

Palestine and the Middle East in the Popular Filmic Imaginary: Historical Memory,
Grievable Lives, and Encountering the Other in Film

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA BY

Stephen Bennett

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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July, 2022

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Acknowledgements

This dissertation and my journey through graduate school would not have been possible without the support of many people. First and foremost, I want to thank my graduate adviser at the University of Minnesota, Catherine Squires, whose mentorship and teaching has been incredibly influential to me. Catherine inspired me to think deeply about audiences and issues of representation, and she championed my work when I needed it the most. It is impossible to overstate the respect I have for her and the appreciation I have for her guidance. Catherine, thank you for showing me how to unflinchingly say what I know to be true, even if it makes people uncomfortable. I could not have made it this far without you.

I am also grateful to my master's adviser at Illinois State University, Issam Nassar, who not only taught me about the history of Palestine and the power of historical images, but also how to be a more thoughtful historian and how to enjoy the process of research and writing. Along with his substantial influence on my work and this project, Issam has provided numerous opportunities for me, from my first internship at the Institute for Jerusalem Studies to introducing me to so many other historians over the years, all of which enriched my time in Illinois, in Palestine, and beyond.

I also want to thank the two other members of my dissertation committee, Mary Vavrus and Mark Pedelty. Mary's work was truly instructive and provided the framing much of this project. I also owe her a debt of gratitude for her encouragement as I made the transition from one university department to another. Mary's support from that new beginning, all the way through to finishing my dissertation, along with all her constructive feedback and insight was incredibly helpful. Mark's global media course truly helped me to 'think bigger' about media and its role in society. I am grateful to him for challenging me to think about my own positionality and the role of the critic in more complex ways, which helped me to formulate a large of part of my theoretical framework in this study. I am also grateful to Shayla Thiel-Stern for her guidance on the prospectus that preceded this final work, and her thoughtful feedback. I am deeply indebted to Laurie Ouellette, whose work and teaching helped me fine-tune my critical lens and had an indelible influence on this project as well.

I am also grateful for the wonderful colleagues and friends I made at the University of Minnesota—Elena Hristova, Justin Bergh, Joy Hamilton, Wes Hansen, David Tucker, Al and Emma Hiland, among many others—thank you for making me feel so welcome and at home in Comm Studies, and for the countless stimulating, supportive, and often hilarious conversations

between classes and in our shared office spaces. Chelsea Reynolds, Anna Popkova, Jiyoung Han, Rodrigo Zamith, Lisa Peterson-de la Cueva, Patrick File, and Brett Johnson, among so many others, thank you for being such great friends and helping me to navigate my first years in Minnesota while I was sleep deprived and taking care of a new baby boy. I owe so much to my dear friend Ruth DeFoster—your friendship and our shared experiences as graduate student-parents have been a constant source of support, comic relief, and comradery over the years.

I also received so much support from the smart and strong sisters of the Osman-Mohammed family—Sarah, Arwa, Ayah, Asma, and Yusra. I hope I can repay them all the effort and the love they have shown me.

I am especially thankful for my incredible colleagues at the Institute for Palestine Studies for their encouragement and substantial support in writing and finishing this dissertation, of whom there are too many to name here. Salim Tamari, whose work on the sociology and history of Palestine is peerless. Sherene Seikaly, one of the most generous and brilliant scholars I have ever met, who makes the people around her feel seen and heard. Rashid Khalidi, who consistently keeps me motivated with his energy, humor, wisdom, and personability. Khaled Farraj, for whom I have profound professional and personal respect, thank you for always holding me to a high standard and showing me what it means to be truly principled and fearless in our advocacy for Palestine. Laura Albast, you are so thoughtful, smart, and indefatigable, and I take great inspiration from all the work that you do. Sebastian Bernberg, thank you for being such a great friend and for listening to me talk for 40-plus hours every week in our shared office, then for even more hours on our weekend backpacking trips into the wilderness. Your friendship and support, not to mention your sense of humor, helped pull me through some difficult times. I could not ask for a better friend.

I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the tremendous role my family has played in my educational pursuits. My parents, David and Linda, instilled in me unyielding principles of social justice and equality from a very young age, and it is their guidance that provided the very foundation for my studies and career. My parents did not just teach by explaining, they did it by setting an example in treating everyone with compassion, acceptance, and love. I am also grateful for my sister, Cherie, who also shares that commitment to social justice and liberation for Palestine, and my brother Mike, who provides endless support while always helping me have a good laugh at my numerous mistakes and faults. I also want to acknowledge the tremendous role the Cullum/Timming family has had in my life and this work. Andy, thank you for the countless good memories growing up together and helping me to navigate my way into higher academia.

Josh, thank you for the great camping and fishing adventures up north when I needed to escape the confines of graduate school. Aunt Cherie, thank you for your unconditional love, generosity, and the formative experiences and memories in my life. I would not be the person I am today without you. Aunt Carole, thank you for supporting me in so many ways over the years. The example you have set in fighting for peace and equal rights, and your role in the very history of this country, is simply incredible. You charted the path for me and so many others to follow.

Raekissa Webb, thank you for inspiring me with your drive, your beautiful soul, and your creativity. And thank you for always laughing at my jokes, even the bad ones.

Zak, thank you for your patience during the countless hours I spent typing away, and for cheering me on during this entire journey.

Thy Phuong Nguyen, thank you a million times over. For everything.

Dedication

This project is dedicated to my son, Zakariyya. Being your dad is the greatest honor I will ever have. And to the people of Palestine who have given me so much inspiration and generous hospitality time and time again.

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Introduction: Representations of Israel-Palestine and the Greater Middle East in Film

Media, Memory, History, and Identity

In the opening of their masterful essay, “The West in the Arab World, Between Ennui and Ecstasy,” Peter Harling and Alex Simon state that “To outsiders, the Middle East usually is an intellectual object—a place on a map onto which they project their fears, fantasies and interests. But to many it is a home to live and despair in, to flee and to cling to, to loath and to love.”¹ Harling and Simon, in drawing a distinction between the representation and reality of the Middle East and its position within the Western mind, gesture to the agenda setting effect of the mainstream media news cycle, where “the brutal execution of one American journalist has approximately the same galvanizing potential as the large-scale persecution and enslavement of Iraq’s Yazidi minority” wherein this galvanizing potential still largely rests upon the victimization of one people by their fellow Arabs or Muslims. Meanwhile, both these storylines are “more compelling than the arrival of several hundred thousand refugees on the shores of Europe, who are in turn of far greater concern than the millions more stranded in their own countries and those throughout the region who are routinely bombed into nothingness.”²

It is the space and processes between representation and reality, between signifier and signified, where lives of the Other are rendered either grievable or unworthy of grief.

¹ P. Harling and A. Simon, “The West in the Arab World, Between Ennui and Ecstasy,” *Peterharling.com*, December 16th, 2016, <https://peterharling.com/2015/12/16/the-west-and-the-arab-world-between-ennui-and-ecstasy/>

² Harling and Simon, “The West in the Arab World”

This is the overarching dynamic I examine in this study of popular films, primarily action, drama, and war films that portray Palestinians and Arabs and the dominant themes found within them. Most of the films I have analyzed present audiences with racialized Others or enemies who are dehumanized to great cultural and geopolitical consequence. In other films that purportedly present a more sympathetic or humanistic Palestinians and Arabs, they are largely used as narrative tools, sacrificed to forward the mission of their White saviors. Holger Pötzsch, building on the work of Judith Butler, argues that it is the filmic relation between hero and enemy that constructs "an epistemological barrier that keeps the other incomprehensible, inaccessible, and ultimately ungrievable."³ One of my primary goals within this study is to analyze representations of Israel-Palestine and the Middle East in film to more closely identify the audio-visual and narrative codes that, in Pötzsch's terminology, "de-subjectifies and de-humanizes the enemy and renders the killing of it unproblematic."⁴ My study here also looks beyond the hero-enemy oppositional dynamic, and uncovers the even more problematic films, where Arabs are coded as friends or allies, providing the audience with the sense that they have watched a more progressive movie.

These popular filmic representations, and the texts that act to actively resist them, constitute the contested terrain of media and popular culture.⁵ This contested terrain is highly complex and multifaceted, increasingly so in the modern mediascape where many

³ Holger Pötzsch, "Border, Barriers, and Grievable Lives: The Discursive Production of Self and Other in Film and Other Visual Media," *Nordicom Review*, 32(2), (2011), 75.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 76.

⁵ Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Post-modern*, (New York: Routledge, 1995).

mediums interact and reinforce one another, the nexus between Hollywood films, mainstream news media, and the collective historical memories they produce. In this introduction I also outline the argument underlying this study that the line between news media, entertainment media, and historical texts is now almost completely irrelevant, where "an epistemological barrier is drawn that hampers the emergence of competing perspectives and alternate discourses."⁶

As Evelyn Alsultany has noted that in looking back on the work of Ella Shohat, Robert Stam, Herman Gray, Douglas Kellner, Stuart Hall, and others, "focusing on whether or not a particular image is good or bad does not necessarily address the complexity of representation. Rather, it is important to examine the ideological work performed by images and story lines."⁷ I am interested here in further uncovering that more complex ideological work and highlighting more deeply coded and subtle forms of dehumanization of Palestinians, Arabs, and Muslims in films that are understood, by critics and viewers, to be more humanistic and empathetic toward subjects still nonetheless rendered as the Other. Numerous examples of these more complex ideological narratives were previously seen in the similar tradition of films that emerged in the wake of the Vietnam War that attempt to flatten the historical debate over the war by presenting narratives of soldiers who regret the acts of violence they inflict upon innocent Vietnamese victims and are left with wounds of their own in the form of PTSD and a pervasive guilty conscience. Examples of these narratives include *Platoon*, *Full*

⁶ Pötzsch, "Borders, Barriers and Grievable Lives," 79.

⁷ Evelyn Alsultany, "Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation After 9/11," (New York, NYU Press, 2012), 13.

Metal Jacket, and *Born on the Fourth of July*. This trend of the updated White Man's Burden continues in films on the Arab-Israeli conflict and American military invasions of the Middle East.

The films that emerged in the wake of the Vietnam War as well as the films that recount American wars in the Middle East and the Arab-Israeli conflict clearly reflect and link to the emergence of an ideology that Joseph Dardo (2017) terms Post-traumatic Whiteness. According to Dardo, "From the Vietnam War to the Trump era, the combat veteran has emerged at the protagonist of a new white racial politics," where even though "a disproportionate number of working-class black, Latino, and American Indian soldiers served in Southeast Asia, most American novels and films about the war tell the story of white men who undergo a process of alienation."⁸ These films are clearly intended to evoke the empathy of the viewer, and largely speak to White Americans and Israelis, and not those rendered as Other. While many Israeli veterans of the Israeli Defense Forces cannot be classified as white as in the American context, the same racial supremacist structures clearly exist in Israel, and these same structures are also present in much of the mainstream filmography produced in Israel that deals with themes of race, religion, and conflict. As my analysis will show here, this archetype of the alienated, disillusioned, battle scarred white US military veteran or Israeli Defense Forces veteran pervades popular films about Palestine and the Middle East in films such as *Munich*, *Waltz with Bashir*, and *American Sniper*, among others.

⁸ Joseph Dardo, "Post-Traumatic Whiteness: How Vietnam Veterans Became the Basis for a New White Identity Politics," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, November 21st, 2017

This dissertation analyzes Hollywood and Israeli-produced filmic images of the modern Middle East, with a special focus on Israel-Palestine, in order to more deeply understand the current modes of Western media representation of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the greater Middle East, and the complex ideological and political work done by these representations. Here I identify televisual coded depictions of race, religion, and nation/space, the power of the narrative film and its influence on popular perceptions and politics, and the way in which victimhood is denied to Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim casualties. In the place of grief for the Arab victims of wars and the acts of violence and trauma perpetrated upon them, I identify and locate an overarching post-traumatic white identity that has pervaded in US and Israeli war films, dating back to the immediate post-Vietnam era.

The following sections in this introductory chapter outline my theoretical framework and explore how Orientalism in media have constructed an Arab world that is marked as inherently dangerous, threatening, and 'Other'. I also explore in this introduction how all type of media is a highly important terrain for the struggle to define one's self to the rest of the world, along with the significance of collective memory as a defining factor in how entire nations understand their own identity and the wider world around them. I close the introduction by taking a deep dive into methods of critical textual analysis, their utility, and what I view as one of the most important factors in a study like this— the positionality and self-reflexivity of the critical researcher.

The second chapter expands on some of these frameworks and explores the relationships between race and ideology as it relates to war narratives in popular media and their roles in constructing collective memories. I then outline the important role of popular film critics and how the discourse of film criticism primes the viewer by establishing films to the public as being historically accurate, realistic, culturally significant, and how they also declare in the public arena that certain popular films are important to watch if one is to understand their own national histories and identities more fully. This is a problematic effect if we are to consider whether films are in fact history, and that many of these films directly deal with complex issues of race and war, and debate I undertake in the chapter as well. This understanding of the role of film critics provides one of the most important concepts that underpins my analysis of the films in the following chapters. I also briefly explore theories of the power of narrative and how films position the viewer to identify with the protagonist and create a narrative proximal distance from the Others who appear in these films.

The bulk of my film analysis begins in the third chapter, where I observe prominent aesthetic features that frames the Middle East not as a homeland for a people but merely as a site of trauma and danger for American and Israeli protagonists. I open the chapter with an exploration of post-racial discourse, wherein popular media assert that race is a diminishing factor in the daily life and how the ideas of a post-racial society make these films on the Middle East falsely appear unaffected by the race or religion of its characters, and that these narratives are simply straightforward accounts of national histories. Ideas and discourses of a post-racial society that became prominent around the

time these films were released frame them as not racist or problematic, but rather factual, that these films and their representations of foreign peoples and lands should be understood and analyzed at face value. After analyses of the films *Thank You For Your Service* (2017), *American Sniper* (2014), *American Assassin* (2017), and *Beirut* (2018), I close the chapter with an exploration of how films help to rewrite history and salve the wounds of defeat for the US and Israel. An almost universal feature of these films is that they show only victorious battles and achievements of supposedly moralistic protagonists, eliding the fact that these wars were in fact humiliating defeats for two of the world's military superpowers.

The fourth chapter observes the coded disposability of Arab lives in films, where they are used merely as sacrificial tools to highlight the supposed humanity of Israeli and American characters, often in their death or as native informants or irredeemable traitors. These sacrificial characters are often established as the exceptional “good Arabs” who turn on their native cultures and brethren in service of the mission of the colonizers and invaders they align with. When not used in this way, these Arab characters are alternatively sleeper agents that eventually cannot help but show their true fanatical colors later in the films, as helplessly bent on extremism and violence. This chapter also explores one of other most important frameworks I have observed in my coding of these films: the shoot-and-kill narrative. The shoot-and-kill film dates back to the post-Vietnam era and comprises one of the most popular genre of war film. In these films, the (usually White American or Israeli) protagonist's hand is essentially forced by the violent misdeeds of the Arab or Muslim characters to exact violence and death, against their

seeming regret and angst over their own actions they were forced to undertake. As seen in *The Kingdom* (2007), *Munich*, (2005) and *Waltz with Bashir* (2008), this frame absolves our main characters of their own actions, as they are understood as purely reactionary, regrettable, and acting against their own humanistic nature, and not merely as the actions of a person who perpetrates unjust war and violence against a racial Other. I then conclude the chapter with a more extended analysis of how the shoot-and-cry narrative is also prominent in news media with a study of articles on drone pilots all of which acts to displace victimhood itself.

The fifth chapter turns to more authentic portrayals of Palestinians by analyzing films that engage the different formations of Palestinian identity in the wake of Zionist colonization, displacement, and occupation. This chapter is intended to highlight how Palestinians and Arabs themselves understand and create their own identities when granted the permission to narrate and represent themselves in the popular imaginary, and then analyze more productive modes of representation in films, in the face of dominant Orientalist portrayals. I then close this study with a wide-angle view of Palestinians and Arabs in media and briefly chart a path forward to making media more constructive and historically accurate as terrain of identity formation and representation.

Because of the longevity of the West's historical encounters with the Middle East and the Arab-Israeli conflict, the deeply embedded issues of racialized identity, and historical depth of media representations, I am especially concerned here with modern representations of Arab and Palestinian identity and so my study builds upon the longer preexisting critical scholarship on race and ideology in media, especially from the realm

of cultural studies. I take entertainment media as seriously as news media. In other words, I consider the wider modern mediascape as the most significant ideological battleground for the popular Western imagination of the Arab world and Israel-Palestine, and seek to uncover how modern films engage with, call back to, and build upon the collective historical memory and understanding that is constructed by what many consider to be more “serious” news media. I argue that in many popular films, Arabs and Palestinians are largely rendered nameless, faceless victims and are used as affective narrative tools, serving as disposable characters who must suffer or die as protagonists venture into a dangerous Middle East as part of a larger Western civilizing mission. These popular media images and film narratives create a Middle East that is concurrently aggressor and victim, home to both violent radicals and questionable victims, with the protagonists agonizing over every unfolding tragedy, maintaining a proximal narrative distance that keeps the Arab characters at arms-length so as not to confuse the viewer by humanizing them as much as the anti-racist white/Israeli protagonist. While there are certainly some sympathetic and empathetic depictions of the Middle East and of Palestinians in films and media, these texts are produced and distributed by smaller and independent studios and remain marginal compared to Hollywood films, and aspects of political economy that prevent such films from achieving the prominence of Hollywood war films, as will also be discussed in the final chapter.

This study is motivated by an array of interdisciplinary research interests. Firstly, as a researcher of media, history, cultural studies, and critical theory, I build upon past research in order to more fully understand how historical memory operates and is largely

shaped by our modern media environment. I am also interested in discourses of race and identity as seen in popular films, the power of cinema and narrativity, and the ideological frames they construct. As mentioned above, this study is also intended as a point of departure in the larger field of media studies, as I argue that the line media researchers have placed between “serious” news and entertainment media has been rendered irrelevant. Entertainment media should be analyzed with the same scholarly seriousness and given precisely the same weight as news media in the modern media environment. While each sector of media operates in different ways, the fact is that news is now entertainment and vice versa, and all media influences public opinion, political behavior, and foreign policy.

Palestine and the Middle East in the American Mind

Nearly every facet of the Middle East, from its people, culture, history, and current dominant religion of Islam has been the object of Western representation for centuries. This is especially true of what is often referred to as the Holy Land, or Israel-Palestine, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Throughout its complex history since the late 19th century, the Arab-Israeli conflict had comprised a central political issue to US, European, and Arab foreign policy and a significant part of their respective religious and political consciousness. But the ongoing struggle between Israelis and Palestinians has now been pushed to the margins of the American political priorities in the wake of significant geopolitical events that have unfolded in the last two decades. Despite increased activism on American campuses and in social media, both the US and Arab world still grapple

with the reverberations of 9/11, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, and the failed Arab revolutions at the expense of the Arab-Israeli peace process. While many Arab regimes like Egypt, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia have fostered ties with Israel in the name of regional security cooperation, the peace process remains moribund and the conflict there remains one of the most intractable struggles in modern history. The Arab-Israeli conflict is now relegated to being just one of many political, humanitarian, and ethnic crises colored by religion and identity in the Middle East today.

There are myriad entry points and subject positions for American observers of the modern Middle East and the Israel-Palestine issue. Some remain heavily invested activists on a number of political, religious, or humanitarian issues, while others are casual observers of unfolding events and the reverberations each sends throughout the Middle East. The humanitarian costs of occupation and conflict in Israel-Palestine have long been a particularly salient issue for those who prioritize social justice issues and human rights, many of whom consider the Israeli occupation of Palestine within larger constructs of post-colonialism. In contrast, for evangelical conservatives, still a particularly powerful but declining voting bloc in the US, it is primarily understood a conflict imbued with divine prophecy and stakes for humanity that are nothing less than apocalyptic. To most Western policymakers Israel-Palestine remains a thorn in their side, the lasting legacy of geostrategic miscalculations and profound historical missteps. The tangled webs of interests at work from these subject positions are profoundly complex and often profoundly misaligned, where some fanatically argue that the Palestinians must either suffer their fate that has been preordained by god in order to bring about the second

coming of Jesus Christ, while others demand an end to a military occupation that has been deemed unjust countless times by the majority of the international community via the auspices of the United Nations.

These ideological projections are used to reinforce their dominant systems of religious belief, political convictions, fear of Islam and Islamic terrorism, to assuage their guilt over historical Christian anti-Semitism, or assert religious and ethnic pride. These projections are rooted in (if not direct reflections of) media images and as the conflict has become more divisive, the corresponding media images operate from increasingly complex ideological orientations. Still, in the popular American imaginary, these terms “Arab” and “Muslim” often remain interchangeable, and the cultures and peoples of the Middle East remain essentialized as fanatical and violent caricatures inherently threatening to what is constructed as Western values. Perhaps the only distinguishing characteristic between Palestinians and the wider Arab world is that the Palestinian has been marked by the US mass media as even more threatening and predisposed towards violence and fanaticism because of the deeper history of media images depicting Palestinians.

Historical Media, Orientalism, and Israel-Palestine

It has been extensively argued by numerous scholars and analysts that Orientalism has governed American perceptions of the Arab world and Middle East for well over a century, starting with Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. According to Said, Orientalism is “a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient’s special place in

European Western experience.”⁹ Orientalism, then, is a reflection of how the West perceives itself, in that we fit ‘the Orient’ into a framework with Western models used as the standard of comparison. The Orient and Orientalism help to define what the West is not and concurrently, what is not the West or Western, and defines and articulates what is “the West” and “the Other”. The prominent dehumanization of Arabs as the ‘other’ in popular film are where we locate that previously noted “epistemological barrier that keeps the other incomprehensible, inaccessible and ultimately ungrievable.”¹⁰ I use the framework of Orientalism here in my specific focus on how films establish a proximal narrative distance, which constitutes this epistemological barrier that prevents the viewer from empathizing (or at least empathizing *too much* or in certain forms) with the Arab subjects of these films.

Regarding Israel-Palestine in the media, Orientalism today centers on a racially charged representations of Arabs, which Said addressed as “information wars” he alleged were being waged by Israel in order to portray itself “to Americans and Europeans as a victim of Islamic violence.”¹¹ Orientalist discourse effectively essentializes the Eastern and Western civilizations, creating a binary opposition between them. As we fit the Orient into a framework with Western models used as the standard of comparison, it then defines and articulates what is civilized ‘us’ and the inferior ‘other.’ Regarding Israeli views of Arabs and Palestinians, Said argues that “Orientalism governs Israeli policy towards the Arabs throughout.” Within the Israeli orientalist mindset, the Palestinian who

⁹ Edward Said, *Orientalism, 25th Anniversary Edition*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), 1.

¹⁰ Pötzsch, “Borders, Barriers and Grievable Lives,” 75.

¹¹ Said, *Orientalism*, xxi.

dared the resist the founding of Israeli is “either a stupid savage, or a negligible quantity, morally and even existentially.” Said notes that under Israeli law, “only a Jew has full civic rights and unqualified immigration privileges; even though they are the land’s inhabitants, Arabs are given less, more simply rights: they cannot immigrate and if they seem not to have the same rights, it is because they are ‘less developed’.”¹² Israeli orientalism portrays the Arab mind as “depraved, anti-Semitic to the core, violent, unbalanced.”¹³ Said utilizes Roland Barthes’s earlier structural semiological concepts, stating that within Orientalist discourse, “One myth supports and produces another” and “answer to one another.”¹⁴ As these myths build upon one another they create a discourse and construct a system of knowledge on the Arab Palestinian as the dangerous, undesirable ‘other,’ for “there are good Arabs (the ones who do as they are told) and bad Arabs (who do not, and are therefore terrorists).” In keeping with the Orientalist line, we have been told that those ‘bad Arabs’ who do not “sit obediently behind a fortified line” bear ultimate responsibility for the Israeli seizing and occupation of all of historical Palestine.¹⁵ This is the image that ultimately lays the groundwork and justification for the permanent division of the land and peoples of Israel-Palestine, and America’s perpetual support for Israel’s violation of Palestinian human rights.

Along with the work of Said, other important critical scholarly frameworks and postcolonial studies provide much of the frameworks of analysis for historical and current media representations of Palestine and Palestinians, much of which demonstrates a

¹² Ibid, 306.

¹³ Ibid, 306.

¹⁴ Ibid, 307.

¹⁵ Ibid, 306.

distinct brand of Orientalism and Othering deployed against Palestinians. This Orientalism made Palestinians look backward, stuck in biblical times, and inferior in contrast with the Zionist immigrants to historical Palestine that began arriving in the 1880s.¹⁶ The origins of these myths that whitewash Israeli settlement activities as a civilizing mission over less-developed natives run much deeper in history, as “several background factors not directly related to the merits of the Arab-Israeli conflict make it easier for a favorable image of Israel and an unfavorable one of the Arabs to gain a foothold.”¹⁷ Here the “Western picture of the Arab has been built up...over a long period in which Arabs have appeared variously as non-Christian fanatics fighting the Crusaders” and “as the source of violent headlines in contemporary newspapers.”¹⁸ These western historical imaginations and myths of Palestine only became more exaggerated when European Jews began immigrating there with the intentions of establishing a Jewish nation-state, and under the colonial framework of the British occupation of Palestine after WWI.

Many films produced in the decades following the beginning of the Arab-Israeli conflict follow the very same orientalist guideposts that have governed policy. For example, both *Exodus* (1960) and *Cast a Giant Shadow* (1966) present a one-sided view of the birth of the State of Israel in which Palestinians are inherently fanatical anti-Semitic obstacles to the Zionist cause. These films were produced and released during the

¹⁶ Issam Nassar, “Early Photography of Jerusalem: From the Imagined to the Social Landscapes,” *History of Photography*, Issue no. 4, (Winter 2003).

¹⁷ Michael Suleiman, “National Stereotypes as Weapons in the Arab-Israeli Conflict.” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (Spring 1974), 109.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 110.

“religious revival” in American during the 1950’s that greatly impacted American views on Palestine its religious meaning. Michelle Mart’s (2009) article “The “Christianization” of Israel and Jews in 1950s America” locates the resurgence of religious belief and the creation of the Judeo-Christian identity in the US. According to Mart, “In the 1950’s there were many signs the United States was going through a religious revival” that “offered postwar Americans a framework through which to interpret the world and its unsettling international political problems.”¹⁹ These perceived political problems included US-Soviet relations and the Cold War, turmoil in the Middle East, and America’s new role as a geopolitical superpower.

Media and Popular Culture as Sites of Struggle

The ongoing struggle over the ‘permission to narrate’ the Arab-Israeli conflict across mass media involves deep disparities between concurrent narratives and parallel realities. This struggle is one element in the Palestinian struggle for rights that was set in motion since the beginning of Zionist immigration to historical Palestine. Historical narratives and mass media representations now comprise the primary battlegrounds for public opinion across the international stage. This battle for favorable public perceptions has been waged globally through the traditional news media, online social media, activist movements, music, television, film, art, and in popular culture. Further complicating matters, the multi-layered mediascape on Israel-Palestine is reflective of the Arab-Israeli

¹⁹ Michelle Mart, “The “Christianization” of Israel and Jews in 1950s America.” *Religion and American Culture*, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Winter, 2004), 109.

conflict itself, with increasingly complex and intertwining elements of fervent religious belief and prophecy, geopolitical strategic interests, ethno-nationalism, and armed conflict.

Even when taking the current complex media environment into account, film stands as one of the more accessible and popular media that assist in the formation of public perceptions and understandings of both the historical narrative and current sociopolitical statuses of Israelis and Palestinians. Not only do popular Hollywood films at times invoke issues of the Arab-Israeli conflict and its actors, numerous independent film festivals and coordinated events in support of Palestinian art and culture often showcase films in order to more effectively present their view of the conflict. Many of these films purport to represent history itself, or are intended to foster understanding of complex historical events, if not become a part of the historical record itself. Much of this historical work is centered on fomenting favorable public and collective memory for each representative community to films seek to persuade.

Film has tremendous cultural influence on American perceptions of the wider Middle East. The power of film and the cinema has long been realized by academics and analysts “as a specific social institution capable of wielding tremendous cultural power.” Cinema’s power as “capable of tapping society’s irrational collective consciousness”²⁰ remains an incredibly important “institution of mass culture.”²¹ With its influence, film is a medium through which producers can propagate differing attempts at writing and re-

²⁰ John Mowitt, *Text: The Genealogy of an Antidisciplinary Object*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992): 143.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 142.

writing historical narratives and thus provides a rich medium through which to identify and analyze dominant narratives and their relation to collective memory. Film, as a medium that partially operates in visual images, is a “privileged” vehicle of memory and memory construction because of its “exceptional ability to close, and at times even obliterate, the gap between first-hand experience and secondary witnessing.”²² As US military involvement in the Middle East has grown, so has the recent body of Hollywood films set in the region, of which most are action films set amidst the wars waged there. As my analysis here will show, the majority of these films use Arab characters to directly and indirectly justify American military presence and aggression there, and represents the region as a dangerous, wild frontier to be tamed by moral, ‘rational’ Western characters, despite their prominent use of violence as a ‘civilizing’ tool of discipline. Many of these films could be described as more ideological than political, in their absence of direct engagement with the justifications for US involvement in the Middle East but ever present underlying message being delivered within the cinematic codes and narratives of these films. For example, the narrative of films such as *Three Kings* (1999) appear to be above or beyond politics, and instead focus on individual characters who adhere to more personal motivations. Nonetheless, in being based in reality or set in realistic situations, each film carries much larger lessons for the viewer about the Arab world itself.

This study also follows work by Stuart Hall and others after him in approaching films as cultural artifacts and reflective of popular culture.²³ Here pop culture represents

²² Wulf Kansteiner, “Finding Meaning in Memory: A Methodological Critique of Collective Memory Studies,” *History and Theory*, 41(2), (2002), 191.

²³ Stuart Hall, *Encoding/Decoding*. In Hall, D., Love, A., & Willis, P. *Culture, Media, & Language*. London: Hutchinson. (1980).

“a crucial terrain of power and struggle that ‘articulates’ with broader social forces and political economic processes.”²⁴ This approach views the popular culture in ongoing states of articulation and re-articulation, where “culture has no singular location or function, not or subcultural or popular cultural forces or actors *necessarily* inscribed with counterhegemonic meanings or effects. Rather, the terrain of the cultural is contradictory and changeable.”²⁵ We can then “theorize culture as frequently constitutive rather than merely epiphenomenal, a crucial locus of political engagement...across a range of institutional locations.”²⁶

Here I am also turning to Hall in identifying some of the “determinant moments” in the encoding/decoding process when historical events are “signified within the aural-visual forms of televisual discourse” during a discursive signifying process.²⁷ In presenting historical narratives of Israel-Palestine these films constitute a “communicative event” which will “at another stage...be integrated into the social relations of the communication process as a whole.”²⁸ Televisual discourse is analyzed here in semiotic terms, in engaging televisual messages “at the connotative level of the sign (where) situational ideologies alter and transform signification.”²⁹ By accounting for some of the various socio-political contexts of the Israeli-Arab conflict I engage televisual signifiers at “the point where already coded signs intersect with deep semantic

²⁴ Rebecca L. Stein & Ted Swedenburg, “Popular Culture, Relational History, and the Question of Power in Palestine and Israel.” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, XXXIII, No.4, (2004), 8.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 8

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 10

²⁷ Stuart Hall, *Encoding/Decoding*. In Hall, D., Love, A., & Willis, P. *Culture, Media, & Language*. (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 164.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 164

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 168

codes of culture and take on additional, more active ideological dimensions.”³⁰ Careful attention must also be paid to the ways that these televisual messages are encoded in film as “encoding will have the effect of constructing some of the limits and parameters within which decodings will operate.”³¹

While there have been some useful textual analyses of films depicting the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Israeli occupation, most are not focused specifically on the particular aspects or contexts of media depictions of Israel-Palestine. Furthermore, several crucially important aspects of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the occupation of Palestine have changed dramatically in the post-Oslo Accords period and these changes have not been accounted for in current scholarship. Perhaps the most important legacy of the Oslo Accords is how it has effectively brought the political and military interests of the Palestinian National Authority closer to that of Israel, and therefore increasingly extricated the PNA from the very people it is intended to represent vis-à-vis the peace process. As a result, the Israeli occupation has become more normalized and embedded than ever before in its history.

While there are a wide range of truly remarkable studies on representations of Israel-Palestine and its history, new analyses and approaches are now needed in order to revisit and reassess current modes of representation. Ella Shohat’s (1987) *Israeli Cinema*, while an indispensable work analyzing Orientalist depictions of Arab Jews in Israeli film and one that provides much of the framework for this study, is now almost twenty-five years old. Shohat’s book is primarily focused on depictions of Arab Jews in Israel, and

³⁰ Ibid., 168

³¹ Ibid., 170.

masterfully captures how though “Geographically set in the East, the dominant Israeli imagery inclines toward the West.”³² She also invokes several aspects of Orientalism, in addressing how “Palestinians have been denied the right to ‘self-representation. Since Zionism undertakes to speak for Palestine and the Palestinians, the Palestinians have been largely unable to represent themselves on the world stage.”³³ Whereas this marginalization was largely true at the time Shohat wrote *Israeli Cinema*, there have since been films that do arguably represent some elements of a Palestinian perspective, which intersect with a wider array of ideologically-charged images. The more recent filmography on Israel-Palestine now presents a much intertextual body of work from which to draw analysis of the aforementioned contexts. In addition, the newer host of films in need of a deep textual analysis was produced after some key events unfolded—the Lebanese civil war, the First and Second Intifadas, and the Oslo Accords—after the writing of Shohat’s book.

Film and Narrative

I understand the narratives analyzed here as being comprised of two elements: “the story and how it is communicated (discourse)” and then placed against the historiographical record and respective dominant collective memories.³⁴ I am interested in identifying elements of intertextuality where these narratives might not overlap, but

³² Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (New York: I.B. Taurus, 2010), 1.

³³ *Ibid.*, 3.

³⁴ Andrew Vassilou, *Analyzing Film Content: A Text-Based Approach*. Doctoral Dissertation, University of Surrey, (2006), 3

rather dovetail in representing the parallel and concurrent narratives of the Arab-Israeli conflict. I will also be utilizing concepts of ‘collateral texts’ of sounds and imagery “that transcribe, accompany, or somehow describe the contents” of each film and how they interact with the discourse contained in each.³⁵ The films will essentially be analyzed as texts in the spirit of Shohat’s highly useful model, in decoding them “as the product of the interweaving of specifically cinematic codes (lighting, editing, camera movement) with more widely shared artistic codes (narrative structure, character, genre, and point-of-view conventions, together with broadly disseminated cultural and ideological codes.”³⁶ But in contrast with Shohat’s study, my analysis will only be inter-textual in terms of intended audience (broad, mainstream audiences), the ways in which film reviewers prime audiences, dialogue between characters, representations of race and religion, and in reference to the historiographical record and respective collective memories being engaged.

Kelly Madison has contributed crucial work on the containment of resistance narratives in popular film, where the “Anti-racist white hero” displaces the oppressed from their own movement, thereby denying them any semblance of agency.³⁷ This is done in a number of ways in films on Israel-Palestine, including viewing the narrative through the eyes of the dominant group while keeping ‘the Other’ at a certain distance from the viewer. As the Other is displaced and can only be rescued by a member of the dominant class, racial supremacy is merely reinforced as a result, albeit in a more friendly

³⁵ Ibid., 4.

³⁶ Shohat, *Israeli Cinema*, 8.

³⁷ Kelly J. Madison, “Legitimation Crisis and Containment: The “Anti-Racist-White-Hero” Film,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, Vol. 16, No. 4. (1999), 399-416.

form. In addition, the way members of subordinated classes are portrayed leads to sympathy from the viewing audience, and not empathy as is felt for the white protagonist. As a result, the experiences of the other are “devalued, simplified, marginalized, decentered, and subordinated relative to the experience of ‘white’ people.”³⁸ Special attention will then be paid here to narratives that reinforce racial supremacy by marginalizing the Other within their own struggle and how patriarchal elements of white dominance issue moral judgments on the acceptable methods of resistance in order to contain it. I also observe to the relative levels of character development of members of the dominant class in relation to the development of the Other in the narratives presented by the films.

Much scholarly analysis done on media representations of Israel-Palestine and the complex history of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and most of this research has centered on making arguments about imbalances in favor of either Israel or Palestine, with the arguments depending on the positionality of the scholar, simply replicating and extending the struggle for representation Israelis and Palestinians respectively feel they are involved. Interestingly, both Israelis and Palestinians seem to argue that they are fundamentally misrepresented in American media. Nonetheless, this misrepresentation has arguably had more negative consequences for Palestinians, where American policy has supported Israeli actions almost without exception, often conflicting American values ostensibly rooted in universal human rights and social justice. For many analysts and observers, the founding of the State of Israel and the subsequent occupation of Palestine

³⁸ Ibid., 409.

are completely out of sync with the spirit of the supposed post-colonial period following the Second World War (and are not even on par with the more hidden forms of neo-colonialism). These contradictions can be tied to the imbalance of positive and negative representations of opposing forces in the Arab-Israeli conflict in which the Palestinian historical experience has traditionally been marginalized if not wholly ignored. The nexus of mass media representation, public opinion, American democracy, and foreign policy, in my view facilitates a US foreign policy that has lent little credence to the plight of Palestinians.

Defining the ‘Collective’ and ‘Memory’ of Collective Memory in Media Studies

Historical Palestine has been subject to a wide array of contradictory yet overlapping historical imaginations for millennia, long before the modern State of Israel was declared. All three Abrahamic religio-historical traditions place Palestine and the city of Jerusalem at an elevated status, which has paradoxically sentenced Arab Israelis and Palestinians to their current reality. The high status historical Palestine and Jerusalem have held for centuries has subjected Israel-Palestine to an existence determined by a colonial mindset, pitting religious and ethnic communities against one another in quest for possession of the ‘holy land’.

Collective memories and historical narratives are cultivated to meet ideological, nationalist, or religious needs, and so they must also take on aspects of exclusivity, primacy, and accessibility for the communities whose interests they serve. Issam Nassar has discussed the ways in which collective memories of Jerusalem diverged as

“Generations of Jews, Christians, and Muslims first learn about Jerusalem through the tales of their elders, stories they learn in religious (or Sunday) schools, and from reading holy books.” Each different channel “invariably focuses on a small fraction of the general history of the city,” gives these narratives linearity, and “connect(s) the city to their community alone.”³⁹ The same inclusive/exclusive transmittals of history have arguably become more disparate in recent decades after Israel and Palestine were extricated from one another. Nassar poses some important and difficult questions specifically on the historiography of Jerusalem:

*Is it possible to write a history of modern Jerusalem without falling into the traps of religion, national, or sectarian histories? Is it possible to write a history of the city in modern times without having to rely extensively on Western travelogues, diplomatic documents, and the like? ...And is it possible, in this day and age, to write a narrative that does not fall into the teleological trap that takes legitimation of one of the sides in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as its ultimate goal?*⁴⁰

Though addressing Jerusalem, these questions exemplify difficult issues the current scholars of Israel-Palestine must grapple with today if we are to displace the hegemony of the dominant western narrative and religious myth from the hyper-real media image of the Arab-Israeli conflict and engender a peace process rooted in reality.

Beginning with Maurice Halbwach’s foundational work, the scholarship on collective memory and memory studies has expanded rapidly, partially as a result of its particular relevance and relation to post-modern theory. Definitions of collective memory

³⁹ Issam Nassar, “Jerusalem in the Late Ottoman Period: Historical Writing and the Native Voice.” In Mayar, T & Mourad, S.A. (Eds.), *Jerusalem: Idea and Reality*. (New York: Routledge, 2008), 206.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 209.

identify a malleable shared record of the past that “continuously negotiates between available historical records and current social and political realities.”⁴¹ Yael Zerubavel (1995) examines “how the meaning of the past is constructed, and how it is modified over time” as a result of social collective memory, and sets the study of history apart from actual historical events themselves.⁴² Here history is “the product of a scholarly scrutiny of the records of the past,” and a “superorganic” discipline. Collective memory, though, “is an organic part of the social life that is continuously transformed in response to society’s changing needs.”⁴³ However the overarching American positions on Israel-Palestine have largely remained unmoved in comparison with other shifts in collective memory and historical interpretation of the global community. While the vast majority of the global community voted to establish a Palestinian state at the United Nations in 2012, the US effectively vetoed the resolution. With the exception of some activist organizations, Americans have not been receptive to an independent Palestinian state whatsoever as reflected in the US’ almost unconditional support for Israeli actions and a massive imbalance in foreign funding given to the Israeli government and Palestinians living under occupation. Thusly we should investigate construction of the American historical memory on Israel-Palestine, and put structures of collective memory in conversation with film narrative and critical film theory.

⁴¹ Maurice Halbwachs, (Translated by L. A. Coser), *On Collective Memory*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992).

⁴² Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 3.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 14.

Others have taken more recent approaches specifically towards the role of the media and its relationship with collective memory⁴⁴ In the context of Israel-Palestine, Yoram Peri (1999) highlights the contentious struggle in the medium of television over the commemoration of the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin. Peri observes the “power of the media in framing remembrance and producing instant memory” as “a result of their technological advantage over other mnemonic agents.” Peri’s study looks at the consequences of an intra-media struggle in creating memory, “when there is a struggle between mnemonic communities” over a commemoration process.⁴⁵ Some of Peri’s ideas are relevant here, in that some films on Israel-Palestine act as commemorations of important historical events.

Based on scholarly articulations of collective memory, one could argue that it is the terrain where Americans would be most open to adjustments in historical interpretations of major events as a result of the relatively open nature of the US media systems. In addition, part of the challenge in altering a dominant social memory is that alternative narratives threaten the legitimacy of peoples’ beliefs and thus the alternative narratives are seen as having a “hostile and subversive relation to collective memory.” The stakes are higher as the challenge presented by a counter-narrative extends beyond the “symbolic realm” translating into “direct political implications.”⁴⁶ Yet collective memory is a nearly constant state of “selectively emphasizing, suppressing, and

⁴⁴ See Barbie Zelizer, *Covering the Body: The Kennedy Assassination, the Media, and the Shaping of Collective Memory*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

George Lipsitz, *Time Passages: Collective Memory and American Culture*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

⁴⁵ Yoam Peri, “The Media and Collective Memory of Yitzhak Rabin’s Remembrance,” *Journal of Communication*, 49(3) (2006), 107.

⁴⁶ Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, 10.

elaborating different aspects of that (historical) record,” so just how malleable is collective memory and why has this aspect of it has not happened in America on the issue of the Arab-Israeli conflict?⁴⁷

Perhaps current theoretical approach towards collective memory is largely misconceived. Gedi and Elam (2002) take issue with the “collective” approach toward studying memory, as well as “the belief in memory as an actual living entity” as a “supposition of memoriologists.” In their view, all uses of the “collective” aspects of memory “are problematic...because they are conceived as having capacities that are in fact actualized only on an individual level.”⁴⁸ Though I agree with their assertion that Halbwachs took Durkheim’s theories to the extreme by only giving memory meaning in the social context, we should not throw out the baby with the bathwater. Indeed, “individual conscious” is “real and determinate” and holds meaning, but social context and influences, as well as previously acquired information inarguably bears on the formation of historical memory at the individual level. More specifically, these pre-existing aspects of memory determine the context in which in individual ‘decodes’, ‘reads’, or views an audio-visual text. Gedi and Elam’s call for emphasis on the term “stereotypes” is a move in the right direction, but their conclusion that collective and individual memory are “located in the same individual mind” does not account enough for the social and cultural influences of the formations of memory nor for memory’s influence on society and culture.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 5.

⁴⁸ Noa Gedi & Yigal Elam, “Collective Memory – What is it?” *History and Memory, Vol. 8, No1.* (1996), 34.

Having evaluated the usefulness of the “collective” then, we should more deeply evaluate ‘memory’ as the terrain for analysis. Confino (1997) identifies memory as “the ways in which people construct a sense of the past” and identifies media as “vehicles of memory.”⁴⁹ But there remain limitations in its uses, since “in itself memory does not offer any true additional explanatory power. Only when linked to historical questions and problems, via methods and theories, can memory be illuminating.” Instead, Confino proposes using memory in “articulating the connections between the cultural, the social, and the political, between representation and social experience.”⁵⁰ In turn, it seems that memory itself may not be the prime object of analysis, but instead its social function and influences. In other words, we can “view memory as an outcome of the relationship between a distinct representation of the past and the full spectrum of symbolic representations available in a given culture.”⁵¹

I argue that both the ‘collective’ and ‘memory’ of collective memory are useful elements, but in their current uses do not make the best terrain for analysis as previously defined and utilized. Instead we should use media as cultural artifacts to identify and analyze dominant *collective narratives* as determinants of memory. Here collective memory retains both its relevant aspects though as a much larger meta-product of collective narratives formed by media. Memory then retains its susceptibility as it is

⁴⁹ Alon Confino, “Collective Memory and Cultural History: Problems of Method,” *American Historical Review*, Vol. 102, No. 5, (1997), 1386.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 1388.

⁵¹ Ibid, 1391.

“subsumed within a culture that is constituted by common practices and representations.”⁵²

My move here toward narrative as the object of analysis follows Wulf Kansteiner in calling for studies of collective memory though methods used in communications and media studies, which are highly useful in historiographical and postmodernist approaches. By using methods of communications studies to understand memory we immediately find that “physical and social proximity to past events and their subsequent rationalization and memorialization do not have to coincide.”⁵³ Simply put, memories are always constructed and mediated through media. According to Kansteiner, “even the memories of eyewitnesses only assume collective relevance when they are structured, represented, and used in a social setting.” Narrative operates within “media of memory that help us construct and transmit our knowledge and feelings about the past (and) rely on various combinations of discursive, visual, and spatial elements.” In other words, “collective memories are multimedia collages” and dominant media narratives of events form its very patchwork.⁵⁴

The importance placed upon narrative is also a result of narrative as a tool of persuasion and “analyzing how exposure to fictional narratives design to entertain or cause enjoyment (and contain) implicit *arguments* about different topics or social actors.”⁵⁵ The Extended Elaboration Likelihood Model shows that “fictional contents can

⁵² Ibid, 1399.

⁵³ Kansteiner, “Finding Meaning in Memory,” 190.

⁵⁴ Ibid, 190.

⁵⁵ Juan Jose Igartua & Isabel Matilde Barrios Vicente, (2012). Changing Real-World Beliefs with Controversial movies: Processes and Mechanisms of Narrative Persuasion. *Journal of Communication*, 62, (2012), 514.

be effective tools of persuasion because *involvement in the narrative* [narrative absorption or transportation] and *involvement with the characters* [identification with characters] are processes that limit counter-arguing...thus reducing individuals' *resistance*" to preferred decodings of the narrative presented.⁵⁶ Even in films on highly controversial issues, a viewer's identification with a character fostered by narratives provide "an effective tool for cultivating beliefs regarding polemical topics or for weakening strongly consolidated attitudes, as it is assumed that counterarguing during the reception process...and identification with characters are incompatible."⁵⁷ This is because film narratives, particularly as audio-visual representations, can create emotional empathy, cognitive empathy, a feeling of shared goals with the viewer, or actually becoming the character.

Having established and more accurately defined dominant narratives and their relation to memory as the object of analysis then, we can now turn the frameworks that help define the nature of the texts at hand.

Textual Analysis, Self-Reflexivity, and the Role of the Critic(al Scholar)

Theories and arguments as to what types of media do or do not constitute a text and can therefore be placed under methods of textual analysis, have provided some of the most important methodological frameworks for studies of communication and media. However, many of the theoretical debates that emerged in the wake of post-structuralism and post-modernism are often frivolous and tend to steer scholarly attention away from

⁵⁶ Ibid, 515.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 517.

more immediate and tangible humanistic goals of critical theory and analysis. With the proper scope of analysis, considerations of what constitutes a media text and how these texts interact with one another produce some of the most provocative and powerful theories from which to locate and decode problematics embedded in the media artifacts from which we construct our social realities.

These theoretical frameworks on textual and critical discourse analysis are especially beneficial in researching conflicts perpetuated, sustained, and engaged in divergent historical and media narratives like the Arab-Israeli conflict. As mentioned above, analyses of media texts on the conflict in Israel-Palestine have been well trodden by numerous scholars across various disciplines, and many of the analysis presented often mirror an author's own political position on the conflict. To expand on this point, political or ideological positionality is not always necessarily a problem. Textual and critical discourse analysis has an inherent goal of uncovering power inequities and seeks to address issues of social justice and human rights. These goals can and should be more fully embraced, while maintaining a strong basis in rigorous theory and methodology, in order for methods of textual analysis reach their full critical potential.

In the background of these considerations of textual analysis are theories on the relationship of communication and culture, and the cinema is one such institution where these issues are intricately bound together. James Carey, paraphrasing Tom Burns, summarizes theoretical approaches to culture and media succinctly in saying that the task of art is to make sense out of life, while the task of social science is to make sense out of the senses we make out of life. By such reasoning the social scientist stands toward their

material—cultural forms such as religion, ideology, journalism, everyday speech—as the literary critic stands toward the novel, play, or poem. The researcher then has to figure out what it means, what interpretations it presents out of life, and how it relates to the senses of life historically found among a people.⁵⁸ My project on the body of recent films set amidst the Arab-Israeli conflict is an attempt to go deeper than this framework in addressing not only film texts themselves but to decode their more consequential meanings within the cultural, sociopolitical, and media environments in which they are produced and received, and the collective memories and human experiences they interrogate.

And yet there are still many methodological issues to be resolved in order to bolster the legitimacy of critical theory in a methodological approach to media object as text. Here I explain how applying theories and methods of textual analysis to media artifacts provide, at the very least, a highly useful metaphor and process for structuring analysis. When utilized to their full potential, textual analysis and its related methods such as critical discourse analysis can uncover ideology and problematics of representation in ways that no other method can. Televisual mediums are arguably more multilayered texts than the written word and therefore require an even more complex framework for analysis. More specifically, when placing film under methods of textual analysis the researcher must also account for how filmic texts interact with other media texts such as news journalism, as well as consider myriad layers of historiography,

⁵⁸ James Carey, "Review Essay: Communication and Culture," *Communication Research*, 2: 173. (1975), 178.

cultural influences, and human experience. This in turn requires a broad but fully delineated theoretical definition of what should be considered and analyzed as text, which are in the case of this study, film reviews and mainstream film critic commentary. Much of my original contribution to discussions on textual analysis here outlines an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that resides at the intersection of history, semiotic theory, critical media studies, memory studies, and cultural studies that considers the ways in which film interacts with other paratexts, including pre-constructed social reality and historical memory, and (mis)represents the world around us. The conceptual layering in this essay is intended to synthesize a more finely tuned theory and methodology of textual analysis.

From Theory to Methodology: Intertextuality and Textual Analysis

Julia Kristeva first introduced the concept of intertextuality in a series of essays during the late 1960s. Building upon advances in Saussurian semiotics and Bakhtin's literary theory, Kristeva saw text as "a dynamic site in which relational processes and practices are the focus of analysis instead of static structures and products" and saw signs as unstable in meaning by constantly interacting with one another across other texts.⁵⁹ Semiotics had previously understood language and sign systems as closed-off structures with little dynamic interaction between them, making this evolution an important correction to semiotic theory in that it accounts for preexisting codes that transcend and preexist texts. Other main figures in the poststructuralist movement like Roland Barthes

⁵⁹ M.J.J. Alfaro, "Intertextuality: Origins and Development of the Concept," *Atlantis*, XVIII (1-2), (1996), 268.

had also gestured to the importance of intertextuality in semiotic codes, or the understanding of how sign systems can only communicate meaning by utilizing already-established codes that pre-existed the text itself, as well as both author and reader.⁶⁰ Kristeva envisioned a more sophisticated dual-axis system of intertextuality, with one vertical axis that connects reader and author to the text, and a horizontal axis on which texts interact with one another. The interaction that took place on these axes depended on codes that can produce meaning only by operating with preexisting codes. These initial ideas on text and intertextuality had great implications for literary theory that completely reworked ideas of authorship and authorial intent, as well as how semioticians theorized how sign systems operate. Within the considerations of this essay and my current vein of research, the continued evolution of theory on texts, paratexts, and intertextuality determines what must be considered in conducting textual analyses of media artifacts.

As poststructural theory also helped to displace previous structuralist ideas of a unified linguistic system from which one could understand all of human culture and society, its implications bled into other disciplines and semiotic methodologies of analysis began to develop. These ideas began to turn back in on philosophy and science itself when figures such as Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Lacan revealed the unavoidable cultural context of social sciences and the ways in which language was unavoidably a vehicle of ideology. These developments necessitated a primary focus on text as the object of analysis, now understood as the primary site from which we make meaning of ourselves and the world around us. The insights gleaned through these later

⁶⁰ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*. New York: Hill and Wang (1972).

advances in semiotic analysis showed how language/sign systems did not transmit ‘truth’ in a clean and direct way, but was in fact a complex system of ‘signifiers’ and ‘signifieds’ that can, at best, communicate through the use of signs that refer to the object they ostensibly represent. In the words of Raymond Williams (1977) as cited in Brennan, “Language is not a pure medium which the reality of life or the reality of an event or an experience or the reality of life can ‘flow’. It is a socially shared and reciprocal activity, already embedded in active relationships, within which every move is an activation of what is already shared and reciprocal or may become so.”⁶¹ As the definition of text expanded, methods textual analysis produced deeper and deeper insight into the problematics of representation. However, it must be noted that semiotics falls within the spectrum that is postmodern theory and philosophy, and as a result mirrors the fragmented nature of postmodern thought itself, which deserves some exploration here.

Postmodern theory and philosophy frames our reality and its representations as deeply fragmented and contradictory, and so it is not surprising that postmodern theory and its components are similarly fragmented and contradictory. Semiotic theory is no exception and is often either tragically oversimplified or made pedantically and unproductively complex. Others share my reservation on the fine line walked by postmodernist thought between productive methods of analysis and counterproductive philosophical collapse of itself. David Morley (1996) has examined how the largely misread and misunderstood elements of postmodern theory, especially how Derrida’s approach to analysis as deconstruction can lead to believing “the vulgar

⁶¹ Bonnie Brennan, *Qualitative Research Methods for Media Studies*. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 166.

deconstructionist-view that all concepts come down to metaphors in the end...or that all philosophical truth claims come down to a play of underground figural tropes with displacements.”⁶² Morley, in my view, correctly reframes the dominant understanding of Derrida’s postmodernist thought to actually be not the destruction of philosophical truth but a reinscription of it in more meaningful ways.

In other words, there are standard elements of semiotics, textual analysis, and critical discourse analysis that can be utilized with highly productive results without an inevitable descent into endless philosophical navel gazing as to how and where we can apply semiotics and textual analysis to untangle elements of ideology or culture in media texts. By defining and delineating the scope of how to approach text as the primary object of analysis we can more appropriately focus on the decoding the myriad meanings of the media texts around us, and by defining what exactly we mean by text and intertextuality we can more wholly understand their ultimate importance in critical media and cultural studies.

Brennan clearly and succinctly defines texts as “cultural artifacts (and) material documentary evidence that is used to make sense out of our lives,” which echoes the earlier ideas of Carey cited above.⁶³ This definition includes all types of media like “books, films, newspapers, magazines, websites, games, television programs, radio broadcasts, advertisements, fashions and popular music” as “examples of the types of texts that qualitative researchers interpret in an effort to understand some of the many

⁶² David Morley & Kuan Tsing Chen (Eds.), *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, (New York: Routledge, 1996), 344-45.

⁶³ Brennan, *Qualitative Research Methods for Media Studies*, 193.

relationships between media, culture, and society.”⁶⁴ Thus, my primary objects of analysis here are not only films, but also the paratextual discussion and reviews of them by film critics with a popular mainstream media presence. Always in the background of such a definition is that these texts are comprised of semiotic signs that are encoded both within and before their use in texts in ways that define the political and ideological meaning or significance of these signs within the text for the reader. By analyzing the meanings that readers/viewers/listeners gain from these texts in the process of decoding, or ‘reading’ them, we begin to articulate how perceptions of reality itself is constructed through them. But as will be explored below, the analyst must consider and account for more complex intertextual nexuses that involve history, memory, identity and experience.

The definition of text that I use in my own work as described above is a purposefully *operative* and *methodological* definition of text from which the scholar conducts their investigation and analysis. I highlight these elements because it speaks to an approach characteristic of scholarly analysis with the goals of research always present in the process. This is an important distinction since others have problematized poststructuralist ideas of text and its function to a point that seems to be taking the terminology surrounding textual analysis of other mediums too literally. Stephen Prince’s “The Discourse of Pictures: Iconicity and Film Studies” contains highly applicable insights into how pictures constitute discourse. However, his consideration of how scholars should define text limits analytical constructs and stands as a perfect example of how such discussions can lead to pedantry that renders theory impractical for any

⁶⁴ Ibid, 193.

methodological application.⁶⁵ Prince does well in describing the great influence of the Saussurian linguistic turn that birthed new disciplines and approaches toward studying culture and communication that drastically changed the course of media studies, including film and cinema studies. But only after he spends many pages outlining semiotics and textual analysis does the reader realize that Prince has set up a straw man of sorts in that his entire analysis is built upon a somewhat mistaken view of semiotics in proposing that current approaches to textual analysis do not account for iconography and mimesis within texts.

Early in the essay Prince argues that the arbitrary nature of the sign renders semiotics unable to account for iconography, and that in undertaking “this kind of interpretive work it is important to have a clear sense of where cultural variables do and do not enter into the production of meaning by the cinematic language.”⁶⁶ This is a very simple but important weakness of formal semiotics; while signs are indeed initially arbitrary at their origin, some signs become so deeply loaded with meaning that they become icons. In the eyes of a strict semiotician, icons are signs all the more deeply loaded and imbued with meaning, while formal and strict semiotic analysis does not treat icons differently from other signs because in the eyes of a semiotician an icon is simply another sign.

Roland Barthes (1972) issues important correctives to this shortcoming of semiotics in his seminal compilation *Mythologies* by successfully demonstrating how

⁶⁵ Stephen Prince, “The Discourse of Pictures: Iconicity in Film Studies,” *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 47, No. 1 (Autumn, 1993), 16-28.

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, 17.

semiotic aspects of textual analysis decode myth and icons. His approach is especially pertinent in analyzing the historiography and media texts surrounding Israel-Palestine, a place and history arguably more steeped in mythologies than any other on earth. As myth operates by using iconic signs, “since myth is a type of speech, everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse...Every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society” (p. 109).⁶⁷ He then turns to other non-oral forms of communication, beyond original forms of myth whereas now in engaging pictures or films, “we are dealing with *this* particular image, which is given for *this* particular signification.” Here “mythical speech is made of a material which has *already* been worked on so as to make it suitable for communication it is because all the materials of myth (whether pictorial or written) presupposing a signifying consciousness, that one can reason about them while discounting their substance.” Here Barthes envisions a semiotic analysis that accounts for preexisting codes such as myth and iconography.

Prior to Barthes’s writings on mythology, the key process missing from semiotic analysis was that which marked that of signification, which takes place within texts as well as outside of and between them, in social, political, and cultural processes. For example, despite all the ideology invoked by a crucifix, the uninitiated reader of English could be forgiven for ‘reading’ a crucifix simply as a lower case “t”. It was a long chain of signifying practices processes that transformed the crucifix into the icon of Christianity and all its entangled extended meanings. And, of course, the meaning of this iconic

⁶⁷ Barthes, *Mythologies*, 109.

symbol has been constructed in various ways throughout the world. These signifying practices clearly do not take place within a single text despite the description of the crucifix within it, though a single text may be its origin and its iconography reinforced or created within cultural practices. Barthes identifies mythology as a motivated and purposeful process for ascribing meaning, “for myth is a type of speech chosen by history: it cannot possibly evolve from the ‘nature’ of things.”⁶⁸

When casting even a cursory glance upon Israel-Palestine and its peoples, histories, locations, and lands all so deeply imbued with myth and meaning, we can begin to understand what a wide net that can be cast in determining what interrelated texts constitute those available for analysis. Neither the production of texts nor reading or analysis of them takes place in a hermetically sealed semiotic system; instead, semiotic theories and methods are best used to compliment other critical approaches. As a semiotician, Barthes was clearly gesturing to a more open definition of text in taking “*language, discourse, speech, etc.*, to mean any significant unit or synthesis, whether verbal or visual: a photograph will be a kind of speech for us in the same way as a newspaper article; even object will become speech if they mean something.”⁶⁹ Most importantly, in terms of my approach to semiotic analysis of media texts that are so deeply inscribed with issues of history, historiography, memory, and myth, Barthes is keenly aware of the tangled territory of these issues in critical textual analysis, where “on the plane of ‘life’ there is but a totality where structures and forms cannot be separated.” Barthes postures against rigid scientific formalism in historical criticism and ideas of any

⁶⁸ Ibid, 110.

⁶⁹ Ibid, 111.

“quixotism of synthesis.” I strongly agree with Barthes’s description that “the more a system is specifically defined in its forms, the more amenable it is to historical criticism...Semiology, once its limits are settled, is not a metaphysical trap: it is a science among others, necessary but not sufficient.”⁷⁰

Stuart Hall expanded on considerations of intertextuality in framing media and cultural artifacts as central to the utility of critical and cultural analysis. Hall explicitly describes these approaches as one that uses text as metaphor, and he understood the crucial importance of language and of the linguistic metaphor to any study of culture; the expansion of the notion of text and textuality, both as a source of meaning, and as that which escapes and postpones meaning; the recognition of the heterogeneity, of the multiplicity, of meanings, of the struggle to close arbitrarily the infinite semiosis beyond meaning; the acknowledgement of textuality and cultural power, of representation itself, as a site of power and regulation; of the symbolic as a source of identity.⁷¹

Hall expanded the multiple meanings and dynamics of texts in a clearly discernible way, while accounting for its multifaceted, possibly even contradictory nature and meanings. In Hall’s view, there is a process of decentering taking place in attempting to link concepts like “language, textuality and signification, which always escapes and evades” the analyst, but at the same time, the shadow, the imprint, of those other formations, of the intertextuality of texts in their institutional positions, of texts as

⁷⁰ Ibid, 112.

⁷¹ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies and its Theoretical Legacies,” in *Cultural Studies*, Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler (Eds.), (New York and London: Routledge, 1992), 270-71.

sources of power, of textuality as a source of representation and resistance, all those questions can never be erased from cultural studies.⁷²

It is ultimately up to the analyst or critic to locate these shadows and imprints through the process of textual analysis, research to bolster shortcomings in their own knowledge base, and referencing their own experience. For example, Edward Said (1979) referenced his own life experiences in “Zionism from the Standpoint of its Victims” saying that “I have been directly exposed to those aspects of Jewish history and experience that have mattered singularly for Jews and for Western non-Jews reading and thinking about Jewish history.”⁷³ He adds, “I know as well as any educated Western non-Jew can know, what anti-Semitism has meant for the Jews, especially in this century.”⁷⁴ While accusations of anti-Semitism against critics of Zionism may have led Said to proffer this explanation of his own positionality, it is nonetheless an interesting insight into Said’s accounting for intertextual influences on Zionism. This is just one example as to how textual analysis is one that invokes and benefits from expertise, specializations, and experience.

Of course some traces will be missed due to an oversight or gap in knowledge, but these spaces produce scholarly conversations amongst and between texts. This is the literal intertextual nature of academic scholarship itself. These oversights are constantly being corrected within this intertextual nature of scholarship as critical texts and theories build upon one another, collaboratively honing an increasingly finer critical edge. Where

⁷² *Ibid*, 271.

⁷³ Moustafa Bayoumi and Andrew Rubin, A. (Eds.), *The Edward Said Reader*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2000), 119.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 119.

Said perhaps oversimplified the essence of European colonialism while helping to establish postcolonial thought in *Orientalism*, Issam Nassar later drew a finer distinction by analyzing European photography in the Middle East and understanding how Europeans viewed the Middle East through a prism that misrepresented the region as a place still existing in frozen, biblical stasis.⁷⁵

Much of what makes textual analysis so provocative and insightful in utilizing its interdisciplinary orientation are captured in a framework Douglas Kellner refers to as media culture. In *Media Culture: Cultural Studies, Identity and Politics Between the Modern and the Postmodern*, Kellner decries the overuse of “postmodernism” as a label and then effectively reclaims the term by marking the current period as a transitional one between epochs, and combs out the deeply persuasive ideological elements of recent media artifacts. It is by placing televisual media artifacts in conversation with the dominant political culture and postmodern pop culture within which the reader views them that Kellner does much of his most effective textual analysis. Like Hall, Kellner understands media culture as sites where ideologies of power are both produced as well as challenged, where “key social groups and competing political ideologies struggle for dominance and where individuals live these struggles through images, discourses, myths, and spectacles of media culture”⁷⁶

Media culture involves dynamic processes where the groups and individuals compete to mark and inflect discourse itself—in other words, to produce texts and

⁷⁵ Issam Nassar, “‘Biblication’ in the Service of Colonialism: Jerusalem and Nineteenth-century Photography,” *Third Text*, Vol. 20, Issue ¾, May/July 2006, 317-326.

⁷⁶ Kellner, *Media Culture*, 2.

attempt to define the signs within them through code and discourse. In turning to Hall on the subject of texts, we see that actors encode meanings within texts and audiences decode according to divergent situational contexts of existence.⁷⁷ Said also noted the struggles taking place within the text and “lamented the extent to which representational forms such as photography ignore the immediate and fragment lived experience and the memory of it.” Said specifically faulted photography as a medium since it “was much more about omission than inclusion, highlighting very little at the expense of much.”⁷⁸ Film and cinema are also a “double edged sword, with the representative image simultaneously conveying both hegemonic and counterhegemonic messages.”⁷⁹ These two points demonstrate the most important functions of textual analysis: not only is the analyst interested in the struggles for hegemony of representation, but also in *uncovering* and *locating* what is hidden not within but by the text. When the analyst speaks of locating problematics of representation within the text and its intertextual elements, it is a matter of locating absences and obfuscations, with a newly produced scholarly text as the result. The function of textual analysis is to reclaim the ‘permission to narrate’ that has been denied to the subaltern in general. Textual and critical analysis are then a process of bringing marginalized voices to the fore, fulfilling “the potential of humanistic critical analysis and participatory resistance to intervene and transform.”⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Stuart Hall, (1980). *Encoding/Decoding*. In Hall, D., Love, A., & Willis, P. *Culture, Media, & Language*, (London: Hutchinson, 1980).

⁷⁸ Adel Iskandar and Hakem Rustom (Eds.), *Edward Said: A Legacy of Emancipation and Representation*, (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010). 12

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, 13.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 14.

Kellner also highlights the great influence of multimedia texts in our media-saturated age. According to Kellner, “media culture has become a dominant force of socialization, with media images and celebrities replacing families, schools, and churches as arbiters of taste, value, and thought, producing new models of identification and resonant images of style, fashion, and behavior.” Kellner’s explanation of how the interdisciplinary scholar should approach text in locating sites of ideological influence and is worth quoting at length here:

Transdisciplinary approaches to culture and society transgress borders between various academic disciplines. In particular, they argue that one should not stop at the border of a text, but should see how it fits into systems of textual production, and how various texts are thus part of systems of genres or types of production and have an intertextual construction...One should not however, stop at the borders of intertextuality, but should move from text to its context, to the culture and society that constitutes the text and in which it should be read and interpreted.⁸¹

There is much to unpack from the above quote that speaks to the multifaceted and highly productive elements of textual analysis, intertextuality, as well as considerations of encoding and decoding processes.

Firstly, we see that textual analysis and understanding elements of intertextuality must be undertaken from a distinctly interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary position. For Kellner’s own example, “Interpreting the cinematic text of *Rambo* thus involves the use of film theory, social history, political analysis and ideology critique, and other modes of cultural criticism.”⁸² My own approach to analyzing the text of films on the topic of

⁸¹ Kellner, *Media Culture*, 27-28.

⁸² *Ibid*, 28.

Israel-Palestine is one deeply inflected by an interdisciplinary background, personal experience, and an acknowledgement of my own ideological proclivities that developed as a result. Yet my own positionality and training as a researcher provides me with insight into both American and Arab understandings of history, society, politics, and religion, and provides me with the insight required to decode how various audiences within the Arab world and the US will ‘read’ (or decode) various cinematic texts dealing with Israel-Palestine and the Arab-Israeli conflict.

While interdisciplinary approaches to textual analysis are necessary across the spectrum of critical studies, it is especially true in attempting to analyze media texts on the Arab-Israeli conflict. Any modern media artifact on the topic can only be fully understood and analyzed with a strong grasp of the region’s socio-religious fabric, its twisted modern historical experience with Western colonialism, and its current struggles with tribalism, racism, and fraught factional politics. And indeed, different approaches and backgrounds will inevitably inform differing readings of media texts apart from Hall’s dominant preferred reading. Similarly, disparately different human experiences in Israel-Palestine both produce vastly different media texts as well as different readings of them, which begs the question—are critical media scholars merely replicating the ideologies we attempt to uncover? In some ways we certainly are. However, the process of applying a deep textual reading to media artifacts not only reveals the promises and problematics of news media coverage and depictions of the conflict, it is a sort of activism in itself that reflects our own positionalities. This activism/action does not need to be at all tribalist, political, sectarian, or ideological. At the risk of sounding idealistic, I

argue that deep textual readings can cut past most –isms by simply invoking and appealing to universal humanist goals, especially those of human rights and social justice. From such a position deep readings can show how conflicting groups operate and compete within unstable power dynamics through the discourse comprised of media texts.

In analyzing a topic like the Arab-Israeli conflict we are all in some sense prisoners of the political discourse found within media texts, and critical discourse analysis and textual analysis in my view the most potent method for attempting to free ourselves from such constraints. This is not undertaken to locate a truth, since according to postmodern theory the truth cannot necessarily be represented, only revealed in increments by what the truth is not. In other words, we use textual analysis and its constitutive body of theory to present analyses of representations, misrepresentations, and their ideological, political, and social dynamics in creation (encoding) and reception (decoding). Take, for example, readers of American news sources when they read news reports that Israeli military forces have dropped several tons of bombs on civilian targets in Gaza. According to the official state and media narrative, Israel is merely defending itself and its right to exist as a Jewish state in the face of Islamic terrorism. For the Arab Muslim reader, their life experience and encounters with media texts will inform a vastly different reading where in their view, Zionist usurpers are unleashing terrorism on a defenseless population living under an unjust occupation. But there can be myriad layers to these texts and their encodings/decodings.

Take as another example, something as simple as a still image of an Apache military helicopter shooting missiles at targets in Gaza. For the American viewer/reader who follows mainstream American news sources, the Apache helicopter is known to be a distinctly American-made piece of military hardware and therefore is itself a sign within the televisual text. The Apache helicopter, its presence in Israel, and its use by Israel Defense Forces stands as a reminder of the “special relationship” between the US and Israel, a common Western-oriented politico-societal linkage, and a geostrategic military alliance that has not wavered since 1948 when the US and Soviet Union clamored over one another to endorse the State of Israel’s existence. The Apache is also a sign of counterterrorism and the rhetorical and real alignment of Israeli and US security goals on a global scale. The image of the American Apache helicopter, in the post-9/11 environment, surely evokes more sympathy and support by the American reader/viewer for Israel’s actions. But what about the Arab or Palestinian viewer? For the uninitiated analyst who is not familiar with the Palestinian experience, they may not understand that for many Arab Palestinians, the helicopter is a sign of terror and violence, and the continued historical encounter with Western imperialism and intervention via Israel, first in the form of Zionist colonization primarily by European Jews, and currently in the form of American neocolonial support for Israel and its unceasing territorial expansion. These meanings of the Apache helicopter as a sign speaks to the absences in the photograph, and its multifaceted meanings in different contexts and audiences.

In his essay “Encoding/Decoding,” Stuart Hall articulates a structural loop in the communicative process where there are “linked but distinctive moments – production,

circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction,” in which a text’s meanings are articulated and made meaningful in different ways within these processes.⁸³ For this loop to be completed or made meaningful, “the discourse must then be translated...into social practices if the circuit is to be both completed and effective.”⁸⁴ Within this circuit are feedback loops within the reception and production communicative processes, where texts are read and taken into consideration during the production process, one of the “meaningful moments in the process.” It is also at certain points along this varied circuit and its numerous feedback loops that “meaningful discourse” is made within media texts that, should they result in social practices. It is in these determinant moments of media production and dissemination that “the structure employs a code and yields a “message”: at another determinate moment the “message,” via its decodings, issues into the structure of social practices.”⁸⁵ While the media scholar could very easily decode such preferred or resistant readings as described by Hall, or revert to studies of “low-flying behaviorism” as seen in mass media effects research, my goal is akin to Hall’s. In undertaking textual analysis of films on Israel-Palestine, my goal is intended to decode the more hidden aspects of the preferred reading that actually have the opposite effect of the preferred reading on the viewer. For example, where the reader/viewer of media texts believes they are receiving humanizing portrayals of actors and events in the conflict, they are often in fact taking part in an active Othering of Arab Palestinians and Palestinian resistance as in the film *Munich*.

⁸³ Stuart Hall, *Encoding/Decoding*. In Hall, D., Love, A., & Willis, P. *Culture, Media, & Language*. (London: Hutchinson, 1980), 163.

⁸⁴ *Ibid*, 164.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 165.

Much of this work in uncovering the deeper but no less ‘real’ ideological effects is conducted through textual analysis’s sister method, critical discourse analysis. Similarly, many scholars and funding institutions often view discourse analysis on issues of social marginalization “a ‘political’ issue, or a domain anti-racism activism, rather than an object of ‘serious’ and systematic scholarly inquiry.” As previously described above, I share in Teun A. Van Dijk’s view that discursive texts are a crucial form of analysis in that texts can create social systems of marginalization, and that “sociocultural differences and hierarchies, not only appear in self-legitimizing discourse of extremist racist parties, but increasingly also in mainstream discourse in politics, the media, education and scholarship.”⁸⁶ This self-legitimization is especially relevant to media formats like news media or documentary film, often considered authoritative sources of information on current events for the general public. Within popular film, depictions of Israelis, Palestinians, and the conflict itself have been naturalized in American Hollywood films to such an extent that the codes for representing them has already been firmly established.⁸⁷ According to Edward Said and Jack Shaheen, the Palestinian in film is undeniably fanatical, violent, and irrational, among other Orientalist qualities. Meanwhile the Israeli is Western in terms of their sociopolitical orientation, sophisticated, rational, democratic, and their use of retributive force is justified in the face of Palestinian terror. Similarly, there are Arab-produced and Palestinian films that invoke subaltern Palestinian histories while also glossing over some aspects of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Of course

⁸⁶ Teun A. Van Dijk, “Discourse and Racism,” *Discourse and Society*, 10:47 1999. 147

⁸⁷ Jack Shaheen, “Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People,” *Annals of the American Academy of Political Science*, 588, (2003), 171-193.

these dominant depictions have been challenged by a growing body of film produced by Arab Palestinian and liberal Israeli filmmakers, which must also be analyzed and decoded as a part of this project in order to understand how the subaltern has responded to its own misrepresentation.

While this essay has exploded the borders to textual analysis in order to account for intertextuality and the dynamic interaction of media texts, drawing from our own experiences and expertise is how we draw the borders of textual analysis in a delineated and meaningful way. As much as each segment of my project requires differing levels of engagement of historiography, nationalist ideology, and previous media depictions for example, it is impossible to account for all the textual and cultural processes at play within a text. This impossibility again highlights the functional goals of textual analysis as creative and political process of production. It should be noted that textual analysis is not merely an interpretation—a decoding is in itself the act of layering theoretical constructs and criticisms over a highly complex mediascape with select media texts at its center. The process of textual analysis is a decoding in itself, and the act of putting these findings into writing is yet another act of encoding—the write-up of a textual analysis is no more a ‘pure’ form of communication than any other. It is dominant aspects of the selected media artifacts under examination then determines the media texts and paratexts that are to also be engaged and put in conversation with the prominent texts it invokes according to the positionality of the analyst. For example, while biblical histories and myth of divine promises can operate in the background of representations of Israel-Palestine in that such mythologies created the social relations of the conflict, biblical

themes are not explicitly engaged in a film like *Waltz with Bashir*. However, the film is clearly in an intertextual engagement with the history of the Lebanese civil war in which it is set. I can extend the intertextuality of the film by lending my own (inter)textual analysis to *Waltz with Bashir*, a film that reflects on the nature of human memory and trauma in war. By analyzing the final scene of the film, a break from its animated sequences to real news video footage of Palestinian widows weeping over the massacre of their husbands and sons, my intertextual engagement with the film might involve placing this footage in discussion with Derrida's extensive analyses of the nature of the archive, its relationship to individual and collective memory, and how these ideas are reflected in the film. I can also put the use of this footage in the film in conversation with its original broadcasting as news journalism and how *Waltz with Bashir* actively reworks the collective memory of the conflict in evoking empathy for those who murdered the dead Palestinians. These are just a couple of the interpretive, creative, intertextual actions, informed by positionality, experiences, interests, and training. This process does not intend to uncover truth, partly because of the self-reflexive awareness that my own productive process circles around the truth in indirect ways that respect the nature of the text under analysis as well as my own production of text itself. Just as *Waltz with Bashir* as filmic text calls out to and disrupts Israeli news media discourse on IDF actions in Lebanon, the text I produce explicitly cites figures like Edward Said or others, and intertextually engages and builds upon their texts, and clearly uses some of the same codes and discourse. The use of same or similar codes is another reason for the necessity of self-reflexivity and why textual analysis must be an ever-evolving body of work, so as

to avoid the very problematic trappings of text and discourse I set out to articulate. In sum, textual analysis and the production of the analysis is an intensely self-reflexive, metatheoretical endeavor.

For so many Americans today, just the word “Palestinian” still invokes images of stone throwing youth with *kuffiyeh*-wrapped faces, as it did with me when I was growing up. We were also taught that these fanatical Palestinians were in opposition to a chosen people, whose existence and homeland was promised by god and ensured by shared Western ideological values. And how could we have known any better, when these narratives were reinforced again and again by mass media images of Palestinian suicide bombers and violent Islamic rhetoric? As this study will show, these discourses do not take place in hermetically sealed spaces. Historical narratives, news media, religious belief systems, nationalist ideologies, racist rhetoric, and other media images all intersect, interact with, and often reinforce one another, creating a patchwork of collective historical memories. Whether or not they correspond with reality is almost irrelevant, especially where the US voting public and foreign policy is concerned, for it is only our dominant collective understanding and established belief systems that guide our voting behavior and our political and military action. This has become increasingly apparent as the distinctions between our entertainment and news media has become largely nonexistent. The disappeared separation between entertainment and new media serves a main point of departure for this study.

I write this study deeply mindful of my positionality in relation to a Middle East that has been subject to these repeated acts of violence, invasion, occupation, war, and

colonialism by the West. And while I am one who has had more than a cursory experience with Palestine and the Arab world, I was raised within the cultural milieu that renders Arab lives disposable and ungrievable. Most Americans encounter the Middle East through the lens of news and entertainment media, in the discursive media texts that establish who is 'Us' and who is 'Other'. It is my own upbringing and encounters with media texts that contrast sharply with my later real-life encounters with the Arab world that provide the underpinning of my analytical approach towards filmic depictions of Palestine and the wider Middle East.

Having grown up in a small rural farm town in Wisconsin, I can attest to the woefully simplistic image of Palestinians and Arabs that dominate the American understanding of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the wider Middle East. In our public school and Sunday school classrooms, we were taught little-to-nothing about modern Israel-Palestine. But from the nightly news and popular action films, we did know that the word "Palestinian" signified danger and terrorism. For people who grow up in places like my hometown, such matters felt a world away from our insular middle-American community and existed only in images. This insularity was disturbed only intermittently when international crises were beamed into our living rooms in small bites of nighttime TV news. Any knowledge I had of the Middle East was largely understood through the buzzwords of the first US war with Iraq, the civil war in Lebanon, and the First Intifada in Palestine. We heard terms new to the era, like "SCUD missiles," "PATRIOT missile defense system," and "precision warfare." The vocabulary only expanded slightly as we entered the post-9/11 era and saw the omnipresence of "Arab terrorism," "Islamic terror,"

and even “Islamofascism.” The realities of daily life for people who inhabited these faraway places barely existed except at these points of violence, conflict, and crisis; Arabs and Palestinians were hardly acknowledged as human except in the eventual context of delivering them ‘democracy’ and ‘freedom’ to justify the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The Middle East itself was presented primarily as a site of danger and home to an alien other, diametrically opposed to ‘us’ in its religion, politics, and people. The contradiction of saving these alien others from themselves was hardly engaged as US political leaders launched their missions of democratization and the ideologically loaded “War on Terror.” This study is an attempt to unravel these depictions, articulate the problems therein, and analyze them in a meaningful way.

Chapter 1

War Films as a Public a Memory Project

On November 11th, 2017 the US National Archives hosted a screening of the 2002 film *We Were Soldiers* to celebrate the opening of their new Vietnam War exhibit.⁸⁸ The film, directed by and starring Mel Gibson, is a dramatic retelling of the Battle of Ia Drang in 1965 during the Vietnam War. In many ways the film presents a perfect example of the numerous Vietnam War battles in which US forces suffered tremendous casualties in efforts to gain a small piece of territory, only to abandon it and see it recaptured a short time later by North Vietnamese forces (a similarly futile process is also captured during the Afghanistan war in the documentary *Restrepo*). *We Were Soldiers*, as well as other films such as *Hamburger Hill*, which tell of similar territorial battles fought in vain in Vietnam, are largely intended to highlight and profile the bravery of individual soldiers and their commanders and to inspire nationalist patriotism in the name of service and sacrifice, even when their victories in war are for naught, whether in battle or the overall war itself. The underlying argument to these films, that the bravery and sacrifice of these soldiers is ultimately an abused commodity but an indispensable feature of ‘American freedom’, replicates the historically incorrect but oft-repeated belief that the Vietnam War could have been won if the US government had not ended their support for it in the face of an ever-growing antiwar protest movement.⁸⁹

⁸⁸ National Archives, “The National Archives Marks Vietnam War Exhibit Opening with Special Programs,” October 2nd, 2017. <https://www.archives.gov/press/press-releases/nr18-01>

⁸⁹ Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America*, (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, 2018).

It is telling that *We Were Soldiers* was selected for the opening of the exhibit at the National Archives and not a film that challenges idealistic and patriotic historical framings of the Vietnam War. If the opening were to feature the films such as *Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, or *Dead Presidents*, for example, it would surely spark a very different discussion. While all these films are based on true stories (*Dead Presidents* is based on the book *Bloods: An Oral History of the Vietnam War by Black Veterans*), it comes as no surprise why a film that challenges preferred patriotic narratives is not featured at official US government-sponsored events. And though all of the films mentioned above carry their own contained brands of criticism of the Vietnam War, *We Were Soldiers* serves official government interests by delivering only ideologically sanctioned criticism that has become acceptable with contemporary historical and analytical hindsight, as opposed to presenting an historical experience that might speak to more contemporary issues like the US military's ongoing misadventures in the Middle East or the current mistreatment of veterans by the US government.

Mary Vavrus's (2019) *Postfeminist War: Women in the Media-Military-Industrial Complex* illustrates the deep connections between entertainment media producers and the US military, and the shared interests of both in the pursuit of profit and nationalism. While the Hollywood entertainment industry largely works in pursuit of profit, for the Pentagon, their goal is to depoliticize and "normalize support for war and other military interventions, casting it as a commonsense, inarguable position that equates to fortifying the home front against terrorists. Signifying this political construction as nonpolitical or

outside the realm of public contestation is a feat of media orchestration.”⁹⁰ This effect became extremely important amidst American wars in the Middle East when military casualties began to mount, and public support flagged. Vavrus’s work “reveals the multiple discursive strategies used in hybrid, news, and documentary media to normalize militarism” specifically using women and women-centered stories since the 1991 Persian Gulf War and again in the post-9/11 era.⁹¹ Her work also demonstrates the same process I am interested in here, where entertainment media is part of a “regime of truth” that “influences social experience and knowledge production” about war and “guides and sculpts audience perceptions of what are real and accurate accounts of war and military service, as well as about those populations that the United States targets for war.”⁹² To be successful (that is, profitable and to have a lasting social and cultural impact) media texts of war must seem realistic to audiences. While film producers have a lot of leeway in claiming to be ‘based on a true story’ or ‘based on actual events’ as so many of these films purport to be, this claim is clearly understood by mass audiences to be “real.” In this way, these films are not only effective in presenting “realistic” representations of war and assigning meaning to it, but they also concurrently form perceptions about those being targeted in the war front. These constructed perceptions of the targeted enemy are the focus of my textual analysis in the following chapters.

Vavrus also illustrates the political economy of these relationships, where the US military can drive up support not only for the wars themselves, but also for obscene

⁹⁰ Mary Vavrus, *Postfeminist War: Women in the Media-Military-Industrial Complex*, (Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, 2018), 3.

⁹¹ *Ibid*, 4.

⁹² *Ibid*, 7.

amounts of public funding for the military from an American public that has been activated to support the war effort.⁹³ The *media-military-industrial complex*, as defined by Vavrus, demonstrates the nexus of intertwined interests in fostering a complicit American public, and reflects how little space there is between news media, entertainment media, political leaders, defense contractors, and the military.⁹⁴ Within this nexus, “each entity in this partnership profits from not disclosing conflicts of interest: retired military officers provide expert commentary to news media and also serve on the boards of directors of various defense contractors; media corporations are commercially and institutionally interlocked with...defense contractors. None of the parties in this collusion reveals that encouraging the war effort...allows them to profit financially and professionally.”⁹⁵

But again, as Vavrus also points out, the news media and military officials are only a part of this complex. The other key component is my focus here, the film and entertainment industry, which produces narratives that drive stories home in deeply affective ways. Rather than a 5-minute tv news clip or sound bite from a White House podium, realistic war films can often draw the audience in deeper, with relatable protagonists and narrative arcs understood to be based in the real world, all of which ultimately generates ideological consensus. This ideological consensus is produced by the media-military-industrial complex in legitimizing only officially approved discourses of war. But how are certain media texts made ‘official’ or verified as ‘true’ for audiences?

⁹³ Ibid, 16.

⁹⁴ Ibid, 18.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 18.

Arguably, the primary way to make a film feel realistic is not just basing the narrative within reality and historical events, and also having a large budget resulting in a high-quality production. And while film studios might have production budgets in the hundreds of millions of dollars, they do not have anywhere near the resources the US or Israeli military has. Enter the Pentagon Entertainment Office, which will provide military hardware and funding to a military-themed movie or television production, after approval of the script and final product before release.⁹⁶ In *Postfeminist War*, Vavrus's study of *Army Wives* also shows how in order to "maintain militaristic realism, it could be expected to pull its punches at times and self censor, just as the Pentagon entertainment liaison chief Phil Strub insists film producers must if they want military cooperation with the program."⁹⁷ Considering that essentially every war film produced by a major studio needs access to military equipment and hardware, most Hollywood films has gone through the screening and approval processes via the Pentagon Entertainment Office at multiple stages in its production.⁹⁸ In her study of the Lifetime show "Army Wives," Vavrus also demonstrates how the "intertextual weaving of fictional and nonfictional worlds" has "expanded the number of sites available to negotiate meaning about military family life and U.S. missions in Iraq and Afghanistan—beyond news media and into serial drama."⁹⁹

Roger Stahl's *Militainment* also offers a thoroughly researched account of direct funding and support by the Pentagon in producing war and military themed media. The

⁹⁶ Ibid, 20.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 43.

⁹⁸ Ibid, 20.

⁹⁹ Ibid, 35.

Israeli government has also funded ideologically sanctioned films, as was the case with their funding and lending of military warplanes to the production of the action films *Iron Eagle I* and *Iron Eagle II*.¹⁰⁰ Both the Vietnam war and the 2003 invasion of Iraq can essentially be considered losses for the US military, and both losing popular domestic support and having harmed domestic and international impressions of American military might, both eventually lost public support. In sum, with Pentagon approval throughout, Hollywood had to fall back on historical snapshots devoid of larger context in order to center smaller-scale stories of victory. Films obscuring the historical context of the Vietnam War and presenting individual victorious narrative (often despite severe losses and incredible infliction of violence) include *We Were Soldiers*, *Rescue Dawn*, *The Green Berets*, *Hamburger Hill*, *Causalities of War*, *Missing in Action*, *Uncommon Valor*, *Rolling Thunder*, and *Flight of the Intruder*. A similar host of Hollywood films that focus on military conflicts in the Middle East, including *Hurt Locker*, *American Sniper*, *Green Zone*, *The Kingdom*, *Lone Survivor*, *Delta Force*, *Death Before Dishonor*, and *Brothers*.

My analysis of films portraying American and Israeli wars in the Middle East argues that this same tradition continues as there is still a sphere of ‘legitimate’ ideologically sanctioned film narratives, some moderately critical and others that outright glorify US and Israeli state violence. While other films do stray outside this sphere, they find no place with large film studios or as a wide mainstream release in theaters and are relegated to independent film festivals and smaller cinemas. Furthermore, the core ideological messages of a film like *We Were Soldiers* still pervades within films about

¹⁰⁰ Kellner, *Media Culture*, 83.

wars waged upon the Middle East: that every American war is just, patriotic, and winnable, if not for the shortcomings of government bureaucrats and the public's fickle support for war, and that every life lost in combat is justified and honorable since their blood is shed in defense of American freedom and liberty. As my analysis will also show here, nearly the exact same framing is repeatedly seen in representations of Israeli state violence against Palestinians. In this sense, not only is US and Israeli foreign policy one and the same, so are the narrative framings and ideological justifications presented in US and Israeli entertainment media. The screening of *We Were Soldiers* at the National Archives is only one example of mainstream films being used in service of a state-sanctioned public memory project.

Film and Public Memory

Writing on the relationship between film, history, and memory, James F. Moyer states human beings often recall historical events they never saw, "having always wished or concocted or succumbed to groundless remembrances" based their viewings of what he refers to as "nonfiction film fragments."¹⁰¹ Though Moyer's analysis is in the context of real-life documentary footage, much of his framework on memory is applicable to dramatized war films and those that are based on real events. Much like my argument on collective memory in the introductory chapter, Moyer notes that public memory involves some aspects of the literal memory of an individual, in that the individual person has had a viewing experience and thus are "a form of historical witness." By referring to filmic

¹⁰¹ James Moyer, *Film and the Public Memory: The Phenomena of Nonfiction Film Fragments*, *Contemporary Aesthetics Vol.5 2007*, 1.

memory as *public memory*, Moyer distinguished from “literal memory as we normally understand it, without compromising film’s own literalism, transparency, realism-or whatever ontological term honors its accuracy.”¹⁰² However, any analysis that places film as a literal or transparent medium is problematic, despite its perceived realism, as Moyer states that “public memory, as constituted by some films, is always accurate” and collective memory is often not.¹⁰³ I argue that neither collective nor public memory can be understood as accurate on the individual or collective level. However, collective memory and public memory are highly useful, not for their accuracy, but for analyzing the role of media in the construction of popular narratives, national myths, and their sociopolitical or cultural effects, and the exchange between memory and media. I agree with Moyer’s stating that filmic memory constitutes public memory in that it extends beyond the experience of our individual lives and in being a shared experiential medium, audio-visual “content inhabits-haunts-the public domain.”¹⁰⁴ Film’s effectiveness in the public realm is rooted in how the “camera is the physical basis for the idea that film bears human witness” due to the presumed presence of a camera operator. In other words, when we as viewers watch a film, we “reflexively acknowledge the camera’s reality.”¹⁰⁵

The potency of filmic memory for the individual explains why film is often used in service of a public memory project and in the construction of collective memories and narratives, to great effect. In the words of Moyer, “We are obliged to remember what ‘the camera operator’ witnessed-to remember now in his place. This is what film lets us

¹⁰² Ibid, 1.

¹⁰³ Ibid, 1.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 2.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 2.

do...have 'someone else's' memory."¹⁰⁶ In addition to the example in the opening of this chapter, there are several others where film is presented as legitimate documentation of important historical events. Steven Spielberg notably led a program in cooperation with US state governors to provide free screenings of *Schindler's List* for students in California¹⁰⁷ and Connecticut.¹⁰⁸ *Hotel Rwanda* has been played at college campuses to raise awareness of the genocide in Rwanda. The Denzel Washington film *Glory* has been a staple of middle and high school history units on the Civil War since its release. Similarly, the massively popular miniseries *Roots* was played in American classrooms for years, often implemented as an official part of school curriculum in efforts to show students the historical experience of Black slaves in America. These projects take place on both the large and small scale in America. For example, when I worked as an assistant history teacher at a Level V security alternative high school for juvenile offenders near Wichita, Kansas, every Friday we played films for our students that glorified war and military service. Films such as *We Were Soldiers*, *Black Hawk Down*, *Rescue Dawn*, and *Behind Enemy Lines* were regular features of our Friday movie days. US military recruitment posters that covered the walls of this classroom reinforced the central message of these films. In sum, there are countless lesson plans at nearly all levels, from grade school to the college course curriculum, utilizing historical films as legitimate educational historical texts.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 2.

¹⁰⁷ Tracy Wilson, "OJAI: Movie Offers Youth Lessons on Holocaust," *Los Angeles Times*, April 14th, 1994.

http://articles.latimes.com/1994-04-14/local/me-45761_1_high-school-students

¹⁰⁸ http://articles.courant.com/1994-04-01/news/9404010288_1_free-screenings-school-students-school-classes

Are Films History?

The presentation of films as legitimate historical texts by official governmental institutions and schools demands critical analysis. Hollywood historical films played by teachers in classrooms and as part of official events across the country both reinforces and reflects the idea that historical films arguably constitute a crucial part of historiography on par with history books and other legitimate historical research materials. Though film could potentially be constructively used as a legitimate teaching tool, the movies produced by Hollywood and mainstream film studios veer too far from what I will refer to here as legitimate history, or in other words, historical narratives and texts produced by trained scholarly historians. This distinction is for the analytical purposes here and not intended to discredit the myriad and interesting other historical narratives produced throughout the world in various mediums.

In *Make Believe Media*, Michael Parenti notes that “Americans are among the most ignorant people in the world when it comes to history,” largely the fault of now sub-par education systems and a commercial media environment that emphasizes and values consumption, imperialism, and state power. And as Parenti also notes, “when portrayed in movies and television dramas, history is usually turned on its head or reduced to personal heroics,” the narrative presented with little to no useful historical context.¹⁰⁹ Furthermore, “the make-believe media reinforces the kind of history taught in the

¹⁰⁹ Michael Parenti, *Make Believe Media: The Politics of Entertainment*, (Cengage Learning: Boston, 1991), 58.

schools, mouthed by political leaders, and recorded in the news media.”¹¹⁰ So how did movies come to be understood as a legitimate, or at least important, component piece of historiography?

One contributing factor to the inclusion of films in official history or wider historiography can be attributed to the discourse of prominent mainstream film critics in lauding the hyper-realism and perceived historical accuracy of war films. Most of these realistic films also center on ideological constructions of nationalism, bravery, sacrifice, and service. Reviewing one of the most popular war films of all time, *Saving Private Ryan*, Roger Ebert wrote that “The movie's opening sequence is as graphic as any war footage I've ever seen.” Yet instead of comparing the film to actual war footage, his standard of comparison is the “fierce dread and energy” of the film “on a par with Oliver Stone's *Platoon*.” Ebert then places Spielberg's direction and camerawork alongside the reality of the landing at Omaha Beach, saying “Spielberg's camera makes no sense of the action... For the individual soldier on the beach, the landing was a chaos of noise, mud, blood, vomit and death.” As mentioned above, the requisite narrative contrasting the experience of ‘boots on the ground’ against that of military bureaucrats is present, which Ebert locates as well:

This landing sequence is necessary to establish the distance between those who give the order that Pvt. Ryan be saved, and those who are ordered to do the saving. For Capt. Miller (Tom Hanks) and his men, the landing at Omaha has been a crucible of fire. For Army Chief George C. Marshall (Harvey Presnell) in his Washington office, war seems more remote and statesmanlike¹¹¹.

¹¹⁰ Ibid, 58.

¹¹¹ Roger Ebert, “Saving Private Ryan,” Rogerebert.com, July 24th, 1998.
<https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/saving-private-ryan-1998>

As noted by Ebert, the effect here is to issue an indictment of the ‘suits in Washington’ and their abuse of the American soldier, rather than any kind of direct commentary or criticism on the justness or necessity of the war itself; the necessity of the war is the preexisting context here. Interestingly, there appears to be a shift in the representation of the ‘suits in Washington’ who were largely understood to have sent innocent American boys to die in Vietnam. Now they appear to be obstacles to war and weak-willed. There are numerous recent examples of the villainization of civilian bureaucrats set against patriotic, eager, hyper-masculine soldiers and special operatives in these films. In *The Kingdom*, Jeremy Piven plays a bureaucrat who attempts to keep the FBI from entering Saudi Arabia to investigate a terror attack. Piven’s character is told in turn, “They need to be let loose!”. Later in the film he becomes nauseous at the sight of blood and dead bodies, portraying him as a weak-stomached civilian who has no place working alongside or issuing orders or oversight to the trained operatives who are the main characters of the film. Similarly, in *Operation Finale*, starring Oscar Isaac, Israeli officials resist the wishes of their underling agents and operatives to pursue the arrest and extradition of Adolph Eichmann, one of the most notorious Nazi war criminals, because they are too busy dealing with their contemporary Arab and Palestinian enemies.

For Ebert, *Saving Private Ryan* “presents lessons about war that are as complex and difficult as any essayist could express, and does it with broad, strong images, with violence, with profanity, with action, with camaraderie,” which Ebert says reminds him

of the classic war novel *All Quiet on the Western Front*.¹¹² Ebert is not the only mainstream film critic to liken the war film to the history and reality of war itself. Writing about *Saving Private Ryan* for Empire Online, a popular film review site, critic William Thomas sounds as if he has experienced the battle first-hand, finding himself “subsumed by the sickening minutiae of combat” where “the overriding effect is exhausting, numbing visual viscera that leaves you shaken to your very core.”¹¹³ For Stephen Hunter (1998) of the *Washington Post*, Spielberg’s film “has clearly been informed by a close study of as much archival footage of The Real Thing as can be had... (I)t's ersatz documentary.” In Hunter’s view, the film’s main subject “isn't heroism, but duty, which is to say, repression. It's about men who make a conscious decision that the self does not matter; the ‘personality’ is irrelevant; feelings are dangerous.”¹¹⁴ Though attempting to avoid clichés in his review in order to write about a movie he feels transcends them, here Hunter still cannot help but frame the film within his own understanding of nationalist patriotism, even despite his own mentions of the brutality and terror of war and the role played by universal base instincts of survival. Attempting to elevate the message of *Saving Private Ryan* beyond its cinematic components to grander platitudes, Hunter falls short and retreats to nationalist tropes where “war's deepest reality, which is that being there is not enough, and being willing to die for your country is also not enough; you have to be willing to kill for your country.”¹¹⁵

¹¹² Roger Ebert, “Saving Private Ryan,” July 24th, 1998.

<https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/saving-private-ryan-1998>

¹¹³ William Thomas, “Saving Private Ryan Review,” January 1st, 2000

<https://www.empireonline.com/movies/saving-private-ryan/review/>

¹¹⁴ Stephen Hunter, “Spielberg’s War, It’s Hell,” *The Washington Post*, July 24, 1998.

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/style/movies/reviews/savingprivateryanhunter.htm>

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

Historians, this author included, no doubt take exception to the idea that historical films and dramatized recreations should be placed on equal footing with scholarly historical research and writing, or anything close to it. The historical film is problematic from the outset, in presenting a compressed account of lives and experiences placed within a neatly paced narrative arc. There are numerous other limitations of the medium, one being the need for a commercial to film and make a profit for the film studios; in other words, the consumer needs to be entertained for their money and not confronted with uncomfortable truths. The consumer must not only be entertained but also reassured of their own conceptions of themselves, their moral framework, and their national ideology. The historical film is also problematic in that if it is to receive production funding, the story of a film must also contain all the requisite elements of the Hollywood film: a heroic protagonist, an enemy Other inevitably linked to contemporary fears and geopolitical events, and an ending with some level of inspiring resolution, moralizing lesson, or triumph (in the case of the war film, usually with the hero protagonist, whom the viewer has come to identify with, vanquishing the dehumanized Other). In the words of Anton Kaes, historical war films “do not show isolated pictures of accidental, contingent events but select, narrativize, and thereby give shape to the random material of history.”¹¹⁶

The nationalist ideological influence of historical war films and the veneration of the military also erodes democracy itself. Writing for the Brookings Institution, Karlin and Friend argue that since 9/11 nationalistic myths and a pervasive veneration of

¹¹⁶ Anton Kaes, “History and Film: Public memory in the Age of Electronic Dissemination,” *History and Memory, History and Memory, Vol. 2, No. 1*, 1990, 112.

military service in the US has “eroded faith in civilian leadership of defense policy.”¹¹⁷ This includes the myths of the “superior virtue of military over other kinds of public service” and “that battlefield experience is the most authoritative source of military expertise.” Though writing from a pro-military view in favor of a strong US defense posture, Karlin and Friend provide useful insight on the attitudes of Americans and how these attitudes erode the democratic system. For example, they find that allowing veterans to board planes early, their prominent presence in advertising campaigns, and other ways of “Admiring and expressing gratitude for military service, especially in wartime, is simply the right thing for a society to do,” the problem being, in their view, that “admiration for military service eclipses respect for other national-level institutions and other forms of service.”¹¹⁸ This belief that only those with military experience can and should determine military policies removes the checks and balances engrained within the civilian oversight of the military, and should this myth continue to grow, could lay the foundations for a military dictatorship, or alternatively give the military a free hand to operate throughout the globe as they wish, fully removed from the wishes of the American public or structures of governance (or at least more so than they already do).

In highlighting the myth that “policy-relevant national security expertise is best developed with firsthand operational experience in the theater of war,” Karlin and Friend couch their analysis within a pro-defense context to argue that strong military-civilian

¹¹⁷ Mara Karlin and Alice Hunt Friend, “Military Worship Hurts US Democracy,” *Order From Chaos*, published by Brookings, September 24th, 2018. <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/09/24/military-worship-hurts-us-democracy/>

¹¹⁸ Ibid.

institutional cooperation is best for American democracy, which arguably limits the scope of their analysis. If American or Israeli civilians are effectively sidelining themselves in full deference to military officials, what of civilians who are caught in the theater of war? This question is incredibly pertinent in the realities of war, where military action unfolds not on a battlefield where regular military forces fight, but in civilian areas where insurgent forces fight occupying militaries, as in the case of Afghanistan, Iraq, and Palestine. If the American or Israeli publics applaudingly approve military action with little effective protest or need for oversight, the civilians in the places being occupied and invaded are surely nothing more than an afterthought. As we will see in my analysis of films later in this chapter, as in real life, the suffering or killing of civilians only becomes a concern in popular war films when those civilian lives are decidedly and explicitly presented as innocent, serving military interests, acting as translators, informants, or simply as ‘one of the good ones.’ They remain, nonetheless, largely disposable in the end.

Film Criticism and Race

Beyond the nationalistic ideological underpinnings of film criticism, the sheer lack of diversity and overrepresentation of White males in mainstream film criticism must also be highlighted. A 2017 study from the Annenberg Inclusion Initiative of the most popular online film review platform, Rotten Tomatoes, titled “Critic’s Choice?: Gender and Race/Ethnicity of Film Reviewers Across 100 Top Films of 2017” found that 82% of film reviews in 2017 were written by White film critics.¹¹⁹ Meanwhile, critics

¹¹⁹ Marc Choueiti, Dr. Stacy L. Smith, & Dr. Katherine Pieper, “Critic’s Choice?: Race/Ethnicity of Film Reviewers Across Top 100 Films of 2017,” USC Annenberg Inclusion Initiative, 2017.

from underrepresented racial ethnic backgrounds, despite comprising roughly 40% of the US population, had written only 18% of the reviews of 2017's top 100 movies.¹²⁰

Statistics on gender in film criticism are similarly problematic. In looking at 19,559 film reviews, only about 20% were written by women. The same study also looked at the actual number of film critics, finding that about two-thirds of all film critics were male, while “a full 76.3% (n=1,241) of all critics were White and 23.7% (n=386) were from underrepresented racial/ethnic backgrounds.”¹²¹ It was also determined that “compared to underrepresented males and White females, White male critics wrote more reviews – on average – and underrepresented females wrote fewer.”¹²²

The problem of overrepresentation of White and male film critics adds another layer to the ever-present issues of minority representation in film and television. The “Hollywood Diversity Report 2018: Five Years of Progress and Missed Opportunities” released by UCLA found that while some relative gains had been made overall from 2015-16, minorities had lead acting roles in only 13.9% of films, and only 12.6% of films had minority directors, while 8.1% had minority writers.¹²³ Despite these poor figures, their research also shows that all audiences prefer more diverse content in a more diverse, globalized, and transnational society. For example, “films with casts that were from 21 percent to 30 percent minority enjoyed the highest median global box office receipts and

<http://assets.uscannenberg.org/docs/cricits-choice-2018.pdf>

¹²⁰ Ibid, 3.

¹²¹ Ibid, 4.

¹²² Ibid, 4.

¹²³ “Hollywood Diversity Report 2018: Five Years of Progress and Missed Opportunities,” UCLA College of Social Sciences, 3.

<https://socialsciences.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/UCLA-Hollywood-Diversity-Report-2018-2-27-18.pdf>

the highest return on investment, while films with the most racially and ethnically homogenous casts were the poorest performers.”¹²⁴ (p. 4). But even though minorities bought most box office tickets for 5 of the top 10 most popular films in 2016, “Films with Black and Latino leads and majority-minority casts were released, on average, in the fewest international markets in 2016” (p. 5). Hollywood seems to have taken note of this box office data from 2015-16 and their lost financial opportunities during those years, considering that 2017 and 2018 saw the release of global blockbusters featuring Black and minority characters such *Black Panther*, *A Wrinkle in Time*, *Moonlight*, *Coco*, *Hidden Figures*, *Sorry to Bother You*, and *Crazy Rich Asians*.

Although Hollywood appears to now be figuring out exactly where its bread is buttered, and minority representation is marginally improving in popular films, data on television also leaves much to be desired. Another study released in 2018 by the MENA Arts Advocacy Coalition found that 90% of both broadcast network and basic cable television series had no recurring characters from the MENA region (Middle East and North Africa), and that 97% of both premium cable and streaming television shows had no MENA regular characters. According to the same study, “Whites dominate the television landscape, making up nearly 70% of television series regulars, compared to MENA actors, who comprise only 1% of regular actors on TV.” The study also points out that 90% of shows that feature of MENA character only have one, which “increases the potential for tokenization within the show context” and “more than half of the actors are not even playing MENA characters, which makes the onscreen representation of MENAs

¹²⁴ Ibid, 4.

even lower.”¹²⁵ Even when MENA characters do identifiably appear on television shows, 78% of them portray “trained terrorists/agents/soldiers or tyrants, exacerbating the stereotype of MENAs as threats.” One of the concluding points of the study argues that with the overwhelming representation of MENA characters as terrorists and almost 70% of MENA characters onscreen speaking with foreign accents, these representations surely contribute to anti-immigrant sentiments in the US.¹²⁶

Despite some marginal gains in onscreen representation and Hollywood’s growing awareness of the profitability of diversity in movies, audiences are still left with an overwhelmingly white body of mainstream films and shows being discussed and reviewed by an overwhelmingly white body of film critics. This has not gone unnoticed by commentators in the Twittersphere, where the #CriticsSoWhite followed the #OscarsSoWhite hashtag campaign and sparked a brief discussion on diversity in Hollywood in early 2018 following the release of the reports cited above.¹²⁷

Adding yet another layer to the inherent problems of a largely white community of film critics, Symeou, Bantimaroudis, and Zyglidopoulos argue that agenda setting is not only present in media discourse of political issues, but also in cultural contexts where “the transfer of salience from the media to the public also applies to the case of cultural products” such as art and film.¹²⁸ In other words, critics have a large role in agenda setting by simply helping to determine what is worthy of an audience. The authors

¹²⁵ Ibid, 3.

¹²⁶ Ibid, 3.

¹²⁷ “#CriticsSoWhite,” *Code Switch*, National Public Radio podcast, September 26th, 2018.

<https://one.npr.org/?sharedMediaId=651613239:651628015>

¹²⁸ Pavlos C. Symeou, Philemon Bantimaroudis, and Stelios C. Zyglidopoulos. “Cultural Agenda Setting and the Role of Critics: An Empirical Examination in the Market for Art-House Films,” *Communication Research*, Vol. 42(5), (2015), 733.

observe the two levels of agenda setting in cultural and artistic contexts, the first being where cultural products attain public salience from the media and the second is where “media also influence the attributes of various cultural objects.”¹²⁹ In their view, agenda setting is even more influential in this context due to a higher need for orientation (NFO) because of the oft experimental and inconsistent nature of cultural products and art. They point out that “there is no guarantee that the producers of successful cultural products will continue to do so.”¹³⁰ For example, filmmakers can be inconsistent or exchange their success for greater creative risks that are not well-received by critics or audiences, so in this sense, audiences often rely on the critics to help them navigate towards ‘quality’ cultural products and sets the context for the reception of these products. The agenda setting component of film critics then becomes especially problematic in popular TV shows or films, especially films that are elevated to the status of “tent pole” blockbuster films and have a large impact within popular culture and therefore public memory that contain tokenized characters or racist depictions. In other words, if a film or TV show receives critical praise and is deemed as a ‘quality’ cultural product, it will most likely attain popularity to a less critical general viewing audience, thereby subsiding the effect of a critical lens on the part of general viewers. Furthermore, when a cultural product, in this case a film, contains a narrative centered around or containing ideological elements Americans consider sacrosanct, such as duty to nation, US soldiers in war, or nationalism itself, audiences will be even less critical and internalize the messages of such films more deeply.

¹²⁹ Ibid, 734.

¹³⁰ Ibid, p. 734.

The Power of Historical Narrative

Much important work has already been done on the highly effective narrative persuasion of films, images, and entertainment narrative, and the concurrent limiting aspects of historical narrative, which will also be explored further below. Green and Brock have shown how fictional entertainment media narratives contain arguments about events and people that persuade viewers.¹³¹ Igartua and Barrios demonstrate how not only normative persuasion but also controversial implicit arguments in movies persuade viewers through narratives.¹³² Building upon the work of Moyer-Gusé and Slater & Rouner, Igartua and Vicente argue that movie narratives are effective because “*involvement in the narrative* (narrative absorption or transportation) and *involvement with the characters* (identification with characters) are processes that limit counterarguing” with the ideas and perspective presented onscreen.¹³³ While this might provide an opportunity for mainstream viewers of entertainment media to step outside their own perspectives and explore the viewpoints of marginalized Others, this is largely not the case when films explore subjects like US wars in the Middle East (however, it is worth noting that Clint Eastwood’s *Letters from Iwo Jima* did just that quite successfully, but to relatively minimal commercial success). Most notably in the context of my study here, Igartua and Barrios found that “there was a greater impact on the individuals

¹³¹ Melanie C. Green and Timothy C. Brock, “The Role of Transportation in the Persuasiveness of Public Narratives,” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, Vol. 79, No. 5, (2000), pp. 701-721.

¹³² Igartua & Vicente, “Changing Real-World Beliefs with Controversial Movies.”

¹³³ *Ibid*, 515.

ideologically most removed from the message cultivated by the film.”¹³⁴ While this effect could be a strong asset in changing attitudes on controversial sociopolitical topics, the fact is that popular commercial films overwhelmingly tend to defer to all that is military and violent. In addition, as I will demonstrate in my following analysis, films like *Munich* or *American Assassin* that do contain characters who can best be described as native informants, their presence is contained and relegated to supporting the US/Israeli military mission. Often the native informant character is killed or made an example of to demonstrate the error in straying from American or Israeli military might and motives.

Writing on the limitations of the historical narrative and its effect on the communication and collective understanding of history, Hayden White argues that the writing of history is reliant on literary narrative structures and therefore unable to remain objective. According to White, if “every fully realized story...that familiar but elusive conceptual entity, is a kind of allegory, points to a moral, or endows events, whether real or imaginary” contains “a significance they do not possess as a mere sequence, then it seems possible to conclude that every historical narrative has as its latent or manifest purpose the desire to moralize the events which it treats.”¹³⁵ This effect is arguably not present in less popular film genres such as realism and neorealism but is undeniably a feature of nearly all mainstream Hollywood films.

The dependency of history on narrativity, or narrative arcs and structures, “suggests that narrativity, certainly in factual storytelling...is intimately related to, if not a

¹³⁴ Ibid, 526-527.

¹³⁵ Hayden White “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” in Joyce Appleby, Elizabeth Covington, David Hoyt, Michael Latham, Allison Sneider (Eds.), *Knowledge and Postmodernism in Historical Perspective*, (London: Routledge, 1987), 14.

function of, the impulse to moralize reality, that is, to identify it with the social system that is the source of any morality that we can imagine.”¹³⁶ This impulse of historians and filmmakers alike undermines history and historiography, as reality is not bound by morals, neat resolutions, or justice. Reality is undeniably messy, chaotic, ongoing, ever-changing, and often cruel. In the words of White, the “value attached to narrativity is in the representation of real events arises out of a desire to have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary.”¹³⁷ To confine the telling of reality and history within the confines of narrative structures, moralizing, and satisfactory resolutions is to bastardize it from the outset.

The impulse White outlines is one that meets the impulses of modern society to categorize and systematize and to make sense, as much as is possible, of a chaotic world around us. But the negative effects on the representation of reality cannot be denied. In the words of White, “events are not real because they occurred but because, first, they were remembered and, second, they are capable of finding a place in a chronologically ordered sequence.”¹³⁸ Furthermore, White states, “reality wears the mask of meaning, the completeness and fullness of which we can only imagine, never experience...This is why the plot of a historical narrative is always an embarrassment and has to be presented as ‘found’ in the events, rather than put there by narrative techniques.”¹³⁹ White also identifies how “the demand for closure in the historical story is a demand...for moral

¹³⁶ Ibid, 14.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 24.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 20.

¹³⁹ Ibid, 21.

meaning, a demand that sequences of real events be assessed as to their significance as elements of moral drama.”¹⁴⁰ This demand is perhaps most conspicuous in Hollywood movies, in all of their moralizing on the meaning of war and sacrifice for nation, and full-throated justifications for the invasion and subjugation of the Other, actions that must always be assigned nationalistic meaning (which in the mind of so many Americans is one and the same with the divine). In sum, “the various histories that tell of merely regional happenings in the past are revealed for what they really are: images of that authority that summons us to participation in a moral universe that but for its story form, would have no appeal at all.”¹⁴¹

In further considering the utility of narrative, we see that it is the gap between the human experience and its telling, between the reality which cannot be fully communicated, and its textual representation is where the moralizing narrative provides its connective tissue. This moral of the narrative is desired but ruinous in its assault on the historical record, but its ruin is full of purpose. The moral lesson of the story is a distinct product of the narrative structure’s demanding of meaning. This demand is most overbearing and ever-present in the American war film, for the American war film is largely intended to assuage the collective guilt of Americans. It is meant to drive out the doubts still left knocking around in people’s mind over the justness of the war in Vietnam, the false justifications for invading Iraq that must be forgotten, the ghosts of slavery and segregation who still hover too close to our current national reality. The masses want to erase these invasive doubts that darken our conception of America, which

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 21.

¹⁴¹ Ibid, 21.

is pre-defined as inherently good, unerringly moral in its intentions, and leaning toward justice. If America does not meet these qualifications of justness, whether in the distant past or recent memory, then the collective memory must be reconciled; it is not the events of history that have meaning, but only how we remember them. These invasive doubts rooted in memory can only be cleansed and driven out by the more powerful moralizing narrative text.

The inherent appeal of neatly narrated history, and the overrepresentation of white film critics, are both incredibly important when focusing more specifically on the historical film and its persuasive powers, and clearly seen in Kelly J. Madison's highlighting of the anti-racist white hero in film. Much like my study here, Madison is interested in the role of popular films in constructing collective memories of Black Americans' struggles for civil rights. Madison locates what she calls the "legitimation crisis for white supremacy and patriarchy and a concurrent backlash of the institutionalized forces of white supremacist patriarchal capitalism."¹⁴² This legitimation crisis was created by Black struggles for equal rights in America as they "destabilized white domination by forcefully arguing, and painstakingly illustrating, the illegitimacy of the structure of white 'racial' oppression" (p. 400). Madison brilliantly highlights the role mainstream popular films play in containing the legitimation crisis, "managing it, reigning it in, controlling it in such a way that the damage to white identity and domination is minimized."¹⁴³ (p. 400).

¹⁴² Kelly J. Madison, "Legitimation Crisis and Containment: The "Anti-Racist-White-Hero" Film," 400.

¹⁴³ Ibid, 400.

The effect of these films that work to contain the legitimation crisis are especially important for their role in collective memory. Drawing on Zelizer, Madison highlights to usability of collective memory and how “shared memories of the past are constructed, nurtured, and invoked as tools to defend political aims, objective, and realities of the present.” Evidence for the desired “aims, objectives, and desired realities” for certain segments of the population is carefully selected, “remembered, commemorated, embellished, and even fabricated.”¹⁴⁴ Madison’s explanation here is instructive for why the US National Archives features a film like *We Were Soldiers* specifically in service of desired collective memories, while “what is inconsistent and, therefore, threatening, is erased, obscured.”¹⁴⁵

Another important layer that should be explored again here is the role of collective memory, as outlined in the introduction. Madison states that “collective memory...involves a process of discussion, negotiation, debate, and contestation” by the masses, but “groups with social, economic, and cultural power are at a distinct advantage when it comes to constructing recollections of the past that serve their interests.”¹⁴⁶ When narratives invoke or foster memories that challenge the logic of white capitalist patriarchy in America, or Jewish domination over Arabs in historical Palestine for example, those memories must be contained. One major “mechanism utilized in the larger ideological processes of containing” the narratives leading to a legitimation crisis is “the manufacture of collective memories of anti-racist struggles that highlight ‘white’ heroes, marginalize

¹⁴⁴ Ibid, 400.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid, 400.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid, 401.

‘black’ agency, and obscure the deeper structure of white capitalist domination.”¹⁴⁷ These anti-racist white heroes serve as interlocutor for white audiences, including, of course, white critics. By highlighting anti-racist White heroes and minimizing Black agency, history becomes idealized in service of white supremacy and assuages the conscience of the contemporary viewer, assuring them that it was white saviors that bent history toward justice, and not Black resistance or protest. In the context of the war film, we often see the antiracist white hero who empathize with the humanity of those whose lands they have invaded or put themselves in harm’s way to protect the native peoples they have invaded. For example, this is the narrative arc of the Michael J. Fox film *Casualties of War* where his character protects a woman from being raped and murdered by his fellow soldiers in Vietnam, or in the film *Hurt Locker*, in which US soldiers are frightened of every Iraqi they see, but their racism is reconciled by the relative racial diversity and relationships within their deployed unit.

Anti-racist white heroes, omnipresent in representations of history, are necessary to subdue white anxiety, and are in fact a direct product of white anxiety over ongoing current events for decades. Most importantly, the bastardization of history in these films and the presence of the anti-racist white hero produces expectations that ultimately produce white anxiety. For example, white Americans found Colin Kaepernick’s kneeling during the National Anthem abhorrent, and unleashed so much anger because it does not match the sanitized versions of war, conflict, or the civil rights struggles that have been generally provided by mainstream media and film. By upsetting the

¹⁴⁷ Ibid, 401.

nationalistic, ritualistic social order of the National Anthem in the NFL, Kaepernick not only used sports as a platform to elevate racism in the American consciousness, he did it within a sport where predominantly black players perform on teams owned primarily by white owners. In the mind of the white American, Black players should in fact feel grateful for their position and the opportunity to play. For players like Kaepernick to kneel during the National Anthem is a slap in the face to white America, which feels Kaepernick has been provided wealth that rightfully belongs to them. In the context of the Middle East, this same anxiety also explains why so many Americans view Iraqis as ungrateful for the democracy the US military has afforded them, while ignoring the illegal invasion, occupation, hundreds of thousands of civilian deaths, the toppling of their government and severe damage done to Iraqi society and institutions. In the eyes of the American white racist, US blood and treasure was spilled to provide these gifts to ungrateful Iraqis.

Similarly, both Israelis and Americans perceive Palestinians to be rejectionist and ungrateful to the Israelis who colonized their country, dismantled their institutions, forced them off their land, and occupy what remains. Americans and Israelis alike overlook the dismantling of historical Palestine and then cannot fathom the lack of Palestinian admiration for the Israelis 'making the desert bloom', perhaps one of the most damaging myths perpetuated by Zionism. In this context, Palestinians might have legitimate grievances, but they must be contained and relegated to accepted modes of protest. A similar anxiety outlined above also pervades Israeli society, where any resistance to Zionism can only be understood as overtly anti-Semitic. The minimizing effect of the

anti-racist white hero archetype is indeed severe but must be acknowledged for its remarkable success in counteracting very real historical injustices, including slavery, the colonization of land, the theft of resources, war crimes, and the killing of native populations.

Nationalist Ideology and Film Criticism

There is a clear historical link between the modern rise of white supremacist racism in the United States and the media narratives of the Vietnam War. In my later analysis here, I also draw a historical continuity and linkage between the post-9/11 era, US and Israeli films about their essentially unified ‘War on Terror’, and a more recent reemergence of supremacist ideology. Just as racist supremacist ideology has gained a stronger foothold in the US, both amongst the public as well as in the halls of government, we have also seen in Israel a very similar effect leading to a racialized ideology of Jewish supremacy that has taken hold as a result of the Arab-Israeli conflict and its media representations, as well as a new re-emergence of White supremacist ideology in the US in the wake of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and their media representations as well. Kathleen Belew’s *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* outlines the experiences of defeat in wartime and feelings of betrayal that contributed to an increase in White supremacist groups in the US after the Vietnam War. The similarities are unmistakable in how the war in Iraq also ‘came home’ to US in the wake a humiliating defeat in an asymmetrical battlefield. There is essentially the same dynamic in Israel, in the context of their inability to win the 1973

War or to stave Palestinian resistance or their defeat at the hands of Hezbollah in Lebanon in 2006. As a result, in Israel we see a siege mentality and violence perpetrated against Arabs that has come home to roost, both in society and in the form of a right-wing racist government.

In the American context, Belew argues that four main factors led to a new rise of white power movements after the end of the Vietnam War: the defeat of the US in the war; economic uncertainty; a loss of confidence in American institutions because of the war; the increase in immigration that was perceived to be changing the character of the US. As uncertainty and anxieties about the legitimacies of US institutions increased after Vietnam, Americans from all walks of life coalesced into the modern white power movement. In the words of Belew, “They were men, women, and children. There were high school dropouts and holders of advanced degrees; rich and poor; farmers and industrial workers. They were felons and industrial leaders...civilians, veterans, and active duty military personnel.”¹⁴⁸ This rise of White supremacists was not without deep historical roots of American racism, the resultant anxiety from a humiliating military defeat, and the perception of a changing America due to immigration. This racism and anxieties about the future of America cut across class lines, much like the coalition of white racists that Donald Trump cultivated in his rise to power in the wake of the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan.

American soldiers in Vietnam found themselves just one party in a fractious civil war, much like the war in Iraq that created a catastrophic power vacuum after the fall of

¹⁴⁸ Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home*, 2.

Saddam Hussein just a few decades later. Belew's explanation of the war in Vietnam, where "American soldiers entered a morally ambiguous proxy war and faced an enemy comprising highly motivated guerrillas, partisan soldiers, and supportive or ambivalent civilians" also encapsulates the social dynamics at play during the Iraq War. The mass disenchantment in American society created by the Vietnam War soon was reflected in media texts during the 1980s that highlighted the mistreatment of war veterans by both the US government and society, inspiring political movements through the 1980 on both the political left and the right.¹⁴⁹ White supremacists come to understand the Vietnam War not only as a "story of constant danger, gore, and horror," but "also a story of soldiers' betrayal by military and political leaders and of the trivialization of their sacrifice."¹⁵⁰ These narratives of betrayal that appear so often in films depicting the Vietnam War planted the seeds for what Belew terms "white power activism." These media texts, including books, journalistic coverage, and films, "created an emphasis on healing and memorialization" and "papered over a critique of the war itself by foregrounding the wounded and wronged veteran."¹⁵¹

This papering over of overt critiques of wars in the Middle East operate in much the same way in current media texts and in effect renders these wars, perpetrated upon foreign and/or occupied peoples by the US and Israeli governments, as apolitical since their historical meaning within the mainstream consciousness bears meaning almost solely in the context of the wounded US or Israeli soldier. In other words, if the meaning

¹⁴⁹ Ibid, 22-24.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 3.

¹⁵¹ Ibid, 23.

of the war lies not in its substantive history and politics but only with the casualties and wounded veterans—that is, casualties who are American or Israeli veterans. Film critics perpetuate this by genuflecting to the idea that veterans are beyond politics, and therefore so is war and its narratives.

This central placement of the wounded veteran in media representations of these wars renders them as apolitical by putting the wars in the historical rearview, where the core motivations for these invasions, wars, and conflicts are no longer relevant. A highly selective historical amnesia is a necessity; the war happened, and that is that. In this framing there is little need or utility for debate about the justness of a war, and attention must be directed toward venerating the military veteran. It does not matter that the history of the Vietnam War and the wider lessons that should be learned from it have been lost in the process of telling the war; the only thing that should be allowed to impact our society and politics are the unified narratives that emerge and form our understanding of the war and its meaning—that of the wounded sacrificial veteran. Many other films set this agenda and perform this function exceptionally well, including *The Deer Hunter*, *Platoon*, and *Hurt Locker*, among others, where the central narrative is that of the apolitical wounded veteran.

Narratives and representations of the Vietnam War directly inspired potent white supremacist activism and violence in the US. According to Belew, the Vietnam War story's "precise function changed over time, often following generational shifts."¹⁵² Many of the White supremacists who founded their own branches of the movement or

¹⁵² Ibid, 24.

joined other “often referred to their own experiences in the Vietnam War as justification for perpetrating racist violence at home” and “drew upon their wartime experiences for tactical guidance, weapons expertise, and rhetorical framing of their white power and mercenary activities.”¹⁵³ What Belew terms “white power activism” would ultimately culminate into acts of antigovernment, anti-establishment, and white racist domestic terrorism such as the Oklahoma City bombing, the incident at Ruby Ridge, the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, and the 2016 election of Donald Trump. For many leaders of these movements, the connection between imperialism, racism, and war was also starkly apparent even before it ultimately metastasized into potent White supremacist terrorism. For example, Bob Mathews was driving on his way to enlist in the US military when he heard a story on the radio about the prosecution of Lieutenant William Calley, one of the main perpetrators of the massacre of Vietnamese civilians at My Lai. For Mathews, “such acts of violence were justified,” and he “saw Calley’s prosecution as evidence of government betrayal,” leading him to found the Order, a white terrorist organization.¹⁵⁴

When considering the consistent and deep thematic similarities found in narratives of the Iraq Wars as those of the Vietnam War, it seems only logical to conclude that those narratives in film have had the same affect in more recent years. Belew’s analysis can therefore be extended a step further into the politics of today, in tracing the more recent rise of white supremacist ideology and violence to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and their aftershocks in American society. In Iraq, just as in

¹⁵³ Ibid, 24.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid, 24-25.

Vietnam, American soldiers were humiliated by a foreign people and “dealt a profound humiliation by a non-white, non-European army made up of soldiers who Americans were inclined to hold in contempt as racially inferior.”¹⁵⁵ And just as in the Vietnam War, the American establishment argued for the unending support of the war effort, no matter the cost in life and dollars, only to lose the support of the public and forced to withdraw in the face of political support from the general electorate. In both wars, the American presidential administrations continued the war effort for as long as they could, until a breaking point was reached. Resentment ran deep throughout American military and society that non-white irregular militias could patiently let them bleed out until it could no longer be justified by the US government. And again, just as in Vietnam, the narratives in movies about the war wholly ignored the official, and outright false, justifications initially provided for the invasion of Iraq, instead focusing on the sacrifices and heroics of individual soldiers. Like the Vietnam War films and novels, the media narratives that emerged after the Iraq War ignore the victimhood of the Other, their suffering, their trauma, and severe damage to the society at the hand of the American military. Instead, the viewer mourns the loss of American soldiers and the trauma they bring back home with them. When the Other is represented, they are merely set pieces who, as demonstrated in the following chapters, are sacrificed so that the white savior may live or carry out their mission. In these instances, the life and existence of the Other, their very human drive for survival, somehow becomes secondary to the mission of the white occupier.

¹⁵⁵ Patrick Blanchfield, “Declaration of War,” *The Nation*, June 20th, 2018. <https://www.thenation.com/article/declaration-of-war/>

In the preceding sections I have outlined several interconnected factors that contribute to the power of popular film and its problematics: the militaristic and nationalistic ideological underpinnings of the historical film; sanitized portrayals of war; the centering of whiteness in filmic narratives; the utilization of war as a public memory project; the overrepresentation of white film critics, their lauding of inaccurate historical films, and their subsequent role of agenda setting in popularizing films that adhere to the dominant ideological structure; the effects of narrativizing history; the presence of the anti-racist white hero; and the connection between white supremacy and media representations of war. These form the theoretical framework and historical context in the following analyses of films that attempt to represent Israel-Palestine and greater Middle East through the lens of popular films.

Chapter 2

Sites of Evil and Trauma

The rendering of Arabs and Palestinians as inherently violent and threatening, contrasted against the heroics of judicious militarized saviors who purposefully deploy violence in their mission to spread Western values, is one of the most prominent representational elements contained in mainstream popular films set in the Middle East. One of the more prominent narrative and aesthetic elements of these films is the rendering of Muslims and Islamic countries as inherently threatening and hostile to American and Israeli soldiers simply because of who they respectively are, inherently and without context, explanation, or reasoning. Just as the Americans and Israelis cannot help but be internally devoted to principles of freedom and civilization, the Arabs of these films cannot help but engage in violence and hostility to these values. Nowhere in these films is the perspective or experiences of the colonized peoples presented, nor are they humanized unless they serve the mission of the invading soldiers, often in their sacrificial death, which is explored in the following chapter. The sheer disposability of Arab life in these films, along with the absence of grief for them in death, augments these effects, all of which are thematic elements that have been present in films for decades.

Jack Shaheen's *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* analyzes film depictions of Arabs throughout roughly the last century of film, and briefly lends focus to Palestinians in film. However, the scope of his analysis is limited, in focusing on Palestinians as villains at a time when films showing "human dramas revealing

Palestinians as normal folk” were completely absent. He continues, “Never do movies present Palestinians as innocent victims and Israelis as brutal oppressors. No movie shows Israeli soldiers and settlers uprooting olive trees. No movie shows Palestinian families struggling to survive under occupation, living in refugee camps, striving to have their own country and passports reading ‘Palestine’.”¹⁵⁶ In *Reel Bad Arabs*, Shaheen states that, “When colleagues ask whether today’s reel Arabs are more stereotypical than yesteryear’s, I can’t say the celluloid Arab has changed.”¹⁵⁷

Shaheen’s assertions may be true on the overall Orientalist depictions of Arabs in films; however, the body of film on Palestinians has, as noted above, changed greatly in recent years. But this is not to say the depictions of Palestinians are no longer problematic. Instead, it appears that the modes of Orientalism in film have shifted and operate in more nuanced and complicated ways. Films like *Waltz with Bashir* and *Munich* lend some humanism to Palestinians, though in an obscured and indirect way by presenting a narrative of their killers’ remorse. Both these films should be placed in conversation with one another to understand the full implications of such films that humanize and elicit sympathy for the Palestinians’ killers. I intend to deconstruct their motivations within the narrative, and how these narratives interact with the wider collective memory of the Arab-Israeli conflict and memories of the violence perpetrated by both Israelis and Palestinians.

¹⁵⁶ Jack Shaheen, *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*, (Northampton: Olive Branch Press, 2012), 186-187.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid*, 172.

The films I analyze here all take different forms from past Orientalist depictions in that they also combine its classical elements with allegedly sympathetic or humanistic portrayals, providing a “feel good” story or an apparent “teaching moment” for the viewer. In these films, Arab peoples and their cultures are presented as backwards, and in turn need to be saved by the US/Israel, and the deaths of Arab characters are used as affective tool in these films as a moralizing tale. According to Evelyn Alsultany, the recent sympathetic portrayals in film and television that have emerged since 9/11 have to be understood within the context of a more complex ideological agenda and the longer history of Orientalist portrayals of Arabs and Muslims.¹⁵⁸ Alsultany, also drawing also on the work of Melanie McAlister, identifies the Orientalist representations deployed amidst prominent geopolitical events such as the founding of Israel on Palestinian land after World War II, the Munich Olympics hostage crisis in 1972, the Arab oil crisis in 1973, the Iran hostage crisis in 1979-80, or the hijacking of planes by Palestinians in the 1970s and 80s, all of which framed the Middle East as little else beyond a breeding ground of terrorism, antisemitism, misogyny, and oil sheiks. Many of these historical events are now being replayed in film, and in many instances the historical record is being rewritten and stripped on any larger geopolitical context in films such as *Munich*, *7 Days in Entebbe*, *Beirut*, and *Waltz with Bashir*. With these overarching framings of the Middle East, the complexity of cultures, modes of life, and religious tradition are reduced, essentialized, and conflated to merely being sites of terrorism and danger. According to Alsultany, “This recurring conflation, advanced by the US government and media

¹⁵⁸ Evelyn Alsultany, “Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation After 9/11.”

discourses..., serves as a larger narrative about an evil Other that can be easily and mobilized during times of war.”¹⁵⁹ Furthermore, “With this conflation established, it is easy to conceptualize the United States,” and in my analysis here, Israel “as the inverse of anything that is ‘Arab/Muslim.’” Meanwhile, the US and Israel are bastions of “equality and democracy, culturally diverse and civilized, a land of progressive and liberated women,” juxtaposed against a Middle East frothing with political and religious extremism.¹⁶⁰

However, these traditional Orientalist depictions are now being more deeply coded within seemingly sympathetic narratives, many of which reflect the post-racial discourses that emerged after 9/11, and even more prominently following the election of Barack Obama in 2008. Catherine Squires’ *The Post-Racial Mystique: Media and Race in the Twenty-First Century* traces the rise of post-racial discourse and media narratives in this period, and how “media discourses and imagery help us to map the contours of change in society’s understanding of race.”¹⁶¹ According to Squires, following the election of Barack Obama, ideas of a “post-racial” America were invoked within the mainstream news media proposing that discussions over race and ethnicity were becoming more sophisticated in the US and that race was becoming less of a significant factor for American life in general. While “the gap between the aspirational post-racial discourse and the brutal realities of poverty, police profiling, anti-immigration vitriol, and

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 9.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid, 9.

¹⁶¹ Catherine Squires, “The Post-Racial Mystique: Media and Race in the Twenty-first Century,” (New York: New York University Press, 2014). Accessed online: <https://www-degruyter-com.ezp2.lib.umn.edu/document/doi/10.18574/nyu/9780814762899.001.0001/html>

mind-boggling incarceration rates for blacks and Latinos/as is wide... the media continue to churn out films and shows that feature scores of people of color living discrimination-free lives.”¹⁶² Squires highlights how within coverage of racist incidents in the news, “sources scramble over each other to deny any racist intent or impact of the event in question” and “point to millionaire black athletes, Asian American collegians, and, of course, our biracial president as proof of that America is post-racial.”¹⁶³ Filmic narratives explored here function in essentially the same way, where our just protagonists cannot possibly be motivated by racial animus or religious difference, and instead operate in a post-racial society with a post-racial view, where only actions, and not preexisting racist structures and vast power disparities, have consequences.

Squires also identifies how in the post-9/11 era, racial difference, primarily the difference of the Muslim or Arab ‘Other’ within white society, can be highlighted only within contained contexts. In the US, “in the wake of 9/11, attacks on multiculturalism were launched in part on the idea that “tolerance” of differences had gone too far” and so “a return to a national identity grounded in Judeo-Christian principles was necessary to squelch the alleged excesses of multicultural relativism.” Following the 9/11 attacks there arose

amplified concerns about “Other” enemies within, providing proponents of assimilation with a dramatic, violent example of what they saw as the endgame for multicultural tolerance: endless fragmentation amongst groups and internecine battles for ideological purity. After the attacks, many commentators insisted that the impetus was on people of color and non-Christian religions to prove their American-ness, to attend more to similarities with other Americans

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid.

*than to differences. Here national identity became the more important marker for Muslims in America, and any framing of Muslims as Other, or pointing to racist crimes against Muslims, was declared as un-American*¹⁶⁴.

Squires also highlights the work of Evelyn Alsultany, where she observed during this period a turn toward featuring patriotic Arab Americans in media, “to disrupt the association between American Muslims and terrorism and assert their patriotism.” However, an Alsultany concludes, this actually “reinforced existing racist and Orientalist representations of Arab and Islamic peoples by highlighting the exceptionally patriotic attributes of individual Muslim Americans and families in images and texts that reinforced an Us-Them binary.”¹⁶⁵ The frame also extends to Arab to several films, where they also prove their loyalty to the American mission, even if they are not Arab American. In some instances, these characters revert to extremism, while in others the friendly Arab is killed, rendered into a device for white angst and trauma, as will be demonstrated below. In films such as *American Assassin* and *The Kingdom*, the Other is suspect until they can prove their loyalty, just as Arab Americans were compelled to subject themselves to racial profiling to prove their trustworthiness after 9/11.

Alsultany notes that in this supposedly post-racial era, many in the US political right “went as far as to say that racial profiling has nothing to do with racism and everything to do with national security,” and it was these discourse purporting to be anti-racist wherein “racist policies and practices are advanced through the very stance that

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

appears to disavow it.”¹⁶⁶ Alsultany points to well-known examples intended to deflect legitimate criticisms of racist policies, for example when prisoners in Guantanamo are provided with Qurans or when the PATRIOT Act denounces racism and bigotry while legalizing racist laws and policies.¹⁶⁷ Films of the current era follow this trend by purportedly telling ‘both sides’ of the conflict or attempting to humanize the Other, but while also reinforcing racist stereotypes by rendering Arab and Muslim lives as less valuable, more disposable, and merely serving the ends of the patriotic white American or Israeli protagonist. Often these protagonists are explicitly portrayed as anti-racist or morally conflicted about the conflicts in which they inflict violence and death. It is their emotional conflict and supposed empathy for those they kill and terrorize that redeems their violent acts in the eyes of the viewer. In regards specifically to films about Israel-Palestine, several scholars have focused on the “Shoot and Cry” (also referred to as “Shoots and Cries”) genre of films produced in Israel, a genre which is also prominent in American films following the Vietnam era, as explored in the following chapter. The effects and narrative lessons of Israeli Shoot and Cry films are essentially the same as the post-Vietnam American films as well as films portraying trauma inflicted upon the veterans of American wars in the Middle East, as will be explored in more depth in the following chapter as well.

Sites of Evil and Trauma

¹⁶⁶ Evelyn Alsultany, “Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation After 9/11,” 11.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 12.

Time and time again, movies and select scenes depicting Arab countries are portrayed as threatening and sites of danger and trauma for American soldiers. The Arab inhabitants and their pain and trauma are merely secondary, thereby prioritizing the narrative of the American soldier and their personal experiences and sacrifices in the name of 'spreading democracy and freedom to the Middle East'. In keeping with classical Orientalist discourse, audiovisual techniques as well as dialogue between characters is used to establish that the Middle East is the inverse of the West, trapped in the past, uncivilized, even alien, sometimes quite literally. In *The Kingdom*, one American FBI agent asks another what it's like in Saudi Arabia and is told, "It's a bit like Mars." The opening credits of both *American Sniper* and *Thank You for Your Service* begin with the *adhan* (Muslim call to prayer) echoing in the distance while the screen displays black and dark-colored title cards and production credits. The echoing of the *adhan*, in its foreignness to most Western audiences, is intended to give it a distinctly haunting quality to signify danger. There are additional examples where the danger of Muslims and their presence in their own physical space is signified using filmic visual cues. Scenes in *American Sniper*, *Hurt Locker*, and *The Kingdom*, and others often feature Arabs are repeatedly shown looking down at streets from their rooftops or peering through windows, and where American soldiers are operating. Rarely do these scenes distinguish between civilian and enemy combatant; here all Arabs peer suspiciously and all are suspect if not dangerous.

Thank You for Your Service

Thank You for Your Service, released in 2017 and based on a 2013 non-fiction book of the same title, primarily focuses on the experiences of American soldiers in the Iraq war, the disconnect between the warfront and home front, and the institutional failures of the Department of Veterans Affairs. *Thank You for Your Service* follows the experiences of Adam Schumann after a grueling 15-month combat tour in Iraq as he returns home to his family and subsequent struggles with post-traumatic stress disorder. The film features frequent flashbacks to the experiences that traumatized Shumann, the only times in the film that take place in Iraq. In this way, Iraq is presented not as a place that is relatable or complex, much less a home to millions of people. Rather, it is portrayed solely as a dangerous, almost alien place, and the harrowing series of events there only induce anxiety for the viewer. The Iraq war is also portrayed devoid of any historical context whatsoever. Here again, as in the Vietnam war films discussed in the previous chapter, the politics and debates surrounding the Iraq war are essentially irrelevant if not nonexistent. The violence of the war and its consequences for those who experienced it first-hand are not up for debate, and the film acts solely as a vehicle of genuflection to veterans. This historical amnesia decontextualizes the war as a whole, in all its false justifications in the name of national security, post-9/11 jingoism, War on Terror paranoia, and the Bush Administration's disingenuous prognostications for "Iraqi freedom." Considering the unquestioned and unconditional deference for veterans that is so ubiquitous in the US, the lack of context renders the war above debate.

Thank You for Your Service opens with a black screen and the words “Inspired by a true story,” and then cuts to a shot of numerous hanging military dog tags, symbolizing the US soldiers who have fallen in war. A simple three-line voiceover begins: “I was a good soldier. I had purpose. And I loved it.” We are then taken to Rustamiyah, Iraq in 2007 as Shumann, played here by Miles Teller, rides in the passenger seat of a Humvee looking for roadside IEDs. The Humvee rides through trash-riddled streets as two Iraqi children run away with their soccer ball, their faces not shown. Shumann talks about how “You don’t see the bomb unless they want you to” as shots of empty and seemingly lifeless city streets and buildings are shown. A handful of women wearing black *jellabiyas*¹⁶⁸ and *hijabs*¹⁶⁹ are shown leaving the streets and retreating into buildings, again, with their faces not seen by the viewer. The violence breaks out only two minutes after the opening title screens, as Shumann and his fellow soldiers enter a building in tactical mode and point their rifles across the rooftops, seemingly at no one until his comrade, “Emory,” is shot in the head by a sniper. The soldiers fire their rifles from the rooftop, still seemingly at nothing. Shumann immediately carries Emory on his shoulders down the stairwell to bring him to a medic. Emory bleeds profusely from his headwound, the blood running down Shumann’s face and into his mouth. After Shumann stumbles and drops Emory to the floor, exacerbating his injuries, the scene cuts to Shumann leaning against a building, hyperventilating, and vomiting onto the street. We are then taken to the military barracks, the camera slowly panning across the wall where the words “160 days to go” and “Fuck Iraq” are scrawled, along with a list of names of

¹⁶⁸ A long dress-like garment worn by Muslims

¹⁶⁹ Also known as a head scarf worn by Muslim women

soldiers killed in action, and poems that serve as lamentations over the lack of appreciation and fair compensation for soldiers in war.

The rest of the film follows Shumann after he returns home to his wife and two children in Kansas and suffers from regular flashbacks and bad dreams over his experiences in Iraq. Despite his struggles with PTSD, he is established as relatively strong and resilient as he attempts to assist his two best friends, Billy Waller and Solo Aieti, who he served alongside in Iraq also have PTSD and struggle to readjust to civilian life. Not long after returning home Billy commits suicide after his fiancée leaves him, meanwhile Solo struggles throughout the film in trying to be redeployed to Iraq but is ruled ineligible due to a traumatic brain injury, and then turns to drugs to cope. One scene in *Thank You for Your Service* juxtaposes sex and violence in almost the same way a pivotal sequence does in *Waltz with Bashir*, explored in greater depth in the following chapter. As Shumann has sex with his wife in their bed he hallucinates that she is shot in the head, with her blood splattering on the ceiling of the bedroom above them. The combination of marital sex and violence in war is, in my view, intended to not only show the difficulties of these soldiers in closing the distance between the brutalities of the battlefield and the gentle settings of family life, but also to distinctly signify the American home/home front as a place as a place of safety and calm. Here the soldier, in the safety of his home and making love to his wife, is disrupted by such a sudden, violent, graphic hallucination of violent murder, something that is supposed to happen “over there” in the Middle East. Here again, the very real things that take place in the Arab world, rendered only as a battlefield and not as home to anyone worthy of concern, are

alien to a US setting. The things that take unfold in that alien Other place serve as the ultimate trauma and disruption to the American way of life.

A number of scenes depict Aieti struggling with symptoms of PTSD and hitting repeated administrative roadblocks to receiving care at the VA and eventually turning to street drugs to self-medicate, culminating in a violent outburst at his home in front of his wife. Meanwhile, Shumann is confronted by his own wife, who sees his VA intake form and is disturbed to learn he also struggles with suicidal ideations and receiving proper care due to military administrators who are unable or unwilling to relate or empathize with the trauma he and Aieti face. When Shumann is supposed to travel to an inpatient facility for mental health rehabilitation, he sends Aiti in his place, sensing that his struggles are more difficult than his own. When Shumann calls to inform the program that he sent his friend in his place, he is told he still needs to deal with his own issues and confront and open up to others about what he experiences in Iraq to gain some sense of relief.

Shumann then visits the wife of a fellow soldier, Sergeant Doster, to tell her everything that happened, initiating a flashback scene to Iraq. The first frame in this flashback again shows Humvees driving by women in all black *jellabiyas*, their backs turned to the camera and their faces not shown, just as in the opening scene. We do see some Iraqi faces as they then travel down a cramped street, as we see several cuts of unsmiling, stern Iraqis looking at the Humvees rolling through. In these Iraqi streets everyone and everything is a potential threat and source of death for these soldiers. One young boy pantomimes shooting a handgun at the soldiers, while another woman looks

deeply concerned and scared as she watched them go by. Haunting music plays in the background, much like we often hear in the suspenseful scenes of a horror movie, indicating impending danger. The streets are lined with litter, the camera focusing on the various trash, again harkening back to the opening scene when Sumann's voiceover talks about the importance of staying alert and looking for roadside bombs to survive. The camera looks between Iraqi men walking down the street, indicating that they are as much a threat to the soldiers as much as roadside bombs disguised as garbage. Shumann tells the driver of the Humvee to stop, apparently based on a sixth sense. Two Iraqi men look back over their shoulders at the soldiers, and a worried mother hurriedly rushes her daughter inside with her. Notably, these shots are filmed from inside the Humvee, the viewer's perspective claustrophobic and obscured by the windshield and frame of the interior of the vehicle. We are made to see these scenes from the perspective of the patrolling soldiers, under threat inside the Humvee from possible roadside bombs and ambushes from the numerous Iraqis walking in the street, who raise even more suspicion by simply looking at the soldiers, this suspicion only heightened as they try to rush inside their houses to avoid contact with them. The only thing that feels like a greater threat than being inside the Humvee is to step outside of it, to break the relative safety of the hermetic barrier of the armor of the vehicle and put yourself into the Iraqi street. After all the people clear the streets and retreat into their houses, the soldiers sit in their Humvee and peer through the windows into a now deserted street, the only movement from trash that blows in the wind. The convoy decides to turn left rather than continue down the empty street and the truck is hit with a rocket propelled grenade. The camera remains in

the Humvee as we see dust from the blast billowing inside as the soldiers clear the vehicle and fire towards the roof. The soldiers, as in the opening scene, make their tactical movement up the stairwell and as they enter the roof one of the states over the radio “We got a *haji* fire escape,” using the pejorative term American soldiers used for Iraqis in the war. From here we are again brought back to the same opening scene sequence from the film, ultimately leading the Emory’s death and Shumann’s experience carrying him back down the stairwell as Emory’s blood runs into his mouth.

After the replaying of this scene, we are brought back to barracks in Iraq, where Shumann cannot stop looking at Emory’s blood on his boot. This is the first time we see Sergeant Doster, who comes to talk with Shumann and, knowing that he is struggling with the responsibility he feels for the severe injuries his friend now has and learning that he will most likely never be the same, tells him that he will take Shumann’s place on patrol the next day so he can use the satellite link to talk to his wife back in Kansas. The film quickly cuts to the next day when two Humvees make a commotion rolling back into base, soldiers rushing out the vehicles screaming for medical attention for the sergeant. As Shumann runs up to help pull the unconscious and nearly mutilated Sergeant Doster out of the Humvee he is told “He was in your seat!”. As medics take the Sergeant inside and attend to his injuries, Aiti screams at Shumann, “None of this would have happened if you were there!”. We are then shown the next day when taps plays in honor of the fallen Sergeant, and then brought back to Shumann telling Doster’s wife everything that transpired and confessing his sense of responsibility of his death in Iraq, signifying Shumann’s finally opening up about his traumatic experiences. Doster’s widow tell

Shumann to honor his fallen comrade by living his life because it's what Sergeant Doster would have wanted, helping to absolve Shumann of his internalized guilt. The film closes with a shot of Shumann moving his family back into the house they owned before his deployment, meeting his goal of regaining their home, then a somber series of photos of the real soldiers whose stories were depicted in *Thank You for Your Service* and with brief updates on their lives, driving home the film's connection to real events and lives.

Reviewers of the film, however, in writing from a more nationalist-centered perspective, present a different view than my reading above. In coding the reviews from mainstream media critics, I found a consistent praise, as with other war films as seen in the previous chapter, for the realism of the film. Here again, the viewer is primed for a “real” war experience from the film, and therefore historical accuracy. Matt Zoller Seitz is so taken with the performance of one of the actor's “disarmingly understated performance... that there are times when the film's dramatic architecture seems to vanish, leaving you feeling as if you're watching a fly-on-the-wall documentary about a young man who just got back from war.”¹⁷⁰ Zeitz also notes the regular featured trope of US service members bearing the brunt of warfare while politicians and military administrators sit comfortably in offices, noting that the US government “ever since the military and humanitarian disaster of Vietnam... has subcontracted war to lower middle class and poor people (and mercenaries), then allowed politicians to keep them mostly out of sight and mind after they've endured and committed unimaginable violence.” The *New York Times* review of *Thank You for Your Service* says that the “most relevant

¹⁷⁰ Matt Zoller Seitz, “Thank You for Your Service,” Rogerebert.com, October 27th, 2017. <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/thank-you-for-your-service-2017>

movie precursor” is not other similar films like *American Sniper* or *The Hurt Locker*, but rather the 2015 documentary *Of Men and War*, yet another example of a dramatized film being placed on par with ‘reality,’ in this case the reality presented in a war documentary. While a documentary film is arguably ‘closer’ to reality, if only for the nature of its production, it is still nonetheless a snapshot of a reality, a highly edited, and selective sequential narrative in comparison to the wider totality of human experience.

Several reviewers note the clunky filmmaking of *Thank You for Your Service* overall, but nonetheless, forgivingly pay deference to the film for its subject matter in dealing with issues of veterans and trauma. David Erlich calls the film “True and trite in almost equal measure,” but says that it “hums with a furious helplessness that’s been missing from so many of the narrative films about soldiers returning from Iraq.”¹⁷¹ Similarly, Peter Travers, writing for *Rolling Stone*, says that despite its shortcomings “You can’t watch a frame of Jason Hall’s *Thank You for Your Service*, about Iraq war veterans suffering from PTSD, without believing the film’s intentions are honorable. Points for that, for sure.”¹⁷² Travers ends his review by praising the Bruce Springsteen song that closes film, which in his view “stays in your head, like it needs to, reminding us of those who serve and how they need more than ever to be honored.”

Alissa Wilkinson’s review for *Vox.com* is even more explicit in noting that the topics of the film tempers her criticisms, saying that it presents the treatment of soldiers

¹⁷¹ David Ehrlich, “‘Thank You for Your Service’ Review: Miles Teller Stars in a Clunky but Crucial Drama About What Supporting the Troops Really Means,” *Indiewire.com*, October 24th, 2017. <http://www.indiewire.com/2017/10/thank-you-for-your-service-review-miles-teller-1201890415/>

¹⁷² Peter Travers, “‘Thank You for Your Service’ Review: PTSD Drama Is ‘Too Timid by Half,’” *Rollingstone.com*, October 27th, 2017. <https://www.rollingstone.com/movies/reviews/peter-travers-on-thank-you-for-your-service-too-timid-w509934>

“with such humanity and simplicity that it feels unimpeachable” and “That the film’s characters are based on real men makes the indictment more searing.”¹⁷³ Wilkinson also highlights where the film, in her view, “effectively chronicles is the way veterans are too often used as political props...praised and thanked, but also trotted out and forced to slog through a veterans affairs system that would rather they just... go back to the battlefield, where they can’t complicate the patriotism of those who idealize it.”¹⁷⁴ Notably, the apparent indictment issued by this film is how American soldiers were put in harm’s way and not an indictment the invasion of Iraq and the war perpetrated upon the country and its people. And despite the numerous shortcomings of *Thank You for Your Service*, Owen Gleiberman, says that “you don’t feel like you’re watching actors portraying soldiers; they’re neither too macho nor too soft — they have just the right obscene bellicosity, baptized in hormones.”¹⁷⁵

Seitz also praised the film for its tightly contained politics that focuses on the US government’s treatment of veterans and not the historical and political context of the war itself:

"Thank You for Your Service" is also, in its way, a political film, though not in a tedious left wing/right wing sense. The causes of the Iraq War and its ultimate historical significance are not Hall's concern, but at the same time, the film avoids lapsing into the cliché of "The only thing that matters in war is the soldier next to you," perhaps recognizing it as a means of avoiding political reality. In its own quiet, even sneaky way, however, this is an angry film. It directs its anger at a country which,

¹⁷³ Alissa Wilkinson, *Thank You for Your Service is an Empathetic Film About War Vets and How America Fails Them*, Vox.com, October 26th, 2017.
<https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/10/26/16535762/thank-you-for-your-service-review-miles-teller>

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Owen Gleiberman, “Film Review: ‘Thank You for Your Service’,” Variety.com, October 24th, 2017.
<http://variety.com/2017/film/reviews/thank-you-for-your-service-review-miles-teller-1202596432/>

*ever since the military and humanitarian disaster of Vietnam and the end of the active draft, has subcontracted war to lower middle class and poor people (and mercenaries), then allowed politicians to keep them mostly out of sight and mind after they've endured and committed unimaginable violence.*¹⁷⁶

It is remarkable that the reviewer here acknowledges the limited politics and presents it as a strength of film, despite also explicitly mentioning the violence that has been perpetrated upon the people of Iraq. In his review for the *New York Times*, Ben Kenigsberg says that the director of *Thank You for Your Service* was “Striving for the elusive goal of political neutrality,” which makes it “a less jingoistic film than *American Sniper*” because “in the combat sequences, villainous Iraqis have been replaced with faceless ones.” This difference instead makes *Thank You for Your Service* a “macho weepie, whose message — that wars are permanent for those who fight in them — has broad appeal.”¹⁷⁷ Kenigsberg’s description and classification of the films here is emblematic of the how Americans understand the genre of war films, where the simple denial of Iraqi agency in a film is not damaging or problematic, but rather transforms it from a violent fever dream to a “macho weepie” with a meaningful message.¹⁷⁸ Kenigsberg’s focus on how “wars are permanent for those who fight them” and apparently not for those innocent civilians caught in the middle of them is also indicative of Americans’ truncated field of view.

¹⁷⁶ Matt Zoller Seitz, “Thank You for Your Service”

¹⁷⁷ Ben Kingsberg, “Review: In ‘Thank You for Your Service,’ the War at Home,” *New York Times*, October 26th, 2017.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/10/26/movies/thank-you-for-your-service-review-miles-teller.html>

¹⁷⁸ Ibid.

Owen Gleiberman's (2017) review of *Thank You for Your Service* in Vanity Fair takes a similar approach. Describing the scene when the two main characters visit a Veterans Affairs hospital finally seeking mental health treatment, only to find they face a six to nine month waiting period, Gleiberman says that

A lesser film would have made a demagogic anti-government point out of all this. But *Thank You for Your Service*... accepts the over-leveraged condition of veterans' benefits as, simply, the sad state of the system. It argues, implicitly, for a better way, but its real intent is to bring the news about what our bureaucratic betrayal of veterans is doing to the heart of the country.

Here again, just as in the genre of Vietnam films, governmental bureaucracy is positioned as the real social problem, though in this depiction there is essentially no one responsible or to blame, as opposed to the actual wars being waged.¹⁷⁹

Thank You for Service is significant not just for its sole focus on centering the experiences of US soldiers, but for its hollow depiction of Iraqi civilians and Iraq as a site and source of trauma for these soldiers. *Thank You for Your Service* is, if anything, wholly consistent in its not lending any sort of humanism the Iraqis nor any agency to them beyond their ability to inflict harm and commit acts of insurgency. The representation of Iraq here is severely limited, despite some of the most pivotal sequences of the story taking place there. All the viewer sees is trash-lined cramped streets, their inherent danger accentuated by a harrowing soundtrack straight from a horror film. The first-person viewpoints are only that from the soldiers' perspectives, again driving home the sense of danger. A more balanced film might have included at least one frame filmed from an Iraqi's perspective watching the armored Humvees enter their neighborhoods.

¹⁷⁹ Owen Gleiberman, "Film Review: 'Thank You for Your Service.'"

Instead, every single Iraqi that appears in the film is either completely faceless, their backs turned to the camera/soldiers as they seek safety in their homes or are shown frowning and peering through the windows of the military Humvee. As a result, there are no Iraqis in the film can be understood to be a civilian. They are nameless, faceless, and do not speak a single word throughout the entire movie. To even label them as background characters would be an overstatement. In *Thank You for Your Service*, every Iraqi of every age and gender is suspect, and there are no innocent figures, except for the American soldiers who patrol a dangerous foreign land, understood to be sacrificing their safety in defense of the homeland. It is not just the title but every shot and narrative element in the movie itself that operates as a nearly two-hour genuflection to military service, and a total obfuscation of the political and historical context for the war. In the extremely narrow narrative of *Thank You for Your Service*, there is only space to acknowledge the suffering or sacrifice of Americans in Iraq and back in the home front, and Iraqis are not worthy of recognition, except for the danger their existence presents to the soldier and viewer who takes on their perspective through the camera work and aesthetic elements of the film.

American Sniper

American Sniper (2014) is a film directed by Clint Eastwood and based on an autobiographical book of the same title. It follows the life of Navy SEAL sniper Chris Kyle, played by Bradley Cooper, and his experiences in becoming the deadliest sniper in US military history, though many of his claimed experiences have been called into

question. In the early scenes in the film, Chris Kyle is shown learning to hunt with his father and how to handle his rifle with respect, and then as a man who has grown up to become a wholesome rodeo cowboy, coded here as an altruistic down-home American. Soon Kyle is inspired to join the military after seeing the attack on the *USS Cole* on the news, with Kyle commenting, "Look what they did to us." After becoming a Navy SEAL sniper and getting married, Kyle is deployed to Iraq, with the attacks of 9/11 and the ensuing War on Terror serving as the backdrop. Kyle learns of his deployment at his wedding ceremony, here again a common thematic element of the danger "over there" rupturing the safety of the American homeland. When he first lands on a US military airstrip in Iraq and gets off the plane he is immediately told, "Welcome to Fallujah. The new Wild West of the Old Middle East." The description of Iraq as the Wild West marks it as untamed, uncivilized, lawless, and most importantly, dangerous. The Iraq of *American Sniper* is the epitome of Other in the threat it and all its inhabitants pose to Kyle. Every Iraqi in the film is suspect as they peer around corners and from balconies and avoid interaction with heavily armed US soldiers. The framing of these shots, which creates distance from these background Iraqis, does not code them as frightened civilians who are being faced with heavily armed foreign soldiers invading and occupying their cities. We are not presented with these Iraqi civilians from their perspectives as they cower in their homes or suffer the consequences of war in their neighborhoods, but rather from the perspectives of the American soldiers. The viewer is positioned as soldier and feel the threat of every Iraqi who dares peer at them under suspense of what might unfold in their presence. These Iraqi civilians are coded only as suspicious, and not threatened

but rather as a threat to our protagonists. In the first scene set in Iraq, Kyle is forced to debate whether to shoot a woman wearing a black *jellabiya* and her young son, who she hands an explosive grenade and sends him forward to confront a convoy of American soldiers. Here again, Iraqis are not civilians, but consistently a threat.

Lennart Soberon's analysis of *American Sniper* and its depiction of Iraq as a wild frontier, much like Western cowboy films depicted the American West, notes that the film was equally successful and profitable as it was controversial. After its release the film led to so many threats against Arab Americans that the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee had to request police protection from those who went to see the movie.¹⁸⁰ Soberon argues that despite it cast and production crew claiming that the film does not have a political message, "American Sniper has an obvious political agenda in advocating a view of the 2003 Iraq invasion—and the subsequent military measures taken in that context—as just and necessary" framed by what he calls "mythological mechanisms."¹⁸¹ Soberon identifies the film's use of "Western tropes, iconography and, most importantly, frontier mythology" and as a result the film "transfigures a politically complex conflict into a moral, manicheist struggle between civilization and savagery."¹⁸² Just as the early frontier settler "tamed" the American West from the natives, Kyle's four tours in Iraq are framed as a civilizing mission, one he undertakes out of a sense of duty to country and American values, as established in the opening scenes. This contrast between the wild country of Iraq and the domesticity and calm of America frames Iraq as

¹⁸⁰ Lennart Soberon, "The Old Wild West in the New Middle East": *American Sniper* (2014) and the Global Frontiers of the Western Genre," *European journal of American Studies*, 12-2, 2017, 1.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid*, 2.

¹⁸² *Ibid*, 2.

unwelcoming and hostile i.e., not as a home, despite it being a home for millions of Arab inhabitants. Iraq here is unmistakably something else, something dangerous and repulsive, but necessary to engage and tame, purportedly in defense of the American way of life. This narrative element of *American Sniper* sets it apart from *Thank You for Your Service* in that it makes a clear argument for the invasion of Iraq and the actions of soldiers there. As a result, *American Sniper* is in fact a distinctly political that sends a clear message that the invasion of Iraq was justified.

When one of Kyle's Arab insurgent nemeses, a sniper known as Mostafa, first appears in the film the *adhan* is again playing the background, signifying a connection between his being Muslim and an irredeemably evil enemy. And in a later scene when Kyle sees his brother in an American military airstrip in Iraq, his brother is completely shaken, distant, and seemingly traumatized, and tells our main character, "Fuck this place" (Similarly, in the opening scenes of *Thank You For Your Service*, we see the wall of a soldier's bunk spray painted with the words "Fuck Iraq"). Not long after this scene in *American Sniper*, Kyle is being given an assignment to pursue "the Butcher" in Iraq, with his commander telling him, "I want you to put the fear of god into these savages. Find his ass." The use of the word savages is particularly conspicuous here, not just for the framing of Iraqis as backwards in general, but also because of the numerous ways that *American Sniper* uses tropes from Western cowboy films and calls back to familiar frames for those familiar with such films.¹⁸³ When one of Kyle's fellow soldiers begins to doubt their mission in Iraq, saying "I just want to believe in what we're doing here," Kyle

¹⁸³ Ibid. 2.

responds, “There’s evil here. We’ve seen it... You want these motherfuckers to come to San Diego or New York? We’re protecting more than this dirt.” Significant in this exchange is the lack of any pretense that was commonly used in the US military’s reasoning for invading and occupying Iraq. Whereas the war itself was referred to as Operation: Iraqi Freedom and the common line is that the US was spreading democracy in the region, the occupation is framed here as “protecting dirt” and preventing the spread of the Islamist threat to the American homeland, a highly debated assertion that nonetheless is presented in *American Sniper* as an unquestioned principal reasoning for the war.

Not only the Arab street but also the Muslim family home is clearly rendered a site of danger for American soldiers in the film. One tense scene shows Kyle and his team of five other Marines breaking into an Iraqi civilian’s house with a sledgehammer, with Kyle then pointing his rifle in the face of a young Iraqi boy in the home. This scene is shot with a handheld camera, making the action at times hard to follow, giving the scene a hectic and chaotic feeling, giving the viewer the high-stress and overstimulated feeling one would have in real-life. Multiple American soldiers scream out orders in English at the Iraqi family in the house, making the scene even more chaotic and nearly indecipherable. The camera quickly darts between screaming soldiers and the Iraqis pleading for their lives in Arabic, women wailing and children crying, creating a growing crescendo of noise, increasing the stress level of the viewer along with a sense of things going dangerously wrong. This also gives the scenes a greater sense of realism in how the camera techniques imitate a documentary film or first-person viewpoint. Similarly, the

scene imitates the all too familiar scenes often seen on television news of American soldiers breaking into Iraqi homes searching for insurgent as they are filmed by embedded news reporters. The boy's father, Sheikh Al-Obodi, pleads with Kyle and tells him that his son does not understand English. Al-Obodi is punched in the face and detained, with Kyle saying, "I don't give a fuck if it's your house, this is a war zone, sir." Focusing his analysis on this scene, Kristian Petersen (2017) notes that "What unfolds in this scene is the discursive reclassification of 'family' and 'home' to 'combatants' and 'war zone,' with all the attendant social consequences" and that "It is through this interpretive move that the premise for mistrust is established."¹⁸⁴ It is scenes like these, seen in several films depicting the Iraq War, where the "Justification for the intrusion policy" where soldiers repeatedly break into civilians' home "is evident for the audience" and "further reinforces distrust for the general population by flattening the contestations of Muslim intentions into a singular motive, of undermining the US military."¹⁸⁵ The framing of these actions as justified within the theater of war absolves our main characters of their own actions and excuses their terrorizing innocent civilians in their own homes and streets if they are doing it in the name of protecting their own. For the viewer, every Iraqi is suspect, and denied the status of "innocent" or even "civilian." Every Iraqi here is coded as a threat, and even those that cooperate with the US military are ticking time bombs who will eventually reveal their true nefarious intents.

¹⁸⁴ Kristian Petersen, "Hollywood Muslims in Iraq," *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*, Volume 29, Number 2, (Summer 2017), 92.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid*, 92.

The release of *American Sniper* was met with a slew of articles and reviews praising its realism, despite numerous accusations raised that its subject, Chris Kyle, known as the deadliest sniper in US history, had embellished his record of military service in his book that served as the basis for the film. A story from *USA Today* opens by arguing that “For all the debate surrounding the movie *American Sniper*, few people know the moral choices involved in the job better than those trained to pull the trigger...For the sniper, killing is more personal, placing a heavy burden of responsibility on those that take up the profession.”¹⁸⁶ Noting that in past years snipers were considered cowards in the battlefield until the Vietnam era, the story praises the film for presenting “a more realistic look at snipers on the modern battlefield, replacing the Hollywood myth of a rogue operator with that of a highly trained sharpshooter — and one with a conscience.” After detailing how more skilled training and technology has also changed perceptions of snipers, the story closes with a quote from a veteran intended to praise their role: “As snipers we have a saying: ‘Kill one, terrorize thousands’.”¹⁸⁷ In 2015, the *SC Times* published an article highlighting several quotes from US military veterans and pro-military supporters who “couldn’t care less about what critics, celebrities or pundits have to say about the movie.”¹⁸⁸ For one person interviewed, “it was the realest portrayal of the war over there so far,” with another commenting that, even though he never met Kyle, “He was like our savior. ... The movie portrayed him as who he actually was.”¹⁸⁹ It

¹⁸⁶ Jim Michaels, “‘American Sniper’ as Viewed by Real American Snipers,” *USAtoday.com*, January 22nd, 2015.

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁸ Kate Kompass, “Veterans, Advocate Praise Realism of ‘American Sniper’,” *SCTimes.com*, January 23rd, 2015.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

is worth noting that a number of articles were also published by various news outlets that raised serious doubts about the accuracy of Kyle's book and therefore the film based on his life.¹⁹⁰

Reviewing the deeply racist but massively popular biopic *American Sniper*, Glenn Kenny (2014) writes that for director Clint Eastwood, "Violence and its relation to both American history and the American character is one of Eastwood's great themes as both a filmmaker and a film actor. But he is not a director of an overly analytical or intellectualizing bent, and this turns out to be one of this movie's great strengths." Glenn also sees it as a strength of *American Sniper* that it

has nothing to say about whether the war in Iraq was a good or bad idea. It simply IS, and Kyle is an actor in it, and he's also a devoted husband and father. But Kyle is more than just an actor in the war: he's a true believer in what he's doing, and his intensity in this respect bleeds into his relationships back at home in ways that can't help but be unsettling.

How Chris Kyle, the American sniper, is both "just an actor in the war" and yet also a "true believer" in a war that just factually "is" remains unclear.¹⁹¹

¹⁹⁰ See Courtney Duckworth, "How Accurate Is *American Sniper*?" Slate.com, January 23rd, 2015. http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2015/01/23/american_sniper_fact_vs_fiction_how_accurate_is_the_chris_kyle_movie.html

Alex Horton, "American Sniper Feeds America's Hero Complex, and it isn't the Truth About War," The Guardian, December 24th, 2014.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/dec/24/american-sniper-real-life-movies-hollywood>

Alex Von Tunzelmann, "Is American Sniper historically accurate?," The Guardian, January 20th, 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2015/jan/20/why-american-snipers-historical-dishonesty-misleads>

¹⁹¹ Glenn Kenney, "American Sniper," Rogerebert.com, December 25th, 2014. <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/american-sniper-2014>

The apparent inability of American film critics to analyze the best and worst of war films beyond the limiting parameters of deference to patriotic service and nationalism makes mainstream film criticism only further perpetuate the propagandistic message of traditional war films that heroize war or violence. This propagandistic effect of film criticism is surely much to the chagrin of some filmmakers who themselves have attempted to make films that look beyond nationalist clichés and do something greater than heroize wartime violence and its perpetrators. And while this propagandistic effect of film criticism may have waned for some time because of ‘Vietnam syndrome’, its effect has undoubtedly made a comeback along with the resurgence of patriotism in the post-9/11 environment. Were it not for 9/11 and the ensuing War on Terror, critics reviewing films like those above might have more objectively questioned the obvious bloodlust for Arabs and Muslims that permeates these films.

American Assassin

In *American Assassin* (2017), the main character, Mitch Rapp, initially trains himself to become a freelance anti-terrorist operative before being recruited by a Black Ops CIA unit. Rapp is motivated to become an anti-terrorist agent to avenge the death of his new fiancé who was shot by AK-47-wielding Muslim attackers who boated up to their picturesque beachside vacation in Ibiza in the opening scenes of the film. During his self-training in his neighborhood mixed martial arts gym, fueled by rage after the death of his fiancé, Rapp becomes overly aggressive with his sparring partner and is kicked out. Rapp angrily goes home and begins chatting undercover with Islamic militants online. With

tense dramatic music playing in the background, Rapp types in Arabic as we see closeup shots of the language unmistakably coded as mysterious, dangerous, and Other as he chats with an Islamist militant on aspects of Islam and *jihad*. After tricking the recruiter into believing he wants to join their cell, Rapp later enters what could be seen as a beautiful Libyan seaside town on a sunny afternoon, were it not for the inherent danger of the place signified by Arabic music echoing in the background as if it was played down a deserted alleyway. Like in the early scenes of this film mentioned above featuring the *adhan*, here again the echoing quality of the music is intended to be haunting and ominous to a Western audience. The sparse and deserted streetways portray a desolate and abandoned country, devoid of activity or witnesses. When Mitch is pretending to join the terrorist cell and he is about to exact his revenge on the leader who is responsible for the death of his fiancé, American special operatives execute an operation against the cell, saving his life but denying him his desired mode of violent justice.

After being recruited by the CIA (this section of the movie discussed below), when Mitch is sent on an undercover mission to Istanbul, Turkey he is told the city is “ready to blow,” and soon after enters a remarkably dark restaurant where all the shades are inexplicably closed despite it being in the middle of the afternoon. When we ultimately find out that the targets of Rapp’s mission are Iranian generals, yet another site of ominous danger, they are portrayed as driven only by their anti-Semitism and subsequent hatred of Israel, with one character providing the simple yet useful expositional line, “They want nuclear war with Israel.” Upon purchasing nuclear bomb-making material from an arms dealer the Iranians are told by the Russian arms dealer that

now “you can kill as many Jews as you want.” When the weapons dealer is preparing the nuclear bomb for detonation he comments, “You Iranians all probably learned this growing up,” as if nuclear physics and bomb-making is standard elementary school curriculum in Iran. The single line of dialogue is grotesque in its assumption of bombmaking being an inherent part of an Iranian child’s development, yet it is presented rhetorically, a throwaway line that provides a linkage of Iranian children and society with bombmaking and terrorism. The remainder of *American Assassin* retreats to the basic conventions of the Hollywood action film with large set pieces and explosions, culminating the ultimate victory of Mitch Rapp over the Islamic militants.

Beirut

Beirut, a 2018 film starring Jon Hamm and Rosamund Pike, is one of the most interesting films in this study if only for its historical setting amidst the Lebanese civil war in the early 1980s and the prominent role Palestinians play in the film. Though the film is set during the early years of the war and invokes several real historical events, it is a fiction film. Hamm stars as Mason Skiles, a US diplomat stationed in Lebanon in the early 1970s. In the opening scene Skiles and his wife host a dinner party as he smooth-talks and rubs elbows with other international diplomats while deftly discussing the complex civil war in Lebanon. Skiles’s comments on the situation in Lebanon take place from on high, both figuratively and literally, as he hosts a party in his lavish diplomatic residence atop a scenic hillside overlooking the city of Beirut and talks condescendingly about Arabs as if they are disagreeable children. From the high-level discussions taking place at his cocktail party, the viewer comes to understand that Skiles is supposed to be

very well versed on the situation in Lebanese and Arab politics and that other officials and politicians turn to him for insight, despite the religious complexities and resultant political instabilities of Lebanese society. But much like in *Munich*, Palestinians are distinctly portrayed as a nagging problem and a perpetual nuisance with no historical context. The Palestinians, their historical experience, status, or situation within international politics, nor their needs or goals, are given any depth or explanation; Palestinians simply *want or demand things* in both films. Hamm's character also describes the Lebanese people in classical Orientalist terms, as historically volatile and untrustworthy. Asked to explain the situation in Lebanon to a US congressman, Skiles says

...I like to tell people, if you want to understand Lebanon, think of a boardinghouse without a landlord. And the only thing that the tenants have in common is their talent for betrayal. So these people have been living together, cheek by jowl, for 20 centuries. So, 2,000 years of revenge, blood feuds, vendettas, murder. One night there's a storm. Raining like all hell. There's a knock at the door. Who is it? It's the Palestinians. They want in. They've been up and down the block, get doors slammed in their face. They're cold, they're tired. They want in, they want in now. So the house is thrown into confusion. Tenants, arguing. Some of them violently opposed. Some of them think, "Let them in, they'll be gone by morning." Some of them think, "If I let them in, then I'll have an ally against my enemy down the hall." Some of them are terrified as to what happens if they keep the door shut. So it isn't until after the Palestinians move in that the other people in the house realize the tragedy of the situation: that the Palestinians want nothing more than to just burn down the Israeli house next door. Welcome to Beirut.

Notable in Skiles's description of Beirut is its complete lack of historical context, namely the very reason for the confessional system of government in Lebanon imposed by French occupation after World War I or the displacement of Palestinians in 1948 and the

Arab-Israeli conflict in its wake that saw Palestinian militias operate in Lebanon in the 1970s and 80s. There is no mention of how the events of “June 1967 plunged Lebanon into the Arab-Israeli conflict, which it had sought to evade for so long” and how it became subject to “Israeli military retaliations that escalated into ‘preventative strikes’, which transformed the southern part of the country into a battlefield for years to come.”¹⁹² Also not mentioned in the monologue is that the PLO was overall “favorably welcomed by a population shocked by the Arab defeat of 1967.”¹⁹³ (p. 152). In this conversation, the actions of Israel do not even come into play, much less exist. The disagreeable and demanding Palestinians simply show up at the figurative doors of the Lebanese people and demand to be let in.

The plot of *Beirut* centers on the multiple traumas suffered by the white American characters at the hands of Palestinians in Beirut; Skiles’ wife is shot dead by a machine gun-wielding Palestinian, and white characters are kidnapped, held hostage, held at gunpoint, killed, or injured by a car bomb, or are repeatedly betrayed by Palestinians throughout the film. When his home is attacked by machine-gun wielding Palestinians wearing *keffiyehs*, Skiles’s soon-to-be adopted son, a 13-year-old Palestinian refugee named Karim Abu Rajal, is kidnapped by his older brother, Rafid Abu Rajal. We learn from a conversation between American agents that Rafid took part in the attacks in Munich (again, though *Beirut* is not based on a true story or on actual events, the 1972 Munich attack against Israeli athletes by Palestinians are used as a backdrop for these fictional characters).

¹⁹² Fawwaz Traboulsi, *A History of Modern Lebanon*, (Ann Arbor: Pluto Press, 2007), 152.

¹⁹³ *Ibid*, 152.

Skiles is so deeply shaken by the attack, the shooting death of his wife, and the kidnapping of his son, that he leaves Beirut and the diplomatic corps altogether. We find him 10 years later in 1983, a burned out depressive and traumatized alcoholic back in the United States now running a small two-person firm that mediates labor disputes. Skiles has clearly fallen from grace and his formerly high perch in the hills of Beirut when he was directing policy and running elbows with senators. After a rough trade union negotiation in an outdated and rundown hotel conference room, Skiles retreats to a darkened and dingy dive bar where he is approached by a sketchy former client. The man nervously passes Skiles an envelope full of cash and a passport and informs Skiles that the American government needs him to travel to Beirut that night for an urgent situation, using an academic lecture as a cover. Despite Skiles's initial outright refusal and expressed disdain for going to back to Lebanon, he relents and gets on the plane. Here we come to understand that Skiles only travels to a place like Lebanon, a place he reviles, because he has nothing left to lose. After Skiles is summoned by a team of American intelligence operatives he briefed on the situation, and told that his former friend from the CIA, Cal Riley, has been kidnapped. Through the rest of the film, Skiles slowly begins to regain his confidence, control his drinking, and put his negotiation skills to work throughout the film, outsmarting and out-negotiating one group of hapless Arabs after another, despite their propensity for violence and retribution when crossed.

During the first round of negotiations in a dilapidated building outside of Beirut, Skiles and his small team of operatives are confronted by a hostile, aggressive, older, unshaven Palestinian man who yells at them repeatedly in Arabic, with several younger

Palestinians in *keffiyehs* standing menacingly behind him. When everyone in the room loses patience with the old man's yelling, one of the young Palestinians pulls out a pistol and shoots him in the head, killing him dead in front of everyone. As the Americans react and compose themselves the young shooter removes the *keffiyeh* covering his face and reveals himself to be Karim Abu Rajal, Skiles's former adoptive son, now grown up and a member of a Palestinian militia. Karim Abu Rajal is no longer the fresh-faced and well-dressed boy we met in the opening scene in Skiles's residence. Karim is older, unshaven, sports shaggy hair, military fatigues, and the trademark Palestinian *kuffiyeh*.¹⁹⁴ Karim, we come to find, is now the ringleader of the kidnapping and ransom plot and a member of the fictional Militia of Islamic Liberation, a group, we are told, that is so extremist that they are rejected even by the PLO. There is no emotional reunion between Skiles and Karim, despite Skiles saying repeatedly in the earlier scenes that Karim is a "part of the family." Whereas Skiles previously planned to take in Karim and give him exceptional opportunities and love, we find that having fallen in with Palestinian Islamic extremists and now demanding the release of his older brother, Karim is now an irredeemable violent and hostile Palestinian militant. Karim's actions that signify his as a Palestinian militant largely derive from the essentialist depictions seen in mainstream news; he takes hostages, makes violent threats, wields guns, leads a militant cell, and shoots his comrade in the head almost naturally, without a second thought or sign of emotion beyond annoyance with his victim as he bleeds out on the table. For the remainder of the film, we are provided little depth or understanding of Karim's character as he spends most of his

¹⁹⁴ Traditional Arab headdress, now often worn as a scarf to express solidarity with Palestine.

time on screen making demands under threat of death, violently pushing Skiles into and out of old vans, or expressing his emotional agony over his incarcerated and notorious ‘terrorist’ brother.

It should be noted that despite being set in Lebanon and featuring Palestinians as a central component of the plot, every Palestinian character is a part of or becomes a member of a terrorist cell. The fact that Skiles and his wife intended to adopt Karim before he was kidnapped and raised by Palestinians strongly invokes a civilizing mentality and message from the film. Were Karim to stay with Skiles and his wife, Karim would have had loving parents, opportunity, and access. But here Karim is ‘raised by wolves,’ taken and raised by Palestinians. Inevitably, the film suggests, he becomes fully Palestinian—irrational, angry, disgruntled, demanding, and violent. Again, the Palestinians residing in Lebanon are established early on by the characters’ dialogue as an utter nuisance, completely hostile, and motivated only by their desire to destroy Israel (much like the Iranian generals in *American Assassin* only want to “destroy Israel”). As a singular character, Karim is simply one-dimensional and hell-bent on freeing his brother. He expresses no emotion upon being reunited with Skiles and nothing is mentioned of their shared personal past or close relationship, this sentimentality having been destroyed by his becoming fully Palestinian in culture and identity. Much like other films such as *Munich* or *Waltz With Bashir*, you would need to pick up a book about the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict to have any idea at all as to what motivates the Palestinians in *Beirut* or have any understanding of the historical roots of the conflict, and the modern history of the forcible displacement and occupation of Palestinians within their native country or

the exile of the Palestinian refugees diaspora. Instead, Palestinians are simply just there, devoid of historical context, a nuisance to be tolerated, and a perpetual problem for white Americans and Israeli protagonists to deal with.

Lose the War, Make Movies About the Victory: Masculinity and the Rewriting of History

Many of the films that portray the Iraq War, both fiction narratives and those based on true stories, actively rewrite, and reconstruct history and do so in a way that changes its meaning by assigning a more individualized moralistic lessons in such stories. These films center on smaller-scale victories, as the failure of wars must be rewritten to uphold the dominant interventionist ideology. Kellner and Parenti, among others, have noted this increase in films that rewrote the Vietnam War in the post-Vietnam era as well.¹⁹⁵ Though in real life both wars were lost amidst tremendous numbers of enemy casualties, the rejection of the native populations, and eventual US withdrawal, films set during these periods in history often portray a successful or winning effort on a smaller, individual scale. These films therefore show patriotic sacrifice and nationalistic resolve as the triumph itself, and elide the actual larger, and very real, geopolitical context of unjust, unwinnable wars waged upon their victims, and avoids questions about the war altogether. Mary Vavrus has also written on a similar effect amidst the Iraq War in her work on *Army Wives* where soldiers “are portrayed as ever heroic and self-sacrificing” sending the “not-so-subtle message that both warriors and the Army must be defended as

¹⁹⁵ See Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture* and Michael Parenti, *Make Believe Media*, both previously cited here.

partial compensation for soldiers' sacrifices; to question their work is to betray profound, even unforgivable selfishness."¹⁹⁶ Indeed, this message underlying almost all of the films containing individualized tales of self-sacrifice is unmistakable, especially considering *Thank You for Your Service*, which practically beats you over the head with ideology with its title alone. In following the same historical trajectory as I do here, Vavrus also points to how "war critics since Vietnam have nuanced their message to more clearly support the humans involved in war...while arguing against the bellicose mindset and policies that make war possible."¹⁹⁷ This is a great propagandistic achievement of televisual texts these televisual texts in circumscribing legitimate modes of criticism of American wars—criticize the war, not the soldiers who execute the war itself. Vavrus also highlights how every episode of *Army Wives*, just like the movies such as *Thank You for Your Service* and *American Sniper*, "foregrounds the concerns of soldiers and their families in situations that appear to be outside of politics (and discourse), thus making support of the troops apparently uncontroversial, even foreordained." This point also demonstrates the great ideological work of these texts in making "support our troops" an unquestionable, assumed, common sensical concept.

Smaller-scale, often singular character-focused individual victories in battle are highlighted and to demonstrate and restore military power and pride. Parenti points to films such as *Apocalypse Now*, *Platoon*, *Full Metal Jacket*, and *The Deer Hunter* as part of the "resurgence of racist and anticommunist stereotypes in the media" in the post-

¹⁹⁶ Mary Vavrus, "Lifetime's *ArmyWives*, or I Married the Media-Military-Industrial Complex," *Women's Studies in Communication*, 36:1, 92-112, (2013), 97.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 97.

Vietnam period.¹⁹⁸ Herein resides another linkage between the Vietnam War and US action in the Middle East and their reverberations in popular culture, where films are essentially a tool to restore militaristic pride, bandage old wounds, and reinforce dominant nationalistic ideology.

Yael Zerubavel's *Recovered Roots: Collective Memory and the Making of Israeli National Tradition* is a masterful study on this same process, in this case where pivotal events in Jewish history have been reconstructed to change their meaning within collective memory in service of Zionist ideology. Zerubavel focuses not on history itself but rather the history held in the popular consciousness, which, as I argue in the opening to this study, is arguably more important due to the resultant politics and policy that emerge out of collective understandings of history. As Zerubavel notes, no one is free from these shifting dynamics in the remaking of history, not even historians, and its meaning as "collective memory continuously negotiates between available historical records and current social and political agendas."¹⁹⁹ She also highlights the ways in which "the selection of certain points highlights the ideological principles underlying the master commemorative narrative by dramatizing the transitions between periods."²⁰⁰ Zerubavel's examples, the Battle of Tel Hai, the Bar Kokhba Revolt, and the fall of Masada all effectively demonstrate how in the earliest days of modern Zionism, tragic events in Jewish history were reconstructed and in turn assigned revised meanings,

¹⁹⁸ Michael Parenti, *Make-Believe Media*, 23.

¹⁹⁹ Yael Zerubavel, *Recovered Roots*, 5.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 9.

ultimately transformed from stories of oppression into narratives of Jewish strength and resolve.

Nationalist and masculinist ideology is clearly a driving force behind the apparent collective need to repair a damaged national psyche in the US as well. Kellner's analysis of *Rambo* provides an excellent demonstration on how "meathead-hero films can be read as expressions of white male paranoia which presents males as victims of foreign enemies, other races, the government, and society at large."²⁰¹ According to Kellner, the "return to Vietnam films also exhibit an attempt at re-masculinization, in which highly masculinist male behavior is celebrated."²⁰² He also points to Susan Jeffords (1989) excellent work, *The Remasculinization of America*, arguing that Vietnam severely injured American masculine pride and that a "vast amount of Vietnam films and literature deal with this problem" and "attempts to heal the wounds and to reconstruct a damaged male psyche."²⁰³ Many of the films about US military action in the Middle East that are listed above operate in essentially the same way in how they convey the might and right of interventionist foreign policies and "put on display the raw masculinism which is at the bottom of conservative socialization and ideology."²⁰⁴

The narrative and main protagonist of *Hurt Locker*, with its critical acclaim and Academy Awards, is unmistakably driven by a desire for danger and violent heroics in the theater of war and suspicious Iraqis, as its "distinctive visual style – its combination of documentary and action aesthetics - evokes a feeling of presence or immediacy which

²⁰¹ Douglas Kellner, *Media Culture*, 65-66.

²⁰² Ibid., 65.

²⁰³ As cited in Kellner, 65.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 65.

is belied by the studied avoidance of wider political or ideological themes in favor of a portrait of heroic male performance under pressure.”²⁰⁵ All of these films and their selective portrayal of history “provides an exploration of the nature of masculinity in relation to war, violence and fatherhood” in how the heroic protagonist becomes a man apart, rendered bored by mainstream society and forced back into the theater of war by his incessant need for danger and to be with his fellow soldiers.²⁰⁶ This theme is driven home perhaps most explicitly by the final scene of *Hurt Locker* showing the Jeremy Renner’s main character back in Iraq, confidently striding on his way to defuse a bomb set to a soundtrack of driving hard rock music, a scene that belongs more in a music video than an Oscar-winning film by any account.

Masculinist needs for violent revenge are a driving force of many of these films as well. In *American Assassin*, Mitch Rapp transforms from a loving shaggy-haired boyfriend proposing to his blonde fiancé to an intense rage-fueled self-trained killer after he witnesses her being killed by a brown-skinned Muslim, identified as such by his kufi cap and beard, along with their landing on the Ibiza beach in very small fishing boats (more akin to the real-life methods of Somali pirates than any other terrorist attack that has taken place). The viewer of *American Assassin* is intended to identify with Rapp’s anger and mentality in the wake of his traumatic experience, empathizing with his aggressively losing control on his sparring partner, angrily throwing knives at a target in his apartment, and shooting targets at an indoor gun range. Rapp’s drive for revenge takes

²⁰⁵ Yvonne Tasker & Eylem Atakav, “The Hurt Locker: Male Intimacy, Violence and the Iraq War Movie,” *Sinecine* 1(2), 57-70, 2010, 58.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

him to the coastal Algerian town where he deceives the militant leader who masterminded the attack that killed his girlfriend by posing as a potential recruit. When Rapp is about to make his move and kill him, he is interrupted by US Special Forces operatives and snipers who burst into the room and kill him first. Rapp, blown to the floor by the action and denied his revenge, crawls over and in a fit of rage repeatedly stabs the dead body before he is dragged off by the Special Forces operatives. The viewer soon learns, informed by conversations between CIA operatives, that they like Mitch Rapp's "agenda" but that he has a "bad psych profile." Nonetheless, despite his acknowledged psychological instability, he is recruited to join a CIA Black Ops team and train at a remote cite under the tutelage of Stan Hurley, played by Michael Keaton, who we are told previously "served in the Gulf." Soon Rapp's masculinist rage, only mentioned previously in the film as a liability, and revenge-fueled anti-terrorist agenda, is portrayed as his primary asset in becoming a CIA Black Ops "American assassin." Other agents comment on how Rapp has "talent and balls," but he is warned by Hurley to "Never, ever let it get personal" and "Don't let emotions cloud your judgement." Despite these lines of dialogue, the viewer is clearly meant to understand that Rapp's need for violent masculinist revenge over his dead fiancé is his strongest asset as an operative.

As briefly mentioned above, one of the more difficult and nonsensical masculinist elements of some of these films is the juxtaposition of sex scenes set against depictions of violence and trauma. *American Sniper* depicts Chris Kyle watching the events of 9/11 on television with a horrified expression on his face, then quickly transitions to another closeup of Kyle's face on the shooting range as he takes a single shot with his sniper rifle,

then another quick cut to Kyle naked in bed with his fiancé. In *Munich*, there are several quick cuts in one scene in the film as the screen switches back and forth from images of Palestinian militants killing Israeli athletes to images of Avner having sex with his wife. In this scene, explicit violence is set against recurrent images of Avner on top of his wife, sweating and seemingly traumatized as he makes love to her, thinking about and replaying the images of the killings in his mind while he has sex. Avner, clearly in emotional distress while making love to his wife, climaxes while the screen repeatedly cuts back to crescendos showing the violence of the attack in Munich. In *Thank You for Your Service* we again see our main protagonist having sex with his wife while in his mind he is reliving his traumatic experience in Iraq when his close friend was killed, and he was forced to carry his dead body out of a building as his friend's blood runs all over his body and into his mouth, a specific point of trauma that emerges repeatedly throughout the film. The connection between these scenes of sex and violence appears to be simple, in that the films are drawing a linkage between sex, violence, war, and masculinity itself.

Although I do not analyze the film *Hurt Locker* here, Kristian Petersen's article "Hollywood Muslims in Iraq" presents an excellent analysis of the film, which was released to critical acclaim and won six 2010 Academy Awards, including Best Picture, and contains many of the same themes and textual elements found above. *Hurt Locker* follows a bomb squad stationed in Baghdad during the height of the Iraq War and portrays the effects the war has on them. The film is partly a meditation on trauma and

war, and rife with Orientalist depictions. Petersen's analysis, like mine presented here as well as in Evelyn Alsultany's work cited in this study, demonstrates and examines how "films' depictions within visual, discursive, and sonic fields of production" and the meanings they convey about Muslims "signify specific meanings to the audience, which render Muslims distrustful, threatening, and uncivilized, thereby legitimizing specific treatment and policies toward them"²⁰⁷

Petersen identifies important common elements between both *American Sniper*, *Thank You for Your Service*, and *Hurt Locker*, in that they both received great praise from film critics, that the main characters of the film have trouble striking a balance between their commitments to the US military and their family and civilian lives. He also points to a point I raise earlier here on the substantial persuasive power of film, in this case "an aesthetic of verisimilitude, which powerfully accomplishes viewer immersion and acceptance of the mediated world," where "what is left for the audience is a hyperreality that is artfully designed, coded based on audience expectations, and clandestinely fictionalized"²⁰⁸ The hyperrealism of these films is a very important point for this study, as the argument on the immersive nature of these films can be applied to almost all of them due to their high quality of production, acting, and directing. As is also the case with the films I analyze above, Petersen identifies how within the films "One frequently encounters mosque-centered frames, male-dominated social settings, women in dark veils, and angry *kufiyah*-wearing Arabs." Here, "the viewer is presented with a

²⁰⁷ Kristian Petersen, "Hollywood Muslims in Iraq," 87.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 88.

war zone that is demarcated as a stereotypical Muslim space.”²⁰⁹

Petersen’s analysis of the two films can also be applied to all of the films I analyze here, in that they all obscure “the line between extremists and the overdramatized” Arab populations they depict. Across these films “the civility of Muslim civilians is perpetually questioned, and the general public is framed as a potential threat and source of danger” as is the physical space of the Muslim world, as I have demonstrated above.²¹⁰ Petersen also points to how “the relational hierarchy between ‘Us’ and ‘Other,’” a prominent element of my analysis here, “is accomplished through the demarcation of both the environment and its inhabitants as innately inferior, evolutionarily primitive, trapped in tradition, and requiring elevation.”²¹¹ Throughout these films, Iraq and the wider Middle East is portrayed as “undesirable for Americans, made up of barren, crumbling, and littered stretches” and “barren and inhospitable” in general.²¹² This is expressed in the graffiti reading “Fuck Iraq” seen in *Thank You For Your Service*, in the repeated warnings Kyle is given about Iraq, and the numerous textual elements *American Assassin* that portray rather mundane Middle Eastern spaces as deeply dangerous.

Orientalist depictions feature prominently in the films analyzed here. They also draw their simplistic depictions and borrow the same tropes from one another and from past Orientalist discourse. I want to turn my focus here into more recent films about US/Israeli encounters with the Middle East that couch their racism is much more subtle

²⁰⁹ Ibid., 89.

²¹⁰ Ibid., 92.

²¹¹ Ibid., 94.

²¹² Ibid., 94.

and complex ways. It is these representations of the Other that become even more problematic when combined with the dominant discourse of film critics framing such films as having value in their supposedly being apolitical, humanistic, empathetic, and accurate in their narratives of human experience, history, conflict, war, and violence, as outlined in the previous chapter. These framings set up the viewer to generate empathy and understanding within themselves. This elicitation of empathy from their viewer might be true on a very shallow surface level, but the more deeply coded racism and Orientalism in these films operates in much more subtle ways. The modern war film sells to the viewer the feeling or perception of enlightenment about the Other, when in fact the inherent racism that pervades US and Israeli policies and practices of war have simply been re-inscribed in more subtle ways.

Chapter 3

Superior Saviors and the Sacrificial Other

Native Informants and the Sacrificial Disposability of Arab Lives

Having discussed the Middle East as a site of trauma and inherent danger in a number of films, this chapter turns to representations of Arab and Muslim characters in particular who are ultimately sacrificed in the service of the American/Israeli civilizing mission, yet concurrently deemed unworthy of grief, rendering them secondary and disposable. Both ‘enlightening’ and ‘difficult’ films, as I frame them here, often perform these effects by using non-White characters, sometimes known as native informants. These native informants are understood to be ‘good guys’ of a lesser order within these narratives in their dissenting from their home country and people, and align themselves with the colonizing or invading military protagonists. Viewers are meant to form an attachment to these characters, who are sometimes revealed to be double-agents and at other times proven to be pure of heart. Almost without exception though, these native informants are killed or sacrifice their lives. There is grief from the American and Israeli present in these instances, albeit brief, and the function of that grief is largely to humanize the heroic protagonist and defuse the racism that permeates these films.

Evelyn Alsultany has written extensively on how “the production and circulation of ‘positive’ representations of the ‘enemy’ has become essential to projecting the United States as benevolent, especially in its declaration of war and passage of racist policies and notes that entertainment and news media on the one hand and “the ways that the US

government has portrayed recent history on the other, are ‘inextricably linked.’”²¹³ I share her framework here in understanding “interrelated ‘government and media discourses’...together forming a hegemonic field of meaning.”²¹⁴ Also seen in all my analyses here as throughout this study is “the lengthy history of Orientalist tropes.”²¹⁵ Many of these tropes have remained unchanged for well over a century, a direct reflection of how the Western world sees the Middle East and Arabs as unchanging, trapped in the past, almost fixed in time. Alsultany has also noted how Arabs are all conflated as Muslims and deployed strategically because this conflation “draws on centuries-old Orientalist narratives of patriarchal societies and oppressed women, of Muslim fundamentalism and anti-Semitism, of irrational violence and suicide bombings.”²¹⁶ This dynamic is clearly seen in films where the use of violence is purely irrational, often anti-Semitic, and driven by pure fanaticism. This representational mechanism is directly reflected in President George W. Bush’s ahistorical and simplistic declaration that terrorists “hate our freedoms.”²¹⁷ In these films, the terrorists are not only irrational, their only logic is pure evil.

Shooting and Crying: The ‘Humanistic’ Film and ‘Both Sides’ Narrative

²¹³ Evelyn Alsultany, *Arabs and Muslims in the Media: Race and Representation After 9/11*, 7.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 7.

²¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 9.

²¹⁷ George W. Bush, “Address to a Joint Session of Congress and the American People,” White House Archives, September 20th, 2001.

<https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>

While the Orientalist, ahistorical, and racist textual representations of Arabs and Palestinians in films are damaging in their own right, the effect is compounded when the viewer is primed by critics to interpret the problematic representations not only as apolitical, but also as humanistic or simply empathetic to the Other portrayed onscreen. Furthermore, these subtly problematic media representations are for many viewers the only encounter they might ever have with an Arab/Muslim/Palestinian, making these films more influential on the viewer as they have no realistic basis from which to make critical assessments of the representations or dominant ideological themes contained therein. Nonetheless, the viewer is left feeling more informed, enlightened, and connected to the global world around them from watching a ‘difficult’ film set within an international or intercultural context through a particular ideological lens. The viewer, meanwhile, is none the wiser to the fact that the ‘humanistic’ film that formed their understandings is in fact deeply problematic, if not completely removed from reality and history, in the film’s service of racism and cultural, religious, and supremacist underlying ideology.

As my analysis showed in the last chapter and will further demonstrate in this one, often Arabs do not appear in these films at all but are nameless, faceless agents of trauma and death for American and Israeli protagonists. In the case of *American Sniper*, for example, it is glaring that every Iraqi who appears in the first 32 minutes of the film is shown almost solely through the scope of a rifle and that not a single one of them survives; every single Iraqi who appears in those first 32 minutes, whether man, woman, or child, is shot dead. In *Waltz with Bashir*, the vast majority of Palestinians and Arabs in

the film appear almost only as corpses, devoid of life, voice, or agency; their bodies are merely background props to the protagonist's 'Shoot and Cry' narrative. I argue that the most important aesthetics that now reify patterns identified by Shaheen and Alsultany are found in the "Shoot and Cry" genre of film.

In Shoot and Cry films, the protagonist is a "trauma hero" who is "indifferent to both nationalist justifications for the war and to anti-imperialist critiques," and simply "observes, suffers, and testifies."²¹⁸ The trauma hero, in being apolitical, then is above criticism and in a conduit for the viewer to experience the horrors of war without having to wrestle with its politics, motivations, or consequences. When we experience war through the trauma hero protagonist, war simply exists devoid of larger context. According to Holstun, "Late modernist war narratives have lost high modernism's obsessive historical interests, becoming not merely nonhistorical, but antihistorical, from the global level (by erasing primitive accumulation and imperial conquest) to the level of the individual sentence (by collapsing subject and object, cause and effect). The resulting "shoot and cry" narrative... provides US readers with heightened affect and a political alibi."²¹⁹

Holstun notes that "Shoot-and-cry also permeates the films, fiction, and memoirs coming out of America's wars since 1965, which spend much more time on American trauma than on foreign perfidy, suffering, or writing."²²⁰ He also does well in drawing a distinction between "simple racism or the colonial "othering" familiar from Edward

²¹⁸ Jim Holstun, "Shoot and Cry: Modernism, Realism, and the Iraq War Fiction of Kevin Powers and Justin Siroi," *Cultural Critique*, 104, (Summer 2019), 1.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 2.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 5.

Said's analysis of orientalism." It is worth quoting Holstun at length here to understand how shoot-and-cry narratives deny

responsibility for the other's suffering while appropriating it as an authenticating experience. The detached moments of isolated, ostensibly uncaused traumatic affect form an alibi for the colonial narrative they comprise. Serious Iraq War films, fiction, and memoirs seldom affirm the war as a positive, patriotic good. Rather, they question its merits and parody a lost patriotic narrative, ultimately presenting the war as senseless or absurd. But instead of going on to analyze and attack the war as an imperial assault, they tend to bracket its moral and political status and assimilate it to an existential fate. Indeed, they reaffirm the narrative of duty, replacing anything like ideological reflection with a focus on the agonized loyalty among small groups of US soldiers.²²¹

Shoot-and-cry genre films are essentially agnostic about war itself and only provide then the affective experience of war, devoid of context or meaning beyond that of the pain of the colonizer or invader. The cost of war is not paid by the native, only the soldier who shoots and cries over their own misdeeds. When observing how shoot-and-cry narratives operate and provide the aforementioned "political alibi," and considering the questionable-at-best motivations for US wars in the Middle East, it should be no surprise at the dominance of this affective turn in modern war films since the Vietnam War.

Also damaging are the "difficult" films that on its surface appear to make the viewer struggle with complex issues, but nonetheless reinforce Orientalist and racist perceptions with little redeeming value. Nearly all the films analyzed here can be framed as "difficult" if only because they deal directly with issues of war, violence, death, and trauma. In these instances, the viewer believes they have watched a film that counters the

²²¹ Ibid., 5-6.

dominant pro-war ideology and thus leave the film with a sense of self-satisfaction, having purportedly subjected themselves to such a “difficult” film. In the end, the viewer feels satisfied with themselves for experiencing or bearing witness to such “difficult” modes of life of the Other. This experience through film, though perhaps emotional, uncomfortable, or disturbing, is itself illusory in its distinct narrative distance from reality, along with the fact that the screen can be turned off and turned away from (if not forgotten altogether). In the same way a white conservative American might feel that they more deeply understand the Iraq War after watching *American Sniper*, so too might a liberal American feel that they are more understanding of the Arab-Israeli conflict after watching *Munich*.

Many popular films that render lives ungrivable and sacrificial have been elevated to prominence thanks to film critics and their racial colorblindness and ignorance of the politics surrounding the historical events these films portray. *Munich* and *Waltz with Bashir* originate from different genres of film, both have been described as humanistic and as films that struggle with difficult issues of the Arab-Israeli conflict but propagate overlapping Otherings of Palestinians.

Here I analyze how ‘Shoot and Cry’ narratives (also sometimes referred to as “Shoots and Cries”) are presented in film and news media; how these narratives shift the cultural logics of masculinity, violence, nationalism, and war; and how these narratives affect the collective memory of war and conflict in the US and Israel. I am primarily interested in how these films each promote mourning and ascribe meaning in the death and violence of war but concurrently circumvent any critical examination of war and

violence itself. The only meaning that remains in most of these narratives is that the war and violence of nationalistic war contains meaning due to the sheer death, pain, and sacrifice in what is often labelled the ‘defense of freedom’ or ‘service to country.’ This is an active public memory project that is necessary to heal a country’s collective consciousness after extensive casualties in wars that have been essentially lost, as is the case in the Vietnam War and the 2003 Iraq War. For the purposes of nationalism, the history of losing wars must be rewritten and evaluated through different frames so that wider efforts like the War on Terror or the occupation of Palestine can continue unabated and with public support.

Native Informants in the *The Kingdom* and *American Assassin*

There are numerous ‘good Arabs’ throughout *The Kingdom* (2007), though they are positioned this way due to their subservience and deference to their American counterparts, shared values established within the story, and their assistance provided to the FBI. There are telling distinctions drawn between good Arabs and bad Arabs throughout the film. For example, when the FBI is negotiating to be let into Saudi Arabia to investigate a large terror attack, they are only let in when they threaten to expose the corruption of a Saudi official. Later, the American FBI team, led by Jamie Foxx’s character Special Agent Ronald Fleury, whose close friend and fellow FBI agent was killed in the attack. Fleury’s personal stakes in finding those responsible is established early in the film when he goes to meet with his friend’s widow and young son. After starting the mission and entering Saudi Arabia, Fleury befriends some of his Saudi

counterparts because of a shared values of secular patriotism for one's own country and their mutual desire for vengeance of their friends who have been killed. In other words, his Saudi allies are never established to have Muslim identities; here their identities are flattened, rendered merely as allies. The primary 'good Arab' in the film is Colonel Faris Al-Ghazi, played by Ashraf Barhoum. Fleury and Al-Ghazi find their common bond when Al-Ghazi tells Fluery that he no longer cares about why people were attacked and that he only wants to catch those responsible (this conversation interestingly evades any discussion of Islam or religion with a Muslim character in the context of motivations for the attack). Now all he knows is that "When we catch the men who murdered these people, I don't care to ask even one question. I want to kill him. Do you understand?" Fluery replies "Yes, I do," and gives a slight smile showing his approval and their shared mission of violent revenge. Then he asks the Colonel's first name and they officially become friends. Near the end of the film, as the joint Saudi-US team finally locates their terrorist mastermind target, Al-Ghazi is predictably killed during the operation, sacrificing his life so that the American operatives can complete their mission. Fluery comforts Al-Ghazi as he dies only by informing him, "We got him." Fluery later visits Al-Ghazi's son, invoking their shared family values and calling back to his visit with his FBI colleague's family.

Released in 2017, *American Assassin* is an adaptation of a series of popular novels by Vince Flynn. The novels each follow the fictional Mitch Rapp, who is recruited to become an assassin for the US government after his girlfriend is killed by Muslim militants. Despite being a wholly generic Hollywood action-thriller full of nearly every

stereotype of the genre, the film still managed to garner over \$65 million at the box office.

The film opens with Mitch Rapp and his blonde fiancé on an Ibiza beach. Just moments after he has proposed to her on the beach and walks away to get celebratory drinks, several brown-skinned assailants armed with AK-47s and wearing *khameeses*²²² and kufi caps pull up to the beach in several small boats. The use of small boats reminds us of the images of Somali pirates, the first of several essentializations of Islamic militant behavior in this film. The attackers on the beach are completely emotionless and expressionless as they open fire on beachgoers. As Mitch Rapp attempts to locate his new fiancé and get to her, one of the attackers who is wearing a kufi cap and sporting a long dark beard kills her nearly point blank and in cold blood before Mitch's eyes. Almost immediately we come to understand that *American Assassin* is overall a masculinist revenge fantasy film wherein Mitch Rapp will channel his loss and anger into violent vengeance.

After the killings we find that Mitch Rapp has become a human rage machine with suggestions of him having PTSD. Instead of the usual lamenting and evoking of sympathy over the main character's PTSD that we see in most of the films here, Mitch's experience only fuels his rage and seem to increase his physical abilities. Soon Mitch is visiting a Mixed Martial Arts gym, where he acts overly aggressive with his training partners to the point that he is kicked out of the gym because he cannot control his violent inclinations. In these scenes the viewer is positioned to empathize with Mitch and share

²²² A long, ankle-length garment worn by Muslims

in the experiences and rage that fuels his violence because we have witnessed his traumatic experience. Doubling down on practices that are severely frowned upon in real life, Mitch then angrily goes to a shooting range where his rage apparently transforms him into an expert marksman, even shooting target practice with a fully automatic assault rifle.

After Mitch is kicked out of the gym and he makes his trip to shooting range, he returns home to get on his computer and begin typing in Arabic, here coded as mysterious and exotic through the composition of the scene, including music and lighting that renders the Arabic language mysterious and ominous. Mitch then spends time watching what we understand to be Islamic militant recruitment and propaganda videos, and the viewer comes to understand that Mitch is now operating as a freelance independent counterterrorism double-agent of sorts. Mitch then rounds out his day by angrily throwing tactical throwing knives at a board in his room.

The next scene shows to a seaside scene in Algeria, which by all accounts appears to be a normal scenic and sunny beachside town in North Africa, but the eerie and ominous music playing over the scenery informs us that danger is imminent; be scared, there are Arabs here. Eventually Mitch walks down a littered alleyway to meet up with a mysterious Arab man wearing a scarf and is eventually led to safehouse. The militants Mitch is dealing with here must have fallen on financially hard times, considering their safehouse has no lights and little furniture, leaving them to either stand or sit at the lone folding card table or sit at one of the two folding chairs available, now occupied by Mitch Rapp and their apparent leader. After a short conversation the US agents conducting

surveillance stage an operation and kill all of them with murderous precision, leaving Mitch extremely distraught that he has been denied revenge over his fiancé's killer.

We then find our protagonist in a meeting with US operatives in a center of intelligence and operations. A US agent states that “I like your agenda, Mitch” and that his anti-terrorism skills are “through the roof” but he has a bad “psych profile.” We also come to learn that these same agents are working on a situation involving Russia and stolen plutonium. Enter Michael Keaton’s character Stan Hurley, a former Navy SEAL and Cold War veteran who also “has served in the Gulf” and becomes the tough mentor that will whip Mitch into shape and complete his training into an anti-terrorism superhero. Mitch is brought out to a non-descript house in the woods and he joins a group of men being trained as special operative agents called Orion. Interestingly, the trainees are shown by Hurley how to correctly slice an enemy’s throat, and not to slice horizontally across the throat since it is only done like that “in the movies,” instilling an apparent sense of realism for the viewer. Ultimately, the trainees are told “You’re a ghost. You do not exist.”

Later in his training Mitch is in a high-tech room where trainees must navigate around holograms of civilians and ‘kill’ a simulated terrorist. The trainees receive an electric shock if they are shot by the enemy or kill a civilian. In another demonstration of Mitch’s inherently “bad psych profile” he endures multiple electric shocks and severe pain but remains physically functional against all odds so that he can kill the designated terrorist hologram. Here we come to understand that Mitch’s “bad psych profile” and drive for revenge is not a problem and is in fact an asset, and arguably why he was

chosen by the US government to join the anti-terrorism strike force. However, this message in the text is contradicted when Stan Hurley tells Mitch Rapp to “Never, ever let it get personal” and “Don’t let your emotions cloud your judgement,” despite Rapp’s deep personal motivations for fighting terrorism in the first place.

During Mitch’s training we come to find that some nuclear material from a Russian facility has gone missing and will find its way into the hands of Iranians who oppose the international denuclearization agreement made with Iran. The US is secretly dealing with Iranian officials, including a general and Minister of Defense, both of whom are established as two-faced liars and untrustworthy as they attempt to work around treaties due to their involvement with “Hezbollah, Hamas, Houthis,” establishing a grab bag of nefarious Shia enemies. When the nuclear material is being sold in Poland it is stolen by a mysterious third party, who is later identified as a rogue former Orion agent, now known by the name “Ghost.”

Furthering the coding of the Middle East region as an inherently dangerous place, Mitch, Stan, and another operative fly to Turkey to visit an arms dealer, where Stan states that Istanbul is “ready to blow.” While attempting to intercept the triggering device for a nuclear bomb, they enter a Turkish restaurant, wherein again the room is very darkly lit, rendering the location mysterious, uncertain, and dangerous. After the meeting goes sideways and violence breaks out Stan orders the mission cancelled because Mitch acts impulsively and refuses to “stand down” as ordered. Mitch pursues a foreign operative to his apartment, kills him, and steals his laptop. Soon after, however, it is stated that Mitch has “talent and balls.”

As the film progresses Arab and Iranian militants become completely interchangeable, despite the reality of tensions between Iran and most of the Arab world, and their differences in ideology, aims, and methods. In the filmic world of Mitch Rapp, the American Assassin and in keeping with the core aspects of Orientalist depictions, characteristics of the Other are flattened and become one and the same. Mitch soon teams up with Annika, who is attractive but of somewhat mysterious origins. The depiction of Iranians becomes essentially a caricature when the rogue agent, Ghost, is selling the nuclear device to Iranian extremists in Rome and says, "You Iranians all probably learned this growing up," as if an obsession with nuclear weapons permeates Iranian society, including children. As the weapon is being prepped it is found out by the viewer that the Iranian extremists want to trigger a nuclear war with Israel. Ghost tells the Iranians they can "kill as many Jews as you want," now marking the Iranians not only as obsessed with obtaining nuclear weapons, but also identifying their end goal as fervently antisemitic.

After the group travels to Rome in pursuit of the nuclear device, Stan Hurley meets with one of his Iranian contacts who is trustworthy and honest with Stan about his interests, they come under attack by Ghost. Ghost kills Stan's Iranian contact and captures Stan. Meanwhile in their safe house in Rome, Mitch comes to suspect the attractive foreign agent Annika is in fact a double-agent, leading him to assault her by repeatedly dunking her head in a bathtub full of water while screaming "You're Iranian, aren't you?! Are you Iranian intelligence?!". Soon after Annika admits to working for Iran, although the main Iranian elements trying to stop the extremists from setting off the nuclear device, she is being escorted out of the safehouse by Israeli Mossad agents. As

she is being driven away, Mitch intercepts the car and takes her. They work together and find a series of tunnels in which the Iranian hardliners are working with Ghost, where Stan is also being held and tortured by Ghost. After Annika and Mitch violently kill some guards in the tunnels, they find a severely wounded Stan and Ghost. During a hostage standoff situation, Annika kills herself with Ghost's gun so that Mitch and Stan can escape. Ghost is able to get onto a boat with the nuclear device, headed for a fleet of US Navy ship off the coast. Mitch pursues Ghost, kills him on the boat, and stops the destruction of the Navy fleet by throwing the nuclear bomb into the water, creating a massive tidal wave that the fleet survives.

American Assassin prominently features the female native informant character, Annika, played by Iranian-Canadian actress Shiva Nivar. After the trained US operative assassin Mitch Rapp is assigned Annika as a mission partner from the US Foreign Service, he is the one who later exposes her to be an Iranian double-agent. She reveals she is a double agent but is in fact working within the Iranian regime to stop the hardline fundamentalist rogue generals from her country. As Annika is being taken away in a car by Mossad agents to meet her fate after now being revealed as a not-quite-double-agent, Rapp intervenes and 'goes rogue,' crashes into their car, and seizes Annika so they can go complete his revenge mission against "Ghost," the arms dealer who is supplying plutonium to Iranian terrorists. After Mitch uses his car to mow down Iranian foes in a concrete tunnel, a particularly violent scene, Annika is soon held at gunpoint by Ghost in a standoff with Rapp. With Ghost holding a gun to her, Annika dramatically tells Mitch, "I want to see my family," having previously revealed that her family was all dead in an

earlier scene. With Rapp briefly pleading with her, Annika grabs Ghost's gun and shoots herself in the head, implausibly and needlessly sacrificing herself for the apparent benefit of Rapp's mission. With the sheer nonsensical and unnecessary nature of Annika's death, her character's actions unmistakably reflect stereotypes of Muslims as having a death drive or propensity for motivated suicide.

The final sequence finds Stan Hurley recovering from his injuries and saying that Mitch Rapp is now on vacation in Dubai, while also watching a news report stating that the Iranian group who attempted to steal and detonate the nuclear material will win the Iranian elections. The final scene is of members of the Iranian group in Dubai entering an elevator in which Mitch Rapp is waiting with a smile on his face.

MUNICH

Stephen Spielberg's *Munich* was released in 2005 to much critical acclaim and was nominated for numerous Academy Awards including Best Picture. Based on a true story, the film is largely be interpreted as a meditation on the costs of terrorism and violence for those who fight it. The film attempts to present a humanistic portrait of Mossad agents who have been secretly commissioned by the Israeli government to avenge the killing of eleven Israeli Olympic athletes taken hostage and killed by a militant faction of Palestinians known as Black September in 1972. The film opens with the initial entry of Black September members infiltrating the Israeli Olympic athlete's quarters in Munich, immediately killing some of them who resist. The events that unfolded as the hostages are moved and ultimately murdered when the rescue effort fails

are revisited throughout the film, inserted occasionally to provide dramatic effect for the motivations, and later misgivings, of Avner, played by Eric Bana.

Despite its intents to show the human suffering produced by terrorism and the vengeance it can elicit, *Munich* so thoroughly Others Arab Palestinians that any productive message is lost in the Orientalist images presented. Despite the opening scenes featuring members of Black September and many of the scenes set in Israel and Palestine, it is not until almost a half hour into the movie that the word “Palestine” or “Palestinians” is uttered by any of the main characters in the film. Prior to this mention, Palestinians are referred to as “Arabs,” “*fedayyin*,” “Arab terrorists,” and “people like these.” The first invocation of the actual existence of Palestinians comes over 12 minutes into the movie when Golda Meier, portrayed as unsure of her decision to exact revenge upon the members of Black September, describes Palestinians as such: “The people, they want to destroy us...Forget peace for now...We have laws, we represent civilization...I don’t know where these maniacs are or where they come from.” Unfortunately, neither does the viewer of *Munich* since, just like in *Beirut*, no context or background is provided about the Palestinians in Black September or their motivations for undertaking terrorism. Instead, we are presented with a stark dichotomy as in traditional Orientalist texts—the Palestinians are purely evil, driven only by their desire to destroy Israel, and in Meier’s words here, unrecognizable, whereas Israel is clearly legible and representative of Western civilization and values.

Soon after the viewer is informed of the incivility of Palestinians and the senselessness of their violent actions, we see Avner making love to his pregnant wife at

home. Here the Mossad agent is presented as a sexual being, a family man and a lover with much to lose in the form of his wife and unborn child. Avner's wife is similarly loving, affectionate, and supportive of her husband. Meanwhile, the only representations of Palestinian spouses found in *Munich* are that of hysterical women weeping when the newsman on television states that the "Arab terrorists" of Black September are dead. Thus, the Mossad agent as a lover and family man is set against nameless, faceless, terrorists whose families only come into play for a few select seconds of the film. And in the select moments when Palestinian families are shown, they speak Arabic, yet often no translated subtitles are provided, further Othering the Arab characters and rendering them even more unrecognizable and unrelatable to the assumed Western viewer.

Tropes from the Orientalist rendition of the history of Israel-Palestine emerge at many points in the film as well. The revenge killings are framed in terms of the apparent weakness of Israel because it is just "a small country." The Palestinian connection to their land is rendered inauthentic or false when one Palestinian character is told by the main character Avner that he should leave Palestine and settle elsewhere because "You are Arabs, there are lots of places for Arabs." In essence this line essentializes all Arabic cultures into one, painting them as a mass of commonality and sameness, as is often a method of Othering peoples of the Middle East throughout Western Orientalist historiography.

The Mossad agent characters in *Munich* that carry out the targeted revenge killings of Palestinians throughout the film are all developed into deeply human and caring individuals, despite their numerous methods for violently killing Palestinians. The

only personality conflicts that emerge among them is when one of the Mossad operatives begins to question the morality of their revenge killings, and even when such issues arise, the character with moral qualms is quickly killed off as happens twice in the film. The message because of these events is that even questioning the morality of such acts can only end in weakness and death. In addition, the agents purportedly make every effort to avoid civilian casualties. At one point, one of the Mossad agents declares “It’s strange to think of yourself as an assassin.” No such qualms are mentioned by Palestinian characters in the film, who barely speak and for whom the morals of killing are apparently natural and never brought into question.

However, when Avner truly begins to question to morality of the killings he commits for Mossad, he is consistently reassured by other characters as to the righteousness of his actions. Among other justifications, Avner is explicitly told “If these guys live, Israelis die... You know this is true,” and “You killed for the future, for peace.” When Avner again confronts his Mossad supervisor in the closing scene of the movie and expresses his misgivings, he is left standing all alone, rendered small by a wide-angle shot set against the skyline of New York City. As he struggles with the actions, he has undertaken to avenge the killings of the Israeli athletes and the viewer is left to sympathize with the burden Avner bears as a revenge killer, he walks away and out of the frame. As the scene fades out, we see the Twin Towers in the background, which would be destroyed decades later in the 9/11 attacks, a vivid calculation laid out for the viewer that all terrorism is essentially the same and must be dealt with such as the characters in the film have done, lest history repeat itself.

WALTZ WITH BASHIR

Palestinians and Lebanese Arabs occupy an even more insignificant role in the 2009 part-animated film, part-documentary *Waltz with Bashir*, another popular film that garnered numerous awards and accolades upon its release, including nominations for a Golden Globe and Academy Awards. In *Waltz with Bashir*, narrator/auteur Ari Folman recaptures his forgotten memories from his time serving in Lebanon by tracking down and interviewing his former IDF comrades, and each hauntingly recounts their time spent together in the war. While its confrontation of how the Israeli Defense Forces facilitated the slaughter of hundreds of Palestinian civilians from the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in the midst of the Lebanese civil war in 1982 appears to break with dominant narratives, Palestinians are marginal in the film.

Whereas Arab Palestinians have problematic but still active roles in *Munich*, they are almost completely absent from *Waltz with Bashir*, despite the film ostensibly being about a mass murder committed against them. Instead, Palestinians are used primarily as background props, yet again in the form of mourning, wailing women. And within the numerous flashback scenes where the Folman's IDF tank unit roll through Lebanon shooting their guns aimlessly in the dark, Arab characters are conspicuously absent. Yet when Ari is told to go gather and dump the bodies, a task Ari does not want to undertake, several dead Arab bodies are suddenly produced on stretchers. When hijab-wearing Arab women express their lamentations in the street, the animated scene scans right past them, instead focusing on Ari's face. Similarly, when Ari's unit senselessly opens fire on a Mercedes that happens to drive near them when they arrive on a Lebanese beach, their

victims are only seen as motionless, bloody bodies slumped over in their car. Here the viewer of the film is provided only the viewpoint of Folman, in which Palestinians are nameless, faceless casualties, or closeups of his face, centering his own emotional pain. Their death is not a tragedy for the Palestinians and their families, but solely as a burden of guilt placed upon the main character.

In an interview with his friend, Ari's friend Boaz retroactively expresses his regret over being ordered to shoot dogs so that the soldiers can enter an Arab village, an act that still haunts him in his dreams. Boaz still claims to remember "Every face, every wound. The look in their eyes. Twenty-six dogs." Later in the movie, another of Ari's friends from his time with the IDF in Lebanon confesses that it was only when he came upon several emaciated and slaughtered Arabian horses that he becomes affected by the violence around him. Notable here is that two characters throughout the film become deeply disturbed and haunted by the death and suffering of animals, while human victims are hardly ever a topic of conversation or reflection.

Where the Palestinian victims are finally shown, when the Phalangist Christians begin loading civilians into trucks and driving them to their execution, nearly all the scenes consist of distant, impersonal shots. *Waltz with Bashir* soon after closes with real, unanimated archival video footage of Palestinian women screaming and mourning those murdered from the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps. Still pictures are then shown of murdered Palestinian corpses. All of them are grotesquely swollen and bloody, and just as in *Munich*, unrecognizable. Over the course of the film, no Palestinian or Lebanese Arabs are interviewed or provided any voice whatsoever. Instead, the viewer is presented

with a narrative of the Sabra and Shatila massacre from an Israeli/IDF view, where the tragedy is only considered in terms of their guilt, thereby invoking viewers' sympathy for the killers of Palestinian civilians and enablers of their murderers.

A common element that underpins the storyline and narratives of these films analyzed here is the ideas of shared mission and values between the US, Israel, and cooperating nations, most prominently Israel and Saudi Arabia, invoking the George W. Bush administration's "collation of the willing" that perpetrated the 2003 invasion of Iraq. These stories also clearly reflect the common shared 'civilizing' mission and mentality by the US and Israel vis a vis the War on Terror, where essentially the same tropes as seen below in *Munich* and *Waltz with Bashir* are deployed in other films about American experiences in Iraq or fighting in the 'War on Terror' in the greater Middle East. These films contain a clear message about the danger of terror and the importance of constant vigilance. Most prominently here is the final shot of *Munich* we see Avner dejected and emotionally injured after executing revenge killings on behalf of Israel, the Twin Towers, and the knowledge of their eventual destruction, looming in the background as the screen fades to black. The message here is again unmistakable, that the 9/11 attacks are just off in the horizon, a point of eventual arrival amidst the impending War on Terror in which Israel and the United States have the same goals and ideological orientations. Similarly, in *The Kingdom*, those Arab characters established through the film as 'good' Arabs have shared values with the FBI agents. Their identity as Muslims is largely obscured or barely addressed and they express a deep dedication, sometimes to the point of sacrificing their lives, to the American mission driving the plot. Alsultany

(2014) has also discussed these types of representations, where “some citizens perceived the TV dramas and government speeches that portrayed Arabs and Muslims favorably as signaling, or even confirming, a postracial era” even in the wake of 9/11 (p. 11).

Alsultany states that “demonizing the enemy during times of war is not a thing of the past” but instead “has assumed new forms” (p. 13). Though Alsultany’s work is focused on media images of Arab Americans, her same argument applies here to Arab Muslims in general, that films like these clearly demonstrate that there “is indeed a process of rehabilitation taking place, but it is one in which images of *acceptable*” Muslims are deployed (p. 14).

Munich and *Waltz with Bashir* were specifically chosen for analysis here because while they originate from different genres of film, both propagate distinct but overlapping Otherings of Palestinians. While both are successful and popular films among critics that provide different meditations on the killing of Palestinians, *Munich* was a big-budget film by an internationally known group of actors and producers, while *Waltz with Bashir* was an independent film. In *Munich*, the Palestinians are purely terroristic and killed out of what is constantly reinforced throughout the movie as a justified revenge. In *Waltz with Bashir*, Palestinians are killed out of the circumstances and confusion of the Lebanese civil war. *Munich* presents starkly realistic depictions of violence and killing, while the war scenes in *Waltz with Bashir* take place amongst sleek music and effects that arguably glorify the violence unfolding on screen. Yet both films overlap heavily as several of the main characters are burdened with the guilt of their having killed Palestinians. Mossad agent Avner is intermittently haunted by visions of the Israeli athletes being murdered at

the hand of Black September and concurrently bears the burden of guilt for the killings he has committed for revenge of the massacre at Munich. However, it is not guilt that ultimately drives Avner to spin out of control and storm into the Israeli embassy in his new home in New York. Instead, he is overtaken by paranoia over possible retribution for his actions or for his leaving both Mossad and the State of Israel. Meanwhile, in *Waltz with Bashir*, Avi and his comrades discuss their guilt only amongst one another as Israelis and former IDF members. No Palestinians or Arabs take part in the conversations, and the viewpoints of the actual victims at Sabra and Shatila hardly occupy any space at all throughout the entirety of the film.

Even when their images are barely present and the killings of Palestinians are ostensibly the topic of these films, or at the very least, when the morality of killing them is called into question, Orientalism still permeates their depictions at every turn. Perhaps more damaging, since these films attempt to confront the morality of Israeli killings of Palestinians, old tropes are reinforced when Palestinian characters are Othered in either their complete absence, lack of agency and humanistic character development, being placed in binary opposition with their civilized Israeli killers, or in being seen only as dead corpses. These depictions reinforce traditional Orientalist Otherings of Palestinians as originally elucidated by Edward Said, and renders Palestinians disposable. While their killings may be portrayed as regrettable in these films, they are regrettable only to the extent that they their Israeli killers must bear the burden of guilt. This effectively displaces Palestinians themselves from films that supposedly address the morality of the 'Palestinian situation' and the events that unfold as a result. Only when Palestinians are

portrayed as more than mere victims, dead bodies, or crazed terrorists without a cause, can the mainstream discourse on Israel-Palestine shift. Otherwise, should these Orientalist depictions that so thoroughly Other Palestinians continue, the skewed, dominant historical memory of the Arab-Israeli conflict will continue and only further impede any hope for peace.

One should also note that these films attempt to represent or recount pivotal events in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict. In turn, we must acknowledge the effect of the narrative elements of these films that so effectively tap into and help form collective memory on Israel-Palestine. By telling the narrative of these historical films from the point of view of the reluctant killer, the deaths of the Othered Palestinians in history become excusable, acceptable, and necessary, if regrettable. Despite these films purporting to provide humanistic narratives of the Arab-Israeli conflict, they merely serve to render Palestinian deaths grievable only insofar as they create guilt on the part of their Israeli killers. In the case of *Munich*, the deaths of Palestinians are unmistakably political and necessitated by both the waging of the conflict and the search for peace via revenge. In *Waltz with Bashir*, the main character is largely removed from the political context, and the killings of Palestinians in the Lebanese Civil War become essentially apolitical. Yet these films dovetail in their obscuring of the actual face of Palestine and Palestinians, their legacy of resistance beyond terrorism and violence, and the historical roots of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

“Shoots and Cries” Cinema and the Displacement of Victimhood

In *Place and Ideology in Contemporary Hebrew Literature*, Karen Grumberg succinctly describes the “typical Zionist Shoots and Cries consciousness: The Zionist solider, a man with a conscience, loathes violence but realizes he must act violently to survive; the dilemma causes him to weep while pulling the trigger. Looking inward, he despairs at the violence he feels compelled to enact primarily because he fears his own moral corruption.”²²³ There are two conspicuous dynamics from the Shoots and Cries consciousness that are stark in this construction. First, wholly absent is the acknowledgement of the existence of the victim of this violence and their suffering, death, or trauma experienced resulting from the violence inflicted upon them. Second is the assumed reluctance of the Zionist solider in inflicting the violence upon their victims. This construction of the solider who Shoots and Cries is still productive to Zionist cause in Palestine in that it absolves the Israeli solider of responsibility. The Israeli soldier here is not driven by nationalism or revenge; they are purely defense (invoking the idea of purity of arms) and can only kill with regret. The Palestinian or Arab victim then is responsible for their own pain, suffering, occupation, or death as the Israeli soldier cannot be responsible for their suffering. Furthermore, the only suffering present is that which has been inflicted by the dead Palestinian victim upon their victimizer. The responsibility being assigned to the Arab or Palestinians, the status of victim is then reversed in the Shoots and Cries construction of the solider. Here the solider, the one who cries while pulling the trigger, is the only one suffering. This impression of reluctance of the solider to inflict violence in turn legitimizes the violence and makes it necessary if the solider is

²²³ Karen Grumberg, *Space and Place in Contemporary Zionist Literature*, (New York, Syracuse University Press, 2011), 49.

to survive. In this sense then, within the construction of the soldier who Shoots and Cries, the only violence acknowledged is the violence the soldier has done unto themselves.

This is clear in films like *Munich* and *Waltz with Bashir*. In both films the main characters feel anguish over what they have done to Palestinians, but their victims' pain or death is barely shown, if acknowledged in the text at all. Instead, we are given extended filmic meditations on the pain suffered by the killers.

In a rare wholly critical review of *Munich*, Jonathan Freedland invokes the Shoots and Cries narrative without using the term. Freedland highlights that the Israeli Mossad hit team in the film

"not only shoot, bomb and variously take out their Arab prey, but also grapple with the legitimacy of their mission. Can they be certain the names they have been given are the right ones? What is the evidence of the targets' guilt? And, most pressingly, will revenge not inspire its own counter-revenge? "All this blood will come back to us," Robert the bombmaker, played by Mathieu Kassovitz, tells Avner with anguish. By the final scene, Avner agrees "Everyone we killed was replaced by six more." ²²⁴

Most importantly, Freedland points out that "the ultimate humanization of the voicing of doubt" and that "Israelis are redeemed in the audience's eyes by their moral anguish," a doubt that is a prominent narrative feature of the film. In *Munich*, Mossad agent Avner is intermittently haunted by visions of the Israeli athletes being murdered at the hand of Black September and concurrently bears the burden of guilt for the killings he has committed for revenge of the massacre at Munich. However, it is not guilt that ultimately later drives Avner to psychologically spin out of control and storm into the Israeli

²²⁴ Jonathan Freedland, "Blood Breeds Blood," *The Guardian*, January 13th, 2006. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2006/jan/13/1>

embassy in his new home in New York. Instead, he is overtaken by paranoia over possible retribution for his actions or for his leaving both Mossad and the State of Israel. Similarly, in *Waltz with Bashir*, Avi and his comrades discuss their guilt only amongst one another as Israelis and former IDF members. No Palestinians or Arabs take part in the conversations, and the viewpoints of the actual victims at Sabra and Shatila hardly occupy any space at all throughout the entirety of the film. As mentioned above, the Palestinians, who are the victims whose murders are being repeatedly meditated upon so that the guilt of others can be washed away, are denied any agency whatsoever.

Arav and Gurevitz focused their analysis of *Waltz with Bashir* on the testimonial aspects and themes of witnessing within the film. In their view, “Questions regarding the different relations between victim and victimizer, confession and forgiveness, testimony and representation, have become central to psychological, political, and philosophical agenda of our times.”²²⁵ Their analysis is important in contextualizes both the cultural and ideological influence of these films, as well as what they reflect about society, where the “confession is the present culture’s state of mind’ it is a part of the collective mentality...to cast off the traumatic yoke, to purify oneself, both on the political level (the unspeakable acts between nations) and the personal level.”²²⁶ The authors frame the primary aim as confessional films like *Waltz With Bashir* as almost purely cathartic because “the entertaining confession discourse is meant to play on viewers’ emotions and, by doing so, the expropriate them from the realistic political-moral arena in the

²²⁵ Dan Arav and David Gurevitz, “Trauma, Guilt, Forgiveness: The Victimizer as Witness in the Cinematic and Televisual Representations of Conflict in Israel,” *Media, War & Conflict*, Vol. 7(1) 104–120, 2014, 106.

²²⁶ *Ibid.*, 106.

fictional-entertainment one, thus relieving them of their responsibility for any injustice which takes place outside the realm of entertaining representations,” harkening to my argument earlier in the introduction of this study emphasizing the growing cultural and political influence of entertainment media.²²⁷ They also gesture towards the fact that a film like *Waltz with Bashir*, with all its filmic elements and slick animation and music, is almost purely affective in nature, meant to stylishly guide you through the emotions and experience of the protagonist.

Though the Trauma, Guilt, Forgiveness construct proposed by Arav and Gurevitz is overly simplistic (I argue that in fact these processes are much more highly varied in their being linked to contemporary politics, historiography, and culture in general) their arguments on the representational elements of the testimonial/confessional film are highly useful here, especially the presence of Palestinians in these films or the lack thereof. They note that in Israeli televisual texts, both television shows and films, most of the victimizers “claim that they are sentenced to live forever with their unjust acts, and their victim’s image will haunt them wherever they will go” but that “almost none of the them wishes to concentrate on the Palestinian victim and the grave injustice that was inflicted upon him – let alone take responsibility, by acknowledging their moral failure, and ask for forgiveness from the injured side.”²²⁸ This reflects a clear and further dehumanization of Palestinian victims and the remarkably one-sided nature of the confessional ‘humanistic’ film. It appears that the victimizer then is not actually asking for forgiveness from their victims, but rather a reassurance from their fellow soldier or

²²⁷ Ibid., 106.

²²⁸ Ibid., 109.

citizen that what they did is understandable and acceptable, given the circumstances. The confession is the whole point. The forgiveness is not necessary as the victim is not even present or acknowledged enough to provide testimony; their testimony is not even necessary much less desired. Again, in this process then the pain of the Palestinian victim does not even exist, only that of the Israeli victimizer. Furthermore then, the end goal is only to express and concentrate on the humanity of the Israeli victimizer, a humanity that absolves them of their crimes. This dynamic is seen in the secondary and background positions Palestinian and Arab victims occupy in these films, while the narrative is focused primarily on the American/white or Israeli interlocuter, or the “suffering witness,” centering and privileging their experience and perspective.²²⁹ While subjects of these films, like Avi and his comrades in *Waltz With Bashir* meditate on their victimizing acts, there is essentially no presence of acknowledgement of their victims themselves. Therefore, the concept of “forgiveness does not apply since there is no dialogue between the parties regarding the questions of justice which the forgiveness should address.”²³⁰ The suffering and/or death of the Palestinian victim is displaced by the centering of the Israeli victimizer, as the “movie centers on the sufferings of the witness who has failed morally in real time...expressed by his helplessness to ‘stop the awful wheels of history’, to stop the unstoppable: the moral horror which history has determined as an irreversible fact.”²³¹ (p. 111). All in all, any evaluation of a ‘humanistic film’ such as this one must acknowledge that it is “is more concerned with trying to portray the sensitivity and

²²⁹ Ibid., 114.

²³⁰ Ibid., 110.

²³¹ Ibid., 111.

misgivings of the ‘good Israeli soldier’, rather than making a genuine attempt at taking responsibility and asking for forgiveness, while keeping in accordance with the ‘shooting and weeping’ theme.” Ultimately, “the dialogue about forgiveness takes place on the same side – amongst Israelis themselves” and Palestinians play no part in their extended meditation on self-victimhood.²³²

Another problematic layer to the film is the previously mentioned stylistic and aesthetic elements of *Waltz with Bashir*. Though it is a serious film, to be sure, the slick animation and electronic music makes many of its scenes play more like a music video than an historical or documentary film. Turning again to Arav and Gurevitz, they note that “the richness of its images and its eclectic soundtrack...necessarily create a distance from the pain” that is supposed to be the focus of the film. They are correct in noting that the “beauty creates a sense of peace and reconciliation, almost fondly reminiscent of the suffering” which is why “we are prevented from dealing with the ‘true material’, *the real*, that which is not overwhelming with its aesthetic allure.”²³³ The authors also note, as I have above, that the closing scene and its switch from animated documentary to real archival footage is highly problematic. Not only is it essentially the only place in the film where Palestinians are shown in detail, again in the form of dead bodies and weeping women, but “the change from the stylized animation of the film to the harsh realism of the archival footage turns the attention towards the film’s making and style.”²³⁴ I strongly agree with the authors’ reaction to the final scene where any “possibilities for moral and

²³² Ibid., 116.

²³³ Ibid., 113.

²³⁴ Ibid., 113.

political discussions that the film opens up are almost defeated by this shocking aesthetic effect,” which any viewer would arguably find jarring.²³⁵

The Americans Who Shoot and Cry

[N]ot only will America go into your country and kill all your people. But what's worse I think is they'll come back twenty years later and make a movie about how killing your people made their soldiers feel sad. -Frankie Boyle²³⁶

In “Shoot and Cry: Modernism, Realism, and the Iraq War Fiction of Kevin

Powers and Justin Sirois,” Jim Holstun observes how the “trauma hero is most at home inside a particular subgenre of late modernist fiction that emphasizes affect, fragmentation, and discontinuity, at the expense of cause, effect, and narrative totalization.” Holstun cites Kakutani and Packer in identifying how an episodic genre of modern war films have emerged instead of larger-scale and more complete historical narratives. As argued previously here, this selective rewriting of the narrative and the focusing on specific episodic war stories is intended to uphold the dominant imperialist ideology of interventionist warfare by presenting smaller-scale victories to avoid retelling the very real defeats in war. The “shoot and cry” film and its inversion of the status is victimhood is another genre legitimizing the same interventionist and supremacist ideology. However, as I will show here, the Shoots and Cries genre is not just limited to the context of Israeli soldiers of the IDF since some of the American Hollywood films contain the same narrative effect. Furthermore, the Shoots and Cries genre might appear

²³⁵ Ibid., 113.

²³⁶ Maya Oppenheim, “Frankie Boyle gets own BBC2 topical news show: The most devastating takedowns from Britain's biggest cynic,” *The Independent*, April 28th, 2017. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/tv/news/frankie-boyle-bbc2-topical-news-show-best-takedowns-queen-donald-trump-a7193471.html>

as unique to more recent wars, but in fact has been a prominent theme in mass and entertainment media for decades. There are numerous other Shoots and Cries films focused specifically focused on the Vietnam War produced in the post-Vietnam period, including *The Deer Hunter*, *Coming Home*, *Born of the Fourth of July*, *Platoon*, *First Blood*, and *Jacob's Ladder*, among others.

Undergirding my analysis of the American context for Shoots and Cries narratives is that this victimhood has been inextricably linked to white identity, both in the wake of the Vietnam War as well as in the current post-9/11 era amidst the ongoing wars in Iraq, Afghanistan, and the omnipresent “war on terror.” Tracing the beginning of this linkage in “Post-Traumatic Whiteness: How Vietnam Veterans Became the Basis for a New White Identity Politics,” Joseph Darda traces how “From the Vietnam War to the Trump era, the combat veteran has emerged as the protagonist of a new white racial politics.”²³⁷ Darda argues that amidst the American civil rights movement during the late 20th century, “trauma became a central part of how Americans of different racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual backgrounds and identities asserted their cultural inheritance and their place in a diverse nation.” However, before this emergence of “group-based or collective trauma” came to prominence, “the diagnosis (of post-traumatic stress disorder) was based on the experience of white vets whose psychic injuries offered white men...a way to leverage their own identity politics against demands for racial, gender, and sexual equality.” Darda

²³⁷ Joseph Darda, “Post-Traumatic Whiteness: How Vietnam Veterans Became the Basis for a New White Identity Politics,” *Los Angeles Review of Books*, November 21st, 2017. <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/post-traumatic-whiteness-how-vietnam-veterans-became-the-basis-for-a-new-white-identity-politics#!>

notes the skewed racial dynamics in mass media representations of the Vietnam War, where “although a disproportionate number of working-class black, Latino, and American Indian soldiers served in Southeast Asia, most American novels and films about the war tell the story of white men who undergo a process of alienation, traumatization, and self-reckoning in Vietnam.”²³⁸

The use of the combat veteran to air white grievances has been deployed in many ways, for example “When president Donald Trump condemned NFL players for kneeling during the national anthem, he pitted their protests of racial violence and police brutality against the injuries of young vets.” Much of the current American conservative rhetoric on race and white grievance that helped propel Trump to the American presidency echoes that of the post-Vietnam era, where “Stories of men abandoned in by their government in Southeast Asia resonated with those men who felt left behind by the economic changes of the 1970s” and progressions of the civil rights movements. According to Darda, the framing of the “wounded warrior,” whether the “abandoned POW of the right-wing culture” or the wounded combat veteran of US-led wars in the Middle East, “allow(s) white men to see themselves of victims of, but also situate themselves within, the trauma-minded multiculturalism of the post-civil rights era.”²³⁹ Darda’s analysis is useful in how he identifies how white American men have co-opted the racialized politics of the wounded warrior in how they are most presumed to be white, patriotic, and conservative, which in turn centers whiteness and displaces others in media narratives prominently featuring post-traumatic stress disorder and trauma in war. In in the United States, the

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Ibid.

“wounded warrior has given civilian white elites like (President Donald) Trump a cultural vehicle for lamenting the browning of the United States by defending the flag and the anthem... to conflate war trauma with white grievance... remaking whiteness in the name of veteran America” and “reimagining whiteness as a post-traumatic condition.”²⁴⁰

The Drone Pilot as “Untold Casualty” of War

Within these “shoot and cry” narratives, the very real causalities and victims are displaced as soldiers become the true victims of war, which in turn reframes the justifications, meaning, and public memory of these conflicts. This narrative theme is by no means limited to one war or medium and is seen prominently in recent years on news articles and films about US wars in the Middle East and is also a prominent theme in Israeli films. This shoots and cries framework also emerged in news media coverage and in films about drone warfare in the Middle East. According to the Bureau of Investigative Journalism and their statistics on drone warfare conducted by United States, almost 14,000 drone strikes have been executed since January of 2002, killing between 910 and 2,181 civilians in Yemen, Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Somalia alone. This figure includes between 283 and 451 children in these four countries. Nonetheless, the drone pilot are often framed in US media as an “untold casualty,” to use the terminology of a 2018 article in *Rolling Stone*.²⁴¹

²⁴⁰ Ibid.

²⁴¹ Vegas Tenold, “The Untold Casualties of the Drone War,” *Rollingstone.com*, February 18th, 2016. <https://www.rollingstone.com/culture/culture-news/the-untold-casualties-of-the-drone-war-67029/>

The 2014 film *Good Kill* starring Ethan Hawke was shown at several film festivals and received overall positive reviews upon its release. *Good Kill* is a fiction film telling the story of Air Force officer Major Thomas Egan, who is stationed in Las Vegas, Nevada. Though he is usually an F-16 pilot, we find Egan working on a current assignment as a UAV (Unmanned Aerial Vehicle) or drone pilot. Since the drones he flies are in Afghanistan, Egan spends his nights piloting MQ-9 Reaper drones in Afghanistan taking out unambiguous “terrorist” targets, including vehicle and sites where cells are operating, and spends his days catching up on sleep and spending time with his wife and two children in their suburban home.

After Egan is reassigned to begin operating UAVs for CIA missions in Yemen and Somalia, where the US has no official involvement declared, he starts to crack under the pressure of shooting missiles at more ambiguous and questionable targets, including public gatherings and civilian buildings. The pace of the strikes also increases in comparison with his past missions staged in Afghanistan, and he starts drinking more heavily and showing the psychological stress he is now under. Egan’s performance also begins to decline, while before joining the CIA missions he was seen as a highly skilled and praised pilot partly because of his calm and professional demeanor. Now our protagonist is emotional and agitated almost constantly because of these more questionable missions. Egan is ordered to fire on several civilian targets but is told by his CIA commanders that the “terrorists” are simply using civilians as human shields and that despite it being unfortunate, he should have little qualms about taking them out. While conducting an “overwatch” mission where he uses the surveillance capabilities of a

UAV to protect a group of American soldiers, the soldiers are killed by an improvised explosive device, only increasing Egan's angst. He finally reaches his breaking point when ordered to fire on several civilians who are gathering at the site of a building he already destroyed. Egan uses a technique that causes the drone to appear to malfunction and avoids killing the civilians. Egan is then demoted back to "overwatch" missions, during which he sees a rapist approaching the home of a woman who has attacked and sexually assaulted previously in the movie. Despite Egan being told by his mission commander that "he is a bad guy, but not *our* bad guy," our protagonist sends the rest of his mission support team away on break and uses the UAV to shoot a missile kill the rapist. The final scene shows Egan leaving his post without permission and driving away from Las Vegas.

On one hand, *Good Kill* can be considered a 'difficult film,' as it ostensibly shows "both sides," not necessarily of the conflict or the military operations or in any balanced way, but in its showing the moral conflicts of the films characters. Like other 'difficult films' discussed here, *Good Kill* still has several problematic elements, primarily the transformation and status of the Reaper drone in the film from a tool of death and destruction being used in questionable ways into a tool of heroic justice. Even more problematic is that the resolution to Egan's character arc is achieved by his disobeying orders of his commanding officers, after which he literally just literally drives away. Had this series of events happened in real life, Egan would have been met with extremely harsh legal repercussions in military courts, and most likely been dishonorably discharged, the irony here being he would have been punished not for the extrajudicial or

illegal killing, but the simple act of disobeying orders. Again, that the drone was transformed into a tool for good being the ultimate resolution of the film, after its use to reign down death upon civilian subjects in the film arguably provides a tidy ideological resolution for many Americans, that drones can and should essentially be a “weapon for good” if within capable hands of judicious military commanders and soldiers. As in other war films, in *Good Kill* we again see the reluctant victimizer who cannot be held accountable since they are only following orders, a victim of circumstance amidst the fog of warfare.

The same themes of the reluctant victimizer in the form of a drone operator have emerged repeatedly in news reporting as well, especially in stories that seek to raise questions about the US military and CIA conducting drone strikes and mounting civilian casualties, much like the dominant themes we see in ‘difficult films.’ These long-form news stories often raise the ethical questions of drone warfare but in carefully circumscribed areas of acceptable discourse, not questioning the mission of the war on terror or the use of drones as a means to avoid putting human soldiers in harm’s way. Eyal Press’s 2018 feature in *The New York Times Magazine*, “The Wounds of the Drone Warrior” focuses on both psychological trauma as well as moral injuries, and the subject of the story follows a similar arc as that of Egan’s in *Good Kill*. Press opens by telling the story of drone operator Christopher Aaron who flew drones from a remote location in Langley, Virginia. For Aaron, at first “the good days outnumbered the bad ones...He wasn’t bothered by the long shifts, the high-pressure decisions, or the strangeness of being able to stalk – and potentially kill – targets from thousands of miles away.” When

Aaron first witnesses the Predator drones firing their missiles, he found it “surreal” but “he also found it awe-inspiring” and sometimes “experienced a surge of adrenaline, an analysts in the room exchanged high-fives.” After serving in the military and then stints as a military contractor, Aaron was offered a job as an imagery analyst for a different military contractor, but he “began to fall apart physically” as “the distress began with headaches, night chills, joint pain” and “more debilitating symptoms emerges – waves of nausea, eruptions of skin welts, chronic digestive problems.” With the emergence of these symptoms and his awareness that the stress and intensity of working on deadly drone programs was affecting him, “Working for the contractor was out of the question.” Aaron eventually consulted doctors and was never given a diagnosis, but as his physical health began to improve his psychological health took a nosedive. Nightmares began to haunt Aaron and often “he dreamed he could see – up close, in real time – innocent people being maimed and killed, their bodies dismembered, their faces contorted in agony.” The emergence of traumatic dreams in the wake of inhumane acts in war is also seen repeatedly in films like *Waltz With Bashir* and *Munich*. Their role in bringing suppressed to the surface memories and trauma are essentially the same for Aaron, the subject of this story, and the two films as well, Aaron saying much like Avi in *Waltz with Bashir*, “It was though my brain was telling me: Here are the details that you missed out on...Now watch them when you’re dreaming.”²⁴²

Press’s piece spends a substantial amount of the story on discussing the concept of “moral injury” in the context of drone pilots. As with several of the “wounded warrior”

²⁴² Eyal Press, “The Wounds of the Drone Warrior,” *New York Times Magazine*, June 13th, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/13/magazine/veterans-ptsd-drone-warrior-wounds.html>

themes throughout this study, the concept of moral injury has its roots in the Vietnam War. Although the concept initially centered on “the betrayal of what’s right by authority figures,” a prominent theme of literature and several films about the Vietnam War, over the years its definition shifted to “a wound sustained when soldiers wading through the fog of war betrayed themselves, through harmful acts they perpetrated or watched unfold” (Press, 2018). The story frames these moral injuries, “the burden of killing” as residing “not in attacks by the enemy the veterans had survived, but in acts they had committed that crossed their own ethical lines.” One example of moral injury provided by a psychologist quoted in the story is “that Vietnam veterans who killed prisoners of war had especially high rates of trauma.”²⁴³ The sheer illegality of the act of killing enemy prisoners of war, much like the illegality of killing civilians from Reaper drones throughout these stories, is simply not discussed, further demonstrating the displacement of victimhood; here the victimizer becomes the victim and the casualties of war. Those that have been killed are, like the dead Palestinians in *Waltz with Bashir*, nameless, voiceless, devoid of agency and semblance of identity.

Another long-form piece by Vegas Tenold in *Rolling Stone* titled “The Untold Casualties of War” also opens with a personal profile of a drone operator, Brandon Bryant. Much like the protagonist of *Good Kill* as well as Press’s story on Christopher Aaron, we are told that Bryant was initially professional and experienced, flying drone “missions in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and Somalia – where he helped kill 1,626 people, according to his performance review.” The *Rolling Stone* piece does quote

²⁴³ Ibid.

the critical words of Tenold and his small group of veterans who now oppose drone warfare, calling it a “wasteful abuse of power, promoted on lies, and, in practice, a cause for more enemy combatants than it could ever kill.” We are told of Bryant’s friend Cian Westmoreland who after serving in the US drone program now “travels with a battery of pills, lithium among them, to keep him on an even keel, the nightmares and other symptoms of mental stress at bay.” The subjects of Tenold’s *Rolling Stone* piece are not merely wounded veterans, they are active participants in a campaign against the US’ drone programs and “speaking out about matters of incompetence and disregard for human life” hoping that “they can alter what is likely to be a central military strategy for generations to come.” However, as in movies and other news stories, we are presented with the reluctant victimizer. Two subjects of the piece meet with their commanding officer and object to being assigned roles in the drone programs, one of them being told “tough shit” and to “shut up and do my job.” When Bryant, here said to have been a “devout Christian” approached his military chaplain about his reservations in taking part in the program, his “chaplain told him that if he killed people with a drone, it was probably because God wanted them dead.”²⁴⁴

As in other stories like the *New York Times Magazine* piece above, the positive aspects of drones are presented. The *Rolling Stone* piece for example states that “In the ongoing war on terror, armed drones provide a peace of mind that comes with raining down fiery death on whoever you want, whenever you want, without the concern of putting the troops at risk.” Later in the same story and again emphasizing the apparently

²⁴⁴ Vegas Tenold, “The Untold Casualties of War.”

positive attributes of their use in the Middle East, South Asia, and Africa, we are told that “Of course, drones have killed many more militants than civilians – and saved the lives of countless American troops.” The closing of the article returns to the framing of the drone pilot as victim, with Bryant saying “What we did as sensor operators and pilots tears a hole in your soul...Being in the drone program is a kind of madness that sticks to you and won’t come off.”²⁴⁵ Both stories also show an underlying concern about the “combat trauma” suffered by drone pilots and the resultant “high rate of burnout” among pilots of UAVs.²⁴⁶

The storied liberal magazine *The Nation* also published an article more explicitly critical of the drone program but still positioning on the drone operators as the main casualties. In “When Drone Operators Become Collateral Damage,” Pratap Chatterjee levels the playing field between victim and victimizer early in the story (and seemingly stretches the definition of “survive”) saying that “in Washington’s drone wars neither the ‘good guys’ nor the helpless, endangered villagers under those robotic aircraft actually survive the non-so secret drone war that the Obama administration has been waging relentlessly across the Greater Middle East—not, at least, without some kind of collateral damage.” Chatterjee continues, “In addition to those that they kill, Washington’s drones turn out to wound (in ways both physical and psychological) their own operators and the populations who live under their constant surveillance.” *The Nation*’s coverage, though focused as others on the wounds of the drone operator, is the most balanced in lending a good portion of the story to how for people who live in drones’ areas of operations,

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Eyal Press, “The Wounds of the Drone Warrior.”

drones “also create anxiety, upset, and a desire for revenge in a larger population and so have proven a powerful weapon in spreading terror movements across the Greater Middle East.” Similarly, Chatterjee closes on the most empathetic note of any of the films or articles discussed here by quoting a former drone pilot commenting on not her own wounds but casualties who have been targeted by drones:

*I just want people to know that not everybody is a freaking terrorist and we need to just get out of that mindset. And we just need to see these people as people—families, communities, brothers, mothers, and sisters, because that’s who they are...Imagine if our children were walking outside of the door and it was a sunny day and they were afraid because they didn’t know if today was the day that something would fall out of the sky and kill someone close to them. How would we feel?*²⁴⁷

All the articles here also notably humanize the drone operator as casualty in similar ways and all the drone operators quoted and interviewed initially began as well-intentioned, almost pure of heart in the joining the military. In Chatterjee’s article, “the distinctly Hollywood vision of America’s drone wars (with a *Terminator* edge) was the one that filtered down” to her interview subjects and “looked to them then like a war worth fighting and a life worth leading.”²⁴⁸ Another subject in Tenold’s *Rolling Stone* article joined the military with “very little patriotic fervor” and just wanted the benefits of the GI Bill.²⁴⁹ Eyal Press in *The New York Times Magazine* says that Christopher Aaron’s “path to the drone program was unusual,” only because “His parents were former hippies

²⁴⁷ Pratap Chatterjee, “When Drone Operators Become Collateral Damage,” April 21st, 2016. <https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/when-drone-operators-become-collateral-damage/>

²⁴⁸ Ibid.

²⁴⁹ Vegas Tenold, “The Untold Casualties of War.”

who marched against the Vietnam War.” Aaron’s story doesn’t seem that unusual though, in that “in 2001, he woke up one morning to a phone call from his father, who told him the twin towers and the pentagon had been attacked,” leading Aaron to think “instantly of his grandfather, who served for three years as a military police officer on the European front after the attack on Pearl Harbor” and in turn “wanted to do something heroic.”²⁵⁰ Similarly, the articles make other attempts at assigning the pilots a form of innocence by mentioning their child-like facial features. Tenold tells us how former drone operator Michael Haas has “longish red hair that frames a freckled and boyish face.”²⁵¹ In Eyal Press’s article, Press describes Aaron as having “a calm, Zen-like bearing, honed in part through yoga and meditation” but that there “was a trace of worry in his eyes and a degree of circumspection in his voice.” Another pilot, Steven, featured in the same article is described as having “a boyish face and sensitive eyes.”²⁵²

Conclusion

Having established in the previous chapter the ways that the sites of peoples of the Middle East is consistently depicted as sources of White trauma and danger, in the films discussed above we see a displacement of the status victimhood that is denied to Arabs and Palestinians not only in the mainstream popular films set within the Arab world, but also in news media reports on the Global War on Terror itself. It is remarkable the amount of film and ink that is used in representing the sites and events in the Middle East, a place subject to constant Western representation, and yet so few of those

²⁵⁰ Eyal Press, “The Wounds of the Drone Warrior.”

²⁵¹ Vegas Tenold, “The Untold Casualties of War.”

²⁵² Eyal Press, “The Wounds of the Drone Warrior.”

representations substantively engage Arab characters, nor center them in their own homes, streets, and nations. What we see instead is a body of films dedicated solely to presenting American audiences with damaging representations of irredeemable Muslims, contrasted against American and Israeli characters who inflict wanton violence but inherently remain 'good' and heroic because of their underlying ideological mission. The prevalence of the native informants in so many of these films could present a more complex representation of Muslims and Arab characters, yet they retreat to the same tired tropes of the Arab who cannot help but turn to anger, extremism, and violence or be rendered disposable and barely grievable in death. Even when the native informant is honest and true within the narrative, they primarily operate in service of the American and Israeli 'civilizing mission' in the Middle East, a new formation of the White Man's Burden that still renders Arabs and Muslims disposable in the context of these films. Compounding these damaging representations is the role of critics, who effectively prime audiences to believe they are watching accurate accounts of history and 'complicated' or 'difficult' films that unflinchingly confront reality. Yet none of these films center the experiences of Arabs or peoples of the Middle East. Instead, we are primarily presented with the clean narrative arcs of White American and Israeli characters, who agonize over the death and violence they are allegedly forced to inflict on their victims, but not the deaths of victims themselves. Rarely is the morality of their actions called into question, and even more rare is the presentation of historical or wider context for the violence that unfolds on screen. The violent acts of these characters are preemptively redeemed, for they are well-intentioned and compelled to inflict violence, crying as they pull the trigger.

When we read about true accounts of those who kill with regret, like the drone pilots profiled in the media coverage in the final section of this chapter, just as in the films analyzed here, the murdered brown Muslim victims comprise merely a backdrop or serve as narrative devices that propel the American and Israeli protagonists on their moralistic journey. The anguish of the moral killer remains central to the story, leaving the viewer to mourn their experiences rather than grieve the actual victim of the violence. Having more thoroughly examined here the narrative elements of the White Trauma Hero and the soldiers who ‘shoot and cry,’ the following chapter highlights films that do center Palestinian and Arab experience and identity, and present audiences with more productive and personal histories of the Palestinian experience and modes of life in the Arab world.

Chapter 4

‘Authentic’ Filmic Portrayals of Arabs and the Complexities of Identity

It is difficult to summarize expressions of Arab identity from the immense body of films produced in the Middle East and by Arab filmmakers throughout the world. What is often lost in the Western terminologies and categorizations of the Middle East, just as is lost in their representation in Western films, is the sheer diversity of cultures, languages, religions, and landscapes contained in the region, and the wide variety of films it produces. However, there are some cohesive features we can identify. As Viola Shafik states in *Arab Cinema*, “the Arab-Muslim lifestyle and popular culture have developed different local contours” but they “still possess in many cultural fields a common topography, in particular in so-called high culture—the classical language, science, theology, and the arts of the elites.” Shafik also complicates the cultural impact of the Arab world’s relationship with the West. In her view, “most Arab countries possess a comparable history regarding colonialism and dependency on foreign powers,” and I follow Shafik’s thinking that “comparisons and juxtapositions may therefore give way to a deeper understanding of cinematic production” in the Arab world “if differences and similarities are taken consciously into consideration.”²⁵³ This is not to suggest an analysis based in binaries, but rather one that treats film not only as text but also as a language on its own terms.

²⁵³ Viola Shafik, *Arab Cinema: History and Cultural Identity, New Revised Edition*, (New York: The American University of Cairo Press, 2007), 1

And like Shafik in her own work, I also want to carefully consider and differentiate expressions of national identity from expressions of cultural identity. National identity and nationalism have tremendous importance in the context of Palestine and Palestinians, as they face down a brutal occupation from a government that seeks to outlaw and erase Palestinian identity itself. As such, there are numerous studies on formations of Palestinian national identity in general. Here I have chosen films that only partially deal with themes and issues of national identity and instead have chosen films that interrogate the challenges of maintaining and reshaping cultural identity in the face of challenging circumstances such as emigration, displacement, and social and political marginalization. Shafik's work on Arab cinema lays solid groundwork for my own analysis to build upon, in her noting that "In spite of a seventy-year history, and because its existence is based on a Western technique, Arab cinema is frequently criticized as evidence of Westernization and acculturation."²⁵⁴ This brand of critique is terribly limited, since what "hides behind this notion is the belief in culture as an undivided possession," and not a complex intertwining of exchanges, encounters, shared histories, and unequal dynamics of economic, social, military, and political power. She adds that the "idea of cinema as an alien cultural element...has to be questioned in the same way as the notion of cultural 'authenticity,'" since "authenticity can only exist within an impermeable cultural environment, cut off from foreign influence."²⁵⁵ When taking into consideration the history of the Middle East and its array of identities and cultures, and the exchange that has taken place both internally and with external influences, we can

²⁵⁴ Ibid., 4.

²⁵⁵ Ibid., 5.

understand that authenticity exists, not based on a purity of identity, but on identifications that are constantly multilayered and evolving. Furthermore, rather than frame the West as center and the Middle East as periphery in the development of their cinema industries, we can account for the antagonisms wrought by the legacies of colonialism and imperialism in the region, and be mindful that “Western culture, in spite of the consumption of its products, is by no means adopted completely or without resistance.”²⁵⁶ In other words, while many of the conventions and practices of filmmaking have been adopted by creators in the Middle East, these cinematic expressions of identity are often utilized as tools of resistance.

As I explored in the introduction to this study, there is no objective history but rather representations of historical events that are often defined by or produced in service of contemporary ideology or geopolitical aims. And within the body of American films on the Vietnam War, for example, are different historical lessons and interpretations, from the anti-imperialist to the purely jingoistic to alleviate America’s “Vietnam syndrome” and its wounded national pride. Again, while an analysis of national identity is not my focus here, a similar effect is seen in films dealing with the history of Israel and Palestine, “with Palestinian resistance interpreted as mere terrorism...in Hollywood, while it is portrayed sympathetically in Arab cinemas.”²⁵⁷ A fundamental aspect of Hollywood’s Orientalist representations of the Middle East are focused not only on essentializing its

²⁵⁶ Ibid., 7.

²⁵⁷ Lina Khatib, *Filming the Modern Middle East: Politics in the Cinemas of Hollywood and the Arab World*, (New York: I.B. Taurus, 2011), 4.

lands and spaces, religions, or history, but also making racist essentializations on the cultural identity and attributes of Arabs themselves.

Having prioritized Hollywood portrayals of Palestine, Palestinians, and the wider Middle East in previous chapters to understand American constructions of history, in this chapter I turn to Palestinian and Arab-produced films in order to productively delve into issues of Arab cultural identity and their ‘authentic’ modes of self-representation. While the first four chapters were intended to uncover how Americans have also ‘encountered’ the Arab world through film, in my view and in following the arguments of Viola Shafik above, issues of culture and identity must be observed on a subject’s own terms, rather than afford such power to Hollywood cinema alone. My analysis of two Arab-produced films, *Amreeka* (2009) and *Forget Baghdad* (2002), is intended not just to draw differences and juxtapose them against the films covered in previous chapters but is also an attempt to let these films and filmmakers speak for themselves and take them on their own terms and within their own respective historical and contemporary contexts.

This chapter begins with an overview of Palestinian national identity in film and frames Palestinian cinema as a new form of media mobilities as acts of resistance and self-expression. I then outline and reevaluate Hamid Naficy’s framework of accented cinema as a lens through which to view Palestinian and Arab-produced films and the ways they contend with space, place, and identity, and use that lens to frame ideas of transnational experiences and identities, firstly in *Amreeka* and then *Forget Baghdad* in the later section. I then close the chapter by returning to my broader ideas on memory and identity that were explored in the introduction to this study.

Palestine and Palestinians in Film

Expressions of Palestinian identity in various media have been a central and unifying mode of resistance and a rallying point in resisting erasure in the face of occupation and ethnic cleansing since the outbreak of the Arab-Israeli conflict and ensuing Israeli occupation. These expressions of identity are inherently forms of resistance and a crucial terrain of struggle if only because Palestinian identity, politics, history, and culture has been actively suppressed by the State of Israel for decades. In this sense, and because of the sheer power imbalance between Israel and Palestinians, essentially all Palestinian films are counternarratives that act as modes of resistance and oppositional consciousness. Now almost seventy-six years after the *Nakba*²⁵⁸ and approaching well past the fiftieth anniversary of the Six-Day War with no workable peace agreement between Israel and Palestine in sight, and with the vast majority of Palestinians living in exile, the possibilities for a Palestinian state are more tenuous than ever. While some Palestinian films are explicit expressions of Palestinian national identity, some of the more recent filmic narratives of Palestinian experiences are also indicative of an increasing transnational and transcultural formation of Arab and Palestinian identity, reflecting the substantial diasporic population that has now existed outside historical Palestine for so long.

²⁵⁸ The Nakba, Arabic for “the catastrophe,” refers to the events of 1948 when at least 750,000 Arab Palestinians were forcibly expelled from their homes by Zionist paramilitary forces and later by the Israeli military during the Arab-Israeli War.

Palestinian films primarily operate as persuasive mobile artifacts, in their role representing Palestinian history and performing political and ideological work that effectively builds international solidarity with the Palestinian movement for freedom and justice, and many films depicting Palestine and Palestinians also often appeal to more universal sensibilities of human rights and humanistic experience. While others have keenly observed the common threads of memory, displacement, and exile in such films, which are prominent themes in the work of Elia Suleiman for example, I argue here that the former state of Palestinian liminality is now evolving into a more permanent component of transnational/transcultural identity formation that is reflected in the narrative codes of Palestinian cinema, arguably a direct product of the current diasporic condition for the millions that live outside historical Palestine. While a belonging to the land of Palestine remains central to this identity, this transnational and transcultural character is prominent in *Amreeka*, among others, and concurrently speaks to and of Palestinians and their varied experiences in exile. I lend my analysis to *Amreeka* here because of the critical praise it garnered, its highly successful distribution in the US, and the meanings it arguably transmits about one element of Palestinian identity.

By revisiting and building on Hamid Naficy's idea of an accented cinema, I argue that in recent films Palestinian identity has taken on an especially transcultural character, or a new type of 'accent', due to the historical longevity of Palestinians living as a diasporic people and the proportion of them that live in exile outside of historical Palestine. Palestinian films comprise an important component of the pursuit of international solidarity for their cause through cultural cinematic production, both in the

Arab world and beyond, and therefore have highly differentiated audiences. Both *Amreeka* and *Forget Baghdad* portray many of the various modes of Arab and Palestinian experience in Israel-Palestine, under occupation, and living abroad. I also seek to locate where Palestinian subjects in these films experience challenges or reinforcements to their Palestinian and Arab identity in particular, and yet foster new emerging transcultural formations. By framing diasporic Palestinian films partially as a method of overcoming structural barriers and restrictions on freedom of movement, and therefore making the Palestinian case more salient within the wider global mediascape, I first outline the ways in which film produced in the Middle East serve as an indispensable tool to express identity by seizing the ‘permission to narrate’, as first proposed by Edward Said. I then analyze the narratives and filmic codes of *Amreeka* and *Forget Baghdad* wherein Palestinian and Arab identity has taken on this transnational/transcultural accent, where both the commonalities and uniqueness of the Palestinian experience produce a culturally hybrid filmic text.

On Accented Cinema

In *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, Hamid Naficy surveyed the landscape of post-colonial, diasporic cinema and the production methods employed by several non-Western filmmakers. Identifying a number of commonalities and shared attributes of accented filmmakers while also differentiating and accounting for their historical, political and other contextual specificities, Naficy argues that “although there is nothing common about exile and diaspora, deterritorialized peoples and their

films share certain features” but “continually engage with the specific histories of individuals and groups that engender divergent experiences, institutions, and modes of cultural production.”²⁵⁹ He also notes accented cinema as “an increasingly significant cinematic formation in terms of its output...its variety of forms and diversity of cultures... and its social impact, which extends far beyond exilic and diasporic communities.” Along with this widening cultural reach, Naficy identifies prominent themes of “journeying, historicity, identity and displacement; dysphoric, euphoric, nostalgic, synesthetic, liminal, and politicized structures of feeling.”²⁶⁰ Naficy also complicates the relationship between the author and text and eschews the postmodernist tendency to separate the author from their work, instead reinstating agency to the author by framing their text as performance.

Characteristics of the accented cinema and Naficy’s frames of analysis provide a lens through which to analyze and understand the substantial body of Palestinian film and cinema. Just like other accented cinema, the vast majority of Palestinian films “emphasize territoriality rootedness, and geography” and in being deterritorialized are “deeply concerned with territory and territoriality” and emphasize time-place experiential themes. This territoriality also involves frequent themes of travel and migration, a liminality of time and place, and a fetishization of the homeland, which is seen in the expression of desire, nostalgia, and longing for one’s home and the prominent use of nationalistic symbols, landscapes, or monuments.²⁶¹

²⁵⁹ Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema: Exilic and Diasporic Filmmaking*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), 1.

²⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 2.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

In one of the most relevant aspects of accented cinema as it relates Palestinian cinema, Naficy identifies accented cinema as being “in dialogue with the home and host societies and their respective national cinemas, many of whom are similarly transnational, whose desires, fears, and aspirations they express.”²⁶² In the case of Palestinian films, they tend to express anxiety over the loss of land and a suppression of culture, as well as a loss of voice or the right to expression or self-representation. Palestinian films are indeed in dialogue with the homeland, and many serve as a rallying point of Palestinian identity. Palestinian films highlight an often overlooked, and in some cases disappeared history of culture, art, and tradition, uprooted and forcibly displaced. This historical narrative has been almost wholly sidelined within the Western world’s consciousness by the dominant media narrative of an aggressive Arab region that left Israel with no choice but to colonize and occupy what remained of Palestine. Palestinian films also express the desires to maintain and express culture without suppression, and to achieve statehood and security for themselves.

In his contribution to *Dreams of a Nation: On Palestinian Cinema*, Naficy focuses on the shared aspects of Palestinian cinema that make it a unique form, as one that is “structurally exilic, as it is made either in the condition of internal exile in an occupied Palestine or under the erasure and tensions of displacement and external exile in other countries.”²⁶³ He also notes some of the qualities that form the Palestinian cinematic accent, in its films being “transnationally funded...multinational, multilingual,

²⁶² Ibid., 6.

²⁶³ Hamid Naficy, “Palestinian Exilic Cinema and Film Letters,” in Hamid Dabashi (Ed.), *Dreams of a Nation: On Palestinian Cinema*, (New York: Verso, 2006), 91.

and intercultural.”²⁶⁴ He also gestures towards the argument I make here on the emerging transcultural cultural character of Palestinian films, which takes such a unique form because Palestinian filmmakers are “displaced empirical subjects, situated in the interstices of cultures and film practices...As such, they are presumed to be more prone to the tensions and hesitations of exile, diaspora, and transnationalism, and their films should and do encode these tensions.”²⁶⁵ Taking this into account, along with the unique positionality and circumstances of Palestinian filmmakers both in and outside of historical Palestine, they arguably grapple with issues of transnational and transcultural identities more intensely, and with the forces of cultural suppression while producing films in various forms of exile. Furthermore, in what Naficy understands as the performativity of the filmmaker, “personal identity is enmeshed more than ever with identities of other sorts” and do not necessarily focus on the identity of the individual.²⁶⁶ This is not to argue that Palestinian identity is becoming diluted in film or otherwise, but rather is complicated by a multilayered experience and the resultant modes of expression of those complexities. These complexities are engaged on a wider scale in terms of group identity such as “race, gender, class, ethnicity, nationality, religiosity, and political belief,” making Palestinian films an “exilic epistolary cinema (that) is highly social at the same time that it is intensely personal.”²⁶⁷

Naficy also places the accented cinema within the context of rising globalization and the challenges that a globalizing world places on identity, highlighting authors and

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 92.

²⁶⁵ Ibid., 94.

²⁶⁶ Ibid., 95.

²⁶⁷ Ibid., 95.

creators who present a “new and critical imagination in the global media: an accented cinema of exile and diaspora and its embedded theory of criticism.”²⁶⁸ The accented cinema comprises a body of critical texts that express the voice of the subaltern, the occupied, exiled, and displaced peoples created by the sweeping forces of globalization and the realignments of the new international order. It is in the accented cinema that these experiences, fears, and anxieties are often most clearly expressed, in a medium that can overcome physical and structural barriers and deploy affect through narrative, as outlined below.

Media Mobilities and Representations of Palestine

Since the outbreak of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the unravelling of the peace process between Israel and Palestine, Palestinians have been struggling for, in the words of Edward Said, the “permission to narrate.”²⁶⁹ This “permission to narrate” that Said highlights is denied primarily in the Western context, but also inside Israel, where Palestinian voices are effectively silenced, and the Israeli point of view dominates media discourse. This denial of voice is one of a spectra of rights denied to Palestinians, including a complex and discriminatory bureaucracy that limits their freedom of movement, as they attempt to traverse the lands of historical Palestine or venture outside their own borders, or to visit or return to their homeland. Yet Palestinians have found methods to overcome these structural limitations on their freedom of physical movement and communicate their plights, hopes, fears, and histories through the virtual mobility of

²⁶⁸ Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 8.

²⁶⁹ Edward Said, “Permission to Narrate,” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Volume 13, Issue 3, (1984).

media and film. Other forms of virtual mobilities include traveling exhibits, theater and art, lectures, fairs and cultural events, literature and poetry, journalistic work, and social media, among others. And while much attention has been given to social media, especially in the context of the ‘Arab Spring’ within the disciplines of mass communication, journalism, and media studies, cinema has provided an especially effective method of overcoming the limitations of movement imposed upon Palestinians. Along with some films that garner attention and nomination from the Academy Awards, such as *5 Broken Cameras* (2013) and *Omar* (2014), numerous independent Arabic and Middle East film festivals are held all over the world. There are now at least nine major Middle East film festivals that take place every year from coast-to-coast in the US, and each serve as an important conduit for cultural expression within America. The DC Palestine Film and Art Festival is an especially successful and valuable one that I have attended. Though Arabs and Palestinians are still largely denied the ‘permission to narrate’ in the mainstream media on the decades after Said’s first articulated it, this power has been seized in other venues and platforms. Furthermore, the fact that the Palestinian solidarity movement has garnered so much global support and remains a salient issue shows that the Israeli project to suppress and eliminate Palestinian culture has failed.

The mobility of Palestinian messaging has also been an important force for maintaining Palestinian identity as well as articulating the aspirations for a Palestinian state and just end to the Israeli occupation. This phenomenon of nations being created and maintained through media that has been effectively argued by both Benedict

Anderson, among others.²⁷⁰ Here I turn again to the work Stuart Hall and Douglas Kellner in focusing on liberatory potentials and moments in increased virtual mobility through increased media access and networks of distribution. Rather than viewing the phenomenon of increased virtual mobility as a frame of control, it instead facilitates the development of public modalities as theorized by Brouwer and Asen (2010).²⁷¹ Not satisfied with the metaphors available for understanding communicative communities such as public spheres and networks, Brouwer and Asen employ the metaphor of modalities, which refers “both to ways that social actors engage each other publicly and to ways scholars study processes of public engagement.” More specifically, “With respect to practice, modality illuminates the diverse range of processes through which individuals and groups engage each other, institutions, and their environment in creating, reformulating, and understanding social worlds.” In their formulation, these engagements can “utilize verbal and visual symbols, statistical evidence, narrative testimony, formal argumentation, tactical consumerism, humor, sentimentality, corporeality, and more.”²⁷² Their descriptive metaphor of communicative modalities best accounts for the state of Palestinian and Arab cinema and its processes and functions in the current age, especially when considering the reflexive function of the scholar and their role in the wider analysis of culture, media, ideology, and politics of identity formation. As I outlined in the introductory chapter here, the role of the scholar and critic is not hermetically sealed from

²⁷⁰ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (New York: Verso, 2016).

²⁷¹ Daniel C. Brouwer and Robert Asen, *Public Modalities: Rhetoric, Culture, Media, and the Shape of Public Life*,

²⁷² *Ibid.*, 16.

the real world in which their objects and subjects of analysis reside and the networks through which they are distributed, shared, and discussed.

These potentials and progress of media mobilities reflect a clear progression from the former communicative limitations imposed upon Palestinians by the Israeli government and military, where previously exiled peoples were forced “to get around the censorship and surveillance of their native or host governments by developing encryption procedures for communication with each other and with their compatriots elsewhere.”²⁷³ Naficy, in looking at the epistolary functions of Palestinian exile cinema for example, states that it is “about breaking out of the loneliness and isolation that exile imposes. It is about expansiveness and not closedness; it is about immensity not claustrophobia.”²⁷⁴ Other motivations can of course also be explicitly political in their engagement of the tangible or metaphorical restrictions of exile and with wider communities.

Identity and Palestinian Film

Yasir Suleiman’s 2016 edited volume, *Being Palestinian: Personal Reflection on Palestinian Identity in the Diaspora*, provides deeply insightful and surprising insights into how Palestinians understand their own identity as it relates to the experience of living in exile. Suleiman instructed the contributors to avoid the “‘high’ politics” of Palestine and to focus on “what needed to be narrated through reflections...that can give readers a glimpse of what it means to be Palestinian for those who are considered lucky

²⁷³ Hamid Naficy in Hamid Dabashi (Ed.), *Dreams of a Nation*, 96.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 104.

enough to live in the diaspora,” a somewhat controversial stance to take. But Suleiman adds that,

*the comforts and privileges of the diaspora...could not erase engagement with Palestine as a location and object of belonging that is inseparable from injustice, bewilderment, disbelief, denial, grief, vulnerability, loss, pain, suffering, struggle, adaptation, survival, resilience, resistance, hope, anger, friendship, marginality, oppression, transgression, occupation, bombardment, siege, brutality, rupture, displacement, temporariness, statelessness, restlessness...*²⁷⁵

Jean Said Makdisi shares these sentiments on the idea that being Palestinian involves a constant engagement with a “continual, unbroken, violent history of political, social, military, and cultural injustice, and to be perpetually obsessed with this historical set of grievances.” She adds, “Being Palestinian is not just a national experience, but a personal, deeply felt consciousness of loss and alienation,” and “an inescapable identity forced on them by their being, precisely, Palestinian”²⁷⁶ What is so striking in many of the essays of *Being Palestinian*, is also a certain ambivalence and exhaustion from engaging with media, memories, identity, and outsiders’ conceptions of Palestine. Makdisi says “Sometimes, often, I wish I could forget Palestine. I wish I would not leap up at every mention of it, at every provocation by those not similarly engaged, at every foolish remark made by the ignorant and the misled, at every media report that covers up the truth instead of exposing it.”²⁷⁷

²⁷⁵ Yasir Suleiman, *Being Palestinian: Personal Reflections on Palestinian Identity in the Diaspora*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 5.

²⁷⁶ Jean Said Makdisi, “Stranger to my Own Story,” in Yasir Suleiman (Ed.), *Being Palestinian*, 245.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 246.

Ghazi Hassoun writes about the difficulties of reconciling his Palestinian identity with his American-ness. After finding his skills as a theoretical physicist were not needed in his homeland but that the US would provide a career and permanent home. Hassoun found himself full of questions:

Was it right to commit my life to a career in physics and citizenship in America? It would entail setting aside much of my other human concerns, especially related to Palestine. Was I ready to detach myself from the past and emotions, motivations and hopes that, at its very core had propelled my pursuits heretofore? How was I to reconcile the Islamic/Palestinian/Arab precepts, values, and aspirations and ways of life, deeply engrained in me at a tender age, with those of a country with a starkly different history, social fabric and worldview? What would all this do to me as a Palestinian?

For Hassoun, “The soul-searching transcended traditional views of nationalism, religion, and identity,” as he “saw these as time and place dependent, relative, culturally intertwined and evolving models for living.” In the end, Hassoun finds some level of closure, and of all the excerpts included here speak most directly to the themes of *Amreeka*, where his “path became clear: be resilient, evolve, adjust, adapt and keep up. The affiliations and identity need not be given up, but they may take a different form and/or be exercised differently.”²⁷⁸

For Lila Abu-Lughod, “To be Palestinian is to be at once rooted – in family, community, memory and history – and to be buffeted, often violently, by the ways others see you.” Abu-Lughod speaks in her entry how childhood memories and news from Palestine forged and maintained her connection to Palestine, “But more than anything, you experience the different ways Palestinians are viewed, constantly seeing yourself

²⁷⁸ Ghazi Hassoun, “Reconciling Araby and America,” in Yasir Suleiman (Ed.), *Being Palestinian*, 188.

through the eyes of others.”²⁷⁹ She adds that “Because I live in the US, I too sometimes watch other Palestinians with ambivalence, forced to see them through the eyes of others.”²⁸⁰ Interestingly, she also tells of the internet and media maintaining other Palestinians’ identity when she meets a young Palestinian girl who recites a poem about Palestine that she learned from watching YouTube.²⁸¹ Abu-Lughod also directly engages the tensions she feels from media representations, longing “for a presentation of the truth of our story that can convince the kinds of people I know in the US who do not know what we know. A representation that works with a different aesthetic or structure of feeling.”²⁸²

Films also provide an especially effective form of both the expression and formation of identity, for filmmakers and audiences respectively. The growth of audience studies within media and communication studies reflects the increasing influence of media as a driver of identity formations, as seen in the more recent focus of cultural studies on identity politics, ideology, and lived experiences (Means Coleman 2002). It is the narrative and affective qualities of film that makes it such a powerful medium in fostering both the expression and formation of identity for exiled peoples. Filmic narratives and the ways in which they are encoded form our social realities and serve as the basis for how we understand ourselves and the community of which we are or are not a part, how we maintain our sense of identity to ourselves and others, and the political and social conflicts that may arise because of these identity formations. Much like Robin

²⁷⁹ Lila Abu-Lughod, “Buffeted by How Others See You,” in Yasir Suleiman (Ed.), *Being Palestinian*, 31.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 32.

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, 33.

R. Means Coleman in *Say it Loud!: African-American Audiences, Media, and Identity*, I do not seek to close off identity formations or the theoretical study of them, but rather to highlight the ways that identity is “complex, diverse, multiple, heterogeneous, and negotiated.”²⁸³ In other words, I am not looking for markers of difference as much as I seeking to study film as a cultural artifact that can “reveal why people invest in certain identity positions, how such identifications are formed and maintained, (and) to what end.” However, we must also not be overly deterministic in looking toward one medium or artifact, and account for other factors that must always be placed in conversation with media such as daily experience and substantive conditions of living. Only then can we conduct more inclusive media analysis and locate the ways that “identity is variously constituted” and “defined through representation—how we are represented and how we represent ourselves—and that our interest should also be with how we come to gain knowledge about our identities” through an array of channels, experiences, interactions, and institutions.²⁸⁴

Nonetheless, Palestinian film is especially important for Palestinians, and not only because of the pride it evokes from Palestinians as an effective form of virtual mobility and their determination to overcome limitations of movement. It is also an arguably more effective in influencing senses of Palestinian identity because of the inherent historical work conducted in presenting a historiography that has been sidelined in much of the Western collective consciousness, as well as the fact that the wide array of films present

²⁸³ Robin R. Means Coleman, *Say It Loud!: African American Audiences, Media and Identity*, (Routledge, 2002), 5.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

so many of the various modes of the Palestinian and Arab experience in encountering Israel, from forced exile and displacement, occupation, resistance, uncertainty, the mundanity of waiting while crossing borders, or the tenuousness of the refugee experience, among others. Palestinian films now constitute a significant factor in the formation of the world's collective memory of Palestine and its historical experience and provide a much more accessible medium than does academic writing and even mainstream journalism, to which much of this body of film seeks to issue a corrective. Every Palestinian film is in and of itself a political act of resistance, if only for being Palestinian, an identity that has been politicized.

While there has been much research on media effects in the context of journalism and news media on opinions about the Arab-Israeli conflict, or on constructions of Palestinian identity on new social media networks, there has not been sufficient work on understanding constructions of Palestinian identity in analyses of entertainment media. This is, again, not to suggest that the existing scholarly work on the role of Palestinian, accented, and mainstream film does not provide highly valuable insights. Many of these works focused on Palestinian films inspect its development, as well as the historicity, trauma, function, places and spaces, tensions, contentions, and politics contained within them. But for a more complete view of how Palestinian films operate, as an increasingly significant and important component of the overall media representations of Palestine, its history, and the experience of Palestinians, the body of media studies literature should expand in studies of production, circulation, and distribution along with more deeply considering the resultant modes of reception, including identity construction. Some of the

important groundwork for understanding the role of media in Palestinian identity construction has already been paved.

One of Hamid Naficy's most interesting insights in *An Accented Cinema* includes his observation that "the exilic nostalgia for a real and originary homeland prevents the exilic performance of identity from being either totally unmoored or totally subversive" in that "nostalgia tends to drive the exiles' conservative tendencies (in the sense of keeping them rooted)". He also notes that the deployment of identity in subversive contexts and in depending on "splitting and multiplication, they produce subjectivities and identities that are often more anxious and phobic than at-ease and pleased."²⁸⁵ Naficy also locates films where "Accented filmmakers who live in various modes of transnational otherness inscribe and (re)enact in their films the fears, freedoms, and possibilities of split subjectivity and multiple identities" in "fragmented split subjectivities and multiple identities."²⁸⁶ These ruptures translate into the fragmented, disjointed, or tenuous nature of these films where, in Naficy's view, the role of the author remains performative.²⁸⁷

Many of these ruptures and fragmentations come from the fundamental idea of identity being rooted in its attachments to a physical location, space, and time. With the growth of globalization and the proliferation of new and increasingly mobile media technologies, identity has progressed from being attached to a singular place to multiplicities and complex configurations. In analyzing *Amreeka*, as one of the most

²⁸⁵ Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 270.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 271.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 271.

popular recent films that depicts one aspect of the Palestinian experience, I explore below how transcultural identity formations are emerging in films about Palestine and Palestinian identity, how these films take on transcultural codes of narrative and language, and then assess the implications for these emergences as it relates to the construction of identity for Palestinians living in exile and beyond. I also engage with the differing temporal memories of these Palestinian characters, in their respective attachments to Palestines of different times and places. I then turn our attention to the film *Forget Baghdad* (2002), a documentary film by Samir, which features interviews with Arab Jewish writers who emigrated from Iraq to Israel after 1950. Though at first glance it might appear odd to highlight these two films, especially in comparison with the mainstream films analyzed in previous chapters, both these films deeply engage themes of identity, experiences of immigration and displacement, Otherness, language, and most substantially, memory, a primary topic of this project. This is not to conflate Arab, Iraqi, and Palestinian identity, and my analysis below does not look for overlap in these themes or identities. Furthermore, these films are not intended to be paired together here, but rather taken on their own terms in how these each exploring these themes in such differentiated ways as a way of uncovering how malleable, and yet fixed, identity itself can be in such fluid circumstances. Both films also deal with transnational experiences and interrogate notions of Arab identity within individuals and how those individuals negotiate their identity within their interactions with wider, often unfamiliar communities. While the experiences of a Palestinian-American woman who immigrates to the post-9/11 US and a displaced Mizrahi Iraqi who finds themselves in a new and

unfamiliar nation are vastly different, I would however argue their representations in these films interrogate identity so well partly due to the transnational identities of the people who produced these films. Beyond those thematic aspects, both films also saw relative success in the US for being independent Arab-produced films. *Amreeka* was widely distributed in the US on video and won numerous awards on the independent film festival circuit, including three Independent Spirit Awards, the awards for Best Arabic Film and Best Arabic Script at the Cairo International Film Festival, and was an official selection and the 2009 Sundance Film Festival. *Forget Baghdad*, meanwhile, garnered positive reviews in large mainstream publications including the *New York Times*, *Village Voice*, *Variety*, and the *Washington Post*.

Transnational Experience and Transcultural Identities in *Amreeka*

Amreeka is a 2009 semi-autobiographical drama film written and directed by Cherien Dabis that tells the story of Muna, single mother living in Palestine whose marriage has failed after her husband left her for another woman. After seeing her former husband's new lover while out buying tomatoes, Muna returns home to her mother to find that she has won the US green card lottery and makes the decision to emigrate from Palestine with her son to central Illinois to live with her brother and his family. The film portrays the trials and tribulations of unmet expectations, the Arab-American and Palestinian-American immigrant experience, the challenges of navigating a new culture, and the hope that can be found in starting a new life in an unfamiliar place. The

independent film was very well-received by critics and audiences alike and was picked for distribution by National Geographic Entertainment.

The transculturalism of *Amreeka* is very evident from just a surface-level reading, partly a result of its transnational narrative and resides in several of its characters and character development. While setting itself apart from most other films about Palestine and Palestinians in that regard, *Amreeka* still utilizes some of the main features of Palestinian films, including early scenes that take place along the separation wall, at Israeli military checkpoints, and in the security checks at airport terminals, and the disruptions caused to daily life in Palestine and indignities they experience under Israeli occupation. The film also deploys the oft-used film trope of a young Palestinian character who, after repeated harassment and becoming angry over his treatment, resorts to violence when he confronts his bully, but in the process learns the value of nonviolence and the futility of acting in anger. But what sets *Amreeka* apart from other Palestinian films is, most importantly and prominently, an *Arab-American immigrant* experience, with the American component largely emphasized. *Amreeka* appeals as a film across communities and borders in that it so accurately portrays the common elements of this immigrant experience, which significant number of Americans relate to, and White Americans often uplift as evidence of America as a land of opportunity. Whether or not they are a part of a recent immigrant community, it is middle America that ostensibly most appreciates a neoliberal ‘pull yourself up by your bootstraps’ story that speaks to wider traditional American values and the perceived potential for economic success.

Language, Conversation, and Assimilation in *Amreeka*

The linguistic features of *Amreeka* also reflect its transculturalism. The dialogue of the film is roughly half in English and half in Palestinian Arabic, with some of the characters switching between the languages very fluidly in the same way multilingual speakers do in real life. In one of the earlier scenes, Fadi speaks in English as a means of teenage rebellion and his mother scolds him, “So you are speaking English now?”. Arabic is still spoken within the house when Muna and Fadi come to live with Muna’s sister, husband, and two young daughters, retaining a sense of ‘accented’ realism within the dialogue.

Similarly, with the 2003 American invasion of Iraq used as a backdrop of the film, the conversations between Muna and her brother-in-law, Nabeel, are very authentic in how they express and navigate the uncertainty, anxieties, humor, and resignation to what is unfolding thousands of miles away. The viewer can also read the tensions and contradictions of both young and old characters living in the US while its government invades and bombs an Arab country using American tax dollars. Nabeel resorts to finding humor in the tragic absurdity of an “accidental bombing” that killed civilians while the younger characters debate the war in their classrooms and navigate the bigotries and racism that became and remain so salient in the post-9/11 environment.

While being subject to the dynamics of being a recent immigrant to middle America where he is rendered a minority, Fadi is also forced to navigate the pressures of simply being an American teenager. His cousin tells him not to wear certain clothes, otherwise risking that he will look like a “FOB” (Fresh off the boat) at school. When Fadi

does don American-style clothes, he does so through one of the most common American art forms that has served as conduit for transcultural exchange: rap and hip hop. While hanging out and smoking marijuana with his cousin, Salma, and her boyfriend, they show Fadi how to untuck his shirt and keep a looser posture, all the while a rap song plays in the background. Fadi's transcultural transformation becomes obvious to his mother when he later tells his mom to "stay out of my grill." The tensions of transcultural life emerge again when Fadi and Salma return home late into the night and are getting scolded by Salma's mother, Raghda. As Raghda asks Salma why she was out so late, Salma tells her mother in no uncertain terms, "We're American!". Here Salma eliminates any questions as to how she views her own identity, and yet Raghda responds in Arabic, "As long as you live in this house, you are Palestinian!"

In fact, it is Muna's and Raghda's different respective understandings and their differing levels of enthusiasm for their lives in America that provide some of the most fruitful text for analyzing modes of transcultural identity here. Like so many other characters in Palestinian films, Raghda yearns to be back in Palestine and reminisces for her homeland while smelling a bag of *za'tar*²⁸⁸, commenting that "Nothing smells like home." Muna, meanwhile, is largely happy to have left Palestine and all the daily difficulties of living there behind. When Muna does experience homesickness, it is not due to anything specifically about Palestine that she misses, but it is rather the difficulty of her transition in her problems finding a good job and money that makes her miss home. In a bid to cure her homesickness, Raghda brings Muna to the local Arabic grocery

²⁸⁸ An aromatic blend of spices found in Palestine and the Arab region

store and it is here, along with the final scene in an Arabic restaurant, that shows how *Amreeka* is a distinctly hybrid *Arab-American* transcultural film, and not for any themes of liminality or traveling that are so often seen in Palestinian films. *Amreeka* is a film that portrays a distinct Arab-American experience in a rural area, where community is found and fostered in transcultural spaces like the home, grocery stores and restaurants, among allies in the community and those who share some aspects of your identity, even within a differentiated experience. My high praise for this portrayal partly comes from the fact that it is set in central Illinois, a place where I spent three years of my graduate career and became familiar with the Arab community there. Having grown up in white Midwestern America and seeing the racism against minority communities that exists there, while those communities continue to flourish and foster various intercultural modes of life, I find that *Amreeka* captures the racial and cultural dynamics at work in this part of the US remarkably well. *Amreeka*'s engagement with identity resides largely in how it emphasizes neither Arab/Palestinian-ness or American-ness as much as it portrays the hyphenated (not one or the other, but *both*) Arab-American identity as a basis for telling its story.

Themes of Space, Place, and the Palestinian Experience in *Amreeka*

Tensions of differentiated transcultural experiences also emerge in highly interesting ways. Muna is clearly aware that Raghda yearns to be back in a Palestine that no longer exists, or perhaps only exists in an idealized form in Raghda's mind. The Israeli occupation still looms over Muna's thinking about Palestine, as she reminds

Raghda that she has not been back to their homeland in over fifteen years. It is during these fifteen years that the Oslo Accords effectively made the occupation the status quo and saw the building of the Security Wall, none of which are fully accounted for in Raghda's thinking about Palestine. Muna seems keenly aware that Raghda reminisces for place that is no longer locatable in reality. Muna and Raghda are both exist as transcultural figures, yet each metaphorically look in opposite directions, with Muna looking forward to her new life in the US and Raghda looking back to (or for) the Palestine she left behind. In this sense, Muna and Raghda's transcultural experiences and understandings of their homeland unfold in highly differentiated temporal spaces, and though much of their identities and experiences are shared, it is the temporal difference that creates a failure to bridge the distance between them. And yet neither of them can be neatly categorized in Palestinian-American or Arab-American for reasons beyond Raghda's nostalgia and Muna's recent migration, further reflecting all the overlapping and fractured components of identity itself. For example, when the family begins receiving threatening letters amidst the rising socio-political tensions surrounding the Iraq War, Raghda expresses what I read as a very American response when she demands her husband buy a gun for protection.

Amreeka also captures the positive effect of transculturalism and multiculturalism on other non-immigrants, beyond the presence of intercultural sites. One scene shows Muna making "falafel burgers" in the deep fryer at the White Castle where she works. She shares these falafel burgers with her blue-haired teenage male coworker, who finds the new flavors delicious, and he later tells Muna "masalama" (goodbye in Arabic) when

she leaves work in one of the final scenes. In my view, the most defining scene depicting Muna ultimately entering the quintessential American experience, she falls and injures her back while working at White Castle and cannot go to the hospital because she lacks health insurance, choosing instead to remain on her back on the restaurant floor waiting for her family to come get her.

The most important transcultural moment comes near the end of the film, in an emotional climax when Fadi and his mother argue over Fadi's sense of alienation and not belonging in Illinois after being beaten up by a group of white teenagers. Fadi states that they do not belong there in Illinois, and Muna asks rhetorically "If we don't belong here, then where do we belong?". Muna then asserts that "We have every right to be here. Just like everyone else... And be proud of who you are." When Fadi states that being in Illinois "sucks" she responds that "Every place sucks. The important thing is that you can't let anyone make you question who you are. Do you understand me?" Who Fadi is, in terms of his identity or character, is not articulated or explored beyond Muna's reminder to remain true to himself, leaving room for the dynamics of their identities to be considered by the viewer. Or read another way, perhaps Muna does not articulate exactly who he is or who they are because they are inhabiting a liminal, transitional time and place, like so many Palestinians we see in cinema. However, the film leaves no room for misinterpretation; they are now indeed 'home' in America, and the closing scenes of *Amreeka* clearly suggests that they are simply in a transitional period in their new home of Illinois. Furthermore, the film does not end in an uncertain moment and instead ends with the traditional narrative closure one expects from the Hollywood form. After

showing us the trials and tribulations of transnational migration, the family convenes at an Arabic restaurant to eat, joyfully dance to Arabic music, and smoke *shisha*. The scene represents a celebration of Muna and Fadi's successes within the context of their new life in America and the richness of their transcultural existence. The final scene provides the unmistakable message that despite the difficulties in their past and future, with Muna all the while instructing her son to remember who they are, that they are home in central Illinois, USA. So, while their identity is clearly transcultural and their experience transnational, the identity of the main characters as individuals is portrayed as hybridized, varied, overlapping, diverging, but nonetheless a foundation for something greater, even if it simply is a sense of self.

***Amreeka* as Accented Cinema and Neoliberal Text**

Amreeka is undoubtedly an 'accented' film, though it expresses a new accent not fully present or formulated when Naficy wrote his book surveying accented cinema. Despite being an independent film by definition of its production, *Amreeka* presents an accent that has been flattened out as it is packaged and presented in the dominant codes of Western filmmaking. While most of the background music is in Arabic and the early scenes that take place in Palestine have the washed-out sun-drenched filter that we often see in Hollywood films portraying the Middle East, the colorization of the film takes on the qualities of Western films when they arrive in the US, highlighting a sense of inherent difference of place that is so familiar for the American viewer. In addition, the narrative is not fragmented or experimental and follows a traditional narrative arc, and the shot composition is straightforward throughout. Embedded in the narrative are clear and

universal moral lessons of hard work, tolerance, and non-violence, along with uplifting narrative resolutions that most viewers of Hollywood films have come to expect. It is this utilization of Western cinematic codes to which we can attribute much of its success in the US, along with its inspiring story and appeal to American values where immigrant face hardships but “pull themselves up by their bootstraps,” as the saying goes.

Additionally, the harassment and bullying faced by the main characters of the film present racism as a small-scale problem harbored and deployed by individuals, and not as a pervasive structural issue. It is worth questioning whether the film would have received so much praise and distribution if the film had challenged Western neoliberal sensibilities instead of reinforcing them. *Amreeka* is both an expression of transcultural identity and an appeal for others to understand it, while still appealing to the segment of American values that exalts the immigrant experience and their contributions to America’s labor economy. The film may be an act of political resistance, in its portrayal of the Israeli occupation of Palestine and pockets of racism, but it does so through familiar Western cinematic conventions and an appeal to American values that the film palatable for even politically conservative American viewers. Both the narrative and codes of the film appeal to nationalist American sensibilities of patriotism through the glorification of labor, hard work, and independence, and to cultural integration.

While *Amreeka* performs affective work for the American viewer who may not understand or appreciate the Arab-American or immigrant experience, we should also consider how the film can be read by Palestinian exiles both in and outside of America, and by audiences in the Arab world. In Naficy’s view of accented cinema, films are

accented by a quality of difference, through the production process and narrative form in contrast with dominant mainstream films. With film being an important driver in the formation of identity, transcultural identity shifts in accented cinema are flattened out in such a way that the film adopts Western codes, traditional narrative structures, and generic moral lessons. And though I am not framing viewers of this film as one-dimensional “cultural dopes,” and resistant audiences certainly interpret filmic codes like *Amreeka* outside the dominant preferred readings, the dominant preferred reading must be accounted for with the more temporal and spatial distance comes between Palestine and Palestinians, and as the Palestinian movement becomes increasingly marginalized in the priorities of Arab geopolitics.²⁸⁹

For all the productive work the film does for the mainstream American viewer in fostering intercultural understanding through its portrayal of the Arab-American immigrant experience, this emphasis on the hyphenated identity formation may serve to create a permanence of exile, and the effect this might have in keeping a Palestinians state and its land as a central point of Palestinian aspirational politics for successive generations. Revisiting Naficy’s argument quoted above that “the exilic nostalgia for a real and originary homeland prevents the exilic performance of identity from being either totally unmoored or totally subversive” and that “nostalgia tends to drive the exiles’ conservative tendencies (in the sense of keeping them rooted),” time will tell what directions exilic identity takes on and further shifts in what it means to be Palestinian

²⁸⁹ Stuart Hall, (1980). *Encoding/Decoding*. In Hall, D., Love, A., & Willis, P. *Culture, Media, & Language*. London: Hutchinson. pp. 128-138, (1980).

outside their homeland.²⁹⁰ Furthermore, in presenting a positive narrative with moral closure, *Amreeka* portrays a Palestine in which it has become too difficult to live while better opportunities await in America. It is imperative to depict of the difficulties and injustices imposed by the occupation, but films can also balance that picture with a portrayal that fosters the richness of daily Palestinian life as well, as an increasing flow of Palestinians from historical Palestine could serve the Israeli project of Arab displacement and create demographics more favorable to Israel. With a critical reading of films like *Amreeka*, I consider here the long-term effects of films with a flattened accent on Palestinian identity, their political goals, and the lessons that these films provide. In addition, a film like *Amreeka* may work to circumscribe acceptable modes of political resistance, where it is no longer productive to act in opposition to the occupation but rather to leave for a better life somewhere else. However, with identities of all forms now becoming increasingly politicized due to the reactionary rise in White nationalism throughout the Western world, filmic portrayals of identity, in all its multilayered, complex, transcultural formations, can still make a return to their subversive qualities and project a more definitive accent.

Memory, History, and Identity in Samir's *Forget Baghdad*

In undertaking a textual analysis of Samir's documentary film *Forget Baghdad* (2002), with a focus on the film's use of archival footage and engagement of historical

²⁹⁰ Hamid Naficy, *An Accented Cinema*, 270.

memory in discussing identity, I am interested in observing how Samir's film interacts with dominant Western understandings, media depictions, and therefore collective memory of the Arab-Israeli conflict and themes of identity in the wake of displacement and exile. Samir's documentary undoubtedly engages human experiences in Israel-Palestine in upending dominant media and modern historiographical narratives that center on a binary opposition between Arab and Jewish identities, which overlap in the identity of Mizrahi Jews. By putting this film in conversation with my previous discussions of collective memory and history, my aim is to identify the use and effect of memory and archival footage in *Forget Baghdad*, and the film's representations of the Mizrahi experience in the first years of the Arab-Israeli conflict and establishment of the State of Israel in 1948. I chose *Forget Baghdad* as a text for analysis because it represents another terrain for contesting the dominant historiography of Israel-Palestine and expressing the complexities of Arab identity with provocative results.

Forget Baghdad

Samir's 2002 documentary *Forget Baghdad* is a deeply intertextual film that in many ways interrogates themes of memory and experience. Samir originally set out to make this film to find and film interviews with people who may have known his deceased father or shared his experience as an Iraqi Jew and member of the Communist party in Baghdad before immigrating to Israel. Though most Mizrahi Jews, also known as Oriental Jews or Arab Jews, did not emigrate right after the founding of Israel when historical Palestine was divided by United Nations Resolution 181, almost the entire Arab

Jewish community fled to Israel around 1950. Motivations for Mizrahi emigration to Israel varied from state to state in the Arab world, but most situations were like that in Iraq — primarily a mixture of political and religious tensions and all-out upheaval due to the emergence of Zionism, Arab nationalism, and Western colonial influence and intervention. Whereas anti-Semitism was previously a somewhat foreign concept to the diverse cultural traditions of the Middle East, newly emerging formations of nationalism often forced an extrication of identities from one another, just as it had in other colonial states. This was most acutely seen in British Mandate-era Palestine, when Arab Palestinian Jews were pushed into ‘choosing sides’ between their Jewish or Arab identities, between Arab Palestinian nationalism or joining the Jewish state as a second-class Arab citizen of Israel. Due to the very nature and administration of the Mandate, Arab Jews in Palestine were instantly made suspicious of, and suspected by, both their Arab and Jewish neighbors. The devastating effects of this extrication and rigid classification of identities is still seen in the deep sectarianism across the Middle East today.

This nostalgia for a diverse Middle East lost to the wheels of modern history and ideology is apparent from the opening scene of *Forget Baghdad*. And yet, this nostalgia is made apparent for two Baghdads—the Baghdad of our Orientalist fantasies and the modern Baghdad that came undone by sectarianism. After the opening credits and footage of Samir walking through Ben Gurion Airport in Tel Aviv, the film cuts to a scene of an old Orientalist film featuring a man and woman floating over ancient Baghdad in a magic carpet. Samir narrates, “I was born in Baghdad. No, not the Baghdad

of our fantasies...” We are then presented with footage of a Baghdad largely unfamiliar to us today. There are images of new roads and cars, gardens, development and industry, and cosmopolitan urban scenes. These images are interrupted only for a brief second by black-and-white US military footage of a precision missile destroying an Iraqi building, a reminder of what both Baghdads, real or not, eventually became—relics of memory.

Transnational Experiences, Memory, and Engaging Identity in *Forget Baghdad*

Samir explains that he was interested in his father’s experiences growing up in Iraq with the Arab Jewish community there, and “what it’s like to change countries, to forget your culture and your language, and to become enemies of your own past.”

Though his father was not himself Jewish, Iraqi Jewish writers comprised his social and creative life, and Samir seeks to understand his father’s experience through those of five important Israeli authors and intellectuals, none of whom actually knew his father:

Shimon Ballas, Moussa Houry, Samir Naqqash, Sami Mikhael, and Ella Shohat (Samir’s father himself emigrated from Iraq to Switzerland). In this sense, each act as a surrogate of his father’s memory; it is not exact but there is some symmetry and meeting points of experience that become clear. Each author is given an introductory quote and we are made aware of the development and splitting of their identities as Iraqis, as Arabs, and as Mizrahi Jews emigrating from an Arab state to Israel. “In Iraq I was an Arab. Here I am a Jew. I’m talking about my nationality, not my religion! I’ve already been a Jew in Iraq!” states Houry. Naqqash adds, “We’ve lived in palaces and they put us into tents. Instead of bringing us home after 3000 years, they sent us 100,000 years back.” Shohat later speaks

of her “contradictory memories, especially in regards to Muslims” that her family relayed to her from their time in Baghdad. Shohat herself was born and raised in Israel, so these memories have been told to her second-hand. She relates how after her father died, her family were made destitute and cared for by her Muslim neighbors, yet just a couple years later she encountered the wrath of Muslims in the *fahoud* of 1941, an anti-Jewish riot in Baghdad. Echoing a similar sentiment to that of Moussa Houry, she says that after arriving in Israel her family realized that “In the Arab world we were Jews, in Israel we were Arabs. Everywhere we’re the wrong identity.” In other words, in the last century of the Middle East’s experience with nationalism, there has been a perpetual ‘othering’ of Mizrahi Jews wherever they live.

Almost all of the introductory scenes to each topical section of the film are comprised of archival British propaganda films produced in both Israel and Iraq in the early 20th century, which are then immediately met with opposing commentary provided by the film’s subjects. Both Iraq and historical Palestine were British colonial projects after the First World War and the implementation of the Sykes-Picot agreement, in which colonial administration of the Middle East was divided between France and Britain. The exaggerated British narrator in this propaganda footage boasts of the development in Baghdad under British occupation and features a brand-new bridge constructed over the Tigris, “another example of British industry.” The archival footage of the opening of the bridge reveals a stark juxtaposition, as the Iraqi and British officials who open the bridge are all, without exception, dressed in Western business suits. As the camera pans away to the Iraqi crowd watching the ceremony, we see they are all dressed in traditional Arab

dress. The structure of *Forget Baghdad* and commentary that contrasts so starkly with the old British-produced propaganda reflects a direct engagement with the Western colonial archive of the Middle East. Where a surface-level viewing of the propaganda films portrays a Baghdad being thrust into modernity, the authors interviewed in the film, as well as the post-colonial historiography of the region render the archival footage nothing more than a whitewash of the actual events that took place there.

Each of the Mizrahi authors soon relay their own memories of the mixed, intercommunal neighborhoods of Baghdadi Christians, Jews, and Muslims all living together without any sectarian strife. As each subject speaks, half of the frame displays several historical family photographs that come into and out of the picture. Almost all the historical photos exhibit Arab peoples whose religious affiliations are almost completely unknowable, a reflection of the social and historical milieu in which they were taken, again a distant memory of a richly diverse Middle East now lost. Sami Mikhael states that the Mizrahim that lived in these mixed neighborhoods had a much easier time adjusting to modernization and life in 20th century Baghdad, and a distinct desire to enter the modern world.

In addition to the pictures that bring the viewer to shed their preconceived notions of identity for early 20th century Baghdadis, words in English, Arabic, and Hebrew drift behind inset footage of the interviews. Each drifting word is in large, old white typeset against a black background. Reading these words de-centers the viewer of *Forget Baghdad*, as we either recognize the word as meaningful to ourselves, unrecognizable, or multi-layered across all three languages, depending on the viewers'

language abilities. As a speaker of Arabic and English but not Hebrew, during my viewings of the film I developed a particular self-reflexivity in listening to the interviewees speak almost solely in Arabic, reading the subtitles in English, reading the Arabic words on the screen, and having no understanding of the Hebrew words both spoken and written. As I understood the rich meanings of the Arabic expressions used and realized the loss of that richness in the English translation, I found that my reading of the film can only be partial because of my own inability to translate a ‘third layer’ of Hebrew and understand the other dimensions of the words being used. I also began lamenting that viewers of the film who only speak English could not understand the colloquial Arabic phrases the interviewees used, with their interjections of *iani* (“I mean...”), *wallah* (swear to God), and *khallas* (enough!) throughout. These expressions give speakers of Arabic a feeling of familiarity and affection for the subjects of this film since their colloquial phrasing was so casual as compared to the rigid formal Arabic. In all, these words provide much more individualized viewings of *Forget Baghdad* compared to other films and play with the conception of identity, not just thematically but for the viewer in real time.

Meanings of Space and Place in *Forget Baghdad*

Interestingly, Samir chose to feature the Hebrew names of locations in Israel on the screen, and only the Arabic names for Iraqi locations. Each location is assigned to its own linguistic space, with varying identifications and familiarities drawn for the viewer. However, in taking the film as a whole, these are not made out to be starkly juxtaposed

places in that Ballas, Houry, Naqqash, Michael, and Shohat all serve as bridges between these places and borders of language. All of them know Hebrew and Arabic and personify the problematics of classifying and delineating identity itself. In this sense, they all occupy a liminal space that their experiences have forced them into where identity is not fixed but fluid, and at times uncertain. This allows us to transcend simplistic American conceptions of the Arab-Jew binary and the process of othering the subject. It is in this liminal space where we find the very falsity of using the term *Arab-Israeli conflict* as if it has a definite and fixed meaning and distinct conceptions of reality that can be derived from such distinctions. It exposes the conflict as one not over identity but of overarching ideologies with human subjects trapped in between.

A variety of footage from many older films is shown throughout the movie besides the British propaganda. Some clips are taken from Egyptian cinema during the 1940s and 1950s, which are influenced by Western cinema but retain their distinctive Arab character. But the most prominently featured archival footage is from a 1964 Israeli TV series titled *Sallah Shabati*, which is now seen as one of the main sources of Israeli Orientalism on the Mizrahim. But every clip shown from *Sallah Shabati* in *Forget Baghdad* is mostly obscured by a shifting, hazy black frame that prevents us from seeing the entire picture. Instead, our focus is repeatedly brought directly to the main character of *Sallah Shabati*, a buffoonish, uncivilized, and recently emigrated Mizrahi Jew whose idiocy conflicts with the modern society of Israel around him. We are told by Ella Shohat that in *Sallah Shabati* the main character eventually marries his daughters off to Ashkenazi Jews and it becomes a tale portraying the necessary assimilation of the

Mizrahim into Israeli Ashkenazi society. The obscuring of the picture makes what is happening in the totality of the frame unknowable, and so the complete picture is unclear. In this way, Samir's use of this archival footage is meant to imitate memory, in that human memory is not always complete and over time becomes focused on specific and dominant elements from the narrative at the expense of others. The other, less important characters, information, and aspects fall to the wayside of memory and into the black nothingness outside the frame, obscured completely. The very nature of memory itself is invoked *Forget Baghdad*, and in some ways evokes a questioning of the memories of all the interviewees. Are their memories clouded? Perhaps idealist? Overly critical? And again, as in the uncertain nature of memory, we do not and cannot know anything beyond those memories are inexact. Our reading, or decoding, of the film is limited by what we are presented with during the interviews and archival footage.

History and Memory in *Forget Baghdad*

In one very telling scene two of the Mizrahi men tell of their experiences during the *farhoud* in 1941 in Baghdad. Both men took part in a large Communist demonstration against the emerging anti-Semitism and discrimination in Baghdad, only to be fired upon by police as they neared British administrative government buildings. As the young men were fired upon many of them were hit and were taken in temporarily by prostitutes working at the neighborhood brothel, including both interviewees here. Yet their stories are starkly different, both in their telling, remembering, and in their presentation in the movie. Sami Mikhael speaks of a harrowing experience, of being shot and waking up

covered in blood, thinking he was dead, and eventually being rescued. Both his tone and the background music are especially serious. Samir Naqqash, however, laughs as he recounts his experience at the very same demonstration, and more joyful Arabic music is played. Naqqash has apparently fond memories where he was also rescued, sheltered, and protected from the police by prostitutes, and his telling is quite jovial. It is here we see the malleability and personal elements of memory, in that remembering is an individual, selective act and one that changes over time. It seems that memory has been shaped not only by their encounter with the past but also their reoccurring encounters with it, and by the current sociocultural conditions in which they find themselves. Perhaps just as importantly, these memories can be coded differently in media. Samir's presentations of these memories in his film are not only reflective of the subjects' respective attitudes, but he also emphasizes these differently through audiovisual methods.

What I find most fascinating about *Forget Baghdad* is Samir's use of images of the interviewees' eyes and hands as backgrounds to several of the frames. In the documentary *Derrida* (2004), Jacques Derrida says that "the eyes are the part of the body that doesn't age. In other words, if one looks for one's childhood across all the signs of the aging body...one can find one's childhood in the look of the eyes." No matter the age of the subject, they keep "the exact same eyes that he had as a child...Through the eyes the inner soul presents itself to the outside." He continues, "One's act of looking has no age. One's eyes are the same all of one's life." It appears that in the use and focus on the eyes of each subject in *Forget Baghdad* Samir is looking to capture some semblance of agelessness, and to find an unchanging conduit into their memory and experience. This

method also highlights the intensely personal character of memory—only *their eyes* saw what they saw and provided the images of their experience. As explicated in the beginning of this study, it is the individual aspects of memory we must start with as an object of analysis and as a constructed product, and only then can we move to the collective. As family photos of each author floats aside the frame we instantly see the same eyes on the screen, between youth and adult. We know we are tapping into memory through their eyes and theirs alone. Despite the flaws and changeability of memory we are given the most direct conduit into their youth and memory. Here we locate at least a sense of comforting timelessness, a fixed aspect of individual human memory. Only in understanding memory within the individual can we even consider a gesture to the collective and larger decodings of media as cultural artifact.

It is in this move where we see the importance of the narrative aspects of telling history, where we come to identify with the narrative subject in order to re-live their experiences as best we can through any medium. Again, the narrative telling makes the viewing of *Forget Baghdad* a very personal and humanistic one. But there is a distance involved that we must not forget, which I think is revealed in Derrida's thoughts on the hands and in Samir's shots of the subjects' hands and hand movements as they talk over the course of the interviews. Derrida was interested in the "privilege" given to the hands. Although a person's hands age, "it is the eyes and hands that are the sites of recognition, the signs through which one identifies the Other... They are, paradoxically, the parts that we see the least easily." He states that while we can look in the mirror and know what we look like, "it's very difficult to have an image of our own act of looking, or to have a true

image of our hands as they are moving. It's the Other who knows what our hands and eyes look like." Here Derrida is, in my view, speaking to not only an othering of the subject upon which we gaze and therefore how we establish a distance between us and the subject, but also an inevitable othering from ourselves. And concurrently, this othering can be somewhat lessened by the specific relationship we have as a subject with the Other, and their distinct view onto us as subject. We cannot see of ourselves what others see, which provides them their own privileged perspective. This othering is multidirectional at all times and forces us to acknowledge this constant distance and the limits it places on our own humanism, and this dynamic is clearly at work in *Forget Baghdad*. Though the human subjects of the film do not return our gaze, the close-up shots of their hands and eyes transport us to their childhood, their history, and connects us to their being in a way we only can as viewers. The telling of *Forget Baghdad* and its imagery of the hands and eyes pushes historical narrative beyond its usual limitations and effects.

We find in *Forget Baghdad* an emerging alternative history that transcends beyond dominant political histories of conflict and instead expresses a concern for humanism and human experience. It brings to light the richness of identity and the damage done by rigid categorizations, and the ways in which this categorization does violence to humanity. In turn, we should then question the structure of historiography and its requisite categorization of human history and how that shapes collective understandings of the past, and thus our understanding of the present. In doing so we come to an invariable conclusion: that we must constantly engage history, memory, and

the archive to obliterate its determination of the past. Only then can we locate and present tellings of history that account for the very real costs of colonial pasts, retain their memory, and afford them new meaning.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

*Take up the White Man's burden -
The savage wars of peace -
Fill full the mouth of famine
And bid the sickness cease;
And when your goal is nearest
The end for others sought,
Watch Sloth and heathen Folly
Bring all your hopes to nought.*

*Take up the White Man's burden -
No tawdry rule of kings,
But toil of serf and sweeper -
The tale of common things.
The ports ye shall not enter,
The roads ye shall not tread,
Go make them with your living,
And mark them with your dead!*

*Take up the White Man's burden -
And reap his old reward,
The blame of those ye better,
The hate of those ye guard -
The cry of hosts ye humour
(Ah slowly!) towards the light:-
"Why brought ye us from bondage,
"Our loved Egyptian night?"*

-Rudyard Kipling, *The White Man's Burden*, 1899

What, then, are the cumulative effects of the American and Israeli films analyzed here? Underlying the story arcs of films discussed in the first four chapters a common thread of imperialism and colonialism, an updated version of the White Man's Burden in their assumption that the Arab world is a place to be tamed and civilized at the barrel of a gun, and that it is the US and Israel that bear the cost of their own militarism, represented

as a noble sacrifice. Furthermore, the ideological orientation of this new White Man's Burden, which is hardly removed from the original sentiments of Kipling's poem, presupposes that the so-called collateral damage of this civilizing mission is necessary and must be forgiven, for the motivations of the imperial states are always redeemable. While one would expect progress from societies that now claim to look beyond race and exist in an era where the arc of history allegedly bends toward justice, the evidence tells us that the underlying racialized and supremacist ideology remains the same, though more cleverly coded in the language of a more politically progressive and inclusive packaging. These media texts are an essential component of that packaging and operate on the same foundational myths that led to the genocidal settling of the American West, the incomprehensible costs of Vietnam War, the criminal invasion and dismantling of Iraq, the colonization of Palestine and the violent continuing expulsion of the Palestinians as the world watches. The films analyzed here all form an important conduit for how the West encounters the peoples and history of the Middle East, and are, at their core, fundamental misrepresentation of those peoples, their cultures, and their histories. These films assert the justness of imperial aggression, as they present and prioritize highly selective perspectives to heal the very real wounds of wars that are waged on vulnerable societies. Where the true victims' experiences are so horrific that they hold the potential to upend these dominant ideologies and altered history, they are ignored or rendered barely legible, as background supporting characters, or a backdrop to the selfless and heroic soldiers who have undertaken the new White Man's Burden. These films directly invoke and perpetuate these myths that only the West can 'make the desert bloom', and

that the Middle East is a site of only trauma and danger, to be invaded and tamed. In these myths, the Arabs must be saved from themselves, and America and Israel are selflessly operating within their civilizing mandate. If these films and their representations are to be believed, the Arab world is not comprised of people, their homes, relationships, loves and losses, joys and fears, and the full range of human experiences.

In sum, these films perpetuate and widen the dangerous chasm between representation and reality in the service the geopolitical interests of the most powerful militaries in the world. The texts of these films operate on the malleability of memory, at both individual and collective level. They are a fundamental part of a large-scale public memory project supported by official institutions like the Pentagon Entertainment Office working in direct concert with some of the largest Hollywood film studios, each with their own motivations and ends. Within this symbiotic relationship, vast government and private capital rework history and make the events of the past more palatable to a public that would be horrified to learn of the atrocities committed on other peoples and societies in their name, for it would disturb popular notions of the US and Israel as defenders of human rights and progress. These motivations and systems are now decades old and deeply embedded, not just in the political economy in which they operate, but also in their result as seen in media. While I have identified new frames that emerge in the films I have written about here, it is disconcerting to see so many of the same stereotypes of Palestinians and Arabs deployed time and time again, if in ways that appear on their surface to be more progressive or speak to higher ideals like peace and justice. Americans

and Israelis alike should be wary of media frames that make it appear that *real* cost of war is paid by the world powers and not the countless civilians and children whose lives are upended, cut short, or destroyed by conflict. Without an unflinching critical eye to this brand of justifications for invasions, oppression, and war, this lineage of deluding imperialist thought, and its justifications will continue, and the peoples of the Middle East and beyond will continue to bear the true cost, while the American and Israeli public is presented only with the perspectives of the grieving aggressor, inherently redeemed by their remorse and appeals for forgiveness.

It is perhaps not necessarily problematic to have discussions and representations of soldiers' experiences in war or the accounts of drone pilots and the negative psychological consequences of their actions. In a fuller context, these conversations and texts can present an unflinching look at history and help us avoid repeating the mistakes of the past. Furthermore, these texts can be a tool for justice and facilitate truth and reconciliation commissions, for example, something that will be necessary to heal the wounds of the past in Israel and Palestine and should be utilized to find justice in other wars perpetrated on the Middle East. But that is not the context for *Shoot and Cry* films and blatantly Orientalist depictions. What we have now is regular mediations on the grievances of killers and aggressors with little actual or substantive acknowledgement of their victims or those victims' agency. When patriotism and nationalism are the main ingredients in that mediation it becomes a self-reinforcing system, a feedback loop saying that we can do no wrong if our intentions were worthy and that the individual sacrifice must be honored. When the crimes of American and Israeli soldiers are presented only

with the requisite nationalism and patriotism, and when their victims are portrayed as inherently evil, as Other, or less than human, audiences are clearly primed to devalue their victims and the honorable aggressor is already forgiven. But with an uncompromising critical eye, the veneer of our exceptionalism easily wears away, and we can come closer to an accurate version of history.

I undertook the writing of this study mindful of two overarching elements: the substantial existing body of knowledge about representations of Palestine and the Arab world that has been produced over the years and my own positionality to Palestine, Palestinians, and their history. Rather than replicate existing literature demonstrating what is readily evident – that Orientalist, Islamophobic, and racist depictions of Arabs and Palestinians continue to be produced in American and Israeli media – the research presented here is an attempt to fill the gaps I saw in that body of literature, take an even sharper critical look, and to highlight frames I saw in films that had not been raised before. I had found myself disturbed in listening to influential film critics praise and help promote so many of these films, framing them as historically accurate or socially conscious when I found them to be so damaging to popular conceptions of Arabs, the Arab world, and the struggle for justice and peace in Palestine. Another main starting point for this study was when I was beginning to take entertainment media more seriously as a text for analysis, and having a friend recommend to me *Waltz with Bashir* and praising its allegedly subversive voice. I distinctly remember being horrified when I watched the film, in its bastardization of the Lebanese civil war and its use of Palestinian

bodies as a backdrop to instill sympathy for their killers. It wasn't just the film that bothered me for days, it was how critics and audiences were praising and interpreting it, including my friend who didn't realize its dehumanization of Palestinians. This fueled my inquiry into other films that were understood by audiences to be politically progressive and sympathetic to the lives of Arabs and Palestinians, but merely upheld notions of American and Israeli exceptionalism. This study is also a continuation of my deep interest in the theoretical frameworks about the complex relationships between media, memory, history, and historiography.

In his 1984 article for the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, "Permission to Narrate," Edward Said explicated how a "disciplinary communications apparatus exists in the West both for overlooking most of the basic things that might present Israel in a bad light, and for punishing those who try to tell the truth" about Israeli apartheid. Indeed, one of the Israeli and US governments' most successful propaganda achievements has been to utilize complicit media apparatuses to launder the continued ethnic cleansing of Palestine. Palestinians and their allies also face what Said identified as the "superior force of the ideological consensus."²⁹¹ This ideological consensus and subsequent imbalanced news coverage of the Middle East was further entrenched in the post-9/11 era, which firmly consolidated the regional strategic goals of the US and Israel. This era also allowed for an exacerbation of simplistic media discourses whereby any resistance against injustice, aggression, and occupation is coded as "terrorism" in news coverage, drawing a stark dichotomy of the 'civilized' and 'rational' states juxtaposed against the Palestinian and

²⁹¹ Edward Said, "Permission to Narrate," *Journal of Palestine Studies*, Volume 13, Issue 3, (1984)

Arab Other. Despite the great gains of the Palestinian movement in the US and the wider international community, that disciplinary mechanism has only intensified with accusations of anti-Semitism lobbed at anyone who criticizes Zionism or the actions of Israel. It is my view that these accusations debase the very real resurgent threat of right-wing anti-Semitic and racist fascism.

While I hope this study does help to fill in the gaps in the literature on representations of the Middle East and successfully utilizes the methods for analysis I learned from the invaluable guidance of my mentors, my reading of these films is underpinned by knowledge about fundamental human rights denied to Palestinians daily. I now work for a Palestinian research center and so my daily life is intertwined with the movement for peace, justice, and liberation in historical Palestine. At many points in writing this study I felt overwhelming guilt and a pervasive helplessness as I read daily accounts of life in the Occupied Territories and all the indignities and violations of human rights that the Israeli military and police forces perpetrate upon Palestinians, while I live in the relative comfort of Washington, DC. I lived in the Occupied West Bank for only a short time, and after seeing first-hand the daily violations of Palestinians' human rights there, I had the ability to cross its borders and leave when I chose. My career is to some extent built upon that history and those injustices I saw and continue to read and report on daily. I am also cognizant of the fact that I am now a part of the non-profit/think tank industrial complex that largely exists outside the regions it endlessly analyzes and speaks about from afar. Fractured and dysfunctional as the United States is at the current moment, I enjoy all the benefits and privileges afforded to me here, living in the country

whose machinations have kept Palestinians living under the boot of the Israeli occupation and its structures of apartheid. There are multiple levels to that obscenity. I hope that there is some redemptive value in what I have written, if only to contribute to the disciplines of history, communication, and media studies, and to further revealing the truth and history of Palestine and its people.

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