Screening the 'War on Terror' : the politics and aesthetics of torture in American and European cinema

Bodde, O.C.

- Introduction -

Screening the 'War on Terror': The Politics and Aesthetics of Torture in American and European Cinema

Zero Dark Thirty (2012) caused a stir upon its release, which gradually developed into a heated debate between reviewers and film scholars about the film's depiction of the torture of terrorism suspects. The film's plot builds on real events and centres on the ten-year manhunt for Al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. Many, most notably feminist theorist Naomi Wolf (2013), accused director Kathryn Bigelow of releasing a patriotic pro-torture propaganda vehicle "à la Leni Riefenstahl", and of creating a confusing mixture of fact and fiction. Moreover, it was argued that seeing such 'torture-endorsing' feature films would lower the spectator's standards and normalise torture's use in real life (e.g. Mayer 2007; Žižek 2014 and 2015).

These are serious claims and fascinating responses. The nature of these reactions inspired my investigation into what it was about the scenes of torture and their position in *Zero Dark Thirty*'s narrative that caused this reaction. Some of this criticism can be explained by positioning the film within a cultural and political context, shaped by the events of 11 September 2001 (or '9/11'), and marked by a growing dissatisfaction with America's treatment of terrorism suspects and its interventions in the Middle East. Taking this context into account, the criticism includes the fear that such a film could further negatively compromise the image of the US in relation to extra-legal torture methods such as those used at Abu Ghraib (Mayer 2007), or endorse the continued use of these methods (Žižek 2014 and 2015).

These responses to the film also suggest a fair amount of offense on the part of the spectator for being subjected to a politically sensitive issue from the real world that is moulded into a melodramatic, action format. This response pertains to the way in which the story is told. The offense stems from being treated like someone who cannot distinguish fact from fiction, and impartiality and political bias (which underlies Wolf's argument). Yet we know that cinema's fictional world is not the

real world of daily life, and that cinema does not present referential reality, or 'the' reality, but rather 'a' reality (Houwen 51-52). Cinema offers an equivalent of 'it', or of 'that' which we refer to when we talk about reality and aspects of reality (Rancière 93; Grønstad 2011, 7; White 87), and cinema does so through different, cinematic forms of realism.[1] With regard to Hollywood cinema, the spectator is absorbed into the film's conventional seamless narration and participates in the illusion of this form of realism. The screening of a politically sensitive topic like torture, however, can disrupt this illusion after which the spectator is no longer willing to engage in a game of make-believe with the film's reality: due to the way in which this topic is framed, the film world clashes with the spectator's own moral and political beliefs as she becomes aware of the mechanisms behind the film's realism and the subjective decisions made therein.

The element of illusion ingrained in cinematic realism underlies the second motivation for feeling offense: the spectator could also blame the film for creating the impression that torture is a 'normal' procedure in the eyes of those who cannot make such distinctions between the fictional world and the real world (which underlies Žižek's and Mayer's argument). This argument assumes cinema's power in influencing public opinion.

This study departs from the debate surrounding *Zero Dark Thirty* and the assumptions about the film's rendering of torture methods as formulated above. Its central concern is to increase understanding of the ways in which North-American and European cinema has incorporated and depicted what I will call 'political torture', within the context of the War on Terror.

Cinema reflects upon, bolsters, refurbishes, and undermines normative ideologies that pervade social and political life in the time the film is made (Markert xx; Dittmar and Michaud 6). The relevance of cinema as an object of study thus resides in how it renders visible the

[1] Realism in film is established through types of realism, making use of different formal and stylistic techniques that are locally and historically dependent (Jakobson 24; Houwen 51-52; Hallam and Marshment x).

aspects of reality or of history that we find difficult to process or look at. It presents beliefs concerning and perspectives on sensitive topics from the real world, such as of the use and function of torture. Such depictions represent shifting cinematic, as well as cultural, standards and values regarding aggression, warfare, the motivations for and conditions of torture, and regarding those towards whom this violence is directed (Slocum 2000, 649-650).

At the same time, cinema is neither only a manifestation of explicit or deeply rooted cultural and political issues, nor should it just be evaluated in terms of being a poor or good reflection of such issues. Focussing on the political, aesthetical, and ethical dimensions of representations of political torture in film will provide a new understanding of the ways in which torture, as a form of screen violence, sheds light on our own beliefs about ourselves, others and the use of violence, and will also evaluate cinema's constantly evolving role in society and its function as art object, commercial production, commentary, or as all three.

Recent research has analysed depictions of torture in the context of the War on Terror and terrorism.[2] Hardly any of these studies, however, have taken up the actual representation of political torture as their pivotal focus. Moreover, although several comprehensive studies about torture have arisen in recent years (e.g. Wisnewski; Rejali 2007), only few have tackled the depiction of political torture in cinematic terms.[3] As of the time of writing, none have probed the significance of depictions of torture in feature films concerned only with the War on Terror. It is, I argue, important to study such depictions, as they contribute to our understanding of which political and aesthetical focal points come to the fore in representing political torture, both as a sensitive political issue and as a form of screen violence, and why these focal points are incorporated into the films.

---

[2] This research includes Oliver (2007), Faludi, Prince (2009), Kellner, Birkenstein, Hassler-Forest (2012), and Hamad.

[3] This research includes, most notably, *Screening Torture: Media Representation of State Terror and Political Dominations*, a diverse collection of articles by Flynn and Fernandez Salek (2012).

Before I explain my methodology and choice of films, that is the case studies, it is necessary to elaborate on the broader War on Terror discourse in which to view the manifestation of political torture in real life, what characterises political torture as a form of screen violence, and the occurrence of torture in cinema previous to 9/11.[4]

Why a study on depictions of torture and why now?

There seems to be something specific as well as timeless about torture as a form of violence. Torture, inflicted for a variety of reasons, is as Jeremy J. Wisnewski notes, as old as humankind (16-19), and was depicted in films prior to 9/11 – think only of Jean-Luc Godard's *The Little Soldier* (1960). So why pursue this topic now?

From the publication of the Abu Ghraib photographs in 2003 until the publication of the Senate Committee's CIA Torture Report in 2014,[5] the question of 'to torture or not to torture' has occupied many discussions in relation to the War on Terror's strategies in finding suspected terrorists. Until the eighteenth century, the realm of torture was the public sphere, and torture was executed as a form of punishment upon the "body of the condemned" (Foucault 1995, 43-45). After 9/11, dark rooms and secret sites concealed torture, where it was inflicted under the guise of 'national security' (Wisnewski 44). Although torture was employed by dictatorships such as the Nazi and Soviet regimes, Pol Pot's genocidal regime, and the Argentinian 'dirty war' (2, 170), Wisnewski notes that during the War on Terror torture was re-

[4] Gayatri Spivak argues that the use of quotation marks when talking about the 'war on terror' or the war on 'terror', both neutralises the term and restricts it from being too political, and thus commodifies the terminology for overall use in the media and arts (2012: 376). This study uses capitals to indicate the actual wars fought in Iraq and Afghanistan and, secondly, to connote the rhetorical, discursive component of the term that was first used by President Bush days after 9/11. For an understanding of 'discourse' or 'discursive' in this thesis I rely on Michel Foucault's formulation of the term. Forms of discourse or discursive practices shape and produce knowledge and power. Discourses are constituted by and ensure the maintenance of social systems through inclusion/exclusion, organisation, selection, and control (Foucault 1981).

[5] See the Senate Committee's online torture report ("The Senate Committee's Report on the C.I.A.'s Use of Torture") on the website of *The New York Times*. 9 December 2014
< http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/12/09/world/cia-torture-report-document.html?_r=0>

appropriated and semi-institutionalised in legal terms (44-46), and, especially by countries that advocate for and tout their own democratic values (168). As such, a significant component in recent debates about the use of torture during the War on Terror comprises the mental and physical effects on those being tortured (12), and of the motivations and conditions for inflicting such violence, which, unlike dictatorial regimes, call into question the basic pillars of the legal structure of democratic nations (168).

Although torture was implemented as an interrogation strategy shortly after 9/11, the self-evidence of torture's justifiability, effectiveness, and its damaging consequences have been publically questioned in recent years. This development and questions pertaining to its use in exceptional circumstances are visible in War on Terror cinema. There is thus an urgency in understanding not only this re-appropriation and semi-institutionalisation of torture in the twenty-first century, but also what representations tell us about cinema's interaction with particular political and cultural aspects of contemporary society, such as political torture, and the incorporation thereof into fictional, stylized formats.

Brutal violence is a common trait of many popular films; one only has to think, for example, of Tarantino films, *The Godfather* trilogy, and the *Rambo* series. Two questions immediately arise: firstly, what is the difference between torture and other types of screen violence – between the Bourne series (2002-2012) which are thrillers in which a political quest prevails, on the one hand, and post-9/11 'torture porn' (Jones; Kerner) on the other? It is imperative to ask what defines the torture that is analysed.

According to Alfred W. McCoy, "while violence had long been a staple of Hollywood films, the sudden emergence of torture as a major multimedia theme was [a] distinct post-September 11 phenomenon" (2012, 126). In the series *24*, for instance, which first aired just months after 9/11, there are sixty-seven torture scenes within the first five seasons. For this reason, many have deemed the show to be the leader of, or catalyst behind, the post-9/11 'torture' trend in TV and cinema (Mayer 2007). There is thus a particular connection between the semi-

institutionalised use of torture after 9/11 and the parallel depiction of torture as a recurring motif in film and on television. This relation pertains to the increased quantity of visual representations of political torture that arose after 9/11.

In addition, the particular political nature of the torture depicted and the motivations that drive torture in War on Terror films are crucial in distinguishing torture from other forms of screen violence. One could object that torture is always political. Yet for lack of a better term, the 'political torture' meant here is, as I will argue, related to specific political reasons for torture and the 'shape' of torture (for example, as an interrogation strategy or as punishment) and to specific political situations and contexts in which such torture occurs (such as in extra-legal circumstances or as part of combat). Instead of defining political torture by referring to a dictionary prescription of what political torture entails, this study examines how cinema defines what 'political torture' entails, how it occurs, the various motivations for inflicting it, and how it can occur in tandem with other forms of screen violence.

Political torture did occur, however, and was used as a strategy during previous wars. The second question that arises is what in particular is different between depictions of torture or violence in earlier war films and that shown in recent War on Terror cinema?

What was filmic torture like before and what is different now?

In order to explain the depictions of War-on-Terror-specific torture, it is crucial to understand the general perception of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan in relation to the Vietnam War (1955-1975) in particular, and the appropriation of this war in cinema. In their articles, J. David Slocum (2005) and Thomas Riegler both draw a parallel between 'violent times' and 'violent cinema', and point to the historical and cultural specificity of screen violence. As Slocum notes, movies made during the Second World War and those made before the revolutionary 1960s were tame and quaint (41). Rather than screening explicit violence, what was instead recapitulated was a civilising process concerning American values in terms of emotional and aggressive

behaviour, and indirectly, the institutionalising role of cinema in society. During the Gulf War in the 1990s, which produced only a few Gulf War films, and during the onset of the War on Terror in the early 2000s, the World War Two combat film witnessed a revival and, in addition to screening much more explicitly and gruesomely violent scenes, became a touchstone for heroic behaviour and morality for War on Terror productions (36-37).

Vietnam War films made during and after the war prove to be a different case in point. Between the patriotic *The Green Berets* (John Wayne, 1968) and the critical *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978), no films were produced that tackled the Vietnam War directly (Morag 191; Dittmar and Michaud 2). Only after the Vietnam War did cinema start to depict the war, but in a predominantly critical fashion to show the impossibility of justifying the sacrifice of so many individuals in the bigger picture of war (Gosline 89-95). While *The Green Berets* was produced at the turning point between support for and criticism of the war, the films made directly after the Vietnam War in the 1970s presented a critique of governmental failures encased as a representation of the corporal and psychological horrors of war (Slocum 2005, 36). Not until the early 80s did a shift from left-wing criticism to Republican counter-narratives occur, and the Vietnam soldier and veteran began to promote the Reagan era's reinterpretation of the war (Dittmar and Michaud 5). The torture Rambo undergoes in *First Blood* (Ted Kotcheff, 1982), for instance, can be seen in this conservative light: it radiates a new, heroic perspective on the Vietnam War and parallels the 1940s and 50s World War Two narratives that prescribed normative behavioural and emotional codes and morals. In the "grim fatalistic and hyperreal" films of the late 80s, however, the veteran was reintroduced as a victim of a political system (Devine ix), and additionally, the veteran started to explicitly address the war's imperial and racist agendas (Dittmar and Michaud 5).

While after the Vietnam War the Democratic administration of Jimmy Carter in the late 70s made way for to the Republican government of Ronald Reagan in the 80s, the opposite occurred during the War on Terror: the Republican administration of George W. Bush

was succeeded by the Democratic government of Barack Obama in 2008. Unlike the Vietnam War films, after 9/11 and during the onset of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, films were produced that directly reflected on the themes of war and terrorism (Riegler 24). At first, these War on Terror films were patriotic; American masculinity ideals and virility rhetoric undercut legitimizations of the interventions (Hannah 552). The transition from conservative and patriotic rhetoric to a democratic administration, concerned with the side effects of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, occurred in a dialectical process with shifting public opinion in 2005 (Markert 59-60). In addition to the change in political hue and the waning of patriotic sentiments, the growing discussion surrounding the treatment and legal status of detainees in Guantanamo Bay and the publication of the Abu Ghraib torture photographs in 2003 established a mood-swing to an anti-war sentiment comparable to the turning point in 1968 after the Tet Offensive in January and the Mai Lai massacre in March during the Vietnam War (Anderson 169; Louw 161).

More importantly, compared to the Vietnam War, the War on Terror has proved to be more of a rhetorical war than one of physical combat, despite troop deployment in Iraq and Afghanistan. Obama became president at a time when it had become apparent that the intervention in Iraq and Afghanistan was not as successful as the US and the Coalition of the Willing had hoped. The disintegration of Al-Qaeda's global profile into various, often more fundamentalist, offshoots and "rogue states" (Devji 2014, 436) occurred in tandem with the revolutionary movement of the Arab Spring which started in late 2010, and the disintegration of the war against Al-Qaeda and the Taliban, especially after the execution of Osama bin Laden in May 2011 (432, 435). The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan ended, and while the rhetorical War on Terror similarly disintegrated, it also transformed into an on-going, weaker version of itself.

This switch in sentiment is detectable in documentaries and cinematic productions about the War on Terror released around 2007/2008 (including superhero narratives and post-9/11 apocalyptic films) that start to question America's foreign policies and that present

the political, social, and cultural implications of the War on Terror from an American perspective (Early 2014, 20, 24; Hassler-Forest 2011).[6] These narratives particularly accentuate bodily vulnerability and exposure (Burgoyne 2012a, 7, 8, 12), often starring the veteran, while simultaneously presenting "an implicit critique of the distance – moral and physical – of remote targeting and weaponry" (12).[7] As Greta Olson notes, there is thus a detectable difference between American post-9/11 texts and "post post-9/11 texts": the former are patriotic, retributive, and violence-justifying narratives. In the latter, the narratives are increasingly self-conscious and critical about the use of torture, weaponry, and surveillance (2013).

The Vietnam War films built on revolutionary social movements of the late 60s and early 70s, which was echoed in the 'American New Wave' cinema that subsequently depicted unprecedented brutal violence (Slocum 2000, 658-660). Stephen Prince notes how these films, epitomised by Sam Peckinpah's audacious *The Wild Bunch* (1969) could, partially due to the Hollywood Production Code that regulated screen content, not have surfaced before 1968/1969 (2000, 2, 6). Explicit and brutal screen violence thus began to parallel the real violence pervading America's cultural and political landscape in terms of social reform, the Vietnam War, Civil Rights, and sexual liberation.[8] Like *The Wild Bunch*, these violent films often combined graphic violence with social and war criticism (13).

---

[6] These films include *Redacted* (Brian de Palma, 2007), *A Mighty Heart* (Michael Winterbottom, 2007), *Rendition* (Gavin Hood, 2007), *The Kingdom* (Peter Berg, 2007), *The Hurt Locker* (2008, Kathryn Bigelow's project prior to *Zero Dark Thirty*), and *Green Zone* (Paul Greengrass, 2010, release date initially planned for 2008).

[7] Burgoyne sees a decisive difference between these war films and films like *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979, on the Vietnam War) and *Saving Private Ryan* (Steven Spielberg, 1998, on the Second World War) in the sense that most War on Terror films foreground the private (and corporeal) experience and are 'no longer defined by the ideology of total war that shaped the grand narratives of twentieth-century combat'. Veteran films include *Home of the Brave* (Irwin Winkler, 2006), *Badland* (Francesco Lucente, 2007), *In The Valley of Elah* (Paul Haggis, 2007), *Stop-Loss* (Kimberly Peirce, 2008), *The Hurt Locker* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2008), and *The Veteran* (Matthew Hope, 2011).

[8] Consider also *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967) and *Straw Dogs* (Sam Peckinpah, 1971), and the first part of the *The Godfather* trilogy (Francis Ford Coppola, 1972).

Yet the depiction of violence in Vietnam War cinema is different from the violence depicted in War on Terror cinema. With the exception of *The Deer Hunter* (Michael Cimino, 1978), a film that notably incited as much emotional response as did *Zero Dark Thirty* (Walsh), and the first two *Rambo* films (Ted Kotcheff, 1982 and George P. Cosmatos, 1985), Vietnam War cinema rarely depicts torture. Instead, violence is inflicted on both sides as part of warfare, the result of the increasingly brutal nature of the Vietnam War.

Although there is no such thing as a sudden transition in brutal 'screen violence' before 9/11 and 'political torture' post 9/11, the occurrence of torture as a new form of violence in War on Terror cinema is significant. Moreover, political torture returns in other films, not necessarily about the War on Terror, in which the influence of post-9/11 torture can be detected: *Rescue Dawn* (Werner Herzog, 2006), about a young pilot whose plane is shot down during the Vietnam war, depicts how actor Christian Bale is brutally tortured as a prisoner of war. Similarly, the James Bond film *Casino Royale* (Martin Campell, 2006) features a most excruciating, "alluring and potent", yet un-James-Bondian torture scene (McCoy, 130). Most remarkably, torture makes its entry in the 'torture porn' genre, including films such as *Saw* (James Wan, 2004) and its sequels that became particularly popular after 9/11 (Kerner; Jones).

In European cinema, while the War on Terror theme is not as pervasive, the depiction of torture is. Rather, European cinema has a longer tradition with terrorism and terrorist organisations, as well as with torture, but these two are not joined together in the way Hollywood has appropriated torture after 9/11. In the past decades, terrorist activities instigated by, for instance, the German Red Army Faction, the Irish IRA, and the Basque ETA, have translated to European cinematic depictions of terrorism that portray societal rupture rather than violence.[9]

However, the recent wave of "fact-based European films", as Tobias Grey notes, grappling with the particularly violent nature of

[9] Films include Rainer Werner Fassbinder's *Germany in Autumn* (1978) and *The Third Generation* (1979).

these terrorist organisations seems to be fuelled by 9/11 and the War on Terror.[10] Yet only a few European films deal with the War on Terror directly, such as *Route Irish* (Ken Loach, 2010) and *Five Years* (*Fünf Jahre Leben*, Stefan Schaller, 2013). In others the influence of 9/11 seeps through implicitly, such as in Michael Haneke's *Time of the Wolf* (*Le Temps du Loup*, 2003) and *Hidden* (*Caché*, 2005) (Bradshaw 2011b). Others, like the British production *The Mark of Cain* (Marc Munden, 2007) and the Danish *Brødre* (*Brothers*, Susanne Bier, 2004), which are analysed in this thesis, use military intervention in the Middle East as context for narratives about the personal costs of war; these two films, together with *Five Years*, also depict torture.

The depiction of torture in European cinema is featured in pre-9/11 films about war and independence, such as *Le Petit Soldat* and *The Battle of Algiers* (Gillo Pontecorvo, 1966), or in other categories, such as *Salò, or The 120 Days of Sodom* (Pier Paolo Pasolini, 1975) and *Antichrist* (Lars von Trier, 2009). Torture also occurs in Michael Haneke's oeuvre, and in the cinema of the New French Extremity of the late 1990s and 2000s. In other words, while Hollywood saw a clearly detectible emergence of torture in War on Terror films, in Europe, this threshold of 9/11 and the theme of the War on Terror are less visible; both torture and terrorism were components of European cinema prior to the attacks, although not necessarily occurring together.

By mutually comparing both American films and European films, and by also comparing American cinema with European cinema – to the extent that one can speak of a homogenous 'American' and 'European' cinema – this study determines the films' diverging political and aesthetical focal points in depicting torture.

Methodology: The politics and aesthetics of film torture

The case studies are closely read and analysed at the intersection between film narratology and the practice of cultural analysis. In my approach of 'reading' and interpreting film scenes or shots I rely on

[10] These films include *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (Ken Loach, 2006), *Bullet in the Head* (Jaime Rosales, 2008), *Hunger* (Steve McQueen, 2008), and *The Baader Meinhof Complex* (Uli Edel, 2008).

Peter Verstraten's *Film Narratology* (2009),[11] which appropriates the post-structuralist narratological approach as formulated by Mieke Bal (1985/2009). This approach is particularly relevant for my thesis for several reasons: it provides insight into form and style and narrative structure, but also into the films' relation to the ideological, cultural-political discourse from which they originate, and how the spectator as the 'reader' of the scenes is addressed or positioned by formal means.

With the practice of cultural analysis (Bal 1999 and 2002), theoretical frames and conceptual tools are employed to inform the case studies and to subsequently position them within political and cinematic contexts. I will make use of the work of cultural (particularly post-colonial and gender) theorists and political philosophers. In addition, I will rely on film reviews and related discussions when this substantiates my analyses of the films and their position within a broader cultural and political War on Terror context.

This study neither employs the theoretical framework in the service of a philosophical and political debate about torture methods, nor does it analyse the films in normative moral terms and argue whether or not torture is legitimised or how it should or should not be represented. Rather, the premise of this thesis, how North-American and European cinema has given shape to political torture in the context of the War on Terror, requires an analysis of form and content substantiated by a theoretical frame that serves the purpose of that which is analysed: the implications of why political torture is depicted and how this is done politically and aesthetically.

What is therefore meant by 'aesthetics' are film form and style, or principles of narration and techniques of film, and the way in which torture is presented therein through *mise-en-scène*, cinematography,

[11] *Film Narratology* departs from the work of film scholars such as David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, Edward Branigan and Seymour Chatman. These approaches, however, rely too heavily on a de-personified, cognitive narrative process (Bordwell), 'nonfocalized' narration (Branigan) and an implied author (Chapman). In addition, they rely on structuralist analyses that ignore the social, political, and cultural discursive practices in which cinema is embedded.

sound, and editing (Verstraten 2009, 8-9).[12] Torture can, for instance, take place off-screen and yet be narrated by an auditive narrator. It can be stylized in graphic terms, rendered without dialogue, or occur as a character's flashback. Form and style are never neutral and these different ways of representing torture have implications for how torture scenes and plots are perceived by the spectator. It is thus crucial for an understanding of representations of political torture to scrutinise those features of narration and composition that give insight into the way torture is depicted on screen.

Yet torture shots and scenes do not stand on their own, and a distinction should be made between how torture manifests stylistically and narratively: the former concerns the composition of torture, the choices made therein, and "how it exploits the resources of the medium" (Grønstad 2008, 49). The latter concerns the way in which shots and scenes can be analysed temporally, spatially, and causally as segments in the narrative (ibid.). Analysing a scene as such a segment, as well as relevant plot elements that help interpret the torture episode, exposes the semantic role of torture in the plot.

'Politics', in turn, refers firstly and most tangibly to the diegetic, political context of the War on Terror: the extent and fashion in which real people and events in recent history are referred to, how the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and political interference in neighbouring Middle-Eastern countries are fictionalised, and other ways in which a political context is delineated. The diegetic political film world is in turn informative of the cultural, political, and social discourse from which a film originates (Grønstad 2008, 10).

Although the films draw on a War on Terror theme, the Hollywood War on Terror film generally combines several generic characteristics, such as war and active combat, terrorism, the veteran, thriller aspects, suspense and spy characteristics, ticking bomb situations, and specific 9/11 elements (Markert xxxi-xxxii). The fact that the films belong to a heterogeneous Hollywood as well as European cinematic tradition indicates that, like the Vietnam War films

[12] What is however not meant by 'aesthetics' is the manifestation of an essential beauty or of the 'sublime' (Grønstad 2008, 48-49).

made in the post-war years, "they borrow their narrative and cinematic codes freely from other media and other films" (Dittmar and Michaud 2).

Secondly, as mentioned, 'politics' refers to the politics of representation: the way in which a story is told and presented by the narrator.[13] Whether classical Hollywood or art house cinema, ideologies are inevitably at play in the way in which the narrative is moulded and interpreted – and in the decision to depict torture in the first place.[14] I argue that the ideologies scrutinised in relation to the depiction of political torture against the backdrop of the War on Terror, tie in with particular, normative assumptions about warfare, the use and legitimisation of violence, and gender and ethnicity tropes.[15] Made in the US and Europe, the case studies share a Western, predominantly white and male, ethnocentric perspective on the War on Terror. Making transparent and reflecting on the gender and ethnicity of those torturing and those being tortured is significant for understanding how political torture is employed in film, and how such depictions dovetail with both the ratification and challenging of ideologies surrounding the role of torture in film.

Lastly, 'politics' and 'aesthetics' inevitably concern spectatorship. The interaction between the film and spectator positions the 'spectator' as an addressee, positioned by principles of narration and formal techniques (Verstraten 2009, 8). The fact that real, embodied spectators react to violence and sympathise or identify with

---

[13] The politics of representation also refers to external (political or financial) constraints that influence a film's eventual content (Markert xxiv). In the present study these constraints will not be taken into account.

[14] Ideology can be translated as "a set of ideas and representations in which people collectively make sense of the world and the society in which they live […] ideology is a characteristic of all human societies, but a given ideology is specific to a particular culture at a particular moment in history" (Dyer 1994, 2). Ideologies are discursive and inevitable, but they are always, in principle, normative.

[15] According to Grønstad, in the cinematic representations a trope can be seen as a "figurality" that constitutes the film's discursive substance (2011, 7). One of the ways in which substance is made understandable for the spectator is by bestowing characters, as Richard Dyer argues, with aural and visual stereotypical traits that places them "quickly and economically" in order to construct an intelligible story for its viewers (Grønstad 2011, 7; Dyer 1977, 32).

characters depending on personal and socio-cultural (i.e. gender and ethnic) characteristics is only taken into account when I refer to film reviews used to substantiate my interpretations. Spectatorship tells us, in this respect, more about principles of narration and techniques of film, than about the actual spectator.

This positioning or addressing of the spectator can be considered in terms of how the spectator is invited to identify with or relate to a character's position as the subject of torture or when torturing others. This can be established by using point-of-view shots or facial expressions that offer insight into a character's perspective and state of mind (Dyer 1994, 133-136; Verstraten 2009, 90-92), by withholding crucial information from the spectator, or by allowing the spectator to have more details about a situation than the characters. The same techniques can be employed to encourage a critical, self-reflexive attitude on the part of the spectator about political themes presented, or to become affected when watching graphic torture. Analysing the role of the spectator as such shows how features of narration and composition facilitate or problematize an understanding of the political and moral decisions made by characters in the use of torture when such decisions remain opaque, and of actions undertaken as a consequence of torture.

Hence, this study analyses torture on four levels: the politics and aesthetics of torture shots and scenes, the segments' position within the narratives, the way in which the spectator is addressed or positioned, and a comparative analysis of the films in their particular cinematic as well as political, cultural, and historical contexts.

Case studies and chapter overview

As this study's aim is to provide insight into the particular aesthetics and politics of fictional representations of torture, the case studies will consist of feature films and not documentaries. Some of their representations of political torture are inspired by real events, while others are completely fictionalised. A comparative analysis consists of eight Hollywood and European films released between 2004 and 2012, which function as a cross-section of films about the War on Terror in

which torture is depicted. At the same time, these case studies by no means encompass or speak for all Hollywood or all European cinema in which political torture has been depicted after 9/11. Together however, they are firstly informative of the variety of ways in which aesthetics and politics intertwine to create a cinematic representation of torture, and secondly of how cinema can frame, re-frame, and in some cases "rewrite" violent aspects of the War on Terror (Burgoyne 2010, 1-2).

The first two chapters of this study scrutinise four Hollywood films, while the last two chapters comprise, predominantly, European films. The first two films, *Zero Dark Thirty* (Kathryn Bigelow, 2012) and *Unthinkable* (Gregor Jordan, 2010) stage the torture of Muslim detainees as part of a 'ticking bomb scenario', in which the elements of urgency, action, and suspense structure the plot. Chapter 2 analyses *Syriana* (Stephen Gaghan, 2005) and *Body of Lies* (Ridley Scott, 2008), in which the torture of CIA agents is depicted within the framework of geopolitical action films. The prevailing hypothesis of these two chapters suggests that the reversal of roles gives shape to a different 'role-play' (McKenzie 342-343) between torturer and tortured: diverging motivations and methods present the torture of Muslim detainees as justified, and the torture of CIA agents as unwarranted and more brutal. I explore the way in which these different role-plays and contexts – the 'ticking bomb scenario' on the one hand and the geopolitical action film on the other – have consequences for the way in which torture is depicted in political and aesthetical terms.

The first chapter illustrates how the debate surrounding *Zero Dark Thirty*'s depiction of torture can be explained by analysing formal means. In particular, two aspects are focused upon: the ambivalent position and function of the film's female protagonist Maya (Hasian 323) who is associated with torture, and the way in which the film creates a form of cinematic realism that suggests a documented, referential reality, or rather 'the' reality instead of 'a' cinematic reality (Houwen 51-52). *Zero Dark Thirty* will be compared to *Unthinkable*, which similarly stages torture as a method to retrieve information, but that presents to the viewer an obviously exaggerated ticking bomb scenario. This comparison will also illustrate the problematic

association of female protagonists with torture methods, and how their respective expressions of femininity influence perception of the use of torture.

Zero Dark Thirty presents contradictory messages, in terms of the characters' moral stance towards torture and in terms of torture's effectiveness. Although structured according to conventional Hollywood narration that builds on a passive acceptance of a film's plot, I probe whether these contradictory messages in *Zero Dark Thirty* invite the spectator to critically evaluate the film's politically sensitive themes.

While *Zero Dark Thirty* was the subject of critique, the geopolitical action film *Syriana* (2005) was praised as one of the first films to be unequivocally critical of America's intervention in the Middle East during the Bush administration. At the same time, the film reverses the role of CIA torturer and Muslim tortured, and seems to present the Muslim torturer as stereotypically villainous. In order to see how this dual, seemingly paradoxical, move is made, Chapter 2 close-reads *Syriana* in tandem with *Body of Lies* (2008), which stages a similar torture scene in a different plot.

In this chapter, the torture episodes are closely tied to a political critique of US interference in the Middle East. This entanglement necessitates the analysis not only of the occurrence and role of torture in the narrative, but also of related plot elements that help interpret the abusive role-play between torturer and tortured. Therefore, this chapter builds on three themes or questions: firstly, what is meant when a film is deemed to be 'critical' of American normative ideologies and politics? Secondly, the question is raised whether, and if so how, the motivations provided and the conditions under which torture takes place in the films differ from those established by CIA agents. Further, if this results in a different 'type' of torture, does this influence the way in which torture is framed and shaped on screen? This, thirdly, necessitates focus on the use of gender and ethnicity tropes as developed in the first chapter. Where in the previous chapter the role of female protagonists is analysed, in this chapter the 'post-heroic' heroism (Burgoyne 2012a, 8) of the male protagonists is analysed in

tandem with the double valence of the 'good Muslim' and the 'Muslim villain' (Mamdani 768).

The last part of this chapter will position the films discussed in Chapters 1 and 2 within their temporal context and in relation to other Hollywood films on the War on Terror, and investigate whether the different themes and nuances incorporated in the four films can be explained by the respective film's year of production.

The hypothesis of Chapter 3 is that the European films have different focal points than the Hollywood films. Rather than building on ticking bomb scenarios, intelligence gathering, and active combat, they accentuate psychological consequences of war and violence, and in particular the consequences of torturing or having been tortured. Chapter 3 moves away from the global stage of terrorist networks and geopolitics to the consequences of warfare and torture for veterans. This turn to the domestic sphere presupposes a different political undercurrent and critical evaluation of the War on Terror. *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable* built on the self-evidence of an American national trauma as experienced after 9/11 and as ingrained in American narratives and rhetoric. In the European narratives discussed in Chapters 3 and 4, national trauma is less naturally associated with the intervention in the Middle East; instead personal trauma features prominently.

Through close-readings of the British television production *The Mark of Cain* (Marc Munden, 2008), the Danish film *Brødre* (Susanne Bier, 2004) and its American adaptation *Brothers* (Jim Sheridan, 2009), Chapter 3 illustrates how the films connect torture, and more particularly, having tortured others in combat, to the development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Due to the simultaneous occurrence of having tortured and also having suffered personal trauma, these three films are, for this study, an indispensible category in War on Terror cinema. Additionally, these films again focus on male protagonists, and, unlike the films discussed in the first two chapters, fuse the status of victim of torture with culprit, thereby explicitly collapsing the binary of Western 'civilised' versus Muslim 'barbarian'.

The Mark of Cain is, like *Zero Dark Thirty*, based on real events, yet where *Zero Dark Thirty* purports to depict torture in an ostensibly impartial and near-referential manner, *The Mark of Cain* does not explicitly draw on its ties to a real torture episode. The film introduces and focuses on the development and experience of trauma after being involved in torture, which results in a distorted and atemporal narrative structure. This formal construction, in which the distorted form underscores the traumatic and gruesome content, addresses the question of the un/representability of trauma. I will illustrate that the emphasis on the experience of trauma presents a potent political critique of peer pressure and issues of personal and collective culpability, and will investigate whether this emphasis reduces the actual occurrence of torture to a secondary theme.

The last part of Chapter 3 similarly investigates how the development and experience of PTSD in the protagonists, consisting of war veterans, translates in the narrative structure of *Brødre* and *Brothers*. A comparative analysis between the three films explores the degree to which the protagonists invite identification and how this is established, and whether and how the films' unconventional narration works together with an understanding of the characters' ambiguous positions.

A crucial difference between *Brødre* and *Brothers* concerns the way in which *Brothers* appropriates the political and social themes ingrained in *Brødre* and adapts them into the Hollywood mould. This reworking affects the way in which torture is depicted, as well as the political themes that are addressed. This necessitates an inquiry into whether the Danish *Brødre* is more critical of the intervention in the Middle East and of its harmful side-effects than *Brothers*, or whether these "micro-dramas" (Burgoyne 2012b, 179), with a focus on personal trauma, largely avoid contextual questions about long-term consequences of the War on Terror.

In the case studies analysed in Chapter 3 the diegetic political context and the 'role-play' of torture, which are pivotal elements in Chapters 1 and 2, seem of secondary importance in relation to conveying and elucidating the experience of personal trauma as a

consequence of torture. In Chapter 4 the focus lies on two European films, the Polish *Essential Killing* (Jerzy Skolimowski, 2010) and the French *Flanders* (Bruno Dumont, 2006). They feature modes of narration that are even less conventional than *The Mark of Cain* and *Brødre*, in which references to the War on Terror are only sporadic or even opaque. Although the opaque diegetic worlds seem to divert attention from the films' political undercurrent, the films' diegetic worlds steer perception and spur the spectator to view and review these narratives through a historically determined post-9/11, War on Terror lens.

This chapter investigates how the alienating contextual voids and unconventional narrative structures urge the viewer to actively interpret the characters and the torture scenes, while often preventing her from satisfactorily constructing meaningful coherence, and while an understanding of the characters is made difficult. This investigation builds on three interrelated pillars of inquiry: it investigates how the informational voids, few moral guidelines, and minimal emotional expression surround the framing of the torture episodes and other instances of brutal violence. It then investigates how this way of framing violence in an opaque context is subsequently processed by the spectator. As in Chapter 2, the formal and semantic ambiguities necessitate the interpretation of other plot elements and formal aspects: the use of gender and ethnicity tropes, the use of sounds and colour, the delineation of a diegetic context and character motivation, and the ways in which the films give shape to a political-ideological view on the War on Terror are discussed.

The last two chapters reveal the different angles and focal points of North-American and European film, and how these films formulate a particular vision of the occurrence of political torture in a War on Terror from a Western perspective.

The films gradually move from classic Hollywood narration with a seamless structure in the first chapter, to more complex modes of narration when concerning the European films. The case studies give shape to various forms of realism to depict torture and its function in

the plots by employing different formal structures, which affects the way in which the spectator is invited to engage with the characters and the torture they are subjected to or employ. This set-up, from conventional to less conventional modes of narration, illustrates that the principle feature of my approach will comprise an investigation into the relation between modes of narration and the films' realisation of a diegetic political context, the manner in and degree to which torture is motivated and framed, the degree to which identification with the protagonists is facilitated, and the consequences of these four interrelated features for modes of spectatorship.

This study's specific focus on depictions of political torture and the analytical and theoretical methods employed to analyse them contribute to on-going research into the aesthetics and politics of screen violence. Moreover, this study enhances our insight into the role of cinema in depicting politically sensitive issues from the real world while veering between its function as cultural art object, commercial artifice, commentary on socio-politically sensitive issues, and its role in maintaining an ideological relationship to recent history.