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Reel Fallout Cinema

Space to Mourn in Hollywood's War on Terror, 2007-2018; Grief, Trauma and Disillusionment on the Endless Frontier

by

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<u>Abstract</u>

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This thesis identifies the emergence of a new cycle of Hollywood films concerning the war on terror which has succeeded films designated as "post-9/11 cinema," initiating a displacement of the discourse that, on that fateful September day in 2001, "everything changed."[1] I will maintain that the effects of 9/11 on Hollywood cinema were not fully realised until the development of a post- post-9/11 era which I term Reel Fallout Cinema. Released between 2007 and 2018, these films create space to mourn both the events of 9/11 and subsequent wars and terrorist attacks. In comparison with post-9/11 releases such as *Black Hawk Down* (dir. Ridley Scott, USA, UK, 2001) which displayed U.S. military intervention as benevolent, and *United 93* (dir. Paul Greengrass, USA, 2006) which directly portrayed the attacks, Reel Fallout Cinema depicts war and terrorism in more sombre, mournful ways, foregrounding grief, trauma and disillusionment with American foreign policy in the wake of the September 11, 2001, attacks.

My research focuses on nine subsequent releases with war on terror narratives: *The Kingdom* (dir. Peter Berg, USA, Germany, 2007), *The Hurt Locker* (dir. Kathryn Bigelow, USA, 2008), *Green Zone* (dir. Paul Greengrass, USA, 2010), *Zero Dark Thirty* (dir. Kathryn Bigelow, USA, 2012), *Captain Phillips* (dir. Paul Greengrass, USA, 2013), *Lone Survivor* (dir. Peter Berg, USA, 2013), *American Sniper* (dir. Clint Eastwood, USA, 2014), *Patriots Day* (dir. Peter Berg, Hong Kong, USA, 2016) and *The 15:17 to Paris* (dir. Clint Eastwood, USA, 2018). All based on real events, they portray lost missions and American sacrifice without the victories typically associated with World War I and II films, or 1980s and 1990s action thrillers. Heroes are replaced with traumatised American protagonists, evocative of Vietnam War films of the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, but the Reel Fallout films were made and released during rather than post-war. They also feature non-American characters with agency whose deaths are grieved as well as foregrounding disillusionment with endless war on the United States' global frontier. Many anti-war Vietnam films were political and explicitly critical, for example, *The Deer Hunter* (dir. Michael Cimino, USA, UK, 1978) and *Born on the Fourth of July* (dir. Oliver Stone, USA, 1989) depicting overt manifestations of trauma. Reel Fallout's disillusionment with conflict is more subtle, the narratives imbued with sadness, powerlessness and vulnerability. Through focusing on the damage of never-ending wars, this study will establish how the Reel Fallout cycle intervenes into debates concerning "a failure of mourning"[2] following 9/11 and generates space to mourn.

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[1] Richard Gray, *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2011), 5, https://doi-org.soton.idm.oclc.org/10.1002/9781444395860.ch1.
[2] Ibid., 8-9.

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Research Thesis: Declaration of Authorship

Print name: OLIVIA FLINT

Title of thesis: Reel Fallout Cinema: Space to Mourn in Hollywood's War on Terror, 2007-2018; Grief, Trauma and Disillusionment on the Endless Frontier

I declare that this thesis and the work presented in it are my own and has been generated by me as the result of my own original research.

I confirm that:

1. This work was done wholly or mainly while in candidature for a research degree at this University;
2. Where any part of this thesis has previously been submitted for a degree or any other qualification at this University or any other institution, this has been clearly stated;
3. Where I have consulted the published work of others, this is always clearly attributed;
4. Where I have quoted from the work of others, the source is always given. With the exception of such quotations, this thesis is entirely my own work;
5. I have acknowledged all main sources of help;
6. Where the thesis is based on work done by myself jointly with others, I have made clear exactly what was done by others and what I have contributed myself;
7. None of this work has been published before submission

 Signature: ....Date: 21 November 2025

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Definitions and Abbreviations

CIA .... Central Intelligence Agency. "The National Security Act of 1947 created the position of Director of Central Intelligence (DCI)… The sole element of the intelligence community independent from a cabinet agency is the CIA… [T]he president… has the authority to direct it to conduct covert operations"[3]

CNN................................ Cable News Network, Inc. "CNN Worldwide is the most honored brand in cable news, reaching more individuals on television and online than any other cable news organization in the United States."[4]

D.C. .... District of Columbia. Shorthand for Washington D.C., capital of the United States of America

FBI.................................. Federal Bureau of Investigation. "At the federal level, much law enforcement activity is concentrated in the Department of Justice. For countering terrorism, the dominant agency under Justice is the Federal Bureau of Investigation… In 1986, Congress authorized the FBI to investigate terrorist attacks against Americans that occur outside the United States. Three years later, it added authority for the FBI to make arrests abroad without consent from the host country."[5]

ROE................................ Rules of Engagement. "The Rules of Engagement (ROE) are those directives that delineate the circumstances and limitations under which United States (US) forces will initiate and/or continue combat engagement… ROE provide a framework that encompasses national policy goals, mission requirements, and the rule of law… ROE define the way in which we can engage the enemy."[6]

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[3] Thomas H. Kean (Chair) and Lee H. Hamilton (Vice Chair), *The 9/11 Commission Report*, July 22, 2004, 86, accessed May 7, 2019, https://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf.
[4] "About CNN Worldwide," accessed December 4, 2024, https://edition.cnn.com/about.
[5] Kean and Hamilton, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 74-75.
[6] "Law Of War / Introduction to Rules Of Engagement, B130936, Student Handout," in *Basic Officer Course, United States Marine Corps*, accessed June 2, 2025, https://www.trngcmd.marines.mil/Portals/207/Docs/TBS/B130936%20Law%20of%20War%20and%20Rules%20Of%20Engagement.pdf.

Chapter 1 Introduction: Post- Post-9/11 Cinema

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"JUST AS OUR UNDERSTANDING OF BOTH THE SECOND WORLD WAR AND THE VIETNAM WAR HAS BEEN COMPREHENSIVELY SHAPED BY THE FILMS PRODUCED ABOUT THEM, SO WILL FILM PLAY A DISTINCTIVE ROLE IN HOW THE 'WAR ON TERROR' COMES TO BE REMEMBERED."[7]

TERENCE MCSWEENEY, *AMERICAN CINEMA IN THE SHADOW OF 9/11*

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1.1   "A Failure of Mourning"

The aim of this research is to interrogate and account for a distinct collection of war and terrorism films, released between 2007 and 2018, which have eschewed the adrenalin-fuelled thrills associated with action cinema, with which these films share generic traits, and focused instead on the emotional consequences of conflict. The films integrate representations of the inner feelings of the main characters with depictions of the duties and roles they have performed in keeping the United States safe. I argue that "post-9/11 cinema" accounts for Hollywood films released in the years immediately following 9/11, but not this distinct cycle. Post-9/11 cinema was initially characterised by representing patriotism in American sacrifice, in films such as *Black Hawk Down* (dir. Ridley Scott, USA, UK, 2001), *We Were Soldiers* (dir. Randall Wallace, France, Germany, USA, 2002), *Behind Enemy Lines* (dir. John Moore, USA, 2001) and *Windtalkers* (dir. John Woo, USA, 2002). In the following years, on-screen depictions of the 9/11 attacks, including *United 93* (dir. Paul Greengrass, USA, 2006) and *World Trade Center* (dir. Oliver Stone, USA, 2006), performed a watershed for Hollywood to begin portraying the war on terror. From 2007, a new cycle of sombre narratives was released, a collection of films I identify as requiring a new term to account for its post- post-9/11 qualities; this cycle depicts non-American characters as grievable, Americans as traumatised and a disillusionment with American exceptionalism

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[7] Terence McSweeney, "American cinema in the shadow of 9/11," in *American cinema in the shadow of 9/11*, ed. Terence McSweeney (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 8, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1g0524v.

upon which endless war and the latest incarnation of the frontier is founded; I term this cycle "Reel Fallout Cinema."

The nine films which form part of the Reel Fallout cycle on which I will focus throughout this thesis are: *The Kingdom* (Peter Berg, USA, 2007), *The Hurt Locker* (dir. Kathryn Bigelow, USA, 2008), *Green Zone* (dir. Paul Greengrass, USA, 2010), *Zero Dark Thirty* (dir. Kathryn Bigelow, USA, 2012), *Captain Phillips* (dir. Paul Greengrass, USA, 2013), *Lone Survivor* (dir. Peter Berg, USA, 2013), *American Sniper* (dir. Clint Eastwood, USA, 2014), *Patriots Day* (dir. Peter Berg, Hong Kong, USA, 2016) and *The 15:17 to Paris* (dir. Clint Eastwood, USA, 2018). All based on real events, I will argue that these films, imbued with emotion and vulnerability, address the post-9/11 world's "failure of mourning" as identified by Richard Gray, "Acting out grief has been jettisoned in favor of hitting out… The result has been… a failure of mourning".[8] My contention will be that the nine films listed above respond to this absence of mourning. By depicting grief, trauma and disillusionment with conflict, they offer opportunity and space to mourn the events of September 11, 2001, and the United States' response with the war on terror. Marita Sturken's explanation of the impact of 9/11 adheres to my understanding, "That day does demarcate a before and an after… because of the brutal response to the attacks that effectively shaped the post-9/11 era that followed."[9] The sadness imbued in the films is uncharacteristic of war and terrorism cinema and addresses an active viewer who can project their own grief into this space. Berenike Jung's assertion that, "*Zero Dark Thirty* has become a projection screen for the audience's perceptions and sympathies"[10] endorses this argument. In addition to the reasons cited by Gray for the failure of mourning, I maintain that the processing of grief takes time, and it is only years after the 9/11 attacks that Hollywood started to engage with the sadness caused by the tragedy. Referencing an audience comment on an online *Rolling Stone* review of *World Trade Center*, Karen Randell observes, "The notion that audiences need at least 'ten years' in which to process the trauma of 9/11 is pertinent."[11] This aligns with Congress' mandate for memorials in the United States that they "be built only after a ten-year period had passed since the war's end."[12] In support of this insight, the films which constitute Reel Fallout Cinema were released between six and seventeen years after 9/11.

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[8] Richard Gray, *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2011), 8-9, https://doi-org.soton.idm.oclc.org/10.1002/9781444395860.ch1.

[9] Marita Sturken, *Terrorism in American Memory: Memorials, Museums, and Architecture in the Post-9/11 Era*, published online May 19, 2022, accessed March 21, 2025, 10, https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479811670.001.0001.

[10] Berenike Jung, *The Invisibilities of Political Torture: The Presence of Absence in US and Chilean Cinema and Television*, (2020), https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9781474436991.001.0001, 34.

[11] Karen Randell, "'It was like a movie': The Impossibility of Representation in Oliver Stone's *World Trade Center*," in *Reframing 9/11: Film, Popular Culture and the "War on Terror"*, ed. Jeff Birkenstein, Anna Froula and Karen Randell (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 144.

[12] Sturken, *Terrorism in American Memory*, 13.

The injection of a sombre tone permeates the Reel Fallout corpus in response to "the ongoing post-9/11 wars, which have failed to produce narratives of triumph and patriotism."[13] In deploying the term "sombre," I am identifying the mournful feeling the films evoke in the viewer which, as referenced in relation to *The Hurt Locker*, "is seeking to produce a certain affective powerlessness amongst its viewers".[14] They do this through a range of aesthetic features which will be discussed throughout this thesis, including minor-key sorrowful music; camera techniques which emphasise vulnerability and powerlessness rather than narrative control; and subdued reflections of events which end in tragedy and ongoing conflict as opposed to victorious celebration. Conventions of realism also play a part in achieving a sombre tone; they immerse the viewer in the action as if they are experiencing conflict rather than escaping into a fantasy depiction.

In naming the cycle Reel Fallout Cinema, "Fallout" refers to how mourning has infiltrated action cinema narratives which would have previously given prominence to thrills over expressions of emotion. "Reel Fallout" is not to suggest that the immediate effects of 9/11 weren't real, but to offer a concept which explores Hollywood cinema's reflection on both the aftereffects of 9/11 as well as the fallout from the war on terror, contributing an original area of study. The use of the term "reel" invokes a study of on-screen representations through reference to the reel of film traditionally employed in filmmaking. Several film scholars have used "reel" similarly, for example, Terry Christensen, *Reel Politics: American Political Movies from* Birth of a Nation *to* Platoon (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1987), and Sarah Hagelin, *Reel vulnerability: power, pain, and gender in contemporary American film and television* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2013). It also plays on the word "real" which references the fact that all of the films are based on real events[15] and evoke aesthetics of film studies' realist mode while dramatising the stories.

Realism has a long and complex history in cinema studies. Siegfried Kracauer explains that, "Film… is uniquely equipped to record and reveal physical reality".[16] Richard Maltby explains how, "In 1898, a traveling exhibitor commented that in a film of the Spanish-American War… 'the pictures of the battleships in action were so real that every time a shot was fired the women would duck their heads to let the thirteen-inch shells pass over.'"[17] This suggests that viewers could not distinguish between reality and on-screen depictions. André Bazin

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[13] Sturken, *Terrorism in American Memory*, 18.

[14] Paul Gormley, "Blowing Up the War Film," in *A Companion to the Action Film*, ed. James Kendrick (February 1, 2019), 370, accessed May 21, 2025, https://doi-org.soton.idm.oclc.org/10.1002/9781119100744.ch19.

[15] There are other films concerning the war on terror which are in the fantasy and spectacle genres, for example *The Dark Knight* (dir. Christopher Nolan, USA, UK, 2008), *Iron Man* (dir. Jon Favreau, USA, Canada, 2008), *Iron Man 2* (dir. Jon Favreau, USA, 2010) and *Avatar* (dir. James Cameron, USA, UK, 2009), all of which form the focus of chapters in Frances Pheasant-Kelly's *Fantasy Film Post 9/11* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), but my research concentrates on films in the war and terrorism genres.

[16] Siegfried Kracauer, "Basic Concepts," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings Fifth Edition*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 172.

[17] Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1995, 2003), 234-235.

proposed film as open to interpretation, "What Bazin saw as important about deep-focus photography was that it allowed the viewer a continuous gaze over a continuous space, rather than fragmenting the viewer's perception of that space through editing."[18] This empowered viewers to determine their own meanings. However, it has been argued that "'reality' is nothing but an expression of the prevailing ideology".[19] Lapsley and Westlake expand on this and ascertain that, "'From the moment the camera intervenes a form of manipulation begins.'… [R]ealism… shows itself to be neither window nor mirror but a set of conventions."[20] Realism and generic conventions are intertwined in the depictions of the real events in the Reel Fallout films.

Rather than depicting reality on screen, my case study films create representations of events, in some instances utilising the tools of realist traditions of filmmaking and creating visual and audio with a quality of authenticity. *Patriots Day*, for example, incorporates archive footage from CCTV cameras at the finish line of the Boston Marathon as well as sound from the attacks to enhance the reality of the film. Nick Dawson describes *The Hurt Locker* as "a thriller that eschews fast-cutting and showy visuals for a far more unsettling depiction of combat that is palpably grounded in reality."[21] In both *The Hurt Locker* and *Captain Phillips*, shaky camera techniques emulate characters' points of view and enhance the viewer's feeling that they are in the scene, viewing it first-hand. It has been argued that this style of filmmaking is manipulative, indicated by Steven Boone's description of *The Kingdom* in *Slant Magazine* as using, "chaotic visuals to enforce a sense of absolute realism that is more insidious here than any state-commissioned propaganda."[22] Judith Butler also determines of cinema more generally that, "a certain reality is being built through our very act of passive reception, since what we are being recruited into is a certain framing of reality."[23] I will contend, however, that these assessments do not account for the nuances and complexities of my case study films detected through active viewing, which will be discussed in more detail in my Methodology, as well as through an understanding of the real events being depicted.

My thesis will not seek to determine the accuracy of the representations but explore the themes being depicted. Grievability and mourning have become prominent in the Reel Fallout cycle; therefore, I will examine whether the employment of realism relates more to

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[18] Maltby, Hollywood Cinema, 234.

[19] Jean-Luc Comolli and Jean Narboni, "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism (1969)," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings Fifth Edition*, eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 755.

[20] Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake, *Film Theory: An Introduction* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988, reprinted 1990), 158.

[21] Nick Dawson, "Time's Up from *Filmmaker Magazine*, Spring 2009" in *Kathryn Bigelow: Interviews*, ed. Peter Keough, (University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 143, accessed September 26, 2019, ProQuest Ebook Central: http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/soton-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1113434.

[22] Steven Boone, "They Do It with Love: *The Kingdom*," *Slant Magazine*, September 28, 2007, accessed June 21, 2022, https://www.slantmagazine.com/film/they-do-it-with-love-the-kingdom/.

[23] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is life grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009, this edition 2010), xii.

attempting to capture the emotional impact on the characters involved. This engages with Jack Davis' discussion of *Born on the Fourth of July* (dir. Oliver Stone, USA, 1989), "*Born* prods the audience to *feel* the trauma… Stone encourages viewers to experience history not on an intellectual level but on an emotional one… The idea here is that the emotional will have a more lasting effect than the intellectual."[24] Through their depictions of trauma, Reel Fallout Cinema similarly affects the viewer emotionally, conveying the real-world impact of the war on terror and contributing to discourses concerning American foreign policy. This also demonstrates a similarity between my case study films and Vietnam War cinema which emphasised how the war traumatised American soldiers. However, as post-war releases, the Vietnam films retrospectively considered the effect of Vietnam once American troops had been withdrawn, making it less controversial for directors to criticise the war. My corpus represents the war on terror while the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were being fought and, as director Kathryn Bigelow observes, "'Dealing with a conflict that's real and ongoing provides the opportunity for the material to be topical and relevant.'"[25] In analysing the portrayals in these films, this thesis will offer insights into how the films are constructed and the impacts of those constructions on the viewer as well as on the representation of contemporary American foreign policy.

Numerous books and articles have appraised the tragic events of September 11, 2001, as transformational for motion pictures, referencing Hollywood's "post-9/11 cinema".[26] Scholarship includes Richard Gray's *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11*[27] and Terence McSweeney's *American Cinema in the Shadow of 911*,[28] both titles indicative of a world transformed. Films released in the immediate aftermath of 9/11 typically represented American power as benign, as demonstrated by Markovitz's description of *Black Hawk*

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[24] Jack E. Davis, "New Left, Revisionist, In-Your-Face History: Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July* Experience," in *Oliver Stone's USA: Film, History, and Controversy*, ed. Robert Brent Toplin (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 141.

[25] Paul Hond, "Shoot Shoot, Bang Bang, 2009, from the *Columbia Magazine*," in *Kathryn Bigelow: Interviews*, ed. Peter Keough (University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 206, accessed September 26, 2019, ProQuest Ebook Central: http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/soton-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1113434.

[26] Books and articles include: Wheeler Winston Dixon, *Film and Television After 9/11* (Southern Illinois University Press, 2004); Tom Pollard, *Hollywood 9/11: Superheroes, Supervillains, and Super Disasters* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), accessed March 18, 2024, ProQuest Ebook Central; Glen Donnar, *Troubling Masculinities: Terror, Gender, and Monstrous Others in American Film Post-9/11* (Jackson, MS, 2020; online edn, Mississippi Scholarship Online, 21 Jan. 2021), accessed August 9, 2023, https://doi.org/10.14325/mississippi/9781496828576.001.0001; Guy Westwell, *Parallel Lines: Post-9/11 American Cinema* (London: Columbia University Press, 2014); Christina Hellmich and Lisa Purse, eds., *Disappearing War: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on Cinema and Erasure in the Post-9/11 World* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017); Jeff Birkenstein, Anna Froula and Karen Randell, eds., *Reframing 9/11: Film, Popular Culture and the "War on Terror"* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010); Stephen Lacey and Derek Paget, eds., *The War on Terror: Post-9/11 Television Drama, Docudrama and Documentary*, 1st ed (University of Wales Press, 2015), http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt17w8h11; and B. Ruby Rich, "After the fall: cinema studies post-9/11," in *Cinema Journal* 43, no. 2 (2004): 109-115 (Gale Academic OneFile), accessed March 18, 2024, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A160419199/AONE?u=unisoton&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=bafef1ca.

[27] Richard Gray, *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2011), https://doi-org.soton.idm.oclc.org/10.1002/9781444395860.ch1.

[28] Terence McSweeney, ed., *American cinema in the shadow of 9/11* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1g0524v.

Down, "the film works to rejuvenate myths about the benevolence of U.S. foreign policy and to fortify the ideological foundations for future military campaigns."[29] *Tears of the Sun* (dir. Antoine Fuqua, USA, 2003), a "Defence Department-endorsed picture starring Bruce Willis about steely but benevolent American troops attempting to save a group of Nigerians fleeing murderous rebels"[30] also depicts American soldiers as rescuing those at risk of "ethnic cleansing," as one of the soldiers describes it. Their involvement in the conflict leads to the lives of many villagers being saved. *We Were Soldiers* characterises American intervention in Vietnam as benevolent. Moore (Mel Gibson) tells his daughter, "War is… when some people, in another country, or any country, try to take the lives of other people and then soldiers like your Daddy, you know, it's my job to go over there and stop them." The war is represented as requiring sacrifice by loyal soldiers devoted to their mission and to one another. Along with *We Were Soldiers*, three additional films released within two years of the 9/11 attacks, *Black Hawk Down*, *Behind Enemy Lines* and *Windtalkers*, are all noted as portraying "the US as victim… [which] showed the moral imperative of military intervention, thereby corroborating the wider call to war."[31] The films demonstrate the necessity of conflict to eliminate enemies, implicitly supporting the Bush administration's response to the terrorism of 9/11.

Hollywood has typically portrayed the United States' conflicts patriotically, depicting American protagonists heroically prevailing over their enemies. As Birgit Streich writes, "During times of war… movies always played a major role in propaganda."[32] Examples include *The Little American* (dir. Cecil B. DeMille and Joseph Levering, USA, 1917) and *Hearts of the World* (dir. D.W. Griffith, USA, 1918) in World War I, *Underground* (dir. Vincent Sherman, USA, 1941) and *Casablanca* (dir. Michael Curtiz, USA, 1942) in World War II, *The Steel Helmet* (dir. Samuel Fuller, USA, 1951) in the Korean War, and *The Green Berets* (dir. Ray Kellogg, John Wayne, Mervyn LeRoy, USA, 1968) in the Vietnam War, all of which convey stories of American soldiers dedicated to their missions in the morally righteous world wars or anti-communist Cold War, with belief in their country and the wars' aims, and characterising home as a place of safety worth defending. While post-war periods have witnessed Hollywood films more critical of war, for example, World War I film *All Quiet on the Western Front* (dir. Lewis Milestone, USA, 1930) and Vietnam War film *Casualties of War* (dir. Brian De Palma, USA, 1989), many post-war films have continued the trend of supporting American intervention overseas, for example, *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (dir.

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[29] Jonathan Markovitz, "Reel Terror Post 9/11," in *Film and Television After 9/11*, ed. Wheeler Winston Dixon (Southern Illinois University: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004), 212.
[30] Scott Laderman, "Introduction: Camouflaging Empire: Imperial Benevolence in American Popular Culture," in *Imperial Benevolence: U.S. Foreign Policy and American Popular Culture since 9/11*, ed. Scott Laderman and Tim Gruenewald (University of California Press, 2018), 11.
[31] Guy Westwell references Hoberman in this context; Westwell, *Parallel Lines*, 9.
[32] Birgit Streich, "PROPAGANDA BUSINESS: THE ROOSEVELT ADMINISTRATION AND HOLLYWOOD," *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 16, no. 1 (1990), 44, http://www.jstor.org/stable/24003022.

George P. Cosmatos, USA, Mexico, 1985), *Saving Private Ryan* (dir. Steven Spielberg, USA, 1998) and *Wonder Woman* (dir. Patty Jenkins, USA, China, 2017). The terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, however, penetrated the nation's belief in its invulnerability, "America had been impervious... Then everything changed. On September 11, 2001… America… was… invaded. The homeland was no longer secure and, to that extent, no longer home."[33] The term "post-9/11 cinema" was coined within film studies to account for a wider cultural shift which followed the attacks and affected Hollywood in the five or so subsequent years.

In 2006, *United 93* and *World Trade Center* were released, the first Hollywood feature films to depict the September 11, 2001 attacks. *United 93* provided a documentary style account of the hijacked aeroplane which was forced down by passengers in Pennsylvania, and *World Trade Center* portrayed the brave actions of firefighters who responded to the collapse of the Twin Towers in New York City. My contention is that these films enacted a watershed for Hollywood in releasing films concerning the attacks and the war on terror which instigated the Reel Fallout cycle. I have chosen nine case study films as representative of this cycle to argue how sombre tales of grievable non-American others, traumatic ordeals and internal enemies disrupt typical representations of conflict in Hollywood cinema and challenge the concept of unequivocal support of the U.S. government's war on terror. These high-grossing films by renowned directors, the selection of which will be discussed in more detail shortly, demonstrate a progression from post-9/11 cinema to a distinctive post- post-9/11 collection of war and terrorism films. To investigate this, my thesis will analyse war and terrorism narratives drawn from this cycle and based on real events, addressing the following research questions:

(1) In their representation of the war on terror, how do these nine case study films compare with prior war and terrorism narratives?
(2) What is the relationship between the war on terror and terrorism as depicted in these films?
(3) How does Reel Fallout Cinema characterise the war on terror through its portrayal of non-Americans, protagonists and American exceptionalism?

To answer these questions, I will (1) compare my case study films with earlier films of the same genres; (2) consider the case study films collectively to compare their representations of the war on terror and terrorism; and (3) conduct close textual analysis of all nine films, focusing on their portrayal of non-American characters and American protagonists, as well as their treatment of American exceptionalism. Throughout all three thematically-driven

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[33] Gray, After the Fall, 5.

chapters, I will examine how these characterisations influence the representation of American foreign policy.

The films I have selected as case studies are by four directors who have made at least two films concerned with the war on terror. Peter Berg, Kathryn Bigelow, Clint Eastwood and Paul Greengrass have all made an Afghanistan or Iraq War film, *Lone Survivor*, *The Hurt Locker*, *American Sniper* and *Green Zone*, and a terrorism film, or, in Peter Berg's case, two, *The Kingdom*, *Patriots Day*, *Zero Dark Thirt*y, *The 15:17 to Paris* and *Captain Phillips*. Although it is notable that there are recurring directors in the material, my interest is in the shifting of genre evident across the film corpus, a discussion which will be considered in detail in the Material Selection section below. Genre is relatively static, providing familiarity for the viewer, so its evolution following the 9/11 attacks, demonstrated by this collection of films, is of considerable significance. Authorship and genre have historically clashed for recognition in film studies, but this thesis does not focus on the directors as auteurs or why they are making these films, although that could make for an interesting companion study. Instead, I prioritise the discursive links, and similarities and tendencies in genre and themes, across the four directors and nine films, to investigate how American foreign policy is represented differently from prior action cinema depictions. Combining analysis of two subgenres of the action genre, war films and terrorism films, will provide an overview of the representation of the whole war on terror rather than focusing on either the wars or the terrorism incidents. This will enable an original approach not undertaken by others.

This chapter will introduce the study by first providing historical background which will include a brief overview of Hollywood's past relationship with American foreign policy, conventional representations of war and terrorism, the post-Vietnam Reagan administration and the decades immediately preceding the 9/11 attacks. I will present a literature review, establishing how my research fits into existing scholarship and serves to further articulate the research problem, research aim, objectives and questions, as well as introducing my case study films and my reasons for choosing them. I will explain my methodological approach and significance of the study, along with the limitations. I will conclude with a chapter breakdown, contextualising the three chapters which form the fundamental analysis of my thesis, and a summary of the insights my research will bring to the field of film studies.

1.2　　Hollywood Conventions

Hollywood's historical support of government policy in times of war has been comprehensively chronicled. One of the earliest films, *Tearing Down the Spanish Flag* (dir. J.

Stuart Blackton, USA, 1898), is recognised as introducing foreign policy to the screen. With the 38-second short in which, "the director's own hands rip a Spanish flag from its mast, only for the offending article to be replaced with the Stars and Stripes… Blackton brought iconic imagery, political commentary and international relations to the American cinema."[34]
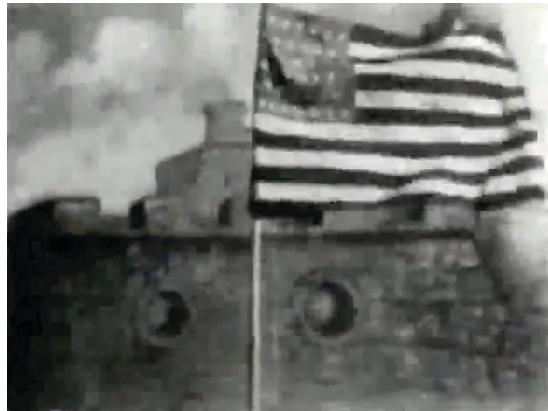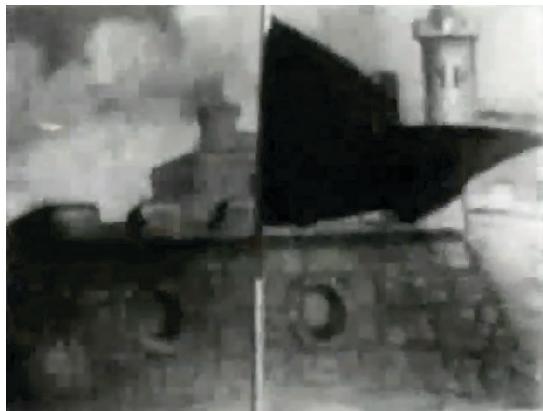
Figure 1.1 and Figure 1.2   Spain's flag is replaced with the United States' flag, *Tearing Down the Spanish Flag*, 0:00:05, 0:00:20

In creating newsreels of the Spanish-American War, "Vitagraph cameraman Albert E… Smith's fabrication of the Cuban battle footage was the first time that a deliberate attempt to falsify actual military action for a predetermined purpose had been attempted. Smith created a film that not merely reported… but glorified."[35] This glorification in the news was emulated by Hollywood's narrative representation of foreign policy. In the First World War, Hollywood's explicit support of the nation's war effort was institutionalised, as James Chapman and Nicholas J. Cull explain, "the cinematograph came of age as a medium of propaganda".[36] Guy Westwell expands on the implications of this, "With America's entry into the war on 6 April 1917… pacifist films were immediately banned and movies showing unbridled support for the Allies… became the dominant trend."[37] This demonstrates the U.S. government's control of the cinema industry's production. A similar propagandist role was fulfilled by Hollywood during World War II, established by the close relationship between the military and the film industry which continued post-war; in 1942, "the War Ministry set up a partnership bureau in Hollywood"[38] which was followed by the establishment of a permanent office in response to the Cold War.[39] During the Cold War, depictions of the paranoia and

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[34] Ian Scott, "International Relations on Screen: Hollywood's History of American Foreign Policy," *E-International Relations*, Oct 10, 2013, accessed November 13, 2020, https://www.e-ir.info/2013/10/20/international-relations-on-screen-hollywoods-history-of-american-foreign-policy/.

[35] John Garofolo, "War Films in an Age of War and Cinema," in *A Companion to the War Film*, ed. D.A. Cunningham and J.C. Nelson (2016), accessed May 21, 2025, https://doi-org.soton.idm.oclc.org/10.1002/9781118337653.ch3, 39.

[36] James Chapman and Nicholas J. Cull, *Projecting Empire: Imperialism and Popular Cinema* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 4.

[37] Guy Westwell, *War Cinema: Hollywood on the Front Line* (London: Wallflower Press, 2006), 14.

[38] Jean-Michel Valantin, *Hollywood, The Pentagon and Washington: The Movies and National Security from World War II to the Present Day* (London: Anthem Press, 2005), 6.

[39] Ibid., 6.

fear associated with the internal Communist threat were prevalent in Hollywood cinema. As early as 1948 with the release of *The Iron Curtain* (dir. William A. Wellman, USA, 1948), Hollywood was producing spy thrillers and films noirs to accommodate the suspicions surrounding the United States' stand-off with the Soviet Union, "The Cold War seemed tailormade for cinema. The daring feats of espionage and the never-ending sense of paranoia. Secret rendezvous in dark alleys and world-wide fear of nuclear attack."[40] Referencing the early 1950s, Jean-Michel Valantin explains how, "A large number of films from this era participate in… a consensus in society on themes stemming from the Soviet Communist threat."[41] Anxiety concerning communism was pervasive in post-World War II society and was incorporated into Hollywood cinema which portrayed communists and Russians as the archetypal enemy.[42]

Anti-Communist sentiment in the United States informed the decision to send troops to Korea and Vietnam, with the latter resulting in the longest war in American history prior to the recent Afghanistan War. Several films concerning the Korean War were produced while the war was ongoing, including *Fixed Bayonets!* (dir. Samuel Fuller, USA, 1951) and *Battle Circus* (dir. Richard Brooks, USA, 1953) as well as after the war, such as *The Manchurian Candidate* (dir. John Frankenheimer, USA, 1962). Films depicting the Vietnam War released during the war or immediately after were rare. Michael Hammond explains how, "Vietnam War films were few and far between during most of the 1970s"[43] and Karen Randell notes that, "There was not… an explicit combat film made… for 13 years after the Vietnam War".[44] The few films which were released, such as *The Green Berets*, were supportive of the war effort, in keeping with world war representations. Hollywood films critical of wars whilst they were ongoing was unimaginable but, once the final American soldiers had been withdrawn from Vietnam in March 1973,[45] there was a "change of opinion in Hollywood against the Vietnam War".[46] The end of the 1970s prompted the production of films concerning Vietnam which continued into the 1980s; whilst many portrayals criticised the United States' involvement,[47] several offered positive representations of the American armed forces and reflected President Reagan's approach to foreign policy.

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[40] Narrator, "Cold War & Cinema: 1: The Cold War Begins 1945-1960," *Sky Arts*, 2:05am – 3:05am, Wednesday 15 March 2023.

[41] Valantin, *Hollywood, The Pentagon and Washington*, 13.

[42] Iconic Cold War films include *Fail-Safe* (dir. Sidney Lumet, USA, 1964), *The Manchurian Candidate* (dir. John Frankenheimer, USA, 1962), *Dr Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (dir. Stanley Kubrick, UK, USA, 1964) and *The Hunt for Red October* (dir. John McTiernan, USA, 1990).

[43] Michael Hammond, "Some Smothering Dreams: The Combat Film in Contemporary Hollywood," in *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, ed. Steve Neale (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 64.

[44] Randell, "'It was like a movie'," 144-145.

[45] History.com Editors, "U.S. withdraws from Vietnam," *History* (A&E Television Networks, November 24, 2009, last updated May 25, 2022), accessed March 27, 2023, https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/u-s-withdraws-from-vietnam.

[46] Valantin, *Hollywood, The Pentagon and Washington*, 17.

[47] For example, *The Deer Hunter* (dir. Michael Cimino, USA, UK, 1978), *Apocalypse Now* (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, USA, 1979), *Platoon* (dir. Oliver Stone, USA, UK, 1986) and *Full Metal Jacket* (dir. Stanley Kubrick, UK, USA, 1987).

Reagan's presidency, 1981-1989, brought a reassertion of American military prowess which Hollywood transposed to the screen. Peter Biskind describes how, "As the 1970s bled into the next decade, resurgent Republicans… rewrote the history of the Vietnam years, casting them in a more pleasing light… [T]he door was opened to a backlash... Hand in hand, Reagan and Rambo were only too happy to walk through it."[48] The 1980s was replete with a spate of patriotic titles which Stephen Prince explains was encapsulated by "Rambo… a symbolic statement about the reawakening of American military power after its period of post-Vietnam dormancy, an idea that was a key theme of Reagan's presidency."[49] The decade also produced, "hard-body stars like Sylvester Stallone and Arnold Schwarzenegger… heartthrobs like Tom Cruise and Mel Gibson; martial artists like Jean-Claude Van Damme, Chuck Norris, and Steven Seagal; and even comedians like Eddie Murphy—who came to embody an ethos of winning".[50] This winning mentality is demonstrated in films such as *The Delta Force* (dir. Menahem Golan, USA, Israel, 1986) starring Chuck Norris and *Top Gun* (dir. Tony Scott, USA, 1986) starring Tom Cruise, both of which display support of American foreign policy.

The Delta Force is based on the real-life "1985 skyjacking of TWA 847 by the Shiite Islamic Jihad. While this hostage scenario was ended following secret negotiations, *Delta Force* gives free rein to a military solution… [T]he counter-terrorist elite force is dispatched to liberate the hostages."[51] Originating in reality, the film develops into fantasy, its tagline reflecting this evolution, "They don't negotiate with terrorists… they blow them away!" Similarly, and in the same year, *Top Gun* was grounded in "real-life military aviation programs".[52] Towards the beginning of the film, it is explained by Jester (Michael Ironside) in a briefing that the "Top Gun" programme was established to improve dogfighting skills after the Vietnam War, During Korea, the Navy kill ratio was 12:1; we shot down 12 of their jets for every one of ours. During Vietnam, that ratio fell to 3:1… Top Gun was created to teach ACM, air combat manoeuvring, dogfighting. At the end of Vietnam, that ratio was back up to 12:1. After contextualising the narrative in reality, the film soon expands into fantasy, demarcated by thrilling sequences of aerial combat. *Top Gun* is acknowledged as aiding recruitment for the U.S. Navy which "saw an additional 20,000 sailors join following the

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[48] Peter Biskind, *The Sky is Falling! The Unexpected Politics of Hollywood's Superheroes and Zombies* (UK: Penguin Random House, 2019), 75.

[49] Stephen Prince, *American Cinema of the 1980s: Themes and Variations* (Oxford: Berg, 2007), 12.

[50] James Kendrick, "A Genre of Its Own." In *A Companion to the Action Film*, ed. James Kendrick (February 1, 2019), accessed May 21, 2025, https://doi-org.soton.idm.oclc.org/10.1002/9781119100744.ch2. 47.

[51] Thomas Riegler, "Through the Lenses of Hollywood: Depictions of Terrorism in American Movies," in *Perspectives on Terrorism*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (Terrorism Research Initiative, May 2010), 37, accessed March 22, 2023, http://www.jstor.org/stable/26298447.

[52] "*Top Gun* Movie vs. Reality," *Sky Combat Ace*, accessed December 12, 2023, https://www.skycombatace.com/blog/top-gun-fact-fiction.

movie's release".[53] With conscription removed in 1973, cinema was recognised as a significant promotional tool in the era of the all-volunteer armed forces.

In the 1990s, the production of terrorism films increased as attacks on the United States and Americans abroad became more frequent. In 1993, "New York's World Trade Center was attacked",[54] the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City was bombed in 1995,[55] and, in 1998, bombs exploded in front of American embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania.[56] In response, Hollywood released many films in the 1990s featuring American heroes defeating terrorists[57] and, as with 1980s action cinema and world war films previously, the films ended triumphantly for American protagonists, often defeating nameless, faceless enemies.[58] The unparalleled attacks at the start of the 21st Century, however, were unlike any real-world terrorism the United States had experienced before and their influence on Hollywood quickly became apparent. On September 11, 2001, the United States experienced the "greatest loss of life from a foreign attack in the country's history."[59] Guy Westwell describes how,

> terrorists hijacked four passenger planes and used them as weapons against civilian targets in the U.S. Two of the planes were flown into each of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York, another was flown into the Pentagon in Washington, DC, and the fourth crashed in Pennsylvania.[60]

On the afternoon of the attacks, President George W. Bush "met with his principal advisers through a secure video teleconference. [National Security Advisor Condoleezza] Rice said President Bush began the meeting with the words, 'We're at war,'".[61] This statement conflated terrorism with war and explains the Bush administration's response of combat in Afghanistan, "By early October, Afghanistan, a nation accused of harbouring members of al-Qaida ('The Base'), the terrorist organisation responsible for the attacks, was bombed and invaded, heralding the beginning of over a decade of continuous war."[62] The Afghanistan

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[53] Forrest S. Crowell, *Navy SEALs gone wild: publicity, fame, and the loss of the quiet professional* (Calhoun: The Naval Postgraduate School Institutional Archive, 2015), 25.

[54] Chuck Kleinhans, "1993: Movies and the New Economics of Blockbusters and Indies," in *American Cinema of the 1990s: Themes and Variations*, ed. Chris Holmlund (London: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 91.

[55] Thomas H. Kean (Chair) and Lee H. Hamilton (Vice Chair), *The 9/11 Commission Report*, July 22, 2004, 82, accessed May 7, 2019, https://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf.

[56] Chris Weller, "Startling maps show every terrorist attack worldwide over the last 20 years," *Insider*, November 1, 2017, accessed July 14, 2022, https://www.businessinsider.com/global-terrorist-attacks-past-20-years-in-maps-2017-5.

[57] Such as *Patriot Games* (dir. Phillip Noyce, USA, 1992), *Under Siege* (dir. Andrew Davis, France, USA, 1992), *True Lies* (dir. James Cameron, USA, 1994), *Speed* (dir. Jan de Bont, USA, 1994), *Executive Decision* (dir. Stuart Baird, USA, 1996), *The Rock* (dir. Michael Bay, USA, 1996), *Broken Arrow* (dir. John Woo, USA, 1996), *Air Force One* (dir. Wolfgang Petersen, USA, Germany, 1997) and *The Siege* (dir. Edward Zwick, USA, 1998).

[58] As an example, both *Saving Private Ryan* (dir. Steven Spielberg, USA, 1998) and *The Thin Red Line* (dir. Terrence Malick, USA, 1998) with World War II narratives, feature unspecified enemies.

[59] Weller, "Startling maps show every terrorist attack worldwide over the last 20 years," *Insider*.

[60] Westwell, *Parallel Lines*, 1.

[61] Kean and Hamilton, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 326.

[62] Westwell, *Parallel Lines*, 1.

War was designated part of the "war on terror," which involved covert operations against terrorism and in which, "the U.S. would strike pre-emptively at threats rather than rely on containment or deterrence."[63] The most significant expression of this pre-emptive approach was the controversial invasion of Iraq in March 2003, "based mostly on… spurious claims that Iraq was hiding weapons of mass destruction from UN inspectors, and dubious accusations that linked Saddam Hussein's regime to al Qaeda and the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001."[64] These concerns regarding the justification of the Iraq War inform the representation of the war on terror in several of my case study films.

In the wake of 9/11, following a meeting of President Bush's political adviser, Karl Rove, with film industry executives, Hollywood committed to "help the war effort."[65] Valantin states that, "The aim of the meeting was the coordination of American foreign policy, dominated by the 'war against terrorism', with Hollywood productions."[66] Patriotically-appropriate pictures were identified which could be released in the aftermath of the attacks, including *Black Hawk Down* and *We Were Soldiers*, which "served to encourage the warrior spirit for the new war."[67] Other films, such as *Buffalo Soldiers* (dir. Gregor Jordan, UK, Germany, 2001) which "offered a biting critique of the American armed forces and the troops serving on the frontlines of the European Cold War"[68] and *The Quiet American* (dir. Phillip Noyce, UK, Germany, USA, Vietnam, Australia, France, Canada, 2002) which showed not only the origins of America's bitter war in Vietnam; it also presented the United States as a sponsor of terrorism,"[69] were "quietly shelved".[70] An alteration to *The Sum of all Fears* (dir. Phil Alden Robinson, USA, Germany, Canada, 2002) demonstrated Hollywood's willingness to adapt its narratives with enemies being changed from Arabs to "neo-Nazis pretending to be Russians",[71] the director promising that "Muslims would not be depicted as terrorists, and that he had 'no intention of promoting negative images of Muslims or Arabs.'"[72] The term "post-9/11 cinema" explains such changes, encompassing both the influence of the attacks on Hollywood's output and Hollywood's solidarity with the U.S. government's aims.

These initial films, released in the aftermath of 9/11, suggested a return to 1980s representation. This assessment was expressed by various writers, as Glen Donnar explains:

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[63] Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack* (London: Pocket Books, 2004), 132.
[64] Trevor B. McCrisken, "George W. Bush, American exceptionalism and the Iraq War," in *America and Iraq: Policy-making, intervention and regional politics* eds. David Ryan and Patrick Kiely (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009, this ed. 2010), 189.
[65] Westwell, *Parallel Lines*, 8.
[66] Valantin, *Hollywood, The Pentagon and Washington*, 90.
[67] Garofolo, "War Films in an Age of War and Cinema," 49.
[68] Laderman, "Introduction: Camouflaging Empire," 1.
[69] Ibid., 2.
[70] Ibid., 2.
[71] David Morgan, "Terrorism in Movies, Pre- and Post-9/11," *CBS News*, September 8, 2011, accessed March 27, 2023, https://www.cbsnews.com/pictures/terrorism-in-movies-pre-and-post-9-11/.
[72] Ibid.

> Arguments about the post-9/11 remasculinization of American society, politics, and popular culture… implicitly assumed that a Republican presidency post-9/11 would encourage political and cultural responses mirroring Reagan-era America… [and] presumed reinvigoration of 'muscular' 1980s action film gender codes in redressing prior (national) wounding.[73]

Films such as *Black Hawk Down* demonstrated Hollywood's potential for depicting conflict as the appropriate response to the attacks, "heightening a national sense of 'aggrieved injury'… and suggesting that military power can provide a salve for that injury… pav[ing] the way for the global extension of U.S. hegemony".[74] Scott Laderman agrees, citing how, "Twenty-first-century productions… have, with relatively few exceptions, persisted in fundamentally presenting the United States as a global force for good."[75] However, I argue that Hollywood released films critiquing the war on terror, the longevity of the war inevitably leading to fissures in public support which informed Hollywood's depictions. Richard Haass notes, "If there was… something [close to]… consensus on not tolerating terrorism, there was even more agreement that the United States was wrong and unjustified in the spring of 2003 when it went to war with Iraq."[76] In *Lions for Lambs* (dir. Robert Redford, USA, 2007), Janine Roth (Meryl Streep) declares, "After 9/11, we had the whole world on our side. Here we are, six years later, stumbling through one of the worst times to be an American." My analysis will reveal films which question the virtue of Bush's pre-emptive approach, particularly the Iraq War, and offer opportunities to mourn both American loss and the American response. To understand the debates into which my research intervenes, I will now proceed to a literature review.

1.3 "Post-9/11 Cinema

This thesis seeks to address the gap in scholarship concerning war and terrorism films based on real events and the relationship between war and terrorism cinema. Whilst there are numerous books dedicated to the study of war films, and a substantial literature on post-9/11 cinema, my research encompasses the representation of the war on terror in relation to both the terrorist acts which motivated the Bush administration's response, and the response

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[73] Glen Donnar, *Troubling Masculinities: Terror, Gender, and Monstrous Others in American Film Post-9/11*, (Jackson, MS, 2020; online edn, Mississippi Scholarship Online, 21 Jan. 2021), 10, https://doi.org/10.14325/mississippi/9781496828576.001.0001.
[74] Jonathan Markovitz, "Reel Terror Post 9/11," 220.
[75] Laderman, "Introduction: Camouflaging Empire," 17.
[76] Richard Haass, *A World in Disarray: American Foreign Policy and the Crisis of the Old Order* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017, this ed. 2018), 122-123.

itself, including the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. It also discusses the distinct nature of the Reel Fallout corpus, unaccounted for in post-9/11 literature. Robert Burgoyne identifies in relation to *The Hurt Locker* how, "a number of scenes convey a powerful sense of pathos, an affective quality that has been relegated to the background in the criticism of the film."[77] My analysis instead foregrounds the representation of tragedy in narratives driven by sadness. When considered together, the war and terrorism films of my corpus represent violence and war as unable to provide a solution to terrorism.

The war film is one of Hollywood's most enduring genres and the wide array of scholarship on the war genre complements its popularity. Books such as Robert Eberwein's *The War Film*[78] and Michael Hammond's *The Great War in Hollywood Memory, 1918-1939*[79] denote an ongoing interest in war on screen, particularly the world wars and Vietnam which have been well covered. *War Cinema: Hollywood on the Front Line*[80] by Guy Westwell provides a comprehensive overview of war cinema since Hollywood's inception. Incorporated into this academic field is "post-9/11 cinema," entering various studies since 2001 and exploring films concerned with immediate post-9/11 filmmaking. These works generally offer a survey of many films with brief analysis rather than in-depth exploration of fewer films, integrated into a historical summary of the American foreign policy which influenced the films, for example, Westwell's *Parallel Lines: Post-9/11 American Cinema*.[81] Books which offer in-depth analysis of particular films often present their examination in chapters dedicated to specific films, such as Frances Pheasant-Kelly's *Fantasy Film Post 9/11*[82] and Robert Burgoyne's *The New American War Film*[83] rather than comparative interrogation of multiple films.[84]

My discussions engage with various books and articles concerning the individual films, for example, Berenike Jung's examination of *Zero Dark Thirty*[85] and Paul Gormley's analysis of

[77] Robert Burgoyne, "Embodiment in the war film: *Paradise Now* and *The Hurt Locker*," in *Journal of War & Culture Studies*, 5:1, (2012), 15, accessed September 12, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1386/jwcs.5.1.7_1.

[78] Robert Eberwein, *The War Film* (London: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

[79] Michael Hammond, *The Great War in Hollywood Memory, 1918-1939* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2019), accessed March 27, 2023, https://search-ebscohost-com.soton.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx.

[80] Guy Westwell, *War Cinema: Hollywood on the Front Line* (London: Wallflower Press, 2006).

[81] Guy Westwell, *Parallel Lines: Post-9/11 American Cinema* (Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2014).

[82] Frances Pheasant-Kelly, *Fantasy Film Post 9/11*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013).

[83] Robert Burgoyne, *The New American War Film* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2023).

[84] The insights gained from a comparative study are demonstrated when considering The Hurt Locker, Green Zone and American Sniper, all set in the Iraq War. Green Zone opens with the American "shock and awe" invasion of Baghdad, but from the point of view of Saddam Hussein's deputy and his staff as they evacuate, depicting the destruction of the city and impressing upon the viewer the damage done by the war as opposed to conveying American arguments for its inevitability. There is no mention of 9/11 or al Qaeda in the film and the narrative presents the search for weapons of mass destruction (WMD), articulated as the Bush administration's primary reason for war, as futile and based on falsified evidence. This provides commentary on the United States' foreign policy, contrasting with *The Hurt Locker*'s apolitical approach which portrays the damaging effects of war on individual soldiers, with two key American characters being killed by explosions and the protagonist struggling to adapt to life at home in the United States. Similarly, American Sniper emphasises the difficulty for the protagonist in adjusting to life on returning to the United States. Comparisons such as these are attainable by considering all nine case study films throughout the thesis.

[85] Berenike Jung, *The Invisibilities of Political Torture: The Presence of Absence in US and Chilean Cinema and Television*, (2020), https://doi.org/10.3366/edinburgh/9781474436991.001.0001.

The Hurt Locker.[86] Peter Keough's edited collection of interviews with Kathryn Bigelow[87] offers invaluable insights into the director's visions for the films.

Several studies explore documentary and independent cinema rather than narrative Hollywood films, such as Douglas Kellner's *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era*[88] and *Post-9/11 Cinema: Through a Lens Darkly* by John Markert.[89] Whilst various studies have examined war or terrorism films in isolation, this study considers both together. Through close textual analysis of a combination of high-grossing war and terrorism films by renowned directors who have made more than one film concerning American foreign policy, it considers the impact of the war on terror on Hollywood more widely and how depictions of war and terrorism correlate. My research also comprises more recent terrorism films, as most books published on post-9/11 cinema are pre-2016,[90] so do not include reference to films such as *Patriots Day* concerning the Boston Marathon bombings or *The 15:17 to Paris* regarding the attempted terrorist attack on a train in France. Two of my other case study films, *Green Zone* and *Captain Phillips*, are also less widely discussed, providing space for novel insights.

Burgoyne's *The New American War Film*[91] is a very recent contribution to Hollywood war cinema scholarship which demonstrates the urgent and current debates into which my analysis is intervening.[92] Burgoyne's contention is that war cinema has changed in the "post-9/11" era, no longer focusing on national glory but on the psychological repercussions of war. Whilst this forms part of my argument, by introducing the concept of Reel Fallout cinema and incorporating analysis of terrorism films in addition to war films, my analysis determines that two of the films Burgoyne discusses are more accurately understood as part of a distinct

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[86] Paul Gormley, "Blowing Up the War Film," in *A Companion to the Action Film*, ed. James Kendrick (February 1, 2019), 364-380, accessed May 21, 2025, https://doi-org.soton.idm.oclc.org/10.1002/9781119100744.ch19.
[87] Peter Keough (ed.), *Kathryn Bigelow: Interviews* (University Press of Mississippi, 2013), accessed September 26, 2019, ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/soton-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1113434.
[88] Douglas Kellner, *Cinema Wars: Hollywood Film and Politics in the Bush-Cheney Era* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).
[89] John Markert, *Post-9/11 Cinema: Through a Lens Darkly* (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2011).
[90] For example, Wheeler Winston Dixon, ed., *Film and Television After 9/11* (Southern Illinois University: Southern Illinois University Press, 2004); Trevor McCrisken and Andrew Pepper, *American History and Contemporary Hollywood Film* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005); and Jeff Birkenstein, Anna Froula and Karen Randell, eds., *Reframing 9/11: Film, Popular Culture and the "War on Terror"* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010). There are articles from which I have drawn, for example, Johannes Riquet, "Screening Railway Terrorists: Light Modernity, Invisible Threats and the Aesthetics of Concealment in *The 15:17 to Paris* and *Bodyguard*," in *The Figure of the Terrorist in Literature and Visual Culture*, eds. Maria Flood and Michael C. Frank, 87–104 (Edinburgh University Press, 2023), accessed June 19, 2025, and Brian Danoff, "'I'm the Captain Now': Power, Justice, and Tragedy in 'Benito Cereno' and *Captain Phillips*," in *American Political Thought 6*, no. 1 (Winter 2017), 30-53, accessed June 19, 2025. https://heinonline-org.soton.idm.oclc.org/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/ampolth6&id=31&collection=journals&index=.
[91] Robert Burgoyne, *The New American War Film* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2023).
[92] Burgoyne's book was published in the final stages of writing up my thesis so there was not sufficient time to incorporate it into my arguments; however, Burgoyne's prior discussions of *Zero Dark Thirty* proved very useful for Chapter 3; Robert Burgoyne, "The Violated Body: Affective Experience and Somatic Intensity in *Zero Dark Thirty*," in *The Philosophy of War Films*, ed. David LaRocca, 247-260 (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), accessed January 14, 2021, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt12880b3.10.

"post- post-9/11" era, as well as enabling comparison of the effects of the war on terror and terrorism on the ordinary civilian. Two original insights I will offer are that, taken collectively, my case study films assert that the war on terror has been unsuccessful in preventing further terrorist attacks, and that, as demonstrated in the concluding chapter, Reel Fallout films have influenced mainstream action cinema, including superhero blockbusters, emphasising the implications of my research for wider Hollywood productions.

With a background in film studies and international relations, I offer an interdisciplinary approach which will provide a comprehensive understanding of the foreign policy on which the films are based. There is a wealth of material on American foreign policy, 9/11 and the war on terror, which provides useful insights into the attacks and their aftermath, including the Bush administration's response, incorporating the Afghanistan and Iraq wars.[93] However, there are few mentions of cinema within the international relations corpus. My research will combine close textual analysis of scenes and sequences in my case study films with consideration of real-world American foreign policy approaches. Framing the films through the lens of cultural studies will offer contextualisation of the real-life events on which the films are based and provide a deeper understanding of the contribution of cinema to foreign policy conversations. Film can, in some cases, be a viewer's dominant source of information regarding a particular subject. This sentiment is endorsed by the film critic Mark Kermode who discerned, "all I know about boxing is from boxing movies."[94] This could readily be translated to the war on terror; very few viewers will have first-hand experience of the conflict so a film's representation may be considered an authority, tying into the quote from Terence McSweeney which opens this thesis. In relation to the Vietnam War, Lawrence H. Suid similarly considers, "However inaccurate the portrayals, viewers were likely to remember only Hollywood's Vietnam."[95] Shohini Chaudhuri explores this idea in relation to *Zero Dark Thirty*, "[It] has been more widely seen than other films on the topic. It has the power to create a moral consensus about these events."[96] The impact of cinema on viewers contributes to the importance of its examination. For example, in its review of *Green Zone*, *Times of India* explains, "*Green Zone* is an important film that questions the entire US offensive in Iraq… [T]here are no weapons of mass destruction to be found. So what's the war for? And why has

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[93] Books such as Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), Parmar, Miller and Ledwidge's edited collection *New Directions in US Foreign Policy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), Asaf Siniver's edited collection *International Terrorism Post 9/11: Comparative dynamics and responses* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), and Bob Woodward's *Bush at War* (London: Pocket Books, 2003) and *Plan of Attack* (London: Pocket Books, 2004) all offer useful insights into the Bush administration's response to the September 11, 2001 attacks. Richard Haass' *A World in Disarray: American Foreign Policy and the Crisis of the Old Order* (New York: Penguin Press, 2017, this ed. 2018) also considers the effects of the U.S. administration's response to 9/11.

[94] Mark Kermode, "*Creed II* reviewed by Mark Kermode," *kermodeandmayo YouTube*, accessed October 2, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJu-Np6jPko.

[95] Lawrence H. Suid, *Guts & Glory: The Making of the American Military Image in Film* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 369.

[96] Shohini Chaudhuri, *Cinema of the Dark Side: Atrocity and the Ethics of Film Spectatorship* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2014), 24.

an entire country been turned to rubble?"[97] Films can provoke discussion regarding real-world events and be read as supporting or challenging ideological positions.

My three analytical chapters will employ a variety of theoretical frameworks to inform my analysis of the films. Underlying my approach in **Chapter 2. Grieving the Hollywood Non-American Other**, is Edward W. Said's renowned work, *Orientalism*.[98] Said asserts that the West "others" the East, thereby creating a divide between the active author and the passive authored, "The construction of identity… involves establishing opposites and 'others' whose actuality is always subject to the continuous interpretation and re-interpretation of their differences from 'us'."[99] The concept of "us" and "them" has often been assigned to Hollywood cinema as films frequently depict a good side fighting an enemy. Michael Richardson relates Said's work to film, noting, "Hollywood offers fascinating source material for an examination of what, in the modern world, we understand by 'Otherness'."[100] I will show how some of the films in my corpus problematise this West vs. East binary,[101] generating a more nuanced approach to characters who have typically been othered.

Reflecting on othering, Judith Butler, in her seminal work, *Frames of War: When is life grievable?*,[102] argues that cinema bears a responsibility for representing people of every country as equal, or "grievable." This discussion is highly relevant to my research; ascertaining the grievability of characters helps to determine the extent to which they are othered and how invested the viewer is in their existence. Butler establishes that the absence of mourning for a character's death indicates a lack of worth, "Without grievability, there is no life, or, rather, there is something living that is other than life."[103] The concept of "other" is made more profound by Butler's assertion that a life which is ungrievable is not life; it is an existence without significance. If the viewer does not recognise a life as a life, empathy and the ability to relate to their experiences becomes increasingly difficult. Butler states that lives being considered of equal value "might make violence less possible, lives more equally grievable, and, hence, more livable."[104] In applying this condition to cinema, she advocates for the representation of an equal distribution of grief transferring equivalent value to a variety of characters; I will argue that several of my case study films distribute grief across characters of different countries in a similar way. This addresses Gelado and Colón's call for

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[97] "*Green Zone* Movie Review," *Times of India*, accessed September 8, 2018, https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/entertainment/english/movie-reviews/green-zone/movie-review/5778815.cms.
[98] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1978, this ed. 1979).
[99] Ibid., 332.
[100] Michael Richardson, *Otherness in Hollywood Cinema* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2010), viii, accessed January 15, 2020, ProQuest Ebook Central.
[101] The assumption of a binary as posed by Said was questioned by Abderrahmene Bourenane in his paper, "Anti-Orientalism in Ridley Scott's *Kingdom of Heaven* (2005)" at the *Elsewhere from an American Perspective* Conference in Arras, France in May 2022 on which I have reflected.
[102] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is life grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009, this edition 2010).
[103] Ibid., 15.
[104] Ibid., viii.

consideration of this area, "Does this mean that the door for a mutual understanding and a more respectful and fairer treatment of the Other –in this case the Arabs– is still open in Hollywood films? This should be fully discussed in other papers focused on that specific topic."[105] I will determine that, not only does my study offer analysis in this area, but also establishes that, in films such as *Lone Survivor* and *Green Zone*, the door to respectful treatment of those typically othered is firmly open.

Moving from non-American characters to American protagonists, **Chapter 3. Expressions of Trauma in Vulnerable American Protagonists** will consider the traumatising effects of war and terrorism on the lead characters of my case study films. It will reference a range of scholarship, which identify definitions of personal and collective trauma, the influence of melodrama on Hollywood cinema, typical representations of masculinity and violence, conventions of realism, and commentary on empathy, as well as considering international relations books on the war on terror to determine the relationship of the trauma portrayed with real events. Discussions in *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures*, edited by Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams[106] underpin explorations of melodrama in relation to the case study films' emotional protagonists. I also engage with E. Ann Kaplan's *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*,[107] identifying the thesis as contributing to Cinema Studies' "new interest in trauma"[108] more widely. My work will reference Nadia Abu El-Haj's *Combat Trauma: Imaginaries of War and Citizenship in post-9/11 America*[109] which provides a thorough history of the psychological approaches to the trauma of soldiers, including definitions of PTSD. When analysing the depiction of characters crying following traumatic situations, I draw on Glen Donnar's *Troubling Masculinities: Terror, Gender, and Monstrous Others in American Film Post-9/11*[110] to argue that this representation diverges from typical Hollywood portrayals of a regenerative relationship between masculinity and violence. Explaining traits of the warrior soldier is John Garofolo's chapter, "War Films in an Age of War and Cinema",[111] on which I will reflect for further comparison. Chapter 3 will also reflect on multiple chapters from Terence

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[105] Roberto Gelado and Pedro Sangro Colón, "Hollywood and the representation of the Otherness. A historical analysis of the role played by movies in spotting enemies to vilify," *Research Gate*, May 2016, accessed January 27, 2020, 22, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303093147.

[106] Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, eds., *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), accessed May 17, 2023, https://search-ebscohost-com.soton.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1719946&site=ehost-live.

[107] E. Ann. Kaplan, *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*, (London: Rutgers University Press, 2005).

[108] Ibid., 69.

[109] Nadia Abu El-Haj, *Combat Trauma: Imaginaries of War and Citizenship in post-9/11 America* (London: Verso, 2022).

[110] Glen Donnar, *Troubling Masculinities: Terror, Gender, and Monstrous Others in American Film Post-9/11*, (Jackson, MS, 2020; online edn, Mississippi Scholarship Online, 21 Jan. 2021), accessed August 9, 2023, https://doi.org/10.14325/mississippi/9781496828576.001.0001.

[111] John Garofolo, "War Films in an Age of War and Cinema," in *A Companion to the War Film*, ed. D.A. Cunningham and J.C. Nelson (2016), accessed May 21, 2025, https://doi-org.soton.idm.oclc.org/10.1002/9781118337653.ch3.

McSweeney's insightful collection *American cinema in the shadow of 9/11*[112] and Scott Loren and Jörg Metelmann's highly relevant *Melodrama After the Tears: New Perspectives on the Politics of Victimhood*,[113] as well as several publications by Guy Westwell on war and cinema.[114] International relations-focused books pertinent to my discussion of how depictions in the films relate to the real-life events include Asaf Siniver's *International Terrorism Post 9/11: Comparative dynamics and responses*[115] and *New Directions in US Foreign Policy* edited by Inderjeet Parmar, Linda B. Miller and Mark Ledwidge.[116]

Building on the considerations of grief and trauma in chapters 2 and 3, **Chapter 4. American Exceptionalism and its Discontents** will show how my case study films represent the enaction of the war on terror with a sombre rather than triumphant tone, employing pauses and reflection on actions and consequences which disrupts the United States' claim to exceptionalism as manifested through conflict. Similarities between the films and the Western genre depict the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as the United States' most recent incarnation of the frontier, characterising them as endless and featuring an enemy within. The chapter is informed by Greg Grandin's extensive account of U.S. history, *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America*,[117] in which he discusses the nation's continual reliance on conflict to establish its national identity. As noted previously, Hollywood's representation of conflict has typically been supportive of government policy, particularly during the world wars. However, my case study films depict methods employed in the war on terror, such as torture and the misrepresentation of evidence of WMD, as questioning the American values the war on terror is being fought to defend. In *The Sky is Falling! The Unexpected Politics of Hollywood's Superheroes and Zombies*,[118] Peter Biskind offers useful insights into typical Hollywood depictions, and, in *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity*,[119] Christian G. Appy

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[112] Terence McSweeney, ed., *American cinema in the shadow of 9/11* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), accessed January 27, 2020, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1g0524v.
[113] Scott Loren and Jörg Metelmann, eds., *Melodrama After the Tears: New Perspectives on the Politics of Victimhood* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), accessed May 18, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1017/9789048523573.
[114] Guy Westwell, "In Country: Mapping the Iraq War in Recent Hollywood Combat Movies," in *Screens of Terror: Representations of war and terrorism in film and television since 9/11*, ed. Philip Hammond, 19-35, (Bury St Edmunds: Arima Publishing, 2011); Guy Westwell, *Parallel Lines: Post-9/11 American Cinema*, (Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2004); and Guy Westwell, *War Cinema: Hollywood on the Front Line*, (London: Wallflower Press, 2006).
[115] David Hastings Dunn and Oz Hassan, "Strategic confusion: America's conflicting strategies and the war on terrorism," in *International Terrorism Post 9/11: Comparative dynamics and responses*, ed. Asaf Siniver, 57-82, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010).
[116] Inderjeet Parmar, Linda B. Miller and Mark Ledwidge, eds., *New Directions in US Foreign Policy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009).
[117] Greg Grandin, *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2019).
[118] Peter Biskind, *The Sky is Falling! The Unexpected Politics of Hollywood's Superheroes and Zombies* (UK: Penguin Random House, 2019).
[119] Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016).

provides thought-provoking analysis of the Iraq War, informed by an understanding of Vietnam.

The case study films focus on mourning the sacrifices and losses which I will argue contributes to the discourse of the "failure of mourning" of the September 11, 2001, attacks, as expounded by Richard Gray in *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11*.[120] Discussion in Donnar's *Troubling Masculinities: Terror, Gender, and Monstrous Others in American Film Post-9/11* of melancholy and a lack of triumph in two of my case study films complements Gray's reflections on mourning. The edited collection, *Panic and Mourning: The Cultural Work of Trauma*,[121] explores Freud's concept of "successful" mourning to which my work will respond, and *Terrorism in American Memory: Memorials, Museums, and Architecture in the Post-9/11 Era* by Marita Sturken considers memory and mourning in the war on terror. A variety of authors reference my case study films in relation to Westerns, including Johannes Riquet in "Screening Railway Terrorists: Light Modernity, Invisible Threats and the Aesthetics of Concealment in *The 15:17 to Paris* and *Bodyguard*."[122] In-fighting between American soldiers in *Green Zone* and assimilated enemies in *Patriots Day* and *The 15:17 to Paris* also prompt discussion of the enemy within. Reference to three additional films by three of the case study directors, *Detroit* (dir. Kathryn Bigelow, USA, 2017), *22 July* (dir. Paul Greengrass, USA, Norway, 2018) and *Richard Jewell* (dir. Clint Eastwood, USA, 2019), further explore the theme of "an enemy within." Depicting racism, police brutality and corruption of law enforcement in the United States, and domestic terrorism in Norway, inclusion of these films form trilogies of interest in the enemy within by each director.[123] The following section will consider how my nine case study films are grouped by generic conventions of war and terrorism films, as well as thematic concerns with threats against Americans and the war on terror, and my approach to their examination.

1.4   Material Selection: The Reel Fallout Film Cycle

My nine case study films incorporate four war films, *Lone Survivor*, set in the Afghanistan War, and *The Hurt Locker*, *Green Zone* and *American Sniper*, set in the Iraq War, and five

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[120] Gray, *After the Fall*, 11.

[121] eds. Daniela Agostinho, Elisa Antz and Cátia Ferreira, *Panic and Mourning: The Cultural Work of Trauma* (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, Inc., 2012), accessed March 11, 2025, ProQuest Ebook Central, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/soton-ebooks/detail.action?docID=893983.

[122] Johannes Riquet, "Screening Railway Terrorists: Light Modernity, Invisible Threats and the Aesthetics of Concealment in *The 15:17 to Paris* and *Bodyguard*," in *The Figure of the Terrorist in Literature and Visual Culture*, eds. Maria Flood and Michael C. Frank, 87–104 (Edinburgh University Press, 2023), accessed June 19, 2025.

[123] A trilogy of Peter Berg films, *The Kingdom*, *Lone Survivor* and *Patriots Day*, already forms a focus of examination throughout the thesis.

terrorism films, *The Kingdom*, *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Captain Phillips*, *Patriots Day* and *The 15:17 to Paris*. Generically they are two distinct subsets of action films but, as a cycle, they can be grouped as contributing to an understanding of the war on terror. I refer to Reel Fallout Cinema as a film cycle as understood by Amanda Ann Klein, as a specific era within the war and terrorism genres. Klein references how, "intrageneric cycles can serve as a cross-section of one specific moment in time, accurately revealing the state of contemporary politics, prevalent social ideologies, aesthetic trends, and popular desires and anxieties."[124] These films share conflict as their central theme as well as a sombre aesthetic which contributes to creating a space to mourn. The linking of these is demarcated in John Garofalo's description of *Gold Diggers* (dir. Busby Berkeley, USA, 1933), "In 1933 Busby Berkeley… included a remarkably somber, socially conscious sequence in his film *Gold Diggers*… in which he depicted the plight of downtrodden World War I veterans… set against the mournful song, 'My Forgotten Man.'"[125] In this way, a mournful musical soundtrack establishes a sombre tone.

All nine of the case study films are inspired by real events. Set in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Pakistan, off the coast of Somalia, Afghanistan, the United States and Europe, the films offer opportunities to explore a variety of international relations debates: the war in Afghanistan in *Lone Survivor*, the war in Iraq in *The Hurt Locker*, *Green Zone* and *American Sniper*, terrorist attacks in Saudi Arabia in *The Kingdom*, the war on terror and search for Osama bin Laden in *Zero Dark Thirty*, Somali pirates taking a ship's captain hostage in *Captain Phillips*, the Boston Marathon bombings in *Patriots Day*, and an attempted terrorist attack on a train from the Netherlands to France in *The 15:17 to Paris*. Maltby explains how, "we need to know already what the 'reality' or 'real life' we are referring to is, before we can assess the 'realism' of a representation."[126] I have studied the real events on which my case study films are based to inform examination of the films' representations.

Seven of the films are based on written accounts: four on autobiographies[127] (*Captain Phillips*, *Lone Survivor*, *American Sniper* and *The 15:17 to Paris*), two on the reports of journalists embedded in the Iraq War[128] (*The Hurt Locker* and *Green Zone*) and one on a

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[124] Amanda Ann Klein, *American Film Cycles: Reframing Genres, Screening Social Problems, and Defining Subcultures* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 9.
[125] Garofolo, "War Films in an Age of War and Cinema," 40-41.
[126] Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*, 232.
[127] Richard Phillips, *A Captain's Duty: Somali Pirates, Navy SEALS, and Dangerous Days at Sea* (New York: Bantam Press, 2013); Mark Luttrell and Patrick Robinson, *Lone Survivor: The Incredible True Story of Navy SEALs Under Siege* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 2014, originally 2007); Chris Kyle with Jim DeFelice and Scott McEwen, *American Sniper: The autobiography of the most lethal sniper in U.S. history* (St Ives: HarperCollins, 2012, this edition 2014); Anthony Sadler, Alek Skarlatos, Spender Stone and Jeffrey E. Stern, *The 15:17 to Paris: The True Story of a Terrorist, a Train, and Three American Heroes* (London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2016, this ed. 2018).
[128] Mark Boal, "The Man in the Bomb Suit," *Playboy Magazine*, September 2005, accessed January 21, 2020, https://playboysfw.kinja.com/the-man-in-the-bomb-suit-the-story-that-inspired-the-h-1532191766; Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Baghdad's Green Zone* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2008).

non-fiction account[129] (*Patriots Day*). My analysis of the films will incorporate consideration of comparisons with the source material where applicable. The development of the script for *Zero Dark Thirty* included meetings between the filmmakers and the CIA.[130] *The Kingdom* and *Green Zone* are fictional stories formulated from real events; *The Kingdom* "is loosely based on the FBI's investigation of the 1996 bombings of Khobar Towers in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia, which Berg read about in former Bureau director Louis Freeh's memoir, *My FBI*",[131] and *Green Zone* is based on the search for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. *The Hurt Locker* contains fictional characters informed by real Explosive Ordnance Disposal technicians scriptwriter Mark Boal met in Iraq. *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Patriots Day* both feature composite characters amalgamated from real people involved in the events depicted; in *Zero Dark Thirty*, the "main character is thought to be based on an amalgam of CIA operatives";[132] in *Patriots Day*, the lead character is "a composite of three Boston police officers who worked the Boston Marathon and aided in the manhunt that followed."[133]

Audio and video footage from the real events infiltrates three of the films. For *Patriots Day*, Peter Berg made significant use of real footage of the bombings,

> [P]ost-production used over four terabytes of archival footage collected from the event itself and the investigation that followed. This included footage captured on people's personal smart phones and video cameras, local security and surveillance cameras, television news crews on the ground, other audio and visual broadcast media, and law enforcement radio communications.[134]

Interviews with some of the film's crew, including sound editors and a production designer, elucidate the process. Dror Mohar, re-recording mixer, sound designer and supervising sound editor on the film, explains how, "'Sixty percent of the movie has at least one layer of sound from the real, original occurrences'"[135] including "using an actual bystander's recording of the Watertown gun battle".[136] The film ends with archive footage of Fenway Park, the

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[129] Casey Sherman and Dave Wedge, *Boston Strong: A City's Triumph Over Tragedy* (ForeEdge, University Press of New England, 2015).

[130] Jacob Shamsian, "The director of the CIA secretly helped produce Hollywood's biggest movie about the Osama bin Laden raid," *Business Insider*, Sep 9, 2015, accessed January 18, 2024, https://www.businessinsider.com/cia-helped-produce-zero-dark-thirty.

[131] Christine Spines, "Inside 'The Kingdom': Jamie Foxx and Jennifer Garner star in this highly anticipated September 2007 release," *Entertainment Weekly*, September 6, 2007, accessed May 27, 2025, https://ew.com/article/2007/09/06/inside-kingdom/.

[132] Aram Roston, "Exclusive: Ex-CIA analyst says she 'got bloodied' in tangled U.S. war on Al Qaeda," *Reuters*, April 20, 2022, accessed January 18, 2024, https://www.reuters.com/world/exclusive-ex-cia-analyst-says-she-got-bloodied-tangled-us-war-al-qaeda-2022-04-20/.

[133] Kara Haar, "'Patriots Day': 14 of the Film's Stars and Their Real-Life Inspirations," *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 13, 2017, accessed January 18, 2024, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/lists/patriots-day-14-films-stars-real-life-inspirations-963172/sgt-tommy-saunders-portrayed-by-mark-wahlberg/.

[134] Edward Landler, "Recreating the Boston Marathon Bombing in 'Patriots Day'," *CineMontage: Journal of the Motion Picture Editors Guild*, December 21, 2016, accessed April 6, 2023, https://cinemontage.org/recreating-boston-marathon-bombing-patriots-day/.

[135] Ibid.

[136] Ibid.

baseball stadium of the Boston Red Sox, where those responsible for bringing the bombers to justice were honoured. *Zero Dark Thirty* opens with archive audio of real telephone conversations from people in the Twin Towers after they were struck by aeroplanes on September 11, 2001. Snippets are distinguishable: "I can't breathe," "A plane crashed into World Trade Center One," "I love you," "I'm gonna die… It's so hot, I'm burning up." In *The 15:17 to Paris,* the three real people who prevented the attack play themselves.

As noted previously, I assert that Hollywood was empowered to re-introduce terrorism into entertainment cinema[137] through my first case study film, *The Kingdom*, in 2007 following the release of *World Trade Center* and *United 93* in 2006. *The Kingdom* commences the era of post- post-9/11 cinema, Reel Fallout Cinema, in which I am interested. *The Hurt Locker* and *Green Zone* follow, and later *American Sniper*, all offering critical portrayals of the Iraq war through either traumatised protagonists or a narrative criticising the failure to discover weapons of mass destruction, the premise on which the war was waged. The story of *Zero Dark Thirty* involves a 12-year search for Osama bin Laden, the orchestrator of the 9/11 attacks. The search is successful, resulting in the death of bin Laden, but the subdued ending suggests that a feeling of triumph is unattainable considering the events preceding it. *Captain Phillips* explores terrorism in the form of an American ship being captured by pirates off the Somali coast and the captain held hostage in a lifeboat. *Lone Survivor* documents a Navy SEAL mission in the Afghanistan War which resulted in the deaths of nineteen SEALs and dozens of Afghan combatants.

The depiction of post-2011 terrorist plots in my later case study films, *Patriots Day* and *The 15:17 to Paris*, indicates that bin Laden's elimination did not stop further terrorism. Taken collectively, my film corpus portrays a world of threat and danger for Americans, particularly overseas, but also in their own country. I will argue that 2011 delineates the commencement of sadness and criticism of conflict in Reel Fallout Cinema influencing other, mainstream action genre cinema. The films of 2007-2012 pre-empted this representation, and the films of 2013-2018 consolidated it. 2018 provides a useful end point for my research as it incorporates a terrorism film by Clint Eastwood and renders my analysis as contemporary as possible as this is when I commenced my investigation. *The 15:17 to Paris* also indicates the longevity of the effects of terrorism as it was released almost 20 years after the September 11 attacks, and 12 years after *The Kingdom*. This supports my contention that, taken collectively, my case study films portray the ongoing war on terror as endless and failing to prevent further terrorist attacks.

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[137] "Entertainment" cinema is of particular significance in relation to my material selection; the films of my corpus are big budget, high-grossing films intended for large audiences, to be discussed shortly.

Zero Dark Thirty was released one year after Osama bin Laden was found and killed in real life. The military mission leading to his death which constitutes the final 30 minutes of the film closely resembles *No Easy Day: The Firsthand Account of the Mission that Killed Osama bin Laden*,[138] Navy SEAL Mark Owen's account of the real mission. It has been unusual for Navy SEALS to document their missions in this way, but three of the autobiographies on which the films are based are written by Navy SEALS seeking to gain acknowledgement of, and appreciation for, their work. Owen explains, "it is time to set the record straight about one of the most important missions in US military history… This book will finally give credit to those who earned it."[139] This attitude contradicts SEALs' historical commitment to confidentiality regarding their missions, discussed by Forrest S. Crowell in his thesis, *Navy SEALs gone wild: publicity, fame, and the loss of the quiet professional*. Crowell states, "Navy SEALs have traditionally shunned publicity, and are supposed to adhere to an ethos of quiet professionalism, otherwise known as the SEAL Ethos."[140] He continues, "The dual requirements of security and surprise necessary for successful special operations forces (SOF) missions do not fit within such a promotional construct."[141] *Lone Survivor* and *American Sniper* are both based on autobiographies by Navy SEALs, demonstrating the benefit to Hollywood of first-hand accounts of missions which would have previously been undisclosed.

There are several reasons for the choice of films and directors for this study. *Lone Survivor* provided the initial inspiration for my research through its atypical representation of "the other," namely Afghan villagers, led by Mohammad Gulab (Ali Suliman), who save the life of American soldier, Marcus Luttrell (Mark Wahlberg) after his team is surrounded and killed by Taliban fighters. Gulab protects Luttrell until he can be rescued, and Luttrell is emotional as he leaves, crying as he repeats the words, "Thank you," and kissing Gulab's son on the head. Contextualising the representation of Gulab in *Lone Survivor* as atypical, a further inspiration for my thesis was reading President Barack Obama's speech to the Islamic Society in Baltimore on 3rd February 2016. In it, he asserts how, "many only hear about Muslims and Islam from the news after an act of terrorism, or in distorted media portrayals in TV or film, all of which gives this hugely distorted perspective."[142] This opinion helped inform my analysis of the other, to be substantially discussed in Chapter 2.

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[138] Mark Owen and Kevin Maurer, *No Easy Day: The Only First-Hand Account of the Mission that Killed Osama Bin Laden* (London: Penguin Books, 2013).

[139] Ibid., xii-xiii.

[140] Crowell, *Navy SEALs gone wild*, 2.

[141] Ibid., 3.

[142] There is considerable scope here to contemplate this quote's implication of the existence of an objective truth, as well as examining how films based on real life accounts will always convey a distorted perspective because they depict one person's point of view, based on memory which is unreliable. With more space in this study, I would have liked to have explored the implications of this discussion for my film corpus. Barack Obama, "Remarks by the President at Islamic Society of Baltimore," *The White House, Office of the Press Secretary*, February 3, 2016, accessed September 4, 2018, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2016/02/03/remarks-president-islamic-society-baltimore.

Figure 1.3   The inspiration for my thesis, Luttrell thanks Gulab's son, *Lone Survivor*, 1:47:36

Being inspired by watching *Lone Survivor* prompted me to explore other Peter Berg films. The closing sequence of *The Kingdom* stimulated a desire to examine the film further as the ending again broke with genre expectations; instead of a triumphant return to the United States having found and killed the person responsible for the bombings, the final scene juxtaposes a call to arms by American characters with a commitment to conflict by the Saudi characters. This correlation challenges the wisdom of addressing violence with violence, unusual for a Hollywood action film and warranting analysis. The inclusion of a further Peter Berg film, *Patriots Day*, enabled me to extend analysis of the war on terror to 2016 as well as to terrorism on American soil, expanding the remit of the investigation. Researching other films with war and terrorism narratives resulted in uncovering films made by Kathryn Bigelow, Clint Eastwood and Paul Greengrass who have each directed more than one film relating to the war on terror, including at least one war film and one terrorism film. Their combined catalogue provides both comparable approaches to war and terrorism and indicates widespread interest in this subject area, worthy of study to gain a greater understanding of the films' contributions.

The four directors are all established filmmakers with commercial pedigrees who bring a large catalogue of work; between them, they have directed over 80 feature films and are acclaimed within the film industry.[143] Clint Eastwood and Kathryn Bigelow are Academy

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[143] Interestingly, on Peter Berg's imdb.com page, he is listed as "Producer. Actor. Writer" but not director, even though he has 36 citations for film and television series under director. He hasn't received any Academy Award nominees but won awards for *Very Bad Things* (dir. Peter Berg, USA, 1998) as well as a Spotlight Award with Mark Wahlberg at the 2016 National Board of Review. Berg also received two Primetime Emmy nominations for *Friday Night Lights* (created by Peter Berg, Imagine Television, Film 44, NBC Universal Television, 2006-2011). "Peter Berg," imdb.com, accessed January 15, 2024, https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000916. Paul Greengrass was nominated for Best Director for *Captain Phillips* at the Golden Globes, Directors Guild of America and BAFTAs. He was also nominated at the 2007 Academy Awards for Best Director for *United 93* for which he won a Best Director BAFTA. He won the BFI Fellowship Award and UK Achievement in Film Award at the 2017 London Film Festival. "Paul Greengrass," imdb.com, accessed January 15, 2024, https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0339030. Kathryn Bigelow won Best Director and Best Motion Picture Oscars for *The Hurt Locker* and was nominated for Best Motion Picture for *Zero Dark Thirty*. She won numerous other

Award-winning directors and recognised as auteurs. Paul Greengrass is a British-born director working in Hollywood prompting a distinct experience of American foreign policy and is familiar with representing real life stories, having directed *Bloody Sunday* (dir. Paul Greengrass, UK, Ireland, 2002), *Omagh* (dir. Paul Greengrass, Ireland, UK, 2004) and *United 93*. Berg and Greengrass have been discussed less than Bigelow and Eastwood so incorporating their films will offer further opportunities for original insights. Berg and Bigelow generally offer more visceral representations with more emotional characterisations, whilst Eastwood and Greengrass provide more distanced, clinical approaches, so make for a compelling comparative study.

Each director has made numerous films in the action genre, cited by Andrew Syder as "emblematically American",[144] as well as many war and terrorism films, demonstrating an interest in American national identity and foreign policy. Operating within genre involves employing "rules… [which] are… a set of expectations shared by audiences and producers alike… [A]udiences recognize and anticipate … familiar features."[145] These rules can also be modified or broken to disrupt viewer expectations and generate consideration of a film's construction. Maltby identifies war cinema as distinct, "Genre criticism usually identifies up to eight genres in Hollywood feature film production. The Western, the comedy, the musical, and the war movie are four uncontested categories."[146] War films have generic traits associated with them, as do terrorism films which have been recognised as a subset of other genres, predominantly action and thriller; Tony Shaw asserts how, "filmic terrorism is principally about action. Whatever the genre, most films have focused on what terrorists are doing rather than thinking".[147] Films such as "*Invasion U.S.A.*, *Delta Force*, and… *Die Hard* (1988) were trendsetters for a whole genre of action movies in which a lone hero has to defeat single-handedly numerous terrorist enemies in a spectacular showdown."[148] I approach all nine of my case study films as a cycle with an interest in how they employ and

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awards for *The Hurt Locker* including Best Film and Best Director BAFTAs, Outstanding Directorial Achievement at the Directors Guild of America, and Director of the Year at the London Critics Circle Film Awards. Bigelow won Best Director for *Zero Dark Thirty* at the 2012 National Board of Review and Director of the Year at the 2009 Hollywood Film Awards. "Kathryn Bigelow," imdb.com, accessed January 15, 2024, https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000941. Clint Eastwood won Oscars for Best Motion Picture and Best Director for both *Million Dollar Baby* (dir. Clint Eastwood, USA, 2004) and *Unforgiven* (dir. Clint Eastwood, USA, 1992), as well as receiving the Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award, joining a prestigious list including Cecil B. DeMille, Alfred Hitchcock and Steven Spielberg. "Irving G. Thalberg Memorial Award," Oscars.org, accessed January 15, 2024, https://www.oscars.org/governors/thalberg. *American Sniper* was nominated for Best Motion Picture at the 2015 Academy Awards and Eastwood won for Best Director at the National Board of Review. Eastwood has various achievement awards including Lifetime Achievement Awards from the American Film Institute in 1996, the Critics Choice Awards in 2004 and the Directors Guild of America in 2006. "Clint Eastwood," imdb.com, accessed January 15, 2024, https://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000142.

[144] Andrew Syder, "Clint Eastwood," in *Contemporary North American Film Directors: A Wallflower Critical Guide* eds. Yoram Allon, Del Cullen and Hannah Patterson (London: Wallflower Press, 2002), 147.

[145] Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*, 76.

[146] Ibid., 85.

[147] Tony Shaw, *Cinematic Terror: A Global History of Terrorism on Film* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 284, accessed March 22, 2023, http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781501300363.ch-0001.

[148] Riegler, "Through the Lenses of Hollywood," 38.

break with generic conventions such as these, along with their focus on the war on terror which groups them thematically and makes comparison pertinent.

Genres are not static and the opportunity to redefine genre expectations has enabled directors such as Kathryn Bigelow and Clint Eastwood to influence their films with a distinctive style. Stephen Neale explains, "As far as genre is concerned, expectations exist both to be satisfied, and, also, to be redefined."[149] Hannah Ransley remarks on, "Bigelow's trademark subversion"[150] and demonstrates why auteurs working within genre can be so effective:

> much of her work has been made within the traditionally male-dominated arena of big-budget action movies… However, Bigelow's films often reflect a different approach to these genres because she consistently explores themes of violence, voyeurism and sexual politics[151]

Clint Eastwood addresses genre similarly. Drucilla Cornwell asserts, "what makes Eastwood's work so interesting is how he engages with accepted genres and pushes them to their limits",[152] whilst Andrew Syder states, "the majestic *Unforgiven* (1992) finally brought Eastwood success at the Academy Awards… [and] forced critics to re-evaluate his earlier work. Eastwood was now at last an auteur."[153] These directors are recognised as transforming genre, denoting the value of thorough analysis of their recent films.

In addition to being made by renowned directors, all of the films except *The 15:17 to Paris* feature prominent, award-winning actors including Jamie Foxx, Guy Pearce, Matt Damon, Jessica Chastain, Tom Hanks, Mark Wahlberg and Bradley Cooper. The significance of the involvement of celebrated directors and actors with these films is that all of my case study films have been widely seen, indicated by their box office records and awards. My interest in how genre conventions are destabilised and ideology presented in a more nuanced way necessitated choosing films which were intended for mass appeal, as any challenge of the status quo would be more likely to require ambiguity rather than explicit condemnation. Alex Evans discerns how, "the real ideological work, and, hence, the real signs of splinter and dissent, are to be found at the coal face of hegemonic, mainstream, populist texts."[154] High grossing films are therefore of particular significance for study.

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[149] Stephen Neale, *Genre* (London: British Film Institute, 1980), 54.
[150] Hannah Ransley, "Kathryn Bigelow," in *Contemporary North American Film Directors: A Wallflower Critical Guide*, eds Yoram Allon, Del Cullen and Hannah Patterson (London: Wallflower Press, 2002), 51.
[151] Ibid., 50.
[152] Drucilla Cornwell, Clint Eastwood and Issues of American Masculinity (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), ix.
[153] Syder, "Clint Eastwood," 148-149.
[154] Alex Evans, "Superman Is the Faultline: Fissures of the Monomythic Man of Steel," in *Reframing 9/11: Film, Popular Culture and the "War on Terror"*, eds. Jeff Birkenstein, Anna Froula and Karen Randell (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2010), 117.

For this reason, films such as *Rendition* (dir. Gavin Hood, USA, 2007), *In the Valley of Elah* (dir. Paul Haggis, USA, 2007), *Redacted* (dir. Brian de Palma, USA, Canada, 2007), *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (dir. Mira Nair, USA, India, Qatar) and *Camp X-Ray* (dir. Peter Settler, USA, 2014) were not included as none were in the domestic or worldwide top 150 of highest grossing films in their year of release and all of them made a loss at the box office except *In the Valley of Elah* which made a small profit of $7.5m; *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* had a budget of $15m and made only $2m at the box office and *Rendition* and *Redacted* are referred to as two Hollywood films which attempted to "address the Iraq war and failed",[155] performing "disappointingly at the box office."[156] *Redacted* "opened at only 15 theatres and, in its first weekend, grossed a mere US$25,628 – a meagre initial return on producer Mark Cuban's US$5 million outlay".[157] These films are more overt in their criticism of American foreign policy, with narratives focused on extraordinary rendition, torture, atrocities committed by American soldiers and profiling of Muslim characters. It is noted that, "*In the Valley of Elah*… is slated by one critic for its unpatriotic themes."[158]

In contrast, my case study films were made with large audiences in mind and their budgets and box office takings reflect this. In an interview in *The Guardian*, *Green Zone* director explains his approach,

> 'I thought… if I'm going to make a film about Iraq, I'm going to see if I can bring that Bourne audience with me… [I]t was a film made out of my sense of affront and anger. I wanted to say, 'I know what you did.' And that statement has immeasurably more power if it's made to a broad audience in the vernacular of popular genre cinema.'[159]

Similarly, in making *The Kingdom,* director Peter Berg sought "to concoct a socially relevant story that wouldn't play like an episode of *Frontline* [an investigative journalism series on PBS (Public Broadcasting Service)]… 'It's kind of like tricking a kid to do his homework,' says Berg… 'You've got to make it fun.'"[160] Brian Danoff explains how the intention with *Captain Phillips*, which was "a commercial and critical success… nominated for six Academy Awards",[161] was to both entertain and inform, "the Hollywood filmmakers of *Captain Phillips* obviously also sought a box-office hit… [It exemplifies]… how popular forms of entertainment

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[155] Steve Rose, "Interview: Paul Greengrass: the betrayal behind *Green Zone*," in *The Guardian*, March 8, 2010, accessed May 29, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/mar/08/paul-greengrass-betrayal-green-zone.

[156] Tom Pollard, *Hollywood 9/11: Superheroes, Supervillains, and Super Disasters* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2011), ProQuest Ebook Central, accessed June 9, 2025, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/soton-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4186464, 41.

[157] Simon Philpott, "Is anyone watching? War, cinema and bearing witness," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 23:2, June 23, 2010, accessed May 21, 2025. DOI:10.1080/09557571003735378, 326.

[158] Philpott, "Is anyone watching? War, cinema and bearing witness," 327.

[159] Rose, "Interview: Paul Greengrass: the betrayal behind *Green Zone*," in *The Guardian*.

[160] Spines, "Inside 'The Kingdom': Jamie Foxx and Jennifer Garner star," *Entertainment Weekly*.

[161] Brian Danoff, "'I'm the Captain Now': Power, Justice, and Tragedy in 'Benito Cereno' and *Captain Phillips*," in *American Political Thought 6*, no. 1 (Winter 2017), 31, accessed June 19, 2025. https://heinonline-org.soton.idm.oclc.org/HOL/Page?handle=hein.journals/ampolth6&id=31&collection=journals&index=.

can also educate by inspiring critical examination of social and political phenomena."[162] Danoff continues by referring to how,

> films like *Captain Phillips* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, both of which explore complex moral questions, can often be more valuable than films that offer a one-dimensional moral understanding of the world… [Providing] an ambiguous, nuanced, and tragic outlook, can help train audiences to think through the moral complexities of the political issues on which a democratic citizenry must render judgment.[163]

This is significant in relation to the lesser grossing films noted above which could be viewed as less ambiguous in their political and moral outlooks. All nine of my case study films have inspired academic study as well as generating millions of dollars and eight were in the top 90 domestic highest grossing films with *American Sniper* (1), *Lone Survivor* (23), *Captain Phillips* (31) and *Zero Dark Thirty* (33) in the top 35. Only *The Hurt Locker* was outside and was soon seen more widely after achieving several Oscars at the 2009 Academy Awards,[164] becoming "the most celebrated… of the post-9/11 combat films focused on the war in Iraq or Afghanistan."[165] They all had budgets in the millions of dollars, and all of them made profits, even *Green Zone* with its $100m budget, taking over $154m. *American Sniper* was the highest-grossing film of 2014[166] and is the highest grossing war film of all time.[167] *Captain Phillips* took $218.8m, and *Lone Survivor* took almost $155m. *Zero Dark Thirty* took nearly $133m worldwide, more than double *The Kingdom*'s box office, and almost three times the global box office of *The Hurt Locker*, *Patriots Day* and *The 15:17 to Paris*.[168]

Further to the above considerations, there are two additional reasons for focusing on the films of these specific four directors. One is that these directors have all vocalised opinions on the subject matter of their films, meaning they have contributed to the surrounding discourses and understanding of post-9/11 war and terror culture. For example, Kathryn Bigelow has commented on *The Hurt Locker,* "'If you can cause people to think about that conflict [in Iraq] as they walk out of the theater, then I think you're really maximizing the potential of the medium.'"[169] Eastwood has also been noted as, "part of that special group of

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162 Danoff, "'I'm the Captain Now'," 48.
163 Ibid., 50.
164 *The Hurt Locker* won six Oscars at the 2010 Academy Awards: Best Motion Picture of the Year, Best Achievement in Directing, Best Writing, Original Screenplay, Best Achievement in Film Editing, Best Achievement in Sound Mixing and Best Achievement in Sound Editing; "*The Hurt Locker*: Awards," imdb.com, accessed December 16, 2024, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0887912/awards.
165 Pollard, *Hollywood 9/11: Superheroes, Supervillains, and Super Disasters*, 39.
166 *American Sniper* was the highest grossing film of 2014 in North America: https://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?yr=2014, and the thirteenth highest grossing film of 2014 worldwide: https://www.boxofficemojo.com/yearly/chart/?view2=worldwide&yr=2014.
167 Ben Hathaway, "The 10 Highest-Grossing War Movies, Ranked By Box Office Mojo," *Screen Rant*, July 31, 2022, accessed January 25, 2014, https://screenrant.com/highest-grossing-war-movies-box-office-mojo/#american-sniper-2014-547-4-million.
168 *Box Office Mojo by IMDbPro*, accessed August 7, 2024, https://www.boxofficemojo.com/.
169 Hond, "Shoot Shoot, Bang Bang," 206.

directors who make viewers think".[170] Employing film to provoke thought and discussion indicates a specific interest in raising the profile of the war on terror with their work. This is significant because of the large, global audiences the films can reach and impact. Depictions of American foreign policy may influence viewers' opinions of the United States and its role in the world if the films are considered representative of American policy rather than the visions of filmmakers. Secondly, there are examples of the directors engaging with genre conventions as well as having distinctive styles; this study will interrogate the use of genre to create expectations and the extent to which these are resisted, as well as considering how ideological doctrines are challenged. To discern similarities and differences with certain genres, I have watched the highest grossing Hollywood films released since 9/11 with narratives relating to conflict, as well as some television series,[171] and war and terrorism films along with Westerns from Hollywood's history.

1.4.1   Methodology

My methodological approach will principally involve employing close textual analysis to interrogate how, in Chapter 2, the Hollywood non-American other is represented, in Chapter 3, American protagonists are depicted as traumatised, and, in Chapter 4, sombre narratives constitute an enemy within and a disillusionment with conflict; each chapter will discuss all nine of my case study films. Close textual analysis utilises formalist approaches advanced by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson which determine that "all materials of cinema function narrationally – not only the camera but speech, gesture, written language, music, color, optical processes, lighting, costume, even offscreen space and offscreen sound."[172] I will scrutinise shots, sequences and scenes to explore how they produce meaning.

In addition to deeming texts inherently worthy of study, I also acknowledge the presence of an active viewer. This aligns with Bordwell who observes, "It is not hard to find empirical fault

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[170] Sam B. Girgus, *Clint Eastwood's America* (Cambridge, Polity Press, 2014), 3.
[171] Fictional television series include: *Homeland* (created by Howard Gordon and Alex Gansa, Teakwood Lane Productions, Cherry Pie Productions, Keshet Broadcasting, Fox 21 Television Studios, Showtime Networks, 2011-2020); *Generation Kill* (created by David Simon, Ed Burns and Evan Wright, Boom, Blown Deadline Productions, Company Pictures, 2008); *The Pacific* (written by Bruce C. McKenna, Eugene Sledge, Chuck Tatum, Robert Leckie, Robert Schenkkan, Laurence Andries, Michelle Ashford, George Pelecanos, Graham Yost, DreamWorks, HBO Films, Playtone, 2010); and *24* (created by Joel Surnow and Robert Cochran, Imagine Entertainment, 20th Century Fox Television, Real Time Productions, Teakwood Lane Productions, 2001-2010). Documentaries include *The Vietnam War* (dir. Ken Burns and Lynn Novick, ARTE, Florentine Films, PBS Pictures, Public Service Broadcasting, The Vietnam Film Project, WETA, 2017); *Turning Point: 9/11 and the War on Terror* (directed by Brian Knappenberger, Luminant Media, 2021); *Inside Obama's White House* (directed by Mick Gold, Delphine Jaudeau, Paul Mitchell, Sarah Wallis, ARTE, Al Jazeera America, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), Brook Lapping Productions, 2016); and *Once Upon a Time in Iraq* (directed by James Bluemel, KEO films, British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), 2020).
[172] David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (London: Routledge, 1985, this ed. 1995), 20.

with the invisible-observer account. It must ignore many stylized techniques which cannot correspond to optical processes (split screen, wipes, negative filming, 'impossible' camera positions and movements)."[173] The signs of a film's construction are often apparent, which necessitates active engagement by the viewer who can accept or challenge a film's ideological position. This contributes to a long-running debate within film and media studies regarding the ability of audiences to critically engage with Hollywood narrative cinema. Some writers determine that, because viewers are entertained by cinema, they are unable to watch films critically. Jack Shaheen, for example, notes, "We absorb what we see, but with our guards down."[174] Assigning one definitive impact of a film which viewers fail to evaluate suggests a disempowered audience and an outdated view of the influence of cinema. This is affirmed by Peter Biskind who notes the transformational effect of the Vietnam War on film spectatorship,

> Historically, spectators, almost by definition, are passive, and passive spectators are uncritical spectators. Uncritical spectators don't disrupt the status quo, shake up the center, or abandon the mainstream. During the 1960s, when the Vietnam War polarized the nation, the bubble of security that enveloped spectators was increasingly regarded as unconscionable.[175]

It could similarly be considered imperative to critically consider the representation of the war on terror on screen.

My contention is that the relationship between film and viewer is dynamic, aligning with Maltby's assertion that, "far from being passive recipients of a finished 'text,' the cinema audience plays an active role in the construction of a movie's meaning."[176] Shohini Chaudhuri expands on this, explaining how, "different people can experience the same images in startlingly different ways dependent on how images interact with their own embodied histories and circuit of images they have previously encountered."[177] This determines that one definitive impact cannot be guaranteed for a film. Guy Westwell considers how, "Hollywood's complexity – its diverse community of producers, filmmakers, distributors and exhibitors, and its socially, racially and geographically diverse audiences – ensure that Hollywood itself, the war movie genre and each individual film will remain a site of ideological struggle."[178] It is this ideological struggle I am interested in examining.

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[173] Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 10.
[174] Jack Shaheen, "Perspectives on the Television Arab," in *Image Ethics: The Moral Rights of Subjects in Photographs, Film and Television*, eds. Larry Gross, John Stuart Katz and Jay Ruby (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 204.
[175] Biskind, *The Sky is Falling!*, 91.
[176] Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*, 1-2.
[177] Chaudhuri, *Cinema of the Dark Side*, 17.
[178] Westwell, *War Cinema*, 8.

The engagement of an active viewer and possibility of multiple interpretations accounts for the different readings of some of the films I am analysing, for example, *Zero Dark Thirty* which "received widely varying critical response in terms of whether it was seen as supporting or questioning the manner of prosecution of the 'War on Terror'."[179] Viewers' individual experiences can influence the extent to which they identify with certain characters and how they understand specific scenarios. This notion draws on film theory devised as far back as 1916 when Hugo Münsterberg, who "undertook the first rigorous inquiry into the nature of film in his book *The Photoplay: A Psychological Study*… argued that cinema's claim to aesthetic validity lay in the fact that it transformed reality into an object of the viewer's imagination."[180] Building on this concept, in the 1960s, cultural studies explored how a viewer can determine a film's meaning: "[T]he active viewer is presumed not to be locked into a subject position offered by the film but rather to enter into a co-constitutive relationship with what is on screen in ways demarcated by culture context and experience."[181] This was further developed by "Hall, Morley, John Fiske, and others [who] addressed the question of how cultural texts produce preferred or dominant readings, arguing that the reader or viewer is not obliged to adopt these and can choose to read or view texts in a resistant manner."[182] This corroborates Westwell's assertion of the prospect of ideological struggle.

A further concept which will prove useful for my thesis is trauma theory which is a key concept for my analysis in **Chapter 3. Expressions of Trauma in Vulnerable American Protagonists**. It considers film's ability to "place spectators in the position of witness to personal or collective trauma"[183] but has since been expanded by scholars such as Susannah Radstone to consider how films "offer spectators a broader range of positions than that of witness."[184] My consideration of films such as *Captain Phillips* and *Patriots Day* will incorporate examination of the portrayal of trauma as well as the melodrama genre, associated with the war film by, among others, Linda Williams.[185]

Whilst my analysis focuses on nine films released between 2007 and 2018, I will employ the same approach as Michael Coyne to his study of the Western, "Despite dealing in detail with a relatively small group of films, my preparation has entailed viewing as many Westerns as

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[179] Geoff King, "Responding to Realities or Telling the Same Old Story? Mixing Real-world and Mythic Resonances in *The Kingdom* (2007) and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012)," in *American cinema in the shadow of 9/11*, ed. Terence McSweeney (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 64, accessed January 27, 2020, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1g0524v.

[180] Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*, 497.

[181] "cultural studies and film," in *A Dictionary of Film Studies (2 ed.)*, eds. Annette Kuhn and Guy Westwell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).

[182] "cultural studies and film," in *A Dictionary of Film Studies (2 ed.)*

[183] Susannah Radstone, "Getting Over Trauma: New Paradigms in Trauma Theory (University of East London): Abstract," in *UK Research and Innovation*, accessed July 14, 2022, https://gtr.ukri.org/projects?ref=AH%2FF012926%2F1#/tabOverview

[184] Ibid.

[185] Linda Williams, *Playing the Race Card: Melodramas of Black and White from Uncle Tom to O.J. Simpson* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001).

possible."[186] Having watched numerous Hollywood war, terrorism and Western films, as well as the highest grossing films from post-2001 and the back catalogue of films by the four case study directors, I will provide context to my film corpus. Primary sources include the autobiographies and journalistic pieces on which the films are based, reports such as *The 9/11 Commission Report*[187] and Boston Marathon bombing reports[188] and other books such as *My FBI: Bringing Down the Mafia, Investigating Bill Clinton, and Fighting the War on Terror* by Louis Freeh[189] which documents the investigation into bombings in Saudi Arabia on which *The Kingdom* is based, noted in *The 9/11 Commission Report*, "Longtime FBI Director Louis Freeh left in June 2001, after announcing the indictment in the Khobar Towers case that he had worked so long to obtain."[190] I also draw on source texts such as fictional and documentary television series, in addition to the films, as part of my cultural studies approach.

1.5   Chapter Outline

The analysis and contentions of my thesis are articulated through three interconnected thematic chapters. These develop individual arguments which contribute to the overarching assertion threading through my research that the films create space to mourn 9/11 and the war on terror. The thesis structure, deriving from research question 3,[191] enables the arguments of each chapter to augment the previous chapter's proposition; the grievable non-American other of Chapter 2 introduces a contrasting depiction from previous war and terrorism films; Chapter 3 examines how the films' portrayals of emotional protagonists diverges from the conventional action genre's representation; and the sombre narratives explored in Chapter 4 contrast with prevailing war and terrorism film depictions which focus on victory and triumph. Chapter 4's exploration of the destabilising of American exceptionalism in relation to endless conflict on the United States' global frontier builds on

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[186] Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie*, 13.

[187] Thomas H. Kean (Chair) and Lee H. Hamilton (Vice Chair), *The 9/11 Commission Report*, July 22, 2004, accessed May 7, 2019, https://www.9-11commission.gov/report/911Report.pdf.

[188] Inspectors General of the Intelligence Community, Central Intelligence Agency, Department of Justice and Department of Homeland Security, *Unclassified Summary of Information Handling and Sharing Prior to the April 15, 2013 Boston Marathon Bombings*, (April 10, 2014); and Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency, Massachusetts Department of Public Health, City of Boston, City of Cambridge, Town of Watertown, Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority Transit Police Department, Massachusetts National Guard and Massachusetts State Police, *After Action Report for the Response to the 2013 Boston Marathon Bombings*, (December 2014)

[189] Louis J. Freeh with Howard Means, *My FBI: Bringing Down the Mafia, Investigating Bill Clinton, and Fighting the War on Terror* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005).

[190] Kean and Hamilton, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 209.

[191] How does Reel Fallout Cinema characterise the war on terror through its portrayal of non-Americans, protagonists and American exceptionalism?

the discussions of grief and trauma in chapters 2 and 3. All three chapters address research question 2[192] by depicting terrorism as ongoing during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, portraying the war on terror as unable to make the world safer for Americans.

1.5.1   Chapter 2. Grieving the Hollywood Non-American Other

The first chapter will focus on portrayals of non-American characters who would typically be othered in Hollywood cinema.[193] My primary argument in this chapter will be that many non-American characters are constructed as grievable, providing additional opportunities for both the American characters and the viewer to mourn. Engaging with conventions of the other, established by writers such as Edward Said[194] and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak,[195] this chapter will engage with research question 1[196] regarding the extent to which my film corpus resembles previous war and terrorism films. The chapter will begin with examples from my case study films of similar depictions of othering, but in which there is no triumph in the capturing or killing of these characters, the response being one of reflection. An examination of the portrayal of sympathetic non-American characters whose voices are heard will follow, beginning a consideration of characters who would typically be othered being depicted differently from the conventions of action films. This argument will be developed by contemplation of empathetic non-American characters with agency for whom American characters show compassion and, finally, non-American characters who are grievable, drawing on Judith Butler's analysis of lives which are grieved as those with value.

My analysis relies on conceptualising the terms sympathy, compassion and empathy in relation to viewers' responses. Tim Gauthier's description is useful here,

> the events of September 11 brought forth calls for greater displays of sympathy, compassion, and empathy… [which can be defined as] experiencing sorrow when confronted with the suffering of another… a desire or willingness to come to the aid of

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[192] Research Question 2: What is the relationship between the war on terror and terrorism as depicted in these films?

[193] My thesis was inspired by discerning a change in the representation of characters who would conventionally be othered in *Lone Survivor*. Keen to explore the extent to which this was a widespread phenomenon, I viewed further war on terror films based on real stories and discovered nuances to their depictions of non-American characters, problematising the concept of the "us against them" approach of the Bush administration.

[194] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1978, this ed. 2019).

[195] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in Rosalind Morris, *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea*, 21-78, accessed September 28, 2022, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), https://search-ebscohost-com.soton.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=584675&site=ehost-live, [published in a book in 1999].

[196] Research Question 1: In their representation of the war on terror, how do these nine case study films compare with prior war and terrorism narratives?

the sufferer… [and coming] closer to an understanding of the other's suffering through recognition that this pain could have been one's own.[197]

Starting the analysis of my thesis with an investigation of how non-Americans are represented as grievable provides context for the remaining chapters which build on this chapter's propositions; grieving lives of value affects the protagonists and contributes to their trauma, discussed in Chapter 3; and depicting the lives of Afghans, Iraqis and Saudis as sharing the precariousness and humanity of the American characters contributes to Chapter 4's interrogation of American exceptionalism in relation to the war on terror. By portraying local characters as valuable, the films determine violence as less desirable, and challenge the inclination towards conflict, a theme which runs throughout the thesis.

1.5.2   Chapter 3. Expressions of Trauma in Vulnerable American Protagonists

For this chapter, the trauma and emotion of the American protagonists of my film corpus will form the focus. Depicting both American and non-American characters as grievable contextualises the protagonists' trauma as they grieve losses on both sides. The chapter will begin with examination of the global war on terror resulting in nowhere being safe for the American characters, including at home in the United States, the setting for *Patriots Day*'s portrayal of the Boston Marathon bombings of 2013. The characters are depicted as traumatised while the events are taking place, rather than their trauma being explored post-conflict as is the approach of many Vietnam War films. This correlates to the films being released during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq whereas Vietnam War films were almost all produced after the war had ended. Creating the films during the wars informs the representation of the war on terror as endless and characterises the characters' trauma as compounding previous traumatic events such as the September 11, 2001, attacks.

The chapter will progress to consider how the depictions have been impacted by cinematic conventions of melodrama and realism, creating authenticity but also extremes of emotion, enhancing empathy and creating space to mourn. This extends the influence of these traits from prior war and terrorism cinema. In addressing research question 1, I will demonstrate how my case study films combine attributes of melodrama and realism to intensify the protagonists' emotional expressions of vulnerability, not typically associated with masculinity in action cinema. The melodramatic mode informs the construction of the narratives being driven by emotion, expressed through the personal stories of individual characters. Combined with integrating real elements of events, such as sounds from the real bombings

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[197] Tim Gauthier, "French Fiction, Empathy, and the Utopian Potential of 9/11," in *Studies in 20th & 21st Century Literature,* Vol. 37, Iss. 1, Article 7, 2013, 118, accessed May 21, 2025, https://doi.org/10.4148/2334-4415.1798.

in *Patriots Day*,[198] the films offer greater opportunities for the viewer to identify with those impacted by war and terrorism and empathise with their traumatic situations.

The characterisation of the protagonists as emotionally damaged by the war on terror, alongside depictions of ongoing terrorist attacks, responds to research question 2. The trauma experienced problematises the war on terror as a solution to terrorism and interrogates whether the sacrifices to Americans are worth the cost. This argument contributes to the following chapter which challenges the United States' recourse to conflict in response to terrorism, informed by the conviction in American exceptionalism.

1.5.3 Chapter 4. American Exceptionalism and its Discontents

This chapter will explore how the nine case study films represent the war on terror as the most recent manifestation of the United States' global frontier. This is informed by the nation's conviction in American exceptionalism which has resulted in a desire to both extend its values and assert its supremacy. My analysis will open with an introduction to American exceptionalism, to understand how it underpins this chapter, and relates to the development of the United States' endless frontier, which began as an internal line of hostility and progressed to an external opportunity to source overseas enemies. I will consider how the characterisation of never-ending conflict as integral to the national identity of the United States in the films demonstrates how the frontier has extended to the recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In Hollywood cinema, the frontier has been represented in numerous Westerns and the impact of this genre on my film corpus is evident in the use of distinctive imagery and tropes. By identifying influences of the Western, my examination demonstrates an association of the war on terror with the United States' challenging history concerning European settlers' treatment of indigenous populations including Native Americans and Mexicans. The case study films depict the employment of methods such as torture and extraordinary rendition, as well as controversies surrounding the Iraq War, problematising the war on terror's claims to moral integrity consistent with the principles of American exceptionalism.

Following this discussion, I will examine how the concept of the enemy within is revealed in the case study films. This will be contemplated in relation to how the protagonists are portrayed, as exceptional or ordinary, the characterisation of international law, and attacks taking place overseas and at home, developing the discussion of Chapter 3. In the war films,

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[198] As discussed in Edward Landler, "Recreating the Boston Marathon Bombing in 'Patriots Day'," CineMontage: Journal of the Motion Picture Editors Guild, December 21, 2016, accessed April 6, 2023, https://cinemontage.org/recreating-boston-marathon-bombing-patriots-day/.

exceptional soldiers show a lack of conviction in their missions, willing to compromise in an attempt to protect their fellow soldiers, while the terrorism films depict ordinary civilians and law enforcement agents behaving extraordinarily to accomplish their aims. International law is depicted as weakening principles on which the United States was founded, being shown to put American lives at risk and create hostilities between American characters. Terrorism is represented, as discussed in Chapter 3, as taking place in the West, including in the United States, as well as in countries further afield, portraying enemies being closer to home.

Focusing on narratives of unsuccessful missions and conveying stories with a sombre tone, this chapter will engage with how the films convey a disillusionment with conflict, disrupting the representation of triumph in the defeating of enemies typically associated with Hollywood's action genre. Portraying grief and trauma, they engage with the "failure of mourning"[199] determined by Richard Gray to characterise the post-9/11 environment of the United States. With the war on terror initiated in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, Gray argues that mourning was not sufficiently prioritised or accessible. I will contend that, through displaying mourning on screen, the Reel Fallout films provided a cathartic space for grief, empowering viewers to express their own pain.

1.5.4 Conclusion: The Effects of Mourning Hollywood's War on Terror

The concluding chapter will summarise how Reel Fallout Cinema provides a framework for analysis of post- post-9/11 Hollywood cinema which differs from prior war and terrorism narratives. It will also assert how Reel Fallout Cinema has influenced subsequent high-grossing Hollywood cinema. All nine case study films give prominence to sombre narratives which emphasise the effects of conflict on their protagonists. I will conclude that the representation of grief, trauma and mourning pre-empts and shapes the action genre depicting mourning more widely in the late 2010s and 2020s.

Beginning with an assessment of the arguments each chapter has contributed to my overarching contention, I will progress to consider how my thesis has engaged with a variety of scholars and how my interdisciplinary methodology has generated opportunities to explore the films' representations of American foreign policy. I will then introduce the impact Reel Fallout Cinema has had on ensuing Hollywood action cinema. This will include showing how my case study films depict primarily enemies from the Middle East, forging a temporary break in the representation of Russian enemies which has since returned, and the impact of depictions of mourning on blockbuster superhero cinema which has weaved sadness and

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[199] Gray, *After the Fall*, 8-9.

reflections of loss and sacrifice into what would previously have been narratives focused on action and destruction without regard for the consequences. I argue that my case study films forged a path for emotionally vulnerable protagonists and sombre narratives to take centre stage in these blockbuster films which consider the consequences of conflict. I will show how this has extended the space to mourn to even more mainstream, high-grossing genres of Hollywood cinema.

Chapter 2 Grieving the Hollywood Non-American Other

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"A LOT OF BAD PEOPLE OUT THERE."

KEVIN FLEURY (T.J. BURNETT), *THE KINGDOM* (PETER BERG, USA, 2007)

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2.1   Challenging the "Familiar v Unfamiliar" Dichotomy

The other is the opposite of the self. The concept was initially developed by philosopher G. W. F. Hegel in the late 1700s. Hegel expounded in his The Phenomenology of Spirit, "It is in confronting an other that the I is itself."[200] The other has since been debated in a variety of academic disciplines, including film studies. In one of the fundamental texts in which understanding of the other was advanced, *Orientalism*, Edward W. Said considers the colonial effects of othering. He discerns that, "Orientalism is never far from… a collective notion identifying 'us' Europeans as against all 'those' non-Europeans".[201] Said focused on how othering occurs in literature, but his conceptualisation can be equally applied to analysis of cinema. In Hollywood films, the familiar self has conventionally been characterised as white, male, heterosexual and American, denoting any variations as "other". This has resulted in racist othering, and the politicised cultural othering of Muslims and Arabs, discussion of which is highly relevant for my analysis of films set primarily in the Middle East.

In this chapter, I am concerned with representations of non-American characters in my nine case study films, terrorism films *The Kingdom* (dir. Peter Berg, USA, Germany, 2007), *Zero Dark Thirty* (dir. Kathryn Bigelow, USA, 2012), *Captain Phillips* (dir. Paul Greengrass, USA, 2013), *Patriots Day* (dir. Peter Berg, Hong Kong, USA, 2016) and *The 15:17 to Paris* (dir. Clint Eastwood, USA, 2018), Iraq War films *The Hurt Locker* (dir. Kathryn Bigelow, USA, 2008), *Green Zone* (dir. Paul Greengrass, USA, 2010) and *American Sniper* (dir. Clint

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[200] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, translated and edited by Terry Pinkard, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Georgetown University, Washington DC. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), accessed May 29, 2025, https://files.libcom.org/files/Georg%20Wilhelm%20Friedrich%20Hegel%20-%20The%20Phenomenology%20of%20Spirit%20(Terry%20Pinkard%20Translation).pdf.
[201] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1978, this ed. 2019), 7.

Eastwood, USA, 2014), and Afghanistan War film, *Lone Survivor* (dir. Peter Berg, USA, 2013). The countries represented in *The Kingdom* (Saudi Arabia),[202] *The Hurt Locker*, *Green Zone* and *American Sniper* (Iraq),[203] *Zero Dark Thirty* (Pakistan and Afghanistan),[204] *Lone Survivor* (Afghanistan)[205] and *Captain Phillips* (Somalia)[206] are predominantly Islamic states. The non-American characters in these films are predominantly Muslim[207] and generally originate from outside the west,[208] often from states within the Arab League.[209] They are either local to the countries in which my case study films are set or, in the case of *Patriots Day* and *The 15:17 to Paris*, live in the United States and France respectively, but were born elsewhere. My contention is that characters from these films counter conventional portrayals of the "other" in conflict films, providing nuance to their depictions of the war on terror and challenging the East/West binary discerned by Edward Said. Said determined that, "Orientalism was ultimately a political vision of reality whose structure promoted the difference between the familiar (Europe, the West, 'us') and the strange (the Orient, the East, 'them')."[210] I will argue that many of my case study films do not assert a simple "familiar versus unfamiliar" dichotomy between self and other, but construct familiarity with non-American characters through extended screen time, conversations and empathy from both the American protagonists and the viewer. These characters become familiar through the viewer being given personal information about them and being able to recognise their role in the narrative and relate to their experiences. The term "non-American characters" is used to collectively distinguish between the local characters in the films who are of different nationalities and the Americans, but they could also be referred to as, for example, Afghans, Iraqis or Saudis. The films dedicate screen time to these "non-American characters" to express their views, and portray their deaths as grievable, denoting their lives as valuable.

I will demonstrate how non-American characters in Reel Fallout Cinema are afforded an opportunity to speak and be heard and make decisions which affect their own lives. This

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[202] "Saudi Arabia country profile," *BBC News*, August 29, 2023, accessed June 2, 2025, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14702705.
[203] "Iraq country profile," *BBC News*, September 13, 2023, accessed June 2, 2025, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-14542954.
[204] "Pakistan country profile," *BBC News*, March 15, 2024, accessed June 2, 2025, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12965779; "Afghanistan country profile," *BBC News*, March 10, 2025, accessed June 2, 2025, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12011352.
[205] "Afghanistan country profile," *BBC News*, March 10, 2025, accessed June 2, 2025, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-south-asia-12011352.
[206] "Somalia country profile," *BBC News*, January 2, 2024, accessed June 2, 2025, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-14094503.
[207] For example, non-American characters in *The Kingdom*, *The Hurt Locker*, *Lone Survivor*, *American Sniper* and *Patriots Day* are characterised as Muslim through scenes of them praying or references to their faith.
[208] Characters from Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Somalia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kyrgyzstan and Morocco are represented in my case study films.
[209] The Arab League nations represented in my films are Saudi Arabia in *The Kingdom*, Somalia in *Captain Phillips*, Iraq in *The Hurt Locker*, *Green Zone* and *American Sniper*, and Morocco, the birthplace of the terrorist in *The 15:17 to Paris*. "League of Arab States (LAS) and the EU," *European Union External Action: The Diplomatic Service of the European Union*, August 3, 2021, accessed August 22, 2024, thttps://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/league-arab-states-las-and-eu_en.
[210] Said, *Orientalism*, 43.

challenges the concept of the other, or subaltern, propounded by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak that "in the contest of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak".[211] Characters which have typically been othered and not able to voice their concerns are portrayed in several of my film corpus as empowered to speak and be heard, as well as being attributed a history. I will also maintain that there are opportunities to identify and empathise with non-American characters, including Arabs and Muslims. This contributes to addressing Said's assertion that Western literature consists of an "almost total absence of any cultural position making it possible either to identify with or dispassionately to discuss the Arabs or Islam".[212] Several of my case study films position the viewer as being able to identify with Arabs and Islam through constructing an understanding of, or affinity with, their situation and experiences, as Simon Philpott argues of two of the films, "war-on-terror-themed films that provide some substance to the character of Muslims or Arabs:… [include] *The Hurt Locker*… [and] *The Kingdom*."[213] In some examples, this relies on a partial "westernisation" of non-American characters to enhance their familiarity for western audiences, for example, a name change, interest in western culture, or the translation of languages other than English through subtitling. However, I contend that this does not diminish the complexities of their characters or retained characteristics which would typically be othered, such as being Muslim or revealing a history of fighting for their country.

In addition, the concept of grievability and ungrievability of the "other" which is central to Judith Butler's proposition in her influential work, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?*[214] demonstrates how these films differ from prior renderings of those typically othered. In considering two of my case study films, Tom Pollard agrees that, "Grief serves as the overarching emotion… including grief… for those killed attempting to defuse explosives in Iraq (*The Hurt Locker*)… and for the people of Iraq (*Green Zone*)."[215] Building on her earlier work on the gendered other[216] and mourning,[217] Butler establishes that, "Forms of racism instituted and active at the level of perception tend to produce iconic versions of populations who are eminently grievable, and others whose loss is no loss, and who remains ungrievable."[218] In relation to typical representations in conflict films, this distinguishes between American protagonists with whom the viewer is encouraged to identify and grieve

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[211] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in Rosalind Morris, *Can the Subaltern Speak?: Reflections on the History of an Idea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), accessed September 28, 2022, [published in a book in 1999], 41, https://search-ebscohost-com.soton.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=584675&site=ehost-live.

[212] Said, *Orientalism*, 26.

[213] Philpott, "Is anyone watching? War, cinema and bearing witness," 328.

[214] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009, this edition 2010).

[215] Pollard, *Hollywood 9/11: Superheroes, Supervillains, and Super Disasters*, 44.

[216] Judith Butler's books include *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, first published 1990, this edition Routledge Classics, 2006) and *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (London: Routledge, 1993).

[217] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*, (London, Verso, first published 2004, this edition 2020).

[218] Butler, *Frames of War*, 24.

their loss, and the other who is characterised as having no value. Butler references conflict films as typically depicting the other as ungrievable, "Lives are by definition precarious… there is no thinking of life that is not precarious – except, of course, in fantasy, and in military fantasies in particular."[219] My contention that Reel Fallout Cinema portrays a shared precariousness between some American and non-American characters in several military films is therefore highly significant.

This chapter will employ Butler's definitions and framework as identified in *Frames of War* to analyse representations of the non-American characters. Butler discerns how the other has typically been depicted as instruments of war and dehumanised, characterising them as the enemy. Some of my case study films portray enemies in this way, but with alternative reactions to their treatment, for example, their deaths are not celebrated. This understanding will provide a useful counterpoint to my analysis which determines some of the non-American characters as possessing agency, being grievable and occupying a shared precariousness. This is problematised by the prioritisation of a western audience in creating empathy through westernising certain traits, as introduced above; as explained in my introduction, these films are intended for the widest possible audience as high-grossing, global Hollywood productions and are inevitably aimed at English-speaking, white, Christian viewers. However, I contend that the non-American characters do not lose their authenticity or three-dimensional characteristics and empathy is created for their individual situations, disrupting the typical othering which often takes place in Hollywood films. Finally, I will argue that, by portraying the lives of both Americans and non-Americans as grievable, these war and terrorism films problematise the righteousness of the war on terror, advocating the futility of conflict and desire for non-violent resolution.

2.2   Initiating an Understanding of Othering

The notion of the other was soon employed by numerous writers, including René Descartes, John Stuart Mill, Edmund Husserl, Emmanuel Levinas, Jacques Derrida,[220] Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre,[221] and has since become "situated in philosophy, psychoanalysis, Jewish and African American studies, and psychology, as well as in

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[219] Butler, *Frames of War*, 25.
[220] Robert Bernasconi, "Other," in *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2005), accessed May 28, 2025, https://www-oxfordreference-com.soton.idm.oclc.org/view/10.1093/acref/9780199264797.001.0001/acref-9780199264797-e-1826.
[221] "Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Sartre," in *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, first published August 17, 2004, revised January 11, 2023, accessed May 29, 2025, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/beauvoir/#SecoSexWomaOthe.

sociology and anthropology where the concept is more established."[222] It accounts for the othering of a variety of people, including non-white peoples who were othered as part of the colonial conquest by Europe of territories across the world, meaning they were determined to be inferior to the white settlers. In discussing the "colonial subject as Other",[223] Spivak utilises "Antonio Gramsci's work on the 'subaltern classes'",[224] "subaltern" defined as "'of inferior rank' [identifying]… those groups in society who were destined to be subject to the hegemony of the ruling classes."[225] Gramsci deliberated on the employment of culture to help reinforce ideologies associated with representing one group as dominant over the other and maintain this hegemony. In the 1970s, Edward Said contributed to debates on cultural leadership, discussing "various Western techniques of representation that make the Orient visible, clear, 'there' in discourse about it."[226] Initially concerned with portrayals in literature, in an Afterword written in 1995, Said referenced "electronic" media such as television and films which he determined, "have been awash with demeaning stereotypes that lump together Islam and terrorism, or Arabs and violence, or the Orient and tyranny."[227] Gramsci and Said's proposition that the othering of people in culture, asserting a form of dominance and control over how they are represented, affects how they are understood in reality underpins the significance of the research undertaken in this thesis.

Debates concerning othering in cinema have since been explored by numerous film studies scholars, including Judith Butler,[228] Jonathan Markovitz,[229] Shohini Chaudhuri,[230] and Roberto Gelado and Pedro Sangro Colón.[231] Applying Said's observations to cinema, it is apparent that, throughout Hollywood's history, action films have exploited the concept of othering, not just of Islam, Arabs and the Orient, but of many non-American characters.[232] Conflict necessitates two opponents, and, in war and terrorism films, an enemy is required to oppose the American protagonists. The enemy has typically been othered, depicting their lives as insignificant and enabling a sense of victory in their defeat, with the viewer encouraged to identify with one, moral side, against an other, opposing side. The opening

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[222] J. Mitchell Miller and W. J. Chambliss, "Otherness," in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2008), accessed May 29, 2025, https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412963909.n304.

[223] Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," 35.

[224] Ibid., 37.

[225] Ghanshyam Pal and Dharmendra Yadav, "The Representation of Subaltern," in *Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal*, Vol. 5, Issue III (May 2016), accessed May 30, 2025, 101, https://www.galaxyimrj.com/V5/n3/Pal.pdf.

[226] Said, *Orientalism*, 22.

[227] Ibid., 347.

[228] Butler, *Frames of War*.

[229] Jonathan Markovitz, "Reel Terror Post 9/11," in *Film and Television After 9/11*, ed. Wheeler Winston Dixon, (Southern Illinois University: Southern Illinois University Press, 2003).

[230] Shohini Chaudhuri, *Cinema of the Dark Side: Atrocity and the Ethics of Film Spectatorship* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2014).

[231] Roberto Gelado and Pedro Sangro Colón, "Hollywood and the representation of the Otherness. A historical analysis of the role played by movies in spotting enemies to vilify," *Research Gate*, May 2016, accessed January 27, 2020, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/303093147.

[232] In addition to other oppositions of the white, heterosexual male who has dominated Hollywood's representation of "self;" for example, African-American characters, Native Americans, gay characters and women.

quote of this chapter from Kevin (T. J. Burnett), the son of Agent Fleury (Jamie Foxx) in *The Kingdom*, encapsulates many of the assumptions associated with the other; that it is possible to determine that people are "bad," that there are "a lot" of these "bad people," and that they are "out there" rather than here. In the Western, a genre which shares many traits with war films, to be discussed at length in **Chapter 4. American Exceptionalism and its Discontents**, white settlers were characterised as the "good people" fighting the "bad" Native Americans, depicted as "out there," in the wilderness. The opening of one of the earliest Westerns, *Stagecoach* (dir. John Ford, USA, 1939), emphasises these two opposing sides. Orchestral music scores the opening credits, beginning in a major key with brass and strings romanticising shots of cowboys on horses galloping past the camera in silhouette. As Native American characters approach and pass the camera, there is a sudden change in the accompanying soundtrack to low drums and brass, distinguishing them as the enemy which poses a threat to the moral and righteous cavalry. This theme continues in the narrative as the passengers of the stagecoach are told there will be Apaches on the journey and it will be dangerous. The driver, Buck (Andy Devine), declares: "If there's anything I don't like, it's driving a stagecoach through Apache country." One of the passengers, Doc Boone (Thomas Mitchell), explains: "We're all gonna be scalped, massacred in one fell swoop. That's why the soldiers are with us... It's that old Apache butcher, Geronimo... He's jumped the reservation, he's on the war path." The Native Americans are characterised as dangerous and different from the central characters with whom the viewer is encouraged to identify.[233]

In the same tradition as the Western, war films have othered the enemy. Guy Westwell observes how, "the war movie... [depends] on a prejudicial construction of cultural otherness, in which an American identity is forged in relation to the threat of an enemy who is alien and dangerous."[234] World War II film, *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (dir. David Lean, UK, USA, 1957), exemplifies this characterisation, portraying the Japanese as merciless and cruel in their treatment of British prisoners of war. Numerous war films have continued this representation, with *Behind Enemy Lines* (dir. John Moore, USA, 2001), *Windtalkers* (dir. John Woo, USA, 2002), *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (dir. George P. Cosmatos, USA, Mexico, 1985), *Rambo III* (dir. Peter MacDonald, USA, 1988) and *We Were Soldiers* (dir. Randall Wallace, France, Germany, USA, 2002) as a small selection which other the enemy. In *Black Hawk Down* (dir. Ridley Scott, USA, 2003), reference is made only to the 19 American soldiers who died in the Mogadishu raid and there is no mention of the "'estimates of Somali

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[233] Reference to Geronimo is made in one of my case study films, *Zero Dark Thirty*, in which the mission to capture Osama bin Laden is named "Geronimo". This demonstrates the continual influence of the Western and how recent films have appropriated language associated with the genre. *Chapter 4. American Exceptionalism and its Discontents* will consider the Western's impact on my case study films in detail.
[234] Guy Westwell, *War Cinema: Hollywood on the Front Line* (London: Wallflower Press, 2006), 110.

dead [which] ranged from 350 to 500, with up to 1000 wounded'".[235] Jonathan Markovitz describes how the film depicts "scene after scene of Somalis as an absolutely undifferentiated and unthinkingly brutal threat… The dehumanization of Somalis is so complete as to be casual and automatic".[236] In Judith Butler's terms, characterising non-Americans in this way removes their worth, "if certain populations… do not count as living beings, if their very bodies are construed as instruments of war or pure vessels of attack, then they are already deprived of life before they are killed."[237] Examples of enemies' bodies as instruments of war can be found throughout the 2000s and 2010s, including terrorists in *Die Hard 4.0* (dir. Len Wiseman, USA, UK, 2007), *Taken* (dir. Pierre Morel, France, USA, 2008) and *Hotel Mumbai* (dir. Anthony Maras, Australia, USA, UK, Singapore, 2018).

There are several examples of my case study films othering non-American characters and, in some instances, depicting them as instruments of war. However, I maintain that the constructions of these scenes generate nuance in the representations and contrast with previous conflict narratives. In *The 15:17 to Paris*, based on the real attempted terrorist attack on a train travelling from Amsterdam to Paris, for example, the terrorist is represented as an instrument of war. In the opening moments of the film, the attacker, Ayoub El-Khazzani (Ray Corasani), is introduced walking through a train station. He is presented in a suspicious way through the camera revealing only parts of his body as he walks to the train. The opening shot shows the back of his head, followed by a close up of his backpack before a pan down to his hand holding a suitcase. There is a cut to his stomach and chest, then up to his chin before the camera cuts to his feet walking. In this opening introduction to the character, his face is not shown so the viewer is unable to familiarise themselves with him. When his face is eventually revealed almost twenty minutes into the film, he is taking guns out of his bag, preparing for his attack. His identity is associated with a perpetrator of violence, with his name not given until the end, after his capture. His presence is established as a potential threat, his body an instrument of war, emphasised when he opens the door of the bathroom on the train, revealing a topless, armed figure.

[235] Phil Gunby, "Battle of Mogadishu," *JAMA: The Journal of the American Medical Association*, vol. 283, no. 21, June 7, 2000, 2780, accessed May 29, 2025, https://oce-ovid-com.soton.idm.oclc.org/article/00005407-200006070-00021.
[236] Markovitz, "Reel Terror Post 9/11," 214-216.
[237] Butler, *Frames of War*, xxix.

Figure 2.1 Depicting a dangerous, terrorist, other, *The 15:17 to Paris*, 0:19:30

With the ammunition securely attached in a rucksack, and his hands gripping a gun, his body is fused with the weaponry. In Butler's words, he is "deprived of life"[238] through being a "vessel of attack".[239]

The three American lead characters, played by the real people who halted the attack, Spencer Stone, Alek Skarlatos and Anthony Sadler, confront the terrorist, running towards him and taking his guns. Their response then contrasts with how heroes in an action film would conventionally be portrayed, as they do not shoot him. Instead, they overpower him, hold him down and deprive him of oxygen until he falls unconscious, then tie him up. The dehumanised representation continues as he is led away from the train like an animal, trussed up like a pig on a stick. However, his life is also acknowledged as having value; it is his arrest which serves justice rather than his death. The Americans show respect for human life and allow the legal system to sentence the terrorist rather than taking the law into their own hands and killing him. The scene of the terrorist being carried away ends with a voiceover of Stone reciting the Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi, opening with the words "Lord, make me an instrument of your peace. Where there is hatred, let me sow love,"[240] emphasising being an instrument of peace rather than of war, and a desire for the violent assault to end without further violence.

In *American Sniper*, there is a similar portrayal of a falling Iraqi body as an instrument of war, but the focus is on his death rather than the threat he poses which is absent from the depiction. In an early scene, the protagonist, U.S. Navy Chief Petty Officer Chris Kyle (Bradley Cooper), is in Iraq on his first tour. Multiple lines of ground troops furtively make

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[238] Butler, *Frames of War*, xxix.
[239] Ibid., xxix.
[240] "Prayer of St. Francis of Assisi (Prayer for Peace)," *The Cathedral of Saint Thomas More*, accessed August 27, 2024, https://www.cathedralstm.org/about-our-catholic-faith/expressing-our-faith/treasury-catholic-prayers/prayer-st-francis-assisi-prayer-peace/.

their way down an Iraqi street as the camera slowly pans from left to right until it reaches the front of one of the lines of soldiers and starts tracking backwards, maintaining a constant distance from the head of Kyle's platoon, Marc Lee (Luke Grimes). As the camera focuses on Lee, a blurred shape falls in front of the screen, only visible for a split second. A cut to a wider shot from behind Lee reveals that the shape which suddenly crashed down in front of them is a body. The loud sound of the body's unexpected collision with the ground, demonstrating the considerable height from which it fell, disrupts the quiet movement of the troops and shocks both them and the viewer. Lee tells his unit, "That was the Overwatch… You can thank him later," referring to Kyle, the sniper protecting them from above. The implication is that Kyle is their guardian angel and the man's death has saved American lives.

Figure 2.2 Kyle protects American lives by killing Iraqis, *American Sniper*, 0:28:51

However, Lee's words contrast with the visuals. With no prior shot of the combatant, there is no indication of the threat he poses to the troops and the necessity of his death. When Lee salutes Kyle, there is a brief, close shot of Kyle's face as he reloads his gun and he appears visibly shaken by the kill. The death is not a triumph for Kyle, it is a requirement of his role which he performs but does not celebrate. The sequence is also contextualised by a preceding scene, which will be discussed subsequently in the thesis, in which Kyle expresses unease at having had to kill a woman and child. The shock of the falling Iraqi body and Kyle's reaction following his shot emphasises the death and reluctant sniper, rather than generating a release of tension in the protection of American lives. The sequence diverges from comparable scenes in war films in which the focus would be on the danger presented by the combatant and on the sniper taking the shot.

In *Shooter* (dir. Antoine Fuqua, USA, 2007), for example, tension is created in the opening scene, set in Ethiopia, when hostile forces are sighted driving towards a line of American Humvees. American sniper, Bob Lee Swagger (Mark Wahlberg), and his spotter, Donnie Fenn (Lane Garrison), are tasked with removing the threat and Fenn refers to the vehicle as

a "target" as a shot of the truck is shown with a large machine gun located on the back and a shooter preparing to fire. Close ups of Swagger and Fenn are juxtaposed with long shots of the enemy vehicle, distinguishing between the lives of significance and the other whose lives simply pose a threat. Swagger fires two shots, the first killing the combatant and the second killing the driver. The only indication that lives have been taken is the blood from each of the combatants' heads which covers the windshield. As the American Humvees drive past the crashed enemy vehicle, relief is generated that they are able to continue in safety. Shohini Chaudhuri considers how a film's construction differentiates between the value of characters' lives, "Through their aesthetic strategies, filmmakers make decisions about whose death and suffering should be acknowledged and whose should be permitted or pass unnoticed."[241] In *Shooter*, the lives of the combatants are insignificant, their deaths a necessity to protect American lives. The death of the Iraqi in *American Sniper*, however, does not "pass unnoticed" but is the focus of the sequence. The shock of the landing body aligns the viewer with the American troops' point of view, but not with the protagonist, Chris Kyle, as his viewpoint is never shown. This restricts identification with him during his first tour, and also means the scene does not end in release at the threat being neutralised, but in fear and disorientation of not knowing where the body came from or the threat it posed, and whether there are any more enemies nearby. There is no weapon in frame, and it would appear from him lying face down with a wound in his back that he has been shot from behind with no prior knowledge that the sniper was there and no way to defend himself. This puts into question the necessity of his death because the danger he posed is not shown, in turn, interrogating the legitimacy of the war in Iraq.

The opening scenes of *Zero Dark Thirty* similarly depict the dehumanisation of the enemy to offer a critique of the war on terror. Al-Qaeda prisoner, Ammar (Reda Kateb), is portrayed being tortured and treated like a dog, with a collar put around his neck to lead him around the room. Robert Burgoyne explains how, "the depictions of interrogation and torture that dominate the first third of the film accentuate the dehumanizing and degenerative nature of violence."[242] Subsequently, the prisoner is humiliated by having his trousers pulled down, causing protagonist, CIA agent, Maya (Jessica Chastain), to flinch and avert her eyes. As Ammar is introduced having already been captured and imprisoned, the viewer is unaware of any threat he poses to the American agents. However, he is also not represented as having no evidence against him, as in the narratives of films such as *Rendition* (dir. Gavin Hood, USA, 2007) and *The Mauritanian* (dir. Kevin Macdonald, UK, USA, 2021) in which characters are tortured and subsequently released with no charges brought. The mistreatment of

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[241] Chaudhuri, *Cinema of the Dark Side*, 10.
[242] Robert Burgoyne, "The Violated Body: Affective Experience and Somatic Intensity in *Zero Dark Thirty*," in *The Philosophy of War Films*, edited by David LaRocca, accessed January 14, 2021, (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 2014), http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt12880b3.10, 252.

Ammar "provides… an aesthetic experience of ambiguity"[243] in which he is depicted as associated with Osama bin Laden, but also powerless which, as Berenike Jung explains, is a fundamental purpose of torture, "its goal is not to gain information but to win the contest over the social imagination by reinforcing power relations".[244] Ammar's dehumanisation isn't represented as a triumph but instead problematises the Americans' methods, challenging the United States' treatment of detainees in the war on terror.

In each of these examples, there is no glory in the capture or death of the enemy, and the othering does not lead to the characterisation of the protagonist as a hero, as is a convention of the Hollywood action film. Instead, the films are reflective and harrowing in tone, generating an opportunity to interrogate the employment of force to address violence. In several of my films, this questioning progresses to a contextualisation of the enemies' actions which enables a greater understanding of their points of view, examples of which will now be discussed.

2.3   A Lilting Dance of Duality

Following on from not celebrating the deaths of the enemy, there are several examples in Reel Fallout Cinema of the motivations of enemy actions being portrayed. This is often how American antagonists are represented; in *White House Down* (dir. Roland Emmerich, USA, 2013), for example, in which the president is attacked in the White House, the attackers are revealed to be Americans, led by ex-Delta Force and CIA operative, Stenz (Jason Clarke), and Special Agent-in-Charge Martin Walker (James Woods) who is retiring as the head of the secret service. Martin's motivation is established as vengeance against the president who he holds responsible for the death of his son, Kevin, who was a Marine. Martin's wife Muriel (Barbara Williams) tells him, "You make them pay for what they did to our boy." In *Non-Stop* (dir. Jaume Collet-Serra, UK, France, USA, Canada, 2014), the viewer is informed that the father of one of the terrorists, also American, died in 9/11. The terrorist states as his reason for hijacking a plane, "Security is this country's biggest lie." Character backgrounds such as these examples are rarely provided to explain the motives of non-American characters who are othered, however. Their actions are often attributed to their inherent merciless nature rather than for personal or political reasons. *Black Hawk Down*, *3 Days to Kill* (dir. McG, USA, France, Serbia, 2014), *Hacksaw Ridge* (dir. Mel Gibson, Australia, USA,

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[243] Jung, *The Invisibilities of Political Torture*, 27.
[244] Ibid., 26.

UK, China, 2016) and *Flags of our Fathers* (dir. Clint Eastwood, USA, 2006)[245] all depict faceless, nameless enemies whose reasons for fighting are not contextualised. Conversely, in case study films *Green Zone*, *Captain Phillips* and *Patriots Day*, characters who are established as posing a threat to the American protagonists are offered opportunities to articulate their experiences and account for their actions. This creates a duality in their depictions as both other and sympathetic.

The opening sequence of *Green Zone* immediately contextualises the Iraqi experience. Over a black screen, the audio of a news report can be heard which describes the initial stage of the American invasion of Iraq, "Cruise missiles and airstrikes raining down here in a relentless assault on Baghdad… the Iraqi capital is experiencing shock and awe." The visuals begin from inside the compound of General Al Rawi (Igal Naor) as he packs up his things to leave. Explosions and gunfire can be heard from outside, accompanied by people screaming as they run to escape the building. The camera shakes in response to bombs landing in the vicinity, struggling to focus on characters or their surroundings. Rapid editing disorientates the viewer further and aligns them with the impact of the bombing on the Iraqis. The characters refer to one another by name and, as they seek to depart for safety, their fear is palpable with the building being rocked by explosions, ceilings starting to collapse and darkness enveloping the hallways as power is lost. Al Rawi's deputy, Seyyed Hamza (Said Faraj), moves through the rooms trying to find Al Rawi, demonstrating concern for his safety. When they are shown outside, they get into their cars and there is a momentary sense of relief that they have survived. As the camera pans up, it shows a skyline being constantly lit up by explosions with bombs dropping continuously on to a whole city. This translates the opening shot of Vietnam War film *Apocalypse Now* (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, USA, 1979) to the urban environment of Iraq in which buildings rather than trees are destroyed. It contrasts with *Apocalypse Now*, however, by preceding the shot of the bomb pounding the landscape with the experiences of Iraqis affected by the explosions. In *Apocalypse Now*, no Vietnamese experiences are depicted, and the camera observes from a distance, as if on board one of the American helicopters shown flying past, aligning the viewer with the American position of initiating the bombing. In *Green Zone*, however, the viewer is placed with the Iraqis trying to escape, giving prominence to the agency of the people affected by the invasion and depicting bombs exploding in the middle of the city from their point of view when they move outside. The filmmakers focus on their experience and establish the local population as neither enemies nor victims, but survivors with whom the viewer can sympathise. When explosions are shown across the city, the emphasis is on the effects on the people who populate the city by the opening scene in Al Rawi's complex providing a microcosm of their

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[245] The unidentified Japanese soldiers in *Flag of our Fathers* are countered by companion film *Letters from Iwo Jima* (dir. Clint Eastwood, USA, 2006), released in the same year, which is portrayed from the Japanese point of view.

situation; it is apparent that the experiences of these few Iraqis are being multiplied as thousands of similar people are put in a precarious situation, having to escape to survive.

Towards the end of *Green Zone*, Al Rawi's views are represented when protagonist Chief Warrant Officer Roy Miller (Matt Damon) arranges to meet with him at night. Miller walks through dark streets for the rendezvous, unable to find anyone until two cars approach and he is forced into one of them before they speed off and Miller's radio thrown out of the window, leaving the Americans to deem that he has been abducted. He is held with a gun to his head by an Iraqi combatant who tells him, "I am going to kill you today, soldier." Al Rawi enters and ushers the Iraqi to leave the room, indicating his desire to speak with Miller. He faces the camera which frames him standing from Miller's point of view, who sits in the foreground with his back to the camera. Al Rawi has his hands in his pockets and looks down and to the side, a despondency to his demeanour. In contrast with the guard who has left, Al Rawi is not intimidating, angry or loud; he speaks gently and appears willing to hear what Miller has to say and share his knowledge with him. When Miller says he knows Al Rawi was willing to share everything about Iraq's WMD programmes, Al Rawi does not get angry, he quietly replies, "What programmes? There are no programmes." As they talk, Al Rawi is framed to the left side of the screen leaving empty space on the right which the top half of Miller's body fills when it cuts to him sitting looking up at Al Rawi. Miller tells him, "There are still people in Washington who will work with you. People who understand that we still need the Iraqi Army to hold this place together." He replies, "Then why is your government disbanding the Iraqi Army, making us outlaws?... I risked my life to tell you the truth about WMD. 'Tell the truth and you'll have a place in the new Iraq,' they said. So, where is my place?" During this exchange, Al Rawi grabs Miller's shirt and is emotional as he talks. His viewpoint is clearly articulated and felt, and Miller listens, representing an American soldier's concern for an Iraqi individual's opinion and for the future of Iraq. The conversation ends when Al Rawi tells him, "You think the war is over because you are in Baghdad? You will see, it has only just begun." With hindsight and extra-textual knowledge of the Iraq War, the viewer knows this to be true, the information provided by Saddam Hussein's general demonstrating a superior understanding of the situation in Iraq to many of the American characters.

Paul Greengrass' other film in my corpus, *Captain Phillips*, begins with a similar contextualisation of non-American characters, in this instance, Somalis. The initial shots of Abduwali Muse (Barkhad Abdi), the captain of the pirates' skiff, is juxtaposed with opening shots of Phillips (Tom Hanks), captain of MV Maersk Alabama, an unarmed[246] "container

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[246] Gwynne Watkins, "Real-Life Action-Heroes: Talking With Captain Phillips's Real-Life First Mate, Shane Murphy" in *Vulture*, October 16, 2013, accessed May 29, 2025, https://www.vulture.com/2013/10/meet-captain-phillipss-first-mate-shane-murphy.html.

ship"[247] which will be taken hostage by the Somali pirates. The juxtaposition of the homes and countries introduces a mirroring of the two captains which continues throughout the film. A scene in which they look at each other through binoculars, for example, is discussed by Brian Danoff as establishing a parity between them, "the reciprocal gaze that they share through their binoculars is clearly intended to establish a certain symmetry between the two characters."[248] The concept of mirroring American and non-American characters as a technique for demonstrating comparable worth will be explored in relation to *The Kingdom* in this chapter, and *American Sniper* in Chapter 4, generating nuance in the deaths of characters which would be typically othered.

Following a sequence of Phillips at his suburban home in Vermont and travelling to the airport with his wife, the film cuts to a settlement on the edge of the desert by the coast in Eyl, Somalia, a stark contrast to the Vermont shots. In the opening shot of the sequence, characters with guns patrol the desert and people in bare feet look towards the sparse landscape as vehicles approach on the horizon. Their lives appear precarious, and awareness of the threat is palpable as the camera struggles to focus on the vehicles getting closer. The clips are reminiscent of amateur footage as the camera shakes and the edits are quick, conveying on the viewer a sense that they are part of the settlement and so feel the fear of the villagers who start shouting and running. The edits become quicker and the shots more frantic as women gather the children and run inside to hide. An edit to inside the shack where Muse resides begins with a slow track down a rifle which is hanging on the wall and pointing directly at his head; this is highly symbolic of his life being lived at gunpoint. A wider shot provides a brief insight into his living conditions; the mise-en-scene includes a thin mattress on the floor, a corrugated iron panel for a wall and sheets covering the doorway and windows. The film's parallel introduction of the two captains emphasises the contrast in their circumstances and Muse's struggle to survive.

Muse is awoken and joins the men from his village outside who are surrounded by armed men. The villagers are derided by the leader for not being out in their boats; he shouts, "Why aren't you out on the water?... You should be out there earning money." An older man explains, "But we caught a ship last week." The man replies, "That was last week. The boss wants money today. Bring Garaad another ship soon or you will answer for it." Three gunshots are fired into the air and the men are rounded up and forced down to the beach to take the boats out. They are characterised as acting under duress and fear for their lives, not through choice. Muse selects his crew for the skiff and all four central Somali characters are named, Muse, Bilal (Barkhad Abdirahman), Elmi (Mahat M. Ali) and Najee (Faysal Ahmed), unlike in Phillips' book, humanising them and providing familiarity for the viewer. The

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[247] Phillips, *A Captain's Duty*, 20.
[248] Danoff, "'I'm the Captain Now'," 38.

language of the pirates is subtitled throughout *Captain Phillips*, indicating the equal worth of their conversations to those of the American characters speaking English.

The poverty of the villagers is evident from the way Muse's clothes hang off him as he pushes the boat into the water, as well as through their old, dirty equipment and containers, evidence that they are surviving from day to day.

Figure 2.3   Muse's clothes hang off him and his ribs are visible as he pushes the skiff, *Captain Phillips*, 0:07:37

In a later scene, when Phillips is being held hostage in the lifeboat, additional background information contextualises the pirates' situation further. Muse tells Phillips, "You come to our waters, you got to pay." Phillips says, "We were in international waters… We were carrying food for starving people in Africa. Even Somalis." Muse replies, "Yeah sure, rich countries like to help Somalis. Big ships come to our water, take all the fish out. What's left for us to fish?" Phillips asks, "You're fishermen?" Muse responds, "Yeah, we're all fishermen." Phillips' response then prompts Muse to reply with mournful contemplation, "Phillips says to Muse, 'There's got to be something other than being a fisherman and kidnapping people.' Muse then somberly delivers the… line: "Maybe in America.... Maybe in America.'"[249] This demonstrates how the characterisation of the pirates contributes to the sombre tone and opportunity to mourn which I argue *Captain Phillips* delivers.

The acknowledgement of the pirates' position, being unable to compete with bigger fishing vessels and having no alternative source of income, suggests that the Somali pirates have no choice but to hold ships hostage to earn money. This contrasts with how Jonathan Markovitz describes the characterisation of Somalis in *Black Hawk Down*, "A key part of the film's process of dehumanization rests in its failure to ask why the Somalis were so angry at

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[249] Danoff, "'I'm the Captain Now'," 41.

the United States."[250] The Somali pirates in *Captain Phillips* are not dehumanised as they are given opportunities to voice their frustrations and their motivations are revealed. Danoff asserts that the film,

> resists turning the poor people of the developing world into a distant 'other'…
> [emphasising] the common humanity that Captain Phillips and his captors share…
> including that whether one lives in the United States or Somalia, one has to somehow
> make a living in a global economy that is filled with change and uncertainty[.][251]

He continues by noting how "the film generates sympathy for the Somalis by suggesting that there is a large degree of coercion involved in their decision to engage in piracy."[252] I would argue that the pirates' violent treatment of Phillips and his crew, holding them at gunpoint and knocking Phillips into the lifeboat, prevents extensive sympathy with their situation, but they are not a one-dimensional enemy whose actions are not contextualised, as is found in many action films.

The actions of Katherine (Melissa Benoist), the wife of bomber Tamerlan Tsarnaev (Themo Melikidze) in *Patriots Day*, are similarly contextualised. Unlike the Iraqis and Somalis discussed so far, Katherine is not othered through her nationality, as she is American, but through her loyalty to her husband being depicted as superseding her loyalty to her country. She watches her husband and brother-in-law prepare for the bombings without reporting them to the police, aiding their terrorist activities, and refuses to cooperate with the FBI and inform them whether there are any more bombs. She is cross-examined by an interrogator who wears a headscarf, demonstrating respect for Katherine's religion, and introduces herself as Veronica (Khandi Alexander). Katherine is denied access to a lawyer or to leave the interview room, prompting Police Commissioner Ed Davis (John Goodman), watching from outside, to ask, "Who the f*** are these guys?" Katherine appears scared and vulnerable; a brief cut towards the beginning of the scene shows her daughter outside the interrogation room, staring at the gun holster of an agent, followed by a close up of Katherine's hands nervously playing with a piece of paper; both shots emphasise the precarious position in which they find themselves.

Veronica tells Katherine that her husband is "gone". She slowly unfolds a piece of A4 paper, lays it flat on the table and pushes out the creases, then holds it up in front of Katherine. A photo of Tamerlan's blood-covered body fills the paper. Katherine looks at it before saying, "Stop," and pushing the paper away. She sniffs, as if holding back a desire to cry, and then begins a compelling monologue, defiantly telling Veronica, "For a Muslim woman, marriage is

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[250] Markovitz, "Reel Terror Post 9/11," 214-216.
[251] Danoff, "'I'm the Captain Now'," 35.
[252] Ibid., 41-42.

a lilting dance of duality: strength and submission… The life a Muslim woman lives is a dangerous and difficult one. If she does not submit to her husband, there's a spot reserved for her in hell." Throughout her speech, the camera frames her face in tight close up, to the left of the screen, leaving space for the imprint of Veronica's attentive face, which the camera cuts to sporadically, in the space to the right. She is given time and space to share her views with the camera focusing entirely on her and her words and a character listening respectfully.

Figure 2.4 and Figure 2.5   Veronica listens as Katherine shares her experiences of being a Muslim woman, *Patriots Day*, 1:32:17, 1:32:31

The significance of using close ups is explained by Benshoff and Griffin, "individual close-ups… [force] the viewer to pay attention to just one person instead of the entire group. Audience identification with specific characters can be encouraged or discouraged in this manner".[253] The close-ups of Katherine, as with several non-American characters in my case study films, direct the viewer to focus on these characters who would conventionally be othered and identification discouraged.

The filmmakers create opportunity for sympathy with Katherine's situation, as her resistance to the FBI's questioning presents the possibility that she has been brainwashed. She appears vulnerable and fearful but, as someone aligned with the bombers' aims, does not elicit empathy. The distinction between sympathy for the characters discussed so far, who are still characterised as enemies of the Americans, and empathy for characters, to be considered subsequently, is significant. Kyle DeGuzman acknowledges the difference as, "Empathy refers to the ability to understand and share the feelings of another, essentially stepping into their shoes and experiencing their emotions as if they were your own. Sympathy, conversely, does not involve a shared perspective or experience. Instead, it's about recognizing another's hardship and feeling sorrow or pity for their situation."[254] The five films which have been discussed so far, *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Captain Phillips*, *American Sniper*, *Patriots Day* and *The 15:17 to Paris*, include representations of enemies who are othered but whose deaths or capture are not celebrated and who are permitted time to speak. By giving voice to characters which have often been denied an opportunity to speak, these films offer

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[253] Harry M. Benshoff and Sean Griffin, *America on Film: Representing Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality at the Movies* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 5.
[254] Kyle DeGuzman, "What is Sympathy – Emotional Connection in Storytelling," *StudioBinder*, February 4, 2024, accessed May 11, 2025, https://www.studiobinder.com/blog/what-is-sympathy-definition/.

opportunities to sympathise with characters which would conventionally be othered, feeling sorry for them but not sharing in their experiences. These films were released in the middle and towards the end of my film corpus, from 2012-2018. By now turning to the earlier releases, *The Kingdom* (2007), *The Hurt Locker* (2008) and *Green Zone* (2010), as well as *Lone Survivor* (2013) released in the middle, I will consider how empathy for non-Americans is characterised. This is established through the characters being depicted as having agency as well as being grievable, contrasting significantly with depictions in previous war and terrorism cinema.

2.4   Agency and Empathy

Antonio Gramsci's writings on the subaltern recognise that, "the working people… are without power, living at the bottom of the social scale."[255] Power can refer to their voices being heard or having agency to affect situations. Having discussed enemies of the Americans having their voices heard, the subsequent evolution in representations of non-American characters in Reel Fallout Cinema concerns them being given agency. This is most effectively characterised in *The Kingdom* with the Saudi police officers, Colonel Faris Al Ghazi (Ashraf Barhom) and Sergeant Haytham (Ali Suliman), *Green Zone* with the Iraqi character of Freddy (Khalid Abdalla), and *Lone Survivor*, in which Mohammed Gulab (Ali Suliman) saves the life of the protagonist, Marcus Luttrell (Mark Wahlberg). Each character from the country in which the film is set expresses their feelings and desires and acts of their own volition. They are depicted as fundamental to the narrative, dramatically affecting the outcome of the American missions. *The Kingdom* incorporates two Saudi police officers who are defined separately from their American counterparts. Both their personal and professional lives are depicted, providing context and background, and they have agency to make their own decisions. The Iraqi character of Freddy in *Green Zone* inserts himself into the narrative by approaching a unit of American soldiers which includes the protagonist, Chief Miller, and providing information. Freddy accompanies Miller as his translator, but screen time is also dedicated to allow this character to express his opinions and affect the course of events. In *Lone Survivor*, the Navy SEAL who survives the Taliban onslaught is rescued by Afghan villagers. The villagers are depicted as distinct from the Taliban and willing to risk their own lives to help the American soldier. In each film, the Americans are reliant on the local characters for assistance and survival. Both the protagonists and the non-

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[255] Robert J. C. Young, 'Subaltern knowledges,' in *Postcolonialism: A Very Short Introduction, 2nd edn, Very Short Introductions* (Oxford, 2020; online edn, Oxford Academic, 22 Oct. 2020), accessed May 30, 2025, 24, https://doi.org/10.1093/actrade/9780198856832.003.0002.

American characters are empathetic, and there is an opportunity created for the viewer to identify with them, challenging the notion that only American characters provide a source of identification.

By introducing the Saudi police officers in *The Kingdom* separately from their involvement with the American FBI team, they are afforded recognition as significant characters, distinct from the American protagonists. The film opens with attacks on American civilians at a compound in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, by terrorists dressed in Saudi Police uniforms. The police force is portrayed as being under suspicion as Chief of Investigative Services for the Saudi Arabian National Guard, General Al Abdulmalik (Mahmoud Said), tortures one of its officers, Sergeant Haytham, for information. Abdulmalik accuses Haytham of being a terrorist and supplying the attackers with uniforms as he has more shirts than his allocation; Haytham accounts for the extra shirts by explaining that he sweats. As with *Captain Phillips*, the conversations are all subtitled, generating not only a level of authenticity through the Saudi characters speaking their own language, but providing insights into Saudi lives through all of the characters in the scene being Saudi, avoiding the mediation of presenting the scene through the point of view of English-speaking characters. Haytham's innocence is established in the opening bombing scene in which he shoots and kills one of the terrorists, preventing more American deaths. Haytham's superior officer, head of the Saudi Arabia police, Colonel Faris Al Ghazi, becomes increasingly agitated during the torture and close-ups show him flinching and looking away as Haytham is hit causing blood to cover the side of his face and tears to roll down his cheeks. Al Ghazi retrieves the shirts stained with sweat and presents them to Abdulmalik, attesting to Haytham's innocence and persuading Abdulmalik to end the interrogation. Al Ghazi is depicted as a compassionate character prepared to defend his officers who are, in turn, depicted as honest and willing to confront the terrorists and put their lives at risk.

Following the torture, Al Ghazi and Haytham eat together, and Al Ghazi assures him that he does not believe he was involved. He tells him, "You saved lives today. I have no doubt about that." Haytham replies, "I love my country. Never in my life, never have I thought to betray my country," to which Al Ghazi responds, "Believe me, I know. That's why I want you to use all your energy, anger and frustration as a tool to drive us to capture those criminals and bring them to justice." The portrayal of the relationship between two non-American characters is unusual. Al Ghazi shows empathy towards Haytham and recognises that he must be angry and frustrated in response to being suspected by Abdulmalik. Close-ups of each character allow time for reaction and pauses in their conversation, one of which Al Ghazi fills with a reassuring pat on Haytham's shoulder. The angle of the camera is slightly below Al Ghazi demonstrating his authority and confidence, while the shots of Haytham are level with him, showing him as subordinate to Al Ghazi but not powerless, he is equal to the viewer so his voice is also important.

Within the opening scenes of the film, both police officers show traits of heroism with which viewers can identify, characteristic of Hollywood action cinema but customarily reserved for American protagonists. The viewer is also given access to knowledge of the Saudi characters, in addition to information uncovered by the protagonist. Viewer knowledge is often restricted to sharing in the protagonist's knowledge, the significance of which is explained by David Bordwell, "To a great extent, our 'identification' with a film's protagonist is created by exactly this systematic restriction of information."[256] If an action film contains scenes in which the protagonist is not present, it is often to create tension by showing how the enemy is plotting against them and the threats which will endanger their lives. In *The Kingdom*, however, information regarding the Saudi characters is not restricted to the American characters' knowledge, it is obtained prior to the Americans' arrival, and it does not involve threats to other characters' lives; the Saudi characters are established separately with their own desires and opinions, and it is therefore possible to identify with them independently, as self-sufficient, autonomous characters, not in relation to any American characters.

The Iraqi character of Freddy in *Green Zone* is also introduced separately from the presence of American characters. Guards are shown patrolling a street as Freddy walks to his car. Hearing a conversation, he turns to see General Al Rawi, Saddam Hussein's deputy, entering a complex. The scene is depicted from Freddy's point of view, aligning the viewer with his interest and suspicion.

Figure 2.6 and Figure 2.7   Freddy watches General Al Rawi enter a complex, followed by a reverse shot of his point of view, *Green Zone*, 0:21:50, 0:21:54

The reverse shot portraying Freddy's viewpoint contains significant space on the left side of the screen, representing General Al Rawi's ability to walk freely in Baghdad without fear of persecution. Freddy is angry at Al Rawi's freedom, and, in the subsequent scene, he reports his information to American protagonist, Chief Miller.

The soldiers in Miller's unit are initially suspicious of Freddy and force him to the ground. In a similar scene in *The Hurt Locker*, lead character Sergeant James (Jeremy Renner) watches as an Iraqi driver is forced from his car at gunpoint by a troop of soldiers and pushed on to

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[256] Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 65.

the floor with a soldier's knee in his back. The driver is silent throughout. James cynically remarks into his radio, "Well, if he wasn't an insurgent, he sure as hell is now", referring to the real-life situation, "The United States demobilized the entire Iraqi military, leaving 500,000 armed men unemployed and angry. They formed the basis of a growing anti-U.S. insurgency."[257] Richard Haass provides further analysis, "Sunni anger and humiliation stoked recruiting for both al-Qaeda and subsequently ISIS."[258] In *Green Zone*, however, Freddy does not accept the Americans' treatment and remain silent, shouting his objections when he is pushed to the ground, "You are hurting me… Why are you doing this?" Miller orders for him to be released and asks Freddy to calm down. Freddy responds, "I'm trying to calm down but this guy, he put me on the floor." Miller asks his name to which he responds, "My name is Farid Youssaf Abdul Rhaman. You call me Freddy." The westernisation of Farid's name could be considered to problematise the claim that he has equal worth with American characters. His change of name assimilates him to a certain extent with the soldiers to enhance his familiarity for western viewers. However, I contend that it is Freddy himself who chooses the name and decides to identify himself as Freddy, it is not forced upon him by another character. This demonstrates his agency, as Miller complies with his request to "call me Freddy," as well as maintaining a distance between himself and the occupying American troops by not permitting them to call him by his real name, reducing their familiarity with him and deepening Freddy's characterisation. Miller's immediate embrace of the name, "Ok, Freddy," suggests that it is Freddy who displays autonomy and power in the scene and Miller's role is to comply with his wishes.

In *The Kingdom*, the viewer is provided with Colonel Al Ghazi's first name when the protagonist, Agent Fleury, enquires. Al Ghazi replies, "Faris," offering a more personal connection and opportunity to empathise without westernising his identity. Empathy with Al Ghazi continues to be developed through conversations with Agent Fleury, and scenes of him spending time with his family. As Fleury and Al Ghazi work together to investigate the bombings, Al Ghazi is portrayed as being as determined as the Americans to find the perpetrators. He tells Fleury, "I'm 42 years old. I have two daughters and a son… And I find myself in a place where I no longer care about why we are attacked. I only care that 100 people woke up a few mornings ago, had no idea it was their last. When we catch the man who murdered these people, I don't care to ask even one question. I want to kill him. Do you understand?" Fleury: "Yes, I do." They share a common understanding of the situation and their response to it.

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[257] Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity* (New York: Penguin Books, 2016), 310.
[258] Haass, *A World in Disarray*, 154-155.

The Saudi officers are also depicted relaxing with their families, not solely in their police roles. This offers further insight into their personal lives which enable parallels to be drawn with their American counterparts relaxing in their makeshift accommodation in the sports hall. In a sequence showing the FBI agents and Saudi police off duty, the FBI team lay on their beds in the sports hall socialising, followed by a montage of Al Ghazi and Sergeant Haytham at home with their families. Al Ghazi, in casual dress, the only time we see him not in his police uniform, relaxes on the floor colouring with his children. A shot of him lying with his arms around his children engenders empathy; he is portrayed as a loving father, an image common in Hollywood films and one to which the viewer can relate. The football in the shot connects Al Ghazi's family to the "family" of FBI agents in the sports hall, who have previously been portrayed playing basketball, demonstrating sport as a mutual interest.
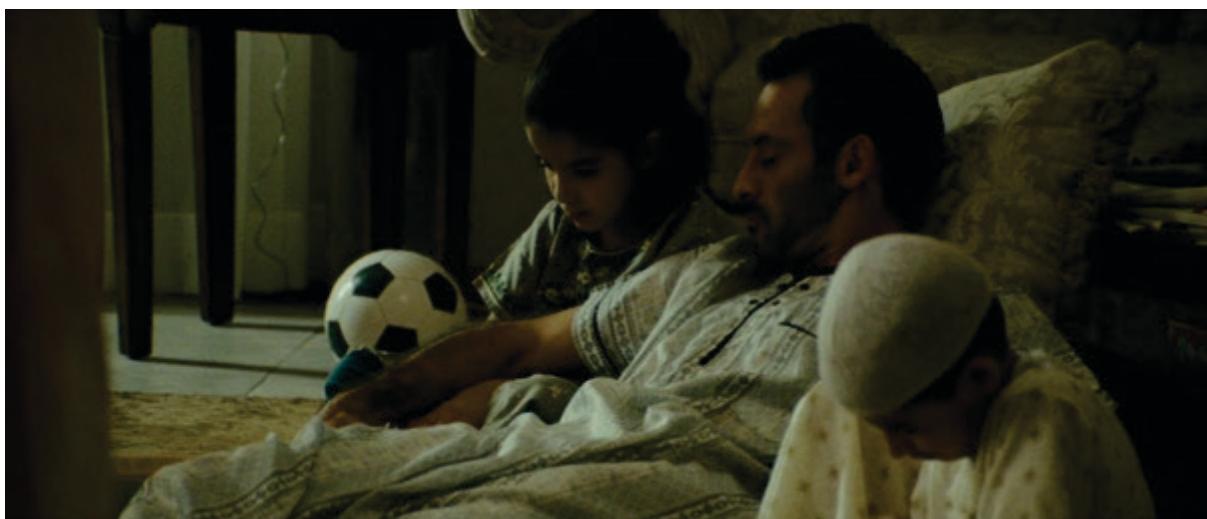
Figure 2.8   Ghazi's life is valued, spending time with his family who love him, *The Kingdom*, 0:47:56

Al Ghazi and Sergeant Haytham both pray with their families. Haytham lives with his father (Nick Faltas) and they say, "Peace be upon you," to one another when he arrives home. The significance of their faith is displayed in an expression of kindness towards each other, not of threat or danger. Haytham helps his father up to a chair to pray and, as Haytham prays, his father places his hand on his head. Music accompanies the scenes in the form of an electric guitar serenading the action with a slow, gentle tune, creating a romanticised atmosphere. This is complemented by warm lighting from lamps in the rooms which flood the scenes with a yellow glow. In contrast to Edward Said's declaration, quoted in the Introduction, that there is an "almost total absence of any cultural position making it possible either to identify with or dispassionately to discuss the Arabs or Islam",[259] in *The Kingdom*, Muslim characters are depicted as those with whom the viewer can identify. *Zero Dark Thirty* similarly familiarises Islam by situating a Muslim praying in a typical American office environment. When Dan

[259] Said, *Orientalism*, 26.

(Jason Clarke) visits Counter Terrorism Director, The Wolf (Fredric Lehne), he finds him reciting the Islamic daily prayers on a prayer rug. Waiting for him to finish, Dan greets Wolf with the Muslim greeting "As-Salamu alaykum" to which The Wolf responds "Alaykum salam." Dan shows no animosity towards The Wolf's faith and understands the language and salutation by which to greet him. In *The Kingdom*, the portrayal of the Saudi Arabian Muslim characters is of people who are loved by their families and whose lives are valuable, to be discussed in more detail shortly.

Immediately before the above sequence, a shot of the FBI investigators and the Saudi police officers walking together demonstrates their unity of purpose. Agent Fleury asks Al Ghazi if they can visit a tall building outside the compound from where the attackers may have filmed the attacks. Al Ghazi reluctantly agrees, and Fleury tells him they will wait in the community centre until they are permitted to leave the compound; in previous scenes, Al Ghazi has had to persuade the Americans to return to the sports hall, but, by pre-empting the requirement to return to their accommodation, Fleury acknowledges Al Ghazi's authority. The Americans and Saudis walk together in very similar colour outfits, integrating the teams and accentuating their cohesiveness. Fleury and Al Ghazi walk side by side in the centre of the shot, exhibiting the equality of the two people in charge of their respective teams.

Figure 2.9 The FBI agents and Saudi police are integrated, working as equals, *The Kingdom*, 0:47:29

This equality has manifested throughout the scenes described above which display significant examples of shared humanity, including being loved by their families, playing sport and having faith. None of these are westernised but are all intrinsic to the Saudi characters' lives, adhering to Judith Butler's philosophy of a shared precariousness. Butler asserts that, "The recognition of shared precariousness introduces strong normative commitments of

equality".[260] From the opening scenes introducing the FBI agents and the Saudi police officers until the end of the film, a parity is portrayed throughout *The Kingdom*. *Captain Phillips* is similarly noted for establishing a shared precariousness between the protagonist and the pirates once they board the lifeboat, "in this tense hostage situation… everyone on the lifeboat could at any moment share the same fate of death."[261] When three of the pirates are shot towards the end of the film, to be discussed in the following chapter, "The Somalis' blood that covers Phillips is another reminder of their common humanity."[262] Demonstrating universal human qualities such as mortality and how we all bleed contributes to establishing the pirates lives as having equivalence to that of Phillips.

A later scene in *The Kingdom* creates a common adversary for Al Ghazi and Fleury, a further opportunity to unify their purpose. The team visit the building from where the attack was filmed and, as they disembark from their vehicles, they are stopped by Saudi armed forces. When Al Ghazi tells them they have permission, he is punched, and it is Fleury who retaliates and hits the man, not one of Al Ghazi's fellow officers. Their protection of one another consolidates their alliance. A similar unity of enemy and objective is created in *Lone Survivor* through Taliban insurgents threatening both American and Afghan characters. At the beginning of the film, Navy SEALs at an American base in Afghanistan are briefed on a reconnaissance mission to locate Afghan warlord, Ahmad Shah (Yousuf Azami), "The objective of this mission is to capture and kill Ahmad Shah." Murphy (Taylor Kitsch) describes him as a "Bad guy. Senior Taliban commander responsible for killing Marines in eastern Afghanistan." Shah is referenced as "killing Marines," but it is Afghan lives being taken which is depicted, aligning their worth with those of Americans within the opening minutes of the film. Shots of the briefing are intercut with shots of Shah and his soldiers entering an Afghan village with weapons, shouting and pointing. Women in the foreground pick up children and run out of sight. Shah's deputy, Taraq (Sammy Sheik), captures one of the villagers, drags him to a log in the middle of the village and chops off his head with an axe. There is an immediate distinction between the dangerous, merciless Taliban and innocent Afghan civilians. The villagers watch the killing taking place and the sombre music heightens as the edits of the chopping accelerate, showing increasingly quickly the knife coming down over and over again, until the man is dead. In this situation, the villagers do not intervene, allowing Taraq to kill him in front of them. However, as will be discussed, they later put their lives at risk to protect American soldier, Marcus Luttrell.

There is a cut from a shot of one of the Afghan villagers watching Taraq to the three American soldiers listening in the briefing room. This aligns the Americans with the non-

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[260] Butler, Frames of War, pp28-29.
[261] Danoff, "'I'm the Captain Now'," 36.
[262] Ibid., 37.

Americans, suggesting they are all witnesses to the same atrocity and fighting the same enemy. There are tears in the eyes of Axelson (Ben Foster) as he listens to the briefing of Shah and Taraq's attack on the village and empathises with the Afghan loss of life, indicating Afghan lives as valuable and grievable.
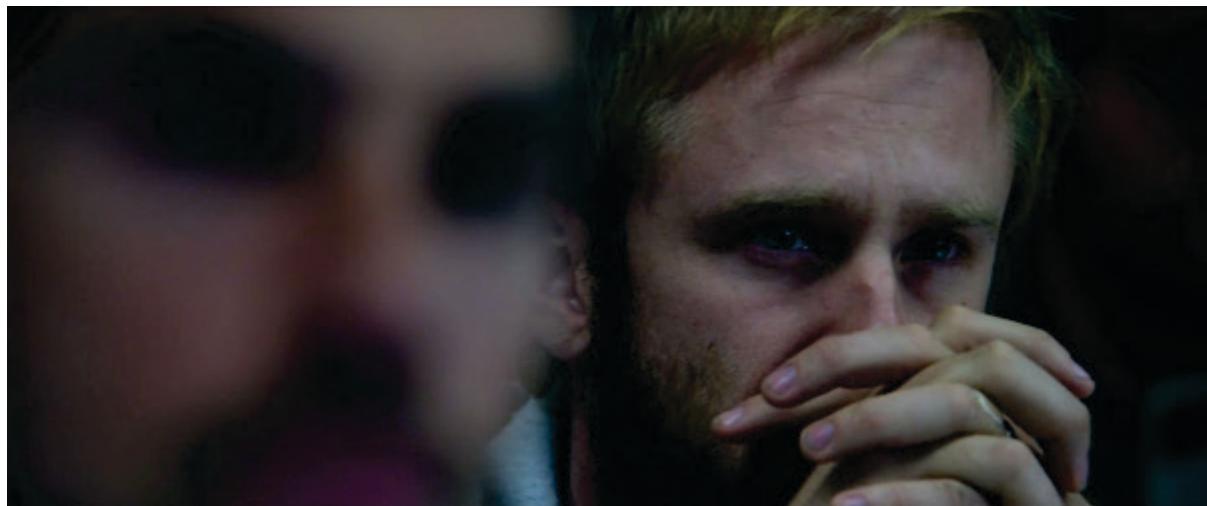
Figure 2.10   With tears in his eyes, Axelson could be watching the attack in person, *Lone Survivor*, 0:14:40

Afghan villagers and American soldiers are again aligned towards the end of the film when American protagonist, Marcus Luttrell, is the only survivor of the Taliban's onslaught on the four SEALs. Seriously wounded and hiding from the Taliban, he discovers a pool of water and dives in and drinks. He looks behind him and notices a group of Afghan villagers. He takes a grenade out and points it at them, saying, "Stay back." The camera cuts to a low shot from Luttrell's point of view showing four Afghans looking staring down at him. The body language of the leader of the group, Mohammad Gulab, indicates that he has no desire to harm Luttrell as he stands with his arm across his chest and his hand flat. All of the characters stand still and are calm, until they hear voices in the distance and Gulab moves quickly towards the pool to offer. As the camera passes the sun, there is a flare which creates a romanticised look as Gulab reaches out to take Luttrell's hand and help him up. A close-up of Gulab's son (Rohan Chand) displays his innocence as he looks on. As an Afghan, Gulab could be expected to be characterised as a threat but, in *Lone Survivor*, he is depicted as a hero. He motions to Luttrell to be quiet, demonstrating an equal fear of the Taliban discovering them, and continues to reach for Luttrell in the water.

Figure 2.11   A close-up of the young boy displays his innocence, *Lone Survivor*, 1:31:03

Luttrell eventually takes his hand and, by placing his other hand on top of Luttrell's, Gulab shows care and compassion towards him. Both Gulab and his son are shown in close-up, the expressions on their faces revealing concern and their desire to help. The warm lighting and sometimes out-of-focus background bring a softness to the scene which indicates that the characters pose no threat to Luttrell.

The villagers take Luttrell back to their village, the same one as that which featured in the American briefing at the beginning of the film, and care for him. When Shah's soldiers, led by the Taliban commander Taraq, enter the village, they grab Luttrell and take him to the log to behead him, shown from a distance and a low angle from Gulab's son's point of view. This is significant because it transfers identification in the scene from Luttrell to the villagers. As Taraq lifts his knife, Gulab fires his gun before pointing it at him, instantly stopping him in his assault of Luttrell and there are multiple shots of the villagers surrounding the insurgents with weapons pointing at them; in contrast to their passive response to the beheading of a villager earlier in the film, they protect Luttrell against the Taliban. Gulab tells Taraq, "This is my guest. Leave our village." For the first time in the film, the Afghan language is subtitled, demonstrating the equal worth of the conversation and importance of viewers who don't speak their language to be able to understand what they are saying. This consolidates identification moving from Luttrell, who cannot understand what they are saying, to Gulab and the villagers with whom the viewer is now aligned. Butler explains the importance of characters being understood, "the body is exposed to… claims of sociality – including language, work, and desire – that make possible the body's persisting and flourishing."[263] The potential to be a life of value hinges on the viewer understanding a character's point of view; in this scene, this is achieved through understanding Gulab's words. Identification with Gulab means also comprehending what he hears Taraq say in response. Taraq replies, "For

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[263] Butler, *Frames of War*, 3.

an American, you will die?... You will all be slaughtered." This increases the identification with Gulab because the viewer understands Taraq's threat to his life and, having spent the majority of the film with the Americans, increases empathy with Gulab's willingness to sacrifice his own life to protect Luttrell.

Lone Survivor depicts Afghans fighting the Taliban, defending their country and their way of life. The closing credits of the film explicate the code by which the villagers felt duty-bound to protect Luttrell,

> The Afghan villagers who protected Marcus did so out of duty to their 2,000 year old code of honor, known as Pashtunwali. Pashtunwali requires a tribe to undertake the responsibility of safeguarding an individual against his enemies and protecting him at all costs. These brave men and women still thrive today in the harsh mountains of Afghanistan and their fight against the Taliban continues…

The end of the film demonstrates Luttrell's gratitude to Gulab and his son. Luttrell is rescued by American forces and, as he leaves the village, he stops and deliberately turns to find Gulab. He cries and thanks him and his son, saying, "Thank you, thank you." He motions the boy over to him and kisses the son's head with his hand holding the back of his head tightly. He is emotional and acknowledges his vulnerability and dependence on them for his survival. A close up of Gulab as he looks over at Luttrell and his son betrays sadness in his face, not excitement or happiness that Luttrell has been rescued but an understanding that the conflict is not over. The emotions of the scene are reflected in the soundtrack with Berg's signature melancholy, electric guitar-led music,[264] similar to that used to accompany the agents and police walking together in *The Kingdom*, evoking the impact of the kindness of Gulab and the villagers on Luttrell. The film's credits end with a photograph of the real Marcus Luttrell hugging the real Mohammad Gulab. Gulab's actions are shown to be heroic when the ostensible hero of the film, Luttrell, was not able to save himself.

As with Gulab in *Lone Survivor*, the character of Freddy in *Green Zone* also has agency to make decisions and determine his own path, as well as influencing the film's course of events. He has substantial screen time to share his background as well as his opinions on the current situation in Iraq. Miller recruits Freddy as his translator to interview Iraqi characters but Freddy is also depicted as using his own initiative. In a scene in which the protagonist, Chief Miller, clashes with American soldier, Briggs (Jason Isaacs), Miller surreptitiously asks Freddy to hide a book from Briggs containing information about Al Rawi. A brief shot shows Freddy quickly leaving the scene while Miller and Briggs fight. Once Miller realises Freddy has left, he and his unit chase him, thinking he has stolen the book. One of

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[264] Berg employs similar music in television series, *Friday Night Lights* (created by Peter Berg, Imagine Television, Film 44, NBC Universal Television, 2006-2011).

the soldiers catches up with Freddy and grabs him by the leg and pulls it away; the soldier and viewer realise concurrently that Freddy has a synthetic leg. As Freddy hops, a close-up of the end of his trousers shows his foot missing, focusing the viewer on his precarious situation being surrounded by armed soldiers and having to balance on one leg. He implores Miller, "What more I have to do for you, huh?... You think I can leave my car?" He gestures towards his missing leg, indicating the car's importance for his mobility. Miller picks up the synthetic limb and asks what happened. Freddy tells him, "My leg is in Iran, since 1987. Me too, I fight for my country." Miller tells him he will get him a reward for his help. Freddy replies, "All the people now, even they have no water, they have no electricity, you think I do this for reward? You don't think I do this for me, for my future, for my country, for all these things? Whatever you want here, I want more than you want."

Figure 2.12   A close-up of Freddy hopping emphasises his sacrifice for his country, *Green Zone*, 0:39:56

The characterisation of Freddy is unusual for a war narrative in which El Haj determines that, "Iraqis or Afghans appear only as backdrops, not as subjects articulating their own perspectives on and experiences of war."[265] In *Green Zone*, significant screen time is assigned to the vocalisation of an Iraqi viewpoint and the protagonist listens to what he says. This indicates an influence on the film of "liberation movements in the twentieth century"[266] which Edward Said discerns show how "the subaltern *can* speak".[267] Benita de Robillard writes how, "failure to recognise the Other, by not taking into account, and not making an account of, the pain that is inflicted, engenders indifference and impedes empathy".[268] In contrast, *Green Zone* encourages empathy as Freddy recounts his experiences and

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[265] Abu El-Haj, *Combat Trauma*, 4.
[266] Said, *Orientalism*, 335.
[267] Ibid., 335.
[268] Benita de Robillard, "9/11, Iraq, Abu Ghraib: Time, Death and Empathy," *Ecquid Novi: African Journalism Studies 27* (1), 2006, 56, accessed May 21, 2025, doi:10.1080/02560054.2006.9653342.

expresses his opinions, providing insight into the views of a non-American which are developed throughout the film.

Towards the end of *Green Zone*, Freddy is empowered to make a decision about his future and the future of Iraq in choosing to take the life of General Al Rawi. While Miller, along with CIA Agent Brown (Brendan Gleeson), wants to work with Al Rawi, Freddy provides an alternative view. When Miller arranges to meet Al Rawi, Freddy says, "You are serious to do a deal with Mohammed Al Rawi? You know what already he do to this country?" Miller replies, "We're just trying to save lives, Freddy. There are people who think he can stop an insurgency… I just need you to do your job tonight, Freddy." Miller's lack of consideration of Freddy's opinion leads to Freddy feeling disempowered which results in him taking the law into his own hands. As Al Rawi leaves after speaking with Miller, Briggs attempts to kill Al Rawi, aiming his gun with the camera showing the orange light of the target on Al Rawi's head. Miller runs towards Briggs and pushes him away before he can fire, saving Al Rawi's life which is depicted as worth Miller risking his life to defend. Seconds later, Freddy arrives and shoots Al Rawi dead, undoing Miller's attempt to protect Al Rawi and bring him in. Miller shouts, "What the f**k did you do?" Freddy responds, "It is not for you to decide what happens here." Freddy is given an opportunity to articulate his opinion and his actions are condoned within the narrative; there is no punishment for his killing of Al Rawi as Miller simply tells him to go home and he leaves without recrimination. *Green Zone* establishes Al Rawi, Freddy and Miller as united in their defiance of wanting the truth to be known and to serve their countries, portraying their opinions as having equal significance and as having agency and being empathetic.

2.5   Grievable Non-Americans

The depiction of non-American characters in Reel Fallout Cinema as those with whom the viewer can empathise, as well as having equal value to American lives, lays the groundwork for the prospect of their deaths being grievable. This is a concept discussed at length by Judith Butler in *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* Butler explains the significance of lives being grievable, "Only under conditions in which the loss would matter does the value of life appear. Thus, grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters."[269] Butler continues, "Without grievability, there is no life, or, rather, there is something living that is other than life."[270] The implication is that othering takes place in the lack of acknowledgement that a life

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[269] Butler, *Frames of War*, 14.
[270] Ibid., 15.

is important. The viewer only grieves for lives that "matter,"[271] and, consequently, grievable lives are instilled with value. Several non-American characters in my case study films are portrayed as grievable, being mourned either by the American protagonists or by their family and friends, similarly to the grief associated with American characters. This is rare, particularly in conflict films, in which the deaths of non-Americans are often depicted as less significant and so ungrievable.

Hollywood cinema has typically othered non-American characters, portraying their lives as inconsequential. Examples include *Rambo: First Blood: Part II*, *Behind Enemy Lines*, and *Taken 3* (dir. Olivier Mégaton, France, USA, Spain, 2014). In *Behind Enemy Lines*, protagonist American Navy pilot, Burnett (Owen Wilson), finds himself on a road covered with trip wires attached to bombs. Serbian troops approach and he runs, tripping a wire and triggering one of the bombs to explode. The Serbian soldiers who are in pursuit are hit by the blast and their bodies are thrown, one literally off the screen in ultra slow motion. The stylisation of the scene contributes to representing them as disposable. Similarly, in the final, climactic sequence of the film, Serbian tanks and hundreds of troops approach Burnett. He is completely outnumbered and alone until American helicopters arrive. Patriotic music plays as the Americans fire on the Serbian soldiers, destroying both the vehicles and troops, to rescue Burnett. As Burnett is carried to safety, an overhead shot of the battlefield shows the massive loss of "insignificant" others in the protection of one valuable American soldier.

Figure 2.13   The loss of dispensable others in the rescue of one American, *Behind Enemy Lines*, 1:30:00

Butler describes how ungrievable characters "are made to bear the burden of… differential exposure to violence and death."[272] As in *Behind Enemy Lines*, violence against an

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[271] The use of the word "matter" in the title of the organisation "Black Lives Matter" is instructive here, affirming Butler's view of the importance of grievability as an indication that a life has value.
[272] Butler, *Frames of War*, 25.

ungrievable other is portrayed as acceptable, even welcomed, if it protects the life of the protagonist with whom the viewer identifies.

A further powerful example of the distinction between grievable and ungrievable characters is rendered in the depiction of American deaths in Vietnam War film *Hamburger Hill* (dir. John Irvin, USA, 1987). In a battle scene two-thirds of the way into the film, American soldiers advance on *Hamburger Hill*. An American helicopter flies overhead and gunfire descends from it, targeting American soldiers on the ground. Soldiers fall and die as they are hit by the helicopter's machine gun tirade and the camera shows the view from behind the gun in the helicopter as it continues to fire rapid shots. Shots of the machine gun firing, and American soldiers being shot and killed, are intercut with shots of two soldiers on the ground trying desperately to stop the shooting, shouting into their radio, "They're ours!" The viewer is aligned with the frustration and despair of the two soldiers watching the massacre take place as more soldiers fall to their deaths and the camera focuses on an American helmet rolling down the hill. A lingering close-up of the helmet provides time to reflect on the shock of watching American soldiers kill American soldiers. The scene conveys devastation at the needless loss of life; the soldiers did not die through fighting the enemy and advancing their country's cause, but by "friendly fire". The lives are represented as worth saving, as grievable, as if real people lost in war.

As has been discussed so far, Reel Fallout Cinema foregrounds the lives of many non-American characters, distinguishing them as having views worth listening to, having agency to make their own decisions and worthy of sympathy if not empathy. Several of the films also apply the concept of grievability, as represented in *Hamburger Hill*, to non-American characters, challenging the notion that only American characters are grievable. I will now examine three examples which show how the grief of local characters over the death of loved one forms the focus of a scene in *American Sniper*; and the grief of the American protagonists creating an opportunity to mourn for the viewer, is employed to demonstrate the grievability of local characters in *The Hurt Locker* and *The Kingdom*. There are two forms of identification which contribute to grieving these deaths, identification with non-American characters who care for them and so mourn their deaths, and identification with the American protagonists who grieve which leads to empathising with their grief; both result in a depiction of the non-American characters as grievable.

In *American Sniper*, non-American characters are depicted as grievable through constructing identification with the grief of those who love them. On a door-to-door search of buildings, protagonist Chris Kyle discovers the house of Sheikh Al-Obodi (Navid Negahban) who helps the American troops by providing information. In an ensuing scene, the Americans' primary enemy, The Butcher (Mido Hamada), retaliates, seizing Sheikh Al-Obodi's son, Omar, (Jad Mhidi Senhaji) and killing him, mercilessly drilling into his head. When Sheikh Al-Obodi

protests, he is also killed. The two civilians are represented as grievable by Sheikh Al-Obodi's wife crying over his body. She is shown running up to him in tears, and later, from above in an aerial shot, the two bodies are depicted amongst the rubble of destroyed buildings, emphasising the destruction of the city and the lives of those within it. A similar characterisation occurs when Kyle and his unit track The Butcher's location and stakeout the building by occupying the residence opposite. The man who owns the house (Ayman Samman) in which they stay is hospitable and willingly provides food. However, Kyle, remains suspicious of him and uncovers a store of weapons hidden in the floor underneath a bed. He grabs the owner and pushes him against the wall, forcing him to help them infiltrate The Butcher's hideout, which he does. When he gains access to the building, he picks up a gun, sanctioning the Americans to shoot and kill him. His intention with the weapon is not clear but he poses a potential threat to their lives so is shot dead. Once the Americans have cleared the building, they witness a crowd of people parading throughout the streets, holding the body of the man aloft and mourning his death. This is comparable to the parade for Kyle at the end of the film, the streets lined with people paying their respects. The Iraqi man's death is not portrayed as victorious for the Americans but as a focal point for the mourning of Iraqis, demonstrating that even the lives of those who pose a risk to the Americans are grievable and, therefore, valuable, as the above quote from Butler indicates, "grievability is a presupposition for the life that matters."[273]

In the above examples from *American Sniper*, the non-American characters are mourned by local characters with whom the viewer sympathises. In *The Hurt Locker*, the grief for an Iraqi child is expressed by the American protagonist, Sergeant James. Through the viewer's identification with James, there is an opportunity to empathise with his grief and therefore mourn the local character too. Soon after James joins the American base at the beginning of the film, he forms a friendship with a young Iraqi boy. James asks his name and, similarly to Freddy in *Green Zone*, he introduces himself with a western name, Beckham (Christopher Sayegh). Again, by naming himself, he demonstrates his autonomy, a trait which contrasts with prior war cinema, for example, *The Steel Helmet* (dir. Samuel Fuller, USA, 1951), in which a Korean boy is designated a nickname, "Short Round" (William Chun), by the protagonist, Zack (Gene Evans) and the boy asks what it means, having no power over his identity. In contrast, Beckham's choice of his own name displays his love of the sport and idolisation of a player, characteristics not restricted to the west as football is global and young people across the world want to emulate the success of players such as David Beckham. James immediately recognises the name, "like the soccer player?", and they create a bond based on their familiar knowledge and James' willingness to play the sport

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[273] Butler, *Frames of War*, 14.

Beckham loves with him. Soccer is "the most popular sport in Iraq,"[274] while, in 2008, the year of the film's release, it is described as "a niche sport in the US",[275] so it is James' assimilation into Beckham's domain which enables them to form a friendship. This demonstrates James' compassion and desire to treat Iraqis with respect. As the viewer discovers later in the film, James has a baby son, so this scene also offers a glimpse into what his future could be if he survives his time in Iraq and is around for his son when he is old enough to play sport together. As well as playing football, James also buys DVDs from Beckham and offers him a cigarette. When Beckham tries to take one, James moves the packet, saying, "Get outta here. You shouldn't smoke," showing his consideration for his health. The exchanges make Beckham a recognisable, familiar character.

Figure 2.14   James and Beckham build a rapport, *The Hurt Locker*, 0:44:53

When James finds a "body bomb" in an abandoned warehouse, he thinks the body is that of Beckham. He is emotionally affected by seeing the body and can only stare, not noticing the stench which clearly affects his team; Sanborn (Anthony Mackie) looks away and gags, and Eldridge (Brian Geraghty) covers his mouth. James tells them, "I know this kid. His name is Beckham, he sells DVDs." Sanborn asks Eldridge if he's seen a body bomb before, unwilling to recognise the boy as that of a familiar person or view the body as a child, only as a weapon of war. In contrast, James cannot see past the body's humanity.

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[274] "Case Study: Uniting through the power of football in Iraq," *International Federation of Red Cross*, (June 2022), accessed August 18, 2025, https://www.ifrc.org/sites/default/files/2022-11/IFRC_Case_Study_Iraq_EN_Web.pdf.
[275] Robert Weintraub, "How America learned to love soccer," *The Guardian* (30 June 2008), accessed August 18, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2008/jun/30/euro2008.ussport.

Following procedure, James gently places C4 on the body in a medium close-up of the explosives on the boy's chest before the camera tracks back to include his head. As James begins to prepare the C4, there is an extreme close-up of his right eye as he looks sadly down at the body. A cut to a wider angle shows him removing the C4 and carefully placing his hand over the boy's face to close his eyes. He pauses momentarily before abruptly removing his helmet, throwing it down and putting his hands on his head as he begins to cry before slamming his hands on the table. Although there are cuts, the sequence plays out as if in real time, placing the viewer with James' range of emotions and decisions. After briefly cutting to Sanborn and Eldridge outside, the scene returns to a close-up of James' hands gently moving along the outside of the body trying to source the detonation wire. When he fails to find it, he takes out his knife and pauses, breathing out and shaking his hands before starting to cut the stiches in the boy's stomach. It is in the pauses, which contribute to the sense of realism, that opportunities for reflection are most prevalent; the viewer is forced to remain in the scene and think about what they are watching while James considers what he must do next. Drawing comparisons with Vietnam War films, the sequence from *Hamburger Hill* discussed previously alludes to the impact of a break in violence when the depiction of deaths of Americans by Americans ends with a lingering shot of a helmet rolling down the hill. There are no soldiers portrayed reflecting, however, and, significantly, no tears. Similarly, in *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, Rambo does not cry when his companion, Co (Julia Nickson), is killed; instead, he ties on his headband and walks off to find the soldiers who shot her, with no time to mourn. These representations contrast with the emphasis in *The Hurt Locker* on assigning space for an emotional response.

The following shots intercuts close-ups of the stiches being cut with James reacting to the smell and covering his nose with his scarf. There is a close-up of his hands probing inside the chest followed by a tight close-up of the boy's blood-soaked face with the eyelashes on his left eye accentuated by the light from outside, emphasising his youth and humanity. James finds the explosive and pulls it out before covering the body with a white sheet. Robert Burgoyne describes the scene as reaching "a heightened quality of visceral intensity… an act that puts into a single frame the imagery of bomb defusing, with its wires, leads and secret triggers, and the imagery of surgery, the manipulation of organs, vessels and flesh",[276] the boy's body fused with the ordnance. The subsequent shot begins as a blur which slowly comes into focus as James processes towards the camera carrying the body, the stylisation acting as a mourning ritual. Burgoyne explains how the "extreme manipulation of emotion in this scene evokes the pathos formulas of the past, but pushes them into the emotional range usually reserved for horror, as the shell-shocked face of the sacrificial

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[276] Burgoyne, "Embodiment in the war film: *Paradise Now* and *The Hurt Locker*," 16.

soldier of older war films is here replaced by the face of an innocent child."[277] James' apparent familiarity with the boy increases the intensity of sadness associated with the loss and transformation of the boy from a "victim of terror [to] become a weapon of terror… [which] creates a metaphor for war, its pointlessness and barbarism and its self-reinforcing nature."[278] The depiction of the Iraqi boy as grievable contributes to a disillusionment with conflict.

In a further example in *The Hurt Locker*, towards the end of the film, an Iraqi civilian is portrayed as grievable as James responds to a situation in which an Iraqi man (Suhail Al-Dabbach) has had a metal-framed suicide vest attached to him with padlocks. James looks at disarming or removing the bomb but after he finds a timer, the camera shows multiple padlocks and the likelihood of James being able to disarm it in time diminishes. As this realisation sets in, James gently places his hand on the back of the man's head and says, "It's OK, you're all right, you're all right." The man immediately looks to the sky saying, "Please don't leave me," understanding James' concern at whether he has enough time. When he is unable to cut the locks in time, James apologises for not being able to save him, saying, "There's too many locks… I can't get it off. I'm sorry, ok?" The camera cuts to a close-up of James as he looks the man in the eyes and emotionally tells him, "You understand, I'm sorry. You hear me? I'm sorry. I'm sorry." He shouts the final "I'm sorry" as he runs away before the explosion. Throughout the scene, James shows care and compassion for the civilian who is represented as harmless and scared of dying, and is traumatised by not being able to help him, to be discussed further in **Chapter 3. Expressions of Trauma in Vulnerable American Protagonists**.

It is significant that the examples regarding grievable characters discussed so far are from two of the war films of my corpus, a genre which would typically other non-American characters. Butler's observation, referenced in the Introduction, notes how, "there is no thinking of life that is not precarious – except, of course… in military fantasies in particular."[279] *American Sniper* and *The Hurt Locker*, along with *Green Zone* and *Lone Survivor*, all contrast with this characterisation, representing non-American lives as grievable, diverging from many war films which exploit the othering of a nationality to provide an enemy which can be killed without consideration. Time is given to mourn several non-American characters who die in my case study war films.

Terrorist film, *The Kingdom*, also establishes grief of a local Saudi character through identification with the American protagonist. Of all my case study films, Colonel Al Ghazi is afforded the greatest screen time for mourning. As discussed in the previous section, his

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[277] Burgoyne, "Embodiment in the war film: *Paradise Now* and *The Hurt Locker*," 16.
[278] Ibid., 17.
[279] Butler, *Frames of War*, 25.

character is established independently of the Americans and, through the grievability of his death, he is represented as being of equal value to them. In a sequence towards the end of the film, Al Ghazi, his deputy Haytham, and the American FBI agents, locate Abu Hamza (Hezi Saddik), the terrorist responsible for the bombings at the beginning of film, in a block of flats. On entering the flat where he resides, Agent Mayes (Jennifer Garner) notices Abu Hamza's granddaughter playing with a blue marble which resembles those found by Mayes within the bomb components. Knowing they have found the perpetrator, Al Ghazi stares at Abu Hamza and then walks across to him and offers to help him up. As Abu Hamza puts out his hand, Al Ghazi notices that two of his fingers are missing, having been blown off from bomb-making. Al Ghazi says, "Abu Hamza," realising that they have found him. Abu Hamza's grandson appears in the room with a gun and shoots Al Ghazi. Fleury rushes to Al Ghazi and holds him as he dies, saying his first name, "Faris." There are tears in his eyes and Al Ghazi's life is portrayed as one of significance, worthy of being mourned. Through providing opportunities for identification with both Fleury and Al Ghazi throughout the film, the viewer is encouraged to grieve his death, empathising with the protagonist's emotional response.

Figure 2.15   Fleury grieves Al Ghazi's death, *The Kingdom*, 1:35:43

Al Ghazi is also depicted as having equal worth to an American character through mirroring his death with the death of an FBI agent, Francis Manner (Kyle Chandler), which occurs at the beginning of the film. Agent Manner is stationed in Saudi Arabia and attends the scene of the bombing of the American civilian compound in the opening sequence. The mise-en-scène is depicted as chaotic, with characters constantly passing in front of the camera and brief glimpses of Manner in the background as he speaks on the phone. The shot cuts away and, when it returns, it focuses on a close-up of a small baseball cap on the ground. Manner sits nearby and notices the cap. He retrieves it, looks at it and clasps it tightly in his hands, holding it against his head. His colleague, Rex Burr (Tom Bresnahan), approaches and Manner asks him, "How old were you when your hat was this small?" Close-ups of Manner's face show him staring at the cap holding back tears, withdrawn and distraught. He folds the

cap and it fits into his hand. He shows compassion for the victims and anger at the attack, in a similar way to Al Ghazi when he tells Agent Fleury that he does not care why they were attacked, he simply wants to kill the person responsible. As Manner and Burr discuss their next movements, a further bomb explodes and envelops them. Manner's death is shown as affecting the protagonist of the film, Fleury, through his family referring to Manner as "Uncle Fran," and affecting Fleury's team, especially Agent Mayes who responds to the news of his death with tears. Manner's life is established within a few minutes on screen as being grievable. Fleury visits Manner's son, Teddy, (Brody M. Tardy) and speaks to him about his father. He tells him, "You know your Dad and I were friends… So that means that now you're my friend."

This response to Manner's death is emulated when Al Ghazi dies towards the end of the film. Following Al Ghazi's death, Fleury visits Al Ghazi's family to offer his condolences. He speaks with Al Ghazi's son, Sultan (Gaith Al-Jaberi), mirroring his visit to Manner's son, Teddy. The two colleagues are aligned and Fleury tells Sultan that his father was a very brave man and that "he was a good friend of mine." Sultan offers his hand and they shake.
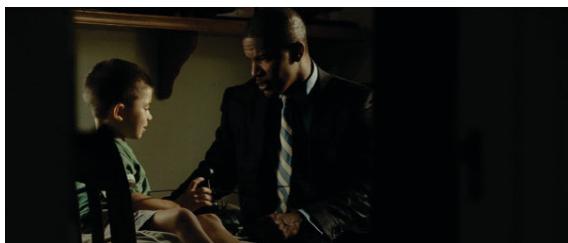
Figure 2.16 and Figure 2.17 Fleury visits Agent Manner's son shortly after Manner is killed, and shakes the hand of Al Ghazi's son following Al Ghazi's death, *The Kingdom*, 0:19:35; 1:38:46

The sombre guitar music which played over the montage of Al Ghazi's family playing together and praying returns, reminding us of the earlier scene and indicating that he is a life worth mourning because he has a family who love him. This emphasises Fleury's grief being significant for both characters, suggesting an equality in the value of both their lives. It is highly unusual for a Hollywood film to present a Saudi national as grievable, a character who would typically be othered and so ungrievable; however, *The Kingdom* accentuates his grievability, representing the grieving of his death similarly to that of an American character.

2.5.1   Making Violence Less Possible

The depictions of non-American characters as grievable or ungrievable have implications for the representation of American foreign policy in Hollywood cinema. Judith Butler discerns that depicting lives as having equal value and worth grieving "might make violence less possible, lives more equally grievable, and, hence, more livable."[280] By portraying lives which have typically been othered as being of equivalent worth to American characters and not presenting non-American deaths in a triumphant way, the harmful effects of conflict are felt more intensely which makes violence a less desired solution. My case study films' portrayals of equally grievable non-American characters contrast with previous war and terrorism narratives and emphasise the consequences of the war on terror for both sides. By offering space to mourn the deaths of local victims, as well as American deaths, Reel Fallout Cinema makes conflict less desirable, humanising those affected by it and conveying that war has consequences for both the United States and the countries in which the battles are fought. Through generating empathy and identification with characters whose lives would conventionally have been represented as insignificant, the effects of the war on terror are portrayed as multilayered. Prior notions of the protagonist being the only character of value are complicated by depicting concern for the lives, making their deaths in conflict problematic and local characters complicating the concept of the "us against them" mentality which determine some characters as good and others as enemies.

Hollywood war and terrorism films have often depicted non-American populations as insignificant. This has meant victories in conflict can be celebrated, regardless of the number of enemy deaths because they are characterised as immaterial. In *War Cinema: Hollywood on the Front Line*, written in 2006, Guy Westwell explains how, "War continues to be shown… as an existential battle between humane, moral individuals and a faceless, fanatical, inhumane enemy."[281] World War II films such as *Pearl Harbor* (dir. Michael Bay, USA, 2001) and *Dunkirk* (dir. Christopher Nolan, UK, Netherlands, France, USA, 2017) demonstrate this approach. In relation to *Saving Private Ryan* (dir. Steven Spielberg, USA, 1998), Westwell describes the effect of such depictions, "fostering a sense of World War II as a 'just war' fought by a 'greatest generation'… [which] led to a war cinema… that is more positive about war."[282] Representing the enemy as inhumane distinguishes their lives as existing solely to threaten Americans. This makes war acceptable, even virtuous, because defeating such an enemy protects lives portrayed as more valuable; there is no grief over the deaths of a merciless enemy. Judith Butler explains how ungrievable lives make this possible, "To kill such a person… differentiates in advance who will count as a life and who

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[280] Butler, *Frames of War*, viii.
[281] Westwell, *War Cinema*, 111.
[282] Ibid., 84.

will not… Under such conditions, it becomes possible to think that ending life in the name of defending life is possible, even righteous."[283] By their lives having no value, it is acceptable to kill them.

Butler considers the implications of these depictions for generating support of responding to violence with violence,

> The differentiated distribution of grievability across populations has implications for why and when we feel politically consequential affective dispositions such as horror, guilt, righteous, sadism, loss, and indifference. Why, in particular, has there been within the US a righteous response to certain forms of violence inflicted at the same time that violence suffered by the US is… loudly mourned (the iconography of the dead from 9/11)…?[284]

Many Hollywood films endorse this approach by depicting enemies of the United States killed in conflict as ungrievable, as deaths which do not matter. Some deaths are categorised as "collateral damage," a term introduced during the Vietnam War[285] and referenced in films such as *The Bourne Identity* (dir. Doug Liman, USA, Germany, Czech Republic, 2002), *X-Men: First Class* (dir. Matthew Vaughn, USA, UK, 2011) and *Eye in the Sky* (dir. Gavin Hood, UK, South Africa, 2015) as well as in the title of *Collateral Damage* (dir. Andrew Davis, USA, Mexico, 2002). My case study films portray the lives of non-American characters differently and do not mention "collateral damage". Instead, they depict the lives of people of different nationalities as having value, being arrested instead of killed, having motivations for their actions, being empowered to affect their futures, and being equally grievable, representing a shared humanity which challenges the apparent virtues of conflict.

The end of *The Kingdom* displays the consequences of conflict on those caught in the crossfire, and asserts that ongoing conflict will not lead to peace. This is highly significant in relation to President Bush's rhetoric regarding the war on terror. Bush claimed his aims were to secure peace for the United States, as Richard Haass asserts, "motivations for the war [included that]… the democratic transformation of the Middle East… would pave the way to a regional peace. This view [was]… deeply and widely held in the administration of George W. Bush."[286] This is endorsed by Bob Woodward's evaluation of a conversation with President Bush:

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[283] Butler, *Frames of War*, xxix–xxx.
[284] Ibid., 24.
[285] "Inventing Collateral Damage: Civilian Casualties, War, and Empire," *University of Toronto: Faculty of Arts & Science, Department of History, Between the Lines*, 2009, accessed August 31, 2024, https://www.history.utoronto.ca/publications/inventing-collateral-damage-civilian-casualties-war-and-empire.
[286] Haass, *A World in Disarray*, 223.

> On August 20 [2002], I interviewed the president… He talked… about remaking the world… Saddam was starving his people in the outlying Shiite areas, he said. 'There is a human condition that we must worry about. As we think through Iraq, we may or may not attack... But it will be for the objective of making the world more peaceful.'.[287]

My case study films depict a concern for the human condition of the Afghans and Iraqis portrayed, but also contest the view that conflict will lead to peace, aligning with Greg Grandin's proposition in *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America*. Grandin deploys the term "endless war" to describe the United States' historical approach to foreign policy, a discussion which underpins my discussion in **Chapter 4. American Exceptionalism and its Discontents**, and explains how this continuing policy has not achieved peace, "After centuries of fleeing forward across the blood meridian, all the things that expansion was supposed to preserve have been destroyed, and all the things it was meant to destroy have been preserved. Instead of peace, there's endless war."[288] Samuel Moyn concurs, declaring, ""Endless war has become part of the way Americans live now".[289] All four war films in my corpus end with the wars ongoing, and the final sequence of *The Kingdom* establishes how vengeance on both sides will result in an ongoing cycle of violence.

The Kingdom ends with the FBI agents discussing the investigation in their office, having returned to the United States from Saudi Arabia. Agent Leavitt (Jason Bateman) asks Fleury what he said to Mayes to stop her crying after briefing them about the death of Manner. The scene is intercut with the mother of the grandson of Abu Hamza asking the boy, "Tell me, what did your grandfather whisper in your ear before he died?" In the FBI office, Fleury replies, "I told her we were gonna kill them all." In Saudi Arabia, the grandson replies, "Don't fear them, my child. We are going to kill them all." The echoing of these words emphasises how, whilst both sides continue to seek revenge, the vicious cycle of violence between the west and the Middle East will be ongoing. By mirroring the two situations and lives lost on both sides, the narrative establishes that neither side is righteous in its killing and all lives are equally valuable. This concept of equality of life is vital to Judith Butler for all of humanity to thrive. Butler asserts how, "shared precariousness… invites a more robust universalizing of rights that seeks to address basic human needs for food, shelter, and other conditions for persisting and flourishing."[290] Reel Fallout Cinema's portrayals of shared humanity demonstrate a desire for violence to be less possible so that all lives have the opportunity to flourish.

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[287] Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, 162.
[288] Greg Grandin, *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2019), 270.
[289] Samuel Moyn, *Humane: How the United States abandoned peace and reinvented war* (London: Verso, 2022), 4.
[290] Butler, *Frames of War*, 28-29.

2.6   Conclusion

This chapter contends that, in Reel Fallout Cinema, several characters local to the countries in which the films are set are depicted differently from conventional representations in Hollywood conflict films. Instead of being portrayed as inhumane enemies, they have a shared humanity with the American characters. This is achieved through their motivations being contextualised, their voices being heard, their empowerment to make decisions and have agency, opportunities for identification and sympathy, traits of heroism, and their deaths as grievable. This aligns their worth with those of American characters and challenges the United States' commitment to endless war, an area which will be discussed in detail in **Chapter 4. American Exceptionalism and its Discontents**.

War and terrorism films have typically portrayed Americans as grievable and non-Americans as expendable, but these films, including all of the war films, represent many non-American lives as valued and grievable. By offering opportunities to identify with and grieve local characters, the films provide space for the viewer to mourn both American and non-American characters and reflect on the war on terror as a whole. In this way, these films represent a post- post-9/11 world; they construct a compassionate framing of characters who would typically be othered which contrasts with prior war and terrorism cinema and establishes a distinct collection of films.

In the earlier films of my corpus, *Green Zone*, *Lone Survivor*, *The Kingdom* and *The Hurt Locker*, the characters of Freddy and Gulab have agency to make decisions about their own lives and destinies, and Al Ghazi and Beckham are depicted as grievable, mourned by the American protagonists. *American Sniper* also portrays grievable non-American characters such as Sheikh Al-Obodi, his son, and the owner of the house opposite The Butcher's hideout, who are grieved by other Iraqis. In the later films, *American Sniper* (2014), *Patriots Day* (2016) and *The 15:17 to Paris* (2018), as well as *Captain Phillips* (2013) and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), there are others who are characterised as the enemy, more similar to genre conventions, but they still contrast with previous war and terrorism films as the Americans do not revel in their capture or death, and in some instances, their actions are contextualised and their voices heard.

By constructing local people as sharing a humanity with the Americans, violence becomes less appealing. These films suggest that the harm done to *both sides* by an endless cycle of violence matters, making peace more desirable. By determining that lives of Americans and non-Americans are valuable, there are more losses to affect the protagonists. This will be

explored in the following chapter, **Chapter 3. Expressions of Trauma in Vulnerable American Protagonists**. The deaths of grievable, non-American characters in these films contribute to the trauma of the American characters and lead to the supposition that conflict is detrimental to both sides.

Chapter 3 Expressions of Trauma in Vulnerable American Protagonists

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"PTSD IS A REAL THING. IT WILL EAT YOU UP AND KILL YOU. IT'S LIKE A DIFFERENT LIFE, A DIFFERENT LIFE."

JOHN MACLELLAN, AMERICAN MANHUNT: THE BOSTON MARATHON BOMBINGS, CHAPTER II, "THE AMERICAN DREAM," NETFLIX[291]

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3.1   Traumatic Events and their Effects

The previous chapter established how several of the films in Reel Fallout Cinema depict non-American characters as grievable, contrasting with conventional portrayals in prior war and terrorism films. This chapter will determine that many of these films also diverge from pre-9/11 Hollywood in the representation of their protagonists. All nine case study films have war and terrorism narratives which involve American protagonists being emotionally affected by conflict and expressing their emotions, unusual for the action genre. The films convey sadness and reflection in response to traumatic events, the exception being *Green Zone* in which the protagonist expresses anger and frustration but still responds emotionally and shows vulnerability when captured. My research draws on "Theories of trauma, testimony and witnessing [which] are currently informing literary, film and media studies."[292] One of the fundamental differences from depictions of trauma in previous Hollywood films, many of which are set during war, is that some of the distressing situations occur in the West, as in *The 15:17 to Paris* (dir. Clint Eastwood, USA, 2018) in which a train in France is attacked, as well as within the United States itself, as in *Patriots Day* (dir. Peter Berg, Hong Kong, USA, 2016) which depicts the bombing of the Boston Marathon. Taken as a collective, Reel Fallout Cinema portrays a world in which nowhere is safe for American civilians, not even the United States. Threats are depicted in an American civilian compound in Saudi Arabia in *The*

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[291] *American Manhunt: The Boston Marathon Bombings*, Chapter ii, "The American Dream," directed by Floyd Russ, viewed July 6, 2023, on *Netflix*.
[292] Susannah Radstone, "Trauma Theory: Contexts, Politics, Ethics," in *Paragraph* 30, no. 1 (2007), 22, accessed April 6, 2025, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/214014.

Kingdom (Peter Berg, USA, 2007), an unarmed container vessel off the coast of Somalia in *Captain Phillips* (dir. Paul Greengrass, USA, 2013), and various locations in Pakistan in *Zero Dark Thirty* (dir. Kathryn Bigelow, USA, 2012). *The Kingdom* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, along with Iraq War film *American Sniper* (dir. Clint Eastwood, USA, 2014), also reference the September 11, 2001, attacks, emphasising the context as being one of fear of further terrorism.

A further distinction with prior war and terrorism films is that the protagonists are depicted as being traumatised during the incidents rather than afterwards, conflating the attacks with the emotional effects and generating opportunities for new distress to compound previous trauma. In Vietnam War films *The Deer Hunter* (dir. Michael Cimino, USA, UK, 1978) and *Born on the Fourth of July* (dir. Oliver Stone, USA, 1989), for example, themes of war and trauma are explored, but the films were released after the war and the focus on trauma is post-war rather than during combat. In contrast, all nine case study films were released during the war on terror, with the four war films released during the ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the emotional effects on the protagonists are depicted during the traumatic events, not once those experiences are over.

The case study films also diverge from previous conflict films through their protagonists extensively expressing their emotional state. Their willingness to display vulnerability inevitably leads to an exploration of parallels with melodrama which is noted as influencing, "war films… [which] participate, along with any drama whose outcome is the recognition of virtue, in the long-playing tradition of American melodrama."[293] My film corpus, however, emphasises a different impact of melodrama, creating heightened displays of emotion and vulnerability. Linda Williams describes how "melodramas are deemed excessive for their… naked displays of emotion,"[294] a description which can be applied to Reel Fallout Cinema which focuses on tears. This aligns with "melodrama weepies aimed, presumably, at passive women".[295] However, my case study films are in the war and terrorism subgenres of the action film with predominantly male protagonists expressing their feelings, extending the influence of melodrama and challenging typical representations of masculinity in action cinema. The only lead character of the nine films who noticeably restricts viewer access to their inner feelings is female protagonist, Maya (Jessica Chastain), in *Zero Dark Thirty*, whose stoic, resolute dedication to her mission to find Osama bin Laden aligns her portrayal more with typically masculine qualities, until the end of the film when tears betray her troubled emotional state.

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[293] Williams, *Playing the Race Card*, 26.
[294] Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," in *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 44, No. 4 (Summer, 1991), accessed November 21, 2020, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1212758, 3.
[295] Ibid., 4.

The emotional expressiveness of the protagonists is indicative of grief driving the narratives which also pertains to the melodramatic mode. In Hollywood conflict films prior to 2007, American protagonists would typically be depicted as unaffected heroes acting to complete their mission, suppressing any emotional reaction to events. The protagonists of Reel Fallout Cinema are more passive and reactive, responding to an emotional driver rather than an active attempt to change the course of events. Some of the films depict them showing symptoms of PTSD such as flashbacks, being constantly aware of threats, and engaging in destructive behaviour,[296] in Iraq War films *American Sniper* and *The Hurt Locker* (dir. Kathryn Bigelow, USA, 2008), for example. In others, such as terrorist films *The Kingdom*, *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Captain Phillips* and *Patriots Day* as well as Afghanistan War film, *Lone Survivor* (dir. Peter Berg, USA, 2013), they are depicted in a heightened emotional state and expressing vulnerabilities through crying or presenting PTSD symptoms such as being easily startled or having difficulty concentrating. Iraq War film *Green Zone* (dir. Paul Greengrass, USA, 2010) and terrorism film *The 15:17 to Paris*, as well as *Captain Phillips* and *The Hurt Locker*, characterise their protagonists exhibiting high risk behaviour in response to traumatic situations, increasing the danger to their lives.

A further trait of melodrama is that of the personal journey of an individual, another feature on which these films draw. I will argue that many of the films employ the use of an individual or small group of lead characters to focus on emotional identification and construct empathy, increasing the viewer's ability to feel for, and with, the protagonists; this contributes to my overarching contention that the films generate space to mourn. The use of conventions of realism creates greater opportunities for identification through extensive point of view shots, hand-held camerawork and real people playing themselves. The empathy of the viewer is supplemented by the protagonists themselves being highly empathetic compared with typical heroes of Hollywood conflict films. They grieve for non-Americans, as discussed in the previous chapter, and mourn losses on both sides, thereby destabilising the United States' claim to exceptionalism in its implementation of the war on terror which contributes to the argument of the following chapter. Representing traumatised protagonists and soldiers losing their lives for the war on terror while attacks on Americans continue, as depicted in the terrorism films, questions whether the sacrifices are worth the cost if the war on terror is unable to prevent further terrorism.

In examining the representation of trauma, my analysis draws on the deliberations of Nadia Abu El-Haj in *Combat Trauma* which discern how trauma caused by conflict has been diagnosed over the decades and defines PTSD symptoms. By reflecting on the behaviours of

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[296] A list of symptoms associated with PTSD can be found on the NHS website. "Symptoms - Post-traumatic stress disorder," *NHS*, accessed September 12, 2024, https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/conditions/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/symptoms/.

the protagonists in the case study war films, I determine how trauma manifests in the representations of soldiers fighting in Afghanistan and Iraq. It utilises "[t]heories of trauma, testimony and witnessing [which] are currently informing literary, film and media studies."[297] In "Representing Trauma: Grief, Amnesia and Traumatic Memory in Nolan's New Millennial Films,"[298] for example, Fran Pheasant-Kelly discusses how the Vietnam War destabilised conventional masculinity which has since been further affected by 9/11 and subsequent events. My case study films draw on the collective trauma of the nation, and the world, following the attacks on September 11, 2001, and enhance the personal trauma of their protagonists to emphasise how the compounding of that trauma through the war on terror has affected them. The PTSD symptoms shown by many of the protagonists demonstrates the intensity of the trauma. The terrorist attacks in *Patriots Day* and *The 15:17 to Paris* add to experiences of previous attacks. In addition, I consider how the films use affect to generate responses in the viewer which enhance empathy with the traumatised protagonists.

This chapter will begin with an exploration of how my nine case study films depict the dangers Americans face across the world, including at home, and how these events are framed as traumatising. This will be followed by a discussion of the ways in which the collective trauma of 9/11 provides context for several of the narratives, impressing how the ordeals experienced in the films compound previous trauma with new, personal trauma, manifesting as PTSD in several examples. Discussion will then progress to demonstrate how the characters are shown to be traumatised during the events rather than the traumatic effects being displayed post-conflict, as well as examining how they expressively display their emotions. This will include substantial consideration of the influences of melodrama and how emotion motivates the diegesis of each film, as well as how drawing on the melodramatic mode enables the depiction of personal journeys which, alongside realist conventions and affect, results in identification and empathy with the protagonists. To conclude, I will examine how the representation of trauma engages with American foreign policy discourse, commenting on the incursions into Afghanistan and Iraq as well as further terrorist attacks, and portraying damage inflicted on both military personnel and American civilians.

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[297] Abu El-Haj, *Combat Trauma*, 22.
[298] Fran Pheasant-Kelly, "Representing Trauma: Grief, Amnesia and Traumatic Memory in Nolan's New Millennial Films," in *The Cinema of Christopher Nolan: Imagining the Impossible* eds. Jacqueline Furby and Stuart Joy, 152-178 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), accessed June 12, 2025, ProQuest Ebook Central, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/soton-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1980213#.

3.2 Global Threats in a Never-Ending Conflict

Hollywood war films have typically represented the trauma of American soldiers in overseas conflicts. In films such as *Captain Newman, M.D.* (dir. David Miller, USA, 1963), *The Manchurian Candidate* (dir. John Frankenheimer, USA, 1962) and *Born on the Fourth of July*, set in World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War respectively, characters fight in other countries and then attempt to process their trauma back in the United States, either post-war or on leave from the battlefield. In *Captain Newman, M.D.*, the lead character explains how, "acute anxiety cases were sent into combat and sooner or later, they began to crack up. Now they're streaming back from Europe, from Africa, from the Pacific." The trauma is portrayed as being the result of activity "out there" as well as happening prior to the focus of the narratives. Terrorism films such as *The Delta Force* (dir. Menahem Golan, USA, Israel, 1986) and *Munich* (dir. Steven Spielberg, USA, Canada, France, 2005), both based on real events, similarly focus on overseas threats. The films which have incorporated terrorist attacks on American soil, such as *Die Hard* (dir. John McTiernan, USA, 1988) and *The Siege* (dir. Edward Zwick, USA, 1998), are generally fictional, escapist action cinema rather than accounts of real situations. In contrast, Reel Fallout Cinema, made up of both war and terrorism films based on real events, depicts traumatic situations taking place both overseas and closer to home, and reveals its protagonists being traumatised in the moment of the battles and attacks contributing to the representation of endless conflict, rather than in the safety of a post-war environment. This results in the emotional effects of events being compounded by further traumatising experiences portrayed throughout the films.

Before exploring how the films demonstrate global, never-ending conflict which affects the protagonists and supplements previous trauma, I will first consider definitions of trauma and how trauma and war, and trauma and terrorism, have been discussed. Trauma "refers to experiences that cause intense physical and psychological stress reactions."[299] It is the psychological effects of the wars and terrorist attacks on the American protagonists which are the focus of many of the Reel Fallout cycle of films. This is particularly true of three of the war films, *The Hurt Locker*, *Lone Survivor* and *American Sniper*, the latter described by Tim Newark as "very much about the psychological impact it has on soldiers",[300] and four of the terrorism films, *The Kingdom*, *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Captain Phillips* and *Patriots Day*. The relationship between war and trauma has an extensive history; in *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America*, Greg Grandin explains how there was

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[299] Center for Substance Abuse Treatment (US), "Trauma-Informed Care in Behavioral Health Services," in *(Rockville (MD): Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration* (US); 2014), (Treatment Improvement Protocol (TIP) Series, No. 57.) Section 1, A Review of the Literature, accessed May 11, 2025, https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK207192/.
[300] Tim Newark, *Fifty Great War Films*, (Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2016), 204.

"an increasing concern for the mental health of veterans"[301] from as early as the aftermath of the Civil War.

In cinema, trauma was foregrounded with representations of the Vietnam War in which "58,000 Americans [were] killed… [and] 4 million Vietnamese"[302] and "PTSD [was]… [f]irst articulated in the early-to-mid 1970s as the 'post-Vietnam syndrome'".[303] Lawrence H. Suid explains Vietnam's effect on Hollywood,

> No one could offer a justification for the fifty-eight thousand American combat deaths… Reflecting the nation, Hollywood could not come to terms with the trauma the war had inflicted on the American people and so could not figure out how to turn an apparent defeat into popular entertainment.[304]

Suid recognises the trauma felt by Americans civilians, in addition to the soldiers who fought, and references the "apparent defeat" the United States suffered. Similarly, the Afghanistan and Iraq wars have been determined as "comprehensive failures".[305] The Afghanistan War resulted in "2,324"[306] US Military deaths and "In April 2021 new US President Joe Biden announced that the remaining 2,500 US troops would be withdrawn from Afghanistan by 11 September 2021. Biden: 'I've concluded that it's time to end America's longest war; it's time for American troops to come home.'"[307] In the Iraq War, "more than 100,000 Iraqi civilians have been killed… Since 2003 [to 2011]… nearly 4,500 Americans… [have been] killed",[308] and, "[In March 2023], roughly 2,500 U.S. troops are scattered around the country [of Iraq]".[309] I contend that these statistics indicate a primary reason for the narratives of my case study war films focusing on the effects, both physical and mental, of conflict on the protagonists.

The major difference between films concerning the Vietnam War and films depicting the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq is that Hollywood's representations of Vietnam were released once

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[301] Grandin, *The End of the Myth*, 102.

[302] Westwell, *War Cinema*, 58.

[303] Abu El-Haj, *Combat Trauma*, 7.

[304] Lawrence H. Suid, *Guts & Glory: The Making of the American Military Image in Film* (Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky, 2002), 315.

[305] Mark Landler, "20 Years On, the War on Terror Grinds Along, With No End in Sight," *The New York Times*, September 10, 2021, updated September 26, 2021, accessed September 11, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/10/world/europe/war-on-terror-bush-biden-qaeda.html.

[306] "Human and Budgetary Costs to Date of the U.S. War in Afghanistan, 2001-2022," *Watson Institute for International & Public Affairs*, Brown University, August 2021, accessed June 2, 2025, https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2021/human-and-budgetary-costs-date-us-war-afghanistan-2001-2022.

[307] "Afghanistan War: How did 9/11 lead to a 20-year war?" *Imperial War Museum Stories*, accessed June 2, 2025, https://www.iwm.org.uk/history/afghanistan-war-how-did-911-lead-to-a-20-year-war.

[308] Zachary Laub, Council on Foreign Relations, Kevin Lizarazo, Council on Foreign Relations, and Jeremy Sherlick, Council on Foreign Relations, "A timeline of the Iraq War," *PBS NewsHour*, March 7, 2023, accessed September 18, 2023, https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/a-timeline-of-the-iraq-war.

[309] Associated Press, "Why US Troops Remain in Iraq 20 Years After 'Shock and Awe'," *U.S. News*, March 15, 2023, accessed September 18, 2023, https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2023-03-15/why-us-troops-remain-in-iraq-20-years-after-shock-and-awe.

the war had finished, while my case study films were released during the wars while the fighting was ongoing and appeared to be never-ending; the concept of endless war will be discussed in detail in the subsequent chapter, **Chapter 4. American Exceptionalism and its Discontents**. Also, several films concerning the Vietnam War include representations of trauma but it is often supporting characters who are traumatised and their mental state results in them deserting their platoons or dying, for example, Kurtz (Marlon Brando) in *Apocalypse Now* (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, USA, 1979) and Nick (Christopher Walken) in *The Deer Hunter*, or the depiction of trauma is set post-war, as in *Coming Home* (dir. Hal Ashby, USA, 1978) and *Born on the Fourth of July*. In my case study films, however, it is the main characters who are affected by their experiences and trauma is foregrounded during conflict. The lead characters are not the unyielding, action heroes of *Rambo* (Sylvester Stallone) in *First Blood* (dir. Ted Kotcheff, USA, 1982) and *Rambo: First Blood Part II* (dir. George P. Cosmatos, USA, Mexico, 1985), or the stoic Colonel Moore (Mel Gibson) in *We Were Soldiers* (dir. Randall Wallace, France, Germany, USA, 2002) who remains steadfast in his conviction that U.S. involvement in Vietnam is righteous and necessary; instead, they are emotional and vulnerable.

Vietnam War films which have featured emotion have either provided safety and closure to the protagonist's tears or manifested as resolve rather than sadness. In *Casualties of War*, the protagonist, Eriksen (Michael J. Fox), is distressed by failing to prevent his fellow soldiers attacking and murdering a Vietnamese girl, but the film ends with resolution in the four soldiers being convicted and Eriksen being told, "It's over now." The war doesn't feel never-ending and he is given closure to continue his life unimpeded by the traumatic events. When Rambo cries at the end of *First Blood*, it is once the fight is over and he is being consoled by Colonel Trautman (Richard Crenna) who led his platoon in Vietnam and he trusts completely. While fighting, Rambo is determined, resilient and uses his initiative to survive. He is characterised as an elite warrior, displaying no weakness. Towards the end of *Full Metal Jacket* (dir. Stanley Kubrick, UK, USA, 1987), the unit are attacked by an enemy sniper who, after a prolonged battle, is killed. The film ends with a voiceover from the protagonist, Joker (Matthew Modine), stating, "I am alive, and I am not afraid." He is determined and undaunted rather than vulnerable and powerless as he joins the troops singing "Mickey Mouse Club" as they march away.

Studies considering the traumatic effects of terrorism have a much shorter history, with "[r]esearch examining the psychological consequences of terrorism… [being] in its infancy".[310] The heroes of terrorism films do not typically display grief but act decisively to

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[310] Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on Responding to the Psychological Consequences of Terrorism, "2. Understanding the Psychological Consequences of Traumatic Events, Disasters, and Terrorism," in *Preparing for the Psychological Consequences of Terrorism: A Public Health Strategy*, eds. A Stith Butler, AM Panzer and LR

prevent attacks and save lives, for example, Casey Ryback (Steven Seagal) in *Under Siege* (dir. Andrew Davis, France, USA, 1992), Frank Horrigan (Clint Eastwood) in *In the Line of Fire* (dir. Wolfgang Petersen, USA, 1993) and David Grant (Kurt Russell) in *Executive Decision* (dir. Stuart Baird, USA, 1996). Conversely, my case study terrorism films incorporate depictions of the psychological effects of terrorism. By analysing traumatised protagonists in terrorism films alongside examining war cinema, this thesis offers a diverse perspective from other studies which have focused on one subgenre or the other rather than focusing on the portrayal of trauma in war and terrorism films concurrently. I will now explore how the nine case study films portray global threats to American citizens, including within the United States, showing how traumatic situations affect the protagonists. I will also consider how the war on terror is represented as never-ending, with the September 11, 2001, attacks leading to subsequent traumatic events portrayed as compounding prior trauma.

3.2.1   Nowhere Safe for Americans

Of the nine case study films, *Zero Dark Thirty* has the most wide-ranging of settings with scenes of threat in a variety of different countries, conveying the impression that Americans are at risk globally. In this way, the film acts as a microcosm of the larger picture illustrated by the Reel Fallout cycle, that Americans are vulnerable to terrorism across the world. Robert Burgoyne describes how, "*Zero Dark Thirty*… maps the specific contours of what might be called a new violent imaginary, shaped by endless threat, by the constant possibility of attack".[311] I argue that "Reel Fallout Cinema" could supplant "*Zero Dark Thirty*" in this sentence. The first half of *Zero Dark Thirty* is primarily set in Pakistan, in which lead character, Maya, faces a range of violent incidents; she assists in the interrogation, including torture, of a prisoner who associated with Osama bin Laden; has dinner in a hotel when a bomb explodes; and is shot at when leaving her apartment. Outside of Pakistan, Maya cross-examines terrorists in Poland and Afghanistan, indicating the global reach of terrorism, and is informed of attacks taking place in Turkey and the United Kingdom. The film depicts a chaotic, dangerous world in which nowhere is safe.

While abroad, Maya's life is under constant threat, contributing to her fragile emotional state. When she asks her colleague, Dan (Jason Clarke), if he will interrogate a suspect, Dan declines, telling her he is leaving, "I just think I've seen too many guys naked… I need to go and do something normal for a while… You should come with me… You're looking a little strung out yourself." Dan is portrayed relaxing on a chair as Maya approaches and then

Goldfrank, accessed June 26, 2024, (Washington (DC): National Academies Press (US), 2003), https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK221638/.

[311] Burgoyne, "The Violated Body," 247.

shown in close-up with a plain blurred background of the ground surrounding him, signifying his freedom now he is leaving. Conversely, Maya is shot standing in front of a cage with the bars close to her face denoting her as partially trapped in her determination to continue the mission. When Maya replies, "I'm not gonna find Abu Ahmed from D.C.," Dan tells her, "Watch your back when you get back to Pakistan. Everyone knows you there now." The following sequence plays on the tension created by Dan's words as the shot cuts from the well-lit, relative safety of the military base to dark shots of Maya approaching a checkpoint at night. The car headlights generate a glare towards the camera and mask the surroundings hidden in the pitch-black darkness. A security guard shines a torch towards Maya and she is forced to close her eyes, making her additionally vulnerable as she would be unable to defend herself if she was attacked. Tight framing of the security guard behind the torch followed by a cut to Maya's face covered by the reflection from the torch beam in the car window produce a disorienting feeling emulating Maya's perspective. Berenike Jung explains how the film invites the viewer "to explore their feelings,"[312] illustrated by this example.

Figure 3.1 Maya is blinded by the security guard's torch, *Zero Dark Thirty*, 0:47:11

Once through the checkpoint, Maya arrives at the Marriott Hotel where she is meeting her colleague, Jessica (Jennifer Ehle), for dinner. She apologises for being late, "Sorry, f***ing checkpoints," indicating the stressful effect living in Pakistan is having on her, and covers her eyes with her hands, again demonstrating her vulnerability and desire to block out the world around her.

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[312] Jung, *The Invisibilities of Political Torture*, 27.

Figure 3.2 Maya puts her hands over her eyes, stressed, *Zero Dark Thirty*, 0:48:53

Maya coughs and Jessica says, "We're just worried about you, ok? Is that ok to say? I mean, look how run down you are." Shots of Jessica are warmly lit close-ups of her leaning on to the table towards Maya and accentuate her wedding ring and the bottle of wine in front of her. The hotel restaurant is represented as a sanctuary from the dangers outside. This is undermined moments later when Jessica receives a phone call and the camera focuses on Maya eating with her head propped up by her hand. She finally appears to have relaxed into the meal when they are blasted from their chairs to the floor by an explosion. The bomb emphasises the toll of Maya's work as nowhere is safe; the dangers of life in Pakistan for the CIA characters are everywhere. A further example is a scene in which Maya leaves her apartment for work in the morning and, as she drives out of her gate, two shooters with machine guns fire at her continuously until she manages to reverse the car and close the gate. The car with the shooters in is foregrounded as the gate opens in the background, creating tension for the viewer having knowledge of the danger Maya is in slightly prior to the attack. A plethora of bullets sprays the car and guard's cabin and the process of Maya reversing and the gate being closed is revealed in detail with close-ups of the gear shift and Maya's foot pressing down on the pedal followed by the security guard's hand shaking as it pushes the gate button. As Maya breathes quickly in her car, she is clearly traumatised by the incident. The chief of the Pakistan station later explains to Maya: "You're on their list… and you of all people should know that once you're on their list, you never get off. Next time there might not be bullet-proof glass to save you." Maya's life is at constant risk, in her accommodation, in public spaces and navigating around the country.

The remaining eight films contribute to this representation by portraying Americans at risk in different specific countries; Afghanistan in *Lone Survivor*, Iraq in *The Hurt Locker*, *Green Zone* and *American Sniper*, off the coast of Somalia in *Captain Phillips*, Saudi Arabia in *The*

Kingdom, France in *The 15:17 to Paris*, and the United States in *Patriots Day*. *The Kingdom* opens with an attack involving terrorists dressed as Saudi police officers who infiltrate an American civilian compound and open fire with machine guns on families living in the compound following by a suicide bomber who detonates, killing and injuring Americans playing softball. The scene of the explosion juxtaposes the socialising and enjoyment of the families with the horror of the deaths and injuries. The initial attack is followed by a second bombing of the first responders. The incidents portrayed are based on the real-life attack on Khobar Tower in Saudi Arabia which killed 19 American military personnel and injured "more than 400 U.S. and international military members and civilians."[313] By depicting American families playing softball, a quintessential American sport, the film emphasises the vulnerability of American lives and that anyone, including civilians, is in danger. Following the first explosion, FBI Agent Manner (Kyle Chandler) stands in the destroyed compound and starts giving orders when the second blast occurs, killing him and his colleague, Agent Burr (Tom Bresnahan). The impact of the first attack and presence of the FBI beginning their investigation may cause the viewer to think it was the only attack, so the second blast delivers a shock factor which reiterates the lack of safety for all Americans overseas, including FBI agents.

My case study films demonstrate the dangers of the sea as well as land. In *Captain Phillips*, Americans are threatened on an American cargo ship off the coast of Somalia. Lead character Captain Richard Phillips (Tom Hanks) is taken hostage by pirates and forced into a lifeboat. Over half of the running time of the film takes place in the confined space of the lifeboat with the four pirates and Phillips. The camera appears to be sharing the enclosed area with them, only providing close-ups with no wide angles or full-length shots and emphasising the proximity of the characters. His life is threatened on numerous occasions and the tension and pressure is compounded by the claustrophobic nature of the very small space in which the five people are contained. The pirates shout at one another and at Phillips. When one of the pirates, Elmi (Mahat M. Ali), says he wants some air, Bilal (Barkhad Abdirahman) replies, "It's like hell in here." The traumatising effect on Phillips is demonstrated by his attempt to escape by jumping into the ocean. He is willing to risk the dangers of the open sea because being held at gunpoint in the small lifeboat has become overwhelming. The pirates fire on him in the water and he is obliged to return to the lifeboat. When Phillips is eventually rescued, it is by the U.S. Navy which is depicted as competent, calm and professional, contrasting with the haphazard, amateur characterisation of the Somali pirates. Rescuing Phillips off the African coast emphasises the significance of the Navy in the United States' protection of its citizens anywhere in the world. Phillips' book on

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[313] Tech. Sgt. Michael Battles, "25 Years Later: Remembering Khobar Towers bombing," in *National Guard*, June 25, 2021, accessed August 21, 2025, https://www.nationalguard.mil/News/Article-View/Article/2671211/25-years-later-remembering-khobar-towers-bombing/.

which the film is based is an account of "The Maersk Alabama… appears to be the first US-flag vessel taken by Somali pirates, making the crew the first American citizens captured by pirates in about 200 years."[314] There were 556 pirate attacks in total globally in 2009[315] but, by choosing the only American ship to be captured, *Captain Phillips* establishes a global threat to Americans.

In *The 15:17 to Paris*, the threat of a terrorist attack occurs in the West, situated on a train travelling from the Netherlands to France. Three Americans are on holiday in Europe and are on board the train when the terrorist attacks. The mise-en-scène of a high-speed train is more similar to that of the urban United States than the desert of Iraq or the mountains of Afghanistan, making the attacks feel closer to home. *Patriots Day*, depicting the bombing of the Boston Marathon, returns the terrorist threat to American soil as it was on that fateful day in September 2001. Several of the case study films are contextualised by the 9/11 attacks. Richard Gray compellingly argues how, due to the Bush administration's immediate military response, including wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, "commemorative rituals… ceded place to the initiation of a state of emergency".[316] E. Ann Kaplan's analysis of World War II trauma explains how war could detract from the grieving process, "If acknowledging the war traumas soldiers suffered in World War II was slow to gather public momentum, this was understandable. While a war is ongoing… the public needs to give it their full support."[317] This was true of the wars which were declared in response to the 9/11 attacks, "The tide of nationalistic fervor provided significant public support for the wars in Afghanistan (begun in 2001) and Iraq (begun with the invasion of Baghdad in 2003)".[318] My contention is that the films which comprise the Reel Fallout cycle initiated an emphasis on the emotional impacts of conflict in war and terrorism films because the support of the wars halted the nation's opportunity to mourn and an outlet was subsequently required for grief. As further attacks and threats against Americans occurred, the trauma of 9/11 was not only unresolved but compounded by successive incidents in the war on terror. My case study films' representation of traumatised protagonists through the lens of a post-9/11 world demonstrates this assertion.

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[314] Mark Tran, "Somali pirates seize ship and US crew off Horn of Africa," In *The Guardian*, April 8, 2009, accessed June 4, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/apr/08/somali-pirates-ship-hijack.

[315] Jose Luis Sabau, "Modern Day Pirates: Attack Numbers and Types," in *Desteia*, May 27, 2024, accessed June 2, 2025, https://desteia.com/blog/modern-pirates.

[316] Richard Gray, *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd., 2011), 8, https://doi-org.soton.idm.oclc.org/10.1002/9781444395860.ch1.

[317] Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*, 75.

[318] Sturken, *Terrorism in American Memory*, 6-7.

3.2.2   Compounding the Trauma of 9/11

Peter Frankopan explains the implications of September 11, 2001 on people's mental health, "The psychological impact of the attacks, which saw the collapse of both of the Twin Towers and the Pentagon building damaged, was intense… [A] co-ordinated attack against mainland targets was devastating."[319] Karen Randell's discussion of Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11* (dir. Michael Moore, USA, 2004) references how this devastation was felt globally, "Moore acknowledges that the 9/11 event is a collective trauma, one in which we can all share, no matter whether we are a New Yorker or a world citizen."[320] Collective trauma is defined as "a traumatic psychological effect shared by a group of individuals of any size, up to and including, an entire society or ethnic group."[321] The significance of recognising that "trauma is not only experienced individually, but also collectively (or culturally)"[322] is asserted by Beschara Karam who explains,

> Trauma studies initially focused only on the trauma of the individual and precluded the historical or cultural context. However, as trauma studies has evolved, it has become apparent that the individual traumas experienced as well as the historical context in which these traumas occurred, are relevant to understanding trauma.[323]

The collective trauma of the September 11, 2001, attacks forms the backdrop to my case study films and demonstrates the never-ending nature of the threat against American lives which is characterised as unpredictable, global and relentless. It is within the context of collective trauma that the individual trauma of the protagonists is examined. Four films, *The Kingdom*, *Zero Dark Thirty*, *American Sniper* and *Patriots Day*, explicitly reference 9/11, the first two in their opening sequences, connecting their narratives to the attacks, *American Sniper* showing the attacks as an incentive for its protagonist wanting to serve in Iraq, and the terrorists in *Patriots Day*, where I will begin, referencing a belief that 9/11 was a conspiracy perpetrated by the U.S. government.

The Boston Marathon bombings depicted in *Patriots Day* occur within the shadow of 9/11. In their comprehensive account, *Boston Strong: A City's Triumph Over Tragedy*, Casey Sherman and Dave Wedge describe the significant impact of the September 11, 2001, attacks on the city of Boston and surrounding region,

> In 2001,… two planes left out of Boston's Logan International Airport and crashed into the World Trade Center, killing nearly three thousand people and changing our world

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[319] Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 498.

[320] Randell, "'It was like a movie'," 142.

[321] Beschara Karam, "The Representation of Perpetrator Trauma in Forgiveness," in *Communicatio: South African Journal for Communication Theory and Research*, 45:1, 73 (23 Apr 2019), accessed May 21, 2025, DOI: 10.1080/02500167.2018.1561480.

[322] Ibid., 72.

[323] Ibid., 72-73.

forever… Most of the passengers on those flights hailed from Boston… Most in New England knew someone, or knew someone who knew someone, who was on one of the planes or was in one of the Twin Towers. The wounds were deep and personal.[324]

This provides context to the trauma of the people of Boston prior to the Marathon bombings. In *Patriots Day*, 9/11 is referenced by a radio news report playing in a car which has been hijacked by the bombers. The reporter states, "The Boston Marathon tragedy is being described as the worst act of domestic terrorism since the September 11 attacks." The bombers Tamerlan (Themo Melikidze) and his brother, Dzhokhar (Alex Wolff), question this comparison, telling Manny (Jimmy O. Yang), whose car they have stolen, that 9/11 was faked. In response to the broadcast, Tamerlan angrily turns off the radio and hits the dashboard, exclaiming, "F*** them!" He continues, "You know that's bulls***, right Manny? 9/11? Muslims didn't blow up those buildings. The U.S. government did… to make Americans hate real Muslims. A lot of people who said they were at 9/11, they're all actors." Dzhokhar adds, "You're conditioned by the media." With the pain caused to Boston, as well as the wider nation, by both terrorist incidents, this scene emphasises the callous nature of the bombers and their disregarding of the trauma caused by 9/11 which has been compounded by their attacks on the marathon.

In *Patriots Day*, the September 11, 2001, attacks provide a frame of reference for the bombings. In *Zero Dark Thirty*, *American Sniper* and *The Kingdom*, the trauma experienced by Maya, Kyle and Agent Fleury (Jamie Foxx) respectively is explicitly linked to 9/11 and the U.S. response. The opening of *Zero Dark Thirty* recalls the feelings of desperation of the people phoning emergency services from the towers and encourages the spectator to share in the pain of the people who were killed. The film begins with a black screen on to which fade the words, "The following motion picture is based on first hand accounts of actual events." The writing fades out and the screen remains black as the sounds of people talking can be heard. The words, "September 11, 2001" appear on the screen and someone says, "I can't breathe." Another voice states, "A plane has crashed into the World Trade Center." A third voice says, "I love you," and a fourth asks: "Are you gonna be able to get somebody up here?" A final voice says, "I'm gonna die, aren't I?" In his examination of the film, Robert Burgoyne explores the construction of the opening,

> the film uses the sound track of victims' recorded voices as a kind of sonic shorthand… [T]he sounds of 9/11 serve to call up the emotional meaning of the

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[324] Casey Sherman and Dave Wedge, *Boston Strong: A City's Triumph Over Tragedy* (ForeEdge, University Press of New England, 2015), 224-225.

events, giving them a personal focus, providing a direct rendering of the experience of the victims.[325]

In the dark of the cinema, looking at a black screen, there is no way to avoid the voices, no distractions and no way to escape. This creates an intense rendering of the traumatic events and opens the film as it intends to continue, "aiming not to explain history but to offer a feeling."[326] Evoking the suffering of those in the Twin Towers determines the importance of the protagonist, Maya, in finding the person responsible, Osama bin Laden. Her drive and dedication to her mission shapes the narrative of *Zero Dark Thirty*. An immediate cut to "2 Years Later. THE SAUDI GROUP," and the torture of a prisoner, Ammar (Reda Kateb), explicitly links the attacks to the film's events, as Guy Westwell explains, "This transition (two years in real time, two seconds of screen time) establishes a direct connection between terrorist atrocity and an unbridled CIA response."[327] The traumatic events of the film are therefore represented as compounding the trauma of 9/11. With only two seconds between the attacks and the investigation, the rapid movement of the diegesis also leaves no time to process or mourn, reflecting the swiftness of the Bush administration's progression to war.

Similarly to Maya, it is Chris Kyle's (Bradley Cooper) desire to serve his country in response to terrorism which shapes the narrative of *American Sniper*. Following his enlistment after seeing the attacks on American embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in 1998, Kyle is depicted with his wife-to-be, Taya (Sienna Miller), watching news footage of 9/11. He stands with no top on and puts his arm around Taya, emphasising both his masculinity and an urge to protect. The camera intercuts slow tracking shots towards the television with gradual tracking shots to a close-up of Kyle's determined, angry face. The scene then cuts to a scene of Kyle behind his gun at a shooting range and a slow tracking shot into a close-up of Kyle's face as he fires his weapon, denoting the connection between his emotional reaction to the September 11, 2001, attacks and his military service.
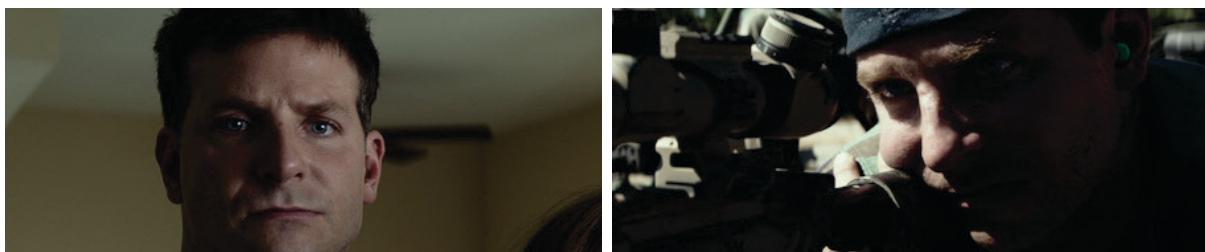
Figure 3.3 and Figure 3.4   Kyle watches the 9/11 attacks on television, and shoots his weapon as if in response, *American Sniper*, 0:21:53, 0:22:00

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[325] Burgoyne, "The Violated Body," 248.

[326] Jung, *The Invisibilities of Political Torture*, 43.

[327] Guy Westwell, *Parallel Lines: Post-9/11 American Cinema* (Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2004), 173.

The juxtaposed shots align 9/11 with Kyle's decision to join the military as a sniper, connecting the people he kills in Iraq with avenging the lives lost on September 11, 2001. In this way, the United States' invading and occupying of Iraq is connected directly to 9/11 and the country's alleged connections with al-Qaeda,[328] one of the Bush administration's reasons for invading Iraq.

The Kingdom unequivocally illustrates the connection between Saudi Arabia, where the film is set, and the people responsible for the 9/11 attacks. The opening credits provide a brief history of the relationship between the United States and Saudi Arabia before featuring an animation of the Twin Towers in New York with an aeroplane flying towards them before cutting to blackness. The line, "15 out of the 19 hijackers" appears, accompanied by a voiceover that states, "15 of the 19 were Saudis," and a link is made between the protection of the United States' oil supply from Saudi Arabia, the attacks on the World Trade Center towers, and the need for FBI agents to investigate wherever in the world Americans are killed.

With 9/11 contextualising these four films directly, and the other five case study films to a lesser extent, the effects of the war on terror are depicted as contributing to trauma already experienced by the September 11, 2001, attacks. In the war films, in which the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are represented as never-ending, this compounding of trauma is shown to be ongoing as the soldiers return to high-risk situations multiple times. The following section will consider how the protagonists express their emotional response to traumatic events as they occur, as well as showing vulnerability, diverging from prior war and terrorism narratives which typically focus on trauma in the aftermath of the incidents and emphasise the agency of their protagonists to recover. With no end to the war on terror, the films conclude with an undercurrent of threat and convey an awareness that there is no safety for the American characters.

3.3   Melodramatic Displays of Emotion

Each of my case study films represents the protagonists experiencing traumatic events and, in several of the narratives, the trauma is foregrounded as fundamental to the plot. In *Green Zone* and *The 15:17 to Paris*, the situations propel the protagonists' desires to respond, either through seeking the truth concerning weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, or through

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[328] Alex Roberto Hybel, and Justin Matthew Kaufman, *The Bush Administrations and Saddam Hussein: Deciding on Conflict* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 83-85.

preventing a terrorist attack, respectively. In all of the films except *The 15:17 to Paris*, the protagonists outwardly express their trauma, through anger and frustration in *Green Zone*, and tears and anguish in the remaining seven. This explicit expression of emotion exploits traits of melodrama to draw the viewer in and intensify identification with the characters, generating empathy with their experiences.

The traumatising stories which emotionally affect the lead characters are outwardly expressed through grief, frustration and vulnerability. Grief is generated in part through their characterisation as empathetic, feeling the pain and suffering of others, both Americans and non-Americans, as demonstrated in the previous chapter. The protagonists are also shown responding emotionally in the moment of the incidents rather than afterwards, a departure from many conflict films which depict traumatised veterans post-conflict, for example, *Coming Home* and *The Deer Hunter*. It is with the Reel Fallout cycle that the traumatising of protagonists during conflict is foregrounded with the characters expressing their emotional turmoil as events are occurring. The perception of the characters as traumatised reveals the primary relevance of melodrama for my examination of the films, aligning with E. Ann Kaplan's assertion that, "in the millennium… the relevance of trauma studies to melodrama emerges." [329] By navigating trauma, the films deploy melodramatic attributes to engage the viewer in emotional responses to the protagonists' suffering, enabling the opportunity to mourn with the characters, to be examined further in the following chapter. As a genre, melodrama has the potential for the portrayal of trauma, indicated by Loren and Metelmann's description of, "an interplay between initial loss/threat and subsequent action to retrieve or compensate for loss, which is usually accompanied by the further threat of loss." [330] A longer tradition of the melodramatic mode informs the Hollywood war film [331] while terrorism films have typically been less influenced by melodrama, drawing on conventions of the action genre. The terrorism films of my corpus contrast with this and also emphasise the emotional effects.

Expression of emotion is indicative of the influence of melodrama, as Linda Williams observes, "melodramas are deemed excessive for their… naked displays of emotion". [332] The excessive display of emotion characterises the protagonists as vulnerable in several of my case study films, aligning them more closely with melodrama than previous conflict films. Even in films in which protagonists have displayed emotion, for example *Casualties of War* or *Apocalypse Now*, they are depicted as regaining their composure and achieving their goals.

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[329] Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*, 71.
[330] Scott Loren and Jörg Metelmann, "Introduction," in *Melodrama After the Tears: New Perspectives on the Politics of Victimhood*, eds. Scott Loren and Jörg Metelmann (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 12, accessed May 18, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1017/9789048523573.
[331] Hermann Kappelhoff, "Melodrama and War in Hollywood Genre Cinema," in *Melodrama After the Tears: New Perspectives on the Politics of Victimhood*, eds. Scott Loren and Jörg Metelmann, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 82, accessed May 18, 2023, https://doi.org/10.1017/9789048523573.
[332] Williams, "Film Bodies," 3.

In *Casualties of War*, for example, Eriksen reports his unit for kidnapping, assaulting and killing a Vietnamese woman and they are punished for their actions, permitting Eriksen to return to his life in the United States with some closure. The opening of *Apocalypse Now* depicts Willard (Martin Sheen) as having already experienced considerable trauma. He punches a mirror, making his hand bleed, and wipes the blood over his face and bed as he cries, naked. His assignment to find and kill Colonel Kurtz (Marlon Brando), however, provides him with a purpose and, by the end of the film, he has completed his mission and leaves Kurtz's compound, portraying a similar closure as in *Casualties of War*. The narratives of several of my case study films depict ongoing trauma which is not resolved and the lead characters exhibiting signs of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The lead character of *Patriots Day*, Police Sergeant Tommy Saunders (Mark Wahlberg), for example, is highly empathetic and expresses his emotions to his wife, Carol (Michelle Monaghan). After witnessing two bombs explode at the finish line of the Boston Marathon and helping survivors, Saunders returns home and collapses in tears as he describes his experiences to his wife. In close-ups, his face is pale and his eyes are red from crying. As he talks, his eyes are wide as he stares ahead, detached from his surroundings as if reliving the events. His explanation is disjointed as he attempts to makes sense of what he witnessed, "I don't even understand what I saw. I keep seeing this blood, it's everywhere. I saw a foot… This boy from… well, I think from Marathon Sport… [H]e helped, we moved her. We laid her down. Blood just started to spread, and his knee was in her blood, and then there was an eight-year-old boy. He was just laying there. They had to take his family away… I got these images in my head. They ain't going away." The *Institute of Medicine* website explains how, "Because terrorist attacks may cause violent injury, death, and destruction, there often will be a targeted population that experiences extreme trauma".[333] Saunders' proximity to the bombings and empathy with the victims, as well as their families, leads to him being traumatised by his experiences.

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[333] Institute of Medicine (US) Committee on Responding to the Psychological Consequences of Terrorism, "2. Understanding the Psychological Consequences of Traumatic Events, Disasters, and Terrorism."
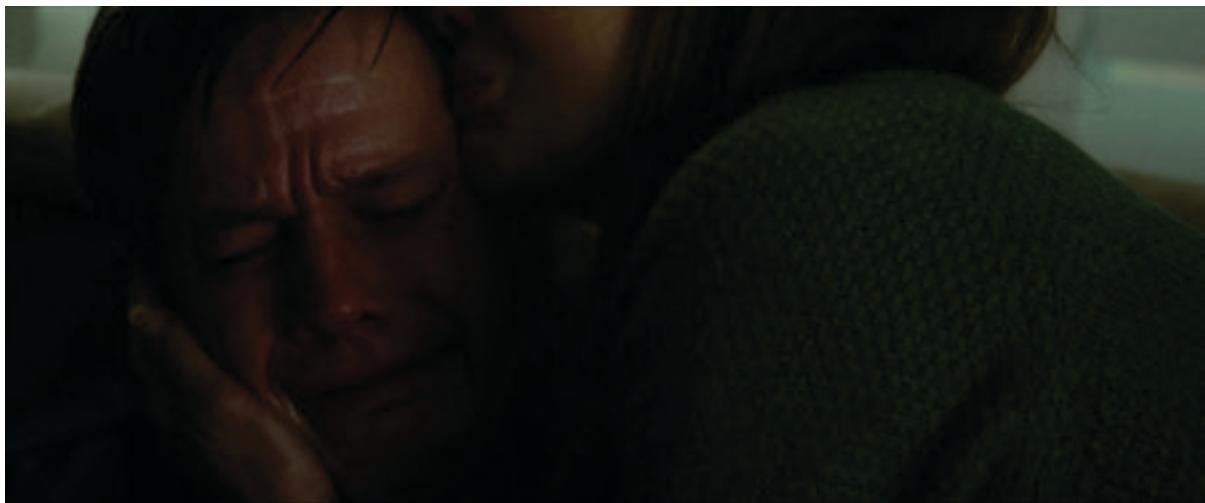
Figure 3.5 Carol holds Saunders as he cries, *Patriots Day*, 0:50:13

It is when Saunders describes seeing the child's body and how his family had to be taken away that his emotions overwhelm him and he has to pause his recollection while the camera cuts to show his wife wiping away tears.

Saunders' sadness resembles the representation of Sergeant James (Jeremy Renner) in *The Hurt Locker* who also cries over the loss of a child. On discovering a body bomb he believes to be Beckham, the boy he befriends on the base, as discussed in Chapter 2, James displays signs of empathy, aligning with the following definition, "the capacity to share the feelings of others is called empathy… we can share the experience of suffering when we empathize with someone in pain."[334] I contend that James experiences the suffering of the child and this traumatises him, as Singer and Klimecki explain can be an effect of empathy, "In order to prevent an excessive sharing of suffering that may turn into distress, one may respond to the suffering of others with compassion… Compassion is feeling *for* and not feeling *with* the other."[335] Compassion provides a distance between the person affected and the observer; James, however, is unable to maintain this distance, reflected in the shots when he finds the body bomb, in which close-ups of the child's face and then James' face fill the screen, as well as tightly-framed shots of James' face when he cries. James accepts the impact of seeing the child's blood-soaked body by releasing his tears and demonstrating his humanity.

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[334] Tania Singer and Olga M. Klimecki, "Empathy and compassion," *Current Biology*, Volume 24, Issue 18, September 22, 2014, 875-878, accessed June 26, 2024, doi: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cub.2014.06.054.
[335] Ibid.

Figure 3.6   Tightly-framed shots of James' face fill the screen as he accepts the emotional impact of finding a body bomb, *The Hurt Locker*, 1:21:56

Towards the end of *Captain Phillips*, the humanity of both the protagonist and the pirates is accentuated through Phillips' fear and him being covered in the pirates' blood when they are shot, causing him to cry. After being forced to return to the lifeboat following his escape attempt, Phillips thinks he will be killed and begins writing a note to his family. He has tears in his eyes as he writes. When Najee (Faysal Ahmed) discovers what he is doing, he rips the note from him and they fight. The pirates beat Phillips and tie him up, blindfolding him. Phillips screams to the American Navy personnel who have surrounded the lifeboat in preparation to rescue him, "Tell my family, I love them." There are numerous close-ups of Phillips' agonised face which are intercut with shots inside the naval ship determining how many targets they have visible. Waiting for all three targets to be clearly in sight, increasingly short cuts and handheld camerawork make it difficult for the viewer to determine whether or not Phillips is safe. Eventually, the Navy commander orders, "Execute." There is silence before gun shots kill the three pirates. Blood spatters over Phillips' face and he screams, "For the Love of God!" and "What was that?" The camera remains tightly framing Phillips' face as he reacts by moving his blindfold down with his arm and exhaling loudly, the only sound on the soundtrack as seconds pass. Once the blindfold has moved enough for the lifeboat to be visible, there are intermittent cuts to his viewpoint as he sees the dead bodies of the pirates. He screams, "Oh no!" which Brian Danoff explains subverts viewer expectations of a victorious ending, "Phillips's pained reaction to their deaths denies the audience the sense of triumph that they might have been expecting."[336] Danoff also attests to the trauma caused as

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[336] Danoff, "'I'm the Captain Now'," 45-46.

the Navy "pick off three of Phillips's captors, leaving Phillips shaken to his core".[337] The prolonged sequence in which the camera remains in the lifeboat with Phillips heightens the effect of his visceral response to the deaths.

Figure 3.7   Blood from the killing of the pirates spatters over Phillips, *Captain Phillips*, 01:57:47

A naval officer jumps down onto the lifeboat and helps Phillips off. Phillips continues to show shock and confusion, failing to answer when asked if he is ok. The effects of his traumatic experience remain with him for the final minutes of the film and the viewer's lasting impression of Phillips is of him being traumatised.

Lone Survivor also ends with a traumatised protagonist. Marcus Luttrell (Mark Wahlberg) cries as he is rescued and, on the soundtrack, minor piano chords begin as the American soldiers secure the village to where Luttrell has been taken. The soldiers find him and ask, "Are you Marcus Luttrell? You're safe Marcus." The volume of the music increases as Luttrell is taken to the helicopter and treated for his injuries where he cries, expressing the emotion of the past three days of trauma. Bookending the film with this scene which opens and closes the narrative, to be discussed in detail shortly, indicates the events depicted being based on Luttrell's memory as the only survivor. This intensifies identification with Luttrell as only he can account for the action of the film. Melanie Piper observes how, "through the instant biopic the audience gains access to events that they may or may not remember… By connecting with characters, the viewer can place themselves in the story as they engage with the affective experience of the film."[338] The protagonists' emotional expressions enable the viewer to experience the events with them. Piper's discussion is in relation to *Patriots Day*,

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[337] Ibid., 37.
[338] Melanie Piper, *The Biopic and Beyond: Celebrities As Characters in Screen Media* (Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2022), 156, accessed June 23, 2025, ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/soton-ebooks/detail.action?docID=7020151.
Created from soton-ebooks on 2025-06-23 20:34:39.

but it can be equally applied to various films in this study as many are based on personal accounts which rely on the authors' memories.

Figure 3.8 Luttrell cries on the helicopter after being rescued, *Lone Survivor*, 01:48:17

American Sniper similarly depicts its lead character crying on realising he can return home. After killing his arch rival, enemy sniper Mustafa (Sammy Sheik), to be scrutinised in the following chapter, Kyle has completed his reason for returning to Iraq and he weeps as he phones his wife, Taya, to tell her, "I'm ready to come home." On returning to the United States, he sits alone in a bar and cries. When Taya rings him, he tells her, "I guess I just needed a minute." Along with Luttrell in *Lone Survivor*, these depictions conform to Tom Lutz's description of classic melodramas, "The flashpoint for tears in these films is the character's recovery of his or her proper social role after an exciting foray into social disruption".[339] The difference in *Captain Phillips*, as well as *Patriots Day* and *The Hurt Locker*, is that the protagonists cry during the traumatic incidents, depicting them as traumatised in the moment of the events occurring. With the endless nature of the war on terror, their trauma is portrayed as ongoing as the films present no closure to the events; the wars haven't ended and terrorist attacks could continue to take place.

In addition to tearful responses, some of the further displays of emotion by the protagonists indicate post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Some of these portrayals, primarily in the terrorism films, demonstrate symptoms of PTSD but, due to the lack of longevity of the effects, do not fit the classification of PTSD; the *National Institute of Mental Health* website, for example, determines that, for trauma "[t]o meet the criteria for PTSD, a person must have symptoms for longer than 1 month".[340] It is primarily the soldiers in my case study war films, therefore, who exhibit PTSD symptoms, their experiences lasting many months indicated by

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[339] Tom Lutz, "Men's Tears and the Roles of Melodrama," in *Boys Don't Cry?: Rethinking Narratives of Masculinity and Emotion in the U.S.* eds. Milette Shamir and Jennifer Travis (Columbia University Press, 2002), 189, accessed July 5, 2024, ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/soton-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1041185.
[340] "Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder," *National Institute of Mental Health*, accessed October 2, 2024, https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd.

the lengths of their tours and their ranks in the armed forces; *American Sniper* references Kyle's four tours of Iraq; James in *The Hurt Locker* is introduced as serving in Afghanistan prior to Iraq, as well as displaying the number of days he has left of his current tour, ending with "365 days" when he returns for a further year; the rank of Chief Miller (Matt Damon), the protagonist of *Green Zone*, indicates his length of service; and Navy SEAL Petty Officer Marcus Luttrell "deployed with SEAL Team 10 to Afghanistan in March 2005, having previously deployed to Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom in April 2003."[341] The extended length of service and multiple tours contributing to trauma is referenced by Nadia Abu El-Haj in her comprehensive account of traumatised veterans, *Combat Trauma: Imaginaries of War and Citizenship in post-9/11 America*, "With no draft… to keep up with the wars' force demands – the military has sent soldiers on longer deployments and rotated troops in and out of Iraq and Afghanistan on multiple tours."[342] Americans serving in the military in the "decades-long wars in Afghanistan and Iraq… [account for] fewer than one percent of US citizens",[343] meaning that many soldiers are effectively veterans who have been traumatised previously and new traumatic events are compounding the prior trauma. The more tours undertaken, the greater the risk of mental health issues, borne out by the statistics, "on average, 17.9 percent of those surveyed screened positive for mental health problems (acute stress, depression, or anxiety)… Rates of mental health problems rose to 27.2 percent by the third and fourth tours."[344] The connection between trauma, 9/11 and the war on terror in relation to film is examined by Fran Pheasant-Kelly,

> The more recent academic turn to trauma (and trauma cinema) is likely not only a result of the immediate experience of the September 11 attacks… but also because of reports of the mental distress endured by army combatants returning from operations in Iraq and Afghanistan[.][345]

Factors which are noted as contributing to soldiers' "widespread mental health problems… [include] separation from family, lack of privacy, [and] sleep deprivation – in addition to long deployments", all of which my film corpus depicts, for example, Kyle and James struggle being apart from loved ones, Kyle shares a dormitory with several other soldiers, Luttrell is under attack for days with no sleep, and James returns for a year's tour; Abu El-Haj asserts that, "the highest risk for mental health problems peaking at months eight, nine, and ten in the field",[346] demonstrating James' vulnerability.

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[341] "Marc A. Luttrell," in *Veteran Tributes: Honoring Those Who Served*, accessed June 2, 2025, https://veterantributes.org/TributeDetail.php?recordID=963.
[342] Abu El-Haj, *Combat Trauma*, 106.
[343] Ibid., 2.
[344] Abu El-Haj, *Combat Trauma*, 106.
[345] Pheasant-Kelly, *Representing Trauma: Grief, Amnesia and Traumatic Memory*, 155.
[346] Ibid., 106.

Marita Sturken considers how, "the veterans – in particular, the high numbers of veterans who were wounded and who suffer from PTSD – [have largely been] rendered invisible within the fabric of the nation."[347] This indicates the importance of this study in identifying and recognising the individuals mentally wounded by the war on terror. PTSD symptoms as listed on the *National Health Service* website include re-experiencing, being constantly aware of threats, being easily startled and destructive behaviour.[348] All of these are exhibited in my case study films which are set in recent wars since "Post-traumatic stress disorder… [has been] widely recognized as a very real affliction and a relatively common combat injury."[349] In *American Sniper*, scenes set in the United States are employed when Kyle returns home between tours to demonstrate the effects of the Iraq War on his mental health, including displaying PTSD symptoms. When he returns home after his second tour, he is waiting for his car at the garage with his son when he hears the noise of a pneumatic impact wrench being used to put on a tyre. The volume of the wrench is louder than it would realistically be heard by Kyle behind the glass where he is standing, emphasising the overwhelming impact of the noise of Kyle's subconscious. The viewer is drawn out of Kyle's conversation with his son as Kyle turns suddenly to look at the mechanic and the viewer is shown his point of view. Although there is no visual flashback, the sound is enough to remind the viewer, as it does Kyle, of The Butcher's (Mido Hamada) drill and of the boy killed with it, recalling Kyle's powerlessness to prevent the death. Placing Kyle's son in the scene further stimulates the recollection of the child. Walter A. Davis' definition of trauma explains how the construction of this scene conveys Kyle's mental state, "Trauma occurs when… [an] event persists… that awakens… images bound to repressed memories that bring with their return an anxiety that threatens psychic dissolution."[350] The drilling sound in the car garage evokes Kyle's memory of The Butcher's drill in Iraq. Erin P. Finley's description of a veteran of Iraq resonates with the depiction of Kyle, "perception of sights and sounds and smells had been transformed during his time overseas… Cars backfiring now sounded too much like gunfire."[351] A pneumatic impact wrench sounding like a drill employed as a weapon similarly jolts Kyle.

A further example of Kyle being mentally transported back to Iraq is when he is driving home with Taya after the funeral of his friend, Marc Lee (Luke Grimes). The scene opens with persistent shots of the car mirrors which Kyle is continually checking for suspicious vehicles. A van is shown twice in the wing mirror and once behind Kyle's vehicle as it accelerates towards them before overtaking them. It is only when it drives past, a manoeuvre which the camera follows, that Kyle can concentrate on a conversation with Taya and respond to her.

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[347] Sturken, *Terrorism in American Memory*, 23.
[348] "Symptoms - Post-traumatic stress disorder," *NHS*.
[349] Abu El-Haj, *Combat Trauma*, 101.
[350] Walter A. Davis, *Death's Dream Kingdom: The American Psyche Since 9-11* (Pluto Press), 3, accessed June 14, 2023, https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt183q5h4.5.
[351] Erin P. Finley, *Fields of Combat: Understanding PTSD Among Veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan* (Cornell University Press, 2011), 53.

This aligns with Gerdes, Williams and Karl's assertion that, "One particular characteristic of combat-related PTSD is a pattern of hypervigilance symptomology… such as the constant sensory scanning and searching…Individuals are on constant 'high alert' even when threat is low".[352] Kyle is constantly checking for signs of danger, even when he has returned home.

Similarly to Kyle, both Phillips in *Captain Phillips* and Luttrell in *Lone Survivor* exhibit signs of being easily startled, Phillips after he is rescued as he is assessed by a doctor, and Luttrell when he is offered help by Afghan villagers. When Phillips is evaluated, he flinches in response to being touched, indicating his elevated state of alertness. When Gulab and the other villagers approach Luttrell, he takes out a grenade and threatens to pull the pin, which would kill them all. High-risk or destructive behaviour is also evident in *Captain Phillips* when Phillips jumps into the ocean in an attempt to escape the pirates, risking his life; in *The 15:17 to Paris*, when Spencer Stone, who plays himself, charges the attacker who holds a machine gun poised to fire; if the weapon hadn't jammed, Stone would more than likely have been shot and killed; and in *Green Zone* when Chief Miller disobeys his commanding officers and the U.S. administration, represented by Poundstone (Greg Kinnear), and puts his life in danger by joining a covert meeting with Saddam Hussein's deputy, General Al Rawi (Igal Naor). Miller is effectively captured with a balaclava put over his head and a gun held to his head to attend the meeting, and Al Rawi orders him shot as American troops approach their position and enable him to escape. These examples all indicate an emphasis on the traumatic nature of the characters' experiences.

3.3.1   Driven by Empathy

The traumatic situations which affect the protagonists are portrayed as affecting their decision-making. In this way, the films' narratives are driven by emotion, a further attribute of the melodramatic mode, rather than the agency of the characters actively affecting events. Instead of proactively attempting to protect people or save lives, they respond reactively from their emotional response to events. Christine Gledhill explains how,

> from melodrama's perspective, dramatic emphasis shifts from cause to consequence… [W]hen viewed as melodrama… interaction of gestures and eye-lines; the heightening effects of mise-en-scène, camera movement, and sound design—function as conduits for characters' emotional actions and reactions. As

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[352] Samantha Gerdes, Huw Williams and Anke Karl, "Psychophysiological Responses to a Brief Self-Compassion Exercise in Armed Forces Veterans," *Frontiers in Psychology*, Vol 12 - 2021, published online January 18, 2022, 2, accessed June 26, 2024, doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2021.780319.

Deidre Pribram (2012) argues, the protagonists' emotions, rather than narrative logic, drive the drama.[353]

This is how several of my case study films are constructed, framing the narrative through the pain and suffering of its lead. *Lone Survivor*, for example, opens with the end of its protagonist's story before flashing back to "3 days before". Employing the ending to open the film's narrative exploits melodramatic conventions utilised by other genres. It offers an "acknowledgement that a tale is being presented for a perceiver,"[354] and joins conventions of *film noir*[355] as well as previous war cinema such as *Saving Private Ryan* (dir. Steven Spielberg, USA, 1998). This signifies that the narrative is motivated by Luttrell's memories and emotions, portraying his experiences which establish how he arrived at needing to be evacuated and resuscitated.

Loss and trauma also frame the narrative of *The Kingdom*, from the opening credits with shots of an aeroplane flying towards the World Trade Center towers, to two bombings in the opening scenes resulting in the deaths of Americans, including two of the protagonist's colleagues. Grief over these deaths, particularly of Agent Manner, is portrayed as the catalyst for further events. Before Manner is killed, he calls Agent Fleury and describes the first attack. He tells him, "You gotta get out here, don't take no for an answer." He hangs up and, moments later, dies in the second explosion. His desire for Fleury and his team to investigate the attacks becomes his final wish and Fleury is compelled to fulfil it. When his team are refused permission to travel to Saudi Arabia by the Department of Justice, Fleury meets with Prince Thamer (Raad Rawi) from the Saudi Embassy and blackmails him to arrange them visiting the bomb site. Fleury and three other FBI agents, Mayes (Jennifer Garner), Sykes (Chris Cooper) and Leavitt (Jason Bateman) are given authorisation to investigate. On the flight, Sykes leans over and puts his hand on Fleury's chest. He tells him, "Oh man, it feels like you've got a beast in there, Fleury." Fleury responds, "What is this, you don't think I'm ok?" Sykes says, "I think you're not entirely clear right now." In blackmailing the Prince Thamer and travelling to Saudi Arabia in direct contravention of the orders of the Department of Justice, Sykes' words describe Fleury's troubled psychological state.

The effect of Manner's death on Fleury is continually referenced. On their arrival in Saudi Arabia, the agents disembark from the aeroplane as the coffins carrying the bodies of Manner and Burr are loaded on. Fleury turns to watch and the camera focuses on Fleury and Mayes' reactions; a shot of the coffins from their point of view is followed by a reverse shot of

[353] Christine Gledhill, "Prologue: The Reach of Melodrama," in *Melodrama Unbound: Across History, Media, and National Cultures*, eds. Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams, accessed May 17, 2023, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), https://search-ebscohost-com.soton.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1719946&site=ehost-live, xxi.

[354] Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 58.

[355] Classic *film noirs Sunset Boulevard* (dir. Billy Wilder, USA, 1950) and *Double Indemnity* (dir. Billy Wilder, USA, 1944), for example, open with the end of their stories.

them suppressing their tears. With "such images… banned from public view since the Vietnam War",[356] the display of American coffins is rare and striking, similarly impactful in *American Sniper* when Kyle accompanies five coffins draped in American flags, one lit more brightly to accentuate it carrying his friend Marc Lee, in the hangar of an aeroplane back to the United States. Once settled in their accommodation, Fleury speaks to his son, Kevin, on the phone. Fleury tells him, "Yeah, Fran's around… I saw him… He's tall as ever." Fleury has not told his son that Manner has died. He says he saw Manner, although what the viewer understands is that he saw his coffin. The bars in the foreground of the shot of Fleury portray him as being trapped both literally in the gym in which they are staying, which is locked, and in his pain at losing his friend.

Maya in *Zero Dark Thirty* also grieves the loss of her colleague and friend, Jessica (Jennifer Ehle), who is killed by a suicide bomber. On hearing the news, Maya sits on the floor of her office cubicle in shock. Guy Westwell explains how, "Sympathy is elicited for the traumatic experience suffered by those fighting the 'war on terror' thereby placing CIA agents in the role of victim."[357] While Maya does not cry in mourning Jessica's death, her emotional response does motivate her actions. Robert Burgoyne's explains how *Zero Dark Thirty*, "presents… the intimate experience of constant threat and response… as… defining and shaping the life and the actions of the main character".[358] He determines that the trauma Maya experiences leads to her resolve to find and kill bin Laden, "Maya's encounter with violence shapes her character, driving her to prosecute bin Laden... [H]er single-mindedness takes on an almost religious zeal: 'I believe I was spared so I can finish the job'."[359] *Zero Dark Thirty* demonstrates how the traumatic events Maya experiences motivate her to continue her search which eventually leads to the locating and killing of bin Laden.

Having suppressed her emotions to focus on her work, Maya does break down in tears once her mission is complete. The end of *Zero Dark Thirty* emphasises her reliance on the emotional response to both 9/11 and to Jessica's death as providing her life purpose. In the final scene, Maya approaches the large hangar of an aircraft, appearing tiny and insignificant. She walks up the ramp and the pilot enters and says, "You can sit wherever you want, you're the only one on the manifest. You must be pretty important, you've got the whole plane to yourself. Where do you want to go?" His recognition of her importance juxtaposes with the visual representation of her as very small. Maya sits, initially looking at the pilot, then turns to look straight ahead followed by a cut to show the aircraft's door closing. Returning to a medium close up of Maya's head and shoulders, she closes her eyes and a tear falls from her left eye. She starts crying and doesn't answer the pilot.

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[356] Garofolo, "War Films in an Age of War and Cinema," 51.
[357] Westwell, *Parallel Lines*, 177.
[358] Burgoyne, "The Violated Body," 251.
[359] Ibid., 255.

Figure 3.9   The final shot displays Maya's tear-stained face, *Zero Dark Thirty*, 2:26:01

Burgoyne notes how, "The reaction of Maya to confirmation of apparent success… is without any hint of triumph or satisfaction. The closing stages of the film are distinctly sombre in tone, featuring muted, uncelebratory music and the quiet shedding of tears."[360] The muted sequence is penetrated only by the sad composition on the soundtrack is compelling. It creates ambiguity concerning how Maya feels. She has achieved her goal of finding bin Laden, but there is a sense of deflation. Her inability to answer the pilot with a location suggests she now has no purpose and, literally, no direction.

Chris Kyle's direction in *American Sniper* is driven by his feelings of frustration at being unable to save his fellow soldiers and Iraqi civilians which leads to him abandoning his position as a sniper and joining the ground forces. He also pursues enemy sniper, Mustafa, who, in a pivotal scene, prevents him saving the life of an Iraqi child. Kyle's vehicle is ambushed and he runs up to a rooftop to gain a better vantage point. Once on the roof, he is shot at by Mustafa and a chained dog continually barks at him. For seconds, he is frozen in fear against the wall before attempting to look over at events below. The shot cuts to show The Butcher drilling into the head of Sheikh Al-Obodi's son, Omar (Jad Mhidi Senhaji), referenced previously in this chapter as contributing to Kyle's PTSD symptoms, and Sheikh Al-Obodi (Navid Negahban) is shot. As soon as Kyle shows his head above the wall, Mustafa shoots and hits his helmet. Kyle attempts numerous times to aim at Mustafa but each time Mustafa shoots at him, pinning him down. Mustafa's expertise in shooting and Kyle's inability to achieve an advantageous position haunt Kyle as Iraqis and Americans are killed and he is

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[360] Geoff King, "Responding to Realities or Telling the Same Old Story? Mixing Real-world and Mythic Resonances in *The Kingdom* (2007) and *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012)," in *American cinema in the shadow of 9/11*, ed. Terence McSweeney (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 60, accessed January 27, 2020, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1g0524v.

unable to protect them. His emotional response determines his actions and reactions as he seeks to avenge their deaths.

In contrast with the representations discussed in *Patriots Day*, *American Sniper*, *Captain Phillips* and *The Hurt Locker*, the typical representation of masculinity in war and terrorism films is to depict strong, heroic men coming of age. Guy Westwell asserts how, "War films… celebrated war as both an exciting and spectacular experience, and as a rite of passage, with boys becoming men and in doing so confirming and defining conventional masculine identity."[361] Characters are shaped by their experiences, but they are typically portrayed becoming more resilient as a result rather than more vulnerable. A conventional portrayal in conflict films is summed up by Miroslav Lokar (Olek Krupa) in *Behind Enemy Lines* (dir. John Moore, USA, 2001). Lokar informs a fellow soldier, "Less emotion. You'll live longer." This is similar to the lack of emotion expected of male military personnel in real life, as Samantha Gerdes, Huw Williams and Anke Karl explain, "the masculinized culture of the armed forces that promotes emotional stoicism… can prevent people from sharing emotional distress".[362] Kate McLoughlin concurs, "Military service constructs and depends upon models of masculinity in which strength, physical prowess, courage, leadership, violence and mental toughness are valorized".[363] Terrorism films have similarly represented protagonists as unaffected by events, for example, Horrigan in *In the Line of Fire* and President James Marshall (Harrison Ford) in *Air Force One* (dir. Wolfgang Petersen, Germany, USA, 1997). My case study films, however, subvert the expectation that men will remain stoic and detached. Along with the female characters Agent Mayes in *The Kingdom* and Maya at the end of *Zero Dark Thirty*, they are depicted reacting emotionally to events, portraying them as vulnerable rather than resilient.

Emotion and empathy are discussed as integral to the human condition, challenging unemotional depictions in conflict films which were previously portrayed as positive. In **Chapter 2. Grieving the Hollywood Non-American Other**, I referenced Judith Butler's assertion that a flourishing life is possible if those typically othered in films are represented as grievable. This chapter maintained that empathy expressed by the protagonists of my case study films determines the lives of local characters as significant. This topic is raised by Karsten Stueber who observes, "more recently the claim that empathy is central for morality and a flourishing human life has again been the topic of an intense and controversial

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[361] Guy Westwell, "In Country: Mapping the Iraq War in Recent Hollywood Combat Movies," in *Screens of Terror: Representations of war and terrorism in film and television since 9/11*, ed. Philip Hammond (Bury St Edmunds: Arima Publishing, 2011), 19-20.

[362] Gerdes, Williams and Karl, "Psychophysiological Responses to a Brief Self-Compassion Exercise," 2.

[363] Kate McLoughlin, *Veteran Poetics: British Literature in the Age of Mass Warfare, 1790–2015* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 83, accessed March 3, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108350754.

debate."[364] I contend that Reel Fallout Cinema has contributed to generating these discussions, representing empathy as determining the protagonists as moral, beginning with *The Kingdom*, released twelve years prior to the publication of this article.

M. Night Shyamalan discussing his 2024 film, *Trap* (dir. M. Night Shyamalan, USA, Canada, 2024), explains how an emphasis on a lack of empathy has previously been depicted as benefitting the armed forces, "They say that 4% of the population of the United States has no empathy, that would qualify a sociopath… Upon my research, evolutionarily, those people were advantageous to a population because in war… they're very helpful."[365] The conflict films which comprise Reel Fallout Cinema demonstrate a transformation in this representation; this change is assessed by Josh Hartnett who stars in Shyamalan's film,

> I read a few books that you wouldn't have thought would be about sociopathy but clearly were like books of heroism and war… We tend to look at people that are archetypal heroes and think… 'Wow, they sacrifice anything to get their goals met.' Well, that's not really good. You don't want to be around somebody who has no empathy and will sacrifice you. It's sort of an inconsistent thing that we have in our culture that we tend to celebrate people who are driven to achieve at all costs.[366]

I contend that my case study films contributed to this transition to understanding the importance of empathy for protagonists of conflict films. By depicting the protagonists as suffering the effects of trauma, they are represented as negotiating the damage done by war and terrorism, rather than simply agents of their narratives; as discussed above, events happen to them and the stories are driven by their emotional response rather than by their active decisions to affect the outcomes. Typically, in Hollywood action films, there is no time for protagonists to be emotional because the narrative is driven by their agency, so they need to respond actively to continue the story. The narratives of many of these films, however, are driven by trauma and it is the emotion with which the viewer is encouraged to identify. They represent the soldiers described by Nadia Abu El-Haj who do not adjust to "'combat normal,'… [raising] questions about technoscientific fantasies of making soldiers so resilient that they will go to war and incur no psychological harm."[367] Through both male and female protagonists expressing and sharing their inner feelings and mental states with the viewer, identification intensifies, enabling greater empathy with the characters.

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[364] Karsten Stueber, "Empathy," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2019 edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta. First published March 31, 2008; substantive revision June 27, 2019, accessed June 26, 2024, https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/empathy.
[365] "Josh Hartnett Studies Heroes to Play a Killer in 'Trap'," *imdb.com*, July 2024, https://www.imdb.com/video/vi2837431833.
[366] Ibid.
[367] Abu El-Haj, *Combat Trauma*, 164.

3.4   Identification and Empathy

Representing the protagonists as traumatised and having empathy with others enhances their humanity which provides an opportunity for greater identification and viewer empathy. This identification is reliant on the employment of a further trait of melodrama, that of a "focus on the individual"[368] to transform an event which would have affected many people into a personal journey to make it more relatable. Illumination on the significance of utilising individuals is provided by The *Arithmetic of Compassion* website which explains, "Due to psychic numbing, our sympathy for suffering and loss declines precipitously when we are presented with increasing numbers of victims. Research has shown that compassion fade can begin to occur when a threat to a single person expands to as few as two people."[369] The events depicted in my nine case study films are large-scale wars or terrorism incidents which could inspire impersonal accounts of conflict. The films portray events that are traumatic for more than one person by definition and, in some ways, concern the experience of the nation as a whole. By personalising the stories and creating characters with whom the viewer can identify, the films portray war and terrorism as tangible and immediate. It is common of Hollywood cinema to depict personal journeys to encourage identification and empathy; in Reel Fallout cinema, however, this identification is intensified through a combination of soundscapes reflecting the protagonists' mental states, disorienting sequences and a focus on emotional expression. Each of these mechanisms construct scenes to encourage viewer understanding and empathy for the protagonists' situations and prompt a visceral response. Aesthetics of realism and documentary are also employed to increase the spectator's ability of feeling as though they are experiencing events with the characters and further enhance viewer empathy.

In each of my case study films, except arguably *The 15:17 to Paris* although there is a greater characterisation of Stone than the other two main characters, there is one central protagonist, an individual who motivates the film's plot. In *Green Zone*, Chief Miller provides a point of identification for the viewer by leading a search for weapons of mass destruction in war-torn Iraq. He features in almost every scene and his determination to discover the truth of the presence of weapons propels the narrative, his character fusing the different strands of the story. Similarly, Sergeant Tommy Saunders in *Patriots Day* interacts with each of the supporting characters to unify the account. The importance of using a single individual is substantiated by understanding that the character of Saunders is an amalgamation of several people involved in the Boston Marathon bombings investigation, "[S]tar Mark Wahlberg plays

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[368] Gledhill, "Prologue: The Reach of Melodrama," xxi.
[369] *Arithmetic of Compassion*, accessed June 26, 2024, https://arithmeticofcompassion.org/about.

a fictional character named Sgt. Tommy Saunders, who's a composite of three Boston police officers who worked the Boston Marathon and aided in the manhunt that followed."[370] The personal journey of Saunders told throughout the film is easier to follow and identify with than an ensemble of three characters; it enables more screen time for Saunders' back-story and relationships and the effects of the bombings on him and his wife, representative of the effects on many people from Boston.

The Kingdom also avoids including too many characters in the investigation of an attack. A comparison with the real FBI investigation of the bombing of an American compound in Riyadh, from which the film's narrative draws inspiration, is enlightening here. The Director of the FBI at the time, Louis J. Freeh, included an account in his autobiography, describing how, "150 FBI pros – including agents, lab analysts, and forensic experts – were headed for Riyadh".[371] This greatly contrasts with the four FBI agents who travel to Saudi Arabia to attend the scene in *The Kingdom*, supervised by lead character Agent Fleury. This demonstrates how the melodramatic mode influences the decision to focus on a small number of characters rather than more realistically portraying a less personal account of hundreds of characters. My case study films draw the viewer in through identification with an individual with whom they can empathise, aligning with E. Ann Kaplan's assessment that "spectators do not feel the protagonist's trauma. They feel the pain evoked by empathy – arousing mechanisms interacting with their own traumatic experiences."[372] In the same way that the films evoke prior trauma for both the characters within the narratives, they may also invoke previous trauma for the viewer, strengthening their affinity further.

By foregrounding traumatic situations and showing the characters responding emotionally, the films encourage the viewer to respond in a similarly emotional way. Through the characters visibly expressing their emotions through crying, the viewer is afforded an opportunity to respond with their own tears. This utilises a "feature crucial to melodrama… its ability to move its spectators and in particular to make them cry."[373] The films enhance empathy by relying on the melodramatic mode's representation of exaggerated emotions. Linda Williams observes how the success of a genre such as melodrama "is often measured by the degree to which the audience sensation mimics what is seen on the screen… whether the spectator of the melodrama actually dissolves in tears".[374] Williams continues by explaining how viewers can feel "a sense of over-involvement in sensation and emotion. We

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[370] Kara Harr, "*Patriots Day*: 14 of the Film's Stars and Their Real-Life Inspirations," in *The Hollywood Reporter*, January 13, 2017, accessed May 27, 2021, https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/lists/patriots-day-14-films-stars-real-life-inspirations-963172.

[371] Louis J. Freeh with Howard Means, *My FBI: Bringing Down the Mafia, Investigating Bill Clinton, and Fighting the War on Terror* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), 8.

[372] Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*, 90.

[373] Steve Neale, "Melodrama and Tears," Article 1986 in *Screen* v27 n6 (19861101), 6.

[374] Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," 4-5.

feel manipulated by these texts… [demonstrated by the] colloquialism… 'tear jerker'".[375] Through utilising the melodramatic mode, the films construct characters with which the viewer can identify in an intensified way, generating an understanding of the protagonists' feelings and creating empathy for their circumstances.

One of the ways identification is intensified is through many of the characters being portrayed in a heightened emotional state and the viewer experiencing the traumatic situations through the protagonist's eyes. In *Patriots Day*, empathy with lead character Saunders is created through several audio-visual cues constructing a sensory closeness to his experience. When the second bomb explodes, Saunders moves towards the bomb sites and the shots cut frequently to his point of view, looking down as he approaches those who have been injured. The viewer is made to feel as if they are at the scene with him, experiencing the devastation with which he is faced. On entering a shop, Saunders finds many more people injured. The sounds of people crying and screaming represent his perception of the room as numerous shots of bloodied legs and faces from Saunders' point of view are quickly edited together. The chaotic soundtrack provides the viewer with an insight into Saunders' mental state; sounds of sirens, screaming and crying and radio conversations compete for the viewer's attention along with a mid-pitch note as if left by the damage done from the loud noise of the explosion. The note makes it difficult to hear people's words and the frequent cuts and shaky shots restrict the viewer's ability to focus on the scene which is claustrophobic with no establishing shots; there are only close-ups of people attempting to strap up their thighs having lost legs. The shots and the sound reflect Saunders' difficulty in concentrating or grasping what is happening. A man tying up a woman's leg with a scarf asks Saunders, "Can we get some help, Sir?" The ringing note ends and Saunders is released from his state of shock to reply, "Yeah," and he leaves to call for an ambulance. When he goes outside, there is a temporary feeling of being able to breathe again with a restored clarity to the soundtrack before the feeling of disorientation returns. A blurry, low-resolution shot from above suddenly and dramatically zooms in to the ground before moving up to show emergency service vehicles. It conveys the impression of amateur footage, creating a highly disorienting feeling, similar to motion sickness. Saunders enters an empty restaurant and a loud popping sound as two lightbulbs blow sounds like a gun shot. Saunders ducks suddenly and the tension of the situation continues to build.

Depicting the bombings and their aftermath from the point of view of Saunders more conspicuously contrasts his approach with that of the FBI agents who arrive once all of the injured have been transported to hospital. When the agents disembark from their vehicles, an eerie silence has encompassed the street which moments before was chaotic and loud. They approach the situation as a crime scene requiring investigation, including locating evidence,

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[375] Ibid., 5.

while Saunders is emotionally invested in the victims' plights. His heightened emotional state is palpable when the FBI tells the police not to move the body of the eight-year-old boy who has been killed. When asked, "What are they doing?" Saunders responds, "I said that's an eight-year-old kid under there," to which they are told, "No, they can't move the body." As agents are directed to prevent the body being moved, voices overlap and Saunders becomes progressively more irate, shouting at FBI Special Agent in Charge, Rick DesLauriers (Kevin Bacon), "Who the f**k are you?" DesLauriers responds, "Sorry Sergeant, could be clues in the blood-spattered bomb residue on the boy's body. We can't risk moving him. Nothing moves." The FBI agents are detached and able to view the site in a scientific, methodical way. DesLauriers approaches the scene with purpose, walking quickly, not distracted by anything around him, and wears a smart suit, out of place in the blood and debris from the bombs. The distinction with Saunders' high-vis jacket covered in blood emphasises the difference in their emotional states; Saunders has experienced the bombings, witnessing the impact on the people first-hand, whereas DesLauriers has arrived after the wounded have been taken to hospital. As a local police officer, Saunders empathises with the family of the child, and represents their anger, shouting, "What's the matter with you guys? You going to tell that boy's parents that their son's still lying on the f***ing street?... F**k that." The viewer, having accompanied Saunders through the impact of the explosions for the preceding seven minutes empathises with his understanding of the situation rather than the view of the FBI who have limited knowledge of the scene and the locality, having barely arrived.

In a subsequent scene in the FBI Command Center, an agent yawns as he watches CCTV footage of the street where the bombings took place. He does not appear emotionally invested in finding the bombers, the contrast further emphasising Saunders' distress. Saunders phones his wife and, when she doesn't answer, leaves her a panicked voicemail, "Carol? Pick up the phone. Carol, can you hear me?... Carol, you got to call me back as soon as you get this message, all right?" He looks around the enormous warehouse and sees people's clothes, shoes and possessions laid out on the floor, mobile phones being put into boxes and DesLauriers briefing the team. The camera tracks around him anti-clockwise as he moves his head clockwise, creating a disorienting, dizzying effect which emulates his unbalanced psychological state. Through representing Saunders' personal journey, the viewer experiences the bombings through his eyes, as a member of the Boston community, enabling them to empathise with him.

A similar example of sensory alignment between the traumatised protagonist and the viewer which creates empathy occurs in *American Sniper* as Kyle's trauma forms the focus of his fourth and final tour of Iraq. When he arrives, he is told that his friend, Biggles, has died, and is then confronted with the possibility of having to shoot a little boy, younger than the boy in the opening scene. Kyle is stationed on a roof looking for threats. The viewer is immediately positioned with him as the camera shows his point of view through the binoculars with the

distances marked. He suspects a car which pulls down an alleyway, out of sight, and picks up his rifle. His point of view is again shown through the weapon's sights as a man with a rocket launcher emerges, firstly through a wider shot which incorporates the boy in the bottom left corner, and then in a tighter frame when he aims the weapon. Kyle does not hesitate to shoot and the man is killed within seconds of his appearance, a justifiable death of an ungrievable insurgent whose intention is to kill. Kyle watches as the boy runs over to the dead body and looks around, initially shown from Kyle's point of view before portraying him from multiple angles on the ground to provide the viewer a clear, close shot of the boy's face, conveying his youth. Shots of the boy are intercut with a very slow track in towards Kyle's face. The tension builds as the panic grows in Kyle's eyes on realisation that the boy may take the weapon.

As the boy struggles to lift the rocket launcher, Kyle continually whispers, "Don't pick it up" followed by, "Drop it." The camera remains tightly focused on Kyle's face and distanced from the boy, aligning the viewer with Kyle's dread. The boy mounts the rocket launcher on his shoulder and aims it, and there is a close-up of Kyle's finger moving to the trigger before his view through the sights is shown again as the boy throws the weapon away and runs off. The camera returns to a very tight close-up of Kyle's face as he chokes in relief; it remains focused on his face for 20 seconds as he breathes heavily and there are tears in his eyes and the viewer absorbs the reprieve from the violence and horror that has occurred previously in the film. Kyle is depicted as traumatised by the possibility of killing another child, having shot a boy at the beginning of the film. Through the framework of Nadia Abu El-Haj's work on perpetrator trauma, the effect of his experiences in Iraq could be attributed to his actions rather than the actions of others. Abu El-Haj discusses how, "As initially framed, the trauma of American veterans centered on perpetration"[376] determining that "perpetrators abroad could become victims at home."[377] With more space, there is scope for further contribution to this debate, incorporating also *Zero Dark Thirty* in which Maya's trauma could be discussed in the context of her involvement in perpetrating torture.

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[376] Abu El-Haj, *Combat Trauma*, 10.
[377] Ibid., 7.

Figure 3.10   Kyle recovers from the panic of the possibility of shooting another child, *American Sniper*, 1:32:48

The scene releases the tension, both for Kyle and the audience, of prior sequences including Marc Lee's death, the ultimatum from Taya, Biggles' death and that he had to kill a child. He is mourning the deaths of his friends and allowing himself to feel the pain of his experiences in Iraq. The scene demonstrates Kyle's frame of mind through his empathy with an Iraqi child, as with Sergeant James in *The Hurt Locker* on discovery of a body bomb. The deaths of children in *American Sniper*, *The Hurt Locker*, *The Kingdom* and *Patriots Day* all magnify characters' trauma and enable the viewer to relate to their pain.

Empathy is also elicited through the case study films enlisting conventions of realism. Michael Hammond illustrates the potential of cinema in this regard, "By realistically depicting the horror of a fire-fight, it is considered possible to put the audience through a traumatic experience in ways which clarify the motivations of the characters."[378] *Lone Survivor* and *The Hurt Locker* both contain compelling depictions of soldiers' experiences of war in the realism mode Hammond describes. When the four SEALs in *Lone Survivor* are discovered by Taliban combatants, they are engaged in a continuous battle until all but Luttrell are dead. They fall down cliffs and are wounded repeatedly. The falls are highly visceral with the soundtrack permeated with bones crunching and breaking as the soldiers' bodies hit rocks and trees at high speed. Geoff King comments how *Lone Survivor* "is a film that almost fetishistically emphasises the suffering bodies of the heroes during extended sequences of fighting action."[379] By heightening identification with the characters, the viewer feels the shocks and pain to their bodies which increases empathy, particularly with Luttrell who survives each damaging experience and is hurt further.

[378] Michael Hammond, "Some Smothering Dreams: The Combat Film in Contemporary Hollywood," in *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, ed. Steve Neale (London: British Film Institute, 2002), 63-64.
[379] King, "Responding to Realities or Telling the Same Old Story?," 62.

The visceral nature of the soldiers falling in *Lone Survivor* conveys the damage done. *The Hurt Locker* also uses realism to depict the soldiers' experiences and enhance identification but, rather than portraying continuous engagement with the enemy, it is the suspense of enduring the tensions of war which is explored. Scenes of bombs being neutralised are unnerving, the viewer aligned with the soldiers, sharing their fears that the bombs will explode. This contrasts with the traditional representation of bombs in war cinema whose explosions have contributed to the films' entertainment, as Lawrence H. Suid explains, "Planes, bombs, guns, the destruction they cause, the very elements that filmmakers believe show the evil of war ultimately provide the attraction that makes war films so popular."[380] Focusing on explosions in *The Hurt Locker* subverts this typical representation; the bomb poses a deadly risk to the Americans so, by aligning the viewer with them, they do not want it to explode, and bombs lead to devastation rather than excitement or entertainment. This is particularly true of the opening scene in which James' predecessor, the head of the EOD (Explosive Ordinance Disposal) team, Sergeant Thompson (Guy Pearce), is killed by a bomb discovered in the middle of an Iraqi street. Planning to detonate the device with a remotely controlled robot, Thompson describes to his unit, Sanborn (Anthony Mackie) and Eldridge (Brian Geraghty), how, "that blast is gonna roll straight out there… Most of the shrapnel is going to shoot straight up in a beautiful umbrella pattern." However, when the wheel of the robot's trailer detaches, Thompson approaches the device himself. Shots from within his helmet align the viewer with his viewpoint, showing him looking around the area and up into the sky where he watches a helicopter pass by. He tells his team, "Nice and hot in here," as the sun's rays obscure part of his view through the visor. Paul Gormley's analysis identifies the difference between his characterisation and the conventional action hero,

> If the action-image protagonist was marked by his ability to act decisively in a world or milieu that recognized those actions, the protagonist here is trapped… This powerlessness is turned back toward the viewer as the claustrophobic sensations from Thompson's heavy breathing on the soundtrack and the close-ups of his sweaty face, combined with jerky POV shots, resonate from the screen.[381]

Thompson walks slowly to the bomb and Sanborn informs him he is in the "kill zone." He places the explosives on the device and begins his retreat. As he reaches 25 metres away, Eldridge spots a butcher (Omar Mario) with a phone and runs towards him. Sanborn follows and Thompson notices their movement and begins running. The camera shakes as if attached to the characters and the shot length decreases to fractions of a second as the tension builds before the explosive is detonated. The frame does not foreground the "beautiful umbrella" Thompson described but focuses instead on his body being thrown to

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[380] Suid, *Guts & Glory*, 6.
[381] Gormley, "Blowing Up the War Film," 371.

the ground. A shot of his helmet filling with blood indicates his instant death and the focus is on the loss of life, not the thrill of the explosion as typically depicted in action cinema.

The director, Kathryn Bigelow, explains how she wanted to create a film which represented the reality of the situation for the soldiers, "I realized that the real responsibility of the filmmaking here was to keep the film reportorial, keep it as honest, realistic, and authentic as possible."[382] *The Hurt Locker* achieves this realism through scenes such as the sniper sequence, the start of which is filmed as if in real-time, conforming to the description of depicting reality that "requires the narrative to respect the actual qualities and duration of the event".[383] James and his colleagues oppose an Iraqi sniper from a considerable distance and the emphasis is on the length, boredom, lack of water, and waiting to confirm if the threat has been neutralised, as opposed to constant firing which would conventionally characterise battle sequences; towards the end of *Full Metal Jacket*, for example, the platoon is targeted by a sniper and responds by firing incessantly. The beginning of *Green Zone* also demonstrates the control of the soldiers in stealthily seeking out a sniper to kill them rather than firing continuously, representing a more realistic rather than sensational response. During the sniper scene in *The Hurt Locker*, Sanborn's gun jams and James realises it is because there is blood on the bullets. He passes the chamber down to Eldridge who is keeping watch below and tells him he needs to clean it. With no water to use, James suggests spitting on the bullets and wiping them. Bigelow discusses how people have reacted viscerally to the scene, "'There was this one article… in which the writer talks about watching the scene and trying to get saliva in his mouth, so that he could help Eldridge clean the bullets.'"[384] In addition, quick edits, shaky camerawork and close-ups intercut with disorienting medium shots to create an identification with the characters' and a feeling that they are with them and want to assist.

Patriots Day and *Captain Phillips* also employ documentary aesthetics to enable empathy with their traumatised lead characters, merging real-life components with their fictional narratives. In *Patriots Day*, imagery and sound from the real Boston Marathon bombings lend the scenes authenticity, supplementing the depiction. Towards the beginning of the film, Sergeant Saunders patrols the finish line of the marathon and the significance of the Boston setting is established. Saunders is played by real-life member of the Boston community, Mark Wahlberg, his Bostonian credentials established through his portrayals in *The Departed* (dir. Martin Scorsese, USA, Hong Kong, 2006) and *The Fighter* (dir. David O. Russell, USA, 2011). Wahlberg brings an authenticity to his role as a Boston police officer investigating

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[382] Tobias, "Interview: Kathryn Bigelow, June 24, 2009, 156.
[383] Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, "II: Film and Reality," in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings Fifth Edition*, edited by Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 167.
[384] Paul Hond, "Shoot Shoot, Bang Bang, 2009, from the *Columbia Magazine*," in *Kathryn Bigelow: Interviews*, edited by Peter Keough, (University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 210-211, accessed September 26, 2019, ProQuest Ebook Central, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/soton-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1113434.

attacks on his home city, the film offering a multifaceted level of identification through a local's perspective. As he hugs someone in the crowd, the "Boston" on his high-vis jacket is clearly visible, and he jokes with another crowd member about losing his Yankee cap, indicating his familiarity with the community.

Saunders' affinity with the local area is accentuated when the person he is closest to, his wife, Carol (Michelle Monaghan), appears in the crowd, passing characters who will be injured in the bombings, emphasising her proximity to the danger. Carol smiles and looks around for Saunders and then the shot cuts to CCTV footage of the real Boston Marathon from 2013 and the soundtrack instantly changes; the background crowd noise drops out and a low, synthesised chord plays, increasing in volume as it is accompanied by a frequent high note, creating an ominous, eerie atmosphere. Edward Landler comments on post-production's use of "over four terabytes of archival footage collected from the event itself and the investigation that followed… [including] local security and surveillance cameras".[385] Landler references sound designer, mixer and editor, Dror Mohar, commenting on how "'Sixty percent of the movie has at least one layer of sound from the real, original occurrences'".[386] The contrast of the CCTV shots is conspicuous because, whilst many of the previous shots have been shaky, as if from a hand-held camera within the crowd and the runners, the CCTV shots are static and grainy with very low-resolution images. The people in the shots are pixelated and the soundtrack change punctuates the contrast in shots.
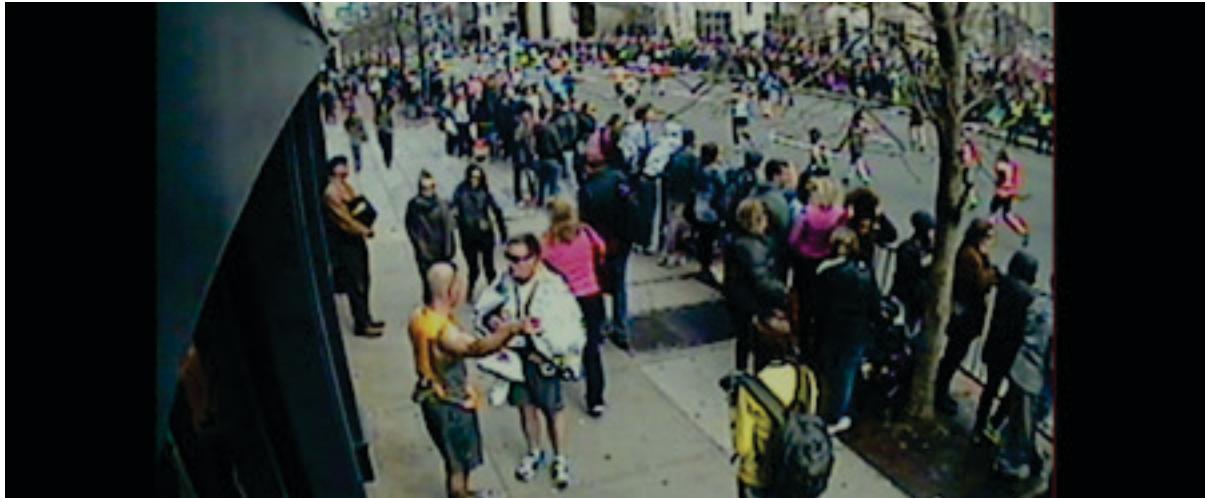
Figure 3.11   CCTV footage features static, low-resolution images, *Patriots Day*, 0:23:19

Handheld cameras are similarly used throughout *Captain Phillips* to evoke documentary footage and give the film a greater feel of authenticity; for example, when Muse holds Phillips at gunpoint after his escape attempt by jumping into the ocean, the camera evokes amateur footage of documenting proceedings; it is from a high angle, as if on a helicopter looking down, and cannot maintain focus on the characters, contributing to the chaos of the scene.

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[385] Landler, "Recreating the Boston Marathon Bombing in 'Patriots Day'."
[386] Ibid.

The final scene emphasises the filmmakers' commitment to realism. The shot drifts in and out of focus and the camera shakes as if someone on the ship has been asked to spontaneously document a real medical assessment. The scene was not planned or scripted but devised in the moment, based on the account of the ship's captain who rescued the real Captain Phillips. The captain explained that Phillips had been assessed in the infirmary so real staff were asked to re-enact the evaluation.[387] Real Naval Hospital Corpsman, Danielle Albert, plays the doctor, Chief O'Brien, who attends to him.[388] Greengrass notes how "whenever I see that scene, there's a shocking sense of humanity. And that is an actor finding the truth."[389] After checking his physical injuries, Chief O'Brien tells Phillips to lie down and she treats his mental state, "Sir, I need you to breathe, ok. You are safe, and you are fine… Everything's gonna be ok." Strings on the soundtrack indicate the sombre nature of the scene and encourage identification with Phillips as he cries.
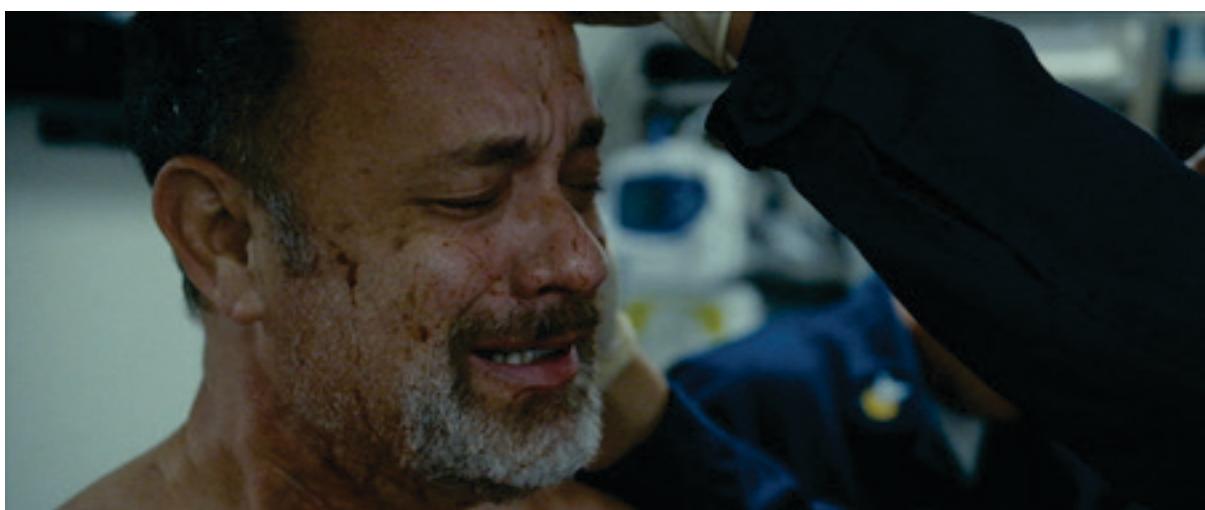
Figure 3.12   Phillips is treated by a real Navy Hospital Corpsman, *Captain Phillips*, 2:00:59

Encouraging identification with the personal journeys of individual characters, a mainstay of melodrama, invites empathy with traumatised protagonists. I have shown how Reel Fallout Cinema intensifies this identification and generates empathy with the protagonists through depicting extensive sequences in which they are traumatised, and exploiting realism and documentary aesthetics. Portrayals which resemble the realities of conflict evoke the reactions of the characters in the viewers who have experienced the events alongside them. Empathising with traumatised characters involved in the war on terror enables the films to comment on foreign policy issues, discussion of which forms the final section of this chapter.

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[387] Similarly to *The 15:17 to Paris* in which the three leads play themselves. Scott Meslow, "The best scene in *Captain Phillips* wasn't even in the script," *The Week*, January 8, 2015, accessed April 21, 2023, https://theweek.com/articles/458929/best-scene-captain-phillips-wasnt-even-script.
[388] Brad Brevet, "Could a Real Corpsman Earn an Oscar Nomination for Her Role in 'Captain Phillips'?" *ComingSoon.net*, October 14, 2013, accessed April 21, 2023, https://www.comingsoon.net/movies/news/584616-danielle-albert-captain-phillips-oscar-tom-hanks.
[389] Meslow, "The best scene in *Captain Phillips* wasn't even in the script."

3.5   Engagements with Foreign Policy

The emphasis on the trauma of those involved in the war on terror provides the films of the Reel Fallout cycle opportunities for critical engagement with the United States' foreign policy in the months and years following the September 11, 2001, attacks. The interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq are interrogated, along with whether the sacrifices of soldiers in each of the wars were worth the loss of life and damage to mental health when the war on terror has been unable to prevent further terrorism and threats against American citizens. This section will explore further sources of trauma for the protagonists and how they relate to the films' representations of American foreign policy, particularly in relation to the war films.

The life-changing effects of the events on September 11, 2001, are undisputed. On a personal level, people were traumatised by the sight of aeroplanes crashing into the Twin Towers in New York and Pentagon in Washington, and crash-landing in Pennsylvania, as E. Ann Kaplan explains, "the catastrophe reactivate[d] my old traumatic symptoms from World War II England… When the Towers were struck… I seemed to fear an attack whenever I was on a train… the new traumatic event merged with the childhood events, so that history and memory, time and space collapsed into one present time of terror".[390] On a national level, the attacks transformed foreign policy, "For an administration that had initially signaled the limits of America's international involvement, the events of 9/11 prompted a reordering of US international engagements."[391] In the immediate aftermath, President Bush invoked both the necessity of responding with war to what he termed, "were more than acts of terror. They were acts of war'",[392] and with American exceptionalism, the belief that "the United States is a special nation chosen by Providence to play a special role in human history… [and] US foreign policy should not be regarded as anything other than benign."[393] Assigning the United States' actions in conflict as having positive consequences has been referenced in relation to conventions of Hollywood melodrama,

> Scholarship on Hollywood representations of gender has long emphasized its
> prominent ideological role in the resolution of male crisis… particularly so in the
> conspicuous melodrama of "male action" genres, most often action films, war movies,

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[390] Kaplan, *Trauma Culture*, 3.
[391] David Hastings Dunn, and Oz Hassan, "Strategic confusion: America's conflicting strategies and the war on terrorism," in *International Terrorism Post 9/11: Comparative dynamics and responses*, ed. Asaf Siniver (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 60.
[392] Ibid., 58.
[393] Trevor B. McCrisken, "George W. Bush, American exceptionalism and the Iraq War," in *America and Iraq: Policy-making, intervention and regional politics*, eds. David Ryan and Patrick Kiely (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009, this ed. 2010), 182.

and westerns… Gallagher… observes the continued construction of violence as
redemptive and regenerative.[394]

Reel Fallout Cinema's portrayal of the traumatic effects on the protagonists contrasts with
this, violence characterised as the opposite of redemptive and regenerative. Discussing *Zero
Dark Thirty*, Robert Burgoyne affirms this view, noting how, "both terrorists and
counterterrorists [are] defined mainly by destruction."[395] Instead of energising the
protagonists, violence is depicted as damaging the characters and causing them distress.

The Iraq War is characterised as dangerous and posing a constant threat to the American
soldiers in *The Hurt Locker*. Sanborn and Eldridge both fear death and want to leave Iraq.
Sanborn tells James, "I'm not ready to die, man… I don't even have a son… I want a son."
Having witnessed soldiers wounded and killed throughout the film, Sanborn can no longer
contain his fear that he will be killed. Eldridge similarly, shows concern about how likely he is
to die in Iraq. On his first journey with Sergeant James, after seeing his previous
commander, Thompson, killed, he states, "Anyone comes alongside a Humvee, we're dead.
Anybody even looks at you funny, we're dead. Pretty much the bottom line is, if you're in
Iraq, you're dead." He is constantly aware of his own mortality which becomes his primary
focus. These characterisations align with Judith Butler's consideration in *Frames of War* of
how soldiers "begin in neo-liberal fashion to calculate their chances of success rather than
ask whether the war is just or justified."[396] The concern of both Sanborn and Eldridge is that
they survive their time in Iraq and are able to return home to their lives. There is no
discussion of why the Americans are there or whether their jobs are making a difference. In
this way, *The Hurt Locker* could be set in any warzone, as observed by Nick Dawson, "It
concerns itself not with the politics of the war, but with the visceral experiences of the
soldiers who fight… Instead of being about the Iraq war, then, *The Hurt Locker* is simply
about war."[397] However, the trauma of the primary characters results from their experiences
in the EOD team, a unit specifically associated with the Iraq War, as director Kathryn Bigelow
explains, "'The psychology of the soldiers, the fact that it's a conflict that's very unique to this
particular engagement. It's not a ground war, it's not air-to-ground, it's basically a war of
invisible, potentially catastrophic threats, 24/7."[398] The constant risk the soldiers face in
neutralising explosives contributes to their traumatised states.

The narrative of *Green Zone* is also specific to the Iraq War but, in contrast with *The Hurt
Locker*, does concern itself with the politics of the war, its protagonist angered by the

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[394] Glen Donnar, *Troubling Masculinities: Terror, Gender, and Monstrous Others in American Film Post-9/11*
(Jackson, MS, 2020; online edn, Mississippi Scholarship Online, 21 Jan. 2021), accessed August 9, 2023,
https://doi.org/10.14325/mississippi/9781496828576.001.0001, 7.
[395] Burgoyne, "The Violated Body," 255.
[396] Butler, *Frames of War*, xv.
[397] Dawson, "Time's Up (2009)," 143.
[398] Ibid., 143.

Americans' inability to find the weapons of mass destruction, the reason given for initiating the war. Chief Miller remains resolute throughout that, "The reasons we go to war always matter." Raymond Hinnebush explains how, "The invasion of Iraq was the most controversial and momentous foreign policy decision in recent memory… the justifications for war advanced by its proponents – Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) – …proved to be hollow."[399] Although Greengrass' focus is on the story of WMD, he employs traits of melodrama to pursue the narrative through an individual soldier who acts as a vessel into which to pour all of the information collected throughout the film. Miller is angry about the injustice of being sent to uncover weapons of mass destruction, based on false information, which turn out not to exist and his rage increases as he discovers the truth about the weapons and confronts the U.S. government's representative in Iraq, Poundstone, responsible for perpetrating the lie. American foreign policy is placed at the forefront throughout the film and directly criticised, the film ending with Miller sharing the truth with reporters and publishing the United States' purposeful falsehoods.

The declining support for the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq is noted by numerous scholars. Writing in 2009, Thomas M. Kane describes how "many Americans, including prominent G.W. Bush administration supporters, have come to rue invading Afghanistan and Iraq."[400] Hinnebush states that, "it is not as if the military were pushing for this war: Rumsfeld and his political appointees had to override the objections of the senior generals and the career security bureaucracy,"[401] and Greg Grandin writes how, "All four presidents [Reagan, Bush, Clinton, Bush] steadily upped the ante, pushing global 'engagement' as a moral imperative, a mission that led the United States to the Persian Gulf and to its financially exhausting and morally discrediting global war."[402] The lack of moral vindication for soldiers' presence in Iraq may have contributed further to their trauma.

Critics of the war in Iraq refer to an "ever-increasing casualty rate and widespread mental health problems among troops."[403] Deudney and Meiser note how the war in Iraq affected the United States' resolve, "American occupation of Iraq proceeded to bleed American strength."[404] Sergeant James in *The Hurt Locker* represents both a character who has bled strength for the United States and been drawn into a never-ending war, returning for a further tour lasting a year at the end of the film. *American Sniper* and *The Hurt Locker* both

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[399] Raymond Hinnebush, "The US Invasion of Iraq: Explanations and Implications," in *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies Vol. 16, No. 3*, 01 Oct 2007, 209, accessed 23 Nov 2019, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/10669920701616443.

[400] Thomas M. Kane, "1. Realism" in *New Directions in US Foreign Policy*, edited by Inderjeet Parmar, Linda B. Miller and Mark Ledwidge, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 10.

[401] Hinnebush, "The US Invasion of Iraq," 212.

[402] Grandin, *The End of the Myth*, 6.

[403] Richard Jackson and Matt McDonald, "2. Constructivism, US foreign policy and the 'war on terror'," in *New Directions in US Foreign Policy*, edited by Inderjeet Parmar, Linda B. Miller and Mark Ledwidge, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 26.

[404] Daniel Deudney and Jeffrey Meiser, "American exceptionalism," in *US Foreign Policy Second Edition*, edited by Michael Cox and Doug Stokes, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 36.

foreground the effect of the Iraq War on the two protagonists, maybe because the war in Iraq was not won. This parallels with films concerning the Vietnam War,

> We know that the Vietnam conflict traumatized the American psyche, the only time, it likes to believe, that the United States 'lost' a war… It is perhaps not surprising, then, that almost all of the films centred upon the Vietnam War have been concerned not so much with the war itself but with its impact upon American consciousness.[405]

By not being able to focus on a triumphant victory in films concerning the Iraq War, there is a focus on the effect of the soldiers' experiences on their mental health. This manifests differently from how Vietnam War films represent their protagonists, as Nadia Abu El-Haj asserts,

> in contrast to the late 1970s and early 1980s… the popular culture figures we are seeing now are by and large neither *Apocalypse Now* nor Rambo-type figures. They tend not to be soldiers so damaged by war that they wreak havoc and terror on the battlefield and at home. The appropriate response is sympathy rather than fear or even simple hero worship.[406]

It can be argued that engendering sympathy with the traumatised soldiers characterises them as victims, as Terence McSweeney considers in describing *American Sniper* as a "depiction of the American soldier as the primary victim of their respective conflicts, not, as one might expect, the Vietnamese, Iraqis and Afghanistanis who died and were wounded in their hundreds and thousands, if not millions."[407] This is central to *American Sniper* and *The Hurt Locker*'s portrayals of war; it is the effect war has on the American soldiers serving their country which is the story the filmmakers want to tell, not the effect of war on the inhabitants of the country the United States has invaded.

American Sniper might appear pro-war in its scenes in Iraq where Kyle is resolute in his killing of Iraqis to protect his fellow soldiers and prevent attacks on his country, but in its representation of trauma, the film is anti-war. This ability of the film to appear both pro-war and anti-war relates to Guy Westwell's consideration that,

> PTSD licenses dialogue and agreement between those with differing political points of view… leading Barker to argue that the therapy paradigm forms a 'bridge across conservatives and liberals in America' (2011:99)… therapy in this case [is] the key

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[405] Michael Richardson, *Otherness in Hollywood Cinema* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2010), 137.

[406] Abu El-Haj, *Combat Trauma*, 3.

[407] Terence McSweeney, "American cinema in the shadow of 9/11," in *American cinema in the shadow of 9/11*, ed. Terence McSweeney (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 9, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1g0524v, accessed January 27, 2020.

ground upon which the convergence of seemingly irreconcilable positions takes place.[408]

The representation of trauma and the focus on the suffering of an individual can enable empathy from the viewer regardless of their opinion on the war. This is particularly true of *American Sniper* as Kyle dies at the end of the film; there may be reluctance to criticise the war, and Kyle's involvement, as he is no longer alive to defend his actions. Lawrence and Jewett write, "We hope that *American Sniper* does not contribute to the feeling Kyle's death, along with the suffering of so many other veterans, somehow sacrificially atones for all the wrongs that were wrought by the war that he served."[409] A potential problem with relying on the conventions of melodrama and making a war film a personal journey about one individual, especially when that individual is based on a real person, is that it becomes more difficult to be critical of the war if it appears that the criticism would be directed at individuals damaged by their experiences and in some ways characterised as victims. Abu El-Haj advocates that this politicises the support of traumatised veterans,

> I approach the… need for the American public to care for returning soldiers… as decidedly political. To grapple with the trauma experienced by American military personnel is to always raise the question of America's wars abroad… I argue, the discourse of soldier trauma… that one must support the troops regardless of whether or not one supports the war – is a fundamental building block of American militarism.[410]

In opposition, I assert that sympathy with soldiers suffering from trauma does not necessarily indicate a support of war. My film corpus demonstrates the damage done by war to individuals without convincing of the merits of conflict. *American Sniper* can be read as both a nationalistic film gratefully acknowledging the sacrifices made by the men and women who fight, and as an anti-war piece. This corresponds with the description of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, renowned for being one of the most anti-war films which "projected the futility and hopelessness of combat… [but also represents the soldiers as] return[ing]… home to a grateful nation."[411] Support of the individual is separated from the opinion of war.

American Sniper highlights the damage done to both individuals and society in expecting serving members of the armed forces to experience the atrocities of war and simply assimilate back into American society. Both *The Hurt Locker* and *American Sniper* portray adjustment to life at home as difficult if not impossible to achieve. Scott Tobias perceives that Kyle, "spends so much time immersed in war and death that re-acclimating to everyday life

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[408] Westwell, *Parallel Lines*, 158-159.
[409] John Shelton Lawrence and Robert Jewett, "The Mythic Shape of *American Sniper* (2015)," in *American cinema in the shadow of 9/11*, ed. Terence McSweeney (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 43-44, accessed January 27, 2020, http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctt1g0524v.
[410] Abu El-Haj, *Combat Trauma*, 8-9.
[411] Garofolo, "War Films in an Age of War and Cinema," 40.

becomes impossible."[412] Kyle's inability to reconcile his experiences in Iraq with life back home is demonstrated when a soldier, Mads (Jonathan Groff), with whom Kyle served in Fallujah, approaches him back in the United States. Mads thanks Kyle for saving his life and salutes him. Kyle struggles to respond and avoids eye contact with him.

Figure 3.13   Kyle struggles to acknowledge Mads' appreciation, *American Sniper*, 1:12:28

Kyle's difficulty in readjusting to life in the United States is acknowledged by Michelle Obama's assessment, "'This film touches on many of the emotions and experiences I have heard first-hand from military families over these past few years… the challenges of transitioning back home.' (Quoted in Oldenburg 2015)."[413] *American Sniper* portrays the dangers of this inability to acclimatise to domestic life. Kyle's trauma continues when he returns home after his final tour. The camera begins a continuous tracking shot from behind the television at which Kyle is staring. Sounds of gunfire and helicopters hovering form quiet background noise, appearing as if from the television. The camera approaches Kyle and the sound effects increase in volume. As the camera turns to show the television screen, the sounds get louder, overwhelming the scene before the camera pans to show that the television is off, creating a surprising dislocation of visual and sound and jolting the viewer from passive consumption of the scene to actively appreciating Kyle's disturbed state as he imagines the sounds of war and the viewer hears them with him. When Taya calls his name, she is unable to awaken him from his daze. The sequence cuts to the garden where Kyle watches his dog playing with some children while Taya chats to him. Again, the soundtrack reflects his belief that he is back in a warzone, with aeroplanes flying past, and distorted noises creating fear. Kyle sees the dog licking one of the children's necks and believes it to be attacking. He jumps up, removes his belt and marches over to the dog, grabbing it by the collar and preparing to hit it before Taya shouts his name, bringing him out of his traumatised

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[412] Scott Tobias, "Here's what ties together Clint Eastwood's heroes, from '15:17 to Paris' to Dirty Harry," *Washington Post*, February 16, 2018, accessed May 10, 2023, Gale General OneFile, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A527809125/ITOF?u=unisoton&sid=oclc&xid=034e1311.
[413] Lawrence and Jewett, "The Mythic Shape of *American Sniper* (2015)," 28.

state. Lawrence and Jewett note how the scene, "symbolically conveys that Chris is close to the edge of insanity and no longer the fable's protective sheepdog."[414] By representing soldiers as unable to distinguish between memories of war and reality, Reel Fallout Cinema depicts the damaging effects of war as extending to creating risks for people in the United States as well as overseas. The end of *American Sniper* emphasises the manifestation of this threat as, "Kyle was killed at a firing range during the making of the film by a US veteran he was trying to help deal with battlefield trauma."[415] This demonstrates a real-life example of the trauma of war not being processed, identified by Scott Laderman, "The fact that Kyle met his fate not in Iraq or Afghanistan but at the hands of a fellow veteran in Texas in 2013 suggests the psychological damage that the post-9/11 wars have inflicted upon thousands of men and women in the U.S. armed forces."[416] *American Sniper* demonstrates that there is a lack of support from the military or government for veterans of war once they return home and that, left untreated, the trauma of war poses a significant danger to others.

Similarly to Kyle, James struggles to adjust to life in the United States in *The Hurt Locker*, represented by a sudden cut from shots in Iraq where he is travelling with Sanborn with Iraqi children throwing rocks at his vehicle, to walking slowly through a supermarket with a trolley. The scenes are intrinsically linked through the camera filming out to the left of the vehicle in Iraq as it drives along, followed by a tracking shot backwards and to the left as it follows James' reflection in the glass freezer doors as he moves down the aisle. His window on the world has transformed from a warzone to the consumerism of an almost infinite choice of meals, and the fragmentation of his reflection mirrors his discombobulation at adjusting to the domesticity of life back in the United States.

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[414] Ibid., 36.
[415] Newark, *Fifty Great War Films*, 204.
[416] Laderman, "Introduction: Camouflaging Empire," 12.

Figure 3.14   James' reflection is obscured and fragmented, *The Hurt Locker*, 1:58:12

These juxtaposed shots enable the viewer to identify with James' culture shock when his role as a soldier is exchanged for the mundanity of supermarket shopping. James stands in front of the long row of cereals and an establishing shot shows his small size in comparison with the shelves and the enormity of the supermarket.

Figure 3.15   James is small and insignificant, overwhelmed by the choice of cereals, *The Hurt Locker*, 1:59:15

He looks up and down the aisle, the camera representing his view looking left and then right, and he then selects a cereal from directly in front of him without paying much attention. He appears to have no interest in being there and is detached from life at home.[417]

Both *American Sniper* and *The Hurt Locker* also represent their protagonists as being silenced at home when trying to talk about their experiences in Iraq, confirming an absence of support in processing their trauma. Their families want them to return to how they were before they went to war, illustrated by Taya telling Kyle in *American Sniper*, "It's not about them, it's about us. You have to make it back to us, ok?" This aligns with McLoughlin's description of responses to veterans, "Returned from the wars, the veteran poses the question 'is the person who has come back the same as the one who went away?'… The person who is at once much changed and deeply familiar is ontologically troubling."[418] In this way, the soldier has been categorised as the other, forming the opposite side of an "abyss dividing 'the soldier' from 'the civilian' in American society… 'Think of the military as the Other 1%'".[419] McLoughlin continues, "Cathy Caruth claims that the soldier is 'the central and recurring image of trauma in [the twentieth] century'. In a similar vein, Sarah Cole writes tellingly of a 'distraught fraternity', a band made brotherly through silence."[420] By placing traumatised Americans front and centre, the films emphasise the damaging effect of conflict on soldiers' mental states. According to McLoughlin referencing McDermott, this is not a true representation of the diverse experiences of war, "McDermott's findings… uphold the view that, while some ex-servicemen 'suffer' as a result of their military experiences, the 'great majority' do not and, after leaving the armed forces, go on to lead 'successful civilian lives'."[421] These films, therefore, focus on one side of war and the soldier's experience, suggesting that the filmmakers intentionally created films critical of the traumatising effects of war, choosing the less typical response as they focus on the damage of war rather than a more realistic portrayal of many soldiers leading "successful civilian lives".[422]

A successful civilian life is not possible for James in *The Hurt Locker* as there is no end in sight to his time in Iraq. When he returns home towards the end of the film, he tells his ex-wife with whom he still lives about a bomb that has been detonated in Iraq. Between shots of them washing and peeling vegetables, he tells her, "They're saying 59 are dead." He pauses and watches her peeling carrots before looking out of the window, closing his eyes and exhaling, as if resigning himself to take the decision alone to return to Iraq in recognition of

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[417] There is a very similar scene in Vietnam War film, *Heaven and Earth* (dir. Oliver Stone, USA, France, 1993), in which the supermarket is also used to represent the disconnect between war overseas and the capitalist consumerism of home.

[418] McLoughlin, *Veteran Poetics*, 22-23.

[419] Abu El-Haj, *Combat Trauma*, 22.

[420] McLoughlin, *Veteran Poetics*, 191.

[421] McLoughlin, *Veteran Poetics*, 67.

[422] This is similar to Hollywood's response to the Vietnam War; many of the releases focus on the damage done by the war, for example, *The Deer Hunter*, *Full Metal Jacket* (dir. Stanley Kubrick, UK, USA, 1987), *Born on the Fourth of July* and *Casualties of War* (dir. Brian De Palma, USA, 1989).

her not being willing to discuss the situation with him. He says, "You know they need more bomb techs," to which she responds with a smile and replies, "You want to chop those up for me?" ignoring his attempt at a conversation. The only opportunity the viewer is given to gain an insight into his thoughts is when he talks to his infant son who has no understanding of his words; therefore, again, his experiences are not heard. Following his brief visit to the United States, James returns to Iraq for another year, potentially to be silenced forever.

Lone Survivor does not depict the soldiers at home but does depict a failed mission in the Afghanistan War which ended with only one survivor, problematising the rationale of sacrificing American soldiers in the war on terror. The opening scene emphasises Luttrell's loneliness as he lies in a helicopter as the only soldier rescued. He represents the United States in relation to Greg Grandin's assertion that the nation was "created lonely",[423] and indicates the advantage of being unattached to ensure survival. Michael Wood explains how,

> there is in America a dream of freedom… at the back of several varieties of isolationism and behind whatever we mean by individualism, which converts selfishness from something of a vice into something of a virtue, and which confers a peculiar, gleaming prestige on loneliness. It is a dream of freedom from others; it is a fear… of entanglement.[424]

Tania Modleski's description of the war film demonstrates the significance of such detachment to war cinema,

> If there ever was a purely masculine genre, it is surely the war film. That women in the genre represent a threat to the male warrior is revealed in a time-worn convention: whenever a soldier displays a photograph of his girlfriend, wife, or family, he is doomed to die by the end of the film.[425]

This is nowhere more prominent than in *Lone Survivor* in which each of the three men who die on the mission with Luttrell are characterised as being loved; within the opening few minutes of the film, relationships with wives or girlfriends are depicted as being a fundamental part of their existence, while Luttrell, who survives, does not mention anyone in the United States who loves or misses him.

The relationships of Murphy (Taylor Kitsch), Axelson (Ben Foster) and Dietz (Emile Hirsch) are emphasised through the opening shots in which the viewer is shown close-ups of family

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[423] A consideration of the concept of loneliness and American exceptionalism will form part of the following chapter regarding *Zero Dark Thirty*. Greg Grandin, *The End of the Myth*, 34.

[424] Michael Wood, *America in the Movies or "Santa Maria, it had slipped my mind"* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1975, this ed. 1989), 28.

[425] Tania Modleski, "Do we get to lose this time? Revising the Vietnam War film," in *The War Film*, edited by Robert Eberwein (London: Rutgers University Press, 2005), 155.

photographs intercut with the men sleeping, a warm, orange glow lighting the figures of the three men who will die while a colder, more artificial light surrounds Luttrell.

Figure 3.16   The light on Luttrell's body is cold, more artificial, *Lone Survivor*, 0:06:36
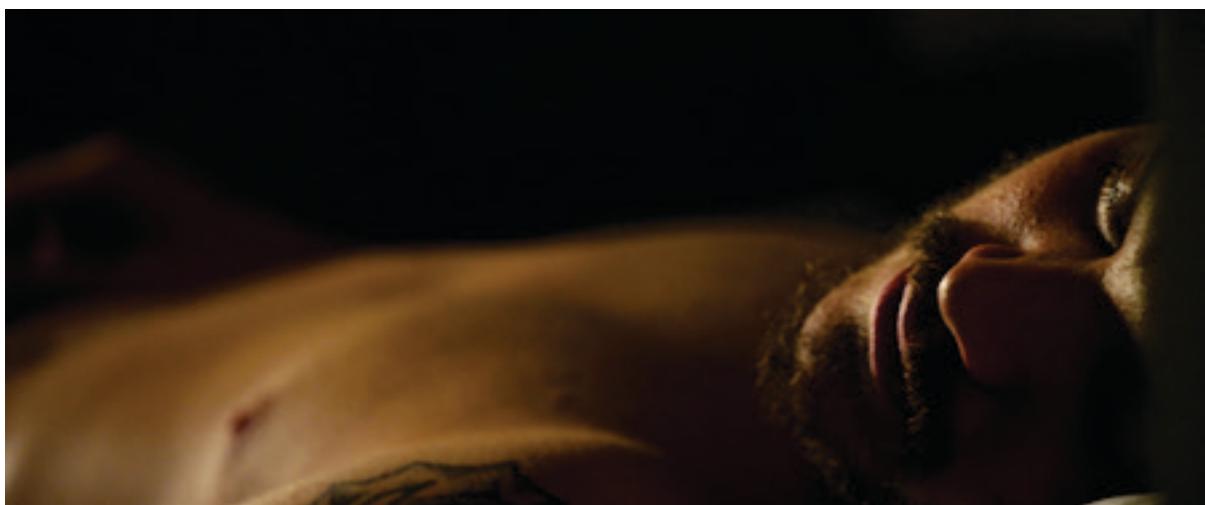
Figure 3.17   The light on Dietz's body is warm and romanticised, *Lone Survivor*, 0:06:42

Axelson's wedding ring is framed clearly in the centre of the shot of him sleeping, and when he wakes, he types to his wife online. Once the men awaken, they join each other outside and discuss what Murphy's fiancée would like as a wedding present and what colour Dietz's partner is planning to paint their home, prompting comments about the likelihood of her being pregnant. Considering the three characters who die in the mission as representative of the nation, they demonstrate the dangers of attachment. Translated to American foreign policy, this illustrates the appeal of an isolationist policy which protects Americans as opposed to one of intervening into the situations of others which puts American lives at risk. Kyle and James' inability to adapt to domestic life in *American Sniper* and *The Hurt Locker* respectively, Miller's disobeying of orders and high-risk behaviour in *Green Zone*, and the injury done both to Luttrell's body and mental health in *Lone Survivor*, all demonstrate the

damaging effects of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars on their veterans, and the nation as a whole.

3.5.1 Burden of Responsibility

In addition to advocating for an isolationist approach to foreign policy, several of my case study films represent the United States as failing to follow through with their military incursions and overseas investigations, deserting the American protagonists in the process. An absence of authority figures and powerlessness to prevent attacks are depicted as resulting in the lead characters taking responsibility for events which contributes to their trauma. Other than in *The 15:17 to Paris*, all of the protagonists request help and are refused, being compelled to go it alone and burdened with accountability for actions which should belong to superior officers. When pirates approach Captain Phillips' ship, for example, Phillips calls for help, telling First Officer, Shane Murphy (Michael Chernus), "Get me U.S. Maritime Emergency." Murphy attempts contact and reports that there is no answer. Phillips speaks to UKMTO (UK Maritime Trade Operations) and is told, "I'm relaying your transmission now but chances are it's just fishermen." He responds, "They're not here to fish," and the camera cuts to show the side of one of the skiffs speeding through the water followed by a close-up of a machine gun, validating Phillips' assessment. He is forced to resort to protect his crew on his own as no one in a position of authority will assist. In *The Kingdom*, Agent Fleury and Agent Mayes feel responsible for the death of their colleague, Agent Manner, as an incident in which they were involved resulted in him being relocated to Saudi Arabia where he was killed. Agent Sykes explains how, "They celebrated her [Mayes'] graduation at the IHOP until some townie called Janet [Mayes] something… so the townie didn't see Fran coming out of the head, but he definitely felt Fran's uppercut shatter his jaw… I do know the post to Riyadh was part of the deal Fleury cut to save Fran's career." Sergeant Saunders in *Patriots Day* also feels responsible for placing his wife, Carol, at risk. He asks her to bring his larger knee brace to the finish line and tells her afterwards, "You were right there. Please don't be mad that I told you to come down there… I'm sorry that I put you there." The implication made by the films of the characters taking responsibility in this way is that the nation should take greater responsibility for its implementation of the war on terror. Without an authority being accountable, individuals take on the burden which can be damaging and traumatising.

The Hurt Locker, *American Sniper*, *Lone Survivor* and *Zero Dark Thirty* all heighten the burden felt by the protagonists by emphasising how their trauma is generated by the responsibility placed on them. In *The Hurt Locker*, Sergeant James leads his team with no superior officer present; he is depicted as solely responsible for the soldiers in his unit,

Sanborn and Eldridge. In their final mission together in which Eldridge is injured, they are called in the middle of the night to do a post-blast assessment of an oil tanker explosion in the Green Zone. James orders them to accompany him into the streets to investigate whether the bomb was remotely detonated, even though Sanborn asserts, "You got three infantry platoons behind you whose job it is… that ain't our f***ing job." James responds, "You don't say no to me… We're going." They turn off their torches and the screen fades into complete blackness for over ten seconds, representing their expedition into an unknown space, and only their footsteps and heavy breathing to indicate that the camera is still rolling. James assigns them each an alleyway to search and, when he and Sanborn hear gunshots, they run after Eldridge, fearing that he has been killed. They find a body but it is not Eldridge, and they see him being dragged away. They chase after him down streets sparsely lit until he is in view and James fires four shots, killing his abductors but also injuring Eldridge. Sanborn states, "Oh, s***, he's hit, man. You hit him in the f***ing leg," before reassuring Eldridge that he will survive. As they pick him up, the scene abruptly cuts to an empty bathroom with sinks lining the right side and showers along the left. James enters at the far end and stops to lean on the first sink, looking down before looking in the mirror. There is a cut to the camera showing his reflection as he stares at himself and then looks away. Still fully clothed in his army uniform and helmet, he walks into the shower and turns it on, the water pouring onto his helmet. The camera tracks down his body until showing the tray full of red water as it washes the blood from his clothes. He removes and drops his helmet, sinks to the floor and cries. His pain is palpable as he hits the walls and holds his head, crying, exhibiting the trauma of almost losing one of his team. The viewer is aware that it was his decision to go into the streets which led to Eldridge's capture, and it was a shot he fired which wounded him.
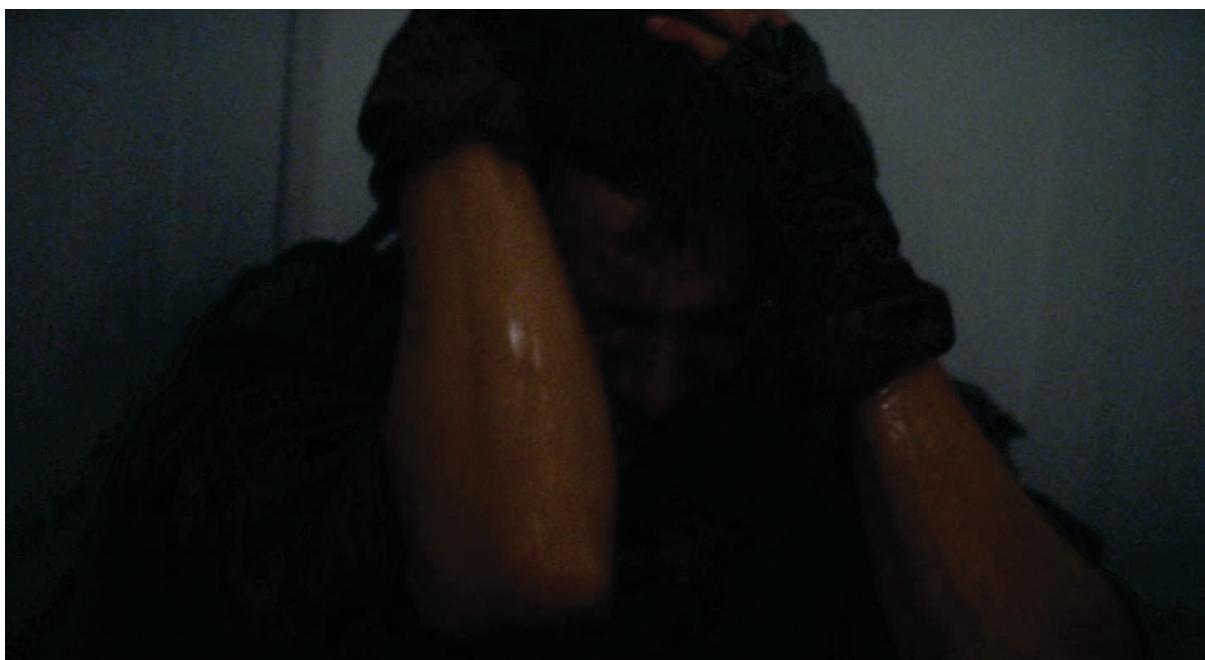
Figure 3.18   James cannot contain his pain after almost losing Eldridge, *The Hurt Locker*, 1:44:47

The responsibility he feels as the head of the unit is emphasised further by juxtaposing the sequence with a cut to the next morning. Sanborn sits in the Humvee, brightly lit, tapping his hands on the steering wheel and whistling, suggesting he is unaffected by the previous night's events.

In *American Sniper*, Kyle must similarly take responsibility for his actions. In the opening scene, and subsequent conclusion to it later in the film, he watches a woman and a boy through the sights of his sniper and is compelled to shoot and kill both of them as they pass a bomb between them. The bomb poses a threat to a cohort of American soldiers close by and, by removing the threat, Kyle saves the soldiers' lives. He clearly feels conflicted regarding this decision throughout the film, however, which is made clear is solely his choice; his superior tells him, "You know the R.O.E. Your call." This absolves the senior officer of accountability and suggests soldiers like Kyle are made to take sole responsibility for such actions. This affects him throughout the film, underlined by the fact that the scene is repeated later in the film and that he has tears in his eyes when forced to consider shooting another, even younger, child towards the end of the film.

Characterising soldiers having to take responsibility for the lives and deaths of others pertains to the fact that, a few weeks after the invasion of Iraq, President Bush announced that the United States had succeeded in its mission to liberate Iraq, as Bob Woodward describes,

> On May 1… [i]n an address to the nation… [Bush] proclaimed, 'Major combat operations in Iraq have ended.' Though he was technically correct and did caution, 'We have difficult work to do in Iraq,' there was no doubt that it was a victory speech. As Bush spoke a large banner hung in the background: 'MISSION ACCOMPLISHED.'… 'The tyrant has fallen, and Iraq is free,' the president said from the sunbathed deck. It was a 'noble cause' and 'a great moral advance'.[426]

The films suggest that the work of the troops who remained in Iraq was not fully supported by the U.S. administration and accountability was passed on to the soldiers. By deeming the intervention into Iraq a success, the continuing presence of American troops is depicted as being considered part of a post-conflict endeavour to achieve and maintain security rather than receive the full weight of the military behind their work. The Afghanistan War also contributed to troop numbers being stretched, "The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are the first extended conflicts the US has fought in the absence of a draft. As of October 31, 2007, 1,638,817 military personnel had deployed to Iraq or Afghanistan. Seventeen years into the war, that number had risen to 2.77 million."[427] The large numbers of "soldiers required has

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[426] Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, 415.
[427] Abu El-Haj, *Combat Trauma*, 106.

posed problems for the military"[428] and added to the burden placed on the soldiers returning for multiple tours. A scene in *Lone Survivor* suggests a lack of support from superiors. Commander Christensen (Eric Bana), in charge of the operation to find Ahmad Shah (Yousuf Azami), contacts Commander Schriever (David Shephard) to inform him of the inability to communicate with the SEAL team. Schriever is depicted as angry and unhelpful, asking, "Why am I hearing this from you right now?" and "Is there a f***ing problem here, Eric?" He offers no solutions or assistance, leaving Christensen to respond to the situation himself which results in himself and fifteen others being killed when they mount a rescue attempt in a helicopter which is blown up.

The burden of responsibility the protagonist, Luttrell, feels in *Lone Survivor* is portrayed throughout the mission. In a scene to be discussed in detail in Chapter 4, the platoon is discovered by a group of goatherders who are suspected to be in communication with the Taliban. Luttrell advocates for their release but this leads to the other three soldiers in his unit being killed when they are surrounded by Taliban insurgents. When the goatherders are let go, Luttrell watches them leave for longer than the others and turns back twice. This demonstrates his fear of where they are headed and who they will tell about the Americans' presence on the mountain, emphasising the responsibility he feels for arguing for their release. As the medic on the team, Luttrell is also responsible for treating his fellow soldiers' injuries. The visceral nature of the falls, explosions and gunshots informs the viewer of the severity of the wounds, as described earlier in this chapter. Luttrell tells Murphy to pack his stomach wound with dirt and, in a subsequent scene, looks at an injury on Axelson's head and swears, unsure how to help.

Figure 3.19   Luttrell's swears in reaction to seeing Axelson's head wound, *Lone Survivor*, 1:17:39

Axelson asks, "Are we dead?" Luttrell replies, "Not yet." The deaths of each of the three soldiers are accentuated through employing slow motion, a variety of camera angles and building tension as they each accumulate multiple wounds before they die. After receiving a shot in the head, for example, Axelson, is shot twice more. He defends himself with his handgun but is surrounded by Taliban and a close-up of the gun shows when his ammunition runs out. He is shot at three times, the final shot landing in his head and killing him. The drawn-out death sequences invite the viewer to empathise with Luttrell and identify with the traumatising effects of knowing all three of his team have been killed. As Elizabeth Samet notes, "who could fail to understand the intensity of Luttrell's desire to seek a balm for grief, guilt, and the constellation of emotions besieging the lone survivor of a battle?"[429] As the only one left, Luttrell feels the burden of responsibility.

The representation in *Lone Survivor* of the characters letting their prisoners go is reversed in *Zero Dark Thirty* as prisoners are held and tortured to try and obtain information. CIA agents are tasked with finding out the location of Osama bin Laden, as well as when and where any subsequent attacks will take place. This results in the lead character, Maya, being distraught when she is confronted by numerous terrorist incidents, including in Khobar, Saudi Arabia, and the bombing of London transport in the United Kingdom, having failed to obtain any information from their prisoners. It is the desperation of the United States in wanting to protect people from similar attacks which is characterised as leading to them resorting to objectionable methods including torture and extraordinary rendition. The responsibility Maya feels for these approaches is represented following her participation in Abu Faraj being hit and tortured with waterboarding. The scene cuts to Maya in the bathroom, removing her wig and breathing heavily and quickly. She looks at herself in the mirror and the camera cuts to a shot of her reflected in a mirror different from the one in which she is looking, her physical presence in the room absent from the frame. This creates a disorientating effect for the viewer as she is facing in the opposite direction but the camera remains the same side of her. The shot is out of focus and contains the reflection of lights, completely obscuring and fragmenting her face, reflecting her disintegrating mental state in being unable to view herself clearly. Jung observes how, "The bathroom scene demonstrates the toll the work takes on her".[430] The lack of responsibility taken by authorities also contributes to this toll. In the following scene, Dan tells her, "You gotta be real careful with the detainees now. Politics are changing and you don't want to be the last one holding a dog collar when the Oversight Committee comes." There is an implication that accountability for torture could rest solely with her. In two other examples, CIA Station Chief Joseph Bradley (Kyle Chandler) tells

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[429] Elizabeth Samet, "Can an American Soldier Ever Die in Vain?" in *Foreign Policy*, May 2014, 74, accessed June 23, 2025, https://www.proquest.com/magazines/can-american-soldier-ever-die-vain/docview/1523727285/se-2.

[430] Jung, *The Invisibilities of Political Torture*, 39.

Maya, "Let me know when you've got some actual intelligence, preferably something that leads to a strike," indicating that information provided by Maya may lead to people being killed, and Maya takes personal responsibility for Jessica's death, remarking that she was "spared" to complete the task, as noted earlier in the chapter.

The trauma of the lead characters through feeling a burden of responsibility for the injuries and deaths of others parallels with the responsibility of the nation for sending their soldiers and investigators into harm's way. Reel Fallout Cinema demonstrates the damage done to American soldiers, law enforcement and civilians in the war on terror and questions the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq. The representation of conflict as traumatising the protagonists contravenes conventional depictions in action cinema of violence as regenerative and instead emphasises the suffering caused by ongoing conflict.

3.6   Conclusion

This chapter has established how Reel Fallout Cinema represents a post- post-9/11 world in which American characters are emotionally affected by the events of 9/11, further terrorist attacks and the subsequent war on terror, and outwardly express these emotions. In several instances, they exhibit symptoms of PTSD with the films conveying prolonged trauma by ending without resolution. Emphasising traumatised lead characters breaks with war and terrorism genre conventions which create expectations of tough, unemotional heroes carrying out their duties regardless of the mental effects, as displayed by Rambo throughout *First Blood* and *Rambo: First Blood Part II*, in which his survival instincts and commitment to completing the mission surpass any emotional response. Being released during the war on terror, including during the Afghanistan and Iraq Wars, also represents a departure from prior portrayals of trauma in war, for example, in World War II films and Vietnam War films, which were released post-war.

The protagonists of my case study films are often driven by empathy, pausing for reflection and permitting themselves to cry which, in some instances, compromises missions, to be discussed in depth in the following chapter. The terrorism films denote the trauma caused to American civilians across the world, including at home, and how the war on terror has not secured safety for American citizens anywhere. Jackson and McDonald confirm how, "[I]t is certainly far from clear that the elimination or even significant reduction of the terrorist threat has been achieved through the means the Bush administration and its allies have employed

in the 'war on terror'."[431] In addition to being global, the war on terror is also portrayed as endless in these nine films, through the war films ending with the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq being ongoing, and terrorist attacks taking place concurrently in the terrorism films.

Focusing on the trauma of American soldiers, agents and civilians caused by conflict, as well as grieving the loss of life on both sides, the Reel Fallout cycle demonstrates a further cost of the war on terror, that of the damage done to American and non-American characters. In considering these nine films together, there is a question of whether the sacrifices are worth the cost, especially when attacks against Americans are shown in the terrorism films to have continued alongside the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Combined with the previous chapter on grieving non-American characters, my analysis indicates that everyone is vulnerable and at risk, and everyone should be mourned, destabilising claims to American exceptionalism which will form the focus of the following chapter. The incorporation of passive characters, rather than the active involvement of the protagonist who impacts the outcome, also weakens the United States' claim to exceptionalism. Chris Kyle is pinned down on a roof by both a sniper and a barking dog in *American Sniper*, unable to save an Iraqi child from being killed; Sergeant James in *The Hurt Locker* discovers a child's dead body, not in time to save him, and subsequently cries in the shower; Marcus Luttrell in *Lone Survivor* is incapacitated and awaits rescue; and Maya in *Zero Dark Thirty* sits shocked on the floor of her office cubicle after her colleague Jessica has been killed by a suicide bomber. Each of these demonstrate reactive, traumatised protagonists, unable to help and protect others, or themselves, contravening the typical Hollywood lead role.

Traversing the pain of their experiences and the obligations to continue their missions and investigations, enhanced due to the absence of authority figures, means that prior trauma is compounded by new traumatic situations which additionally affect the lead characters. Through heightening identification with traumatised protagonists, the viewer is invited to project grief on to the characters, acknowledging that the "white male hero",[432] in many of these films an exceptional, highly trained, elite soldier, no longer comes to the rescue unaffected by his surroundings, but is affected the same as anyone else. Walter A. Davis encapsulates this sentiment,

> history remains irreversible in its tragic consequences until we find for our history… a way… that sustains trauma and depressive mourning as the destiny of historical subjects who know that reversal begins only when we are willing to plumb the depths of our collective disorder. A tragic understanding of history assures us no catharsis, no

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[431] Jackson and McDonald, "2. Constructivism, US foreign policy and the 'war on terror'," 18.
[432] Discussed by Drucilla Cornwell and explored further in Chapter 4. Drucilla Cornwell, *Clint Eastwood and Issues of American Masculinity* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), x-xi.

renewal, no guarantees. What it offers instead is the realization that to sustain and deepen the trauma is our only hope.[433]

I contend that this is the contribution my case study films make, an acceptance that Americans have been traumatised and offering space to mourn the trauma.

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[433] Davis, *Death's Dream Kingdom*, 9.

Chapter 4 American Exceptionalism and its Discontents

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[N]EOCONSERVATIVE WRITER IRVING KRISTOL… SAID IN 1989, "WE MAY HAVE WON THE COLD WAR… BUT THIS MEANS THAT NOW THE ENEMY IS US, NOT THEM."… WITH THE SUDDEN DEMISE OF THE SOVIET UNION, WESTERN SOCIETIES NOW HAD TO STAND ENTIRELY ON THEIR OWN TERMS, AND IT WAS SUDDENLY MUCH MORE DIFFICULT TO SAY EXACTLY WHAT IT WAS THAT THEY STOOD FOR. [434]

I AM A GENUINE BELIEVER IN PEACE; BUT I BELIEVE IN RIGHTEOUSNESS FIRST. [435]

THEODORE ROOSEVELT, 1915

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4.1   Compromised Missions

My overarching contention in this thesis is that my film corpus differs from prior war and terrorism films. In Chapters 2 and 3 respectively, this was demonstrated through their representation of non-American characters as grievable and of the American protagonists as emotional, vulnerable and traumatised. In this chapter, I will show how my case study films contrast with previous war and terrorism narratives by questioning the American exceptionalism on which the war on terror was founded and portraying a disillusionment with endless conflict through offering space to mourn. They do not end with "the possibility of

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[434] Philip Hammond, "Introduction: Screening the War on Terror," in *Screens of Terror: Representations of war and terrorism in film and television since 9/11*, ed. Philip Hammond (Bury St Edmunds: Arima Publishing, 2011), 15.

[435] *Letter from Theodore Roosevelt to Paul Sabatier*, Oyster Bay, New York, March 13, 1915, *Theodore Roosevelt Papers*, Library of Congress Manuscript Division, Theodore Roosevelt Digital Library, Dickinson State University, accessed July 12, 2024, https://www.theodorerooseveltcenter.org/Research/Digital-Library/Record?libID=o212029.

closure and the comfort of moral certainty"[436] of many World War II films, characterising sacrifices as honourable, as in *Bataan* (dir. Tay Garnett, USA, 1943); nor do they express the political convictions criticising war evident in many Vietnam War films, including *Born on the Fourth of July* (dir. Oliver Stone, USA, 1989); nor do they present the enthusiastic attitude to violence of many 1980s and 1990s action films, such as *Commando* (dir. Mark L. Lester, USA, 1985). I argue, instead, that Reel Fallout Cinema foregrounds grieving, emotional protagonists and compromised missions which dispute the value of responding to violence with violence whilst wars in Afghanistan and Iraq are ongoing, unheard of during previous American wars. The films depict the war on terror as the latest incarnation of the United States' frontier, employing imagery and themes more resonant of the Western than the war film, such as individualism and lawlessness. I will demonstrate how the exceptional soldiers of the war films lack conviction in their missions, ordinary civilians in the terrorism films are compelled to respond in extraordinary ways making them vulnerable, the enemy is characterised as within, and endings are imbued with mourning rather than victory in conflicts characterised as never-ending.

Fundamental to this chapter's proposition is the notion of American exceptionalism. The discussion will comprise of a brief overview of the historical significance of this concept, exploring how belief in the unique place of Americans inspired conflict with the indigenous communities to claim land and form the United States, and how assurance in the values of Americans as extraordinary motivated a desire to spread those values across the world. I will proceed to show how depictions in my film corpus of the enemy within and the war on terror as endless pose a challenge to the decision to underpin American foreign policy with American exceptionalism. In the final section, I will assess how the case study films' representations of an ongoing cycle of never-ending conflict have reinstated the frontier in the West, with terrorism infiltrating the United States and Europe in three of my case studies, alongside further films released by my focus directors. I will also discuss how the sombre tone of the narratives, characterised by unreleased tension rather than thrills, traumatic events, sad music, realistic portrayals and representations of time passing, pauses and reflection, discussions of feelings, empathy and depictions of protagonists as vulnerable and powerless rather than invincible, provides space for mourning the war on terror, challenging the nation's commitment to an endless cycle of violence. This will include consideration of how the debate regarding successful mourning applies to the films. My conclusion will consider how the films are illustrative of a weakening American exceptionalism through the enemy within, ongoing conflict and sombre narratives which contrast with previous action cinema's representation of war and terrorism, problematising Hollywood's customary support of foreign policy when war is ongoing.

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[436] Garofolo, "War Films in an Age of War and Cinema," 42.

4.2   An Endless Frontier

In this section, I will introduce how American exceptionalism contributed firstly to the establishment of the frontier, and secondly to informing American foreign policy in generating an overseas frontier, motivated by a continual demand for enemies. As the quote which opens this chapter explains, without an enemy, it is difficult for a nation to determine what it stands for; therefore, ongoing enemies assist in maintaining a cohesive understanding of self. The quintessential rendering of the frontier in cinema is found in the Western. By examining my case study films' employment of genre characteristics associated with the Western, I will show how the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, alongside frequent terrorism, augment the United States' evolution of the frontier as endless.

As one of the founding tenets of the United States, the American frontier evidenced the European settlers' perspective that they were "civilising" their presumed newly-discovered territory. Writing in 1893, Professor Frederick J. Turner in his formative essay, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, explains how, "the frontier is the… meeting point between savagery and civilization."[437] The new inhabitants progressed westwards, fighting indigenous communities along the frontier in their onward expansion. The commitment to continually moving the frontier west was prompted by the concept of American exceptionalism, a fundamental conviction of American national identity. Uri Friedman ascribes the term's origin to Alexis de Tocqueville in 1840 "in his seminal work, *Democracy in America*… that the 'position of the Americans' is 'quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one.'"[438] American exceptionalism determines that Americans occupy a unique place in the world and that, as asserted by Trevor B. McCrisken, "the unique blend of values and principles on which US society and American national identity are built have universal appeal and application, are desired by the rest of the world, and should be adopted globally for the betterment of all human kind."[439] This helped justify taking ownership of the land which would later form the United States. Advancement continued until the settlers reached the west coast; as Greg Grandin expounds in his compelling book, *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the*

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[437] Professor Frederick J. Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, available through: Adam Matthew, Marlborough, Empire Online, 1894, 199-200, accessed July 21, 2023, http://www.empire.amdigital.co.uk.soton.idm.oclc.org/Documents/Details/The Significance of the Frontier in American History_.
[438] Uri Friedman, "'American Exceptionalism': A Short History," *Foreign Policy*, June 18, 2012, accessed March 14, 2022, https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/06/18/American-exceptionalism-a-short-history/.
[439] McCrisken, "George W. Bush, American exceptionalism and the Iraq War," 182.

Border Wall in the Mind of America, the national desire for land "was uncontainable… When they 'tire of one place, they move to another.'"[440] The ambition to increase its claim to territory created a vicious cycle, whereby further bloodshed was necessary to achieve the nation's aims.

The American frontier as integral to the nation's identity was largely due to the endless possibilities it provided. Turner explains how, "American social development has been continually beginning over again on the frontier. This perennial rebirth, this fluidity of American life, this expansion westward with its new opportunities… furnish the forces dominating American character."[441] This constant requirement for new horizons generated an inevitability to the progression of the frontier once the west coast was reached:

> [War in 1898 was] necessary to prevent the country, now that its frontier was closed, from getting too comfortable with itself… Woodrow Wilson… identified America's post-1898 wars in the Pacific and the Caribbean as part of its permanent revolution on the frontier… 'We made new frontiers for ourselves beyond the seas,' Wilson said.[442]

Grandin continues, "Theodore Roosevelt described the 1898 deployment overseas of occupying troops as a 'righteous war…'".[443] This corresponds to McCrisken's definition that American exceptionalism is, "a belief that the United States is unique among nations and that it has a particular destiny to improve the human condition."[444] The second opening quote of this chapter demonstrates the commitment of President Roosevelt to war over peace if it is considered a righteous war, demonstrating a belief in the United States intervening overseas where it considered its core values such as freedom and democracy to be threatened. Combined with a belief in American exceptionalism, developing a global frontier became integral to the United States' missionary approach of extending its values across the world.

Belief in American exceptionalism has proceeded to inform American foreign policy, leading to the continuation of a global frontier into the 21st century. Discussing the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq in 2004, President George W. Bush stated, "Our Nation's founding commitment is still our deepest commitment: In our world and here at home, we will extend the frontiers of freedom."[445] *The 15:17 to Paris*, for example, is discussed as "another refiguration of the western… François Hollande's use of the train as a synecdoche ('to save

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[440] Grandin, *The End of the Myth*, 26.
[441] Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier*, 200.
[442] Grandin, *The End of the Myth*, 126-127.
[443] Ibid., 126-127.
[444] McCrisken, "George W. Bush, American exceptionalism and the Iraq War", 181.
[445] George W. Bush, "Remarks Accepting the Presidential Nomination at the Republican National Convention in New York City," *The American Presidency Project*, September 2, 2004, accessed December 17, 2021, https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/remarks-accepting-the-presidential-nomination-the-republican-national-convention-new-york#axzz1Xs4CwFYP.

those who were on that train, that is to say, humanity')… supports the familiar narrative of America heroically civilising and saving the world."[446] Natsu Taylor Saito explains how the Bush administration characterised its foreign policy as compassionate, stating that "the aim of the U.S. international strategy 'is to help make the world not just safer but better. Our goals… [include] peaceful relations with other states'.[447] However, motivations for the war in Afghanistan and Iraq have been proposed as "revenge[,]… increased protection… [and] to counter apparent signs of vulnerability,… the US [choosing]… to assert its exceptionalism."[448] The lengths of the wars, and the casualties inflicted on both sides, have resulted in criticism of their implementation and declining support for President Bush whose "personal approval rating peaked at an astonishing 90 percent after the attack on the towers. By the time he left office, in January 2009, it had slid to 33 percent".[449] Waning support for the war on terror can be connected to condemnation of the original frontier through the American exceptionalism which has informed both. Calls for reparations for Native Americans since World War II indicate a challenge to American exceptionalism as a justification for dispossessing indigenous communities of their land. For example, "In 1980, the Supreme Court ordered the United States to pay the Sioux nation over $105 million for the illegal government seizure of its land."[450] By evoking the frontier through resemblances with the Western, my case study films associate their depiction of the ongoing war on terror with the representation of a problematic history.

The Western embodies a prominent means by which Hollywood cinema has reflected American national identity back to itself. The genre comprises iconic representations of the frontier and, by employing Western tropes, my case study films draw on this history to portray the American frontier moving beyond its borders. In the Iraq War films, there is a clear correlation between the war and the Western, which renders the concept of an external frontier explicit. This will be analysed in detail in relation to *American Sniper* (dir. Clint Eastwood, USA, 2014), with reference to *Green Zone* (dir. Paul Greengrass, USA, 2010) and *The Hurt Locker* (dir. Kathryn Bigelow, USA, 2008). In *Lone Survivor* (dir. Peter Berg, USA, 2013), the soldiers' collective decisions and the depiction of Bagram Air Base where the Americans are stationed as safe contrast with Western conventions, making a parallel between the Afghanistan War and the global frontier more ambiguous; however, the lawlessness outside of the base and battle imagery both correspond to Western representations, thematically associating the war with the frontier. In the terrorism films, the

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[446] Riquet, "Screening Railway Terrorists," 97-98.
[447] Natsu Taylor Saito, *Meeting the Enemy: American Exceptionalism and International Law* (New York, NY, 2010; online edn, NYU Press Scholarship Online, 24 Mar. 2016), 1, accessed February 7, 2024, https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9780814798362.001.0001.
[448] Gauthier, "French Fiction, Empathy, and the Utopian Potential of 9/11," 137.
[449] Biskind, *The Sky is Falling!*, 102.
[450] Rachel Hatzipanagos, "Native Americans call for reparations from 'land-grab' universities," *The Washington Post*, July 9, 2023, accessed March 8, 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2023/07/09/native-indigenous-reparations-colleges-land/.

depiction of the frontier takes the form of a threatening world which poses danger to Americans wherever they are, including in a compound for American workers in Saudi Arabia in *The Kingdom* (dir. Peter Berg, USA, Germany, 2007), and at the U.S. Embassy in Pakistan in *Zero Dark Thirty* (dir. Kathryn Bigelow, USA, 2012).

Of all the case study films, *American Sniper* most explicitly exploits the iconography and language of the Western. This can be attributed in large part to its director, Clint Eastwood, a star and director of numerous Westerns,[451] whose "films consistently [explore]... his country's myths and legends through such emblematically American genres as the western".[452] Prior to his service as a Navy SEAL, the protagonist of *American Sniper*, Chris Kyle (Bradley Cooper), was a cowboy. He informs his wife-to-be, Taya (Sienna Miller), "I always wanted to be a cowboy, but I did that, thought I was meant for something more." This indicates the honour and value placed on being a soldier, aligning with Garofolo's assertion that, historically, there has been, "widespread acceptance of the notion that service in the military was a higher calling".[453] It also reflects on Eastwood's career, starting out acting in cowboy roles and progressing to directing. On Kyle's first tour, Marc Lee (Luke Grimes) introduces him to Iraq, "Welcome to Fallujah, the new Wild West of the old Middle East." This resonates with terminology used in a real CIA report regarding Iraq, referenced in Bob Woodward's book, *Plan of Attack*, "It's the wild west, was Tim's first thought in the second week of July 2002 as he and seven other CIA operatives made the 10-hour overland drive from Turkey into Iraq."[454] It is also used to describe Afghanistan, "During one workshop on PTSD and moral injury led by a VA [Veterans Affairs] psychologist in 2015, one participant… told us, his son deployed to Afghanistan, at a time when 'it was the Wild West.'"[455] The "wild west" refers to the lawless frontier, also described as the wilderness, which is distinguished from towns in the Western which are part of civilisation and have recourse to law.

These terms draw on distinctions listed by Jim Kitses who references "savagery" verses "humanity", and "The Wilderness" verses "Civilization".[456] In *American Sniper*, Kyle refers to the insurgents as "savages", echoing Kitses' language, and, in *Lone Survivor*, the target location of the SEALs' mission is characterised as lawless and savage with Taliban commander, Ahmad Shah (Yousuf Azami), ordering Taraq (Sammy Sheik) to chop off a villager's head. The villager is held down over a log and Taraq strikes his neck with a knife

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[451] Clint Eastwood's Westerns include *A Fistful of Dollars* (dir. Sergio Leone, Italy, Spain, West Germany, 1964), *For a Few Dollars More* (dir. Sergio Leone, Italy, Spain, West Germany, 1965), *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* (dir. Sergio Leone, Italy, Spain, West Germany, 1966), *Hang 'em High* (dir. Ted Post, USA, 1968), *High Plains Drifter* (dir. Clint Eastwood, USA, 1973) and *Unforgiven* (dir. Clint Eastwood, USA, 1992).
[452] Andrew Syder, "Clint Eastwood" in *Contemporary North American Film Directors: A Wallflower Critical Guide*, edited by Yoram Allon, Del Cullen and Hannah Patterson (London: Wallflower Press, 2002), 147.
[453] Garofolo, "War Films in an Age of War and Cinema," 38.
[454] Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, 140.
[455] Abu El-Haj, *Combat Trauma*, 231.
[456] Jim Kitses, *Horizons West: Anthony Mann, Budd Boetticher, Sam Peckinpah: studies of Authorship within the Western*, (London: Thames and Hudson in association with the British Film Institute, 1969), 11.

seven times, the final four chops depicted in quick succession with blood splashing up as the editing emphasises the merciless nature of the attack. Both *The Kingdom* and *Zero Dark Thirty* incorporate similar frontier outpost representations. The FBI team in *The Kingdom* travel to Saudi Arabia and find themselves in a country in which the rules are different, they have no authority, and they are under constant threat of attack. Agent Fleury (Jamie Foxx) convinces the Saudi Arabia Ambassador, Prince Thamer (Raad Rawi), to permit his FBI team to travel to Riyadh and, on arrival, the agents discover they are severely restricted in where and when they can investigate. Glen Donnar describes the film's association with the Western:

> The attacked oil company housing compound represents an idea of America as an isolated, vulnerable frontier outpost in foreign territory… Western tropes of the insecure outpost and a fraught experience of hostile territory position the film as a frontier western[.][457]

Violent confrontation between the Americans and the terrorists continues to the end. As the FBI agents travel to the airport to return home after discovering a terrorist hideout resulting in a firefight, shaky cam close-ups of their faces from within the vehicle, and very quick edits, heighten the tension of a possible attack on their convoy. Agent Fleury discusses a car bomb attack with Colonel Al Ghazi (Ashraf Barhom) while continually looking around for suspicious activity, indicating his state of high alertness similar to that of Kyle incessantly watching his mirrors in *American Sniper*, discussed in the previous chapter. Fleury notices a car pull in front of the line of vehicles and moves to grab the steering wheel as the car explodes, throwing the vehicle at the front of the convoy into the air. Their vehicle crashes into it and turns over multiple times until landing upside down. Agent Leavitt (Jason Bateman) is dragged from the vehicle by terrorists dressed as Saudi police officers and driven away. Al Ghazi commandeers a vehicle in which Sergeant Haytham and the remaining FBI agents join him, and they follow the car in which Leavitt has been taken. They arrive at an apartment complex where they survive several shootouts and fights before rescuing him. Along with the terrorist hideout, the bombings at the beginning of the film, and Abu Hamza's staging warehouse, the whole city is represented as dangerous and teeming with terrorists, an uncivilised frontier on which the Americans must fight.

Imagery in *Zero Dark Thirty* also resembles the frontier outpost, not for the threat posed but for the expanse of land in the middle of unpopulated desert. When the SEALs leave for Osama bin Laden's compound in the final act of the film, two helicopters depart the American base which is formed of rows of tents surrounding a central courtyard. The helicopters' departure from the courtyard is shot from above, the camera at a high vantage point, leaving

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[457] Donnar, *Troubling Masculinities: Terror*, 143.

the protagonist, Maya (Jessica Chastain), alone underneath. She is surrounded by sand whipped up by the rotor blades and the scene emphasises her isolation and the desert's resemblance with the frontier. Joyce and Simm affirm how, "A compelling argument can… be made for seeing *Zero Dark Thirty* as a Western,"[458] as illustrated by this scene.

Figure 4.1   Maya stands alone at an isolated outpost on the global frontier, *Zero Dark Thirty*, 1:52:52

With location shooting in the desert of New Mexico, part of the original frontier, to represent Afghanistan,[459] *Lone Survivor* instantly invokes the Western with the desert and mountains representing dangerous terrain. The four Navy SEALs who form the central team of the film are briefed on a reconnaissance mission to locate a Taliban warlord. They are transported to the mountains and find a view of the village where the Taliban has been sighted. The SEALs are discovered and soon surrounded by Taliban combatants. This is reminiscent of Westerns such as *Stagecoach* (dir. John Ford, USA, 1939) and *Fort Apache* (dir. John Ford, USA, 1948) in which enemy fighters line the landscape high above the protagonists.

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[458] Daniel Joyce and Gabrielle Simm, "*Zero Dark Thirty*: international law, film and representation," *London Review of International Law*, Volume 3, Issue 2, 2015, Advanced Access publication 17 August 2015, accessed June 23, 2025, doi:10.1093/lril/lrv015.

[459] Alexandra Cheney, "On the Horizon: The Making of 'Lone Survivor'," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 17, 2013, accessed February 16, 2023,
https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052702303531204579204261494624396.

Figure 4.2   A line of Native Americans surrounds the American soldiers, *Fort Apache*, 1:49:00

Figure 4.3   The horizon is lined with Taliban fighters, *Lone Survivor*, 0:52:00

The SEALs in *Lone Survivor* enter a long battle in which they are vastly outnumbered. In addition to bullet wounds, the Americans are injured by the environment, the mountainous landscape contributing to their defeat. Whilst Afghan characters move easily, running and jumping down the steep gradients, the soldiers are shown struggling to navigate the terrain. The mountains are portrayed as unfamiliar and highly dangerous to the four highly trained SEALs who are forced to jump and fall off two cliff edges to escape the Taliban's onslaught.
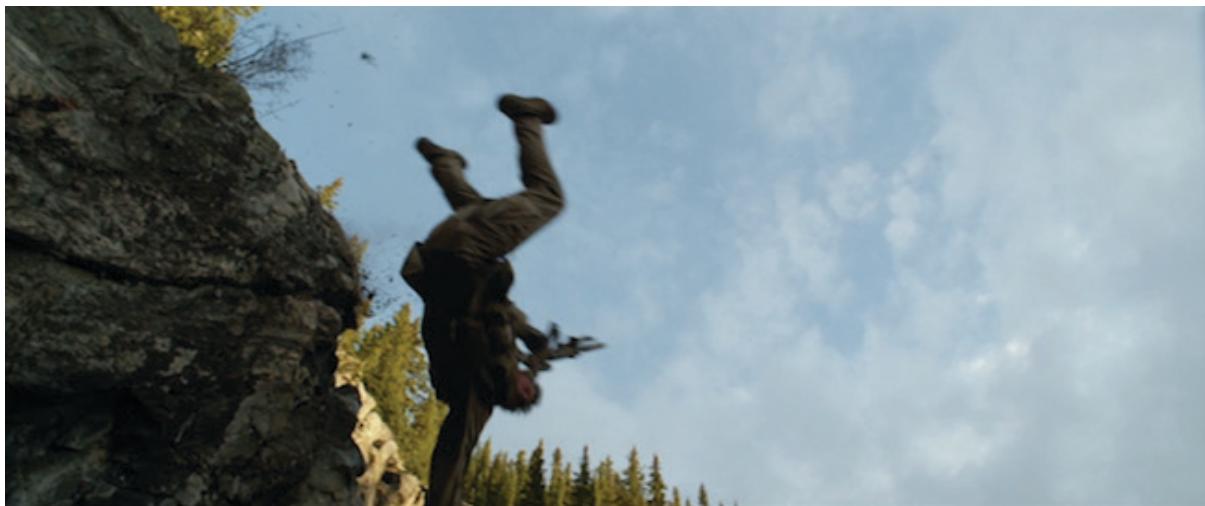
Figure 4.4 The soldiers fall off the cliff to escape being shot, *Lone Survivor*, 1:05:00

There are numerous shots of the soldiers' bodies hitting rocks and trees as they land, and the soundtrack highlights their bones breaking, accentuating the effects of the falls on their bodies, as discussed in the previous chapter. The foreign landscape presents as much of a threat to the soldiers as the enemy insurgents, and the isolation of protagonist Marcus Luttrell (Mark Wahlberg) is progressively emphasised as his fellow SEALs are killed and he is left alone to seek refuge.

Kyle is also depicted as a solitary figure in *American Sniper* but for different reasons. He is marked out from others by his remarkable skill as a sniper, the most proficient in the Navy. On arrival for his second tour, his superior, Lt. Col. Jones (Chance Kelly), tells him, "You're now the most wanted man in Iraq," followed by another colleague informing him, "There's 180,000 on your head, congrats." This recalls earlier language from Lee who tells Kyle, "AQI put a price on your head so now extremists from around the globe are flooding the borders to collect on it." Whilst these comments are meant as compliments, they represent Kyle as a sole target of Iraqi vengeance. They also align Kyle with the dangerous criminals of the Western by referencing "wanted" posters which publicise rewards for their capture or death. The ending of *Jane Got a Gun* (dir. Gavin O'Connor, USA, 2015) demonstrates the centrality of the wanted poster and the threat posed by the outlaw. The lead character, Jane (Natalie Portman), rips down wanted posters from a board before a medium close-up reveals her looking at the poster of John Bishop (Ewan McGregor) whom she killed in the previous scene. This is followed by a close-up of her hand ripping it from the board. The destruction of the poster represents closure for Jane and her family.

Reference to the Western to achieve closure was also made by President Bush following 9/11. Bob Woodward observes how,

> Bush was interrupted for calls with foreign leaders, including one with Mexican
> President Vicente Fox, whose ranch he had visited shortly after taking office. As the

two ranchers spoke, Bush slipped into the vernacular of the Old West. 'Wanted dead or alive. That's how I feel,' Bush said.[460]

Kyle's association with this Western trope enhances Kyle's infamy, paralleling that of the outlaw, the wanted man. In civil war film, *The Desperadoes* (dir. Henry Levin, USA, 1969), a comparison is made between the outlaw and the soldier. Protagonist David Galt (Vince Edwards) asserts, "When we started out, we were gonna do one thing: raid military targets, destroy Union supplies and equipment... Right now, we're nothing better than renegades and outlaws... slaughtering women and children." *American Sniper* opens with Kyle shooting and killing a woman and a boy, aligning him with this description of the outlaw, although these deaths are not the result of Kyle disobeying orders but a welcome protection of American forces. By aligning the contemporary soldier's orders with the wanted man from the Western, the film problematises American military intervention in Iraq.

Kyle's disregard for orders begins subsequently, emphasising his self-reliance and individualistic attitude. Following a mission, Kyle is questioned concerning one of his kills, "His wife said he was carrying a Koran." Kyle replies, "Look, I don't know what a Koran looks like, but I can tell you what he was carrying. It was pressed metal, shot 7.62s and it looked just like an AK-47, so you tell me what he was carrying." In a later sequence, Kyle tells Marc Lee he wants to lead the unit on the street. Lee tells him, "House to house is the deadliest job here, man… Just keep banging on the long gun." The shot cuts to Kyle watching from a roof as Marines clear houses. Kyle sees a wounded American being carried by two other soldiers and his frustration at failing to prevent American injuries is tangible. He informs his spotter, "I'm gonna go clear houses with Marines." He joins the soldiers on the street and leads the team breaking into a house, directly contravening his superior's orders. On discovering a family in the house, he interrogates the father, Sheikh Al-Obodi (Navid Negahban), who provides information regarding the Americans' priority target, Zarqawi. Kyle returns to base to inform his superiors and they travel back to the sheikh's home. On arrival, they are attacked, and Sheikh Al-Obodi's son, Omar (Jad Mhidi Senhaji), is killed in retaliation for the sheikh speaking to the Americans. Kyle's decision to join the ground troops and obtain information jeopardises the lives of both the American soldiers and Iraqi civilians.

All three Iraq War films comprise American soldiers taking the law into their own hands, aligning them with Grandin's description of the original expansion of the United States, "On the frontier, each man… was a law unto himself, each living the 'perfect freedom' to work out his own morality."[461] This indicates how the Iraq War forms part of the United States' more recent incarnation of its global frontier. In each Iraq film, the protagonists act independently

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[460] Bob Woodward, *Bush at War*, (London: Pocket Books, 2003), 96-97.
[461] Grandin, *The End of the Myth*, 120-121.

of their superiors' orders. Chief Miller (Matt Damon) in *Green Zone* disobeys his command and follows his own agenda. When Miller approaches Agent Brown (Brandon Gleeson) regarding assisting him, Agent Brown references the Western: "What do you think you're doing here, Miller? You're off reservation for a reason, what is it?" The implication is that Miller has abandoned the safety and security of the homeland and is conducting his own mission. A visual cue indicating that Miller has disregarded his orders is discarding his uniform halfway through the film once he begins assisting the CIA in seeking out General Al Rawi (Igal Naor).

Figure 4.5 Miller discards his traditional soldier's uniform to help the CIA, *Green Zone*, 0:53:19

The significance of this is evidenced by Valantin's description of Schwarzenegger's character, Dutch, in *Predator* (dir. John McTiernan, USA, Mexico, 1987) who "loses his soldier's identity, defined by the uniform."[462] By changing out of his uniform, Miller discards his identity as a soldier and can act uninhibited by the Army's rules to seek the truth regarding weapons of mass destruction. Sergeant James (Jeremy Renner) in *The Hurt Locker* continues to dress in army fatigues but also frequently pursues an independent agenda. When he thinks Beckham (Christopher Sayegh), the Iraqi boy with whom he plays football, has been killed, he begins a search for the person responsible. He leaves the base at night without permission and puts his life at risk, walking the streets of Iraq alone and, on his return to base, being forced to the ground at gunpoint by the troops guarding the compound until they can verify his identity.

In *American Sniper*, Kyle's most flagrant contravention of his orders, again putting his life and the lives of his platoon at risk, is at the end of his final tour in Iraq when he shoots enemy sniper, Mustafa (Sammy Sheik). Mustafa is responsible for many American deaths, just as Kyle is responsible for many Iraqi deaths, and in this way, Mustafa manifests as a classic

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[462] Valantin, *Hollywood, The Pentagon and Washington*, 73.

Western trope in his mirroring of Kyle. In addition, a further opposition of the Western as listed by Kitses is in effect here, that of "honour" versus "institutions".[463] Kyle's honour is at stake in being pitted against a sniper with a similar skillset and reputation and he prioritises his personal vengeance over his military orders. Kyle and Mustafa are represented as doubles of one another, "Mustafa is increasingly shown to have a life parallel to that of Kyle; we see him in his apartment with his wife and child… We see the worried look on the face of his wife as he packs his sniper gear to return to battle."[464] Richard Maltby discusses how the protagonist's mirror image has to be challenged, "In John Cawelti's analysis… the Western takes place on the frontier between savagery and civilization, where the hero confronts his uncivilized double."[465] The director, Clint Eastwood, is clearly drawing on this filmic convention as Mustafa is not characterised in this way in Chris Kyle's autobiography on which the film is based; this doubling only takes place in the film. By depicting a sniper equal in prowess to Kyle, *American Sniper* undercuts Kyle's claim to uniqueness and his legendary status within the Navy SEALs and, in turn, American exceptionalism.

Kyle is committed to killing Mustafa before returning home, his final tour becoming a personal vendetta when the enemy sniper hits one of his unit, Biggles (Jake McDorman), in the eye. Peter Biskind explains how, "revenge not only… undermines the rule of law, but… is personal."[466] This applies to Kyle's team which note that Biggles is "the first SEAL hit" and when the team is asked if they want to return to battle, Lee states, "Eye for an eye," citing an Old Testament approach to addressing violence with violence. This is redolent of many Westerns in which revenge is an acceptable response to violence. In *El Dorado* (dir. Howard Hawks, USA, 1966), for example, Cole Thornton (John Wayne) defends the right of Mississippi (James Caan) to take the law into his own hands and kill Charlie in revenge for killing the man who raised him, Johnny Diamond. In *American Sniper*, when Kyle tells them, "We're going back out," they respond, "F**k, yes," their motive clearly personal. As they drive through the streets of Iraq, they destroy everything and everyone in their path.

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[463] Kitses, *Horizons West*, 11.
[464] Lawrence and Jewett, "The Mythic Shape of *American Sniper* (2015)," 35.
[465] Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*, 91.
[466] Biskind, *The Sky is Falling!*, 122.

Figure 4.6   American soldiers continuously fire on a car, *American Sniper*, 1:22:00

Iraq is portrayed as a place where destruction and death have no recourse to law, representative of a global frontier, ungoverned and anarchic. On their return to battle, Kyle's confidant, Marc Lee, is shot and killed, demonstrating the negative consequences of their vengeance for Biggles being shot. Biggles also subsequently dies of his injuries and, by his final tour, Kyle is characterised as alone in his experiences as he is predominantly surrounded by a new team. When he is briefed on a mission to eliminate an enemy sniper, Kyle asks if the assailant is Mustafa to which the briefing leader replies, "He can be whoever the f*** you need him to be. We just need him dead." This exchange acknowledges vengeance as a useful asset in motivating American troops and reflects how "The post-9/11 wars… were fought in revenge".[467] Kyle's orders sanction him to enact revenge.

The doubling of Kyle and Mustafa reaches a climax at the end of Kyle's final tour in Iraq. Eastwood employs another archetype of the Western, the Mexican standoff, which involves two or more cowboys facing each other with guns, preparing to be the quickest in shooting the other and avoid being shot themselves. The final scene of *The Good, The Bad and The Ugly* (dir. Sergio Leone, Italy, Spain, West Germany, 1966), in which Eastwood starred, contains a pre-eminent representation of this convention with a standoff between the three main characters searching for $200,000 in a graveyard. The sequence lasts almost six minutes from Blondie (Clint Eastwood) moving to a clearing to Angel Eyes (Lee Van Cleef) being shot. They stand far apart from one another and, as the sequence reaches its climatic shootout, the tension increases through the music and rapid cuts between close-ups of their eyes. The gunfire releases the tension and one of the three is killed. In *American Sniper*, Kyle's final is reminiscent of such a final showdown, albeit containing a very long-distance stand-off.

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[467] Sturken, *Terrorism in American Memory*, 8.

Killing Mustafa requires Kyle to disobey orders and take a shot which Dandridge (Cory Hardrict) describes as "more than a mile, impossible shot, Chris." Kyle is over one mile away from Mustafa and the two snipers are assembled on separate rooftops as they aim at one another.

Figure 4.7   Mustafa takes aim, mirroring Chris Kyle, *American Sniper*, 1:37:00

Figure 4.8   Kyle aims at Mustafa, *American Sniper*, 1:39:00

Kyle's superior orders him not to take the shot for fear of disclosing their location to enemy combatants, "Hold your fire. We got uglies right below us." Kyle disregards the orders, emulating a Western protagonist, as described by Michael Coyne, "No Western movie hero has ever sidestepped a showdown because he was worried… how the courts might judge him for taking the law into his own hands."[468] Kyle fires at Mustafa, the action depicted in slow motion as the bullet travels the extremely long distance before hitting and killing the enemy sniper. Ready to return home having enacted his revenge, the unit is surrounded and a battle ensues. Lawrence and Jewett note the resemblance of Kyle taking the law into his own hands with the Western:

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[468] Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie*, 11.

The classic Western story presents outsize figures who bear a sense of command and destiny that leads them to act independently in response to evil… In 'the showdown' that Cooper depicts we see egregious disobedience to his commanding officer in order to take a shot that exposes his platoon's tenuous position. 'The Legend' and his companions barely scramble away from death, Chris losing his iconic Bible, American flag and gun in the dust.[469]

The "egregious disobedience" emphasises Kyle's maverick approach which is in keeping with cowboys' individualist nature, "Western heroes… are normally… maverick characters… [He] could usually stand alone and face danger on his own… with an expert display of his physical skills."[470] Kyle's self-reliance and individualist nature contradicts the brotherhood mentality of the armed forces, aligning him more with cowboys than the military.

There is also the inclusion of the solitary cowboy style figure in *The Hurt Locker*, acknowledged by the film's director,

[Kathryn Bigelow]: 'you're walking toward what most people in the planet would run from. In the EOD [Explosive Ordnance Disposal, the units assigned to defuse IEDs] parlance they call it "the lonely walk." Because you're by yourself.' [Peter Keough]: 'It's kind of like *High Noon*.' [Kathryn Bigelow]: I know. I saw that when we were shooting it… we were in the Middle East, and the nature of the light, the reflective surfaces of the sand, just creating this kind of classic palette and then this guy in the suit. The solo nature of the job.'[471]

War narratives, particularly concerning World War II, have often involved orders, structure and hierarchy, along with characterising soldiers as a "band of brothers," as the WWII television drama was named.[472] Mark Owen, Navy SEAL and author of an account of the mission to find Osama bin Laden, references "brothers" in describing his fellow SEALs, "the heroic actions of our brothers were not going to be in vain."[473] In contrast, *The Hurt Locker*, *Green Zone*, *Zero Dark Thirty*, *American Sniper* and *Lone Survivor* depict their protagonists as lone warriors, the title of *Lone Survivor* evocative of this Western archetype, its protagonist the only one of the mission to prevail.

This representation aligns more with portrayals in the Western than the war film, such as the lone cowboys of films such as *Shane* (dir. George Stevens, USA, 1953) and *The Searchers*

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[469] Lawrence and Jewett, "The Mythic Shape of *American Sniper*," 33.
[470] Tim Dirks, "Westerns Films: Part 1," *Filmsite*, accessed August 30, 2022, https://www.filmsite.org/westernfilms.html.
[471] Peter Keough, "An Interview with Kathryn Bigelow, July 4, 2009, from the *Boston Phoenix* website," in *Kathryn Bigelow: Interviews*, ed. Peter Keough (University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 174, accessed September 26, 2019, ProQuest Ebook Central: http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/soton-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1113434.
[472] *Band of Brothers* (created by Stephen E. Ambrose, Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks, DreamWorks, DreamWorks Television, HBO Films, 2001).
[473] Owen and Maurer, *No Easy Day*, 115.

(dir. John Ford, USA, 1956). These films portray their lead characters as wandering the frontier, unable to settle in a domestic setting. The protagonists of *Green Zone* and *Lone Survivor* only exist in their respective warzones in Iraq and Afghanistan, never shown at home, and Sergeant James in *The Hurt Locker* returns to the United States from Iraq for only one brief sequence towards the end of the film. *American Sniper* incorporates multiple scenes of Kyle in the United States in between tours of Iraq, more than all of the other war films combined, and the scenes focus on his struggle to adapt to domestic life as a husband and father.

By emulating traits of the Western, my case study films align the war on terror with the American frontier, a lawless land in which individualism and own agendas are prioritised. The soldiers battle not only the other, but also internal trauma and their own moral compass regarding the nation's motivations for war. Characters in both *The Hurt Locker* and *American Sniper* question the sacrifices made. In *The Hurt Locker*, Sanborn (Anthony Mackie) says, "I'm not ready to die… Nobody would give a s**t." In *American Sniper*, Marc Lee tells Kyle: "I just want to believe in what we're doing here." This echoes Richard Haass' observation that, "the United States acted against Iraq in 2003 without adequate legitimacy in the eyes of much of the world."[474] The films' questioning of American exceptionalism as grounds for sanctioning war re-introduces the concept of the enemy within, prevalent in Hollywood during the Cold War, to the Reel Fallout era of cinema.

4.3   A Return to the Enemy Within

In a pivotal scene in *Green Zone*, Chief Miller tells CIA Agent Brown, "I thought we were all on the same side." Brown replies, "Don't be naïve." Miller is forced to choose between the CIA and the U.S. administration in Iraq, represented by Poundstone (Greg Kinnear). When Miller elects to assist the CIA, Poundstone tells him, "You chose the wrong side." American characters are depicted as opposing one another and Poundstone, along with the armed unit which enforces his commands, become Miller's enemy for the remainder of the film. I contend that the concept of "the enemy within" forms a significant component of my film corpus, responding to the fall of the Soviet Union, referenced in the opening quote of this chapter from Irving Kristol, and the problematising of the other as the enemy, discussed in Chapter 2, which contributes to the assessment that "the 'War on Terror' is… presented as a war… with an enemy largely imagined."[475] It is determined that, "When the dominant system

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[474] Haass, *A World in Disarray*, 124.
[475] Joyce and Simm, "*Zero Dark Thirty*: international law, film and representation," 305.

finds itself enemyless, it turns on itself",[476] and examples of this can be found in my case study films. I will explore three manifestations of the enemy within, all of which interrogate American exceptionalism's influence on American foreign policy. I will begin with how the missions of exceptional Americans in the war films are not completed, while ordinary Americans in the terrorism films perform remarkably to achieve their objectives. I will then proceed to discuss the characterisation of international law, in some instances represented as influencing decisions which put American lives at risk, and in others, depicted as being contravened, causing in-fighting and problematising American exceptionalism. Finally, I will examine how attacks in the USA and Europe determine the enemy as closer to home, recalling themes such as suspicion and paranoia prevalent in Cold War Hollywood cinema.

Confrontations between heroes and villains have always formed a staple component of cinema. In Hollywood war films, the nation against which the United States was fighting in real life constituted the enemy, the British in Civil War films, for example, or the Japanese in World War II films. The concept of the enemy within became prevalent in Cold War cinema. Elisabeth Bronfen describes how Cold War paranoia manifested to create opposition between Americans,

> Under Senator Joe McCarthy's witchhunt against alleged Communist spies and sympathizers in the United States government and elsewhere, the Cold War not only turned into a domestic issue... Rather, the logic of antagonism on which this international conflict was predicated also transformed into a struggle within. The simple opposition between 'we' and 'them' transformed into the far more differentiated opposition of 'we v. us,'… [A]n anxious hypervigilance fostering the collective fantasy that subversive elements where [sic] living everywhere, undetected, ready to contaminate or attack their unsuspecting fellow men, underscored not only a crisis of national security but also of the home as its most effective cultural trope.[477]

Film examples which typify this representation include *The Manchurian Candidate* (dir. John Frankenheimer, USA, 1962) in which American soldiers are brainwashed by American communists to carry out an assassination, *Three Days of the Condor* (dir. Sydney Pollack, USA, 1975) featuring a conspiracy within the CIA, and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (dir. Don Siegel, USA, 1956) in which the people of a small town are surreptitiously replaced by aliens while maintaining their human appearance. In each film, the enemy is, or presents as, American and concealed, the characters within the narratives unaware of their rival allegiance.

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[476] Gauthier, "French Fiction, Empathy, and the Utopian Potential of 9/11," 124.
[477] Elisabeth Bronfen, "Internal Enmity: Hollywood's Fragile Home Stories in the 1950s and 1960s," in *Cold War Film Genres*, edited by Homer B. Pettey (Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 123-124.

Post-Vietnam War films are discussed as similarly portraying an enemy within, "Film critics and scholars began to note in the post-Vietnam movies a new emphasis on personal revelation and individual survival. The real enemy was within – if not within oneself, then within one's government and misguided culture."[478] This characterisation continued into the 1980s, as well as after the collapse of the Soviet Union, mentioned above; with no replacement superpower to oppose the United States, the enemy became "us, not them". My contention is that this representation has resurfaced with the controversial implementation of the war on terror; as with the Cold War, the opponent is obscured and varied. Peter Biskind's analysis of *American Sniper* engages with this concept, "In Eastwood's *American Sniper* (2014), Our sniper and Their sniper are on opposite sides, but they are both, after all, snipers, so instead of Us versus Them, it's more like Us as Them."[479] *Captain Phillips* (dir. Paul Greengrass, USA, 2013) is also referenced in relation to this notion with the American government depicted as a potential enemy. The captain of the USS Bainbridge, assigned to attempt a rescue, is told, "The White House hopes this can be resolved peacefully but, whatever happens, Captain Phillips does not leave Somalia." Phillips is characterised as being aware of this policy, telling Muse, "'The Navy is not going to let you win. They can't let you win. They would rather sink this boat than let you get me back to Somalia.'"[480] Danoff continues,

> the makers of *Captain Phillips* seem to… be implying that the US government would rather have Phillips go down along with the pirates if the alternative is the national humiliation that would occur if Phillips were to be held hostage on Somali soil. Thus, the SEALs and the government officials who control them are portrayed in the film as incredibly competent and efficient, but also as ruthless[.][481]

By being captured, Phillips is at risk from both the pirates and his own people, willing to sacrifice him rather than be forced into a hostage situation. These examples accentuate the lack of a common enemy in the war on terror, discussed by Richissin, "Analysts say… there is no single war against [the war on terror]… because there are few common causes, no common enemy and no common strategy for fighting one".[482] I argue that this has influenced my case study films' representations of obfuscated enemies.[483] An uncertainty regarding who

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[478] Jack E. Davis, "New Left, Revisionist, In-Your-Face History: Oliver Stone's *Born on the Fourth of July Experience*," in *Oliver Stone's USA: Film, History, and Controversy*, ed. Robert Brent Toplin (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 137.

[479] Biskind, *The Sky is Falling!*, 154.

[480] Danoff, "'I'm the Captain Now'," 43.

[481] Ibid., 43.

[482] Todd Richissin, "'War on terror' difficult to define (*The Baltimore Sun*)," *The Seattle Times*, September 2, 2004, accessed February 28, 2024, https://archive.seattletimes.com/archive/?date=20040902&slug=russanal02.

[483] A sequence in *The Hurt Locker* in which Eldridge (Brian Geraghty) plays a combat computer game draws attention to their problematic identification of the enemy. Close-ups of the screen show Eldridge shooting everything in sight, without having to determine whether they are an enemy. When his counsellor, Colonel Cambridge (Christian Camargo), sits down, Eldridge tells him Thompson would still be alive if he had shot the person who detonated the bomb; he repeatedly resets his gun followed by pulling the trigger, saying, "He's dead,

the Americans are fighting has resulted in a return to the Cold War notion that the enemy is within, problematising the conviction of American exceptionalism and the concept of American foreign policy as ultimately benevolent.

4.3.1   A Question of Conviction

One of the ways my film corpus represents a destabilising of American exceptionalism is through the films' representations of exceptional Americans as unable to complete their missions, in contrast with ordinary American citizens behaving in extraordinary ways to confront terrorism. Prior to 9/11, several exceptional action film heroes appeared on screen. As an antidote to the negative reaction towards veterans of the Vietnam War,[484] the character of John Rambo, played by a very muscular Sylvester Stallone, was introduced in *First Blood* (dir. Ted Kotcheff, USA, 1982). Rambo is a Green Beret and a war hero, awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. His mentor describes him as "the best". When he is targeted by local law enforcement officers, he fights and escapes from over 200 National Guard, reclaiming his dignity from those critical of his service in Vietnam. The success of the film led to numerous sequels, the latest of which, *Rambo: Last Blood* (dir. Adrian Grunberg, USA, Hong Kong, France, Bulgaria, Spain, Sweden, 2019) was released in 2019. Glen Donnar explains how Hollywood has been recognised as addressing crises, such as Vietnam, with "recuperative violence." He references "Fintan Walsh… [who] propounds… national crises are followed by periods of remasculinization across the culture… [and] the exposed vulnerability of emasculated and victimized masculinities provoke[s]… recuperative violence."[485] The Rambo series is an example of this remasculinisation. Further films similarly recuperated national pride, *Commando*, *Top Gun* (dir. Tony Scott, USA, 1986), *Die Hard* (dir. John McTiernan, USA, 1988) and *Air Force One* (dir. Wolfgang Petersen, Germany, USA, 1997) all employing violence as recuperative and emphasising the exceptional quality of their American heroes.

Commando introduces protagonist Matrix (Arnold Schwarzenegger) through a slow tracking shot along his muscley arm followed by a close-up of his flexed muscles before cutting to a close-up of his face and medium shots of him carrying a tree log, accounting for the flexing of his muscles. In a later shot, he picks up a telephone box with a person inside and throws it over his head. His extraordinary strength is emphasised throughout. *Top Gun* opens with a

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he's alive," explaining that, if he had fired his weapon, the bomb would not have exploded. The sequence demonstrates that if only the war he was fighting was as simple as his computer game, he could have protected Thompson.

[484] Reflected in Hollywood films released from the late 1970s to late 1980s such as *The Deer Hunter* (dir. Michael Cimino, USA, UK, 1978), *Apocalypse Now* (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, USA, 1979), *Hamburger Hill* (dir. John Irvin, USA, 1987) and *Casualties of War* (dir. Brian De Palma, USA, 1989).
[485] Donnar, *Troubling Masculinities*, 8.

title card which refers to an elite school being established by the United States Navy for "the top one percent of its pilots" and ensure that the graduates were "the best fighter pilots in the world. They succeeded." The introduction of President Marshall (Harrison Ford) in *Air Force One* includes him earning a "Medal of Honour." Films such as *Invasion U.S.A.* (dir. Joseph Zito, USA, 1985), *The Delta Force* (dir. Menahem Golan, USA, Israel, 1986) and *Die Hard*, "were trendsetters for a whole genre of action movies in which a lone hero has to defeat single-handedly numerous terrorist enemies in a spectacular action showdown."[486] The perseverance and ability of *Die Hard*'s protagonist, John McClane (Bruce Willis), to withstand multiple attacks and damage to his body characterise him as exceptional and invincible. In all of these depictions, the exceptional characters succeed in defeating their enemies. In my case study films, however, Hollywood relinquishes its typical model of "recuperative violence" and portrays American exceptionalism as vulnerable.

The opening of *Lone Survivor* illustrates the perfection for which Navy SEALs strive in acquiring their recruits. During almost three minutes of archive footage, real Navy SEALs undergo arduous training, emphasising the strength, both physical and mental, required to achieve a place in the force. This contextualises the exceptional nature of the characters who are introduced on the base following this prologue, and the rigorous training programme they would have endured to become Navy SEALs. When the four protagonists are surrounded by Taliban insurgents and relentlessly attacked, the success of the enemy is emphasised because it is against the United States' best of the best. The protagonists of *The Hurt Locker* and *American Sniper* are also characterised as having extraordinary expertise, Sergeant James disarming "873" bombs, the most of any bomb disposal expert, and Kyle referred to as "Legend" due to his status, according to the title of his book, as the "most lethal sniper in U.S. history".[487] In *Green Zone*, the protagonist is "Chief" Miller, the head of his team with the authority to pursue his own agenda without reproach. All four case study war films depict the soldiers as having remarkable qualities; however, their missions do not end triumphantly.

The subverting of American exceptionalism due to the representation of exceptional protagonists being unable to achieve victory is most apparent in *Lone Survivor*. The film establishes its characters as elite but unable to defeat the Taliban, and as employing international law to make decisions but endangering their lives and compromising the mission in the process. Discussion of a pivotal sequence in which the SEALs are discovered by Afghan goatherders in contrast with a comparable scene in which a spy is revealed in World War II film, *The Guns of Navarone* (dir. J. Lee Thompson, UK, USA, 1961), demonstrates how the war on terror is portrayed as lacking the conviction of World War II.

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[486] Riegler, "Through the Lenses of Hollywood," 38.

[487] Chris Kyle with Jim DeFelice and Scott McEwen, *American Sniper: The autobiography of the most lethal sniper in U.S. history* (St Ives: HarperCollins, 2012, this edition 2014).

The four protagonists of *Lone Survivor*, Navy SEALs Murphy (Taylor Kitsch), Luttrell, Axelson (Ben Foster) and Dietz (Emile Hirsch), are on a reconnaissance mission to gather intelligence on the location of senior Taliban commander, Ahmad Shah. As the goatherders approach, close-ups of the SEALs are intercut with medium shots from ground level of the goats and goatherders, aligning the viewer with the SEALs' hiding positions. The SEALs capture them and tie them up and Murphy finds a walkie talkie on the older man (Zarin Rahimi) and asks if he is talking to the Taliban; there is an assumption that the purpose of the device is communication with the Americans' enemy but it is not enough to determine they should kill them.[488] Murphy tells the others, "The way I see it, we've got three options. One, we let them go, hike up, we'll probably be found in less than an hour. Two, we tie them up, hike out, roll the die. They'll probably be eaten by f***ing wolves, or freeze to death." Dietz: "Three?" Murphy: "We terminate the compromise." A similar scene occurs in *The Guns of Navarone*. The soldiers are faced with the discovery of a spy, Anna (Gia Scala), and Corporal Miller (David Niven) tells Captain Mallory (Gregory Peck), "As I see it, we have three choices. One, we can leave her here but there's no guarantee she won't be found… Two we can take her with us… and three… if we're going to get the job done, she has got to be killed." In a heated debate between Mallory and Miller, they both reference feeling trapped by the armed forces and not wanting to kill anyone. They are depicted as ordinary civilians who have been conscripted into the army and must undertake exceptional duties to contribute to their side winning the war.

This characterisation aligns with the portrayal of the protagonists of my case study terrorism films who are depicted as ordinary citizens capable of exceptional feats. They resemble soldiers of 1990s war films as defined by Guy Westwell in his description of Tom Hanks' character Miller in *Saving Private Ryan* (dir. Steven Spielberg, USA, 1998) which Westwell notes is a stark change in characterisation from soldiers of the 1970s and 1980s:

> [Miller] faces down a German tank armed only with a pistol. Tom Hanks' star persona – with its measured balance of physical awkwardness, reticence, good-natured intelligence, ordinariness, and so on – meshes perfectly with the character of Miller and this sequence demonstrates precisely how the psychologically unstable characters of *Apocalypse Now* and the superhero of the *Rambo* films have now been replaced by the image of an ordinary man behaving in an extraordinary way.[489]

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[488] The treatment of a similar character in *The Hurt Locker* provides a useful insight. Eldridge views a goatherder in the distance but believes him to be carrying a gun so shoots him. The viewer is shown a close-up of the dead body with a gun next to him, confirming Eldridge's suspicion, but Eldridge does not have this privileged information. However, he is confident in shooting to protect his unit, addressing his lack of conviction in the opening scene when Thompson was killed.

[489] Westwell, *War Cinema*, 97.

I argue that the protagonist being an ordinary American behaving in an extraordinary way has been transplanted from previous Hollywood war films to the terrorism films of the 2000s and 2010s I am analysing. The competent, stable assessment of Miller in *Saving Private Ryan* can be applied to Captain Phillips, coincidentally portrayed by the same Hollywood star, Tom Hanks, in *Captain Phillips*. Phillips is established as ordinary from the outset. The opening shot depicts his house in the suburbs with two estate cars and a worn basketball net on the drive, in need of repair. A sequence of him packing his belongings includes close-ups of his passport, travel documents and photo frames of his wife and children. He travels with his wife to the airport and expresses concern regarding his son's employment prospects, "It worries me when Danny doesn't take school seriously. Him missing class… it might hurt him when he's out looking for a job." Phillips is represented as a regular civilian working as a merchant mariner who captains a cargo ship.

The fictional protagonist of *Patriots Day* (dir. Peter Berg, Hong Kong, USA, 2016), Sergeant Saunders (Mark Wahlberg), is similarly depicted as ordinary, the opening scene portraying him patrolling with two uniformed officers having been demoted. The Police Commissioner Ed Davis (John Goodman) refers to him being in the "doghouse" and the film focuses on his flaws. He tells Davis, "I should be a captain, or a deputy super, or probably in your job by now." His aspirations do not correspond to his reality. At home, Saunders sorts through his baseball cards and removes his knee brace which supports a damaged leg. He is not characterised as exceptional in the manner of 1980s action heroes such as Rambo or John McClane. The three lead characters of *The 15:17 to Paris* (dir. Clint Eastwood, USA, 2018) are also the polar opposite of these invincible 1980s heroes. They are the embodiment of ordinary Americans as they play themselves, "The film stars the three real-life heroes Anthony Sadler, Oregon National Guardsman Alek Skarlatos, and U.S. Air Force Airman First Class Spencer Stone."[490] Emphasis is placed on the average nature of Stone through depiction of his failure to gain admission into the Air Force Pararescue troop due to a lack of depth perception. He tells his Mum, "I tried, and I failed, this is worse." He signs up for SERE (Survival, Evasion, Resistance and Escape) where he tells his teammates, "I'm already pretty behind on my assignments, I'm about to fail out." Juxtaposed with the opening shots of Navy SEALs training in *Lone Survivor*, the ordinariness of Stone is accentuated when compared with the elite Luttrell.

The establishment of these protagonists as ordinary results in the exceptional acts they perform as additionally extraordinary. Captain Phillips demonstrates resilience and initiative to protect his crew and survive being held hostage by Somali pirates in a lifeboat for five

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[490] Jon Lyus, "Exclusive: Clint Eastwood on political correctness and the real life heroics of *The 15:17 to Paris*," *Hey U Guys*, February 6, 2018, accessed May 10, 2023, https://www.heyuguys.com/clint-eastwood-the-1517-to-paris-interview/.

days. In *Patriots Day*, Sergeant Saunders is stationed at the finish line of the marathon. When two bombs explode, he runs towards the explosions, shepherding people away and tending to the casualties. He is depicted as courageous and fearless as he searches shops for injured people and risks his own life to save others. Spencer Stone in *The 15:17 to Paris* also shows extraordinary bravery, putting himself in harm's way in charging a terrorist on a train and preventing him firing his weapon. He forces him to the ground and Stone's two friends, Alek and Anthony, join to help overpower him. Owen Gleiberman recognises how "None are professional actors, but they're heroes playing heroes"[491] and Nick Pinkerton describes them as, "aggressively ordinary lads who will be called on to perform an extraordinary duty."[492] Stone applies the first aid skills he attained during his training and saves one of the passenger's lives, indicating that ordinary people can perform exceptional, life-saving acts.

In each of these examples, ordinary protagonists apply extraordinary perseverance to confronting the dangers, doing whatever is necessary to respond. The soldiers in *Lone Survivor*, however, are not depicted as demonstrating the same commitment to their mission. Although they are Navy SEALS, expertly trained to deal with any occurrence, they are portrayed as willing to abandon their assignment to protect the lives of three Afghan goatherders who are likely to betray their position to the Taliban. The SEALS also deploy international law to determine their course of action, aligning with "more recent characterizations of the United States as a global policeman tasked with upholding international norms and laws."[493] However, in *Lone Survivor*, being guided by international law is represented as holding greater importance than their survival and ultimately results in the deaths of 19 American soldiers. It could be interpreted as admirable, to put the lives of others before themselves, but it illustrates an undermining of the exceptionality of American foreign policy. By resorting to international law instead of prioritising American lives or their country's aims, the SEALs demonstrate commitment to a shared precariousness, as discussed in Chapter 2, of all lives having equal value and being equally fragile; however, their approach compromises the mission. This contrasts with both the protagonists of the terrorism narratives, and the characterisation of the World War II mission in *The Guns of Navarone*.

The SEALs in *Lone Survivor* are aware that if they let the group go, their location will be reported and their mission will fail. Axelson argues to kill the goatherders, explaining how the target of their mission, Shah, is "down there, we let them go, we're letting him go, mission

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[491] Owen Gleiberman, "*The 15:17 to Paris*. (Movie Review)," *Variety* 339, no. 3 (February 7, 2018): 85-86. https://variety.com/2018/film/reviews/the-15-17-to-paris-review-clint-eastwood-1202690699/.
[492] Nick Pinkerton, "*The 15:17 to Paris*. (Movie Review)," *Sight and Sound* 28, no. 4 (2018): 58, accessed May 9, 2023.
[493] Laderman, "Introduction: Camouflaging Empire," 5.

fails." He goes on to describe how many Americans have died, "Shah killed 20 Marines last week, 20. We let him go, 20 more will die next week, 40 more the week after that. Our job is to stop Shah." The mission is important to Axelson because he wants to protect American lives. When Luttrell states, "Rules of engagement says we cannot touch them," Axelson tells him, looking at each of the team in turn, "I understand, and I don't care. I care about you, I care about you, I care about you." Luttrell asks, "Are we gonna kill them?... They get found, then what?... It's gonna be out there for the whole f***ing world. CNN ok? 'SEALs kill kids,' that's the f***ing story forever… We cannot do it. They are unarmed prisoners." Luttrell's principal concern is how the SEALs' actions will appear to the world whilst Axelson's priority is staying alive.

The scene portrays Luttrell and Axelson as representative of the two types of Navy SEAL discussed by David Philipps in *The New York Times* article, *Navy SEALs Were Warned Against Reporting Their Chief for War Crimes*. Philipps explains how, "the Pirates, I think, would argue, hey, look, war is messy, and we can't be tied down with expectations that were made at a desk somewhere in the United States. And the Boy Scouts see that as a very slippery slope and say, no, we need to follow the rules that are given to us as professional soldiers."[494] Axelson is the pirate, motivated by wanting to avenge American deaths and prevent more, similar to Kyle in *American Sniper*, and Luttrell is the boy scout, applying a reasoned approach which considers what will happen to them when they return to base.

In contrast, there is no mention of the soldiers being punished for killing Anna in *The Guns of Navarone*. They are at war and have an essential mission, and Anna's presence could jeopardise it. Mallory and Miller debate killing her but are not divided in their final decision, as Luttrell and Axelson are; Mallory and Miller correspondingly conclude that she needs to be killed. Mallory draws his weapon but, as he points his gun at Anna, her friend, Maria (Irene Papas), also betrayed by her deception, shoots and kills her. Although Mallory did not pull the trigger, he agreed that it was necessary for their mission to continue unheeded and was willing to kill Anna.

The SEALs in *Lone Survivor*, however, disagree with one another regarding how to proceed. It is the responsibility of the leader of the team, Murphy, to make the decision; he decides to release the goatherders, stating, "This is not a vote… This op is compromised so we're gonna pack up everything, we're gonna cut them loose and we're gonna make this peak… When we get these comms up, we're gonna call for extract and we're going home." All three respond, "Roger that, sir" or "Roger," immediately accepting Murphy's resolution and discarding the mission. Murphy's verdict prioritises the lives of the Afghan goatherders ahead

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[494] David Philipps, "Navy SEALs Were Warned Against Reporting Their Chief for War Crimes," *The New York Times*, April 23, 2019, accessed September 8, 2023, https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/23/us/navy-seals-crimes-of-war.html.

of their own and over the mission. This is the opposite representation of the mission in *The Guns of Navarone* which the soldiers must, under any circumstances, complete.

The soldiers in *The Guns of Navarone* display unwavering belief in their objective, whilst the SEALs in *Lone Survivor* prioritise saving the lives of the goatherders over protecting their own lives. Following their release, one of the goatherders runs down the mountain to inform the Taliban of the Americans' position. The SEALs are soon surrounded and forced into a firefight which leads to all but one of them being killed, along with sixteen other SEALs whose helicopter is shot out of the sky when they attempt to rescue them. Murphy's decision ultimately leads to the deaths of all but one of the extended SEALs team, but it is not him which is characterised as the enemy, neither is it the goatherders who are unarmed; it is the rules of international law which determine that they are not allowed to harm "unarmed prisoners", Taliban or not. Their only choice to prevent their deaths is to let them go, whereas *The Guns of Navarone* represents it as acceptable and necessary to kill an unarmed prisoner if she will prevent them completing their mission. *Lone Survivor* problematises international law as a replacement for American exceptionalism because it depicts it as putting American lives in danger. It confirms the argument Saito describes that, "the United States has both relied upon and shaped international law while selectively exempting itself from its application with the exceptionalist argument that it represented a higher, more evolved, form of civilization."[495] The discussion between the SEALs foregrounds the military's struggles in conforming to societal expectations regarding what actions are morally acceptable, alongside attempting to protect their soldiers in war. Their dilemma contributes to the debate regarding whether American lives can be protected while maintaining an ethical approach to warfare or whether adhering to international law will always result in sacrifice.

The difficulty of protecting soldiers is emphasised in *The Hurt Locker* in which several prominent characters die. After watching his team leader killed in an explosion, Eldridge constantly fears death. He asks Colonel Cambridge, "What if all I can be is dead on the side of an Iraqi road?" He persuades Cambridge to accompany them on a mission which results in Cambridge stepping on an IED and being killed. Eldridge weeps in response, the death represented as grievable but needless, achieving no purpose. In a subsequent scene, following the death of an Iraqi civilian (Suhail Al-Dabbach) with a suicide vest bolted to him, James asks Sanborn if he is ok. Sanborn replies, "Nah, man. I f***ing hate this place." Sombre music plays and minor chords accentuate his desperation as he continues, "Another two inches, shrapnel zings by, slices my throat, I bleed out like a pig in the sand. Nobody'll give a s***… I'm done." His reason for wanting to leave Iraq is due to not wanting to die rather than being against the war, his apolitical stance being representative of the "post-9/11 wars. No significant or widespread organized dissent or anti-war politics has appeared

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[495] Saito, *Meeting the Enemy*, 230.

among soldiers and veterans."[496] This contrasts considerably with many Vietnam War veterans joining anti-war activism, depicted in films such as *Born on the Fourth of July* and *Coming Home*. Marc Lee in *American Sniper* represents a more political view of the Iraq War. He is killed after questioning the American intervention in Iraq and, at his funeral, his mother (Pamela Denise Weaver) reads from a letter he wrote, "Glory is something some men chase and others find themselves stumbling upon. My question is when does glory fade away and become a wrongful crusade? When does it become an unjustified means by which one is completely consumed?" This reflects the discrediting of the motives for the Iraq War which Appy explains, "There were no WMD in Iraq… [and] Iraq had nothing to do with the al-Qaeda attacks on September 11, 2001."[497] In diverse ways, *The Hurt Locker* and *American Sniper*, alongside *Green Zone*'s explicit critique, demonstrate a lack of conviction in the country's foreign policy.

4.3.2 In-Fighting

Both *Green Zone* and *Zero Dark Thirty* depict opposing American approaches and a questioning of American exceptionalism. The protagonist of *Green Zone*, Chief Miller, confronts the United States' primary reason for invading Iraq, the country's potential possession of weapons of mass destruction (WMD). There was no irrefutable evidence to prove the existence of such weapons, and *Green Zone* opens with Miller searching possible locations of WMD based on intelligence. Having "come up empty" on more than one site, he breaks from his team to investigate the source of the information and determine its reliability. Miller discovers that the evidence of WMD has been falsified and reports his revelations to the media. The narrative depicts American characters on opposing sides, one side deeming the falsification of evidence of WMD necessary to sanction an invasion, the other side maintaining that the United States has a moral obligation to share the truth. This opposition is best exemplified in an exchange between protagonist U.S. government representative Poundstone and protagonist Chief Miller at the end of the film. Referring to the truth regarding WMD, Poundstone tells Miller: "None of this matters any more. WMD, this doesn't matter." Miller grabs hold of him and shouts, "What are you talking about? Of course it f***ing matters… It's all that f***ing matters… What's gonna happen next time we need people to trust us?" *Green Zone* foregrounds the importance of being able to evidence justifications for war, reflecting the reality that the lack of WMD challenged the foundation of the American invasion, "Iraq was more important to the United States than the principles of international

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[496] Abu El-Haj, *Combat Trauma*, 236.
[497] Appy, *American Reckoning*, 310.

law".[498] In the book which inspired the film, Rajiv Chandrasekaran describes how, "By early 2004, leaders of the CIA-led team… had all but concluded that Iraq didn't possess nuclear, biological, or chemical munitions."[499] Peter Biskind notes the implications of failing to find WMD, "When no weapons of mass destruction turned up, it was Vietnam all over again, and confidence in the authorities crumbled."[500] *Green Zone*'s narrative portrays the US administration as the enemy within, responsible for invading a country without necessary evidence to prove its case and opposing the protagonist's search for the truth.

Zero Dark Thirty also depicts foreign policy approaches which have been discussed as undermining American moral authority. The narrative begins with the torture of an al Qaeda suspect, Ammar (Reda Kateb). CIA agents, representatives of the United States, led by Dan (Jason Clarke), undertake the torture themselves, characterising them as acting similarly to an enemy. Berenike Jung asks, "Could it… be the 'normal' quality of the perpetrators in *Zero* that feels so terribly uncomfortable to the audience?"[501] The torture is not portrayed as outsourced, Americans employed by the government are responsible. CIA "Black sites" where torture takes places are depicted in different countries. The protagonist, Maya, interrogates suspects who are being or have been tortured, signifying her complicity. Christian G. Appy observes how President Bush objected to occurrences in Abu Ghraib, stating, "'What took place in that prison does not represent the America that I know.'"[502] As Appy continues, however:

> Bush opened the door to just such behaviour when he signed a memorandum on February 7, 2002, waiving U.S. adherence to the Third Geneva Convention, which guarantees humane treatment to prisoners of war. The memo asserted that al-Qaeda or Taliban detainees were exempt from such protections. In practice, the military and CIA used that authorization to justify the use of torture on any of its captives, even those who had nothing to do with the attacks of 9/11.[503]

Joseph S. Nye, Jr. notes that, "Pictures of torture at Abu Ghraib undercut American soft power",[504] and Stephen M. Walt explains how,

> the abuses at Abu Ghraib and the George W. Bush administration's reliance on waterboarding, extraordinary rendition, and preventive detention should shake America's belief that it consistently acts in a morally superior fashion. Obama's

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[498] Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 477.
[499] Rajiv Chandrasekaran, *Imperial Life in the Emerald City: Inside Baghdad's Green Zone* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing PLC, 2008), 363.
[500] Biskind, *The Sky is Falling!*, 76.
[501] Jung, *The Invisibilities of Political Torture*, 37
[502] Appy, *American Reckoning*, 309.
[503] Ibid., 309.
[504] Joseph S. Nye, Jr., *Do Morals Matter? Presidents and Foreign Policy from FDR to Trump* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 151.

decision to retain many of these policies suggests they were not a temporary aberration.[505]

Both *Green Zone* and *Zero Dark Thirty* depict the discarding of international law, to invade a nation on a false premise in *Green Zone*, and to torture suspects in *Zero Dark Thirty*.

It is highly unusual for Hollywood to portray American protagonists enacting torture. They are often tortured by the enemy, for example, James Bond, Ethan Hunt in the *Mission: Impossible* franchise, and the American soldiers in *The Deer Hunter* (dir. Michael Cimino, USA, UK, 1978), but Americans torturing suspects is rare. This is indicated by the numerous scholarship surrounding television programme, *24* (created by Joel Surnow and Robert Cochran, Imagine Entertainment, 20th Century Fox Television, Real Time Productions, Teakwood Lane Productions, 2001-2010), in which lead character, Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland), made a name for himself through his willingness to "break a few" rules[506] in the pursuit of information about the next terrorist attack.

The controversy regarding the depiction of torture in *Zero Dark Thirty* is apparent from its lack of success at the Academy Awards. Kathryn Bigelow's previous film, *The Hurt Locker*, won "six Oscars from nine nominations, including Best Director for Bigelow, Best Original Screenplay… as well as Best Picture".[507] *Zero Dark Thirty* was anticipated to achieve similar success, "a strong contender to pick up the biggest prize of Best Picture, as well as the Best Actress and Original Screenplay awards."[508] After the 2013 Oscars, however, *Reuters* reported that it won just one award for Sound Editing, "In recent weeks, the movie has seen a fierce backlash over its implied message that torture helped crack the bin Laden case."[509] The CIA distanced itself from this depiction, "acting director, Mike Morrell… [said], 'the film creates the strong impression that the enhanced interrogation techniques… were the key to finding Bin Laden. That impression is false.'"[510] A report in *The Guardian* supports Morrell's view, "there is a strong case to argue that torture is not part of the story of finding Bin

[505] Stephen M. Walt, "The Myth of American Exceptionalism," *Foreign Policy*, October 11, 2011, accessed August 24, 2023, https://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/the-myth-of-american-exceptionalism/.
[506] Jack Bauer, *24*, Season 1, Episode 4: 3AM-4AM (created by Joel Surnow and Robert Cochran, Imagine Entertainment, 20th Century Fox Television, Real Time Productions, Teakwood Lane Productions, 2001-2010)
[507] Marshall Kingsley, "*The Hurt Locker* Interview: Kathryn Bigelow and Mark Boal, *Little White Lies*, September 1, 2009," in *Kathryn Bigelow: Interviews*, ed. Peter Keough (University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 199, accessed September 26, 2019, ProQuest Ebook Central: http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/soton-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1113434.
[508] Tim Reid and Jill Serjeant, "'Zero Dark Thirty' fails at Oscars amid political fallout," *Reuters Entertainment News*, February 25, 2013, accessed April 21, 2023, https://www.reuters.com/article/entertainment-us-oscars-zero-idUSBRE91O07S20130225.
[509] Ibid.
[510] Matthew Alford and Tom Secker, *National Security Cinema: The Shocking New Evidence of Government Control in Hollywood* (Torrazza Piemonte, Italy: Amazon Italia Logistica S.r.l., 2017), 46.

Laden."[511] It is not denied that "enhanced interrogation techniques" took place, but that information gleaned from these interrogations did not assist in finding bin Laden.

The acknowledged sanctioning of such methods by the U.S. government distinguishes the war on terror's representation from previous conflicts. Peter Biskind asserts that, as "[a]udiences knew… American soldiers didn't kill or torture prisoners."[512] Killing or torturing prisoners was invariably the enemy's domain. *Zero Dark Thirty*'s portrayal is atypical of Hollywood's depictions of American foreign policy, challenging assumptions concerning military behaviour. Christian G Appy explains how, "torture… and 'extraordinary rendition'… fundamentally contradicted a core principle of American exceptionalism – the belief that the United States adheres to a higher ethical standard than other nations."[513] In its portrayal of torture, *Zero Dark Thirty* questions the war on terror's adherence to American values and contributes to the depiction of the enemy within. The film's lead actress, Jessica Chastain, observes,

> my favorite moment is the very end of the film… It's not a propaganda movie—"go America"—it's through the eyes of this woman who has sacrificed, become a servant to her work, and she lost herself along the way, and she realizes that… it's like what Kathryn said: where does she go, but then also where do we go as a country? Where do we go as a society? What do we do now?[514]

The implication of Chastain's alignment of her character Maya as representative of the nation is that the United States has sacrificed its exceptionalism in pursuit of bin Laden, torturing suspects and subjecting them to extraordinary rendition. By establishing an enemy within in relation to the methods employed by the United States in the war on terror, the question of how the country should move forward is considered, as Maya is required to do when she is asked, "Where do you want to go?"

4.3.3   Closer to Home

A further representation of the enemy within is the enemy moving closer to home. This is rendered in my case study films in two forms; one is the portrayal of attacks taking place within Western countries, including the United States; terrorism occurs in Boston in *Patriots*

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[511] Alex von Tunzelmann, "*Zero Dark Thirty*'s torture scenes are controversial and historically dubious," *The Guardian*, January 25, 2013, accessed April 21, 2023, https://www.theguardian.com/film/filmblog/2013/jan/25/zero-dark-thirty-reel-history.

[512] Biskind, *The Sky is Falling!*, 126.

[513] Appy, *American Reckoning*, 309.

[514] Peter Keough and Brett Michel, "Press Conference for *Zero Dark Thirty*, December 4, 2012, New York City," in *Kathryn Bigelow: Interviews*, ed. Peter Keough (University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 224-225, accessed September 26, 2019, ProQuest Ebook Central: http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/soton-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1113434.

Day and in France in *The 15:17 to Paris*; the second is the progression by all four directors on which this thesis focuses to choose stories of violence within the west rather than outside on the global frontier. The selection of narratives by each director demonstrates a move from threats overseas, in Peter Berg's *The Kingdom* (Saudi Arabia) and *Lone Survivor*, Kathryn Bigelow's *The Hurt Locker* (Iraq), Clint Eastwood's *American Sniper* (Iraq) and Paul Greengrass' *Green Zone* (Iraq) and *Captain Phillips* (Somali coast), to threats closer to home, in Berg's *Patriots Day* (Boston), Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* (European attacks) and *Detroit* (dir. Kathryn Bigelow, USA, 2017) (Detroit police), Eastwood's *The 15:17 to Paris* (France) and *Richard Jewell* (dir. Clint Eastwood, USA, 2019), and Greengrass' *22 July* (dir. Paul Greengrass, USA, Norway, 2018) (Norway). Although three of these films are outside the scope of this study, their existence indicates the development of focusing on enemies outside the west to enemies within.

The enemies in *Patriots Day* and *The 15:17 to Paris* are from within the western societies in which the attacks take place. In *Patriots Day*, the two brothers responsible for the bombings, Tamerlan (Themo Melikidze) and Dzhokhar Tsarnaev (Alex Wolff), live in Cambridge, Massachusetts. They "emigrated to the US in 2002"[515] with Dzhokar becoming "a naturalized U.S. citizen in 2012… [and] Tamerlan… lawfully in the United States as a green-card holder."[516] The beginning of the film introduces them in their apartment in the same way other characters are established, chatting and going through their morning routines. From external shots of their residence and interior shots of their life, the family appears to live like any other Americans. Sherman and Wedge explain that this was the impression the public had of the real brothers,

> neither man looked like a prototypical jihadist terrorist; rather, they looked like two everyday college kids in a city filled with more than two hundred thousand students. They were so nondescript that one popular men's website, Barstool Sports, proclaimed that the city had been bombed by two random 'bros.'[517]

However, as shots of the Tsarnaevs' apartment continue, it becomes apparent that the younger brother, Dzhokhar is watching a YouTube video instructing on bomb making, immediately indicating to the viewer the threat they pose, and Tamerlan is shaving off his beard, demonstrating his desire to appear as "nondescript" as possible and not draw attention to them in the marathon crowds. Tamerlan and Dzhokhar are plotting an attack on the city which has taken them in and so embody the enemy within.

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[515] "Profile: Dzhokhar and Tamerlan Tsarnaev," in *BBC News*, April 22, 2013, accessed June 2, 2025, https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-us-canada-22219116.

[516] Chelsea J. Carter and Greg Botelho, "'CAPTURED!!!' Boston police announce Marathon bombing suspect in custody," in *CNN US*, April 19, 2013, accessed June 2, 2025, https://edition.cnn.com/2013/04/19/us/boston-area-violence.

[517] Sherman and Wedge, *Boston Strong: A City's Triumph Over Tragedy*, 146.

In *The 15:17 to Paris*, the attacker is originally from Morocco but has moved to France and resides there. This information is not provided by the film, but the opening sequence demonstrates his integration. Although as discussed in Chapter 2, the construction of the shots with close ups of his backpack and concealing his face indicates that he poses his threat, it also depicts him as resembling other passengers. As he walks through the train station, his clothing and baggage are very similar to the person walking behind him, and when considered alongside a similar sequence in *Hotel Mumbai* (dir. Anthony Maras, Australia, USA, UK, Singapore, 2018) released in the same year, his assimilation is apparent. In *Hotel Mumbai*, the attackers are conspicuous in their large coats and big bags, alongside other passengers wearing shirts and carrying very little.

Figure 4.9 and Figure 4.10   The terrorist in *The 15:17 to Paris* is less conspicuous than the terrorists in *Hotel Mumbai*, *The 15:17 to Paris*, 0:01:20, *Hotel Mumbai*, 0:10:50

The bombers in *Patriots Day* also assimilate into their surroundings. When walking through the crowds at the finish line of the Boston Marathon, no one is aware of their presence and they drop their rucksacks and depart without being noticed.
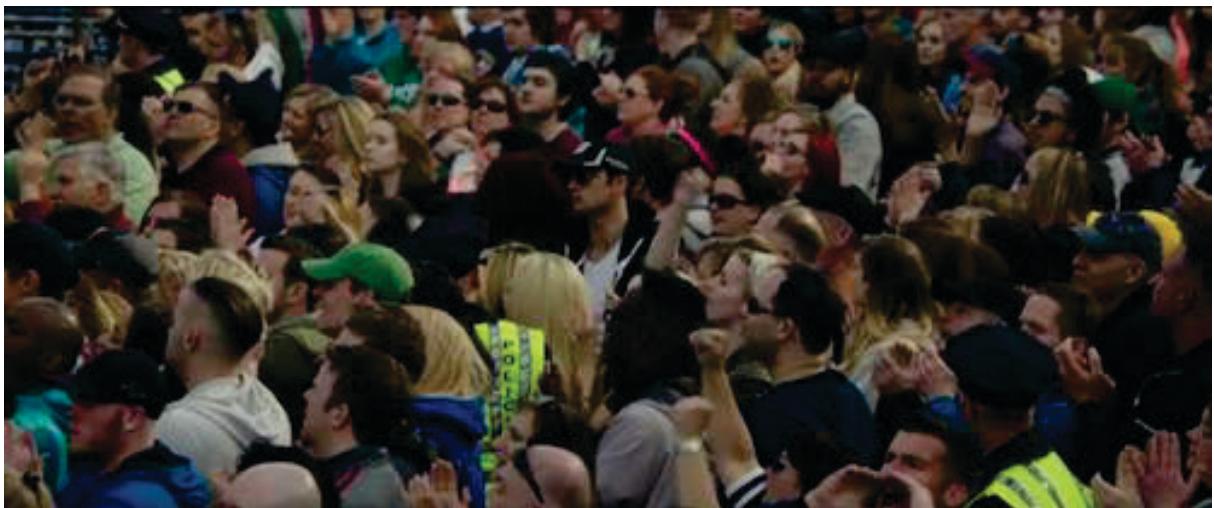
Figure 4.11   The bombers integrate with the crowds, *Patriots Day*, 0:28:28

The bombers wear baseball caps and sunglasses which is what several people in the crowd are wearing and enables them to blend in.

Patriots Day further characterises the terrorists as the enemy within by referencing the Western in FBI Special Agent Richard DesLauriers' (Kevin Bacon) description of the two suspects; he names them Black Hat and White Hat. Conventionally, "a white hat-black hat

conflict",[518] describes the hero against the villain. This reference in *Patriots Day* suggests that the enemy and hero have become conflated and both are now villains, other characters being unable to determine them as the enemy on first sight. Numerous shots of FBI agents watching CCTV footage from before the bombings, trying to identify anyone suspicious, are depicted before a clip of the bombers is shown. The agent rewinds the footage several times, zooms in twice and plays it in slow motion before the viewer can be clear who is under suspicion and why. He then points to the screen to show Des Lauriers, and confirm for the viewer, one of the bombers moving in the opposite direction to the crowd when the bomb explodes. The characterisations of both this pair, and the terrorist in *The 15:17 to Paris*, recall the suspicion associated with Cold War cinema in which anyone could be a communist. This resonates with Biskind and Richissin's comments at the beginning of this section that "instead of Us versus Them, it's more like Us as Them" and that in the war on terror there is "no common enemy".

The American characters of my case study films are portrayed as battling internal obstacles and difficulties produced by their superiors, as much as with the enemy other. Richard Gray considers that, "9/11… punctured America's belief in its inviolability and challenged its presumption of its innocence, the manifest rightness of its cause."[519] Drucilla Cornwell agrees, asserting, "we cannot expect to rest assured in easy fantasies that we can recapture the good old days when what it meant to be on the right side of the law could be shown in a simple light."[520] As displayed in comparing similar scenes from *Lone Survivor* and *The Guns of Navarone*, there is a distinction between Hollywood's representation of the war on terror as morally questionable and the world wars as morally-just. While "the Vietnam débâacle, made mockery of long-cherished national concepts of invincibility and righteousness",[521] Hollywood reasserted American exceptionalism in its releases throughout

> the decade that followed… most of which sought to recast U.S. intervention as either the 'noble cause' posited by Ronald Reagan (think *Rambo: First Blood Part II*…) or, like the Academy Award winners *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and *Platoon* (1986), an overwhelmingly American – as opposed to Vietnamese – tragedy.

I contend that my film corpus depicts the war on terror as undermining the righteousness of American intervention but through creating an ambiguous enemy which is often characterised as from within.[522]

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[518] Virginia Luzon-Aguado, "Who are the Pirates? Somali Piracy and Environmental Justice in Alakrana, Stolen Seas and *Captain Phillips*," in *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 26, no. 1 (2019), 203, accessed June 19, 2025, https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isy087.

[519] Gray, *After the Fall*, 11.

[520] Cornwell, *Clint Eastwood and Issues of American Masculinity*, x.

[521] Coyne, *The Crowded Prairie*, 189.

[522] Following the representation of "Us as Them" in the directors' overseas war films, *The Hurt Locker*, *Green Zone*, *Lone Survivor* and *American Sniper*, a notable progression is made by each director to focus on narratives concerning terrorism closer to home; *Zero Dark Thirty* depicts attacks on American and European soil, *Captain*

Taken collectively, my nine case study films demonstrate a progression from a focus on external enemies, overseas and in different countries, to threats being present within the West, including with the United States itself. This progression creates a cycle, beginning with 9/11 and returning to depicting terrorism in the United States with *Patriots Day* portraying the Boston Marathon bombings of 2013. Each of the films contains a sadness which offers space to grieve the losses of the almost twenty years between 9/11 and the release of *The 15:17 to Paris* in 2018, "the acts of terror that left nearly 3000 dead by the end of that day and the acts of both terror and the 'war on terror' that have accounted for hundreds of thousands more deaths."[523] These nine films contribute to addressing what Richard Gray terms the "failure of mourning" of the 9/11 attacks.

4.4   Mourning the War on Terror

Discussing the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, Richard Gray compares the national, and international response, with the assassination of President John F. Kennedy,

> The Kennedy assassination left a huge hole in the life of America… but the period of national (and international) mourning that followed his death provided, at least, some measure of release, an appropriate catharsis. With 9/11, however, the period of commemoration has been hijacked by a series of events tied to it in rhetoric if not necessarily in reality: the 'war on terror,' the Patriot Act, extraordinary rendition, the invasion of Afghanistan and then Iraq… Acting out grief has been jettisoned in favor of hitting out; getting through the crisis has yielded, in terms of priorities, to getting back at those who initiated it; commemorative rituals have ceded place to the initiation of a state of emergency. The result has been, to return to that phrase, a failure of mourning: a failure that leaves an open wound, a gap or emptiness in the psychic life of the nation.[524]

Phillips portrays an American civilian ship being held hostage by pirates, *Patriots Day* renders the bombing of the Boston Marathon on screen, and *The 15:17 to Paris* represents the attempted attack of a train travelling through Europe. In subsequent films, Kathryn Bigelow, Paul Greengrass and Clint Eastwood portrayed threats within the west, with Bigelow and Eastwood focusing on narratives of law enforcement being the enemy in *Detroit* and *Richard Jewell*, and Greengrass representing the "worst terrorist attack" ("*22 July*," *imdb.com*, accessed November 15, 2023, https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7280898) in Norway's history in *22 July*. Within each film canon, the director moves from an interest in overseas conflict, to terrorism and violence within the west, portraying the enemy as being within. The enemy within takes the form of immigrants to the United States orchestrating a terrorist attack (*Patriots Day*), someone from within a Western country attacking their fellow citizens (*22 July*), and corruption of the institutions responsible for their protecting citizens (*Detroit* and *Richard Jewell*). Three of these films are out of the scope of my thesis (*Detroit*, *22 July* and *Richard Jewell*), but their presence is instructive, demonstrating an ongoing interest of these directors in terrorism on western soil and the American enemy within.
[523] Gray, *After the Fall*, 4.
[524] Ibid., 8-9.

Gray discerns a void in the prospect to mourn the tragedy of September 11, 2001, due to the immediate and extensive response by the U.S. administration, leaving an "open wound" by initiating the war on terror. My contention is that my nine case study films invoke this missing opportunity to mourn by depicting sombre narratives and endless conflict, offering space to grieve, signifying how "mourning can be unsettled, interrupted or even refuelled by another catastrophic incident."[525] By not ending triumphantly, they acknowledge the need to reflect on the losses and sacrifices of 9/11, as well as subsequent terrorist attacks and the war on terror, both of which interrupted and refuelled mourning of the initial tragedy.

Patrick McCormick states, "Perhaps if we could learn to admit our own sadness and powerlessness, we might be able to move beyond anger into something more productive."[526] This contributes to the discourse debated by Freud and many authors since regarding the concept of "successful mourning", which, "in Freud's reasoning, implies 'working through' grief and liberating the subject from the lost object in order for it to find a new object of attachment… contemporary critics have come to question the ethical and political desirability of mourning, in that it promotes forgetting, normative conciliation, and an abdication of responsibility".[527] I propose that the case study films advocate for confronting grief and processing loss rather than internalising it by providing opportunities for the viewer to project their grief. Joyce and Simm indicate how *Zero Dark Thirty* provides such a space, "in some ways [the film] represents a screen onto which the audience can project its own anxieties and desires."[528] The endings of my case study films are not shown to resolve the sadness, as they do not end triumphantly or with closure, but to permit the protagonists, and in turn the viewer, to acknowledge the experiences which have traumatised them and instigate an emotional response.

4.4.1   Sombre Endings

Responding to the September 11, 2001, attacks with war may have been deemed necessary by the Bush administration, but the sombre quality of my case study films suggests disillusionment with the response rather than triumph. I contend that the solemnity of the Reel Fallout narratives is accounted for by the losses and trauma of both 9/11 and the subsequent war on terror in which more Americans died. Following the Vietnam War in which

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[525] "Introduction," in *Panic and Mourning: The Cultural Work of Trauma*, eds. Daniela Agostinho, Elisa Antz and Cátia Ferreira (Berlin/Boston: De Gruyter, Inc., 2012), 1, accessed March 11, 2025, ProQuest Ebook Central.
[526] Patrick McCormick, "Mourning sickness: Americans have learned from Hollywood and Capitol Hill to seek revenge when tragedy strikes. We would all be safer--and saner--if we could just grieve," *U.S. Catholic*, Vol. 72, Issue 8 (August 2007, Claretian Publications. Gale Academic OneFile), accessed June 9, 2025. https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A166944994/AONE?u=unisoton&sid=oclc&xid=e2133bcf.
[527] eds. Agostinho, Antz and Ferreira, "Introduction," 1-2.
[528] Joyce and Simm, "*Zero Dark Thirty*: international law, film and representation," 302.

58,000 American soldiers died,[529] there was an emphasis in American foreign policy on not losing American lives. Jean-Michel Valantin explains, "the sudden emergence of the 'zero losses' ideology at the time of the Gulf War declared any loss unacceptable… [T]he benchmark of victory became 'zero losses'".[530] The films cannot portray "victory" in the form established by the U.S. military because the narratives depict American deaths and powerlessness in attempting to protect American lives, for example in *The Hurt Locker* in which the "armoured body of the main character… can be read as… nearly immobilized by the desire to wage a war in which 'no soldier is lost'."[531] Even the "100-pound Kevlar 'bomb suit',"[532] however, cannot prevent American deaths, as displayed at the beginning of the film, "The quiet, sombre setting of… rows of boxes containing the remains of soldiers killed in Iraq awaiting shipment back to the States, communicates a deep, understated sadness."[533] The Afghanistan and Iraq wars could not achieve the zero losses standard, as Sturken explains,

> The post-9/11 wars… came with staggering costs: more than seven thousand American lives—more than double that of 9/11… The narrative of 9/11 exceptionalism justifies… [the] human, economic, and social costs and… the changing of legal norms and moral stances that followed in 9/11's wake with the Patriot Act, the condoning of torture, and the secretive systems of illegal incarceration at sites like Guantánamo.[534]

By focusing on the sombre aspects of their stories, all nine case study films represent a destabilising of exceptionalism by criticising the actions it endorsed. War and terrorism are not shown as triumphed over, as in many world war films and 1980s and 1990s action cinema, or battled against, as with many Vietnam War films, but mourned.

The sombre atmosphere of *Captain Phillips* epitomises this. There is no rousing music, no triumphant hero, and no slow-motion defeating of an enemy, "nor do we actually get to see Phillips enjoy a touching reunion with his wife, children, and community."[535] Instead, "[the] narrative… [is] ultimately more tragic than triumphalist"[536] and "succeeds in enlarging what one might call the tragic perspective of the viewer."[537] Conveying its basis in real-life events, it is filmed in a documentary style with shaky cam, exhibiting its director's skills, "Greengrass has become an action auteur of sorts, with a very personal, gritty filmmaking style, which he developed during his years of TV documentary making in the UK."[538] The shots on the lifeboat are close to the characters, as if the viewer is being held hostage with Phillips, and

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[529] Appy, *American Reckoning*, 299.
[530] Valantin, *Hollywood, The Pentagon and Washington*, 76.
[531] Burgoyne, "Embodiment in the war film: Paradise Now and The Hurt Locker," 8-9.
[532] Ibid., 12.
[533] Ibid., 15.
[534] Sturken, *Terrorism in American Memory*, 8.
[535] Danoff, "'I'm the Captain Now'," 47.
[536] Ibid., 45.
[537] Ibid., 37.
[538] Luzon-Aguado, "Who are the Pirates?," 201.

the mise-en-scène is highly claustrophobic. Phillips is rescued by Navy SEALS who shoot and kill three of the pirates, but this sequence lasts only seconds. The film does not linger on the success of the rescue or end with a celebration of Phillips returning home. Instead, it ends with its star in shock being treated for his wounds, both physical and mental. *Lone Survivor* ends similarly with its protagonist, Marcus Luttrell, being evacuated from a firefight having sustained life-threatening injuries; he requires resuscitation, almost dying on the operating table. Peter Biskind draws a parallel between the representation of Phillips and the condition of Luttrell:

> The confident man we knew as Captain Phillips at the beginning of the film… before the brutal Somali pirates hijacked his tanker in the Indian Ocean, by the end is gone. It seems as if he has lost everything that made him human… The pirates have wiped his slate clean. Likewise, in *Lone Survivor*, Mark Wahlberg is last seen on a gurney as well, reduced to zero after his squad has been wiped out by the Taliban.[539]

The Americans are devastated by the events they have experienced and the endings mourn the strength and confidence exuded by Phillips and Luttrell at the beginning of each film.

Director Peter Berg chose narratives of damage to Americans for all three of his films studied here; *The Kingdom*, *Lone Survivor* and *Patriots Day* all emphasise American loss, as well as resilience in the face of that loss. In choosing to portray the real Luttrell's account of his experience in Afghanistan, Berg selected one of the most devastating events in Navy SEAL's history. 19 soldiers died in the mission, the "worst single-day U.S. Forces death toll since Operation Enduring Freedom began. It was the single largest loss of life of Naval Special Warfare since World War II."[540] By characterising the SEALs as exceptional through the opening training sequence discussed previously, the high number of deaths conveys the devastating nature of the mission's failure. *Zero Dark Thirty* also portrays real events in which several Americans atypically died. The attack at Camp Chapman depicted in the film resulted in the deaths of seven CIA agents. It was "the second-largest single-day loss for the spy agency in its history."[541] The choice of these stories suggests that the directors wanted to acknowledge and confront loss of American life. These sacrifices are made in the service of defending those unable to defend themselves and so are represented as honourable losses.

Similarly to *Lone Survivor* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, *American Sniper* focuses on the most sombre aspects of Chris Kyle's autobiography, adapting some elements to make them more controversial or disheartening. Kyle was recognised as "the most lethal sniper in U.S.

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[539] Biskind, *The Sky is Falling!*, 179.
[540] Eric Sof, "Operation Red Wings: The darkest day in history of Navy SEALS," *Spec Ops Magazine*, October 4, 2017, accessed December 19, 2021, https://www.special-ops.org/operation-red-wings-darkest-day-navy-seals/.
[541] Siobhan Gorman, "Suicide Bombing in Afghanistan Devastates Critical Hub for CIA Activities," in *The Wall Street Journal*, January 1, 2010, accessed June 2, 2025, https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB126225941186711671.

history",[542] "Clearly the best in his business, Kyle was credited with more than 150 kills during his Iraqi service – the previous American record was 109, racked up in Vietnam by an army rifleman – and in his book he claimed to have slain more than 250 people."[543] The film could therefore have depicted numerous kills and focused on his expertise as a sniper. Instead, however, it portrays him making very few kills as a sniper, and the ones he does are mostly controversial; his first kills are shown to be a woman and a child and he tells Biggles, "It's just not how I envisioned that first one to go down." In a subsequent scene, enemy sniper, Mustafa, fires continuously at Kyle on a rooftop, forcing him to retreat and watch as The Butcher (Mido Hamada) kills the Sheikh and his son. Kyle is powerless and his skills as a sniper are undermined. Instead of celebrating Kyle's expertise and prowess as a sniper, *American Sniper* problematises many of his kills by depicting a handful of controversial ones by which he is haunted, and demonstrating his inability to save and protect both Iraqi and American lives. When Kyle achieves six kills on one day, Lee informs him, "You just got more than the rest of the snipers combined." Kyle responds, "Yeah but they got one of us." He is unable to celebrate his victories, focusing on the American lives lost. The sombre nature of the film is heightened with its final scene. Kyle plays with his children and holds his wife, Taya, in the house before leaving to join a fellow war veteran. The shot cuts to Taya watching him go and closing the front door before it fades to black and a line appears explaining that the veteran killed Kyle that day. The final shots comprise archive footage of the real Chris Kyle's funeral, *American Sniper* ending in mourning.

The Kingdom and *Zero Dark Thirty* also end mournfully rather than triumphantly. Glen Donnar observes, "in *The Kingdom* and *Zero Dark Thirty*… violent retribution results in melancholy rather than triumph."[544] This is unconventional for Hollywood films which typically depict the successful killing of terrorists. *The Delta Force*, for example, inspired by real events but ending in fictional fantasy, as with *The Kingdom*, ends with cheering crowds waving American flags to send off the aeroplane carrying the Delta Force soldiers who rescued the hostages, accompanied by celebratory theme music. In contrast, *Zero Dark Thirty* does not celebrate the American success of finding and killing Osama bin Laden. Jung describes the scene in which he is killed, "The camera then holds back and lingers… These images eschew first-person shooter suspense, gung-ho dialogue and action film heroics."[545] Instead of creating a fantasy ending, it "claims to reveal the truth about the hunt for bin Laden and adopts the visual techniques of documentary film-making such as the greenish hue of

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[542] The title of Kyle's autobiography attests to this: Chris Kyle with Jim DeFelice and Scott McEwen, *American Sniper: The autobiography of the most lethal sniper in U.S. history* (St Ives: HarperCollins, 2012, this edition 2014).
[543] David Sterritt, *The Cinema of Clint Eastwood: Chronicles of America* (Chichester: Wallflower Press, 2014), 207.
[544] Donnar, *Troubling Masculinities*, 28.
[545] Jung, *The Invisibilities of Political Torture*, 43.

filters used for the raid on bin Laden".[546] The reporting of bin Laden's death is eerily reminiscent of President Obama's description of how the news was received in real life. In *Zero Dark Thirty*, the Navy SEALS place bin Laden's body on a table inside a large tent and Maya follows them in to identify the body for the president. As she approaches the table, any background noise fades away and she is foregrounded in the shot with the body, with military personnel out of focus in the background. The only sound is a synth chord and high beating note. Maya unzips the body bag, looks at bin Laden's face, and turns and nods to indicate that it is bin Laden. The positive identification is reported and the scene is silent as she leaves, stands outside and closes her eyes. In the documentary series, *Inside Obama's White House, Episode Four: The Arc of History* (dir. Mick Gold, UK, 2016), Obama recounts, "I said, 'We got him,' but there was no whooping, there was no hollering, there was no high-fiving." *Zero Dark Thirty* ends without triumph or ceremony, retaining a sombre atmosphere which reflects Obama's description and respects the tragedy of September 11, 2001, which opened the film.

The final sequence of *Zero Dark Thirty* portrays Maya boarding a military aircraft and finding herself the sole occupant of the large hangar. Her isolation is emphasised by her small figure inside the massive space and having the choice of any seat; the pilot tells her, "You must be pretty important, you got the whole plane to yourself," but her exceptionality manifests as loneliness. Similarly to Luttrell in *Lone Survivor*, discussed in Chapter 3, Maya's characterisation corresponds to Greg Grandin's notion that, "The United States… was created lonely and raised thinking it was one of a kind."[547] As representative of the nation, Maya resembles both the exceptionalism and solitude of the United States. The pilot asks her where she would like to go but she is unable to answer. With tears rolling down her cheeks, she sits and stares, as if unable to engage with other people or decisions. She embodies a dejected figure, invoking not victory but sadness. Richard Brody remarks that Maya's inner life is not incorporated into her portrayal, *Zero Dark Thirty* enacting "a renunciation of the fuller possibilities of cinema… by the rigorous exclusion of… the constantly streaming phantasmagoria of inner life."[548] I dispute this interpretation as I contend that the ending brings nothing but Maya's inner life to the fore; her tears express everything that has affected her over her twelve-year assignment, from mourning the death of her colleagues to disbelief and relief in finding bin Laden. Through aligning the viewer with Maya, Bigelow depicts how mourning has been suppressed until the person responsible for 9/11 has been found and killed, but now the feelings and inner life can be expressed. The

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[546] Joyce and Simm, "*Zero Dark Thirty*: international law, film and representation," 300.
[547] Grandin, *The End of the Myth*, 34.
[548] Richard Brody, "The Deceptive Emptiness of 'Zero Dark Thirty'," *The New Yorker*, accessed June 4, 2019, https://www.newyorker.com/culture/richard-brody/the-deceptive-emptiness-of-zero-dark-thirty.

ending offers an opportunity for reflection and sombre realisation of the consequences of bin Laden's actions and offers space to mourn.

The Kingdom also features a sombre ending instead of a resounding victory. The film ends with the death of the terrorist responsible for the attacks, Abu Hamza (Hezi Saddik), which could be celebrated by the FBI agents. However, the Saudi Chief of Police, Colonel Al Ghazi, along with Abu Hamza's grandson (Elie Georges El-Khoury), are also killed in the firefight, and the reaction to both prevents a celebratory atmosphere. Agent Mayes (Jennifer Garner) attempts to resuscitate the grandson, leaning over the body and repeating, "He's just a kid" as she checks for breathing and presses her hands down on his chest. Agent Fleury cries as he holds Al Ghazi in his arms as he dies, as discussed in Chapter 2. Both *Zero Dark Thirty* and *The Kingdom* initiate space to mourn. Their final sequences are painful reflections on what has transpired, and apprehension regarding what is to follow.

Through centralising mourning and trauma, my film corpus does not celebrate heroic deeds but concentrates on the painful impact of the events depicted. This builds on the unresolved fallout from the September 11, 2001, attacks as discerned by Richard Gray. The war on terror, particularly the expediated wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, displaced the time and space to grieve the events of 9/11. The sombre narratives and mournful scenes demonstrate a purposeful decision on the part of the filmmakers to highlight the sadness and trauma experienced in the post-9/11 environment of the war on terror, contrasting with triumphs of pre-9/11 Hollywood. In addition, the Reel Fallout films' characterisation of conflict as ongoing and damaging generates the impression of mourning as endless.

4.4.2   Never-Ending Conflict

I contend that the Reel Fallout cycle characterises the war on terror as never-ending, both when analysed as a collective and separately. Taken together, they illustrate war and terrorism co-existing, demonstrating the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq being unable to prevent terrorism. Individually, each film portrays endless conflict, contrasting with the triumphant endings of prior war and terrorism films in which conflicts are concluded. In *The End of the Myth: From the Frontier to the Border Wall in the Mind of America*, Grandin deploys the term "endless war" to describe the United States' historical approach to foreign policy. However, whilst World War II was portrayed by Hollywood with patriotism and a sense of triumph in defeating the enemy, and only one feature film was made during the Vietnam War, my four case study war films depict a disillusionment with conflict and were all released during the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. I maintain that this has influenced the depiction of the wars as never-ending, with both wars lasting many years, the Afghanistan War being the longest war in U.S. history. The narratives of my film corpus are not triumphalist narratives

like classic World War II films of good overcoming evil and feeling energised to fight another day, but stories of survival, doing what must be done, and succumbing to trauma and anguish.

The characterisation of conflict aligns with Grandin's assertion that, "After centuries of fleeing forward across the blood meridian, all the things that expansion was supposed to preserve have been destroyed, and all the things it was meant to destroy have been preserved. Instead of peace, there's endless war."[549] This is highly significant in relation to President Bush's rhetoric regarding the war on terror. He claimed his aims were to secure peace for the United States, as Richard Haass explains, "motivations for the war [included that]… the democratic transformation of the Middle East… would pave the way to a regional peace. This view [was]… deeply and widely held in the administration of George W. Bush."[550] This is endorsed by Bob Woodward's evaluation of a conversation with President Bush:

> On August 20 [2002]… the president… talked… about remaking the world… Saddam was starving his people in the outlying Shiite areas, he said. 'There is a human condition that we must worry about. As we think through Iraq, we may or may not attack... But it will be for the objective of making the world more peaceful.'"[551]

This belief in war achieving peace is not represented in my case study films.

The concept of an endless war and, in turn, a never-ending global frontier, is borne out by the end of Kyle's final tour in Iraq in *American Sniper* in which Kyle and his unit are enveloped in a sandstorm whilst being attacked by enemy fire. Clips of the enormous sand cloud, redolent of an apocalyptic scene, show it moving towards the troops from a variety of angles, including above, showing its enormity in comparison with the troops who appear like ants on top of the roof, emphasising their insignificance. Cutting back to shots alongside the soldiers, the mise-en-scene is completely obscured by the sand sweeping across the screen and the viewer is completely disorientated, barely able to discern events. The limited visibility and sounds of the soldiers enables enough understanding of the scene to see a rescue helicopter opening its back doors to let soldiers in and the doors closing before Kyle, who was forced to the ground by a shot, is aboard. One of the soldiers asks where he is and the doors are re-opened to allow him in, only just escaping alive. This scene cuts to Kyle in a bar in the United States, leaving the viewer with an indelible memory of Iraq as an eternal place of violence and the war as unresolved.

The end of *The Hurt Locker* also imprints ongoing war in the mind of the viewer. Throughout the film, the number of days left of Sergeant James' time in Iraq are displayed on the screen.

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[549] Grandin, *The End of the Myth*, 270.
[550] Haass, *A World in Disarray*, 223.
[551] Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, 162.

Following James having two days left, he returns to Iraq for a further tour of duty, and a title appears on screen, "Days left in Delta Company's Rotation: 365". James will spend at least another year in Iraq, "doomed to repetitively carry out the same bomb disposing duties that, in the end, have no telling effect on the situation as a totality."[552]

Figure 4.12   A year's worth of days left in Iraq, *The Hurt Locker*, 2:02:00

The representation of disarming bombs being an ongoing task aligns the film's view of the war with that of Dunn and Hassan who describe how, "by the time the Bush administration left office, Iraq looked more like a demonstration of the limits of American power than its ability to shape events."[553] *The Hurt Locker* highlights the reactive role of the United States' in continuing to neutralise bombs rather than being able to control the environment and prevent them being planted in the first place, there being "no Hollywood hero who can resolve the situation."[554]

The end of *The Kingdom* also acknowledges the limits of American power, portraying endless conflict as being unable to resolve violence. In the final shootout, Saudi police officer Al Ghazi dies in Agent Fleury's arms as terrorist Abu Hamza dies watching his grandson being killed. Abu Hamza whispers something to his younger grandson of which the viewer is not apprised until the final scene. The end sequence juxtaposes shots of Agent Fleury speaking with his team back in the United States with Abu Hamza's grandson speaking to his aunt (Yasmine Hanani) on the rooftop of their home in Riyadh. In the FBI office, Director Grace (Richard Jenkins) tells the team, "You did outstanding work over there. You hold your heads high." His words are accompanied by close ups of the grandson and aunt looking at

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[552] Gormley, "Blowing Up the War Film," 365.
[553] Dunn and Hassan, "Strategic confusion: America's conflicting strategies and the war on terrorism," 68.
[554] Gormley, "Blowing Up the War Film," 371.

one another solemnly. Cutting back to the FBI team, their sadness emphasises their disagreement that the work was "outstanding" because many people died in its completion; human life, including Saudi lives such as Colonel Al Ghazi, is valued higher than any triumph felt by killing the terrorist responsible for the attacks.

Referring to the briefing towards the beginning of the film, Agent Leavitt asks Fleury what he said to Mayes when she started crying at the news of Agent Manner (Kyle Chandler) being killed in the bombings. The scene cuts to the grandson's aunt asking him what his grandfather told him before he died. Returning to the FBI office, Fleury says he told Mayes, "We're gonna kill 'em all." All four agents appear despondent with the prospect of endless conflict, rather than triumphant at killing Abu Hamza. On the rooftop, Abu Hamza's grandson replies: "We are going to kill them all." This ending conveys that the vicious cycle of violence between the west and the Middle East will continue while both sides seek revenge. The director, Peter Berg, asserts that conflict will not achieve peace, "'Certainly in my lifetime, military attempts to solve these problems don't seem to be working. Violence is just not going to work,' affirmed Berg."[555] *The Kingdom*'s new frontier, as designated in Donnar's description, is a never-ending conflict which a cycle of violence will not resolve.

A perpetual state of conflict is demonstrated by Reel Fallout cinema, depicting ongoing terrorism alongside the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.[556] This aligns with the reality, "data from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) points to a worldwide rise in terrorism activity and intensity, especially since 2011."[557] *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), *Captain Phillips* (2013), *Patriots Day* (2016) and *The 15:17 to Paris* (2018) all portray attacks on Americans which took place since the war on terror began. Significantly, all four of these films were released following the killing of the person who orchestrated the 9/11 attacks, Osama bin Laden. Christian G. Appy views the death of bin Laden as having limited impact on American foreign policy:

> on May 2, 2011, the White House announced that a team of navy SEALs had killed Osama bin Laden in Pakistan. To some, it felt like the first moment of closure in the long, disastrous decade since the United States was attacked on September 11, 2001. But the killing of bin Laden changed little… President Obama believed he found in drone warfare and special operations a more surgical approach, but it only succeeded at extending the global war to more countries[.][558]

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[555] Alford and Secker, *National Security Cinema*, 107-108.

[556] The list of attacks referenced or depicted in my film corpus is extensive, including bombings in Saudi Arabia, Kenya, Tanzania, the United Kingdom, Pakistan, Afghanistan and the United States, the bombing of the USS Cole, the September 11, 2001, attacks, Somali pirates capturing an American ship, and an attempted terrorist attack on a train from the Netherlands to France.

[557] Crowell, *Navy SEALs gone wild*, 47-48.

[558] Appy, *American Reckoning*, 306.

I argue that, for Hollywood cinema, the death of Osama bin Laden consolidated the period I have termed Reel Fallout; the four terrorism films mentioned above, alongside *Lone Survivor* (2013) and *American Sniper* (2014), were released after 2011 and all problematise the success of the war on terror by emphasising trauma to American soldiers or ongoing terrorist attacks against Americans.

Green Zone depicts the American invasion as failing the Iraqi people, corresponding to Appy's description, "After the rapid toppling of Saddam Hussein's regime in April 2003, Iraq descended into chaos. The U.S. occupation failed in every possible way. There was massive looting, disorder, displacement, unemployment, and human suffering".[559] The opening scenes of *Green Zone* portray Iraqis pleading with Americans for water and looting buildings for furniture, realistically representing the beginning of the war. Along with *The Hurt Locker*'s portrayal of the American occupation contributing to creating enemies, considered in Chapter 2, the war on terror is characterised as generating suffering rather than solving problems. The case study films encapsulate the criticism of the war on terror that there is "no evidence that the United States or the world was safer because of it."[560] By portraying real terrorist attacks on screen, concurrently with the ongoing wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, my film corpus represents the war on terror as failing to prevent terrorism.

4.5   Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated how my case study films transform the representation of conflict from a triumphant destruction of enemies to an internal, endless conflict, questioning the justification of the war on terror and mourning the sacrifices made. The films depict a weakening of American exceptionalism which contrasts with typical representations of war and terrorism in previous action cinema's representations, problematising Hollywood's customary support of foreign policy when war is ongoing. By employing conventions of the Western rather than the war film, my film corpus portrays the war on terror as the latest incarnation of the United States' frontier, determining a continuation of endless war. This has been informed by American exceptionalism, the belief that the United States has a special place amongst nations and therefore a justification for intervening overseas to promote its core values of liberty and democracy. However, my case study films portray the methods employed to attain these goals, such as torture and misrepresenting evidence of WMD, as

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[559] Appy, *American Reckoning*, 310.
[560] Ibid., 306.

contradictory of American values, in turn showing the war on terror as morally inconsistent with the exceptionalism it purports to protect.

The characterisation of the war on terror as never-ending has also damaged the claim to American exceptionalism. Endless conflicts and ongoing terrorist acts portray the war on terror as unsuccessful in preventing terrorism. My case study terrorism narratives represent their characters as ordinary, achieving extraordinary feats. In my case study war films, however, the soldiers do not achieve their objectives, even though they are characterised as exceptional. There is a lack of conviction in the missions which results in rendering the wars as endless and morally questionable.

The four directors have chosen stories of controversy rather than obviously pro-American, patriotic narratives with righteous protagonists, and focused on grieving losses through sombre endings which offer space to mourn rather than celebrating victorious achievements. The protagonists do not triumph as in world war or Cold War films because the implementation of the war on terror is problematised; when destroying the Nazis or dismantling communism, there was widespread consensus that protagonists' actions were warranted and appreciated; with the war on terror, my film corpus reflects a questioning of its implementation. This resembles Hollywood's approach to the Vietnam War in the 1970s, but Reel Fallout Cinema provides space to grieve rather than provoking anger or frustration at the Americans' actions. Sympathy and empathy remain with the American protagonists, as well as non-American characters, but emphasise a disillusionment with conflict through a sombre tone. The case study films' representations disrupt conventions of previous war and terrorism Hollywood cinema, particularly World War I and World War II films and 1980s and 1990s action cinema, replacing triumph with grief as central to the American experience, both military and civilian, in the post- post-9/11 world. It is the sadness imbued in these films which I argue creates space for mourning, of both the characters on screen and the real lives lost in the 9/11 attacks, subsequent terrorist attacks, and the war on terror. There is no opportunity to celebrate foreign policy success, either in real life or in cinema, because the conflict is endless and the damage ongoing.

Chapter 5 Conclusion: The Effects of Mourning Hollywood's War on Terror

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"**War is mankind's most senseless act. I hope no more wars happen in this country, this region, or the world.**"[561]

Mohsen Sazegara, Iranian Deputy Minister

"**we understand history has called us into action; and we're not going to miss this opportunity to make the world more peaceful and more free.**"[562]

President Bush, United States of America

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This thesis has analysed and discussed nine Hollywood films concerning the war on terror to establish the necessity of a term to account for a post- post-9/11 cinematic world which gives prominence to grief, trauma and disillusionment with conflict and has influenced subsequent Hollywood action cinema. Based on real situations and real people, these films are sombre in tone and foreground the emotional effects of conflict and the pain of loss rather than portraying exhilarating combat sequences and invincible protagonists, breaking with generic conventions of Hollywood action cinema. As a collective, they comprise Reel Fallout Cinema which engages with discourses concerning the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, as well as subsequent terrorism and the war on terror. This Reel Fallout cycle of films is distinct from post-9/11 cinema which depicted U.S. foreign policy as benevolent and necessary in films such as *Black Hawk Down* (dir. Ridley Scott, USA, UK, 2001) and *We Were Soldiers* (dir. Randall Wallace, France, Germany, USA, 2002), avoided representing Middle Eastern characters as the enemy as in *The Sum of All Fears* (dir. Phil Alden Robinson, USA, Germany, Canada, 2002), or represented the events of September 11, 2001, as in *United 93*

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[561] *The Iran-Iraq War: A Tragedy That Changed History*, Episode Four, "Breaking Point," directed by Jonathan Hacker (OR Media, 2021)
[562] Woodward, *Plan of Attack*, 113.

(dir. Paul Greengrass, USA, 2006) and *World Trade Center* (dir. Oliver Stone, USA, 2006). Marita Sturken perceives how, "From… 9/11 emerged a culture of nationalism and excess patriotism, of revenge and Islamophobia, of fear of the racialized Other, of securitization and defense and a ramped up bellicosity".[563] In contrast, Reel Fallout Cinema problematises American foreign policy, depicting the war on terror as unable to prevent further attacks on Americans, and portrays non-American characters, including Muslims, with agency and as being grievable. These representations diverge from those of conflicts prior to 9/11; *The Hurt Locker* (dir. Kathryn Bigelow, USA, 2008) for example, is described as, "A far cry from the patriotic war films seen after World War II",[564] and *Green Zone* (dir. Paul Greengrass, USA, 2010) and *The Hurt Locker* are noted as developing "Muslim and Arab characters of some sophistication, something largely absent with respect to the Vietnamese."[565] The Reel Fallout films also deviate from preceding war and terrorism films by foregrounding mourning as central to their narratives, focusing on sombre narratives and grief-stricken, vulnerable protagonists who express the effects of conflict, rather than gung-ho, thrill-seeking heroes who prioritise the mission over everything else.

The films depict mourning of the September 11, 2001, attacks, subsequent terrorism and the war on terror, each compounding the previous traumatic event and contributing to a necessity to process grief, contradicting prior portrayals, as Philpott asserts, "certain films concerning Iraq bear witness to the tragedy and violence of war in a way not found in their Vietnam counterparts".[566] The sombre tone of the films is characterised by powerless, grieving Americans which is atypical of Hollywood action cinema, explained insightfully by Patrick McCormick's discussion in his article on the film, *Reign Over Me* (dir. Mike Binder, USA, 2007),

> Grief is a rare and unwelcome emotion in American cinema and television. It makes us feel powerless and sad--sentiments repugnant to our national character… [W]e prefer… our heroes [to] respond… by taking action. We want protagonists… to get over their grief and get on with life, preferably by hunting down and punishing the people responsible for this sadness… [S]torylines… rarely pause to explore the grief and sorrow… Our government is unwilling for us to see the bodies or caskets of dead soldiers coming home from Iraq[.][567]

The films emphasise grief through employing conventions of realism, opposing the stylisation of films such as *Apocalypse Now* (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, USA, 1979) and using

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[563] Sturken, *Terrorism in American Memory*, 6.
[564] Pollard, *Hollywood 9/11: Superheroes, Supervillains, and Super Disasters*, 39.
[565] Philpott, "Is anyone watching? War, cinema and bearing witness," 328.
[566] Ibid., 328.
[567] McCormick, "Mourning sickness: Americans have learned from Hollywood and Capitol Hill to seek revenge when tragedy strikes. We would all be safer--and saner--if we could just grieve."

techniques such as those featured in *Captain Phillips* (dir. Paul Greengrass, USA, 2013), "typical of the documentary genre, such as certain sound and visual effects, the use of hand-held cameras, actors' improvisations, the insertion of actual footage or an emphasis on the accurate representation of historical facts and events".[568] The deployment of real footage and audio in *Patriots Day* (dir. Peter Berg, Hong Kong, USA, 2016) demonstrates this. The films also linger on traumatic events, such as the body bomb in *The Hurt Locker* and injuries in *Patriots Day*, and pause for reflection including at the end of *The 15:17 to Paris* (dir. Clint Eastwood, USA, 2018). With portrayals of trauma and grief, the films address the lack of opportunity and time to grieve following 9/11 which was restricted by the swift mobilisation of troops and move to war by the Bush administration, first in Afghanistan and then, soon afterwards, in Iraq. The Reel Fallout films depict grievable others and suffering protagonists which provides space to mourn for both the characters within the narratives and viewers.

By emphasising the damage done in the war on terror to both Americans and local populations, these films offer a critique of the United States' wars in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as revealing that terrorism has continued to take place concurrently, threatening Americans at home and abroad. Taken collectively, the films create a world for Americans in which nowhere is safe, and they have to constantly fight on an endless frontier. This contradicts Alford and Secker's assessment that films such as these, "mislead… people about real events and political dynamics while portraying the security state as the only answer to a dangerous and hostile world."[569] The case study films portray military intervention overseas as being unable to provide a solution to the dangers the world presents. In some films, the enemy is within, demonstrating a questioning of American methods and motives, particularly in relation to the Iraq War, which destabilises and weakens American exceptionalism in its informing of foreign policy decisions. The films depict a disillusionment with this constant battle through protagonists questioning whether responding to violence with conflict is a solution which will lead to peace. They have initiated a new era of Hollywood releasing films critical of a war *during the war*, unprecedented in previous wartime, for example World War II or the Vietnam War.

I maintain that, by emphasising grief and mourning, these films address a wider cultural "failure of mourning",[570] cogently discussed by Richard Gray in *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11*. Following 9/11, the Bush administration immediately initiated wars in Afghanistan and Iraq to seek out al-Qaeda operatives and those responsible for the attacks, specifically Osama bin Laden. I determine that my case study films demonstrate how the swift progression to war and demand for public support of the country's troops curtailed

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[568] Luzon-Aguado, "Who are the Pirates?," 201.
[569] Alford and Secker, *National Security Cinema*, 148.
[570] Gray, *After the Fall*, 8-9.

sufficient time for mourning and established a necessity for space to mourn years later. I contend that the Reel Fallout cycle addresses the failure of mourning by emphasising grief, trauma and disillusionment with conflict as central to narratives concerned with the war on terror and creating a space to mourn. These are narratives which destabilise the righteousness of American foreign policy and problematise the war on terror's moral consistency with American exceptionalism by:

- Questioning the military missions they depict, as in *Green Zone* and *Lone Survivor* (dir. Peter Berg, USA, 2013)

- Exploring the trauma caused by non-American deaths, as in *American Sniper* (dir. Clint Eastwood, USA, 2014) and *The Hurt Locker*

- Depicting the pain caused by violence, as in *Captain Phillips* and *The 15:17 to Paris*

- Emphasising the emotional impact of lost lives, as in *The Kingdom* (dir. Peter Berg, USA, Germany, 2007), *Zero Dark Thirty* (dir. Kathryn Bigelow, USA, 2012) and *Patriots Day*.

This distinguishes my collection of films from post-9/11 cinema which either endorsed American foreign policy through the depiction of a benevolent military and a faceless, nameless enemy other, as in *Black Hawk Down* and *We Were Soldiers*, or portrayed the attacks of 9/11 itself on screen, as in *United 93* and *World Trade Center*. Throughout my three chapters, I have shown how my case study films diverge from these representations as well as from previous war and terrorism films.

In **Chapter 2. Grieving the Hollywood Non-American Other**, I argued that non-American characters who have typically been othered are represented differently. In *Captain Phillips* (2011), *Zero Dark Thirty* (2012), *American Sniper* (2014), *Patriots Day* (2016) and *The 15:17 to Paris* (2018), incorporating the three most recent releases of my corpus, the other is characterised as the enemy, but their capture or death is not the source of triumph or glory for the Americans, and, in *Captain Phillips*, their motivations are contextualised, a convention usually reserved for American foes.[571] In *Green Zone* (2010) and *Lone Survivor* (2013), in the middle of my focus years, representatives of the local populations in the figures of Freddy (Khalid Abdalla) and Mohammad Gulab (Ali Suliman) respectively have agency and are empowered to make decisions and affect their futures as well as that of their countries. The characterisations of Al Ghazi (Ashraf Barhom) in *The Kingdom* (2007) and Beckham (Christopher Sayegh) and an Iraqi civilian wearing a suicide vest (Suhail Al-Dabbach) in *The Hurt Locker* (2008), the two earliest films, are of grievable people with value, conveying a shared precariousness between them and the Americans, assigning equal significance to

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[571] *White House Down* (dir. Roland Emmerich, USA, 2013) and *Non-Stop* (dir. Jaume Collet-Serra, UK, France, USA, Canada, 2014) both contextualise the motivations of their American terrorists.

their lives. This is a distinctly different portrayal for Hollywood, particularly when the United States was still at war. Through providing identification with local characters and empathy with them and with the Americans grieving them, there are multiple frames through which the viewer can mourn their deaths and, in turn, grieve the effects of the war on terror. This establishes Reel Fallout Cinema as a cycle in which non-American characters who would typically be othered is problematised through being grievable and encouraging compassion from both the protagonists and the viewer.

Chapter 3. Expressions of Trauma in Vulnerable American Protagonists continued to explore empathy as a key theme in Reel Fallout Cinema. Here I interrogated how traits of melodrama are employed by the case study films to heighten identification with the protagonists and enhance empathy, providing the viewer with opportunities to project their grief on to the narratives, creating space to mourn. The lead characters of all of the films are represented as emotional, whether distressed, angry or reflective, expressing their vulnerability rather than appearing invincible and unaffected which has been typical of the Hollywood action genre. They grieve both the deaths of Americans and of local characters, as well as experiencing trauma from the situations they face, with empathetic depictions enabling the viewer to identify with their experiences. They demonstrate that nowhere is safe for Americans. In *Lone Survivor* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, Afghanistan is a hostile environment in which Americans are killed; in *The Hurt Locker*, *Green Zone* and *American Sniper*, Iraq is a warzone filled with dangers for American troops; *The Kingdom* depicts Saudi Arabia as unsafe for American contractors and their families; *Captain Phillips* represents the coast of Somalia as threatening for merchant mariners transporting goods and aid; *The 15:17 to Paris* shows Europe as dangerous for American tourists; *Patriots Day* presents the return of terrorism to the United States in the form of two bombs at the Boston Marathon.

In **Chapter 4. American Exceptionalism and its Discontents**, further generic conventions were recognised as destabilised by the ways in which the narratives end in grief as opposed to triumph, or ongoing conflict as opposed to resolution, questioning the nation's commitment to endless war. I discussed how my case study films have drawn on tropes of the Western to demonstrate how they represent the Afghanistan and Iraq wars as the most recent manifestation of the global frontier and utilise themes including individualism and lawlessness to convey a disillusionment with conflict. This disillusionment is extended by the depiction of exceptional protagonists in the war films who challenge the necessity of their orders and prioritise individual lives over completing their missions, while the terrorism films portray ordinary lead characters who are required to respond to extreme situations in extraordinary ways. The war on terror necessitates both the military and civilians responding differently. A further problematising of American exceptionalism is created through portrayals of in-fighting and a lack of support between Americans, characterising the enemy as within, as well as American characters using methods such as torture and extraordinary rendition,

conventionally associated with enemy tactics. In this way, Reel Fallout Cinema contributes to the discourse surrounding post-9/11 challenges faced by the American nation, namely the Abu Ghraib revelations, financial crisis of 2008 and, as discussed by Sturken, "the crises of 2020/21… [which] demonstrated… that its primary sites of conflict are internal rather than external."[572] The United States is depicted as breaking with principles associated with American exceptionalism which should entail holding itself to higher standards, weakening its claim to moral righteousness in its implementation of the war on terror.

Now established, Reel Fallout Cinema can be used to analyse other high-grossing, Hollywood films, released contemporaneously with and subsequently to my case study films, in a variety of ways. These offer extensive further prospects for research, briefly outlined in the following discussion which will firstly consider other foreign policy-related Hollywood films released during the Reel Fallout cycle, to ascertain whether the cycle can be applied more widely than my nine case study films; secondly reflect on how Reel Fallout cycle reveals a temporary break in the representation of enemies as Russian which has resurfaced in the mid-2010s; and finally, and most significantly, examine how the greater inclusion of mourning in recent action cinema, especially superhero films, establishes the influence of Reel Fallout Cinema, which will be demonstrated in relation firstly to a comparison of *Independence Day* (dir. Roland Emmerich, USA, 1996) with *Independence Day: Resurgence* (dir. Roland Emmerich, USA, Russia, 2016), twenty years apart, as well as reference to *No Time to Die* (dir. Cary Joji Fukunaga, UK, USA, 2021), followed by examples from superhero cinema in which grief and trauma are given prominence.

Other films concerned with American foreign policy released during the Reel Fallout cycle form part of the wider post- post-9/11 discourse regarding non-American characters, trauma and soldiers, and an ongoing search for enemies in endless conflict. These fall into two categories, one being films based on real situations, and the other, fictional narratives. Films based on real events include *Argo* (dir. Ben Affleck, USA, 2012), *Act of Valor* (dir. Mike McCoy (as Mouse McCoy), Scott Waugh, USA, 2012), *13 Hours* (dir. Michael Bay, Malta, Morocco, USA, 2016), *12 Strong* (dir. Nicolai Fuglsig, USA, 2018) and *Hotel Mumbai* (dir. Anthony Maras, Australia, USA, UK, Singapore, 2018) which could all offer interesting case studies. Further comparisons of my film corpus with fictional war and terrorism films released during the same period would also enable further illumination of the characterisations initiated by Reel Fallout Cinema. Fictional narratives which could be incorporated include *Source Code* (dir. Duncan Jones, USA, Canada, France, Germany, 2011), *White House Down* (dir. Roland Emmerich, USA, 2013), *Olympus has Fallen* (dir. Antoine Fuqua, USA, 2013), *Non-Stop* (dir. Jaume Collet-Serra, UK, France, USA, Canada, 2014), *Mission: Impossible – Rogue Nation* (dir. Christopher McQuarrie, USA, China, 2015), *Whiskey,*

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[572] Sturken, *Terrorism in American Memory*, 11.

Tango, Foxtrot (dir. Glenn Ficarra, John Requa, USA, 2016) and *Mission: Impossible – Fallout* (dir. Christopher McQuarrie, USA, China, France, Norway, UK, 2018). The use of drones in warfare was a significant focus for cinema during the Reel Fallout cycle with several films released dramatising fictional events of civilians killed in drone attacks; these include *Eye in the Sky* (dir. Gavin Hood, UK, South Africa, 2015) and *Good Kill* (dir. Andrew Niccol, USA, 2014), analysis of which would also expand my research.

A further research area could be the resurgence of Russian characters as enemies towards the end of the years under analysis in this study. Russia has been characterised as the archetypal enemy of the United States in Hollywood films for many decades, beginning with post-World War II cinema at the start of the Cold War, "The Soviet Union's drive for nuclear parity with the United States spawned a cycle of espionage films, in which Soviet agents and their henchmen replaced the Nazi spies and saboteurs of the 1940s."[573] It wasn't until 1989 that the Cold War was considered over. However, as National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice's comments following the attacks on September 11, 2001, attest, hostilities between the United States and Russia had continued, reflected in cinema by films such as *Goldeneye* (dir. Martin Campbell, UK, USA, 1995), *Crimson Tide* (dir. Tony Scott, USA, 1995) and *Air Force One* (dir. Wolfgang Petersen, USA, Germany, 1997) which all feature Russian enemies. In *9/11: Inside the President's War Room*, Rice describes a conversation with the Russian president, "I had a phone call with President Putin and I said, 'Mr President, our military forces are going to be going up on alert' and he said, 'Don't worry, ours will be coming down,' and I remember… recognising right at that moment that the Cold War was truly over."[574] Langenbacher and Shain affirm this view, stating, "it was not the fall of the Soviet Union (which only served as an intermediate phase), but the 9/11 attacks that marked the end of the century".[575] This made films such as *The Sum of all Fears* as "out of touch with the post 9/11 reality since the story focuses on the ensuing escalating tensions between the US and Russia."[576] With its Middle Eastern enemies, Reel Fallout Cinema does not feature Russian villains and, notably, there is not even a mention of Russia in any of the nine films, unusual for narratives set in Afghanistan and Iraq in which prior wars had been fought against the Soviet Union, depicted in films such as *Rambo III* (dir. Peter MacDonald, USA, 1988) and *The Living Daylights* (dir. John Glen, UK, 1987) which feature American support of Afghans fighting the Soviets. Reference could have been made to the Soviet-Afghan War of 1979-1989 in *Lone Survivor* and *Zero Dark Thirty*, both of which feature Afghanistan, but any

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[573] Bernard F. Dick, "Introduction" in *The Screen Is Red: Hollywood, Communism, and the Cold War* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), accessed March 17, 2023, ProQuest Ebook Central: https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/soton-ebooks/detail.action?docID=4438735.

[574] *9/11: Inside the President's War Room*, BBC Two, September 14, 2021: https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m000z8p5.

[575] Eric Langenbacher and Yossi Shain, "Introduction: Twenty-first-Century Memories," in *Power and the Past: Collective Memory and International Relations* (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2010), 6, accessed March 12, 2025, ProQuest Ebook Central.

[576] Riegler, "Through the Lenses of Hollywood," 40.

mention of the effects of the Soviet invasion are noticeably absent, the sole enemy being the Taliban and al-Qaeda respectively. In addition to marking a post- post-9/11 cinema, Reel Fallout Cinema also denotes a momentary post-Cold War cinema, instituting a temporary space in which Russia and communism are not the most significant threats to the United States' security.

With the capture and death of Osama bin Laden in 2011, however, came the reinstatement of Russia as a primary enemy in Hollywood, demonstrating that 9/11 initiated only a temporary break in Hollywood's Cold War. High-grossing films such as *Mission: Impossible – Ghost Protocol* (dir. Brad Bird, USA, 2011) and *Red Dawn* (dir. Dan Bradley, USA, 2012) feature Russian adversaries. By 2013, U.S.-Russia tensions had become a prevalent source of American anxiety, restoring the pre-9/11 status of the Cold War and indicating that 9/11 did not render the Middle East as the archetypal enemy. This is evidenced in numerous Hollywood films including *Charlie Wilson's War* (dir. Mike Nichols, USA, Germany, 2007), *Salt* (dir. Phillip Noyce, USA, 2010), *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (dir. Tomas Alfredson, UK, France, Germany, USA, 2011), *A Good Day to Die Hard* (dir. John Moore, USA, 2013), *Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit* (dir. Kenneth Branagh, USA, Russia, 2014), *John Wick* (dir. Chad Stahelski, David Leitch, China, USA, 2014), *Taken 3* (dir. Olivier Mégaton, France, USA, Spain, 2014), *xXx: Return of Xander Cage* (dir. D.J. Caruso, China, Canada, USA, 2017), *Atomic Blonde* (dir. David Leitch, USA, Germany, Sweden, Hungary, 2017), *Red Sparrow* (dir. Francis Lawrence, USA, 2018), *No Time to Die* and *Without Remorse* (dir. Stefano Sollima, USA, 2021). These films all include Russian enemies, many more than those containing adversaries from the Middle East. The move from a Middle Eastern enemy to a Russian enemy is perfectly exemplified by the television series *Homeland* (created by Howard Gordon and Alex Gansa, Fox 21 Television Studios, 2011-2020). The final two seasons illustrate Russia as the United States' most significant adversary – out of all the countries in which to embed a U.S. spy, Russia was selected as the most important. The title of Tatiana Prorokova-Konrad's 2021 edited collection, *Cold War II: Hollywood's Renewed Obsession with Russia*, recognises the reanimation of the Cold War; it was not a restoration of the original Cold War, principally due to Russia's transformation from a communist bloc to a market-based economy, but a return to hostilities between the two countries. I maintain that this would be a fertile area for complementary research.

The third opportunity for future investigation stemming from my thesis is that of analysing the influence of Reel Fallout Cinema on Hollywood's action genre. My research offers a framework by which to evaluate recent action and superhero cinema and demonstrate how real-world events, and films based on them, have influenced Hollywood's fictional, fantasy cinema. Evidence that Hollywood has embraced greater emotional expression by its characters, demonstrating the effects of emphasising mourning in the Reel Fallout cycle, is revealed by comparing *Independence Day* and *Independence Day: Resurgence*. Although in

a different genre from my case study films, they depict the American military which offers insights when compared. Expressing emotion, even in death, is not prioritised in *Independence Day*. When Major Mitchell (Adam Baldwin) is shot down and killed, close friend Capt. Steven Hiller (Will Smith) shoots down the alien responsible and then walks with bravado over to the alien ship and makes a quip. He behaves as if the death of his friend does not affect him; he has a mission to accomplish and that takes priority. The mission is represented similarly to those in World War II cinema, essential and meaning there is no time to mourn. In contrast, in *Independence Day: Resurgence*, screen time is allocated to mourning the death of a colleague. Two scientists, Dr. Okun (Brent Spiner) and Dr. Isaacs (John Storey), are shot at by aliens. Isaacs is hit and Okun rushes over, telling him he can't go and holds his head in his hand. As Isaacs dies, Okun cries, "Oh, no, no, no" and places his head on his chest. The death is depicted as worthy of mourning, demonstrating a changing tide in Hollywood's relationship with characters expressing emotion over loss.

Spy films have also exhibited a developing trend towards emotional responses to loss. An examination of *Three Days of the Condor* (dir. Sydney Pollack, USA, 1975) portrays Turner (Robert Redford) focusing on his task of uncovering the people responsible for murdering his colleagues, not on grieving their deaths. In contrast, James Bond film, *No Time To Die*, centres on the protagonist's trauma and grief. When Bond (Daniel Craig) is infected with a poison which will kill anyone he touches, he can't image living without the woman he loves, Madeleine (Léa Seydoux), and their daughter, Mathilde (Lisa-Dorah Sonnet) so he sacrifices his life to destroy the poison. As Safin (Rami Malek), the villain of the film, articulates, "Now we are both poisoned with heartbreak." Bond has previously encountered numerous life-threatening situations and has always survived, generally unscathed, denoting his superhero-style invincibility. In *No Time to Die*, however, he is vulnerable, heartbroken and mortal.

The influence of the sombre narratives of Reel Fallout Cinema is nowhere more apparent than in recent superhero releases. The vulnerability of the lead characters, expressions of emotions and problematising of countering violence with conflict depicted in my case study films pre-empted a mainstreaming of traumatised, emotional heroes being held to account in many subsequent, high-grossing superhero films. The Reel Fallout cycle has become emblematic of a cultural shift towards narratives focusing on grief and mourning, and holding Americans to account, emphasising the impact of conflict on the American psyche. After the death of Osama bin Laden in 2011, a more critical representation of American power was initiated in superhero films. With his death, the person responsible for the 9/11 attacks had been brought to justice. However, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq were ongoing, and terrorism, such as the Boston Marathon bombings and attack of a train in France, continued, demonstrated by my case study films released post-2011 concerning real-life events. These indicated that the war on terror had been unsuccessful in preventing terrorism against

Americans, even on American soil. Superhero films have subsequently been influenced by the mournful tone of Reel Fallout Cinema, signifying a similar disillusionment with American power. Fran Pheasant-Kelly discusses how, "The implication in *The Dark Knight* is that terrorism exists merely because of the war waged against it, with the film making much of the consequences of a war against terrorism, namely the deaths of innocent civilians."[577] *Captain America: Civil War* (dir. Anthony Russo, Joe Russo, USA, 2016) and *Avengers: Infinity War* (dir. Anthony Russo, Joe Russo, USA, 2018) both reference war explicitly in their titles and feature superheroes battling each other as well as external enemies. *The Kingdom*, *The Hurt Locker* and *Green Zone* all pre-empt this, characterising an enemy within in light of the controversial Iraq War.

Superhero films have typically represented resolute, unemotional protagonists, invincible, both physically and mentally, and able to save the world. In *Superman* (dir. Richard Donner, USA, UK, Canada, 1978), for example, the protagonist was invincible, able to reverse time to protect those he loved, and, in *Captain America: The First Avenger* (dir. Joe Johnston, USA, 2011), the Captain (Chris Evans) watches as his best friend, Bucky (Sebastian Stan), falls to his death but does not shed a tear; instead, he continues with his mission and successfully completes it. In releases since the mid-2010s, however, many Marvel and DC creations have replaced invincible heroes with vulnerable humans. Their protagonists have special abilities but are reluctant to use them for the psychological harm they may suffer and damage that may be caused. In numerous films including *Captain America: Civil War*, *Logan* (dir. James Mangold, USA, 2017), *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (dir. Jon Watts, USA, 2021), *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (dir. Zack Snyder, USA, 2016) and *Wonder Woman* (dir. Patty Jenkins, USA, China, 2017), loss has taken its toll on the primary characters. The trauma portrayed in the protagonists of my case study films permeates these narratives, with superheroes exhibiting signs of trauma and devastation not present in such action genres previously.

Examples of superhero films portraying their narratives similarly to my case study films include *Wonder Woman* in which celebrations at the end are tempered both by Wonder Woman with tears in her eyes touching a photo of her friend, Steve Trevor (Chris Pine), who was killed, and by the viewer's extra textual knowledge that World War I was soon succeeded by a second World War. In a voiceover, Wonder Woman questions the virtue of fighting, saying, "Only love can truly save the world." This echoes Sergeant Saunders' words in *Patriots Day* when he tells his colleague, Billy (James Colby), that you can't let hate consume you, you have to fight back with love, "It's the only thing he [the devil] can't touch…

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[577] Fran Pheasant-Kelly, "Ghosts of Ground Zero: Fantasy Film Post-9/11," in *Screens of Terror: Representations of war and terrorism in film and television since 9/11*, ed. Philip Hammond (Bury St Edmunds: Arima Publishing, 2011), 124-125.

I don't think there's any way he can win." In *Captain America: Civil War*, Captain America is held accountable for the damaging consequences of his actions, representative of the United States being held accountable for deaths in conflict. Biskind confirms how,

> Until *Civil War*, none of the superhero movies paid the slightest attention to collateral damage... Perhaps it was the Iraq War, when critics charged George W. with invading Iraq for personal reasons – to finish what his father started – and then turning his back while the country devolved into chaos that turned things around. In any event, only after the nation of Sokovia is destroyed in *Age of Ultron* does it become an issue too serious to ignore, even popping up in films like *Batman v Superman*.[578]

I contend that, not only the Iraq War but also Iraq War cinema, such as three of my case study films, have contributed to this change. The grievability of local characters in several of the Reel Fallout films demonstrated the requirement of accountability for deaths which would previously have been characterised as "collateral damage."

A further superhero film, *Logan*, focuses on the protagonist's humanity as he begins losing his powers, the title emphasising the human name of its lead character rather than the superhero name, Wolverine.[579] Biskind describes how, "*Logan*… is practically a case study of the decay of the post-human and the return of the human. It is a movie drenched in remorse, grief, and melancholy… emotions unbecoming superheroes".[580] Biskind recognises that superhero films which foreground emotions are atypical, identifying that a change has occurred. Logan is reluctant to fight and pursues a life without conflict but is forced to return to battle when his home is attacked. *Spider-Man: No Way Home* emphasises the traumatising effects of loss on its protagonist by multiplying the grief by three with the presence of all three actors who have played Spider-Man since 2002. In each franchise represented, Spider-Man (Tobey Maguire, Andrew Garfield and Tom Holland) is emotional and regretful at being unable to prevent the losses of loved ones. There are discernible parallels between the effects of conflict on the main characters of my case study war and terrorism films, and the protagonists of these recent superhero films. The new superhero, emotional, traumatised and to be held accountable for any damage and injury caused by their actions, warrants further investigation to help identify the extent and shape of the influence of the Reel Fallout cycle.

My research concludes that Reel Fallout Cinema has influenced mainstream, high-grossing Hollywood genres of the late 2010s and early 2020s, predominantly superhero films, which

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[578] Biskind, *The Sky is Falling!*, 140-141.
[579] Two films with Wolverine in the title were released previously, *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (dir. Gavin Hood, USA, UK, 2009) and *The Wolverine* (dir. James Mangold, USA, UK, Japan, 2013), prior to the effects of Reel Fallout Cinema being so strongly felt.
[580] Biskind, *The Sky is Falling!*, 207.

have incorporated mourning and loss unseen on this scale prior to 9/11. I contend that it is the case study films analysed in this thesis which pre-empted the move towards mourning and sadness found in these films, extending the space to mourn the sadness and tragedy felt by 9/11, subsequent terrorist attacks and the war on terror to a wider audience. Speaking with people in the UK of a similar age to myself, the attacks on September 11, 2001, are imprinted on their memories; they can recall exactly where they were and how they found out what was happening, and they watched live as the towers fell. Those pictures will always remain with them, as they will with me, engraved on our psyches as a moment the world changed.

After such life-altering moments, it is important to consider the aftermath and the effects on the culture which attempt to make sense of them and interrogate the response. The war on terror was the United States' swift reaction, with a primary purpose of bringing the orchestrator of the attacks, Osama bin Laden, to justice. This left little time for grief or reflection, the country being immediately rallied to support its troops in two Middle East wars. The Reel Fallout cycle of films, with their focus on loss and trauma, contribute to fill the void of mourning by offering space to project grief on to their sombre narratives. Focusing on the emotional effects of 9/11, they depict characters confronting threats to Americans overseas and at home. With nowhere safe, they are constantly on alert and poised for battle, often against the enemy within while they search for an enemy other to fight. By emphasising the damage, both physical and mental, to those sent overseas, the nine films engage with discourses which question responding to violence with conflict and portray the war on terror as unable to achieve peace for the United States. Through representing endless conflict and emphasising the damage done to both Americans and non-Americans, the films suggest military intervention overseas will not provide security for the nation.

The significant impact of this cycle is apparent in the highest-grossing films of the mid-2010s onwards, depicting grief and trauma as central to the narratives of action thrillers and blockbuster superhero films; superheroes are required to take responsibility for any damage incurred by their actions, invincible characters are no longer invincible, and macho masculinity is replaced with emotional vulnerability. Traumatised protagonists are foregrounded in relation to the damage inflicted on others and grief is expressed rather than suppressed. Displaying the effects of the Reel Fallout cycle, these subsequent films also emphasise a desire for peace. As the ending of *The Kingdom* identifies, the only alternative to pursuing peace is both sides convincing themselves, "We're gonna kill them all," which can only end in requiring space to mourn for everyone.

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12 Strong (dir. Nicolai Fuglsig, USA, 2018)

13 Hours (dir. Michael Bay, Malta, Morocco, USA, 2016)

The 15:17 to Paris (dir. Clint Eastwood, USA, 2018)

22 July (dir. Paul Greengrass, USA, Norway, 2018)

Act of Valor (dir. Mike McCoy (as Mouse McCoy), Scott Waugh, USA, 2012)

Air Force One (dir. Wolfgang Petersen, USA, Germany, 1997)

All Quiet on the Western Front (dir. Lewis Milestone, USA, 1930)

American Sniper (dir. Clint Eastwood, USA, 2014)

Apocalypse Now (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, USA, 1979)

Argo (dir. Ben Affleck, USA, 2012)

Atomic Blonde (dir. David Leitch, USA, Germany, Sweden, Hungary, 2017)

Avatar (dir. James Cameron, USA, UK, 2009)

The Avengers (dir. Joss Whedon, USA, 2012)

Avengers: Endgame (dir. Anthony Russo and Joe Russo, USA, 2019)

Avengers: Infinity War (dir. Anthony Russo, Joe Russo, USA, 2018)

Bataan (dir. Tay Garnett, USA, 1943)

Batman Begins (dir. Christopher Nolan, USA, UK, 2005)

Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice (dir. Zack Snyder, USA, 2016)

Behind Enemy Lines (dir. John Moore, USA, 2001)

Black Hawk Down (dir. Ridley Scott, USA, UK, 2001)

Black Panther (dir. Ryan Coogler, USA, 2018)

Bloody Sunday (dir. Paul Greengrass, UK, Ireland, 2002)

Born on the Fourth of July (dir. Oliver Stone, USA, 1989)

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Filmography

The Bourne Identity (dir. Doug Liman, USA, Germany, Czech Republic, 2002)

The Bridge on the River Kwai (dir. David Lean, UK, USA, 1957)

Broken Arrow (dir. John Woo, USA, 1996)

Buffalo Soldiers (dir. Gregor Jordan, UK, Germany, 2001)

Camp X-Ray (dir. Peter Settler, USA, 2014)

Captain America: Civil War (dir. Anthony Russo, Joe Russo, USA, 2016)

Captain America: The First Avenger (dir. Joe Johnston, USA, 2011)

Captain Phillips (dir. Paul Greengrass, USA, 2013)

Captain Newman, M.D. (dir. David Miller, USA, 1963)

Casablanca (dir. Michael Curtiz, USA, 1942)

Casualties of War (dir. Brian De Palma, USA, 1989)

Charlie Wilson's War (dir. Mike Nichols, USA, Germany, 2007)

Collateral Damage (dir. Andrew Davis, USA, Mexico, 2002)

Coming Home (dir. Hal Ashby, USA, 1978)

Commando (dir. Mark L. Lester, USA, 1985)

Crimson Tide (dir. Tony Scott, USA, 1995)

The Dark Knight (dir. Christopher Nolan, USA, UK, 2008)

The Deer Hunter (dir. Michael Cimino, USA, UK, 1978)

The Delta Force (dir. Menahem Golan, USA, Israel, 1986)

The Departed (dir. Martin Scorsese, USA, Hong Kong, 2006)

The Desperadoes (dir. Henry Levin, USA, 1969)

Detroit (dir. Kathryn Bigelow, USA, 2017)

Die Hard (dir. John McTiernan, USA, 1988)

Die Hard 4.0 (dir. Len Wiseman, USA, UK, 2007)

Double Indemnity (dir. Billy Wilder, USA, 1944)

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Dr Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb (dir. Stanley Kubrick, UK, USA, 1964)

Dunkirk (dir. Christopher Nolan, UK, Netherlands, France, USA, 2017)

El Dorado (dir. Howard Hawks, USA, 1966)

Executive Decision (dir. Stuart Baird, USA, 1996)

Eye in the Sky (dir. Gavin Hood, UK, South Africa, 2015)

Fahrenheit 9/11 (dir. Michael Moore, USA, 2004)

Fail-Safe (dir. Sidney Lumet, USA, 1964)

The Fighter (dir. David O. Russell, USA, 2011)

First Blood (dir. Ted Kotcheff, USA, 1982)

A Fistful of Dollars (dir. Sergio Leone, Italy, Spain, West Germany, 1964)

Fixed Bayonets! (dir. Samuel Fuller, USA, 1951)

Flags of our Fathers (dir. Clint Eastwood, USA, 2006)

For a Few Dollars More (dir. Sergio Leone, Italy, Spain, West Germany, 1965)

Full Metal Jacket (dir. Stanley Kubrick, UK, USA, 1987)

Goldeneye (dir. Martin Campbell, UK, USA, 1995)

A Good Day to Die Hard (dir. John Moore, USA, 2013)

The Good, The Bad and The Ugly (dir. Sergio Leone, Italy, Spain, West Germany, 1966)

Good Kill (dir. Andrew Niccol, USA, 2014)

Good Night, and Good Luck (dir. George Clooney, USA, France, UK, Japan, 2005)

The Great Escape (dir. John Sturges, USA, 1963)

The Green Berets (dir. Ray Kellogg, John Wayne, Mervyn LeRoy, USA, 1968)

Green Zone (dir. Paul Greengrass, USA, 2010)

The Guns of Navarone (dir. J. Lee Thompson, UK, USA, 1961)

Hacksaw Ridge (dir. Mel Gibson, Australia, USA, UK, China, 2016)

Hamburger Hill (dir. John Irvin, USA, 1987)

Hang 'em High (dir. Ted Post, USA, 1968)

Heaven and Earth (dir. Oliver Stone, USA, France, 1993)

Hearts of the World (dir. D.W. Griffith, USA, 1918)

High Plains Drifter (dir. Clint Eastwood, USA, 1973)

Hotel Mumbai (dir. Anthony Maras, Australia, USA, UK, Singapore, 2018)

The Hunt for Red October (dir. John McTiernan, USA, 1990)

The Hurt Locker (dir. Kathryn Bigelow, USA, 2008)

In the Line of Fire (dir. Wolfgang Petersen, USA, 1993)

In the Valley of Elah (dir. Paul Haggis, USA, 2007)

Independence Day (dir. Roland Emmerich, USA, 1996)

Independence Day: Resurgence (dir. Roland Emmerich, USA, Russia, 2016)

Invasion of the Body Snatchers (dir. Don Siegel, USA, 1956)

Invasion U.S.A. (dir. Joseph Zito, USA, 1985)

Iron Man (dir. Jon Favreau, USA, Canada, 2008)

Iron Man 2 (dir. Jon Favreau, USA, 2010)

Jack Ryan: Shadow Recruit (dir. Kenneth Branagh, USA, Russia, 2014)

Jane Got a Gun (dir. Gavin O'Connor, USA, 2015)

John Wick (dir. Chad Stahelski, David Leitch, China, USA, 2014)

The Kingdom (Peter Berg, USA, 2007)

Letters from Iwo Jima (dir. Clint Eastwood, USA, 2006)

The Little American (dir. Cecil B. DeMille and Joseph Levering, USA, 1917)

The Living Daylights (dir. John Glen, UK, 1987)

Logan (dir. James Mangold, USA, 2017)

Lone Survivor (dir. Peter Berg, USA, 2013)

Lions for Lambs (dir. Robert Redford, USA, 2007)

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The Longest Day (dir. Ken Annakin, Andrew Marton, Gerd Oswald, Bernhard Wicki, Darryl F. Zanuck, USA, 1962)

The Manchurian Candidate (dir. John Frankenheimer, USA, 1962)

The Manchurian Candidate (dir. Jonathan Demme, USA, 2004)

The Mauritanian (dir. Kevin Macdonald, UK, USA, 2021)

Million Dollar Baby (dir. Clint Eastwood, USA, 2004)

Mission: Impossible – Fallout (dir. Christopher McQuarrie, USA, China, France, Norway, UK, 2018)

Mission: Impossible – Ghost Protocol (dir. Brad Bird, USA, 2011)

Mission: Impossible – Rogue Nation (dir. Christopher McQuarrie, USA, China, 2015)

Munich (dir. Steven Spielberg, USA, Canada, France, 2005)

No Time to Die (dir. Cary Joji Fukunaga, UK, USA, 2021)

Nomadland (dir. Chloé Zhao, USA, 2020)

Non-Stop (dir. Jaume Collet-Serra, UK, France, USA, Canada, 2014)

Olympus has Fallen (dir. Antoine Fuqua, USA, 2013)

Patriot Games (dir. Phillip Noyce, USA, 1992)

Patriots Day (dir. Peter Berg, Hong Kong, USA, 2016)

Pearl Harbor (dir. Michael Bay, USA, 2001)

Platoon (dir. Oliver Stone, USA, UK, 1986)

The Power of the Dog (dir. Jane Campion, New Zealand, UK, Canada, Australia, 2021)

Predator (dir. John McTiernan, USA, Mexico, 1987)

The Quiet American (dir. Phillip Noyce, UK, Germany, USA, Vietnam, Australia, France, Canada, 2002)

Rambo III (dir. Peter MacDonald, USA, 1988)

Rambo: First Blood Part II (dir. George P. Cosmatos, USA, Mexico, 1985)

Rambo: Last Blood (dir. Adrian Grunberg, USA, Hong Kong, France, Bulgaria, Spain, Sweden, 2019)

Red Dawn (dir. Dan Bradley, USA, 2012)

Red Sparrow (dir. Francis Lawrence, USA, 2018)

Redacted (dir. Brian de Palma, USA, Canada, 2007)

Reign Over Me (dir. Mike Binder, USA, 2007)

The Reluctant Fundamentalist (dir. Mira Nair, USA, India, Qatar)

Rendition (dir. Gavin Hood, USA, 2007)

Richard Jewell (dir. Clint Eastwood, USA, 2019)

The Rock (dir. Michael Bay, USA, 1996)

Salt (dir. Phillip Noyce, USA, 2010)

Sands of Iwo Jima (dir. Allan Dwan, USA, 1949)

Saving Private Ryan (dir. Steven Spielberg, USA, 1998)

Shooter (dir. Antoine Fuqua, USA, 2007)

Sicario (dir. Denis Villeneuve, USA, 2015)

The Siege (dir. Edward Zwick, USA, 1998)

Silence of the Lambs (dir. Jonathan Demme, USA, 1991)

Source Code (dir. Duncan Jones, USA, Canada, France, Germany, 2011)

Speed (dir. Jan de Bont, USA, 1994)

Spider-Man: No Way Home (dir. Jon Watts, USA, 2021)

Stagecoach (dir. John Ford, USA, 1939)

The Steel Helmet (dir. Samuel Fuller, USA, 1951)

The Sum of all Fears (dir. Phil Alden Robinson, USA, Germany, Canada, 2002)

Sunset Boulevard (dir. Billy Wilder, USA, 1950)

Syriana (dir. Stephen Gaghan, USA, United Arab Emirates, 2005)

Taken (dir. Pierre Morel, France, USA, 2008)

Taken 3 (dir. Olivier Mégaton, France, USA, Spain, 2014)

Tearing Down the Spanish Flag (dir. J. Stuart Blackton, USA, 1898)

Tears of the Sun (dir. Antoine Fuqua, USA, 2003)

The Thin Red Line (dir. Terrence Malick, USA, 1998)

Three Days of the Condor (dir. Sydney Pollack, USA, 1975)

Three Kings (dir David O. Russell, USA, 1999)

Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy (dir. Tomas Alfredson, UK, France, Germany, USA, 2011)

Top Gun (dir. Tony Scott, USA, 1986)

Total Recall (dir. Paul Verhoeven, USA, Mexico, 1990)

True Lies (dir. James Cameron, USA, 1994)

Under Siege (dir. Andrew Davis, France, USA, 1992)

Unforgiven (dir. Clint Eastwood, USA, 1992)

United 93 (dir. Paul Greengrass, USA, 2006)

Very Bad Things (dir. Peter Berg, USA, 1998)

We Were Soldiers (dir. Randall Wallace, France, Germany, USA, 2002)

Whiskey, Tango, Foxtrot (dir. Glenn Ficarra, John Requa, USA, 2016)

White House Down (dir. Roland Emmerich, USA, 2013)

Windtalkers (dir. John Woo, USA, 2002)

Without Remorse (dir. Stefano Sollima, USA, 2021)

The Wolverine (dir. James Mangold, USA, UK, Japan, 2013),

Wonder Woman (dir. Patty Jenkins, USA, China, 2017)

World Trade Center (dir. Oliver Stone, USA, 2006)

X-Men: Apocalypse (dir. Bryan Singer, USA, 2016)

X-Men: First Class (dir. Matthew Vaughn, USA, UK, 2011)

X-Men Origins: Wolverine (dir. Gavin Hood, USA, UK, 2009)

xXx: Return of Xander Cage (dir. D.J. Caruso, China, Canada, USA, 2017)

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DreamWorks, DreamWorks Television, HBO Films, 2001).

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Wednesday 15 March 2023.

Friday Night Lights (created by Peter Berg, Imagine Television, Film 44, NBC Universal
Television, 2006-2011).

Generation Kill (created by David Simon, Ed Burns and Evan Wright, Boom, Blown Deadline
Productions, Company Pictures, 2008).

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Cherry Pie Productions, Keshet Broadcasting, Fox 21 Television Studios, Showtime
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Broadhurst, 2017).

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The Pacific (written by Bruce C. McKenna, Eugene Sledge, Chuck Tatum, Robert Leckie, Robert Schenkkan, Laurence Andries, Michelle Ashford, George Pelecanos, Graham Yost, DreamWorks, HBO Films, Playtone, 2010).

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