

America in the scope

A post-colonial study of *American Sniper*, mourning and nationalism

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Abstract

The aim of this thesis is to discuss how themes of nationalism, mourning and death can be implemented in a film such as *American Sniper* to reproduce the idea of nation states as well as enforce nationalism. Through a close analysis of chosen sequences in the film the thesis presents a mode of looking at film, rooted in the given themes, which will help analyzing similar films with these reoccurring themes. The study shows not only how a film such as *American Sniper* can be seen as a form of reproducing banal nationalism but also how given narratives devalue the life of Others while reinforcing the idea of how Our lives are valuable, essentially creating a rift between who can be mourned and 'who can be forgotten. This rift can be seen in the narrative of the film and it is argued that this is acting as a form of banal propaganda, enforcing Our right to perpetrate violence against Them.

Keywords

American Sniper, post-colonial, Orientalism, patriotism, Other, Othering, West, East, Occident, flagging, nationalism, mourning, death, violence, war, heroism, dehumanization, Islam, Christianity, Michael Billig, Judith Butler, Edward Said, Benedict Anderson, imagined communities.

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

In 2014 Clint Eastwood released his latest cinematic feature *American Sniper*, based on the book with the same name, written by Chris Kyle based on his experiences in the Iraq war (2003-2011). It quickly became a box office hit and while it seems to have split reviewers and moviegoers alike, it received several Academy Award nominations and won one of them. Its themes of patriotism, war and its consequences are what seem to have split the reviews as some found them refreshing and some seem to think that Eastwood has just recycled old stereotypes while the director himself claims that the film is an anti-war statement.¹

However, one wants to look at it the film does follow a tradition of how “terrorists” in Hollywood are portrayed that also falls in to a pattern of Oriental stereotypes. The Orientals are vicious, immoral, brutal and savage while the US soldiers soldiers have noble reasons for going to war and are not seen in the same light. In fact the difference between the violence performed by Chris Kyle (Bradley Cooper) and that perpetrated by Orientals is not really a difference in which acts they perform, but rather how those acts are judged.

Unsurprisingly, considering the film takes place during the Iraq war, there are plenty of deaths shown on the screen. However, the depiction of death and mourning differs greatly between the Western and Eastern characters. When Western characters are killed or even injured, this becomes something crucial that we as audience must experience. When the Eastern characters suffer loss, however, it is not addressed in even a remotely similar way. Their suffering is often not shown, which is interesting considering the film mostly takes place in Iraq, during the war meaning that there is plenty of death to explore as a theme within the narrative. This, however, is never the case.

These ways of separating between Us and Them is part of a nationalistic discourse stemming from a will to categorize humans as one can do with plants. While this is

¹ Kilday, Gregg. “Clint Eastwood on ‘American Sniper’s’ ‘Biggest anti-war statement’”. The Hollywood Reporter. <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/clint-eastwood-american-snipers-biggest-766498> (accessed 2015-05-22)

a nationalist way of looking at the world it becomes interesting to discuss since it is not often that this reproduction is considered nationalism or benevolent. This thesis will discuss how the aspect of death and mourning goes hand-in-hand with the reproduction of nationalism, especially in its more banal forms, and what consequences this has, with the intent of deconstructing how these factors are formed and at the same time overlooked as something natural.

1.2 Material and selection

This thesis centers its analysis on the film *American Sniper*, thus, that is the only film that is actually part of the material. While it could be interesting to compare the film to other similar features such *Jarhead* (Sam Mendes, 2006) or *Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2008) that would make the thesis focus more on how different films can be compared within a post-colonial scope and not how they actually can be studied. By focusing solely on *American Sniper* the idea is to provide a mode of looking at films and more specifically how the concept of banal nationalism is constructed within a film in relation to death and mourning. The thesis will give tools to look at the ways nationalism and patriotism is reproduced under the label of war film. By using a feature that is based on real life events such as *American Sniper* this is also a starting point for how portrayals of reality/fiction can be deconstructed in terms of how we look at and discuss death and mourning in regards to Otherness and nationalism.

Thus,, the goal is not to provide a quantitative study of the state of nationalist themed films, but an in depth analysis and a mode of looking at film. *American Sniper* was chosen for several reasons. First of all the reception of the film has been a very mixed bag of praise and critique. Its nationalistic and political elements have split reviewers and audiences alike making it an interesting piece of media to discuss. Furthermore, its focus on mourning, death and coping with the realities of war makes it a good fit for discussing with support from post-colonial theories regarding nationalism and Orientalism. Lastly it is a relatively new film, thus, placing the thesis and the theories used in a contemporary context.

The thesis is mainly focused around three books and their theories. While other literature was used as well, these three have been chosen to provide a solid ground for the analysis of the film, giving three different perspectives that not only complement each other , but are also important for the understanding of the film itself.

Michael Billig's book *Banal Nationalism* has been chosen since his theories are fitting to discuss how nationalism can be perpetuated in the little things, a concept he calls "flagging". Thus, it has been chosen over other works since its method is centered around how seemingly banal features can act as producers and reproducers of nationalism which is one of the key point that is made throughout the thesis. Furthermore, Billig provides a precise and useful definition of nationhood and nationalism which coupled with Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* provides the groundwork for understanding the construction and reproduction of those concepts.

Edward Said's *Orientalism* was chosen even though it might not provide the newest take on the concept, but instead for its thorough analysis of Orientalism. His theories are mostly sound to this day and provide a solid ground for the understanding of how Orientalism is constructed and upheld to this day. Furthermore, it is more precise to this thesis than using other theories which focus more heavily on the position of the Other or whiteness since Said's focus is specifically the Orient and, thus, becomes very relevant when looking at *American Sniper* and its themes centered around Iraq, Orientalism and Western versus Eastern beliefs.

Precarious Lives: the powers of Mourning and Violence by Judith Butler has been selected to show the actual effects of the separation between Us and Them, providing not only insights in how 9/11 has changed the discourse about human lives, but also how the discrepancy in which bodies and lives can be mourned deconstructs who gets to be human enough. Butler does not only provide a useful model for discussing the value of human lives, but also puts this into a context that is highly relevant for *American Sniper* since it so clearly presents a difference in which characters get to show grief.

Several reviews will be used to provide context for how the film was received. These will not be able to provide an exhaustive image of the reception of the film, but will provide the reader with an insight of different viewpoints on Eastwood's feature, with a focus on a US context. The idea is to show the reactions it caused and look for reoccurring themes regarding the value of lives and nationalism, no matter the actual opinion of the author.

1.3 Methodology

As mentioned *American Sniper* will be discussed with the help of mainly Said, Butler and Billig. These three authors and their theories have been chosen to provide a wide, but cohesive, spectra of how one can perform a post-colonial study of a cinematic feature. These theories will further be discussed with the literature mentioned under chapter 1.2 *Material and Selection*, to provide a wider perspective on the topics and not be limited to three specific authors mentioned above.

Key sequences have been chosen to exemplify how nationalism is constructed and upheld within the narrative of the film. The criterion for whether a sequence is considered important or not is based on their theme where those revolving around death and mourning have been chosen. The introduction scene is not as obviously related to these themes, however, it has been chosen for its way to justify the violence perpetrated by Chris Kyle throughout the film and is, thus, very relevant in the context of this analysis.

1.4 Research questions

This thesis focuses on discussing questions regarding nationalism, death and mourning, by analyzing these themes within the film *American Sniper*. The thesis will answer the following questions:

- * How is death portrayed differently depending on the origin of the characters? In scenes revolving around death or the threat of death, how does the film treat the characters differently? How can this difference be discussed in the context of nationalism?
- * How is mourning portrayed differently depending on the origin of the characters? Who gets to be mourned, how does the mourning differ and what significance does this bear?
- * How can we discuss banal nationalism and the concept of “flagging”, as defined by Michael Billig, in *American Sniper*? Is the film propaganda or does it simply bear similar “flagging” as our everyday life?

1.5 Scholarly significance

This thesis intends to place itself in a contemporary discourse of race, nationalism and stereotyping within film. By examining *American Sniper* I hope to not only provide the tools for discussing the banal and explicit nationalism within the film itself, but also develop a methodology for studying films from a post-colonial perspective, in regards to the key themes in the thesis: nationalism, death and mourning. While post-colonial analyses have of course been made before and will be made after this thesis as well, the combining of situating a distinct methodology for deconstructing nationalism in relation to death and mourning is not as common. By utilizing and combining three different viewpoints on the construction of nationhood and its consequences the thesis provides not only a methodology for discussing how Orientalist stereotypes manifest themselves today. It also brings up how these manifestations are at the same time timeless as well as affected by current trends. Thus, while not exploring a completely new territory, this thesis stands out with its combination of fields to form a precise tool for analyzing and discussing films from a post-colonial perspective.

1.6 Disposition

Following this first chapter, the second one is divided in to three sub-chapters, each explaining and discussing the aforementioned literature in relationship to how it will be used within the framework of thesis. This will provide the theories needed to understand the analysis of the film.

Chapter three is divided in to two subsections, placing *American Sniper* in a contemporary context. The first sub-chapter is dedicated to the reviews following the release of the film, presenting the common themes that occur between positive as well as negative reviews. It is meant to showcase how reviewers were split by the film, but also how they seem somewhat focused on the same characteristics of the narrative, but interpreting and appreciating it differently. The second sub chapter places *American Sniper* in the context of terrorism in Hollywood. It presents the reoccurring themes that have been used in Hollywood films centered on terrorism, which often includes themes of nationalism and Orientalism.

In chapter four each of the sequences that have been chosen for the thesis are presented and analyzed. The presentation is a brief retelling of what happens in the sequence to serve as a reminder for the reader but also showcase elements that are relevant in this thesis

that some may overlook. The analysis focuses on the themes presented and discusses them in relationship to the themes of the thesis as well as the literature previously presented. This is followed by chapter five that is a concluding discussion that tries to answer the research questions previously presented as well as provide a summary of the key points brought up in the thesis.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Orientalism and the division of Us and Them

The concept of Orientalism, a term used and described by Edward Said, is the division between an Us and a Them. Us in this case is referring to the West, the concept of Westernness and Westerners while Them is the Orient, most often referring to the Middle East.² Orientalism is the expression of the imperialist European Western experience of the Orient. It is a collection of ideas regarding Orientals: their behavior, mentality and culture. The Orient itself is more or less a Western invention, an interpretation of Middle East through a foggy mist of mystery and colonialism, it is a political tool to divide the known, Us, from the strange, Them. Said says that:

The Orient that appears in Orientalism, then, is a system of representations framed by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness, and later, Western empire. If this definition of Orientalism seems more political than not, that is simply because I think Orientalism was itself a product of certain political forces and activities. Orientalism is a school of interpretation whose material happens to be the Orient, its civilizations, peoples, and localities.³

Being adjacent to Europe, the Orient has helped form the face of Europe through its inventions, cultures and languages. Furthermore, it has been a way for Europe to define itself with the Orient as a contrasting image.⁴ While the term itself has lacked a stable definition over time the concept of the Orient is still persistent, separating Us from the Other. One of the effects of Orientalism or rather the division between Us and the Other is how history bears less significance if it is not Western. Said mentions the huge loss of lives, cultures, languages and expressions have been lost as an effect of Western imperialism. This is not only a thing of the past either. Said sarcastically implies that if Iraq had been the world's largest exporter of oranges or bananas they had not been invaded by the USA to take down the dictator who was

² Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 1977), 7.

³ *Ibid.*, 188.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

in part created by the Americans themselves.⁵ The same ideas of Orientalism live on and justify these actions, the same prejudices, the same stereotypes. While the Holocaust “has permanently altered the consciousness of our time: why do we not accord the same epistemological mutation in what imperialism has done, and what Orientalism continues to do?”⁶ Within academic studies Orientalism has influenced the research and texts produced simply by influencing the researchers and authors to accept an Orientalist world view centered around a clear distinction between East and West, Us and Them.⁷ The Orient is in many ways a construct of Western willingness to Orientalize a fixed space. The Orient was not made into what it has become, because it seemed so Oriental or different from European culture, but because it could be Orientalized, differentiated and fetishized.⁸ The ideas of the Orient are not simply something that can be wished away, however. Even though they are based on myths, exaggerations and prejudices they still hold a level structural truth. It is a system of ideas that has remained relatively unchanged from the 1800s until today. It is more of a systemic web of lies. However, one must not confuse lies with being unreal. Although, we can acknowledge these ideas to be false they still hold actual real life effects on how we perceive and approach the Orient.⁹

The separation between East and West is reliant on the flexible positional superiority which constantly places West on top. This stems from an idea that Western culture is per definition superior to the culture of non-Westerners. The ideas of Orientalism also coincide with the Renaissance, when European culture was booming, thus, further allowing for this sense of superiority, of course further developed when Europe became colonizers.¹⁰ Europe is powerful and known, the Orient is defeated and unknown. However, superiority or authority is nothing given, but something that is formed and taken. In the case of Europe this power was taken by colonization.¹¹ Orientalism is an effect of this, not only ideas, but writings based on those ideas. Studying the Orient from the outside, in a perceived superior position has of course influenced the writings (and writers) themselves. This also situates a Western privilege where Westerners can take part of, exploit and reshape Oriental culture, but the

⁵ Said (1977), 9.

⁶ Ibid., 10.

⁷ Ibid., 20.

⁸ Ibid., 22-23.

⁹ Ibid., 23.

¹⁰ Ibid., 24.

¹¹ Ibid., 122.

opposite was impossible.¹² However, the retelling and thinking about this colonization is told from the colonizers point of view, meaning that it is not a question of how this has happened, but rather a question of how the West perceives that it was done.¹³ Furthermore, the division of ours and theirs in regards to geographical positions is a rather arbitrary idea, because it does not require Them to acknowledge the division. We can create imagined borders and differentiate between what is ours and what belongs to the barbarians, without the need for the latter to take part in this division, thus, inadvertently creating a rift between what is Us and what is Them.¹⁴

Said uses the term *strategic location* to describe the author's position in regards to its subject, in this case being the European writer studying the Oriental. Furthermore, this allows for a *strategic formation* where certain texts gain larger influence within a culture than others.¹⁵ It is my understanding that one can use these terms to pinpoint why certain narratives get to be told when others do not, more specifically why films such as *American Sniper* are not only pitched, financed, produced and filmed, but also become critically acclaimed as well as box office hits. It places itself in an established discourse, a *strategic location* where it gets to look in from the outside. A location where it does not challenge the current discourse nor does it explore new ways to look at its subject. Instead it ends up in the formation of other similar narratives, drawing from recycled Orientalist ideas to tell a new story. The purpose is never to try to reflect the actual Orient, but rather contain it and speak on its behalf. The Orientalist does not intend to make the Orient speak for itself, but rather to make the Orient speak for the West, to reveal itself for the outside, but also to place the Orientalists themselves in a context that is clearly defined as outside the Orient.¹⁶

The idea of Orientalism comes from the willingness to divide nature as well as man into different types. In the spirit of Linnaeus, Orientalism separates our species into specific types with discernible traits. Not surprisingly the more favorable characteristics such as being morally good, educated and civilized were categorized as belonging to the Western body while Orientals were seen as primitive and barbaric.¹⁷

This division is further complicated by religion with Islam being the religion of Orientals and Christianity being the one of Westerners. Islam's position as both familiar, being

¹² Said (1977), 55.

¹³ Ibid., 195.

¹⁴ Ibid., 63-64.

¹⁵ Ibid., 35.

¹⁶ Ibid., 36.

¹⁷ Ibid., 118-119.

a religion closely related to Christianity, and unfamiliar made it unpredictable. The many wars fought with religion as a backdrop came to create a lasting trauma for Europe and its relationship with Islam.¹⁸ While it is not uncommon to resist what is unknown and apply one's "superior" culture to a colony, but to the Westerner Islam had a specific position, being both familiar, but unknown at the same time, making it harder to reform. Muslims seemed like a barbaric and primitive version of Christians more than anything else, but they were still seen as provocative. The similarities in religions were often a result of creative "borrowing" and, furthermore, believers of Islam they had huge military and political success. Last, but not least Islamic countries were on top or adjacent to biblical locations, being geographically closer to the "source" of Christianity than the Christians themselves.¹⁹ While there are few direct references to Islam in *American Sniper* it is often implied. Furthermore, Chris Kyle's Christian belief is referenced frequently, reminding us of the rift that Said describes as well as the differences between Orientals and Westerners shown in the film itself.

Said tries to outline how anti-Orientalist studies might be achieved and suggests that to actually study other cultures and people from a non-repressive position one must rethink the whole dynamic of knowledge and power.²⁰ While this thesis will not be a rethinking of the power dynamics between Orientalism the intent is to dissect and discuss contemporary expressions of Orientalism within contemporary cinema, deconstructing the false dichotomy between Us and Them and the expressions of that division.

Over the years Said and his theories on Orientalism has been criticized. Bernard Lewis is one of the most outspoken ones, accusing Said of over generalizing the European intents and purposes with Orientalism and claims that this point of view overlooks the good that Orientalists have done. Said, however, responded to this by basically claiming that Lewis is upholding the Orientalist point of view. In *Orientalism Reconsidered* he wrote that Lewis is trying to say that "Western quest for knowledge about other societies is unique, that it is motivated by pure curiosity, and that in contrast Muslims neither were able nor interested in getting knowledge about Europe, as if knowledge about Europe were the only acceptable criterion for true knowledge".²¹ In other words, according to Said, Lewis is reproducing the Orientalist Euro-centrism, assuming their intentions to be noble and their finds to be more relevant than others, while at the same time undermining the Orientals and their curiosity and knowledge. Lewis seems to have mistaken the systemic critique that Said presents with a

¹⁸ Said (1977), 68.

¹⁹ Ibid., 80.

²⁰ Ibid., 38.

²¹ Ibid., 96.

vilification of all Europeans, thus, ignoring the imperialist consequences of Orientalism and instead focusing on intentions, which is largely irrelevant in this context.

Another critical voice that was raised against Said was Daniel Pipes. Pipes claims Said's *Orientalism* is part of a personal vendetta and inner demons. Said goes in to detail to deconstruct Pipes own book *In the Path of God*, a book that focuses heavily on criticizing Islam and making it out to be a political force rather than a religion. Said comments on Pipes position by saying that he revealing himself to be an Orientalist:

The pages of *In the Path of God* are dotted with references to Islam's incapacity for self-representation, self-understanding, self-consciousness, and with praise for witnesses like V.S. Naipaul who are so much more useful and clever in understanding Islam. Here, of course, is perhaps the most familiar of Orientalism's themes -since the Orientals cannot represent themselves, they must therefore be represented by others who know more about Islam than Islam knows about itself.²²

He also claims that Pipes has shown an unwillingness to actually understand Islam, ignoring research done by and literature written by Muslims. Furthermore,, he ignores the position that Islam has, being a religion highly affected by the consequences of imperialism.²³ It is interesting how these two, being two of the main critics of Said, seem to have ignored the critique he presents is systemic and instead shifted their focus to exceptions rather than looking at a system of oppression. It becomes clear that they have not understood the viewpoint Said is trying to share, but instead fall in to Orientalist behavior.

²² Edward W. Said, "Orientalism Reconsidered" *Cultural Critique*, No. 1. (Autumn, 1985), 97.

²³ *Ibid.*, 98

2.2 The concept of the nation, “flagging” and banal nationalism

Few things are deemed as justifiable to spill blood over as the concept of the nation. Whether to expand national territory, defend one's borders or protect the very idea of nationhood, no idea seems to be as prevalent as a motivator for violence. However, we seldom question what the nation is and how it came to be so important. Michael Billig points out that “it seems as if an aura attends the very idea of nationhood. The rape of a motherland is far worse than the rape of actual mothers; the death of a nation is the ultimate tragedy, beyond the death of flesh and blood”.²⁴ Not only does the nationhood embody this sense of duty and honor, but it also draws a line between what can be considered “us” and what is “them” as well as distinguishes who can perform nationalism. According to Billig nationalism is most, in both popular and academic writing, something performed by those trying to subvert the nation in its current form, in other words extreme right-wing politics and those aspiring to separate and/or create new states.²⁵ This idea of nationalism places it in an exotic and peripheral position, thus, not relating to nationalism performed by Western nations. The term is preferred when it comes “in small sizes and bright colours” as something to label those who try to re-draw the map and threaten the national-state in its current form.²⁶ It is as if those threatening the nation state (i.e. those called nationalists) are the creators of nations, almost like they do not actually exist outside of these interactions, while in fact the nation-states are reproduced as nations outside these struggles.

Benedict Anderson argues that nations and nationality can be defined as an imagined political community and that it is imagined in a way that allows it to be both limited and sovereign.²⁷ The community is imagined, because nationhood is constructed as a shared consciousness even though most citizens in said nation will never meet, speak or in other ways interact with each other. Nationhood is constructed on the idea of citizens sharing an identity with other citizens of the same nation state, although, generally they have nothing else in common. Thus, this division is limited by national borders. The imagined communities of nations do not include all inhabitants of Earth, but are instead limited by these, flexible, but

²⁴ Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London, California & New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1995), 4.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁷ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London, & New York: Verso, 2006), 6.

solid, borders. Nationhood does not stretch outside of one's nation, allowing for an “ingroup” and an “outgroup” to be formed.²⁸

The communities are sovereign in the sense that they were created during a time of Enlightenment when the measurement for freedom was in fact the sovereign state. Lastly the nation is to be understood as a community, because it bears a sense of camaraderie that extends to people who we will never interact with. This fraternity is also, according to Anderson, what allows blood to be spilled over something as banal and imagined as nationhood.²⁹ Billig builds on this idea by claiming that being part of a nation and sharing nationhood goes beyond the sense of identity, claiming that this position also entails a certain idea: the concept that “we” should possess a state (“our” state), because people should have a nation, as that is the national order of the world.³⁰ Billig's aim is to extend the term “nationalism” to include the means of how nation-states are reproduced. This is also the way nationalism, nationhood and nation-states will be addressed in this thesis or rather how *American Sniper* can be read as being a reproducer of nationalism. Billig says that broadening the term would make no distinction between different types of manifesting nationalism, be it

th
fighting for independence or waving an American flag during 4 of July. Thus, he introduces the term “banal nationalism” to refer to behavior and habits that enable Western nation-states to be reproduced. This is something that happens at a daily basis, where the nation is “flagged” in different ways as a reminder for its citizens (and non-citizens). While this “flagging” is not as strictly political as the understanding of nationalism as a concept often suggests, it is not always benign, but simply banal. The continuous, daily “flagging” allows for the concept of the nation-state to become a natural part of the citizens life. However, this is done in small ways that the reminding is not even registered as a reminder. Billig states that “The metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building”, in other words claiming that the reproduction of the nation-state is done unnoticed to the actual citizen.³¹

To reach the core of nationhood and nationalism it is hard to bypass the discussion of identity, which is something Billig implies is often counterproductive. However, to understand nationality one must understand the reasons why people today never forget their nationality, which is partly due the phenomenon of “flagging”. Billig suggests that having a

²⁸ Anderson, 6-7.

²⁹ Ibid., 7.

³⁰ Billig, 24.

³¹ Ibid., 8.

national identity is to have the tools to speak about (that nation's) nationhood itself. Furthermore,, it implies being situated physically, legally and mentally to a fixed geographical and political location. The idea of nationhood is of course a socially constructed device that must be built and “flagged” into our general understanding of the nation and ourselves. Inventing traditions, which are often woven from several sources and contexts, is a vital part of constructing a nation, since it allows for citizens to share their heritage with others. This also elevates the national identity to something natural and ancient which must be celebrated and honored.³² The struggle to create a nationhood is a struggle to create an idea of a national, hegemonic, shared essence that “we” inhabit due to our citizenship. In the process of doing so one must separate the “ingroup” from the “outgroup”. This is done not only by upholding one's nation's and nationhood's uniqueness, but also the opposite, stereotyping the “outgroup” and by giving traits to others “we” also define “ourselves”. “They” are what “we” are not and vice versa. Not only traits given by stereotypes are important for the separation of “us” from “them”, but the fact that “they” do not share nationality with “us” is essential to creating this rift.³³

How we speak about, or rather how we address, “ourselves” says a lot about nationalism. Often Western (perhaps most commonly US) politicians refer to a “we” and “us” which is to be understood as “our nation” or “the West”. Even though the “us” can be a flexible category it most certainly never includes “them”, which is the most important distinction. “Us” can refer to the nation, allies, a coalition, a continent, but will always include at the same time as it excludes. Regularly small words such as “we”, “them”, “us” and so on are the upholders of banal nationalism and often “our” enemies will not only be those who resist or fight “us”, but those that merely oppose what “we” represent. This language of universality is a must for nation-states to disguise its own interest in upholding and perpetrating violence. Doing so allows it to maintain an international hegemony while still denying its nationalism.³⁴ Billig sums this point up in reference to terrorism: “nation-states may commit far more violence than terrorists, but the figure of the international terrorist is used to represent a threat to moral order and reasonableness itself. (...) Each terrorist act threatens more than individual lives: it challenges the monopoly of violence, claimed by the nation-states”.³⁵

³² Billig, 26.

³³ Ibid., 79-81.

³⁴ Ibid., 92.

³⁵ Ibid., 91.

The process of creating an actual, physical nation-state is a process of violence. To create it one must defeat other forms of nationalism and alternate nationhoods in order to make room for one's vision. The winners get to declare that they acted in the name of their people, for the good of the nation or their father/motherland, effectively making their nationalism a rational, morally correct act of patriotism while the “others” and their nationalism is the direct opposite.³⁶

In order to study nationalism we must, according to Billig, recognize that it is something that not only exists in others, but also in ourselves, that nationalism is not something contained to political extremists, but also spills in to our regular life. In our everyday life nationalism describes an extreme reaction in relation to the nation-state, which in fact shields us from seeing nationalism perpetrated by our own nation-states. To study nationalism we must leave behind our idea of common sense regarding these practices and redefine not only how we look at nationalism, but also how we ignore it. This does also include revising the nationalist idea of the natural origin of nation-states and discuss a world before and possibly after nations.³⁷

If we instead accept nationalism as a widespread ideology we are also forced to include us to rethink the patterns which reproduce ideas of “our” and “their” world, meaning the very foundations of nation-states themselves.³⁸ When speaking of “our” nationalism we tend to prefer terms such as loyalty or patriotism, effectively excluding the “nation” from “nationalism”, letting “others” perform that kind of nationalism which is, thus, seen as more exotic and more dangerous. What “we” produce and reproduce is then overlooked as benign. By using nationalism in such a narrow way as it is used today nationalism is projected upon others while “our” own expressions of it are naturalized and forgotten. By broadening the term it is easier to map how the concept of the nation and nation-states is reproduced within our society, including “banal nationalism” as a category.³⁹

In the world of nation-states it seems only natural for people to inhabit a national identity and remember it. However, this remembering is also part of a process of forgetting. Since nations must have a collective memory, a shared history for its citizens that enforces the idea of the nation's antiquity it must, at the same time actively forget about its own recency. The relationship between remembering and forgetting also applies to violence as we tend to forget that our nation-states are formed out of violence, but remember violence

³⁶ Billig, 49.

³⁷ Ibid., 37.

³⁸ Ibid.,15.

³⁹ Ibid., 16.

caused upon the nation. Thus, it is essential for the nation to rely upon the amnesia of its citizens.⁴⁰ The sense of nationhood is constantly enforced by “flagging” causing us to remember at the same time as we forget. We pass constant reminders of nationhood in our daily routine, for instance an actual national flag outside a public building, being reminded, but forgetting that we have been reminded right away, because these symbols are so banal. When we define nationalism as something extreme and dangerous, something contrasting our every day life, it is hard to see these acts as nationalism. Thus, we sum nationalism up to something performed outside of our sphere or as Billig adequately puts it “Only the passionately waved flags are conventionally considered to be examples of nationalism. Routine flags – the flags of 'our' environment – slip from the category of 'nationalism'. And having slipped through the categorical net, they get lost”.⁴¹ National flags, being at the center of the concept of “flagging”, are a crucial factor in the upholding of nationalism. In the regular life of a citizen in a nation-state the majority of national flags they face will not be conveying an explicit or specific message. These are what Billig calls unwaved flags, those which are seen on buildings or in passing on TV which are contrasted by the more seldom seen waved flag. These flags are consciously waved in a symbolic manner, often accompanied by public displays of emotion. Billig takes United States as an example for how flags are used in everyday life in a way that they do not demand immediate attention or response. They are mindless flags seen in everyday situations and do not require the attention of the citizen, but perhaps, Billig states, it would be noticeable if they were suddenly gone such as a clock that's stopped ticking.⁴² The purpose of these unwaved, mindless flags are to serve as banal nationalism or discreet, unnoticed “flagging”. They are an unconscious reminder of nationhood in contrast to more intrusive flagging, which demands the attention of the citizen. These flags are symbolic in the way that they represent a nation and, thus, implicitly its nationhood and citizens. For instance a waved Palestinian flag will bear a political and symbolic message no matter where in the world it is present, representing its nationhood, people and struggle. However, it is important to remember that “flagging” is not an act solely focused around physical flags, but rather vessels of symbolic nationhood. For instance coin and bank notes will often bear reminders of the nation-state such as Guatemalan quetzal which borrow the name from the nation's national bird or the Swedish notes which show off Swedish cultural personalities. Banal reminders of nationhood like these are devices put in

⁴⁰ Billig, 38.

⁴¹ Ibid., 38-39.

⁴² Ibid., 40-41.

place to to transform “background space into homeland space” effectively creating a scenario where citizens are constantly, but unconsciously exposed to nationalism.⁴³

The waved and celebrated flag is that which is noticed which adds up with the view of nationalism as something perpetrated by Others trying to achieve change, autonomy and unity. “Our” nationalism is once again forgotten and ignored, forcing a rhetoric dichotomy between “us” and “them”. In for instance media and writings “we” are assumed to belong to the civilized, responsible world, more or less free of nationalism. There is an idea of common sense of who “we” are (victims of nationalism) and who “they” are (perpetrators of nationalism).⁴⁴ However, this view on nationalism narrows it down into a force which strives to overturn existing nation-states or create new ones and, thus, lacks the perspective of how nationalism is maintained once the nation is situated. At that point it would rather seem as if nationalism disappears and becomes a force to be forgotten and to defend the nation-state from. The life in the created nation-state is assumed to be banal and non-nationalist while nationalism is its opposite: overflowing with politics and emotions. This perspective on nationalism omits the routine “flagging” of nationalism in favor of the more exotic and obvious nationalism perpetrated by Others. This is not merely a question of flags, both literal and symbolic ones, but also a look into how nationalism erases itself from memory and creates a national identity around the assumed natural state of the nation-state. By being omnipresent the nation-state can “flag” its existence and simultaneously erase it from memory, creating the illusion of it being a natural part of one's life and identity.⁴⁵

The forgetting of “our” nationalism is crucial for upholding the rhetorical dichotomy between the irrational, dangerous nationalism and the beneficial, banal, often American, patriotism.⁴⁶ Patriotism and nationalism are seen as two different states of mind. Billig argues that nationalism is often seen as an irrational force derived from an idea of “blood ties”, an almost mythological sense of ethnic purity and superiority. Patriotism on the other hand is seen as a deliberate, rational act of loyalty. Billig states that:

So much can be forgotten, as 'we' recall 'their' nationalism with horror. The wars waged by US troops; the bombings in endless display of the revered flag: all these are removed from the problems of over-heated nationalism. If required, they can be

⁴³ Billig, 43.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 49.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 44.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 55.

transmuted into the warm glow of patriotism, the healthy necessity rather than the dangerous surplus.⁴⁷

It becomes clear that the rhetoric used is forcing an understanding of nationalism as vastly different from patriotism, causing a discrepancy between the causes and reasoning behind violence based on origin. In other words, we excuse “our” violence, even welcome it as a logical conclusion and something crucial for maintaining “our” way of life, while “their” violence is considered unjust, morally inexcusable and unreasonable. This is made clear when looking closely at a film such as *American Sniper*, the rift that is created between “their” violence and “our” violence. It becomes clear that it is important to separate them from a narrative perspective to justify “our” violence or even make it a form of non-threatening violence, since “we” are not “them” and will, thus, not be victims of it.

The issue is that in a world of nation-states everyone's violent actions can be explained and excused as merely acts of defense. Going to war, thus, becomes an act of self defense, outside of ones borders. Few patriots will admit to hating all foreigners (and to be fair, few probably even feel that way), but they will say that they are ready to defend the country they love from outside threats, which implicitly adds up to foreigners. Likewise fascists will claim that they are acting out of love and self-defense, defending their race from pollution, their country from infestation and their people from extermination. An argument in distinguishing patriotism from nationalism seems to be that the latter relies on hatred for the group outside while the former on the love for the group inside.⁴⁸ However, this is merely a rhetorical difference since the motivation for people to go to war is usually not the hatred of the outside group, but the will to sacrifice oneself for a greater good, being the well-being of the inside group and the cause of the homeland. The willingness to sacrifice ones life for the cause of the nation is the backbone of patriotism and comes with rhetorical expressions such as “there is great pride in defending the nation”, “serving my country” or “doing what's right.”⁴⁹ These excuses for violence are common in the narrative of films as well, *American Sniper* being no exception. Chris Kyle acts of violence are always put in a larger context of him being a part of defending the US and its interests. However, that context is never broadened in a way that includes critique of what this justification entails. The division of “their” and “our” nationalism results in the split of nationalisms that Billig discusses, where

⁴⁷ Billig, 56.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 57-58.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 57-58.

one is not seen as nationalism or even seen as a benign form of nationalism, while the other, performed by Others, is seen as being inexcusable, immoral and savage.

2.3 Death, mourning and the value of life

[T]he cry that 'there is no excuse for September 11' has become a means by which to stifle any serious public discussion of how US foreign policy has helped to create a world in which such acts of terror are possible.⁵⁰

In her text *Precarious Lives* Judith Butler discusses how grieving is a central part of being human. We all experience loss sooner or later and, thus, we all experience grief. This is one of the few things that are universal to the human experience. A sense of vulnerability that is induced by the loss is perhaps inevitable and acknowledging that quality within others becomes a way of recognizing others humanity.⁵¹ In the process of grieving comes the acceptance that one is changed by the loss, possibly for ever. Grieving can, thus, be seen as a process of transformation of oneself.⁵² While mourning can be seen as a personal, private process it also inhabits a political level. If one accepts that our bodies are not simply our own, but also socio-political vessels within our society and while many social justice causes are fought partially to achieve the liberation of one's body this does not mean that it loses its public dimension.⁵³

Therefore it becomes important to discuss mourning on a political level. If our bodies do grant us a socio-political position so does our lives and deaths as well. Butler brings up a hierarchy of grief using obituaries as examples. For instance, how often are the victims of US foreign politics recognized in Western media? The Palestinians killed by US supported Israel military and those killed in the major wars the US have fought are just some examples of lives that are easily forgotten or justified as part of war or retaliation. These lives are unseen or unreal. If they are not real enough to be mourned what does that make the violence perpetrated against them?⁵⁴

If violence is done against those who are unreal, then, from the perspective of violence, it fails to injure or negate those lives since those lives are already negated [...] They cannot be mourned, because they are always already lost or, rather, never

⁵⁰ Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The powers of Mourning and Violence* (London & New York: Verso Books, 2004), 3.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 28-29.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 21.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 25-26.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

'were', and they must be killed, since they seem to live on, stubbornly, in this state of deadness.⁵⁵

By creating a hierarchy of who can be mourned we also create a hierarchy of who's lives were worth living or whose lives were “real” lives. However, the hierarchy plays a pivotal part of creating a discourse where some violence is seen as justifiable, even welcomed, while other is seen as despicable.⁵⁶ This leads back to Anderson’s idea of imagined communities, where we will consider violence performed against the “ingroup” to be an act of evil whilst the opposite can be an act of good or at least excused in some way or the other. This is reflected in how we report on lives lost, why non-Western death can become a footnote while Western deaths are noticed, honored, and grieved.⁵⁷

This division between lives that can be mourned and unnoticed deaths becomes obvious in certain narratives and it is argued in this thesis that *American Sniper* is one of them. A process of dehumanization runs parallel to the ways of how the hierarchy of death and mourning is constructed. In other words, while certain lives are made non-human throughout the narrative, we as audience are constantly reminded of the humanity of other lives. While certain deaths are mourned others are forgotten.

⁵⁵ Butler, 33.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 34-35.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 38-39.

3. *American Sniper* and its contemporary context

3.1 The reception of *American Sniper*

As mentioned in the introduction *American Sniper* was a box office success grossing \$535.8 million worldwide (with \$346.3 million of those being in North America) as of April 6, 2015.⁵⁸ It also became the highest grossing war film globally, beating *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998),⁵⁹ as well as being nominated for a total of six Academy awards, winning one for Best sound editing.⁶⁰

Critically the film has received mixed, but overall good ratings, landing it at an average of 6.9/10 out of 219 reviews on Rotten Tomatoes, with an average of 4.2/5 from over 127.000 users.⁶¹ At Metacritic the numbers are similar with a “metascore” of 72/100 based on 48 critics and a user score of 6.6/10 based on 646 ratings.⁶² While the reviews might point to a mediocre-to-good reception these numbers might rather be a reflection of extremely mixed reviews rather than the quality of the film itself.

Positive critics have focused on the performance of Bradley Cooper, its honesty when depicting the war and its consequences as well as Kyle's relationship with his wife and children. Cooper's performance is called “career-best” by reviewer James Berardinelli,⁶³ “completely on target” by Kenneth Turan,⁶⁴ Claudia Pulg claims that the film is “clearly

⁵⁸ Box Office Mojo, “American Sniper” <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=americansniper.htm> (accessed 2015-04-07).

⁵⁹ McClintock, Pamela. “Box office milestone: ‘American Sniper’ hits \$500M globally, becomes top 2014 title in U.S.”. The Hollywood Reporter. <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/box-office-milestone-american-sniper-779977> (accessed 2015-04-07).

⁶⁰ The other categories being: Best film, actor, adapted screenplay, film editing, sound mixing. Oscars, “2015 Oscars ceremonies”. http://awardsdatabase.oscars.org/ampas_awards/DisplayMain.jsp?curTime=1428271870695 (accessed 2015-04-07).

⁶¹ Rotten Tomatoes, “American Sniper”. http://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/american_sniper/ (accessed 2015-04-06).

⁶² Metacritic, “American Sniper”. <http://www.metacritic.com/movie/american-sniper> (accessed 2015-04-07).

⁶³ Berardinelli, James. “American Sniper (United States 2014). Reel Views. http://www.reelviews.net/php_review_template.php?identifier=2846 (accessed 2015-04-07).

⁶⁴ Turan, Kenneth. “‘American Sniper’ goes above and beyond war-hero tradition”. LA Times <http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/movies/la-et-mn-american-sniper-review-20141225-column.html> (accessed 2015-04-07).

Cooper's show"⁶⁵ and Rafer Guzmán states that Cooper embodies the role as "looking physically fit, but emotionally strained".⁶⁶

Many of the positive reviewers address the patriotism in *American Sniper*, but most do not seem to think it problematic. On the contrary Turan praises its effort to show that heroism cannot save everyone,⁶⁷ Berardinelli boldly claims that the film does no preaching and that it has washed away much of the patriotism in Kyle's autobiography.⁶⁸ Puig says that the film can read either as a patriotic flick or an anti-war statement⁶⁹ and Guzmán shares this duality as he states that the film "hangs a halo, albeit a battered one, over Kyle's head" and also states that the film still reminds us of the cold reality of war.⁷⁰ The film even gained traction with US politicians. Republican politician Sarah Palin called out "Hollywood leftists" claiming that they are not fit to even polish Kyle's boots.⁷¹ Furthermore, the first lady herself, Michelle Obama, praised the film, claiming that it is very true to being at war as well as the process of leaving it.⁷²

Critics of the film focus on the portrayal of the US military, the Iraqis and the war itself. Zack Beauchamp calls it a "dishonest whitewash of the Iraq war" and points out several flaws in the narrative. First of all he says that within the narrative of *American Sniper* it would seem that the US invaded Iraq as a response to 9/11. The film never mentions Saddam Hussein or the supposed weapons of mass destruction, but instead makes it seem that the attacks on the World Trade Center were the sole reason for the US to go to war. Second, Beauchamp points out, within the narrative the invasion of Iraq seems like a response to al-Qaeda, when in fact they arrived to Iraq as a response to the US invasion. This lack of

⁶⁵ Puig, Claudia. "Bradley Cooper's aim is true in 'American Sniper'". USA Today. <http://www.usatoday.com/story/life/movies/2014/12/23/american-sniper-review/19157153/> (accessed 2015-04-07).

⁶⁶ Guzmán, Rafer. "'American Sniper' review: Bradley Cooper nails the role". Newsday. <http://www.newsday.com/entertainment/movies/american-sniper-review-bradley-cooper-nails-the-role-1.9740058> (accessed 2015-04-07).

⁶⁷ Turan.

⁶⁸ Berardinelli.

⁶⁹ Puig.

⁷⁰ Guzmán.

⁷¹ Garcia, Ahiza. "Sarah Palin to critics of 'American Sniper' movie. God bless our snipers". Talking points memo. http://talkingpointsmemo.com/livewire/sarah-palin-american-sniper-critics?utm_content=buffer50286&utm_medium=social&utm_source=twitter.com&utm_campaign=buffer (accessed 2015-05-22).

⁷² Johnson, Ted. "First lady Michelle Obama offers praise for 'American Sniper'". Variety. <http://variety.com/2015/film/news/first-lady-michelle-obama-offers-praise-for-american-sniper-1201419881/> (accessed 2015-05-22).

contextualization leads to a portrayal of the war that is black and white, there is only good and evil, “us” and “them”.⁷³

Inkoo Kang criticizes the film's monotony in its portrayal of violence. The film is compared to a repetitive video game with only one character, Kyle, even resembling an actual human.⁷⁴ Paul Edwards states that the film is a long glorification of “a real self-confessed serial murderer”.⁷⁵ Garret Reppenhagen, he himself a sniper during the Iraq war, says that the film completely ignores the political context of the war itself. Furthermore, he criticizes the fact that several characters in the film refer to Iraqis as “savages” without this being questioned at all within the narrative of the film, something he himself does not think represents the actuality of how many soldiers thought and felt.⁷⁶ Alex von Tunzelmann dissects the historical accuracy of the film, claiming that it should be taken with a “very, very large pinch of salt”. He also discusses how the portrayal of good and evil in the film is very black and white, where the US soldiers can literally do no wrong, but every Iraqi seems to be a threat.⁷⁷

Several reviewers discuss the aspects of patriotism and nationalism within *American Sniper*. John Wight condemns the way it rewrites history to instead create a patriotic myth. It washes the real Chris Kyle in a light of heroism when in fact “he was in fact a racist killer for whom the only good Iraqi was a dead Iraqi. He killed men, women, and children, just as his comrades did during the course of a brutal and barbaric war of aggression waged by the richest country in the world against one of the poorest”.⁷⁸ Roy Scranton makes similar points when saying that Chris Kyle is transformed from a killer to a victim of trauma, thus, never really making him responsible for the acts that he has committed.⁷⁹ Matt Taibbi

⁷³ Beauchamp, Zack. “American Sniper is a dishonest whitewash of the Iraq war”. Vox. <http://www.vox.com/2015/1/21/7641189/american-sniper-history> (accessed 2015-05-22).

⁷⁴ Kang, Inkoo. “‘American Sniper’ Review: War plays out like a video game in Clint Eastwood’s Navy SEALs biopic”. The Wrap. <http://www.thewrap.com/american-sniper-review-bradley-cooper-clint-eastwood-sienna-miller/> (accessed 2015-05-22).

⁷⁵ Edwards, Paul. “The sociopath as hero”. Counter Punch. <http://www.counterpunch.org/2015/02/04/the-sociopath-as-hero/> (accessed 2015-05-22).

⁷⁶ Reppenhagen, Garrett. “I was an American sniper, and Chris Kyle’s was not my war”. Salon. http://www.salon.com/2015/02/01/i_was_an_american_sniper_and_chris_kyle_%E2%80%99s_war_was_not_my_war/ (accessed 2015-05-22).

⁷⁷ von Tunzelmann, Alex. “Is ‘American Sniper’ historically accurate?”. The Guardian. <http://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2015/jan/20/why-american-snipers-historical-dishonesty-misleads> (accessed 2015-05-22).

⁷⁸ Wight, John. “Hollywood uses ‘American Sniper’ to destroy history & create myth”. RT. <http://rt.com/op-edge/224507-american-sniper-movie-usa/> (accessed 2015-05-22).

⁷⁹ Scranton, Roy. “The trauma hero: From Wilfred Owen to ‘Redeployment’ and ‘American Sniper’”. Los Angeles Review of Books. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/essay/trauma-hero-wilfred-owen-redeployment-american-sniper> (accessed 2015-05-22).

bears down on the fact that Eastwood himself claims the film to be a personal story, not a political one, something Taibbi cannot agree with. He is bothered by the focus on the US soldiers comparing it to films such as *Deer Hunter* and *First Blood* dealing with the consequences for US soldiers after the Vietnam war. While those films were to be praised no narratives of the thousands of lives lost in Indochina were seen.⁸⁰ In the piece “Killing ragheads for Jesus” Chris Hedges criticizes *American Sniper*'s patriotism, saying that its portrayal of Others as irredeemably evil embraces a nationalistic ideal that is dangerous. He says that “facts and historical truths, when they do not fit into the mythic vision of the nation and the tribe, are discarded. Dissent becomes treason. All opponents are godless and subhuman” and that this in turn goes hand in hand with this ideal that borders on becoming US fascism.⁸¹ Edwards goes further and says that Kyle embodies a “Nazi-style 'patriotism’”.⁸²

⁸⁰Taibbi, Matt. “‘American Sniper’ is almost too dumb to criticize”. Rolling Stone.

<http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/american-sniper-is-almost-too-dumb-to-criticize-20150121?page=3> (accessed 2015-05-22).

⁸¹Hedges, Chris. “Killing ragheads for Jesus” .Truth Dig.

http://www.truthdig.com/report/page3/killing_ragheads_for_jesus_20150125 (accessed 2015-05-22).

⁸²Edwards.

3.2 Terrorism in Hollywood

While *American Sniper* is perhaps not a full-on terrorist film such as the likes of *Die Hard* (John McTiernan, 1988) or *True Lies* (James Cameron, 1994) it is certainly a film with powerful connotations to terrorism, since the war in Iraq was, at least within the narrative of *American Sniper*, a response to acts of terror from the al-Qaeda such as those performed September 11, 2001. It, thus, becomes not only a film focused on terror per se, but also a story about the war itself and not centered around a single act of terrorism, but rather the aftermath. However, it is important to note that the retelling of the war and perhaps more importantly the reasons behind the war in *American Sniper* differ from those that actually happened. Within the narrative of the film Kyle joins the army as a direct response to the 1998 al-Qaeda bombings of US embassies in Tanzania and Kenya. His rage and motivation is further fueled later on when witnessing the events of 9/11. This is all that is shown regarding why Kyle wants to fight (he even says “look what they did to us” when watching the embassy bombings on TV with his brother) and why the US decides to invade Iraq. There are no mentions of Saddam Hussein or weapons of mass destruction. This creates a scenario where not only is al-Qaeda the only enemy, but there is no distinction between al-Qaeda and Iraqis. All civilians are seen as potential al-Qaeda sympathizers and this is something we get to see over and over. For instance the man who invites them to have dinner with his family turns out to have a weapon's cache at his home or the two out of three children we see who are armed (one does not actually fire towards the US soldiers, but nevertheless picks up a rocket launcher and aims it towards them). There are no signs of the Iraqi resistance against al-Qaeda, other than the family that fears the Butcher, but that family is forgotten as soon as they're murdered. They are never mentioned again nor is the resistance against al-Qaeda.

Long before *American Sniper* terrorism was a central aspect of Hollywood films, however, often acting as a response to US foreign policies and political violence within and outside the nation's borders. Terrorism has become a fascinating source of narratives, not only for its depiction of political violence (a theme that seems ever so fascinating), but also because of its exotic and international settings and the never ending conflict between morally good and its evil counterpart.⁸³ Biggs and Pollard argue that images of terrorism and counter-terrorism seem to have a natural appeal to audiences, especially to those in the US, because of

⁸³ Carl Boggs & Tom Pollard, “Hollywood and the Spectacle of Terrorism” *New Political Science*, (28:3, 2006), 335.

how close to home it is. Both in terms of settings, as the US is often a big if not the biggest actor in the film, but also in real life context as the US are often involved in conflicts around the world as well as in regards to domestic gun culture.⁸⁴

While having appeared earlier in cinema history, it is by the late 1980s, at the very end of the Cold War, that cinematic terrorism on screen became more like what it looks like today. Earlier it was often included in ridiculous plots and outlandish villains such as those found in James Bond films. In a humorous manner Bond would dispatch of his, often communist, foes. Foes who were not fanatical, but calculating political terrorists. Now, however, Hollywood turned its eye from Communists to the Middle East where Arab/Muslim insurgents were in constant battle with Israel and, thus, to some extent, the US.⁸⁵ Many films, such as the *Delta Force* franchise, consisting of: *The Delta Force* (1986, Menahem Golan), *Delta Force 2: The Colombian Connection* (1990, Aaron Norris) and *Delta Force 3: The Killing Game* (Sam Firstenberg, 1991), were made in Israel and/or received Israeli funding. Thus, the terrorists were seen as violent, suspicious, morally evil and beyond redemption, thus, suited for a brutal, but justified annihilation. Cast member of the *Delta Force* film summed it up pretty well by saying: “I like what the picture says... Audiences love to see the bad guy get it. We start blowing up everybody. That's good old American revenge”.⁸⁶

Similar themes and villains are seen in films that followed such as *Frantic* (1988, Roman Polanski), *Navy Seals* (1990, Lewis Teague) and *Patriot Games* (1992, Phillip Noyce). In *Navy Seals* the enemy are evil-looking Arabs that are casually referred to as “scumbags” while Beirut is reduced to a “shithole” and its population are “ragheads”.⁸⁷ The interesting thing is that the villains are often Palestinians performing international terrorism, although, Palestinians in fact have never been involved in global terrorism, but rather focused their actions directly against the state of Israel.⁸⁸ Production companies have clearly overlooked this matter in favor of patriotic flicks with the clash between West and East as a main motif. A perfect storm of Hollywood’s vision of terrorism can be seen in *True Lies*. Arnold Schwarzenegger plays an undercover agent working to take down the Arab terror group called Crimson Jihad. It is interesting that Schwarzenegger remains the hero throughout the film since he does kill countless people and his response to if he has killed when asked by his wife Helen (Jamie Lee Curtis) “yeah, but they were all bad”. The same wife that he later

⁸⁴ Boggs & Pollard, 335.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 338.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 338.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 339.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 339.

forces to strip for him in a convoluted ploy where she thinks she's doing undercover job, seducing a gangster, while it is in fact her own husband that is engaging in rather questionable behavior. The Arabs are generic villains and portrayed as cold, barbaric and somewhat fanatic. Following *True Lies* and in response to the growing political violence within the US borders (including the World Trade Center bombing in 1993 and the Oklahoma City attack of 1994) as well as the fallout from the Gulf War and the Palestine-Israel conflict⁸⁹ emerged a period of an almost endless stream of crazed Middle Eastern villains, constantly threatening the US way of life, both on screen and as a reminder of events off screen.⁹⁰ The depiction of the villains often one sided and plays into the Orientalist stereotypes of barbaric, uncivilized, ruthless Others. To further distance them from the imagined Western audience, they will often be Muslims, excusing their actions with religions beliefs, shouting “Allahu Akbar” while performing their violent actions against the US, such as in *Delta Force 3: The Killing Game* where the crazed Palestinians shout that very phrase before attempting to blow up a nuclear bomb. There are, however, exceptions to this way of portraying terrorism and terrorists during the late 1980s and 1990s, most glaringly is perhaps *Die Hard* that focuses on a German terrorist instead of the Arab threat.

It seems that the threat of actual terrorism was too real after the 2001 attacks on World Trade Center to warrant the same kind of tone that we had seen before. This might seem surprising since prior terrorist attacks have indeed occurred, such as the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center. The explanation of how differently these attacks are treated seems to be found in the fact that the 9/11 events killed a lot more people as well as ripped the American self esteem in two. It is important to notice, however, that terrorist attacks around the globe have indeed occurred in similar or bigger scale than those aimed towards USA, but those have less impact on the Western sense of security.

This change in tone was addressed by James Cameron addressed when speaking about his planned sequel for *True Lies* which was to be released in 2002 with, according to IMDB, the words “in this day and age, terrorism just isn't funny anymore”.⁹¹ Furthermore, *The Sum of All Fears* (Philip Robinson, 2002) was severely delayed due to trepidations regarding its content in relation to recent events, since the narrative focuses on the possibility of terrorist attacks within the US borders. Furthermore, *XXX* (Rob Cohen, 2002) seemed more like a fast paced music video with some cues from old-school James Bond-films than a 90s terrorist action flick. *United 93* (Paul Greengrass, 2006) was the first Hollywood film to

⁸⁹ Boggs & Pollard, 340.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 340.

⁹¹ IMDB, “True Lies (1994) Trivia” <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0111503/trivia> (accessed april 6, 2015).

actually depict the events of 9/11 and while the film received criticism for its sensitivity towards the terrorists it still held an obvious patriotic agenda, perfectly summarized by Boggs and Pollard (my emphasis):

In the end, however, Greengrass' picture conveys a starkly polarized world *where cruel, sadistic, terrorists*, filled with *irrational hatred attack innocent Americans*, who in this case exhibit *tremendous courage* once their plane has been taken over, as they begin fighting the hijackers. Of course no one really knows what took place aboard United 93 that fateful day, but the consensus view (adopted by Greengrass) shows passengers and crew as *heroic martyrs struggling valiantly* as they unwittingly unleash one of the first salvos in the war on terrorism – in the process saving the White House from almost certain devastation.⁹²

The same authors point out that there are an overwhelming amount of “alien” threats for Hollywood heroes to deal with and more often than not are these heroic deeds performed by white males with a great amount of violence. Nowadays, as a response to present day politics, the most common enemy is the Arab or Muslim, over the previously preferred (but far from dead) villains found in caricature Communists and Nazis. These groups are not seen as threats merely, because of their military force, but also for their way of challenging the foundations of the US itself, the Western civilization and their politics. The Arabs and Muslims are depicted as part of a monolithic, violent culture with deep seated hatred of the Western society. Local terrorism, on the other hand, will seldom be seen in the mainstream films effectively making “terrorism” in to something global (most often performed by Others) as opposed to global or domestic.⁹³ The last two decades Hollywood terrorism has been converted in to being equated as jihadist terrorism which in turn whose performers are seen as amoral and irredeemable evil without putting this in a real life political context. Fictional violence is perpetuated by certain groups driven by fanatical and sadistic desires, although, real life political violence are driven by ideologies that aim to create or reshape nation states, combat oppression, etc. The Hollywood terrorism occurs in a political vacuum where there are clear definitions between good and evil, something that is much more complex in the real world. Instead terrorism as a concept is portrayed as a monolithic menace directed towards the US, justifying violent responses. Boggs and Pollard suggest that this might be due to the history of the US itself, often employing political violence as a means of achieving political goals. By demonizing the perceived enemy one can also glorify one's own violence against

⁹² Boggs & Pollard, 336.

⁹³ Ibid., 147.

that threat and US being the super power that it is can also refuse the self-reflection needed to see the double standard in this mode of thinking.

4. Analysis

4.1 Sheep, wolves and sheepdogs – breakdown

This sequence is the introduction to the film. Before the audience gets to see anything “Allahu Akbar” is chanted repeatedly. When it fades from black we see a tank rolling on the streets of Fallujah. This starts off the scene that is described under 4.5 (as it is repeated) and, thus, it will be more thoroughly described and analyzed there. As Chris Kyle fires upon the boy with the grenade the scene cuts to Kyle as a child shooting and killing a deer while hunting with his father. The father exclaims that “That was a hell of a shot son. You have a gift. You're gonna make a fine hunter some day”.

The scene cuts to a church where Chris and his family (father, mother and brother) are attending a mass. The reverend is speaking about how all must question their faith in God, but should find comfort in the fact that we do not know His plan, but that day we will understand his intentions. During the speech Chris picks up a Bible and puts it in his pocket. The scene cuts to the Bible lying on a bookshelf in what one can assume is Chris's room. We hear the father speak of what he considers the three types of people in the world: sheep, wolves and sheepdogs. During this conversation the scene intercuts to a scene from the boy's schoolyard where Chris violently assaults his brother's bully. The father asks his brother, Jeff, to confirm whether it is true that he was bullied. He confirms Chris's story and the father turns to Chris to ask if he “finished the job”. When Chris nods the father simply states “then you know who you are”.

4.2 Sheep, wolves and sheepdogs – analysis

As mentioned the breakdown and analysis of the scene in Fallujah will be presented under sub-chapter 4.5 and 4.6. However, it is important to note how this scene cuts which is different from the second time the scene is shown. The cut is done just as Kyle takes the shot that will kill the child carrying the grenade, cutting to him as a child killing a deer. It almost

becomes a comparison between the deer and the child, as if hunting for sport is the same as taking a child's life in war. This becomes even more apparent as the father states that he will become a fine hunter some day. Which he will become, but he will hunt human Others, not deer, making this scene cut a way to dehumanize Others.

The scene with the father situates the conflict that is to come early in the film. He makes a division between three types of people in the world. Sheep, wolves and sheepdogs. Sheep are the weak who must be protected. The wolves are predators and will use violence to prey on the weak. Finally there are sheepdogs, who, similarly to wolves are predators, but also filled with the desire to help the weak and those important to them. This situates Chris Kyle early on as a sheepdog, willing to do what is necessary to protect the weak and his own. During the conversation we see a young Chris violently assaulting the school-yard bully who was beating up his younger brother. It is made clear in this scene that the brother is a sheep, the bully is a wolf and Chris is a sheepdog. This is a very foreboding speech by the father, mirroring the identity Chris will take in the war. He is out there trying to save the sheep, by using violence against the wolves, thus, making him a sheepdog.

There is no question about what role Chris will play either. As the father says towards the end of the scene “we're not raising any sheep in this family. And I will whoop your ass if you turn into a wolf”. However, this seems to be mostly aimed towards Chris and not his brother, something that will ring true throughout the film. His brother is not a go-getter like Chris. He joins the army as well, but cracks under the pressure and the reality of war. We never see the brother in the same light as Chris. He does not get a training montage, heroic scenes or even recollections of deeds performed in the war.

There is a not-so-subtle parallel to US foreign politics here as well. With the knowledge of what issues the film will bring up (or basically any knowledge about the film prior to watching it) this scene establishes not only Chris as a sheepdog, but American foreign politics, situating the US as a sheepdog and their foes as wolves early on in the film. The Christian undertone in the scene seems very similar to the US concept of “one nation under God”, making this parallel even more obvious. Furthermore, it sets up a clear difference between Kyle and those he will be fighting. Considering that the film starts off with the “Allahu Akbar” chant which is most often connected to Islamic belief and how Kyle is so strongly associated with Christianity it is not difficult to see how the conflict that's coming is related to religious beliefs. It seems that this sequence plays on the idea that Said discusses, that religion is a symbolic divider between East and West. Furthermore, as presented by Boggs and Pollard, that very phrase is very commonly used in Hollywood's depiction of

terrorists. We never really see any of the Muslims in the film praying or performing anything related to Islam except eating Eid al-Adha supper. Even so this phrase is the first thing we as audiences hear, even before we actually get to see anything. It, thus, becomes clear right from the start that religion will be of significance throughout the film. While the inclusion of the chant could of course be a way to set the scene of Fallujah right away, it is the only time we get to hear it. Furthermore, this becomes reminiscent of the concept of “flagging” brought up by Billig. The separation of “us” and “them” is made right away, with the assumption that the audience will perceive Christianity as familiar and Islam as foreign. It subtly reminds us of what we are assumed to identify as “us” and “them”.

Parallel to this Kyle is in this sequence presented as someone familiar, a morally good Western Christian, while Others are related to Islam, foreign territory and terror deeds that include children and women, becoming morally evil and unfamiliar. This becomes important to the narrative as Kyle becomes a visual representation of not only *an American*, but *America* itself, acting on its behalf for a greater good. Thus, his acts throughout the film often do not only represent him, but his nation, something which is further developed when Kyle goes into war to defend his new family, the Navy Seals, and American values. This echoes throughout the film as we see how Western lives are valued compared to Oriental lives, in a manner close to what Butler describes.

4.3 Terrorism on TV – breakdown

This is a two part sequence intercut by Kyle joining the Navy SEALs, a training montage and him dating Taya (Sienna Miller). The first part is him casually talking with his brother while drinking beer and watching TV. They are discussing Chris's future and if he should reconsider his career choice as a rodeo. They are interrupted by an extra news report on the explosions at the US embassies in Tanzania and Kenya in 1998. Chris stands up and moves closer to the TV, tells Jeff (who's almost fallen asleep in his chair) to watch it and Chris says “look what they did to us”

The second scene in this sequence shows Chris as he's washing himself in the bathroom and Taya calls for him from another room. When he gets there he sees the attacks on the World Trade Center of 2001. He hugs Taya who seems very upset, almost in shock. Chris on the other hand looks surprised and angry. The scene is accompanied by a dark score,

underlining the seriousness of the situation. It cuts to Chris at the shooting range (where we have seen him previously, as part of the Navy SEALs training) seemingly more focused than before.

4.4 Terrorism on TV – analysis

The first instance of terrorism on TV is interesting in the way that Chris reacts to it. Following this he decides to join the navy and rigorously train and hone his marksmanship skills. It becomes the motivation to not only leave his life a rodeo behind him, but also find a purpose in life, to bloom into the sheepdog he was meant to be. Thus, this short sequence becomes a turning point for Kyle who up until now has been selfish and uninspired. Now he has the chance to serve a bigger cause, to fight terrorism. The phrase “Look what they did to us” becomes a clear marker of banal nationalism as there is an implicit “us” that we as audience are supposed to recognize, which is the US. We are reminded of the separation of “us” and “them”, furthermore, we are informed who are the evildoers and who are the victims.

It is worth noting that the US embassies were in fact the target and, according to the news cast, eight US citizens including a child were killed. However, a total of 224 people were killed in the bombings and over 5000 people were wounded.⁹⁴ The lives lost are, thus, not the main focus of Kyle's anger, but the fact that an attack was done with the target being the US. It is relevant to recall Billig's theories on banal nationalism since an embassy is an institution many citizens won't be in contact with, but they act, at least to Kyle, as a symbol for the nation as a whole. Furthermore, this scene speaks of how differently lives are valued since Chris' focus is “us”, not the (many more) lives of Others lost. Again we are also reminded of the value of life, depending on whether someone is within the “ingroup” or “outgroup”. It is the fact that the US, at least symbolically, got attacked that stirs Chris' anger, not the many casualties.

The second scene establishes what is the threat and, thus, who Chris is going to fight. Both the attacks on the embassies and the events of 9/11 were deeds orchestrated by al-Qaida. Thus, Kyle's path is set for him, he will go to war against them and the terror group's relationship to Islam furthers the conflict set up between Christians and Muslims. The lack of

⁹⁴ CNN: 1998 U.S. Embassies in Africa Bombings Fast Facts
<http://edition.cnn.com/2013/10/06/world/africa/africa-embassy-bombings-fast-facts/> (accessed 2015-05-07)

context of these attacks, as they weren't random attacks of violence, but rather part of a chain of events, strengthens the sense of nationalism. "We" have done nothing wrong, but are attacked anyway. While I am in no way claiming that these attacks were in any way deserved they are still part of a larger chain of events that are never really addressed within the narrative of the film. Furthermore, we again see a division of "us" and "them" or rather between the barbaric Others who perform cowardly and brutal acts of terrorism and what Kyle will do: bravely put his life on the line for a greater good.

These short clips lay the ground work for Kyle's motivation throughout the film. In the narrative they fit in such a way that Kyle's actions later on in the war are merely a response to violence perpetrated by Others. He is basically acting out of self-defense, echoing the "war on terror" itself, striking them before they can strike "us" (again). This narrative standpoint not only frees Kyle from guilt from his actions, but also sets the audience in a position where our standpoint is chosen for us. There is no middle ground to pick.

4.5 The first kill – breakdown

Before the scene we get to see Kyle moving out with his sniping partner, to take position with overview of where a US convoy will pass. They casually discuss Mustafa, the insurgent sniper who has participated in the Olympics. When they' are in place Kyle spots a woman and a child walking out of a house and moving towards the convoy. Kyle becomes suspicious when he can't see her arms moving as she walks. He then sees her passing a grenade to the kid. The audience can clearly see their faces through Kyle's scope and the camera cuts between close-ups of Kyle and a view through his scope of the potential enemies. Kyle tries to get orders from his superiors, but they leave the decision to him and his partner warns him that "they'll fry you if you're wrong". As the kid starts running towards the convoy with the grenade the music gets toned down and we get to hear Kyle's breathing, similar to what we have heard during the scenes where he's been training as an audio queue that's he's getting ready to shoot. When he takes the shot, killing the kid we hear the woman scream and she starts running towards the body. She does not stop by the body, but immediately picks up the grenade and runs towards the convoy to throw it. We get a slow motion as she get's ready to throw it, but Kyle kills her before she can finish the throw, making the grenade explode far from the convoy. Kyle's partner start laughing saying "fucking evil bitch" and they get a confirmation by radio that it was "nice shooting". Kyle, however, seems frozen, looking through the scope

at the dead kid, reacting to his partner's touch by saying “don't fucking touch me”, clearly shook up by the situation.

4.6 The first kill – analysis

This scene is perhaps the central scene of the film, shown by the fact that it is seen twice, as the film opens with a shorter version of this very scene. While this scene is horrible for both the audience and Kyle it works as a narrative device to not only situate him as a good marksman, willing to do what is necessary to defend his people, but also works as a way of humanizing him. His hesitation, reaction to the actual kill and the sorrow afterward. However, this sorrow must not be mistaken for regret or mourning. He does not mourn the child, he mourns his loss of innocence.

It is important to note that this loss is forced upon him, by the situation. He is in a foreign land, in a different environment just trying to do what's right. These acts of violence are forced upon him, as was the war, in the narrative of the film. Furthermore, it is after this event that he is introduced to the comically simple justification of his acts of violence. They are “savages”. He was simply protecting his own. While this is not a novel concept in the context of war it is highly interesting in the context of films. The difference between it being said in the reality of war and the fictional space of cinema is that war is full of propaganda (whilst one might of course argue that films are as well, it is at the very least less of a natural part of it). The concept of “savages” and “protecting your own” might make more sense in the context of war to excuse perpetrating violence against others, one could argue that this is not the case or at the very least not needed in a commercial film. While the latter of course tries to describe and show the utter reality of combat, complete with violence, loss and tough decisions, it is strange that statements about “savages” are never really challenged throughout the film, as the Others are continuously called savages without any protests or contextualization. They remain barbarians, although, they as well (we must presume, we never get to see it) are protecting their own. There is no contextualization of their position, of their families and their suffering. This is Anderson's idea of imagined communities summed up very neatly within the narrative of the film. It seems reasonable, even logical, for Kyle to act the way he does, because he is defending those within his “ingroup”. However, what is important is how this is never contrasted with the Others trying to do the same. One must

assume, since it is never shown, that they as well have their reasons for fighting the US soldiers. It becomes quite clear that the exclusion from the “ingroup” justifies violence against them, something that goes with Butler's idea of how violence becomes almost invisible when it is done against those that are not seen as real (or real enough). Since they are not one of “us” the violence performed against them is not only justified, but even seen as non-violent.

Furthermore, it is important to look at how the scene is constructed. The audience gets several close ups of Kyle as well as the child and woman. Most of the scene is constructed around what Kyle can see through the scope of his rifle, although, we do not always see through the actual scope. When it comes down to the actual kill shot it is very focused on his technique. The background noise is muffled and we get to hear his breathing, similar to what one might hear in a sports related film. This is key to being a sniper as we have learned from his training montage. The scene becomes a testament of his rigorous training, what he has learned and how he applies his abilities, but this also works as a dehumanizing agent for the Others. They are no longer humans of flesh and blood, but an obstacle for Kyle to overcome. They are, but pawns in a bigger game. This dehumanizing is taken further when his partner exclaims “Fuck that was gnarly” and “Fucking evil bitch” in response to the lives Kyle took. Furthermore, Kyle is endorsed for his performance with comments such as “Nice shooting” and “hell of a call”, adding to the sports like feeling the scene gives. The only actual reaction to the lives lost is Kyle himself who exclaims “get the fuck off me” when his partner tries to touch him. This is key to constructing Kyle as something more than a mere killing machine, to make him human. He is clearly shaken up by the events, however, this grief is not long lasting.

It is relevant to discuss the acting of the Oriental characters. While Kyle acts rationally throughout the scene, making the “right” call in killing the woman and child they on the other hand seem to act incredibly irrationally. First of all they step out into the street before making the grenade exchange, which is done in clear sight. The child then rushes straight towards the convoy which is guarded by armed soldiers. When he is shot the woman (assumed mother throughout the film) seems to be in despair, crying out. She runs up to the body, but does not take the time to mourn, but immediately picks up the grenade and tries to finish the mission even though the child was clearly shot by a sniper with overview of them both. It becomes almost comedic how irrational they act compared to the total calm and coolness of Kyle. The assumed mother does not even seem too fazed by the death of the kid. While she does indeed seem upset that mourning is immediately turned in to anger towards the US soldiers. Considering how Kyle and his fellow soldiers act as soon as “one of theirs” is

injured it becomes very strange how the woman isn't seen crying or checking to see if the kid is really dead. It is as if she is so consumed by evil she doesn't feel sorrow for the dead child. It is as if his life did not have meaning outside of the mission to bomb the convoy. He was, but a pawn and should, thus, not be mourned when sacrificed. They are not what we as the audience are supposed to mourn either, but rather we're supposed to see how Kyle has performed his first act of heroism in saving the men at the convoy as well as how shaken up he gets by doing so.

4.7 Aftermath of the first kill – breakdown

When Kyle returns to the military base he is greeted by a sole fellow soldier, Biggles, who is resting since he “has the shits” and cannot participate in training. He recognizes that Kyle has “popped his cherry”, meaning he has performed his first kill. Kyle shows concern in regards to the boy's age, but the soldier ensures him that he did the right thing, saying that kid could have cost the lives of ten fellow American soldiers and that Kyle did his job. Kyle agrees, but also states that it did not turn out the way he had thought it would.

4.8 Aftermath of the first kill – analysis

This scene bears significance for the character of Chris Kyle, since it is one of the few times he actually gets to show remorse for the violence he perpetrates. However, as mentioned in the analysis of the previous scene, this remorse is short lived, since he is more or less convinced that he has performed what was not only required of him, but also what was right. He never mourns the death of the child or the mother, but is focused on the horror that was forced upon him by the situation itself. The scene discusses how the violence has affected Kyle, but never how lives were lost. The mourning is centered around the Western body and its experiences, but never on the Oriental counterpart. Not only does this make the Oriental life seem unworthy of mourning it also seems as if this fact is not reflected upon, at all. Never is it mentioned that war comes with the price of killing people other than in the context of how this affects the US soldiers. It is as if the Oriental life has no agency at all, but is simply a

prop in the narrative. Their lives and deaths are not real enough to address, only the effect that they do have on “our” Western heroes.

Kyle and his soldier friend do, however, reflect upon the fact that by taking lives Kyle also saved lives and more importantly, the lives he took must be put in comparison to the lives saved. This is the first time in the film the audience really gets to experience the harsh reality of *American Sniper*, not only the deaths themselves, but how lives are compared in order to decide whether they were worthy kills or not. One must question that if this scene had taken place in a Western context and the woman and child had been Westerners, had not Kyle been the villain? The marines saved are nameless and mostly faceless, a gray mass hidden behind tanks and uniforms, but the audience are supposed to feel for them over the mother and child. The “flagging” becomes obvious as most narratives would rather focus on the brutal murder of a mother and child who are being attacked in their homeland, but here they are not victims, but justifiable kills. It is never discussed how invading a country and killing their citizens could be a moral gray area, but this is only natural, because “they” threatened “our” lives. We as audience are subtly reminded who the morally good and who the morally evil are, even though if one does judge the actions in another context this might be less clear cut. However, since a rift between the “ingroup” and “outgroup” has already been created within the narrative of the film, those questions are never supposed to be asked. The narrative instead focuses on Kyle's loss of innocence and how this is justified from a US perspective, how US lives must be defended whatever the cost. The cost is not the lives lost, but how Kyle is forced to rethink his persona.

This scene further establishes the relationship between an “us” and “them”, the separation between which lives are worth being sacrifices for a greater good and for other lives. While Kyle can definitely be seen as the perpetrator of the violence that occurred his actions are excused by the soldier at the base. The soldier in the scene acts as a stand in for the military as a whole, who in extension act on behalf of the US, since he is the only one to actually represent them at all after the kills. With his approval and excuse of Kyle's actions they are not really mentioned any more throughout the film, meaning one must assume that the kills bore no consequences for Kyle from the military itself. The actions, thus, seem condoned and forgiven without much actual thought or discussion. Will Kyle's action be as easily forgotten by the Other side?

In this scene Kyle says something that will echo throughout the film “It was evil like I've never seen before”. He says it in regards to the mother's and child's actions, but never in regards to what he has done. “Their” acts were evil, but he was just doing his duty. As

mentioned in the analysis of the previous scene, his actions are something that is forced upon him by their evil doing, not a consequence of choices he has made. It becomes important to remember that Kyle joined the army in an adult age and has trained for similar situations to this, but still seems surprised by how ugly war is.

The differentiation of “savage” Others and the civilized “us” is a constant reminder of who “we” are as audience. We are supposedly siding with the latter, because of how the narrative is constructed. The Others are acting cowardly, savagely, violently and irrationally while the “us” are acting valiantly, justly, rationally and forcefully. By continuously situating a distinct difference between “us” and “them” the audience are constantly reminded who is included and excluded in those groups.

4.9 The sheik – breakdown

This sequence starts off with Kyle and his partner on a roof overlooking the US soldiers that are “clearing” houses looking for someone that can give them information on Zarqawi's whereabouts. Chris quickly grows tired of just overlooking the situation, however, since he cannot protect the soldiers once they've entered a building. He decides to join the soldiers on the streets, telling his partner that “if I don't see you down there, make sure I don't see you again”.

Kyle finds a squad to join and takes the lead since they are mostly inexperienced soldier's and he's a trained Navy SEAL. Chris takes the lead as they breach a house where they find a child. He points his rifle at him and yells at him to get down on the ground. The child screams and his father runs up to them saying that “he doesn't understand”, but is beaten in the face with a rifle butt and held down on a sofa. Chris keeps screaming at them, asking why they are still there when the area is supposed to be evacuated. The father explains that he is sheik al-Obeidi and that this is his home and that's why he's staying. Kyle replies “I don't give a fuck it's your home, this is a war zone sir”. A US soldier appears with three women saying “I found these bitches in the back closet”. The sheik tries to invite the soldiers to his home, saying that they are his guests, but the soldier says that “this haji (in this context, a disrespectful slang referring to Muslims or Arabs) just wants us all in here so he can blow us up. Check his ass for a vest”. The sheik says that “he” will know that they have spoken if “he” sees Americans. Kyle wants to know who this “he” is and the sheik tries to explain using body

language and saying that he is very bad. Chris orders him to lie on the floor with his hands on his back so they can search him.

The scene cuts to Chris, the sheik and an interpreter discussing. Kyle wants information on the man he keeps referring to as “he”. He finds out that it is the Butcher, Zarqawi's right hand man. Chris wants more information, but the sheik says that the risks are very high so he'll need 100.000 USD. When asking for proof the sheik calls one of the women, Fatima, to show her cut off arm. Kyle says that he needs more proof, promising that if he gets a name he will provide security for them. The sheik gives them the name of the Butcher, Amir Khalaf Fanus.

4.10 The sheik – analysis

This is one of several scenes in the film where the US soldiers storm a home threatening their inhabitants. In the context of war this is perhaps not surprising, but it's worth noting how this is something justified; the blame is actually shifted to the Iraqis since they have stayed in a war zone, refusing to leave their home.

Furthermore, it is relevant to look at how the US soldiers actually address the Iraqi civilians. Again, this is a war, but no one questions the soldier calling the sheik a “haji” who is probably conspiring to blow them up or the “bitches” he found in the closet. It seems as if this language is almost natural, as it is never addressed. However, this might not so surprising considering the Iraqis are often referred to as “savages” throughout the film. The Oriental stereotypes have more or less become normalized within the context of the film, making them unnecessary to question, it would seem. Throughout this scene the US soldier's treatment of the family is rather despicable; they threaten them, storm their home, assault them physically, use derogatory words, demand their cooperation and so on. This is in spite of the fact that the family actually does cooperate without question. Even so they are treated with disrespect, assumed to be terrorists and liars.

The concept of home becomes interesting as well. As Chris so adequately puts it “I don't give a fuck if it's your home, this is a war zone”, boiling down what his thoughts on the value of Others homes is. He is right that the house is in fact in the middle of a war zone, but it becomes an interesting contrast to how the subject is treated throughout the film. When Kyle returns from the war he is haunted by post traumatic stress disorder and has a hard time

relaxing. The war has found its way in to his home. Furthermore, when he witnesses terrorism on TV he immediately exclaims “look what they did to us”. As Anderson describes it he is feeling an emotional connection, because of the imagined community of nationality when it happens to “us” instead of “them”. Now, however, the concept of home is not something that is in any way sacred. The US soldiers storm their home and threaten their lives, but they are not doing anything wrong, yet again.

Furthermore the value of the Oriental lives in this sequence is not determined by the fact that they are human beings but instead that they may or may not have information that the US soldiers need. To clarify: they do not have an inherent humanity but are only seen as a potential tool to reach a higher goal. Their lives are only worth protecting if they can provide the US soldiers with information, thus, they are effectively reduced to pawns without agency in a much bigger (and more important) game.

4.11 The Butcher – breakdown

The scene starts in the back of an army truck with Kyle and his fellow soldiers on the hunt for the Butcher, Zaraqawi's right hand man. Some soldiers start a conversation about the Butcher, how he is Zaraqawi's enforcer and how his weapon of choice is a drill. Kyle and a fellow soldier, Marc, have a casual conversation about Marc's former plans to be a preacher, spoiled by the fact that he loves to gamble.

We get to see Mustafa upon a rooftop, lying down, adjusting his scope in preparation for a shot. Kyle receives a call on his satellite phone, casually avoiding Marc's question “so it's like that now huh?” by referring to his new nickname, the Legend. The call is from Taya who is on her way from the hospital. She confirms Kyle's premonition that they're indeed having a boy. During the phone call the driver of the truck gets killed by Mustafa. Panic ensues as several soldiers are shot while they're trying to secure the bag of money meant for the Sheik all while Taya is still on the phone, hearing nothing, but the sounds of combat. Kyle and Marc get pinned down, but after seeing that the Butcher is dragging the Sheik's son out on the boulevard Kyle makes his way to the roof to challenge Mustafa. The scene cuts between Kyle on the roof trying to get a clear shot, but being pinned down by Mustafa and an aggressive, but leashed dog while the Butcher tortures the Sheik's son by drilling him in the leg while his family watches. The family is in despair, the women screaming and crying and the Sheik being held back by the members of the family. When the

Butcher moves the drill to the boy's temple the Sheik breaks free only to be shot by the Butcher's men as the boy is brutally murdered by the Butcher. He shouts "You talk to them, you die with them" and a woman runs to the body of the Sheik in screaming and crying in despair. The Butcher and his men drive off and Kyle can finally stick his head up as Mustafa leaves as well. The scene cuts from the wife's desperate screams as she's bent over her husband's body to a soldier claiming "Jesus what a fucking mess". Marc receives a scolding for their failure to secure the area and their operation is shut down.

4.12 The Butcher – analysis

This is a rather revolting scene where the son is brutally murdered in front of the family's eyes, drilled through his temple, while the father gets shots when trying to rescue him. While this is an effect of "speaking with the Americans" as the Butcher states, their deaths are never really addressed by the soldiers. They had promised to keep the family safe, but instead two of their members are murdered. Of course the Butcher is to blame for their deaths, but it's interesting that the soldiers never take the time to even comment on the events or their actual involvement of the events. Marc and Kyle both have a rather blank expression of the faces afterward, but it seems more like a disappointment that the mission went sideways than an expression of remorse directed towards the family. Considering the brutality of the murders that they've witnessed (or at the very least heard) it is interesting how they are never mentioned again, nor is their actual involvement in the events leading up to their deaths. Kyle's will to protect others is a theme throughout the film - he is branded as a sheepdog, he uses it as a reason for constantly coming back to the war, it was his excuse for performing his first kills – but here it is nothing that seems to actually bother him at all. He was even the one who promised the Sheik and his family protection and the Sheik kept his deal of the bargain, which he did. However, these lives seem like nothing to feel guilt about or to mourn. As soon as the Sheik and his son are dead it is as if they had never existed, almost as if their lives were not real to begin with.

This scene is one of the few where we get to see Others mourn. However, this is done in an almost caricature like way. Of course the scene contains acts of extreme violence, but in similar situations, as we will see later, citizens of the United States (mostly soldiers, however) react in an almost calm way in comparison. The reaction of the family is hysterical and lacks dignity in comparison to mourning that is shown later on in the film, in response to Western deaths.

There is an important part of this scene regarding the phone call. First of all it is relevant how family becomes a central theme in the scene, both Kyle's family and the Sheik's. While Kyle's family is taking its first, metaphorical baby steps and is threatened by the war the Sheik's well established family is torn apart by the same war. Secondly the shoot-out becomes a powerful moment as Taya can hear the battle, but not discern whether Kyle is alive or not. It is striking not only in the scene that the realities of war are literally moved within the borders of the US nation, but the scene also makes a statement where Mustafa, the Others or the “terrorists” have moved beyond just being an international threat, but are also something to fear within the borders, literally threatening their way of life. It is as if the Western family becomes a symbol for the civilized, threatened by the savages from the East. Mustafa becomes a linchpin between the two lovers and their dream of a future together, a motif that echoes throughout the film as Kyle has trouble returning home before his mission is done, something that is also shown towards the end of the scene when he gets very upset that they're not allowed to pursue the Butcher exclaiming “but I leave in three weeks”. Mustafa and the Butcher are both part of his mission and he is not done until they are dead. Furthermore, during the actual shoot out on the roof Kyle is attacked on two fronts, by Mustafa and by the dog. The dog has a shock value since very few animals are seen throughout the film, but on this very roof at this very moment in time there apparently is an aggressive dog in a leash. It becomes an almost comical symbolism of the hostility of Fallujah towards Kyle and the US soldiers. This combined with the fact that Mustafa seems to use the environment to his favor by constantly running over rooftops as a mode of transportation and finding nooks and crannies to hide makes it seem as if the land itself is tainted with hatred for the US, Kyle and his men. The people as well as the very ground they are standing on cannot be trusted.

4.13 The restaurant – breakdown

Kyle leads a company of soldiers to storm a house overlooking a restaurant that they suspect might be a base of insurgent operations. They find a family in an apartment and force the father down on the floor with his face down and hands behind his back to be able to search him. They set up in the apartment to be able to overlook the restaurant.

They start interrogating the family to find out if they know the Butcher. They say they don't and Chris tells them that they won't be allowed to leave until the soldiers do. Chris falls asleep and when he wakes up he is informed that 16 military aged males have gone

in, including the Butcher himself. The soldiers tell some jokes and are interrupted by the father who invites them to join his family for Eid al-Adha supper.

During the supper the soldiers, including Kyle, are enjoying themselves, eating and telling jokes. However, Chris notices a burn or an injury on the man's elbow, so he excuses himself by saying "I've gotta wash my hands". He goes around the apartment looking for something and eventually finds a hatch under a rug, where there are a whole stack of firearms. He returns to the dinner table and grabs the father by the neck. He drags him back to the room with the hatch and says "See that muj? See that?". They give him a choice to either face Iraqi justice or help them get into the restaurant.

In the next scene we see the soldiers approaching the restaurant and then the father goes up to knock on the door. When he has been vetted the door is opened. A US sniper says "lights out muj" and shoots the man who opened the door. The father then picks up the rifle from the dead man and immediately gets killed as well. As they move through the building they find a cold storage where a dead, or at least severely tortured, man is hanging from the roof in chains as well as several body parts belonging to various victims. Suddenly the Butcher runs by and the soldiers start pursuing only to be caught up in a massive firefight with insurgents. Kyle sees the Butcher running to a car and driving off so he tries to pursue them. An explosion happens off screen and Kyle reports that the Butcher is down. During this sequence he is being watched by a woman who then makes a phone call to Mustafa who prepares to go out and kill Kyle. When he arrives a mass of angry Iraqi civilians are carrying the body of the dead father, screaming at the US soldiers who are about to leave. Mustafa never gets a clear shot and the soldiers drive away.

4.14 The restaurant – analysis

In this sequence it becomes clear that the US soldiers cannot trust anyone. It begins with a scene that is reminiscent of the one in the sheik's house where the soldiers force their way in to a home of a family. This time, however, they seem slightly less suspicious of the owner of the house. Their trustfulness is punished, however, as it becomes clear that the house belongs to someone helping the insurgents. This is revealed by Kyle's sharp eye noticing a burn or injury on the father's elbow. Even though they were invited to his dinner table it seems that it was all some kind of decoy to ensnare the soldiers. Furthermore, when the father gets the restaurant door open and the man who opened the door is shot he picks up the rifle he had and tries to shoot the US soldiers. The woman in the window is the one that tips off Mustafa that

Kyle is there. It would seem that they were right when meeting the sheik to not trust anyone as it would seem as everyone is willing to go against them, to be a threat to them and to have them killed. No Other can be trusted. Even the angry uprising when the fire-fight has ended suggests that Others are dangerous. The mob is mostly ignored by the soldiers making them seem like a gray, irrational mass that lack individual will. They are just an angry, unruly mob, much like the insurgents are portrayed. The stereotype of dangerous, treacherous and deceiving Others is really in full swing by now.

It is relevant to discuss how the father acts in this scene. When approaching the restaurant he knows very well that he has a full squad of US soldiers watching him and preparing to storm the restaurant. Even so, as soon as the man who opened the door is shot he tries to pick up his rifle and is immediately shot and killed. While one could argue that it's an act of panic it's still worth noticing comparing to how US soldiers are seen acting in the heat of battle. They have been seen to act rationally and make good decisions even though they are under heavy fire. The father on the other hand, while not a soldier, but no stranger to weapons, seems to be so full of hatred of the US presence that he disregards logical reasoning and dies for his decision. There is really no other way to interpret why he, in such an exposed position, would act that way and risk his life and making his son lose his father. He could have, one can assume, walked away after letting the US soldiers in. Although, we do not see the actual agreement the soldiers have shown no will to kill him.

4.15 Biggles gets shot – breakdown

This scene starts off by letting the audience see Kyle and his company in a car pursuing a courier for the Butcher. He is chatting with Biggles who is driving the car. He tells Chris that he has bought the ring for his fiancé to be. Kyle questions if it was a good choice to buy it from “savages” as it could be a blood diamond. Biggles finds it amusing as Kyle is called the Legend for spilling blood. “It's not for a rock” Chris replies. They see Mustafa's spotters who text him and we get to see Mustafa getting ready in an apartment with a woman and a child. Meanwhile Biggles asks Kyle if he wants to be his best man. The people in the car they are pursuing suddenly start shooting at the US soldiers. They answer back and eventually the car stops and one man runs away and the other one gets shot on his way out of the car. Kyle takes the lead and brings Biggles with him up on a roof. They discuss what would happen if Biggles girlfriend found out that ring is not from Zales as he is planning to claim. There they get to

hear that the enemies are down and report that the roof is secure. Suddenly Biggles is shot by Mustafa. Chris tries to return fire, but Mustafa escapes. He picks up Biggles and helps him walk down to their Humvee. He and some fellow soldiers lay Biggles on the floor and drive off. Biggles makes Chris promise that he will get his girlfriend the ring.

4.16 Biggles gets shot – analysis

It is relevant to look how this sequence is set up. First of all the key theme throughout it is the idea of family and the life after the war. Biggles is speaking about his future in saying that he wants to marry his partner. Doing so is setting up that he will indeed be missed, not only by his fellow soldiers, but also by someone at home. Kyle is asked to be his best man, in other words, included in a major way in Biggles life after the war. They are becoming “real” family. Similarly Mustafa’s presumed family are introduced, but only seen in a glimpse. The woman and a child in his apartment are never really introduced to the audience and mostly act as a kind of backdrop. When Biggles is shot he is backed up by follow US soldiers and brought to the Humvee, where he is still speaking of the wedding, making Kyle promise to get his girlfriend the ring. He is making sure that he will not be forgotten after his presumed death.

It is interesting to notice how the ring acts as a metaphor as well. The idea of marriage is of course a way to create a family. Chris questions whether he should have bought the ring from “savages” and throughout the scene they keep discussing whether the ring could become an issue if the bride-to-be found out it wasn’t from Zales, but a “blood diamond”. It is as if the ring seals Biggles faith, but not in the way he intended. When he has bought it he is immediately mortally wounded by a “savage” and it seems yet again as if everything in Iraq is tainted. Chris is right about the ring coming between Biggles and his girlfriend, just not the way he thought. Once again the “savage” Others have become a threat to the Western family.

Lastly it is relevant to see how Chris refers so casually refers to Iraqis as “savages” by now. Furthermore, he assumes that they have blood diamonds there, a metaphor for how corrupt the country itself seems to him. However, when questioned, albeit jokingly, by Biggles regarding the blood he carries on his own hands he simply says that he isn’t doing it for a rock, implying that his goals are not mere capitalist gain, but something bigger. It seems almost religious how he is not there for his personal profit, but for a cause greater than himself, his nation and his family. It can also be read as a metaphor for the US prescience in

Iraq. They did not invade for monetary reasons (something that the US is often accused for), but for a good cause, bringing peace to the country. This is of course not spelled out per se, but the insinuations are there. Furthermore, it becomes interesting in contrast to his rivalry with Mustafa, considering the latter is a mercenary who is not even Iraqi. He seems to be there as for other reasons than Kyle, perhaps even treating it as a sport, since his win in the Olympics is constantly referred.

4.17 Death of Marc – breakdown

This sequence takes place just after the previous one. Back at the base the soldiers are rather quiet. A soldier asks Kyle if he saw where the shot came from and they reach the conclusion that it must have been Mustafa. Kyle walks away when he hears the news that Biggles injuries are very serious. They are informed that a civilian has given them a tip where the insurgents might be. They are also given the opportunity to stand down considering one of them just has been shot. Marc answers “Lex talionis – eye for an eye” whereby Chris returns and says that they're going after them, a comment which is met by a “fuck yes” by his fellow soldiers.

Cut to when we see them driving, accompanied by drums. They shoot a car full of armed insurgents and ram their vehicle before stopping at their destination. They clear the building thoroughly and find the water running in a bathroom sink, thus, assuming that someone has just left. When Marc exits the bathroom he is shot in the head through a window. Chris pulls him from the line of fire, but he is soon declared dead.

The scene is cut to the inside of an air plane where Chris and some other soldiers are sitting in the cargo room accompanied by several coffins, covered with American flags. As the scene fades to Marc's funeral we hear and eventually see a slightly older woman at his funeral(one can presume it is his mother) reading a letter he had written:

Glory is something that some men chase and others find themselves stumbling upon, not expecting it to find them. Either way it is a noble gesture that one finds bestowed upon them. My question is when does glory fade away and become a wrongful crusade, or an unjustified means by which consumes one completely?

I have seen war. I have seen death...

She begins crying and stops reading and salutes are shot, a US flag is folded and given to Marc's presumed partner. Chris pins an emblem of sorts on the coffin before he leaves. In the car Taya begins asking Chris about the letter that was read during the funeral and apparently was written two weeks prior to the funeral. Kyle seems distracted by a car he sees in his side mirror, as if he is being shadowed. Eventually he explains what happened the day Marc died, but simply claims that it wasn't the bullet that killed him, rather the letter and, in extent, Marc's attitude. He had given up and those were the consequences.

4.18 Death of Marc – analysis

It is relevant to frame this sequence in light of how the soldiers actually end up in the house where Marc is shot. Both him and Kyle say it out loud, it is about revenge for Biggles. In fact all the soldiers seem to be in on this idea. Apparently Biggles, someone within the “ingroup”, being shot is something that cannot simply be ignored or dealt with in due time, but must be immediately avenged. This becomes relevant as we never get to see any non-US soldiers actually show anger in response to injuries or death. The few reactions we see from Others are limited and contained such as the women mourning the sheik or in the expression of an unruly mob as is the case with the father in the restaurant. We never really get to see Others reacting with this kind of nuanced anger, in other words, we never get to see them actually deal with emotions, just express them at a rather primitive “all or nothing” kind of way. In the context the concept of *lex talionis* seems somewhat reasonable, this is a war after all. But never is the anger of Others motivated, justified or even explained in any way. This discrepancy in depicting emotions point to US soldiers being rational, but forceful and Others being brute and unreasonable. It is almost as if the Others have a primitive range of emotions.

Furthermore, the actions of US soldiers are even accompanied by a drum track as they engage in this avenging mission, adding a sense of forcefulness to their actions. They almost casually shoot up a car full of armed insurgents before slamming in to the car itself. When arriving to their destination they realize they have walked into a trap. It would seem that yet again no Other can be trusted. The tip they received from the cab driver brought them in to an ambush, the Other abusing the fact that Biggles was shot to play on their moment of weakness costing Marc his life.

The funeral scene becomes very relevant to the discussion of death and mourning when we get to see this long, touching sequence for a character that has not been that relevant to the story. Marc has been by Chris' side throughout the war, but he has in no way been a main character of the narrative. Even so he gets a grand funeral scene which show plenty of people mourning. The fact that the letter that is read is part of the letter that the real life Marc Allan Lee's letter home before his death adds a layer to how real this death actually seems.⁹⁵ This is a real life that has vanquished, not only a character in a film, unlike all those Other lives lost that never seem real. This mourning crosses the boundaries of the cinema and moves in to our reality, something that the death of Others never get to do within the narrative of this film. While we as audience may or may not be aware of the fact that the events in the film are based off of memoirs from the real life Chris Kyle, no death or suffering of Others within *American Sniper* ever tries to move outside the boundaries of the medium. They seem like fictional characters when (some of) the US soldiers do not.

4.19 Death of Mustafa – breakdown

This sequence begins with Kyle and his team being briefed about their coming mission, they are to protect engineers building a wall, but they keep getting picked off by a sniper, whom Kyle suspects is Mustafa. They take their position on the rooftop overlooking the sniper's position. However, as one of the engineers is shot Kyle realizes that they're facing the wrong way. When turned the right way Kyle sees something he is convinced is Mustafa, but the target is more than 2100 meters out. He is informed that he should not take the shot as it is too far out and the building they're on top of is surrounded by enemies. Kyle, supported by a fellow soldier saying he should take the shot if he can, says “aim small, miss small. Doing it for Biggles” and takes the shot and kills Mustafa. The building is immediately swarmed with armed oppositional forces. Meanwhile a sand storm is closing in. A big firefight ensues and many Iraqi gunmen are killed, but they keep coming in swarms. As the sandstorm draws near the US soldiers are running out of ammunition and Kyle says they should “call it”, in other words they request for an air strike on the building they are on top of. He makes a call to Taya on his satellite phone saying that he is “ready to come home”, a reference to how he felt compelled to return to the war previously in the film. The air strike, however, misses due to the

⁹⁵ America's Mighty Warriors: Marc's Last Letter Home http://americasmightywarriors.org/_a/marcs-last-letter-home/ (accessed 2015-05-07)

sandstorm and as it is finally upon them the US soldiers start retreating towards their evacuation vehicle which has recently arrived. They all make it to the van, but realizes that Kyle has been left behind since he has been shot in the leg. He manages to run to the van anyway and is helped aboard by his fellow soldiers, leaving his rifle behind.

4.20 Death of Mustafa – analysis

Considering the build-up for this scene it is actual quite anti-climactic. While the actual kill shot is built up in a similar way to Kyle's first kill, with focus on the feat that must be performed, although, the conditions are very demanding. The focal point is, again, not the life that must be taken, but the obstacle of performing the shot. The shot is shown in slow motion, yet again with focus on Kyle's breathing. When he exclaims "mission accomplished" after the kill (which he logically should have no way of confirming, since he can't actually see Mustafa) it further lays focus on what he has performed and overcome and not the violence he has perpetrated.

Furthermore, yet again, Kyle is in a situation where he must take a moral stance before taking the shot. Both times it is a question of greater good. The first time it is about saving lives of those within the "ingroup" by taking lives of Others. Now it is about risking the lives of the "ingroup" in order to potentially save more of them in the long run. Yet again Kyle takes the route of the sheepdog, choosing the way that saves as many US soldiers as possible, and in extension the lives of the nation itself, no matter the cost. He, yet again, makes the very tough, but correct call, something that seems to have become a trait of his. It also makes for a clear difference between Mustafa and Chris. Even though they have the same role in the sense that they are both snipers, Mustafa comes off as cowardly, as he is hiding while he takes his shots Chris seems brave. Not only has he many times given up his role as a sniper to breach houses with other marines, but he also makes the tough calls that put himself in danger. Furthermore, his shots often have focus on his performance, but never do we see the same treatment for Mustafa. He is credited with being a good shot as he performs kills that no other sniper (except for Kyle perhaps) could perform, but the actual shots are never given the same attention as Kyle's.

It is interesting, however, that no US soldiers are killed throughout the shoot-out sequence. While one soldier is shot by Mustafa before the firefight begins no other US soldiers are injured or killed until Kyle is shot in the leg just before the sequence ends. It becomes almost comical, in a James Bond-esque manner, how the masses of Others keep swarming the US soldiers who keep their focus and manage to kill a lot of enemies without taking any hits themselves. I say comical, because they are grossly outnumbered and are running low on ammunition, but still manage to outsmart the enemies who do not seem to use any tactics at all when approaching the soldiers, merely running in, shooting blindly.

This scene is very clearly set up for closure. Chris says to Taya that he's finally ready to go home and choose their family over the military. He finally kills Mustafa who's been a thorn in his side throughout the film. The scene even ends with him having left his rifle on the ground and a shot of Mustafa's dead body as the storm covers him in sand. It becomes obvious that Mustafa will no longer become a linchpin between them any more and Chris can leave having finished what he had started. Again we see an unmourned, even unnoticed, death of an Other. Mustafa has been Kyle's nemesis throughout the film, but he is rather unceremoniously killed. There is no one there to mourn him and his is literally buried in sand before anyone has even noticed that he has passed. He has previously been shown with, what we can assume at least, his wife and child, but in this instance the family does not seem to be as relevant to his character as the US soldiers.

4.21 Death of Chris Kyle– breakdown

The film ends with a credit sequence where we learn the fate of Chris Kyle, being shot and killed by a fellow veteran. During the sequence we get to see documentary footage of how Kyle's death was honored, in his home state of Texas, as well as pictures from the Cowboy's stadium where a memorial was held. The flag of the United States of America is shown in excess throughout the scene: waved by civilians, shown atop of his coffin, seen waving in the wind. The sequence ends with his coffin being shown. Throughout the scene a sad theme is played, “The Funeral” composed by Ennio Morricone.

4.22 Death of Chris Kyle – analysis

Chris Kyle's death and the following mid-credits montage plays a pivotal role in not only finishing the film, but also topping off the character itself. Kyle is saluted for his bravery and his patriotism which in reality meant his violence and with what skill he perpetuated his violence. His death is honored and mourned on the simple premise that he caused death and, although never seen, mourning. The real life images add a sense of reality to the film, since Chris Kyle did indeed exist in real life, his character transcends the boundaries of cinema in a sense. It also adds a layer of reality to his death. These are real people we see mourning, real humans affected by his death. Something equivalent to that we never see for his victims. They are never made real, because they are in fact not seen as real. Just as Butler has pointed out, there is a difference in whose lives are considered real. It is no coincidence that the narrative so heavily focuses on making Kyle's death seem so real in contrast to all the “fictional” lives of Others lost. The violence against them does not exist, because the people suffering from the violence are not real. This also means we cannot mourn them, creating a full circle of neglect of human lives. A non-grievable life is not a life at all, unlike Kyle's.

It also becomes clear that the reoccurring theme of comparing lives reaches its peak here. Chris Kyle is celebrated as a hero for his outstanding performance, being the most efficient sniper in US history. It is no stretch to say that Kyle's heroism is based on a nationalistic idea of how “their” lives are worth killing to save the life of “ours”. As Kyle states several times throughout the film his main goal is simply to save fellow soldiers and this scene adds to that thinking. The only thing of importance is the lives of US citizens, the rest are expendable and unworthy of contextualizing. For instance Mustafa, probably had the same intentions with his missions, but he is the film's villain and Kyle is the hero, simply because of nationality, one being in the “ingroup” and the other in the “outgroup”.

5. Conclusions

5.1 Reoccurring themes

The concept of family is hugely important and interesting in *American Sniper*. While Kyle keeps neglecting his family back in the States the relationship with the other family, the army grows stronger. Family is key in the narrative of this film, not only for Chris Kyle, but for the story as a whole. Kyle's fellow soldiers are humanized by talking about their loved ones at home who they are staying alive for. When someone dies, they are mourned and buried. The Others on the other hand have no families, show no mourning. When the child with the grenade gets shot, the woman who is with him shows signs of sorrow, but is instantly taken by her sense of completing the task at hand: blowing up the convoy. While Kyle and the rest of the military get to show a lot of emotions in answer to death and violence, the Others are unfazed. Their sorrow is not seen, is not heard and, thus, does not humanize them. They do not get to show vulnerability in order to be constructed as three dimensional characters. As Butler points out, images like these serve not to condemn the violence done upon the other by the perceived "Us".⁹⁶ The image of a dead child is presented as critique for the situation the Other has created, not the violence perpetuated. To elaborate: when Kyle kills the child, and the killings to come, the images are presented as an effect of the actions of the Other, while the West cannot be held accountable for what happens. "We" are simply acting out of necessity. This state of mind also means that, although Westerners are fewer in numbers we are entitled to own or consume the world's resources, while the undeserving, uncivilized Orientals are not. This is all simply because the Westerner is a true human being while the Oriental is merely an outlined, vilified caricature.⁹⁷ The West, thus, becomes the judge and jury of Oriental behavior, making them the actors while Orientals lack real agency.

It is also interesting to look how Others treat children in the context of the film. In the chosen sequences we see four children in total: the mother and child with the grenade, the sheik and his son, the man and his son in the restaurant scene and the assumed child of Mustafa. Furthermore, we see another child picking up a rocket launcher and aiming it at UIS

⁹⁶ Butler, 6.

⁹⁷ Said (1977), 111.

soldiers, forcing Kyle to prepare himself to kill the child. However, he drops the rocket launcher and runs off before Kyle is forced to kill him. It would seem that children in the narrative of *American Sniper* are neglected by their parents. The sheik keeps on living in a war zone even though it endangers his child, the mother gives her son a grenade to throw at the US convoy effectively putting him in harm's way, the man living opposite the restaurant does help his son with his homework during the scene, but is also part of the insurgents and is swiftly killed when he, with no regards of consequences it would seem, picks up a rifle only to be shot down. Mustafa's presumed family is only briefly introduced, but he seems to neglect them entirely to perform his mission. Not only does the "barbaric" stereotype come to mind, but since we never get to see or have any chance of understanding the Oriental characters motivations, these actions seem completely irrational. Which parent would endanger their kids' lives in such a way? Why is there a kid just roaming the streets with no adults around to see him pick up a rocket launcher? Why does the man living opposite the restaurant and Mustafa endanger their lives in such a way when they have children? It is impossible to find answers to these questions within the narrative of the film, because it does not provide us with any insight to the war itself nor does it give any details of the lives of Others.

In contrast we have Chris Kyle. While not in the chosen sequences it is still relevant to quickly compare Kyle's relationship to his kids. While one can easily argue that he neglects his children quite a bit there is one big difference. He does not put them in harm's way. In fact he does what he thinks is needed to keep them from coming to harm, in other words defending his country from an outside threat. His neglect is part of a bigger cause, which in the end is a noble one. The contrast becomes apparent since his neglect is constantly motivated throughout the film while the motivations of Others are never disclosed. While Kyle is self-sacrificing and selfless, the Others instead seem ruthless, uncaring and even stupid.

Similar imagery come to mind when looking at the narrative and how the rivalry between Chris and Mustafa is set up, being an important and constantly returning theme. They are situated as each other's nemesis, both very skilled snipers, in fact they are both renown for their high kill rate and ability to perform a kill shot from a great distance. Their rivalry is often seen in the light of physical and mental performance, almost like a sport. For instance the scenes revolving around Chris performing hard or important kills are shown in slow motion with the sound of his breathing enhanced, Mustafa's participation in the Olympics as a

sniper is referred to several times throughout the film and he is constantly transporting himself by running on rooftops, performing quite dangerous jumps between houses in the process. In one scene not included in the analysis, US soldiers arrive to change shift with Kyle and question why the room reeks of urine. It is never confirmed, but heavily implied that Chris has urinated without leaving his sniping position, prioritizing the mission over personal hygiene and comfort. It is clear that he has his priorities set straight.

There is, however, a difference in how they are both presented. Never do we get the same sort of slow-motions when Mustafa is about to perform a kill, except in the scene where he is shot while taking aim. While the actual rivalry between them is set up like a competition their performance is shown differently. Thus, we are allowed to see Kyle in the light of overcoming an obstacle, making a tough choice as well as performing a hard shot, while Mustafa is simply a worthy opponent, matched in physical capability. He, however, does not overcome anything when performing his kills, they are simply done.

In all of the sports related imagery we do, however, see a distinct difference in why the characters are performing these deeds. Kyle's motivations are built throughout the film, but in the end it boils down to the religious beliefs coupled with his role as a sheepdog, both presented in the first sequence of the film. He himself sees his motivation as something noble (or at least more noble than monetary gain) while we never get any real insight as to why Mustafa is so hell bent on killing US soldiers. While that is true for all the insurgents the lack of motivation can only be explained by him being a mercenary, thus, his intentions are not as “noble” as Kyle's. Mustafa is in fact not even Iraqi so he has no inherent reason to be there, at least not that we as audience are presented with, aside from money and the challenge. Perhaps one could also argue that he is doing it literally for sport, as his sports background is constantly referred to. If so it would seem that to him it is a game of performance and not a matter of life and death.

This reading of Mustafa works quite well within the context of how they deal with the aftermath of their kills. While Kyle is seen showing remorse and sorrow, as well as suffering actual consequences for his actions as he develops PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) when returning home. However, his grief and sorrow is of course very relative. He never actually mourns the death of Others. He even states that the reason he feels bad about being back in the US is the fact that he can't save other US soldiers when he's not there. He is never focused on the lives of Others, but always those within his “ingroup”.

The themes of death, mourning and the value of a human life ties in with all the themes mentioned above. While death seems like something life altering and horrible to the Western character, it does not seem that way for the Eastern ones, or at the very least we are not allowed to see it. Kyle's sheepdog persona is what keeps him motivated throughout the film and his willingness to sacrifice himself for others is key to understanding his character. He is always the one looking out for his fellow soldiers: he leaves his safe position as a sniper to go clear houses with other soldiers, he is willing to kill women and children to protect his own, he will put his life at risk to kill Mustafa and he is wants to extract revenge when Biggles has been shot. In contrast we have the Others who seem desensitized to all the deaths occurring around them. While there are a few glimpses of Others mourning those are never seen in the same light as Western mourning where we get to see anger and sorrow, funerals and revenge. Thus, the Others come off as cold-hearted and, since their anger is never motivated throughout the film, irrational. Western lives are valued, but the Others seem almost accustomed to death.

If one establishes that there are reoccurring themes throughout the narrative of the film one can also discuss the implication of these. The first and most important point to make is how the Others are constantly dehumanized while the Westerners are constantly made as real as possible. The Others are continuously dehumanized in terms of language with the constant references to them as “savages”, “muj” and so on. They also stereotype the Others quite often, assume them to be terrorists and so on. These terms and the manner of speaking to and of the Iraqi civilians is never condemned by Kyle. Furthermore, it seems like every Eastern person in the film is conspiring, in one way or the other, against the US. Again, we have no motivations given for these characters so their actions seem vile and brutal. Even civilians who at first seem non-threatening become threats to Kyle and his fellow soldiers. No Other can be trusted throughout the film and it is as if the very ground they are fighting on is conspiring against them as well.

5.2 Concluding remarks

If we look at Billig's wish to expand the term nationalism to include the reproduction for the nation state, it is clear that a cinematic feature such as *American Sniper* falls under that category. However, its nationalism (if it will even be recognized as that) will often be read as benign. When looking at how these sort of films constantly reproduce the same ideals of a white, violent, often Christian, male fighting Oriental “savages” it is clear that its part of a larger discourse that is somehow accepted. We see a repetition not only of the stereotypes that Boggs and Pollard bring up, but also of those that Said has presented. Orientalism is something that doesn't only continue to exist but that is actively reproduced with narratives such as the one seen in *American Sniper*. It makes no effort to change this, rather the other way around, cementing the stereotypes with its way of depicting violence, death and mourning. Orientalism, as a tool of oppression, is still prevalent and, thus, the discussion about it needs to continue, a discussion where this thesis and the methodology presented can contribute by further discussing Orientalism in relation to death, mourning and the construction of (banal) nationalism.

Furthermore, looking at Billig's term of “flagging” helps out when analysing the film. While not exactly the way he describes it, *American Sniper* is littered with “flagging”. In fact, the whole narrative relies on the audience's ability to recognize themselves in Kyle, being in his “ingroup”. We are constantly reminded of how “natural” it is to spill blood over nationhood and how justified it is when coming from the “right” side. Furthermore, there are tiny ways in which we as audience are reminded which side is the “natural” and morally good side. For instance Kyle is always seen fighting for something, instead of against something. He has his family make proud, he has his brothers in arms to protect and his nation to serve. Moving on, there are constant reminders of who are the morally good and who are the morally evil. As presented in the analysis it seems that Kyle can do no wrong, even when he kills a child. The horrible actions he performs are simply forced upon him and he is, thus, justified to perform violent acts. It is almost as if it is the Others fault that he is killing them, since they put him in that position. Never is he questioned, never does he make a bad call. We never question him as a hero, because he does no wrong. The film requires the viewer to look beyond the narrative to question him. Why is he there? Is this a just representation of the war? What are his true motivations? Constantly we as audience are baited to root for the Westerners

through the use of “flagging” where the West and its people are quite simply made out to be better. The dangers Chris' faces when back in the States are paranoia induced by the war itself. Same thing when he gets killed, he is shot by a fellow veteran suffering from PTSD. The war is polluting the US soil it would seem. However, the dangers do stem from that very soil and not from the “much superior” US.

To discuss the *strategic location*, the term introduced by Said, of features like these seem to be a good explanation of why they can actually be made. Not only are terrorist films quite popular, but the barrage of them seems almost endless. They also act as propaganda, albeit in a banal way. The constant reminders of the division of Us and Them but most importantly the continuous dehumanization of characters that are never made real (unlike the US soldiers) is a way not only to construct a division between the “ingroup” and the “outgroup” but to normalize and justify violence done by Us against Them. Thus, I would argue that *American Sniper* can indeed be seen as propaganda, as it enforces a hierarchy of grief, actively dehumanizing Others to justify violent actions against them. Not only does the film rewrite the events leading up to the Iraq war but it also justifies the violence itself. Although Eastwood's intentions were to make an anti-war statement this thesis shows that it can be read in a totally different manner.

Furthermore, *American Sniper* is also a testament of who gets to dictate what is (dangerous) nationalism and who is a terrorist. Butler describes the word “terrorist” as a tool for powerful actors of war to use against the independence movements that struggle against them and exemplifies with how Israel can call Palestinian acts of violence terrorism while justifying their own as self defense or something similar.⁹⁸ Likewise, the terrorist and terrorism on film is summed up to being Orientals with the goal of eradicating Western lives and their way of life. Thus, these films are not only made for entertainment, but are a way of upholding the system of Orientalism. Furthermore, they act as reminders of the nation-state, how they can be threatened and, thus, justify violence against Others. The Others are not allowed to mourn, because that would humanize them, making this narrative more complicated and less nationalistic. It is not in the interest of a film such as *American Sniper* to provide the audience with real life characters on both sides of the war. Only to provide justified violence against those that are deemed to deserve it. While the reading in this thesis is of course not the only reading that can be made, it is definitely supported by *American Sniper's* Orientalist and dehumanizing narrative, no matter the director's intentions.

⁹⁸ Butler, 25-26.

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