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- Chapter 2 -

Punitive torture, antiheroism and a critique of US foreign politics in *Syriana* and *Body of Lies*

Introduction

2005 can be seen to demarcate the start of a shift from conservative and patriotic rhetoric in Hollywood productions to a "growing dissatisfaction with America's course" (Markert: xvii). A burgeoning nuance and progressive hue proves to be characteristic of Hollywood cinema that follows in the years after.

Syriana (Stephen Gaghan, 2005) was hailed as provokingly liberal and as "one of the best geopolitical thrillers in a very long time" (Scott 2005). The film, whose title is a metaphor for foreign, Western intervention in the Middle East (deWaard and Tait 153), is loosely based on former CIA case officer Robert Baer's memoir *See No Evil: The True Story of a Ground Soldier in the CIA's War Against Terrorism* (2002) and connects the War on Terror theme with that of "big oil". Although acclaimed, *Syriana* was also maligned for its critical depiction of America's politics in and interference with the Middle East and accused of political bias (deWaard and Tait 155). As such, writer Stephen Gaghan and producer Steven Soderbergh initially had trouble funding the production (Kemp).

The film has multiple storylines that depict the converging fates of various protagonists (such as CIA agents, lawyers, Pakistani migrants, and Emirs), influenced by the "dark amoral world of unregulated and destructive corporate power" (Riegler: 21) [57] embodied in the oil industry and arms trade. In one of these plotlines, CIA agent Bob Barnes (George Clooney) is tortured by a mercenary, a former CIA operative (Mark Strong) now sympathizing with Hezbollah. Peter Bradshaw (*The Guardian*) denounced the film's tasteless

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[57] Riegler also mentions The Bourne series (2001, 2004, and 2007), *Blood Diamond* (2006), *Shooter* (2007), *Michael Clayton* (2007) and *The International* (2009) as pertaining to this category, but I would argue that these films are less directly linked to the War on Terror than *Syriana*.

inversion of roles, that of a CIA agent tortured by a Muslim, and the film's naive simplicity in terms of 'good' and 'bad' so soon after torture incidents at Abu Ghraib (Bradshaw 2006). This inversion, he argued, suggests a covert legitimization of torturing Muslim detainees as it proves that they "do the same thing to us" (2006).

The seeming paradox, of a critique on *Syriana*'s torture scene on the one hand, and praise for the film's politics agenda on the other, provides the starting point of this chapter: firstly, it explores the inversion of roles, or 'role-play', as examined in the previous chapter, between Muslim torturer and CIA victim, in order to illustrate how this inversion gives rise to different motivations for and types of torture. Secondly, it probes what is meant when one calls a film 'critical' of a government's political activities, and particularly of normative political ideologies pertaining to the War on Terror. In other words, it asks to what extent a film such as *Syriana* can be 'critical', when its complex and multi-layered depiction of conflicted interest, clandestine affairs, and interference simultaneously stages a torture scene that uses blunt stereotypes that seem to justify this very interference? In extension, it investigates whether *Syriana* provides an oppositional view of the US intervention in the Middle East and its use of violence during the War on Terror, or whether this view functions as a legitimized political alternative within normative Hollywood discourse.

In order to explore this inversion of roles in *Syriana* and the critical questions addressed by the plot, *Body of Lies* (Ridley Scott, 2008), a film that stages a similar torture scene in an entirely different plot, is analysed in comparison. Both films were produced prior to *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable* (and *Homeland*, briefly mentioned in the previous chapter) and although this difference in time seems marginal, it is in fact significant for understanding and positioning the nature, shape, and framing of the films' torture scenes. The War on Terror theme is less prominent in *Syriana* than in *Body of Lies*, yet *Syriana* assimilates the War on Terror into a complex narrative in which oil, terrorism, torture, money, and power are interlaced. *Body of Lies*, on the other hand, was released three years later and is part of a wave of

diverse films following *Syriana* that collectively started to question American foreign policies and the ambiguous practices of the US government and the CIA in locating terrorists.

Due to the focus on global affairs and terrorist activities, torture's part in the films' plots is considerably smaller than in *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable.* Yet the occurrence of torture is tied to America's meddling in the Middle East, and as such, an inquiry into the diverging ways in which the films address or critique this meddling is important for understanding the function torture plays in both films.

This chapter thus explores the paradoxical argument underlying *Syriana* and *Body of Lies* and the significance and consequences of this seeming tension: on the one hand, the films depict the CIA as morally ambiguous and their political business in the Middle East as suspect in which the protagonists (George Clooney and Leonardo DiCaprio) are presented as duped antiheroes. On the other hand, the films portray Muslim torturers as villains who employ, to the Western spectator, 'unfair' and punitive torture. As such, a 'critical' depiction of the position of the CIA in the War on Terror and of global corporate power as the motor driving political wrongdoings is, to an extent, neutralized.

This chapter starts with a comparison between *Syriana*'s and *Body of Lies'* torture scenes, and then interprets these scenes as they occur within their respective plots. In doing so, an analysis of plot elements and narrative techniques that help interpret the torture scenes and that pose alternative or conflicting perspectives on American foreign policies during the War on Terror is required. The films will also be positioned within a contextual time frame to compare them to the films discussed in the previous chapter, and to a corpus of War on Terror films made in the past decade.

1. Torture scenes in *Syriana* and *Body of Lies*
Torture in *Syriana*

Syriana has five protagonists and four plotlines that often intersect. It will be unnecessarily mystifying to explain *Syriana*'s plot structure in detail in this section, therefore a simplified version of the relevant aspects of these plotlines will be provided to explain the events leading

up to torture and to position *Syriana*'s torture scene within the narrative. One of these protagonists is Bob Barnes (George Clooney) an "old-school" (Bradshaw 2006) and "disillusioned" (Scott 2005) CIA agent, whose primary job is to stop illegal arms trafficking. He has lived and worked in the Middle East for years and has acquainted himself with local customs. When on assignment in Tehran, he learns that one of the CIA's missiles was stolen and diverted to an Egyptian. Bob then quickly becomes absorbed into a shady world of conflicting agendas.

In another storyline, energy analyst Bryan Woodman (Matt Damon) becomes the economic advisor of Prince Nasir (Alexander Siddig), eldest son of a Persian Gulf Emir, who aims to establish a progressive and democratic government and to use his state's oil trade and profits for national and global interest. His democratic political agenda conflicts with his father's conventional and repressive government that favours a national and privatized oil trade supported by the American government. Meanwhile, Bob is sent by the CIA to kill Prince Nasir, who is identified as the financier behind the Egyptian's acquisition of the missile, in order to pave the way for Nasir's conservative younger brother to inherit the throne instead. Bob hires a mercenary named Mussawi (Mark Strong) to help him kidnap and assassinate Nasir. Mussawi, formerly known as Jimmy, now works as an Iranian agent on the side of Hezbollah. Unaware of Mussawi's double agenda, their brief conversation indicates that Bob refuses to call Jimmy "Mussawi", who, in turn, seems evasive and unwilling to assist Bob. When the latter states his demands – he wants Mussawi to drug Nasir and abduct him in a car – Mussawi refuses and leaves. Shortly after, he has Bob abducted and tortures him.

The torture scene opens with a shot in which Bob's head, centrally framed, rests on his chest. The lighting comes from a small window to the right and catches his right shoulder and his sweaty forehead. He has a cut on the bridge of his nose and breathes quickly. The visible part of his upper body is naked, and a wound is discernible on his right shoulder. The background is blurry, accentuating Bob's tense face and anxious anticipation. Mussawi enters the room in the background and asks Bob, "What do you know about the torture

methods used by the Chinese on the Falun Gong?" Mussawi proceeds to explain the steps in these torture methods while Bob listens, approaching Bob as he outlines the first step ('water dungeon'). The next shot cuts to the other side of the room and frames Bob and Mussawi centrally in the shot. Mussawi is dressed in a casual summer suit. Bob sits in an old-fashioned school chair, with his feet strapped to its legs with duct tape and his hand taped to the table in front of him. The spacious room is furnished with dirty white tiles, a metal table, and a sink, which suggest the room's former function as a kitchen. The small windows are covered with blinds.

As Mussawi turns towards Bob, he starts explaining method number two, "twisting arm and putting face in faeces". The camera cuts to a close-up of Mussawi's grave face when he sternly proclaims that he is "not interested in two". He walks towards the kitchen sink and the camera, positioned behind Bob, now shows that Bob has been strapped to his seating's support with duct tape around his waist. Mussawi picks some utensils from the kitchen in the background, while he tells Bob that he is interested in the third method, "pulling nails from fingers", and shows Bob a pincer. The camera cuts back to Bob's face as he looks up. Mussawi asks whether Bob agrees that this is a good method, while he throws the pincer into the metal sink and takes off his jacket in preparation. Bob averts his eyes to the side and starts breathing heavily. Mussawi continues that the purpose of nail extraction was to "get the monks or whatever to recant their beliefs".

Mussawi grabs the pincer and walks towards Bob. He halts before him and with a stern face he looks down at Bob, his shaved head reflecting the light, and asks, "What if I had to get you to recant? That'd be pretty difficult, right?" Mussawi continues, "Because, if you have no beliefs to recant, then what?" The camera cuts back to Mussawi's face as he lowers it close to Bob's, and says, "Then, you're fucked, is what", and pauses for a second. He grabs Bob's hand and points the pincer to his face and demands, "You're gonna give me the names of every person that's taken money from you!", and starts pulling the nail from one of Bob's fingers. This pulling comes with some effort, which is made explicit by the facial expressions of both men, Bob's face in distorted

pain and Mussawi's clenched teeth signalling struggle, and in shots of Bob's chair moving violently back and forth. The camera alternates rapidly between their faces, the chair, and the nail. The shot that frames the extraction is only displayed for a fraction of a second, but its graphic content is replaced by a close-up of Bob's pained face and groans, and the nauseating sounds of the pincer tearing the nail from Bob's flesh.

An appalled Mussawi holds up the pincer with the bloody nail in it, proclaiming, "Oh, that is disgusting". He bends over the kitchen table and shakes the nail off the pincer. Bob suddenly remarks sarcastically, while breathing heavily, "Come on Jimmy, you're not a Quran-thumper", still using Mussawi's former name. Mussawi responds as he bends closer to Bob's face, "My name is Mussawi". Offended by Bob's remark, he then places the pincer to one of Bob's other fingers – off-screen –and starts pulling for a second nail. The camera now only shows Bob's feet and the chair moving up from the floor as Bob and Mussawi struggle, with the same accompanying nail-cracking sounds.

Bob must have fainted because a subsequent shot shows Mussawi angrily throwing a bucket of water into the camera, Bob's point-of-view shot. The next shot shows that in an adjacent, darker room, three men sit around a table, smoking leisurely and watching the scene, while Mussawi shouts and curses repeatedly. The camera uncompromisingly cuts back and forth between Bob's face in close-up as he is beaten, and Bob's point of view facing an angry Mussawi who beats him and shouts "This is a war. You're a POW [prisoner of war]! Give me the names!", alternatingly cursing and beating. Bob's upper body stains with blood. A hard blow by Mussawi hurls Bob towards the floor with the chair on top of him. He lands with his beaten and bloodied head on the floor. Mussawi shouts towards the men in the adjacent room that he will cut off Bob's head. The camera cuts from framing Bob's face to his dazed and distorted point-of-view, which frames Mussawi in a skewed-angle shot approaching him with a large kitchen knife in his hand. Mussawi kneels down, his face off-screen, and repeats that he will cut off Bob's head. At that moment, voices are heard and Mussawi looks up. A shot shows Bob, face down on the tiles, slowly coming to his senses. Several turbaned men, Hezbollah, come in and

urge Mussawi to let Bob go: one of them tells Mussawi in Lebanese that "Said Hashimi is very angry with him". From Bob's point of view, Mussawi, frustrated, hurls the knife into a far corner of the kitchen. The frame then fades out.

Later, upon hearing that Mussawi wants to make their plans to kill Prince Nasir public, the CIA scapegoat and deactivate Bob. When Bob in turn learns about the source of and motivation for his being outcast, he tries to warn Prince Nasir, but both men are killed, Bob accidentally, by a CIA drone.

Torture as a punitive method

This torture scene frequently alternates between shots of Bob's facial expressions in medium close-up and his point-of-view shots when beaten. Aligned to Bob's perspective, the information provided for his abduction and torture remains limited to Mussawi's demand for the names of those Bob has worked with. Most of the time, only parts of Mussawi's body are framed, adhering to Bob's limited perspective due to his position in the chair, and his minimal knowledge of the situation. In contrast, Mussawi's betrayal to the CIA and in particular to Bob is accentuated by visually stressing Mussawi's superior position; he towers over Bob while Bob's nudity – he wears only brown pants – contrasts with Mussawi's smart summer suit. Naked from the waist up, Bob's fleshy upper body emphasizes his uncertain, corporeal vulnerability and exposure.

Like the abuse in *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable*, the torture has the structure of a theatrical role-play, with Mussawi performing his superiority for a third party in the room: the men around the table. The bare room, the kitchen utensils and the use of the chair give the scene the aura of a scripted performance, without, however, Bob's knowledge of what will happen. Mussawi's demand of the names of several people the CIA works with motivates his torture, yet his desire to kill Bob reveals that he does not care much for information or Nasir's kidnapping (this last element is not even mentioned). He does not give Bob time to respond to his question, but instead starts beating his face immediately.

His anger and frustration suggest a personal grudge and the expression of these emotions present Mussawi as a radically different torturer than Dan and H. The emphasis on Bob's lack of religion, who has, according to Mussawi, "no beliefs to recant", suggests that Mussawi's tactics of nail extraction are not only aimed at retrieving information but are instigated towards an infidel. His change from Jimmy to Mussawi and his shift from the CIA to Iranian intelligence suggest a conversion to Islam and a preference for working with those who practise similar convictions. Yet Mussawi's ethnicity is never explicated and it remains unsure whether Mussawi was Muslim while working for the CIA, or if he has since 'turned'. It is similarly unclear if he was born American, Iranian, or something else altogether. It is suggested, however, that he and Bob share a similar cultural background and that he desires to chastise Bob for being a personification of all Mussawi dislikes about the CIA.

The second motivation for torture thus ties in with diverging beliefs and seems provoked by retaliation. For Mussawi, Bob embodies American culture and politics Mussawi, for unexplained reasons, no longer associates with and has come to despise. It could even be argued that Mussawi has come to despise himself for once being a part of this culture, which explains the vigour with which he punishes Bob. Although Bob, it is assumed, has no religious beliefs, it is the particular political and cultural foundation of the US, and the Christian beliefs and ideals on with it is constituted (Dyer 1997, 15) that Mussawi punishes, and not necessarily Bob's specific beliefs or his individual, previous actions as a CIA agent. By converting, or by changing sides, Mussawi simultaneously converts Bob into an enemy. In chapter 1 I analysed, while building on Appadurai's analysis of extreme violence (2006, 89), how Dan's torture made visible and affirmed Ammar's inferiority in moral and ethnic terms. Mussawi's torture makes visible and ratifies the difference between him and Bob in terms of the latter's moral and cultural inferiority, but the explicit punitive component in Mussawi's torture further accentuates this newly established cultural difference.

In other words, torture is used as a punitive method to inflict intense pain,[58] not to interrogate, and to accentuate Bob's cultural – or 'Western' – inferiority. At the same time, the desire for retaliation is cloaked by the weak motivation of retrieving information. Yet Mussawi can barely hide the real reason for his torture, which is punishment, in which the argument of information becomes a masquerade for inflicting pain.

The temporal dimension and the rapidness of the role-play, in which Bob is hardly allowed to respond, differs from the slow, processual torture in *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable.* For Dan and H torture is part of their job. They desire to have their victim speak by dehumanizing them (Dan) or by inflicting intense pain (H), in both cases in controlled and orchestrated situations. Despite diverging motivations, Mussawi's vivisectionist violence resembles the interplay between Yusuf and H in *Unthinkable*, but Mussawi's promptness, fuelled by revenge and hatred, reveals that his torture is not aimed at a gradual psychological breakdown, but at killing Bob.

Like H, Mussawi is not committed to anyone. On the one hand, Mussawi's conversion from agent to working for Hezbollah suggests unreliability and wayward behaviour, indicating that he could easily change sides again and has hidden agendas. On the other hand, his conversion displays determination and dogged devotion towards his new faith and employers. The zeal with which he tortures Bob suggests that he has to ardently prove to himself, to Bob, to his new faith, and to his employer that he has converted, which confirms his determination which is carried out through brutality.

Mussawi's personal grudge against Bob suggests both hate towards him, and perhaps towards himself, and also that his torture is seemingly devoid of a political agenda. The political undercurrent of his torture resides, however, both in his punishment of Bob and also in his desire for moral superiority and recognition for his beliefs. Judith Butler has located the desire for recognition as a fundamental

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[58] As Scarry argues, 'pain' has its etymological home in the Latin word *poena*, which also means 'punishment', which indicates that punishment stands in close relation to that which it inflicts, which is pain (Scarry 16).

characteristic within social relations (2004a 2), in which recognition or authority is reached through gaining respect, not through force (Arendt 45). Mussawi's desire for superiority and recognition is made tangible in his insistence on Bob calling him "Mussawi" instead of Jimmy, but it takes an extreme form by resolving to torture in order to achieve this. In fact, his whole act seems to circle this desire for recognition and respect that is demanded by extreme force instead of legitimately earned. Although Mussawi considers Bob an inferior infidel, he needs Bob to acknowledge and recognise his convictions and moral superiority.

When Bob subsequently refuses to comply and pesters Mussawi instead by calling him "Jimmy", decapitating Bob becomes an act to prove Mussawi is worthy of his new name and beliefs. The presence of the three men as his audience reinforces Mussawi's superior position, yet this position is only partially accomplished due to Bob's mockery. Although Bob seems to give in to the situation without resisting, his ostensibly voluntary submission to Mussawi can be seen as a clever strategy that linked to Mussawi's desire for recognition and superiority: knowing that he will never leave the kitchen alive, Bob's last recourse is inciting more frustration in Mussawi. The three-headed audience is then used by Mussawi to establish the ritual nature of Bob's death as public scaffolding.

To the spectator, Mussawi's attempt to decapitate Bob will be reminiscent of the beheadings of American or European journalists, agents, and suspected spies by Muslim fundamentalists (Devji, 90-91, 151).[59] In his desire to become a respected Muslim however, Mussawi's brutal violence and loss of self-control deviate from these orchestrated, ritualized, and recorded decapitations. His vigour and desire to be taken seriously turn him into a stereotypical embodiment of the savage Muslim terrorist. His subsequent reprimand by Hezbollah, and his rage and failed attempt at beheading Bob then, make explicit to the spectator Mussawi's 'wannabe' aspirations. These aspirations and the execution

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[59] See for an analysis of Jihadi's use of decapitation as a media strategy in the War on Terror Cook, and, in Dutch, Bahara.

thereof run counter to that of Al-Qaeda leader Al-Saleem in *Body of Lies*, who has rationally orchestrated the torture and death of a CIA agent.

Torture in Body of Lies

Body of Lies (Ridley Scott, 2008) stages a torture scene quite similar to that of *Syriana*. CIA operative Roger Ferris (Leonardo DiCaprio) operates between his superior, the untrustworthy and flippant Ed Hoffman (Russell Crowe), and the head of Jordanian Intelligence, the austere Hani Salaam (Mark Strong). His goal is to catch fictive Al-Qaeda leader Al-Saleem (Alon Abutbul) in Iraq, who is the instigator behind several fictive attacks on European and American soil. In his cat-and-mouse game with Al-Saleem, Roger becomes a puppet of Ed and Hani's conflicting beliefs and agendas, and his position resembles that of Bob. When Al-Qaeda abducts Roger's love interest and Iranian nurse Aisha (Golshifteh Farahani), Roger concedes to meeting Al-Saleem and offers himself in exchange. He is blindfolded and abducted to a secret location.

This scene opens when Roger is cuffed and hooded and violently dragged into a darkened area, presumably a cellar or a basement. A close-up frames Roger's feet tied to a chair. The camera cuts back to the long dark hallways lit by a flashlight with Al-Saleem approaching. The camera alternates between the approaching man who is accompanied by sinister extradiegetic music, and an extreme close-up of Roger's hands laying flat on a table. The metal door opens and the Al-Qaeda leader enters and walks towards Roger, who moves his head nervously and is now framed sitting behind a wooden desk. He is still hooded and wears a dark shirt. Behind him a black and golden flag is attached to the wall with text in Arab and a symbol on it. Al-Saleem, who wears a black turban, a black gown, and a white button-up shirt under his gown, sits down in front of Roger. The cellar is filled with several men, all of them turbaned, and some of the men's faces are covered in shawls. One of them has a camera on a tripod pointed towards Roger who sits in a spotlight. One of the men walks to Roger and with a sudden gesture removes the hood from his head.

Roger is greeted by Al-Saleem who returns his greeting in Arabic, and addresses him as "highness" or "sheik", but Al-Saleem

replies that he is only a servant. Roger asks him where the girl is, but is not answered. Instead, Al-Saleem tells Roger that he has been lying, which Roger denies. The camera oscillates between close-ups of Al-Saleem and Roger as they engage in a conversation about Roger's value: Roger asks him whether he has paid for him and Al-Saleem tells him, "not as much as he would have. Such a bargain for such a catch as you". Roger informs Al-Saleem that the CIA does not negotiate and that there will be no exchanges, but Al-Saleem answers that the value of the catch lies in Roger being a CIA agent. Al-Saleem proclaims that "in this world there is enough poverty and frustration and anger and passion. There will never be a shortage of martyrs." To which Roger responds, "these men are dispensable to you. They blow themselves up in the name of Allah. There is no place in the Qu'ran for the murder of innocent people". Al-Saleem then recites a passage from the Qu'ran: "Do not say that those slain in the name of God are dead. They are alive but you are not aware of them."[60] While he recites Al-Saleem looks back at his men behind him, one finger pointed in the air like a school teacher, and then back at Roger, who responds with disdain, "So you misinterpret the one book you believe in. But are you pure, or are you just as corrupt as the capitalist Westerners that you despise? To me you are slaves. You are slaves to the Saudi oil sheiks and to the Wahhabi oil money that funds you. But when that oil money runs out, my friend, you will all disappear into the ashes of history".

Realizing that Roger will refuse to read any statement and become a martyr, Al-Saleem crumples up the piece of paper with the words Roger was supposed to recite before the camera and throws it away. Al-Saleem continues, "What I need from you I already have. You know what that camera is for? It is not for this, this is just intermission. It is for what comes after this, for what comes now". Al-Saleem inquires whether Roger is comfortable and walks towards what looks like a table where, in extreme close up, a range of knives and other sinister tools are set up. He picks up a hammer and walks towards Roger while asking again, "Can I make you more comfortable?" Framed from a

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[60] Qu-ran, Chapter 2 (Al-Baqara), verse 154.

location behind Roger, Al-Saleem stands immediately before him, raises the hammer, and lets it fall with force. A split second frame shows the hammer crushing Roger's left-hand pinkie finger from above before he screams, and then a close-up of Roger's face expressing his pain. He bangs his head forward on the table, and another close-up of his hands frames the bloodied little finger. Roger manages to proclaim to Al-Saleem that "he is in the light", indicating that the CIA keeps an eye on him and knows his whereabouts. Al-Saleem responds by showing Roger that he is being recorded, after which Roger spits in his face. Al-Saleem wipes it off and continues, "What do you think is happening here Mr Ferris? Do you think the cavalry is coming for you? No one is coming for you". He lowers his face to look Roger in the eyes and proclaims, "Welcome to Guantanamo". A close-up of Roger shows him as he breathes heavily and looks up at Al-Saleem, who then suddenly lets the hammer drop again with great force. Another shot from above shows for a second how his left-hand ring finger is also smashed before the camera turns to Roger's face as he again screams in pain.

Al-Saleem then walks away from Roger and throws the hammer onto the floor. He gives orders in Arabic and disappears down the long hall, accompanied by some of his men carrying a flashlight. Back in the cellar, Roger, who lies with his head on the table, is violently pulled up by his hair. His eyes are closed, he continues moaning, and his assailant in turn spits in his face. He is beaten. Several men cut him loose and, after another close-up of his bloodied hand, lay him down onto the table, face up. Roger violently resists and the struggle he engages in pulls up his shirt and leaves his waist naked. As Roger is put down on the table, the camera on the tripod records him. Shots then alternate between Roger's face and a close-up of the man who spat in his face, who recites, "In the name of God, the gracious, the merciful, fight the infidels. They have no beliefs. This is the punishment for the non-believer. I would advise you to pray. There is no need to resist".

During this recitation, Roger has a flashback to the scene in which he was present in a holding cell and the witness of the torture and death of a Muslim prisoner. As Roger lies there, he remembers this

moment and realizes he will similarly be tortured to death.[61] When Roger's head is about to be cut off by the recanting man, a loud explosion sounds and the 'cavalry' arrives after all. Several helmed soldiers storm in and shoot at the Al-Qaeda followers. Parallel editing indicates that Al-Saleem is also caught outside. Then Hani Salaam, the head of Jordanian Intelligence, enters the cellar, looks at Roger in earnestly and switches off the camera.

Star potential: The recording of torture

Bob's disadvantaged position was emphasized by the camera's position near the floor, filming him from below. Unlike Bob, Roger's position is frequently made pivotal in the frame, and with Al-Saleem seated on a chair he and Roger are placed at the same height. By alternating between close-ups of Roger and close-ups of Al-Saleem, the men are positioned on equal terms and an overview of the room is provided. Where Bob positions himself as submissive and has no time to respond, Roger refuses to cooperate and betray himself, and resists his capturers until the last moment. Additionally, the dialogue between Roger and Al-Saleem, in which Roger spits in his face and accuses Al-Saleem of being evil and a murderer, suggests that Roger has more agency than Bob. Ultimately, this agency to respond is temporarily provided to him by Al-Saleem, who remains in control of himself and of the situation.

Bob's point-of-view shots and his limited perspective make tangible his precarious and uncomfortable situation, and his perspective aligns the spectator to his position. This scene in *Body of Lies*, however, apart from the flashbacks does not present Roger's internal focalisation, but predominantly frames him as the object of focalisation. Although the close-ups of Roger's tormented face indicate his intense pain, the dialogue between him and Al-Saleem, in which verbal rhetoric is intertwined with violent acts, is more lucid in

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[61] During the torture scene Roger has another flashback, which is less relevant for understanding this scene and therefore not emphasised here. This flashback illustrates that Roger recognises someone in the room whom he had previously met and who works with Hani Salaam. Roger assumes this man has betrayed Hani Salaam and in order to regain his advantage and buy time, he points this out to Al-Saleem, who ignores this piece of information.

expressing his ideas and frustration. In addition, *Body of Lies*' torture scene exposes new information in the plot in which Roger's experience of the situation is made secondary.

Roger as the object of focalisation rather than as focaliser is accentuated by the shots in which he is recorded and mediated through Al-Saleem's camera on a tripod. As in *Unthinkable*, the video footage of Roger accentuates the situation as a scripted role-play that is performed for an audience, Al-Saleem's men. The furnished room with Roger in the spotlight, the décor with the flag on the wall behind him, the 'torture tools', and the chairs opposite one other again turn the dark chamber into a stage. Unlike Yusuf, however, this video mediation transforms Roger as both a victim and a 'star' of the scene, which is underscored by the time he is given to respond to Al-Saleem.

Recording Roger seems intended to demoralize the CIA, as well as to archive and distribute the evidence of his enemy's physical and mental humiliation. The suggestion that the spectacle is more important than Roger's death is confirmed by Al-Saleem's departure from the scene before Roger is murdered. He crushes Roger's fingers, but lets his men do the 'dirty work' that remains. His early departure, however, indicates that Al-Saleem does not derive pleasure from watching (and re-watching on screen) Roger's planned decapitation.[62] By not only beheading but by *recording* Roger's torture and decapitation on video, seasoned Al-Saleem moves beyond Mussawi's zeal, which is spurred by personal grudges and a desire for recognition. The intended beheading is also reminiscent of the orchestrated and ritualized beheadings of kidnapped agents or journalists by Al-Qaeda, but the element of recording is employed to inspire and impress followers (Devji 2005, 90-91; Cook).

Secondly, by using the camera Al-Saleem transmits a firm message pertaining to his powerful position. The camera becomes a crucial aspect in Al-Saleem's punitive torture, which is similar to

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[62] Susan Sontag (2005) and Slavoj Žižek (2008b, 171-177) have pointed to use of the camera in Abu Ghraib as a means of increasing the 'fun' of torture for the assailants, as well as to increase distance between torturer and tortured. Al-Saleem's recording, however, is motivated for political rather than directly personal purposes.

Mussawi's; it is inflicted as a form of punishment for crimes, not intended to force the characters to *confess* crimes. Al-Saleem does not desire a political or economic exchange of some sort, and the motivation of "information" is not introduced, not even as a masquerade for pain and punishment. Similar to Bob's torture, Roger's torture is presented as "punishment for the non-believer," as one of Al-Saleem's followers proclaims, as retaliation for CIA's presence in the Middle East and for the CIA's inhumane and extra-legal treatment of detainees in Guantanamo Bay. Al-Saleem's remark, "Welcome to Guantanamo", only briefly refers to the detainment centre, but it acutely addresses the brutality of the US in its detainee program and is significant in light of Roger's capture as CIA agent.

In addition to the predominantly punitive nature of torture and Al-Saleem's remark about Guantanamo, a crucial difference between the situation of torture in these two films as compared to the situations presented by *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable* pertains to the extra-legal nature of Ammar and Yusuf's torture. Dan and H stand above the law and can torture their victims with impunity, yet Mussawi and Al-Saleem, who also torture their victims, are punished for their actions by Hezbollah and by the Jordanian Intelligence Service. The intrusion of these two parties indicates that the spaces in which Bob and Roger are tortured are not extra-legal, as is the case in *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable.* Ironically, Mussawi refers to Bob's status of Prisoner of War (POW), calling upon the protection such prisoners are guaranteed under the Geneva Convention.[63] His use of the term assumes an actual war, whereas the War on Terror is evoked in a predominantly rhetorical manner by *Syriana*, which does not stage active combat. Mussawi thus reflects on this twofold conception of the War on Terror and the extra-legal status under which suspects of terrorism are interrogated, who, like Ammar and Yusuf, "no longer exist".

Al-Saleem's use of the camera has a third function; it is not only employed to inspire and impress followers, but also to shock the Western public and to make the CIA witness their agent's death in a

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[63] For the requirements a POW must meet in order to be considered such, see the entry "prisoner of war (POW)" in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 2015.

media spectacle. The recordings are so a product of what Jon McKenzie has termed (resonating Foucault and Guy Debord) "a global society of the spectacle of the scaffold" (McKenzie 340). This term evokes the spectacular media and film images that pervade daily life, as well as the use of the scaffold to punish criminals in public spaces. This merging of a media-saturated society and public scaffolding, McKenzie argues, is actualized in Al-Qaeda's footage of performing and publicising assassinations (340-341).[64] Further, this mediated scaffolding is readily reproduced in cinematic productions like *Body of Lies* that appropriate and reference real decapitations.[65]

In this sense, Al-Saleem's role-play is not personal, nor a singular event, but marks an on-going violent 'dialogue' with the West. Yet using the camera as a political statement also makes the spectator aware of the underlying politics of Roger's torture. Disciplined and trained for their work as CIA agents, both Roger and Bob's principle crime is ultimately their ambivalent position: on the one hand, as agents of a Western capitalist regime deemed malicious, and on the other hand, as infiltrators who attempt to blend in with Muslim society, culture, and values for undercover operations. Although considered inferior by their torturers, Bob and Roger are not dehumanized or animalized in a series of abusive acts, but they are punished (with the aim of execution) for their secular and immoral 'Western' lifestyle and their efforts to infiltrate. In addition to this personal punishment, they are used by their captors to make a political statement.

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[64] McKenzie stresses that the global, technological, and mediated component of the public scaffold (or "media shock") is not an absolute break with any historical precedent, but that the incorporation of the historical connotation with the scaffold implies and suggests continuity and anachronicity. Devji argues that the particular practice of beheadings and spectacular attacks is novel, however, and has spread like a fashion by means of the use of media (2005, 90-91).

[65] The use of beheadings as a tactic in real life is an important element for creating the image of a savage Muslim culture in cinema. A beheading occurs in *A Mighty Heart* (about the assassination of Daniel Pearl, Michael Winterbottom, 2007) and a near-beheading in *The Kingdom* (Peter Berg, 2007). In *A Mighty Heart* beheading is used by villains to make political statements, but the spectator never sees the actual tape and is relieved from having to see the abuse directly.

Double standards: 'Justified' and 'unfair' torture

Although Mussawi and Al-Saleem believe in the justness of their torture and give explanatory cues for their punishment, for the Western spectator Bob and Roger's torture will not seem justified.[66] Instead, Mussawi and Al-Saleem are portrayed in two distinct ways as Muslim villains: Al-Saleem as a stereotypical fundamentalist Al-Qaeda leader, who, due to his position, has his victim tortured for him, and Mussawi as a new convert who aims to become a genuine fundamentalist, but overcompensates for his desire for recognition with rage, thereby re-inscribing the stereotype of the brutal fundamentalist.

The features used to construct such a stereotypical image pertain to props, such as clothing and lighting, used to portray the 'non-white' villains such as Mussawi and Al-Saleem as darker than the protagonists. As such, the emphasis is placed on the Muslims' ethnic otherness, while visually inscribing 'evil' into their character (Dyer 1997, 45-70, 84-102).[67] Al-Saleem and his men wear dark outfits and black turbans (remember that Ammar in *Zero Dark Thirty* was, on the contrary, aesthetically accentuated with his white shirt). While Al-Saleem's stature however demands a certain respect, Mussawi conversely becomes a caricature of villainy.

Ironically, Mussawi is played by British actor Mark Strong, who also stars as Hani Salaam in *Body of Lies*, and as a CIA executive in *Zero Dark Thirty*. Strong's Italian heritage allows him to easily pass for an undefined Arab, and because his character Mussawi could still be mistaken as CIA, he is not depicted as a stereotypical Muslim villain in terms of physical appearance; rather, this is made explicit through his behaviour. His 'evilness' is accentuated by his impulsive and brutal violence, and also by his towering over Bob, which stresses his betrayal of the CIA and his ideas about Western infidels.

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[66] Again, when I use the terms "Western audience" or "Western viewer" I assume a non-Muslim, normatively white audience.

[67] Dyer uses the term "non-white" to express the category of those people against whom white people are positioned. He traces the significance of "whiteness" and the significance of the hue and colour white used in visual culture (by for instance use of lighting and over-exposure) to indicate which protagonists are morally superior or more civilized than others. As such, any racially organized iconography provided allows the spectator to quickly determine good and evil (1997,11, 44).

In addition to physical appearance, Mussawi's and Al-Saleem's torture methods underscore their barbarism. Unmotivated by an imminent threat, attacks, or a ticking bomb but rather by personal conviction and punishment, Al-Saleem and Mussawi's torture is depicted as the 'unfair' and "sadistic torture" (Mayer 2007; Wisnewski 8) of fundamentalist brutes that is devoid of the 'urgency' or justification that characterizes torture by CIA agents.[68] Not only does the different motivation in a superficial reading justify torture in *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable* but not in *Syriana* and *Body of Lies*, but it expresses itself in different types of torture: interrogational torture – an ostensibly less atrocious form of abuse – versus mutilation as a form of punishment.

As Edward Said argued as early as 1983, Arabs have been frequently portrayed as stereotypical figures in history, yet not always or necessarily as dangerous. This way of depicting Muslims fits into a longer tradition of stereotyping, but has gained a specific character after 9/11 as part of War on Terror rhetoric, in which Muslims have been conceptualized as terrorists and barbarians (Boletsi 1-2; Nickels et al.). In cinematic depictions of the years following 9/11 these stereotypes are similarly perceptible. Mussawi and Al-Saleem's barbarian disposition and their 'unfair', savage violence can be explained as a consequence – the logical outcome – of their inherently barbarous culture. This is, as Mahmood Mamdani has argued, a manifestation of "culture talk" that assumes Western – American and European – countries are capable of creating and transforming their culture, while Muslim culture is deemed petrified and museumized, and their preference for 'unfair' torture to 'justified' torture stems from this background (766-767).[69] The cinematic depiction of two types of culture – Western progressive and Eastern museumized – in films with

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[68] Portraying the figure of the villain as practicing unfair violence in Hollywood film, as Jane Mayer indicates, is not a new phenomenon, but the ethnicity of the villain has varied over time (2007).

[69] Mamdani explains that, although this conception of a culture's 'essence' became dominant in the late 80s- early 90s, the Western ethnocentric view on culture returns in a different form after 9/11. Further, as Maria Boletsi notes, the culturalization of the post-9/11 political conflict goes hand-in-hand with a moralization of the global conflicts that resulted from 9/11 (Boletsi 2).

a Western perspective on Muslim culture and religion explains the difference in motivation for the torture used by CIA and of Muslim terrorists, and the way in which the latter category is stereotyped.

This is not to say that CIA agents prefer non-violent dialogue, or that they do not secretly enjoy inflicting torture (such as H), or feel they are not responsible for the consequences of torture methods (such as Dan).[70] In *Unthinkable*, H's torture is as gruesome and vivisectionist as the nail extracting, finger-crushing scenes in which Bob and Roger are on the verge of being butchered. Although *Zero Dark Thirty*'s torture is not vivisectionist and ostensibly portrayed as more justifiable and acceptable – and predominantly off-screen – it is no less morally questionable as the less aesthetically appealing torture inflicted by Al-Saleem and Mussawi. Additionally, while Dan and H's need for information was credited as the only motivation, upon closer inspection in both cases their torture was fuelled by punitive elements, as Dan's abusive role-play and H's vivisectionist torture showed.[71]

Moreover, despite personal motivations, a potent political agenda underlies Mussawi's and Al-Saleem torture: retaliation for CIA/US crimes. With his remark, "Welcome to Guantanamo" Al-Saleem points out inhumane treatment of suspected terrorists by Americans, while at the same time lowering himself to the same level as the American torturers at Guantanamo. Al-Saleem's remark nonetheless indicates a political 'necessity' for torture on his part. Mussawi's rage similarly suggests a true and founded disappointment in his former employer. On the one hand, he is staged as a caricature savage terrorist to resemble that which he thinks pertains to the punishment of infidels. His eagerness, however, stems from his previous embeddedness in

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[70] Žižek argues that a certain comfort, or *jouissance*, can be derived from "doing one's job" in a smoothly functioning bureaucratic system, which absolves one of personal responsibility, even when the actions one has to undertake are gruesome and violent. Žižek mentions the Nazi system and Adolf Eichmann in particular as examples (2008a, 69-70).

[71] Grønstad has raised awareness of the 'aesthetic fallacy': violence that is portrayed artfully, tastefully, or predominantly off-screen could sanction ticking bomb scenarios of questionable morality, while scenarios that are *as* morally questionable yet that depict aesthetically less-appealing violence are automatically rejected (2008, 39-40). My analysis shows that this is not the case for the case studies depicting torture.

Western culture and politics, and his desire for recognition and dominance is interwoven with an opposition to perceived Western moral dominance based on experience.

When comparing the formal means and narrative structure of the four films' torture scenes, three major differences strike the eye: firstly, the difference between the motivations of gaining information and inflicting punishment. Secondly, this difference structures the 'shape' of torture ('justified' and 'unfair'). Upon closer look, however, both 'types' of torture analysed disintegrate the binary distinction between justified and necessary on the one hand, and unfair and punitive on the other. Thirdly, although Mussawi and Al-Saleem substantiate their use of torture with a political motivation, H's and Dan's torture is likely to be perceived as more justifiable by the Western viewer. Although their torture is substantiated with and motivated by political criticism, the torturers in *Syriana* and *Body of Lies* are depicted as more barbaric than those in *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable*, which suggests that Muslims are brutal and prefer punitive, ritualized violence to debate.

The torture scenes do not stand on their own, and when considered as a segment in the narrative their function in the plot changes our perspective of the films' political agendas, as well as of the use of torture therein. In *Syriana*, the seeming binary between torturer and tortured is problematized. In addition, not only is the trope of the barbarian Muslim terrorist is questioned, but also that of the white, masculine, and morally superior hero. In chapter 1 I analysed the intricate position of female intelligence agents associated with torture. In the next sections I will explore the way in which *Syriana* and *Body of Lies* cast their protagonists Bob and Roger as antiheroes and will briefly discuss the reception of their roles as antiheroes subjected to torture. This analysis allows me to further investigate the extent to which *Syriana* can be regarded as a 'critical' film that plays with normative gender and ethnicity tropes associated with torture, and that poses a self-reflexive critique on US political and economic interference in the Middle East.

2. The scenes' locations and functions in the plot

In *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable*, torture becomes a red threat; Ammar's abuse in *Zero Dark Thirty* is an embedded scene that particularly marks Maya's initiation into advanced interrogation practices, and also positions Ammar, the terrorist, as a side character. Yusuf's torture, and hence the interaction between Yusuf, H, and Helen, is presented as the plot's pivotal theme. In *Body of Lies*, Roger's torture by Al-Saleem is accentuated and framed as a climax in the plot; it seems only a matter of time before Roger is caught and tortured by Al-Saleem, whom he has been looking for the entire film. Further, since the scene is one of the final ones in the film, Roger's subsequent release is anticipated and does not come as a surprise. The interplay between Roger and Al-Saleem is deferred for the sake of plot development and conclusiveness; the scene in which Roger is tortured is a culmination of events and needs a dialogue to express conflicting beliefs concerning religion and politics. As such, their dialogue, rather than rage or betrayal, becomes a pivotal component.

Not only does 'unfair' torture occur in the film, however, but so too does 'justified' torture. When tortured, Roger has a flashback in which, in the film's first few scenes which introduce him as an agent operative in the Middle East, he is present during the beating of an apparently Muslim man in Sammara, Iraq. A medium close-up of Roger's face reveals his discomfort when witnessing the man's torture. His unease suggests he has issues with the use of torture – a sign of his moral disposition, or his incapability of doing anything about it. These shots of Roger's face alternate rapidly with shots of the man, cuffed and blindfolded, being beaten with a baseball bat. The scene is short and the man soon succumbs, but it derives its significance from the previous scene that frames a suicide attack in Manchester. Although the tortured man is not interrogated, the viewer can assume the man has a connection to the terrorist network responsible for the attack and is therefore tortured. The film thus starts with a torture scene and, in an elliptical fashion, ends with a torture scene. The discrepancy between the man's beating and death and Roger's torture and rescue is blunt, as

it suggests that Roger, as American CIA agent, does not 'deserve' this torture but the assumed terrorist in the first scene does.

Unlike *Body of Lies*, *Zero Dark Thirty*, and *Unthinkable*, *Syriana* does not revolve around a paranoid, accelerated 'ticking bomb' scenario in which terrorists have to be captured and neutralized. In this sense, *Syriana*'s focus on the consequences of global illegitimate politics and economics is more prominent, and although arms trafficking – by the US as much as by the Middle East – can be regarded as a form of terrorism, the War on Terror is less significant a theme than in *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Unthinkable*, and *Body of Lies*. The focus on global politics rather than on fighting terrorism translates to the position of the torture scene in *Syriana* as mid-narrative instead of as a climactic finale. Bob's torture proves to be a catalyst for crucial plot developments and his rivalry with Mussawi is of secondary importance. As a result, the scene is abrupt and relatively short (around four minutes).

The torture scenes of *Syriana* and *Body of Lies* both potently reflect as well as determine Bob and Roger's position as protagonists. In the next section I will illustrate how both films stage their protagonists as antiheroes in a manner that determines how the viewer is to perceive the films' political agenda.

The negotiation of white moral superiority

The torture scene in *Syriana* stresses Bob's subservient position as a disillusioned agent caught in the grand scheme of foreign affairs, and in particular as one positioned between the CIA and Middle Eastern parties in the investigation of the stolen missile. Where Bob passively undergoes his torture, Roger's status as star of the scenes is reinforced by his resistance, the video camera, the 'cavalry', as Al-Salaam notes, that comes to rescue him, his 'undeserved' torture, and especially by his ability to recover from the abuse. Despite the finger crushing torture, Roger manages to continue conversing with Al-Saleem, and the excruciating pain that his face betrays does not prevent him from maintaining his consciousness and rationality. When the next scene shows Roger hospitalized and talking with Hani Salaam, he is both energetic and angry. Like Ammar's quick recovery in *Zero Dark Thirty*,

for the sake of narrative and plot development the torture has to remain an interesting viewing experience; allowing the victims to speak and walk despite gruelling torture has narrative purposes, for the torture would take up too much time in the plot otherwise.[72]

Similarly, Bob quickly regains his wits, as shortly after "he's striding through customs with a couple of plasters round his fingertips" (Bradshaw 2006). Despite their gruesome content and suggestive sounds, the finger crushing and nail extraction scenes are visualised just enough, so that unlike *Unthinkable*'s excruciating scenes, the alternating rapid shots between the men's grimacing faces and their fingers only suggest the pain Bob and Roger must suffer, and allows the plot to continue (*Syriana*) or end (*Body of Lies*). Bob's subservience is, however, far less heroic and his mockery of Mussawi and their previous working relationship designates a complicated entanglement between the two men that is less antagonistic than between Roger and Al-Saleem. This entanglement between characters returns throughout *Syriana* and the film can be seen to incorporate a moral grey zone that is not visible in *Body of Lies*.

Despite their extraordinary recovery from torture, Roger and Bob are not presented as heroes, but as antiheroes (Brustein 31), a term that has gained a new meaning after 9/11 in "post-heroic" narratives (Burgoyne 2012a, 8). These narratives, which emerge around 2007/2008, reflect a growing awareness of the side effects of the War on Terror and are increasingly self-conscious and critical about the use of violence and weaponry.

Two branches characterize this shift from patriotic to post-heroic narratives: one category paves the way for narratives that depict American torturers, as presented in the first chapter of this thesis. This category addresses the legal and moral parameters of torture, but it also includes films that 'outsource' their torture activities and have

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[72] Other good examples of miraculous recoveries can be found in *First Blood II* and *Casino Royale*, in which Rambo and James Bond are subjected to torture (Rejali 2012, 222).

Muslims conveniently tortured by their 'own' people to avoid the suggestion that 'we', Westerners, are the torturers.[73]

The films in the second branch accentuate the side effects of war and violence for the vulnerable, exposed body, which as Robert Burgoyne argues, assembles many War on Terror films into a particular "body genre" (2012a, 12). At the same time, these films present "an implicit critique of the distance – moral and physical – of remote targeting and weaponry" (ibid.).[74] Some of these War on Terror films are inevitably more about war and warfare, while others are more about ticking bombs and torture. Yet both branches depict mutual bodily exposure and vulnerability on both sides of the conflict. *Syriana* and *Body of Lies* fall into this last category, but they combine this accent on bodily vulnerability with torturing Muslims. However, the trope of the Muslim villain and the theme of CIA agents subjected to 'unfair' torture becomes rare after 2008: portraying the Muslim as stereotypically 'evil' is one thing, but dovetailing this depiction with 'unfair' torture, as is the case in *Body of Lies*, is another.[75]

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[73] Such as *The War Within* (2005), *Rendition* (2007)*, The Kingdom* (2007), and the recent *Rosewater* (2014).

[74] There are many cinematic forms that, as Burgoyne notes (2012a 7), can be described as a 'body genre'. A particular conception of the term is coined by Linda Williams (1991) in her study on horror, melodrama, and pornography. In relation to the War on Terror body genre, Burgoyne sees a decisive difference between films like *Apocalypse Now* (on the Vietnam War) and *Saving Private Ryan* (on World War Two) and War on Terror films 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" (2012a 8). It can be argued, however, that the rhetorical War on Terror, that kick-started days after 9/11, presupposed a similar ideology of total, global war. This new grand narrative was characterized by President G.W. Bush's statement "Either you're with us or against us" (Bush 30), suggesting that every country on Earth should be involved. The War on Terror films referred to by Burgoyne see a waning of this grand narrative rhetoric.

[75] Around the same time, James Bond's *Casino Royale* (Martin Campbell, 2006), which depicts the torture of James Bond, and *Rescue Dawn* (Werner Herzog, 2006), which depicts the torture of a POW during the Vietnam War, make use of the 'American being tortured by the villain' trope. In recent productions, the trope of the Muslim terrorist seems (at least temporarily) exhausted, and the terrorist is paramilitary or pertaining to a corrupt government (*White House Down* [2013] and *24*), from another ethnicity (*Olympus Has Fallen* [2013], *Quantum of Solace* [2008], and *Skyfall* [2012]), or white American (*Unthinkable*, *Homeland*).

The figure of the antihero is part of the post-heroic narrative that accentuates the body at risk and the antiheroic qualities of its protagonists. [76] Bob and Roger's positions as the pawns of uncompromising, egocentric organisations makes them manipulated dupes of parties and forces beyond their control, and they no longer fully belong to any organization or group. The way in which they are forced to compromise their masculinity, and their precarious positions as outsiders breaks with the depiction of the masculine antihero as successfully operating autonomously. The cowboy in the classic Western thanks his valour and antiheroism precisely by moving between parties, while representing the best of both worlds: 'going native' (Native American) as well as restoring colonial law and justice by operating outside of it (Verstraten 2009, 175). In a contemporary format, the Vietnam veteran action antihero of the 80s and 90s "patriot narratives," (Jeffords 331), and of the hero in patriotic narratives released shortly after 9/11 (Markert 32, 314) also function autonomously and outside the law to successfully fight threats and injustice (Jeffords 333-335).

Bob and Roger, however, neither embody this conventional masculine valour, nor do they operate succesfully outside of law or organizations.[77] In *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable*, the CIA and FBI agents also function outside of law to catch terrorists, but are respected by their organization and are succesful in their jobs. Bob's long career, conversely, has left him disillusioned and morose. With his inability to practice political discretion he agitates his superiors, and his assignment to kill prince Nasir in the Persian Gulf is an attempt to keep him away from headquarters. After Mussawi's betrayal of the CIA, they

[76] Robert Brustein witnessed the rise of the antihero in the late 50s. The antihero would, however, temporarily be replaced by the reinstatement of the masculine hero in the Reagan Era and again shortly enjoy revival after 9/11. Burgoyne argues that the Hollywood War on Terror 'body genre' connects the vulnerable and exposed body to new questions about antiheroism. Dan Hassler-Forest (2011), Slavoj Žižek (2012a) and Todd McGowan (2012, 127) notice a similar antihero movement in post-9/11 superhero narratives, but explain the status of antiheroism, its cause, and its implications differently.

[77] The antihero of the post-heroic, post-9/11 narrative can best be compared to the antiheroic Vietnam War veteran of the 70s, who was traumatized by war and felt duped by the American government (Gosline 94-95).

have Bob, who is recovering from torture, investigated and scapegoat him to pacify those involved. While fighting to make his way back into the CIA, the man responsible for his removal tells him, "Your entire career you've been used, and you've probably never even known what for".

Although staged as a 'star' of his own torture scene, Roger has to negotiate his autonomy as an intelligence agent in favour of Ed and Hani's conflicting agendas. He clashes with his boss Ed, a Texan conservative, who does not hide his low esteem of other ethnicities and cultural diversity. Hani, by contrast, presents himself as a kind gentleman but uses Roger as live bait to find Al-Saleem. Roger defies orders and operates autonomously in an effort to safeguard political stability, but realizes that the man he has come to trust most uses his torture as bait to catch the big Al-Qaeda fish. However, while Roger's rescue by Hani Salaam indicates his protection by Salaam's intelligence agency, Bob's antiheroism exceeds that of Roger: he does not have similar guarantees as he is banned and excluded from political protection, and operates autonomously against his will. His status comes close to that of Ammar and Yusuf's status of "bare life", the extra-legal status of he who "no longer exists". As a banned subject, Bob is included in the system by his very exclusion from law and its protection (Agamben 1998, 8-12).

The difference between how *Syriana* and *Body of Lies* construct their antiheroic protagonist, I argue, is a crucial one: their antiheroic image comprises both Bob and Roger's intricate positions as pawns, and also their respective physical appearances. Together, I argue, these two become significant indicators of how the spectator is to perceive the diverging political agendas of these two films: while Bob's antiheroic character poses an explicit critique of the US interference in other countries' political and economic policies, which result in violent practices, torture, and death, *Body of Lies* uses a veneer of antiheroism to justify the hunt for terrorists in the Middle East.

Apart from their positions as pawns and outsiders, another way in which Bob and Roger's masculine heroism is negotiated is by means of their looks. George Clooney in his role of Bob, a grizzled veteran with

a pudgy waistline "has been giving his handsome lessons a miss" (Bradshaw 2006).[78] He has grown a 'Muslim' beard and speaks Farsi, but he is also a fast-food-consuming, sombre man. His long stay in the Middle East as an undercover agent has estranged him from Western social codes of conduct and office conventions. Roger similarly speaks Arabic, wears long, local gowns, and has a unkempt beard, but unlike Bob, does so in order to capture terrorists without raising too much suspicion. He prefers working in the Middle East to working in the United States, and this preference is emphasized throughout. While his boss Ed grows an obsession with killing 'bad guys', Roger falls in love with an Iranian nurse and invests time and energy into becoming part of her world, an endeavour that is often sabotaged by the strict regulations and etiquette between men and unmarried women. When Hani Salaam – whom Roger confides in and respects tremendously – compliments him by saying he is secretly an Arab because he speaks the language and respects his elders, the compliment is readily accepted.

Through Bob and Roger's appropriation of these traits connoting Arab ethnicity the films' consciously rearticulate the cultural binaries as presented in the scenes of torture, and undermine the trope of the white American male hero as opposed to the Muslim villain. Like a contemporary 'Lawrence of Arabia', Roger and Bob each borrow and practice aspects of Arab culture according to their needs at particular moments. At the same time, they are reminded through the use of torture that accentuates their otherness and reminds them of their American background, that they could never blend in with the cultural and moral codes of Muslim society.

Apart from illustrating how Bob and Roger prefer aspects of Middle Eastern culture to that of the US, the appropriation of these ethnic traits are important for another reason. This reason concerns the way in which a perception of George Clooney as Bob and Leonardo DiCaprio as Roger in the narratives works in tandem with the way in

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[78] Brustein sees "puffy-faced and tending to fat" as physical characteristics of the antihero and antiheroine (29). Richard Dyer has pointed to the relation between masculine, powerfully-built bodies and mental and social superiority (2007, 310-311). Bob and Roger's unkempt physical appearance, which occasionally seems to suggest Arab dress is slovenly, accentuates their statuses as antiheroes.

which these actors thwart their image as handsome film stars outside the narrative. A star image, according to Richard Dyer, consists of what we refer to as his or her 'image', made up of screen roles and stage-managed public appearances, yet also, he argues, "of images of the manufacture of that 'image' and of the real person who is the site or occasion of it (2004, 7-8)".[79] Reading stars as images thus includes interpreting features of a particular performance onscreen with other 'texts' that relate to the star and that construct his or her public image. Similar to the way Samuel L. Jackson's role in *Unthinkable* was partially determined and interpreted by his other screen roles, in the cases of George Clooney (Bob) and Leonardo DiCaprio (Roger), audience foreknowledge of previous screen roles as well as public appearances together construct the image of these stars (Dyer 1994, 2, 121 and 2004, 4), which proves to be a crucial factor in interpreting the films' political undercurrents.

Where Samuel L. Jackson's other screen roles were characterized by dark humour, wittiness, and understatements, Clooney and DiCaprio have performed a fair number of roles that were, at least initially, defined by their good looks.[80] After these roles, both pursued ridding themselves of the 'heartthrob' label by playing more serious parts.[81] DiCaprio's real-life appearances as an environmental and animal activist and a UN climate change ambassador (D'Zurilla 2014), reaffirmed by appearances in politically-engaged films like *Blood Diamond* (Edward Zwick, 2006) add to his image as a seasoned actor to be taken seriously.

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[79] Dyer uses an intertextual approach to determine stars as phenomena of production and consumption, as star images that are made, read, and consumed. The star is such an effect or product of the cinema system and of his or her own stage-managed public appearances, that the spectator will take both aspects into account in tandem.

[80] DiCaprio achieved fame for playing the part of Romeo in Baz Luhrmann's *Romeo + Juliet* (1996), subsequently for his role in the epic and romantic *Titanic* (James Cameron, 1997), and for wandering the screen in swimming trunks in *The Beach* (Danny Boyle, 2000).

[81] DiCaprio has associated himself with Christopher Nolan and Quentin Tarantino, and was most notably engaged in a series of productions with director Martin Scorsese: *Gangs of New York* (2002), *The Aviator* (2004), *The Departed* (2006), *Shutter Island* (2010), and *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2013).

Like DiCaprio, George Clooney has carefully rid himself of his Dr Ross ('ER') image by combining his appearance as a smart gentleman with serious performances (e.g. *Michael Clayton* [Tony Gilroy, 2007]), and his roles as a producer with an extensive background of humanitarian work and political activism (Flock 2012). Although starring in satirical war films like *Three Kings* (David O. Russell, 1999), [82] which simultaneously rearticulate American foreign interventions and mock Clooney's fame, *Syriana* is the first role in which Clooney has deliberately made himself 'unattractive'. Notably, as a signifier of Clooney's stardom, all reviews of *Syriana* mention Clooney's physical transformation in praise or in mockery,[83] and all translate this appearance as an indication of the film's expression of serious political messages. Similarly, DiCaprio's transformation into "the acceptable face of CIA black ops complete with a bum-fluff beard (signifying wisdom) and pensive frown (suggestive of Growing Doubts)" (Brooks 2008), is mocked as well as considered contrived, but reviews express this as a sign of the film's serious political undertone.[84]

Clooney and DiCaprio thus underwent both a transformation from heartthrobs to serious and political personas in their stage-managed public appearances, and also in their screen roles. Although, as stars, they do not have access to real political power, they can have, as Dyer notes, political or reactionary significance (1994, 7). Particularly in *Syriana* and *Body of Lies*, their current 'image' bestows on the films an aura of authenticity (Dyer 2004, 11) as Clooney and DiCaprio's looks and roles become more credulous and relatable. By accentuating their disadvantageous positions – Davids against the

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[82] Some have argued that satirical war films like *Three Kings* would no longer be possible after 9/11, but *The Men Who Stare at Goats* (Grant Heslov, 2009) and films like the British production *Four Lions* (Chris Morris, 2010) prove otherwise. These films were made, however, during the Obama administration, when films about the War on Terror became more nuanced and self-reflexive.

[83] Peter Travers (2005), Jeremiah Kipp (2005), and Peter Bradshaw (2006) interpret Clooney's effort to make himself less attractive for a political plot as a paradoxical form of 'macho pride'.

[84] Brooks' review of *Body of Lies* resonates with reviewers Philip French and A.O. Scott, who mock Leonardo DiCaprio, Russell Crowe (as Ed Hoffman), and director Ridley Scott. (Dutch newspapers, I noticed, were considerably less preoccupied with the actors' physical transformation in both films).

Goliath of world politics and Al-Qaeda – rather than their looks, Clooney and DiCaprio become vulnerable and genuine characters. Apart from suggesting that the spectator should take these films with genuine actors and its political themes seriously, Clooney and DiCaprio's 'commonness' diminishes the line between the political reality of the spectator and the antihero in politically sensitive plots (deWaard and Tait 154; Brustein 28).[85]

As the figures of the cowboy and soldier or veteran indicate, heroes are conventionally men, yet this conceptualization of Clooney and DiCaprio sheds yet more light on the role of Maya (Jessica Chastain) in *Zero Dark Thirty*. Her role raises the question of whether female protagonists can be, and by extension can be perceived as, heroic and antiheroic. In terms of this specific screen performance, Maya could be seen as the female embodiment of the antihero: she uses up all her energy to find bin Laden. This draws attention to the film's political tone, as the repression of traits deemed feminine while at work suggests that the film's political themes are more important than the relationships between protagonists. Maya is, however, integrated into and protected by her organisation. She works in a unit, gives orders, and her extra-legal operations which lead to bin Laden's hiding place eventually make her heroic. Yet there is, as discussed, a catch to her gender expression: Maya's transformation from gender-defying obsessed agent at work to normative female character after bin Laden's capture suggests heroes can be female. This transformation also makes the expression of Maya's gender while pursuing bin Laden problematic by assuming that, when the moment of heroic bravura and action has passed, heroism fades into female emotionality when the hero is a woman.

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[85] Although a familiar star is recognisable and easily 'placeable', his stardom together with his transformation into a 'common' character allows for easy identification. At the same time, the fact that the star suddenly appropriates a new or different part – a rupture with previous performances – could also mean that this new character 'type' makes identification more problematic. As Richard Dyer argues, "the truth' about a character's personality and the feelings which it evokes may be determined by what the reader takes to be the truth about the person of the star playing the part" (1994, 141).

In terms of Chastain's previous screen roles and public appearances, *Zero Dark Thirty* followed shortly on her breakthrough role in Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* (2011), in which she plays Grace, a tender-hearted mother in 1950's Texas. Due to her recent debut, she does not have a similar performance record to Clooney and DiCaprio and her public appearances are less frequent, less outspoken, and less consistent. This means that when watching these three War on Terror films a reverse movement occurs; in the cases of Clooney and DiCaprio, one first takes into account the actors and their previous films and public images, and then connects these to their onscreen roles. With Chastain's role as Maya, one first sees her character, a female agent operating in a male-dominated world while looking for an infamous terrorist, after which her burgeoning star image appears.[86] The other 'textual' extradiegetic features are thus less potent in Chastain's case, in comparison to Clooney and DiCaprio's stage-managed, humanitarian work.

Having analysed Bob and Roger's star image as such, the question arises of whether or not this image of antiheroic, yet authentic and genuine characters, operating between the uncompromising CIA and terrorist villains, implicitly endorses political and economic interventions in the Middle East and extra-legal activities initiated by the US. In other words, are tortured antiheroes staged in tandem with Muslim torturers, not to create a critical view on America's or the CIA's violent and intrusive foreign affairs, but as covert sustenance for the moral superiority of the US and of the CIA's very presence there?

In *Body of Lies* this proves to be the case, yet not in *Syriana*. In both films, the CIA performs a morally dubious role when it uses its agents as bait. By unscrupulously positioning Bob and Roger in precarious roles as pawns and victims of a political system, it is

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[86] Of course, these star images are locally and historically dependent, for if one has never before seen a film with George Clooney or Leonardo DiCaprio, or if one is unfamiliar with their public appearances, these intertextual features will not be taken into account when watching *Syriana* and *Body of Lies*. In that case, the two protagonists will be perceived in a similar way as Maya and judged only for this particular performance. Likewise, *Zero Dark Thirty* will be viewed differently in twenty years' time, when Jessica Chastain's star image is more developed.

suggested that the CIA maintains a problematic relationship with its employees, while mingling with and disrupting foreign governments and their economies. While portraying Muslim terrorists as practising unfair and punitive torture, by positioning the CIA as a morally dubious organisation that folds Bob and Roger into their webs ('bodies') of lies, and by emphasizing the side-effects of war and the vulnerable and exposed body on both sides, the films abandon the heroism and self-evident moral superiority displayed in earlier patriotic films and subvert the trope of the action hero fighting terrorists (Markert vii, 32, 314).

Body of Lies, however, implicitly reinforces Roger's bravery,[87] thereby staging him as a heroic antihero. Whereas Bob's depressed state manifests when tortured, Roger actively resists and engages in conversation with Al-Saleem about the evilness of the latter's beliefs. This dialogue expresses and justifies Roger's work as an intelligence agent in the Middle East. Although used as bait, his antiheroism is overthrown when it turns out his work, and indirectly that of the CIA and of the Jordanian Intelligence, was fruitful in finding Al-Saleem, and as such underscores Roger's character as superior in terms of strength as well as morality. Roger's antiheroism thus implicitly reinforces his heroic courage and he becomes the moral voice of the CIA.

Clooney's role as Bob, however, is not a veneer for the heroic patriotism Body of Lies upholds. His character, which underscores the political message of the narrative, exposes the reactionary potential of his star image, an image that includes intertextual references to other 'texts' in which Clooney appears, and that now stands in favour of the film's political message. This political message, accentuated by the star Clooney as Bob Barnes, pertains to the immorality and corrupt activities of CIA. The CIA's plan to deactivate Bob after being tortured first fails, but is then achieved by accidently assassinating him in the drone strike. Bob's submissive pessimism and his position as outcast

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[87] As mentioned, Body of Lies fits into the War on Terror body genre as noted by Burgoyne. Other films that reinforce the bravery of its protagonists include A Mighty Heart (2007), Rendition (2007), The Kingdom (2007), The Hurt Locker (2008), and Zero Dark Thirty.

reinforce his function as opposition to underhand practices, yet also accentuate his tragic character. Thus, in *Body of Lies*, Roger's heroic antiheroism neutralizes a critical depiction of the CIA as a morally ambiguous organization interfering in Middle Eastern politics, and Roger's figure is staged alongside a portrayal of Muslim torturers as evil villains using 'unfair' measures. In *Syriana* both parties operate within a moral grey area: the CIA, it is suggested, has duped Bob as well as Mussawi.

In addition to Bob, *Syriana* presents the character of Prince Nasir, who counters the depiction of the villainous Muslim torturer. In the sections below I will probe his role and argue that his character's purpose is twofold: together with Bob he embodies a critique of America's sabotaging of foreign economic affairs and of the CIA's moral ambivalence, neither of which is detectable in *Body of Lies*. Secondly, his character provides an Arab perspective that moves beyond a stereotypical appearance of a 'good Muslim,' but that is no less problematic than that of the evil Muslim villain. The character of Nasir is thus important to reflect upon, as it will substantiate my analysis of the entanglement between the film's use of torture, ethnic tropes, and a critique of American political and economic interference in the Middle East.

The 'good Muslim' as a critique of US interference

Despite the portrayal of terrorists as evil and sadistic, *Syriana* and *Body of Lies* do not portray *all* Muslims as evil or terrorists. Various appearances of what we can call the 'good Muslim' or 'good Arab' characters[88] are a 'benevolent' yet problematic attempt to nuance the idea that all Arabs are terrorists. These good Muslim characters consist of Prince Nasir in *Syriana*, and Roger's love interest Aisha, his associate Bassam (who is killed early in the film), and the head of Jordanian Intelligence Hani Salaam in *Body of Lies*.

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[88] The phrase 'good Arab' or 'good Muslim' has become a common trope in cultural expressions, but Mamdani and Shehabuddin are particularly helpful in illustrating what this cultural figure means and how it is adapted in film.

Both the evil Muslim villain, such as Al-Saleem, and the good Muslim can be seen as a form of "culture talk" (Mamdani 766), which, as a Western invention (Shehabuddin 103) self-evidently assumes that fundamentalist Islam prevents a genuine and moderate Islam from flourishing. It assumes good Muslims are keen on resembling Western standards and norms and that this assimilation will increase their chances of being accepted.[89] In film, their characters are constructed through visual and behavioural traits, such as a having a benevolent and responsive attitude, education (often in the West), a progressive political stance, being well mannered and well dressed, and speaking eloquent English. Moreover, good Muslims are far lighter skinned and wear lighter clothes than evil Muslim villains like Al-Saleem.[90] Hani Salaam and Prince Nasir wear current Western suits – as does Mussawi, the former CIA agent – and white thawbs, which are important signs of power, prestige, and status (Dyer 1997, 299).

These good Muslims are also usually undeveloped side characters that conveniently reinforce Western protagonists' actions and opinions. Bassam is brutally killed by his 'own people', Muslim radicals, in *Body of Lies,* and Aisha serves only to underscore Roger's preference for the Middle East. Some Muslim characters combine traits of both tropes, that of the good and evil Muslim. Of all subplots in *Syriana*, least attention is invested in Wasim's storyline and character. Aiming to make progress by working for an American oil company, Wasim is duped by the merging of Connex-Killen, with oil rights obtained through bribery. As a result, the young Pakistani man loses his job, food, and shelter, and radicalizes under the influence of the charismatic Egyptian man who stole the CIA's missile. Finally, he carries out a suicide attack on an oil tanker of his former employer with the device. Although he becomes the victim of underhand oil politics, the

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[89] Alain Badiou has neatly summarized contemporary Western ethics regarding ethnic otherness, to which culture talk' belongs, in the phrase "become like me and I will respect your difference" (25).

[90] The use of lighting and props to make some white and non-white characters lighter or whiter skinned than others is not specifically used to connote goodness and evil only in War on Terror films, but has, as Dyer notes, a longer tradition in photographic media and film (1997 11, 94-110, 135-142).

narrative does not sufficiently show why Wasim opts for his radical move. Although depicted sympathetically, his character implicitly reinforces the idea that Muslims are susceptible to indoctrination. Peter Bradshaw's argument that *Syriana* only stages Muslim extremists and suicide bombers and that "moderate Islam does not exist" (2006) seems founded on the characters of Mussawi and Wasim.

In *Body of Lies*, Hani Salaam gains, like Wasim, an ambivalent position that borders on 'bad Muslim-ness'. He is a well-mannered gentleman, intelligent and educated, but is by no means responsive and loyal to the Western cause. Instead of mimicking Western codes of conduct and dress with the aim to assimilate, he mocks Western characters.[91] He respects Roger for his efforts to integrate, who in turn, craving Hani's recognition, readily accepts his compliments. Hani loathes the uncompromising US foreign policies embodied by the self-centred character of CIA boss Ed Hoffman, a Texan patriot and "a ruthless, xenophobic bully" (French). As head of Jordanian Intelligence, Hani's method of using Roger as bait, of playing Roger and Ed off against each other, and of retrieving information through torture reveal his dubious morality and uncompromising approach. His violent game with Roger, however, not only mocks Westerners, but also suggests his deep roots in Muslim culture. As such, he bolsters the image of Islamic inclination to brutal violence.

Like Hani Salaam, Prince Nasir gains more substance than his fellow good Muslims and becomes, together with Bob, the focal point of *Syriana*'s critique of political and economic interference in the Middle East. Peter Bradshaw's statement that "moderate Islam does not exist" (2006) in *Syriana* is undermined through the character of Nasir: he is autonomous, in the sense that he is not positioned against an American character, he undergoes a transformation, has his own storyline and occasionally focalises parts of this subplot, which disrupts the

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[91] On a diegetic level, his character can be seen to simultaneously resemble and mock the West's behavioural and physical norms in a form of "mimicry" (Bhabha 85-86). This simultaneous resembling and mocking of characters lays bare the artificiality of Western norms, self-evidently appropriated by Hollywood films, as well as of the (cinematic) stereotype of the good Muslim.

ethnocentric perspective provided by white Western protagonists. Educated in Oxford, he wears suits as well as traditional Saudi thawbs, a symbol of his dual interest and position. He favours a healthy global economy that includes different business partners, and as the oldest son, Nasir is a likely candidate to succeed his father to the throne. Torn between his brother and father's conservative and oppressive regime on the one hand, and the shady oil politics and economics of the US on the other, Nasir aims to "I want to create a parliament, I want to give women the right to vote, I want an independent judiciary, start a petroleum exchange in the Middle East", and rebuild his country.

When his energy analyst Bryan Woodman (Matt Damon) enthusiastically endorses Nasir's plans and prospects, Nasir replies by mocking Woodman's naivety, arguing "except that your president rings my father and says I have unemployment, in Texas, Kansas, Washington State. One phone call later, we're stealing out of our social programs in order to buy overpriced airlines". With these words Nasir confronts the self-interest of the US that will eventually ruin his country. Woodman, however, believes Nasir "might be able to revolutionize not only his country but the whole region [...] he could be like [Mohammed] Mossadegh in 1952 in Iran". His hope of having Nasir establish a healthy and progressive economy is shattered when Nasir's conservative father, inspired by current US support, favours his younger son to accede the throne by side-lining Nasir. Due to Nasir's trading with various non-American parties, including the Chinese, the CIA believes Nasir is responsible for the missing missile and is the financer behind the Egyptian's acquisition of the weapon. Deemed a threat to the US, suddenly Nasir's opportunities to reform are drastically diminished when both his father and the CIA cease to support him.

His conversation with Woodman indicates a tipping point in Nasir's mood, and he changes from an optimistic and reform-minded man into a defeated one. He reminds Woodman of the pressing conflicting interests and the fraudulent political situation by saying, "I accepted a Chinese bid, the highest bid, and suddenly I'm a terrorist. A godless communist". By connecting "terrorist" to "communist" in one

sentence, Nasir mocks Hollywood's desire for categorizing bad guys as America's current political enemy, whether communist (in the 90s) or terrorist (in the 2000s). Secondly, Nasir attacks the US government's destructive interest in oil and international politics that traces back to the Cold War.

The historical precedent of the War on Terror and its relation to previous conflicts is made explicit by Woodman's comment about Nasir being like the Iranian democratic politician Mossadegh. Woodman's remark links the current status of contemporary politics to decades of shifting political and economic interest and deals, and emphasizes that leaders, like Mossadegh and Nasir, can be replaced by those who favour and endorse America's vision. With the character of Nasir, *Syriana* diverges from other War on Terror films like *Body of Lies*, *Unthinkable*, and *Zero Dark Thirty*, which seem to present their particular post-9/11 War on Terror context as separate from pre-9/11 relations between the US and the Middle East. As such, a contemporary Mossadegh, Nasir not only reinforces the negative image of the CIA created in *Syriana*, but his character also makes political parallels explicit. Whereas good Muslims like Aisha reinforce Western actions and opinions, Nasir becomes a tragic figure who is destroyed by the CIA, an organization more corrupt and immoral than himself. Nasir's good Muslim character therefore combines a critique of Hollywood politics and its use of tropes with a critique of America's meddling in the Middle East that spans decades.

After Bob's torture, the CIA deactivates Bob and decides to assassinate Nasir with a drone. In doing so, the US not only facilitates Nasir's younger brother's accession to the throne, but also guarantees American access to oilfields, rendering Nasir's democratic and progressive agenda obsolete. When Bob learns of these plans, he hastens through the desert towards Prince Nasir's convoy. Before Bob is able to warn Nasir the drone hits them, killing Bob, Nasir and the prince's family. At the same time, the camera alternates between shots of the annual 'Oil Industry Man of the Year' party that awards a Connex-Killen CEO, while praising the company's 'strategic partner', Prince Nasir's younger brother. *Syriana*'s narrative then culminates in Wasim's suicide attack on an oil tanker. This last shot is a blank one, suggesting

the missile attack's major impact and explosion. This final scene is edited directly after the alternating scene of the drone strike and the Oil Award party. The joint death of the two outcasts, Bob and Nasir, silences them while the oil merger triumphs. The death of Wasim shortly after underscores the vicious politics, circle of violence, and counter attacks co-initiated by the CIA. These three deaths thus become a judgment of American foreign policies that do not consider them "bodies worthy of protection" (Lurie 177) and favours politics over people.

Bradshaw has argued that in *Syriana* the American antagonists remain faceless, while the Middle Eastern villains are clearly identified (of personified) as the Egyptian, Nasir's father and brother, and the suicide bomber, Wasim. Bradshaw argues that this move shows that the film's director Gaghan is "fearful of unsophistication or anti-Americanism or [of] just taking a clear position" (2006). The scene of the Oil Industry Man of the Year Award, however, gives a face to those pulling the strings in Washington and Langley (CIA). In addition, it reveals the hypocrisy of scapegoating and blaming terrorists while trying to hide behind a façade of faceless governmental organisations.

The 'connectedness of everything'

The way in which *Syriana* presents the CIA as wreaking havoc in the Middle East and the film's depiction of the Middle East as a swamp of conflicting global political and financial interests departs from the way in which *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Body of Lies* stage the Middle East. The latter films do so by presenting the area as a dangerous territory and the site of barbarians whose fundamentalism will spread like a virus if not contained. Its spatial vastness, wasteland, and indefinability not only abolish boundaries and borders, but also fuse social life with threat and danger, law with anomie, and backwardness with terrorism. This danger is accentuated by attacks, both suicide and orchestrated, that are based on real events in *Zero Dark Thirty*, and fictional incidents in

Syriana, Body of Lies, and related War on Terror films,[92] which are instigated and retaliated against. These attacks add to the impression of perpetual bodily exposure, but they also undercut the necessity of military or political action. By appropriating terrorist attacks from real life, the films tap into the fear of violent fundamentalism that trespasses national and international boundaries. As such, this depiction of the Middle East as dangerous and backward justifies the torture of suspects of terrorism (*Zero Dark Thirty*) and the hunt for torturing Muslim terrorists to safeguard stability in the US (*Body of Lies*).

Syriana, on the other hand, does not necessarily, nor only, attribute anomie and danger to fundamentalism, as do *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Body of Lies*, but also associates the danger in and of the Gulf States with the legal, political, and social side effects of oil industry corruption, misuse of technology, and arms trafficking by the Gulf States' governments as well as the CIA. This deviation from a conventional cinematic conceptualization of the Middle East and the focus on the historical and global interconnectedness of people and countries provides a final critical element in *Syriana*'s narrative.

Although *Syriana*'s torture scene reinstates the idea that Muslims (Mussawi and Wasim) are more susceptible to excessive violence, it also suggests that the torture of CIA agents is a consequence of US interference in the Middle East, which subsequently places people in complex positions, facilitates moral corruption, and inspires revenge. The depiction of torture is integrated into the plot as one of many elements that together constitute a view of American amorality and "murderous *realpolitik*" (Hamid 55). With its tag line "everything is connected", *Syriana* thus uses the "connectedness" of everything and everyone as a way to address America's imperialism, as well as its patriotism and its status as a victim of terrorist attacks shortly after 9/11. The film conveys that this connectedness is not "as random or disparate as we might be led to think" (Hamid 53), but precedes 9/11

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[92] Deemed critical for their portrayal of the counter-productivity of violence (*The Kingdom*, 2007) and depiction of torture as ineffective (*Rendition*, 2007) both narratives present a backward and dangerous Middle East by means of unnamed locations and the foreign city as a dangerous maze.

(as recognised by Woodman's reference to Mossadegh), and includes the existence and rise of terrorist networks in reaction to decades of shifting political and economic interests and deals.

This is not to say that the film presents global corporate interest as a motor behind or as an excuse for terrorism or torture, but since "everything is connected", only a few manage to keep their hands clean. For every evil Muslim, there is a good one, and for every evil American, there is a good one, and so the ideology inherent to 'culture talk' is productively reversed. That is, when Arab culture is internally divided along the lines of conservative/progressive and fundamentally religious/moderately religious, *Syriana* shows that 'the West' (the US) has a similar divide, symbolized by the joint deaths of Bob and Nasir. Together, they embody the "rhizomatic" (deWaard and Tait 158-159) intricate connectedness of the characters on a micro-level, as well as that of macrocosmic global affairs. Although the reversion of 'culture talk' is still a binary way of approaching matters of ethnicity and torture, *Syriana* shows a sliding scale of morality and immorality, responsibility and complicity, in which the occurrence of torture is only one component.

In *Body of Lies*, the criticism of American imperialism seems to be a half-hearted attempt to counter the film's underlying message of the necessity of American intelligence agents working in the Middle East. The film's plot feeds on the fear of a global network of terrorism that rejects borders and entangles the West in its giant web (a situation Judith Butler has termed the "spectral infinity of the enemy" [2004b 34]). Most of the terrorists' spectrality and spatial omnipresence is communicated by means of the video recording of the near-execution of Roger, and also by shots of Roger that frame him in the video displays of a drone, governed and watched by the CIA. In turn, technology proves useful in tracking down terrorists (which lends the film its spy characteristics of speed and secrecy, as well as its pace).[93] As such, the Middle East is depicted as a dangerous region, where barbarian

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[93] See Paul Virilio's work on the link between technology and speed in logistical and actual war, and the role of technology used *to* film and as used *in* film.

terrorists behead CIA agents and where CIA agents need to be monitored 24/7.

Whereas in *Syriana* the CIA is depicted as a shady and uncompromising organization, "keen to bump off a good man they see as a threat to their interests" (Segal 2006), in *Body of Lies* Roger is the CIA's moral voice and his boss Ed Hoffman its 'rotten apple', responsible for racist statements and violent excess. This 'rotten apple' motif returns in many films that criticize US foreign policies and violent measures,[94] and provides a clever way of criticizing a morally ambiguous institution or governmental body without presenting this morally ambiguous character as metonymically standing in for his employer.

Having thus analysed the occurrence of torture in relation to *Syriana* and *Body of Lies*' rendering of American political interference and economic interests in the Middle East, it is, finally, important to illustrate how the films' diverging styles evoke different forms of spectatorship. *Body of Lies*' seamless, conventional narrative and *Syriana*'s formal and semantic complexity position the spectator as a compliant viewer and as a critical viewer respectively. This, I argue, has consequences for the way in which the spectator is invited to identify with Bob and Roger and for how the torture scenes are eventually perceived. I will first explore the ways in which *Syriana*'s composite character problematizes identification with any individual protagonist and then argue how its torture scene, on the contrary, diminishes the distance between spectator and protagonist.

Identification: The composite character

Syriana's five protagonists, Bob, Wasim, Prince Nasir, Bennett Holiday and Bryan Woodman, as A.O. Scott rightly notes, "add up to a sort of

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[94] Examples are particularly found in Vietnam War films from the 70s, which similarly tend to objectify rather than individualize 'those to blame' and depict their soldiers as victims of a political system (a depiction that became more prominent during the Reagan Era in the 80s) (Devine 199). Unlike these objectified government institutions, the 'rotten apple' motif, by giving particular individuals a face, becomes a recurrent theme in War on Terror films and series (such as *Rendition*, *Homeland*, *24*, and also *The Mark of Cain* – see Chapter 3).

composite hero, though their heroism, collective and individual, is highly ambiguous" (2005). This quote reveals three things: the first is the lack of female protagonists in *Syriana*; the second relates to the moral ambiguity of the film's composite hero; and the third, more covertly, suggests that none of these characters separately evokes the spectator's sympathy.

Apart from America's international politics, another principal – psychological – motif in *Syriana* is "the mutual disappointments of fathers and sons" (Scott 2005) and, by extension, disappointment with ideals of masculinity and fatherhood briefly inspired by 9/11 (Hamad 48). This disappointment is expressed in Prince Nasir's conflict with his conservative father, Bob's conflict with the CIA figuring as a dominant and controlling father figure and in his own role as a father to his adolescent son, the drowning of Bryan Woodman's young boy, and Wasim's separation from his father before his suicide attack. Apart from Julie Woodman (Amanda Peet), energy analyst Bryan Woodman's wife, *Syriana* does not stage a single significant female role. Julie's stock character gains some significance when their son drowns in the Emir's swimming pool and the parents cannot find one another in their diverging expressions of grief. In *Body of Lies*, alongside the problematic relationship between Roger and his boss Ed, and that between Roger and Hani, Aisha's character is presented to construct a "class and race barrier defying romance" (McGowan 2011, 114) to substantiate Roger's benevolence towards the Middle East. In both films female characters are thus reduced to having a particular function as 'women of'.

Both Aisha's and Julie Woodman's positions accentuate the marginalization of women in War on Terror narratives. As analysed in Chapter 1, the absence of women in War on Terror films specifically makes their rare appearance in leading parts more likely to be the subject of criticism. In leading parts, women are seen as figureheads or, as side characters, as desirable objects. If gender distribution and equality is an element that co-constitutes a film's progressive undercurrent, then *Body of Lies'* and *Syriana*'s scenarios are conservative. Male characters of colour (and Muslim characters for

obvious reasons) are significantly better represented in leading or supporting roles or as side characters in War on Terror films.[95]

The second characteristic of Scott's quote about *Syriana*'s composite character is that all characters are antiheroes who not only remain ambiguous in the sense of their morality and interest, but also in the identification they elicit. Unlike films with one or two protagonists who attach the spectator to their perspectives and positions, as in *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Unthinkable*, and *Body of Lies*, *Syriana*'s composite character problematizes a similar engagement with any of the protagonists' individually. The film gives all characters, and thus sides, a voice (Bradshaw 2006), but as perspectives constantly shift, the spectator is moved around between different positions and stakes. The three characters who inspire some identification, because their respective parts in the story are slightly larger or more developed, are Bob, Bryan Woodman, and Nasir (Bennett Holiday is a cardboard, impenetrable character in the most complex storyline and Wasim, as discussed, is assigned even fewer character traits and less screen time). Bryan Woodman's character functions as a counter-character to Nasir in their plot line, but takes on a morally dubious position when Nasir financially compensates him and his family for the loss of their son, after which he and his wife become estranged. Nasir's explicit views on the political and economic policies of his father and of the US present him as an accusatory 'moral character', easy to follow and sympathize with. Yet he and Bob are tragic figures that become the victims of higher powers.

Bob's subservience and passivity attest to a world-weariness, of which the most potent (and painful) example is a shot in which he silently eats fast food alone on a deserted café terrace. After being

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[95] Dittmar and Michaud note that most Vietnam War films similarly stage women and non-whites as stock characters, despite their large presence in combat (9). These films are about active combat, whereas in War on Terror films this is not necessarily the case. Examples of non-white actors in War on Terror films are Samuel L. Jackson in *Unthinkable*, Jeffrey Wright in *Syriana*, Jamie Foxx in The *Kingdom*, Don Cheadle in *Traitor* (2008), Alexander Siddig in *Syriana*, and protagonists and crucial supporting actors of various ethnic backgrounds in *24* and *Homeland*. *Zero Dark Thirty* has surprisingly few non-white characters. Additionally, these actors are all male.

tortured and scapegoated his character changes and seems to deepen.[96] While desperately attempting to find out who is responsible for his scapegoating, his sudden desperation and anger inspire sympathy. Nonetheless, the difficulty in attaching to Bob's character is created by his morose facial expressions, and by the many alternations between his character and the remaining characters and plot lines. The torture scene, however, in which Bob focalises large parts, marks a break with the difficulty to align to Bob.

Disruptive torture: *Syriana*'s realism and critical reflection

Having analysed Bob and Nasir's function and Bob's part as a component of the composite character, it appears that *Syriana*'s torture scene is the only moment in which the spectator perceives the situation through Bob's eyes. In point-of-view shots the spectator sees Mussawi through Bob's eyes, facing him in a skewed angle shot from his position on the floor. Mussawi throws water in his face and soon after, states his intention to behead Bob, who, too beaten down to get up, sees Mussawi coming toward him. Moreover, the claustrophobic nature of the event is established through Bob's limited perspective, which translates in close-ups of Bob's face and shots that frame only body parts or a blurry background. This perspective of Bob's torture disrupts the impossibility of identifying with characters throughout Syriana's plot and with Bob in particular.

The torture scene is the only truly violent scene in *Syriana*; the drone attack shows the scene of explosion but no bodies, and a white screen suggests the missile attack's impact. Although the torture scene is not nearly as graphic as that of *Unthinkable*, the suggestive nail cracking sounds and the spectator's proximity to Bob's body and perspective create a stylistic rupture with the film's 'clean' style. However, both the torture scenes of *Syriana* and *Unthinkable* are disturbing, yet in different ways: the graphic content of *Unthinkable* presents disturbing images, while *Syriana* – as well as *Body of Lies* and

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[96] None of the characters in *Syriana* is truly round due to the composite character. See Richard Dyer's analysis of round characters and the traits that they should have (1994, 104-108).

Zero Dark Thirty – presents images that disturb (see Grønstad for this difference 2011, 6). The unsettlement created by being attached to Bob's skin and viewpoint in *Syriana* is, moreover, different from that of *Body of Lies* in the sense that in *Syriana*'s torture scene we watch through Bob's eyes while he is tortured. Similarly, in *Zero Dark Thirty* Ammar's point-of-view shots, and shots suggesting his point of view, inspire the spectator to feel sympathy for him.

After the torture scene, *Syriana* again disconnects the spectator from Bob's perspective and he changes from a vulnerable and exposed man to a man who regains his composure as well as his moodiness. At the same time, there is something paradoxical about this torture scene. Opposed to the sterility of the violence portrayed throughout the narrative, the point-of-view shots and the implied, largely offscreen nail extractions absorb the spectator into the scene. Disturbed by the gruesomeness of the shots, the spectator is made aware of the act of watching torture (Grønstad 2008, 13), yet is confronted with watching this torture through Bob's eyes.

Apart from the torture scene, the viewer is likely to assess the film's overall complex structure on a predominantly intellectual level. *Syriana*'s often mystifying plot structure with multiple layers transforms it into a 'brainy' film; because the structure is not seamless and the plot lines occur simultaneously, the film urges the viewer to be highly attentive, while dissecting conflicting interests and agendas that are presented through moving perspectives. This complexity that aims for rational rather than emotional engagement, together with the use of the composite character, suggest that *Syriana*, more so than *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Unthinkable*, and *Body of Lies*, was made with an intellectual (or even elitist) audience in mind who can draw on cultural and political knowledge and memory.

At the same time, as with *Zero Dark Thirty*'s incorporation of real footage, *Syriana* is loosely based on former CIA case officer Robert Baer's memoir, with Baer forming the model for Clooney's character

(deWaard and Tait 153).[97] The references to Mossadegh, and Clooney's 'serious' and 'genuine' character, give the impression that the film presents a highly realistic account of the geopolitical state of affairs. The film's integration of subjective experience into a fictional adaptation transforms it into what DeWaard and Tait have called a "docudrama" (154). This drama recreates documented events and may involve real footage, yet needs dramatization to make it palatable and as such deliberately constitutes a grey area between fact and fiction (ibid.). Taking these elements into account, *Zero Dark Thirty* can also be seen to be such a docudrama. Unlike *Syriana*, however, *Zero Dark Thirty*'s narration is constructed along the principles of cinematic realism (causality, plausibility, linearity, character motivation, psychological realism, and compositional unity), and it fuses geopolitical spy characteristics with ticking bomb features that build on suspense and a climactic finale. *Syriana*, however, builds on social verisimilitude and stylistic and semantic complexity that evokes a documentary style of filming, rather than on seamless cinematic realism (Neale 34).[98]

Syriana's complex depiction of social and political relations and the distance established between spectator and screen inspire a critical evaluation of the spectator's own moral position within the intricate entanglement of foreign affairs and corporate globalism with the rise of corruption, violence, and terrorism.[99] The torture scene, however, inspires an affective engagement. As a whole, *Syriana* is thus not a

[97] The information for Baer's memoir is listed in the credits, and every review makes note of the adaptation (deWaard and Tait 154).

[98] deWaard and Tait call this docudrama style pertaining to producer Steven Soderbergh "very Soderberghian": it pulls the viewer into its 'raw' and seemingly uncut style, while alienating through artifice. They add that although concentrating on facts to avoid opinionated bias, the impartial depiction aimed for by the 'docudrama' is rarely, if ever, achieved (2013,154, 155).

[99] Ethical spectatorship is a self-investigation into moral themes and positions and into presupposed ideas and beliefs, and needs to be distinguished from moral or immoral themes present in the film's content (Koopman 235; Wheatley, 38-39). Catherine Wheatley argues that critical awareness is a necessary condition of ethical awareness. (Counter-)cinema's use of estranging techniques and cinematic reflexivity (that negate the illusion seamless narration provides) allow the viewer to become critically aware of the medium's working. This is a first step towards becoming ethically aware (38-39, 54-55).

provocatively violent film, but the short moment of repellence when witnessing torture creates an insular moment of self-reflection as well as affective engagement.

The seamless narrative structure of *Body of Lies* absorbs the spectator into the plot. Unlike *Syriana*, Roger is the only real protagonist of the film, which facilitates an engagement with his character. His character is delineated against the 'bad guys' (Ed Hoffman and Al-Saleem), and the film makes use of a bombastic finale which establishes a feeling of relief. The film's end, the result of Roger's 'unfair' punishment by Al-Saleem and subsequent rescue, underscores the normative political ideology of the film: the Middle East is a dangerous 'dark continent', occupied by a pervasive terrorist network that brutally punishes Roger for making an effort at integrating, as well as for working for an organization co-responsible for Guantanamo Bay.

The differences between the two films and the analysis of *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable* in the first chapter suggest that the critical engagement inspired by *Syriana* occurs in tandem with a more active viewing attitude, effectuated by the distance between spectator and screen. The other three films draw on affective engagement and passive spectatorship, with the option of becoming more critical.

The different viewing experiences tie in with *Syriana*'s complex form, which resembles European art cinema more than Hollywood cinema; its complicated and unconventional narrative structure with many mystifying plotlines transgresses generic conventions of the Hollywood geopolitical spy thriller with War on Terror elements. The lack of emotional engagement with the characters, the film's lack of speed, and its overt criticism of American international politics make the film a Hollywood oddity. Its playfulness and complexity do not mean, however, that *Syriana*'s message concerning the "connectedness of everything" is not at times an ideologically manipulative one, nor does the film's detached construction rule out an active evaluation of

these ideological messages without ultimately becoming an affected agent (except momentarily during the torture scene).[100]

Although initially meeting difficulty in financing the production, George Clooney's reputation as an actor who combines serious screen roles with humanitarian work, and Steven Soderbergh's reputation as an innovative and maverick political producer (deWaard and Tait 155) align the film with an acceptably democratic and liberal agenda recognisable to (educated) viewers. *Syriana*'s 'progressiveness' and 'critical' message thus operate within the parameters of criticism of the politics in and of Hollywood.[101]

Conclusion

I began this chapter with the assumption that the inversion of torture roles, or of abusive 'role-play' as conceptualized in the previous chapter, leads to a depiction of Muslim torturers as more brutal than their Western counterparts. Secondly, I investigated what we mean when we say a film is 'critical' of US foreign affairs and interventions in the Middle East.

In *Syriana* and *Body of Lies*, Muslim torturers present political motivations as a necessity for retaliation against CIA practices in the Middle East. Their torture, however, is portrayed as punitive, unfair, and brutal. The American agents in *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Unthinkable* were presented as reverting to torture as a last resort to prevent more terrorist activities, and in comparison to *Syriana* and *Body of Lies*, this motivation presents the torture in the former two films as more 'just'. At the same time, the motivation of retrieving information was questioned when it became apparent that in both films interrogational torture is infused with punitive elements.

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[100] There is another quite harrowing scene in *Syriana* in which Amanda Peet, as Bryan Woodman's wife, holds her drowned little boy in her arms and starts wailing uncontrollably. These scenes invite an emotional engagement with the mother's pain.
[101] *Syriana*'s form resembles the equally complex and schematic 'docudrama' *Traffic* (2002), directed by Stephen Soderbergh with a screenplay by Stephen Gaghan. Gaghan/Soderbergh productions are explicitly political and stylistically unconventional by Hollywood standards.

In *Body of Lies*, Roger's torture in the final scenes eventually justifies the CIA's interference in the Middle East and their hunt for barbarian terrorists. The critical note directed against Guantanamo Bay, presented by fictive Al-Qaeda leader Al-Saleem, is overruled by the impression evoked that terrorist networks are pervasive, brutal, and dangerous. Bob's torture in *Syriana* by Mussawi, a disillusioned former CIA operative turned extremist Muslim, proves less antagonistic, as both men are presented as outcasts and are, as the spectator is led to assume, wronged by the CIA. Bob and Mussawi's ambivalent positions, as well as the punishment underlying Dan and H's torture, disintegrate the binary between justified and necessary interrogational torture and unjustified and unfair punitive torture as initially assumed.

In both films, the occurrence of torture is tightly connected to ethnic tropes, as well as to the way in which the films critically address the CIA's activities in the Middle East post-9/11. In *Body of Lies* Roger is an 'antiheroic hero' who operates between immoral organisations and who becomes the moral voice of the CIA. His boss, on the other hand, is framed as a 'rotten apple' whose unscrupulous actions do not stand in for the CIA as a whole. This duality inherent in the CIA, personified by Roger and his boss, and the stereotypical depiction of the fictive Al-Qaeda leader thus neutralize the critique addressed to the CIA and the US government.

In *Syriana* the tragic characters of 'good Muslim' Prince Nasir and antihero Bob together present an explicit critique of American (consisting of the CIA, businessmen, and politicians) political and economic interference in the Middle East that precedes 9/11, but also of the politics of normative Hollywood ethnic tropes. While *Body of Lies* depicts the Middle East as the dangerous space of barbarian fundamentalists, in *Syriana*, it functions as a swamp of the conflicting global political and financial interests of both sides. In particular, the CIA's unscrupulous activities transform into the lethal fusion of technology, weaponry (missiles and drones), harmful social side effects, and counter-violence, including the torture of CIA agents.

Whereas *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Unthinkable*, and *Body of Lies* provide an American perspective on Muslims and terrorism and as such

construct an image of Muslim characters, *Syriana* disrupts the Western ethnocentric perspective, established by predominantly white male protagonists, through the character of Nasir. At the same time, in *Syriana* as well as in *Body of Lies*, Muslim characters whether 'good' or 'bad', and female characters are generally positioned as backdrops. The emphasis remains on the struggle of the Western male protagonists and both films provide a patriarchal perspective on the War on Terror.

Body of Lies encloses the spectator within a seamless narrative in which emotional engagement with Roger is facilitated. With the exception of the torture scene that functions as an insular moment of affective engagement, *Syriana*'s multiple complex storylines create an emotional distance between the spectator and the film's protagonists. This engagement positions the spectator in Bob's shoes when tortured, while the distance created by film's formal structure activates a critical reflection on the political themes presented, which makes the emotionally-engaged yet passive spectatorship effectuated by *Body of Lies* difficult. Drawing on the spectator's political engagement, *Syriana* seems to want to inspire a critical rethinking of one's own moral position within global "interconnectedness" when watching.

In its play with form, *Syriana* resembles European art house cinema, yet the film remains 'Hollywood' in the sense that its criticism operates within a Hollywood discourse. Furthermore, only few European films have taken up the theme of the global War on Terror and its consequences as pivotal. In the next chapter I will concentrate on two European films and one American adaptation that explicitly accentuate the consequences of torture in a War on Terror context, in particular, the consequences of being forced to torture, which becomes a form of torture in its own right. These consequences of having tortured translate into the development of post-traumatic stress disorder. As such, these films simultaneously show the vulnerability of bodies in warfare while depicting the mental consequences of engaging in violence.