Ubiquitous Absence

Character Engagement in the Contemporary War Film

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Abstract

The present article provides an analysis of the narrative and technical devices through which contemporary war films frame audience engagement with characters. It compiles and systematizes a wide set of empirical findings and exemplifies these through brief, illustrative readings of a selection of films. Combining Smith's approach to film reception with insights from Laclau and Mouffe's theory of discourse, the article argues for the significance of the identified audio-visual rhetoric for political discourse and practice.

Keywords: war film, character engagement, allegiance, enemy framing, cognitive theory, subject position theory

> *Films, like Saving Private Ryan, which restrict themselves to one point-of-view, propagate the unnatural divisions that cause war in the first place.*
> Richard Misek (2008: 123)

> *We don't do body counts.*
> US General Tommy R. Franks in response to a question about civilian deaths during the US invasion of Afghanistan, March 2002.

Introduction

In a press briefing in 2002,[1] then US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld made his by-now notorious remarks regarding different categories of knowledge. He distinguished between the known-knowns (the things we know that we know), the known-unknowns (the things we know that we do not know), and the unknown-unknowns (the things we do not even know that we do not know). With implied reference to alleged Iraqi WMDs, and without a due sense of irony, he claimed that the latter category – the unknown-unknowns – would be the most important ones to tackle for war planners. However, as Žižek (2004: 9-10) points out, there is a fourth category that was evaded by Rumsfeld and that can be seen as even more crucial for war preparation – the unknown-knowns, the knowledge we do not know we have, the interpretative schemata that tacitly guide and predispose individual and collective attitudes, conceptualizations, and behaviour.[2]

The present article aims at assessing some of the tacit contributions of popular culture to the formation of such unknown-knowns. I address the ways through which audio-

visual media, and the war film in particular, play into and reinforce a social optics, a net-work of interpretative schemata, that makes the public susceptible to a political rhetoric calling for a perpetual war against enemies that appear as chimeras – inaccessible and incomprehensible, yet potentially omnipresent as a deadly threat.

As a first step, I will provide a theoretical frame that allows for an understanding of audience identification in film. To this avail, I introduce Smith's (1995) framework and relate it to the generic properties of the war film. Secondly, I systematize key findings in the form of a table before presenting a series of brief illustrative readings to exemplify the concepts used.

Character Engagement in Film

Sobchack (2004) and Grodal (2009) have shown from each their theoretical and meth-odological vantage point that watching a movie is an inherently embodied and emotional experience that triggers sets of hard-wired reactions in the viewer. Certain images or sounds make us react affectively, eliciting immediate bodily reactions such as acceler-ated heart rate, increased level of adrenaline, nausea, sexual arousal, or the shedding of tears. Sobchack argues that the recipients' emotional responses to the other on screen are based on the experience of their own embodiment, which emerges as a precondition for identification with protagonists. Earlier, Williams (1991) has stated that body genres, such as the horror film, pornography, and the melodrama, entail affective responses that narrative, psychoanalytical, or cognitive frameworks cannot sufficiently account for. These approaches signal a shift from an understanding of reception as a distanced (and inherently rationalized) gaze to direct embodied experience, and extend a purely intel-lectual and rational focus with a bodily component that can account for the affective reactions elicited through the filmic experience.

Even though Sobchack's, Grodal's, and Williams' thoughts doubtlessly provide im-portant insights and crucially sophisticate an understanding of the various ways through which films impact on audiences, I will follow Smith (1995), who applies a combination of narrative and cognitive approaches to cinema. Acknowledging that many war movies employ technical devices familiar from the horror genre (for instance *Platoon*, *Kokoda: 39ᵗʰ Battalion*, or *Tears of the Sun*), and regardless of the fact that the unveiled presenta-tion of blood and guts in a war movie absolutely is inclined to cause immediate bodily reactions such as nausea or tears, my interest lies predominantly in the narrative framing of these affective responses. Why and how are our bodies led to shed tears due to the death or suffering of only certain characters depicted on screen? And what does such a biased structure of sympathy imply? It appears that the affective images and sounds have to be narratively contextualized to gain an understanding of how audience engagement with self and other in the evoked discourse of the film is framed.

Plantinga (2009) emphasises the importance of pre-rational, embodied, and affective dimensions of film reception. According to him, a film's formal, textual features frame affective and emotional engagement, as well as rational responses. The effects of film viewing are predisposed through, among other things, narrative and technical devices that frame spectators' possible engagements with characters. Therefore, an analysis of the devices eliciting such character-based responses becomes an important endeavour.

When conceptualizing the effects of film, Plantinga (2009: 106-111) draws on the

work of Murray Smith, to whom he ascribes "a central contribution to our understanding of character engagement" (Plantinga 2009: 106). Indeed, Smith (1995) asserts a "saliency of character" (17) for processes of film reception. Character engagement, he argues, is the result of sets of cues – "collections of inert, textually described traits" (82) – which form analogies to actual persons. This means that the effects of film on the spectator are not due to an illusory belief in becoming a character, nor are they exclusively due to an "emotional simulation" or "affective mimicry" (103) of the depicted character's feelings and/or physical condition. Rather, involuntary affective responses are "subordinate to [an] overarching structure of sympathy in that initial simulations and mimickings of the emotional states of characters are constantly filled out, modified, sometimes overturned by our cognitive construction of the narrative" (103).[3] Our subsequent understanding of the narrative context might lead to a retrospective reassessment of immediate affective responses caused by a film's sounds or images. This narrative context can be described as a diegetic discourse that vicariously positions the spectator through various engagements with key characters.

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

When asking "are spectators simply 'positioned', or do they respond to texts in a more flexible way?" (41; my emphasis), Smith (1995) rightly criticizes a widespread application of subject-position theory in film analysis to conjure up an axiom allowing for the quick induction of the ideological or interpellative effects of certain films on an amorphous mass of passively consuming audiences. Bordwell (1985) rightly asserts that diegetic approaches and subject-position theory often assume that the perceiver is "the victim or dupe of narrational illusion-making" (29). However, the notion of over-determination that was developed by, for instance, Laclau and Mouffe (2001) within the frames of their theory of discourse suggests that subjects are always positioned by several different and often mutually exclusive discursive frames at the same time. Audiences actively negotiate these various positionings in a form of "constrained or situated freedom" (Stam 2000: 244). By these means, agency under determinate structure can be conceptualized; the subject "oscillates between different versions of reality" (Pötzsch 2011: 77) and can simply subvert one discursive frame with reference to another.[4]

A combination of Smith's thought with a discourse-theoretical approach entails that spectators who ally with characters engage subjects positioned by textually produced discursive frame(s). Through this form of involvement, the spectator vicariously takes part in these characters' various re/positionings, enforcing a constant play of hypothesis and revision on the basis of textually delivered cues or keys. As such, allegiance to certain characters serves as the basis for a positioning of the subject within textual frames. These textually acquired subject-positions are actively negotiated against preestablished extra-textual discursive frames and identities.

When perceived in this light, it becomes apparent that a combination of affective and cognitive approaches with discourse theory can account for the process of reception in a comprehensive manner. As for instance Staiger (2000: 3) asserts, "[r]eception occurs to an individual as both a psychological and a sociological experience". Both these levels of experience can be understood as the overdetermination of the spectator-subject through textual and extra-textual discursive frames that are actively negotiated. As such, even though the present article approaches the issue of reception from the vantage point of textual structures that systematically cue particular forms of engagement in that they establish diegetic subject-positions the viewer is invited to identify with, the same theoretical framework can take extra-textual discourses as a point of departure and scrutinize how certain individual, socio-political, or historical contexts motivate the activation of particular interpretative schemata predisposing the production of certain tendencies of meaning. As Plantinga (2009) notes, "context-centered, audience-centered, and text-centered studies" are of equal value "assuming that they maintain a certain humility of outlook" (16).

I choose here a text-centred approach and argue that the formal properties of the war movie genre systematically facilitate the allegiance of the spectator to only one of the depicted conflicting parties. By means of certain cues, the construction of a biased structure of engagement[6] is motivated that unilaterally aligns and allies the spectator with one side, while it discourages such involvement with the enemy. This form of textual framing can be conceptualized as the drawing of an epistemological barrier that precludes access to the subjectivity, rationality, and humanity of the respective opponent. In excluding one side's protagonists, the respective discourse of this faction is equally confined, and monolithic hypotheses concerning the nature of conflict, enemy, and viable means of resolution are motivated and supported. When reified in and through various textual configurations that cross medial and genre boundaries, the established relational logic can develop into an interpretative metascript that tacitly predisposes subjects' engagements with actual or potential opponents in other than merely diegetic contexts (Pötzsch 2011, 2012a).

Epistemological Barriers in the War Film

War films often provide a complex picture of a social or historical situation, and vary in focus from mere combat movies that mainly present battle sequences and the various woes and potentials for heroism these might entail, to homecoming movies that often deal with the consequences of warfare for the individuals or societies directly or indirectly affected by this practice. Accordingly, different scholars have defined the war genre differently. While for instance Neale (2000: 125) or Basinger (2003: 9-13) limit the genre to the combat film featuring modern mass armies, others have adopted a wider perspective that includes not only 'classical' war films, but also science-fiction, action, or fantasy movies as long as these deal with "conflicts (…) between at least two opponents with at least one of them operating collectively (…) and deploying massive, organized violence" (Pötzsch 2012a: 43).

For the purpose of the present article, I follow Eberwein (2010) who occupies a middle ground. Eberwein (2010) explicitly connects the war film to preceding historical events that have been documented through film or photography. Drawing on the thought

of Tzetvan Todorov, Eberwein (2010) argues that the war film plays on two ranges of verisimilitude, one generic the other historico-political, i.e. the war film relates to audience expectations regarding the presented semi-fictional universe and its respective conventions, and asserts its authenticity in relation to visually documented real-world events.[6] On the basis of these considerations, I define the war film as the narrative film that on the basis of available visual documentary material sets out to realistically reenact the practices or consequences of past or present wars that are, or have been, fought by modern mass armies.

My corpus of films is limited to the post-Vietnam era – a time frame that I somewhat vaguely define as contemporary. The end of the Vietnam war is often seen as ushering in a new phase in the way Western, and in particular American, mainstream media represented warfare. A new counter-hegemonic discourse of war was partly reflected, but mostly actively countered in and through mainstream popular culture. Westwell (2006), for instance, writes in his study of the ways through which powerful societal interests shape "the cultural imagination of war" (1), that the Vietnam experience entailed "first a traumatic disruption of a particular embedded sense of war" that was then followed by "a recuperation and rescripting of this sense of war" (57) in and through popular Hollywood film.[7]

In spite of their often overtly critical thrust, popular post-Vietnam war movies generally play into and reinforce a hegemonic discourse of war. This happens through the textual imposition of a biased structure of engagement that motivates audience identification with only one of the depicted parties and frames a generic adversary as an evil, inhumane, and irreconcilable threat, the very nature of which necessitates massively violent means of containment. In this way, these films can openly address the sufferings and grievances of violent conflict without challenging the discursive logics of an overarching culture of war that is vested in the constitutive exclusion of a demonized other.

In her study of the anatomy of the World War II combat film, Basinger (2003) isolates what she terms sets of recurrent story patterns exhibited by this body of films. According to her, the same patterns subsequently structure the narratives of combat films dealing with wars other than World War II. The present article complements her work. In contrast to her, however, I do not focus on certain recurrent narrative elements alone, but also direct attention to the technical devices employed to motivate the cognitive construction of these narrative elements, and to the generic structure of engagement they imply. The following table (Table 1) systematizes the technical and narrative means through which the contemporary war film predisposes audience recognition of, alignment to, and allegiance with key protagonists.[8]

Character recognition is usually achieved through close-ups or mid-shots on certain individuals. To be shown as a distinctive body marks protagonists as potential objects for audience's emotional and intellectual involvement and is the precondition for an emergence of character. Also the deployment of names and speech serves this purpose.

Audience alignment to characters is usually, yet not exclusively, achieved by focalizing events through the eyes, ears, or minds of key protagonists. Audio-visual alignment, or "spatio-temporal attachment" in Plantinga's (2009: 106) terms, is facilitated through such means as point-of-view shots, eyeline matches, shot/reverse-shot sequences, certain tracking shots, or diegetic sound, while close-ups on faces combined with flashback or

Table 1. *Structure of Engagement in the War Film*

Structure of Engagement in the War Film		
Recognition	Alignment	Allegiance
All conflict parties – Visual presentation as distinct body and/or agent – Audible presentation as distinct agent	One or more conflict parties Visual: – Point of view shot – Eyeline match – Shot/reverse-shot sequence Audible: – Diegetic sound combined with close-up on face Conceptual: – Flashback sequences – Dream sequences – Voice-over thought or monologue – Dialogue	Usually one conflict party Technical means to frame audience engagement: – Slow motion emphasizing suffering or heroic deeds – Music and sound facilitating particular responses Narrative means to frame audience engagement: – Shared values and norms – Familiar references – Recognizable social roles – Evil deed – Unexpected event – Juxtaposition to main adversary

dream sequences, dialogue, or voice-over thoughts and comments open for a conceptual alignment with certain characters as they provide "subjective access" (Plantinga 2009: 106) to the inner lives, hopes, or fears of key protagonists. According to Plantinga, such forms of alignment are an important, yet not necessary, condition for the formation of allegiance to certain characters.

Allegiance requires a complex interplay of narrative and technical devices. Plantinga (2009: 107) argues that allegiance is the result of long-term emotional and intellectual engagement with characters. In the war film various technical devices facilitate emotional involvement with characters. Slow motion, for instance, stretches narration time and enables detailed access to the sufferings or heroic deeds of particular individuals. Another strategy is the use of valorizing or sorrowful musical elements to provide reading instructions and guide audience engagement in a particular direction. According to Plantinga (1999), dwelling on close-ups of the human face combined with the devices mentioned above are particularly efficient means to predispose allegiance with protagonists in what he describes as scenes of empathy (239).

Allegiance is dependent on a perceived proximity between character and spectator. To achieve such proximity, familiar cultural icons are deployed or emotionally charged contextual settings are constructed. An audience might more easily ally with a character who is presented in recognizable social settings or as a bearer of similar cultural competencies and preferences (idiom, hobbies, dress code, etc.). In the war film, such common cultural or social backgrounds are made available through flashbacks, voice-over, dialogues, or a particular mise en scéne.

The fact that a character whom the spectator is led to ally with is engaged in the massive killing of others significantly decreases the emotional and intellectual appeal of this protagonist. This problem is usually alleviated through the narrative device of the evil deed – a major atrocity committed by the enemy and witnessed by the soldier-self – that

frames these killings as justified and indeed inevitable to ensure the protagonist's own survival. At the same time, an unexpected event often pins down the main protagonist in immediate proximity with a dangerous enemy-other and as such precludes retreat as a nonviolent alternative.

In the war film, the enemy-other remains largely anonymous.[9] Sets of technical and narrative devices direct audience engagement away from a particular group or party. In battle scenes, for instance, the enemies' plights are deemphasized through extreme long-shots, internal framing, rapid cutting, or the ready deployment of smoke or explosions. At other occasions, the enemy is presented indirectly, often through traces, as the elusive object of the main characters' fears and anxieties. The other is talked about, condemned, analysed, but only as an anonymous menace, or as a passive victim and object of the protagonist's own inherently humanitarian conduct. The exception to this rule is the recurrent figure of the main adversary – an individualized representative of the enemy who serves as a projection screen for the negative associations towards the other in general, the inevitable death of whom symbolically confines the threat. Engagement with the main adversary is limited to recognition and alignment.

Table 2 illustrates the degree to which the technical and narrative devices outlined above are deployed in the contemporary American war film to draw an epistemological barrier between soldier-self and enemy-other.

What do the various variables of the table imply? The number of conflicting parties indicates how many groups or individuals representing distinct interests are involved in the depicted conflict. Following Smith's (1995: 197) distinction between two moral structures in film, I distinguish between two types of conflict: Manichean and graduated. The first refers to a relation of mutual exclusivity where the success or survival of one group normally necessitates the failure or death of the other, while the second type indicates a multidimensional approach that opens for mutual dependencies among the opponents and takes heed of the complex grievances underlying the behaviour, conceptualizations, and the attitudes of the opposing parties. The contemporary American war film exhibits a tendency to present conflicts as Manichean and thus to preclude the conceptualization of nonviolent alternatives.

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

The following six columns refer to Smith's (1995) conceptualization of modes of audience engagement with characters in film that have been introduced above – recognition, alignment, and allegiance – and to the narrative devices that effectuate a particular structure of engagement in the war film – evil deed, unexpected event, and main adversary. The war film predominantly invites for allegiance with only one of the conflicting parties. The identified variables can then be mapped onto the presence of an epistemological barrier that prevents the other's humanity and competing subjectivity from emerging. A biased structure of engagement appears as a recurrent feature of the genre.

Table 2. *Framing Audience Engagement in the War Film*

	# Parties	Conflict Type	Focalization	Recognition	Alignment	Allegiance	Evil Deed	Unexp. Event	Main Adversary	Epist. Barrier
American Soldiers: A Day in Iraq (USA 2005)	3	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	No	Yes	No	Yes
Apocalypse Now Redux (USA 1979)	4	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	Three Parties	Two Parties	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Battle for Haditha (UK 2007)	5	Graduated	Triple	All Parties	Three Parties	Three Parties	No	No	No	No
Behind Enemy Lines (USA 2002)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	Two Parties	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Black Hawk Down (USA 2001)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Body of Lies (USA 2008)	3	Graduated/ Manichean	Double	All Parties	Two Parties	Two Parties	Yes	No	Yes	No/Yes
Bravo Two Zero (UK 1999)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	No	Yes	No	Yes
Enemy at the Gates (USA 2001)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Flags of our Fathers (USA 2006)	3	Manichean/Graduated	Uni	All Parties	Two Parties	One Party	Yes	No	No	Yes
Full Metal Jacket (USA 1987)	3	Manichean/Graduated	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	No	No	Yes/no
Good Morning Vietnam (USA 1987)	3	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	No	No	No	Yes
Green Zone (USA 2010)	4	Graduated	Uni	All Parties	All Parties	Two Parties	No	Yes	Yes	No/Yes
Hamburger Hill (USA 1987)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	No	No	No	Yes
Kandahar Break (UK 2009)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Kokoda: 39th Battalion (Australia 2006)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Letters from Iwo Jima (USA 2006)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	No	No	No	Yes
Miracle at St. Anna (USA 2008)	3	Graduated/Manichean	Double	Three Parties	Two Parties	One Party	No	Yes	No	Yes
Pearl Harbor (USA 2001)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	Two Parties	One Party	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Platoon (USA 1986)	3	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	Two Parties	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Rambo First Blood (USA 1982)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Rambo First Blood Part 2 (USA 1985)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Rambo III (USA 1988)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Recue Dawn (USA 2006)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

Table 2. *Cont.*

	# Parties	Conflict Type	Focalization	Recognition	Alignment	Allegiance	Evil Deed	Unexp. Event	Main Adversary	Epist. Barrier
Redacted (USA 2007)	3	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Route Irish (UK 2010)	3	Graduated	Uni	All Parties	Two Parties	Two Parties	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Saving Private Ryan (USA 1998)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
Stop Loss (USA 2008)	3	Manichean/Graduated	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	No	No	No	Yes
Tears of the Sun (USA 2003)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
The Deer Hunter (USA 1978)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
The Hurt Locker (USA 2008)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
The Mark of Cain (UK 2007)	3	Graduated	Uni	All Parties	Two Parties	One Party	No	No	Yes	Yes
The Situation (USA 2006)	Multiple	Graduated	Multiple	All Parties	All Parties	Multiple Parties	No	No	No	No
The Thin Red Line (USA 1998)	2	Manichean/Graduated	Uni/double	All Parties	Two Parties	One Party	Yes	Yes	No	No
Three Kings (USA 1999)	3	Graduated/ Manichean	Uni/double	All Parties	Two Parties	Two Parties	No	No	Yes	No/yes
Tigerland (USA 2000)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	Two Parties	One Party	No	No	Yes	Yes
Tunnel Rats (USA 2007)	2	Manichean	Double	All Parties	Two Parties	Two Parties	No	Yes	No	Yes
Valiant (UK/USA 2005)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
We Were Soldiers (USA 2002)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	Two Parties	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

The technical and narrative devices listed above do not necessarily entail the success of the deployed rhetoric with each and every audience and in each and every context of reception. As, among other examples, the case of Somali audiences who applauded the downing of US helicopters in Black Hawk Down shows, the framework presented so far only suggests a dominant tendency of meaning emanating from textual frames that is weighted, assessed, played with, or subverted by active overdetermined audiences.[10] Asserting that a passive audience might more easily adopt a proposed hegemonic discursive frame and reproduce the dominant tendency of meaning vested in the formal properties of the audio-visual text does not imply that one is asserting the passivity of all audiences in all possible contexts of reception. It only means that one is addressing the deployed textual structures and the potentials for meaning and discursive impacts these entail.

Readings

I will now turn to brief readings of a selection of films to illustrate the identified variables. I choose a 'classic' Vietnam war movie, two World War II combat films, and three films addressing the recent war in Iraq to achieve a somewhat balanced distribution regarding the covered historical periods. In the end, I add brief references to movies from other genres to show that the identified rhetoric is not only a feature of the war film, but points beyond the confinements of this particular genre.

At first sight, the movies analysed here seem to have little in common. However, as the table above has shown, even though they appear different from the outset regarding their contexts of production or historical settings, they draw upon similar representational conventions – a shared aesthetic – when depicting self, other, and the nature of their conflict. As such, it can be argued that, at a meta-level and with some variations, most of them retell the same core narrative that is structured in, and through, a particular discursive logic: the story of a righteous and individualized soldier-self unwillingly caught up in a vicious battle of self-defence against an aggressive, de-humanized, incomprehensible, and elusive, yet potentially omnipresent, evil enemy-other.

Platoon

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

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

rative frame allows for allegiance with only the faction around Sgt. Elias and Chris Taylor.

The main plot of Platoon features three evil deeds. These are committed against a US soldier, against Vietnamese villagers, and against Sgt. Elias. In all cases these deeds serve to provide legitimacy to severely violent reactive measures carried out by the soldier-self represented by Chris Taylor. When Barnes' platoon finds one of their comrades tortured to death (evil deed 1), they attack and destroy a Vietnamese village, kill civilians and engage in attempted gang rape (evil deed 2). Barnes is directly involved in motivating the atrocity in the village and at this point emerges as the main adversary within the film narrative. Sgt. Elias's explicit intention to expose the atrocity to army command directly motivates the third evil deed – the killing of Elias by Barnes – that, again, morally primes the audience for Taylor's murder of Barnes in the end of the film.

Image 1. *Good versus Evil in Uniform. Main adversary Barnes and Elias in Platoon*

The evil deeds establish a complex narrative structure that predisposes audience allegiance with Chris Taylor even in cases where he is presented as engaged in less favourable activities. In case of the incident in the Vietnamese village, for instance, the tortured US soldier serves to create a psychological structure of motivation for the ensuing massacre. In presenting the crimes as the direct result of immediate traumatic experiences, Platoon maintains a structure of engagement that invites the viewer to ally with Taylor even though he severely harasses unarmed villagers. Even though US soldiers are shown committing the crimes, the massacre is framed as, at least to some degree, the responsibility of a ubiquitously absent enemy-other.

Also visually the Vietnamese enemy is narrowly framed. The sequence showing Sgt. Elias's death (he is shot several times while fleeing from Vietcong forces) constitutes an illustrative example. Aerial long-shots indicating the perspective of US soldiers following the scene from helicopters are cross-clipped with mid-shots and close-ups on the fleeing Elias. While the several Vietnamese fighters who are mowed done with machine guns from the air are reduced to small anonymous figures that simply fall over and disappear, every new hit on Elias's body is strongly emphasized through the deployment of close-ups, slow motion and sorrowful music. The emerging structure of engagement invites empathy with only the fleeing Elias and with his comrades who are forced to watch his slow death without being able to intervene and rescue him. The Vietnamese other remains outside the frame.

Image 2. *The Jungle Coming to Life. Virally Spreading Enemies in Platoon*

By means of its rhetorical devices, Platoon draws two epistemological barriers; one is visual and conceptual and reduces the complex nature of the Vietnamese side to a ubiquitously absent threat, the abominable actions of which implicitly justify atrocities carried out by the soldier-self. The other epistemological barrier is moral and draws a line between US soldiers swept along with a traumatic tidal wave of terror (among others main protagonist Taylor), and those who actively escalate the situation and obviously take pleasure in the massacre, as exemplified by main adversary Barnes.

Christopher (1994) asserts the proximity of Stone's film to the horror genre. He shows that the Vietnamese side is presented under application of similar devices as is the extra-terrestrial threat in Cameron's science fiction-horror film Aliens (1986).[11] Christopher states that the Vietnamese in Scott's movie exhibit "generic qualities" as they do not predominantly point to a specific geopolitical enemy, but become the source of "an unlimited supply of evil" (57). Opponents with generic qualities resemble what I term ubiquitously absent enemies – an elusive potentially omnipresent threat that is concretized differently in different diegetic or extra-diegetic contexts.

The Hurt Locker

Kathryn Bigelow's The Hurt Locker (USA 2008) depicts a Manichean conflict between two parties: US soldiers and a ubiquitously absent Iraqi other. The film has been acclaimed for its unadorned realism, and even though it initially shared the sobering fate of other Iraq war movies at the box office, it won among others the Academy Award for Best Motion Picture of the Year in 2010.

Bigelow's film follows three US soldiers forming a bomb disposal unit in the contemporary Iraq theatre. The main protagonists are introduced throughout the exposition chapter and made available as potential objects for audience alignment and allegiance through the deployment of close-ups, eyeline matches, background information, ex-

tended dialogues and so forth. No Iraqi characters are introduced in this manner and the film also refrains from narratively building up the figure of a main adversary.

Throughout the main plot of The Hurt Locker a peculiar visual regime is conjured up through uses of camera and montage. Again and again, eyeline matches combine close-ups or mid-shots on the three main protagonists with mid- or long-distance shots on surrounding areas. Repeatedly these shots are made through the windows of military vehicles moving quickly through the streets. This technique aligns viewers to the perspective of the American soldiers and implicates them in a common epistemological condition that renders the Iraqi-other a ubiquitously absent, and at the same time threatening, amorphous entity. When working to defuse Improvised Explosive Devices (IED), the main protagonists are under constant observation from balconies, hallways, or windows. A quivering hand-held camera peeps upwards and quickly moves over groups of indistinguishable Iraqi individuals gathering in groups watching. At other occasions, shots through the scope of a rifle briefly capture anonymous faces monitoring the soldiers from virtually everywhere.

Image 3. *Preying Onlookers. The Audio-visual Regime of The Hurt Locker*

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

The techniques outlined above establish a biased structure of engagement that unilaterally invites alignment and allegiance with the three main characters and the con-

flicting party they represent. At the same time an epistemological barrier is drawn that precludes access to the opposing side and renders the anonymous enemy inaccessible. However, The Hurt Locker also fundamentally reconstitutes the role of the home front and sets up a second epistemological barrier towards American civilian identities and frames of meaning.

This second constitutive barrier is graphically illustrated by for instance an apparently insurmountable wall of cereal in a supermarket back in the USA that signifies the increasing incapacity of main protagonist William James to deal with the various challenges of civilian life. However, rather than exposing this growing incapacity as a problematic deviation from an implied norm (as does for instance Kimberley Peirce's Stop-Loss (USA 2008)), Bigelow's film establishes a structure of engagement that retains the main protagonist as an unambiguously admirable hero also in relation to alternative civilian identities. As such, Barker (2010) argues, William James becomes "a poster boy of the Iraq war generation" (157). I can only agree with Barker's conclusion that it is in "James' role model (…) that the real politics of the film [The Hurt Locker] lie" (157).

Image 4. *Containing Subversive Others. Epistemological Barriers in The Hurt Locker*

Redacted and Battle for Haditha

Both Brian de Palma's Redacted (USA 2007) and Nick Broomfield's Battle for Haditha (UK 2007) set out to re-enact atrocities committed by US soldiers in Iraq. However, while Redacted sets up an epistemological barrier that channels viewers' alignment and allegiance towards a powerless witness of the crime and that leaves the atrocious acts committed by the US soldiers unexplained, Battle for Haditha employs a consistent triple-focalization that provides access to the rational calculations, emotional engagements, and structural restraints that predispose the performances of US soldiers, Iraqi insurgents, and Iraqi civilians alike.

In Redacted, Brian de Palma employs an innovative technique that disperses the reality of war into various different screens and media formats. The same story is told in the form of a French documentary, a first-hand account filmed with a US soldier's hand-held video camera, surveillance footage, and material placed on insurgent websites. This "multiple-screen aesthetics" (Pisters 2010:237) successfully emulates the style of digital war footage and explodes the experience of war into many different perspectives. However, in not presenting the structural frames predisposing, and possibly explaining, the war crime committed by individual soldiers, Redacted erects an epistemological barrier that allows for a demonization of the perpetrators and that fails to properly contextualize the atrocious act. Consequently, Redacted leaves the war genre's

biased structure of engagement untouched. In framing US soldiers as incomprehensible perpetrators, De Palma's film merely exchanges established roles of good and evil, yet does little to question the overall validity of these categories for the description of a war situation. Similar to Stone's Platoon, Redacted frames the evils of war as the result of the misguided actions of individuals, not as the necessary consequences of war's structural restraints and limitations.

In Battle for Haditha, on the other hand, a consistent triple-focalization divides screen attention equally between three opposed factions and provides an inside perspective on each of them. In this way, Broomfield's film invites allegiance to all three opposed groups and directs attention to the frames that predispose the performances of perpetrators, facilitators, and victims alike. As a consequence, Battle for Haditha enables an understanding of evil in war as systemic rather than connected to a ubiquitously absent, vile opponent or certain rotten apples in uniform. While Redacted maintains the potential necessity of violence to stop the evil intentions of individual perpetrators, Battle for Haditha shows how war itself brings into place systemic patterns of support and restraint that reduce the paradigm for possible performances until only wrong decisions can be made – a perspective that tacitly dislodges epistemological barriers and unsettles essentializing normative ascriptions of good and evil to individual characters.

Flags of our Fathers and Letters from Iwo Jima

Flags of our Fathers (USA 2006) tells the story of the World War II battle on the Japanese island Iwo Jima. Eastwood's film follows three decorated veterans of the battle on a promotion tour through the US that aims at using their status as heroes to increase the sale of war bonds. The sequences chronicle the exploitation of three soldiers' war experiences for political and economic purposes and align viewers to, and ally them with, these characters. Combat sequences situated on the island of Iwo Jima re-enact these soldiers' experiences and put an individualized soldier-self up against ubiquitously absent enemy-others. Subjective shots, dialogues, close-ups, or flashbacks are consistently deployed to individualize and familiarize the American soldiers, while slow motion, dwelling shots, and sad music enhance emotional involvement in their fate. In contrast, the Japanese remain largely unrepresented. When present, quivering long-shots, quick cutting, or smoke and darkness reduce them to anonymous shadows suddenly appearing from nowhere and vanishing without leaving a trace after being hit. The other is also brought into connection to an evil deed; before the battle a US soldier passes around images that attest to the sadistic torturing and killing of prisoners of war by the Japanese, effectively precluding the option of surrender as a viable alternative to violence.

In Flags of our Fathers a biased structure of engagement denies access to the subjectivity, humanity, and alternative perspective of the other and unequivocally invites audience engagement with the American part of the depicted battle sequences. This however changes with the release of Eastwood's second film about the battle on Iwo Jima.

Letters from Iwo Jima (USA 2006) was shot immediately after Flags of our Fathers and presents the same historical incident from a distinctly Japanese perspective. Also this second film about the battle on Iwo Jima shows two conflicting parties in a Manichean struggle where the survival of one implies the death of the other. This time, however, the deployed technical and narrative devices thoroughly align and ally the spectator with

Japanese characters, providing access to their individual stories, perspectives, and inner lives, while they render the American soldiers an anonymous and ubiquitously absent threat. As such, both films taken together draw attention to the role of epistemological barriers in the discourse of war and war movies. In deliberately playing with the camera's and microphone's selective perceptions, an awareness for the ultimate contingency of established orders and identities is enabled that might challenge a war discourse vested in the implied necessity to kill the other to ensure one's own survival. Both films taken together activate the movie theatre as a potentially disruptive, extra-textual liminal zone of reception that enables an overdetermination of the spectator through two competing diegetic frames.

The formal properties described throughout the sections above do not constitute a determinate frame. Even though most war films in one way or another relate to the predominant rhetoric, not all films deploy the technical and narrative means outlined above. Furthermore, as the brief readings of Battle for Haditha and Eastwood's two films about the battle on Iwo Jima indicate, some war films set out to critically engage and play with the technical and narrative conventions of the genre.[12]

Epistemological Barriers – A Cross-generic Metascript?

Are epistemological barriers a feature of the war film alone? Or, do the technical and narrative devices that frame the other as a ubiquitously absent threat resurface in other movie genres?

The table below (Table 3) shows that as far as the presentation of the enemy is concerned, for instance, many science fiction and action films exhibit similar characteristics as the war film. Also in science fiction and action cinema, a biased structure of engagement brings forth epistemological barriers that render the various diegetic opponents inaccessible and that unequivocally divide the films' diegetic universes into good and evil.

In Die Hard 4.0: Live Free or Die Hard (USA 2007), to provide just one brief example, the remorseless terrorist Thomas Gabriel wreaks havoc in the USA to alleviate a personal grudge. Even though the camera readily aligns to his perspective, the film never provides access to his deeper motivations, doubts, or fears, but constructs him as a demonized main adversary whose death in the end symbolically confines the threat as such. He is opposed by main protagonist John McClane. Camera, editing, and music invite audience allegiance with McClane's character, while his violent performances are narratively framed as a rightful struggle to protect his country and family from incomprehensible evil.[13] However, as reference to Scott's Kingdom of Heaven (USA 2005) and to the director's cut of Lawrence's I am Legend (USA 2007) in the table below indicate, also in this group of films some works challenge such established generic codes and conventions.

The brief examples provided above indicate the pervasiveness of epistemological barriers in an important segment of mainstream cinema. This poses the question of this rhetoric's potential political consequences. Does the ubiquitous absence of diegetic enemies matter for the ways audiences relate to real opponents?

In her study of the narrative framing of 9/11, Anker (2005) identifies the melodrama as a "pervasive cultural mode" (22). According to her, the melodramatic plot "employs emotionality to provide an unambiguous distinction between good and evil through

Table 3. *Framing Audience Engagement in Science Fiction and Action Films*

	# Parties	Conflict Type	Focalization	Recognition	Alignment	Allegiance	Evil Deed	Unexp. Event	Main Adversary	Epist. Barrier
300 (USA 2006)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	Two Parties	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Aliens (USA 1986)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Avatar (USA 2010)	3	Manichean/Graduated	Uni	All Parties	Two Parties	Two Parties	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes/No
Battle: Los Angeles (USA 2011)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Battleship (USA 2012)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Centurion (USA 2010)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	Two Parties	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Die Hard I-IV (USA 1988-2007)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
I am Legend (USA 2007)	2	Manichean	Uni	All parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
I am Legend: Director's Cut (USA 2007)	2	Graduated	Uni	All Parties	One Party	Two Parties	Yes	Yes	No	No
Immortals (USA 2011)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Kingdom of Heaven (USA 2005)	3	Graduated/Manichean	Double	All Parties	Two Parties	Two Parties	Yes	Yes	Yes	No/Yes
Lethal Weapon I-IV (USA 1987-1998)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Parties	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Lord of the Rings-series (USA 2001-2003)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Predator (USA 1987)	3	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Star Wars-series (USA 1977-2005)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
The Kingdom (USA 2007)	3 (4)	Manichean/graduated	Uni	All Parties	Three Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
The Objective (USA 2008)	3	Manichean	Uni	2 of 3 Parties	One Party	One Party	No	No	No	Yes
Transformers I-III (USA 2007, 2009 & 2011)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
War of the Worlds (USA 2005)	2	Manichean	Uni	All Parties	One Party	One Party	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

clear designations of victimization, heroism, and villainy" (23), and entails "a moral imperative to fight" (26). She shows that the official narratives pertaining to 9/11 were melodramatically coded and, as a consequence, arbitrarily subsumed various competing identities and subjectivities under the common denominator of an incomprehensible, evil enemy. This discursive strategy emotionally charged the situation and provided implicit justification for violent state responses.

When perceived in this light, it can be argued that epistemological barriers also structure Anker's melodramatic cultural mode and, in this way, abet the construction of real enemies as ubiquitously absent threats. In this perspective, epistemological barriers emerge as interpretative schemata that inform political discourse in that they tacitly order and disambiguate confusing and complex political environments and challenges. These schemata do not determine the subject, but merely provide readymade frames that can easily be activated to make sense of unprecedented situations and previously unknown opponents.

Conclusion

In his study of point-of-view in Terrence Malick's The Thin Red Line, Misek (2008) connects a soldier's capacity to kill and an audience's capacity to watch acts of killing with pleasure. He writes:

> The ability of a soldier to fight is contingent on his ability to de-individuate the enemy. Analogously, the ability of the viewer to gain 'adrenal stimulation' from a combat sequence [in film] is contingent upon the de-individuation of one side, creating a dialectical 'us' versus 'them' structure of identification (116).

The present article provided a description and systematization of the formal properties, and the technical and narrative devices, through which contemporary American war films create a mutually exclusive structure of engagement that strongly motivates the construction of the lives of the opponents as worthless. Thereby, these enemies' inherently tragic deaths are transformed into an admirable spectacle.

The epistemological barriers brought forth by the described audio-visual rhetoric of war function as a cultural metascript that channels emotional involvement and predisposes, yet does not determine, the conceptual basis for rational responses to real and imagined enemies alike. These barriers structure an elusive background of meaning – the unknown-knowns in the sense of Zizek (2004) – that provides implicit plausibility to a political rhetoric that simplifies the political sphere by reducing concrete, real world opponents and their various positions and subjectivities to a ubiquitously absent threat that has to be eradicated by all means available to ensure one's own survival. This tacit interpretative schema functions as a frame of war, in the sense of Butler (2009), that renders the lives of the other ungrievable and thereby facilitates the justification of war as a viable, and indeed necessary, means of politics.

Notes

1. February 12th, 2002. Transcript available at: http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/news/2002/02/mil-020212-usia01.htm (accessed: 07.06.11)
2. There are other ways of providing meaning to a fourth category. Daase/Kessler (2007), for instance, refer to the unknown-knowns as "ignored or repressed" (413) knowledge "we don't want to know" (412), thereby directing the focus to conscious neglect.
3. See also Plantinga (2009) who emphasizes "the importance of narrative as the governing element in eliciting emotional response" (116).
4. Plantinga, too, emphasizes that "[f]ilms do offer viewers a role or position (or multiple positions), which the viewers accept or reject, in whole or in part" (Plantinga 2009: 17).
5. Note that I follow Plantinga (2009), who replaces Smith's term structure of sympathy with structure of engagement. This is done to avoid some of the conceptual pitfalls inherent in the difficult distinction between empathy and sympathy (Plantinga 2009: 98-99).
6. Similar considerations lead Robert Burgoyne (2008) to define the war film as a mere subgenre of the historical film. For a systematization of authentication strategies deployed in the war film, see Pötzsch (2012c). For an analysis of different styles of realism at play in the war genre, see Pötzsch (2012b).
7. For a similar point, see also Alford (2010).
8. Recently, Plantinga (2010) has suggested a more sophisticated terminology to address the various ways through which audiences engage characters. He distinguishes between 8 different "'pro' and 'con' affective and cognitive attitudes" (43) spectators can develop toward characters. My interest in this paper lies with the vicarious positioning of the spectator in, and through, allegiance with main protagonists. Therefore, I refrain from introducing competing weaker 'pro' attitudes, such as the ones introduced by Plantinga. Plantinga himself takes over Smith's term allegiance to describe the strongest "'pro' stance [toward characters] extended through large portions of the narrative […] governed by moral judgement" (43).
9. Basinger (2003:56), too, identifies "the faceless enemy" as an important convention of the war genre. However, in her approach she only briefly addresses the technical and narrative devices that cue the narrative construction of this anonymous enemy-other.
10. "Somalis cheer at 'Black Hawk Down' screening'", CNN World January 23rd, 2002. Available at: http://articles.cnn.com/2002-01-23/world/blackhawk.screen_1_somalis-mogadishu-audience?_s=PM:WORLD (accessed 01.09.2011).
11. For a parallel reading of Ridley Scott's Black Hawk Down (USA 2001) with Aliens see for instance Pötzsch (2010).
12. Another example for a war film that challenges and subverts the formal conventions of the genre is Terrence Malick's The Thin Red Line (USA 1998). For readings of this film see for instance Misek (2008) or Pötzsch (2010).
13. For detailed readings of Aliens and 300, see for instance Pötzsch (2010:69-72)). For a comparison of director's cut and officially released version of Lawrence's I am Legend (USA 2006), see Pötzsch (2012a: 81-85 and 123-128).

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