and others are addressed in the emergent field of what Olick and Robbins (1998) term *social memory studies*; the study of “distinct sets of mnemonic practices in various social sites” (112). I will here direct attention to the subfield of *cultural war memory* - social memory practices regarding war that are carried out in, and through, cultural and aesthetic expressions.

Much has been written about the interconnection between cultural artefacts, social memory and memory politics. Starting with Jan Assmann (1992) and Aleida Assmann (1999), via Marita Sturken’s (1997) or Allison Landsberg’s (2004) thoughts and through to Astrid Erll’s (2008) contemporary work, also the importance of fiction – be it on film, as novel, poetry, or on stage – for processes of collective remembering has been acknowledged and critically assessed.

Regarding the issue of memory, fiction, and film Marita Sturken (1997:23), for instance asserts that “feature films (...) retain a powerful cultural currency; they provide popular narratives (...) that supersede and overshadow documentary images and written texts”, while Astrid Erll (2008:389) makes explicit that fictional media such as novels and feature films “possess the potential to generate and mould images of the past which will be retained by whole generations.” Fiction (and fictionalized accounts), it seems, matter for processes of collective identity formation. They take part in forming what Allison Landsberg (2004) refers to as *prosthetic memories*, memories of past events one hasn’t experienced oneself, but developed a close relation to. The question remains as to how popular culture impacts social memory? How do fictionalized accounts influence historical discourse and memory politics?

In cultural memory studies an early focus on storage and archiving of historical material has been increasingly replaced by attention to the ways certain accounts are mediated and remediated, and their contents negotiated. This awareness of issues of mediation, reception, and interpretative schemata led Astrid Erll (2008) to propose three analytical levels when dealing with narratives about the past. Drawing upon the well-established distinction between text, intertext, and context, she suggests an *intra-medial*, an *inter-medial*, and a *pluri-medial* level of analysis. These levels imply the following; at an *intra-medial* level attention is directed to the narrative’s textual features. What story is told, and which technical and narrative means are applied in the process? At an *inter-medial* level focus is directed towards the ways through which earlier mediations of an event are remediated within a different work and to what purpose this is done. Is original footage included?

Is documentary material mimicked? Are original locations used? Are particular genre conventions activated or challenged? To what avail?

In an approach that is comparable to Staiger's (2000) contextual analysis, Erll argues that the intra- and inter-medial dimensions merely allow for the assessment of potentials for memory-making inherent in the studied texts – be they fictitious or factual in kind. For instance not every feature film about a historical war that employs real footage is read as conveying historical material by its varying audiences. As such, the technical and narrative means applied to suggest historical validity cannot guarantee the effectiveness of these strategies with all audiences and in all contexts of reception – not even in case of a fully-fledged documentary film. In other words, the intra- and inter-medial levels do not by themselves transform a certain narrative's historical content into cultural memory. However, the technical and narrative devices employed engender a dominant tendency of meaning that entails the potentials for particular discursive impacts. To achieve such memory-making effects a third, contextual level has to activate the deployed content, ensure its continued availability in public discourse, and assert its socio-political relevance. (For a study of the intra-medial devices establishing memory-making potentials in the contemporary war film see the attached article *Framing Narratives*).

According to Erll, it is precisely at this point that the third level of analysis becomes relevant – the pluri-medial constellations surrounding a work – “tight network[s] of other medial representations ... [that] prepare the ground . . . lead reception . . . open up and channel discussion, and thus endow [for instance] films with their memorial meaning” (Erll 2008:396). Pluri-medial networks serve to premeditate a text, predispose its reception, ensure its continued availability, and provide reading instructions, hints or cues to audiences as to how to understand and discursively articulate it. It is at this pluri-medial level that memory-making potentials are transformed into discursive effects impacting memory politics as well as the formation and negotiation of individual and collective identities. In addition, at this contextual level the abstract, ubiquitously absent enemy is endowed with a concretized, yet narrowly framed discursive identity that plays into particular political rhetoric aimed at real world enemies.

Through their focus on often inherently traumatic past events with great individual and collective significance, war movies are particularly well suited to illustrate the important nexus interconnecting historical research, politics, and popular culture. McCrisken and Pepper argue that “historical films should not be seen as transparent windows onto the past but as ideologically

contradictory, textual mediations whose forms and representational strategies produce, and are produced by, ever shifting power relations” (McCrisken and Pepper 2005: 8). First through their embedding in pluri-medial networks do films unfold memory-making potentials that account for various discursive impacts. However, as argued throughout previous chapters, the formal properties of the “textual mediations” referred to by McCrisken and Pepper, frame these impacts and invite the spectator to adopt particular subject-positions in relation to the historical event in question. As such, a discourse-theoretically inspired approach allows for a detailed analysis of the various interplays between textual structures, discursively positioned semi-autonomous subjects, and pluri-medial multi-discursive frames. However, what about the actual past event - the historical raw material that is articulated and constantly negotiated among the receiving subjects?

In his study on cultural commemorations of the Irish Troubles, Dawson (2007) asserts that “the past (...) is shaped by present day needs and interests” (307). It is not fixed but continuously emerges as “a constantly evolving movement” (307) that is constitutively incomplete. What Dawson refers to here is an overdetermination of audiences by various discursive frames, and the inherently precarious, temporary, and processual nature of discursive identities, that point toward an ultimate contingency of historical and other truths. In this perspective collective forms of memory emerge as fluid and changing - as intersubjectively accepted versions of past events that are constantly negotiated and never entirely fixed in one objective and timeless order. However, the tacit deployment and reproduction of particular interpretative schemata that become naturalized as myths frame possible articulations and their reception. They channel discursive negotiations in particular directions, without however determining them in the last instance. History emerges as the ever-changing, temporary, and precarious product of contingent articulations by overdetermined subjects on undecidable grounds.

As argued in the chapter on post-foundationalism above, to assert the ultimate contingency of discursive identities and frames does not imply arbitrariness. Accordingly, in their study on the commemoration of Bloody Sunday, Herron and Lynch (2007) for instance point out that “the emphasis on indeterminacy and *ongoing* struggle over [historical] meaning rather than the reassuring comforts of closure is not the same thing as a denial of meaning or a disabling relativism“ (76; emphasis in original). Even though social memory is inherently contingent and constantly open to change and subversion, this does not imply that all articulations are alike in impact. To achieve relevance for historical discourse and increase its political effect, a historical

articulation, such as for instance a war film or game, has to connect back to a preceding real and signal this connection through certain intra- and inter-medial representational strategies that engender a dominant tendency of meaning vested in the formal properties of the audio-visual text. Through processes of articulation and rearticulation by overdetermined subjects in pluri-medial constellations, the asserted claims are weighted, criticized, promoted, or suppressed. The resulting discursive memory-effects are due to a combination of textual coherence and frames, documentable historical accuracy, and the enunciatory power of the disseminating agents.

The reception of historical narratives is effectuated by overdetermined subjects who are positioned by a variety of diegetic and extra-diegetic frames that are constantly negotiated against one another. Hegemonic discourses signify themselves as totalizing horizons that seemingly arrest such processes of constant change. Such hegemonic frames are constituted in and through chains of equivalence and difference that are naturalized and stabilized as constitutive myths. These myths again function as interpretative schemata that tacitly predispose what is perceived, from which perspective, and how it affects preestablished discursive identities and frames. Cultural memory studies contribute to an understanding of the role popular cultural expressions play in these processes, and enable a critical inquiry into the discursive frames predisposing the production and reception of various articulations of a violent past. This way they enable a better understanding of the schemata, backgrounds of meaning, or logistics of perception that pattern the performances which constantly shape our future. In particular with regard to the perpetuation of warfare and other violent endeavours, a critical analysis of these patterns and their sources and ways of reproduction appear as an important focus for continued research.

## LIMINAL POLITICS? A CONCLUSION

According to Laclau and Mouffe (2001:xvii) “there cannot be a (...) politics without the definition of an adversary”. The adversary is constitutive of the social antagonism that, in the thought of Laclau and Mouffe (2001), enables the conceptualization of an ultimate contingency of the social. Is a discourse-theoretical perspective on politics and the political, as such, inherently violent? Does the ultimate undecidability of the social imply the necessity of an enemy-other? As a conclusion to this dissertation, I will, firstly, outline what Chantal Mouffe (2005:101) refers to as an “agonistic pluralism” that, according to her, constitutes the core of a democratic politics, before I present the argument that this form of politics can be seen as inherently liminal.

In line with post-foundationalism in general, also Mouffe’s thought is based on the distinction between ‘politics’ and ‘the political’.<sup>23</sup> While the former refers to contingent ensembles of practices and institutions in certain discursive orders, the latter term describes the ultimate undecidability of the social as it surfaces in and through the notion of a constitutive social antagonism. While ‘politics’ is enacted at the contingent level of actually existing societies, ‘the political’ reflects the ultimate incompleteness of discursive identities and frames – “the impossibility of the object ‘society’ as a rationally unified totality” (Laclau/Mouffe 2001:99).

According to Mouffe (2005:101), politics temporarily and precariously (b)orders the ultimately elusive social within hegemonic frames. As such, different political practices articulate the constitutive antagonism at the heart of the social in form of various concretized conflicts between contingent groups. It appears that politics is vested in the contingent construction of concrete opponents out of a ubiquitously absent constitutive enemy. Does this entail the necessity of epistemological barriers for politics?

Mouffe (2005) writes that “politics aims at the creation of unity in a context of [constitutive] conflict and diversity” and is “always concerned with the creation of an ‘us’ by the determination of a ‘them’” (101). She criticises deliberative democracy for its insistence that the ultimate aim of politics is to overcome such divisions through the development of for instance a “rational consensus” in the sense of Habermas or Rawls (94). This approach, argues Mouffe, veils the

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<sup>23</sup> For this distinction see for instance Marchart (2007:35-60 & 2010:32-58).



constitutive exclusion on which any system with necessity is based. As an alternative, she develops the concept of “agonistic pluralism” as the core of a post-foundationalist democratic politics.

Mouffe (2005) argues that “[t]he novelty of democratic politics is not the overcoming of this [social antagonism’s] us/them opposition (...) but the different way in which it is established”, and as one could add, negotiated. She then continues to lay out what an agonistically pluralist democratic politics entails in relation to the construction and constant reconstruction of self and other in conflict: “from the point of view of ‘agonistic pluralism,’ the aim of democratic politics is to construct the ‘them’ in such a way that it is no longer perceived as an enemy to be destroyed, but an ‘adversary’, that is, somebody whose ideas we combat but whose right to defend those ideas we do not put into question” (101-102). Within this framework, the aim of democratic politics appears to be precisely to tear down or permeate epistemological barriers, and this way to transform the ubiquitously absent, yet constitutive other into a “legitimate enemy” (102). Consequently, liminality emerges as a crucial component of this politics vested in a productive antagonism toward a constitutive, legitimate other.

Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism emerges as inherently liminal. It enables a politics that accepts the ultimate necessity of social antagonism vested in the constitutive lack of a common ground, and that retains an awareness of the resulting contingency of all discursive positions. Instead of positing an objectified hegemonic frame for the articulation of a politics purporting to arrest the floating of signifiers and identities, agonistic pluralism proposes a nonviolent and inclusive alternative that is based on the acceptance of constitutive difference, and that enables negotiation and peaceful change in and through “performative encounters” (Rosello 2005) and communication-as-interruption (Pinchevski 2005) with a legitimate enemy. This form of politics does not purport to end all conflict in the stasis of a Kantian eternal peace as this would entail the end of politics as well. Instead, agonistically pluralist democratic practice merely aims at resolving ultimately constitutive conflicts through nonviolent and inclusive processes of constant change.

The (transmedial) audio-visual rhetoric of the war genre that has been outlined in this dissertation, indicates two ways of framing adversaries and the nature of conflicts; either the opponent is confined behind epistemological barriers and becomes a threatening ubiquitous absence that proves constitutive of hegemonic discursive identities and frames, or liminal locations and characters enable the emergence of the alternative discourse of the other, the sudden presence of which undermines and dislodges naturalized orders and subject-positions. In the first case,

successful conflict resolution entails the inherently violent oppression, exclusion, assimilation, or annihilation of the potentially subversive other to suppress contingency and maintain the precarious stability of hegemonic discourses and identities. In the second case, the other is enabled to assert its potentially subversive presence, to articulate alternative subject-positions and frames, and this way, to reiterate the ultimate contingency of any discursive order.

Each of the two audio-visual rhetoric described throughout the present dissertation can be seen to play into, and reinforce, each their approach to politics. While epistemological barriers and narrowly framed enemy-others facilitate a politics of polarity and exclusion that defends objectified social structures and institutions against what is framed as an inaccessible and incomprehensible threat, liminal characters and locations play into an agonistic democratic politics that is based on the acceptance of the enemy as a legitimate other and that enables a nonviolent resolution of constitutive conflicts and oppositions.

Seen from the vantage point of a liminal democratic politics, the other emerges as a necessary component of a mutually constitutive antagonism that implies the ultimate contingency of the social. There will always be an other, and it will always pose a dislodging challenge to what is taken for granted and naturalized. However, a liminal politics accepts this ultimate necessity of the “legitimate enemy”, and precisely therefore enables constant nonviolent change and peaceful transformation through first to second person interaction as an alternative to inherently violent struggles between mutually exclusive objectified frameworks that are entangled in a destructive logic of perpetuated war. Liminal democratic politics aim at performative encounters between self and other on a fluid and constantly changing middle ground that is framed by the inherent acceptance that the respective antagonist is neither a constitutive absence, nor a subversive presence, but emerges as a constantly constituting presence that points to the ultimately processual nature of human coexistence and the necessity of perpetuated mutual adaptation on undecidable terrain.

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## Appendix: ARTICLES

### Article 1: “Challenging the Border as Barrier: Liminality in Terrence Malick’s ‘The Thin Red Line’”

This article appeared in the *Journal for Borderlands Studies* in 2010 (Vol. 25, issue 1). Draft versions have been presented at the Association for Borderlands Studies’ annual conference *Cultural Production and Negotiation of Borders* in Kirkenes, Norway (September 2008) and at the Nomadikon workshop *Pluralizing Visual Culture* in Bergen, Norway (February 2009).

Through the parallel reading of four war films - *Aliens*, *Black Hawk Down*, *300*, and *The Thin Red Line* - this paper, firstly, provides additional in-depths studies into the representational conventions of the war genre, before it, secondly, interrogates the ways through which this emergent audio-visual rhetoric of war can be challenged and subverted. The article deploys the key analytical concepts developed throughout this dissertation - epistemological barrier, soldier-self, enemy-other, ubiquitous absence, and liminality - to an analysis of empirical material that has received only brief mentioning throughout the bridging essay.



**Article 2: “Liminale Räume in Srdjan Dragojevićs ‚Lepa Sela, Lepa Gore‘ und Danis Tanovićs ‚Ničija Zemlja‘“**

This article is part of in the anthology *Kulturanalyse im zentraleuropäischen Kontext* that has been published at Francke Verlag, Tübingen in the autumn of 2011 (eds. Wolfgang Müller-Funk et.al.). A draft has been presented at the international conference *Kulturanalyse im zentraleuropäischen Kontext* at Vienna University (September 2009).

In this paper the concept of liminality stands central and is diversified with reference to two films covering the civil war in former Yugoslavia. Both these film feature inherently liminal locations such as no man’s lands or connecting tunnels, but subvert their disruptive potentials throughout the ensuing narrative. The article deploys the discourse-theoretical framework by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe to conceptualize the subversive potentials of liminality and to enable an understanding of the possible impacts of border-crossing characters or shared locations.



**Article 3: “Borders, Barriers, and Grievable Lives: The Discursive Production of Self and Other in Film and Other Audio-Visual Media”**

The article has been published in the journal *Nordicom Review* in winter 2011 (Vol. 32, issue 2). It has been presented in form of a keynote lecture at the *Framing War in the Cultural Field*-workshop at Oslo University College (November 2009), and as a paper at the *Global Media and the War on Terror*-conference at Westminster University, London (September 2010).

This paper addresses a wide range of issues; firstly, it provides an in-depth study into the rhetoric of the *Black Hawk Down*-media complex that consists of a historical novel, a block-buster movie, a computer war game, and a documentary. This way, the article sketches out the transmedial and transgeneric potentials of the present dissertation’s most central analytical tools and concepts. Secondly, the paper combines a discourse-theoretical approach with the thought of Judith Butler and Giorgio Agamben to conceptualize the way through which naturalized interpretative schemata or frames render certain forms of life ungrievable and without rights or legal protection. Through this conceptual focus the article closely aligns to the present main essay’s chapter 9.1 *Framing the Subject*.





#### **Article 4: “Framing Narratives: Opening Sequences in Contemporary American and British War Films”**

This article has been accepted for publication in the journal *Media, War, and Conflict*, Vol. 5, issue 2, 2012..

The paper closely relates to the present bridging essay’s chapter 9.2 *War/Memory*. It provides a close reading of a series of opening sequences in the war film and sketches out the rhetorical means deployed to create particular memory-making potentials in the sense of Astrid Erll. In doing so, it invites for a conceptualization of the opening sequence as a liminal zone that enables the interconnection of the world of the spectator with the world of the text, and this way makes possible an understanding of the processes through which diegetic and extra-diegetic discursive positions interrelate.



